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The Strategic Imperative of New Chinese-Language Networks

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Ambassador Chas Freeman recently gave a speech entitled “The End of the American Empire” in which he used a Chinese saying, 井底之蛙, the “frog at the bottom of a well.” He was referring to a dangerously myopic American view of the world, particular in the National Security Council, where there is a tendency to see everything through the lens of a military solution. This frog in a well syndrome is present in many disciplines, including China studies. It forces us to ask ourselves how can China analysts, policymakers, businesspeople, and members of civil society engaged with China, break out of their respective knowledge silos, to stop being frogs in wells, in order to better understand China? Both the United States and Japan have unique frameworks through which they view China, and both these are limited.

Outside of my day job at the University of Maryland, I founded an organization called the American Mandarin Society (AMS). AMS is composed of Americans who studied Chinese in China and are back in the United States working in areas related to China policy. We currently have over 2000 members spread across the professions. Our aim is to foster the next generation of China experts by helping them maintain their language skills, educating them on policy issues, and offering them professional development opportunities.

A fundamental problem that we are trying to address is that despite large numbers of Americans who study Chinese in China, few of these students are able to retain their language skills for very long. Having already spent considerable time, effort, and resources to develop professional language skills, these returnees face the daunting challenge of maintaining these skills as they embark on diverse and demanding careers. Despite best intentions to regularly read Chinese newspapers or watch Chinese media, the reality is that the demands of the workweek almost always overwhelm individuals’ efforts to maintain language fluency. As such, their skills rapidly deteriorate to the point of Chinese becoming something they “used to know.”

This is frustrating on an individual level (no one likes to feel their language skills disappear after working so hard to obtain them), but is also a major wasted resource on a national level. Language is more than just a tool; it is a framework through which we assess and engage with the world. As the Chinese language skills of Americans atrophy, so too does their ability to effectively understand developments, motivations, and situations in China. These former speakers and readers of Chinese are much less likely to wade through Chinese language materials, and more likely to skim secondary or tertiary analysis. With or without their

language skills it may be the same people making decisions, but their conclusions will most likely be different.

AMS runs a number of programs to help prevent this language atrophy. One of our standard activities is organizing Chinese language policy lectures in Washington DC. These are similar to the sorts of events you would see at a conventional think tank, but all of our events are conducted *in Chinese*. This is helpful not only for our members' language maintenance but also for the visiting officials and scholars from China to be able to express themselves more fully and with more nuance than they could in English. It also gives us access to experts that might not otherwise be part of the dialogue.

One of the interesting things we noticed at these events is that there were a number of Japanese who would attend. Some were diplomats in Washington, and some were from Japanese business organizations. They were just as keen as our American members to keep up their Chinese language skills and to discuss Chinese policy issues in Chinese with Chinese experts.

At the same time, I participated in a number of delegations to Japan to meet with Japanese government agencies and businesses that engaged with China. These meetings were always conducted in English. After the meetings I would talk to some of these Japanese China experts, asking them (in Chinese) if they spoke Chinese. The response would often be something to the effect of "Yes! If I knew you spoke Chinese I would have said a lot more, but my English is not very good, so I didn't speak much!" Now this shouldn't come as a surprise. The U.S. and Japan each send over 15,000 students per year to China

Dialogue between Americans and Japanese is obviously important. When it comes to China, the U.S. and Japan look at China very differently, and we have much to learn from each other. We both have China as a Pacific neighbor, but China's proximity to Japan and the increasing power differential between China and Japan mean that having China as a neighbor means something completely different to Japanese. As each country grapples with how to manage their relationships with China and with each other, each must make concerted efforts to cultivate and train next generation professionals for this responsibility.

Despite many overlapping interests and complementary perspectives, cooperation between the United States and Japan on issues relating to China is still very limited. This is due partly to the decreasing educational exchange between the United States and Japan, and partly to the fact that fewer China-focused professionals in each country spend time in the other country.

So how can we do this? As previously mentioned, over recent decades, ever-greater numbers of Japanese and Americans have traveled to China to study and work, returning with a deeper knowledge of Chinese language, history, and culture. But, these American and Japanese returnees are spending little or no time in each other's countries. This lack of exchange results not only in inadequate understanding of each other, but also in a missed opportunity for better understanding China.

Japanese and Americans have different sources, cultural frameworks, historical experiences, and political realities. The accrued wisdom and experiences of American and Japanese

returnees from China are complementary to each other, yet until now little effort has been made to combine them.

There is a strategic imperative for the United States and Japan to build a community of Chinese-speaking American and Japanese government officials, businesspeople, scholars, employees of civil society groups, and other professionals. Such an innovative network will strengthen relations between the United States and Japan, help build more solid relations with China, and ultimately contribute to greater prosperity, stability, and peace in the Pacific region.

The situation in the Asia-Pacific region is only going to get more challenging and the demands on our leaders in business, government, and civil society are going to increase. Building ties between the future stewards of Japan-China relations and U.S.-China relations is a strategic imperative—I believe stability in the Asia-Pacific region depends on it.

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