The revolution of agricultural education in the People's Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the Chaoyang Agricultural College to illustrate the radical changes of agricultural education in the People's Republic of China during the period of the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976. It describes how a traditional agricultural college located in a big city was closed down, and how its students and faculty were dispersed to the countryside where peasants lived and toiled. It describes how a new type of agricultural college emerged as a result of the dispersal and how its recruitment, training, and placement programs attempted to improve the life of peasants. Lastly, it describes the service function of the new college and how it became the main target of criticism.

Additional index words: **Cultural revolution in China, 1966–1976; Mao's thought on agricultural education; Political education; Teng Hsio-ping's revisionism.**

THE Chinese Communist Party unified China in 1949. Since then, mainland China has been known as the People's Republic of China, in distinction from the Republic of China, Formosa. During the decade from 1949–1959, the People's Republic of China followed the USSR as the national model. Professional schools and colleges in China, whether medicine, engineering, or agriculture, were independent from universities. All college students pursued their specialty immediately during their freshman year, and they studied for 5 years.

In the summer of 1966, the so-called Cultural Revolution swept China. Almost overnight the Russian influence was wiped clean. One of the main thrusts of the Revolution was an expression of profound dissatisfaction with the Russian model. From the point of view of the Revolutionaries, the Chinese institutions of higher learning, by following the Russian model instead of serving the people, had become the selfish intellectuals' vehicle for self-advancement. One inportant order of business for the Cultural Revolution, therefore, was to reshape the institutions of higher learning so that they would serve the masses instead. The rise and fall of the Chaoyang Agricultural College was the result of these attempts under the banner of the Cultural Revolution.

A COLLEGE DECENTRALIZED AMIDST STRUGGLES

Like many provinces in China, the province of Liaoning in Manchuria maintained an agricultural college which was located at the capital of Shenyang. The college had turned out about 7000 graduates in a little more than 10 years, few of whom were willing to return to the rural areas (4). The college, was run by a bourgeoise faculty (2). Students were tempted with fancy titles such as red agronomist or master horticulturist. During their 1st year, students acted like country bumpkins; their 2nd year, Westernized; 3rd year, ashamed of their parents; and 4th year, they refused to go home.

To rectify this situation, the first step was to move the college back to the country where peasants tilled their land. In September, 1968, after the workers, the army, and the Mao Tse-tung Thought Propaganda Team entered and occupied the campus of Shenyang Agricultural College, they led the teachers and students on a 250 km journey by foot arriving at the P'angchin district in southern Lianoning and laid the groundwork for moving the college to the countryside. Two thousand people were on hand to welcome them, but some members of the college opposed the move. An internal struggle started immediately, and as a result, only a few faculty left (5).

Early in 1970 the Provincial Reovlutionary Committee, which took over political power of the provincial government of Liaoning during the Cultural Revolution, formally decided to divide the Shenyang Agricultural College into six parts which were to be located in different countrysides. The faculty feared that the

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college would be destroyed. Training sessions were organized under the direction of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee to allay the fear and to convert the opponents.

The return to the countryside movement involved other colleges as well. Eventually, a newly created Chaoyang Agricultural College would absorb other established institutions in the area.

The absorption of the Chaoyang Water Conservation College met particular opposition. The opposition maintained that Chaoyang, located in the western part of the Liaoning mountain area, had suffered from wind and sand storms and drought for the past 9 years. No students went there, and no water was available for conserving. Despite the opposition, a revolutionary cadre (a loyal party member who was supposed to set an example for ordinary party members by performing extraordinary tasks) by the name of Hsu Ming assumed the lead in an oath-taking ceremony and marched from P'angchin toward Chaoyang. In January 1970, the Thought Propaganda Team and the revolutionary cadres together with their families, arrived at a commune north of Chaoyang (5). Upon their arrival, teachers and cadres were divided into separate groups and settled down in six bases where the production teams of the commune were located. They were re-educated by the poor peasants; they carried sand, placed soil on the land, and repaired ditches. They also engaged in spring planting, breeding finer seeds, and cultivating experimental plots. In working with and for the peasants, these teachers and cadres separated themselves from an established institution called college. This separation disturbed many outsiders (5).

In May 1970, the District Party Committee decided to give these six bases the common name of "May 7 Agricultural and Technical University," which was the predecessor of the Chaoyang Agricultural College. With this name, the hope of going back to the city revived in many hearts.

This "back to the city faction" was strong enough to cause those in charge of the official policy to respond. In November 1970, the College Revolutionary Committee, which was the administrative body, called a meeting to be attended by all party members and some teachers. From this meeting it was discovered surprisingly that there were differences of opinion among the leaders. After achieving basic agreement, the District Party Committee directed leading members of the College Revolutionary Committee to study with peasants and to learn from Tachi in Shansi province, the model farmland in China. Eventually, the College Revolutionary Committee organized its members and teachers to visit, observe and learn from four places: Tachi at Shansi province; the Tsinghua University at Beijing; The Honan Yueht May 7 Agricultural College at Honan; and the Kiangsi Communist University at Kiangsi province (5).

From 1968 to 1970 the established agricultural institutions in Shenyang were disbanded. The staff of these institutions under party leadership scattered over the countryside and worked along with the peasants. The May 7 Agricultural and Technical University was hardly more than just a name. In 1971 several specialized long term classes were established not far from the city of Chaoyang. These classes became the nuclei of a new institution known as the Chaoyang Agricultural College. In addition, seven new teaching points were established in six counties of this district (5).

It took about 3 years, from 1968–1971, for this new institution to be organized, replacing a variety of old institutions.

STUDENTS AND THE PROGRAMS OF CHAOYANG AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

Before the specialized long-term classes were established in 1971, the Chaoyang Agricultural College lacked the physical identity of a college in a conventional sense. After moving to the countryside, students and staff were dispersed among the peasants. The teaching activities were the only traces where the remnants of an organized institution could be found. Teachings were conducted in the following manner, none of which followed the academic routine as we now understand it.

1. The Spare Time University. The university was attended at night by commune workers who worked during the day. They studied politics, language, and scientific farming.
2. Short Term Training Classes. These classes helped solve production problems. There were specialized classes for farmers and veterinarians. Other students learned how to prune fruit trees and conserve water.
3. Scientific Experimental Groups. With the commune production team members as the core, these groups experimented with high yield seed plots. Scientific knowledge was being popularized in these groups.
4. Sectional Teaching Classes. Students studied specific problems for a period of time and returned to their farms to utilize what they had learned.
5. Mobile Teaching Classes. Teachers toured the communes and carried their instruction from house to house, making the teacher more people conscious and less status conscious. Two women teachers climbed a mountain during a snow storm in order to carry their instruction to the houses on the other side (5).

As the classes were established, the Chaoyang Agricultural College began to assume the customary role of an institution of higher education. However, to insure that it would not fall short of its revolutionary mission, the college authority established these three measures: 1) recruiting students from communes and sending graduates back to the communes, 2) alternating students' campus study period with a farm work period, and 3) making Marxism a required subject of study.

As mentioned, the original Shenyang Agricultural College was criticized because its graduates avoided the countryside. To the revolutionaries, agricultural colleges were, by definition, for the peasants, of the peasants, and even by the peasants. The college was controlled by Revolutionary Committee members which included peasants, soldiers and revolutionary cadres who stripped the academicians of their control of the in-

stitutions of higher learning. For the same reason, college students were not to be viewed as a privileged class; hence, they must come from the countryside and return to the countryside.

To implement this principle, teachers and cadres went to the countryside to recruit students. While recruiting, they also promised the community that after graduation the students would return to serve the community. The criteria for recruitment were two: dedication to agriculture and ambition to turn Chaoyang into another Tachi model farmland. The recruiters went to students' homes to spread revolutionary ideology. When a student was recruited, the first question asked was: "Why should I go to college?" The first lession he took after being accepted was to attend a meeting pledging in public that he would return home. According to a news release on 9 Dec. 1975, 167 students graduated from two classes in 1971 and 1972 (2). However, information was given for only 125. Of the 125, four were originally production team leaders and six were commune members. They went back to their original production teams. Fourteen students were production brigade party branch secretaries and revolutionary chairmen, one was a Communist Youth League secretary, and 36 were brigade technicians. All worked in production brigades after graduation. There was one commune deputy party secretary, one commune director of agriculture and forestry, and 41 commune technicians. These 43 worked in communes after graduation. Three county teachers, five middle school teachers and 13 resident teachers also graduated and worked in units other than commune and production brigades.

Among the graduates, 93.6% were either members of the Chinese Communist Party or members of the Communist Youth League. The majority of the graduates were said to be engaged in agriculture and were welcomed by the poor and low-middle class peasants. In 1976, one more class graduated which resulted in a total of 340 graduates.

From these official statistics, we find that most of the students were recruited from the production teams of communes, and most of the students were cadres, officials, or teachers. None was really a peasant. After all, no matter how unconventional the Chaoyang Agricultural College really was, it had to have students who were literate, and the literates in the countryside of China were usually officers, not peasants.

Now, if most of the graduates returned to their communes, would they, in fact, continue to be officials or would they farm as peasants? True, numerous stories were told about how individual college teachers and students helped farm production of cotton, fruit, or corn. Still, the work and impact of the returned graduates should have been counted as the major effect of the college upon the community. Unfortunately, on this point we remain uncertain. One thing seems to be certain, however, and that is the college made sure that the students came from the communes and returned to the communes.

To make sure that students would not forsake the land and the people, the college went so far as to set up two types of classes for comparison. One group was called the long-term experimental class which lasted a year and a half. During this period students concentrated on one scientific basic point. They studied part-time and worked part-time on campus. The other group was called the section-teaching class which lasted a year. During the year students studied on campus for a period and then returned to work on the farm for a period. In the end, according to the official report, the first group of students were reluctant to become farmers, waiting to be assigned other jobs. The students of the second group, however, were happy to go back to the farm (5).

As a consequence of this study, the college adopted the policy of several ups and several downs. Up meant that students studied on campus, while down meant that students went back home to be engaged in the three struggles—the class struggle, the production struggle, and the struggle for science and knowledge. In 1975, the policy was established that the 1st year students should spend at least 1 month at home. The 2nd and 3rd year students, however, would spend 7 months of each year at home (1).

As the college made sure that its graduates returned home to work, the kind of work in which they were engaged had long been a point of contention. Eventually, critics of the college argued that the Chaoyang Agricultural College was more political than agricultural. Its graduates were local red politicians instead of agricultural experts.

The school authority never denied that the college was highly political. Mao's fundamental belief was that education should serve the proletarian politics and be combined with productive labor. In order to assure that the college served proletarian politics, the control of the college was taken away from the academicians and placed into the hands of the Revolutionary Committee. Another measure was to emphasize political and ideological study (2).

In the very first lesson, after students pledged to return to the countryside, Mao's 7 May and 21 July directives were studied. During the 3-year period, Marxism and Leninism were also required study. Six books by Marx and Lenin were assigned and also Mao's selected works, Vol. I to V. In the process of study, Lin-Piao, the purged heir-apparent of Mao, and Confucianism were subject to criticism. The novel, *Water Margin,* which was about the people's rebellion was also used for discussion and study.

In addition to the study of communistic classics, students were also sent to backward localities to investigate class enemies. Sometimes they were encouraged to participate directly in class struggle. At no time was vocationalism allowed to take precedence.

A PEOPLE'S INSTITUTION

The establishment of specialized, long-term classes in 1971 gave the Chaoyang Agricultural College an identity. With this identity there was danger of the college becoming an ivory tower once again, moving away from the people and away from the peasants. This was not to

be allowed. The college made it a policy to keep in constant touch with the people as indicated previously. Students were constantly reminded that they were not a privileged class. They ate coarse grain, slept on the floor, and labored for self-keep.

From 1972 to 1975 cadres and teachers led the students in building the campus. It was frequently remarked that students came to college with mud on their cloth and left with calluses on their hands (2).

Students had to forego their own individual interest in order to meet social needs. Overspecialization was not encouraged. The ideal was for students to master many skills while specializing in one which was considered to be the best way to serve the people.

In addition to recruitment, programming, and placement of graduates, one convenient way to keep the college in touch with people was through graduates. Graduates were invited back from time to time. In 1975, more than 100 graduates came back to the Chaoyang Agricultural College to study proleterian dictatorship. The college also supplied graduates with seeds when they were urgently needed (2).

Establishing teaching bases in the countryside, the measure which decentralized the campus, continued to be the most important measure of being in touch with the people. In March 1974, a teaching location at Yimmach'ih brigade of Hsintayintz commune was established (5). The leadership role was assumed by the party branch of the brigade. Teachers and students were stationed there to criticize revisionism, improve the soil, control plant diseases and pests, produce high-yielding crops, and test phosphate fertilizers. The teachers conducted classes in various forms. As a result, production increased dramatically. Eight topic groups, such as Kaoliang, cotton, and corn, were formed combining teaching, research, and production. In such a set-up, everyone taught everyone else. Everyone studied part of the time and worked part of the time, and everyone resided in the countryside. Through these teaching locations, seven in 1973, the college was in close touch with various levels to form an area-wide network, linking the college to the people.

This network also coaxed people to follow the party line. An American scholar once maintained that Chinese communists had politicized many people who otherwise would not have been interested in politics. It could be called participative democracy. Indeed, Chinese communists attributed their own success, compared to the Nationalists, to their own organizing effort. Peasants in the countryside were so well organized into the communistic orbit that the Nationalists as city dwellers found themselves outnumbered. Ironically, the same happened to the communists themselves; some communists were out-organized by others. During the Cultural Revolution, the revisionists were those who were out-organized and caught off guard in the network.

In the later half of 1973, the college was criticized for its treatment of water conservation, not as a state-wide issue but as a local problem. In reply, the college authority emphasized the local priority (4). In 1974, the college solicited and obtained the support of the leading party daily newspaper, *People's Daily,* which often had issued reports on the achievements and uniqueness of the college. The Science and Educational group of the State Council, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry at Peking, as well as the Laioning Party Committee sent delegates to Chaoyang to demonstrate their support from higher ups. The Tientsin city party committee also sent delegates to observe. Fifty workers, peasants, and soldiers selected from other regions came to study at the college (5).

In 1975 great debates on education took place. Chaoyang was very much a part of the debate. On 20 November, a forum composed of party cadres, teachers, and students published an article in the *People's Daily* describing the college as doggedly carrying out a revolution in education and building a farming community modeled after Tachi (3). One of the authors of the article was College Party Committee secretary, Hsu Ming, who in 1970 led the march to Chaoyang. Apparently, Hsu had become the prime mover of the college through the years, and here he was in 1975 still in the lead struggling against the enemy of the college. He stressed the teaching bases distributed over the counties as symbols of educational revolution. The remaining part written by other cadres, students, and professors was concerned with the college's relation with people. Professor Kung Chi-tao was proud of his research among the people. For example, he reported the development of a high yielding hybrid sorghum which was unfortunately unpalatable, and people who tasted it complained of its unpalatability to him. He tasted it and found it unpalatable, also. Eventually, however, he did further research and made it palatable. This, he cited, was a good example of learning from people. This way of doing research was different from just writing an article for the sake of fame. Two students also told of learning from the people. The article defended the college as a college for the people, of the people, and by the people.

On the other side, the criticism of the college was concentrated on its being a party school instead of an agricultural college, more political than vocational and neglecting academic study by spreading too far and too thin. To counter these criticisms and line up supporters, the college sent delegates in October 1975, to visit Peking University, Tsinghua University, Tachi and Kiangsi once again. On 4 Dec. 1975, a mobilization rally was held. Seven hundred criticism meetings were conducted. Thus, the beginning of the end of the college in 1975 was very much like the beginning of the college in 1968. On 25 Jan. 1976, 176 graduates wrote a letter to the ailing Mao hoping for a reply which could be used as an important supporting document. The 1976 January issue of the *Red Flag* was devoted to defense of Chaoyang. On 6 Feb. 1976, the party committee of the college held study classes criticizing Teng Hsio-ping, a revisionist and an enemy of the Cultural Revolution. This criticism was one of the early criticisms of Teng by

name on record before he was stripped of power in April, 1976. On 14 Feb. 1976, the *People's Daily* published an article supporting the college.

On 20 Apr. 1976, not long after the infamous Tien An Man affair for which Teng lost power, a brief history of the college appeared (5). Finally, on 5 Oct. 1976, an article written by the teachers and students of Chaoyang Agricultural College was published in the *Kwang Ming Daily* in which Teng was criticized for his revisionism (2).

Notwithstanding, the days of the Chaoyang Agricultural College were numbered. Mao died on 9 Sept. 1976. The Gang of Four was purged on 6 Oct. 1976. Not long after, Teng came back to power to launch his Four Modernization Program. From the point of view of modernization, all that the Chaoyang Agricultural College stood for appeared irrelevant and antiquated. How the college fared in 1977 was not at all clear. What was clear, however, was a piece of news on 28 Mar. 1978 which stated that under the order of Liaoning Provincial Party Committee the college was closed (1). The order described the college as an instrument used by the Gang of Four to seize power. The network was castigated as a network of conspiracy. The return of graduates to communes and countrysides, instead of serving the people, was actually done to seize power, to build up an empire. Students spent only one-fifth to one-seventh of their time on studies. The visitation to Peking and Tsinghua Universities had nothing to do with academic exchange. Instead, it served the purpose of plotting against their common adversaries. In a period of a few months, 240 000 people were said to have visited the college. Thus, where was there room left for teaching, research, and production, the order for closure asked rhetorically. After 8 years of existence, the Chaoyang Agricultural College was formally ordered closed on 28 Mar. 1978.

CONCLUSION

The closing of Chaoyang Agricultural College was just a part of the purge which is still going on in China to this day. There was reference to the fact that the college was under the protective wing of Mao Yung-sing, a nephew of Chairman Mao, who was accused of building his own empire in Manchuria, a sensitive spot in Chinese politics.

Politics aside, however, the pedagogy practiced in Chaoyang was more than enough to stir intense animosity in that it deviated far away from the academic tradition. On the other hand, cultural revolution would be less than revolutionary had the kind of pedagogy practiced in Chaoyang not been in existence. While an education appropriate to a socialistic nation may not be of one color, the Chaoyang Agricultural College did make a stab at the issue—trying out something different from what had been going on under ancient regimes.

Certainly, an outsider must not be credulous as to what was reported in the official channels. The change of regime changed the interpretation. In touch with people became conspiracy; send graduates back to the country became a power play. Still, the ideal, the intention, and the objectives were unmistakable. They were strikingly different from what Americans are accustomed to so far as institutions of higher learning are concerned.

At present, the Chinese agricultural universities and colleges are busy reclaiming their campuses, restoring their research labs, and reassembling their instruments. Above all, they are looking for ways and means to make up for 10 years, 1966–1976, of "academic bankruptcy." Those who are now in power, like Teng, think they have much catching up to do. The Chaoyang Agricultural College apparently was out of place in this changing priority.

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