

IN MEMORIAM

Ezra F. Vogel, 1930–2020

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Ezra Vogel, the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences, Emeritus, at Harvard University, was one of the world's leading authorities on East Asia. In a career spanning more than 60 years, he published ground-breaking works on both China and Japan based upon detailed fieldwork, in-depth interviews and documentary research, using near-native fluency in both languages. He established a distinguished record in public policy advocacy, promoting better relations between the United States and rising East Asian powers, and among those powers. He also played a leading role in organizations dedicated to promoting better understanding of Asia.

Early Life and Career

There was little indication in his early years that Ezra would become an expert on Asia. He grew up in the small town of Delaware, Ohio, the son of Jewish immigrants, Joe and Edith Vogel. His father owned The People's Store, a boys' and men's clothing store where Ezra often helped out, while Edith was a homemaker and part-time bookkeeper at the store. He enrolled in the local college, Ohio Wesleyan University, graduating in 1950 with a major in sociology. After further study of sociology at Bowling Green State University, Ezra served in the US Army from 1951–1953, working as a social work technician at an army base in Pennsylvania. In 1953 he enrolled in the doctoral programme in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, intending to become a family sociologist. He obtained his PhD in sociology in 1958.

Ezra's transformation into a researcher on Japan, and subsequently on China, occurred as a result of chance conversations and a willingness to take risks and explore unfamiliar opportunities, a characteristic of both Ezra and his wife, Suzanne, a trained social worker whom he married in 1953. One of his dissertation advisors, anthropologist Florence Kluckhohn, asked Ezra how he could become an expert on American families if he had never studied families in other societies. Accepting this challenge, Ezra obtained funding that enabled the Vogels to spend 1958–1960 living in Tokyo, where they studied Japanese intensively and then began research in a middle-class suburb, a project involving weekly interview sessions with six families over the course of a year. The result of this immersion was Ezra's first book, *Japan's New Middle Class* (1963), an ethnographic classic that described the family patterns of the rising class of "salarymen." Ezra did not treat his Japanese informants simply as data sources but remained in touch with the six Tokyo families who helped launch his career, visiting them often on later trips to Japan and hosting some members in his home when they visited America.

Ezra returned from Japan to become an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Yale, but he quickly realized that this position didn't fit his changing interests. When he returned to Cambridge to try to sell the house he and Suzanne had bought there, another chance conversation with a different Harvard anthropologist (John Pelzel) opened the door to a second transformation. Pelzel revealed that Harvard had received a major Ford Foundation grant to fund social scientists willing to retool for careers studying contemporary China. (Almost all college teaching and research in Chinese studies at the time was in traditional Sinology, emphasising the humanities

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plus history, with very few social scientists inclined or equipped to specialize on China.) Even though he had no background on China, Ezra was intrigued by this news, and Pelzel arranged for him to meet with John King Fairbank, the Harvard China historian who had obtained the Ford grant. With Suzanne's support, Ezra declared he was willing to transform himself into a specialist on China as well as Japan, provided that he receive a three-year post-doctoral fellowship to enable him to learn Chinese and then begin research on contemporary China, to be followed by a faculty position in the Department of Social Relations. This package was quickly negotiated; Ezra left Yale in 1961 and spent the remainder of his life based at Harvard.

Ezra threw himself into learning his second Asia language at Harvard, sitting in Chinese classes alongside undergraduate and graduate students. Then, since the People's Republic was not yet open for research or even travel, the Vogels spent 1963–1964 living in Hong Kong. There Ezra used his new Chinese language skills to conduct in-depth life history interviews with dozens of individuals who had once lived in the PRC. These refugee accounts of daily life, augmented by a systematic review of the Chinese press (in which Ezra was assisted by Edward Chan, a refugee informant introduced to Ezra by Jerry Cohen), became *Canton under Communism* (1969). That work, a systematic examination of how the Chinese Communist Party had transformed the institutions and social patterns of Guangdong Province and its capital city after 1949, was awarded the Harvard University Press faculty book of the year award.

Subsequent Scholarship and Teaching on Japan and China

Ezra's subsequent research shifted back and forth between China and Japan, driven by his keen sense of the research questions arising from the dramatic changes occurring in both societies. The difficulties faced by American automobile companies competing with Japanese carmakers helped stimulate Ezra to publish his provocative book, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (1979), which argued that in certain respects Japan was doing a better job than America operating as a modern society. By the 1980s the beginnings of China's spectacular post-Mao economic boom drew Ezra's attention back to the PRC. He and Suzanne had divorced, and in 1979 Ezra married Charlotte Ikels, an anthropologist of China. In 1987 Ezra and Charlotte spent seven months living in Guangzhou while both conducted research on the dramatic social changes unleashed by China's market reforms. That fieldwork became Ezra's book, *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform* (1989).

Ezra began teaching in Harvard's Department of Social Relations in 1964, and he was promoted to professor with tenure in 1967. He regularly offered courses on both contemporary China and Japan, and he developed a popular undergraduate course on industrial East Asia, which examined the rapid rise of modern industrial societies throughout East Asia. He also designed and launched Harvard's East Asian Studies undergraduate concentration in 1972 and served as director of that programme until 1991. In 1991 he published *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia*, a volume growing out of the course he had developed. Over the years Ezra mentored a large number of Harvard undergraduate and graduate students as they headed toward academic and non-academic careers focusing on Asia, and he was also very generous in providing advice and assistance to many students and young scholars working on China and Japan who had no connection to Harvard at all.¹

1 A partial listing of Ezra's Harvard students who became China scholars includes Martin Whyte, Perry Link, Vivienne Shue, Victor Nee, Tom Gold, Richard Madsen, Deborah Davis, Bob Snow, David Wank and Hu Xiaojiang. Non-Harvard students who credit Ezra with mentoring that helped them become China scholars include Tom Bernstein, Bernie Frolie, Susan Shirk, Anne Thurston, Stanley Rosen, Kellee Tsai, Ashley Esarey and Chris Reardon. Similar lists of individuals who were mentored by Ezra and became Japan scholars, academic specialists on other societies and students of Asia who went on to have successful non-academic careers could be added to Ezra's impressive record of cultivating talent.

Ezra retired from teaching in 2000, but if anything his scholarly and other activities accelerated after that. He spent ten years on research for his masterful book, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (2011), which described how Deng, a lifelong communist, was able to steer China into a successful post-socialist transition that led to the dramatic economic growth and rising prosperity we see today. Translated editions of both *Japan as Number One* and *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* became best-sellers when they were published in Japan and China, and Ezra donated all the royalties from the PRC translation of his book on Deng to his alma mater, Ohio Wesleyan University.

In the final years of his life, Ezra became increasingly concerned about the deterioration in relations between Japan and China. Characteristically, he undertook new scholarship in the hope of playing some modest role in influencing opinions in both countries and reducing Sino-Japanese tensions. His final book, *China and Japan: Facing History* (2019), published when he was 89, is a detailed historical investigation of the relations between the two great Asian powers over many centuries. When Ezra died unexpectedly on 20 December 2020, from complications following surgery, he had work underway on two more planned books: a detailed study of the life and political career of Hu Yaobang, the leader whose death in 1989 sparked the Tiananmen demonstrations that spring, and a personal memoir.

Describing what was distinctive about Ezra Vogel's scholarly works on East Asia is no simple matter. Although he was trained as a sociologist and credited his teacher, theorist Talcott Parsons, with influencing his conceptual orientation, in his publications Ezra was not concerned with expounding or testing abstract social theories, and he remained quite happy not following the increasingly dominant trend in sociology for quantification and survey data analysis. He was also not concerned about remaining within the boundaries of any particular discipline. Rather, he borrowed eclectically from whatever field he felt would help him understand the societies and research questions he studied. At the most general level, much of his work was an extended pondering of how China, Japan and other East Asian countries were changing, and how to explain the dynamism and social conflicts that characterized these societies. Ezra had a gift for selecting important research questions, whether it was the challenges to America presented by the rising Japanese automobile industry or the paradox of China, a poor and rigidly doctrinaire Marxist society under Mao, vaulting ahead of the former Soviet Union and East European socialist states in transforming itself into a market-based economy. In pursuing his chosen research puzzles, Ezra's gathering of evidence was again eclectic, combining a determination to master all relevant documentary evidence in addition to conducting extensive personal interviews with key individuals in each society he studied, all the while discussing his impressions and emerging generalizations with scholars, journalists, diplomats, and anyone else he thought might help shed light on the problems he was studying.

Ezra's reputation for honest, thorough and sympathetic scholarship on the societies he studied earned him widespread praise and respect throughout Asia, and in Western countries as well. He travelled to Japan at least once a year starting in 1958, and after a first visit to the PRC in 1973, he also visited China annually after 1980. A crucial aspect of Ezra's research orientation was his determination to conduct his in-depth interviews in Chinese and Japanese. He was convinced that his interviewees would be more appreciative and candid if addressed in their native tongues. So Ezra, even in the last years of his life, regularly hired private tutors to help him brush up on his already quite fluent Chinese and Japanese, a dedication to continued language learning that very few young scholars can match. As a result of his language skills, Ezra was regularly in demand in China and Japan to give press interviews and public lectures, requests he gladly accepted. Indeed, after he became famous due to having translated books become best-sellers in both Japan and China, some of Ezra's Asian public lectures, delivered in his fluent Chinese or Japanese without notes, led observers to describe him as having attained rock-star status, with hundreds of eager Asian fans packing audiences to hear Fu Gaoyi's views.

Ezra Vogel's Legacy in Public Policy Formation and Institution-building

Ezra's legacy is not limited to his scholarship and the students he advised and trained. He believed strongly that Asian scholars should not remain confined to their ivory towers, but should use their expertise to try to improve the world, and particularly to promote mutual understanding and improved relations between the US and both China and Japan, as well as between those two rising powers. Throughout his career he devoted considerable time and energy to writing opinion pieces and publishing essays about political and economic trends in the countries he studied and their implications for the US and other Western powers. Following the controversies stirred up by his publication of *Japan as Number One*, Ezra published *Comeback, Case by Case: Building the Resurgence of American Business* (1985). Perhaps most notably, he took leave from Harvard in 1993–1995 to serve as National Intelligence Officer for East Asia in the Clinton administration, being recruited to that post by his Harvard colleague, Joe Nye. In Washington he contributed fresh insights on trends in Asia as well as policy recommendations, although sometimes also ruffling feathers by jetting off for meetings with Asian leaders he already knew without always clearing his plans in advance with the bureaucracy. Over the years Ezra also regularly joined with other Asia specialists to write committee reports and policy recommendations on how to improve relations between the US and China and Japan. In fact, at the time he died Ezra was hard at work with other Harvard colleagues, in an informal group co-chaired with Graham Allison, writing policy guidance and recommendations for the incoming Biden administration in an effort to try to halt and reverse the deterioration in relations between the US and China.

Ezra also believed strongly in the importance of well-run organizations and institutions in making the world a better place, and he generously used his abundant administrative and fund-raising talents to promote such organizations, both within Harvard and outside. In 1972 he succeeded John Fairbank as director of what is now known as the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, and as noted earlier, that same year he designed and launched the undergraduate concentration programme in East Asian Studies at Harvard. From 1980 to 1987 he directed Harvard's Program on US–Japan Relations, and he served a second stint as director of the Fairbank Center after returning from his service in the Clinton administration in 1995. Then in 1997, convinced of the need for more over-arching leadership and coordination of Asian studies at Harvard, including encouraging research and teaching on Southeast and South Asia, Ezra became the founding director of the new Asia Center.

Over the years Ezra played active roles in a wide range of outside scholarly and policy-oriented organizations related to his interests, including the Council on Foreign Relations, the Committee on Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China, the Contemporary China and then the Japan Joint Committees of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, the Association for Asian Studies, and the American Advisory Committee of the Japan Foundation. He was a member of the International Advisory Committee of the Hong Kong Universities Service Centre (the premier base for research on contemporary China before research within the PRC became possible) from 1971 onward, and he served as Chairman starting in 1995.

Perhaps most notably, Ezra played an active role in the National Committee on US-China Relations from 1966 onward. His role was particularly vital when the National Committee launched its Public Intellectuals Program in 2005, a programme that selected promising young China scholars in different fields and institutions to broaden their experiences and become better equipped to relate their scholarly work to public policy issues and public opinion. The PIP invited each year's class to two workshops in Washington, DC as well as two extended group trips around Asia, and Ezra participated actively in the workshops and trips of most PIP cohorts. His final Asia trip with the group was in January 2020, at age 89. Ezra did not take his PIP involvement lightly, and he made sure to meet and spend time with each of the 20 annual PIP fellows, discussing their careers and research

interests while also enriching their experience by sharing his knowledge of both Washington and Asia. The foregoing is only a partial listing of his activities outside of Harvard, but hopefully enough to make clear why his colleagues and former students were regularly amazed that even at an advanced age, Ezra had the discipline, time and energy to maintain such a hectic schedule and to perform at such a high level while doing so (perhaps aided by a routine of jogging until he had knee problems, and then regularly biking even after he turned 90).

Ezra Vogel as a Very Special Person

The extensive accomplishments and contributions of Ezra Vogel over his six-decade career briefly summarized here cannot explain the intense levels of affection and gratitude he earned from people around the world whose lives he touched, in academe and outside. To understand those sentiments, and the deep feelings of loss felt by so many upon learning of his death, some concluding comments on the unusual character of Ezra Vogel are called for.

Harvard likes to portray itself as the best university in the world and promotes the myth that each tenured faculty member is the foremost expert anywhere in their specialty. It is not surprising that some Harvard professors come to believe these myths, thereby contributing to an elitist and competitive atmosphere that can be very intimidating to junior colleagues, students, office staff, and outsiders.

Ezra Vogel was the total antithesis of stereotypes about remote and arrogant Harvard professors. His friendliness, boundless optimism, utter lack of pretentiousness, generosity, intense curiosity, ability to interact comfortably with anyone without regard to rank or status, eagerness to exchange ideas, and devotion to promoting the careers of others earned him an extensive network of friends and admirers around the world. On his trips to Japan, Ezra would always stay in the International House of Japan, rather than in a fancy Tokyo hotel. There he regularly convened reunion meetings with his former students based in Japan, checking on how they were doing and asking for their insights on things he was working on. A Harvard colleague described such meetings as epitomizing Ezra's "irrepressible networking aimed not so much to help him as to enable all of the rest of us to thrive." He had an extraordinary memory for people and names, and he regularly impressed individuals with his friendliness and willingness to offer help and advice even when they thought he could not possibly remember meeting them years earlier.

Ezra and Charlotte regularly opened the doors of their large house at 14 Sumner Road in Cambridge, right next to the Harvard campus, for gatherings and parties of subsets of the various social networks Ezra was involved in, and many old friends and even somewhat casual acquaintances, as well as an occasional Asian political refugee, were invited to stay in one of the extra bedrooms in their home while visiting Harvard. Ezra cherished and thrived on his wide-ranging social ties, and his efforts to keep in touch included maintaining an active Christmas card mailing list that eventually exceeded 600 names.

I had the good fortune of knowing Ezra Vogel for 55 years, taking my first course on China with Ezra in 1965 while an MA student in Russian studies. After being lured into sociology and the study of China, I became Ezra's first China sociology doctoral student. I taught at the University of Michigan and then the George Washington University before returning to Harvard as professor of sociology in 2000, after Ezra had retired. The renewed interactions and friendship with Ezra, which included jointly hosting monthly China sociology dinner talks at 14 Sumner Road for the benefit of sociology graduate students and visiting scholars, made the years until I retired myself in 2015 particularly rewarding. Ezra's friendship was a gift that kept on giving, with no possibility for me to adequately reciprocate, as exemplified by the new chair Harvard awarded me in 2013. The chair was endowed to honour Ezra by John Zwaanstra, one of his East Asian Studies undergraduate students, who went on to a successful career as an investment banker in Asia.

This brief summary cannot do justice to what a special person Ezra was, but a more adequate portrait is available. In the wake of Ezra's death, the outpouring of grief and gratitude from so

many led to an effort to solicit and publish a collection of short reminiscence essays in his honour. The resulting volume, *Remembering Ezra Vogel*, containing 155 reminiscences from individuals ranging from a former prime minister and a former secretary general of the United Nations to office secretaries and the immigrant handyman who cleans and does repairs at 14 Sumner Road, was published in September 2022 (Martin K. Whyte and Mary C. Brinton, compilers, *Remembering Ezra Vogel*, Cambridge: Harvard East Asia Monographs, 2022). A fuller appreciation of the extraordinary career and character of Ezra Vogel can be obtained by reading the moving reminiscences contained in that volume.

Competing interests: None

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