

China Legal Daily – November 9th 2005

***Bridging, understanding, and collaboration
between China and the United States***

*Interview with Jeffrey Lehman,
President of The Joint Center for China-U.S. Law & Policy Studies*

[Translated by Liya Rong]

On the morning of November 7, Peking University welcomed a distinguished guest to receive an honorary doctoral degree. Jeffrey Lehman, a famous American legal scholar and former President of Cornell University, gave an impassioned speech entitled “Developing a Transnational Perspective: One Student’s Journey from Washington to Paris to Beijing.” He used his experience as a student in France to explain the importance of learning foreign languages and cultures. “Humility about one’s own knowledge can be learned by experience and contact with others,” he said, quoting the philosopher John Dewey, and he affirmed that the world’s leading universities should teach their students how to adopt a transnational perspective. “The duty of Cornell is to serve all humanity.”

President Lehman may have appeared only to be relating his personal experience. In fact, he was trying to explain a more basic and general idea: communication between China and United States can help us understand each other better. For the world to be harmonious and prosperous, and for the development of humanity, we need to learn to cooperate with each other.

The evening before the ceremony, our reporter interviewed him at his hotel.

The purpose of President Lehman’s visit was to do more than receive an honorary degree. It was also to establish the Joint Center for China-U.S. Law & Policy Studies, where he will be the first President.

The Joint Center for China-U.S. Law & Policy Studies, initiated at the suggestion of Justice Anthony Kennedy of The United States Supreme Court, is a joint initiative of Peking University and Beijing Foreign Language University. Due to the forces of globalization and the current trends in information technology and economics, legal systems and legal education are witnessing a trend towards coordination and convergence. Although differences between political and economic systems - as well as between different legal traditions and legal systems - exist, world development requires countries to cooperate more in fields like politics, economics, culture and law. President Lehman said that development has helped us to see local problems as common problems. As a consequence, we need more international instruments for cooperation in order to enhance communication with

each other and to improve legal education in the two countries.

In fact, extensive communications between Chinese and U.S. legal education leaders began in 1998. In that year several deans of law schools met in Beijing after the former president of China, Jiang Zemin, spoke with the former president of the U.S., Bill Clinton during Jiang's 1997 trip to the United States. The two presidents spoke about enhancing common legal research between China and the United States in order to improve communications between the two countries.

The research center run by President Lehman will mainly focus on legal and policy research, translation of foreign books, high-level forums, and similar initiatives.

Who could act as president of the center was considered a problem for quite some time. According to a common view, such a person had to be a famous legal expert who encouraged communications and who had an excellent experience in administration. For these reasons, President Lehman is the right man for the post.

President Lehman, who received his bachelor degree in math from Cornell University in 1977, a master degree in public policy and a doctor degree in law from the University of Michigan in 1981, has a deep friendship with China. In July 2003, after 9 years as Dean of the University of Michigan Law School, he became president of Cornell University. He is well known for his effort to improve international cooperation in legal education, to promote public service, and for his innovative legal scholarship. He is a renowned scholar of the welfare state in and out of America, including China.

In legal circles, and in the society at large, he became widely known when he received the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund's National Equal Justice Award in 2003. The award was conferred because of his role as a party in a 6-year-long lawsuit about affirmative action. The case, which was a landmark for the U.S. educational system, cost over 8 million dollars.

Back in 1992, Lehman was a professor of law at the University of Michigan. He was asked to help reshape the law school's admission policy, in order to assure the admission of the most talented U.S. students and to guarantee diversity in the student body, considering applicants' undergraduate majors, nationalities and races. Lehman's idea was to promote more complex thinking through legal education, with students having different backgrounds. In 1997, a white woman sued the University of Michigan Law School, asserting that its admission policy was unconstitutional. Ultimately, the United States Supreme Court decided in favor of the Law School's policy. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, impressed by Lehman's role in the lawsuit, awarded him the National Equal Justice Award, to praise his contribution in promoting race relations.

President Lehman has done a lot to strengthen cooperation between Cornell University and China in legal education, as attested by Cornell University Day at Peking University, in 2004. At that time, he was impressed by the unremitting effort shown by China in the modernization of its legal system.

The honorary degree has previously been awarded to several country presidents and the presidents of famous universities such as Colombia, Oxford, Cambridge and Waseda. Professor Lehman said humorously: “Now, as the newest graduate of Peking University, I hope to be able to support the continued harmonization of the legal systems of China and the United States. All of this is a great honor for me”.