

China's children

*Healthy, hardy, happily harmonious—
they are their country's greatest asset.*



by Vivian Van Vick

"HANG ONTO your heart when you visit China," my husband and I were told when we joined a 50-member tour group from the U.S. and Canada, "or you'll lose it to the children there."

The warning was warranted. The conquest began with a remarkable song-and-dance performance by rosy-cheeked 3 to 6-year-olds in Peking, and continued right through the upper grades to one-on-one conversations with students at Zhengzhou University.

The Chinese are rightfully proud of their children, and the visitor immediately looks for the influences that produce such impressive youngsters.

Free and continuous health care is obviously one factor. Late marriages—women usually marry at 28 and men at 30—accomplish two things. Population growth is slowed

for the benefit of the economy, and defective births from too-young mothers are reduced. Sex before marriage is severely criticized.

Most babies are born in the rural communes or in city hospitals; 85 percent of them are breast-fed, a factor held to be important to their growth.

The mother is given a flexible 56 to 70 days of maternity leave. If there is no grandmother in the home to care for the infant when the mother returns to work, she brings him to the factory creche and nurses him there.

As the child gets older, there are boarding facilities for parents who work at a distance. Everyone works six days a week, so parents pick up their babies on Saturday afternoons for the weekend. These nurseries and kindergartens are free and open year-round.

Chinese nursery schools are much like those in western countries: children learn manual dexterity, to play games,



Left: An aspiring student artist finds inspiration amid the autumn foliage of Fragrant Hill outside the city of Peking.

Left: A self-assured young performer tries her wings in the role of Queen Bee in a Zhengzhou kindergarten dramatization.

Right: Students at Zhengzhou and other Chinese universities are now openly interested in the once-forbidden cultures of other lands.

and to sing and dance and paint. The nursery-age child is taught to use chopsticks, and a 3-year-old can manipulate them as deftly as an adult.

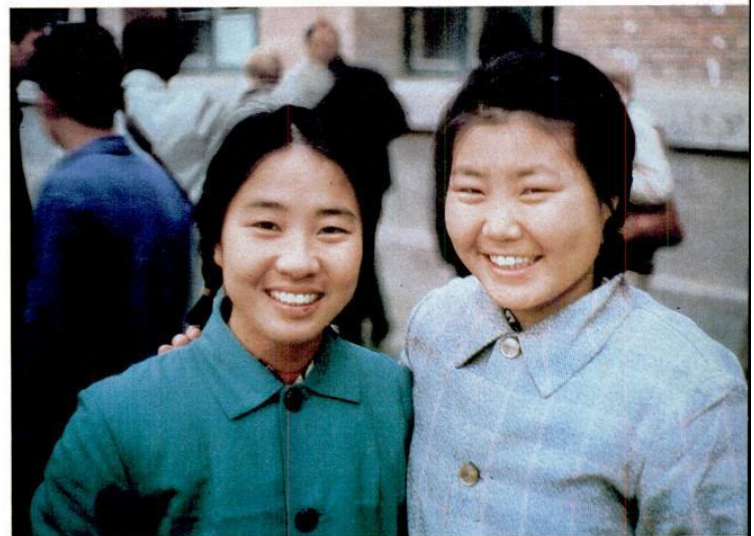
All teachers for this age level are women, and each supervises 20 children. The teachers are often city middle school graduates of approved political persuasions who are fulfilling their annual requirement of two months' work on a farm or in a factory.

Nine-tenths of China's one billion people live in rural areas; thus it takes a veritable army of nurses and "barefoot" doctors to visit all schools regularly. The medics also check children who are under a grandmother's care at home.

The newborn immediately receive inoculations against tuberculosis. These are followed by other vaccines, up to the age of seven, to prevent contagious diseases. Former Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung insisted that prevention of sickness be given the first priority.

In the countryside, where there is a shortage of milk for children, inexpensive milk-substitutes are now being produced. This new food has eliminated most childhood malnutrition.

An important feature of early kindergarten is learning the proper brush stroke sequence in writing Chinese



characters. First, brush strokes are practiced diligently in the air. When mastered, they are transferred with ink to paper. Just to read a Chinese newspaper, one must know a minimum of 3,000 ideograms.

At kindergarten performances in Zhengzhou and Peking, the children sang with excellent voices and showed great stage presence. As we left, these self-confident youngsters rushed up to us, took our hands, and led us into the yard where they posed for pictures. We and our fellow tourists were captivated.

Chinese children learn early in life that the "retired" and elderly remain very important members of society. Since women usually retire on pension at age 50 or 55, they are still very capable of caring for their own grandchildren or those of neighborhood working mothers. All healthy Chinese women take employment outside the home to increase family income.



Above: This Peking kindergarten typifies the order, discipline, and enthusiastic interest found in Chinese classrooms everywhere.

Right: Chinese children lovingly wave and clutch the only balloons they have ever seen, the colorful gifts of a U.S. tour member.

Left: In the new China, even the Forbidden City in Peking, once open only to emperors, now discloses its treasures to all.

The Chinese child also learns that one must work hard for what are considered to be luxuries. These luxuries include bicycles, radios, sewing machines, watches, and cameras. Television sets are still too expensive for the average family, but children watch TV in community centers. There is no buying on credit; the child learns that when he becomes an adult he must always bank some of his earnings.

Youngsters begin primary school at 7½ years of age, and attend it for five years. Classes start at 7:25 a.m. and usually last till 4:15 p.m. Everyone also goes to school on Saturday mornings. Courses include Chinese, arithmetic, politics (morals), physical culture, and self-study. Later, writing, drawing, abacus, fundamental knowledge (appreciation of agriculture and manufacturing), and singing are added.

An innovation, to the Westerner, is the daily practice of specific eye exercises to prevent shortsightedness.

Naughty youngsters are not disciplined as they are in the West. Teachers say that organized peer pressure usually persuades them to change their ways and cooperate for the good of all. If this doesn't work, the parents join the teachers in heart-to-heart talks with their unruly offspring. Demerits are recorded for each infraction. When a child alters his behavior, these are cancelled and all is forgiven.

One of the rewards for good behavior is participation in "Children's Palaces." These huge, after-school centers provide opportunities for the study of ballet, acrobatics, telegraphy, trade skills, and countless other activities. Retired teachers and workers, peasants with good skills, commune cadres, and soldiers organize and supervise the groups.

School children must buy their books. Teachers assign homework and claim that older students study about two hours each evening. Since the nation is on an energy conservation program, most families turn out their lights at 9 pm. The family often sits in the dark and listens to the radio.

Five years of middle school (for ages 12 to 17) follow the 5 years of primary study. Classes average 45 to 60 students, so self-discipline is important. In each grade, music, science, math, and English are taught. English has become the favored second language and both radio and television stations broadcast daily English lessons. Millions of English-teaching records are now in use. In a few schools Japanese is taught, but there were no Russian classes in either the middle schools or universities we visited.

During the mid-morning break, middle school students meet on the playground for calisthenics. At the school we visited, an instructor with a megaphone stood on a high platform and called out the exercises. Everyone appeared to be full of fun, but not rowdy. Of course, they were aware of their audience.

The result of the great attention to nutrition and exercise is easily measurable at this age level. A test in

Nanking, comparing its 14-year-olds in 1975 with those in 1956, showed a marked change in the average height and weight. Height had increased over 8 centimetres, weight nearly 4 kilograms.

Graduates of middle school who desire higher education must pass specific examinations. Unfortunately, the shortage of universities means that hundreds who pass their tests still cannot continue their schooling and must accept jobs in industry.

In the mid-60's, when Mao launched the Cultural Revolution, the universities were closed. The purpose was to give a heavy-handed role to political training. Thus, years of higher education were lost and a whole generation of potential students sacrificed. These were mainly middle school graduates with fine technical qualifications. China now realizes the tragedy of the program, even though its concentration on mass education at lower levels did result in wiping out illiteracy in the nation. Some of the abandoned colleges have recently been reopened.

One of our travel guides was a victim of the unpopular system that sent urban youths to work, often indefinitely, on farms. The son of a railroad executive, Fan was sent to Inner Mongolia for four years. Due to his brilliance in languages, he was allowed to return to Peking.

According to Vice-Premier Zhen Yong-gui, 16 million city people have spent time in the country since the work program began nearly 30 years ago. Although Fan said he bears no resentment for his hard experience in that remote northern region, many young people do not agree with him.

The sudden turn-around in China's policy was expressed at the National Conference on Youth in early December 1978. Vice-Premier Zhen gave the students four new options: they could continue their studies, settle in rural areas, work in border regions in construction, or take city jobs. Students would no longer be assigned to collectively owned farms or recruited for intermediate technical or vocational schools.

It remains to be seen if the program can be carried out. At least there is new hope among those who wish to become scientists, engineers, and economists. Entry examinations have been restored; there is a cutback on political studies; an elite school for exceptional students has opened in Peking; art schools have admitted 2,500 students, and Peking's Central Conservatory of Music has taken in 17 gifted 9- and 10-year-olds.

If life for the young sounds like all work, this is not true. Recreation takes the form of some 40 different sports. Basketball leads in popularity, with volleyball and football next. Long-distance running, with cross-country and round-the-city races, is held on New Year's Day and at the

[continued on page 53]

• A schoolteacher for 16 years, Vivian Van Vick knew just the right questions to ask when she finally was able to visit the Peoples' Republic of China, a civilization that had long intrigued her. The answers—from teachers, parents, and students—provided the data for this illuminating article. For more information about her, see *By the Way*, page 2.

China's children . . .

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Spring Festival. Those who prefer split-second-reflex sports take up *Taichi* or *wushu*, the martial arts.

Swimming is popular in the warm south. Each year, on July 16, the young attempt cross-river or cross-lake swims to commemorate the anniversary of Chairman Mao's swim in 1966 across the Yangtze River. He was then 73.

In the northeast, ice-skating, ice hockey, skiing, and hunting are pursued. Everywhere the Sports Federation promotes table tennis, badminton, fencing, Chinese chess, and archery. The philosophy behind China's sports stresses creating friendships rather than putting all attention on "winning at any price."

There are questions in the minds of veteran China watchers now that Peking is out to win new friends. Will the young, moving into industrialization, destroy the "classless" society and create a gap between laborers and intellectuals? This year, the United States expects to enroll 500 of the 10,000 college-age students being sent abroad. When they return home in three to four years time, what changes will they demand of their burgeoning society?

A few Chinese journalists think that religion will eventually return to their country. The state constitution allows freedom of religion now, but the young will tell you that work is their religion.

While drinking tea at Shumchun on my way to Canton, a first-year university student, curious about our customs, asked me to discuss our western religions. When I finished, he thought a moment and then remarked, "Lack of prejudice is a kind of religion, isn't it?"

For the first time, this past Christmas Eve, a program of religious music, sung by a Yugoslav choir, was broadcast in China. Also, the midnight mass in Peking's Nantang Catholic Church attracted more Chinese worshippers than previously.

China is opening up to the outside world. Love stories and discussions of marriage problems, long banned, are now appearing in magazines. Children are reading such forbidden classics as "Robinson Crusoe," "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," and "The Merchant of Venice." Radio Peking plays three hours of "foreign" music, including the once-believed-dead Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt. We can expect other dramatic breaks now that Premier Deng Xiaoping has adopted a policy of realism.

Put all this intellectual excitement together with a nation of young people who are energetic, enthusiastic, and self-assured, and there can be little doubt in anyone's mind that China is ready for its greatest leap forward to date, through the greatest cultural resource available to any nation—its children.

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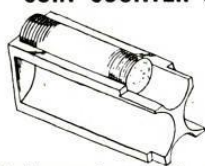


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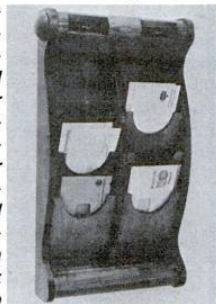
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Glossary

(1) The author – Vivian Van Vick



A nation can be known through its children, and journalist Vivian Van Vick, author of this story, introduces us to a mysterious, enigmatic country by telling us of her encounters with China's children in 1979 when the country was recovering from the 10-year Cultural Revolution (無產階級文化大革命). There were more than a billion people in China, many of their children emerging into adulthood contemporaneously with China's emergency into the modern world. How did writer Van Vick's "long march" to China come about?

"The oldest continuous civilization on earth has always intrigued me," she said. "While waiting for resumption of travel to the People's Republic of China, I studied Chinese, learned a bit of calligraphy, subscribed to English magazines from Peking, and read every book that would help me." "My husband, Joseph Tomes, and I traveled with a 50-member group from the United States and Canada. One cannot travel alone in China due to language problems. The shortage of English-speaking guides makes group travel necessary."

Md. Vivian Van Vick, who has often traveled to Europe, Africa, and the Orient, described her month-long trek through China as a "travel experience without compare." Many of the reasons can be found in her article.

(2) Zhengzhou University = 鄭州大學

(3) Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung = Chairman Mao Zedong = 中國共產黨中央委員會主席毛澤東

(4) Peking = Beijing = 北京

(5) Nanking = Nanjing = 南京

(6) Vice Premier Zhen Yong-gui = Vice Premier Chen Yonggui = 國務院副總理陳永貴

(7) Yangtze River = 揚子江 / 長江

(8) Shumchum = Shenzhen = 深圳

(9) Canton = Guangzhou = 廣州

(10) Nantang Catholic Church = The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception = 聖母無染原罪堂 / 宣武門天主堂 / 南堂

(11) Deng Xiaoping = 鄧小平

This article was edited by Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian) on 1 July 2015.