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**The Broken Promises of China's WTO Accession:  
Reprioritizing Human Rights**

**Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC)**

*Representative Christopher H. Smith*  
*March 1, 2017*

Over the years, I have chaired 62 congressional hearings on human rights abuses in China.

In 1994, the Clinton Administration de-linked Most Favored Nation status from human rights. Mrs. Pelosi, Mr. Wolf, and I were critical. By 1996, the State Department said, "All public dissent against the party in government was effectively silenced by intimidation, exile, the imposition of prison terms, administrative detention or house arrest. "No dissidents," the report goes on to say, "were known to be active at year's end."

On December 8, 1999, I chaired a hearing entitled *China, the WTO, and Human Rights* and in my opening statement I asked the threshold question whether at that moment in history, "bringing the PRC into a permanent and more privileged trading relationship with the United States and other WTO members will make it act more humanely toward its own people."

Tragically—and predictably—the answer was then—and now—an emphatic "no".

At the same hearing, Charlie Wowkanech, the president of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO testified and said, "Chinese economic policy depends on maintenance of a strategy of

aggressive exports and carefully restricted foreign access to its home market. The systematic violation of internationally recognized workers' rights is a strategically necessary component of that policy. Chinese labor activists are regularly jailed," he testified, "or imprisoned in reeducation camps for advocating free and independent trade unions, for protesting corruption and embezzlement, for insisting that they be paid the wages that they are owed, and for talking to journalists about working conditions in China. In January 1999, police attacked a group of retired factory workers in Wuhan, who were protesting unpaid wages and pensions. Many of the retirees were beaten."

A decade later, I chaired another hearing *Ten Years in the WTO: Has China Kept Its Promises?* Again, the record showed a complete failure—promises made were not kept, and human rights violations had gotten worse.

In 1991, Frank Wolf and I visited Beijing prison #1. It was just two years after the Tiananmen massacre and many of the protesting students had disappeared, were killed, or been arrested.

I am still haunted by what we saw that day—the shaved heads and gaunt, hollow faces of prisoners--who gave us looks of fear and despair. I will never forget their emaciated bodies, dressed in rags, making forced labor goods for the US and other foreign markets. They looked more like Jewish victims of the holocaust than the other Chinese people we met on that trip.

The passion to oppose unfettered trade with Communist China came from looking at these faces of persecution.

My passion for human rights in China has remained strong after meeting women whose babies were forcibly aborted in service of the evil "One-Child Policy"; assisting blind rights advocate Chen Guancheng escape from China; and by working with the champions of democracy, human rights and religious freedom--Wei Jingsheng, Harry Wu, Bob Fu, Chai Ling, Bishop Su Zhimin, Rebiya Kadeer, Yang Jianli, the Dalai Lama, and so many others over the years.

During the 1990s, many Members of Congress sought to link increased China trade with human rights improvements. We could not comprehend how US trade policy could put profits before the poor and the persecuted.

We could not comprehend how the so-called "realists," who still drive much of US foreign policy toward China, could argue that increased trade and investment would lead to political reform and human rights improvements.

We know now that this was a "fantasy" as Mr. Mann book "The China Fantasy" described so well.

It was a bipartisan fantasy.

Bill Clinton predicted that trade would open China's political system. Chinese democracy, he said, was "inevitable, just like when the Berlin Wall fell." George W. Bush also focused on the inevitability of history saying "trade freely with China and time is on our side."

The arc of Chinese history has not bent toward justice. Just the opposite in fact has happened. Chinese authoritarianism proved remarkably resistant to reform or change.

President Xi has presided over an extraordinary assault on the rule of law and civil society using repressive policies and new laws that threaten freedom advocates in China and challenge both U.S. interests and U.S.-China cooperation and goodwill. The CECC has a list of over 1,400 known political prisoners.

China is in a race to the bottom with North Korea for the title of world's worst violators of human rights. The hope that an economically prosperous and "rising China" would embrace political reform and human rights has been completely destroyed. It is time for a new approach.

The U.S. cannot be morally neutral about human rights improvements in China. We cannot be silent in the face of the Chinese government's repression. We must show leadership and resolve because only the U.S. has the power and prestige to stand up to China's intransigence.

The new Administration should not shy away from "shining a light" on human rights problems in China--not just in private meetings but in public as well.

China's leaders need to know that the United States stands for the freedom of expression, the freedom of religion, the rule of law, transparency and an end to torture as critical interests, necessary for better bilateral relations, and linked to the expansion of mutual prosperity and integrated security.

The U.S. must not shy away from meeting with the Dalai Lama or other dissidents. We must use visa bans and financial sanctions on Chinese officials who perpetuate the worst types of human rights violations.

The U.S. must also connect Internet and press freedoms as economic and human rights priorities. And we must demand, repeatedly and clearly, that the unconditional release of political prisoners is in the interest of better U.S.-China relations.

It is tempting to be pessimistic about China's future and the future of U.S.-China relations. I am not pessimistic, but hopeful, because I know that constant repression has not dimmed the desires of the Chinese people for freedom and reform.

I believe that someday China will be free. Someday, the people of China will be able to enjoy all of their God-given rights. And a nation of free Chinese men and women will celebrate the prisoners from Beijing Prison #1. They will be honored as heroes, along with all others like them, who have sacrificed so much, and so long, for freedom.