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Local woman building bridges to Northeast Asia



She looks friendly, right? Even so, Susan Shirk has a formidable reputation (Peggy Peattie)

How did a dozen North Koreans land in a local mushroom farm?

By PETER ROWE

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**Susan L. Shirk**

The San Diego Union-Tribune

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Born: San Antonio, Texas

Personal: Married to Samuel Popkin; two adult children, Lucy and David

Recent books: “Changing Media, Changing China,” editor, 2011; “China: Fragile Superpower,” 2008

Trivia: Shirk is a friend of Su-Mei Yu, the owner of Saffron. The Thai-born restaurateur says that Shirk makes a terrific Pavlova, a meringue dessert named for the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova.

North Korea may be the world’s most isolated country. Tourists rarely enter; residents hardly ever exit.

But one day in March, a dozen subjects of the hermit kingdom descended on Escondido’s Mountain Meadow Mushrooms.

“They were pretty excited about the farm, to see how things operated,” said Gary Crouch, Mountain Meadow’s owner. “They had no idea, no conception of what a farm even looked like.”

The 10 economists and two government figures were the first North Koreans to study the American economy on site. Over two weeks, they quizzed financiers in New York City; roamed a rice farm outside Sacramento; explored Universal Studios in Los Angeles; and spent six days in San Diego. Here, they toured Qualcomm and — of critical interest to citizens of a famine-wracked nation — Crouch’s farm and Catalina Offshore Products, a seafood wholesaler.

Their hostess, Susan Shirk, directs the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. Since 1993, she’s led a forum for foreign and defense ministry officials, military officers and academics from the U.S., China, Japan, Russia, South and North Korea. By holding unofficial, off-the-record talks, the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue helps inform official government-to-government parleys.

“The idea,” noted Shirk, “is to transform North Korea from the inside out.”

Based on March’s visit, how’s that going?

“The good news is the North Koreans were interested in coming. The bad news is I got no information, no impression that there is any movement under way domestically in reforming their economy.”

North Korea, a Stalinist dictatorship whose threadbare economy hasn’t kept it from pursuing nuclear arms, has humbled diplomats for decades. Judging by appearances, you wouldn’t bet on Shirk’s chances on reforming this regime — she has a slight build, a gentle voice, a friendly demeanor.

But her reputation is formidable.

“She’s expert, positive and doesn’t take no for an answer,” noted Peter Cowhey, dean of UCSD’s School of International Relations and Pacific Studies.

“It’s the combination that works. People respect her knowledge and capabilities; she exudes an attitudes that reminds people that you should look for a way forward; and at the same time, when you run into the inevitable tangles that come with North Korea, she doesn’t get discouraged.”

Oh, she’s been discouraged. But Shirk pushes on, tilting at the windmills of Pyongyang.

“Sometimes,” she admitted, “this seems rather quixotic.”

A household name — in China

Raised in Port Washington, N.Y., Shirk became fascinated by Asia as an exchange student in Japan. At Mount Holyoke, Berkeley and MIT, she focused on China. Interviewing refugees in Hong Kong for her doctoral research in 1971, Shirk learned of President Nixon’s planned visit to Beijing.

With the Bamboo Curtain pierced, Shirk slipped into the once-forbidden land.

She was one of the first Americans in Mao’s China, a fact that was invaluable to her research — and led to her becoming a household name, at least in Chinese households. With other American graduate students, she had a long interview with Premier Zhou Enlai. During the session, Zhou claimed that the Chinese and American peoples’ friendship explained why Beijing would welcome an old anti-communist like Nixon.

But, he joked, “I wish Susan Shirk was president.”

Years later, Shirk discovered that Zhou’s comments had been published and widely disseminated. Traveling in China, she became accustomed to this incredulous question: “You’re Susan Shirk?”

Back in the United States, Shirk earned a name among other Asia scholars. In 1975, the new Ph.D and her husband, political scientist Samuel Popkin, came to UCSD. They helped found the school’s political science department; later she helped found the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies; and then became the Institute of Global Conflict and Cooperation’s director.

In 1992, when Popkin was conducting polls for an Arkansas governor’s presidential run, she came to Bill Clinton’s attention.

Shirk would eventually join that administration, as deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 1997 through 2000. But even before Clinton took office, she pushed incoming policymakers to pay more attention to the Pacific Rim.

When she founded the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue in 1993, Clinton’s team pledged their support.

Plugging away

Every successive administration, regardless of party, has backed the Dialogue — although finances have been tight since this forum lost federal funds in 2006. North Korea’s nuclear arms program and its failing economy remain key

issues, but the Dialogue also wrestles with security issues and territorial disputes between other member states.

The goal is to build relationships, explore solutions to intractable problems, and forward ideas to each nation’s decision-makers.

Dialogues occur at least annually, in locations as diverse as Beijing and La Jolla. Last October, the 21st meeting was held in Seoul; the next meeting is set for October in Honolulu.

The North Korean delegation was a no-show in Seoul; Shirk has been assured it will come to Hawaii.

Talking to Kim Jong Il’s regime is always difficult. Official negotiations, known as the Six Party talks, have been in limbo since North Korea walked out in 2009, protesting U.N. sanctions imposed after Pyongyang conducted nuclear tests. On Sunday, China urged the resumption of talks, suggesting they could help resolve tensions.

But Shirk wants talks that lead to action.

“We don’t want to go down the road again of having to reward North Korea for just coming to a meeting,” she said, “and not having any progress on the goal of a denuclearized Korean peninsula.”

Those windmills? They’re still turning round and round.

“You keep plugging away,” Shirk said. “All you can hope for is at the margins you’re building lines of communication among players. Some day, it may help to prevent conflict and solve problems at the official level.”

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