

Obituaries

JOHN KING FAIRBANK (1907–1991)

The outlines of the career of John King Fairbank, who died on September 14, are on record through his own account, *Chinabound: A Fifty-year Memoir* (Harper and Row, 1982) and the account by Paul M. Evans, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China* (Basil Blackwell, 1988). These works project the image of a tireless worker in the fields of modern Chinese history and Chinese-American relations, a consummate strategist in the war to raise American consciousness of the importance of China in the contemporary world, and a master teacher who left an indelible mark on his students through precept and example. John Fairbank's death at the age of 84 leaves many questions, and as many answers, about the influence of one individual on the development and growth of modern China studies in the country that has produced the largest, and arguably the liveliest, constituency of China scholars outside East Asia.

John Fairbank was born in Huron, South Dakota. From public schools in Sioux Falls he went on to Phillips Exeter Academy, after which he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin before transferring to Harvard. At preparatory school and at Harvard he was an enthusiastic debater. "Obviously," he wrote, "I was preparing to speak in public. But simultaneously I was becoming used to beginning languages. . . . Working inefficiently, I became a professional language beginner. My French and German were as dead as my Latin and Greek, embryonic at best" (*Chinabound*, p. 15).

A Rhodes scholarship followed in 1929. This provided the opportunity to work on diplomatic history and, on the advice of Charles Kingsley Webster, the idea of working on "China's secret diplomatic documents," then being published in Peking. These would, he was assured, open up "a whole new area of diplomatic history." At Oxford formal guidance came from W. E. Soothill, who offered to "gladly see me at tea any time," but helped him more by writing to H. B. Morse, a former assistant to Sir Robert Hart in the Imperial Maritime Customs. This association resulted in work that included *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports 1842–1894* (1953), *Ch'ing Administration: Three Studies* (1960), *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs 1868–1907* (1975), and the many volumes and articles that focus on China's intellectual and institutional response to the incursion from the West in the nineteenth century. Fairbank was never apologetic about his presentist focus. He wrote that he warned students throughout his career about the "Iron Law of Retrogression": "History looks backward, seeking causes: if you want to understand events of 1980, start with 1980. You will be pulled back into the 1970s soon enough. If you start with 1970 supposedly en route to 1980, you will find yourself inexorably involved with 1960 and accelerating backward" (*Chinabound*, p. 22). So, too, came occasional deliberately provocative assertions that ancient China was anything before the Opium War, while anything before the Ch'ing was "ancient as hell China."

The point that matters, though, is that Fairbank, like others of his generation of specialists, did not come to Chinese studies through interests sparked by college

courses, as is now the usual route. For Edwin O. Reischauer, C. Martin Wilbur, George E. Taylor, and the other program-builders, it was the accident of birth or someone's suggestion that did it, for there were as yet no academic programs of East Asian Studies. That meant a long tutelage of language study, often inefficiently begun with old-fashioned instructors using unsystematic teaching materials. "Here I was in the typical foreigner's sweat," Fairbank wrote, "flipping character cards on the London underground and buses at age twenty-three. Fortunately, I never asked a wise man if this was feasible. He could have proved it wasn't" (*Chinabound*, p. 23). And again, in Shanghai in 1932, "Mr. [Stanley F.] Wright was cannily concerned lest I compete with his work in Customs history. When he heard I was going to Peking to begin Chinese, he relaxed visibly. He could rely on the language to sidetrack me indefinitely. Some people who went into it were never even heard of again" (*ibid.*, p. 37). That can stand as a reminder of the progress that has resulted from the programs the pioneers built.

In 1932, Fairbank began a three-and-a-half year stay in China. He arrived at Hong Kong, was in Shanghai during the Shanghai Incident, and went on to Peking. In June, Wilma Cannon arrived. They were married by John Hayes, "who had planned the setting in which he was to officiate with the same serious and decorous care with which he inspects famine relief works." Again, the story that followed was typical of the 1930s: the pioneers, if they were lucky enough to have support, profited from lengthy stays in Asia during which their language and dissertations developed, without the urgency to return to take up posts that did not, as yet, exist. The Fairbanks' travels along the coastal ports whose records were to be part of the material for *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* came during the early stages of the instability caused by Japanese aggression in China, but they were protected by the umbrella of Western privilege that was the product of the system whose origins Fairbank wanted to understand.

Next came four years (1936–40) at Harvard, "learning to be a professor," as Fairbank put it. Soon he and Wilma were ensconced in their house at 41 Winthrop Street, a residence that, he wrote, "definitely shaped our lives. We contributed some Chinese furniture and statuary. But the house has had more influence on us than we on it." Generations of students who gathered there on Thursday afternoons for tea and talk know what he meant. The formidable work habits of his mature years must already have been in place. Characteristically, Fairbank noted that since the house was "only two hundred yards from Widener Library . . . I could be in my study in four minutes, after dinner, at 8 A.M., anytime. In forty-odd years I have saved commuting time equal to perhaps half a year of eight-hour days" (*Chinabound*, p. 158). In later years, the greater distance to the East Asian Research Center at 1737 Cambridge Street combined with the advent of new technology to make it possible sometimes to shave while walking.

These years saw the start of Fairbank's productive and cordial relationship with Edwin O. Reischauer. "On our first meeting I recall Ed's look of oriental inscrutability, dead-pan, as if thinking, 'Who is this Fairbank and what does he want?'" Reischauer, according to his memoirs (*My Life Between Japan and America*, 1986), must have found out, for he noted in his diary while ambassador to Tokyo that "negotiating with the Foreign Minister is like talking with Fairbank" (p. 214). Reischauer elsewhere described what he terms "John's forceful leadership, or domineering ways as some called them," which meant that "He unconsciously allowed East Asian projects to narrow down to specifically Chinese undertakings and these in turn to concentrate mostly on the nineteenth century." But while there were the makings for a China-Japan stand-off and additional possibilities for a division between ancients and moderns,

there was never any doubt of a wonderfully productive, almost symbiotic relationship between the two. Each was completely firm in his own opinion and priorities. Reischauer's evaluation describes Fairbank as an "indefatigable writer, or rather dictator, of memoranda and letters, a skilled raiser of funds, and a wily academic politician, who was deeply entrenched in the Harvard community and knowledgeable about the levers of power" (*My Life*, p. 114–15). Fairbank, for his part, reminisced that "We at once found a common bond in our desire to educate the American public" (*Chinabound*, p. 145). It was no modest goal for two beginning academics.

A final preparatory stage for Fairbank, as for most of his generation, was government service during the years 1941–46. For Fairbank this began with what would become the Office of Strategic Services in Washington, helping to organize a Far East Section, where he "represented the idea of using Chinese and Japanese sources to study China and Japan"—a rather original concept at the time. Two rounds of duty in Washington were followed by assignments in China, one in 1942 and a second, of nine months, in 1945, ending in July of 1946, as China Director of the United States Information Service. Wilma Fairbank was in charge of the cultural relations section of the Chungking embassy. "This adventurous interlude, between the ages of thirty-four and thirty-nine," he recalled, "brought me into the world of affairs and undoubtedly remade me" (*Chinabound*, p. 173). It was so, too, with his colleague Reischauer, who turned from early Chinese history to contemporary Japan during the same years. During the years of wartime service in China, nothing so obsessed Fairbank as the despair of the intellectuals, and he made it "my private war" to make Washington conscious of their plight.

Fairbank's major scholarly and institutional achievements began with his return to Harvard in the summer of 1946. His accomplishments are so well-known that it is unnecessary to recount them, but his personal characteristics stand out. The most important is the urgency and intensity with which he approached his tasks. "I began riding two horses," he wrote, "teaching Chinese history and speaking up on China policy" (p. 315). Convinced that United States policy in China was failing and that a long estrangement was to be avoided, Fairbank wrote, spoke, and traveled with relentless energy. *The United States and China* (1948) bridged these concerns, and its opening sentence, "China is only superficially a meeting point between the United States and the Soviet Union," spoke to his desire to distinguish between the understanding of China and the tactics of the Cold War.

He was convinced that the problem was ultimately intellectual, in that it lay in America's failure to study and understand China. His institution- and program-building, publishing, committee-forming, fundraising, and teaching in lecture, seminar, and dissertation-direction were all focused on this goal, and a terrible urgency was attached to it.

In 1946, the China Regional Studies program began at Harvard. Among my fellow students were Benjamin Schwartz, Rhoads Murphey, and an able group of colleagues who went on to journalism, foundation, development, and government work. In what seem in retrospect to have been daily seminars, the great names of the Harvard faculty in social sciences came to discuss their field under the watchful eye of John Fairbank (and the sterner eye of additional regulars Joseph R. Levenson and M. J. Levy, Jr., who added further philosophical and methodologic rigor). After the presentation, the discussion would center on the utility of the approach that had been presented for the understanding of China. Fairbank's acknowledgements in the *United States and China* began with "the participants in the Regional Studies program on China at Harvard, a program which has tried to mobilize in one series of discussions both the expert's knowledge on China and the methods of the social

scientist." Seminar and program members were recruited for a challenge that was described as one of the great intellectual crusades of understanding.

I first met JKF in August of 1946, and remember well the certitude with which he said, "You have a great opportunity." Then and there began a series of notes and messages, first scrawled and later dictated, that never really stopped; they cajoled, encouraged, commented. Nothing ever went unread or unacknowledged. John never insisted on his own views or priorities, but insisted that the task be taken seriously. The many who followed will remember the same experience; we shall not see his like again.

Soon the Harvard General Education courses listed Social Sciences 111, the future "rice paddies" survey. Its lecture format grew to become the two-volume textbook of Fairbank and Reischauer, *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (1960) and, with the addition of Albert Craig's chapters, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (1965).

Like his colleague Reischauer, Fairbank put great importance on his undergraduate teaching. His lectures were superbly organized and delivered with clarity and a quizzical, sometimes sardonic, humor. Reischauer, in contrast, spoke much more rapidly, was full of nervous energy, and included more chronology at the cost of organizational neatness. The combination was an effective one, and classes came to welcome the alternation between them.

It was important to Fairbank that information generated at Harvard spread beyond its borders. The Regional Studies *Papers on China* began this process, and in its mimeographed volumes, which appeared from 1947 to 1971, included many seminar papers that heralded future dissertations. It was even more important that dissertations be published. The Harvard Historical Monographs accepted a few of the early products, but it was not until the establishment of the Council on East Asian Studies that the Harvard East Asian Monographs became an appropriate vehicle for diffusion. The list included works by visiting scholars, studies on Japan and Korea, and occasional translations, but the overwhelming majority were from Fairbank students and dealt with modern China, particularly topics related to China's encounter with the modern West. By 1991, the number of monographs published and in press reached 158.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Fairbank also poured energy into the national organization of China studies. He was among the small group of scholars in the Far Eastern Association who worked to turn the study of Asia toward an emphasis on recent history and the social sciences, away from the American Oriental Society's more traditional orientation toward classical studies. Over the years between 1947 and 1956, the Far Eastern Association broke away from the AOS and matured into the present Association for Asian Studies. Fairbank was an officer in the Far Eastern Association and an active force in the new Association for Asian Studies. Thus, beyond his own passion for nineteenth-century Chinese history, he participated in shaping the direction that Asian Studies in general has taken in the United States after World War II. In 1958–59 he was elected and served as AAS President.

One of the Far Eastern Association's weaknesses had been a lack of funds, and Fairbank worked to find financial support for China studies from the world of philanthropy. Some of this support was channelled through Harvard, but other projects, such the work of the Committee on Chinese Thought (1951–62), operated as an arm of the AAS. Establishing evenhanded access to these channels brought with it spirited and sometimes acrimonious discussion both among China specialists—a field highly sensitized to the political role of scholarship through the national debate about China policy—and among Asianists in general who were devoted to

pursuing their own scholarly agendas. Typically, Fairbank was not drawn away from his interest on China by this debate, but participated while keeping his own focus, and that of his students, fixed on modern Chinese history.

Next came the period of conferences and conference volumes, one that Fairbank helped launch by editing the volume entitled *Chinese Thought and Institutions* in 1957. The conference era undoubtedly deflected some energies that might have gone into larger work, but in the early years conferences performed a marked service by stimulating scholarly thinking, attracting scholars to topics, and arranging their work in an accessible format. Perhaps most importantly, they helped to strengthen a sense of field and sub-field by bringing specialists together for extended periods of intensive discussion.

John Fairbank's final project, *The Cambridge History of China*, was probably the most ambitious of them all. His goal was to set out the historical record for China the same way the Cambridge and Oxford histories had provided authoritative monographic surveys of the history of the West. Together with Denis Twitchett, Fairbank mapped out the terrain, the editors, and the contributors, and personally took charge of the Ch'ing period and after. Six volumes of a projected thirteen came under his personal direction. *Late Ch'ing 1800–1911* (1978) came in two volumes, the second (1980) edited with Kwang-ching Liu; *Republican China 1912–1949* (1983 and 1986) also came in two parts, the second edited with Albert Feuerwerker; another two volumes for *The People's Republic* (1987, 1991) were edited with Roderick MacFarquhar. Together, the volumes of this series provide the fullest and closest approximation we are likely to have of an encyclopedic coverage of the period to which John Fairbank devoted his life.

Fairbank's special kind of energy—a scholarly world order—had its impact on fields of history related to that of China. The *Harvard Papers on Japan* quickly came to stand beside the *Harvard Papers on China*, the Conference on Modern Japan's five volumes alongside the conference papers on China, and the *Cambridge History of Japan* alongside that of China, though carefully held to its promise of six volumes by a chastened Cambridge University Press. So, too, with Korean monographs, journals, and soon, no doubt, a collective history series.

John King Fairbank was not the only mover in these efforts, of course, and he sought and needed the cooperation of his colleagues at other centers. A mere accounting of what was done can give little indication of the energy he poured into such matters in correspondence, travel, and committee work. As the years went on, more and more of the participants in such discussions came to be products of the Harvard seminars or of programs established or directed by those individuals. In all of this, Fairbank earned a position that was rewarded by the affection of those who knew him well and the grudging respect of others who felt an imperial Harvard presence in his ceaseless energy. His Harvard colleagues were no less aware of the force of that personality. Deeply loyal to his institution (looking back, he credited his career to the fortunate coincidence of dealing with the world's greatest revolution at the world's greatest university), he nevertheless lost no opportunity to bend it to his will. The sinocentric world of his scholarship was also the one in which he lived.

Modern China has been no respecter of persons or predictions and a graveyard for prophets. John Fairbank's long battle to have Americans understand that China was distinct and followed its own patterns was built on the hope that the two-hundred-year revolution—summed up in his *Great Chinese Revolution: 1800–1985* (1986)—would bring a better life to the Chinese and somehow ease American tolerance for difference in a plural world. In retirement, his writing, always fluent and easy, became more relaxed, informal, and philosophical. His "Anti-Bibliographic Note"

to the *Great Chinese Revolution* ended with the statement that "I alone can hardly claim to be responsible for all the judgments made in this book, but I can't really tell you who is." But readers who followed his series of reviews of China literature in the *New York Review of Books* noted a decreasingly optimistic tone about China and indeed the larger Chinese political tradition. Mao was more an oppressor and less a liberator, but in becoming so he was, Fairbank felt, following a tradition deeply rooted in the Chinese past. Old battles of the 1950s, in which Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* had been disowned, seemed resolved, and the Chinese revolution less revolutionary. June 4 sealed that march to the Chinese past. Once again, JKF showed that he never stopped reading, thinking, and writing. On the morning of the day he entered the hospital for the last time, he and Wilma delivered the corrected copy of his final book to Harvard University Press. *China: A New History* will provide the distillation of his thought on the course of Chinese history, his final contribution to a dialogue which, as much as any single scholar can, he helped to shape and nurture.

MARIUS B. JANSEN
Princeton University

ANNA KATHARINA SEIDEL
(1938–1991)

With Anna Seidel, who passed away in San Francisco on September 29, 1991, at the age of fifty-three, the international community of China scholars has lost one of its most remarkable and original minds. During her twenty-two years at the Institut du Hōbōgirin of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in Kyōto, Anna Seidel had become the center of gravity for the many Western scholars from all walks of East Asian studies who yearly descend on the ancient Japanese capital to do their research. She was a source of both intellectual and emotional help to many, earning the special gratitude of many junior colleagues to whom she offered invaluable stimulus, guidance, and constructive criticism. Anyone who attended the many lectures, discussion meetings, and receptions Anna Seidel organized at the beautiful temple surroundings of her Institute will remember the warm interest she took in all manner of intellectual pursuits, the sparkling wit of her conversation, and her uncanny sense for crosscultural incongruities. In her last years, her recurring sickness, forcing upon her extended stays in the hospital and a strict diet, in no way reduced her *joie de vivre*, which she most generously shared with others.

Born in Berlin in 1938 as the youngest of three siblings, Anna Seidel spent most of her youth in Munich. During the Nazi era, her father, an aviation engineer, courageously stood by her mother, who was descended from a distinguished German-Jewish family; they sheltered a Jewish friend at their home throughout World War II. Her parents early encouraged Anna to pursue intellectual interests. Having been trained in the basics of Sinology at the universities of Munich (1958–1960) and Hamburg (1961), Anna Seidel specialized in the study of Chinese religions in Paris, where she studied from 1961 to 1968 under two eminent fellow expatriates, Maxime Kaltenmark and Rolf A. Stein. Her doctoral thesis, *La divinisation de Lao-tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient No. 71, 1969) stands as a pathbreaking study. In 1969, Anna Seidel was elected a member of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient and sent to Kyōto, where she resided until the