This query comes from one of the “young” generation of would be hopeful Chinese specialists, who are largely unacquainted with Fairbank, or at least I am.

When I began my undergraduate studies Jonathan Spence's THE SEARCH FOR MODERN CHINA had just come out and it was used in my Modern Asia and Modern China class. I am sure it replaced, at least with these two classes, the use of Fairbank's THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA or THE GREAT CHINESE REVOLUTION 1800-1985. (I don't mean to make any comparisons just an observance of what happened in my case)

Thus my initial exposure to modern or even imperial China was not through Fairbank, as I am sure it was for many of you who are older than I. When he died in 1991, and his CHINA: A NEW HISTORY came out in 92, I noted it but knew little of him other than he was an important man in China studies. Slowly over time a much greater awareness grew of just how important he was. Phrase that described him as the “dean of Chinese studies in the United States” or the “founding father of a field" noted of his significance and aroused my curiosity.

I decided to write my term paper for my history methodology course on Fairbank's methodology and his basic assumptions. I am just starting my reading for the paper, and having just finished FAIRBANK REMEMBERED. I am overawed at his erudition and prodigious production and influence on Chinese studies in America. I am next going to read Paul Evans' JOHN FAIRBANK AND THE AMERICAN UNDERSTANDING OF CHINA, as well as reread the two “classics” by Fairbank mentioned above and his last book as well.

I wonder if I might introduce a question to you all on your responses to a succinct summation of what is meant by the Fairbank Method and the Fairbank school. Ideas are beginning to form, but given the tremendous amount of material he published or had influence in publishing I am sure that such impression will take years to fully distill. Thus for those of you have known him personally, and those who have had extensively more time and experience in the field, I hope you would share your
insights. I hope they are of interest to all, if not they are for sure to me.

Many thanks
Mark B. Griffith

Editor's Note:

I can't help but adding my two cents to this one. I did not study with Fairbank, but Fairbank's influence certainly impacted on me just the same. In my case, one academic generation later. I studied (B.A. and M.A.) at UC Santa Barbara and was thus a student of Immanuel C.Y. Hsu's. Through his personal approach and what so many others have drawn from his _The Rise of Modern China_ (which really is the most appropriate book to compare to _The Search for Modern China_) Fairbank's influence continues through today.

Leibo

Date May 3, 1995

1)******************************************************************************

Subj: RE: Fairbank From: George Pruden
<george_pruden@mailgate.Armstrong.EDU>

Any examination of John King Fairbank's influence on historical methodology should also consider the editorial work he did on _The Cambridge History of China_ series, as well as how he incorporated research for that series in his own later works. I would suggest reading, besides his contributions to the series, reviews of the individual volumes which have appeared in _JAS_, other scholarly journals, and the review-card services, such as CHOICE. George Pruden <george_pruden@mailgate.armstrong.edu> #000#

2)******************************************************************************

From: HERIOT@ACFcluster.NYU.EDU
Subject: fairbank's influence

Your question hit me directly because I have also explored the early developments of the study of modern East Asian history in the United States. I'm sure that you are familiar with Fairbank's own memoir, Chinabound. George Stevens also wrote his dissertation on "John Fairbank and Far Eastern Studies in America: the First Forty Year". I did not study with Fairbank however I was exposed to his core texts. At the School of Oriental and African Studies where I received a Masters degree in Chinese Foreign Policy, we studied The United States and China. I find this topic extremely interesting and would like to add a layer to the conversation. I am interested in hearing from Fairbank's students. I am doing research on the response by some of the generation of East Asian scholars who were studying in the 1960's to the Vietnam war. I would be like to hear from some of these students.

anita heriot, New York University
3)*******************************************************************

From:IN"CLIFFORD@midd.cc.middlebury.EDU" Subj:RE: H-ASIA: J.K. Fairbank's Influence

For Mark Griffith: I am sure I will be just one of a number of people suggesting that before you write your paper on the impact of J.K. Fairbank you take a look at Paul Cohen's _Discovering History in China_ and particularly the chapter called "Beyond China's Response to the West."

Incidentally I'm using _China: a New History_ in a modern E.A. survey this spring (we move too fast I'm afraid to use Spence, though I've also taught that and like it very much). I find the _New History_ considerably better than _The Great Chinese Revolution_ and am impressed as always by the way JFK adapted the latest scholarship in his work, so that if there is such a thing as a "Fairbank school," it is by no means static, unchanging, and mired back in 1950s modernization theory. One of his endearing qualities (for historians, anyway, if not for political scientists and economists, perhaps) is his insistence on a knowledge of China's past for an understanding of the present, and of the futility of trying to understand China as if it had been created _de novo_ in 1949 (somewhere Jules Michelet said that in the future, no one would have to know French history prior to 1789, and we can imagine what JFK would have said to that!). "Anyone who tries to understand the Chinese revolution without a considerable knowledge of Chinese history is committed to flying blind among mountains." (Great Chinese Revolution, p. 11).

Nick Clifford clifford@middlebury.edu

4)*******************************************************************

Subj:RE:H-ASIA: J.K. Fairbank's Influence From: nsivin@sas.upenn.EDU (Nathan Sivin) Subject: Re: H-ASIA: J.K. Fairbank's Influence

I am surprised to hear that there is a Fairbank Method and a Fairbank School. I have never seen any evidence for any of them, but they may be parallel to the "schools" that historians keep imagining in ancient China (I am just finishing a study on the myth of the "school of Naturalists" in pre-Han philosophy). You might say that there were three stages in the development of the historiography of pre-modern China, all of them perfectly conventional from the historiographic point of view. The first was the use of high-level Chinese compilations, mainly official, such as the dynastic histories. The second was the use of more detailed, mainly official compilations, such as the _Shih lu_ and, for studies of Sino-Western contacts, _Ch’ou pan i wu shih mo_. That, along with deep use of Western archives, was what Fairbanks taught and promoted, as did many others, such as Mary Wright, although with more limited resources from government, etc. The third step, intensive use of local sources, was a later development.

If you are interested in specifying Fairbanks' methods, I would suggest supplementing the trade books and textbooks you mentioned, the main virtue of which is drawing exhaustively on contemporary research, with some of his research publications. By "exhaustively" I mean Western research, but Fairbank used a good bit of the best Japanese research, and as much of that from China as was available. The decisive part of his career was formed in the Cold War, and it was probably the key shaping force.
Nathan Sivin  
History and Sociology of Science  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia PA 19104-3325  

I think all of us in Chinese history have been students of Fairbank's either directly or indirectly (or in the case of some of us, both). As an undergraduate I took courses with Winston Hsieh (JKF's student), as a graduate student my professors included Hal Kahn (JKF's student), Lyman Van Slyke (student of Joe Levenson, a JKF student), Ben Schwartz, Joe Fletcher, Alex Woodside, Phil Kuhn (all JKF's students), as well as Fairbank himself. I think it's hard to study Chinese history from historians trained in the U.S. without being part of the Fairbank genealogy (there are, of course, other Chinese history genealogies, Chinese and European). Fairbank himself recognized, though, that others were succeeding him. His review of Spence's _Search for Modern China_ in the New York Review of Books called it the best history of modern China (or words to the effect), implicitly conceding that his own text was supplanted. He did not seem to be bothered by that. Robert Entenmann  
St. Olaf College  
entenman@stolaf.edu  

John King Fairbank's influence was not limited to his historical research, his numerous publications, his professional colleagues, and the graduate students whom he directed. His "Rice Paddies" course (Social Sciences 111) for undergraduates at Harvard consistently--team-taught with Edwin O. Reischauer and/or Albert Craig (depending on the year in question)--consistently received enthusiastic reviews in the "Harvard University Confidential Guide" to courses during the 1960s and drew large numbers of students at a time when the study of East Asian history and civilization was still not particularly popular. (Joseph Esherick and Stephen Large were among others with me at that time.) I count myself among those fortunate enough to be exposed to China at a still impressionable age as a result of Fairbank's teaching and, indeed, I subsequently dedicated to him my first published bibliography on China  

(DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS ON CHINA...1945-1970) in recognition of the influence he had in steering me into the field of East Asian Studies.  

Frank Joseph Shulman  
Date: May 4, 1995  

From: Edward Friedman <FRIEDMAN@polisci.wisc.EDU> Subject: Re: H-ASIA: J.K. Fairbank's
Influence

Dear Mark, Fairbank Remembered is a great intro to what made JFK great. He devoted himself to building the profession rather than promoting himself. He recognized and rewarded talent in an era when McCarthyism in the profession (including the Vietnam war era) led many others to reward safe politics. His center was home to a truly open and international dialogue. Much of the exciting vitality of China studies today is his legacy. Ed Friedman

Well, if no one else is going to do it, I guess I will take up the burden of opening the critical side of the argument regarding Fairbank's influence.

Of course there is a Fairbank school (even if its members don't see themselves as participants in it), just as there was a Boasian school in American anthropology, a Parsonian school in American sociology, etc. Unfortunately, the parameters of legitimate discourse in the formation of the Fairbank school of East Asian studies were set in the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy, leaving the field with a cold war center-right consensus which only came to be seriously challenged when its worst excesses (of collaboration with American imperial ambitions) came to light during the Vietnam War.

If Fairbank was not personally responsible for the purges of the "left" in US scholarship on Asia during the post WWII development of the field, he certainly accepted the much reduced scope of acceptable discourse imposed by the right in developing the field. It was less his students than his students' students that challenged the cold war consensus over which Fairbank presided, and the overwhelmingly idealist, positivist thrust of the scholarship that developed under his aegis.

There, now let the debate begin.

Sincerely,

Gene Cooper
Anthropology
USC

Previous posts have made clear that the debt of (North) American historians of China to Fairbank is enormous. A more balanced evaluation of that debt should at least consider some of the criticisms, occasionally extremely harsh, that have been levied against Fairbank's work. Here are a few suggestions:

Joseph Esherick, 'Harvard on China: The Apologetics of Imperialism,'
Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 4:4 (1972) (Note JFK's response in the following volume)

Tani Barlow, 'Colonialism's Career in Postwar China Studies,' positions 1:1 (1993)

Judith Farquhar and James Hevia, 'Culture and Postwar American Historiography of China,' positions 1:2 (1993) and of course Cohen's book, which by the way I think students find invaluable in making the leap from the survey to the more specialized course, or from The Search for Modern China to the debates in the journals which students use for their papers. Good luck with your project.

Date: May 5, 1995

1)*******************************************

From: HERIOT@ACFcluster.NYU.EDU
Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence

I'm familiar with the Barlow article and the CCAS. In fact my research is focusing on the CCAS(Committee for Concerned Asian Scholars). However I see great differences between Barlow's approach and the approach taken by the Committee for Concerned Asian Scholars.

I'd like to discuss the different critiques. anita heriot

2)*******************************************

Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence
From: "David D. Buck" <davebuck@csd.uwm.EDU>

Gene Cooper is correct about the Fairbank approach as being idealist and positivist; he is wrong, however, to suggest that Fairbank ever accepted the McCarthy era's limitations. While not a firebrand opponent of McCarthyism and the resulting distortions of US Asian policy, Fairbank did not knuckle under to McCarthyism either. Ed Friedman's {earlier} posting captures the spirit of man and his milieu. I remember clearly Fairbank introducing and praising Owen Lattimore to a large audience at Harvard in 1958 or 1959 at a time with Lattimore seldom appeared in American universities. Later, Fairbank was clearly less vocal in his opposition to the Vietnam War during the years after 1965 than many others, but again I remember him as being so much more open to views on all sides of the political spectrum than most other specialists, no matter what their own views. Yes, Fairbank was one of those who had served the US government in World War II and continued to give advice, but to look back from after the great division that occurred during the the Vietnam era this question of working for and with the government and to characterize Fairbank as a willing Cold Warrior always has seemed strange to me. I think we badly misread the past when on the one hand we have Robert McNamara saying in his new book that he didn't listen to "Asian experts" who would have counseled against the war he directed in Vietnam, and we also talk about Fairbank as if he somehow encouraged the Cold War fixation on Communism as the only factor that needed to be considered in making US policy in Asia. David D. Buck

3)*******************************************
Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence
From: Edward Friedman <FRIEDMAN@polisci.wisc.EDU>

The supposed critical comments on JKF are unpersuasive. The point is not that he was right on everything. I too have criticized him both factually and methodologically. But in his time and place, he organized the profession to defend Lattimore. He took on Wittfogel and the Neanderthal right that insisted that the PRC was but a USSR puppet and that Maoism was a mere replica in obeisance to Moscow. His "school's" insistence that the Chinese revolution should be seen primarily as a product of Chinese national history and that as a consequence one should not expect an eternal alliance with Soviet Russia was the far out, dangerous and accurate position of its time. It led to his denunciation from the KMT and their friends in the USA. It cost him politically. He was a pariah in Washington where not until 1966 could the State Dept call the PRC Chicomms instead of Red Chinese. Historians are supposed to have an understanding of historical context. A major reason Harvard grad students in CCAS could attack JKF with impunity was that they knew he would in no way retaliate. Such intellectual freedom was not invariably the norm at every EA center. He was special and much that is best in the profession is his heritage.

Ed Friedman
Date: May 7, 1995

1)*************************************************************************

From: nsivin@sas.upenn.EDU (Nathan Sivin)

I wonder whether those who consider John Fairbank an accomplice of the redbaiters have read his testimony when he was attacked in person by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Nathan Sivin
History and Sociology of Science
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia PA 19104-3325

2)*************************************************************************

From: fisk@midway.uchicago.EDU "magnus fiskesjo" In re: Fairbank influence in N American China studies

It was interesting to see some references posted to writings critical of Fairbank, and the pointed remarks by Gene Cooper about how he "accepted the much reduced scope" of acceptable "China studies" discourse.

- I also remember vaguely that several years ago there was an interesting exchange in the pages of the New York Review of Books about precisely these issues. I am wondering if someone might be able to remind us of when that was - does anyone have a better memory?

Magnus Fiskesjo
University of Chicago
Date: May 8, 1995

1)******************************************************************************

From: IN%"HERIOT@ACFcluster.NYU.EDU"
Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence

This response is in regards to the question about the exchange in the New York Times Review of Books. Could that exchange have been between Marilyn Young and Fairbank. In the 60's she and Fairbank exchanged words on the politics of Asian Studies and she also reviewed a book for the New York Times Review of Books which resurrected some of that debate. I am not sure what he book was. It was either China Misperceived or the Fairbank book. anita heriot

2)******************************************************************************

From: YOUNGMA@ACFcluster.nyu.edu

I wouldn't mind saying something about the Fairbank discussion: what Fairbank did, among other things, was to connect his students with China in a way radically different from the approach taken by Soviet specialists with their graduate students. Pipes, et al inculcated -- with greater or less success -- their own deep anti-Communism. Students studying the USSR at Harvard in the late 50s, when I was there, studied it as an enemy empire. Those of us who studied China did so in an entirely different context -- one of empathy, of actively liking the country and the culture. Maybe there others teaching China that way in the 50s, but I doubt it. Certainly it didn't happen in Russian study centers anywhere. As we learned the Chinese revolution there was no sense of its being a "betrayal" or an enemy. Fairbank's shifts -- as reflected in the various editions of U.S. and China -- are important to note. But it is worth remembering too that he was among the first to warn about the impact of the post 1978 reforms on the countryside and to insist on attention being paid to the vast majority of Chinese who lived there. Fairbank and I disagreed -- sometimes virulently -- on the subject of imperialism, on the best ways to oppose the Vietnam war, etc. But he was open, flexible and above all intellectually skeptical and always ironic. He had the best sense of humor of almost anyone I've ever met and his dry, near laconic, manner made conversation with him an absolutely unique experience in the Harvard of that period. Finally, and very personally, his praise for the book I did on Vietnam was more generous, more deeply sympathetic to what I was trying to do than others whose anti-war stance had been more superficially vigorous than his own.

Marilyn B. Young

Date: May 9, 1995

1)******************************************************************************

subj:RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence
From: YOUNGMA@ACFcluster.NYU.EDU

To Ann Heriot: my exchange with Fairbank on the subject of imperialism was not in the NY R of B, but in the BCAS -- and unpublished at various AAS conferences... Marilyn Young
From: IN%"ms44@cornell.EDU"

Subj: Fairbank's Influence

The discussion of John Fairbank's legacy, carried forward principally by his students David Buck, Ed Friedman and Marilyn Young, highlights important dimensions of the man and his work. Fairbank was the central figure in creating China and East Asian area studies; he was a consummate teacher who earned the respect and often the affection of his graduate students; a victim of McCarthyism himself, he had the courage to defend Lattimore and others who suffered career-destroying attacks; and in contrast to the targeting of "the evil empire" that long dominated Soviet Studies, Fairbank and others taught with empathy about China, its people and culture.

I was, I suppose, Fairbank's student once removed (as a student of Mary Wright in the 60s), and I had contact with him only briefly during the embattled and creative years of the late 60s and early 70s at the intersection of the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution and the end of the era of U.S. hegemony which generated challenges to reigning paradigms in American intellectual life.

Fairbank's relationship to this process in the Asian Studies field was complex. In spring, 1968, following a highly charged meeting that debated and critiqued U.S. Vietnam policy coinciding with the AAS meeting in Philadelphia, Fairbank was one of three senior faculty members (Rhoads Murphey and Joe Levenson were the other two if memory serves) to meet and plan an ongoing response to U.S. Asian policy. That meeting, which itself grew out of the mobilization of Asian Studies students and a few faculty at Harvard and other campuses, led to the formation of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), and shortly to the publication of the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars (BCAS), which quickly turned to critique not only of U.S. Asian policy but also to the theoretical, institutional and financial foundations and premises of Asian Studies. Many of Fairbank's graduate students played central roles in framing the critique that unfolded over the next few years: one that reexamined premises of historical and contemporary imperialism in general and the U.S. global role in particular, revolutionary change, the global order and China's place in it, and that opened the way to much of the most innovative and significant work that subsequently transcended the modernization paradigm. In the summer of 1968 and 1969 Harvard became the location for seminars that brought graduate students and junior faculty from across the country together for a reexamination and critique of Asian Studies, and BCAS was published out of 1737 Cambridge St. in its early years. Fairbank responded vigorously to the critics (notably his own graduate students) when they attacked both the reigning premises in Asian Studies and his work. The generations were arrayed in the exchange between second year graduate student Jim Peck and the doyen of the China field in a discussion of imperialism and modernization. (BCAS 2,1 and 2,3, Oct. 69, Apr.70; or Peck alone (revised) in Edward Friedman and Mark Selden, eds., America's Asia. Dissenting Essays on Asian-American Relations)

Peck (quoting Fairbank): [T]he basic pattern of this confrontation is clear to the experts: not Western imperialism per se, but "circumstances made China the worst accident case in history." Fairbank responded with reference to the cycles of American China studies (from wai to nei, from the targeting by an earlier generation of the menace of "aggressive Japanese militarism" and a recent one preoccupied with "monolithic international communism" and went on both to reject "revolutionary
Marxism" as an alternative approach for the field and to welcome the study of imperialism.

Fairbank: [I]n any case "imperialism", even though rather wai, is now a wide open subject as we go into the '70s because the chief menace to mankind now seems to be human growth and expansion itself. Understanding our expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may help us to control it and survive into the twenty-first century." Reflecting on the debates of that period, two points stand out. First, the rethinking (in the context of the anti-war movement that sparked it) was critical to opening the way for much of the most significant subsequent work in Asian Studies, and may have contributed in minor ways to building a climate of opinion for ending the Indochina War and for U.S.-China recognition. Second, there has emerged in Asian Studies no successor to Fairbank (individually or as a group) capable either of defining a clear and powerful new direction in the field, or of writing compellingly about China past and present, about U.S.-Asian relations, or about the nature of global power for a broad popular audience.

mark selden

Date: May 11, 1995

1)**************************************************************

Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence
From: Edward Friedman <FRIEDMAN@polisci.wisc.EDU>

John Fairbank was not my teacher. I was in Political Science. He was in History. My teachers were Ben Schwartz, Barrington Moore and Judith Shklar. I kept away from Fairbank while I was at Harvard. I was too stupid to appreciate him until after I left and began to gain some perspective on the profession. Then I could appreciate him as someone who promoted and appreciated Mary Wright. Not until I became a faculty member and saw the sinister workings of reactionary political prejudice in hiring, promotion and firing and decided to join the faculty union to work for victims of that still potent and poisonous illiberalism that pervades the supposedly liberal academy did I begin to appreciate what a very special contribution Fairbank made in being open to a genuine market place of ideas where you engaged those with whom you differed in a respectful way. In a world of pervasive liberal hypocrisy and reactionary veto power, Fairbank's authentic liberalism and commitment to merit criteria made him a giant among moral cretins. Ed Friedman

2)**************************************************************

From:IN"YOUNGMA@ACFcluster.NYU.EDU"
Subj: RE: H-ASIA: Fairbank's Influence

Response to Selden: of course my memory fades with age, but it was my impression that CCAS was a movement from the bottom up and that Fairbank et al certainly did NOT call it into being, though he attended a first meeting and did not oppose it. Marilyn Young.

Date: May 12, 1995

1)**************************************************************
Subj: Fairbank's contribution
From: Edward L Farmer <farme001@maroon.tc.umn.EDU>

Most of the comments on Fairbank's contribution have focused on the political issues of the 1960s. Something should be said about his earliest accomplishments which go back to the 1930s and early 1940s. He started out looking at China from the outside, from a foreign relations perspective, analyzing the Qing response to British power. What set him apart from others was the early insistence on getting into the Chinese archives and using the Chinese sources. With a number of Chinese collaborators (S.Y. Teng, E-tu Zen Sun, K.C. Liu) he helped students to get at the Chinese materials. There were early articles on the memorial system and communication within the Qing bureaucracy, translations of excerpts about "China's Response to the West," and an introductory syllabus for learning how to read Qing documents. Although a foreign relations specialist himself, Fairbank pushed his students to go the next step to try to understand China from the inside. It was a real pioneering effort, broadly conceived and energetically promoted.