New book tells story of Xi's 'fun' days in Iowa

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You may recall vividly, the time when we met.  
No matter how time flies, never fades our sweet memory.  
A Muscatine High School choral group sang the above lyrics from Lasting Memory in Chinese on Thursday at the launch of a memoir about Xi Jinping's visits to the Iowa town.  
To Sarah Lande, author of the bilingual book, Old Friends: The Xi Jinping - Iowa Story, the song is an ode to her friendship with the current Chinese president and the first lady Peng Liyuan.  
Lande coordinated Xi's visit to her hometown in 1985 and met him again during his 2012 return trip. Lande herself traveled to Beijing in June 2012, several months after Xi's visit to Iowa when he was vice-president.  
The former executive director of the Iowa Sister States organization said Iowa established a sister-state agreement with Hebei province in North China in 1983. The upcoming 30th anniversary of the sistership was a topic that she discussed with Peng.  
"She (Peng) said, 'You know, I think we should commemorate the 30th anniversary of the relationship between Hebei province and the state of Iowa, and maybe we should do it with a friendship song,'" Lande told China Daily.  
"So she selected three composers to develop the songs, the lyrics and the music and then a person that we work with a lot, Madam Li (Xiaolin), president of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, helped make her vision come true."  
Lasting Memory is such a beautiful song that Lande said she had hoped that Peng, a renowned singer, would perform it herself. It is unclear if the invitation got through, but Lande said that she had fond memories of her time with Peng.  
"When we were there (in Beijing), they had a lovely banquet for us, and I ended up sitting between President Xi and his wife, and she said, 'I just had to come and meet these people from Iowa and see what is it that he finds so special about them!'"  
Lande would later recall that Xi, as an official of Zhengding county in Hebei province, led an agricultural delegation to Iowa in 1985 to visit farms, a grain processing plant and other facilities and had stayed at a home in Muscatine for three days and two nights.  
"We treated him just as a regular guy, and you'd be surprised at all the loving pictures we have," Lande said. "He had a big smile on his face and was fun and funny."  
It turned out that Xi had sent some of the pictures that he had when he heard about Lande's book project.  
"When we got pictures from him, we were amazed," Lande said.  
Lande said Xi took a boat ride on the Mississippi River, and he told her that he had always read Mark Twain and wanted to be on the Mississippi.  
In his 2012 visit to Muscatine, Xi told Lande and her neighbors: "You know, you were the first people I met in the United States. You're among the first people, to me, you are America."  
Lande has told that and other stories in a book that she hopes will "inspire US-China relations and inspire citizen ambassadors of any age, long into the future".  
Cui Tiankai, Chinese Ambassador to the US, said, "The Xi Jinping-Iowa story is a miniature of the past 40 years of robust and all-round development of China-US relations, which has served the interests of our two peoples."  
"These exchanges and the remarkable story of President Xi Jinping demonstrate the significance of citizen diplomacy and treating everyone whom we meet with respect and dignity," US Ambassador to China Terry Branstad, who received Xi in his office in 1985 as Iowa governor, said in his foreword to the memoir.

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