

IF YOU DON'T SPEAK CHINESE



by E. James Burton, Dean, Jones College of Business

In October I had the opportunity to accompany Governor Phil Bredesen, Commissioner Matt Kisber, and about 100 other Tennesseans on a trade mission to China. It was an incredible experience.

Some of us started in Tokyo with a joint meeting of the Southeast U.S./Japan and Japan-U.S. Southeast Associations. The Japanese were wonderful hosts. Governors or significant representatives from Tennessee, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia met outstanding Japanese industry leaders. It was a productive opportunity to enhance trade relations between Japan and the Southeastern states.

I followed Governor Bredesen and Commissioner Kisber to Beijing, which was bustling with activity with the Olympics less than a year away. Our visit coincided with the Communist Party's National Congress, held every five years. Significant historical events were taking place down the street from our hotel. A top Chinese political figure, Madam Wu, addressed one of our meetings in celebration of the opening of Tennessee's first trade office in Beijing and within days was voted out of power in the party.

Beijing is an incredible city with many beautiful buildings. We visited the site that will serve as the center of Olympic activity and saw the remarkable "Bird's Nest" stadium but no other buildings one would expect. The Chinese seem confident everything will be ready in time.

Everywhere contrast is quite stark. Multiple-lane roads are shared by luxury cars, trucks, motorcycles, mopeds, motorized carts, bicycles, and tricycle carts. Commerce is carried on in every corner and alley. Everything is negotiable; there is no such thing as a final price. The very old stands next to the remarkably new and modern.

I had the privilege of visiting the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and Tiananmen Square as well as a portion of the Great Wall. What seems old in our culture is considered quite new by Chinese standards. This history affords the Chinese a worldview and approach to planning much different than we can appreciate.

After meeting numerous government officials and persons interested in doing business with or in Tennessee, the delegation moved to Shanghai, which seemed even more industrious than Beijing. With more than 15 million people,

it made New York City look like a sleepy village. The activity on the waterfront was constant with every kind of vessel imaginable. The city houses many clusters of 20- to 30-story apartment buildings that seem close enough for neighbors to shake hands from their windows.

I was part of a delegation of academics to visit Fudan University, one of the best in China, with about 30,000 students and many excellent programs. During our stay in Shanghai, an international rating of executive MBA programs rated a joint program between Washington University and Fudan in the top 10 worldwide, and a government study concluded the city of Shanghai alone was at least 8,500 university professors short. This gives a sense of the focus and emphasis being placed on education.

The Maglev train ride from Shanghai to the airport was a study in contrasts: the train reached a speed of 431 kilometers (268 miles) per hour as it zipped past rice fields and vegetable patches that have remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years.

The last stop was Hong Kong. Part of China, it retains some autonomy, with its own currency and customs offices. One island is home to the airport and a new version of Disneyland; another is the main area of commerce. Much of the commerce of Asia comes through the port of Hong Kong, a beehive of activity with land/sea containers stacked 10 or more high as far as one can see and hundreds of cranes for loading and unloading ships.

The nightly light show on the city's skyscrapers and harbor is wondrous. Across the harbor in Kowloon is a shopping mecca: major thoroughfares hold brand-name shops from around the world. Side streets and alleys provide opportunities for significant bargains and local fare such as custom-made clothing and pearls.

What conclusions did I reach from this trade mission? The Chinese—industrious and numerous with a rich history—are ready to do business. Because English is essentially the nation's second language, there may be more English-speaking people in China than any other nation. Hungry for the "good things" of life, willing to do what it takes to acquire them, and possessing the necessary political resolve and human capital, they speak our language. It very well may be time we learn theirs. ■

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