Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations
Edited by Nina Hachigian

A Review by Liyi Ye

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Delicate U.S.-China relations elicit the interest of diverse audiences. Beyond the myriad of news reports and books, there is now a special volume – Debating China: The U.S.-China Relationship in Ten Conversations – that navigates the key issues of contention through vibrant and sometimes clashing conversations between world-renowned American and Chinese scholars. The collection, edited by Nina Hachigian, provides insights on significant challenges in Sino-American relations such as trade and economic relations, political values, human rights, climate change, military dynamics, global investment, potential conflict over Taiwan and Tibet, and regional security in Asia. While the back-and-forth exchanges reveal genuine mutual appreciation between experts from both sides, Debating China voices a palpable sense of distrust between the U.S. and China.

That distrust is already apparent in the opening conversation between Kenneth Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution and Professor Wang Jisi of Peking University. Lieberthal is quick to characterize current U.S.-China relations as “mature,” “dense,” and “expanding,” but still “distrustful” (2). He admits that Americans have a natural inclination to distrust authoritarian states, but emphasizes that the United States has engaged in ongoing efforts to improve trust with China. Wang, while agreeing with Lieberthal’s overall characterization of the relations between the two nations, questions American intentions. He maintains that
the United States is only welcoming the global integration of China to interfere with Chinese domestic politics and push it to become “more like America” (10).

The conversation between Professor Michael Green of Georgetown University and Professor Wu Xinbo of Fudan University reflects the same mistrust. Wu states that China and America should try to reach an agreement on the changing regional dynamics in Asia-Pacific through “enduring, candid, and constructive dialogue” (216), but the United States should refrain from exploiting the South China Sea disputes and forming alliances with China’s neighbors to undermine its regional power. Meanwhile, Green contends that “there is no mainstream support in the U.S. today for a policy of containing China” (206), a sentiment less appreciated by Wu.

Another trenchant debate between Professor Andrew Nathan of Columbia University and Professor Zhou Qi of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences further substantiates such distrust. Zhou argues that two ideologies – “American exceptionalism” and “classical liberalism” – have shaped U.S. foreign policy to promote democracy abroad. She asserts that the self-imposed responsibility of the United States to intervene with the internal affairs of foreign governments is viewed by other nations as part of an attempt to secure “world hegemony” (46). Zhou then explains that China, as an emerging power, attaches more importance to economic and social rights rather than civil and political rights. In response, Nathan argues that abuses of human rights not only offend American values, but also violate international law, which the Chinese government officially recognizes. Nathan does agree with Zhou that human rights are also violated in the United States, but claims that independent media, fair courts, and civil organizations strive to curtail injustice in the country. However, Nathan indicates that such countermeasures are strictly prohibited and even punished in China.

The debate regarding military dynamics between Christopher Twomey, who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, and Xu Hui, a professor at China’s National Defense University, also features strong disagreements.
and irreconcilable differences. Twomey believes that China lacks a legitimate reason to rapidly modernize and expand its military, especially considering its significantly improved security environment. In response, Xu states that China’s official total defense expenditures are quite low compared to what the United States spends on military development both on an aggregate and a per capita basis. Xu argues that if China is expected to stop developing its military because of a relatively stable security environment, the United States, having achieved absolute military superiority for decades, “should have given up its military transformation a long time ago” (163).

Some disagreements between the Chinese and U.S. scholars are caused by divergent social and political values, while others result from different interpretations of history. One prominent example is the exchange between Professor Jia Qingguo of Peking University and Alan Romberg of the Stimson Center over the question of Taiwan. Jia comments that Washington supports the definition of the “One China” (181) policy, but never defines the scope of that policy. He indicates that the U.S. arm sales to Taiwan to maintain its “strategic ambiguity” (182) are detrimental to Sino-American relations. According to Jia, Beijing suspects that the United States is trying to undermine its authority over Tibet under the guise of promoting human rights. On the issue of Taiwan, Romberg contends that the United States supports neither independence nor unification. However, the United States cannot stand aloof if the Chinese government resorts to force to attain its goals, because of both its sense of responsibility and its alliance with Taiwan. He explains that Washington does “acknowledge” the “One China” principle, which includes Taiwan, but it never “accepted” it (188). Romberg then emphasizes that the United States never questions the authority of the Chinese government over Tibet. However, he argues that the United States, as an international advocate for individual rights, is obligated to protect the human rights and religious freedoms of the Tibetan people.

Although many of the conversations have an undertone of mistrust, the discussions on economic relations, media, climate change and clean energy, global development, and foreign investment demonstrate more
convergence than contention. For example, both Yuan Peng of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and Hachigian, the editor of *Debating China*, acknowledge Chinese efforts to achieve more international cooperation with the United States and the rest of the world. Hachigian supports Yuan’s suggestion that the United States and China should solve problems “case by case” and “step by step” (94 and 101), while proposing that the United States and China maintain a broad yet close cooperative relationship in order to keep rivalry, mistrust, and friction under control.

Overall, *Debating China* is the first account of Sino-American relations that explores arguments and insights of the intellectual elites from both the United States and China. Participants are experts with a lifetime of interaction and engagement with the other side, resulting in informative and inspiring discussions about Sino-American relations. The conversations reveal the entrenched mistrust between the United States and China, which is caused by the difference in ideological, cultural, and political differences further compounded by the geostrategic challenge posed by the rise of China. Given the unique comparative presentation of *Debating China*, the reader can effectively follow the back-and-forth exchanges and understand where the opinions start to diverge. However, anyone looking for absolute frankness from Chinese experts in the book might be disappointed; the Chinese participants tend to be less forthcoming with acknowledging flaws and mistakes of the authoritarian regime and remain very careful with toeing the line of the Chinese government. Because of such reluctance to admit real problems, there is no solution reached to eliminate or minimize the tension and distrust in Sino-American relations. Nevertheless, the book remains an encompassing and informative resource for anyone seeking a comprehensive view of significant challenges in managing the U.S.-China relationship.