



were constrained. The nature of NGOs – independent from government and commercial imperatives, flexible in the face of change or opportunity –

uniquely suited to play in defining and shaping a framework to facilitate Sino-American interactions in the coming decades. NGOs are the only actors with the independence and flexibility to grab this moment and to lead us forward.

In the next few pages, I will describe briefly the role American NGOs have played in US-China relations over the past 60 years and their relation to the creation and evolution of policies of “engagement” and “opening”. I will reflect on the reinterpretation of these concepts as a framework for the US approach to China. And finally, I will share a few thoughts regarding the possible role for American civil society at this important juncture.

*First, however, a few words about vocabulary. Civil society is most commonly defined as the arena created by individual and collection actions, organizations and institutions outside the family, the state, and the market, to advance shared interests. Civil society organizations are generally non-profit-distributing and self-governing, and operate in the public sphere. Non-government organizations (NGOs) are one type of civil society organization. Others types of civil society organizations include schools, think tanks, religious organizations, business and trade associations, and philanthropic and voluntary organizations. In the mid-1990's, Chinese scholars and community groups began to explore modern concepts of civil society and to create and establish independent NGOs, and literal translations of the words for “civil society” (民间社会) and “non-governmental*

*organization” (非政府组织) entered Chinese vocabulary. The social and cultural conditions described by these words in their original western context was, of course, different from the social and cultural conditions being described in China. As the contemporary Chinese civil society sector has grown and developed, the words used to describe the social phenomenon of independent, self-governing, non-profit-distributing organizations evolved correspondingly. Today, the key terms that apply to China’s NGO sector are “philanthropy” (公益慈善), which is exercised by “social organizations” (社会组织) which both fund and implement projects for the public good. In China, the “philanthropy sector” and “social organizations” do not include schools or think tanks as those are considered quasi-governmental in nature. For the purposes of this paper, written in English, I will use the phrases “civil society” and “NGOs” or “NGO sector” interchangeably, recognizing that others may choose to define and use the terms slightly differently.*

## **Preparing the Groundwork**

The 1950s and 1960s were not decades in which one would expect to find much nourishment of US-



generations of Americans gained critical skills needed for an improved U.S. understanding of contemporary China. Many went on to play catalytic roles in the development and strengthening of their nation's relationship with the People's Republic of China, while others contributed to a broader overall awareness of, and support for, deeper engagement with the country over time.

The Ford Foundation was not alone among NGOs and civil se amwhile others

Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) was established and dedicated to enhancing public education and discussion about China. In that same year, another foundational institution, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (CSCPRC) was founded, jointly sponsored by the US National Academy of Sciences, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), to begin the exploration of opportunities for Sino-American academic exchanges. Both organizations were created by existing NGOs and organizations to fill a gap in US institutional capacity to coordinate efforts to generate knowledge and promote nuanced understanding specifically about China.

In 1972, the NCUSCR played a pivotal role in hosting the Chinese table tennis team in the US, launching "ping pong diplomacy" and expanding the scope of exchange and engagement between the US and China. The Ch

support in the United States for deeper engagement between the two countries. CSCPRC continued its work coordinating academic exchange, and in 1973, the newly-established National Council for US-China Trade (now, the US-China Business Council) led the first American business delegation to China since 1949. Collectively, the efforts of these American NGOs, their constituent members, and founding partners, played a key role in paving the way for normalization of US-China relations by the end of the decade.<sup>i</sup>

The period from 1949 to 1979, relative to US-China relations, was characterized in both countries by inadequate information, strong ideologies, and limited institutional capacity to generate knowledge and to use it productively in overcoming deep mistrust and building a complex bilateral relationship. A handful of organizations, nevertheless, identified both needs and opportunities. They invested human and financial resources to generate and disseminate knowledge and to create new institutions dedicated to expanding America's competent engagement with China. Independence, a willingness to accept risk, nimbleness and flexibility are important characteristics that made this pioneering work possible, and are characteristics found today in many NGOs and civil society organizations. While geopolitical considerations lay at the center of American government policy-making, and American companies were preoccupied with early visions of commercial opportunities in China, both government and business



engagement was preceded by -- and made possible by -- the



environmental protection, health, and trade promotion. The China Development Brief estimated that by 1999 \$100 million in project funding flowed to China from or through NGOs. A year later, their *2000 Directory of International NGOs Supporting Work in China*, the first compilation of its kind, counted 120 international NGOs with operations in China and approximately 300 more engaging with China from abroad. Most of these were American.

and those that might conduct activities



the US non-governmental and academic sectors (and their counterparts in many other countries) not been prepared or willing to meet the Chinese as they opened their society, the trajectory of China's development would







changed fundamentally. Since coming to power in 2012, President Xi Jinping has asserted in multiple forums, including at Davos and the Bo'ao Forum, that China remains committed to the policy of “opening up”. While the phrase for “open” in Chinese (开放) used by President Xi is the same as the phrase used by Deng Xiaoping and others for the past four decades, understood in the context of China's rise and the emerging global order, the nature and goals of “opening up” as we have understood them have changed. Until recently, the goal of “opening” was to bring in (引进) ideas, resources, investment, expertise from abroad for study and adaptation to support China's domestic reform agenda. Gewirtz, in Unlikely Partners, describes in detail how this worked. Today, the goal of being “open” is to

companies, NGOs, and individuals underscore the shift from bringing ideas and resources (引进) in to China to taking Chinese ideas, experiences and resources out into the world (走出去) as the core meaning of “opening up”. Foreign resources of all kinds, including those coordinated and facilitated by non-governmental actors, are less prized than in previous decades. The promulgation of the Overseas NGO Management Law can, in part, be understood as an expression of independence from an earlier reliance on foreign NGOs as vehicles for introducing resources and ideas to support China’s domestic development agenda.

### Constructive Engagement

In the US, the policy of “constructive engagement” as a framework for our relationship with China no longer has resonance across a bipartisan spectrum of policy makers and figures of influence. In real terms, the US and China remain

China not within the framework of introducing American investment, governance concepts, and technical expertise (引进) but rather in the framework of meeting China as she takes forth

in a changing global order, mistrust has grown, and communication channels are narrowing, leading to an increasingly unstable relationship with implications for peace and security in the world. A new framework is urgently needed which recognizes the full dimensions of China's rise as well as the position of the United States in the world. Ideally, such a framework will create mechanisms to allow China and the United States to work constructively on solutions to the most pressing global challenges while also recognizing that American and Chinese interests will not be aligned in all areas.

American NGO and civil society actors have the opportunity, perhaps the

decades and now comprise a diverse, dynamic network that serves to steady an ever more complex bilateral relationship.

Although the path to the reestablishment of the diplomatic relations, whose establishment forty years ago we commemorate today, was extremely difficult, in some ways the China-US relationship was much simpler in those days. Today, those of us who believe that the two largest powers in the world have a responsibility to create together a stable, peaceful, equitable world, have a much more difficult job. The strength and durability brought to the US-China relationship by NGO and civil society actors is more important today than it has been in the last sixty years, and American civil society again needs to take on a pioneering role as we navigate the broad transformation of the US-China relationship.