“Navigating the US-China Confrontation: Lessons from John Fairbank and the 1950s”

Presentation to the Institute of East Asian Studies Colloquium, University of California at Berkeley, 3 December 2019. Reconstructed (and elaborated) 17 December 2019

My thanks to Kevin O’Brien for such a warm introduction and to the IEAS and the Centre for Chinese Studies for hosting my visit. Today’s rainstorm made a Vancouver visitor feel right at home. It’s a special pleasure to do an international presentation in your own time zone, a West Coast advantage we should do more to exploit in future.

As Kevin noted, my presentation today is based on a work in progress that has been 40 years in the making. In 1988 my biography of John Fairbank was published (*John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China*, Basil Blackwell, 1988) based on a decade of archival work with complete access to his papers and extensive interviews with the man himself and many of his students, colleagues and critics.

In the time since most of my writing and activities as Kevin noted have centred on Canada-China relations and multilateral security processes in the Asia Pacific.

Two years ago I returned to Fairbank to work on a second installment of the biography. In part this is because I located in collaboration with his daughters some materials in the Franklin, New Hampshire summer home (now transferred to the Pusey Library at Harvard) that were particularly interesting on the last few years of his life (he died in 1991) including his reaction to the Tiananmen Square events.

My further motive was abiding curiosity about what Fairbank means thirty years after his death in the three domains I traversed in the book. First, what is his contemporary relevance as a historian? Which of his writings are still being read and debated in the West and China? Second, what is his legacy as institution builder at Harvard and nationally? What parts of his philosophy and which of his creations are still identifiable and relevant? And third, what is his current resonance as a symbol and player in US-China relations at a time of great tumult?

In intellectual terms, Fairbank is of abiding interest as a specimen of a particular type of liberal American that is far from extinct. He was a progressive on domestic issues; an internationalist knowledgeable about the world and active in it; and he took civilizations as a basic building block for understanding what was possible and desirable in dealing with a country like China. He was skeptical about universals, never predicted convergence or an end of history, and saw folly in Western efforts to advance their core values and institutions (religious or political) across civilizational lines. A clash of civilizations was possible but also avoidable based on deep understanding and the fact that there were areas of overlap that could provide the foundation for coexistence.

My presentation today has an instrumental purpose. Graham Allison’s 2018 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Avoid the Thucydides Trap?* Riffs off of Thucydides’ claim that the Peloponnesian was precipitated by the rise of Athenian power and the fear that this caused in Sparta. Looking at a variety of what political scientists like to call hegemonic transitions since, Allison does not predict that war is inevitable. Rather he argues that unless extraordinary measures are taken to avoid it, war is a very real possibility, even a likelihood. In collaboration with several of his Harvard colleagues, he’s actively exploring and debating what those extraordinary measures might be—diplomatically, politically and intellectually.

Graham asked me whether Fairbank could help. This presentation frames my answer.

It will focus on Fairbank in the 1950s. In a China-focused career that started when he was based in China as a research student in 1932, his life and work stretched across domestic upheavals and war in China and multiple chapters in the ups and downs in US-China relations in the 20th century. It would be tempting to trace his views and role in the optimistic era when he was pushing hard for what later would be called “engagement” of China and the “normalization” of US-China relations.

It is the 1950’s, however, that seem to more closely resemble the emotions and mood of the current moment.

The 1950s were an era of full-scale confrontation with the PRC, including during the Korean War, the sanctions and diplomatic isolation that followed. China was not just an adversary but a full-blown enemy.

In the 1950s there was a deep consensus around a policy of containment and isolation in Washington, the media and the public with little credible opposition to it. Orthodoxy and consensus.

In the 1950s developments inside China including land reform, anti-rightist campaigns, the Great Leap Forward and the famine that followed, showed the brutality and violence of CCP leadership. China reasserted control over Tibet and Xinjiang and supported insurrections in several countries in Southeast Asia.

In the 1950s the domestic correlate of the Cold War was a virulent anti-communism at home. It was what Fairbank called “Open Season” on China specialists, McCarthyism, Congressional investigations—the Great Fear described by David Caute in which China was central theatre.

In the 1950s the field of Chinese studies was rent by deep divisions evident in the McCarran Hearings on Capitol Hill and in the investigation and prosecution of Owen Lattimore. The disagreements were intense, bitter, They went well beyond conventional agreement debate. Amplified by Congressional committees, intervention by security agencies, and super-heated media coverage, they raised matters of integrity and loyalty.

The 1950s and now are different in many important ways.

* the current US-China strategic competition has not yet produced overt military conflict;
* the current level of economic, diplomatic, and non-governmental interactions between the US remain enormous, at a level that could not even have been imagined sixty years ago when decoupling was virtually complete;
* and China is now no longer “over there” but on the doorsteps of Americans with a volume of information so vastly larger.
* the current slings and arrows used in academic debates have not spilled over into firings or Congressional investigations of *individual’s* views and behaviour even as they have focused on institutional transgressions and risks.

History may not repeat itself, or even rhyme, but there are sufficient similarities between the 1950s and the contemporary period to justify learning from those fraught and fearful times and how Fairbank tried to navigate them, both personally and as what we might now call an engaged scholar.

Fairbank’s *Chinabound*, his 1983 memoir, recounts his own experience -- with the Military Permit Review Board and the McCarran Hearings, his defence of Owen Lattimore, the labels of “communist sympathizer” and “communist apologist” that were directed at him by Time magazine and a young Congressman, John F. Kennedy, and the rancorous divisions in the China field. His contacts with the State Department were largely severed and he wrote only rarely on contemporary policy issues.

“It was a good time to write history,” he stated in *Chinabound*. And that he did with six books finished in the decade including his seminal *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* and the first volume, with Edwin Reischauer, of their East Asia textbook. He was able to establish the East Asia Research Center at Harvard and supervise some 40 doctoral dissertations.

The inner story revealed in his correspondence and in interviews adds another layer of the complexities of being a scholar at the height of the Cold War caught between a violent and aggressive China and a hostile and frightened United States. How to understand and explain Communist China without apologizing or whitewashing its actions and a trajectory so different from core American values?

Today I will focus on three aspects -- his particular form of liberal moral compass; his understanding of the scholar’s function in a time of public controversy and when operating at odds with the national consensus; and his prescription for contact with China in the midst of Cold War conflict.

**First, setting the moral compass**. How to reconcile his own value system with the violence, evils and horrors of Communist China? In the early 1940s when he was posted in Chungking with the OWI he had written frequently and forcefully about the failings of the Chiang Kai Shek and the Kuomintang in ways that were harsh, angry, and invoked American values. A decade later and for the remainder of his career he portrayed the PRC in a more nuanced way. It was not that he was unaware or emotionally disengaged from the harshness of Chinese Communist actions. Several of his closest Chinese friends fell victim to them.

Part of the answer lies in the intellectual scaffolding of civilizational and historical context that was latent in his early thinking and consolidated in his teaching and writing in the 1950s.

This took form in what he sometimes referred to as “managing his own values” as liberal progressive at home and a contextualist abroad. He was certainly aware on an almost daily basis of human rights violations, the virtual absence of democracy as it was practiced in the US, the specific evils of regime actions and social practices. Often he winced and occasionally he publicly commented upon them. But he did so with emphasis on understanding their origins and dynamics rather than making a judgment or condemnation. And he did so without the cathartic expectation that over time China would converge with Western conceptions of what we now would call freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

His colleague Rod MacFarquahar, who many in this room know, described this as the self-conscious detachment that is the hallmark of a particular brand of liberal academic, himself included. Fairbank and MacFarquhar were not alone, nor were they identical, in their commitment to this detachment. It came to be shared by many of their colleagues and students. It also brought upon them the censure of more conservative anti-communists and, more difficult, the anger and disappointment of other liberals whose value set included universal conceptions of human rights and democracy and a political project of encouraging, expecting and demanding their application in China. This tension was never more evident than in Fairbank’s reaction to Tiananmen Square in 1989. That’s for another day.

The flip side was managing his values and feelings about his own country. Throughout his life he was a consistent critic of American exceptionalism and the exportability of the American dream. Even as he pioneered sophisticated and detached work about the missionary movement in China and US-China diplomatic interactions, he did not accept the premise that US had the mandate or capacity to save China or change it.

In the late 1940s and 1950s as anti-communism pervaded America, he commented that America was more threatened by home-grown fascism than Soviet or Chinese communism abroad. During the darkest period of his own battle with Congressional committees and the loyalty debates, he shared privately his fears about America’s future even while keeping largely silent about them in public statements and writings.

**Second, defining the scholar’s role**. Fairbank helped build the ivory tower of university-based China scholarship but frequently ranged beyond it. For four years during the war, like many of his generation, he served in government and later was an active player in public debate, offering policy analysis and advice through frequent op eds, book reviews and essays.

In the 1950s, the decade when it was a good time to write history, that role was much diminished. He felt at odds with official policy, public attitudes and much of mainstream media coverage. His professional reputation was secure and expanding but he was well aware he held views that ran against the grain of popular opinion.

These surfaced in his 1959 speech Presidential address to the American Historical Association. He made the case for deeper understanding of China but also underlined the risks of being what now might would be called being a public intellectual.

“The Asia specialist becomes more and more important in his American environment as his grasp of Asian life gets thinner and thinner. Having started out as a scholar, he may wind up as ‘an Asia expert’, busily serving to the American public those answers which are already in the common mind, in a process of give-and-take which is touted as democratic discussion or even as policy formation, but which may be no more than collective auto-intoxication.”

This was not just a lament for being on the outside but an identification of different roles that scholar could play: as a professional academic whose credentials rest on academic accomplishment and recognition by peers; as an expert who used academic knowledge to inform public debate and policy formulation; and as a pundit speaking in the terms of mainstream opinion..

Through his career Fairbank played all three roles but was aware that they were three separate games, each with its own risks and rewards. He was certainly more comfortable in the first two and on occasion commented on how uncomfortable it made him feel to have to preface his own analysis with boiler plate condemnations of the evils of communism and his pro-American commitments before he could get into the key points he wanted to make. He encouraged his students to get their dissertations done before heading into public service or “premature” public engagement.

**And third, maintaining contact with China however possible**. In the period immediately after the outbreak of the Korean War, there was no viable option to containment and severe restrictions on Sino-American interactions imposed by both sides. Fairbank’s own contacts with friends and colleagues in China like Ch’ien Tuan-sheng were broken for more than a decade as they were identified as being too pro-American by the Party.

By the mid-1950s, however, Fairbank was making the case for “Containment without Isolation” and by the end of the decade “Contact and Competition, Not Containment.” He emphasized that self-strengthening was more important than shutting China out. The word “engagement” was not yet in use but he was advocating something very similar to it in favouring the normalization of diplomatic relations and doing whatever was possible to establish connections with China and deepen connections with people who studied China. He said at that point that it was his objective to know every China scholar in the world interested in modern China and he aimed to get a goodly number of them to Harvard. This philosophy of opening doors ran into a number of immediate obstacles but later took full flight when academic and other exchanges were possible.

Talking about China was the prelude to talking with China. As diplomatic relations thawed in the early 1970s, Fairbank, Bob Scalapino, Doak Barnett and others provided the intellectual rationale and leadership for opening doors, first though study missions and exchanges and later through student flows. The concept of opening had its opponents then as it does now in the views of intelligence agencies and Congressional critics.

Back to the original question posed by Graham Allison -- how can Fairbank of the 1950’s contribute to current efforts to forestall a Sin-American conflict in a period of power shift and growing fear of China in the United States. To be sure, Fairbank would share the premise of the question and was far from sanguine that conflict rooted in cultural differences and American desire for supremacy *could be* avoided.

He would almost certainly have been one of the 100 or signatories to the letter sent by more than a hundred academics, business people, and former senior officials and military leaders (many of whom were educated at Harvard or shared the Harvard ethos that Fairbank helped shape and absorbed) and published by the Washington Post on July 3rd this year. It offered seven propositions running against the current China confrontation consensus in Washington, among them that China is not an enemy or existential threat to the US, that engagement has been successful, and that “decoupling” be would costly and counter-productive

In concocting an antidote to fear, Fairbank’s life-long commitment was to deepen academic knowledge and learning. His own books and those of hundreds of students stand as a bulwark against the simplifications and distortions behind many of the images and arguments embedded in that confrontation, China-as-enemy, consensus.

But questions can surely be raised – why despite the hundreds of books, the hundreds of thousands of students who have been exposed to a Fairbankian liberal view of China is the dominant discourse running in a different direction? How to undercut the confrontation narrative that for the moment is ascendant? If knowledge is the antidote to fear, why is it not working?

One useful tool may be reframing the possibility for accommodation and compromise in US-China relations by looking not at the tragedy of the Peloponnesian war but China historical experience. Rather than seeing China as the binary understood in Western diplomacy--friend or adversary, competitor or cooperator-- what about partner/rival?

Here Fairbank would welcome the line of inquiry of his Harvard successors in re-investigating the Chanyuan Treaty between the Northern Sung and the Liao dynasties in 1004 that ended along period of fighting and ushered in a century of peace in which there were two Sons of Heaven recognized by each other.

Advocates of contact and engagement now need all the intellectual and political support they can get. This is certainly so here in the United States but also in Canada where the premises of Fairbank-style engagement have been mainstay for fifty years but now face a chorus of angry and emotional voices proclaiming a China threat and our own version of dis-engagement and decoupling.

We need more of Fairbank as do you. Based on my recent travels across the US, it is encouraging that elements of his thinking remain relevant and attractive in the Republic of California, the Republic of Cambridge and the independent kingdom of New York -- if not in the entire country.

I look forward to your questions and comments.