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Social Science Exchanges with China

Ten Chinese social scientists who recently toured the United States received unparalleled and enthusiastic attention from the social science community. Hundreds of distinguished social scientists disrupted their teaching and research schedules to meet with this delegation, eagerly attending National Academy programs, presenting briefings at the Social Science Research Council, and participating in carefully designed programs describing the substance and the institutions of the social sciences at leading research universities and institutes around the country. Foundations, universities, and research councils picked up the heavy tab for a month of seminars, lectures, tours, receptions, and dinners.

Why this attention, this enthusiasm, this expenditure? To be sure, the Chinese guests are distinguished scholars, representative of the best talent of the new Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences. They were also charming and intelligent. But the level of attention and investment in this delegation is exceptional for any group, let alone for ten men who have been isolated from developments in Western social sciences for some 30 years. To explain this attention, we must look beyond the delegation itself to ask what the visit signifies for the future enrichment of the social sciences.

A comparison with natural science is instructive. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Provost Walter Rosenblith, discussing exchanges with China at the recent annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies, observed that the laws of nature are invariant across jurisdictional and geographic boundaries. Scholarly exchange with China will encourage an international partnership in the natural sciences. Physicists, biologists, and mathematicians will journey to China as the quality of science there allows for mutual learning. Or perhaps they will go as missionaries, transferring science and technology from centers of knowledge to less developed areas.

The social sciences start from a very different perspective. The laws of economics, social structure, political process, and human psychology are not invariant across national boundaries. In the social sciences and humanities we accept the profound importance of cultural, historical, and national differences. Social science findings in one society are tested against the experience of other societies. Variation through time and across cultures is turned to scientific advantage.

China's significance for the future of social science is clear. China has a quarter of the world's population. Isolation from the history and contemporary development of this rich, diversified civilization cripples the social sciences. An inaccessible China can only stunt inquiries into such topics as the decline of bureaucratic empires, the anatomy of peasant revolutions, the decision-making processes in centrally planned economies, and the collectivization of rural societies. Even the emerging field of policy sciences has something to learn from China, for China has embarked on history's most ambitious experiment in the deliberate application of social and economic theory and systematic research to strategies for national development.

History, anthropology, economics, and sociology—just as physics, biology, and mathematics—can proceed on their scholarly courses without China. But for the social sciences the costs will be high, higher than those paid by our natural science colleagues. Students of social behavior must account for those variations that are sensitive to jurisdictional and geographic boundaries. The Chinese experience can contribute so substantially to an understanding of these variations, now and throughout recorded history, that a serious social science needs to incorporate that experience. I believe the enthusiastic reception of the Chinese social science delegation is recognition of this need. Moreover, this recognition establishes principles to guide future scholarly exchanges with China, principles premised on the requirement of reciprocity between the social science communities in both China and the United States.—KENNETH PREWITT, *President, Social Science Research Council, 605 Third Avenue, New York 10016*