

**It Changed My (Professional) Life:  
The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations' Public Intellectuals Program**

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As someone well-placed to observe firsthand the tremendous opportunities and sobering challenges of contemporary Sino-American relations, I have long believed in the important contributions of the [National Committee on U.S.-China Relations \(NCUSCR\)](#) to strengthening transpacific ties. It was my particular privilege to serve as a fellow in NCUSCR's [Public Intellectuals Program \(PIP\)](#) from 2008-11. To help ensure that this valuable endeavor continues to grow and develop as productively as possible, I want to share my experience, and explain the tremendous contribution that it has made to my professional career—as well as, far more importantly, NCUSCR's contribution to this century's most important bilateral relationship, on which so much depends.

PIP offers invaluable opportunities for a cohort of twenty mid-career China scholars and specialists to strengthen their knowledge and policy relevance by sharing subject matter expertise and collaborating with professionals from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. As Harvard professor Ezra Vogel emphasized during our October 2008 kickoff meeting in Washington, DC, the latest generation of “China hands” boasts unprecedented language and research skills but lacks the more comprehensive, interdisciplinary perspective that their less-specialized predecessors enjoyed.

The solution? Build a strong network of individuals who can combine their particular expertise to form a better picture of both forest and trees. This we did with gusto during a China study tour, an October 2010 meeting in San Francisco, and a final gathering in Washington in November 2010. Tour logistics necessitated dividing the group in two; my section was able to combine visits to mainland China and Taiwan, with stops in Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha, Xiamen, Jinmen, and Taipei in June-July 2009.

It was here that I witnessed in particular detail the indefatigable contributions of NCUSCR [Vice President Jan Berris](#) to ensuring that problems were solved and opportunities were seized. In a sprawling, dynamic place like China, logistical glitches and organization contradictions crop up constantly, but Jan never let any of these challenges delay, sidetrack, or silence us. Having volunteered for Vice President Al Gore's advance team in college, I still often wondered how she accomplished all this, even as I witnessed her working her mobile and Blackberry simultaneously until well past midnight. What I learned quickly was that Jan was a bottomless source of contacts, ideas, and institutional memory—a one-person facilitator of Sino-American relations. I

was able to discover one additional secret to Jan's success: [Daniel Murphy](#), NCUSCR's Director of Special Initiatives.

One of the many study tour highlights was taking a ferry from Xiamen to Jinmen, where fellow PIPer and Harvard professor [Michael Szonyi](#)—who has literally written [the island's definitive modern history](#)—served as our tour guide. Escorted by one of Michael's local contacts, we met with the Magistrate of Jinmen County before touring the island's extensive fortifications, including underground tunnels that the Magistrate dreamed of transforming into a casino to attract Mainland tourists across a lengthy bridge. But perhaps nothing illustrated the intertwining vicissitudes of history more than Maestro Wu's knife factory, where the third-generation owner—who, like many Jinmen residents, is married to a Mainlander—oversees the fashioning of fine blades from the artillery shells that pummeled the island on alternate days for nearly two decades. Wu's steel, courtesy of countless Chinese families' cutlery via the Second Artillery, proved to be of such quality that when later a friend's wife accidentally dropped one that I had gifted them into a pan, it penetrated the teflon and dug into the metal itself. As I stared out the window on the flight from Jinmen to Taipei, the Strait's fragile beauty assumed a new significance for me.

In between meetings, we PIPers built on the ties forged during team events. Prof. [Timothy Weston](#), University of Colorado, and I continued a conversation we started on the last evening in Jinmen when he invited me and other PIPers to contribute chapters to the third edition of his widely-adopted text [China in and Beyond the Headlines](#). When I struggled to complete Chinese maritime history maps for my own coedited volume [China Goes to Sea](#), Michael Szonyi and Johns Hopkins professor [Toby Meyer-Fong](#) furnished expert advice and valuable documents. For oil and gas insights, I've called repeatedly on Dr. [George Gilboy](#), who has built a brilliant career in Beijing and Perth with Woodside Energy as one of PIP's rare fellows with both academic training and corporate experience.

When I need reliable information on Chinese minorities, I know I can count on details from Prof. [Katherine Kaup](#) of Furman University. Prof. [Yanzhong Huang](#), founding editor of [Global Health Governance](#), has pioneered the study and policy implications of Chinese public health. Prof. [Steve Platt](#), whose [military history of the Taiping Rebellion in global context](#) won the [Cundill Prize](#), the largest international literary prize for an historical work, has supplied captivating reading. Profs. [Charles Laughlin](#) and [Amy Hanser](#) have taught me things about literature and cultural studies that I didn't even know I didn't know. I never walk through Beijing's "Silicon Alley"—Zhongguancun—without thinking of Prof. [Yu Zhou](#)'s [landmark study of high-tech industry](#) there. And I've just asked Prof. [Kenneth Foster](#) what to expect from China's Third Plenum Reforms.

Having completed degrees in the field myself, I'm gratified to see all PIP political scientists in my cohort—such as Profs. [Pierre Landry](#), [Peter Lorentzen](#), [Scott Kennedy](#), and [Andrew Mertha](#)—practicing the discipline at its best. For legal understanding, I can rely on Profs. [Benjamin Liebman](#), [Alex Wang](#), and [Maggie Lewis](#) of Columbia, UCLA, and Seton Hall respectively. It's been a great pleasure to see Ben and Tim Weston

recently at a conference at Notre Dame and Maggie at the Council on Foreign relations, where we're now both term members. With colleagues like these, it's impossible not to develop a nuanced sense of China in its many dimensions.

Meanwhile, as the second generation of PIP fellows, we're connected to such first-generation counterparts as Dr. [Evan Medeiros](#), Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, and Prof. [Phillip Saunders](#), Director of the National Defense University's Center for Study of Chinese Military Affairs—with whom I'm currently working on a collaborative research project. We're also connected to third-generation colleagues like Prof. [M. Taylor Fravel](#) of MIT and Prof. [Jessica Weiss](#) of Yale—whose students I've enjoyed meeting with to discuss China's military-technological modernization. A lively listserv links all three generations of fellows, in addition to the professional events that bring some of us together by subfield. This is truly a wonderful community to be a part of. I trust that a fourth generation will join us soon, and only wish that we could meet in person more extensively.

Through my participation in PIP, I had another exciting opportunity: to help plan, prepare for, escort, facilitate, and translate for a five-Member Congressional trip to Beijing, Qingdao, Chengdu, and Shanghai in April-May 2011. Hosted by NCUSCR and led by its president, [Steve Orlins](#), it was sponsored by the bipartisan U.S.-China Working Group, which educates Congressional Members and staff on Sino-American issues. This fourth trip by the working group was the first to focus on bilateral military relations. It was hosted by China's National People's Congress, which dispatched a delegation of top-level experts and capable staff to accompany us.

Ad hoc meetings on plane flights and car rides offered opportunities to learn about Steve's unique experiences on the frontier of Sino-American relations. Before beginning a successful business career and making a high-profile foray into politics, Steve was [part of the legal team that helped establish diplomatic relations with China](#), contributed to their further development at the State Department, and opened one of the first foreign law offices in Beijing.

Having helped to draft a proposed itinerary, with special focus on military facilities and institutions, I was impressed at the almost-uniformly high level of meetings that we obtained—a tribute to NCUSCR. It was truly “a trip of firsts,” including:

- the first congressional delegation to be hosted by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Chief of General Staff General Chen Bingde for dinner at China's Ministry of National Defense.
- the first foreign civilian delegation to visit the PLA Navy (PLAN) North Sea Fleet Headquarters, where we had a reception and meeting with NSF Commander Admiral Tian Zhong. Having read with great interest an article that Admiral Tian had published on non-traditional security issues, and I found him equally articulate and broadly-thinking in person.

- the first foreign delegation to visit and tour the PLAN Submarine Academy, where we explored two simulation rooms for indigenously-produced *Song*-class submarines, and witnessed a simulated torpedo firing demonstration.
- the first American civilians to board and tour a *Song*-class submarine (Hull 328), at Pier 3, Qingdao Naval Base. Our tour included details on the vessel's command structure and endurance.
- the first Congressional delegation to tour the Flying Tiger Museum in Dayi County, outside Chengdu.

As with so much in life, the best lessons came from interacting with other people, and views from afar can illuminate issues closer to home. The Flying Tiger Museum offered a heartwarming example of positive cooperation in the history in Sino-American relations. Many Chinese wanted their pictures taken with us. One senior Chinese military member of our group was amazed to find his father commemorated at the museum. Like the other Chinese officials accompanying with or meeting with us, he was extremely generous with his time and would answer virtually any question we asked. The resulting discussions were useful for all concerned. They have strengthened my own research and publication on [China's aircraft carrier development](#) and [contributions to fighting piracy off Somalia](#). The latter was rightly highlighted by our Chinese hosts as a fruitful area for further Sino-American cooperation. Indeed, our nations have since conducted two bilateral naval exercises in the Gulf of Aden.

By speaking with the Members and the two of their staffers who accompanied us, I was able to better understand the duties of American elected officials, their districts' interests, and their personal relations with China. While the Members had different backgrounds and perspectives, a common denominator was their belief in free trade's mutual benefits. As the delegation's photographer, I snapped hundreds of photos, but my shutter finger truly worked overtime during our visit to Qingdao Port, where all Members were eager to be captured chatting with workers loading and unloading the cargos of gargantuan container ships. In the sometimes-stormy seas of Sino-American relations, shared economic interests offer a rare reliable compass with which to navigate. It was one of the happiest moments in a trip full of earnestly productive exchanges that revealed differences as well as commonalities.

As an American, I was particularly impressed by the Members' eagerness to interact with students in a small panel at Sichuan University, and the candor with which they discussed their jobs and answered questions on a fusillade of topics. It was something that could never have been scripted, which is probably why it made such an impression. It was also a perfect example of how I've sometimes achieved the greatest appreciation for the American system when traveling far from Washington. More recently, I can't help noticing the unprecedentedly-accessible symbolic approach that China's new President Xi Jinping has employed in holding his own umbrella, buying his own steamed buns, and delivering his "Oval Office" New Year's address. I hope that the Chinese people can continue to pursue governance through their own officials that best addresses the massive challenges and opportunities facing their nation.

Our delegation's itinerary was packed with other fascinating meetings. In Beijing we sat down and broke bread with Chinese and American officials. We discussed regional dynamics and concerns with State Councilor Dai Bingguo in the Great Hall of the People. We addressed economic issues with Vice Premier Wang Qishan, then in charge of economic, energy and financial affairs, in China's Zhongnanhai leadership compound; as well as with scholars from the Central Party School. We enjoyed an all-too-brief meeting with Ambassador Jon Huntsman and his staff at the U.S. Embassy on the ambassador's last day in office. I have rarely seen anyone make more incisive points more concisely on Sino-American relations—it seemed a shame that he was in the process of leaving the post, but the campaign trail was calling. A tour of Chengdu Aircraft Corporation Factory 132 rounded out our defense-related visits. Though the only military aircraft we saw was a J-10 fighter display model by the compound's entrance, it was nevertheless fascinating to see firsthand sections of civilian aircraft under construction. A faculty seminar on Sino-American maritime issues at Ocean University in Qingdao, which I like to call "China's Maritime MIT," highlighted the growing potential for academic interaction.

The most touching moment of the trip for me came on the final morning, in Shanghai. One of the Members had a very personal mission to accomplish before flying home: to locate the house where his grandmother had grown up, which enabled her to escape the Holocaust a continent away—an experience shared by thousands of Jewish people. This vital Chinese contribution to furthering good in the world is an important reminder that U.S.-China relations has countless dimensions—not just in history books, but in family scrap books.

And then, all too quickly, it was over. Never have I been so sad to get on a plane to leave China, and never have I fallen asleep so quickly once aboard.

I simply cannot recommend PIP more highly to future applicants, and to the generous donors who make this valuable program possible. My only regret is that my three-year term had to end. I hope that someday my colleagues and I can be reunited *en masse* through the establishment of official alumni events.

In the meantime, I could not be more supportive of PIP and NCUSCR. Those familiar with my work know that I harbor no illusions about the ease of soon overcoming challenges in Sino-American relations, which stem not just from lack of communication but also from enduring differences in historical experiences, national interests, and political systems. But that's precisely why NCUSCR's many programs are so essential: this is a multifaceted and difficult but essential relationship that must be managed constantly and developed over decades. It's that complex and important.

That's why I stay in close touch with Jan and stop by NCUSCR's office when I can. I do so not only to try to help out where I might be most useful, but also to capture the excitement of a dynamic organization playing a unique role in facilitating this century's most critical relationship: that between the United States and China. Get involved with NCUSCR's efforts, if you aren't already, and you'll come to know exactly what I mean.