

The Cold War and China Studies in the United States

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My talk today is a combination of subjective reflections on forty-plus years in the field of China studies in North America and more objective assessments of the course the field has taken over this period of time. I should stress from the outset that the views expressed here are solely my own; they are not posing as objective truth.

I first became interested in East Asian studies in my second year of college in 1970, forty-one years ago, at the University of Chicago. It was an extremely heady time in China with news of the Cultural Revolution appearing regularly in the newspapers, though the stories were based on little or no firsthand information available. In my sophomore year, I enrolled in a graduate course on contemporary China taught by the late Tsou Tang (Zou Dang). Professor Tsou was the son of Tsou Lu, a high-ranking Guomindang official and historian noted for his anti-Communist profile. Tsou Tang, however, had written highly critical things about Chiang Kai-shek and was thus no friend of Taiwan. His interpretation of the Cultural Revolution was basically no different from what one could read in the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), although he couched his views in political science terminology. Most of us in his course believed everything he said. The next year, another University of Chicago professor of Chinese heritage, Ho Ping-ti (He Bingdi) was able to visit China, and he brought back heroic tales that would have even made Lei Feng blush. Both Tsou and Ho were first-rate scholars and native speakers of Chinese, I thought to myself, but nothing could be as fabulous as the stories they told.

In 1971 I wrote the American State Department and asked about travel to China for U.S. citizens. I received a letter back to the effect that the only impediment to visiting China was the Chinese government's unwillingness to allow us in. I had my doubts, but I was in no position to do anything about it. In 1972 I graduated from the

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University of Chicago, and I entered graduate school at Columbia University in the fall. There had been the totally bizarre Lin Biao affair in 1971, and already show trials were beginning with members of the Chinese military allegedly making an assortment of denials and admissions. Again the news was heavily filtered, and no trustworthy Western press were allowed in. This time, I didn't believe a word of it, and slowly but surely I found myself increasingly interested more in modern Chinese history than I was in the history of the Chinese Communist revolution.

Columbia had a strict language requirement for those of us doing Chinese history—something which it no longer has—and it involved roughly four years (or more) of Japanese language training. The more Japanese I learned, the more interested I became in modern Japan. Then, when it was time to pick a topic for my doctoral thesis, I wanted to be able to use the Japanese I had spent so many hours studying. In addition, China was still off limits to Americans by the mid-1970s, but there was always Japan. I spent about eighteen months at Kyoto University, doing research on Naitō Konan; this was a time when there were basically Naitō's last students—all retired and quite old at the time—and the anti-Naitō people mostly from Tokyo who saw signs of imperialism in everything he had ever written. That situation has now completely changed, in part because of the ongoing work of Professor Tanigawa Michio and in part because of the newfound interest in Naitō among Chinese students. Several days after our conference here concludes, Professor Tao Demin will convene a workshop on Naitō with a group of mostly Chinese scholars—and I am very excited to be a part of it.

I later went on to teach at Harvard University in the 1980s, and then from 1989 at the University of California, Santa Barbara until 2005 when I moved to Canada. I thus first became involved in China studies when the Cold War was calming down and a leftist reaction was forming to it, but I quickly saw that politics and scholarship were a volatile mixture that needed to be avoided personally as much as possible, if in scholarship it might make for an interesting approach. I think it must be my *nichao* 逆潮 nature but I have never fully trusted people in authority, and just as I came quickly to disbelieve my professors at the University of Chicago, I never fully saw eye-to-eye with my thesis advisor at Columbia although he was at the far other end of the political spectrum.

The main topic of my talk today will be a preliminary investigation of how the advent of the Cold War affected the development of China studies in the United States. Although I now live and teach in Canada, as I have mentioned, I am an American and

have been a part of the world of Chinese studies in American for over forty years now. Now that the Cold War has been over for more than two decades, we are only beginning to understand many things that were at best hazy or even obscured during the period when the Cold War was at its height. As Su Dongpo put it so well, 「不識廬山真面目，只緣身在此山中」, or as we say (in a much less poetic way) in English, we couldn't tell the forest from the trees (「山にいて、山を見ず」). Hopefully, twenty or fifty years from now, it will be even clearer for scholars.

America emerged from World War Two not only as one of the victors, but as the only victor that had never been a field of battle. Great Britain, France, Russia, and, of course, China were also on the victorious side, but they had all sustained terrible damage and, particularly in the cases of Russia and China, a huge number of deaths. It would take years to rebuild. In addition, the political situation in China was still unstable, and a renewed civil war would soon erupt causing more destruction and loss of life before the Communists came to power in 1949. Thus, where other Allies were picking up the pieces after August 1945, the United States found itself invigorated by the war. Whole new industries were fostered as a result of the war effort, the Great Depression was finally over, and an entire generation of young men and women returned home and packed the universities in an effort to secure a better place for themselves and their families than their parents' generation had enjoyed. One might easily argue that wartime experiences gave many of that generation (recently dubbed the "greatest generation") a new perspective of a wider world in which they might amount to something.

As the U.S. government frequently—all too frequently—learned too late during the war, it had far too few experts at home for dealing with a previously unknown wartime enemy. The number of Americans who knew Japanese and could thus analyze intercepted documents or monitor radio signals was appallingly small. There was as a result an intensive program during the war to train a group of men with these aims in mind, and they usually came from educated sectors of the population. This group included many who would after the war move into China studies, such as Benjamin Schwartz who taught his entire career at Harvard University, Joseph Levenson who taught his entire career at the University of California, Berkeley, and among my teachers, Wm. Theodore de Bary and John Meskill, both of whom taught at Columbia University during their careers. In this restricted sense, one of the greatest effects of the war was its positive influence on China studies. Without the experience of inten-

sively studying Japanese, it is unlikely that Schwartz, Levenson, or Meskill (and many others) would have ended up in East Asian studies.

Other Americans who had had significant exposure to Chinese language training before the war—or seemed ready, willing, and able to acquire it during the war—served in the O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. This group would include John King Fairbank who had studied Chinese prior to the war and would spend his entire career at Harvard, and my first professor of Chinese history, C. Martin Wilbur, who was born and raised in Shanghai, the son of a YMCA employee there.

Having all these wonderfully gifted young men and women return home ready to take up university positions or enter graduate programs in China studies would have meant nothing if the United States government did not play its part. The postwar economic boom in the U.S. and learning the lesson of unpreparedness from the war years led to a large investment by the national government in education for Asian studies. This became a mission once it was clear that the Communists were going to win the civil war and Chiang Kai-shek's failing regime fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s. And, for several decades, China studies boomed in the United States. Positions were added to universities, students were supported by the federal government in graduate school, often through grants from the Department of Defense, and a small golden age ensued. Although initially founded in 1941, the Association for Asian Studies found new life after the war, and its journal, *The Far Eastern Quarterly* changed its name in 1956 to the present title, *Journal of Asian Studies*.

The war and America's embrace of China during it brought China into the homes of many more Americans than previously. There had been a small number of Americans whose missionary families brought them to China before the war started—of whom Pearl Buck is probably most famous—but during the war, the plight of China appeared in the newspaper almost every day. It helped that Soong Mei-ling, wife of Chiang Kai-shek, was a fluent speaker of English and graduate of Wellesley College and made frequent appeals for help to the American public. Though hardly a friend of democracy, she and her husband were widely known to the generation coming of age in the immediate postwar years.

In addition, in the early postwar years, the United States unlike its earlier history was friendly to immigration from China and Taiwan, especially of those seeking higher education. Many Chinese—as is now the case, with all the obvious differences—came to

the United States from the late 1940s through the 1960s. The majority came from Taiwan or from the Mainland via Taiwan, because China soon shut its doors, refusing to permit the “brain drain,” as it came to be known, from seriously eroding the stock of highly educated men and women in all fields across the boards. Many of those who came to the U.S. from China or Taiwan decided to stay on after graduation and took positions at American universities. And, as a result, many fine teachers of Chinese history and culture—amid a wider pool of Chinese in all fields of learning—remained in America for their entire careers. I myself have been fortunate enough to study or work with many such professors. The chancellor of the university I used to teach at, the University of California, Santa Barbara, was a scientist from Taiwan and before that originally an émigré from China to Taiwan.

In short, then, the postwar period began a boom era in China studies in the United States. After 1949, it was fueled by the government’s desire to “Know Your Enemy.” Very few scholars who benefited from their government’s largesse actually bought into the anti-Communist policies of the United States, but most were only too willing to take advantage of the money made available for research on China. There were a few scholars who remained openly and acerbically anti-Communist, but politics would not intrude for many for a long time.

However, it was not that simple. Before the war, China studies existed in the United States but it was much, much less developed than it became after the war. Britain and France had far more developed traditions of Sinology than the United States, and what existed in the U.S. was mostly directed at traditional Chinese history and culture. In the postwar period, the social sciences exploded in popularity—and in part because the kinds of information that social scientists derived from their studies was what the government needed during the Cold War and sought to fund. Even those scholars, who would otherwise have shown no inclination to take an anti-Communist stand during the Cold War, came to the realization that the revolutionary currents of the China of their own times had been woefully underestimated. They had all read about Mao Zedong and his colleagues in Yan’an in Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China*, but only those motivated more by wishful ideological thinking than by scholarly investigation were prepared for a Communist victory by the late 1940s.

Many scholars felt that somehow they had gotten China terribly wrong. Those who had been studying China or just observing the mass poverty, corruption, and then war and civil war thought that China was a gigantic mess, very sad to be sure, but mori-

bund. Then, right from the heart of the giant came this massive movement of renewal in the form of a Communist movement which had conveniently toned down its sharply leftist bent during the war years and its collaboration with Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang. Many scholars and budding scholars in the United States, even if they were not themselves leftists, were exhilarated when China, in the famous words of the time, "stood up." They may not necessarily have been pleased with Communism, but they felt that some system of political and social organization that would bring order, peace, and a modicum of sustenance to the masses of the impoverished Chinese people might work in China in a way that they would never have agreed to try and implement for themselves. Professor Fairbank makes a similar point in his memoirs.

In the wake of these momentous events, some scholars who had been active as scholars even before the war in more traditional fields switched to studying twentieth-century or contemporary China. My own first advisor in graduate school, C. Martin Wilbur, is a perfect case in point. He had written and published in doctoral dissertation on slavery in the Former Han dynasty, and then after the war worked exclusively on the Nationalist revolution, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and political and military advisors to the Guomindang and Communists sent by the Soviet Union and the Comintern. It was not that he felt that premodern China was uninteresting or unimportant, but he did clearly feel that the revolutionary movements of his own lifetime in China had been underestimated in influence and significance. He also was largely responsible for building Columbia University's East Asian Institute, one of the earliest interdisciplinary institutes for studying contemporary China in the United States.

His change of focus reflected the similar interest of the postwar U.S. government in understanding contemporary China that I mentioned earlier. Money was being made available for scholars not to study topics like slavery in the Former Han, but contemporary China and especially the revolutionary movements that had landed China in the position it was now in. Many scholars would continue to couch their applications for funding in such a way as to address contemporary China, even if they had no particular interest scholarly or otherwise in contemporary China, but the more important change was that China studies in the social sciences began to blossom at this time. The fields of sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science all began to provide places for the study of China throughout the United States.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this development was that until the 1980s no serious American scholar was allowed into China, much less to do field research.

The social sciences are predicated on the intensive field work, observing and interviewing contemporary subjects, and then returning to test out theories developed in the office. The best that American social scientists working on China in the 1950s–1970s could do was to interview refugees in Hong Kong. The interview process in Hong Kong became something of a small industry there, and of course the interviewees were not the best suppliers of unbiased data on China, the country they had recently fled. Oftentimes, scholars were reduced to interviewing the tiniest handful of Chinese refugees and then coming up with a grand theory on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence. Few doubted that the model they were working with—studying contemporary China one step removed from China—was dubious at best, but they had no choice. There were, of course, a tiny number of Americans allowed to visit and travel in China—Edgar Snow, William Hinton, and their ilk—but no serious scholar believed much of anything they said or wrote.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, scholars being trained in China studies did, however, have an option if they wanted to improve their Chinese. Also, for those of us interested in modern Chinese history, lack of access to archives and scholars on the Mainland did not necessarily leave us completely cut off from Chinese scholars, Chinese archives, and Chinese culture. There was lots to do in Taiwan, and indeed many scholars did go on to study in Taiwan. International political conditions changed from the mid-1960s, however, and although many continued to go there, Taiwan became less and less attractive as a place to study.

The 1950s was an era of anti-Communist investigations by committees of the American Congress, and many scholars who had shown the least sympathy for the Communists during the war found themselves in hot water at this time. By the 1960s, though, that had all changed. The U.S. continued to embrace martial-law Taiwan and Chiang Kai-shek in spite of the many abuses committed his regime largely out of fear for his giant Communist neighbor. This policy struck many as increasingly untenable in a realistic world. But more important was the heightening of the U.S. war in Viet Nam. As antagonism toward the American policy of anti-Communist containment, the brutality of the war, and (I believe) the existence of a military draft which made all young men eligible for military service, questioning not just the war which most academics were strongly opposed to by the second half of the 1960s, but the whole anti-Communist thrust of postwar U.S. policy in Asia led many to vehemently protest their government's policies and doubt everything anything any member of the various

administrations responsible for the war in Viet Nam had to say.

Although there was no hot war in Taiwan, the center of the Cold War in East Asia was between China and Taiwan. Whatever one might have thought about contemporary China, the Communist regime there, etc., Taiwan became ever more suspect. Just at this time, a worldwide student movement was growing in France, Japan, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere, and it was enormously influenced by the simultaneous Cultural Revolution in China. What did students in Paris, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo all have in common with young people in Beijing and Shanghai? They all had a copy of *Mao zhuxi yulu* or, as it was known in English, *Quotations from Chairman Mao* or “The Little Red Book.” It was often quoted as much in jest as in seriousness by Americans and other non-Chinese, but much more importantly it was a symbol of an international movement of renovation—out with the old and in with the new—that linked all members of the younger generation, mostly under thirty years of age, irrespective of nationality.

Of course, none of the Americans would have ever visited China. Any news about the Cultural Revolution was filtered through the political apparatus attached to the Chinese news service. So, we had lots of glossy pictures of young people doing good things; any evidence of bad things that managed to sneak out of China, usually via refugees who escaped to Hong Kong, was regularly ignored and imputed to reactionary political views. Thus, the Chinese authorities didn't even have to provide the blinders for the outside world; we did it to ourselves, screening out any information we did not want to hear.

One important institutional development during the height of the Viet Nam war was the organization of a group of younger scholars and graduate students in 1968 called the “Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars.” Let me read you from this organization's 1969 statement of purpose to give you a flavor of it:

We first came together in opposition to the brutal aggression of the United States in Vietnam and to the complicity or silence of our profession with regard to that policy. Those in the field of Asian studies bear responsibility for the consequences of their research and the political posture of their profession. We are concerned about the present unwillingness of specialists to speak out against the implications of an Asian policy committed to ensuring American domination of much of Asia. We reject the legitimacy of this aim, and attempt to change this policy. We recognize that the present structure of the profession has often

perverted scholarship and alienated many people in the field.

The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars seeks to develop a humane and knowledgeable understanding of Asian societies and their efforts to maintain cultural integrity and to confront such problems as poverty, oppression, and imperialism. We realize that to be students of other peoples, we must first understand our relations to them.

CCAS wishes to create alternatives to the prevailing trends in scholarship on Asia, which too often spring from a parochial cultural perspective and serve selfish interests and expansionism. Our organization is designed to function as a catalyst, a communications network for both Asian and Western scholars, a provider of central resources for local chapters, and a community for the development of anti-imperialist research. (March 28-30, 1969)

The point was explicitly political to counteract what the group considered the unspoken political direction of academics in general and Asian studies in particular. Their journal, the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Studies*, still comes out although now under the title *Critical Asian Studies*, and it still has a sharply leftist political bent. My point is that, as was the case elsewhere in the world, China studies and Asian studies more generally were becoming more and more politicized. And, because of Taiwan's cozy place under the American nuclear umbrella and in the ongoing, American-led, anti-Communist struggle, it became tainted politically.

Japan was by no means politically pristine, as it too fell under the nuclear umbrella and was deeply dependent on the United States for many things in the postwar world. Nonetheless, it was less tainted in the field of China studies, and because of its long traditions of Sinological research, many scholars in the first postwar decades went there to continue their research on modern China rather than Taiwan. The first postwar generation included many men and women who had served in the war or in the occupation of Japan, and in the postwar years went into Chinese historical studies. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was their students who followed them primarily to universities in Kyoto and Tokyo. Thus, sufficient expertise to be able to read Japanese secondary writings on China was a prerequisite for anyone pursuing doctoral studies in the United States at this time. During the decade of the Cultural Revolution in China, little research of any significant scholarly value was coming out of China, and that only forced us to rely on Japanese scholarship even more.

The first postwar generation in Japan was overwhelming directed leftward, partly

because any rightist leftovers from earlier had been swept out of Japanese institutions of higher learning after the war, and because of the sharp swing against wartime Japanese activities in Asia. So, many Western and particularly American students of Chinese history who went to study in Japan found likeminded Japanese of their same generation—if anything, even more leftist than the Americans fashioned themselves. In addition, the Fulbright Commission and the Japan Foundation provided fellowships for study in Japan which made it much easier.

This turns out in retrospect to have been a relative short honeymoon period of maybe 25–30 years. Since rise to power of Deng Xiaoping, the launching of China's massive modernization projects, and China's welcoming back into the family of nations from its comparative isolation for so long, there has been an understandable, even logical, but unfortunate byproduct. From the 1980s and then later with the collapse of Communism in the Eastern Bloc countries in 1989 and 1991, graduate students now can travel and study in China for significant periods of time, make use of central and regional archives, interact with Chinese scholars, attend conferences in China and invite Chinese scholars for periods of research and conferences abroad, and in general have access to China and the Chinese in a way unthinkable just a generation ago. And, of course, American and other foreign scholars now flock to China in droves. The byproduct is that few now do research on China in Japan and fewer still learn Japanese at all. This unfortunate development has been exacerbated by the push to get through graduate school as quickly as humanly possible, and that means cutting short language training in a second East Asian language.

There are, of course, exceptions, so I don't want to convey the image that what I have just depicted is a wholesale phenomenon. But, a look through the visiting students and scholars at most Tōyōshi departments in Japanese universities reveals extremely few Americans, Canadians, or Europeans—although, interestingly, there are numerous Chinese students in Japan. Kansai University is at the forefront of this new and fascinating development, and although no one knows where it will go, we can all look forward to positive progress.