

Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary China Studies: *The Journal of Contemporary China*

SUISHENG ZHAO

The late Michel Oksenberg once pointed out that for several decades the United States "set the pace for the worldwide study of contemporary China."¹ Indeed, in recent decades the United States has continued to hold a leading position in contemporary China studies. This position is a result of several factors, among them, the powerful infrastructure for China studies which the United States has constructed and continually developed since the 1960s. The United States is, first of all, home to the largest China watch establishment in the world, which includes several of the best academic centers for China studies (located within major American universities) that are responsible for training a great number of top China scholars. Moreover, the United States also both publishes numerous books and monographs on contemporary China and serves as a major funding source

SUISHENG ZHAO (趙穗生) is Editor of the *Journal of Contemporary China* and Associate Professor and Executive Director of the Center for China-U.S. Cooperation at University of Denver's Graduate School of International Studies. Dr. Zhao is the author and editor of five books and more than two dozen journal articles/book chapters. His most recent books include *Across the Taiwan Strait: Mainland China, Taiwan, and the Crisis of 1995-96*; *China and Democracy: Reconsidering the Prospects for a Democratic China*; and *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior*. Dr. Zhao recently completed a new book manuscript, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*, which is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. Dr. Zhao can be reached at <szhao@du.edu>.

¹Michel Oksenberg, "The American Study of Modern China: Toward the Twenty-first Century," in *American Studies of Contemporary China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1993), 332.

for China study institutions and research programs inside and outside the United States. However, one area of the China study infrastructure in the United States has—until recently—been somewhat weak. This weakness resulted from the absence of a comprehensive and interdisciplinary journal of China studies based in the United States. Several disciplinary-focused journals, such as *Modern China* (modern history), *Chinese Economic Review* (economy), and *Chinese Literature Review* (literature), have been published in the United States. *The China Quarterly*, the premier journal for the study of China, was founded with the support of U.S. funding in the early 1960s, but the journal is edited in the United Kingdom. *The China Journal* (formerly *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*), another major journal devoted to interdisciplinary studies of China, is, as the former name infers, a product of Australia.

This weakness was to an extent corrected with the birth of the *Journal of Contemporary China* (JCC) which covers a broad range of subjects, including economics, political science, law, culture, history, foreign affairs, sociology, literature, and other fields of social sciences and humanities. The JCC is currently edited from the Center for China-U.S. Cooperation at the University of Denver's Graduate School of International Studies in the United States. Founded in the early 1990s, the JCC has seen itself as meeting the challenges of contemporary China studies in the twenty-first century. Among the challenges is how to take advantage of China's opening up to the outside world and how best to employ various analytical instruments to gain a deeper understanding of China's recent past, current dynamics, and future development at both micro and macro levels. In his survey on the evolution of American scholarship on contemporary China, Harry Harding indicated that in the 1960s, scholars produced broad overviews of Chinese politics and economics based on scrutiny of the Chinese press and occasional interviews with Chinese refugees. In the 1970s, American scholars wrote much more specific studies of various issue areas, time periods, and parts of the country by making use of new sources of information provided during the Cultural Revolution. After the 1980s, as new opportunities for field studies became available, American scholars gained first-hand knowledge about life in Chinese villages, factories, and

bureaucratic organizations.² The development of scholarship based on field research has posed a greater challenge to both the scholars of contemporary China as well as China journals. The *JCC* was born at an exciting and opportune time to meet this challenge.

Some of the more recent trends of contemporary China studies have also constituted challenges. In his above-quoted article, Michel Oksenberg observed several important trends in contemporary China studies in the early 1990s; these trends have carried over into the twenty-first century. One is geographical. The heavy emphasis on mainland China has been broadened to include more attention to Greater China—including the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the overseas Chinese, as well as the interaction among them. Another trend is temporal: the distinction between contemporary China (the PRC period) and modern China (the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) has faded as the importance of knowing the ancient past as a means for understanding the present has become more pronounced. The third trend is that the focus of contemporary China studies has shifted from high politics in Beijing (Beijingology) to local levels, examining more closely the behavior and beliefs of the populace and the interaction of state and society. The fourth trend is that China has been increasingly understood in a comparative context rather than as a unique phenomenon.³ These trends have certainly helped expand the field of contemporary China studies. They have also posed challenges to China study journals, including the *JCC*. To meet these challenges, the *JCC* has tried to publish works on high politics and sensitive subjects of Chinese economy, society, and political change on the mainland, while paying special attention to the developments in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as China's relations with the outside world. Additionally, the *JCC* has made efforts to publish original works on local affairs based on field studies, such as rural village and county level studies.

²Harry Harding, "The Evolution of American Scholarship on Contemporary China," *ibid.*, 14.

³See note 1 above.

Scholars of contemporary China studies in the United States have a tradition of sponsoring public education about China and stimulating policy debate about American relations with China. This tradition, however, was somewhat weakened in the 1980s. As Harry Harding indicated, "the 1980s witnessed a tighter focus on scholarly pursuits, with relative less attention devoted to public education and policy debate but great interest in forming collaborative academic relationships with Chinese scholars."⁴ It is indeed important to pursue scholarly excellence and to form collaborative academic relations with Chinese colleagues. It is also important for China scholars to provide a professional service by educating the public about China and making contributions to China policy debates. To meet this challenge, the *JCC* has worked to help renew these fine traditions by publishing, in addition to rigorous scholarly works, articles of policy relevance and for the sake of public education. In this way, the *JCC* has attempted to not only fill the vacuum where there is a need for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary China journal in the United States, but also to bridge the academic and policy study communities.

In addition to the above efforts, the *JCC* has tried to incorporate yet another new development in the field of China studies, that is the gradual integration of Chinese scholars into the mainstream international scholarship of contemporary China studies. Until very recently, very few scholars in Greater China (the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) were able to make serious contributions to the Western scholarly studies of contemporary China due not only to differences in academic training, but also—perhaps more importantly—due to ideological constraints. This situation has changed in recent years. Western studies of China have been greatly enriched in the last decade as Western scholars/policy analysts have found more and more of their Chinese colleagues in a position to equally contribute to the dialogues on China studies. This new development is a result of more and more Western-trained Chinese scholars returning to their homeland and an increasing number of indigenous Chinese scholars re-

⁴Harding, "The Evolution of American Scholarship on Contemporary China," 15.

ceiving rigorous academic training. More importantly, Chinese scholars have explored the contemporary era with fewer constraints than in the past. As a result, a greater number of Chinese scholars have been able to publish their research in Western journals. It is indeed impressive that these works by Chinese scholars have provided not only valuable empirical data (raw materials) but also in-depth analysis (paradigms). The *JCC* has tried to facilitate an equal conversation between Chinese scholars and their Western colleagues and to promote the contribution of Chinese scholars to mainstream international scholarship. This is a challenge that may help lay a foundation for establishing a new standard for scholarship in the twenty-first century that will demonstrate competence in integrating the analytic literature of Chinese and Western discourses.