

A UNIQUE WAY TO FOSTER LIBERAL LEARNING:
THE MANSFIELD FREEMAN LECTURE SERIES AT THIRTY

By Vera Schwarcz
Freeman Professor of History and East Asian Studies

San shi er li
"At thirty I stood firm"
Confucius, *Analects* 2:4

To understand an institution, imagine the sage. When we began to plan the establishment of the Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies in the fall of 1986, we naturally turned to Confucius—the seminal thinker who inspired the traditional cultures of China, Japan and Korea. We were, then, building something new at Wesleyan, and chose a passage from the *Analects* that described the Sage's own beginnings: “*Shi you wu er zhi yu xue*; At fifteen I set my heart on learning.” Consequently, we chose to name the new Center as the *Zhi Xue Tang*, the Hall for Beginning Learning.

Now, as we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Mansfield Freeman Lecture Series, it is appropriate to return to Confucius, a the thinker who also held the admiration of Mr. Mansfield Freeman, the uniquely generous and visionary donor who enabled us to make East Asian Studies such a central part of liberal learning at Wesleyan. As a scholar of Confucian philosophy (in addition to his successful career at a businessman), Mr. Freeman was familiar with the passage in the *Analects* in which the ancient sage discusses his own intellectual maturation. The fragment most apt phrase for us today is: “*San shi er li*; At thirty I stood firm.” For Confucius, this statement was not one of arrogance. It was simply a recognition of challenges overcome, of the fact that he had gained enough knowledge about the world and himself so that he could become “*li*”—established in the world with a clear sense of inner purpose.

This sense of “*li*” also characterizes the Mansfield Freeman Lecture series, an institution that preceded the establishment of the Freeman Center and which continues to have a large impact upon the Wesleyan and Middletown communities and upon Asian Studies across the nation as well. In the past three decades, this annual event has brought to our campus distinguished speakers who sought to foster a vision of genuine liberal education by addressing themselves to topics of public significance that went beyond the classroom concerns of East Asian Studies students and faculty. From its inception, this distinguished series was intended to catalyze broad community interest in the events unfolding in China and Japan. Over the years, Korea became part of the focus too.

Thirty years of such broad minded, public oriented inquiry is cause for celebration indeed. Mr. Mansfield Freeman's hopes for this event have been realized again and again. He had envisioned a yearly occasion of significant public impact. Even as he began to support very generously our academic program in East Asian Studies, he was drawn to the idea of a forum in which renowned scholars would pose questions of public concern that went beyond narrow expertise. The first Freeman Lecture was, therefore, planned with great care. The original invitation went out to Edwin Reischauer, a distinguished professor of history at Harvard who also had served as the American ambassador to Japan. When he suffered a stroke, we had to make alternative plans rather rapidly. I suggested the name of Fredric Wakeman, the China expert from Berkeley University who would be able to address the community about a personality that was gripping the world imagination—Mao Zedong.

The first Mansfield Freeman Lecture also coincided with my first year of teaching. I was naturally nervous to be a very junior faculty member charged with the challenge of introducing a scholar who had been my own mentor in California as well as one of the most thoughtful commentators on Chinese affairs. Fortunately, my senior colleague Lawrence Olson stepped in to help. Having worked closely with Mr. Freeman on the design of the lecture series and having had himself a distinguished career in the foreign service in Japan, Professor Olson was able to make opening remarks that set the event in a context of broad public significance. After my own introduction of Professor Wakeman, I sat back amazed to see the largest lecture hall at Wesleyan packed with students, faculty, and visitors from near and far. The topic of that evening was simple “Mao and History”—three words that linked worlds of conflict which remained very unclear in 1975-1976, a year that witnessed the death of Mao Zedong and the slow abandonment of the violent politics of the Cultural Revolution.

The highly successful format we developed for the first Mansfield Freeman Lecture continued to shape the annual event for the next three decades. We continued to have very distinguished scholars come to address a broad audience, followed by a morning of more informal conversation with students and faculty. Thus the broader Wesleyan community was invigorated by insights into East Asian politics, history, and culture while our own majors had ongoing access to the finest minds in their own field of expertise. In keeping with our mandate from Mr. Freeman, we sought to bring to campus experts willing to address the most important issues of the day. After the Wakeman opening salvo, we brought to Wesleyan Professor John King Fairbank—the founder of American China studies—who delivered the second Freeman Lecture on the subject of “Chinese-American Relations: The Uncertain Future.” In 1976-77 this was a most timely theme as diplomatic relations were tenuously being reestablished after the Cold War.

Like the first Freeman Lecture, this event too was very successful. It showed how we can create a unique forum at Wesleyan for a large number of students and faculty, who have no special background in East Asia, to come together to learn and reflect about urgent world events and cultural concerns. Our 16th Freeman Lecture, delivered by Professor Masao Miyoshi, also took on a difficult and timely subject: “Japan Bashing”—a theme in American political and economic circles that went beyond the scholarly community. As Korea became more central to our intellectual inquiry, we used the Freeman Lecture format to bring to campus scholars such as In-he Lee who spoke about “Understanding Korea: Psychology of a Rapidly Developing Nation.” This, too, was not

a narrow subject of academic interest. Rather, as Mansfield Freeman had wished, we were using the annual lecture to open up avenues of reflection for the community as a whole.

Mr. Freeman's interest in the annual lecture series remained strong, even as we began to strengthen the East Asian Studies major with his generous financial support. Having developed a close personal friendship with Mr. Freeman, I used our correspondence to discuss some of the speakers and the ideas they brought to the Wesleyan campus. In the fall of 1982, I invited Professor Tu Wei-Ming to deliver the seventh annual Freeman Lecture on the subject of the "Confucian Concept of *Xue*." This is an idea that affected the broadest constituency in an institution dedicated to liberal learning. Furthermore I wanted to give our own majors an opportunity to discuss Confucianism with Professor Tu's collaborator from the Chinese mainland, the well-known philosopher Li Zehou. In a letter that came to me in February 1982 from Green Valley, Arizona (the Freeman's winter home), Mr. Freeman wrote:

I am interested in the two distinguished Chinese scholars you have chosen to lecture at Wesleyan. Both are alleged admirers of Confucianism. But it is my understanding that Confucianism is no longer a reputable subject for study and that Confucius himself has been relegated to his feudalistic past.... The present leadership has become tolerant of western ideas in the economic field, but this is only to gain knowledge of western scientific techniques. It has introduced a certain degree of wage differentials only to encourage greater efficiency on the part of workers. Does this relaxation of stern Communist standards also exempt from thought control aspects of the old Confucian civilization? What these two gentlemen may say will be revealing in this respect....

These were brave and insightfully words in 1982. They remain telling about the man who not only supported our efforts in East Asian Studies financially, but who also was willing to engage difficult issues with his own keen mind. Mr. Freeman's extensive experience in China before 1949 and his voracious reading about East Asia after his insurance company moved to New York made him a challenging conversation partner on all subjects relating to China and Japan.

He was eager for news about each speaker in the annual Freeman Lecture series and often commented at length about their ideas, background, and political outlook. In November 1985, after the well known journalist Harrison Salisbury delivered the eleventh Freeman Lecture on the theme of "China's Long March: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," Mr. Freeman was prompt in writing to me about his own reflections.

I note that Salisbury believes that the free economy of Hong Kong can be successfully united with the state planned economy of the mainland and in the foreseeable future Taiwan will also join to become a second trading enclave with a window to the western world. I disagree. I fear that the surrender of Hong Kong by the British will prove a tragedy for the people of that island....

Twenty years after this letter, as we celebrate the 30th Freeman Lecture, these words ring prophetic. Uncertainty hangs over Hong Kong and Taiwan even as the worst fears of

Mansfield Freeman have failed to come true. What lingers most meaningfully is the engagement of a broad mind with the lives and thoughts of peoples who live far from the American shores. Mr. Freeman himself embodied the genuinely liberal learning that this unique lecture series sought to cultivate. He had the courage to disagree with received opinion because he had made his business to become—and stay—exceptionally well informed about world affairs.

Through the Freeman Lecture series we have sought to give the larger Wesleyan community a similarly broad cast of mind. In the three decades that East Asian Studies has sponsored this annual event, scholars with a wide range of interests have come to campus to raise issues that cut across disciplinary boundaries: Professor Donald Keene, for example, delivered the fourteenth Freeman Lecture on the comparative theme of “Japanese Literature as World Literature.” John Dower, speaking nine years later, addressed himself to the subject of “Images of Race and Power: Japan, China and the United States from the 1850s to the present.” Here, too, the aim was to go beyond one region or one historical period so as to provoke wide ranging conversations about issues that continue to affect public policy. Throughout the three decades of this lecture series, our goal was to make comparative studies something more than a passion of the few. Rather, in keeping with Mr. Freeman's own vision, we sought to illustrate how thinking about East Asia was essential to knowledge about America and Europe as well. When Professor Benjamin Schwartz delivered the thirteenth Freeman Lecture, he addressed himself to this challenge directly. Entitled “Why Study Non-Western Cultures,” his remarks provoked campus-wide reflection. His message has now become institutionalized in our expectation that all Wesleyan students need to know something beyond home ground.

At thirty, the Mansfield Freeman Lecture series has indeed “stood firm.” It has become part of the fabric of our intellectual life in a purposeful and creative fashion. It has nurtured broad mindedness across the curriculum. Whether talking about timely issues such as “War and Memory in Japan in the end of Millennium” or suggestive explorations of timeless concerns such as “The Assertion of the Interior Self in Ancient China,” Freeman lecturers have enriched campus conversations in ways that go far beyond even our boldest hopes in 1975. Mr. Freeman himself voiced this sense of wonder when he wrote to me less than half a year before his death in 1992: “I regret that I live so far away that I cannot take a more active role in the activities of the East Asian Studies Center.” This letter came from Scott Farm in Hardwick, Vermont where our 97-year-old benefactor—and my dear friend—lived with continued, keen interest in all that East Asian Studies was doing for Wesleyan and for community at large.

Each time I visited Mr. Freeman, whether in Arizona or Vermont, he wanted to know how students and faculty took their knowledge of China and Japan beyond the classroom. The annual lecture series was the most public sign of this concern. If he were alive today, he would take quiet pride in the significant impact that our majors have had on campus, and on the world. In the years to come, we will continue to do what we have sought to establish in the past tree decades: to bring to campus scholars who sow the seeds of deep reflection.

Mansfield Freeman embodied the ideal of liberal learning that we are celebrating this year. In his own book about the Qing dynasty philosopher Yan Yuan (1635-1704),

Mr. Freeman used words that we may find useful as we plan future lecture series. Quoting the ideals of ancient sages, he wrote:

If he had made his disciples study ceremonies, some music, some military strategies, some water resources and the use of fire...his disciples would have become versatile scholars and, in their intercourse with other men would have been in accord with human nature and destiny. Their speech and deportment would have become a form of self-discipline.... If this method of education had been followed, not only would some prince have invited one of these scholars to serve as minister, but both prince and minister would have accomplished real results, and the world would have surely benefited. (*Preservation of Learning*, p. 66)

Our world at Wesleyan had benefited greatly from the broad-minded concern of one particularly generous donor. Through the vision of Mr. Mansfield Freeman—and the ongoing support and concern of his son, Mr. Houghton Freeman—we have been able to institutionalize East Asian Studies in a way that enriches the entire community. The annual Freeman Lecture series is one forum for promoting the kind of versatility of mind that Chinese sages treasured—and the modern world demands. Even when our subjects are no longer only music, ceremonies, water resources, and fire, the goal remains the same: to full actualize human potential through disciplined inquiry into worlds both far and near.