

# The Educated Giant

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

## On the Ground

**With China's trade surplus with the United States soaring, the tendency in the U.S. will be to react with tariffs and other barriers. But instead we should take a page from the Chinese book and respond by boosting education.**

One reason China is likely to overtake the U.S. as the world's most important country in this century is that China puts more effort into building human capital than we do.

This area in southern Guangdong Province is my wife's ancestral hometown. Sheryl's grandparents left villages here because they thought they could find better opportunities for their children in "Meiguo" — "Beautiful Country," as the U.S. is called in Chinese. And they did. At Sheryl's family reunions, you feel inadequate without a doctorate.

But that educational gap between China and America is shrinking rapidly. I visited several elementary and middle schools accompanied by two of my children. And in general, the level of math taught even in peasant schools is similar to that in my kids' own excellent schools in the New York area.

My kids' school system doesn't offer foreign languages until the seventh grade. These Chinese peasants begin English studies in either first grade or third grade, depending on the school.

Frankly, my daughter got tired of being dragged around schools and having teachers look patronizingly at her schoolbooks and say, "Oh, we do that two grades younger."

There are, I think, four reasons why Chinese students do so well.

First, Chinese students are hungry for education and advancement and work harder. In contrast, U.S. children average 900 hours a year in class and 1,023 hours in front of a television.

Here in Sheryl's ancestral village, the students show up at school at about 6:30 a.m. to get extra tutoring before classes start at 7:30. They go home for a lunch break at 11:20 and then are back at school from 2 p.m. until 5. They do homework every night and weekend, and an hour or two of homework each day during their eight-week summer vacation.

The second reason is that China has an enormous cultural respect for education, part of its Confucian legacy, so governments and families alike pour resources into education. Teachers are respected and compensated far better, financially and emotionally, in China than in America.

In my last column, I wrote about the boomtown of Dongguan, which had no colleges when I first visited it 20 years ago. The town devotes 21 percent of its budget to education, and it now has

four universities. An astonishing 58 percent of the residents age 18 to 22 are enrolled in a university.

A third reason is that Chinese believe that those who get the best grades are the hardest workers. In contrast, Americans say in polls that the best students are the ones who are innately the smartest. The upshot is that Chinese kids never have an excuse for mediocrity.

Chinese education has its own problems, including bribes and fees to get into good schools, huge classes of 50 or 60 students, second-rate equipment and lousy universities. But the progress in the last quarter-century is breathtaking.

It's also encouraging that so many Chinese will shake their heads over this column and say it really isn't so. They will complain that Chinese schools teach rote memorization but not creativity or love of learning. That kind of debate is good for the schools and has already led to improvements in English instruction, so that urban Chinese students can communicate better in English than Japanese or South Koreans.

After I visited Sheryl's ancestral village, I posted a video of it on the Times Web site. Soon I was astonished to see an excited posting on my blog from a woman who used to live in that village.

Litao Mai, probably one of my distant in-laws, grew up in a house she could see on my video. Her parents had only a third grade education, but she became the first person in the village to go to college. She now works for Merrill Lynch in New York and describes herself as "a little peasant girl" transformed into "a capitalist on Wall Street."

That is the magic of education, and there are 1.3 billion more behind Ms. Mai.

So let's not respond to China's surpluses by putting up trade barriers. Rather, let's do as we did after the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957: raise our own education standards to meet the competition.