

# nature

## 14 December 1978

### Human rights in China

MANY Western scientists have experienced the excitement in the past few years of establishing or re-establishing ties with scientists from the People's Republic of China. The openness and frankness of these exchanges (particularly in comparison with the unreal nature of some exchanges with the Soviet Union) has surprised and pleased those involved. Even though there clearly have been and continue to be strong political winds blowing in China, it has been widely anticipated that China will continue to take a fuller place in the international scientific community. But many of the more thoughtful visitors have left wondering what the true price is that the people have to pay to live in modern China. Some inkling of this now emerges from a recent Amnesty International report 'Political Imprisonment in the People's Republic of China'.

The constitution guarantees a number of basic rights, such as 'freedom of speech, correspondence, the press assembly, association, procession, demonstration and the freedom to strike'. In addition citizens have the right to 'speak out freely, air their views fully, hold great debates and write big-character posters'. Furthermore the state 'applies the principle of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" so as to promote the development of the arts and sciences and bring about a flourishing socialist culture'. However, all cultural undertakings must

'serve the workers, peasants and soldiers and serve socialism', and the state 'suppresses all treasonable and counter-revolutionary activities, punishes all traitors and counter-revolutionaries, and punishes newborn bourgeois elements' and 'other bad elements'.

A continuous campaign of purification seems to go on against counter-revolutionary elements, who face a wide range of punishments from public criticism to execution for their crimes of announcing reactionary solutions or writing reactionary posters. Trials leave a lot to be desired; the main aim seems to be to extract a confession, and defence is a rare luxury. Indeed those who refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing are subjected to much severer sentences. The number of counter-revolutionaries that courts have dealt with is difficult to estimate, but clearly runs into many tens of thousands. Chairman Mao himself once estimated the hardcore of reactionaries at two per cent of the whole population.

The Amnesty report is not cheerful reading; the crude ways in which those who do not follow the official line are humiliated, imprisoned or even exterminated cannot but worry all those who wish to establish the closer diplomatic, cultural and intellectual relations with China. And presumably for every one who runs foul of the judicial system for unacceptable views there are many who simply choose to remain silent. □

### Research councils dislocated

ON December 18, Shirley Williams, Britain's Secretary of State for Education and Science will officially open the new premises of the Science Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council at Swindon. This is the final step in a five-year process by which all but a handful of the staff of the two councils have been moved out of London. And the true dimensions of the inconvenience it will cause are now becoming all too clear.

For many of the staff, of course, the move to a more rural environment has had its attractions. Those whose work does not directly involve attending or servicing meetings or being on hand for the scientist who wishes to drop in may well feel that they have gained. But those whose effectiveness depends on easy contact with a wide variety of people have much more reason to complain. In the SRC, for instance, the Chairman's office stays in London, as do the directorates of marine technology and polymer engineering. But the Secretary to the Council is in Swindon, as is the Press Office. Both chairman and secretary are expecting to have to spend

an average of a day and a half per week at the other end of the line.

At present SRC council and committee meetings are continuing to be held in London, scattered around the premises of various learned societies. This is hardly an ideal solution, but in the future, wear and tear on council staff may well lead to pressure for more meetings to be held in Swindon, entailing complex cross-country journeys for those who do not live near London, and presumably necessitating more overnight stays. Fine in some respects; if visiting academics and industrialists can be prevailed upon to give up an extra half day, the quality of committee work will probably rise. But it is every bit as likely that attendance at meetings will fall.

Life in Swindon will be fine for a majority of the councils' staff. But the more senior the person, the more inconvenient and tiring it will be. The net result could well be that it will become much more difficult to recruit to the top posts, and that committee members will become much less willing to give of their time. □