Jon Taylor: Embracing China with both arms

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By May Zhou in Houston |   
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A rich career learning about China through scholarship, travel, friendship  
For Jon Taylor, a professor of political science at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, doing research on modern China goes well beyond intellectual and academic interests - he embraces and enjoys China's culture on a variety of levels.  
Taylor can tell you that those deep fried sea horses and scorpions at the popular Beijing Wangfujing do not really represent China. "Chinese people don't eat that stuff. They are for a dare," he said.  
He can name the most popular and best beer bars in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu. He knows where to find the best microbreweries in China. His favorite baijiu is erguotuo, a strong spirit usually made from sorghum.  
He downloaded the CCTV mandarin app to watch the Chinese New Year Gala and the opening of the 19th CPC Congress.  
He has set foot in most provinces and regions in China. He has ordered dishes at rural restaurants run by farming families.  
He has clinked glasses with Chinese travelers on high-speed trains and played mahjong.  
"Wherever I go, I am always struck by the incredible friendliness, willingness and cordiality of the Chinese people," Taylor said. "Many people think that Chinese are standoffish. Actually they have a wicked sense of humor and they are funny as hell.  
"I always feel that when I leave China, I am like, I miss the place, I need get back," he added.  
Taylor's expertise in all things China was built over the years.  
"I remember as a small kid in the 1960s I watched a news story about the Cultural Revolution unfolding. I remember watching China launch its first satellite. Imagine that I watched American TV broadcast The East is Red. That was in 1970s," he said.  
Taylor did his first research on China in graduate school because he wanted to be different. Most students were studying the Soviet Union.  
So different  
"China was interesting to me because it was so different from what was happening in the Soviet Bloc. That's when the creation of the economic zone happened in Guangdong. That's what got me started on China," Taylor said.  
He wrote a few papers on China then but his China research truly took off when he moved to Houston to work at the University of St. Thomas.  
"The university gave me opportunities to really focus my interest on China. I talk to overseas Chinese here. They bring Chinese officials and delegations to Houston. I have opportunities to talk to them, give lectures about all aspects of the American political system. Guanxi (relationship) took off big time. By interacting with them, invitations came left and right," Taylor recalled.  
The Consulate General of China in Houston is two blocks away from the university. "I have a lot of opportunities to interact with the consulate staff. They have been wonderful and extraordinarily helpful in our study abroad programs," he said.  
For more than a decade, Taylor has been travelling to China two or three times a year to speak at academic conferences, make guest appearances or take his graduate students to do study abroad programs. His office wall is covered with program posters of his visits to renowned Chinese universities such as Nankai, Fudan and Tongji.  
He has written and spoken extensively about the challenges of urbanization, China's fight against corruption and the role that Chinese political science can play globally.  
His most recent publications include Dehegemonizing the Discipline: China's Contribution to a Pluralist Political Science (Nankai Review), Between Sinification and Internationalization: Chinese Political Science in the Post-Reform Era (Chinese Political Science Review) and The China Dream is an Urban Dream: Assessing the CPC's National New-Type Urbanization Plan (Journal of Chinese Political Science). He is currently writing a book examining the evolving role of public administration in China.  
Heavy component  
In teaching courses in political science, Taylor often incorporates a heavy China component for comparison purposes.  
"For political ethics, I took the students to CCDI (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection) website. I showed them how different it is from the US. It has a much stronger enforcement power that the US can't imagine. Then I show them an episode of the popular TV show In the Name of the People.  
"The airing of the show is important to understanding China. It tells you how much concern there is about corruption in China. It's an amazing show, well done with high production value. I hope there is a second season," Taylor said, adding he had watched the whole series.  
Along the way, Taylor made many Chinese friends. "The great thing is that people I meet open up, they're willing to show me aspects of the country you normally don't see," Taylor said, showing photos of a Chinese friend he's following on social media.  
"His goal is to make a stop at every high-speed rail station. I really want to ride the new high-speed Fuxin rail," said Taylor, calling China's high-speed rail system a godsend for travel around the country.  
Taylor also enjoys collecting Cultural Revolution memorabilia, such as Mao portrait buttons, hats and armbands of the Red Guard and a poster of Lei Feng. He said part of the reason he likes them is because they represent a bygone era that will never return.  
Under China's current leader Xi Jinping, Taylor believes the world will see the strengthening of the Chinese Communist Party's leadership and expansion of economic development.  
"He is attempting to fulfill Deng Xiaoping's call in 1980s to have a modest well-off society by 2020. Over 750 million people have been lifted out of poverty since the reforming began. This is the greatest reduction in poverty and the greatest rising to middle class status or higher in world history," Taylor said.  
Taylor said that the UN's goal is to eliminate inequality and poverty and China has done more in that quest than any other country in the world.  
"This is what's interesting about China - every time I go there, I see how much more has changed, how much more has developed."

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