Educational Television in the People's Republic of China: Some Preliminary Observations

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The Chinese government's commitment to a rapid and intensive modernization effort, clearly enunciated in 1978, continues to shape and define issues of public policy in every area within that country. However, specific conceptual definitions of "modernization" from a Chinese perspective remain elusive to a foreign audience. The government's own definition of modernization has changed repeatedly. An initial commitment to improving the heavy industrial sector has been abandoned in favor of progress in the light industry and agricultural sectors. Proposals for increases in defense expenditures have similarly been cut back as overly idealistic economic plans have been redrawn and are now more limited and circumspect in their pronounced goals.[1]

The expansion of all forms of mass media within the People's Republic has been encouraged, as a means of further supporting the modernization drive, and the growing television industry has been specifically called upon to play an increasingly important role in expediting these aims.

Although television has existed in China for over 20 years, it is only within the past few years that it has become an important cultural force. This phenomenon has occurred within the political climate of the post-Maoist era, when commitments to wide-scale technological advancement through all feasible means, including cultural borrowing, have been more pronounced. Although Maoist ideology stressed self-reliance, independent inductive investigative technique, and practical, small-scale construction as a means of pursuing technological advancement,[2] present conceptual frameworks do not include these constraints.

Thus, within the past few years, the television industry has grown to national proportions. By 1979, China fulfilled its yearly production quota of receivers 2 months ahead of schedule, according to the State Radio and Television Bureau. And, by the end of October 1979, China had manufactured 1.01 million black-and-white receivers. Indeed, all provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions with the exception of Xizang, Xijiang, Qinghui, and Ningxia now have the capacity to manufacture receivers,

[1] Nicholas R. Lardy, "China's Economic Readjustment: Recovery or Paralysis?" in *China Briefing: 1980*, ed. Robert Oxnam and Richard Bush (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1980).

[2] Rensselaer W. Lee III, "The Politics of Technology in Communist China," in *Ideology and Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Chalmers Johnson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), pp. 301–25.

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with an average of 30 plants per province producing 10,000 sets annually.[3] In 1980, the country as a whole manufactured over 2.2 million sets.[4] At the same time, within the span of 4 years, from 1977 to 1981, television ownership jumped from 630,000 to 7 million sets, and in Beijing alone, two-thirds of all resident families now own their own sets.[5]

It is therefore not surprising that as a result of this expansion, the role of educational television broadcasting is becoming more prominent and more clearly defined.

Formal educational programming is produced with the cooperation of the Central Television Bureau and the Central China Television University, a relationship which parallels to a certain extent that which exists between the BBC and the Open University in Great Britain.[6] The university itself, an expanded version of the Beijing Television College which first opened in 1960, is run with the expressed intention of supplementing the curriculum of traditional universities where access is severely limited. While 1.1 million students are enrolled in formal postsecondary educational institutions, only 3 percent of the prospective candidates are admitted into the country's universities. Since over 320,000 students are now formally enrolled in the television university network, while over 600,000 students watch at least one televised course, it is quite possible that the television university structure is the largest of its kind in the entire world.[7]

Although regional branches of the China Television University occasionally produce their own materials and exercise some control over their administrative affairs, materials produced at the Central Broadcasting and Television University in Beijing are themselves widely disseminated. This distribution center has over 40 teaching staff, 20 technicians, and other teaching staff affiliated with the formal universities. Together they prepare written materials and programs for circulation.[8]

The university's major courses of study include electronics and machine building, although 16 different subject-matter areas including electronic technology, mathematics, chemistry, physics, and English are taught within a 3-year time span. It is therefore not surprising that while many of the university students are factory workers, lathe operators, mechanics, etc., over 20,000 teachers are enrolled in the university on a full-time or part-time basis.[9]

[3] *Xinhua News Agency* (November 12, 1979), in *Joint Publications Reference Service*, no. 74848 (January 2, 1980), p. 43.

[4] "China's Burgeoning TV," *Beijing Review*, no. 10 (March 9, 1981), p. 26.

[5] "Changing Faces of China's TV," *Asian Messenger* 5, no. 1-2 (Winter 1980/Spring 1981): 34.

[6] Robert McCormick, "Central Broadcasting and Television University," *China Quarterly*, no. 81 (March 1980), pp. 130-32, and "The Chinese Television University," *Educational Broadcasting International* 13, no. 2 (June 1980): 62-64.

[7] *Xinhua News Agency* in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)* (April 26, 1981), p. K20.

[8] McCormick, "Central Broadcasting," pp. 130-32.

[9] *FBIS* (April 26, 1981), p. K20.

Official student status is achieved by graduating from middle school and passing an entrance examination. Students are classified as full-time when they study 4 or more days a week and receive full pay from their employers, half-time when they spend 3 working days studying and work around the broadcast schedule in order to complete normal tasks, and spare-time when they not only make up time spent viewing programs in order to complete daily tasks, but receive no reduction in the number of work tasks expected of them. Full-time students number 110,000; the remainder are spare- and part-time.[10] The Beijing Radio and Television University branch itself has enrolled over 8,300 full-time and 30,000 part-time students.[11]

Full-time students take three courses at a time, while half- and part-time students usually study only English or one of the other full-year course offerings. Each course is intended to be the equivalent of its first-year formal counterpart, taught within traditional universities, although it is generally recognized that students attending the television university have a weaker academic background than would normally be the case. The institution thus represents one alternative for the failed university examination candidate.[12]

As is the case with many types of correspondence schools in the West, continued feedback to participating students is somewhat problematic and often uneven. Mid-term and final examinations are given, and a pass rate is set at 80 percent; weekly assignments are often distributed and then graded by tutors. However, these assignments rarely count for assessment purposes.[13] Efforts to regulate study conditions continue, as students are encouraged to view the televised courses and complete required assignments in a medium-sized group rather than individually.[14]

Finally, it should be mentioned that the television university branches offer a graduation certificate, recognized by the province, after the successful completion of a 3-year program of study, while formal institutions usually offer a 4-year program. The implication that the television university certificate is inferior to a formal university degree is clear. Such an attitude is reinforced by the regulation which prevents part-time television university students from taking the national university entrance examination, a policy which serves to limit the wide range of scores on that test, but which also prevents students from using the television university structure as a stepping stone for possible enrollment into the more established institutions.[15] The fact that such a regulation is deemed important enough to

[10] McCormick, "Central Broadcasting," pp. 130–32.
[11] "Changing Faces of China's TV," p. 35.
[12] *Beijing Review*, no. 10 (March 9, 1981), p. 29.
[13] McCormick, "Central Broadcasting," pp. 130–32.
[14] *Beijing Review*, no. 10 (March 9, 1981), p. 29.
[15] "College Enrollment Regulations for 1981," from *New China News Agency* in *Summary of World Broadcasts* (March 20, 1981), FE/6678/BII/p. 14.

be clearly enunciated indicates that the television university is perceived to be inferior to its institutional counterparts.

While the Central China Television University is certainly the main source of educational programming, it is not the only one. In the past, regular television broadcasts have been classified into three categories: revolutionary operas, ballets, and anti-KMT films; news and sports; and "educational programs," although political messages were expressed in programs falling within each of the categories. During the early 1970s, programs favorably reporting upon the labor-intensive techniques of the now discredited Dazhai commune appeared regularly. And, in 1979, the construction and operation techniques of the controversial and costly Baoshan steel plant, whose design and materials were imported from Japan, were shown to over 5,000 Shanghai steel workers.[16]

In any event, regularly broadcast educational programs do serve to informally complement the specific curriculum of the television university. It has been reported that daily programming emphasizing English language instruction increased by 15 percent from 1977 to 1979, while there was also a corresponding 12 percent increase in the number of general programs devoted to science and technology topics,[17] perhaps reflecting the government's ongoing political commitment to the modernization effort.

It seems clear that educational television can provide a needed service, especially for workers and teachers who seek to improve their own skills and expertise. Since many middle-school teachers in particular were promoted to their present positions during the Cultural Revolution, and their training credentials are now suspect,[18] retraining through educational television programming can be both convenient and opportune.

In addition, factories and state enterprises have specifically recognized the need to retrain workers, and it has been reported that 50 percent of such institutions have established their own vocational schools and short-term training courses, in which 20 percent of the work force participates.[19] It appears likely that educational television may be able to play an important, if supporting, role here.

The existence of severe youth unemployment in urban areas presents a major set of problems for government officials. For example, in Beijing alone, 260,000 youth sought employment in 1981, including 40,000 from the previous year and 140,000 senior middle-school graduates.[20] Enrollment

[16] "T.V. Lectures on Technical Subjects Shown to Shanghai Steelworkers," in *FBIS* (February 8, 1979), p. G4.

[17] Chin-Chuan Lee, *Media Imperialism Reconsidered: The Homogenizing of Television* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), pp. 229–30.

[18] Suzanne Pepper, "Chinese Education after Mao: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back and Begin Again?" *China Quarterly*, no. 81 (March 1980), p. 12.

[19] "State Council Holds Meeting on Workers Education," *Xinhua News Agency*, in *FBIS* (March 23, 1981), p. L1.

[20] *Xinhua News Agency* in *FBIS* (April 24, 1981), p. R3.

in spare-time course work is encouraged as one remedy to the problem, for it is hoped that in addition to getting such youth off the streets, these courses will allow youth to engage in productive activity in lieu of locating specific work. Here, too, educational television has been used to facilitate this goal.

Current attempts to use and expand educational television into an important force supporting the country's modernization efforts face a number of obstacles. As a highly centralized institution, the television university must cater to the specific needs of its clientele, needs which differ widely in terms of interests and commitment levels. By enrolling both full- and part-time students simultaneously, while offering the same course work to each, no allowance is made for differences in performance. And, while discrepancies in the number and variety of course offerings and the quality of tutors and part-time faculty members are to be expected, they are nonetheless problematic.

Since employers are called upon to support the television university concept by sponsoring selected workers, paying both their tuition and their regular wages during their period of study, one wonders what immediate inducements exist which encourage employers to make this investment. This is especially pertinent when the television university curriculum is largely centrally planned and may or may not have direct relevance to the local employer's own immediate needs in terms of skill acquisition. Indeed, while 100,000 candidates registered for the Beijing Radio and Television University's 1979 examination, only 17,000 registered for the 1980 test, and one reason for the drop in numbers appeared to be a widespread reluctance on the part of factory managers and officials to release workers for full- or part-time study.[21]

It should also be realized that at this time initial production of educational television programming remains largely an urban phenomenon, designed to redress urban problems while catering to the needs of a specifically targeted population. How allowances (if any) are made for regional differences in language, custom, and life-style (particularly in rural areas) is an important area of research, worthy of further investigation. Since Chinese officials have optimistically declared their faith in the potential of educational television instruction to present a cost-effective alternative to traditional schooling techniques and practices,[22] it again remains to be seen if the Chinese experience is more satisfactory than that of other Third World countries, whose success in this area has been rather limited.[23] The potential for increased mass media penetration to dramatically raise unreal-

[21] "Changing Faces of China's TV," pp. 35–36.

[22] See, e.g., Liu Xiyao, "Report at the National Educational Work Conference, April 22, 1978," *Chinese Education* 12, no. 12 (Spring–Summer 1979): 28.

[23] See, e.g., G. N. S. Raghavan, "Do Mass Media Reach the Masses? The Indian Experience," *Prospects* 10, no. 1 (1980): 93–95.

istic economic and social expectations and demands is always present,[24] and the necessity of clearly defining educational television's instructional value in contrast to the medium's more widely acknowledged entertainment function is an additional issue which Chinese authorities will have to address.[25]

Some evidence suggests that historically, when television university structures were first introduced into urban areas during the early 1960s, policies which attempted to placate immediate political demands proved to be counterproductive to long-term educational aims.

Lynn White, for example, reported that the diplomas awarded by Shanghai Television University were equal in status to those of a two-year college, and that ultimately, the institution's function became one of simply keeping unemployed workers busy.[26] While over 50,000 students had enrolled in the Shanghai Television University in its early formative years, by the mid-1960s only 12,000 students had actually graduated.[27]

The methods used to respond to the current wide range of issues affecting television policy may give some indication of the regime's success in other aspects of the Chinese modernization campaign, since educational television was to play an important role in that process. In any event, as Chinese efforts to utilize the promise of educational television on a large scale become more clearly defined, such efforts will deserve close scrutiny from interested educators.

[24] See, e.g., Daniel Learner, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958), p. 138.

[25] Raghavan, p. 93.

[26] Lynn White, *Careers in Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 31-33.

[27] Ibid., p. 33.