

In memoriam Universities Service Center

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The first time I heard of the Universities Service Center (USC) was in the mid-1980s. Fellow exchange students in the PRC sang its praises. When I traveled to Hong Kong during the winter break, I made the trip out to Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) to see what it was all about. At that time, the USC was in the basement of the CUHK library and it took a while to find, with just a little sign next to a door. The experience was a big ‘wow’ and I knew I would be back, in earnest, later.

I came back in 1994 when I was writing my doctoral thesis in economics at Cornell University and my advisor (Thomas P. Lyons), watching me labor away unfruitfully day and night on real business cycle models and wanting me to get started on the practical stuff, the China part, finally just packed me off to Hong Kong with a letter of recommendation to the USC Assistant Director Jean Hong. I settled down in a little study room at USC and never wanted to leave again.

Back then, everybody in the China studies field was passing through the USC: Europeans, North Americans, Hong Kongers, and mainlanders. I looked up with awe to the senior scholars who, surrounded by high piles of books, poured over rare materials retrieved from the depths of the USC. I met more China scholars in a matter of a few months at USC than later in a matter of years. Many were my generation. Some are old friends by now, some I haven’t talked to in years but could easily talk to tomorrow, and a few I have lost track of.

Things loosened up considerably on Saturday afternoons when the USC went for a walk. Jean Hong gathered her flock and USC Director Professor Kuan Hsin-chi hauled us all in his big people transporter to one nature park or another. These walks were intensive undertakings: People talked and talked and talked. Every once in a while Jean Hong would interrupt the procession by exclaiming “Look at these flowers” or by pointing out the views, making everyone stop, admire, and take a breath, while naturally reshuffling the procession before it went on. New duets, triplets, and small groups would form, dissolve and rearrange themselves, ideas were discussed, new ideas born, the latest developments in China examined, and gossip about China scholars exchanged. Those new to the USC underwent a crash course in intellectual speed dating (apart from the more standard matchmaking, of which there was some, too).

Lunch was always a big event. Not in terms of food. Some days there were luncheon seminars, often two or three times a week. Other days Jean Hong would come through the USC drumming up everyone for a group lunch in one of the canteens (my mouth still waters today at the thought of the *mala doufu* in the staff canteen). Or she would bring a newcomer to an old USC-hand and say you should talk to each other, typically resulting in a joint lunch. There were hardly enough lunch times to accommodate all that was going on.

A big issue at the time was accommodation. CUHK’s Yali guesthouse was too expensive for a PhD student, and USC visitors didn’t have access to any other accommodation on campus. So Jean Hong served as a one-person accommodation agency, always confident that something would eventually be found. I remember being a ‘snake’ in a graduate student dormitory (illegally staying in the room of a CUHK graduate student who was temporarily away), sharing an apartment with a dozen mainland students (and a room with two of them) in a building next to the train station, all of us on different work schedules, as well as renting a tiny room from an elderly lady in the village behind CUHK. At one point, when my time at a particular place had run out, I arrived in the morning at the USC with my suitcase in hand, not knowing where I would stay this night, until Jean Hong came by in the afternoon to tell me. (I also have some vague recollection of, on a different occasion, sleeping on the floor of the study room at USC.)

For my generation of China scholars at USC, Jean Hong was the heart of the USC: She knew the material available at USC inside out, she was aware of the people near and far relevant to one's research, and she was an expert in how to manage life at CUHK. She helped tidy over personal emergencies (a large loan to me when the expected wire transfer didn't arrive in time). How she was able to keep up the steady supply of new and fascinating material for the USC collection always remained a bit of a mystery. One might be able to catch a glimpse here or there, only enough to realize it was quite an operation that took exceptional skills to pull off and involved substantial personal engagement in complex supply chain management.

Later, after I had joined the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology in fall 1995, I would regularly head over to the USC, now mostly to look up statistical data in the USC's enormous collection of central and local statistical yearbooks. I would try to time it for a Saturday morning, promptly followed by a Saturday afternoon walk. At other times, I sent a research assistant to USC to photocopy specific data. A visit to USC, across town and involving half a dozen modes of public transport, increasingly required an effort and proved exhausting. (In the economist's language, the opportunity cost of visiting USC increased in line with teaching and publication pressures.)

But still, USC was a home. When Ruth, secretary at USC, married, we all went to her wedding ceremony in Mid-Levels. I knew everyone working at USC and it was always a joy to come back to USC and meet the people who had watched me grow up.

When the National Bureau of Statistics started an online database, much of the data that I had previously collected at the USC became readily available on the internet. At that point, which must have been around the mid-2000s, my trips to the USC became fewer. I would still receive the invitations to the luncheon seminars, but more and more the speakers came from the mainland, working on rural issues (not my interest) and speaking in Chinese (fine if it was in Mandarin, less so if it was heavily tainted with, say, Sichuan hua, which I wouldn't know beforehand). The number of international visitors seemed to dwindle and my graduate years and proximity to graduate students (who might be visiting USC) receded.

There was the annual graduate student conference. There was a USC anniversary celebration. In 2009, Professor Kuan and Jean Hong edited a (Chinese language) volume of USC scholars' China research at the beginning of the 21st century to which I contributed a chapter.

By the early 2010s I spent years overseas and my visits to the USC were reduced to once a year, when I, like many other overseas scholars, would swoop through the USC, frantically photocopying for a few days what might just possibly be needed later. In my niche of China research, no library anywhere in the world was a match, not even a close match, to the USC.

But the field of China studies was changing. As the PRC opened up and access to resources in the PRC increased, whether that was new possibilities to conduct surveys, archival research in local libraries on the mainland, or access to official data, China libraries outside the PRC gradually saw their importance fade (at least in my discipline, of economics). Research methods also evolved away from historical-descriptive research to mathematical modeling, statistical methods and surveys, The National Bureau of Statistics now publishes much of its data online and runs a data center at Tsinghua University that serves more specific needs of scholars. Commercial databases that include PRC data sprang up, whether that is CDMNext with its China Premium database, or the Wind Database.

As far as I can tell, the USC could not compete with such well-funded national and commercial organizations. While the USC developed online databases, it had neither the authority, nor, presumably, the finances (and the labor force), to outdo what was increasingly being offered on the mainland and in the Western business world. Never mind that online databases do not document revisions to official data and as data series appear and disappear,

make long-term evaluations near-impossible (whereas archival sources allow one to trace what is happening). Never mind that surveys conducted in the PRC, often in collaboration with mainland scholars, are ultimately shaped by the limitations the “Chinese Communist Party” (CCP) places on such surveys. This means that while conducting research on mainland China had become—until a few years ago—much easier and may have required the USC ever less, both the data we use and the questions we ask are increasingly shaped by the CCP, while the scope for double-checking the data and for questioning what we are doing has decreased.

My last intensive use of the USC was in 2016 and 2017 when I needed county-level data and was working with county almanacs and the county sections of municipal subject almanacs. USC was still the only place in the world where I could go to the shelves, find what I needed, plus, looking around the same shelf, find yet more material that turned out to be of interest.

After 2017 I lost track of what was happening at the USC. Some of it is my personal matters, not having a stable existence any more, but mostly it is a Hong Kong matter. It is difficult to sit in an upper story of the ivory tower and focus on a narrow research topic in China economics when the ground floor is on fire, and the fire threatens to be all-consuming. Inevitably, the USC was (presumably) consumed by the same fire when, in a cloak and dagger operation, the USC was swallowed by the CUHK library system. (An article in *Initium* nicely captures key features of the history of the USC; <https://theinitium.com/article/20210401-hongkong-cuhk-usc-history-pass-by/>.)

I wonder what the CUHK library system’s grab means for China studies. To what extent will access be restricted? Already now, as Hong Kong permanent resident and professor at another Hong Kong university, I can no longer freely enter the CUHK campus (and visit the USC). To what extent will certain materials, previously openly accessible to researchers, now disappear into vaults (or worse, given that Hong Kong public libraries have already started to purge their book collections in line with Hong Kong’s new form of governance)? And even under a best-case scenario, to what extent will China scholars around the world feel that they still have a place to congregate, when it is now simply a stack of books (and other materials) and no longer a center for China studies with all that comes with something that was much more than a library? And who still dares to travel to Hong Kong when scholars disinterested in prostituting themselves for the CCP must fear for their freedom if they enter Hong Kong?

Ironically, now that the USC as a China studies center easily accessible to scholars around the world has disappeared, a USC for China studies in the free world is needed more than ever. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, the opportunities to do survey work in the PRC have become more limited, access to mainland archives more restrictive, and the National Bureau of Statistics’ online database appears, de facto, increasingly inaccessible from overseas and the data increasingly dubious, suggesting the necessity of double-checks against the more extensive data available in print volumes. Even the quality of CDMNext, providing comprehensive data from the National Bureau of Statistics, appears to have suffered in recent years (though that may also be the result of increasingly deficient data offered by the National Bureau of Statistics).

The loss of USC as a window into China, open to academics (and others) around the world, extends the disappearance of research possibilities in the mainland to the world. The timing of the demise of USC as we know it, with the take-over of Hong Kong by the CCP on 1 July 2020, is unlikely to be a coincidence. I suspect it was an opportune moment for the CCP to remove a thorn in its side. The world’s independent access to information about China is now more limited. Rewriting history will be easier for the CCP. The void that its propaganda can fill has become larger. The costs of letting the world’s foremost compilation of archival resources on China slip away are very high, even if they don’t hit the headlines and may not be immediately apparent to academia, governments, and the public in the West.