

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS MAURICE J. MEISNER

Maurice Meisner, the Harvey Goldberg professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, died on January 23, 2012 at the age of 80. Acclaimed by another prominent scholar of China as “one of the foremost historians of our time,” Meisner’s path-breaking books and articles on contemporary Chinese history not only became standard works in the field, but infused a score of PhDs with his own enthusiasm and high standards.

Born in 1931, he grew up in depression-era Detroit, spent two years at Wayne State University and then transferred to the University of Chicago. Bypassing the BA, he was admitted by examination directly into the graduate program, where he earned his MA in 1955 and his PhD in 1962. After teaching five years at the University of Virginia, he joined the UW-Madison history department in 1968, retiring in 1996. In the course of his career, he benefited from and was honored by research fellowships by Harvard’s East Asian Research Center, the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavior Sciences at Palo Alto, the American Council of Learned Societies, the University of California, Berkeley’s Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan’s Center for Chinese Studies, the Social Science Research Council, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Cornell University’s Society for the Humanities. He capped his distinguished career in 1999 with his selection as visiting centennial professor at the London School of Economics.

Meisner’s nine books on the intellectual and political history of the Chinese revolution focused on the theory and practice of socialism, marxism, utopianism and Maoism. Both a committed democratic socialist and a critically rigorous historian, he chronicled and minutely dissected the triumphs, contradictions and evolution of the revolution from his first book on its 1910s anti-imperialist origins in his *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* to his penultimate book on its ironic late-20th century mutation into bureaucratic capitalism in his *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism*. His classic overview, however, was his *Mao’s China: A History of the People’s Republic*. About it, the journal *Foreign Affairs* presciently wrote: “Of the thousands of books written about contemporary China, only a few will stand the test of time. This is one of them.” Twice revised in new editions and translated into seven languages, including Chinese, Japanese and Korean, it was long a standard text in the field. Even its 3rd edition, *Mao’s China and After*, published in 1996, remains important because it not only updated the time frame, but made significant revisions in Meisner’s own thinking, reflecting both new information and his own intellectual rigor and honesty. Fascinated by both the ideals and theory of China’s revolution, he could nonetheless be biting critical of its practice, be it the cult of Mao and utopian excesses on the left or the cronyism, corrupted ideals and one-party capitalism of the Deng era on the right.

A respected and responsible citizen of the history department, Meisner served for most of two decades on its pivotal planning committee and chaired or served on nearly a dozen search committees. His major contribution, however, was as founder and chair of the Goldberg Center for the Study of Contemporary History. A longtime friend of Harvey Goldberg, the department’s legendary and charismatic lecturer, Mauri and his wife, Lynn Lubkeman, took Harvey into their home and gave him care, comfort and friendship during the late stages of his battle against colon cancer. On his death, Goldberg put a small portion of his estate under Meisner’s direction to be used to sustain Harvey’s legacy and its political and intellectual goals. To that end, Meisner wrote the initial proposal for the Goldberg Center, secured its approval as part of the department’s organizational structure and, helped by Stan Kutler, organized a worldwide fund-raising drive among Goldberg’s former students and admirers to augment the original bequest. The resulting fund yielded multiple and varied benefits as it: helped to create the annual Harvey

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Goldberg Lecture in Contemporary History, bringing progressive historians like William Appleman Williams and Howard Zinn to campus; revived Goldberg's famous course on contemporary societies, first as a lecture class headed by Tom McCormick and later as an honors seminar taught by Meisner himself; brought a host of eminent scholars from around the country to participate in that course; joined with the Eugene Havens Center to organize a prestigious, international conference reexamining the Cold War epoch and its demise; provided financial assistance to other campus groups pursuing compatible projects; and archived transcripts and tapes of Goldberg's lectures. A decade and a half after Meisner's retirement, the Goldberg Center remains a vital and viable part of the history department.

While soft-spoken and often self-deprecating, Meisner's sharp, ironic wit, incisive analysis and encyclopedic knowledge made him a popular teacher, especially in the heyday of undergraduate interest in the Chinese revolution. It was in his graduate seminars, however, where he made his greatest mark, successfully directing a near score of doctoral students in a field made especially difficult by the demands of language acquisition, long-distance travel, extended stays in different cultures and the shifting currents of available financial aid. Revered for his liberal approach in letting students follow their own interests, not his, Meisner's students have now carved out distinguished careers of their own in America, Asia and Europe. Fiercely loyal and devoted to him intellectually and personally, they organized a four-day conference in his honor in 2009 entitled "Reflections on History and Contemporary Change in China Before and After Tiananmen." Those conference presentations, in turn, became the basis of an edited book in 2011 entitled *Radicalism, Revolution and Reform in Modern China: Essays in Honor of Maurice Meisner*.

Professor Meisner is survived by his wife, Lynn Lubkeman, his son Matthew and three children by his first marriage, daughter Anne and sons William and Jeffrey.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
Thomas J. McCormick