

Chinese Students and their Universities

by Shi Xintian

translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.

Introduction

In China I am called a “foreign expert” because I am employed by a university to help my Chinese colleagues complete their education in foreign languages. During the last ten years, I have taught in five different places. Don’t imagine this is because I like change. No, but the Chinese authorities fear that we, “foreign experts” might become influential among our colleagues and students. They systematically thank many of us every two years, regardless of the quality of our work, to avoid any risk of ideological or political “contamination”.

During all these years, I have observed the development and behaviour of Chinese students in many large cities. In this article I would like to share my reflections and observations with you.

The Tiananmen massacre is already an ancient event!

Westerners are saddened when I tell them that students in 1996 no longer think about the Tiananmen massacre. Neither do they plan to engage in any new demonstrations. This year, on the night of June 3, many among them said to me, “The police are on alert. Once again they are doing this for nothing; nothing is going to happen.” Those who were saying this were twelve years old at the time of the “event”. The more clearheaded among them think that the students at the time, were wrong in confronting the authorities by forcing them to show their claws. One former demonstrator adds, confiding in a whisper, “With that kind of government, confrontation is worthless. Both sides become more entrenched in their positions and the weaker of the two is crushed. No, it is better to gain freedom gradually, imperceptibly but surely. In that way the government does

not lose face, and we achieve our goal without shedding blood!" He is certainly right.

Students are more economically comfortable

With better economic conditions, the life of the students has improved. They have more pocket money and are more resourceful about finding little jobs. As a result, their material life is more comfortable. We can see that every day by observing the food they eat and the fashionable clothes they wear. Furthermore, we often see students in restaurants, in taxi cabs and out dancing on a Saturday night. Only five years ago that was very rare! We must add that the manner of recruiting students also has changed. Previously, students were mostly scholarship holders. They came from humble backgrounds and considered it an exceptional opportunity to be able to study at the university level. Now, the cost for one year of study is more than 3000 *yuan*. Added to this amount are food, clothing and pocket money. Only fairly well to do families can meet such expenses. These young people are less inclined to profit from such an opportunity. They are less motivated and less inclined to concentrate on their studies. There are more leisure time activities in the city and around the campus and they can afford them.

Professors as always are poorly paid

With thousands of students paying 3000 *yuan* annually, the financial situation of universities and institutes should have improved considerably. But that is not the case. Chinese professors are still poorly paid. Even after years of education, they often earn less than factory workers without any academic qualifications whatsoever. To supplement their monthly salary many take on a second job or accept additional work such as teaching special courses, doing translations and secretarial work. Because of this the quality of their work suffers. They are satisfied to teach the same course every year; they never have the time to meet their students and still less to do a bit of research. Students openly declare that they do not want to become teachers. This situation is already disturbing at the present standard of education and for the future of university education in general.

However, the mistrust of the government towards intellectuals is understandable. Intellectuals tend to set up centres of reflection that call into question the present political situation or simply to adopt some critical stance. Authorities prefer to save professors from such 'perils' by keeping their minds busy and keeping them in the present situation.

Foreign experts less and less qualified.

The financial situation of "experts" has not improved either. At one time, with 1000 *yuan*, I was able to save something regularly, without depriving myself. Now with 3000 *yuan* I am not so well off. Some of my students, in their first year of work, earn more than I do. This lessening in buying power for the experts has also caused a lowering of standards. Real professors are no longer interested in teaching in China. As a result, they now hire just about anyone: a student who has just graduated, who is younger than the Chinese students; retired persons who seek to do something useful for a few more years; short term tourists who stay only briefly fearing to be unable to find work once they return home.

There is no doubt that the situation of the teachers, Chinese as well as foreign, is deteriorating along with the general level of education. The students are the ones who bear the brunt of this operation and paradoxically, it is at the very moment when they are asked to pay more and more.

The on-going Western fever

The taste for anything Western is always great. On the campus in the evening, we meet Chinese students who speak in foreign languages or who have their ear glued to the radio listening to the BBC, and the Voice of America. Western styles and tastes in music, clothing or hair style are all popular. American, French or Spanish magazines are passed from hand to hand in the dormitories and re-sold by small vendors. We also meet many young people who are preparing to study overseas. That is very chic! A few among them speak about this very seriously and might be able to realize their wish within a reasonable time. But most will not go abroad. They are satisfied to talk about their supposed family relations who will

pay the costs and help with the formalities. They cherish a beautiful dream for the pleasure of escaping even for a moment from an often dull reality. Within this context, the required Marxist education that they have all received since their infancy does not have much of an impact. It is a lesson learned by heart in order to get good grades in the examinations and to be admitted into the university. However it has very little influence on daily life. Students easily realize that it is a useless and thankless subject that brings additional unneeded stress at the end of the semester already loaded with too many examinations. Yet a good grade in politics can be a very useful last hope for those who are not too smart.

Collaboration with the authorities is not excluded

Strangely enough, in spite of the general crisis in Marxism, every year many students join the Communist Party, two or three in each class. Motivations change. This is what I have observed. Until 1989, there were still young people who believed in the Communist ideal and who supported the Party because it was in line with their own aspirations. There were also some who supported the Party because they had something that needed to be forgiven. I think in particular of those who took part in the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Then came the generation of “scouts”. From the intellectual point of view, these were not the best types, but they were generous students and docile. The political monitor could mention them for their good behaviour and their courtesy. Scouts are the type of young people we enjoy meeting who bear out their name. Now, however, it is the time of “profiteers” The Communist ideal is forgotten but the advantages which adherence to the Party brings with it are highly regarded. Those who become members of the Party hope to find a job they like, a good unit and the possibility of rapid social promotion. Certainly this type of member has always existed but now it seems they are becoming the majority. The classmates of a young man without personal convictions were chiding him for having just joined the Party. He answered them with no problem whatsoever, “When you are looking for work, you will realize that I was right!” A young woman asked me recently whether it was possible to adhere to the Party and also to be a baptised Christian. When I answered her in the negative, she was sur-

prised. She assured me that for her becoming a member of the Party changed nothing whatsoever in her way of living or in her deepest convictions. Obviously, Marx and Jesus were not in competition in her heart. It seems that the notion of sincerity had not so much as crossed her mind.

A baffling logic

We now come to the heart of the problem that astonishes so many Westerners. Chinese students have a different way of thinking about the integrity of life that demands adhering to certain principles. With a great deal of pragmatism, Chinese students take what seems worthwhile to them. They let the rest go without worrying too much about actualizing a certain harmonious synthesis among the various ideological elements they assimilate. These elements are sometimes incompatible! They can complain about political examinations and at the same time, in order to obtain supplementary advantages, kowtow before the political monitors who organize these examinations. Some students sent abroad for special studies, who are members of the Party, tell no one that they are Communists. They size up the situation, that is to say, the advantage or the harm that such information might bring. A Westerner would quickly label this kind of attitude as insincere or hypocritical. A Chinese, on the other hand, sees this as knowing how to utilize every possible asset in order to succeed, or at least not to set oneself against one's circle of friends. After all, many Taiwanese have no problem making investments in mainland China, all the while supporting the Guomindang.

Three ideals proposed to students

Chinese students are also in search of an ideal. They realize that their life is spiritually empty. They want to find some meaning in it and devote themselves to some worthy cause.

Here are three ideals proposed to them in everyday life:

1. *Marxism, of course, which is repeated to them over and over again.* This is of interest to them since it is a means of social promotion but as an ideal, it has no appeal. For them it is an ideology of another age. It resonated with their parents and their old professors

and it must still be respected since it is a facade which crumbles only slowly. It will no doubt still be around for some time to come in China. But it is not an ideal which today can motivate people, bring them happiness or answer life's crucial questions.

2. *Patriotism is another ideal officially presented to young Chinese.* Young people are shown how, in the past and still today, heroes and heroines have contributed to the reputation of the country and to its development by devoting themselves body and soul to its cause. The model proposed is Lei Feng, an exceptional soldier, who served the people and who died while he was still very young. This type of patriotism initially motivates students. The young men and women in the freshman year are required to weed the campus, plant trees, clean the dormitories and dining hall. Some among them do this with a great deal of generosity. This enthusiasm does not last because the attitude of their elders is far from exemplary. Their indifference and, even at times, the cynicism of the other students, the injustices encountered in finding work, the corruption among the cadres, the privileges accorded to members of the Party, etc., quickly discourage even the most ardent among them. They continue to repeat the slogans taught them but without conviction.

There is one exception, however, and this is in universities that specialize in foreign or diplomatic relations. Here the passion for patriotism is greater than elsewhere because in these places it is easier to calculate more concretely the extent of the challenges coming from the West, Japan and South Korea. Building up patriotism, therefore, is of great importance.

3. *Another ideal aimed at young Chinese and conveyed through films, Western novels and European and American business people living in China is the ideal of Western bourgeoisie.* This ideal seeks material and emotional comfort in a world where we can consume without restraint because the salaries are good; where we can satisfy all our family needs and even its whims. If we cannot immediately buy the most expensive machines: refrigerator, air conditioner, car, we economize. This is a motivation for work. This lifestyle is already widespread in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This ideal is not in contradiction to Beijing's present economic policy which encourages people to get rich. In the more developed regions such as Guangdong and Fujian, this way of thinking has met with a certain measure

of success among young couples who aspire to a more comfortable life. They feel that by working hard they will be able to obtain all they need to live the rest of their lives in comfort. A middle class is growing in the more developed provinces. The ideal being proposed is absolutely faulty. It is beyond realization for all the people in the relatively poor provinces where buying only one television set can wipe out many years of family savings. Furthermore, this ideal is incapable of satisfying the deepest aspirations of the person. Even the rich quickly sense within themselves a void that money cannot fill.

The private colleges, currently on the increase in the provinces that are better off, are beginning to notice this. Registration and school fees are exorbitant. Only the rich can afford to pay these fees for their children. They think they can get a better education in these colleges and better prepare their children for a profession and family life. But that is not what actually happens. These students, 'Daddy's boys' have money but lack affection. They are often lonesome and become difficult. Accustomed to being waited on, they are demanding. But the authorities in these establishments are more interested in financial gains than in education and pedagogy. The result is that they offer material comfort to the students but the contents and methods of instruction are mediocre. As far as education is concern, it does not exist. And that is not to mention the spiritual void that so many among them experience.

What is sure is that a well-to-do class is emerging. The people in this class are demanding and influential. They are in a better position than the poor classes to express their dissatisfaction and to force the government to change its inadequate educational policy, and its method of indoctrinating the population.

Seeking a more satisfactory ideal

The more thoughtful students are beginning to talk about human fulfillment, the quest for happiness and the meaning of life. They seek an ideal that provides a challenge, that it is say, something that can fulfill their deepest aspirations. In light of this situation, we can understand why the Christian faith is becoming so popular among the students. For them it is a new and demanding doctrine that calls them to a conversion of heart. It proposes remedies to the

evils from which China is presently suffering: intolerance, corruption, injustice, favoritism, lack of respect for human rights, etc. They believe that Christianity comes from the West and is lived out authentically by an influential segment of foreign experts (especially English-speaking experts). In effect, certain Western professors, without making any publicity, but by proposing to the young an authentically evangelical witness, naturally attract students and quite simply make them discover Christ, who gives meaning to life, animates and enlightens it. Some young Chinese professors, now join the students and participate in prayer meetings. This is a new phenomenon.

Conclusion

China must still reform its higher education. In order to become a modern nation, it must also modernize its educational methods. This is urgent since the good professors, relatively well-formed, are getting older and the young are slow in coming to relieve them. The content of education does not correspond to the needs of the present world. It is stuck in rigid, unattractive and often outmoded forms. The research that ought to stimulate progress in so many fields is non-existent. There is no stress on acquiring competence, or on the importance of specialization. The Marxist propaganda, which is of another era, defies the common sense of the most simple person and is conducive of infantilism. Education should be "laicised", separated from politics, and opened up to the world and the great streams of present day thinking. The Chinese people, so smart and so capable, deserve universities of a much better quality for the education of its youth. China must enter the 21st century under the best possible conditions.

The ideal foreign teacher in China

Teachers have the possibility of having a great impact on young minds and hearts. Below are qualities in teachers that, according to former teachers in China, would serve the students, their schools and China very well indeed.

Teachers should be:

**Professionally competent
Dedicated and kind
Authentically human
Friendly and free of any messianic aspiration
Open to discovering and
appreciating new values, ideals and needs
Knowledgeable of Chinese culture
Appreciative of Confucian and Daoist concepts of life
Able to see life within the global context
Conscious of the religious sense of the Chinese
Aware of young people's hunger for the meaning of life.
Witness to a value other than love of money**

Teachers should avoid:

**Excessive crusading for democracy
Advocating sexual liberation
Proselytizing and direct evangelization
Projecting an attitude of Western superiority.**