A glimpse of China through young eyes

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A CHANCE meeting with a group of students recently in a hotel lift gave me a glimpse of the generation that will inherit a rising China.

I was in Beijing recently for an event organised by the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) on the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Meeting's seventh summit.

I had come to the ASEF meeting straight from the annual conference of the Fulbright Association. It had chosen Beijing as the venue both to honour the city that had hosted the Olympics this year, and to mark the 30th anniversary of the normalisation of relations between the United States and China.

At the Fulbright conference, I had led a roundtable on China's rise. It had been a productive session at which the Chinese participants had responded frankly and amicably to concerns over how a powerful China might behave.

But the discussion had been one among adults. What did young Chinese want the future to be? It was here that the meeting with the students proved fortuitous.

The young people, first-year students of history at Beijing Normal University, were on their way to another ASEF event when they ran into me in the lift.

I asked whether I could meet them before I left Beijing. They agreed. Three days later, 10 of them turned up at my hotel to take me to the Temple of Heaven.

As we posed for a group photograph, they unfurled the flag of the Chinese Communist Youth League. That China's young communists should choose the Temple of Heaven as the venue was an interesting comment on the place of history, if not of religiousity, in post-Maoist China.

Emperors had once prayed at the temple for good harvests. Caught up in the mood of the moment, I thought that I should seek blessings for the students and the vanguard of China's future. I asked them what they wanted as a boon.

They were as surprised by my question as I had been by the appearance of their flag. A brief discussion ensued among them. "Peace" was their spontaneous, and unanimous, first choice of blessing. "Cooperation" and "friendship" followed swiftly. As I was about to make my way to an altar nearby, one of the students added, almost as an afterthought: "Could you pray for a bright future for us?"

That afterthought made me think. The students, four men and six women drawn from across China, had entered the 100-year-old university after having scored well in competitive examinations. Competitiveness came naturally to these 17- and 18-year-olds, whose entry to the prestigious university gave them access to a bright future.

They were a part of China's elite, and they knew it. However, for all of them, the public goods represented by peace, cooperation and friendship came to mind first, before their personal success did. Theirs was a social conscience in which individual ambitions were expressed through collective values and goals.

Indeed, in the six hours that I spent with the students, the word "I" was sounded no more than two dozen times and then, too, in answer to a specific enquiry, such as where a student was from. Most answers were phrased around "we".

Certainly, it was a contested "we". For example, if one student said something like "the Chinese people think that..." and another disagreed with her, he would argue that "while this is true, we must also remember that..."

However, "we" prevailed over "I". The students' individualism was defined, not by its distance from a feared collectivity, but by a reverence for peace within a trusted collectivity.

Their social consciousness appeared to have grown from a strong sense of cultural comfort. That comfort, in turn, seemed to have grown organically from China's success in emerging repeatedly from epochs of internal strife, foreign invasion and "peaceful evolution", or alleged attempts by foreigners to subvert its polity from within.

China was so large and populous, and the weight of its history so great that, among the students, at least, a secure identity came with the fact of birth as a Chinese. These young people had no need to define themselves in opposition to other nationalities. If others chose to define themselves in opposition to the Chinese, that was their choice.

As for China's place in the world, the rather long walk to the subway station gave me an opportunity to ask the students: Had they had the choice of being born in an earlier era of Chinese history, which would it be?

The Tang Dynasty won easily; for that was when a peaceful and prosperous China had been the world's most powerful nation. However, a shy woman from Jilin province turned stern when she mentioned the Qin dynasty that had unified China.

Her body language suggested that, if it ever came to the issue of China's unity, even a cruel and autocratic emperor like Qin Shi Huang would be preferable over those who would want to take the country back to the Warring States Period.

It was 11.30pm when we returned to my hotel. The students, who had travelled for more than an hour to meet me at 7am, were famished. I invited them to join me for a meal in the hotel.

As we were ushered into a restaurant, a student asked me anxiously: "This place looks very expensive. Are you certain that we should eat here?"

Seated around the table, we received five copies of the menu. No one touched it except the group leader. I glanced at it and asked him to order. It was only when I received the bill that I realisaed that he had picked the cheapest items on the menu.

Secure in their Chineseeness, courteous to a foreigner, and deferential to an older person, my new Chinese friends embody for me a China that is confident enough to seek its place at the table of the great powers — not by ejecting those already seated, but by asking for a larger table.

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