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Li and Me

DURING A WEEK-LONG TRIP TO CHINA IN JANUARY THIS YEAR, I WAS INVITED TO MEET WITH PREMIER LI Keqiang in Beijing to discuss science. At first, I was in disbelief. After all, China is a nation of 1.3 billion people. Li, as Premier and Party Secretary of the State Council, has many pressing issues of national and international concern to attend to. In all my years as a scientist, including heading a billion-dollar U.S. research agency, this was the most significant invitation I had ever received to meet with a sitting national leader to hear his vision for science and discuss important global science matters. The fact that the Chinese Premier wanted to meet with me sent strong signals as to how China is seeing science as critical to its future well being.

The meeting would have clear ground rules. Just me, no U.S. reporters, for 30 minutes. We would discuss science and the economy, not politics. Some topics were off limits for the Premier, suggested as more appropriate for conversations between President Bai Chunli of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and me. I arrived early for the meeting at a beautiful traditional Chinese reception hall. No x-ray machines or body scanners such as you find at the entrance to the U.S. Capitol and the White House. The Premier and me, having tea. And we talked, and talked, for 70 minutes, on topics ranging from space exploration to international cooperation to climate change and environmental protection [see related AAAS News and Notes (<http://www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.1253962>) and a transcript of the meeting (<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/science.1253962/DC1>)]. At one point early in the conversation, Li's aide rushed in with an urgent note. And yet Premier Li dismissed him; whatever important matter demanded his attention elsewhere would have to wait.

The Premier was clearly well prepared to demonstrate that China's efforts to address its environmental woes have gone beyond intent to yield results. He quoted numbers on carbon stored through returning farmland to forest since 2000 (160 million tons) and the value of China's energy-saving and environmental industries [4.5 trillion RMB yuan (approximately US\$0.72 trillion) by 2015]. He stated: "We need to declare war on environmental pollution, on unclean water and dirty air." As an example of how China is moving forward aggressively on this front, Li claimed that 60 million rural water users were supplied with clean drinking water in 2013, with another 60 million scheduled to benefit in 2014. Yet there is still much to do. The day after I left Beijing, the capital experienced dangerous smog, with concentrations of 2.5-micrometer particles that were 20 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization.

Ensuring that China has the best and brightest scientists to solve these problems is not just good policy for the Premier, but something personal. Over 30 years ago, Li was a peasant from a poor rural part of China. Thanks to his excellent performance on the college entrance examination, he was admitted to the elite Peking University, which helped launch his own illustrious career. When Li became Premier, he noted that the proportion of poor students at the elite Chinese universities was declining. Therefore, last year the Chinese government asked those universities to enroll more rural students from underdeveloped central and western areas of China and provided 50 billion RMB (approximately US\$0.8 billion) in scholarships to offset the cost of their college attendance. Their representation increased by 10% over the previous year, Li noted.

Our meeting made the 7 p.m. national news and was all over the morning papers. Even cab drivers knew about the meeting and were impressed. Scientific research had attained rock-star status in China. I suspect that this was the hoped-for intent when Dr. Bai of the CAS made the request for my meeting with the Premier. If the long-term result is that China's most talented youth become researchers to find environmental solutions, then we all win.

— Marcia McNutt

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