Chinese Americans: A Rising Factor in U.S.-China Relations

Xiao-huang Yin  
Occidental College

Zhiyong Lan  
Arizona State University

U.S.-China relations have entered a stage of uncertainty since the end of the 1980s. While China's authoritarian political system and its rapid economic growth are often perceived by Washington as a potential threat to the balance of power in Asia, America's support for democracy and human rights in China is seen by leaders in Beijing as a conspiracy to overthrow their government. Other problems such as trade disputes and U.S. relations with Taiwan have further rocked the fragile bilateral relationship. Any inappropriate move, whether intentional or casual, may trigger a high level of hostility and confrontation.

Among various forces at work on U.S.-China relations, a new group of players is the Chinese Americans. Although highly diversified in ideology and economic interests, they have played a more significant role in America's relationship with China and gained growing visibility on China-related affairs in recent years. Shortly after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, a group of prominent Chinese Americans established a "Committee of 100" to offer themselves as an intermediary and consultation resources for the U.S. and Chinese governments. As its name indicates, the committee consists of a hundred distinguished Chinese Americans, including David Henry Hwang, a highly acclaimed playwright; Tsung-Dao Lee, a Nobel laureate in physics; Bette Bao Lord, a popular writer and wife of Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord; Yo-Yo Ma, a cellist with an international reputation; I. M. Pei, a renowned Chinese-American architect; Chang-lin Tien, chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley; S. B. Woo, former lieutenant governor of Delaware; and Shirley Young, a vice president of the General Motors. While most of the committee members are first-generation Chinese Americans, some, such as David Henry Hwang and Michael Woo, are American-born with little personal attachment to their ancestral land.1 Despite differences in their personal backgrounds, how-

1. Michael Woo was a city councilman of Los Angeles from 1985 to 1993. Although he is not an official member of the committee, Woo has attended its meetings.
ever, they all share strong concerns for the development of U.S.-China relations and express the desire "to represent Chinese Americans the way lobbying organizations for other minority groups have long done." The formation of the committee immediately captured the attention of Washington and Beijing. James Lilley, then American ambassador to China, and Zhu Qizhen, Chinese ambassador to the United States, both spoke at the organization's first national meeting at San Francisco.  

Meanwhile, Chinese-American scholars and activists have participated extensively in debates on China's human rights, most-favored-nation status, trade disputes, U.S. role in China-Taiwan relations, and other issues. Their talks on prime time TV programs such as the "Nightline," "60 Minutes," and the "McNeil/Lehrer News Hour," and their articles in magazines and newspapers such as the Atlantic Monthly, New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and Los Angeles Times have made an impact on American public opinion. Works written by Chinese Americans on U.S.-China relations also frequently appear in influential professional and scholarly journals such as Foreign Affairs and China Quarterly, and in book forms published by leading academic and commercial publishers, including Harvard University Press and Simon & Schuster. Widely read by both general public and academic circles, their works, written from a Chinese-American perspective, have affected American public opinion on China.

The dispute over a naturalized American citizen and human rights activist, Harry Wu (Wu Hongda), in June 1995 illustrates the impact Chinese Americans may have on U.S.-China relations. Shortly after Wu's arrest, Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord sternly warned that China's conduct in arresting Wu was "legally and morally unacceptable. . . . If Wu's case is not resolved quickly, it is plain that the consequences will not be limited to his own situation." The fact that top-ranking officials in the Clinton administration such as National Security Adviser Anthony Lake and prominent Republican leaders, including Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and House Speaker Newt Gingrich, all met Wu's wife demonstrated how Chinese Americans could take the spotlight of national politics on U.S.-China relations.

Prior to Hillary Clinton's attendance at the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in September 1995, public debates were focused on whether the First Lady's China trip would give "face" to the Chinese regime. Harry Wu and Haiqing Zhao, a former student from China