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REFORMS AND INNOVATIONS

by Su Xiaohuan

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PREFACE

My son is 19 years old and attends college now. His schooling can perhaps show how China's young generation is being educated.

Like most children in cities, my son entered kindergarten when he was 2.5 years old. Since the kindergarten is fairly distant from home, a year later, day care became "complete care" — my son came home for weekends only. At the kindergarten, the children mainly played and did games. When the kids were five to six years old, the teachers began teaching simple arithmetics and Chinese language pinyin (alphabetic system of writing). As a result, children having attended a kindergarten would have a comparatively easy time when they take grade-one courses in a primary school.

Children are required to attend schools close at home. My son spent six years in a primary school in the hutong (alley) where we live. Math and Chinese were the major courses. Other courses were English, nature, drawing, music and physical culture.

After graduation from the primary school, he entered a middle school attached to a college. It is a good school. But his strong interest in the computer, cartoons, pop music, cars and sports attracted his attention from more academic courses, and his academic record was not impressive. Upon graduation from junior middle school, he applied to both a regular senior middle school and a vocational senior middle school for further studies. My train of thoughts ran as follows: If he was enrolled by a regular senior middle school, he could go on to a college, and that would be the best of prospects; if he had no option other than attending a vocational school, where he could learn

a practical skill appealing to him such as artistic design or computer, that would be OK too. After graduation, he could either locate a job and attend a college for adults, or apply for enrollment by a college-level vocational school or a regular institution of higher learning. It turned out that my son was enrolled by a regular senior middle school. The three years my son spent at the senior middle school were soul-stirring for both him and his parents because competition for enrollment by an institution of higher learning was too heated. Fortunately, universities expanded enrollment in that year.

Today he attends a university in Hebei province as an English major. If he wants to continue his studies after graduation, he can apply to study computer-related courses; or if he wants to work, he can work and, in his spare time, continue to study. He can attend a professional training class or receive distance training via the Internet. The sons and daughters of some of my colleagues have gone abroad for further studies after graduation from college. I don't know how my son will choose to do in the future. The Chinese society has undergone great changes, and rapid economic development has provided more opportunities for the young people of today.



China Hall of Science
and Technology

Chapter I

Past and Present

Since ancient times, people in China have had the tradition of respecting teachers and prioritizing education. Confucius (551-479/BC) has been respected by the Chinese as a thinker and educator. Two thousand years ago, Confucius initiated private schools and advocated free teaching and learning, breaking the monopoly of education by the government and making education possible for ordinary people. Confucius had more than 3,000 students. After that, private schools flourished as an educational system that existed side by side with official schools. Confucianism and Confucian classics represented by Confucius were the main content of education in China's feudal societies.

The Metropolitan College established in 1898 in Beijing was the earliest institution of higher learning in modern China.



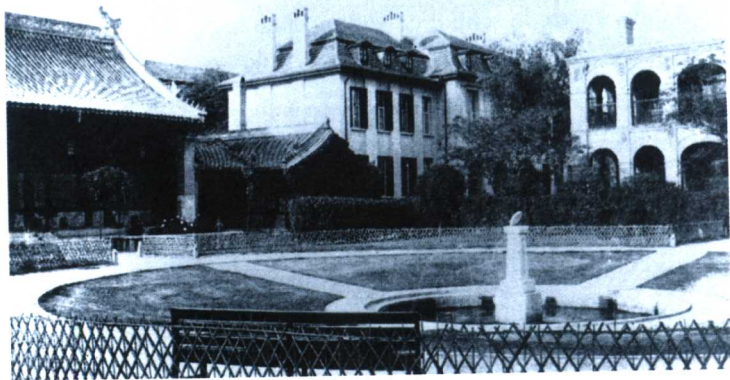
School education has had a history of several thousand years in China. There were educational institutions called *xiao* and *xue* in the Xia Dynasty (circa 2070-1600 BC) 21 centuries ago. The official schooling system, included a central school and local schools in different administrative regions. By the end of the feudal society, these schools had degraded into a dependency of the imperial examination system, through which officials were selected.

In China, the main objective of feudal education was to train officials. At the same time, it created a special social stratum in China's feudal society — the literati. The imperial examination system



In 1919, Chinese universities began enrolling female students. This picture shows women students in a library of Yenching University in Beijing.

From 1910 separate schools were set up in Chinese universities. Pictured here was Peking University's School of Science in the 1920s.





The Confucius Temple—together with the Confucius Family Residence and the Confucius Family Cemetery, is listed as a World Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

was an important form of education in China's feudal society. Beginning from the Sui period (581-618), the government held examinations through which to select officials. The imperial examination system became part of the feudal bureaucracy and gradually overrode school education. The imperial examination system was different from the Western educational system under which knowledge is taught according to branches of learning. Under the imperial examination system the content of teaching and examinations included poetry, essays, Confucian classics, and comments on strategies of governance advocated by past sages. The purpose was to instill into students feudal orthodox ideas such as loyalty to the emperor and the duty to defend traditional moral principles. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911)

periods, candidates sitting at imperial examinations were required to write essays strictly in accordance with a rigid eight-part form. Essays of this kind were known for poverty of ideas. The imperial examination system became a narrow bridge, through which the educated in the feudal society acquired the benefits of a privileged class. It resulted in a lopsided development of educated people in China's feudal society. Along with progresses in science and technology, school education in feudal China, while dominated by Confucian teachings, began to cover math, astrology and traditional medicine. The Tang period (618-907) saw the establishment of a number of special schools and official organs such as the Imperial Medical Office, Office of Carriages and Horses and Office of Astrology. Students were enrolled for different branches of learning and became professionals. Such schools developed to a considerable extent during the Tang-Song periods (960-1279). But in the centrally-administered official educational system, such schools had a low political status. As the official system declined, the teaching of natural sciences and technology was gradually taken up by individuals as a private undertaking.

After the Opium War in 1840, with the spread of Western science and technology into China, the imperial examination system became ever more evident as useless and empty of ideas, and it came under attack by people with insight. In the 31st year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1905), the Qing government began promoting school education and abolished the imperial examination system.

Schools of a modern sense appeared in China in the 1860s. Set up the earliest were foreign languages, military and technical schools. The Qing government also sent young people to Britain, France and other countries to study technology and military science. In the early 20th century, the Qing government promulgated a series of "school

regulations,” in accordance with which a modern educational system was established in China. It was patterned after Japan's educational system at the end of the 19th century. The system should be “based on Chinese traditional learning with Western knowledge to be acquired for practical purposes” — this was to be the guiding principle for China's educational system. And its purpose was to “read ancient classics and extol Confucianism.” Education was divided into three stages: nine years of primary education, five years of secondary education and seven years of higher education. Students began their education at the age of seven, and their courses were predominantly related to Confucian classics. Teachers were mostly scholars who had passed the imperial examination at the county level and had had teaching jobs at private schools. Graduates of institutions of higher learning might be given an official title. Schools refused to accept girls, who could receive education at home only.

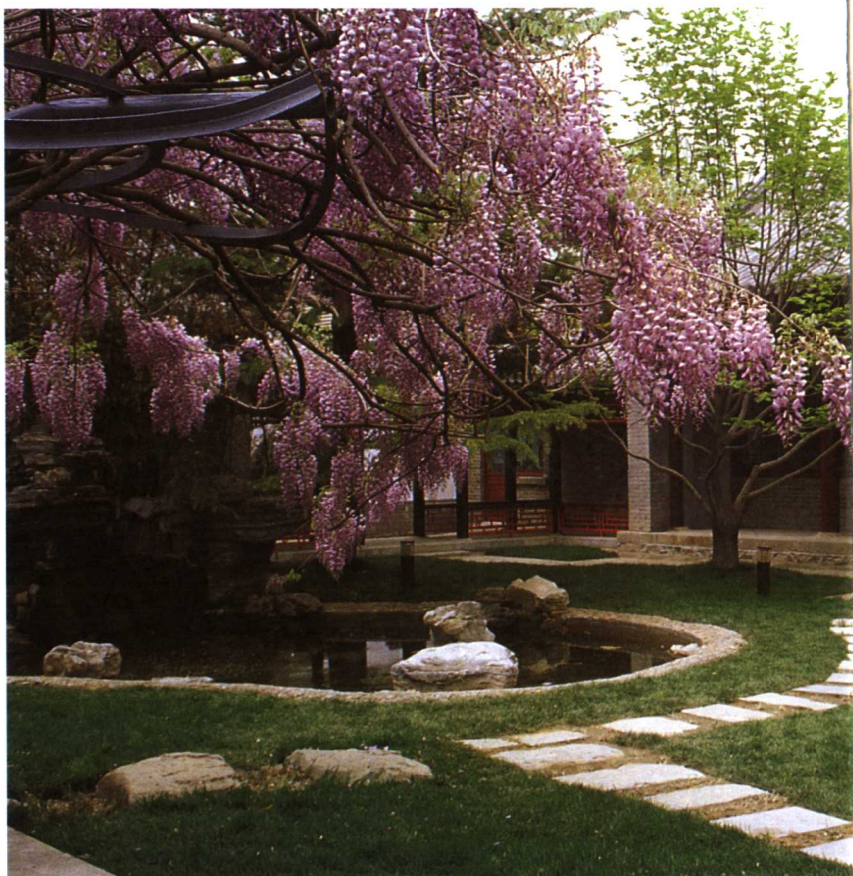
The Revolution of 1911 overthrew the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), ending feudal rule that had lasted more than 2000 years in China. In 1912, the newly founded Republic of China (1912-1949) reformed the then feudal educational system in a comprehensive manner. The principle of enabling those who receive an education to “develop morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically in a balanced manner” was first advanced. Around 1919, China's education was faced with new changes. The New Cultural Movement that started in 1915 advocated democracy and science; the year of 1917 saw the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia; and in 1919 the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal May 4th Movement rocked China. These exerted great influences over the Chinese society and enabled education to keep pace with the times. After the May 4th Movement, the reading of Confucian classics was abolished in school education; difficult classical Chinese was replaced by the vernacular for

textbooks; a phonetic alphabet was promoted; colleges were allowed to enroll girl students; education became more oriented toward the common people and more practical; and some Western teaching theories and methods were introduced into China, leading to a series of reforms in the school system, curricula, teaching materials and methods.

On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded. A month later, the Education Ministry of the Central People's Government was established. Education began its new development in a peaceful and stable social environment. A number of statistics can well reflect conditions of China's education at that time. In 1946, the year when China's education was at its best before the founding of New China in 1949, out of every ten school-age children, only two attended school; and out of every ten young adults, eight were illiterates. Calculated on a national population of 470 million at the time, of every 10,000 people, there were three college students, 38 middle school students and 486 primary school students.

In the 17 years from 1949 to 1966, China established pre-school, regular and adult education systems that began to take shape. Full-time education and spare-time education were provided for an increasing number of people. In 1957, Mao Zedong proposed the following in accordance with the country's conditions: "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." This policy guided the development of China's education in the following three decades and its spirit has extended to the present.

The "Cultural Revolution" of 1966-1976 brought calamities to the Chinese nation. During the ten-year period, development of education came to a stop, the order of teaching and learning was



A garden at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

disrupted, textbooks used in primary and middle schools were full of political slogans, and institutions of higher learning stopped enrolling students. Intellectuals, including teachers, had a very low social status. The prevailing idea of “learning is useless” adversely affected the cultivation of a generation of people.

With the disastrous “Cultural Revolution” coming to an end in 1976, major efforts were made to correct past wrongs. Economic development began taking center stage throughout the country. As