

Peter Perdue

*Peter Perdue: Reflections on James C. Scott and  
the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University*

The Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Todd Holmes  
in 2018

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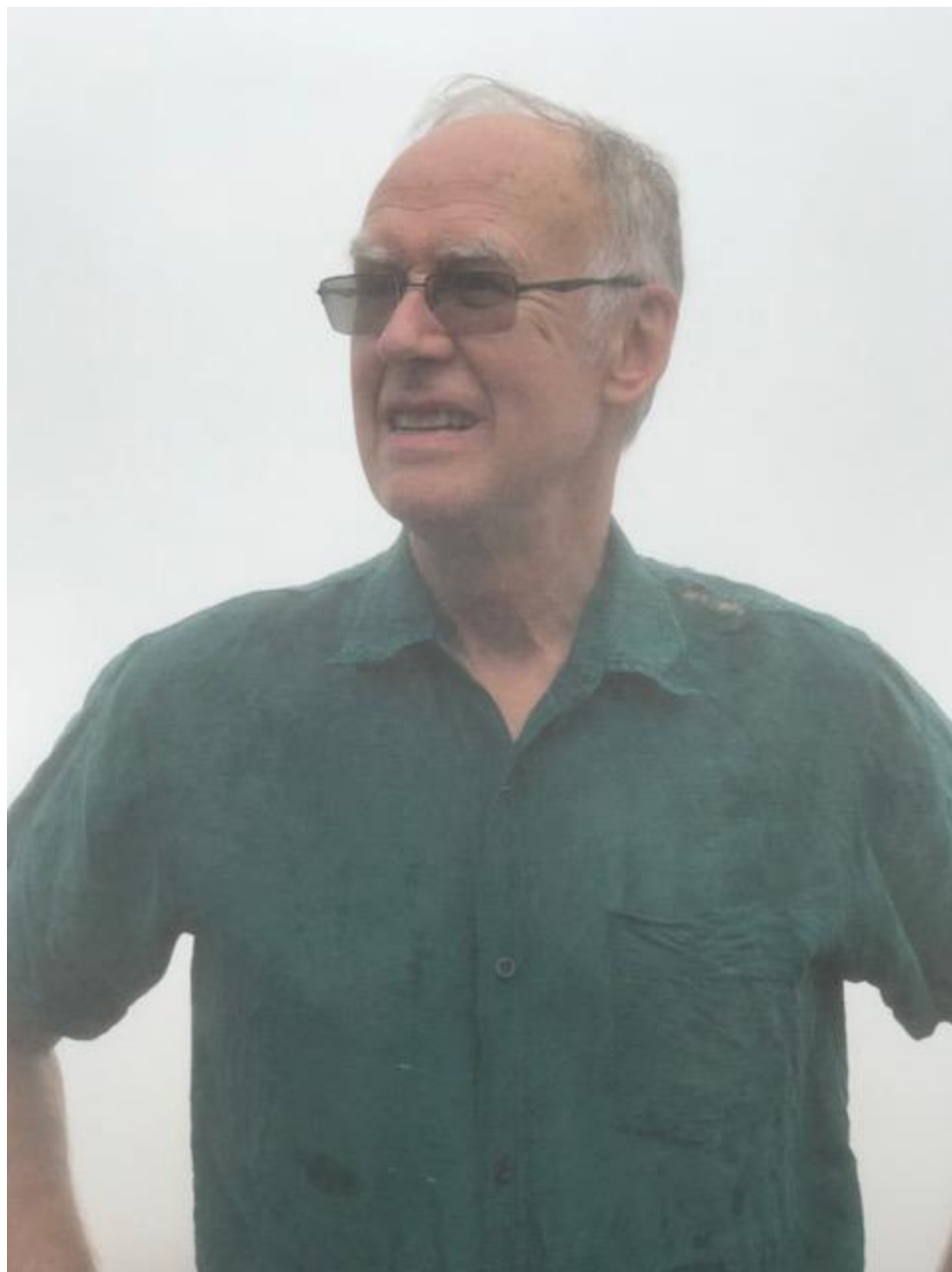
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Peter Perdue

**Abstract**

Peter C. Perdue is a professor of history at Yale University. Specializing in China, he taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for nearly twenty-eight years before arriving at Yale in 2008. Though new to Yale, he was a familiar figure in the rooms of the Agrarian Studies Program, as he frequently drove down for the Friday colloquia since it began in 1991. In this interview, Perdue discusses meeting James C. Scott and attending the early colloquia; memorable events of the program and reflections on Scott; as well as the uniqueness and impact of the program and reasons for its success.

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## Project history

By Todd Holmes  
November 25, 2020  
Berkeley, California

Since its inception in 1953, the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley has been responsible for compiling one of the largest and most widely used oral history collections in the country. The interviewees within this vast collection include many of the nation's high-profile citizens, ranging from senators and governors to artists, actors, and industrialists. And standing among this distinguished list is an equally impressive group of scholars. As a research unit based at UC Berkeley, the Oral History Center (OHC) has long gained rare access to the academy and ultimately built one of the richest oral history collections on higher education and intellectual history. Interviews with Nobel laureates and university presidents fill this collection, as do those with leading scientists and pioneering faculty of color. In recent years, the OHC has sought to further expand this interview collection with ambitious projects on University of Chicago economists and the founding generation of Chicana/o studies. Thus, a project on the famed Yale University political scientist, James C. Scott, and his equally renowned Program in Agrarian Studies stood as an obvious choice in these efforts and a fitting addition to the Bancroft collection. The result was the Yale Agrarian Studies Oral History Project, a two-part series featuring the life history of Jim Scott and short interviews with nearly twenty affiliates of the Yale Agrarian Studies Program.

Part I of the series, "James C. Scott: Agrarian Studies and Over 50 Years of Pioneering Work in the Social Sciences," was released in September 2020, marking Jim's final year at Yale and the thirtieth year of the Program in Agrarian Studies. This collection of interviews with program affiliates represents Part II of the project, aptly titled, "Reflections on James C. Scott and the Agrarian Studies Program." Here affiliates relate their experience with Jim and the program, helping to document the history and impact of Agrarian Studies, as well as offer future generations a glimpse at the scholar who shaped it. As Scott himself described their approach:

This is a sort of sermon I give actually, which is, you know how the health food people say, "You are what you eat"? Well, you are what you read. And if we can encourage students to read things broadly in several disciplines bearing on their interests, and force them, as we do in the Agrarian Studies Program, to make sense across disciplinary boundaries and leave behind their esoteric vocabularies of their own little discipline; if you're reading across disciplines, if you have friends across disciplines, you're going to be an interdisciplinary scholar. . . . So, you are what you read and you are who your intellectual companions are, and if we can change that . . . we can at least make a step toward real interdisciplinary work.

For the last three decades, this interdisciplinary spirit has made the rooms of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University one of the most exciting intellectual ecosystems in the academy. For both the humanities and social sciences, the program has served as a haven for heterodoxy, where casting aside boundaries and going against the grain not only proved to be the norm but a rite of passage. Officially founded by Jim Scott and collaborators in the fall of 1991,

the program brought a critical and interdisciplinary lens to the everyday experience of rural societies. With the world as its intellectual playground and the sweep of history as its scope, the Program in Agrarian Studies became *the* place for cutting-edge research. Anthropologists, historians, and political scientists filled the rooms of the weekly colloquium, as did sociologists, activists, and real-life farmers. The topics of discussion stood just as diverse. From peasant revolts in France and ancient Roman cuisine to dam-building in India and the industrial foodways of American agribusiness, nearly any topic of interest found a place within the big tent of Agrarian Studies. Few could have realized in the fall of 1991 that the newly minted program would not only last thirty years but also come to shape over two generations of scholarship and redefine the notion of interdisciplinary work.

The interviews included in this volume take stock of the program's history and achievements. They discuss how the team-taught graduate seminar, Agrarian Societies, proved the springboard for the program when first offered in 1990. The unprecedented student turnout for the course revealed an unfeigned appetite for such topics to Jim and collaborating faculty. To this day, the course continues to consistently boast the largest student enrollment of any graduate seminar at Yale. The interviews also offer highlights of the program's renowned Friday colloquium, a weekly forum that for over three decades has hosted leading scholars from around the world. Here cutting-edge research is presented to the group in a format that would become as famed as the program's founder. Unlike the typical academic lecture series, presenters at Agrarian Studies were asked to pre-circulate their papers, and after a brief framing and introduction, sit silently while the group discussed. After an hour, the author would then be "ungagged" and join the discussion, directing their responses to whatever they deemed most interesting and relevant. To be sure, it was a format that fostered vibrant intellectual exchange, one that often proved to be fruitful for authors and attendees alike. In his oral history, Jim Scott recounts how his adoption of the colloquium format was based on the Women's Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, where he taught between 1967 and 1976. And if imitation is the best flattery, it should be noted that it was a format well-copied by other colloquia and programs around the world.

As the interviews in this volume also attest, Agrarian Studies was more than just a seminar and colloquium; it was an intellectual community. From Friday lunches to evening potlucks at his farm, Jim Scott understood the bonds that could be built over a good meal and conversation. He not only built this understanding into the program but would also generously open his home to guests and affiliates throughout the year. Longtime affiliates such as Bob Harms, Helen Siu, Michael Dove, Peter Purdue, and Paul Freedman (just to name a few) also played vital roles in the Agrarian Studies community, creating an environment of friendship that transcended disciplines, generations, and one's academic ranking. So too did the program's ever-growing family of postdoctoral fellows. Cared for by program coordinator—and designated "mother hen"—Kay Mansfield, the fellows created a new group of scholars-in-residence each year that offered both a freshness and stability to the program. This fraternity of *Agraristas* also added to the program's diverse and cosmopolitan nature, with the list of fellows representing nearly 40 countries.

Moreover, it is hoped that these interviews with affiliates provide some measure of the program's impact. In the university environment, where academic programs come and go with the changing seasons of disciplinary trends, Agrarian Studies celebrating thirty years of operation is a clear

testament to its continued contribution and importance. These interviews help bring such attributes into clearer focus, as affiliates detail the program's influence on their own work and careers. In some cases, they even discuss efforts to replicate Agrarian Studies in one form or another at their home institutions. Above all, many affiliates offer their observations on the success of Agrarian Studies, namely how a program on rural societies has remained adaptable, relevant, and popular in an ever-changing academic environment. To do so for a decade is an achievement; to do so for thirty years is nothing short of remarkable.

As a graduate student at Yale, I had the privilege of working for the Agrarian Studies Program for four years. That experience left an indelible mark on me, both intellectually and professionally. It also inspired the idea of using oral history to document and capture intellectual history. Reading the works of James C. Scott is much different than having Jim Scott discuss the aims and struggles of writing those works. Thus, the same could be said for capturing the history and importance of programs like Agrarian Studies. I hope the interviews conducted for the project do justice to that intended goal.



## Interview 1: September 26, 2018

01-00:00:00

Holmes: All right, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today's date is September 26, 2018, and I have the pleasure of sitting down with Peter Perdue, professor of history here at Yale University. We are here at the Agrarian Studies office on campus, and this is for the Agrarian Studies Oral History Project. Peter, thanks so much for sitting down with me this morning.

01-00:00:29

Perdue: Sure.

01-00:00:30

Holmes: To start off, why don't you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came here to Yale?

01-00:00:37

Perdue: Well, I'm a historian of China. That's what I studied in graduate school, and got interested originally in peasant revolutions when I was in graduate school. It was the age of the Cultural Revolution—Chairman Mao and his ideas of peasant revolutions around the world. He even had traction on American campuses at the time. I still remember that, when student radicals, antiwar radicals, and others at Harvard and other places like Berkeley, thought Chairman Mao and Maoist political parties would be the guide for revolution among the oppressed workers in the US, as well as in China. Well, nobody knew very much about China back then, but people were waving the *Little Red Book* in English. And so, I thought maybe first, if I learned Chinese, this would make a little more sense. Then I discovered Mao's famous essay in 1927 about the peasant movement in Hunan, "A Single Spark Can Light A Prairie Fire," and how that would lead to revolution around the world, which didn't quite happen in 1927, of course, but the Communist Party came to power twenty years later.

So, I thought, "Well, I wonder what were the agrarian conditions in Hunan at that time that led Mao to think that a peasant revolution might be in the works very soon," and that was what attracted me to agrarian history in the first place. I started doing a dissertation on agrarian society in Hunan in the twentieth century, and that was where the other side sort of kicked in, that I was interested in the *longue durée*, the French idea of long-term changes in societies and economies. The French had—of course, beginning with Marc Bloch and a whole series of others—done these very long-term studies, lovingly detailed, of individual regions of France over several centuries. So, I thought we could do something like that for China, because we do have long series of documentation, of gazetteers, memorials, and maybe I should try to fit these two together and see what is the long-term evolution of agrarian society in Hunan, and how did that lead up to the revolutionary conditions that Mao saw in 1927?

So that's really what started me on my agrarian studies track, you could say, which eventually led to a book in 1987. It turned out I went back to about the sixteenth century in Hunan and got involved in fascinating things about soil, and water, and land clearance, and officials, and I never got back to Chairman Mao, never got to the twentieth century. For a while, I thought I'd do a second book on Hunan and get back and explain the revolution, but then I got diverted into other things.

01-00:03:56

Holmes: And you finished your PhD at Harvard?

01-00:03:58

Perdue: Right.

01-00:03:59

Holmes: And then, you had a position at MIT?

01-00:04:02

Perdue: That's right, yeah.

01-00:04:04

Holmes: And then you came to Yale in what year?

01-00:04:09

Perdue: Came to Yale ten years ago, 2008.

01-00:04:12

Holmes: How did you first meet Jim Scott?

01-00:04:16

Perdue: Well, that, I wonder. I actually don't know when the first meeting was. I read his books, all of them, as they came out. Maybe I missed the first one, or the articles on patron-client relations in Southeast Asia, but *Moral Economy of the Peasant*, I forget what year that was now, but that had a big impact, especially for a lot of us in the China field who were trying to look at the peasant societies—yeah, his book made a big impact. I may have also heard him speak at the AAS at some point. I really actually can't remember. I'm sort of surprised to be reminded that Agrarian Studies started in 1990, because I thought I'd been coming down here even before that, when I was in graduate school. I think I did come down here to Yale for some things, and probably saw a seminar that Jim gave, or some talk he gave in the 1980s. That's my vague memory.

01-00:05:23

Holmes: Well, why don't you talk a little bit about how you got involved in Agrarian Studies?

01-00:05:30

Perdue: Okay. Well, and if it started in the 1990s, I was at MIT at that time. I was teaching general courses about China. Of course, by the 1990s, Mao had died,

the Soviet Union had fallen, we're in the reform period, there's a lot less talk about peasant revolution and a lot more about commerce and economic development. But somehow, I think a lot of us brought up in the Mao years, felt that peasants are still important in China, even though they're not getting the attention they used to get. So, I would drive down to New Haven fairly often to the Friday colloquium to see what people were talking about. I think there was more on Latin America in those days. Certainly, there were still studies of peasant revolutions in Latin America. There were some on Southeast Asia. I don't recall very much on China in those days, but I thought, we could somehow figure out how to keep this idea alive by coming down here.

01-00:06:42

Holmes:

And what attracted you to Agrarian Studies? In your academic career, you probably have sat in a number of colloquia, right? What was it about the Agrarian Studies Colloquium that you found unique?

01-00:06:58

Perdue:

Well, obviously, Jim is a charismatic figure. [laughs] I think everybody will tell you that. They might not agree on why he's charismatic, but at least there's an immediate attraction to his way of thinking, his mindset. And he doesn't impose what he thinks on anybody else. He brings together people from a wide diversity of disciplines and environments, and that's the most refreshing thing about it, that it wasn't planned in advance to reflect one person's point of view. You could get a political scientist, a historian, anthropologist, real-life working farmers, political activists—all sorts of people would be coming in, with all sorts of different takes. But there was an underlying community there, a kind of continuity, a concern for the lives of agrarian peoples in general, I think, and a real humanity about it, that somehow this wasn't just about detached academic research, that it really might help us at least understand and maybe even do some real good for some real people that might come out of some of this.

01-00:08:19

Holmes:

In your years that you've known Jim Scott, what are some of the more memorable stories or things that stick out in your memory?

01-00:08:27

Perdue:

Well, I was trying to dredge these anecdotes out of my memory. I'm afraid they fade away too fast. He went through several phases, of course, in his own life. So there was a political science phase. Of course, it's always struck me as an incredible irony that he was the president of the APSA as a self-confessed anarchist. I thought there was a delicious irony in that, [laughs] that he came out of this field that is all about the state, but he would always make these comments about what states do, what terrible things states do to people. Well, there was the little epigraph to *Weapons of the Weak*—or was it *Hidden Transcripts*—the Jamaican proverb, that "when the landlord strides through the field, the peasant bows his head deeply and silently farts." [laughter] that

was one of my favorites. It sort of captured the down-to-earth quality of the approach, and the sort of "hidden transcripts" idea that what you see on the surface is not what people really think, often.

Then when he did the field work in Malaysia. He used to talk about it because he went there with his family—that's a hard thing to do, bring kids to a rural village in Malaysia, learn Malay—and said that that's where he and his family really confronted death. In the village, like everywhere, people die, but unlike here, they don't try to deny it like we do—the person is there; the coffin is there—that people sort of get used to this as a cycle. It becomes more normal when you just see it in the experience by people, so that was the other side of it. He's always had very funny anecdotes, of course, about all sorts of things: the quirkiness and plain cussedness of human nature; ironies in the archives, and so forth. Wish I could remember more things concretely.

01-00:11:01  
Holmes:

Well what are some of the memories that strike you from the colloquium? You've been attending the colloquium now for many years, both traveling down once in a while from MIT, and then being also further involved in the program as an affiliated faculty here at Yale. What are some of the more memorable events or aspects of the colloquium that really stick out to you?

01-00:11:29  
Perdue:

Well, I suppose looking from now, so many people who first presented at the colloquium are now well-established, famous people or established here. Shivi [K. Sivaramakrishnan], for example, was a postdoc way back when. I remember his first paper back then, when—well, he maybe was not the Shivi we know and love today. [laughs] He was a little less confident, and less structured than the way Shivi behaves these days, like most of us, I think. We start out with sort of fumbling ideas that we're exploring, and either go on with them and make them convincing or not, and that's part of the fun of it, to see people exploring ideas at the very beginning, the sort of burgeoning sprouts of an idea that can get some encouragement back then, in developing the things later.

I tend to remember the anthropologists more than historians, I guess. The historians, I sort of know how that field works and I've learned most from Agrarian Studies by looking at or seeing how anthropologists behave. I think Nancy Scheper-Hughes was one who came to talk about starvation in Brazil, and she'd done field work with these poor families, and later became a marvelous, big, fat book, but when she presented that, literally, it made you want to cry. Just the terrible deprivation that lack of nutrition does to people, and yet the life within these people—they were still talking about sex, and food, and music, even though they were desperately poor—and that's the kind of thing an anthropologist who's sensitive can capture.

Also, the topic of food in the colloquium. What seems to have happened partly in Agrarian Studies over the years is that peasant revolutions have faded out and food has come forward as a major topic of interest by many people. So, the food sessions, I think, were some of the most fun, when someone talks about the tomato, or the big conference on the chicken. That is, you get a whole range of people focused on one product, one meat, one animal, one crop. That's always been fun. Gabe Rosenberg's study of the rape crate [laughter], essentially what farmers do to breed pigs, which he gave in great detail from this sex-studies, queer-studies angle. That one was very memorable. So, sex and food, of course, that's all part of agrarian life too.

01-00:14:28

Holmes: Have you had experience with the agrarian seminar?

01-00:14:34

Perdue: You mean the graduate seminar?

01-00:14:34

Holmes: Yes.

01-00:14:35

Perdue: Well, yeah, I've co-taught with Jim and Shivi and other people in that seminar off and on since I've been here, four or five times, I guess.

01-00:14:46

Holmes: You've taught numerous seminars in your career. What stands out as unique about the Agrarian Societies seminar?

01-00:14:55

Perdue: Well, of course, again, the diversity of the graduate students in it is, certainly, the main distinctive feature of it, so it's not for any one department. You get historians, forestry school people, anthropology, political science, literature, divinity school, a whole range of people who are taking it, from many different angles. And so, you never quite know where somebody's interest is going to come from, and if you're, say, lecturing about China, there often now are Chinese students in the seminar. In the early days, there weren't. I felt I had to portray China to people who don't specialize in China, but give them enough detail that they get a sense of it without overwhelming things, but also a bigger picture. That, for me, was the best part. You have to give the big picture of Chinese agrarian society. Mostly I've done it from 1,000 BC to the present. I would never get away with that in a graduate seminar, [laughter] for China students, certainly.

01-00:16:10

Holmes: I know those who have taught in the seminar often comment on the experience of team teaching, and particularly that you have scholars from different disciplines coming together. How has that experience been for you?

01-00:16:25

Perdue:

Well, that's been great. That's something I did do at MIT. In fact, with MIT, we've had these courses they called "context courses" where you co-taught with an engineer. So, in the days when Japan was felt to be a threat to US economic productivity, I did a series with a mechanical engineer on steel industries, and auto industries, and industrial production, and in Japan and the US. He did more of the sort of technical side of economic and material evaluation, and I did more of the social, political, cultural side of Japan and the US. So that was, for me, very mind broadening at MIT.

The reason I came to Yale was to teach students about China, which I guess I know more about, but in a way, that was a narrowing of my focus, to just do Chinese history. So, the Agrarian Studies colloquium and seminar, interacting with the other people there, kept me trying to stretch my mind more. You know, you have to get on someone else's wavelength, or you have to respond to students who are responding to someone else's lecture besides your own. There's more freedom that way. They may not understand what Jim said, and so then it's my turn to explain—without Jim in the room usually—what I thought he was trying to say, [laughs] so they get multiple interpretations out of that.

01-00:18:04

Holmes:

Over your career you've certainly seen a number of programs and centers come and go. Agrarian Studies now is encroaching almost three decades here at Yale. What do you think the key to the success of that program is?

01-00:18:22

Perdue:

Well, Jim will never do this—I don't know if I should—but does the Yale administration deserve any credit for backing this program? And I think many people think it's been maintained in the teeth of the Yale administration, [laughter] but I'm not so sure about that. I don't know the background of it. I think it's the leadership and commitment of Jim and all his colleagues who have kept it alive, because as you say, most of these well-intentioned programs that are cross-disciplinary come and go, and either it's because the people who are leading it go on and do something else, or it doesn't get institutionalized in the university itself. That was our problem at MIT. We've had this context idea, wider span of engineering idea, come and go, and never really get established in the curriculum. There are just a couple of people that come together and do it once and then go on and others do it, and that's more typical of how these cross-disciplinary things work.

So, the continuity of it, definitely. The fact that Jim, and later Shivi, have been here all the time, I think, committed to it, makes a big difference. And then flexibility. I think that's the way it's morphed over time intellectually. In a way, its components are another key feature. If it had just been about peasant revolution, much as I love the subject, it would have died. That is not the main exciting topic, political movement, in the world for our students today. They should know about it historically, but that's a piece of history now. So, it has

morphed, and been flexible into many things. Food studies is one aspect of this, I think. So is a wider lens of environmental studies, going beyond nature, going beyond humans, and so forth. So that's another key aspect. You have to be renovating it, I guess, flexibly renovating it over time to keep these things alive.

01-00:20:27

Holmes:

What impact has Agrarian Studies had on you as a scholar? Especially in the 1990s and before, as a newish scholar, there at MIT, taking the trip down from Cambridge to New Haven to attend a Friday colloquium, which certainly shows the growth and the size of the Agrarian Studies community that was developing. What impact did the program have on you?

01-00:21:00

Perdue:

Well, let's see. So, as a junior faculty member, I guess I was junior faculty at MIT before it even started, but I was still coming down here, and I was interested in the topics here. Well, junior faculty are always very conscious of how they use their time, so you wonder: "Well, this is a complete distraction. This isn't going to lead to my book in the field. I probably shouldn't be doing this." And yet, I had to do something else to get out beyond my own particular niche in Chinese history, and then afterwards, after tenure, of course, you can do whatever you want, and maybe the Agrarian Studies people nudged me in a direction I was going already, or there was a sort of parallel evolution. I took on a very big project that took twenty years really to finish on the expansion of the Qing Empire and its connections to Central Eurasia, and nomads, and pastoralism, and all sorts of ridiculously ambitious things. So, I think Agrarian Studies stimulated me to think big in that way, to try to address these sort of larger questions, if I could.

01-00:22:18

Holmes:

Finally, Peter, as one who's seen the program, the networks developing before the program, the program as it developed in the 1990s, and then being involved in it here on campus when you moved to Yale, what hopes do you have for the program in the future?

01-00:22:38

Perdue:

Well, Jim won't be here forever, okay. It has to, I hope, keep going in some form after that. It will be, I'm pretty sure, and it has to be a new generation that will carry it on in some form. I won't be here forever either. We hope that there's a younger generation that's still committed to this idea that will take it on, and that's the key thing. Of course, there are funding issues, I suppose, but I think the key thing is intellectual excitement and commitment by people here to make it something valuable that's worth keeping on. My attitude, more or less, I guess, is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Maybe there's some tinkering, but the basic components of it I think have worked out very well.

You have the graduate seminar, so it's embedded in the graduate school, in many different schools, and that's key to have it there, otherwise it's floating

beyond the departments. You have the colloquium that spreads this very wide net, and you have the postdocs who come in. They started some publications. They haven't really done an Agrarian Studies publication series, I guess. They haven't done a website. I think with the younger generation, new scholarship, so much of it comes out on the Web. Somebody, not me, who's experienced in these things could make a Web presence out of it, and use social media, and who knows what, to make it a more digital presence. That would be, I think, probably a need for the future, but the basic components I hope will stay more or less as they are.

01-00:24:35

Holmes:

Well Peter, I want to thank you for your time to sit down and talk today. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share before we go?

01-00:24:42

Perdue:

Well, doing this archive or oral archive—I guess this is a digital form, I suppose—is a great idea, I think. Now, it's good to have a historical perspective on the whole thing, and this is just one tiny index, say, of how the academic world, and mostly the non-Western world, has been studied in the US and so it's a very valuable, I think, historical resource that you're creating here, so, I appreciate it.

01-00:25:13

Holmes:

Well thanks so much for your time, Peter.

01-00:25:15

Perdue:

Okay, great.

01-00:25:16

Holmes:

Thank you.

01-00:25:16

Perdue:

Thanks.

[End of Interview]