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Remembering Ezra Vogel

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When I received the request to review this volume, I replied that I had to recuse myself because I contributed to the book as well as having a close professional and personal relation with Ezra Vogel (1930–2020). He was my adviser in graduate school, and he insisted that I stay in the second floor bedroom in his house at 14 Sumner Road, Cambridge, whenever I was in town, and he prepared scrambled eggs (with a dash of milk) or pancakes (blueberry if available) for breakfast while wearing pajamas, a bathrobe, bedroom slippers and a knit cap. After reading the 155 contributions in the book, I realized that I wasn't so special after all, and that's one of my main takeaways – he treated so many people, high, low and in-between, pretty much the same way. He wore his fame lightly and surprised many people with his affability and lack of pretension.

This book is a labor of love. Taking a similar volume in remembrance of China historian John King Fairbank as a template, two of Vogel's Asia-focused colleagues in the Harvard Sociology Department, Martin K. Whyte (China) and Mary C. Brinton (Japan) reached out to who knows how many people associated with Ezra, and collected 155 brief essays (limited to 1000 words or less) relating a particularly memorable experience they had with him. They relegated the essays into thirteen categories somewhat arbitrarily. The categories are: family and early years; friends and colleagues; pivoting to research on Asia; scholarly contributions; in the classroom; mentoring Harvard students for academic careers; mentoring non-Harvard students for academic careers; mentoring future journalists, business executives, diplomats and others; institution building at Harvard; institution building beyond Harvard; shaping public policies and promoting positive ties with Asia; tributes from Asia; and what made Ezra Vogel so special. Not surprisingly, "mentoring" occurs most often, followed by "institution building". The section titles indicate the breadth of his activities and networks. There's no way to know who was not solicited for an essay or declined the invitation, or their reaction when they see the completed volume.

The book provides a Chronology and a Harvard Memorial Minute but the ultimate picture of Ezra Vogel emerges kaleidoscopically, as the reader take bits and pieces from the contributions to compose a picture of the man. Perhaps amazingly, although the writers come from a very wide array of professions and time periods, there is remarkable consistency in the impressions they have. The pieces range from short, often humorous anecdotes to touching heartfelt testimonials, but here again, no matter

how the writer's life course turned out, they seem to have the same view of the man and use similar words and phrases to describe him. The editors did not cut out repetition across contributions, but this is also testimony to the fact that, without consulting other writers, we seem to use the same phrases and vocabulary. I assume that many contributors will have a reaction similar to mine: why didn't I write about XYZ? Should I have adopted a different tone?

Vogel famously treated each individual as a unique person. Much of the evidence of his uncanny ability to identify a special characteristic of everyone he met comes from the inscriptions he wrote in books he sent as gifts. In my copy of *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong Under Reform*, he wrote "One of the best of our China watchers from a fellow Jewish Ohioan Harvard sociologist." This basically ticked off some of my identifying markers, but also those we had in common, even though Jewish practice (but not values) was not central in his life.

Not surprisingly, the essays are quite positive across the board, although there are some hints of disagreements, in particular over his magisterial *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, that some people found overly effusive about its protagonist, glossing over his role in the Anti-Rightist Movement and June 4.

One theme woven through the book is Vogel's concern with the current status, ongoing trend and future of Asian Studies. He retired from teaching at the tender age of 70 in 2000, in part, he told me, to make way for younger scholars. At the same time, he was concerned that the rising cohort of social scientists, not only of Asia, was more focused on big data sets and testing theories statistically, rather than – in one of his pet phrases – "letting the data sing." I organized a panel in his honor at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in 2000 that I called "Don't Forget There Are People Out There", calling attention to another maxim he used as he sent us out to the field. This relates to another theme stressed across the book: his emphasis on being fluent in the language of our subjects, and his own relentless study of Chinese and Japanese, up to the last days of his life. Ezra was trained as a sociologist by Talcott Parsons among others, and he employed Parsons' AGIL grid in his early books on Japan (*Japan's New Middle Class*) and China (*Canton Under Communism*) but he was not motivated to confirm, negate or elaborate theory. He was cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary, not wedded to any narrow field or theoretical perspective. He was at heart an ethnographer who wanted to get the story right and help readers understand how his subjects saw the world, based on his own deep investigations. Some cheeky essays show how he could at times overdo it, rushing up to complete strangers in airports or stores who were speaking Chinese or Japanese and insert himself into their conversations. Language was a window and a bridge. He reveled in speaking those languages and constantly improving himself as evidenced by chapters by some of his many tutors.

If he did have a goal as an Asianist, it was to make the study of East Asia central to the social sciences. He lobbied Harvard to expose undergraduates to non-Western societies, to see Asia as the world frontier. He established the East Asian Studies program and created a wildly popular course on Industrial East Asia as part of the core curriculum. He also had an uncanny ability, as some writers testify, to recruit people into the East Asian Studies major, and thereby change their lives. He earned very high marks as a professor who saw students as whole people and seemed to know more about them than they themselves knew. It certainly worked in my case as he diverted me from History into Sociology, a field I knew absolutely nothing about. He told me that I was more suited to Sociology than History and I could pick it up quickly, an insight that proved to be correct. He also supported promising students who wanted to pursue careers in journalism, business, or public service rather than academics. Several writers compared him quite favorably to other (unnamed) professors who were loath to spend time with them, and took little interest in them as people.

Ezra Vogel was a committed public intellectual. He served as the National Intelligence Officer for China and East Asia in the Clinton administration, as a senior advisor to the Public Intellectuals Program of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, and as an advisor to numerous political and governmental officials. After Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election, he and Harvard colleague Graham Allison wrote up a list of things for the new administration to consider as regarded relations with China and the region. He was a tireless cheerleader for improved understanding,

reconciliation and relations between the U.S. and China as well as between China and Japan, the subject of *China and Japan: Facing History*, his final completed book, another massive tome. He argued for the importance of acknowledging that there could be multiple paths to modernity, something some critics found naïve and excusing authoritarianism. Perhaps reflecting the influence of Talcott Parsons, he searched for order and not conflict in social relations. But several writers acknowledged his disillusionment and distress at the unresolved conflicts brewing at the end of his life.

After reading the book, I felt obliged to compile a Vogel Concordance, as the same words and phrases recur with such regularity. It would include: his *small town childhood* in Delaware, Ohio, the son of Jewish European immigrants. He worked in his father's People's Store selling clothes. Many writers attributed his *humility, empathy, generosity, curiosity, ability to make you feel special, kindness, lack of pretention* and *salesmanship* to this background. Many referred to him with the German/Yiddish work *mensch*, meaning a person of integrity and honor, and with the Chinese term *junzi* 君子, meaning a superior man. His unselfish *mentorship* provided a foundation for countless people in an astounding array of professions. Before graduate school at Harvard he attended the local college, Ohio Wesleyan University, and was such a dedicated alumnus that he donated the sizeable profits from the Chinese edition of the Deng book to his alma mater. He was a *good listener*, convinced that he could *learn something from everyone*. He had remarkable skill at *time management*, squeezing a phenomenal number of activities into a day, reluctant to turn anything or anyone down. He was a master of *multitasking*, in particular combining meals at his usual residence in Tokyo, International House, with meetings with students, officials and others who sought out his company. He was an *institution builder*, as evidenced by his leadership of the East Asian Studied AB program, East Asian Research Center (later the Fairbank Center), Council on East Asian Studies, Program on U.S.-Japan Relations, and the Asia Center. He had a loud and infectious *laugh*. He had an astounding *network*, a *Rolodex mind* and an eagerness to share his connections (*guanxi* 关系) generously if it could help your research or work.

A final takeaway is the fact that the exercise of writing a short essay for this book made so many contributors of wildly diverse career paths realize the degree to which Ezra Vogel is embedded in them: the desire to mentor, concern for the future, empathy, seeing the world from the perspective of others different from ourselves, treating others with kindness, and trying, even in the darkest times and with our final breath, to find some glimmer of hope to hang on to.

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