CityDance双城记

Editor's note: *Amity between the people holds the key to sound state-to-state relations. China Daily will come out with a series of stories highlighting Chinese cities' special connections with sister cities, mutual understanding, trust and friendship between peoples of different countries and cultural backgrounds, and shining light on "city diplomacy".*

JOINING HANDS ACROSS THE WATER

Two cities, one in China and one in the US, celebrate a friendship that knows no bounds



By **YANG RAN** and **HU MEIDONG** in Fuzhou and **LINDA DENG** in Tacoma, Washington

It's a relationship forged by history, geography and trade — among other things — and symbolized by a certain fragrance and the way it is produced.

That fragrance emanates from the process of scenting jasmine tea, an intangible cultural heritage of China and a specialty of the city of Fuzhou, Fujian province.

Fuzhou's jasmine tea is a delicate blend of green tea leaves and jasmine blossoms, and scenting the tea involves mixing jasmine buds with tea leaves overnight. In the morning the flowers are removed and the leaves dried. This process is repeated up to nine times to achieve a rich, fragrant jasmine tea.

When Victoria Woodards, mayor of the city of Tacoma in the US state of Washington, visited Fuzhou in June, she was invited to witness for herself part of this exquisite process.

"If you think about it, the scenting process symbolizes building a friendship again and again because you can't just do it once, as it doesn't last," Woodards said. "If you continue to do it over and over again, then the bond is stronger, just like the fragrance gets stronger."

This marriage of taste and fragrance in tea is as serendipitous as the Pacific Ocean currents that play a role in bringing Fuzhou and Tacoma together despite the 10,000 or so kilometers that separate them. In fact, so kindred are the two cities' spirits that 30 years ago the two decided to formalize their relationship by becoming sister cities.

One of those who contributed to establishing that relationship was Connie Bacon, a former commissioner for the Port of Tacoma and a former executive director of the World Trade Center Tacoma. And it was she who in October 1993 welcomed to the city a visiting delegation from Fuzhou.

One member of that delegation was then Fuzhou's Party Secretary Xi Jinping. Bacon invited him to her home for dinner.

That visit, including the close personal relationships it cultivated, bore fruit a year later when Bacon signed the sister-city agreement with Fuzhou on behalf of Tacoma. In the years since then the two cities have engaged closely with each other, with about 100 delegations sent to each other between the two sides. Their collaboration covers many areas, including culture, education, sports and trade.

It is the last of these that has been a cornerstone of the relationship, with both cities being important ports for their countries.

Trading partners

"For Tacoma, a leading US seaport for international trade, China is a very important trading partner and has been our No 1 trading partner by volume and value for many years," said Tong Zhu, chief commercial and strategy officer for the Port of Tacoma and Northwest Seaport Alliance.

Zhu had worked with Gary Locke, a former governor of Washington state, and US ambassador to China from 2011 to 2014, to develop trade with China. Locke himself embodies the close relationship between the state and China, having ancestral roots in Guangdong province, neighboring Fujian, and whose grandfather was among the early Chinese migrants to Washington in the late 1800s.

Trade ties between the two cities became stronger in 2008 with the establishment of a trade project aimed at helping Tacoma businesses attract Chinese investment and aiding Chinese companies in expanding to the US.

"Working in partnership with the city of Fuzhou and the city of Tacoma, we developed a program based on the sister-city relationship that ultimately led to an exchange of personnel to promote and drive tangible international trade transactions," Zhu said. "Activities later expanded into attracting inbound foreign direct investment from Fuzhou and China at large to the Tacoma area."

The Tacoma-Fuzhou Trade Office Exchange Program set up in 2008 lasted for 18 months, during which Fuzhou sent three representatives to Tacoma, each serving a six-month term. The project resulted in direct bilateral trade worth $450,000 and facilitated trade agreements totaling $1.57 million, Fuzhou Evening News reported.

Commercial deals signed as a result of the program included exports of wine to Fuzhou and of industrial bags to Tacoma, Zhu said.

During the pandemic, based on an earlier agreement between the two cities, the World Trade Center Tacoma and the Administrative Committee of Fuzhou Area of China (Fujian) Pilot Free Trade Zone held joint virtual trade conferences to match small and medium-sized companies together.

This year, the Asia Pacific Cultural Center in Tacoma signed an agreement with a tea company in Fuzhou to promote jasmine tea in the US, the type of collaboration that "offers an economic development opportunity for us", Tacoma Mayor Woodards said.


Teachers and students of the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education and students from Tacoma enjoy calligraphy on June 26. HU MEIDONG / CHINA DAILY


Teachers and students from the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education and visiting students from Tacoma learn paper-cutting on June 26. HU MEIDONG / CHINA DAILY


Students from the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education and Lincoln High School in Tacoma show their handmade paper-cutting artwork on June 26. WANG ZHENGXING / CHINA DAILY

"From an economic development standpoint, we are really focused on technological innovation and collaboration among cities to support more green jobs and low-carbon sustainable development in our communities."

In this respect, she said, "I think we have a lot to learn from Fuzhou and from China."

Flourishing exchanges

In addition to trade, educational exchanges have flourished between the sister cities, fostering long-lasting connections among young people in China and the US.

On Sept 23, 2015, during his first state visit to the US as China's president, Xi returned to Tacoma. Lincoln High School was selected as the venue, partly because of the sister-city ties and the sister-school relationship between the school and the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education.

At the school, Xi spoke to students, brought a ping-pong table and books on China, and later sent a personal invitation for 100 students to visit China the following year.

"I feel incredibly lucky and grateful for being selected for that trip," said Rigel Adams, now 23, who was a member of the Lincoln High School group that traveled to China in 2016.

"We did so much in those days, meeting other Chinese students, visiting different schools and getting to truly experience Chinese culture. It was the experience of a lifetime. After I visited in 2016, I just fell in love with the people and the culture in China. Everyone here is caring and polite, and it's much more community-focused. It's very different from the US, and I like it."

Since that trip, Adams, who recently graduated from university with a bachelor's degree in science and economics, has been back to China six times and visited many Chinese cities.

"During those trips, I was able to build some personal as well as professional relationships. My hope is to continue expanding those relationships and maybe to one day (turn that) into a business relationship."


Tacoma Mayor (second from left) sings with students from both Fuzhou and Tacoma on June 26. HU MEIDONG / CHINA DAILY


Teachers and students from the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education and visiting students from Tacoma enjoy a calligraphy activity on June 26. HU MEIDONG / CHINA DAILY

Since 2016, Lincoln High School has frequently arranged visits to China, and the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education has also sent students to attend summer camp exchange activities at Lincoln High School every year before the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the offline exchange programs between the two cities had to be put on hold, but many initiatives demonstrated how close the cities had become to one another. Fuzhou and Tacoma began setting up relationships between schools, facilitating exchanges between Chinese students studying English and Tacoma students studying Chinese.

"From 2020 to 2024, our school exchanged letters with Lincoln High School over 50 times. In 2023, we relaunched our Pen Pal project with Lincoln High School, pairing 35 of our high school freshmen and sophomores with 38 students from Lincoln High School studying Chinese," said Wei Jian, head of the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education.

The school hosted a Tacoma student group led by Mayor Woodards in June and another US student group in July.

"Through diverse activities such as traditional Chinese cultural classes including calligraphy and paper-cutting and friendly sports matches like basketball and rugby, such visits help to strengthen understanding and friendship between Chinese and American youth, laying a solid foundation for future relations," said Wei.

"So often our young people live in their communities and they don't know about the entire world," Woodards said. "I think when they get out of their surroundings and have an opportunity to travel across the world and meet other young people who are just like them, it makes not only our cities a better place, but it makes our world a better place."

The sister-cities program is about promoting peace through people, and the idea is that the more people know about communities worldwide, the more they understand that we are more alike than we are different, she said.

Striking similarities

At the end of her one-week Fuzhou trip in June, Woodards marveled at the similarities between the two cities. Fuzhou's green surroundings remind her a lot of Washington, which carries the moniker the Evergreen State, she said.

"I can see why 30 years ago the man who I called my father, Harold Moss, the mayor of Tacoma at the time, would make this sister-city relationship with Fuzhou, because we have so much in common. ... I hope that in 30 years from now someone from the city of Tacoma will be here in Fuzhou celebrating the 60th anniversary of our sister-city relationship."

On July 19, the sixth US-China Sister Cities Summit was held in Tacoma. During the summit, Chinese Ambassador to the United States Xie Feng said that serving as bridges for mutual understanding and trust, the sister-city relationships have nurtured goodwill between the two peoples, and injected vigor into China-US relations.

"The closer subnational exchanges and cooperation are, the more solid the popular foundation for China-US relations will be, and the greater room we will have for taking this relationship forward," said Xie.

The significance of sister-city relationships is often underreported and not well understood by people from both countries, said Wang Xiaofeng, director of international cooperation at the Center for China and Globalization, a Chinese think tank.

"Sister-city relationships have transcended symbolic gestures to deliver substantial benefits and created a dynamic and multifaceted connection between China and the US. These partnerships have facilitated economic growth through increased trade and investment opportunities and cultural exchanges that foster mutual understanding," she said.

"City-level exchanges through sister-city programs can help ease bilateral mistrust between China and the US by fostering direct, people-to-people interactions that build mutual understanding and respect," said Wang.

"By focusing on these tangible and positive interactions, sister cities can reduce stereotypes and misconceptions, paving the way for a more constructive bilateral relationship," she said.

Yang Jie in Fuzhou contributed to this story.

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Watch the video by scanning the code.

Journey to the West goes East and then back again

By **YANG RAN** in Fuzhou and **LINDA DENG** in Tacoma, Washington

For Greg Youtz, friendship between the East and West is of high importance to him.

"Many people in Tacoma and many people in Fuzhou value our friendship very strongly," Youtz, chairman of the Tacoma-Fuzhou Sister City Committee, said. "It's very important for individuals in both the US and China to remain positive and interested in each other."

Youtz's interest in China began in the 1960s when his parents returned from a seminar on China with books in hand. One of them was the classic Chinese tale *Journey to the West*, which Youtz read, leading to his lifelong fascination with Chinese philosophy and culture.

Youtz has visited many Chinese cities and said he considers China his second home. On his first trip to China in 1991, he was part of a faculty delegation from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma to visit Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou.

In 2008, with support from an organization called The Freeman Foundation, Youtz conducted educational projects and student exchanges, enriching teachers' understanding of China through visits to Beijing, Xi'an, Chengdu and Shanghai.

"It's essential for teachers to effectively share their experiences and knowledge about China with their students, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of the country," he said.

Since first serving as chairman of the Tacoma-Fuzhou Sister City Committee in 2008, he has hosted more than 40 delegations from Fuzhou and promoted the sister-city relationship by encouraging people in the United States to learn about China and facilitating exchanges.

Like Youtz, Michael Fowler's connection with China spans decades. "I first visited China in 1979," said Fowler, managing director of the World Trade Center Tacoma, who has worked on Sino-US economic collaboration for many years. "Since then, every time I come, I am surprised by the nation's development."

In 2008 under the Tacoma-Fuzhou Trade Office Exchange Program, Fowler worked with three Fuzhou representatives who traveled to Tacoma to help small and medium-sized enterprises from both cities to benefit from the thriving sister-city relationship.

The project ended 18 months later, but the connection between Fowler and his Fuzhou friends continued. In a trip to Fuzhou this June, Fowler managed to meet with all the three representatives, whose names he still remembers after 14 years.

"We send each other greetings every holiday and still help each other with various tasks," he said.

"One of the lasting successes of the project is our relationships. Just the number of people my Fuzhou friends asked me to go back and thank was so touching, and it shows that they clearly connected with many in Tacoma."

During his latest visit, Fowler signed a deal with the representative of the Administrative Committee of Fuzhou Area of China (Fujian) Pilot Free Trade Zone.

"With this agreement, we will collaborate again, focusing on helping to foster new business partnerships. I believe in peace and prosperity through trade and investment. Our focus should be looking for the win-wins, whether in city-to-city or nation-to-nation relations. The sister-city relationship between Fuzhou and Tacoma is exemplary," he said.

Rigel Adams, a graduate of Lincoln High School in Tacoma, has visited Fuzhou and other Chinese cities.

"I think that people-to-people exchange is the most important component of our bilateral ties. I find that most people that have an unfavorable view of China just don't know very much about China," Adams said of the China-US relationship.

"China and the US are the two major countries in the world, and the world will be better if we work together, cooperate and build strong personal relationships between our peoples. That starts small with a trip to China or with a Chinese person coming and visiting the US. It starts with friendship."


A teacher from the Tacoma visiting group showcases the Tacoma postcards she plans to gift to students in Fuzhou. QIN JIAHE / CHINA DAILY


The process of making jasmine tea is displayed at a tea house in Fuzhou. QIN JIAHE / CHINA DAILY


Students from Fuzhou's Affiliated High School and students from Tacoma write to each other on postcards on June 26. WANG ZHENGXING / CHINA DAILY

Decadeslong ties between Fuzhou, Tacoma yield rich dividends

By **HU MEIDONG** and **YANG RAN** in Fuzhou

Fuzhou and Tacoma's decadeslong sister-city relationship has yielded fruitful results, exemplifying a strong bond between the people of China and the United States, said Wu Xiande, the mayor of Fuzhou, expressing hope for continued deepening of mutual understanding and friendship.

The tale of friendship between Fuzhou and Tacoma began with the efforts of the Chinese city's then Party Secretary Xi Jinping, Wu told China Daily.

In late 1993, Xi, then secretary of the Communist Party of China Fuzhou Municipal Committee, visited Tacoma, advocating for the establishment of a sister-city relationship between Fuzhou and Tacoma.

This vision materialized in November 1994, when the signing ceremony of the sister-city relationship agreement between Fuzhou and Tacoma took place in Fuzhou, initiating a new era in their sister-city exchanges.


Wu Xiande

Since 1994, economic, trade, and people-to-people exchanges, notably youth interactions between the two cities, have flourished, bolstering mutual understanding and friendship among their people.

"Youth exchanges between China and the US are crucial for bilateral relations. We have been actively fostering sister-school relationships between schools in Fuzhou, like the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education, and schools in Tacoma," said Wu.

"We have conducted extensive educational collaboration in teaching, and student visits, and we use this bond to promote friendly exchanges among young people in both cities."

"I believe that through these friendly exchanges, Chinese and American youth can enhance mutual understanding and recognition by engaging in dialogue, respecting each other's cultural differences, and injecting new energy into the development of Sino-US relations," Wu said.

Wu highlighted that economic and trade cooperation serves as the cornerstone of sister-city relationships. Fuzhou and Tacoma have recently organized many successful online matchmaking events, fostering mutually beneficial development.

Enhancing connectivity

"Fuzhou and Tacoma are boosting trade through their ports to enhance connectivity. We are also collaborating on developing intelligent and eco-friendly ports to improve ports' competitiveness together," said Wu.

As this year marks the 30th anniversary of the sister-city relationship between Fuzhou and Tacoma, Wu expressed anticipation for deepening the traditional friendship and expanding exchanges and cooperation across various fields with Tacoma.

According to Wu, Fuzhou intends to utilize current sister-school partnerships to introduce more youth talent and student exchange programs, fostering new advocates for the cities' friendship. The two cities also plan to boost collaboration in cross-border e-commerce, expanding markets for specialty items like jasmine tea and nuts.

"Amity between peoples holds the key to the relationship between countries. The interactions between the two cities will also facilitate economic and trade exchanges, establishing a foundation and providing impetus for the healthy, stable, and sustainable development of China-US relations," Wu said.

Yang Jie in Fuzhou contributed to this story.

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A dragon boat team from Tacoma participates in a dragon boat race in Fuzhou, on June 7, 2016. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY


Students from the Affiliated High School of Fuzhou Institute of Education attend the welcome ceremony for the Tacoma delegation on June 26. QIN JIAHE / CHINA DAILY