

Spur creativity? China must be careful what it wishes for

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BEIJING - CHINA is far-sighted in identifying creativity as a key ingredient for future economic growth, but encouraging students to think independently may also have 'potentially subversive' consequences, said Yale University president Richard Levin.

Such changes will not happen overnight, but could play out over a generation as more Chinese youths learn to think for themselves and become more willing to challenge authority, he told The Straits Times in an interview here last week.

He is leading a delegation of 100 Yale faculty members and students on a 10-day visit to China.

President Hu Jintao has set out an ambitious plan to turn China into an 'innovation-oriented society' by 2020, with the government announcing increased spending on research and development and higher learning.

Beijing is also aware that achieving this strategic goal requires more than just money. Speaking to undergraduates at Shanghai's Tongji University last week, Premier Wen Jiabao encouraged them to think both independently and creatively. However, this process may have consequences in the future for which Beijing did not intend, said Dr Levin.

He added: '(Promoting creativity) means a fundamental change in the way Chinese students learn.

'Instead of being passive recipients of education, they will have to be more interactively engaged, willing to challenge authority and think independently. This will have potential political implications that are obvious and interesting.'

He did not elaborate on what the implications might be, but added with a laugh that some of the consequences could be 'potentially subversive'.

Among China watchers, there is little consensus on the political future of the world's most populous country.

One popular school of thought, which draws upon the broad historical trend of Western democracies, suggests that an increasingly affluent Chinese middle class would eventually demand greater political participation and accountability, just like their counterparts in the developed world.

Thus, greater economic engagement of China would eventually prod the country towards political openness, if not democracy.

But Dr Levin said it was not obvious that China would follow such a path, given its vastly different political culture and history.

'This is where there is tension between what the history of the West teaches and what Chinese values, culture and history teach,' he added. 'I think it could go either way.'

What is certain in his books, though, is the need for greater people-to-people exchanges between China and the United States, whose relationship with each other would have a great impact on global peace and prosperity in the future.

This view is widely endorsed by the Chinese leadership as well. In fact, the Yale delegation led by Dr Levin is in China at the personal invitation of President Hu, who delivered a speech at the campus in April last year as part of his official visit to the US.

Said Dr Levin: '(The Yale delegation's visit to China) really symbolically demonstrates what (Mr Hu) and President Bush believe, that is, if young people from our two countries really get to know and understand one another better, then there will be a better future for us.'

Yale's relationship with China is said to be longer than any other US university's, with the first mainland Chinese student, Yung Wing, arriving at its campus in 1850. The university currently has more than 600 mainland Chinese students and academics, the largest 'foreign presence' on the campus.

Yale also has extensive ties and collaborations with Chinese universities and the government in fields such as law, biomedical research, nanotechnology and leadership training.

An area that Dr Levin hopes to expand on is Yale's collaboration with China on environmental problems. The university already has a joint programme with Qinghua University in Beijing to educate mayors and vice-mayors in sustainable development and environmental issues, and its president hopes to create more such opportunities.

'If China and the US don't seriously start to address the issue of greenhouse gas emissions, the whole planet is in trouble,' he warned.