

“Reflections on a Semester at Tsinghua University”

Wednesday, February 20, 2013 | Event Summary

School of International Relations and Pacific Studies Dean's Roundtable Lecture Series

Overview: Barry Naughton, IR/PS Professor of Chinese Economy and Sokwanlok Chair of Chinese International Affairs, spent the fall term as a Visiting Scholar at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, which served as a platform to observe a rapidly changing Chinese society. In the roundtable talk, Naughton shared his insights into a leading university's struggle to adapt global standards. In addition, he discussed China's new political leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, who ascended to power during the 18th Party Congress in November and the struggle that new leadership faces as they try to define a coherent program of economic reform and national revitalization. [Click here to read more.](#)

Rapporteur: Haiyi Liu, PhD Candidate, UC San Diego

China Impressions 2012

I first went to China in 1982, so my term at Tsinghua in 2012 was a 30th anniversary visit. One of the greatest things was walking everywhere. From early September until late December, I never drove a car, although of course I rode in many. So for four months, I didn't drive, and it was delightful.

Walking from my apartment to my office was a daily event. Some time in week three, I was making this walk when a bicycle came bearing down on me. The rider jumped off in front of me and said: “Ah, Barry, I heard you were here, it's good to see you.” It turned out to be an excellent economist and old friend of mine. We chatted for a bit and he said: “It's such a great time to be here, it's so interesting!” Was he talking about the leadership transition coming up at that time? I was not sure.

“Optimistic?” I asked. “Optimistic? No, I'm not optimistic! It has just been so interesting. Everything is changing. Everything we have known to be true for the past 30 years is now changing.” And I think that's right. I learned 3 things: one is that people still ride bicycles, at least on campus; the second is that intelligent people in China feel that the ground is shifting under their feet; and the third is that the most intelligent people aren't quite optimistic, for reasons I'll discuss later.

But for now, let's go back to walking.

One time on campus, a walking companion said: “Hey, watch out! You just stepped on that guy's ashes!” I hadn't noticed the chalk circle that surrounded a small pile of ashes left over from *guijie*, which is like our Halloween. When I started to notice, I realized there were quite a few by the bridge over the canal. There are a couple of lovely canals on the Tsinghua campus because the campus was once part of the old Summer Palace. The campus is famous

for the ruins of the Western style buildings that were designed for the Qianlong Emperor by Jesuit artists and architects and then destroyed by the English and French armies in 1860. Spirits, like living people, use transportation arteries, so this is the perfect place to burn an offering.

Of course, everything in China is complicated. It turns out there's not just one Ghost Day, but actually four. This was lucky for me, because I got to see people burning paper money and marking out the ashes with a chalk circle. In fact, another walking companion nudged me and said: "Well we shouldn't stare at them." I was happy to turn away and continue walking. I was secretly feeling very pleased because after 30 years of being stared at in China, a Chinese person had finally told me that it wasn't polite to stare.

Even a place as modern, international, science-oriented, and politicized as Tsinghua has plenty of people who want to revive old cultural traditions or even old superstitions. This says something about the increasing pluralization of China. Increasingly you see evidence of sub-cultures. Tsinghua, of course, is dominated by a nerd subculture. Yet there are also emerging little pockets of other sub-cultures such as punk, greaser and gay. Of course I am too old to investigate any of those. It could be a good project for a graduate student.

China is thriving, diversifying, and pluralizing. The entire Tsinghua faculty that wants cars has cars now. They're pleased but also frustrated because despite having a car, traffic keeps them from getting anywhere. The frustration is broader. Systemically, things aren't going forward that much and might even be going backwards. In the U.S., getting tenure means you have job security; at Tsinghua, it means you're losing your job security! This is because in the old system, everybody had tenure! Even though the idea is the same and the institution might be exactly the same, the significance is exactly backward.

China is facing a crisis of confidence. How can this be? In recent years there is the sense that the country has changed or grown or developed in fundamental ways and yet has not been able to adapt institutions in a way that's called for. In terms of domestic policy, Wen Jiabao set out to achieve three big things: (1) keep economic reforms moving ahead; (2) shift China's economic growth model; and (3) build the beginnings of a comprehensive society-wide social security system. This is big. This is a lot. They achieved one of the three. But they failed to achieve two out of the three. And that means the credibility is not high. Now when I say "failed" I don't mean that the goal was 100 and the performance was 76 or 80. I mean the goal was to move 100 in the direction north and we did not move at all or even a little bit south. These are serious "epic fails," as the gamers say.

The achievement of a society-wide social security system is not really visible to people, but it hasn't yet begun to affect their sense that life is uncertain, that you can't depend on the government and that you have to depend on yourself. People see and feel the other two. Their lives and careers are not opening up for them in the way you might expect from such an explosively growing society. Recently a number of reformist economists have begun calling for a "Reform Commission," which is a way of saying: "Hey guys, let's get the process going!" Long-term negotiation. That is so characteristic of China. Did I come away cynical and depressed?