

## Obituary

**Keith McPherson Buchanan**  
**Born 14 February 1919, Dudley, England;**  
**died 18 June 1997, Paraparaumu, near**  
**Wellington, New Zealand**

R. D. Hill

Although Keith Buchanan was more a geographer than a sinologue, his impact on the study of China in particular and the Third World in general was considerable both in his adopted country and elsewhere. His research and fieldwork in China, undertaken from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, when both were difficult, were marred by his lack of Chinese. Nevertheless he was a notable student of the People's Republic at a time of great interest, great ignorance and a great polarization of viewpoints. Buchanan was a fierce "Cold Warrior of the Left," unpopular to the point of being perceived as a threat by the forces of reaction. But he was far too individualistic and idiosyncratic ever to make a formal political commitment or to develop a consistent political stance other than that of a romantic revolutionary, happy enough to feed the backyard blast-furnaces of the Great Leap Forward and to be a thorn in the flesh of New Zealand and American politicians and bureaucrats of the Cold War, but too comfortably bourgeois in his position as Professor of Geography at Victoria University of Wellington to "forsake all" in the manner of Rewi Alley and commit his life to the betterment of the proletariat and the peasantry.

But they also serve who present an alternative view, and this was Buchanan's metier. Highly articulate both in lecture and text, passionate in support of the underdog – so long as it was not him – he stimulated generations of students at home and abroad. As a student of the Third World at a time when there really was one, especially its "damnes" as Franz Fanon called the underclasses, Buchanan was able to direct serious attention to a global situation in which the majority was receiving a disproportionately small share of this world's goods and services, in which imperialism was still a keen reality, self-determination a nullity.

His academic reputation as a student of China rests basically upon two books: *The Chinese People and the Chinese Earth* (1966), and his monumental *The Transformation of the Chinese Earth*, somewhat curiously subtitled "*Aspects of the Evaluation of the Chinese Earth from Earliest Times to Mao Tse-tung*" (1970) – the latter, though obviously now dated, still the best geographical synthesis to appear. In addition there are his essays, mainly published by the Hong Kong journal *Eastern Horizon*, collected in *Out of Asia* (1968). It is not at all clear whether Buchanan regarded these as serious academic contributions or as journal-

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ism, just as he never made clear his roles as academic, journalist or polemicist, sometimes to the chagrin of his colleagues.

*The Chinese People and the Chinese Earth* is a slim volume, barely 70 pages of text plus telling illustrations, produced at a time when interest in the New China was burgeoning and few in the West could claim first-hand knowledge of any part of the land other than Taiwan, a province that Buchanan ignored, with a regime eschewed as “bandit.” His skill at presenting a broad-brush picture illuminated with detailed vignettes was superb. No dull “geography” this, for his list of background books, at the time quite exceptionally, included basic history, personal memoirs, novels, poetry and periodicals, both China-produced and the home-grown Pacific viewpoint of which he was a founder.

The major work though was *The Transformation of the Chinese Earth*. In a notably handsome volume, illustrated in part with paper-cuts collected in China, Buchanan developed the ambitious theme of transformations of what he called “man-made” landscapes, which, in an unoriginal metaphor (originally Whittlesey’s?) he likens to a palimpsest, a document written upon over and again. He rightly discerned that the socialist revolution, while taking a wholly new path based upon the peasantry, in many essentials did not represent a fundamental break with the past. He emphasized the syncretic nature of Han civilization which included foreign religion, foreign crops, foreign bronze technology, in one view rice agriculture from abroad, and aspects of irrigation.

Ironically, despite his commitment to self-determination and freedom for such as the Bretons in France and the Celts in Britain (he was of the latter ancestry), he did not realize that the integration of “... formerly marginal areas ... into the Chinese oecumene ...” involved the imposition of a cultural uniformity underpinned by “Middle Kingdom” attitudes that in other contexts he denounced as global “Coca Cola-ization.” Ironically too, for an avowed democrat, he seems to have accepted the substantially discredited notions of Wittfogel’s “hydraulic civilization” and the alleged role of the imperative water management in the emergence of larger and larger polities. He was no happier with the minutiae of scholarship. He wrote on the “Old Silk Road” seemingly without realizing that there were many “Roads.” He accepted at face value certain Chinese statistics when a moment’s thought would have demonstrated their falsity. The alleged doubling of steel production from 1957 to 1958 is a case in point, and he was far from alone in failing to understand the serious implications of the withdrawal of labour from the rural sector, accepting the notion of a labour surplus. Data on tree planting were also accepted at face value without asking about survival rates. Like the CCP, he accepted the utility of learning from Dazhai, little realizing that its techniques were applied willy-nilly without regard to local circumstances.

But what if Buchanan, like many others, was misled by patently false claims and by Potemkin communes? There remains a solid core of sense, a challenge to seek the truth as best one may, a reorientation of thought beyond the mental walls of the West. These are his legacy.