The China Quarterly and the History of the PRC

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When I was appointed editor of the CQ in 1959, my vision was that it should focus primarily on all aspects of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and on Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history, but that there should also be occasional articles on contemporary Taiwan and the overseas Chinese. That autumn, I did a quick tour of a few American campuses to try to drum up contributors; basically I needed social scientists. But even those universities with significant China programmes were peopled mainly by historians who were not doing research on the PRC. Benjamin Schwartz at Harvard, who had already published Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao, did write articles from time to time on the current scene; at MIT, Lucian Pye was ensuring that political scientists should incorporate East Asia into analyses of comparative politics; at Berkeley, Franz Schurmann (a Yuan historian in an earlier incarnation) was engaged in what became Ideology and Organization in Communist China, S.H. Chen was interested in contemporary mainland literature, and Choh-ming Li (like Alexander Eckstein at Michigan) was studying the economy; at Columbia, C. Martin Wilbur was working on the documents captured when the Soviet embassy in Beijing was raided in the 1920s, but Doak Barnett would not get there till the end of 1960; the only real nest of social scientists examining Chinese behaviour on a daily basis that I found on that trip was located at RAND: Allen Whiting, A.M. Halpern and Alice Langley Hsieh, all working on Chinese foreign relations. The shock of the launch of the first sputnik in 1957 had already led the US government to allocate massive funds to academia for the training of specialists on Russia and China, but the first beneficiaries of that largesse did not start coming out of the pipeline until the late 1960s. With so few potential contributors available, I stopped reviewing China books in case I offended any of them! But the scarcity of talent was also an advantage, for Western and Asian China watchers – diplomats in Beijing, journalists in Hong Kong, businessmen travelling in and out – all subscribed, making the CQ the house magazine of a growing community.

I exploited that community, perforce, and so the CQ had a much wider range of authors back then, coming not just from academia but also from journalism, think tanks, government, business and even the intelligence community. Donald Zagoria left the CIA to write his famous analysis of the Sino-Soviet dispute, but later the CIA allowed Philip Bridgham to publish under his own name his series of perceptive CQ articles on the Cultural Revolution. Partly because most authors could not get into China, the CQ published several articles about the PRC in relation to the outside world. And since the mildness or fervour of China’s foreign policy tended to mirror the domestic scene, it was not a bad perspective. Considering the lack of

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information in the 1960s, I think that it was credible that our authors, watching from afar, were broadly right in their analyses of what was going on in China. The CQ did not have the information to plumb the depths of the Great Leap famine though we did have a debate about it. Nor did it predict the coming of the Cultural Revolution, but then neither did Liu Shaoqi. Mao kept his cards close to his chest, not revealing skullduggery, probably to preserve his image for posterity.

There was one advantage of being able only to see the wood and not to get in among the trees. As contemporaries living through the events, CQ authors, day by day and as a matter of course, read in their newspapers what was going on in the world outside China. One had an immediate perception of the external environment within which Mao and his colleagues were operating. It was thus easier to understand Chinese actions and reactions, especially as one knew from a CQ article that, in addition to their own sources, the Chinese leadership had those same Western news reports translated for them in internal publications. One important example of the advantage of the contemporary perspective, though it occurred before the CQ was inaugurated, was the 1958 Taiwan Straits crisis. At the time, it seemed plain that China’s shelling of Quemoy (Jinmen) and Matsu was a reaction to the Middle East crisis and the stationing of US and UK troops in the Lebanon and Jordan, but looked at from a later perspective it could be seen as part of an effort to arouse militancy in connection with the formation of the communes. After 40 years, the role of the Middle East crisis was finally confirmed in Wu Lengxi’s Shinian lunzhan (1, p. 175). Today, when access to China is so much easier, and scholars can bury themselves for long periods in among the trees, in town or country, it may sometimes be more difficult to grasp any overall relationship between domestic and foreign developments. And yet with China so open to the outside world, there must be thousands of daily interactions, some of importance. This problem is mitigated, however, by the existence of China internet chat rooms through which scholars can derive differing perspectives and observations from all over the China-watching world.

Looking back over PRC history, one can see that the CQ first appeared on the cusp of a new leftist era, though it was not clear to me at the time. The first issue provided some of the older grandees of our field a chance to look back over the decade since “liberation.” A common theme was the power and discipline of the Chinese party-state that had been set up. And even though the united front policies of the “hundred flowers” period had been abandoned in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, a united China at peace with the outside world looked a lot better than what had preceded it. Only Richard Walker, in Chinese Communism: The First Five Years, had chronicled in detail the harsh campaigns and purges which the CCP had used to assert its power. Mao turned left again in the summer of 1957, and crossed the Rubicon with his colleagues by purging Marshal Peng Dehuai and
other Long March comrades in 1959 (the subject of a famous CQ article a few years later). After a breather to recover from the famine, Mao adjured his comrades-in-arms never to forget class struggle, and in 1963 launched the Socialist Education Movement. For the Chairman at least, it was then but a hop, skip and a jump to the Cultural Revolution, the triumph and the downfall of his utopianism, the alpha and omega of Maoism, the chasm between the old dream of a socialist China and the new hope of a modern China. All Mao’s worst fears have come to pass. Fortunately today the CQ can call on dozens of scholars world-wide to chronic and analyse the stunning transformations.

What has been lost in the reform era is an authoritative master narrative. The original communist master narrative is most easily accessible in the work of Hu Qiaomu, who, on Mao’s instructions, laid it out in his brief Thirty Years of the Communist Party of China: An Outline History. The Chinese revolution had two origins: the need to fight against the imperialism which had transformed China into a semi-colony, a “most fundamental task of the Chinese revolution” from the Opium War onwards; and the need to overthrow “feudalism,” because before and after the 1911–12 revolution various factions of feudal rulers refused to carry out any real social reforms. Many struggles against imperialism and feudalism had taken place in the 19th century – most significantly the Taiping rebellion – but they all ultimately failed because of the lack of correct leadership, for which a new class, the proletariat, had to emerge.

According to Hu, the proletariat – which had grown in strength as Chinese industry flourished during the First World War – first demonstrated its power in the May Fourth Movement and began to accept the influence of Marxism-Leninism. As a result, China’s nationalist revolution became part of the world proletarian socialist revolution, and shortly thereafter the CCP was born. Writing soon after the communist victory in 1949, Hu asserted that the “establishment of the People’s Republic of China was a glorious culmination of the struggles of the Chinese people over the past century against imperialism and feudalism and especially of their struggle in the previous 28 years under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” The Chinese revolution had now entered “a new stage.” An outsider might note, though, that the Chinese had gone back to the future, erecting a state which again had a maximum leader and a loyal bureaucracy, whose right to rule was enshrined in a doctrine that embraced state and society.

While the Chinese under Mao had hitherto made their own revolution, in this “new stage” they were prepared to accept the path followed by the Soviet Union under Stalin as their model. “The Soviet Union’s today is our tomorrow” was the watchword as they proceeded with their two major goals: transforming their country economically and socially. After a period of rapid economic recovery, the Chinese geared up for a command economy to be masterminded
in a series of Five-Year Plans with the principal aim of establishing heavy industrial bases in various parts of the country. There was a tragic detour when Mao decided to abandon the Five-Year Plan system in favour of a bootstrap development model in the Great Leap Forward, but on the eve of the Cultural Revolution China was ready to restart the system with the new slogan of the “four modernizations.”

In social transformation, the CCP outperformed its Soviet model. Within seven years of the revolution, China’s peasants were all in collective farms and its industries and commerce were nationalized or under joint state-private ownership. And yet the country had managed to avoid the terrible disruption of agriculture that collectivization had brought about in the Soviet Union. Again, Mao went wrong in the Great Leap by amalgamating collectives into communes, but by 1965 the worst egalitarian excesses had been recouped and the countryside had recovered from the famine. Then came the chasm of the Cultural Revolution and the end of Hu Qiaomu’s master narrative. Since 1978, China has been launched on a course which Hu could not have foreseen.

Looking back from the early 21st century over the period covered in Hu’s brief history, it is possible to discern a different master narrative whose theme is the modernization of China and its incorporation into the global system. The familiar problems are still there even if one might use different terminology. China needed to be able to get rid of extraterritoriality and other imperialist encroachments on its sovereign territory; and in order to do that its traditionalist government had to make some hard decisions, which it failed to do for most of the 19th century. British and French aggression was insufficient to shake the mandarins out of their Confucian complacency. Reforms were necessary, but the slogan was “Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for practical use.”

The moment of truth came with defeat by Japan in 1894–95. The Confucian master narrative had depicted the Chinese as the creators of a civilization that embraced their known world, including Japan, Korea and northern Vietnam. But the Japanese victory revealed that, whatever these “younger brothers” owed to Chinese civilization, they had now transformed themselves into a Western-style nation state. They could no longer be seen as integral part of the Confucian world order. They were an “other.” This was rubbed home in 1900 when Japanese troops marched as of right with Western troops to the relief of the Beijing legations during the Boxer uprising. The massive shock dealt by defeat by Japan resulted first in the abortive 100 days reform of 1898, and then, after the march on Beijing, the abandonment of Confucianism in 1905 as the basis of the Chinese education system. Perhaps finally China had begun its march to “wealth and power.”

Yuan Shikai’s prevention of Sun Yat-sen and his colleagues from establishing a viable democratic system after the 1911–12 revolution, the division of the country under the warlords, the Kuomintang’s inability to proceed with nation-building as a result of Japanese
aggression, all seemed to underline Hu’s point that it was only with the creation of the PRC and the restoration of peace and unity, that the modernization of China could really begin. But Mao prevented it from happening, first with the Great Leap, but finally and decisively with the Cultural Revolution.

To gauge the extent of the shock the 1966–76 decade was to Deng Xiaoping and other leaders who survived it, one has to start by thinking about how the world looked in 1951 when Hu Qiaomu was writing his triumphal 30-year history of the CCP. Japan had received a crushing defeat after the devastation of two atomic bombs and the fire-bombing of its capital, and was only just about to recover its independence after the post-war American occupation. The whole of South Korea was in the process of being even more thoroughly devastated by struggle between the American-led UN armies and the forces of North Korea and the Chinese People’s Volunteers. On Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek was licking his wounds in his rural refuge. Singapore and Hong Kong were sleepy colonial entrepôts. In 1951, China’s leaders had to be confident that they would once again show East Asia, perhaps all Asia, the way forward.

As late as the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1965, Japan was independent, but its “miracle” was only just visible over the horizon; on Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek had carried out the land reform that he had balked at on the mainland, but not much else seemed to have changed. South Korea was under military rule, Singapore was independent, Hong Kong was still Hong Kong, but there was nothing eye-catching in any of them. By 1978, East Asia was transformed, miracles of economic development everywhere. In 1978, the leaders who survived the Cultural Revolution should surely have felt the humiliation of knowing that they had allowed Mao to throw away the likelihood of China’s leadership. And so the reform era began. Japan’s achievement in becoming a world economic power was awe-inspiring; South Korea’s neo-authoritarian nation-building was envied as was Singapore’s social stability. Even the Kuomintang on Taiwan were an example to their mainland enemies of what Chinese could accomplish. China would now learn not lead: it did not matter what colour the cat was as long as it caught the mice. The master narrative of China’s modernization thus seems to be that breakthroughs are achieved only after massive shocks. The first shock led to the abandonment of the traditional Confucian system, the second to the shelving of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This poses a problem. Chinese regimes, traditional and communist, seem to need a doctrine to glue state and society together. Doubtless this is why Hu Jintao has had senior officials lead ideological refresher sessions in their units in the past year. “Marxist-Leninist learning for the essence, Western and East Asian learning for practical use”? This approach will not work any better for communists than it did for Confucians. The CCP leadership is clinging to a doctrine which combines a mid-19th-century analysis of the English industrial revolution with an
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ey early 20th-century covert action plan devised to take on a traditional
ductocracy. If 21st-century Chinese leaders in the information age do
find ways to corral the internet it will not be by consulting Marx or

Lenin.
The essence of modernity, even in most of East Asia today, is that
the only glue that will bind state and society – as Sun Yat-sen grasped
– is some form of democracy, which gives citizens the confidence of
ownership of their state and gives politicians a mandate to lead it. The
master narrative of China’s march to modernity suggests that it will
require another massive shock before there is a political transforma-
tion. Absent Deng Xiaoping, the student movement of 1989 might
have been that shock. One can only hope that when the third shock
comes it will be administered by equally peaceful demonstrations and
not by foreign war or internal convulsion as in the past. It may be that
at its 45th anniversary, the CQ is again on the cusp of a new era. If so,
with the enormous scholarly resources now available in the China
field, the Editor should be able to spot it and chronicle it better than I
could all these years ago!