



INTERVIEW

# Fox Butterfield on China in the 1970s

*The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author tells us about his first trip to China, and opening the Beijing bureau of "The New York Times" in 1979.*

LIU HE — OCTOBER 29, 2024

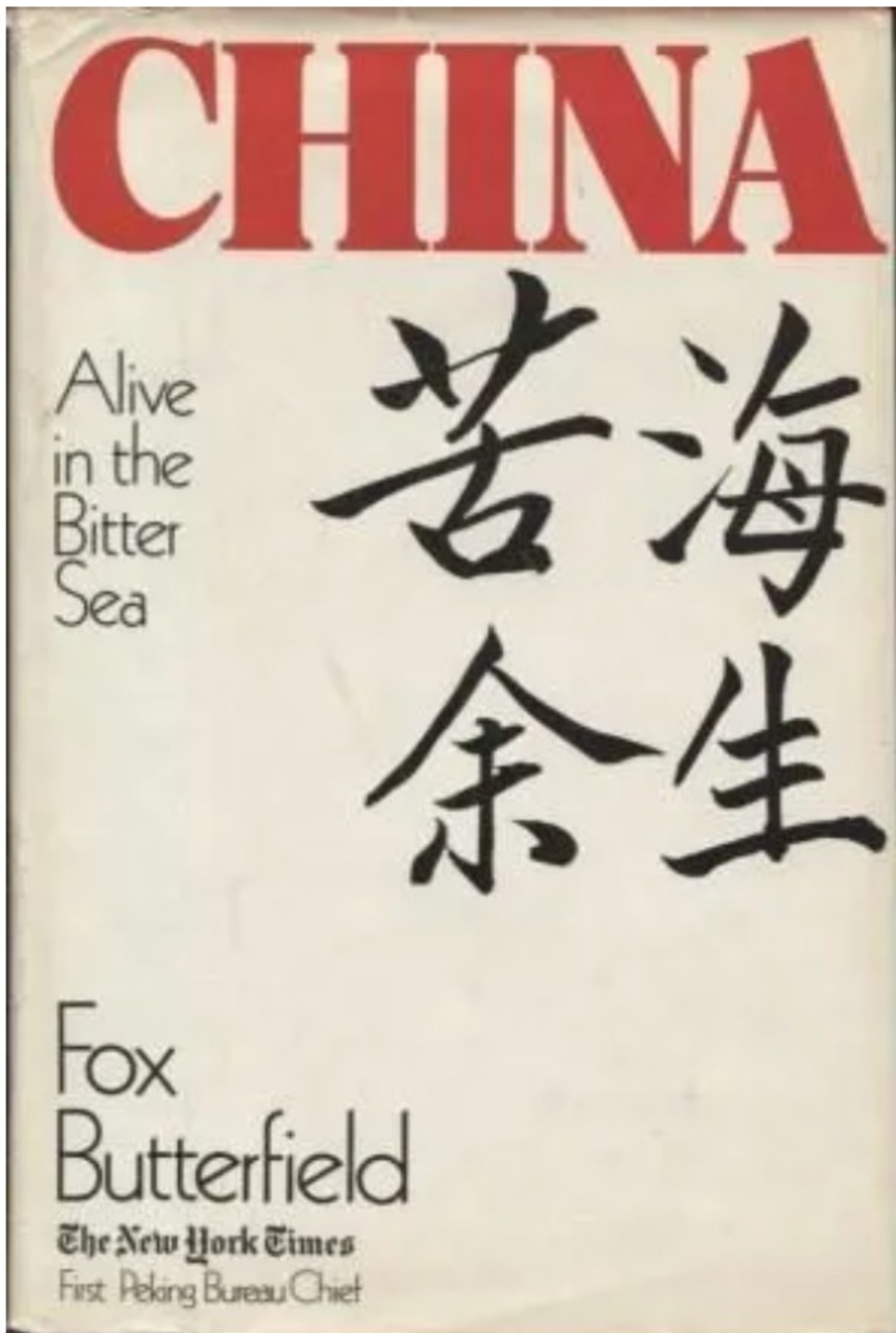
HISTORY



This post is a collaboration with the Substack podcast and newsletter [Peking Hotel](#), hosted by Liu He (何流), which publishes bilingual oral histories of China experts around the world. Subscribe on your favorite podcast platform for more, or listen to selectively syndicated episodes [here at China Books Review](#).

Fox Butterfield is an award-winning journalist who was the first *New York Times* correspondent in China since 1949, opening the newspaper’s Beijing bureau in 1979, just after diplomatic relations between China and the U.S. normalized. Born in 1939 and trained as a China specialist, Butterfield’s reporting culminated in his seminal book [China: Alive in the Bitter Sea](#) (1982), a bestseller that launched the genre of journalist books on contemporary China, and set the benchmark for generations of China correspondents. Later, in his reporting on the Vietnam War, Butterfield helping to expose the Pentagon Papers, which earned him a Pulitzer Prize.

I sat down with Butterfield this summer at his Portland home to record his personal oral history, taking us back to those years when China first began to open up, in the 1970s and early 1980s. He holds a unique vantage point as an Asia



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correspondent during the Cold War, and one of the first American journalists to report in China. In this edited cut of our conversation, he talked about his first trip to China (bunking with Joe Biden), his studies at Harvard under John Fairbank, and opening the Beijing bureau for the *Times* in 1979. This bureau was a new window for the American public to understand China, a gesture of goodwill from the Chinese government toward the Western world, and a pivotal step in bridging the two nations and making China's reality more accessible to the world. Forty years later, its history is only beginning to be told:



## Guest



Fox Butterfield is the author of [\*China: Alive in the Bitter Sea\*](#) (1982), which won the National Book Award, and [\*All God's Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence\*](#) (1996). He was a member of *The New York Times* reporting team that won the Pulitzer Prize for its publication of the Pentagon Papers, and served as a bureau chief for the newspaper in Boston, Saigon, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Beijing, where he opened the *Times* bureau in 1979.

“ From the Communist perspective, they assumed *The New York Times* was America's official publication. They thought it was the *People's Daily* of America. ”

— Fox Butterfield

Transcripts of this interview are published at [Peking Hotel](#).

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Liu He (何流) is a visiting scholar at Hoover Institution, Stanford University, where he conducts research on the oral history of China experts in America. He has spent most of his career in Chinese civil society, where he has worked on various rural development and global health projects. He is host of the [Peking Hotel](#) podcast and newsletter.