

Conflicts Surrounding Rural Education Reforms In China

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In 1995, China established the Education Law of the People's Republic for the purpose of reforming an outdated education system. These reforms mainly targeted urban education leaving rural education distressed. Starting in 2004, the Chinese government and Ministry of Education set in motion a new set of reforms targeting the disparities facing rural education. These reforms included a nine-year compulsory free education, an increase in teacher's salaries, re-construction of run-down schools and programs targeting China's rural illiteracy problem. Billions of dollars are being spent on these new reforms, which is a vital step in addressing some of the disparities. Unfortunately, there are serious issues surrounding the reforms and rural education, which are still not being addressed.

Based on research, personal interviews conducted while teaching in China, and viewing first hand rural schools and villages, I will argue that the current financial reforms do not address issues that could prevent China's rural education from becoming equal with its urban counterpart.

“Due to inconsistencies in Chinese classification system for urban, rural and city populations, data on city growth and rural populations are problematic in China,”¹ For the purpose of this paper we will define rural as small agricultural townships and villages, with less than 20,000 population.

In the early 1990s, the Chinese government set forth a goal of making nine-year compulsory education universal by the end of the century and formulated a set of policies to

¹ *China Statistical Yearbook*. 1998. – Data on city growth and rural-urban migration are highly problematic in China. There are gross inconsistencies in Chinese classification system for urban, rural and city populations.

- Chinese urbanization statistics use several different methods of classification
- Definitions of “urban” and “rural” are constantly changing.
- Boundaries of town and cities are frequently defined according to political and administrative considerations.
- There are frequent reclassifications.

A growing number of people do not live where they are officially registered.

achieve that goal. Their definition of “universal” was that 85 percent of all school children would be able to receive public education for at least nine years.² According to statistics researched in 2002, by Albert Park, Columbia University, China’s educational goals were gradually achieved by 2000, with only 20 percent of China’s children still not receiving compulsory education. These 20 percent not receiving education were mostly in the rural areas of China, consisting of 65 percent of China’s population. At the completion of the study, near the end of 2000, China had 440,284 rural primary schools consisting of 85 million students not receiving compulsory education.³ This study did not address children not registered in schools, which include the children of migrant workers.

The Government and the Ministry of Education have taken the first step in addressing some of the disparities: cost of tuition, school reconstruction, and economic hardship. Where they fall short is the need to address the extreme poverty, century old cultural values and the migration of the rural population.

In 2005, a survey of 4,128 residents in rural areas, conducted by Horizon Group, a leading firm in market research showed that only 27.2 percent cared about education for the young. The other 81.8 percent were more focused on agricultural policy, economic development and the security of migrant workers.⁴ In China’s rural past, education has not been the priority, but the fight against poverty and for survival dates back to the days of Confucius (551-479 B.C.)

History

Family piety and harsh laws dating back some 2500 years have shaped the character of rural China. Confucius and his teachings had a great impact on the Chinese culture. Education, education entrance exams and family values have been the thread that has held China together over the centuries. Though Confucius professed that in education there should be no social status, after his death, a class of elite scholar officials grew to a position of dominance over the entire Chinese social system. Confucianism became the official state philosophy and sets of civil service exams were created to assure a dominant position on the scholar-official within the

² Chinese Government. Ministry of Education, *“Survey of the Educational Reform and Development in China.”*

³ Park, pp. 1-4.

⁴ Horizon Group.

government and society. The first Imperial University (124 B.C) was established in the Western Han dynasty, based on the entrance exams and Confucius thought.⁵ These exams stayed in place until 1904, near the end of the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911). Confucian philosophy regarding filial piety became a solidified cultural norm, which affects Chinese thinking today. Starting in 1949, with establishment of the Peoples Republic, Confucianism was stifled for forty years, but remains ingrained within the culture and is making a recent comeback.

Legalism first appeared in China's history during the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C). The first emperor of China persecuted Confucian thought, but with his reign only lasting 30 years, Confucianism resurfaced in the new Han dynasty (206 B.C- 8). Legalism established three specific concepts during the Qin dynasty that still affect and shape China's culture today: standardization of thought, harsh punishments and a central and regional government. The idea of standardized thought affects all aspects of Chinese life. Once officials in government make a policy, the Chinese people are to follow it without hesitation. This blind following remained during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978) and was enforced through the use of harsh punishments. The establishment of a central and regional government allowed for opportunities for abuse and corruption.⁶ This abuse and corruption are still present in local rural areas and are one cause of rural education disparities.

During China's Imperial past, education was only available to the wealthy, children of corrupt officials and a few rural residents, who if fortunate enough to make it through the civil service exams, were allowed opportunities for advancement to the official appointments. With China's population consisting of eighty percent rural and impoverished, few had any opportunity for advancement, creating a country of massive illiteracy. Finally, in 1904, during the Qing Dynasty the civil service exams were eliminated. The Qing government set in place new reforms in education based on a more westernized model. The Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911, and a republican government was established. During this time education went through a number of experimental reforms, but no standardization of education took hold.

In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established. Though not in power until 1949, its leaders voiced ideas about the "correct form" of education. In 1926, during the Hunan

⁵ Theodore de Barry *et al.*, pp. 18, 111.

⁶ Theodore de Barry, pp. 137-140.

Provincial Committee conference, social injustices that existed in China's education system were publicly addressed and a demand for free education for the rural poor was voiced. The Committee declared, "The rural poor bore the cost of education, but they are deprived of educational opportunities. The fruits of the poor peasants' labor enabled a small privileged group to enjoy the benefit of education. But this small privileged group then turned around to deceive and bully the rural poor, and label them as ignorant and stupid."⁷ From 1911 through 1949, European, American and Japanese education models found their place throughout China. Shortly after the victory of the CCP in 1949, the Chinese were ready for a more solid model of education. With motivation driven for the need for technology, China adopted the Soviet model of the Unified Labor School system. Creating a work force of children versus education, creating massive illiteracy throughout the rural areas. A growing separation between rural and urban education and income became extreme and inequality between rich and poor overtook the country. The idea of free education for the rural poor that Mao and the CCP voiced held little validity after they took power.

The CCP officials' focus became the education of their own children, who resided in urban areas. Directing resources and quality education towards urban schools further enhanced a huge inequality between rural and urban education. So-called "key schools" were established in each provincial capital and major city, giving easy access to children of bureaucratic parents. "In essence, this key school system was not much different from the *"zong xue"*, the old school system set up by the different royal families throughout Chinese history for privileged children."⁸

In 1958, the Great Leap Forward widened the gap between rural and urban education. There were three main inequalities: inequality between urban and rural education, between workers and farmers, and between mental and manual labor. The peasants believed that the government had become aware of the disparities of the rural areas and at first welcomed the policies of the Great Leap. From 1956 to 1958 a number of new schools were built and more resources were allocated to rural areas. Within the CCP Party there were two factions; urban conservative policy makers and the pre-Leap rural policy makers. Eventually, the conservatives gained power and cut back on spending on rural education. Between 1949 and 1966, rural

⁷ Han, p. 23.

⁸ Han, p. 24.

education was neglected and remained inadequate in terms of quality of education. Many rural children never attended primary school and even fewer had opportunities to attend middle or high school.

According to a study by the Asian Development Bank on rural education, there were three factors accounting for the lack of enrollment by rural children. First, there were difficult entrance exams required for primary school children. Students who made it into school found it difficult to pass the exams required for promotion to higher grades. The exams had two objectives, to weed out the less talented and not overload the limited space in schools. The second factor accounting for the lack of enrollment by rural children was that most rural families could not afford the cost of tuition, books and other miscellaneous expenses. Third, many rural families needed their children at home to help out with chores.⁹ Boys were needed in the fields to help with the harvest and the girls were needed to keep the house in order. These same issues continue to plague rural China today.

In 1966, after the collapse of the Great Leap Forward, Mao began to attack his own officials, dismantle the government, persecute the intellectuals and formed the Red Guard. Thus began the Cultural Revolution, which was disastrous to the education system in China. Mao adopted four goals for the Cultural Revolution: to surround himself with leaders more faithful to his revolution ideals, to rectify the CCP, to offer China's youth a revolutionary experience, and to establish policy change in health care and education, creating a less elitist government system.¹⁰

Corruption and abuse of power became widespread among the rural Communist leaders. Bent on pleasing their superiors, villagers were forced into working long hours, and formal education became nearly extinct. Dongping Han, author of *The Unknown Cultural Revolution*, states:

“The submissive culture of the abused was formed over a long time, and it was started in the family, in the upbringing of children. In a way, this culture of the abused was a factor

⁹ Han, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Wills, p. 356.

contributing to the problem of official abuse of power. In the final analysis, officials abused their power in part because the abused let them get away with it time and time again.”¹¹

This allowance of abuse by the authorities is still present in today’s rural culture.

Near the end of Mao’s life, primary education had achieved new heights throughout rural China. Primary education was strengthened through the formation of commune schools, which advocated Maoist thought. Though higher education suffered in both urban and rural areas, the education system didn’t see its extreme downfall until the reforms ushered in by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), Mao’s predecessor.

During this time a number of schools closed in rural areas due to a law passed stating that rural students could only attend approved government schools. As a result enrollment dropped, because students were unable to attend local schools. The cost of tuition increased, along with financial pressure on villagers after the government created the agricultural decentralization in 1978. This provided for a financial compensation system based on output, so families prioritized working versus education.¹² This mindset in the rural areas is still very present, especially in the more impoverished areas, based on survival.

In 1995, China introduced the Education Law of the People’s Republic of China.¹³ Though many of the new reforms targeted rural education, many of the reforms only were applied to urban schools. Problems within the law were:

- Article 14: Secondary education and education at lower levels shall be administered by the local people’s government under the guidance of the State Council. Unfortunately many of the local governments were corrupt and not monitored closely, attaching illegal fees to education.
- Article 20: The State will apply a national education examination for the propose of attending university. The national examination dictates middle through senior school education. Poorer families have few resources to hire tutors or extra help in order to get higher scores, leaving rural students at a disadvantage compared to their urban counter parts.

¹¹ Han, p. 17.

¹² Mok, p. 191.

¹³ Chinese Government. Ministry of Education. “Education Law.”

- Article 34: The State applies a system of qualifications, posts and appointments for teachers, enhances the quality of teachers and builds a strong contingent of teachers by means of examination, awards and training. Many of the teachers in rural areas are poorly qualified.
- Poor unqualified teachers can receive a basic certificate of teaching, giving them the right to teach, providing they teach in a rural area.
- Article 38: The State, society, schools and other institutions of education shall carry out education for the disabled in light of their physical and mental conditions. Many of the students with disabilities are ignored within the state system, leaving them with poor education opportunities.
- Article 54: The proportion of educational appropriations in gross national product allocated by the State shall gradually rise, as the national economy develops and financial revenue increases. As the GDP increases local governments need to increase education budgets. However, China's economic development is imbalanced and many counties do not have the ability to invest in education because of their own financial deficits.
- Article 57: Taxation authorities shall collect in full the extra charges of education funds, all of which shall be controlled by the local administrative departments of education. This allows for corrupt township officials to add fabricated charges onto educational fees.

The Chinese government along with the Ministry of Education reviewed the Education Laws and added reforms starting in 2004, which specifically target disparities in rural China. According to a report by the Asian Development Bank, in 2003, the PCR had made significant progress in extending rural education coverage, but major challenges remain. Disadvantaged communities are least able to mobilize and manage resources to provide quality education; disparities in per-student expenditure have grown too fast at the primary level. Reinforced by poor planning and management, inadequate funding for teachers and learning materials, cost burdens on poor households and low quality of education continue to depress enrollment and

learning outcomes.¹⁴ These new reforms by the Ministry of Education, which are being implemented, are missing some important characteristics of rural China.

Current Reforms, 2004

China is working to reforming the law governing mandatory education for rural students, who currently pay different fees and receive a varying quality of education depending on where they live and their family's financial status. China's Ministry of Education has set three goals to promote education reform in rural areas. These goals include: "promotion of a nine-year free compulsory education for all children in rural areas, to improve the educational quality and reduce the number of dropout students in rural junior middle schools and to rebuild rural schools into training bases to help peasants through adult education programs, reducing China's illiteracy rate".¹⁵

The first step taken by the Ministry of Education is to offer free nine-year compulsory education to disadvantaged rural students. "Free compulsory education will allow rural students tuition free education from primary to middle school (ages 7 to 16) relieving the burden that has been on the parents of rural children. By 2007, all rural students in poverty, whose total family income is below 625 yuan (\$US 75.50)¹⁶ annually, will be exempt from tuition and textbook fees. Poor boarding students will also be offered a living allowance".¹⁷ A \$96 million dollar budget has been approved per year to subsidize the cost of textbooks, which is very low considering China's education population. China will invest another 218 billion yuan (\$ US 27.25 billion) on rural education over the next five years.¹⁸ The Chinese/US Embassy, shows 300 billion yuan (\$ US 37.5 billion) allocated to support rural education development over the next five years.¹⁹ China's financial allocation for education in its GDP rose from 2.5 to 3.41 percent last year and is expected to increase over the next five years. Local governments will draw their own timetables to implement the free education in the localities. All middle schools in rural areas

¹⁴ Hertel and Zhai, p. 3-6.

¹⁵ Chinese Government Official Website. "*Compulsory Education Program in Poverty-stricken Region*".

¹⁶ Current Exchange Rate US\$1.00 = CNY8.0.

¹⁷ Chinese Government Official Website. "Rural Education."

¹⁸ China Education and Research Network.

¹⁹ Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China

are to have new computer classrooms and primary schools satellite teaching programs by 2007. National funding for the reforms of rural education is expected to reach 99 billion yuan (\$ US 12 billion) by 2010.²⁰

A total of 10,000 experimental schools have been set up in the western areas along with school reconstruction. These experimental schools are designed to offer general education, technical education, and programs to address the rural illiteracy problems. This project is estimated to cost 1.34 billion yuan (\$ US 162,319 million) again a small amount compared to the need.

A domestic teacher's exchange program is being implemented; sending better trained teachers to the western Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region to help local educators. Rural teachers are then sent to larger city universities in the east for better training. An increase in rural teacher's salaries is to be allotted throughout counties where wages are below average. Apart from direct financial support, China has abolished the 2,500-year-old agricultural tax²¹ to provide farmers fewer financial burdens.²²

Wealthy people are also being encouraged to support the poor and outside programs like Project Hope have been given access to supporting rural education, along with smaller outside organizations. Minister Zhou of the Ministry of Education has frowned on the idea of profit-making education, discouraging private schools in the more impoverished areas. Zhou has also pushed for creative fund raising ideas.²³

An aggressive reconstruction project has been started to improve schools that are in disrepair. According to the Chinese Government's Official web site, 2000 new primary and junior schools and 1,898 senior schools were either renovated or rebuilt in 2003. Starting in 2004, each county was to be given 14 million yuan to help with school re-construction over the

²⁰ Chinese Government Official Website. "Rural Education."

²¹ Agricultural Tax: A tax levied on each peasant family according to their land and agriculture, dating back to the landlord-gentry class.

²² Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China in the United States Official Website. "*China Pledges to Boost Rural Development.*"

²³ Chinese Government Official Website. "*Compulsory Education Program in Poverty-stricken Regions.*"

next five years.²⁴ All these reforms have pushed money as the ultimate resolution for China's rural education disparities, though a necessity; it may outweigh the conflicts still in place.

The Conflicts

In 2005, I viewed an international film titled, "*Not One Less*", produced in 1998, by Zhang Yimou.²⁵ This film shows the education disparities that have taken place in the rural areas of China. The conflicts that are presented in the film have changed little in the past seven years. Extreme poverty, lack of qualified teachers, disrespect for education and the belief that cities hold ones future are issues not being addressed in the reforms.

China has 200 million children in primary through high school, more than the total populations of Japan and Korea combined.²⁶ Today's big worry is that the system cannot accommodate the next big growth in education. Students that could not previously afford education now want this opportunity. Though there is free compulsory education, there are other expenses that are required which fall to local governments to acquire: chalk, desks, general education supplies, drinking water, lighting, heating and facility maintenance and repairs. In some rural areas, local governments collect extra fees from students to help with these added expenses. Fines for violating family planning, fees for road construction and other illegal

²⁴ Chinese Government Official Website. "*Development of China's Educational Services.*" 2005. http://english.gov.cn/205-08/12/content_21848.htm (accessed January 14, 2006).

²⁵ Zhang Yimou. "*Not One Less.*" DVD (Shanghai Triad, Lumiere and Company) 1998. The film opens in a rural village in China; the primary school teacher must leave because of his dying mother. The mayor, searching for a solution to the problem, hires a substitute teacher, but she is only 13, not much older than her students. She is capable of writing the lessons on the board, part of the reason she is hired, and promised 10-yuan bonus to keep the children from leaving school. She cares little about the children and has no experience teaching. The students are leaving the school to find work. The village is extremely poor and the schoolhouse consists of one room. There is a striking scene where Wei Minzhi (the hired 13 year old teacher) is handed one piece of chalk and told to use it sparingly for there is little left for the year. One of the students, Zhang Huike, does not show up for school and has run away to the city to find work. Wei follows him to the city in order to bring him back and receive her bonus. Zhang Huike can find no work and is reduced to stealing food from outdoor vendors. Wei Minzhi is told her best hope is to place an ad on the local TV. The young teacher camps outside the TV station until the staff notices her. After a fairytale ending the two children, teacher and student are reunited and the TV crew, are touched by Wei Minzhi's story. They return to the village to interview the villagers, and tell their plight of poverty. The movie ends with the school receiving large amounts of fresh chalk. The village, schoolhouse and people are not actors but ordinary people playing their real life parts. We are told at the end of the film that there are thousands of village schools in China as poor or poorer than the one portrayed in the film.

²⁶ China Education and Research Network. "*Rich-poor Education Gap to be Addressed.*" 2005 <http://www.edu.cn/20051130/3163495.shtml> (accessed January 12, 2006).

educational charges are put upon the rural families.²⁷ These burdens cause the families to undermine their children going to school. The inclination that it is more valuable for children to work in the fields or get a job than struggle for an education becomes paramount.

Corruption seems to be threaded deep in the Chinese culture. In 2004, the Minister of Education announced “a total of 853 million yuan (\$US 103.02 million) of illegal educational charges were uncovered and a total of 2,488 people were convicted, including many headmasters. Education experts estimate that more than 200 billion yuan (\$US 24.15 billion) has been illegally collected from primary and middle school students over the past ten years”.²⁸ This behavior of corruption dates back to the imperial times in China and is still prevalent throughout the country. Through my own experiences of dealing with the local authorities I have seen first hand the passing of money from one hand to the next, though I was told the money was for something totally different. In applying for an extended visa it was the fact that a friend knew the head of the local police that warranted the extent of the fees that I was charged.

According to an article published in *Beijing Review*, due to the lack of education during the Cultural Revolution, the adult illiteracy rate twenty four percent in China stands around 85 million, of which three quarters live in rural areas.²⁹ Even illiterate parents who value education, but carry the burden of feeding their families have little respect for education versus harvest and food. According to David Archer, head of international education for Action Aid, a British-based organization stated in recent interview, “If a child’s parents are illiterate, the child will struggle for schooling with his parent’s lack of respect for education, even if they are provided free education.”³⁰

Lack of funds and poor management in the past has led to a lack of qualified teachers in the rural areas. In Pan’an Primary School in Gangu County, there are over 1,300 students, but only 39 teachers.³¹ In Yixian, Zhejiang Province, I found the same to be true. The local school had around 900 students and 26 teachers. Due to the poverty that rural China faces, many of the

²⁷ Chinese Government Official Website. “Crackdown on Illegal Educational Charges.” 2005 http://english.gov.cn/2005-08/12/content_21900.htm (accessed January 14, 2006).

²⁸ Chinese Government Official Website. “Crackdown on Illegal Educational Charges”.

²⁹ Feng Jianhua, “Rural Education: Struggling With Bare Essentials.” (*Beijing Review*. October 2005.) p. 32.

³⁰ Chinese Government. US Embassy, 2005.

³¹ Chinese Government Official Website. “Compulsory Education Program in Poverty-stricken Regions.”

teachers move to the more urban areas to find better paying jobs. This leaves the rural schools short-staffed and teachers having to teach a multitude of subjects like Chinese, mathematics, music and physical education. Some schools only have one or two teachers responsible for as many as six grades of students. During an interview in 2005, Xu Yan, a teacher at a private school in Zhuji, Zhejiang Province, whose friend is a teacher in Yixian, a small rural town, stated that she (Xu Yan) makes 800 yuan/month (\$ US 100.00) compared to her friend who makes 200 yuan/month (\$US 25.00). Xu Yan teaches English as her main course, while her friend teaches math, science and Chinese. These two teachers teach only sixty miles apart. During another interview with Xu Yan, she shared that her father, a local farmer, made less than 1000 yuan/month and her teaching salary helped pay for the family's extra expenses.³²

Guo Shui Ying, Yixian's teacher, stated that some of the teachers at her school only had a high school education and that many of the more qualified teachers had left the village seeking better employment. She had close to fifty students in her class, 80 percent boys.

“It is important for all the students to work hard as grades define the future of one's success. This is very hard on the students since most families cannot afford to send their children to university even if they do well.”³³

Guo Shui Ying told a similar story to Zhang Yimou's, *Not One Less*. She laughed, explaining someone had recently donated a couple of boxes of colored chalk and it had been the talk of teachers and students for a week. When asked if either of the teachers saw the new education reforms and compulsory education as a positive step, they both agreed that it would take more pressure off of the parents of students financially. They did not see it benefiting some families or changing the opinion that it was still more important to find work and make money than to get an education. There is the belief that a person can find work in the cities without a proper education. Though the students get a free education for nine years, the financial burden of senior school and the cost of university are out of reach for most families. Xu Yan shared that;

³² Xu Yan interview, 2005.

³³ Guo Shui Ying interview, 2005.

“Her father had worked for years from sunrise to sunset and her mother had worked to afford her an opportunity to attend school”.³⁴

She is now helping save money so her sister can attend university. Her only educational opportunity based on her entrance exam scores was to attend a university that offered her a teaching degree.

While staying in Yixian I found most of the farmers spun silk for textiles on looms situated next to their homes. Due to the energy crisis in China the government shut off the electricity every other day, from 8am until 7pm. I observed that no one was able to work and the children were out playing instead of attending school. This meant that their education was cut during part of the year. This conservation of electricity runs from May through October, then the electricity is restored to daily availability.

The Ministry of Education has yet to address the cost of education after the nine-year free education has run out. Senior students from poor villages have few resources to carry them the remaining three years and beyond into university. There is added stress with the fact that the better universities quickly accept students from urban areas versus rural. The students of families that have higher incomes, hire tutors, go to schools with better education, and have more time to study, not having the added burden of helping the family in the fields.

I observed during my times of teaching English in China, that many schools have old-fashioned teaching methods. For instance, students sit in class, listen and obey, without actively participating or asking questions. Teamwork, student projects, debating, and exploring one's own interests are practically unheard of, especially in rural education, according to the teachers I talked with. Much of the material taught in middle and senior school focuses only on passing the university entrance exam, consisting of studying for tests with a heavy concentration on math, science and written English. Spoken English is only offered during special summer programs. This serves no purpose for rural students who do not get into university. Therefore, if their grades are low they drop out before they finish. The idea of open education and less focus on entrance exams is not readily accepted throughout China, and is a long way from rural schools.

³⁴ Xu Yan.

In a study by US Rural Education Foundation, the main focus of education throughout China is to pass the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). “Different regions have different subjects within the NCEE, and different scoring systems. Scores are normalized and then compared with the required score for a special major at different universities. For different regions, there are different required (normalized!) scores. These scores are set by the Department of Education of the central government. In some regions there are fixed numbers of students allowed to be admitted, but this is not the case in all regions. A student can indicate four university preferences, six major preferences, and an arbitrary university of their choice, in case they do not make their preference. This form has to be submitted before knowing one’s score on the NCEE, and in some places even before taking the NCEE. This requires good guessing and a clever planned strategy”.³⁵

In another interview conducted with a science teacher at Ronghuai Private School, Yang Jung noted that only eight out of forty students from his high school passed the entrance exam. He attended school in his home village of Datong, Zhejiang. The school only had 400 students and the education was poor. Yang Jung graduated in 2000, but claimed that nothing had changed in his home school. He remembers a time in primary school when they would sit on the floor for lack of desks.³⁶ It is important to note that both the schools in Datong and Yixian, though in rural areas, are in fairly prosperous regions of China.

According to Jasper Becker’s “*The Chinese*”, printed in 2000, at that time there were approximately 3 million untrained teachers, known as *minban*. The *minban* were to be phased out by the end of 2000, but in the midst of bureaucracy they were relabeled *daike* teachers and offered a training course to be classified a state teacher.³⁷ Unfortunately the cost of 8,000 yuan to attend the course outweighed the benefits. Once classified a state teacher one loses peasant status, with possible repercussions of losing one’s land. According to the World Bank study on *Impacts of the Doha Development Agenda on China*, “households that cease to farm the land

³⁵ Wei Ji Ma, pp. 4, 5.

³⁶ Yang Jung interview, 2005.

³⁷ Jasper Becker, pp. 203, 204.

may lose the rights to it, so they have a strong incentive to continue some level of agricultural activity, even when profitability is low”.³⁸

Due to the large income and poverty differential between rural and urban areas, along with economic growth in the cities, many of the families or family members including teachers are leaving the rural areas to find more profitable work. If a town or village is poor, parents want their child to go to work rather than pursue a higher education. In rural areas, senior high school students constitute only 20 percent of their age group, while there are 70 percent in the cities.³⁹ This is due to the large dropout rate in rural areas, creating an influx of migrant population into cities. Recent statistics state an estimated 300 million people will migrate towards the cities over the next five years, giving China one of the largest internal migrations in history.

Households must have the appropriate registration (*hukou*) in order to legally reside in an urban area. Without this registration, access to many of the urban amenities, including housing and education, is limited and quite expensive. Children can apply for nine years of compulsory education after their parents have lived in a settled residence for one year, with stable employment.⁴⁰ Many of the migrant workers do not stay in the same place for that long. In an article published in the fall of 2005 by *Business Week*, China is now seeing a trend, a “floating population” which is estimated at 120 million, about 8 million of them school-age children. According to recent statistics, “Beijing alone has as many as 340,000 migrant children, many who are not permitted to attend the city’s schools. Migrant families have taken on the burden of educating their own children, creating special migrant schools. These schools are unlicensed, often in run-down neighborhoods and the quality of education is poor. A migrant family that makes around 900 yuan/year will still be required to pay 100 yuan for their child to attend”.⁴¹

During studies conducted by the author in Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces in 2005, many of the villages, especially in the mountainous regions, are left with only the elderly and very young. During interviews conducted with some of the residents, the common complaint was that the young people had left and moved away to the cities to find better work. The elderly have

³⁸ Asian Development Bank, p. 4.

³⁹ Horizon Group.

⁴⁰ Asian Development Bank. p. 5.

⁴¹ Bruce Einhorn.

been left behind to care for the grandchildren with the hopes that their children will someday return with a pocket full of money. Many of the elderly women sold fruits and vegetables by the roadside and the men were in the fields or playing cards. Village elders are concerned that their traditions and way of life are being jeopardized by the temptation of money.

Sophia Lou, Professor of Foreign Affairs, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, during an interview expressed concerns about all the migrant workers arriving in Hangzhou. She stated:

“It is very difficult to see the pressure being put on the infrastructure of Hangzhou to help these people. Though Hangzhou is a very prosperous city, we do not have enough room or work for most of these families, so they end up on the street. It is sad because many of them have children that do not attend school and are learning to beg for a living. Some of the parents, because they cannot find work, send their children into the street to beg for money. It gets worse every year. Money is all that is on everyone’s mind”⁴².

She believes that the influx of migrant families is changing the culture of the rural villages and the cities. Educators’ fear that failure to provide good education for rural migrant children will condemn their families to perpetual poverty or induce unemployment and crime in the future. Local governments are concerned with this increase in migrant population. Gangs are forming and the level of crime is increasing in most cities. Many migrant families are targeted while traveling and are robbed, arriving in the cities with nothing.

While in Hangzhou I observed numerous children out of school and begging in the streets. When I asked the local residents about this trend, I was told that there are now numerous gangs throughout China who kidnap children from one province, train them to beg and put them on the streets in another province. These children do not attend school and the authorities turn a blind eye to their existence.

The children who fall under the title of handicapped are not yet covered under the nine-year compulsory education. Within China there is a great prejudice towards children with disabilities. Though the education system has addressed a more balanced education for male and female, they have yet to address the issue of handicapped children. There is an attitude within the culture that if they ignore these special needs children, they will somehow disappear.

⁴² Sophia Lou interview, 2005.

The one-child law creates a complex thinking within China that any disabled children that is not perfect and cannot supply a future for themselves and their extended families have no value. Many of these children have slight physical disabilities that are medically repairable. Due to poverty, the high cost of medical care, lack of elderly care and one-child policy, many of these children end up in orphanages. The orphan program for Chinese children, has taken great strides to improve its inner workings though there is still little recognition for special needs children. According to the Chinese Government survey on educational services, there are only 1,600 schools engaged in special education, which seems unbalanced in a population of 1.3 billion people. This form of education is not included in the nine-year compulsory free education. In visiting orphanages in Northern China, I was aware that the children without special needs were sent to a local school, while the children with special needs were held back in the orphanage. These children had few books, some desks, but no educational materials to stimulate creative thinking.

While visiting Jaotang village, Jiangxi province, one student shared that whenever it rained, her classroom had water all over the floor and sometimes the roof leaked so bad that they couldn't open their books. The students brought chairs from home, which they returned after school. While visiting there I met Lui Baomei, a student whose education is not covered under the new reforms.

Lui Baomei is an 11-year-old deaf girl from Jaotang village, who is not allowed to attend the local school due to the fact she is deaf. She lives with her grandmother, mother and four other siblings in a small mud house located on the outskirts of the village. Her mother is no longer married and has the full responsibility of taking care of the family. She works at a local factory, while Lui Baomei spends her days at the base of a local tourist attraction waterfall. She hikes up and down the mountain picking up trash left behind by the tourists and sells it for money which she in-turn gives to her mother to help buy food. There is a near by school which has a program for the deaf, but it cost over 4500 yuan/ year. Lui Baomei attended the school before her father left the family but her mother cannot afford the tuition. These special education schools are not covered under the free compulsory education program. Her dream was to return to school one day. I have now sponsored her and she has returned to school. She is proud to be one of the top ten in her school. Lui Baomei's story is only one of many stories of children throughout China with disabilities.

Conclusion

China has come along way in its openness to the outside world and its economic endeavors. If one looks at world history, the greatest influence on economic and social change has been influenced by education. Pushing to improve education in rural China is a step in the right direction, but there is more to reform than money.

The gap between the rich and poor in China already is extremely large and many of the rural areas hardly benefit from the country's overall economic growth. China has a very unequal distribution of income, with a small percentage of the people owning the bulk of the wealth. People in the poorer rural areas still have to face the struggle of poverty, corrupt local officials and their youth leaving to find work. This challenges the structure of China's agricultural community.

There is the argument that if a student finds work or gets a good university education he or she will return. Young people do not return, and why should they? The temptation of money draws them deeper into the city life and there is no future to return to in the country. Even the students of wealthy families face this problem, the big companies that hire are miles from home. The majority of large companies are along the mid to southeast coast, with few in the north and western regions. Trains and public transportation are overloaded with family members trying to return home during Spring Festival.

Farmers in rural areas are looking at the their children leaving home to find better jobs and with free education this provides some opportunities for better work. The old people I talked to were worried that there would be no one to work the fields. Farmhand work is losing its credibility as a reputable career. Young people are more interested in all the new fashions and gadgets, like I-Pods and computers, than the old traditions that are still alive in the rural villages. This trend is not unlike the youth of America, but it is a known fact that America has lost much of its family values for technology and money.

Educators in China talk about addressing educational inequality and revamping curriculums, but scoring well on the entrance exams remains the key to a successful job in China. The Ministry of Education needs reforms to make university entry a more balanced opportunity. Free compulsory education needs to extend to twelve years, covering the last three years of senior school and easier financial access to University needs to be made available.

More emphasis needs to be placed on education for children of migrant workers and children with disabilities. Creating a positive view on these children versus the negative one that now exists, along with building more schools that address the needs of these special children. Free compulsory education needs to be made available to all students through China.

To find creative solutions, the Chinese government first needs to see where they are falling short in their reforms. China is faced with 1.3 billion population, over-consumption, resource depletion, hunger, a generation gap between modernized youth and a Confucius generation and a wide spread gap between the rich and poor. Though a more open form of education needs to be addresses, I believe the government feels threatened by a country of free thinkers.

There is an old Chinese proverb: *What is done to children they will do to society!* Education comes in many forms, children learn through the actions of those they look up to, including authority figures such as the government.

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