

*Interesting Times: Some New Zealanders in Republican China.*

By Chris Elder.

Wellington: Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2024.

RRP: \$40, ISBN: 9781776921416.

Reviewed by James Beattie.

Chris Elder's latest book is a fascinating, engaging and well-written account telling the stories of some of the many New Zealanders in Republican China, the period from the end of the imperial dynasty (1912) to the beginning of the People's Republic of China (1949). Elder writes with sympathy, humour and knowledge in this excellent book.

Elder is a former New Zealand Ambassador to China – and indeed first went to China as a junior diplomat following New Zealand's establishment of its embassy there in 1973 – and he writes with authority and knowledge. As with *Interesting Times*, his other works are informed by a wide knowledge and readership on China. Readers will probably already know Elder from his thoughtful commentary on China in various media, as well as through his works examining New Zealand-China relations, such as *New Zealand's China Experience: Its Genesis Triumphs, and Occasional Moments of Less Than Complete Success* (2012). Elder's other books, probably lesser known in New Zealand – *Old Peking: City of the Ruler of the World: An Anthology* (1997), *China's Treaty Ports: Half Love and Half Hate* (1999) and the wonderful privately circulated *Pekingographica ...* – are equally fascinating and well worth the read.

In *Interesting Times*, Elder turns his considerable knowledge and intellect to examining the several dozen New Zealanders who found themselves in Republican China, as missionaries, humanitarians, explorers, reformers, journalists, economists, pacifists and teachers. In thirteen pithy chapters, Elder unearths the lives of often-forgotten New Zealanders who devoted their lives to improving China, as they understood it.

Chapter One follows the fascinating life of Tapanui-raised (East Otago) James Huston Edgar, of the China Inland Mission (CIM), who spent twenty-five years on the China-Tibetan borderlands. Although a missionary, Edgar's real passion seems to have been exploration, and Edgar's mission in mountainous Sichuan gave him the ideal base from which to explore Tibet, itself reeling from successive recent British and Qing incursions. Tough, resourceful and generous, Edgar wrote several popular articles and books on Tibet, at a time when the region was little-known to western readers. As a consequence of his scholarship – which included the first (and probably still the only) dictionary of a Tibetan people north of Tatsienlu – Edgar was elected a member of the prestigious Royal Geographical Society. Edgar also helped several other plant hunters (such as the famous E.H. Wilson) and explorers in the region.

Chapter Two examines the medical missionary H.B. Turbott, part of Otago Presbyterian Church's mission to evangelise among the villages of the Cantonese in New Zealand. Turbott joined the Canton Villages Mission, working at its main compound, a medical mission in Kong Tsuen, Guangzhou. Elder next considers (chapters three and four) perhaps the most well-known New Zealander (at least outside Aotearoa) in China – Rewi Alley, whose long life in China of some sixty years from 1927 coincided with almost all the major twentieth century upheavals in that country, from the end of the imperial dynasty, to republicanism and then the assumption to power of the Chinese Communist Part in 1949; later, the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and subsequent Reform-and-Open period. Here, given the book's temporal focus, Elder examines Alley's role as a humanitarian, through his influence on the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, and his role as an educationist in Shandan, Gansu Province. Following the focus

on Alley, is a chapter on George Shepherd (chapter five), also from a rural South Island background. Where Alley threw his support behind the communists, Shepherd supported the Nationalists, becoming an advisor to Chiang Kai-shek. Like Turbott, Alley came to China as a missionary – in his case, the Plymouth brethren. Despite his remarkable prominence at the time, Elder notes, Shepherd is largely forgotten today in his native New Zealand, in part because he was claimed by the Americans.

Another New Zealander associated with China in the late 1930s was the journalist James Bertram who, unlike Shepherd, supported the Chinese communists, first through his reportage and well-read books on China, and finally for his support of China overseas (chapter six). Today, Bertram is perhaps best known for his early interview of Mao Zedong, which brought the future leader to western attention. The attention on Bertram continues in chapter seven, which examines the role of Bertram and Iris Wilkinson, both journalists who championed the cause of China in its war against Japan.

Chapter eight examines Agnes Moncrieff, a figure who knew – and often crossed swords with – several of the figures mentioned in the previous chapters, including Alley, Bertram, Shepherd and Wilkinson. Moncrieff had a very important role as Foreign Secretary of the YWCA of China, which focussed on women's well-being and career development, as well as being a vehicle for promoting Western values. Chapter nine considers another forgotten aspect of New Zealand's relationship with China: the involvement of New Zealanders in the Institute of Pacific Affairs (IPA), funded mainly by the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations. The IPA commissioned economic research and reports into different parts of the world. In 1926 economist J.B. Condliffe, who taught at Canterbury College, became research director of the IPR. Condliffe, as Elder shows, focused his research on China. Accordingly, in the late 1920s he undertook a research trip through China. Concerned to present a balanced assessment of China, Condliffe also commissioned the English economic historian J.H. Tawney to consider the state of China's economy. The result, *Land and Labour in China* (1932), notes Elder, 'was influential in bringing a domestic focus to bear on the challenges the country faced [and] ... offered a powerful corrective to then-prevailing Western orthodoxy' (p. 151). New Zealander Bill Holland provided Tawney with research support in China, while H.B. (Brian) Low became assistant to J.L. Buck, whose scholarship resulted in the still-influential text, *Land Utilisation in China* (1937), a remarkable work which studied 38,000 farms across 22 provinces in China. (His wife, Pearl Buck, though, is perhaps better known today for her sympathetic novels of China, including *The Good Earth*, written while with her first husband J.L. Buck in China, and which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932).

The remaining three chapters focus on the period from the late 1930s to the 1940s, one of great hardship and turmoil for China. In chapter ten, Elder considers the missionary Kathleen Hall, who took a grassroots approach to her calling, by working as a nurse in a remote area of north-central China. As well as nursing, Hall – at great personal risk – helped young people escape from Japanese-held territory and join resistance work. She smuggled both medical supplies and personnel through Japanese control points. Westland-born missionary Marjorie Monaghan worked as a teacher in Peking, before being interned in Shandong by Japanese forces (chapter eleven). The penultimate chapter twelve tells the story of the Friends' Ambulance Unit, established by the Society of Friends (the Quakers) in the First World War. Twelve New Zealand conscious objectors joined, including Courtney Archer and Lindsay Crozier. Chapter thirteen rounds out the book with a discussion of the later missions in China, which had to leave China following the assumption to power of the Chinese Communist Party.

Aside from a few shoddy typos on the part of Te Herenga Waka Press, my only criticism is that this book wasn't longer, such are the fascinating biographies which Elder gives us. Each entry could well warrant a book, especially the little-known Huston Edgar or Shepherd. It is a credit to the author, though, that he has managed to produce an informative yet engaging narrative which doesn't get bogged down in detail, nor suffer from over-generalisation. Indeed, the structure of placing short historical overviews of China between chapters works well and doesn't interrupt the flow of the book.

During a period in which universities in New Zealand have been foolishly shedding expertise on China, Elder's book is a timely wake-up call of the importance of China and of the absolute necessity of well-informed analysis of that country. It is a book highly deserving of a wide readership.