

History of US-China Relations

September 29 at 9:00 a.m. ET
Rayburn House Office Building Room 2044

Five Interlocking Themes

Three long-standing patterns are changing:

- China's population is shrinking faster than expected. This has huge implications for the economy, especially the bloated construction sector. The required bailouts will increase Beijing's leverage over localities.
- A long-running oscillation between centralization and decentralization is swinging toward centralization. Some of this is due to Xi Jinping, but more of it is due to technology.
- China's policies on ethnic minorities are taking a sharp turn away from multiculturalism and toward assimilationism. Ironically, many in PRC equate this with an American "melting pot" model, while blaming multiculturalism for the break-up of the USSR.

Two continuities:

- Despite tremendous aggregate growth, many people remain quite poor. The political leadership sees further growth (not redistribution) as the main cure. They also don't feel they can fully trust global markets, which has huge implications for environmental, trade, and foreign policies, and further reinforces tendencies toward centralization.
- National pride and a sense of grievance about having suffered "national humiliation" are felt strongly, even if partly engineered by the government. This fuels reactions to sanctions and symbolic "insults," and reinforces insistence on self-sufficiency in key goods.

US-China Scientific Exchange

- The rich history of US-China exchange in science started with the American Presbyterian missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin, who in 1862 was appointed the first president and science teacher at the Interpreter's College in Beijing, the predecessor to Peking University, a top Chinese university today.

- Funds from the American portion of the Chinese Boxer Indemnity went toward scholarships for Chinese students to study in the United States. The majority of these students studied the sciences. Chinese students in the United States established the Science Society of China in 1914–15. In the same period, American philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation offered scholarship programs that helped to train a key cohort of Chinese scientists. These efforts shaped the sciences in China, even after the communist rise to power in 1949.
- Science has become an area of contention in the growing geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, but the history of US-China scientific exchange shows the perils of politicizing science and the costs for individual scientists caught up by forces beyond their control.

Chinese Nationalism in relation to Sino-American Relations

- Chinese nationalism has been intertwined with the United States since its inception in the early 20th century. At times, the United States has served as an inspiration and model for Chinese nationalists, and also as a critical military ally.
- But the United States also has been perceived as unprincipled and fickle, a threat to Chinese interests. In some instances, Chinese nationalism has arisen organically from within Chinese society; in others, it has been nurtured and manipulated by political actors. China has not figured as prominently within the currents of American nationalism as the other way round, but that is changing.
- In the United States, too, nationalist feelings about China have developed organically and been manipulated by political actors. For both countries, but especially China, the highly emotional tone of nationalistic expression toward the other must be understood against the backdrop of the two nations' longer history.

Participant Biographies

Tobie Meyer-Fong, professor and chair of the history department at Johns Hopkins University, is a historian of early modern and modern China. She is the author of two books: *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou* and *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China*. She is active in the National Committee on US-China Relations. She has written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *China File*, *China Channel*, *Pengpai* (the Paper), and *The Hill*.

Kenneth Pomeranz is University Professor of History and East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He has written, edited, or coedited 11 books, including the prize-winners *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000), *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society and Economy in Inland North China, 1853–1937* (1993), and *The World that Trade Created* (with Steven Topik). He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the British Academy, and was president of the American Historical Association in 2013.

Tim Weston is associate professor of history at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is the author of *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals and Chinese Political Culture, 1898–1927* (2004) and co-edited three volumes on contemporary China. Weston is the past president of the Historical Society for Twentieth-Century China and regularly speaks to the public and writes on modern and contemporary China for the popular media. He is an active participant in the second cohort of the Public Intellectuals Program, organized by the National Committee on US-China Relations.

Shellen Xiao Wu is associate professor and L. H. Gipson Chair in Transnational History at Lehigh University. She is the author of *Birth of the Geopolitical Age: Global Frontiers and the Making of Modern China* (2023) and *Empires of Coal: Fueling China's Entry into the Modern World Order, 1860–1920* (2015). She has published articles in *Nature*, the *American Historical Review*, and other leading journals in history, history of science, and Asian studies. She is an active participant in the fifth cohort of the Public Intellectuals Program, organized by the National Committee on US-China Relations, and a Wilson Center China Fellow in 2023–24.

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