

Obituary

Michel Charles Oksenberg: In Memoriam

Steven M. Goldstein, Kenneth Lieberthal, Jean Oi and Andrew Walder

Michel Charles Oksenberg passed away on 22 February 2001 after an eight-month battle with cancer.

Mike was determined to face his disease with dignity, optimism and activism, and he did all three. Until shortly before the end, he continued to pen articles, to advise students, to give media interviews, to take part in academic panels and to mobilize support on Asian policy issues. He also communicated frequently with colleagues and friends by phone and e-mail. Mike drew great strength from these contacts, and they comforted those of us who were deeply affected by his illness. He was, until the end, a life force.

In October 2000 Mike attended a conference held in his honour at Stanford University. Nearly 100 scholars from Asia and the United States gathered to discuss the China field and to relate stories about him. Virtually all of the participants, in one way or another, focused their thoughts on how Mike's overpowering enthusiasm had changed their lives. Mike used his seemingly bottomless reservoir of energy to take on the huge task of making China and America understandable to each other, and on that basis he strove to develop realistic ties that would serve the interests of both countries. His accomplishments as he pursued this large goal were considerable.

As a teacher, Mike Oksenberg held appointments at Stanford University (1966–68, 1995–2001), Columbia University (1968–74), and the University of Michigan (1973–91). At each of these institutions he contributed to an enhancement of China programmes and, when it finally became possible, to the development of ties with China. His presence attracted graduate students intent on studying China; his wisdom and infectious enthusiasm persuaded many others who had initially not intended to enter this field to devote their careers to China. By the time of his death, Mike had trained more Ph.D.s in the study of contemporary China than any other scholar in the field.

As a scholar, Mike Oksenberg always pushed the limits of the current conceptual paradigms. At various points in his career of nearly four decades he wrote articles that summed up the existing literature and then suggested new approaches to the conceptualization of the Chinese political system. His approach to understanding policy-making in China always emphasized the importance of doing more than simply tracing the whims of the core leader. He led the way in identifying the fault lines and channels of authority in the Chinese political system. He contributed in a major way to understanding the conditions that shaped China's fidelity to international agreements. He repeatedly provided keen insights into the

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dynamics of the U.S.–China relationship. In all of these endeavours Mike never lost sight of the importance of the past in shaping China's present. His writings were enriched by an encyclopedic knowledge of China's modern political history.

Mike Oksenberg tirelessly contributed his ideas and energy to promoting an understanding of China in the United States. He played a major role in shaping the evolution of the National Committee on U.S.–China Relations, the (now defunct) Committee on Scholarly Communications with the PRC, and the U.S.–China Business Council. He extended his reach to America's ties with all of Asia during his presidency of the East–West Center from 1992 to 1995. He served on many editorial boards (including that of *The China Quarterly*). He was also a very active member in major organizations, such as the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations. And he constantly promoted funding for the field, stimulating major foundations such as MacArthur, Luce, Ford and Smith Richardson to think in new ways about China and to provide critical resources. Finally, Mike contributed to the development of economic ties between the United States and the PRC by advising corporations and speaking to business groups.

In 1977 Mike joined the administration of President Jimmy Carter. He served as Senior Staff member on the National Security Council and played a central role in bringing about normalization of relations between Washington and Beijing in January 1979. He then advised every subsequent U.S. president, regardless of political party, on China policy.

Mike Oksenberg, in short, cut a very wide swathe in the China field as few others have done. Those who met, studied or worked with him were almost inexorably changed by the experience. His commitment to understanding China still inspires them while his scholarship sets a standard of intellectual excellence that continues to have a subtle, but profound effect on their work.

Mike Oksenberg was a passionate man. He was passionate most of all about his family. He was a devoted son and loving husband and father. He leaves behind his wife Lois and children, Deborah and David, who were by his side constantly and lovingly throughout his illness. He was passionate about Michigan football and country-and-western music. His knowledge and enthusiasm about each matched his excitement about China. He was passionate about his teaching, research, policy work and his friends. He lived life to the full. He leaves behind a rich legacy – but an even larger void.