

Børge Bakken: *Kunnskap og moral. Om utdanningsreform i dagens Kina* (Knowledge and Moral: On Educational Reform in China Today). Department of Sociology, Report No. 1, University of Oslo, 1989. 266 pp.

The reforms in Chinese education after the death of Mao Zedong have been less successful than the reforms in many other fields, and both Chinese and Western scholars have pointed out a number of serious problems inherent in the elitist educational model of the 1980s. Bakken shows no mercy in his analysis of the outcome of the reform process, which he describes, borrowing a phrase from a peasant quoted in the *People's Daily*, as a "backward reform". Based on a rich selection of Chinese sources as well as on personal observations from three years of study in China, he points out the heavy urban bias of the reform, the concentration of resources in elite education, the rigid and obsolete teaching methods, the increasing number of losers and dropouts and a host of other problems aggravated by the post-Mao reforms.

Bakken follows Susan Shirk in seeing the basic dilemma in selection and evaluation inside the Chinese educational system as the schism between virtuocracy and meritocracy, or, to use an older phrase, between red and expert. The examination system introduced after 1977 is, of course, a manifestation of the strongly meritocratic orientation of the post-Mao reforms, but Bakken shows that the "reign of virtue" never totally ended. In the 1980s many students began to feel that the moral standards and ideals of the CCP had become outdated. As it became possible to climb up the school

ladder on the basis of academic merits alone, the schools lost much of their control over students' careers and, thereby, over their thoughts and behavior. The authorities then tried to regain their moral and ideological hold over the students by adapting their methods of control to the new conditions. In the most original section of the book Bakken shows how the teachers' moral and political evaluation of the students was objectified and rationalized in order to integrate it with the general meritocratic trend. The authorities set up an elaborate system of moral evaluation and equal competition in order to quantitatively measure the students' moral standard. In the selection to key schools, universities and jobs, preference was given to students who had been awarded prizes for good behavior. In this way moral evaluations still exert a considerable influence on students' careers. The virtuocratic mobility model thus survived the meritocratic wave, but in a revised form.

In Bakken's view the dualism between meritocratic and virtuocratic patterns of mobility is mollified by the traditional Chinese concept of *guanxi*, the network of personal connections. He sees *guanxi* as a flexible element in the evaluation and mobility process making it possible for some individuals to evade rigid bureaucratic control. The importance of *guanxi* for social mobility is one example of the traditional elements in Chinese education. Bakken argues against the views of some Chinese reformers, like Su Shaozhi, who see traditional features in present day China as remnants from a feudal past which will gradually be wiped out as the reforms are more fully implemented. Instead, he uses Andrew G. Walder's concept of "neo-traditionalism" to point out that traditional behavior patterns (teaching and learning methods, interpersonal relations, etc.) have been revitalized by the reforms: the tendency to make girls leave school at an early age is an effect of the contract system in agriculture, for example, just as the mindless memorization of texts is an effect of the new examination system.

The book is uncompromising in its unmasking of official rhetoric about modernization, entrepreneurship, new mobility patterns, etc., and is studded with interesting examples, from Chinese propaganda as well as from real life, of some of the more bizarre effects of the reforms. In the light of the 1989 student demonstrations, the detailed description of the ideological "crisis" among the students

and the desperate efforts of the schools to reestablish some kind of political-ideological control system is particularly interesting.

One objection could be that the picture painted of Chinese education in the 1980s is more gloomy than the realities (which are bad enough). Bakken has chosen to give more credence to reports on failures and problems than on reports on the success of certain reforms and tends to ignore that the 1980s also witnessed a raising of academic standards in urban schools and in universities, an improvement of the qualifications of the teaching force, the establishment of a vocational education system and, most importantly, a rehabilitation of the social prestige of education. To see this as a mere "backward reform" is to go a bit too far, in my opinion, although the present problems, particularly in rural education, are frightening. This objection may not be quite fair to the book, however, because it does not claim to present a detached evaluation of the reforms. Its main objective is rather to show how the official Chinese modernization ideology hides the problems in the educational system instead of confronting them, how it preaches social and political unity and the merging of interests across class boundaries while actually fragmentating Chinese society, and how it puts the blame for problems which have actually been created by the reforms on the "backwardness" of parents and teachers.

The book successfully combines a critical sociological method with deep personal insight into the social processes unfolding in the Chinese educational system. It is of current interest also after June 1989 with Chinese papers full of articles stressing the importance of "moral education". The hollowness of most of these articles stands out even more clearly after going through Bakken's study.

Those who do not read Norwegian can acquaint themselves with parts of Bakken's critique in his article in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 19 and 20 (January and July 1988), pp. 127-163.

Stig Thøgersen
University of Aarhus