

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 6, 2018,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Philip A. Kuhn
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

PHILIP ALDEN KUHN

BORN: September 9, 1933

DIED: February 11, 2016

Philip Alden Kuhn was born to a family of writers in 1933 in London. His mother wrote for the *New Yorker* and *Current History*; his father was London bureau chief for the *New York Times*. Together, they authored the book *Borderlands*, describing the Inner Asian frontiers of the country whose history Philip would make his life's work.

Philip was a proud graduate of Harvard College, A.B. 1954. After a year in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies, he served in the Army, where he studied Chinese at its Monterey language school. He earned an M.A. from Georgetown before returning to Harvard, where he studied under John King Fairbank and Benjamin Schwartz. Graduate student colleagues recall his rare intelligence, his good fellowship, and the powerful bat he wielded at baseball games.

Philip taught first at the University of Chicago before joining Harvard's faculty in 1978. He was, his former student Prasenjit Duara recalls, "a historian's historian. Sitting at a vast table, with gazetteers and documents spread out before him, he approached these materials like a master craftsman, his sleeves rolled up and a pencil lodged behind his ear." Through artful, deeply researched storytelling, he reshaped approaches to modern China for historians everywhere.

His first book, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China*, argued against a historiography that framed China's modern history in terms of its interaction with the West, showing that two major trends—militarization and fragmentation—had more to do with domestic forces than with pressures from abroad. The book revolutionized how Western students of Chinese history theorized their subject and set standards for a China-centered social history that is with us still.

Philip was in the first cohort of American historians who had the opportunity to work in Beijing's palace archives. His could be perilous research. After a year's microfilming in 1984, he felt the need to send the films back securely, by diplomatic courier. They never arrived.

Years later, it was discovered that a Chinese staff person in the U.S. Embassy had come across them, and—unable to read documents written in the classical language—decided they were in code and hid them away. Happily, Philip’s friends at the archives made another copy, and they hand-carried it to him.

Philip’s most popular book, *Soulstealers*, came from those documents. Based on a case of supposed witchcraft, he discerned a “premonitory shiver” at the height of Qing power in the middle 1700s. In a court panic born of news of sorcerers who cut off the braids Chinese men were made to wear as a sign of submission to Manchu rule, he found a telltale example of imperial overreach and insecurity; in the mass hysteria arising from the same rumors, he unearthed stories of social disruption and coerced confessions; and in the prolonged debate between ruler and minister, he described the enduring battle of wills between autocrat and bureaucracy. In this work as elsewhere, Philip spoke to the present as he reconstructed the past: many innocents died in the mystical madness of 1768, he wrote, “because the empowerment of ordinary people remains, even now, an unmet promise.” *Soulstealers* sold well in this country for an academic book, perhaps because booksellers often shelved it in the “occult” section. In China, it was a bestseller.

His later contributions to the field were varied in topic but unvarying in significance: each charted new paths of inquiry with an eye to the contemporary scene. In lectures given at the Collège de France, published as *The Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, he drew out the lessons of his longtime focus on the pragmatic strain he identified in Qing statecraft; in his final book, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*, he explored the rich story of the Chinese diaspora, placing the history of the Chinese in a truly global context.

Philip was a master of the seminar, pushing hard, probing deeply, and working to help students interpret seemingly incomprehensible texts. “There are lies, there are damn lies, and then there are documents,” he told his students, as they looked in the archives for what Marc Bloch once called “the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves.”

He taught his doctoral students to take teaching as the foundation of all else we do: “Teach well. It is our bread and butter.” Teaching Harvard undergraduates, he knew from personal experience, was tougher still. He regularly invited graduate students and faculty to Ipswich, where he and his wife Mary hosted them over beer and fire.

Philip was a committed citizen of this University. When he joined our History Department, he stood out for actually knowing the names of junior colleagues, and even their work. As Fairbank Center director, he opened new partnerships with China. Later, as chair of EALC, he mentored untenured faculty and protected the interests of language instructors, upon whose efforts the entire enterprise depended. He believed always in faculty self-governance, to the annoyance of more than one dean.

Philip was generous but direct. He could be counted on to unmask pretense. At any talk's Q&A, you could feel the tension building to the moment when Philip's hand would go up and he would ask his signature question: "So what?"

Anyone who knew Philip recalls his wicked, relentless fusillade of puns, in Chinese as well as English. At the risk of confusing the permanent records of the Faculty, we repeat just one here: He once told a scholarly panel on the topic of humor in East Asia that the greatest sin in Confucian culture was *bu xiao*, "not to laugh"—a Kuhnian pun on the homophone for the truly greatest sin, "to be unfilial."

Never mind. You had to be there.

Philip would be proud of how his son, Anthony, is the voice—to some of us, Philip's voice—of NPR in China, and he would be proud of his daughter, Deborah, Harvard College 2009, who is now just beginning the Long March of graduate school.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter K. Bol
Mark C. Elliott
Andrew Gordon
Michael Szonyi
Hue-Tam Ho Tai
William C. Kirby, Chair