

Allyn Rickett interviewed

by Susan Johnson

Though reform, or ideological remoulding are terms that conjure up horrifying images of psychological manipulation. To most of us, its purpose seems to be to create slavishness and passive obedience. To the Chinese, however, the meanings of these terms are far different. The Chinese say that some ideas, attitudes and outlooks are derived solely from self-interest and find expression in conduct that is detrimental to the well-being of the wider community. It is these ideas that they challenge.

To the Chinese, anyone, under certain circumstances, can come to see the world through the narrow prism of self-interest. By the same token, anyone can learn concern for others, if the conditions are right.

Although all people are expected to reform their outlooks, those who have committed serious and blatant anti-social acts are in most need of transformation. The Chinese believe that the only enduring correction of criminal behaviour is the correction of the mental outlook that motivated it. It is therefore in the prisons of China that the practice of ideological remoulding can be seen in its most concentrated and systematic form.

Presently, there is very little information available in English on this subject. One fortunate exception is the book *Prisoners of Liberation* written by Allyn and Adele Rickett, an American couple imprisoned in China in the early 1950's for carrying on espionage for the American government. In this work the Ricketts describe their experiences and the progression of changes in their thinking during the full term of their imprisonment. They also describe the American reaction upon their return to the United States in the middle of the McCarthy years.

Allyn Rickett, who now teaches Chinese in the Oriental Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania, was in Halifax last month for a public speaking engagement. The following is a selection of a few questions asked to Rickett during his public presentation and his later discussion with an education class at Dalhousie.

Gazette: How transferable is the whole process of criticism—self-criticism to this society?

Rickett: The technique is not unknown in this society. There are many experiments going on in prisons here using group therapy and other techniques to help prisoners. They can have a certain amount of success but the biggest difficulty is that the society provides no backing at all. The society is not moving along with those experiencing the therapy, so they have trouble adjusting.

There is no such thing as permanent reform. I hope that becomes clear in the book. It is not permanent at all, so without support it can fall apart very quickly.

The other thing about it, criticism groups, is you have to know the motive or purpose for the group. It isn't supposed to be some place to get rid of your frustrations and if that happens it can be a very ugly situation. So if the technique is going to be used it needs two things: the motivation must be very clear and it must be handled very well, very thoughtfully with great sympathy and understanding; the other thing is that there has to be a follow up and that requires a social contact which is not impossible in this country. You can form

very small support groups but don't try to isolate yourself from the world or you have defeated the whole purpose of the reform. So it isn't easy in this kind of situation, you have to adapt the Chinese model to our own situation. Any idea has to be fitted to the realities of your own life in order for it to be worthwhile.

Gazette: Do you think it is possible or profitable to do self-criticism alone; when you are by yourself?

Rickett: No, I think you need a group. You can do an awful lot of self-criticism but a group helps because really it can help you to articulate and formulate your criticism. They can put you in the position where you must go a little bit deeper than just saying the criticism. It is very hard, as an individual to go much further beyond a simple guilt feeling. It is hard to get into reform, unless you have the group helping you and willing to bring the issue up again. It is just very hard to do it on your own. I think we all do it to some extent -- we are sorry for something we've done but it is hard for it to go further than that when you are alone.

As well, intellectualizing your mistakes doesn't mean reform. The real process of reform comes from participating in real life in a new way and not intellectualizing about it. In order to be ready to experience new things you do have to go through an intellectual process but it can't stop there. And this is what has really brought about the change in China. The whole social context is moving ahead, and people interacting upon one another are moving ahead. It is important to have the support of the people around you.

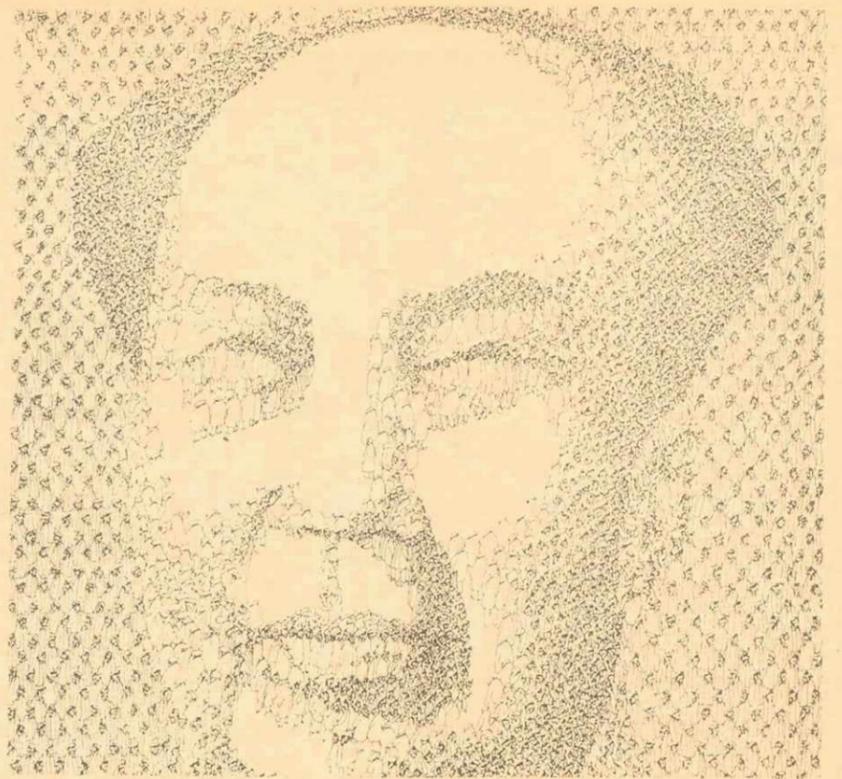
Gazette: What do you think would happen to someone who refused to participate in the process of thought reform?

Rickett: Well the law, of course, was very clear. If you refused to confess and refused to reform in those days just after the revolution when China was still under the military rule you would be brought before the military tribunal; immediately tried and sentenced. The law was such that there was no possibility of leniency under those circumstances. The only way to enjoy lenient treatment was being willing to make a confession and undergo reform. I would imagine that if your crime was serious enough and you refused to take part in reform, after a certain period of time--be it six months or a year--you might be taken out and shot or taken to a maximum security prison.

One of the problems with American liberals, you know, is their great concern about capital punishment. In a certain political context it is important to make sure that it doesn't happen but, on the other hand, when you have gone through a bloody revolution shooting people is not as unthinkable as it is in a lot more staid societies.

Gazette: What of the idea of China being a crime-free society, is there any factual basis for such a belief?

Rickett: Probably in China more effort has gone into making people feel that the goals of the society are their goals or should be their goals, that they should want what the society wants. There is probably more of this than any other place. They can do this because there is a real basis for it. The greatest justification for cheating and crime in the United States is that everybody else does it but if you are



in a society where everyone else doesn't do it then that argument doesn't work. The pressure to not cheat is so great that it seldom happens.

In China there has been an enormous effort to change people's attitudes, habits, and customs; to conform and fit in with the new society. There hasn't been just the building of the new socio-economic structure, but new social attitudes as well. The Chinese would be the first to admit that they have a long way to go. They are also the first to admit that special problems can arise.

China is not a country in which there is not crime: there is crime. There are crimes of passion, occasional crimes of embezzlement, and there is a good deal of petty thievery that comes about from structural problems in the new system. A few years ago there was a whole rash of such crimes because young people going to the countryside for one reason or another--they were homesick, couldn't adjust, the peasants took advantage of them, or whatever--would come back to the city. The system of rationing and the social disgrace which their parents would suffer led these young people to become something of a floating population in the city, living off their friends and occasionally stealing. So there was a sudden rise in this sort of crime. Now that is a special thing, a special situation.

There is no question that in terms of crime China is probably the most crime free country -- in spite of the fact that there is some crime. It does have probably the least crime of any country. It is not a society where crime is a major problem. A good deal of this has to do with the fact that you have a general social consciousness and social morality, a general feeling of togetherness in the society, which doesn't permit that sort of thing.

Gazette: How are crimes handled now--are there definite sentences, and what happens if after your sentence is up you have not reformed?

Rickett: We probably know less about how the system works now than we did when I was there, or even up till 1959. After that time the system became much more flexible.

Basically the situation is this, crimes that would result in less than a three year sentence are handled by the local police or by the street committees. They can impose certain kinds of sanctions such that the person does a certain kind of labour or checks in at certain times.

If the punishment is to be for more than three years it goes before a court and the court can then decide what kind of punishment

should be meted out. They can decide if the person would do best sent to the countryside to work or a factory--but now people are more often sent to the countryside. Sometimes they will decide that the case is serious enough that the person must be sent to a prison with a definite sentence. However, at the end of that sentence if that person has not reformed, and reform there would be indicated by his/her conduct in prison, the sentence could be prolonged. It can also be reduced, in the sense that they do have reform boards to review the cases.

It is my understanding, though, that the practice of sending people to prisons and so on has more or less ceased. There really aren't very many cases where it is necessary in the first place. The last thing they want to do is coop somebody up in a prison, and they will only do that if it becomes very clear that he is a menace to the society. And, if he is too much of a threat, if he has displayed homicidal tendencies, then as far as the Chinese are concerned you might as well end the problem.

Gazette: In your book you do not go into too much detail about your experience once you left China, the treatment you received from the American authorities and public. Could you elaborate a little on that now?

Rickett: The American authorities were very anxious about us. My wife and I had, separately, come to the conclusion that whenever we were released we would have to tell the truth, and when we got to the United States, again separately, since my wife was released before me, we were considered prime examples of brainwashing. The government was seriously interested in this business of brainwashing so, they just happened to have a psychiatrist on the ship my wife came over on, and they really put her through it. When she got to San Francisco she suddenly found that to get into the United States she had to take the Cornell Medical Test. I don't know if you've ever seen it but it asks such brilliant questions as "do you ever feel that life isn't worth living?" and "do you wet the bed at night?" She also had to have a physical and they kept wanting her to go to New York for check-ups...and they were quite willing to do all this for free.

Actually, the government, in our case, took a very careful position. They didn't want to be in a position of seeming to harass these two kids that had been brainwashed in China and spent a couple of years in prison. They didn't like that position one bit, so all they did was have us carefully watched and so on and not much more than that. We

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