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Growth, development and education

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In a recent *Financial Times* [article](#) (registration required) the founder of Foxconn, the firm that manufactures iPhones and iPads, lamented the changing work preferences of Chinese young people. At an Asian business meeting he said, “The young generation don’t want to work in factories, they want to work in services or the internet or another more easy and relaxed job. Many workers are moving to the services sector and, in the manufacturing sector, total demand [for workers] is now more than supply.”

It is easy to understand Terry Gou’s frustration, as the founder of a company whose success is a function of low labor costs, but I’d make two observations about this development.

First, this is exactly what economic development is supposed to look like. One generation moves from agricultural labor into manufacturing jobs in what some would call sweatshop conditions, but from the perspective the workers, the manufacturing jobs are a step up in terms of both working conditions and pay. With economic growth, the next generation’s expectations and aspirations rise and manufacturing jobs are no longer as attractive. This is the story of successful economic development everywhere. Consider how many generations back the typical middle class American goes to find a relative who worked in manufacturing and prior to that in agriculture. Two generations brings me back to the farm. So this story about China is truly good news for millions of Chinese (though it may well raise costs for Chinese made goods that are purchased in the west).

Second, from a the perspective of a small liberal arts school in the Midwest, this change in Chinese tastes represents an opportunity. The jobs Chinese young people are seeking will require more education. Certainly Chinese authorities are aware of this and are working to increase educational opportunities, but there are a number of Chinese students who have been, and will be, seeking the opportunity to study abroad. Our specific challenge is to find these students, secure the necessary resources to help them come here (ideally with some tuition money coming from international students themselves, as well as some assistance from scholarships and aid) and to ensure that a residential, liberal arts, Catholic and Benedictine experience is as meaningful and transformative for a foreign student at Saint John’s and Saint Benedict’s as it is for our domestic students.

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