

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-47
China in Retrospect

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

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Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y..

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In the past dozen letters I have described some aspects of the China that is shown to the foreign tourist. As I indicated, it is not the whole China, and many questions remain unanswered, but it is the China that one can read about in the Chinese press. The picture which emerges from these sources is of a poor under-developed country with a long way to go to catch up with present day living standards in the West, but with an almost fanatical determination to do so.

It is a country permeated to the core by ideological indoctrination, a country tightly controlled by the Communist Party which seems to believe that politics provides answers to most of the country's problems. I was amazed at the openness with which the political campaigns and political indoctrination were discussed. I had expected it to be a subtle, almost secret process which the Chinese would attempt to conceal from foreign eyes. But on the contrary, my hosts were proud of their technique and clearly believed it of great importance. If I chose not to agree with them, obviously they considered it to be my loss.

China is a country newly dedicated to science and rational thought, a country with great energy and determination to improve, and where innovation is considered a virtue. I have already discussed the pros and cons of this in an earlier letter, but to me it has very significant long-term implications. Despite the political indoctrination which goes with the Chinese education I remain optimistic that the emphasis on rational thought can only be to the ultimate benefit of mankind.

China is also a country of wonderfully human people. It is not a country of automatons or the so-called "blue ants". Although at first one is struck by the conformity and apparent totality of the political indoctrination, deeper probing reveals an occasional glimpse of what, to me, was a refreshing lack of success of the indoctrination process.

The first public non-conformist that I saw was in a Hangchow park. I had wandered on my own one morning and stopped to watch a group of primary school children playing games under the supervision of a teacher. In one game the children sat in a circle, one child skipped across the circle and stood in front of another child. The second child was supposed to stand up, the two bow to each other, do a little jig together, and the first then sit down in the other's place, whereupon the latter repeated the procedure with someone else. One boy refused to stand up and join in. The teacher told him to participate but he would not. She went up and spoke to him. He still would not obey and so she drew him on one side and told the others to continue. I couldn't hear what she said, but I could imagine the "thought reform" session in process.



The group of school children in a park in Hangchow. This is a different game from the one described in the text.

Five minutes passed and the other children began to lose interest in the somewhat pointless game, but still the boy refused to conform. It was a trivial matter but I found myself willing him to stick it out and be an individualist. He did so. The teacher finally gave up, and as she went to organise the next game the boy turned and looked sheepishly in my direction. I gave him a discreet wink and his face broke into the most mischievous of grins.

Much of the other evidence of non-conformity came from the statements of the officials at schools and universities: "Some students don't want to take part in labor"; "Some are still influenced by the old society"; "Some teachers still have old ideas, they don't know how to combine theory with practise"; "Some students want to choose their own job after graduating from the university". There were also others who I spoke to on the street who were obviously non-conformists at heart.

But the overall effect of the indoctrination remains to me a complete unknown. I would particularly like to know its effect on the children, and on the scientists.

Some clues to the effect on children can be gained from students educated in China who now live in Hong Kong. Over the past three and a half years Brenda and I have become close friends with a number of such students in the age range of 18 to 22. In all cases their parents had belonged to the capitalist or bourgeois class, and in most cases they had been discriminated against at school in China because of their background. For most of them their first year in Hong Kong brought mixed reactions. They found such freedoms they never knew existed anywhere. But they also found many of the bad things they had been told existed in capitalist societies: tremendous contrasts in wealth and standards of living; exploitation and sweated labor (as well as modern factories); corruption; a fantastic

preoccupation with the making of money, and little civic pride or social conscience.

Gradually they settled to their new life and to all outward appearances most of them were adjusted within a year. But in many ways it was a superficial adjustment. One 18 year old girl came to live with our family for a few weeks to help with my language tuition. She had had a particularly rough time at school in Shanghai, being criticized on many occasions for being a "rightist". But whenever we got into discussions on the pros and cons of the present regime in China she would always come to its defense -- not because she was a communist, far from it -- but because of a deep sense of pride in a resurgent China. One Mainland university-trained student, lamenting on the thought controls in China, remarked, "... but maybe it will go down in history that my generation had to sacrifice its freedom for the good of the future generations of Chinese." He considered the present regime 75% good and 25% bad.

Another 19 year old girl we knew, went back to Shanghai last year. I should stress that none of these people are communist or have much sympathy for communism. But their patriotism and sense of pride in a potentially strong united China is great indeed. These were not refugees that I found to interview, they were people who had become personal friends of the family, and who I believe spoke their innermost thoughts. I don't know whether their views are typical of most of those students who come to Hong Kong, but if they are in any way representative of the youth of China, then this spirit of nationalism must be counted as a major motivating force -- much stronger in my estimation than any appeal of communism.

Also unknown is the effect of the political indoctrination on the scientists. It is clear that scientist:politician relations have followed a cyclic path of more or less government political interference in science affairs, ever since the communist victory in 1949. In the early years there was a suspicion of the Western-trained scientists but this was followed by the "Hundred Flowers" period in 1957, which was a period of comparative intellectual freedom. This was succeeded by the anti-rightist campaign, followed in its turn by the "Great Leap Forward" and the period the Russian scientist, Klotchko, has described in his recent book, Russian Scientist in Red China. It was a period when the time spent in political meetings almost completely disrupted the progress of science in China. This was followed by a much more rational period beginning in 1961 when it appeared that the Communist rulers had profited from their mistakes. Scientists were given much more freedom, and "quality" became the catchword rather than "quantity". There are some indications that, beginning in 1964, politics is again beginning to interfere with scientific endeavour, although it is too early to assess the impact of the latest campaigns.

What is a scientist to do under such circumstances? Some become dedicated communists. Others have nervous breakdowns. But in between there are the majority of scientists who, for patriotic and other reasons, continue to do good scientific work, frequently with good facilities. What is their attitude? Obviously I do not know, but whenever I think about this problem I am reminded of an incident which took place when I worked for a large industrial organization a few years ago. It is not an exact analogy by any means but there are sufficient similarities to warrant recounting.

The company was going through a lean period and almost overnight its policies changed. Over a period of several months a group of scientists (including myself) became increasingly unhappy with the company's new policies which we felt were basically wrong; wrong on moral grounds; wrong on economic grounds; and

frequently wrong on scientific grounds. We opposed the policies, wrote memoranda, protested when colleagues were arbitrarily dismissed, but all to no avail. Then one day one of my close friends came into the office and announced that he was changing his outlook. He said, "Fighting the company is ridiculous! It's ruining my health, making me a bear at home, and making us all thoroughly miserable. I'm going to stop opposing the policies, I'm going to implement them. I'm going to become 'a company man'". He did change, and within a short while he was a much happier person, and his health improved. Within a few months he received a major promotion and has gone from strength to strength. For the rest of us there was another alternative: we could resign, and several of us did so.

For "company" read "Chinese Communist Party" and you have the analogy. But for Chinese scientists there is only one choice. Opposing policies is not a practical alternative, and most cannot resign. But by paying lip service to the policies many can continue to do satisfying work in science.

Yours sincerely,



C.H.G. Oldham.

Received in New York March 16, 1965.