

Nov 04, 2016 by [Jian \(Jay\) Wang](#)

Mr. Xi Comes to America's Heartland ^[1]

Muscatine, Iowa, is to play host to a special guest on Wednesday, when China's Vice President Xi Jinping, the nation's presumed next leader, returns to the small town he first visited as part of a sister-state program more than two decades ago. Mr. Xi's journey to America's heartland underscores the importance of the public dimension of U.S-China diplomacy.

Despite growing and deeper ties, U.S. and China relations seem more volatile and fragile than ever. While the two governments have proclaimed to pursue a "positive, cooperative and comprehensive" relationship, there is, in the recent words of a senior Chinese official, a "trust deficit" between Beijing and Washington.

Trust is invariably a function of risk, and risk perception is heightened in times of great uncertainty. The China in 1985, when Mr. Xi was last in Iowa, certainly feels like a lifetime ago. Although what China has since accomplished is truly remarkable, the speed and velocity of development has also exacted immense social and environmental costs that the country is beginning to grapple with. Similarly, contemporary America is confronted with the daunting challenges of wrestling with the redistribution of work and wealth, unleashed by global capitalism, and of re-adjusting its evolving international role in light of the "rise of the rest."

Indeed, competing and conflicting interests abound between the two countries; and there are genuine differences in policy pursuits and the values they embody. These shifting realities are likely to be further complicated and tested by this year's political transitions.

Nevertheless, the bottom line is clear: the U.S.-China relationship is simply too consequential to let it falter and fail. The cost of mishandling it will be enormous, possibly disastrous, for the two peoples and beyond.

While the two governments continue to negotiate differences and to adjust and accommodate each other's priorities, public diplomacy, invaluable for laying the broad and solid foundation of trust, must come to the fore.

At times the differences concerning the two countries may be overdrawn. In fact, mutual public opinion has been relatively stable over the last two decades. National polls (e.g., Gallup, Pew Research Center) indicate that, barring a few isolated time periods, Americans' positive and negative views of China have respectively hovered around 40-50 percent, trending slightly towards the negative. Meanwhile, Americans have consistently shown admiration of Chinese culture. As for America's image in China, anti-U.S. sentiments by some vocal Chinese netizens aside, the mere fact that Chinese parents have been clamoring to send their sons and daughters to American universities at "full freight" speaks volume of the attraction and prestige of what this country has to offer.

High-level official visits, such as this one, are by design symbolic, media-oriented events.

Since China's "soft power" efforts have largely been bi-coastal, Mr. Xi's trip to the fly-over country is particularly noteworthy.

Iowa occupies a special place in the American national imagination, from the vigorous presidential caucuses every four years, to the still yet timeless landscape mythologized in Grand Wood's paintings. While not a microcosm or the "MagicState" representative of the entire country in the social scientific sense, Iowa and, for that matter, the Midwest, exude a certain "middleness" that, as author Colin Woodard wrote, serves as an "enormously influential moderating force in continental politics."

Sarah Lande of Muscatine, who hosted a dinner for Mr. Xi's delegation back in 1985, will be welcoming him to her house this time. "I do feel a little bit the weight of helping shape the future," she recently told the local paper *The Muscatine Journal*. "I hope this can be an example of learning about each other's culture, working together and listening to each other."

Let's also hope that Mr. Xi's Iowa visit will help broaden and enrich the Chinese imagination of America.
