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On the Anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's "Three Fors" Thirty Years of School Reform in China

In September, 2013, China celebrated the thirtieth anniversary¹ of Deng Xiaoping's "Three Fors," a document that launched educational reform in China. The "Three Fors" was a simple inscription, part of a long history of inscriptions by high officials, bestowed on institutions/sites at stops along the way of their travels. It was written in ink on paper in Deng's best calligraphy at the Jingshan School² in the heart of Beijing. The document states, "Education is/should be for modernization, for the world, and for the future."³ It is on display in the Jingshan School's museum room and has been reproduced in bronze on a plaque on the school's exterior wall. "Three Fors" is displayed, as well, on school walls all



Deng Xiaoping's "Three Fors" posted on the outer wall of the Jingshan School in Beijing

over China. What made it such a revolutionary, inspirational, and visionary declaration is the broad interpretation of its stated ideas by China's educators.

The declaration contains an inherent directive for education and educators to adapt to new technology and global forces after decades of Mao's highly centralized, narrowly focused educational system and the highly destructive Cultural Revolution. It also exhorts educators to transform the country and to produce citizens

who will contribute to China's development and improve the world. The anniversary of the "Three Fors" offers an excellent opportunity for us to take stock of China's achievements in education since 1983, and evaluate the status of reform since Deng's declaration. In addition, we can assess the principal focus of the conference, which was the need to incorporate critical thinking and creativity into teaching and learning as essential steps toward assuring China's future preeminence on the world's stage. This new emphasis on critical thinking and creativity, today's version of "Three Fors" reform, presents, however, a serious dilemma for China's teachers: how to elicit critical thinking and creativity from their students, while, at the same time, respond to conflicting demands from parents and administrators.

Deng's "Three Fors" heralded the beginning of modern educational reform in 1983. China was still reeling from the effects of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which was characterized by class struggle, closed schools, persecuted teachers, and a highly centralized, narrowly focused educational system. The task of educational reform seemed monumental: to reopen schools, to reinstate the exam system, to admit students into universities, and to salvage the teaching profession. China set out to learn 'best practices' from other countries' school systems.⁴ Ten years later, the goals of education were further refined: to decentralize the school system; to renovate, consolidate, and build schools; to implement a modern curriculum, with special emphasis on the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; to instill patriotism; and to train a new generation of teachers. By the twentieth anniversary, the themes were broader: to improve the capacity of teachers and the quality of teaching and to extend educational opportunities for students, while continuing along the road taken at the tenth anniversary. Indeed, China's education reform has succeeded in achieving almost universal literacy; it has massively restructured the largest school system in the world; it has extended vocational education, adult education, and distance learning; it has improved the quality of teaching; it has fostered the rise of a large network of private schools; it continues to set a pace and a rigor for reform that the rest of the world carefully follows. This year, Shanghai schools placed first in the world on the PISA international test for reading, mathematics, science, and problem-solving skills. In the thirty years since the "Three Fors" was issued, China has changed more quickly and more deeply than any other society in history. Her students are connected and engaged in the world in countless ways that Deng Xiaoping himself could not have foreseen, despite his prescience and his vision of "opening and reform" in the realm of education. Progress in educational reform is further propelled by Chinese people's enviable respect for education and their deep-seated belief that education is the only means for improving one's life and developing the country. Now, at the thirtieth, the educational landscape is changing once again, consistent with the goals of reform, but the "Three Fors" remains the driving inspiration.

The thirtieth anniversary celebration of the "Three Fors" put education front and center in the media, demonstrating a uniquely Chinese emphasis on education that goes back thousands of years. It reminded the nation that Deng's "opening and reform" extended to education, and not just to business and economics. Both in its appearance and in its substance, the event celebrated the renewal of emphasis on education, and the prodigious progress it has made in thirty years. Speakers at the conference included teachers, administrators, recently graduated students, and government officials. Everyone spoke about how far China's education had progressed in thirty years, how much further it had to go, and how likely was its future success. Running through all of the presentations was the conviction that critical thinking and creativity were essential ingredients of modern education, necessary to move China to the position of preeminence it occupied in the world in the past and expects to reoccupy in the future. For these speakers, the idea of critical thinking and creativity seemed to be abstract, undefined, perhaps not fully understood — a good idea only. However, discussion of critical thinking and creativity is currently widespread in the Chinese media, in literature about education in China, and among

educators, though there is not a lot of agreement about how to implement critical thinking and creativity. Yong Zhao, an educator now living in the U.S., often compares Chinese and U.S. education and manages an indirect dialogue between Chinese and American educators, translating their works to one another. He observes of education in China, "When one is taught to conform, it will be difficult for him to be creative. When one is punished for making mistakes, it will be hard for her to take risks."⁵ He introduces us to Chinese educators, who are working to bring creativity and critical thinking found in American classrooms into Chinese classrooms. One of them, Li Xigui,⁶ describes his vision for the kind of school environment that is required for developing students' critical thinking and creativity: in summary, granting students 'ownership' of their schools, giving them responsibility for their own learning, and providing them with teachers who love students, love knowledge, and love teaching. This vision is a far cry from the traditional Chinese model of a school environment in which the teacher is on center stage as the provider of knowledge and model of virtue.



The conference marking the anniversary of the "Three Fors" (with the "Three Fors" in the background)

Critical thinking (*pipanxing siwei*, 批判性思维) and creativity (*chuangzao li*, 创造力) are the terms used in discussions about the new direction in education and their role in preparing the next generation for China's growing importance in the world. As it is understood in U.S. schools, critical thinking is a wide-ranging, questioning approach to learning in which students examine all possible alternatives before providing the best answer. Teachers in the U.S. spend a long time training to teach students to be critical thinkers. The current teachers at the Jingshan School, in an informal survey⁷, talked about what critical thinking means to them and how they teach their students to think critically. They all agreed that they have not been trained to elicit critical thinking from their students. They said, "We are trying to encourage students to think for themselves instead of simply following others' opinions/ideas. It's something like individual thinking, and also similar to your definition. As you may understand, one of the core traditions of Chinese education is obedience, which influences not only people's daily behaviors, but also their thoughts. However, in the recent decade, it's believed that this obedience in thoughts takes away students' courage and abilities to form creative ideas and make inventions. Therefore, such [an] idea as critical thinking is emphasized more and more frequently in education. As for English language classrooms, we [teachers] are often asked by the so-called language teaching experts the question, "How [do] you train your students' ability of critical thinking in your class, though nobody has ever given us an official definition of 'critical thinking'?" The teachers have not received any special in-service training to incorporate critical thinking into their teaching methods, nor are they given any pre-service training in their

colleges or universities. They are told that critical thinking is important but not how to achieve it.

When one visits the classrooms in schools all around China, one still rarely sees critical thinking used in teaching and learning. One sees teacher-centered classrooms and conformity to the group. Questions have only one right answer. There are many reasons for the intransigence of the traditional classroom configuration in China. First, because the college entrance examination (*gao kao*, 高考) is so determinative of students' future opportunities that parents and educators continue to believe that 'teaching to the test' is more effective than alternative teaching methods for guaranteeing the highest test scores. Even those students fortunate enough to have the option of study abroad must take standard qualifying tests such as TOEFFEL, IB, or SAT, which elicit routinized methods of test preparation, similar to those for *gao kao*. In fact, Chinese teachers of the special courses for study abroad and those in cram schools that help to prepare the students for standardized tests do an excellent job—far better than most of the foreign teachers in China's schools can do—even in English—because of their deep understanding of tests and test preparation and because their livelihoods depend on their students' success on these tests.



High school students taking a test

A second reason for the lack of critical thinking is political. In China's one-party system, free-ranging discussion, true debate, and disagreement are discouraged. Political education, in its current form, was introduced into the schools in 1994 and was fully implemented in schools by 1997. After the protest demonstrations in 1989, Deng famously said, "[O]ur biggest mistake was made in the field of education, primarily in ideological and political education—not just of students, but of the people in general. We did not tell them enough about the need for hard struggle, about what China was like in the old days, and what kind of a country it was to become. That was a serious error on our part."⁸ Patriotic education in the primary school starts unpretentiously with an introduction of 'beautiful places in China' to elicit pride. In junior middle school, it involves teaching the

many reasons one should love the country and the Party. By the end of senior middle school, units focus on China's century of humiliation and how the Party saved China from foreign oppressors, corrupt Nationalists, and incompetent feudal rulers. The focus on the era of Mao's class struggle and anti-feudalism has been replaced by a focus on foreign oppressors.⁹ Beyond schools, in society at large, the patriotic education campaign has been permanently institutionalized to reach into every segment and every age group of society, through the one hundred best songs one should heed to the designated 'red-tour' sites one should visit. Using all forms of media to educate the public and conduct regular training sessions for Party members and government officials, the Party conveys the patriotic message in one voice. This campaign of political education is deeply embedded in school curricula.

The Party Secretary in each school is responsible for keeping abreast of the Party message and imparting it to the administrators and teachers, who impart it to their students, smoothly, in one voice. The Party determines the correct response to current events and trends and the proper way to remember historical events and ideas¹⁰ and can ensure that the students receive the proper messages. It has mastered the intricacies of modern communication, public relations, and advertising, to reach out to its membership with positive, pleasant, and incontrovertible messages. Some relatively recent events of modern history have not yet been adjudicated, and, therefore, are not yet found in textbooks and cannot yet be taught. For example, the Cultural Revolution is mentioned only briefly as one of Mao's missteps but is not studied or analyzed. Teachers, who like to conduct classes in which discussion is encouraged, know how to gently and kindly cajole students away from strong political observations and negative comments about social problems. Indeed, it is part of their job to make sure that the Party's interpretation is the one that will win out in classroom discussions, and students emerge with the 'correct' viewpoints.

Another possible reason for the lack of critical thinking in Chinese classrooms is even more basic: The Chinese language itself.¹¹ Those who have studied this difficult, complex, and multi-modal language know that rote learning is used to memorize visual characters, the meaning or sound radicals, the tones, and stroke order. Any missing ingredient of this language means lack of fluency, illiteracy, and failure. China's educators have ascertained over millennia how best to teach their own language. Most of them teach it according to the same methods by which they themselves learned it. The methods used to teach Chinese language to China's children arguably could be easily adapted to teaching math, science, and even to English language; however, these methods are widely used in teaching all subjects. In classes where critical thinking would especially enhance learning—literature, history, arts, laboratory sciences—it is still largely absent, partially perhaps because of the universality and omnipresence of the method used to teach language. To most people in China, including most parents of children in school, the traditional model of instruction, whereby the teacher imparts knowledge and is a figure of respect, IS teaching.

Finally, the trend of globalization—that is, increasing decentralization to more school-based management and building a market force incorporating choice—has contributed to the confusion about how to teach. It has led to a paradigm shift from traditional to modern education and a resulting confrontation of ideologies: global market forces of competition, choice, efficiency, flexibility, individualism, diversity, and accountability versus traditional Confucian values of humanism, authoritarianism, integrity, self-cultivation, civility, and duty.¹² Educators are divided about how to respond to this shift because they are pulled in conflicting directions by their immediate superiors and by parents. They may be told to be more child-centered in their classrooms to permit critical thinking and creativity, but they are also required to raise students' test scores. They do not easily see how to reconcile the two directives. In the most selective schools in which the students will excel no matter

how they are taught, the task is less daunting: encourage creativity and critical thinking within limits, enrich the students with a broad spectrum of elective classes, and spend less time teaching to the test. But for the overwhelming majority of students in regular schools, test scores drive the teaching, and traditional ways are most successful for test preparation.

Often in China, the term for creativity, *chuangzao li*, 创造力, is mentioned simultaneously with critical thinking, as if the two are synonymous. China's history is famous for its "four great inventions": papermaking, the compass, the printing press, and gunpowder, which all Chinese children learn early in their primary school years. China



Unconvincing school motto promoting creativity and knowledge

is seeking to generate a new era of invention to match its resurgent economic rise in the world. Creativity is good for business and also good for image. The government is increasing funding to scientific laboratories, universities, and think tanks to help them to achieve world-class status. In schools, it has directed educators to provide opportunities for children to become creative, by providing more elective courses so that they can explore and develop their interests, more hands-on classes to provide them with practical experience, more opportunities to attend international educational fairs and competitions, and course content more relevant to their lives. Stressing the importance of creativity for China's future, a recent Chinese visitor to an American school said, "Creativity is like a seed: it can grow very well if it watered, fertilized, and nurtured properly, especially when it is germinating. No matter where it will be planted later, it will grow into a big healthy tree. Imagination and creativity must be nurtured in the young."¹³

When one visits primary schools in different parts of China, one can believe that creativity will prevail in the next generation. The children are happy, curious, and focused. Certainly the children are engaged in learning, playing, and inquiry, elements of education most necessary for creativity and critical thinking, and can make choices that develop their interests. Increasingly, in addition to a rigorous academic program set into a lengthy school day, there are many electives for children to choose, depending on the school, from culturally predictable

classes, such as knot-tying or chess-playing to eclectic classes like target shooting or tea-serving. There are few limits to the children's enthusiasm for life and for school, despite most schools' lack of tolerance for messing up. Most students are only children, and so they relish the opportunity to work and play with other children. On weekends they may be programmed into arts, sports, or cram classes, so school is where they can daily make friends and enjoy learning.

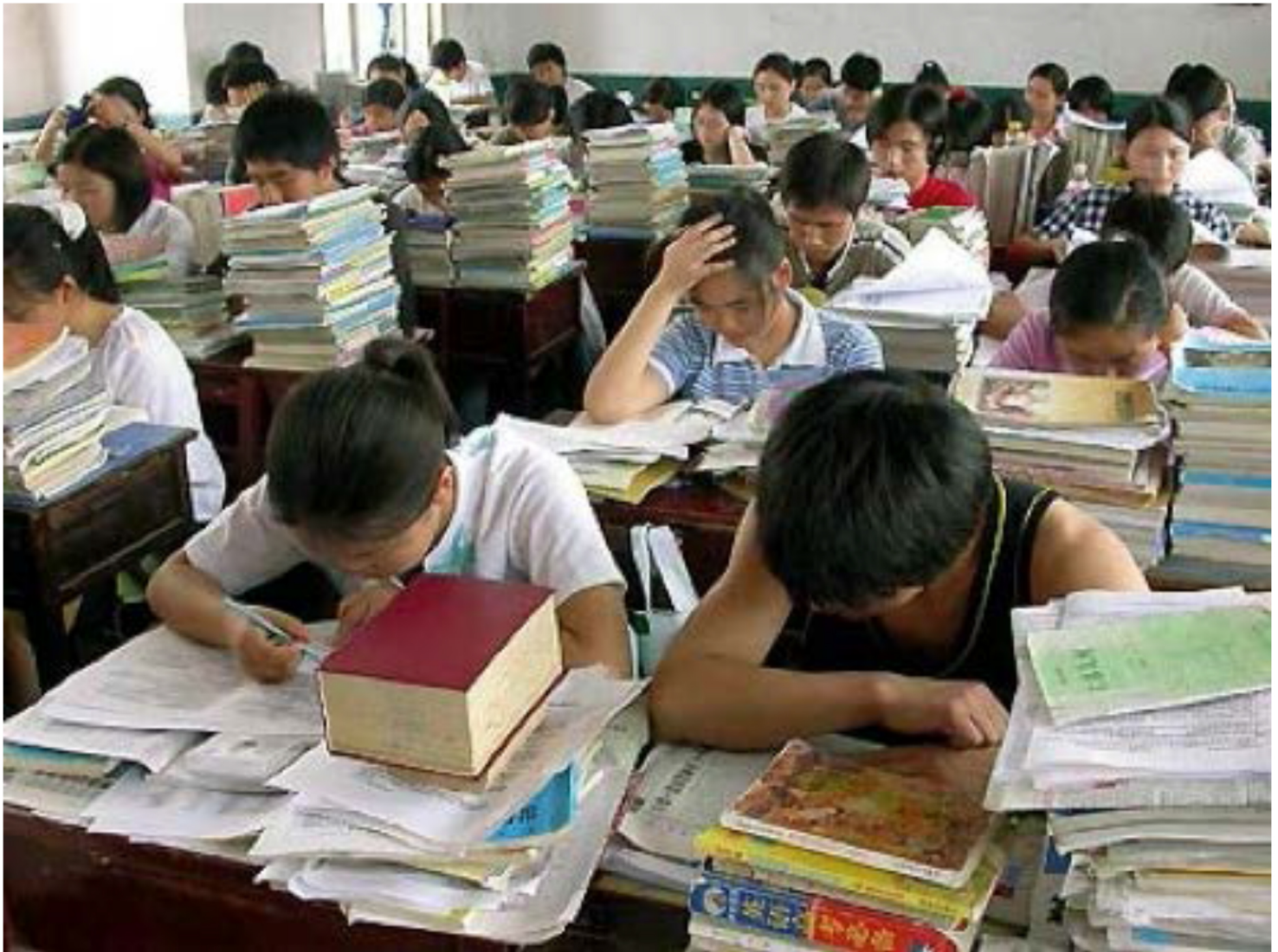


Primary school students in class and at play

By the time the children reach junior middle school (Grades 7, 8, and 9), school is a less happy, more anxiety-provoking experience, as the students and their families begin to worry about which high school their children will qualify to attend. The families jockey for the schools that provide the most advantageous positioning for their children's future success on the high-stakes, standardized test in Grade 12 (*gao kao*) for college entrance. Although basic education (Grades 1-9) is compulsory and universal, high school is not. Parents and students have to worry about the entrance examination for high school (*zhong kao*, 中考) in Grade 9. Since everyone knows which are the 'best' high schools in their local area, based on the test scores of the students and the success rate for college entrance, families want their children to enter those schools, rather than the 'ordinary' high schools that are less difficult to enter and may even be more conveniently located. It is possible for students to enter the more desirable schools, even if they don't make the required grade on the *zhong kao*, if their families can afford to pay tuition. High schools are legally allowed to create special classes for tuition-paying students, according to a formula¹⁴ based on their test scores, but the school administrators will tell visitors to the school that those classes are "deficient." In any case, as they near entry to high school, students are less likely to avail themselves of high-interest electives that do not directly prepare them for the *zhong kao*.

Lest one think that perhaps there is a lack of ability for critical thinking among Chinese students, one need only listen to the discussions that pepper dinner tables in people's homes and places where students gather.¹⁵ There the discussions are all-embracing, extensive, and private. The students critique, second-guess, and understand the state-controlled media for what is omitted, as well as what is included. Reading between the lines, interpreting, and analyzing the government press is second nature for students by the time they reach college. Young people interested in political and social current events know how to use alternative social media

for their news sources, and can find their way beyond China's Internet firewall to gain access to the news directly from other parts of the world. Students welcome foreign visitors into their classrooms, seizing the opportunity to ask 'hard' questions about world events and to challenge different perspectives, sometimes to the discomfort of their teachers. As for creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit, China has a number of bright young people who are creating their own high-tech start-ups and other businesses. Some are graduating from China's universities, some returning from education abroad, and others circumventing school altogether. They aspire to become the next Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg.



High school students in a "self-study" class preparing for test

As China continues its remarkable transformation, pinning its hopes on the next generation, its schools remain the fulcrum of society's massive adaptation and reordering of priorities. Deng Xiaoping, himself, through the "Three Fors," exhorted schools to be the drivers of change and responsible forces for good. All agree that enormous progress has been made in education, yet today China's teachers often express frustration at the difficult work they are asked to do, to reconcile conflicting messages relating to teaching: how to teach critical thinking while limiting discussion to content acceptable to the Party; how to be child-centered and foster creativity, while teaching to the test; how to change their own pedagogy, despite having been taught by traditional methods

themselves. Principals complain about pressure from parents and conflicting messages about excellence and success — exam prowess or happy, confident, engaged students. Students often complain about dullness of their classes and the pressure of examinations; however, they all agree that great advances have been made to modernize education and the country through education. During the celebration marking the thirtieth anniversary of the "Three Fors," the speakers, from teachers to officials, all expressed pride in the progress inspired by Deng Xiaoping, confidence that they will solve ongoing problems, and faith in the "Chinese dream" of an ever-brighter future. Despite the simplicity of Deng's words in the "Three Fors," his successors' broad interpretation of it has set an ambitious course for continued school reform in China. In its sights, not yet achieved, perhaps to be articulated at a fortieth anniversary of the "Three Fors," are universal K-12 education, including special education, and improved access to quality education for children of migrant workers, minorities, and the rural poor. Looking at the distance traveled in a mere thirty years, it is clear that education in China shows remarkable momentum, achievement, resilience, and promise, its goals aligned with those of other world powers. It is not yet clear if reform can continue at the current pace or what new directions it will take — that we will have to find out at the fortieth anniversary of the "Three Fors" in ten years' time!



School for migrant workers' children and an elite key school

Endnotes

¹ The author attended this event. She is a long-time observer of China's schools, first, as an exchange teacher assigned to the English Department at the Jingshan School from the Newton Public Schools in 1989, and, later, as the co-founder and director of the China Exchange Initiative, an organization that forges exchanges of U.S. and Chinese school administrators. She has visited over a hundred and fifty schools in China during the years of educational reform and has met and discussed educational issues with hundreds of Chinese principals, teachers, students, and education officials during this time.

² The Jingshan School is known as the school preferred by China's high government officials for their children. Deng's granddaughters attended the Jingshan School, as did the daughter of Xi Jinping at the primary level more than a generation later. The school opened in 1963 as an experimental school to create curriculum for China's school system and materials for China's less privileged, more poorly funded schools, and it has housed

(literally and figuratively) many of China's best teachers.

³ The "Three Fors" (*san ge mian xiang* 三个面向) has also been translated into English as the Three Represents or the Three Faces: "Education represents/faces modernization, the world, and the future."

⁴ The Newton (MA) Public Schools played an indirect role in China's early era of educational reform. As an experimental school, the Jingshan School was asked by the Ministry of Education to prepare teaching materials for the new era of opening and reform. Because of its early association with the Newton Public Schools, a partnership that began in 1979, Jingshan teachers turned to colleagues in Newton, who generously provided materials from all disciplines used in Newton schools. Many of these materials were adapted to newly designed Chinese curriculum. Additionally, in the early and mid-1980s, the Jingshan School sent several delegations of educators to Newton to observe classes and report on pedagogy, school governance, and curriculum.

⁵ Zhao Yong, *World Class Learners*, p. 139.

⁶ Li Xigui, *My 36-Day Education Tour in the U.S.*, pp. 136-141. Mr. Li is the principal of one of Beijing's best high schools, The National Day School, known for its student-centered instruction under his direction. During his visit to the U.S., he spent a day with the author observing classes in Newton and meeting Newton's high school principals and its superintendent. Upon his return to China, he wrote a book, *My 36-Day Education Tour in the United States*, in which he reflects on his Newton visit.

⁷ This survey was taken by a teacher in the English Department of the Jingshan School on October 25, 2013.

⁸ Deng Xiaoping, "Address to officers at the rank of general and above in command of the troops enforcing martial law," quoted in Wang Zhang, "National Humiliation, History Education and the Politics of Historical Memory," p. 788. Ezra Vogel also describes Deng Xiaoping's view of patriotic education in detail in *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Chapter 22.

⁹ Wang Zheng, "National Humiliation, History Education and the Politics of Historical Memory," p. 790.

¹⁰ In May, 2013, to the distress of most educators, the Party issued seven topics (*qi bu jiang* 七不讲) not to be discussed in the media and in schools and universities: universal values, human rights, civil society, press freedom, Party mistakes, people with high social status or political power, and an independent judiciary.

¹¹ Several studies of Chinese education make this point, including those of Li Jin, *Cultural Foundations of Learning*, p. 138 and Nancy Pine, *Educating Young Giants*, pp. 96-97, 100.

¹² Nicolas Sun-Keung Pang, "Educational Governance and Management in Sinic Societies," in Zhao Yong, ed., *Handbook of Asian Education*, p. 7. Throughout the book, this ideological confrontation is described as one that is occurring in all Asian educational systems.

¹³ Wu Shimin, a participant in the China Exchange Initiative's administrator shadowing project in 2007, in an unpublished report of his experiences, p. 4.

¹⁴ Students who fail the cut-off score for admittance to a selective high school by no more than two points can

enter a school as tuition-paying students. Those who fail by one point pay lower tuition than those failing by two points.

¹⁵ Michael Paton, in "Asian Students, Critical Thinking, and English as an Academic *Lingua Franca*," pp. 30-33, describes his study of undergraduate and graduate students in China and India to determine their perceptions of critical thinking, and found them to be aware of and committed to critical thinking.

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