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EDUCATION IN CHINA TODAY¹

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With a population of approximately 850 million living in an area of 9.6 million square kilometres, or the size of the United States of America or Europe, China's efforts to provide mass education since 1949 can only be described as impressive. Whether it is formal education or non-formal education, as educators in non-communist countries categorize education systems, China's education of the masses must be seen in the light of its role of "social reconstruction". The vital role of education in accelerating economic growth is only a means to bring about reconstruction, not an end in itself as in other developing countries.

Any visitor to the People's Republic of China will invariably be told of the rationale and justification underlying its education policy — the necessity of massive social reconstruction to abolish poverty after the devastation of twenty-five years of civil war and the Japanese war, and to transform the population into a collectivist society based upon Marxist-Leninist-Maoist doctrines.

Our three-week visit of seven major cities from Canton in the south (near the Tropic of Cancer) to Shenyang in the north (near 42°N latitude) covered some of China's most densely populated, better developed and most fertile areas. Yet all the people we met tried to impress upon us the necessity for massive social reconstruction and the perennial efforts to fulfil Chairman Mao Tze-tung's education aim and policy. The spokesman for every formal or non-formal education institution drew our attention to Chairman Mao's saying:

"Our educational policy must enable the educated to develop morally, intellectually and physically and to become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture".

我们的教育方针，应该使受教育者，在德育、智育、体育几方面都得到发展，成为有社会主义觉悟有文化的劳动者。

Since political and social objectives are dominant considerations, moral development with emphasis on collective and national aspects is given priority over the intellectual and physical development of children. The education system, methodology and techniques are so organized as to yield maximum

results. Often there is no mention of individual needs for that would be undesirable in a collectivist society but great attention is paid to the collective needs of the labouring people and those of the country.

According to official statistics, there are now 150 million pupils in primary schools which are free and available to all, and 59 million pupils at the secondary level. Lower secondary education is universal in large and middle-sized cities, and upper secondary education is available in larger cities including all the places we visited — Canton, Kweilin, Peking, Dalian, Shenyang, Shanghai and Hangchow.

As for the length of time spent in school, there is no national plan to return to the twelve-year primary and secondary system. It is reported that the Education Ministry in China intends to standardize a ten-year system with five years of primary education and five years of secondary education. At the college level, a three-year undergraduate curriculum adopted after the Cultural Revolution of 1966 has been retained.

The rest of the populace, except those under three years of age, attend induction classes known as 'hsieh-si' sessions, where they discuss and learn Marxist-Leninist-Maoist doctrines from books entitled **Chairman Mao's Sayings**. The most current text is Book Five of **Chairman Mao's Sayings**. These sessions are conducted twice weekly or daily at the communes whether agricultural, industrial or residential. So thoroughly structured is the society into communes that no one is left out in this massive education programme. As a result, the People's Republic boasts of a very high percentage of literacy, in fact, 90 per cent of the population is considered literate, whereas before 1949, 80 per cent of the population was illiterate. Our impression is that there is a socialist consciousness among most of the people as everyone we met gave a standard answer: "I will work wherever the country needs me" or "I will study whatever course the country wants me to."

How did the Chinese manage to effect such tremendous success in exposing everyone to the same socialist message, and getting them to grasp the main points, retain what is learned and change their attitudes and behaviour? The critical factor is not first establishing specific and clear-cut goals, or implementing the right strategy, or constant analysis of effectiveness and evaluation. It is the sum total of the above implemented in a tightly organized and determined fashion. Formal and non-formal education

¹The writer visited China in June 1977 as a member of the Economics Society of Singapore China Study Tour.

programmes are only one focal point. The other is the organization of cultural activities. A large part of the cultural activities including music, drama and sports are offered in schools and colleges as well as in children's palaces (the equivalent of Singapore's ECA centre) under the formal education system. The adults are exposed to songs, operas, films and sports, all of which are directed at communicating collectivist ideals in the communes.

In communicating these educational ideals, the Chinese are extremely skilled in identifying and understanding the basic human needs for food, shelter, recognition, status and love. No matter whether it is in the kindergarten, the schools or university, the farms, factories or residential communes, educational and cultural activities are geared to implement Mao's philosophy.

Mao has always emphasized the role of the workers in effecting socialist transformation. He said:

"To accomplish the proletarian revolution in education it is essential to have working class leadership; the masses of workers must take part in this revolution and, in cooperation with Liberation Army fighters, form a revolutionary three-in-one combination with the activists among the students, teachers and workers in schools and colleges, who are determined to carry the proletarian revolution in education through to the end. The workers' propaganda teams should stay permanently in the schools and colleges, take part there in all the tasks of struggle — criticism and transformation, and always lead these institutions. In the countryside, schools and colleges should be managed by the poor and lower-middle peasant — the most reliable ally of the working class".

(实现无产阶级教育革命，必须有工人阶级领导，必须有工人群众参加……工人宣传队要在学校中长期留下来参加学校中全部斗、批、政任务，并且永远领导学校。)

Thus, in every school or university we visited, we met the chairman or vice-chairman of the propaganda or revolutionary committee as well as teachers and students. But interestingly, none of these revolutionary committee chairmen are "workers" in our understanding of the term. They are simply "working members" of a community. Thus, in Kweilin's Seven Star Kindergarten, the spokesman was the Principal. The chairmen of the revolutionary committees of schools in Shenyang and Shanghai as well as Peking University were either teachers who were communist cadres or Party members themselves. They did not give us the impression that they were "workers" or "the poor and lower peasants" as advocated by Chairman Mao.

The other members of the schools are engaged in literacy as well as vocational education. The pupils

study eight to thirteen subjects depending on the level. They also engage in meaningful labour in a school factory or school farm as part of their school curriculum. In addition, all primary, secondary and tertiary students participate yearly in a month-long labour programme in the farms. In the famous Hangchow Dragon Well Tea Farm, we saw a group of ten-to twelve-year-old boys camping within the tea factory to learn productive labour from the tea growers.

This system of education satisfies the basic needs of food, shelter, recognition and status. The pupils earn their keep while participating in industrial and agricultural production. While they study the traditional three R's, reading both Chinese and English, mathematics and writing, they also study science, military affairs, politics, geography, history, health science, music, art and productive labour. The better students who are also politically conscious and socially cooperative are chosen as "small red soldiers" in primary schools and "red guards" in secondary schools and universities. Their talents and loyalty are identified and recognized, then given some status so to speak. It is also worthwhile to note that recognition and status are not just accorded to the selected few. In most of the classes we visited, at least half of the students wore the distinguishing red scarf of small red soldiers for those under twelve or the red arm bands of the red guards.

Judging by the confident, happy behaviour of the students, it would seem that there is true satisfaction of basic needs, however unnatural or artificially generated the needs may be. Also, peer group influence and opinion are of utmost importance in a collectivist society where the role of the family can be said to have diminished. Group care from the time a child is 57 days old is becoming increasingly important. Maternity leave in China is 56 days, after which the working mother can leave her child in a commune nursery.

For about eleven years after the Cultural Revolution, students at all levels progressed at their own pace without the fear of school leaving or entrance examinations. Students could be promoted from grade to grade by demonstrating socialist consciousness and cooperation in productive labour. This situation, however, was blamed for the lowering of academic standards. The "Gang of Four" championed by Chairman Mao's wife Chiang Ching was discredited and held responsible for China's educational and economic setbacks.

In Shenyang we were told that entrance examinations for secondary schools are being re-introduced. Elsewhere in districts where the demand for places in secondary school is greater than the supply, entrance examinations will also be restored. At the university level, the previous system of tripartite recommendation by peer group, revolutionary committee and teachers will no longer be effective.

In most cases, students with two years' productive labour experience in farms, factories and the army will compete for admission to the colleges and universities by sitting for an entrance examination. The exceptions are students with special aptitudes or training in foreign languages, like our Peking guide, or other training as in sports, fine arts, and certain science subjects. But these would probably comprise no more than ten per cent of the freshman class. Officially, however, it has been said that twenty to thirty per cent of college students will be enrolled from among secondary school graduates. The Education Ministry has also issued a ruling that starting from 1977, all college applicants in science and engineering subjects must have graduated from upper secondary school. Arts applicants must at least have completed lower secondary school.

In order to restore academic standards at university level, theoretical courses and laboratory work will be reintroduced into the curriculum as deemed necessary by lecturers and administrators. Another change is that the productive labour schedule has been reduced to a more modest one-month a year, plus a day every other week devoted to odd jobs on campus. University lecturers are gradually being given more time to do research.

It is interesting to note that there is a new emphasis on showing respect to teachers. This is seen in an article by the Ministry of Education in the December 1977 issue of *Hung Chi Magazine*. It quoted Chairman Mao thus: "Teachers should be respected as teachers. Don't criticize them whenever they say something wrong. Is it possible to be correct all the time?" Hitherto there had been reports of how university lecturers reacted negatively to productive labour in the farms, and how the revolutionary committees of the communes took delight in assigning lecturers and professors to the unpleasant chore of collecting human manure and waste to spread over the cultivated plots.

At the secondary level, a word about science learning is relevant. In Shanghai we were told and in Shenyang we saw that students learn physics and chemistry from text books and occasional demonstrations of scientific experiments. The secondary schools have no science laboratories. The average students are given an elementary review of any scientific topic.

Only the exceptionally bright students with scientific aptitudes are given special training in the children's palaces in the cities. For example, secondary school students go once a week in the afternoon to the Shanghai Children's Palace for subjects such as anatomy, pharmacy, naval art, aeronautics, electronics or special industrial manufacturing skills.

Other students who are selected to take part in the training programme at children's palaces, whether at street, district or city level, learn how to play a Chinese or Western musical instrument, or study ballet, singing, art, handicrafts and embroidery.

There are also all kinds of games and sports including gymnastics and acrobatics.

It is via these scientific and cultural activities that the Maoist ideals of socialism and collectivism are reiterated and reaffirmed. After three weeks in China, every member of our Economic Society Study Group could, almost word for word, recite the Maoist sayings and communist explanations about their political, educational, socialist and economic setups. It is no wonder that children who have been brought up from young to conform to "real life, class struggle and socialist ideals" all speak the same language and give the same answers.

The pictures, stories, songs and dramatic activities for both the young and the adult within or without the formal education system are based upon "social realism" and they reflect not only a deliberate policy to minimise fantasy, imagination and individualism but to encourage sentiments for national leaders, heroes or model communes. The children at Kweilin's Seven Star Kindergarten sang "Our Hearts are linked with Chairman Hua's" and performed dances like "We Learn Farming from Young", "Washing Clothes Dance", "Little Rabbit Plants Carrot" and "I Love Peking's Tien Aun Men". Elsewhere the students as well as professional artistes sang and dramatised sequences glorifying Chairman Mao, Chairman Hua and Prime Minister Chou En-lai as well as national heroes like Luo Feng (雷锋). The model industrial commune Taching (大庆) and agricultural commune Ta Chai (大寨) were glamourised and widely publicised so that they have truly become household words.

Cultural activities, literature and education are thus geared to cultivate socialist feelings and altruism. Not even once did any of the operas and concerts and the films and pictures we saw depict love for parents or love between sexes. The visual and auditory messages from the kindergarten to the public theatre proclaim the "Five Loves": Love of Chairman Mao, Chairman Hua, Chou En-lai and other national heroes; the Chinese Communist Party, the motherland, collective life and physical labour.

On the personal level, even one's health is taken care of in public. Daily mass drill aimed at building up the body takes place in every school early every morning. This habit is carried over into adult life so that everywhere on the road, in the street corners, in front of the house or up in the flats, people do their tai-chi from five to six in the morning.

Another feature is that of daily eye exercises for school children. Twice a day, each time for five minutes, music accompanied by clear oral instruction is piped over the public address system throughout the school. Every other activity is halted in order that children may rub their eyes at four pressure points. These eye exercises are China's own invention. They are so effective, we were told, that the younger generation does not suffer from myopia anymore.

From our observation, it is true that no student in school wears spectacles. There is also no evidence of the use of contact lenses.

To sum up, what can be observed in China today is a country with a single purpose, a single goal. It is a country devoted to a collectivist way of life and it is determined to educate each new generation into positive attitudinal and behavioural participation in its continuing revolution. One is impressed by the singleness of purpose, enthusiasm and the thoroughness evident in its education system. One admires the

effectiveness of the total communication of the collectivist message so that no one can tell where culture, or education, or political propaganda begins or ends.

Nevertheless, one may raise questions about the effects upon family life with parents going out to work and children being left under group care at creches, or about the extent of provision for children's curiosity and individual development in such a highly structured education system. Or it may be that we need to examine our own educational assumptions.