

A Time of Upheaval

John Gittings (Acting Editor, 1972)*

The year during which I served as acting editor while David Wilson was away (1971–72) came amidst “great changes” both in China and in China studies. Indeed it was a time of “great upheaval.” While the anarchic phase of the Cultural Revolution was giving way to one of shaky stability enforced by state violence, how to look at China had become part of a fierce controversy both in academic and political terms among Western scholars of Asia. Not surprisingly, both the upheavals in China and among China scholars were reflected in the pages of this journal.

On the ground, the most significant development for those studying the People’s Republic from outside was the possibility, for the first time in many years (and for US scholars the first time ever) to actually visit the place. In 1968, while I was working for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Hong Kong, I had met Edgar Snow lingering there in vain hope of securing an entry visa. Snow, the journalist who knew the communist leaders from Mao downwards better than anyone else, was remarkably generous in his appreciation of orthodox China scholarship as expressed in the *Review* and *The China Quarterly*. In an appreciation after Snow’s death in 1972, John S. Service (political officer on the US Dixie Mission in Yan’an, and in the 1950s prime target among China specialists of the McCarthyite witch-hunt) would pay tribute to Snow’s “warm, intense, almost passionate sense of humanity.”¹

By 1971–72 access from abroad, though of a limited nature, at last became possible. As well as a very small number of individual visits, the Chinese authorities now accepted several tours arranged by organizations such as the (US) Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) and the (UK) Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU). Such tours by definition excluded those who were particularly critical of the Beijing government – like many others I was interviewed by a SACU committee before being invited to join the second SACU tour in April 1971. To their credit the editorial board of *The China Quarterly* would overcome their scepticism about the value of these highly organized tours, accepting my proposal that the journal should carry reports of information obtained in this way.

* I would like to thank Mark Selden for his helpful comments. I have discussed at greater length some of the issues from this period in “Reporting China since the 1960s,” in Lionel Jensen and Timothy Weston (eds.), *China’s Transformations: The Stories Beyond the Headlines*, (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 285–301. The controversy among US China scholars was revisited by the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars in a 1996 conference, published as *Asia, Asian Studies, and the National Security State: A Symposium*, vol. 29:1 (1997).

1 John S. Service, “Edgar Snow: Some Personal Reminiscences,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 50 (1972), pp. 209–19.

The first to appear,² by my SACU companion Andrew Watson (and later for many years head of the Ford Foundation in China) carried his observations on two visits during the tour to a commune and a factory, but also addressed the issue of whether anything of value could be learnt from what, from the Chinese point of view, was evidently a propaganda exercise. The title of his report, “The Guiders and the Guided,” was chosen with care. Not all places that were visited, he suggested, were obvious showcases, and through diligent question it was often, though not always, possible to glean useful information. At the Nanjing Chemical Fertilizer Plant, for example, it could be concluded that “the mass organizations have limited powers and that executive authority is vested in the Party and revolutionary committees” – a significant insight into the way that the mass activism of 1967–69 had been curbed. Watson also noted that “seeing what is actually happening” could sometimes yield information which simply did not exist in the official media. An unreported campaign for people to go camping (*yeying*) “and by living rough to learn the spirit of the People’s Liberation Army” was revealed by the almost daily sight of “columns of students and workers marching out to camp with their bedding on their backs.”

“Reports from China” would continue under subsequent editors as a regular feature of *The China Quarterly* until 1982, when the slot was replaced by “Research Notes” (later “Research Reports”). By then it could be assumed that most researchers into contemporary China would have had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of their subject matter on visits or tours, and increasingly to do at least limited field research while sometimes able, except in sensitive areas, to discuss their topic with Chinese officials or scholars.

By the early 1970s the “struggle between two lines” had to some extent abated on the mainland, only to break out again with devastating force in 1975–76 as Mao approached his death. Meanwhile in the Western China field there had emerged if not two lines then two very different tendencies which led to considerable and at times heated controversy. Shorthand labels for these – inevitably over-simplified – were “established” or “orthodox” scholars in one camp and “revisionist” or “radical” scholars (mostly of a younger generation) in another. One of my first tasks as acting editor was to proof-read a review article in issue No. 48 by the distinguished former US diplomat O. Edmund Clubb³ which took sharp issue with *America’s Asia*, a collection of “dissenting essays on Asian–American relations” (including one by myself) edited by Edward Friedman and Mark Selden. The book offered a broad critique of, in the main, US Asian scholarship which the editors saw as having been “shaped by the Cold War and the growth of American hegemony in Asia.” In reply, Clubb defended “the bona fides of the majority of the [US] Orientalists” and

2 Andrew J. Watson, “The guiders and the guided,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 49 (1972), pp. 136–50.

3 “China: ‘beloved’ or enemy,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 48 (1971), pp. 749–52.

criticized the book for offering “blanket approval” to current Maoist policy (a charge which Friedman would deny in a subsequent reply to Clubb).⁴ The title of Clubb’s review, “‘Beloved’ or Enemy?,” gives an idea of the extent to which this debate could at times become polarized. It was also part of a much wider contention over values and allegiances in Western academia which had largely emerged from opposition to the Vietnam War and, more broadly, to the global exercise of US power in the name of the Cold War.

Important though these issues were (and the controversies of the early 1970s might well be worth revisiting), it would be wrong to give the impression that conflict in the China field dominated the pages of *The China Quarterly*. Many articles by established scholars sought valiantly to make sense of Mao’s Second Revolution (the term used by K. S. Karol in his book published in 1976). Stuart Schram, then professor of Chinese politics at SOAS – both witty and inspirational in his role as mentor to the acting editor of *The China Quarterly* – was breaking new ground in his study of Maoist ideology which he related clearly and firmly to the Cultural Revolution (as in his “Mao Tse-tung and the theory of the permanent revolution, 1958–69”).⁵ Later, presenting the first full translation of Mao’s 1919 essay “The Great Union of the Popular Masses,” Schram made the link between the early and the late Mao explicit, arguing that “The Cultural Revolution was (among many other things) an attempt to re-create, for the benefit of today’s youth, an experience analogous to that of Mao’s generation of young Chinese half a century ago.”⁶

From today’s perspective this may seem a shade utopian, yet the glib tendency now to view Mao as nothing more than “a monster,” and to dismiss the Cultural Revolution as “ten years of madness,” neglects altogether the ideological, and – for many grassroots participants at the time – idealistic dimension. Other thoughtful contributions in the early 1970s included Maurice Meisner on “Leninism and Maoism”⁷ and Donald Munro on “The malleability of man in Chinese Marxism.”⁸ Economic policy was also looked at seriously, as in Carl Riskin’s study of “Small industry and the Chinese model of development.”⁹

More change was under way, with implications we are still witnessing today, in the US rapprochement with China, dramatized by Nixon’s China visit in February 1972 and the formation of an implicit anti-Soviet entente. *The China Quarterly* was able to put these developments into a broader context than that of a stroke of Kissingerian inspiration. A previously unpublished CIA paper on discordant Sino-Soviet ideological views, prepared in 1953, showed that

4 Edward Friedman, “‘Beloved’ or enemy: a reply to Edmund Clubb,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 50 (1972), pp. 341–42.

5 *The China Quarterly*, No. 46 (1971), pp. 221–44.

6 Stuart R. Schram, “From the ‘Great Union of the Popular Masses’ to the ‘Great Alliance’,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 49 (1972), pp. 88–105.

7 “Leninism and Maoism: some populist perspectives on Marxism-Leninism in China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 45 (1971), pp. 2–36.

8 *The China Quarterly*, No. 48 (1971), pp. 609–40.

9 *The China Quarterly*, No. 46 (1971), pp. 245–73.

even at this early stage significant differences could be detected in this supposedly “monolithic” relationship.¹⁰ In his “On the making of US China policy 1961–69: a study in bureaucratic politics,”¹¹ James Thomson threw light on earlier efforts in the State Department to put behind the legacy of McCarthyism and consider fresh approaches to China. It was an unfortunate irony that while in the post-Geneva mid-1950s the US had failed to grasp the opportunity offered by Zhou Enlai for better relations, by the early 1960s when Washington was prepared to explore the possibility, Beijing saw itself as standing alone against both superpowers. We still do not fully understand the story of these missed opportunities and mixed motives on both sides.

The China Quarterly also explored another sensitive subject: Hong Kong. In a thoughtful study of “Hong Kong and Chinese foreign policy, 1955–60,”¹² Gary Catron showed that China “has been flexible enough to work out, for political as well as economic reasons, a stable relationship with the colony of a Western power.” And Graham Johnson, in a review article on *Hong Kong: the Industrial Colony* (edited by Keith Hopkins), observed that while the place was used by large numbers of researchers as a base from which to study the mainland, little systematic research had been done on life in urban Hong Kong and on difficult issues where colonial rule was deficient such as social welfare, education and health.¹³ In this as in other areas even greater changes, barely perceived in the early 1970s, lay ahead.

10 Philip Bridgham, Arthur Cohen and Leonard Jaffe, “Mao’s road and Sino-Soviet relations: a view from Washington, 1953,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 52 (1972). pp. 670–98.

11 *The China Quarterly*, No. 50 (1972), pp. 220–43.

12 *The China Quarterly*, No. 51 (1972), pp. 405–24.

13 Graham E. Johnson, “Hong Kong: colonial anachronism,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 52 (1972). pp. 554–57.