

Gifts: Insight into Chinese tradition, progress

FROM PAGE 1

That put the DVD sets on par with more iconic Chinese items like porcelain and silk that have formed many of Beijing's gifts to foreign leaders and dignitaries.

The marked departure from tradition generated great media interest. Observers said the DVD sets reflected an accurate, changing China, even if they were surprising.

"My experience tells me it doesn't matter how many gifts you give or how expensive the gifts are ... it is important that the gifts represent China and highlight shared values," said Lu Peixin, former acting head of the protocol department of the Foreign Ministry.

"Gifts like contemporary movies and TV dramas are a good choice as they help the world better know today's China and the Chinese," said Lu, 77.

"But I could hardly have thought of them when I was working in the ministry," he said, laughing.

"China today has much more things to present than before," said Lu, who spent more than half of his diplomatic career, from 1960 to 1997, in the protocol department.

After serving several generations of leaders, including Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, Lu saw at first hand the changing tastes in gifts.

Modern China's diplomatic gifts are not only a token of friendship, they can also provide a tantalizing insight into its characteristics, tradition and progress.

Practical beginnings

When Chairman Mao Zedong visited the Soviet Union in December 1949, just two months after the founding of the People's Republic of China, he presented gifts that were carefully planned but probably very rare in modern diplomatic history.

Besides tea, porcelain and other offerings, Mao personally assigned two railway carriages to be packed with vegetables and fruits including cabbage, scallions and kumquats, as gifts from the newborn country to its then "big brother."

"In the early days of New China, we were not quite clear about gift-giving. So we tended to give a large amount of practical gifts that could be used, like food and clothes, to benefit more people rather than just the top leadership," Lu said.

Being practical and useful to the greater public also mean different things in different times.

From a bicycle to former US president George H. W. Bush and a set of audio equipment to Pyongyang in the late 1980s, to the sewing machines and skincare products that first lady Peng Liyuan gave to Tanzanian women in 2013, China's gifts also portray how lives have changed in recent years.

Yao Yao, chief of a soft power studies center under China Foreign Affairs University, said: "It doesn't matter whether people in other countries like the songs or TV dramas produced by today's China, we should at least help them know about today's China."

"Most issues of contention arise from a lack of understanding," he said.

"It's not an easy task, but we have to continue presenting a true picture of the country."

Soft power

Ling Di, a brand director of Perfect World (Beijing) Film and Entertainment Co, which produced the shows included in the DVD gift sets, noticed that the Chinese government has been paying increasing attention to spreading China's soft power and development through its rich culture and modern values, rather than "show how wealthy we have become."

"Popular TV drama and movies are the most straightforward way to demonstrate China and how ordinary Chinese people are living," he said.

"Family intrigue, romance and friendship can strike a chord in any audience regardless of their nationality."

The DVD sets that Xi presented to Brazil and Argentina during his visit to Latin America in July included subtitles in Chinese, English, Spanish and Portuguese.

Zhang Jingying remembered a different type of gift and how it has been updated.

The general manager of the Tianjin-based Flying Pigeon bicycle brand, behind the first bicycle after the founding of New China, referred to a Flying Pigeon bicycle that was given to former US president George H. W. Bush. An electric bike was subsequently presented to US President Barack Obama.

"From the bicycle to Bush in 1989 to the electric one to Obama in 2009, the technologies we used have changed beyond all recognition. Take the one to Obama for example — the lithium batteries we used could match standards in the US or Europe," Zhang said.

The role of bicycles has also changed a

A LOOK BACK: THE EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL GIFTS

2015



During a special luncheon on the final day of President Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea in **JULY 2014**, Xi presented a scroll bearing the image of ancient Chinese general Zhao Yun, a CD of songs by first lady Peng Liyuan, who is also a famous folk singer in China, and a piece of handicraft shaped like the Rose of Sharon, South Korea's national flower, to his South Korean counterpart Park Geun-hye, the Korea Times reported. In Park's 2007 autobiography, "Despair

Trains Me And Hope Moves Me", she referred to Zhao as her "first love".

Also in July, President Xi decided that the movie *Love Is Not Blind* and TV series *Beijing Youth* were good enough to be presented as State gifts to his Latin American hosts, putting the DVD sets on par with more iconic Chinese items like porcelain and silk that have formed many of Beijing's gifts to foreign leaders and dignitaries.

2010



Accompanying President Xi Jinping on his visit to Tanzania in **MARCH 2013**, first lady Peng Liyuan brought a variety of gifts to the Women and Development Foundation in the African country. The list included sewing machines, schoolbags, pearls, Pechoin skincare products and the Shu embroidery of a giant panda. These Chinese brands set the Internet abuzz and experienced a surge in sales after the list was exposed.

2005



Most of the gift exchanges between leaders are carried out by protocol departments or other bodies without the presence of leaders. However, then president Hu Jintao personally introduced a gift to visiting US President Barack Obama in **2009**: a wooden framed and matted fine silk embroidery depicting a portrait study of the First Family. Artists in Nantong, Jiangsu province took four months to complete the embroidery. The team presented another silk embroidery depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin as a gift from President Xi Jinping to Putin during his first visit to Russia in **MARCH 2013**.

2000



1995



1990



When George H. W. Bush was the Chief of the US Liaison Office in the People's Republic of China from 1974 to the end of 1975, he was keen on visiting Beijing's ancient hutong alleys by bicycle. When he visited China as US president in **1989**, then premier Li Peng offered him a Flying Pigeon bicycle. Bush jumped onto the bike as soon as he saw it in the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. The bicycle was later exhibited in the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

1985

In November 1984, the Shanghai Feiyue Audio Equipment Co Ltd was restructured into a joint stock company, becoming the first stock company in China to issue shares to the general public. During a **NOVEMBER 1986** meeting in Beijing between late leader Deng Xiaoping and John Phelan, then chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, Deng offered Phelan a share certificate of the company, marking the US guest as its only foreign shareholder. The offering by Deng sparked wide speculation among international media, which said the move signaled that the Chinese economy would become increasingly market-driven.

1980



Pat Nixon, wife of former US president Richard Nixon, visited pandas in Beijing during Nixon's groundbreaking visit to China in **1972**, which marked the beginning of the normalization of bilateral ties. During the visit, then premier Zhou Enlai announced the gift of two pandas to the United States. About 20,000 visitors visited the National Zoo in Washington to see the pair on the first day they were put on public view. The gift became a prominent example of "panda diplomacy" — in which the Chinese government loans pandas to foreign countries as gestures of goodwill.

1975

1970



It doesn't matter how many gifts you give or how expensive the gifts are... it is important that the gifts represent China and highlight shared values."

LU PEIXIN, FORMER ACTING HEAD OF THE PROTOCOL DEPARTMENT OF THE FOREIGN MINISTRY

lot in China, she said.

In the 1980s, bicycles were the top means of transportation and Bush was keen to visit places in Beijing by bicycle when he worked in China before he became president.

"Now they are more about leisure, physical exercise and environmental protection," she said.

Lu said when Bush first saw the gift standing in the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, he just jumped onto it and kept riding "so fast and happily that the Chinese security guards could barely follow him".

This bicycle was later exhibited in a prominent position in the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

On the occasion of Obama's 53rd birthday in August, The Washington Post listed all 274 gifts he received from 2009 to 2012. Among the 15 gifts given by China during the period, the Flying Pigeon electric bicycle ranked first.

Economic effects

Diplomacy has never been independent from economic interests and the promotion of products related to diplomatic gifts is a common occurrence.

When first lady Peng gave the Pechoin skincare products to African women, the 83-year-old brand and other homemade skincare products in China saw a surge in sales.

Ling, from Perfect World, said the company would "definitely" promote itself overseas as a producer of the national gifts.

"The government has set the platform for the development of China's cultural industry, and we have to perform well on that platform," he said.

A delegation from the company had traveled with Xi to Latin America to seek business opportunities, following a wave of Chinese TV drama exports.

Mao Doudou And Her Sweet Days, a 36-episode light comedy about a modern Chinese couple and their relationship with each other's families, struck a chord with African audiences last year. Other TV series have gone down well in Southeast Asia.

"Both the company and the directors were surprised by the gifts chosen for Latin America. Beijing's decision greatly encouraged us to match Western TV levels. As long as we produce something that is really high quality, it can be a national gift and honor for us," Ling said.

Zhang said Flying Pigeon has established more than 60 stores across China to sell bicycles of the same model as those given to foreign leaders.

Lu said this was not something new. When Beijing was considering giving a cashmere coat to visiting former Soviet Union president Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989, many Chinese coat producers flocked to the protocol department he worked for, hoping the free sample they brought might be chosen.

The foreign ministry usually did not pay for the gifts. It would give a certificate to the producer instead, Lu said.

"The issuing of such certificates has become more strict due to the economic windfall it can lead to," Lu said.

Some gifts can also bolster development.

In July, Xi also presented former Cuban leader Fidel Castro with 5 kg of moringa seeds, an edible plant whose Chinese name literally means "spicy wood", and promised closer cooperation with Cuba to develop the plant.

In 2011, Xi, then vice-president, visited Cuba and Castro's house, which was shaded by moringa trees. Soon after the visit, the Ministry of Agriculture launched a program with Cuba regarding pest control, breeding and cultivation techniques.

Liu Changfen, an expert at the Tropical Crop Research Institute in Yunnan province, said the move reflected China's own rich experience in moringa planting.

The seeds were "a perfect gift from the country", Liu said.

Contact the writer at zhaoshengnan@chinadaily.com.cn

Li Xiang in Tianjin and Chen Jie in Beijing contributed to this story.