A day in the life of an MCEPA student

In a Q&A complementing our Flickr tour of a day in the life of Charlie Vest, the 2019 MCEPA candidate paints a picture of what attending GPS looks like today

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

Tossing around his jianzi (think Chinese hacky sack), you can usually spot Vest in the quad at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), with his signature shades and Chuck Taylors, all smiles.

“I started playing it when I was in China. Traditionally it’s a children’s playground toy,” laughs Vest. “Yet old people, like me, are also really great at it...the game has something for everybody!”

Growing up in Fort Collins, Colorado, his interest in China grew out of a desire to travel and live abroad during his freshmen year at Colorado State University (CSU), Fort Collins. After connecting with a great teacher, he wound up majoring in international studies, with a focus on China.

As part of the first incoming class of Master of Chinese Economic and Political Affairs (MCEPA) students, and the only American, Vest offers us a unique insight into his daily life including his love of music. Ask him about the time he played trumpet at bar shows and festivals in China.

Check out our Flickr album for the full story.

What drove you to GPS to pursue your MCEPA?
“During my sophomore year at CSU, I studied abroad at Beijing Foreign Studies University and completely fell in love with China. After graduation, I worked as an English translator for a while, until landing a job at the China Energy Storage Alliance in Beijing. It was a really interesting place to be at, working for a trade group as a researcher in clean energy.

It was actually a GPS alumni and mentor from my study abroad program, Brian Eyler MPIA ‘05 who currently works at the Mekong Policy Project at D.C. Stimson Center, that turned me onto the program. My Dad also lives here, so it was a soft-landing pad to choose San Diego!”

What is your specialization track and why did you choose it?

“I’ve always been interested in environmental issues since the beginning...China has amazing biodiversity and NGOs. Most of my academic work in the Chinese environment track so far has been on decarbonizing China’s power grid. I study how to make institutional changes, make the grid more efficient and how to use wind and solar more efficiently.”

The Chinese government has been proactive, with the largest installation of wind and solar power. They are investing a lot in trying to clean up the air...it’s a really great time to be working on these issues.”

Is there a particular class or professor that already has made an impact on you?

“I have really enjoyed Professor Barry Naughton’s class on the social and economic development of China. It was a great introduction to the tools and framework to understand China today.

It gives a great overview of the economy since the early 1980s. I mean he literally wrote the textbook on China’s economy, it’s hard to beat that for your professor!”

Is there one facet of the program that has been most challenging?

“I would say the quantitative element of the program, as I come from a more political science background. However, when working at China’s Energy Storage Alliance, I realized I needed these skills to make me more employable.

It is definitely preparing me to work in an environmentally-focused NGO or
private sector cleantech consulting job post-graduation.”

What motivates you to come to campus every day?

“In my MCEPA cohort, I am the only American. All of my colleagues are from Hong Kong and mainland China. I am learning stuff from them every day. Really interesting perspectives on an academic level.

The relationships are mutually beneficial, as I love asking questions and learning from them. It’s a really great relationship and connection. I also have been enjoying the Friday China Research Workshops. It’s a great way for us to learn about research from visiting scholars.”

What’s your favorite neighborhood in San Diego?

“I live in Ocean Beach (OB). I love the mellow neighborhood. When I’m not at home studying, I’m hanging at New Break Coffee. It’s definitely the best neighborhood in San Diego. It’s a great little beach town. I also love going to the dog beach. While I don’t have a dog yet, I can get my fix while I’m there!”

Amid your rigorous academic schedule, in what ways do you strike a work-life balance?

“While I grew up landlocked, I have the benefit now of living close to the beach, so I get a chance to surf whenever I can. It’s been about a year and half and I absolutely love it.”