

China's development through the eyes of long-term expats

About 800,000 foreigners living in China have shared both the hardships and benefits of the country's development, and a look at China through their eyes provides insights into how the nation has been transformed and what it can offer the world.

An American in Xiamen

After living in China for 29 years, William Brown, an MBA professor at Xiamen University, is often considered something of a China expert.

Back in 1988, William sold his company and moved to Xiamen, a coastal garden city in east China's Fujian Province, with his wife and two sons.

"I chose Xiamen University because it was the only university that allowed foreigners to take their families with them to learn Chinese at that time," said the former U.S. military man, once stationed in Taiwan.

The Brown family flew from California to Hong Kong, where they took a miserable 18-hour boat ride to reach the coastal city.

Back then, there were only three bus routes in the whole city.

"The floor of the buses were made of wood, and the bus exhaust fumes could come into the bus," he said.

Brown said he has witnessed China changing from being "really backward" to moderately prosperous over 30 years.

In addition to teaching, he has been committed to developing English websites and has published more than 10 English books about Xiamen.

Brown said he was excited when he once walked into a bookstore and found that several young students were reading his books with a dictionary in their hands.

"The young people love their city and want to know a foreigner's perspective on it," he said.

This inspired him to publish the Chinese edition of the book "Discover Gulangyu." This small island in Xiamen entered the UNESCO world heritage list in July this year for its cultural history and historic buildings.

Brown said he was more than happy that a traditional Chinese version would be published in Taiwan later this year.

"Only when the youth understand history can they walk into the future," he said.

He was excited when the city of Xiamen hosted the BRICS summit from Sept. 3 to 5.

“The G7 and G20 are the past, while BRICS is the future,” he said. “BRICS offers opportunities for countries to find a way to do business.”

He said it is right that China has put forward the concept of “BRICS Plus” by inviting Egypt, Mexico, Thailand, Tajikistan and Guinea for dialogue.

A Korean in Hefei

Korean teacher Cho Sung Hye landed in Hefei, capital of east China’s Anhui Province, in 1996, and had no idea she would stay for so long. In 2006, she became the first person from the Republic of Korea (ROK) to get China’s “green card” for permanent residence.

“None of my friends back home knew where Hefei is in China, and there was not a single foreigner that I could find in the city,” Cho said, in fluent Chinese.

She remembered that 1996 was just four years after the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping made a series of landmark speeches marking China’s opening up and modernization.

There were only eight students in her Korean language class, which used the smallest classroom in Hefei College. Now the school has four Korean major classes, enrolling 500 students a year.

Over the past 20 years, Cho has seen 3,500 of her students go to the ROK for further studies.

“When I got here, I could not even find a Korean language dictionary. I asked my brother to mail me a dozen dictionaries and asked the consulate people from Shanghai for help to print teaching materials for my Chinese students,” Cho said.

She said it was the students’ thirst and passion for learning a foreign language and new knowledge that inspired her.

“Even at that time, I could feel China’s shining vigor and that it was on the way to rejuvenation into a great international power, and the world needed to establish closer ties with China,” she said.

Cho is now more than a teacher. She still routinely has 10 classes a week at school, but in 2016 the 57-year-old woman started a cultural exchange business, which recruits international talent to Anhui.

“China’s wheel of development won’t stop rolling. Too many foreign people that I know are eager to study, work and live here. I am so lucky that I’ve made it my home,” she said.

Cho said she no longer suffered from homesickness as it takes less than three hours to fly from Hefei to Incheon Airport in Seoul.

A Japanese in Beijing

Toshio Fukuda, a Japanese nano-tech scientist, made his first visit to Beijing in 1995, attending a manufacturing technology summit at the invitation of China's Ministry of Science and Technology.

Since then, his communication with China has continued. He has been teaching as a visiting professor in a number of China's high-tech institutions, including Harbin Institute of Technology, Chinese Academy of Sciences and Huazhong University of Science and Technology. From 2000, he decided to completely base his research work at Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) and has stayed ever since.

"As a scientist, I want the micro-nano field to grow bigger and deeper, no matter where my research is based," he said.

He led the innovation in developing micro-nano robots as small as a particle of dust in the air, and artificial blood vessels as thin as a capillary.

He said that Chinese people worked very hard. When he first came to China, the only computer integrated manufacturing was in a lab of Tsinghua University.

"The Chinese government did not have a lot of funding, but it funded Tsinghua's research," he said.

By 2000, he could see research on robotic technology was spreading to science institutes all over China.

Fukuda said he chose BIT as his base because of the research environment, and because the National Science Foundation provided funding for his research.

"The school has a very nice human relationship and facility, and the Chinese I know work harder than the Japanese," he said.

China is his home now, and many people tell him that he is already half-Chinese. Indeed, his favorite food is hot-pot, a spicy Sichuan-style food, and his youngest daughter also speaks Chinese.

"In 2025, micro-nano robotics will be very important for China to realize its modern industrial manufacturing goals. How can we make it different from countries? Better performance, higher efficiency and lower cost. That's what micro-nano robotics are going to do," Fukuda said.