

Recent news reports point up the persistence of China's class system. A Chinese student dressed in workers' clothing is turned in at a train station while attempting to escape because his hands are too smooth to be those of a worker. The students who demonstrated are described as the "children" of China's ruling class, while the soldiers who gunned them down are "illiterate peasants." Whether or not these reports are apocryphal, they illustrate the exclusiveness of the Chinese educational system--a system which is designed to serve best the children of the elite. While the education systems in virtually every nation perpetuate the advantages of the advantaged, China's "key" schools make its education system particularly elitist. There are a number of paradoxes in a political system founded on the ideals of a worker/peasant society.

For many students, the tracking into key or regular schools occurs as early as elementary school, with enrollment patterns clearly set by the time students enter secondary school. Selection to secondary school is based on academic ability (primarily examinations) and other factors such as "moral quality" and "physical health"--possibly euphemisms for alumni preference. Indeed, Chinese key schools do not seem at pains to hide their elitism. The official literature describing one school which opened in 1950 notes that the school initially served children of workers and peasants but now serves mainly the children of intellectuals.

So far these selection criteria might not sound very different from the selection of students to elite private schools in the United States. But the effect on the Chinese population as a whole is much more devious. The elitism in China applies to the entire public education system. It gives enormous preference to children of the ruling class and to the most prosperous areas, particularly the major cities. And because China is a poor nation which can afford to send only a small fraction of its students to a university, the result is that a Chinese student who has not attended a key school has almost no hope of attending a university.

These are the odds: In a nation where fewer than one in 20 students can attend a university, some key schools send virtually all of their students to universities, with as many as 80 percent of these students attending key universities. Put another way, more than two-thirds of China's university students come from key middle schools and almost all key university students are key school graduates--a powerful statistic when one considers that only about six percent of the middle schools in China are designated as key schools. Clearly, the most elite private secondary school in the United States cannot point to this level of success in getting its students into competitive colleges. And what it means for the vast majority of Chinese youth who have not attended key schools is that there is no way to enter the system.

These students simply do not have the educational background to pass the tough university entrance examinations. They have attended schools where the average annual investment is well under \$100 per student and where the subject matters included in the exam simply are not covered. How can students pass the English portion of the entrance exam, for example, when English language instruction is not offered in the schools they attend? How can they master the other subject matters when they are taught by teachers who themselves are poorly educated? Indeed, many of these teachers grew up during the Cultural Revolution when the

schools were closed, teachers were humiliated, and a favorite story was about a teacher who was delighted with a promotion to shop assistant.

Recent trends toward decentralization may have exacerbated these problems. While China has a high level of basic education compared to other low-income countries, primary enrollment is only 50 percent in some rural areas. Local governments are expected to provide most of the support for primary and secondary education with parents required to pay fees which are particularly burdensome in a nation with a very low per capita income. Rather than supplementing the resources available to the poorest areas, the central government makes its largest contribution to education in the more prosperous areas.

The key schools give students the best the Chinese educational system can offer. They have substantially more resources. They have the best teachers, many of whom have graduated from universities in a society where it is not unusual for teachers to have only a primary education. They offer the courses that will be covered in the university entrance exam. And they spend several months training students for these exams. At least one key school offers these "cram courses" to faculty children who are not attending the school (presumably those who could not pass the school's entrance exam). As one principal of a key school put it, "Finance decides all."

The effects of concentrating resources in a small proportion of schools is of course apparent to Chinese policymakers. There is some debate about the policy's advisability. With severely limited resources, some argue, it is important to give a high quality education to at least some students. Others feel this concentration of resources is appropriate at the university level but not at the precollege level and particularly not at the primary level.

It is easy to give policy advice from the vantage-point of a rich nation and criticize a developing country for not distributing its educational resources more equitably. HELP, GENE! I NEED AN ENDING.