The Disturbing Educational Discipline of "Peasants"
Author(s): Andrew Kipnis
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THE DISTURBING EDUCATIONAL DISCIPLINE
OF “PEASANTS”*

Andrew Kipnis

Educational discipline—pushing to complete homework assignments, to study hard and to succeed by scoring highly on entrance exams—is often seen as both a hallmark of an urban middle class and the means by which members of that class distinguish themselves both occupationally and morally from those they take to be below them. Sociological and anthropological studies of education have reached this conclusion in Europe, the United States, the developing world, Japan and China, even as they diverge over the causes for and implications of this finding.¹

In the course of research in Zouping county, Shandong province, over the past dozen years, I often felt that this view elided the dedication to education shown by many rural families. I have met numerous former rural students who studied hard to succeed on university entrance exams and left their villages, eventually moving on to urban jobs. As I focused my attention on the

* Research for this paper was supported by funds from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. I thank all those who granted me interviews in Zouping, Annalisa Cummings for research assistance, and Joel Andreas, Anita Chan, Louise Simon, Stig Thogersen, Jonathan Unger, Janet Upton, Terry Woronov and two anonymous reviewers for useful suggestions on sources and revisions.

implementation of China’s recent education reforms during research in 1999 and 2000, the deficiencies of this view became even more apparent. Rural communities more than urban districts were resisting reforms designed to decrease the importance of testing, to lower the hours spent in school and to reduce the amount of homework assigned. In some cases rural schools also outperformed the schools in wealthier, more urban sectors of the county on examination results. I have called the rural students who study so hard to pass their exams “peasants” not because the term accurately depicts who they are, but because the desire to escape the stigma of being considered “peasants” motivates their strong discipline in preparing so rigorously for the examinations. I term this discipline “disturbing” because of its adverse implications for China’s education system as a whole, and for the recent education reforms in particular.

Although I would not deny the existence of settings in China where children from poorer rural communities rarely succeed educationally and parents and schools do not or cannot impose strict educational discipline, neither do I take Zouping to be an anomaly. Stig Thogersen’s mid-1980s research on high schools in Yantai, Shandong province, for example, revealed that students from the main rural school did better on the University Entrance Exams (UEE) than those from the main urban school. Journalistic reports about poor rural schools that exhibit extreme degrees of educational discipline and success on examinations provide similar evidence. More importantly, nationwide statistics on the origins of university students reveal that even though rural students as a group still lag behind urban students in terms of applying for university, the gap is not large. In 1995, 72 per cent of 18 and 19 year olds came from rural areas, and 59 per cent of university applicants were rural. In Shandong rural people made up 68 per cent

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2 For a critique of the term “peasant” as it is used in the PRC, see Myron L. Cohen, “Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese Peasant”, Daedalus, No. 122 (Spring 1993), pp. 151–70.


5 The nationwide population statistics are taken from the China Population Statistics Yearbook 1996 (Zhongguo renkou tongji nianjian) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 76 and 85; while the Shandong figure comes from the Shandong Statistical Yearbook 1996 (Shandong tongji nianjian) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1996), p. 33. The university recruitment statistics come from the Comprehensive Statistical Yearbook of Chinese Education 1996 (hereafter CSYCE) (Zhongguo jiaoyu zonghe tongji nianjian) (Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1996), p. 64. The term university here refers to institutions running short courses (dazhuan or zhuanke) and to regular undergraduate institutions (benke). Although I cannot be absolutely sure that the same definition of rural and urban is being used in each case, all of these statistical yearbooks use the term
of the population but 69 per cent of university applicants in 1995, the latest year for which such data were available. In 1993 the rural population accounted for 53 per cent of those admitted to university nationally and almost 72 per cent of those admitted in Shandong.

The comparison between university applicants of rural and urban origin becomes even more interesting when looking at the students who, not having done well enough in the UEE the first time around, retake their final year of senior high school (at considerable cost) in order to resit the UEE and reapply to university. As Table 1 indicates, rural students are far more likely than urban students to try this route into university. Nationwide, in 1995 the number of such rural applicants was more than double the number of urban ones. In Shandong, the ratio approached four to one. This statistic more than any other demonstrates the extent of rural students’ commitment to securing a higher education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Shandong</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total university applicants</td>
<td>2,530,813</td>
<td>201,286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of first-time urban applicants</td>
<td>769,513 (30%)</td>
<td>44,645 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of first-time rural applicants</td>
<td>940,352 (37%)</td>
<td>95,444 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of urban applicants resitting the UEE</td>
<td>235,666 (9%)</td>
<td>11,630 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of rural applicants resitting the UEE</td>
<td>562,159 (22%)</td>
<td>43,999 (22%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The numbers do not add to 100 per cent because the table does not include students in the military and students from abroad.


*chengzhen* for urban. The *China Population Statistics Yearbook 1996*, p. 2 defines *chengzhen* as the population living in urban areas and county seats.

*CSYCE 1996*, p. 66.

*CSYCE 1994*, pp. 35–6. Again, 1993 was the latest year for which information on university applicants and acceptances was available.
Past studies of education in China, as in other parts of the world, have emphasized a strong relationship between social class and educational success, as well as a considerable urban bias. Jonathan Unger demonstrates that in the 1950s and 1960s the students who advanced in the education system by virtue of academic achievement (as opposed to political criteria) were overwhelmingly of middle-class origin. The urban bias was extreme. Canton had universalized junior high school education before many rural children had access to even one year of elementary school. Until the reform era, most rural children simply did not have access to enough years of reasonable quality schooling to compete with their urban counterparts. Many still do not. Although Thogersen’s mid-1980s research in Yantai showed children from the main rural school testing into university at a higher rate than those from the main urban school, it also showed a strong tendency for children of manual workers to end up in the vocational track. Studies in the early 1980s of rural districts—in Dongguan county, Guangdong province, and suburban Shanghai—mention the near impossibility of rural students testing into university.

My purpose here is not to deny the validity of these previous studies linking educational achievement to social class. Rather, by examining educational discipline in Zouping county and its relationship to recent education reforms, I hope to point out emerging contradictions in this received picture of urban educational bias and to discuss their implications. I have three sorts of evidence to present. The first involves the general level of commitment to educational discipline in this rural but urbanizing county. The second involves an attempt to assess levels of educational discipline and success in examinations in relation to socioeconomic differences within the county, while the third involves the reactions of the county’s rural schools to the recent education reforms. In addition to archival data, I rely on interviews conducted in October and November of 1999 with teachers and administrators at the county education office (jiaowei), at five primary schools, four junior high schools and four senior high schools, as well as informal interviews with more than 40 parents and students undertaken during the same visit and during an October 2000 trip, and knowledge


9 The 1995 target for the year 2000 was to have 99 per cent of students enrolled in primary school and 85 per cent in junior high school. Although the most prosperous provinces have already attained such levels, the poorest provinces have not even come close. See “Education”, *China Development Briefing*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (August–November 1999), pp. 11–13.


accumulated over seven previous research trips to Zouping between 1988 and 1998.

**Educational Discipline in Zouping**

In terms of economic development, Zouping has occupied a middling position during the reform period, nowhere near as prosperous and industrialized as Guangdong or the lower Yangzi valley, but nowhere near as poor as rural areas in the interior provinces. The completion of the highway from Jinan to Qingdao in 1995, which passes just to the south of the county capital, has sped up the rate of economic growth. Zouping's per capita gross domestic product exceeded the national average in 1998, and Table 2 shows that the per capita income of rural residents exceeded the national average by 1995. The level of industrialization depends on how this measure is defined. Although the value of industrial output in 1998 was more than four times the value of agricultural output, and although industry accounted for almost all of the taxes paid to the county, the agricultural sector still employed 61 per cent of the workforce. In 1995, 85 per cent of the people lived outside the county capital. In short, although the vast majority of the county's revenues came from industry, the majority of its people continued to live in rural townships and to be employed in agricultural work.

**Table 2:** Per capita rural cash income in China, Shandong and Zouping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Shandong</th>
<th>Zouping</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>1,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>2,162</td>
<td>2,453</td>
<td>2,680</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Educational discipline in Zouping is even more difficult to measure than industrialization, but several sorts of evidence suggest that the general level of commitment to educational discipline in Zouping is high. Indications include historical studies, the percentage of students attending school beyond the compulsory nine years, the atmosphere and UEE success rates at the county’s high schools, and the willingness of families to spend money on education.

Formal education was well established in the Qing dynasty in Zouping and expanded throughout the 20th century. Thogersen argues that Zouping villagers early in the 20th century consistently valued education in academic schools that provided a chance of upward social mobility over more practically oriented vocational schools. Although only a small minority of boys ever succeeded in securing jobs outside of their villages through such schools, good students who did not make it out of their villages were often rewarded with the best positions their villages had to offer—as schoolteachers, doctors and, in the mid-20th century, accountants and technicians. The respect for academic achievement in Zouping cannot be considered only a recent phenomenon.

The county’s economic growth during the post-Mao period has enabled a continued expansion of educational opportunity, making educational discipline a realistic strategy for social advancement for a growing percentage of Zouping’s families. In addition to universalizing nine years of education to satisfy state requirements, the county has been aggressive in expanding educational opportunity at the senior high school level. In 1999, of roughly 8,000 junior high school graduates, 6,000 attempted to continue their education. Zouping’s senior high schools had enough places to admit 4,000 of these, half of whom gained admittance to one of the more prestigious academic senior high schools. This is double the percentage of students who made it to any type of senior high school in 1980. The hunger for education did not stop at the secondary level. In 1999, about 70 per cent of graduates from academic senior high schools went on to some form of further education.


This and all subsequent unreferenced data come from interviews.

Slightly more than half of these students made it to a tertiary institution, while the others attended technical senior high schools (zhongzhuan). Since they already had a senior high school certificate, these students were able to complete their technical middle school education in one to two years.
The percentage of Zouping students doing well enough on the UEE to enter university has been impressively high throughout the 1990s. In 1995, 817 of the 1,438 graduates from academic senior high schools did well enough on the UEE to enter a tertiary institution. Since then the number of Zouping students entering university has continued to grow, although an increase in high school graduates has meant a decline in percentage terms. Nevertheless, Zouping has managed to stay ahead of provincial averages for university admittance. As argued above, the fact that some of Zouping’s UEE success is attributable to its students repeating the final year of senior high school and retaking the UEE only further demonstrates the commitment of Zouping students to securing a higher education.

Another factor behind Zouping’s UEE success is the boot-camp-like schedule at all five of Zouping’s academic senior high schools. In 1999, excepting meal times and brief rests, students were scheduled to participate in either formal classroom activities or mandatory “self-study” (zixi) periods from 6.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m., six days a week. During “vacations” students were given considerable amounts of homework, and even on Sundays, when students had the option of leaving campus, large numbers could be found studying in their classrooms. Homeroom groups of students were compared on everything from how they cleaned the bathrooms to their scores on the latest tests, and the administrators tried to maintain as competitive an atmosphere as possible. In short, Zouping’s academic senior high schools were thoroughly disciplined institutions.

Government and community support for spending on education was evident throughout the county as well. At all of the senior high schools and many of the junior high schools, new school buildings and new housing for teachers were being built. At the primary schools, low-paid community-sponsored (minban) teachers were rapidly being put into salaried positions funded by the county government. The willingness of parents to spend on education was also evident. I heard no parent complain about primary or junior high school fees, and the teachers and administrators I spoke with did not see fee payments as much of a problem. One principal of a rural junior high school said:


20 The China Education Yearbook 1999 (Zhongguo jiaoyu nianjian) (Beijing: Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1999), p. 669 shows that in Shandong in 1998 there were slightly less than three tertiary places for every ten academic senior high school graduates. The 30 per cent success rate that these numbers imply is lower than the 38 per cent success rate for Zouping students in the same year.

21 In 1999 primary school fees in Zouping were limited to 40 yuan per semester plus book fees, while junior high school fees were limited to 65 yuan per semester plus book and room fees if a student lived at school. (Book fees were controlled by the central government and varied between 50 yuan and 100 yuan a semester for primary school students and between 150 yuan and 200 yuan a semester for secondary school students.) School fees have been widely described as being a great burden in poorer rural areas. Although I do not dispute this
with the birth control policy and only one or two children per family, parents' hopes that their children will become dragons [wang zi cheng long xinli] has grown. They almost always pay their fees quickly, buy books early, support community investment in education, review their children's homework, and respond to our other requests as soon as we send home a notice. If anything, they pay too much attention to their children's schooling.

Senior high school and university fees have become considerably more expensive. However, although county administrators are concerned about the burden on poor families and offer reductions in senior high school fees for poverty-stricken students, they also note that there had not been one case in the entire county of a student turning down admission at a university for financial reasons. One said, "everyone wants their child to go to college, and even if they're too poor to pay the tuition themselves, they can find friends or relatives to borrow from". One teacher did suggest, however, that poorer students may only be able to apply to the less-expensive universities, such as the teacher training, military, mining, forestry and agricultural universities.  

**Variations within the County in Educational Discipline and Success**

In describing attitudes toward educational discipline in Zouping as a whole, the above section has elided discussion of variations within Zouping. Boys, for example, on average face higher expectations from parents and teachers and score higher than girls. Teachers said that girls performed better on tests until the early grades of junior high school, but did worse thereafter. Consequently, almost 60 per cent of the students in the county's academic senior high schools are boys. More importantly for this paper, within Zouping the moderately well-off rural communities exhibited equal if not higher levels of educational success than did their urban counterparts.

There are no standardized statistics on the UEE success rates of children from different districts in Zouping county, and I was not able to examine the standardized exam results from different primary and junior high school districts. However, scattered evidence from newspaper articles about the successes of various schools in the county, discussions in the 1986-95 County Yearbook and the County Educational Yearbook of student promotion rates for the academic conclusion, I suspect that in the counties where local tax revenues are reasonably high, the temptation to milk students and their families through school fees is not so great.

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22 Standard fees for academic senior high school in Zouping vary somewhat from school to school. In 1999, at Zouping's best and most expensive senior high school, fees included a one-time entry fee of 1,500 yuan, tuition fees of 500 yuan a semester, plus books and board if the student lived at the school. For students from wealthy families who did not meet the cut-off score on the senior high school entrance exam, the one-time entry fee was 4,500 yuan, or in some cases 10,000 yuan (see note 36). Fees at Zouping's other senior high schools were slightly lower. Tuition fees at universities in China have been rising so quickly that the comments on the affordability of a university education in 1999 will already be out of date.
senior high schools and some of the junior high school districts (townships), and the comments of teachers suggest that exam-oriented educational discipline was not limited to the most wealthy, urbanized students. Several teachers expressed the sentiment that the laziest, lowest scoring students were the children of successful entrepreneurs (*getihu*) who could guarantee their children high-paying jobs in the family business after graduation. Senior high school teachers also reported that rural students with few opportunities other than farming generally study the hardest.

Within the county there is a considerable variation in levels of industrialization and income. In 1995 the southeastern township of Changshan had the highest per capita income. Located within easy commuting distance of the city of Zhoucun in the neighbouring county of Zibo, Changshan has historically provided the greatest opportunities for off-farm employment and has had the greatest degree of industrialization. This higher level of development has not, however, led to above-average educational success. Over the 10-year period between 1986 and 1995, Changshan produced academic senior high school students at a rate slightly below the county average. The three townships for which I have evidence of consistently higher than average educational success (Handian, Mingji Zhen and Libatian Xiang) are all socioeconomically average townships located near the geographic centre of the county. Of these, Handian did the best, producing 38 per cent more academic senior high school students per capita than Changshan. The three townships for which I have evidence pointing to a worse performance than Changshan (Matou, Taizi and Sunzhen) are among the poorest in the county. Unlike Changshan, however, these townships were handicapped by being the last to universalize nine years of education (reducing the percentage of students who even entered the competition for senior high school places) and by having the highest percentages of low-paid, underqualified community-sponsored teachers.

Of the five senior high schools, the Number One High School in the county capital has consistently had the highest success rate on the UEE. Since this school enrolls the best students from throughout the county, this cannot, however, be considered evidence of the dominance of county-capital students. During the early and mid-1990s, the other four senior high schools only admitted students from their own districts. Of these four schools, the two that drew from the least

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23 For a fictional depiction of such a student, examine the character of Peng Liyong in the Xu Xuwen novel *Zheng shi gaosan shi* (Senior Times) (Guangzhou: Hua Cheng Chubanshe, 1994).

24 In general, the further north and west one goes, the poorer the county becomes. Comparative data on township-level rural net incomes is available from *Zouping Yearbook 1986–1995* (Zouping nianjian) (Jinan: Qilu Shushe, 1997), while Walder, “*Zouping in Perspective*” provides a general discussion of industrialization in the county.


industrialized districts, Weiqiao Senior High School and Huang Shan Senior High School, had the highest UEE success rates.\textsuperscript{27} For the five-year period between 1990 and 1994, 36 per cent of those taking the UEE at these two schools made it into university compared with 31 per cent at the other two high schools.\textsuperscript{28} A mid-1990s graduate of Weiqiao High School said:

You should visit Weiqiao Senior High. The students there may not have scored as highly as those at the Number One High School, but they are even more driven. When I was there we studied so hard that we motivated the teachers to work harder. At the Number One High School, the teachers are of a high level and they motivate the students, but we studied late into the night and pushed the teachers to work harder than they might have otherwise.

Exam-Oriented Education and the Quality Education Reforms

Since the late 1980s much debate and experimentation with educational reform in China has taken place under the banner of “quality education” (\textit{suzhi jiaoyu}).\textsuperscript{29} The term “quality” (\textit{suzhi}) is vague enough to allow considerable divergence of interpretation. In Chinese, it has both Confucian and Social Darwinist connotations. In the Confucian sense, education has the potential to raise the moral quality of an individual; in the Social Darwinist sense, the survival of China as a nation hinges on its ability to enhance the competitive quality of its population, especially that of its children.\textsuperscript{30} In June 1999 the State Council

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{27} Although the town of Weiqiao itself is quite industrialized, the Weiqiao district also includes the three poorest and least industrialized townships in the county (Matou, Taizi and Jiuhu). Huangshan’s district includes a number of predominately rural but moderately well-off townships (Handian, Sunzhen, Libatian, Qingyang and Lishen). The other two high schools, Nanbei Si and Changshan, each draw from three comparatively industrialized townships—Haosheng, Linchi and Xidong for the former and Changshan, Yuancheng and Jiaojiao for the latter. See \textit{Zouping nianjian} for figures on the industrial output of townships.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Calculated from \textit{Zouping xian jiaoyu nianjian}, pp. 275–7; 1994 was the last year for which full statistics were published.
\item\textsuperscript{30} The term is sometimes translated as “competence education”, but I feel that the translation “quality education” better captures these overtones. For further discussion of Social Darwinism in discourses on population quality in China, see Ann Anagnost, “Children and National Transcendence in China”, in K. Lieberthal, S. F. Lin and E. P. Young (eds), \textit{Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economy} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 195–223.
\end{itemize}
declared quality education the guiding policy for all forms of education throughout China.\(^{31}\)

In Zouping, as in the rest of China, many teachers and administrators described the implementation of quality education as countering the excesses of too much “exam-oriented education” (ying shi jiaoyu). For these educators, exam-oriented education meant teaching and learning for the sole purpose of passing exams. It involves only studying what is to be tested, reliance on memorization as opposed to analytical reasoning, excessive amounts of homework, drilling and review, and the evaluation of students, teachers, administrators and schools solely in terms of standardized examinations. The county educators argued that exam-oriented education stifles creativity, numbs students’ minds, causes teachers to ignore and dislike students who do poorly on tests, and leads to numerous social and psychological problems.\(^{32}\) A few other Zouping teachers and officials, while agreeing with the gist of the above critique, objected to defining quality education in opposition to exam-oriented education. They felt significant quality gains could be made not by downplaying exams, but by changing their content and structure.

The criticism of exam-oriented education reverses the logic of the long-standing relationship between exam success and assessments of an individual’s quality in post-Mao China. “Quality” has long been associated with notions of social class, and the slur that a person lacks “quality” is often directed against “peasants” or other “uncultured” people. Although passing university entrance examinations and graduating from university has generally guaranteed that one will not be mocked as “lacking quality”, advocates of quality education argue that students who focus solely on passing examinations in fact become uncreative, not well-rounded, “low quality” adults. The title of the reforms thus involves an inversion of one of the more common uses of the word quality in everyday life.

Although the quality education reforms did not begin in Zouping until the mid-1990s, the problems they aim to resolve have deep historical roots. Journalistic critiques of exam-oriented education trace the problems back to the imperial examination system and quote Mao’s hatred of it.\(^{33}\) Unger describes how

\(^{31}\) The official policy declaration is published as “Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu shenhua jiaoyu gaige: quanmian tuijin suzhi jiaoyu de jueding” (The State Council’s Decision on Deepening Education Reform: Broadly Advance Quality Education), in *Disanqi quanguo jiaoyu gongzuo huiyi wenjian huibian* (Collected Documents from the Third National Meeting on Education Work) (Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1999), pp. 1–13.

\(^{32}\) For published versions of such critiques see Liu Linping, Zhang Rongguo, Wan Xiangdong (eds), *Aide wuqu: zhongxiao xuesheng chengzhang wenti beiwanglu* (Mistakes of Love: A Brief on the Developmental Problems of Primary and Middle School Students) (Beijing: Zhongguo Renshi Chubanshe 1997); Huang Wei, “Growing Up under Pressure”, *Beijing Review*, 27 March 2000, pp. 15–19; and “Public Discussion on Cutting Students’ Burden”, ibid, pp. 23–4.

\(^{33}\) Liu, *Aide wuqu*, pp. 60–95.
the emphasis on tests, memorization and homework were matters of controversy and press campaigns in the mid-1960s. These controversies fed the tensions played out in schools during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, conflicts between the “expert”, high-scoring students of middle-class origin and the mediocre-scoring but good-class “red” students were a driving force behind early Cultural Revolution violence. The abolition of the UEE became one of the most famous of the Cultural Revolution policies. As the 1980s witnessed a massive return to exam-oriented education, it was all too predictable that some type of anti-examination reform would reappear.

In Zouping the most significant of the quality education reforms have been carried out at the primary and junior high schools. Five major reforms were implemented. First, the importance of exams in the system was reduced. The transition from primary school to junior high school, once governed by an entrance exam, became automatic. The county ended its policy of sending the students with the best exam results to the best junior high schools by tying junior high school attendance strictly to the district in which a student lived. For the transition from junior high school to senior academic high school, the county switched from a senior high school entrance exam to an exam and quota system. Although the exam still takes place, each junior high school is now given a fixed quota of places at one of the local district’s academic senior high schools. Because each school has a quota, the exam only determines which students in a given junior high school make it into the academic high schools, but not how many students from that school make it. Consequently, although students have plenty of incentive to study hard and compete against their classmates, junior high school administrators can gain little from pressuring their students to do so, since that will not affect the school’s quota. They are therefore more likely to comply with the quality education policies that direct them to reduce the emphasis on tests and homework in their school’s curriculum.

Second, the content of the senior high school entrance exam has shifted to cover a wider variety of reading materials and to present more “lively” (huo) questions. This follows the principle of emphasizing analytical reasoning over memorization. Significantly, one senior high school teacher said that the new exams had resulted in a decrease in the proportion of rural students among the top

34 Unger, Education Under Mao, pp. 74–8.
35 Thogersen, Secondary Education in China, pp. 70–7.
36 In 1999 the system worked as follows. First the 220 students with the highest scores in the entire county were placed at the two best senior high schools. Each top-testing student was deducted from his or her junior high school’s quota. The rest of the school’s quota was then filled by that school’s remaining top scorers. These students were offered a place at the academic senior high school for their school’s district. In all 80 per cent of the academic senior high school places were allocated in this fashion. The academic senior high schools were allowed to allocate the remaining 20 per cent of their places at one of two higher-than-normal fee levels, depending on how far below the entrance requirement a given student scored.
scorers, although I could not independently confirm this result. He argued that rural students were better at memorizing than urban students, but not at synthesizing.

A third type of reform has been to expand the senior high school curriculum to place more emphasis on non-examination subjects. Following the principle of encouraging a well-rounded education, this reform has included expanding offerings in physical education, art and music (yintimei), and introducing computing, oral English (facilitated by expensive language labs) and varied science labwork.

A fourth thrust of the quality education reforms has been to reduce school hours and the amount of homework. This is supposed to increase students’ free time, which supposedly will enable them to unleash their creativity. In contrast to the six-day weeks and 12-hour days of the academic senior high school students, primary schools and junior high schools are supposed to be limited to five-day weeks, with six-hour days for primary school students and eight hours for junior high school students. In addition, there should be 12 weeks of holidays each year (including summer and winter breaks, which in rural schools are adjusted to correspond to busy agricultural periods). Beginning in 1996, daily homework times for most students were limited to: 1st grade—no homework, 2nd and 3rd grades—30 minutes, 4th grade—45 minutes, 5th grade—one hour, junior high school (grades 6–9)—1.5 hours. Although compliance with these standards has not been as universal as in the case of curriculum expansion, their implementation (along with an end to the old system of relying solely on examinations for promotion into junior and senior high school) does seem to have reduced school and homework times for many. The junior high schools that I visited had all eliminated two hours of evening self-study from the schedules, while many of the primary schools had eliminated one afternoon period to shorten the school day. Of the more than 40 primary and junior high school students whom I talked to, only two said they did more than the homework time recommended for their grade. Teachers said that reductions in the amount of homework have allowed students to complete most of their homework during the afternoon study periods. Fifth and finally, the quality education movement has involved changes in the teaching methods advocated by the county administrators. One junior high school literature teacher said that she had responded by introducing more discussion into her classroom.37

A Quality Education Model

Xiao Aizhen, the principal of the Experimental Junior High School (EJHS) located in the county capital, has been at the forefront of the quality education reforms in Zouping and Shandong province as a whole. Principal Xiao’s

background as a model teacher and Party member, and her efforts in studying educational methods from around the world and experimenting with them at the EJHS, have brought attention to her at a province-wide and even national level. In 1992 she was selected as the county's sole representative to the 14th National Party Congress. Her school has won so many awards (model this and model that), that even after covering all four walls of a large conference room with plaques, there are still many left over. In interviews she brimmed with energy and ideas. Unique among the Zouping schools that I visited, the hallways of her school were covered with student artwork and essays instead of pictures of Marx, Engles, Mao, Zhou and various famous scientists, scholars and revolutionary heroes. She insisted on the importance of developing the leadership and creative abilities of students by engaging them in hands-on activities and demanding that they organize their own athletic meets, variety shows and other activities. The number of student clubs and extra-curricular activities at EJHS surpassed those of any other school I visited. The homework levels mandated by the quality education reforms were equivalent to what she had allowed teachers in her school to assign even before the reforms took effect.

Perhaps because of this lack of emphasis on homework, the EJHS did not produce exceptional examination results. Although I was never allowed to scrutinize the comparative exam results, several senior high school teachers told me that until 1997 the EJHS scores on the senior high school entrance exam were below average. Even though they were now said to be above average, they were never described as outstanding. One senior high school teacher said bluntly, "EJHS students were just never been pressed to study hard. They have a lot of potential, though". Because of its model experimental status, however, a fair share of EJHS students were admitted to the senior high schools even before the 1994 quota system.

Funded directly by the county and given the best teachers and facilities, the school has an excellent reputation among local urban residents and has consistently needed to turn children away. The county restricts enrolments to the children of parents with urban (feinong) household registration status who work in government departments in the county capital. Two senior high school teachers referred to this enrolment pattern to explain the EJHS's recent improvement on the senior high school entrance exam. Since the governmental departments began in the early 1980s to recruit university or technical high school graduates, the recent graduating classes of the EJHS are the first to consist primarily of the children of educated parents.

The combination of the urban backgrounds of its students and the atmosphere encouraged by Principal Xiao's educational philosophy made the

38 Zouping nianjian, pp. 496-7.
39 Local educators called this the "inheritance factor" (yichuan yinsu). As an American, my first instinct was to read this phrasing in terms of Western nature/nurture debates. However, when I asked whether this referred to a genetic or cultural "inheritance", these educators replied both and whatever else it is that parents pass on to their children.
EJHS one of the most thoroughly urban institutions in Zouping county. The
enthusiasm of local urban parents for Principal Xiao's educational philosophies
went beyond the simple calculation as to which schools, whether by quota or test
scores, were best able to secure senior high school places for their children.
Those I spoke to echoed the quality education language of teaching creativity,
leadership and analytical reasoning instead of mere memorization. Some also
mentioned the importance of all-around development (quannian fazhan) as
opposed to a narrow academic focus and the detrimental effects of too much
memorization. The preference of urban middle class/professional parents for
institutions offering quality education is not limited to Zouping either. Beijing
professional and upper-class parents who send their children to private schools
consistently explained their school choice in terms of promoting creativity.40 In
Nanjing, such parents described calligraphy, music and English training as
strategies for improving their child's quality.41 The well-educated, university-
employed Chinese parents of my acquaintance in both Hong Kong and Beijing
often expressed concerns over the excessive amounts of memorization required
by the education system and what this might do to their children's desire for
higher education. Such enthusiasm for quality education reforms, however, could
not be heard from all Zoupingers.

Resisting the Quality Education Reforms

The most common form of resistance to the quality education reforms was
refusing to reduce school hours. County officials said that, especially in the
village schools, many parents did not approve of shortening the school day. At
least two of the rural schools I visited were holding Saturday classes or longer-
than-mandated school days. I heard of many other cases of extended hours in the
rural areas but neither saw nor heard of any in the county seat. One rural primary
school teacher observed: "rural parents are especially afraid that their children
will fall behind. They feel they don't have the educational background to help
their children study at home and they approve of hard work". At her school,
students spent four hours each Saturday doing extra work on their mathematics
and Chinese. Another rural primary school held seven hours of classes each day
instead of six, giving the children more drill work and time to complete
homework when the teachers were still available. One rural mother said that
"urban kids all have private tutors (jiajiao) so it's only fair that our children
spend extra hours in school".42

40 Elisabeth Rosenthal, "China's Middle Class Savors its Wealth", New York Times, 19 June
41 Anagnost, "Children and National Transcendence in China".
42 This is an exaggeration. There were very few "private tutors" in Zouping. Perhaps this
woman was referring to the more common privately run after-school classes, but even these
did not tend to focus on the core exam subjects like maths and Chinese.
In part because they lacked the resources to do much else, the poorer rural primary schools also spent more time on the core exam subjects of maths and Chinese. Though the primary school curriculum is basically set by the county, the rural schools were both more likely to devote extra Saturday mornings or late-afternoon periods to maths and language, and less likely to have activities such as computing, oral English or “creativity” classes during their mandated “activity” periods. Without teachers with expertise in such topics, most rural primary schools simply lack the resources to hold such classes.

Children living in the urban districts also have much greater access to privately run after-school and Saturday classes in subjects such as English, computing, art and music. One rural primary school teacher pointed out that the quality education reforms could eventually reduce the opportunities of the rural students. He said that through hard work rural children could hold their own in maths and Chinese, as all schools had teachers prepared in these topics and little equipment was necessary. If the county stopped the quota system and began basing significant portions of the senior high school entry examinations on topics such as computing and oral English, the rural students would be put at a disadvantage.

Although some urban parents and students suggested that the lack of diversions in rural communities lowered the quality of rural students by making them too inexperienced and narrow (shimian buguang), one teacher said that rural students work harder because they do not have as many distractions. In my conversations with rural parents, however, I sensed that the emphasis on hard work in the basic tested subjects went beyond a lack of opportunity for other activities. Although most expressed a clear desire for their children to go as far in the education system as possible, few spoke in terms of the importance of nurturing creativity, exposing their children to a broad curriculum, or other key quality education arguments. None expressed the fear that too much homework or drilling would dull their children’s minds. One grandfather said: “Rural people believe in hard work. If you’re in school you should be working hard at that, otherwise you should be working hard making money”. Several village parents said they pushed their children to work hard with the hope that this would enable them to gain admittance to the highest reaches of the education system. One father said, “it isn’t worth spending a lot of time in school unless it leads to a decent job, so if you go to school you have to give it everything. Doing it half-heartedly is a waste of time”. Another said: “City kids get jobs even if they don’t do well at school. For us it’s either success at school or hard work on the farm”.

Causes of Rural Educational Discipline

The most obvious cause for rural educational discipline is a desire for social mobility. Throughout the reform era, Zoupingers have expressed this desire with the adage “hoping one’s child becomes a dragon” (wang zi cheng long).43

43 Paine comments on the use of this adage during the 1980s. See “Making Schools Modern”, pp. 234–5.
Thogersen describes a 1988 national survey that showed that 90 per cent of rural parents wanted their children to leave the countryside. In many urban areas, qualifications are among the considerations when applications for non-peasant household registrations are reviewed. The commitment to leave the countryside reflects not only the hope of relatively lucrative urban occupations but also, for many students, a desire to shed the stigma of the "peasant" label. When I asked a group of 20 Zouping high school students why their names all had only two characters, one sheepishly answered that although many of them also had three-character names, they did not like to use them outside of their villages because they sounded too "earthy" (tu).

For many rural people, direct routes into urban employment without a university education do not exist. Studies of migrant labourers in urban areas show that even this sort of employment requires some kind of networked connection between one's home village and the urban employment site. In fact, a few Zouping students told me that they would jump at the opportunity to become a migrant worker (dagongzai or dagongmei) in Shenzhen if they only knew someone who could get them a job there. That teachers criticized the children of successful entrepreneurs for their lack of educational discipline, and that exam success rates were relatively low in the parts of Zouping with the highest levels of industrialization further suggest an inverse relationship between direct access to urban jobs and educational discipline.

The possibility of mobility through educational discipline must also be economically feasible for rural families to pursue. In school districts so poor that the local governments cannot pay salaries and thus lose teachers, or where parents are too poor to forego the income their children could generate by

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45 Until the early 1990s, university graduates were assigned to jobs, and university graduation almost automatically resulted in an urban household registration. Although this is no longer automatic, a university degree greatly smooths the proceedings. For descriptions of this process in Shanghai and Shenzhen see Linda Wong and Huen Wai-Po, "Reforming the Household Registration System: A Preliminary Glimpse of the Blue Chop Household Registration System in Shanghai and Shenzhen", International Migration Review, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 974–94. A Beijing researcher told me that the recent decision to allow those with Masters degrees or higher to secure Beijing household registrations relatively easily has led to an increase in applications to Masters programs by non-Beijingers.


47 However, even if Zouping students did find it easy to obtain migrant worker jobs, I suspect that the gulf between such employment and full urban citizenship would make them wish they had continued their education instead. See Zhao Shukai, "Criminality and the Policing of Migrant Workers", Andrew Kipnis, trans., The China Journal, No. 43 (January 2000), pp. 101–10.
working instead of attending school, educational discipline ceases to be a real possibility.\textsuperscript{48} Although many such places exist in rural China, the example of Zouping suggests that economic growth along with the impact of the birth-control policy have brought many other rural communities and families to the point where even a university education, although difficult, is possible.

In addition, the possibilities of mobility through education must be \textit{perceived} as real. In Zouping I suspect that this perception has relatively deep historical roots. Although neither Zouping nor Shandong in general was known for social mobility through examination passes during the Qing dynasty, Zouping, like much of China, did have schools and people who got ahead by attending them well before Party rule.\textsuperscript{49} During the late 1950s and early 1960s, some children of Zouping farmers were already graduating from the Number One High School and doing well enough on the UEE to enter university. During the post-Mao era, Zouping families have been quite clear about the relationship between the education system and social mobility. In the early 1990s, when technical high schools (\textit{zhongzhuan}) stopped guaranteeing their graduates urban jobs, Zouping students immediately directed all of their attention to the academic senior high schools, which at least offered the possibility of gaining entrance to university. Technical high schools became a last resort for those who either failed to qualify for an academic senior high school or, after academic senior high school, failed to qualify for university.

Though anti-intellectualism has its historical roots in rural China, and the Party’s recruitment of poor illiterate peasants to leadership positions in villages before and after 1949 may have reinforced it,\textsuperscript{50} this strand of Chinese culture has not interfered with perceptions at Zouping schools of the best route to upward mobility. Here the contrast with the Western literature on the reproduction of class in educational settings is striking. In the English-speaking developed nations, anthropologists and sociologists have often pointed to the role of cultural identities in deterring educational discipline. Paul Willis’s classic ethnography of education in urban England argues that working-class boys do not even try to compete academically.\textsuperscript{51} The culture created by their fathers, functional enough in the context of factory conditions, rejects and disrespects (as it is rejected and

\textsuperscript{48} Thogersen, \textit{Secondary Education in China}, p. 68, for example, describes cases of children dropping out of school to help on their parents’ farm. The “Education” section of \textit{China Development Briefing} gives a good discussion of educational difficulties in the poorer areas. The Zhang Yimou movie “Not One Less” presents a fictional depiction of a village where poverty interferes with education.

\textsuperscript{49} Ping-ti Ho, \textit{The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911} (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), pp. 222–54.


\textsuperscript{51} Willis, \textit{Learning to Labour}.
disrespected by) the middle-class culture of schools. Identifying with elements of their fathers’ culture, working-class boys clash with school authorities and create an anti-disciplinary school counterculture. Although other analysts of working-class Western schools point to more concrete influences of poverty on educational attainment, such as underfunded schools or overstressed parents, these are usually seen alongside, or as part of the cause for, an anti-disciplinary school counterculture.\textsuperscript{52} In the United States, educational anthropologists develop similar arguments in their analyses of schooling and ethnicity. They argue that groups forcefully incorporated into the United States see academic success as “white” behaviour and thus develop a school counterculture that inhibits educational attainment.\textsuperscript{53} In some schools, such countercultures are so dominant that children who might otherwise willingly embrace various forms of educational discipline fail to do so out of fear of being ostracized by their peers.

The emergence of such countercultures in Western nations indicates a relatively long-term historical relationship between the social reproduction of a certain class or ethnic structure and a given education system. For distrust of educational authority to be passed on, it must have been learned in the first place. The relative absence of anti-educational countercultures in Zouping’s schools points to a different relationship between the education system and hierarchical social structures in the PRC. Not only has the structure of opportunities in Zouping changed rapidly since 1978, from an agricultural economy where the overwhelming majority were farmers to a diversified economy with an ever-widening range of potential occupations, but the relationship of educational discipline to one’s eventual occupation and social position has also shifted.

At the end of the Maoist era very few people in rural China would have imagined that their status as “peasants” stemmed from their personal failure at school. For some people, such as literate landlords during the land reform and intellectuals sent down to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, being well educated in fact contributed to their being assigned to rural labour. At the same time, most villagers never had the opportunity even to consider the possibility of entering an institute of higher education. It was only in the 1980s that the vast majority of children had both the chance to succeed educationally and the opportunity to have their educational success translated into real social mobility. Given all this, Zouping’s education system has not witnessed the widespread consolidation of cultural identities that embrace an anti-intellectual


counterculture. Few, if any, rural Zouping students have their perception of the possibilities of educational mobility clouded by issues of how such mobility would affect their cultural identities.

An interesting if depressing question is whether school countercultures will eventually emerge in places like rural Zouping. If the present pattern of successful rural students moving into careers in towns and cities outside of their villages of origin continues, Zouping’s villages will some day be filled with parents whose own experience of the education system was that of failure. What such a situation will mean for the culture of discipline within local schools remains to be seen.

**Urban Bias and the Educational Discipline of “Peasants”**

Most of the disturbing implications of rural educational discipline relate to the contradictions between this discipline and the hopeful humanism of the quality education reforms. As mentioned above, these reforms reflect issues well described by Jonathan Unger in his discussion of education before and after the Cultural Revolution of 1966–68. When viewed through the lens of social class, however, the present reforms seem quite different. Before the Cultural Revolution, it was the urban professional classes that had the most to lose from reducing the emphasis on “exam-oriented education” in the Chinese education system. Now the urban professional classes appear to be the strongest supporters of such reforms, while rural families have the most to lose.

In part, this difference reflects the arrival of large numbers of rural students into the competitive game of Chinese education. During the Cultural Revolution and earlier, the opposition to exam-oriented education came primarily from the most “red” class—the children of the Party elite. Now that claims to university places in terms of “redness” are no longer relevant and the numbers of rural university applicants have expanded, the entire game has shifted. Indeed, despite a constant expansion in the number of university places, the entry of large numbers of rural students into the university applicant pool, and the end of secure jobs for working-class urbanites has acted to widen and intensify the level of exam-oriented education since the reforms began. What during the 1950s was a competition among a small group of middle-class urban children is now a game involving a vast number of Chinese children. As Ronald Dore’s argument about the “Diploma Disease” predicts, when the status and pay of employment in the urban and rural sectors of the economy diverge sharply, and educational success becomes a primary means of attaining urban employment, then the education system is bound to become more exam oriented.

This intensification of competition, however, has not been distributed evenly throughout the system. A prestigious university’s quotas for admissions are set for each province and, in some cases, redistributed from the provinces to cities and prefectures within provinces. The result is that UEE admission cut-off scores (fenshuxian) for that university differ greatly from province to province and sometimes even within a given province. Although this system has been used to ensure that at least a few students from the poorest provinces earn a place at a prestigious university, by far the biggest beneficiaries are students in Beijing and
Shanghai, who enjoy the highest entry quotas. The most prestigious Chinese universities are in Beijing and Shanghai, and they reserve large quotas for local students.\footnote{Although these separate admission standards may have had their origins in the Maoist era, during that period they were used to provide affirmative action for rural students (Unger, \textit{Education Under Mao}, p. 296 n. 10). Now in effect they provide affirmative action for urban students, especially those from Beijing and Shanghai.} The students from some of the provincial capitals and other favoured urban areas similarly enjoy higher quotas from their provincial universities.

The \textit{China Youth Daily} publishes data on the lowest cut-off scores for admission into the first year of a four-year undergraduate course for students from each province and, in some cases, for students from subdistricts within provinces. The cut-off scores in 1999 for students from Beijing were 466 points in the humanities UEE and 460 points in the sciences UEE. For students from Hubei, a province with a much higher percentage of rural students than Beijing, these scores were approximately 100 points higher, at 544 points in the humanities and 566 points in the sciences.\footnote{Though Shandong did not report cut-off scores in an exactly comparable manner (using standardized [biaozhun] instead of original [yuanshi] scores), an approximate conversion shows that its scores were much closer to the Hubei scores than the Beijing ones.} Within Shandong, lower cut-off scores were reported for its major cities than for the province as a whole. The city of Qingdao even distinguished between Qingdao’s urban areas (\textit{shiqu}) and suburban areas (\textit{jiaouq}), with suburban students requiring over 20 points more for admission to the same tier of universities.\footnote{“Ge di gaokao luqu fenshuxian” (UEE Admission Cut-Off Scores for Each Area), \textit{Zhongguo qingnian bao jiaoyu daokan} (China Youth Daily Education Section), 28 July 1999.}

One implication of this differentiation in cut-off scores is that exam-oriented education and discipline is much more intense in rural counties such as Zouping than in cities such as Beijing. A consequence is that at the major universities in Beijing the gap in discipline and achievement between students from Beijing and those from elsewhere has become obvious. One Peking University student, explaining her inability to keep up with her rural classmates, related educational discipline to a lack of opportunities: “If village kids don’t study well, they just don’t have any other way out, so of course they generally work harder on their studies than we do”.\footnote{Chen Zhiwen, “Beijing fenshu weihe di, waidi fenshu weihe gao” (Why Are Beijing Cut-Off Scores Low and the Scores of Other Places High), \textit{Zhongguo qingnian bao} (China Youth Daily), 24 February 2000, p. 5.} Others, echoing the language of the quality education reforms, claimed that though rural students were better at exams, students from Beijing were well rounded and thus of higher quality.\footnote{Ibid.} A Beijing education official concurs:

\begin{quote}
A student’s overall quality is a product of social environment, school environment, teachers, family, and level of individual effort. Individual effort is only one aspect.
\end{quote}
Beijing is the nation's economic, political and cultural centre, and all sorts of information are densely concentrated here. A child who lives every day in such an information-saturated environment develops a very high level of overall quality ... The reasons behind the high examination scores of Hubei students are that schools there turn students into “testing machines” and that education is the only way out for students in poverty-stricken areas. But these high scorers are not really any better than Beijing students. Their foreign language and computer skills are lower and their analytical and practical capacities are also lacking.\(^5^9\)

Derogatory statements like these demonstrate how the language of quality education can be turned against the interests of rural students.

The differences in the cut-off scores and the levels of rural educational discipline reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. When the gap widens, students from the more competitive regions redouble their efforts, leading to even higher UEE scores in those districts and an even wider gap in cut-off scores. One effect of this cycle is an expansion of the social and cultural gulf that separates rural and urban students at China’s most prestigious universities.

Although partially contained by the quota system, a high level of educational discipline in some districts has enormous potential to influence schooling elsewhere. For poorer rural areas, well-off places like Zouping raise the level of educational attainment necessary to enter into the competitive game of university admission. The higher that level becomes, the more some poorer families, school districts and local governments are likely to abandon their educational efforts altogether. For those urban areas that benefit significantly from their high quotas and comparatively low cut-off scores, the threat of a reform of the university entrance quota system poses a considerable danger.\(^6^0\) If China were to eliminate quotas and base admission entirely on UEE scores, the extent of examination-oriented education at many urban senior high schools would necessarily intensify.

It is therefore difficult for the state to reconcile a desire to change the exam-oriented education system with the wish to achieve equal opportunity for rural students. By separating the primary and junior high school levels from the intensely exam-oriented senior high school level, the quality education reforms in Zouping suggest one manner of implementing such reforms without adversely affecting the opportunities of rural students. The rural resistance to these reforms, however, indicates some limits even to this strategy. On the one hand, if limiting exam-oriented educational discipline at the primary and junior high school levels turns out to adversely affect UEE performance, then those students and their teachers who resist the quality education reforms will gain an advantage on the

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59 Zang Tiejun, “Zhei shi Zhongguo jiaoyu zui dade bu gongping?” (Is This the Greatest Inequity of Chinese Education?), Zhongguo qingnian (China Youth), No. 8 (April 2000), p. 38.

60 A media debate on the issue took place in China Youth Daily. The debate started on 24 February 2000 with the publication of Chen Zhiwen, “Beijing fenshu”. Also see Luo Xinyu, Chen Zhiwen and Li Liping, “Qingxiede gaokao fenshxian” (Uneven UEE Cut-Off Scores), 24 February 2000, p. 5; and several opinion pieces in the same issue.
UEE. The success of such resistors would undercut enthusiasm for the reforms across the board. On the other hand, if the quality education reforms become a pretext for basing admittance to senior high schools and universities on skills and abilities that rural students simply do not have the opportunity to develop, the reforms will severely limit equal opportunity.

In a perverse twist of logic, a more narrow, exam-oriented, memorization-based, creativity-stifling education system would appear to give rural students the greatest opportunities for social mobility. On the other hand, access to university places by routes that do not require exam-oriented education discipline seems to favour urban students. If admission to university were to become based on the decisions of university admission boards (as in the United States) instead of the UEE, then well-connected urban students would surely work the system better than rural ones. If the UEE itself were to start emphasizing less memorization-oriented topics, such as creative writing, then rural students would be disadvantaged by the fact that a limited number of rural teachers could teach such topics well and anticipate what the examiners were looking for, and that these teachers would be drawn to the urban schools. Finally, reinforcing the current inequitable university quota system would only disadvantage rural students further.

Rural students have a basic advantage in the area of brute memorization. The lack of other routes to urban jobs and the stigma of a rural household registration drive large numbers of rural students to slog through what many would consider to be tedious material. The more the UEE relies on the memorization of boring facts that are relevant to nothing other than passing the exam, the more that desperation for social and economic advancement through the UEE becomes a factor in motivating students to undertake the necessary preparation. For some rural students, devising ways of making the UEE preparation more fun, interesting, relevant and varied would be like offering beautiful weather and a well-conditioned field to a football team that excels when playing in the sleet and mud.

Of course, the simple fact that such a narrow education system promotes rural social mobility is not reason enough to favour it. I never heard a rural student explicitly wish for a more boring curriculum. More importantly, the system must serve those who do not enter university, as well as those who do. Exam-oriented education might be the most opportunity-enhancing form of education for high-scoring rural students, but it does little for those who do not

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61 Louise Simon, Examination Orientation and the Opportunity Structure in Chinese Education: Case Studies of Kunming High School, Ch. 6, PhD dissertation, The Australian National University, Canberra, shows how some well-connected urban parents are able to work the current university admission system to place their children ahead of others who have slightly higher UEE scores.
make it to university. Preparation for life other than at university requires making education as interesting and relevant as possible.62

The potential negative implications of quality education reforms for rural social mobility should, however, raise a few red flags for those who otherwise might be all too willing to jump on the quality education bandwagon. In the end, the way rural educational discipline divides the interests of rural students with good and mediocre exam scores is perhaps its most disturbing implication. In places like Zouping, the social divisions between the winners and losers at the competitive game of university admission will reinforce and perhaps ultimately even replace the rural–urban gap.

Canberra
February 2001

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62 Lynne Paine suggests that one of the problems of Zouping’s education system is that it fails to prepare students for rural life ("Making Schools Modern", pp. 232–5). Today, almost a decade after Paine completed her research, it is apparent that even in Zouping the majority of students in school today will not be working as farmers when they graduate. The issue Paine raises—making education relevant to life outside the education system—is still important, but must be framed in a way that addresses China’s rapid rate of urbanization. Zouping’s children ideally should receive an education that prepares them for life in general, rather than for rural life. To train them for rural life would be to reproduce a social division that few want to see continue.