

HARNESSING THE DRAGON

FORGING ACADEMIC TIES WITH CHINA

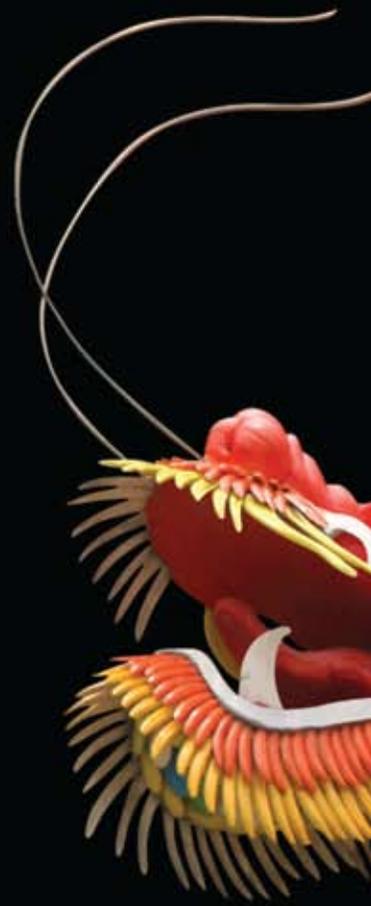
By Kathleen Tuck

FROM THE CARS WE DRIVE TO THE TOYS OUR CHILDREN PLAY WITH TO OUR COMPUTERS AND SMARTPHONES, CHINA IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE A PART OF OUR DAILY LIVES. NO LONGER A SLEEPING DRAGON, THE ASIAN POWERHOUSE HAS BECOME THE GLOBAL LEADER IN MANUFACTURING.

China boasts the fastest-growing economy in the history of the world. That means that whatever happens there, especially events and initiatives that influence its vast work force, inevitably affects the West.

A growing number of faculty at Boise State are taking note. At a time when economic realities are forcing budget cutbacks at universities across the United States, China is investing unprecedented resources in higher education. Many faculty are taking advantage of opportunities to study and travel to China, and U.S.-China relations was the topic of a recent public affairs conference hosted by the university's Frank Church Institute.

The country currently is home to almost 1.4 billion people – compared to a population of about 308 million in the United States. Given that one in eight people on the planet are Chinese farmers, the importance of advancing one's lot in life through education is not lost on the average Chinese citizen.





“In the last 20 years China has seen the largest migration in human history, from rural to urban and from west to east,” says Shelton Woods, a Boise State history professor and expert on Asia who is teaching a class on 21st century China. “Because there are so many people in China, if you are one in a million, that means there are 1,400 people just like you.”

Excelling in academics, particularly science and engineering, is the best way to stand out from the competition. “Students who get a shot at an education don’t want to blow it and end up as agricultural workers,” says Woods.

For a number of Boise State instructors and researchers, China’s interest in higher education is a boon for their own academic portfolios.

“The government of China is pouring a lot of money into universities,” says professor of health sciences Uwe Reischl. “They believe education is the future of China — economically, politically and socially. As a result, (academic) salaries are very attractive and there are many resources available for research.”

Reischl has worked on several projects in China over the past few years, including research on formaldehyde levels in newly constructed homes and the long-term effects of foot binding on aging Chinese women. In addition, the medical doctor has visited the country as part of a delegation looking at occupational health facilities, and again as an adviser to a group of students interested in the Chinese medical system.

Currently, he is working at Boise State with Ravindra Goonetilleke, a visiting professor from Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, on a number

of projects, including the development of a vest that reduces heat stress for agricultural and construction workers by blocking radiation from the sun.

Reischl is not alone in teaming up with Chinese colleagues. Biology professor Marcelo Serpe has been collaborating with researchers in Xinjiang in western China for two years.

Serpe was invited to China by Zhang Yuanming of the Xinjiang Institute of Ecology to study the functions and restoration of biological crust soils in the region. Because the area’s climate is so arid, research on the types of mosses and lichens that thrive in desert conditions is vital to attempts to stabilize the soil.



Marcelo Serpe and a Chinese colleague examine a plant used to stabilize sand dunes.



Michael Bixby pauses outside the Forbidden City in Beijing.

BECAUSE THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE IN CHINA, IF YOU ARE ONE IN A MILLION, THAT MEANS THERE ARE 1,400 PEOPLE JUST LIKE YOU.

“They want to see how we do research outside of China, particularly in the U.S.,” Serpe says. “On the flipside, doing research in that area increases my knowledge in terms of understanding desert organisms in other parts of the world.”

The collaboration also has helped him better understand how similar Americans are to their Chinese counterparts. It is that quest for cross-cultural understanding that motivated management professor Mike Bixby to teach a course in Shanghai in 2008 for the University Studies Abroad Consortium. Although this was his fourth time teaching abroad, it was his first trip to Asia.

Bixby says that not only do visiting scholar programs help Chinese students understand

western culture, they also allow American faculty members to expand their worldviews.

“I learned a lot about Chinese customs and a lot

Ravindra Goonetilleke, a visiting professor from Hong Kong, and health sciences professor Uwe Reischl developed a vest to reduce heat stress in outdoor workers.



about the country,” Bixby says. “Through programs like this, Boise State professors gain some understanding of the different cultures, ways of education and ways of doing business in China that they can share with their students.”

Bixby especially appreciated the opportunity to experience firsthand the interplay between traditional Chinese culture and Communism mixed with free market principles.

“China is a world player in business and politics, and many markets are influenced by what is happening there,” he says.

While China may seem to be calling many of the shots on the world stage, there are opportunities to influence what is happening in China through collaborative efforts at all levels, and across all disciplines, of education.



JOHN KELLY

Educators in Boise State’s Department of Nursing are reaching out to their Chinese counterparts in an exchange of eastern and western philosophies. As China’s population grows, so does its need for more trained doctors and nurses. Many of those professionals are looking for ways to mesh traditional eastern medicine with a more clinical western approach.

Nursing faculty have made several visits to Hangzhou Normal University in eastern China, with which the university has a memorandum of understanding. Boise State also has hosted several faculty visitors from HNU, and researchers from both universities recently completed a collaborative study on incivility in the classroom.

“Working with colleagues in other countries provides opportunities to learn about other cultures and other systems of health,” says associate professor of nursing Barb Allerton, who has taken the long plane ride to China several times.

While Boise State faculty have shared tips on western teaching methods and clinical study, they in turn have been treated to greater insight on Chinese herbal remedies and other holistic treatments.

“It’s been a mutually beneficial relationship,” Allerton says, and one that is essential not only to greater academic understanding, but also to a positive economic and political reality.

It is clear that the waking dragon is both an important ally for the United States and a serious competitor.

Partnerships such as those forged by Boise State faculty will play an increasingly crucial role in future diplomacy and in the development of shared technology and innovation.

“We need to make sure we do not make the mistake with China of not understanding its worldview,” says Woods, adding that disagreements between the two countries are inevitable. “We either can work together to make the world a better place, or we can be at odds with each other. I’m excited that Boise State can be involved and can help make the world a better place.”



Susan Parslow, Barb Allerton and Pam Strohfus with Hangzhou Normal University School of Nursing Dean Fu Wei.

THE WAKING DRAGON IS BOTH AN IMPORTANT ALLY FOR THE UNITED STATES AND A SERIOUS COMPETITOR.