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The China Connection

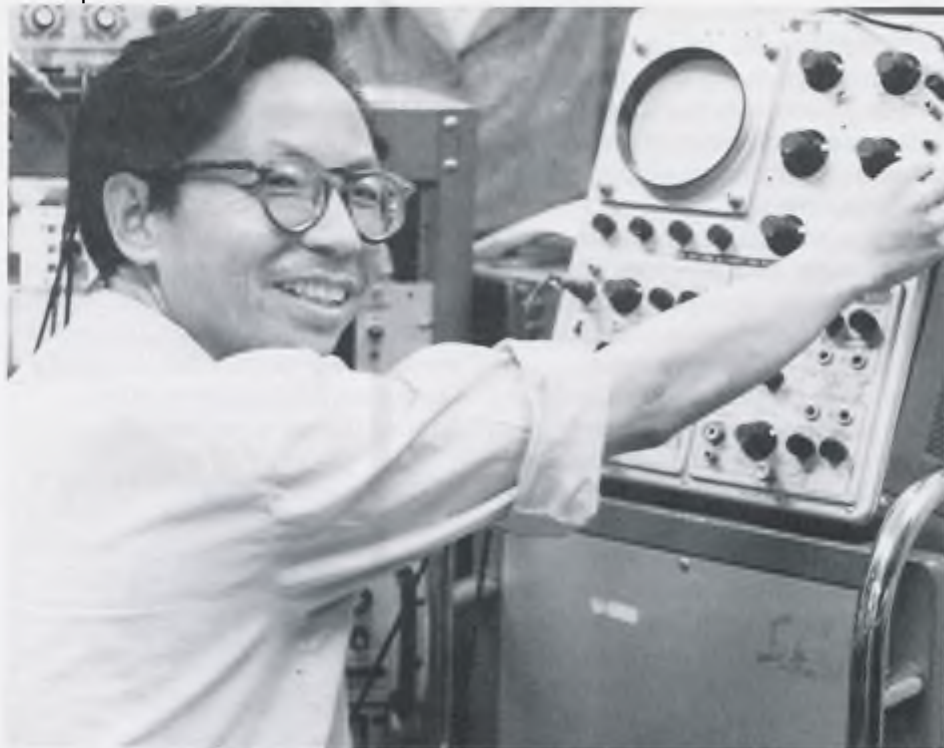
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Xuechu Li

THE CHINA CONNECTION

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Since 1966, Xuechu Li of the Dalian Institute of Chemical Physics in northern China has been using lasers as tools for chemical research. But his research efforts often were stymied because his laboratory's equipment was so limited.

In 1981, he read an article in the magazine *Laser Focus* which described some research being done at Howard University by William M. Jackson, professor of chemistry. Li began scanning the scientific literature seeking articles the Howard laser chemist had published. He discovered that the two men—working in two different parts of the world under two distinctively different political/economic systems—were engaged in a similar scientific quest.

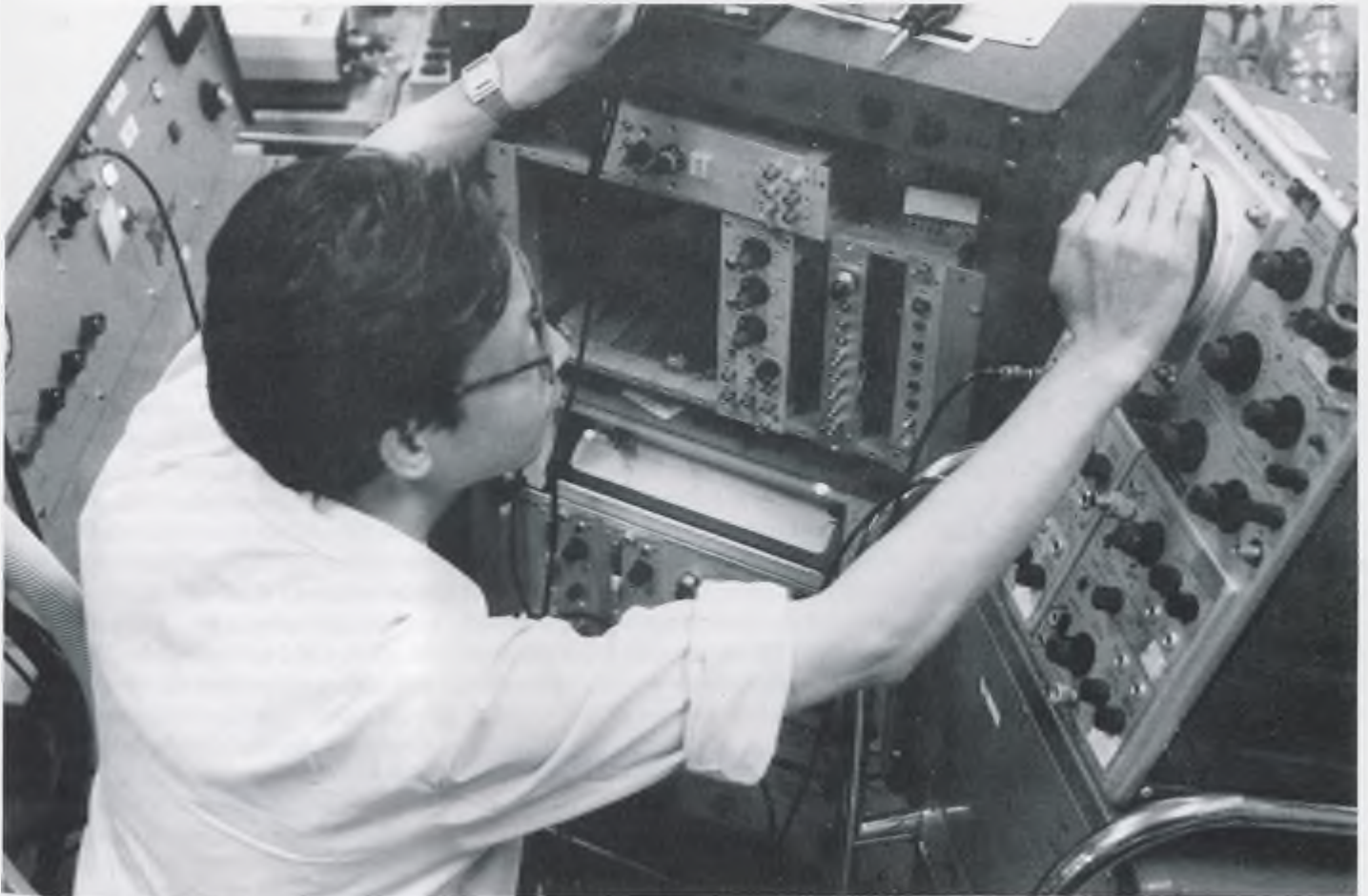
Li wrote to Jackson and sent him one of his own scientific papers (in an English translation), asking if he could work with him. Jackson agreed. For about a year and a half now, Li has been an integral part of Jackson's research team, utilizing the state-of-the-art equipment of the university's Laser Chemistry Laboratory to

learn more about chemical reactions that are important in combustion, a research project supported by a Department of Energy grant.

A block away from the Laser Chemistry Laboratory, Wei Tong diligently studies fluid mechanics as he works on a master's degree in the School of Engineering. [Fluid mechanics is the science that deals with the static and dynamic behavior of liquids and gases.]

Before coming to the United States in May 1983, Tong taught textile engineering at Henan Province Textile Industrial College in Central China. When he returns home, he hopes to put his new academic specialty to work as a teacher and researcher.

Tong first learned of Howard through an article in the Chinese magazine *Windows of the World* about a prominent physician who was a Howard alumnus. "I learned Howard University was a very famous university in the United States," recalls the engineering graduate student. "About the same time I read the article ['81-'82] my father [an agricultural specialist] was in the United States as a visiting scholar with the Department of



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Agriculture and I learned more about Howard from him. He said, 'Howard University is a very good university' and so [with promise of initial financial support from an aunt who lived in New Jersey] I applied to Howard."

Even in China, Tong says, he knew that Howard was a predominantly Black educational institution. Speaking with heartfelt emotion and the often charming syntax of one who is still struggling with English, he observes: "Chinese people and the Chinese government are very friendly to American Black people. I think they know and understand the struggle of American Black people to get the equal rights.

"I like Black people. I think Black people is a very beautiful, very, very nice. Everyone here [at Howard] — from undergraduates to professors — has been very nice and very patient with me, even though I have some difficulty learning English. They have been very patient to explain to me and to help me."

In addition to increasing his knowledge of mathematics, fluid mechanics and heat transfer, Tong says he's had his first chance to operate a computer while at the

university. "In China I just had learned some computer language, but I had no opportunity to operate computers," he explains. "Now I do and I'm very, very interested in operating them."

Similarly, Li says that he has found his stay on the Howard campus intellectually rewarding. He, too, expresses his thoughts in words that often lack grammatical precision but whose meaning is unmistakable: "I think from laser experiments here I learn a lot — because China not rich like America so in our laboratory we don't have a lot of lasers like Jackson's laboratory."

"I come here very serious," he adds. "I think maybe Jackson say I not work well, maybe I'm lazy [he laughs]. So personally I don't sit down and read a newspaper or anything. I spend all day long doing the research work and when I go back to the apartment I'm very tired."

Both in China and at Howard, Li has had close contact with graduate students and he contrasts them this way: "Here graduate students' knowledge is very wide. In China, a student can get a good grade but will not be so good at research

work because his knowledge is so narrow."

As for Jackson, he says, "I learned a lot from him. I think Jackson [is] smart. He knows a lot. And I'm learning a lot. When I go back to China I can continue this research . . . I want to write a paper to introduce Jackson's research to China. [For a profile of Jackson, see "William Jackson: Science is His Tool, Advocacy His Passion" in the April 1982 issue of *New Directions*.]

Xuechu Li and Wei Tong are among a small contingent of Chinese scholars and graduate students who have come to Howard in recent years to study and to work on research projects. In addition to those affiliated with the Laser Chemistry Laboratory and the Department of Mechanical Engineering, visiting Chinese scholars have done research in the Department of Electrical Engineering, the Department of Physics and the Department of Biochemistry in the College of Medicine, while a Chinese graduate student has studied international relations in the Department of Political Science.

When you add up those from the People's Republic of China who are currently on campus, have been on campus or were expected to arrive on campus by the end of the summer, the figure comes to 18. A drop in the bucket when you consider the foreign student population at Howard (2,234 during the last academic year, reports the Office of International Student Services.) Certainly a drop in the bucket when you consider the total number of Chinese scholars and students in the United States (approximately 10,000, reports a spokesman for the Chinese Embassy.)

But the small number of Chinese scholars and students at Howard shouldn't obscure the significance of their presence on the campus. For it is the small quiet

experiences of people like Xuechu Li and Wei Tong that reveal the human dimension behind the larger story of the improvement in U.S.-Chinese relations.

A press release distributed by the New China News Agency notes that the Chinese Ministry of Education sent the first group of 52 visiting scholars to the United States on December 26, 1978, ten days after the announcement of the normalization of relations between the two coun-

"They are excellent scientists who work extremely hard . . ."

tries. [Groundwork for this momentous turnabout in U.S. foreign policy was laid in 1972 with President Nixon's historic meeting with Mao Tse-tung in Peking and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, the essence of which was that "there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China."]

According to a 1981 report prepared by the U.S.-China Education Clearinghouse, a joint project of the National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the National Association for Foreign Students, today more than half of the Chinese students and scholars in the United States are receiving full or partial financial support from their government (with the percentage of government support much higher

for scholars than for students.) Others are supported by the American universities and colleges that accept them as students or researchers. Still others receive financial backing from relatives who are either American citizens or permanent residents of this country.

"Consistent with the emphasis placed on science and technology by official Chinese commentaries on the country's economic and developmental needs," the Clearinghouse report stated, "a large majority of all PRC graduate students and visiting scholars are in mathematics, physical science or engineering disciplines."

Most of the Chinese at Howard have been scholars who are well established in their fields at home, rather than graduate students. But their areas of concentration match the national picture noted in the Clearinghouse report. "We started getting some people from the People's Republic about three years ago," says Barry Bem, director of International Student Services at the university. "They've been primarily in chemistry, physics and engineering. Most are instructors or researchers in some institute or university in China. They're usually in their 30s and 40s, older than our typical student, and they come to work on a specific project for one or two years and then go home. Individual Howard professors make the arrangements."

"Generally," adds Bem, "the Chinese scholars are not really integrated into the [larger] university community. Their level of English is usually not very high. But they do work closely with professors and students in particular departments. In fact, if you speak to some of the faculty members in those departments, you'll get a better picture of how it's all working out."

William Jackson has only positive things to say about his laboratory's experience with visiting Chinese scientists. Before Li came on board, two other Chinese scientists worked as a part of his research team (one from the Dalian Institute, the other from the Optical Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences), and at the time this article was being prepared he was expecting the arrival of a Chinese graduate student.

"It should be clear that these people are not junior scientists," he says of the three Chinese investigators who have worked in his lab. "They are doing major work in their fields. They are excellent scientists who work extremely hard and who are exactly the kind of role models our students need. Dr. Li, for instance, gets here about 9:30 and stays till 7:30, longer if he has to. That's a minimum of ten hours a day and he does that on a regular basis. And while he's here, he's *working*. He's not lollygagging and talking to people."

"There has been a lot of interaction between the Chinese scholars and our graduate students," Jackson adds. "The students are with them every day, all day long and this direct interaction, I believe, has enabled them to learn more and to produce more than they probably would have otherwise. In fact, I think the presence of the Chinese scientists here has been a strong factor in the lab's productivity." In tangible terms, for instance, collaboration between visiting Chinese scientists and students and researchers working in the laboratory has resulted in numerous scientific articles accepted for publication in such journals as the *Journal of Physical Chemistry* and *Chemical Physics Letters*.

As for how the Chinese scientists are benefitting from the Howard experience, Jackson says: "I think they have been ex-

posed to some state-of-the-art experiments using the latest equipment, which is what they are over here for — as well as general exposure to science as it is done in the United States."

The timing of Li's stay at Howard has been especially propitious, considering the fact that it came while Jackson moved his operations from makeshift quarters to a newly-renovated spacious facility — a facility considered to be one of the few

"Most of the Chinese at Howard have been scholars who are well established in their fields . . ."

comprehensive laser chemistry laboratories in the nation. Reflecting on this, Li says: "Since I've been here, I've found this laboratory getting better and better. When I first came, there were just two small rooms. The experimental conditions were not good — a lot of noise. And there were just two postdoctoral students.

"The new building is big and beautiful so everyone has space. Right now, there are five postdoctoral students and twice that number of graduate students. Everything is good. Dr. Jackson asks a graduate student to give a talk each week and asks every student to look at the literature. In China, I also teach like this — so that every student can understand recent developments. That way you can get new ideas. It's very good."

Dah-Nien ("Dan") Fan, professor of mechanical engineering in the School of Engineering, is Wei Tong's adviser. (He previously supervised research done by a former Chinese air force pilot who had come to Howard to study fluid mechanics and who is now teaching the subject in China.) Fan, who is fluent in Chinese, was born in China, finished college in Taiwan and then came to the United States for graduate studies. He was the driving force behind a three-year agreement signed last winter between Howard and China's Zhejiang University.

Under the terms of the agreement, Howard's Department of Mechanical Engineering agreed to take in at least two faculty members from Zhejiang's Department of Mechanics to do research. The Howard department also agreed to have two of its own faculty members travel to the Chinese university to give seminars (something Fan did during the summer of '83 and his colleague, Peter M. Bainum, did this summer.) The first visiting scholar under the agreement, Bo Qian, a lecturer in solid mechanics, arrived at Howard in May to work with Robert Reiss, acting chairman of the department. A second visiting scholar from Zhejiang, who will work with Fan, was expected in August. [Some people might find it strange that Fan, a former resident of Taiwan, could travel freely to China and that the Chinese government would trust him to serve as an adviser to Chinese students. Fan doesn't find it so strange. He is now an American citizen, he notes. "While the government of China and Taiwan are theoretically at a state of war," he adds, "on a people-to-people level, things are very different."]

"Overall, the first person we had from the People's Republic [the former air force pilot] worked out

10 well," Fan says, "even though he had some problems initially because his background was more military than academic. Much of his learning had come through his own studies, not from formal schooling." The two men jointly produced a book, *Tensorial Fluid Mechanics*, based on what Fan teaches in his advanced fluid mechanics course. The Chinese edition of the book is scheduled for publication this fall by the Water Resources and Electric Power Press in Peking and will be used in university classes in China.

"In general, the Chinese students and scholars who come to this country are very enthusiastic and work very hard," Fan has found. "They come here to further their knowledge. They recognize that the U.S. is far more advanced from the point of view of pure research than their own country. After they come here, when they go back they assume at least middle management positions. So I think it is extremely important that this country make an effort to let them come here to study and research. It will have a long-range influence on the mutual relations between the two countries."

David Y. Chung, a Howard professor of physics who also was born in China and speaks Chinese, was assisted in his research in the area of acoustic properties of materials by three visiting scholars from China during the 1980-81 academic year. He, too, was expecting another Chinese scholar to join him in August.

"**T**hey have different equipment but the knowledge [of physics] is the same," says Chung, reflecting on his experience working with his three Chinese colleagues. "The knowledge crosses all barriers or boundaries. After spending a few months becoming familiar with all the equipment I have, they were able to go right in to do research." That

research resulted in four published articles, Chung reports, and he proudly shows a copy of one in an issue of the *Journal of Magnetism and Magnetic Materials*.

For the Howard physics professor, the benefits stemming from opening the university's doors to Chinese scholars extend far beyond the realm of his own research: "The Chinese scholars have a chance to see this country, to see what a university education is all about in the United States and, most importantly, to know how we live, how we work in this country; because this is the first opportunity they have to go overseas — anywhere."

Howard students who interact with the visiting scholars, he adds, "get a truer picture of Chinese people and of China today." The university as a whole benefits as well, Chung believes, because through such exchanges "Howard becomes well-known to a country with the largest [1.1 billion] population in the world. That is a very good thing."

In addition, for Chung, Fan and other Americans of Chinese descent, there is somewhat of a "Roots" experience that seems to reach deeply into their souls as they work side by side with those who represent the "new" Chinese man or woman of the People's Republic of China. "I left China a long time ago," Chung says. "I came to Canada, then to the States. So I really became sort of detached from China for awhile and from them [the three visiting scholars] I really learned a lot about the kind of system China has now and how the educational system works. I could get a personal glimpse of China that I couldn't before."

Adds Fan: "In a certain sense I do feel more in touch with my roots now, if you put it that way. My ancestral home is in the same province — Zhejiang — as the university involved in the exchange

agreement. The Chinese custom is to visit the ancestors' cemetery to pay respects. Last summer when I went to Zhejiang to teach, I did that. I took my son."

Tapping ethnic roots, furthering international understanding, advancing scientific knowledge, broadcasting and boosting the name of Howard University in a nation that is geographically the third largest in the world (after the U.S.S. R. and Canada) and contains approximately a quarter of the world's people . . . such are the benefits cited by those at Howard who work with visiting Chinese scholars.

There have been some difficulties, some problems as well. The Chinese visitors are too polite to dwell on any negative experiences or impressions, so most information in this area must come from others.

Language remains a formidable obstacle for many of the Chinese who come to Howard and to other American colleges and universities as well, as the U.S.-China Education Clearinghouse also reported. While the visiting scholars often can read scientific or technical materials in English with relative ease, many have difficulty speaking the language and understanding it when it is spoken.

The isolation caused by the language barrier is often compounded by the isolation stemming from their living arrangements: Chinese scholars at Howard and other area universities tend to rent apartments together instead of living in dormitories or with American families. Informal social evenings with departmental colleagues, formal programs arranged by the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association and visits to professional colleagues or Chinese-speaking relatives in other areas of the country help to counteract some of the isolation, but not to erase it completely.

And because most of the Chinese

scholars who come to the U.S. leave their families behind, the feeling of isolation is often mixed with plain old homesickness, as Barry Bem observes. Li, for instance, speaks wistfully of his wife (also a scientist) and two daughters in China, while Tong confesses, "I miss our country very much."

Other observers at Howard also have found that the Chinese often experience difficulties adjusting to a life-style that is so radically different from their own.

"Having visiting scholars here — from any country — is a great opportunity for them and also . . . for us . . ."

They often find the fast pace of American life exhausting, traffic terrorizing (the bicycle remains the main mode of transportation in China) and American movies and music, particularly rock, indecipherable — and not just because of language problems.

Indeed, culture shock seems attendant to many of their experiences. When David Chung took his three Chinese colleagues to New York to attend a scientific meeting, for example, the visitors were appalled by the litter that decorated the streets. "They couldn't understand why a city with such a large workforce couldn't clean the streets efficiently," Chung recalls. Chinese visitors also were appalled — and frightened — by crime. When a Chinese biomedical researcher was mugged one night on his way to check on an

experiment at Howard's Cancer Center, the news flew through the People's Republic grapevine in Washington in no time.

Despite some negative or perplexing experiences and impressions, Howard's Chinese visitors are quick to offer unsolicited comments on the "friendliness" of most of the people they have met and of this country's "beauty," "efficiency," "abundance," "variety." Overall, their enthusiasm for living and working here seems undimmed. The same seems true for the way they regard Howard University. In this light, it might especially interest them to know that the Chinese presence on campus reaches far back into the university's history.

In his book, "Howard University: The First Hundred Years (1867-1977)," Rayford W. Logan pointed out that on February 28, 1870, three Chinese students were admitted to the university's Model School at the request of the American Missionary Society, and that a history of the university written by Walter Dyson and published in 1941 had included their pictures. Logan's book also referred to a decision made by the university's executive committee in March 1900 to extend free room rent to a Chinese student.

Records of other Chinese students enrolled at Howard through the years are scanty. Notes Bem: "We've always had a handful of Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong — and I suppose before 1949, from China."

The year 1949, of course, was one of those key dates in world history. It marked the victory of the Chinese Communists (led by Mao Tse-tung) in the civil war that shook China after the defeat of Japan in World War II. It marked the flight of the Nationalists (under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek) to the island of Taiwan, 90 miles off the mainland. It marked Mao's proclamation of the People's Re-

public of China.

It also marked the beginning of a 25-year period of bitter estrangement between Washington and Peking, a time in which the United States government refused to recognize the People's Republic, insisting that the staunchly anti-Communist Taiwan was "China." As late as 1978, Ronald Reagan had characterized "Red China" [his then-description] as "a statist monopoly founded on violence and propaganda and destructive of the Chinese people themselves," as Robert G. Kaiser recalled in a *Washington Post* commentary published at the time of Reagan's visit to China last May.

To many China watchers, it is not without irony that it now has become fashionable — even politically expedient — to visit the People's Republic (what with all those great "photo opportunities" of walking beside the Great Wall, peering at 2,000-year-old statues, making mao-tai toasts to eternal peace and friendship . . .)

Surely, then, the statistics and stories of Chinese students and scholars at Howard and elsewhere in the U.S. should be viewed within the larger context of the softening of U.S.-China relations. But they also should be viewed within the context of contemporary Chinese history as the present Chinese government has steered the nation away from the policies and philosophy of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when all things Western were considered decadent or elitist — or both. In fact, the Cultural Revolution could be viewed as the catalyst which propelled Chinese scholars and students to these shores.

Under the leadership of the so-called Gang of Four, led by Mao Tse-tung's widow, Chiang Ching, the Cultural Revolution had permeated all aspects of Chinese so-

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ciety. But its impact hit with particular vigor on education and science. Basic research, for example, largely ground to a halt while universities closed their doors and young people were sent into the countryside to work on farms and in factories and to engage in political agitation in the name of "pure" Maoism.

With the death of Mao in 1976, the trial and consequent disgrace of the Gang of Four and the rise of the pragmatic Deng Xiaoping and his allies to power, the government began pulling back from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Stressing the "four modernizations" in agriculture, industry, science-technology and the military, it embarked on an ambitious drive to make China a modern industrial nation by the year 2,000. And it emphasized the importance of science, technology and education in achieving that goal.

Sending some of the nation's specialists to the United States was an integral part of the new leadership's efforts to make up for what many in China now call "the ten lost years." Elaborates the U.S.-China Education Clearinghouse Report:

"Government officials [in China] were eager to send these people to America and other foreign universities for advanced training to help overcome the deleterious consequences of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) during which many professionals were unable to teach, conduct research or keep abreast of developments in their fields. It was hoped that after one or two years of advanced training in the United States these scholars could use what they have learned to raise the level of teaching and research in their own country and build upon newly established personal ties with American faculty to develop joint projects and future study opportunities for their own students."

The Howard experience is but one example of how that hope seems to be coming to fruition. The Howard experience illustrates something else as well: When Americans and Chinese daily work side by side, they tend to overlook all the rhetorical labels (whether "decadent capitalists" or "godless Chinese" or "inscrutable Orientals," whatever) and see each other as *people*, people who have the same basic needs and hopes and dreams. And that, perhaps more than any other reason, is why those at Howard who have been involved in scholar exchanges with the People's Republic find them so rewarding.

Says William Jackson, who was a member of a delegation of Black scientists who visited China last November: "Cultural exchanges between peoples are very important in increasing our overall understanding of them and their understanding of us."

Says David Chung: "Having visiting scholars here — from any country — is a great opportunity for them and also a great opportunity for us. They can contribute a lot and we can learn a lot from them. I think we should promote more of this kind of international collaboration of research here at Howard."

But perhaps Wei Tong says it best. Dressed in blue jeans and a casual cotton knit sport shirt, he sits in a study room in the School of Engineering and shares his views on the ultimate value of the kind of experience he is having at Howard:

"It's very good that there are more and more Chinese students coming to the United States. China now needs a lot of advanced techniques and advanced people with higher education. So I hope a lot of Chinese students will come here. I hope, especially, a lot of Chinese students come to Howard University.

"I think it's better to understand each other. The more Chinese students come

here, the more Americans will understand a different culture. You know, China has a long long history and a beautiful and graceful culture. 13

"I think most Americans are very friendly to China and to the Chinese. But some are not. I think this is maybe because of the apartness [separation] for many many years. Now, it's better. I hope there will be good relations between the two countries." □



Choy Awah, one of the earliest students (about 1870) from China.