

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on November 1, 2022,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Ezra Feivel Vogel  
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **EZRA FEIVEL VOGEL**

BORN: July 11, 1930

DIED: December 20, 2020

Ezra Vogel, Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences, *Emeritus*, was one of America's foremost authorities on East Asia. In a career spanning sixty years, he published groundbreaking works on Japan and China based upon detailed fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and documentary research.

Ezra grew up in the small town of Delaware, Ohio. His father ran a men's and boys' clothing store where Ezra often helped out; his mother was a homemaker and part-time bookkeeper at the store. He graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, and, after serving in the army, he enrolled in the doctoral program in Social Relations at Harvard. He intended to become a family sociologist, completing his Ph.D. in 1958.

Ezra's transformation into a researcher on Japan, and then on China, occurred as a result of chance conversations and a willingness to take risks (on the part of both Ezra and his wife, Suzanne, a trained social worker, whom he married in 1953). One of his doctoral advisors, Florence Kluckhohn, asked Ezra how he could generalize about American families if he did not have anything with which to compare them. Accepting this challenge, Ezra obtained funding to spend 1958–60 living in Tokyo, where he studied Japanese intensively and then conducted weekly interview sessions with six suburban families over the course of a year. The result was *Japan's New Middle Class* (1963).

Ezra returned to a position at Yale. Opening the door to a second transformation, the anthropologist John Pelzel told Ezra that Harvard had received a grant to fund social scientists willing to retool for careers studying contemporary China. Despite having no background on China, Ezra was intrigued by this opportunity, and Pelzel arranged for him to meet with John King Fairbank. With Suzanne's support, Ezra declared himself willing to transform into a specialist on China as well as Japan, provided he received a three-year post-doctoral fellowship to enable him to learn Chinese and begin research on contemporary China, to be followed by a teaching position in Social Relations. This package was quickly negotiated, and Ezra left Yale in 1961 and spent the remainder of his career at Harvard.

After Ezra's intensive Chinese lessons, the Vogels spent 1963–64 in Hong Kong, where he conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who had once lived in the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.). These refugee accounts of daily life, augmented by Chinese press accounts,

became *Canton under Communism* (1969), detailing how the Chinese Communist Party had transformed the institutions and social patterns of the province adjacent to Hong Kong.

Ezra's subsequent research shifted between China and Japan. The difficulties American auto companies experienced in competing with Japanese carmakers stimulated Ezra to write his provocative book *Japan as Number One* (1979), which argued that, in certain respects, Japan was becoming a more successful modern industrial society than the U.S. By the 1980s, China's nascent economic boom drew Ezra's attention back to the P.R.C. In 1979, divorced from Suzanne, Ezra married Charlotte Ikels, an anthropologist of China, and in 1987 they spent seven months living in Guangzhou. That fieldwork became *One Step Ahead in China: Guangdong under Reform* (1989).

Ezra was concerned about America's ability to compete on the world stage but was also deeply committed to cooperation between America and Japan and China. *Comeback* (1985) conveyed his ideas about how the U.S. could respond to the Japanese challenge. In 1993–95 he took leave to serve under the Clinton administration as the National Intelligence Council's officer for East Asia, and over the years he published numerous essays analyzing America's relations with rising East Asia.

Ezra continued writing and publishing after retiring from teaching in 2000. He spent more than ten years on research for his masterful book, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (2011), which described how Deng, a lifelong communist, was able to steer China into a successful post-socialist economic transition. His last book was *China and Japan: Facing History* (2019), a detailed historical investigation of the relations between the two great Asian powers over many centuries.

Ezra's reputation for honest, knowledgeable, and sympathetic scholarship on the societies he studied earned him widespread praise and respect on both sides of the Pacific. The translation of *Japan as Number One* became a bestseller, and a Chinese translation of his book on Deng likewise became a bestseller in the P.R.C. He traveled to Japan at least once a year starting in 1958. After a first visit in 1973, he visited the P.R.C. annually starting in 1980. He lectured frequently in Asia, giving public lectures and media interviews in fluent Chinese and Japanese.

In addition to his impressive scholarship, Ezra was an academic institution builder. At Harvard he directed the East Asian Research Center, the Council of East Asian Studies, the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, the Asia Center, and the Program on U.S.-Japan Relations, and he was the founding chairman of the East Asian Studies concentration, continuing in that role from 1972 to 1991. He was also active in numerous external organizations devoted to Asian studies and U.S.-Asia relations.

Ezra earned multiple book awards, was given honorary degrees by eleven universities, and received Japan's Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold and Silver Star, in 1991 and the Centennial Medal of the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 2008.

None of these honors conveys the characteristics of Ezra Vogel that earned him such gratitude and affection from those whose lives he touched. His boundless optimism, utter lack of pretentiousness, generosity, intense curiosity, eagerness to exchange ideas, and devotion to promoting the careers of young scholars generated an extensive network of friends and admirers around the world. Ezra cherished these ties, maintaining contact partly through his annual Christmas card list, which eventually included more than 600 names. His was a full and rewarding life on a large stage for a modest youth from a small town in central Ohio.

Ezra is survived by his wife, Charlotte Ikels; children, David, Steven, and Eve; sister, Fay Vogel Bussgang; and five grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary C. Brinton  
Martin K. Whyte, Chair