

Obituaries

C. MARTIN WILBUR (1907–1997)

C. Martin Wilbur, George Sansom Professor Emeritus of Chinese History at Columbia University, died in Haverford, Pennsylvania, on June 18, 1997. The foremost scholar in the United States of China's Nationalist Revolution, Wilbur played a pioneering role in developing American historiography of China's republican era, a role comparable to that played by John King Fairbank for the late imperial era. As cofounder, long-time director, and tireless fundraiser for Columbia's East Asian Institute, he was a key figure in the use of regional studies institutes to broaden the scope of American higher education in the post-World War II decades. As founder and long-time chair of Columbia's University Seminar on Modern China, he guided the study of that subject throughout the New York metropolitan area and beyond. As the moving force behind the Chinese Oral History Project, he was a major contributor to preserving the historical archive of twentieth-century Chinese history. And as a trainer of graduate students at Columbia from 1947 to 1976, along with Fairbank he played the major role in peopling the profession, as the discipline of Chinese history emerged to become a standard component of American academic life.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Wilbur grew up in China as the son of a YMCA family. He graduated from Oberlin in 1931 and received his doctorate from Columbia in 1941. Serving as Curator of Chinese Archeology and Ethnology at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, he began his scholarly career as an historian of the Han. His first monograph, *Slavery in China During the Former Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.–A.D. 25* (Field Museum, 1943), remains the standard work in English on that subject. Turning thereafter to the historical study of events he had lived through as a youth, he published many influential books and articles on the Nationalist and Communist movements. Among the books are *Sun Yat-sen: Frustrated Patriot* (Columbia, 1976), *The Nationalist Revolution and China, 1923–1928* (Cambridge, 1983), and *Missionaries of Revolution: Soviet Advisers and Nationalist China, 1920–1927*, with Julie Lien-yang How (Harvard, 1989).

Marty Wilbur was a kind man, an accessible and supportive colleague, and a devoted and beloved teacher. He was broadly curious, and flexible in entertaining student research interests which varied widely from own. He set high standards of his students, as he did of himself, demanding that historical scholarship be based on exhaustive research, demonstrate independent critical judgement, and avoid simplistic or conventional answers to complex questions. A man with deeply held political convictions, he insisted that the duty of the historian was to remain as faithful as possible to the sources, and not allow history to become the servant of politics.

From 1971–72, C. Martin Wilbur was President of the Association for Asian Studies.

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