

# The China Quarterly

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CQY>

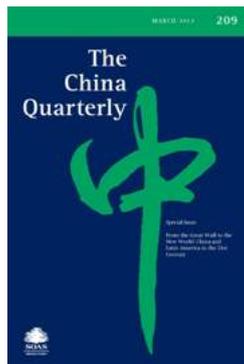
Additional services for *The China Quarterly*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Robert Scalapino (1919–2011)

Ezra Vogel

The China Quarterly / Volume 209 / March 2012, pp 217 - 221

DOI: 10.1017/S030574101100155X, Published online: 29 March 2012

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S030574101100155X](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S030574101100155X)

### How to cite this article:

Ezra Vogel (2012). Robert Scalapino (1919–2011). The China Quarterly, 209, pp 217–221 doi:10.1017/S030574101100155X

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## *In Memoriam*

# Robert Scalapino (1919–2011)

Ezra Vogel\*

Professor Robert Scalapino, indefatigable traveller, omnipresent conference participant, prolific scholar, generous mentor, and public intellectual – the best-known political science specialist on Asia in his generation – died on 1 November 2011 in Oakland, California, at age 92, from complications of a respiratory infection.

Born in Kansas of school teacher parents, Scalapino excelled as a student, graduating from high school at 16. As a small boy, Scalapino attended one-room elementary schools in town after town in Kansas and Missouri as his father, amidst the depression, sought a stable income. When Scalapino was in the sixth grade, as he explains in his autobiography (*From Leavenworth to Lhasa*), he and his family put all their belongings in a car and travelled to Santa Barbara, California, where his father acquired a stable position as science teacher. Bob's family lacked money to send him away to college so he attended Santa Barbara College, where he joined the debate team and was elected student body president. After graduation, he lived at home and taught for a year at his alma mater to save money for graduate school. That year he met a music major, Dee Jesson; he married her the next year (1941) and they were separated only by her death 63 years later.

Scalapino enrolled as a graduate student in the government department at Harvard in September 1941. Initially he had intended to study European politics and international affairs, but after Pearl Harbor, he became a Japanese language officer in the military. By the time he left Harvard in 1943 to begin 15 months of intensive Japanese language training in the navy language school in Colorado, he had completed all his course work for the PhD. In military service, Scalapino was assigned to Hawaii as a code breaker. In the spring of 1945, he was sent to Okinawa where, as fighting continued, he searched caves for documents and interviewed Japanese prisoners.

When Scalapino returned to Harvard in the fall of 1946, he was still concerned with the issue that dominated post-war planning for Japan: how to introduce democracy. In his thesis on Japanese efforts to introduce democracy before the Second World War, he traced the development of political parties which had begun to acquire more power in the 1920s, only to be eclipsed by the military in the 1930s. His revised thesis, *Democracy and the Party Movement in Prewar Japan*, became his first book in 1952.

\* Harvard University. Email: [efvogel@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:efvogel@fas.harvard.edu)

By the time he returned to Harvard in 1946, Scalapino had decided to broaden his studies to include all of Asia. In 1947, he served as a teaching assistant for Ch'ien Tuan-sheng, a leading Chinese political scientist who was then living at the home of John K. Fairbank. Following Fairbank's advice, Scalapino expanded into Chinese studies, taking three years of Chinese language classes while working on his thesis.

In 1949, after completing his PhD, Scalapino accepted an offer from the University of California at Berkeley. Two years later he was awarded tenure. By 1953, when he returned from a year's research in Japan, the turmoil of the Korean War had died down and he could devote himself fully to teaching and research. As California grew, Berkeley rapidly upgraded to become the pre-eminent state university. With Scalapino and his colleagues like Joseph Levenson in Chinese history, Thomas Smith in Japanese history and Robert Bellah and Franz Schurmann in sociology, the University of California became a world-class centre for Asian studies. The university was further strengthened when outstanding Berkeley PhDs, including Fred Wakeman and Chalmers Johnson, joined the faculty, along with scholars with degrees from elsewhere like Tom Gold, Ye Wenxin, Lowell Dittmer and Kevin O'Brien.

Scalapino always examined specific issues in light of broader developments. He saw his mission as gaining an overview of Asian politics and international relations, and of placing current issues in historical and global perspective. He was a master at providing a succinct overview of key issues in a clear well-organized fashion. By the early 1950s he became a favourite commentator on Asian affairs for radio and television and remained a favourite for six decades. He was a popular lecturer known for his ability to present a comprehensive survey course. When accepting invitations to attend important conferences, he put lectures on a tape which a graduate assistant played for students in his absence. A well-known but apocryphal story related that one time when his flight to a conference was cancelled, he went to teach his class only to find tape recorders placed by students to record his taped lectures. He provided broad education for undergraduates and trained specialists, like Lynn White (Princeton) and Cheng Li (Brookings), who later played key roles as scholars and public intellectuals.

Scalapino's speeches and writings on contemporary affairs were informed by his search to understand the historical background. In addition to his initial work on the history of democratic movements in Japan, he completed in 1967 a study on *The Japanese Communist Movement, 1920–1966*. With Chong-Sik Lee, he published two lengthy volumes on the history of communism in Korea; and with a former PhD student, George T. Yu, he published a lengthy book, *Modern China and its Revolutionary Process, 1850–1920* and a history of anarchism in China. Scalapino had no pretence of being a historian's historian, but he worked with specialists on various countries who dug out the details while Scalapino put those details in a broader perspective.

In 1959 Scalapino attracted wide public attention when a San Francisco acquaintance, Richard Conlon, then preparing a report on US Asian policy for

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked Scalapino to do the section on Northeast Asia. By then, Joe McCarthy's influence, which had retarded the study of Communist China, had begun to ebb. In his carefully reasoned report, Scalapino argued against continuing efforts to isolate China, and for beginning to explore, with China, possibilities for their greater participation in world affairs. Scalapino's presentation for the Conlon Report became an important focus for those who thought that the United States should expand the study of contemporary mainland China and promote contacts between China and the United States.

In 1965, Scalapino achieved even more attention in a nationally publicized debate over Vietnam. Originally plans called for George Kahin of Cornell and three of his supporters to present one side and for McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor, to present the other side, supported by Bob Scalapino, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Wes Fishel. At the last minute, when Bundy was called away on a national emergency, it fell to Scalapino to present the case for a strong US response. Having studied the history of communist movements in Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia, Scalapino argued that anti-communist Vietnamese were also strong nationalists and that the United States must stand firm against Communist advance. By the 1970s he believed that the other Southeast Asian countries had become strong enough to resist communist advance, but in 1965 he feared that the fall of Vietnam to communism could lead to communist expansion in Malaysia and Thailand.

Scalapino became a leading target for opponents of the Vietnam War. The protests in Berkeley were among the most vehement in the country. His classes were disrupted; he and his family were threatened. Protests peaked in the fall of 1970. Scalapino announced that he would continue to teach his class and that he would be available for political discussions, but outside the class. Leaflets were distributed saying that Scalapino was a war criminal. One activist announced that Scalapino should not be allowed to live safely in Berkeley, and his daughter received a phone call saying, "How would the professor like it if his child were dead, like so many children in Vietnam?" Two bombs exploded in front of Scalapino's house. Police surveillance was provided for six months. During the decade of protests, Scalapino continued to offer his courses; he continued to provide advice and help to all his students, including some who joined in attacks; he continued his research; and he worked to hold together a political science department that he headed from 1962–69 at a time when some faculty refused to talk with others in the department.

Throughout his career, Scalapino was a key participant in conferences on Asia, wherever they were held. His energy in attending conferences, presenting overviews and mentoring participants was legendary. His Christmas letters recorded his enthusiastic sightseeing, including pictures of him, accompanied by Dee, visiting famous Buddhist shrines, climbing mountains or riding on a yak. He not only frequently visited Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and Southeast Asian countries, but also travelled to Outer Mongolia, South Asia and Inner

Asia. Beginning in December 1972, he made 63 trips to mainland China. He made five trips to North Korea. In some years, he accepted as many as ten or more invitations to speak or attend conferences in Asia. He made it a point in each country he visited to exchange views with intellectuals and government officials of many different political persuasions, nearly all of whom sought his perspectives and his advice.

At conference sites, even when he was in his 80s, Scalapino was typically the first one down to the breakfast table as he awaited others to join in discussion. He appeared tireless as he carried on conversations throughout the day. He did not hesitate to talk about personal matters, but he did not gossip. He focused overwhelmingly on the big international issues of the day and the specific issues to be discussed at the conference. Scalapino developed dialogue partners in every country he visited, partners who regarded him as a reliable friend, and used his visits to keep up to date on various strands of thinking in East and Southeast Asia countries as well as the United States. He was justly proud of his former students in Asian countries including Sadako Ogata, who served for a decade as UN High Commissioner of refugees; Han Sung-joo, who became South Korea's Foreign Minister; and Mikio Higa, who became Vice Governor of Okinawa.

Scalapino was always ready to explain his point of view, but he was skilled at listening thoughtfully to opposing views. He believed that the United States should stand firm against communism, but for 11 years, beginning in 1979, he headed a team of American scholars in meetings with scholars from the Soviet Union's Institute of Asian Studies headed by Evgenyi Primakov, later Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of the Soviet Union. In these meetings, specialists on various Asian countries in the two countries exchanged frank views. As a participant in one of these conferences, I can testify that Scalapino did not hesitate to criticize Soviet policy, but he never engaged in a personal attack. As Scalapino explained, he called Primakov "Gene," and the two met privately during the course of the conference to see that the discussions got at the key issues. The Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, which Scalapino founded in 1978, became a vehicle for hosting conferences and for planning conferences in collaboration with scholars and officials from other countries. If anything his travels increased after he retired from teaching in 1990.

The almost continuous conversations with academics and officials in Asian countries gave Scalapino an extraordinary base for understanding the current issues in Asia. His capacity to keep up with current developments was strengthened through his editorship of *Asian Survey* from 1962 to 1996. Although others did the detailed work of editing, Scalapino supervised the journal and provided judgment on the selection of articles, deepening his knowledge of scholarly work on all Asian countries. He took the initiative to get scholars to write about important topics that others had neglected. His own articles for journals and the popular press not only dealt with politics within the region but with relations between Asian countries and the rest of the world, including Europe and Africa. Although Scalapino had strong views about how the US should

respond to major issues, he rarely advocated specific policies. He saw his role as shedding light on the big issues of the day by presenting various perspectives in a dispassionate manner.

Considering the breadth of Scalapino's contacts with Asian political and intellectual leaders, his knowledge of Asian affairs, and his ability to present information in a coherent and objective manner, it is not surprising that US government officials as well as foundations called upon him for advice. He was twice offered the position of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and twice turned it down, explaining that he felt he could be more effective outside the government.

Virtually all foundations and institutions concerned with Asia called upon Scalapino and later honoured him with awards. He was a director, advisor or board member in the Asia Foundation, the Asia Society, the Atlantic Council, the National Bureau of Asiatic Research, the Council of Foreign Relations, the Pacific Forum and various foundations. No organization played a more critical role in developing Sino-American relations than the National Committee on US–China Relations, of which Scalapino was the first chairman. He and others formed the National Committee, which was not identified with any particular point of view except to promote better understanding of and better long-term US policies toward China. When ping pong diplomacy began, the National Committee offered to host the Chinese team in the United States, which it did. Since that time the National Committee has played the central role in hosting prominent Chinese coming to the US and in promoting Americans of various circles to visit China. It became, as Henry Kissinger said, a crucial organization for providing the public support and institutions to sustain a viable government-to-government Sino-American relationship.

Scalapino's beloved wife Dee was driving in a rainstorm in 1974 when the car skidded off the road and turned over, killing Scalapino's mother instantly and causing injury to Dee's spinal column. She bravely continued to travel to Asia, with a wheel chair that Bob pushed around, until she died of a brain tumour in 2005.

Scalapino was by nature an optimist but he knew the problems in Asia and the United States too well to be glib. He typically ended his masterful summary of issues at a conference saying he was "cautiously optimistic." On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, he would say, he was optimistic. On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday he was pessimistic. And on Sunday he rested. In fact, Scalapino rarely rested.

Scalapino remained intellectually engaged until his death. Some health issues kept him off airplanes for several weeks before he died, but when he passed away he was still planning to resume travel. Scalapino had three daughters: Leslie who died earlier, Diane and Lynne. He is survived by five grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and by thousands of people he mentored.