

The Young in China's Families

by Sergio Ticozzi

Who are the young people of China?

Questions related to the younger generation are of deep concern to anyone interested in the future of a country. For China, the issue is crucial where there are some 400 million young people under the age of eighteen. Of these approximately 200 million are students at various levels. But who are they? First of all they are the children of the youth of the Cultural Revolution, the so called "lost generation". They have been characterized as psychologically "wounded", as "confused or frustrated", as "cynical", as "redundant or useless", as "violent or proud of their bad manners", as "problematic", as "disillusioned fighters", etc.¹ Obviously, the children of such parents have been deeply affected by the many evil effects of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese authorities are thoroughly aware of this and are trying in every way possible to find a solution to the problem. They have launched several campaigns in schools and in society as a whole for building up a "socialist morality" and a "socialist spiritual civilization". Unfortunately, this enormous number of young people has also been growing up in an atmosphere of rapid and unsettling change. The new policies of economic reform and opening up to the outside world have raised the standard of living of the population considerably. They have also altered the life style of the Chinese family. The family is shifting from *dajia* (the traditional ideal of the family being "four generations under the same roof") to the nuclear family. Women are struggling for equality; traditional customs and habits are disintegrating; the great majority of people, from parents to the persons in charge of implementing the "socialist morality" or "spiritual civilization", regardless of previous convictions, now seem to value money above everything and are willing to try to obtain it at any cost and by any means. In this context values and



concerns often change swiftly and irrationally. Young people are often the first affected and in the forefront of change. "These young students no longer hold the traditional social values their parents and grandparents treasured. But their own values are not always clear. The old values are fading away; the new ones have not yet taken shape."²

The young people of China are not only the children of the "youth of the Cultural Revolution," with their many residual scars but they are also the product of China's society today where persons in charge of educating the population operate under a double standard or what someone has called a social "boundary psychology"³ where there is no relationship between what is taught and what is practiced. This state of affairs is often combined with cynicism, pragmatism and competitiveness.

The speed of change, the confused standard of conduct and the exposure to new stimuli coming from outside of China are shaping the psychology of China's younger generation.

Let us now consider in more detail some traits which characterize China's students, China's youth in general and Christian youth in particular.

Some Characteristics of China's Students

Today, due to the "one family, one child" policy and especially in the urban area, China's children are often known as "little emperors." Because of a greater availability of money and a higher degree of comfort in the house, the only child grows up doted upon by parents and grandparents, becoming spoilt and self-centered. Parents in general are anxious for their child to have the best things that money can buy. Moreover, they want their children to receive the best education possible. The schools, being exam-oriented, place heavy demands on pupils and require a lot of homework. The education in general is based on rote knowledge, memorization, repetition and passivity. This system kills originality and creativity. The textbooks put a strong emphasis on "socialist morality," social order and political leadership. Materialism and atheism dictate the basic contents. The Cultural Revolution's opinion that good manners were bourgeois is now being countered by the "spiritual civilization" which comprises the Three Loves (for mother-

land, Party and Socialism); the Five Stresses (decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline and ethics) and the Four beauties (beautiful mind, language, behavior and environment), there is an emphasis on "an advanced education in science and technology, a high level of ideology and morality, the Communist ideal, a good spirit of cooperation with everybody for the Four Modernizations of the country." The results, however, are not immediately apparent.

The general climate in urban schools and colleges is characterized by a passive acceptance of the system. A small number of students are really committed to their studies and the strongest interest would seem to be in foreign languages. The great majority of students exert only a minimum effort to cope with the exams. They prefer to spend their energies in meetings with friends, in social and recreational gatherings. They are quite conscious of their rights and ready to complain about the bad conditions on the campuses, even joining demonstrations (all the student demonstrations in recent years have started with these practical issues). But a deep concern for human and democratic rights, in the full political sense, is shared only by the most reflective and sensitive groups.

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"Ten years after the present economic reform started, the student's moral concepts are undergoing serious changes. Compared with the generations before, young students now value money as well as achievement; they emphasize self-interest in choosing their own careers. Among the students surveyed, 91.8% hope they will have high incomes, or an income as high as possible..."⁴ However, they do not seem to be satisfied. The same report continues: "Unlike the young Chinese in the 1950s and 1960s, many young students now worry about their future, instead of being simply optimistic." The reasons given are that they consider their prospects unpredictable, their future worrisome or bad. Furthermore, they consider that their life has

become disoriented and their scale of values confused. Any foreign visitor who manages to contact and communicate with young people in China, unfailingly is asked to help him/her to go abroad. There is an obvious sense of frustration and hopelessness among Chinese students.

In the countryside, where the one child policy cannot be strictly implemented, but where traditional convictions are still strong, and there is still a strong preference for male offspring (cases of killing baby girls are frequent), children are often exploited as early as possible for house and farm work, growing up without any proper instruction.

The official percentage of children attending primary school is over 95%; however only 60% complete 6 years of primary education and only about half can be considered as really having a primary education. This factor is also due, in part, to the shortage of qualified teachers. In some provinces 60-70% of juvenile offenses is committed by school drop-outs.⁵

Some Characteristics of China's Youth

Chinese youth today are interested in "searching for the new, for the practical and for the different... They tend towards consumerism, enjoyment of life, are interested in what is fashionable, the useful, the convenient, the modern and the attractive. Their interests and contacts run along these lines."⁶

The evening life in Chinese cities bears out the truth of the above observations: bars, discos, karaokes are quite popular, attended, mainly by young people who enjoy themselves by drinking, listening to music and dancing, not infrequently in a rather sophisticated atmosphere. Youngsters also fill the theaters and cinemas, especially if Western films are being shown.

Modern rural youth, unlike their elders who have been satisfied to live in a small village for a lifetime and to earn enough to feed their families, feel themselves under-employed on the farm and are eager to go to "better" places, to see the world outside. Furthermore, they don't want to return home unless they have earned a substantial sum of money. They also have other reasons for leaving the villages: the generation gap, intolerance for or refusal to accept the traditional ways of living (clan type of the family, children being "property" of the parents, all

authority concentrated in the hands of the father, arranged marriages, etc.), attraction of modern comforts, spirit of adventure, etc. They leave home in the thousands: statistics show that between 100 to 200 million rural youth are in this kind of situation. At best, they end up as hawkers, domestic servants, or on construction teams, working and living in the terrible conditions of the mushrooming building sites of the booming cities and towns, or not infrequently, they join gangs engaged in any kind of crime or illegal traffic, from prostitution to smuggling.

Young people, both in the rural and urban areas, are convinced that knowledge of technology and science (computer science, in particular) will ensure an income in the future; but only a very few can afford to obtain this knowledge and realize their dream. Even those who have an opportunity to attend either day or evening classes, sooner or later, and for a variety of reasons, find they cannot continue. Once they have left school, they are unable to obtain a satisfactory job. Soon they are found wandering the streets associating with unsavoury groups, and often ending up as delinquents. Zhang Yuan's recent film, *Beijing Bastards*, vividly depicts these gangs roaming the streets of the capital. The film has been officially banned.

Youth, given a choice of profession (or even those who can only dream about the possibility), list their job priorities in the following order: opportunity to demonstrate ability, a chance to learn, social status, stability, salary and an easy job.⁷

Many employers maintain that the young employees lack idealism; that they are concerned only with themselves. Critics point out that young people are generally interested in sitting for graduate examinations only because this is a step towards getting a better job; they are interested in learning foreign languages because this can be a step towards going abroad, or being transferred to big cities or to special economic zones.⁸

Interest in Religion

Interest in religion seems quite widespread among Chinese youth. In rural areas, this interest is based on utilitarian motives, such as healings, exorcisms, extraordinary events, prediction of the future, assurance of protection for dead relatives, etc.

Being very pragmatic, young peasants resort to religious practices and beliefs only if they see something useful in them. They are also attracted to certain religious sects which exert a strong influence on their psychological makeup.

The interest in religion among students and intellectuals, at the same time frequently springs from the present spiritual vacuum, from disillusionment, from lack of faith in the official ideology, from moral confusion as well as from interest in the Western world and culture.

"In recent years, with the implementing of the Party's policy on religion, religious activities in monasteries in various parts of the country have been restored. A number of young people have enthusiastically embraced Buddhism; some even apply to live in monasteries and become monks or nuns," reads the report of a research carried out in Fujian.⁹ "These young people were born and grew up in the sunshine of the new society. What, then, made them so eager to become Buddhists?" The report asks and finds the answer in the following motivations: the influence of their Buddhist families, the attraction of Buddhist culture and its works of literature and art, loss of courage when confronted with set-backs, disappointments, failures, bitterness, as well as the influence of fatalism and superstitious ignorance, etc.

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Colleges and universities are becoming aware that a growing number of students and graduates, even those who have specialized in technical subjects, are turning to religion. In a Catholic catechumenate in Tianjin opened in 1988, 90% of the 300 participants came from technical institutes.¹⁰

"A certain university surveyed some of its students and found that most students do not have the least knowledge about religion or 'know very little' or are 'very vague' about it. Young people have a very strong desire to learn, and some young people want to learn about religion. This is only normal.

We regret that their desire cannot be met, with the result that they come to know and judge religion by hearsay, or by reading certain literary works. Some of them turn to religious organizations or actually go into the temples and monasteries."¹¹

Interest in both traditional religions and Christianity even among young intellectuals and writers can be verified by the number of publications and research being done in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and the popular religions of the minority ethnic groups. For Christianity, in addition to a growing number of conversions among intellectuals, there is the phenomenon of "Cultural Christians", so named by Shenzhen University professor Liu Xiaofeng. These are Christian believers without any established church affiliation.

The official Chinese press frequently carries articles on "the widespread superstitious practices" among young people. Christians who visit China also observe this phenomenal interest in religion and the number of conversions. Many do not hesitate to speak of a religious revival and quote the 1992 report of the State Statistical Bureau stating that about 200 million mainlanders profess some religious belief.¹² It is difficult to contradict this claim, but it is equally difficult to verify it with reliable data and statistics, when we take into consideration the various underlying motivations for the religious interest. However, even if some are motivated by the wrong reasons, the interest of Chinese youth in religious issues can be an indication of the desire for a fuller and richer way of life, one which encompasses the whole range of human values, both material and spiritual.

Some Characteristics of China's Christian Youth

Basically, Christian children and youth are very much like all their peers, but they also manifest some differences. Visitors to Christian communities and villages are often surprised by the large number of children attending church. This is all the more amazing since everybody knows that the government regulations do not allow adults to bring children to church nor do they permit anyone under 18 to be baptised. Christian parents do not seem to be afraid of the penalties imposed for

breaching these regulations nor do they seem afraid of violating the "One Family, One Child" policy. The children themselves seem quite happy and enthusiastic. "I had never seen so many children in Sunday school!" writes a Protestant catechist visiting a village in Zhejiang. "Tears came to my eyes as I watched them happily sing, pray and study the Bible. Each of the house churches I visited had three to five Sunday school classes, and the total number of students ranged from 100 to 300 per house church."¹³

When visiting Catholic families, one sees many youngsters reciting prayers and learning catechism with the help of their grandparents and parents. They lack religious books, but they seem eager to learn about the religion for which their relatives had to suffer so much. Actually, they know very little about Christian doctrine and their ways of expressing the faith seem rather simple; but their strong feeling of solidarity provides them with stability in China's present confused moral standards and spiritual vacuum. Many of them readily volunteer for services to the local Christian community. These services often require courage and involve risks, e.g., they contact priests and other Catholic families, distribute religious literature, teach catechism to friends, organize celebrations or pilgrimages, etc. Religious vocations are comparatively numerous. A significant number of young people want to become priests and nuns in order to put their complete life in service to the Church.

Difficulties do not keep Christian youth who belong to the unofficial communities, (those who refuse to join the government-supported Patriotic Associations) from joining the Church. Often, they are harassed and hindered from carrying out their activities: catechism classes are interrupted by the Public Security officers, religious literature and articles seized, young people detained, beaten, fined and even sent to re-education camps, as happened last year in Hebei and in Fujian.

Chinese youth do not lack courage. They manifest a sacrificing and fighting spirit. Young religious believers, Christians as well as Tibetan monks and nuns, stand out as models for their courageous witness to their religious faith.

These young people stand out all the more because they are part of a generation that supposedly lacks ideals and whose main concern is personal economic gain. Their living situation is complex and difficult. They are deprived of their freedom of

speech and free exercise of their religious belief and are under constant pressure from the government. In addition they must also fight against the temptations presented by economic progress and the secularism of the modernization process which can be detrimental to their altruism, to their love of service and to their religious commitment. But it is only in people such as these that the hope for a truly brighter future for China can be realized.

End notes

1. "Wounded" as Xiao Hua, the heroine portrayed by Lu Xinhua in *The Wound*, as "confused or frustrated" like Pan Xiao in her letter to *Zhongguo Qingnian* (Chinese Youth) in May 1980, which started a long public debate among the youth, as "cynical" as Li Xiao Zhang of *If I were truly...* ("You are an impostor!" "Don't be silly. They all are!"), as "redundant or useless" like those who illegally returned to the cities without permission to work, as "disillusioned fighter", like some pro-democracy activists, etc.
 2. Wang Zhenyu, in "Student Concepts of value have changed", *China Daily*, 20 August, 1988.
 3. Wei Lei, in *Zhongguorende Renge* (The Personality of Chinese People), Guizhou People's Publishing House, 1988, introduces this term *bianji xinli* (boundary or limit psychology), to explain this phenomenon of double standard or split personality between the traditional and the modern, the theoretical principle and the practice, etc.
 4. Wang Zhenyu, op. cit.
 5. *China Daily*, 5 September, 1988.
 6. Wei Lei *Zhongguorende Renge* (The Personality of Chinese People), op. cit., pp. 121-123.
 7. According to a survey conducted by the magazine *Zhongguo Qingnian* (Chinese Youth), quoted in *China Daily*, 18 March, 1986.
 8. *China Daily*, 28 October, 1986.
 9. "Why some young people become Buddhists" reported in *Religion under Socialism in China*, Ed. Luo Zhufeng, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., New York, 1991, pp. 183-191.
 10. More information is given in *China News Analysis*, No. 1440, June, 1991.
 11. *Religion under Socialism in China*, op. cit., pp. 186-187.
 12. Quoted in *Hong Kong Standard*, 28 September, 1992.
 13. Su Shan, in *Asian Report*, No. 198, March/April 1993, p. 3.
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