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Bush China Foundation Brief: Generational perspectives in U.S.-China relations

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Over the past few years, U.S.-China tensions have been increasingly framed as great power competition, which has become a fixture in the international environment. However, this framing fails to advance a deeper and more nuanced understanding of various perspectives on critical issues impacting the relationship. With the future of U.S.-China relations increasingly uncertain, it is crucial to infuse new viewpoints and solutions into the conversation to address not only the challenges we face today but also in the years to come.

To that end, the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations (Bush China Foundation) launched the U.S.-China XGen (cross-generational) Initiative to broaden the discourse and to identify generational perception differences. The project engages Americans and Chinese of varying ages and brings members of “Generation Z”—those between ages 18 and 25—into dialogue on an equal footing. As part of the initiative, the Bush China Foundation convened last month five virtual focus groups featuring the perspectives of American and Chinese GenZers, which are highlighted in this report.

Generational perspectives

Chinese and Americans define generations differently. In China, generations are commonly categorized by decade—for instance, the post-80s (八零后) cohort refers to those born between 1980 and 1989. Another Chinese categorization is based on “social cohorts” where people in the same generation experience the same major historical event, such as the Cultural Revolution. The U.S. follows the Western framing that defines generations as Boomers, Generation X, Millennials/Generation Y and Generation Z, which generally refers to groups of people born over a 15–20-year span. For instance, the Millennial cohort refers to those born between 1981 and 1996, defined as the first generation coming of age in the new millennium.

An individual’s age has been a common predictor of differences in perceptions and attitudes toward another country, and in most cases, economics features significantly. Chinese post-60s and 70s cohorts—due to their experience of severe economic hardship—look up to the West and constantly look for ways to improve their and their children’s lives. Similarly, the older generation in the U.S. born during the same period still remembers and views China as a third-world country. A later generation in America—Millennials, who were dubbed “the unluckiest generation in U.S. history” by the *Washington Post* because of their inability to earn more and accumulate more wealth than their parents—is characterized by a general sense of disappointment in their own economic (under)achievements. Therefore, they are preoccupied with economic security and tend to view China from an economic lens, which has implications for the perception of the state of the bilateral relationship (to be discussed below).

Compared to earlier generations, the shared identity between current young people in the two countries is noteworthy. American GenZers understand economic prosperity is not easily attainable, so they are not burdened by economic-oriented disappointment and are more aware of social change and how they are affected by it. They are also more likely to see China as a

peer to the United States in technology and accept China the way it is. In China, young people born during the same period are less impressed by the West than their parents and grandparents due to China's developmental successes. They are a more inward-looking generation concerning themselves to a greater extent with social challenges and effecting domestic changes.

These are broad generalizations, as U.S. and Chinese participants are quick to point to the diversity and fluidity of views within any generation—a product of exposure (through media or physical travel) and changes in perceptions over time. China's state media-dominated news content and the U.S. media's negative bias have prompted young people to reduce consumption of news through traditional channels and instead turn to other means, including social media. That has to a large extent broadened and nuanced their perspectives toward the other country. However, in the social media era, people react more to emotions than facts, which could happen in any generation. In China, the strong presence of the online group of young people, "Little Pinks", provides an interesting case study. The group is known for its ultranationalism which scrutinizes online posts and attacks those who dare to criticize China. They see their country as a powerful and rich one that demands respect from the rest of the world.

Bilateral relations

Many American and Chinese GenZers think that the core challenge in bilateral relations lies in the perception of deception and distrust between the two nations. Beijing is deeply conscious of long-term threats to its political legitimacy and fears the United States is intentionally exacerbating China's domestic frictions. On the other hand, the U.S., seeing China as an agent of subversion, is convinced of an approach to the PRC that is rooted in defending democracy, free trade and the integrity of the global order. The media's influence further heightens the emotions and perception differences as topics such as human rights and sovereignty are often highlighted. This ideological difference stemming from misperceptions and false narratives will be difficult to bridge.

Instead of ideology-focused narratives, an American GenZer pointed to material conditions as the root of the challenge between the two countries, especially in economic competitiveness across industries such as semiconductors, biotech, artificial intelligence, 5G and energy. The experiences of people are shaped on one hand by economic inequality and limited mobility in the U.S., and on the other by the unattainability of property ownership and an overly competitive job market in China. This participant argued that the inadequacies in people's material well-being is a fundamental driver of how each country behaves toward each other and will potentially propel conflicts if left unmanaged. These economic uncertainties shared by the young people in both countries impel them to focus more on domestic issues than foreign policy.

When it comes to the future of bilateral relations, the opinions are mixed regarding the two countries' ability to compartmentalize issues in a way that would allow cooperation in areas such as climate change and nuclear nonproliferation. Some American GenZers in the group were less optimistic about compartmentalization than their peers, as they cannot imagine the U.S. compromising democratic values which have given it the pretense to enact trade measures

that advance its competitiveness in the global marketplace. Many have identified trade issues as the area where tensions could continue to escalate.

Climate change

Both American and Chinese Gen-Zers have shown a keen interest and enthusiasm for climate issues, confirming the strong engagement among the younger generation in this existential challenge. Young people increasingly favor sustainability over fossil fuels and extractive industries, causing a ripple effect in both political campaigns and consumer behaviors. They are important actors to effect changes in decision-making and cultural shifts. For instance, companies like Nike take careful consideration of their supply chain and carbon footprint to meet the demands and preferences of younger consumers. Further, the traditional thinking that youth only engage in activism and only experts with decades of experience can make progress on climate issues is shifting. The inclusion of younger voices and youth-led activities in the COP conferences—the United Nations Climate Change Conferences—highlights the contributions of the younger generation to climate action, which is inherently innovative and collaborative.

Participants from both countries recognize the disconnect between those who emitted the most and those affected by climate events and believe that climate justice and responsibility must be addressed. Domestically, for example, the Chinese government must address employment and other socio-economic impacts caused by decarbonization policies to ensure a just transition. Currently, there has been limited measures and compensation for unemployed coal workers in China. Internationally, advanced economies like the United States and Europe should take up more responsibility and provide support to emerging economies that would otherwise have limited resources to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Although global discussion about “loss and damage” is moving in the right direction, much more still needs to be done. One challenge is the lack of political will in policymakers who do not see climate change as a pressing international issue. Until this mindset changes, progress cannot accelerate.

There is an overall fragmentation in climate policies within each country. In the United States, although climate change is framed as a major threat to its national security, there is a lack of coherence at the state and local levels, which use varying definitions and approaches to climate goals. In China, provinces also have different climate plans and approaches, which often confuse foreign companies operating in the country. Moreover, there is a general skepticism among participants about net-zero goals and promises without the support of coherent and actionable actions at all levels.

Climate change is commonly viewed as an area where U.S.-China cooperation can take place. Many participants thought both countries could contribute to helping third countries in areas such as ESG guidance and adaptation strategies. U.S.-China competition can potentially help advance global climate action as long as it is a fair race to the top for innovative solutions, rather than one focused only on winning.

Technology and privacy

There was a widespread concern among GenZ participants about personal data privacy as well as the social implications of data collection, usage and storage at the individual, societal and cross-border levels. People often are not aware of how their data is being used, especially with

artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics becoming commonplace, and regulations have not kept pace with these advancements. Concerns over AI's role in spreading misinformation, creating fake content and human rights issues have brought more attention to data protection. There is a perception that the United States gives big tech companies control over users' data, whereas China sees data as state property to help maintain social order. The difference in treating data has implications for how each country interacts with its citizens and one another.

In the context of U.S.-China relations, TikTok is a case in point. The United States is worried that TikTok could be required to supply the Chinese government with American user data. Given that the app is hugely popular in the U.S., harmful content could spread widely in a matter of minutes, making it an effective tool to disseminate Chinese propaganda and misinformation to influence the minds of American youth. The U.S., along with other countries, has moved to ban the app on government phones and is considering further legislation. The case not only illustrates the deep distrust in the bilateral relationship but underscores the normalization of the banning of apps run by private companies on national security grounds. A Chinese GenZer posited that since China has banned Google and Facebook, the U.S. ban on TikTok seems fair.

Moving forward, GenZers from both countries agree there is a need to build consensus and standardize data collection and usage, which can mitigate data security concerns for both nations. As data appropriation is a concern for everyone, regardless of nationality or affiliation, countries must find solutions that prioritize individual data privacy and protection while facilitating meaningful collaboration between nations. Chinese GenZers shared that China needs to have transparency, which is crucial to facilitating public education on technology and digital literacy. An American GenZer shared that the U.S. could learn from China to improve digital access and recommends a closer examination of tech companies' stated goals concerning data and whether they have kept their promises.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)

Participants delved into how advancing rights for one group can cause resentment in another within society and discussed their skepticism on whether top-down diversity-focused education policies (often seen as progress by the majority) meaningfully improves the lives of minority groups. Both sides discussed at length China's gaokao (高考) system, the standardized nationwide college entrance examination, which reflects and can perpetuate existing inequalities, as students suffering from poverty and lack of educational resources are put at a disadvantage. Preferential gaokao policies for minority groups are controversial and viewed as unfair to those who do not benefit from these policies. And yet, these policies could be merely gestures or quick fixes in place of real attempts to level the playing field.

Elite schools have adopted a lottery admission system to avoid class discrimination, and the government has cracked down on the private tutoring industry to promote an equitable educational environment. However, some Chinese participants noted that social and economic factors contribute to creating inequities in education and society, which needs to be addressed on top of the temporary solutions for higher education.

In the United States, political disagreements and ideological divides have hindered progress in advancing racial justice and other DEI issues. Although there have been improvements during the pandemic in bridging educational and employment disparities, these policies are reactionary

and one-off. The integration of diversity and inclusion standards in higher education is a good sign, but other trends, such as the conflation of critical race theory and African American history, are cause for concern.

Overall, participants agreed on the need for continued reflection and dialogue around these issues. Although addressing topics like resources redistribution will be challenging, criticizing and openly discussing injustice is essential, especially beyond one's social circle, to broaden perspectives. An American GenZer suggested that more community outreach programs targeting underrepresented groups would be meaningful and impactful for these communities.

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