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China winning intellectual competition

By Jim Nowlan

During his recent trip to Washington, D.C. and Chicago, Chinese president Hu Jintao stuck closely to a script of friendly trade relations and close cooperation between the two superpowers. Probably untouched in his discussions was the increasing intellectual, that is, educational, competition between our two countries, a competition China is winning.

Americans are either unaware or in denial over the competition, which we ignore at our long-term peril.

In recent years, I have taught short-term graduate courses at Fudan University in Shanghai, a commercial hub of 20 million people whose elementary and high school students scored best in the world in recent standardized tests. My impressions of China are of crowded and heavily polluted cities and of an intensely energetic populace that reveres and understands the potential of educational achievement.

One early morning about 6:30 a.m. on the Fudan campus, for example, I took a walk around the grounds with a Chinese student of mine. We came upon a big building with a gaggle of students in front of the main doors, waiting to enter.

“What building is that?” I asked. “Oh, that’s the library,” my student friend responded.

On another day, I was hosted for dinner by a Chinese professor and her family in their apartment. Their single child, a 3-year-old daughter (that’s the limit, one child,

enforced by the government, to stem population growth) was proud to count in English and say her ABCs. All Chinese pupils, at least in the cities, learn English from the beginning of their intense education.

Chinese parents are not all like the Asian “Tiger Mom” of recent note in the U.S., who sternly disciplines her children and demands they be Number 1 in their classes, basically taking play out of their lives.

But the Chinese parents do almost uniformly set high expectations for their children’s education and provide them strong support at home. And their schools are in session from 9-5 each day and half days on Saturday, for about 200 days a year (versus our 175 or so).

Future economic strength will be determined by intellectual capacity, and this intellectual “battle” between China and the U.S. is far from settled. China’s universities are far inferior to ours, for example. And rote learning still dominates in the Chinese classroom, in contrast to group problem solving which is more and more emphasized in the U.S.

The authoritarian Chinese political system is also an albatross around the neck of the Chinese people. I found that the Chinese people are rather indifferent to Americans as people, neither liking nor disliking us, but they absolutely love our freedoms and rule of law political system. They yearn to breathe free.

I am reading Winston Churchill’s “History of World War II.” In the 1930s, following the unspeakable horrors of World War I, England and France were in denial that their recent enemy Germany, under Hitler’s leadership, was indeed rearming in violation of treaty obligations. Meanwhile, the two countries unilaterally disarmed.

As we know, England, with a U.S. partnership, ultimately won the war, but only after supreme sacrifice.

America will not win the intellectual battle in progress with China by ignoring or denying it, nor can we win with short school days and school calendars built around the farming rhythms of a century ago.