

Chinese education demands social conscience

By ROBIN PORTER

To go to China is to be brought up short. It is to be assaulted by a cacaphony of exotic sounds, sights and smells, to confront a system whose values are very different from our own, but also different from what the myth-makers of past decades have proclaimed them to be. This was my experience last June when I had opportunity to spend four weeks in the People's Republic as part of a group of twenty teachers and students organized into the University of Toronto China Tour.

The focal point of our tour was to be an investigation of Chinese educational facilities at all levels, so apart from more general sight-seeing and visits to communes, factories, theatres and other places of interest, we were taken to inspect two kindergartens, three primary schools, two middle schools, two teachers' colleges, three universities (Fu Dan in Shanghai, the University of Peking and the University of Wu Han), and a May Seventh Cadre School.

We covered four thousand miles during our month in China, mostly on trains, and passed through eight cities, Canton, Changsha, Hangchow, Shanghai, Nanking, Peking, Shih-

chiachuang, and Wu Han. We were quite easily able to see a number of things which had not been placed on our "agenda". Simply by asking if we could do so, we were able to take pictures of anything except military equipment, and although I do have one or two reservations, my overall impression of what I witnessed in China, and of the cordiality with which we were received, is very favourable.

In this article I shall try to convey my image of education in contemporary China, not by attempting to outline the system in its entirety which would be impossible in so small a space, but rather by delineating four characteristics which seem to me to be evident in Chinese education at all levels.

The first characteristic is the effort to inculcate social consciousness in Chinese young people from their earliest days in kindergarten through to post-graduate work in university. In a nation where until only two decades ago a very small fraction of the population monopolized the wealth and power it is understandable that this effort is manifest partly in stress on the class origin of students, and on the continuing class struggle. So in institutes of higher education we encountered frequent reference to the high

proportion of students of "worker peasant soldier" origin enrolled, especially since the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), as opposed to the small percentage of students from former landlord or "intellectual" or bourgeois backgrounds. The responsibility of higher level students to the masses is emphasized and reinforced by the present four-stage method of recruitment to teachers' colleges and universities. This involves voluntary application by the interested student, after two or three years of post-secondary school work in the fields or in a factory, recommendation by the student's co-workers in the unit of production, approval by the local party committee, and examination of the candidate's academic qualifications by the college or university concerned.

In addition the emphasis on class was present in teaching, not only in courses such as History and Politics, but also in material for subjects not directly concerned with social analysis. In one English class there was written on the board: "Your mother is a peasant. My father is a worker. Father. Mother. Party member. Live a happy life." To a westerner this may not appear very subtle. To the average Chinese, for whom the

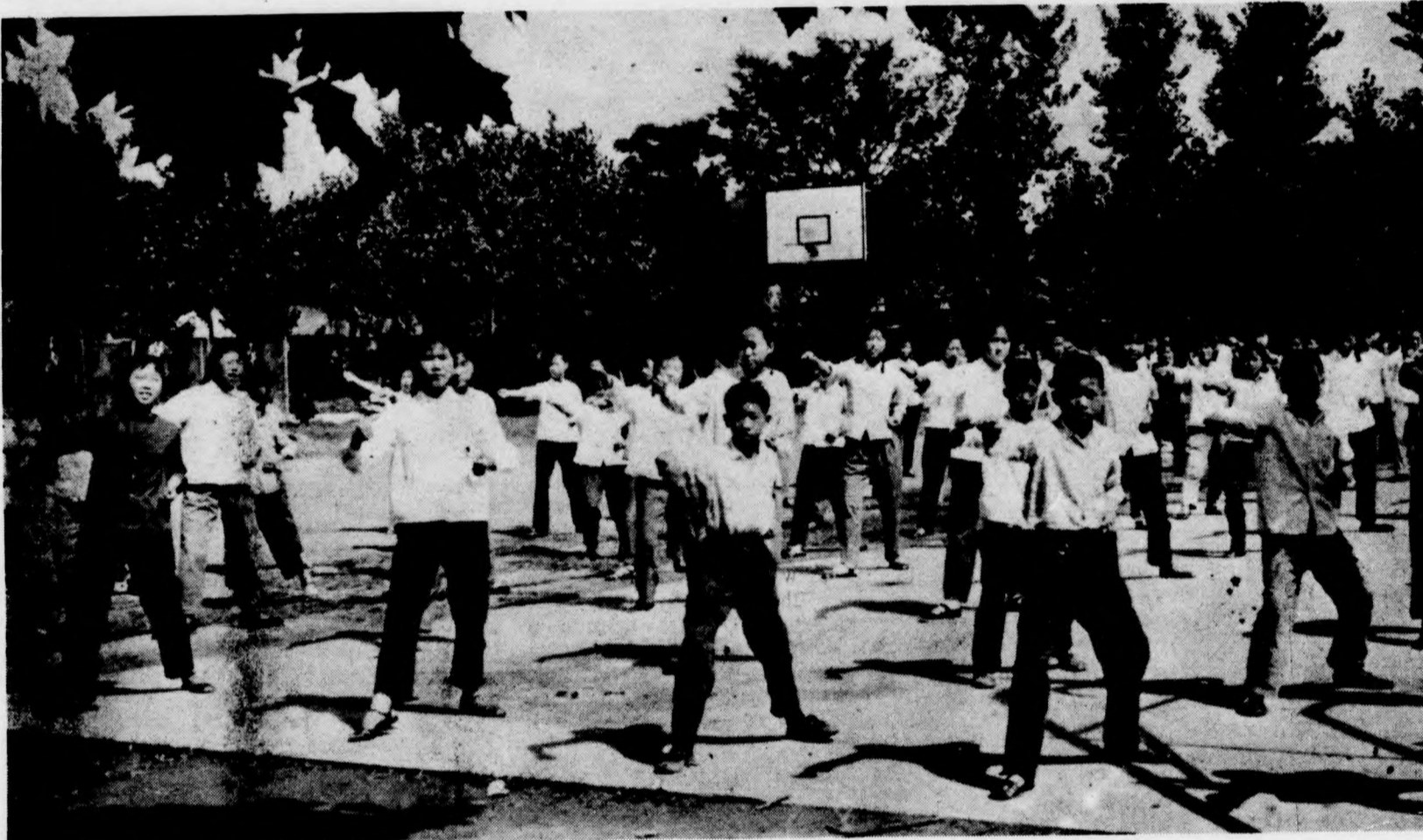
victory of the Communist Party has meant a vastly improved level of comfort and happiness, it is no more than an expression of the facts of life.

The attempt to inculcate social consciousness is manifest not only in the stress on class, but also in an exhortation to students to "put the people first", to subordinate their own individual interests to the needs of others, and the needs of the whole. The example of self-sacrifice of the Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, who died in China in 1939 ministering to Communist forces embroiled in battle with the Japanese, is one of which Chinese students from kindergarten to university are all aware. Even outside the schools, exhibitions of the legend of Norman Bethune are to be found, and the two which we visited seemed to attract much attention. Throughout China the Toronto group was welcomed as the delegation from the "home country" of Dr. Bethune.

The ideology of collective self-improvement is introduced at a very early age to children in China. At the Dong Fang Hong (The East is Red) Kindergarten in Canton we saw children four or five years of age perform several short plays the theme of which was that each citizen should pull his or her weight in the common struggle to better the lot of everyone. Children are taught devotion to others, and to think of themselves last; a case was cited to us of a child at that kindergarten who, handing out the lunches one day discovered there was one plate missing, and so went without herself so her friends could have enough to eat. There is, finally, an acute awareness among Chinese youth of the responsibility that goes with education. This extends to a willingness, even an enthusiasm, that the state should have the final say in determining the career the graduating student should follow. All these attitudes and models go to make up the social consciousness which is encouraged in Chinese students today.

A second characteristic of Chinese education, which follows logically from the first, is the universal attempt to integrate theory and practice, to eliminate the artificial distinction between book learning and practical work. It is felt to be particularly necessary to stress this aspect of the revolutionary programme in peoples' China, because in the past the traditional Chinese intellectual's abhorrence of manual work and imported Western concepts of ivory tower education both tended to perpetuate the scholar's comfortable isolation from the community. In the new China, manual labour is as honourable as mental work, and the society intends to impress this upon its young citizens as soon as they are capable of comprehending it.

Thus in kindergarten children are given "labour education". In Canton this took the form of an hour per week spent folding



These children attend Re Lu Hsun middle school in Nanking. Exercise and proper health are essential parts of a youngster's schooling.

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