

Pinocchio's Funland: Schools without Exams during the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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04/08/2001

Cobb 403

Workshop for High School History Courses

It is really my pleasure to have the opportunity to meet you and talk to you here.

In the last several years, I interviewed five hundred people from 98 schools in China and collected documents in an attempt to understand how the Cultural Revolution played out in schools. I published a series of articles about my investigation and research on the Revolution. Today, my topic is "Pinocchio's Funland: Schools without Exams during the Chinese Cultural Revolution."

The school system in China has a long history. More than two thousand years ago Chinese established schools and the concomitant "teacher-student" relationship, which links both sides through institutional methods such as lecturing, testing, grading, degree awarding, and so on.

As the spiritual and academic leader through pre-modern times, Confucius was a teacher, not a religious leader. According to tradition, Confucius taught three thousand students, among whom the seventy-two were singled out for recognition, their names and anecdotes appearing in Confucian classics, and their academic and personal relations serving as role models for thousands of years.

This is a remnant of a Chinese exam paper that dates to the year 408. This paper was

unearthed in Xinjiang, an area at center Asia, which is very dry, so we still can read it sixteen hundred years later.

There are two parts in the test. One part is identification and one part is short essay. One can see that the exam taker wrote two short essays: one is about the origin of Chinese characters; one is about how to build city walls.

From the paper we can know it was a test for a degree named “xiu CAI,” an academic degree, which literally means “excellent talent.”

Started from two thousand years ago, Chinese emperors hold exams to select their officers until 1905, in that year the civil service exam was abolished. West style schools were established in China in the early twentieth century. Almost all of the first-rate universities and high schools are public schools and are tuition free. So entrance exams for admission of those schools were very competitive. Test scores were the most important condition, if it were not the only condition for admission. In the 1930’s, a high school in Suzhou, a city near Shanghai, was very proud that they rejected the son of Jiang Jieshi, the president, because his scores were not good enough.

After 1949, the party controlled all schools. In 1957, 100,000 people were labeled so-called “rightists” and were punished. Some of them were sent to labor camps. Among the 1,000,000 people, at least one-third is teachers. However, students still need to take exams in order to attend middle schools and colleges, even though family background and so-called “political conditions” were emphasized much more than exam scores. The middle school entrance exams were held in each county. The university/college entrance examination is a national event.

In this kind of background, the eleven years, 1966-1977, in which the school exam system was abolished, are very unusual in Chinese history and can be considered a "revolution," if we define a revolution merely by the degree of departure from accepted convention.

In May of 1966, Mao Zedong, usually called "Chairman Mao," issued a directive to start the Proletarian Cultural Revolution for the declared purpose to purge the capitalist road takers in the party and academicians, and to eliminate all capitalist ideas and to build a completely new society. (Quote.) "We want a revolution on education. We will not allow the capitalist intellectuals to rule our schools any more." (End quote.)

On June 2, 1966, regular class ceased in all colleges and high schools. On June 18, the Party announced to abolish the national University/college entrance examinations. Consequently, other exams were abolished as well.

From 1966 to 1977, there was no exam in China's school for 11 years.

You may have read Pinocchio's story when you were little. The story is originally written in Italian and has been translated into many languages. Pinocchio is a puppet made by a woodcarver. A fairy changes him into a real boy. His father, the woodcarver, sent him to school. But Pinocchio does not like that. He goes to a place named "Funland." There is no school, no class, and no teachers, of course, no exams in the "Funland". Plus, they can eat lollipop and candy cane as much as they want. At the beginning, Pinocchio and his friends really have a lot of fun in the Funland.

Pinocchio is a fictitious character. But during the Cultural Revolution, for a hundred million Chinese teenagers, the Funland became true. They did not have to take exams for eleven years. They were liberated from the suppression of exams. They established a

new organization named “Red Guards” and controlled every school. Actually, starting from the summer of 1966, all colleges and high schools in China closed class for three to five years. More than lollipop and candy, the Red Guard students received free train tickets to Beijing to meet Chairman Mao. On eight occasions Mao met totally ten millions of the Red Guard students at Tiananmen Square. Students could also take free trains; buses to travel cross the country in the name of “spreading the revolutionary fire.”

During the Revolution, a Lenin’s quotation was used often. Quote: “Revolutions are great the carnivals of revolutionaries.” It seemed to be true for Chinese teenagers in 1966 and 1967. In those pictures published by Chinese authorities at that time, we can see that the teenagers were really excited and happy after the elimination of the examination system.

In Pinocchio’s story, the children who play all day and do not study in Funland became donkeys. Worse, those donkeys’ skins later are used to make drums. Obviously, this unrealistic threat is a way that the author used to deliver a message to teach children.

We are not little kids. We won’t be scared by such a threat. Today, I would like to examine what really happened in the Funland that the Cultural Revolution brought in. Besides the carnival-like side of the Revolution, we need to know the unreported sides of the Revolution.

1. Teachers were persecuted seriously

Teachers were labeled “capitalist intellectuals” and were considered the target of the revolution. In the summer of 1966, students were mobilized to attack their teachers verbally and physically. In the 96 schools reached by my investigation, 29 educators were beaten to death and 36 committed suicide after being insulted and humiliated. Some

names of victims have been lost. When violence spread from inside school to the outside, more people were killed like teachers.

I put together a chart with the data I have collected. This chart shows the daily death in Beijing. From August 24 to September 10, more than 1,000 people were killed. As I have mentioned, on eight occasions Mao met with ten millions of Red Guard at Tiananmen Square in 1966. Those rallies were like great carnivals. But at the same time, the killing reached its peak between Mao's first and second meeting with million Red Guards in Beijing.

However, the killed teachers' stories have not been reported during and after the Revolution.

This is the first teacher who was beaten to death by her students in Beijing. She died after being tortured for three hours on campus.

This is the poster that students put on the wall of her home. They accused her of being a "poisonous snake."

Mao Zedong's two daughters were previously her students.

Two weeks after her death, on the Tiananmen Gate, when Mao met 1 million Red Guards, this girl from her school, presented a Red Guard armband to Mao. Violence spread into whole country, every school.

The Red Guards even made a song to force teachers to sing. Here is the song.

Similar things also happened in universities and colleges. At Beijing University, 10 percent of professors were tortured to death at so called “struggle session” or committed suicide after they were tortured in the first three years of the Revolution.

During the Cultural Revolution, teachers in China suffered unprecedented brutality and humiliation. As one result, teachers were not able to do anything to protest the new education policies.

2. Moral standard was changed

In 1968, Sixteen million teenagers in the cities were sent to the countryside. The propaganda said it was to eliminate the gap between the city and the countryside and it was an important step to the communist society.

After all colleges in China did not enroll new students for six years, in 1972 they started a new way of admission that differed from the old: first, only those who had worked in a factory or countryside for two years were allowed to apply for college; secondly, political loyalty was considered the priority instead of the test scores; thirdly, it was the local communist party branch who decided who could go to colleges instead the education department of the central government.

Many young people wanted to go to college, not only for the education but also for a job after graduation. But the number of the college students were less than before the Revolution. In addition, there was no objective standard to judge political loyalty. Therefore, some cadres used their power or connections to get their children into colleges; some people without power bribed the cadres to get the admission. Thus, a new term appeared into Chinese language: "back door." Some people went to college through the

"back door," the secret improper way. Meanwhile, since many new students did not reach the level of high school, and the colleges had to reduce their level of classes.

In 1972, Chinese government ordered a new admission of college and it was considered one of the most important institutional changes the Revolution brought. First, students did not need to take entrance exam. Political loyalty was considered the priority instead of the test score. Second, it was the local communist party branch that decides who can go to college instead of the education department.

Chinese authority reduced twenty percent college graduate's starting salary. But because those who could not go to college also make much less money than before the Revolution, the gap was still there and even got bigger.

Many young people wanted to go to college, not only for the education but also for a job after graduation.

In this case, high officials used their power to get their children into colleges; some people without power bribed the Party cadres to get the admission. Thus, a new phrase appeared into daily language: "take the back door." Some people attended college through the "back door," the secret and improper way.

Things were worse in secondary and elementary schools. In elementary and high school, students spent a lot of time play around. Because of shortage of papers, two or three students had to share one textbook. At that time, people said that the way to tell where the school was to look for the building with broken glass. The teenagers broke the windows for fun.

(Have you read this book? "Wild Swans." The author is from China, Sichuan province. According to the book, the author's father was a high-ranking cadre in Sichuan province. This is a 500 page long book. The author used only three lines to describe the process, which is easy for her but could be as difficult as crossing the Great Wall for others. Let's see how the author received her college admission. (read) It seems that the author did not realize the unfairness at all.)

3. Values of knowledge were changed

Qinghua University in China is just like MIT in the States. In 1973, some teachers there complained that Qinghua University should change name into Qinghua Middle School or even Qinghua Elementary Schools because some freshmen even did not know what the ratio of circumference of a circle to its diameter, 3.14159, was about, which should be learned in the third grade. But their voices were suppressed immediately as "counterrevolutionary" things.

When some educators tried having an informal and simple college entrance exam for those who had been recommended by local branch of the Party In 1973, they held an informal simple entrance exam for those who had been recommended by local branch of the Party. A man in Liaoning Province could not do the test well and turned in an almost blank test paper. He wrote a letter on the back of the test paper, attacking the examination as "a backlash of the capitalists in education." Mao's wife said: (quote) "the author of the blank test paper is a hero." (End quote.) And his story was immediately on the front page of newspapers. This man was considered a hero by Mao's wife and was appointed as a president of a college later.

In 1973, in a small town named Mazhenfu, an English teacher gave eighth grade students

a test. A student got only 6 of 100 points but wrote four lines on the paper: “I am a Chinese, I don’t need to learn English. Without learning ABC, I am still a revolutionary and will bury the American imperialism.” The principal of the school criticized the girl. Unfortunately the girl committed suicide in a pond. Mao’s wife heard of the story and ordered to arrest the teacher and the principal. They were in jail until Chairman Mao died in 1976.

Since then ever, nobody dared to mention the examinations anymore, even though it was obvious that the new way brought more inequality and was ruining the schools.

Through the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong tried to establish a “new society” in which there is no exam in schools, no market or commodity production, even no money for economy. He told people that the “revolutionary new men” should not have any selfishness.

In 1966, when the radio broadcasted party’s decision on abolishment of college entrance exams, students had a parade to celebrate it. Many students thought they were liberated from the hell of the examination. But later they felt that they had been deceived and fooled. But people could do nothing until Chairman Mao died.

After Chairman Mao Died in 1976. New Party leader Deng Xiaoping started repudiating the Cultural Revolution cautiously. The two great steps he took first for his reform were restoring farmers market and recovered the college entrance examination. The former measure improved the food supply in short time. The latter measure changed the lives of Chinese teenagers.

Pinocchio's Funland disappeared. The University/college entrance exam is like a sword that hung over the head of high school students and they have to study very hard for the exam that is held only once a year.

When I took the national college entrance exam, I received the highest scores. My picture was on the front page of newspapers. But I did not want to mention that for years, not only because I thought it was just an exam, it was not real thing.

But one day a professor told me that I should not think that way. She joked: You received more scores than other, just like an Olympic medal winner may have 0.1 point more than others. You don't have to feel embarrassed.

I considered her opinion. She was right. First, it is not some thing about me. It is a institution which we all live with. Second, the exam system is related our values of knowledge and fairness in our society. So, we should discuss the issue very seriously. It is one reason why I talked about the exam-related stories that Chinese people experienced 30 years ago.

Thank you.

When I recorded those brutal attacks against educators during the Cultural Revolution, I felt how faint, fragile, and vulnerable our civilization is, no matter how long its history is. But when the traditional way came back, it seemed to be still powerful. Between people and the institution, probably, the institution, always shape and change people, no matter it is with exams or without exams.

