Matthew D. Linton’s article on the fate of a proposed National Center for Far Eastern Studies in the United States during the critical decade between the Great Depression and the early Cold War is a valuable and timely contribution to the institutional history of East Asian studies as an academic field. Current concerns over the involvement of the Confucius Institute, the cultural diplomacy agency of the People’s Republic of China, in university teaching and research on China in the United States, make this article particularly relevant today. Linton’s study of an earlier period confirms the importance in understanding institutional actors, which often shaped the intellectual agenda in powerful ways, and cautions against “the organicist approach to professionalization” (10). While East Asia as a geographical concept has its limitations, I will use it as the preferred term to avoid the overtly Eurocentric connotations of Far East.

Linton’s research centers on the evolving visions of Mortimer Graves, the Executive Secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). The gist of Linton’s argument pertains to the unexpected decentralization of East Asian studies as a field in the 1930s and 1940s, despite Graves’s original plan to the contrary. The National Center began in Graves’s thinking as a New-Deal style state intervention “to protect and accelerate the professionalization of China studies” and to emulate its counterparts in Europe (8). The sudden military need of expertise on East Asia during World War II, instead of bringing further “centralizing impulse” as in other fields, ultimately pushed Graves in a different direction (10). In response to the call for military preparedness, the ACLS under his leadership set up the Intensive Language Program through a “decentralized” network of university facilities (20). At the conclusion of the war, the ascendance of the United States as the new global hegemon and center of scholarship firmly convinced Graves of the value of this institutional model for the American universities and public. This, however, is not the end of the story. As Linton perceptively points out, Graves’s faith in this new model, based on his progressive belief in “education as a tool to facilitate informed popular democracy,” did not result in the democratization of East Asian scholarship (25). Rather, it was gradually eclipsed by the unequal distribution of resources and the dominance of specialists and elite institutions.
So how should we make sense of the changing beliefs of this “quintessential American progressive reformer” and their impact (11)? Given that Linton is telling a largely institutional story, it is important to situate Graves and the ACLS in the larger institutional matrix. There are at least two comparative questions to be raised with regard to such contextualization. First, what is the relationship among Graves’s ACLS and other contemporary organizations that had similar professional interests in East Asia? Linton mentions several of them in his article, such as the American Oriental Society, the Institute of Pacific Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Far Eastern Association, and various American universities. There was clearly an institutional milieu in the United States, even during an era of supposed isolationism, of cultural engagement with different parts of the world. With regard to the American Oriental Society, the oldest learned society in the United States devoted to the study of the ‘Orient,’ Linton at several points alludes to its different approach to the promotion of East Asian studies from that of the ACLS (10, 17). It will be useful for readers to know more about such differences and how Graves engaged them in promoting his agenda. The Far Eastern Association, founded in 1941, is another potential venue for continuing similar inquiries. As the predecessor of the Association for Asian Studies, the largest professional organization of its kind, the Far Eastern Association started exactly at the transitional moment of Graves’s thinking on the best institutional model for the field. A discussion of how this fledgling organization interacted with the more established ACLS on its own professional turf would also add more texture into an already fascinating story.

Another contextual question pertaining to Linton’s study is how to compare the institutional planning of East Asian studies to that of other fields. As Linton shows in his article, Graves’s incredible energy in institution-building took him to diverse fields such as Middle Eastern studies, Russian studies, and South Asian studies. Particularly with regard to Middle Eastern studies, Graves also envisioned a similar national center as indicated by Zachary Lockman’s recent study of the history of that field in the United States (n. 7, 10-11). Fleshing out this comparison would allow the author to discuss whether or not Graves’s plans for East Asian studies were following a larger trend. Also, it probably is not a pure coincidence that Graves was involved in a series of fields that were not part of the core canon of Western civilization. It will be helpful to know whether they experienced distinctive institutional planning as compared to the scholarship on Western Europe and the United States.

Besides contextualization, there is also the challenging issue of reception. However energetic Graves was, and however influential the ACLS was, their proposals had to persuade different constituents. The relationship among different professional organizations of East Asia already touches upon issues of reception. A more direct question here is what the U.S. government actually made of Graves’s plans, which, at least in the beginning, were targeting “modest federal financial and institutional support” (8). Linton covers federal agencies such as the Library of Congress and the military, including the army and navy. The former was “a logical starting point” given its extensive collections on Chinese and Japanese materials, but it was ultimately insufficient for Graves’s grand vision (16). What then was his next goal within the federal bureaucracy, if the military was more of an accidental player due to unpredictable exigencies? What did Graves’s intended federal agency actually think of his plans? Elaboration on these questions will address the complex dynamics in persuasion and reception.

Linton’s detailed study of how Graves and other Americans deliberated on the development of East Asian studies in the United States also gives rise to the question as to whether Americans totally dominated relevant conversations. As a historian of modern China by training, I confess this is a self-interested question. By the 1920s, a shared aspiration had already emerged among Chinese scholars of different political persuasions to bring the world center of Sinology from Paris, Tokyo, and Kyoto (the United States was not high on their
agenda) back to what they considered its rightful position in Beijing. Specifically with regard to the United States, Liu Tingfang (Timothy Tingfang Lew, 1892-1947), a leading Chinese theologian at the American missionary Yenching University in Beijing, already lamented the inadequate coverage of China in school textbooks through a pamphlet published in 1923.¹ A decade later, in the New York Times, there was a polemical exchange between Jiang Kanghu (Kiang Kang-hu, 1883-1954), a Chinese scholar who was then professor of Chinese studies at McGill University in Canada, and Pearl Buck, whose The Good Earth had just won a Pulitzer Prize and was going to clinch the Nobel Prize. A key point of contention therein was Jiang’s mistrust of the authority of Buck, and for that matter foreigners in general, in writing about China. To be sure, neither Liu nor Jiang was directly involved in Graves’s planning. Yet the simmering Chinese sentiments in asserting the sovereign control of their own international image, including how it was studied abroad, meant that the seemingly technical planning for an academic field in the United States was actually a key front of intercultural politics involving multiple national stakeholders. As the current controversy of the Confucius Institute testifies, Americans need to face such sentiments and actions.²

This, of course, is a long-term issue. Likewise, the questions raised above are meant to generate further research into a promising larger project. Answers to them require more archival and conceptual work. I look forward to reading Linton’s future study.

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