

**Rebuilding Sino-U.S. People-to-people Exchanges:  
Personal Reflections**

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As the relationship between the two most important countries in today's world, China and the U.S., relations have transcended beyond the scope of bilateral ties and are crucial to the future of global affairs. Since the two countries officially established diplomatic relations in 1979, the relationship has gone through ups and downs, but, as a whole, moved forward. However, over the past decade, factors such as the internal affairs of both countries, the COVID-19 pandemic, the international geopolitical landscape, and shifts in their respective strengths have plunged Sino-U.S. relations to its lowest ebb since diplomatic ties were established. Due to escalating confrontations and precautionary measures, compounded by deficits in mutual understanding and trust, normal interactions and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries have been directly affected.

This past January, I traveled to the United States as part of an overseas research program organized by my university. During the trip, my colleagues and I visited Chicago, Des Moines, San Francisco, and Atlanta. We had the opportunity to engage in friendly communications with faculty and students from Northwestern University, Stanford University, and Emory University. However, upon arriving in Chicago, we were detained by U.S. Customs for nearly three hours, during which three of my colleagues were taken for interrogation.

In fact, since Trump came to power, the United States has frequently restricted the entry of Chinese citizens for the sake of so-called "national security." Consequently, numerous Chinese students, scholars, technical

personnel, and media professionals have been refused visas every year. Cases where Chinese citizens get questioned or have their visas canceled and repatriated have become increasingly common, creating significant artificial barriers to civil exchanges between China and the United States. Although it may be challenging to restore Sino-U.S. relations to the level it was in the early 21st century in the near future, the significance of rebuilding people-to-people exchanges between the two countries to bring the relations back on the right track is increasingly paramount.

### **Why Sino-U.S. People-to-people Exchanges Matter**

As a Chinese saying goes, “Friendship between people holds the key to amity between two countries.” Looking back on history, we can see clearly that none of the high-stake events in Sino-U.S. relations would have been possible without people-to-people relations. During the World War II, the Chinese and American people forged a bond of the Flying Tigers, which has stood the test of blood and fire. In 1971, a small ball moved the globe, leading to the handshake across the Pacific. Today, Kuliang Friends continue to add new chapters to a century-old story of friendship. The Philadelphia Orchestra returned to China for a concert in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of this exchange [1].<sup>1</sup>

However, identity politics in the United States, which has fueled class antagonisms and divisions, has led both major political parties to redirect conflicts towards China. This shift has contributed to a rising Sinophobic sentiment and negative perceptions of China within American society. Against this backdrop, it is essential to strengthen Sino-U.S. people-to-people exchanges to broaden consensus between the two

<sup>1</sup> See “Mao Ning: None of the high-stake events in Sino-U.S. relations would have been possible without the reaching out to each other by our peoples,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, November 17, 2023, available at : [http://russiaembassy.fmprc.gov.cn/sp\\_683685/wjbfyrlxjzh\\_683691/202311/t20231117\\_11182583.shtml](http://russiaembassy.fmprc.gov.cn/sp_683685/wjbfyrlxjzh_683691/202311/t20231117_11182583.shtml).

peoples. This will encourage both governments to formulate mutually beneficial policies aligned with public opinion, thereby ensuring that the relationship between the two countries will not deviate from the keynote of stable development.

Education plays an important role in Sino-U.S. people-to-people exchanges. In 1979, Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping paid an official visit to the United States and signed the U.S.-China Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement with President Jimmy Carter. This landmark agreement laid the foundation for bilateral cooperation in science, technology, and education between the two countries. In 1985, China and the United States signed the Protocol for Cooperation in Educational Exchanges, which solidified the educational cooperation programs, including the Fulbright program, under a framework of intergovernmental agreement. Throughout the 21st century, both countries have engaged in numerous substantive educational cooperation projects based on common interests: New York University Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, Wenzhou-Kean University, and many others have thrived as collaborative educational ventures between China and the United States.

During the Obama administration, Sino-U.S. education cooperation entered a golden age. The U.S. government launched the “100,000 Strong Initiative” in 2009 and “1 Million Strong Initiative” in 2015. These initiatives aimed to increase the number of American students studying in China to 100,000 and 1 million, respectively, with the goal of cultivating a group of individuals knowledgeable about China across various fields. At that time, the United States became the second-largest source country for international students in China. Concurrently, the Chinese government

initiated the “Three 10,000 Initiative”, which included sending 10,000 Chinese students to the United States for doctoral degrees and inviting an equivalent number of American students to participate in the “Chinese Bridge” program. In 2011, the Chinese government set up 10,000 scholarships to bolster Sino-U.S. educational cooperation. As a result, the number of Chinese students studying in the United States surged from 98,000 in the 2008-2009 academic year to 350,000 in the 2016-2017 academic year. Simultaneously, the peak number of American students in China occurred in 2012, reflecting the vigorous promotion of educational exchanges by both governments [2].<sup>2</sup>

In addition to educational cooperation, China and the United States established a new bilateral consultation mechanism in 2010 to enhance people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. Since then, they have conducted seven rounds of high-level consultations, yielding fruitful achievements from various sectors. In the field of science and technology, the two countries have launched exchange programs and initiatives for young Chinese scientists to visit the United States. Both countries have also agreed to collaborate on joint research in clean energy and established platforms for cross-border innovation and entrepreneurship cooperation. In cultural exchanges, the China National Symphony Orchestra has been invited to perform in 29 American cities across 16 states, and the Across the Pacific-China Arts Festival has been regularly held in the United States. In sports diplomacy, ball games have become integral to Sino-U.S. relations. Chinese enterprises and the four major American professional sports leagues have engaged in practical

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Goodier and Amy Hawkins, “US-China cultural exchange at low point after tensions and Covid, data shows,” The Guardian, July 22, 2023, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/22/us-china-cultural-exchange-at-low-point-after-tensions-and-covid-data-shows>.

cooperation on cross-border talent selection, training, and the development of sports, tourism, and recreation complexes. In public health, the two countries have worked together on medical assistance to third countries and collaborated on the construction of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) during the Ebola epidemic.

As a critical driver of national soft power, people-to-people exchanges have strengthened social bonds and integration between China and the United States. Civil interactions between the two countries have also made great contributions to enhancing mutual understanding, trust and cultural appreciation, becoming foundational pillars of the Sino-U.S. relations. According to Gallup, the favorability of the U.S. public towards China experienced only slight fluctuations from 2009 to 2018, a period when Sino-U.S. people-to-people exchanges continued to flourish, despite challenges such as Obama's East Asia-Pacific Rebalance aimed at containing China's influence and Trump's initiation of a trade war [3].<sup>3</sup>

In Contrast, Trump unilaterally initiated a “cultural decoupling” from China in 2020 by suspending the Fulbright program with China, restricting Chinese STEM students and scholars from conducting research in the United States, shortening the visa validity period of Chinese journalists stationed in the United States, and designating the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a diplomatic mission. In this context, the flow of people between the two countries has been labeled as “politicized.” Combined with the impact of COVID-19, people-to-people exchanges between China and the United States have nearly ground to a halt. As

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<sup>3</sup> “Is your overall opinion of China very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable or very unfavorable?” Gallup, available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>.

expected, Americans' negative attitudes towards China have increased sharply, with the percentage of the population holding strongly negative views rising from 13% in 2018 to 45% in 2023 [4].<sup>4</sup> A poll conducted by Tsinghua University indicates that 59.1% of Chinese held a negative impression of the U.S. in 2023, whereas a similar poll conducted by Stanford University shows the percentage reaching 75% [5].<sup>5</sup>

By comparing the above statistics, it becomes evident that maintaining people-to-people exchanges between China and the United States is crucial for easing political friction and managing the structural contradictions between the two countries.

During my visit to the United States, I met an American student at Stanford University who had a strong admiration for Chinese culture. However, she had studied Chinese only in Taiwan and had never been to mainland China, which limited her understanding of China to a superficial level. She was also influenced by certain "Taiwan independence" ideas. In addition, I also got to know two students minoring in Chinese at Emory University. They both had a rich knowledge about contemporary Chinese literature and movies, and expressed a strong desire to study in China in the future. However, their classmates and family members had limited understanding of China, and like the Standard student, was vulnerable to negative influences from media propaganda and political narratives that are hostile toward China.

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<sup>4</sup> "Is your overall opinion of China very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable or very unfavorable?" Gallup, available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> 《“中国人的国际安全观”民意调查报告（2023）》，Center for International Security and Strategy, May 24, 2023, pp.23；Adam Y. Liu, Xiaojun Li and Songying Fang, "Unpacking 'the West': Divergence and Asymmetry in Chinese Public Attitudes Towards Europe and the United States," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, No.1, Vol.52, 2023, pp.119-133.

Before my departure, I was also concerned about facing unfair treatment or security threats. Except for the unpleasant experience at U.S. ports, everyone I met during my visit was friendly and hospitable, and the overall social security situation was not as bad as I had initially feared. Therefore, based on my personal experience interacting with American people, I have learned that only through real participation in people-to-people exchanges can individuals from both countries dispel misunderstandings about each other and strengthen the public opinion's foundation for the stable development of the Sino-U.S. relations.

### **Rebuilding Sino-U.S. People-to-People Exchanges in Tough Times**

**The healthy development of Sino-U.S. relations hinges on close contact at high levels.** Given that the current Sino-U.S. relations are at a low point, resuming high-level exchanges is essential to gradually restoring people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. Since the escalation of the Sino-U.S. trade dispute in 2019, there has been a significant reduction in high-level exchanges, leading to intensified mutual strategic suspicions. After Biden took office, the high-level talks between China and the United States in Alaska ended without results. With no direct dialogue channels at the top level, Sino-U.S. relations continue to stagnate. However, since May 2023, the two governments have resumed high-level contacts in accordance with the consensus reached at the Bali Summit between President Xi Jinping and President Biden. Several senior U.S. officials have successively visited China: Secretary of State, Antony Blinken; Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen; Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry; Secretary of Commerce, Gina Raimondo; and Majority Leader of the Senate, Chuck Schumer. Meanwhile, Chinese officials including Politburo Member and

Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, and Vice Premier, He Lifeng, have been invited to visit the United States.

Last November, President Xi Jinping visited San Francisco at the invitation of President Biden. In addition to reaching significant agreements in political, diplomatic, military security, global governance, and anti-drug cooperation, the two leaders unanimously expressed their intention to introduce more measures facilitating people-to-people exchanges and promoting cultural communications between China and the United States. With the intensification of high-level contacts between the two countries, the most immediate benefit has been a significant increase in Sino-U.S. scheduled passenger flights. Since March 31<sup>st</sup>, Chinese and U.S. airlines have been permitted to operate a total of 100 regular passenger flights per week. Although it is only one-third of the pre-COVID-19 frequency, it marks a significant breakthrough following the leaders' meeting in San Francisco last year, which provides great convenience for the people of both countries to engage in economic and trade cooperation, educational exchanges, family visits and tourism. It also clears logistical obstacles for individuals involved in promoting stable development of bilateral relations, such as friendly civilians, local officials, as well as cultural and educational figures from both nations.

**The future of the Sino-U.S. relations depend on the youth.** Young people are not only witnesses but also beneficiaries of the development of Sino-U.S. relations. They will play a pivotal role as “American hands” and “Chinese hands” in the future. Their understanding of both cultures will directly influence their perception of Sino-U.S. relations. According to a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, young Americans generally hold a more positive attitude towards China



compared to their elderly counterparts, with little apparent hostility on most China-related issues. Nearly 60% of American millennials oppose restrictions on educational exchanges between China and the United States [6].<sup>6</sup> Although today's young Americans hardly view Sino-U.S. relations through the lens of Cold War mentality as their parents did, there remains a serious imbalance in the proportion of Chinese and American students studying in each other's country as the frictions continue. The U.S. ambassador to China Nicholas Burns once said that six or seven years ago, there were 15,000 American students in China; that number dropped to 350 in 2022. While the number of American students rebounded to 700 in 2023, it does not represent interest by Washington [7].

Nevertheless, the encouragement is that recent youth exchanges between China and the United States are showing signs of warming. Activities such as reciprocal visits between the table tennis teams from Peking University and University of Virginia, and youth exchanges between the High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China and Muscatine High School in Iowa, continue to foster bilateral relations. Furthermore, Tsinghua University and Beijing Foreign Studies University have recruited students to carry out cultural research in the United States, while China has also warmly welcomed American students for exchange programs. It is necessary to establish government-sponsored scholarships and intercollegiate cooperation programs through official channels, universities, and non-governmental think tanks, in order to attract more young Americans to study in China and further enhance their understanding of Chinese culture. More academic seminars, subject

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Kafura, "Generational Differences on US-China Relations," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Jan 14, 2022, available at: <https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/generational-differences-us-china-relations>.

competitions, internships, and practical activities should be organized among Chinese and American young people. From a technical standpoint, the visa application process for international students can be streamlined, and social media platforms can be effectively utilized to provide American youth with a more comprehensive and authentic view of China.

**The vitality of Sino-U.S. relations comes from exchanges at subnational levels.** Against the backdrop of ongoing tension in Sino-U.S. relations, local dialogues carry lower risks and are more conducive to bridging the differences between the two countries. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, China and the United States have set up 284 pairs of sister provinces and sister cities, encompassing more than 90% of American states. For instance, Iowa became a sister province with Hebei in 1983. President Xi Jinping led delegations to Iowa in 1985 and 2012 to study American agricultural practices. During his visits, he formed a deep friendship with Rick Kimberly, the owner of Kimberly Farms. Fortunately, during my stay in Iowa, I had the opportunity to visit Kimberly Farms upon invitation. According to Mr. Kimberly himself, he had been to China over 20 times, participating in numerous agricultural demonstration projects in Hebei, Zhejiang, and other regions. As a result, he has become a promoter of agricultural exchanges between China and the United States.

California, as the state with the largest Chinese American population, serves as another example of local exchanges between China and the United States. It has a long history of climate governance cooperation with China. In 2019, the University of California, Berkeley collaborated with Tsinghua University to establish the California-China Climate Institute. In 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom became the first U.S. local

official to visit China after the pandemic, furthering California's strong tradition of climate cooperation with China. During his visit, he focused on discussions with China regarding carbon emissions, electric vehicles, and clean energy initiatives. Additionally, under an agreement between the San Diego Zoo and the China Wildlife Conservation Association, California has become the first state in America to revive “panda diplomacy” with China, which will serve as a significant foundation for international panda conservation cooperation between China and the United States, while also fostering deeper friendship between the two peoples.

### **Conclusion**

People-to-people exchanges serve not only as the foundation for stabilizing Sino-U.S. relations but also as an important means to manage and resolve differences between the two countries. At present, Sino-U.S. relations are situated at a historically low position. Frictions in political, economic and military aspects, compounded by the American stereotype of China as a strategic competitor, remain major obstacles to the normalization of the bilateral relations. Communications at the local level also face the challenge of stagnant growth. As the 2024 American presidential election approaches, politicians from both parties are expected to intensify their rhetoric on Sino-U.S. relations. The potential turmoil arising from American domestic political struggles could introduce further uncertainty into the bilateral relations.

Faced with these challenges, both China and the United States should continue to promote people-to-people exchanges, putting up a new “ping-pong table” to enhance mutual understanding and trust between each other. This effort not only requires dialogues and negotiation among

high-level officials to remove unnecessary political barriers, but also demands expanding channels of communication among youth to foster a foundation of mutual amity. Meanwhile, innovating local cooperation mechanisms will also strengthen the public support for mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries.

In conclusion, people-to-people exchanges serve as a critical link in Sino-U.S. relations, and rebuilding these exchanges represents an arduous yet essential task.

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