

FORTY YEARS AT YALE, FIFTY YEARS IN ACADEMIA

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First thank you for coming to what I hope will be a conversation about how conditions and expectations beyond one's control shape an academic career and an intellectual trajectory. Next, I want to thank Gary Haller for giving me this opportunity, or more accurately this challenge, to reflect on fifty years in academia and forty years on the Yale faculty. Finally, I want to thank Dolores Hayden for providing a point of departure when she recommended that I foreground the shifting terrain of my scholarly work since first doing fieldwork in China in 1979. But contrary to conventional practice, I will begin by describing two recent experiences to illustrate how broad structural and political shifts as well as serendipity shape an intellectual trajectory.

In March 2019, at the annual meetings of the Association for Asian Studies in Denver, I served as a discussant for a panel entitled *Maternity in China—Technology, Morality, and the State*. All of the investigators were born in China after 1980 and all had completed degrees in programs that also had been created after 1980. Because I have published books and articles in both English and Chinese about Chinese family life, it was not surprising to me or the audience that these four new assistant professors chose a senior scholar from the United States as their commentator and mentor. But objective professional considerations did not fully explain why they had invited me nor why I had accepted. No, the reason I spoke in Denver was that ten months earlier a sociologist whom I had previously asked to contribute to a Stanford University volume, invited me to a dinner in Hong Kong in honor of one panelist's adviser from the UK. As we left the restaurant, the skies opened, and one guest discovered she had no umbrella, and I carried her suitcase across a railroad bridge to the metro station. Six weeks later, this guest asked me to join a panel she had organized for AAS in Denver. Such is the role of serendipity.

Tom Duffy prefaced his opening remarks by reminding the audience that intellectual currents continually reconfigure the centers and peripheries of academic prestige and influence, and that for many decades, ambitious young scholars in the United

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States freely borrowed and built on the discoveries made in more established laboratories in Europe. Since the 1940s, as U.S. universities moved to the center, new arrivals from across the world have diversified our professorial and student bodies, and we are the richer for being open to ideas and people whose origins are outside our national borders.

Positive, generative transnational partnerships, however, can easily be sabotaged by political conflicts and financial exigencies. Never more than today, when Chinese investigators are moving to center stage from what many in the United States and Europe had considered the intellectual periphery, there is new turbulence. Chinese scholars must also deal with the challenge of establishing legitimacy among two very different audiences, one a global scientific elite who advocate universal knowledge and the other an increasingly patriotic, domestic audience who press for unique and exceptional Chinese explanations. For sociologists striving to analyze contemporary Chinese society, political realities have always constrained research agendas, shaped the language in which we communicate to one another, and defined our primary readership. Another recent professional gathering illustrates the impact of international and domestic political realignments of the past few years.

In August I gave the keynote address at the annual meetings of the International Chinese Sociological Association, a scholarly association created in the 1990s when few American sociologists built an academic career around the study of China because without data from nationally representative surveys or tightly controlled experiments, we could not meet the methodological requirements of peer-reviewed journals. Not only did the Chinese government prohibit foreign investigators from conducting survey research, it also excluded us from ethnographic fieldwork.

Consequently, sociologists who wrote about China became relentless scavengers. We sifted through government documents scattered in libraries across the globe, read between the lines of every newly published novel, and interviewed refugees in Hong Kong about the everyday lives of friends and family. Today mixed methods have become the methodological gold standard in sociology, but for most of my research career they were simply a necessity. Even after 1978 when sociologists first began to work in China, political “minders” surveilled us and controlled both entry and exit from “the field.” Consequently, we continued to rely on triangulation of multiple sources to piece together a coherent synthesis. As late as 1986 when I drew my first random sample for a household survey to study class mobility, I was limited to a population of 100 households within one neighborhood of Shanghai. Colleagues working on rural subjects were similarly limited to a single location, and at each interview local officials would join them. In those early years of fieldwork, we also had no Chinese peers as co-investigators. Nor did we have a readership in China. It was not an echo chamber, but we wrote in English for an overwhelmingly American audience.

Today sociology is a well-established discipline in China, and top journals in Europe and the United States regularly publish articles by faculty from Chinese

universities. Scholars inside and outside of China have easy access to some of the world's best census data and longitudinal surveys. Sitting at my computer in New Haven I can access Yale's subscriptions to digital platforms that provide uncensored access to every major Chinese newspaper and more than a thousand academic journals. In one afternoon, I can complete a literature review or tabulate trend data that in 1995 would have required a month sifting through archives with incomplete runs of printed documents.

When the president of the Chinese Sociological Association first invited me to address their annual meetings in New York, he expected me to reflect on the progress that sociology had made since he himself had gone to graduate school in 1992. He thought the rising generation of young scholars would enjoy stories about the "bad old days" before China had opened its doors to non-Chinese scholars, and graduates of top U.S. doctoral programs could teach in equally prestigious Chinese universities.

Over this colleague's professional career, the relationship between intellectual periphery and center had been reconfigured, and to the extent that there was a dominant scholarly voice, it spoke in Chinese and addressed an audience in China. But when I sent the final abstract for the keynote, I surprised him (as I may have surprised you here today) because rather than proposing I trace my trajectory to retirement from Yale back to a first job in Hong Kong in 1967 where I had worked with labor organizers in a transistor radio factory, to teaching in Taiwan in 1970 under conditions of martial law, to interviewing refugees in Hong Kong in 1976, to fieldwork in Beijing in 1979 as the first social scientist funded by the National Academy of Sciences, I proposed to reflect on a recent setback.

Currently, I am part of a team assessing the impact of policy experiments on the quality of life in newly urbanized city districts. Sociologists routinely assume that attributes of individuals and the community in which they live determine the impact of policy interventions. However, because it has not been feasible to routinely connect multiple attributes of an individual to characteristics of their residential community, researchers have relied on the statistical solution of "fixed effects" to estimate neighborhood effect. However, recent advances in collecting geocoded responses now permit us to unpack fixed effect at a reasonable cost. Our 2018 survey was one of the first to take advantage of these new opportunities, and during summer 2019 we had high hopes that we would be one of the first groups to generate explanatory models that went beyond fixed effects. Unfortunately, but as often happens, we did not immediately succeed, and I therefore sent the association president a new abstract for my keynote. In the new keynote, I proposed to leverage our setback in Hong Kong to reflect on how conditions beyond our control repeatedly alter the expectations of sociologists writing about contemporary Chinese society.

In the past three years, the leadership in Beijing has radically repoliticized the research environment. Constraints are not as severe as those between 1950 and 1980, but in contrast to the first decade of this century, when sociological inquiry flourished

as never before, today we negotiate around multiple, forbidden zones. Take for example the term civil society, a concept central to most contemporary analysis of social movements, community resilience, and the strength of the private realm. In 2011 the government banned its use in public lectures, and soon publishers had excised the term from all items in their publication queues. Prior to 2011 the government had invited scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan to instruct local officials how to train new civil society actors. After 2011, such invitations ceased. However, sociologists could still initiate research if they substituted the phrase “third sector” for civil society. Today there are no verbal work-arounds.

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When the young scholars whom I addressed in New York began their undergraduate programs in China, they encountered few forbidden zones; and when they entered doctoral programs overseas, they expected that the training they received in the United States would lead to publications in the leading international journals that had become the necessary stepping stone to tenure. In short, for most of their educational careers, they had presumed an orderly trajectory from graduate school in the United States to a tenured position in a Chinese university.

In the past three years, digital surveillance has become far more pervasive and consequential in China than in the United States or Europe. Yet these young scholars and myself live within a profound contradiction. Core research questions are often beyond open debate and inquiry, and there is little private space beyond the gaze of government censors. Yet simultaneously the Chinese government’s ambition to accelerate from the periphery and become a global leader and innovator has produced a treasure house of digitally available information. Thus, even today, because the data are stored on mirror servers outside China, I can read and download census data from the past forty years, monthly statistics from multiple government agencies, and even raw data from national surveys. Again, elite national politics complicate research strategies and derail linear trajectories.

In concluding I will briefly describe how specific changes in the global political environment altered the constraints and opportunities during my first years as a sociologist. In 1969 I started a master’s program at Harvard in East Asian Studies. Even before the shootings at Kent State on May 4, 1970, mobilization against the Vietnam War shaped our cohort intellectually and personally. For those of us studying contemporary China, the war was of particular consequence. Cut off from any real contact with China, which was then under a form of martial law, we parsed newspapers, novels, movies, and refugee interviews to capture the reality of everyday life. In terms of audience, we wrote for each other and in English.

In 1971 Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to Beijing in an effort to leverage Chinese support against the Russians. Later that year, the PRC replaced Taiwan as the Chinese representative on the Security Council in the UN. In February 1972 Nixon signed the Shanghai Communiqué. During these two years, when I was working and studying first in Taiwan and then in Germany, there had been a tectonic shift in the relationship

between Washington and Beijing. However, graduate students in the social sciences continued to work as scavengers from afar. Then one spring day in 1972 as I sat in a Munich library, I recognized Dan and Lois Tretiak, two Harvard colleagues, in a photo on the front page of *People's Daily*. It was a blurry group photo of a trade delegation to the annual Canton Trade Fair, but for the first time, I saw people I knew personally who were physically and professionally present in China.

Between 1972 and 1975 I regularly hosted visiting scholars from China over our dinner table. I helped organize trips to China for the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. We were still very far from the immersive experiences I had enjoyed in Hong Kong and Taiwan, but in comparison to the years when I had entered graduate school, Chinese society had become less of an abstraction.

As I promised Dolores, I'm not going to review every twist and turn of my intellectual trajectory since my first fieldwork in China in 1979. Rather, in closing, I will highlight the importance of audience. When I wrote my master's seminar paper in spring 1970, my only audience was the instructor who graded the paper. I never expected that it would be read by anyone else. When later, the essay appeared in a volume published by Harvard University Press, I crossed into a new world. Not only did I benefit from the expertise of an experienced copy editor, I also began to write for a new audience. Henceforth, I would address experts in my field. My ideas would be quoted, reproduced, and critiqued beyond the classroom and beyond my purview.

In the past five years, most scholarly work in English about Chinese society has been written by scholars writing about their own country. Thus, rather unremarkably, the concerns of Chinese scholars often set the scholarly agenda. For me, such intellectual succession interacts with larger political and societal externalities. In the current bleak environment of U.S.-China relations, one source of optimism arises when I consider which colleagues I consult or with whom I share work in progress. Here more decisive than the deteriorating diplomatic relations between our two countries is the presence of intellectual peers in China. Moreover, these peers come from among several generations of scholars and they work not only in universities, but also in private and public think tanks, and in digital media.

When I began doctoral work, sociologists didn't go to China, and sociologists at elite universities rarely wrote about China. In fact, when I suggested my thesis topic to one very eminent sociologist, he asked: "How can you ruin your career?" Because at that time I had neither a career nor serious academic ambitions to teach at an elite university, I ignored his advice. As a result, I've benefited professionally from the serendipitous timing of a career trajectory that coincided with one of the most generative, if turbulent, decades of deepening intellectual partnerships between Chinese and American social scientists.