**Chapter Two: Chinese Students and Mao**

My contact with Chinese students and academics, at least in Beijing, has now, I think, reached a point of being reasonably representative. Or if it hasn’t, too bad, because I am going to speak about them anyway. My main contact has been with the students in my own classes at Renmin University of China.

To begin with, they are all rather silent in class. I put this down in some cases to difficulty in understanding English or diffidence with respect to speaking English. But in the case of those whose English is quite good, I think it has something to do with diffidence about speaking one’s mind in a country still fearful of communist surveillance. Actually another of my students told me the other day that, in the case of matters Chinese, it might also have to do with diffidence in speaking with a foreigner, especially an American, who cannot be expected to be unprejudiced. Well, whatever the reason, I can only really get them to talk when I get them one on one in my office or after class when we can wile away a few hours over coffee (at Starbucks across the street or in my apartment).

And I must admit, when they get a chance to speak reasonably freely, they show themselves to be very bright and amusing kids. They have lots of questions about philosophy and about America. Occasionally I try to get them to speak about life in China but they seem reluctant to do so. I’ll have to push them more. But the impression I get is that China can still be rather restrictive. I mean in particular the one party rule but also the closeness of the families. The parents of some of these kids have really sacrificed themselves to enable their children to go to a good university and the kids are expected to repay the kindness by raising the whole family’s status to a higher economic level. The idea is that they will get a good paying job to support the rest of the family, especially the aging parents. China does not have much of a welfare system and the old communist system where the factory in which one worked provided housing, medical care, retirement, and so forth has long since gone (I doubt it ever worked well even at the material level and the costs to independence of mind that it brought with it must have corrupted and deadened the spirit). So if your kids don’t help you out, who will? Of course, the kids are grateful to their parents and feel duty bound to them, as they should, but if they want to pursue their studies, either in
China or abroad, the countervailing family pressures can be distressing. Bright kids are academically ambitious in China as elsewhere.

However, I have been more intrigued with how Marxist the students are. I had been given the impression by what some students told me that they would be very Marxist. Marxism is still taught in the high schools and universities and attendance at a certain number of classes in Marxism is compulsory. But, first, the Marxism that is taught is mainly through textbooks and not from Marx himself, and, second, whatever is compulsory tends to turn students off (that was true, I recall, of compulsory religion classes in the UK when I was growing up). One student told me that she did not have a very good academic record because she could never take her Marxist classes seriously and so always did badly in the exams (the exams, I am told, consist largely of giving back to the teacher more or less verbatim what is said in class).

She is a bit of an exception, I think. She is always reading and thinking and her mind is overflowing with ideas and theories and proposals that she has picked up or devised along the way.

Her English is a little halting so she struggles at times to get her ideas across to me but she never gives up and can talk, if she feels like it (or if I do), for hours. Starbucks’ seats, if not their coffee mugs, get to be much used on these occasions. I always pay for the coffee of course, not only because I have more money but because the price of Starbucks’ coffee by student standards is outrageously high. It’s about normal for me. $1.25 or $2.50 for a coffee is 10 yuan or 20 yuan, and when you figure that students get paid 250 yuan a month by the government for their living expenses (excluding accommodation), you can see how hard it would be to pay for Starbucks’ coffee. Actually MacDonald’s hamburgers, which are junk food in the US, are a luxury here. You can get a good Chinese meal, with several dishes, for about 10 yuan in a student restaurant, but you have to pay twice that for burger, fries, and coffee at MacDonald’s.

Anyway, to return to my topic of Marxism, I have found that what the students know, or profess to know, or say they know, about Marxism is not very much. When Marxism has come up in class I’m the one who introduces all the relevant concepts: labor theory of value, class struggle, proletariat, etc. Maybe the kids don’t care about Marxism anymore or they’ve forgotten (they remember long enough to pass the exam and that’s it)
or they don’t trust me so let me blabber on to my heart’s content. Well, I make absolutely no attempt to be cautious in what I say about communism, Marxism, Chairman Mao, or whatever. I’m probably more blunt here than I am in the US. So far it hasn’t caused any problems. I reckon they expect an American to be like this and put up with it as the price to be paid to have free teaching (the US government pays for Fulbright lecturers; the host university just provides accommodation)! However, on a recent occasion when I was giving an invited lecture on war and terrorism at another university in Beijing I opined, in answer to a question about the Vietnam war, that it was in general a good thing to oppose communism and stop its spread. Since this occasioned some surprise on the part of the audience I explained that while communism professed noble enough aims (the improvement of the people, especially the poor) it actually produced the reverse (greater poverty and misery) and did so by means of brutal tyranny. My translator was caught by surprise and said straight out “I’m not going to translate that.” Some, however, in the audience knew enough English to have caught on and I saw a few knowing smiles. I was now a little surprised myself at my translator’s response (I’m an American in China; he can’t expect me to adopt Chinese attitudes can he?). But I did not push him—after all he has to live here; I can go when I please. He was again surprised (though he did translate this time) when in answer to a question about Taiwan I said that if China tried to invade, any American President who refused to defend Taiwan would face the wrath of the American people. The surprise for my translator was the word “invade.” How could China invade what is after all, in Chinese opinion, its own territory? I added that I was speaking from the American perspective and went on to explain the special relationship that has long existed between the US and the one part of China that did not go communist.

It struck me, though, as I thought about this afterwards, that the Chinese opinion about Taiwan, as about Tibet, is that the territory is theirs no matter what the people living there think. Consequently they do not care even to ask, let alone to listen to, what the people in Tibet or Taiwan think about being ruled by the communist party in Beijing. The Argentinians seem to have had a similar approach to the Falkland Islands when they invaded in the early 80s. They didn’t care either what the people there thought; they just wanted to possess the land.
Another thought also struck me, that when serious belief in or serious imposition of communist ideas erodes, as it did a decade ago in the old Soviet Union and is now in China, what takes its place as the focus of passion and commitment is nationalism. The communist party has to hang on the loyalty of the people somehow, and the people have to believe in something, and nationalism is the obvious and most handy thing available. This nationalism seems a little crude to me. Whenever I challenge students to say why Tibet or Taiwan should belong to China, or what is so important about such territorial integrity, they respond with distorted history (Tibet has always been part of China and ruled by China) or tu quoque arguments (what would you do if the state of Georgia broke away from the US?). They really have nothing else to say, and when I ask if they would be willing to accept the results of a referendum in either place about what the people there wanted, they are not at all keen to say yes. My guess is that they are just repeating the party line which no one has ever seriously challenged in their hearing before. I suspect some sort of patriotism is at stake too. Nations have to believe in themselves, and one way to do so is to believe in the rightness of what your nation has done and is doing.

I think the same patriotism is behind the generally favorable opinion that most people, including the young, have about Chairman Mao. After all Mao did preside over China’s restoration to national independence and to its place in the UN. That Mao was 3 times worse than Stalin (Stalin killed 20 million of his own people while Mao killed 60 million, or so I am told) and 6 times worse than Hitler (who killed 10 million) does not seem to matter. I have said this on a number of occasions at the English Corner (it meets on a Friday night on the grounds of my university campus and anyone comes along who wants to practice English; of course native English speakers like myself always attract a crowd). When I do the listeners gasp with astonishment, not unmixed with amusement (did he really say that?). But the worst gasps, unmixed by any amusement, are reserved for any Chinese who agrees with me or voices the same opinion—which has, surprisingly, happened on more than one occasion. A prejudiced American can say these things perhaps, but a Chinaman...!

Talking of Americans, the Chinese, whether students or faculty or others, tend to have a pretty jaundiced attitude towards American foreign policy (as the student questions quoted in the previous chapter indicate). A typical feeling about the attacks of
September 11, for instance—apart from shock and sympathy of course—was that America somehow brought them on itself by its bullying approach to international questions. “America is always using force to settle problems; America runs the UN according to its own interest; America always interferes in other countries’ affairs (usually code, by the way, for American military support for Taiwan); America wants to keep China weak and dependent (also usually code for Taiwan); America always thinks it’s right;” and so on. Of course some Americans think the same about America. Lots of Europeans think the same too. Maybe that’s the price you have to pay for being top dog in politics or the only remaining super-power in a media swamped world. But, whatever the Chinese think of America as a super-power, they all want to visit America, and of those who succeed in getting a visa (which the US Immigration Service shortsightedly makes as difficult as possible) some 90% don’t come back to China, or not until they are US permanent residents or citizens. That must mean something.

Anyway, to return to my topic, I think there is a certain defensiveness behind the respect people show for Mao. After all the miserable tyrant tormented China for some thirty years and to think there was nothing good in what he did, that nothing at all about his rule redeems it from being murderous insanity, that those thirty years were a complete waste, is just too much to bear. One has to think otherwise just to preserve a bit of mental sanity.

Well, I think the older Chinese have a reason for thinking thus. I am more puzzled why the younger ones think the same (all my students were born after Mao died). Or was there really something good about Mao’s rule? Did he really achieve something that no one else could have achieved or have achieved so well? Maybe I really am missing something. Sometime my students suggest as much. Here at any rate is what one of them wrote to me (I leave uncorrected the charming English).

“But speaking frankly, it’s more difficult to understand China by American than to understand America by Chinese. Because China is just like an old grandmother who have experienced much, and America is just like a young gal who is very beautiful but can’t understand the full wrinkles and scars on the face of an old woman.
Maybe this kind of expression is too abstract, but that’s true, in the cultural sense. As for the concrete affairs, I can’t explain them clearly in some sentences. But I’m sure that you have not known China well, for example, Taiwan affairs and Tibet problems etc. The difficulty is WE (not only you) can’t separate the Chinese government with China and Chinese people!”

What you might see from this is not only what she thinks but what I have been saying in my classes. But I make no apology for being controversial. It’s part of a teacher’s task to provoke students into thought. So far no one in authority here in China has complained or suggested I cool it or told me to leave the country. I suppose that says something too—both about China and my students.

I saw Mao the other day, by the way, or what’s left of him—which, deo gratias, is not much. Actually I may only have seen a wax model. But whatever it was I saw what the authorities choose to put on display as his mortal remains in the Maosoleum (as English speakers in Beijing fondly call it).

It’s a huge rectangular building with columns that sits in the middle of Tiananmen Square. Lines and lines of Chinese, with occasional stray foreigners, make their way into it to pay their respects—or to see what a tyrant looks like in my case (but I did say prayers at the same time for all the people he killed). You don’t get to see much anyway. A few seconds as you walk by and you don’t get closer than 10 feet at most, and he’s in a glass case. And that’s it. Nothing else to see. Or at least not when I was there, though there is supposed to be a room where they show a video of his life, and lots of other rooms celebrating other communist leaders, whose bodies were all cremated, not embalmed (and even Mao wanted to be cremated; that they embalmed him instead is probably the only occasion when most of the politburo opposed Mao’s wishes). The rest was tourist stalls selling Mao paraphernalia and anything else sellable. I was impressed, though, by how reverential the Chinese were.
Many of them bought bunches of flowers to lay before his statue. He seems to be a sort of secular god. My curiosity was peaked, though, about the flowers. The admiring throngs lay them on movable tables just inside the entrance, and when these tables get full, a couple of ladies come in and wheel them out, replacing them with empty ones. What happens to the flowers then? I could not see, but the thought crossed my mind that they were taken back to the flower stands outside to be recycled, I mean resold. If so, would Mao mind that his mortal remains are being used for a bit of economic sharp practice?

Well, be that as it may. For my part the main value of the Maosoleum is that it makes it harder for tanks to careen around the square killing people, and easier for people to find a place to hide. But then I’m just a prejudiced American…