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Rural Return: Xi Jinping's Iowa Visit

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By Kate Merkel-Hess

Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping's visit to the US took him across the country, from Washington, DC, to Los Angeles (where, sadly, despite spending some time with a [sartorially-challenged David Beckham](#), he did not [show off his soccer skills](#), as he did in the subsequent Irish leg of his trip):



But it wasn't the visits to the coasts that dominated human interest stories on Xi Jinping's trip, but the days in the middle, when he spent a little time in Iowa. Xi first visited Iowa in 1985, when he was an official in Hebei province, and this trip was a triumphant if low-key return.

I grew up in Iowa—as a fifth-generation Iowan—and so I was particularly interested to see this rare juxtaposition of China and Iowa in the national media. And the coverage was fascinating, characterized by a dismissive tone (such as *The Atlantic's* David A. Graham, [who wrote of the Iowa visit](#): “Apparently would-be Chinese leaders have to go through the same somewhat humiliating corn-country rituals as would-be American presidents before they can take the reins

of power”) that seemed to overlook that China is now the largest market for U.S. agricultural products.

In China, where over the past 25 years a growing wealth gap between city and countryside has become a yawning chasm, where farmers barely manage to turn a profit, and where rural corruption and corresponding unrest are a persistent concern, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have made rural modernization a central part of the government’s policy and rhetoric. “Corn-country” problems are foundational concerns for the top levels of Chinese government, whether those problems are in China or the US.

Nevertheless, the story of China’s future president in Iowa—considered a quaint Americana setting for most people in the US—was ready-made for media (as Xi certainly knew). Here are a few of the stories that highlight not just the heartland setting but the complications of the Iowa-China story.

1. NPR did some solid coverage of Xi’s visit, including [this piece](#), which gives an overview of Xi’s 1985 stay. If you can’t get enough, [here’s one from after the visit](#), that discusses the Tibetan protestors who were present at Xi’s stops throughout the US and also details of the gala dinner in Iowa. (Weekend Edition, meanwhile, did [a story on Xi’s wife](#), the singer Peng Liyuan.)

2. *Des Moines Register* writer Kyle Munson gathered together [a series of anecdotes](#) from Xi’s visit that didn’t make it into news stories, but it was this juxtaposition that highlighted Iowa’s two conflicting recent moments in the national media: “People kept remarking on the odd contrast: One month we see caucus-crazed Republicans scurrying around Iowa railing against President Barack Obama’s socialist regime. The next month arguably the world’s top Communist becomes the toast of conservative business and political circles.”

Munson was also [interviewed on Talk of the Nation](#) about Xi’s visit.

3. “[Xi’s Iowa Dinner Serves Porkfest With Side of Dietary Nightmare](#),” Bloomberg (h/t [China Digital Times](#)): Banquets are a big deal in China and food—its quality *and* quantity—matters. So it was surprising to me that the journalists who wrote this piece chose to emphasize the expansive nature of the official dinner for Xi in Iowa (tying it to Iowa’s obesity epidemic). The nutritionist they interviewed said, “It’s a lot to have appetizers, two courses, dessert, soda, wine and beer.” My reaction? That is not nearly enough food.

Also, it’s worth noting that they served an edamame-and-corn salad not only as a marriage of “Asian” soybeans and Iowan corn, but also because, while corn is Iowa’s number one crop, soybeans are second.

In fact, one of the important bits of business conducted during Xi’s trip was a [\\$4.3 billion agreement](#) signed by Chinese officials—to purchase 8 million tons of soybeans from the U.S.

4. The *New York Times* ran [a piece that explored Iowans’ responses to the visit](#), including their urges to make a buck. Here’s an excerpt:

And with reporters and cameras swarming in town—the Chinese news media were especially keen to get shots of the various houses and bedrooms where Mr. Xi stayed—Muscatine’s moment in the spotlight, many residents said, was not to be squandered. It is the sort of rural wisdom that Mark Twain—a local hero who lived briefly here on the banks of the Mississippi River and wrote for *The Muscatine Journal* in the 1850s—might well have praised or parodied: When opportunity knocks, shake it by the lapels until the coins fall out.

“We’ve displayed to this world leader our work ethic, No. 1, and our value for friendship; that’s No. 2,” Mayor DeWayne M. Hopkins said in an interview at City Hall. “If that message can be disseminated into the rest of the United States in encouragement for people to be interested in Muscatine and perhaps relocate here—and I mean people all the way from households up to retail and manufacturing—then that’s a plus.”

At the Long John Silver’s fast-food restaurant, the sign out front said, “Welcome back to Muscatine Xi Jinping” on one side, and on the other, “Original menu available, fish sandwich 2 for \$3.”

Inside, the general manager, Michelle Cacho, said that good buzz was good business. “It’s kind of propaganda, but if it helps folks in Iowa we might as well roll out the red carpet,” she said.

Other residents said they believed the compliment that Mr. Xi paid the town by coming back was real, and that residents should be honored.

“He could go to Nebraska, or anyplace else in heartland America, but he chose to come back here, which shows well for Muscatine,” said Dennis Figg, 62, who had stopped in at the Phillips 66 gas station on the edge of downtown to visit with a friend and buy some chewing tobacco.

5. *The Wall Street Journal* ran a series of short videos about Xi’s trip that provide glimpses of footage from Iowa.