

The Cultural Revolution to Sino-American Rapprochement

David Wilson (Editor, 1968–74)

In 1968, when I took over the editorship, *The China Quarterly* had already established itself as the leading English-language journal on China in the world. Great credit is due to the founder editor, Rod MacFarquhar, for this achievement. It was a time for consolidating that position of pre-eminence and giving the journal a firm academic basis. The stars were right. At the School of Oriental Studies in the University of London, the Contemporary China Institute was being set up under Stuart Schram, with generous support from the Volkswagen and Ford Foundations. *The China Quarterly*, with its new editor, moved from an upstairs room in Oxford Street to a modern office block near the University and then into the faded grandeur of Fitzroy Square.

There was a paradox at the heart of *The China Quarterly* in those days. Its readership was world-wide; the majority of its contributors came from the United States; and yet it was published in London. An oddity maybe, but it made sense. Most of the research on contemporary China was being done in the United States. China was inaccessible to most Americans. Charitable foundations and government agencies devoted great sums of money to the study of China – the unknown, puzzling and sometimes frightening Communist giant. Research in Europe and elsewhere was minor by comparison. It was the United States which provided the bulk of both the readership and the contributors to *The China Quarterly* in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nevertheless, publication in London of a journal on contemporary China suited everybody. Rival and deeply held views about China remained strong in the United States. McCarthy was dead; but the divisions and bitterness of the witch-hunts over which he presided still persisted and rankled. Objectivity on China, or even honest diversity of opinion, would not have been easy for a journal published in the United States in those days. In London that problem was far less. But, even in London, the passions of the Cultural Revolution had a marked impact. Those who believed the world was being re-made, with a new egalitarianism and selfless morality, had little time for the drier views of those who suspected millennial enthusiasm or had a more sceptical view of human nature. Many believed that it was a time to take sides and looked askance at those who preferred the niceties of academic debate.

In that tumultuous world, sound scholarship, objectivity and an honest diversity of views were the goals we aspired to as *The China Quarterly* moved to its new home at the Contemporary China Institute. The use of the plural is deliberate, not editorial. As editor, I inherited an Editorial Board containing some of the most distinguished China scholars from round the world. Like many such Boards it never met, unfailingly helpful though its members were when asked to give advice on articles or

potential authors. So we set up an Executive Committee, composed by necessity of those living in the UK, to meet regularly to guide the editor and, as they no doubt saw it, keep him on the right tracks. As somebody who had newly moved out of public service into the academic world, the thoughtful and often forcefully expressed advice of those like Kenneth Walker, that painstakingly great scholar of Chinese agricultural economics, or Stuart Schram, the world's leading specialist on Mao's life and philosophy, was invaluable. I owe them, and the many others who supported *The China Quarterly* during my editorship by deed and word, a great debt of gratitude.

The serious study of China is, or should be, a matter which stretches far beyond academia into the world of public affairs and business. That need was particularly great during the 1960s and early 1970s when the number of foreigners visiting China was small and the general understanding of Chinese affairs sadly superficial. There is though an inherent tension between the needs of those doing academic research and those with a general non-specialist interest in China. With much of the Chinese system little understood, and information restricted and hard to come by, there was a great need in those days for articles of detailed, basic research – the coal-mining approach, digging a deep seam on a narrow front. A real understanding of China could not move forward without such fundamental work. At the same time there was a need for more eclectic scholars who could distil the fruits of all this basic research and make of it a coherent overall picture which could inform the actions of the non-expert – the horizon gazing article. Authors qualified to join that second group are by far the hardest to find. One of the joys of editorship was the chance to travel – to the United States, Europe and Australasia – to meet people in the China field world-wide and to encourage those who had valuable insights into China to write for *The China Quarterly*. Reluctant authors are often the best.

Thanks to the tolerance of the Contemporary China Institute and the generosity of Columbia University, those visits included a period away from the editorship as a visiting scholar at Columbia University to complete a Ph.D. dissertation using the marvellous library facilities there and benefiting from the accumulated wisdom of a great group of contemporary and modern China scholars. These included one (not to be named) who found doctoral research so lonely that he took up smoking to have somebody to talk to when he bought his daily ration of cigarettes. Those who have sat day after day in libraries know the feeling all too well. John Gittings, now Foreign Leader Writer of *The Guardian* newspaper, very kindly stepped in as acting editor to cover my absence. It is a mark of how cut-off we then were from the day-to-day life of China that only once during these six years of editorship was I able to visit China, and then only briefly as a transit stop-over, on the way to Australia via Moscow. Our remoteness from China in those days stimulated the research from which we have gained so greatly. As China has become so much more accessible, we must guard against the easy assumption that it no longer merits dedicated study and the resources that support it.

One change can be taken as symbolizing the endeavours of those years. Those who move into new houses redecorate. Those who take over journals or magazines hanker after a new format. So it was that the cover and design of *The China Quarterly* changed during my editorship. The beautifully written *Zhong* which now adorns the cover stands, of course, for China. But it was chosen to symbolize more than that. It was an earnest that the journal sought to be fairminded and impartial, standing in the centre, and belonging to no faction. Despite all the pressures of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, despite the euphoria surrounding the changed relationship implicit in President Nixon's visit to China in early 1972, I believe it succeeded. Long may it continue to do so. Our dealings with China need the backing of well-informed scholarship. Scholars need a well-respected, non-partisan journal. *The China Quarterly* of the coming decades can, and I trust will, serve both needs.