Letter from China: A scholar's prescription for getting to next level

By Howard W. French  International Herald Tribune

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2005
SHANGHAI Sometimes a single person's life can tell you more about a country's experience than a shelf full of history books. Among Chinese people of a certain age, such lives, rich in struggle, in suffering and in the consequences of man's folly and often enough in a measure of redemption, come in abundance.

These are people who are today in their 40s, whose transition to adulthood was hijacked by the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution.

Their high school and college studies alike were aborted. Among urban dwellers, many were "sent down" to the countryside to labor as peasants, or assigned to antiquated factories to churn out rough-hewn goods.

For the lucky, life resumed, productive life, that is.

Such is the story of Xu Tian, a 43-year-old Chinese scientist from Zhejiang Province whose discoveries involving the transposition of genes were featured last month on the cover of the prestigious scientific review, Cell. People who know about such things say that Xu's work has a very good chance of affecting all of our lives, making it possible to switch genes on and off, facilitating therapies for diabetes, depression, you name it.

So significant are his findings that the scientist, who divides his time between Yale University and Fudan University, in Shanghai, is already being mentioned by his peers as a potential Nobel laureate. But this is not a column about Xu's work. It is about his life, and its relevance to the history and future of China.

"I never expected to go to college," Xu said during a recent visit to Shanghai, speaking of the great suspension of normal life that was the Cultural Revolution. "Nobody in my high school went to college. We had half-pound rations of meat and of cooking oil. Matches were rationed. Toilet paper was rationed."

The most striking thing about returning home from the States, he said, is the intensity of commerce in today's China.

"People try to sell you things," Xu said with the pinch-me air of disbelief of someone who grew up in an era of persistent scarcity.

Xu was fortunate to enter Fudan University, one of the greatest names in Chinese education, shortly after the Cultural Revolution.

He remembers traveling to Shanghai to visit the school, wide-eyed and thoroughly uncertain about what route to take in academia. Parents and relatives had been active in the humanities and had suffered persecution as a result. All cautioned him against following their path.

"I saw that Fudan offered genetics, so I asked my family what is genetics, and they had no clue," Xu said without affectation. "I asked my neighbors, and they had no clue, so I thought genetics must not be very popular. Maybe I'll have a chance."

There is a dreamily idealized quality to the way Xu described the academic environment of the day.

"People were very eager to teach and to learn," he said. "Many of the people had been trained in the West, and had never had the opportunity to teach before. The students were incredibly ambitious. We had no clue what the outside world looked like, and suddenly we had an opportunity to study."

It is at this point in the narrative curve that China must hope that Xu's experiences no longer track reality with such fidelity. China has ambitions to build one of the world's greatest educational establishments, and like almost everything here these days, the authorities want to achieve their goals in a hurry.

And yet Xu suspects that in some ways, the country peaked academically back in those days, at least where the spirit of pure inquiry is concerned, and although his comments are particularly pointed, among his peers he is far from alone.

Xu made his way to the United States in 1983, landing in Harlem, the New York City neighborhood, with $50 in his pocket. After six months, Yale offered him a full scholarship, allowing him to pursue his graduate studies, and work there ever since.

His visits home now are very much those of a prodigal son, and his feelings toward China are at once hopeful and deeply critical. What he has found is a nation investing furiously, and with some notable successes, in educating its people. At the same time, he fears the implications of a system heavily invested in control, and the culture of rampant and mindless materialism, careerism and cronyism that it has produced.