

## **My Convoluted Journey toward a Career as a Sociologist of China—Marty Whyte**

I was born in Oklahoma, but I grew up mostly in Trumansburg, NY, after my father, William Whyte, accepted a job teaching sociology in the ILR School at Cornell in 1948 and began commuting by carpool to campus. I had always done well in math and science classes, and when I graduated from Trumansburg Central, it was a no-brainer to get a tuition-free college education at Cornell, where I majored in physics. As a product of the Sputnik generation, I decided to minor in Russian Studies, including spending a month in the summer of 1963 on a language study tour around the Soviet Union.

I very much enjoyed my college years at Cornell and made friendships that have lasted ever since, including with fraternity brothers such as Ken Kupchak and John McClusky, fellow sociologist Lenni Weitzman (with whom I served on the Executive Board of student government), and Bill Lacy. I got to know Bill well when we both served in our senior year as resident dorm councilors in the older freshman men's dorms at the bottom of Libe Slope. However, my coursework at Cornell didn't do that much to prepare me for my eventual specialty. Cornell had some very good courses on China in those days, but I didn't have the foresight to take any, and I only took introductory sociology in my final semester, as I coasted toward graduation.

After the Kennedy assassination I decided not to pursue graduate work in physics, but instead to apply to MA programs in Russian Studies, and after graduation I entered the program at Harvard, where initially I lived in a Cambridge rooming house with Cornell classmates, Dave Gunning and Jim Munsell, who were beginning Harvard Law School. I had already taken so many courses on the Soviet Union at Cornell that I decided to enroll in some courses on the other communist giant, China, and before long I was hooked, especially after Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which began with the Party leader (Mao) mobilizing student Red Guards to attack the Party elite, which would never have happened in Brezhnev's USSR. But I hadn't started studying Chinese yet, so in the summer of 1966 I scurried back to Cornell to take an intensive Mandarin language class (again, tuition-free). Since I wanted to become an academic, I eventually decided to pursue a doctorate at Harvard in sociology after my MA, despite it being the same field as my father, thinking that sociology would give me the best preparation for a career researching either the Soviet Union or China.

A sequence of serendipities tipped the scale in favor of specializing on contemporary China rather than the Soviet Union. In 1966 I had married Veronica (Ronnie) Mueller, and by 1968 we had a son, Adam. If I went to the USSR on the official exchange program for my thesis research, Ronnie and Adam would have to stay behind. But I also applied for and was awarded a fellowship to travel to Hong Kong (with my family) to carry out a different thesis project based upon interviews with refugees from the PRC. In addition, the University of Michigan had received a Ford Foundation grant to hire starting assistant professors in neglected fields (including sociology) specializing on contemporary China, and Michigan took a gamble by offering me a job even before I departed for Hong Kong, as well as providing a year of salary to write up my thesis in Ann Arbor before I would have to start teaching. Needless to say, I have been grateful ever since that Michigan was willing to take a gamble on me.

I was taking a gamble myself, because I had never been to China, and as I embarked on my career, it was not clear that I would be able to visit, much less to do research in China or

have students and collaborators from the PRC. I made my first visit to China (of more than 2 dozen, most recently in 2019) in 1973, as a China specialist accompanying a delegation of child psychologists that included Cornell professor (and family friend) Urie Bronfenbrenner. Sociology had been abolished as a discipline by Mao in the 1950s and was not “rehabilitated” until after his death in 1976. Americans could not conduct research within China until after diplomatic relations were established in 1979.

However, Hong Kong, then still a British colony, had developed the infrastructure to facilitate research on the PRC at a distance, and my first three year-long projects were all carried out there via interviewing refugees from China, who were treated as ethnographic informants about the communities and organizations they had left behind. My thesis project based upon my interviews in 1968-69 became my first book, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (1974). I spent 1973-74 and 1977-78 conducting new rounds of interviews in Hong Kong that became my books, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (1978) and *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (1984), the latter two written in collaboration with University of Chicago sociologist, Bill Parish, who had received his PhD from Cornell.

I spent the years from 1969-1994 on the faculty in sociology and China studies at the University of Michigan, which provided a very resource-rich and supportive environment in which to launch my career. The Department of Sociology was very strong, with impressive colleagues and very talented students, by the 1980s beginning to include graduate students from the PRC. Curiously, one of the talented graduate students was Bill Lacy, who had taken a detour for military service and an MA elsewhere before arriving in Ann Arbor to pursue a PhD in sociology and social psychology. (Bill prevented me from lording it over him by running me around the local tennis courts and totally humiliating me on the squash courts.) Michigan’s Center for Chinese Studies was in those days perhaps the strongest such center in the US. When it became possible for Americans to conduct research within China, my location at Michigan, with its strong reputation in survey research training, helped me retool myself to conduct large scale sample surveys within the PRC.

In general in my research on contemporary China I have explored many aspects of social patterns and change trends. Although my original interest in China was stimulated by Mao’s claim that China would construct a more pure form of socialism than the USSR, starting with the Cultural Revolution, after his death when China changed course and began its dramatic post-socialist transition, I didn’t lose interest, particularly because the subsequent economic boom was so unexpected and successful (particularly compared with the chaotic post-socialist transitions in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe). In addition, I found it paradoxical that at roughly the same time that China launched its market reforms and partial relaxation of controls over culture and private life, that society was launching its decades-long one-child policy, which tightened controls over the most intimate of behaviors, how many babies families could have. So over the course of my career I have had no trouble finding interesting China topics to research, including not only village and city organization, but also family change patterns, inequality trends, gender relations, and the peculiar history and social consequences of the one-child policy. My primary research focus recently has been on how ordinary Chinese citizens view the sharp rise of income and other inequalities in the post-Mao era, views explored through three China national attitude surveys I directed, in 2004, 2009, and 2014. (See my book, *Myth of the Social Volcano*, 2010.)

While at Michigan and later in my career, I divided my teaching roughly equally between lecture courses and seminars on contemporary Chinese society and general sociology courses

in my other specialties, particularly family sociology (3 of the books I have published are in family sociology) and the sociology of development. Ann Arbor also turned out to be a very good place to raise a family, and my children, Adam and Tracy, both attended high school there and then graduated from the University of Michigan.

In 1994 I resigned from Michigan and began teaching at George Washington University, a transition linked to a change in my family situation. By the late 1980s my marriage to Ronnie was ending, and while I was in Chengdu, Sichuan, directing my first PRC survey project (focusing on the change from arranged to free choice marriages in the lives of women of that city), I was paid a site visit by the new grant officer in the program in the National Science Foundation that had funded my project, Alice Hogan. Alice had received an MA in Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, but I had not really known her there. But later on, after my return from Chengdu, I saw more of Alice and eventually in 1991 we got married. By then I had learned that she was also a Cornell grad (1974), and that she had a more proper Chinese studies background than I did, having been trained in the Cornell FALCON program. During the early years of our marriage we were a commuting couple, until an offer to me from GW made it possible for us to begin “post-marital cohabitation.” During my years at GW we also became a Chinese family, after we adopted our daughter, Julia, from China in 1994 as a 9-month old, making us beneficiaries of China’s awful national policy.

Our new family stability did not last long, since the Harvard Department of Sociology, having seen the departure of its China sociologist, my former Michigan student, Andy Walder (who now teaches at Stanford), began trying to recruit me as his replacement. Eventually I agreed, moving from GW to Harvard in 2000, but that decision led to a new complicated situation of commuting, with me flying to Cambridge each week to meet my classes the first two years, and then after our move to Massachusetts, Alice combining commuting back to DC with tele-commuting for the next 5 years, until she negotiated early retirement from NSF in 2007.

So for the last 15 years of my teaching career I was back at Harvard, working in the same building as when I was a graduate student 40+ years earlier, although now they gave me a better office. At Harvard I was again blessed by having talented colleagues in sociology, a very strong and resource-rich Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, and very bright students to teach and train. By prior agreement, after I retired from teaching in 2015 Alice and I moved back to the DC area, and we now reside in the suburb of Kensington, MD. Since my retirement Alice and I have spent very enjoyable times “down under,” first through a visiting fellow post at the University of Melbourne for 3 months each year, 2017-19, and then in 2020 with a similar gig at Wellington University in New Zealand, which was cut short by the pandemic. I also have a courtesy affiliation back at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at GW, which may draw me back into the city occasionally once normal times resume.

All in all, it has been a very rewarding career. My one regret, particularly in these pandemic times, is that my children and grandchildren are far away. Adam and his wife live in Berkeley, Tracy in Hawaii, and Julia in Seattle, and my 3 grandchildren are in disrupted college studies, at UC-Berkeley, University of Nebraska, and Lewis & Clark College.

A fuller account of my career can be found in the *Annual Review of Sociology*: <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-soc-081320-112539>

Additional details about my life and career can be found on my Harvard faculty website, see: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/martinwhyte/home>