

## COMMENTARY

*Elitism in Tiananmen Square*

By Iris C. Rotberg

**T**he educated young people who provided much of the drive behind the recent movement for democracy in China are, ironically, part of one of the most elitist institutions in Chinese society.

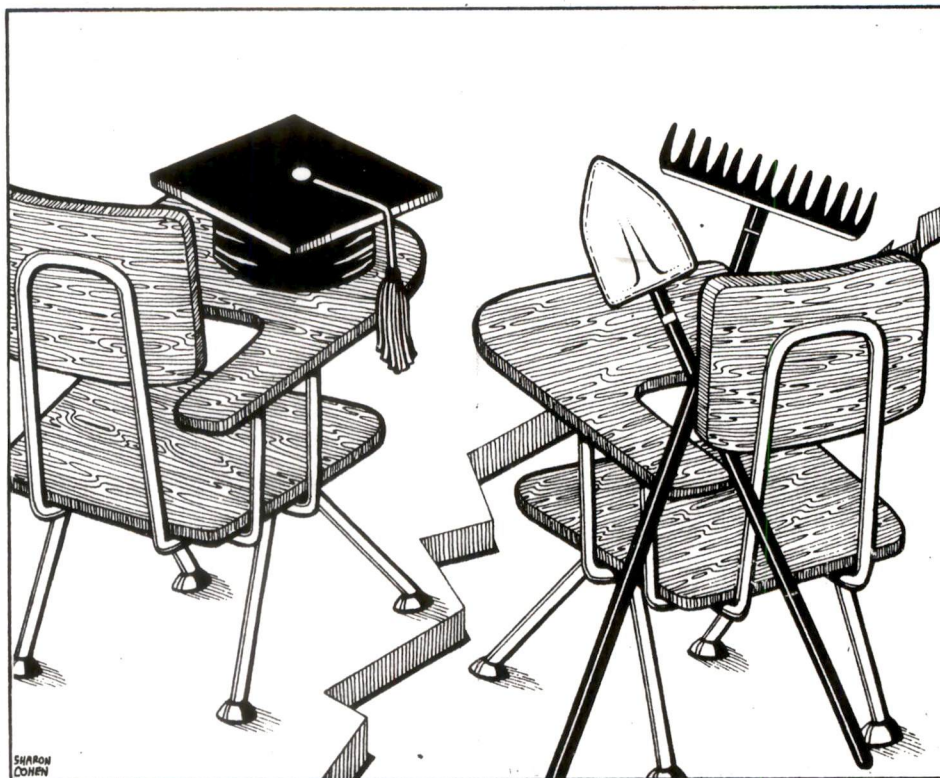
A Chinese student dressed in workers' clothing was turned in at a train station while attempting to escape because his hands were considered "too smooth" to be those of a worker, according to newspaper accounts. Demonstrating students were described as the children of China's ruling class, while the soldiers who gunned them down were identified as "illiterate peasants from the provinces."

These reports reflect the exclusiveness of an education system designed to serve the children of the advantaged. In virtually every nation, schooling perpetuates in one way or another the advantages of privileged families. But China's continued support of schools established to provide a high-quality education to selected students—traditionally known as "key" schools—makes its system exceptionally elitist.

The Chinese are apparently unconcerned about the paradox of an exclusive education system in a "classless" society of workers and peasants. This elitism is so ingrained historically in Chinese society that even the suffering inflicted by the Cultural Revolution did little to moderate the reversion to the old system:

Chinese educators report that children are tracked into key schools as early as the elementary years, with enrollment patterns set by the time students enter secondary school. Selection to secondary school is based partly on academic ability, as measured by examination, and partly on "moral quality" and "physical health"—factors that, like U.S. colleges' preference for children of alumni, can be used to favor those who might not otherwise qualify.

Indeed, the key schools do not hide their elitism. The official literature describing



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schools are denied access to higher education—and are thereby turned away from the main route to status and upward mobility.

These other students simply do not have the academic background to pass the tough university entrance examination. They have attended schools where the average annual investment is well under \$100 per student, where the teachers themselves are poorly educated, and where the subject matter tested on the examination is often not part of the curriculum. The entrance exam requires proficiency in English, science, and advanced mathematics, subjects typically offered only in the key secondary schools.

The effects of concentrating both financial and human resources in a small number of schools have been noted by some Chinese policymakers, and the matter is not free from debate. Nonetheless, despite the frequent lessons in Chinese history about the dangers of elitism, officials so far have opted to encourage an education system that serves primarily the children of advantaged families.

Under the circumstances, the use of military force by "illiterate peasants" was indeed an ominous sign, pitting those disenfranchised by lack of education against "intellectuals." The civilian and military leaders are in a bind. It is the educated young—their own children—who have led the movement for reform and democracy.



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one such school notes that it initially served children of workers and peasants but now serves mainly the children of intellectuals. This elitism, which makes key schools accessible to children of families who have political and economic power and to those from the most prosperous geographic areas, cuts across the entire public-education system. Since the country can afford to send only 1 in 20 of its students to a university, a young person who has not attended a key school has little hope of gaining a place.

Some key schools send virtually all of their graduates to college, with as many as 80 percent of these students attending key universities. According to Chinese educators, more than two-thirds of the nation'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 6 percent of the middle schools in China are key schools.

The most exclusive preparatory schools in the United States cannot point to this level of success in getting their students into competitive colleges. Nor can any American university point to such a concentrated source of students.

In effect, the vast majority of Chinese young people who have not attended key

Recent trends toward decentralization have exacerbated the problem. While compared with other low-income countries China has a relatively high level of basic education, primary-school enrollment is only 50 percent in some rural areas. Local government is expected to provide most of the support for primary and secondary education. Local officials pass the costs on to parents, charging fees for books and supplementary materials that fall as a heavy burden on low-income families. The overall effect of such policies has been to widen the already large gap between the poorest areas and the more prosperous cities and provinces.

The key schools receive the highest concentration of resources, including the best teachers, many of whom are university graduates in a society where it is common for teachers to have only a primary education. Not only do the key schools offer the courses that will be covered in the university entrance examination, they also may spend several months training students for the test. Some key schools even extend these cram courses to faculty children who are not attending the school—presumably those who could not pass the key school's entrance examination.

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We do not have accurate information about the extent of the arrests or intimidation. Several recently enacted policies, however, affect large numbers of students: requirements that freshmen receive as much as a year of political indoctrination and military training before beginning regular classes; a rule that university graduates, especially social scientists, spend time doing "factory or farm work"; and reductions in financial support for study abroad.

It remains to be seen whether those in power will be able to protect their offspring and the nation from yet another trauma. ■

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