

After the Cultural Revolution

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Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep, grateful and obedient. . . . Choosing "bread" Thou wouldst have satisfied the universal and everlasting craving of humanity—to find someone to worship. . . . But man seeks to worship what is established beyond dispute, so that all men would agree at once to worship it. . . . This craving for community of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*

To the outside world the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which convulsed the People's Republic of China from 1966 until 1969 looked like a whole society gone mad. An aging and seemingly demented revolutionary leader had unleashed a teenage rabble on the middle and upper-level leadership of the new China and paralyzed the economic, cultural and educational life of the largest nation on earth. Now, three years after the close of the Cultural Revolution, those of us who have been able in recent months to visit a more stable and tranquil China have come away with a different impression.

The Cultural Revolution now appears as a rational—if somewhat exaggerated—response to the need to maintain revolutionary zeal, social egalitarianism and ideological commitment in a political system which requires those qualities if it is to maintain

political control and to function effectively. The lasting effects and ultimate rationale of the Cultural Revolution are nowhere more apparent than in the important changes in the structure and content of Chinese education which took place during and after that upheaval.

Other Communist societies have, of course, emphasized the need for ideological purity, but none seems to have been so obsessed with maintaining conformity of thought or so successful in using it as a motivating force for the solution of social problems and the exercise of political and social control. In the Soviet Union the heavy reliance on physical coercion in the Stalin period has given way to an increasingly "consumerist" orientation. In Cuba the official rhetoric about the new socialist man and the campaigns for greater production have failed to develop an economy which can survive without outside assistance. In China, however, it appears that the economy is growing at a rate and through a structure which meets the basic requirements of medicine, housing, literacy, employment and security for the overwhelming majority of its 800 million population—while officially encouraged qualities of service to others, self-discipline, sexual puritanism and hard work are being developed through an educational system which has been restructured and focused upon the "worship" of Mao Tse-tung and the practical application of his thought to the problems of the workers, peasants and soldiers of China.

The most important structural changes in education since the Cultural Revolution have been three. *First*, the financing, staffing and operation of nursery, primary and secondary schools have been put into the hands of local bodies such as agricultural communes, factories and neighborhood associations. *Second*, primary and secondary education have been reorganized and expanded with the aim of making the completion of nine years of schooling nearly universal. University education, on the other hand, has

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been sharply cut back and restricted to a small percentage of the population which has proven itself ideologically as well as by work in factories or communes. *Third*, a new network of adult schools, the so-called May 7th Cadre Schools, has been created as part of a program of indoctrination of the middle and upper leadership which has been undertaken by local, provincial and national Party and state organs. At all levels education has been given a heavily practical orientation and is combined or interspersed with periods of "productive labor in factories or agricultural communes."

It is impossible to say at this early date, from the limited opportunity which outsiders have had for observation, what effect the new educational structure will have upon creativity and the innovative capacity of China or whether it can maintain the desired revolutionary élan for the indefinite future. (The Chinese already speak of the necessity of new cultural revolutions "in a different form" in the not too distant future.) Thus far, however, the new system appears to be successful in preventing the establishment of the intellectual and bureaucratic élite, the emergence of which Mao feared before he unleashed the Red Guards in 1966.

The Chinese educational system begins with nurseries which are available for working mothers in urban areas from the ninth week after birth of the baby. The nurseries are attached to local factories, and nursing mothers leave their jobs twice a day to breast-feed their children. Working parents may leave their children overnight for six days a week (Chinese factories operate on a six-day, 48-hour week), but most take their children home each evening. The nurseries have not supplanted the family entirely, since it is common to see toddlers being taken around the cities by grandparents. But the sight of a young mother out with her child is relatively rare, because a large percentage of Chinese women are employed.

The next stage is the kindergarten for children aged three to seven, and already at this point a high degree of ideological content appears in the school. Children are taught songs glorifying Chairman Mao, they learn Mandarin, the national language, in areas where it is not the mother tongue (including most of southern China, where Cantonese is spoken). Dances and plays emphasize the defense of the country against foreign aggressors (there is no inhibition against militaristic toys), and the cultural life of ethnic minorities such as the Tibetans and Mongolians is praised but assumed to be integrated into a unified China. The ubiquitous pictures of Mao Tse-tung hang in each classroom, and children are trained to help each other and to "serve the people." Like the nurseries the kindergartens seem to exist only in urban areas and are similarly attached to social or economic institutions rather than to a particular cen-

tral or provincial ministry of education.

In the major cities, kindergarten and primary school children are taken to massive playground complexes known as Children's Palaces. It was difficult to believe, as we were told, that 10,000 children used the Palace in Canton, until we learned that most came with their classes only once every four or five months. Only the most artistically, athletically or scientifically talented children attend on a daily basis—and some of them display considerable talent indeed. Particularly impressive were a six-year-old ballet dancer doing scenes from the Peking Revolutionary Opera and a young calligraphist painting quotations from Chairman Mao on wall hangings. A miniature observatory stimulated scientific interest and a room with wall-to-wall ping-pong tables, some of them junior-sized, helped to explain the proficiency of the Chinese table tennis teams.

In the Children's Palaces and in the primary and secondary schools music, art, dancing and sports are used to emphasize patriotic themes and the thought of Mao Tse-tung. Primary schooling for a six-year period is now said to be universal. Despite periodic literacy campaigns there is still considerable illiteracy among older people in the countryside, but it seems to be unknown among the young—a phenomenon chiefly attributable to the massive expansion of primary education in the rural areas. In the commune we visited in Manchuria each local production brigade (communes are subdivided into production brigades and production teams) was responsible for a primary school, while the commune operated its own secondary ("Middle") school.

In order to make secondary education generally available, its length has been sharply reduced. After six years of primary school, secondary education will now last three years instead of the six years (three years of junior middle school and three years of senior middle school) which had been the norm before 1966. All schools were closed for at least two years during the Cultural Revolution so that secondary students today are the age of their American counterparts, but eventually the system will produce secondary school graduates at the age of fifteen or sixteen. This will not create any serious problem, since, in effect, what has now replaced the last three years of high school is a compulsory period of two or three years in an assigned factory or agricultural commune. Only then, and after they have received the recommendation of a "mass organization" and presumably of the local Party, may young people consider applying for higher education. Most will stay where they have been assigned—a system which has already been used to transfer a reported ten million young people from the cities to rural areas (including the most troublesome of the Red Guard leaders).

Among the curricular changes in one urban "Middle" school resulting from the Cultural Revolution were the introduction of a compulsory course in

agronomy, work in a shop attached to a nearby factory and two months a year (one in summer and one in winter) of work in factories, accompanied by the teachers. The impression was given that the curriculum was still in something of a state of flux, since the authorities were discussing whether to add a fourth year of Middle School for the present students in the third year—possibly an indication that the six-three pattern will not be universal.

Classroom work in secondary school is also structured around the cult of Mao. Mao's picture hung in front of every classroom. (Portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin appeared on the back wall.) Art classes sketched scenes from the Peking Revolutionary Opera, music classes sang songs of the People's Liberation Army, and English classes studied the works of Mao in translation. (In Manchuria, close to the Russian border, half the secondary school students took English rather than Russian as their compulsory foreign language.) About 70 per cent of the students wore the red armbands of the Red Guards and 10 per cent were said to belong to the Communist Youth League (the equivalent of the Russian Komsomol). Classes were held from 8 A.M. until 4:30 P.M. and included two hours a week of political education and several hours of physical training.

As centers of the intellectual élitism which was a target of the Cultural Revolution, the universities were more adversely affected during the Cultural Revolution and more thoroughly reorganized thereafter. Most were closed from 1966 until 1970 and are now accepting only very small entering classes. At Sun Yat-sen University in Canton, only one class of 550 students has been admitted since the Cultural Revolution, and that was in December, 1970. Of that group 90 per cent are the children of peasants and workers and most of the rest come from the army. Twenty per cent are women, half are members of the Communist Party, and an additional 40 per cent belong to the Communist Youth League. A new class of 800 students is about to enter, and the percentage of political activists among them was reported to be equally high. Despite official insistence that anyone who has spent two to three years in a commune or factory may apply to the university, it was clear in interviews that the students came from what in America would be called "culturally deprived" backgrounds. The passivity and limited horizons of the university students mainly of peasant background were in striking contrast to the alertness and knowledge of the students in urban secondary schools.

The university is still organized into departments, but its overall direction is carried out, as elsewhere in post-Cultural Revolution China, by a Revolutionary Committee composed of representatives of workers, peasants and the army, and of "cadres"—i.e., administrators and professors. Each department also



has a worker assigned to it whose function is to advise the professors on the practical application of their teaching. To give them further contact with the problems of workers and peasants, university professors were sent during the Cultural Revolution to work for periods of six months to two years in factories and fields.

University courses have now been reduced in length from five or six years to two or three years. Even in medicine the curriculum is only three years in length and includes 15 courses instead of 36. (Graduates who have practiced medicine for a minimum of five years may be selected for more specialized training.) Included in the curriculum are periods of physical labor in factories or communes, as well as university-run paramilitary courses. All students must be single and may not marry during their studies. Dormitories are segregated by sex, and although there are social events involving members of the opposite sex, it is understood that only after graduation are they to begin to look for a mate. (When I asked students at Sun Yat-sen University ranging in age from 21 to 23 whether they had steady girlfriends, their reply was, "We are too young for that.")

On a typical day the students arise at 6 A.M. (like everyone else in China, it seemed), do calisthenics

to the radio and eat breakfast. This is followed by classes from 7:30 until 11:30. After a long noon break for lunch and a nap, which also seems to be almost universal in China, classes are resumed from 3:00 until 5:30 P.M. This is followed by calisthenics and dinner, study from 7:00 until 9:30 and lights out at 10 P.M.

It has been reported that much emphasis is placed on self-study and group discussion, but in the classes which we observed quite traditional lecture and recitation methods were used. The professors also indicated that entrance examinations, which were criticized during the Cultural Revolution, had been reinstated—"although they are given less emphasis." University texts have been rewritten since the Cultural Revolution to give greater emphasis to the practical application of theory and, of course, to Mao Tse-tung's writings. When I asked a philosophy professor whether his students read any works by non-Marxist writers, he could cite only the writings of Liu Shao-chi (president of China purged for "bourgeois revisionist" tendencies during the Cultural Revolution).

Possibly the level of instruction is higher at specialized scientific and technical institutes in China, but, if Sun Yat-sen University is typical, the academic quality of Chinese higher education has been reduced substantially as a result of the recent changes. The senior professors insisted that they were able to continue their research and to train junior assistants, yet research seems to have been at a standstill for at least four years and only now is beginning again. Admittedly a society where 85 per cent of the population is engaged in agriculture does not require the same level of education as a more industrialized state, but China may be paying a price for the maintenance of ideological fervor in the loss of potential talent through the limitation of access to the university.

Thus one is tempted to speculate on the adverse effects of the new orientation in higher education in the areas of medicine, technology and weaponry. (It is known that China's nuclear bomb was developed by Western-trained scientists.) Recent reports of the establishment of a theoretical physics research group at Peking University may indicate that the Chinese are moving away from an excessively practical orientation in that field.

The most significant educational innovation resulting from the Cultural Revolution was the establishment of the May 7th Cadre Schools. The schools are named for a directive issued by Mao Tse-tung on May 7, 1966, urging the army to "be a great school . . . engage in agriculture and run small or medium-sized factories," and calling on personnel in Party and government organizations to "learn industrial production, agricultural production, and military affairs . . . and study politics and raise their educational level." The Schools themselves were

not established until October, 1968, near the close of the Cultural Revolution, when Mao called on all "cadres" to "go down in turn to do manual labor" (*Peking Review*, May 12, 1972).

The response to his call was the establishment of hundreds of May 7th Schools by local, provincial and national governments, Party and other organizations, to which the "cadres," or middle and upper-level professionals, intellectuals and government and Party functionaries are sent for periods of several months to three years. (Nearly all the interpreters who accompanied my delegation had attended such schools. One of them had only recently returned from three years in the countryside. Married and in his late thirties, he had seen his wife and child only once a week—but he claimed to have left the school with great reluctance.) Most of the schools are located in the countryside and combine manual labor with the study of the works of Chairman Mao. Early mornings and late afternoons are spent in the fields, and other periods (longer in winter and shorter in summer) are devoted to study and discussion of the application of Mao's principal works, especially *On Practice*, *On Contradiction* and *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*. Extracts from the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin are also studied; in Stalin's case, particular emphasis is given to *The Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, an essay written in 1952 which is interpreted as an admission by Stalin of the continued existence of capitalist tendencies in the USSR long after his announcement of the triumph of socialism in 1936. Under the direction of a Party secretary, the members of the schools build their own housing in the countryside near to, but not directly among, the peasantry. Workers and peasants are interviewed and asked to tell about their life-experiences so that the "cadres" may learn about their problems, and the interviews are then discussed by the group. The students are given time to keep up with their professional studies, and they engage in militia training and participate in sports and cultural activities. They may also go into local villages and communes to engage in mass political campaigns or carry out special work projects. The schools are coeducational but "we are too busy" to develop boy-girl relationships.

The *Peking Review's* description of the topics studied seems to be taken from a course outline: "Students at cadre schools take part in class struggle and in criticizing the bourgeoisie to temper themselves. They often link their work and ideological problems with their mass criticism of swindlers like Liu Shao-chi, or the theory of the dying out of class struggle, the bourgeois theory of human nature, the theory of productive forces, idealist apriorism, the theory that doing manual labor is a punishment, and the theory of going to school in order to get an official post."

The schools seem to have a minimum of admin-



istrative structure, and self-study and group discussion are utilized, requiring each member to discuss with the group the creative application of what he has read to his own life. The Western observer may note some similarity with group therapy—or, because of the messianic and conformist elements, with Moral Re-Armament. Perhaps the nearest parallel in the West is the Jesuit “tertianship,” when, at the end of thirteen years of training for the priesthood, the Jesuit goes on a “long retreat” of thirty days of meditation on *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, followed by practical work in hospitals, orphanages and parishes—even when he is clearly destined for a career as a scholar and teacher. Unlike the Jesuit system, however, theory and practice are closely intermingled in the May 7th Schools, and heavy reliance is placed upon group pressures to rekindle dedication and instill conformity of thought. In both cases the scholar or professional administrator, however unsuited for scrubbing floors or weeding rice paddies, may find a certain joy in hard physical labor instead of his usual sedentary life. (Although several of our interpreters complained of sore backs and legs from stooping in the fields, and one who had been a Red Guard activist before being sent to the May 7th School did not seem exactly eager to return to his job of collecting nightsoil for processing into fertilizer.)

All cadres except “the old, weak, ill, or disabled”

are expected to attend the May 7th Schools in rotation, but it is doubtful that all attend, since the numbers involved are too great. The schools are supposed to be financed with “the productive labor” in which they engage; their main object, however, is not to create material wealth but rather “to transform the subjective world of the students as they transform the objective world.”

It is impossible to speak of educational changes in China without alluding to the Cultural Revolution's reforms aimed at increasing the ideological content in literature, art, ballet and music. Since the Cultural Revolution, radio music seems to be restricted to excerpts from the Peking Revolutionary Opera and a limited number of patriotic songs usually embodying specific references to Mao Tse-tung. The Peking Opera has been rewritten and new productions prepared to present highly moralistic and patriotic tales of peasant and worker heroes and heroines who are guided by Chairman Mao's thought to overcome the schemings of “class enemies,” “despotic landlords” or Japanese invaders. Foreign-language bookstores contain only Marxist-Leninist ideological works, and literary production appears almost to have ceased during the Cultural Revolution.

A possible sign that literary and artistic life is now being reactivated is the attention currently being

given in schools and public discussion to Mao's *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*. Slogans or quotations from Chairman Mao continue to appear on billboards, on the front of buildings and on special red concrete slabs at the entrances to courtyards, factories and communes, but the *Little Red Book of Quotations From Chairman Mao* does not appear with the ubiquity reported by earlier observers, suggesting that a somewhat less simplistic approach to the use of Mao's writings may be taken in the future. (It may also be due to the fact that a new edition has been necessary in order to eliminate a lengthy introduction by Lin Piao.)

Related to the Cultural Revolution's emphasis on complete identification with Maoism is the almost total elimination of the last vestiges of religious influence in China. Catholic and Protestant services are held in Peking for foreign students and the diplomatic community, but in Shanghai no churches were open, and I saw many pseudo-Gothic Christian churches in major cities boarded up or being used for other purposes. Those churches that were still functioning at the time of the Cultural Revolution were said to have been closed by the Red Guards after arms were allegedly discovered in a church basement and evidence produced that a churchman was a spy.

China's hostility to religion (which includes opposition to Buddhism, treated in the opera *The White-Haired Girl* as an integral part of landlord control) contrasts with the permitted survival of vestiges of Christianity in the Soviet Union and the active effort to collaborate with "progressive" Christians in Castro's Cuba or Allende's Chile. It follows logically from the regime's emphasis on conformity of thought and Mao's determination to rely upon ideological and social pressures to provide motivation and social control. At a time when political scientists are questioning previous conceptions of totalitarianism as a way to look at the Communist world, it may be that in the case of China such a successful effort is being made to achieve total control of thinking that the other accoutrements of totalitarianism—heavy reliance on secret police, terror, imprisonment—do not seem to be very important. Recent Western students of the Chinese legal system as well as responses to my own inquiries also seem to indicate that minor criminal offenses are handled through the use of public meetings, shame, social pressure and persuasion rather than trials and jails.

Most observers who have recently visited the People's Republic of China have come away with the impression that the populace is relatively content with the regime. Perhaps the Grand Inquisitor was right and the impressive success of the regime in providing health care, literacy, housing, food, employment and security to vast masses of the population as well as

an object of communal worship in the person and writings of Mao has assured continued support and commitment from a population which does not miss the absent freedom to live and work and read and think and disagree as they please.

Where these freedoms are most likely to be missed is among young people, especially university students—refugees currently arriving in Hong Kong are mainly in the 20-29-year-old age group—intellectuals, and the professional, military and bureaucratic middle and upper-level leadership. It is precisely at potential danger from these groups that the changes in education since the Cultural Revolution have been aimed. Universities will now contain only the most ideologically dedicated, and they will work on practical problems and mix their studies with "productive labor." Intellectuals will devote their attention to serving the workers, peasants and soldiers in their literary, artistic and cultural activities. "Cadres" which may grow lax, bureaucratic or élitist in their attitudes will receive ideological reeducation (sometimes for rather long periods of time) and emerge rededicated to serving the workers and peasants.

It is an awesome conception—the establishment of institutions aimed at the elimination of the effects of institutionalization, the continuing struggle to maintain the priority of ideological over material incentives and the mobilization of 800 million dedicated and hard-working Chinese under unified central direction while maintaining flexibility, "self-reliance" and initiative in dealing with local problems. Whether, to use Mao's own terminology, the contradictions between these goals are "nonantagonistic" or whether the "revisionist" tendencies inherent in the "bourgeois theory of human nature" will reemerge and perhaps ultimately triumph as they seem to have elsewhere in the Communist world is a question that may only be answered after the present aging leadership (Mao is 78 and Chou En-lai is 73) retires from the scene.

The concern over the age of China's present leadership underscores the need for unity at the center from which radiate the statements and interpretations which are the ideological motive force for the system to work. With the removal of Lin Piao as heir-apparent, a succession struggle after the death of the current leadership seems more likely, and one can only speculate as to whether the anti-institutional bias of Maoism may not bring about its own demise as divisions at the top destroy the present precarious stability. But unless and until this happens Mao's impressive accomplishment in creating an equalitarian and service-oriented society where the basic physical and psychic needs of 800 million Chinese are met should not be underestimated. Neither should the price of surrendering certain freedoms—a price which is extracted for that accomplishment—whether or not one believes that price worth paying.