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William P. Alford:
Kindness, Integrity, and Insight

Benjamin L. Liebman*

In the summer of 1988, travelling from Dengshikou, in the center of Beijing, to the Xiyuan Hotel, just across from the Beijing Zoo, seemed like travelling to the outer edge of Beijing. I was back in Beijing visiting my host family at the end of the summer, and they were worried about me travelling so far on my own. But I had an invitation to dinner with an American professor, and my host family reluctantly let me travel across Beijing on the electric trolley bus to attend the dinner.

I do not remember how I managed to make arrangements to meet Professor William Alford for dinner (home telephones were still rare). But I do remember the dinner, at which we were joined by a handful of Bill's students from UCLA. I also remember that Bill took me seriously, despite the fact I was 19, still years away from law school, and probably a bit self-focused in describing the summer I had just spent in Chengdu. The image I have of that dinner is one that has stayed with me: Bill, surrounded by students, showing deep concern for and great interest in each of his students, and for me. The scene repeated itself two years later, when I again met Bill in Beijing, and he took me along the following night to attend a Cui Jian concert in Ritan Park—in what may have been Cui's first public appearance since Tiananmen Square the year before. This was my first inkling of how Bill always manages to stay connected to the pressing issues of the day.

A few years later it was Bill who single-handedly convinced me to go to law school. I was considering pursuing a Ph.D. in Chinese literature. Bill made the persuasive argument that a law degree was the best way to study and be engaged with China. I am not sure if I ever really decided I wanted to go to law school, but I did decide that I wanted to be Bill's student. It was the most important career decision I have made, and one that transformed me into Bill's student for the decades that have followed. Bill's argument—that a degree in law opens up an enormous range of opportunities for those with an interest in and passion for China—has been one that I have found myself repeating countless times over the years.

Bill's career has itself reflected this advice: he has combined scholarship with engagement throughout his career. He has written eloquently and in-

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sightfully on a stunning range of topics from Qing legal history, to trade, environmental law, the legal profession, disability law, and intellectual property law. In many of his writings he has been prescient, writing about important issues, such as Chinese environmental law, before their importance has been apparent to others. He has pursued nuanced understandings of law in China, most notably intellectual property law, even when doing so has not been fashionable. And he has sought to highlight the legal needs of those often overlooked by legal systems undergoing rapid change. At every step of his scholarly career Bill has also pursued constructive engagement with the world outside the academy, from his work with the Committee on Legal Education and Exchange with China in the 1980s and early 1990s, his efforts helping China draft environmental laws in the 1990s and 2000s, and his crucially important work on disability law and tireless efforts for the Special Olympics over the past twenty years. He has never shied away from doing what is right, be it hosting dissidents seeking refuge from oppressive regimes abroad, or fighting bias here in the United States. In much of this work he has been joined by Yuanyuan Shen, herself a distinguished scholar, and also a mentor to many of Bill's students.

Many can attest to Bill's almost super-human commitment to serve others: his devotion to his colleagues, to Harvard Law School, to scholarship that advances our understanding of China, to the Special Olympics and those with disabilities, and to his family. For me the greatest manifestation of Bill's dedication to those around him has always been his devotion to his students. I am sure that I am not alone in recalling the long hours Bill spent with me during my 1L year as I struggled to find relevance in the first-year curriculum, given that it was my interest in China that had brought me to law school. Likewise, I am sure I am not the only one who can remember Bill reading multiple drafts of everything I wrote, and at times calling me with a few last-minute suggestions before I submitted my work for publication. Bill came up with a very creative way to spend my 1L year in China (simultaneously navigating the equally challenging Harvard Law School funding bureaucracy and Chinese visa regulations). Even more importantly, he guided me throughout my law school career as I sought to balance my interest in pursuing all things related to China with the need to establish myself as a student of American law. It was Bill who first suggested that I clerk (and later spent hours on the phone with prospective judges on my behalf, convincing them to take me despite my somewhat thin background in U.S. constitutional law), and who explained to me why experience working within the U.S. court system would make me a better scholar of China. It was probably Bill who convinced me to take Federal Courts during my final semester at Harvard Law School. It was certainly Bill who, a few years later, helped me prepare for academic job interviews.

When you become Bill's student, you become his student for life. Bill has been a reader of my draft papers throughout my career, in particular in my

pre-tenure years. His comments today are as detailed and thoughtful as they were when I was in law school. He takes obvious delight when his students thrive. And he is there for students when they run into challenges along the way.

Bill set an extraordinarily high bar for all of us who followed him and became teachers and scholars ourselves. He has worked tirelessly to make the study of Chinese law more than just a niche subject, best manifested by his large 1L class on Chinese law at Harvard. He writes more letters or recommendation than any professor I know. His work, and in particular his teaching, reflects the passionate belief that through the study of foreign legal systems we become better scholars of and practitioners in our own legal systems.

What does it mean to be a great teacher? For me, it means trying to be like Bill Alford. It means combining principled scholarly insight with compassion and academic rigor inside and outside the classroom. It means always being there for your students, even decades after they graduate. But perhaps more than anything, it means inspiring generations of students from China, the United States, and the rest of the world to seek to deepen their understanding of a range of legal systems and of each other, and to engage in the world outside the academy to effect positive change, regardless of the geopolitical winds.