

An African Student in Red China

by Emmanuel John Hevi

A young idealist from Ghana discovers the disillusioning truth about Peking's medical schools, plumbing, segregation, and campus life.

My first contact with the People's Republic of China took place when the poorly heated and poorly pressurized Iyushin plane which took us from Rangoon via Mandalay touched down in the provincial capital, Kunming. We arrived at about three o'clock on November 27, 1960. We had departed from Accra, Ghana, seven days earlier, three student companions and I, and were received at Kunming airport by two broadly smiling Chinese comrades, one representing the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which had granted us scholarships, and the other representing the Chinese Tourist Agency.

The following day we continued our journey by the same plane to Peking, capital of the People's Republic of China. Here also there was a reception committee awaiting us, this time a very imposing affair consisting of high officials of the All-China Federation of Labor, and the dean of the Foreign Students' Department, and other staff of the Institute of Foreign Languages, together with an interpreter. We were received with all the outward signs of cordiality. After very casual immigration and customs formalities, we were taken, with hugs, handshakes, and backslaps, to a sumptuous banquet in the airport's restaurant. There were many speeches and toasts

to the eternal friendship of the African and the Chinese peoples.

The banquet over, we boarded an ancient and rickety bus. The drive to the Institute seemed to last an eternity. Despite our woolen clothes, we found the weather bitterly cold, and to us who had lived all our lives around the Equator it was veritable torture to be suddenly transplanted into that piercingly cold climate.

That first night, I lay awake a long time, turning over memories of the events that led me to China, of my wife and family, my parents and relatives, of all the friends I had left behind me thousands of miles away. And I thought of the seven years of hard work that lay ahead before I could qualify as a doctor. The warmth of the greeting we had received from the Chinese also held my attention for a long time that night; I noticed then and subsequently how especially cordial was the welcome given to students, like myself, from Ghana. At first, this pleased and impressed me. It was only later that I came to realize that there were special reasons for this special welcome given to Ghanaians, and that the Chinese reserve their most cordial greetings for people whose countries are known, or are expected, to be traveling along the same road as China—to communism.

As time went on, I became more and more uneasy at this singling out of the Ghanaian students for special consideration by the Chinese.

Life on a Chinese campus has some rather striking characteristics, the main one being that students are expected to live like Spartans. In the

Institute of Foreign Languages, overseas students lived separately from the Chinese, so foreigners did not really have a proper opportunity to learn about the life of Chinese students. It was only when I entered the Medical College that I got to know about university life in China. What I saw came as a pretty sharp shock.

Eight Chinese students occupy a room ten by twelve feet in size, sleeping in tiered bunks. Their personal belongings—boxes, bags, books, and clothing—are stacked higgledy-piggledy in any available corner. For lack of space, there are no tables, no chairs, no bookshelves. Students have to study in the lecture halls. The room has one door and one window. In winter, the window is sealed shut with wedges of newspaper; the door is always kept closed because of the cold. With eight people, those rooms get very stuffy! Each accommodation block has three floors; each floor, containing nearly 150 students, has one washroom and a lavatory with five cubicles. In some of the cubicles, the water system is permanently out of order. The result is rather hideous. On the floor where I lived (in Block 5-2, which was mainly occupied by foreign students: Nepalese, Indonesians, Albanians, Vietnamese, and myself, the lone African in the Peking Medical College) every student swept his own room and left the rubbish in the corridor. On Sundays when the comrade charwoman had her day off, the corridor got bestrewn with rubbish. I forbear to repeat the caustic comments of Sunday visitors, many of them diplomats; the best that can be said is that the living quarters of the Chinese students were a good deal more squalid.

The lecture halls were swept once a week, on Saturday afternoons. It is not easy to describe the squalor of those halls by Friday afternoon and Saturday morning. In winter, many of the students catch cold. Phlegm and sputum are spat on the floor indiscriminately during lectures. Offenders are never rebuked. Everybody seems to regard spitting as normal. There are about 5,000 students in the college (though the number may have increased since I was there), and all eat in

one dining hall, which also does duty as assembly hall, theatre, and indoor games room. Lecturers who are not Party members also eat here.

The teaching staff are a little better accommodated. Three or four bachelor professors and lecturers share a room. They sleep on camp beds and their room may have one or two small tables with matching chairs. There is not much else by way of amenities and certainly nothing which could be regarded as approaching comfort. The relationship between students and tutors is the closest thing to social equality I saw in socialist China. But the officials running educational institutions, Party members with hardly any exception, stand outside this relationship.

The whole college has only one bathhouse, which serves professors, technical assistants, and students alike. The bathhouse is divided into two compartments: a small section with six bathtubs for members of the staff, and a larger compartment containing twenty-six showers for the 5,000 students. The same bathhouse serves men and women alike, so an arrangement is worked out to avoid embarrassing clashes. On one day, men bathe between midday and two o'clock; women between five and seven-thirty in the evening. The following day the order is reversed: women in the afternoon, men in the evening. The college has about as many women as men. The mind boggles at the thought of what would happen if all 2,500 men decided to have their bath on the same day. Each person would have seventy-two seconds to undress, bathe, dry, dress, and get out. Many foreign students found the hygiene in this bathhouse so unimpressive that they refused to bathe there, preferring to go quite long distances to their respective embassies.

Do you think I'm being unduly critical? Well, of course it would be foolish to expect elaborate amenities in the universities of a country which is struggling to raise itself from the dust of backwardness. A life of austerity is concomitant with that struggle. And in China, which for centuries has known huge mass populations, overcrowding has to be accepted as a norm of life. Through long experience, the Chinese can adapt themselves to conditions which would daunt people of other countries. But the conditions I met with could easily have been remedied by a government more concerned with the welfare of its people and less with expenditure on aid to communist guerrillas in other countries and on military preparations for dominating and annexing weaker neighbors.

A Chinese girl student once said, quite bluntly, that Africa is universally known as the most

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backward continent on earth. I come from this "primitive backwater," and so far as accommodation for higher as well as lower institutions of learning is concerned, and in what relates to personal and general hygiene and the treatment of students as human beings, it is we Africans who must civilize the Chinese, not vice versa.

Lenin the Fountainhead

It is at the college and university level that Chinese students are formally introduced to Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao Tse-tung. Every student, no matter what course he is taking, has to attend four or five hours of compulsory political lectures each week. Students who get consistently low marks in political studies run the risk, no matter how good they are at their specialty, of expulsion to the collective farms. On the other hand, students who shine in the political course, however dim and backward in their formal studies, can be assured of high favor with their superiors.

School textbooks, and every other kind of book for that matter, all go through the censor's mill. All the textbooks have been rewritten to give them a Marxist bias. It is the same with fiction; everything an author writes must reflect the Party's attitude. If a writer is so foolhardy as to express opinions which run counter to what the Party says in any matter, two results will follow for certain: the book will never be published, of course; and the author will end up doing several years in labor and "political re-education" camps. If he is lucky enough to get out of these alive, and still wants to continue as a writer, then what you will get from him will be books praising the Chinese Communist Party to high heaven.

The thing goes so far that any new book you open seems to have the same theme as the one you have just closed. This is why I find it hard to work up much interest in novels published in mainland China.

There was a time when I went in for buying large numbers of little illustrated books: the sort of thing which in Africa or other parts of the world would be called comic books; only in China they cannot be called such because they contain no humor at all. They are simply bursting with politics, hidden or overt. One of these little books was telling me of a former soldier in the Liberation Army who after demobilization became a ragpicker for one of the state textile factories. This man, the little book said, was so expert in domestic economy that he made his shirt (he had

only one) last him ten solid years. The little book did not specify what material that shirt was made of, but I'll bet it must have been made of chain mail.

The fact is, of course, that clothing materials had become scarce and the people could not get any more than two feet of cloth per person per annum. So the Party adopted this method of conveying to them the sad fact that they had better make their shirts last longer, for they were not likely to get another one in the foreseeable future.

I remember the day my class in the Institute of Foreign Languages was issued copies of a new textbook for chemistry. The first chapter gave the definition of matter. It began: "Lenin said . . .," and there then followed something that Comrade Lenin considered to be the correct definition of matter. But this definition conflicted so violently with everything I had learned before that I promptly raised the point with the instructor. She explained to me very patiently that what our class was expected to do was to master some technical terms; we were not to worry about Lenin's definition of matter. And so I stopped worrying. But millions of high-school students all over China have really got something to worry about; that book is their foundation textbook in chemistry. Now, of course, Lenin is a very important political thinker. But did you know he was also a great physicist and chemist? You didn't? Well, the Chinese Communist Party says he is, and the Party must be right whatever the rest of the world says!

Chinese universities and colleges very rightly pay great attention to the natural sciences, medicine, agricultural science, and technology. These are particularly important to China in her efforts at socialist reconstruction. They concentrate on these studies. Any subject not directly connected with industrialization or food production is considered "useless." So if you are aiming at going to China to study economics, anthropology, sociology, or any of the liberal arts, you had better think again; for either these things are not catered to in Chinese education or they are narrowly treated from a doctrinaire Marxist viewpoint. The study of history is limited to the history of the Chinese Communist Party, while studies in politics won't take you further than Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao Tse-tung.

In just the same way as books are controlled, professors are subject to control in what they teach. I came across a striking example of this in the Peking Medical College. Our biology professor was lecturing to us on metabolism. There was every indication that she was an expert in

her subject (she had studied, I believe, in the United States before China's "liberation"). Yet she told us that, because proteins, fats, and carbohydrates are interconvertible during human metabolic processes, the people of China do not suffer any nutritional loss in consequence of their diet's deficiency in fats and proteins. This is as much as to say that all the advice doctors and experts in nutrition give us about the importance of mixed diets to our health is just flat nonsense. I did not blame her then, nor do I blame her now. She was not telling us what she knew to be a fact, but rather what she had been ordered to tell us as a political necessity. It's not surprising she could not look us in the face as she was telling us this tripe nor make what she said sound convincing.

All this is easily understood by those who know something of the situation in China. Faced with a super-acute shortage of protein foods (meat, eggs, milk) and fats, the Party declares that these things are no longer real necessities, but are luxuries which the Chinese people can well do without. The people accordingly must be persuaded to accept an all-carbohydrate and nutritionally useless roughage diet until an improvement in the food situation occurs.

This lecture on metabolism was one of the foundation stones on which I was expected to build my medical studies. Chinese doctors are safe from ridicule in their own country because everyone is taught to accept the same standard lie. But I should be hooted at with contempt if I voiced such an idea outside China. This distortion of what I knew to be scientific fact cropped up within my first days at the Medical School. I began to wonder how many more lay ahead and what use my studies there were going to be to me in the profession I wanted to follow.

The Seeds of Disillusion

One of several incidents that did much to shake my confidence in the teachers and the college happened when I went for the first time to the organic chemistry laboratory. That afternoon we were conducting an experiment to determine the melting point of some organic chemical.

Before we started, I had an argument with my partner about how the apparatus should be fixed for checking the accuracy of the thermometer. He stoutly maintained that, since we were taking the temperature of water, the bulb of the thermometer should be immersed in the boiling water. That, of course, would have been correct enough

if only approximate results were required. But we were supposed to be checking the scientific accuracy of our thermometer, and any factor which could give rise to an erroneous reading had to be carefully eliminated. The water we were using was ordinary tap water containing dissolved chemical impurities and our flask still had irremovable deposits in it from previous experiments. So I argued that the best method (as every student of elementary chemistry knows) was to keep the thermometer bulb well above the water, in the stream of escaping steam. He didn't look convinced, but he reluctantly allowed me to arrange the apparatus my own way. Shortly after, the supervising laboratory technician came round, took one look at our setup and told me the arrangement of my apparatus was dead wrong. I tried to explain, but she took the same line as my partner: the bulb must be immersed in the water. I was the only foreign student among all the Chinese in that laboratory group, and, as my Chinese was rather inadequate for scientific argument, I gave up.

But as soon as the class ended, I dashed to my room and feverishly examined four chemistry textbooks printed in English. All four books showed I was right. I took them straight to my Chinese laboratory partner in the experiment and showed him the authorities for my case. Would he do the same for his? He couldn't.

A fortnight later, another organic chemistry experimentation class came round. The technical instructor who had made the mistake was no longer there. I never saw her again till I left the college. There was another experiment on melting point that day. Her replacement took care to explain to us the right way to fix the thermometer and why. Everything she said was a repetition of the arguments I had previously put forward. I didn't expect apology or explanation, and none was offered.

By itself, this incident may not be of much consequence, and I do not cite it to boast a petty triumph. I refer to it because it was one of the links in the chain of events which eventually sent me packing home. Professors and technical instructors were people whose authority I had been taught to respect. Yet early on in my studies, I had been required to swallow statements that had no basis in scientific fact. If in such elementary things I had come across mistakes and deception, what was I to expect when it came to higher things about which I had no previous knowledge or easy means of checking? Would the medicine taught me by the Chinese be acceptable back home where I was to practice?

The Chinese delight in saying that such and such a good thing was done "under the leadership of the Party." It is for the same reason that train crews, hospital staff, and the personnel of every conceivable institution have to be under the control of Party representatives. I remember reading in one of my language textbooks of a steelworker in Shanghai who was severely burned in an accident at work. As they rushed him to the hospital, he kept calling out in his coma: "I want to live, I want to live. Steel needs me, steel needs me." This sounded a bit improbable to me, but that was what the textbook said. While the patient waited, the Party's agent attached to the hospital thought it necessary first to call a meeting of all the doctors and staff. He gave them a long harangue which in substance amounted to this: under the leadership of the Party, this man has to be saved at all costs. The doctors were finally released from the meeting and went into action. After a series of operations, skin grafts, and blood transfusions and many months of anxiety, the man's life was saved.

In the opinion of some foreign doctors, the Chinese did a really brilliant job. The lesson we were to draw from this story was that in socialist countries doctors give disinterested service to their patients, whereas in capitalist countries they are only interested in money, and that without the Party's leadership the man's life would never have been saved. But I somehow doubt if a man's life can be saved, however inspiring the "leadership of the Party," if the doctor in the first place does not have the know-how. And I certainly question the wisdom of leaving a patient to await treatment to enable his doctors to listen to a long harangue from an official of the Party.

The medical course in the China I know leaves much to be desired. It is entirely wrong to judge Chinese doctors by the brilliant performances of a few of their number, such as in the case of the burned steelworker. Many of the old hands, trained in Japan, the United States, France, and other countries may be as good as doctors anywhere else in the world. The new crop of communist doctors, however, appears to be wanting in much. The incompetence of Chinese doctors was always a regular topic of discussion among foreign students. Most of us had had our individual experiences and no one ever appeared impressed by their performance. I knew a foreign student, a girl who was so seriously ill that we all feared for her, but who obstinately refused to go to the hospital. Because drugs were in rather

short supply, doctors gave the patient "*á-sí-pí-lí-ní*," alias aspirin, for almost every ailment. That girl did not care for more aspirin. Another girl who had lain in a solitary bed in the Third Medical Hospital (attached to my college) for several weeks, simply walked out on her doctors and into the full blast of Peking winter—in her pajamas. Rather a silly thing to do, but I am not sure I wouldn't have done the same thing under the circumstances.

How Qualified a Doctor?

Added to my growing concern over the quality of the instruction at the Peking Medical School was a certain uneasiness over the fact that Chinese universities do not grant degrees, only diplomas. The absence of degrees in China was one of the main grievances of the first batch of twelve African students who left China for home toward the end of 1960. I found this question loomed large in the complaints of the only Rhodesian student who arrived a year later to study medicine. The look of the Medical College did not inspire much confidence in him, and when he learned that he would not be awarded a degree at the end of his studies, he decided he was wasting his time in China, for without a degree there was little chance of his obtaining recognition at home as a qualified doctor. This is the case in most African countries. We may be rightly skeptical about paper qualifications, but how far can we afford to disregard the usages of the community in which we hope to live and work?

It is not easy for me to say whether the abolition of degrees is just a measure aimed at doing away with fancy academic titles and thus promoting greater social equality. The official explanation is that the non-award of degrees "is in consonance with the socialist educational policy of China."

I got an unofficial—and more convincing—explanation from a student friend in Peking. According to him, communist students in the early days of the regime were so busy watching over the socialist consciousness of their non-communist fellows that they had little time left for attending formal academic studies. The result was that the non-communist students, who asked only to be left alone with their studies, began to beat their communist comrades in examinations to such an extent as to alarm the Party. To prevent "loss of face," diplomas were substituted for degrees. As qualification for diplomas, the student's level of socialist consciousness is consid-

ered even more important than his scholastic achievement. If, as it seemed after my first weeks in the college, it was questionable whether my training would match that of doctors trained in other countries, what then would be my fate on returning home? After seven years of grueling study, what if I were to arrive back in Ghana only to find that the government which gave a verbal promise to take me into its service on the strength of a diploma only had changed its policy in favor of medical graduates with degrees recognized by the world of medicine? As I pursued my studies in Peking, these anxieties were increased. They were not allayed by my ordinary day-to-day experiences as a student.

Toeing the Line for Fun

Chinese campuses do not have the multitude of different clubs and societies that enliven university life elsewhere. During my first weeks in the Language Institute, life was so unbearably dull that I asked the dean of the Foreign Students' Department to introduce us to some clubs we could join. He replied that we must wait until we knew Chinese. But when I had learned the language, I didn't trouble the dean with this question a second time; I had by then discovered that there were no student societies other than the Communist Youth League.

The two favorite sports in China are table tennis and basketball, but in many cases the basketball courts have been taken over for cultivation. Hunger has driven the students to convert almost all their playing fields into vegetable gardens. At no time during my stay in the country did I see or hear of intercollegiate sports competitions of any sort, and certainly I detected none of that friendly intercampus rivalry which puts so much healthy pep into college life. The students were obviously too busy growing cabbages to think of such frivolities.

Paradoxically, for all the emphasis on collective acting and thinking, I never got the impression of belonging to a corporate life. Even without sports activities or degree-giving assemblies, one would have thought there would have been occasions when the university gathered as a body to do something interesting, academically or socially. But the Chinese don't waste their time on convocation ceremonies. What comes closest is the assembly of a whole teaching institution on New Year's Eve. I was present at the one held in the Language Institute in 1961. The president mounted the platform in the hall that

does service also as dining and lecture hall, and amidst loud applause began his speech. It was what you would have expected from any run-of-the-mill Party secretary. He churned out all the stock statements of the Party. He told us that the East wind was prevailing over the West wind and how happy the Chinese people were under the leadership of the Party and all about the Great Leap Forward. We'd all heard this sort of thing time and time again. In a speech from the head of your college, you look for something relevant to your life as a student, something to set your brain working. But not if you are at a Chinese university. This president of ours, like his colleagues in other teaching institutions, was just a stalwart of the Party who had been rewarded with a job. He just stood there shouting: "Long live the people's communes!" The Party at that time had not officially condemned the commune idea, and I suppose that if he had dared to wish anything other than long life to the communes, he would have been reduced to the status of a peasant in one of them. He had to toe the Party line in order to retain his post as a fifteen-kilograms-of-meat-a-month president of a college.

Throughout our life in China there was a constant dearth of normal diversion and entertainment. Film shows were an important item of recreation during the earlier part of our sojourn. The films were usually either about their revolution or about the Korean War. The revolutionary films have an exasperating habit of ending on the same theme: while a gallant revolutionary hero lies wounded and dying, surrounded by anxious comrades, a young zealot comes running across the screen waving a voluminous red flag signifying the victory of the revolution. In China I never once saw a science-fiction film or any film that stirred your imagination.

Dance parties were held on the campuses, but these were rather peculiar affairs. In the beginning, music used to be provided by a Chinese student band. But it made no attempt whatever at real dance music. Chinese bands have three standard songs (one of them is "Socialism Is Good") they play over and over again till you are ready to burst your spleen in sheer boredom. In a year I never heard anything like a new hit. But what really knocked all interest out of their dances for us was that things began to grow rather awkward when an African boy danced with a Chinese girl. Immediately after you left the girl, some tutor or a Youth League activist was sure to go running to her to scrutinize her about the subject of your conversation during the dance. The girl was duty bound as a good social-

ist to confess as requested or else suffer the penalty of being "criticized."

There was another kind of "entertainment" we tried but with no marked success. This consisted in just making friends. During our early days many Chinese students, mainly boys, approached us with intent to make friends. We accepted them readily, but we gradually learned that these "friends" were people set upon us by the authorities to report on almost everything we did. They reported on the books we read, the people we met, the usual topics of our conversation, and every other matter that could help the authorities to determine our level of socialist consciousness. We grew very resentful when we made the discovery about the informers, particularly as students who had no specific instructions to spy on us were strictly warned against associating with us.

Sino-African relations were in no way improved by the fact that such girl friends as we were able to make were packed off to prison or to commune farms for hard labor almost as fast as we made them, their only crime being that they dared to make friends with Africans, contrary to the Party's orders.

Too Painful a Price

The Chinese have so long posed as defenders of the African and the persecuted races that it must really come as a shock to many people to hear that racial discrimination is practiced in China. Chinese racial discrimination is not of the kind that springs spontaneously from the people. It is a deliberate attempt by the Communist Party to assert and to make the African accept once and for all the idea of the superiority of Yellow over Black. But we made them understand in very unequivocal terms that we were not prepared to add the burden of Yellow superiority to that of White superiority under which we and our forebears have been groaning for more years than we cared to count.

Among our woes "manufactured" directly or indirectly by the Party, was the people's hostility toward us. Foreign students were many times better off than the Chinese students, workers, and peasants. We never did a thing to merit this privileged treatment. We understood all too clearly that the Chinese Communists only sought to ingratiate themselves with us and thus make us more pliable for pro-communist molding. Who would blame a Chinese worker for being hostile to African students when he who toils to contribute to their scholarship funds is left half-starv-

ing on evil-smelling cabbage while the foreigners can eat good food in almost unlimited quantities? Or when he is made to drink and smoke the worst concoctions and clothe himself in the poorest garments while the foreigners imported by the Party can have the best in the land? And how could Chinese students be expected to put up easily with the fact of being packed eight to a room with a monthly allowance of 10 yuan while foreigners in the same institution lived one or two in a room and had 100 yuan each per month? Could Chinese tutors put up kindly with the idea of being paid 40 yuan monthly, not even half as much as their foreign students got? And what of the dean of an institution who has to receive the same pay as his foreign students?

At the beginning of 1961, Chinese students were spending about 10 yuan (roughly \$4.20) on food each month. The food is very cheap; cabbage is never very costly anywhere in the world. But by the time I left Peking, in April 1962, students in the Medical College were spending an average of only 5 yuan each month on food. The situation had grown so bad that even rice had become unavailable. The Chinese students had not tasted rice for the three months preceding my departure.

Out of a total of 118 African students who studied in China during my time, ninety-six have actually left and a further ten had signified their intention to leave by the time I packed my bags. This means that approximately 90 per cent of the original number have found something wrong with China—something which made it impossible for them to stay longer.

In my view there were two causes of the student exodus: First, China failed us miserably by not offering a standard and quality of education acceptable to us. Second, *we were disenchanted with socialism when we discovered that the Chinese brand of socialism was not the material of our dreams*—nor the nostrum by which we dreamed to cure all the ills of Africa.

Africans have studied in foreign countries where, in the midst of plenty, they suffered many forms of privation. But, somehow or other, they got through it all and today they are among the foremost and most respected leaders of Africa. But for us there was lacking the sustaining hope of reaching the final goal—sound education. We were suffering to no purpose. This purposelessness more than anything else made the majority of us back out.

No matter what the future holds I, for my part, will never regret my decision that Red China and I must go separate ways.