Two Years at University

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Graduating from middle school was for me a very different experience from primary school graduation, since by then there was no one attempting to map out my future. My father had been dead for more than a year, and, in that respect, I was completely free to do as I chose, but family finances were much worse than before and this placed new constraints on me.

My brother, who was only six years older than I, had assumed the heavy burden of supporting the family. A young man in his early twenties, he was expected to deal with the many financial problems which arose after my father’s death. In a little town like ours, where money was so important, it was humiliating for him to have to face our father’s creditors, and he became very aware of the cruelty of human and social relations. He constantly grumbled about this to me and declared that it was his intention to restore the family fortunes. As a part of his plan, he approved of my wish to sit the university entrance examination, and promised to do everything he could to help me.

Five members of the graduation class, myself included, were going to sit the examinations in Beijing. Just before I left, my brother and my mother managed to scrape together fifty silver dollars for me. Since a third-class ticket to Beijing cost nearly twenty dollars, I had no idea how I would manage on only thirty dollars after I arrived in Beijing. The other four students started out from Hangzhou, and we met up together on the way. My brother came along to the station to see me off, and travelled with me for a short stretch before returning home. On the train neither of us spoke a word, except when he urged the other four to look after me. He got off at Jiaxing and waited for a while at the train-window, not knowing what to say. As the train moved off, he stood there in the sunset watching me. I leaned out of the window. On his face I could read the expectations he had of me, and this put me in a solemn frame of mind; it was as if we were comrades-in-arms, and I was off to the front to fight to restore the fortunes of the family. However, I completely failed to fulfil those expectations. As time went by, our ideas grew further and further apart, and after many disappointments his brotherly affection towards me cooled considerably.

My long-cherished dream materialised: I passed the entrance examination to Beijing University. I was very happy and excited, rather like a Christian must feel on entering a great cathedral. Beijing University was a very different place
from what it had been at the time of the May Fourth Movement. Cai Yuanpei had already resigned as president, and Chen Duxiu had long since left Beijing to devote himself to Communist Party work. Hu Shi was said to be at odds with those professors who were members of the Guomindang, and had asked for extended leave, but there were still many other professors working at the university whom I looked up to. And then there was the library, stacked high with books I had never seen or even heard of before, and the porter’s lodge, where many different sorts of publications were on sale. I was deeply impressed by the magnificence of China’s highest educational institution, and as I drank in the air of learning and culture I felt that I was close to the vital pulse of the nation, the epoch, and the world. I think that this combination of reverence and exhilaration was felt by many of the young people who came to Beijing from all over China in search of knowledge.

The political situation in Beijing at that time was rather unstable, and was moving quickly to the left. As a result of the warlord Feng Yuxiang’s change of allegiance, the confused war between the Fengtian and the Zhili warlords had come to an end; Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, had been swept out of the Forbidden City in Beijing; the political reverberations of the campaign launched by the Left after Sun Yat-sen’s death could still be felt, and political life was in a state of lively ferment.1 The May Thirtieth incident in Shanghai, the world-famous Guangzhou-Hong Kong general strike of 1925–6 and the Shaji shootings in Guangzhou on 23 June stimulated and reinforced political developments among the intellectuals in Beijing.2 The Duan Qirui régime in Beijing was nothing more than an empty shell propped up by a number of

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1 On 15 September 1924, Zhang Zuolin (1875–1928), head of the Fengtian warlord-clique, declared war on the Zhili warlords headed by Cao Kun (1862–1938), then President of the Beijing Government. This, the second Fengtian-Zhili war, was brought to an end within a month by the defection to the Zhili forces of one of the three top commanders, Feng Yuxiang (1880–1948). Having established secret contact with the Guomindang, Feng called for the cessation of the war and moved his forces back to Beijing, driving Puyi (1906–67), the former emperor of the Qing dynasty, out of the Forbidden City and inviting the Guomindang leader, Dr Sun Yat-sen, to Beijing. Duan Qirui (1865–1936), leader of the Anhui clique of northern warlords, came to Beijing to be ‘Provisional Executive Chief of State’. Dr Sun came to Beijing with the aim of convoking a national congress, but fell ill and died on 12 March 1925.

2 In response to the May Thirtieth Incident in Shanghai, 250,000 Hong Kong workers staged a general strike, beginning on 19 June 1925. They left en masse for Guangzhou. At the same time workers in Shamian, a settlement for foreigners in Guangzhou, also joined the strike. On 23 June, when the strikers together with peasants, students, and soldiers, were marching along Shaji (opposite Shamian), British and French marines behind barricades in Shamian machine-gunned the demonstrators, killing 52 of them, and badly wounding more than 170.