

A Major Turning Point in International Studies

*Speech to the Committee on University Resources
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VIRTUALLY EVERYONE in any field of “regional studies” or “area studies” is a virtuoso more or less by definition: there are so few of them to cover so much of what is “out there,” and each faculty member may have to cope with an entire string of dynasties, or a large bundle of rebellions and revolutions. I myself once specialized in English lyric poetry from the 1530s to about the 1630s, and even that seemed quite a stretch at times. But we ask our East Asian scholars (as well as those in Middle Eastern studies, Latin American studies, and other analogous fields) to bestride whole centuries and even continents. And they carry it off in a remarkable way.

Therefore, the first point worth remembering when we discuss regional and international studies is that they present unusually difficult challenges. They require versatility and elasticity. They also typically involve the ability to manage, deftly and fluently, two, three, or more languages (often complicated languages). And the

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people, cultures, and documents to be studied are not nearby. It is difficult enough for the rest of us to understand the pattern and meaning of events close to home, where we speak the language and know the customs. To try to do the same in China, or Korea, or Japan, or Vietnam demands formidable scholarship, a special kind of imagination and human perceptiveness, decades of experience, and great perseverance against what are sometimes heavy odds.

It is not surprising, therefore, that these fields of study are far from easy to launch, and are usually very slow to develop. Harvard had been in existence approximately 250 years before the first course in Mandarin Chinese was taught, and it was not at all clear whether anyone was actually interested in taking it. Finding students, developing faculty, acquiring books and scholarly journals and other research materials, raising funds to endow professorships, or to support travel and research, or to create fellowships for graduate students – all of these matters take literally decades.

Harvard's first real library and research center on China (and I will focus to some extent on China, mainly because it was the first Asian country to receive serious academic attention here and in several other American universities) was the Harvard-Yenching Institute, founded in 1928. That was rather early for higher education in the United States, but perhaps rather late from the point of view of China. By the mid-1930s, we had laid modest foundations for work in the earlier periods of Chinese history, literature, art, and related subjects. But it was still a slender enterprise, and might well have continued so indefinitely, if the external world had not erupted in ways that changed the course of history dramatically.

Let me focus for a moment on a single day in 1935. A Harvard freshman studying European history found himself cramming for examinations in a Boylston Hall room that he described as "crowded, sweaty, and steamy." He noticed, on the other side of the corridor, a large chamber that looked empty and tranquil, so he quietly slipped across the way, where the air seemed more

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fragrant. The room turned out to be the library of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. The shelves were lined with handsome blue-bound volumes, printed on fine rice paper and studded with unfamiliar characters. Years later, the one-time freshman recalled his experience:

As I became more and more and more accustomed to the... atmosphere, and my eyes rested on the scrolls of calligraphy on the walls, I began to feel at home. The Boston Latin School had given me reading knowledge of Latin, German, and French... Hebrew was the language... I spoke best after my native English. Why not, then, take a giant step, and add Chinese to my languages — and find out what the blue-bound volumes said.¹

So began the journey of one young student (ultimately a distinguished writer and a member of our Board of Overseers) to learn about China and Asia. At the time, undergraduates had just been granted (against the will of many faculty) the right to study the Chinese language. Only graduate students had been eligible before then. A grand total of five students (three at the doctoral level, and just two undergraduates) were enrolled in the introductory course. One of the two undergraduates failed, more or less immediately. Our hero survived and received an A. He then went on to be the only person in his Harvard class concentrating in Chinese studies. His tutor was a recently minted Ph.D. — the only person on the Harvard faculty teaching any topics in Chinese history beyond the eighteenth century. The tutor was convinced that the recent “Long March” of Mao Tse-tung was an epoch-making event.

The young undergraduate and the youthful instructor became an adventurous pair of exploratory modernists. They worked intensively together, even as wars in the Pacific and in Europe were beginning. In his senior year, the student won a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship. He left New York in September 1938, on a bunk bed deep in the hold of the SS *President Roosevelt*. He wrote:

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My sense of history was drawing me outward [toward Asia].... I hoped eventually to come back to Harvard. But first I must satisfy curiosity, my absolute lust to see what was happening in the China I had studied. How did history actually happen?²

The student was Theodore White, who gradually shifted his focus from China to the United States, and later wrote *The Making of the President, 1960*, among other volumes. And the young tutor was John King Fairbank, magister of modern Chinese studies for decades afterward.

That was how the second half century of Harvard Chinese studies, from the late 1930s to the 1980s, began: one undergraduate who was interested in languages and history, a peaceful room with intriguing books in the Yenching library, a committed young teacher and scholar, earth-shattering events in the world outside, and a fellowship grant that allowed the student, after his tutelage, to set off on his own to see for himself what was actually happening on the other side of the globe.

Here, in this one vignette, we can see how a number of different factors can sometimes converge and catalyze entire fields of learning. Fortunately, Chinese studies at Harvard had progressed just enough to provide the basis for that next major leap, to a new phase of rapid and intensive development. But that leap would never have happened if far-reaching transformations had not already been under way in China, and in Asia more generally.

As we know, within the space of a single short decade (between the late 1930s and the late 1940s), Japan had begun and lost the war in the Pacific; that earlier and relatively tranquil China, which included merchant traders and Christian missionaries, had been replaced by the new revolutionary China of Mao Tse-tung; and a previously isolationist America had become an engaged international power. In addition, by the late 1940s, a small but growing number of people in the United States had begun to believe that the study of China, Japan, and other Asian countries was impor-

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tant, not only for itself; it now seemed increasingly essential in terms of national security and world politics.

For the next three decades, international studies enjoyed a boom, made possible by the strong support of the federal government, several foundations, and many individual donors. Departments, research centers, and institutes were established. The governing purpose was to focus not only on individual countries, but also on specific regions of the world: East or Southeast Asia, the Middle East or the Near East, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, and other areas. The growth was spectacular compared to anything and everything that had ever happened before in such studies. But it still fell short when compared to the real needs or to the substantial resources available in much more established fields of knowledge. And that is why we must still rely so much on professorial virtuosity.

In fact, the needs and the demands are now so great that the gap between our present number of faculty and the mission to be accomplished has widened since even a decade ago. Why is this the case? The reason is quite clear: the world has changed dramatically (and the pace of technological innovation has accelerated) in ways that have created far more pressure for more information and knowledge, with less response time and more demand for precision. We are at another major turning point in international studies, and we need to think clearly about our educational goals for the period ahead.

Think for a moment about the real-world changes that have taken place since the late 1980s. The combination of them is more deeply transformative than at first we might suspect. The breakup of the Soviet Union, ending forty years of superpower Cold War, was certainly the single most significant event. In addition, there have been the different but steady effort to create peace in the Middle East, the sudden sea change in South Africa, the continued opening up of China, the shift throughout much of Latin America toward more democratic governments. The list goes on:

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powerful changes, sometimes happening simultaneously, that even in 1980 would have seemed unimaginable.

We have also witnessed the widespread shift in the direction of free-market economies, the privatization of many state monopolies and services, the increasing belief that economic entrepreneurship and controlled growth are crucial to political and other forms of stability.

Then, there is the revolution in modern information technologies, including telecommunications. Suddenly, it is essentially impossible to insulate any nation or people from ideas, news, video, and the free flow of e-mail or satellite broadcasts to (and from) the most remote corners of the world. There can still be, and there is, much oppression in the world. But there can no longer be impenetrable iron curtains that isolate entire areas or regions from world opinion. That single fact marks an enormous shift in human history.

Finally, in spite of the strife and even war that we continue to witness in so many places (the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Zaire, Albania, Nigeria, Rwanda, Bulgaria, Peru, Ireland, and elsewhere), it is nonetheless clear that most of the world community has developed a strong consensus in favor of limiting such conflicts and attempting somehow to resolve them, rather than exploit them in order to provoke larger-scale war.

For at least the past two centuries, and in fact much longer, many nations have operated on the assumption that war was an effective instrument of state power, so long as there seemed a reasonable chance of coming out ahead. But for several years now, most major powers appear to have concluded that aggressive full-scale war in the nuclear age makes it difficult to imagine how anyone can conceivably come out ahead. The stakes are simply too high.

Most, if not all, of the developments I have just described have been positive. And yet, it is also obvious that they have not resulted

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in a New World Order. They have unleashed a multitude of old rivalries – political, religious, ethnic, racial, tribal, economic, and territorial. They have also demonstrated again how exceptionally difficult it is to create and sustain successful institutions of government – or effective legal systems, or a private economic sector that operates with a high degree of stability and integrity. The alternative to totalitarian or authoritarian regimes may possibly be some form of democracy. But it may also be the equivalent of a social and political vacuum, leading to a process of civic chaos and collapse, followed by a return to authoritarianism. How to create a strong infrastructure, how to build effective and participatory structures for governing, how to reduce the ferocity of age-old hostilities among different groups, and how to do this across the entire globe: these are some of the most formidable challenges of the present moment.

Fifty years ago, it took great vision and determination to recognize that it would be far better to help reconstruct Germany, and all of Europe, far better to help Japan regain its strength as a society, than to seek the kind of immense vindictive reparations that followed in the wake of World War I. In the 1920s and 1930s, we discovered what can happen to nations that are crippled economically and embittered politically. As an antidote to that earlier experience, the Marshall Plan and similar efforts were born.

Today's situation is more complex – less clearly focused and more diffuse – but it is no less difficult. The number of countries and peoples at risk has multiplied substantially. The number of nations where provocative or violent events can create a crisis of international proportions has also grown. The challenge of constructing and maintaining an intricately balanced and cooperative international system, or a constantly negotiated process that might result in a reasonable degree of world order, is huge in its dimensions and unpredictable in its likely outcomes. What policies do we follow in order to realize such a vision? We are beginning to learn some of the essential tasks, but we still know far too little about other nations, regions, and peoples of the world.

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Without such knowledge and experience, we cannot possibly act in an informed and effective way in order to achieve the broad goals that I have been discussing.

Meanwhile, the amount of information available to everyone is greater by far than ever before. Many more archives, libraries, and other institutional sources of information are now open. Many societies are more accessible: people in dozens and dozens of countries can now be interviewed easily, and they discuss matters more freely than a brief decade ago. For universities, therefore, the job of seeking to understand and reinterpret the history and culture of many “known” nations and peoples is itself a massive undertaking, even as we also try to understand enough about the many less familiar societies with which we now interact.

In other words, we must now expect to survey a scene that is essentially worldwide or global in nature. And we ourselves are an inescapable part of that scene yet we understand far too little about it. Given the fact that the world has changed significantly in the last decade, it is clear that the university’s international agenda must also change.

What, then, are some of the implications for Harvard? Education in itself can do only so much. But education has come to be seen, correctly, as indispensable if we are to have any chance at all of analyzing and addressing exceptionally difficult problems and situations that confront the world today. Allow me to sketch the barest outlines of a provisional agenda for the future.

First, we must continue to deepen our knowledge of individual cultures, nations, and regions. Otherwise, we will have no real basis for understanding the fundamental attitudes, beliefs, viewpoints, and expectations of people in other countries. A “global” perspective is not a substitute for “local” or regional perspectives.

Second, we must make it easier for faculty in the various regional centers based in the arts and sciences to collaborate with faculty in our professional schools – business, divinity, design, education, government, law, medicine, and public health. We must develop a more comprehensive and complex view of par-

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ticular societies and regions. That can be achieved only by drawing together individuals from a wide number of disciplines and fields across the entire University.

Fortunately, our regional centers and departments in Arts and Sciences are already doing precisely that: creating stronger relationships with colleagues throughout Harvard, in order to share knowledge; seeking a deeper understanding of issues and problems that require an interdisciplinary and interfaculty approach.

Third, we need to make it easier for faculty and students who are studying one particular region, such as Asia, to work more closely with those involved in other regions, such as Latin America or Eastern Europe. Not all such connections make sense. But as regional economies develop (and become more intertwined), or as religious or political ideas and movements migrate across boundaries, there is obviously a greater need to study such developments at a transregional or worldwide level. It is an oversimplification to say that this is the moment in modern history when we are expanding our vision from a predominantly regional approach, which has been the governing model in international studies since World War II, to one that is essentially global. But there is more than a single grain of truth in the idea.

Fourth, we must continue to identify those important topics that are in fact transregional, so that we can give them the sustained attention they deserve. Environmental issues are obviously one such subject. Pollution and ozone loss affect everyone, everywhere, not simply the people in a particular country or area. The emergence of powerful, widespread religious movements is another significant topic. The complex problems faced by emerging and fragile democracies or developing economies constitute additional topics. The multiple causes of ethnic, religious, or racial strife in different societies are yet another subject. The analysis of conflict resolution and of the essential factors in creating a successful peace process is another fertile field for greater exploration. All these subjects (and others) can benefit greatly from

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research and discussion by individuals who approach them from different points of view, with different skills and methodologies, and who can therefore pool their insights and ways of thinking in order to extend their scope and reach.

Fifth, we should encourage more of our own students to study, work, and travel abroad during some part of their education. Similarly, we have to continue to bring students from foreign countries to Harvard, both to widen our own perspectives and to enable students from abroad to have contact with American students and the United States, including its institutions and values. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can replace the sustained, direct contact that takes place within a diverse community of students and faculty if we want to increase mutual understanding and the chances for cooperation in the world at large.

Finally, I believe we must think more carefully about the contribution that Harvard can make at advanced levels of education – at mid-career or executive levels in the professional schools, as well as in Arts and Sciences. If we consider our own comparative advantage and examine what we are best able to offer other countries in the form of assistance in higher education, then it seems clear that we are in a position to help educate and train individuals from abroad who are already in positions of some responsibility and leadership but who need to strengthen their skills and deepen their insights in order to be even more effective.

There is now a vast need in dozens and dozens of countries for well-trained government officials, institutional managers and leaders, business entrepreneurs, public health officials and doctors, urban planners, international lawyers, and economists, as well as academics and educators. Without such people, there is very little hope that many of the world's societies can become, or remain, stable. There is little prospect that they will be able to achieve levels of basic political and economic well-being. Relatively few nations have higher education systems that are sufficiently developed. Even fewer offer graduate and professional education opportunities of the highest quality. And fewer still

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can create exceptional programs for individuals in mid-career or in positions of significant responsibility. The investment in such individuals can have a powerful “multiplier effect” in societies that desperately need people capable of managing complex institutions – including entire nations or economies or health care systems.

The agenda I have just outlined is very substantial. It will not be easy to achieve, and it will take time. But our new Asia Center is taking shape. In addition, Harvard has (in the past five years) established the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies; it has strengthened the Korea Institute and been helped by a substantial endowment for the Kathryn W. and Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Russian Studies; it has created the Reginald F. Lewis Center for International Law and is beginning to establish an Islamic Law Center. In addition, a new international studies complex will help to bring many individual units into closer working relationship with one another.

We are well on the way. But we lag in relation to our own goals – and to what our times will require. We will need (and demand) a great deal more knowledge about the world which we now inhabit in order to help ensure that the world itself remains habitable and hospitable in the century ahead. The challenge is a formidable one, particularly at a time when the nation’s attention is focused inward, and when the federal government’s investment in international affairs has declined drastically in the last decade and a half.

As we explore ways of developing our international responsibilities, it is important to bear in mind that, in an era of instantaneous communication, current events and the historical past can act upon one another in new and unpredictable ways. On January 6, Angelica and I received a personal e-mail from a friend in Serbia, titled “Declaration of Professional Walkers in Belgrade.” These were the days of massive protest against the government because of its manipulation of recent election results. The letter read, in part:

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We have been stirring the conscience of Belgrade, tirelessly marching and persistently walking, whistling and ringing, lighting candles and lamps to illuminate streets and squares of Serbian towns for more than a month. This act of civil resistance is our choice. Why?

Because we want to live in peace and freedom, in a parliamentary and democratic state, governed by the rule of law, and not in chaos and lawlessness, in a primitive, totalitarian, dictatorial regime. Because we refuse to allow our lives, or our votes and the laws and all our requests to be ignored; because our children are arrested and battered... We want to live in a [place] where all human rights and all achievements of the civil society shall be respected, and every [person has] a chance to make a creative contribution. We want to join the world community.

The protest in Belgrade (instantly broadcast throughout the world) was immediate, current, political; but the ideas were as ancient as they are contemporary: ideas that come from the past, and that have now traveled across all boundaries of time and place, stirring the spirit of people everywhere. And the experience of receiving such messages is radically different from reading about a distant political protest in the morning papers.

Yes, the larger world has undergone another significant shrinkage. It can enter our consciousness directly, one way or another, at any hour. We need, more than ever, to help ourselves, our students, and society to be prepared for this new form of drama, with all its unpredictability and fluidity. And that is a central part of our emerging agenda in international studies.

1 Theodore H. White, *In Search of History: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 46.

2 *Ibid.*, 55.

