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# CHINA US FOCUS DIGEST

## Diplomacy Starts With Education

Distinguished scholar Da Wei explores the importance of educating the next generation of global thinkers as people-to-people relationships take center stage.


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*It worries me that we seem to be regressing as humanity on a number of fronts, as opposed to being able to continue working together for common peace and prosperity.*

INTERVIEW: DA WEI

# Diplomacy Starts with Education

*On the historic campus of Tsinghua University in Beijing, Professor Da Wei, a distinguished scholar of international relations, explores the current state of global affairs, the evolution of U.S.-China relations and the role of education in shaping future leaders with China-US Focus host James Chau. Professor Da recounts his experiences growing up in an "urban island" within rural China during the country's reform era and discusses his current role of helping to educate the next generation of global thinkers. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

▲ Professor Da Wei, Director of Center for International Strategy and Security and Professor at Tsinghua University, is interviewed by China-US Focus on Tsinghua University campus in June.

*Scan the QR code and watch the interview.*

**James Chau:**

Da Wei, thank you for being with us here and for having us here on the campus of Tsinghua University. It's really special.

**Da Wei:**

Thank you, James. Thank you and welcome to Tsinghua.

**James Chau:**

Da Wei, you recently spoke about the world, describing it in terms of being very, very difficult. There are multiple stress points that the world is trying to navigate or trying to survive. But what are those stress points for you when you think about the world and its complexities? What comes to mind? And what does it mean?

**Da Wei:**

I think there are several things that I really have some very heavy, very big concerns about. First, I think there is a tendency that this world is splitting into different camps. I don't know how many, maybe two different camps. So the economy becomes, you know, decoupled. Of course, everybody says I just want to de-risk, I don't want to decouple. But I think because of the lack of trust, and because of the complexity of one of the most advanced technologies, it's really hard to limit the scope of this de-risking, and it very easily expands into decoupling, and then the standard of new technology, then the way to run the different countries and regions, then the global governance institutions. I think we are facing a very real challenge.

Now about this word "splitting" into different camps. If that happened, if it becomes more serious in the coming years, I think the quality of life will decrease. We will waste a lot of potential that humans should have to make everyone have a better life. I think we are facing the danger that — probably because of

this split, because of this bloc politics — we may have problems.

**James Chau:**

You're using words like bloc and camps. And it makes me think also of the social fabric. Because around the world, of course, there is an emergence of tribalism as well in society — one example being what's referred to as the woke culture. In a sense, that has value because people are awakened to past injustices. And how do you address those? Is there a link between that kind of bloc and camp to the bloc camps that you described just now?

***Saying that we need a peaceful world is one thing, how to make it happen, I think it's another thing.***

**Da Wei:**

You can say tribalism between the countries, or between different countries. And you describe what you mentioned, like a woke culture, it's mainly a separation in one society, or in one country. For example, in the West, different people have different identity problems now. But that kind of place, I think, well, it's not so serious in terms of its economic and social or technological consequences. It's more or less the social split. What I am describing — this international split — I think it will, for example, reduce the economic efficiency. When we were in the globalization period, everyone, or all the countries, different companies, they are interconnected to each other. But now they're split. And in the future, maybe when you come to China, you need to use another cellphone, because maybe your cell phone in other countries cannot be used here. So everybody will need two or three cellphones. When you go to another country, you want to drive a car, but you find the automatic system is totally different. So that will make us suffer a lot. And in this split, in this bloc politics, people will have strong tension. And probably it will also lead to conflict and war. So that is, I think, very serious.

**James Chau:**

As we have this conversation I think about my 6-year-old nephew, and I'm sure you think about your 15-year-old teenager. So when we think about the people who are important in our lives, among them may students here at Tsinghua University, are you confident that we have the experience, the incentive, the willingness and the skill set to address the very, very difficult world that you see?

**Da Wei:**

I am not so confident, to be honest. I think we as adults, I think all of us are talking about maintaining the peace, avoiding a war or maybe reinforcing globalization — these kinds of things everybody talks about. But can we, particularly the policymakers, and those, you know, who can have impact on this can really do something — for example, to correct the mistake that we, I mean, different countries made by ourselves? Are you willing to admit and recognize that "I'm sorry, I messed it up, this is something, you know, I've done mistakenly." And maybe China needs to do this, the U.S. needs to do that, Russia needs to do that, and other countries. I mean, saying that we need a peaceful world is one thing, how to make it happen, I think it's another thing. It's very costly. I don't think we can do that.

**James Chau:**

And not only peace, but lasting peace, a very different version of peace. You bring up the United States and China, and I think about 45 years of normalization of diplomatic ties. It is now 2024 and we should be using the verb celebrate. So we should be saying we are celebrating 45 years of U.S.-China relations in the

modern era. But instead, we use words like "honor" or "mark" as a more neutral approach to it. Where did that trust go? And was there real trust to begin with when you reflect on almost a half-century of relations?

**Da Wei:**

I think that trust actually has grown in those 45 years. I'm not very confident about 45 years ago because I was too young at the time. But my hunch is, at that time, we of course had some strategic consensus — like we needed to balance the Soviet Union together. We may have had that consensus, but for ordinary people, for a lot of decision-makers, I think at that time, we still had very strong suspicion about each other. For example, China believed we are a socialist country, the U.S. is a capitalist country, so can I really rely on or trust them? But I think in those 45 years, you know, both countries — China and the U.S. — got benefits from that process. The Cold War concluded peacefully, right? And then the two countries' economies grew very dramatically after the end of the Cold War. So in that process, the trust has grown dramatically. Having said that, in the last eight to 10 years this trust declined dramatically for different reasons. In short, the U.S. believes China takes advantage and utilizes it, it's not fair and it's not in the U.S. interest; while China thinks U.S. policy toward China is so harmful in the past eight years. So this trust has been damaged dramatically. This is quite a complicated process, I will say.

**James Chau:**

Let's look at the Middle East today, and Russia, Ukraine and what's happening over in Yemen and other parts of Africa are really concerning. And they're not separate to the U.S. and China, both in the joint ability to meet the moment of these challenges and also to understand that the world is not separated into regions. What one does has an impact on the other, on our neighbors, whether our neighbors be the person living next door or the person on the other side of the world on the next continent.

You said recently that what's happening in the Middle East in terms of the decision-making around international policy is still being determined by a few major powers, rather than by the collective multilateral system that was established and designed to do that very thing — to provide a representative and inclusive voice. We're not really seeing that. We're just seeing a few countries trying to moderate, or even intervene. How do you change that, so the world moves on from a postwar architecture that was very relevant in 1945? We're not in 1945 now.

***I think we're facing a danger that those global platforms or mechanisms will collapse.***

**Da Wei:**

I think now we're saying farewell to that old world order of 1945, or even post-Cold War structure. We are gradually departing from that. How to transform it to a more effective way to govern today's global challenges and also reflect today's international politics is a huge challenge. Ideally major countries like China, the United States, Russia and other countries need to sit down together to discuss it. But obviously, this won't happen. So we are facing a possibility that this real global governance mechanism — like what we have seen after 1945, the UN system or later, like the WTO system — I think we're facing a danger that those global platforms or mechanisms will collapse. Or maybe they will be there but to not actually work. I think this is a big challenge we are facing.

**James Chau:**

I'll touch on the UN in just a moment. But before that, some Americans, including one of the speakers at your conference, say that the United States is aware that this system is beginning to withdraw but that Americans are not ready to let go of that yet. What's your take?

**Da Wei:**

There is a strong mood in the United States that asks, why should the U.S. take the responsibility to take care of that system? Or why should the U.S. pay the cost for that? I think there is a sense, a sentiment of isolationism that's rising in the United States. I think ordinary people don't want to spend money on that, or don't want their soldiers die for that. I think the reason for this global governance mechanism collapse can be attributed partly to America's unwillingness to maintain it. I respect this sentiment, this mood, because this is a choice of American people. As the U.S. is withdrawing from that, who can fill that vacuum? I don't think any country can fill the vacuum.

**James Chau:**

I'm going to be a little provocative over here and ask you: Should we not have empathy and gratitude for the United States? Given what [Japanese] Prime Minister [Fumio] Kishida that said of Washington a few weeks ago? He said America has taken on this burden. Now, some people will say that that was a choice, that was a voluntary choice to take on that burden. But should we also thank the United States for ultimately taking on something that exerts a lot of pressure on itself, with its own voters?

**Da Wei:**

Of course, to be honest, I think we should

**CUSEF x Young Leaders Initiative, August 2024**

Twenty-five U.S. students from two high schools and six universities join this program, including Sidwell Friends School, Germantown Friends School, College of William and Mary, Haverford College, University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Tech and Washington University of St. Louis.

▲ The students visit the Hong Kong Palace Museum in West Kov

▲ The students from Georgetown University, University of Cali and Fudan University visit the Sky of Edge in Shenzhen.

**CUSEF Next Gen - U.S.-China Student to Student Dia**

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fornia San Diego, Peking University

▲ The students share their experience of cultural exchanges with their peers from Tsinghua University High School in Beijing.

**logue, May 2024**

thank the U.S. In the world there has to be some country playing a bigger role to maintain the system. I think the U.S. played that role and the paid the price. Actually, on that order, a lot of countries benefit, including China. China probably has been the biggest beneficiary from that system, particularly after the end of the Cold War. So the U.S. played a basically a constructive role to maintain that order. But, of course, at the same time we have also need to admit that the U.S. made many mistakes as it tried to maintain that responsibility. These are two separate things.

***What China wants is not to construct a totally new system.***

**James Chau:**

Americans then feel that China has benefited, and even exhausted the benefits of that system. So it's now convenient for China to move on and construct a new system that will then ensure that it continues to benefit going forward in other ways.

**Da Wei:**

What China wants is not to construct a totally new system. Actually, I think China has for very long time argued that we want to maintain the current system, we want to maybe make more contributions to the system. And China also wants to, of course, reform some elements of that. But the problem is, for different reasons, the U.S. believes China is an illiberal country. It asks, are you really qualified to make a bigger contribution to this system or to reform while only liberal countries can play that role in this liberal international order? So I think both China and the U.S. maybe missed some opportunities. Maybe the U.S. missed some opportunities to work with China together, you know, to try to share the burden and also make the system better. But the U.S., more or less, views China as revisionist when China says I want to make some contribution or reform. Then the U.S. believes that China wants to overturn the whole order, the whole system. I think that's wrong. That's a misperception. But that's the widely accepted perception in the West. It's very unfortunate.

**James Chau:**

Let's apply some of these discussions to the United Nations. China has contributed richly to that system, to that existing system, in the form of being the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces and also as a major funder to the outcomes of the Sustainable Development Goals, so that countries in the Global South have a shot — or a better shot — at achieving those goals nationally. The UN reform discussion has continued for some time. A number of countries really want to get on the Security Council, whose gatekeepers, in effect have been five countries — and possibly in some discussions being six, the P5 plus one, Germany. These are largely the P5, the victors of World War II. You've got Germany as a sixth in some ways, as a major global economy, I think No. 4 in the world. But I have a concern that if you reform and bring in more voices (which I'm in favor of), then then it doesn't become a checklist for affirmative action, that it needs to be set up with guarantees, so that those new members, those new countries that will benefit from reforms, will also be allowed to take part in the decision-making process and leave their imprint on the results that come out of those decision-making processes. What's your take on reform?

**Da Wei:**

I think that's too difficult a topic to address the reform of the UN. The UN is a product of the World War II, so at that time, it was relatively easy to create a new organization like the UN and decide who should be the P5, because those P5 were the countries that won the war. But now that we are in a peaceful transitional period, we want to reform something peacefully. That means difficult — like when you are eating your lunch and suddenly I say I need to

reform the food on your plate and I give some food to others and add some food to your plate. So everybody has a very complicated calculation here.

Last week I was in Europe, and we also touched upon these questions. And then one of the participants asked other European participants, Do you think we can reduce our representation in the UN to one vote as Europe? And the other interlocutor immediately said no, because now they have France and the UK, in the council. So then you bring in Germany, so then you have three votes. Bringing in new members also may mean lower efficiency. I think this is already a problem with the UN and other multilateral organizations.

I think we need a very, very long process. We need to be very patient. But most important, I think that China, the U.S., Russia, Europe — those players need some consensus first. We cannot do anything without a consensus by those major players. Because those countries' relations are now so bad that they don't talk to each other. Sometimes the UN becomes an arena for great powers to compete. Under that circumstance, how can we expect them to work together to reform it? I'm very pessimistic about that.

**James Chau:**

You know, I've moderated and chaired many discussions at the United Nations, both in New York and in Geneva, in my UN role, and you find all these representatives of member states coming to the table and reading their set pieces that were passed to them by their capitals. And it's frustrating in the sense that you use the opportunity of being in the same room together to simply come with what you were told to come with, but not reflecting what you're hearing in the room and finding common cross points that could actually build to consensus.

Let's leave the UN. As you said, it's a complex subject and one that would require a much longer exploration. I want to ask you: You were about 5 years old in 1979. So probably not too many memories of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and President Jimmy Carter, up on the White House lawn. What was your first exposure to the United States, your first memory of the idea of America?

**Da Wei:**

The first time, I think I watched an advertisement on TV at that time. My parents bought a TV set — a black-and-white one, Hitachi, a Japanese one. There was a Procter & Gamble ad on TV. That was the first TV ad I'd seen. I think that was a very interesting ad. I will say it was at an American house. Very nice house, and the housewife was washing dishes in the kitchen. And then the camera turned away to a lawn and the kid, a Chinese kid, playing baseball there. And then there was a song that said Xiao Hua went to the U.S. and learned to play baseball, and his mother now loves to use the company's product. So that's the first American image in my memory. It's a kind of typical American Dream thing.

**James Chau:**

So the mother and son in that commercial were Chinese ethnicity?

**Da Wei:**

Yes, ethnic Chinese. Obviously, they moved to the U.S. maybe immigrated to the U.S., so it's blue sky, green lawn, beautiful house. Basically, that's the image of the USA in the early 80s.

**James Chau:**

Did it shock you that, you know, you were living in China, which was still mired in the problems of poverty in the 1980s? Were you shocked by what you saw on screen that people could have houses and gardens? And, you know, the son would have time to go and play baseball? Did that shock you?

**Da Wei:**

Of course. At that time, there was a big gap bet-

ween the living standards of the two countries. So at that time, you could not imagine some people living in such a beautiful single house. At that time, we didn't have that in China. So it's a totally different lifestyle.

**James Chau:**

Your parents were really better off. They were professionals. They were university-educated. But also you could afford a television set that was made in Japan. It's funny how, when you talk about Chinese people of the 80s, or even 70s, it always comes down to television sets. In a conversation with Ambassador Cui Tiankai, who of course served eight years as China's top diplomatic envoy in Washington, he said in 1979 that his memory of being a graduate student in Shanghai was seeing the two leaders waving from the balcony of the White House over the lawn. And he watched it on a neighbor's television set. There was maybe one family that had a small television set in a compound, and everybody crowded around and watched it. Your story is similar, as it speaks to the idea that the American Dream was also the idea of globalization, of watching an American consumer commercial in 1980s — on a Japanese-made television set. It seems sweet and innocent and a lovely era to go back to. Tell me about your childhood. You were born in Xi'an, a historic city, a former ancient capital, the home of the Terracotta Warriors. What was life like?

**Da Wei:**

I grew up there because my parents worked there. Both my parents worked for the defense industry in China. They were from Shanghai, actually, in eastern China. But they had the opportunity to go to college in the early 1960s. After graduation, before the Cultural Revolution, China's external environment was already very serious. At that time, it had a very bad relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States. So China moved a lot of factories and research institutes deep inland. It's hard to imagine now, because my father is from Shanghai, the most modern city in China. He grew up there. So actually, when he came here, he told me, the lifestyle, the living standard, was really low at that time. Because he was from Shanghai they had rice every day, but when you go to the northern part of China, they don't have rice. They had mantou, actually, the steamed buns. So for them, that's very hard. My mother worked in a factory. But when she first went there, it was nothing but bare ground, so they started to construct the factory. That was a hard life in the 1960s.

I was born in the early 1970s. So I have almost no memory of the Cultural Revolution, but when I do have a memory, I remember those hard times. My parents were in the middle class at that time, still not very comparable with today. You know, life was very, very hard. I'm fortunate that they could get me a good education. We were an island in a rural sea.

When I was a kid, I didn't speak the local dialect because everybody spoke Mandarin. I even thought everybody should have a college degree because all my parents' colleagues had college degrees. But when I grew up, I found it was something quite unique. I grew up in that urban island, speaking Mandarin, getting a good education. But that was a good time because China was starting its reform and opening-up, I started my [formal] education in 1979 — the year that China and the United States established diplomatic relations. So, basically, I can represent the generation that grew up in the era of opening-up and the reform. We received the benefit of that.

**James Chau:**

Is life in China good today?

**Da Wei:**

I think so. Yes. Particularly for people like me. Of course, different people have different stories. As for me, I think I have a life that I never expected when I was a kid in the 1980s. When I was a kid, I still remember that in Xi'an we

had the first five-star hotel, which was run by a Hong Kong businessman. So some of the teenagers in our island found a job there. At that time in the 1980s, they could earn 200 yuan per month. At that time, I thought, wow, that's a wonderful job.

**James Chau:**

Two hundred yuan, which is about 30 U.S. dollars a month?

**Da Wei:**

Two hundred at that time was already much higher than my parents' salary of about 100 yuan.

**James Chau:**

Is the hotel still there?

**Da Wei:**

I think so. But obviously, it's not a very good hotel now. At that time, I thought, if one day when I grew up, I could work at that hotel, that will be my dream life.

**James Chau:**

I want to finish with where we are. And in some way circle back to where we began in this conversation. We're on the extraordinary grounds of Tsinghua University, a world-leading university, which was established in 1911. It was a moment of absolute transformation here in China, which went from many dynasties of imperial rule to the Republic and to the People's Republic after that. This was the site of an imperial garden. This university was set up with some reference to the United States and China — the relationship to follow. But what are your students being taught? What are they learning? To go back to our first question, is that sufficient to meet the needs of a world that is in constant flux?

**Da Wei:**

I think Tsinghua University and Peking University are regarded in China as the top two universities. Probably this is one of the best universities in China, and or maybe in Asia. The students here, particularly the undergraduate students, went through the extremely competitive gaokao system — the entrance examination for university students in China and very, very competitive. So they are all very talented, top students here.

For example, I teach in the Department of International Relations. So my students take courses such as international relations, theory, research, methodology, mathematics. And yes, they learn, of course, foreign languages, and they also learn a lot in courses such as China-U.S. relations and history. The theory they are learning here, I think, is just basically the same as in American universities. The reading material we give them — most of them — are also in English. So some courses are taught in English. Basically, what we are providing here I think is quite similar to what you can imagine at an American university.

But to your question, is that adequate? Is that good enough? I don't think so. I think beyond what you can learn from a class there are still a lot of things to do. I think the students today, particularly in the university — in particular, in the so called elite universities — I think the task for them is not only to acquire some knowledge but to be the future leaders, the future leadership of a country, or maybe global leadership or for an industrial company, a society or a community. So they need to understand the dramatically changing globe, as we discussed earlier. I always encourage them to pay attention to what is happening in the world — for example, in the Middle East.

I always want them to debate, you know, the pros and cons of the two sides — I mean, the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. What is wrong? What is correct? As a Chinese stu-

▲ Professor Da Wei and the Tsinghua University research students visit Professor Paul Gewirtz, director of the Yale China Center, at the Yale Law School library in July 2023.

dent, what is your position? All of you can have a debate on the Russia and Ukraine issue, right? What is the rationale behind each side? Why did Russia do that? Why did Ukraine do that? I think the students need to pay more attention to what is happening now. Or a new technology, AI, this kind of thing. They need to understand what is happening now. Also, they need to think about why those people, the Palestinian people, are really different. People have different rationales. Why do they have different values? Why different policies? I mean, the logic behind that. I want them to step further.

So in that regard, I think our students do have a long way to go, I think our university needs to provide them more opportunities to think, to reflect. That's a reason every summer vacation I always bring my students to the United States to talk to American government officials, university professors and of course, their peers, the university students in the U.S., to understand why these two great nations have such different policies. And also why we have so many tensions now. I want them to understand this. And then when they return to their country, they know the world better.

**James Chau:**

Unfortunately, I'm not one of your students. I wish I were. But we did start off the year in America, in three different places — in Atlanta, and then Stanford in Palo Alto and of course in Washington, D.C. So it means so much to me that as we reach the midpoint of this year, we're finally speaking at your home at Tsinghua, here in Beijing.

***I think the task for them is not only to acquire some knowledge but to be the future leaders.***

**Da Wei:**

Thank you. Well, thank you, James, for coming to Tsinghua and I hope you can visit more often and we can continue this discussion — in Beijing, Hong Kong or somewhere in the United States. Thank you so much.