



Behind the Great Wall

Chinese students 'seek truth from facts'

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In October of 1976, the Central Committee of China's Communist Party decided to arrest Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, Jiang Qing, and Yao Wenyuan, the notorious "Gang of Four." So came to an end a decade of terror and destruction, an end to "whateverism" (whatever Chairman Mao said was sacrosanct), and an end to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

During the revolution, the dominant theme was class struggle. This meant that the development of socialism required working class purity and the elimination of all vestiges of bourgeois culture. Of course, the best way to prove one's working class status and loyalty was to identify decadent bourgeois values and attitudes among friends and colleagues, and the closer the friends and colleagues, the more convincing the proof. The result was an atmosphere of hatred, fear, insecurity, and paranoia.

Today the dominant theme is *shi qiu shi*, or "seek truth from facts." This innocuous sounding slogan has a profound meaning. It stands for the liberation of China from the dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution and symbolizes the Party's formal call for intellectual freedom. The slogan ushers in a wave of pragmatic social and economic reforms that are breathing new life into Chinese society. Nowhere in China are these reforms more dramatic than in the universities.

Nankai University, my home for the year, is located in Tianjin, China's third largest city. NU has 7,500 students (about 1,000 graduate students) and 1,700 faculty. The campus is about the same size as BSU's. There is very little landscaping, and the land space between buildings is mainly hard-packed dirt. There are no parking lots, no stadiums, and the sport fields have no grass. There is, however, a

beautiful lotus pond and a small attractive lake in the center of the campus, and the road from the guarded main gate is lined with trees.

The architecture at NU is Chinese-Soviet cement block. There are no fancy offices (most faculty have no offices), no air conditioning, no carpeting, and the indoor lighting is bad. Many buildings have no heat, and the restrooms are difficult for most Westerners to get used to. Between class periods, outdoor loudspeakers broadcast marching music, news reports, exercise cadence, Strauss waltzes, and Chinese classical melodies.

I teach two graduate classes per semester. My lectures are in English and the students seem to understand about 80 percent. My students are exceptionally bright, enthusiastic, mature, and very hard-working. They are very anxious to learn Western economics and more than willing to practice the principle of *shi qiu shi*. Their new-found freedom to study other cultures and philosophies seems to have ignited their intellectual curiosity and they appear quite bored with the dogmatic Marxist-Leninist theories that they still must learn.

Despite the fact that my students speak English quite well, their bashfulness about using the language makes classroom discussion virtually impossible. Besides, it is not in the Confucian pedagogical tradition to publicly confront the professor one-on-one. The casual American style of teaching is very uncommon here, and I have seen many Chinese professors just sitting before their classes reading from the text.

Student life at NU is much like that at any residential U.S. college. Freshmen arrive by train during the first week of September and are greeted at the station by upper-class students and faculty. The students come laden with typical student paraphernalia: trunks, tennis rackets, "ghetto blasters," guitars, and, in a few cases, doting parents.

The opening week is registration week..



"Why can't you smile? I thought intellectuals were better off nowadays."
by He Junhua

The students get settled in their assigned dorms. Undergraduates live eight to a small room and graduate students live four to a room. The music begins to blare, the pinup posters go up (all quite discreet), and the fun begins: talent shows, patriotic speeches, singing, poetry reading, imitations of Peking opera, outdoor martial arts movies, and dancing (usually waltzes and tangos, but some "disco"). The atmosphere is festive and the good cheer lasts until the mid-autumn festival in September. Then, when the weather begins to chill, the grind begins.

Beneath the prevailing optimism and the intellectual enthusiasm at NU, there is an undercurrent of hesitancy and uncertainty about the future. This is especially true of the older faculty for whom the scars of the Cultural Revolution have not yet healed. The lingering memory of the indiscriminate persecution of millions of innocent people makes many older Chinese intellectuals hesitant to commit themselves to China's new ideals. One senses among some of them a certain degree of estrangement and cynicism.

It should be remembered that during the Cultural Revolution, NU, like many other

universities in China, was virtually shut down by the Red Guard. The study of liberal arts and humanities was banished, books were burned, artwork was destroyed. Professors were beaten, imprisoned, publicly denounced by their students and colleagues, and sent to the countryside to do hard labor. Many were driven to suicide. NU legend has it that the "most guilty" faculty were given the honor of being imprisoned on the top floor of the main building from which they had free access to the windows.

It is not surprising that one must approach conversations with older Chinese professors with the same caution as one would with survivors of the Holocaust. Certain questions about the past are ultrasensitive and usually best avoided.

Younger students and faculty are more willing to embrace the new realism of *shi qiu shi*. They are more willing to talk about the Cultural Revolution and they openly express their determination to never let it happen again and their fear that it might. They have faith in the new reforms and are anxious to take advantage of the new opportunities which these reforms promise them. The young people quite readily admit that the ideal of egalitarianism is not attainable and they do not seem concerned that Western style modernization will inevitably lead to larger inequalities in economic and political power.

China is in transition. The dominant theme of class struggle has been officially replaced by "truth from facts." But, in fact, the transition is only beginning and the tension between the old and the new is very much in evidence at NU. I am confident, however, that the students and younger faculty will strive to continue the momentum of change.

Peter Lichtenstein is a Fulbright professor teaching economics at Nankai University in China. His impressions of the country and its people will be a regular feature in the next three issues of FOCUS.