

# Guests retrace Chinese roots

Westerners tour county in Fujian as special invitees to visit the homes of their ancestors

By **AN BALJIE** and **HU MEIDONG**  
in Fuzhou, Fujian

When Mark Becker climbed a mountain in Fuzhou in the eastern province of Fujian with his aunt and wife, in late September, he praised the efforts of President Xi Jinping that helped his family fulfill their dream of visiting the place where their ancestors lived and sometimes fought.

In the early 1900s, Becker's great-grandfather, Harry Caldwell, arrived in Guling (previously known in the West as Kuliang), a mountainous county in Fuzhou.

Caldwell spent about 40 years doing missionary work there and improving the county's educational facilities before returning to the United States during World War II.

"My grandfather's first language was really Chinese. He only spoke English until he was 3 or 4 because all his friends were Chinese children," said Becker, one of 19 people from seven families the Fuzhou government invited to visit their ancestors' old home.

Missionaries first arrived in Guling in 1886. Later, the county attracted diplomats and merchants who wanted to avoid the summer heat in Fuzhou, one of five Chinese treaty ports opened in the wake of the First Opium War (1839-42).

Becker also expressed gratitude for the efforts Xi made 25 years ago to help a widow visit Guling.

"I don't think we'd be here if he hadn't done that," Becker said. "We've all dreamed of coming here for years. We all grew up with the same stories. So for him to help us come was a wonderful thing to do."

In 1992, when Xi was Party secretary of Fuzhou, he read a story in *People's Daily* about Elizabeth Johnson Gardner, who wanted to honor her late husband's wish to revisit his childhood home by traveling to Guling herself.

In February 2012, when Xi, who was then vice-president, visited the US, he told the story of how he helped to fulfill her Guling dream.

Milton Gardner (1901-86), a professor of physics at the University of California, lived in Guling for the first nine years of his life, until 1911. He repeatedly muttered "Kuliang, Kuliang" in the final hours of his life, according to his family.

Xi said that after reading the touching story, he immediately had government officials contact Gard-

ner and invite her to visit Guling. Four months later, Gardner completed her trip to the county.

"Mrs Gardner was so excited that she had finally fulfilled her husband's last wish," Xi said later. "She said she would cherish this bond of friendship between her husband and the people of China, because after seeing for herself the beauty of Guling and the warmth of the Chinese people, she understood why her husband had been so deeply attached to the country."

Xi called on the two countries to strengthen people-to-people exchanges and build stronger public support for mutually beneficial cooperation between China and the US.

"I am sure there are many such touching stories between our two peoples," he added.

Xi still attaches great importance to people-to-people exchanges in the promotion of international relations.

At the conclusion of the BRICS summit in Xiamen, Fujian, which took place during Sept 3-5, people-to-people exchanges were highlighted, along with economic and political cooperation among the five members: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Becker has a good understanding of the friendship between the people of China and the US. His great-grandfather killed 30 to 40 tigers to protect local residents from harm.

"There was a Chinese man whose nickname was Dada, who was a very good friend of my great-grandfather and hunted tigers with him. They were best friends. He became a sort of uncle to my great-grandfather and his brothers," he said.

He added that his relatives lost contact with Dada when they left China: "That's one of the things my family has always wondered about — if there would be a way to get in touch with his family."

Elyn Gregg Cheney MacInnis is the daughter-in-law of Donald MacInnis, who came to China in the 1940s and fought the Japanese as a member of the Flying Tigers air squadron. She said her father-in-law had fallen in love with China.

"When my husband's father passed away in 2005, he sat there still, with Christmas cards from his Chinese friends held tightly in his hands," she said. "He loved China throughout his entire life."

In the last year of his life, Donald MacInnis visited China and taught English and journalism at a university in Nanping, Fujian. He contracted



Relatives of foreign nationals who lived in Guling, East China's Fujian province, in the early part of the 20th century pose for a group photo. Mark Becker stands second from left in the back row. Elyn Gregg Cheney MacInnis is first from the right, while Dean Raymond Billing is fourth from the right. PHOTOS BY HU MEIDONG / CHINA DAILY



Andrea Condit and mother Karyl, visiting Fujian province, hold a photo of J Bruce and Isabelle Eyestone, Condit's grandparents, who lived in China in the early 1900s.



A 1912 photo taken at the house of missionary AW Billing in Guling, which was known as Kuliang at the time. Billing's children are center stage. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

meningitis during his trip and died several months later after returning to the US, she said.

"In this beautiful place they shared love with the people here and were loved in return. And this love was so deep that it has reverberated through the generations, and we have been called back to this place our family once called home," she added.

The grandparents of Andrea Kathryn Condit founded a middle school in Minqing, Fujian, in the early 1900s.

Condit said that throughout the trip, she wanted to learn a great deal more about the life of her great-grandmother, who came to China alone as a single woman at age 26 and then taught at a girls' school in Fuzhou.

"The signs that pointed to different places, like the cultural center, the swimming pool and the church, are well-preserved. We are very grateful that the government has preserved the history we share with the local people," she said.

Dean Raymond Billing, grandson of Arthur W Billing, a Methodist missionary who lived in Guling from 1900 to the 1940s, said Xi had made great efforts to help the visitors trace their ancestors' Chinese roots.

"There used to be so many Westerners here, there was real connection. Xi has restored that connection. Before that, it was hard to travel here."

After discovering that the house his grandfather built was still standing, Billing said it was "amazing". His family and the current owner of the villa feature in a photo taken in front of the house.

Lin Yanan, an expert in Guling culture at East China University of Science and Technology, said the county was the first home of many Westerners who were born there, and as a result, they regarded the place as their hometown.

Yang Jie in Fuzhou contributed to this story.

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