

COMMUNIST EDUCATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

There are a variety of agencies engaged in elementary education in Communist China. Besides the regular elementary schools for children, there are adult schools of elementary grade and spare-time elementary schools for youth as well as older people; there are winter schools in the rural areas, worker-peasant schools, and various kinds of literacy classes.

The complete elementary school consists of six grades, usually divided into the lower elementary of four years and the higher elementary of two years. In 1951, a revised school system was adopted and it was announced that the elementary school would be reduced to five years. It was then contended that the six-year elementary school was unsuitable for new China, because the long course was a scheme of bourgeois society to prevent the broad masses from getting the benefit of universal education.

The change to a five-year unitary school proved to be not so easy. Here and there the new experiment was tried and much success was claimed, but there was no widespread adoption of the new plan. In December 1953, the government decided to postpone the change indefinitely on account of "inadequate preparation of teachers and teaching materials."

Elementary education is not free, though attempts have been made, especially in the schools established by communes and by some industries, to run the schools without tuition fees. The principle of free universal education is accepted but the present financial situation makes it necessary to charge fees. Practices vary in different parts of the country. Sometimes, the families of the pupils are asked to contribute to the teacher's board either by taking turns to prepare meals or by donation of food. It is also not uncom-

mon to fix tuition charges according to the financial stature of the families.

The distinguishing characteristics of the curriculum are manual labour and the weekly assembly for political and civic education. Compared with the American elementary curriculum, the Chinese curriculum is more rigidly prescribed and the subjects are narrower in scope.

It is possible that the temporary abandonment of the five-year unitary school was, in part at least, motivated by a desire to slow down the popular demand for education. A campaign was launched to discourage elementary school pupils from seeking entrance into junior middle schools. It was emphasized that the chief purpose of the elementary school was to produce enlightened workers and that most pupils should consider it normal to take up productive labour when they leave the elementary school.

Entrance examinations are another means of controlling the advance from elementary schools to junior middle schools. In 1954, it was

stated that no more than one-third of graduates of elementary schools could be accommodated in the post-elementary schools of various kinds. Even after 1956, when the rise of non-state schools greatly increased the number of schools, the government continued to pursue a restrictive policy. One reason for this may be the desire of the government to correct the confusion and deterioration of standards which have resulted from the expansion of enrolment and the appearance of numerous schools with inadequate facilities and incompetent teachers. It is possible that, in the Communist philosophy of education, some education of elementary grade is needed so that the people may be more receptive to indoctrination and propaganda, but education beyond the elementary must be reserved only for those whom the state wants to train for specific tasks. In that case education for the enlightenment or the advancement of the individual would be considered a bourgeois concept that has no place in the Communist scheme of education.

The campaign to discourage continued schooling coincided with the new emphasis on labour in the rectification campaign of 1957 and later with the campaign to send large numbers of youth to the countryside to stimulate lagging agricultural production. Young people who had gone from elementary schools to production were asked to return to the schools to tell the pupils their joy at helping the production programme of the state. They were honoured as successful citizens to show the pupils that further study was not the only means of advancement. Pupils were taken to visit farms and factories to arouse their interest in production.

The Communists almost at once decided to abolish private education and put all education in the hands of the state. In 1952, the Ministry of Education announced a policy of taking over private schools. The enrolment in private elementary schools quickly dropped from 34.1 per cent of the total enrolment in all elementary schools to 5.5 per cent in 1952 and 3.8 per cent in 1953. It was soon realized,

however, that the state could not possibly provide enough schools for the millions who demanded education. The government then reversed its policy and decided to encourage the establishment of schools by the "masses" and by private organizations such as factories, business concerns, collectives, and, later on, communes. A campaign was launched to establish large numbers of non-state schools known as "min pan" schools. The mushroom growth of such schools accounts for the big jump on elementary school enrolment after 1955.

Many of the *min pan* schools are make-shifts of one kind or another. Classes are held in private homes or in temples, warehouses, or other unused public buildings, and pupils are often asked to bring their own desks and chairs. Teachers are untrained and, in too many cases, not too far removed from illiteracy. Some are only "spare-time" schools; others are "half school, half farm." They do not teach all subjects of the standard curriculum; the only teaching that is considered indis-

pensable is political and ideological indoctrination. As a matter of fact, such improvisations are officially encouraged, and local authorities are told that they should feel free to depart from the regulations and adapt to local conditions.

The Ministry of Education has encouraged the double session in elementary schools. There are even schools on triple shifts. There are a variety of forms of the double session. Sometimes, alternate sessions meet half a day each, one class in the morning and another class in the afternoon, using the same classroom. Or they may alternate, meeting every other day. In any case, the pupils do not attend school full-time. Experiments have been made to keep pupils in school all day, to schedule one class in a room and another class in outdoor activities and alternating them so as to get double use of the facilities, but bad weather spoils the schedule and causes much confusion.

Political education in all schools is carried on under the direct supervision of Party authorities. The Party

is assisted by the youth organizations and the labour organizations, which come into the picture not only because the Communists ideology glorifies the working class, but also because labour organizations play an important role in promoting productive labour while in school and encouraging youth to join the "full-time labour force upon leaving school.

Reading newspapers, discussing current events, visits to factories, farms and government offices, and the study of speeches and reports of Communist leaders are regular features of the programme. The weekly assembly is an important occasion for political education.

The Communists make a distinction between "Communist morality" and "bourgeois morality." The Common Programme of 1949 listed the "five loves" which education should try to develop: love of the fatherland, love of the people, love of labour, love of science, and care of public property. Since the "fatherland" and the "people" are both symbolised by the Communist Party, love of obedience to the Com-

munist Party becomes the highest attributes of Communist morality.

An important role in moral education is played by the Chinese Young Pioneers, the officially sponsored youth organization for elementary school-children too young to join the Communist Youth League. This youth organization for elementary school-children not only moulds the characters of its members but also plays a leading role in all branches of school life.

The Communist way of life is the collective way. One of the tasks of moral education is to train children in collective living. Here again, the Young Pioneers are supposed to set the pace. The collective way is fostered by having children study, labour and play in groups. In recent years the scope of collective activities has been expanded and the slogan of "four collectivisations" has gained increasing popularity. The "four collectivisations" refer to collective study, collective labour, collective residence, and collective board. It is contended that the full development of the collective way of life requires having pupils

live together in dormitories under the constant supervision of teachers, who in turn are under the constant guidance of the Communist Party.

In the absence of dormitories, some schools turn classrooms into sleeping quarters at night and push together chairs and tables to make improvised beds. Teachers sleep in the same room with the pupils and it is proudly reported that many a teacher has turned into a nursemaid, waking up small children at night to attend to toilet needs. Such loving care of children, it is said, is a natural expansion of the new socialist consciousness of teachers. The teacher is instructor, nursemaid, and production guide at the same time.

Productive labour in schools has been given a new emphasis since 1958. The elementary curriculum has been revised to provide for four to six hours a week of manual work for the senior classes and at least two hours a week in the junior classes. Smaller children are assigned duties such as cleaning and sweeping in school and at

home, elimination of insect pests, etc., while pupils in the upper classes engage in actual production on farms or in factories. The "work-study plan" gained popularity. It reduce the hours of classroom study and allows as much as half of school time for productive labour. In some schools the schedule provides for a half day of study and a half day of productive labour; in other schools, pupils set aside entire days for work.

The Communist emphasis on the "complete development" of man encompasses five major aspects of the development of the individual: intellectual, moral, physical, artistic and the knowledge and skills of production. In practice, little attention is paid to the artistic side, and physical development is often neglected, even endangered, as a result of the heavy schedule of study, labour, and political activities.

Quantity is not the only enemy of quality. The pressure for political activities and the demand for productive labour must necessarily reduce the time and energy

available for academic study, but here the dilemma must remain insoluble as long as the Communists adhere to their dogma that politics must always "take command" and their belief that with proper ideological orientation all good things in life will follow. Teachers as well as pupils are frequently summoned by government and Party officers to do clerical and other chores. A post-office might ask teachers to help solicit subscriptions for publications; a peasant association might ask school bands to play at weddings; such miscellaneous tasks not only meant the suspension of classes but much illness on the part of overworked teachers and pupils.

There is an upsurge of demand for education in China, but premature withdrawal from school constitutes one of the puzzling problems facing educators. In 1955, out of a total enrolment of over 53 millions, more than five million withdrew before the end of the elementary course. — *Theodore H. E. Chen*, condensed from the *China Quarterly*, 1962