

The new mandarins: a look at Peking University

By Ross Meek

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Lin Fushao lives in a damp, ten by sixteen, cement floored room with five other women and some rats. Bottles, dishes, books, clothes, in fact, all the worldly belongings of six people overflow the one shelf, two tiny tables, and six bunks. Lin must carry her own dishes to the cafeteria, purchase food with ration tickets and return to her room to eat. The cafeteria has no space for tables and no money for dishes. After a ten hour day, Lin falls asleep surrounded by mosquito netting with only a thin quilt between her and a wooden mattress.

Lin Fushao is an elite student attending China's premier university, Beijing Dashwei (Peking University).

Any Canadian student would be appalled at these living conditions, and certainly distressed by the academic facilities. Only two at a time can study in the dorm, others must line up outside the library a half an hour before it opens, hoping to find a seat. Books are held in locked stacks. Students can borrow only those books that apply to their field. This only appealing to the overworked, unsympathetic librarian.

Lectures are constantly interrupted as stray students walk back and forth through the classrooms. Revolutionary exercise music plays periodically over loudspeakers outside, drowning out the professor.

Yet to some ten thousand students at Beida (an abbreviation for Beijing University), this is the best of all possible worlds. They are among the highest class in a classless society.

"A few years ago, thinkers and scholars were 'stinkers'; today, they are desperately needed," said Theodore H. White in a recent article in *Time*. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, a decade of chaos between 1966 and 1976, the young communist leaders now know they must find young talent to carry forward their tired government. They must create a new mandarin class of scholars and bureaucrats to administer their experiment in modernization.

Who are these new mandarins? And, what role will they play in their country's future?

For the new mandarin dawn breaks early. It is 5:30 a.m. and a heavy haze hangs over the tree tops. The sun has yet to break through but the campus is alive with morning exercise. It is strangely quiet. Individuals beside the path, or on the dusty knolls perform the ancient art of Tai chi. The slippered shuffle of joggers rounding the lake is muffled in the still air.

This early morning ritual provides breathing space, a mental escape from the regular crowds of 25,000 residents on the 50 acre campus.

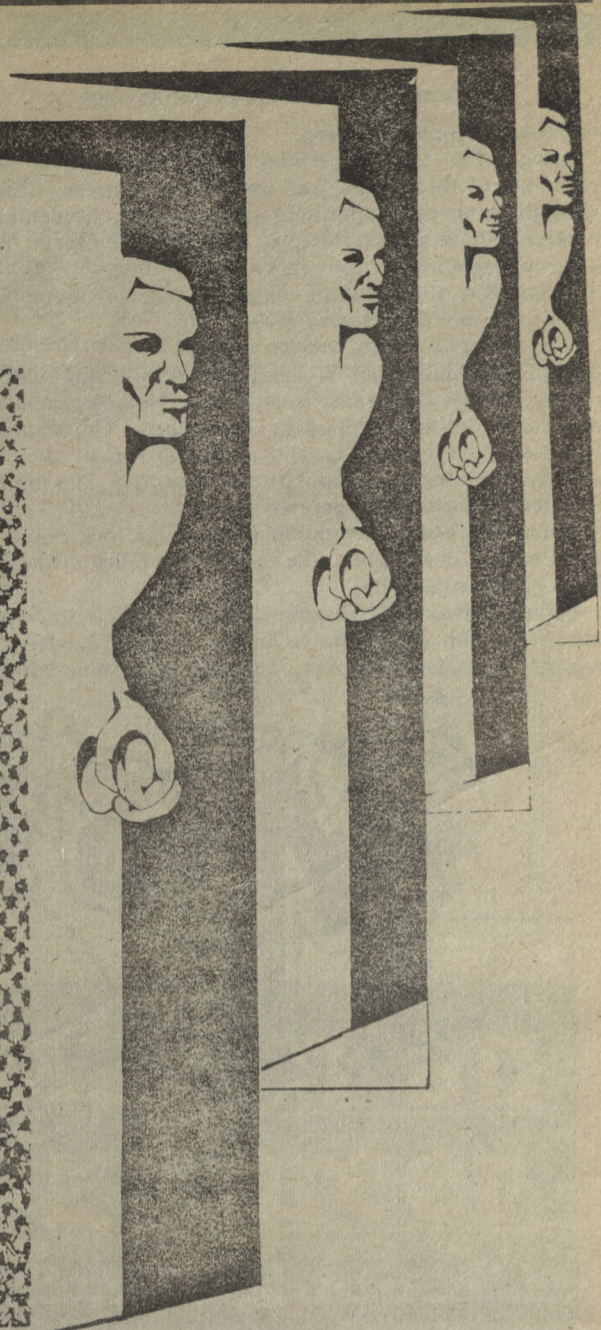
Zhang Bonfan finishes his breakfast of rice gruel, preserved tofu, ammonia risen bread with bean curd and collects his books for class. He is a geography graduate student specializing in quantitative methods.

As Zhang approaches his class down the poorly lit hall of the dilapidated Russian Language building, four young women giggle and chatter like elementary school students. Zhang impresses them. He has been selected to study at Stanford University next year. A great honour.

To receive this opportunity, Zhang holds important qualifications. He is near the top of his class. He speaks English well. And most importantly, he is a member of the Communist Party. Proud of his accomplishment, he feels 40 per cent Western."

Yet when visiting Canadian students show him a women's fashion magazine he is silent and blushes at the lingerie ads. After overcoming his shyness, he asks how they know which stume is for sunbathing and which is for underclothes.

Another student, Ding Bilan, is fortunate to lunch at the foreign students cafeteria with her Canadian friends, twenty-two students from the University of British Columbia's Geography Department. The UBC students are spending six



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weeks of their summer at Beida in the first student exchange with China at the departmental level.

This cafeteria has tables with dishes and chopsticks, and is attended by serving girls. During the conversation, Ding fills up on the rich food that is unavailable to regular students. She gestures with her chopsticks and pigtailed bob up and down while she searches for the correct English words to describe her country's customs.

Explaining the superior treatment of foreign students Ding says, "it is our tradition to treat our guests with whatever the best we have. When I told my family that we had taken you to the student's dining hall, they blamed me for being 'ridiculous'; for 'whoever heard that guests could be entertained in a student's dining hall?' My grandma likes to tell me about a village tradition; if one receives a present of cakes or vegetables, they usually preserve it as long as possible

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in case any guests might come. They would not eat the best food themselves. So you see, there is nothing extraordinary."

Ding's Canadian friend noticed quite a separation between male and female students. She asked Ding about her male classmates. "Where are the boys in my class? To tell the truth, they are so 'tiny' (both in size and in ambition) that they escape our notice (no bragging). First of all, girls are the majority in my class. Secondly, most of the girls study harder and are better than the boys. I do not mean they are not smart. They are. Only they are not intelligent enough to bear the title of 'men'. Lastly, girls are more bold and outspoken. Actually, being of a more generous sex, we treat them well enough," explained Ding.

This did not coincide with reports of campus security flushing many young lovers from the bushes above the small man made lake. But it did make an interesting contradiction.

Not lucky enough to eat at tables in foreign students' cafeteria, Lin plods back to her dorm, dinner in hand. Most of it eaten by the time she arrives. She hungrily swallows the

slippery noodles, nibbles the crisp lotus root, and crunches the deep-fried rice cake. The scrambled egg and tomato will wait, and her roommate would bring rice for all to fill up on after the meal.

Although there is now plenty of food, it never seems to supply enough energy. The students tire quickly, probably because their diet supplies 1800 calories a day, on average. A Canadian consumes close to 3000.

Lin smiles and nods at the elderly lady sitting at the entrance to her dorm. She is the housemother, a Party member, and Lin is always polite to her.

After her meal Lin must line up, waiting for the library to reopen after the supper break. Beida's library is reputed to hold some three million volumes. Other libraries suffered vandalism during the Cultural Revolution. There were gutted by the Red Guards and the books sold for fuel. Beida was Mao's favorite library, so it survived.

When the library doors open, she smiles at the doorman (also a Party man) and enters to find a seat in the crowded hall.

There are many lingering reminders of the persecution felt by scholars during the Cultural Revolution. "Work. Work is good," says a campus maintenance worker. This statement has clear overtones suggesting 'my work is good, but what students do is no good.' He is old and can no longer shift his values with China's zig-zagging policies.

The tormented decade of the Cultural Revolution was a time of terror and persecution. It resembled civil war, not culture. White describes it as a "sweep of terror, China under the Cultural Revolution was the equivalent of Nazi Germany. Thugs, Red Guard bands and idealists fought in the cities, all rivaling one another to show loyalty to Mao Thought ... So millions suffered."

White quotes a one-time student: "My brother was at Peking University; he was beaten to death; then my mother committed suicide. Anyone with an education ... could be sent down ... Being 'sent down' or Xiafang, as the Chinese call it, was a very simple punishment. 'Stinking intellectuals' were supposed to learn from the peasants what life was like when one must stoop for hours transplanting rice seedlings in the wet muck."

Students must live in the wake of such chaos, resentment

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