

The History of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 1966-1989

by Kazushi Minami

University of Texas at Austin

 © 2019 by Kazushi Minami



January 1, 2019 marked the 40th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and China. Scholars and policymakers are deeply divided over the virtue of U.S. engagement with China in the past 40 years, with some criticizing it as failure and others defending it as success. Both camps would probably agree, however, that the complexity of U.S.-Chinese relations rules out a simple answer. The dense, thick web of economic, cultural, and educational ties, most of which did not exist in the 1950s and 1960s due to Cold War tension, constitute the contemporary Sino-American relationship.

Who built the foundation for this relationship? Undoubtedly, U.S. and Chinese policymakers—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping, to name a few, laid the groundwork by opening the initial dialogue, settling the Taiwan question, and restoring diplomatic relations in 1979. One should not, however, underestimate the contribution of people outside of government. Groups of businessmen, scholars, and activists, with and without the assistance of the U.S. government, cultivated connections with Chinese counterparts in the 1970s, connections that led Americans and Chinese to support normalization of relations and embrace deeper interactions between the two countries.

The most important among these groups was the National Committee on United States-China Relations (hereafter National Committee), an organization established in 1966 by Quakers, feminists, business leaders, and China scholars. With the membership quickly expanding to several hundreds of influential figures in various professions, the National Committee has been striving to strengthen Sino-American relations through people-to-people exchanges to this day. The National Committee records at the Rockefeller Archive Center provide new perspectives into the recent history of U.S.-Chinese relations.

The National Committee came into being in the mid-1960s, when an increasing number of Americans began to question U.S. policy in Asia due to the expansion of the Vietnam War. They understood that they could never address the Vietnam problem without addressing the China problem. Between 1965 and 1966, more than a hundred conferences on China took place across the country, an indication of

rising public interest in the issue. The University of Chicago hosted one conference in February 1966, organized by Cecil Thomas, the associate peace education secretary of the American Friends and Service Committee. Cooperating with the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago, the Quaker put together several panels of leading China experts, attended by 125 participants from government, education, and business.¹ This conference resulted in the birth of the National Committee in the same month. The inaugural executive committee members included leaders from various backgrounds, including A. Doak Barnett (China scholar at Columbia University), Robert Scalapino (China scholar at the University of California, Berkeley), Dan Koshland (former CEO of Levi Strauss and Co.), and Jack Gomperts (former president of the World Trade Association in San Francisco).

In the late 1960s, the National Committee organized numerous conferences throughout the United States, featuring China specialists, both supportive of and critical of building contacts with China. These conferences aimed at promoting public interest in China, a topic dominated by prejudice and misunderstanding due partly to McCarthyism of the 1950s. The largest among these conferences was the national convocation in February 1969, titled “The United States and China: The Next Decade.” The two-day symposium in New York was attended by 2,500 participants, including scholars, congressmen, and policymakers. The national convocation established the National Committee’s reputation as a “new China lobby” advocating expansion of bilateral ties with China.²

The National Committee also engaged in educational activities aimed at promoting better understanding of China among the public. Titled the China Seminar Program, these grassroots efforts began with graduate students in East Asian studies at Harvard University. These students, many of whom worked under John K. Fairbank, the dean of Chinese studies, launched a curriculum development project for secondary and post-secondary schools; a research bureau to collect and edit educational resources for public use; and a speakers’ bureau to deliver lectures at local townhall meetings. The Harvard experiment spread to other universities such as Michigan, Columbia, and Berkeley. The educational efforts in the San

Francisco Bay Area resulted in the launch in 1973 of the Bay Area China Education Project (BAYCEP), the prototype of today's Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE).

In the early 1970s, the National Committee shifted its focus from organizing educational activities to managing exchange programs. The famous Ping-Pong diplomacy in April 1971 and Richard Nixon's historic trip to China in February 1972 created new venues for people-to-people exchanges. In the absence of formal diplomatic relations, Washington and Beijing agreed in the Shanghai Communique to promote "non-governmental" exchanges. The U.S. government designated the National Committee as an organization responsible for cultural and educational exchanges. Its success in hosting the Chinese table tennis delegation in April 1972 earned the National Committee a reputation as the main group devoted to the exchange programs with China.

The first U.S. cultural delegation that the National Committee assisted was the Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra, which visited China in 1973. Led by Conductor Eugene Ormandy, the Philadelphia Orchestra played Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and other Western pieces, prohibited during the peak years of the Cultural Revolution, in front of enthusiastic audiences in Beijing and Shanghai. Even Jiang Qing, a radical politician who tried to purge Western influence on Chinese culture, welcomed and praised the Philadelphia Orchestra. As the commentator for an ABC documentary film on China stated, "With the Philadelphia Orchestra tour, the U.S. has put a toe into the water of China and found it warm."³

Despite the innocuous outlook, cultural exchanges produced bilateral tension in the mid-1970s, when Beijing tried to use them as a vehicle for propaganda. The cancellation of the Chinese performing arts troupe in April 1975 showcased this tension. In early March, three weeks before the Chinese delegation's arrival, the Chinese side made last minute changes to the program, adding a song titled "People of Taiwan, Our Own Brothers." Its lyrics contained a controversial passage: "We are determined to liberate Taiwan. Let the light of the sun shine on the island." Jan Berris, then a program coordinator at the National Committee, immediately realized the problem. The National Committee received funding from the Bureau of

Educational and Cultural Affairs of the State Department for hosting the Chinese delegation, so the program should not contain items that could embarrass the donors. Notified about the news, the State Department rushed to solve the problem by explaining to the Chinese that cultural exchanges should not contain political contents. The Chinese response was adamant. They argued, “Taiwan... is an integral part of China and thus it is only natural for them to give expression to their true feelings in the matter.” Left with no choice, the State Department decided to postpone the performing arts delegation indefinitely. This incident illustrated the difficulty facing the National Committee throughout the 1970s: It hoped to promote cultural exchanges with China, but could not let the Chinese use them as a tool for propaganda.⁴

The Chinese performing arts troupe eventually travelled to the United States in the summer of 1978. At that time, the Chinese government, now under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping after the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of Jiang Qing in 1976, no longer viewed cultural exchanges as a venue for propaganda. Instead, the Chinese viewed them as a tool to earn foreign currency for modernization projects. The U.S. side concurred with the Chinese on the commercial potential of the delegation. Anthony Bliss, the executive director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, noticed the “entertainment value” of Chinese opera despite its political contents and asked the National Committee to co-host the group. Confident that Americans would not be “brainwashed” by Chinese propaganda, Arthur Rosen, the National Committee chairman, viewed the delegation as an opportunity to expose Americans to the political reality of Chinese culture. To make Chinese performance more entertaining for American audiences, the MET and the National Committee persuaded the Chinese to reduce normal Western music and increase things Chinese such as Peking Opera. The delegation was a financial, as well as political, success. Thanks to television rights, box ticket sales, and donations from major corporations such as Coca Cola, the tour generated revenues of \$280 thousand. The delegation also added momentum to normalization of Sino-American relations. Receiving the delegation at the White House Rose Garden, Jimmy Carter praised it as “the most ambitious cultural exchange we’ve ever had with your country” and “one further step towards full normalization of relations.” In the tour finale in

Washington, the troupe reappeared for curtain calls four times and responded to the claps that lasted for ten minutes.⁵

The Chinese also became more open to Western culture. The most symbolic was the Boston Symphony Orchestra's visit in 1979, the first U.S. cultural delegation assisted by the National Committee after the normalization of relations. The entire Boston Orchestra, led by Conductor Seiji Ozawa and consisting of 160 members, attracted huge audiences in Beijing and Shanghai. Chinese spectators vied for tickets to listen to Western symphonies by composers such as Verdi, Mozart, Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Liszt, Ravel, and Mendelssohn. Even the open rehearsals attracted thousands of audiences, including hundreds of musicians from around the country. At the grand finale in Beijing, 217 musicians from the Boston Symphony and the China Central Philharmonic jointly played Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* before the exultant audience of 18,000. This scene, televised to American viewers in a CBS documentary, symbolized China's embrace of Western music.⁶

The United States and China normalized relations on January 1, 1979. After that date, people-to-people exchanges between the United States and China expanded far beyond the National Committee's jurisdictions, with numerous companies, universities, and citizen's groups establishing ties with China. The National Committee, however, continued to organize a number of delegations to/from China and to serve bilateral relations as a leading group devoted to promotion of mutual understanding between the two countries. The National Committee, therefore, faced a difficult situation on June 4, 1989, when the Chinese military massacred democracy activists in the Tiananmen Square. U.S. public opinion on China took a sharp turn for the worse, and influential figures around the country questioned the wisdom of people-to-people exchanges with a communist dictatorship that killed hundreds of dissidents.

The National Committee quickly responded to the crisis. On June 5, it issued a policy paper advocating five points. It stated that the National Committee should:

1. speak truth about events in China and their consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations, as we understand those events;

2. stay engaged, for it has been engagement that has contributed to the change which the Chinese people themselves have demonstrated they desire and which Americans applaud;
3. recognize that although there may be tough times ahead, China is a big, diverse country in which American interests endure;
4. remain true to the Committee's historical mandate to foster thoughtful, balance, and informed discussion of China policy in the United States;
5. and look to the future as we recall the past.⁷

The National Committee members reaffirmed their commitment to engagement in early July, when the National Committee held a large conference attended by more than forty leading China experts in business, government, academia, and philanthropy. The participants did have a range of views on economic sanctions imposed on China by the U.S. government. They agreed, however, that people-to-people exchanges should continue as long as they were honest, valuable, and free from propaganda. Engagement with the United States and the world, they reasoned, inspired Chinese people to demand positive changes in the Chinese political system. As stated by David Lampton, the National Committee chairman, "One does not want to isolate China."⁸

Furthermore, Lampton, along with A. Doak Barnett, a former National Committee chairman, traveled to China in September for a fact-finding mission, conducting 52 meetings with groups and individuals in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. After the trip, Lampton and Barnett concluded that China was "in for a sustained period of political and economic unrest and change" due to the economic downturn and the post-Deng leadership struggle, conditions that empowered the faction in the Chinese Communist Party that criticized the United States for trying to change China politically, including through people-to-people exchanges. While opposing full-fledged exchanges as "unproductive," Lampton and Barnett advocated continuation of exchange programs as long as they focused on "professional," "non-ideological" areas such as economic development.⁹

Thanks to the efforts of Lampton and other National Committee members, the U.S.-China Dialogue, postponed in May 1989, resumed in Beijing in February 1990.

Hosted by the National Committee and the China People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Dialogue featured leading scholars and officials from both countries, who discussed numerous issues about the future of U.S.-Chinese relations. The meetings far from removed hostilities, however. The American and Chinese participants had wide-ranging disagreements over what happened on June 4, who was responsible for the tragedy, and how the United States and China could amend bilateral relations. Harry Harding, then a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, stated at the last session that the tension at the Dialogue reaffirmed "a sad but important fact" that U.S.-Chinese relations faced "an impasse." Harding emphasized, however, that "an atmosphere for constructive dialogue still exists." "Americans and Chinese can differ—sometimes seriously—and maintain personal friendships."¹⁰

As predicted by Harding, political and economic stabilization in China due to the end of the leadership struggle and continuation of Deng's reform restored the foundation for U.S.-China relations. The National Committee played an important role in promoting people-to-people programs after Tiananmen, as it did during the formative years of U.S.-Chinese relations in the 1970s. By promoting these programs, the National Committee established engagement as the core goal in U.S. policy toward China, the goal that continues to shape U.S.-Chinese relations even today.

¹ Letter, Kale Williams to Detlev W. Bronk, January 25, 1966, fol. 43, box 79, FA965, Rockefeller University records, President, Detlev Bronk, Personal and Professional papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC).

² The conference resulted in A. Doak Barnett and Edwin O. Reischauer, eds., *The United States and China: The Next Decade* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

³ Louise Hood, "China Diary," September 10-23, 1973, fol. 126, box 16, FA1186, RG 4, Accession 4, National Committee on United States-China Relations (hereafter NCUSCR), RAC.

⁴ Letter, Arthur Rosen to Alexander Eckstein, March 11, 1975, fol. 385, box 39, FA1184, RG 4, Accession 4, NCUSCR, RAC.

⁵ Reports attached to letter, Nancy Y. Suey to Rosen, July 21, 1978, box 44, FA1186, RG 4, Accession 4, NCUSCR, RAC.

⁶ CBS Report, "The Boston Goes to China," April 20, 1979, fol. 72, box 9, series 3, FA1186, RG 4, Accession 4, NCUSCR, RAC.

⁷ Annual Report 1989, National Committee on United States-China Relations, undated, fol. 213, box 143, series 6, FA772, RG 1, Accession 1, NCUSCR, RAC.

⁸ The Johnson Foundation, Inc. News Release, July 9, 1989, fol. 2112, box 141, series 5, FA772, RG 1, Accession 1, NCUSCR, RAC.

⁹ Report, Lampton and Barnett to the National Committee Board of Directors, undated, fol. 630, box 33, series 3, FA772, RG 1, Accession 1, NCUSCR, RAC.

¹⁰ Harry Harding, "Prospects for Sino-American Relations," February 28, 1990, fol. 117, box 13, FA1184, RG 2, Accession 2, NCUSCR, RAC.