

The Dilemma of the Chinese Diaspora in the Decoupling Era

Rong Xiaoqing

On November 9, six days before the virtual meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and China's President Xi Jinping attracted the world's attention, the two leaders had shared their thoughts about the relationship between the two countries. It was at the annual gala of the [National Committee on U.S.-China Relations](#), held in the Plaza Hotel in New York. In their congratulatory letters to the committee, both acknowledged the challenges in the relationship of the two countries and expressed willingness to overcome them.



But the guest speaker whose words struck me the most that night was Elaine Chao, former U.S. Secretary of Transportation and Labor Secretary. "We must ensure that the difficult relations between our two countries do not turn into anti-Asian hate or negative sentiments or violence that harm the Asian American community," said Chao, a Chinese American herself.

With anti-Asian hate crimes triggered by the Covid 19 pandemic showing no sign of subsiding, Chao's warning resonated. But even against this backdrop, it still evoked a different era, a time associated with something like the "Japanese internment," a period I thought had been cemented in the tomb of history.

After all, many in my generation of Chinese immigrants who came to the U.S. in the new millennium had thought we were merely helping to fortify already built bridges and participating in the perpetual trajectory of an amicable relationship between the two countries.

Now the bridges seem to be collapsing while many Chinese immigrants stand on the top of them, watching in shock. And this perilous situation has produced a tsunami of "life is stranger than fiction" stories that awe me even after I have spent the past 20 years covering the Chinese diaspora community in the U.S. as a journalist.

The previous optimism about the relationship between China and the U.S. among Chinese immigrants was not unfounded. Most of the time since I came to the U.S. as a journalism student in 2000, the relationship had seemed to be going from good to better.

One of the milestones of the good old days took place in 2005 on the very same stage - the annual gala of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, an organization that has been promoting communications between the two countries since its inception in 1966. In his keynote speech that night, [Robert Zoellick](#), U.S. Deputy Secretary of State at that time, called

for China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system.

Journalists at the scene, myself included, were jolted into breaking news mode as no one had expected the U.S. to associate China with the friendly word “stakeholder” for the first time at an otherwise routine event.

The optimism had only grown stronger when [Chimerica](#), a term coined by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick in 2007 to describe a new world economic order based on the synergy of Chinese’ savings and Americans’ overconsumption, was increasingly adopted by people of good will to highlight the intricate bond between the two countries.

Intricate and, therefore, inseparable. At least that was a perception that seemed to have been supported by statistics in various fields--between 2009 and 2019, the number of [Chinese students](#) studying in the U.S. jumped from 127,600 to 372,500, the number of [Chinese tourists](#) to the U.S. grew from 525,000 to 3 million, and [Chinese direct investment](#) in the U.S. leapt from just \$703 million in 2009 to more than \$45 billion at its peak in 2016. That was before Beijing's curbs on currency outflows and deteriorating trade and political relations between the U.S. and China slammed the total back to just \$5 billion in 2019.

When I look back at the stories I covered during the “positive” days, they seem to be shouting out the passion, hope, and possibilities of that period. Be it the [concert in Central Park](#) for a group of rock bands and folk singers from China organized by an indie label company there, the first [Lunar New Year firework show](#) on the Hudson River sponsored by China’s Ministry of Culture, or [the young Ohioan](#) who became an Internet sensation by teaching vernacular English and Chinese languages to people in both countries online. The multitude of such stories showed that the Chinese living in the U.S. as well as their culture were increasingly gaining respect and were

embraced.

As if to highlight the amicable atmosphere, some American experts on China, journalists, and business leaders even started asking in their books, articles and speeches whether there was anything the U.S. could [learn from China](#), an idea that would probably get more scorn than anything else today.

The Tide Changing

The rosy picture was shattered rather abruptly after President Donald Trump came to power. The [trade war](#) initiated by Trump, including higher tariffs from January 2018, was only the start. That year was a turning point in the relationship between the U.S. and China and the life of Chinese living in the U.S.

The following month, Christopher Wray, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informed a Senate Intelligence Committee [hearing](#) that all Chinese living in the U.S. are potentially informants working for Beijing, and recommended “a whole-of-society response” from the U.S. side. And in November, the U.S. Department of Justice launched the [“China Initiative”](#) to counter intellectual property espionage emanating from China by, among other tactics, fending off “non-traditional collectors” working as researchers and scholars and educating American universities about the risk of working with Chinese scholars.

These cemented the new role that the Trump administration had assigned to China at the end of 2017 -- [“strategic competitor.”](#) Although China has rejected this title, a more euphemistic term “decoupling” seems to have been accepted on both sides as the inevitable fate of the U.S.- China relationship. No one is now using the term “stakeholder”.

But the old optimism didn’t die easily. In the

summer of 2019, I interviewed a group of young Chinese restaurateurs who vowed to change the out-of-date image of Chinese food in the U.S. from the cheap Americanized Chop Suey to authentic cuisine in modern settings. Unlike the older generation of blue collar Chinese immigrants who were forced to toil in restaurants to make a living, these young people, who had grown up in middle or upper middle class families in China and had then been educated at top schools in the U.S., chose to enter the industry to fulfill their dream of elevating Chinese cuisine. Despite the ongoing trade war and declining U.S. China relations, they seemed undeterred.

Yong Zhao, a Yale graduate and co-founder of the Chinese fast casual chain Junzi Kitchen, pointed out that the banquet hosted by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai for U.S. President Richard Nixon during the latter's icebreaking trip to China in 1972 triggered a fever for Chinese food in the U.S.

"Cuisine is the least sensitive part in the U.S.-China relationship," Zhao told me. "It is possible that one day, when the two countries would like to cool things down, President Trump and President Xi Jinping can have a talk at Junzi. We sell Chinese food, and we hire American employees. Why not?"

That was a time before COVID-19 turned the world upside down, and before the toxic term "China virus," promoted by President Trump and officials in his cabinet, left all Asians living in this country in peril.

At the end of 2020, when I revisited some of the aspiring restaurateurs I talked to the previous year, I found quite a few had moved back to China for good. The initial failure of the U.S. in controlling the pandemic and rising crime rates helped to make them feel uneasy and contributed to the exodus. But the stresses went deeper, according to **Jinyu Zhong**, a graduate from the Culinary Institute of America who was working on launching her own fine

dining restaurant in New York before packing up for China last October. She told me: "Now the more you talk about China, the more resentment you get. But I wanted to promote Chinese culture via food. I don't want to compromise."

"My Chinese heart"

But many more Chinese who call the U.S. home couldn't leave, and, against the common understanding, they learned in a hard way that the word "decoupling" is not interchangeable with "divorce." In a divorce, more often than not, the parents would both tell the children that they still love them. But when the two countries are decoupling, the Chinese diaspora finds itself left in limbo with no empathy from either.

In the U.S. **Chinese students, scholars, and scientists** have been placed under tight scrutiny. Some were labeled as spies only to have the charges against them dropped when the prosecutors couldn't prove their cases. During the pandemic, Chinese became easy scapegoats for the havoc the virus has wreaked. To make the situation more ironic, some victims of anti-Asian violence that I've talked to were helping to **donate PPEs** to local hospitals and senior centers when they were attacked.

But the plight of Chinese in the U.S. cannot be attributed only to the American government. With nationalism and anti-American sentiment surging in China, every word they utter publicly, be it on social media platforms, in speeches or in traditional media outlets, can be put under the microscope of nationalistic warriors back home. These trolls often seem to be looking to elevate the tensions in the U.S.-China relationship, and don't care too much who gets hurt in the process.

A typical example is the Oscar winning film

director [Chloe Zhao](#). After her big award for *Nomadland* as best picture and best director in 2020, Chinese netizens dug out interviews she gave years ago to Western media. In one, she said she grew up in a country “where there are lies everywhere,” and in another “the U.S. is now my country.” Although she was misquoted in the second one as she actually said “is not” and the publication had issued a correction, it didn’t stop her being bashed for having betrayed China, and news about her awards was banned by censors in China.

Nationality has become such a sensitive topic. Even [Meng Wenzhou](#), the chief financial officer of Chinese technology company Huawei, had to face it when she went back to China after three years of home detention in Canada. While Meng’s return to China was largely considered a victory by the Chinese government, some netizens still questioned why China had to celebrate her release when she already taken Canadian citizenship. (A spokesperson from the Foreign Ministry told journalists she is still a Chinese citizen).

While most Chinese in the U.S. may not have to go through the doxxing that celebrities like Zhao and Meng have received, the resentment against them from some people in their home country can also be palpable. Last March, the video repentance of a man who called himself “overseas Chinese ” went viral on social media. The man said he had given up his Chinese citizenship and had not lifted a finger when his birthplace needed him. And now when he saw China had controlled the virus better than many other countries, he realized he had no right to go back there.

It turned out the man was indeed a bit part actor living in a second tier city in China. But the 650,000 clicks the video attracted before it was taken down were chilling to real overseas Chinese, many of whom had donated to their home towns to build schools and roads and to their native country whenever a natural

disaster struck.

In the 1980s, a song sung by Hong Kong pop singer Cheung Ming-man called “My Chinese Heart” went viral after it was on the very popular Lunar New Year Gala broadcast on Chinese Central Television. The lyric goes “despite the Western suits that I wear, my heart is still a Chinese heart.” People in the whole country were deeply touched by the bond overseas Chinese managed to maintain with their home country. But now the common sentiment in China appears to be that if you still have a Chinese heart, why do you put on Western suits?

The thorny situation makes many Chinese in the U.S. feel they have been pushed into a corner, and have to pick sides. Last September, I wrote a piece for the New York Times Chinese language site about how more Chinese in the U.S. were determined to [break up with China](#). Some of them did so out of their genuine disdain for the Chinese Communist Party while others took this as a survival strategy given the anti-China attitudes growing in the U.S. It was always a confusing response because it is not clear how xenophobes and racists can distinguish U.S.-loving Chinese Americans from pro-Beijing Chinese nationals.

Challenges for the Media

As an industry insider, I know how hard my colleagues in the media have been working to cover this treacherous time of U.S.-China relations. Still, I have to say the media in both countries haven’t helped much to correct the misperceptions that drive the two countries and their people further apart. The American media’s coverage of China is often laden with insinuations either out of ignorance or ideological bias, while the media in China often exaggerate any chaos in the U.S. during the pandemic and the anti-police violence protests to suggest that the superpower is in terminal

decline. Such reports are then used as tinder by the audiences in each country - who take them as signs of international hostility - to fan the fires of rage.

As journalists, our job is to tell the truth. But the truth has different sides all of which are part of the whole. When everyone insists on telling only their side and ignoring any sense of balance, it presents journalists with a greater challenge to broaden our vision. This is a test we face in this new era.

But to me, the biggest challenge in everyday work now is that many Chinese in the U.S. have zipped their mouths up when it comes to U.S.-China related topics.

The chilling effect of the divide made itself clear to me as early as October 2019 at the annual convention of the Chinese Association for Science and Technology USA held at Columbia University. Founded in 1992, the organization has close to 10,000 members in the U.S. working in technology, education, law, finance and other fields, including many leading scientists and academics.

The annual convention has been a platform for Chinese and American researchers to communicate and cultivate collaboration. That year, the keynote speakers were as appealing as ever, including Nobel Laureates and members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. But the organizers told me the number of attendees from China, who used to travel to the U.S. for the convention, had sunk.

The Chinese scientists I talked to at the convention, both Chinese nationals living in the U.S. and American citizens, shared their concerns about the overcharged atmosphere between China and the U.S. But many talked gingerly and anonymously, worrying that a quote in the media, even a benign one, could draw unnecessary attention from suspicious FBI agents.

The fear is not only confined to the science field, or fears of the FBI. This summer, I wrote [a story for Curbed](#) about the dwindling number of Chinese buyers in the real estate market in New York. A Chinese realtor who focuses on clients from her home country told me she thought China, which used to be the number one source for foreign buyers of properties in the U.S., had dropped to third this year, behind Canada and Mexico, because of the pandemic's impact on travel and investment. She predicted that when the virus is under control, they'll come back because "Chinese always have a longing for the U.S."

While I'd finished my first draft of the story, the realtor called and asked me to take her comment out of it. She said she had talked to some friends in China recently and found the anti-American sentiment had grown even stronger. "I don't want to become a target for the Internet trolls," she said.

Normally, at this stage, many journalists would politely explain that she was on the record with her original statement. But I deleted her quotes because they weren't essential and I knew well that her worries could easily become a nightmarish reality.

All of this may prompt some readers to draw the conclusion that this is one of the worst times for Chinese living in the U.S. and for a journalist covering the Chinese diaspora community. But this is not how I see it. Yes, it is a confusing time as many Chinese in the U.S. may often feel torn apart by the tensions between the U.S. and China. But as humans, many of us are tormented by the ultimate question "who am I?"



**Stop Asian Hate, April 4, 2021
demonstration in New York's Chinatown
(Photo by Rong Xiaoqing)**

The process for human beings seeking an answer to the question has generated many of the great literary works in history. And the story is often more intriguing when the confusion is combined with extreme add-ons such as poverty and wealth, and love and betrayal.

Now in a time when a pandemic is savaging society, people are polarized and even wars might be looming, the resulting chaos is producing many striking stories in the Chinese diaspora community. It feels like a time when we might come closer to answering that question - painful though it might be.

As a Chinese living in the U.S. and as a journalist, I feel lucky to be a witness to this era.



**Stop Asian Hate, April 4, 2021
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(Photo by Rong Xiaoqing)**

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