

AN ODE TO FRED RIGGS

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ABSTRACT

Fred Riggs's creative scholarly career in the field of comparative public administration brought him worldwide recognition, especially in Asia where he contributed to development of public administration in India, Indonesia, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. He was awarded the Order of the White Elephant by the King of Thailand in 1983; and was honoured in a major festschrift by 20 authors published in India in 1992. He was in Who's Who in the World and in America. His writings were translated into many languages, including Italian, French, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. He lectured on every continent, including the countries of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Tanzania.

Fred Riggs was a doyen of Public Management theory. He passed away on 9 February 2008. This article was written in honour of him.

INTRODUCTION

Fu De Lin was born in Kuling (which later was to become the capital for Chiang Kai-Shek's Koumintang government), China, on 3 July 1917, and **Frederick Warren Riggs** died on 9 February 2008 in Honolulu, Hawaii. Confused! It is the same person whom we know affectionately and reverentially as Fred Riggs of the comparative/development administration frame.

Fred's father must have been prescient in giving him the Chinese name. For one, for someone born in China, a Chinese name is proper in that the person would have no trouble fitting into that society. For another, the name turned out to be apt if one looks at the entire life of Fred. 'Fu' in Chinese denotes a blessed person, 'De' suggests a virtuous individual and 'Lin' is a very common name (which has little significance in this context).

To write a short piece on Fred's life, and his academic contribution throughout life, would take volumes. Some actually earned doctoral degrees in doing so (Sharma, 1992). Here is a simple effort to write a short piece which expresses the deep-seated reverential feelings of some of his admirers.

My own intellectual association with Fred started while working on my Ph.D. after my domicile in the United States. Interested as I have been in comparative administration, I started with his 'prismatic society' (Riggs, 1964). In 1982, he wrote an epilogue for a book I edited (Tummala, 1998). And our friendship — both academic and personal — flourished since then, and lasted until his death. In fact, sometime in May 2007, Fred wrote to let me know that he would soon be turning 90 years of age, and that he regretted his inability to travel any more. As we all know, for a comparativist, not to travel is a major blow. But Fred was adept at the internet and compensated by travelling in cyberspace constantly. I told myself that I must see him before his 90th birthday, and travelled to Honolulu along with my wife, where we had a dinner at a mutual friend (from India). Regrettably, Fred's wife, Ceil, could not join us due to her indisposition.

Here I would like to recall two different instances to underscore his knowledge of other cultures, as a true comparativist. In 1992, a *festschrift* was published in India. I reviewed that work in 1996 for *Administrative Change*, a journal out of India. There I used the Sanskrit expression that Fred is the *pitaamaha* of comparative administration. While the term is transliterated as 'the great father', it has a much deeper meaning for the Hindus. It is an expression of great reverence towards the 'guru of gurus' in the great epic *Mahabharatha* — namely Bhishma. For the non-Indians and the non-Hindus, this might be a rather strange and confusing usage. But no

sooner had he read it than Fred called to thank me for equating him with a great mythical figure in the Hindu lore. He of course was very pleased; my intent was to give what was due to him.

The second instance was when I visited with him in June 2007 in Honolulu, as observed above. Again, although I am far from being a traditionalist, I decided to do something which is very traditional in India. When one visits a 'guru' one must take something or the other as a gift, however inconsequential it might be. And if it were an eminent scholar, one will take a nice shawl and spread it on the shoulders of the guru/scholar. Before we started dinner, I pulled the package out and told Fred that I had something very traditional. When he saw the shawl (it was made of the beautiful *pachmina* wool, light but very warm), it delighted him. He did not take it off, but let it rest on his shoulders, in the Hawaiian summer. And, only when it became unbearably hot midway through dinner, he asked me whether I would mind if he removed it. I told him that I was in fact amazed that he kept it that long, suffering it all the time. Such was his appreciation of other traditions.

He was the contemporary towering giant in comparative administration. But he was not trained in Public Administration (either as a discipline, or as a profession). His Ph.D. thesis was in international relations, with a minor in Chinese and Western philosophy. But that study incidentally led him to examine the Chinese Exclusionary Acts, and thus began the long and great journey into the discipline of public administration.

He was the founding director of the Comparative Administration Group (CAG), which was the initial representative body of the comparativists. It was this CAG that later transformed into the very first Section of the American Society for Public Administration — the Section on International and Comparative Administration (SICA) — a section which honoured him by creating the Riggs Award to be given each year to someone in recognition of 'lifetime scholarly achievement in the field of comparative and international public administration.'

Fred was a pragmatist. He accepted the pressure of the Ford Foundation which wanted 'development' to be studied by the comparativists (as funding was contingent upon this). He was criticised by some for thus muddying up the specialisation. But in fact, by doing so, he did not depart from his convictions regarding comparative study; he simply expanded the same. When it was pointed out that there never was any consensus as to what, or how, to study comparative administration, Fred readily agreed that there indeed was 'dissensus' (Riggs, 1988). And he welcomed it, contrary to any dogmatic belief in what exactly should be studied.

He was a prodigious scholar in several areas. He himself grouped them under four headings: 'Globalization; Ethnicity and Ethnic Nationalism; Constitutional Problems and Politics/Administration; and Conceptual and Terminological Analysis.' It was his facility with the last group that caused a great deal of distress to a great many students and some teachers as well. He used to tell a story with a glint in his eyes that, growing up in China, while playing with the son of his nanny, he learned to speak Foochow. His own parents were learning Mandarin, and did not know for long that he was in fact using some 'naughty' words in another tongue. His facility with languages thus started in early childhood, and continued throughout his scholastic life. When he found a concept that could not be adequately expressed in words, he minted new words, driven by the belief that no word has any intrinsic meaning of its own. For him it was the context that made the difference (Sartori, Riggs & Teunne, 1975).

His traversed several disciplines. Consider for example his use of the language of physics, in particular optics, to express his finding of internal contradictions in bureaucratic and social institutions — the prismatic model, as opposed to the normal distinction between the traditional (diffracted) and modern (integrated). He defined the 'prismatic' society as one 'which has achieved a certain level of differentiation of specialization of roles that is necessary for dealing with modern technology, but has failed to integrate these roles' (Riggs & Krishna, 1973). That led to his formulation of 'formalism' which basically meant that what we see in the transitional

societies is far different from the real. This inadequacy of the formally observed vis-à-vis the traditional behaviour was explained by using the 'sala' model, inspired as it was from the Spanish language.

One of his great contributions was his insistence on the ecological study of administration (Riggs, 1973a). Times were when American scholars believed that theirs was the 'best way' of doing things administratively, and thus those practices should be exported to all others who were on their path towards development. He vehemently disagreed. Apparently, his father's experience with failed attempts to modernise Chinese agriculture by using Western methods — in this case the American in particular — left an indelible mark on him. His father soon realised that he must learn first what the Chinese farmers were used to, and then move on from there. This was precisely what Fred did when he went to Thailand to study and suggest reforms, which ultimately got him the highest civilian award — the Order of the White Elephant, conferred by the King of Thailand. For Fred, a new framework of 'world system' and 'political ecology' had 'promised a standard for evaluation that could be detached from the self-interest of western countries or of western scholars, as analysts' (Riggs, 1961).¹

His studies in comparative public administration further led him to raise and answer some fundamental questions such as why it is that the presidential form of government has been a success in the United States, but failed in other countries which followed the same. His answer was in 'American exceptionalism' which was not captured by other nations. Similarly, his imbalance thesis explained that bureaucratic institutions proliferate where political institutions are weak. His contributions towards constitutionalism, presidential and parliamentary forms and the like would make any traditional political scientist proud. Using constitutionalism, he built bridges between politics and administration in that he thought we not only must have limitations on the powers of government (a matter of constitutionalism and politics), but make sure that the government has the capacity to govern (administration). This in turn led him into people's participation, government penetration and integration. This for Fred, however, was not a static or deterministic model; it was but only a framework that one could use to study any society from 'agrarian' traditional to modern — 'fused,' 'diffracted (prismatic)' to 'integrated.' And of course he always believed that there is no society which is so developed that it does not need any more development. Thus, all societies are assumed to be necessarily 'developing'.

Several years ago, sitting at dinner with him in Seoul, South Korea, this contributor admiringly pointed out that his was one of the most active websites, and that he kept publishing so well so long after retirement that the younger lot felt left out, a little nonplussed, and even jealous. He responded simply: 'Just because I am retired does not mean that I should not work, is it?' Such was his commitment which he continued throughout his life, till weeks before his demise.

He agonised over the paucity of outlets for comparative literature. At one time we both were talking about the lack of this kind of material in *PAR*, in particular. When I told him I would soon be the Chair of SICA, he encouraged me to do something about this. I had a conversation with the then Editor-in-Chief, David Rosenbloom, who told me that not many submissions were coming in the first place. Then we argued what was the cause and what was the effect. Was it because scholars got convinced that *PAR* did not publish this kind of material? So, we both agreed to try to show that *PAR* cares for this literature by publishing a symposium. I sold the idea later to Irene Rubin who succeeded Rosenbloom as the Editor-in-Chief. She agreed. I approached Fred and Ferrel Heady for their contributions. They readily agreed to write, which they did. I already had another article that I was reviewing under the normal process, and the result was the first symposium. Encouraged, I did yet another symposium with three other contributions — one from a Chinese in Singapore, another from a Persian somewhere in Kentucky and the third from an Indian sitting in the middle of nowhere. I owe a great deal to Fred, David and Irene for their encouragement. Now we see such articles in *PAR* almost on a regular basis — sometimes even country-specific writings.

Fred was open for criticism and very encouraging of diverse opinions. He had his quota of critics and detractors — some iconoclastic, some irreverent. But he was not offended. In fact, he felt thankful and took considerable pleasure in that his writings provoked controversies from which he learned a great deal himself (Riggs & Krishna, 1973:133). One could see this, for example, by looking at the revised study of his 'prismatic' society published in 1973 (1973:133). He was always willing to learn new thoughts and refine previously held views. Thus he remained a perpetual student. His considered belief that each country should hoe its own developmental path is amply and categorically expressed thus: '... the essence of development is that, for India, the Indian people should be able to recognise, within the constraints of their environment and context, how they can best move toward attaining their own purposes in life ... whether India develops or not depends ultimately on the actions and decisions of Indians and of no one else.' (Riggs, 1973b). He further added: 'What I want to avoid is suggesting to others what their priorities should be' (Riggs & Krishna, 1973:154). Fred was no imperialist — academic or otherwise. There were occasions when some third-world scholars complained that Fred was trying to impose Western concepts, and even jargon, to explain developments everywhere. Fred did not take offence, but must have smiled knowingly, and exhorted indigenous scholars to develop their own conceptual baggage and vocabulary to express the same. To this end, he (along with Giavonni Sartori) created the Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis — COCTA. He implored scholars not to necessarily take the English words and read new meanings into them, but to search for new words.

He was a great teacher. He took pride in that he was born in the Chinese year of 'snake.' Unlike in other cultures, the Chinese believe that the snake is wise, and a teacher born in this year is 'naturally gifted with the ability to learn from mistakes.' Fred always invited criticism of his writings, and encouraged dissent, as already noted. He, however, always expressed his ideas with strength and conviction, but was ready to be corrected. Talking to him, and discussing with him, was an enjoyable learning process — an education in itself. While he was not a person for small talk, he had the gift of elevating the smallest, the most trivial that he observed, to a higher level of comparative/developmental discussion.

He was noble and generous. He valued friendship. To use a metaphor which is easily understood in the tropical climes, Fred was like the banyan tree — he grew and grew, and spread himself very wide providing comfortable shade and protection from the tropical heat. But there is a downside to a banyan tree; under its shade nothing much grows. Fred was an exception, however, in that he moved every which way to allow the necessary sunshine to seep in and let other plants grow and flourish. Thus, there must be numerous scholars, young and old, who must have benefited from his munificence. He was always willing to help. He must have written innumerable letters of recommendation; and he did not take that responsibility lightly. I myself am one of the several beneficiaries; three weeks before he died, Fred was writing a letter of support for me. And I am profoundly grateful for the Riggs Award; I am humbled and fulfilled. By accepting it, I pay my homage to him.²

He was himself very humble. He stated his philosophy of life thus: '... I am happy to receive comments, even adverse ones, since it is better to be taken seriously than to be ignored' (Riggs & Krishna, 1973:154). He could not be ignored! For his contributions are enormous. To ignore him would be more than a peril to the academe; it would be a sin.

He was a gentle man, and a gentleman. He belonged to such a rare breed whose company was never overbearing, but pleasant. His presence was always felt, but was not intimidating. He was one of the greatest observers, and could turn the simplest thing he observed into a treatise. Thus the obligations of academe in comparative and development administration are immense and heavy towards Fred. It would be hard to find the likes of him. Ceil told me that he believed in re-incarnation (he was a Unitarian and was cremated) just as she does, and wanted that when he

gets to be re-incarnated she would also like to be re-incarnated by his side. Wouldn't it be nice to have him one more time!

NOTES

1. His conception of 'ecology' had changed after the publication of this book as he later found the need to distinguish between 'environment' and 'context' while talking of ecology — albeit a purely analytic exercise which not only restricted but also expanded the concept of ecology.
2. It is likely that Fred did not know that I was receiving this award. The award was announced on 31 January 2008, and I wrote to him on 2 February to express my debts and sense of fulfilment. He had a massive stroke on 31 January, and passed away on 9 February 2008.

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