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“Chinese Americans and China:
A Fraught and Complicated Relationship”

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January 1, 1979 for many Chinese Americans (those of Chinese ancestry who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents) was a joyous moment. They enthusiastically welcomed the normalization of relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China as it ended the politically charged and long-hostile relationship between the two countries: one, their land of ancestry -- no matter that for some it was four or five generations past -- and the other, their land of nationality for themselves and their families for now and the future.

Few saw the moment as validating the politics of either the PRC or the U.S. – politics *per se* was not the reason for celebration. A major step toward full social and cultural acceptance in American life was the reason for Chinese American hopefulness. For the backers of the ROC on Taiwan who had watched as their ranks had steadily shrunk over the years, the day was dismal, of course, but they had been prepared for it. That Taipei was the capital of *China* had become difficult to maintain even for many of them. For most Chinese Americans, a bright new day seemed to have arrived.

During the many years from the early 1850s, when Chinese began to arrive in the U.S. in significant numbers, to that moment in 1979, Chinese believed that their land of ancestry, regardless of the form of its government – imperial, warlord, nominally republican, and

communist – had been disrespected and treated unfairly. Social discrimination and the prejudice Chinese Americans suffered was part and parcel of what they believed was the global insult and oppression of China. The relatively brief rule of the Republic of China on the mainland had been a high point in both the Sino-American relationship and in Chinese American history.

Unprecedented mutuality and public affection between the two countries accompanied the alliance during World War II. The putative friendship between the two countries, however, was more a product of sharing a common enemy than anything else. During the war, the Chinese Exclusion Acts that started in 1882 began to end. Marginalization of Chinese Americans moderated albeit slowly. Hatred of imperial Japan was a powerful, though ephemeral, adhesive. Soon after the end of World War II, the United States reconstructed its relationship with Japan in the early the Cold War and began to distance itself from the ROC as Chiang Kai-shek's regime lost the Chinese civil war.

After the Communist victory in 1949, and then the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, China and the United States confronted one another in what became the coldest front in the Cold War. For many in the U.S., the racial Yellow Peril merged with the political Red Peril to form an especially dangerous and unpredictable enemy. Chinese Americans, especially those with liberal politics, came under intense scrutiny and surveillance. Geopolitics served to isolate Chinese Americans generally and perpetuate their second-class status. Chinese in the United States had virtually no contact with family, friends, or anyone in their land of ancestry. News about China for them and the American public was filtered through the prism of Cold War attitudes. “Free China” on Taiwan, for many Chinese Americans and other Americans, was largely a political expedient. The possibility of its return to the mainland steadily eroded over the years and its desperate efforts to retain the support of Chinese in America actually alienated

many and served to separate them from the mainstream of American life. Trying to continue to conduct the Chinese civil war on American soil found fewer and fewer sympathizers. Moreover, the regime on Taiwan, despite its vigorous efforts to claim itself as the inheritor of cultural China, the land of ancestry that transcended regimes and ideologies, always had a difficult time relating to the Chinese Americans whose descent was from the Pearl River delta, far from the historical centers of Chinese civilization and culture to the north.

The historic, and globally transformative, normalization of relations in 1979 was thus a watershed for Chinese Americans. It appeared to end the effort to avoid reality, as well as signal, finally, U.S. acceptance of China on the basis of formally expressed equality and mutual respect. Even more, as everyone knew, normalization had been made possible by the visit of the first sitting U.S. president to ever visit China. None other than conservative Richard Nixon, the erstwhile ardent defender of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists, had gone to Beijing, toasted Zhou Enlai, shaken Mao Zedong's hand, and visited the Great Wall, the symbol of eternal China. It was indeed a "great wall," the never eloquent Nixon is said to have announced.

Chinese in America had long believed that as long as their land of ancestry was disrespected as poor and weak, their own fates would also be bleak. Conversely, a united, modern, and strong China that enjoyed international respect was essential for Chinese Americans to be able to enjoy their own due place in America. This was a core assumption of Chinese through the years, whether they were followers of Sun Yatsen, Chiang Kai-shek, or, Mao Zedong, (though very quietly). Some ROC followers in the U.S. even celebrated China's atomic bomb test in 1964. *China* now had the bomb! And thus January 1, 1979 seemed to be the start of a promising new era, even for many who had once backed the ROC. China had stood up, demanded respect, and finally received it. President Jimmy Carter confirmed the China reality.

If nothing else, it was evident that the PRC was here to stay and the United States had committed itself to building a long term relationship with it.

The national flag of the ROC that had flown over the family and civic associations of Chinese communities throughout the United States for decades gradually came down over the years, replaced with the red and yellow five-star banner of the PRC. Some Chinese American merchants saw the possibility of economic advantages in the opening, but these were less the reason for celebration than what normalization seemed to mean for the place of Chinese in American life and the ability to reconnect with the land of ancestry for social or family reasons.

Today, forty years later, those rosy hopes are long gone and remembered by few. The optimism of that time now appears to have been naïve, or certainly short-sighted. The consequences of normalization were enormously positive for Chinese Americans, no doubt about it, but their attitudes toward China today, and their positions in American life, are far more complex, and vexed, than one would have anticipated following 1979.

One might wonder why this is the case, given the soaring rise of China's market-oriented economy, its rapidly expanding stature and presence in international affairs, and the exuberance of many of its people overseas. The rigidity, austerity, and isolation of Mao's China is long past. The demographics and social profile of the Chinese population in America have changed in far-reaching and profound ways.

Forty years ago, there were approximately 800,000 persons of Chinese ancestry in the country, the majority American-born of Cantonese background, the rest permanent residents waiting to adjust their status. Today, there may be more than 400,000 citizens of the People's Republic of China in the U.S. here as students, tourists, undocumented residents, and temporary

resident workers and professionals. Hundreds of thousands of others from China are here waiting to become American citizens. The Chinese American population today is officially over five million, the result largely of a vast immigration of people of Chinese ancestry not only from the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but from Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia. America has never seen so many “Chinese” before. Southern Chinese no longer predominate; Mandarin-speakers do.

Chinese Americans are no longer a modest-income, residentially segregated, and politically unimportant part of the U.S. population. Today, Chinese Americans can be found in the ranks of the wealthiest Americans; they are in aggregate among the most highly educated and successful in their professions; and they have become a political and philanthropic force that is not ignored but courted. They live in high income suburban areas throughout the country, no longer relegated to urban enclaves. Since 1979, Chinese Americans are occupying seats in presidential cabinets and gubernatorial and mayoral offices. Chinese Americans populate news rooms, Hollywood director’s chairs, and editorial boards of leading newspapers and opinion-influencing periodicals. They are building a presence in sports and the arts. They travel back and forth from China with ease.

Despite the notable progress of Chinese in American life, all is not well in Chinese America. Far from it.

Income inequality among Chinese Americans, as with other Asian Americans, is the widest among all social groups in the country. Attention to the well-to-do Chinese and the hundreds of thousands who arrived in the past several decades with H-1B visas that privilege highly-educated professional immigrants overlooks the still significant numbers of Chinese

Americans are struggling to establish a permanent place for themselves and their children in America.¹

The relationship between Chinese Americans and the People's Republic of China is as fraught and complicated today as it has been since normalization. The relationship has never been simple, unemotional, or without significance, but political, economic, and social developments in recent years have created not only opportunities but also highly troubling challenges. Popular reactions to the "tiger mom" included revealed respect toward Chinese parenting, but also widespread resentment and hostility toward aggressive and driven Chinese Americans taking over suburban schools and communities once reserved for whites. One hears all around the country not welcome, but condemnations, of monied Chinese buying choice property and driving up land values. Anti-immigrant sentiment is stimulating racial prejudice against Chinese and other Asians perceived as inassimilable foreigners. Most ominously, powerful voices in America link Chinese Americans to a putative geo-political China threat. Demonizing certain domestic ethnic communities because of international tension has a long tradition in American life, from German Americans in World War I to Japanese Americans in World War II, and Middle Eastern Americans today. Might Chinese Americans be next?

In these vexed circumstances, Chinese Americans themselves are presenting themselves in a variety of ways. They are deeply divided in their attitudes toward their land of ancestry and the rise of China since Normalization. Two prominent examples illustrate this tension.

The religious group from China known as Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa), with a branch founded in the U.S. around the turn of the 21st century, has become a familiar presence in American public spaces thanks to its performance of meditation practices and energetic

¹ "Some Are 'Crazy Rich,' But Asians' Inequality Is Widest in the U.S.," *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2018.

demonstrations against visiting Chinese officials and Chinese diplomatic offices in the U.S. Holding bright banners and displaying gruesome photographs of alleged communist atrocities and persecution of their movement in China, their members have become the most visible expression of Chinese American hostility toward Beijing. The leader of the group, Li Hongzhi, moved out of China and has lived in the United States since 1996. Ostensibly focused on attaining spiritual enlightenment, the organization sits at the core of a fiercely anti-Beijing movement and has become the most vociferous social force against Beijing, perhaps even surpassing the public influence of the ROC-linked anti-communist crusade in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s.²

Perhaps the most prominent and visible expression of the Falun Gong movement is a cultural troupe, Shen Yun Performing Arts, whose connections with Falun Gong is not widely known but not hidden. Based in the Hudson River Valley, the large troupe has staged hundreds of elaborate performances of Chinese dance and music at high profile venues throughout the United States and other countries since 2006. It boldly declares that its intention is to reclaim China’s “5,000 years of civilization.” Echoing the ROC’s claim in the 1950s, it maintains that it presents “traditional Chinese culture,” which “cannot be seen anywhere else in the world—not even in China.” It claims that “the ruling communist regime has viewed China’s rich spiritual and artistic heritage as a threat to its ideology, and for decades sought to erase it. Chinese artists have suffered untold ordeals over the past century.” Politics is never far from their performances: the troupe says that it draws “from their shared practice of Falun Gong” and its “repertoire regularly includes important works shedding light on the plight of believers like themselves in communist China today.” It also engages in noncultural activities including

² <http://en.falundafa.org/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2018)

condemning “Chinese student associations” on college campuses and “Chinese business associations” in the U.S. as being covert agencies for Chinese communist-related activities.³

Another wing of the Falun Gong movement is a well-funded media group best known for its publication of *Epoch Times*, which has print and online editions in two dozen languages. Founded in 2000 by what is says was a “group of Chinese-Americans” and based in New York City, it is a registered non-profit organization that declares its purpose is to “bring honest and uncensored news to people oppressed by the lies and violence of communism.” It distributes full editions in English and Chinese five days a week for the New York and Washington, D.C. area and shorter versions throughout the rest of the United States. It maintains professionally-produced online versions. The media group claims that it produces the largest Chinese-language newspaper outside of “mainland China and Taiwan.”⁴

Its content is full-range, from reportage to cultural and life-style features, but its focus is on developments in China and the U.S.-China relationship. On American politics, it assumes an unabashedly pro-Trump position and supports the administration’s array of policies on immigration, business and economics, and international affairs. It is militantly anti-Beijing, condemnatory of Beijing in all of its China coverage. Articles are from a range of sources, including mainstream commercial outlets, staff writers, and far-right independent authors. Identification of its ownership, editorial board, and sources of income is murky. The paper’s editor-in-chief refuses to share the identity of its owners and main funders.

Among the most troubling of its coverage is its regular reportage of alleged Chinese spying in the United States, including implicating Chinese working and living in the country. In

³ <https://www.shenyunperformingarts.org/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2018)

⁴ <https://www.theepochtimes.com/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2018)

this, the newspaper echoes one of the most disturbing developments under the Trump administrations: the drum beat about Chinese agents as a national security threat living within the country. In February 2018, the director of the FBI in a highly publicized statement, described Chinese spies as a “whole-of-society threat” to America. *Epoch Times*, in its zealousness, echoes unfounded claims about the danger that Chinese, and Chinese Americans agents, pose to the United States and has impugned the integrity, and even loyalty, of those of liberal to middle to the road position, including Chinese Americans involved in the Democratic Party.

The significance of the Falun Gong movement, especially its cultural and media wings, lies in its efforts to influence public opinion, rather than on credible opinion or policy-makers, who do not appear to hold the movement in high regard.

Diametrically opposed to this unremitting hostility toward Beijing is the position of the Committee of 100, a member-by-invitation organization of now approximately one hundred and fifty Americans of Chinese descent who have achieved high distinction and recognition in their careers.⁵ The organization’s stated dual purpose is to “promote full participation of all Chinese Americans in American society” and advance “constructive dialog and relationships between the peoples and leaders of the United States and China.” The idea for the non-partisan organization of elite voices came a few years after Normalization from the renowned architect I.M. Pei and Henry Kissinger who saw the need for an organized expression of the views of accomplished Chinese Americans that could address developments in United States-China relations. Among its members today are business leaders such as Jerry Yang of Silicon Valley, former U.S. ambassador to China and Washington State governor Gary Locke, actor Lucy Liu, and artist

⁵ The author is a member of the organization.

Maya Lin. In its ranks are among the wealthiest and most influential Chinese Americans. All are American citizens.⁶

Unlike the highly visible Falun Gong and its related organizations, the C-100 takes a low public profile. It quietly organizes venues for meetings of Chinese and American political and business leaders to address issues of common concern, organizes public forums, and occasionally issues statements on current developments. It commissions studies on American public opinion toward China and Chinese Americans to gauge the social climate.

One of its concerns has been the excesses in the U.S. government efforts against Chinese espionage in the U.S. For example, in 2018 the C-100 assumed a firm, public position in demanding justice for Sherry Chen, a U.S. citizen employed by the Department of Commerce who was accused of espionage for China in 2014. Though charges against her were completely dropped a year later, she was dismissed from her position. She sought to resume her employment but was blocked by the Department of Justice in 2018. In contrast, *Epoch Times* reported on her arrest and the incendiary charges against her but never ran follow-up reports on the clearing of her name.

In the view of many C-100 members, the treatment of Chen recalled that of the earlier mistreatment of nuclear engineer Wen Ho Lee, who worked for the University of California at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. In 1999 when he was in his 60s, authorities arrested Lee and accused of him of spying for Beijing. His name and reputation were smeared and he lost his job. He was jailed and placed into solitary confinement for nine months before he was cleared of all spying charges. Lee was a Taiwanese-American U.S. citizen and had been in the country since 1965 when he arrived as an international student.

⁶ <https://www.committee100.org/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2018)

For many C-100 members, the cases of Chen, Lee, and others Chinese American scientists who have been arrested and accused of espionage and then had their charges dropped are troubling evidence of racial profiling. They fear a worsening of a climate of suspicion and mistrust of Chinese Americans. Remarkably, the professional success of the elite members of the C-100 has not left them insensitive to social injustice and they are keenly aware that the advances Chinese Americans have made since normalization of relations cannot be taken for granted.

As with the diplomacy of the PRC generally over the past several decades, China's attitude toward those of Chinese ancestry in America has grown tremendously in sophistication. In 1971, when I visited the PRC, I entered the country from Hong Kong. I crossed over the territorial boundary via a bridge, where, in mid-span, a PLA soldier stood. He gave me a stern disapproving look when he saw that my passport had a used ROC visa stamp. He then announced that I, as a returned *tongbao* ("fellow countryman"), was nevertheless warmly welcomed back to the "motherland," the People's Republic of China, "the one and only China." For a few years after normalization, PRC representatives in the U.S. viewed Chinese Americans similarly, making little distinction between Chinese nationals and Americans of Chinese ancestry.

Today, that confusion, is no longer made, or is rarely made, in China or by its diplomatic representatives in the United States. They try to make clear distinctions between Chinese nationals who hold Chinese passports ("zhongguo gongmin"), overseas Chinese who reside long term overseas either as immigrants or permanent residents ("huqiao"), and Americans of Chinese ancestry ("huayi").

There is little question that the PRC is concerned about, and monitors, the behavior of Chinese nationals in the U.S., especially its students and visiting professionals, whether government officials, scientists, or researchers. In recent years, it has actually stepped up its surveillance and efforts to secure the support and affection of its nationals overseas. And Beijing seeks to positively influence its general image and reputation through its Confucius Institutes, the language training facilities it has funded on American campuses in recent years, as well as through other “soft power” instruments such as promoting traditional cultural practices, sports competitions, and media. But there is little evidence that Beijing seeks to involve itself in Chinese American (*huayi*) communities to serve immediate interests. It seems, at least to this writer, that Beijing tries to avoid even the perception of meddling in the lives of Chinese Americans and their communities, let alone seeking to recruit them to become agents of the mainland. The once common presence of representatives of the ROC in the community life of Chinese in America has been replaced by that of the PRC and sometimes by the uneasy, but not impossible, presence of both.

What of the future?

Normalization of relations between China and the United States has resulted in enormous benefits for Chinese Americans. Their numbers alone have grown tremendously. They have become an undeniable and accepted fact of everyday life in communities and walks of life throughout the country. The economic relationship between China and the United States, though now in deep trouble, has created tremendous opportunities for their own entrepreneurial activity. Chinese and American companies have also turned to Chinese Americans for their expertise in business, and as researchers, scientists, and academics. Everyday families have enjoyed

reunions, thanks to immigration and to the ease of travel across the Pacific. The huge success of leading Chinese American bankers and investors, as well as businesses such as the popular Panda Express, whose owners rank among the wealthiest of Americans, would not have been possible without Normalization.

But visible success has also inspired new insecurity and worry, not unalloyed confidence. There is fear of new forms of racial discrimination against Chinese and other Asian Americans in education, in hiring, and in everyday community life. Backlash is a word often heard locally as Chinese Americans, seeking their place in local life, encounter resistance from established populations. And above all, there is the looming fear of catastrophe, or at least setback, as conflict continues to rise in the global U.S.-China relationship. Might Chinese Americans be caught in the middle of a conflict between the two countries?

Among Chinese Americans, discord, not unity or agreement, is likely to continue to rise as their political differences over Beijing and Washington sharpen. In recent years, a growing number of new-comers from China (sometimes called the “new Chinese immigrants”) have become a loud and visible element within the Chinese American community. Though they may have had a good education in China and are professionals and middle class here, many are indifferent to learning about American life and history, especially regarding racial prejudice and rightwing extremism. They often are antagonistic towards other immigrants of color and racial minorities, and even other Chinese Americans whose families go back generations in the U.S. Inexperienced in the politics of a pluralist democracy and civic engagement, they eschew collaboration and coalition building, the hallmarks of American politics. Their style is confrontational and combative. Many are also disdainful of China and hope for radical change

there. As such, they have found a home in the Trump movement and proudly proclaim that they are “Chinese Americans for Trump.” They like his belligerence toward Beijing.

Other recently arrived Chinese strongly identify with the mainland and vociferously advocate for it, in a manner similar to the way that supporters of the ROC did in the years before Normalization. The specter of fighting over “homeland politics,” which divided Chinese American communities during the Cold War, is rising.

Differences among those identifying with Taiwan and those with China are also deepening, as the relationship between Taipei and Beijing continues unresolved. Identification with Taiwan among those from Taiwan has grown markedly and confidently since the 1970s. PRC efforts to discourage such sentiment has resulted in strengthening rather than weakening resolve. More than ever, many from Taiwan forcefully reject Chinese ethnic identity. A similar trend, though still early, is emerging among younger people from Hong Kong in the United States.

Heterogeneity within Chinese America is growing, not diminishing. Differences in generation, socio-economic position, religious belief (many more Chinese are evangelical Christians than before), regional origin in Asia, education, American party identification, and attitude toward Beijing are widening among Chinese Americans, even though the larger American population sees little nuance.

And thus, the dilemma or challenge for Chinese Americans who seek to make a difference in U.S.-China matters: common ground will be more difficult than ever to establish among Chinese Americans, despite the persistence in America of seeing racial sameness and the PRC’s growing effort to cultivate the good favor of overseas Chinese. Agreement among

Chinese and Chinese Americans is becoming more difficult because of the scrutiny of the two state powers. Regardless of differences internal within the communities identified as Chinese American, they will continue to live under the shadow of the looming U.S.-China geopolitical relationship. Not long ago, political leaders of both countries spoke of seeking a constructive engagement and defying the odds that conflict was inevitable between the two powers. Now, dark clouds are gathering and there is little that Chinese Americans will be able to do to clear the horizon. That is the reason for the growing worry within Chinese American communities throughout the country. Will the mounting anti-China sentiment among the American public stoke anti-Chinese fear, including of Chinese Americans? Will they be caught in the middle of global geo-politics?