The Subway to China

David Alan Grier, George Washington University

You can’t argue with a five-year plan.

Every few weeks, I take the subway to China. More accurately, I board a metro train in downtown Washington and travel 40 minutes to a Virginia suburb that’s mostly populated by people of Chinese heritage. The area is as much a center for Chinese visitors as it is a home to immigrants. The local restaurant serves Hong Shao Rou, a dish rarely served in more Americanized Chinese restaurants. A local office building houses not one but two branches of the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs. I travel to this neighborhood to address one of the great challenges of the past 30 years: integrating China into the industrial economy. I get to learn how China makes decisions about technology and try to help visiting officials understand how we make ours.

I need to confess that I’ve been leading a double life. In addition to this column for Computer, I write a monthly essay (published in Mandarin) for the Communications of the Chinese Computing Federation (CCCF) under the name “CS David.” It was an assignment I accepted when the Computer Society was starting to build its presence in China. Judging from the email I receive, the column is read by engineers who are a little mystified about US technical decisions and equally mystified that we don’t understand their decisions.

On my Virginia trips, I meet with small groups of Chinese officials who have come to the US to get a better understanding of how the US government and American companies develop technology. In general, they know a great deal about American organizations, but they tend to cast their knowledge in molds that are shaped by their lives in China.

During my most recent visits, I’ve been asked to talk about a series of reports that were written by the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST). Over the eight years of the Obama administration, PCAST published 36 of these reports on subjects ranging from vaccinations and STEM education to advanced manufacturing and big data. At this point, they’re historical documents. During the Obama years, they were tools to help political leaders achieve their goals. My Chinese audience almost always views these reports as the American version of five-year plans.

China is in the middle of its 13th five-year economic plan, which has two large sections that deal with computers, software, and information technology. These sections point to a more detailed document called “Internet Plus,” which is intended to “promote deeper and more extensive applications of the Internet.” With this plan, Chinese leaders are attempting to “transform modes of production and methods of organization.” They’re hoping to create “a new pattern of industrial development that is Internet-based, intelligent, service-oriented, and coordinated.”

I’ve sat in enough Chinese meetings to know that a five-year plan will regularly be quoted in moments of debate. At one such meeting, a speaker ended a contentious argument by reciting a line from one of them. I looked to my translator to explain what had happened, but she just shrugged. “You can’t argue with the five-year plan,” she said.

Of course, the US does engage in industrial planning. However, that planning tends to be done by industry rather than PCAST or any other government office. Time and again, I’ve had to explain that the International Technology Roadmap for Semiconductors (ITRS), perhaps one of the most successful industrial plans of recent years, was created by private organizations and not the government.

Rarely do I end my visits to Virginia feeling that I’ve completely explained how American businesses make plans for technology, create technical standards, or educate technical personnel. Chinese visitors and residents see this suburb as an American town that feels like China; I see a Chinese community that stands apart from other Washington suburbs. Sooner rather than later, the two points of view will need to understand each other more clearly.

David Alan Grier is an associate professor of international science and technology policy at George Washington University. Contact him at grier@gwu.edu.