Vignette: Training Farmers or Educating Citizens? A Very Brief History of Rural Education in China

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Abstract

Jørgen Delman's Ph.D. thesis "Agricultural Extension in Renshou County, China" (1991) was the result of his return to academia in the late 1980s after he worked for three years at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN in China. It is a detailed study of the complex rural bureaucracy promoting agricultural innovation and change and reflects a deep understanding of how things worked on the ground in those relatively early years of market-oriented rural reforms. It also contributes to a larger story of how 'modern' knowledge over the last century has been transmitted and negotiated between China's urban centers and its countless rural communities. This vignette offers some thoughts on this larger topic.

Keywords: *China; rural education; agricultural education*

Introduction

The term 'rural education' signifies more than simply education taking place in rustic surroundings. Rural education became relevant at a particular point in Chinese history when the discrepancy between urban and rural living conditions, life chances and mentalities grew so significant that it started to dominate the way reform-minded Chinese understood their own society. In this sense, the history of Chinese rural education started in the 1920s, and its continued relevance right up to the present day is due to the fact that the rural-urban divide remains one of the most crucial cleavages in Chinese society.

During the last century, rural education policies and local responses to them have emerged within the tension between education for a rural life based on agriculture, on the one hand, and education for upward social mobility leading out of agriculture and away from the village, on the other hand. The two approaches to rural education

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share much in common with their ambition of spreading basic skills in reading, writing and calculation among the rural population, as well as general knowledge about the world. They also both emphasize character formation as an important purpose of school education, albeit with differences regarding which moral-political values should be promoted. The waters divide, however, when it comes to crucial issues such as national standards for academic quality and teachers' qualifications, the inclusion of local knowledge in the curriculum and whether training in practical skills related to agriculture and rural life should be part of the mission for village schools. Generations of educators have faced a dilemma regarding which education curriculum they should promote. On the one hand, a more 'rural' education that prepared village children specifically for peasant life would freeze or even expand the rural-urban gap and reduce rural children's chances of achieving full citizenship in the attractive urban world. On the other hand, when village schools tried to imitate their urban counterparts and match them academically, they tended to raise village families' expectations about upward social mobility to an unrealistic level, while those children who did not manage to escape the countryside would be alienated from and unprepared for rural life.

Traditional Village Schools and Rural Life

The traditional Chinese village school was not rural in the sense outlined above. Training for adult life was clearly divided between school education and vocational preparation. Elementary education took place in Confucian schools where a teacher taught a small group of boys to read and write through the memorisation of a standardised set of primers and Confucian classics. A lineage or a wealthy family could invite a tutor to teach their sons, and in exceptional cases even their daughters, but quite often, a whole village joined forces to be able to pay a teacher to set up a 'private school' (*sishu*). In the late imperial era, these private schools were supplemented by a limited number of state schools (variously called *yixue* or *shexue*), which were intended to cater to talented children of families who could not afford private education.[1]

The traditional elementary school integrated village children all over the country into the larger Chinese cultural sphere through the inculcation of a Confucian morality, which was seen as universally relevant across time and place. At the same time, it guided its pupils to the foot of the 'ladder of success' (Ho 1962), i.e., the civil service

examination system, through which they might, in theory at least, enter the world of officialdom with all the social benefits and geographical mobility involved. The preparation for these exams took place in academies (*shuyuan*), centers of advanced learning, which for centuries were placed in quite isolated and rustic surroundings and only in late Qing became concentrated in larger cities (Woodside and Elman 1994: 527). As the mission of these academies was defined by their role in the imperial examination system, their teaching and learning clearly pointed towards the macro environment of the empire rather than towards rural needs. Academies lost their relevance after the abolition of the civil service examinations in 1905, but private Confucian schools continued to dominate rural education long after the initiation of modernising reforms, in some villages, right up to the early 1950s.

Vocational training was situated outside the context of Confucian schools and academies. The more formal kind of training took place through apprenticeship. A master-apprentice relation could be validated through a contract, or it could simply be a practical arrangement where handicraft skills were transmitted inside the family, normally from father to son or from uncle to nephew. If the profession demanded it, specialised literacy training could also be involved. Carpenters, blacksmiths, shop assistants, pharmacists, medical doctors and people in a host of other professions were trained in this way. In addition, outside any formal framework, village children would take part in agricultural labour and household chores. In this way, they would learn relevant, often gender specific, agricultural and household skills from their parents, so that they would know how to plant rice, weave a basket and sell goods on the market before they eventually would take over responsibility from the older generation. This kind of situated learning in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) was still the most common way to have acquired practically all agricultural and most other vocational skills when I interviewed villagers in Zouping County, Shandong province, in the 1990s (Thøgersen 2002), and it probably still is in much of rural China.

The Invention of Rural Education in Republican China

Education reforms in late Qing and early Republican China replaced the classic Confucian curriculum with modern subjects imported from Japan and the West. Although the 'new schools' (*xin xuetang*) on the surface were more oriented towards practical use and included subjects such as arithmetic and natural sciences, they were in other ways still far

removed from rural realities due to their obvious roots in modern and, as contemporary critics often pointed out, 'Western' content and categories of knowledge. Traditional schools, the *sishu*, were cheap and flexible. They were not restricted by specific regulations for school buildings or qualification requirements for the teachers, and they had been a part of rural life for as long as anyone could remember. The 'new schools' were much more exclusive, and many villagers could not afford to let their children attend. Enrolment, therefore, grew quite slowly in most rural areas, and many traditional Confucian primary schools survived.

Major reforms of the education system in 1912 and 1922 introduced some practical handicraft skills in primary school and a vocational track in middle school. In this way, the Republican authorities signaled that the school system should go beyond its traditional focus on academic learning and take at least some responsibility for preparing children for their future vocations. However, while these reforms modified the official curriculum, they did not directly address the difference between urban and rural conditions. Even village schools provided their students with the kind of generalised academic knowledge that would, in principle if not in reality, enable them to work their way up the educational ladder and enter jobs in the emerging modern sector. The local environment they lived in was largely ignored and so was their future livelihood in agriculture, handicraft, petty trade, etc.

It was in this context of a school system – radically modernised after Japanese and Western models but out of touch with village life – that the idea of 'rural education' was born. In the late 1920s, Chinese reformers and revolutionaries of different political persuasions turned their attention to the countryside (Hayford 1990). They were angered by continued rural illiteracy and poverty and by an arrogant state that cared little about rural needs. To many of them, the new schools became prime symbols of the urban bias of the emerging Republican state. In the words of Liang Shuming (1931), one of the leading figures in the Rural Reconstruction Movement in the 1930s: 'The result of thirty years of "new education" has been that group after group of village sons have been lured and driven into the cities'. In Liang's eyes, the fact that some rural students managed to enter middle schools did nothing to promote rural development, but rather deprived villages of valuable skills and talent.

Tao Xingzhi, a former student of John Dewey at Columbia, proposed a fundamental reform of rural education:

> Chinese rural education is on the wrong path. It teaches people to leave the country and run to the city. It teaches people to eat rice, not to grow

> it, to wear clothes but not to plant cotton and to build houses rather than planting forests. It teaches people to admire expensive habits and look down on devoting oneself to agriculture. It teaches people to consume, not produce. It teaches farmers' children to become bookworms… In the face of impending disaster, it is imperative that all comrades rein in their horses and find a new road. What is this new road? It is to establish a living education adapted to the actual needs of village life (Tao 1927: 33).

In the same year, Mao Zedong approached the same theme from a class perspective in his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, criticising how '[t]he texts used in the rural primary schools were entirely about urban things and unsuited to rural needs' (Mao 1967 [1927]: 53-54).

Cultural conservative Liang Shuming, American educated liberal Tao Xingzhi and Marxist Mao Zedong could all agree that education in the villages had to adapt to rural children's immediate social, cultural and economic environment. China was at that time, and would be for many years to come, an overwhelmingly agrarian country – their argument went – so the nation's modernisation must include the rural population. To achieve this aim, the organisation of schooling and the content of the curriculum should reflect rural conditions. This line of thought, and not least the practical educational experiments conducted in rural reconstruction projects and in communist base areas, had a deep and lasting influence on Chinese education discourse. Even today, many Chinese educators turn to these intellectual sources when they look for inspiration for solving the problems surrounding rural children's disadvantaged position in the school system.

Rural Education under Mao: Trying Out New Models

After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized power, villagers primarily expected the new government to provide their children with opportunities for upward social mobility through the school system. To satisfy this huge pent-up demand, the government was under considerable pressure to develop regular primary education and even to establish middle schools that were accessible to rural children.

There was a heated debate inside and outside the Party about which educational model to lean on in order to achieve these ambitious aims, and policies shifted several times during the 1950s and early 1960s.[2] Up until 1957, the main trend in CCP education policies was to follow the Soviet model and restore a regular and standardised school system with a unified curriculum emphasising academic skills that could be

tested through exams. The urban bias of this model became particularly blatant in 1953, when it was announced that future state funding for education would be concentrated in regular urban 'model' schools, while rural communities were made responsible for funding their own education (Peterson 1997: 34). Until agriculture was collectivised in the late 1950s, there were no established mechanisms for extracting local resources for education purposes, so the central government's decision was a hard blow to rural schools.

Despite this urban bias, educational policies of the early 1950s had some positive results, even in rural areas. By 1957, on the eve of the radical phase of educational reforms, access to basic education had been significantly expanded, and it had become a social norm that peasant boys should finish at least lower primary school. Village schools were often set up in quite primitive surroundings, and most of them had only one teacher, who was often poorly trained, but the most important thing for ordinary peasants was that schools were open to their children and they were affordable (Thøgersen 2002: 139-165). However, the Soviet-inspired model left the larger issue of adapting schools to rural life unresolved.

From 1957, Chinese education policies entered a more radical phase, which lasted until the reintroduction of university entrance exams in 1977-78. In a rural context, this period saw repeated, but substantially different, attempts of combining education with production and transmitting agricultural skills. The first model, dominant during the Great Leap and the first half of the 1960s, was based on the idea that the primary task of rural schools was to prepare students for life and work in the new socialist collectives and therefore created a particular rural track inside the education system. The Cultural Revolution model, on the other hand, turned against this 'dual track' arrangement and promoted a unified school where all students, regardless of their social origin and academic destination, should 'combine theory and practice'.

A significant example of the Great Leap strategy was the establishment of agricultural middle schools (AMS), which was an ambitious attempt of adapting rural schooling to local needs without increasing state expenditures. AMS mushroomed all over China from 1958 onwards, and again, after a halt during the post-Leap famine, from 1964 on. In these schools, students funded much of their own education through manual labour in agriculture and local industry. This 'half-work half-study' model facilitated a massive expansion of secondary

school enrolment, which was in high demand as an increasing number of rural children finished primary school. The curriculum combined a discount version of what was taught in regular middle schools with courses in agriculture and a substantial amount of productive labour. The limitations of this model soon began to show, however. Villagers were acutely aware that AMS were not 'the real thing'. To rural families, becoming a farmer – even a literate and better trained one – was not the purpose of attending school, so the large majority clearly preferred general middle schools and only entered the AMS as a last resort if all doors to regular schools were closed. It also proved to be hard to combine the learning of new agricultural skills with income-generating work as few teachers were qualified to relate textbook knowledge to actual agricultural production in any meaningful way (Pepper 1996: 305-318; Peterson 1997: 125-133; Thøgersen 2002: 187-201).

During the Cultural Revolution decade, the two-track education system outlined above with one regular, academic stream and another stream for part-time and agricultural school students was criticised as 'bourgeois'. All students, urban as well as rural, should then combine theory with practice and do manual labour to prevent the emergence of a new academic elite out of touch with the masses. The radical leaders abolished the university entrance exam and replaced it with a recommendation system that demanded a few years of practical work experience. Academic success was no longer a potential way out of the village, and this, together with the restrictions on mobility created by the *hukou* system, forced rural students to imagine their own future inside the framework of their collectives. Contrary to what is normally heard in the post-1978 Chinese discourse on Cultural Revolution education, however, this did not mean that schooling became 'useless' (*wu yong*) to all rural students. As Joel Andreas (2004) has argued, middle school education became closely tied to future work opportunities, so students still had strong incentives for studying. Collectivisation and the general modernisation of rural society created a large number of jobs, which were more attractive than working in the fields, and when collectives selected accountants, primary school teachers, barefoot doctors or electricians, they looked for young people who had shown talent in school. However, most schools were unable to find a formula that allowed them to make productive work and theoretical learning mutually reinforcing. In most cases, students' participation in productive agricultural work was driven more by economic and political

considerations than by didactic principles, and its relevance to students' actual learning process was questionable.[3]

The expansion of general education also had several limitations: many locally recruited teachers lacked academic qualifications, school buildings were often in a poor condition and political indoctrination and campaigns impeded teaching and learning. During the almost three decades under Mao Zedong, however, rural education went through a remarkable development, and by 1978, the educational level in Chinese villages had been raised dramatically. Most rural families would now let both their sons and daughters continue as far as junior middle school (which at that time comprised years six and seven), and many went on to high school (years eight and nine). This meant that illiteracy dropped sharply among the younger generation, and most young people achieved basic skills in reading, calculation and science that prepared them for their job roles in the collectives – and later for the rural industrialisation of the 1980s. The expansion of enrolment took place with practically no financial support from the central state. Village communities paid for the new opportunities out of their own pockets and collective agriculture made it possible for them to free resources to build schools and set aside manpower to work as teachers.

Rural Education after Mao

When the national university entrance exam was reintroduced in 1977, it started a chain reaction that deeply affected rural schooling. Counties and townships struggled hard to get as many of their students as possible into college, parents once again saw a chance for their children to gain access to higher education and leave the countryside and teachers had their salaries tied to students' test scores and 'promotion rates' to the next level of schooling. It did not take long before the entire school system worked as one big sorting machine, which streamed children into slow and fast tracks, concentrated available resources in 'key point' (i.e., model) schools in urban centres and placed academically less advantaged students at the back of the classroom from where many would eventually drop out of school. What was presented in the late 1970s as a return to academic quality soon turned into a serious crisis. School fees rose dramatically while the best village teachers were transferred to key point schools in the county seats. Around 1980, rural middle schools all over China closed, and it was impossible for local communities to resist this trend (Pepper 1996: 491-511). The state

reacted in 1986 by passing a law on nine years compulsory education. However, this was not accompanied by the substantial investments that would be needed to generate more equity between rich (mostly urban) and poor (mostly rural) areas. Only with the revised law in 2006 did the central government promise to waive tuition fees and 'offer equal education to children no matter whether they live in the city or in the countryside'.[4]

During the reform period, education planners, parents and students have consistently seen education mainly as a route out of the village, so there has been little room for local variation within the nine years of compulsory education or in the academic high school. In this sense, the schooling that goes on in villages and townships has been detached from its local environment and is now fully oriented towards the national – and even global – labour market.

Will Rural Education Disappear?

Does this mean that 'rural education' is no longer a relevant category? In some respects, the answer is affirmative. It no longer makes sense to look at rural schools as places where students are trained specifically for agriculture and rural life. The present level of geographical mobility of labour makes it increasingly uncertain whether children born in a village will end up as farmers.

Seen in another perspective, however, the term is as relevant as it was almost 100 years ago. The continued existence of the *hukou* system makes the rural-urban divide highly important for rural people's lives and for the education of their children. Migrants with rural *hukou* have problems getting access to affordable schools of a reasonable quality in the cities where they live and work. The wide gap in wealth between rural and urban areas still creates huge differences in the quality of equipment, school buildings and teachers. This all works to the disadvantage of rural children in the breakneck competition for access to the best universities.

Apart from the issue of social equity, however, rural education is also important in another way. While practically all rural parents want their children to get a higher education and land an urban job, many will not achieve these goals, and even those who get a university diploma may face unemployment and find themselves forced to go back to their village. The education system has prepared them poorly for this fate. Chinese researchers are therefore, once again, engaged in a debate

about whether the purpose of education is to 'leave the countryside' (*li nong*) or 'serve the countryside' (*wei nong*).[5] As the history of the last century shows, there is no simple answer to this question.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of elementary education in late imperial China, see in particular Rawski (1979) and Leung (1994).
2. The debate on education and the ups and downs of the early reforms are excellently covered in Pepper (1996) and Peterson (1997).
3. I base this conclusion mainly on my interviews in Zouping. For a more positive view of the achievements of this aspect of Cultural Revolution rural education, see Han 2001.
4. 'China adopts amendment to Compulsory Education Law', http://english.gov.cn/2006-06/30/content_323219.htm, accessed 28 May 2012.
5. For a review of some of this debate, see Zhuang and Wang (2011).

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