

NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

Report on the Conference on Asian Economic History

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A meeting of scholars to consider problems of teaching and research in Asian economic history was held in Highland Park, Illinois, October 30–31, 1959. It was organized under the auspices of The Research Center in Economic Development and Cultural Change of the University of Chicago, and funds were provided by the Division of Social Sciences of the Rockefeller Foundation. Professor Bert F. Hoselitz chaired the sessions. Participants included Wolfram Eberhard, Department of Sociology, University of California; Alexander Eckstein, Department of Economics, University of Rochester; Albert Feuerwerker, Center for East Asian Studies, Harvard University; Alexander Gerschenkron, Department of Economics, Harvard University; Bert F. Hoselitz, Research Center in Economic Development and Cultural Change, University of Chicago; Charles Issawi, Near and Middle East Institute, Columbia University; E. A. Kracke, Jr., Far Eastern Studies, University of Chicago; Simon Kuznets, Department of Economics, Johns Hopkins University; William W. Lockwood, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University; Morris David Morris, Department of Economics, University of Washington; Henry Rosovsky, Department of Economics, University of California; Thomas C. Smith, Department of History, Stanford University; Burton Stein, Department of History, University of Minnesota; Erskine McKinley, The Rockefeller Foundation. Due to the absence of Dr. K. J. Pelzer, Yale University, there was no representative of Southeast Asia.

A preliminary agenda had been circulated in April 1959. In addition, several participants prepared in advance critical bibliographies of work in the economic history of the various Asian regions: Rosovsky on Japan, Feuer-

werker on China, Issawi on the Middle East, Stein on Ancient India and Morris on Modern India. These and other participants also submitted lists of essays for possible inclusion in collections of readings. These materials provided the basis for much of the policy discussion with which the conference ended.

The State of Asian Economic History

The conference discussed first the state of teaching and research in Asian economic history in the United States and quickly decided that the situation is not a happy one. The thirteen participants represented about 50 per cent of the total number of scholars in the country seriously working on one aspect or another of the field. The publication record is further evidence of the situation. The *Journal of Economic History* in eighteen years has published only nine articles in the field, five of which related to China. The *Economic History Review* in more than thirty years has published only four essays in Indian economic history. A survey of the approximately 350 Ph.D. dissertations in Economics accepted in the United States during the past four years shows only seven in the field. Between 1948–1959 only five dissertations in Economics were concerned with Indian economic history, and only one of these considered a problem predating the First World War. Nor does the situation seem to be any better in England or in Europe. Moreover, with the single exception of Japan, the work done in Asia tends to be quite inadequate, as the critical bibliographies prepared for the conference indicated.

The group agreed that the need to stimulate work in Asian economic history is clear enough. Virtually all the evidence we have about the character of economic change and

growth is related to Western societies (with the possible exception of Japan). We are currently faced with problems of economic development, and it is clear that the pattern in newly developing societies is likely to vary significantly from Western experience. The critical current problem is to obtain adequate generalizations about economic and social change and their interrelations. Apart from whatever intrinsic interest Asian economic history may have, the subject can provide three or four different socio-cultural cases to add to the study of the pattern of economic development. Regions such as India, Egypt and pre-Communist China are examples of stagnation or abortive growth that can cast considerable light on the whole process of development.

With regard to this discussion, it is interesting to note that of the thirteen scholars present only six were economists. There was, however, no substantive methodological issue that divided the group. All agreed that the critical problem was to bring people with economics training into the field, and there was general agreement that stress should be placed on stronger quantitative investigations and along lines to which economists, with their bag of tools, might most appropriately contribute. If there was any division of interest it was perhaps that some of the group were primarily interested in the recent periods for which quantitative data were available, while others were also interested in earlier periods for which quantitative data were not easily found but for which structural analysis might still be important.

The Teaching of Asian Economic History

At the undergraduate level there are virtually no courses on Asian economic history generally or on any specific region. Moreover, even in the so-called "Civilization" courses economic history is neglected and the entire discipline of economics tends to be frozen out. This is partly a result of the fact that such courses have been dominated by the humanities, and typically all social sciences are neglected. Even where this is not the case, as at the 1957 University of Chicago conference on "Introducing India into Liberal Education," economics and economic history are badly

neglected. Apart from all other reasons, the neglect of economic history stems from the lack of needed materials in such courses.

At the graduate level, Asian economic history is neglected because the field has traditionally stressed the United States and Europe. However, graduate work in economic history is beginning to focus on the problem of industrialization on a comparative basis. Here again the critical weakness is lack of materials from Asian regions that can be used for comparative purposes.

It was quickly decided by the participants that until adequate materials are available for teaching, not much change could be expected at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Availability of materials would depend on the future work of scholars already in the field and on the training of more scholars who would contribute to the supply of usable materials.

Support for Training

While anthropology and political science have recruited talent into Asian studies, this has not happened in economics and economic history. The training requirements in Asian economic history are very great. A student must be trained in economic theory and in Western economic history as well as in the economic history of his Asian region; he requires special training in his region's socio-cultural history and structure, and (with the partial exception of India) he must learn languages of far greater difficulty than those normally required of the Ph.D. candidate in economics.

Graduate students in economics don't need to undertake the enormous burdens imposed by specialization in Asian economic history. Most students of quality, by specializing in the more orthodox fields of economics, can get good jobs without such great effort. Moreover, there are few if any positions in Asian economic history as such. There is, further, a generalized lack of enthusiasm in economics departments for area specialists even when they are adequately trained as economists.

Apart from these not insuperable difficulties, the lack of funds to finance students is critical in explaining the unattractiveness of a field with such formidable training problems. To

make it attractive would probably require fellowship support on a considerable scale—for language training and graduate work through the thesis-writing stage. Here the group felt that current foundation support is inadequate and of the wrong sort. It generally tends to run from year to year, and stresses area familiarity. When the student shifts to his disciplinary training, foundation support typically has not been forthcoming. Some evidence of the difficulty in recruiting economists into the Asian area is suggested by a recent report on the Ford Foreign Area Training Fellowship Program. Between 1952 and July 1958 some 472 persons had completed fellowships, only 10.5 per cent being in economics. Not only has the number of economists in the overall program been small, but the proportion seems to be steadily declining. In the 1958–1959 Asian and Near Eastern Studies part of the program only 5 per cent of the fellowships went to economists.

The Possibility of Research Centers

Given the problems of training and research, the group considered the possibility of establishing formal research centers. It was quickly decided that Asian economic history has no substantive unity. Asian regions have to be considered as separate entities, except perhaps as comparative studies are involved. In the case of comparative work, however, there would be as much validity in establishing links with studies in Western economic history and the general problems of economic development as in forging links between one Asian region and another.

The group, after discussion, discounted the possibility of a single center in Asian economic history fashioned after the Russian Research Center (RRC) at Harvard. The lack of enough scholars at any single institution vitiated serious consideration of such a proposal. Moreover, it was clear that work on Asia is at a different stage of development than were Soviet studies when the RRC was established. At that time the only work on Soviet society was being done at Columbia, and the RRC took on the aspect of a pioneering crash program. But today there are a number of Asian area study programs in existence. Al-

though attention to economics is not extensive and there is no concern with economic history, careful consideration by the group ultimately resulted in some rather startling conclusions about these matters.

Discussion revealed that possibilities for work on the individual regions stood at different stages of development. While the China field has been badly neglected in the past, large foundation grants have been made to California and Harvard to finance training and research. The language training barriers to recruitment of students would probably be overcome by the development of adequate fellowship support during the period of training. These grants to universities, designed to finance studies on the Chinese communist economy, would possibly result in some resources flowing into studies of the economic history of modern China. Further, the establishment of the joint ACLS-SSRC committee on modern China studies would probably stimulate training and research all along the line.

While Japan studies are nowhere near as well developed as the China field gives promise of becoming under the impact of political necessities, the scholars representing this area felt that the problem of financing research and recruiting students was not desperate and could be carried off with existing resources. Moreover, Japanese scholars themselves have been doing an inordinate amount of work on their own economic history. Not only is the monographic literature enormous, but the main outlines of that history are fairly well known and thus the problems for this region are substantially less intractable than for any other region of Asia.

The group concluded that the two regions which are truly underdeveloped, stagnant and without the resources for growth of scholarship at the present are the Middle East and South Asia areas. It was felt, however, that the development of research and training in the economic history of these regions could not be carried out effectively by a group concerned with the whole of Asia. Leadership in the development of work in economic history must come from the scholars specifically concerned. It is up to them to create in the foundations an awareness of need for the support of

this work. However, even these scholars are not wholly without resources. The Middle East Committee of the SSRC and the South Asia Committee of the Association for Asian Studies can be used as vehicles to obtain support. The foundations may be willing to sponsor summer workshops as devices for getting substantive work under way.

While more adequate support for faculty research in Asian economic history is needed, it was agreed that requests for substantial grants would certainly be received by foundations with the same consideration as would large grants for any other projects. As to regular grants for research to individual scholars in any single year, the group agreed that no strong case could be made for treating individual scholars in Asian economic history any differently than scholars concerned with other problems.

This discussion concluded with the decision that no attempt would be made to seek special foundation support for Asian economic history, a self-denying ordinance probably unique in modern academic history.

Proposals for the Future

Given the weakness of teaching in Asian economic history at both undergraduate and graduate levels, it is necessary to provide materials as rapidly as possible for such programs. The best way to do this would be by developing volumes of "readings" in the economic history of the various regions (1) for use in undergraduate "Civilization" courses; (2) as basic materials for comparative purposes; and (3) for the long-run effects on future scholarship. Here two tasks emerged:

- (1) It was decided that the bibliographies prepared for the conference should be made available to a wider public as a first step in increasing interest in the field. It was felt that the compilation, "Materials for the Study of Quantitative Japanese Economic History in the United States: A Preliminary Survey," because of its specialized nature was not suitable for publication. However,

interested scholars may contact Henry Rosovsky, Department of Economics, University of California for copies. It was decided that the critical bibliographies on China, India and the Middle East, after some modifications, would be submitted to appropriate journals for publication. It is possible that if all these bibliographies are published, reprints might be collected and bound for wider circulation.

- (2) The major task for the future is the development of a volume of selected readings on the economic history of each region. As currently planned, there will be five volumes: one on the Near East, one on India, one on Japan and two on China. A volume on Southeast Asia is not being considered at the moment. The materials in each volume would seek to serve an audience that knows economics or economic history but is unfamiliar with the particular region. The object would be to make them useful for "Civilization" courses and for work in comparative economic history. Above all, the main function of these volumes should be to provide documents difficult of access to scholars and researchers in economic development and economic and social history. The problems of appropriate focus and some symmetry of structure among the volumes have to be worked out. However, the audience for which these volumes are intended suggests the emphasis that should be given. Various members of the group have taken responsibility for the several volumes, and some progress has recently been made in finding possible financial support for the enterprise.

Professor Bert Hoselitz and the Research Center in Economic Development and Cultural Change, University of Chicago, volunteered to serve as administrator and clearing house for these and other future activities of the group.