

Red Scare Recovery: The Ford Foundation's Role in Rescuing China after McCarthyism

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Council of Graduate Schools



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In the late 1940s and early 1950s, McCarthyism blighted the American intellectual landscape. The search for communists and communist sympathizers destroyed the careers of many scholars whose work touched on sensitive or controversial topics. It was exactly this “multistranded nature of McCarthyism” that made it so vexing for its antagonists and has made it such fertile ground for historians.¹

China scholars were one of the major strands of McCarthyite persecution. The victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War in October 1949 occurred as the winds of the Cold War began to blow across American domestic politics. Academic China specialists were easy to blame for America's “loss” of China to communism. Many had served in either the State Department or military intelligence. Their specialist knowledge gave them early insight into the weaknesses of the Chinese Nationalist regime and confidence in the CCP's ability to unseat them.

One of the most vocal China experts was Owen Lattimore.² Lattimore was unusual in the China studies field. American by birth, he had gained much of his knowledge of China exploring the country as a young man. He did not hold a doctorate, neither was he connected to any of the leading American China centers. Still, he published several highly regarded histories of China's northern and western frontiers with this work earning him the editorship of *Pacific Affairs*, the influential international journal of the Institute of Pacific Relations.³ During World War II, Lattimore served in the Office of War Information where he was frustrated by Nationalist intransigence and impressed by CCP resilience. At war's end, he published broad criticisms of the ongoing American support for a

Nationalist government that he believed had lost the support of the Chinese people and was doomed to failure.

Lattimore's outspoken criticism caught the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Labeled a "top American spy," Lattimore endured five years of investigation, which irreparably sullied his academic career in the United States. Making matters worse, many China specialists who were his friends and supporters were also investigated, most notably Harvard University's John K. Fairbank. The investigation of many prominent academic China specialists cast a pall over the field of China studies. Furthermore, some China specialists, like Karl Wittfogel from the University of Washington and David Rowe of Yale University, attested to the veracity of HUAC's accusations. By 1953, the China field was discredited and divided.

China scholars were deserted by many of their allies after the Lattimore case. University administrations were anxious to avoid hiring politically questionable scholars and many young scholars found that even the slightest whiff of political leftism disqualified them from teaching positions. Furthermore, the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) a think tank that was a centripetal force tying together China specialists from across the United States and the world, was driven into bankruptcy by an anticommunist investigation by Senator Patrick McCarran.

Though university abandonment and the folding of the IPR did much to damage the career prospects of American China specialists, the most harmful desertion was that of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF). Since the field's inception during the late 1920s, the RF was the backbone of funding for American China specialists. As historian Mary Brown Bullock has shown, "Rockefeller Trustees embraced humanistic inquiry as central to international understanding" and believed ignorance of foreign cultures would impede American foreign relations.⁴ To that end, the RF invested millions in the 1930s and 1940s to grow American expertise on China through funding educational centers at American universities, luring European experts to the United States to teach Chinese philology and history, and providing fellowships for promising students to receive training in Chinese language in Europe and Asia.⁵ Even with increased American governmental

support for China scholarship during World War II, the RF remained the primary funder of basic research in the Chinese area studies field in the postwar period.

China experts not actively investigated as suspected communists attempted to woo Rockefeller Foundation funding by attesting to their political bona fides as patriotic Americans. In an interview between RF officer David H. Stevens and University of Washington professor George E. Taylor, Taylor sought to convince Stevens to continue to fund the growth of the university's center for far eastern studies by noting that while his university did employ faculty members who had testified *against* suspected communists there was no known communist activity at the university. He also noted that while the University of Washington had taken a hard line against communist activity on campus, its position was moderate compared to the University of Texas "where legislators told the President that he must not employ either a professor or a student of communist membership or a private belief in communism."⁶ Another officer averred that "Washington looks surprisingly liberal against the background of recent state laws in Texas and Illinois."⁷ In fact, the University of Washington was able to parlay its anticommunism into an outsized role in the China field in the two decades after McCarthyism.

Despite attempts by Taylor and others to convince the Rockefeller Foundation that funding China studies ought to remain a priority, the organization largely abandoned the field after 1952. The proximate cause was the investigation of the RF by the Select Committee to Investigate Tax-Exempt Foundations and Comparable Organizations led by Edward E. Cox and B. Carroll Reece. While the Cox and Reece investigation was nominally to determine whether untaxed philanthropic foundations were continuing to operate in the spirit of their founding, there was special attention given to issue of whether or not these foundations were using their resources to support un-American activities. Indeed, the committee's final report did note that funds provided by the RF (as well as other philanthropic bodies) had altered American education by making it more international and political "sometimes deny[ing] the principles underlying the American way of life."⁸

Fortunately for American China experts, as the RF was drawing down its support for the field a rival philanthropic organization, the Ford Foundation (FF), was becoming interested in it. In 1952, FF planned the creation of an International Training and Research (ITR) division to support training and research into neglected areas of the world.⁹ To prepare for the division's creation and identify areas of need, the FF commissioned Carl Spaeth and Paul Langer to survey university resources (libraries, trained staff, departments, and so on) in a variety of world areas. Initial survey returns suggested that China was not a priority. As FF officer John Howard later noted, "the Far East was thought to be 'taken care of' so it [ITR] was pretty heavily South Asian, Southeast Asian oriented."¹⁰

Even though immediate returns were unsuccessful, as the ITR began operation in 1952, it became clear that greater attention to East Asia, and China in particular, was needed. While there were more university resources devoted to China than to many other parts of the world, those resources were largely antiquarian in nature. Since most American interest in China before World War II focused on early modern China as well as Chinese art and archaeology, many of the available university library collections and department resources remained focused on those subjects. There was a particularly glaring need for social scientists fluent in Chinese and knowledgeable about China. "[W]e didn't have economists, we didn't have political scientists, and so on, who knew about the Far East," John Howard noted about the early ITR, "so that was melded in before the process [of creating ITR] was finished."

Even though the Ford Foundation recognized the need for more China experts trained in the social sciences, there was work to do before it agreed to fund such an expansive (and expensive) undertaking. McCarthyism was beginning to ebb in 1953, but the China field remained bitterly divided politically. Luminaries in the field had accused one another of tainting their research with political bias and using their positions as experts to mislead their students and the American public. Making matters worse, the war in Korea brought the United States and the People's Republic of China to the brink of war, which made conducting any sort of field research in China impossible. These challenges meant rehabilitating the field's reputation, while revolutionizing its tried methods for producing scholarly

research. The Ford Foundation would be taking a significant risk by pouring money into such a politically outcast and intellectually tumultuous field.

To reinvent Chinese area studies, leaders in the field collaborated with Ford Foundation officers to create a series of private committees that would insulate researchers from public political criticism. At the outset, the Langer survey had noted a lack of leadership in the China field as one of its central problems.¹¹ In early conversations between the FF and university experts, however, two enemies emerged as leaders: Harvard University's John K. Fairbank and the University of Washington's George E. Taylor. Fairbank and Taylor had been rivals since the 1930s. With the rise of McCarthyism, however, that personal animosity became refracted through the prism of red-baiting. Though Taylor never directly called Fairbank a communist, he supported one of his most ardent accusers, Karl Wittfogel, as a friend and colleague. At the same time, Fairbank had cast aspersions on Taylor and Wittfogel to the Rockefeller Foundation through his brother-in-law, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who called them "almost as repugnant as those who regard Stalin as defensible."¹² Still, by 1954, it had become clear to both Fairbank and Taylor that if their field were to survive, they would need to work together to heal the wound caused by McCarthyism.

The first of these committees was the Joint Committee on Contemporary China (JCCC). This committee was formed in 1956 with the purpose of helping the Ford Foundation – and later other philanthropies – determine which research projects to support. The committee focused on contemporary China because it fit most neatly within ITR's mandate and was politically delicate after McCarthyism. The committee model provided a useful vetting process for projects dealing with contemporary China. If a project was too controversial or did not seem possible given American lack of access to the Chinese mainland, it could be declined in committee before reaching a broader public audience or wasting valuable foundation dollars. Furthermore, since the JCCC was a closed committee, it was a safe space to air grievances left over from the earlier McCarthy period. Over the next ten years, the JCCC dispersed nearly six million dollars to university China programs.¹³ The committee model was so successful that it was adopted by other organizations like the Social Science Research Council and American Council of

Learned Societies to distribute funds to the China field.

Despite JCCC's success funding the field, the move to closed committee funding signaled an abandonment of many of China studies' founding principles. Early pioneers like Mortimer Graves wanted to build the field to disseminate knowledge of modern China widely.¹⁴ Instead, JCCC projects sought a purely academic audience with little room for public engagement. Furthermore, it exacerbated institutional inequalities within the China field. Though the Ford Foundation lavished money on contemporary China specialists, it only did so to academics representing a few institutions. Indeed, of the nearly \$6 million given to the field, almost all of it went to five universities.¹⁵ Other institutions were left to fight over the less than half a million dollars provided by the RF and Carnegie Corporation.

Ultimately, the result of the FF's financial rescue of the contemporary China studies field was a more politically stable and fiscally secure climate for leading scholars and their students to conduct research in the United States. It kicked off a period known as the "Development Decade," where China specialists at elite universities expanded the field into the social sciences and repaired relationships with the national security state that had fractured during McCarthyism.¹⁶ China specialists were no longer marginalized figures, but instead part of the liberal coalition of university professors, business leaders, government officials, and philanthropy officers that flourished during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

At the same time, the elite control of China scholarship by a few institutions made many scholars uneasy. Conservative scholars, many of whom were not invited to participate in the field's committee culture, believed they were being blacklisted by their peers. While the written evidence to support these accusations are limited and some conservatives (notably George Taylor) were active on these committees, the most vociferous McCarthy supporters were largely absent. Though less vocal than their conservative counterparts, leftist China specialists were also not invited to participate in JCCC and other committees. Many, like Owen Lattimore, had been so thoroughly harassed by red-baiters that they withdrew from the field altogether. Still, as Fabio Lanza has shown, it would be a younger generation of

radical China specialists coming of age during the Vietnam War that would break the political consensus caused by the committee model and force a restructuring of the field during the 1970s.¹⁷

Ford Foundation investment in China studies in the mid-1950s provided an essential lifeline to a field decimated by McCarthyism. The millions that Ford invested replaced (and eventually exceeded) the support given by the Rockefeller Foundation during the 1930s and 1940s. FF pressure compelled warring factions within the China field to put their differences aside and form committees to better govern and more efficiently allocate funds to promising programs. This investment came at a cost, however. These closed committees were by design opaque to outsiders, which included the public the field was created to educate. They also served to make the field more elitist by concentrating funds at a few prestigious institutions. The FF rescue was vital, but in saving the field for an elite coterie of academic specialists, the organization unwittingly compelled China specialists to abandon its commitment to public education.

¹ Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998): xv.

² The best biography on Lattimore remains, Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³ Owen Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* is one of the first great American works of China scholarship. See, Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1940).

⁴ Mary Brown Bullock, *The Oil Prince's Legacy: Rockefeller Philanthropy in China* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011): 70.

⁵ These three areas of need are clearly defined in L. Carrington Goodrich's Memorandum to the Rockefeller Foundation on September 17, 1929. Memorandum from Doctor L.C. Goodrich (Columbia University, New York City), September 17, 1929, Rockefeller Foundation Records (hereafter RF), RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 220, Folder 2638 (Columbia University – Far Eastern Studies, 1929-1935), Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter RAC). For more detailed information about the process of establishing the field of Far Eastern Studies during the 1930s, see, Matthew D. Linton, "Understanding the Might Empire: Chinese Area Studies and the Construction of Liberal Consensus, 1928-1979," Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2018 (21-78).

⁶ Diary of David H. Stevens, "Interview with George E. Taylor," March 28, 1949, RF, RG 1.1, 253 R, Box 3, Folder 22 (University of Washington – Far Eastern Studies, 1949), RAC.

⁷ RSM Interview with George E. Taylor, March 29, 1949, RF, RG 1.1, 253 R, Box 3, Folder 22, RAC.

⁸ Norman Dodd, "The Dodd Report to the Reece Committee on Foundations" (New York City: The Long House, Inc., 1954): 7.

⁹ Interestingly, though not immediately successful, leading China specialist John K. Fairbank joined by American Council of Learned Society's Mortimer Graves met with Spaeth in May 1951 about the idea of creating a division to "acknowledge the importance of a wider and deeper knowledge of Asia in American education." Letter from Lawrence Sickman to Knight Biggerstaff, May 24, 1951, HUGFP 12.8 John K. Fairbank Papers, Box 13, Folder – ACLS, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁰ Interview with John B. Howard conducted by Charles T. Morrissey, February 13, 1973, Session Number 1, New York City, Ford Foundation Records (hereafter FF), Oral History Project, Series 4: Transcripts, Box 2, Folder – Howard, John B., RAC.

¹¹ Letter from Paul Langer to Cleon O. Swayzee and David C. Munford, October 17, 1954, FF, RG 1 Subject Files, Box 6, Folder – China: Paul F. Langer, RAC.

¹² Letter from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Charles Burton Fahs, December 5, 1951, RF, Cox and Reece Investigation, Series 1, Digest Files, Box 5, Folder 90 (Far Eastern Association, 1949-51), RAC.

¹³ International Training and Research, Social Science Research Council Support for Modern China Studies, 1, FF, RG 1 Subject Files, Box 6, Folder – China: Exchange Fellowships, 1956-1960, RAC.

¹⁴ Matthew D. Linton, "Any Enlightened Government: Mortimer Graves' Plan for a National Center of Far Eastern Studies, 1935-1946," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 24, No. 1 (Spring 2017): 7-27.

¹⁵ Those universities were Harvard University, the University of Washington, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and Columbia University. [Social Science Research Council Support for Modern China Studies, 1.](#)

¹⁶ For a longer discussion of the Development Decade in China studies see, Linton, "Understanding the Mighty Empire," 181-240.

¹⁷ Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 27-34.