I n October I had the opportunity to accom-
pany Governor Phil Bredesen, Commis-
sioner Matt Kisber, and about 100 other
Tennesseans on a trade mission to China. It was
an incredible experience.

Some of us started in Tokyo with a joint
meeting of the Southeast U.S./Japan and Japan-
U.S. Southeast Associations. The Japanese were
wonderful hosts. Governors or significant rep-
resentatives from Tennessee, Florida, Alabama,
Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South
Carolina, and Virginia met outstanding Japan-
ese industry leaders. It was a productive oppor-
tunity to enhance trade relations between Japan
and the Southeastern states.

I followed Governor Bredesen and Com-
missoner Kisber to Beijing, which was bustling
with activity with the Olympics less than a year
away. Our visit coincided with the Communist
Party’s National Congress, held every five
years. Significant historical events were taking
place down the street from our hotel. A top Chi-
nese political figure, Madam Wu, addressed one
of our meetings in celebration of the opening of
Tennessee’s first trade office in Beijing and
within days was voted out of power in the party.

Beijing is an incredible city with many
beautiful buildings. We visited the site that will
serve as the center of Olympic activity and saw
the remarkable “Bird’s Nest” stadium but no
other buildings one would expect. The Chinese
seem confident everything will be ready in time.

Everywhere contrast is quite stark. Multi-
ple-lane roads are shared by luxury cars, trucks,
motorcycles, mopeds, motorized carts, bicycles,
and tricycle carts. Commerce is carried on in
every corner and alley. Everything is nego-
tiable; there is no such thing as a final price. The
very old stands next to the remarkably new and
modern.

I had the privilege of visiting the Forbidden
City, the Summer Palace, and Tiananmen Square
as well as a portion of the Great Wall. What
seems old in our culture is considered quite new
by Chinese standards. This history affords the
Chinese a worldview and approach to planning
much different than we can appreciate.

After meeting numerous government offi-
cials and persons interested in doing business
with or in Tennessee, the delegation moved to
Shanghai, which seemed even more industrious
than Beijing. With more than 15 million people,
it made New York City look like a sleepy vil-
lage. The activity on the waterfront was con-
stant with every kind of vessel imaginable. The
city houses many clusters of 20- to 30-story
apartment buildings that seem close enough for
neighbors to shake hands from their windows.

I was part of a delegation of academics to
visit Fudan University, one of the best in China,
with about 30,000 students and many excellent
programs. During our stay in Shanghai, an
international rating of executive MBA pro-
grams rated a joint program between Washin-
ton University and Fudan in the top 10
worldwide, and a government study concluded
the city of Shanghai alone was at least 8,500
university professors short. This gives a sense
of the focus and emphasis being placed on edu-
cation.

The Maglev train ride from Shanghai to the
airport was a study in contrasts: the train
reached a speed of 431 kilometers (268 miles)
per hour as it zipped past rice fields and veg-
etable patches that have remained largely
unchanged for hundreds of years.

The last stop was Hong Kong. Part of
China, it retains some autonomy, with its own
currency and customs offices. One island is
home to the airport and a new version of Dis-
eyland; another is the main area of commerce.

Much of the commerce of Asia comes through
the port of Hong Kong, a beehive of activity
with land/sea containers stacked 10 or more
high as far as one can see and hundreds of
cranes for loading and unloading ships.

The nightly light show on the city’s sky-
scrapers and harbor is wondrous. Across the har-
bors in Kowloon is a shopping mecca: major
thoroughfares hold brand-name shops from
around the world. Side streets and alleys provide
opportunities for significant bargains and local
fare such as custom-made clothing and pearls.

What conclusions did I reach from this
trade mission? The Chinese—industrious and
numerous with a rich history—are ready to do
business. Because English is essentially the
nation’s second language, there may be more
English-speaking people in China than any
other nation. Hungry for the “good things” of
life, willing to do what it takes to acquire them,
and possessing the necessary political resolve
and human capital, they speak our language. It
very well may be time we learn theirs. ■