

# ***The China Journal* and the Changing State of China Studies**

ANITA CHAN AND JONATHAN UNGER

Most scholarly books on China address narrowly targeted readerships. A journal, however, aims to reach readers in China studies from all of the various disciplines and sub-specialties. A journal serves as a meeting ground—the means by which specialists studying altogether different types of topics stay attuned to each others' debates and findings.

As the editors of *The China Journal*, our task has been to see how best to meet this function. With the assistance of external referees, we have sought to give priority to articles that are of interest beyond a particular sub-field, and have tended to reject papers whose conclusions have only narrow implications. Since the journal can accept only a limited number of papers for each issue, we have been in a position to be more selective, and have given preference to papers framed by conceptual issues that we consider are of potential importance to the field. As one example, *The China Journal* was the first to focus on, and debate, the questions of civil society

---

ANITA CHAN, a sociologist, is a Senior Research Associate of the Australian Research Council, hosted by the Australian National University. She is Co-Editor of *The China Journal* and has published eight books about China, including *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation*; *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng* (co-authored with Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger); and most recently, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*. She is currently engaged in research on governance in Chinese enterprises. She can be reached at <anita@coombs.anu.edu.au>.

JONATHAN UNGER, a sociologist, is Director of the Australian National University's Contemporary China Centre and Co-Editor of *The China Journal*. His dozen books on China include *Education Under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960-1980*; *Chen Village Under Mao and Deng* (co-authored with Anita Chan and Richard Madsen); and most recently, *The Transformation of Rural China*. He is currently conducting research for a book on the recent history of a Chinese urban work community. He can be reached at <unger@coombs.anu.edu.au>.

and political corporatism in China.<sup>1</sup> We have also published a number of papers on the tenor of Chinese nationalism.<sup>2</sup> We believe that, all too often, the modern field has been inward-looking and has taken China to be unique; we have therefore also sought out papers that help illuminate what occurs in China by way of a comparative perspective. As an illustration, the journal ran a special issue comparing the parallel economic and political reforms in progress in Vietnam and China.<sup>3</sup>

In our years as editors, we have noticed significant changes in the backgrounds of contributors. Compared to a decade and a half ago, far more of the China specialists today who write in English originate from the People's Republic. Most hold Ph.D.s earned outside China, yet before traveling abroad many of these scholars were young researchers in think tanks and ministries of the State Council, or within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences or university departments. This background sometimes gives their scholarship a healthily different vantage point, and has opened up the field to new sources of knowledge and insight.

A decade and a half ago, only a few dozen academics at Hong Kong's universities conducted research on the People's Republic. Now Hong Kong has a very large concentration of academics who specialize in the PRC, and a growing portion of the submissions to *The China Journal*

---

<sup>1</sup>We believe that the first author to discuss the emergence of civil society in post-Mao China was Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, in her "Between State and Society: The Construction of Corporateness in a Chinese Socialist Factory," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 22 (July 1989): 31-60. The first papers to present the alternative framework for China of political corporatism were Gordon White in "Prospects for Civil Society in China: A Case Study of Xiaoshan City" (see his conclusion) and Anita Chan, "Revolution or Corporatism? Workers and Trade Unions in Post-Mao China," both in the same issue of *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 29 (January 1993). This was the title of *The China Journal* before 1995.

<sup>2</sup>The papers about Chinese nationalism that appeared in *The China Journal* are by Wang Gungwu, in issue no. 23 (January 1990); James Townsend, no. 27 (January 1992); Lucian W. Pye, no. 29 (January 1993); Prasenjit Duara, no. 30 (July 1993); George T. Crane, no. 32 (July 1994); John Fitzgerald, no. 33 (January 1995); Geremie Barmé, no. 34 (July 1995); Peter Harris, no. 38 (July 1997); John W. Garver, no. 45 (January 2001); and Peter Gries, no. 46 (July 2001). The first seven of these papers were subsequently revised for publication and included in the book *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>This special issue of *The China Journal* was no. 40 (July 1998).

derives from Hong Kong. More recently, as ever-increasing numbers of Taiwanese develop business relationships in China, there appears to have been a parallel awakening of interest about the mainland among Taiwanese academics. A growing number are taking advantage of their native language skills to launch research projects about the PRC, and we can expect a rise in the submissions from this source. Not surprisingly, among the papers from Taiwan already arriving at our office, a major focus has been on cross-Strait political and economic relations.

The above developments all add up to an ever larger field, and a flow of publications about the People's Republic (and about Hong Kong and Taiwan) that noticeably increases annually. Several new journals, such as *China Review*, *Provincial China*, and *China: An International Journal*, have come on the scene just within the past year—and there is ample room for them. In fact, despite the new entries, it has been noticeable that the numbers of submissions to *The China Journal* continue to rise, to slightly more than a hundred submissions within the past year. So, too, the numbers of books published about the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong increase each year—to the point that a China studies journal now is hard put to find the room to publish reviews of all the books that arrive.

What changes are noticeable in the types of topics that get submitted to our journal? First, the growing ease in conducting research within China has spawned an ever-increasing number of on-site micro-studies. In looking at both the piles of non-published papers and the manuscripts that our journal has accepted, it becomes apparent that the quality of the on-the-ground studies tends, on average, to be higher than those based on little or no fieldwork. For most areas of research on contemporary China, fieldwork research is becoming *de rigueur*.

Direct access has also been a spur to quantitative analyses. A large number of scholars—sociologists, political scientists, and economists alike—who used to rely on other research techniques turned, during the 1990s, to surveys in China. This development, in turn, has given rise to an ever-growing list of collaborative research projects between Western-based scholars and their Chinese counterparts. A fair proportion of the recent issues of *The China Journal* have contained at least one article that is co-

authored by PRC and non-PRC scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Another shift that has become noticeable during the past decade is a greater awareness and sympathy among authors toward the problems faced by the many tens of millions of people who are adversely affected by the economic changes of the reform era. A decade ago, in 1993, one of us wrote a paper about the state of China studies,<sup>5</sup> noting that the research interests of most English-language China specialists at that time were in tune with the rightward shift of the past quarter century in the political spectrum in the Western world. Very few English-language authors in the early 1990s conducted any research on the problems facing China's urban workers in the state-run industrial sector. Despite all of the research being conducted a decade ago on rural industrialization, few scholars at that time bothered to examine the conditions of the workers in the rural factories. Few also closely examined the pulls and pushes on the peasantry, whose living standards were stagnating in the agricultural heartlands. Nor was much attention being paid to the many tens of millions of itinerant laborers who were flocking into the cities in search of work.

Today, even though there continues to be a general rightward shift in the English-speaking world—illustrated by the most aggressively conservative American presidency of modern times, the China field has defied this overall trend. An increasing number of submissions to journals nowadays focus on topics such as migrant workers, rural poverty, women in factories, the unemployed, and marginalized ethnic peoples.<sup>6</sup>

There is a decided benefit in this shift; the field is now obtaining a more balanced view of China's headlong rush to modernize. Fifteen years

---

<sup>4</sup>The current issue contains a good example of such collaboration by economists: Scott Rozelle, Jikun Huang, and Vincent Benziger, "Continuity and Change in China's Rural Periodic Markets," *The China Journal*, no. 49 (January 2003). A recent example of survey collaboration among demographers is Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ben Jiao (Benjor), Cynthia M. Beall, and Phuntsog Tsering, "Fertility and Family Planning in Rural Tibet," *The China Journal*, no. 47 (January 2002).

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Unger, "Recent Trends in Modern China Studies in the English-Language World: An Editor's Perspective," *Asian Research Trends*, no. 4 (1994): 179-86.

<sup>6</sup>A good example from the current issue is Dorothy J. Solinger, "Chinese Urban Jobs and the WTO," *The China Journal*, no. 49 (January 2003).

ago, most of the scholars in modern China studies ignored the undercurrents of dissatisfaction among the sectors of Chinese society who felt themselves unfairly losing out amidst the economic reforms of the 1980s; the field thus found itself largely unprepared for the explosions of protest in 1989. It remains an open question whether similar blowups will occur in the near future, but if any crises do break out, the field will be less bewildered this time around.