

CONNECTIONS

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Exploring the
Relationship between
**THE PUBLIC
AND GOVERNMENT**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Decades of Dialogue: Reflecting on US-China Exchanges

By Maxine S. Thomas

To mark the 40th anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and China, a small Kettering Foundation delegation traveled to the Carter Center in Atlanta in January 2019 to participate in a symposium commemorating the event. The Kettering delegation joined more than 150 scholars, foreign policy professionals, diplomats, and others in attendance. Maxine Thomas, vice president, secretary, and general counsel at the Kettering Foundation, was invited to speak, and the article that follows is based on her remarks.

The Kettering Foundation has had a long and deep relationship with several entities in China, but particularly with our collaborator in this celebration, the



US-China Delegation, Beijing, China, November 2000

Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The Kettering Foundation's interest in international issues started almost immediately after its founding in 1927. It entered the field in earnest in 1972, just months after President Richard Nixon's official visit to China.

Kettering's then-president, Robert Chollar, started a program for scientific and cultural exchange with the Peoples' Republic of China. And in 1985, a small team led by Kettering's new president, David Mathews, visited Beijing to explore with several Chinese nongovernmental organizations their interest in establishing a dialogue. Preparations for the 1985 trip to China were facilitated by former US President Gerald Ford, in

whose cabinet Mathews had served. Ford put Mathews in touch with an officer in the Chinese embassy who had helped Ford organize a visit to China.

The meeting grew into an ongoing set of dialogues about our two countries. Ultimately, a dialogue between two organizations would complement the work of the two national governments by systematically broadening and deepening the interactions between the two societies. For the US, the organization was the Kettering Foundation, and for the Chinese, the organization was the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Mathews described the work this way: "International relations have changed. It is no longer just government-to-government but society-to-society." This dialogue was to be society-to-society and has continued for more than 30 years.

The ongoing dialogues were, of course, impacted by what was happening in the world. A pivot point happened early in the dialogues, with the 1989 Tiananmen Square event. After Tiananmen Square, many US organizations cancelled plans to visit China that year, but Kettering did not. Kettering's philosophy of dialogue has always been that it is even more important to talk when times are bad than when they are good.



Harold Saunders and David Mathews, Beijing, China, October 1989

The US-China dialogues were held as planned in October 1989.

The first decade of the dialogues ended in formal, off-the-record summaries drafted by the late Kettering Foundation director of international affairs, Harold Saunders, who had served as assistant secretary of state in the Carter administration. The dialogues were extremely formal and often took the form of an exchange of prepared speeches or lectures. The only real conversation occurred during tea breaks.

In 1998, the dialogues took a turn. The meeting that year began with our Chinese colleagues lamenting the pressure they felt the US was exerting on China to behave like the US, particularly as it related to human rights. The problem was that Americans, they said, were reading bad stories about China in the press. US dialogue participants were appreciative of the differences in the two countries. Chinese colleagues were convinced that if the US participants would get the US press to stop printing negative stories about China, it would persuade the US government to stop pressuring China to follow a US-dictated agenda.

The American participants protested. “Americans do not believe what the press tells us to believe,” we said. “People expect the press to print what it prints, but we do not take it



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as fact because it is in print. We are independent thinkers.”

Out of that meeting came an agreement to look at the differences in public opinion within our two countries as the research basis for the next meeting.

A task force, led by Zhao Mei for China and myself for the US, was created to carry out the research. The results of this work formed the basis for an interim research meeting and provided the discussion point for the October 2000 meeting of the dialogue group. This meeting was

different from previous ones as it centered on sharing how Americans and Chinese thought about each other.

Zhao Mei and I each designed our own methodologies to find out what our citizens thought of the other country. The research in the US was done through dozens of deliberative forums. Kettering brought a group together to frame an issue guide on the US-China relationship, and forums were held across the country. Kettering revisited Americans' opinions in 2016, and Americans seemed much more negative than they had been in 1998. We updated this information again in 2018. The differences over time are interesting.



The research in the US was done through dozens of deliberative forums. Kettering brought a group together to frame an issue guide on the US-China relationship, and forums were held across the country.

In 2000, American participants in forums didn't think about China much, but events in the news and what they had learned in school formed their initial perceptions of the Chinese people. As those participants talked together about their perceptions, several themes emerged.

When talking about human rights, they were quick to draw comparisons between the two countries. Many suggested the US might be more patient in its concerns. Comparisons were drawn between the Tiananmen Square incident and the Rodney King beating; the US should be slow to criticize China when the US has its own issues, they concluded.

In 2018, in general, Americans still didn't think much about China. Some people, however, were engaged and following the China story. Americans viewed China with wariness and sometimes with suspicion. Some were favorably disposed to China, but few would call China a close friend or US ally.

In 2000, equality, fairness, and the notion that there should be a "level playing field" motivated participants to look at China through the same lens they used to look at the US. Viewed in this light, many were able to see China as a large nation like the US, addressing its internal matters in the best way it could for its own citizens and with as many shortcomings as any other nation, even the US.



Deborah Wadsworth, Hu Guocheng, Michael Lampton, Ding Xinghao, Robert McNamara, Washington, DC, March 2002

There emerged the sense, sometimes reluctantly, that China had every right to do what it did regarding human rights.

That same year, concerns over female children and child labor were also flash points. But this was juxtaposed against Americans' love of a bargain. These Americans acknowledged that they liked the opportunity to buy low-priced goods. Even the fact that inexpensive goods from China might displace American workers or violate child labor principles did not deter many forum participants from wanting access to them. Mention of a scandal concerning Chinese prisons or child labor used to produce these goods, however, caused many to say they would not buy tainted goods, even at bargain prices.

In 2018, American forum participants were most likely to talk about the economic dimensions of the US



Zhao Mei, Ding Xinghao, Maxine Thomas, Washington, DC, March 2002

relationship with China. China was seen as a manufacturing powerhouse. The "Made in China" label is everywhere, and Americans know China for producing inexpensive goods. They bemoaned the loss of American jobs and industry and worried that this made the US vulnerable.

In 2000, forum participants were clear and consistent in their willingness to engage China and to take China seriously. They were prescient in their thinking that China would play a much more significant role in the 21st century and that China deserved Americans' attention.

By 2016, Americans' views about China had become less favorable than they were in the earlier deliberative forums. There were concerns about US debt to China and potential loss of US jobs. Their analysis revolved around low wages paid in China to produce low-cost goods. Theft of intellectual property was also implicated in what they saw as unfair competition. Most saw China as an economic threat. What Americans perceived as China's effort to control its population was also mentioned as troubling. They thought, or perhaps hoped, that these differences in political systems would result in the US retaining its world leadership in the future, even as they expressed concern that China was trying to

take over the world. But Americans also saw themselves as part of the problem. As one participant stated:

We've become an outright lazy country. The drive's not there for anybody. And it just seems like other countries just have that drive. We have cars that practically drive themselves, you have an app to order fast food, you have people bringing you food to your house. People want a good job right out of the gate. And if you grow up with that culture, then you think you shouldn't have to work hard to get the job or salary you want.

In 2018, Americans continued to be self-critical, believing that the US had lost its edge because of a weakening work ethic and a perva-



Yao Yunzhu, Wang Jisi, David Mathews, Zheng Bingwen, Beijing, China, September 2016

sive sense of entitlement. In contrast, they saw the Chinese as hard working, reliable, and thorough.

What does all of this say about how Americans think about China? While China is not at the top of their consciousness on a regular basis, history, experience, and world events shape their views slowly over time. They see China as important. They lament that they do not know more about China. But they want unfiltered information.

When asked how he formed his opinion of China, a forum participant said that he recalled “being told as a child, if you keep digging a hole deep enough, you will end up in China.” Others recalled reading Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* or seeing films like *The Soong Sisters* or *The Manchurian Candidate*. Still others remarked about liking Chinese food or knowing an exchange student from China. These experiences added to their views of the Chinese. But such limited knowledge is even more reason that supplemental diplomacy is needed.

Governments have their roles to play, but what governments do will not be the only determinant of what Americans think about China. Americans see opportunity in a US-China relationship. Connections with people through work, exchanges, and dialogues like the ones the Kettering Foundation has held over the last 33



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years with the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences help to shape their opinions. As a Chinese colleague stated after our 2016 meeting in Beijing:

Indeed, it is my own observation that the greatest contribution Kettering has made to the China-US relationship is to bring together social elites from the two societies, making friends between us, letting us share the same purposes in life—happiness, love, family, harmony, and unity. To be sure, political and cultural differences, as well as geographical spans, divide the two peoples, but these differences are secondary if compared to our shared purposes of life as human beings. ■

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