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## BRIEFINGS FROM THE LAND OF THE DRAGON

*This article describes the author's perspective on China since his relocation from the United States*

**“You** really have to master the Chinese language to understand Chinese business and people”, advised a 76-year old retired businessman on a flight from Shanghai to Beijing. I nodded in agreement as I looked back at my own experience. My two semesters of Chinese in the United States helped, but I got a long way to go before I can master the 5000-odd Chinese characters. What added to my confidence is the fact I “mastered” the indecipherable “Modern Physics” during my first semester in Pilani, circa 1984. So Chinese shouldn’t be that bad, I comfort myself.

It has been 8-months since I relocated to China after living in the United States for the past 15 years. I have been going to and fro China since 1997 almost every year. I have seen a lot of changes within the Chinese economic and business landscape and people’s attitudes since then. There is no doubt that the Chinese economy is growing at a mind-boggling rate. The landscape and economy are being continuously reshaped. First time visitors to China are quite shocked at the high level of development and sophistication in China, especially in the coastal provinces. The 8-lane freeways are very similar to that found in the United States, the only give away signs are the highway signs written in Chinese in addition to English. The skyscrapers in Shanghai, a la futuristic Blade-runner kind, compete with the world’s best.

The business environment is very unlike of the United States or India. It runs by its own rules. I am able to experience this personally in my role of managing the subsidiary of a multinational major in China. Having the ability to converse with Chinese gives you a better glimpse on the

but only on paper. An erudite Beijing businessman told me after he watched “The Gangs of New York” that he felt China feels similar to the environment portrayed in the movie. China is a new nation being born out of the principles of raw capitalism. Lots of opportunities are up for grabs and



going-on in addition to bringing the credibility. Knowing the right people is essential for success in this new business frontier.

The pace of things in China is very fast. A skyscraper can appear from nowhere in a year. Business opportunities are found and exploited within a few months. The unbridled capitalism at work in China is certainly going to make Adam Smith proud. Yes, this is still a Communist country,

there is the making of rubber barons equivalent in China. Having established itself as the unquestioned Manufacturing Superpower, China is now focusing on reshaping its vast industrial and information base. Like any other nation, China has its own Achilles’ heal. But the nation’s people and its leadership are supremely confident that they are going to reclaim the economic and political leadership on the world stage that rightly belongs to China.



Foreigners still have a lot of misconceptions about China. I am quite shocked at the low level of awareness at the corporate levels in India about China. I also feel an average Chinese knows more about India than vice-versa. A Chinese man on the street knows about Vajpayee being the PM of India, and that the famed Shaolin temple (of the 36th Chambers of Shaolin fame) in China was founded by an Indian monk in the 6th century AD. On the contrary, I am not sure an average Indian knows who the PM of China is, nor knows that China has a better quality of life factors than India.

What struck me first during my visit in 1997 as very impressive was the leap in living standards achieved in one

generation. I spoke to the average man on the street and students in buses and trains. And the stories I hear amazed me. I distinctly remember one conversation where a student told me how her peasant parents now live in a 3-bedroom house with all the modern conveniences whereas just 15 years back they lived in a house sharing with two other families. I confirmed this story is quite common across coastal China. People who were previously using hand-fans can now sit in air-conditioned homes and offices.

There is an infectious energy in China especially in the area of doing business. People are willing to do whatever it takes to build a business and grow it big. There is tremendous pressure in the society to succeed. There is also a growing tension in society with this pressure and also with



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the disappearance of the iron-bowl social security umbrella. The

competition therefore is pretty ferocious. This is quite evident in my conversations with business folks and entrepreneurs in China.

With regards to improving the English language skills, I have seen the commitment of the Chinese government in action on the ground. Since my past two visits I have seen a noticeable change in English speaking ability. I was surprised when the person who washes hair in a hair-salon started conversing in some rudimentary English. Even the regular guy standing besides a soybean milk stand is now trying to say a few words in English. The joke that is going around is that it is 'WTO English'. The students whom I met tell me that their government wants them to focus on learning English more than Chinese. The roads, highways, and public places now have signs both in Chinese and English. I have seen this phenomenon in the Chinese hinterland not just in the coastal areas.

There is lot of respect for India and its intellectual firepower in China. Everybody in China knows that India is a software and movie powerhouse. Many Chinese are not aware that China and India had a border dispute and that both the countries went to war in 1963. The knowledgeable ones feel there is no need for both the countries to be hostile. When I was visiting a museum of a tomb of a Tang Dynasty royal in interior China, I noticed so many artifacts that clearly had strong Indian influence. I could have mistaken them to a temple in southern India. A staff of that museum remarked "Mao bought down misery to millions of Chinese. He also started a war with India. Lets not be hostage to some incident in the past. These artifacts show our common heritage and how both our cultures flourished together in the past. We should join forces and flourish together today and in the future".