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The Educated Giant

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Taishan, China

Every day, it seems, China's economic success grows more obvious. As China's economy soars, the tendency in the U.S. will be to react defensively—with tariffs and other trade barriers. But, instead, America should take a page from the Chinese book and respond by boosting education.

The educational gap between China and America is shrinking rapidly. Recently, I visited several public schools in China accompanied by two of my children. In general, the level of math taught even in rural 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 sixth 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 three reasons why Chinese students do so well.

First, Chinese students are hungry for education and generally work harder academically than American students. 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 until 5 p.m. They do homework every night and weekend, and an hour or two of homework each day during their eight-week summer vacation. In contrast, U.S. children average 900 hours a year in class and 1,023 hours in front of a television.

The Chinese firmly believe that education (not sports, or appearing on American Idol) is the fast lane to success. Litao Mai grew up in rural China. Her parents had only a third grade education, but she became the first person in the village to go to college. She now works as a financial analyst in New York and describes herself as "a little peasant girl" transformed into "a power broker on Wall Street." That is the magic of education, and there are 1.3 billion more behind Ms. Mai.

The second reason is that China has an enormous cultural respect for education, so governments and families alike pour money and 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 the Chinese believe that those who get the best grades are the hardest workers. This means that they believe academic success is attainable by *anyone* who is willing to work. They acknowledge that academics can be easier for some and more difficult for others, but they firmly maintain that each student is given a personal choice to succeed or fail. 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.

So let's not respond to China's economic success 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.

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9/23 HW: Read the article carefully. Interact with the text.

Type your answers to these 3 questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Define the following words. Ask about any other word you don't understand.

- patronizingly
- attainable
- innately
- upshot
- mediocrity

2. What specific information does the writer give you about summer homework in China?

3. Are you as worried as Mr. Kristof? Type a response (blog back) in which you react to his editorial. Do you understand what he wants changed? Do you agree? Do you disagree? Do you have questions? Be sure to take at least one of these approaches and explain yourself fully and persuasively. Use paragraphs with topic sentences. Although this a blog, be sure you edit and proofread.

For discussion in class:

Idioms = What does Kristof mean by "take a page from the Chinese book" in the first paragraph? What is an idiom?

Allusions/ references = What does he mean by his reference to "1.3 billion more"? What does he mean by his reference to Sputnik?