

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jian (Jay) Wang*

Public Diplomacy in U.S.-China Relations ^[1]

As Secretary Hillary Clinton stated last week, U.S.-China relations are now at “a critical juncture.” Public diplomacy plays a crucial role in steering this vital relationship in a positive direction.

U.S.-China relations have always been complex and, at times, tumultuous. Amidst the ups and downs of this relationship, popular perception of each other matters, because it forms the climate of opinion in which policies and actions are considered, weighted and pursued.

The good news is that both Americans and Chinese appear to see eye-to-eye on the importance of their oft-not-so-easy relationship. A recent Pew Research Center poll reveals that a majority of Americans consider it very important to build stronger ties with China, as they increasingly see Asia and China of greater importance to the United States.

Similarly, in China, according to an opinion survey conducted by China Development Research Foundation and Horizon Research Consultancy Group last year, when asked which countries are the most important to China currently as well as in 10 years, the U.S. comes in first by a wide margin, followed by Russia, E.U. and Japan.

On the other hand, these surveys also indicate that Americans and Chinese alike identify each other as posing the greatest threat to their own country. Their mutual image is mostly divided and, in some instances, gross misperceptions abound.

Public opinion from China indicates that, while most Chinese view positively their country's global influence, they see the U.S. (and the West in general) as attempting to contain China's rise, suggesting a lack of trust in America's intentions and actions.

Still, the U.S. frequently tops the most-favorable-nation lists in China. The U.S., for instance, is the destination of choice when Chinese parents decide where to send their children for education. Meanwhile, although many Americans like and even admire Chinese culture and tradition, overall they tend to see China in a more negative light as evidenced in national polls over the last two decades.

The Pew study finds that almost half of Americans mistakenly believe China is now the world's leading economic power; whereas in the minds of most Chinese, China remains primarily a developing country.

These mutual popular perceptions speak to some of the deeper anxieties and suspicions about the relationship between the world's super-power and a re-emerging one.

Nurturing and sustaining a positive relationship between the two countries is consequential not only for the U.S. and China but also for the world. And, it requires the active engagement of public diplomacy.

But the practice of public diplomacy is conditioned by institutional and ideological imperatives and contexts. So, an important first step is to initiative dialogs and substantive exchanges between practitioners and scholars of public diplomacy of the two countries.
