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BRIDGING THE WORLD

**Speech given by
Ambassador Christopher Bo Bramsen
Rotary International Special Representative to China
at the RI luncheon held on 14 June 2006
at the Rotary International Convention
in Malmö/Copenhagen**

Your Highness Princess Alexandra
President Carl-Wilhelm Stenhammar and Monica
President-elect Bill Boyd and Lorna
Distinguished RI leaders
Fellow Rotarians and friends

It's a great honour for me to be here today to give a talk on the theme of this year's Rotary International Convention: "Bridging the World".

It was the British poet, Rudyard Kipling, who in 1892 wrote a ballad that begins with these well-known lines:

"Oh, East is East and West is West
and never the twain shall meet".

No doubt, there was some truth in this statement - at that time. And of course, to some extent there still is. We are all witnessing differences in the world that lead to suspicion and friction, and at worst to hatred and violence.

But we are also living in a world where cultures, countries, regions and people are gradually getting closer to each other - every day. We are building bridges. We are bridging the world. Not only physically, across straits, rivers and valleys, but also culturally between people. This is where all of you here and all the other 1.2 million Rotarians from more than 32.000 clubs all over the world, play a very important role.

Let me go one generation or more back to the 1960's. Europe was divided between East and West, and the world was divided. It was the Cold War at its worst.

Here in Denmark, when I was a young reserve officer in the Danish Royal Guards, we knew where the Russians, the Poles and the East Germans would attack us. And they knew that we knew. It was here in Danish waters that we spotted a Russian ship on its way to Cuba with nuclear missiles. Many of you remember the Cuban missile crisis, where we were all on the brink of a new disastrous World War.

When I went around the world on a backpacking tour in 1964, I visited a divided and war-torn Vietnam as free-lance journalist.

When I came to Hong Kong, I tried to get into China, to see where my grandparents had lived, and where my mother grew up in Shanghai. But this was not possible. China was closed, especially to young foreign back-packers.

It was also in the 1960's that Cyprus was split into two parts. In 1965 I participated in the Danish military contingent and went to Cyprus as a UN peace keeper. My job as a "blue beret" was to keep the local Turkish and Greek Cypriots from shooting at each other. Not through the use of force, but by talking to the two sides and solve the local problems. This was dialogue, diplomacy "en miniature", and an attempt to build the necessary bridge of peace between the two communities.

I mention these episodes from the 1960's because they show what a long way we have come since then. In just one generation.

During the last few years a number of new initiatives have been taken by Rotary International in the field of the geographical extension of Rotary.

If we take a look at those countries that I mentioned, we will get a new picture.

In Germany, in Europe and on the world scene as a whole there is no longer a political division between East and West. No Berlin wall and no longer any iron curtain.

In stead, a bridge of peace and friendship has been built. Rotary clubs and districts are now being established in Russia and Eastern Europe. Indeed, a great step forward.

Cuba and Vietnam have also become potential new countries for Rotary extension.

Although Cyprus is still a divided island, the Rotary clubs of the two communities are now getting together to form one single Rotary district. This is a good example of how the people-to-people approach can build the bridge of trust that is necessary for a unification of the island.

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Then there is China.

Let me first tell you how the telegraph came to China!

In 1870 a large Danish ship went from Copenhagen out to the Far East to establish a telegraph line from Hong Kong via Shanghai and Nagasaki and Vladivostock, and then across Russia, to Copenhagen. My grandfather's brother, William Bramsen, was on board the ship as a young telegraph apprentice.

The first part was to lay an underwater cable on the bottom of the sea from Hong Kong to Shanghai. When the end of the cable was taken ashore on "the Bund" in Shanghai, the young Danes, by use of the Morse code, were eager to test the cable and see if they able to communicate with their colleagues in Hong Kong. They were exhilarated when they got an answer back. It worked!

But the Chinese merchants in Shanghai were somewhat sceptical about what was going on. When asked by the Chinese, how many characters they used to communicate by this telegraph invention, the Danes said, "Two! A dot and a dash". They explained the Morse code, but the Chinese shook their heads and

said that the telegraph system could not be used in China, as they would need several thousand characters in their communication.

Then the Danes asked the Chinese to give them 600 Chinese characters, that could be used for sending orders to merchants in Hong Kong. This was done, and each of the 600 characters was given a number. Then, orders for products were sent off to Hong Kong as numbers in the Morse code: 324, 246, 407 etc.

When the goods arrived by ship from Hong Kong some days later, it was the Chinese merchants in Shanghai who rejoiced. It worked!

A Danish professor was then asked to put together a numeric system that could be used for a large number of Chinese characters. He figured out that if you use the digits from 0000 to 9999, then you can assign a 4-digit number to 10.000 different Chinese characters. He designed such a system, which became the basis for the Chinese telegraph code. Today you can find its offspring in the Chinese computer code.

This development is a good example of bridge building between different cultures. By combining the Latin alphabet with Arabic numbers and Chinese characters the complex Chinese characters are included in modern communication.

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When I came to China in 1994, first as Danish Consul General in Shanghai, and then as Denmark's Ambassador to China in Beijing, I had been member of the Rotary Club of Copenhagen for several years. However, there were no Rotary clubs in China.

10 years ago, almost to the day - on the 18th of June 1996, a German businessman who was a Rotarian from Hong Kong, took the initiative to meet for lunch with a number of Rotarians from other countries who lived in Beijing.

This was the beginning of the first Rotary club in the People's Republic of China. A number of Rotary clubs had already existed in China during the first part of the 20th century, but they had all been closed during the early 50'ies. So, in Beijing we started meeting regularly as Rotarians on a weekly basis. We would like to meet "as if" we were a club. We even had a banner that said "Rotary Club of Beijing", preceded by the words "Striving to be". (Today a collector's item).

All this was going a bit too fast for some people. The RI Board had not yet taken the necessary step to open China for Rotary extension, and we were told in clear terms from Evanston not to meet "as a Rotary club".

The Chinese, however, had no objections that we met as expat Rotarians in China on an informal basis. They realized that even though Rotary International was not yet formally registered in the PRC, a lot of humanitarian projects were being carried out in China through local Rotarians and many Rotary clubs around the world.

Also in Shanghai foreign resident Rotarians were now meeting on a regular basis. And these two groups of Rotarians - in Beijing and Shanghai - were doing an impressive job in fund-raising for large projects to the benefit of thousands of Chinese.

In 2000, we arranged for a high-level official visit to China of three RI Presidents: Frank Devlyn, Richard King and Bhichai Rattakul. This visit was a breakthrough. It resulted in the decision of the RI Board in 2001 to give the two groups of Rotarians in China status as provisional Rotary clubs - in anticipation of the expected Chinese legislation on the registration of Non Governmental Organisations, the so-called NGOs. [Applause]

In November last year, the current RI Board of Directors took a new step. They formally adopted the decision that China should be open for Rotary extension. Indeed, a very important decision. At the board meeting RI President Stenhammar was requested to appoint an RI Special Representative for a three year term with two main tasks.

First, the SR should liaise with the Chinese government in order to pave the way for formal registration of Rotary in China. The SR should report directly to the RI President.

Secondly, similar to a district governor, the SR should provide guidance to the two Rotary clubs in China. These two clubs would be given full club status as non-districted clubs.

When I was asked by President Stenhammar to serve Rotary International as Special Representative to China, I accepted the nomination and the challenge, and we have since then been very busy on the China scene.

The most important thing is that we have now established a direct way of communication between the Chinese Government in Beijing and the RI leadership in Evanston. The Chinese authorities appreciate this direct channel of communication. Because it shows that Rotary International, for the first time, is now asking China in clear language to join the world of Rotary.

The formal chartering by RI of the two clubs took place on the 8th of February, 2006. 4 months ago.

So, let there be no doubt: The two clubs Beijing and Shanghai ARE chartered. They are listed in the new Official Rotary Directory. You can see where they meet, and you are all welcome to visit. The meetings are held in English. This change in status has meant that the clubs are now better able to access financial support from the Rotary Foundation and other RI programs and sources.

In China, we have established an SR Advisory Committee to provide guidance on government relations with the PRC. This committee is a successor to the RI China Extension Subcommittee.

We have also set up a Rotary China Team which functions as a mini District Leadership Team for the two clubs.

Let me point out, that in Hong Kong and Macao, Rotary Clubs have existed for many years. As these two regions have now become part of the People's Republic of China, Rotary in fact is very much present in China.

But in Mainland China, we only have the two clubs in Shanghai and Beijing. And local PRC citizens can NOT join these clubs. At least not yet.

This is what we are working on. To be able to have Rotary registered in China in a foreseeable future, so that more Rotary clubs can be established in other provinces of China, and so that local Chinese citizens can join as Rotarians.

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A few weeks ago, President Stenhammar visited the clubs in Beijing and Shanghai to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Rotarians meeting in China and to acknowledge their accomplishments through these years.

Many RI leaders, including Past President Jonathan Majiyagbe and President Nominee Wilf Wilkinson, as well as many Rotarians from other countries and regions participated in these celebrations.

In Beijing we had a big banner put up at the hotel entrance: “Welcome to RI President Carl-Wilhelm Stenhammar” And the red carpet was there too. I am not sure whether you ever saw that banner, because it was taken down again before the arrival of another Rotarian: Chancellor Angela Merkel from Germany. But you did get a red carpet treatment! And why did the two of you stay at the same hotels in Beijing and as well as in Shanghai? I guess because the hotel managers are Rotarians!

In Beijing and in Shanghai, the two clubs organized Rotary meetings and gala evenings on the occasion of the visit. With top class entertainment, inspiring speeches, good fund-raising activities and many hundreds of guests. The events were a great success.

And let me tell you that when the 100 members of two Rotary clubs in China raise money, they really do a tremendous job. Let’s give our Rotarians in China a big hand. [Applause]

Together, the Rotary festivities in Beijing and in Shanghai in May turned out to become the largest Rotary event to be held in the People’s Republic of China.

In particular there were many Rotarians from District 3450, which covers Hong Kong, Macao and Mongolia. I would like to use this opportunity to thank the leaders from District 3450 for their contribution over the years to the work of Rotary in the People’s Republic of China and for their support given to the clubs in Shanghai and Beijing. We look forward to a continued cooperation. A big hand to District 3450.

I would also like you all to recognize Her Highness Princess Alexandra, who comes from Hong Kong. In fact I took Her Highness to her first Rotary meeting. This was in Hong Kong in some years ago, where we met Gloria Cheng who was District Governor. Gloria is here with us today, and together with her husband, PDG Andrew Cheng, they are the trainers in the Rotary China Team. [Applause]

Princess Alexandra is involved in many activities that we are familiar to Rotary, including polio and demining. She is also involved with UNICEF. [Applause]

Also a big hand to Rotarians from Taiwan and overseas Chinese Rotarians from other countries who support the ongoing Rotary activities in China. [Applause]

I know there are Rotarians, also among the leaders of RI who are a bit disappointed with the pace. Why not more clubs in China? Why not Chinese citizens as club members? Why not any grand charter celebrations in China?

Well, I understand.

But it is important to look at the situation in a wider perspective. China is opening up towards a number of international organisations and fora, of which Rotary is one. The NGO legislation is very close, but certain questions still remain to be solved with regard to the status and functioning of these

international groupings. With the upcoming Olympic Games in Beijing in July 2008, two years from now, I do believe that we will see things moving soon.

So, let's be patient, and take one step at a time. Yi Bu, Yi Bu, as the Chinese say.

During the RI Presidential visit to China in May, the RI delegation went to the Imperial Palace in Beijing, where we were presented with a large beautiful calligraphy with the Chinese four characters, Fu Lun Tian Di.

This means Rotary Global or Rotary Universal. Indeed an appropriate gift at a time when Rotary is reaching out to the world. To all countries in the world, on a global scale.

The global aspect is important when you want to bridge the world. But the Rotary projects are often of a much more local character. The two clubs in China are involved many projects. Small and big. I would like to mention just one, which we are preparing now.

Almost every child and grown-up in China knows Hans Christian Andersen and many of his stories. The most well-known story is the Little Girl with the Match-sticks. Most of you saw this sad story depicted at the opening ceremony of this Convention.

With literacy as one of the major key areas of Rotary this year, the two friendship clubs since 1998, the Rotary Club of Copenhagen and the Rotary Club of Beijing, now with matching grants from the Rotary Foundation, have started a new project, where children of poor migrant workers in a school outside Beijing, will learn to read and speak English. They will do this on the basis of Hans Christian Andersen textbooks in Chinese and English. With the aid of English speaking teachers living in China. We are also working with the Hans Christian Andersen ABC Foundation on this project, which we expect to become a success.

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I am proud to be part of this bridge building process between Rotary and China. The two clubs in China will act as important bridgeheads to show how Rotary clubs function. They will show what "Service above Self" means. And they will be there to "Lead the Way".

If you want to know more about Rotary in China, you can check our new website:
www.rotary.org.org

It was this year's RI Board of Directors who made the bold move of opening China for Rotary extension and establishing a new Rotary structure in China.

Stenhammar means "stone hammer". I think that you, President Stenhammar, will be remembered as the viking who took his stone hammer and with a global far-sight and true conviction brought a new impetus to building extension bridges for Rotary to those areas in the world where Rotary clubs do not yet exist.

Let's give President Carl-Wilhelm and his team of extension bridge builders a big round of applause.

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To sum up, dear fellow Rotarians.

Rotary is about people. People who get to know each another and communicate with each other. Who build bridges between cultures, who help those in need, and who show compassion and love. Who work for peace and prosperity through dialogue, education and humanitarian actions.

Paul Harris had a vision about a world wide movement that would work for the welfare of all mankind. This is what Rotary is all about. And I actually believe that Rotary and Rotarians all over the world are doing a great job to fulfil these goals.

I began my speech by quoting Rudyard Kipling, and I will finish by using the same quote, but this time allow me to give it a more optimistic twist. I think time will show that this is where we are heading, if we all – on a global basis – continue to bridge the world and in our work for peace and understanding:

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
but surely the twain shall meet.

I understand that today's farewell theme will be about vikings. So let me finish by telling you a short story that we enjoy here in Denmark and Sweden, and Norway and Iceland too:

When Columbus came to the new world he met some local indians on the beach. When he gave them each a glass of redwine and said "Salud" they all looked a bit puzzled. Until one of them got the picture. He raised his glass and said:

SKÅL!

Thank you.