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Learning Diplomacy: China's South-South Dance Exchanges of the 1950s and 1960s and Their Relevance Today

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Abstract

China-U.S. relations have reached their lowest point in decades, prompting serious questions about what changes U.S. policymakers should make to restore this critical relationship and begin to move forward in a more positive and productive direction. When seeking new approaches, China's foreign relations with other nations in the Global South offers an important point of reference. During the 1950s and 1960s, when U.S.-China relations were also at a low point, China cultivated relationships with other nations using an approach that can be called "learning diplomacy." As applied in the field of dance, this involved exchanges in which dancers from more developed countries learned from dancers from less developed ones, countering the conventional direction of cultural knowledge flow in colonial relationships at the time. Although observers in the U.S. recognized the power of China's cultural diplomacy efforts, few identified the specific strategy of reversing learning hierarchies as a component of China's foreign relations approach. Today, China continues to employ relational methods based on mutual respect and people-to-people exchange as a key component of its foreign relations activities in the Global South. This strategy aligns with new conceptions of cultural diplomacy that move beyond notions of culture as a means to represent national interests and instead regard it as a space for dialogue and mutual understanding between nations. This approach should be considered in U.S. cultural diplomacy efforts with China in the coming years.

Implications and Key Takeaways

- U.S. policymakers should take immediate steps to revive the Fulbright and Peace Corps Programs to China, two highly successful people-to-people exchange programs that operated for decades with excellent results but were suspended during the Trump administration. U.S. policymakers should recognize that reinstating the Fulbright Program, in particular, is essential for maintaining China expertise in the U.S. today.
- U.S. policymakers should continue to support initiatives such as the Foreign Language and Area Studies Program, the Critical Language Scholarship Program, and Federal Title VI grants that support teaching

and research on the cultures, societies, and languages of foreign countries, especially China, in U.S. universities.

- U.S. policymakers should promote the honest teaching of U.S. and world history in K-12 education so that Americans gain accurate understandings of issues such as U.S. race relations and foreign engagement, which will better prepare Americans to engage in international dialogue on equal footing with educated individuals in foreign countries.
- U.S. policymakers should collaborate with Chinese partners, industry, and international organizations to prioritize the return to pre-pandemic ease of travel between the United States and China, recognizing that open borders and increased movement of people between the two countries is necessary to the long-term improvement of U.S.-China relations.

Introduction

In 2019, the U.S.-China relationship reached what leading U.S. Chinese security studies expert Michael Swaine called “its most daunting challenge in the forty years since the two countries established diplomatic ties.”¹ Although the situation seemed to have already hit rock bottom at the time, things have since only gotten worse. The eruption of the global COVID-19 pandemic, passage of the Hong Kong national security law, new limits on international travel and people-to-people exchange, a rise in anti-Asian violence in the United States, and further escalation of negative rhetoric by U.S. and Chinese politicians and media have all led to an even further decline over the past three years.

As the U.S.-China relationship has alarmingly deteriorated, China has meanwhile been actively strengthening its cooperation and exchange with countries in the Global South. Although this effort has a long history, as discussed further below, its latest formulation has gained particular momentum since the launch of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. According to the most recent dataset published by AidData, a large-scale research project based at William & Mary that tracks international aid finance, “during the first five years of BRI implementation, China solidified its position as the world’s largest creditor to the developing world,” including major investments in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern and Central Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania.² While the core focus of BRI is on infrastructure connectivity, the initiative is intended to “work with partner countries to build five ‘connectivities’ or ‘links’: 1). physical connectivity via infrastructure-building; 2). policy coordination; 3). unimpeded trade; 4). financial integration; and 5). people-to-people exchanges.”³ Thus, through BRI, China is pursuing a holistic effort on a massive scale to strengthen its ties with regions across the world, with a special focus on Global South countries.

This conjunction of plummeting U.S.-China relations combined with a concerted effort on China’s part to solidify relations in the Global South is something we have seen before, albeit at a time when China’s position in the world political and economic order differed significantly from what it is today. In the early 1950s, the United States sought to isolate the newly founded People’s Republic of China (PRC) and limit its economic and military development through intensive international relations pressures and trade embargoes as the two countries went to war on the Korean peninsula. Meanwhile,

China launched a strategic project of building relationships in the developing world that was designed to mediate Sino-U.S. relations and, ultimately, diminish U.S. power on the global stage. This strategy was successful insofar as it allowed the PRC to expand its formal and informal ties with numerous countries outside the socialist bloc, including many that also had diplomatic relations and alliances with the United States. One measurement of the success of China's efforts during this period was the historic vote to admit the PRC to the United Nations in 1971. As previous scholars have demonstrated, this vote relied heavily on China's support from newly independent countries in the Global South, especially in Africa.⁴

According to historian Chen Jian, China's strategic approach to counter U.S. power by fostering relations with countries in the Global South was articulated explicitly by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Mao Zedong as early as 1946. At this time, Chen argues, it was an early formulation of what later became known as the "intermediate zone" thesis:

In an interview in 1946 with Anna Louis Strong, a leftist American journalist, Mao introduced the 'intermediate zone' thesis. He noted that a global confrontation had been emerging between the United States and the Soviet Union. He argued that between the two big powers existed a vast 'intermediate zone' in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and that the U.S. imperialists could not directly attack the Soviet Union until they had managed to control the intermediate zone, including China. As a result, concluded Mao, although the postwar world situation seemed to be characterized by the sharp confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, the principal contradiction in the world was represented by the struggles between peoples in the intermediate zone (including China) and the reactionary American ruling class. These struggles, emphasized Mao, would determine not only the direction of the global confrontation between the two superpowers but also the fate of the entire world.⁵

Mao's "intermediate zone" thesis laid a foundation for what historian Sandra Gillespie, citing international relations scholar Michael B. Yahuda, called "China's three main foreign policy strategies: the 'Peaceful Coexistence'

strategy of the 1950s, the ‘Revolution’ approach of the 1960s, and the ‘Grand Alliance’ tactics of the 1970s.”⁶ In Gillespie’s view, these ideas continued to have relevance in the early twenty-first century: “While all three strategies failed to survive in totality, each, in part, continues to influence current policies as China continues to define itself and its place in the world.”⁷

Given the parallels in international relations trends and China’s renewed effort to engage with the Global South through BRI today, this article posits that U.S. policymakers and analysts can learn from looking more closely at China’s cultural diplomacy efforts during the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, this article posits that an approach to cultural diplomacy the PRC formulated and enacted during this period—what is termed in this article “learning diplomacy,” or a policy of building relationships through learning from others—offers lessons for U.S. handling of current China-U.S. relations.

At the heart of “learning diplomacy” is the idea that strong foreign relations requires mutual respect. That is, if one nation wants to develop a strong relationship with another nation, the way to go about cultivating this relationship is to express respect for the other nation by seeking to learn from it. Historically, imperialistic and colonial relationships have been characterized by the forceful imposition of the colonizer’s ideas, culture, and ways of life onto the colonized. For leaders in the PRC at the time, obvious examples of this process were the historical relationships between Western European, U.S., and Japanese imperial and colonial rulers and their subjects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Thus, during the 1950s and 1960s China’s strategy of “learning diplomacy” deliberately sought to challenge and overturn this imperial and colonial hierarchy as a strategy to build relations with countries in the Global South that had been victims of this history.

By positioning itself as an eager learner of other nation’s culture during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as a nation that had something to teach countries more powerful than itself, the PRC advanced an anti-imperialist, anti-colonial vision of international relations, one that was grounded in notions of radical equality and humility and directly challenged the chauvinism and arrogance of great power hegemony. At the same time, this approach positioned China as a member of the formerly colonized world whose behavior presented a striking contrast to that of imperialist and colonial powers in the Global North. By subjecting oneself to the tutelage of others, the PRC demonstrated

in this context, one could gain friends and promote more equal relationships, while also gaining influence and power.

Learning Diplomacy: China's International Dance Exchanges in the 1950s and 1960s

A representative space in which we can see China's articulation of "learning diplomacy" during the 1950s is in the field of dance. Dance has played an important role in contemporary China's domestic and international cultural politics since the first half of the twentieth century. During the New Yangge movement of the Yan'an era, artists and intellectuals in the Chinese Communist Party studied rural Han folk dance forms from north China and adapted them into a tool of political education and recruitment for the Communist cause. In the Chinese Civil War of the late 1940s, dancers on both the Nationalist and Communist sides further incorporated dances of ethnic minority groups—then known as "frontier dance"—into their performance repertoires as a way to build support by promoting the ethnopolitics of national unity. During both the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, dancers toured abroad performing for Chinese diaspora communities and general audiences in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. In this way, they used dance as a means to cultivate nationalism and solicit financial support from overseas Chinese, while also promoting new images of modern China to foreign communities.⁸

During the 1950s and 1960s, like many other countries around the world, China sought to develop national dance forms and to promote its national image by touring its own cultural dances internationally. Dance delegations from China performed Chinese folk, ethnic minority, and classical dance works at all of the meetings of the World Festivals of Youth and Students held from 1949 to 1962, where they won numerous awards and gained great acclaim abroad. Members of China's newly established professional dance companies specializing in Chinese national dance forms—the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Ensemble, the Central Experimental Opera Theater, and others—also toured widely internationally during this period. Between 1949 and 1967, China sent 166 officially sanctioned performing arts delegations abroad, which visited over

sixty countries and greatly contributed to China's cultural diplomacy abroad through dance performances.⁹

At the same time that the PRC was sending its own dance abroad, however, Chinese leaders also employed dance as a medium of cultural diplomacy in other ways—most notably by having its dancers engage in a range of teaching and learning encounters with dancers from other countries. Through China's engagement with dancers from other parts of the Global South, it becomes clear that Chinese cultural planners aimed to project a willingness on China's part not only to promote its own dances abroad, but also to learn the dances of these other countries. For example, during this period dancers in China embarked on projects to learn dances from many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. At the same time, in its interactions with dancers from countries regarded as more developed than itself, such as the Soviet Union and Japan, Chinese dancers participated in a dual process of learning as well as teaching. In all of these arrangements, China's dance exchanges manifested a model of cultural diplomacy that overturned previous colonial hierarchies and behaviors that had been established and in some ways were still practiced by Western European countries, Japan, and the United States during the Cold War. Through these activities, China's cultural diplomacy strategists posited that more developed countries could learn from less developed countries and expressed this idea through dance exchange. China thus presented itself as a new kind of leader by submitting itself to the tutelage of other nations, using dance as a public medium to display this mutual learning.

One of the earliest instances of learning diplomacy in PRC dance exchange occurred in 1951-52, when North Korean dancer Choe Seung-hui was invited to the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing to train a large group of dance students recruited from across China. Choe was an accomplished dancer who had studied dance in Japan in the late 1920s and 1930s and developed her own style of modern Korean dance that she promoted internationally on a world tour in 1938-1940.¹⁰ In the 1940s, Choe spent several years in China, where she befriended Chinese opera performers and began to develop a new dance technique on the basis of Chinese opera movement.¹¹ Choe's invitation to teach in Beijing in 1951 occurred in the context of the Korean War of 1950-53, when Choe's dance school in Pyongyang had suffered damage from U.S. bombing, and it was dangerous for her and her Korean students to remain

there. Thus, both North Korea as a country and Choe herself as an artist were envisioned in the Chinese media as recipients of Chinese military aid, while Choe and North Korean dance were presented as sources of learning for Chinese dancers. A national news article announcing Choe's classes in Beijing described the situation as follows:

The Central Academy of Drama Choe Seung-hui Dance Research Course is scheduled to begin classes officially in early March. The research course is led by the renowned dance artist Choe and her daughter the young dance artist An Shengji. The creation of this course embodies exchange between Chinese and North Korean art and deep friendship between Chinese and Korean people, and it will have great use for the elevation and development of Chinese dance. The goals in establishing the research course are as follows: cultivate Chinese and Korean professional dance work cadres; organize basic movements of Chinese dance, and create dance works that oppose U.S. imperialist invasion, protect world peace, and express the intimate unity between the Chinese and North Korean people. Students in the research course include 40 dance worker cadres from various locations in China and 25 dance worker cadres from North Korea. Their period of study will be one year. Additionally, there will also be training for fifteen Chinese youth in middle school or above and 30 Korean youth, whose period of study will be three years.¹²

As this report makes clear, Choe and her daughter were to lead the course, and this fact was advertised plainly in the course title, which bore Choe's name. Moreover, a clear relationship is drawn between the training of Chinese students and the expression of themes of China-North Korea friendship, as well as joint opposition to U.S. imperialist forces. According to this same account, the content of the course would include "Korean ancient dance and folk dance," along with several other dance forms in which Choe and her daughter specialized, including Chinese dance adapted from Chinese opera, as well as "Eastern dance, Soviet ballet and folk dance, New Dance, improvisational dance basic training, and rhythmic training."¹³ During this same time, numerous other accounts appeared in the Chinese press that lauded Choe's

artistic accomplishments and presented her as a visionary leader whose teaching and example would help develop the Chinese dance field.¹⁴ Following Choe's departure from China in 1952, the students she had trained were promoted to prominent positions in China's dance establishment, thus further ensuring the lasting impact of Choe's teaching in China.¹⁵

A second example of this learning diplomacy approach occurred in a series of high level dance exchanges that Chinese leaders orchestrated with India, Indonesia, and Burma over the period from 1953 to 1961, which contributed to China's participation in the Bandung Afro-Asia movement and strengthening of diplomatic ties in South and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ During this period, Chinese dancers learned and publicly performed numerous works of Indian, Indonesian, and Burmese dance through a variety of teaching arrangements with artists from these countries. Additionally, four Balinese dancers were recruited from Indonesia to lead a degree-granting professional program for Chinese students at the Beijing Dance School, China's top dance conservatory. In 1957, shortly before their arrival, a national news article offered the following account of the Balinese artists and their teaching plans in China:

Four Balinese dance instructors from Indonesia began their journey to China today. They are responding to an invitation from the Beijing Dance School to travel to Beijing to teach the graceful Balinese dance and music. They will stay in Beijing for one year, and they plan to teach twelve kinds of classical and modern Balinese dance to Chinese friends. They also plan to study China's dance and music.¹⁷

According to records of the Beijing Dance Academy, the Balinese teachers remained at the school for two years, departing in August 1959. The students they trained went on to become founding members of the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (*Dongfang gewutuan*), a company established in the PRC in 1962 that specialized in performing music and dances from across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. National news accounts of the ensemble's founding stated explicitly its diplomatic mission: "The Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble was established to suit the needs of our country's people's foreign exchange activities, which are developing daily."¹⁸ The act of "studying" (*xuexi*) was emphasized again and again in news reports about the company, and this

activity was consistently linked to strengthening China's ties with foreign countries, especially those in the Global South. In the company's inaugural public performances held during the 1962 Lunar New Year holiday, the program included items from Indonesia, Japan, India, North Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, Pakistan, Ceylon, Mexico, Cuba, Ethiopia, Guinea, Nepal, the Soviet Union, Brazil, and Argentina.¹⁹ Reporting on this performance, a leading Chinese state magazine wrote:

The Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble has at this time already studied over eighty song and dance numbers from twenty-three Asian, African, and Latin American countries. They will continue to study the strengths of the various countries' people's art, in order to further strengthen the friendship between our country's people and the people of various countries and to serve the promotion of cultural exchange. They also add new flowers to our country's dazzling artistic garden.²⁰

Like many similar reports of the time, this one clearly conveys that the primary purpose of learning these foreign songs and dances was to advance China's international relations, described here as "friendship between our country's people and the people of various countries." The Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble thus embodied the central idea, then fundamental to China's cultural diplomacy with the Global South, that learning from others and strengthening diplomatic ties go hand in hand.²¹

The application of learning diplomacy also worked in reverse. In other words, China welcomed opportunities to teach its dance culture to artists from other nations, particularly if they were from countries that had formerly been colonizers or were considered equally or more developed than China. An early example of this kind of exchange occurred in 1958, when the Matsuyama Ballet, a dance ensemble from Japan, presented an original ballet adaptation of the Chinese land reform drama *The White-Haired Girl* in China. Chinese reviews of the production frequently praised the Japanese dancers' efforts to embody Chinese performance aesthetics on stage, particularly their efforts to perform *yangge*, a type of northern Han Chinese folk dance, specifically for this production. The author of a review in a leading music journal, for example, recounted:

The performance left our country's audiences and the literature and arts world with a very deep impression, receiving unanimous praise [...]. In the process of adapting and rehearsing this drama, the Matsuyama Ballet put forth great effort. To make the work artistically closer to reality, each time after rehearsing and performing, they would always undergo new revision, with the goal of better expressing Eastern people's lives, making made relatively good use of the distinctive qualities of upper body and hand movements used in Eastern dance. Throughout the dance drama, they inserted *yangge* dance scenes. For this purpose, when Matsuyama visited China in 1955, she specifically studied Chinese dance. Last spring, she sent Ishida Taneo and Kodaira Tsuyako to China to study yangge dance and other Chinese dances.²²

As we can see here, the reviewer again singles out the act of studying as an important component of successful intercultural dance exchange. In this case, however, it is a foreign company that is learning China's dances. The reason this makes sense in the diplomatic logic of the time is that Japan was a more economically developed country than China, and Japan had previously been an imperial power in East and Southeast Asia. Hence, the act of Japanese ballet dancers learning Chinese folk dance in order to perform a production of a Chinese revolutionary drama embodied a reversal of hierarchies and conveyed the idea of promoting equality and mutual respect.

The same year, the New Siberia Opera and Ballet Theater, after returning from their tour in China, reportedly presented a gala of Chinese-style dance and music for audiences back home. According to a report in Chinese newspapers, "They performed in workers' clubs, cultural palaces, and factories. The works included lotus dance, tea-picking dance, fan dance, and red silk dance presented by the female performers and a Chinese traditional waist drum dance and a Tibetan cavalry dance presented by the male performers. The orchestra also gave audiences performances of works by Chinese composers. These dances and music were all learned by them in China."²³ The following year, the same company staged a ballet adaptation of the Chinese dance drama *Magic Lotus Lantern*, a project for which Chinese artists travelled to Siberia to help out with the rehearsal process.²⁴ Once again, this act of learning was interpreted as an expression of "friendship" that was destined to promote "mutual understanding" and "cultural exchange."²⁵

Continued Relevance: Mutual Respect and Relationality in Diplomatic Strategy

The United States took significant notice of China's dynamic use of cultural diplomacy to build international ties during the 1950s and early 1960s. However, China's strategy of learning diplomacy was rarely identified in these accounts. In his detailed and otherwise very perceptive study of China's cultural diplomacy activities published in 1963, for example, Columbia University Japanologist Herbert Passin wrote the following:

Since China lies about midway in degree of development within the Communist *bloc*, we find an important differential. Towards the more developed countries (the Soviet Union and the Eastern European people's democracies), China is relatively 'backward'... Therefore, more Chinese go to those countries, particularly in the learner categories—students, trainees, etc., than come to China from them...But in relation to the less-developed Communist countries, such as North Korea, North Vietnam, and Outer Mongolia, China is the 'teacher.'²⁶

Similarly, USIS reports sent from Hong Kong to Washington in the late 1950s describe China's cultural diplomacy efforts in significant detail, but they place emphasis on the number, kind, and countries engaged in these efforts, rather than on the specific diplomatic strategies employed. A report from 1957, for example, begins as follows:

Since the Communist bloc smile campaign of 1955-56, Communist China has been heavily engaged in a concerted and highly organized effort to win unofficial and official recognition and status through cultural and media exchanges with non-Communist countries. Under this effort, labelled the cultural offensive, contacts with nationals of neutralist or even anti-communist countries have been initiated or expanded with emphasis upon Afro-Asian nations. Peiping [Beijing] claims that this offensive has developed contacts with 63 countries in 1955 and 75 countries in 1956. Among these, 63 are non-communist countries. In 1956 alone, it appears that Communist-China succeeded

in establishing contact with 12 additional non-communist countries through its people's diplomacy program.²⁷

The report provides statistics of the numbers of individuals and delegations from specific regions and countries and pays special attention to change in number and type from year to year, as well as directions of flow. However, apart from generalizing terms such as “smile campaign” and “cultural offensive,” the report gives little attention to what actually takes place in these cultural exchanges. The report is accompanied by large quantities of newspaper clippings detailing China's dance diplomacy during this period, and this suggests that the USIS office was following these events closely and considered them important information. Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent the nature of these activities informed U.S. intelligence officers and policymakers in their assessments of and responses to China's foreign relations.

In the twenty-first century, analysts of China's cultural diplomacy have identified trends in China's engagement with countries of the Global South that seem to echo aspects of this earlier practice of learning diplomacy. In particular, the explicit effort to present oneself as an equal and to engage in relations of mutual respect with Global South countries is something that scholars have identified as a feature of China's approach that makes it more appealing, especially in relation to the United States and other Western countries. This has been true even as China has itself transformed into a global superpower and begun to operate in ways that some find reminiscent of past colonial and imperial powers. Writing on China-Africa diplomacy at the start of the BRI in 2014, China foreign policy and diplomacy expert Ingrid D'Hooghe made the following observation:

Foreign policy issues are of far lesser concern in Africa. African people generally regard China as a longstanding partner that, itself a developing country, understands Africa's needs and that gives them more attention and shows them more respect than Western countries, which always seem to know better. Creating these feelings of equality between China and Africa is a fundamental characteristic of China's public diplomacy toward Africa.²⁸

Even when the relationship is asymmetrical and China is engaged in uni-directional teaching to its counterparts in the Global South, this can still be perceived as more equal than relations with Western powers. In her 2020 book on China's foreign relations with Africa over the last decade, scholar of politics and international affairs Lina Benabdallah explains this dynamic as follows in the case of Chinese investment in people-to-people relations and human resource development:

Since the early 2000s, Chinese foreign policy makers have emphasized Africans' call for more programs that facilitate the trainings of skilled labor and promote opportunities for transfers of technology from Chinese experts to African recipients. For African elites, what has long been missing in Africa's relations to traditional powers is this very aspect of transferring skills. In their view, without training a strong workforce, Africa and Africans would continue being dependent on European elites and their expertise...For this reason, one of the ways that China markets its investments in Africa as different from the European powers is to emphasize vocational training programs."²⁹

According to Benabdallah, traditional international relations theory fails to fully explain the foreign policy making of emerging powers such as China, especially their activities within the Global South, because it has focused on assessing material capabilities such as economic or military dimensions of power rather than on what Benabdallah calls "relationality."³⁰

What Benabdallah proposes instead is that human relations and social networks are at the center of China's foreign relations strategies, and it is thus through people-to-people exchanges and expanding networks of connections—in activities such as teaching and learning—that China builds power in these regions. Based on her extensive field research in China and several African countries, Benabdallah found that "impressions on China's knowledge-sharing programs with Africans were overwhelmingly positive. In a conversation over dinner with a Nigerian diplomat who had participated in two delegation visits to China, he emphasized that the most important part about the trips for him was how African delegations were treated as equals, with respect and care, by their Chinese hosts."³¹ As Benabdallah makes clear in her

analysis, it is the social networks themselves, which are built through these diverse interactions and China's investments in developing human capital such as trainings, which themselves constitute power in China's foreign relations with Africa.

Regardless of who is doing the teaching and who the learning, interactions based on people-to-people contact and what Benabdallah theorizes as "relationality" differ from conventional understandings of cultural diplomacy as the projection of a national image or set of messages to a target audience through some apparently transparent, reified medium known as "culture."³² More contemporary approaches to cultural diplomacy, by contrast, imagine it as a dialogic process and point precisely to the more relational approach that Benabdallah identifies in China's engagements in the Global South today. In a recent review article advocating for this newer approach to cultural diplomacy, cultural studies scholars Ien Ang, Yudhishtir Raj Isara, and Phillip Mar sum up the view succinctly as follows:

In order to move on from a focus on soft power projection, [in] cultural diplomacy policy and practice we would do well to adopt an understanding of culture and communication derived from contemporary cultural theory, which stresses culture as an ongoing process and as inherently relational, and communication as a social process of co-production of meaning. Such an understanding would help legitimize and buttress the more dialogic, collaborative approaches to cultural diplomacy that have begun to be proposed.³³

This approach to cultural diplomacy is somewhat radical because it leaves the content of the exchange potentially open-ended, and it focuses more on the creation of relationships and interactions than on the communication of unified national representations. Thus, while previous approaches theorized cultural diplomacy simply in terms of promoting the national interest, newer ones expand its purpose to "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding."³⁴ Ang, Isara, and Mar remind us that even Joseph Nye himself, inventor of the term "soft power," envisioned the possibility for a more complex articulation of this strategy, namely, "that of 'meta-soft power,'

which is a nation's capacity and introspective ability to criticize itself that contributes to its international attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility."³⁵

While such approaches to cultural diplomacy as relationality, dialogue, and mutual learning are considered new, however, they seem to implicitly inform the examples of dance exchange discussed above from China in the 1950s and 1960s. What is learning diplomacy if not an approach to cultural diplomacy that centers "dialogic, collaborative approaches" and "a social process of co-production of meaning"? The act of seeking to learn from another through a direct human-to-human encounter sets up the opportunity to engage in cultural diplomacy in this relational manner. As Chinese students learned from their North Korean and Balinese teachers, and as Chinese dancers taught their Japanese and Soviet colleagues, they were establishing relationships. Moreover, these relationships entailed some amount of communicative interactions beyond the basic transfer of knowledge—such as trust, admiration, sharing, and vulnerability. As human beings coming together to learn from each other, whether as teacher or student, they engaged in a powerful process that had the potential to transform international relations.

As China shifts into new relationships with Global South countries, the strategies of the past cannot remain entirely unchanged. In 2021, the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble appeared in the China Central Television New Year Gala performing renditions of African, Asian, Latin American dances similar to what they had performed back in the early 1960s. However, whereas in the earlier period, these cross-cultural renditions took place within a politics of South-South mutual learning cultivated in a context of Bandung Afro-Asia diplomacy and decolonization, sixty years later they strike a different tone, in some cases eliciting criticisms of cultural appropriation in light of China's incredible economic and political power in the world today. Some scholars have also worried about new cultural politics of racial triangulation in Chinese performances portraying dances from the Global South, such as the much critiqued 2018 CCTV Gala sketch portraying African dances and characters, as well as other contemporary Chinese media representations of Africans.³⁶

While the situation in these examples is sometimes more complex than critics acknowledge, and there is a need to differentiate between commercial and diplomatic modes of cultural production, these recent examples do remind us

of the need to be vigilant about issues of cross-cultural representation, as well as the need to continuously adjust cultural engagements to current historical conditions. While we can draw broader lessons and principles from China's "learning diplomacy" of the 1950s and 1960s and the similar practices China is engaged in with various Global South countries through BRI and related initiatives today, none of these practices can be adopted wholesale into contemporary U.S. cultural diplomacy. Just as China of the 1950s and 1960s is different from China today, so too the U.S. relationship with China is not the same as China's relationship to the Global South, whether past or present. These differences need to inform the ways in which U.S. policymakers adopt lessons from China's "learning diplomacy." This process must involve an honest appraisal of the United States' own historical relationship to issues of colonialism, imperialism, and racial oppression, as well as the United States' distinct relational positionalities vis-à-vis China and the Global South both in the past and today.

Conclusion and Implications

Examining the foreign policy statements and remarks in the early Xi administration, some scholars identified a concerted shift toward a "relational" approach that emphasized "win-win" engagements between countries on the international stage.³⁷ While I personally find it problematic to link such current Chinese policy approaches with historical traditions such as Confucianism, as the author cited above does, it is interesting to note that this scholar, based on an analysis of Xi's early foreign policy as a "relational" one, warned against the dangers of overly confrontational foreign policy toward China at this time:

[I]f other countries want China to be more inclusive and relational in its foreign policy, they must by the same token reciprocate with an inclusive and relational foreign policy, so reducing Chinese apprehension of foreign threat. A strategy of overt balancing against China, for example, will raise such apprehension and galvanize nationalistic and realpolitik sentiments within China, and suppress inclusive relationalism.³⁸

While there is no doubt that China played a role in the current souring of U.S.-China relations, it seems clear that the aggressive and confrontational stance initiated by the United States during the Trump years, and still continuing under the Biden administration, have been counterproductive at fostering productive relations between the two countries.

In this time of dire hostility and broken trust between the world's two most powerful nations, U.S. policymakers should take it upon themselves to modernize their approach to diplomatic relations with China. An overly aggressive and assertive approach does not work well when dealing with those who wish to be seen as equals, nor does it suit today's complex and increasingly multipolar world. These grave errors of the past are a major factor that brought us to the current moment, and this needs to be acknowledged and corrected in order to begin to rebuild the U.S.-China relationship in a constructive manner. The Biden administration should recognize that taking responsibility for past U.S. behavior and changing it is an expression of strength and confidence, while the opposite is an expression of weakness and fear, not the other way around.

To rectify this situation requires a number of solutions, one of which is renewed cultural diplomacy between the United States and China that is modeled on the new approaches discussed above. Similar to China's strategy of learning diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s and its relational approaches to foreign relations with other states in the Global South today, the United States should place more emphasis on leveraging the power of people-to-people connections and developing social networks on the ground in China to deepen mutual understanding and promote dialogue. A confident country recognizes that they have as much to learn as they do to teach. Moreover, it also recognizes that in the contemporary world, connectedness builds power, while isolation breeds danger. Thus, to be effective, U.S. efforts in this new mode of cultural diplomacy should be aimed not at projecting and asserting a pre-defined U.S. message or agenda, but instead first and foremost at building productive mutual learning relationships. Building human ties in global social networks is the basis for effective international relations policy.

To pursue this strategy effectively, actions taken during the Trump administration that were designed to sever meaningful people-to-people interactions between the United States and China should be critically reassessed and,

unless absolutely necessary for verifiable national security reasons, immediately suspended. One obvious example is the recently ended China Initiative, which drew significant criticism for its failed methods, as well as for allegedly threatening U.S. economic competitiveness and potentially violating the civil rights of U.S.-based researchers.³⁹ Another obvious example is the Trump administration's suspension of two highly successful and longstanding people-to-people exchange programs between the United States and China: the Fulbright Program and the Peace Corps. Numerous calls have been made to reinstate these two programs on the principle that they improve U.S. citizen's understandings of other countries and ultimately benefit U.S. society.⁴⁰ The Fulbright Program, in particular, is absolutely vital to maintaining an informed U.S. public and ensuring that professionals and academics in the U.S. continue to have real ties to and expert knowledge about China in the future.

Returning to Michael Swaine's reflections on the U.S.-China relationship in 2019, both Swaine's urgent call to action and his proposed steps for resolution remain relevant today. He advises:

In each of these policy areas, greater trust and understanding could facilitate less politicized efforts to discern the actual nature and extent of the differences between the two sides and the possible dimensions of any achievable middle-ground understanding. This would involve a willingness to 'seek truth from facts' and, equally important, an acknowledgement that the criticisms of the other side, while in many cases greatly exaggerated, have some basis in truth.

Both China and the United States, in order to move toward a more positive relationship, need to be willing to acknowledge their own shortcomings, as well as their respective strengths, and to come to the table as equals. This has historically been difficult for the United States in its relationship with China. This orientation of equality may be the single most important lesson the United States must learn if it is to overcome its current impasse with China in the coming years.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Government or the Wilson Center.

Notes

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- 3 Ibid, 22.
- 4 Mohamed A. El-Khawas, "Africa, China and the United Nations," *The African Review*, 2:2 (1972), 277-287.
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- 6 Sandra Gillespie, "Diplomacy on a South-South Dimension: The Legacy of Mao's Three-Worlds Theory and the Evolution of Sino-African Relations," in Hannah Slavik, ed., *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, pp. 109-30, (Msida: DiploFoundation, 2004), 110.
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- 11 Emily Wilcox, "Crossing Over: Choe Seung-hui's Pan-Asianism in Revolutionary Time." *무용역사기록학 (The Journal of Society for Dance Documentation and History)* 51 (December 2018), 65-97.
- 12 "Zhengli Zhongguo wudao yishu peizhi zhaunye wudao ganbu [Organize Chinese Dance Art Train Professional Dance Cadres]," *Guangming ribao* [Guangming Daily], February 14, 1951.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 See, for example, Chen Jinqing 陈锦清, "Guanyu xin wudao yishu [On New Dance Art]" *Wenyi bao* [Literary Gazette], no. 2 (1950), 20-23; Gu Yewen 顾也文, ed., *Chaoxian wudaojia Cui Chengxi* [North Korean Dance Artist Choe Seung-hui] (Shanghai: Wenlian chubanshe,

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- 30 Ibid, 14.
- 31 Ibid, 12
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- 33 Ibid, 377.
- 34 Ibid, 367. Here, the authors are citing Milton Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United*

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- 35 Ibid, 367. Here, they are referring to Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Super-power Can't Go It Alone* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).
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