Letter from . . . Shanghai

Following the line

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It may be something to do with bone structure, or with the sounds and intonation of the language; whatever the reason, Chinese people tend to smile frequently. In contrast to the grim faces so commonly seen on the streets in Western countries, the Chinese walking and talking appear happy and animated. In ordinary conversation our interpreters often laughed, and even when dealing with the most mundane subject their faces seemed naturally to break into dimples. We were a conspicuously foreign group. Wherever we went, whether strolling along the Bund or buying books, fruit, or soap flakes in Nanking Road, the people stood back for us. I never saw an expression of irritation or heard a grumble—the Chinese appeared happy to see us in their country and politely made way for us.

Many of them had good reason to be happy. Those over 40 often told us how much things had improved compared with pre-liberation days—the time before Chairman Mao proclaimed the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China on 1 October 1949. Uncertainty of employment, poor housing, poor sanitation, widespread poverty, starvation, disease, and in the late 'forties wild inflation made life in China often short and harsh. Now, in the 'seventies, everybody was assured of food, shelter, clothing, and employment, and the currency had been stable for 20 years. By our standards life in China was regimented and lacked privacy, and there was little scope for dissent on any topic, but compared with what had gone before things had improved a good deal. The Chinese over 40 knew it—those younger had grown up with stories of how things had been, and, as we were to see, indoctrination began in the kindergarten.

The "mass line"

"The mass line," a theme running through many Chinese publications, occupies a chapter in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung*, or as it is more widely known, the *Little Red Book*. The masses are made up of workers (that is, factory workers) and the peasants (peasant being an honourable name for those who work on the land), the latter being the biggest group in the country. The role of other groups, such as the intellectuals, bureaucrats, and Party officials, in ascending order of importance, is played down. Wisdom resides in the masses. It is the Communist Party's duty to ascertain the wishes of the masses, and then work towards their realisation. A cardinal rule of life in China is that the minority is subordinate to the majority. Anybody may register his dissent, may appeal to a higher authority,

and carry his appeal right up to Chairman Hua, but until his appeal is upheld, he must still conform.

Those who deviate are subject to criticism by their peers, who aim to help them correct their mistakes on the basis of "curing the sickness to save the patient." (There are many parallels between the teaching of Mao and the teaching of Jesus—a major difference is that Mao made his work.) Eight hundred and fifty million people is a great many people. It is impossible to get away from people, one's every action is under observation; one's every conversation must be widely overheard; and so any form of dissent or deviation from the Party line is rapidly observed and corrected, by persuasion if possible. (Everybody knows what the velvet glove hides.)

On one of our many bus trips I sat next to Mr Yien, our brilliant interpreter, whom I have mentioned before. I asked him about working conditions in China. Mr Yien explained that his countrymen worked eight hours a day, six days a week. Factories ran on three shifts. Married women worked as a matter of course, and quite often a husband and wife had shifts at different times, and a day off on a different day. The weekly day off was used for housework and shopping. There was no official vacation system, but if, for instance, a person's relatives lived in another town, he could get a week or ten days' break to go and visit them, while those without this need to travel could arrange to have a week's holiday for other special reasons. There was a break at New Year, and China's National Day was also kept as a holiday, but public holidays were few. As I remained silent through this recital, Mr Yien said, by way of explanation, that the Chinese still had a great deal of work to do.

There was no doubt about it—the Chinese took their work seriously. Children up to the age of 3 were cared for in nurseries; from 3 to 7 they attended kindergarten. All children continued at primary school until 12, most stayed at middle school until 17. Every primary and secondary school had a small factory or workshop on the premises. We saw youngsters making parts for transistor radios, repairing electric motors, and making model ships and aircraft, some required by the armed Forces. Chairman Mao had always insisted that theory must be accompanied by practical application, and though, according to members of our group, Chinese teaching methods were sometimes not up to ours, it seemed to me that the students' practical skills were much more highly developed. Farm work for three weeks each year was part of the curriculum, for students and teachers alike.

Competition for entry into tertiary institutes was intense—for instance, the acceptance rate into a teachers' training college was one in 20. The attitude of the applicants is expressed in this quotation from the *Hsinhua News Agency Bulletin* of 18 December 1977: "Chen Li, who settled in a production brigade after she left middle school over a year ago, told Hsinhua: 'I took the examination because I want to learn more so that I can better serve the people. If I fail, I shall continue studying by myself while working in the countryside and do my share to promote farm mechanisation.'" (Do Western students see it that way?) The editor adds: "The candidates . . . understand that they took the examinations not for their own sakes but for the sake of the construction of the country."

WORK FOR ALL

Any country could solve the problem of unemployment by learning from the Chinese—all that is necessary is a stock of picks, shovels, and baskets. As an example, workers on a commune who could not afford machinery moved three million cubic metres of earth over seven winters to deepen their fishponds. Research had shown that more fish could be bred in the same area of water if the depth was greater, and this proved to be the case. Their increased income will help them achieve the goal of farm mechanisation by 1980. Chairman Mao's roots went deep into Chinese soil—he was very much a man from the land. He saw China as primarily an agricultural country, and he was determined to give the peasant a status equal to that of the worker, both blue- and white-collar types. The Government guarantees the farmer's income. It buys his produce, and sells to the consumer; it fixes the price of his farm machinery, fertiliser, and pesticides. The income of the farm worker is roughly equal to that of a factory hand, though the city dweller possibly benefits in relation to the amenities of urban life.

There is great disagreement in China about what we would call marginal payments. In a detailed briefing at a commune near Shanghai we were told that all workers received 12 yuan (£3) a week, this being sufficient on which to live, if simply. Points were allocated for heavy work, long hours, and skills. Each worker's points were published monthly, and at the end of the year the commune's profits were shared in proportion to the points awarded through the year. In answer to a question the commune spokesman insisted that this was not a bonus, and in the sense that points had to be earned by work it was not, though undoubtedly it was a margin of some sort.

A large body of opinion in China opposes all types of marginal payment, on the basis that they constitute a bourgeois tendency, while many believe that, in the face of the need for

constantly increased production, material incentives are necessary. This argument is likely to be thrashed out at the highest level, the Central Committee of the Party, before it is resolved, and might form part of another debate on the direction of the mass line. As, however, the Chinese give themselves until the year 2000 to achieve their four modernisations—in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence—a decision may be deferred until production goals have been won.

Improved living conditions

There has been a revolutionary change for the better in the living standards of the ordinary Chinese, yet they are still well below the expectations of the average Western family. Private cars are unknown. There is a shortage of power—public buildings and private homes are usually not heated (though, fortunately for visitors in winter, Western style hotels are). Industrial air pollution is conspicuous. I should think that many houses and factories built since liberation will before too long be demolished and replaced by something better, and if this is so the Chinese have 20 or 30 years' hard work ahead of them.

Perhaps people work better if they have a major challenge, a conspicuous objective, can believe in what they are doing, and have faith in their leadership. (The Chinese may have lost some of their faith during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, but these events are receding into history.) This may just be another way of saying that it is easier to make hard conditions good than good conditions excellent. To a Westerner, China's lack of privacy and lack of the opportunity to differ could make life intolerable, yet we found much there to admire. A State that could combine the best of Western ways with the best that China has to offer would provide a good life for its citizens.

*If I Had . . .***If I had a transient ischaemic attack at the age of 55**

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Transient ischaemic attack means a transient disorder of cerebral function most commonly manifested as hemiparesis, loss of visual or speech function, lasting less than 24 hours, with complete recovery.

History (fictitious)

"It is only a funny attack of migraine," I thought as the shadow appeared in the upper part of my right field of vision while I sat at lunch one day. The shadow descended like a

shutter darkening the vision, and dropping relentlessly downwards until the lamb cutlet in front of me disappeared when I covered my other eye. The descent of this spectre took only a minute, and then a strange numbness and tingling affected the lips on the left side of my face, and five minutes later I felt a similar sensation in my fingertips and in my foot. My fingers became clumsy, the fork in the left hand missed its target, which was clearly perceived through the left eye. A momentary feeling of panic supervened but was quickly dispelled by the brain's incredible capacity for self-deception which enabled me to recall the papers I had written years before on complicated migraine; not forgetting, of course, attacks of common migraine years before which had faded as increasing maturity had replaced the enthusiastic impulsiveness of youth.

I managed to leave the table and get to my favourite armchair, noting with some satisfaction that my left arm and leg could still move, although they felt like heavy lumps of lead and had lost more than a little of their customary agility and dexterity. Some 10 minutes later the shutter started to lift in my right eye and the heaviness had started to lessen in the limbs.

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