The China Quarterly and China

Dick Wilson (Editor, 1975–80)

My first impression of *The China Quarterly* was its extraordinary efficiency. As I was about to enter the editor's office on my first day, I noticed that they had anticipated making my name plate and had already mounted it on the door. It was only later that I realized that the real cause for congratulation was the School's parsimony in making do with an old name plate to serve a new editor. So I shared a name plate with my predecessor, another D. Wilson. In more imaginative mood I could even toy with the idea that my candidacy had been approved over other applicants precisely because they would save money on a new name plate.

The big event during my years at *The China Quarterly* was China's invitation to visit, which had never been offered before, and to meet leaders with responsibility in various fields. Local costs would be met by China, but SOAS would be expected to pay for the air travel. This was a very important development in the international career of *The China Quarterly*. By a stroke of pen, so to speak, *The China Quarterly* was transformed from playing a semi-parochial role centred on Hong Kong to a fully international one gaining vital authenticity. It was as if the China that had been studied before in the West as a laboratory specimen now enjoyed a seat among the judges. The spadework for that had been done, of course, by the first Mr. D. Wilson who brought his great knowledge of Chinese officialdom and Western scholarship to bear on what was then such a notable weak link in China's foreign relations. For its part, *The China Quarterly* could now draw on the world of Chinese Sinology to illuminate the post-ideological scene.

The historic first visit by *The China Quarterly* after years of stand-off was accomplished with enthusiasm and goodwill, leaving both sides with benefit. I was able to arrange for several researchers to submit articles for *The China Quarterly* which enhanced its level of scholarship and raised its reputation in the world.

The China Quarterly's secretary then was super efficient and well-liked but was ignorant of the Chinese language. Although much discussion went on in English before an article was published, my instincts told me that it was tactless, not to say provoking, to insist that everything should be talked over or written about in a language different from the native tongue. I managed to steer the original Secretary elsewhere to enable the post to be held by a fluent Chinese speaker.

There was one major event near the end of my term of office, when it was pointed out by admirers that another editorial tour of American universities was due. It was common ground that US campuses provided more publishable

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articles for *The China Quarterly* than any other intellectual centre. If you are sitting in some mid-west university researching for your special interests, it is natural to sound out editors of appropriate learned journals in order to make sure that your subject is not put out of court by domestic rivals and will receive equal treatment with them. To receive a visit by the editor of such a journal is very much more telling than getting a letter from him or her.

The opportunity of touring virtually all the major centres of China studies in the US was not only valuable for putting a personal relation of the two sides in the forefront, but also for exciting the interest of many lower-level students who might not meet the visitor but would be influenced by his or her presence on the campus. SOAS backed such thinking by allocating the funds for an editorial visit every three years. We began the preparations for the next tour, but hit a crisis. SOAS, we were told, had used up *The China Quarterly*'s available travel allowance on the trip to China, and could not be expected to finance two substantial foreign trips so close together. I was dismayed, arguing with the senior member of our faculty committee for *The China Quarterly*, the sociologist Woody Watson, that while the China trip was a vital underlining of international status, the US trip had been undertaken in the past by successive editors as an indispensable means of access to the articles needed. Without this triennial gingering up of the best sources of materials, it was hard to see how *The China Quarterly* could maintain its quality.

Then I realized that most of the host officials in the US had their own budgets from which they commonly commissioned talks for their student bodies, and that this usually brought US$100 or even more into the pocket of the touring editor or his or her representative. It was a kind of courtesy towards foreign visitors. When I totted up this kind of income that I could expect, it matched my travel outgoings pretty well. So I was able to complete the programme to the benefit of *The China Quarterly* and its editorial reputation, while at the same time absolving SOAS from any financial obligation – though I had to forego speaking fees, I was, after all, on the SOAS payroll throughout.

America was gearing up to recognize the People's Republic of China, and any editor of *The China Quarterly* visiting campuses had to get involved in the arguments about this. Sometimes, I had to act as a public relations officer for China, even on basic questions.

The China Quarterly was in the same dilemma as several other university media based on a particular country or study. It is hard to marry the two types of article together between the same covers. Business readers typically excused themselves from reading the products of the university cultural departments, while journalists tended to skip the economic jargon, to allow the journal to describe events in China.

My general impression was that readers were more interested in the realities behind the intellectual constructs of scholars. Words like "paradigm" and "perception" meant little to this band of readership. What they appreciated was the descriptive material about current events in China. *The China Quarterly* will

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always be indebted to Bob Ash for his 27 years of running the Quarterly Chronicle. He presented the facts, including the presumed facts, about Chinese politics, economy and social affairs in a simple and unadorned style which was felt, quarter by quarter, to be more complete, non-partisan and down to earth than the other China-watchers of the British Press.

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