

**Critical Issues Confronting China:
Living with the U.S.: What Would Fairbank Advise?**

Paul Evans, University of British Columbia

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Although President Trump and President Xi Jinping reached a truce for the trade war on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Argentina on December 1, there are many long-standing structural factors that make any reversal of deteriorating U.S.-China relationship difficult. This round of the trade war is not only about the bilateral trade balance, but also about who would dominate future technologies, with profound implications on the widening geo-strategic competition between them. Whereas the tariff war is kindled by Trump, these underlying structural changes in the relative capabilities of the two countries are not.

Dismayed at increasing repression in China and disappointed that China has failed to liberalize politically after four decades of economic opening, American politicians, journalists, and lobbyists in Washington across ideological and sector divides almost unanimously perceive China as America's adversary, for having taken advantage of the U.S. for too long and for undermining American institutions and values. The engagement strategies of previous American administrations toward China are widely questioned, and many people call for a new approach, which would usher in more hardline policies with respect to China.

In this downturn in U.S.-China relations, what would John King Fairbank (1907-1991), a seminal American China scholar, advise if he were alive today? Paul Evans, Professor at the University of British Columbia, and author of Fairbank's biography, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China (1988)*, explored the contemporary meaning of Fairbank as a historian, an institution builder, and a player in U.S.-China relations. To prepare the second edition of this biography 30 years later, Evans searched for Fairbank's ideas still in play and his legacies at Harvard University and around the nation. In Fairbank of the 1950s, he found guidance to thought and action in a moment of turbulence in U.S.-China relations.

Evans approached this task from the perspective of why and how Fairbank would be helpful to the Chinese in understanding America now. He chose to focus on the first half of the 1950s, the darkest period in U.S.-China relations, overshadowed by the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on the mainland, its violent land reform, the Korean War (1950-53), the "who lost China?" debate, McCarthyism and the McCarran hearings in the U.S. Fairbank was caught in a very difficult position in the 1950s, trying to understand and explain Communist China to an intensely anti-communist American audience. He responded by focusing on his academic writing, teaching, building the infrastructure of East Asian studies at Harvard University, and maintaining a national network of China scholars. In the 1950s, he finished five

books, but wrote little on U.S.-China relations or contemporary developments in China. He gave a full-time seminar at Harvard, which led to a master's degree in Regional Studies-China, the precursor of the current Regional Studies-East Asia (RSEA) master's program. His numerous disciples from this program contributed to his enterprise of establishing the field of China studies in the U.S., hence his national influence and standing.

How did Fairbank manage his own values and feelings about China during this period of tension? That is, how did he come to terms with a China so at odds with his own political beliefs and values? Recognizing civilizational, historical and political differences, he intentionally divorced his own emotions and private views from his public assessments. His public comments were detached, largely non-judgmental on Chinese actions.

How did Fairbank see his mission and role as a scholar on U.S.-China relations? Fairbank became very critical of the KMT government in the 1940s for its inability to live up to his democratic ideals. After the CCP took over the mainland in 1949, he was optimistic initially, hoping that it might be popular among the Chinese people. But his optimism was dashed when his liberal Chinese friends were all harmed in the successive political campaigns of the 1950s and in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). He distanced himself from what was happening in China. On the other hand, he was disappointed at his own country, where many American China experts were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers, including Fairbank himself, and became targets of investigation by the U.S. Congress. Their careers and reputations were smeared, their loyalty questioned. In an essay, Fairbank stated that he was more worried about American fascism at home than Chinese totalitarianism abroad.

When Fairbank died in 1991, China's open-door policy and market reforms had just begun to make strides. He couldn't have imagined that China could grow so rich and powerful over the last quarter century, albeit with a myriad of problems. But drawing from Fairbank's spirit, Evans postulated that Fairbank would speak to the current situation in three ways.

First, Fairbank's views on the role of universities entail that he would try to maintain every possible channel for contact in the face of growing U.S.-China tensions and those who wanted to close doors. He would likely be more concerned about the overreaction to an alleged "existential threat" posed by China than about the threat itself. He would also be more concerned about the risks of decoupling from China than the risks of mutual subversion. Evans thought it very likely that Fairbank would position Harvard as a national leader in formulating pragmatic responses to the challenges in academic exchange, and promote discussions with China about how to manage them. Evans emphasized that the anticipated closing of American universities' doors to Chinese students and scholars as part of a new strategy of techno-nationalism should be targeted as narrowly as possible in specific areas that have military or dual-use applications.

Second, Fairbank would examine closely the role of the scholar in public debate and policy advice. While believing that scholarship should inform policymakers and educate the public, he developed ideas in the 1950s about three different roles for the academic: as a scholar with a foundation of knowledge and professional achievement; as an expert bringing that knowledge

into the public sphere; and as a pundit, participating on the media's terms. He questioned where the line was between addressing the public mind and becoming part of it? How to maintain the quality of academic detachment and rigor while speaking in a language that connects with a broad audience? If scholarship is intended to educate and inform the public, thereby influencing policy, why is its influence so inadequate? If not, what is its use?

Third, Fairbank would contribute to what Evans called "a post-engagement engagement policy." Evans suspected that engagement would still be Fairbank's basic posture. In the late 1940s, Fairbank advocated "contact and competition, not containment;" in the early 1960s, he made the case for "containment without isolation;" and he applauded Nixon's visit in 1972 which restored diplomatic relations. Fairbank's appreciation of cultural differences and belief in the possibility of mutually advantageous interactions was not conflated with any belief in convergence or the impulse to change China. Rather his basic thinking focused on how to live with China, perhaps influencing some of its behavior at the margins, valuing its deepened integration into the international system, while simultaneously accommodating China's core interests and refraining from framing it as a rival superpower that requires confinement (the modern version of containment).

Looking forward, Evans believed that the U.S.-China relationship hinges on two critical questions that Fairbank foreshadowed in successive editions of his book, *The United States and China*. First, can the U.S. live with and accommodate a peer competitor with such different institutions, values and systems, but with no expectation of eventual convergence on American terms? Can the U.S. tolerate being number two after being the leading power in the world for more than seven decades? Second, how will China's leaders define their preferred world order and China's role in the world? Will its role as a great power be based on its own imperial history, more like Japan in the early 20th century, or the U.S. in its century of dominance? In the answer to these questions lies the future of war and peace for the two countries Fairbank devoted his life to bridging.