

Stress-Free Primary Education and Stricter Higher Education: Toward the Systematic Evolution of Chinese Education

“We shouldn’t encourage high school students to study overly hard, nor should we encourage undergraduates to indulge themselves.” This remark was made by a leader of the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) at the International Forum on Higher Education Annual Conference, held in Ningbo, China, in early November of this year. Observers believe that his words summarize the systematic evolution of Chinese education that is intended in the government’s new policies for reforming both primary and undergraduate education, and in the Double First-Class University Project.

Bridging the divide between elementary and secondary education

For a long time, taking the college entrance exam—a “wooden bridge” that is extremely narrow relative to China’s huge population—has marked a dividing line for Chinese students between their lives before and after. Under the pressure of great competition and the traditional idea that “learning is the noblest of human pursuits,” many Chinese children receive education even before birth (prenatal education), and attend various training courses at a young age, including painting and foreign languages, to cultivate their tastes and learning abilities. For most students, such courses will run throughout their primary education years. At the same

time, from kindergarten on, they are required to do a great deal of studying. Thick glasses and a heavy school bag can be seen on many children. For such reasons, Chinese students have been praised by overseas universities for their strong knowledge base, yet criticized for their lack of creativity and imagination.

However, this “Purgatory-like” schooling ends immediately after a student’s admission to university. For those who do not have enough self-discipline, the university is their paradise. Their lives will become a series of games, romantic relationships, and sleep. Learning will become secondary. Four years of shiftless pursuits results in a great waste of students’ academic ability and educational resources.

In summary, in the eyes of Chinese policy mak-



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