Bridging the U.S.-China Divide Through Humanization

By Angie Zhang

As long as I could remember, my identity as an American-born-Chinese has always been complicated. My parents grew up in communist China and have always been pretty reluctant to assimilate to the full-blown American lifestyle. We have especially always held our differences on the topic of the Chinese Communist Party and the way the government treats its people—I can clearly remember my parents discussing over the dinner table whether it was possible to love China as a country without loving the CCP, which they came to conclude was not possible.

Growing up in the United States, I have a completely different stance: I loved going back to China every few years and spending time there during the summer, and I was always excited to see my cousins and roller-skate through our gated community of high rise apartments and catch tadpoles in the pond. I also loved China because I felt like it was my home away from home: while I didn’t speak the language perfectly or know all the cultural and social norms, it felt relieving to be finally surrounded by people who looked like me, as opposed to in America where as a child I felt like I did not fit in with my blonde, pigtailed classmates.

As I grew older, however, I learned about the extent of which the CCP suppresses people’s voices, including censorship of the Chinese Me Too Movement, the mistreatment of Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang area, the handling of the Hong Kong protests, and the censorship of history lessons in which the famine under Mao is still taught in schools as a “natural disaster” [see lecture on Famine & Violence Under Mao].

All this made me understand the complexity of my parents’ question, “Can we love China if we don’t love the CCP.” And while I’m navigating through my own complicated views on China, it seems that a lot of people also have binary ideas about the United States versus China.

Misconceptions occur even when it comes to social matters. For example, a very popular derogatory term for the Chinese to call westerners or white people is “guilao,” which translates to “foreign ghost” (and is the Chinese equivalent of gringo), and a popular thing American students will say about Chinese students include something along the lines of, “Rich international Chinese students are so stuck up and only stick to themselves.”

This mutual suspicion arises due to lack of interaction and understanding, as well as equating a country’s individual citizens to their government when in reality there are often discrepancies between a country’s people and its government.
My parents may feel a strong alliance with not only their country but its government, because my grandfather fought under the communist army in World War 2; my dad witnessed the end of the Cultural Revolution; both of my parents worked in Chinese government/bureaucracy so their personal experiences would naturally shape their view of China.

But as things are constantly changing in the world, one of the most beneficial things we can do to correct these misconceptions and mutual distrust is to stop equating the nature of government regimes with the nature of their respective citizens. It is easier to vilify China in the name of their “cruel” regime and political suppression, making China the enemy than it is to get to know Chinese citizens on a personal level and see them as actual people.

As disinformation, binary narratives about the U.S. vs China, and racism continue to grow during COVID-19, we must remember that these events affect everyone regardless of nationality, race, or political ideology. It is easy to make generalizations and be quick to judge China/Chinese people as the villains, threatening our Western-style democracy, but the right thing to do would be to try to empathize with Chinese people and see them as individuals rather than political puppets to an authoritarian regime (especially given that China’s political system is way more complicated than merely being authoritarian).

We, especially as American college students, should try to understand China not through painting a black and white picture of “good versus bad” but through understanding Chinese people, as we share a campus with many international Chinese students who may not be reflective of the values of the CCP at all. And when we humanize this issue, we can bridge the divide between the United States and China through mutual understanding and deliberative discourse rather than pitting people against each other through disinformation and polarization.

If the personal is political, we as American students should try to personalize this debate so we can be more empathetic in fostering U.S.-China relations.

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