



US Ambassador Jon Meade Huntsman with American students in Hunan Province earlier this year.

## History Reverses Itself in Student Exchange Programs

By LAUREN JOHNSON

**A**FTER decades of bumpy China-U.S. relations, America is set to expand the 100,000 Strong Initiative, sending more American students and teachers to China to gain real-world experience, learn about China and bridge the gap between two of the world's largest and most influential countries.

The tale of China-U.S. relations is one with many twists and turns. The U.S. slams China on human rights while China criticizes the U.S. on its intervention in sovereign nations. Trade disputes between the two countries continue to cause concern and there are fundamental differences in world views as represented by the majority of citizens in each of these two vastly different countries.

Still, there have been ongoing and impressive attempts by both countries

to understand one another. Chinese have adopted Western dress and business practices. Westerners have adopted many of the pillars of Chinese culture, like martial arts, Chinese medicine and Buddhism. Most importantly, both parties have been historically interested in sending their most precious resource abroad — students.

In 1872, after China lost the Opium Wars, the Qing Dynasty instituted a new program to learn from Westerners. Professor T.K. Chu writes of the movement: "In 1872, the year when the Qing court sent its first dispatch of thirty teenage students to America, China had been left behind by the Industrial Revolution for more than a century." There was no intention, of course, of eclipsing the society's essential Chinese characteristics. The country badly needed to advance,

modernize and reorganize in order to prevent infringements on sovereignty or further imposition of unequal treaties. The Qing Dynasty employed young minds to absorb Western technology and methodologies and then return to China to educate others and spread the secrets of Western success. Many returned students shaped the future of their nation by working as leaders and educators in academia, industry and even the government. The initial Qing Dynasty educational push created lasting results, and established the tradition of sending students abroad.

Today, ten times more Chinese enter the United States for educational purposes than the inverse, and 600 times more Chinese learn English than Americans learn Chinese, says a recent Open Doors report issued by the Institute of Inter-

national Education. Now, with the 2010 launch of the 100,000 Strong Initiative, the Obama administration aims to reverse this trend and pave the way for generations of Americans to study in China.

The national initiative is government-supported, but privately funded, relying "fully on private-sector philanthropic support to direct funds to existing U.S.-China educational exchange programs that are seeking to expand," according to the U.S. State Department website. This separates the students from the auspices of the government, and gives them the autonomy they need to return to the U.S. and pursue their natural interests using their newly gained China expertise. So the initiative is focused on its specific long-term goal of building up enough volume and consistency of philanthropic and non-profit funding to ramp up existing study abroad programs.

With China emerging ever more powerful on the international and economic scene the U.S. is serious about the professional preparation of the next generation of China communicators. Spending time in China, learning Chinese and making personal connections with citizens is an ideal way to educate the Americans who will someday officially represent their government, the academics who will advise domestic policy makers, and the industry leaders who will shape international policy and trade relations.

In January 2011, when President Hu Jintao visited the U.S., the two nations reaffirmed their commitment to enhance people-to-people engagement through educational exchanges. "It is clear that virtually no global challenge can be met without U.S.-China cooperation," said Carola McGiffert, director of the 100,000 Strong Initiative.

Just as the U.S. welcomed Chinese students so long ago, the Chinese have opened their educational facilities to participating Americans. The Chinese government had already supplied 10,000 Bridge Scholarships for Americans studying in China when at the U.S.-China Consultation on People to People Exchange held in Washington D.C in April 2011, State Councilor Liu Yandong announced an additional 10,000 bridge scholarships would be given out. These scholarships will assist U.S. high school and college graduates, teachers and school administrators in traveling to China over the next four years to teach, operate schools and

educate themselves.

Growth in study abroad programs in China has been very apparent in recent years, without orchestrated government stimulation and even before the launch of the 100,000 Strong Initiative. Americans are simply taking more notice of China. The number of U.S. students studying here grew by 30 percent annually from 2001 to 2007, and continues to rise. In the 2007-08 school year, for example, 13,165 American college students and an estimated 1,000 high school students went to China for some type of study program, according to the U.S. Embassy in China website.

These impressive growth figures are perhaps partially explained by a deepening of interest in China and Chinese culture in America. It may have begun with specific elements like *Taiji*, Buddhism, and Chinese fashion, music, cinema and art, but the number of American students knocking down to learn Mandarin Chinese has tripled in recent years, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. More American students are recognizing the importance of an international education, with China as a critical region strategically and economically.

"The beautiful spring of China-U.S. people-to-people exchanges has arrived," said Liu.

Conversely there are programs underway to help Americans who have studied

in China use their newly gained knowledge back home. The Golden Bridges Foundation, a non-profit organization aimed at facilitating positive Sino-U.S. relations, announced the May 9th launch of Project Pengyou (friends) to harness the power of Americans who have studied in China. Part of the 100,000 Strong Initiative as an autonomous private sector support network, Project Pengyou gives alumni of the 100,000 Strong Initiative a forum for networking, support and shared experiences. Since some participants will be graduating this year, the project aims at harnessing their skills and knowledge in an online forum for jobs, career advice and networking. "We help (returned students) continue their engagement in China-U.S. relations," says Holly Chang, CEO of Golden Bridges. The launch of the site coincided with the official U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogues held in May, 2011.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cited individual exposure and education as the keystone for bridging gaps and bettering Sino-U.S. relations. Liu agrees: "People-to-people exchanges are a bridge for understanding and trust between nations and between peoples." ■

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University of Miami sophomores peep into Shishi Middle School in Chengdu City during national college entrance exams at spring term's end. Photos by China Foto Press