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# China's New New Youth

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Alec Ash keeps the blog [Six](#), which over the past year followed the lives of six young people in and around Beijing University. A graduate of Oxford University, Ash is now studying Chinese at Tsinghua University and, as a new school year begins there today, he kicks off another year at Six. Here, a reintroduction to his blog's subjects. Ash will chronicle their lives further at his blog in the coming months.

By Alec Ash

In 1915, in Shanghai, Chen Duxiu founded a magazine called *qingnian zazhi* (青年杂志), or *Youth Magazine*. Soon after, it was renamed *xinqingnian* (新青年): *New Youth*. Perhaps Chen came to feel that the youth of the times had something new to offer China, or that his writers had something new to offer China's youth. Either way, the magazine and the name captured the spirit of the New Culture Movement which led to May 4th. *New Youth* aimed to call China out of its Confucian slumber with plain, angry writing by the likes of Lu Xun and essays promoting democracy. Later, it more heavily promoted Marxism and eventually provided an intellectual base for the Communist Party which Chen co-founded in 1921. The name was iconic for a China fresh out of imperial rule, standing up for a new and fairer future.

The next 'new youth' to publicly embody this spirit was the Tiananmen students, who with the same fighting words challenged the very new China which the magazine had helped to create. They failed. But now, thanks not to protests at Tiananmen but the slower crawl of global integration, there is a 'new new youth' of around my age: in or just out of university. Zhang Shihe, a 56-year old blogger and political activist [quoted in the Los Angeles Times](#), gives them a less flattering but possibly catchier moniker: "the stupid generation".

"They were raised on Coca-Cola and Western movies," Zhang enjoys himself, "and they're very isolated from their country's history". Well I appreciate, Mr Zhang, that the *LA Times* is ruthlessly selective, but I can't help but question how much time you spent talking to this "stupid generation" before dismissing nearly a hundred million young people from the future of China. Of course, no-one can describe this new new youth except themselves. But here are six of my acquaintances from a year's study at Peking University who I feel capture some key angles of a multi-faceted generation pretty well, and who I follow on my blog, [Six](#).

ZHANG NING (JACK)

Zhang Ning just graduated from Beijing's prestigious Foreign Affairs University, and will begin in autumn a career in China's Foreign Ministry. He's an impressively thoughtful and industrious guy (he practices real-time English-to-Chinese translation for half an hour every morning, to polish his diplomatic English), until you mention anything political and he becomes the prickliest man in the world. Zhang Ning is passionately patriotic, will use every ounce of his ability to further China's causes by his government's side, and as a result is touchy at any apparent criticism of China. In any discussion of government policy he will happily quote local statistics while questioning their veracity, but he is both convinced that the Tiananmen protests were instigated by the US and is among the majority of Chinese that still believe the May 8<sup>th</sup> 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was intentional. Despite this one-sided information, he is several thousand *li* from stupid.

TONY

Tony, who prefers to keep his Chinese name anonymous, has been [on The China Beat before](#), as Secretary General of the model UN. He's a 21 year old third-year student of Politics and International Relations at Peking University (or 'Beida'), and privileged in that his dad works at the Foreign Ministry and he's currently at summer school in Yale. Like Zhang Ning, he is intensely politically in-the-know, reading foreign news as well as Chinese news. Unlike Zhang Ning, he is more sympathetic to 'Western politics' and has a less paranoid view of the events of May 8, 1999 and Tiananmen square. But, again

he wants to change China from inside its system not outside it. Tony, like everyone I describe below, would only follow others in protest himself (I speculate) in exceptional circumstances combining an issue he felt passionately about, where not only is the government an aggravating factor but there are other viable options, and an assurance of security for his prospects after. That scenario isn't anywhere on the horizon yet.

#### LI MINGMING (MINDY OR MARIE)

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Mingming's first English name, chosen by her Chinese English teacher, was Mindy. When I first met her, she didn't like it much. She thought Mimi might be better. Her dream at the time was to study in Paris (first reason she gave me? "Disneyland"), so I suggested Marie. She still hasn't decided which name to use, and will probably go through Marion and Mia before settling on Anne. She hates her subject at PKU, Artificial Intelligence, as she dislikes maths: AI was chosen for her by her parents, who felt it would lead to a competitive job. She enjoys more her free time activity of 'sexy jazz' dancing, which looks a bit [like this](#), and when we meet we often listen to her favourite music on her MP3: Avril Lavigne, Britney, the Pussy Cat Dolls. She is a reminder that the vast majority of students at Beida aren't Tony or Jack. She also studies 10 hours a day, every day in termtime, at a subject she can't stand. Why? "There is a question I always ask myself: what kind of person I want to be, and what work I want to have. If I have a goal, I will ignore the tiredness."

#### ZHENG BINBIN (BEN)

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Binbin is as hard working as Mingming, only in the field of business. On the very day he graduated from his hometown in Shanxi province, he took the train to Beijing (his email address, cutely, is wodebeijingmeng@ ... 'my Beijing dream'). For the last two years he has run an online clothes shop, buying clothes cheap from southern Guangzhou factories and selling them from the capital. And he's doing great. In high season (winter), he sells fifty to eighty items a day, earning up to 500 RMB (£45) – significantly more than his dad who is a salesman and gave Binbin his start-up loan of 20,000 RMB (which he has built up to almost 80,000 RMB). Such entrepreneurial spirit is far from new to the Chinese, but it is this memory-less generation to which it is entirely natural to begin a private business. Binbin's contribution to China in the new millenium, like Mingming's, will be as earnest as any of the protesters on Tiananmen square. And it will highly likely be done entirely within and not in contradiction to the present system of government which fosters people like him.

#### CHENG LIANG (LEONIDAS)

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The contribution Cheng Liang, a postgraduate student of linguistics at Beida, will make towards a fairer China will also be hard work not protest. He has just sat his GRE, and hopes to do a PhD in an American university for five years or so. He is immensely bright and I'm sure will have the opportunity to remain in the US in some capacity, as generations before his have consistently done – the infamous 'brain drain'. But he is insistent that he will come back to China to use his knowledge to better his homeland, just like everyone else I've talked to who wants to study, or is studying, abroad. For all his admiration of Western culture and philosophy (his ex-girlfriend, Lei Wen, or – [aptly](#) – Matilda, once recommended I read Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*), Liang prefers Classical Chinese history and literature, is passionate about fixing inequalities in education, and would be loath to leave China behind. If you're wondering about his English name, incidentally, it was given him by his first teacher in Ancient Greek, which he took because (why else?) "there was a beauty in the class".

#### WILLIAM

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William, from a farming household in the poor province of Anhui, dropped out of college in Beijing (studying that difficult to digest subject, Food Sciences) one year from graduation to pursue his passion: environmental activism. He didn't like school because "you must learn political communism, the ideas of the CCP, and must do what your teacher tells you. ... I want to live my life, not another life, so I do what I want to do. I want to listen to my heart." He has since worked for the environmental website [China Dialogue](#), was involved from its conception in the [China Youth Climate](#)

[Action Network](#), and gets very fired up discussing the upcoming talks in Copenhagen. He's going back to finish his degree next autumn, and hopes to get into Beida after that, but "in my heart", he assures me, "I am still a peasant". You can call William's passion and idealism naive, but he and the rest of the new new youth have more information and a wider perspective than ever. And like the new youth did in 1919, the class of 2009 can still change China.

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