



DENIS TWITCHETT

Denis Crispin Twitchett

1925–2006

I

DENIS CRISPIN TWITCHETT was born on 23 September 1925, the elder of two sons of Crispin William Twitchett, born 5 August 1897, died 6 August 1979, an architectural draftsman who worked mainly on ornamental iron-work for cathedrals and large houses. His mother, Gladys Claire Twitchett, née Goff, was born 1 May 1898, and died 8 January 1969. She was Russian by origin: her grandfather had left Russia for Switzerland in about 1870 and her father had lived in Switzerland until the age of five, when he was sent to England. The family name, originally Zwezdakoff, was changed to Swezdakoff in Switzerland and then to Goff in England. But this Russian origin came as a surprise to Denis Twitchett, who learnt of it only when being vetted for security in connection with his naval service in the Second World War.

Twitchett was confirmed as a member of the Church of England by the Bishop of Kensington at Heston Parish Church on 14 May 1941. Though he subsequently followed no religious rule, he was, decades later, to be supportive of his wife's commitment to Anglicanism. He was educated at Isleworth County School, before being awarded a State Scholarship to study Geography at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. The Second World War then intervened to change his career: he attended the University of Liverpool from 1942 to 1943 as a naval cadet, reading geography. Here, his interest in China was aroused for the first time by hearing lectures on its geography. He underwent a period of six months training in Japanese

at Bletchley Park, followed by service in the Royal Naval Intelligence Division as a Japanese Language Officer, operating in Ceylon.

His service experience remained with him and later gave him useful contacts. It was said, for example, that when in 1970 his appointment to a Lectureship in Chinese Studies of Wing Commander R. P. Sloss (1927–2007) ran into difficulties with the Ministry of Defence, these were resolved when Twitchett was able to call on an old contact, by then very senior, from his naval days.

From 1946 to 1947 he studied Modern Chinese at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and from 1947 to 1950 he read at Cambridge for the Oriental Studies Tripos under Professor Gustav Haloun (1898–1951), Leipzig-trained and responsible for the major expansion of the University Library's Chinese holdings after the Second World War. Twitchett sat Part I of the Oriental Languages Tripos in 1949, and Part II the following year, when Professor Haloun and A. R. (Bertie) Davis (1924–83) were Examiners. In both Parts he was in the First Class. After Part II, he was awarded the E. G. Browne Prize in Oriental Languages by the Faculty of Oriental Studies, jointly with B. C. McKillop (1921–89) of Queens' College, and was elected a Scholar of St Catharine's. McKillop went on to serve at the University of Sydney but, in marked contrast to Twitchett himself, produced no publications of note. He was what Twitchett drily called 'strictly a non-producer', a reproach that carried with it all Twitchett's deep professional commitment to continuous publication of research. The only other candidate in Chinese Studies was awarded an Upper Second. The Chinese Lecturer during his residence as an undergraduate was Mrs Yang Wang Huan. But, if he went through an elementary training in the spoken language, like others of his generation in Sinology, Twitchett never spoke Chinese with any fluency. In his case though, his unwillingness to speak the Chinese vernacular was reinforced by his complex relationship with the China of the period and its political turmoil. He did, however, study the Confucian canonical *Four Books* under A. C. Moule (1873–1957), the successor at Cambridge to H. A. Giles (1845–1935) as Professor of Chinese. He also attended lectures by the scholar of Japanese literature Donald Keene, an Assistant Lecturer in Japanese for three years from 1949, and in his recollection of the Cambridge phase of his career, Keene made what may have been a reference to him as one of two students who went on to distinguished academic careers.¹

¹ Donald Keene, *On Familiar Terms: a Journey Across Cultures* (New York, 1994), p. 103.

He then registered for the Ph.D. degree and wrote what he called 'a quick thesis on T'ang financial institutions'. His supervisor was again the Professor of Chinese, Gustav Haloun. He himself related how Haloun needed persuasion that a topic in medieval history, as opposed to the early or classical period, the Zhou dynasty to the end of the Han, was academically respectable. He told how Haloun objected: 'This is not history; it is journalism.' His thesis was in fact an annotated translation of the 'Monograph on food and goods' (*Shihuo zhi*) of the *Old Tang History* (*Jiu Tang shu*) of 945 CE. He read the text with Piet van der Loon (1920–2002), appointed to a Lectureship at Cambridge in 1948. The two young scholars shared the same training in philology and textual criticism, the 'high Sinology' of the pre-war European tradition, and would have analysed the language of early texts in much the same way. But their perspectives on China were increasingly to diverge. Van der Loon engaged compulsively with Chinese society, especially regional society, at grass-roots level, searching for its chthonic energies, while Twitchett never wholly relinquished the top-down outlook that the copious and detailed official and institutional sources he dealt with embodied. The difference was sustained through to their retirements: van der Loon went to south China for field-work, even at the risk of ill-health; Twitchett set foot on the soil of the People's Republic only for the very briefest of private visits in 1981. But his doctoral research laid the basis for the first phase of an extremely productive record of publication. It did so in two directions, first that of economic history and financial administration, and secondly that of institutional history and its integral connection with the history of the texts that recorded it.

Twitchett was then seconded to the University of Tokyo and the Tooyoo Bunka Kenkyuujō, where from 1953 to 1954 he studied under the great historian of Tang law and institutions Niida Noboru (1904–66). He later recalled Niida as a friend as well as a major academic influence.² From this period of his career, too, he retained a lifelong respect for the best Japanese scholars of China and for the culture of Japan. He revisited Japan and kept in contact with a number of his colleagues there. He knew Japanese history well, and later even remarked that, had he been allowed his time again, he would have specialised not in medieval Chinese history but in the extraordinarily well-documented economic history of Edo period Japan. But his outlook on Japanese scholarship was selective, favouring the rigorous empirical approach of the best of the Kyoto tradition: he was to

² See his 'Niida Noboru and Chinese legal history', *Asia Major*, NS 12.2 (1967), 218–28.

criticise a colleague for indebtedness to more doctrinaire and schematic Japanese approaches to Chinese sources.³ In 1953, he married Ichikawa Umeko, whose father was a textile dyer and fabric designer in Tokyo and whom he met there.

He returned to the United Kingdom in 1954, to be awarded the Ph.D. Degree by the University of Cambridge in 1955. From 1954 to 1956 he served as Lecturer in Far Eastern History at SOAS, when Walter Simon (1893–1981, elected FBA in 1956) held the Chair of Chinese.

He then resumed his Cambridge career, being appointed Lecturer in Classical Chinese at Cambridge. The Professor of Chinese at this time was Edwin Pulleyblank, a Canadian whose first degree had been in Classics and who, having trained in Chinese Studies at SOAS, had been elected to the Chair in 1953. Pulleyblank was also, like Twitchett, a specialist in Tang history and, for a period of a decade or so, ‘Pulleyblank and Twitchett’ were frequently mentioned in the same breath, as the leading productive Western experts in the history of the Tang dynasty, and the comparison between them was a frequent topic. Tradition had it that ‘Pulleyblank thought in zig-zags, while Twitchett thought along straight lines, continuous and direct.’ There was something in this: Pulleyblank, having made a seminal and lasting contribution to Tang studies in his *The Background to the Rebellion of An Lu-shan*,⁴ let his interests migrate to historical phonology, and eventually to the comparison and possible connection, in the remote past, between Sinitic and Indo-European languages. Twitchett never relinquished his primary commitment to the medieval history of China, and it was in this field that his enormous contribution of published research was principally to be made.

From service under Pulleyblank at Cambridge, London and then at Cambridge again, a full Chair for himself beckoned, and from 1960 to 1968 Twitchett succeeded Walter Simon as Professor of Chinese at SOAS. A postcard from his long term friend Arthur Wright (1913–76) prominently displayed on his mantelpiece for supervision pupils making the journey to Arbury Road in North Cambridge for their tutorials encouraged him, as Denis, ‘to menace from new heights’ in his new post. At SOAS he was now *ex officio* Head of the Far East Department, and in that capacity served on the Heads of Departments Committee and the

³Review of Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (London, 1973), ‘The real problems of Chinese history’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Aug., p. 948. This is of course an unsigned review.

⁴E. G. Pulleyblank, *The Background to the Rebellion of An Lu-shan* (London, 1955).

Academic Board and the University's Board of Studies. This was the period, too, when he was most active in the subject nationally. But in 1967 Pulleyblank had decided to return with his wife to his native Canada to take up a chair at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. With the Cambridge Chair vacant, Twitchett returned there, succeeding Pulleyblank as Professor of Chinese and serving from 1968 until 1980.

In Chinese Studies, through these decades, changes were enormous. In China itself, the Mao regime was deeply hostile to meaningful academic research. Contact with Chinese academia was all but impossible. Denis Twitchett himself wrote later of '... the unbelievable scale of the human suffering and the appalling damage that had been wrought by [Mao's] Cultural Revolution'. A limited recovery was only possible after Mao's death in 1976. When it came, as Twitchett himself observed, it was led by the spectacular retrievals of documentary sources and archaeological material, mainly from the early period, but also from the medieval age. For the Chinese, these discoveries were a matter of cultural pride and were therefore more easily presented to the public than interpretative scholarship. Denis Twitchett kept himself fully abreast of these retrievals and, indeed, it will be shown below that his response to them helped shaped his own research output.

The domination of post-1949 Chinese academia by crude political interests was therefore deeply unsympathetic to him. In Cambridge and London in the 1960s and 1970s, left-wing idealists and not a few students saw in Maoism values that might be endorsed beyond China. Among them were several senior Cambridge figures who enjoyed celebrity, Joan Robinson (1903–83, elected FBA in 1958) and Joseph Needham (1900–95, elected FBA in 1971) being the best known. In the late 1960s, the student body was also affected by events in Paris and Berlin, and by protest against the American-led Vietnam War. Strong though they were, Denis Twitchett did not engage in any way with these currents; nor was he ever an advocate of the bitter opponents of the Communist Party in China, the Guomindang. He also resisted any attempt to force Chinese history into predetermined schemes: 'We do not need,' he wrote many years later, 'grand general theories accounting for the development of mankind, and we have no need ... to try to make our picture of China fit into them.' His main target here was Marxism, which he saw as having 'cast a blight over Chinese historiography in the past half-century and more'.⁵ A remark that could be made

⁵Fu Ssu-nien Memorial Lectures, 1996 (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1997).

in print, reflectively, in 1996 would have been little less than incendiary if given in connection with China in the 1960s.

Twitchett's response to the feverish atmosphere of the late 1960s was rather given through his initiatives in promoting language teaching and in the weightier arena of his appointments. He had always been interested in fostering the early acquisition of Chinese by secondary schoolchildren, for at SOAS he had 'brokered a deal with thirty secondary schools around the country to start teaching Chinese with the support of his department, aiming both to increase numbers and to improve standards'. In the event, only Abingdon School managed to implement a long-lasting programme, appointing a succession of SOAS graduates as teachers.⁶ He took other initiatives at this period to testify to his ambition to provide general leadership for Chinese Studies. In 1966, he called a meeting in London to sound out opinion on founding a professional association for scholars of China. Names for membership of a projected council were even put forward. But some dissent, inspired by left-wing interests, was voiced and in the event the scheme never proceeded.

Twitchett, however, encouraged basic language programmes in other ways. Towards the end of his SOAS tenure, he designed and tried to have endorsed a pre-university language course that would have required students selected to read Chinese in British university centres of Chinese Studies to attend a year of intensive language teaching before taking up the subject at university level. The scheme had considerable strengths. But there was a prolonged argument between the universities involved about where the school was to be sited, and the newer departments of Chinese at least feared for their own independence. The eventual outcome was, to Twitchett's frustration, that the University Grants Committee withdrew its offer of funding for the project.

Returning to Cambridge in 1968, he fostered the development of Chinese linguistics and modern language teaching and made appointments in early and dynastic Chinese history, rather than the less stable field of China's post-1949 history. The brilliant but maverick historian Mark Elvin was Assistant Lecturer in Modern Chinese History from 1964 until 1969, but the appointment was not renewed and upgraded. He went on to serve at Glasgow, Oxford and the Australian National University, continuing to produce provocative, influential and intellectually penetrat-

⁶Hugh Baker, 'And what should they know of SOAS, who only SOAS know?', in David Arnold and Christopher Shackle (eds.), *SOAS Since the Sixties* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2003), p. 171.

ing scholarship. Martin Bernal, whose left-wing credentials as the son of Joseph Needham's friend J. D. Bernal (1901–71) were such that he was, exceptionally, allowed to study in Beijing in the early 1960s, and who conducted an eloquent campaign in Cambridge against the Vietnam War, was a Research Fellow at King's over the same time. He offered lectures on 'Chinese Society during the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties', and 'Nationalism and Communism in Modern China' in the year 1967–8, but was not considered for an established university post. When Elvin's post in Modern Chinese History became vacant, Twitchett rather appointed a medieval historian, requiring that he cover basic modern literary texts in the Tripos. He repeated a similar pattern in 1974, appointing Timothy Barrett, a Cambridge graduate whose doctoral work had been in Religious Studies under Twitchett's former SOAS colleague Stanley Weinstein at Yale, to an Assistant Lectureship. Barrett, who has had a distinguished career and currently holds the Chair of East Asian History at SOAS, was also a medievalist.

Out of his failure to establish a pre-university school, however, came a programme known at Cambridge as the Chinese Language Project. Using a grant that he secured from the Nuffield Foundation, Twitchett appointed an Assistant Director in Research and two language teachers. The programme was overseen by a body with cross-university membership, and its aim was to produce a new language primer for use in university courses. It was run by Wing Commander R. P. Sloss, seconded from teaching Chinese in the Royal Air Force, who now became a University Lecturer in Chinese and served in Cambridge until his retirement. A small number of highly motivated graduate students, some, like the *New York Times* correspondent, and later for seven years the newspaper's Executive Editor, Joseph Lelyveld, already well-advanced in their professions, were admitted and taught the modern language intensively for a year. The Chinese Language Project lasted until the grant ran out in 1973. Its students, highly dedicated, worked at breakneck speed and achieved a commendable standard. They were able, for example, to read the text of one of the Cultural Revolution period 'revolutionary operas', though perhaps at the cost of seriousness over its content.

The need to train more young professionals in the modern Chinese language in this way has been generally acknowledged. But integrating 'conversion courses' like this into existing research and degree-giving programmes has always presented a challenge. The Chinese Language Project, and indeed Twitchett's general concern for better and more easily available basic Chinese language training, anticipated the graduate conversion

courses that a number of United Kingdom Chinese Studies departments started with government funding in 2000. The need remains, and the challenge of achieving an acceptable standard in a short time, for all the professionalisation of 'second language acquisition' that has taken place since the Chinese Language Project, is still there. Thirty years earlier, Twitchett's fingers had been burnt, and the underlying cause was the lack of resources in the British university system. This may be a reason for his beginning, in the course of the 1970s, to look increasingly to North America for his own future. In the larger and better funded programmes there, provision of conversion courses and elementary language teaching was more comprehensive. There was thus more scope to pursue graduate teaching, research and editorial commitments.

Bob Sloss continued to serve as a Lecturer in Chinese after the Project closed. Despite a difficult career as Lecturer, he remained devoted to Twitchett, and it fell to him to deliver a moving tribute at Twitchett's funeral in Madingley Church, outside Cambridge.

Following the failure of his own initiative of 1966, Denis Twitchett also stood aloof from the professional associations, some of which now underwent a period of turmoil at the hands of Maoist enthusiasts. He was not a member of the delegation of British Sinologists who visited China in 1974, and whose falling out among each other became something of a *cause célèbre* in the lore of the subject. He was not a member either of the quaintly called Younger Sinologists, who held regular, Europe-wide conferences in which his Cambridge colleague Piet van der Loon played a leading part. And he stayed away from the British Association of Chinese Studies, founded in the YMCA at Kowloon following the more successful visit a group of Younger Sinologists made to China in the spring of 1976. Indeed, tradition has it that one of the aims of this new association was to shrug off perceived direction from above and to provide a new voice to government, independent of his. But he always kept up his contacts with younger Sinologists, both in the United Kingdom and beyond. He invited two, Tonami Mamoru and Ikeda On, now senior and highly respected in the field of Tang Studies, to take part in a seminal Tang Studies conference at Cambridge in 1969. He also supervised a larger than average number of doctoral students, including scholars who went on to serve in Australia, Japan, Korea, and the United Kingdom.

From 1974 on, Twitchett made frequent visits to the United States and laid the basis for his move to Princeton. Up to the early 1970s, his impressions of Chinese Studies in North America had not been altogether positive, and he would still maintain that British traditions, and particularly

that of the single subject degree, made the United Kingdom the best place in which to research and teach. His standard advice to younger colleagues tempted by the offer of appointments in North America was that they should relent only if they were quite sure that they were really wanted in the institutions concerned. He finally left the University of Cambridge in 1980, serving at Princeton as the first Gordon Wu Professor until 1994. Here, he continued his editorial work and his research activities. He also served on the China Committee of the American Council of Learned Societies, a substantial source of financial support for his editorial and conference activities from the 1960s on. The 'Memorial Resolution' read on his death before the Faculty at Princeton also spoke of his supervising 'a steady stream of dissertations on middle-period history, and his students [going] on to academic positions in Taiwan, Singapore and the United States, including Princeton'.

But his English roots held good, and in 1994 he retired to the same house in North Cambridge where he had been since the start of his Cambridge career. He lived there in comfortable and greatly extended premises, with his son Peter and grandchildren, until his death in February 2006.

II

If Twitchett was infallible in identifying cant and resisted left-wing ideologues, he was himself far from being a scholar in a traditional, conservative mould. He certainly admired a number of scholars in the field; but they were from the Continent. They included Henri Maspero (1863–1945), Etienne Balazs (1905–63), scholars who had bitter experience, in Maspero's case fatal, of the all-powerful state, and Marcel Granet (1884–1940), whose anthropologically inspired reinterpretation of the canonical *Book of Songs* was influential. More recently the historian of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese poetry Paul Demiéville (1894–1979, FBA 1969) and Jacques Gernet (1921– , FBA 1996), whose instinct for the economic key echoed his own, were other French figures whom he admired.

His was, moreover, the generation whose publications finally and irrevocably changed the tone of British scholarly writing on China and expanded its range. The previous generation had been dominated by Arthur Waley (1889–1966, elected FBA in 1945). Waley was a translator; whose first interest was in literature. He wrote for a sophisticated general readership. His appeal, 'fresh as paint', a reviewer exclaimed, depended on

the urbanity of his English renderings and his extraordinarily sure-footed ability to locate Chinese and Japanese sources that would transpose well into English. In that sense, Waley was an heir to the approach of H. A. Giles (1845–1935), the second Professor of Chinese at Cambridge, who translated what he called ‘gems of Chinese verse’ for a genteel Edwardian readership.

Twitchett recognised the quality of Waley’s scholarship and his erudition; but he disliked the implicit elitism of the Bloomsbury Group, and his engagement with Chinese history was from the start refreshingly different. Waley, for example, seems implicitly to suggest that the great Tang dynasty verse writer and moderate official Bai Juyi (772–846 CE) would have been spiritually at home, at least in the period of his retirement at Luoyang, in one of the deeper chairs in London’s liberal club-land. He even equated the composing of Bai Juyi’s fifty or so poems of political protest of the decade 795–805 with ‘writing a letter to *The Times*’.⁷ Twitchett had a long-term interest in Bai Juyi’s extensive collection, but saw in the same series of protest poems not an act of urbanity, but rather a chance for the modern scholar to offer penetrating and wide-ranging analysis of the appalling economic and political problems that faced the Tang court and its administrators at that time.

If his relations with Arthur Waley were cordial and admiring, those with the second towering figure in mid-century British scholarship on China, namely Joseph Needham, were less successful. Like Waley, Needham was Cambridge-trained, and in a subject not connected with China. But unlike Waley, Needham remained in Cambridge all his life. Some commentators ascribed the distance between them to Twitchett’s review in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* of Volume III of Needham’s great series *Science and Civilization in China*. Yet, rereading this review, it is in the main constructive and welcoming rather than hostile. Generally positive in tone, such a review would hardly be a cause of permanent alienation between professional colleagues serving in the same institution.⁸ Twitchett was certainly not alone in having a cautious attitude to Needham’s basic Sinology, his approach to texts and his views on how Chinese society operated at all levels. His reservations were shared by his Cambridge colleague Piet van der Loon, himself an exponent of rigorous philological and textual–historical standards. But Twitchett also paid

⁷ Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chu-I* (London, 1949), p. 62.

⁸ D. C. Twitchett, review of Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China, Volume III, Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth*, xlvii, 877 pp., 75 plates (Cambridge, 1959), *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 35 Part I (1962), 186–9.

tribute to Needham in various ways, commending to undergraduates, for example, Needham's essay on the Chinese concept of time.⁹

Yet Needham referred to a 'plate glass window' existing between himself and the Faculty of Oriental Studies. Needham of course was set on founding his own institute, and in making it legally and operationally quite separate from the University while being virtually embedded in and dependent on it. He and Lu Gwei-Djen (1904–91) declined to entertain any possibility that the Needham Research Institute might ever offer a teaching programme, though they conceded that they 'could not bind [their] successors'. Perhaps this refusal to consider teaching ironically made the separation of the Faculty and the Institute, *de facto* as well as *de jure*, easier. For indeed the Institute went its separate way. By 1985, when Needham appealed to the richer Cambridge undergraduate colleges for financial support for a grand new building and received nothing apart from a paltry donation from Clare Hall, relations were distinctly cool. Twitchett had left some years earlier for the American phase of his career. But it is hard to believe that he would have encouraged support for a project over which he retained misgivings. The Needham Institute, the enormous prestige of Needham's name in East Asia, which many there confused with the University's programme in Chinese Studies, the uneven but occasionally brilliant quality of its published research, and perhaps especially its determined efforts to conduct separate fund-raising in East Asia for its own operation, remained something of a problem for the Chinese section of the Faculty of Oriental Studies and for Twitchett's successors in the Chair of Chinese. But happily, the prospects for fruitful and irenic collaboration are now brighter than hitherto. And in the end Denis Twitchett too paid tribute, at least in conversation, to Needham's colossal achievement in founding the discipline of the History of Chinese Science, calling him 'an impressive figure'.

To Laurence Picken (1909–2007, elected FBA 1973),¹⁰ like Needham a Cambridge scientist who developed an intense interest in China and made substantial contributions, in his case to the history of Tang court music, Twitchett offered only support and encouragement. He saw in Picken's fastidious approach to textual evidence and his highly original achievement in recovering from Japanese sources the melodic lines of Tang court ritual music the remarkable research achievement that it was.

⁹Joseph Needham, 'Time and eastern man', in his *The Grand Titration* (London, 1969), pp. 218–98.

¹⁰On whom see the memoir in this volume (pp. 227–55) by Richard Widdess.

It took a rather special set of circumstances to reverse Twitchett's resistance to staying for any length of time in any part of Chinese East Asia. Through his tenure in America, he had, in a number of highly able and bicultural Chinese colleagues from Taiwan, a ready contact with Taiwan academia and with its supreme body, the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica. It was their role to persuade him to change his mind and visit Taiwan. He did so in 1996, accepting the invitation of the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica at Nankang in the suburbs of Taipei to deliver the Fu Ssu-nien Memorial Lectures. During his three-week visit there he was treated with great courtesy, and his visit remained a source of pleasure to him for many years. More important, he left in the published text of his three lectures an invaluable record of his own experience and outlook on the way the subject had developed in the course of his career. After his death, his own book collection was secured by the Fu Ssu-nien Library and is now housed there.

III

Twitchett's career in scholarship spanned a period when seismic changes took place in East Asia. When he first took up Japanese, Britain was in a total land and sea war with Japan, while on the Asian mainland the Nationalist Chinese state was struggling to confront both the Japanese invaders and the Communist forces. By the time in 1950 he graduated in Chinese Studies, the Communist regime was firmly in control of China. The Korean War followed, and in it British and Chinese armies fought each other savagely on the Peninsula. Only after 1979 did the political situation in East Asia achieve some stability and the prospects for engagement with China improve. But even so, at the time of his death in early 2006 the new East Asian and global order was only beginning to emerge.

If the changes in the political situation in China were enormous, the changes in conditions for serving academics in East Asian Studies were no less great. When Twitchett started in research, it took him seven weeks to make the journey by ship to East Asia. The typewriter and carbon copies were the main means of producing and reproducing texts. Chinese was inserted into an English text either by hand or by mimeograph, or in a final type-set version, by laborious manual insertion of typeface. By the time he retired, East Asia was less than a day away by air and the digital revolution had utterly changed the way texts were produced for publication.

Twitchett was always at the forefront in exploiting the great changes that took place. He had every reason for confidence. He knew the European languages from his schooldays and, by virtue of his command of East Asian written languages, was well qualified to provide intellectual and scholarly leadership. His reading of academic Japanese was effortless and this gave him ready access to the best body of secondary scholarship on medieval Chinese economic history of the middle decades of the twentieth century. Early in his career, no less a scholar than Lien-sheng Yang of Harvard (1914–90) praised his command of the documentary language of medieval Chinese sources. He had a keen appetite for any secondary scholarship within his larger field that came to his notice, and he read fast. He had indeed a powerful ability to ‘think in straight lines’, to isolate, explore and then represent in scholarly articles issues in social and economic and institutional history that less gifted scholars might have struggled to identify. The result was, over some four decades, a series of articles that were pioneering in their field and most of which have remarkably stood the test of time.

He once said of himself that he ‘began life as a physical geographer, graduated in the high tradition of European Sinology, worked in the field of economic history and administer[ed] a department of languages and literature’. All these very different fields exerted profound influence on his scholarship, interacting to make him the rounded humanist scholar that he became. The one plank that was missing from his early training was that of history itself. He himself related how in 1954, on appointment as Lecturer in Far Eastern History at SOAS, he ‘had never had a course in any sort of history since [he] left school’. He simply taught himself to be a historian through the experience of research and teaching. His success in this is an irony, because few reading his mature scholarship, or using the volumes of *The Cambridge History of China* that he designed and edited, would guess that he had never been formally trained as a historian. The word ‘interdisciplinary’ is now facile, a label often used in the field of Chinese Studies to mask the occasional flimsiness of postgraduate courses. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the disciplines more nearly resembled separate fiefs, it perhaps meant more.

His early training as a physical geographer helped shape his technical approach to issues in the history of Chinese administration. He had a strong instinct to account for what actually happened at the interface between administration and society. In the Chinese tradition an ability to identify ‘administrative reality’, in the felicitous phrase of Etienne Balasz, and separate it off from ideological posturing was an essential skill for the

economic historian. His sense of topography lent clarity and precision to his presentation of the often volatile and bewildering history of outlying regions of the vast Tang empire, including the regions of modern Xinjiang, Tibet and Mongolia. His skill as a geographer and interest in cartography resulted in his being co-editor of *The Times Atlas of China*.¹¹

His experience of study under Niida Noboru gave him a sense of the enormous scale and complexity of the record of medieval Chinese administrative institutions. He rapidly mastered the technicalities of the medieval system of statutory and penal law. He was, for example, able to lecture on the medieval judicial system to a large audience, at short notice and without notes, at Harvard in the mid-1960s. He remained an expert on Chinese criminal code and its implementation. He published twice on this topic, once in 1978 in *Civiltà Veneziana Studi*,¹² and again in 1990 in collaboration with the Princeton-trained Chinese legal historian Wallace Johnson in his own *Asia Major*.¹³ These articles, with Wallace Johnson's two-volume translation and introduction to the full Tang dynasty penal code and its sub-commentary, the introduction to which acknowledges the debt to Twitchett, remain the best work in English on the medieval judicial system.¹⁴

But his training in what he called 'the high tradition of European Sinology' under Gustav Haloun at Cambridge, starkly contrasting with the approach of the physical geographer, also stayed with him. He emphasised the historian's need to 'attain a feeling of the totality of any period'. The depth of his conversion is apparent in a celebrated piece of polemic that he published as comment on a major conference held in 1964. 'A lone cheer for Sinology' may be brief; but it contains a powerful plea for standards of erudition that are often overlooked in the haste and pressures of modern academia.¹⁵ Interest in 'administrative reality' and Sinological respect for the nature of a medieval text bore fruit in his first book, *Financial Administration under the Tang Dynasty*.¹⁶ Here, he recast the findings of his exhaustive reading and translation of the 'Monograph on

¹¹ P. M. J. Geelan and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Times Atlas of China* (London, 1974).

¹² Denis C. Twitchett, 'The implementation of law in early T'ang China', *Civiltà Veneziana Studi*, 34 (1978), 57–84.

¹³ Denis Twitchett and Wallace Johnson, 'Criminal procedure in T'ang China', *Asia Major Third Series*, 6 Part 2 (1990), 113–46.

¹⁴ Wallace Johnson, *The T'ang Code Volume I, General Principles, translated with an introduction by Wallace Johnson* (Princeton, 1979); *Volume II, Specific Articles* (Princeton, 1997).

¹⁵ Denis Twitchett, 'A lone cheer for Sinology', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 24.1 (1964), 314–17.

¹⁶ Denis Twitchett, *Financial Administration under the T'ang Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1963).

food and goods' from the *Old Tang History* into a presentation of the entire economic and financial regime of the medieval period. He showed how drastically it changed in the course of the near three centuries of the Tang, and suggested the legacy of that change to later Chinese society. This analysis, written with Twitchett's clarity and directness, has remarkably exceeded his own prediction that a work of scholarship should last for twenty-five years or so. When in 1969 a second edition was considered, he merely corrected a few 'minor errors' and inserted as a postscript a ten-page critical summary of secondary scholarship, including new documentary retrievals, published in the decade that had intervened since its first completion. His book remains the standard work in English in its field.

From his doctoral research he had a research interest in the complex and multilayered medieval Chinese corpus of institutional texts. Official compendia that initially might appear to be 'seamless' could, he demonstrated, be unstitched by those who studied the process of compilation and exposed as the end-product of a long process marked by inefficiency, delay, obstinate tenacity and political sycophancy. His greatest monument to this ability to unravel official documentary sources came in his second book, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*.¹⁷ This was an exhaustive exploration of the process that ultimately yielded the *Old Tang History* and the *New Tang History*. When he observed casually in conversation that he was seriously tempted to undertake a similar operation for the Song official history, those who knew him well knew also that this was not an empty claim. But, perhaps thankfully, other projects intervened to claim his time and energy.

Interest in textual history combined with his insistence that the full role of Japan in the East Asian scholarly inheritance be recognised to make him, right into his final decade, a formidable historian of textual transmission in East Asia. These bore fruit, for example, in one of his late studies, his analysis of the works attributed to the Empress Wu, China's only woman emperor, who ruled over China from 690 to 705.¹⁸

If his main contribution in the early phase of his career was in financial administration, and if this slid gradually into an interest in Tang scholarly institutions, there were other themes to his research in medieval economic history that deserve emphasis. He was also an expert in the field of Dunhuang Studies, the research centred on the precious library of

¹⁷Denis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁸Denis Twitchett, 'Chen gui and other works attributed to the Empress Wu Zetian', *Asia Major, Third Series*, 16 Part 1 (2003), 33–109.

medieval manuscripts retrieved from Cave 17 of the Dunhuang complex in north-western Gansu. Not only did he publish an early but authoritative account of the full range of the Dunhuang archive;¹⁹ he also made use of the fragments of administrative documents that it contained. Three articles here deserve highlighting: his study of monastic estates in Tang China, published in 1956;²⁰ his analysis of fragments of Tang dynasty regulations governing waterways at Dunhuang, published in 1957;²¹ and his account of lands under state cultivation in the Tang, mainly as documented by official sources.²² Characteristically, he was not formally involved in the development of what he called ‘an organized international endeavour’, the International Dunhuang Project, based in the British Library, which, started in 1993, runs conferences, hosts visits and links the curators and conservators for the collections at the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Institute for Oriental Studies at St Petersburg, the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin and the National Library in Beijing. But he remained in touch with its organisers, his former Cambridge student Dr Frances Wood and Dr Susan Whitfield, and with individual Dunhuang scholars and gave them encouragement.

He also retained a respect for Chinese poetry. The enormous output of verse from the medieval period offered a copious general source for the historian. This he made use of over his career in various ways. His analysis of Bai Juyi’s poems of protest has already been mentioned. It is a matter for regret that he started publication of this research late in his career and that at the time of his death he had completed analysis of only two poems of a long series of some fifty.

But to him verse was more than just a source for historical evidence. He linked it to his understanding of the early and medieval biographical tradition, a subject on which he wrote two valued articles. He saw in medieval verse at its best an expression of the profound tensions to which members of the Chinese medieval literate elite were subject. He saw the individual as caught in ‘a complex of interlocking relationships with larger groups’, ‘bound legally in various external relationships’, and committed to ‘performance of his duties and obligations within these relationships’.

¹⁹ Denis Twitchett, ‘Chinese social history from the Seventh to the Tenth Centuries: the Tun-huang documents and their implications’, *Past and Present*, 35 (1966), 28–53.

²⁰ Denis Twitchett, ‘Monastic estates in T’ang China’, *Asia Major*, ns 5.2 (1956), 123–46.

²¹ Denis Twitchett, ‘The fragment of the T’ang Ordinances of the Department of Waterways discovered at Tun Huang’, *Asia Major*, ns 6 (1957), 23–79.

²² Denis Twitchett, ‘Lands under state cultivation under the T’ang’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2 (1959), 162–203.

He observed, in conversation, that ‘it was always difficult to be a Chinese’. And he certainly believed in the *longue durée*, the continuity of Chinese social traditions, to the extent that he considered the appalling suffering of colleagues in the Cultural Revolution an indirect consequence of that same sense of social obligation. This deeply rooted concept of the individual in China, contrasting sharply with western concepts, no less profound, of the individual as an autonomous agent protected by law, accounted indirectly, he believed, for the absence in the Chinese tradition of the heroic epic and the tragedy. He held that poetry offered some form of self-expression for the individual trapped in this predicament. He noted how for English-language biographers of the major poets, such as William Hung (1893–1980) on Du Fu²³ and Arthur Waley on Bai Juyi,²⁴ official biographies and formal commemorative tributes were a virtually negligible source, while it was their verse itself that enabled a sympathetic reconstruction of their affective worlds. If he was never a literary critic or a literary historian, in the best traditions of humanist scholarship he appreciated and enjoyed Tang verse. ‘Poetry’, he once stated in conversation, ‘is the one thing the Chinese do really well.’

Another sub-theme that he treated in the second half of his career may also be seen as a challenge to the main narrative of Chinese history, obsessed as it is by unitary dynastic domination of the East Asian mainland. Again, it was discreetly and indirectly given. He found the periods of disunity in Chinese history more interesting than those of centralised dynastic control. He said of the ninth century in China, a period of political disintegration when an old Tang aristocracy lost power and new elites began to emerge, that ‘this is when it begins to get interesting’. He was sceptical over the facile racial and social universalism that forms a strand in Chinese political moralising ideology and that late Qing and subsequent political idealists promoted. He also explored the history of the states and cultures that historically were on the periphery of China. It is possible to read two of his late works as expressions of interest in and sympathy for the history of what are patronisingly called ‘minority cultures’ on the margins of the Chinese cultural heartland.

The first was his analysis of the role of Tibet in the history of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. In ‘Tibet in T’ang’s grand strategy’,²⁵ he showed how the Tibetan empire had matched China in terms of military

²³ William Hung, *Tu Fu, China’s Greatest Poet* (Cambridge, MA, 1952).

²⁴ Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chu-i* (London, 1949).

²⁵ Denis Twitchett, ‘Tibet in T’ang’s great strategy’, in Hans van de Ven (ed.), *Warfare in Chinese History* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 106–79.

power until near the end of the Tang, when both empires collapsed. Tibet, borrowing in equal measure from Indian and Chinese culture, maintained a warlike independence from the Tang that threatened the western flank of the Tang empire and Chinese control of the Gansu Corridor and present day Xinjiang. He demonstrated how Tibetan expansion and the competition for domination of the Silk Road often dictated Tang military policy. Tibetan aggression in the mid-seventh century, for example, effectively ruled out Tang ambitions to subjugate the Korean peninsula to the east, while in the 740s the expansion of Tang influence over the Karakoram and down as far south as Gilgit in the North-West Frontier Province of present day Pakistan, 'some of the most rugged territory on earth',²⁶ was driven by Chinese strategy to outflank Tibet to the west.

The second was his remarkable analysis of the Liao empire, given in collaboration with the American scholar Klaus-Peter Tietze, as 'The Liao', in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* and as the second of his Fu Ssu-nien lectures at Academia Sinica in Taipei in 1996.²⁷ It is hard to believe that a scholar who had, in effect, restricted his publication record to the Tang dynasty could, relatively late in his career, so wittily and persuasively represent a very different world, one of great sophistication and complexity. Yet it was precisely his command of the Tang historical heritage that enabled him to suggest how the Liao, a non-Chinese people, echoed, exploited and paid homage to their Tang forebears as rulers of China, operating a dual form of government.

IV

Twitchett's role as an editor was remarkable and he sustained it throughout his career. He conceived the idea of a *Cambridge History of China* early, for the proposal was put to Cambridge University Press in 1966. In this multi-volume series he undertook responsibility for deploying a programme of synthesis and coordination that, with his principal co-editor, John King Fairbank (1907–91) of Harvard, was global in its reach. He had been involved in one of the turning points in Western historiography,

²⁶ Twitchett, 'Tibet in T'ang's great strategy', p. 130.

²⁷ Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze. 'The Liao', in Denis Twitchett and Herbert Franke (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 43–153.

the realisation of the wealth, continuity, copious documentation and historical importance of East Asian cultures. His motive in initiating the *Cambridge History* was to ensure that, from the first, understanding of East Asian history in Western academia should be based on sound research, as far as possible undistorted by the powerful ideological currents of the mid-twentieth century. The series embraced the entire span of Chinese dynastic history, from the Former Han to the modern period, and enlisted scholars from Europe, Asia and America. It was originally envisaged that the first volume would cover the first dynasties, the Qin and Han; but this was changed, perhaps because the flood of new documentary discoveries from China had left the whole field of the pre-Qin period and the Qin and Former Han in flux. The first volume, covering the Sui and Tang empires, was published in 1979.²⁸ The Han volume followed only in 1986.

He had had early experience of editing, and it had taken him from the first into the field in North America. With his friend and fellow medieval historian Arthur Wright, of Yale, he co-edited two volumes of essays by international, but mainly North American, groups of scholars. The first, *Confucian Personalities*, the fifth and final symposium volume published under the auspices of the American Committee on Chinese Thought of the Association of Asian Studies, was published in 1962, and Twitchett, as well as co-editing it, contributed one of his essays on 'Problems of Chinese biography'.²⁹ The books in this five-volume series, published by the Stanford and Chicago university presses between 1959 and 1962, figured very largely on the reading lists of undergraduates reading Chinese Studies and Chinese history from the 1960s on.

The second of Twitchett's early forays in editing, the product of a conference supported by the American Council of Learned Societies and held in Cambridge in 1969, was published as *Perspectives on the T'ang* with a date of 1973.³⁰ The list of eleven contributors in this volume included only one other British scholar apart from himself. No fewer than six were from the United States, and this was an early indication both of the way in which the subject was developing in North America and of the efficacy of Twitchett's contacts there. He later described the volume as a precursor

²⁸ Denis Twitchett (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 3, Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge, 1979).

²⁹ Denis Twitchett, 'Problems of Chinese biography', in A. F. Wright and D. C. Twitchett (eds.), *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford, 1962), pp. 24–39.

³⁰ Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, CT, 1973).

for the first published volume in the *Cambridge History* series. But in fact only four contributors to the *Perspectives* volume contributed to this first volume in the *Cambridge History* series. The explanation for this is straightforward: Twitchett planned a second Tang volume, to cover religion and culture. But this volume was never completed. Those enlisted for it, moreover, published their own studies, sometimes as free-standing volumes, while the fate of the 'second Tang volume' became a source of mild chagrin among those concerned.

He was jointly, with his former SOAS colleague, the Harvard scholar Patrick Hanan, the editor of a major series of monographs published by Cambridge University Press under the title *Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature and Institutions*. This series, which contained monographs of great research importance and first recourse for scholars, started in 1970 with the publication of *The Hsi-yu Chi: a Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth Century Novel* by Glen Dudbridge (elected FBA in 1984), who was to be Twitchett's successor from 1984 to 1988 as Professor of Chinese at Cambridge, and who with his *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China* (1995), contributed again to the series towards its end. The closure of this monograph series, forced by stringency at the Press, was much regretted through Europe and North America.

Twitchett warmly welcomed the incorporation of Chinese history into general history syllabuses and the involvement of many historians of China in history faculties. This development was led by North American institutions, but European departments of history have followed suit. He saw this development as beneficial, because it extended the range of approaches and sense of problem of those involved with China. He deplored the trend away from learned journal publication to the requirement for over-hasty publication of doctoral theses as single free-standing volumes and the proliferation of symposium volumes. He also deplored the decline in the custom of wider reading in Chinese sources and the increasing tendency for research scholars, using digital resources, to focus only on materials of immediate relevance to their projects.

His commitment to learned journals was expressed through his lasting concern for *Asia Major*. He guided the migration of this periodical first from London, where he was its editor following Walter Simon, to Princeton, and then from Princeton to the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica in Taipei, where it has achieved a fine reputation as one of the best English-language research journals in the field. He ceased formally to be its Editor only in the mid-1990s. In the final phase of his career, he made *Asia Major* his favoured outlet, publishing no

fewer than seven full-length articles in the *Third Series* of this periodical between 1988 and 2003.

V

Denis Twitchett was a very private person. He had a convivial side; but typically he expressed it through individual contacts rather than in large gatherings. He did not make intimate friends easily. In his early days, he might invite scholars singly to dinner at his Cambridge house. Here dinner was served by his wife, who, following Japanese convention, did not join the table, and wine flowed. As Professor of Chinese at SOAS, he managed to divert the termly drinks allowances of the Near and Middle East Department to the Far Eastern Department and to use it to hold open house in his office after 5.00 p.m.; but he made no such provision for this 'happy hour' at Cambridge. At Princeton, too, he lived very quietly, rarely entertaining at home. It was his love of music and his piano playing that permitted some breach of otherwise strictly maintained barriers. He had some unusual interests: in the Tokyo of the mid-1960s he was an avid watcher of Sumo wrestling and would drop everything to watch television coverage of the National Championships. He enjoyed wood-block printing and cartography.

He certainly was not prudish. The undergraduate who bet that he would bring the erotic Ming novel *Jinpingmei* into all his essays in the *Tripes* retained throughout his life the ability to laugh at stories of sexual adventure. In the 1960s he could enjoy a lively and adventurous evening in the Tokyo bars. But in later years, the laugh became a chuckle, to be followed by a mordant remark. He liked a rogue, even among his own undergraduates, and he liked eccentrics. His enjoyment of roguery and love of Chinese verse combined in his friendship with Arthur Cooper (1916–88), whose translations of a selection of the verse of Li Bai and Du Fu, a labour of love, were published by Penguin and whose unconventional exploration of the early Chinese script he treated with uncharacteristic indulgence.³¹ He may have been disdainful of much of the scholarship by 'old China hands', and he enjoyed mocking the hauteur of Englishmen who had managed early relations with China; but his mimicry was generally kindly. He had an autocratic streak and delivered assessments sometimes harshly, both verbally and in writing, and occasionally inconsistently.

³¹ Arthur Cooper, *Li Po and Tu Fu* (Harmondsworth, 1965).

Opposition to him was not easy. Yet in the larger academic fora in which he took part, especially the General Board at Cambridge in the early years of his Professorship there, he contributed conscientiously and gave insightful and moderate recommendations on a wide range of issues. In this arena at least, he had to accept defeat along with success.

At Cambridge, he made no use of use of his Fellowship at St Catharine's College, where he was entitled to 'commons', free meals, and where he could have had access to convivial academic company. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1967; but, though he retained views on its Fellowship, he was not active there either. After his retirement and return to Cambridge, he lived almost as a recluse, entertaining only rarely at his home. More usually, it was a matter of tea and conversation that remained centred on his research, his editorial work and the state of the field of dynastic and early China. His love of music continued and before a serious stroke greatly restricted his movements a select few were still invited to his home to play duets. He also asked favoured individuals to pub lunches in the vicinity of Cambridge, the Three Horseshoes at Madingley being a favourite. Otherwise he lived quietly, with the collection of Twentieth Century Moorcroft china that he had built up with his wife, his life punctuated by gentle rituals, of which a regular pruning of the standard roses in his garden on Boxing Day was one, while attending the midnight Christmas service at Ely Cathedral with his wife was another.

He had trained very able women graduate students, notably Hilary Beattie and Helen Dunstan, both late imperial historians, and he gave encouragement to many more, in North America as well as the United Kingdom, helping several to publish through his monograph series. But, at least early in his career, he characterised able women graduates as exceptions. He had a particularly sympathetic interest in colleagues who had, like him, married Japanese women and in the challenges that they might face in adapting to life in the West. He spoke to very few about his devastating sense of loss at the death of his wife, who died on 16 July 1993 from stomach cancer diagnosed late. There is little doubt too that the experience of being a grandfather to girls began, late in life, to change his outlook, and did so delightfully, for he enormously enjoyed the childhood of members of his own family. But he remained intensely private, and it was possible only to catch rare glimpses of this delightful change.

In retirement at Arbury Road, Cambridge, even after his stroke, he kept himself informed of the explosion of publication in the People's Republic of China and of the field, especially in North America. He remained abreast also of the digital revolution in communications and scholarship. But he

continued to make a sharp distinction between digitalisation as a means to fast and flexible publication and to communication between colleagues and the facile use of data bases and search machines as aids in research. And even in his final illness, termination of his activities, especially his ongoing research, was simply not on the agenda for him. He died on 24 February 2006. It is as a totally dedicated professional scholar of medieval Chinese history with wide sympathies, rare erudition and prodigious energy that he should be remembered. His contribution to shaping the field of Chinese Studies in his generation was enormous.

DAVID McMULLEN

Fellow of the Academy

Note. I have been greatly helped in writing this memoir by the following scholars: Professor H. D. R. Baker, Professor T. H. Barrett; Professor Glen Dudbridge, FBA; Dr Joe McDermott; Professor Willard Peterson; and Professor David Pollard.