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The Missing Middle: Why Citizen Diplomacy Still Matters ^[1]

It was March 18, 2020, and I was rushing to catch the last flight home. In an elevator, a man adjusted his mask and stepped away from me once he realized I was Chinese. It had been over a year since I'd been in China, but he saw me as the poster boy for the "Chinese virus."

That quiet moment left an imprint. It taught me how quickly identity can become a barrier. And it made me look inward, reflecting on my own ignorance and closed-mindedness. Before I ever faced discrimination, I internalized the idea that cultural difference meant danger.

As the first person in my family to study abroad, I left home at sixteen with a suitcase, a student visa, and the weight of my family's hopes. My father made the most significant decision of my life when he sent me to high school in the United States. At the airport, anxious and probably too young to be making life-altering choices, I stood beside him as he offered one final piece of advice.

"Be careful around Americans," he told me. "They don't like the Chinese very much." It was his way of protecting me. And like the obedient son that I was, I took his words to heart.

If "be careful around Americans" was a class, I would've earned an A+. I avoided unnecessary interaction, kept to my cultural bubble, and convinced myself that staying quiet meant staying safe.

Everything changed the winter I visited Birmingham, Alabama, to spend Christmas with a friend's family. I had been warned not to go. People told me I wouldn't be welcome there. But when I arrived, I was met at the airport by a group of college students holding a hand-painted poster with my name in Chinese characters. We spent the week sharing meals, telling stories, and learning about each other's lives. That experience quietly dismantled the "us vs. them" mindset I had carried for years. It showed me that even across different cultures, people can connect. Not through grand gestures, but through small, human moments. I wondered: What if more young people had access to this experience? That question became my driving inspiration for starting the Bridge Cultural Exchange Academy (BCEA).

I founded BCEA at the University of Southern California to make citizen diplomacy accessible for students who, like me, didn't grow up with international exposure. Since 2021, BCEA has reached over 3,000 students from 25 countries through online cultural summits, peer-led dialogue projects, and a global mentorship network. One of our alumni—a skater from Guangzhou—launched a virtual exchange project called "Girls Who Skate" with peers in Los Angeles, using skateboarding as a language of empowerment and mutual learning.

Today, however, cultural exchange programs like the ones that shaped my worldview—and launched the Bridge Cultural Exchange Academy—are under growing strain. A funding freeze by the U.S. State Department placed key initiatives like the Fulbright, Gilman, and

International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) on uncertain footing, leaving many young people, educators, and professionals in limbo.

In 2024 and 2025, the U.S. House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party issued formal letters to several major universities—including the University of Southern California and five other schools—requesting detailed information on Chinese student organizations and institutional partnerships. While these letters were framed as transparency measures, their broader implications raised concerns about academic freedom and the potential profiling of international students based on nationality.

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These developments threaten not only individual programs and campus communities but also the United States' long-term reputational security. According to public diplomacy scholar and professor Dr. Nicholas J. Cull, a nation's standing in the world is shaped not only by its policies but by its image—its perceived values, openness, and moral authority. Cull argues that reputational security is earned through sustained, credible engagement with foreign publics, mainly through mechanisms like education, exchanges, and dialogue. When the U.S. curtails these very channels—either through funding freezes or actions that signal distrust of international students—it risks eroding the trust and goodwill that undergird its soft power.

Opportunities for mutual understanding—once seen as diplomatic assets—are increasingly being reframed through a lens of risk and suspicion. In this climate, students and young professionals, who have the potential to bridge divides, often find themselves under scrutiny. Without sustained support and a commitment to maintaining the openness that defines its educational and civic institutions, the U.S. could inadvertently weaken one of its most strategic advantages: the power to inspire and attract through connection, not coercion.

Cultural exchange programs have a very real and measurable impact. In our most recent Global Intelligence Summit for BCEA, 92% of participants reported strengthened confidence in having respectful, cross-cultural dialogue. That number means something to me—not because it looks good in a report but because I've seen what that growth can lead to. When students gain the courage to ask a difficult question or share something personal with someone from a different culture, they rewrite their inherited narratives.

Beyond BCEA, I've worked with other institutions committed to the same purpose. At Global Ties U.S., I helped coordinate public diplomacy initiatives through the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), supporting exchange programs between American and international professionals—from police officers to civil society leaders. I contributed to project research, proposal development, and event planning for a national gathering that brought together over 800 participants. I saw how public diplomacy is not just a soft add-on to foreign policy; it's an ecosystem of daily human moments that quietly shape how nations see one

another.

At the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and United States Heartland China Association, I supported programs that reminded me how fragile yet essential dialogue can be. I helped facilitate engagement between experts, scholars, and emerging leaders, and worked on mapping the organization's People-to-People Exchange database to help identify opportunities for deeper subnational engagement. After all, the most promising seeds of diplomacy are often planted far from a nation's capital.

Ultimately, real diplomacy begins with seeing others as humans first. My journey from guarded distance to genuine connection shows that while dialogue and cultural exchange can be messy and slow, it holds the power to rewrite inherited narratives. Whether through a conversation, a shared meal, or a simple act of welcome, these moments can bridge our divides, connect our global community, and make the world a better place.

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