Obituary

James R. Townsend (1932–2004)

Joyce K. Kallgren

James R. Townsend, emeritus professor of political science and East Asian studies in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle, passed away peacefully on January 17, 2004 after a decade-long battle with cancer. He was 71.

Professor Townsend was a member of the first post-Second World War generation of China scholars. He studied in the late 1950s and early 1960s at one of the Centers for Chinese Studies that had been established by the Ford Foundation to supplement traditional discipline training. Townsend completed his PhD at the University of California at Berkeley, as did other prominent scholars such as Fred Wakeman (history), Chalmers Johnson (political science), Paul Ivory (economics), and Woody Watson (anthropology). He commenced his teaching career in the Berkeley department of political science, only to be recruited away by the University of Washington in 1968. Washington remained his home base thereafter.

Jim Townsend's place in the development of contemporary Chinese studies was multifaceted, due to his intellectual ability, his deep personal commitment to expanded knowledge and interest in China and, equally important, his unique personality. He was a teacher, a researcher and an advocate of knowledge for knowledge's sake.

He taught all his professional life – to undergraduates, to graduate students (many now teaching in American and other universities), and to colleagues at home and abroad who sought his advice about some difficult research problem or source. He taught casual strangers who attended his public lectures in Seattle, in Australia and in Asia. He took very seriously the guidance of students writing dissertations, and served on numerous dissertation committees both formally and informally. His textbook and handbooks were written with an eye to the needs of students, the interested public, and the growing number of foreign policy experts looking in the 1970s and 1980s to Asia.

Townsend did spend one term at Tubingen University in Germany, but virtually all his travel and the great bulk of his teaching abroad was in Asia. The most significant of such efforts was his two years in China as adjunct professor at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies in 1986–87 and 1990–91.

Jim Townsend's research has remained important some 40 years after initial publication, even though research opportunities today are far more varied than when he wrote his classic work *Political Participation in Communist China* (University of California Press, 1967). Prior to the

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publication of this book, Townsend had written a number of shorter pieces published in various journals. These pieces on Maoism, (1966) and the communes, administrative decisions and government (1963–67) set the stage for *Political Participation in Communist China.* The book required immense research and careful balance, which accounts in part for its enduring usefulness and continued relevance on topics now routinely studied at the Carter Center and by contemporary scholars. A paperback version was published in 1969 with a greatly expanded introduction.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the subfield of political science known as comparative politics was greatly influenced by the contributions of Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell in their book entitled *Comparative Politics*. They commissioned a series of single country volumes that were to draw upon their theory, considering its applicability to specific nation states. Townsend wrote *Politics in China* (1974), authored the second edition (1980) and co-authored the third edition with Brantley Womack (1986). He wrote a short version of the book's main themes, which was included in the general textbook of *Comparative Politics Today* also by Almond and Powell, and he collaborated with Richard Bush in developing *A Basic Handbook of the People's Republic China*, a handbook designed for an audience seeking general information about the emerging Asian power. Townsend authored a monograph about the Chinese Youth League (1967) as well as a number of articles. Some examples will serve to indicate the breath of his interests: "The military in modern China" (1978), "China's ideals discarded" (1981) "China's open foreign policy: some comparative and historical perspectives" (1984). He was also invited to contribute to various collections celebrating Chinese anniversaries.

Because of his position at a major China studies centre but, more important, because of his reputation for thoughtful judgment and clear thinking, Jim was recruited for various administrative and committee assignments in the 30 years of his professional life. He served on editorial boards of publications such as *Chinese Law and Government* and *Asian Survey*. He was an active member of the Committee on Chinese Research Materials charged with recommending the purchase of large collections and other items that suddenly became available. He served on the Social Science Joint Committee on contemporary China (1970–74) and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC screening committee. He accepted Fulbright screening assignments and served as an external examiner for the Chinese University in Hong Kong. Jim also served on the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) China and Inner Asia Regional Council, the China Council of the Asia Society and the National Committee on U.S and China Relations. When it became possible to travel to China, Jim was invited to go as a China expert. He went in May 1974 with the acupuncture anesthesia group and later, as barriers eased, he traveled extensively throughout China.

The unfortunate diagnosis of cancer in 1991 led Jim into early retirement (1992) and effectively ended his direct involvement in the China

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field. The initial diagnosis predicted a rapid decline but access to an experimental drug afforded him an extension of his life in reasonable comfort until 2003.

Taken altogether his contributions to the field remain substantial as a teacher, researcher, and public advocate. But his contribution is broader. He made full use of the many opportunities that presented themselves to him to sustain high standards of scholarship as a political scientist, to encourage students interested in foreign relations and international politics and to counsel leaders and staffs of non governmental organizations interested in but cautious about China matters. He demonstrated by his work and personal style that one could be involved and still be even handed in a period when controversy raged around him. He did so with humour, wit, and good will.

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