On Campus

East Asian Studies at Columbia: The Early Years

By
Wm. Theodore de Bary '41CC, '53GSAS, '94HON
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Not least among the things that got Columbia off to an early start in Chinese studies was the letter sent in 1901 by Dean Lung to President Seth Low, who was about to become mayor of New York that year.

Some have supposed that the “Dean” in this name was an academic title, a thought perhaps stemming from the widespread belief in the West that learning in China had been the preserve, if not almost a monopoly, of an edu cated Confucian elite. Actually, however, “Dean” was just an ordinary Chinese surname (usually rendered “Ding” or “Ting”), and it belonged to the manservant of a Columbia Trustee—a personal valet whose relatively humble status did not preclude his testifying to the deep respect for learning that Confucianism had engendered in most Chinese.

Whatever the “fund for Chinese learning” amounted to at Columbia in those days, it could not have been much. The first contribution to Chinese studies had been made only the year before by an alumnus and Trustee William Barclay Parsons ’1879C ’82E in the form of a gift of Chinese books to the library. That same year the eminent scholar in Indo-Iranian studies, Abraham Valentine Williams Jackson, urged President Low to set up instruction in Chinese studies, but it was clearly the initiative of Dean Lung, and the deep respect held for him by the Trustee General Horace Walpole Carpentier, that led the latter to contribute the substantial sum (for those days) of $226,000 to set up an endowment for Chinese studies. The endowment was established in memory of Dean Lung, as a tribute to this “Chinese person” who was not just his valet but also a friend, admired for his personal qualities and love of learning.

Prompted in part by this action, the noted Columbia anthropologist Franz Boas made a powerful plea in 1902 for Columbia and the American Museum of Natural History together to establish “a great Oriental School” that would “imbue the public with a greater respect for the achievements of Chinese civilization.” In “A Plea for a Great Oriental School,” Boas, referring to the collections being acquired for the museum by Berthold Laufer, said, “We hope by means of these collections to bring out the complexity of Chinese culture, the high degree of technical development achieved by the people, the love of art which pervades their whole life, and the strong social ties that bind the people together. . . .”

Then, expressing a view often repeated later in the century, he added, “Under present conditions a more extended knowledge of East Asiatic cultures is a matter of great national importance . . . and in order to deal intelligently with the problems arising in this area we require a better knowledge of the people and of the countries with which we are dealing. . . . It was hoped that the establishment of these collections [at the Museum] would give an impetus for the universities of our city, particularly Columbia University, to take up the establishment of an East Asian Department. This hope has been fulfilled at an unexpectedly early date. Through the gift of General Carpentier a Department of Chinese has been established at Columbia University. . . .”

Early scholars

Even with this endowment, however, the new department was slow getting started. Chinese studies of any kind hardly existed in America, and almost no qualified scholars were available. Instead Columbia turned to distinguished professors from Europe. Herbert Allen Giles from Cambridge University inaugurated the program with a series of lectures in 1902. He was followed by Friedrich Hirth, a German authority on ancient China, who occupied the Dean Lung chair until 1917. Thereafter a tenuous program was carried on by the short-term incumbency of scholars, mostly from a China missionary background, and by inviting professors who represented the leading sinological studies in Europe, including Paul Pelliot of Paris (1926), William E. Soothill of Oxford (1928), and Jan J.L. Duyvendak of Leiden, who visited six times between 1929 and 1946.

Meanwhile, other developments were taking place that would have a profound effect on Chinese-American relations. After the fiasco of the antiforeign Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the Manchu government of China adopted more progressive policies emphasizing cooperation with the West and Japan, including an expanded program of study abroad for promising young scholars, some of them supported by funds from the indemnity payable to the United States as part of the Boxer peace settlement. Many came to study at Columbia and later became major figures in Chinese government, diplomacy, education, and academic life.

Outstanding among these was Hu Shih, a student of John Dewey, who became a leader of the literary renaissance in Republican China; Chinese Ambassador to the United States; president of China's premier university, Beijing University; and subsequently president of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. Following in Hu's footsteps was Fung Yu-lan, another student of Dewey, who became the leading figure in Chinese philosophy down to 1949. V.K. Wellington Koo '08C '12GSAS '17HON contributed greatly to the development of a modern Chinese foreign service, later becoming Chinese ambassador to the United States, foreign minister, acting prime minister of the Republic of China, and vice president of the International Court of Justice, the Hague; T.F. Tsiang, a graduate of the Department of Public Law and Government, served as China's permanent representative at the United Nations. Also at the UN was another of the many students of John Dewey, P.C. Chang '24TC, who was to play a leading part in the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Chi Ch'ao-ting in economics became a major figure in the development of the social sciences in Republican China.

These are just a few members of a Columbia-educated generation who served importantly in the development of Chinese American cultural and diplomatic relations during a period when the serious study of China at Columbia was just getting under way.

In 1902, concurrent with the founding of the chair in Chinese studies, the Manchu government, as part of its new opening to the West, made a substantial gift of books to the fledgling Chinese collection, a set of the encyclopedic collection, *Tu-shu chi-ch'eng*, which included copies of much of the Chinese historical and literary legacy—a monument to the finest of classical scholarship that had been patronized by the Manchu regime, handsomely printed in an old-style, fine rice-paper edition. The acquisition of additional library materials went on through the twenties and thirties, with the support of the American Council of Learned Societies and the

Rockefeller Foundation, to the point where Columbia's Chinese collection became a major American resource along with the collections at the Library of Congress and Harvard. Needless to say, no serious study of China could be carried on without such a collection, the existence of which itself attracted both scholars and students. The aforementioned Fung Yu-lan, who became China's leading philosophical historian and chair of the Department of Philosophy at Beijing University, later recalled fondly his early days "on the banks of the mighty Hudson," when he worked his way through graduate study with Dewey as a library attendant of this new Chinese collection (then housed in Low Library).

The collection proved also to be a magnet for other East Asian collections—Japanese and Korean—that naturally found their place alongside the Chinese. In 1929, through the generosity of the Japanese Imperial Household and Baron Iwasaki (of the Mitsubishi interests), a Japanese collection was brought to the University and put in the care of Ryusaku Tsunoda '62HON, who too had come as a student of Dewey. While curator of the collection, Tsunoda sidelined as a lecturer in Japanese cultural history, and, without ever being named as a formal member of the tenured faculty, became the father of many later American scholars of great distinction. (One of these, Donald Keene '42C '50GSAS, has contributed an article on the subject to this issue of "Living Legacies"—see below.) Soon after Tsunoda arrived in 1934, Sir George Sansom, a noted British diplomat and scholar, began his lectures at Columbia on Japanese history.

L. Carrington Goodrich

By this time the department had been renamed the Department of Chinese and Japanese and came under the leadership of L. Carrington Goodrich '34GSAS '62HON, who was to provide the stability and continuity of direction for the program (hitherto lacking) in the thirties, forties, and fifties. Goodrich, from a New England missionary family, had grown up in China before attending Williams College, and then served in the developmental work of the Rockefeller-supported China Medical Board until he decided in 1926 to pursue an academic career in the new program at Columbia. After making his way, through a succession of teachers and visiting professors, to the Ph.D. in 1934, he led in the assembling both of a growing China collection and a gradually expanded staff, including Chi-chen Wang in Chinese literature, Hugh Borton '32TC in modern Japanese history, and Cyrus Peake '32GSAS in modern

Chinese history. Both Borton and Peake had studied in Columbia's history department and served in the government during World War II.

Nevertheless, before and during World War II, the department remained small, the offerings in languages and history were limited, and typically classes were offered to only a handful of students—in the late thirties usually no more than half a dozen. The present writer started elementary Chinese under Goodrich as an undergraduate in 1938. I recall that the second-year class included myself; a classmate who did not continue with Chinese but later became a distinguished microbiologist; a couple of would-be China missionaries; Paul Robeson '23L, who had become enamored of the Chinese Communist cause and wanted to sing militant Chinese songs; and a German woman, who turned out to be a spy for Hitler, using her studies at Columbia as a cover for espionage activities. As one can imagine, the work of the class was quite a mix, responding to such diverse interests, backgrounds, and levels; though serious enough, it was anything but the systematic, highly focused, intensive study that came to characterize postwar language study. But few in numbers though they were, students were highly motivated, very bright,or both, and so things somehow worked out.

Wang taught classical language and literature. As a liberated child of the Revolution and alienated from much of traditional culture, he tended to be somewhat cynical and less than inspiring as a lecturer. His forte was as a translator of modern literature, and though allergic to all talk of grammar, he would spend long hours in virtually tutorial sessions with those determined enough to benefit from his fine command of both Chinese and English.

As a scholar, Goodrich was a down-to-earth, careful historian with broad interests in material culture, cultural exchanges with Europe, and in both early and later periods of Chinese history. But—perhaps on the rebound from his culturally conflicted early life as a "missionary kid" in a China riven by revolution and civil war—he largely disqualified himself from engagement with the religious and political issues that so roiled the modern scene. He was given to meticulous scholarship on concrete, factual matters but also had a gift for clear, straightforward, unadorned prose that served him well in his best-known work: A Short History of the Chinese People (1943). The most famous Chinese scholar of the day, the aforementioned Hu Shih, called this book "the best history of China ever published in any European language."

A kindly, generous, and courtly person, Goodrich was respected as the even-handed and conscientious administrator of the program in Chinese studies and became recognized at home and abroad as one of the founding fathers of Chinese studies in America. He was early elected president of the American Oriental Society, the Association of Asian Studies, and—for a long time—was head of the New York Oriental Club.

A major adjunct and accessory to Goodrich's career as scholar, teacher, and administrator was his wife of 65 years, Anne S. Goodrich, who managed to combine roles as caring mother of a large family, a warm-hearted hostess in their Riverdale home to Goodrich's students and colleagues, and a scholar in her own right, with published accounts of Chinese Taoist temples and monasteries in the Beijing area.

A flourishing program

Thus far is the history, in very brief, of the early years of Chinese studies at Columbia, to be supplemented on the Japanese side by Keene's article on Tsunoda. The next stage in this development was the major expansion of the program in the fifties and sixties—a considerable enlargement in the staff, courses, and students of the department, as well as of companion programs in the professional schools. Much of this was attendant upon the development in the fifties of the College's general education program in Oriental (now Asian) studies, which established a much broader undergraduate base for Asian studies. The language program too was greatly strengthened by support from the National Defense Education Act, and, on the graduate level, new programs benefited substantially from Ford Foundation grants. This is all another story, but it should be noted that in the course of these developments came the addition of Korean studies—another pioneering venture that warranted a change from the name of the Department of Chinese and Japanese to East Asian Languages and Cultures and which gave a significant new dimension to the work of the East Asian Institute.

Before concluding this brief account of the early phase in East Asian studies, I want to mention two episodes that provide a striking counterpoint to the foregoing—which might otherwise appear to have followed a smooth and steady pattern of unproblematical growth.

The first comes to mind in connection with the upcoming 250th anniversary of Columbia, which recalls the bicentennial celebration of 1954. On that occasion I was asked to mount a special convocation relating the bicentennial theme—“Man’s Right to Knowledge and the Free Use Thereof”—to East Asia. For this I invited Hu Shih and Daisetz T. Suzuki as representatives of the Chinese and Japanese traditions respectively. By now Hu needs no further introduction to readers of this essay, but something should be said about Suzuki.

Earlier, Tsunoda and I had joined Professor Horace Friess ’19C ’26GSAS, chair of the religion department, in inviting Suzuki to give a series of special lectures at Columbia on Zen Buddhism. By this time (1954), Suzuki was already something of a celebrity, an early and well-known cult figure for the Beats at Columbia. Tsunoda (less well-known outside of Columbia and even to local Beats such as Allen Ginsberg ’48C and Jack Kerouac ’44C) had for some years been teaching a wide range of courses on Japanese history, religion, and literature. As one who took a broad approach to Japanese thought and especially to Buddhism, he had reservations about Suzuki’s special promotion of Zen at the expense of other aspects of Buddhism and Japanese thought overall. Nevertheless, Tsunoda joined in the invitation to Suzuki, and the series went well. In fact, Suzuki’s Columbia lectures came to be regarded as a significant launching pad for the academic study of Zen.

Now to the bicentennial convocation. As a young reformer in Republican China, Hu had been identified with the New Culture and popular literature movements, generally antitraditional and often anti-Confucian. But Hu’s American mentor, John Dewey, who lectured to enthusiastic audiences in China during the late teens, was by no means unappreciative of Confucianism, and by the time of this convocation Hu himself had mellowed greatly on the subject. To no one’s surprise on this occasion, he spoke appreciatively of knowledge and learning in the Confucian tradition, and, against the background of the current Chinese Communist repression of intellectuals, eloquently endorsed the bicentennial theme of “Man’s Right to Knowledge.” Contrary to a widespread misinterpretation of Confucianism as authoritarian and thus a long-term cultural factor conducive to the intellectual repressions of the Mao regime, Hu acclaimed Confucius and later Confucians as defenders of intellectual freedom and independent scholarly inquiry.

This was not the first time that Hu and Suzuki had squared off on scholarly issues, and the latter gave no quarter here to Hu. He challenged the very basis of scholarly learning, contending that man’s right to knowledge was an illusion unless it was

predicated first on man’s need for enlightenment (satori). In Suzuki’s view, the need for a higher spiritual freedom would take priority over any advocacy of intellectual freedom.

In the ensuing discussion it was not to be expected that Hu and Suzuki would come to agreement on an issue defined in such disparate terms. The result was pretty much a standoff, but not of the kind commonly expressed in the cliché: “East is East, West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” Hu stood for both East and West, and for the commonality of human values; if Suzuki stood for any commonality, it would be one that came through the East, with few, if any, concessions to the modern, liberal West.

The Chinese History Project

The second episode involves another high-level intellectual engagement on a global horizon, but this time in the arena of politics and the social sciences. Today hardly anyone remembers that there existed at Columbia from 1939 to 1951 a major scholarly research project, of international dimensions and involvements, called the “Chinese History Project.” It was initiated by Karl August Wittfogel and George Taylor (neither of them Columbians), and with the support of the Institute of Pacific Relations and Rockefeller Foundation, was housed at Columbia to take advantage of its strong Chinese collections, essential for any in-depth research. No doubt the location was also Wittfogel’s choice; as a refugee scholar from Hitler’s Germany, he, like many others at Columbia and the New School, preferred the challenging intellectual environment of New York, especially its émigré scholars, to a place such as the University of Washington, Taylor’s base.

The Chinese History Project was nothing less than an ambitious attempt to rewrite the whole dynastic history of China, with special attention to its institutions and systemic features. For this purpose outstanding scholars from China, as well as others already in the United States, were recruited and brought to New York to assist in the work on individual periods (dynasties). Wittfogel was to provide the overall theoretical and methodological guidance. In Germany he had been associated with the famous Frankfurt school of left-wing social scientists, and he thought of himself as following up on the work of Marx and Max Weber in the analysis of Asian societies. An active Communist intellectual, he engaged in dialogue with the likes of

Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, and Georg Lukács. Jailed by Hitler for his active opposition to Nazism and distrusted by Moscow for his intellectual independence, he escaped into exile in China and the United States. By 1939 (the year the project was started at Columbia but also a watershed year for those disillusioned by the sudden agreement between Hitler and Stalin [The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939] to divide up Europe between them), Wittfogel had already begun to distance himself from Communism, a tortuous and painful process for someone quickly stigmatized as a “renegade” and “traitor to the cause” and one estranged from friends with whom he had been associated either in the Party or the Institute of Pacific Relations.

Despite these political complications and those involved in the evolution of Wittfogel’s own theoretical and ideological position, the Chinese History Project continued through the war years and eventually produced a substantial volume dealing with the history of the Liao Dynasty (907–1119). Others dealing with the Han and Ching dynasties (much larger projects) were underway when the cold war brought new complications for the project. Wittfogel was called to testify before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, chaired by Senator Pat McCarran, investigating the Institute of Pacific Relations as a research organization allegedly influenced by Communists, and his testimony implicated Owen Lattimore as well as other writers or scholars said to be aligned with the Communists. As if he had thereby broken some unwritten law against informing on his colleagues, Wittfogel was soon ostracized by many scholars in the field—becoming virtually an academic pariah. His grant support evaporated, his staff dispersed elsewhere, and he was asked to vacate the space he occupied in Low Library. In the midst of this turmoil, Wittfogel did manage to complete his own major work, *Oriental Despotism, A Comparative Study of Total Power* (completed in 1954, published in 1957), in which he set forth his mature views on Marx’s concept of the Asiatic mode of production, the hydraulic economy and society, the agro-managerial state, and Communist totalitarianism. Given the author’s international reputation and the political nature of the issues he addressed, it is not surprising that the book aroused enormous controversy, pro and con, all over the world. What is surprising is that as late as 1999 some pundits included it among the hundred great books of the twentieth century. Recently, too, Jonathan Spence, the China historian at Yale, has drawn renewed attention to the importance of Wittfogel’s contribution to Western perceptions of China and to the incisiveness of his analysis of the uses of power both in traditional China and by Mao Zedong.

There was not, however, to be any revival of the Chinese History Project, or any reclaiming of a place for Wittfogel in Chinese studies at Columbia—which is our subject here. He continued to live on Riverside Drive, where he kept up a kind of cosmopolitan salon for New York intellectuals (mainly of a Social Democratic persuasion, identified with the New Leader magazine) and also kept up correspondence and activities on a global scale (one of them a celebratory homecoming in Germany where in Dusseldorf he was welcomed by political and scholarly figures, including “Red Rudy” Dutschke of the so-called New Left, once of dubious fame in the European student revolt of the late 1960s, but later greatly mellowed). Wittfogel’s involvements at Columbia, however, were largely limited to a group of anthropologists (principally professors Marvin Harris ’49C ’53GSAS and Morton Fried ’51GSAS), and occasional appearances at special seminars on “Asia in World History” conducted by Professor of Indian History Ainslie Embree ’47 ’60GSAS.

In the present context, the question naturally arises: Where did Goodrich stand in all this? The answer is that he stood pretty much apart. Wittfogel could never have been lodged in Low Library in the first place without Goodrich’s approval, nor could he have been removed later except as Goodrich allowed or caused it to happen. Yet almost from the beginning there was a world of intellectual and ideological difference between the two scholars working in the same building. Again East may be East, and West West, but it was the twain on either side of the same building that did not meet—the down-to-earth factual and largely non-political scholarship of the practical, plain-spoken American scholar Goodrich, standing worlds apart from the ideologically intense, theoretically driven, macroscopic analyses of the sophisticated European scholar, washed up on the banks of the Hudson by the political storms and tides of the twentieth century.

There is, however, something of a happy ending to all of this. In the 1960s, as Goodrich’s successor in the chairmanship of the department, I organized a project to compile the Dictionary of Ming Biography. Goodrich came out of retirement to head it up editorially, and two of Wittfogel’s former colleagues in the Chinese History Project, Fang Chao-ying ’76HON and Tu Lien-che ’76HON, came back (all the way from Australia!) to constitute the backbone of the research staff. The large, encyclopedic, two-volume work, completed in 1976, was not the dynastic history envisaged by Wittfogel, but it stands as a monument to collaborative Sino-American scholarship and remains the single most important reference work on the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). At the time of publication, Fang and Tu received honorary degrees from Columbia, East finally meeting West, and, after all, at a convocation

held in Low Library—named after the very president, Seth Low, to whom Dean Lung had sent his check in 1901 to get Chinese studies going at Columbia.

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