



Young Leaders Forum: Contrasting Perspectives

The National Committee launched the Young Leaders Forum (YLF) in 2002 as a means of building personal and professional relationships between the next generation of leaders from the United States and China. YLF Fellows, who are under forty years of age upon entering the program, are selected on the basis of their accomplishments, leadership potential and interest in civic and international affairs. Membership in YLF lasts for a minimum of two years, and the venue for the annual four-day forum alternates between the United States and China, allowing each participant to attend a conference in each country.

In two contrasting participant perspectives, writer, translator, editor and teacher Elizabeth Gaffney shares her impressions of the 2007 Forum in Nanjing, while Xu Zhiyuan, author of several books, co-publisher of City Magazine and former chief writer at the Shanghai-based Economic Observer newspaper, describes his experiences in the 2006 Forum in Santa Cruz, California.

Participant Perspective: Elizabeth Gaffney

The meeting room of the Mao Villa at the Dongjiao State Guesthouse has surely seen many remarkable events and personages—there were pictures of Mao with his vast entourage all over the walls—but it seems unlikely that such an eclectic yet accomplished bunch could ever have gathered there as did this past November, for the sixth annual meeting of the Young Leaders Forum (YLF). Our number included astronauts, fighter pilots, and military policy analysts sitting alongside conductors, composers, playwrights and authors, bankers, lawyers and internet entrepreneurs, rocket scientists, educators, and activists.

Our present-day discussions went on with considerable candor—perhaps more so than in the prior session I attended in the United States. It seemed to me this was possible because the topics we dwelled on were less focused on Sino-American relations, and more on the work of the individuals in the room.

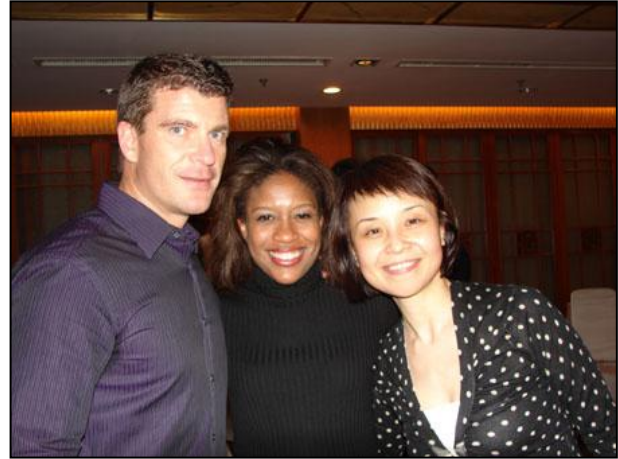
With its explicit focus on breadth rather than in-depth expertise in any field, YLF has staked out a subtle and important long-term goal of expanding our two cultures' mutual understanding by forging personal and professional relationships. It is not a policy think tank. It is a friendship tank. And friendship among individuals of different backgrounds necessarily breeds greater knowledge of their mutual cultures. Weddings have occurred between fellows, jobs have been offered, articles assigned, concerts and gallery openings attended, overseas performances have been arranged. Not to mention the many, many meals and glasses of cheer that have been shared by both Chinese and American YLF fellows in the off-months. Many of us have undertaken to learn or improve our knowledge of the other language – though to be fair, it should be noted that all the Chinese fellows know English quite well, whereas the majority of us Americans struggle to master a few phrases beyond ni hao. The listserv is busy year-round distributing people's invitations and announcements of their international travel plans. To me, all this shows how well the program is already working. A decade from now, these ties will have multiplied





exponentially, and the growing network of YLF connections will indubitably be responsible for innumerable yet-unimagined international partnerships.

Fittingly, I think, the most meaningful exchanges in this year's forum occurred when our topics spanned not our national identities but our various professions and passions. We took up issues that pertained to both countries, each in their different ways: world hunger, intellectual property, civil rights, and the cultural value of spending on the arts and theoretical sciences versus more pragmatic concerns such as health care and poverty. Surprising and illuminating alliances emerged, as in our discussions of spending, when the space, military, and high tech people were more closely aligned with the artists, favoring funding for arts and theoretical research, while the predominance of educators and business and entrepreneurial types seemed more concerned with the urgent matters of poverty relief. Excitingly, to me, the lines of agreement occurred much more along professional lines than national ones, and it drew the group together in new ways.



But for me, this and every year, the most important work of the YLF—educating us all about one another and our respective countries—has been done outside the formal sessions. There were two remarkable moments for me in our day at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center: The first, somewhat troubling moment happened at a cocktail reception, when two passionate and smart young Chinese students of the Center, both of whom had taught English as a foreign language at the secondary level, agreed about the impossibility of including literature in the high school English curriculum in China. It was just too difficult, they said, until the grammar and vocabulary and basics has been mastered. As a writer and editor, who relished the small scraps of literature that were larded into my earliest language lessons, I was crushed by this. I believe that we can come to know one another and forge genuine human empathy across vast distances simply by reading books, all without the cost and ardor of travel. For me, literacy, multilingualism and broad reading are the most practical and deepest possible routes to widespread mutual understanding. That conversation reminded me how desperately important ventures like YLF and the National Committee's other exchange programs are, if we are ever to know one another.

The other, truly stirring moment at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center occurred when our distinguished guest speaker, Professor Ren Donglai, learned that one of the YLF fellows he would be addressing was Xu Zhiyong, the noted legal scholar, civil-rights activist and independent member of the Beijing People's Congress: Our speaker bowed to Xu Zhiyong and told us he was humbled to be in his presence. It was a reminder to me that we, sitting there at that table, were capable of changing the world; some of us already have.

Just how we will change it will be changed by our knowledge of one another, not just professionally but personally. Dozens of conversations took off on different tangents, all starting from the basis of our plenary sessions, as we rode bicycles through the hilly roads of the Zhongshan Cultural Park, where our hotel was located within a stone's throw of the Sun-Yat-Sen Mausoleum, the tomb of the first Ming Emperor, a botanical garden and an aquarium, among many other attractions. Another day, we discovered which of us were most competitive racing dragon boats on a nearby lake. We shared our understanding of history, genocide and the purpose of monumental architecture on a



tour of the new Nanjing Massacre Memorial. We walked at night through the unlit streets of the ancient water town Tongli, guided by Wang Jianshuo, one of China's foremost bloggers and a connoisseur of the old town's mysteries and pleasures. On a visit to a pristine model school in Suzhou, where we were treated royally but kept carefully away from any students, we played ping pong in the gym and afterward discussed the difficult plight of China's migrant workers – as well as the effectiveness of government propaganda. We spent a morning learning how silk is made—watching silkworms munch mulberry leaves, workers unwind boiled cocoons, and women gymnastically weave brocade with all four limbs and their teeth to boot—and then contemplated the tiny silken slippers made for bound feet and the cultural implications of that tradition, wondering what the closest parallel might be in American culture—corsets, stiletto heels, cosmetic surgery? After a tour of Shanghai's swankier shops and restaurants, we lingered on the couches of a modern Shanghai teahouse run by fellow Tang Haisong's wife and compared the wealth gap in America and the new China.

As for the results of the session, there was nothing concrete, thank goodness. Instead, there was a vast fertile ground laid, with no limit on what may come of it in future years.

Participant Perspective: Xu Zhiyuan

The mere mention of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy building in Belgrade angers every Chinese attending the meeting; the Americans, on the other hand, draw a blank—most of them are ignorant of the event, and the few who remember it assume it was a mistake, not a political gesture. The Americans do not understand why the Chinese react so ferociously, why they interpret the bombing as an affront. The Americans reason that mistakes happen in war, that American bombs sometimes even killed U.S. soldiers.

The northern California sun shines brilliantly outside the windows, across thick woods and scattered towns to the Pacific coast five kilometers away. Thirty-two young men and women from China and America, all under forty, discuss our understanding of Sino-American relations. We will be together here for three days. This meeting is arranged by the National Committee on United States-China Relations, the very agent of the famous Ping Pong Diplomacy in 1972. The Committee invites the “best and brightest”—the Americans seem to have a particular fondness for phrases of the kind that suggest both content and a disproportionate amount of encouragement and praise—young people from both countries to attend the “Young Leaders Forum” and hold discussions in a casual, intimate environment.



Every participant is at his or her best when talking about his or her growth and dreams. Two people's presentations strike me the most: a fervent admirer of the Jewish writer Elie Weisel and his books on the Holocaust, Mexican-born Daniel Lubetzky is full of the vigor that characterizes Latin-American culture. He talks about founding an organization devoted to establishing cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians, hoping to create trust and understanding between the two. In contrast, Zhu Yongzhong, a wonderful singer of Tu minority folksongs, has a solemn soul. He recalls his childhood experience of spending three hours fetching water with his mother as his



motivation to establish the Sanchuan Development Association (SDA), an organization that helps the poor in four counties in the Qinghai Province by improving drinking water and education.

When the topic shifts to the Sino-American relations, however, ignorance and doubts prevail. The participants—successful entrepreneurs, tech wizards, musicians, financial types, NGO leaders—confess their lack of understanding on the issue, although they are all sure that the relations between the world’s greatest rising power and the world’s present leading power will give significant shape to the political and economic order of the world. How on earth will Sino-American relations shape that order? What can be done to avoid the possible risks that threaten to break down Sino-American relations? Neither the American nor Chinese participants have an exact answer, but we’d better figure something out. A recent survey done by the World Public Opinion reveals that the trust between China and America is declining.

First of all, we only have a shallow understanding of each other’s country. Most Americans only know of Confucius and the cheap “Made in China” goods available at WalMart; and most Chinese, who think they know America better, hardly know anything beyond Hollywood movies and McDonald’s.

Lacking understanding of the other country’s traditions, political concepts, and social psychology, we revert to the favorite topics of the media and politicians: exchange rates, trade deficit, North Korean nuclear tension, and Taiwan. For a moment, I think that I am witnessing a political debate for election—everyone is keen to clarify his position without giving analyses. No doubt, these are highly ideological issues.



The American participants air their views on these matters: “China’s RMB is grossly underrated, so why doesn’t the government revalue it, and make U.S. goods cheaper for the Chinese consumer?” “China has more than one trillion dollars foreign exchange reserve and is one of the permanent members of UN Security Council, so why doesn’t it shoulder more responsibility in international affairs?” “Why does it have such close relationship with so-called rogue states like North Korea, Venezuela, and Sudan and turn a deaf ear to the horrible massacre in Darfur?” The Americans do not know why, on mentioning the Taiwan issue, the Chinese participants invariably get stirred up. Of course, what puzzles them most is that the Chinese are never seemingly willing to criticize their own country for any wrongdoings.

The Chinese respond in a somewhat embarrassed tone. We have a sense of anxiety about our identity. In other circumstances, perhaps, we will criticize our nation harshly, but when sitting with foreigners, our personal identity gets mixed up with the national identity. The collectivism that dominated our education for too long leaves us accustomed to using “we” rather than “I.” Because China has fallen far behind other countries in political, economic, and cultural aspects in the past 150 years, we are extremely sensitive to any outside criticism. We suffer from the same “victim mentality” that all developing countries suffer from.

To make the situation worse, almost all the Sino-American issues discussed at the Forum are still sensitive or taboo for the Chinese, and we are almost as ill-informed as our American friends. We lack open and serious discussions at



home, and it is nearly impossible to find explanations due to the complex social reality and tradition in China. Therefore, as defensive and passionate as our responses are, they are hardly persuasive to a rational ear.

The young Chinese sitting in the room epitomize Chinese society. After Zhu Yongzhong tells his story about the Qinghai people's desperate fighting for basic rights and needs, Liu Jun, from Lenovo, and Cao Kebo, a private businessman from Jiangyin, tell theirs—stories of China marching towards the world, winning the glory that not long ago seemed to belong exclusively to America, Germany, and Japan. China, where per capita income is among the lowest in the world, is rapidly becoming the world's largest economic power.

Two facts curiously parallel each other: on the one hand, China exerts a profound influence in the world order; on the other, our mentality remains one more typical of the poor and weak. We hungrily seek to have everything, but we never know how to accept responsibilities or to give reasonable explanations for our deeds. America's, or the world's, worry about China derives from their uncertainty of the future of this large country, as China fails to give the world a set of consistent and transparent codes. We complain about others' misunderstandings, but have little time to reflect on our policies home and abroad that have formed a complexity and lack clear explanation.

On the 1999 bombing, the arguments are doomed to be fruitless, as the emotional baggage each side brings to the table is so different. The Chinese can easily draw up a long list of the irresponsible diplomatic policies of the American government. In the name of national interest, for instance, America has supported many autocracies. Questioned by the Americans, we should and need to question back.

At the same time, however, we have to admit that American citizens have much more concern and many more heated debates about their government's policies than we do about our own. The endless debates, though often superficial, do serve to reshape American society and deepen the understanding of the policies both on the part of the government and of the public.

While China is described as a country enjoying a huge trade surplus and foreign exchange reserve, she is suffering from a huge deficit as well—a deficit in our understanding of the world. The Young Leaders Forum seeks to address this deficit, for both the Chinese and American participants. By the time the conference concludes, there is a sense that Forum participants will return home with some new, enlightened ideas. Of course, one Forum isn't able to entirely bridge the wide gaps that exist between Chinese and American cultural understanding. But it is a beginning that, with vigilant follow-up, just might lead to progress down the road.

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