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THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE ACADEMIC CHINA-WATCHER

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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It's hard for me to believe that I've been watching China professionally for more than a quarter century - indeed, closer to thirty years than to twenty-five. I've done so first as a faculty member in a small liberal arts college, next as a professor at a large research university, then as a policy analyst in a Washington policy research institute, and now as the dean of a professional school of international affairs.

I've seen lots of changes in those nearly thirty years of watching China:

- Changes in China itself, in terms of its political and economic institutions, its value systems, and above all in the lives of its people.
- Changes in the way in which we watch China, in terms of the availability of published information and the openness of the country to archival research, interviews, and fieldwork.
- Changes in our models of China, from totalitarianism to factionalism to bureaucratic politics and now to state-society relations.
- Changes in American attitudes toward China, tracing the familiar cyclical pattern from disdain to admiration and back again.
- Parallel changes in American policy toward China, from the confrontational to the cooperative and now possibly the competitive.

Many of these changes were explored in the course of the conference earlier today. Tonight, I want to talk about a different (and to me equally fascinating) transformation: the changes in the roles that academic China specialists in the United States play outside the academic community. My basic thesis can be simply put: the non-academic roles of this group of China-watchers have been rather steadily shrinking, at least in relative terms. In some ways, this is an entirely appropriate development, related to the greater availability of information and analysis about China in other sectors.

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of society. But in other ways, it is grounds for concern, as roles that might usefully be played by academic China-watchers are being assumed by others who lack the comparative advantage to perform them well.

What are those shrinking roles? I will discuss five of them here:

- The business consultant: sources of information and analysis about China for the business community.
- The intelligence analyst: providers of information and analysis for government officials and policymakers.
- The media source: sources of background information and analysis for the electronic and print media.
- The policy advocate: givers of advice on policy toward China, on both long-term strategy and specific issues.
- The public intellectual: providers of understanding of China to the broader public, beyond the community of practitioners who deal with China on a daily basis.

These five roles are closely interrelated, but for the sake of clarity I will discuss them separately.

**Business Consultant**

In the past, three sectors of American society turned to academic China-watchers for information and analysis about China: business, the government, and the media. All of these connections have been weakening, although to different degrees, over the last decade. The connections with the business community have attenuated the most; those with the media have weakened the least; and the ties with government fall somewhere in between.

Area specialists, including academic China-watchers, can be very knowledgeable about the macro environments in which business firms operate. This kind of knowledge – about a country’s culture, history, general economic trends, and political structures – is especially valuable to the corporate community in several situations, notably when a country first becomes open to foreign economic relations, when a company first explores operations in a country where it has not worked before, and when there are dramatic changes in the business climate in a country where a corporation has a large stake.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some academic China-watchers served as consultants to corporations in the 1980s, when China first began to open up to foreign trade and investment. And, in subsequent years, as new players have entered the China market over the last twenty years, they have occasionally been called in to advise them.

But now that most large U.S. businesses are already operating in China, and are familiar with the macro environment there, academic China-watchers are far less relevant to their needs. Today, companies no longer require general cultural or historical background on China, or broad overviews of Chinese economics and politics. Their staff, especially those working in China, are already familiar with those issues. Instead, they want detailed information on regulatory policy, the legal system, and the tax
structure. This is information that few academics can provide, but are now offered by law firms, accountancies, and consulting firms. To the extent that corporations do turn to the academic community, it will be to those members of business school faculties who specialize in doing business in China.

Although these new types of knowledge are clearly important, there is still a continuing need for macro-level expertise about China. Corporations that have investments in China need regularly to monitor the political, social, and economic environments in which they operate, and to assess the level of country risk that those environments produce. Academic China-watchers still have a comparative advantage in this regard – in assessing the long-term trends in the Chinese economy, the stability of China’s social and political order, the evolution of U.S.-China relations, and the effects of the ups and downs of U.S.-China relations on commercial opportunities for American firms.

But the academic China-watcher faces two obstacles to continued relevance. First, in the absence of an acute and obvious crisis, such topics tend to be seen as long-term issues, not immediately related to a firm’s bottom line, and less important than the specific issues dealing with taxes, regulation, and the like that I mentioned above. In an era of limited time and limited budgets, these longer-term issues that are the comparative advantage of the academic China-watcher will often be set aside.

Second, discussion of macro-level issues such as these often takes place in high-level “summits,” including those organized by leading business periodicals, aimed at top corporate executives. But for the business community, the purpose of these conferences is as much to network with counterparts and with foreign government officials as it is to gain objective information about the question at hand. Scholars are seen as irrelevant to this additional purpose, or even as a threat to it. If they say critical things about China, as they are wont to do, then they may discourage Chinese officials from participating in future sessions. The organizers of such meetings may therefore feel that it is better to have anodyne presentations by Chinese officials about how their country is “open for business,” or optimistic presentations by corporate CEOs about how well their companies are doing in China, than to run the risk that an academic will say something impolitic.

Often, academic China-watchers are simply asked to serve as moderators at such occasions – not giving their own opinions, but implicitly giving legitimacy to the presentations by the government officials and corporate executives.

Perhaps the most realistic solution to this dilemma is to find other mechanisms for linking the business community and the scholarly community. Consulting firms, which either hire academic China-watchers as consultants or hire their students as employees, are the most obvious of these mechanisms. In turn, the business community should realize that the business climate in China involves more than simply the details of the legal structure, the tax code, and regulatory policy, and to understand that tapping the expertise of the academic China-watching
community is an important way of monitoring China’s macro environment.

Intelligence Analyst

But what about the government? Isn’t the government more interested in “big-picture” issues than is the business community? Yes, to a degree. But I’ve also noted, over the years, that academic China-watchers are called upon by government agencies less and less for their analysis of developments in China.

In part, this is the result of budget cutbacks. In the past, there were specialized agencies within government that were responsible for gaining the insights of outside experts. Some of these, particularly the old Office of External Affairs in the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR/XR), have been eliminated altogether. Others have had their funds reduced. Liaison with the academic community appears to be a lower priority for government now than it was in the past.

But beyond this, there are some structural problems that limit interaction, some of which were mentioned this morning. Intelligence analysts are focused on the immediate; scholars focus either on the past or the more distant future. The government increasingly values information on topical issues; China specialists, by definition, are part of a community that organizes analysis geographically. And . . . perhaps most important, the intelligence community values information that is classified because of the means by which it was acquired. Scholars cannot provide them with this kind of information.

This is a huge opportunity cost for the government community, especially given the decline in genuine expertise inside government that was described to us earlier today. Outside scholars bring a far greater depth of knowledge about China, as well as a longer-term historical standpoint and a more sophisticated analytical perspective, than is readily available inside government. Moreover, many scholars now have far better contacts in China, among both officials and ordinary people, than do government analysts. This is particularly true with regard to the analysis of U.S.-China relations and international issues, given the great increase in the number of so-called “Track Two” dialogues between the two countries.

The failure to tap this expertise in an ongoing and systematic way is a national tragedy. And I’m not referring to “outsourcing” intelligence to outside consultants, but rather utilizing the insights of the academic community as one source of information and analysis that can be woven into a broader tapestry. Rebuilding the organizational linkages between the government and the academic community that have atrophied for lack of funding should be a high priority for the future.

Media Source

Of these three sectors of society, it is the media that most frequently turn to academic China-watchers for background, analysis, and forecasts when there are dramatic developments in China or in U.S.-China relations. However, in relative terms, our importance to the media is declining as well. I say this for
the following reasons:

First, the media now have alternative sources of information about China that were not available in the past. Increasingly, these include Chinese sources, both principals and analysts, who are willing to be interviewed and quoted. In 1989, I wrote an earlier essay on the relationship among scholars, officials, and journalists that contained the following passage: “One insightful American reporter has predicted that, over time, the opening of China may enable foreign reporters to obtain useful analysis from informed Chinese observers, and the role of American scholars may correspondingly decline.” That insightful reporter was Jim Mann, and his prediction has been proven correct. The desire of reporters, especially those writing from Beijing, to use Chinese sources as well as American is perfectly understandable and is highly appropriate.

Relatedly, much of the information and analysis needed by the media, print or electronic, are now better provided by analysts outside the academy than by China-watchers within it. As I noted in that 1989 essay, journalists are working on breaking stories, about which academics are usually poorly positioned to comment. Or they may be doing stories on particular issues in China, on which few scholars are doing detailed research. They will then turn, appropriately, to analysis in financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, or other institutions that follow such matters in detail, and on a day-to-day basis. Thus, for analysis of the human rights situation in China, one can do no better than to ask Mike Jendrzejczyk of Human Rights Watch Asia; for analysis of short-term trends in the Chinese economy, Hong Kong financial analysts like Andy Xie of Morgan Stanley are probably better sources than academic economists who specialize on China.

Finally, if the story is on U.S.-China relations, then journalists may value commentary and analysis from those who seek to influence American policy as much as those who merely study it from an academic perspective. As U.S. China policy is increasingly driven by interest groups, representatives of those groups are an ever more important source for reporters covering the Sino-American relationship.

**Policy Advocate**

And that leads naturally to the fourth role I wish to discuss: the academic China-watcher as policy advocate. This is a role pioneered by the Doak Barnetts and the Robert Scalapinos who, in the mid-1960s, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee calling for fundamental change in our policy toward China, and thereby laid the groundwork for the breakthrough toward Beijing undertaken by the Nixon Administration only three years later.

The reality is that very few policy analysts outside government have much direct influence on an administration in office. In part, this is because policymakers simply have too little time to read outside the cable traffic and the bureaucratic memoranda that fill their in-boxes. In part, it is also because it is very difficult for outside analysts to know issues in enough detail to offer
specific advice that is very valuable. As one high-level Administration official recently put it, not speaking specifically of China, there are very few specific ideas generated outside government that have not already been discussed extensively inside government.

But while the direct influence of policy advocates has always been less than many of them would like to admit, they have increasingly faced an additional problem in more recent years. Policy analysts working on China have been losing influence relative to lobbyists. As U.S.-China relations have grown and thickened over the last two decades, the issues in the relationship have captured the attention of the interest groups that normally dominate discussion of any policy question in pluralistic America.

A simple way to illustrate this trend is to compare the list of those who testified before the Fulbright Committee in 1966 with those who are called to testify in a Congressional hearing on China today. Then, although the witnesses held quite divergent views, virtually all of them were academic specialists on China. Now, virtually all the witnesses will be representatives of the lobbies and interest groups involved in a particular issue. Scholars will be called as witnesses much less frequently. Often they testify as the representative of an interest group, as Andrew Nathan has done for Amnesty International. Or else, since they are presumed to represent some interest, they may find that they are seen as presenting the Chinese position, albeit indirectly.

I believe that, here too, there is a considerable opportunity cost. Policy analysts have two potential advantages that lobbyists do not. First, the best policy analysts—at least those from universities and from non-ideological think tanks—can be objective to a degree that lobbyists cannot be. And second, they are the ones who can try to pull the strands of policy together, balancing competing objectives and devising strategies for pursuing overall national interests. Although it is natural that academics will no longer dominate the debate over China policy, it would be tragic if their voice were lost altogether, or if it were assumed that they represented China’s interest, rather than America’s.

One response to this relative loss of influence is for the academic community to reconceptualize the way in which it influences policy. John Steinbruner, my former boss at the Brookings Institution, often said that think tanks have less influence on the present administration than on the next administration. By this he meant that policy analysts influence the broad climate of opinion in which long-term foreign policy is shaped. They may therefore have a greater ability to influence the assumptions that political appointees bring with them when they assume office than to shape the specific decisions they take once they hold office. This is even more true given that many political appointees responsible for China have been trained at major universities, and that some (like Michel Oksenberg, Gaston Sigur, Susan Shirk, or Kenneth Lieberthal) have actually taught at those same universities as part of the academic China-watching community.

Another response is for academic China-watchers to redefine the kind of
policy-relevant research they conduct. The same government official cited above suggested that those who wish to shape policy would have more influence if they stopped offering specific suggestions on how to deal with immediate issues — topics on which they have little comparative advantage — and conducted deeper analysis of the assumptions that underlie the policymaking process. For example, broad conceptual work on the major trends in international affairs would be of particular interest. In addition, careful empirical research on the consequences of past policy — when various approaches have succeeded, and when they have failed — might also be of value.

Public Intellectual

Finally, let me turn to the last role that academic China-watchers can play outside the university: that of public intellectual. By that, as I’ve already indicated, I mean those who offer a broad understanding of an issue like China to the educated public, both inside and outside the policy community. This role is similar to, but can be distinguished from, the four other roles I’ve mentioned. All these roles involve sharing academic insights with non-academic audiences. But the role of the public intellectual is to educate in the broadest sense, not just to provide detailed information on a particular problem or to propose specific solutions to immediate policy issues.

There was a time when scholars wrote for wider audiences, and when their work was reviewed by mainstream news media. When I was a graduate student, I remember that a review of Franz Schurmann’s Ideology and Organization in Communist China was the lead item in the New York Times Book Review. Those days are over. With the exception of the New York Review of Books, it is very unlikely that a scholarly work on China will be reviewed in major news media, or indeed that it will sell more than a few hundred copies, other than to academic libraries.

This is, in part, the result of the specialization of our field. I agree with those who, earlier today, noted that scholars are now learning more and more about less and less. And as the topics of academic scholarship are defined more narrowly, they cannot be expected to be of interest to a broader public. Equally important, this trend is also the result of the vocabulary and tone in which the scholarly community writes. Most academics no longer write for general audiences, but write instead for their scholarly colleagues, using jargon that is increasingly difficult for non-specialists to understand. The norm of the scholarly community is that writing for a broader public is no longer its job.

Then whose job is it? Increasingly, the role of public intellectual, abandoned by the academic community, is being assumed by journalists. It is they who now write the books on foreign countries, international trends, and foreign policy issues that were once written by academics. Thus, the most widely-quoted work on globalization is The Lexus and the Olive Tree, by the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, rather than any of the books on globalization produced by
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academic analysts.\(^1\)

Again, I think there is a huge opportunity cost as scholars abandon the role of public intellectual and leave the field to journalists. Scholars know how to do systematic research, conduct rigorous analysis, and bring theoretical insights to bear on their conclusions. Few journalists, except perhaps those who have done doctoral work, have similar training. Instead, their work tends to rely on interviews and on personal anecdotes, without much analytical rigor. But where university-based academics belittle the task of popularization, journalists welcome the challenge (and the reward) of writing books for an educated public.

We need to maintain space, within the academic community, for works of scholarship that are intended for, and accessible to, wider audiences. Professional schools of international affairs might place this responsibility high on their agendas. So might those few think tanks, such as The Brookings Institution and the Hoover Institution, that sponsor book-length works that are based on thorough original research. But perhaps we could begin to instill the norm that all first-rate scholars should, at some point in their careers, write for wider audiences, distilling their lifetime of research on a subject into a book that could be understood and enjoyed by a broader public.

**Conclusion**

In short, the roles of academic China-watchers outside the university are shrinking, at least in relative terms. (They are also shrinking inside the university, as the perceived value of area studies declines, but that's a different story altogether.) As analysts and consultants, they are losing out to China-watchers in other professions. As media sources, they are also losing out to the Chinese themselves. As policy advocates, they are losing out to lobbyists. And as public intellectuals, they are losing out to journalists.

Why is this happening? To a degree, this represents the normalization of China and U.S.-China relations. As China opens up, and as more American organizations deal with China on a day-to-day basis, the near-monopoly of information that scholars once had has been decisively broken. Genuine expertise on China is now distributed more widely than ever before, including among professionals originally trained in China studies programs in major universities. At the same time, as U.S.-China relations become more normal, issues in that relationship attract the attention of lobbyists and interest groups, as is true with virtually every issue on the American political agenda.

But the relative loss of role is also related to changes within the academic community. Scholars have, over the last twenty-five years, redefined their role more narrowly than ever before. They believe that their principal responsibility is to write articles for each other to read, not to draw on their research to educate broader audiences. That means that their eagerness to perform these additional roles is being steadily reduced.

Is all this a good thing or a bad

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thing? I've tried to suggest that it is both. Scholars do not have a comparative advantage in performing many of these roles directly—in advising businesses on the nuts and bolts of working in China, providing specific policy advice to government officials, or helping journalists interpret breaking stories in China. It may be best, in effect, for them to leave this work to China-watchers in other professions, many of whom were once students in their own universities.

But in many other areas, scholars have much to contribute. This includes providing analysis of the general business climate in China, offering overall assessments of American policy toward China, and helping the public understand China's past, present, and future.

It would be tragic if scholars turned away from doing what they have the comparative advantage to do well, or if society turned towards others who can perform those roles less adequately. The shrinking role of the academic China-watcher is in many ways an entirely appropriate response to the wider availability of information about China in other quarters. But in some respects—particularly the education of the general public on China and America's relationship with China—it has gone too far. The responsibility for remedying that situation, in my judgment, rests largely within the academic community itself, which needs to resurrect the responsibility for writing for broader audiences and speaking with wider constituencies, and not just producing narrow-gauged research for itself alone.