

# Going Down to the People

*Watching them, listening to them, it is easy to imagine that these are simply two intelligent, articulate young North American women. But listen to what they say and you realize that Susannah and Catherine Yeh are different.*

*Born and raised in China to an American mother and Chinese father, the Yeh sisters are a unique product of the Cultural Revolution. For the past year they have been living, working and studying in the United States, improving their English and talking to people about China. During the Cultural Revolution they joined the millions of Chinese young people who quit school to work in the fields and the factories. Both worked as "barefoot doctors", Susannah by design, Catherine more or less by accident.*

*In Ottawa recently they talked to the annual meeting of cuso (Canadian University Service Overseas) about being a barefoot doctor, and much else besides. Here are some of the things they had to say.*

**SUSANNAH** The barefoot doctor movement started among the people working in the communes down south. When I was in high school in 1966 the Cultural Revolution started and the barefoot doctor movement was coming to a pretty high point, so I asked the school to send me to a hospital to learn to be a barefoot doctor. So I joined a group of people at the Chinese Traditional Medicine Institute in Peking.

First they'd talk about human bodies, how human bodies really function. And after we learn everything about our own bodies they start training us in Chinese traditional medicine. We also learned some western medicine, like how antibiotics really function and how you use them. And maybe a third of the time we were learning acupuncture.

After we learn acupuncture we went to the hospital clinics to see how the doctors really train and practice in the hospital. They explained everything to us as we were going to learn as fast as we could, and after three months like that we go into some kind of practice in the hospital, working side by side with the doctors. Some doctors here (in North America) will think "I learned for eight years to be a doctor, what do you know about your body?" But that's something about their ego: they have to control everything.

But in China doctors really know that the barefoot doctors are going to help them, because in China we still need a lot of doctors. And especially if you work with the people you're close to, you really know what's wrong with them.

**CATHERINE** When we went down to the countryside there was a big movement started by the youth. The youth said let's go down, since we can't decide what kind of education we want, we should go down and enquire from the people and see what they want. And millions and millions of Chinese youth went down to the countryside, went down to the factory to try to find out who is the people and how can we serve them. Or else it's an empty slogan, right?



Photo: Ottawa Citizen

Before I went I was sort of hollow, I had nothing in me, I don't know if I could believe in myself or not because I didn't know the values. I had been taught in books, but not in practice. So when I went there I was pretty scared. I was sixteen and I had never contacted true Chinese working people, but they took me in just like I was one of them, and that was so different from anything I have experienced.

I don't think I should call myself a barefoot doctor, but I did work as a barefoot doctor. My sister bought me the Barefoot Doctor Handbook, it describes every part of your body just like a medical book with common language that everyone can understand, and with pictures so you can see exactly what's happening. So I took it with me and it was tremendous, it was so useful. People come to me with an illness—in the fields during the harvest season people have to rush and lots of accidents happen—I don't know what to do, so I look in my book and try to find out what's happening.

And if I had never been down in the countryside I would never have dreamed I would be the least interested in medical care. I am scared of the responsibility. **SUSANNAH** I asked to be assigned to the little factories nearby the clinic, because if I am working side by side with the people I can treat them at the same time. I'm a worker in the factory, and when they need some kind of medical help, I help them if I can. Before that if they wanted to see a doctor they would have to leave the factory for maybe a few hours, but now the clinic is in the factory we save a lot of time.

A lot of people ask me about psychiatry in China. We don't have too much psychiatry, we usually don't need them. We have "people psychiatry" and the barefoot doctor is one. But the job is not done just by the barefoot doctors, it's done by the masses in the factory. For example some woman would complain that she had quarrelled with her husband. And everybody listened and tried to help, saying "Yes, you are right," or sometimes "We think you are wrong," and would try to help her understand why.

This has become like some kind of a movement in China, and I really feel the barefoot doctors can only be based on a socialist kind of country because we are not competing. We are trying to help each other, trying to serve the people.