

A Tribute to Roderick MacFarquhar

By Yasheng Huang

With an Introduction by Nancy Hearst

Nancy Hearst

As a former student, Yasheng was asked to speak today. Unfortunately, he unexpectedly had to go to Beijing and thus is unable to be here. So he asked me to read his presentation on his behalf.

Before I start, however, I am going to steal one minute of his time. Those who know me know I do not like to speak in public, but for Rod, I cannot but say a few words. I think it is particularly fitting that as a former student Yasheng should ask ME to make his presentation. I have always felt that I too was one of Rod's many students. But in this respect, I was the longest, 35 years, and the only one who never got a degree.

Rod was such an important influence in my life both professionally and personally. Professionally, he was one of the two biggest supporters of the library at the Center. He encouraged me to begin my book buying trips to Beijing – and always to buy an extra copy of everything I purchased for his own personal collection – and he taught me how to seek out the treasure books that have now become a staple in the library.

Personally, I have to admit that when I first met Rod in 1984, I was really intimidated. But after I got over my fear, his door was always open for me, as it was for so many others. Over the years, I never once saw him get angry or lose his cool, even if he should have. He was always the perfect gentleman, and he treated everyone with respect and sincere kindness. As time passed, we became much closer and I feel extremely flattered and privileged that he began to treat me as a member of his family. I truly treasure his friendship and appreciate all that he taught me, not only about China, or about books about China, but even more importantly about how to be a good person, open, accepting, and inclusive to all.

Just as one afterthought, Rod, I must say there were 5 typos in the last manuscript.

For all of these things, and so much more, I will always be immensely grateful.

Yasheng Huang

Many know Rod as a historian and as an intellectual giant on China. For those of us who were fortunate to be his students, we also got to know Rod as an amazing person and gentle human being.

One of my first memories of Rod was formed not in Cambridge but in Beijing. It was the summer of 1986. Rod was visiting Beijing and I accompanied him to a number of meetings. The meetings themselves and what they were about have long faded from my memory, but I do remember taking Rod to a restaurant near the Museum of Fine Arts. (Nancy was there too.) It

was a small inconspicuous restaurant in a back alley of Beijing, one of the famous hutongs many of which have since disappeared.

To my great surprise, Rod was fascinated by many details of this humble restaurant. I acted as his translator when he asked the restaurateur questions about the history of the restaurant and what happened to it during the Cultural Revolution. His questions were quite persistent, designed to extract every bit of detail from the puzzled restaurateur who probably thought it very strange for a Westerner to show so much interest in him. It was also a meal that showcased the degree of care and curiosity that Rod had about cuisines. He asked about many of the dishes in front of us, making me painfully aware that simply being a Chinese did not automatically lead to knowledge about Chinese cuisine.

Rod's curiosity about this restaurant and its food had an intellectual origin. He marveled at the quality and the delicious tastes of the food in this newly-opened private restaurant and I could see that Rod was busily translating his encyclopedic knowledge of the Cultural Revolution into an appreciation of the food in front of us.

Even a casual acquaintance of Rod would immediately know that Rod had a photographic memory. His attention to and the ability to remember details were just amazing. His interest in the details of this humble Chinese restaurant was just the beginning for me to get to know this aspect of Rod's personality, but there were many other instances as well. Once Rod invited me and Fu Jun, another former student and now a professor at Peking University, to dinner at his home. During the dinner, the topic of He Long, the famous Chinese general, came up and both Fu Jun and I insisted that He Long was born in Hubei. Rod disagreed and he ventured that He Long was born in Hunan, the neighboring province.

Fu Jun and I were adamant that Rod was wrong, and my own conviction was reinforced by the fact that I am 50 percent Hubeinese and 50 percent Hunanese. This was before the age of Google so to settle the debate Rod had to go to his library and retrieve a thick book on Chinese revolutionary leaders. It turns out that He Long was as Hunanese as my mother. This story is actually quite telling. He Long made his name in Hubei and this is how many of us would remember him. But Rod was conscientious and careful to distinguish between He Long's birth place and the place of his activities. Details!!!

My most intensive interactions with Rod were when I served as his Head Teaching Fellow in his famous course on the Cultural Revolution, Foreign Cultures 48. Alan Wachman, Rod's student and a former dear friend of many of us, was the inaugural Head TF and I was the second one. There were many administrative details to be handled as well as managing some 14 or 15 TAs with varying degrees of experience. To add to the managerial complexity, Rod was busy with many other things, such as writing his last volume on the origins of the Cultural Revolution and serving as director of Fairbank Center. As a result, we had very little face-time with Rod. One favorite rumor among graduate students was that sometimes Rod would carry on a discussion on Mao or Lin Biao in the men's room in the old Coolidge Hall, a rumor I am not empirically able to verify.

The pressure on me was enormous to get Foreign Cultures 48 right because the course had over 1,000 students. At that time, the only Harvard course that closely matched the enrollment level of Foreign Cultures 48 was EC 10, the introductory course on economics. Like EC10, the lecture sessions for Foreign Cultures 48 were held in the majestic Sanders Theater. While there may be a congruity between economics and Sanders Theater, the classroom setting of Rod's lecture sessions contrasted sharply with many of the topics of Rod's lectures on class struggle, Mao's paranoia, the violence of the Red Guards, and so forth.

But there was a perfect fit between Rod's lecture style and the majesty of Sanders Theater. At the appointed hour—Harvard time—Rod would stride onto the stage, quickly survey the massive span of Sanders Theater, put his hands on the lectern and began to lecture. He would go straight to the topic of the day, without any of the chit-chat or small talk that professors often engage in with students to warm up the atmosphere. Rod had no lecture notes and no blackboards to write notes on. (And Chairman Mao forbid, no power-point presentations.) He would lecture for a full hour, his lectures densely populated with events, dates, names, and large and small historical contexts. There were no unintended pauses or repetitions. The references were exact, and the words were precise and economical. Each of his lectures was like beautifully crafted and masterfully delivered prose.

We—the teaching fellows—along with the thousand or so undergraduate students would sit there totally spell-bound and mesmerized by Rod's lectures. As I was sitting there, I often thought to myself that the madness of the Cultural Revolution did not deserve such a beautiful rendition of the subject matter. But it was because of Rod that thousands of Harvard College students learned about Cultural Revolution in ways that they will remember for the rest of their lives. Whereas today's college students in China do not know the difference between Peng Dehuai and Peng Zhen, thanks to Rod I bet that there are many former Harvard women and men who still remember in minute detail all the events from those tumultuous years. On occasion, I still run into some of the students who took the course in 1988 and who still recall how they jumped up and down in the aisles of Sanders Theater shouting "Long, long live Chairman Mao."

It is too bad that Foreign Cultures 48 was taught at a time without Youtube. Otherwise those former Harvard students could view the videos and refresh some of the antics they mastered in Foreign Cultures 48. Who knows, these techniques could be quite useful in China today.

This is related to another topic. An incredible insight that Rod had was about the importance of history. Rod was a political historian and he believed firmly that history shapes everything today in powerful ways. I would admit that I did not appreciate this insight of Rod's about historical determinism until quite recently. At graduate school, I did not pay a lot of attention to history. China is now fundamentally different because of its economic growth and development, we had convinced ourselves. China is about change and development, we constantly told ourselves.

But we were wrong and Rod was right. To understand what is going on in China today, it would not be wrong to dust off the big course pack of Foreign Cultures 48 and start reviewing topics such as personality cult and class struggle. Last year, a Chinese official even talked about

“private-public joint development” in a tone and in phrases eerily reminiscent of the nationalization movement covered in Rod’s book on the Great Leap Forward.

For the rest of my life, I will remember this valuable lesson Rod taught us about the importance and value of understanding history and indeed I am implementing that lesson now. My current book delves into Chinese history as a way to understand everything that is occurring in China today.

Early last year, Minxin and I organized a dinner for Rod at my house. Dalena, Nancy, and other friends were there. We had such a lovely time, reminiscing about our graduate school days and all the classes we took with Rod. Rod was at his usual best—witty, sharp, observant, and so kind to Minxin and me. He told us that he was proud of us for what we have done and so typical of Rod, he said, and I quote, “I take none of the credit, but I share in the reflected glory.”

I think that I can speak on behalf of all of Rod’s students that it is us who are basking in your glory. You taught us so much and you gave us even more. Your teachings may not show up in each sentence we compose or each table we construct, but they permeate the way we think about the world, about each other. and about China. You were our teacher and you always will be.

Thank you, Rod!

Yasheng