

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on November 14, 2000, the following Minute was placed upon the records.

BENJAMIN ISADORE SCHWARTZ

Born: December 12, 1916

Died: November 15, 1999

Born in East Boston to an immigrant family, Benjamin Schwartz was educated at Boston Latin School and Harvard College. With a major in Romance Languages, he was preparing for a career in high-school teaching when World War II turned him toward East Asia, specifically Japan. As an army officer in signals intelligence, he was immersed in Japanese secret radio traffic, and happened to be the duty officer who read and analyzed the first intercepted message that hinted at Japan's readiness to surrender. During postwar service in occupied Japan, he was assigned to censor the Japanese press. That role did not come naturally to him, and, as he told the story, he censored nothing — except one piece dripping with anti-Semitism. That one he censored with ease. After the war, he entered the Harvard Graduate School, studied Chinese, and joined the first of John K. Fairbank's seminars in Regional Studies (along with Joseph Levenson and other future leaders in the modern China field). He was appointed in 1950 to the Harvard faculty, on which he served until his retirement in 1987.

The work that established Schwartz as an intellectual leader, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Harvard University Press, 1951) was developed from his doctoral dissertation. Here already were visible the subtlety and penetration of his scholarship. His aim was to describe the relationship between worker and peasant movements in the evolution of Communist Party doctrine, particularly Mao's role in rationalizing the de facto autonomy of the militarized party from its supposed "proletarian" base. The trick for Kremlin and party ideologists was to camouflage innovations in deed by orthodoxy in word, in order "to conceal...the actual severance of the Chinese party from its proletarian base." Sources in Russian, Japanese, and Chinese led Schwartz to conclude that Maoism was no mere concoction by Moscow strategists, nor yet orthodox Leninism, but rather an original adaptation to the military and political situation of China in the 1920s and 1930s. This conclusion, now so generally accepted, constituted a crucial advance in the intellectual context of 1951 and a turning point in the development of modern China studies.

Delving deeper into how Chinese conceived the relationship between their own cultural background and Western thought, Schwartz studied the pioneer translator-interpreter, Yen Fu. His second book, *In Search Of Wealth And Power: Yen Fu And The West* (Harvard University Press, 1964) could only have been written by one broadly learned in both Chinese and Western cultures. Schwartz's study of Yen's translations required a critical re-reading of the works of Spencer, J.S. Mill, Montesquieu, Huxley and others, in a way that revealed their core messages as perceived by a Chinese mind. The mind of Yen Fu focused on how state power in the West was connected to Western social thought, and how Chinese state power could profit from the same connection. To perceive the connection between "liberal" thought and the "Promethean explosion" of the Western industrial state was Yen's special contribution to his age, and at the same time Schwartz's contribution to a deeper understanding of the modern West.

Yen Fu never believed that the world of thought could be neatly divided between Chinese and Western civilizations, or between “traditional” and “modern.” Schwartz, too, believed that universal problems (such as the relation of man to the “unknowable”) could be approached through studying the compatibilities of cultures, as well as their oppositions. This ecumenical spirit animates his third major book, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Harvard University Press, 1985). Here Schwartz confronted what he believed to be the historian’s most demanding task: keeping faith – with people of his own era, by framing his message in language that they find meaningful; with people of the past, by limning their thoughts in language that is true to their own world-view. For all the difficulties, the reader never feels that Schwartz’s ancient thinkers are living in a world totally alien to our own. The philosopher Mencius, he wrote, rejected a simple dichotomy between words and feeling: “[T]endencies of language arise out of the deeper moral tendencies embedded in the heart. The realization of the true way cannot come simply by submission to external rules embedded in language but arises out of an undeviating commitment of the will to do the right.” Meditations on this level, illuminating the human identity we share with the ancient Chinese, are to be found throughout the book.

Schwartz’s interests expanded into ancient time, rather than (as these books might suggest) drifting backward into it; he remained fascinated by contemporary China throughout his career and wrote upon it often. His many articles show how the questions he addressed early in his China studies remained vivid in his mind thereafter, and how connectedness seemed more significant to him than conventional divisions. Many of these articles are collected in *Communism and China: Ideology In Flux* (1968) and *China and Other Matters* (1996; both Harvard University Press).

Schwartz seemed to compose his lectures before the very eyes and ears of his astonished audiences, surfing freely among the hyperlinks of his mind, so that he might begin a sentence with Mao and end it (many clauses later) with Maimonides; an exaggeration, perhaps, but not by much. The impression was never one of artfulness or intellectual “packaging,” but of ideas picked fresh from his garden and presented with soil still clinging to their roots. Schwartz’s inspiration as a teacher came from this extraordinary freshness and inventiveness, as well as the impression left upon even the most junior student that he and Schwartz were exploring ideas together.

After a productive and serene retirement, Schwartz died on November 15, 1999, at his home in Cambridge. He is survived by his wife, Bernice, by his children Jonathan and Sara-Ann, by four grandchildren, and by a host of grateful students.

Respectfully submitted,

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Roderick L. MacFarquhar
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