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LUCIAN W. PYE



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LUCIAN PYE, longtime political science professor at MIT, past president of the American Political Science Association, passed away at age eighty-six on 5 September 2008. Pye was born in Shanxi, China, where his father, Watts O. Pye, was a Congregational missionary. His father died in 1926 at age forty-eight when Lucian was only five,<sup>1</sup> but Lucian remained in Shanxi with his mother, Gertrude Chaney Pye, who had joined the Fenzhou Mission before her marriage. After some years in Oberlin, Ohio, schools, Lucian returned to China with his mother, attending high school at the North American School in Beijing.

As an undergraduate at Carleton College, Lucian met Mary Toombs Waddill. They married in 1945 and became lifelong partners. She is listed as a co-author of the book *Asian Power and Politics: Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, but she played a key role as editor, typist, and sounding board for all his works, as Lucian gratefully acknowledged at the beginning of each book. Combining dedication and intellectual vitality with Southern graciousness and generosity, Mary was Lucian's inseparable companion.

As with a number of offspring of missionaries, the experience in China helped shape Lucian's interests and career. Throughout his scholarly career, he remained deeply involved in the study of China. He was one of the leading scholars of Chinese society, culture, and politics. But Lucian was much more.

Political science is a broad discipline, studied in many ways. Which method is the best? Some argue the need for close analysis of one society, so that analysis can be based on rich cultural and historical understanding. Others argue for a broader, comparative approach across many countries; indeed, sometimes for a global scope. Some scholars prefer solid foot-on-the-ground description and analysis; others call for broader theoretical schemes. Lucian solved these dilemmas by doing it all. He was a close analyst of China throughout his career and the author of fifteen books on China. But he also did significant work on other Asian nations, in particular Malaysia and Burma. And he wrote generally about politics in the developing world. He was not dogmatically committed to any particular intellectual theory or framework, in an age when a number of rival theories were passionately held by one school or another. He was open to ideas from psychology, political science, sociology, and anthropology. He was a leading figure in the development of work on the cultural roots of politics and on the application of psychological analysis to political and social phenomena. Lucian

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<sup>1</sup>John Schrecker, "Watts O. Pye, Missionary to China, 1907-1926," Harvard University East Asian Research Center, *Papers on China* 13 (1960): 32-59.

was broadly and deeply curious. He was always wrestling with some intellectual puzzle, trying to understand why political leaders behaved as they did and why Chinese politics worked as it did, how politics elsewhere was similar to, or different from, that in China.

After returning from the war, as a graduate student at Yale University from 1947 to 1952, Lucian had the good fortune to be part of a creative new generation of comparative political scientists. Before World War II, political science had been dominated by the study of political structures, political leaders, legislatures, executive branches, and how they worked. After the war, Talcott Parsons and other social scientists began looking not only at the structures of politics, but at the functions as well. They looked not just at how a president and legislature operated, but at how authority operated. Instead of merely examining how laws were made, they asked broader questions about how societies established rules, informal as well as formal. This led to a fresh look at comparative politics, in which Gabriel Almond, one of Lucian's teachers, played a key role, not only at Yale, but through conferences and papers at universities around the world. As the Cold War took shape, another teacher of Lucian's, Nathan Leites, was asking questions about the underlying assumptions of Communists. Lucian thrived on the intellectual dynamism of these two colleagues, among others.

Lucian took in the burgeoning insights from social science without being stuck on literal formulations or on the subtle distinctions between different theories. He always came back to what was happening on the ground. Deeply rooted in Chinese politics, Lucian was always aware that some of the formulations of his more parochial American colleagues did not fit China. He enjoyed hearing the theories, but then wanted to know how they would help him understand: "What is really going on?"; "What are they really thinking?"; "What is driving them?"; and "How do cultures differ?"

The original puzzle that intrigued Lucian was the strategies of Yan Xishan, the local Shanxi warlord. Given the overall chaos in China, Yan Xishan had to be a very good strategist to hold together a governing coalition. At Yale, Lucian wrote his thesis on warlords. With little change, the thesis was published as *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (Praeger, 1971). The book was primarily a political history, with only a hint of the boldness in examining underlying cultural and psychological attitudes that imbued his later works. It traced the history of the warlords north of the Yangtze from 1920 to 1928 and put them in the context of the times. He made good use of the diaries of another modernizing warlord, Feng Yuxiang. He pointed out that the basis of power in the 1920s was military, but that the competing warlords lacked the capacity to set up a

national regime. The warlords competed not only on the military battlefield, but also on the ethical battlefield, where each tried to show that he possessed superior moral virtue, the traditional underpinning of legitimate rule. Lacking an established rule of law, the warlords relied for power on the personal loyalty of key subordinates. Strong warlords had officers who remained loyal even when their salary payments fell behind.

When many of the Yale comparative political scientists went en masse to Princeton, Lucian went with them. After a brief stint there and at Washington University, St. Louis, he went in 1956 to the Center for International Studies at MIT. There he joined a fledgling political science department just as the former engineering school was expanding to include a full-blown social science faculty. At MIT, Lucian played a central role in building the political science department that he later chaired.

Like his father, Lucian was a dedicated institution-builder. He enjoyed working with colleagues. Even before he went to MIT, Lucian had played a central role in the work that Almond and Coleman did in setting up a series of conferences and volumes on political modernization. When William Marvel, representing several foundations, was trying to decide where to fund a new China research center, Lucian suggested that, instead of choosing between Harvard and the University of Washington in Seattle, the two largest modern China centers of the day, a center be built in Hong Kong to serve China scholars from around the world. Marvel followed Lucian's advice and in 1963 established the Universities Service Centre, which played a crucial role in the development of contemporary Chinese studies. Nearly three decades later, as foundation funding for the Centre was drying up, Lucian played a key role in transferring the Centre to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where it continued to thrive.

In the mid-1960s Lucian, Doak Barnett, John Lindbeck, and others founded the National Committee on U.S.–China Relations to promote informed discussion on China, U.S. interests in China, and U.S.–Chinese relations. It was founded just in time to play a key role in launching ping-pong diplomacy and has played an important role in promoting U.S.–China exchanges ever since. Lucian held a variety of leadership positions, including acting chairman in 1981. Lucian also played a key role in the Council on Foreign Relations; eventually he became its editor for books on Asia and provided brief introductions to those concerned with policies regarding Asia. Lucian was not only an unwavering, enthusiastic supporter for building institutions, but also a conceptual thinker, studying how to make an institution work. His colleagues called on him, not only because he was fun to work with, but because

they knew he was absolutely dedicated to building good institutions and did not seek personal credit or position.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1950s Lucian expanded the scope of his work from China to two nearby Asian nations. He spent a year doing interviews in Malaya, trying to understand what it was that made Asians turn to Communism (*Guerilla Communism in Malaya*, 1956), and in 1958–59 he went to Burma to do a study that examined the psychological impediments to nation-building (*Politics, Personality, and Nation Building*, 1962). By this time, having taken part in a faculty seminar with Erik Erikson at MIT, Lucian had begun to focus on the psychological issues that were to play a central role in his later studies. The Burma book helped spawn the new sub-field of “political culture,” of which Lucian was one of the founding fathers. The books are prime examples of Lucian’s comparative scope and his evolving intellectual orientation.

Lucian spent the spring and summer of 1964 at the University Service Centre in Hong Kong, which he had helped to establish. There he returned to the study of Chinese politics, but with his new perspective as a comparativist thinking about psychological aspects of culture. He noted that China, with such a long history, had been spared the identity problem of many developing nations. The crux of China’s problem, he believed, was to reconcile the accomplishments of its traditional civilization with the radical changes needed to modernize. China suffered from a crisis of authority, the lack of a coherent decisive system to resolve issues such as differences of interest between the national and regional governments. Government officials at the top operated in relatively self-contained circles, with few impediments from local areas or citizens. Recruitment into officialdom screened out the more Westernized and modernized Chinese. The sense of the greatness of their nation was frustrated by a century of failures, leading to a powerful sense of humiliation. Filial piety, which is the basis of political socialization, teaches the obligations of the subordinate to the superior, but not the obligations of the superior to the subordinate. The subordinates, trying to preserve an area of freedom while displaying proper respect, often resort to feigned compliance (*The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, 1968).

Lucian continued to refine his psychological analyses of China in several other works (*China: An Introduction*, 1972; *Mao Tse-tung: The Man in the Leader*, 1976; *The Dynamics of Chinese Politics*, 1981; *Chinese Commercial Negotiating Style*, 1982). His book *The Mandarin*

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<sup>2</sup>In 1988, when Lucian was elected president of the American Political Science Association, his colleague Don Blackmer presented a detailed introduction to Lucian and his work. Donald L. M. Blackmer, “The Contributions of President Lucian W. Pye,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 21.4 (Autumn 1988): 882–91.

*and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1988) illustrates the kinds of questions he raised and the insights he achieved as he looked at concrete political developments. In discussing the Cultural Revolution, for example, he asks, Why were so many intelligent people taken in by the Cultural Revolution? Why were so few people engaged in critical introspection? How was it that longtime friends and associates, classmates and office workers, were so quickly brought to the state of attacking each other in life and death struggles? Why was there such rage? What are the psychological problems of post-trauma stress and the loss of meaningful goals? Why is it considered disloyal to try to analyze the nature of patriotism? How much more skeptical will those who survived become? After examining the materials on the Cultural Revolution that he was able to see, Lucian suggested that Mao was driven to extremes because he could no longer count on feigned compliance. Frustration from the failure to realize the bold goals that Communist leaders earlier announced must have been a source of much of the anger that found expression. He notes that because the nation lacked clear rules about succession, many people feared that their own network might be replaced and cast aside. As Tom Gold said, the Cultural Revolution strengthened the need for *guanxi* and the willingness to sacrifice comradeship. Yet considering how badly they were devastated by the Cultural Revolution, it was astonishing how quickly the Party and the ministries decimated in the Cultural Revolution reestablished their hierarchy and achieved order. Lucian notes the Chinese political practice of seeing the past in the worst possible light so as to make the present look good. But now that the Cultural Revolution is over, there must be people who once supported it, but no longer express their views publicly. He concludes that without the horrendous events of the Cultural Revolution it is inconceivable that post-Mao China could have deviated as much as it did from any known concept of Communism.

In his book *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Harvard, 1985), written in collaboration with Mary, Lucian presents psychological interpretations of ten different Asian countries. The book could not have been written had Lucian not worked so closely with graduate students who were studying these various countries. Lucian's ability to articulate interesting insights about each of these ten countries is a testimony to his intellectual involvement in the issues the students were wrestling with and to his generosity in acknowledging the contributions of his students and colleagues.

Lucian's work usually focused on China, while including close comparisons with other Asian nations. But he also thought and wrote more generally. He entered political science as attention was turning from the

known Western world to the “new nations,” and was part of an intellectual group, centered around the Social Science Research Council’s Committee on Comparative Politics, that worked on the politics of the developing nations. In an early essay that had great influence on political science, he argued that these new nations could not be understood in the frameworks developed for the analysis of American or European politics. In this essay, he developed a framework for analyzing the special features of politics in the new nations. And in contributions to the SSRC’s series on comparative politics (as co-editor and co-author of *Political Culture and Political Development*, 1965), he made further contributions to political culture and political development.

In the large political science department at MIT, Lucian supervised far more theses than any other faculty member. Like other professors, he gave lectures, but his hallmark as a teacher was his role in and out of class as a gadfly calling attention to all the interesting issues and involving students as intellectual companions seeking answers. To use a family metaphor to explain his relations with students, Pye was more like the friendly interested uncle than the stern disciplinarian father. He was generous in acknowledging the contribution of students and colleagues to his thinking, in letting them use insights that originally were his, and in supporting those who challenged his own thinking.

Among his many outstanding students were Richard Solomon, Susan Shirk, and Richard Samuels, all of whom joined his search to understand the underlying sources of political behavior. Solomon, in his first book, which grew out of his thesis under Lucian, *Mao’s Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture*, explored the fear of chaos and how Chinese leaders try to avoid or manage it. Susan Shirk, in her first book, *Competitive Comrades*, explicitly challenged Lucian’s stress on psychological factors, stressing instead the importance of institutions and career incentives in shaping social relationships in the schools. Dick Samuels, in his book *Machiavelli’s Children*, explored the leadership strategies of Japanese and Italian political leaders.

Some historians find many of Lucian’s sweeping psychological characterizations more than a little fanciful. Political scientists who want to make their discipline into a real science by having testable theory and methods say quietly to each other that Lucian’s sweeping psychological interpretations were not a real contribution to the discipline. Despite their criticism, Lucian was invariably interested in what they had to say. He showed that he deeply believed what he wrote in the preface to *The Mandarin and the Cadre*: “Our need for knowledge is far too great to allow us the extravagance of slighting the advantages of multiple forms of analysis.” Colleagues who had a different vision of scholarship not only reciprocated his cheerful friendliness, but, when caught

off guard, would acknowledge that his questions were stimulating and his interpretations sometimes fascinating.

In his last years, Lucian suffered from Parkinson's, and shortly before his death he suffered a broken back from a fall. Until a year before he died, he and Mary lived in their home in Belmont, enjoying Mary's beautiful large flower garden and many lovely Asian artifacts. They then moved to a retirement apartment not far away, where their children, Lyndy, Chris, and Virginia, were of great help. Until Lucian broke his back, his mind was clear. His curiosity and his readiness to challenge accepted wisdom never waned. Until the very end, he remained remarkably upbeat, and it was fun to talk with him.

Elected 1976

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