

The Future of U.S.-China Relations Lies With a New Generation

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Today's deteriorating relations between the U.S. and China take me back to my mid-20th-century childhood when the U.S. experienced the threat of a different Communist regime. Vivid in my memory are classroom drills crouched beneath our desks, all of us already well convinced of America's inherent goodness and praying for its victory over a Communist enemy we believed intent on destroying us and our way of life. The worst school-yard taunt, "Commie," invoked shudders as we envisioned these unknown but surely evil creatures seeking to take us over. As a nation, the U.S. endured the tragedies that ensued when we began to hunt out these others among ourselves.

Today, much has changed... but not all. As an educator, I am now accustomed to a more nuanced approach to civic education, an undertaking now increasingly recognized as a high-stakes educational priority. But tensions are, if anything, greater now than they were in the last century. The difference is that now conflict is internal and sharply divided, no longer united by opposition to a common enemy. Also missing are clear-cut good guys. What kinds of citizens, then, are we educating our children to become?

The opposing poles are well-marked: At one end is the objective of national identity and faith and pride in a set of core principles that define and unite us, and at the other is recognition of the need to prepare young people as global citizens of an increasingly complex, heterogeneous, and unpredictable world. Increasingly, the threats and challenges of fear and hatred lie at home. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the specter of such an unlikely group as Asian-Americans becoming a demonized, even persecuted group is not a groundless fantasy.

In this context, the future of U.S.-China relations takes on new meaning. Yet, amidst the uncertainty, there is one certainty that cannot be ignored and, to the contrary, warrants our focused attention. Those who shape the future of U.S.-China relations, and indeed influence international relations worldwide, will be not of my generation but of a new generation of young people around the globe. They are now constructing their own images of the major players on the world stage and how they compare with one another and interconnect. Does an emerging

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politics of care (Slaughter, 2023) stand a chance in an international arena long regarded as competitive and adversarial?

With all these considerations in mind, we recently undertook a simple (albeit clearly only fledging) experiment, what social scientists call a proof of concept, yet in doing it we hope we may have planted a seed, one that might grow and take the next generation in a good direction. The core concept underlying it is far from new and often heard these days: Let's get people on opposite sides of the fence into conversation with each other, to learn who these others really are, and in so doing possibly reduce the sense of menace and potential threat that their "otherness" confers.

Our undertaking was supported by two developments. One is the development in technology unknown in the last century that makes it straightforward for individuals on opposite sides of the world to experience clear real-time communication with one another. Educators today lament that this technological capacity remains far from being taken full advantage of for educational purposes in ordinary classrooms (Arvidsson & Kuhn, 2021).

The other is a series of educational activities that my associates and I have designed that engage young adolescents in direct debate on significant contemporary issues, one-on-one or at most two-on-two. In the process, they need to do far more than air uninformed opinions. They are responsible for addressing one another's claims, drawing on an accumulating body of evidence to support and challenge them.

I took advantage of both developments to collaborate with former Chinese graduate students now returned to China to implement this method internationally. We organized a series of rotating electronic dialogs each between an American teen and a Chinese counterpart, one signing on mid-evening and the other early morning. We began with a topic of mutual personal concern: the best path to success in school. The schools we approached in China were hesitant to become officially involved, but they happily made the opportunity available to families, who quickly became enthusiastic. Most importantly, so were the young participants in both countries. Every single one reported that they enjoyed the activity and hoped to participate again.

Their reflections after a week of dialogs with two new partners each day struck a similar tone among the American teens: "The fact that I was able to communicate with and have real-time conversations with people halfway across the world really stood out to me, and is an experience I'll never forget." Another said, "The most surprising thing was how easy it was to communicate

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with a stranger.” And even this: “The evidence and the claims they were making started to make me question my opinion.”

The Chinese teens echoed the reactions of the American teens regarding the ease and directness of communication: “It was unbelievable that I communicated with my American partner without barriers.” “American teens are friendly,” one remarked, and another said, “Talking to new people each day allowed me to hear new ideas and perspectives.” Chinese comments differed only in a wish that the sessions had been longer.

The research data collected previously among teens within a culture over longer periods have demonstrated the gains the activity produces in both argumentation skill and individual verbal and written expression (Kuhn, 2018). But the demonstration experiment we share here has a further message: The unknown is often not difficult to make known and familiar, with potentially far-reaching and long-term consequences.

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Deanna Kuhn, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University Teachers College, is a cognitive and educational psychologist and a member of the National Academy of Education. Her primary concern is with how best to educate students for their adult roles in the workplace and in their personal lives as life-long learners and as citizens. Her work has been published widely in outlets ranging from *Psychological Review* to *Harvard Educational Review*. Her books include *Education for thinking*, *The skills of argument*, *The development of scientific thinking skills*, *Argue with me: Argument as a path to developing students' thinking and writing*, and, most recently, written directly to teens, *Building our best future: Thinking critically about ourselves and our world*.

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