

FOCUS: IN BUSINESS WITH CHINA by Elissa Alford

From Here to China

Two women in business make the connection

China was on view for just over two weeks last month, as the world tuned in for the spectacle of the summer Olympics. For many Americans, it was the first chance to take a sustained look at a country with 5,000 years of history — and the world's fastest growing economy. For some local business women, however, China is already a familiar—and sometimes a central—part of their working lives. Below, women at the head of two very different companies, one dedicated to publishing, the other to corporate promotions, offer a glimpse of their experience doing business with China.

Karen Christensen got a call recently from the U.S. Commercial Service in Boston, a government agency that helps companies expand their international sales. The caller was puzzled by a request: a woman visiting from the Beijing consulate wanted to meet with Christensen. Why would she want to meet someone in Western Massachusetts? Christensen told the caller, 'I guess you guys haven't heard that Great Barrington is now the China publishing capital of the world.'

Christensen was only partly joking. Her business, Berkshire Publishing, is responsible for both the Encyclopedia of China and the foremost newsletter for Americans doing business there. But having lived for many years in Europe, Christensen herself seems a bit surprised to find herself a China expert. "In 1998, I was sitting in a publisher's office in New York and it just came out of my mouth: 'Why don't we do an encyclopedia of Asia?' And I really knew nothing about Asia—though I'd been fascinated by it since I was a kid."

In another sense, the China connection expands on Christensen's core interests. An ardent environmentalist, she's including more infor-



Karen Christensen

mation on the subject in the next release of the encyclopedia. (A new edition of her book *The Armchair Environmentalist* is being released this year.) She says that reports by the U.S. press about China's environmental issues can be misleading. "There are plenty of challenges there, but in terms of renewable energy sources they have made considerable efforts and are doing important things. It's not a rosy picture, but it's far from the doom and gloom that one gets in the press here."

Christensen also has a strong interest in social networking and community, and personal connections are central to business in Asian cultures. The name of her newsletter, "Guanxi," means relationship; for the Chinese, she says, business partnerships tend to be much more durable than elsewhere. "There's a very clear, unspoken sense of reciprocity—it's much more than just exchanging business cards. From the Chinese people's perspective you build a relationship, and if you build a relationship then

you will do good business together."

In May 2007, in recognition of her business's unique focus, Christensen was nominated for membership on the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, a nonprofit that promotes a productive relationship between the two countries; she's now part of a select group that includes Madeleine K. Albright, David R. Gergen and Henry A. Kissinger. She continues to develop her own network of experts in order to learn more about doing business in China and to disseminate information through her publishing company and trainings. China is unquestionably a challenge, she says, in terms of the business culture, the management culture, and the language. But for a publisher it's also the perfect subject. China is a place, she says, "where a lot is happening and people are not doing things as well as they could if they had more information available. There's just an enormous need for information."