

# The Reed 2026

Asian Studies in  
Troubled Times





# The Reed

The Annual Journal of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute  
2026 Edition

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*Front cover:* “The Bust,” April 30, 1968: NYPD plainclothes officers drop a student protester on the ground after forcibly removing him and others from their sit-in at a Columbia University building. *Back cover:* Demonstrators wave a Viet Cong flag from the top of Columbia’s Math building, spring 1968. (Both images: “Columbia University 1968” website, [columbia.edu](http://columbia.edu))



## Letter from the Director

**Lien-Hang T. Nguyen**

Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute; Dorothy Borg Associate Professor in the History of the United States and East Asia, Department of History

Hello and welcome to *The Reed*, the annual journal of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. It's a pleasure to introduce this year's edition because for the first time in several years, we're featuring work by one of our faculty members—a contribution that neatly aligned with our developing thoughts about what thematic direction we wanted to pursue with this latest issue.

The piece is “There Would Be Reverberations: Columbia in the 1960s,” a memoir of graduate work in East Asian Studies, both at Columbia University and elsewhere, against a backdrop of growing political unrest and seismic cultural change. Its author is **Professor Morris Rossabi**, Associate Adjunct Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (EAL-AC) and a veteran member of our research community.

Morris begins his personal chronicle in the fall of 1961, when an almost genteel environment still prevails on the Morningside Heights campus: in his Early Chinese History course, for instance, male students are required to wear jackets and ties to class. He ends it back at Columbia as a newly minted Ph.D. in the spring of 1970, when the Kent State and Jackson State shootings in the aftermath of the U.S. incursion into Cambodia sparked a fresh round of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and campus division. Morris writes, in his magisterial conclusion, “The 1960s at Columbia had an extraordinary influence on me and my generation at the university.”

As soon as we read Morris's submission, we realized we had our essay prompt for the 2026 *Reed*. There are too many differences between the 1960s and the present day to draw any easy parallels (although the campus protests and wars in the wider world are certainly there), but a question for the emerging generation of Asia scholars readily presented itself:

**“What does it mean to study Northeast, Southeast, and Inner Asia now, in another moment of geopolitical turbulence? Share your understanding and experience of Asian Studies in a moment of extraordinary turmoil.”**

(We qualified our prompt with the proviso that all submissions had to focus on the regions in which the Weatherhead East Asian Institute specializes, i.e., Northeast, Southeast, and Inner Asia.)

The three essays we selected from this year's submissions, one First Prize-winner and two runners-up, appear in the following pages. They respond to the challenge with a variety of approaches, from the more historically grounded to observation rooted in personal experience to a more speculative, even philosophical vein.

For the historical perspective, look no further than this year's First Prize-winner, "Frontiers of Crisis: Asian Studies in an Age of Uneven Globalization," by EALAC doctoral student **Hekang Yang**. Hekang extrapolates from his extensive research into the border zones between late imperial China and Russia to argue that an intellectually honest Asian Studies must reckon with the asymmetrical nature of globalization, a phenomenon that is as true now as it has been historically. In Hekang's telling, the perennially marginalized frontier regions he studies offer a window into understanding the roots of present-day tensions and demonstrate the need for "histories that move across linguistic, political, and institutional boundaries," taking into account "the multiplicity of perspectives that shape any given region."

**Xinwen (Sheena) Liang**, an MPA candidate in the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), contributes a more personal history in "Between Memory and Dialogue," the first of our two runner-up essay winners. Sheena describes her participation in a recent Osaka "youth summit" that convened students from China, South Korea, and Japan; the face-to-face encounters she enjoyed there, all marked by a spirit of curiosity and openness, became a counterweight to what she had learned in formal educational settings and from stories of her family's bitter wartime experience. Optimistic yet tempered with realism, the essay's light-touch conclusion suggests achieving that kind of balance is a worthy aspiration for Asian Studies.

In the provocative "Beyond the Other—Why Studying Asia Matters Now," **Irene Souny** (GS '26) posits Asian Studies as a means of transcending the kind of blinkered Western perspective on present-day turmoil in which "every rupture is read as unprecedented, every crisis as uniquely severe." The study of East Asia won't relieve those concerns, Irene argues, but it may help practitioners reorient themselves, question underlying intellectual premises, and possibly come to understand that "durable solutions emerge from specific histories" rather than supposed universal templates.

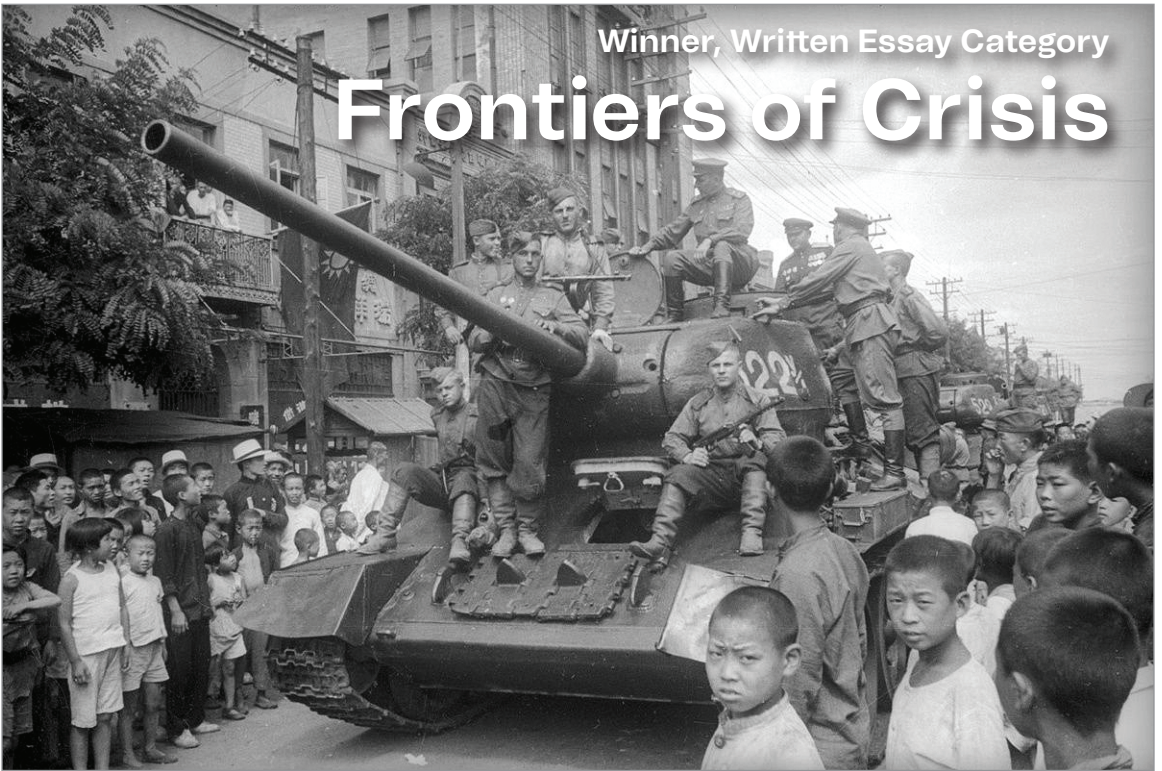
We thank all four of our writers for providing us with such lively reading. And we hope you, in turn, will find their contributions to this year's *Reed* as stimulating as we have.

Sincerely,

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen  
Director, Weatherhead East Asian Institute

Winner, Written Essay Category

# Frontiers of Crisis



## Asian Studies in an Age of Uneven Globalization By Hekang Yang

In May 1946, Ray Huang, later a historian of Ming taxation at the State University of New York at New Paltz and an affiliated scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, was a 29-year-old officer serving in the Nationalist Army. Transferring from the Yunnan-Burma war theater, he found himself in Changchun (Hsinking), the capital of Manchukuo, just retaken from the Communists by Nationalist forces. Assigned as aide-de-camp to a senior commander, Huang was tasked with clearing the Yamato Hotel, formerly a property of the South Manchuria Railway Company, in preparation for the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek. The Yamato Hotel had become a temporary refuge for a heterogeneous group of occupants, including Nationalist officials, foreign correspondents, and Soviet diplomatic personnel who had remained in the city following the Red Army's occupation.

What Huang expected to be a tense quarrel with the Soviets unfolded instead with surprising ease. Their representative, a thin and soft-spoken man fluent in English and passable in Chinese, requested only half a day to relocate his group to the Tchurin Company. He expressed a concern for their safety, noting the hostility of Nationalist troops, who had vandalized Russian signage and, in some cases, looted foreign property under the banner of patriotism. Huang resisted the implication that his forces could not maintain order. Yet the

*Above:* Soviet tank troops enter the Manchurian city of Dalian (known as Dairen during the Japanese occupation) in August 1945. (Evgeniy Khaldey/TASS/Public domain via waralbum.ru)



Soviet delegate disarmed him through candor. “I mean no offense, Captain,” he said in English, “but only weeks ago, our own army committed some of the worst acts in the world. I understand how you feel.” The remark won Huang’s respect.

Shortly thereafter, however, Huang was confronted with a scene that nearly led to tragedy. A Nationalist soldier was caught attempting to seize a table lamp from the Yamato Hotel. As Huang arrived, he found the Soviet representative struggling with the soldier, insisting, “Look, this does not even belong to us, it belongs to you.” In that moment, Huang felt a sense of shame. The object in dispute, a piece of hotel property, symbolized something larger: the collapse of discipline, the fragility of authority, and the moral contradiction of a Chinese state that claimed sovereignty in Manchuria but failed to enforce it. Enraged, Huang drew his pistol and came within seconds of shooting the soldier. Only at the last instant did he restrain himself. He noticed the soldier’s face, aware of imminent death, filled with a raw and unmistakable terror. Huang turned to the Soviet representative, expecting perhaps approval or vindication. Instead, he encountered an expression not of satisfaction but of shock. As Huang later recalled, “He stood speechless, utterly shocked, stunned by the brutality and savagery of what I was about to do.” In that gaze, Huang saw the face of what he despised. The logic of the situation collapsed. He lowered his pistol and holstered it.

Manchuria in 1946 was not only a region contested by competing Chinese factions. It was a zone shaped by decades of Russian, Japanese, and Qing imperial expansion, where authority was asserted but rarely secure. Geopolitics, in such moments, tends to obscure the possibility of trust between individuals and replaces it with layers of misperception. Decades later, Huang believed that he had been spared a lifelong burden. Had he fired, the act would have haunted him until death. The encounter shattered the image of Russians he had been taught to accept. The Soviet representative altered the course of Huang’s life. From that day forward, Huang said, he never again carried a weapon.

More than a personal turning point, this episode revealed the fragility of sovereignty in a contested frontier space. Republican China at the time occupied a position not unlike that of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Poland, caught between Prussia and later Nazi Germany on the one hand, and the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union on the other; or, more recently, Ukraine, situated between larger geopolitical forces in the 2020s. In each case, sovereignty was asserted yet structurally constrained, shaped as much by external threats as by internal chaos.

If the 1960s, as recalled by Morris Rossabi elsewhere in these pages, forced scholars to come to grips with the entanglement of knowledge and political upheaval, the 2020s present a different but equally



Ray Huang as a student at Nankai University, Tianjin, China, in 1937.

profound challenge. Today, to study Northeast, Southeast, and Inner Asia is to reckon with not only geopolitical tension, but the uneven and fractured nature of globalization itself.

Globalization has never been a uniform or universal process. As always, it has proceeded through selective integration, producing zones of intense connectivity alongside vast regions of partial incorporation or exclusion. In my own research and travels across Eurasia, through Russia, Central Asia, and the borderlands of Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia, I encountered many places that were not fully integrated into the global economic order that emerged after the Cold War.

These regions were not outside globalization, but existed within its shadow, connected through limited infrastructure, trade, and migration, yet lacking the institutional stability and economic vitality that characterized core regions of global capitalism.

This asymmetry is not new. As the Soviet writer and war journalist Ilya Ehrenburg, whose incendiary dispatches earned him a devoted following among front-line Red Army soldiers, and who contributed several influential pieces to *The New York Times Magazine* during and after World War II, penned in the first volume of his memoirs, *Люди, годы, жизнь* (*People, Years, Life*, 1961), recollecting the famine year of his birth, 1891: hardship and prosperity often unfold simultaneously in different parts of the world. A drought that devastated peasants in the Russian Empire enriched wine producers in France. When the United States, in the aftermath of the Second World War, celebrated victory and consolidated a new global order, China descended into civil war. These overlapping yet divergent trajectories remind us that global history is never experienced synchronously. It is fractured across space and structured by inequalities that shape who is included, who is excluded, and on what terms.

To study Asia in the era of geopolitical turbulence is therefore to grapple with a fundamental reality: global systems are not cohesive wholes, but uneven assemblages. Nowhere is this more evident than in the frontier regions that have occupied the margins of area studies frameworks. In the nineteenth century, the frontier

trading marts in the Qing-Russian borderlands, from Kiakhta to Chuguchak and Vladivostok, were critical nexuses where empires negotiated trade, sovereignty, and jurisdiction. These were spaces of overlapping authority, where merchants, state agents, and local actors navigated multiple legal and economic systems.

Such frontier zones challenge the nation-centered and Cold War-derived frameworks that have structured Asian Studies. My own research on Qing-Russian frontier trade seeks to recover these dynamics. The overland trade system at Kiakhta, dismissed as a relic of premodern barter, was in fact a sophisticated set of legal and economic institutions that continued to structure trade and migration across imperial

boundaries well into the twentieth century. It was not replaced by global capitalism so much as reconfigured within it. In the nineteenth century, Russian merchants expanded into treaty ports such as Hankou, integrating inland tea production into global markets, while Chinese traders, artisans, and laborers sailed to the Russian Far East through the Liaodong Peninsula and routes from Shanghai to Nagasaki. Russian and Chinese officials adapted their fiscal and administrative practices accordingly; Chinese subjects in the Russian Far East held extraterritorial rights rooted in the 1727 Treaty of Kiakhta, a legal inheritance that persisted long after the treaty's original context had dissolved. The frontier trade regime did not disappear. It was reconstituted within a changing global order.



Chinese Communist soldiers marching in Manchuria, circa late 1946–early 1947 .  
(Public domain via ThinkChina.sg)



This historical perspective offers a way to understand the present. The current time, marked by tensions between major powers, the wars in Ukraine, the Gaza Strip, Israel, and Iran, and the reorganization of global supply chains, has exposed the fragility of the post-Cold War order. New initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative seek to reconfigure Eurasian connectivity, linking regions that were previously marginalized within global economic networks. Yet these efforts also reproduce older patterns of uneven development, raising questions about sovereignty, dependency, and the distribution of power.

This disjuncture between integration and fragmentation, between normalcy and violence, finds a powerful expression in Czesław Miłosz's 1943 poem "Campo dei Fiori." Writing of wartime Warsaw, Miłosz describes a scene in which "the bright melody drowned the salvos from the ghetto wall," as couples rode a carousel under a cloudless sky while violence unfolded nearby. The coexisting image of celebration and destruction captures a deeper condition of modern history: that suffering often takes place in silence, overshadowed by the rhythms of everyday life. What is most striking in the poem, however, is what Miłosz calls "the loneliness of the dying," the absence of any language capable of conveying their experience to those who live on. This silence is not merely a failure of empathy, but a structural condition that shapes how violence and inequality are distributed and perceived across space.

To study Northeast, Southeast, and Inner Asia requires attention precisely to these often silent spaces. Like the burning ghetto that disappears behind the music of the fair, entire regions of Eurasia have existed within global systems yet remain structurally marginalized, their crises obscured by the apparent coherence of globalization elsewhere. Asian Studies shall become a way of listening for these silences and recovering histories that cascade beyond the dominant narratives of global integration. To study these regions today is not simply to analyze a set of geographical areas, but to question the processes through which global orders are constructed, contested, and experienced. It requires attention to spaces where integration is incomplete, where institutions are hybrid or thin, and where the boundaries between empire, nation, and market remain fluid.

This realization has reshaped my own understanding of Asian Studies. Trained across Chinese and Russian sources, I have come to see the field as defined by a methodological challenge: how to write histories that move across linguistic, political, and institutional boundaries, and that take seriously the multiplicity of perspectives that shape any given region. Asian Studies today is about the study of relational worlds—about understanding how human actors, whether merchants, officials, laborers, or soldiers, operate within overlapping systems of power, and how these systems are themselves products of historical forces that extend far beyond any single nation-state or bounded area.

The scene that Ray Huang encountered in Changchun in 1946 captures this complexity. A table lamp became the site of a confrontation that revealed the limits of sovereignty, the ambiguities of moral authority, and the entanglement of local and global forces. Nearly 80 years later, we continue to inhabit a world shaped by similar tensions. Globalization has not fully erased these contradictions. In many ways, it also has intensified them. In troubled times, the task of Asian Studies is to provide the historical and analytical tools to understand how such change unfolds unevenly across space. It is to recognize that the frontiers of the past, whether in Manchuria, Siberia, Central Asia, or Southeast Asia, are not relics, but enduring arenas where the structures of global order are made and unmade.

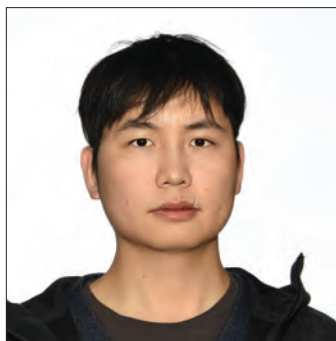
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Runner-up, Written Essay Category

# Between Memory and Dialogue

By Sheena Liang

Before I left for Japan, my grandmother asked me a simple question: Why would you go there?

Her father died in the war against Japan. When I was young, she took me to the 烈士陵园 (a martyrs' cemetery), where rows of names carved into stone stood in quiet testimony to a generation lost to war. She is from Shandong Province, a region that bore deep scars during the conflict. It is one of the early sites of resistance, and a place where entire communities were mobilized into war efforts. For her, history is personal and unresolved.

So when I told her I would travel to Japan to participate in a trilateral youth exchange with students from China, Japan, and South Korea, her response was immediate, not angry, but firm. *Why go there?*

I carried that question with me when I boarded the plane.

As a student studying international affairs in the U.S., I studied Northeast Asia through geopolitical frameworks like U.S.–China competition, historical disputes, economic interdependence, and regional security. But in Osaka, sitting in a room filled with students from across the region, I realized that studying Asia today is not just about understanding tensions. It is about living within them.

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*Above:* The Yangshan Martyrs' Cemetery in Yangshan Town, Jining, Shandong Province, cited above in Sheena Liang's essay. (Baiduwiki)

The August 2025 exchange was hosted by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), an intergovernmental organization established by China, Japan, and South Korea to promote regional collaboration. Its premise is that despite a shared history marked by conflict, the three countries also share a future. At the same time, that cooperation has proven fragile: even the trilateral leaders' summit itself had been suspended for several years amid geopolitical tensions, only resuming shortly before our gathering after a four-year pause. So this Youth Summit felt especially significant since it was occurring at a moment when dialogue at the highest political level was only just being restored. At the Youth Summit, we were tasked with discussing areas of cooperation and drafting a joint declaration across key domains, from sustainable development to economic collaboration.

I remember one discussion on history and education. A Japanese student spoke about how her schooling had only briefly addressed wartime history, and how she had begun

learning more independently at university. There was a pause in the group. A Chinese participant responded by sharing how deeply that history is embedded in our national consciousness, how it shapes not only what we learn, but how we feel. The exchange was not confrontational, but it was not entirely comfortable either. And yet, it was precisely in that discomfort that something meaningful began. Growing up, history had always felt structured, contained in textbooks, timelines, and official narratives. But in that room, it became fluid. It was shaped by personal experience, education, and willingness to engage. Through talking to different youth delegates, I began to understand that memory is not uniform across borders and that it is also deeply human.

What struck me the most, however, was openness. Despite the weight of history, students from Japan, Korea, and China were genuinely curious about one another. Conversations extended beyond formal sessions to over meals, in hallways, and during late-



Participants in the 2025 Youth Summit hosted by the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in Osaka, Japan, in August 2025. (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat)

night convenience store runs. We compared small things like how some words in our languages sound similar, how each of our cultures has its own version of rice dishes. We also spoke about identity, about how we saw the future, and about the shared concerns on climate change, public health, economic uncertainty, and the pressures facing our generation.

At the policy level, we worked together to produce a joint statement outlining areas of cooperation. These included strengthening people-to-people exchange through easier travel and cultural programs, promoting sustainability and disaster resilience, enhancing economic and technological collaboration, and addressing challenges related to public health and aging societies. The document reflected the youth delegates' optimistic vision of regional cooperation which required shared responsibility and mutual benefit.

In another session, we discussed the future of the region in the context of rising geopolitical tensions. The conversation turned to how the three countries position under U.S.–China competition, the security alliances within the region, and beyond. These were topics I had analyzed in academic settings, but here, they felt immediate. Students spoke about how these dynamics shaped their identities and opportunities. A Korean participant reflected on the tension between national alignment and regional cooperation. A Japanese student spoke about navigating historical responsibility while looking toward the future. I found myself thinking about my own position, Chinese, studying in the

United States, participating in a dialogue shaped by both.

Throughout the formal negotiation and informal exchanges, Asian Studies no longer felt like an academic discipline but a lived reality. Returning home full of happy memories, I am also thinking of the limits of these exchanges. It would be easy to see youth dialogue as a solution to historical conflict, but the conversations we had were dependent on a shared willingness to participate from all countries involved. Outside these spaces, broader political media narratives often reinforce division rather than understanding. The contrast made clear that connections are possible, but they exist alongside a lot of structural tensions.

And yet, I do not think that diminishes the significance of these interactions. If anything, it underscores their importance. These youth dialogues are the beginnings of spaces where inherited narratives can be questioned and new forms of understanding can take shape. If high-level cooperation can pause for years and only cautiously resume, then these smaller, human-scale exchanges take on a different meaning: they become part of the process of keeping dialogue alive.

When I returned home, my grandmother did not ask much about the trip. I thought about telling her about the students I met, about their openness, their curiosity, and their willingness to engage with a difficult past. But I hesitated. How do you explain to someone whose family was shaped by war that you found connection in the very place associated with that loss?



What I do know is that my experience did not erase history, but it changed how I understand what it means to study it. To study Asia today is not to stand at a distance, analyzing events from afar. It is to navigate memory, identity, and uncertainty. It is to hold space for both conflict and connection. And it is to recognize that understanding is an ongoing process that unfolds not only in institutions, but in conversations between people.

In troubled times, perhaps this is what Asian Studies demands most: the willingness to remain in that process.

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**Xinwen (Sheena) Liang** is a Master of Public Administration candidate at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, concentrating in Climate, Energy, and Environment. She graduated summa cum laude from The George Washington University with a Bachelor of Science in International Affairs, with a focus on international economics. Her academic and professional experience spans international organizations, sustainability initiatives, and policy research institutions across China, the United States, and South Korea. Her research interests include U.S.–China relations, global climate governance, and sustainable business. Having studied and worked across different cultural and political contexts, she believes that addressing global challenges requires sustained dialogue, international cooperation, and collective action.

Runner-up, Written  
Essay Category



## OPENING CEREMONY

### 44<sup>TH</sup> AND 45<sup>TH</sup> ASEAN SUMMITS AND RELATED SUMMITS

9 OCTOBER 2024, VIENTIANE, LAO PDR



## Beyond the "Other" — Why Studying Asia Matters Now

By Irene Souny

"From a Western point of view," Simon Leys wrote, "China is quite simply the other pole of the human experience... China is the fundamental 'Other' without whose encounter the West would be unable to become truly conscious of the contours and limits of its own cultural self" (my translation). This citation featured in all of my college admissions essays, and I returned to it often when explaining my interest in China. What could be a more compelling statement to capture the excitement of studying Asia? It offered a promise: to study Asia was to be confronted with alterity at its most extreme, and through it, to better understand oneself.

Yet what once appeared as an invitation to intellectual expansion, increasingly reads today as a symptom of a deeper epistemological structure. The framing of China—and more broadly of Northeast, Southeast, and Inner Asia—as the West's "Other" does not simply describe difference, but actively produces it. The enduring oppositions of "East" and "West"—which remain difficult to abandon—have long organized our engagement with Asia across all disciplines. Logos versus dao, sociology's grappling between tradition and modernity, or political science's framework of liberal democracy versus authoritarian governance: these binaries do not only simplify reality, they direct our attention toward difference as the primary object of knowledge,

*Above:* Southeast Asian leaders pose for a photo at the opening ceremony of the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits in Vientiane, Laos, on Oct. 9, 2024. (ASEAN Secretariat/Kusuma Pandu Wijaya)

perpetuating assumptions about norms and deviation.

Consider the debate over whether Confucianism is a religion. Most would say no, citing the absence of a pantheon or clerical structure. Yet Tu Weiming's work reveals a practice centered around ritual systems, cosmology, and a spirituality embedded in human relationships rather than abstracted from them—religion, then, refracted through a lens other than the Christian one. Scholars such as Anna Sun go further, questioning whether “religion” itself is a viable term to apply to Chinese thought and practice at all, arguing that the concept is so thoroughly shaped by Western intellectual history that its imposition distorts more than it clarifies. What begins as a question about Confucianism opens a question about the frame—about what we assume we already know before we start asking.

To study Asia, then, is to discover Leys was only half-right. The encounter does not simply confront us with the other side of a pole—it reveals that the poles themselves are a construction. And that discovery bears directly on how we make sense of a moment of exceptional geopolitical turmoil.

In 2024, the United States and China combined accounted for over 40% of the world's GDP. The temptation to read the current world order through the lens of this concentration of power is understandable—and it has produced its own shorthand.

Three years ago, at a Sciences Po conference provocatively titled “G20 = 2 + 0?” Professor Stephanie Balme invited us to confront an uncomfortable realization: that Europe had

failed to articulate an alternative vision for a global order, defaulting instead to being the junior partner in someone else's rivalry. It was, for the French student that I was, the realization that motivated my decision to come to Columbia. Yet the G2 framing reproduces the problem that the study of Asia exposes. By mapping a Cold War bipolar logic onto an increasingly multipolar world, it renders invisible everything that does not fit the contest between two centers, treating the remainder as periphery to be managed. The Westphalian is a historically specific European export that sits uneasily alongside alternative regional logics. The Mandala system that structured political authority across much of Southeast Asia operates on an entirely different premise of overlapping spheres of influence, graduated sovereignty, and centers of power that attract and repel. The framework redefines what it means to study periphery—for it is precisely at the edges of one's sphere of influence that the terms of power are contested.

If the G2 model appears convincing from a distance, it dissolves upon looking at Asia. ASEAN, often invoked as a single bloc, reveals upon inspection a set of political formations that share little beyond geography. Singapore's technocratic model of governance has no analogue in the region. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, governing an archipelago of extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity. Malaysia's political life is structured by an ethnic calculus distinct from its neighbors. These are not variations on a single Asian template, but distinct configurations shaped by divergent colonial histories, demographic compositions, and negotiations of sovereignty. Central Asia complicates this picture. Caught between competing Russia, China, and an assertive regional Islam, this





TSMC factory in Central Taiwan Science Park, Taichung, Taiwan, June 2020. (Briáxis F. Mendes / Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

Eurasian corridor is where the next century's resource and connectivity architecture is being quietly decided. Even the question of Taiwan, where Cold War bipolarity is most aggressively retrofitted onto the present, looks different when approached on its own terms. To read Taiwan primarily as a flash-point and proxy for U.S.-China rivalry and a terrain of confrontation between two competing powers is not to describe the situation but to participate in it. It obscures the fact that the China-Taiwan relationship is not simply one of domination but a dual claim to a single inheritance and the name China. It equally obscures Taiwan's integration into a global economic system that extends beyond the interests of any single power.

Western commentary on the present is saturated with the language of exception—every rupture is read as unprecedented, every crisis as uniquely severe. War, renewed protectionism, the resurgence of authoritarian politics, challenges to democratic norms:

all feel magnified beyond anything that came before, as though the baseline from which we have fallen were the natural order of things rather than a historically specific and unusually stable interlude. But looking at Asia, the exceptionalism of our current moment becomes less evident. South Korea—only an independent state as of 1948, devastated by war just two years later—compressed into half a century a political and economic journey that elsewhere took generations, emerging as a liberal democracy and a global cultural force in a turn no prior framework could have predicted. But this trajectory was neither linear nor inevitable. The country experienced brutal military rule and civilian oppression in the 1980s, and a financial crisis in 1997 requiring IMF intervention which restructured the economy almost overnight. These were not deviations from a stable norm but rather the norm, turbulence as the condition and renewal as the recurring possibility contained within.

Studying Asia will not resolve anxieties about this moment but rather recontextualize them and make visible the degree to which our sense of exception is a product of the particular history we are taught to treat as universal. If the diversity of ASEAN teaches us anything, it is that durable solutions emerge from specific histories, and offers us the capacity to resist the comfort of universal templates. Leys was right that the encounter with Asia forces a reckoning with the limitations of one's own cultural self. What he did not anticipate was that the most important lesson of that encounter would not be about otherness at all. It would be the discovery that the self doing the encountering was never as stable or as universal as believed. To study Asia in a moment of exceptional geopolitical turmoil is not simply to confront the other pole, but instead imagine what comes after.

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**Irene Souny** (GS '26) is in the Dual B.A. program between Columbia University and Sciences Po Paris, majoring in Financial Economics and minoring in East Asia Studies. Her academic interests sit at the intersection of political economy, regional studies, and comparative frameworks, with a particular focus on how the study of Asia unsettles binary frameworks and resists easy categorization. After graduation, she will remain in New York to begin a career in finance.



## There Would Be Reverberations: Columbia in the 1960s

**By Morris Rossabi**

Adjunct Professor of East Asian Language and Cultures, Department of East Asian Languages & Cultures

The fall of 1961 was one of the first occasions during which the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures offered a rapid introduction to the Chinese language. The class met two hours a day, five days a week for two semesters, along with two hours a week of oral practice, which provided a preparation for third-year Chinese language in the following summer. It was intensive, but the Department allowed students to take two other courses per semester on East Asian culture. Those of us who started that fall would convene daily from 4:00 to 6:00 in the afternoon in Low Library (where the East Asian Library was located at that time) with Loretta Pan. We focused mostly on writing and reading, with limited attention to speaking. The students, who included Paula Johnson and me, among three or four others, were Ph.D. candidates, and our objective was literacy as rapidly as possible. Loretta Pan (always “Miss Pan”) emphasized that goal in her teaching. She kept a record of our inaccurate writing of any Chinese characters and required students to write each one correctly five times. If a student wrote one again

*Above:* Demonstrators protest against the presence of a U.S. Marine Corps recruiting desk on the Columbia campus on April 21, 1967. (“Columbia University 1968” website, [columbia.edu](http://columbia.edu))



incorrectly, 25 copies were mandated; on a third occasion, it was 125 times (I hit that last number; Paula never did). Toward the end of the course, Ms. Pan assigned us to keep diaries in Chinese of our daily lives, and she clearly enjoyed the romantic lives (no sex, of course, just longings and dating) of the students.

The atmosphere, as well as the relationships between instructor and student, differed markedly from that of the present time. One example: when Hans Bielenstein arrived to teach Early Chinese History, he required all male students to wear a jacket and tie in class. I do not remember any similar clothing demands on female students. Perhaps very few women were in the graduate program at that time, and most, if not all, wore skirts or dresses, not pants. In the blazingly hot summer of 1962, the men sat in the air-conditioned comfort of the Law School, which had just been built, to begin the study of Classical Chinese with Hans, but they sweltered when they left the building. (Hans eventually became more flexible, and we actually became friends.)

The East Asian Institute was on the fifth floor of Kent Hall, which the Law School had just vacated, and consisted principally of Professor C. Martin Wilbur's office. The only seminar on Modern China was in the room adjacent to his office. He and Doak Barnett, who had just arrived at Columbia, directed the seminar, and Paula Johnson, Richard Goodman (who had received a law degree at Yale), and I were participants,



Longtime Columbia Chinese language instructor Loretta Renqiu Pan (1917–2015) celebrating her 78th birthday. (Columbia Global Centers | Beijing)

with occasional visits from Mike Oksenberg and John Dardess. We each prepared a M.A. thesis and made a presentation based on our research. Visiting scholars offered lectures because there were too few students to fill the 14 weeks with presentations.

Limited relations between China and the U.S. resulted in few students in courses on China. David Keightley and I were the sole students in Hans Bielenstein's seminar on the Han dynasty. Paula Johnson and I were the only students in C. T. Hsia's course on Modern Chinese Literature. We were also the only two in a course on Japanese Sociology, whose instructor Herbert Passin had never taught before, and who, on the first day of class, handed out a 60-page list of books and articles on Japanese society. We were intimidated and rarely spoke up for the rest of the semester. If

we had known that Passin was a good friend of Saul Bellow's, we might have reacted differently.

The Department did not require a series of exams to qualify for the Ph.D. There were no Chinese or Japanese language tests, and no written exams on specific fields concerning China or Japan. The only requirement was an oral exam on a major and a minor field. I chose a major field in early Chinese history and (in a foolhardy decision) a minor in Russian history. I had never taken a graduate course on Russian history and was ill-prepared for the minor. Professor Marc Raeff mercifully gave me a passing grade in Russian history.

On the other hand, there was no vocational guidance during the initial years of graduate school, at a time when the first decline in faculty openings since World War Two hit universities. Several of us scrambled to secure openings. The competition was so intense that several excellent specialists on China, especially those interested in traditional China, sought positions outside the academy. My classmates served as consultants for the World Bank, financial planners, and directors of projects at foundations, banks, and newspapers. A few managed to receive positions at Washington University, University of Toronto, Berkeley, Case Western Reserve University, University of Kansas, and the University of Virginia. These newly-minted Ph.D.s often developed the first East Asian Studies programs in their respective institutions.

The Vietnam War shaped the last years of

our Ph.D. programs. As so-called experts on Asia (although not specifically knowledgeable about Vietnam), some of us became involved in the debates concerning U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, which many considered to be a civil war while others perceived it as Chinese Communist expansionism. By the height of the war, in 1968, I had received a Smithsonian Fellowship at the Freer Gallery of Art to complete my dissertation and to learn about Chinese ceramics. My family and I moved to Washington right after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the attendant riots. We had rented an apartment in Capitol Hill and were shocked to see soldiers on the steps of the Capitol. Demonstrations continued throughout the year, in some of which we participated. Not all focused on Vietnam. There were Poor People's marches and protests revolving around Martin Luther King, his ideals and his assassination. The assassination of Robert Kennedy in June contributed to the disarray throughout the country. The ensuing chaotic Democratic Party National Convention that nominated Hubert Humphrey for President led to even greater turbulence.

Washington was at the center of this maelstrom. Nonetheless, I persisted in conducting research for my dissertation, although I also took part in demonstrations opposed to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Many of the protesters were students, but many other sectors of the population also disagreed with U.S. policy. I discovered such dissent when an administrator at the University of Virginia offered me a part-time position teaching Chinese history at branches of the University in

the military bases at Fort Belvoir and Quantico. I was flabbergasted that most of the students I taught at Belvoir and Quantico, quite a few of whom had served in Vietnam, believed that the U.S. government had made a tragic mistake in its military intrusion in Vietnam. I spent the following year in Taiwan and found similar reactions among the soldiers stationed there. My wife taught Russian history to servicemen at the University of Maryland extension, and we became friendly with several of them. They were not optimistic about the war.

After a year in Taiwan, during which I completed a draft of my dissertation, I returned to New York in April of 1970. Columbia had resolved the controversies concerning the building of an allegedly racially segregated gym in Morningside Park and had ended cooperation with the Institute for Defense Analyses, an organization that supported U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. Thus, I could devote April, without interruption, to preparation for the oral defense of my dissertation. Fortunately, my defense went well. In addition, Professor L. C. Goodrich offered me a full-time position for the summer to work on the Ming Biographical History Project (Kent Hall, fifth floor) at the lordly sum of \$35 a week, which, even then, placed me, my wife, and our three-year-old child below the poverty line. Nonetheless, the opportunity to work with Professor Goodrich, Fang Chao-ying, Lien-che Tu Fang, and Hok-lam Chan somewhat compensated for the rock-bottom salary.

On May 4, my wife and I celebrated my new status as a Ph.D. by going to the theater. When we left the theater, a large crowd had gathered to watch the neon lights on the New York Times building, which reported that National Guard troops had shot and killed four Kent State University students who were protesting the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, as well as the very presence of the National Guard on campus. Shocked by this event, we recognized that there would be reverberations at Columbia. The campus reacted: classes were canceled, but faculty and students were divided in their responses. Some were distressed by the attempts of protesters to prevent the opening of campus buildings, while others believed it was an essential response to the War and to the killing of students on a university campus. The protests continued, particularly after the revelation of the U.S.'s secret bombing of Cambodia. But by late August, I had moved to Cleveland, where I had been appointed Assistant Professor of History at Case Western Reserve University and could not observe first-hand developments at Columbia.

Yet the 1960s at Columbia had an extraordinary influence on me and my generation at the university. We certainly benefited from the demanding assignments and the rigorous training that helped us develop our critical faculties. Our development occurred, ironically, amid the first student challenges to authority, whether in the form of government officials or university administrators. Those challenges also led to changes in relations between students and faculty.



As I re-read this essay, I notice that everyone I mention, aside from my immediate family, has died. Yet, for me, they live on as distinguished Columbian contributors toward an understanding of China and indeed the world.

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**Morris Rossabi** (right, in the Vietnam War era) is a historian of China and Central and Inner Asia. He teaches courses on Inner Asian, East Asian, and Chinese history at Columbia. During the 2008–2009 academic year, he received an honorary doctorate from the National University of Mongolia. He and Mary Rossabi are involved in an oral history of 20th- and 21st-century Mongolia, which has led to the publication of *Socialist Devotees and Dissenters*; *A Herder, a Trader, and a Lawyer*; and *The Practice of Buddhism in Kharkhorin and Its Revival* (National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2010, 2012, and 2013).

In 2006, he was named chair of the Arts and Culture Board of the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation). He is the author of *Herder to Statesman* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); *The Mongols and Global History* (W. W. Norton, 2011); *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2012); *A History of China* (Blackwell, 2013); *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists* (University of California Press, 2005); *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (University of California Press, 1988), chosen as a main selection by the History Book Club; and *China and Inner Asia* (Universe Books, 1975). He is the editor of *China*



*Among Equals* (University of California Press, 1983), *Governing China's Multi-Ethnic Frontiers* (University of Washington Press, 2005) and *Eurasian Influences on the Yuan* (NIAS Press, 2013), and a contributor to several volumes of the *Cambridge History of China*. A collection of his articles has been published as *From Yuan to Modern China and Mongolia* (Brill, 2014).

He has helped organize exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. He was on the advisory board of the Project on Central Eurasia of the Soros Foundation. The author of numerous articles and speeches, he travels repeatedly to Central Asia and Mongolia, where he teaches courses on Mongolian and East Asian history.

Professor Rossabi received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1970.



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