From Propitious Birth, through Troubled Adolescence, to Prosperous Maturity: The Journey of the National Committee on United States-China Relations, 1966-1972

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Abstract

One of the primary goals of the founders of the National Committee on United States-China Relations was to encourage discussion of China policy. In 1966, when they formed the group, there was little debate on the topic, and much public ignorance concerning current and recent events on the Chinese mainland. While the NCUSCR as an organization took no political positions, its leaders all supported ending the U.S. isolation of the Chinese Communists and pursuing a new policy of outreach and rapprochement. This occasioned some opposition from conservatives who supported existing policies, and who saw the Committee as a de facto lobby, despite its leaders’ protestations of non-partisanship and its tax-exempt status as a non-political organization. Within less than five years, the Committee appeared to become a victim of its own success. Discussion of the issue was uncontroversial, and President Nixon had begun the process of outreach to China. The organization gave serious consideration to closing up shop. Yet rapprochement, while threatening one primary mission, increased opportunities to pursue the other: public education, particularly in the form of cultural exchanges. This gave the group new relevance and renewed public prominence, allowing it to maintain its presence and persevere.
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Every organization needs a compelling mission, as well as the resources to achieve that mission. The ends which an organization’s leaders seek to pursue often determine whether it can acquire the financial means to achieve that goal. Organizations involved in topical matters of public policy face the dilemma of events rendering their original mission either moot or redundant. For example, conservative political activists established in 1954 the Committee of One Million Against the Admission of Communist China to the United Nations (COOM). It was an interest group dedicated to maintaining the recently established U.S. policy of both containing and isolating the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Given this explicitly political bent, the I.R.S. denied their application for tax-exempt status, limiting their fundraising reach. Their mission constrained their resources. This paucity of resources came into contact with a late-1960s political landscape altered by the Vietnam War and the Sino-Soviet split. Both of these events made isolating China seem counterproductive, and the Committee of One Million admitted defeat by disbanding in early 1972. This occurred months after the PRC entered the United Nations, and shortly before President Richard Nixon visited mainland China. The stated mission of the organization had become moot.

Around that same time, the National Committee on United States-China Relations (NCUSCR), founded in 1966 by academics with the support of businessmen and some clergy, faced a crisis of redundancy. Though seen by many affiliated with the Committee of One Million as a mirror image and adversary, the NCUSCR was officially non-partisan and apolitical, and therefore tax-exempt. This allowed it to accrue annual revenue triple or quadruple that of the COOM. Yet the NCUSCR still felt poor, with resources in early 1971 “sufficient to prevent us from dying, but not adequate to permit us to really live.” At that time, even its own leadership would not have viewed death as an unalloyed tragedy. They had
formed the Committee in large part to foster a dialogue on China policy and present all points of view, not just the previously prevailing COOM support for the status quo. With this achieved, and with President Nixon already incrementally upending the China policy status quo, the NCUSCR seemed on its way to becoming a victim of its own success. Back in 1966, its founders had declared “the National Committee does not expect to become a permanent institution,” and “sees itself going out of business as soon as possible.” Its work would be “catalytic,” a term repeated in multiple subsequent internal documents. They estimated that the NCUSCR could achieve its purpose of fostering “an atmosphere in which the public can make informed and independent decision on American policy toward China” in three to five years. By early 1971, it was in the latter half of its fifth year.

Before that year was out, the acceleration of the policy changes which initially threatened to make the NCUSCR redundant would provide it with a long-term stability its founders had not envisioned. An end to the isolation of Communist China enabled the start of people-to-people contacts, in which the National Committee assumed a leading role. It turned out to be an organization titulary devoted to U.S.-China relations, founded during a period when there were technically no substantive official relations between the two polities and their citizens. The Committee could live a far less precarious existence when that was no longer the case. But this required a shift in mission, or more precisely, a decision on which aspect of its mission to emphasize. In March 1967, the NCUSCR’s annual Program Summary declared two primary goals for the following year: “to reach all segments of American society” and “to forge enduring links” between the foreign policymaking elite, media outlets, and academics. This broader framing of organizational mission could outlast policy changes, and perhaps benefit from them.

My report covers the formative first half dozen years of the NCUSCR, from birth through precarious youth to maturity. The six years can be divided into three periods. First was a time of awareness raising, culminating in the group’s widely publicized March 1969 Convocation. Second was a period of stasis when, having achieved the initial aims of many of its founders, the organization stagnated and became mired in internal conflict. The third period commenced in mid-1971 with
the beginnings of diplomatic normalization, which gave rise to events establishing the NSUSCR in its still-existing form.

Founded in June 1966, the NCUSCR grew out of a December 1964 conference on China held at the University of California-Berkeley, where future Committee Chairman Robert Scalapino taught. The conference was co-sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, where future Committee Executive Director Cecil Thomas worked. The NCUSCR received initial financial support from businessmen in San Francisco and New York – the latter city was where the NCUSCR would establish its headquarters. In the spring of 1967, the National Committee acquired three-year sustaining grants from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund – providing an annual baseline income of $123,000, approximately half of its projected annual budget. Public education was a primary goal from the beginning, the group’s leaders repeatedly referencing a 1964 opinion poll showing that over one-quarter of the American public did not know mainland China was ruled by a communist government. Early activities to remedy this centered around the dissemination of materials and speakers about China to civic organizations and high schools, as well as seminar meetings with local groups of prominent citizens around the country upon request. Academics associated with the National Committee also met with senators and representatives, House and Senate staffers, and in February 1968, with President Lyndon Johnson.

Thomas and Scalapino, along with important Committee leaders Columbia University Professor Arthur Doak Barnett and University of Michigan Professor Alexander Eckstein, were known public advocates of changing U.S. China policy to what Barnett, in his widely publicized March 1966 testimony before Senator William Fulbright’s (D-AR) Foreign Relations Committee, termed “containment without isolation.” Thus, the National Committee’s well-wishers and detractors alike assumed the new organization was intended for political advocacy. The New York Times – whose editors had recently endorsed Barnett’s slogan – explicitly framed the NCUSCR as an antidote to the Committee of One Million which “seems to reflect a feeling of disappointment with the Dulles-Rusk Asian policy” and whose advocacy would “almost certainly spur a change in official policy.” Eckstein echoed the group’s official line when he wrote that while “we do not take
policy positions ourselves” as an organization, “we make no effort to silence or restrict individual members of this Committee from expressing their personal position.” But ideological allies of the COOM viewed this as a distinction without a difference, the National Review calling the NCUSCR “a lobby for recognition,” the Wall Street Journal labeling its leaders “monologue artists,” and Senator George Murphy (R-CA) publicly criticizing the group’s perceived bias.8

These conservatives responded at first by trying to join the NCUSCR. Five individuals affiliated with the Committee of One Million sent similarly-worded letters to the National Committee in July 1967 applying for NCUSCR membership. Sloan Foundation President and future National Committee Treasurer Everett Case termed this “an organized effort of the Right to ‘crash the party’,” questioning the sincerity of their motives. Barnett agreed, and also observed that the NCUSCR chose its members by invitation only. Scalapino decided to admit one of the group – National Review Publisher William Rusher – since the National Committee conspicuously lacked representation from media organizations.9

Rusher attended and spoke at the National Committee’s First National Convocation, held in March 1969 in New York City. It was the group’s largest public event by far, attended by 2,500, including nearly 200 journalists, featuring 35 speaker and panelists, broadcast locally on WNYC radio, and summarized in a two-hour national program that Sunday on NBC. Organized by Barnett, the Convocation’s most newsworthy portion was the dinner address by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), presenting perhaps the most forceful argument to date by a leading politician for normalization of relations with Communist China.10 While media coverage was in general quite positive, Kennedy’s address reinforced charges of political bias, as represented by a Chicago Daily News piece referring to the National Committee as “A new China Lobby” that was soon re-published in numerous other daily newspapers. Barnett said the piece “disturbed” him due to the use of the word “lobby.” In accepting his invitation to attend, Rusher commented that “the list of speakers seems rather heavily weighted in a given direction for a tax-exempt organization,” a quip alluding to conservative resentment that the NCUSCR had a coveted legal status the COOM did not enjoy.11
Yet this proved to be the high-water mark for conservative criticism. In 1971, then-Chairman Eckstein noted that while in its first three years of existence, the organization had faced “considerable pressure from the right,” in the next two, it was the left end of the political spectrum which proved more troublesome, particular on college campuses. An energized New Left combined with a temporary decline in public interest in China policy, while Nixon’s tentative attempts at made the group less relevant by demonstrating this was no longer “a taboo subject,” proving the National Committee had already achieved one of its primary goals. Donors matched the general public in their waning interest. By 1970, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Ford Foundation grants constituted 82% of guaranteed income, with 3% coming from businesses, and 15% from individuals. China was no longer controversial, but the Vietnam War and the related domestic tumult caused by the rise of the counterculture definitely were. In March 1966, The Economist magazine approvingly claimed that the individuals involved in the National Committee weren’t “Vietniks,” meaning student radicals, but instead were “all middle-class and middle-aged.” Of the three academics in the group’s senior leadership, Scalapino was strongly pro-war, Barnett moderately pro-war, and Eckstein strongly anti-war. All three affiliated themselves with mainstream elements of the Democratic Party. Barnett served as a foreign policy advisor to Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 presidential campaign, while Eckstein assisted Robert Kennedy’s primary efforts in Michigan. They all believed in some form of anti-Communist containment, supporting alterations in tactics, not overall strategy. To the Old Right at the COOM, that made them rivals. To the New Left on campus, it made them the enemy.

Johns Hopkins Political Science Professor Richard Pfeffer became a member of the NCUSCR’s Board of Directors in June 1969. He resigned after serving for a little over a year. Describing himself as “the single self-styled radical” in a position of leadership in the group, he agreed with conservatives that the National Committee was “an ideologically committed organization – anti-Communist, liberal, largely self-righteous about American foreign policy,” while committed to outreach toward the Chinese communists. He claimed that NCUSCR Secretary Robert Gilmore told him the organization’s goal was “to educate the American right wing on U.S.-China relations,” seeking to bring one establishment faction into line with the other. He also claimed that decisions were made from
Scalapino’s “hip pocket,” and that Scalapino ran the organization in a “personalistic” rather than a collaborative manner. Pfeffer proposed three-year terms for board members, and the replacement of the “old guard” of Scalapino, Barnett, and Eckstein with younger scholars, such as Harvard’s Jerome Cohen and Ezra Vogel. Pfeffer noted neither of these men were themselves radicals, terming them “liberals of one hew or another,” and both were already tangentially involved in National Committee activities. Actual political radicals who were elite China experts, such as Franz Schurmann, had rejected membership invitations, in part because they saw the organization as too mainstream. Pfeffer tried to advance their viewpoint from the inside, arguing unsuccessfully that the organization should sponsor a conference to investigate and criticize U.S. behavior towards China, and argued that U.S. China policy would only truly change when the Americans abandoned “our militaristic and imperialistic role in the world today.”

Pfeffer represented a small minority of his peers, but a more sizeable cohort of the era’s students, including the China studies graduate students the group needed for its University Program Field Staffs. The National Committee’s leadership in 1970 “recognized that graduate students at some universities wish to be partisan and not develop community activities under the auspices of a non-partisan organization.” Sponsored by professors of China studies, led by their graduate students, and staffed by graduate and undergraduates, the field staffs conducted outreach to their local communities by sponsoring talks and events on China, as well as assisting high school teachers with their curriculum materials. The organization saw the field staff program as “one of the most effective ways for the Committee to be truly national and to reach a broad public.” Yet in 1970, only the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and Columbia University had operating field staffs.

The prevailing impediment to establishing and sustaining the field staff program was the result of the small number of institutions at that time with a significant focus on China studies, as well as the need for professors and graduate students at these institutions to feel motivated to volunteer considerable time and effort to such service activities. Harvard University provided a telling example. Widely recognized as the leading U.S. center of China studies, under the leadership of
Professors John Fairbank and Ezra Cohen, that school created the first field staff in December 1966. This effort built upon attempts at community outreach which slightly preceded the founding of the National Committee. Led by graduate students such as future scholarly luminary Andrew Nathan, they held a National Journalists Seminar in July 1967, a three-day teachers’ seminar in the fall of 1968 for seventy Boston area high school teachers, and assisted Michigan graduate students in founding their own staff, which soon became the largest by a wide margin. Yet by 1970, the Harvard field staff no longer existed. \(^{22}\) Over the next year of “careful but impressive expansion,” students at Seton Hall University, the University of Washington-Seattle, and the University of California-Los Angeles established staffs of their own, and the National Committee increased its proposed field staff budget from $2,000 annually (of which Michigan utilized the vast majority) to $13,000. By 1972, the number of field staffs had expanded to eight. \(^{23}\)

As these institutions’ geographical distribution implies, the National Committee’s activities remained largely limited to areas along the coasts, and reached but a small subset of the population. The same was also the case among the membership of about 200 which drew disproportionately from academics. \(^{24}\) While educating the mass public had been one of the founding goals, lack of resources prevented the establishment of an often-proposed mass media campaign. \(^{25}\) In 1969, the group’s leaders concluded they “should not even attempt to maintain contact with a wide general audience,” and instead continue to focus their activities on the “educated elite” and “opinion makers.” \(^{26}\)

By March 1971, the combination of changing policies, campus polarization, and lack of resources led the group’s leaders to take stock of the organization and its future. Other, larger, better-funded organizations like the Foreign Policy Association and the Council on Foreign Relations already did inform elite opinion makers on these topics. As for regionally specific groups, there were the China Institute and the Asia Society. Faintly echoing Pfeffer, Program Director Douglas Murray argued that the main concern had become “institutional survival” and existence purely for its own sake. He worried about a lack of “clearly stated purposes” to justify continued existence and mused about “how to phase out our activities with dignity.” \(^{27}\) Staff Executive Director Preston Schoyer conceded “a
fuzziness of purpose” since Nixon began improving relations with the Chinese communists in 1969, but argued that the organization still had a cause in “public education.” Alexander Eckstein, who had succeeded Scalapino as chairman in 1970, agreed with Schoyer, putting forth the idea that, having succeeded in “legitimizing the China issue,” now they must endeavor towards “rationalizing it.” The group’s leaders ultimately decided not to close shop, though this decision was not unanimous. Even those who argued for forging onward admitted that they were “prepared to dissolve in the next two years or so if conditions warrant.”

Still, hope in the future carried the day, reflected in Schoyer’s reminder that “we don’t know what lies ahead. All sorts of profound changes may occur in the next two or three years, and some possibly within the next six months, which could present unique opportunities for a Committee such as ours to be of unusual service.”

That unique opportunity presented itself sooner than anyone on the Committee could have anticipated. In early April 1971, the Chinese government invited the U.S. table tennis team to become the first authorized American delegation to visit the People’s Republic of China. This calculated goodwill gesture gave the world a glimpse of the results of two years of intermittent indirect contacts between US and PRC officials, and began a cascade of events culminating in Nixon’s February 1972 visit to China. The Chinese also requested a reciprocal visit of the Chinese team to the United States. This “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” made the Chinese players their nation’s first goodwill cultural ambassadors to the formerly vilified Americans. Sensing an opportunity, the National Committee oversaw and funded the April 1972 visit. For 19 days, the Chinese delegation travelled with the U.S. team and State Department staff to eight U.S. cities, playing tournaments, meeting Americans, and visiting tourist sites. The Chinese called the visit a great success, and it allowed the National Committee to position itself for “a leading role in facilitating future educational and cultural exchanges.”

Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs John Richardson complimented the National Committee on its efforts. While not offering any government grants to assist the group in its semi-official diplomatic capacity, as the Committee had requested, he conceded that the trip “put considerable strain upon your modest exchequer.” The costs of a nationwide tour of over 100
individuals, only 13 of whom were Chinese table tennis players (one-third from China, one-third from the U.S. table tennis organization, and one third from the State Department, a 1-to-7 tooth-to-tail ratio, as it were), including a chartered jet, was about $250,000, nearly equal to the rest of the Committee’s annual budget. University of Washington Professor George Taylor, one of a handful of conservative scholars who had accepted membership when the group formed, offered his resignation, terming the expense “sheer madness,” and claiming that amount of money could have been spent in much better ways “to increase understanding of China.” Schoyer responded that the goal was “to test the water in this country,” in the hope that a successful visit would lead to future exchanges. Eckstein agreed the cost seemed exorbitant, but offered it was best for “the national interest” that “a responsible non-politicized organization” handled the endeavor. After a period of “frantic crisis psychology” due to a temporary deficit of $127,000, the Committee was able to raise sufficient private donations to offset the visit’s cost.

The promise of future cultural exchanges gave the NCUSCR a new mission as what its leaders internally termed “the equivalent of China’s ‘non-governmental’ cultural organization,” and offered an enhanced public presence. The end of the group’s formative period was perhaps best signified by Eckstein’s turning over of the chairmanship in November 1972 to W. Michael Blumenthal of the Bendix Corporation. For the first time, the group would not be led by a professor. Academics such as Scalapino, Barnett, and Eckstein became personally prominent around the time of the Committee’s founding for their advocacy of policy change and encouraging of debate on the matter. Now that this was no longer necessary, the institution they had created could be led by the businessmen who had long backed their efforts, and were perhaps better suited to its organizational needs at that time.

After the successful table tennis tour, Barnett suggested that if the NCUSCR had not been created by them, it would, by necessity, have been created by someone else, and that if it were to go out of business, another such organization would surely materialize. This implies two things. First, that the organization was essential, providing laurels to Barnett and the others present at its creation. Second, that it was inevitable, and its founders were largely successful due to good
timing, detracting from their significance as historical actors. Simply put, there was a vacuum to be filled, and it they had not, others surely would have. Yet others who cared about China policy lacked their public stature as scholars, which separated them from political actors and interest group operators. They were experts, and thus their opinions, if not unbiased, were at least relatively well-informed. That was why politicians, the media, and the informed public took their actions seriously. It was also why they could raise money from businessmen and foundations to found such an organization.

In the aftermath of Nixon’s visit to China and the Chinese table tennis tour of the U.S., one businessman, who was one of the group’s early key fundraisers and board members, decided to rescind his support, on the belief the group’s job was done. In response, an NCUSCR leader agreed with him that the group “was not without influence in creating a climate” for policy change, citing the assessment of the New York Times that the NCUSCR had been “quietly laying the groundwork” for rapprochement. Yet, he also recalled “the old cyclical pattern of ‘love-hate’ which has so unhappily characterized our past relations” with China, including the McCarthyism of the recent past.38 Now that there were United States-China relations, there needed to be a group to encourage informed debate that veered neither toward messianic idealization nor racialized demonization. It was for this reason the National Committee proved more than a passing phase.

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