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## Reports from China: Joan Robinson as observer and travel writer, 1953-78

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REPORTS FROM CHINA:  
JOAN ROBINSON AS OBSERVER  
AND TRAVEL WRITER, 1953-78

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CENTER FOR THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY  
AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

# Reports from China:

## Joan Robinson as Observer and Travel Writer, 1953-78

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**Abstract.** Joan Robinson's infatuation with Mao's China remains the most controversial episode of the Cambridge economist's life. Drawing on the literatures on observation in science and economics, and economists' travels, we aim at overcoming the dichotomy between Robinson as a 'political pilgrim' and as a 'development economist'. Instead, we take a closer look at her observation practices, her literary choices, and her position within different political and intellectual communities. The structure of the paper is quasi-chronological: each trip to China is described in its own right, but also treated as an entry point to shed light on a particular aspect of Robinson's engagement with the country.

**Keywords.** Joan Robinson, China, travel writing, observation, communities, socialism

**JEL classification.** B24, B31, B50

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## 1. Approaching Robinson on China

Joan Robinson's (b. 1903; d. 1983) infatuation with Mao's China remains the most controversial page of the Cambridge economist's life. Over the course of eight trips (1953, 1957, 1963, 1964, 1967, 1972, 1975, 1978) she visited Chinese farms, plants and educational institutions, and found evidence that a brave new world was born or, at the very least, that 'so far as the underdeveloped countries are concerned, it seems that socialism is going to beat capitalism at its own game' of capital accumulation (Robinson [1957] 1960: 98). As discussed below, in the 1950s she supported enthusiastically Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-1961). A massive famine also occurred (1959-1961), but Robinson, as many others, was unaware of its full extent. In the 1960s and 1970s she celebrated the success of the Cultural Revolution, which, as we now know, caused the persecution of millions as class enemies and the deaths of many (see Wemheuer 2014). It was only in the 1980s that data became available about deaths caused by the Chinese famine (Sen 1983: 757-9). By 1979, Robinson had become increasingly disillusioned with China in the aftermath of Mao's death – a disillusionment that broadly affected the left in the West (Lanza 2017) – but still denied the dramatic consequences of 1959-61 harvest failures, and praised Chinese authorities for the rationing system they then put in place (Robinson [1979] 1981: 143-44).

Two main attitudes have emerged in the literature on Robinson and China. The first has inscribed Robinson's trajectory within a larger group of 'fellow travellers' (Caute 1973) and 'political pilgrims' (Hollander [1981] 1982). Robinson appears as the most prominent economist who sought the realisation of utopia in a foreign communist regime. As Geoff Harcourt – who does not share that attitude – pointed out, Robinson 'was always looking for Utopia. She didn't find it in Russia, then she didn't find it in Eastern Europe, then eventually she didn't find it in China, and she backed off on China' (Harcourt and King 1995: 56).

Terence Hutchison (1981: 98) treated Robinson's admiration for China as symptomatic of the 'degeneration' within the relationship between politics and scientific knowledge that, in his view, characterised the trajectory of the Cambridge economists. Whereas a combination of positive analysis and active interest in social issues enriched the work of Henry Sidgwick and Alfred Marshall, Hutchison claimed, Robinson's championing of Mao's regime subordinated the quest for truth to political ideology. More recently, Sylvia Nasar (2011: 429) has portrayed Robinson as a 'trophy intellectual' for communist regimes, but also paradigmatic of early development economists' disregard for human rights and political freedom (Nasar 2011: 444).

The second attitude, which has prevailed among commentators sympathetic to Robinson's battle against neoclassical economics, has sought and protected the analytical content in Robinson's writings on China. As pointed out by Harcourt and Kerr (2009: 144), 'when her writings [on China] are stripped of advocacy [...] she had relevant, sensible, down-to-earth views on what should, could and was being achieved'. Robinson's post-war work on growth and distribution theory 'spilt over into her concern about the terrible problems of the Third World, the plight of the wretched of the earth' (Harcourt 2005: 23).

Scholars sympathetic to Robinson's methodological and theoretical research programme have distinguished three different phases (e.g. Adelman and Sunding 1989). Likewise, Tahir (2019) divides Robinson's thinking about China into three stages. During the first, spanning from her first (1953) to her third (1963) visit, Robinson applied to China her views of economic development, as reflected in three lectures she gave in China in 1957 (JVR/iii/5.5-5.3) on choice of techniques and capital accumulation, based on her 1956 book (Tahir 2019: 22-60; Harcourt and Kerr 2009: 143-53). The second and third phases owed much to her first-hand observation of China. During the second stage (1963-75), which marked the peak of Robinson's commitment to Maoism, the 'starry-eyed' Robinson, as she

referred to herself in hindsight (quoted in Tahir 2019: 61), praised the agricultural communes and the Cultural Revolution. The last phase (1975-83) was a period of self-criticism and support of ‘Rightist’ economic reform (Tahir 2019: 119-135; for a detailed reconstruction of post-Mao debates see Weber 2021).

Drawing on the literatures on observation in science and economics (Maas 2011; Morgan 2011; Serra 2018) and economists’ travels (Boianovsky 2013, 2018; Serra forthcoming), we aim at overcoming the dichotomy between Robinson as a ‘political pilgrim’ and as ‘development economist’. Instead, we take a closer look at her observation practices, her literary choices, and her position within different political and intellectual communities. The structure of what follows is quasi-chronological: each trip to China is described in its own right, but also treated as an entry point to shed light on a particular aspect of Robinson’s engagement with the country.

## **2. Reporting from Utopia (1953)**

Joan Robinson visited China for the first time in 1953, the only economist in a delegation of seventeen British businessmen (Perry 1977: 5). The group had been invited by the Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade, a new institution aiming at increasing China’s trade with Western countries. This institution was modelled on its Soviet counterpart, in turn the outcome of a conference that took place in Moscow in 1952. Robinson attended the Moscow Conference, and reported her impression in a pamphlet composed entirely of anecdotes (Robinson 1952). Although Robinson (1952) expressed some admiration for Stalin’s Russia, it would be simplistic to treat – as Hutchison (1981) and Nasar (2011) have – Robinson’s writings on the USSR and China as the expression of the same political attitude and affective disposition (Serra forthcoming). Despite sharing the motivation to use what she

had seen to counteract the derogatory tone of Western propaganda on those countries (Robinson 1952: 26-27; Robinson 1964: vii), the 1952 conference sketchbook is primarily an ironic commentary on the awkwardness of the linguistic and cultural encounter across the Cold War divide. In contrast, *Letters from a Visitor to China* (Robinson [1953] 1977), the main publication resulting from her 1953 trip, introduced a utopian register in Robinson's writings.

In 1953 she spent most of the time in Peking, and some days in Canton, with a few detours to three (unnamed) villages, one day in the industrial town of Mukden, and one day in Manchouli, 'a bleak railway town dumped down in the wild empty steppes of Inner Mongolia' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 36), from where she left for Russia. Robinson ([1953] 1977) is the account of a new world in which flies have been eradicated (Robinson [1953] 1977: 9), people do not fear to leave their properties unattended due to rampant honesty (Robinson [1953] 1977: 10), painless childbirths methods are widely adopted (Robinson [1953] 1977: 13), and criminals and prison inmates are 'treated' (rather than punished) through 'discussion and self-examination' and 'learning to work' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 21).

Even Marxism, with which Robinson had a complicated relationship, acquired positive connotations in China, becoming 'the very opposite of the obscurantist-dogmatism that [she found] so maddening in English intellectual Marxists' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 13). By avoiding 'any Hegelian metaphysics to cloud the operation of common sense', Chinese Marxism emphasised practical solutions to social and economic issues and, by challenging the respect for authority imbuing pre-revolutionary intellectual traditions, 'imports the scientific, empirical spirit, and respect for results' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 13).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is not a precise characterisation of Chinese Marxism, and of the importance of dialectics (although heavily mediated by Soviet Marxism). See Mao's essays collected in Knight (1990).

Yet, reporting from a far-away utopia raised two inter-related problems. The first pertained to the foreigner's capacity to collect information and interpret correctly what she observed: 'I have had a little glimpse at this huge event [China's transformation] and I tell you what I can. It does not add up to a great deal, but in the prevailing state of ignorance at home I feel that any crumb of information is worth sharing' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 35). The second arose from the likelihood of being disbelieved. Robinson was painfully aware of the latter: 'I suppose I must prepare to meet sceptical smiles at home. It is more inconvenient to be disbelieved when you are lying, but is more annoying when you are not' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 36). The task of gathering reliable information was complicated by the Chinese regime's employment of 'techniques of hospitality' (Hollander [1981] 1982: 16-21), a range of practices aiming at shaping the travellers' perceptions of the society visited. Including visits to statistically unrepresentative 'model' sites and restrictions over the freedom of movement, the mobilisation of 'techniques of hospitality' was a far-reaching form of cultural diplomacy.

Marxist economists claimed to bypass the narrow-mindedness of those who emphasised the 'typical' by invoking the need to embrace another, more holistic, way of seeing. There is continuity between Dobb reporting in the 1930s that Russia was the embodiment of dialectical contradictions – and therefore 'only Marxists can understand Russia today' (Dobb no date: 7; Serra forthcoming) – to Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy's report of their trip to Cuba (Huberman and Sweezy 1960: 77). Robinson, however, was no Marxist and, even when she engaged with Marx's economics, she removed it from its dialectical foundations (Robinson 1942; 1956; 1960). She never deemed necessary to invoke a 'dialectical' way of seeing, or appeal to any specific philosophical framework to justify her capacity to observe the 'real' China. The ultimate proof of her claims lay in what she had



witnessed first-hand, as suggested by P. D. Dhar's (2002: 155, our emphasis) recollections of Robinson's visits to the Delhi School of Economics in the 1950s:

It was in the Senior Common Room that Joan Robinson threw a cup of tea at the sceptic when she was holding forth on the efficiency of the backyard steel furnaces in Mao's China. *She had actually seen*, she announced, Chinese peasants making ball bearings!

That is consistent with Robinson's ([1953] 1977: 13) reference to the "scientific, empirical spirit" quoted above. Moreover, it broadly fits her endorsement of the Popperian demarcation between science and metaphysics (Robinson 1962), even if acknowledging difficulties – which increased as Robinson became further involved with Chinese matters – involved in separating science from ideology in economics.<sup>2</sup>

But with whom did Robinson go about 'actually seeing' China?

### **3. Circle of Friends (1957)**

Robinson's second trip to China occurred in 1957. In Peking, on the occasion of the anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (1<sup>st</sup> October) she shook hands with Mao on the balcony of Tiananmen Square, but 'was too shy to make a remark, and he moved on to the next visitor' (Robinson 1977: 39). She travelled to Sian, Chengtu, Chungking, and Wuhan, where 'the foundation for the great iron and steel complex were being laid' (Robinson 1977: 38). Besides getting a sense of how far the socialisation of agriculture had come, she visited Shanghai for the first time, a city that she saw caught in rapid transformation, with slums being cleared, and a 'standpipe for water' being built 'at every corner' (Robinson 1977: 39).

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson's reaction in Delhi may, alternatively, be seen as remindful of Wittgenstein's threatening Popper with a fireplace poker when the two philosophers debated in Cambridge in 1946 (Edmonds and Eidinow 2001).

Although the emphasis so far has been on what Robinson claimed she saw, both Robinson's observational practice and her political commitment were embedded in networks and communities. Two individuals loom large in the recollections of Robinson's 1957 trip (Robinson 1977: 37-39), sponsored once again by the Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade: Ji Chaoding (1903-1963), who was also the head of this organisation, and Solomon Adler (1909-1994). The economist Chaoding remained Robinson's main Chinese contact until his death in 1963.<sup>3</sup> Brought up in 'the cultivated tradition of the old *literati*' (Robinson 1977: 37), Chaoding pursued a PhD at the University of Chicago on Chinese economic history. During the Second World War he worked with the USA Currency Control Commission in Chungking, where he met and became friend with Adler (Robinson 1977: 38). A communist sympathiser since his youth, upon his return to China in 1939 he occupied key positions in the Nationalist government (but was already an undercover agent of the Chinese Communist Party) and, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, became assistant general manager of the Bank of China. Robinson met him in the preparations for the Moscow Conference, and he showed her around during her first visit to China in 1953 (although in her travelogue he is simply referred to as C.). In Robinson's recollections of the 1957 trip, he

Was an ideal guide for the journey, for he had lived in the old world and the new, in the West as well as in the East, so that he could help us to understand what we were seeing from every point of view. [...] He was a connoisseur of Chinese art. On our tour, when visits to factories and farms around each city were over, he would poke about the local antique shop in search of scrolls of calligraphy. [...] He had old tales to tell of every place we visited and every dish we ate (Robinson 1977: 37).

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<sup>3</sup> He died during Robinson's 1963 trip (JVR/xi/5.1/33).

But the intermediary who would have the most significant influence on Robinson's perceptions of China would be Solomon Adler. Born in the UK, following studies in economics at the Universities of Oxford and London in the 1930s, Adler moved to the US and became an American citizen. From his posting in Peking (1941-48), he worked as Representative of the US Treasury, but allegedly already worked undercover for the US Communist Party and the Soviets (Haynes and Klehr 1999: 129). After having become the target of a Loyalty of Government Employees investigation, he resigned and moved back to Britain, before moving to China in the 1950s. Galbraith (1973: 48) defined him as 'expatriated by McCarthyism'. Adler remained in China until his death in 1994, serving in the foreign intelligence of the Chinese Communist Party.

Robinson was Adler's guest during her second visit, in 1957. Their tour resulted in a co-authored pamphlet (Robinson and Adler 1958) praising the modest and conservative character of statistical estimates (Robinson and Adler 1958: 4), the good working conditions in industrial plants (Robinson and Adler 1958: 11), and the open discussions about the necessity of family planning (Robinson and Adler 1958: 19). Adler also acted as a 'man on the ground', offering Robinson additional evidence in the form of data and publications (JVR/7/22/8, Adler to Robinson, 21 January 1964), as well as sharing his own first-hand observations. The latter amounted to the replacement of the alarmist undertones of the Western press by a rosy picture of improved harvests (JVR/7/1/22/1, Adler to Robinson, 7 August 1962), and a 'a sizeable increase on last year in economic crops as well as grain' (JVR/7/22/6, Adler to Robinson, 20 October 1963).

Adler contributed more than anyone else to make Robinson feel like an authoritative observer of Chinese affairs. This was particularly important during the Cultural Revolution, defined by Adler as 'the most complex thing', in comparison to which 'the weird intricacies of US politics or the finer points of quantum mechanics are child's play' (JVR/7/22/25 Adler

to Robinson, 28 May [1968?]). He praised Robinson's work on China and contributions to economic theory against the background of conservatism that, according to him, dominated the discipline (JVR/7/22/32, Adler to Robinson, 27 January 1969). Sympathetic Western intellectuals were constrained in their fact-findings efforts by their reliance on a small group of elite intermediaries that, by virtue of their cosmopolitan education and lives 'in the West as well as in the East' (Robinson 1977: 38) were in a privileged position to impart a specific version of the 'truth'.

#### **4. Observing the communes (1963-64)**

By the time of Robinson's next visit, in 1963, China had gone through 'the Great Leap Forward' (1958-1961) and experienced a famine that killed between 16.5 and 45 million people.<sup>4</sup> Like many others (including apparently Adler), Robinson found out about this only after Mao's death. Instead, in Peking she found an improved bus service, 'plump and bonny' faces, children 'playing as perkily as ever', very high standards of honesty, and still no flies (Robinson [1964] 1977: 40). Some 'bitter years' had indeed occurred, but she was reassured through unspecified conversations that 'the bad times had slipped into the past' (Robinson [1964] 1977: 40-41). She returned to China in 1964, but also managed to take a short trip to North Korea, a country that illustrated 'in miniature Mao's thesis that, if the imperialists choose to smash up the world, it will be rebuilt under Communism' (Robinson [1965] 1977: 77).

Yet, in 1963 and 1964 Robinson's focus was on the agricultural communes. The new system was created by reorganising the cooperatives. These were too small to invest in land,

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<sup>4</sup> Ghosh (2020: 251) presents a detailed list of alternative estimates of 'unnatural deaths' caused by the Great Leap Forward.

but too large to manage day-to-day operations successfully (Robinson 1964: 29). The result was a three-tier organisation in teams, brigades and communes. More importantly, agricultural communes represented an alternative socialist path to the Soviet focus on heavy industry (Robinson 1964: 27), and the promise of simultaneously increasing agricultural surplus, producing consumer goods, and raising rural living standards. As Robinson noted in her travel diaries at the time, the Soviets say “priority for heavy industry and expanded reproduction... Hard to get rid completely of Soviet experts’ influence” (JVR/xi/6.2/34).

How did Robinson observe and make sense of this political and economic experiment? She acknowledged that

I do not know any Chinese language and I have made no special study of Chinese history. I am not well qualified to discuss its affairs. However, since there is so much malicious misrepresentation of China in the Western press ... it seems to me to be a duty for anyone who has been able to make the smallest first-hand observation to offer it... (Robinson 1964: vii).

Robinson left behind a copious archive of notes from her trips to China. The historian looking for the utopian undertones, the juicy descriptions and the witty anecdotes that punctuated her published travelogues would be disappointed. Instead, most of her travel notes, between the late 1950s and the 1970s, consist of many hundreds of pages of numbers and figures, provided by the interpreters and the spokesmen of each economic unit visited. There is nothing exceptional about this: the predominance of figures in note-taking was shared by travellers as different as Robinson’s Cambridge colleague Piero Sraffa, a member of the first Italian delegation to visit the country after the revolution in 1954, and Roland

Barthes (2012: 10, 128), who visited China in 1974 with a delegation of the French magazine *Tel Quel*.<sup>5</sup>

Despite such similarities, the conceptual framework within which travellers made sense of official figures, and the questions they raised, varied. Robinson's notes suggest her commitment to learn how the system of planning, marketing and management worked. This can be seen, for example, in a list of questions she intended to raise about the relationship between communes, their suppliers, and the Commercial Department (JVR/9/5.1./48-49). In contrast, one may see Sraffa's curiosity with accounting for the value of a commune's product and its division between land and labour (PS/E55/f015r) – and his questions about the division of the net profit of a wool-sewing workshop between workers and capitalists (PS/E55/f036v-f037r) – as an extension of his theoretical work. Sraffa appeared particularly interested in matters of definition and terminology: for example, he reported that 'rich peasants' were those whose income was based on someone else's exploitation rather than with how much was earned per se (PS/E55/f048v-f049r).

In 1963, Robinson visited, for five or six hours each, 'a dozen communes in seven different district' (Robinson 1964: 33). For each commune, she reported in detail numerical information on aspects as different as the population, gender composition, numbers of people composing up the brigades, the teams and the communes, output, income, or even the number of electric pumps and animal carts (JVR/xi/5.2/69). Typically, this is how a visit to a commune was translated into Robinson's notes, extracted from her notes on the North Luoyang Commune: 12 brigades, 59 teams; 2,833 households; 12,038 population; 5,991 males, 6,547 females; irrigated 4,543 for vegetables; dry 2,034 → for grain; reduction in animals due to electric pumps, mills; 57 347 carts driven by men; 6 trucks, 25 electric mills

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<sup>5</sup> Sraffa's notes fill a Cambridge pocket agenda (PS/E26), and a red Chinese notebook, in which Sraffa reported in extended form the observations made in the pocket diary (PS/E55).

brigade (JVR/xi/5.2/70). Occasionally she wrote down some remarks, such as “not possible under cooperatives because of conflicts of interest” and “formerly peasants exploited by middlemen” (JVR/xi/6.2/20) while visiting the Hong Tu Kong commune in 1964.<sup>6</sup> In that same year, she observed that Chinese “disapprove of Soviet suggestion of using profit as criteria” of efficiency in the economy.

Figures occupied an ambivalent position against the changing background of ways of knowing the Chinese economy. In the 1950s, Chinese statisticians were discussing and imagining the essence of the new socialist statistics. The debate revolved around the comparative merits and disadvantages of three approaches: an emphasis on complete enumeration, popularised in China by the Soviet Union; random sampling, which came to be momentarily seen as cost-effective and theoretically sophisticated method (but also tainted by bourgeois ideology); and an ‘ethnographic tradition’ that traced its roots to Mao’s own *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (Tse-Tung [1927] 1965; Ghosh 2020: 5-6).

At the time of Robinson’s 1963 visit, the last method had prevailed as the ‘correct’ one, but there was no longer an official ‘macroeconomic’ picture of China that an economist like Robinson could have found legible, and which could have allowed her to reflect systematically on the relationship between the communes visited and the new system they embodied. The triumph of Maoist ethnography resulted in the suppression of ‘any residual concerns with typicality (or representativeness)’ (Ghosh 2020: 276), and in many cases made it impossible for the Chinese government to verify the accuracy of the information reported (Ghosh 2020: 279). Robinson filled this open-ended relationship between ‘parts’ and ‘wholes’ (Morgan 2011; Serra 2018) by going back and forth between remarking the ‘casual’

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<sup>6</sup> Domar (1966) put forward around that time a first formal model of collective farms, with discussion of some of the conflicts involved in their operation. Robinson (1967) reacted critically.

and ‘superficial’ nature of her impressions, and making bold generalisations about China as an unprecedented historical formation. While this emphasis on the ‘paradigmatic’ rather than the ‘typical’ (Ghosh 2020: 277) shared some superficial similarity with the rhetoric of Maoist mass science, Robinson’s transcriptions of second-hand statistics were the opposite of the immersive fieldwork prescribed as the only legitimate foundation for a correct observation of the communes (Ghosh 2020: 263).

Mao firmly placed ‘the surveyor’s personal on-the-ground experience at the heart of any kind of social research’ (Ghosh 2020: 275), and envisaged statistics as the outcome of a collective process in which the gap between the surveyor and the people observed was abolished. Despite often remarking her ignorance of the language (Robinson [1953] 1977: 17; Robinson 1964: vii; Robinson 1973: 1), Robinson did not acknowledge the implications of her position as an outsider observer. This can be seen for example in the very optimistic assumption that she could intuitively distinguish truthful informants from ‘slogan bores, who could not go beyond saying the correct thing’ (Robinson [1953] 1977: 11). Perceiving frank and honest conversations as the norm, she made a point of reporting explicitly each instance in which she felt that her interlocutor was simply paying lip service to party propaganda rather than sharing actual thoughts and experiences. Allegedly, this happened only once or twice in occasion of her 1953 visit, (Robinson [1953] 1977: 11), once in 1957 (Robinson [1957] 1977: 39), and once in 1963 (Robinson [1964] 1977: 40). The conceptualisation of the implications of her ignorance of the language, and of her reliance on interpreters subverted the claims of ‘epistemic humbleness’ that punctuated her writings on China:

The figures are given in a set form but our questions are answered readily. [...] Usually the spokesman is frank and articulate. Generally the sense of our questions is picked up even when our town-bred interpreter does not understand them himself. Sometimes there is



confusion and a lot of argument we cannot follow before an answer emerges, generally because our questions were not clearly put (Robinson 1964: 33).

Besides reiterating the ‘truthfulness’ of the communes’ spokesmen, this remark redefines significantly the position of Robinson as an observer who does not speak the language. How could she understand that the essence of the questions was understood by the communes’ peoples *before*, or better than, the interpreter? Did the reference to the fact that interpreters were ‘town-bred’ imply that there was a profound fracture between urban and rural China? If that were the case, why would the questions of the foreign economist be more ‘legible’ to the communes’ workers than to the ‘urban’ interpreters? On other occasions, reflections on her position as an observer amounted to a minimisation of the complexities of the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic encounters. Reflecting on her first visit, she remarked that ‘in spite of the language and in spite of being inescapably foreign with my large nose and greying hair [...] I do not feel at all like a stranger; certainly less so than I do in posh or philistine circles in England’ (Robinson [1953] 1977: 17). For Robinson, new China’s ‘anti-posh’ and ‘anti-philistine’ attitude was simultaneously evidence that a better society was being built, and reassurance that she felt at home in it.

## **5. Narratives and communities (1967)**

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution inaugurated a new chapter in China’s turbulent history. Although *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Robinson 1969), based on Robinson’s 1967 visit, was one of the few ‘direct accounts’ of the Cultural Revolution available in the West at the time (Weber and Semieniuk 2019: 34-35), the book amounts to a series of second-hand reports and policy documents, interspersed with brief comments by Robinson. This shifted the position of the author, from someone who grounds her personal authority in travels and

first-hand exposure, to a transmission channel of evidence from the place visited. In contrast with Robinson's previous emphasis on her ignorance of Chinese language, the emphasis now was on the foreign observer's impossibility to penetrate the emotional landscape of her interlocutors, and thus the intimate significance of the revolution (Robinson 1969: 28). The cast of 'characters' was also broadened: peasants, workers and communes' spokesmen were joined by Red Guards and Party functionaries in the unfolding of a new collective history. In 1967 she noted in her travel diary that the Cultural Revolution was a "struggle for political power", and that the incidents "of great violence" of August 1967 had turned "the class lines clear." (JVR/xi/8.1/66).

When compared with previous reports, *The Cultural Revolution in China* stands out for its more extensive employment of direct quotations. The claim that the foreigner could perceive, but not fully understand, the greatness and the significance of Mao for the Chinese people (Robinson 1969: 28), amounted to a way of marking as 'authentic' evidence of the revolution's transformative potential the same pompous and grandiose declarations that in previous reports would have been dismissed as 'slogan bores' (Robinson [1953] 1977: 11). For example, the description of a transport company in Peking includes the 'voice' of a 26 years old driver:

I thought that I had come from a poor peasant family, so naturally I should be a genuine, spontaneous red. I took part in the Cultural Revolution with the idea of being a spontaneous red. I thought I did not need to remould my ideas or make revolution against myself. Owing to these ideas I was influenced by the bourgeois revolutionary line. (Robinson 1969: 134).

Yet, in the 1960s, Robinson's commitment to counteract the negative propaganda of Western media found its most systematic expression in her role as deputy chairman of the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU). The society was established in 1965 under the chairmanship of Joseph Needham, a Cambridge historian of Chinese science.

Needham established SACU after resigning from his post as President of an older organization created in 1949, the Britain-China Friendship Association (BCFA). The BCFA agenda was dominated by issues such as pleading for the People's Republic of China admission into the United Nations, contesting the American trade embargo, and promoting trade and cultural exchanges between Britain and China. Needham resigned, and communicated that he would form another organization, because he felt that BCFA had been unable 'to exert influence of weight commensurate with the need of the international situation' (CP IND/HANN/11/08, Needham to Dribbon, 26 January 1965). BCFA's 'unduly close connection with the British Communist Party' (CP IND/HANN/11/08, Needham to Dribbon, 26 January 1965) had prevented an open and productive discussion on crucial issues like the Sino-Soviet split.

The list of SACU's initial sponsors included many distinguished Sinologists, philosophers, historians and natural scientists (CP CENT/ORG/20/02, leaflet of invitation to SACU inaugural meeting). Robinson was the only economist. From the beginning of her involvement as member of the management council, Robinson was crucial in dissociating SACU from communism. In the inaugural meeting, she emphasised that the council was formed of individuals holding different political opinions, including 'some Communists, not very many of those, and I believe they are being expelled for having anything to do with us' (CP CENT/ORG/20/02, 'Report of the meeting Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding', 2). This claim was immediately rectified by a member of the Communist Party from the audience. The atmosphere can be glimpsed by the transcript of the Q&A session at the end of a lecture by Robinson on the Cultural Revolution in 1968:

An elderly nut-case now started a long question about his shock at hearing J.R. say that people {in China} hesitated to discuss certain matters. There was obviously no freedom. Mao was deified. It was as bad as with the wickedest man who ever lived - Stalin, etc.

(Alexander Tudor-Hart shouted out violently “Why did you come here, then.”)  
 (CP/CENT/ORG/20/02, ‘Joan Robinson lecture to Camden branch of SACU, 24.1.68 on  
 the Cultural Revolution’, 6).

In spite of its progressive stance, Marxists saw SACU with a mixture of suspicion and hostility. An anonymous flyer worried that the organization – which involved several businessmen- could be used for ‘upper class penetration of People’s China’ (CP/CENT/ORG/20/02, ‘Vote down the resolution of the Council of Management’). In 1968, Robinson became the victim of a virulent attack by a group of students of the University of Sussex:

How can we have anything to do with [Robinson] this ideologist for state monopoly capitalism, a follower of J M Keynes, himself a deadly enemy of the working class, an ‘inveterate bourgeois’, as the immortal Lenin called him, ‘a merciless opponent of Bolshevism’? Are we to speak differently of those who follow him? Are they also not merciless opponents of the working class? [...]

This woman Robinson is poison, all the more dangerous because she poses as one of China’s friends. She wants China to end its ‘isolation’ – isolation from imperialism [...]

As Professor of Economics at Cambridge University, Joan Robinson is the hireling of the capitalist class. [...] She is an enemy of Marxism, of Mao Tse-tung, and of working peoples the world over. (SACU News 1968, vol. 3, no. 6-7, 4)

Robinson’s response to the students, mild and conciliatory, contrasts with common narratives of her fierce attitude in discussing China, and is testimony to her willingness to build a united pro-China front in Britain. The key contradiction, claimed Robinson, was not between her and the students, ‘but between both of us and the apathy which permits decent British people to be unwitting supporters of aggression and imperialism’ (SACU News 1968, vol. 3, no. 6-7, 5). The clash between SACU’s different souls, comprising Marxists, businessmen interested

in trade with China, and people interested in Chinese culture and history, became difficult to sustain (Buchanan 2012). Although for most of the British left the Cultural Revolution marked a phase of detachment from China after an initial wave of interest in the 1950s, Robinson would find kindred spirits in an unlikely place: the American economics profession.

## **6. Robinson and the economists (1972)**

In May and June 1972, hosted by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Robinson returned to China for six weeks. She visited communes and industrial plants in Peking, Shenyang, Wuhan, Nanking, Shanghai and Canton. Like in Robinson (1969), the author's perspective was momentarily suspended and replaced, in this case by the voice of the chairman of the revolutionary committee of a textile factory in Peking (Robinson 1973: 29-31). Even more so than its predecessor, *Economic Management in China* made non-monetary incentives and the increasingly decentralised nature of planning the lynchpins of China's successful economic transformation. According to Robinson, what made this possible was the fact that people's attitudes and the changing economy mutually reinforced each other, leading to higher living standards and increased collective welfare:

The success of the Chinese economy in reducing the appeal of the money motive is connected with its success in economic development. When everyone has enough to eat today and hope of improvement tomorrow, when there is complete social security at the prevailing level of the standard of life and employment for all, then it is possible to appeal to the people to combat egoism and eschew privilege (Robinson 1973: 13).

In that same year, China featured prominently in the chapters on ‘Socialist planning’ and ‘Socialist states’ in Robinson and Eatwell’s (1973) innovative (if controversial) introductory textbook. Several passages can be properly read only against the background of her travels to China. That is the case of the remark that ‘the Chinese seek to overcome alienation by political education and consultation between managers, technicians and workers, giving everyone a feeling of concern for production’ (Robinson and Eatwell 1973: 317). Again, the Chinese planning system is reported as ‘not controlled by profitability ... but by self-respect, or, as the Chinese put it, by the higher level of political consciousness of the workers’ (321). In a textbook, such passages read like authoritative statements, not as mere “impressions” as she often described her travel reports, although the sources were likely to be the same. The same applies to her later book on development (Robinson [1979] 1981), where the discussion of Chinese economic development is not supported by references to the literature, unlike her treatment of other developing countries. Statements like ‘only in China has a system been evolved which permits the cultivators to benefit themselves while supplying the needs of the economy’ (Robinson [1979] 1981: 58) read like Robinson’s own evaluation on the basis of her visits to the country.

Around the early 1970s, Richard Nixon’s visit opened China’s doors to a new generation of American travellers. Many American intellectuals visited China towards the end of the Vietnam War, when ‘the need to expiate the sins of their country’ was particularly acute, and when ‘disenchantment with “Establishment” views and attitudes, especially toward communism, was at a high level’ (Hollander 1981: 279-280). In their reconstruction of the the First Friendship Delegation of American Radical Economists’ 1972 journey to China, Weber and Semienuk (2019) analysed the economists’ expectations, experiences and recollections. Members of the First Friendship Delegation shared Robinson’s enthusiasm for the communes as the embodiment of a truly alternative economic, political and moral order.

In September 1972, another delegation set out to observe China's economy first-hand, this time composed by three former presidents of the American Economic Association, who shared a qualified optimism about the country. James Tobin, Wassily Leontief and John K. Galbraith visited Peking, Nanking, Shanghai, and Hangchow. Leontief (1973:74) summed up his overall judgement about socialism in China: 'It works'. While lamenting that 'freedom of the spoken and written word and freedom of thought obviously do not exist' (Leontief 1973: 81), Leontief (78) also acknowledged China's 'unique accomplishment' in eliminating abject poverty and obtaining full employment. What certainly would have met Robinson's disapproval was Leontief's comment on the similarity between the Soviet Union and China in 'methods of economic planning and the most important formal aspects of economic administration' (Leontief 1973: 78).

In form and content, Galbraith's *A China Passage* (1973) comes even closer to Robinson's reports. Galbraith's (1973) and Robinson's writings on China were motivated by the same necessity to make the most of visiting a country about which so little was known (Galbraith 1973: xi). Secondly, they combined the admission of not possessing any distinctive expertise on China (Galbraith 1973: xi), with the assumption that they would be able to see through at least some of the 'unrepresentativeness' of the places they were shown: 'Without question we were taken to see and were told about the best. But in all travel one sees much that one is not shown' (Galbraith 1973: 119). Other similarities included the encounter and consultation with Sol Adler, whom Galbraith knew from the time of their work at the Treasury during the New Deal (Galbraith 1973: 48).

However, the First Friendship Delegation and Galbraith shared a certain degree of dissatisfaction or scepticism towards the implications of the Cultural Revolution for academic education. The First Friendship Delegation's encounter with economists at Peking University and Fudan University marked a 'low point' in the trip (Weber and Semienuk 2019: 48). The

Cultural Revolution's emphasis on the primacy of politics and its anti-intellectualism resulted in the undermining of the expertise of academic economists. This was difficult to reconcile with the radical economists' vision of their discipline as a critical tool to analyse and change the world (Weber and Semienuk 2019: 57). Galbraith expressed scepticism during his visit to the University of Peking: 'However important it may be to keep university faculties and students from being a privileged caste, you cannot make first-rate mathematicians, physicists, chemists in a factory' (Galbraith 1973: 74).

Robinson reported a visit to the University of Peking and a discussion with Chinese academic economists in her first visit (Robinson [1953] 1977: 14-15). During the Cultural Revolution, she focused on visiting different types of educational institutions, like the Geological Institute and the Medical Academy in Peking, and the College of Construction and Civil Engineering in Shanghai (Robinson 1969: 138-146). Despite admitting that it was too early to assess the effect of political education on students of technical subjects (Robinson 1969: 146), she did not seem to share the scepticism of Galbraith and of the American delegation. Instead, her position seemed to echo Adler's belief that 'the need for at least one Cultural Revolution is self-evident in China. In no other country have the intellectuals constituted a privileged stratum for so long and so continuously' (JVR/7/22/6, Alder to Robinson, 2 August 1966). According to Robinson (1969: 154), 'if the Party and the intellectuals are to serve the people, the people must judge the service, though Western professors secure in their "mountain strongholds" would not much like the judgement to be applied to themselves'.

Robinson's correspondence provides additional entry points to observe the relationship between her attitude towards China and professional networks. Edward Wheelwright, an economist based at the University of Sydney who co-authored a book on the economics of Chinese socialism (Wheelwright and McFarlane 1970), wrote:



I have your invaluable Economic Heresies, and saw your guest lecture to the A.E.A. a while ago. The neo-classicals are hard to shift though; Paul Samuelson was here recently, and insisted on giving a long highly mathematical lecture to our students, on a topic of no importance, which few understood. Typical – the students were [infuriated]. He needs a spell in a commune for self-criticism... (JVR/7/469/1, Wheelwright to Robinson, 14 May 1973).

In contrast, Marxists could use Robinson's work on China to detect inconsistency between her vocal opposition to the labour theory of value and her actual employment. This was the case of John Henry, of California State University, Sacramento:

I had written you a long letter defending the labour theory of value, but felt that you had been besieged sufficiently in the past by individuals of my ilk in this area. It remains, however, that you did employ the LTV to explain pricing in China (JVR/7/198/1, Henry to Robinson, 21 August 1973).<sup>7</sup>

Treating Robinson as either a 'development economist' or a 'fellow traveller' hides the extent to which Maoist China provided not only an unprecedented case study or a shared political myth, but also a discursive repertoire that informed perceptions of Robinson's identity as a heterodox economist.

## **7. Coming to terms with Maoist China (1975-1978)**

In 1975, Robinson travelled to China's Southwest, in the areas bordering Vietnam, Laos, Tibet and Myanmar. Visiting Kunming and the Tai autonomous prefecture of Hsishuangpanna, she caught a glimpse of how communist China was integrating and 'developing' the ethnic minorities of Yunnan. She had already encountered in miniature the state's 'civilising mission' towards minorities during her first visit in 1953, when she visited

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<sup>7</sup> Presumably, Henry was referring to Robinson (1958) and Robinson (1960).

the College of National Minorities outside Peking. In that occasion, she was happy to report the ‘great care’ with which the government was respecting the cultural and religious beliefs of the ethnic minorities: ‘This careful respect for other people’s nonsense is an important part of Chinese policy’ (Robinson [1953] 1977: 19). In 1975, she went as far as to claim that the government intervention in Yunnan offered ‘a remarkable story of colonialism in reverse’ (Robinson [1975] 1977: 131). Her last visit took place in 1978, when she was still vice-president of SACU (Tahir 2019: 122).

Even if the full extent of the 1959-1961 famine remained unknown, the revelations of widespread violence that took place under the banner of the ‘Cultural Revolution’, and Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, produced a collective change of mind. With reference to the latter, some leftist intellectuals felt that China was turning its back on revolutionary achievements to embark on a capitalist path of development. It was in response to one of such economists – the Frenchman Charles Bettelheim (1978) – that Robinson reflected on Mao’s legacy, and defended Deng Xiaoping’s reform and the re-introduction of monetary incentives (Robinson 1978). The Cultural Revolution had turned out to be quite different from what Robinson thought: ‘The history of the decade, 1966-76, has been a profound shock. How could it happen that, under the cover of Mao Tse-Tung thought, a medieval drama of ambition and treachery could play itself out?’, she wrote in 1978 (JVR/2/55/9). Eventually, she declared that ‘the romance has gone out of China for me’ (quoted in Marjorie Turner 1989: 88).

In an addendum to the foreword to the 1981 reprint of her 1979 book, Robinson acknowledged that news coming out of China since Mao’s death showed that “some of the allusions [in the 1979 print of the book] to the success of Chinese agriculture were over-optimistic”. But she maintained that “all the same, the level of production and the standard of nutrition compare favourably with those of the Third World”, a view held also by the World Bank at the time (see Weber 2021).

In contrast with discussions of Robinson as a ‘fellow traveller’, we have avoided reducing her involvement with China to a mere allegory of epistemic hubris and political naïveté. On the other hand, we have not attempted to isolate the analytical core of her writings on China from the political and ideological context in which they originated. The resulting reconstruction is a story about seeing, taking notes, writing, corresponding, and building political communities. This has allowed us to focus on some underexplored aspects of Robinson’s intellectual and political trajectory.

Firstly, unlike Hutchison (1981) and Nasar (2011), we have argued that Robinson’s writings on China are not the expression of the same political attitude that permeates her impressions from Moscow. Moreover, speaking of a ‘starry-eyed’ Joan Robinson limitedly to the 1960s misses significant continuities in both the utopian underpinnings of her narratives, and the concrete ways in which she observed China. The reliance on ‘cosmopolitan brokers’ like Ji Chaoding and Solomon Adler, and the detailed transcription of figures for each economic unit visited represented the empirical backbone of Robinson’s writings. By the 1960s, the unavailability of aggregate statistics created an open-ended epistemic and narrative space in which issues of ‘typicality’ had to be bypassed for the claims made to appear authoritative. Robinson, who unlike Marxist economists had no use for dialectical heuristics to address this issue, sometimes positioned herself in an ambivalent manner, going back and forth between acknowledging her ignorance and claiming to have access to ‘the truth’ about China.

The fact that her enthusiasm for China was to some extent shared by the American delegation of radical American economists, and also by Galbraith and Leontief, makes Robinson’s position appear less exceptional; more the product of its time than an individual idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless, looking closely at SACU’s early years allows to rescue not just the atypical position of Robinson as an economist deeply involved in this project, but also her

pivotal role in seeking to carve a new political and intellectual space in which a wide pro-China front could be built without the leadership of the British Communist Party.

When all these disparate threads are brought together, the result is a more nuanced portrait, in which Robinson appears as neither just a social scientist trying her best to make sense of China *despite* her ideological beliefs, nor merely a utopia seeker blinded by political faith – even acknowledging the role of utopias in her frame of mind. Moreover, Robinson's travelogues are an entry point also into what they leave out, which represent productive avenues to historicise economists' travels: the complexity of the politics of translation, and the multiplicity of ways in which, by circulating across different communities, travel writings acquire distinct political and economic meanings.

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