

By Elaina Loveland

East Meets West

**An interview with Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch,
president of the U.S.-China Education Trust**

JULIA CHANG BLOCH is president of the U.S.-China Education Trust (USCET), a non-profit organization working in China to promote U.S.-China relations through education and exchange. USCET works with a network of 32 Chinese institutions, and Ambassador Bloch serves as distinguished adviser or visiting professor at several top Beijing and Shanghai universities.

Ambassador Bloch, the first Asian American to hold such rank in U.S. history, has had an extensive career in international affairs and government service, beginning as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Sabah, Malaysia, in 1964, and culminating as U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Nepal in 1989. From 1981 to 1988, Ambassador Bloch served at the U.S. Agency for International Development as assistant administrator for food for peace and voluntary assistance and as assistant administrator for Asia and the Near East, positions appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. She also was the chief minority counsel to a Senate Select Committee; a Senate professional staff member; the deputy director of the Office of African Affairs at the U.S. Information Agency; a fellow of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and an associate of the U.S.-Japan Relations Program of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard.

After 25 years in government service, Ambassador Bloch moved to the corporate sector in 1993, becoming group executive vice president at the Bank of America. From 1996 to 1998, Ambassador Bloch moved into philanthropy, serving as President and CEO of the United States-Japan Foundation. Beginning in 1998, Ambassador Bloch shifted her focus to China, first becoming visiting professor at the Institute for International Relations and Executive Vice Chairman of the American Studies Center at Peking University, and subsequently affiliating with Fudan

University in Shanghai, as well as the University of Maryland as ambassador-in-residence at the Institute for Global Chinese Affairs.

A native of China who came to the U.S. at age nine, Ambassador Bloch grew up in San Francisco and earned a bachelor's degree in communications and public policy from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964, and a master's degree in government and East Asia regional studies from Harvard University in 1967. She was awarded an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Northeastern University in 1986.

IE: You hold the distinction of being the first Asian American ambassador in the history of the United States. What led you on your journey to becoming an ambassador?

BLOCH: From the time I was a child, I was focused on the importance of bridging cultural barriers. My first lessons came from my father. He was the first Chinese to graduate from Harvard Law School in 1917, and when he returned to China, he held a number of key diplomatic positions. He participated in negotiations that led to the founding of the United Nations and was present at the post-World War II Yalta Conference. Diplomacy was always part of his life.

My father immigrated to the United States in 1949, and my family followed two years later. At the age of nine, I arrived in the United States as a refugee, knowing no English and next to nothing about America.



CHRISTOPHER MURPHY

Julia Chang Bloch

The only thing I did have was my father's unshakable belief that, in America, if you worked hard enough, anything was possible.

In my lifetime, I have gone from being a young émigré, to an exchange student in the former Soviet Union, to a Peace Corps volunteer in Borneo, to an official in the United States Agency for International Development and the United States Information Agency, to United States Ambassador to Nepal. I became a true hyphenated American—Chinese by birth, American by choice, Asian by legal classification, and later, Jewish by marriage.

Becoming an ambassador was a natural extension of what I learned from my father. For the first time, I was not only bridging cultural barriers, but I was also breaking them. I am proud to have followed in his footsteps in this important calling.

IE: During your career, what did you observe about the role of education around the world and were there any particular challenges in educating young people that you found to be the most critical and in need of reform?

BLOCH: Sadly, many people still view study abroad and international education as a frill, rather than an essential part of becoming a global citizen. Universities and students are sometimes complicit in approaching study abroad as a college ritual that is long on recreation and short on substance.

This attitude and practice need to be changed. For the United States to remain competitive in this globalized world, students,

parents, universities, and the government need to understand that international education is serious, not frivolous.

After the end of the Cold War, funding for exchange programs plummeted, participation in study abroad programs plunged, and geography and foreign language skills lagged behind other nations. We are starting to see some improvements. More Americans are studying abroad, including in China. But we have a long way to go before we fully understand that international education and exchange are key to producing the workers needed by the global economy, as well as to spreading American values and creating goodwill for our nation.

The future demands that we take much bolder steps. As Senator J. William Fulbright said in 1946, "We must try to expand the boundaries of human wisdom, empathy, and perception, and there is no way of doing that except through education."

IE: What inspired you to start the U.S.-China Education Trust?

BLOCH: The U.S.-China Education Trust (USCET) is a direct outgrowth of my firm and unshakable belief in international education and exchange. I decided that I had an obligation to apply what I had learned to the U.S.-China relationship. This is unquestionably the most important bilateral relationship in the world, and it is absolutely central to future peace and prosperity.

I also knew that in today's global economy, the practice of diplomacy is no longer confined to governments, but is actively pursued by individuals and institutions in both the public and private sectors. When I was invited by Peking University to help revive their American Studies Center in 1998, I plunged right in. I felt I could offer a unique and bicultural perspective to make a difference in this all-important relationship. I decided to turn myself into a vehicle of international education for China's best and brightest—the students of their premier universities.

Out of this grew the U.S.-China Education Trust, an organization devoted to improving U.S.-China relations through education and exchange. From the beginning, we listened to the Chinese and developed programs that address mutual concerns and mutual misunderstandings. So despite our small size, we rapidly expanded our impact and influence, and we are now celebrating our tenth anniversary. But more importantly, based in the United States but grounded in China, we are making a real contribution to improved understanding between the U.S. and China. And together with our partners, we are poised to make even more progress in the next 10 years.

IE: The U.S.-China Education Trust promotes American studies in China. Why is it important for Chinese students to learn about the United States?

BLOCH: Education is central to the future of the U.S.-China relationship. We must take every opportunity we have to learn about each other, as this will lead to better understanding. Who can doubt that, at a time of crisis, we will be better off relying on leaders who



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understand each other, who have been extensively educated about our common ground and our differences? It is absolutely essential that Chinese students learn about the United States, particularly those who are destined to become China's next generation of leaders in government, economics, and society.

USCET succeeds in part because it is truly filling a gap in U.S.-China relations. It is the only China-related organization that works primarily in China with key Chinese partners. It does so by promoting knowledge, understanding, and cooperation among China's next generation of leaders. Its programs have reached thousands of students and educators throughout China, educating them about all aspects of American life, including the American political system, elections, and the free press.

I have utmost confidence that every time an outstanding Chinese student or scholar gains more understanding of America, we move one step closer to building long-term trust and cooperation between the United States and China. And we move one step closer to a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous world.

IE: What other programs does the U.S.-China Education Trust offer to build intercultural understanding between China and the United States?

BLOCH: As USCET has grown in size and influence, the scope of our programs has grown as well. In addition to American studies, our two other flagship programs focus on American governance and media education. We send prominent U.S. political figures and journalists to Chinese campuses, and we partner with American universities to provide video-conferencing and other interactive means of learning about the American legislative and executive branches, and the role of a free press and free speech in a free society.

USCET also sponsors programs to bring about cultural and economic exchange. We bring outstanding Chinese students to live and study in Washington, D.C., and invite Chinese journalism professors to study in the United

States. Our Economic Dialogue Program brings together Asian and American scholars to discuss the economic relationship between the United States and China, including issues like China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the shared economic history across both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Finally, our scholarship and fellowship programs have succeeded in helping more than 50 Chinese study at Harvard Law School, and they give exceptional students from China's poorest families an opportunity to attend Yunnan University.

IE: Why is international education and intercultural exchanges like those available through your organization and others so important in today's world?

BLOCH: I have always been struck by the volatility in U.S.-China relations. Since the nineteenth century, U.S.-China relations have moved from crisis to crisis in perpetual uncertainty. The United States and China went to war once in my lifetime and were on the verge of going to war at least four times since Korea. Those are very dangerous odds, and while the two countries have shifted closer together in recent years, the fundamentals have not changed—there is still no foundation of trust. Time and time again, we see this relationship characterized by unrealistic expectations, misperceptions, and miscalculation.

There is only one way out of this cycle. We must build mutual understanding and trust, which in turn requires a long-term investment in international education and exchange between the two countries. We are now beginning to make some inroads in these areas, and I am proud that USCET is able to contribute to improved understanding between the two nations. But we also need a firm commitment by the two governments to these goals, backed up with real funding.

This is not just a lesson for the U.S. and China, but for all nations of the world. If we hope to transcend endless conflict, war, and misunderstanding, we must embrace education and exchange with open hearts and a combined sense of purpose.

IE: What is your proudest accomplishment as both a former ambassador and as the founder of the U.S.-China Education Trust?

BLOCH: My proudest accomplishment as the first Asian American ambassador is that I opened the door for other Asian Americans to attain diplomacy's highest calling and that there will now be many more Asian American ambassadors to follow.

Founding the U.S.-China Education Trust is the embrace of my father's legacy. It is tragic that the Chinese of my father's generation worked and sacrificed to bring China into the modern era and into the community of nations without living to see the fruits of their efforts. I am proud to contribute in a meaningful way, through USCET, to the work they started.

My father would also be pleased and excited that I was able to recapture my Chinese heritage—its history, politics, and civilization—by taking advantage of this type of international education myself. At Harvard graduate school, my degree in East Asian regional studies gave me back the values of my ethnic heritage. And USCET compelled me to relearn the Chinese language and return to China as part of my quest to overcome boundaries and build bridges between my native and adopted countries.

Perhaps that is what it means to be a modern citizen of the world—we must strive constantly to transcend national boundaries and build understanding among peoples, while maintaining pride in and upholding the dignity of our own national and ethnic origins. The greatest accomplishment for all of us is to give to others, while standing up for ourselves. **IE**

ELAINA LOVELAND is managing editor of *IE*.