

## **Partners with China?**

Ask the average American what they know about China, and the response will likely be that it is the most populous nation in the world, or that it is one of last communist countries, or, given recent events, something about the downed American spy plane.

What few of us know, however, is that, for centuries, Chinese civilization led the world in the arts and sciences. That, today, it has the world's second-largest gross domestic product, that the U.S. is its largest trading partner, that, while political controls remain tight, Chinese students are making a far greater effort to understand us than our students are to understand them.

Our failure to better understand China may work to our disadvantage.

On a recent two-week lecture tour of China, I had the opportunity to meet faculty and students at three prestigious national universities located in different parts of the country. These people are the elite and future elite of China. They are friendly, sophisticated people who regularly raised a set of challenging questions: Why don't Americans like China? Why do so few Americans know much about China? Why do Americans not want to learn more about China or think that they do not need to learn more?

It is clear that Chinese undergraduates at the universities with the most competitive admissions policies know much more about the United States and our system of government than their American counterparts know about China. In an advanced course on American politics at Beijing University, an undergraduate art major gave a presentation on the U.S. judicial system and its relationship to the political system that any American political science major would have been proud of. The hour-long presentation analyzed race relations from 1790 to the present as the primary case for understanding the U.S. judicial system in a political context. I was struck by the depth of the student's knowledge.

So, why are we, as Americans, not placing a higher value on developing strong and effective partnerships with China? American corporations (e.g., Pepsi Cola, General Motors) seem to realize that it is in the economic interest of the United States to develop these partnerships. But, this is clearly not as true in the cultural, educational, and governmental areas.

There needs to be a major attitude adjustment in the United States toward China and the Chinese people. We should be promoting understanding, respect, and greater exchange at all levels. We should be thinking systematically about what can be learned from China. Communication is not heavily constrained by language barriers because English is being taught as the primary second language in Chinese schools.

I asked Chinese students: why do you think that Americans do not know more about China? They replied that Americans do not believe that it is important to know more than they currently do. The Chinese were pretty accurate in their perception of Americans.

How can we continue to be leaders in a global society if we do not include China as a full partner?

This is not just a message for President Bush, who the Chinese believe epitomizes the negative attitudes they described to me, but a message for our elementary, secondary, and university students who can be “highly educated” and yet know almost nothing about China.

China has put its children at the top of its national agenda. We would serve the children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century well by fundamentally changing our attitude toward China and building meaningful partnerships that will promote understanding and exchange.

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