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## **Project Hope and the Hope School System in China: A Re-evaluation**

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### **Abstract**

I investigate the creation, development, contributions and limits of Project Hope, a huge government-endorsed education project seeking non-governmental contributions to overcome educational inadequacy in poverty-stricken rural communities in transitional China. By reexamining the composition of sponsored students, the locations of Hope Primary Schools and non-educational orientations for building and expanding schools, I argue that Project Hope and its Hope School system have not contributed to educational access, equality, equity, efficiency and quality as it should have. Poverty-reduction-oriented curriculum requirements in Hope Primary Schools are theoretically misleading and realistically problematic.

### **Introduction**

According to what is published on the official homepage of the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), the founder of Project Hope, "[Project Hope's] mission is to raise much-needed funds for the improvement of educational conditions in China's poor areas and promote youth development in China. Its goal is to safeguard the educational rights of children in poor areas. In line with government policy of raising

educational funds from a variety of sources, Project Hope mobilizes Chinese and foreign materials and financial resources to help bring dropouts back to school, to improve educational facilities and to promote primary education in China's poverty-stricken areas" (CYDF 1996a).

Seeking non-governmental financial and physical support in both China and overseas for the improvement of primary education in economically underdeveloped regions in China, Project Hope tries to help enroll in school those school age children who can not go to school or drop out of school because of poverty. It tries to improve the educational conditions, the classroom and school facilities in particular in underdeveloped rural areas. Furthermore, Project Hope tries to contribute to poverty reduction in local areas by contributing agricultural and technical knowledge and skills to the curricula and instruction of its Hope Primary Schools and encouraging the schools' participation in business operations (Yue, 1991; Huang, C. 1994; Tou, Cheng and Huang 1995).

Project Hope has sponsored the schooling of tens of thousands of children in poor areas. To date, it has sponsored the construction and renovation of over 5,000 primary schools in poor areas (Guangmin Daily 1997; CYDF 1998). As a non-governmental charitable project, it has special political and educational legitimacy, power, and influence in China. The phrase "Project Hope" has become a household word among the Chinese people.

This article traces the origins and development of Project Hope and the Hope Primary School system, which are marked by high politicization and bureaucratization, and investigates their contribution to the development of rural basic education. By examining the demographics of sponsored students, the locations of Hope Primary Schools and non-educational orientations for building and expanding schools, I argue that Project Hope and the Hope School System have not contributed as they should have to educational access, equality, equity, efficiency and quality in poverty-stricken areas. I suggest that poverty-alleviation-oriented curriculum and instruction requirements in Hope Primary Schools are theoretically misleading and realistically problematic. With the growth of political liberalization in the central government and sustained economic growth in China, the signs of competition for financing rural basic education have already appeared; rural basic education will experience a new stage of expansion. The theoretical basis of my analysis is the philosophy of basic education for literacy and socialization of children and the World Bank's guidelines for education: highest priority for investment in basic education for educational access, equality, equity and efficiency in developing countries. The main methods applied here are historical analysis based on documentary records and macro-economic analysis based on the criteria for educational access, equity and quality.

## **Origins and Development**

On October 30, 1989, only months after the Tiananmen Tragedy, the CYDF, a sub-organization of Communist Youth League (CYL), declared that Project Hope was set up to help school age children in poverty-stricken areas to enroll in school. The league, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), is regarded as a supporting hand to CPC in conducting national youth activities according to its political guidelines. The league set up CYDF in March 1989 allegedly for the purpose of promoting activities related to youth development. Winning endorsement and support from state leaders and the central government and becoming nationally visible since its inception, Project Hope added the topic of poorly supported rural basic education to the

list of issues that government officials hoped would distract the public from focusing on the aftermath of the Tianamen Tragedy. However, it is very difficult to trace the exact political origins of Project Hope from available documents and verify the hypothesis that it was a politically motivated project undertaken at this critical time.

Soon after its founding in 1989, Project Hope sponsored 11 children who could not go to school because of poverty in north China's Hebei Province. On May 15, 1990, the project sponsored the renovation of an old primary school in Jinzhai County, in east China's Anhui Province and renamed the school "Hope Primary School." Since then, the organized solicitation of donations and gifts for the project started to acquire momentum. A great number of old schools were renovated and new schools were built with the project's sponsorship. All these schools were uniformly named the Hope Primary School. Project Hope has received aggregate donated funds and gifts of 1.257 billion RMB (about 151.5 million US dollars) and has sponsored 1.8 million school age children from poor rural families to enroll in schools. The project has sponsored the construction and renovation of 5,256 primary schools (Guangmin Daily 1997). Thus, Project Hope has set up a special school system, the Hope Primary School system.

Interestingly, the Hope School system, just like the reemerged private school system in China, to a certain extent is not within the dominant state public school system in terms of school financing. Private education has reappeared since the middle 1980s (Deng 1997; Kwong, 1997; Mok, 1997), with school numbers and enrollments reaching 0.4 percent of the total number of schools and student population in China in 1997 (Wang 1997). Private schools are under the supervision of the Superintendent Office; therefore, they are under the control of state educational authorities in terms of macro administration and political monitoring (Deng 1997). Organizationally and administratively, only the Hope Primary School system is to any great extent outside the hierarchy of the State Education Commission, renamed the Ministry of Education after 1998; and more often than not, it operates independently of the educational authorities.

The Chinese educational system was centralized and politicized to great extent in terms of administration and financing until the middle 1980s, when a series of educational changes and reforms took place in line with the state economic reform and modernization strategies. The success of vanguard agricultural and economic reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s provided physical resources for new educational expansion (Riskin, 1993). In 1985, the CPC Central Committee enacted the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on the Reform of China's Education Structure." In the following year, the National People's Congress turned it into the Compulsory Education Act, the first education law since 1949 when the new China was founded. The most important features of this fundamental reform are legalization of 9-year compulsory universal education; the decentralization of educational administration; the diversification of the educational financing system; and the vocationalization of secondary education (Lewin, Little, Xu and Zheng, 1994; Zhu and Lan, 1996). For primary education, according to Tsang (1996), the most important change was that the central government would get rid of almost all its financing responsibilities in order to encourage lower level governments and communities to tap their great potential to finance education. The local governments, plus the provincial government that provided a minor share of funds, became almost totally responsible for the financing of primary and secondary education. According to the data of the State Education Commission, provincial and local governments accounted for 99.98 percent of budgeted expenditure in 1991 and 99.97 percent in 1992 for primary education. The national-level investment in basic education remained inadequate after the reform, much below the average level of developing countries (Tsang, 1994, 1996).

The local resources for education in "poverty-stricken areas" (state- or province-categorized "poor counties") were notably inadequate. In 1995, there were 592 counties categorized as "poor" with 85 million of people, whose average annual income was less than 268 RMB (about 32 US dollars per capita). Of these poor counties, there were 195 "extremely poor" counties with 58 million people whose average annual income was less than 200 RMB (about 24 US dollars per capita) (Huang, 1995). The average annual income per capita in these poor counties was far below the UN poverty indicators that regard PPP (purchasing power parity) below \$60 per month per capita as poverty and \$30 as extreme poverty (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 1994). In these poor counties, people lacked subsistence levels of food and clothing. Naturally, it was very expensive for poverty-stricken households and local governments to provide basic education to school age children in these counties. Also, the teaching force in these counties continued to be inadequate in both quantity and quality. Even though there was free tuition in all public schools, school age children could not go to school or they dropped out of school because their parents were not able to pay general fees and because they were needed as farm or household helpers. In addition, the school buildings and facilities were in very poor condition. In some extremely poor mountainous counties, teachers taught students in unsafe and undesirable places such as dilapidated temples or caves, according to many reports (Cheng, 1992; Huang, 1994; Zhang and Ma, 1996). Striving to obtain enough food and clothing for local people to subsist, the political authorities and school communities in these poor counties were not able to invest adequately in education. They were very eager to accept any financial contributions from outside to help expand education.

The trends of educational decentralization and finance diversification in reform and long standing poverty in the underdeveloped areas in particular, provided Project Hope the sociopolitical atmosphere to come into being and grow quickly. The initiators of the project took on the gritty issue of the long-awaited rural education expansion by making the best use of the opportunities for change and reform to promote basic education investment in poor areas. When local governments were not able to take care of the basic education in all poor counties, Project Hope's participation in and contribution to primary education expansion grew significantly.

## **Empowerment by the Central Authorities**

Almost all the leading officials at state and provincial levels gave Project Hope unusually enthusiastic endorsement and support. The reasons behind this were multiple. They could be due to the real sympathy the leading politicians felt for poor children and their sincere willingness to support basic education expansion in rural areas. They could be due to the close personal connections between the CYDF organizers and the leading politicians, or due to the political needs for the authorities to avert public attention from the tight governmental budget for basic education after reform, or possibly to divert attention from the newly strangled student movements. Leading officials in China have a long tradition of writing calligraphy to express their reflection, admiration and other personal attitudes. Although he vowed to stop writing anything for others to show his personal endorsement in the 1990s, the late leader Deng Xiaoping wrote the title of Project Hope for CYDF to show his endorsement of the program on September 5, 1990. He then donated 5,000 RMB (about 600 US dollars) on two occasions in the name of "an old CPC member." He encouraged his family members to make donations. The late President Li Xiannian wrote the title for the first Hope Primary School that was built in Anhui Province. The Party Secretary General and President Jiang Zeming and then

Premier Li Peng followed suit. Almost all the important politicians and celebrities emulated Deng by showing support and making personal donations to the project in one way and another (Huang, 1994; Legal Daily, 1997). Consequently, all governmental departments at different levels related to rural education gave the green light to the implementation and development of a variety of programs of this non- governmental project. More often than not, the programs of Project Hope were even given the highest priority on government agenda in some poor counties and prefectures.

## **Domestic and Overseas Solicitation**

With endorsement and support from state and provincial leaders, the mass media joined the publicity campaign for the project. The mass media broadcast a great number of touching stories about how poor kids longed for schooling and about how poor citizens as well as high profile officials and celebrities helped dropouts go to school. Books, television features and films related to the project were produced, publicized and won the popular acceptance of the public. In April 1992, one program named "A Million of Love Hearts" for children in poor areas was launched to seek donations from urban areas across the country. In January 1994, another program named "Project Hope: One Home for One Dropout" covered the whole country. The purpose of this program was to encourage one well-off family in both rural and urban areas across the country to help sponsor the schooling of one poor child. In May 1997, a program entitled "Project Hope: The Last Large-scale Domestic Donation Solicitation" was waged nationwide. Through these programs and many others, Project Hope was well known in urban areas as well as in rural areas. It was estimated that every government employee made donations to the project at least once. According to a random survey done by the State Science and Technology Evaluation Center, 98 percent of the respondents in Beijing knew the project. 80.8 percent knew the project through television, newspapers and other media. Eighty-two percent of the respondents made donations to people in poor areas or areas hit by natural disasters; 73.1% made donations to Project Hope (Beijing Youth Daily, 1997). In recent years, corporations, and specifically foreign enterprises like the multinationals Motorola, Coca-Cola and Phillips in particular, were attracted by the publicity for Project Hope. Corporate donations and gifts accounted for the major portion of the funds in recent years.

Well-organized publicity work also targeted potential donors overseas, especially entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao. A great number of individuals from Japan, the US and other countries made donations and sponsored poor students. In 1996, Project Hope created its homepage on the Internet and made its programs more accessible to international communities. The CYDF held an international conference entitled "Project Hope and Fund Raising in China." In addition, three students who were sponsored by the project were selected to participate in the passing of the Olympic Torch in the US that year.

During 1980-1988, the total number of school age children who are not in school in China was estimated to have reached 37 million due to various socioeconomic reasons. In the early 1990s, the number decreased due to the government's growing will and more serious work in implementing the 9-year compulsory education policy. But it was still estimated that over one million students dropped out each year. Most of the dropouts were in the poverty- stricken areas (Yue, 1991).

Project Hope's outstanding efforts and activities against the bleak rural education background have been warmly accepted by people in all walks of life in the country. It has sponsored the return to school of nearly 2 million dropouts and constructed over

5,000 primary schools. Currently, its organizers seek to raise the aggregated number of sponsored students to 3 million, and the number of constructed and renovated schools to 6000 by the year 2000. In addition, and more ambitiously, Project Hope has attempted to train primary school teachers and tried to use the Hope Primary Schools to directly reduce poverty in families and communities. It is widely believed that Project Hope has made a great contribution to the development of rural basic education in poor areas. It is even regarded as the only hope for developing basic education and reducing poverty by some policy-makers as well as by the public in some poverty-stricken areas.

## **Politicization and Bureaucratization**

Not only did the state and provincial leaders support the project directly and make personal donations, but they also made use of the project for various political purposes. The donations and gifts from high officials were always in the headlines of national and local media, which publicized them caring about poor children and their schooling. In addition, the central political authorities used the project as an important means of implementing top-down "ideological education." Through supporting this campaign, it was expected that the CPC members, government officials and staff as well as the ordinary citizens would be taught to continue the popular traditions of the party and avoid corruption and other social ills exacerbated by the introduction of a free market economy. According to the People's Daily (1995) and Guangmin Daily (1997)--mouthpieces of the central party authorities and the central government--Project Hope has become one of the most effective and most influential "ideological education" programs in recent years.

On March 10, 1994, former Premier Li Peng made his "Government Work Report" to the National People's Congress. He specifically emphasized Project Hope by urging people to "mobilize the social forces to continue the implementation of Project Hope." For three consecutive years since 1994, the "White Paper of China Human Rights Development" detailed the yearly statistics of the project's achievements in school enrollment and school building as important indicators of human rights improvement in China (Xinhua News Agency, 1997).

Behind the fanfare of this highly politicized educational scene were the bare facts of rural basic education. First, though there have been significant increases in financial and physical resources invested in education since the 1980s, national investment in education remains relatively low compared to other countries. In 1992, the per-student budgeted expenditures for primary education in China, as a ratio of per capita GNP, was only 6.8 percent, substantially lower than the average of 10-11 percent for countries in Asia (Tsang, 1996). By contrast, public spending per student in the higher education sector as a percentage of GNP per capital was 193 percent in 1990 and 175 percent in 1994, much higher than the 1990 average of 98 percent in East Asian countries (World Bank, 1997). Second, "minban" teachers (literally "people-managed" teachers, or community-supported teachers), most of whom teach in poor school communities in rural areas, have been decreasing by tens of thousands each year due to the governmental policies aimed at eliminating them and due to the differential pay they receive. The shortage of rural teachers has become more serious. In 1998, minban teachers decreased to about 2.3 million, accounting about 40 percent of the total teacher population in rural areas. They do not enjoy "equal pay for equal work," the golden rule that China has always pledged to obey both in Mao's egalitarian era before reform or in free market era since the late 1970s. Most of these teachers are actually living under the poverty line; some even join the ranks of the extremely poor because the poor and extremely poor

communities are not able to pay their salaries and benefits for months or even years (Paine, 1991; Cheng, 1992; Zhang, 1994; Wang, 1997).

Third, the education surcharges and taxes legalized by central and local governments, which aim at development of basic education and at compensating minban teachers' salaries in particular, are difficult to collect, or are misused by being invested in township enterprises when they are collected. Both minban and public basic teachers, in particular minban teachers, working in poor communities more often than not are paid IOUs for their work, and the school facilities remain in poor conditions or worsen (Cheng, 1992; Wang, 1996; Zhang and Ma, 1996). All of these undesirable situations related to rural schools and teachers could have been much improved if the state and provincial authorities had shown equally their enthusiasm and endorsement for Project Hope for the basic education expansion in poor counties.

Bureaucratization of the project and the Hope Primary School system is closely linked to politicization of the project. In addition to its own leaders and operational departments, CYDF has invited a number of politicians, officials and celebrities to be honorary leaders. CYDF's honorary president is the former top legislator Wan Li, the former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Its president Li Keqiang is a member of the Standing Committee of National People's Congress. A number of retired political elites such as generals and the former leading members of the secretariat of the State Council and even some current officials of the Ministry of Education and the representatives of the upper-house-like People's Political Consultative Conference were invited to hold the titles of supervisors for the implementation of Project Hope programs. It was arranged that they would occasionally visit prefectures and counties to supervise and examine the implementation Project Hope programs and report to the public and external decision-making bodies on behalf of the CYDF and Project Hope.

Just like a centralized governmental organization, CYDF and Project Hope have developed their top-down national networks from Beijing-based headquarters down to county-level branches in almost all provinces and autonomous regions. These parallel the hierarchy of the public educational system under the Ministry of Education. Seemingly, they are non-governmental, non-profit social welfare promotion organizations. As a matter of fact, they have been shaped into another pseudo governmental organization with its personnel actually on the governments' payroll. In most extremely poor counties, the local economy is simply subsistence level agriculture; the local budget sometimes can not cover the payrolls of the over-staffed governmental departments. Furthermore, it is difficult and time-consuming for the external financial aid for education to reach these remote poor counties. The CYDF and Project Hope branches in these counties most often have nearly nothing to contribute and merely add to the burden of local fragile financial, administrative and educational systems. In some counties, when a limited amount of sponsorship for a program is available, various kinds of corruption (such as misuse of funds, cheating, and falsification of records) beleaguer the program. Becoming fully aware of these organizational and management problems, the headquarters attempted to adjust and downsize their organizations and improve management and efficiency by eliminating those ineffective and problematic prefecture- or county-level branches. Such a goal, as the leaders of CYDF admit, is difficult to achieve (CYDF 1996).

### **For Equality, Equity, Efficiency and Quality?**

A great deal of attention has been focused on the issues of equality, equity,

efficiency and quality in education investment by educational researchers, policy decision makers in governments and the international institutions represented by the World Bank (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 1994; World Bank, 1995). Originally, the goal of Project Hope was to increase educational equality, equity and quality by sponsoring the education of school age children of poor families and by improving school facilities. The school age children who can not go to school and those who drop out of school because of poverty reach one million across the country per year as mentioned above, and such children account for from 20 percent to over 50 percent of school age children in different poor counties (Tsang, 1996). Therefore, the students that Project Hope can help account for only a very small percentage of the total population of these children. The question arises: Among them who should receive the limited sponsorship? The obvious answer should be those who are from the poorest families based on basic economic principles, so that sponsorship can be used with the greatest marginal utility and effect. In fact, however, the financial aid more often than not goes to students related to the power groups such as administrative authorities, government employees, the school principal and teachers as well as the students from relatively rich families.

*Where should Hope Primary Schools be located; who should be enrolled?*

There are two kinds of standard that CYDF set for Hope Primary School construction. If the donated funds reach 200,000 RMB (about 24,100 US dollars), a new school should be constructed with the funds. If 100,000 RMB (or 12,200 US dollars) are available, an old dilapidated school should be renovated with the funds. According to the requirements of CYDF, the location for a new school should be in the township center. In reality, a great number of newly built Hope Primary Schools are built in county centers, cities and towns. It is mandatory that the location for renovated schools be at least on a village center school if a location is not available where, for instance, a group of households are clustered and share a small simple school. Most renovated and reconstructed Hope Primary Schools, however, are former township center schools. Obviously, the county centers, the township centers, and even the village centers, are relatively economically developed and have higher average household income than surrounding areas in the county. This is especially the case in extremely poor and remote mountainous counties. Generally, in these central areas, there are comparatively fewer school age children who can not go to school or drop out because of poverty. Thus, the building of new schools and school renovation contribute less to educational access, equity and equality for poorer children in the county than they should.

My visit in 1996 to a beautiful Hope Primary School located in a town center in Anhui Province revealed substantial inequality and inequity in the student enrollment of the Hope Primary School. The school I visited was the only Hope Primary School under the jurisdiction of a township level, the lowest level government in a county categorized as being of "extreme poverty." From random sampling and interviewing thirty K-1 and K-2 students, and their parents and interviewing the principal and teachers, I found that all students' families had adequate food and clothes. This meant that the families were not "poor" according to local governmental poverty criteria--as discussed above--despite the fact that in this mountainous county the average annual income per capita is less than 200 RMB (about 24 US dollars). All interviewed families reported that they could regularly give their children pocket money during the academic semester. They all responded that they were able to support the general fees if their children were otherwise sent to an ordinary public school in the town, which was tuition free but charged general



fees. Second, 51 percent of the total enrollment lived in the prosperous township center with booming business. Forty-one percent lived in the three neighboring villages that were about half an hour to one hour for students to walk to school; a few students in senior grades from rich families rode bikes to school. This group of students all had family members working in the town, most in township factories. Only 8 percent of students came from the outer six villages, which were home to 59 percent of the population under the township jurisdiction. Almost all this 8 percent of students had one family member working in the township either as a factory worker or self-employed businessman, so that the students had places for boarding and lodging. The principal and 5 teachers interviewed stated that it was impossible for the school to enroll children whose family members were peasants in the outer poorer villages in deep mountains, which were anywhere from a one-hour to a five-hour walk from the township center. They admitted that it was financially impossible for the school to support students' lunches, not to mention board, lodging or transportation to some villages.

The typical rhetoric concerning the Hope Primary School's location in the highroad-accessible town or county centers is that more of the general public will see the exemplary buildings and teaching activities of the school. More importantly, the higher-level authorities who sometimes make investigations of grassroots units can easily witness the physical outcome of Project Hope. Thus, hopefully, they will provide greater attention and support to basic education in the county. If schools were built in remote mountainous villages where the cars and busses can not reach, the authorities would not see the evidence of educational development in the area. One concludes that in locating a school site, building and renovating a school, the local policy makers orient to the response of higher level authorities and relatively rich students and their families rather than to the educational needs and expectations of economically disadvantaged children and their families who live in geographically disadvantaged places (Tou et al., 1995).

*After a school site is located, on what scale should a Hope Primary School be built or renovated?*

Though the distribution of the donated funds for school building or renovation is fixed to standard amounts, the local governments can supplement extra funds when available if they think necessary. Due to the huge regional differences and economic variation across the country, it is impossible for CYDF to strictly apply uniform standards. The local politics use the opportunity of school building and expansion to exercise their powers and seek local funds to invest in education based on local economic conditions. Nevertheless, some, if not most, local authorities unrealistically aim at building the best, the biggest and the most beautiful school building in the region. In many cases because of careless planning and mismanagement, the building of the main school infrastructure expends all the funds before a school can be completed. Then, no more money is available for purchasing accessory parts and items to complete the school. For instance, the government of the rural Xinguo County in east China's Jiangxi Province made the ambitious decision to build the best primary school building in the Ganzhou Prefecture. The county government even sent professionals to the city where the prefecture headquarters was located to investigate what the most modern and beautiful primary school building should be like before they started construction. The county used 200,000 RMB (about \$24,100 US) externally donated funds and gifts, plus over 100,000 RMB locally collected funds to build a Hope Primary School. After the main building was finished, the builders found no money was left for completing

washrooms, laboratories or to order blackboards, desks and chairs, not to mention equipment and books for the school laboratories and library. It was impossible to collect more non-governmental funds in this poor county. The county and lower level governmental branches were unable to provide extra financial assistance. This Hope Primary School was left as nothing but an unfinished modern building (Tou et al., 1995). It then took many years for the county to complete the school and make it useable. Unfortunately, a great number of Hope Primary School buildings were built or half built in the same way.

Because of the complicated dual leadership in administration and management, most Hope Primary Schools can not fully improve their potential for internal and external efficiency. As required by the CYDF, a Hope Primary School should upon completion be immediately put under the leadership and administration of the local Educational Bureau or Office at the county or town level, which is the grassroots level in the hierarchy of the Ministry of Education. However, the school is built with the funds obtained by and under instruction of the local CYDF and Project Hope Office. And they are affiliated with the local branch of the CYL, which also functions as a governmental branch. Thus, the Hope Primary School is subject to two administrators. Since the League branch solicits and accepts the donations and gifts, and is responsible for building the school, it always has greater decision-making power in administration and management. The local educational authorities are often put aside in the decision making process about Hope Schools. But local educational authorities will not easily retire from the competition for power and influence, particularly on the high-profile Hope Primary School.

In addition, who should be the principal, who should be teachers in the new school, what kind of poor children should be enrolled, and what special management policies should be practiced in the school? All these equality, equity and efficiency-related questions receive conflicting answers from the two different administrative authorities with different motivations and orientations. Hence, constant conflict and tensions ensue between the two power systems.

When the two administrators can not reach a compromise, as is usually the case, the Hope Primary School becomes the victim of their conflicts, competition and antagonism. Teaching quality and student achievement are thus negatively affected.

## **Curriculum and Instruction: For Poverty Reduction?**

China has long worked under a national uniform core curriculum in primary education. Alternations of core curricula are under the absolute control of the Ministry of Education. Naturally, Hope Primary Schools are expected to follow the standard practice of all public primary schools about what core curricula should be taught. The curricula and instruction do not include vocational and technical education at the level of primary schools, but only at the level of junior and senior secondary schools and beyond. This is in line with World Bank educational policy recommendations: "Basic education encompasses general skills such as language, science and mathematics, and communication skills that provide the foundation for further education and training. It also includes the development of attitudes necessary for the work place. Academic and vocational skills are imparted at higher levels, on-the-job training and work-related continuing education update those skills." (World Bank, 1995).

In early 1994, Vice Premier Li Nanqing, who took charge of national education policy, suggested that the Hope Primary School should be different from other general public primary schools in curriculum and instruction. The Hope Primary Schools should

educate elementary graduates in the agricultural and technical knowledge needed and develop the skills to help families and communities in the drive to alleviate poverty. Obviously, such educational goals for children ages 7 to 13 years in primary schools were unrealistic given the inadequacy of the schools and the communities. What is more, these goals are inconsistent with the commonly held philosophy of universal primary education (Wang, 1995). In the education reform of 1985, the educational authorities proposed vocationalization at secondary school level and beyond. Almost half of the secondary schools in the country have been gradually turned into vocational and technical secondary schools since then (Lewin et al., 1994). This policy orientation and implementation were regarded as realistic, viable and effective because they were based on the economic development strategies of China, on the advice of educational professionals, and on the related experiences of other countries. The vice-premier's radical educational policy proposal for Hope Primary Schools did not win warm support from educators, especially professors and researchers under then State Education Commission. But the CYL and CYDF followed this proposal and demanded that the Hope Primary Schools should define their own character by educating students with agricultural, scientific and technological skills as well as cultural knowledge. Since then, it has been required that the Hope Primary School should take the path of "combining agricultural and technical knowledge and skills with cultural contents" by adding farming and technical education to the core curriculum. In addition, more radical policy guidelines were adopted to encourage Hope Primary Schools to develop school economies, such as the school-affiliated business operations, and furthermore, to develop schools as technical extension stations in poor rural areas. Later, CYDF explicitly required Hope Primary Schools to become agricultural and technical extension stations or centers in local communities (CYDF 1996b).

According to case studies by Peking University graduates, four obstacles lay directly in the way of this "new path" (Tou et al., 1995).

- First, there were no places such as experimental fields or laboratories to implement agricultural and technical education. When not even desks and chairs were available or adequate for students, it was difficult or nearly impossible for the school to obtain extra facilities such as land plots or laboratory equipment to teach plant cultivation techniques or electrical skills, for example.
- Second, teachers were notably inadequate in both quantity and quality in poor counties. When the supply of teachers in vocational and technical schools at secondary level were inadequate, it was to be expected that they would also be inadequate for the agricultural and technical curricula of the Hope Primary Schools. This was partly because vocational and technical teacher qualifications were not yet required in Hope Primary Schools, and most probably would not be considered by planners of teacher education. The Hope Primary Schools occasionally had to invite experienced farmers and technicians or secondary vocational school teachers to classrooms, as mere gestures toward implementing vocational and technical curricula and instruction.
- Third, the elementary students were obviously too young and cognitively unprepared to accept vocational and technical training; and the acquired knowledge and skills would most probably become obsolete years later when they graduated and entered the labor force.
- Fourth, parents opposed the non-cultural content of curricula and instruction. If children had to spend a significant amount of time in agricultural work in school, peasants would prefer that they be household helping hands or learn farming skills

on the farm instead. And even some local administrative and educational leaders believed that it was not realistic for primary school students to be directly involved in programs of poverty alleviation and economic development for families and communities.

According to Chinese educational professionals, some light agricultural work is necessary. Children should be educated to have solid ethics and a good attitude toward productive and vocational work through such experiences. But the Hope Primary School has little alternative to being a general primary school rather than a vocationally or technically oriented school carrying heavy political and economic expectations (Sha, Zhou, Fang and Xu, 1995). As the World Bank (1995) pointed out: "Education alone will not reduce poverty; complementary macroeconomic policies and physical investments are also needed." When actual investments in the poverty stricken counties were rare and problematic, the great hopes and expectations placed on the children of Hope Primary Schools to contribute to the reduction of poverty and to economic development are only daydreams, even if the students are otherwise adequately equipped with vocational and technical knowledge and skills.

## **Conclusion**

Encouraged by its political endorsements, its great achievements and popularity, Project Hope has become more and more ambitious in its educational endeavors. The leaders of CYDF and Project Hope expect the Hope Primary School to be not only the hope for children of poor families, but also the hope for parents and local communities to rid themselves of poverty and become well off. Unless poor children are lucky enough to live in the more advantaged villages or unless they are related to locally powerful people, the children's chances of truly escaping poverty through schooling are small. The expectations placed on the Hope Primary School have become a burden for the young children and teachers; these expectations are unrealistic and problematic.

The leaders of Project Hope now plan to set up at least one Hope Primary School in each of the over 500 poor counties in China. Presently, because the donations and gifts are not adequate, Hope Primary Schools currently exist in only about 100 poor counties. But, the leaders now have new plans in addition to continuing to sponsor children and building schools in every poor county. In addition to transforming Hope Primary Schools into agricultural and technical stations and training students with poverty-reduction skills as mentioned above, the new goals and plans include the following:

- First, to seek donations and gifts to set up the Hope Library in every Hope Primary School. If one donates 3,000 RMB (approximately US\$ 362), 500 books for children will be purchased and a small library in a Hope Primary School will be set up.
- Second, to build up Training Bases for Hope Primary School Teachers. The first National Training Center for Hope Primary School Teachers, at least the physical building, has been completed in Zhejiang Province.
- Third, to establish the Project Hope Award for Outstanding Teachers. Dozens of dedicated and experienced teachers from extremely poor school communities have been selected for the awards. They were invited to Beijing to accept the honors.
- Fourth, to organize the selection of a number of outstanding students from Hope Primary Schools as Hope Stars (CYDF 1997a, 1997b).

At present, more and more people and institutions unrelated to the system of the CYL and CYDF use, consciously or unconsciously, the title of "Project Hope" for financing basic education, or for non-educational or profit making purposes. They thus challenge the political and educational authority of CYDF and Project Hope for rural basic education expansion. To safeguard its best and exclusive interests, CYDF registered its service trademark of Project Hope with the China Trademark Bureau in April 1997. This places in legal jeopardy any individual or any institution using the title "Project Hope" in China without approval from CYDF and Project Hope. It is estimated that over 400 Hope Primary Schools in China have recently been built with the funds from sources outside CYDF and Project Hope. Apparently, all these schools will have to either change names or join the Hope Primary School system under CYDF in the near future.

In November 1997, the State Education Commission and the Ministry of Finance set up the "State Compulsory Education Scholarship For Children in Poor Areas" by earmarking 130 million RMB (about 15.7 million US dollars) to support poor children in the state-categorized "poor" and "extremely poor" counties. It is expected that every year over 600,000 students will receive the scholarship (CYDF 1997). Though started much later and on a smaller scale compared with Project Hope's programs, this was the biggest effort ever made by the State Education Commission after educational reform in the middle 1980s to directly sponsor the schooling of children of poor families in poor areas.

When CYDF and Project Hope play bigger roles and the Hope Primary School system attempts to exercise greater influence in basic education and community development in poor areas, the Ministry of Education will become more active in rural basic education expansion. The ministry along with other powerful ministries will probably make greater financial contributions and work out more carefully-designed policy guidelines for all primary schools including Hope Primary Schools in rural areas. This will improve educational access and quality for school-age children of poor families. Along with the state's poverty- alleviation and economic development programs, it is expected that educational equity and efficiency as well as the governmental goal of universalization of 9-year basic education will be gradually realized in the future.

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