THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

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2015

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Kettering and China:

Thirty Years and Counting

As two nations struggle to come to grips with each other, the foundation looks at what two peoples think of the relationship.

Maxine Thomas

In 2016, I will travel with a delegation including Kettering president David Mathews, David Lampton, and Kettering board member Hank Meijer to Beijing, China, to celebrate 30 years of dialogue between the Institute of American Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the Kettering Foundation. This relationship builds on the very early normalizing efforts between China and the United States, which Kettering was involved in from the start.

The People’s Republic of China was established under Mao Zedong in 1949. It was characterized by hostility toward the West and the outside world. US opinion of China was equally cool, with many Americans viewing China as a direct military threat. It would be another 20 years before the United States formally acknowledged an interest in connecting with China. In 1972, as a part of its international outreach, Kettering Foundation president Robert Chollar took a delegation to China just months after President Richard Nixon’s official visit, which opened up relations between our two countries. From these humble beginnings, connections between China and the Kettering Foundation have deepened.

Robert Chollar and Professor Yang, 1977

In July 2008, The Public Policy Workshop is renamed the Deliberative Democracy Exchange (DDEX).
All along, the two sides have struggled with the distinction between what our governments were doing and saying and what the public, on both sides, thought about the relationship.

Focus on the Public

As the foundation does in all its research, the work has focused on the public. At the first meeting in 1985, participants included David Lampton, now with the Johns Hopkins China Institute, Kettering vice president Rob Lehman, Kettering program officer Suzanne Morse Moomaw, Kettering vice president Phillips Ruopp, and conference coordinator Patricia Coggins. This initial meeting resulted in citizen-to-citizen meetings held the following year in the United States. Over time, participants on the US side included leaders like Robert McNamara, Kenneth Lieberthal, William Taft IV, James Leach, Donald Oberdorfer, and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Early dialogue members from China included Li Shenzhi, head of the Institute of American Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Huan Xiang, head of the Center of International Strategic Studies of the State Council; and participants from the Beijing Institute of International Strategic Studies. It also included young scholars like Wang Jisi and Yuan Ming, who went on to have illustrious careers and now head the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University.

The central question for these dialogues was how to maintain a US-China relationship in the wake of China, Russia, and US-Russia challenges. All along, the two sides have struggled with the distinction between what our governments were doing and saying and what the public, on both sides, thought about the relationship. Over the years, Kettering networks held deliberative forums using National Issues Forums issue guides on the public’s views of China (China-U.S. Relations: What Direction Should We Pursue? and China-U.S. Relations: How Should We Approach Human Rights?), and Chinese colleagues began some innovative Chinese public opinion research (something not really done before in China). In 2001, we jointly published a volume in Chinese and English, China-United States Sustained Dialogue, 1986-2001, and a summary history of the dialogue. Along the way, we not only got to know more about each other but also were able to present deeper and more nuanced understandings of our countries, something the Chinese were particularly interested in. Each of our trips to China included visits to the US ambassador in Beijing, and Chinese colleagues also took the opportunity to meet with Chinese officials when they were in the United States.

The Impact of Events

But the dialogues have not been held in a vacuum. World events, particularly those involving one or both of our two countries, had an impact. Twists and turns affecting the relationship included the uprising in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Hainan Island incident in April 2001, the September 11 attacks in 2001, and China’s hosting of a UN summit on women’s rights in 2015. Sometimes events caused us to delay or cancel a meeting, but the dialogue somehow continued.

In 2014, I led a small research update team to Beijing to meet with the new director of CASS. Over the years, there have been changes in leadership on
the Chinese side. We met with Zheng Bingwen, who had just come on as director of the institute. He was somewhat familiar with the program, and he knew how long the dialogue had gone on, but we were not sure where this work would fit in his plans for the institute. The meeting was amazing! Zheng was delighted to take on the mantle of this work. He called this new phase of the work under his leadership “the second child” (with a nod to China’s move to encouraging families to have a second child). Our task, he said, was to make sure this work continued to thrive. As part of the dialogue, he gathered more than 30 professors who have come to Kettering as international fellows. It was a profound, unique, and moving experience, for it is only with China that we have had 30 years of staff from one country participate as fellows. Nowhere else in the world do we have as many former international fellows.

At this meeting, I invited Zheng to participate in and present at Kettering’s Multinational Symposium in April 2015, and he gladly accepted. At the symposium, Zheng introduced the foundation to the research he has been doing on changing housing ownership in China. He also had an opportunity to meet over lunch with Mathews and Kettering staff, and plans were made to hold 30th anniversary celebrations for the dialogue in Beijing in 2016. On his return to China, Zheng reached out to Wang Jisi and others who were involved along the way to join him in the celebration. Zhao Mei, one of the first international fellows, visited Kettering in August, and she and I continued to finalize details for this September celebration.

This month, we heard from Wang Jisi. No longer a new scholar, he indicated that he has retired from his former job as dean of international studies at Peking University and has just established a university-based think tank at Peking University, the Institute for International and Strategic Studies (IISS). His new institute will join CASS in the 30th celebrations.

In November, Lampton and I presented at an international conference hosted by CASS. We also met with CASS staff to develop common research and plan relevant publications, as well as move the 2016 plans further along.

This is a particularly exciting time for this work. Kettering hosted the 25th anniversary celebration, which resulted in a joint volume, China-United States Sustained Dialogue: Celebrating 25 Years, a best seller in China. While our goals for the 30th celebration may not be as extravagant, (although there will likely be a joint publication), this is an important milestone and proof that the work of citizens is both important and sustainable. We look forward to the work ahead and to continuing this important dialogue.

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