

## CHAPTER 4

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### A HALF CENTURY OF ENGAGEMENT

#### The Study of China and the Role of the China Scholar Community<sup>1</sup>

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One of the chief beneficiaries of—and contributors to—the era of U.S. engagement with China is the community of American China scholars. The resurgence of China scholarship that set the stage for engagement rose from the ashes of the McCarthy period, when sinologists were often met with suspicion and hostility. The careers of such China experts as Owen Lattimore, John Service, and John Paton Davies were abruptly curtailed, and a generation of China expertise was sacrificed at the altar of the who-lost-China debate.<sup>2</sup> In an echo of the past, engagement with China has once again become something of a dirty word. In the United States, the growing bipartisan consensus that China has become stronger, more assertive, and more authoritarian has dampened earlier enthusiasm for sustained interaction. Chinese students are coming under increasing suspicion of stealing secrets to strengthen the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the expense of U.S. interests.<sup>3</sup> Visas are now being used as a political tool, not only in China (where this has always been the case) but also in the United States.<sup>4</sup> The FBI is making the rounds to warn U.S. citizens and professionals about the insidious ways in which China is infiltrating the United States in order to weaken American competitiveness.<sup>5</sup> And some China hands have become jaundiced in their views of Chinese motivations and intentions.

China's illiberal behavior has made disillusion easier. Opportunities and access that had been taken for granted by American China scholars during the period of engagement have disappeared under Xi Jinping. The frigid political climate that has accompanied Xi's rise to power and his tightening of party

and coercive control has challenged our ability to understand what is actually happening in China. China's rise, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis and the tarnishing of the liberal international economic order, has driven nationalist sentiment in China. This has, in turn, been reinforced by the PRC's muscular behavior in the South China Sea and, more recently, in Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> Beijing's actions in Xinjiang have been deeply disturbing.<sup>7</sup> And China's forays into soft power—mobilizing its own citizens abroad through a more open united front (whole of society) strategy and seeking to generate a positive international image to compete with the West—have only complicated engagement and increased suspicion on all sides.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more problematic narratives that has arisen amid the debate over what to do about China is that the China studies community somehow got China wrong. This narrative often assumes that the community has been of one voice in advocating engagement as a way of encouraging China to move in the direction of political liberalization and eventually democratization.<sup>9</sup> A version of this story has been articulated at the highest levels of the U.S. government:

Look, the President has done his level best to correct 40 years of appeasement of China. . . . For an awful long time there was this theory that if we just were nice to China that their system would change and the Chinese Communist Party would begin to behave in ways that were consistent with the things that were of a benefit to America.<sup>10</sup>

Not only does this play into one of the most deeply held suspicions of leftist Chinese authorities—that engagement has been little more than a Trojan horse, the perennial Chinese preoccupation with peaceful evolution (*heping yanbian*) going back to John Foster Dulles—but it is also empirically inaccurate and historically untrue, as other chapters in this volume similarly demonstrate.<sup>11</sup> Very few serious scholars of China were motivated by this objective, and the majority did not see it as a likely outcome.<sup>12</sup> Rather, most serious China scholars are animated by a different overarching goal: a thirst for knowledge contributing to deeper understanding that would be mutually beneficial for our two peoples, regardless of what form of government our respective countries might take.

Indeed, stepping back from the fray, the current state of bilateral relations actually supports and reinforces the case for engagement. The present downturn is precisely what happens when the infrastructure for engagement is drawn down and hollowed out within an environment of runaway nationalism (in China), intense politicization (on both sides), and administrative incompetence (predominantly within the Trump administration). The correct premise is not that engagement makes problems within the bilateral relationship go away; rather, it is that this vital relationship is immensely challenging at even

the very best of times, and engagement is what keeps it from spiraling out of control. When engagement is dropped from the equation, nothing can prevent a race to the bottom like the one in which we find ourselves today.

In my view, the bilateral political relationship between our two countries is best served by depoliticizing the actual nodes of engagement—in this case, those that allow meaningful scholarship to take place. Regardless of whether their relations are friendly or adversarial, neither side benefits from curtailing knowledge about the other. Closing off channels of scholarship and mutual understanding can lead to misperceptions and potentially destabilizing political outcomes, the dangers of which far outweigh the perceived benefits of micromanaging these nodes of contact in the shortsighted belief that one side will gain a tactical advantage over the other.

To underscore the mutual and iterative benefits of engagement, this chapter documents what we have learned (and how we learned it) in the period from 1971 to 2020. I begin with a history of the accumulation of knowledge going back to the 1960s and conclude with five profoundly important advances in our understanding made possible by engagement, as well as two areas that have suffered during this same period. I begin with the baseline of the state of the field in the 1960s, when Pekingology and the reading of the figurative and literal tea leaves were among the few intellectual resources available to members of the China-watching community and policy makers who relied on them.

### **How Did We Know What We Knew Back Then?**

To ascertain what we have learned as a field from the era of engagement, we must look at the period immediately before engagement as a benchmark. The figures of that generation—among them Lucian Pye, A. Doak Barnett, John King Fairbank, and Robert Scalapino—stood out in at least two ways. First, they differed from their predecessors in that their contributions were not bound by the all-consuming urge to change China.<sup>13</sup> Second, they were responsible for training the generation that came of age at the eve of the engagement era, some of whom are contributors to this volume. The question that drives this section is: *How in the world did these individuals learn so much about China when they had so little real contact with it?*

Part of the answer is that they were themselves products of China.<sup>14</sup> Many of these scholars, journalists, and government employees came from missionary, business, and other families that had lived in China for decades or had considerable professional experience there, especially in the military during the Second World War. Additionally, these individuals and many of their students were exceptional people whose deep knowledge of China was matched by their

intelligence, drive, and ability to withstand discomfort as well as accept often significant risks to their own careers and livelihoods. They were often fiercely entrepreneurial and bureaucratically savvy. Perhaps the most important reason we knew what we knew back then (and know what we know now) has to do with the sheer intelligence, diligence, and enthusiasm these individuals had to create from scratch a critical mass of scholars committed to the study of China. They were helped in their effort by great American philanthropies, several of which had long histories in China, such as the Rockefeller and Luce foundations, and, later on, Ford.

Second, greater China continued to exist as a key node not simply for language study but as a rich environment to understand and appreciate Chinese cultural norms—from *guanxi* to bureaucratic practices to the everyday exercise of power—that could provide essential, if indirect, understandings of the kind of interactions that sometimes lay just under the layer of Maoist conformity and the engineering of the new socialist man. Richard Solomon relied to no small degree on surveys conducted in Taiwan for his classic study of Chinese political culture.<sup>15</sup> And, of course, intelligence on the PRC was diligently collected by Taiwanese government agencies and foreign analysts in Hong Kong (the location of the largest American consulate in the world at the time). Sometimes, a lucky scholar simply stumbled upon a gold mine. While studying in Taiwan in the mid-1960s, a quick-thinking Richard Baum suggested that he help a young assistant librarian in what was known as the “dirty books room” of the Institute of International Relations translate a stack of soiled, water-damaged documents marked *top secret*. These turned out to be important Communist Party directives bookending the just-completed Socialist Education Movement. Moreover, Baum’s careful reading of these documents uncovered a split at the very top of the Chinese leadership that would subsequently lead to the purge of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping and the instigation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Eventually, Baum teamed up with a young Frederick Teiwes (then a doctoral candidate and now one of the luminaries of archival-based scholarship on Chinese politics) to further analyze these documents. Their collaboration resulted in a Berkeley monograph, *Ssu-Ch’ing: The Socialist Education Movement of 1962–1966*, which to this day remains an essential piece of scholarship on Mao-era Chinese politics.<sup>16</sup>

Third, sources like the CIA-funded Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), which monitored broadcast media in the PRC, became publicly available and provided an important thread for keeping abreast of developments behind the bamboo curtain. FBIS continued to be an invaluable resource for understanding the twists and turns in China’s official media at the national and local levels well into the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Another source, the U.S. Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS), published reports on a broader sweep of Chinese society and made use of an even larger number of sources. The *Selections*

from the *Chinese Mainland Press* (SCMP) and *Selections from Chinese Mainland Magazines* (SCMM) provided translations of Cultural Revolution materials, including Red Guard documents and local newspapers, as well as other media. In addition, the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong allowed access to its Daily Appearance Tracking Data set of all Chinese leaders (in the form of a card file kept in a vault).<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most important single resource on contemporary China, one that signaled the shift from the pre-engagement period and has informed China scholarship from the beginning of the engagement period onward, is the Universities Service Centre (USC) in Hong Kong. The USC served as ground zero for much of the research on China through the 1970s and the collection, now at a different venue, continues to serve as a staging ground for scholarship to this very day.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the USC or to imagine what the state of China scholarship would be today in its absence. The USC brought together several generations of some of the titans of the field, then developing the knowledge and expertise that would eventually shape the study of China. These included Michel Oksenberg, Ezra Vogel, Steven Goldstein, Andrew Walder, Mike Lampton, Susan Shirk, Martin Whyte, and Kenneth Lieberthal. In the words of Mike Lampton, “it was an intergenerational hothouse,” which was “a wonderful experience for a young person.”

The idea for the USC was conceived in the late 1950s by Lucian Pye and Bill Marvel, both of whom recognized that universities were extremely nervous about sponsoring the study of contemporary China (as distinct from Chinese history, language, and literature) in the wake of McCarthyism and the purge of China expertise throughout the U.S. government. In addition, there was a growing rivalry between the two main China centers at the time, one on the East Coast (at Harvard, under John King Fairbank) and the other on the West Coast (at the University of Washington under George Taylor). Their competition grew out of disagreements between Fairbank and Taylor dating from their work together at the Office of War Information during the Second World War. Even then, the U.S. China studies field was undeniably polarized. Hong Kong, although not exactly neutral ground—as the mid- to late 1960s would dramatically illustrate—was nonetheless somewhat more hospitable than the United States (although the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies were supporting nascent programs at the time, while the National Defense Education Act and the Ford Foundation offered four-year awards for language and graduate study—underscoring that Hong Kong was certainly less systematically biased than Taiwan). The USC was, if you will, a safe space for the study of Chinese politics.

Another place where one could undertake the careful reading of official pronouncements trickling out of China was the Union Research Institute (URI), which shared its English- and Chinese-language press clippings with the USC.<sup>20</sup>

These were worth their weight in gold. As Simon Leys<sup>21</sup>, who served as the Belgian cultural attaché in Beijing in 1972, wrote:

Sometimes, in all innocence, the woman at the market stall where you buy your pound of apples or the cobbler who has repaired your shoes will absent-mindedly give you your goods wrapped in a taboo old [local] newspaper; needless to say, the dirty and crumpled sheets are then smoothed over lovingly by China-watchers, who pass them around with trembling hands, deeply excited, and after being multi-photocopied they end up in the black market in Hong Kong, where various research institutes outbid themselves to get them.<sup>22</sup>

This task was eventually taken over by the USC as the URI began to decline in the mid-1960s and, combined with the USC's growing collection of books and periodicals, led the USC to become the one-stop shop for archived data sources on contemporary China.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, a small army of interviewees shuttled between Western academics eager to learn from them. The interviewers had to be careful about the veracity of such sources, since the twenty Hong Kong dollars per hour the refugees received for their interviews were not exactly an incentive to stick to the facts. Two of the most entrepreneurial sources—but also among the most knowledgeable—were the “Yangs” (fondly recalled as “Xiao Yang” and “Lao Yang”). The Yangs were important informants for “the vast majority of scholarly books, articles, and PhD dissertations written about China during the Cultural Revolution decade, 1966–1976,” recounted Richard Baum, with tongue only half in cheek. In fact, people like Sai-cheung Yeung (“Lao Yang”) were instrumental in providing data necessary for the work of such scholars as Michel Oksenberg, Ronald Montaperto, and David Lampton (who even credited him in his monograph, *Paths to Power*).<sup>24</sup> These informants became research assistants as well, helping scholars like Ezra Vogel, Michel Oksenberg, Susan Shirk, B. Michael Frolic, Steven Goldstein, Jerome Cohen, Suzanne Pepper, John Dolfen, and a host of others in their work.

Four factors contributed to the unique environment of the USC. The first was the configuration of disciplines represented by these young scholars: political science, economics, anthropology, sociology, journalism, history, and law, as well as some of the humanities. The USC provided the opportunity for these scholars to analyze the complex organizations and developments within China as truly interdisciplinary area specialists. Second, the USC was international in the makeup of individual scholars among its ranks and was therefore able to push back against tendencies toward what Ezra Vogel called “American chauvinism” in the study of China. Third, unlike the rigid pecking-order system in most university departments, the USC created an environment where no hierarchy existed—an extremely liberating experience for young China scholars at

the time. Finally, during its initial stages, the USC was unparalleled in its ability to attract prime sources of information on the otherwise closed book that was mainland China. Chief among them were the refugees who fled the PRC, beginning in earnest in 1962, and who (reluctantly at first) provided personal accounts of local politics and everyday life in Maoist China.<sup>25</sup>

It was at the USC, for example, that Doak Barnett interviewed the former cadres who formed the basis of his classic *Cadres, Bureaucracy, and Political Power in Communist China*.<sup>26</sup> Barnett's volume is invaluable even today in providing a structural roadmap for the party-state system in China, bringing in such diverse but essential elements as inside versus outside cadres, party life, indoctrination, and guest houses and canteens, alongside such bread-and-butter concepts as staffing, formal supervision, organization and appointments, and document flows. Nonetheless, Vogel is unflinching in describing the challenges that this community faced in their role as scholars of contemporary China:

It is now hard to recapture the scale of our ignorance about mainland China when the USC opened its doors, and the naïve excitement as we listened with bated breath to the latest traveler or refugee from China or to government officials from various countries who had access to sources of information that we did not. We did not even know China's simple organizational charts. We were just beginning to understand the operation of political campaigns, the structure of communes, neighborhoods, *danwei* [organizational units] and work points.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the foundational work done by Barnett, Vogel, and others, this period witnessed a shift from, to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, “not knowing what we don't know” to getting a handle on “knowing what we don't know.” This was the state of the field at the dawn of the era of engagement.

### **The Opening to China and the Schism of the Vietnam War**

Despite the careful scholarship being undertaken in Taiwan and Hong Kong at a time when Americans were unable to visit the PRC and in the growing number of U.S. China centers entering the fray (Columbia, Michigan, Stanford, and Berkeley, for instance), the actual, on-the-ground impressions of the earliest Western scholars in China betrayed the limits of what could be gleaned from the outside looking in. Those lucky few who were allowed into China, like the first delegation of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1971, were often presented with a stage-managed experience—including a secretly planned flat tire somewhere in the countryside after which local peasants would magically appear with a spare and change the tire—that only further confirmed their bias as “friends of China.” These highly choreographed tours

were “always superbly organized, anything that might be unpredictable, unexpected, spontaneous, or improvised [was] ruthlessly eliminated.”<sup>28</sup> Edward Friedman, skeptical by nature and armed with the advice of social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong to “learn to see the invisible,” was nonetheless unknowingly drawn into researching Chinese Potemkin villages (in this case, Wugong village in Raoyang County), convinced that he had “beaten the system.” Subsequently humbled when he checked his notes against the clippings at URI (“a critical reading of the URI files was more revealing than the prior two months in China”), his response was to redouble his efforts at finding the truths hidden in the “invisible” on subsequent trips.<sup>29</sup> This was in 1978.

Early forays into China often left researchers on more extreme ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand were those who became caught up in the propaganda of the regime, allowing the seductive images from such officially produced magazines as *China Reconstructs* and *China Pictorial* to color what they were being presented in situ in China. On the other were those who felt a sense of betrayal at being so easily (and, in retrospect, obviously) duped by the Chinese authorities. Jonathan Mirsky went “from Mao fan to counter-revolutionary in 48 hours” when, the day after he visited a model Chinese work unit in Guangdong, he came upon the same unit the next morning on an unaccompanied walk. He was invited in for *bai kaishui* (literally “white hot water,” which substituted for tea when the host was too poor to afford tea) by a worker whose living conditions and attitude toward the state completely contradicted the rosy, carefully orchestrated experience of the workers he had met the day before. The cold, even hostile reception Mirsky received from his Chinese handlers in response to his transgression further removed the scales from his eyes, confirmed four years later when one of his guides told him, “we wanted to put rings in your noses, and you helped us put them there.”<sup>30</sup>

In short, officially arranged visits to the PRC were not particularly propitious for careful, disinterested analyses of the country, and the different and contradictory experiences of those early visitors also served to open up profound cleavages and divisions among students of Asia that threatened to upend the China studies community.

By 1968, the Vietnam War was polarizing American society. Among scholars of Asia, such polarization led to a schism in which those on the left often allowed their political biases to shape their approaches to China. This led them not only to ask questions and pursue topics that might not have otherwise been undertaken—Mark Selden’s classic *The Yen-an Way in Revolutionary China* is the apogee of this line of research<sup>31</sup>—but also spurred many to adopt an attitude toward China lacking the minimum academic standard of skepticism. One fiery revolutionary is reputed to have tried to swim to a North Vietnamese vessel anchored in Hong Kong’s harbor as a show of his support, but he never quite got there.<sup>32</sup>



For some, the rosy view of late Maoism engendered prescriptive possibilities for the social upheavals then taking place in the United States.<sup>33</sup> The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) was one manifestation of this preoccupation, and it led to a split within the growing field of Asia scholarship. The result was a growing number of pitched scholarly and even ideological battles on the one hand and a multidimensional richness in Asia scholarship on the other, the likes of which continues to the present day in the journal *Critical Asian Studies*.<sup>34</sup>

This growing cleavage reached its nadir in 1971 when former Kennedy administration national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, then the president of the Ford Foundation, which was a major funder of USC, was invited to lunch at the USC in Hong Kong.

When Bundy was introduced to the assembled scholars in the center's lunchroom, a CCAS spokesman . . . rose to his feet to read a prepared statement [detailing Bundy's alleged war crimes]. . . . Thereupon he and the other CCAS members silently and in unison turned over their lunch plates. Displayed on each overturned dish was the famous photo of a naked young Vietnamese girl who had been napalmed by US forces.<sup>35</sup>

The incident created a schism within the China community that took decades to heal. Apparently Bundy never mentioned the incident to his colleagues at Ford, and the Centre's funding from the foundation continued for a number of years.

Less known were important differences within CCAS in members' motivations and approaches to scholarship. While the more revolutionary strand felt that the American system itself was immoral, another group had come to oppose the war for different reasons. This reformist constituency of the CCAS was made up of people who had served in the U.S. military (Mike Lampton and Thomas Fingar; Terry Lautz had actually been deployed to Vietnam) or had joined the Peace Corps (Halsey Beemer). They believed the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake and the result of profound ignorance about Asia. They saw their scholarship as a mission to educate decision makers in order to avoid such monumental errors in the future.

As China moved away from the Cultural Revolution, attitudes about it changed across the spectrum. Overseas leftists felt betrayed by the geopolitical (and subsequently *capitalist*) path China was taking, while the establishment view shifted 180 degrees from negative to positive (as it would again, in the opposite direction, following Tiananmen in 1989<sup>36</sup>) as images broadcast before and after Nixon's February 1972 visit to China saturated the media.<sup>37</sup> But even while public opinion about China in the United States was shifting, opportunities for China watchers to glean any meaningful insight into unofficial China remained limited and challenging, notwithstanding academic delegations

under the auspices of the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China.

One record of China at the time, fiercely negative, nonetheless transcended some of the more knee-jerk (positive or negative) reactions of other contemporary works and remains a dark but compelling commentary on late Maoist China. Simon Leys's *Chinese Shadows* underscored the limits of what could be garnered from everyday experiences—"in the end, one learns most from the repetition of certain silences, the recurrence of a certain reticence about several points."<sup>38</sup> As Leys was at pains to admit, he could only guess at what lay behind the gray conformity of the local cadres that controlled the universe for ordinary Chinese (and foreigners living inside the walled compounds of Beijing's diplomatic ghettos). More measured, but only slightly less critical, were the accounts that emerged in the thaw after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, which led to American journalists taking up posts in Beijing for the first time since 1949. Roger Garside's *Coming Alive: China After Mao* and Fox Butterfield's *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* are good examples of how journalists experienced China in those early years following normalization.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, Butterfield's failure to protect his sources foreshadowed the challenges of conducting field research within an extremely politicized setting and the moral imperative of protecting informants.

### The Era of Access, 1979–2008

In 2002, Andrew Walder looked back on the strides made by China studies since 1979 and identified areas where China scholarship had made advances so significant that it no longer resembled that of the earlier era described in the previous section. The first of these had to do with the newfound access to information brought on by a remarkable expansion of domestic research opportunities. As restrictions on publications were relaxed in the PRC, scholars "eventually found themselves buried in an avalanche of new newspapers and periodicals, books, and published regulations, and the trickle of more valuable 'internal' documents and books also grew to a steady stream," overloading the docket of scholars and East Asia librarians.<sup>40</sup>

Second, research opportunities available to American scholars within China grew apace. Individual scholars were gradually permitted to undertake language study and conduct fieldwork in China.<sup>41</sup> Initially, these opportunities were heavily regulated by the Chinese authorities and far more structured than they would be a decade or so hence.

The Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, sponsored jointly by the National Academy of Sciences, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies, began exchanges in the fall of 1979, initially sending only language students.

Shortly thereafter, the committee sought to place researchers with universities and academies of social science; within two years, scholars were sent to China for field research, and there followed a long struggle to gain research access to archives and villages.

These new opportunities were not without incident. The case of anthropologist Steven Mosher represented both what was possible as well as what was spectacularly ill-advised. The Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the Social Science Research Council's Joint Committee on Contemporary China had lobbied hard for the first contingent of American researchers in China to include an anthropologist conducting research in a Chinese village. That anthropologist was Stanford PhD candidate Mosher. Mosher's work in rural Guangdong shifted from dispassionate scholarship to activist research as he witnessed firsthand the draconian enforcement of the one-child policy. Subsequently charged with being a spy and expelled from the PRC, his actions led to a moratorium on rural field research for several years. Stanford University's collective decision not to award Mosher a PhD was based on charges of academic dishonesty and exposing his sources to retaliation and elicited countercharges that Stanford was folding in the face of Chinese pressure (a theme that has returned in present-day discourse). The episode, taken as a whole, underscored a fundamental tension that would emerge within the China studies field. One camp sought to objectively describe and analyze what was going on in China (and would be roundly criticized by Mosher and others for discounting human rights abuses). The other embraced a kind of activist scholarship that was reminiscent of the CCAS but now firmly opposed the Chinese line instead of accepting it at face value.<sup>42</sup>

Yet as access widened, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the quality of life endured by the overwhelming majority of Chinese, which often bordered on the horrific. According to one colleague, who is anything but an anti-China activist:

The biggest thing I learned from studying the history of the party and from talking to people in China is how cruel the party can be to its own people. Although this leads to a lot of grumbling and dissatisfaction and even fear among party cadres, most also feel that they don't have any alternatives to the party. They don't see an alternative either in China's political system or in their own career trajectories. This has led to stability in the party's rule. However, this also means that the moment that people within the party can see an alternative, the continuation of CCP rule will be very fragile.<sup>43</sup>

How to process all of this without falling into the traps of apologia, cultural relativism, or critical analysis is a fine line that China scholars walk to this day.

Nonetheless, by the end of the 1980s, in-country scholarship was becoming the norm. During this time, the field grew more functionally and spatially

specialized, as well as focused on a wider range of issue areas (agriculture, health care, education, etc.). Certain individuals ventured beyond Beijing in their selection of primary field sites and contributed greatly to our understanding of China by undertaking arguably more arduous research in the provinces. There, challenges like unfamiliarity with foreigners and nonadherence to educational policies aimed at foreign researchers were tempered by curiosity and local conditions that allowed for central directives to be overlooked or even quietly challenged.

While this was occurring, risk-acceptant and forward-thinking universities all over China were seeking to establish programs with their foreign counterparts, sponsoring language and other study programs, joint research, and university-to-university exchanges. Some of these operated under the aegis of state-to-state relationships, such as that between Ohio and Hubei province. These programs expanded the universe of personal relationships that foreign scholars, up to that point, had been singularly ill-equipped to establish and nurture themselves. This was one of the primary results of the Luce Foundation's U.S.-China Cooperative Research Program, which funded forty-nine joint projects during the late 1980s and into the 1990s. These informal norms, in turn, created professional relationships that blossomed into friendships—perhaps the most important single element providing those on the outside a window through which to understand the functioning of the Chinese state and its shaping of Chinese society. Often the most profound eureka moments were, in retrospect, the most straightforward and prosaic:

A rather obvious and saccharine but nonetheless important take-away would be that when one gets to interact and talk directly with Chinese people, be they party officials or noodle-shop owners or sheep-herders, it is fairly easy to find common ground even about political issues that seem to divide the US and China. In some ways, the best versions of American and Chinese culture are complementary: we respect and enjoy different aspects of each other.<sup>44</sup>

But, as Harry Harding notes, this was also a time of sober reassessment of our most basic assumptions about China. In no small part, this was a corrective to much of the euphoria that followed in the wake of the 1972 Nixon visit, as well as lingering misconceptions of Chinese reality that took official narratives of equality, unity, and meaningful political participation at their word. Harding provides a particularly egregious example:

In the mid-1970s, Joel Fort, a celebrity psychiatrist from San Francisco, could win ardent applause from a student audience at Stanford by proclaiming that there was no rape or premarital sex in China and that was so because Chinese youth, unlike their American counterparts, sublimated their libidinal energies toward service to the nation.<sup>45</sup>

Part of this reassessment emerged from questioning earlier conclusions about China that were, on their face, ridiculous. But much had to do with the fact that the scholars emerging in the 1980s were spending more time in China than had their predecessors. They coexisted with the journalists and businesspeople whose perspectives broke sharply with the prevailing wisdom. Extended exposure to Chinese realities contributed to frustration over restrictions on interacting with Chinese friends and colleagues and recognition of the inefficiencies and immovability of the vast bureaucracy upon which so much depended.<sup>46</sup> These were a fact of life for China's citizens, and they soon became part of foreign scholars' experiences in China and informed their research.

And then came 1989. The crackdown and subsequent shift in the U.S. narrative—from being overly credulous (pandas and the Great Wall) to painting all of China with a single, negative brush (butchers of Beijing)—changed some of the parameters for access. Surprisingly, though, it did not close China off to research entirely. In fact, the period bookended by Tiananmen and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis witnessed some of the most penetrating new research to be done in China: “jointly planned and administered sample surveys or field research projects, in which Chinese and foreign researchers jointly analyze and publish the resulting data . . . [on] political participation and political attitudes, rural household incomes, health and nutrition, mate choice and marriage patterns, social stratification and mobility, and other subjects.”<sup>47</sup> These, too, were not without incident. When the first round of data to be gleaned from the Four-County Survey was embargoed in China, the U.S. administrators of the study argued to the Chinese that they had approved the questions. The Chinese authorities responded with “yes, but we didn't approve the answers.”<sup>48</sup>

Another feature of this era, alluded to earlier, was the dramatic influx of Chinese students coming to study in American universities. Chinese politics—long the domain of white men and a few white women—was expanded quantitatively and qualitatively not simply through collaboration with Chinese scholars in China but by students from the PRC in the United States, some of whom stayed on and built their careers in U.S. colleges, universities, and think tanks, a phenomenon described in detail by Robert Daly in his contribution to this volume. Walder writes of these students:

From the first few graduate students to arrive in the [late 1970s and] early 1980s, the PRC graduate student has become an important fixture in social science departments across these three fields [political science, economics, and sociology]. This is an immense and seemingly inexhaustible national pool of talent; its impact on such fields as physics and chemistry is already legendary in this country. The effect has not been so dramatic in the social sciences, but the impact is highly magnified in the study of contemporary China.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, this flood of new talent required us to update our conception of the area specialist. As Walder writes, many of these students eschewed that label and have acted as a force for mainstreaming the study of China within their respective social science disciplines:

From our area studies perspective, we would have expected such students to excel at intensive documentary research of the kind we commonly practiced ourselves, enjoying a massive linguistic advantage. Instead, students from China gravitated quickly to models that predominated in the core of the disciplines: theoretically engaged empirical research, often highly mathematical and statistical in orientation. . . . This single-minded dedication to disciplinary canons has served these students well in the competition for elite faculty positions during the past 15 years. Near the end of the 1980s it was becoming apparent that students from China were out-competing students trained in the traditional “area studies” approach in the job market. In the 1990s, the most highly coveted jobs in Political Science—Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Duke, and Michigan—have been filled by PhDs who came originally from China. In sociology, students from the PRC have been offered similar entry-level jobs at Harvard, Chicago, Cornell, Duke, Minnesota, Michigan, and California-Irvine.<sup>50</sup>

As this implies, one of the greatest changes in the field has been a shift in the grounding of the study of China from a tribalist outlier in the social science disciplines to a subfield that is rightly seen as a peer to the more traditional subfields in economics, sociology, and especially political science.<sup>51</sup> When asked point blank what it is that these Chinese scholars bring to the China field that is different from their non-Chinese counterparts—besides native language skills, contextualized knowledge, and excellent professional and social networks—the best answer I can give is: *nothing*. That is to say, when one looks at the work by Yasheng Huang, Cheng Li, or Wang Yuhua, to name just three, there is nothing Chinese about it; rather, it is the sheer superiority of their scholarship and its power to move the subfield of Chinese politics forward that matter.

This is not simply a result of the changing demographics of the China field; it is also a result of ongoing changes in China itself. The 1980s provided an unprecedented sociopolitical experiment in state transformation. This began with the politics of early reform (changing ownership patterns in agriculture and rural industry) and extended through the first significant challenges faced by China’s reformers (industrial reform and early privatization). At the same time, how Chinese society responded to and absorbed these changes, and through them asserted individual and group agency, altered Chinese state behavior in ways earlier scholarship was unable to capture.

The heady 1990s and early 2000s saw a further retreat by the state from interfering with the work of foreign scholars. The type of engagement that

was possible at this time was extraordinary compared to what had been possible in the not-so-recent past as well as the immediate future. American China scholars were able to make themselves sufficiently invisible to become participant-observers of factory floors,<sup>52</sup> enforcement against illegal market activity,<sup>53</sup> legal proceedings,<sup>54</sup> informal employment markets for laid-off workers,<sup>55</sup> and retail outlets in state-owned department stores<sup>56</sup>; one even worked undercover as a karaoke hostess.<sup>57</sup> These undercover approaches were enhanced by increasingly sophisticated survey techniques made possible by technological improvements in data collection and analysis as well as the cumulative formal and informal institutionalization of access made possible by years of collaboration.

This golden era is encapsulated by an exchange I had with some local officials during an alcohol-soaked lunch in the Sino–North Korean border town of Dandong in the fall of 2004. I was traveling with a family whose patriarch was a provincial-level official on a working vacation. We had rented a boat to take us to the North Korean shore and visited the one-and-a-half bridges that spanned the Yalu River, the older of which had been bombed by U.S. planes during the Korean War. The expanse from the middle of the river to the North Korean shore was completely destroyed, earning it the moniker of the “Yalu River Broken Bridge” (*Yalu Jiang Duan Qiao*). During lunch, one of the local cadres at our table staggered over to me and mumbled in my ear, reeking of liquor.

“What country are you from?”

*Oh, God, here it comes*, I thought. “The United States.”

“Do you see those two bridges?”

I looked down from our perch in the rooftop restaurant. “Yes,” I ventured cautiously.

“Do you know why one of those bridges is only half standing?” he wheezed.

I nodded, dreading what was coming next.

“You Americans blew up that bridge. You Americans. Americans . . .”

I waited for the other shoe to drop.

“I *respect* you Americans!”

*What?* I looked up in shock.

He said it again; there was no mistaking it, *wo peifu nimen Meiguo ren!* He continued, “You Americans flew in and blew up the Korean side of the bridge and left the Chinese side standing, all with 1950s technology. You Americans!” And he flashed the thumbs up sign.

Overtaken by the moment and clearly off-balance, I raised my glass and shouted, “*Meidizhuyi wansui!*” (“Long live American imperialism!”)

Before I could realize the magnitude of my faux pas, everyone at our table—my cadre friend, his family members, and all the local cadres who had

joined us—immediately stood up, raised their glasses, and roared, “Long live American imperialism!”

In that moment, all differences melted away, the multilayered insider irony of what we were saying was clearly understood by all, and the subversive absurdity of the moment was equally relished around the table.

Sadly, this was not to last.

### **The Downturn, 2008–2020**

Beginning around 2006, access to people, publications, and data in China began to slowly diminish. This was partly due to the color revolutions unfolding elsewhere in the world. Suspicion was deepened by leftist dissatisfaction with developments in China deemed antithetical to Marxism.<sup>58</sup> The Chinese state was becoming increasingly anxious about its ability to maintain control in an era of rapidly evolving communication facilitated by smart phones and the Internet. Although this process had started a few years before, everything seemed to converge in 2008. As China prepared for the Beijing Olympics in September of that year, two events provided the parameters for what would be the increasingly mixed environment for China studies in the decade after 2008. The Tibetan protests in March became a lightning rod for anti-Chinese activism worldwide, nationalistic reaction among the Chinese inside and outside China, and Beijing’s perennial suspicion of foreign influence. Two months later, in May, and aided by the fortuitous presence of an NPR crew working on a project in Chengdu, the world was able to follow the devastation wrought by the Sichuan earthquake in real time—including the state’s attempts to simultaneously control the narrative and scramble to help its victims.<sup>59</sup> Genuine sympathy for the latter and positive reporting on the mobilization of Chinese society to assist in the recovery were contrasted with stories on the shoddy construction of schools and other infrastructure that led to the unnecessary deaths of scores of schoolchildren in Dujiangyan and outlying counties.<sup>60</sup>

The period since 2008 has witnessed a general restriction of scholarly access and a closing-off of critical nodes of contact between foreign researchers and the Chinese state, epitomized by the promulgation of the infamous “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere” (commonly referred to as “Document 9”) and accelerated by the rise of Xi Jinping.<sup>61</sup> China has not returned to the pre-1979 period, let alone the pre-engagement era, but it has become increasingly difficult to undertake the type of research that had been done in the recent past. This has reinforced the tendency within the social science disciplines and the academic job market to force China scholars to perform increasingly niche research and rely on a more arm’s-length approach than had previously been the norm. Although some of these scholars still make



somewhat intrepid, risk-embracing forays into studying the Chinese body politic, these are quickly becoming the exception. A few scholars have responded to this narrowing of access to China by adjusting their research approach to be more comparative in scope. For instance, David Lampton and two colleagues have done an eight-nation study of Chinese rail building, Maria Repnikova has taken a deep dive to look at how Chinese soft power unfolds in Africa, and I have extended my own field sites into Cambodia to document China's foreign assistance to the Khmer Rouge.<sup>62</sup>

For the most part, we are seeing fewer and fewer opportunities to conduct field interviews, access data sources we used to take for granted, and invest in networks of sources and associates that had been nurtured for decades. Even more alarmingly, the generation of China scholars currently being minted is confronted with truncated fieldwork opportunities and limitation of access. The inevitably from-a-distance nature of what research is still possible reinforces the tone as well as the content of the discourse that emerges from it. Our knowledge base risks becoming increasingly brittle, bereft of the nuance and subtleties central to our understanding of the Chinese state. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that we are witnessing a historical bookend for the engagement era in the China studies field as well as in the political and economic spheres.

### **What Have We Learned in the Era of Engagement?**

So, what have we learned? The short answer is both more than we could have possibly imagined and less than we would like to think. It is humbling to consider the extent of what we knew at the dawn of engagement and how much of what we have subsequently learned is largely a fleshing out of those initial insights. Articulated in the 1960s and early 1970s, these understandings continue to inform China scholarship into the present, despite trends within the academy to supersede them and evolutionary changes in China that coexist alongside or build upon these earlier-documented forms of statecraft.

### **From Structure to Process: Examining the Makeup of the Party-State**

A. Doak Barnett's masterful mapping of the Chinese government and party bureaucracy remains a Rosetta stone for those who study China's political institutions. Going through its index, substituting *pinyin* for Wade-Giles, the reader is struck by the number of terms and phrases that continue to be the vocabulary of Chinese cadres themselves as well as those who study them.

Yet such a description, while representing an extraordinary step forward in our knowledge of the Chinese state structure, tells us less about how it functions in the everyday governance of the country.

Extending the work of Barnett are Lieberthal and Oksenberg in their path-breaking book, *Policy Making in China*, and Lampton's earlier work on policy making and implementation.<sup>63</sup> Collectively referred to as "fragmented authoritarianism," the framework that emerged from their scholarship moved Barnett's descriptive findings and demonstrated how cadres and other bureaucrats in China contributed to a policy making process characterized by bargaining and negotiated outcomes, in which the eventual contours of a given policy reflect the interests of the implementation agents at the expense of the policy making bodies' original intentions.

The work of Lieberthal and Oksenberg in particular demonstrated the new-found availability of data sources that the denizens of the USC could only dream about.<sup>64</sup> *Policy Making in China* was itself the continuation of a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Energy that allowed an unprecedented degree of access at all levels of the political system to the two scholars and was made possible by the steadily maturing strands of engagement between the United States and China.<sup>65</sup>

A generation later, this framework remained the standard lens through which to understand policy making and implementation in China, but was updated to include the early signs of (subsequently reversed) political liberalization, in which nonstate actors as well as those within the state that did not necessarily have a political mandate to encroach upon a given policy area nonetheless did, altering not only the outcomes of implementation but also the actual shape and scope of the policy itself. Initially drawn from studies of China's hydropower policy, these updates were extended to other policy areas, including international trade, health care and tobacco regulation, and civil-military relations.<sup>66</sup> The ability to undertake the shoe-leather field research necessary to uncover this evolution in policy making was possible because by the mid-2000s, one could undertake off-the-grid research through freedom of movement within China and informal networks of individuals embedded within the policy sphere. The chief constraints were time, research funds, the individual researcher's threshold for discomfort, and accumulated connections and trust earned with informants.

More recent work on other aspects of China's policy making, particularly on coordinating mechanisms like leading groups (*lingdao xiaozu*) and government-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) relations, have developed Barnett's work even further.<sup>67</sup> As a result, we have a much clearer understanding of how the wheels on the Chinese Leviathan actually move and can make sense of why and how the various constituent parts of the Chinese state combine to make or undermine a given policy area.

Increased access has also let us look more closely at the CCP itself. Descriptive accounts like those of John Burns have been extended and deepened over

the past four decades. Susan Shirk's groundbreaking work on the early reform era applied principal-agent theory to the relationship between the CCP and the government.<sup>68</sup> Dan Lynch's research on the impact of marketization on thought work showed that the CCP was not simply a collection of "sinister keepers of the ideological flame."<sup>69</sup> Charlotte Lee has extended this to the party schools themselves, demonstrating how cadre training has literally been internationalized and underscoring the important point that CCP officials serve crucial civil service functions.<sup>70</sup> David Shambaugh has documented how the party has undertaken substantial efforts to remake itself in a domestic and global environment of change.<sup>71</sup> Victor Shih and Cheng Li have dusted off the focus on factional politics to show that the CCP is anything but a monolith.<sup>72</sup> And Christian Sorace has reinvigorated the pioneering work of Franz Schurmann to illustrate that ideology and organization continue to remain alive and well—and in tension with one another.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the promotion incentives facing party cadres, research spearheaded by Yasheng Huang in the 1990s, have become a facet of much of the current work explaining outcomes that could only be hinted at by the earlier scholarship of Barnett.<sup>74</sup>

There has likewise been an extraordinarily deep dive into Chinese military studies. Historical approaches weave the military history of the CCP into current practices. Other studies look at the evolution of the People's Liberation Army over time, from training for Maoist "people's war," to becoming commercialized in the 1980s and 1990s, to developing into the world-class military it is today.<sup>75</sup> There is a great deal of technical work that is important to comprehending the empirics of military development, procurement, and deployment. Our understanding of the military's relations with the CCP has been incalculably helped by the early work of Ellis Joffe, Michael Swaine, and others.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that the Chinese Leninist state operates differently from that of the Soviet Union provides important clues as to the fault lines and pressure points that underlie governance, control, and the management of propaganda and communications in the PRC. This has important comparative and policy implications. To cite one dramatic example, the debacle of de-Baathification during the second Gulf War could have been avoided, and history might have been very different, if the lessons learned by China scholars of how one-party states function—that party membership is not simply the domain of the true believers and keepers of the ideological flame but also a meritocratic ladder for the best and the brightest to ascend to the top of their fields—had been applied by policy makers in rebuilding Iraq.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Richness of State-Society Relations**

Perhaps the most dramatic expansion of our knowledge about China in the past quarter century derives from studies of state-society relations.

As Elizabeth Perry cogently argues, the first generation of China scholarship used the USSR as the major comparison case to China, the second generation drew inordinately from American conceptual approaches, and the third generation was “too drawn to European exemplars.” That is, the paradigm by which to leverage our understanding of where the state ended and society began was that of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European concept of civil society. This approach received a particular boost in the wake of the student protests that preceded the 1989 crackdown. Perry herself questioned the utility of such an approach because “the economic trends characteristic of modern Europe never really took hold” in China.<sup>78</sup>

Rather than overreliance on the civil society concept, much of the work on state-society relations in China that began to emerge in the 1990s embraced a more inductive approach. One of the prominent themes in personal accounts of China watchers’ first direct exposure to China is the relentless degree to which China’s own citizens were shaped by the politics that ruled over them. The ubiquity of the work unit (*danwei*) and household registration (*hukou*) systems from the Mao era through the 1980s made it difficult to determine where the state ended and society began. The protests in 1989 led to soul-searching on how this type of mobilization could have existed outside of approved state channels. Trying to force onto the study of Chinese politics the lessons learned from the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union ended up at a dead end. But as the *danwei* system itself became increasingly relaxed and the itinerant Chinese workforce grew to 150 million and beyond, traditional ways of conceptualizing social organization could not capture what was happening in China.

The fact that individual Chinese citizens were no longer tied to their work units led to a vast range of studies on organization outside of the state. Dorothy Solinger’s work on migrant workers was timely and groundbreaking.<sup>79</sup> Jean Oi’s research on rural industry coincided with a revolution in government-workplace relations after which the relationship between state and society could no longer be captured by the traditional role of the state.<sup>80</sup> Scott Kennedy’s investigation of lobbying groups and the publications by Jessica Teets and Timothy Hildebrandt on nongovernmental organizations shed light on an extremely complex network of individuals alternatively being coopted by and pushing back against the state.<sup>81</sup> Scholarship by Anita Chan, Ching Kwan Lee, Mary Gallagher, and Diana Fu has revealed the factory floor as a venue for transformative change, drawing on Walder’s classic study of workplace politics.<sup>82</sup> Kellee Tsai’s trailblazing work on unofficial banking and finance would have been impossible without her granular field research and would have left all sorts of unknowns in place as far as our understanding of China’s ubiquitous, yet often invisible, informal finance ecosystem is concerned.<sup>83</sup> Studies by Barry Naughton and Edward Steinfeld, among many others, have opened wide windows into the

inner workings of state-owned enterprises and the ways in which they have evolved.<sup>84</sup> They were able to do so because of the remarkable access they had to the factories they studied. More recent work on local people's congresses, village elections, mayor's mailboxes, and petitions and letters have expanded the use of survey techniques, Internet scraping, and dogged local field and archival research to tell us much about how the state works with its citizens.<sup>85</sup> And work on local enforcement in China—too many to cite here—shows us the sometimes unbridgeable gulf between how things are perceived to occur in the capital and how they actually play out throughout the continent-sized country.

Case studies of counties like Zouping<sup>86</sup> or rich longitudinal studies like those undertaken by Ralph Thaxton<sup>87</sup> have allowed other scholars to understand the political microclimates of individual locales in China and to use local eccentricities to test their own abilities to generalize as well as contextualize the subjects of their study. Localized but broader studies by scholars like Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have provided key links between these microsites and more generalizable conclusions.<sup>88</sup>

### The Heterogeneity of China

During his first meeting with Mao, Richard Nixon told the Chairman that “you have changed the world,” to which Mao responded, “I have only been able to change a few places in the vicinity of Peking.”<sup>89</sup> While a graduate student at Michigan, a professor there told me of an infamous (and likely deliberately provocative) comment he attributed to Michel Oksenberg that “to understand Chinese politics, you don't have to look outside of Beijing.” Whether that was ever the case, it certainly is not today. The four decades of engagement have demonstrated this beyond any doubt, and Oksenberg himself embodied this change in thinking and in access when he became the “honorary mayor of Zouping” by fostering intensive research on local governance there.<sup>90</sup>

Ezra Vogel's classic *Canton Under Communism* and the work of Chan, Madsen, and Unger on the various iterations of *Chen Village* were early indications there was much to learn outside of Beijing.<sup>91</sup> However, it is no accident that these studies relied substantially on émigrés to Hong Kong, most of whom were from Guangdong. Beginning in the 1980s, scholars were able to travel to a growing list of cities that were no longer off-limits and witness for themselves the ways in which coastal and interior provinces differed from one another. The city of Wuhan, for example, became a major field site for Mike Lampton and Dorothy Solinger. Minority politics became increasingly variegated as scholars gained access to Yunnan as well as Tibet, Xinjiang, and other autonomous regions. Researchers there were able to gain insights into the different models of local statecraft that governed these areas and the diverse experiences of various

minority groups.<sup>92</sup> It is impossible to understand why Beijing implements the policies it does—and why these policies are often so misguided or realized in the *breach*—without understanding Beijing *and* these outlying areas. Historical and cultural attributes, as well as experiences over contested border inter- and intrastate areas, also raised questions about modes of state penetration as well as reactions to them.

When policies linking enormous areas of China required cooperation among two or more political units (be they provinces, prefectures, or counties), a focus on Beijing provided the observer with little, if any, insight or predictive power over outcomes. What was taken as gospel in Beijing was not the case in Heilongjiang or Guizhou. Sometimes this was idiosyncratic, sometimes due to a set of measurable indicators—but regardless, it was a reality that required our understanding and attention.<sup>93</sup> Early studies on the Three Gorges Dam project, extending into current work on infrastructure like high-speed rail,<sup>94</sup> can only be undertaken with this preoccupation in mind. Indeed, the very question about what Chinese state capacity really is can only be examined by thinking of the Chinese body politic as a whole.

This is even more relevant given the current state of globalization. As China embarks on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is not simply the national-level state-owned enterprises that are on the front lines. The vast majority of foreign direct investment is being done by subnational corporations and the local governments in which they are embedded, lifting the veil and suggesting the fault lines in this little-understood but globally significant policy turn.<sup>95</sup>

Even studies of nationalism benefit from looking at variation in different parts of China. After the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, it was safe to say that all Chinese were up in arms about the event, but the ways in which protests against the United States unfolded in Beijing, Shenyang, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Chengdu told us as much about local politics as they did about national policies.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, what people often miss about the significance of the 1989 protests is that they occurred in *every major city* in China. This was a national phenomenon, not simply one that took place in front of the cameras in Tiananmen Square. Moreover, each local government handled the crisis differently—Shanghai, Chengdu, Changchun, and Chongqing being prime examples—which had important local and national ramifications.<sup>97</sup>

### The Cyclical Importance of History

It is a cliché to talk about the resonance of history to the ways in which Chinese look at their place in the world. But in addition to the nationalistic uses of Chinese history to explain Chinese backwardness or suspicion of the outside world, history remains instructive.

For example, by going back in time, we can see how patterns of elation, enthusiasm, and subsequent disappointment actually go back as far as contact between the United States and China itself. John Pomfret's *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom* describes this cycle particularly well.<sup>98</sup> It underscores the fact that what we observe in the relationship at any point in history has already occurred, often many times, and thus decreases the sense of crisis we might be fueling at that moment. It also lays bare the important fact that the U.S.-China relationship is one that has endured over time. It may be, as Harding has argued, "a fragile relationship," but it is not as fragile as we might think, and history is replete with lessons on how to improve upon it.<sup>99</sup>

Jeremy Wallace has also raised an important point: engagement, well into its fourth decade, allows us to revisit some of the earlier works on China in order to mine their conclusions as secondary data from which to demonstrate change and continuity.<sup>100</sup> This gives the study of China a longitudinal dimension that contains a multitude of lessons, insights, and policy recommendations.

History is useful at a somewhat "meta" level as well. For many, the things that initially attracted them to China, but got lost along the way as China evolved over this period, have come back with a vengeance. For example, the ways in which China's leaders shaped Marxism to suit Chinese conditions (quite apart from the empty sloganeering of, say, "socialism with Chinese characteristics") or how Chinese society was mobilized for political campaigns during the Mao era lost their bearings during the late 1990s and early 2000s. They are, however, making a comeback and have been captured by a new generation of young scholars (and reenergized some older ones) eager to dust off these concepts and engage them in fascinating new ways.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, these can be deployed in comparisons with governance structures, social movements, and the power of ideas to help us understand them in non-China contexts.<sup>102</sup>

### **... And Two Things We Have Unlearned About China**

Despite the extraordinary trove of knowledge and scholarship made possible over these forty years of engagement, there are at least two areas that have been somewhat undermined by the richness of data and institutionalized incentives within the scholarly profession: "Pekingology" and our ability to understand and analyze China as a singular unit of analysis.

#### Pekingology

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the sheer amount of information that is now available on China, one of the analytical tools that has been dulled during this

time period is the ability to read between the lines in those areas for which there is little information—the political “black boxes,” such as succession, national security decision making, and deeper intraparty deliberations. A handful of China watchers (Joseph Fewsmith, Alice Lyman Miller, and Cheng Li, for example) serve as invaluable resources into making sense of contemporary Chinese court politics. But the type of approach that is required is one that is often supplanted by the more available and less frustratingly muddy data that can be used to follow other scholarly lines of inquiry, while neglecting this more difficult parsing of elite politics. It is perhaps ironic, then, that as China continues to close itself off to direct access to individuals and documents for foreign researchers, these Pekingological tools might make a comeback—necessitating a shift in scholarship that the current incentives in academia do not favor.<sup>103</sup>

### “China,” Unmodified

Finally, when one looks back at the scholarship of the 1980s—Harding, Lieberthal, Oksenberg, Lampton, and, more recently, David Shambaugh<sup>104</sup>—especially among those scholars with one foot in (or aspirations to join) the policy world, one is struck by the extraordinary skills they demonstrated in aggregating their vast amounts of knowledge to describe and analyze China as a whole. Of course, they were able to go into detail and focus on particular aspects of China as the situation saw fit, but they were also capable of corraling all they knew into one big picture. Many scholars today are at a disadvantage in following this model. Part of the problem is that these earlier scholars made it look *easy*, thereby masking their own talents in accomplishing this difficult task. Another part of the problem is that we are now aware of so many more moving parts that such an aggregation poses a greater challenge than it did in, say, 1985.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, it is an important skill to master, both in terms of where our own specific areas of knowledge fit in, but also as a vehicle for communicating as public intellectuals outside the rarified halls of China scholarship. One way to think about this is that everybody in China is bilingual: they speak *Putonghua* and they speak their local *fangyan*. Those of us in the China field need to aspire to do the same with regard to our knowledge of China.

\* \* \*

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. I have argued that under the era of engagement, we have learned a tremendous amount about China. The political constraints that are emerging in both China and the United States threaten to curtail this important mission. There is a tendency to divide people with strong opinions about China into two camps: the “panda huggers” (or the “red team”)



and the “dragon slayers” (or the “blue team”). These are biases that have been mercifully exiled to the periphery of the China studies field but are increasingly being mainstreamed as labels to differentiate one group from the other. Commitment to engagement is increasingly seen as a characteristic weakness of the panda huggers. This is a dangerous distinction, not simply because it marginalizes a group of people whose collective body of work has expanded the universe of knowledge about China in ways that would have been unimaginable at the time of Nixon’s 1972 visit. It is also dangerous because, regardless of whether one sees China as a threat, a nuanced understanding of the People’s Republic is absolutely necessary in the pursuit of policies that are beneficial to the United States. In *The Godfather Part II*, Michael Corleone warns us, “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.” The China hawks may well wish to consider this—and, in doing so, inevitably secure a better appreciation for China’s complexity, complicating the good and softening the bad.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank David M. (Mike) Lampton, Terry Lautz, Anne Thurston, Stan Rosen, Madelyn Ross, and Ezra Vogel for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter and Huang Yufan for his editorial assistance. I want to thank all the participants at the November 2018 Wingspread conference (Five Decades of U.S. Engagement with China: What Have We Learned?) for sharing their experiences and insights accumulated over the past half century. All remaining errors are mine.
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25. Vogel, "The First Forty Years," 1–7.
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