



ARTICLES

On the Birth of *The Birth of China*

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(The following talk was given at the Society for the Study of Early China Roundtable on 21 March 1986 at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Chicago. We include it here for your interest.)

When I was told that at this meeting there was to be mention of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of The Birth of China¹ I was immediately reminded of the title of one of Shakespeare's comedies: Much Ado About Nothing. That book may have been the first to inform the general reader of the revolution that was under way in China's early history, but it was full of the kind of errors that are hard to avoid in such an initial effort. In the ensuing fifty years there has been an avalanche of research and excavation bearing on this subject. In any fast-changing field, every book is at least partly obsolete before it can get through the presses. The only proper thing to do about The Birth of China is what I did fifty years ago: forget it.

I proposed that this be done. But I was overruled, and it was insisted that I ought to speak on this occasion. I will therefore describe the circumstances that caused me to write the book. It was chiefly the product of two things: mistakes and good luck.

The most important mistake was made while I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. While studying history of religions and philosophy I had become deeply interested in Confucius, and had decided to spend the rest of my life trying to understand the history of Chinese culture--I am still trying. This was difficult because the university had no faculty, no courses, and no books in Chinese. I decided I would teach myself the language, and I was fortunate enough to get some help from a good Chinese scholar who was also a graduate student.

There was a very eminent Sinologist, Dr. Berthold Laufer, at the Field Museum, from whom I hoped to get some advice. It was my bad luck to go to see him on an off day. He disposed of me in five minutes, saying, "Well, you are a student, don't you have teachers? I will not waste my time." I retreated, resolving never to darken his door again. About a year later I needed a copy of the Mo-tzu, which could only be obtained from the Field Museum. I telephoned and told the operator that I would talk to anyone else, but not to Dr. Laufer. By mistake she connected me with Laufer. If that operator had not made that mistake, I would not be here today.

Dr. Laufer said, "Mr. Creel--haven't I heard of you?" I did not tell him that he had practically kicked me out of his office. He said to come in, and when I did greeted me like his long-lost nephew. He asked what I was going to do after I took my Ph.D. I told him I had a job teaching at a little college downstate. He said, "Oh, don't waste your time teaching. I will get you a fellowship." I thought that sounded nice, and went to my job teaching Spanish, English, and psychology.

Dr. Laufer was chairman of the newly formed Committee on Chinese Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies, and to my surprise he did get me quite a good fellowship. I went to Harvard, where I wanted very much to study with Mei Kuang-ti, because of his classical learning. But I don't think he thought much of my qualifications, and for about a month he put me through something like hazing. At the end of that time he said, "Well, you're still here. Now we get to work."

During the next two years we whipped through a wide range of literature. The pace did not quite kill me. The ACLS and Harvard-Yenching Institute supported me by tossing me back and forth for fellowships in alternate years. It was my great good luck that Professor Mei returned to China in 1932, only a few weeks before I went there. He knew almost everyone in the scholarly world, and gave me a great many introductions both in person and by letter. As a result I soon knew most of the leading men in the fields in which I was working.

Naturally I knew the staff of the Academia Sinica, especially Tung Tso-pin and Liang Ssu-yung. Tung, who was in charge of the excavations at Anyang during my visits to them, became one of my closest friends. Among others whom I knew well, and who helped me greatly, I can mention only a few at random: Jung Keng, Ku Chieh-kang, Liu Chieh, Shang Ch'eng-tso, Sun Hai-po, T'ang Lan, T'ang Yung-t'ung, and many more. The cordiality and helpfulness of these scholars astounded me.

The conditions for research were unbelievable. When I was stopped by an insoluble problem I would simply get on my bicycle, go to the home of the best authority on the subject, and get his advice over a cup of tea. I asked myself: why this incredible generosity? Certainly this was the most amiable group of men I have ever known. Also, I got the impression that they thought I had some special knowledge of "scientific method." I told them very frankly that I knew very little about scientific method, and what little I did know I could not impart to anyone else. But apparently they did not believe me. That was their mistake, and my good luck.

It seems to me that the most important intellectual institution of that Peking was one that was not only completely informal but perhaps even unrecognized: the frequent dinners, in restaurants, attended by scholars. I was told that some professors spent half of their salaries entertaining their friends. As I recall, I was invited to such dinners at least once a week.

They lasted about four hours. There were eight, seldom more than twelve scholars, around a large table. They included historians, archeologists, paleographers, art specialists, textual critics, even an occasional poet. These were in effect important seminars, but anyone listening outside would have principally noted the frequent laughter. Conversation started with gossip, chitchat, and went everywhere: the most recently excavated bronze, a new reading of a passage in one of the classics, women (perhaps a particular woman), why had so-and-so ruined his reputation by publishing his latest paper? Even politics was mentioned occasionally, but not often--it didn't interest them much. And always there was the lubrication of the most benevolent of liquors, shao-hsing chiu.

All of this conversation was rapid-fire, often technical, and constantly employed sophisticated puns. You may wonder how I understood it. I didn't. When I arrived in Peking my spoken Chinese was at the elementary tourist level. For almost a year I suffered, hardly understanding two words in ten. Then something snapped, and from understanding almost nothing I went to understanding almost everything. I still remember the occasion when I threw into the conversation a moderately sophisticated and apparently successful pun. An electric shock seemed to go through the whole circle around the table. I felt that I had passed through an initiation.

I began to realize that I was living in a historic moment. In studying for my Ph.D., and with Professor Mei later, I had got a fairly good idea of the previous conception of very early

Chinese history, both in the West and in China. But these scholars in Peking were groping toward, and molding, a totally new history. It had many sources and indications. Research on the Shang oracle bones began to bear its full fruit only in the nineteen-twenties. Scientific excavation at the Anyang site was started in 1928, but did not get well under way until the thirties. The Ku-shih pien--that marvelous treasury of nine volumes of precisely the kind of ruminations and arguments that were going on in Peking--began publication in 1926 and was in mid-course in 1935.

But already the twilight was visible. For some of the time Japanese trenches were only a few miles away, beyond Yenching University. Japanese warplanes frequently flew over the city, though they never dropped bombs. President Hutchins cabled me an offer of a job, beginning with 1936, to establish Chinese studies at the University of Chicago. I accepted immediately, before he could change his mind.

I knew that I must do some writing before I became embroiled in academic routine. I started writing what was published in 1937 as Studies in Early Chinese Culture.² When I showed the first few pages to friends they said, "This is no doubt scholarly, but nobody can read it." I had started writing for newspapers when I was sixteen, and had published millions of words in newspapers. I had published a book in 1929--a very bad book, which was unfortunately written well enough so that some people liked it. But for five years I had done nothing but research, and had completely lost the ability to write. As a finger exercise to loosen myself up for serious writing I wrote a popular book, The Birth of China.

It has taken years to write each of my other books. But for The Birth of China I was crammed with the material and it just bubbled out. I wrote from morning till night, and then into the night. In six weeks it was finished.

Just one word more. I certainly do not consider myself anything like an elder pundit, but I do think that my slightly august age of eighty-one qualifies me to offer unsolicited advice to younger scholars. And I suggest that, if you want to publish a mildly successful book, there is nothing wrong with working hard if you like that sort of thing. But there is one point that you must not, on any account whatever, neglect. Be lucky!

NOTES

1. London: Jonathan Cape, 1936.

2. American Council of Learned Societies, Studies in Chinese and Related Civilizations, no. 3. Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1937.