

Obituary

In Memory of Gordon White

Born 13 October 1942; died 1 April 1998

Tony Saich

Anyone who knew Gordon would have been impressed not only by his enormous courage but also his wicked sense of humour and keen analytical mind. There are few people in our field who can move you from guffaws of laughter to a penetrating comment about China's political development between mouthfuls of food. Gordon was such a person and we shall all be deeply affected by his loss. It is sad to think that I shall no longer be subject to that focused look, the pursing of the lips, and the head slightly cocked that made him resemble a wise owl before he dispensed the necessary wisdom on whatever topic we were discussing. The dwindling field of contemporary China studies in the UK has been hit hard by the loss of such a stimulating thinker, energetic teacher and good friend. His visits to China were always much anticipated, providing an opportunity for both professional interaction and to catch up on the personal - he was so proud of his partnership with Barbara Harriss, his wife, and their two daughters, Kaveri and Eleanor - and his many friends and colleagues have been distressed to hear of his death.

Gordon's academic work had a depth and breadth that reflected his inquisitive mind and his broad training in Classics, archaeology and, later, political science. His publication output was awesome, ranging from the politics of class and class origin in the Cultural Revolution, demobilized soldiers, the reform of education, banking and finance, industrial planning and policy, the process of democratization and the emergence of civil society through to the reconstruction of the welfare system. Certain key themes guided his academic agenda - particularly the role of the state in the developmental process and how a more humane society could be created through the process of rapid industrialization and social change. His field site was primarily China, but his work drew on empirical studies of development in East Asia and beyond, and the theoretical literature on the developmental state and state-society relations.

The entire corpus of his work, partially summarized in *Riding the Tiger*, demonstrated that the progressive decline in state control of the economy, with powers devolving from state agencies to enterprises and a decreasing use of mandatory planning mechanisms, had been concomitant with the increased use of market forces to guide distribution and production choices. Gordon's work showed articulately how this process of reform had redefined the social structure, leading to changes in the distribution of power between the Party-state and society. This in turn altered the principles on which society was organized and the ways in which it interacted with the Party-state apparatus. His numerous writings

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explored the increased social and geographical mobility and the greater horizontal interaction and integration that developed as the traditional Leninist system underwent change and reformation. In addition, his work directed us to the consequences of a significant redistribution of economic power away from the state and its ancillary agencies towards groups, new or reformed institutions, households and perhaps even individuals.

This framework guided his three most recent lines of research: the role of the state in development, the potential for the emergence of civil society, and the long-term consequences of systematic change for welfare provision. Gordon retained the belief that markets cannot resolve everything and that there is an appropriate role for government to play in guiding development - especially in states defined as late developers. He was a persuasive supporter of the state's constructive role in providing political order and necessary direction during this transition to regulate an emergent market and civil society in a huge and increasingly complex country still facing mammoth development obstacles. However, for Gordon, the ultimate purpose of this transition was to realize a society that was democratic and able to provide a decent material and spiritual life for its citizens - a concern which guided his research into China's emerging civil society and the reform of the welfare system. This resulted in his book (with Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan) explaining the symbiotic relationship between the state and newly emerging organizations and how their further expansion was hampered by the lack of more complete democratization of China's political institutions.

For those who cared about the questions that Gordon raised, his work has laid down a number of directions for the future. Perhaps we should leave the last question to him - although a question he posed many years ago, he was still wrestling with its implications: should we make a distinction between developmentally "rational" and "irrational" and historically "progressive" and "reactionary" forms of authoritarianism, particularly considering that the former, whether socialist or capitalist, create the social and potential conditions for the emergence of more democratic and participatory institutions? It is a question still worth researching, but in the spirit and memory of Gordon White, make sure that you have fun and appreciate others while pursuing it.