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## China : A Place of Change and Opportunity

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As a Vice-Chancellor of an Australian university I have made around 30 visits to China. I have also been once on holidays. During this period of almost 13 years, I have experienced immense change, both in China and, in my own outlook. At the beginning, although with some trepidation, I was excited to be going to China. After 2 or 3 or maybe 4 visits I became more confident that I knew what I was doing and that the Chinese were accepting of my good intentions.

At about that time I was fortunate to be able to speak with an American, who was a graduate of an Ivy League University in the USA, who had spent 5 years as the CEO of a significant company in China. I asked him what I needed to know about doing business in China. He replied without hesitation: "...Kerry, there are only two things you need to know about doing business in China – "First, you can do anything. Secondly, no matter what you set out to do, no matter how big or how small, unless you go about it the right way you will get nowhere". Through personal experience and from watching others I have come to the conclusion that he provided very sound advice to me.

For any business deal, trust is important for the Chinese partners and cannot be fast-tracked. So are government approvals, often at both Provincial and Central levels. Potential deals can move very slowly for months – even years but then accelerate rapidly over a few days – we want it done now!

A really big change I have noticed in the last 10 years is that the university students, with whom I speak, no longer require a translator. Most have the confidence and ability to stand and ask in English quite searching questions. For instance, on a recent trip I was asked about the attitude of my home University in Australia to gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgender people (I answered, "respect" is one of our 4 core values at Edith Cowan University). 10 years ago I would not have been asked that question. Increasingly, at least some of the leadership positions of universities and institutes are held by people who are competent and comfortable speaking in English. Their English has improved at a far greater speed than my Mandarin!

Many universities and institutes in China have benefitted from targeted and generous funding from the Central Government in Beijing, as well as from Provincial Governments in their particular part of China. Thus modern buildings that are well equipped with the latest in digital communication systems are the norm. I am also very impressed by the clustering of quite separate universities in the same area, for example Chongqing. Since most staff and students actually live at the universities, this part of the city is known as "University City". One senses that China understands that in a global knowledge economy it is wise to increase significantly the proportion of the population who can participate productively in the knowledge industry.

Another big change over the last 10 years has been improved roads and bridges, a most striking example being from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, but there are numerous other examples. Urbanisation in China has occurred at great speed. It was stated recently that Chongqing, a city of some 30 million people, that I was visiting in order to talk to colleagues at 5 universities, had been a city of only 2 million people a decade ago. This phenomenal growth is largely due to rapid urbanisation and also to the listing of Chongqing as one of four municipal cities after Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin under the jurisdiction of the Chinese State Council. The emerging significance of South-West China is illustrated by the facilitation of international trade and investment through the building of a cargo railway line, directly from Chongqing to Europe. Yes, it seems that you can do anything in China.

At peak traffic times the great number of modern cars are often travelling very slowly or have stopped. And on a freeway it is not unusual to see someone on a bicycle with 20 dozen eggs strapped on both sides of the rear wheel. On one occasion I saw somebody on a bicycle with a double-bed somehow attached to the bicycle and to himself. In most cities it is very easy to see on any occasion hundreds, if not thousands, of people streaming at a fast pace in various directions.

One thing that has not changed in China is the respect of the Nation for older people and also for people who hold senior positions. Also the custom of meeting for a couple of hours for lunch or dinner at a restaurant in a room with a large round table and a lazy-susan laden with many diverse dishes remains deeply embedded. Along with toasts of welcome with Chinese and/or imported wine and/or fine spirit, an interesting 2 hours passes quickly.

My education and training has been greatly facilitated by my many trips to China. In my experience, Chinese people appear to be optimistic and also ambitious, especially parents for educational success by their children.

Whilst poverty is still an issue in the world's most populous country, over my 13 years of visits to China some hundreds of millions of Chinese have moved from poverty to a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. These changes can be seen in shopping malls in many of the cities where the infrastructure, the brand names and the prices of products could easily lead you to believe that you were in Europe, the United States or Australia.

I value greatly my Chinese friends (brothers) in China and Australia, from whom I continue to learn.

My advice to all youngsters and to those not so young, is, jump at any chance you have of visiting China. You are likely to be rewarded by friendly people, interesting food and a nation moving very rapidly to be the predominant force in nearly all aspects of world affairs. And, in any part of China you will be able to draw on the rich history of the country over thousands of years.