

## Filling the Educational Gap in China

By

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“When Westerners come to China,” said Vice President Kouqing Li of the Shanghai National Accounting Institute, “they see our vast new buildings and read about our industrial growth. What they don’t see and cannot imagine is the wounds we all carry concealed in our experience. Most of the people of my generation lost a decade of our lives during the Cultural Revolution.”

Conversation after conversation I have held with Chinese businessmen and government officials echoes Dr. Li’s remark. It is the hidden dimension of China. What happened was that in 1957, the Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, encouraged criticism and dissent from the Communist Party program in what he called the “Hundred Flowers Movement.” Taking him at his word, intellectuals responded with a deluge of criticism. Mao and his colleagues were appalled by the reaction and hit back with the power of the state against those they had encouraged to speak out. About one in each ten students in Beijing University, for example, were denounced, arrested and packed off to remote areas to work as peasants.

Mao then promoted an anti-intellectual and anti-professional movement called “The Great Leap Forward” that aimed to get around the requirements of science and technology by such ventures as producing iron and steel in peasants’ huts and promoting agriculture with various unworkable projects. The result was that tens of millions of Chinese starved and the country slipped further back into poverty. For this catastrophe, Mao was bitterly criticized and went into semi-retirement. As he came out, he decided

that what had gone wrong was not his program but a failure of Chinese discipline and will; so he set out to purge the Party and the country of evil influences. That was the impetus behind the Cultural Revolution that convulsed China from 1966 to 1976.

During the Cultural Revolution, young revolutionaries tore large numbers of the brightest and most able people in China from their jobs, took them from schools, colleges and research institutes and, acting on behalf of the Communist Party and the State, imprisoned or sent them to work in remote areas in heavy manual labor.

After Mao's death in 1976, China gradually regained its equilibrium and began a program of restoring what had been damaged or lost in the decade of terror. Returning to their studies or regaining their places in government, industry and academic life, young men and women matured and gained skills. However, for many, those years of lost education remained a hollow, which they yearned to fill. . Ever since then, they have been haunted by what they lost. "In a way," as one of them put it to me, "we have become China's 'Lost Generation.'"

"That is how I felt about it," the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Shanghai Airlines, Zhou Chi, told me. "I have been running this airline for ten years, very successfully, but I felt that I needed to learn much that I was prevented from learning before. It isn't that I have been doing a bad job. I haven't. The airline is going well and is improving all the time. But I was sure that there was much I was missing."

Mr. Zhou, whose company owns 33 jet passenger aircraft and is comprised of 4,000 employees, is 50 years of age. He is one of some 64 senior Chinese executives, running some of the largest state-owned or partially state-owned enterprises in China,

who agreed to commit every weekend for two years to a program designed to help them fill that void.

Most of the men and women are in their prime. Most, like Mr. Zhou, occupy the highest, most responsible positions in their companies. And some of those companies are among the largest in the world. Giant Baosteel is the third largest steel producer in the world. Its products are sold all over the world. Most of the SEAT cars manufactured in Spain, for example, are filled with steel from Baosteel's enormous Shanghai industrial park. The company is represented in the program by its chief executive officer, xxx, its vice president, Guoqiang Ma, and the chief financial officer of its aggressive and successful trading branch, Anot Zhou Zhuping. The company is highly receptive to the desires of his senior officers to resume their studies. Like many Chinese companies, Baosteel requires them to continue their studies. Along side of them are the vice mayor of Shanghai, the presidents of the Bank of Shanghai, the Shanghai Pudong Development Bank, presidents or other senior officers of other corporations and the senior partner of a law firm.

The study program in which are engaged must rank as the most unusual in the world. Set up by the W.P. Carey School of Business of Arizona State University and the Shanghai National Accounting Institute, it has brought together professors from the major American schools of business, many of whom are "overseas Chinese" who of course know the main Chinese language, Mandarin, with chief executive officers or men of comparable rank from the largest Chinese enterprises for a two-year-long "EMBA" (Executive Master of Business Administration) program.

The study program for the EMBA has been adjusted from what is taught in the West to meet the particular needs of the Chinese executives. What they say they need is to acquire the fundamental skills to manage increasingly “global” corporations, to interface with their European and American partners, and to be able efficiently to oversee their already complex enterprises. To get these skills, each participant must agree to devote every weekend for the two-year-long course.

Comparing this program to others in the west shows how keen the Chinese are for education. As one of the American professors laughed, “could you imagine the head of a major American bank or airline agreeing to give up his weekends of golf for the next two years to go to a course on what he thinks he already knows? Even if he did, all his colleagues would think he had gone mad.”

“What we are finding,” said Professor Buck Pei, Associate Dean of the W.P. Carey School and head of the Shanghai program, “is that the second group of students is every bit as experienced and able as the first. They are almost literally fighting to get into the program. We had three times as many applicants as we could take. We believe we are really helping these people to fill the void they find in their educations. It is a very rewarding experience for both the American teachers and the Chinese participants. They show that by their willingness to give up all their weekends. What senior group of western chief executives would do that?”