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***China's impressive strides in higher education***

by Mel Broitman

My first ten days of March were spent in what is becoming the most exciting city in the world today – Beijing. It was my second visit to China in the last fourteen months, and it confirmed what was evident from the first visit last year – China is THE MOST IMPORTANT centre in the world in the globalization of education.

I had been to India a few dozen times before first traveling to China in January 2002. I had always understood and felt India to be the most important education centre in the international education market. India's population is enormous (of course it's only rivaled by China) and has a burgeoning middle class. The use of English-language is wide-spread and often prolific in India – critical for integration into the global economy. Indian families are transfixed on education, and will make virtually any sacrifice to provide their young with the best academic environment possible. But India has a great rival in China – and as many who have experienced both nations may conclude – it's China that is going to truly become the next world superpower, and then its real rival will be the United States. It's true that China's one party political system provides an incredible focus and impetus for goal-oriented progression. There is little opportunity for dissent if one does not agree with the government's views of where the country is headed and how to get there. Regardless, progress in China is fast and furious and it's the education of China's youth that is providing the fuel for the country's tremendous drive.

The passion for education in China is remarkable and it's especially evident among families in major cities. The Chinese policy to control population growth of one child per family (which is quite strictly adhered to in urban centres) only serves to emphasize education even more. With only one son or daughter to depend upon and the overwhelming importance and obligation to family, Chinese parents are hyper keen to equip their child with the best possible education for future earning power.

And while it's a stark reality that English-language skills are not commonly found among typical Chinese citizens of even its major cities of Beijing and Shanghai – China is undergoing rapid changes. Cities once teeming with bicycles are now crammed with cars. Western fast food is in abundance and there are hundreds of thousands of foreigners in the major cities, working and studying in what is becoming a very internationalized climate. Even plans to have all Beijing taxi drivers adequately conversant in English by the time the Summer Olympic Games arrive in 2008, seems absurd considering as of today one has to show the cabbie a card with Chinese characters spelling out the destination desired. However, if it's possible to educate a taxi driver in a foreign language, China's intensely goal-oriented policies would be a reasonable bet to deliver on this fanciful idea.

China's education system is similar to India's in that it struggles with the same problem of providing sufficient quality opportunities for outstanding students. Just as is India, Chinese students must write highly competitive entrance exams to seek places in the nation's best universities. The National University Entrance Exams (NUEE) represent the most imposing and anxiety riddled challenge for China's teenagers. Those who perform with brilliance will be slotted into seats at Beijing University and Qinghua University – the two biggest higher education names and brands in the country. But there are many more quality institutions, about 100 in China. More are coming as investment in China's higher education sector would be the envy of those wishing to see India's universities revamped and re-energized.

The "Top 100" Chinese universities are public institutions, and they are well-resourced. Similar to an Indian IIT graduate, China's universities turn out thousands of Bachelor degree holders who can easily gain entrance at the top universities in the U.S., Britain and elsewhere. It's just that China is turning out many more top candidates each year than India, as it has more universities of world-class quality.

Recognizing that even the Chinese government has its own limitations to fund higher education, the private sector has opened up. China welcomes (and is encouraging) private and foreign investment. It's not a simple matter, as in all such aspects in China there is lots of bureaucratic control and involvement. However, provincial education ministries are actively monitoring to ensure their goals are met. "We want to bring in foreign investment and we want bring in education expertise," said Mr. Ding Hongyu, the Director of the Office for International Cooperation and Exchange at the Beijing Municipal Education Commission. "A foreign partner must find a Chinese partner, but it is not restricted for institutions to choose certain partner at certain levels. It's logical for them to work with another university, but if they chose to work with high school or a kindergarten, they can."

Unlike India, China is experiencing a great deal of two-way international student traffic. China has become one of the world's great study-abroad destinations. Currently more than 60,000 foreigners study in Chinese universities, and that number is swelling each year. Powerful nearby economies and advanced technological societies of South Korea and Japan are sending huge numbers of students to China. For Americans, China is among the most popular destinations for study-abroad and the number-one choice for U.S. students who want to study in Asia (conversely very few Americans study in India, as most are frightened by perceived security risks).

Chinese universities tour Asian countries to promote study at their institutions. China is active and aggressive about becoming a major player in international education. It recognizes that huge sums of money leave the country when students go abroad, and it is keen to tip that trade balance in its favour. Recently, seventeen Chinese universities from Jiangsu province went to Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia in search of education links and opportunities for student exchanges. *Can one imagine Indian universities banding together for such a promotional campaign?*

Much of the world doesn't know it yet, but by the summer of 2008, when the Olympics place China on a grand stage, China's prominence will shine for all to see. The world won't only be dazzled by spectacular stadiums and fantastic facilities –China's impressive universities and schools will make their own statements that the Chinese are champions in education as well.