# HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-MAO CHINA

Edited by
Michael Agelasto and Bob Adamson

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# 1

# Editors' Introduction[1]

*Michael AGELASTO and Bob ADAMSON*

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is home to the single largest indigenous population in the world. The sheer size of the PRC's natural and human resources has enabled the country to occupy an increasingly important position internationally as a socio-economic and geopolitical force. After the death of the nation's founding father, Mao Zedong, the PRC's growing stature as a global power has accelerated since the government's shift from isolationist, politics-oriented policies to open door, economics-oriented policies. This shift was accompanied by major reforms in higher education, which was ascribed a key supporting role in the drive to modernize the nation. Although economics-oriented policies had featured in earlier stages of the PRC's development and although China has a long history of education, the reforms of the post-Mao era have taken the country's economic, social, political and higher education systems into unexplored terrain.

For China, the modern enterprise of 'higher learning' is a century-old foreign import and has been influenced to a large extent by Western philosophy and models during its development.[2] Later influence, shaped by both the international and domestic political environment in the 1950s and early 1960s, came from the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for mainly ideological reasons, most notably the failure of the United States to recognize the PRC and the latter's need for a socialist role model. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power under the leadership of Mao Zedong in 1949 and set about transforming the institutions left by the Nationalist Government, the central concerns of

higher education remained unchanged — political order and rapid economic development. These concerns, especially the former, were reinforced during the period of close imitation of the Soviet experience because it 'held promise for an economic modernization that proceeded within a hierarchical and authoritarian political order'.[3] Such political order, plus a planned economic system under the control and scrutiny of the central authority, dominated all aspects of life in the PRC, including the higher education sector, during that era. Order was incrementally consolidated by disastrous back-to-back political movements in the country — the Anti-rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the decade-long Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.[4] During these movements, education played an instrumental role in supporting the policies of the national leadership.

The Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, left the political, economic and social scenery of the PRC looking like a bomb-site. The nation had been torn by factional fighting and nowhere was this more evident than in education. Indeed, throughout the turmoil, students provided the fundamentalist vanguard of the movement. Teachers were vilified, defenestrated, rusticated or murdered, as the Confucian bond of loyalty between students and mentors was ruptured. Campuses became the focal point for revolutionary action with proletarian politics in command; classrooms were abandoned for a number of years. University entrance examinations were discontinued, with preference for admission given to those with a proletarian background. Academic pursuits were condemned as bourgeois and divorced from reality and students undertook farmwork and other labour.

In the two decades that followed the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the principal architect of reform was Deng Xiaoping. Having outmanoeuvred Hua Guofeng (who claimed to be Mao's designated successor) and other pretenders, Deng initiated policies designed to stimulate economic growth. In 1978, the National People's Congress adopted a long-mooted policy, the Four Modernizations programme, which identified agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology as key areas for reform and investment. In economic terms, the targets were threefold: to double industrial and agricultural outputs from their 1980 levels; to quadruple the 1980 GNP by the year 2000; and to achieve economic parity in GNP per capita with middle-income developed countries by 2049.[5] To achieve this, Deng rejected previously favoured Stalinist models of economic development for their negative effect on the people's standard of living and for their overemphasis on heavy industry.[6] Instead, four major shifts were envisaged:

1. the development of a socialist market economy from a socialist planned economy;
2. the replacement of the Stalinist model of investment, imported during the fifties, with an indigenous model;
3. the loosening of state control of production to allow producers to enjoy greater autonomy; and
4. the establishment of the Open Door policy to enable participation in the international economy.[7]

Higher education was accorded a new task: that of supporting the modernization drive through developing the requisite human capital, as articulated by the CCP in 1985:

> Education must serve socialist construction, which in turn must rely on education. Our massive socialist modernization programme requires us not only to give full rein to the skilled people now available and to further enhance their capabilities, but also to train, on a large scale, people with new types of skills who are dedicated to the socialist cause and to the nation's economic and social progress into the 1990s and the early days of the next century.[8]

In the final quarter of the twentieth century, the nation's reforms in higher education have progressed in leaps and bounds along with, as this volume will demonstrate, stumbles and — in the case of the ill-fated *événements* of 1989 — calamitous misadventure. To date, three phases are discernible. Picking up the pieces after the Cultural Revolution and training human capital for national economic modernization were the initial and enduring challenge for higher education. The qualified staff and appropriate curricula, resources and facilities were not immediately available. One approach to this problem was through the Open Door policy, which encouraged foreign investment in the PRC in the form of joint ventures with Chinese companies, a measure designed to facilitate the transfer of technological expertise. In education, communication was two-way: teachers were brought into institutes of higher education from overseas to provide Chinese staff and students with access to foreign learning, while thousands of Chinese students went overseas to study for higher degrees.

This interflow had historical precedents and Deng was cognizant of the political and cultural tensions that this policy could produce. In a statement at the Twelfth Congress of the CCP in August 1982, he stated:

> We will unswervingly follow a policy of opening to the outside world and actively increase exchanges with foreign countries on the basis of mutual equality and benefit. At the same time we will keep a clear head, firmly resist corrosion by decadent ideas from abroad and never permit the bourgeois way of life to spread in our country.[9]

His caveat reflects the guiding principle of *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* (adapting Western practice to suit Chinese conditions) that had been adopted by pragmatists in China since the Self-Strengthening movement in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Also in the first reform phase, the adoption of a new economic model, which involved a change from planned economy to socialist market economy, had important implications for higher education. In a *planned economy*, critical economic processes are largely determined not by market forces, but by a central economic planning body which implements society's major economic goals. A *market economy*, on the other hand, manifests extensive private ownership of capital and allocates goods and services by the price mechanism with government supervision, in the absence of omnipresent government intervention. This latter type of economy is characterized by volatility, competitiveness, openness and information network. It requires a large supply of trained professionals and technical personnel who are practical, flexible, versatile, international and innovative. Since the market fluctuates quickly according to the principle of supply and demand, the society constantly needs people who are well-trained in a certain speciality or a combination of specialities quickly. A market economy not only requires trained personnel speedily, it also needs a large number of them.

The first set of massive market economy reforms launched in the PRC around 1980 brought on startlingly rapid growth forcing the quick formulation of educational policy to deliver new types of human resources. These plans not only specified the mission of educational reform as improving the quality of the Chinese nation while training more and better qualified personnel, but they also emphasized the reform of existing educational structures, as well as the reallocation of responsibilities within each educational sector in the system. As reforms were actualized, tertiary industry (the service sector) increasingly outpaced primary industry, but in both sectors, knowledge-intensive and technology-intensive jobs grew most quickly.

The second phase of Dengist educational reforms started in 1985 and are described in detail in Cheng Kai-ming's chapter in this volume. They were signalled and legitimated two years previously when Deng wrote the 'Three Orientations' (*sange mianxiang*) inscription for Jingshan Secondary School in Beijing, which stated that education should be 'oriented towards modernization, the future and the world'. The focus of government concern was on aspects of the education system which were considered to be flawed, either because previous reforms had failed to address these particular issues, or because the modernization programme had created problems that the

current education system was not equipped to handle. The following areas of higher education were viewed as particularly problematic:[10]

1. the slow development of vocational skills;
2. the mismatch between jobs and tertiary graduates' specializations;
3. the inability of institutes to keep pace with modernization;
4. students' lack of independent thinking and study skills; and
5. over-centralized and over-rigid educational administration.

A number of problems arose from the fact that, for its size, the PRC has a small tertiary education sector. In the 1980s, graduates of conventional higher education institutes and secondary speciality (short cycle) schools totalled 1.7 million, which was only 10% of the population entering the workforce. In state-owned enterprises and industries, only 2.5% of the country's workforce were qualified technicians and engineers. Meanwhile, more than 4.5 million employed personnel required continuing education for in-service training or professional development. State officials estimated in 1987 that, by 1990, the number of technical and engineering personnel would have to be increased to 4.7% of the workforce of 105 million. At the same time, 3.5 million new teachers would have to be trained.[11] By 1994, in fact, total student enrolment in regular full-time higher education institutions had increased to 2.51 million from 1.02 million in 1980. Rapid economic growth in the reform era had certainly stimulated demands for higher education.

The reforms of the second phase placed emphasis on local responsibility, diversity of educational opportunities, multiple sources of educational funds, and decentralization of power to individual institutions' authorities in the governance of their own affairs.

Until recently the PRC had a tightly controlled labour force. Since the early 1950s, Chinese college graduates could get jobs only through state assignment, leaving no choice to the employers or employees. The *danwei*, or work-unit, is an administrative term referring to the organization of almost all urban workers under the authority of the central government. It is through the *danwei* that housing, jobs, goods and services are distributed to people. Until reforms allowed local experimentation in different systems, including the right of individuals to find their own jobs, assignment to the *danwei* was a decision made by the state.

In order to fulfil the need for professional knowledge and trained personnel for national modernization, the state allowed different types of educational institutions to flourish so as to create more educational opportunities. The state, therefore, provides only the framework necessary for educational development in the mainland and has deliberately devolved

responsibility and power to local governments, local communities and other non-state sectors to increase educational provision. Local educationalists and scholars thus have begun to take the lead in developing initiatives to cater for the evolving market needs and people's pressing demands for better education.

At the turn of the century, the PRC is entering a new phase of its reform of higher education. One of several major initiatives is the 211 Project, which seeks to create an élite body of 100 institutions that, with private and state funding, can become centres of academic excellence. The revolution from the hyper-political, anti-intellectual, non-élitist policies of the Cultural Revolution is complete.

In the post-Mao era, therefore, the landscape of China has changed dramatically, both literally and figuratively. Modernization has brought about a building boom, a diversification of industry, a rise in the standard of living and a loosening of many controls on daily life. Likewise in higher education, reforms have sought to produce high-quality personnel and to gear the curriculum to the needs of modernization; to restructure the financing of higher education and the job assignment process as part of the market economy; to decentralize policy-making and to strengthen local autonomy to cater for the disparate needs of different regions.

These reforms have not taken place in a vacuum. During the period, the veterans of the Long March passed away — most notably Deng Xiaoping on 19 February 1997 — and a new generation that lacks the revolutionary credibility of its predecessors has taken control of the CCP. Internationally, the demise of the USSR and its communist satellites has provided salutary lessons to the PRC's leadership on the dangers of economic reforms, which domestically have had critical moments. There have been many outcomes that were unforeseen at the time of formulation. An example is the profound effect that the depoliticization of education has had on students' aspirations. Attitudes and behaviour of teachers and students within higher education have changed. Interactions with other countries, particularly those once anathema to the socialist PRC, have produced cultural tensions and a serious brain drain. Reforms have affected the participation of women, minorities and the disadvantaged in higher education. The purpose of this volume is to reach beyond the articulated goals of reform and their accomplishments and to explore the actual impact, both intended and unwitting. While not diminishing the successes already achieved, the chapter authors take a critical and analytical view of the gaps between Chinese planning and Chinese reality.

Despite China's size and importance, knowledge of the contemporary PRC is limited both inside and outside the country. The closed and often

xenophobic policies of the Chinese political leadership made quantitative and qualitative research regarding many aspects of Chinese society, including education, difficult to carry out. However, since the leadership embarked upon the Four Modernizations drive and the concomitant Open Door policy, the PRC has permitted educational research by both domestic and foreign scholars. Still, much that was published on Chinese higher education in the initial reform period lacked a strong empirical and theoretical basis. Writings were often based on observers' 'impressions', with data coming from state-arranged interviews with educational leaders and policy-makers. From the 1980s onwards, many new scholars have chosen Chinese topics for their dissertation research, reflecting the growing domestic interest in research and the growing international interest in the PRC fostered by the reform era. This volume is composed mostly of thesis-based case studies that provide a wealth of data, new insight and fresh empiricism.

The book comprises 20 chapters, divided into 7 sections. The first section, of which this introduction forms a part, presents an overview of the reforms. The second section looks at the PRC's tertiary educators and is primarily concerned with the goals of the initial reform period. Cao Xiaonan analyses faculty development initiatives and identifies the age gap and brain drain issues as crucial concerns. Next, Wenhui Zhong looks at the participation of Chinese scholars in the world community. Barriers to presenting scholarship in an international forum include funding, language barriers and editorial standards. Then, Michele Shoresman presents a case study of the visiting scholars programme. From 1978 to 1988 mid-career professionals from the PRC undertook advanced training abroad. The author focuses on the University of Illinois which trained over 200 PRC scholars. Finally, Cong Cao examines the Chinese Academy of Sciences. He describes recruitment into this élite group through collective biographical analysis.

The book's next section presents case studies regarding the changing curricula in various institutions, which seek to serve the new economic order. They offer very different perspectives. A view from within, an *emic* view, comes from Liu Yingkai, an associate professor at Shenzhen University. Liu's chapter deals with the reorientation of curriculum to meet local needs, but also describes how the university coped with being a part of, and not just training personnel for, a socialist market economy. As a former 'foreign teacher' and outside observer on the inside, Bob Adamson looks at the education of language teachers at Taiyuan Teachers College. He focuses on two elements: the pragmatic solutions that were adopted to solve tensions arising from the reforms aimed at improving the quality of teacher education, and the problems faced by a middle-stratum institute to

implement them. Next, Greg Kulander discusses agricultural universities, presenting detailed data for Shenyang Agricultural University. He shows how the reform era has caused the role of agricultural institutions to change and he analyses the reforms they have undertaken to meet the changing needs of rural society. Xiao Jin's study of higher adult education then explores an area that is often neglected in the literature, which mostly focuses on regular institutions of higher learning. The rapid expansion of higher adult education during the reform period has brought with it issues of efficiency, quality and relevance.

The fourth section examines the subject of economics of education, which has been a central issue in the second phase of reform. Vilma Seeberg's study of stratification trends in technical-professional enrolment focuses on the urban-rural divide and shows that families are pursuing maximum flexibility and mobility even at a high cost of tuition. Zhang Minxuan looks at changes in tuition policy. He relates changing equity conceptions with student financial support policies. Michael Agelasto surveys the changes in graduate employment, as the PRC moves away from manpower planning towards a market-oriented system that provides both students and employers greater choice. Mok Ka-ho and David Chan discuss the phenomenon of private higher education in southern China and conclude that it is, as yet, peripheral and that quasi-marketization has yet to be fully realized.

The next two sections address key social issues that were not on the original reform agenda, but were affected by the educational reforms. The first looks at how women fare in Chinese higher education. This question has received increasing attention, particularly with the PRC's hosting of the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. First, Carol C. Fan presents an overview of the situation of female teachers and students in both the PRC and Taiwan. She discusses various causes of gender inequality. Then Maria Jaschok presents an ethnographic study of the PRC's first institution of higher education with a women-centred programme. Having served as vice-president of the institute, the author offers valuable insights into educational administration, management and politics. Chuing Prudence Chou and Flora Chia-I Chang focus specifically on discriminatory practices in the hiring, rewards and promotion of faculty staff in Taiwan, and compare the situation to that on the mainland.

The two chapters in the sixth section focus on the tensions emerging from economic liberalization and the determination of the state to maintain control in other dimensions. Gay Garland Reed looks at values education. She asks whether Lei Feng, an ideological role model for university students before reform, is relevant today. The chapter by Teresa Wright looks at

student politics. Specifically, she examines the events of the Beijing spring of 1989. These authors offer insight on state control of education: a continual struggle between political loosening and tightening that has characterized higher education during the reform era.

The final section offers some concluding comments. Successes and tensions of the higher education reform programme are identified and some of the unintended consequences are highlighted. It draws out a number of common threads that run through the diverse chapters in the book. An appendix contains the executive summary of the 1997 World Bank report on Chinese higher education, followed by a glossary of this volume's most frequently used Chinese language terms, which appear in the text and notes in *hanyu pinyin* transliteration.

These chapters were specifically commissioned for this volume. A book of this size and depth would inevitably have omissions. The editors were unable to include individual chapters on important areas (for example, higher education for ethnic minorities, pedagogy, overseas study, World Bank influence and radio/television universities) because potential authors were unavailable. Nevertheless, by presenting new data resulting from in-depth research, much of it obtained at the grass roots, the authors convey the experience of higher education reform as implemented. In doing so, this new scholarship provides a valuable contribution to the literature on Chinese higher education.[12]

## NOTES

1. Vilma Seeberg, Cao Xiaonan, Fu Sin Yuen-ching, Michele Shoresman, Mok Ka-ho and David Chan contributed material for this introduction.
2. See, for example, Xiong, 1983; Hayhoe, 1996. (Full details are in the Bibliography.)
3. Hayhoe, 1989a, pp. 18–9.
4. For a history of modern education in China, see Pepper, 1996.
5. Lewin *et al.*, 1994.
6. Leung, 1995.
7. Lewin *et al.*, 1994.
8. CCP, 1985.
9. Hayhoe, 1984, p. 206.
10. For a detailed discussion see Lewin *et al.*, 1994.
11. Y. Zhao, 1988, p. 217.
12. Some of this literature is critically reviewed in Liu Xiuwu, 1996.

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