

Mao Zedong's Educational Thoughts and China's Undergraduate Curriculum Reform —Focus on the Period of the Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

The 10-year Cultural Revolution brought about great changes in China's higher education. Mao Zedong's talks and speeches about education were taken as principles and guidelines for the educational reform. This paper examines how Mao Zedong's educational thoughts influence China's undergraduate curriculum reform during the Cultural Revolution period. It first introduces Mao Zedong's basic educational ideas such as "all-round development" and "unity of theory and practice", and then examines his representative educational thoughts during the cultural revolution, like May 7 directive and July 21 Directive. Then, it examines what changes occurred in the Chinese higher education system, teachers and students, and undergraduate curriculum under the guide of Mao's educational thoughts.

Key words: Mao Zedong, China, undergraduate curriculum, Cultural Revolution

Introduction

In 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) swept over China, which brought about tremendous political, economic and cultural changes. According to Mao Zedong, "any cultural revolution is the ideological reflection of the political and economic revolutions and must be at their service." As such, a cultural revolution is an integral part of the total revolution. To Maoist, the Cultural Revolution would be the final stage of the Proletarian Revolution. According to the first official document adopted by the Chinese Communist Party concerning the Cultural Revolution on May 16, 1966 (the document is often referred to as the May 16 Circular), the purpose of this movement is¹

...to thoroughly expose the reactionary bourgeois stand of those so-called academic authorities who oppose the Party and socialism, thoroughly criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois ideas in the sphere of academic work, education, press, literature and art and publishing, and seize the leadership in these cultural spheres.

Lin Biao gave the definition of "Culture"²:

Thought, social ideology, world outlook, custom and habits, political viewpoint, legal viewpoint, artistic viewpoint, including cinema, drama, sculpture and literature, and educational system, etc., taken together will be called culture.

One of the most important tasks of the Cultural Revolution was to transform the old educational system and the old principles and methods of teaching. It is widely believed that Mao Zedong's educational thoughts have played a decisive role in the education reforms, particularly in higher education reforms during the decade of revolution.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Mao's educational thoughts and to clarify what changes occurred in China's higher education system and especially in curriculum under the guide of Mao's educational thoughts with a focus on the period of Cultural Revolution.

Mao Zedong's Basic Educational Thoughts

It was in the early 1960s that the term, Mao Zedong's Educational Thoughts was first used in China. Mao's educational thoughts almost involve all aspects of education. This paper will deal with two of the most important ones: "all-round development" and "unity of theory and practice".

"All-round Development"

Mao's idea of "all-round" development in education, first expressed in 1917 in his essay, "A Study of Physical Education", in which he criticizes the Chinese traditional education's exclusive emphasis on knowledge and morality at the expense of physical development and argues that "Physical education completes education in virtue and knowledge,"³ and mentions examples showing that physical education not only advances intellectual attainment, but also improves moral qualities as well. He concludes, "The three forms of education (physical, moral and intellectual) are equally important."⁴ In a major policy statement in 1957, Mao officially revived this idea: "Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually, and physically, and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture."⁵

To Maoist, the principal goal of education is to produce the "all-round man", who is able to work in scientific and technical fields, to do manual labor, and most important of all, to participate in the class struggle. In other words, Maoist education has three dimensions, that is, class struggle in the political dimension, creative abilities in the scientific dimension, and productive labor in the economic dimension.

"Unity of Theory and Practice"

Theory is a guide to action. This Maoist ideology led Mao to develop the unity of theory and practice. He holds that "knowledge begins with practice and must then return to practice." According to Mao, the function of knowledge can only be shown in the practice of production, of class struggle and national struggle, and of scientific experiment. Without practice, theory is merely an empty word.

A direct application of Mao's unity of theory and practice may be shown in his insistence upon combining education with productive labor. In general, productive labor should be a formal course in all schools at all levels, and every student must spend a certain amount of time in manual labor everyday.

The result of this education-production combination is that, while schools set up factories and farms and vice versa, theory is thus united closely with practice. The establishment of half-work, half-study schools is clearly based on this principle of linking education and production. Education must serve practical purposes which include production, class struggle, and scientific experiment, an integral part of Mao's educational thoughts.

Mao Zedong's Educational Thoughts during the Cultural Revolution

To better understand Mao's education thoughts during the Cultural Revolution, one needs to have a look at his criticism of the Chinese educational system of the time before the Revolution.

On February 13th, 1964, Mao gave a talk on education, known as Spring Festival Talk, in which he attacked the educational system of the time.⁶

Our educational policy and guiding principles are correct, but the methods are incorrect. An excessive number of courses cause students to suffer severe strain. The academic system, the curriculum, teaching methods, and the approach of examinations all need to be reformed...Our present examination

system treats the students as enemies and launches sudden attacks on them. This kind of approach is destructive to human talent, and to the youth. I do not approve of such a system and it must be completely reformed.

He raised his suggestions to the educational reform after criticizing. This is the first talk particularly on education made by Mao since the foundation of the People's Republic published to the public. It could also be regarded as a comprehensive summary of Mao's dissatisfaction with the education system transplanted from the Soviet model in the early 1950s. Many of Mao's later educational thoughts can be found origins from this talk.

May 7 Directive

The "May 7 Directive" was contained in Mao's letter to Lin Biao on May 7, 1966 aimed at the all-round new socialist. In this letter Mao pointed out that the soldiers, workers, peasants, and workers in commercial, Party and government organizations should all learn military affairs, politics and culture, and take part in the criticizing of the bourgeoisie. Mao reiterated about students:⁷

While their (students') main task is to study, they should in addition to their studies, learn other things, that is, industrial work, farming and military affairs. They should also criticize the bourgeoisie. The period of schooling should be shortened, education should be revolutionized, and the domination of our schools by bourgeois intellectuals should not be allowed to continue.

"The May 7 Directive" was the principal guideline for educational reforms at all levels during the Cultural Revolution. The official guiding principles adopted in "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (this document is often referred to the 16 Point Decision) were mainly followed the May 7 Directive. Moreover, throughout China many new schools were established entitled the name "May 7 School". It stated in the "Summary of National Conference on Education in 1971" that the May 7 Directive was the correct way to bring up the proletarian successor.

July 21 Directive

On July 22, 1968, People's Daily published an investigation report entitled "The Road for Training Engineering and Technical Personnel Indicated by the Shanghai Machine Tools Plant". In the Editor's note appeared Mao's comments on the report written on July 21, known as "July 21 Directive". This directive reads:⁸

It is still necessary to have universities; here I refer mainly to colleges of science and engineering. However, it is essential to shorten the length of schooling, revolutionize education, put proletarian politics in command and take the road to Shanghai Machine Tools Plant in training technicians from among the workers. Students should be selected from among worker and peasants with practical experience, and they should return to production after a few years' study.

Here Mao expressed his doubt on whether other types of colleges except specialized institutions in science and technology were still necessary or not. He reiterated the shortening of course and revolutionizing education. He stressed that proletarian politics should take command. Instead of depending on formal education, Mao was convinced by this report that factories could train better engineers and technicians.

Revolution in Higher Curriculum under Mao's Educational Thoughts

Although there were some problems as criticized by Mao, the higher education on the eve of the Cultural Revolution was undergoing normal development. With emphasis on the quality, higher education was playing its part in training the high-level specialists and experts so urgently needed to push China into a modern industrial state.

Mainly following the May 7 Directive, the July 21 Directive, and the 16 Point Decision, the changes had taken place in Chinese higher education included the following aspects:

Reorganization of Higher Institutions

Based on Mao's July 21 Directive, Plan Concerning Restructuring Colleges and Universities adopted in 1971. One of the most significant characteristics of this plan is the dismantling of colleges of liberal arts. Such type of higher institutions like China People's University, Beijing College of law and political sciences, and Shanghai College of Finance and Economics, etc. 45 in total were dismantled, and the number of higher institutions was reduced from 434 in 1965 to 328 in 1971. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, that most of the remaining colleges and universities were specialized colleges in the field of technology, agriculture, and medicine⁹.

Table 1. Regular Higher Institution by Type

	1964	1965	1971	1972
Comprehensive University	29	29	27	27
Science and Technology	122	127	115	116
Agriculture	44	45	31	32
Forestry	8	8	3	3
Medicine and Pharmacy	85	92	78	78
Teacher Training	59	59	44	44
Language and Literature	14	16	7	8
Finance and Economics	18	18	2	2
Political Science and Law	6	6	0	0
Physical Culture	10	10	5	5
Art	22	22	12	12
Others	2	2	4	4
Total	419	434	328	331

Teachers and Students

Traditionally, appointment of college teaching position was based mainly on academic qualifications. During the Cultural Revolution, teaching staff in colleges and universities had to pass the examination of ideology. A combination of three groups, the worker-peasant-soldier masses, the revolutionary technicians, and members of the original teaching staff composed the new faculty. The participation of workers, peasants, and soldiers in college teaching helped to ensure more working-class leadership in higher education, and to link education and production.

College entrance examination was abolished as a discriminatory device against students of worker-peasant origins. Students were selected mainly from four sources: workers, peasants, soldiers, and middle school students who had served enough time on farms, in factories, or in the army. Requirement for admission into a university or college were based on three conditions: political correctness, labor experience (at least 3 years), and physical fitness. The admission procedures were: individual application, mass recommendation, official interview, and school selection. In general, the applicants should have finished 3-year junior high school education, but many freshmen had just finished primary education.

Undergraduate Curriculum

The period of schooling was shortened from four, five or six to one, two or three years. Politics became the central subject, and class struggle became the main theme. Study of Mao's selected works was required for all students. Less stress was placed on theory and far greater emphasis was given to applying education to

practical situations.

Take Tongji University, a college of construction and civil engineering in Shanghai as an example, in the first year, half the time would be spent in engineering and building, the other half to basic theoretical studies. For the second year two thirds of the time would be spent on the basic knowledge of designing under the guidance of technical workers and teachers. The third year would be spent on the study of a specialized subject and design of a complete project in a certain field. All through the three years there would be political courses and production labor.

Table 2 is a Plan of Teaching Hours in the Second Half of 1971 of Beijing University¹⁰, which shows clearly the arrangement of teaching hours in one semester.

Table 2. Plan of Teaching Hours in the Second Half of 1971

Course	Academic Hours	Percentage	Remarks
Politics	165	18.8%	
Cultural Learning	596	67.9%	Include social practical activities
Military and Physical Training	85	9.7%	5 hours a week
Daily Labor	32	3.6%	4 hours every 2 weeks
Total	878	100%	17 weeks in total

Cultural learning (Xue Wen) refers to teaching activities concerning specialized courses, including social practices in factories and rural areas. The hours spent on the social practice occupied two thirds of the total hours of cultural learning. That is to say that the total hours of learning of specialized courses were no more than 300 hours a semester.

Universities and colleges were urged to combine themselves with social service. Therefore, colleges of science and technology ran factories and established connections with factories outside. The college of liberal arts took whole society as their "factory". Teachers and students alike went to factories, communes and /or stores for study and practice. Focusing on provision of services for rural areas, the medical colleges established teaching bases in rural areas for students to pursue studies, research and clinical practice at the same time and thereby turned out experienced doctors in large numbers and less time.

As for the subject matter, all textbooks had to be revised in order to eliminate bourgeois influence. All teaching material were compiled and organized in accordance with the three revolutionary movements: class struggle, struggle for production, and scientific experiments. These included simplification of complicated materials, concern of materials in agreement with China's realities, and utilization of inventions and creations by the working class in instruction. Writings of contemporary peasants, workers, and soldiers became the classroom textbooks.

As for teaching methods, strong emphasis was placed on the combination of theory with practice and linking education to politics and production. In classroom, the traditional lecture was deemphasized in favor of independent study, group discussions, and group participation in solving problems and working on projects. The old system of examination was abolished and was replaced by open book examinations in order to discourage learning by rote, and to foster independent thinking.

Conclusion

It is evident that Chinese higher education during the Cultural Revolution was strongly influenced by

Mao's educational thoughts. All aspects of higher education system were reformed under the guide of Mao's ideas and suggestions. The model of higher education adopted during the Cultural Revolution was completely contradictory to the traditional ones. In another word, it was not to reform but to destroy the whole traditional higher education system.

Although there were some reasonable thoughts and suggestions, most of Mao's educational thoughts during this period were demonstrated hard to put into practice. Thus, the higher education revolution proved a failure by its results from the perspective of quality.

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