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“Made in the US/Made in China: Imagining the Future of China Studies”

**Fairbank Center 50th Anniversary Conference
Harvard University
December 9, 2005**

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Let me begin by quoting a radio news story that caught my attention, a report from Beijing correspondent Anthony Kuhn that aired two months ago on National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition*.¹ The story focused on the consequences of China’s rapid economic growth, which—while mostly positive—have also increased social inequality, official corruption, and produced a loss of any sense of collective purpose, since Communism can no longer be held up as the nation-state’s guiding star. The Chinese leadership, correspondent Kuhn noted, had “cracked down” hard on more than 74,000 protests against current policies, but was about to issue a new blueprint for development that puts “more of an emphasis on the equality and sustainability of economic growth.” What I found particularly noteworthy was his description at the end of the report of the party-state’s future leaders:

But I think the main thing is that during this [upcoming] plenum [of the Communist Party Central Committee] we can expect to see the rise of a younger, different group of leaders. During [previous president] Jiang Zemin’s era, most of the leaders were Soviet-trained engineers. Now a lot of them are going to have more of a background *in the humanities* [my emphasis] and that’s going to help [President Hu Jintao’s] development strategy to place the emphasis on more humane development.

Well, *that’s* a relief! Not only have the humanities made the news, but in a very positive context. Humanities employment will boom! And the humanities will finally have a valuable public purpose: reforming—or at least moderating—authoritarian states with kleptocratic tendencies!

Now, whatever unintended conclusions Kuhn’s story may elicit, it does conjoin two critically important dimensions of today’s China: its headlong economic development and its need to understand its future in the context of its past. The humanities are not usually thought of as a part of the first dimension, but they are critical to the second and must, therefore, be a concerted element of modern Chinese studies.

Our topic today is the “the future and funding of modern Chinese studies,” and there is no doubt that the certainty of that future is in no small measure owing to the remarkable history of the John King Fairbank Center and its achievements. I want to salute the Fairbank Center on its 50th

1. *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 11 Oct. 2005.

anniversary and thank Wilt Idema and Roderick MacFarquhar for inviting me to be on this roundtable this afternoon. As an unrepentant premodernist, I would also like to beg your indulgence and take “modern Chinese studies” to mean “Chinese studies now.” That is, I do not want to focus on the study of a particular period of Chinese history, but to sketch what I take to be the most important features of the environment of our field today, in the US, in China and—critically—in an international or transnational dimension. As a premodernist I also think that one way of identifying the key features of our environment is to contrast it with the situation that pertained half a century ago when the Fairbank Center was founded.

Some of the contrasts are obvious. In 1955, China was politically, economically, and academically estranged from the United States. Hostile relations made study *in* China impossible, but did provide a geo-political rationale for the study *of* China. I do not have the time to analyze the impact of Cold War politics on the growth of area studies and China studies within the American academy—a growth that ACLS began to nurture starting in the late 1920s—but the relationship is indisputable. Early funding for our enterprise came not from the government but from a philanthropic elite that saw itself as guardians of American internationalism and that saw the university as *the* natural partner in developing expertise on foreign civilizations. By 1955, the federal government had begun to develop support for international scholarship and exchange, although at first those new mechanisms—the Fulbright program, most prominently—were modeled on practices of what we might call the “philanthropic academic” complex. While the total amount of public and private support helped assure the continuity and even modest growth of Chinese studies, it did not provide for the flourishing of more than a relatively small community of dedicated scholars. Fifty years ago, China studies was set in a well-defined, but also clearly circumscribed, academic space. In 1955, China studies was “made in the US” because no one could go to China, and it was “made for the US” because the American university was the indisputably dominant academic site and largest consumer of the scholarly output.

This situation is substantially inverted in 2005. We see significant, even dramatic, changes in three factors: 1) the tenor of the US-China relationship; 2) the structure of support for American higher education; and 3) the growing wealth and stability of Chinese universities.

In 2005, China and the US are economically entwined, albeit in a form more suggestive of a pathological co-dependence, with America dependent on Chinese credit and China dependent on the American consumer. “Made in China” have probably displaced “new and improved” as the three most common words in American retailing. In this new relationship, China plays at least two roles in the American imagination. It is a nascent America, as the People’s Republic becomes the Consumer’s Republic. It is also America’s greatest economic and military competitor. As connections have expanded, interest in China has, too. A report last month on ABC News noted, for example, that The College Board has begun to offer advanced placement tests in Mandarin, and that “[s]chool districts from Philadelphia to Portland, Ore., are adding Mandarin programs,” with instruction in your neighboring Brookline school district beginning as early as kindergarten.²

2. Nancy Weiner, “As China Grows, More U.S. Schools Teach Mandarin,” *ABC World News Tonight*, 21 Nov. 2005.

This interest ought to be the pre-condition for a new efflorescence of China studies and an increase in the funding to support it. Where will that come from? Any increases for the study of China, I expect, will most likely be shared throughout the academy and not just targeted at centers such as this one and other traditional sites for deep learning about the whole of Chinese civilization. Any increase will also have to be substantial if we are to return to earlier levels of support. While it is hard to come by reliable statistics on field-specific funding, I thought it would be interesting to take a quick look at core samples of fellowships and grants provided by the American Council of Learned Societies to China studies scholars. In the 2004-2005 competition, ACLS awarded \$224,000 to our colleagues for fellowship or conference support, with only about half of that specifically earmarked for the field, and the rest awarded in open competitions. The comparable figure, in constant dollars, from 20 years ago (when Rod MacFarquhar received a grant for language study) was \$868,000, all of which was allocated in programs reserved for China studies alone.

This decrease reflects many factors particular to ACLS, such as the decommissioning of the ACLS-Social Science Research Council joint area studies committees, the United States Information Agency's reorientation of China funding, and others. But local considerations aside, this decline also reflects some national trends we must bear in mind. Public investment in higher education is declining. For the past 20 years the total national spending for higher education has barely kept pace with gross domestic product, and that is only because private dollars have filled the gap. At state levels it has plummeted (although this year may see a promising reversal of that trend). Foundation support for the humanities is an increasingly smaller proportion of overall donations. Perhaps more important are changes in institutional culture. With some notable exceptions—the Henry Luce Foundation being one—many foundations no longer see underwriting higher education and scholarship as the natural object of their work. Universities may receive funding as an element of social action programming, but they are clearly a dependent variable in many foundation plans. In the increasingly competitive funding environment, many foundations have placed a premium on projects with “policy-relevance,” a term that is too often restricted exclusively to the study of contemporary events or phenomena liable to quantitative measures. Disheartening changes in the culture and politics of federal funding have been taking place as well, as long established exchange and research programs have found themselves increasingly buffeted by the winds of politicization.

These trends in philanthropic culture make it less likely that available funds will provide venture capital for institutional and intellectual innovation. I suspect that in the early years of the ACLS-SSRC Joint Committees, almost every dollar spent was one that could not have been acquired elsewhere, and so it really leveraged change. As funding streams increased, more money was necessarily devoted to maintaining a system rather than sparking innovation. And as the aggregate amount of money available declines going forward, system-maintaining funds will likely get the first claim. That is why it is so important to have the few foundations like Luce that continue to think hard about how to leverage innovation in ways that are consistent with academic practice and not distractions.

But what of China? In 2005 and beyond, it is hard to imagine that those who want to study China will not need and want to spend a lot of time there. In that sense, the future of China studies is as much “made in China” as “made in the US.” And now that so much is made in

China and sold abroad, China's aspirations have skyrocketed. We have all heard how China plans to establish 100 new universities over the next 10 years, with at least one Chinese institution to rank among the world's top 10. "China has already pulled off one of the most remarkable expansions of education in modern times, increasing the number of undergraduates and people who hold doctoral degrees fivefold in 10 years," reports *The New York Times*.³ We are, it seems, long past the era so effectively described by David Zweig in *Internationalizing China*, when Chinese scholars hoped to study abroad not just for professional development but as the only way they might acquire consumer durables such as a refrigerator. Chinese universities are now conscious of their privileged access to research sites and data, and can be very selective in their international affiliations. But the Chinese academic scene is not uniformly cheerful. As *The New York Times* notes:

China is focusing on science and technology, areas that reflect the country's development needs but also reflects the preferences of an authoritarian system that restricts speech. The liberal arts often involve critical thinking about politics, economics and history, and China's government ... has placed relatively little emphasis on achieving international status in those subjects.⁴

I would suggest that these forces help set an agenda for China studies in the next 50 years. Three points in my view ought to be at the top of that list. First, we must be vigilant in preserving the holistic core of Chinese studies, both institutionally and in terms of intellectual substance as well. One of the strengths of China studies as it has evolved in the West is the fact that it was interdisciplinary before the rest of the university discovered that that was something it wanted to be. To a certain extent this is a legacy of 19th-century philology and its immodest claims, and it is even more likely the product of necessity—constrained resources—rather than desire, but it has had the undeniably salutary effect of creating a larger scholarly cross-departmental community than our counterparts in European studies generally enjoy. This is all to the good, and a good reason to keep the pre- and post-modernists talking to each other in the same room.

Second, and at the same time, we must be open to approaches that take a more regional and comparative perspective. If the importance of sustained and extensive study of Chinese language, culture, and society remains beyond dispute, so, too, is the value of creating structures within which questions can also be asked thematically and across national boundaries. Let us keep in mind M.H. Abrams' wise reminder that "The endemic disease of analytical thinking is hardening of the categories."⁵ Without abandoning the centrality of deep cultural and historical knowledge, can the traditional area studies paradigm be transcended in more nimble and flexible frameworks that are multilateral, multi-polar, and not necessarily permanent? Can we be area-based without being area-bound?

And third, we must nurture partnerships, collaboration, and the development of genuinely transnational scholarly communities with the China that we can now—unlike the case 50 years

3. Howard W. French, "China Luring Foreign Scholars to Make its Universities Great," *The New York Times* 28 Oct. 2005, late ed.: A1.

4. French, "China Luring Foreign Scholars": A8.

5. Cited by Eugene Eoyang in *The Transparent Eye: Reflections on Translation, Chinese Literature and Comparative Poetics* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1993), xiv.

ago—engage with in every way. Needless to say, without China we have little to study, and the increasing imbalance on the economic scale may lead one to ask what American scholarship has to offer the Chinese. One possible answer was provided by the scientist Xu Tian, who divides his time between Yale and Fudan Universities and was profiled by *The New York Times* last October. The Chinese “are putting more into education than perhaps any other country,” Xu observed, “but what we have not taught people yet is to value ideas, and to value the life of the scholar.” Whether or not our society upholds those values is, regrettably, quite arguable, but Xu made a second comment on the subject that suggests what we might yet bring to the table: China needs a “new revolution” that will help it to overcome millennia of a tradition “that has always avoided exploring different ways of thinking and exploring, and has emphasized staying within the system,” which “teaches people to follow the rules, not to be an innovator.”⁶ Innovation is something the US does know something about.

So, do I foresee massive influxes of new funding that will match the levels of support that helped to launch the careers of many in this room? Not exactly. The good news, however, is that some new sources of support in the foundation world over the past decade or two have materialized, and much of those resources have already been leveraged. One of the most important funding streams, of course, has already originated outside the US, in Taiwan. Institutional enhancement grants and individual fellowships provided by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange have seeded programs and advanced careers, and through a recently initiated program of conference support administered by ACLS will bring scholars together with an eye toward encouraging the development of new perspectives in the study of Chinese culture. Over the course of many years the Luce Foundation has also provided crucial seed funding for faculty positions and substantial grants for collaborative research with scholars in China, and it has just embarked on a new program to strengthen East Asian archeology and early history, administered in part—I am thrilled to report—by ACLS. And the massive influx of support offered by the Freeman Foundation’s recent initiative in support of undergraduate education in Asian studies has funded curricular innovations and new positions that have embedded China scholars within the ranks of the tenure-track faculty at colleges and universities across the country. Similarly, whatever the current political uncertainties may portend, government support for Title VI China and Asian studies centers has clearly succeeded in establishing them as permanent fixtures on the institutional landscape, with funding augmented by both campus budget allocations and private philanthropy.

It is certainly worth noting that the relationship between the Chinese and American university systems is one of the more remarkable pairings in the global history of higher education. Indeed, I would argue that from the 19th-century missionary colleges until today the US-Chinese educational partnership has proven more durable and influential than China’s relationship with any other nation—even those culturally (Japan) and ideologically (USSR) closer. The impressive numbers of Chinese students in American graduate programs (many of whom are now faculty members) and of American exchange programs in China, for example, provide just two among many indices of its magnitude. That partnership was decisively severed in the 1950s, but the fact that it was restored with such relative ease and enthusiasm underlines my point. It seems to me that the future health of China studies correlates closely with the health of that international, and we can hope, transnational academic partnership. There is a new generation of

6. French, “A Lifetime in Recovery from the Cultural Revolution,” *The New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2005, late ed.: A4.

research in which the conceptualization and the conversation are coming from and going in multiple directions.

Let me offer you, finally, a tale of two letters that, together, seem to mark a certain transformation in building a trans-Pacific community of academic inquiry. The first, from 1972, is preserved, along with our articles of incorporation and US Congressional Charter, in the “Important Papers” file at the ACLS offices. It is one sheet of neatly ruled paper. The letter responds to an invitation from the then ACLS President Frederick Burkhardt to the Chinese Academy of Sciences to send a delegation to an international conference on Taoism convened by ACLS and colleague organizations. The responding letter from China is signed by the “Red Guard Team in [the] Academy of Sciences.” Its penmanship is graceful, but its tone is fierce:

July 15, 1972

Dear Mr. Burkheart [*sic*];

We have received the two letters you sent us on behalf of the American Council of Learned Societies. We the Chinese people are very dubious about your purpose and intention of your sending the two letters to us. Religions the very product of remaining feudal system had long been listed among those objects which should be struggled and destroyed as early as at a time when China was liberated by Chairman Mao. At present the People’s Republic of China has only Mao Tsetung Thought. All other sects are big poisonous weeds and they are not allowed to exist under the revolutionary line of the proletariat dictatorship. Whether or not you are thinking again to poison the revolutionary Chinese people by the help of religion and to revive remaining feudal ideology among the Chinese people with the invitation of our representatives to attend the International Taoism Conference. The aggressive ambitions and schemes of the United States can never be concealed before the devil-finding mirror of Mao Tsetung thought. Here we would solemnly warn you that if you dare to play any schemes and tricks, we will certainly smash your dog head.

Long Live down with U.S. imperialism!

Long Live Mao Tsetung Thought!

Red Guard Team in Academy of Sciences, Peking

I ask you to consider this letter alongside a second message I received a little over a year ago. This is an email message with the subject line “Come from the chinese letter” and addressed to “Honorific lady pauline yu.” The author explains his distinctive prose by noting “I do not understand English, the draft write with English translation software, not does the consciousness deny to see understand?” It continues (in much edited form):

I the one who am the faith of a party member of Communist Party of China and socialisms. I know that you do an academic exchanges work of China and the United States from the network.

The United States is a democratic nation, China is the socialism nation, this is the social system totally different two nations. So I think: The United States and China carries on the social system that one of the contents of the academic exchanges should understand the other party mutually, . . .

The democratic institution and the centralization systems must comprehend each other, peaceful coexistence, . . .

Now I send to you the article introduces the Chinese socialism of draft (in the enclosure), I also would like to understand the democratic institution of the United States very much at the same time. We can do not like the social system of the other party mutually, but understand to always have the advantage mutually of!

Please deliver an E- mail for me.

Ask toward you good!

Liu's wave

What has changed? China is still socialist, or at least some who represent it in correspondence are, and they aren't chary of employing words like "faith" from the previously poisonous lexicon of religion. The literary quality of that correspondence has declined, or has certainly been lost in translation, even as its cordiality has increased. Also notably increased is belief in the possibility of intellectual partnership. The Red Guard Team was convinced that the conference invitation concealed a dangerous ploy. Mr. Liu is convinced that ACLS's reputation in academic exchange assures that we will see mutual advantage in his invitation. It took more than three decades to effect this shift. Is this change a small example of the progress "global Asia," "global America," and the "global globe" can make? Will the 21st century see a new transnational scholarship able to comprehend simultaneously the global commonalities and the heterogeneity of local particularities? I can only conclude by invoking Mao Zedong's colleague, Zhou Enlai, who, when asked by Henry Kissinger for his opinion of the French Revolution, replied, "It's too soon to tell." It may indeed be too soon to tell, but we can hope. And we will surely have a better idea 50 years from now, when the Fairbank Center celebrates its centennial.