

EDUCATION FOR ALL – REALITY OR ILLUSION?

Until the Communist takeover in 1949, the great majority of China's population – between 80 and 90 per cent – had received no education and could neither read nor write. Like Mao Zedong, children whose parents could afford to send them to school studied mainly Confucius and other Chinese classics. In power, Mao set out to shake up this outdated system and to bring education to all. But did he succeed, or did the Cultural Revolution that he inspired upset all his plans? Read both sides of the argument and the sources, then judge for yourself.

REALITY?

SOURCE 1

In the early morning I study English; from eight in the morning to three in the afternoon I attend class; from four...until dinner, I study Chinese literature; from the time the lights are lit until they are extinguished, I do homework...and after the lights are extinguished, I exercise for one hour.
(EXTRACT FROM MAO'S WRITINGS OF 1915)

SOURCE 2

In the educational system of our country, required courses are as thick as the hairs on a cow. Even an adult with a tough, strong body could not stand it, let alone those who have not reached adulthood.
(EXTRACT FROM MAO'S WRITINGS OF 1915)

SOURCE 3

	PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS	SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS
1949	24 MILLION	1 MILLION
1952	51 MILLION	2.5 MILLION

MAO'S BELIEFS

Mao Zedong firmly believed in the power of education to improve people's lives and was an extremely hard-working student teacher himself (Source 1). However, he despised pure 'book learning' – that is, elitist education irrelevant to ordinary life. He was also critical of the complex curriculum that young Chinese had to study (Source 2).

FIRST STEPS

Once in power, Mao introduced measures to bring education to the masses. For example, 'winter schools' were opened where people could study during the cold months when there was little work in the fields. In addition, literacy classes were set up in factories and city slums. More children were also encouraged to attend school and numbers rose (Source 3).

THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN

During the first Five-Year Plan, the pace of change increased. Many more primary and middle schools opened, and student numbers at both schools and universities increased. For example, there were 64 million primary pupils by 1957, while 56,000 people graduated from university compared with 48,000 in 1953. The government also produced a code of conduct for students in order to improve discipline (Source 4).



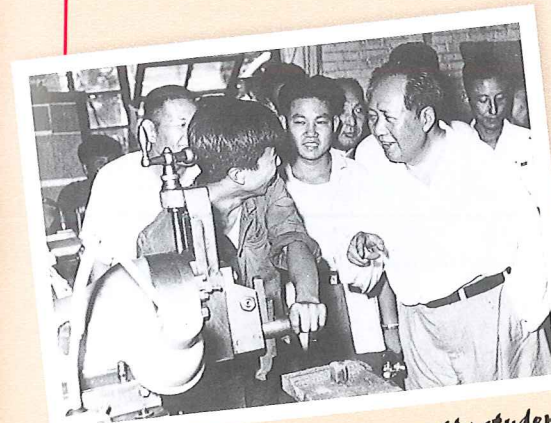
Children in a Shanghai classroom.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

In January 1958, as the Great Leap Forward began, Mao took several steps to break down barriers between intellectuals and peasants. In particular, he established work-study groups where peasants could learn subjects such as philosophy and painting as well as industrial skills and basic literacy. At the same time, Mao organized national propaganda campaigns designed to teach intellectuals that peasants were their equals.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

It was, however, in the Cultural Revolution that Mao shook up China's education system most radically. In a 1966 decision, the CCP leadership explained exactly how it wished to reform teaching (Source 5). By then, Red Guards were already criticizing teachers for their revisionist ways (see page 38). As the protests grew, schools and universities closed. Many students went to the country to 'learn from the peasants'.



Mao talking to a Tianjin university student learning to operate industrial machinery.

EDUCATION IN THE 1970s

Once the Cultural Revolution was over, educational institutions began to re-open. But it was no longer acceptable for them to be set apart from the world of work. All students who wished to enter higher education had to do two years of industrial or agricultural work first, and both school and university courses now included various forms of manual work (Source 6).

REVOLUTIONARY REALITY

In the field of education, Mao put his principles into practice. He gave millions of peasants the opportunity to learn reading, writing and more for the first time. By 1971, China's literacy rate had soared to 90 per cent. At the same time, in accordance with his Marxist principles, Mao ensured that intellectuals learned about the lives of ordinary workers.

SOURCE 4

1. Endeavor to be a good student; good in health, good at study and good in conduct. Prepare to serve the Motherland and the people...

3. Obey all the instructions of the principal and teachers. Value and protect the reputation of the school and of the class...

(EXTRACT FROM 'RULES OF CONDUCT FOR STUDENTS', PREPARED BY THE CHINESE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 1955)

SOURCE 5

It is imperative to carry out the policy...of making education serve proletarian politics and having education integrated with productive labor...The academic course must be shortened and the curriculum simplified... Besides studying academic subjects, [students] should also learn to do industrial, agricultural and military work.

(EXTRACT FROM THE ELEVENTH PLENUM'S DECISION, 8 AUGUST 1966)

SOURCE 6

You wonder at first if you are on a campus at all. Here at Communications University (C.U.) in Sian are people, dressed in conical hats and blue peasant jackets, threshing wheat... In the Middle School attached to Beijing Normal University, girls are making chairs. Next door are boys... making semiconductors.
(EXTRACT FROM 800,000,000: THE REAL CHINA BY ROSS TERRILL)

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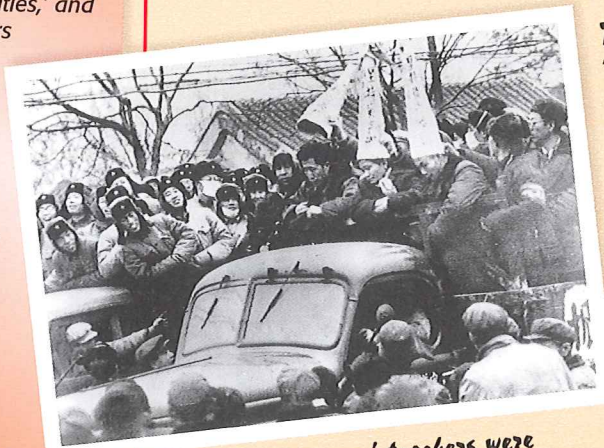
ILLUSION?

SOURCE 7

All secondary schools... should, if possible, experiment in setting up workshops and farms to attain complete or partial self-sufficiency by engaging in production. Students should do part-time study and part-time work... The middle and primary schools of a village should sign contracts with local co-operatives to take part in agricultural... production. (EXTRACT FROM 'SIXTY POINTS ON WORK METHODS' BY MAO ZEDONG, 1958)

SOURCE 8

One day my mother bicycled to the school to find that the pupils had rounded up the headmaster, the academic supervisor, the graded teachers, whom they understood from the official press to be 'reactionary bourgeois authorities,' and any other teachers they disliked. They had shut them all up in a classroom and put a notice on the door saying 'demons' class'. The teachers had let them do it because the Cultural Revolution had thrown them into bewilderment. (EXTRACT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY WILD SWANS BY JUNG CHANG)



'Anti-revolutionary' teachers were often forced to wear dunce's caps.

POLICY PROBLEMS

Mao undoubtedly wished to open education up to all the people of China. However, many of the policies that he devised to achieve this aim were seriously flawed. In addition, some caused so much disruption that they actually reduced students' chances of a good schooling.

FIVE-YEAR PLAN FLAWS

The achievements of the Five-Year Plan in the field of education were marred by many problems. In particular, although more students joined schools and universities, many never finished their complex courses of study. At senior middle schools, 98 per cent of pupils failed to complete their education. At university level, this rose to 99 per cent – as a result there were serious shortages of scientists and other specialists in China.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

The Five-Year Plan ignored other problems, too. In particular, it failed to set up any institutions of higher education in rural areas, where there were none. It also did nothing to improve educational opportunities for girls and young women – there were twice as many boys as girls in China's primary schools, and three times as many at its universities.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

The Great Leap Forward disrupted the education of thousands of young people, as Mao now insisted they should not spend all their time studying but also take on other work (Source 7). During 1958 and 1959, about 3 million secondary school and university students were sent to labour on building sites and

farms in order to learn from the workers. A million teachers and other intellectuals had to do the same.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Matters grew far worse during the Cultural Revolution. While schools and universities were still open, pupils humiliated, beat and even killed teachers (Source 8). However, most educational institutions were closed in 1966 (Source 9). Schools began to reopen only in 1968, and universities in 1970, so millions missed years of education. Later surveys of illiteracy showed many never made up their lost schooling.

STUDY IN THE '70S

The Cultural Revolution led to changes in education that endured until the end of the Mao era. In particular, courses were shortened so that there would be more time for students to do manual



These Shanghai students had to clean up sewage as well as study.

After Mao's death in 1976, China's leaders restored old curricula and stopped making students work in factories and on farms. They realized that Mao had destroyed his own vision of education for all.

work. It was, of course, impossible to learn the same amount when study time had been cut, so learning suffered (Source 10). Another change was that only applicants with strict Maoist political views were accepted at university. As a result, student numbers decreased significantly (Source 11).

EDUCATIONAL ILLUSION

Mao's educational good intentions came to very little. The excesses of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution wiped out early gains.

SOURCE 9

Considering that the Great Cultural Revolution is only now developing in the colleges, universities and senior middle schools, a certain period of time will be needed to carry this movement through thoroughly and successfully. Bourgeois domination is still deeply rooted and the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeois is very acute...

(EXTRACT FROM CCP DECISION TO SUSPEND HIGHER EDUCATION, 13 JUNE 1966)

SOURCE 10

One distinguished scientist, ...discussed this matter of shortened courses around and around. Yet I still felt puzzled about how, at his university, five years' scientific training could be put into two and a half. Our last meeting was at Peking Airport... He concluded on a note he had not struck before: "I was not myself opposed to keeping the five-year course, Now, well now, we just have to work out what we can realistically omit." (EXTRACT FROM 800,000,000: THE REAL CHINA BY ROSS TERRILL)

SOURCE 11

	STUDENT NUMBERS BEFORE AND AFTER CULTURAL REVOLUTION	
	BEFORE	AFTER
BEIJING UNIVERSITY	9,000	2,667
FU TAN UNIVERSITY, SHANGHAI	9,000	1,196