

# The Far East Connection

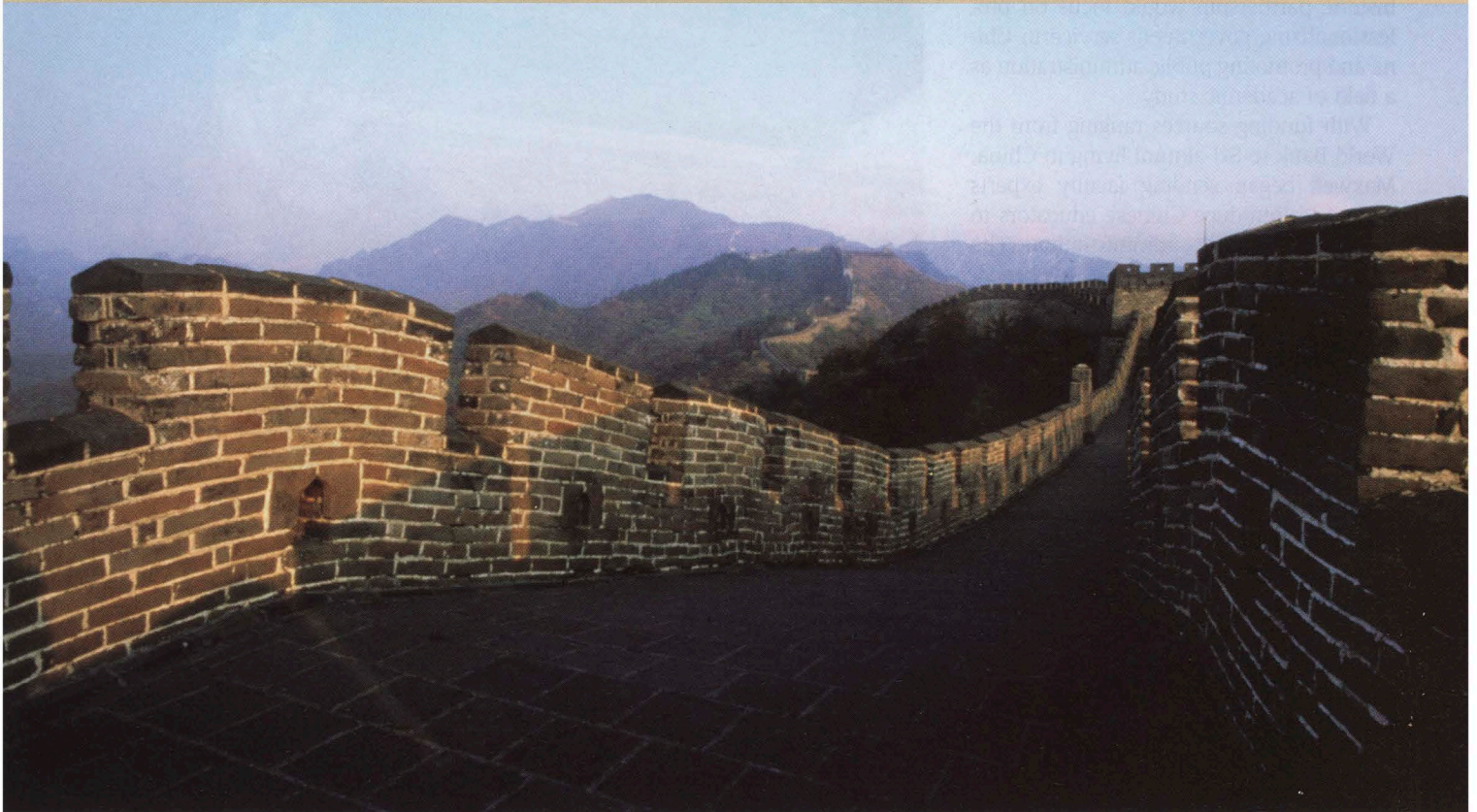
By Denise Owen Harrigan



**W**hen Maxwell School representatives first visited China as educational consultants in 1993, they often received a common query: “Are you any relation to Maxwell House coffee?”

This amusing misperception was understandable. In China, coffee was a known commodity, while the art of public administration—the Maxwell School’s most widely

## *The Maxwell School works with China and Vietnam to improve their government systems*



recognized sphere of influence—was abandoned in the '50s, when political loyalty became the avenue to government employment. But less than a decade after that first visit, the Maxwell School is offering significant assistance to China as it launches master of public administration (MPA) degree programs at 24 universities.

The Maxwell School is no newcomer to international outreach. What is new and intriguing about this partnership with China—and a more recent relationship established with Vietnam—is cooperation in the absence of a common ideology. Professor Jeffrey Straussman, associate dean of Maxwell and chair of the public administration department, says ideology is irrelevant in these endeavors. “We are not trying to bring democracy to these communist countries,” he explains. “We have no such illusions. We are a single, private institution working in a field that is our historic strength, trying to improve the performance of cumbersome governments.”

“This is not an entirely uncontroversial relationship,” admits William Sullivan, director of Maxwell’s Executive Education Programs and a major force in its Asian outreach. “But that’s OK. That’s what an academic institution is about.”

The school’s original partnership with China—a country often at odds with the United States government—had a surprisingly simple start. “One afternoon, a woman from China showed up in my office,” Sullivan says. “She was traveling around the country, looking at American schools of public administration.” It was 1993. China, mired in bureaucracy, was struggling to participate in the emerging global economy. Red tape and inefficiency were strangling its hopes of becoming a major economic power. The Chinese believed that the Maxwell School, often ranked as the top U.S. graduate school in public administration and a renowned training ground for mid-career American government officials, had the tools to help. “By the time that afternoon of conversation was over, I had been invited to China,” Sullivan

Bridge to a pagoda in Vietnam, top left photo; the Great Wall of China, above.

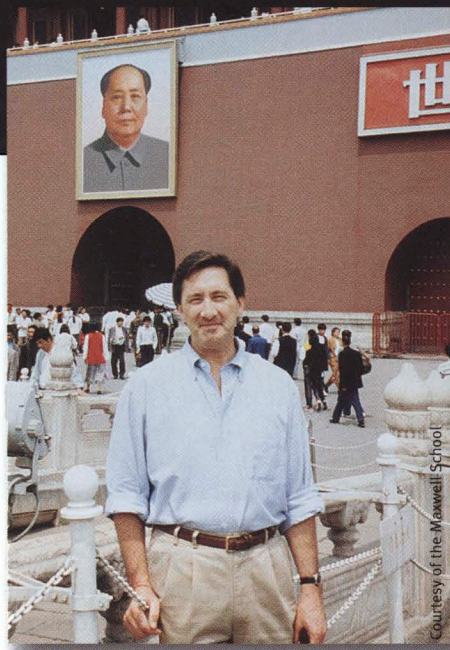
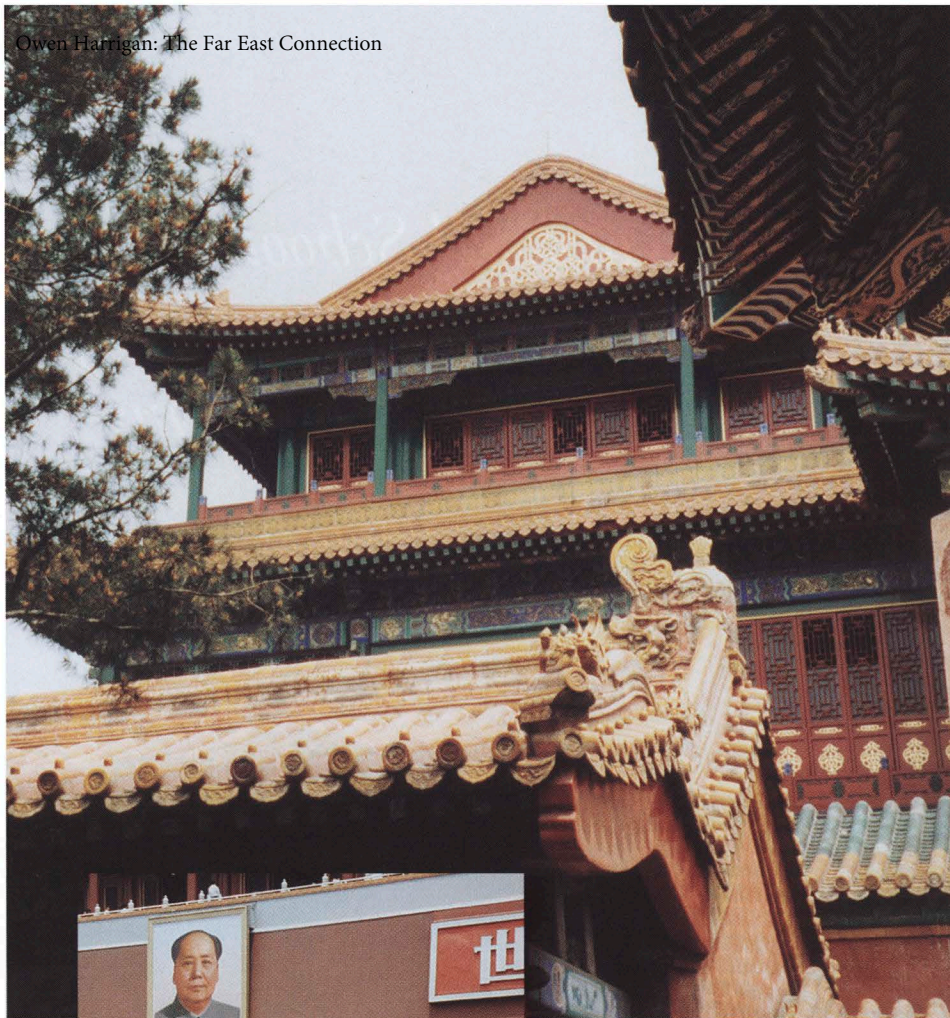
remembers. “Suddenly I found myself in northwest Beijing, talking to people from the China National School of Administration (CNSA). They had plans for a new government training school stretched out on the hood of a car, and we were looking out at land earmarked for a huge new campus.”

In an April 1993 ceremony in Beijing, the Maxwell School signed an agreement with the CNSA, a network of government schools that were being converted into public administration training centers. The historic partnership would focus on professionalizing government service in China and promoting public administration as a field of academic study.

With funding sources ranging from the World Bank to SU alumni living in China, Maxwell began sending faculty experts abroad to introduce Chinese educators to the field of public administration. The pace of the partnership soon quickened. There were curricula to design, textbooks to translate, and institutes to organize, on such topics as the role of the government in a market economy and establishing regulatory processes. “We basically gave them an educational model to follow,” Sullivan says. “At the same time, we began welcoming delegations, visiting professors, and full-time graduate students to Maxwell, to give them a deeper sense of how to build better government systems.”

It is not an exclusive relationship. The Chinese are simultaneously looking at civil service systems around the world, adopting reform tactics from other nations. “Chinese universities have since partnered with other governments and public administration programs, such as Harvard’s Kennedy School and Ecole Nationale in France,” Sullivan says. “But Maxwell was the first partner, and for a long time, the only partner. Over time, Maxwell has hosted more than 1,000 Chinese visitors, offered annual institutes, and had quite a bit of influence.” One major accomplishment was a 1998 agreement with Tsinghua University—often called China’s MIT—to assist in establishing the country’s first university-based school of public policy and management.

Yilin Hou, once a foreign language/linguistics professor and vice chairman of a department at Tsinghua University and now a doctoral candidate in public administration at Maxwell, served on Tsinghua’s Public Management School Preparatory Committee (1998-2000), which created the first Chinese school of public administration. “Harvard University, Carnegie Mellon, and the University of California at Berkeley were among the schools that consulted on the new campus,” he says. “But the contribution of the Maxwell School was the most significant.”



William Sullivan, pictured here in Beijing’s Red Square, received the Friendship Award from China in 1999.

According to Sullivan and other Maxwell experts, the biggest obstacle to civil service reform has been China’s top-down management style—ostensibly abandoned in the ’80s, but still deeply ingrained. “As a government official, you traditionally did what you were told,” Sullivan says. “There was absolute loyalty to the Communist Party. There was also tremendous inefficiency and corruption. When we first got involved, it was a mess.”

Ironically, China created the world’s first civil service system, and it was an excellent model. “One thousand years ago, we had a strong system in China, based on merit, not family ties,” explains Caroline Tong G’91, G’97, a native of China who earned a doctorate in political science at Maxwell and now directs the school’s Asia Program. “But in the 1950s, political loyalty became the criteria for government jobs. China gradually learned that ideology was not enough of a foundation for a functional government, especially a government that employs 6 to 7 million civil servants to manage its 1.3 billion population.

"It's not that all Chinese civil servants are uneducated," Tong stresses. "Many have engineering or technical degrees. What is lacking is management skill. Recently, out of economic necessity, the government has been downsizing and becoming more merit-based. But things still move slowly, and there are many complaints."

## The Rule of Law

One of the most promising ventures to come from the Maxwell-China collaboration is an administrative law initiative between SU's College of Law and CNSA, the Chinese government's elite training institution. "This is essentially about developing laws that govern the government of China," says SU law professor William Banks. "It's a monumental project. In terms of developing a body of administrative law, the Chinese are still at an early stage. But they have begun to make the revolutionary transition from party-dictated rules, made on the whims of officials, to written rules. In basic terms, this is a change from the 'rule of men' to the 'rule of law.'"

Two working sessions for Chinese officials—funded by the Asia Foundation and other sources—are held every year, one at SU and one in China. Chinese professors have also spent semesters in residence at the College of Law. "The Chinese people we work with are very committed," Banks says. "The question is this: Do they have the capacity to implement these laws in an environment that's so staggeringly huge and under-governed?"

"For the next few years, for example, we may help develop a hearing procedure for Chinese people with housing complaints. Designing a model that can be implemented for a billion-plus people, many of them uneducated, is no small task," Banks admits. "At the same time, it's uplifting to think you've had a hand in making the lives of the Chinese people more law-bound."

While the human rights aspect is compelling, Banks adds, "developing administrative laws is also a useful exercise from an economic point of view. To gain the benefits of a world economy, China [which was recently admitted to the World Trade Organization] will have to play by the same rules as everyone else."

## Reform in Vietnam

Another communist nation eager to stake a claim in the world economy has also asked for Maxwell's expertise on teaching public administration. Vietnam, considered about a decade behind China in terms of civil service reform, is even more desperate for economic development. Many of the foreign companies that flocked to Vietnam in the past decade are now leaving. "These businesses can't make money. Things move too slowly," reports Maxwell MPA alumnus Steve Lux G'96, who spends one week a month working as a Maxwell School liaison in Vietnam, under a United Nations Development Program grant.

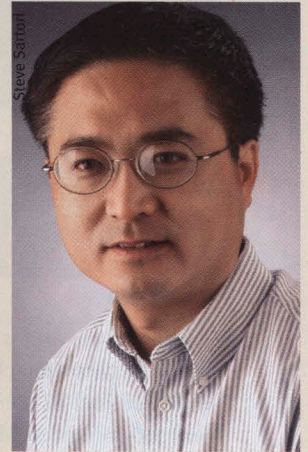
As with its Chinese ventures, Maxwell approaches Vietnam's civil reform issues from several directions. At home in Syracuse, Maxwell hosts Vietnamese delegations, visiting fellows, and three to four graduate students each year. In Vietnam, Lux is helping the Government Committee for Organization and Personnel (GCOP) develop a scaled-back MPA for government employees, with basic courses in such areas as

## Examining Policy, Observing Commonalities

With opportunities to study public administration still "under construction" in China and Vietnam, some of those countries' brightest candidates have come to study at the Maxwell School. It's a mutually advantageous opportunity. They take home practical skills in public administration and leave behind new insights for Maxwell School students and faculty.

Doctoral candidate Yilin Hou found his way to Maxwell through a chance translation assignment in Beijing. Hou, a widely published linguistics professor at Tsinghua University, was asked to translate for visiting SU law professor William Banks. The ensuing sessions opened Hou's eyes to the power of public administration. Although he'd recently been offered a scholarship to study linguistics at the University of Illinois, Hou switched tracks and enrolled at Maxwell, where he's completing his doctoral thesis. "I love the policy issues," Hou says. "And I love the opportunity to talk to faculty and students about commonalities between the United States and China. The media often focus on our differences. America's strong welfare system is just one area of similarity. We're not talking politics here, we're talking public administration. I think that China is much like the United States was 200 years ago. America was open to adopting what was good from other countries. That is where China has been going for the past two decades—steadily moving in a positive direction, learning from other countries, including America. The process is painfully slow, but no good results can be achieved too quickly."

—Denise Owen Harrigan

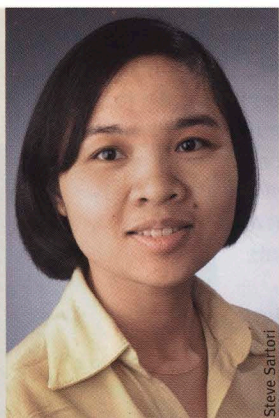


Yilin Hou

organizational development, human resource management, and public finance. "To date, their only training has been Lenin-esque—appropriate for working in huge government ministries, but not useful in this current period of decentralization," Lux says. "GCOP is hopeful that Maxwell will help reorient its mid-level managers."

Lux has taught courses to some of these officials. "They bring a very different perspective to their studies," he observes. "They are not normally involved in policy making. When we cover a subject like statistics, it's clear they aren't accustomed to interpreting things critically. This raises the question: 'Can they use this information?' But, at any rate, our role is instruction, not implementation."

## An Engaging Experience for Vietnamese Scholars



Steve Sathori

Hang Phan

Earning an MPA from the Maxwell School was an opportunity that Vietnamese students Hang Phan and Thu Thuy Tran could not refuse—even though it meant leaving their young children and husbands for more than a year. Sometimes it was a lonely endeavor, yet both feel the experience will dramatically enhance what they can offer to their children, their careers, and their country.

Hang Phan, who is in charge of administrative procedures in the Department of International Cooperation at Ho Chi Minh Political Academy in Hanoi, returned home with a Ford Foundation-funded MPA in September, feeling confident and fortified by her Maxwell experience. “I have much stronger executive leadership skills and a more multidisciplinary background,” she says. “In my work, I translate Russian and English, and now I have a better understanding of public administration, law, and international relations.”

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Thu Thuy Tran works for the Women’s Union in Vietnam, a nonprofit government organization that compares the “policy versus the reality of women’s rights issues.” According to Tran, it’s difficult to compare the progress of American and Vietnamese women “because our backgrounds are so different. In Vietnam, women have worked since 1945. But, like many American women, they still carry most of the responsibility at home.

“My own husband is very modern,” she notes. “He encouraged me to accept the Fulbright scholarship to Maxwell. He told me it would be a gift to my children to have a mother with this knowledge and experience.”

One of Tran’s most meaningful Maxwell experiences was discussing the Vietnam War with her professors and other students. “We watched the movie *Forrest Gump* together, and I drew a map to explain where things happened,” Tran says. “Students asked me if I hate Americans. I said, ‘I hate war, but why would I hate Americans?’”

—Denise Owen Harrigan



Schmitt Shoots!

Thu Thuy Tran

As a Westerner, Lux says, it’s hard to gauge Vietnam’s level of reform. “A lot of hard-liners are still in power,” he says. “It continues to look like one-party rule. But there are definite efforts at legal and political reform. This is a country faced with difficult issues, like huge unemployment. But the Vietnamese have a lot to be proud of. The people are fed. Social indicators are good. There is some degree of gender equality and a high level of literacy.

“The Vietnamese are a friendly, hospitable, consensus-building people,” Lux continues. “Working there can be difficult. But the people are incredibly nice. At the same time, they don’t want to be told by Americans how to develop their country. You can’t be brash or threatening. You can’t run ahead with your ideas. You must take measured steps. Vietnam is a fascinating and tiring place.”

## Developing Trust

Sullivan has also found the Chinese to be rewarding—and enlightening—colleagues.

“They are very curious about public administration, and they have a great sense of humor,” he says. “It’s easy to develop friendships with them. At the same time, it’s a different culture. The relationships are different. You have to be patient and allow things to happen. You have to let the Chinese get a sense of who you are. This is not a ‘let’s-sign-the-deal-and-go-to-lunch’ environment. They are slower to build trust.

“With China, it takes a long time to get there, literally and figuratively,” concludes Sullivan. In 1999, the 50th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, Sullivan was one of only six Americans to receive the Friendship Award from the Chinese government. It is the highest level award presented by the government to non-citizens who have made extraordinary contributions to the welfare of the Chinese people.

Even with this prestigious award, it’s difficult to measure Maxwell’s impact on public administration in China. “It’s too early to say what will ultimately trickle into the government,” says Maxwell doctoral candidate Hou. “But in future years, the impact will be profound. China’s economy will become stronger and stronger. Its living standards will be higher and higher. Its entire system will become more and more open.”

Straussman is more modest about Maxwell’s impact. “It’s a huge country, and Maxwell’s just a little drop in the ocean,” he says. “Certainly they respect our ranking and view us as helping



Jeffrey Straussman



Vietnam, like China, seeks to improve its economic development.

to create a new generation of Chinese managers and leaders.”

Straussman recently returned from his fourth trip to China since 1994. “Over that short time,” he says, “I’ve seen a significant change, at least in Beijing, which has become much more of a ‘world city.’ There’s more commercial activity, technology, and traffic. On this last trip, a gentleman drove me around in an Audi, which he owned. That’s a very recent development in Chinese history. It would seem to represent an impressive increase in China’s economic activity and entrepreneurial development, both of which will be magnified by the 2008 Olympics.”

If Maxwell can’t yet measure the success of its efforts to loosen the grip of inefficient bureaucracies in China and Vietnam, it can speak to the advantages these partnerships have had for the University, which cites the importance of internationalization in its Academic Plan, and for the Maxwell School. For instance, 26 percent of this year’s MPA students are international, including six from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. “I believe this is the highest international percentage in our history,” Straussman says. “These partnerships are an important part of Maxwell’s efforts to expand our international dimension—to go out to the world and bring the world to our students.”

For the past decade, Maxwell Dean John L. Palmer has



Courtesy of the Maxwell School

A delegation from Vietnam’s Government Committee for Organization and Personnel listens to a presentation in the Maxwell School. Joining them, at right, is John Ambler, a consultant and former Ford Foundation representative in Vietnam.

made strengthening this international dimension a high priority for the school—not just in terms of public administration, but across the board. “We’ve created the Global Affairs Institute, conducted a major expansion of the International Relations Program, and hired numerous faculty with international interests,” Palmer says. “In addition to our outreach with China and Vietnam, we have similar relationships with governmental and academic institutions in Russia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. But we’re particularly pleased with the ties we’ve developed with China, because of its rapidly growing importance in the world.”