
Program Brief

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“China-United States Sustained Dialogue”

A Panel Discussion with Dr. Wang Jisi, Maxine Thomas, Hal Saunders, and Dr. Zi Zhongyun

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At a recent luncheon at The Nixon Center, four American and Chinese scholars discussed the attitudes and values that underlie American and Chinese perceptions of each other and how those values affect the fundamental nature of U.S.-China relationship. The research, done in both countries, found that the views of the two populations are not monolithic, that these perceptions vary from issue to issue, and that Americans and Chinese can reach consensus if the dialogue is based on mutual understanding.

These American and Chinese perspectives were analyzed in the recently published *China-United States Sustained Dialogue: 1986-2001*, (edited by Maxine Thomas and Zhao Mei) a joint project of the Institute of American Studies (IAS), the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. *China-United States Sustained Dialogue: 1986-2001* is the latest report of the joint China-U.S. Dialogue started in 1986, and dedicated to promoting open communications in the U.S.-China relationship. The four scholars presenting findings were: Wang Jisi - Senior Research Fellow and Director of IAS at CASS; Maxine Thomas - General

Counsel at the Kettering Foundation; Zi Zhongyun - Senior Research Fellow at IAS; and Hal Saunders - Director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation. David M. Lampton, Director of Chinese Studies at The Nixon Center, and David Mathews, President of the Kettering Foundation, provided opening remarks for the discussion.

Maxine Thomas: “Average Americans Thinking About China”

Maxine Thomas addressed average Americans' perceptions of China. Most often, the first impressions of China held by Americans are hazy and based on bits of information gleaned from various sources: newspapers, movies, books, Chinese restaurants, etc. These initial impressions were generally similar amongst participants and resembled stereotypes rather than well formed opinions. When asked to examine specific issues in more detail, answers became more complex and diverse. Human rights are an example of this (see below). Individual experiences, history, and biases came through to color the responses of the participants.

Although this helped provide a higher resolution in their images of China, it also exposed conflicting feelings that Americans have on this topic. This research is based on forums and focus groups held in communities across America with hundreds of participants.

The concept of human rights in China helps to illustrate the divisions among American perceptions. To a majority of participants, the concept was vague and most asked for clarification, especially when distinguishing between “human rights” and “civil rights.” Many participants brought up the image of the heroic young man facing down the tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Others introduced the idea that America had its own human rights problems by citing the Watts riots in the 1960s and the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King verdict. One respondent said, “It’s like the pot calling the kettle black.”

Wang Jisi: “China-U.S. Relations at a Crossroads”

Dr. Wang Jisi presented the findings of the studies on how Chinese view America. The studies were conducted mainly at two levels: among everyday Chinese, and among the political and economic elite. Most average Chinese had two different perceptions of America. Domestic issues received positive responses. Chinese envied America’s wealth, stable political system, and advanced technology; but there were also mixed feelings on the American crime rate. Chinese views of American foreign policy, especially in Asia, were negative and often marked by perceptions of American hegemony.

The perceptions of officials and business leaders revealed interesting contrasts. In one survey, seventy percent of Chinese participants believed that Americans see China as the greatest threat to U.S. security. Nevertheless, the majority of Chinese (70 to 80 percent) also felt increasingly optimistic about the future of U.S.-China relations. At the Central Party School, a training center for senior Chinese leaders, eighty-five

percent felt optimistic about a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, despite widespread resentment of what they see as U.S. interference. When asked “Why is the U.S. rich?”; most respondents pointed to America’s tradition of welcoming immigrants, its abundance of natural resources, and its open market economy. This conflicts with some official explanations that cite imperialism and working class exploitation as the basis for American prosperity. Notably, many of these surveys were conducted between April 1st and September 11. The terrorist attacks on America may have influenced some of these perceptions in the meantime.

Hal Saunders: “Sustained Dialogue and the Deployment of Realistic Empathy”

Hal Saunders argued that a “sustained dialogue” between the U.S. and China is vital to a mature bilateral relationship. “Sustained dialogue is a systematic process that brings people back together again, over and over again, in an intensive progression of thought together that changes relationships.” Saunders believes that this is a new paradigm in bilateral relations. Unlike the realist paradigm that emphasized “billiard ball-like” interaction between governments and states, this approach stresses the relationship between two whole bodies politic.

Saunders pointed out two propositions underlying the research project. To start, government policies are on shaky ground when they fail to account for the full range of elements in the overall relationship, including social and cultural factors. Next, efforts to significantly change the relationship require addressing the full scope of ties. Focusing on the broad relationship in this way adds an important human and the cultural dimension to the interaction between the two countries. Americans often view Chinese opinion as monolithic, that Chinese unanimously believe what government authorities tell them. Similarly, many Chinese see America as hegemonic and arrogant. However, both of these views only register the

most sensational trends and fail to account for the rich diversity of individual perceptions.

Saunders argued that the April EP-3 incident was the most recent example of misperceptions causing a mishandling of the relationship. Right from the start, the American and Chinese governments traded charges and demands at the highest levels, turning the incident into a confrontation. Instead, Saunders felt a sustained dialogue should have been used to facilitate the deployment of “realistic empathy”, a term coined by Robert McNamara. Realistic empathy is “trying to understand others and their pictures of the world, our pictures of each other, their needs, our needs, so that we try to engage whole human beings and whole bodies politic in dialogue.” Saunders believes that China and the U.S. should act less like governments when interacting and more like real people sharing a relationship.

Zi Zhongyun - “Present at the Creation”

Dr. Zi Zhongyun reflected on the history of the project since it began in 1986. During this period the atmosphere has been friendly, even

though the first topic of the dialogue was Taiwan - the most sensitive subject in U.S.-China relations. A spirit of mutual accommodation has sustained the project through the ups and downs of the U.S.-China relationship, including Tiananmen and the EP-3 incident. She credited the inclusion of young scholars in the dialogues as helping to sustain the project into the future.

Although none of the issues between the two nations has been completely solved, Zi believes that one arguable achievement is the reduction of the gap in understanding between the two countries. As Zi said, “Real understanding is real progress.” An encouraging example of this, according to Zi, is that Chinese no longer need as much background education when considering U.S.-China relations as in the past. The expanded body of common knowledge about America is a sign that Chinese are increasingly informed about the United States and the relationship between the two countries.

This Program Brief was prepared by Nixon Center staff member Kelani C. Chan.

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