

“Crafting the Right Working Environment for a Multicultural Talent Pool”

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Minister Li Yuanchao, Secretary Wang Yang, Distinguished Leaders and Colleagues.

I came to China from Cornell University to serve as chancellor and founding dean of the Peking University School of Transnational Law, the first school of its kind in the world. At STL, we bring the best law professors from around the world to teach the best students in China how to be effective leaders and advocates on the world stage. I have now spent four years living in Shenzhen, which has truly welcomed me as a friend. Shenzhen is my home, and I love my life here.

It is a pleasure to speak with you this morning about our work at STL to create an environment in which talented people from different cultures work together productively. We have learned a lot these past four years at STL. And we have learned as much from our mistakes as we have from our successes.

Today there is broad acceptance of the idea that a heterogeneous talent pool brings benefits that are not available with a homogeneous talent pool. Those benefits exist both at the level of the individual and at the level of the group.

For an individual, a diverse environment is stimulating. The neuroscientist Jeff Hawkins has hypothesized that our brains are primarily pre-

dictive organs, and they develop through encounters with things we do not expect. (See *On Intelligence*). And that hypothesis accords with most of our everyday experiences.

For a group, a heterogeneous talent pool can be more productive than an equally talented homogeneous talent pool. That is partly the result of simple technology transfer – the addition of more new information to the local store of knowledge rather than repeating existing information. But it is also partly the result of interactions: the greater stimulation for individual members of the group can lead to a higher level of creative innovation for the group as a whole.

Unfortunately, these benefits are not provided for free. They come at a cost, and institutions need to understand the cost if they are going to be able to manage it and keep it from overwhelming the benefits.

To begin with, it is hard to live in a new place. The simplest, most essential tasks – getting food, buying things, moving from place to place – suddenly these activities require tremendous effort.

The linguistic, analytical, and social skills that enabled us to get things done in our home environment are never as effective in a new cultural environment as they are at home; and sometimes they can even be counterproductive. And if we lose too much efficiency in those areas, we might not have any energy left over to do professional work.

Moreover, when we move from the level of the individual to the group, we encounter new challenges – subtler but in some ways even more dangerous.

As I mentioned a minute ago, it is stimulating to work with colleagues who are different from ourselves. But it can also be very stressful. Heterogeneous groups are much more fragile than homogeneous groups. They are much more prone to misunderstanding and even to internal conflict.

One reason for this is that people who grow up in different cultures can perceive the same phenomenon in different ways. The psychologist Richard Nisbett has written about some East-West differences that we are all familiar with – such as the way that Westerners tend to be more

focused on the characteristics of individuals and Easterners tend to be more focused on the characteristics of groups. Those differences in perception can easily lead to different assumptions about what is important in a particular setting, which in turn can lead to conflict.

Similarly, different cultures promote different behavioral norms. A sign of respect in one culture can be an insult in another.

And these differences can be especially meaningful in the domain of communication. Some cultures place primary responsibility on the speaker to convey information by moving directly from point to point in a linear sequence. Others place primary responsibility on the listener to interpret a communication that is more indirect, conveying a complex message through metaphor and euphemism.

So how can we create environments that capture the benefits of multicultural diversity and overcome the challenges created by that diversity?

At our school we have learned how important it is to first acknowledge, explicitly, the challenges that this kind of institution creates for everyone – the foreigners like me who come here, and the local citizens who must interact with us. It does not help to pretend that this is easy; on the contrary, it helps to recognize how hard this project is.

Second, we have learned how important it is to develop systems that can help the foreigners to overcome culture shock, systems that can help them to feel at home.

For example, almost all our foreign experts have found it extremely difficult to deal with the procedures required to obtain a Z Visa and a foreign residence permit. Those policies are designed for an ordinary business employee, not for a foreign expert. I hope those policies will change in the future – that China will establish a special visa for foreign experts and will issue the residence permit for a longer duration. But in the meantime we have assigned one of our staff members to full-time responsibility for creating a system that can help reduce the stress that those policies create for our experts.

Finally, we have set for ourselves the task of designing a kind of institutional culture that supports both foreigners and domestic Chinese in

their efforts at multicultural collaboration. The message that we try to give everyone has three parts:

First, let's celebrate the differences among us. When we discover that Americans tend to organize their lives based on the day of the week, and Chinese tend to organize their lives based on the date of the month, let's see that as a fascinating difference that makes our lives more interesting.

Second, let's all "cut each other slack" – let's resist the impulse we might have to feel offended by something someone else does. If someone else acts in a way that we think is inconsiderate or disrespectful, let's stop and ask ourselves whether, within his or her culture, the action has an entirely different meaning.

And finally, let's all laugh together. As much as possible. One of the great universal forces that bridges cultures is laughter. When we create a community where we are happy to laugh at ourselves, when we do not take ourselves too seriously, we make it much easier for all of us – foreigners and Chinese – to overcome the special challenges we face, and to capture the remarkable special benefits that come to us, living and working in a multicultural environment.