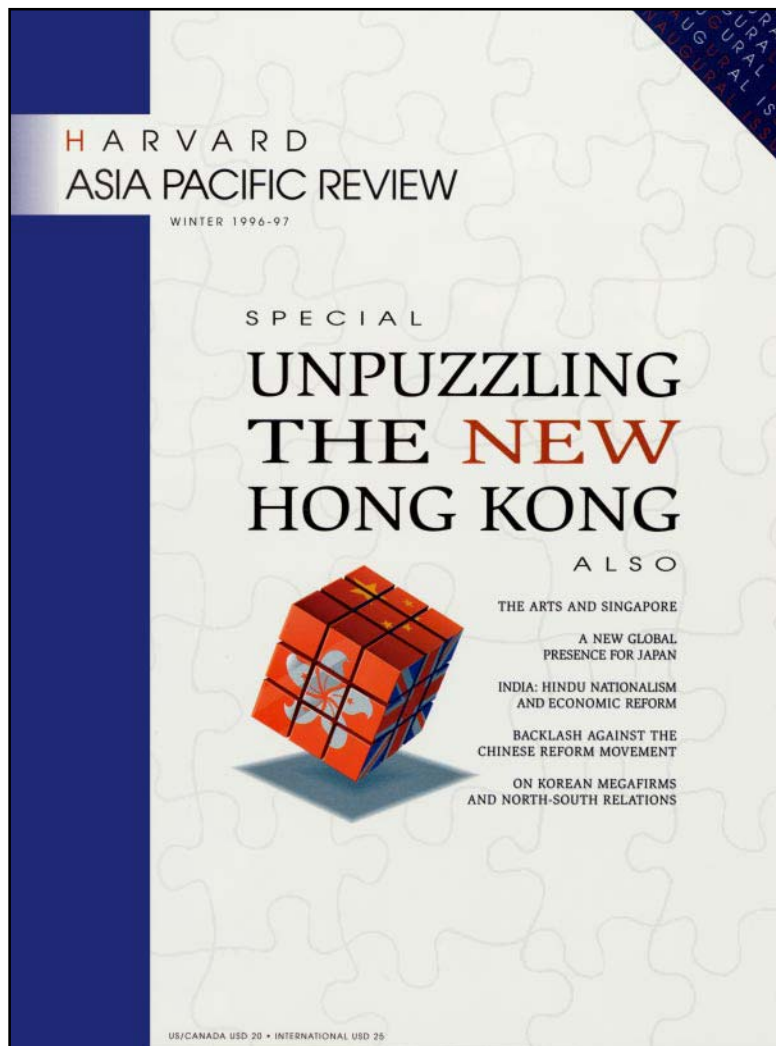


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## Comment

WILLIAM P. ALFORD

# Looking Beyond

Placing area studies front and center in policy, academia, and beyond



**T**HE STUDENTS RESPONSIBLE FOR the *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* are to be commended—not merely for their obvious ingenuity and hard work in establishing a new and highly professional publication, nor even for their generosity in providing those of us in the sheltered groves of academe the opportunity to join such an illustrious list of contributors from the public arena in this issue. Rather, the students who bring you this *Review* are to be commended for their prescience in establishing a publication that points to the future, both in its subject matter and the composition of its editorial staff.

It may be a truism to note the economic, social, and political dynamism of China and Asia more generally, and to under-

score its growing prominence in the United States, whether in policy, academic, or broader circles. And it may also be a truism to take account of the growing internationalization, diversification, and sophistication of today's students with respect to Asia, especially at Harvard and other leading universities. But truisms or not, the fact remains that at least as concerns the American government, and even the academic world, these fundamental lessons have yet to be imbibed.

Consider the following, which are but two examples of a much broader phenomenon. President Clinton's National Security Advisor had never been to the People's Republic of China until arriving there this summer for three days of negotiations with the highest levels of Chinese officialdom. The American equivalent of a minister of international trade, the acting United States Trade Representative, had never been to Japan before arriving there for intense negotiations over contentious commercial concerns three years ago.

My point here is not to single out these individuals for personal criticism. They are both enormously talented and hardworking, and briefed themselves extensively in advance of their missions. Nonetheless, important though these attributes and this advance work may be, these, ultimately, are no substitute for the type of understanding of other societies that requires sufficient first-hand contact so that one has both an appreciation of how others view points of contention and a context into which to put second-hand information—whatever one's negotiating bottom line. Is it any wonder that American negotiators regularly complain about the failure of their Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian counterparts to do what Washington had expected they would do?

The officials in these examples are Democrats, but the problem they exemplify transcends party lines, as the following illustration indicates. If the Republican-led Congress has its way, the chances of having a National Security Advisor or

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**The New Diplomacy: a fashion statement to unite diverse societies**

USTR with meaningful educational or professional experience in Asia (or anywhere abroad) are likely to be substantially diminished. On the educational side, the current Congress has sharply cut the very funds used to send Americans abroad for foreign study, bring foreigners here to enrich our instructional programs, and sustain area studies—all in the aftermath of earlier Congressional cuts and (as will be described below) a retrenchment on the part of many non-governmental funders.

On the professional side, at the end of 1995, under then Senate Majority Leader Dole's sponsorship, the Congress by law barred anyone who had ever represented a foreign government or government-owned company from ever serving as a senior official in the office of the USTR. This provision has already worked to keep the current head of the office, who is as vigorous a proponent of American positions as one could find, from dropping the "acting" before her title.

Although they may be easiest to criticize, it is not merely the current crop of politicians who are responsible for what might be termed a retreat from the hard work and complexity needed to understand and effectively engage other societies. Ironically, American universities and foundations, which really should know better, are also at fault. Citing the need to be more broadly theoretical, the social sciences have in recent years been moving further and further away from the intensive study of particular regions and civilizations, with some specialists and academic administra-

tors going as far as to denigrate the very endeavor as pedestrian and parochial.

Important professional groups and foundations have followed suit, merging area-focused funding panels or divisions into more thematically oriented bodies and reducing funding for American institutions of higher learning. Obviously, those who would do sophisticated work in area studies must deal both in theory and with a recognition of the impact of trends that transcend regional boundaries. And, just as obviously, it is critical that American foundations and nongovernmental organizations direct their resources and energies to worthy recipients abroad. To argue to the contrary would be both unreasonable and unwise for anyone espousing the need for a greater attention to internationalism.

The foregoing cannot, however, substitute for a continued intellectual and financial commitment in this country to high-quality scholarship, teaching and associated activity regarding other societies. Without such work, public, private, and scholarly endeavor will surely be diminished. Again, examples illustrate the point. It is well and good to invoke high theory, but how is one to assess the worthiness of conflicting claims about the status of Taiwan—which issue brought US and PRC military forces into uncomfortably close proximity with one another—without an understanding of history, culture, and current consciousness on both sides of the Taiwan Straits? One need only think of the tragic consequences for both this country and Asia of the fact that Robert McNamara

and other American leaders of the 1960s made no effort to learn even the most rudimentary lessons of Vietnamese history (though the needed expertise was readily at hand) before fashioning policy. Sheer smarts and fancy abstraction only get one so far.

But it is by no means only in the policy context that the rigorous study of distant societies has value. Unless informed by the experience of a broad range of societies, theory generated in the American academy (or, for that matter, the academy of any society) runs the risk of presuming its own experience to be universal and of enlisting that of others superficially, inaccurately, or only as convenient to prove its preconceived points. One would think that for persons committed to the crafting of theory aspiring to universal validity, a serious understanding of Asia—representing many of the world's oldest civilizations, most dynamic economies, and largest populations—would prove indispensable.

To take but two examples, those who see deconstructionism as largely a product of the postmodern era might well acquaint themselves with the *Chuang Tzu* and other early Taoist works, while their compatriots extolling the post-Cold War triumph of *laissez-faire* economics could well benefit from a more probing examination of Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and even Hong Kong.

What, then, does all this have to do with China, the region and the *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* more broadly? China is now

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undergoing what appears to be one of the more extraordinary transformations in modern history. The process of industrial revolution that took a century in Britain and many decades in the United States and Japan is literally happening in less than a single generation on the Chinese mainland. It is occurring at a time when the globalization of capital, markets, information, and other technologies introduce challenges barely, if at all, thought of in earlier centuries. It is occurring for a China that on the one hand feels exuberant over her resurgence and confident about her future, and on the other feels threatened at every turn by the West and deeply anxious about her own capacity to move ahead constructively. It is occurring in a region that itself has recently undergone unprecedented economic, political, and social changes with major implications for China, and with much more in store. Consider, for example, the implications of the effort to reabsorb Hong Kong for both China and the region, not to mention Hong Kong itself. Both those who shape the policy of the United States and other important nations toward China, as well as the rest of us whose lives will be affected by those decisions, need to understand as much as we can about that complex society.

The type of leadership succession issues that dominate attention are important, but so are a host of less dramatic issues. What will serve in China as public morality and a basis for state legitimacy in the face of the erosion of faith in traditional mores and contemporary ideology? Will China's leaders be willing and able to relinquish sufficient control over society to allow the legitimate concerns of workers and other citizens to find constructive channels? How can China stem environmental degradation of historic proportions while considering the need to improve materially the lives of a quarter of humanity? What is and should be the interplay between China and current international norms, be they regarding rights, trade, or whatever?

Broad theory will be indispensable, but so will a deep understanding of the history and contemporary circumstances of China and the other nations of Asia. The editors of the *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* are not only helping to enlighten us all about this, but they exemplify the type of young world citizens who embody that needed knowledge and who one day will bring that richness to bear as they sit across international negotiating tables from one another. ■

## Essay

PETER LO

# Goodbye to All That

What 1997 leaves behind

ON JULY 1, 1997 THE GOVERNMENT of the People's Republic of China will resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong. What will that mean in practice? Hong Kong people are passionately interested in the answer. Unfortunately that cannot be known, not really, until after the big day. In the meantime we can only make do with educated guesses, or simply, fortune-telling.

The movers and shakers are of course not standing idly by, but "the people," the silent majority, are quite powerless, and can only emulate the stoicism of Brutus before the battle at Philippi (as portrayed by Shakespeare): "O that a man might know / The end of this day's business ere it come ! / But it sufficeth that the day will end, / And then the end is known."

Although the end is not yet known, the impending event has "concentrated people's minds wonderfully," putting many things into an unaccustomed perspective. Nobody alive can remember when Hong Kong was not a British colony. In recent years the use of the "C" word has been studiously avoided by "Government" (customarily referred to in English without the definite article—as in "God"), but there is no legal ambiguity about Hong Kong's constitutional status. Its founding charter was the Letters Patent dated April 5, 1843:

"I—Victoria, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen. Defender of the Faith. To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting. Know ye that We, of Our special Grace, certain knowledge, and mere motion, have thought fit to erect, and Do hereby erect, Our Island of Hong Kong and its Dependencies, situate between 22° 9' and 22° 21' North Latitude, and 114°

6' and 114° 18' East Longitude from the Meridian of Greenwich, into a separate Colony, and the said Island and its Dependencies is hereby erected into a separate Colony accordingly, to be known and designated as the Colony of Hong Kong."

The Letters Patent were supplemented by subsequent instruments, including the Royal Instructions. Their theme was "the peace, order, and good government" of the Colony. Together they comprise Hong Kong's constitutional documents under British rule. However, the imperial pomp evinced by the Letters Patent and the Royal Instructions will be brought to an abrupt end by the Hong Kong Act 1985: "As from July 1, 1997 Her Majesty shall no longer have sovereignty or jurisdiction over any part of Hong Kong."

The announced setting of the imperial sun over Hong Kong has one curious effect: it is as if a familiar theatrical set had suddenly been laid bare without the drama. So it is with the props of empire in Hong Kong. Of course stage effect is part of government and politics anywhere in the world. Ronald Reagan, when asked how an actor could become President of the United States, said he couldn't see how anybody not an actor could become President. The Hong Kong show has had a long run under British auspices. Soon a new production will be substituted for the old. What it will be like remains to be seen, but the extraordinary incongruity of the old show, or at least certain features thereof, has become more apparent with its imminent closure.

In a famous line which is always quoted out of context, Rudyard Kipling asserts: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." As a matter of historical fact East and West did meet, in Hong Kong and elsewhere. As with such meetings, there was no meeting of minds, although results were produced. In the case of Hong Kong the meetings were all hostile, in spite of the fact that the various treaties ("unequal" from the

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