Chapter One: Chinese Students and America

In the academic year 2001-2002 I had the privilege, courtesy of the US Fulbright Program and the Chinese Ministry of Education, to teach philosophy at the People’s University in Beijing, China, which in Chinese is Renmin Daxue, or Renda for short.

Renda is one of the top three universities in Beijing, along with Beijing University (Beida) and Qinghua University (Qingda). Qingda actually originated from a school set up by the Americans using war indemnity money—but that’s a story that I will tell later.

Returning to Renda, it is located in what the Chinese call Beijing’s silicon valley, or the place where all the computer stores and software and hardware geeks hang out. It’s also close to Starbuck’s, A&W’s, and MacDonald’s which, for an American with a need for regular shots of Western fast food, was a chief recommendation of Renda.

The other and by far and away best recommendation of Renda was the students. Intelligent, generous, polite, curious, and remarkably brave in conversing in English, they
filled my life with pleasure and amusement. I can only hope my teaching was instructive and fascinating enough to pay back their kindness.

My first classes passed off well enough, or perhaps the students were just being polite. The first class was a bit slow, however, and the students, while interested (or seeming so), did not engage much in discussion. So I ended up lecturing most of the time, which is not my style. The second class was much better and I got quite a bit of response from them, despite their halting English in some cases. But that’s much better than my Chinese which, apart from being minimal, makes even the taxi drivers laugh. The greater response may have been generated because, at the suggestion of another Fulbright scholar here, I started off by asking each student to write down three things they knew about the United States and three questions they had about the United States.

Here, for delectation and instruction, are some of the results, with the English cleaned up a bit:

What do Americans love, God or money?

Do the people in the US like China?

Why are people in the US full of energy—the culture or some other reason?

In world affairs why do Americans use so much violence?

What’s USA’s 21st Century destination?

When China comes to take back Taiwan by force, what do you think the Americans will do? [The student who asked this question also said that one of the things she knew about the US was the Missile Defense System]

Could Americans protect all people from inequality and give people of every color the same chance?
Do all Americans agree with their government’s decisions, such as trying to control other countries’ conduct?

In American eyes, what is most important, freedom or life? [This student also put down as one of the things he knew the “Liberty Goddess”]

Many people say the US is just like heaven? Is it really?

What’s the position of philosophy in American universities?

How great a percentage of the American people dislike China? [The three things this student put down as what he knew about the US were three wars: War of Independence, Civil War, and the Gulf War]

Can a person graduate with a degree in philosophy in the US and get a good job?

Why does the US think that it’s always right? [This student also claimed to know that American philosophy is utilitarianism]

Why does the US think that its values and ideas are applicable everywhere in the world? and Why is philosophy in the US less developed than in Europe? [This student also put down as things he knew about the US: George Bush, basketball, and William James]

Another student marveled that America was now the most powerful country when it had only been in existence for 200 years.

Do most people in the US still believe in God today?

Why do Americans always attack other countries and their people? Why not visit other lands peacefully and aid the poor?
Why are Americans so rich? and Do Americans really have European tradition as their cultural base? [This student also asserted that some Americans can’t speak English]

The Government of the US likes to intervene all over the world. How many people in the US understand China?

The US is both heaven and hell. Is the US afraid of a strong and wealthy China?

Why are there so many killings with guns in the US?

Why do people pay so much attention to their politicians’ private life, such as love, family, sex? [This student also said she knew that the US had fast and convenient food but that it was short of nutrients]

Well, there you have it: a fair sampling. I could not respond to all of them, of course, but I made an effort to respond to a few. In particular I had them read the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights (which form the average American’s attitude if anything does), so that they could see the emphasis placed by these documents on rights and indeed on natural and universal rights. For it is this that explains the American belief that everyone should enjoy the same rights and that American politicians should speak and act on that idea.

A friend back in the States to whom I sent these questions gave them to her American students. Here, for comparison both in content and style, is what one student wrote in response.

“What do Americans love, money or God?” Not an easy question. There’s a very large part of our lives where money is, for many people, THE focus of their lives. Or if not money itself, then the trappings of it. In fact it is quite easy to say that American culture is far more materialistic than spiritual. But when real life disrupts us from our avarice-focused routines, we find that we draw no real comfort from money.
In the wake of the national tragedy of 9/11, people did not review their monetary assets. They prayed to God. And not alone, but with their communities. So, to answer you, we love God more than money... we just tend to forget that sometimes.

“Do the people in the US like China?” I believe most people have no like or dislike of China, and the truth is, since our nations are not on very good terms, we don’t know very much about life in China. I think that there a lot of things about China Americans could like, and vice versa. That being said, China is a non-representative government of a Marxist, or in this case, Maoist, philosophy that teaches that power comes only from the barrel of a gun and that violent overthrow of a government, regardless of the people’s wishes, to put in place a communist regime is a positive development. The United States, being foremost among representative Republics and having democratic ideals, will stand against such actions.

“Why are people in the US full of energy - the culture or some other reason?” In US culture, ambition is considered generally a virtue. By that, I don’t mean backstabbing or undercutting your rivals, but doing more work, and better. And when this energy or concentration is not focused on work, then it is focused on any of the other hundred things one can do. We work hard, we play hard. Sometimes there are so many facets to American life that even the unambitious find themselves with many obligations in short succession. Thus, this energy is a necessity. This is most particularly present in the Northeast region. There is a lot of competition and only those who can outshine their peers will advance.

“In world affairs why do Americans use so much violence?” I am not sure a country that used tanks and machineguns to dispel a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration of their own young intelligentsia has any right to comment on America and violence. Also, I am not exactly sure what is meant by this question. America has responded to violence with violence after words and negotiations have failed. If the questioner is referring to the Korean, Vietnam, or Gulf Wars, then I must respond that the United States was responding to military action against our allies by belligerent factions. In World War II, America acted in much the same way to liberate China from the Japanese, both before and after we entered the war (the Flying Tigers fought in the skies over China against the Japanese starting in 1938).

“What is the USA’s 21st Century destination?” Interesting question. I’m sure we’ll find out once the century’s done and we look back on it. My hope is for Americans to not take so much for granted and to rediscover that the real important thing in life is to raise a family well. It would be nice if we discovered the cure for cancer or AIDS, but I hope we learn more about living life than manipulating it at the cellular level. I’d also like to see, if not a Pax Americana, then at least a coherent foundation towards a world peace kept through the vigilance of our governments.

“When China comes to take back Taiwan by force, what do you think the Americans will do?” Taiwan is an independent sovereign nation from the USA’s point of view, with a populace and government that do not wish to live under the Maoist regime of China. USA also does a great deal of commerce with Taiwan. In addition, USA has an interest in keeping the balance of power in Asia. Chinese dominance of the region could be a stranglehold on Japan, one of America’s allies. So, IF China should try to
take Taiwan back by force, the USA will fight it, and no inch of Taiwan’s soil will be taken without heavy loss of life. It would result in a savage war that neither side could be truly said to win, but the USA generally does not give up easily.

“Could Americans protect all people from inequality and give people of every color the same chance?” On the level of government and law, we do. It is illegal to deny anyone a job for reasons of race, sex, religion, sexual orientation... but that is the official side of things. But a government cannot control all the hearts and minds of its citizens, and personal pettiness and prejudice will still exist. It is just that such things are not encouraged, and they get less prevalent every year. Every ethnic group and nationality has prejudice or the potential for prejudice within them. It is part of being human, just not a good part.

“In American eyes, what is most important, freedom or life?” America has gone to war 9 times since it’s inception for the cause of Freedom. The War of Independence; the War of 1812 to defend that Independence; the Civil War for the freedom of African American slaves; the Spanish-American War to liberate Cuba from the Spanish; the First World War to free Europe from aggressive Imperial states; the Second World War to free Europe again, from the Nazis, and Asia from the Japanese Empire; the Korean War to defend South Korea from the North; the same in the Vietnam War (though we didn’t understand that the Vietnamese in general wanted all foreigners out, regardless); and the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait which had been attacked by Iraq. We have paid a butcher’s bill in lives each time. Yet we will not hesitate to go to war in defense of our own freedom, or of someone else’s, again.

By the way, I like the idea of calling the Statue of Liberty the “Liberty Goddess.” It’s quite appropriate.

Let me add next what a Chinese student wrote to me about the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s and 1970s.

You asked me what I thought of the Cultural Revolution in China under Chairman Mao, and now I just tell you my own opinion. I think that it was totally wrong of course. There were many problems that hadn’t been solved properly from
the foundation of the PRC (People’s Republic of China), and at last the Cultural Revolution came. That is quite a complex problem. I think there are many reasons.

First, maybe it is because power was too centralized in a few persons, especially Mao. Maybe we can analyze starting from Mao. Obviously he was an outstanding leader of the revolution, but he was no good at leading a country in its development. Sometimes I think he was good at plotting. He pretended to be democratic and in the 1950s he said to the people that they could talk about everything freely. The people believed in their leader, and they expressed themselves freely because they were sure what they said was good for the country. But to their surprise, in 1957 Mao called all those had said what they truly thought “YOU PAI” or “rightist”. At that time if you were a “YOU PAI” you were an enemy of the people. From that time on, whatever Mao said was truth and whatever Mao did was truth. Maybe you have known all about this. I just want to say nearly everyone obeyed Mao at that time as if they were all some kind of hypnotics. Maybe that is because of the might of power. The opposing opinions had disappeared, so the people would totally believe in Mao, and power was even more centralized. On the whole, it was a tragedy for the country. What is certain is that trust was destroyed in this period of time, because during the Cultural Revolution and the 1950s, the government and the Party advocated that people denounce their own so called “crimes” and those of their friends and even their parents. You could choose betrayal to rescue yourself and escape punishment, or choose no betrayal to keep yourself noble but be put in a worse situation. It is a pity that a lot of people chose the former one, and in the end it nearly became an action of everyone. Maybe that is why trust is so hard to establish today. Maybe that cannot satisfy you, I should think it over again.

The student ends with the following question:

By the way, don’t you think Marcuse provides us a way to transcend the world we are living in and keep some kind of resilience towards reality?

Marcuse may be dead in the minds of Americans, but I’m sure he’d be glad to hear that he still retains some life in the minds of the Chinese.