

Harvard China Forum

2003

Harvard University

Ladies and Gentlemen, Professors and Students:

I am honored to be a speaker at this conference in one of the world's most important universities. For this I am grateful to the University and the organizing committee of the Harvard China Review for their kind invitation.

Education is a universal topic. As a businessman, I have decided to talk about this topic from the view of an ordinary parent and citizen, and as a person devoted to the social development of China in the world today. My remarks today are not intended to offer any definitive answers, but to provoke more thoughts about Education in China.

To begin with, let us look at a definition of education.

Out of many definitions I found, the one made by the famous 20th century educator

Abraham Flexner is to me the most inspiring. He said:

"Education is an intellectual and spiritual process to open the windows of the human mind and the human soul. It involves the effort to understand, to comprehend, and to be sensitive to ideas and aspirations."

To me this is the ideal goal of education for human kind.

To understand the development of the education system in modern China, we must look into the history of her development, particularly the political and social development.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese society has undergone tremendous changes in its social and cultural ideals. Between 1958 to 1976, there were huge social problems caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.

Since the Korean War in 1950, China's "Closed Door Policy" totally isolated her from the outside world. However, in 1979, China finally abandoned her foreign policy of isolation, and began the long journey changing from a centrally plan economy to a market economy.

The economic changes also brought along major changes in the social and education system.

From 1949 to 1957, the Chinese education system followed the Soviet model in which the major objective was the training of knowledge and skills. However, China soon realized that such a model did not work for China. Also during this period, all private schools became publicly run under the state planning system.

During the Great Leap Forward period 1958 to 1960, the country encountered severe shortages in agriculture and industrial production, as a result poverty increased substantially. The education system at that time was nationally planned according to the "National Development Plan". All teaching was designed by the State, even college graduates were assigned to work according to the needs of regional development.

Following this period, the 10 years of Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) created immense social pressure and problems in the country.

It turned the overall education system to complete devastation. Many major universities were shut down.

In 1972, President Nixon made his historic visit to China. But it was not until 1979 that diplomatic relations were established with the United States. China finally realized the need for new state policies in economic reform, and the opening up to the outside world, with the aim of speeding up economic development.

As the economy of China grew substantially in the 1990s, China transformed from a planned economy to market socialism, and from a farming base to an industrial base. Whether from the government's need to train those promising individuals as leaders, or on a personal and family level to acquire quality education to improve the quality of life, there is now a great need and urgency

to expand China's education system in terms of both quality and quantity.

In 1985, China implemented the "9-Year Compulsory Education" system along the eastern coastal regions with plans to spread it gradually to the rest of the country.

Then in 1993, the new emphasis in education was on raising education quality, and the development of 100 key universities.

Finally in 1999, the Government further expanded the Education Reform and promoted the new idea of Quality Education. It had become clear that in order to build up the strength needed by modern China, groups of people who are capable in independent thinking, problem solving, innovation and the adaptation to changes were urgently needed.

Along with the impressive successes of the changing education system, there have been some problems. Since the implementation of the new education policy, many poor regions are now short of funding for education. Regrettably Government expenditure on education in China is still on the low side today. Education at various levels therefore remains poorly funded, especially in terms of teachers salaries.

A basic objective of education in any country is to achieve the bonding of society through education and the teaching of rules and values. Also for the sake of social stability and reduction of poverty, a society must provide fair

opportunities for all her people.

While the basis of the Chinese Socialist idea is a classless society, where everybody is treated equally, social and economical differences in China have increased tremendously in the past 20 years. The regional differences in schooling is a direct result of changes in economic development. In my own experience, I have observed huge differences from my visits to a range of schools, from world class secondary schools in Shanghai, such as the "Shanghai Yu-Cai Middle School" (育才中學) to tiny shabby village schools in the western regions. Since the change in school financing in 1985, the poor western inland regions have fallen far behind the rich coast provinces in education spending and development.

Therefore, the goals of financial reform in China's education must be balanced against the effects on social differences and the need to protect the weak segments of the population. Technical solutions, such as a new system of inter-governmental grants for education and assistance to the poor are necessary. What is really needed is a long term political commitment to a balanced view on education and national development.

I hope a quick study of the following slides will provide some suggestions and solutions.

In conclusion, as a person who has experienced good times and bad times, and who has seen the hard life of poor people as well as the good life of rich

people, I see education as an important beginning to create a level playing field for all people to start on an equal footing. If I had one wish, it is that all people in the world, male and female, rich or poor would have the opportunity to achieve a certain basic level of education. Higher education may be for those who have aspirations of leadership. But a basic education would be open to all people to offer a chance for growth in learning and development. I sincerely hope that all Governments will make this a top priority.

Last, but not least, I believe no matter what fashion our education systems will be in the future, the spirit of modern education should aim at narrowing the gap between people from different nations, to enlighten people's mind to understand and respect different cultures of different races.

Education, whether in China or in the rest of the world, should be taken as a universal necessity to fulfill the best of all human kind, and thus the basis for world peace and harmony.

Ladies & Gentleman, thank you for your attention and patience.