

"THE DILUTION OF EDUCATION."

By Stephen C. Van Wyck (September, 2005).

Plan.

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INTRODUCTION:

I am an English teacher who has been working in China for eight years. My home is in Maine state, USA. At present, I work in Urumqi Vocational University, in Xin Jiang. Over the past few years (especially in Beijing), I have noticed the following phenomenon among my students—they want to enter graduate school. In fact, this desire has grown considerably in the past twelve months alone. I have seen my students struggle to pass the graduate school entrance exam (*yan jiu kao*), to survive the program, and find a job at the end of it all. This has made me think much on the issue of graduate school, and to write this article. My central idea here is this: *"People who attend graduate school do so at great 'opportunity cost', under market pressure, for 'paper credentials', and not for a simple love or pursuit of knowledge. Since this appears to be happening over the whole country, the result may lead to a 'dilution of education', at the graduate level, threatening the credibility of China's educational establishment."* In this article, I will discuss the question of graduate school from the perspective of (a) the students, (b) society, (c) my own graduate school experience, and (d) some possible solutions to this question. From the outset, I want this article to read, not as a criticism of the current system, but as the starting point of a debate, a public discussion of this question of the role of graduate school in China today.

BODY:

Concerning students.

What students do. Typically, most undergraduate students spend their "junior" year in college studying the necessary materials for taking the graduate school entrance exam in the January of their "senior" year. In addition to their normal, third-year coursework and part-time jobs, they read many exam preparation books. They may also attend special "exam preparation" seminars and courses.

Why they do it. College students try to get a graduate school education for a variety of reasons. First is the general perception that a graduate school diploma, a master's degree, is needed for getting a better job. Where does this requirement come from? Perhaps the employers (the "bosses") in the work world expect a certain standard from the people they hire, and these bosses think that typical undergraduate students are not good enough. In high-pressure cities like Beijing and Shanghai, this is especially the case, but other large cities are already following the trend. Second, some students might not be sure what they want to do, and a few more years inside the courtyards of academia seem desirable.

Consequences and costs of chasing after graduate school. In searching for a higher level of education, today's students pay a heavy price—a very heavy one. First, and perhaps most important, they ruin their "junior" year. Make no mistake, in studying for the upcoming "graduate school entrance exam", they sacrifice their normal (undergraduate) coursework, as well as the range of social activities that "junior" students take part in. I suspect that many undergraduate professors "allow" a drop in academic performance, as they know some of their students are studying for something else. Reader: step back and analyze the four (undergraduate) years of college. "Freshman": play, play, and play. "Sophomore" and "junior": these are the best years, when the student can get into the stride of learning; all sorts of things, in and out of the classroom, can happen

here. "Senior": looking for jobs and possibly the final development of boy friend / girlfriend relationships are paramount; academic things are not as important. This means that the second and third years are by far and away the most important. This is why the evening preparations for the "graduate school entrance exam" are so destructive, in terms of "opportunity cost". Second, most students do not pass the exam. They fail. Also, many students have this attitude: "I want to go to Beijing University, or nowhere at all." Like salmon going up the river to lay their eggs, the "body count" is enormous: yes, a few pass and go on, but the majority have effectively wiped away their "junior" year.

Concerning society.

Problem: the "dilution" of education. If the above-mentioned behavior continues, I suspect there will be a future "dilution" of education at the graduate level. By "dilution", I mean a weakening in the strength of something, as when one constantly adds water to a tea-pot: the tea will get weaker and weaker, until in the end it is just "lightly-brown water", with no more "tea-taste". Here, the "dilution" of graduate education means that a master's degree will not be as valuable as it once was.

Some definitions and examples. I will give two more examples. In the Roman days, at the end of the Roman Empire, certain people took the silver coins, melted them down, added lead, and re-made the coins. These coins looked like silver coins, but they had lead added, and were "debased" and of less value. At the same time, some people added wax to other materials in the fabrication of statues: this is where the word "sincere" comes from (*sin + cere* = Latin, for "without wax"). Second, we have perhaps heard of the story of the wedding guests who were asked to bring their wine to the wedding party, and pour it into a common container. Most people cheated the wedding host, as they added water to their bottles; when the final mixture was served, it obviously tasted "watered down". There are many other examples of "dilution" in the world, which may come to the reader's mind.

Why there is "dilution". Going back to the present, if there happens to be a large amount of "low quality material", then the effect upon the whole is one of dilution. You may say, "Why do you call the present state of graduate degrees 'diluted'?" How can you say this?" I suspect that, if there are too many people pursuing their graduate education for a mere "piece of paper", and not for an innate love of education, then the overall product (at the national level) will be of inferior value. I have already seen this at the undergraduate level in my own classes. The students just want to pass the courses, get their diploma, and get out. (However, that is a topic for another time.) So, why is there "dilution"? There is "dilution" because the number of those students who chase a diploma far outnumber those who genuinely love education for education's sake, or for a desire to improve their skills. This "dilution" is a direct consequence of "market forces", such as bosses and a society that insists on higher credentials.

The costs of "dilution". This may seem obvious, but I think it is necessary to list the consequences. First, there are more graduate students in the universities. As with China's road infrastructure, China's university infrastructure was designed with the "user population" of one or two generations ago in mind. Yes, they are growing to meet the surge in demand, but the stresses are painful, and the product is sometimes, I think, questionable. More students mean more tuition money sought after and paid. The burden on individuals and families continues for another two or three years. Second, there is the issue of "opportunity cost". For every hour, every yuan, every

drop of sweat expended, could that (graduate) student have been better spent doing something else? Remember, the “body count” (those who fail and drop by the wayside) is very high. For example, in one of my classes, about twenty undergraduate students slaved away at trying to pass the graduate school entrance exam, but only four passed and went on... and two of them, I think, had “guan xi” connections. What about the others? The third, however, is much more serious. As with the (earlier) Roman silver currency, the “face value” of a master’s diploma (the “piece of paper”) becomes worth much less—it becomes devalued. The consequences for China, in terms of “educational credibility” both at home and abroad, are very serious.

My own experience.

Before going to graduate school. I too have made mistakes—big mistakes. I want to tell you what happened to me. It is not a perfect example, but it might help. In the summer of 1991, I did not know what to do with my life. I had hoped to work in West Africa for a year or so, but that idea came crashing down. I returned to the USA, after only 1-1/2 months in West Africa. I did not know what to do with my life. I had a choice: to go to one school, or to go to graduate school and study Special Education. I chose to attend the University of Wisconsin—Madison, in Wisconsin state. UW—Madison is a very good place; in fact, it is excellent. However, I wish to state here that *I attended graduate school because I did not know what else to do with my life, and perhaps I was afraid to explore the alternatives.* (Not a good reason, I think.)

During graduate school. I studied at UW—Madison for two years. My professors were “world-class”, and they tried hard to help me. I rented an apartment in Madison, in a very attractive student / young professional part of the city. I had no job at the time, no wife, no children; in fact, no major responsibilities at the time. I could study all day and all night, and I used vast amounts of time to slowly study the material and pass the exams. I am a slow reader and student, and this helped. However, there were great costs. As an “out-of-state” student, I had to pay more for tuition; I had to pay a high rent; there was no job to bring in the “earned” income. I experienced great bouts of depression. I was not happy to be there. I drove my supervisors crazy.

After graduate school. I passed the academic requirements, and (legitimately) got my graduate diploma. After all, if you study slowly and persistently, you will surely win in the end: that is the real secret of success in graduate school. By the end of those two years, I had a diploma, I had spent about \$50,000, was very depressed, had a “qualification” that I did not know (or want) to use... and what did I get? On my resume, it says, in two lines of terse text, that I got my graduate degree in UW—Madison, between 1991 and 1993. All that, for \$50,000. I do not think that I made very wise choices. (I certainly do not blame UW—Madison for this; it was my fault.) It is now 2005, and time has gone by; I feel more mellow about the whole thing now. Yes, I will agree that to have a master’s degree in Special Education is useful, as I plod my way through a career teaching English as a Foreign Language in China (which I like). However, I would not do it again; in fact, I do not want to be a student again. You, the reader, should decide if this was a “normal”, or a “wasted” experience. I still have my notes, but they long since died out in my brain.

Possible solutions.

The “two-tier” approach. As we have seen, society expects many people who work to constantly upgrade themselves; this means attending seminars, workshops, and graduate school. I would like to propose that, in the “professional” occupations at least, a “two-tier” approach be

instituted. There will, in effect, be two "classes" of professional: the "experts" and the "common" workers. The "common" workers do the simple work; they are not really expected to upgrade themselves over the years (or at least, very modestly); they just plod along at the same speed, year after year. Remember, much of today's work is very mundane and repetitive, and can be done by "common" people. On the other hand, the experts get all the usual rewards of higher salary, prestige, and advancement; they are therefore expected to be more highly educated, and to attend much more training.

Examples in society of the "two-tier" approach. The classic examples of the professions which use the "two-tier" approach are medicine, and the military. In medicine, you have doctors and nurses. In the military, you have officers and non-commissioned officers. It is assumed that there will be two levels of advancement. Not everyone is forced to become a doctor, and not everyone is forced to become an officer (to a point).

Benefits of the "two-tier" approach. There are some important benefits in these models, I think. For those who want to have their own "career track" at a level of lower pressure, the lower tier is open. For those who want to get all the honors and responsibilities, the upper tier is open. They choose their career path, and can enjoy the fruits of their choice.

Other professions should also have a "two-tier" approach. I strongly believe that other professions should also follow the "two-tier" approach—and especially the teaching profession! This would ease a lot of today's social and professional pressure on teachers to "upgrade, or perish". That is, it would "cool down" the market's demand that people get further, graduate education.

Going to graduate school later on in life. Another solution to the problem of "diluted" graduate school education is to allow people to go to graduate school when it suits them, later on in life. Many people enter graduate school just after their undergraduate education is finished, and these people often lack social and intellectual experience. Many graduate schools like their students to have had some years of professional experience. Moreover, such students know exactly what they want in life, and have a very focused approach to what they study... as long as the "market forces" are not forcing them to "upgrade" at some employer's whim. When these motivated students finally get their master's degree, the product is of a much higher quality, since it has not been "diluted" by various other negative influences.

CONCLUSION:

I feel the current situation concerning graduate school in China (and in many, many other countries too, including the USA), is like a "stock speculation bubble"; that is, there may be a point when everything or something bursts. In summary, here is the problem. Too many people are attending graduate school in hope of another "qualification" or "credential"—that is, a master's degree. They are driven to do this because society, and especially the employers (the bosses), all expect a higher grade of worker / professional. Students by the tens of thousands try to get into graduate school, at great cost to themselves; some succeed, but many fall by the wayside. Some do attend graduate school and get their diploma. However, the overall quality of today's diploma holders is, I feel, inferior to earlier days, as a diploma today is really worth less—its value has been "diluted". All of these things need to be carefully thought about and discussed in the public forum. So, I hope that everyone with an interest in this problem will discuss it in the right places, so that an answer may emerge from the people. Let the debate begin!