

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

And I'm Steve Inskeep in Beijing. Let's hear a comparison between the United States and China from a person who knows both. He is a sea turtle. That's China's nickname for young people who go abroad and return. In recent years, China has sent 300,000 students per year across the Pacific to the U.S. They emerge from that experience with distinctive views, sometimes dangerous views.

In May, a sea turtle gave the commencement address at the University of Maryland. She praised American free speech, which caused her to be attacked on Chinese social media as a traitor or a tool of the U.S. So when we met another sea turtle here in Beijing, he was a little reluctant to speak out. And he asked that we not use his full name so that he could speak freely. Call him Jonathan. He works in Beijing for a Western financial research firm.

Where are you from?

JONATHAN: I'm from a small city of 8 million people in southern China called Hangzhou.

INSKEEP: And you grew up and thought you'd go out and see a little bit of the world, I guess?

JONATHAN: I think so. I think so - because it is commonly expected for sons to actually travel far, to actually see what's going on outside of the family and to learn and know more.

INSKEEP: Where did you get the idea to go to the United States?

JONATHAN: Funny enough, it started from my parents. They were the one who brought this idea to me, given that I studied English language and literature in my undergraduate degree. So this is an investment that parents put into me. And probably, this means they will not give me money for my wedding, which I hope will be fine.

(LAUGHTER)

JONATHAN: So I went abroad to the United States to Washington, D.C., where I spent three years.

INSKEEP: Do you remember your first impressions?

JONATHAN: So I flew into JFK. And I was just looking at the sky and thinking - wow, the sky is blue. Wow, the clouds are white.

INSKEEP: Because it's not always that way.

JONATHAN: Because it's almost never like that in China because the pollution.

INSKEEP: How were you received by other students at George Washington?

JONATHAN: So one funny relationship that I've created - one of my best friends till today, we started having coffee to talk about the things that she's read on The Economist about China and whether those things are true.

INSKEEP: And?

JONATHAN: And some of them need a little bit of explanation. Some of them need a little bit of context.

INSKEEP: What is one misconception about China that your American friend had?

JONATHAN: The biggest misconception, I think, is China is this one big blob that does everything together, which is absolutely not true.

INSKEEP: You can see why Americans would see China as one giant blob, though, because it is a one-party state, and there's a lot of central planning and everything else. But you're saying it's not going as deep as it might seem in society.

JONATHAN: I just think there's a lot more flavor, a lot more layers when you look deeper into China. China is not all very poor, but China is not very rich either. In this city of Beijing, I would see people line up in big bus stations trying to get on a bus that will take them about two hours to get to their homes alongside Lamborghinis and Ferraris and Bentleys. So at least to start with, the wealth gap is huge. And you see that all in this one megacity.

INSKEEP: Here in Beijing.

JONATHAN: Here in Beijing.

INSKEEP: Americans would like to think they have a freer society. Did you think so?

JONATHAN: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that you might not be able to speak out of your own heart a lot of times. You have to worry about if people are looking at what you post online, people are listening into what you're talking about. But I think, in many ways, Chinese people are still free to pursue what kind of lives that they want to live. And that is an understatement because my parents' generation, they can't buy whatever they want to buy. They can't send their kids to where they want to go. So freedom and the ability to be free has changed a lot just in my lifetime.

INSKEEP: So Americans look at China and see a lack of political freedom. But what you see is a lot more economic freedom than there used to be.

JONATHAN: Exactly, exactly. And I think, in many ways, political freedom doesn't really bother people because they don't have to use a VPN to see whatever the government is blocking them from seeing. They don't necessarily understand what's missing. They don't necessarily know what is freedom and what is not.

INSKEEP: You're telling me that the Internet is censored. Some people use virtual private networks to get around it. But the many people who don't just don't know what they're missing.

JONATHAN: Most of the people don't.

INSKEEP: Don't have any idea even that their information is being edited for them.

JONATHAN: Yes.

INSKEEP: What did you think about that after spending a few years in a different system, in a different society?

JONATHAN: That being in the States?

INSKEEP: Yeah.

JONATHAN: This is something that I've constantly debated, whether this is right or wrong. But at the end of the day, there's no right or wrong answer to it. My friend in the States would say the American political system is chaotic, but at least it's out there. Chinese political system might be chaotic. It's hidden.

An open chaotic system might result in someone like Donald Trump. A closed chaotic political system resulted in someone who people trust and believe that his strong hands can lead China to a better place in the world.

INSKEEP: Xi Jinping.

JONATHAN: Yes.

INSKEEP: So you made the case for China's political system to your friend in the United States.

JONATHAN: Again, it's still a constant debate. I think there's no right or wrong.

INSKEEP: So you spent three years studying. In which country is there more opportunity for a young person right now?

JONATHAN: That's an interesting question because - I think in the past couple years at least, I've seen tremendous growth in the private sector in China. New companies came up to be the fastest-growing companies around the world, and they're expanding outside of China. So with that, I don't actually know. I think China might have more opportunities.

INSKEEP: Thank you very much.

JONATHAN: You're welcome.

INSKEEP: Enjoyed talking with you, Jonathan.

JONATHAN: No problem.

INSKEEP: He's a former student in the U.S. now returned to China.

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