

Appreciating Ezra Vogel (1930-2020)

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Ezra Vogel, a leading Harvard scholar of East Asian studies, passed away at the age of 90 from complications of a cancer operation.

Vogel grew up in a small Ohio town and attended a small Methodist college, Ohio Wesleyan, not a promising launching pad for a future academic superstar. But he made his way to Harvard then Yale, then a long career at Harvard. He trained as a sociologist of the family but mastered Japanese and Chinese and became a polymath East Asia expert drawing from all social science disciplines.

He had an instinct for cutting at the joint. He wrote the most interesting book about the lessons of Japanese success for the world, then a pathbreaking book about the beginnings of economic reform in China's Guangdong Province. His many books included a million-seller biography of Deng Xiaoping when Vogel was 83 and a history of Sino-Japanese relations when he was 89.

Vogel was an extraordinary mentor. When he retired, hundreds of his former students came to the celebration. The gala had a day for sociology panels, a day for China specialists, a day for Japan specialists. Most of the leading U.S. journalists on Asia seemed to be his students. Also numerous were the Japanese and Chinese foreign students whom he had nurtured and organized. Harvard's then-President Derek Bok said he had never seen anything like this outpouring.

Why the enthusiasm? My experience may illuminate it, not because I was special but because this was archetypal of Vogel's devotion to his students. I came to Harvard to become a mathematical physicist, but in my freshman year I took Vogel's course on Chinese society and found myself enchanted. I majored in Social Studies instead. In my sophomore year, I applied for Vogel's graduate course on Chinese society. 30 grad students plus myself wanted in, but Vogel could only take 10. Unlike Kissinger, who started by telling all the undergrads to leave, Vogel asked each of us to explain why we wanted the class. I said that Aristotle, Marx and Weber had all explained persuasively why you couldn't organize peasants into a political force, but Mao had done what they said was impossible. I wanted to understand why the great sociologists were wrong. Vogel accepted me and nine grad students. He liked my paper, so the following year he got me grants to do a senior thesis on why Mao's techniques didn't work in the Philippines. The theoretical work from that paper became my Yale dissertation.

Twenty five years later, Vogel lectured in Hong Kong, where I was working, and I asked him to critique a short paper I had written on "The Rise of China." I expected him to return it with a flood of red ink. Instead, two letters came. Widener Library wrote that Vogel was making the paper required reading in a course that counted for the Core Curriculum; would I charge royalties? (Of course not.) The deputy head of W.W. Norton publishers wrote that Ezra had shown him the paper; he assumed I would turn it into a book (I had no such plans) and would appreciate it if I would accept the enclosed book contract and check to ensure that Norton could publish it. That book, which came out in ten languages, became the foundation of a second career for me.

Nine years later, when I had tired of investment banking, Vogel brought me back to Harvard and midwifed my transition back to the academic/think tank world. I took a Distinguished Chair at RAND, then returned to Harvard. In return for all this, Vogel got nothing except my gratitude. Like many others I was his student for a lifetime.

Vogel's retirement party provided one more insight. He was clearly at the height of his powers, so I asked him why on earth he would want to retire. He said, "It's Important to give younger people a chance at the big salaries." He happily drove his ancient Toyota while ensuring that the "big salaries" went to younger scholars. Characteristically, he devoted all the very substantial royalties for his Deng Xiaoping book to Ohio Wesleyan.

Vogel was an institution builder. He founded Harvard's Asia Center, started the undergraduate concentration in East Asian Studies, organized the Regional Studies East Asia masters degree program, played a crucial role in developing the Fairbank Center for Chinese studies, and founded the U.S.-Japan program. When the Asian Crisis of 1997-'98 occurred, he founded Asia Vision 21, which for the following 18 years was the leading global forum on Asian development and geopolitical issues.

Part of Vogel's institution-building success was his instinct for addressing the right issue at the right time, but much of it was his personal approach. Five years ago he decided that Harvard and the country needed a platform for leading China specialists to address a broad audience. In founding the weekly Critical Issues for Contemporary China series, which became possibly the most popular weekly public forum at Harvard, he formed a committee of three of us, himself, Prof. William Hsiao of the School of Public Health, and myself. Then he did almost all the work himself but spread the credit around. Embarrassed by his undeserved generosity, I leaped at any opportunity to help out.

Informally Vogel was a diplomat. He painstakingly cultivated a self-presentation of modesty, professionalism, warmth, and total attentiveness that enabled him to talk with just about anybody about just about anything. Thus, for instance, at the time of the greatest Sino-Japanese antagonism over interpretations of World War II history, he was able to bring leading Chinese and Japanese scholars together in dialogue. Leaders in Japan, China and South Korea welcomed him and listened. Behind the scenes, he influenced events.

Because of his personal modesty, people who did not know him well may not have perceived his greatness. Because of his eclectic methods and disciplines, in a world of academic hyper-specialization his contributions were not always fully appreciated. It is therefore imperative for those who understood his reach to ensure that he is remembered.