

# The Hong Kong Workshop

## *Preparing for the return of Rotary*

**A**s the R.I. Board of Directors reviewed the notable progress made to date in extending Rotary to all parts of the world, its attention was inevitably drawn to the People's Republic of China (PRC), by far the largest single non-Rotary country. Because of its vast size, huge population, rich culture, and incalculable potential, there can be no question that the PRC will increasingly be a leading country within the next few decades. It will therefore need Rotary all the more.

The Board, of course, was fully conscious that Rotary was no stranger there, but would be returning to a land where it had previously prospered. The Rotary Club of Shanghai was admitted on 1 October 1919. By the 1930s, the Board had authorized three districts for China's clubs, but in 1952, the Board was compelled to terminate the last club on the mainland.

Sparks of Rotary, however, still exist. A delegation from the Rotary Club of Taipei recently met the 96-year-old past president (1934-35) of the Rotary Club of Shanghai, who clearly recalled his meeting with founder Paul Harris in 1936.

In this spirit of restoration, the Board authorized a Presidential Workshop in Hong Kong on 14-15 January 1994. Its scope was not limited to the PRC but included several adjacent non-Rotary countries. Twenty-seven participants from 13 Rotary countries, mostly in Asia, attended the workshop, as well as two residents of the PRC. R.I. Director In Sang Song of Korea chaired the event, assisted by Past R.I. Director Bhichai Rattakul of Thailand. Both have been high government officials in their respective countries.

Chairman Song succinctly stated the workshop's purpose: "To assist the R.I. president in developing a strategy that could be recommended to the Board of Directors to open a door for introducing Rotary to the People's Republic of China

and adjacent non-Rotary countries."

Vice-Chairman Rattakul added other goals: to design a comprehensive vision of how Rotary might grow in China; to analyze the difficulties that might be encountered in bringing Rotary to the PRC; to discuss the steps that should be taken in the future, along with their timing and intermediaries; and to identify various administrative problems to be solved.

The participants noted the similarities between this meeting and the groundbreaking workshop in Vienna, Austria (June 1993), for extension to Central and Eastern Europe:

- The top leaders of Rotary had come to listen and learn from Rotarians knowledgeable about this area of the world;
- Discussion was free and continuous, with no sense of "hierarchy;"
- There was a renewed appreciation of the internationality of Rotary, as well as its non-political and open nature;
- The full participation of the chairman of the Trustees along with four past or current Trustees demonstrated the key role that The Rotary Foundation plays within R.I.;
- Participants recognized that East Asia faced some of the same fundamental problems in (re)establishing Rotary as did Central and Eastern Europe. Among them: difficulty in explaining the altruistic service ethic of Rotary; desire of some to join Rotary for unworthy motives; and the urgent need for a few concise, clear publications about Rotary in the local languages.

The participants also recognized some essential differences between the two meetings.

The Vienna Workshop had been greatly enlivened and enriched by the presence of nearly 30 Rotarians from the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Their insights and concerns represented a rich resource that was unfortunately not avail-

able to the Hong Kong Workshop.

A second key difference was the political stance of governments. The Vienna participants were experiencing new or restored governments that were, to varying degrees, very interested in expanding their contacts at all levels and in all forms with Western Europe and beyond. It is quite otherwise with the governments of the non-Rotary countries in East Asia. Though their economic and trade ties are steadily strengthening with many countries, the governments of the non-Rotary countries in East Asia are unsure whether further contacts, particularly in non-economic matters, would be beneficial for them.

After two days of constructive exchange and debate, the Hong Kong Workshop reached general agreement on these findings.

1. In any extension of Rotary to these countries, R.I. must not in any way be perceived to be pleading for recognition. Rotary must instead always preserve its legitimate dignity and pride and adhere to its fundamental principles. President Robert R. Barth illustrated the proper stance: "We have the seed; have you the earth and climate for growth?" It is, of course, appropriate to stress the real benefits that Rotary can bring to any human society. However, there are some features of Rotary that cannot be compromised, that are not subjects for negotiation, such as the Object of Rotary, The 4-Way Test, and the association's participative procedures.

2. Workshop participants considered how extensive contacts already were between Rotarians and a large number of persons in the PRC, some at rather high levels in their businesses or professions.

3. Everyone recognized the danger in an uncoordinated or too rapid extension. R.I. has no need to hurry. Instead, it has an obligation to build soundly for the future and to ensure that the end product is genu-



inely Rotary. As President Barth remarked: "It is easy to have children (new clubs); it is not so easy to have a family (Rotarians dedicated to service)." Governors all over the Rotary world must therefore restrain any clubs and Rotarians in their districts that may not have considered all the important factors in their understandable desire to sponsor clubs in the PRC immediately, instead of following the Board's lead.

4. It quickly became apparent that Rotary has not always been properly understood by most governments of these non-Rotary countries. It may be seen as too Western or too "American" for some—despite the fact that only about one-third of the world's Rotarians are from the U.S.A. It is also wrongly seen as elitist, a rich man's club, and overly committed to a capitalist economic system. With this false perspective, government leaders could be loath to sanction such an organization in their countries.

5. The workshop participants were glad to learn that Rotary's image in the PRC is nevertheless becoming more realistic, mainly because of the service activities of Rotarians—and The Rotary Foundation of R.I. The Foundation has not only donated nearly U.S. \$19 million for PolioPlus in the PRC (including \$15 million for a vaccine production plant in Kunming); it has also sent to and received from the PRC several Rotary Scholars and GSE teams. Further, the PRC National Immunization Days in December 1993 and January 1994 would not have been possible without the Foundation's

contribution of 70 million doses of vaccine. As a result, the PRC Ministry of Health reported the successful immunization of over 100 million children between the ages of one and four; and the minister personally thanked Trustee Chairman Royce Abbey at a public occasion in Beijing.

In addition, every participant could cite a service project in his country that benefited PRC citizens. For example, Hong Kong Rotarians have aided victims of flooding in the PRC, and they annually award stipends to worthy medical and dental teachers in the PRC to study at a Hong Kong university. Japanese Rotarians have been equally generous to PRC students in Japan. "There is definitely a tale of Rotary humanitarian work in China," remarked President-Elect Bill Huntley, "but it is too little known."

6. Hong Kong Rotarians were clearly confident about that city's future after 1 July 1997, when it becomes part of the PRC. They felt that the published "basic law" documents afford both them and Rotary the necessary freedom for future activities. [Given Hong Kong's significant role in fueling and guiding the current economic boom in the PRC, these Rotarians argued that Beijing will significantly gain by maintaining current arrangements and procedures in Hong Kong.]

7. A strong consensus emerged that the time was right to offer the PRC the opportunity for Rotary to grow there. There were several reasons for this consensus:

a. The PRC is currently enjoying a far-reaching upsurge of economic activity, attaining one of the highest rates of growth among major nations. Millions of Chinese business people now have some "discretionary money" for use beyond their basic needs, which may make it easier for any new Rotarians there to carry out service projects and other Rotary obligations.

b. There is demonstrably an increasing understanding of and openness to ideas from "the West," as well as its products. This is true not only of ordinary citizens but also of governmental authorities, which desire to share in the benefits of certain

international organizations (such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and are more open to sending their outstanding students and others abroad for specialized training.

c. The renewed interest in Confucian ideals, particularly its respect for family relationships and educational achievements, may make many Chinese more receptive to Rotary's ideals.

These findings from the workshop, as well as some concrete suggestions on the next steps forward, were conveyed to the R.I. Board for its March 1994 meeting. After due deliberation, the Board decided on the following strategies:

1. It reaffirmed its earlier decision on the extension of Rotary to non-Rotary countries, which had these main provisions:

- increasing the number of informal initiatives in the areas of education, exchange of persons, and humanitarian assistance;
- no formal extension without the prior explicit approval of the Board;
- and suitable assurance that Rotary clubs will be able to function freely, meet regularly, satisfy R.I. financial obligations, and plan and implement service projects, including participation in all Foundation programs.

2. It reaffirmed its 1991 decision opening Vietnam and Laos for Rotary extension, and agreed to open the PRC, Mongolia, and Bhutan for extension whenever the president and the general secretary certify to the Board that the above requirements have been met for a particular country.

3. It established an international committee, reporting directly to the president—with subcommittees for the above countries—to supervise, encourage, and coordinate the extension of Rotary and the introduction of Rotary service projects in these Asian countries.

4. Under the patient and careful guidance of the international committee, the subcommittees will seek the cooperation of the central government of each of the countries for reestablishment of Rotary there.

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5. The general strategy in each country will be to select one key city (or perhaps two or three in a large country), where the first Rotary club will be chartered and in whose neighborhood additional clubs will in time be established.

6. As determined by the relevant subcommittee and the international committee, work with the central government and with prospective members at the local or provincial level may well proceed simultaneously.

7. In regard to the PRC, the first cities could be Guangzhou, Shanghai, and/or Beijing. Once Rotary is well established along the coast, extension can proceed inland, following the great rivers. There was a general agreement that the committee must respect the manner in which the Beijing government may choose to further the restoration of Rotary. Flexibility and patience must therefore be the hallmarks of Rotary's work towards restoration.

8. Every effort must be made to publicize the true story of Rotary, particularly the benefits it brings to communities. Governments must be encouraged to understand R.I. correctly, that is, as a cultural association and definitely not as a political organization. In portraying the service rendered by Rotarians, the emphasis should not be on charity (which may be misunderstood) but on educational exchange and improved health care among the many service projects of Rotary.

In reflecting on the workshop, Chairman Song stated that "since the PRC has been very successful in its national development and will no doubt become one of the major powers in the coming century, it will be very meaningful for Rotary International to help the PRC citizens also realize the joy of 'Service Above Self.'"

—ROBERT R. BARTH,  
President, R.I.

—BILL HUNTLEY  
President-elect, R.I.

—ROYCE ABBEY,  
Chairman,  
The Rotary Foundation Trustees

[This article is adapted from a longer report sent to district governors and others. —EDS]