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## Mark Elvin FAHA

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1938 – 2023



The passing in 2023 of Mark Elvin, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities since 1993, has been widely acknowledged in the world of Chinese studies. At eighty-five years, Elvin had outlived many of his contemporaries: the obituaries written for him are for the most part by people who, as graduate students, read *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, a book in which he presented the field of Chinese history with a new term

and concept – ‘the high-level equilibrium trap.’ The argument it encapsulated, at its core a response to the question of why capitalism did not independently emerge in China, proved to be both provocative and energising. Elvin took justified pleasure in the long run of reprints that saw it in circulation for more than thirty years. He was thirty-five years old when it first hit the shelves, and it made his name.

His full name was John Mark Dutton Elvin. Born on 18 August 1938, he was the son of Mona Bedortha Dutton, known as Margaret, and (Herbet) Lionel Elvin. Margaret was a graduate of Stanford and a clinical psychologist, Lionel the son of a trade unionist who became a distinguished educationist. They met at Cambridge in 1934. Mark, their only child, was born in Cambridge but passed his early years in the US where his mother took him for safety after the outbreak of World War II. Asked later about what drew him to the study of China, he referred to this period as formative in his impressions of the world, because San Francisco, where they lived, was a place in which the Chinese were always visible to him. That childhood experience no doubt crystallized as a memory when he encountered China itself as an intellectual problem.

His school years were spent at the Dragon School in Oxford, where the family lived in the post war years, and then St Paul’s School, London, where he boarded in school term. St Paul’s offered excellent teaching. More than once in the course of his scholarly career Elvin paid tribute to his history teacher, Byzantium scholar Philip Whitting, as the inspiration for his own vocation as historian. He took history at Cambridge, which largely

meant reading in mediaeval and modern European history. In Part II of the Tripos, however, he was able to specialize in Chinese history, under the tutelage of Victor Purcell. He starred first in Part II for the graduating class of 1959.

Among the luminaries at Cambridge in the 1950s, and for many decades thereafter, was Joseph Needham, historian extraordinaire of science and technology in China, who came to be regarded by Elvin as a friend as well as an inspiration. The impact on him of 'the Needham question' (to paraphrase, 'why did modern science emerge in Europe rather than China?'), and of Needham's critical response to that question, is evident in his earliest extant writings. The University of Cambridge archives hold copies of correspondence between the two concerning his 1966 paper, 'The failure of traditional China to create industrial capitalism'.

Historical problems of this order could not be argued persuasively without a command of Chinese language. Years of postgraduate study first at the Oriental Institute at Cambridge and then at Harvard, on a Harkness Commonwealth Fellowship, gave Elvin the language foundations he needed for his research, including a reading knowledge of Japanese. Historical research on China by Japanese scholars was well in advance of what was available elsewhere at the time and he was soon mining its riches. His first book-length publication was a translation of essays by Shiba Yoshinobu, synthesised into a monograph under the title *Commerce and Society in Sung China* and published in 1970.

At Harvard Elvin became immersed in materials on Shanghai local government held in the Harvard-Yenching library. These became the basis for his Cambridge PhD thesis, 'Gentry Democracy' in Chinese Shanghai, 1905-1914'. The thesis was never published (according to Elvin, a contract for publication was obstructed by John K. Fairbank) but its core argument, showing shades of Needham, is articulated in a short publication of the same name (1969): 'the traditional Chinese social order had... a greater adaptive capacity to the demands of the modern world than it is usually credited with possessing.' The implications of this conclusion for the history of science, technology and economic growth (or capitalism) in China are that cultural explanations for the absence of an endogenous industrial revolution have to be treated with extreme caution. 'Any explanation based on cultural factors,' Elvin was later to write, 'will have to be a subtle one.'

While writing his PhD, Elvin served as Assistant Lecturer in Modern Chinese History at Cambridge University. Post-dynastic China was at that time only just beginning to come under the scrutiny of historians and Cambridge had no institutional commitment to the study of modern Chinese history. Instead of being promoted and retained at the end of his five-year term, Elvin found himself looking for a job. In 1968, PhD in hand, he was appointed to the Department of Economic History in the University of Glasgow. By this time he was married with two small sons, John and Charles, born in 1966 and 1967 respectively. The children's mother, Elvin's first wife, was an American poet and literary

biographer, the celebrated Anne Stevenson (1933–2020). She did not stay the distance with him but thought he was a genius.

His years at the University of Glasgow were highly productive. Economic history there was in a dynamic phase, a chair in the field having been established in 1957. In the coffee room of the felicitously named Adam Smith building, Elvin talked regularly with Indian political economist Radha Sinha about the cotton industry in late imperial China. 'From this chance encounter,' in his words, 'there came the joint theoretical formulation of one of the principal reasons that late-imperial China did not create a technology that would have allowed it to break through into some form of modern economic growth.' They dubbed that formulation the high-equilibrium trap. In both his first developed exposition of it in an eponymously-named chapter published in 1972, and then again in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, published the following year, Elvin paid tribute to his colleague's intellectual contribution with an illustrative graph attributed to one 'R.D. Sinha'.

International publishing arrangements meant that the book had different publishers in the UK (Eyre Methuen) and the US (Stanford University Press). The former appealed directly to a general readership through its China Library series and the latter to an expanding readership of China specialists being trained in American colleges. Elvin straddled the two worlds. He must have recognised the growing strength of area studies in the US in the sixties: in embarking on a doctorate, not yet the sine qua non in British universities that it was eventually to become, he intended to make himself employable in the US. In the end, he remained based in the UK while collaborating with American scholars. Appointed Fellow at St Antony's college, Oxford, in 1973, he found himself working with American anthropologist G.W. Skinner, based at Stanford, on an influential series of books on the city in Chinese history. Together with Skinner he co-edited the second of the three volumes, *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds* (1974). The significant published outcomes of his PhD research are to be found in chapters published in that volume and its companion, *The City in Late Imperial China* (1977).

His years at St Antony's were busy with teaching and administration while at home he was raising two sons as a single parent. In his research, he appears in retrospect to have been struggling for direction. An ambitious *Cultural Atlas of China* (1983), co-written with art historian Caroline Blunden, had a lukewarm reception. Greater impact was had by a 1984 article, 'Female Virtue and the State in China', published in *Past and Present* at a time of growing interest in women's and gender history. Other essays published in the 1980s show that he was reading widely in Chinese literature and thinking against the grain of much received wisdom about what shaped and constituted the Chinese world view or views. He was not much given to the explicit adoption of other people's heuristic frameworks, but this theme suggests an alertness to new intellectual currents in humanities thinking in that decade, including the critique of Western taxonomies of knowledge offered by studies in orientalism and postcolonialism.

It was in a rather different area of history and working in a rather different place that he was again to make a breakthrough in the field of Chinese history. In 1987, the Australian National University was looking for a new chair of East Asian history, following the departure of Wang Gungwu for the position of Vice-Chancellor of Hong Kong University. The ANU's professor of Southeast Asian history, Tony Reid, was visiting Oxford at the time. An admirer of *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, he met with Elvin and urged him to apply for the position. The timing must have seemed right. In 1988 Elvin would be turning fifty. He had been at Oxford for fifteen years. He was by nature restless intellectually: this opening promised new directions to channel his energies.

It was to be a new life in more way than one because when he eventually arrived in Canberra in 1990, he was accompanied by Dian Montgomerie, whom he had wed the previous year. The daughter of Scottish folklorists William and Norah Montgomerie, Dian was an artist in several media and a lover of nature. The couple decided to make their home not in suburban Canberra but across the border, on a rural property in New South Wales. It offered appropriate surrounds for thinking about the environment, the focus of Elvin's historical research over the next decade.

Environmental history, although on the horizon in the 1970s, was still a newish field of study in the 1990s: the journal *Environment and History* was founded only in 1995. In the Chinese context, related themes were already being explored due to the significance of water control as an issue in China's political and social history. Elvin's own work on land tenure, waterways, and agriculture as well as his reading in Chinese poetry, never far from nature as a theme, provided foundations for work in this developing research field. The very first issue of *Environment and History* carried an article by him on the changing morphology of Hangzhou Bay, co-authored with PhD student SU Ninghu. It was a characteristically long-range study on the changing morphology of Hangzhou Bay over an eight-hundred-year period.

By the time this article appeared, a more significant milestone was already in place. In December 1993, in collaboration with Taiwanese historian LIU Ts'ui-jung, Elvin convened an international conference on the history of the environment in China. The outcome was *Sediments of Time*, a volume of nearly eight hundred pages with contributions from twenty-two scholars from four different continents, published by Cambridge University Press in 1997. True to established interests in water-control in Chinese history, a large number of essays focused on exactly this topic, but other themes were sounded: changing weather patterns; vegetation in the frontier regions; the impact of migration, or what would now be called colonialism in Taiwan; and the ecology of human disease. The entire volume was subsequently published in a Chinese edition as well. While much of the research it canvassed was ongoing in the work of individual scholars, *Sediments of Time* effectively put China's environmental history in dialogue with the rest of the world.

Elvin's joint research with Su Ninghu provided one of the many building blocks for his magisterial work, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*,

published by Yale University Press in 2004. For non-specialists (and especially non-Sinophones), one of the great contributions of this book lies in its rich exposition of human (Chinese) attitudes to nature and the changing landscape, presented through extensive translation of literary texts, prose and poetry, from millennia of Chinese writing. This expository style was evident already in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*. *Retreat* covers a longer time period and in greater depth.

To poetry are wedded close accounts of specific locales that provide him with his core questions: Zunhua and the problem of longevity; Guizhou, and the impact of Chinese colonialism. The elephants of the title are mostly conspicuous by their absence from the book but that is his point: there once were elephants where Beijing now sits but they lost out to humans in a protracted war over time. It follows that the history of the Chinese environment is one of human economic activities: 'Chinese farmers and elephants do not mix'. The pressure on the elephants serves him as an allegory for the pressure on the land, which ca 1800 was, he estimates, greater than in Europe. In the concluding chapter he abandons poetry in favour of mathematical formulae as a means of calculating the relationship between, for example, rates of change and sustainability. In this way a history that ends in the nineteenth century, to all intents and purposes before industrialization, points the way to the history of the environment in a cataclysmic twentieth century.

Elvin is sometimes described as an economic historian, but this is not a description that fits him well in terms of his greater oeuvre. In his liking for the proofs and figures, there was something of Whitman's learn'd astronomer about him: he did like to 'add, divide and measure'. At the same time, as evident in this and indeed all his published work, he had a strongly literary bent. This meant that as a writer he was able to address two sorts of reader, the generalist and the specialist. If he did not deliberately foster this talent, it was nonetheless inherent in the way he wrote, which was lively and engaging. He had a talent for translation. In the breadth of his interests, and the ways he found to elaborate on them, he showed a tendency towards the polymath. He took pride in his mastery of several languages and was inclined to be dismissive of scholarship based on just one or two. All these aspects of the man and his work are on display in what was to be his last book.

To read his acknowledgements in *The Retreat of the Elephants* is to see a life in review. They begin with mention of Kay Oldfield, who taught him as a boy how to make a compost heap, and Philip Whitting, who taught him to love history. He remembers the sinologists whose rigorous training underpinned his command of classical Chinese: Pulleyblank, Twitchett, van der Loon. He thanks librarians and collaborators in long-past undertakings. He was not a man with a great sense of entitlement. Having made a living out of his special area of study, he was grateful to the institutions that had helped him pay his family's bills. He pays tribute to his wife for helping him absorb the strains endured while 'working in a still-great but threatened institution that was for a long time in a state of both government-imposed and internal managerial stress'. It is not quite

clear whether he was talking about Oxford or the ANU, but perhaps the hat fitted both cases. He names his sons, who surely played a significant part in his life, if not in the book. Late in life, he suffered the heaviest of blows when Charles, the younger, died of cancer, aged fifty-five. In all, these acknowledgements point to a sense of closure on his endeavours in a field in which he had long laboured, often in the remotest corners.

Congenial by nature, disarming in manner, easy to engage in conversation, Elvin was eccentric in a way that helped him both to think and to live outside the box. After retirement in 2006, he returned with Dian to settle in a village in West Oxfordshire, where he embarked on an annotated translation from the Latin of a 1694 text, R. J. Camerer's *De sexu plantarum epistola* [Letter on the sexuality of plants]. He may have reminded himself on occasion of fifth-century poet Xie Lingyu, who when unwell was happy to rest

on top of the mountain's crest,

Reading his way through the documents the men of old had left.

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