Fullwiley’s own ethnographic research among genetic scientists suggests that much of current medical genetics may reinforce ideas of racial difference. Because certain diseases occur at higher frequencies in some populations (sickle cell anemia in blacks, Tay-Sachs disease in Jews of eastern European ancestry), they have become linked to the idea of race, even when the disease does not result from common ancestry. Sickle cell trait, for example, has arisen independently in several populations as an evolutionary response to malaria. The genetic change appeared first in India and then in Africa; it is also found in Greeks and Italians. But in the United States, Fullwiley says, sickle cell trait is very much linked to African-American racial identity through the history of medicine.

She says the potential for racialization of medical genetics has been institutionalized because “you can’t get a grant from the NIH unless you recruit in racial groups, label people by census category, and then report back the data in terms of outcomes by racial type.” The original intent—to counter the widespread use of the white male body as the working research norm—is “fine and good,” she says, but there “ought to be some flexibility to these race categories, and some thinking about what they mean. This new construction of race...is socially inflected—but it is not solely a social construct because biology is front and center.”

Yesterday’s News

From the pages of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin and Harvard Magazine

1928 Following Harvard’s first spring reading period, the College Library reports about 650 more visitors than in the previous year.

1933 In response to a New Yorker article which “describes the lamentable decrease of hurdy-gurdies licensed by the city of New York,” the Bulletin’s editors cite the welcome increase in street performers and the variety of street music in Cambridge.

1938 After noting that Harvard appears to be the first institution of higher learning to enter into a contract with a national labor union, the Bulletin reports that nine employees’ units have participated in perhaps the first official election to determine the bargaining agent between a university and its workers.

1958 Upon the recommendation of the chairman of the University’s Board of Preachers, the Harvard Corporation has voted to permit Memorial Church to be used on certain occasions for private, non-Christian ceremonies that are conducted by officials of other religions.

1963 What begins in the Winthrop House courtyard as a prank by 20 or so Radcliffe students “hotly perpetrating the first Great B.V.D. Raid in Harvard history” (according to the Bulletin’s undergraduate column) escalates into a riotous event involving close to 2,000 undergraduates and onlookers by the time the action reaches Harvard Square. The shouting, chanting masses finally disperse at the Radcliffe Quad. No Radcliffe women are officially penalized, but five Harvard men spend the night in jail.

1983 Student activists have set up “E for D,” the Endowment for Divestiture, and are urging seniors and alumni to send their class-gift contributions to its escrow account rather than to Harvard until the University adopts a policy of complete divestiture of its South African holdings or until the UN lifts its economic sanctions against that country’s apartheid regime.

Prescription: Music

Nowadays, no one from Faulkner Hospital bothers Stephen Wright ’64 on Thursday nights. But when he joined the Longwood Symphony Orchestra (LSO) in 1993—before he became Faulkner’s chief of medicine and could pick his hours—he kept a pager on his belt during rehearsals. If it went off, he had to put down his bassoon and take the call. Sometimes, after the three-hour rehearsal, he went back to the hospital instead of going home. “I maintain that you make time for what you want to do,” he says. “And I really want to do this.”

Wright wasn’t the only one to bring a pager to rehearsals. A group of
Scanning the Social Sciences

Letters have gone out inviting senior faculty members from across the University, nominated by the deans of their respective schools, to participate in planning for a broad review of the way Harvard handles the social sciences. The list of participants is not yet final, but a recent conversation with University provost Steven E. Hyman offers a preview of the committee’s purpose and the work that lies ahead.

The review will proceed along lines similar to those followed in the natural sciences, where a review that began in 2006 is now moving from goal-setting to implementation (see “For Science and Engineering, New Life,” March-April 2007, page 65). But Hyman, a neurobiologist, warns that this isn’t as easy as mapping the previous process onto the social sciences. “Frankly,” he says, “the natural sciences are simpler. It’s really four schools—arts and sciences, engineering, medicine, and public health. The social sciences are far more complex. Every school at Harvard, arguably, is engaged in the social sciences.”

In the natural sciences, Hyman adds, independent developments such as the biotech boom and stem-cell research have driven collaboration across disciplines. The social sciences, absent such forces, have not gone so far down that path. It also hasn’t helped, he says, that social-science methodologies “differ enormously from the qualitative and ethnographic to highly quantitative.”

But crossing these boundaries is both inevitable and necessary, says Eckstein professor of applied economics David M. Cutler; dean for the social sciences in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), who has already signed on to the nascent working group. For most social scientists, says Cutler, a deep understanding of a single field no longer suffices. In his own case, he has had to learn about aspects of medicine and public policy in order to study the economics of healthcare. In his course on health policy, he uses readings from the New England Journal of Medicine or, he says, “from whatever discipline happens to have someone who wrote a nice paper.”

Yet Cutler suspects that if he showed his research to economists trained 40 years ago, “they would look at it and say, ‘I have no idea what this person is doing.’” The configuration of academic departments—in some cases, set up more than 100 years ago—does not reflect the new reality, he explains. The departments are still important, but a structure for coordinating between them is also necessary.

Harvard’s historic decentralization can hold back interdisciplinary connection, says Cutler. For instance, it would make sense for him to teach at Harvard Medical School (HMS), and for HMS health-policy scholars to teach or co-teach courses offered through FAS, the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), or the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS). But because each professor’s paycheck comes from his or her specific faculty, he says, “we’re not very well set up to deal with that at the moment.”

Facilitating boundary crossing is a high priority for President Drew Faust. In a letter to the Harvard community at the start of the academic year, she wrote of her wish for Harvard to become “a university known more for bridges and less for walls.” In this vein, the provost’s office has become the nerve center for University-wide initiatives in the natural sciences, the arts, and now, the social sciences.

As a model of successful coordination, Hyman cites the interfaculty initiative in health policy. That initiative encompasses a Ph.D. program within FAS, with joint programs through HMS and Harvard Law School (HLS); a secondary concentration for undergraduates; a postdoctoral program; and a program that aims to use Harvard scholars’ knowledge to improve the quality of healthcare in eastern Massachusetts. The initiative gets funding from six faculties; its director, Joseph P. Newhouse, holds appointments at HMS, HKS, and HSPH.

And as an example of what should not happen under the new approach, Hyman points to the field of human rights, where HSPH has the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights; HKS has the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; and HLS has its own Human Rights Program. As executive director of the University Committee on Human Rights Studies—“an awkward overlying planning committee,” in Hyman’s words—Jacqueline Bhabha “has done a brilliant job,” he says, “but it’s exhausting.”

With a University capital campaign on the horizon, creating a wish list for fundraising will be a primary goal for the review. But the eventual recommendations may not all require money. Cutler, for one, believes Harvard already possesses many of the resources needed to increase effectiveness in the social sciences. “If you’ve got butter and sugar and flour and eggs,” he says, “I think you ought to bake a cake.”
Connecting with China

China disorients the visitor. The scale and hustle of its cities—propelled by the greatest economic growth and urban migration in history—overwhelm. The currency features Mao’s likeness, but new luxury apartment towers have displaced commoner housing all around the site of this summer’s Olympics in his capital city. The ubiquitous advertisements for Western consumer goods in Shanghai symbolize openness to the world, but during the March protests in Tibet, China Daily duly reported overseas Chinese students’ outrage at purported distortions by “the Western Goebbels’ Nazi media.” Along a Shanghai thoroughfare near the “Cowboy Boot Bar,” laundry dries on bamboo poles extended from balconies to the passing telephone wires; at street level, a retailer’s lingerie display would make Victoria’s Secret close the curtains.

Perhaps it should not surprise that such contrasts, arising within a generation of the Cultural Revolution, can disorient the Chinese, too. Under the twin pressures of the one-child policy and the migration of 150 million rural workers to urban jobs (with a quarter-billion more expected to follow within 20 years), traditional, extended families have shrunk. Frantic growth and projects like the Olympics have uprooted whole communities and created new ones; what will it mean for the way people live, for instance, as 97 new airports open by 2020?

During a recent visit, some of these issues were tackled by alumni and fellows who have spent time in Massachusetts, by Harvard faculty members and their academic partners in China, and by panelists at the Harvard Alumni Association’s (HAA) conference in Shanghai (March 28–30). They also looked deep into China’s history, analyzed its present challenges, and tried to support its pursuit of a more fulfilling future for its 1.3 billion people.

The statistics in official accounts of every aspect of China’s transformation obscure as much as they explain. The pace and scope of change demand the telling of individuals’ stories, of neighborhoods enduring the whirlwind—the tools of social anthropology. But that discipline has scarcely existed in the Chinese academy, apart from ethnographies of minority groups within the People’s Republic.

Now, Pan Tianshu,