

Hispanics Build International Ties by Organizing Excursions to China

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AUSTIN, Texas -- Last spring, consultant and entrepreneur J.R. Gonzales traveled to China to experience the country's rich history and culture. To his surprise, he also discovered a world of possibility.

While visiting Hangzhou, Gonzales, owner of Austin-based JRG Communications, encountered a Chinese girl named Alice working in her parents' tea shop. She inquired about his ethnicity, and when Gonzales answered, Alice's blank stare told him that she didn't know what Mexican-American meant. As Gonzales began to explain where Mexico was located on a map, the girl's face lit up and she said, "Oh, the KFC taco wrap" -- the taco representing her only connection to "Mexican." At the notion of his culture being diminished to a fast-food value-menu item, Gonzales quickly recognized an opportunity.

"The experience gave me a better understanding of how small the world really is," explains Gonzales, who is also president of the National Hispanic Professional Organization (NHPO). "The Chinese and Latino cultures are actually very similar -- strong sense of family, work ethic, respect for elders -- but we know very little of each other."

Ironically, now that China's economy is opening more and as U.S. Latinos gain ground as an economic powerhouse, they each represent a community poised for growth, vanguards of prominence. It's the ideal time, Gonzales stresses, for Latinos to build early ties in China. However, the way he figures it, only a minute portion of total U.S. tourists to China -- which comprise about 10 percent of China's total tourists annually -- are probably Latino. To provide momentum, he and the NHPO partnered with the Chinese organizers of the tour he took to arrange two more trips to China, one in October 2007 and the next in March 2008.

"I've dreamed of going to China," he says. "I've always wanted to see the Great Wall, but I never thought I'd have the opportunity. Once I got there, I was amazed." First, there were the business opportunities waiting for American and international entrepreneurs to tap. Then, there were the silk factories, the jade stores, the ancient landmarks, and the welcoming people. "It was a completely new world. I was totally fascinated, so much so that I wanted to go back -- and go back often -- and take people I knew to experience the same thing," Gonzales says.

The nine-day, all-inclusive excursions priced at a mere \$1,399 (see itinerary <http://www.Mission2China.com>) are designed as introductory trips. Travelers can go as tourists to explore the other side of the world. Or, they can go in search of opportunity on a burgeoning frontier, because the tour includes an optional networking mixer for those interested in the many business opportunities that exist.

"China is a great market for opportunity that is open to anyone," says Ben Mendez, NHPO chair and president of Houston-based PMG Project Management Group. "We see possibilities for small businesses and large corporations to be part of it. It's an untapped market that needs to be explored."

Arcilia Acosta, Texas Association of Mexican-American Chambers of Commerce (TAMACC) chair of the board, says seeking partnerships in China only makes sense. Latinos comprise one of the fastest growing segments of entrepreneurs in the United States -- it's a natural fit. She adds, "One of the things we need to do is be more global as a country. We need to get out of our comfort zone to expand."

The trip allows participants to act as ambassadors of both American and Latino culture. It is undeniable that China and the United States will continue to develop relations over the years and developing an early familiarity will ease the transitions to come. In fact, in a speech to the National Committee on U.S.-China relations, former U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, discussed experiencing cultures and acting as ambassadors as the best "avenue for mutual understanding and cooperation."

He also encouraged international exchanges, saying that they provide "a bridge between our worlds. As we learn more about each other, and share our future together, we will build a solid bond of friendship in our search for peace, security and prosperity." In closing, he said, "We must encourage East to meet West and West to meet East." And that is what Gonzales' mission to China is all about.

So far, members of the NHPO, TAMACC, Texas State University Alumni Association and other organizations as well as individuals have signed on for the initial expedition this fall. Gonzales, Mendez and Acosta encourage others to come along, explore and experience. "It goes back to establishing relationships with our counterparts in China and seeing what will arise," Mendez says.

For more information on joining the tour, visit <http://www.mission2china.com> or telephone 512-289-3758.