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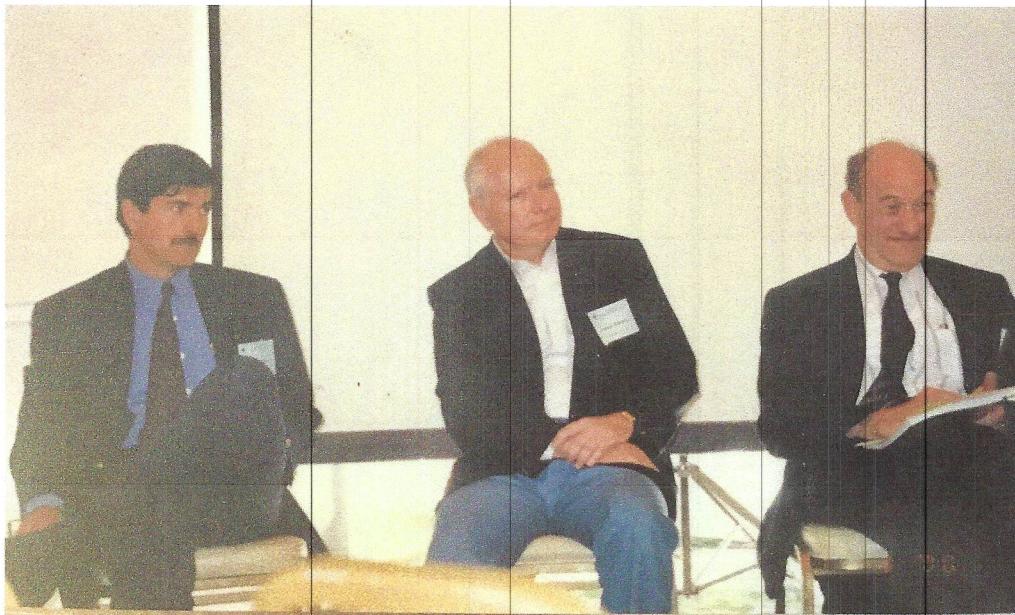
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The Universities Service Centre Made My Career as a China Scholar

Martin King Whyte, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Harvard University



Martin King Whyte (left) ,Ezra Vogel (right)

My first course on China was Ezra Vogel's class on Contemporary Chinese Society, which I took in 1965 as a graduate student in Harvard's Russian Area Studies MA program. When the Cultural Revolution erupted in China the following year, the PRC began to seem a much more interesting society to study than Brezhnev's USSR, so I enrolled in several more China courses and started to study Mandarin in an intensive summer course in 1966 back at my undergraduate alma mater, Cornell. That same year I finished my MA and entered the doctoral program in Social Relations at Harvard, where Ezra Vogel was available to supply advice and support if I wanted to do research on China, and Paul Hollander and Alex Inkeles were available if I wanted instead to continue focusing on the Soviet Union.

As I was finishing my doctoral coursework in sociology, I faced a dilemma in choosing a doctoral thesis research project. I had taken many more courses on Russia, both at Cornell and at Harvard; I was already relatively fluent in Russian; I had spent a month on a summer Russian language study tour of the Soviet Union; and the official IREX exchange program might take me to the USSR for thesis research. But I was

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increasingly attracted by the prospect of research on contemporary China instead, although of course I had never been to China and could not go to the PRC for thesis research, I had had fewer courses in Chinese studies, and my Chinese language skills were still at a beginner level (with only 2 ½ years of Chinese courses by the end of my stay in Cambridge).

Fortunately, Ezra Vogel was an inveterate optimist on the academic reinvention front. He had completed his Harvard sociology PhD in 1958 with no background on Asia and then reinvented himself twice, first as a Japan scholar through a 2 year residence in Tokyo, 1958-1960, and then as a China scholar through a three year post-doctoral fellowship involving Chinese language classes at Harvard and culminating in a year spent in Hong Kong interviewing refugees from the PRC in 1963-64 (after which he began teaching sociology at Harvard). Ezra had, of course, been on the ground in Hong Kong when the Universities Service Centre was initially established in 1963, with his future Harvard colleague, Jerry Cohen, as the founding director. And he had returned to Harvard with transcripts of the many dozens of in-depth refugee interviews he had conducted in Hong Kong (which formed part of the background for his 1969 book, *Canton under Communism*), which filled large filing cabinets in his office in Coolidge Hall.

Ezra reassured me that my limited preparation in Chinese studies would not be a problem, particularly due to the availability of the Universities Service Centre at 155 Argyle Street in Kowloon. He pointed out that if funded for thesis research in Hong Kong, I could hire individual Chinese language tutors there to spend the first part of my stay gearing up linguistically so I could eventually conduct refugee interviews on my thesis topic. At the USC I could also hire PRC emigres as research assistants to help me conduct my interviews and documentary research. The USC had already assembled a very good library of Western language books on China that I could read in my spare time to help fill in my gaps about contemporary China, and it had access to the classified clipping files compiled by the Union Research Institute, which made topically indexed Chinese press articles conveniently available for USC scholars to use. And at the time of my planned first project in Hong Kong (1968-69), the USC had rented a separate apartment not too far away from 155 Argyle St., to provide a relatively private and comfortable setting scholars could use to interview PRC refugees. Ezra gave me full access to read through his 1963-64 interview transcripts in order to help me become more familiar with contemporary China (a generosity he extended to many others later on), and he instructed me in the relatively standardized in-depth refugee interviewing procedures that he and other earlier researchers had established (each interview session typically lasting 3 hours, conducted in Chinese based upon a detailed topic outline, with notes taken but the interview not recorded, and with the interviewee thanked at the end of a session with an envelope containing the standard amount of HK\$15 per hour). Given Ezra's encouragement and support, I applied for a Foreign Area Fellowship to fund planned thesis research in Hong Kong focusing on political indoctrination rituals in the PRC, and when I received the fellowship, I prepared to leave Russian studies and embark on a career studying contemporary China.

However, I was still woefully ignorant and poorly prepared as I set off for Hong Kong in the summer of 1968. One incident illustrates my poor preparation then. I was invited to attend a summer workshop at Stanford University on my way to Hong Kong, a workshop that resulted in a volume edited by Chalmers Johnson, *Change in Communist Systems*. Except for four doctoral students (one other being Ken Lieberthal), the other participants were leading experts on various communist societies, including Ezra Vogel. At one point during our sessions, Chalmers invited my future University of Michigan colleague, Mike Oksenberg (not a participant, but visiting Stanford that summer) to give us a talk to explain China's tumultuous Cultural Revolution. I had not previously met Mike, but found his talk fascinating. But one thing puzzled me. In describing the elite conflicts that led to the Cultural Revolution, Mike kept mentioning Hai Rui. I was troubled by the fact that I had never heard of Hai Rui, but I assumed he must be one of

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Mao's leading critics within the Chinese Communist Party. Only later did I learn that Hai Rui was an official in the Ming Dynasty, not in the PRC!

I found my first year spent doing refugee interviews at the "old" USC an even more rewarding experience than Ezra had predicted. I did hire several individual Chinese tutors to help me improve my conversational Chinese, particularly focusing on vocabulary related to my thesis project. I also hired several very eager and capable research assistants who helped me with my research, and I practically ransacked the reading room to read through books about China, particularly émigré accounts of life in the PRC (e.g. Robert Loh's *Escape from Red China*), but many others as well (e.g. Allyn and Adele Rickett's *Prisoners of Liberation*). My wife and I rented a furnished apartment for the year on Waterloo Hill in Kowloon, which turned out to be a great location in terms of interviewing refugees. The interviewing apartment was located just below Waterloo Hill, so after a day working at the USC, I could go home for an early dinner and then walk down a stairway and cross the street to get to my interview appointments (typically 7-10pm).

However, the most rewarding part of my stay at the USC was the interactions with other researchers, both graduate students and faculty members. Most of the graduate students had spent a year or more in Chinese language study at the Stanford Center in Taiwan before coming to Hong Kong, and many of them were already deep into their thesis projects by the time I arrived. So they were much better prepared and informed than I was. With the Cultural Revolution still underway, it was an exciting time to be puzzling over developments in the PRC, and everyone in residence was only too willing to share the latest tips and rumors, even with a poorly prepared newbie such as myself. Among the graduate students who helped me get up to speed that year were Gordon Bennett, Ron Montaperto, Vic and Peggy Falkenheim, Janet Salaff, Skip Greenblatt, Lynn White, Joe Esherick, Kent Morrison, and others. The luncheon talks at the USC, and even the ordinary lunchtime conversations, provided rich and exciting ideas and constant encouragement. When I arrived at the USC that year, one of the faculty members in residence was Stanley Lubman, who had been conducting refugee interviews on legal topics. Stan very generously provided advice on how to conduct my own interviews and allowed me to read through some of the transcripts of the interviews he had been conducting. Later in my stay Susan Shirk arrived to start planned refugee interviews for her MIT doctoral thesis, and I passed on advice to her that I had received from Stan, Janet Salaff, and others.

As I hope these brief details convey, the USC then, only 5 years after its launch, had already developed into an incredibly rich resource not only for conducting research on the PRC, but also for helping fill in the gaps and share ideas and information so that people such as myself could emerge ready to teach and conduct further research on contemporary Chinese society. In my first year there almost all of the USC researchers were Americans, but later many European and other international China scholars also found it an incredibly valuable research site. I feel that I learned much more from a year at the USC than I could have learned through several more years of China courses and language study back on campus. To be surrounded all day for a year with conversations and ideas focused almost entirely on contemporary China was a heady experience. And when I departed Hong Kong for my new post teaching at the University of Michigan, I had completed close to 100 in-depth interviews with PRC refugees from a variety of backgrounds, interviews that I was able to turn into my doctoral thesis at Harvard and eventually into my first book, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China*, published in 1974.

I found the USC such a rewarding research site that I returned to Hong Kong for two more year-long stints of refugee interviewing, in 1973-74 and in 1977-78, now as a faculty member. (I took my first trip to the PRC in 1973 as a member of a delegation of child psychologists, but it was not possible for Americans to conduct research within the PRC until after diplomatic relations were established in 1979.) For my second stint, I had a sabbatical leave scheduled at Michigan, but that would supply only a half year of my salary. But I learned that Bernie Frolic, who had served as the USC Director in 1972-73,

was returning to his post at York University, so the USC was searching for a successor to Bernie. Even though I was still only an assistant professor, I signed on to be the Director of the USC for one year, seeing this as a way to fill in the financing needed so I could spend another full academic year doing refugee interviewing for my new project, on village and family change in the PRC. Fortunately, John Dolfin had served as the Deputy Director of the USC under Bernie, and he stayed on in that role during my term. To be honest, I was the formal head of the USC in 1973-74, but John Dolfin was already very capably running the place. When I returned to Michigan the Advisory Committee of the USC wisely decided to make John the solo director of the USC, a post he very skillfully occupied until funding problems led to the end of the Argyle Street USC and the move to CUHK in the 1980s.

While preparing to depart for Hong Kong in 1973, I heard reports that Bill Parish, a China sociologist at the University of Chicago, in residence at the USC in 1972-73, had become frustrated pursuing his original topic and had decided to switch to conducting refugee interviews on village and family change (his Cornell doctoral thesis had been a study of family change in Taiwan). Bill and I hardly knew each other and only overlapped in Hong Kong for a week or so in the summer of 1973, but he gave me a copy of his interviewing topic outline and showed me a few interview transcripts. It was immediately obvious that my planned project and Bill's overlapped about 90%, posing a dilemma for both of us. It was not until I returned from Hong Kong that Bill and I met in August 1974 and formally agreed to write a joint book together, sharing our interview materials collected from in-depth interviews with emigres from more than 60 villages, most of them in Guangdong. That joint book, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, was published in 1978.

Even though we had not originally planned to work together on research on social change patterns in contemporary Chinese villages, the collaboration between Bill and myself on that research was so smooth and successful that we decided to formally collaborate again on another Hong Kong interview-based project, this time on urban change in the PRC. So we applied jointly for a grant from the National Science Foundation, and using those funds, we both spent 1977-78 back at the Argyle St. USC, where we eventually conducted in-depth interviews with more than 130 emigres from a variety of cities in the PRC. That project again resulted in a joint book, *Urban Life in Contemporary China*, published in 1984. (By the time of these later projects, the perennial funding problems of the USC had led to the elimination of the separate apartment for refugee interviewing, so our interviews were mostly conducted in a designated office within 155 Argyle St.)

Taken together, the three year-long stints of interviewing provided me not only with material for the 3 books mentioned, but with ideas and materials for quite a few additional publications on other aspects of contemporary China. For example, my first published article on China is now a historical curiosity: a paper on the workings of the distinctive collective agricultural work point system pioneered in the national model Dazhai brigade, which was published in *Current Scene* in 1969. And through not only those refugee interviewing stints, but also through the gains I made in my general understanding of life in the PRC as well as in my contacts made at the USC with dozens of China scholars from many other institutions, I was well positioned to do original research on the PRC for the remainder of my career, and indeed continuing on after my retirement from teaching at Harvard in 2015.

During the 1980s and afterward, when it became possible to conduct sociological research inside the PRC, and influenced by the infrastructure and resources available to me at the University of Michigan, I made a switch in my research locale and methodology. Starting in the late 1980s, I have directed a series of sample survey projects in the PRC involving fixed questionnaires, first in collaboration with PRC sociologists in several cities (Chengdu [1987], Beijing [1991, 2000], Baoding [1991, 1994]), and since 2004 in a series of national surveys (in 2004, 2009, and 2014). Because of my change in research methodology, I have not spent any extended time conducting

research at the “new” USC located at CUHK, although I have visited that institution a number of times and have attended conferences and delivered talks at CUHK. But I continued to advise my graduate students to spend time at the new USC, particularly to take advantage of the extraordinary library collections available there for documentary research, including items not readily available within the PRC. (Obviously using “refugee interviewing” as a way to research Chinese society “at a distance,” is no longer a primary methodology at the CUHK USC, and since 1997 has become somewhat oxymoronic.)

Despite my change in research orientation in recent decades, I continue to be very grateful for the intense learning experiences I had at the old USC. And I also very much miss the pleasures of talking for hours each to a few dozen individuals about their complex lives and experiences before they left China (essentially oral history interviews, a la Studs Terkel), which is much more satisfying than statistically analyzing how a much larger number of PRC survey respondents answer dozens of fixed questions, many of which ask them simply to respond to various statements by saying whether they “strongly agree, agree, are neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree” (with those interviews all conducted by trained Chinese student interviewers, rather than by me). Furthermore, I feel proud that my projects at the old USC allowed me to build on the progress of others to develop methods for obtaining objective and accurate information from PRC refugees about contemporary social patterns in the PRC, despite the atypicality and potential biases of these refugee informants.

If I look back over my entire career, the research I conducted in Hong Kong, primarily through interviewing refugees from the PRC, has stood the test of time very well, and I feel my publications based upon those earlier projects are every bit as valid and informative as the work I have published based upon my later sample survey projects conducted within the PRC. In any case, I would not have been in a position to design informative questions for my later PRC surveys if I had not been well grounded on contemporary Chinese society as a result of my research in Hong Kong at the old USC. Hence the title of this essay. I would not have had such a productive and rewarding career as scholar of contemporary China if I had not benefited from the extensive time I spent at the Universities Service Centre. I know that large numbers of other specialists on contemporary China, in my generation and later, feel that same sense of deep appreciation toward the USC. Because of these feelings, the news that the Chinese University of Hong Kong had decided to eliminate the USC as an autonomous research and training institution shocked and saddened me, as it did many others.

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