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TRADING WITH CHINA - AN OPPORTUNITY WITH HISTORIC PRECEDENT

by
Dr. Tim Brady

China is expected to have the highest growth in air traffic of all Asian countries in the first half of the next decade. The business opportunities along with the training and education needs of China that will emerge as a result of this growth signals the need for aviation educators and aviation business leaders to learn more about the Chinese people, their culture, their political philosophies, their religion and their character. Whether or not we can deal with them successfully depends, in part, on how well we do our homework. If we are not prepared properly to trade with that great civilization, not on our terms necessarily but on terms that are mutually beneficial, then the failures of the past may be repeated.

We westerners need to look into the essential character of the Chinese civilization that most of us know very little about to gain a glimpse of what has happened in the past when our two cultures have come into significant contact.

Traditionally, the Chinese have always considered themselves the center of the civilized world, surrounded by peoples of lesser culture. Since the Han Dynasty (200 B.C.) The leadership of China had gone through a series of sine-wave-like fluctuations historians refer to as the Dynastic Cycle. In a vast generalization, a dynasty would come to power, rule for about three hundred years, and then be replaced by another dynasty. During the first hundred years of rule under a new dynasty, the country would begin to progress reaching a highly stabilized social, economic, and political position. After about a hundred and fifty years, the dynasty would begin a long, gradual, hundred and fifty year decline until it could no longer capably rule the country. The latter fifty or sixty years of dynastic rule would be marked by widespread unrest, economic instability, numerous rebellions and uprisings, and finally collapse.

To put the Chinese culture into a useful perspective, two observations seem appropriate. First, in view of the 4,000 year parade of Chinese dynasties and the nature in which they came to power, reached stability, and continued to rule for over two centuries, it seems that it would be wise for westerners to accept the current government in China as another dynasty which has received the Mandate of Heaven from the Chinese people.

The Mandate of Heaven political philosophy under which the Chinese have ruled themselves for perhaps more than 2,000 years gives the people the right to rise up and overthrow the ruling dynasty when the dynasty loses the ability to govern.

Americans are more familiar with these words, "...that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new

government...." These are words written by Thomas Jefferson. The Chinese call it the Mandate of Heaven; we Americans call it the Declaration of Independence. To each of our cultures the philosophies of governance represented by these words achieve the same ends but decidedly through different processes.

The current government in China is one which the Chinese have apparently accepted and by accepting have endowed the government with the Mandate of Heaven. We should therefore respect the wishes of the mainstream of the Chinese people and be prepared to deal with the current dynasty for about the next two hundred years.

Secondly, the results of our trade relationships with China in the past could hardly have been predicted as a result of two cultures merging for a brief moment in time. Two centuries ago, in trade contacts with China by westerners, trade was profitable for all concerned but the intransigence of the Chinese leaders made the port time almost unbearable. "Foreign traders were permitted contact with only selected Chinese trade ministers. Contact with the population was not permitted. Foreigners were neither free to visit cities in China nor to attempt contact with merchants other than those whom the government had selected. The Chinese, in fact, did not formally recognize the existence of western nations. Ministers sent from western nations could gain no audience with the Manchu leader, to whom the Chinese referred as the Son of Heaven.

The Son of Heaven acknowledged no sovereign with whom he would deal on terms of equality and the foreign missions were casually dismissed as tribute bearers. Trade was allowed only as a generous gesture to peoples so dependent upon the products of China that the Emperor felt moved to compassion in their behalf. Any further concessions were out of the question."¹ A century ago, the Chinese thought of us as barbarians; we thought of them as backward. For example, in nineteenth century contacts with the Western world, particularly with the Americans, the Chinese viewed the Christian religion as barbaric because when we practiced communion ("Drink the blood of my blood, eat the flesh of my flesh"), the Chinese considered this to be cannibalism, a social hurdle they had leaped over thousands of years before. In their cultured minds, Westerners were, therefore, barbarians.

The lessons of the past are to expect the unexpected and for each to respect the sovereignty and dignity of each others' culture.

It is easy to mis-communicate, difficult to clearly express ideas and visions that benefit both cultures.

As the force of western technology permeates Chinese society, particularly in aviation and other high-technology industries, what new changes in their society will occur, changes not resulting from some overt attempt on our part but rather as their society adapts to the technology. Consider, for example, what changes that digital

¹Foster Rhea Dulles, China and America, (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1946), p. 13.

technology alone will cause as the ability to quickly communicate vast quantities of data are firmly in place in China.

The trade opportunities that are unfolding are as enormous as they are fragile. As Anson Burlingame, Ambassador first from the U.S. to China and then from China to the U.S. said more than a hundred years ago,

"I feel the weight of responsibility such as never before pressed upon me. I stand between two civilizations, now for the first time, by their representatives, face to face; and, belonging to one, I am called upon to respond for the other. She wishes no war, she asks of you not to interfere in her internal affairs; she asks you not to send her incompetent men; she asks that you will respect the neutrality of her waters and the integrity of her territory; she asks, in a word, to be left perfectly free to unfold herself precisely in that form of civilization of which she is most capable."

It is quite likely that Ambassador Burlingame's words of long ago still carry substantial merit to our upcoming trade relationships.

We in aviation must approach this market with an understanding of the Chinese culture and a deep sensitivity to the Chinese people and to the potential effects of our forays. We must ask ourselves, "How will this aviation activity which we have already determined will benefit our own society also benefit the Chinese, their culture, their value system, their educational system, their national goals and their national will?"

The success of our endeavors will likely hinge on our ability to provide an effective answer to this question.

We aviation educators in colleges and universities that have Airway Science degree programs must become sensitive to China's aviation education needs. For indeed, we have a great deal to offer to China. For example, here at Central Missouri State University we have two-year degree programs in aviation flight, aviation maintenance and aviation electronics. Our four year degree programs include those in professional pilot, aviation maintenance, aviation electronics, aviation management, agricultural aviation and aircraft systems design. In addition we offer a master's degree in aviation safety.

All of us in aviation education welcome the opportunity to work with Chinese aviation students, to learn more of one another and to celebrate the diversity between our cultures.

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