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From the issue dated August 15, 2008

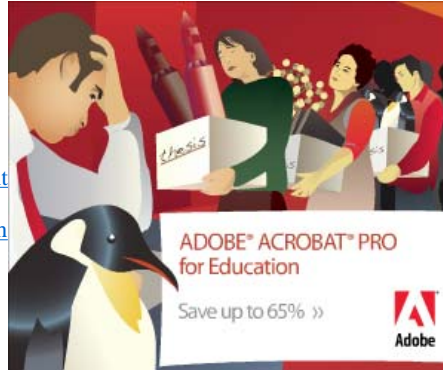
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An Olympic Task



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When Beijing won its bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics back in 2001, millions of Chinese hailed the opportunity to welcome the world. One problem: The country did not have a good track record with welcomes.

China's hospitality industry had retained some uniquely socialist characteristics. Tour offerings tended toward the dull. Restaurants were overstaffed, but waiters inattentive. Housekeepers sometimes woke guests up to clean.

"China was just emerging into capitalism," explains Joseph J. West, dean of Florida International University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management. "But it was about to become the largest tourism country in the world."


Mr. West should know: He was enlisted to help with an overhaul.

His involvement came when an oceanography professor from Florida International schmoozed with Chinese education officials on the heels of the Olympic selection. The vice mayor of Tianjin, 70 miles southeast of Beijing, mentioned he wanted to revamp his city's service sector, and fast.

Mr. West already oversaw an international program — in Jamaica. But then officials in Tianjin described their plans. "They said, 'We'll build you a campus that has everything yours does, except it will be newer and better,'" he recalls. "I said, 'That's OK by me.'"

The Tianjin government spent 220 million yuan (\$32-million) to transform a fish farm into a 13-acre campus with capacity for 2,000 students. With a bilingual, four-year program in

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place by 2004, Florida International's Marriott Tianjin Program turned out its first class just in time for the Olympics.

Six hundred students are now working in Beijing as translators, servers, and cashiers. China's investment seems to have paid off. "Our boss is very happy with us," says Wu Zhimin, a rising senior. "We get jobs that should take two hours. And we finish them in one."

Send ideas to short.subjects@chronicle.com

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