First Interview with Professor Terrill

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Interviewee: Ross Terrill
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Mr. Tseng: Thank you for accepting our interview. First, could you please tell us about your family background?

Dr. Terrill: I came from the countryside, [it was] rural. My father was a school teacher in the small village. We have no shoes; the climate was warm, and we went to school in our bare feet. Nature was our contentment – the birds, and we caught fish. We grew our own food. I think it helps me to be an observer - if you live amid nature. Maybe there’s a snake? You learn to watch out. But my father was a teacher, and he wanted us to study, so we moved to the city in order for us be educated. There wasn’t anything about China at this stage, except I had a girlfriend who was Chinese. Her grandparents had come searching for gold – I mentioned this in the book. But I didn’t know she was Chinese. In the countryside, especially children, we were not conscious of race. No one cares about race. Then, you come to the cities, and everyone’s arguing about race, but in the village, I didn’t know about these things, which is good. [Laughs] But my grandfather knew Chinese people, and he used to talk about it. When we moved to Melbourne, there were Chinese merchants, and grandfather volunteered to teach English at night. And they gave him two lovely gifts: cork carved pictures of the South China landscape. So this was my Chinese experience. But really, the Korean War was the start of me thinking about China, I was only just beginning my teenage years… It was a big shock for Australia. So we had to say: “What is this Chinese revolution?”

But then in college I had two teachers that influenced me very much. One of them was a historian of China in the 19th century. He wrote a very good book on the Taiping Rebellion. I was fascinated by the 19th century. What were the British doing in Guangzhou? Why was the Qing dynasty so helpless? It was very interesting to me. The other teacher had the idea that Asia was important for Australia’s future. That was unusual at the time, and this teacher was very passionate, and very… He was very left-wing, that one. But it made an impact on me. And then the last thing about the Australia is that… because of this influence of left wing teachers thinking about Asia,
I went to India. These teachers, they thought India was excellent – Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Krishna Menon… because they thought neutralism was excellent. Not with America, not with the Soviet Union, but in between. That was their vision. So they encouraged me to be interested. I went to India, and I was a bit shocked at the poverty there. I would have been shocked at any part of Southeast Asia, or South Asia, in my first trip outside Australia. Australia was a very comfortable place. The poverty of India… I thought, “If Nehru was so great, why is India not doing better?” Then, at university, the teachers always compared India and China. They said India is on the democratic path; China is authoritarian, with the Soviet Union. And they had mostly been students at the London School of Economics, and the teachers there were also mainly very pro-Nehru, pro-Menon, pro-India, but I thought, “Well, India’s not that great,” so: “Maybe China is interesting. Maybe even better than India.” That was the real intellectual origin of my interest in China. I knew nothing, but I did have a desire to find out.

My second question is, what was your experience of the Cultural Revolution?

Well, I am one of the few scholars who thinks the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969. Now everyone says it ended with the death of Mao Zedong, but that is not according to how it happened. It’s convenient. It was convenient for Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng (華國鋒) in the late 70s to say the Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong, because their problem was how to deal with the legacy of Mao. And to equate his death with the end of the Cultural Revolution is very convenient, but it’s not quite true. The Ninth Party Congress was the end of it.

Therefore, I did not see the Cultural Revolution. I got a visa. I went to China in 1964, as you know, before the Cultural Revolution. I had no idea and no one gave me any idea that Mao and Jiang Qing were suddenly going to overturn everything. Then in 1967, when I was a graduate student here [Harvard University], I got a visa to China, and was ready to go to Hong Kong. Then I got a message from the Chinese saying they’d changed their mind; “It wasn’t convenient,” so I didn’t go in ’67. When I went again in ’71, and many times in the 70s, the real Cultural Revolution was over. I mean, the universities were open again, and they were being run essentially by military committees. There were committees where they were three parts, but the military part was the main one. So, it was quite orderly, and the Cultural Revolution was not orderly. Moreover, the struggle between Lin Biao and Mao Zedong was much more important in the 1970, 1971 period than the struggle of the Red Guards against the bureaucrats; that was all finished. As you probably know, Mao Zedong in July 1968
had already turned against the ultra-left, the Red Guards. He insulted them, and told them they were children who knew nothing. That’s when he turned to the military.

But my view of the Cultural Revolution is that it was the height of the attempt at social engineering. You know what we mean by social engineering? [Yes] So, we say that Mao was against the Party. In a way, yes, but in another way, the ambition of the Cultural Revolution was social engineering. He was going to remake the minds and the souls of the Chinese people, and this is the very extreme of social engineering.

Now, in the case of the Cultural Revolution, it’s combined with the fascist idea of the leader. No one wants to talk about fascism in the Chinese Communist Party, but, actually, the Chinese intellectuals in the Mainland, they know that there was a fascist element. What is fascism? The leader is above the Party, and Mao was above the Party. Military virtues. Romantic idea of physical activity. Racial consciousness. When the Chinese Red Guards went to Cambodia, and they went to Burma, demanding that the Cambodians and the Burmese salute Mao Zedong, this was Chinese nationalism. But because Mao had such a tremendous prestige, his colleagues did not stop him. They did not stop him. That’s one of the great tragedies for the Chinese Communist Party. Deng Xiaoping did not stop the purge of Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai did not stop the purge of either Liu Shaoqi or [*Deng Xiaoping]… So, the power of the fascistic leader who has achievements in the revolution, it is a tremendous power.

Was it because Mao is so intriguing that you decided to write his biography?

Not quite. The year 1976 was important in my thinking. Not because of the death of Mao in September, but because of what happened in April, the Tiananmen Shijian [天安門事件, Tiananmen Incident 1976]. That’s when I had my big fight with the Chinese officials, because they were telling me Deng Xiaoping was a counterrevolutionary, and I said, “That’s not my belief.” Ji Chaozhu (冀朝鑄), head of Washington office of the Chinese government - not yet an embassy but an office - later ambassador in England said: “If you don’t understand that Deng Xiaoping was a counterrevolutionary, you don’t understand anything about China.” It set me thinking about socialism. Because as you know, I was a social democrat, and I had some sympathy for the Chinese revolution, because I thought in China’s condition, there had to be a period of authoritarianism.

But the manipulation of class thinking in April 1976! An amazing attempt to use the term ‘counterrevolutionary’ to mean absolutely nothing. Then I realized that “rightist”
and “leftist,” with Mao dealing with his enemies, meant nothing at all. That set me thinking that socialists always said socialist ideas are the important thing; personality doesn’t matter, and we just follow the party. But, I thought if socialist ideas don’t matter, then maybe personality does matter, and the next ten years of my life, I spent on two biographies: Mao Zedong and then Jiang Qing. I was still friendly with many people in Beijing. Some of them I liked very much: Zhang Wenjin (章文晉), who was Waijiaobu Fubuzhang [外交部副部長, Vice Foreign Minister], later ambassador in Washington, said (and this is the Jiang Qing bit): “Please don’t write about Jiang Qing. She’s a bad woman, you know. Write about a good woman. All that matters for us now is economic development; politics doesn’t matter.” I didn’t believe that, and I don’t believe it now in case of Bo Xilai (薄熙來) in Chongqing (重慶) which indicates that the Communist Party of China still has not solved the problem of politics and the problem of decision making that the regime imposed from above.

So, to be quite honest about your question, I didn’t know how interesting Mao was until I did the research. I found that he was very interesting, so it kept me happy and busy for three or four years. Why was he interesting? Because he was something of an intellectual - I called him a “semi-intellectual”- and because he was contradictory. I call him in the book “half a tiger, half a monkey.” He loved books like Xiyou Ji [西遊記, Journey to the West], which has a monkey. So the tiger was a Lenin, getting power, and then the monkey wasn’t sure that it was the right place to be, after all. So, Mao said, “We’re going to have to do it again.” That’s the meaning of the Cultural Revolution. It was a tremendous confusion, and that’s why his colleagues didn’t understand him. But Mao, I felt, was certainly interested in Chinese tradition. He was reading about Qin Shihuang (秦始皇), and he was thinking about the dynasties. By the end of his life, he thought he was a kind of an emperor. So this question of how a socialist leader can turn into a semi-emperor and how the party can follow him. This question, I really found it very interesting.

**When you were in China in 1971, did you see the “New Man”?**

Sometimes I thought I did, but that was wrong. You see in 1971, official China controlled everything. I mean compared with my two months in Jinan (濟南) last year. It’s not the same country, because now there’s an unofficial China. Students and teachers, some of whom don’t care about the Communist Party at all… and they are not afraid. But in 1971, there was only official China, a lot of fear.
Now, why did I put up with it? Because my concern was not really with the “New Man,” or the relation of the Chinese government to the Chinese people. My concern was international relations. I was traveling with the leader of the Australian Labor Party, later the Prime Minister [Edward Gough Whitlam]. I had been a student of Kissinger here at Harvard, and in 1971, tremendous things were happening with Kissinger and with Whitlam about opening the relations between the U.S. and China, and Australia and China. That was the top issue in my mind.

I mentioned the Korean War when I was in primary school in Australia. The Korean War had a tremendous impact on Australia. Then when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student, the Vietnam War was on. The Korean War and the Vietnam War drew America in and Australia in, because China was not in relations with them. We thought that if there could be some compromise with China, then another war like that could be avoided. That’s what I cared about in 1971. But the ability of the Chinese Communists to present to visitors the picture they want to present… it’s a very great ability, and we didn’t fully understand this in 1971.

Really? Even by your third time traveling to China in 1973?

I started to learn a bit... [Pause] Yes. But the books that I did then – 800,000,000 and Flowers on an Iron Tree – they were not based on documents, and by the time I got to the Mao and Jiang Qing books, I was reading a lot of Chinese materials, some from Taiwan. Some were Red Guard materials from the Cultural Revolution. Also I took advantage of the fact that a lot of people who knew Mao and knew Jiang Qing had left China, some because they were afraid, like the former husband of Jiang Qing. So I tracked them down all over the world. And people who had talked to Mao. It’s quite interesting; most of the foreign ministers or foreign diplomats – including Kissinger who met Mao – they all thought he was terrific. The advantage for me, as a biographer, is that they love to talk about their talks with Mao. Now, they didn’t know much about Mao, but they loved to talk about what they did know. Some of them hadn’t done it before, like former Prime Minister of Thailand, Kukrit [Pramoj], or the Indonesian leaders, so I made use of that and the Chinese materials. I got a perspective on Chinese history that I never had in the early 1970s.

Now, let’s talk about your Harvard experience. First, who were the professors that had a great impact on you when you were at Harvard?

Intellectually, not great. That sounds strange, but the two teachers in Australia I
mentioned had more impact on my direction. Fairbank had an impact, but in a
different way. I greatly admired his work habit. He was a very disciplined man.
Second, his passion for China, I thought it was extraordinary... this American
professor. He had the vision that China mattered and China-American relations
mattered to the future. That influenced me. His particular ideas were not so original or
so important, though you mention one of them... we’ll come to that in a minute. I
admired him, and he encouraged me.

Now, Kissinger influenced me in a completely different way. Kissinger knew nothing
about China. He was very Germanic. Until he joined the Nixon administration, the
Atlantic was his world, Europe and America. And then, when he discovered that the
Moscow-Beijing split was real, and Chinese Communists could be used against the
Soviet Union... that’s when he became excited. Anyway, that brought me into much
contact with him, and what I learned from him is the moral importance of equilibrium.
It’s no good talking about peace or going to the UN. A balance of forces keeps the
peace, not sweet words. Kissinger taught me that, and his whole approach to Beijing
in ’71 and ’72 was based on the idea that you had to focus on your interests, focus on
Beijing’s interests and see where there was overlap. In the years later, he took the
view that you engage with China, but you build an equilibrium so that it keeps China
in check. Now Kissinger never had to deal with the later problems, because the
anti-Soviet position of China saved him from many complicated issues. But I did
learn realism... yes, realism, from Kissinger: that sometimes you have to prepare for
war if you want peace. That’s why he showed Zhou Enlai photographs that the
American military had taken of the Sino-Soviet border, because he thought that could
push, or pull China and America closer together, and stop war from the Soviet Union.
It was correct.

Now, there were other teachers, but not about China. My Ph.D. was on British social
democracy. Samuel Beer influenced me, because he was a moderate leftist, as I was at
the time. His ability to see the meaning of European social democracy as completely
distinct from communism, and the criticism of capitalism, that influenced me. There
were many teachers here on political philosophy who were very brilliant people such
as C. J. Friedrich, and this was important to me, because I hadn’t had much of that in
Australia. So it just gave me a broader picture of history and political theory. Harvard
graduate studies was very good in that regard, you had to cover lots of different
territory.

But maybe the most important thing was we were all terrified, so we worked hard
because we thought we were all going to fail! That’s the magic of it. It’s an illusion, but it works. Because if you weren’t afraid, you wouldn’t study hard. [Laughs] Then, when we finished, we all thought, “Well, these professors, they’re not so great after all.” [Laughs]

**You were interested in China, but your dissertation was about a British socialist, R. H. Tawney. So, why didn’t you write your thesis about China?**

Because at that stage, I couldn’t read Chinese.

**The following question is: you were interested in socialism, but I think in later days, you very much disliked Leninism. Isn’t Leninism part of socialism?**

Not necessarily. Do you know a little bit about German history? Marx and Bernstein? Remember Marx was not a Leninist, either. Lenin came later. The social democrats, whose father was Bernstein of Germany, they later directly attacked Lenin, and Lenin attacked them. Because they took the view that socialism could be achieved by the parliamentary road and Lenin’s method was armed struggle. That was the fundamental distinction, and so my social democracy was never Leninist at all.

And in Australia, when I was in the Labor Party, the communists were big enemies, because they were competing with us in the trade unions. We were trying to win votes in the election from the Australian people. They were not interested in votes. They couldn’t *get* votes. They *were* trying to get control of the trade unions, so they were our enemies. Leninism never appealed to me.

**How about Marxism?**

[Long pause] Until I read Marx carefully, it appealed to me! Because I was in the hands of my teachers, I was not happy with all of capitalism, and I thought, y’know… Marxism maybe. But when I realized, studying Marx, that: “Everything begins with economics”… I thought it was a distortion. So, I never really believed in dialectical materialism. I think I did, for a while, believe in the historical phases that Marx put, leading from slavery to feudalism to capitalism, socialism, and communism.

But many events started to influence me. One was that the state did not wither away in the Soviet Union. I saw the state getting stronger. So, where was communism? Marx would have been horrified, and Khrushchev’s (赫魯曉夫) famous concept of
“a state of the whole people” in 1961, that was an attempt to explain why the
Communist Party was still going to be all-powerful: a party of the whole people and a
state of the whole people. So, he said, “We don’t have to talk about class struggle
anymore, but the Communist Party is still the boss.” Actually, Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) has
done exactly the same thing, but it’s the “Harmonious Society” rather than “a state of
the whole people,” and he does it for the same reason: that he can’t declare that class
theory was wrong, or even that class is over. It’s too risky, because the Communist
Party’s position may be at stake.

Also, there were other things happening in Western Europe in the 70s and the 80s.
The Labor Party governments in France, in England, and other places, they were
practicing what was called an “industrial policy,” where the government chose the
direction of economic priorities, and it didn’t work. That taught me the lesson that
private enterprise is more efficient than government enterprise. So, there wasn’t much
left for me of social democracy. Other than I believed in the need for a certain kind of
equality.

But freedom is even more important than equality. If you have freedom, then all sorts
of things become possible. If you make equality the center, then the Communist Party
can say “we will achieve equality.” That’s what Mao thought for a while. But what if
it is the equality of poverty? People don’t want that. The Chinese farmers in
1980, '81, '82, they decided they wanted to make some decisions for themselves.
They wanted to grow different crops, and we want to market our products ourselves,
not just fill the state quota. So, actually the European social democrats, they ran into a
great deal of trouble by the 1980s. Intellectually, I think they still… they have very
little left.

Before the 1980s, you talked about the “China difference” that we, America,
ought not use our own values to judge China, as China has different values.¹ But
after the 1980s, freedom became your main concern, and it also became a
universal value to you, right?

Somewhat. Western values are not all good by the way, and some Western values that
we try to take to China or to Africa are not suitable for others. For instance, to raise
the issue of abortion as a condition for this or that, or to tell the churches in Africa
they must have women priests, because we, Americans, have women priests. Or they

¹ Ross Terrill, “Introduction,” in Ross Terrill eds., The China Difference (New York: Harper & Row,
must have gay priests, because we have gay priests. This is all wrong. But the
universal values that I am referring to, as being close to American values, are the two
fundamental values that the Chinese people have an inclination to embrace: free
markets and free trade, and participation in choosing how they will be governed. I
don’t say how much they’re American values or how much they’re universal values; I
do say in the reform period, Chinese values and American values on these
fundamental points have become quite close, and I think the free market and
democracy are much more important than abortion or feminism or sexual
discrimination.

When Deng Xiaoping was labeled “counterrevolutionary,” you stated that you
didn’t believe it, and it seemed you saw him in a positive light. But later, in the
1980s, when Deng became the top leader, you seemed to change your view on him.
Is this the case, and if so, why was that?

I did defend Deng strongly, but later the situation changed, twice. By the mid-1980s, I
had a lot of friends in China, many of them young people who were disappointed with
Deng. This influenced me. As you know, by 1988 and 1989, Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽)
was worried about Deng’s views (and Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) in 1986 was… Deng got
rid of him). My Chinese friends thought that Deng had stopped half-way, so that
influenced me. Deng had made interesting speeches in 1980 about political reform,
and he did not continue that. Zhao Ziyang, in 1984, he tried to do what Deng had said,
but it was impossible. You can’t separate the Party and the government in China. You
can’t do that.

But then, after 1991, I think Deng was brilliant, because he resisted the leftists in the
party who wanted him to cheer the fall of Gorbachev (戈巴契夫), and the fall of the
Soviet Union. This is one of the great achievements of Deng Xiaoping, and he made
his Nan Xin [南巡, Southern Tour] in February ’92. It was a very big struggle. He had
to go south, and he took his family and his staff, and he made remarks, and they
weren’t published in Beijing. He had to take it step-by-step, but he was basically
saying the Soviet Union failed because it did not bring economic results to the
Russian people. So, he said [laughs]: “We will bring economic results to the Chinese
people by strengthening capitalism,” and he announced the stock exchanges in
February ’92. So… I don’t know whether you know the story: when Gorbachev was
captured in Yalta by the leftists in Moscow, for three days Renmin Ribao [人民日報,
People’s Daily] had triumphant stories that revisionism has been conquered in
Moscow… so there were some very leftist people at the top of Chinese Communist
Party, and Deng Xiaoping pushed them back, and said they had the wrong interpretation of why the Soviet Union fell. So during his *Nan Xun*, Deng said: “The main problem is not the student rightists at Tiananmen, the main problem is the leftist spirits.” It was tremendous courage, and tremendous persistence.

**But in *China in Our Time*, the view about China’s future was very dark.**

Well, you are correct. I wrote it in… around… 1992. I was too close to the *Liu Si* [六四, Tiananmen Incident 1989]… Yes, too close. But the CCP recovered better than I expected, and now, looking back, I give credit to Deng for that. He was very clever in foreign policy; he said, “We'll be quiet for a while.” Now they’re no longer quiet, but they were quiet for a while… until America recovered from the shock. But he was always a Leninist, Deng, because he wanted the Communist Party to have a guaranteed leadership, and that’s why he did what he did in June of 1989. Li Rui (李銳), who used to work for Mao Zedong, I visited him in his house in November 2011. He is 90 now… more than that. We talked about the problem of the leader and the party. Li Rui summed up, and he said Deng was a “half Mao.” I think it’s correct. He wasn’t a Mao in his socialist thoughts. Deng Xiaoping didn’t have many socialist thoughts, but he was a Mao in his structural relation to the Communist Party. He was locked into it and that was it. His first foreign visit, after he became powerful in 1978, was to Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew (李光耀) later told me that Deng said to him, said to Lee, that he knew Marxism had failed in China. But that didn’t mean Deng Xiaoping was going to give up Leninism, because that would be giving up his own power, his own legitimacy.

When we talk about Deng, it’s related to reform. To you, the Chinese reform has the problem that it has no clear end, but can reform itself become an end?

Well… no. Two points: one is that… we have to know if it’s reforming the revolution or is it reforming… What is it reforming? Now, for the Marxists and the social democrats in Europe, there were two parts to socialism. There was the revolutionary part, the Leninists, and then there was the parliamentary part, the reformers. That’s what it meant. But the Chinese Communist Party came to power by the gun, the revolution. So, there was never any clarity about the goal of reform. Does the reform continue and continue until the Communist Party’s victory is cancelled? Or does the reform as Li Peng (李鵬) said in 1989: “Reform is to streamline socialism:” that means at a certain point, you’ve repaired it, and improved it, so then hands off.

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Socialism is with us… This has never been made clear.

Now, my friends in China today… It’s interesting. They are social democrats – and this is an accident. It’s nothing to do with my social democratic past, but they have become… they call themselves social democrats. They are so hostile to the one party state that they have to find… These are not dissidents. They are quietly… Many of them are Party members. Anyway, they call themselves social democrats. They said that Sweden has less economic inequality than China, and Sweden has democracy. Swedish social democrats have brought a certain amount of equality to Sweden, but within democracy. They say “we’ve one party rule, but they can’t even give us economic equality, so what’s so great about one party rule? We have no freedom and we have no equality.”

There was a very brilliant man called Xie Tao (謝濤). He died in 2010, but he wrote some articles about social democracy. They’re very interesting. They are not correct in that he is not saying… He doesn’t understand European social democracy, but he understands China. There are a lot of people who are jumping on this banner of social democracy. [Pause] They’re rightists actually. So, Bo Xilai and many of the websites like the… “Utopia” (烏有之鄉), they are the leftists. Mao’s grandson, Mao Xinyu (毛新宇), he read my book Mao Zedong Zhuan (毛澤東傳, Mao: A Biography], and said “It is not good.” [Laughs] So, these are the real leftists, and then the social democrats are the rightists. And they are fighting with each other, and the Communist Party, at least until this Bo Xilai affair, they let it go on. Anyway, it’s much better than it was in the 1970s when no one would dare to argue about politics.

In the Reform era, you talked about how the Chinese political system cannot coexist with economic development. How about if China can manage – if there is a Chinese model, the so-called “China model”? Impossible. Because economic freedom and political freedom, you can’t separate them for a long period of time. The politics has to win or the economics has to win. There has to be a reconciliation between the degree of freedom in the society and the economy, and the degree of freedom in political life. For many reasons: the innovation required for further progress… It’s relative easy to recover from a disastrous past, but the next steps, and the steps after that, are more difficult. It takes freedom of the mind.

Hayek was correct that governments do not have the knowledge to run a command
economy, a planned society. Only the market and the myriad choices of the individuals can produce good results... It sounds like chaos, but it is not chaos. The height of central planning in China was the Great Leap Forward, and Mao thought it was going to be magnificent. It was the worst thing he ever did. It was worse than the Cultural Revolution, and it was a clear-cut intellectual mistake. It was just not possible, the center did not have the information to correctly plan the Chinese agriculture; that’s connected with political freedom, because the people in the south, and in Sichuan (四川), they didn’t dare tell Mao the truth. So he was sitting up in Beijing without sufficient knowledge to plan what he was planning and make the decisions that he was making.

Zhao Ziyang understood this, but a bit late. Actually, it was Zhao Ziyang’s travels in Europe and the States that influenced him. He was a good observer, I think. He was very interested in trade, and the law of comparative advantage, but he didn’t have the ability to link economics and politics. He was good on economic policy, not so good on politics, at least, in 1987 and ’88.

Let me go back to your personal decisions. What drove you to want to emigrate to the United States of America?

To emigrate? I came as a foreign student.

Yes… But, later you became an American citizen…

So, the question is why did I stay, because I was [originally] going to rush back into politics, and be in parliament... Well, the first thing that happened was that I was offered a teaching position here [Harvard University] immediately upon finishing my thesis. That was unusual and I could hardly say no. Then I had this book, the Bawanwan [八萬萬, 800,000,000] which was rather successful. And, I started to think did I want to be an academic, or did I want to be a writer of books, and travel and lecture, another choice to be made. When you’re a professor, it’s very exciting at first, but if you have to teach for thirty years, you repeat the same thing. I thought “this is not my nature,” and then I started writing a lot of books. It’s great fun when you can move from one book to another. Each one is like a new period of your life. I began to prefer that, and some people here at Harvard, they started to guess that, and they don’t like that, because you’ve got to love the institution. Maybe my love was not enough.

Now, what’s that got to do with Australia? Well, Australia is a small world, in terms of
population, but the English language gave me a bridge to America, 15 times the population. I couldn’t write books in Australia just for Australians, so all my publishing since then has been in New York. That leads to publishing in foreign languages, too, which wouldn’t have happened if I were based in Australia. These are some of the reasons I didn’t go back.

Also Mr. Whitlam did his big achievements in the first year, then [laughs] he started to make mistakes. I would like to have joined the government probably at the start, but it was difficult because I had just being appointed here. It’s embarrassing – you’ve just been appointed to the faculty, and you say “I’m leaving.” So, I waited, to think, and then Whitlam changed Australian foreign policy. All very good. But then the Oil Shock came and other problems. He didn’t understand economics. (He was the opposite of Zhao Ziyang!) He soon got into a lot of trouble. I started to think, “Well… I’m better off here!” [Laughs]

So, what was the reason you left academia after teaching at Harvard, since you could choose other universities to teach in?

By then I didn’t want to be an academic, for an indefinite period. It’s hard to explain, because it’s a mixture of success with books and desire for freedom… Maybe a little bit of resentment, too, that Harvard did not promote me in 1978… It’s just my nature to be independent. Take the choice to write those biographies of Mao and Jiang Qing; that was my independent spirit. I went against the Chinese government views that personalities don’t matter and I went against them again in the Tiananmen [Incident]. If you are full-time in an institution, you can’t be so independent.

So, when you visit China, where do you usually go and what groups of people do you usually meet?

You know I’ve been 40-odd times, so, many different… I mentioned Jinan, [as a] visiting professor. The work was tough but it was very interesting. Oh, the students… The first lecture I gave, a student got up, and the first question was: “Was Mao an emperor?” I didn’t know if I could give an honest answer or not… After a few weeks, I realized on Mao you could say what you thought, but on Liu Si you could not say what you thought. In fact, that was the topic where they told me: “You must not discuss this in your lectures.” But on most other things there was much free talk. The Taiwan election was coming up and one professor took me out to dinner. He said, “You know either Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) or Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) would be a good
leader of Taiwan, both of them.” It’s completely contradictory to the Chinese government position. So, it was very interesting to be on the campus, and hear some diverse views... Then I lectured in the Marxism school, and they were all leftists. “What is the future of Marxism in the world, Professor Terrill?” I said: “It doesn’t have any future.” “[Gasps] How could you say that?!”

[Laughs] They were shocked.

They were shocked. Then another... a girl... (for some reason the students in the Marxism school, they are a little older than undergraduates...) she said, “What about class struggle in China today?” I said, “Have you read Milovan Djilas’s book, The New Class?” “No”, but two or three people had, only two or three out of 40, 50. I said “Djilas would ask if the 80 million in the Chinese Communist Party constitute a new class,” and “What about the migrant people from the countryside? Are they a new class? Is the Communist Party the party of the workers today?”

I asked the students to think about these questions. But in another answer, I said I thought that class struggle, class theory, and class analysis had been made just nonsense in the Cultural Revolution. No Chinese Communist leader should talk about it with a straight face, after that. [Long pause] You know, Lin Biao was first called a Jizou Fenzi [極左分子, radical leftist], and later he was called a rightist. There was no reason, no rationality in the use of class struggle talk, at all.

So you feel kind of strange about this? Or...

Well, it proves the bankruptcy of Marxism. Sorry, if you two are Marxists, I don’t want to upset you.

No… that’s fine. My next question is, in the 1970s, China tried to learn from the West, especially from the United States, and after the China-U.S. Normalization, it expanded its learning from the United States. But when things were going as you had anticipated, you started to change your view on China, why was that?

Because expectations rose; you expected more and more of China. In the Mao period, we just thought “dictatorship is static”, and it was – it doesn’t change much. But with the Deng era, we thought one thing would lead to another, but it didn’t always happen.

The second point was that the Chinese Communist Party started talking about the
horrible things in China. Blaming the Gang of Four, blaming – a little bit – Mao, but especially blaming the Four. They didn’t point out that it was the same Communist Party still in power. Zhang Chunqiao (張春橋), Yao Wenyuan (姚文元), Jiang Qing… they were all members of the political bureau. They weren’t kids in the street throwing stones, they were Communist leaders! So, I thought, “There’s something fishy about this.” I mean, the criticism of the Gang of Four was just an attempt to legitimize the reform era, and I thought that was a sign of intellectual bankruptcy.

You asked before, what’s the goal of the reform? The goal of reform should be more than just doing what Mao didn’t do, and doing what the Gang of Four did not do. In the end, to go back to that previous question, there’s no goal to politics, in my opinion. In democratic politics, there is no goal; the goal is set and reset and reset by the will of the people through elections. The people should be sovereign, the system comes from below. It’s a fundamental mistake to say, “What is the goal?” The political process is sacred, just as here in the United States; the constitution, and the rule of law, the decisions of the Supreme Court; these are absolute. But beyond that, the goals lie with the decisions of the citizens, and there is something brilliant about the movement from moderate left to moderate right produced by the elections of democracy, because these express some pretty fundamental points in political theory going back to Hobbes and Rousseau, Burke... You have a push to change things and then you have a period of consolidation, or you have a government that’s got to get economic growth at any price, then you get Labor government that sort of divides up the pie a little bit more equally. All this has to be moderated by the will of the people.

But maybe for the Chinese communists, their goal, like Hu Jintao said, is to revitalize China, and to make China stronger again.

[Pause] It’s already been done. Actually, since Deng Xiaoping died, I’m not sure that Jiang Zemin (江澤民) and Hu Jintao have made many big decisions. Deng made some enormous decisions. In ’78 and then others that I mentioned in ’91, ’92… but what big decision has Hu Jintao made? So, he’s living off the back of Deng Xiaoping, it can’t go on forever. Even Jiang Zemin, I mean by the time of Jiang Zemin, the Chinese people were… unleashed! They were given the chance to do this and do that, and they did it. And foreign money gave a certain amount of freedom. Do you think Jiang Zemin knew exactly where the reform period was going? Even Deng Xiaoping said “I’m going to cross the river by touching the stones.” That’s very clever of him.
Maybe we can turn to two final questions. What are your personal expectations as well as predictions for China's future?

[Very long pause] The Communist Party’s monopoly of power will come to an end, but the 35 years of reform, these achievements, will still be there, whatever happens in the Communist Party. You mentioned your impression of Shanghai (上海). There are dozens of Chinese cities like that. Like Jinan… I had been in Jinan in the 70s, but last year I couldn’t recognize it at all. It’s all new. The highways, the rapid trains, the airport, and… So, the Communist Party may be stuck but China’s not stuck.

Sometimes, I’m reminded of the Brezhnev period in the Soviet Union; Brezhnev was in power for more than a decade, but he didn’t really do anything big. It was collective leadership, just like Hu Jintao. The big difference is that when Gorbachev came, he didn’t have 30 years of economic semi-capitalist development to build on. China has that to build on, a huge advantage. There is the possibility of… in one way or another… Leninism in Beijing being discarded, and probably a crisis. But the achievements of new society and the economy will guarantee to China a strong future… you mention that Hu Jintao is aiming for power and the recovery of China… it will continue to happen.

However, I don’t think China’s going to replace the United States as number one. For many reasons, one is that no one is going to be a number one in the old sense. Globalization, and the fact that the Chinese, and even the Russians, they’re all now part of the global economy. So, the international relations of nation states and super powers, with power based heavily on the military, is probably changing, in ways we can’t be too sure of. The way America replaced Britain in the Western Hemisphere… and then in 1945, with the defeat of Japan and Germany, America was absolutely triumphant. I don’t think we’re going to see this kind of dramatic taking over of world leadership…

Up and down: the 20th century was amazing. Russia, Japan, Germany… they all rose, and fell, dramatically. America’s not going to fall like that. So, America’s not going to offer a big vacancy for China [laughs], and moreover, China is going to slow down. As I say, their success is based on the market and free trade that are not especially Chinese values. 25 percent of their exports are to this country [USA], and they couldn’t replace that market today, anywhere in the world. Not that the Americans will say “no” to these products, because they’re cheap and good. Just the same, the Chinese are not going to sell their treasury bonds. It’s not in their interests. So, this is
an interlocked situation where China can’t just become the number one pushing the USA down.

When Germany, France and England were vying, with their empires or desire for that, Africa was vacant, and [so was] Latin America. But if you want colonies now, where would you go? And anyway, you don’t need colonies. The Chinese attempts at semi-colonies and even allies (Albania? Vietnam?) have been disappointing. You know, they had a very tough time in Libya and they may have it in Sudan also. Do you know how many Chinese had to be evacuated from Libya, with the fall? 37 thousand. And Beijing got them out without a single death. So, they will learn that you can’t have a secure semi-colonial position now. The world has changed. So, in that sense, I think the future rise of China will be limited. They will join the front rank… they are in the front rank, but I don’t think they are going to race ahead of everyone.

**Even if their GDP overtakes the United States?**

Hasn’t happened yet. It’s slowing down, you know. It’s slowing down. If there is a crisis in the Communist Party, or let me say when there is a crisis, there will be a decade of slow growth, or disrupted growth. And unfortunately, there are a lot of Chinese, wealthy people and businessmen who are not particularly loyal. They could leave and do business elsewhere, as the Chinese left at the end of the Qing dynasty, and went to Indonesia, Malaysia, or all over the world. China’s a very unusual nation, because it is a mixture of civilization, empire and modern nation state. These three aspects of China, through the 20th century, they have been related to each other. And the empire part is still not completely dead. You ask the Japanese and the Koreans, and they still feel that Beijing is behaving like an empire towards them. But it’s dying. The civilizational power of China is not coexistent with the nation state. Chinese people can do business and have restaurants and study all over the world, but it’s the nation state that has produced the reform era; the nation state that joins the World Trade Organization, and obeys the rule of trade. And this is what’s winning out for China. Confucianism is not enough to make China a great power.

**Do you think Confucianism is a hindrance to democracy for the Chinese people?**

No, not a big hindrance. Because today’s Confucianism is very diluted. It’s very mild. The hierarchical thinking is not there in a strong way. [Pause] But you raised democracy, not *me*. [Laughs] I’m not sure [of] democracy and China. It may not come
immediately after the Communist Party loses its monopoly.

Yes… You talk about colonialism; China could be seen as a kind of semi-empire, when it deals with Xinjiang (新疆) or Tibet. But aren’t Xinjiang or Tibet parts of China’s territory?

Well, that makes it worse. I mean, the Beijing imperial mentality is reflecting the historical position of the Qing dynasty, and even the earlier dynasties. In that world-view, Korea and Vietnam, for example, are not very different from Tibet or the Turkistan area. They were all supposed to pay some obeisance to the Chinese court. And the Muslim leader, Tamerlane (帖木兒), in the Ming Dynasty, he was told by the Ming Emperor to come to pay his tribute. He was furious, and he said “I’m going to make an expedition to Beijing and covert the Ming Emperor to Islam.” He died on the way, so it didn’t happen…

But Mao did not think of Korea and Vietnam as full nation states in the 1930s and the 40s. He gradually accepted it, later on. In the new materials we have on the Korean War, he called Kim Il-sung Xiao Jin [小金, Little Kim], and the messages between Stalin, Kim, and Mao are treating Kim almost as a younger brother.

Maybe we have a different understanding of the situation. As Xinjiang and Tibet are China’s legitimate territories, China need not use a policy of colonization in its own land; however, in your view, it has become a kind of colonialism…

Yes, it is. It’s semi-colonialism. In Xinjiang, you feel it’s still like the Cultural Revolution. The radio’s talking about enemies who may want to split the country. Xinjiang is a little tense. It’s part of the PRC, but the question is, when China liberalizes, how it will handle these areas that were not traditionally Chinese territory. It includes Nei Menggu [內蒙古, Inner Mongolia], Xinjiang, Tibet. And Hong Kong, too, is interested in this question, because a federal China can hold on to all of these, and even maybe, in a way, Taiwan. But authoritative China risks losing even what it has… So we come back to the question: when will the Communist Party lose its grip?

Thank you very much.
Thank you for accepting my interview. I have just three remaining questions. The first is: how do you interpret Fairbank’s impact-response framework when explaining modern Chinese history?

Well, Fairbank’s view belonged to his time: all historical theories are made at a certain point of time in certain context. And that context was the weakness of China in the late Qing Dynasty. Not only Fairbank, but the Chinese Communist Party also accepted the narrative of China having to respond to the West. Look at the monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen: it starts with the Opium War. The line of the CCP about imperialism, this is all in a context similar to Fairbank’s, with different conclusions. The starting point was that China, and Mao himself, were responding to superior Western power. I think that was widely shared at that time. Now, the fact that it was China’s weakness in the late Qing and the Republican period is made clear when you think of today China’s rise, and now we’re talking about a Western response to China’s rise. So, the Fairbank theory was part of its time.

But in your own work, you talk a lot about modernity; what it is, and what it is not. It seems from your work that you consider China to have been influenced by the West in this regard.

Which work?

Such as China in Our Time. Maybe I could ask what modernity is in your definition, since in the beginning you mentioned that the CCP is the Chinese modernizer, but later it becomes a backward force for China.

Well, that’s a good point. The Chinese Communist Party interpreted “modern” as getting rid of feudalism – what they called feudalism. They would tell us, in their

The environment is different, right?

Yes.

Could you please tell us your view on the June 4 Event?

Yes, it was very emotional for me at that time, because I was there, in Beijing. I was also there in April, just when Hu Yaobang died. The pro-democracy movement of the students was inspiring, and when the period of freedom came in late May, there was openness and excitement; that’s why so many Beijing citizens helped the students, and supported the students. Now, the students quickly got out of their depth. It all went beyond their reach. Not entirely their fault, because as a result of their success in getting a lot of support from the citizens… offering them food, running around to help them, in the back lanes, and so on… As a result of this, the students came up against the question of “What was their aim?” Wu’er Kaixi (吾爾開希) at one point said: “Our purpose was to make the government listen to us, and talk to us. That was our only real demand.” They are the words of Wu’er Kaixi. So, they weren’t prepared for any possibility of challenging the Chinese Communist Party. They were like petitioners in the Chinese dynastic history, petitioning the court, wanting dialogue. If they were a movement to overthrow the CCP, they would have had weapons, they would have occupied the TV studios, and they would have reached out to the people in the government who were most pro-reform.

That leads us to the point of what was going on in the Chinese Communist Party. Zhao Ziyang and Hu Qili (胡啟立) and others, they also failed to reach out to the student movement. Their responsibility was greater, because they had experience and they knew the mind of Deng Xiaoping. As Zhao Ziyang and Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) said, when they went to the Tiananmen at the end, “We have come too late, we have come too late.” And that was true. The only way the student movement could have
ended in a different way was if there had been a connection between Zhao Ziyang and the more mature members of the student movement. That’s one development that would have brought a different end.

Another development: some of the more senior students, some from think tanks or graduate student types, wanted the student movement to leave the square around May 19th, to declare a kind of victory, and go back to the campus, and await the opportunity for the next stage of the movement. But people like Chai Ling (柴玲), they didn’t agree with that. The movement out of Tiananmen Square, together with a connection to Zhao Ziyang, might have meant that events would have gone in a different direction, and reform would have accelerated, which was what the students really wanted. But reform, of course, did not accelerate.

After June 4th, Zhao Ziyang, who had been fighting for economic freedoms, and over the problem of pricing and the problem of inflation, was gone. And reform went backward, and so the getihu (個體戶, small private businesses) and other entrepreneurs, they were cracked down on. So, the extreme violent response, actually, I did not quite expect. [Oh, really?] I didn’t expect to see the tanks and the guns and thousands dead.

On the other hand, some in the crowd said to me, “Our government has gone mad.” Actually, the government hadn’t gone mad. They were doing a very calculated and rational thing. They were defending the Leninist system, and it was a reminder to the world that the Leninist system was in place and the crackdown on the night of June 4th was to tell the nation that no challenge to the Leninist system was acceptable. In that sense, Deng’s move was successful, and the Leninist system stood. Mao said, in 1941 I believe, “We call ourselves communists, because we are communists.” The American mentality often wanted to think that they really weren’t. Going back to the Yan’an (延安) Period, and then in the 80s, TIME magazine twice they put Deng on the cover, and they were talking about him as a capitalist. It was all a bit of illusion, and June 4 brought home the fundamental point.

But at the same time, you had to give credit to the CCP for recovering from June 4th. I didn’t expect that they would recover so quickly. Deng was wisely cautious. He kept China’s head down said “Let’s bide our time,” and they did for a while, so they recovered.
In your book, you mentioned that the students would like to make a connection with farmers.\(^5\) Do you think that if they had gone with the farmers, they would have had success at that time?

No, because the farmers were not ready. The main anxieties among the Chinese people in 1988 and ’89 were in the cities. Their main anxieties were inflation and corruption, and the farmers’ feelings were so decentralized… without connection to each other from one province to another.

**Could you tell us your feeling about your personal experience in 1992, when Shen Tong (沈彤) was arrested and you were personally under supervision by the Chinese officials?**

Well, it was atavistic. Do you know this word? I don’t know the Chinese. “Atavism” is when something comes back from the past. Something that you think was gone, and you think was out of date, but suddenly it comes up, in front of you. The behavior of the officials on the night that they came and got me, it was very much out of tune with what had happened throughout the 1980s.

They were security people, and they… they weren’t educated people, and they were sort of Maoists… They came into my room, had me pack up, three or four of them watching, and they’re looking at this: “Oh, what’s this? A tape recorder? And a camera?” Actually, they were quite interested in these little bits of technology, as if they were not familiar with them. But their task was just to remove me from China, and they were very polite. But my point is they were like the Chinese officials of the 1970s, more than of 1989. They took me to a little motel near the airport for questioning, and that was also like the hotels of the Mao period… And then, the way they interpreted Shen Tong and my role, they said “I was splitting China” and splittists are trying to… this kind of thing. I would call it an “atavism.”

But even today the security corps of the Chinese state is very strong and very large. I don’t know if it’s still atavistic in the sense of… if their mentality is backward. Maybe it’s not, but their activity in controlling the Internet and stopping this and stopping that… would be interesting to know if the mentality of these censors, and spies, and so on… if it has changed. But that’s what I felt in 1989. It was as if the Deng era had not… in 1992, it was as if the Deng era had never occurred. Of course, after ’89, and into the early 90s, a lot of atavistic things occurred. Lei Feng (雷鋒) was brought back

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\(^5\) Ross Terrill, *China in Our Time*, pp. 332–333.
in a big way in 1989.

I am very curious, when did you go back to China after 1992? As there was a chance there might be concerns about you, why did you think that you would be permitted to teach at Shandong University?

Well, China today is not like China in 1989. Second, I didn’t go back for several years after ’92. I got an invitation from the Mao Zedong Poetry Society to come to a conference and I asked for a visa in the New York consulate and didn’t get it. [Laughs] A week before the conference, they replied and sent back my passport and the money for the visa and my form, and said they needed a better letter from the Mao Zedong Poetry Society, an invitation. That the letter I sent was not enough. Well, this was ridiculous. It just meant that it was too late for me to go anyway. They didn’t say “no” to the visa; that was the way they always handled these things.

Later I began to apply for a tourist visa to go as a lecturer with the American Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, when I had regained my Australian citizenship. In 1989, I was not an Australian citizen. I was an American citizen only. But by ’96, ’97, I was both. And several times I received a Chinese visa in my Australian passport, and went… I didn’t try to do anything too risky. On one occasion, I asked for a visa in Washington on my American passport. I didn’t get it. Then I asked for a visa in Houston, Texas, when I was teaching in Austin, on my Australian passport, and I got it. In the same way I got tourist visas several times in the 90s and in recent years. And then the last year as you say, Shan Da [山大, Shandong University], sent a letter of invitation for me to be a visiting professor, and I had to get a professional visa. And I used my American passport. I got a visa from Washington. I used a visa service rather than sending it myself. I don’t know whether that made any difference. Anyway, I got the visa, and I went to Jinan. [Laughs]

After the event of 1992, what made you want to go back to China? Because in the 1980s, just as you mentioned in your book, if not to Sichuan, then you might not be fond of China anymore. 6

Well, curiosity. To see how they were doing in the late 90s… Then, also, it was the developments in the publishing world, because there was an edition of my Mao Zedong Zhuan [毛澤東傳, Mao: A Biography], published in Shijiazhuang (石家莊) by the Hebei Sheng Renmin Chubanshe [河北省人民出版社, Hebei Province

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People’s Press]. And even my book on Jiang Qing was published in Shijiazhuang, in a *neibu faxing* [內部發行, internal distribution]. This made me want to have a connection, which is what I did.

Then in 2003, the *Renmin Daxue Chubanshe* [人民大學出版社, People’s University Press] contacted me and asked for a contract to do *Mao Zedong* [Mao: A Biography]. The people in Shijiazhuang… they were “atavism”… the old-style state [publishing] house… no contract, y’know… very unprofessional, I must say! But *Ren Da* [人大, People’s University] in 2003 was a different China. They did the neat contract, and they published the book in 2006. They didn’t cut out much, [just] a little bit. But they didn’t hide from me what they were cutting. They told me. Some of it, they told me too late for me to object, but anyway, they told me, so… that was, in the years after 2003, that was the reason why I wanted to visit when I could, because I had meetings with my publisher, including when I went to *Shan Da* [山大, Shandong University], I spent a week in Beijing afterwards, giving talks at bookshops. And they have now published another book of mine, *Wo yu Zhongguo* [我與中國, Myself and China], in Chinese. So, this success with the Chinese people reading my books, that has become an important link for me with China.

I see. My final question is, what are your involvements in policy consultation or risk analysis in public? Since I know you went to public hearings, made speeches, and joined TV programs.

Well, my relation to policy is very indirect. I have never been in a government; I’ve never worked in a governmental position. So, it’s mainly my columns and my books. I did influence the debate in the U.S. a little bit in 1971, ’72, because Kissinger and Nixon were reading things I wrote. And I was talking to Kissinger and sometimes I had some influence. There was a big issue of how to wind down the military relations with Taiwan and handle the security treaty. I felt this could be done in connection with China adopting a non-military attitude to Taiwan and wrote that, and Kissinger was very skillful on that in February ’72.

Jumping to the present, I wrote a piece on Pyongyang after the death of Kim Jong-Il. It was called “One Korea, After All”. [Laughs] I said no American president has ever given a whole speech on Korean unification. This business of rejection by Pyongyang over so-called arms control is ridiculous; they were never going to do it. We must change the agenda to the reunification of Korea. When President Obama spoke in Seoul, there’s a couple of paragraphs in his speech about “The fundamental need is
for the reunification of Korea.” President Bush never did this, and no other president that I’ve been watching… so I think the writers, some of his staff, may have read my article. So, this kind of thing happens.

The most direct consultation was in Australia over Mr. Whitlam’s activity. I really arranged the 1971 invitation to Whitlam, through the French ambassador in Beijing. Mr. Whitlam described this in his memoirs, as did the Frenchman. Kissinger was an open mind on China in ’71. It was excellent, because he’s a European, and he didn’t know anything about Asia, but Fairbank and people like Doak Barnett, they were all on the wrong track, they were thinking the problem with China is, how do we have two Chinas in the U.N.? What about the frozen property of the PRC in America? And some trade maybe… Kissinger wasn’t interested in these things. He was interested in the geopolitics. He would say to me, “Ross, what should we talk to the Chinese about?” Actually, that was a good way to start, rather than what Barnett and Fairbank were saying. The balance of power, and seeing the opportunity of the Sino-Soviet split, I thought also that was the path. The Republicans saw that, but the Democrats did not. After Kissinger met Zhou Enlai in 1971, he was quite impressed with him. He asked me, “Is Pham Van Dong, the Vietnamese premier, like Zhou Enlai?” Because the big problem that Nixon was having by then was with Vietnam, and Kissinger hoped that the Vietnamese would be like the Chinese. But actually he was a bit disappointed. They were… [Laughs] they were tough.

I think I’ll have to stop in a minute or two; I’ve got to go out.

Yes, of course, thank you very much.