



Merrill Hotel & Conference Center in downtown Muscatine opened last spring. (courtesy of Merrill Hotel)

Building a Bridge Between Muscatine and China

By Emery Styron



Real estate developer Glad Cheng pours tea for a visitor. (E. Styron)

In 2012, after wrapping up White House meetings with President Obama and dining with Henry Kissinger, China’s Vice President Xi Jinping embarked on a personal mission. On a chilly day in February, Xi’s 747 landed in the Quad Cities, where his entourage loaded into black limousines for the short drive south to Sarah and Roger Lande’s place in Muscatine, Iowa (pop. 23,968).

It had been nearly 30 years since the then-slender, fresh-faced Xi and four other young Chinese on an agricultural study tour enjoyed a potluck dinner at the hilltop Lande home overlooking the Mississippi. Xi thanked the gathered “old friends” who had put the four travelers up in spare bedrooms, treated them to a river cruise, and answered questions about showers, food and Iowans’ preferences for casual attire.

He said his first impression of the U.S. came from them. “To me, you are America.”

Now Xi, 65, is China’s supreme leader.

“We welcomed them as one of us. It seems to have made quite an impression,” recalled the smiling, silver-haired Sarah Lande, who headed Iowa’s sister-state relationship with China’s Hebei province for 10 years.

In *Old Friends*, a book documenting her experiences, she writes that the full impact of Iowa hospitality on the Hebei Shijiazhuang Prefecture Corn Processing Delegation is just starting to be realized.

Chinese Influence Downtown

That impact is obvious in downtown Muscatine, where Glad Cheng, a Chinese real estate developer, owns a 10 percent stake in the Merrill Hotel

& Conference Center. Local investors own the majority of the development, but without Glad the riverfront's \$40 million centerpiece would not have been built, said Dan Stein, Central Bancshares' chair and president of the Muscatine-China Initiatives Committee.

The hotel's glassed-in, light-filled lobby overlooks the sparkling Mississippi River. The Canadian Pacific Railroad still runs along the riverfront, but with the hotel's help, a quiet zone was established, so no more blaring whistles.

The hotel, which opened in March, boasts 122 guest rooms, and 12,000 square feet of meeting space, including a top-floor conference center with an outdoor terrace with stunning views of the river. Other amenities include Maxwell's restaurant in the chandeliered lobby, named for Maxwell Stanley, former chairman and CEO of HON

Some 50 groups, mostly Chinese, visited the city-managed Friendship House in 2018.

Industries, and mentor to the late Stan Howe, who worked alongside him for 36 years and succeeded him at the Muscatine-based manufacturer of office furniture.

The grand lobby is a great place to sample a local beer at the marble-topped bar, or to sink into one of the many plush sofas and chairs and watch barges and towboats glide by. A covered walkway connects the hotel and patio to the old Hotel Muscatine, converted to the Pearlview Condominiums by developers Tom and Ann Mecker in 2008.

A block back from the river and slightly uphill, the colorful cornices of well-tended, 19th-century commercial buildings line Second Street. Thanks to the vision and investment of leaders like the Meekers and Stan and Helen Howe, downtown has become much livelier than it was 25 or 30 years ago,



The lobby of the Merrill Hotel overlooks the Mississippi. (courtesy of Merrill Hotel)

says Joni Axel, who lives on the third floor of Pearl Plaza on Second Street, a mixed-use complex of seven rehabbed historic buildings.

Exposed brick walls, oak-trimmed stairways and landings, overseen by a giant Mark Twain, lead to shops like Elly's Tea & Coffee House, Fresh Vintage and Port City Underground. Up and down the street and for a block or two west, you'll find newer boutiques like Candle Shed Effect, "The Ultimate Eclectic Experience," as well as restaurants and old weathered standbys like Hills Paint Store.

Glad's investment in the hotel and purchase of a vacant furniture store building on Second Street has added to downtown's vitality, said Axel, but "I don't think Glad is responsible for six of the eight cylinders" that make it work.

Glad bought the local travel agency, which has offices in the former furniture store, but he's converting much of it into a Sino-U.S. Friendship Center, where he hopes to encourage more understanding between people of the two nations.

"We have had some Chinese visitors," said Axel, a member with Lande of the old friends group, "many traveling here on official or quasi-official basis." She expects the China connection to increase tourism in both directions.

Another of Glad's purchases, the

John and Eleanor Dvorchak home where Xi and another member of his group stayed in 1985, may become a Chinese tourist magnet. The split-level, brick-front house, renamed the Friendship House, still looks much as it did then. Some 50 groups, mostly Chinese, visited the city-managed Friendship House in 2018.

"A story like this cannot happen in China. The house is a symbol of that story," he said.

Chinese Business Boom? Not Yet

Beyond the hotel and a few more tourists, city business leaders say big commercial benefits of the China connection are yet to arrive.

"The more Chinese who come here, the more opportunity. You never know what will fall out of this," said Stein.

It doesn't hurt that Iowa's former governor Terry Branstad now serves as U.S. ambassador to China, he added.

Tony Joseph, who runs an overseas shipping company, said the relationships he's developed with Chinese officials "haven't enhanced what I do," but he's gained many Chinese friends. "That's most rewarding, even if we have zero dollars of business."

The Mississippi River makes a sharp left turn at Muscatine, and a variety of shipping terminals dot the Iowa shore downstream of the city.

A major Muscatine industry, Kent Feeds, is leading efforts to create a



Glad Cheng owns what is now the Friendship House, where China's President Xi Jinping stayed in 1985, when he was vice president. (E. Styrón)

large international river port. Several Muscatine industries such as Grain Processing Corp. and Kent Feeds have their own docks, but Kent saw the need for a more developed port system that everyone can use.

Containerized shipping is central to the port concept. Containers make it possible to ship manufactured items and small orders of bulk items on barges. The port would include equipment to load materials and goods into containers, and the containers onto barges for shipments downriver to the port at New Orleans, where the containers could be transferred to ocean-going ships for export. Likewise, containerized shipments could come upriver to Muscatine, where they could be unloaded to trucks and trains at the port. COSCO, a large state-owned Chinese shipping company, has expressed interest.

"The port would have value not just to Muscatine but to the entire region," said Kevin Jenison, communications manager for the city of Muscatine.

Commitments are already in place from the state of Iowa, the city and Canadian Pacific Railroad to help build the facility. Kent is looking to broaden the base of industries that would uti-

lize it.

"There isn't a port such as the one being proposed north of St. Louis. Muscatine, at the midpoint between St. Louis and St. Paul, is the perfect location for a port of this type, Jenison said."

More Visits

In spring 2012, a group of Muscatine "old friends" toured China as Xi's guests and heard his plea to foster exchanges in sports, education, govern-

A major Muscatine industry, Kent Feeds, is leading efforts to create a large international river port.

ment, culture and business. Chances for peace and prosperity will improve "if our people get to know, understand and trust each other," he told them.

That may be why a touring Chinese symphony orchestra performs a Chinese New Year concert in Musca-

tine each winter. The musicians "consider Muscatine a home away from home" and look forward to their stays with local families, said Liu Jun, deputy consul general at China's consulate in Chicago.

Selected Muscatine High School students enjoy three-week, expense-paid camps in China, courtesy of the Wanxiang Corp. and the Chinese government.

"Everybody wants to please the leader," explained Lande.

Not quite everyone, said mayor Diana Broderson, who sometimes hears from people in the community concerned about Chinese investors.

"You have folks with a positive reaction to progress, and you have people that are not always on board. I think that's typical," she said. "As long as we keep working toward a positive result for Muscatine, I think it's a win for everyone."

A quick, informal poll at the bar of Mississippi Brewing Co. on the riverfront turned up no naysayers.

"I like it. It brings money into the community," said Harry Church, a retired HON employee.

"I'm good with it," said home remodeler John Kiwala, "It probably enhances life with a little more diversity."

The discussion mystified a visiting computer technician from Indianapolis, but he was impressed to hear that Xi had visited twice.

"There's got to be some positives and negatives. I don't think the negatives have presented any adversities," said Bob Miller, a resident petitioning the city not to change its slogan from "Pearl of the Mississippi" to "Where the river takes a turn for the better."

Regarding current U.S.-China tensions, he said, "It's not up to us in Muscatine to work out those differences that President Trump is working on."

This isn't the first time that tariffs have affected Muscatine. John F. Boepple, the German who founded Muscatine's button industry in the late 1800s, came here after tariffs on ocean shells made his button business unprofitable in the old country. He found a plentiful supply of high quality shells in the river at Muscatine.

Waging Peace Through Friendship

Lande and others believe that as Chinese and Americans get better acquainted, their differences will diminish.

“China’s people want the same things we do — for their families to be well and for their kids to do better than they have. These things only come out when you’re having dinner, tea or coffee, not at formal events,” said Joseph.

Musco Lighting CEO Joe Crookham oversees plants in Muscatine and Shanghai. He believes better understanding leads to increased trade and prosperity for all. “We’re building a better world,” he said.

Last August, at a dinner celebrating the Iowa-Hebei Sister State’s 35th anniversary and the Muscatine-Zhenfeng Sister City Fifth anniversary, Sarah Lande presented the first Pearl of Friendship Award to Ye Changqing, deputy director-general of the People’s Government of Hebei. The award fea-

tures a Mississippi River mussel shell, representing the pearl button industry.

Terry Eagle, assistant director of downtown Muscatine’s Pearl Button Museum, selected the shell, and local artist Jim Elisa painted the scene. The background color represents Muscatine’s famous sunsets, which Mark Twain wrote about and Xi noted in memoirs of his 1985 visit.

As Lande continues to “wage peace through friendship,” she’s most excited by opportunities, like the trips to China by young people.

“It totally opened up their eyes to the world,” she said. “That will make a peaceful world that can thrive.” 🇺🇸

Emery Styron lives in Riverside, Iowa. His last story for Big River was “An Easy Float on the Yellow River,” September-October 2018.



Sarah Lande presents the Pearl of Friendship award to Ye Changqing, deputy director-general of the People’s Government of Hebei. (E. Styron)



Increase your boating pleasure!





Wahoo Aluminum Docks
PWC Lifts
Boat Lifts
Thru-Flow Decking
Touchless Boat Covers
Many more dock accessories

610 Warner St. • Lamont, Iowa 50650
TWRFUN.COM • 563-924-2222
TWRFUNLLC@GMAIL.COM