

IPS Corporate Associates Breakfast Dialogue: The role of “relations” in US-China relations

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR (A/P) Ang Yuen Yuen of Political Science at the University of Michigan addressed the IPS Corporate Associates about the role of relations (*guan xi*) in the ties between the United States (US) and China on 29 May. There were 33 participants and the session was chaired by Professor (Prof.) Wang Gungwu, University Professor and Chairman of East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore.



US and China are often perceived as being diametrically opposed with respect to their emphasis on personal relations — the Chinese are thought to value relationships over rules, while the Americans are thought to place law over relationships.

Contrary to this popular belief, A/P Ang said that policy elites in the US and China are not so different in their reliance on personal networks. Beyond formal diplomacy — formal

pronouncements of leaders of both sides, as reported in the media, there is soft diplomacy — where friendships are built through non-state or personal avenues, and policy outcomes are shaped through these relationships.

In these circles, identities are “amphibious.” For example, in China, some university professors may exercise influence equivalent to high-ranked government officials. The party may second them to various ministries or sectors, should the need arise. Such influence stems partly from their extensive networks of students who ascend to positions of power. With this fluidity in identity and boundaries, formal office and titles may not tell you where real power lies. For instance, Deng Xiao Ping’s highest title was only Vice Premier, whereas Hua Guo Feng was the Premier. But “everyone knew that Deng Xiao Ping was the real person in charge,” A/P Ang added.

Likewise, in America, many academics enter public and diplomatic service, even though it is not as pervasive as in China. A/P Ang cited Michel Oksenberg, who was Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan and the leading China expert on the National Security Council under Jimmy Carter’s presidency. In his biography, Jimmy Carter wrote, “Mike Oksenberg changed my life— and changed the life of this country and to some degree changed the life of every citizen of China.” This was because Prof. Oksenberg spearheaded the normalisation of relations between the United States and China, building an extensive network of goodwill and influence as a top diplomat and scholar. He also pioneered the study of China in America. In his memo to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1977, Oksenberg underscored the importance of cultivating future generations of China experts. He wrote, “How do we cultivate talent so that 15-20 years from now, we will have a core of top-flight Chinese analysts in the age bracket of 40-55. Everyone agrees with me that unless something is done, such a group will not exist.” Prof. Oksenberg realized this vision by “training more students in contemporary Chinese studies during the last 25 years” than any other scholar, forming a lineage that is known today as “the Michigan mafia.” A/P Ang herself was trained by Oksenberg’s students at Stanford, making her a grand-student of this lineage.

A/P Ang also emphasised how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the US play an active, instrumental role in fostering mutual understanding between US and China. The National Committee of US-China Relations (NCUSCR) is one example. It co-hosted the watershed event of a friendly match between table tennis players from the US and China in 1972, the first visit by a Chinese delegation to the United States. This became widely known as “ping-pong diplomacy,” which thawed Sino-American tensions and paved the way for the normalisation of US-China relations. A/P Ang also shared her experiences as the first South East Asian appointed to the Public Intellectual Program (PIP), organised by the NCUSCR. This program selects and trains 20 public intellectuals every two years through meetings with policy elites in the US and China, and engages the fellows to educate the public about China.

A/P Ang said that Singapore should draw lessons from these American efforts, which we do not normally read in media reports. To strengthen Singapore’s ties with China, it will be critical to think ahead and develop a long-term plan to cultivate talent who are culturally

familiar with Chinese norms and who can help facilitate mutual understanding and communication.

She emphasised that there are many avenues for advancing diplomacy beyond formal channels. Non-state actors are important because they can participate in soft diplomacy, circumventing the limits of what leaders and ambassadors can do in their formal capacity.

In conclusion, she pointed to a Russian adage that applies to Singapore's relations with China too: "For my friends, everything. For my enemies, the law". Laws are important, but it may backfire if Singapore approaches China only through legalistic frameworks. It is equally important to foster cultural understanding and friendship (*gan qing*), as the Americans have done with China for decades.

Following A/P Ang's presentation, Prof. Wang shared his expertise on the historical-cultural differences between the East and the West. As he explained, historically, the Chinese governance model had been one of "rule by law" where the ruler used that as a way to assert his authority and bring order and stability to the country. Over the years, it was felt that this harsh legalistic orientation needed to be tempered by the Confucian ethos of seeking to honour relationships instead. The Western model evolved from the belief that humans are fallible and instituted, in democratic fashion, "rule by law".

QUESTION AND ANSWER



Soft diplomacy

A member of the audience asked how Trump has fared in the Chinese context of cultural sensitivities. A/P Ang replied that when leaders engage in formal diplomacy, that reflects the surface of US-China relations. Beneath the tip of the iceberg are other actors, such as NGOs, think tanks, foundations and academics, who shape the process of diplomacy too. President Trump deserves some credit for employing soft diplomacy; for example, at the US-China summit, Trump invited President Xi and his wife to his home at Mar-a-Lago and had his granddaughter sing a Chinese song that first lady Peng Li Yuan previously sang at various events.

Singapore-China relations

A/P Ang was asked how China viewed Singapore since it is a Chinese majority state. She said that her experience of interacting with the Chinese as a Singaporean-Chinese is a double-edged sword. The upside is that both sides share some cultural affinity, but the downside is that Singaporean Chinese are expected to behave like Mainland Chinese and understand their cues. If one ignores or misunderstands these social cues, the Chinese might wonder, “Are you holding us in contempt?” The same challenge applies to diplomacy. The Chinese expect a majority Chinese state to behave in Chinese ways but are confused if we seem to be behaving in a legalistic fashion which they consider “Western”. She urged Singaporeans to examine how our assumptions differ from theirs and adapt our behaviour to work more smoothly with them.

Drawbacks to *guan xi*

Another asked if A/P Ang could discuss the downsides to the “*guan xi*”, given the danger of nepotism and cronyism in light of the difficulties South Korean giant, Lotte, faced in China when China objected to a military defence system hosted by the Korean government. A/P Ang clarified that all attributes, whether it’s formal-legalistic or based on informal *guanxi*, has its respective strengths and weaknesses. She emphasised that Singaporeans need not change our society to follow China’s way; however, we must clearly understand how our norms differ from the Chinese and the Americans, so that we can make necessary adjustments during our interactions with both parties. She added that traditionally, Singaporeans excel in a formal-legalistic system; our strengths lie in our discipline, reliability, adherence to laws, and organizational skills. But the global environment has changed, and China does not operate in the same way as Singapore. We must therefore adapt to the new cultural challenges of foreign relations.

Cultivating talent — a segmented vs holistic mindset

A participant asked how successful Singapore was in cultivating talent who understood China well. Being more familiar with the Singapore context, Prof. Wang cited the organisation, Business China, as good training ground. However, more effective training would have to be holistic. It is natural for Singaporeans to separate the economic from the political or security spheres as we like the scientific, rational method of compartmentalising things according to their discipline. For the Chinese, on the other hand, political actions have economic consequences and vice versa. Historically, Singapore’s security has been tied to the Anglo-American world and it operates by believing all those can be managed separately.

After all, despite the Cold War, Singapore maintained economic ties with the communist world. The Chinese mental model is that “if you are neutral, you are neutral across the board, across all spheres”, said Prof. Wang. This is the mindset that Singaporeans need when they deal with China.

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