Book Review

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Stephen FitzGerald, *Comrade Ambassador: Whitlam's Beijing Envoy*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015, 272 pages.

Stephen FitzGerald was one of the few outsiders who was in China when some of the most momentous events and changes took place there. He was Australia's first ambassador to China following the opening of relations between Canberra and Beijing in 1973, and he served there until 1976. While in Beijing he was also Australia's ambassador to North Korea. Earlier he had travelled to different parts of China as a graduate student and later as a business consultant.

In this very well written book, FitzGerald captures the mood and temper of a defining period in the history of China and Australia. With so much written these days about China as a global economic power, FitzGerald's book covers a period when China was underdeveloped, internationally somewhat isolated, and with a national leadership deeply divided. It was also a difficult and dangerous time in China as a power transition from the men who founded the People's Republic to a new generation of leaders was taking place. More importantly, FitzGerald contends that the recognition of China marked a moment when Australia showed a capacity to move "from insularity and narrow intellectual horizons and racial exclusiveness towards being an open, tolerant and accepting one". Thus, the book is more than just about a changing China. It is also a thoughtful commentary of how Australians see themselves in relation to Asia. But it is the rise of China and its increasing dominance in the Asia-Pacific region that, as the writer argues, created new consciousness and forced Australians to turn their attention to a region they are increasingly a part of. This may not be easy as many Australians still consider their country as culturally European and its security American-backed.

In a way, FitzGerald stumbled into a China career. Growing up in Hobart, a small town in Tasmania, FitzGerald did not know a single Asian until he went to university. Prevailing then was the White Australia Policy which excluded Asian immigration.

On graduating, he joined the External Affairs Department where he found himself assigned to learn China. He was later sent to Hong Kong and Taiwan to continue his language study in a Chinese-speaking environment. But he became increasingly unhappy with the department's two-China policy and support for Taiwan in the United Nations.

FitzGerald resigned from the department and proceeded to the Australian National University. He did a doctoral thesis on contemporary China's relations with Southeast Asia's Chinese.

The Australian government viewed China then as a hostile expansionist power bent on extending its revolution to neighbouring countries. However, a re-think on Australia's foreign policy was taking place especially within the Australian Labour Party (ALP). This reassessment was to lead to a significant shift in Australia's foreign policy and eventually to a recognition of China. Several developments contributed to this review of Australia's position in the region. The most important was what FitzGerald described as leadership of ideas from politicians and the capacity of the Australian people to change. In this Gough Whitlam, the ALP leader, played a major part. As early as 1954 and later as opposition leader he was advocating the recognition of China and a review of how Canberra should relate to its Asian neighbours. And in FitzGerald, Whitlam found someone knowledgeable on China and sharing his vision of an Australia engaging more closely with Asia.

In 1971, Whitlam made an exploratory trip to China, taking FitzGerald with him. Elections were expected soon in Australia and opinion polls showed that the ALP would win. However, even to ALP supporters Whitlam's trip carried some political risks because they were unsure of how an electorate, still largely conservative and long led to believe that the Vietnam War was evidence of China's military expansionism, would react. But in fact the Vietnam War was already becoming very unpopular in Australia and anti-war protests were occurring in the streets and campus throughout the country.

FitzGerald gives a fascinating account of the meeting between Whitlam and Zhou En-lai. Chinese officials as well as a host of journalists from Australia and China were present at the meeting. As FitzGerald describes it, there was Whitlam's intellect, skill and knowledge to duel lightly with Zhou's charm, intelligence and fluency of thought across a range of international issues such as China's fear of being encircled by the United States, its concern about the resurgence of Japanese militarism, the war in Vietnam, and even the threat to China of the Soviet Union. Zhou did not accept that the Western security alliances were defensive in nature, pointing out that the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was used by Australia to justify its involvement in the Vietnam war.

While the Australian visiting party was still in China, President Nixon announced that he would be visiting Beijing. The announcement could not have been better timed for Whitlam.

Whitlam, on taking office after winning the 1972 elections, established diplomatic relations with Beijing and appointed FitzGerald ambassador to China. It was a choice that Australia's Department of External Affairs was

not too enthusiastic about as many considered him too young at age 34 and too junior in service ranking for such an important posting. Later, FitzGerald was to find out how age was seen in China when he met Dong Biwu, acting President of China. Dong, aged 86, when intimating that he planned to retire in a couple more years to come urged FitzGerald to meet younger Chinese leaders. When asked who he should meet, Dong suggested the 75-year old Zhou En-lai.

FitzGerald met Zhou on two other occasions, including one when he accompanied Prime Minister Whitlam in October 1973. In the two meetings, Southeast Asia came up. At that point in time, no Southeast Asian countries had diplomatic relations with China. Whitlam, therefore, held that Australia's developing relations with China could prove to be a positive example for Southeast Asian governments towards normalizing ties with Beijing. At the same time, Whitlam advised the Chinese that Beijing's continued links with communist parties in Southeast Asia countries made it difficult for the governments in the region to establish diplomatic relations with China. There was also the question of the overseas Chinese communities in the region where some governments including the US were wary that overseas Chinese could be a potential fifth column for Beijing.

Zhou, on his part, reiterated that China was not expansionist and had no intention to use ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia for interventionist purposes. Instead, he had urged them to be citizens and integrate into the local societies. Zhou maintained that problems in Southeast Asia could be settled only with complete US withdrawal from the region.

The book offers absorbing reading of the writer's travels in China. In 1966, while on a study tour as a graduate student FitzGerald encountered what he observed as the frenzy and cruelties unleashed by Mao Tze-tung's Cultural Revolution. It was a time when no one seemed sure as to who was in charge, and selected political leaders and intellectuals became targets of the Red Guard's anti-revisionist campaign. Among those "purged from society" were Liu Shaoqi, the *de jure* head of state, and Deng Xiaoping, a former party secretary-general. Many were killed by Red Guards who had gone on a country-wide rampage destroying cultural relics and religious buildings. FitzGerald arriving in Changsha with a party of Australian students came close to being sentenced to death by the Red Guards and was rescued only by the timely arrival of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). FitzGerald had tried to defend a fellow Australian member detained for throwing away a Mao memorabilia. On the same trip, FitzGerald described a terrifying moment during a flight when both the pilot and first officer left the flight deck unattended to read passages from *Quotations of Mao* to the passengers. It was almost with a touch of comic that FitzGerald related the incident and of many others in the book.

Some years later FitzGerald found himself in another unnerving situation when he was in Tientsin barely 140 km from the epicentre of a massive earthquake. The hotel where FitzGerald stayed was severely damaged and the wife of Gough Whitlam was slightly injured. She was travelling with Whitlam who had just been dismissed as Australia's Prime Minister. The Tangshan earthquake in 1976 which killed an estimated 500,000 was seen by many Chinese as a portent and indeed, a few months later, Mao the man who led the Chinese communist movement to victory in China passed away.

Although FitzGerald sees himself as a friend of China, he viewed events in the country objectively. On his return to Australia after completing his term as ambassador he joined the Australian National University (ANU) and was head of the Contemporary China Centre and for a while acting head of the Far Eastern History Department. He was regularly invited by various outside institutions to speak on China. Following the Tiananmen events in Beijing in 1989 when troops crushed a students' protest, FitzGerald spoke in support of the pro-democracy movement in rallies organized in various cities of Australia.

In the concluding chapters of the book, FitzGerald reflects on significant shifts in attitude towards Asia that he believes have taken place in Australia. Immigration numbers from Asia have risen; there are more intermarriages between existing inhabitants and immigrants and greater social interaction of the various groups. But he is concerned that there is still another Australia, one that is conservative and does not want change. He is critical of Australian leaders who allow politics that are inward-looking when dealing with Asia and indeed are "xenophobic, inhumane in attitudes to refugees, and slyly racist". Nevertheless, he is optimistic that Australia's changing approach to the Asian region and the country's growing acceptance of the enmeshing of the good of its European inheritance and the advantages of its natural region is a social transformation that is too strong to reverse. And to him it was engaging with China that marked the beginning of this change.

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