

Recollections of events leading to the first exchange of students, scholars and scientists between the United States and the People's Republic of China

Richard C. Atkinson
President Emeritus, University of California

I recently returned from a trip to China where I participated in the U.S.-China Forum on Science & Technology Policy in Beijing (October 16-17, 2006) and then went on to Nanjing to consult with Li Yuanchao (Secretary of the Communist Party of China Jiangsu Provincial Committee) and Wang Bintai (Director General of the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education) regarding plans for higher education in Jiangsu Province. During the trip I was frequently reminded of my first visit to China in 1978 as director of the National Science Foundation (NSF). I have written about my experiences at NSF in *The Golden Fleece, Science Education, and U.S. Science Policy* (published in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 143, No. 3, September 1999) but realize now that I devoted only a few sentences to the China experience. I will use this memorandum to describe those events.

In 1978 the Chinese government expressed an interest in an exchange of students, scholars and scientists between the United States and China. Some may question this next remark, but I believe the White House was taken by surprise. The Nixon-Kissinger ping pong diplomacy had occurred a few years earlier, but it had not resulted in the normalization of relations. President Carter's White House responded that they were interested in such discussions and that the United States Information Agency (USIA) would be the U.S. negotiating partner. The Chinese immediately responded saying they were not willing to deal with the USIA and wanted instead to deal with NSF. So I was thrust center stage into the negotiations, with no end of admonishments and advice from the China experts in the State Department. Our government was very pleased at the possibility of an exchange agreement, but I was told there was one proviso that had to be met—that such an exchange would require a formal “memorandum of understanding” signed by representatives of the two governments.

After the initial contacts, the White House pressed the Chinese for a broader set of discussions to explore possible joint ventures in science and technology. The Chinese were somewhat receptive to the idea, but continued to say their principal interest was in an informal exchange of students and scholars. At this point, a delegation of senior representatives from various science and technology agencies of the government, led by Frank Press (Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy and Science Advisor to the President), traveled to Beijing on an Air Force plane. I was a member of the delegation and had responsibility for negotiations regarding the exchange program. My counterpart was Fang Yi (Vice-Premier of the State Council). I had no idea about the size of the exchange the Chinese were interested in, but my State Department advisors thought we should press for a large number, perhaps 500 per side. More would be desirable as a step toward normalizing relations between the two countries, but a thousand would be too much to expect given the situation with China at that time.

The issue of numbers came up very early in discussions with Fang Yi, but he gave us no indication of what they had in mind. Several times he asked me about numbers, but I answered by asking him for his opinion. Finally, Fang Yi became very assertive and asked how many students other countries have studying in the United States. A direct question that required a direct answer. I began with Iran which had about 25,000 students and worked down a list of six or seven countries. And then being somewhat mischievous, I concluded by noting that Taiwan had about 9,000 students. A tense moment followed, and then another direct question. "How many can China have?" I decided to press to the limit, and said possibly a thousand. Fang Yi shot back, "Why can't we have as many as other countries?" The American side was stunned, but secretly delighted. After that, talks moved quickly and we soon had the basis for an agreement. But the Chinese insisted that it had to be at an informal level, not a government-to-government agreement.

Our stay in Beijing proved to be very interesting. Americans were still a curiosity to the Chinese, and wherever we went people stared in amazement. Everyone—men and women—wore Mao jackets except for those doing manual labor. There were a handful of cars on the streets and endless crowds of bicyclists packed jowl to jowl. Most of the buildings were fairly primitive, and there were no trees in sight. Mao had ordered that all trees be cut down in Beijing, believing that they were infested with germs that caused disease. In sharp contrast, our group was housed in an elegant mansion, one of several mansions (well separated from each other) in a large park-like compound. We were told that one of the buildings housed the "Gang of Four" who were under house arrest. Several mornings I went jogging and passed many Chinese; none of the officials appeared to be concerned. When I jogged through the front gates of the compound, I would wave to the gatekeeper who was missing his right arm. He was friendly and waved back. One morning he pointed to his lost arm and called out "Korea".

Our delegation had a meeting with Chairman Deng Xiaoping in the Great Hall. We were seated in a circle in huge overstuffed armchairs. On one side of each armchair was a small table with a service of green tea and on the other side a shiny brass spittoon. Deng was of small stature, but had a commanding presence. After indicating his interest in an exchange of students and scientists, he then went on to describe his plans for the modernization of China. He invited questions from members of our delegation and responded in a direct and forthright manner. At one point, I asked if he was concerned that some Chinese students, once in the United States, might choose not to return to China. I said that the Soviet Union would have benefited from a student exchange with the United States, but that, in my opinion, they were fearful that many of their students would defect. Deng said he expected that a few Chinese students might not return, but that the Chinese were different from the Russians; the Chinese, in good times and bad, were extremely loyal to their country. Those students who did not return immediately would, in the long run, still be an asset for China.

There was one moment in our meeting with Deng that was quite unusual. Deng in the middle of a sentence, in a loud and gruff manner, cleared his throat and made a perfect shot into his spittoon. The Americans were astonished. He certainly caught our

attention. Later, one of our Chinese counterparts told us that Deng was raised in a privileged and wealthy family, but once he became a communist this was a way of expressing camaraderie with Chinese peasants.

After our visit to Beijing, the next step in negotiations involved the Chinese coming to Washington DC, hopefully to finalize an agreement. The Chinese delegation was led by Zhou Peiyuan, a physicist who had received his Ph. D. in Canada and was very familiar with the National Science Foundation. At that time he was serving as president of Peking University. He and his family, particularly his son, had experienced severe hardships during the Cultural Revolution. His son, in his mid-30s at the time of our visit, was forced to give up his university studies during the Cultural Revolution and sent to work in the fields under the supervision of peasants; he was in the first wave of Chinese students to study in the United States. I liked Zhou very much, but when we were in group meetings he became very reserved and cautious in his remarks. I suspect that there were political types in the Chinese delegation who were keeping check on him. Remember that this was 1978 and the Cultural Revolution was fresh in everyone's mind.

Instead of flying direct to Washington DC, the Chinese delegation first went to San Francisco, next Los Angeles, and only then to Washington. In San Francisco they met with the chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley and later with the president of Stanford University; in Los Angeles with the chancellor of UCLA and then the president of Cal Tech. Frank Press and I were at the Dulles airport to meet the delegation. Virtually the first remark Zhou made as he got off the plane was to tell us that these university leaders had told him their universities were more than willing to receive Chinese students. They assured the Chinese that there was no need for a government-to-government agreement. The universities on their own, without any involvement of the United States government, were in a position to enroll students from China and would welcome the opportunity. Frank and I were not aware of the delegation's visits to San Francisco and Los Angeles, let alone their contacts with university presidents. However, I was pleased and impressed by Frank's immediate reply to Zhou. "Of course we know about the discussions you have had with these university leaders, but I assure you that no exchanges will take place without the approval of the United States government." My quotation of Frank undoubtedly is not word-for-word accurate, but the sense of his remark was unambiguous. The Chinese, being used to their form of government, accepted Frank's remark at face value. Certainly in China, no university president would dare contradict a statement made by a representative of the government.

Once talks got underway, we quickly finalized the details of our agreement and the Chinese appeared ready to sign. But then without warning a member of the Chinese delegation demanded we ensure that their students would be shielded from any contact with students from Taiwan, and have no access to newspaper or magazine articles about Taiwan. I tried to explain that such an arrangement was impossible given the nature of our universities and our society. This led to a heated and emotional outpouring about the "one word difference" between the "Peoples Republic of China" and the "Republic of China" and the blood and lives that had been lost over that one word. Each member of

the Chinese delegation seemed to try to outdo the others in the intensity of their remarks. By late afternoon we were at an impasse and I was pessimistic about further progress. However, I suggested that we meet the next morning before reaching a final decision about whether or not to go forward.

We met the next morning. Everyone was extremely pleasant and engaging, not a word was said about the “one word difference” and we quickly signed a formal government-to-government agreement. That was the first document ever signed by the two governments, and I was the signatory for the United States. Soon thereafter, our exchange agreement became part of a more comprehensive agreement on science and technology that Chairman Deng and President Carter signed on the chairman’s historic visit to the United States in January, 1979.

One final note. On the 25th anniversary of the signing of the memorandum, a Chinese TV crew came to my office (when I was president of the University of California) to film an interview with me about the origins of the program. The interviewer was well informed, asked good questions, and I was forthright in my answers. Unfortunately, I have never had an opportunity to see the television documentary, but it must exist somewhere in a Chinese television archive.