

## CWEH Obituary

It is with great sadness that I mourn the passing of my friend Mark Elvin (1938-2023) on 6<sup>th</sup> December a leading sinologist, and environmental historian whose pioneering and innovative influence shaped the fields through a range of path breaking books, journal publications, activism, and the mentoring of several remarkable scholars.

In 1973, Mark published *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, which received considerable academic attention and critical response. In particular, the claim that the survival of the Chinese empire (since the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) along with the persistence of its traditional economy was a result of what Mark coined as being a ‘high-level equilibrium trap’, that is, the relatively high yields in agriculture and the efficiencies in trade and labour that obviated the need for improvement. In other words, no revolutionary economic and social shocks could internally emerge within China to unsettle its political arrangements. Transformations, in effect, could only be brought about only with the engagement and struggles against the Western world in the nineteenth century.

He followed up his engaging claims of *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* with a range of publications which further explored the complexities of China’s traditional technological, engineering and ecological worlds. His range was astounding from attempting to understanding climate change, meteorological science, farming techniques, horticulture, water management, urban organization to cartography. In 2006, another large claim was put forward in a widely celebrated intervention titled *The Retreat of the Elephants*. Here, Mark, studied and discussed a 3000-year record of

environmental change in China to argue, in essence, that unremitting agrarian expansion and the steady triumph of the Chinese agriculturists proved to be devastating for the region's forests and wild life. This was the first environmental history of China during the three thousand years for which there are written records. In the book Elvin outlined the spread of the Chinese style of farming that eliminated the habitat of the elephants that populated the country and much of its original wildlife, the destruction of the forests, war and environmental transformation and the re-engineering of the countryside through gigantic water-control systems.

In his final years he was writing a big treatise on Chinese botany. As he wrote to me 'I am re-re-revising my massive book on the experiment-based scientific proof (in 1694) that the vast majority of angiosperm plants can reproduce by sexual means, and that a large number regularly do. It is the result of a desire to establish why European botany, on a rough par with its Chinese counterpart up to the 1590's, suddenly drew rapidly ahead, ending, a century and a half later, with Darwin...It is based on Latin-language sources for the most part, with bits and pieces in everything from classical Greek to Bavarian and Flemish.'

This quote alone gives us an insight into his wide-ranging research and impressive ability to master several languages well into his eighties. A humble and generous scholar despite his celebrated scholarship I was able to participate in several wonderful academic discussions with him, Richard Grove and Rohan D'Souza at his home in outside Canberra and later in England in Long Hanborough. I was also a beneficiary of his and his wife Dian's support after Richard's accident in Australia. In later life he took to composing Haiku poetry.

A young Indian student who was to later become an eminent journalist, M. Rajshekhar, remembers ‘reeling’ after a lecture by Elvin at Sussex, ‘Because Elvin’, he wrote later ‘drawing on sources like old Chinese poems and court documents, had crafted nothing less than an environmental history spanning 3,000 years of the middle kingdom’s history. That was my first glimpse — in a life that had, till then, featured a forgettable academic record and eight years of business journalism — of what was possible with a life of the mind.’

He was Professor emeritus at the division of Asian and Pacific History, School of Asian and Pacific Studies, Australian National University, emeritus fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford and Senior Research Associate of the Centre for World Environmental History at the University of Sussex. His death is a huge loss to the wider academic community.

## LEAVING

Mown stalks lie flat on the field—

A bee or two, hunting

for a last pink flowerhead.

After the sainfoin harvest,

3 July, 2019

The path in the wood—

a fawn, eyes open, hangs limp

from a dog’s mouth.

April, 2019

The sinking sun gleams out

from bent trees' rain-wet trunks.

What's gone—seems still alive.

November, 2019

Darkness, then sunlight

comes-goes across the path, but motionless

the horizon clouds.

Winter, 2019

Like a pogo-stick

the deer's head vanishes, then reappears,

through feathered grass.

August, 2019

Under small pagodas of ripening sainfoin

a midsummer bumblebee

still seeking, seeking.

Summer, 2019

Moon overhead. Near full.

The Dog-star rising above the trees.

Beyond Orion, look on. On. Into the night.

January, 2018

MARK ELVIN



Mark Elvin with Heather Goodall, Rohan D'souza and Richard Grove at Hildenborough, Kent, 2011