Oct. 1, 2018

Chinese Americans and China:

A Fraught and Complicated Relationship

Gordon H. Chang

Department of History
Stanford University
(September 24, 2018)

January 1, 1979 for many Chinese Americans (those of Chinese ancestry who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents) was a joyous moment. They enthusiastically welcomed the

epublic of China as it ended the politically charged and long-hostile relationship between the two countries: one, their land of ancestry -- no matter that for some it was four or five generations past -- and the other, their land of nationality for themselves and their families for now and the future.

Few saw the moment as validating the politics of either the PRC or the U.S. politics *per se* was not the reason for celebration. A major step toward full social and cultural acceptance in American life was the reason for Chinese American hopefulness. For the backers of the ROC on Taiwan who had watched as their ranks had steadily shrunk over the years, the day was dismal, of course, but they had been prepared for it. That Taibei was the capital of *China* had become difficult to maintain even for many of them. For most Chinese Americans, a bright new day seemed to have arrived.

During the many years from the early 1850s, when Chinese began to arrive in the U.S. in significant numbers, to that moment in 1979, Chinese believed that their land of ancestry, regardless of the form of its government imperial, warlord, nominally republican, and

communist had been disrespected and treated unfairly. Social discrimination and the prejudice Chinese Americans suffered was part and parcel of what they believed was the global insult and oppression of China. The relatively brief rule of the Republic of China on the mainland had been a high point in both the Sino-American relationship and in Chinese American history. Unprecedented mutuality and public affection between the two countries accompanied the alliance during World War II. The putative friendship between the two countries, however, was more a product of sharing a common enemy than anything else. During the war, the Chinese Exclusion Acts that started in 1882 began to end. Marginalization of Chinese Americans moderated albeit slowly. Hatred of imperial Japan was a powerful, though ephemeral, adhesive. Soon after the end of World War II, the United States reconstructed its relationship with Japan in the early the Cold War and began to distance itself from the ROC as Chiang Kai-
lost the Chinese civil war.

After the Communist victory in 1949, and then the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, China and the United States confronted one another in what became the coldest front in the Cold War.

If nothing else, it was evident that the PRC was here to stay and the United States had committed itself to building a long term relationship with it.

The national flag of the ROC that had flown over the family and civic associations of Chinese communities throughout the United States for decades gradually came down over the years, replaced with the red and yellow five-star banner of the PRC. Some Chinese American merchants saw the possibility of economic advantages in the opening, but these were less the reason for celebration than what normalization seemed to mean for the place of Chinese in American life and the ability to reconnect with the land of ancestry for social or family reasons.

Today, forty years later, those rosy hopes are long gone and remembered by few. The optimism of that time now appears to have been naïve, or

resident workers and professionals. Hundreds of thousands of others from China are here waiting to become American citizens. The Chinese American population today is officially over five million, the result largely of a vast immigration of people of Chinese ancestry not only from the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but from Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia. America has never seen so m Southern Chinese no longer predominate; Mandarin-speakers do.

Chinese Americans are no longer a modest-income, residentially segregated, and politically unimportant part of the U.S. population. Today, Chinese Americans can be found in the ranks of the wealthiest Americans; they are in aggregate among the most highly educated and successful in their professions; and they have become a political and philanthropic force that is not ignored but courted. They live in high income suburban areas throughout the country, no longer relegated to urban enclaves. Since 1979, Chinese Americans are occupying seats in presidential cabinets and g offices. Chinese Americans populate news

-related activities.[3]

Another wing of the Falun Gong movement is a well-funded media group best known for

this, the newspaper echoes one of the most disturbing developments under the Trump administrations: the drum beat about Chinese agents as a national security threat living within the country. In February 2018, the director of the FBI in a highly publicized statement, described

-of- *Epoch Times*, in its zealousness, echoes unfounded claims about the danger that Chinese, and Chinese Americans agents, pose to the United States and has impugned the integrity, and even loyalty, of those of liberal to middle to the road position, including Chinese Americans involved in the Democratic Party.

The significance of the Falun Gong movement, especially its cultural and media wings, lies in its efforts to influence public opinion, rather than on credible opinion or policy-makers, who do not appear to hold the movement in high regard.

Diametrically opposed to this unremitting hostility toward Beijing is the position of the Committee of 100, a member-by-invitation organization of now approximately one hundred and fifty Americans of Chinese descent who have achieved high distinction and recognition in their careers.[5] stated

-partisan organization of elite voices came a few years after Normalization from the renowned architect I.M. Pei and Henry Kissinger who saw the need for an organized expression of the views of accomplished Chinese Americans that could address

For many C-100 members, the cases of Chen, Lee, and others Chinese American scientists who have been arrested and accused of espionage and then had their charges dropped are troubling evidence of racial profiling. They fear a worsening of a climate of suspicion and mistrust of Chinese Americans. Remarkably, the professional success of the elite members of the C-100 has not left them insensitive to social injustice and they are keenly aware that the advances Chinese Americans have made since normalization of relations cannot be taken for granted.

attitude toward those of Chinese ancestry in America has grown tremendously in sophistication. In 1971, when I visited the PRC, I entered the country from Hong Kong. I crossed over the territorial boundary via a bridge, where, in mid-span, a PLA soldier stood. He gave me a stern disapproving look when he saw that my passport had a used ROC visa stamp. He then announced that I, as a returned *tongbao* (fellow countryman), was nevertheless warmly welcomed ba

For a few years after normalization, PRC representatives in the U.S. viewed Chinese Americans similarly, making little distinction between Chinese nationals and Americans of Chinese ancestry.

Today, that confusion, is no longer made, or is rarely made, in China or by its diplomatic representatives in the United States. They try to make clear distinctions between Chinese nationals who hold Chinese passports (, overseas Chinese who reside long term overseas either as immigrants or permanent residents (h

There is little question that the PRC is concerned about, and monitors, the behavior of Chinese nationals in the U.S., especially its students and visiting professionals, whether government officials, scientists, or researchers. In recent years, it has actually stepped up its surveillance and efforts to secure the support and affection of its nationals overseas. And Beijing seeks to positively influence its general image and reputation through its Confucius Institutes, the language training facilities it has funded on American campuses in recent years, as well as promoting traditional cultural practices, sports competitions, and media. But there is little evidence that Beijing seeks to involve itself in Chinese American (*huayi*) communities to serve immediate interests. It

reunions, thanks to immigration and to the ease of travel across the Pacific. The huge success of leading Chinese American bankers and investors, as well as businesses such as the popular Panda Express, whose owners rank among the wealthiest of Americans, would not have been possible without Normalization.

But visible success has also inspired new insecurity and worry, not unalloyed confidence. There is fear of new forms of racial discrimination against Chinese and other Asian Americans in education, in hiring, and in everyday community life. Backlash is a word often heard locally as Chinese Americans, seeking their place in local life, encounter resistance from established populations. And above all, there is the looming fear of catastrophe, or at least setback, as conflict continues to rise in the global U.S.-China relationship. Might Chinese Americans be caught in the middle of a conflict between the two countries?

Among Chinese Americans, discord, not unity or agreement, is likely to continue to rise as their political differences over Beijing and Washington sharpen. In recent years, a growing number of new-comers from China (sometimes) have become a loud and visible element within the Chinese American community. Though they may have had a good education in China and are professionals and middle class here, many are indifferent to learning about American life and history, especially regarding racial prejudice and rightwing extremism. They often are antagonistic towards other immigrants of color and racial minorities, and even other Chinese Americans whose families go back generations in the U.S. Inexperienced in the politics of a pluralist democracy and civic engagement, they eschew collaboration and coalition building, the hallmarks of American politics. Their style is confrontational and combative. Many are also disdainful of China and hope for radical change

there. As such, they have found a home in the Trump movement and proudly proclaim that they

They like his belligerence toward Beijing.

Other recently arrived Chinese strongly identify with the mainland and vociferously advocate for it, in a manner similar to the way that supporters of the ROC did in the years before Normalization. The specter of fighting over

American communities during the Cold War, is rising.

Differences among those identifying with Taiwan and those with China are also deepening, as the relationship between Taibei and Beijing continues unresolved. Identification with Taiwan among those from Taiwan has grown markedly and confidently since the 1970s. PRC efforts to discourage such sentiment has resulted in strengthening rather than weakening resolve. More than ever, many from Taiwan forcefully reject Chinese ethnic identity. A similar trend, though still early, is emerging among younger people from Hong Kong in the United States.

Heterogeneity within Chinese America is growing, not diminishing. Differences in generation, socio-economic position, religious belief (many more Chinese are evangelical Christians than before), regional origin in Asia, education, American party identification, and

Chinese and Chinese Americans is becoming more difficult because of the scrutiny of the two state powers. Regardless of differences internal within the communities identified as Chinese American, they will continue to live under the shadow of the looming U.S.-China geopolitical relationship. Not long ago, political leaders of both countries spoke of seeking a constructive engagement and defying the odds that conflict was inevitable between the two powers. Now, dark clouds are gathering and there is little that Chinese Americans will be able to do to clear the horizon. That is the reason for the growing worry within Chinese American communities