

China Revisited (1974)

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It was with some apprehension that I crossed the border at Lowu and set foot once again on Chinese soil. Despite some ten years of residence in the Far East since the second world war and frequent visits to the region since coming to teach in Australia and New Zealand, I had not been able to gain entry to China since leaving the country in October 1938.

The contrast between Hong Kong and Canton, between Hong Kong's great houses of commerce and its bustling activity and Canton's relatively quiet streets, with foreign trade centralised in its trade-fair, was a reminder, if such were needed, that we were now in a planned society. Our interpreters and the people we were to meet and talk to were to remind us, over and over, that Chinese society is essentially a society of workers, peasants and soldiers, and that the over-arching philosophy of the state demands that all production and education must serve those three major segments of the population.

Nurseries, kindergartens and primary schools appear to be well established throughout the country, but there seemed to be some unevenness in the availability of middle school (i.e., secondary school) education. In Hangchow, as opposed to Peking, for example, senior middle school education was available only to students who had proved both academically good and politically reliable.

At every educational institution we visited - as at every commune, factory, and workers' residential area - we were welcomed by members of the Revolutionary Committee (the administrative body) and given a brief outline of the history of the institution and its policy by the vice-chairman of the Committee. Since these introductions tended to be fairly uniform in content, it may be useful to refer in detail to one of them.

The Shanghai Teacher Training College

The college, we were told, was established in 1951 to train middle school teachers. In that year there were just over 1000 students and a staff of 350 on a campus covering an area of 300 mu (53 acres). Following the Cultural Revolution, when China's educational policy was subjected to severe scrutiny, the college expanded to the point where it now has 7000 students and a staff of 4000 - 2000 of whom are teachers. About a quarter of the teaching staff are women. The area of the campus has been enlarged to four times its original size, and the

college comprises twelve departments including education, Chinese language and literature, Chinese history, politics, foreign languages, biology, physical culture, mathematics, physics and chemistry. The library holds 2.2 million volumes.

Attached to the college are three institutes and four factories. The institutes are devoted to the investigation of foreign education, the geography of foreign countries, and to problems related to the mouth of the river on which Shanghai stands as well as to the sea in its immediate vicinity. The four factories (every school now has at least one factory or assembly plant attached to it) produce or process transistors, chemistry equipment, electronic meters and instruments and the like.

Cultural Revolution

As we were made to understand, over and over again, just as 'liberation' in 1949 had provided a turning point in Chinese history, so the recent Cultural Revolution was a watershed in Chinese education. The change in educational policy, we were told, was due to the fact that the first president of Communist China, Liu Shao-ch'i, had stimulated the growth of a revisionist line, the result of which was a growing tendency towards elitism - a development which ran counter to the teaching of Mao Tse-tung. Because power was increasingly concentrated in the hands of the 'capitalist roaders', young men and women from poor families were being excluded from the higher education institutions. By demanding that students win high marks in examinations, those who controlled educational policy had caused students to be divorced from the workers, peasants and soldiers; to compete rather than to help each other, and to form an intellectual elite. Whereas the majority of students had wanted to make revolution, the influence of the revisionist line had deprived students of the ability to criticise the bourgeoisie, and science students found that what they were learning lacked any practical significance. Graduates were tending, as in the days before the revolution, to be people who were good at talking but were loath to soil their hands. The masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, we were told, were increasingly dissatisfied with the way education was going, and during the Cultural Revolution the majority of students and teachers, who were also dissatisfied, rose up against the revisionists and seized power. On 26 August 1968, a workers' propaganda team and a People's Liberation Army propaganda team entered the college, and led the students and staff in their struggle for power and helped them criticise past policy. A committee of staff, students and members of the army was then set up which inaugurated the 'Three in One' policy, thus ending the rule of the bourgeois intellectuals and creating a new intellectual atmosphere. The 'Three in One' policy sought to achieve a balance between intellectual, moral and physical development as opposed to the old policy which put a premium on intellectual achievement. Moral development meant the achievement of increased political awareness and the replacement of self-interest with a willingness to place one's knowledge at the service of the workers, peasants and soldiers.

In September 1970, the college set out to implement a plan worked out in the Shanghai Machine-tool Factory, according to which students were to be enrolled from among the workers, peasants and soldiers. Before going on from middle school, students were to work in factories or communes or to serve in the People's Liberation Army for three years or more. On application for college or university, they had to be recommended by their fellow-workers. The application would then have to be approved by the political and college or university leadership. This meant that students commencing their studies now ranged between twenty and twenty-five years of age. Since November 1970, the college had admitted 11,000 students in this manner, and education was being made to serve proletarian politics and productive labour.

The current ideological struggle in factories, communes, the army and all educational institutions is directed against Confucianism and Mao Tse-tung's erstwhile heir-apparent, Lin Piao. As with all such movements, it undoubtedly reflects certain power struggles in the leadership of the

nation and the Communist Party, connected with the impending demise of certain of the 'old guard'. But there is also a fear lest the revolution be betrayed and the Chinese people slip back into old habits of mind. The anti-Confucius, anti-Lin Piao campaign is therefore directed towards 'philosophical purity' and the maintenance of a leadership committed to socialist revolution. To nurture a 'right' philosophical outlook, the attack is not being directed solely against Confucius, but against all exponents of philosophical idealism in the history of Chinese thought. By contrast, the great Legalist philosophers of China's classical period, whose philosophy was adopted by the first uniter of the Chinese nation, Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, in 221 B.C., are being eulogised, and the public is being encouraged to read their works.

A theme which has been central to much Chinese thought has been the goodness or otherwise of human nature. Confucian orthodoxy in the Sung dynasty (960-1278) adopted the view that human nature is essentially good. A small primer, *The Three Character Classic*, was written, probably in the thirteenth century, to teach this orthodox view, and became the first text-book studied by children in imperial China. Composed in lines of three characters, the whole text was easily committed to memory and, even after modern education was introduced, it continued to exercise a strong influence in society. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that this little primer which begins by asserting the goodness of human nature was everywhere under attack. In every school we visited there were classes devoted to its denigration. One little boy of perhaps ten years of age, for example, was made to recite in front of his classmates in a school we visited: 'Human nature is neither good nor bad ... there is only class nature.'

The attempt to link the anti-Lin Piao campaign with the anti-Confucius campaign would appear at first to be ludicrous. Any examination of the careers of these two men, whose lives were separated by nearly 2500 years, reveals that they make strange bedfellows. The link is made by showing that just as Confucius sought to order society by restoring the ways of the ancient kings, so also did Lin Piao, by seeking to restore the pre-revolutionary past. Proof that he wished to do so lay in the discovery of a quotation from the Confucian Analects hanging on the wall behind his bed which read: 'To subdue one's self and return to propriety is perfect virtue.' The arguments by which Confucius and Lin Piao are linked together may seem tortured and far-fetched to us, but to the millions of children and young people involved in the campaign in schools and colleges throughout China, the connection seems self-evident. To strengthen the criticism of Lin Piao, attempts are

being made to show how poorly he conducted the military campaign against the Kuomintang armies during the civil war. In one school we visited, Lin Piao's manoeuvres in the field had been carefully delineated on a blackboard, and a young lad was given the task of enumerating his mistakes.

Work and learning

The factories in the Teacher Training College, like those attached to schools, were directly connected with factories in the city, and work was related to production in those factories. We were told that one result of the ideological campaign outlined above was that students no longer worked solely in the college factories, but also spent some time in the factories outside - uniting theory and practice. Liberal arts staff and students now regarded the whole of society as a factory and, in consequence, the old divisions between teaching and learning and between the intellectual and the worker were being eroded. In the science department, teaching, scientific research and production had been united through the new relationship forged with factories and communes. Liberal arts students not only took part in social struggle, but also visited primary schools to gain practical experience in teaching. More than thirty workers and peasants had been brought into the college as lecturers; and to adapt education to the needs of industry and agriculture, short-term training courses lasting one year, three months and one month had been introduced alongside the regular three-year courses. These short-term courses, which are geared to provide workers and peasants with basic skills, had already processed 2000 students who had returned to their factories and communes to teach fellow workers. Since the educational system was geared to the overall political and industrial aims of the state, opportunities were also provided for teachers in middle schools to engage in further studies in order to raise their political awareness.

We were told that one of the major changes in teaching techniques since the Cultural Revolution was a move away from long, formal lectures and rote learning to a technique whereby teachers and students set out to discuss issues and problems together. Whereas in the past, students had been encouraged to learn texts and teachers' lectures by heart, simply regurgitating them in final examinations, they were now being encouraged to analyse problems and to express their findings in their own words. In practice, this meant that a student would write what he wanted to say as part of his homework; he would then read what he had written to his class and the class would discuss it. Teachers who had previously delivered themselves of a lecture lasting a whole period now tended to talk for ten minutes only, encouraging students to read the subject for themselves in their textbooks, and devoting the remainder of the period to discussion.

From our observation of what took place in classes, and from what we were told, these new techniques were still far from perfect in practice. Old habits die hard, and concern on the part of both teachers and students not to deviate from current orthodoxy must serve as a powerful deterrent to the kind of open discussion encouraged in schools and universities in New Zealand.

Because of the new emphasis on practical training prior to selection for college and university study, students are normally made to sit an entrance examination to check their level of educational achievement. Since selection is determined on political as well as academic grounds, prospective students who have not had a complete education at middle school are required to receive coaching before beginning their college or university studies proper. Enrolment is centralised. Once an applicant for higher studies has been recommended by his fellow workers his name goes to the regional Revolutionary Committee and then the State Council, which makes the final decision as to who will go where. Colleges and universities, however, do seem to have a say in the enrolment process. Some institutions only accept young people from their own region whilst others take them both from their own region and from elsewhere. No doubt students' abilities and interests and subjects taught in the respective institutions play some part

in the final placement of students. After graduation, graduates are normally returned to their own provinces and localities to work, but where appropriate they are assigned to other areas, and, in some instances, to institutes which specialise in certain fields of study and research.

Despite the current emphasis on the practical application of study and links with factories and communes, we found that in practice students only spend about a month a year working in these places. The amount of time spent by teacher trainees in schools depends on the level of their training. In their first year, for example, they devote twenty to thirty days to teaching in schools; and in their third year, two or three months. We were told, however, that it was even more important for them to spend time in factories in order to gain 'social experience'.

It is unusual for students to be married. They are normally required to live in dormitories, and all students are supported financially by the state. Where students have enrolled after five years of work in factories and communes or after serving in the People's Liberation Army they continue to draw full workers' or army pay. In cases of financial hardship the government provides a small living allowance.

The Revolutionary Committee, or governing body of the Teacher Training College, consisted of forty-five members, twenty of whom were representatives of workers and the People's Liberation Army. Ten of them were students, and fifteen were teachers.

Conclusions

We were informed in every institution we visited that it was still far from achieving its goals both in organisation and academically, but there is no doubt that each school and university we visited represented the system at its best. Education in China is a serious matter, since schools are not regarded merely as repositories of learning but as disseminators of political and philosophical truth to which all knowledge is related. One could not help but feel that there was a parallel here to the situation in Europe when theology reigned as the 'Queen of the Sciences'. Cutting through all the political jargon, however, it was not too difficult to recognise educational ideals which are also familiar to educators in the Western world. But one must ask whether the current emphasis on the practical application of learning might not in the long run lead to a situation in which China may have to rely almost exclusively on foreign scholarship for theoretical knowledge, contributing little herself except to technology.

All scientific studies - whether physics, chemistry, biology, agriculture - are now related directly to industry, agriculture and fisheries, since it is the working man engaged directly in these activities, who provides the impetus for scientific advance. Einstein, as I was told by one of the group's interpreters, could just as well have arrived at his hypotheses whilst working at a lathe.

One must also ask whether the dominance of ideology in every branch of learning can really lead to the creativity which Chinese educators say they wish to foster in students. In the field of literature one might become an expert in the techniques of writing modern fiction, but in a system in which strict censorship is applied to all publications, in which every novel and short story is vetted for its ideological purity, it seems unlikely that a truly great novelist will emerge in the foreseeable future.

And what of the questions in my mind as I set out on this journey? Continuity with the past there certainly was. The buildings of the imperial palace in Peking, the Ming tombs and other great national monuments are in a better state of repair than at any time since the downfall of the monarchy; many of the residential areas in the centre of Peking are much as I remembered them, and I walked past places in which I had lived and which had remained fresh in my memory. But changes there also were aplenty. Villages in North China, still built with mud bricks, now appear to be kept in a good state of repair; the burial mounds which once occupied so much land have given way to the plough; poverty, once so marked a feature of much of Chinese society, has disappeared; industry has been expanded and totally reorganised, factories frequently being located close to their source of raw materials, and a sense of purposefulness is apparent everywhere. It is also true, however, that the colourful diversity of Chinese society has largely disappeared, and free communication between foreign visitors and the man in the street is difficult in a way that it never was in the past. One can only hope that contacts with the outside world now being fostered by the Chinese government, and increasing confidence on the part of the leadership in the stability of Chinese society, will eventually contribute to the breaking down of current feelings of reserve.

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