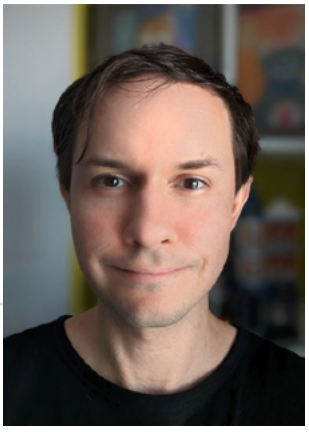
Fulbright Fellow to Fulbright Faculty: My Circuitous Passage from Chengdu to Ho Chi Minh City

Mark E. Frank

Abstract

Over the past five years, I went from being a Fulbright Research Fellow in China to becoming a member of the history faculty at Fulbright University Vietnam. I reflect on the barriers facing similar US exchanges with China today, and the new opportunities for intellectual exchange that Fulbright University Vietnam presents further south.

Keywords: China • Vietnam • international exchange • Covid-19



Limbo, 2021

Sometimes, as my head throbbed after a night of teaching my East Asian history survey from the cruel hours of two fifteen to three forty-five in the morning, I would close my eyes and meditate on a scene I had only ever witnessed on Google Maps: a broad avenue bordering a crescent-shaped lake lined with foxtail palms—and behind the palms, a wall of glass panels imprinted with the words *Fulbright University Việt Nam*.

This was the fall of 2021, and I was newly serving on the faculty of a campus I had never visited in a country, Vietnam, that I had never experienced except through books, films, and the internet. Such was not the plan: like so many around the world, the pandemic left me in limbo, having quit a cushy postdoc, ended my lease, and sold my car, but unable to move abroad without long waits and a mountain of paperwork. As of that July, with the delta variant of Covid-19 raging in Vietnam and worldwide, I was signing on to Zoom faculty meetings from Connecticut hotel bathrooms and bidding my students in Ho Chi Minh City a good afternoon shortly after kissing my wife goodnight in a North Carolina AirBnB, or in the guest room of my parents' house.

Meanwhile, my students and colleagues in Ho Chi Minh City endured a nearly three-month martial lockdown aimed at returning to a state of zero viral transmissions. The Zoom meetings that kept me up through the night were for some a brief reprieve from the monotony of isolation. "How are you doing?" I made a point of asking my classes—out of concern, but also a genuine curiosity about the psychological effects of the lockdown. "How are you *feeling*?" They returned their sympathies when my eyelids visibly drooped,

or when I yawned and grew confused. One of my more thoughtful students, incredulous that I was teaching classical Chinese at three in the morning, polled her classmates on their availability and arranged to move our sessions up by several hours. Classes and emails were full of such compassionate gestures, but the dialogue was limited outside of scheduled class sessions. This was the latest in a series of episodes that left me feeling like time was foreclosing on opportunities for international exchange. Six years earlier, as a Fulbright fellow in China, the mood was very different.

Chengdu, 2015

In 2015 a Henry Luce-ACLS grant and a Fulbright Research Fellowship sent me to the city of Chengdu in southwest China, where my family settled into a workaday *xiaoqu*, an urban apartment community centered around a courtyard where neighbors gossiped and children played. We enrolled our daughter in a neighborhood kindergarten. She quickly learned her Chinese name and picked up *Putonghua* (standard Chinese); her teacher urged us to speak Chinese with her at home, though neither my partner nor I were native speakers. After school drop-offs, I rode our hot pink electric scooter for thirty minutes to the Sichuan Provincial Archives where I leafed through handwritten letters on brittle *xuan* paper or scrolled through digitized documents on LCD screens in the reading room. I sometimes wandered over to the nearby Parasol Tree Café during hours-long lunchtime closures at the archives. If I timed it right, I got to pet the two alpacas who lived in a pen next door.

My goal at the archives was to uncover the history of Xikang, a short-lived Chinese province (1939-1955) that few people anywhere still remember. The reading room at the Sichuan Provincial Archives was a jovial place where staff conversed or watched videos on their phones while researchers mingled and sometimes peered in on other desks to see the archival catch of the day. The contacts I made in the archives proved transformative–none more so than Songsong, a local master's student who turned out to be one of the few people as obsessed with Xikang Province as I was. It so happened that Songsong was contributing research to a project that interested me tremendously: the first official publication of the *Xikang tongzhi gao*, an unfinished manuscript for a provincial gazetteer on government affairs in Xikang. Songsong later sent me a copy of the two-volume set after I returned to the US My dissertation would not have been the same without these marvelously detailed but difficult-to-obtain volumes; I've ported them around the world so that they're always on hand while I write.

In the spirit of what people at the US State Department like to call "citizen diplomacy," I talked with everyone I could and accepted nearly every invitation, personal or professional. As part of a TEDx event hosted by a local school, I spoke on the importance of thinking critically about the meaning of "culture." I gave another talk about "Academic Freedom and its Limits in the United States" at the US Consulate-General in Chengdu, drawing on my

own observations of the notorious un-hiring of Steven Salaita, an acerbic critic of Israel, at the University of Illinois. Various friends adopted me for the lunar New Year holiday in the city of Leshan, hosted me at an eco-lodge in the high grasslands of western Sichuan, and gave me a tour of small coffee roasteries in Jianshui, Yunnan. The connections and reconnections I made in the archives, in my *xiaoqu*, and all over Sichuan were real and lasting.

Today, that experience is unrepeatable: as part of what I consider a deeply misguided response to China's treatment of Hong Kong, the Trump administration moved to terminate the Fulbright China program in 2020. The following year, reacting to US criticism of China, the PRC permanently closed the US consulate in Chengdu and evicted its personnel. Of course, the pandemic has only widened the gulf. In February 2020, a friend of mine, a professor at Appalachian State University, was in Beijing when an alarming message appeared in one of his WeChat groups: by order of the Department of State, current Fulbrighters in China were to leave the country immediately. At the time, living in China seemed like a health risk. Ironically, the pandemic would ultimately kill over a million people in the United States, whereas the PRC's zero-Covid-19 policy kept casualties there extraordinarily low, at least until certain measures were lifted this year. It also practically sealed that country off from the outside world.

Meanwhile, the dissertation that I researched in China generated several article publications and helped me to secure a postdoc at Yale and then a faculty position at Fulbright University Vietnam, but the thought of living so near China without being able to visit it any time soon was heartbreaking. As 2021 came to an end, I was beginning to seriously question whether I would even make it to Vietnam. The fatigue and hotel costs were mounting. On the other side of the Pacific, FUV students were understandably frustrated to be missing out on the everyday, unmediated face-to-face interactions that are supposed to be at the heart of a liberal arts education. Some deferred their matriculation or took leaves of absence.

I did my best to acculturate in absentia to my future home. I devoured Christopher Goscha's wonderful *Vietnam: A New History*. I asked my students about their daily lives. I learned that the avenue bordering our campus, Tôn Dật Tiên, was named after a revolutionary figure I often discussed in class, known to many English-speakers as "Sun Yat-sen." In December, Vietnam relaxed its entry requirements. I bought airline tickets.

Then, two weeks before our scheduled departure, my entire family tested positive for Covid-19. We had to cancel our flights and wait until we tested negative. Reaching Vietnam felt like a Sisyphean task. I found it increasingly difficult to picture the finish line.

Ho Chi Minh City, 2022

This is the scene I wish I could have shown myself at that moment. It's the morning of May 7, 2022, and hundreds—*hundreds*—of undergraduates and their friends from provinces up and down the S-shaped map of Vietnam are jogging, running, sprinting away from the reopened campus of Fulbright University Vietnam. They traveled through lush Hồ Bán Nguyệt Park, and back again along Tôn Dật Tiên avenue to a finish line erected just outside the lower floor of our small campus, where student art and design projects are on display to the public—all part of fundraising "fun run" that our Office of Student Development promoted as "the FIRST AND BIGGEST festival for Fulbright community to come together, in person" since the onset of the pandemic. I am among the runners, keeping pace with most of the community but easily lapped by Sven, the visiting Classics professor from Germany who runs twice this distance every morning before coffee.

While student bands perform on an outdoor stage, I skip upstairs to the common area, a space that recently hosted a talk by former Secretary of State John Kerry and that is now occupied by a group of prospective applicants visiting from Đồng Nai province. Slipping past the high schoolers, I grab my water bottle from the communal faculty office that I share with our two dozen faculty members, who hail from Vietnam, Thailand, Australia, Germany, and the United States (among other places), and who, despite varying levels of experience, are for the time being separated by no ranks or walls in this office. By my American state university standards, our campus is tiny, but I know it's the germ of something bigger—a space where we put our heads together with our students, the most senior of whom are officially designated as the university "Co-Designers," to plan a sustainable liberal arts curriculum that we can port to our new 15-hectare (37 acres) "green campus" in District 9, hopefully near the end of this year.

Our status as the world's only "Fulbright University" can lend itself to misperceptions about the nature of the institution. While FUV has generous financial support from the US federal government and roots in the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program pioneered by the Harvard Kennedy School, it is neither an American University (or satellite campus) nor directly related to the US Fulbright Program. The vast majority of our faculty and staff and nearly all of our students are Vietnamese citizens, although most faculty hold a doctorate from the United States. In truth, we are not "The Fulbright University of Vietnam" (as the school is sometimes mistakenly called by American interlocutors), but simply, Fulbright University Vietnam, a young, private Vietnamese-chartered university with an American-style liberal arts program and a master's program in Public Policy.

During my first year here, like most of my colleagues, I've already played a significant role in redesigning the undergraduate curriculum and updating the curriculum for my major. Our first class is scheduled to graduate in June. As faculty warned when I interviewed for the position, here at FUV we are "building the airplane while flying it."

On my way back down the stairs, I pass behind the glass panels imprinted with the words *Fulbright University Việt Nam*, and beneath that, a quote by J. William Fulbright, a belated but passionate opponent of the American war in Vietnam, which reads: "We must try to expand the boundaries of human wisdom, empathy, and perception, and there is no way of doing that except through education." I wish I could somehow broadcast this whole grand scene to the despairing me of yesteryear.

The Future of Fulbright

As I revise this essay in early 2023, I am currently head of the history program and assistant professor of East Asian history here at Fulbright. Nothing has shaped my approach to these roles more than my experience as a Fulbright Research Fellow in China, which is why it's devastating to think that the age of Fulbright in China has ended. Similar funding opportunities have evaporated, too: the Mellon International Dissertation Research Fellowship was discontinued in 2022 after a quarter-century run, and the Luce/ACLS grant that I received for pre-dissertation research in China has not been offered since 2019. The PRC may be slowly re-opening to the rest of the world, but how many young scholars in the United States will be able to take advantage of China's re-opening?

This is a dire problem for the United States, but also for the world: the quality of scholarship at American institutions has created an international demand for US-trained historians and other humanists and social scientists, including, of course, here in Southeast Asia. We're now facing a generation of doctoral candidates with few opportunities for long-term research in the PRC outside of a handful of wealthy schools. And not for lack of demand: there have been numerous forceful calls to restore the Fulbright China program, including a letter from the Association of Asian Studies and an eloquent article for The China Project by Elizabeth Lynch, one of the first Fulbright fellows in China. Lynch writes that the misguided elimination of the China Fulbright program has only degraded American understanding of China and made it "easier for mutual enemies to bring the two countries deeper into conflict."

It's hard not to draw contrasts with Saigon, where the founding of Fulbright University Vietnam highlights the potential of intellectual exchange for mutual understanding and the normalization of diplomatic relations between former enemies. Apart from historical research, what unites my two major "Fulbright" experiences is the spirit of kindling wisdom, empathy, and perception. For the United States to forgo that approach to China would be a mistake.

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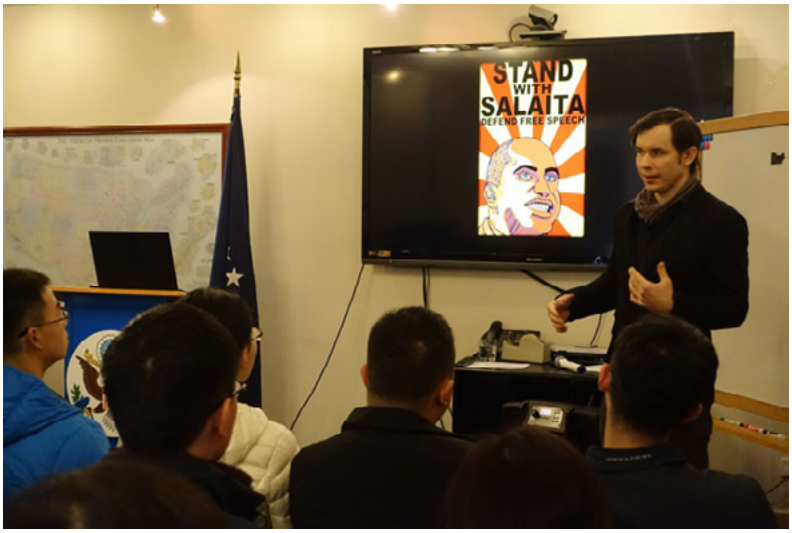
Vietnam, of course, has its own historical sensitivities toward its neighbor to the north, which my students seem to view with a mix of resentment and fascination. If there is one key insight from my experience as a China Fulbrighter that I bring to my work here, it's that there is no one China—China just isn't a monolith that we can wrap our minds around. To build understanding is not to "understand China," because what would that even mean? For my Vietnamese students who, like my American students, often feel overwhelmed by the "Middle Country" monolith, this can be a liberating realization and a gateway to thinking about Chinese people, past and present, on their own terms and in their own times.

NOTES

1. Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV) is a private university chartered in Vietnam, with considerable support from the US and Vietnamese governments. It is not formally linked to the Fulbright exchange programs. FUV admitted its first undergraduate students in 2018 and is the only liberal arts university in Vietnam. Its mission is "to inspire new generations of leaders and ambitious thinkers of diverse origin to serve Vietnamese society and contribute to a better world." You can read more about it here: https://fulbright.edu.vn/origin-story/.
2. For an informal overview of Xikang Province based in part on my archival research, see Mark Frank, "Lost Province: China's Xikang, now Tibet and Sichuan, is turning 80. But few people realize it ever existed," The China Project, December 26, 2018, url: https://thechinaproject.com/2018/12/26/lost-province-chinas-xikang-now-tibet-and-sichuan-is-turning-80/.
3. For a brief overview of the Fulbright China Program and its untimely demise, see here: https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/the-cost-of-ending-fulbright-in-china/.
4. On the closing of the Chengdu consulate, see here: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/asia/china-us-consulate-chengdu.html.

5. Christopher Goscha (2019), Vietnam: A New History, New York: Basic Books. This book is a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in Vietnamese history: https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/christopher-goscha/vietnam/9780465094370/.



Mark E. Frank lecturing at the US consulate in Chengdu, China in 2017.

BIOGRAPHY

Mark E. Frank is a faculty member in History and the major coordinator for the History program at Fulbright University Vietnam, where he teaches courses on East Asian history, environmental history, and the global humanities. He is the recipient of a 2015-16 Fulbright Research Fellowship for mainland China, where he was based in the city of Chengdu. Before joining Fulbright, he held short-term teaching positions at Yale University, Wesley College (Delaware), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is currently developing a book on the environmental history of Chinese frontiers in the early twentieth century. Email: mark.frank@fulbright.edu.vn