

PERSPECTIVES: CHINA'S YOUTH ABROAD

ENCOUNTERING A WIDER WORLD

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Participants: WYS, GW, CK, STT, YL, XZ, LD, GQ

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Young Chinese who study outside the People's Republic of China may become significant thought-leaders when they return home. So what do they make of it? What insights will they take away? HRIC convened two student focus groups, in New York and Hong Kong, to find out.

Yesterday afternoon I went to listen to a talk by the Dalai Lama in New York. I didn't completely understand everything because the jargon was specific to religious theory, but I was quite interested in what happened after the class was over. Before he had started his talk, there had been people outside protesting, people who opposed him. They were demanding that he stop

This group of eight Chinese people studying in the United States, aged 19-33 and ranging from undergraduate to post-doc, includes two with longer-term experience living in the U.S. and others with a social activist background. Asked to describe their major impressions of being overseas, and the differences from their experiences in China, the participants responded so willingly as to leave room for only one follow-up question: what, about China, do they most take pride in? In deference to Chinese tradition, the oldest participant gets the first word.

GQ (Male, 33, undertaking post-doctoral medical research in USA):

I am the oldest, and am no longer called a young person. I am 33 years old. I studied medicinal chemistry at Beijing Medical University. Then I went to Peking Union Medical College Hospital for my PhD, also in medicinal chemistry. I researched AIDS medicine for five years. Now I am serving a three-year stint as a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. I am currently researching children's medicine.

I grew up for more than 30 years under China's political system. Once I came to this country, which was completely unknown to me and operating under an entirely different political system, the impression I got was that it was very free. Perhaps Mr. Gao has much more experience than I with this. It is so free here. I can give you a very small example. Please do not use my real name in this, because I would like to return to China alive.

talking, "give us back freedom of religion in Tibet," etc. What I noticed was this: after the talk, the Dalai Lama had already left, and the people who had been listening to his talk were leaving. These were the people who supported him, so as they came out there arose a sort of stand-off between the two parties. They started protesting against each other. What were the police doing during this time? Confrontations are very common. They happen in every society, but the attitude of the police was a reflection of the difference between China and America. If this were to happen in China, things would be very different. First of all, before the meeting, people who oppose the Dalai Lama wouldn't have even let you in. And afterwards, the [authorities] would not have allowed the two parties to be on the street confronting each other. What they are always trying to sustain is a "harmonious society," one that appears on the surface to be completely harmonious, with no voices of dissent and no conflict.

However, police in America seem to be more concerned about preventing incidents which could result in peoples' physical harm. Both sides have the right to fully express their own opinions. They give you space.

So when the two parties had pretty much protested to their heart's content, and supporters of the Dalai Lama were holding up a dollar bill saying that the others were "bought off by the CPC" (*zhonggong shoumai de* 中共收买的.) The police waited until the protesters were done, drove a car over, and peacefully carted them

away. Then it was over. This is a major difference between China and America. We can think about what they would do in China if they were unable to prevent the protest from starting. If they didn't anticipate that there would be a protest, and suddenly one erupted, like a Falun Gong-related protest, then they would employ different measures to take care of things. They would not use peaceful methods to achieve resolution.

“In America, there are vast amounts of opportunities given to [people] for free ... to improve themselves, to experience the beauty and wonder of this earth, to learn new things, and to acquire tools for their own personal growth.”

— GQ, male, 33, post-doctoral medical researcher

A second example in which I noticed a difference would be in the teaching of humanities-related subjects. If you were to study chemistry in China, it would be pretty much the same as studying in America but studying the humanities is different. Humanities depends on your method of thinking, or who you are inside, or your understanding of culture and the profound background behind certain issues. When I was in [Washington,] D.C. it was like this too, but in New York and Philadelphia, you could get into all the museums for free. Or at least there are one or two days a week that are free for the public. Libraries are also very accessible. There are so many opportunities for you to experience cultural traditions. It doesn't matter who you are, a professor, a PhD, or a black person. When I was at the library, I noticed that quite a few black people came in, didn't pay a cent, and were able to read as much as they wanted. They were treated the same as white people. They were treated the same as professors and lawyers. Commoners are given the opportunity to improve their own circumstances. There are so many opportunities for commoners to improve themselves, to experience the beauty and wonder of this earth, to learn new things, and to acquire tools for their own personal growth. In America, there are vast amounts of opportunities given to you for free. In China, the educational

system is very different. In China, you are controlled by tests. Even if you had a leisurely and carefree attitude and wanted to take two days off to visit some museums, it would be of no use. Visiting museums doesn't help you on tests. But in China, you don't have the opportunity to freely visit whatever museum you want anyway.

A third difference, that shocked me was that [in America,] you hear ambulance and police sirens every day. Every few minutes there's a siren blaring and a car goes by. I asked my friend why this was the case. I've never seen this in China. Why does this occur? At night, right when I'm about to fall asleep, I hear sirens everywhere. I asked, if it was because public services are so practical and readily available in America. If you have the smallest problem, someone is there immediately to help you. He said, “You seem to be right, at least for the most part this seems to be the case.” In China, public services and institutions don't have this attitude toward the needs of commoners. They are busy doing other things.

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STT (Female, 24, studying social security and labor relations):

I pretty much agree with GQ. I have been here for about the same amount of time. I can talk about a few different aspects. First, I'll start with differences I've noticed in everyday life. At first glance, the environment of Beijing and New York seems to be pretty much the same (tall buildings, bustling, fancy, etc.), but I soon realized that when looking at the details, things are actually very different. What deeply impressed me was the people. No matter if you're on the subway, on the street, or anywhere else, I get the impression that people are very gentle. Maybe because you know everyone has their own problems, people seem to be well-mannered. If you accidentally bump into someone and you say, “I'm sorry,” and the other person says, “That's fine.” It

makes you feel better. If this happened in China, you could start a fight if you're not careful. This is one thing.

Another thing [that made an impression on me] was riding the bus. The bus stops are very small, and there's a bus stop on every corner. The bus drivers drive very slowly and they say "good morning" to you and tell you where to get off the bus. Also, they provide excellent services for handicapped people on public buses. They even have those elevators that go up and down for them.

In Beijing, riding the bus is horrific. The drivers are very scary; they curse at people.

Also, we live in an apartment in New York provided by an AIDS organization and it's a very big building. They provide persons with HIV/AIDS with rooms; they have their own property. I think, in China, they wouldn't provide this for them. In addition, anything the government might offer this kind of a group wouldn't be this nice. Also, people living there can get training: medical training and work training. Their setup seems very nice and it's decorated very nicely. It appears from the outside to be very clean. This is very different from China.

Also, I have met a few students since I've been in America. There are many differences between them and Chinese students. American students seem very independent and very good at analytical thinking. They have their own opinions. They know what their own interests are. This is what Chinese people lack. For all these years, we have been force-fed like ducks. For so many years, our teachers have been telling us what to study. And they're very utilitarian. We study what we're told is good, but anything other than that, we don't even give a cursory glance. But American students are very interested in many fields, including international relations, and other topics. And they are so happy to help others. This is a major difference.

I just mentioned independence and will give an example. I have a friend whose daughter came to America to attend high school or something. Now she is a university student. During her summer break, she went to Ireland or some place like that to visit. When she got there, she got a temporary job. Later, she realized she didn't

have enough money left to buy a plane ticket home, so she stayed there for a little while longer. Her mom helped her get a plane ticket home in the end. It's unbelievable to me that a university student would be courageous enough to go out traveling like this all by herself.

Another difference that has left a deep impression is in the area of information. When I came over from China, I was, you could say, a naïve child. I have worked for LD's organization for almost a year now. I'm pretty good-natured, and I'm only working part-time at this organization, so I think that even though I'm slightly aware of the dark side of things, like what happened with Falun Gong, June Fourth, etc., I am not deeply affected by it and I'm not extremely shocked. But after I came here, I have met so many people, including many June Fourth activists and other dissidents. You could say that my former positive impression [of China] has been completely overturned.

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student of Social Security and Labor Relations

Even when I was at the Chinese embassy watching the Tibet protest...people were out there yelling, “Free China!” and “China's lying!” To people who have just come over from China, this can leave a very bad impression. It can be very shocking because they are criticizing a representative of the nation that you once thought you could trust. And then they're telling you that things are not as you thought. I have slowly come to learn more about the Dalai Lama and Tibetan issues. Just this morning, I went to a meeting about the Dalai Lama. All these things have made me realize how closed China really is. It has made me realize that the Chinese government is fooling people. Perhaps all of you

already knew this, but if you were to ask Chinese people to come to this conclusion on their own, it would be very difficult.

“[In the US], there exists a very interesting culture of diversity in which people coexist. ...You can have many people oppose you, but there is no need to cater to others. In China, when you do something ... you have to consider what would make the person above you happy. There are no alternatives.”

— GW, female, 20, student of Political Science, Psychology, and Economics

GW (Female, 20, studying Political Science, Psychology, and Economics): I would like to add to that. When I came to America, my impression of America was two-sided. A country like America does not rely on a sort of fatal attraction, but instead it relies on the strength of forgiveness. Here, I think there exists a very interesting culture of diversity in which people coexist. For example, you can have your own thing that is completely different from other people’s things. You can have many people oppose you, and there is no need to cater to them. In China, when you do something, you have to think, you have to guess, you have to consider what would make the person above you happy. There are no alternatives. You are not the same as the person above you; you can’t guess what he wants. You have to get into Peking University, Tsinghua University, or another good university. Actually in America, if I go to Duke or Harvard or Yale, it’s all the same. Even though each school has its differences and they have differing degrees of fame, no one actually cares which school you go to. When I was applying to these schools in China, I only applied to the top ten schools. I was upset for a very long time about being refused by Harvard. After I came here, I realized your opportunities are equal. That is to say, life gives you many choices. If you don’t choose A, you can choose B, C, or D. It’s not necessarily true that if you are unsuccessful early in life, you will have more problems later. If you slowly accumulate success,

things may get even better for you.

I’ve realized how multi-faceted life is. I have realized that a major difference between China and America is that one country’s culture pursues the natural course of events, while the other pursues man-made standards. These standards, whether from a document or an attitude put forth by the national government, are something you can’t come up with just by guessing. Also, China has many talented actors, such as Zhang Ziyi, Jet Li, etc. If they say or do one thing wrong, all of a sudden they are cursed all over the Internet. It makes you feel like it is very difficult to know how you should live—very, very difficult. It is difficult to know what to say, what to do. What should you do? Don’t do anything!

So since I have come here, I have learned how to be myself, how to not care what others think of me. Thus, as a 20 year-old, I make my mistakes, I walk my path, and whether or not it is successful I choose to follow my heart. I feel that in China, you use your mind to influence your heart. In America, you attempt to use your heart to set goals in your mind. You don’t have to make long-term, five-year, or ten-year plans, and then find in the end that you aren’t even walking that direction anymore because life changes faster than your plans.

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I really like some aspects of Buddhism and Taoism. It was actually not until I came to America that I began to like various aspects of Chinese culture. When I was in China, I liked American culture. People are like that; they like things that complement each other. They treasure the things they can’t obtain. I live in rural

America, in North Carolina. There are trees all around, there are plenty of places to visit, and you can practice meditation or yoga when you're in a bad mood because you can really enter into nature. Sometimes I swim at a river with my friends. It's one of those places where the rock has been blasted out and turned into a quarry. There are people, dogs, and even snakes there. On Independence Day weekend, there were tons of people there. I don't know where they came from, but as soon as it was the Fourth of July, people young and old, male and female all went. It was an atmosphere of happiness. In China, though, the doors of people's homes are closed. At least that was how it was in our community in Qingdao, I'm not sure about others. No one wants to air their dirty laundry. But in America, you can just take off your shoes, wear plain clothes, go out to the river and jump in laughing. You can do whatever you want to do. Some people [there] do carpentry. Even though they don't produce the most beautiful work, they'll tell you, "This is what I was able to make. Perhaps this isn't the best, or what you might want, but it's what my heart considers natural beauty." It just feels so natural.

I recently ran into a bit of friction with my friends . . . it reveals some differences between China and America as well. You have to be open with others. Because I've just come over from China, when I do things I am still especially intense and my emotions fluctuate a lot. One day I'll be happy and they'll all want to be with me, but then yhr nrcy, I'll be sad and they feel that I am internalizing things.

"I have learned two things here [in the US]. First is how to deal with personal relationships and love others. Second is how to love nature and society; to move outwards instead of stuffing things inside."

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I just read an article that was saying that China's history is personal history. *Shiji* (史记), for example, is all about individual's stories. Chinese people feel that the 1840

Opium War still influences the feelings of the Chinese people today. My friend and I often discuss politics, and he said to me, "Chinese people always say that they're 'offended.'" But you can't let your feelings affect the way you perceive society. People are too easily hurt. I don't know why this is, perhaps it is because in Chinese society, they make sure that on the surface they look beautiful, even if they are very deeply hurt on the inside. Any small thing—even something that doesn't have anything to do with them—can hurt a person. Take, for example, those who practice Falun Gong. If something does not happen as they had hoped, or if there is something in society that makes them unsatisfied, it can cause great disruption in their hearts. This little thing triggers them to think about the unhappiness they have experienced in their past life.

"In China, if people hear that you are so and so's child, like Chen Xiaodan at our school, the grand-daughter of Chen Yun [late vice-chairman of the CPC Central Committee], . . . She is using the nation's money, and she would go to class wearing necklaces worth a million yuan. She could do whatever she wanted to do, and she never studied. . . . In America, it would be very difficult to get the approval of people by acting this way."

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In conclusion, I have learned two things here. First is how to deal with personal relationships and love others. Second is how to love nature and society; to move outwards instead of stuffing things inside. Still though, I am often hurt because I haven't learned these things completely.

YL (Female, 19, studying Advertising and Media, also works part-time in catering): There is quite a difference in the education systems of America and China, especially in the weekday/weekend schedules. In

China, we were at school every weekday and then every other Saturday. We were in school for ten hours a day, and they wouldn't feed us. We had to go home for lunch and then go back to school. . . . I never went to kindergarten, and instead went straight into first grade. I remember on my first day of school here, I kept calling [my teacher] "Teacher McGuire." She told me, "Just call me Ms. McGuire." But I kept saying, "Teacher, teacher," and she would say, "Don't call me teacher." Because it's rude here to call someone teacher.

Then, I also remember just like GQ mentioned, being very surprised by the constant sirens. I lived in a place that had a hospital, fire station, and a police station right near it. I got so used to it that when I visited my friend's house and didn't hear the sirens, I was unable to sleep.

Also, like STT said, people don't seem as polite in China. It's not that they're not as polite, it's just that if you, for example, bump into them on the subway, they say, "What are you doing!" To be honest, I rarely go to Chinatown—this year was the first time I've gone in five years—because I always feel like people there are impolite. I would be standing there in line for a long time and people would keep cutting in front of me. I would say "Excuse me," but I don't even know what to say.

Also, when XZ first came here, she reminded me of some of my first impressions. "Wow, in China, things really are so much cheaper!" Then you see that things here were made in China. Is that because everything "made in China" is really cheap? But actually, I was made in China, too . . .

Also, in America you have a lot of rights. In America there are many laws and you can say what you want to say. But, to me, these laws are really just guidelines. You don't absolutely have to follow them. We have more freedom than those in China. I remember one time in China, there was a policeman who was being very mean to us. I have participated in June Fourth activities every year with my mother since I was very young, so I've always heard her say, "Down with the Communist Party." I wasn't careful and said it once when I was with a group of my friends. They all ran away. I didn't get it, what had I done wrong? It wasn't until I grew up that I

realized what I had said wrong.

When I returned to Beijing once, I visited my cousin at his university. I remember him telling me that university was "hard to get in, easy to get out," whereas in America, it's "easy to get in, hard to get out."

Also, I know that in America we have financial aid. I am not sure if they have it in China, it seems that they don't. In America, if you don't have money, you can still go to school, you still have many opportunities. In China, you don't. If you didn't get a good score on your college entrance exam, you have to take it again before you can get into university. In America, they can separate out different students. If you aren't a good student, but you test really well, you can still get into a good university. And if you aren't a good tester, but are good at other things, you can also get into university. But in China, the education system is very difficult. I remember when I was visiting a friend in China once, I was complaining to him about school. I said, "My homework is too hard, I have to memorize 200 years of history." My friend looked at me and said, "Are you joking? China has 5,000 years of history, how can you even begin to compare your workload with mine?"

Also, it's easier for people in China to study English. In Chinese, you have the four tones, and every character is different. For Americans, studying Chinese is very difficult. It's almost impossible for them. I have a lot of friends studying Chinese at Baruch, and they're about to go crazy. They say, "I don't know how you learned all this!" So, I feel like it is easier for Chinese to come here. It will be easier for them to learn English than for Americans to go to China [and learn Chinese].

GW (Female, 20): I have noticed that in America—because I've been working in the admission's office—people really like those who have come from a rough family background and have taken on challenges. They don't care if they are at the same level as others. Everyone is different and they all have different family backgrounds. Take, for example, the children of immigrants. Even after studying, they may perhaps only get a 700 on their SATs. They may feel that you are still better than a candidate who comes from a family in which both parents went to Harvard and who got 800s on their SATs.

They would feel that you are quite impressive. Your parents never went to school, and you were an immigrant, and you had to study English, and you have to study and make the grades all while having to work and provide for the family. There are many who are willing to give people more opportunities. They feel that you shouldn't have to compete unfairly.

In China, the better your circumstances or the more money you have, the less you have to work. But in America, if you have money, you have to study even harder. Otherwise, people will just say, "I'm sorry, I don't care if your parents graduated from Harvard, we're not just going to let you in." No one will just hand you this kind of opportunity.

For example, take someone like Paris Hilton. Everyone thinks she is just a money-worshipper and not the slightest bit intelligent. But in China, you can be so and so's child—like Chen Xiaodan at our school, the grand-daughter of Chen Yun¹—and use the nation's money, and go to class wearing necklaces

worth a million *yuan*. She can do whatever she wants to do, and she never studies. It is very easy for her to get into high-level banquets. In America, it would be very difficult to get the approval of people by acting this way.

When I hear Chinese students complaining about how hard school is for them, I don't even want to hear it. Since I've come to America, I don't get to sleep until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. There is a lot of academic pressure because in a good school, everyone is smart. So getting a good grade is still important to me, but it isn't the most important thing. There are too many things to consider, too many things of interest that I want to explore. Right now I am really interested in Psychology, so every day I get a huge pile of books on Psychology and read them continuously. There are many lectures, and when I don't have too much to do, I can go to a

concert. There are some things about Buddhism and Taoism that I would like to study. I want to go to France and Italy. I'm actually studying three languages right now, and I haven't learned any of them particularly well, but these are opportunities. I feel that if people can have this many options, they can decide for themselves what they want to be devoted to and go for it.

In China, students still complain, even though they have a teacher telling them that if they study A, B, C, and D, they will get a good grade. I don't get it. In America, teachers' requirements are much higher than your realistic abilities. You get the impression that only 10% of students are able to get an A. Whether you're at Harvard, Yale, or Columbia, only 10% of students get A's. And all of these students are so gifted. In competing with them, [you find that] even if you choose not to sleep, you still can't necessarily get a high grade. Also, no one will tell you how to do well on the test, and if you don't sleep, you might do even more poorly on the test. My first semester here, I was constantly struggling

with the question of whether or not to sleep and how much I should study. It wasn't until later that I just relaxed and stopped complaining. I decided that whether I get a C, or B, or A, it doesn't matter. Take things step by step . . . No one tells you how to do it; you have to find out on your own. We have all the resources, we have an academic advising center, but no professor will tell you the "best" way to study. Even if you go to their office hours, they still won't tell you how to study.

WYS (Male, 21, senior at Syracuse University, studying Politics, International Economics, and Marketing. Born in Shanghai; came to the U.S. at age 9): I would like to add a few thoughts. My Chinese isn't very good. I came to America when I was quite young. When I first got here, I was in the fourth



A child of migrant workers is seen inside a classroom at a primary school in Jinzhai county. Photo credits: REUTERS/Joe Chan (CHINA).

grade. In math class, they were still studying addition. In China, we'd been studying algebra. So, when I first got here, I thought America's education system was not nearly as good as China's. But later, once I moved on to high school . . . perhaps you know that in New York there are three top schools that are more difficult than the others. I got into one, Brooklyn Tech. If I hadn't gone to this school, I wouldn't have realized that America's educational system was so developed. Afterwards, I went on to university, a private university about five hours away from New York. Even though the tuition is very expensive, the government gives a lot of money to minorities. If your parents are immigrants, you have a lot of opportunities to go to university. But I have found that my peers didn't take advantage of this. There are both smart and stupid people in university, but a lot of them will go to class, come home, and after finishing their homework, they will go out to the bar. White people and Chinese people all do this. I just returned from Hong Kong in May; I went to study abroad in Shanghai and Beijing. I talked with a student from Peking University, and asked him, "What's it like for you here in university? Are your studies difficult?" He said, "It's probably just like America, it depends on you. Once you've gotten into a good university, it depends on your own diligence."

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— GW, female, 20, student of Political Science, Psychology, and Economics

LD (Male 30, from Beijing, AIDS activist): I'd like to add a few things. First of all, it has already been more than eight years since I graduated from university, so I can't think of much to say on the topic of education.

But I will say something about demonstrations—GQ just made some comments about the Tibetan demonstrations. It seems that everyone here is very orderly;

everyone understands the rules regarding demonstrations. This is very different from the demonstrations in China. On the one hand, demonstrations in China are not permitted by the government. On the other hand, though people may plan on demonstrating, it often turns into an all-out rebellion. They don't know how to control themselves.

I have heard people say that here in America, they teach kids in school about how to demonstrate. They tell students how to exercise their rights. They have them practice, and teach them what ways are most effective and how to organize. I've also noticed that there are a lot of student organizations here, especially at the universities, and in the high schools, too. When I came here in 2006, I gave a lecture for a colleague. He took me around to several different high schools. During these visits, their students performed for us. They welcomed us with singing and dancing. They were all just kids, about 15 or so. I feel that in China and America, the degree of talent may be about the same, but the children in America are much better at performing and showing off that talent and when you watch white and black people dance, you feel like their movements are so precise, and they are so happy to be performing. This is a difference.

Also, if you look at [student] organizations in America, there are so many in their high schools. But there are hardly any in Chinese high schools. Back when I was in school, we had a chess club, a running club, etc. But other than that, once you hit the eighth grade, there weren't many activities. So in terms of young people's ability to perform, or express themselves, there is a major difference.

Another difference is that American students are very idealistic. It's not that all of them are idealistic, but I see, for example, that a lot of them dream of going into medicine. A lot of people dream of going to Africa and working with Doctors Without Borders or going somewhere and being a "Mother Theresa." We once had a volunteer, she is at Columbia University now as well as Human Rights Watch. She once went to Henan, China, to work with China's [World Health Organization]. She was speaking with an official there and asking about what had happened. He said that, first of all, they were

an international organization, and that they couldn't interfere with the Chinese government. And second of all, he personally could not interfere, and so he didn't care. Later, when my friend was talking to me about it, she was so moved she was crying. She said that she didn't understand why, and she couldn't believe that a person could not care about others. Americans think like this. But in China, people think that if something can't be done, it's very normal to just give up. If people live or die, it has nothing to do with me. Many people are more realistic when looking at these issues. But Americans are very idealistic.

Another difference is the dormitory situations in universities. It seems that most American universities, like Columbia University and Harvard University, don't assign dorm rooms to their students. Most students live off-campus. This is an opportunity for them to improve their individual skills and shows that schools trust and respect their students. But in China, it is still the case that students cannot leave the dormitories that have been assigned to them. They can't live off-campus. It doesn't matter how expensive or how dirty it is, you still have to live there. That is, unless you secretly live off-campus and sneak back in whenever there is a room inspection. But you can see from this the sort of military management style that schools just don't trust their students. They are afraid that students might do something, like live together, organize some sort of political activity, or do something else that would make them mad. These are my thoughts on the area of educational differences.

Another difference would be my impressions upon arriving in America. A few things left a rather deep impression on me. One was with regards to social order. A small example would be, when I went to Japan, I was observing the street traffic. If there was a red light, no one would cross the street . . . even if there weren't any cars! But in America, it's a little different. At first, nobody crosses, but as soon as one person starts to cross, everyone else follows him. In China, people don't even look at the lights. Something interesting about America, though, is that if a person is crossing, whether the light is red or green, cars will stop for him. He won't just rush forward honking his horn. Another thing is that here you can take a right on red. But even still, if

you are walking across the street [when they are taking a right on red], the cars will wait for you and let you cross. They won't battle it out with you. Also when they are merging, they seem to do it in an interlocking fashion. For example, if everyone has to move right, they will do it one by one. But in China, the traffic is so bad. You could probably say that 80% of the problem is that people don't wait for each other, but instead try to go first. They fight to get ahead, but then end up stuck. I hardly ever see traffic jams in New York. But in Beijing, from morning peak until about 10:00 or 11:00 am, and then again from 2:00–8:00 or even as late as 9:00 pm, the whole city is a big traffic jam. That is a difference, traffic order.

“Here, people are very respectful of minority cultures. In China, I attended a wedding of a fellow professor from Beijing Normal University. All the professors were standing around discussing what should be done about the problem in Tibet. Later everyone decided that the Tibetans should just be “Han-ified,” then it would all be fine.”

— LD, male, 30, AIDS activist

Another thing is general atmosphere. When I first came to America, I noticed it. When I was walking down the streets, it felt so different from being in China. Americans are all so sunny. Even poor people. In San Francisco, I saw a person who was missing his legs. He was in a wheelchair. He was the kind that would be climbing a pile of trash in China. But here, he was sitting in his wheelchair and seemed very happy. He was holding a sign—he didn't say a word—but he held this sign that said, “Smile \$1,” and he was begging. But he seemed very happy, very happy. I have also noticed that beggars here have dignity. They have volunteers help them. And no one throws them aside just because they're poor. I think this should be something we all do. Both in China and in America, poor people have a hard time taking care of themselves.

“Two days ago, I was in the library reading a bookwritten by [Howard] Zinn, a famous leftist. He was re-analyzing the dark side of American history. ... Say you were to write this kind of book in China—if the government didn’t get to you first, the people would beat you to death.”

— LD, male, 30, AIDS activist

Another difference is the vitality here. Every major city has its own performances (like we were talking about earlier). They have them in their squares, and on the street; there are people who do performance art. It seems that everybody understands this, and that all these artists are very good at what they do. This is different from the people on the streets in China who are just selling art. Those people will just grab an *erhu*, eek out a loud note or two, and be done with it. But here, there are real artists out there [on the streets].

Another point is on the topic of cultural diversity, which was mentioned earlier as well. Here, people are very respectful of minority cultures. In China, I attended a wedding of a fellow professor from Beijing Normal University. All the professors were standing around discussing what should be done about the problem in Tibet. Later everyone decided that the Tibetans should just be “Han-ified,” then it would all be fine. People just do not respect the cultures of different minority groups. When I was in Beijing, I taught a Manchu language class. People thought that, according to Darwin’s theory of survival of the fittest, minority culture would inevitably be phased out. But in America, they place a very high importance on minority culture, including Native American culture, which they are trying to preserve. This kind of respect is very important.

Another difference is in the area of press freedom. Two days ago, I was in the library reading a book. It was a book for children about American history. It was written by [Howard] Zinn, a famous leftist. He was re-analyzing the dark side of American history. Those of us in China look at America and say how democratic and

free it is, and how great a country it has been ever since the revolutionary war. But from Americans’ point of view, there have been many disagreeable points in history, such as the Vietnam War, the poor treatment and even segregation of blacks and Chinese. He put all these things down in writing and compiled them into a thick book, and now there are political cartoons about it. Say you were to write this kind of book in China—if the government didn’t get to you first, the people would beat you to death. Here, people are so tolerant. People are willing to analyze and rethink. This ability to rethink things is what Chinese people lack.

In this morning’s meeting, the Dalai Lama said that last year he had worked with seven students on “ideological work.” He discussed with them questions including, “What is the situation really like in Tibet?” After this “ideological work,” only two students ended up changing their minds. That is to say, only two students ended up agreeing with him on what the situation was really like in Tibet. The other five students were just as if they had never heard him at all. They simply perceived his words as reactionary propaganda. They didn’t consider whether or not he had a logical point. China’s history of re-thinking issues is quite lacking because in the educational system, there is no teaching on how to analyze things.

Another difference here is peoples’ views on the public good. Everyone seems to be very concerned about it here. For example, when I was at Central Park the other day, I saw a bench, and on it was written some sort of a commemoration, like, “This was our 50th anniversary” or something. And everyone can enjoy it. In China, if a respected old man were to pass away, or if someone graduated, they would only treat people to a meal, they wouldn’t think to put their heart on display for the community to see. They wouldn’t think to let everyone appreciate and spread their happiness and wealth to others. This is a problem of “social space.”

Another difference is the transparency of how taxpayers’ money is spent in America. Before each time [money is spent], there is a discussion about what they plan to build, what location, where the government should be investing this tax money. They solicit ideas from different interest groups. For example, last month,

we were at a lawyers' group meeting at Housing Works. We were discussing how the government wanted to cut the budget of its AIDS program, and how everyone should travel there and protest and demonstrate. Even though the budget was still cut, there was a channel for us to voice our dissenting opinions to the government. In China, this would be impossible. People are free to talk about issues like taxes here in America.

Another difference is a feeling of freedom. When you are in America, you very rarely feel pressure from the government. You feel entirely autonomous. When I went to Japan, the most you had to say was *sumimasen* ("I'm sorry"). If you even just accidentally brushed up against someone's shoulder, you had to say this. In America, it wasn't always necessary to say this, but in Japan you had to. Going from China to Japan, the level of required politeness was *much* higher. When I came to America after that, I lowered it a bit, but it was still higher than in China. I just mean that your behavior is influenced by society, by the larger environment around you—you shouldn't curse, you shouldn't spit in public places, you shouldn't take others' things. The people around you give you this feeling, that you should control your own behavior. This is different, or perhaps non-existent, in China. There, we are completely reliant on the rules of punishment and government regulations to mandate how you behave. So I think this sort of civil regulation and accountability, this sort of freedom is very good.

CK (23, law student): I'd like to mention a few things. I don't know much about the education system in America, I have no personal experience with that. Even the education system in China, I'm not really clear on. The experience I can speak from would be elementary, middle, and high school, since I did poorly on college entrance exams and thus got shipped out to Xinjiang. I don't even know how I got there. They just gave me an announcement letter and I went.

But as for my reaction to my time in America, I might say a few things. I went to Wisconsin recently, and I got the basic impression that Americans have great attitudes about life. This made me feel like I needed to have a better attitude about things. But when I went to Wisconsin, I stayed four days. Those four days were significant in

my life. I have been staying with many different families, four days at a time. That particular family lived in a very old house; every item in that house had dozens of years of history. Their vacuum cleaner was 50 years old. Their stove was 65 years old. Their microwave was 35 years old. Their plates and other household items were all very old as well. It was very clean and orderly. The tools used by his grandfather's grandfather were still in the basement. Almost every day was a holiday for them. Every item in their house had a story behind it. They printed out their ancestors' history, with pictures. They made their own record of their family's history. The history of their town, their city, their classmates. Every week they would go visit their friends even if they had to drive four or five hours. I was so surprised, how could this old 66 year-old person be so set on travelling so far away to see another old person? And furthermore, they would only visit for an hour and a half before they had to drive back. All of this made me feel that after I return to China, I really want to take out time to spend with my dad and mom, and talk with my brother and sister. I have not done this enough. Even though I am only 23 years old, I have already been away from home for over ten years. I go home only a few days a year. Since the end of 2002, my time at home every year has been very short. It was only during the Spring Festival in 2008, that I have stayed home longer than 15 days. I have never really thought about what kind of relationship I should have with my family. Even while I was at university, I took my parents' money and did with it what I wanted. My parents have told me sincerely that they are very happy to support me. Even when some of the things that I do hurt them, they still say they support me. I don't know why they think they should. I also don't know why my mother and the rest of them actually do. Even my brother and sister—they are so proud of me, but I don't understand why. Especially when I give them trouble. Since this [visit with the family in Wisconsin], I've felt very guilty. I am even blaming myself [and asking myself], what can I do for my family? This has left a very deep impression on me.

Also, I have been thinking about how I need a normal life; I need to sleep normally, I need to speak frequently with my parents. Even though I have done a little of this before, I flaunted it as some sort of price that I was paying on their behalf. I know my mother really likes it

when I call out to her in front of people, especially on the street or at school. Since my second semester of my first year of high school, she came daily to pick me up from school. Even when I was forced to transfer to other schools, they expended so much on my behalf. Since I was in middle school, I have started dozens of organizations. Except for the one that I gave up on myself, all the others were shut down by the school—they were either banned or cancelled. But these things, in my father's eyes, are Once I asked my father, "Why do you view these things I have done this way?" He said, "What you're doing is good. You are 'accumulating merit by doing good work.'" I asked him, "Why do you say this?" He said that it was because of his grandmother. She lived to be 97, so I had a chance to meet her before she died. My father said that when he was little, people were very poor at the time and didn't have food to eat. She would give a little money and food to passersby on the road. My father's health was very poor and he lived with his grandmother. In the middle of the night, she would often give him something to eat. My father was passing this on to me. I regret very deeply that I have not understood this until today. [CK cries] This has left the greatest impression on me.

GQ (Male, 33): Can I add something? I think, no matter what topic we are discussing, or what backgrounds we come from, we have to look for reasons and patterns behind these topics. The topics are more than detailed events. Just now, we discussed several issues related to differences between China and America in terms of education, public services, and peoples' attitudes. These issues, both above and below the surface, are patterned. Otherwise there would be no point in doing scientific studies on humans. These patterns are very complicated, but there is one that is very important. For example, the reform and opening movement began in the 1970s.

In 1978, China's rural areas became starting points for development. After that, there arose a very famous slogan that has continued to be used to this day: "Keep economic development as the central task." This still remains a basic policy for the country and even a long-term sort of battle strategy for development. It holds a high position and is constantly being imprinted into peoples' hearts with all kinds of propaganda methods.

Now every person has been made to think, "Economic development is in fact the central goal I want to spend my life pursuing. And I want to tell my child this, so that he might tell his children. Our people need to be united on this, and make it the enterprise of our entire country." The emergence of this slogan has inspired a transformation in society and in peoples' attitudes. There is an old saying in China that goes, "It takes three generations of wealth to cultivate a generation of nobility." That is to say, it takes three generations of the accumulation of wealth before you can raise up a generation which possesses the temperament of nobility. China still hasn't accumulated wealth to the point of producing a generation with this noble mentality. What is a noble mentality? I won't repeat myself, but it's the mentality in the kind of person that is close to nature, the kind that naturally does not fear and is not timid. A person who possesses an attitude of responsibility does not pointlessly stir up trouble about things that have nothing to do with him. And with regards to things that are his business, he also does not shirk his responsibility. This kind of disposition has not yet been developed because the accumulation of wealth up to this point has not been enough.

"The guiding principles of [China ... are] centered on economic development ... It is not to pursue an attitude of moderation, enjoy nature, walk a little slower or visit a museum. Who has this kind of time? Every minute, every second of your life must be used to climb higher, make money."

— GQ, male, 33, post-doctoral medical researcher

I worked for a period of time in Yunnan for the Clinton Foundation. At the time we were cooperating with a person who had been working for the Yunnan Provincial Center for Disease Control. He was over 40 years old. He had come out of the laboratory to participate in these kind of social, public welfare projects, and after about a year, he had been tormented to the point of no return. He had been in that laboratory for over 20 years. All he had been exposed to was bottles and jars. He was

a natural scientist, but once he re-entered society, he realized, “How could people’s hearts be this way?” He was cheated many times, and found that people were always trying to think of ways to make money, to accumulate their own wealth. He was vexed, and after talking with him for awhile, we all came to the consensus that the guiding principles of this country, one that is centered on economic development, have already objectified every Chinese person. That is, for the entire life of each person, or at least the years of his prime, his highest goal must be to pursue material wealth. It is not to pursue an attitude of moderation, enjoy nature, walk a little slower or visit a museum. Who has this kind of time? Every minute, every second of your life must be used to climb higher, make money, and establish more relationships. This is a major reason the various kinds systems, political, economic, agricultural, and educational, that have emerged under this kind of guiding principle are not the least bit strange. When you have teachers educating their students about this and then the students return home and hear it from their parents as well, it won’t be long before the student thinks, “I need to get into a good university. After that I need to make a lot of money or be an important official,” and so forth. “My children must go to school in America, I will send them over when they’re young. I can’t live in an 80 m² house like my parents, I need to live one that is 280m². I can’t be like my parents and not have a car for my whole life. I need three cars.” This is what they think about all day long. How are they supposed to have time to handle the people around them gently? They feel that any time spent communicating with you is a waste of time. They really don’t have time to stop.

What CK just said about not being able to see his parents, I completely understand. Everyone is thinking, “I have to work myself to death to make money, so that perhaps one day my children can have a good life. Perhaps one day I can go see my parents, one day I will report back to them. But for now, don’t get in the way of me making money.” If the country’s overarching principle is set as this, it would be very difficult for us to try to fix the surface problems resulting from it. What if you were to start classes to address this? What if you were to make all the museums free? Would people have time to go? Would they be interested in going? If they went, would they experience these undertones of

humanity? Their hearts are simply not there.

“The guiding principles of [China . . . are] centered on economic development . . . It is not to pursue an attitude of moderation, enjoy nature, walk a little slower or visit a museum. Who has this kind of time? Every minute, every second of your life must be used to climb higher, make money.”

— GQ, male, 33, post-doctoral medical researcher

XZ (Female, 23, studying English in the U.S.): I would like to talk a little bit about the issue of education. I feel that China, with regards to my generation, is just brainwashing [its people]. Beginning in kindergarten, every day they play songs extolling Chairman Mao and the Communist Party. They brainwash you from a very young age. Once you are in elementary school, you get those green scarves. Then you join the Young Pioneers, the Communist Youth League, and the Communist Party. By age six, the school has already formed in you a sort of notion: If you did not join them, then you were a bad child.

The educational system in China is like an assembly line that produces children with one kind of personality, one kind of manner. The educational system there fosters a focus on self-development. Due to extended exposure to the Communist Party’s brain washing, many people’s ability to think for themselves has already been dulled. Thus, when it comes to issues like Falun Gong and Tibet, many people just feel that they should believe the Communist Party. And because China’s media is closed, all they can see is a false show of peace and prosperity. They will never see the truth behind it. Even if many people were to learn about things overseas, they would not be willing to believe them. For example, I meet Chinese students [here in America], and they see news about Falun Gong and Tibet, and they still tell me that foreigners are just making it all up, it can’t be believed.

Also, China is always eulogizing the greatness of leaders,

so most Chinese people—even though they are slowly becoming aware of their bad side—think that they are only small citizens, they have no way of standing up to these leaders. They would rather slowly stop caring about politics and only care about their own lives.

I also want to say that in Shanghai, Beijing, and other similar big cities, China is developing very quickly. Chinese people put a high priority on maintaining the outer appearance, so city construction is changing for the better. I think that construction there looks even better than in New York. But, like those old houses in Shanghai, many are only being repaired on the outside. The inside is left in disrepair. It makes you think that in politics, they sometimes make their speeches to people on the outside, but as for those on the inside, they hold to a different standard. I think the problem of integrity is partly due to the fact that China's income gap is so large. Many people from other cities want to come to Shanghai looking for a different kind of life. But Shanghai natives are very prejudiced against outsiders due to the concept of social status that exists in China. Thus, outsiders have a hard time getting jobs, etc. I feel that this has already led to a sort of moral conflict, because many outsiders have now turned into thieves. They are unable to meet their basic needs for food and clothing, so they cannot even begin to consider the issue of integrity.

“The educational system in China is like an assembly line that produces children with one kind of personality, one kind of manner. ... And because China has a closed media, all they can see is a false show of peace and prosperity.”

— XZ, female, 23, student of English

Also, the Communist Party preaches communism. But now, as they gradually get wealthier and wealthier, they want to safeguard their own property. There is this trend toward privatization, many people are being promoted, and their values are changing. Now they are only looking toward money. Their definition of a “good

life” is already changing. They believe that a “good life” is full of wealth: big houses, cars, money, etc. They no longer feel that having a warm and happy home and an ordinary life is already a “good life.” Their definition of a “good life” has already become very materialistic.

After I came here, many of my assumptions were slowly changed. Now I feel that the road to success is not the only road. Society is so real and brutal. Many things may block the road that I originally wanted to take, and I am forced to go in another direction. But no matter what, it's just that the road is different. In the end it will still lead to success.

LD (Male, 30): I have a slightly different opinion. I feel that even though the pursuit of materialism in China is excessive right now, a similar pursuit of the “good life” and a striving sense of individualism exist in America as well. In America, there is also a movement away from over-emphasizing work and returning to love and family. The question is, once you have earned money, how do you use it? This involves the issue of people's sense of safety. Why does everyone work so hard to make money? On the one hand, they want to have a good life, a bigger house. On the other hand, they want to find out where their basic bottom line is.

Ordinary people just want to guarantee that they will be able to continue living—not just now, but later when they get old as well. They want their parents to be able to live in ease and comfort, and their children to be able to go to good schools. Now there are people who have calculated the cost of putting a child through school—all the way from elementary school to university—and how many tens of thousands it costs for the elderly to get surgical treatment for their illnesses. The current systems for medical treatment are inadequate. It is a little better in the city, but in rural areas, there is pretty much no medical insurance. How do you expect these people not to worry and, rather, to donate their money to society? After I donate, what happens if I get sick or if my parents get sick and die? Who will take care of us? Society definitely won't. Nowadays you can see in the newspapers that many people all over China have gone to Beijing to appeal for help, saying that they or their children or parents have a fatal disease. What can they do? They can do nothing. The media can only cover one

or two of these stories, if there are too many, there's nothing they can do to help. This is a very big problem in China. How do we strengthen the social security system to be like America's?

GW (Female, 20): If I were to say the thing about China that moves me the most and is most worthy of my contemplation and protection, it would be our ancient culture. As long as humanity can recognize the things that are of most value. Take, for example, the Book of Changes, Laozi, Confucius, etc., we still have all these. This is because Chinese people once knew the spirit of their people and had moral principles. But now, no one dares to even mention one word to the government about their traitorous dealings with regards to the oil fields in the East China Sea. Even after the earthquake happened, no one dared to go face it with a normal attitude. What was there to be afraid of? We once had a brilliant past. This is not a pipe dream, the existence of this in our past proves that we have the strength to do this again.

“The thing about China that moves me the most and is most worthy of my thoughts and protection ... would be our ancient culture. ... Take, for example, the Book of Changes, Laozi, Confucius, etc., we still have all these. This is because Chinese people once knew the spirit of their people and had moral principles.”

— GW, female, 20, student of Political Science, Psychology, and Economics

What I am relatively disappointed about is that Chinese people now are willing to conduct boycotts so easily. It's like, “If it was a good thing, I'll take the credit for it. If it was a bad thing, I'm sorry, I will bring you all down, and it was all your fault, not mine.” Actually, people are always judging others' feelings based on their own. It is not necessary to make your reputation better than others'.

YL (Female, 19): When people ask me, “When was

your happiest time in life?” My old home in Beijing has now been torn down for the Olympics. I used to live there with my grandmother and my aunts. My happiest time in life were when we would make dumplings together every year during the Spring Festival. When I was living there, my mother was living here, so I didn't have a mom or a dad, but those were still the happiest times in my life. I think it was because I had a sense of safety—safety in my family. I'm not saying that I am not happy or do not feel safe in America, but this is what left the deepest impression on me in China. I am not saying that America doesn't have this, they have Thanksgiving, etc. But it is really very different from China, where you sing, dance, etc. In America, if you were to go out at 3:00 in the morning [during a holiday like this], it would be very dangerous and scary. If you go out at 3:00 in the morning in China, everyone is outside smoking, drinking, chatting, etc. It's very different from America.

“China will soon slowly move toward the right path, and it will once again present itself as an outstanding country to the world—this I do not doubt. But an outstanding and powerful China in the future does not necessarily mean a warlike China.”

— GQ, male, 33, post-doctoral medical researcher

GQ (Male, 33): I said so many negative things before the break, but if I were to talk about the positive, I wouldn't have the time to say all that's in my mind. If I were to say what I'm proud of about being Chinese, I would say, the history of China is quite formidable. Whether you look at it from the perspective of its territory, military, culture, or its position in comparison to the rest of the world, this goes without saying. But in the last few decades, the arrangement of things in this world has gone through certain changes. Some of the rules have changed. But China was sleeping when this happened. After it woke up, things had changed, but the curiosity and diligence that had been characteristic of China for so long, and the moral character that had been engraved into its very bones, was not lost. Thus, at

worst, once China awakened, it could just start from the beginning and learn it all over again. Like a child learning new international political systems, new economic rules, and new customs regarding the exchange between humans and nations. Once we have learned it, we will be a great country. The problems we have mentioned today . . . everyone has lost trust. I don't trust you, you don't trust him, no one trusts the government, and the government doesn't trust its people. I feel that in the learning process, these are things that are very hard to avoid. China will soon move slowly toward the right path, and it will once again present itself as an outstanding country to the world—this I do not doubt. But an outstanding and powerful China in the future does not necessarily mean a warlike China. Of course, during a time when it has no confidence, the country is anxious about everything. But once it becomes really powerful, it should become very gentle. Whether you are talking about people's mindsets and attitudes, or the way power is handled in the government, I anticipate that it will present itself to the world very well. I really believe this, but I don't know if I will live to see it come to pass.

WYS (Male, 21): There are two things I would like to say that I am proud of as a Chinese person. One thing is the importance placed on family in Chinese culture. When I went back to Shanghai two months ago, I was there when they were celebrating several different holidays. They were very good about being together as a family, playing *mah jong* together, etc. In America, this seems a lot less frequent. Americans have Thanksgiving and Christmas that they spend together, but other times they are very independent. In this area, I think the Chinese are much better.

Another thing is that in America, I am called a minority. I am very proud of this. Our people have not been

in America very long, maybe only more than a hundred years, but many are doctors and lawyers now. In truth, though, many are doctors and lawyers because their parents forced them to be. Many Chinese people abroad are pressured like this by their parents, they are not allowed to pursue their own dreams.

STT (Female, 24): I grew up with a really wonderful aunt. You could say that she was representative of a typical Chinese person. No matter how the times have changed, no matter how authorities, or their policies, or the federal departments have changed, it is the bottom rung, the common people, who are just quietly existing. They are the ones inheriting and passing down our traditions.



A boy speaks on a mobile phone in Tiananmen Square ahead of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Photo credits: REUTERS/Jason Lee (CHINA).

No matter what has happened, whether to my grandfather or my grandmother's health, whether there was conflict amongst the brothers, or some sort of split in the family, my aunt would just continue to diligently press on. She took care of my grandmother no matter what went wrong, if she was in bad health, or if the fam-

ily was facing rough times.

You might ask, how much has China changed? What kinds of changes have occurred in Chinese thought? What kind of impact has the outside world made on China? I think that some things are just passed down and thus retained. Every family has to have this kind of a person to keep things going.

Oh, may I ask a question? Since I have come here, I have noticed so much change in my mentality. In America you can get more information, and you can see a variety of different voices, but why are so many Chinese students here unwilling to challenge what they had once seen and heard? Why are they so unwilling to accept any other way of thinking? I really don't understand why. I know that you just mentioned a few reasons, but I am

still not satisfied. You can't just say that if you were educated for a long enough time in China, you will be brainwashed and you won't be able to accept anything else. After all, we are all still young! We still have opportunities to be educated! We shouldn't say that this is too difficult a transformation to make. I'm still confused, I don't know how things can be this way. Because we are able to see that these things are multi-faceted, we can no longer just say, "that's traitorous" and be done with it.

XZ (Female, 23): One of my friends in Shanghai is the daughter of government officials. On the one hand, officials in the Chinese government are the way they are precisely because they have gone through this kind of an educational system. They are constantly just obeying orders. They don't think for themselves and they are not willing to believe other views.

For example, I remember that China put out a movie specifically about Falun Gong. They required all elementary through high school students to watch it. It was basically saying that Falun Gong was bad. Also, after watching the movie, students were required to write reflections on it, and they were supposed to criticize Falun Gong. Under this kind of educational system, China trains its people to follow orders. As for that friend, we had some other friends who, because of their family situations, knew some of the bad things about the government. Sometimes, we would discuss these

things, and whenever this friend would listen in, she would refuse to believe what we were saying and wouldn't even listen. She would tell others we were speaking nonsense.

LD (Male, 30): I think an important reason is factual basis. In China, when we look at *The People's Daily*, everyone knows it is fake. But it's right before your eyes, so it looks real.

STT (Female, 24): Wait a second. Perhaps because you work here in America, you knew those things were fake. But when I was watching the news in China, I really didn't think it was fake.

LD (Male, 30): Right. When we were in school, none of us dared to think it was fake. I guess what I am trying to say is that it is so easy to create fake scenarios nowadays. Falun Gong members claim that a certain number of people were abducted and destroyed. But they can create fake pictures, statistics, and stories. Then, take the Tibet situation, they have never been to Tibet. But here they are saying, "the Dalai Lama and his clique have not returned to Tibet for years so what right do they have to speak about Tibet?" I think we need to strengthen our factual basis. We need to find a way to find 100% accurate evidence that they can't doubt, and put it in front of them. Then they would have nothing to say.

Notes

1. Chen Yun (陈云) was one of the Eight Elders of the Communist Party and a member of the Politburo for many years. The highest official title he held was Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China Central Committee (1956, reinstated 1975). He was also Chairman of the Central Advisory Committee (1987–1992).

STUDYING AT CHINA'S "BACK DOOR"

Location: Hong Kong University

Date: August 11, 2008

Moderators: Professor Fu Hualing, HRIC Executive Director Sharon Hom

Translator: TL

This group of eight young Chinese are undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral students in Hong Kong. Their fields of study range from economics to information engineering to biochemistry. They were asked similar questions as those in the New York focus group—their major impressions being overseas, and the differences between China and their countries—and their answers contrasted sharply with those of their peers in New York.

Frank (20, undergraduate student in Information Engineering, from Chongqing): What left a deep impression on me was that the people in Hong Kong are more courteous. When you seek help from someone, even if that person can't help you, they will refer you to someone who can. I wondered about why there is such a difference. After a couple of years of observing, I realized that people seem to have a better sense of their role in the way society is ordered.

Brandon (26, PhD student in Biochemistry, from Beijing): In Beijing, the government has had such a campaign to get people to queue up, etc., but somehow here in Hong Kong, everyone seems to be taught such courtesies from a young age, without an official government program.

“It is quite rare for my friends to be concerned with rights or reforms. ... Most of the time, you don't believe that your individual actions might make a difference.”

— Frank, 20, undergraduate student in Information Engineering, from Chongqing

HR (postgraduate student in Political Theory, from Nanjing): I think education has a great role, and each generation may experience changes in social norms. Maybe it takes time for people to collectively realize the problems that result from everyone being selfish toward each other.

Melodie (23, graduate student in Economics, from Guangdong province): I've studied in Hong Kong, China, and France. I don't think the level of compassion or civic consciousness is significantly different in any of these places. I think I saw plenty of people in Paris jaywalk and smoke. I think young people in particular are kind. However, the longer you stay in a place, the more you realize that while people may be polite, they can be just as selfish or problematic. Mainland people are not necessarily more rude. I was quite comfortable in Beijing.

HR: Hong Kong is an interesting place, because while it has plenty of Chinese culture, it also has so much western influence. I think the feeling of civic consciousness in Hong Kong is stronger. I think traditional Chinese society is organized around your family and village, so we can be distrustful of strangers and visitors. Whereas the western influence in Hong Kong has made it much more welcoming of visitors.

Danielle (25, graduate student in Economics, from Jiangsu): Hong Kong people are more polite, and they seem to be very friendly to strangers. However, I wonder about how they really feel and whether they are sincere.

Melodie (23): There are not a lot of differences in everyday life. When I first visited Hong Kong at a young age, I saw a poster that was critical of a government official, and I thought it was a scary thing. But now that I've spent more time here, I do appreciate these things. Maybe these kinds of things are possible because of Hong Kong's smaller size and population.

Lucy (24, graduate student in Economics, from Beijing): I saw a female candidate competing for legislative elections.

Frank (20): I think it is quite rare for my friends to be

concerned with rights or reforms. I think that most of the time, you don't believe that your individual actions might be able to make a difference.

Brandon (26): Like now, in Hong Kong, people are debating the preservation of old buildings versus new developments. I think voting on such issues may lead to an effective solution, but in many cases, I think when people oppose such things, they are opposing simply for the sake of opposing.

“I do not have much sympathy for people involved in human rights work.”

— Melodie, 23, graduate student in Economics, from Guangdong Province

Vivien (MBA student, from Luoyang): Take the development of Shanghai, where many old buildings were demolished and people were relocated. The question of whether this was positive development is still open. If more voices can be involved in the decision-making process, there might be a better result. In Zhongda, people were campaigning for low-paid blue-collar workers to have free public transportation. I thought this was good for the workers.

Melodie (23): I do not have much sympathy for people involved in human rights work. But in Beijing, I have an aunt that has friends who were concerned with policy issues in China. Some of them had given up high-paid jobs to join NGOs that work on Chinese issues. I was very impressed with these people.

Danielle (25): I think when you advocate for a particular right, you must be conscious of the rights of others.

Vivien: In Shanghai, my friends were all for demolishing old buildings because it meant greater prosperity, but they did not think about the implications it would have on people who would lose their homes due to inability to afford a similar space and location. When people are comfortable with their house, car, etc., they say that “actually, China is very stable.” But from the

perspective of farmers who earn very little and need to become migrant laborers, it is difficult to adapt to a rapidly changing society.

Melodie (23): I am from Guangdong, where we see a lot of migrant workers who are really quite young—the same age as us when we were going to school—this leaves a strong impression. Now these workers seem more vocal and demanding, and my friends are scared of them. My mother has many friends who own factories, and they find these more-vocal workers a big problem, because you either can't find enough workers or you can't run your factory.

Ryan (student of Information Engineering, from Beijing): Listening to what has been said, I think the real question we should ask is: Why is democracy good? Why do people continue to push for democracy? Maybe this is part of development, or the next stage of development in a society. I suppose people ask what benefit can come from such changes. If you have a strong ruler who is capable and wise, there is nothing wrong with letting him/her make decisions. I think some people might advocate for democracy because they believe that it is important for China's long term development. But unless we've actually had experience in government, we have no way of knowing whether we personally know better than government officials.

Vivien: I was quite amused by what Melodie said about workers. Is it really enough to pay a worker a minimal wage and to allow them to go home only once a year? Shouldn't people have the ability to spend time with their families and take holidays?

“We should ask why democracy is good? ... If you had a strong ruler who was capable and wise, there is nothing wrong with letting him/her make decisions.”

— Ryan, student of Information Engineering, from Beijing

Melodie (23): I didn't say that they have enough. I always felt compassion for these workers. I'm just an