

OBITUARY

IAN TAYLOR: THE COMPASSIONATE APOSTLE OF A PROPERLY RESEARCHED AND FULLY EXPERIENCED APPROACH TO CHINA AND AFRICA

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Ian Christopher Taylor (9 January 1969 – 22 February 2021), Professor of International Relations and African Political Economy at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, died in February this year. He was 52 and had fought against cancer with characteristic courage and amazing humour. In addition to his position at St. Andrews, Ian was a co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and also held a float of other visiting or honorary appointments – at Renmin University in Beijing, Stellenbosch University near Cape Town, the University of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and the Institute of African Studies of Zhejiang Normal University in China. The noteworthy aspect of this list was that he was welcomed, and respected, in both China and Africa, and spoke with familiarity and authority about both. After receiving his DPhil from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, he taught African politics and development in the Department of Political and Administrative Studies at the University of Botswana for four years.

In total, Ian Taylor presented lectures and courses in 55 countries around the world. A cosmopolitan person, he could speak Mandarin, and had visited 44 of the 54 African countries, and also the French Indian Ocean possession of Reunion, near Mauritius. He also studied for pedagogical qualifications in Egypt.

It is with his early death that the academic world seemed suddenly to realise what a huge presence would no longer be available with its enormous insights, experience and huge capacity for compassion. Stories, almost legends, of how he was always ready to help others abound. It is as if he was determined to keep no knowledge for himself. To share knowledge was, for him, the

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vocation of a true scholar – and also, in the name of Christ, the calling of a believer. Ian was an elder of the Church of Scotland, and had qualifications in theology as well as those associated with his academic career. He lived his faith just as he committed himself, with zeal and enthusiasm, to the study of Africa and China and, in the last 15 years, began to publish voluminously on the relation between the two.

In this he was a pioneer. Many latecomers to this field, committed more to commentary than to deep study, and without any substantial knowledge of either, sought to pitch the relation as an aspect of a looming new Cold War, a race between East and West for Africa's resources, and above all made the assumption that Africa was being exploited by the Chinese because it did not know any better.

But Ian had been studying the relation long before almost anyone else. Early in his career as a graduate student at the University of Hong Kong, he finished his MPhil thesis on the relations between the People's Republic of China and Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, producing a 368-page thesis.

Rather than exploitation and opportunism, Ian demonstrated that there were old ties and old congruities and old sympathies. The relations between Africa and China, rather than being described as one between exploiter and exploited, was one of constant and dynamic negotiation and renegotiation, with a post-independence history of many phases. Ian laid to rest the notion of the helpless African, just as he challenged the narrow image of an avaricious China. To see Africa only as a target in a new Cold War rivalry was regarded by Ian as offensive, although he was far too nuanced to say that outright – but he made plain the detailing and delicacies of the relations in his long stream of authoritative writings.

As the Sinologist Kerry Brown stated: "In a time of deep polarisation, Ian maintained huge integrity."¹ This integrity was based on his huge familiarity with the two continents.

His writings began with a series of works on Africa as an emerging continent, before Ian turned his attention to its relations with China. But China had been involved with Africa since shortly after the Bandung Conference of 1955, had helped with the liberation of more than one country, and had asked for nothing in return long before the more recent phase of commercial, commodity and

1 In a communication to Hangwei Li shortly after Ian Taylor's death.

energy resource undertakings with all their problematic characteristics – few of which were premised on any essential African helplessness. Ian published numerous works on the topic of African development (especially of Southern African countries), African political economy, peace and security, regional integration, and the relations between emerging countries and Africa. His multifaceted observations and studies of small African countries, particularly Botswana (such as Botswana’s “conflict diamonds”), their foreign policies and international relations, efforts at democracy and their development strategies made important contributions to filling the gaps in this field. Ian Taylor also published a substantial body of work on South Africa’s post-apartheid foreign policies, which was described by Eduard Jordaan (2012) as “the most articulate and theoretically self-conscious attempt to come to grips with the contradictions in South Africa’s foreign policy.”

His 2006 book, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*, concentrating mainly on Southern African case studies, meant what the title said: there were compromises, meaning both sides had to make compromises, and compromise reflected negotiation not a dictate (Taylor 2006). It was this book that signaled the emphasis in his later publications on the relations between two complex continents. In total, he published 12 books, 84 peer-reviewed papers, and 108 book chapters – as well as a stream of shorter pieces. At the time of his death his work had attracted 9,500 citations and had been published in 15 languages.

Just before his death, the University of St. Andrews awarded him its higher doctorate of letters (D.Litt.) in recognition of his huge *opus*, and the importance of that work. For a recording of the Degree Conferral Ceremony, see YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVhxUkoRxGI>.

Ian was not an armchair Africanist or airport fieldworker. Just two years ago, he backpacked with his brother in the region around N’djamena. He had a huge collection of art from the countries he visited, as well as books written by African colleagues. He was a champion of African universities and the books by African scholars filled what his students at St. Andrews called his “cave” of an office.

A GENEROUS AND OPTIMISTIC FRIEND

Hangwei Li writes about her memories of Ian Taylor:

I met Ian in 2019. At that time, we were both on a research trip to Zambia and Angola, funded by the Polish Science Research Centre. Due to funding constraints, Ian had to change planes three times, but as a “superstar,” he never complained about anything. In fact, he was incredibly low profile. In the meantime, he was fully aware of his privileges, and was always eager to learn and listen to others. We had a fruitful trip. We interviewed more than 50 Chinese companies, many local scholars, journalists and officials. During the field trip, Ian was always on the receiving end, seeking answers by asking dozens of follow-up questions, listening passionately, making detailed notes – just like a curious student, and not an established professor who was known for his encyclopaedic knowledge. He also continually encouraged me to make my own voice heard, to speak out, even if they were different, because “the tension of discussion is what makes the flourishing of scholarship.” Ian was also incredibly modest, “What do you think? You know this better than me.” He said this on numerous occasions to me. As many other scholars reflected, you would often find Ian at a table having lengthy discussions with PhD students and academic newbies instead of “big names.”

After my research, I moved to Ethiopia to continue my fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. Although I knew Ian was well-connected in Addis Ababa, I did not plan to bother him. Surprisingly, I received an email from him the day I landed, and he generously introduced me to a number of Ethiopian scholars. During my field trip, I tried to interview an Ethiopian cabinet member who was not reachable. When Ian heard of this, he once again generously wrote several emails to the Ethiopian cabinet to introduce my research project and me. I was curious: How could such an established professor who always had a busy schedule find time for such trivial matters? Later, I was told that he never considered it “trivial.” Promoting young scholars and bringing new blood into African Studies was part of his everyday work.

Welcoming, warm and personal, Ian generously supported many early-career scholars, and encouraged them with a kind heart. Someone who is now a senior researcher once recalled his encounter with Ian: he was at that point a very frustrated PhD student, who had just lost all of his fieldwork notes and interviews after his computer had been stolen. He accidentally met Ian

in a café in Beijing. In line with his famous saying, “Happy to help,” Ian did exactly this, although he did not know him. He helped the student redesign his fieldwork and the structure of the PhD dissertation in the next couple of days, and most importantly, rebuilt his confidence.

Humour and optimism were Ian’s biggest characteristics. He wore his humanity on his sleeve: everyone who had the chance to meet Ian Taylor would remember his jokes and the unique nature of his humour. It is as if his life found its root and meaning in humour and optimism. Even after the diagnosis last year, Ian did not lose his positivity and remained optimistic during the treatment. Whilst preparing his last wishes for his funeral, Ian was very clear that “if you are not going to clap for this, please leave now!”

We will certainly clap loudly for you, Ian. And for a long time. You touched and inspired the lives of many people through your knowledge, wit, stories, character and kindness. Your intellectual legacy and precious spirit will live on.

References

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