Celebrating a historic collaboration

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Shanghai Jiao Tong University pays homage to alumni who played a crucial role in forging bilateral relations with US institutes  
Twelve senior professors from Shanghai Jiao Tong University formed the first delegation from a Chinese university to visit their counterparts in the United States in 1978, opening the door to a new world of higher education cooperation between China and foreign countries.  
This historical visit, which took place even before the two nations established diplomatic ties in 1979, was just one of the milestones the university reminisced about on June 9 during a reunion of the 1,200 alumni who were admitted to the school in 1977 and 1978.  
According to the university, only one member of the delegation, Zhang Guangyao, the former director of foreign affairs of the university, is still alive today.  
The historic delegation, which was led by Deng Xuchu, the university's Party secretary at that time, visited 27 institutions of higher education and 14 scientific research institutes and factories across 20 cities in the US.  
The visit was supported by the university's alumni association in the US, which helped with arranging the visit, said Sun Ping, director of the editing and research branch under the university's research office of Party and school history.  
The visit was directly approved by late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, wrote Zhang Shou, vice-chancellor of the university at that time and a member of the delegation, in a book recollecting the visit.  
The delegation received a warm welcome from the US education circle.  
"For example, senior directors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology hosted a welcoming banquet in person; The University of California, Berkeley, played the Chinese national anthem and The East Is Red (another famous Chinese song) in honor of the delegation; The University of Texas learned the arrival of the delegation from newspaper and invited them for a visit and exchange," Sun said.  
The visit proved fruitful as both parties signed a dozen agreements regarding academic collaboration. Some Chinese and US universities even became sister schools, laying the foundation for further cooperation.  
Four computers and a set of optical fiber simulation equipment were bought during the visit, and this led to the establishment of Shanghai Jiao Tong University's first computer center. The university claims that this was the first time that computers were utilized by institutions of higher education in China.  
"More importantly, the visit enabled members of the delegation to see the outside world and realize what their institutes were lacking. Many of them felt a strong sense of urgency after witnessing how advanced foreign universities were in talent training and school management," Sun said.  
"Each of them knew that China had to open its door and learn the advanced science, technology and management experiences from the West."  
In 1980, alumni from Shanghai Jiao Tong University who furthered their studies at MIT set up a $200,000 scholarship at the US institute for Jiao Tong graduates.  
In 1982, the university partnered with the University of Pennsylvania to offer the world's first double Master's degrees in computer and management.  
The visit opened up a channel for Chinese universities to introduce experts from abroad, Sun said.  
Within a year after the visit, Shanghai Jiao Tong University welcomed 765 guests from the education field in 24 foreign countries and regions. Three overseas alumni members and 11 foreign professors were employed as honorary professors and foreign advisory professors during that time.  
Among the distinguished visitors to the Chinese university was former US President Jimmy Carter, who visited several labs and spoke with students.  
Feng Dagan, who obtained a master's degree in electronic engineering and computer science at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 1982, furthered his studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, after graduation. He was a student of Zhang Zhongjun, a member of the delegation, and was among the first 38 graduates sent abroad by the university.  
"Professor Zhang encouraged me to further my studies in the US because of his own experience of the visit, and Fan Xuji, the then chancellor of the university, also inspired me to make breakthroughs in the fields of medicine and engineering, and become integrated into the mainstream international academic community as quickly as possible," Feng said.  
Feng, who is now the deputy dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Sydney and a leading expert in biomedical information technology, said he used his first research funds to invite professors from the Shanghai university for collaboration and exchanges.  
"I've received nearly 100 visiting scholars and students for short-term exchanges, and a considerable number of them have grown to be leaders in important positions in various industries in China," he said.

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