Ex-WTO official heartened by China's economic aspirations

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To most Chinese, Barshefsky is not a name easy to remember or pronounce. But a woman by that name and her flowing silk scarves are as well known in China as popular US brands.  
I met Charlene Barshefsky, the former US chief trade negotiator, several times in Washington. Each time I saw her wearing one of her trademark scarves, which earlier reports said often "brightened up" the sometimes dull conference rooms in talks leading up to China's final accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001.  
To a person who has so impressed the Chinese, I have always wondered what about China impressed her most.  
I got the answer the other day at a forum in downtown Washington, where she shared a story that she said exemplified the aspirations of the Chinese people.  
The friendliness of the Chinese people is a soothing reward each time she finishes a "painfully long flight" to China, Barshefsky said.  
"For many years I'm recognized, and even today, people ask me for my autograph, and women will see me on the street and point to my scarf."  
One day she was walking down the street, and a couple with their small son were walking toward her. As they passed, she heard a man ask "Barshefsky" in the way Chinese say it. After Barshefsky said yes, the father asked to take a picture.  
"Then he took my arm and he waited till someone passed who spoke English, and as said to me by this lovely fellow who stopped, he said, 'I wanted to thank you. My son will have a better life,'" Barshefsky said, appreciating his politeness and how an average Chinese would anticipate the opportunities arising from the country's entry to the WTO.  
"I'll never forget this, and the lesson there," Barshefsky said. It was the moment she realized the Chinese have common aspirations, including a better life for their children.  
"He knew what WTO meant. Who else in the US knows? she joked. "This was completely astonishing to me — he equated economic improvements with personal improvements," Barshefsky said.  
That equation is now what's missing in the United States, where economic improvement in the aggregate for the country is no longer viewed as personal improvement, she said.  
In the US' case, it is partly because of the absence of domestic policy measures that take that wealth and distribute it in a more equitable way, whether through better education, re-skilling and so on, which would bring the rest of the country along with that growth, she said.  
"But this gentleman simply equated economic improvement with personal improvement, assuming that this is what would happen," she said. "But in China, this is the case — there's been extraordinary degrees of improvement in the lives of people."  
Since China joined the WTO, its economy has steadily expanded. Vice-Premier Liu He, who is in Washington this week for trade talks, announced at the 2018 World Economic Forum that the number of China's middle-incomers had reached 400 million and is still growing.  
Barshefsky said that the encounter many years ago, with its touching nature, "sticks with me" more than anything else on the WTO side or the negotiations she participated in between 1997 and 2001 as chief trade negotiator.  
"Because it's always important to be reminded that the ultimate aspirations most people in the world have are pretty much the same," she said.  
As pointed out by President Xi Jinping in his address to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October, "Not only have their material and cultural needs grown, their demands for democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, security and a better environment are increasing."  
Barshefsky also said she understood the aspirations of China, which many interpret as realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.  
"I think China has extraordinary aspirations, it should. It's a great nation. It was the center of the world for several thousand years.  
"It should have those aspirations," she said, adding that the question is how those aspirations are manifested, including with respect to the interests of the nation’s strategic and trading partners.  
Perhaps it will take several additional trips to China for Barshefsky to get the answers about how those yearnings are being fulfilled – right from the people who are so familiar with her.  
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