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ABSTRACT

Fourteen prominent American educators report on their trips to China in October through November 1977. The educators hope that reports of their China visit will help Americans better understand what is happening in China and that this understanding will give studies of China a place in America's school curriculum which is commensurate with its importance. The report begins with a discussion of several conclusions of interest to American educators and U.S. China scholars. For example, the Chinese recognize that education, especially in science and technology, is essential if they are to reach the development goals they have set for themselves between now and the end of the century. Education in China remains focused to a remarkable degree on the development of collective political consciousness. The "back to basics" movement has not occurred to the extent reported abroad. The Chinese are largely succeeding in their second most important educational goal: to develop a work force capable of meeting their national production needs. The report goes on to discuss other topics, such as educational decision making; educational organization, politics, and curriculum; labor in the countryside; admissions examinations and quotas; China's educational goals compared to the United States; and the use of group norms, models, and symbols. (RM)

WINGSPREAD brief

A WINGSPREAD CONFERENCE BRIEF IN TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS

A Wingspread Conference Brief in Text and Photographs



# CHINA'S SCHOOLS IN FLUX



Members of the United States Education Leaders Delegation to the People's Republic of China, meeting at a Wingspread Conference, came to several conclusions of interest to American educators and U.S. China scholars:

- The Chinese recognize that education, especially in science and technology, is essential if they are to reach the development goals they have set for themselves between now and the end of the century. Education, both inside and outside the classroom, can therefore be expected to remain high on the nation's list of priorities, and to receive an increasing share of national resources.

- Education in China remains focused to a remarkable degree on the development of collective political consciousness. In this regard, schools continue to place much greater emphasis on what is best characterized as "training" rather than on "education." To meet their political needs, the Chinese operate an educational system which (a) does not encourage students to "stand out" academically, (b) provides access to higher education for undereducated rural youth and minorities by imposing admissions quotas in their favor, and (c) draws fully on its own available resources before turning to foreign means.

- The rumored "back to basics" movement (stressing general education over political attitude) has not occurred to the extent reported abroad. Any claims about "dismantling Maoism" are too simplistic. It is true some major reforms have been instituted in higher education, but except for the reactivation of the "key" schools concept (special track schooling for selected students) post-Mao reforms are not yet filtering down in substantial degree to China's pre-schools, primary and middle schools.

- The Chinese are largely succeeding in their second most important educational goal: to develop a work force capable of meeting their national production needs. This is being accomplished, even under the burdensome weight of the political demands placed on students, by attaching great importance to the integration of work and study and requiring all students to develop employable skills for their immediate placement into production upon graduation.

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- Although the Chinese recognize the importance of vocational training in education, they apparently have not resolved the complex, but important, problem of integrating a program of skills-development into a broader, more liberal curriculum leading to intellectual development as well.

- In the effort to pattern all students' education after a group norm, instruction in China emphasizes learning by conditioning. Chinese teachers therefore rely almost entirely on a single theory of learning: the conditioning of behavioral responses in students. This technique leaves little room for the application of theories used in the West which build upon innate abilities in the areas of problem-solving, inquiry, initiative, and creativity.

- Although much of their educational system remains decentralized and governed at or below the provincial level, the Chinese are not taking full advantage of this flexibility. They could do so by organizing an educational approach which encourages local initiative and recognizes the value of a diversity of educational methodologies.

- Despite the fact that powerful differences in history and political ideology stand between our society and the Chinese, there are areas in which Americans may have much to learn from China. Career education, for instance, was supposed to be the American answer for dealing with such problems as unemployment, underemployment, lack of sense of purpose among graduates, etc. It has not worked in the United States. Yet China seems to have accepted long ago, and put to good use, the idea that, as John Dewey put it, "Education (should be) life, not preparation for life."

The Wingspread debriefing conference was sponsored by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations in cooperation with The Johnson Foundation. The National Committee is a private, non-profit, educational organization which encourages public interest in, and understanding of, China and United States-China relations. The Committee's purpose is carried out through a program of educational, cultural, civic and sports exchanges with China and through educational activities building on such exchanges. The State Education Leaders Delegation was the fourth education-related United States-China exchange sponsored by the National Committee.

The February 1978 Wingspread conference assembled a group of 14 prominent American educators and leaders of education at the state level who had traveled to China in October - November 1977, to observe schools and discuss education with Chinese colleagues. The Wingspread session provided the Delegation members the opportunity to evaluate their experience in China and to discuss the group's book-length report. Participants also suggested a number of ways in which their trip to China could be of significance to the American educational community and to the community of China scholars. China's massive educational experiment continues to be important to the world. The Delegation hoped that reports of their China visit will help Americans better understand what is happening in China and that this understanding will give China studies a place in America's school curriculum which is commensurate with that importance.

China's education policies had passed an important crossroads just before the Delegation entered Peking. A campaign was freshly underway to eradicate the vestiges of what was invariably called the influence of the "Gang of Four," and

many sweeping educational reforms were being contemplated. During their stay, the Delegation had an opportunity to visit a limited number of schools from nurseries to universities and met for short conversations with education officials at the national, provincial, city, and commune levels. Here, in brief, are some of the Delegation's observations as noted at the Wingspread conference:

## Educational Decision Making

China makes all major education policy decisions at the national level. The United States, on the other hand, formulates its policies at all levels, from the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the federal bureaucracy down to the state commissioners' offices and the highly influential parent-teachers associations. Where China has only one real way of making policy, the United States has at least fifty different highly decentralized educational policy making systems, most of them independent of national influence. It was therefore difficult for the Delegation, composed of educators familiar with a decentralized decision-making process, to readily comprehend how China's centralized approach to education is implemented among nine-hundred million people with such impressive uniformity. But for all the appearances of streamlined efficiency that their unified system gives, the Chinese do occasionally have problems persuading provincial authorities to conform. Low level cadre, who are responsible for day-to-day local administration and who receive instructions relayed from Peking, must live among and seek support from local citizens. Balancing these pressures is often an extremely delicate task.

## Educational Organization

The highest level governmental educational organ is the Ministry of Education in Peking, which reports to the State Council (China's national cabinet.) The education budget is set by the State Council, the body which makes overall manpower training decisions for the country (for example, how many mechanical engineers are needed). The Ministry of Education translates these manpower training requirements into provincial directives which in turn are given by provincial bureaus to the schools under their control.

The Ministry has six major offices organized on a functional basis. It operates with a staff that is smaller than the staffs of offices of education

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in some American states! The provincial bureau of education carries out the functions of planning and control. It is responsible, among other things, for screening and forwarding budgetary requests from the school districts to the Ministry. It also coordinates with the Communist Youth League the after-school activities of students. County and district organizations (a) develop curriculum (b) assign personnel (c) administer and prepare budgets and (d) coordinate adult and continuing education. Individual schools request annual modifications of their share of the district or commune education budget, and evaluate personnel. There is no doubt that the function of each level is to control what is below and in turn to be controlled by the level above it. This results in what seems to be an efficient system of resource allocation.

### Politics and Curriculum

Curriculum at all levels is clearly undergoing a period of review and potential change. In the wake of the fall of the "Gang of Four," there is a movement to advance science, to return to examinations for admission to secondary and higher education, and to establish higher standards. It also appears clear, however, that any changes in curriculum will not be as radical or widespread as one might expect from the rhetoric. What is most impressive is the speed with which China is able to integrate new national policy into curriculum development. At the 11th National Party Conference in the summer of 1977, Chairman Hua Kuo-feng sounded the current theme of modernization of science and technology. A national conference was held in November 1977, while the Delegation was in China, which set specific goals for this modernization. By the time the group left China, the Ministry of Education had already assembled teachers from all over the country to develop unified standard teaching texts and instructional materials. It is expected that the new materials will be in the schools by the beginning of the 1978-79 school year!

### Labor in the Countryside

Certain changes may be underway in the program of sending urban middle school graduates "down" to the countryside for two years or more of labor after completion of middle school (high school). The Delegation came across repeated examples of dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the program. The group met some students who expressed their desire to go straight into higher education after middle school; with some exceptions the parents echoed this hope as well; and one commune leader—who should have benefited from increased production by large numbers of urban youth on work teams—was visibly disdainful of the entire idea and testified that the five-hundred students she had received had added nothing to the commune's year end production totals.

### Admissions Examinations and Quotas

It will take until the mid-1980s before China is able to graduate a class of college students who have gone through middle school and higher education without being influenced—and held back—by the anti-intellectualism of the era of the "Gang of Four." As such, the full effects of new policies, including admissions, will be felt gradually by the society. But even in this sensitive area, the mere fact that admissions examinations have been reintroduced does not represent an abandonment of China's commitment to open education. For the forseeable future, test results will not be the only basis on which enrollment decisions are made. Class background will still be a factor, as will ideology. Peer recommendations will remain very important. The Chinese will continue to impose quotas favoring rural and ethnic groups, as they have since 1972. In time, as they are able to provide

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better and more facilities, they will be able to do away with quotas. For the present, only 20 to 30 percent of the students entering higher education will be selected directly from middle school graduates who pass the exams. The rest of China's crop of new graduates will still have to spend a minimum of two years on a commune, in a factory, or in the army before being considered for college.

### China's Educational Goals Compared to the United States

China has specific goals in its educational philosophy which can usefully be compared to the goals of education in the United States. Among those principles are, first, the Chinese concept of combining education with labor. In practice this means that Chinese students are actually involved in real-life situations while they are learning. This is relatively similar to what American educators refer to as "learning by doing," an idea which is hampered in part in the U.S. by constraints against child labor, by union regulations, etc.

A second educational goal in China is to make students serve the system of proletarian politics. This contrasts to the American way, in which the system is geared as much as practicable to serve the particular needs of each student. Each class of Chinese students is supposed to become a homogeneous group of socially conscious workers. The Chinese therefore stress the common moral, physical and intellectual development of their students. American educators also seek to promote well-rounded development, but for the very different purpose of educating a student body of unique individuals, no two of which are the same.

### The Use of Group Norms, Models, and Symbols

Chinese education makes extensive and deliberate use of symbols and models to instill ideal forms of behavior in students. Mao Tse-tung, Hua Kuo-feng, the student-worker-soldier Lei Feng and others are symbolized in portraits, cartoons, songs and dances, catchwords and slogans as well as in styles of dress, gestures and manners. Models and symbols alike are found in profusion in a Chinese classroom, each embodying or representing an ideal which students must learn while in school. Similarly, negative symbols (such as the "Gang of Four") are also often employed to indicate patterns which should not be emulated. Education in the United States, on the other hand, no longer features universal models and symbols. America is too multi-cultured to identify a clear-cut role model which is acceptable to all. As a result, the "popular" models which do exist are found outside the classroom: on television, in sports arenas and behind political podiums. Moreover, models in the United States arise spontaneously and uncritically, while in China they are selected in a precise manner and at the highest levels of government. The United States does have a national educational review panel which strives periodically to express the goals of American education, but it does not go very far.

### A Final Note

The Delegation's eighteen-day trip did much to reinforce the members' commitment to the values of the American educational system. There really is a significant difference between valuing the individual and valuing the group, between allowing both success and failure rather than conformity, and between providing self-determination rather than requiring selflessness. The Delegation was impressed by the contributions of China's politicized educational system to China's progress, yet the members returned with renewed dedication to the system of education in a democracy.

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# WINGSPREAD

The building Frank Lloyd Wright called Wingspread, situated on a rolling prairie site just north of Racine, Wisconsin, was designed in 1938 as a residence for the Johnson family. In 1960, through the gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Johnson, it became the headquarters of The Johnson Foundation and began its career as an educational conference center.

In the years since, it has been the setting for many conferences and meetings dealing with subjects of regional, national, and international interest. It is the hope of the Foundation's trustees that Wingspread will take its place increasingly as a national institution devoted to the free exchange of ideas among people.

The rolling expanse of the Midwestern prairies was considered a natural setting for Wingspread. In the limitless earth the architect envisioned a freedom and movement. The name Wingspread was an expression of the nature of the house, reflecting aspiration through spread wings - a symbol of soaring inspiration.



*The Johnson Foundation encourages the examination of a variety of problems facing the Midwest, the Nation, and mankind. In the belief that responsible analyses and proposals should reach a substantial audience, The Johnson Foundation assists in the publication of various papers and reports. Publication, of course, does not imply approval.*

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