

# Obituary

JAMES R. TOWNSEND

(November 9, 1932–January 17, 2004)

When James R. Townsend, Professor Emeritus of Political Science and East Asian Studies at the University of Washington, passed away on January 17, 2004, the field of Chinese politics lost one of its most thoughtful and insightful pioneers. Trained under Professor Robert Scalapino at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Jim Townsend taught at UC Berkeley for a number of years until he was hired away by the University of Washington in Seattle in 1968. He remained at Washington until his retirement in 1992.

Professor Townsend's first book, *Political Participation in Communist China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), was a landmark study in the then still quite new effort to integrate China into the discipline of political science. By referring to his subject as "participation" rather than "mobilization," Townsend signaled his repudiation of the previously dominant totalitarian model of Communist systems and his resolution to compare the Chinese case with a broader range of other countries. As he put it, "the political awakening of the Chinese people is comparable to similar trends elsewhere, whether recently begun or long established, and is directly relevant to a general understanding of political development" (p. 2). Despite this insistence upon comparability, Townsend also emphasized the distinctiveness of political participation in Communist China, stemming from historical precedents in the imperial and Republican periods as well as from more recent Maoist innovations. Although Townsend acknowledged that the masses' influence on government policy making was limited, his book was nevertheless one of the earliest efforts to understand Communist Chinese politics as an interactive process that involved ordinary people as well as elites. The study is noteworthy for its exhaustive use of primary sources (available outside China) as well as its effective and even-handed treatment of complex and controversial issues. Completed at a time when it was impossible for American scholars to conduct research inside China, the study still stands as an important and illuminating analysis of pre-Cultural Revolution political institutions and practices.

Townsend's balanced handling of competing approaches was equally evident in successive editions of his popular textbook, *Politics in China* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974, 1980, 1986), in which he provided an informative introduction to alternative analytical perspectives as well as to the nuts and bolts of the Chinese political system itself. His commitment to public education on China was reflected not only in writing a textbook but also in editing *The People's Republic of China: A Basic Handbook* (New York: Council on International and Public Affairs, 1979, 1981, 1982) and in serving as director of the Seattle China Council for a number of years.

Professor Townsend's clear-headed and fair-minded approach to scholarship earned him admiration and affection among colleagues and students alike. Although he supervised more than his share of doctoral dissertations and master's theses over the years, Jim's greatest satisfaction seemed to derive from training foreign students—not only at the University of Washington but also during two years (1986–87 and 1990–91) as an Adjunct Professor at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and

American Studies at Nanjing University. Many of his former students are now teaching at major institutions in Asia (Japan and Korea but especially China) as well as in the United States.

Jim Townsend will be remembered for the range and quality of his scholarship and, among those who knew him personally, for his quiet modesty, quick wit, unflappable equanimity, and absolute integrity.

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