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ABSTRACT

This paper explores educational philosophy and its effect on children's development in the People's Republic of China. The Chinese educational system incorporates heterogeneous classrooms and opportunities to "serve the people" through meaningful, productive work in order to foster a perception of group membership among students. The students in China were observed to be healthy, happy, confident, outgoing, and considerate. Children in China under 7 years of age are usually cared for by grandparents or in nurseries, and the warmth and affection of caregivers are valued. After age 7, children are included in a community support system which incorporates units of neighbors to provide direct care for children when necessary. Children are therfore socialized by the school, family, and the community. The Chinese system of all-inclusive health care, the value placed on a stimulating environment in both the school and the home, the nonpunitive attitude maintained by teachers, and the consistency found between parent and teacher attitudes are other facets of the culture which optimize child development in China. (BRT)

# A LOOK AT CHILDREN IN CHINA

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The People's Republic of China is in the midst of a revolution in education. Curriculum is changing at every level. While the emphasis since the 1966 Cultural Revolution continues to be on the moral, intellectual, and physical development of children, particular stress is being placed on the moral aspect (what the Chinese call the ideological or political). This was very apparent on our brief but intensive trip to the People's Republic early this year.

Post-Cultural Revolution emphasis on ideology has meant that the collective, the group, is underscored in the curriculum. In visit after visit to early childhood centers and upper grade schools, we saw educational programs which emphasized "we" rather than "I". The goal seemed to be to develop people who care for others, who are responsible to each other, who are cooperative, unselfish, social beings. Our guide told us, "No one works for fame or position, but to support the people. If someone should start doing things just for himself, he gets criticized in a self-criticism class and talked to, and then he can understand about what he did that was wrong. Everybody helps him."

We found ourselves raising questions concerning the individual in a society devoted to the collective life, and we were soon asking each other, "What exactly do we mean by individuality? To what extent do we Americans recognize that we are bound to see individuality against the background of a competitive society in which we are expected to assert ourselves as individuals in order to be successful and are taught to carve our own pathway to security

and comfort? Can we grasp what uniqueness could mean under conditions where all the basic survival needs are met for everybody as a matter of course?" Coming from a society in which survival of the ruggedly fittest does indeed give us some fascinating variations--along with some cruel aberrations--of human potential, how can we tell what individuality will mean in a society committed to mutual caring?

As we looked at the large classes, with children sitting quietly in group lessons, or taking part in choral or question-and-answer recitations, we could readily assume an emphasis on uniformity. But our observations of classrooms in action in five cities and interviews with teachers, school leadership, and parents led us to conclude that the collective focus does not mean that the individual child is ignored or not treasured. The children responded to us individually, with warmth and spontaneity. Never did we see eyes shift to the adult for permission to relate to us. A child would give a friendly laugh at our attempts to speak Chinese,or spontaneously take the hand of a member of our group and guide her around the school. In the streets and parks, children walked in twos and threes with their arms around each other, laughing and jostling. The adults we met and spoke to, all of whom accepted the ideology of their country without question, exhibited exciting differences of personality and individual style. Differences were apparent in degree of charm, sobriety, capacity for laughter, humor and irony, openness, reserve, wisdom, curiosity, and quickness of grasp. Yet all the people we met were basically serious people committed to their country's development and devoted to their guests' well-being and comfort.

On our final day at the airport, we witnessed an outburst of temper from one of our gentle guides that startled us. She was angry at airport personnel for what she considered ineptness in handling our baggage and departure problems, and she blew her top in a burst of indignation worth observing in a country of generally reserved people.

Since we do not understand Chinese, it is difficult for us to know how accurate our assessments are about the growth of individuality; but our feeling is that the self in Chinese classrooms is strong and well, but is a self in close relation to society.

As we visited classrooms in China, we were especially interested in investigating the following questions: What are the educational goals of a communist society? How, in daily practice, are schools integrating these goals? What happens to the individual child, the preschooler or the older child, during this conscious effort to develop a socialist, collective-oriented person? Is the child's individuality limited by the constant orientation to being a member of a group? Are differences in children considered? Are particular strengths and talents encouraged?

No Tracking--No Segregation in School Organization

Any organizational structure promoting the segregation of children at any level in school is opposed. There are only heterogeneous classes: no classes for the gifted or the slow. Yet individual talent does seem to be recognized and encouraged. We saw several girls and boys in solo performance. They played their instruments well and were given lessons and daily practice time. We admired talented acrobats in the spare-time (after-school) classes

set up for children interested in developing such skills.

Obviously, there are leaders. But when we asked our guides about the status of these leaders, their answer was: "Our leaders are responsible to the masses." There is no "star" concept in sports activities. Instead, the accent is on the slogan we saw in each school: "Friendship first, competition second."

To the question, "Do you have brighter and slower children?" school people answered spontaneously and with surprise at our naivete, "Of course. But the bright child is not made to feel special and the slow child is not made to feel inferior. How could we achieve our communist goal of a classless society if we set up special classes?"

Children with learning problems attend regular neighborhood schools, and children as well as teachers help them. The concept of learning disability was disavowed. "Everyone can learn," they said. "If a child is having trouble, we help him." The only special education schools are apparently for deaf mutes and blind children, who are sent into normal situations as they grow ready to adapt to them.

We could not help asking ourselves: If it is assumed that all can learn and there is neither status nor onus attached to pace of learning, are not individuals being accepted without prejudice for what they are? And is this not a basic foundation for individuality?

Mutual Help in Coping

Nevertheless, it was clear to us that the emphasis on the collective starts early. In infant nurseries, communal play pens and cribs are set close

together deliberately to foster the sense of membership in a group. All children are expected to be helpful to others from an early age. On the preschool level, attitudes of mutual help are encouraged by children taking turns sweeping or helping one another with dress problems. One day care center worker explained that buttons were purposely put on the back of shirts to enable pupils to help each other with buttoning. In Shanghai, musical presentations included an original song and dramatization (created by teachers and children) about a group effort to help a little "brother" who had not dressed properly for bad weather. Through a dance replete with umbrellas, raincoats, pantomine and song, the children found ways of helping their friend. Group dramatizations, song, dance performances and stories in which the group helps the individual and individuals help each other, are an important part of the educational program at all levels. It is as if the Chinese are acting on the assumption that a sense of fulfillment as an individual comes from helping others, so that in the process of "serving the people" a person's feelings about himself and his self-worth are strengthened.

Children are deliberately given opportunities to "serve the people," to contribute through meaningful, productive work to the good of all. Little children in kindergartens plant seeds, grow vegetables, and eat them at school meals. At other schools, children sort beads or prepare boxes for art materials. In one school, "productive labor" at third grade meant folding cardboard containers to hold toothpaste tubes. All productive labor is performed in groups, adding the ingredient of sociality to social participation. The expectation is clear: the child is a member of a group

in which he is to function as an independent person working cooperatively with others toward building socialism. In that connection, it is worth noting that although there are few toys, this is not considered a deficit, because the emphasis is on learning through people-to-people activities.

Chinese children learn from the earliest ages that besides their loving parents, grandparents, and "aunties and uncles" (other adults), they can turn to their peers. The skits suggest that <u>others</u> -- whether role-played as ducklings, sheep, or other children -- will and do provide support, love, and caring, that people of all ages can and will be able to solve problems -- if they work at them <u>together</u>. The individual is not alone. Itty Chan of Harvard, who speaks Chinese and visited China, the land of her birth, in 1973, put it this way: "The child is taught selfishlessness, not selflessness." Importantly, the message of collective action is for <u>coping</u>, not conforming. A popular skit about the sheep and the wolf in sheep's clothing reveals this emphasis most tellingly. A teacher explained, "Before the Cultural Revolution, we did not pay attention to educating the children in the spirit of struggle; they were afraid of the stronger ones. Today children are taught to fight against brutality. Before, in the play about the sheep, when the lambs knew that the wolf wanted to eat them, they cried. Now they are brave and know there are double dealers, and they figure out ways of fighting back."

In the past, the message of correct behavior, filial piety, self-denial, and reverence for authority produced what the Chinese characterize

as a shy, self-effacing individual. Today, there is another, different message transmitted to the children, to develop to the fullest as a productive member of the socialist future. Not only do the posters read, "Be self-reliant," but Chairman Mao himself has said, "We don't want our children to be sheep." So teachers are expected to encourage problem solving and independent thinking, and adults are encouraged to analyze and solve problems. We were told of kindergarten children planting seeds and finding that some did not grow. The problem of "why" was presented to the children, who discovered that the soil was packed too tightly in that plot. (The approach to analyzing and solving problems that is stressed must be understood, however, in the context of a society in which serving the people is primary and where problem solving is interpreted as concrete and practical.) The overriding purpose is to make a better life for all. Science is therefore much respected; science fiction is too remote to be given much consideration.

As we viewed the children of China, we found ourselves joining the chorus of other educators who had visited in describing the children as "healthy, happy confident, outgoing, and considerate." Yet our questions continued. It was obvious that the Chinese do not view children intrapsychically, yet it is apparent that something is working for them. What is it that seems to be meeting what we Americans feel are the basic needs of children? How are the Chinese helping the growing child to have the sense of wholeness about himself which we value as essential?

Consistency in Care

In order to establish basic trust, a child must experience being cared for, fed regularly, treated affectionately, and being responded to. Fifty percent of the children under seven in China are taken care of by grandparents, who provide consistent care. (Young mothers often said: "They spoil our children!") The other 50 percent of the children are in nurseries which can accommodate them from 56 days of age, when their mothers return to work. The caregivers in the nurseries are chosen for their warmth and motherliness, and assigned to what is expected to be a permanent placement; so child care personnel remains stable. There is usually one caregiver to three or four infants. The children are in the nursery the same eight hours that their mothers work. The mother comes to nurse twice a day and during her lunch hour, and the child returns home with her to, most typically, a stable, three-generation family.

The Chinese view children at birth as neither good nor bad, and human development as a continuous process of education and re-education in a social environment. They thus assume an active role in guiding the young, at the same time providing the consistent, patient, and loving supports we deem essential to personality development. We never saw a baby "cry it out." A crying infant was picked up, held, talked to, cared for and soothed.

As children grow older, their range of experience with caring adults widens. In addition to the nuclear family that includes grandparents and the supporting child care at a mother's place of work, there is the inclusiveness of the local community's street teams, block teams, and health teams. All of

these units of neighbors act to strengthen families in their care of children as well as to provide direct care for children when necessary. When children are everyone's concern, all adults feel responsible both to tend to a child's needs and to define clearly their expectations for him.

What is working for the Chinese child today has its roots both in the cultural traditions of the past and in the organization and orientation of the present revolutionary society. Pearl Buck, writing before the Revolution, said, "The Chinese child is born straight into the world, not the possession of two people, but immediately a member of a community of grandparents, aunts, and all the elders to whom he and his parents give respect." Thus, there is a history in China of a kind of socialization which fostered subordination of the individual in favor of the family. Today, that sense of responsible commitment to family is extended to include the larger community. From the past, too, comes the attitude that all adults care for children and children are everyone's concern. Thus, the strong family ties of old and the planning and commitment of the new society to serve the people combine to provide a supporting network for childhood in which children not only know their definite place in the family but also in the local community and in the total society.

Care of Individuals Is Total

The all-pervasive caring starts with the elementary need for physical well-being, health care, good nutrition, adequate clothing. One of the main services of a big city hospital was described to us as health care of all children in the area, including care of newborn, inoculations, home calls, and parent health education. Most amazing to visitors is the inclusive health

care which has ~~lowered~~ infant and child mortality considerably and which reaches into the remote regions of the country to insure every child both preventive and ongoing treatment. The hospital also assumes responsibility for coordination with doctors and nurses in kindergartens, training of medical workers at local health stations involved in neighborhood care, and cooperation with primary school teachers concerning health care of children. Doctors and nurses visit each school regularly for inoculations, check-ups, and health education. Dental examinations are also provided at the schools. Within the schools, part of every child's program includes exercise, as "physical development" is one of the three goals of education. Part of every teacher's and parent's responsibility is to provide nutritious meals. Children are not only warmly clothed in winter, but they wear colorful jackets and hand-made sweaters knitted by their mothers with obvious loving care.'

There is also a stimulating environment, one which affords the child opportunity and encouragement to learn. The emphasis on study and learning, so important in the cultural tradition of the past but available to only a few, is now available to all children; and the value of study is reinforced for the children as they see their parents meeting regularly in study groups to further their understanding of socialism.

Schools offer programmed, structured activities emphasizing the skills of reading, mathematics, the arts, group games, and physical exercises. After-school programs are planned for all children over seven: in the neighborhood (by street teams), in spare-time recreation centers for sports, or in children's palaces, where there are such diversified activities as

orchestra, acrobatics, model boat or airplane building, ballet, art, drawing, acupuncture classes, games, etc. Summer vacation time is also planned for the children and includes trips, swimming, and an hour a week with the teacher to review homework. Children under seven have ample opportunity for old-fashioned play with peers, although our type of nursery school free play does not seem to be scheduled in the nursery school.

Two other important factors seem to be playing supporting roles in children's sense of self. One is the totally non-punitive attitude we saw in the schools and heard about from teachers. The Chinese seem to practice positive reinforcement, even if they do not use the term. They spoke again and again of the importance of being patient with children. For example, children are expected to be toilet trained at 18 months. When we asked, "What if a child isn't toilet trained by then?" the response was, "Well, then he is not ready yet and we wait."

The second factor is the status of the parents as adults in society. In the United States, problems often arise for children when there is a discrepancy in values and ideas about child-rearing between parent and teacher. (This is unlikely in China.) Even more important problems arise when parents feel hostile, frustrated, helpless and unable to cope. In our country we are becoming increasingly aware of the importance to children of their parents' sense of self. No matter how hard a teacher may try to give a child a sense of self-esteem, a child tends to assimilate basically the feelings of his parents. It is in this area that one can particularly see what is working for Chinese children. To the consistency in message and values

between parent and teacher must be added to the sense of contentment with an improved life, and the sense of usefulness experienced by the parents. A mother in Peking put it this way, "By 18 months, the children are singing in the streets and the parents are amazed and happy. The parents are very happy, and they feel good, and they're busy working, and so our children are happier, stronger, bigger, busier, smarter than ever before."

As we looked at the Chinese children and were impressed with their spirit, responsiveness, eagerness, and confidence, it was apparent to us that a society not presently studying child development had created external social conditions which were providing the foundations which our understanding of psychic development leads us to believe are necessary. It was our impression that within such a socio-centered structure Chinese children are being nurtured by many constant adults in an atmosphere of caring, are identifying with parents whose egos are strong and whose hopes are high, are being educated to feel a sense of significance in themselves and of purpose in the future. The dictum for moral, intellectual, and physical education seems to be serving the needs for attention, stimulation, consistency, and stability we consider so important to individuality.

We in the United States are presently considering legislation to establish support systems to strengthen families through quality comprehensive child care. In China, the entire society, with its strong traditions and new commitment, is a support system, and every child feels this supportivness in a very direct, personal way. Perhaps because the emphasis is on the social coping

self, rather than the personal, individual coping self, China may in time help us to expand our understanding of how individual and group can support and enhance each other.

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