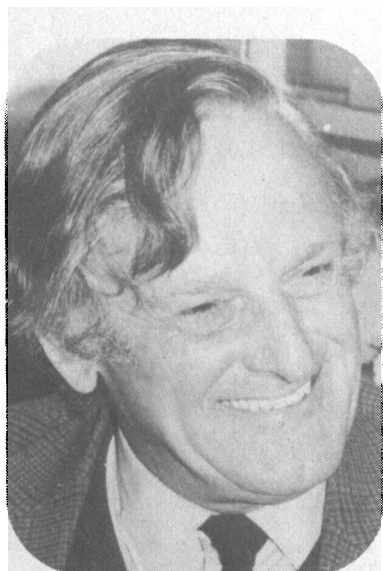


CHINA'S TRANS- FORMED FAMILY



DR. CLIFF WRIGHT

Dr Cliff Wright is the Executive Secretary of the Commission on Christian Education with the Australian Council of Churches.



In May this year I spent three weeks in China, with a group organised by Professor Ronald Goldman of LaTrobe University. Our main interest was in education, but that inevitably opened up many aspects of life in China, including marriage and family, the role of women and of men, child care, family and school, attitudes to sexuality. All of these are profoundly influenced by the social revolution in which China is engaged, transforming the old order.

Some Personal Impressions

In late May, on a warm evening, I had a walk of several kilometres in the streets of Peking. Here are some of my vivid memories.

I saw a soldier in uniform, walking along a crowded street, carrying a young baby in his arms.

In Tien An Men Square there were many family groups, sitting, talking, relaxing. I threw a kiss to two children in one family group. They responded warmly as did the parents. We clapped our hands and laughed. The non-verbal evidence indicated a close, warm relationship in the family itself.

A man walked past with a child on each hand, all three looking relaxed and happy.

I remember seeing a man pushing a bicycle with a side-car. The two children in the side-car looked content.

Couples walked together. Some sought semi-privacy at the back of deep footpaths, sitting side by side. Others walked hand in hand, some just side by side.

Boys played with a ball.

Everything seemed in good order. There was a sense of belonging, combining enjoyment and security.

The same sort of impression was gained in walks in streets in Manchuria, as well as in the south in the Canton area.

The Family and the Conquest of Poverty

Part of the relaxed atmosphere is no doubt related to the conquest of poverty and hunger in China, in such sharp contrast to most other Asian countries. Almost everyone I saw looked well fed, well clothed; signs of malnutrition or slovenly living were evident. The reason for the word "almost" is because I did see one old man sitting alone, rather dirty and forlorn, in a street in Tientsin. But that was only one in the whole three weeks! Even though there is an eight level wage scale, everyone has enough. China is a poor country, but one in which the problem of distribution of what is available has been basically solved. Rice is rationed so that everyone can have a just share. The lack of economic anxiety must be one reason for the apparent general contentment of the people, and for the evident strength and well being of family life.



"Bitter Days" for Women

I heard and have read about the suffering of women in the old China, in what are now referred to as the "bitter days". One evening I watched for several minutes an old woman sitting and rubbing one leg and then the other with her hands. Her feet were tiny, the result of the cruel foot-binding practice which continued well into the 1940's. The bound foot was a symbol of the subordinate role of women in China, as well as being regarded as a mark of femininity and beauty. In all liberated areas prior to 1949, foot-binding was forbidden — but only gradually was the practice abandoned. Under the traditional system women had no property rights and could be bought and sold. Some girl babies were killed at birth. When married, the women entered the husband's family, and were often radically separated from their own kin. There was strong

Let's restore the Balance.

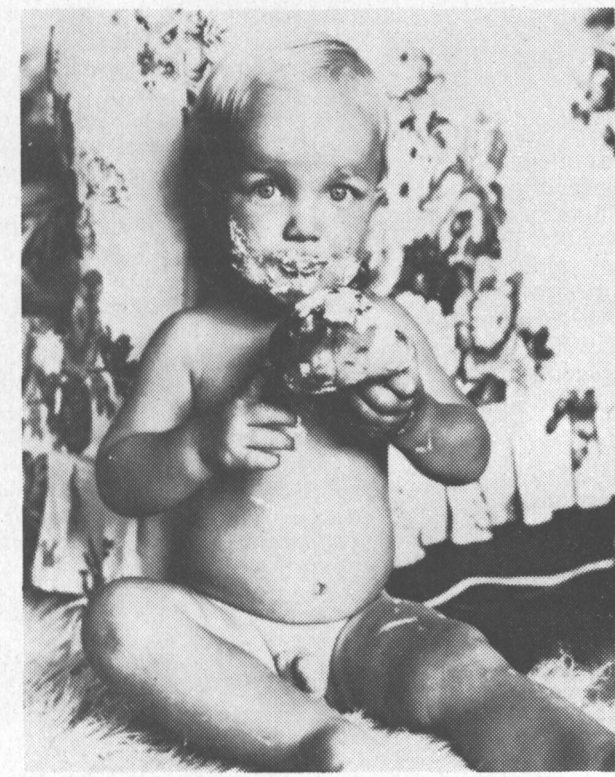


Photo by courtesy of Vivian Jenkins and 'Cleo'



**It's not a question of charity.
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A handful of rich nations—ours among them—consuming most of the world's resources. The rest . . . two thirds of the world . . . some three billion human beings . . . living lives plagued by hunger and disease and deprived of basic necessities.

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We have no political or religious affiliations. Our sole purpose is to help people in the developing nations to help themselves . . . **through the support of those who care.**

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You will be put in touch with the family and kept informed of its progress. One of the children (the "Foster Child") will

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There can be personal interest and personal involvement. Perhaps you cannot commit yourself to full sponsorship. Then just send what you can. It will be put to good use in family, community self-help projects and co-operatives. Foster Parents Plan of Australia is currently at work in Ethiopia, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Peru, Indonesia (Bali & Yogyakarta), Republic of Korea and the Philippines.

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I/We wish to sponsor a child and family for one year or more.

Country preferred (if any) Foster Child
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| \$14.50 | \$43.50 | \$87.00 | \$174.00 |
| Monthly | Quarterly | Half-yearly | Yearly |

Enclosed \$

I/We would like to know more about sponsorship.

I/We cannot 'sponsor' a foster family but would like to help

Contribution enclosed for \$

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Postcode

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CAM/FPP 4

domination by mothers-in-law. There was a stigma attached to failure to produce a male child. It was not considered proper for women to expose any part of the body except face and hands. Many have described the situation of women as that of unpaid slaves, working almost exclusively in the home, dominated, low in status. Male authority was strong indeed. Mao Tse-tung once said: "The Chinese man carried on his back the three mountains of feudalism, capitalism and superstition, but the Chinese women carried four mountains — the fourth a man."



Better Days

Now, women may own property, can share in productive labor. The general slogan is "anything a man can do a woman can do". I bought a copy of an English translation of "The Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" (1950). It states: "The feudal marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman, and in disregard of the interests of children, is abolished." Marriage is based on "the complete willingness of the two parties". "Husband and wife are companions living together and enjoy equal status in the home." "Husband and wife have equal rights in the possession and management of family property." "Husband and wife have the right to use his or her own family name." "Divorce is granted when husband and wife both desire it." When one party insists on divorce, there are procedures aimed at reconciliation. The law supports quite clearly the equality of men and women, giving women some rights above men. For instance, a man may not apply for divorce if his wife is pregnant.

The liberation of women which the Chinese marriage law enshrines, has had a transforming influence on family life, even though there is evidence that the struggle is still go-

ing on. Traditional attitudes giving the husband dominating authority still persist, but reports of improvement are impressive. Men cooperate in caring for children, and do a much greater share of cooking and household work. Mental poverty is being overcome as women share equally in educational, professional work opportunities with men.

I was impressed by the fact that the treatment of women as sex objects, so common in Australia, does not occur in China. The political and economic support of sexism associated with our consumer society, visible most obviously in advertising, has been thoroughly under-

Men and women in China, so I was told and so I observed, view each other more and more as comrades. They work, study, sing, dance, do community service together in partnership. Women are no longer exploited and dominated, sexually or otherwise.

In an automobile factory in Changchun we saw men and women working together in similar loose fitting clothes, sharing common tasks. This raised the question — Do our styles of dress make it impossible to have such sharing without sexuality obtruding?

In sharp contrast to pre-revolution days, prostitution and venereal disease are practically



mined. It was a tremendous relief to be there for three weeks without being asked to buy anything!

The contrast between what happens in China and what happens in Australia sharpened my awareness of the extent to which the sexual appeal of women's bodies is exploited to boost sales and profit. Is the greed of capitalism too great an obstacle to overcoming this evil? Does the full liberation of women wait on a basic change in our social and economic structures?

REVOLUTION IN THE GROWTH OF KINDERGARTENS

(Photography by courtesy of Don Edgar)

unknown. Few children are born outside marriage. Sexual intercourse as a right of husband or landlord no longer exists. After liberation, women quickly closed down brothels. The economic reasons for prostitution are no longer present. There appears to be little pre or extra-marital sexual intercourse,

even though contraceptives are readily available. Young people seemed to enjoy each other's company, working, studying and playing together mainly in groups, with generally-accepted sexual restraints. They do not look frustrated or repressed.

Through an interpreter I spoke to a number of young men and women about sexuality and marriage. One young woman, aged 22, said in answer to a question about friendship with men: "We love everyone". "But don't you have a special man as a friend?" I asked. "No," she said, "I am too young." "When will you be old enough?" "When I'm about 24 or 25," was the reply. The same sort of response came from other young men and women. Certainly, the sexual revolution in China appears to have gone in exactly the opposite direction from ours.



"Private Thinking"

One evening in Changchun we saw a film, "Breaking With Old Ideas". It tells the story of the struggles against elitist educational ideas which excluded most peasants and workers from opportunities for tertiary level education. Later at a film studio we saw two of the leading actors in the film — a man and a woman. One of our party asked to meet the "film stars". The language was unacceptable. They were not "stars", we were told, but workers. Such language was identified as an example of "private thinking", regarded as immoral in China. The wages of actors are the same as those of middle-level factory workers. They work, as others do, to "serve the people". This introduced me to a basic concept. Chinese revolutionary thinking is not "private" but is concerned with society, with community welfare. Through this I was able to understand a little more about attitudes to family, marriage, sexuality, and care of children, which are seen to involve the health and welfare of the whole society.

The special physical needs of women are openly accepted. They receive full consideration during four special times — menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. This fosters the companionship of men and women as equal partners in work and family, as different needs are openly accepted.

Transformed Human Relationships

Even though we would identify many of the attitudes in Chinese society towards the relationships of men and women as "puritan", there seems to be a stability, a security, a warmth in human relationships which is positive and liberating. Young people of the same sex hold hands and hug each other in the streets without any apparent self-consciousness. This warmth is also expressed towards children. They are held and touched a great deal — in a relaxed way. There is a remarkable lack of stiffness in the way people walk and meet each other, with bodily ease and relaxation. The question came to my mind, "How much of our tension is due to our Australian individualism and competitiveness, the stress on our own self centred aims and ambitions?"

Childhood Education

Since the revolution the growth of nurseries, kindergartens, primary schools, has been very rapid. They are part of the life of communes, factories, tertiary educational institutions.

Their establishment has given women freedom to take part in productive labor, study, and many cultural and community activities, assured that their children are cared for.

Grandparents play an important part in the care of children, and in their informal education. Women may retire at fifty on a reasonable "pension", and so there is a large team of people co-operating in the nurture of children. We saw many older people who appeared to have a very good relationship with the children. They often meet them after school, take them for outings, give them personal attention.

We visited a number of kindergartens and primary schools. The children appeared to be remarkably clean, healthy and happy. In an admittedly limited experience, I saw little evidence of aggressive, self assertive, over active, competitive behavior.

We were told that moral education is given first priority, being seen as even more important than physical and intellectual development. Altruism, helping one another, scrupulous honesty, are first in importance. They are fostered by highly "moral" stories of honest, hard-working children and adults who "serve the revolution". There is an effort to thoroughly destroy self-interest, self-centredness, so that everyone may "serve the people". We heard children shouting "We love Chairman Mao, we love our country." They seemed to mean it. (I wondered, "What do our Australian children love?") Pupils are encouraged to help other pupils. It is considered a great honor to help others solve their problems.

In the kindergartens and schools there appeared to be little place for the expression of what we call "natural ego-centricism", little opportunity for free, individual play, or for fantasy. (See a discussion of these issues in an article by Ronald Goldman in *Education News*, Vol. 15, No. 6, 1976). Have the Chinese gone too far, denying what is essential in child development? Or are our individualistic dogmatism open to serious question?

My impression was that, in contrast to many Australian children, the Chinese children are not fighting adults. They seemed to be relaxed without being dull and dominated. They appeared to work enthusiastically; they danced and sang with zest and ability. Maybe the homogeneous nature of Chinese society makes for greater happiness in children than does our multi-cultural society with its bewildering array of choices, conflicting values, and pressures.

It was only at the Australian Embassy that I saw any hyper-active children, or any thumb-sucking. There appears to be remarkably little anxiety among Chinese children.



“Ring a ring a rosy” (Photograph by courtesy Don Edgar.)

Warm caring relationships, secure family life, clear ways of behaving, lack of strong individualistic competitiveness (“Friendship first, competition second” is the basic sports slogan), may be the reason. Moreover, they share life with adults, most of whom are cheerfully working to transform society.

Social realism is strongly present in the education of children from earliest years. Fairy stories are not favored. “In myths or nursery tales the aspects constituting a contradiction have only an imaginary identity, not a concrete identity”. They are not a “scientific reflection of reality.” “They are naive, imaginary, subjectively conceived transformations.” (Mao Tse-tung, *Four Essays on Philosophy*, p.65.)

Children share in productive labor in simple ways from early years. For instance, in kindergartens they can be seen attaching buttons to cards and doing other simple productive work.

Kindergartens and schools are as much as possible in close relationship with the wider community.

Primary children work regularly

in factories and in rural production. This is not exploitation in terms of child labor. Their social development, the unity of theory and practice, and the affirmation of the value of physical labor, their actual achievements, are involved.

At a primary school in Peking we were told that the relationship of the school with parents is very close. Home visits are made regularly by the teachers. Parents and grandparents frequently come to the school, sometimes to assist in teaching, sometimes to discuss problems. In this school there is a committee for each grade and parents are members of the committee.

“We the Large Family”

Families in China are not isolated nuclear units. They are part of a wide, homogeneous community. There are numerous “aunties” and “uncles” who have a close relationship with children, providing a significant extension of the number of adults well known and trusted by children. The significant role of grandparents also provides this wider support.

Perhaps equally important for the family is the celebration of work and the awareness of being part of a community struggling against old practices of exploitation, with great enthusiasm and hope. Chinese people are practical and realistic. They know that the danger of a return to old ways, values, is always present. The class struggle still needs to be maintained.

One of the popular slogans is “Struggle, self-criticism, transformation”. Weaknesses, threats and failures are openly examined. The saying “A fall into the pit, an increase in your wit” expresses this principle.

Mao Tse-tung teaches that the human mind is infinitely malleable and able to expand spiritually; that the human will, once rectified, is all powerful. This gives great hope to the people, provides the basis for genuine celebration. As Jurgen Moltmann has said, “Struggle is the protest of those who hope, and hope is the celebration of those who struggle”. With many imperfections to be overcome in China, the struggle must continue.

