



Captive of One's Own Theory: Joan Robinson and Maoist China

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Hostile observers (including many professional China watchers) like to discredit the reports of visitors who, they maintain, must've been shown around. There is a great deal of reluctance, both in the Soviet Union and in the West, to believe what sympathetic visitors to China report. Is it possible to carry out industrialization without squeezing and dragooning the peasantry? How can there be discipline in a factory where the workers are free to criticize the boss? How can there be incentives to work without inequality? How can there be socialism with grass-roots democracy? How can a backward country develop by its own efforts, without benefit of foreign aid and foreign advisers?

Yet there are certain large facts which no one can deny. Frequent predictions of breakdown, famine, and chaos have proved false.

—Joan Robinson (1970b, 9)

Joan Robinson (1903–1983) began studying economics at Cambridge in 1922, and after graduating she would go on to write numerous major works in microeconomics, macroeconomics, the history of economic thought, and development economics. But in the last three decades of her life, she wrote very favorably of both the economies and the broader societies under two of the more ghastly regimes of the 20th century—Kim Il Sung's North Korea and especially Mao Zedong's China. Given that much information was available to anyone proposing to evaluate the economics and ethics of the Chinese regime, that she wrote what she did seems difficult to understand.

Robinson's long, distinguished record has prompted many evaluations of her work. Most evaluations pay little or no attention to her China writings. When they

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do, her complete and completely confident mischaracterization of what happened there is said to have been only temporary, and something she repudiated late in her life. But this paper argues that Robinson's extreme views on China, even during its darkest post-1949 moments, were not a late-career descent into eccentricity, but followed directly from how she saw the problem of economic development, and the comprehensive superiority of Chinese communism in comparison to both liberalism and to Soviet rule since Stalin, and they betrayed an irresponsible gullibility about what she was told on her visits to the country. This paper uses Robinson's own economic thinking to explain how she came to hold these views, and why she was so reluctant to disavow them. It also documents the failure of scholars on Robinson to grapple with this legacy, which was often expressed with complete certainty rather than scholarly caution.

Joan Robinson before her interest in China

Robinson (née Maurice) enrolled at Cambridge in 1922, and in 1925 passed the economics tripos. In the same year she married Austin Robinson, who himself became an accomplished economist and who later served as an associate editor of the *Economic Journal* while John Maynard Keynes was the editor. After that, she followed her husband while he worked in India; after independence, she would go there again and discuss economic planning with scholars there. Upon returning to England in 1928, she sought a job at Cambridge, but initially the only offer was to her husband, in 1929. In 1934 she was finally appointed an assistant lecturer after the publication of her first major work, *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* (see Harcourt and Kerr 2009, 4).

The period between the World War I armistice and 1930 in the UK had been very different from the 'roaring' 1920s in the United States. In the UK unemployment soared after the surviving soldiers returned home, and both monetary and fiscal policy were subsequently unaccommodating, as were trade unions who resisted wage cuts. The government also tried to maintain an unrealistically high value of sterling. Unemployment gradually drifted lower over the course of the 1920s after the initial huge postwar spike, but it was still over 7 percent by the time of the 1929 worldwide market crash.

Although macroeconomics was not yet a universally acknowledged sub-discipline, the British economists of the day could not help but think of the sustained postwar stagnation as something that traditional liberal economics could not explain. Especially after 1929, the standard liberal recipe of waiting for self-correction was insufficient if not counterproductive for addressing the crisis that faced first Britain and then much of the world.

Cambridge during the 1920s was a leader in this nascent discipline of macroeconomics, and its scholarship was more and more marked by skepticism of free-market processes. Robinson's views fit in this environment well. Shortly after the publication in 1930 of the first version of Keynes's *A Treatise on Money*, which Keynes had become somewhat dissatisfied with, Robinson and several other Cambridge faculty formed a group subsequently known as the 'Cambridge Circus' to discuss the claims in the work (Aslanbeigui and Oakes 2002). Richard Kahn, James Meade, and Piero Sraffa, in addition to Joan and Austin Robinson, discussed new ways of thinking about such problems as stagnation and large economic fluctuations, both of which had been known during the Industrial Revolution but which were now front and center. These discussions in 1930 and 1931 had some influence on Keynes's *General Theory* (1936). Robinson would spend the rest of her career at Cambridge and become one of the department's most influential thinkers.

How Joan Robinson saw the world

Robinson's scholarly output fills seven volumes (Robinson 2001), and she wrote hundreds of essays designed for the broader public in venues from major periodicals to modest Cambridge student journals. When it comes to how she thought about China, several themes evolve over the years. They illuminate why she admired the Chinese economic and social model, even as it played out ever more disastrously during the time she was writing about it, as evidenced both by much newer scholarship and by the substantial deconstruction of the model beginning a few years after Mao's death.

Throughout Robinson's career her focus was usually on society or the economy as a whole. This is so despite *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* (Robinson 1969/1933) being what we would now call 'microeconomic,' and indeed despite its having much influence on how modern microeconomic textbooks are arranged. Subsequent to that work her focus even with respect to the question of monopoly and competition was how microeconomic structure affected the performance of the economy as a whole.

Robinson's background led her to believe that the way to think about the economy was as a relation, generally a conflict, among different economic classes (see, e.g., Robinson 1947/1937). The key actors were not individuals but the collectives of labor, capitalists, and so on. In her framework there was little need to specify different firms, types of workers, or individual industries. Simple aggregates said to describe the interactions of millions of people—the unemployment rate, inflation rate and so on—were the variables of interest. 'Labor' suffers from high unemployment or not, 'the economy' grows or not, etc. Other than the very broad

categories of agriculture and industry, no attention was paid to sectoral shifts or to individual microeconomic relations. This of course is not unusual in macroeconomic scholarship, but it would influence how she thought about China's economic challenges.

The idea of universal economic law applicable to all places in all times was something Robinson for a time rejected. Today we might say that in general she believed every society at any point in time was path-dependent. The choices made in the past determined the choices available in the present. Each society in its particular situation had to choose its own policy regime. Later, however, she would nonetheless assert that the China model in particular was actually widely generalizable (Robinson 1973; 1970d).

Thus, she was a profound critic of liberal economics. While her work on Karl Marx (Robinson 1966/1942) is seen as having made key links between Marx's *Capital* and the economics of the era in which she wrote (see Gram and Walsh 1983), Robinson always had a complicated relationship with Marxism. A goal of Robinson (1966/1942) was to deal with Marx's problematic assumption of the labor theory of value while preserving what was valuable about *Capital* as a whole. Her views on political economy as a parade of progress among giants, Marx included, is found in a work produced during her time in India called "Marx, Marshall and Keynes" (Robinson 1978/1955). But Robinson always abjured the label of 'Marxist' for herself, preferring to think of herself as a left-wing Keynesian. She had frequent debates with neoclassical economists, notably Paul Samuelson. Robinson (1966/1942) pronounced *The General Theory* and what followed to be a more fruitful critique of capitalism than Marxism. Robinson criticized capitalism as having a host of flaws, including the creation and toleration of unacceptable levels of poverty, excessive consumption of luxuries by the rich—a particular problem for developing countries—and perverse incentives. As an example of perverse incentives, she cited the World War II practice of Brazilian companies destroying output or capital stock to prevent prices of output from falling (Robinson 1943, 6). She credited capitalism with being potentially self-regulating in the short run and with creating no end of technological advances, but these features hardly redeemed it. She wrote so enthusiastically about post-1949 China in part because of what she saw as capitalism's ethical deficiencies.

Robinson was a persistent critic of Samuelsonian 'neoclassical' economics. Its reliance on 'equilibrium' as the core of economic analysis struck her as misguided. By the time the second edition of *The Economics of Imperfect Competition* was published she regarded the idea of markets moving toward their neoclassical equilibrium, which had been part of the analysis of the first edition of the book, to be a "shameless fudge" (Robinson 1969/1933, vi). There was no reason to think that the price and output adjustments that might occur in a liberal economy

should actually approximate that equilibrium. There would frequently be, she and other followers of Keynes thought, effective demand failures. She ridiculed macroeconomic equilibrium with characteristic mordancy, writing that “it is necessary to recognise that the classical doctrine does not exclude starvation from the mechanism by which equilibrium tends to be established” (Robinson 1946, 102). This failure to have a tendency to move toward such a fictional equilibrium indicated that a major economic problem was that the economy as a whole was subject to systematic dysfunction. Whereas much liberal thought had recommended government inaction in the face of macroeconomic ‘disequilibrium,’ believing that eventually (in the case of sustained high unemployment) wages and employment would adjust, Robinson believed that dysfunction was the norm. In another classic work and one devoted primarily to development economics, *The Accumulation of Capital*, she described the conditions necessary in liberal economics for a macroeconomic “golden age” to be sustained:

When technical progress is neutral, and proceeding steadily, without any change in the time pattern of production, population growing...at a steady rate and accumulation going on fast enough to supply productive capacity for all available labour, the rate of profit tends to be constant and the level of real wages to rise with output per man ... no internal contradictions in the system ... [if] entrepreneurs have faith in the future and desire to accumulate at the same proportional rate as they have been doing in the past, there is no impediment to prevent them [and] the system develops smoothly [with output and the stock of capital (valued in terms of commodities) growing at a rate compounded of the rate of increase in the labour force and the rate of increase in output per worker. (Robinson 1969/1956, 99)

But this golden age was a theoretical curiosity only, a “mythical state of affairs not likely to obtain in any actual economy” (ibid.) The actual state of affairs could easily be a tragic one of sustained high unemployment. Indeed, a recurring theme in her analysis was that the output market could be in equilibrium even as there was substantial unemployment and yet firms saw no need to add capital. This idea had been a key element in Keynes’s *General Theory*. It should be added that in contrast to postwar American Keynesians, she did not simplistically believe that these sorts of economic fluctuations could easily be managed by proper fiscal and monetary policy, but that in liberal economies they were inevitable and substantial.

Economic development depends critically on the generation and proper allocation of the ‘surplus’ first posited in classical economics, and subsequently depicted as capitalist exploitation by Marx. Robinson believed that the critical matter in modernization and economic development was capital accumulation. Robinson (1943) had given some credit to capitalism for having discovered modern

technology and industry, but she contended that the task for developing countries not yet shackled by capitalism was to make sure that agriculture could create enough surplus value to enable the state-directed building of modern industry while also distributing it fairly. This was still her thinking in the book on economic development she published late in her life (Robinson 1981/1979). In her analysis of development she averred that capitalism had generated the surplus and used it to industrialize, but only by making many mistakes and creating injustice along the way. After decolonization she hoped that the new developing economies could do things better, by taking advantage of technological and organizational discoveries made earlier in capitalist societies but then restructuring their economies in such a way that they could generate the surplus without the injustice.

An implication of Robinson's way of seeing the world was that whether accumulation would happen under capitalism was not certain. Postulated growth paths were just that, with no evidence guaranteeing that actual accumulation and growth would occur in the hypothesized manner. Social institutions, long-term failures of effective demand, and other factors could prevent development, rendering it a perilous process. While writing about China she became more and more convinced that its system under Mao for deciding on the allocation of resources was superior to the happenstance and distorted sort of allocation that happened under other existing economic systems.

Critically, given what happened in China as she was writing about it, Robinson thought that economic policy had ethical dimensions beyond the merely 'economic,' and it was important to be explicit about them. While one could make predictions about the effects of various economic policies and arrangements, not to scrutinize the deeper ethics beyond efficiency of the outcomes yielded was unjustifiable. This was a lifelong theme of her work, and it was central in her *Economic Philosophy* (Robinson 1962a). Even *Freedom and Necessity* (Robinson 1970c), a substantial work in endogenous economic history, emphasized ethical thinking (to which economic history sometimes gives short shrift). In particular, there was a way to engineer policy to make poor countries wealthier. Doing so was an urgent task for economists, and this urgency motivated her to explore the question of development. That poverty could persist amid so much potential wealth was shameful, the more so because wealthier nations were now plowing so much of their own potentially investable surplus into military expenditure.

The China that Joan Robinson wrote about

Robinson traveled to China eight times—in 1953, 1957, 1963, 1964, 1967, 1972, 1975, and 1978. The travel record alone says a great deal, since the CCP

only invited foreign guests whom it thought could strengthen its image at home and abroad (Lovell 2015). She did not speak or read the language, but in addition to being familiar with Marxist economics, she made it a point to follow official Chinese accounts of deliberations on economic plans and pay attention to the Chinese government's descriptions of who the contemporaneously perceived enemies of those plans were, both inside and outside the country. During the 34 years from the CCP coming to power in 1949 and her death in 1983, there were numerous events that were or could have been known to her, although contemporaneous accounts of them both inside and outside China did not reflect with certainty how awful we know now them to have been. Major events are discussed in the following subsections.

1947–1951: Land reform and mass murder of ‘landlords’

Begun even before the Communist Party of China (CCP) came to power nationwide in 1949, and based on the precedent set in areas captured by it in the 1920s and 1930s, it consisted of CCP agents taking private landholdings, from very small to quite large, from those asserted by these agents to be landlords. The land was then given to those deemed peasants. The post-1949 confiscation process involved bitter denunciations and severe physical abuse of ‘enemies’ of the peasants. Ultimately, perhaps two million ‘landlords’ were killed nationwide (Dikötter 2013, xii; Dillon 2010, 290). By the completion of the process, roughly 40 percent of agricultural land had been transferred to peasants. Robinson clearly knew about the campaign since she wrote about it frequently and admiringly in a scholarly sense. Robinson (1966) minimized the violence,² and in later years she compared it favorably to processes in India, Egypt, and Latin America (Robinson 1981/1979, 52–54).

1949–1955: Nationalization

The CCP during this time took over all substantial private property. Buildings, especially factories, belonging before 1949 either to the Nationalist government (which had sometimes seized them after 1945 from the Japanese) and foreigners were simply taken. Sometimes in the latter case foreigners were held hostage until the process was completed (Thompson 1979). CCP cadres were inserted early on into the staff of both Chinese- and foreign-owned factories, and

2. Robinson (1966) writes: “Some landlords were executed, but the proportion seems to have been very small—only those convicted of an exceptional number of murders. The great majority were absorbed into the labor force.” Dikötter (2013) presents voluminous evidence to the contrary.

the freedom of their previous owners to manage the business was gradually restricted. As for domestic firms that had been privately owned in 1949, after a few years of tolerance because of the skills their owners had, all were nationalized quickly after Mao proposed it in 1955. That policy, if not necessarily the details, would have been known to Robinson by her second visit.

1953–1957: The first five-year plan

Heavily influenced by earlier such plans from the Soviet Union, it envisioned a process with industrialization at its core. The CCP discussed the planning process extensively both internally and with what they saw as foreign friends, including Robinson from her very first visit, and so she would have known the general pattern, to the extent that CCP officials spoke truthfully to her.

1953–1958: Collectivization of agriculture

Land reform had been meant as a temporary measure, although peasants were not told this. Shortly after its completion, the peasants were sometimes persuaded and sometimes herded one step at a time into ever larger collective farms, culminating in large communes, initially (although many would eventually fall apart) consisting of thousands of farmers and CCP managers. Robinson not only knew but as we will see frequently wrote favorably about the broad outline of this process.

1956–1959: Hundred Flowers Campaign and aftermath

For a short time beginning in 1956, Mao encouraged the Chinese people to participate in frank discussion of China's problems. Starting in late 1957, many who spoke out were condemned to imprisonment and labor camps. By the mid-1970s, even communist activists in the West were acknowledging at least the quick reversal of intellectual tolerance, if not necessarily accepting the view that it was designed to lure Mao's opponents out for elimination.³

3. For an example of Western radical acknowledgment of the oppressive nature of the post-Hundred Flowers response, see British and Irish Communist Organisation (1977, 13–15). More mainstream historians are divided on this question. Spence (2012/1991, 514) says that the desire to draw out hidden enemies was “merely” part of the motivation for the campaign. Dillon (2010) and Dikötter (2010) depict the campaign as a backlash against unexpectedly fierce criticism arising from the sudden freeing of expression. Chang and Halliday (2005) say that the campaign was designed to draw critics out.

1958–1962: Great Leap Forward (GLF) and associated famine

Launched at the instigation of Mao in 1958, the GLF was largely designed to accelerate China's industrialization and its transformation into a true communist economy by relying on moral suasion and the willpower of the peasantry and working class to do what communism required rather than importing costly, advanced technology. During this period there was a catastrophic famine throughout much of the country. Scholarship now generally places the death toll in the low tens of millions. To what extent the famine was caused by weather and to what extent by government policy has been debated by scholars, but whereas Robinson always attributed the death toll (which she consistently minimized) to weather, policy is now thought to have been far more important. Descriptions of scope, causes, and effects are given by Jisheng Yang (2012), Frank Dikötter (2010), and Jasper Becker (1996).⁴ The Chinese themselves domestically and euphemistically long referred to both the 'Three Years of Difficulties' (三年困难时期) and the 'Three Years of Natural Disaster' (三年自然灾害), and in the last few decades it has become common to refer more straightforwardly to the 'Three-Year Mass Famine' (三年大饥荒). Robinson seems to have generally accepted the anodyne, official, weather-oriented explanation, writing: "The commune system was really well put through the wringer during the three 'bitter years' of flood and drought that followed 1958 (when the critics were shedding crocodile tears over the 'famine') and has emerged in a sensible, flexible and realistic form," and terming the period "the three 'bitter years' of natural disasters" (Robinson 1977/1964, 26).

1960–1962: Sino-Soviet split

After several years of tension, in 1960 the Soviet Union withdrew its economic, technical and military advisers from China, along with most of its engineering plans and even some physical capital. The decision resulted from an

4. Much other empirical research has also been done on causes. Meng, Qian, and Yared (2015) report that the government policy of forcing communes to provide food to the urban areas before feeding themselves must occupy a primary role. Clement (2012) argues that inadequate foodstuff production and flawed distribution were to blame. Bramall (2011) finds that weather had no effect in a cross-sectional analysis. He suggests that differences in the responses of local cadres (i.e., local CCP leaders) were decisive. The toll of the famine as a function of the adherence of local cadres to Mao Zedong thought was also emphasized by Kung and Chen (2011). Houser, Sands, and Xiao (2009) find that weather and government policy both mattered in cross-sectional death rates, but policy mattered more. Li and Yang (2005) report that the majority of the deaths were due to local differences in policies requiring the communes to supply grain to the center and to divert resources from agriculture to industry. They also find that radicalism of local cadres mattered. What unites all this empirical work is that weather, namely drought, was at best a secondary cause.

ideological split that had developed after Nikita Khrushchev's secret de-Stalinization speech in 1956. The divorce quickly became global news.

1966–1976: Red Guards violence and Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution was begun by Mao after his political position was weakened substantially after the GLF. Its nominal justification was to purify Chinese communism by eliminating what Robinson (1970a), in conformity with CCP terminology, termed 'rightists' (右派)—as in right rather than left.⁵ In the end the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution to Chinese cultural heritage and human capital, as well as to general social cohesion, was devastating. The bulk of the damage occurred during the first four years, with roughly two years of chaos as violent groups called Red Guards (红卫兵), acting either independently or as a tool of one communist official or another, destroyed irreplaceable pieces of cultural heritage (temples, books, etc.), followed by two years of substantial military effort to bring this emerging power under control. The total death toll was probably less than in the anti-landlord campaign in the early 1950s, but sometimes the Cultural Revolution resembled incipient civil war. Relying on microdata from around the country, Andrew Walder (2019, 189) estimates the death toll at 1.6 million. Dikötter notes that "many more lives were ruined through endless denunciations, false confessions, struggle meetings and persecution campaigns" (2016, xviii). For individually focused accounts of the cruelty and devastation, see Lian Xi (2018) and Nien Cheng (2010/1987). Robinson wrote in some depth and with great confidence about the Cultural Revolution—which hereafter I shall abbreviate as 'CulRev.'

1976: Arrest of Gang of Four

Within weeks after Mao's death in September 1976, the so-called Gang of Four (四人帮) and many of their underlings were arrested, and at their trial in 1981 many of the charges involved stoking the disastrous chaos of the CulRev.

1978: Beginning of economic reform

At this time discussion and proposals for what would later be seen as merely tentative economic reform began to circulate among the CCP leadership, even as

5. In both Chinese terminology and Robinson's thinking, 'rightists' usually referred to those who sympathized with a Soviet approach to development. The campaign beginning in June 1957 that ended the Hundred Flowers initiative was called the Anti-Rightist Campaign (反右运动).

actual unauthorized reform was underway. By the time of Robinson's last published writings on China, it was clear that the first steps had been taken in China to move in a more economically liberal direction, a process that has continued to this point for over 40 years.

Joan Robinson's writings on China

Robinson wrote short monographs on China and one full-length book (Robinson 1970a). Her views on the Chinese economy and society would also appear frequently either in chapters of edited scholarly books, in reviews in scholarly journals of books written by others on other themes, or in her own books. Many of her works specifically on China appeared in outlets designed for the educated public, including the portion of that public interested in China. G. C. Harcourt and Prue Kerr (2009) have divided her thinking on China into three phases. According to them, before 1963 she had assumed the Chinese surplus-accumulation problem was similar to that in the early Soviet Union. In the second phase, from 1963 until after Mao's death in 1976, she "took a sharp turn to the left" (Harcourt and Prue 2009, 145), i.e., she endorsed Mao's policies. In the last phase, she walked back what were, in hindsight, her naïve views. In the treatment that follows, I structure the discussion around Robinson's visits to China.

Visits in 1953 and 1957

According to a comprehensive list of Robinson's writings on China (Harcourt and Kerr 2009), her first such publication was released in 1954. Published initially by a small publisher in Cambridge known as Student's Booksellers, it was later included in Robinson's *Reports from China: 1953–1976* (1977/1953). It was written after her 1953 trip, and set the table for much of what would follow for the next two-plus decades. The trip occurred because she was invited to join 16 British businessmen who were going to attempt to do business with the new government, and she wrote of improvements that were immediately visible with respect to the squalor, vice, and corruption of the China that certainly existed before 1949.

Robinson (1977/1953) particularly credited the CCP—based on what they told her and allowed her to see—with eliminating the longstanding practices of selling children, forced marriage, and difficulty in obtaining divorce. She lauded a much greater provision of social services and the order of and cleanliness on the streets. In fact, significant progress had been made on some of these problems, especially with respect to women's rights, for several decades before 1949, although the disappearance of both the homeless and drug users from the streets can be

attributed to draconian measures by the new government. During this time, it seemed clear to Robinson that education, and especially literacy, was much better, urban crime was now almost nonexistent, the non-Han Chinese minorities were being effectively integrated, land reform was said to be going well (although some landlords were a little bitter), and prisoners were being reformed through self-criticism. She also believed, correctly and unlike the peasantry who now owned the land, that land redistribution would not last long, being merely a transitory phase toward collectivization, which she would be in favor of throughout her writings on China.

Robinson was invited to come again in 1957, and a big part of this trip was her presentation of three scholarly lectures (Harcourt and Kerr 2009, 144–151). The visit immediately followed a visit to the Soviet Union, where she had engaged in similar conversations with economists there. The first lecture, given on September 4, emphasized her by now firmly held belief that the accumulation of capital via intelligent investment of the agricultural surplus was the key task in economic development, along with the already widely accepted view that Stalin had made mistakes. In the words of Pervez Tahir, “In the process of raising capital per head, Joan Robinson expected China to learn from the Soviet mistakes so as to minimize human costs” (quoted in Harcourt and Kerr 2009, 157).⁶ Perhaps the most important of these costs were the unjust burdens placed on the peasantry and working class. She particularly recognized the unfairness of peasants having to work land of different quality if they were paid by time worked, or by output produced. She proposed taxes assessed collectively on more geographically fortunate communes, and transfers given to those operating in less-productive physical settings.

In the second lecture, on September 6, she discussed the need to adjust ratios between labor and other factors in all productive environments to make sure that no one fell below a minimum threshold of consumption. Yes, short-term growth and the speed of the transition to socialism would suffer, but the economy would not suffer unacceptable Soviet-style moral costs.

In the third lecture, delivered September 9, she said that Marx was theoretically analyzing rapid accumulation under capitalism, and so the theoretical framework did not suit a mostly pre-capitalist society like China’s. She outlined what Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr (2002, 274) call “legal, market and moral” approaches that could be used to propel an economy. The strength of the Chinese model, as

6. As this essay was being prepared and circulated, the author learned of a new book on Joan Robinson and China, authored by Tahir (2019). Tahir is a longtime admirer of Robinson’s work, and some of his other work on her is cited in this paper. The author was unable to obtain a copy of the book by the time the revised version of this paper was submitted.

she saw it then, was that the apparatus for accumulation was being constructed in conjunction with a moral code appropriate to that apparatus. The Chinese model would avoid the problems faced in capitalist societies, where the moral code emphasized the propriety of making as much money as possible, with the result that distribution of income and the goods and services it could buy became unacceptable. Already there was a hint of why she would have such a favorable view of the GLF and CulRev as they were happening, namely that the Chinese were discovering a method of promoting Robinsonian accumulation that was both economically and morally preferable to capitalism and to the Soviet model.

This attitude is in conspicuous contrast to her skepticism almost from the beginning of Indian economic planning, which in her view neglected the fundamental moral questions of the country's distribution of wealth and its rigid social structure (Robinson 1962b; 1976b). Robinson felt India was in thrall to its traditions, and economic planning, when grafted onto a society with these traditions and funneled through parliamentary democracy, could not work. Robinson (1962a, 113) contrasted India's struggles in carrying out a transformation of its economic structure with China, where "a violent reversal of ideas has opened the way for rapid changes in technology and in the social forms appropriate to exploiting them." That she was enthralled by the Chinese model, despite this violent reversal, is indicated by the fact that despite having lived in India before independence and visiting to consult with scholars on development plans shortly after independence, she wrote far more about China.

Visit in 1963

Whereas before her 1963 visit, Robinson had seen China through the prism of capital accumulation and looked at the economy in terms of its ability to collect and allocate the surplus for that task, she gradually began to see the country now as in the process of seeking through experimentation a novel, better, and more appropriate way for China to accomplish this. She came to see the CCP commune system as the crowning experiment, a belief she would hold for the rest of her life. She indicated having visited "a dozen communes in four provinces" on the 1963 trip (Robinson 1973, 213).

In an account of the visit, Robinson (1977/1964) confidently said things that seem incredible now. She asserted that during the GLF famine, which she now referred to as "the bad years," the "rationing system worked" (Robinson 1977/1964, 41). Rations had been calculated and honored based on proper criteria such as body type, age, etc. The Chinese reacted, she indicates, with immense "civic morality" (*ibid.*), this morality fully cultivated a mere 10 years after 1949. She praised a redirection of resources from previously prioritized heavy industry to

agriculture and light industry during the years of harvest failure, but such had not in fact happened. The opposite was true: although there is no reason to think the CCP told her so, agricultural produce was diverted from the starving communes to the cities and, in exchange for factory equipment to facilitate rapid industrialization, exported to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These policies significantly exacerbated the famine (Meng, Qian, and Yared 2015; Yang 2012; Zhou 2012; Dikötter 2010; Li and Yang 2005; Chang and Halliday 2005). Rather than civic morality, the famine is represented in the newer, substantially more evidence-based scholarship by its viciousness, both in the macro sense in the policies of diverting commune production, and in the micro sense of the violence and other cruelties routinely inflicted by cadres in the countryside (Yang 2012; Zhou 2012).

Based only on accounts that were related to her by CCP officials, Robinson (1977/1964, 45) said confidently the GLF overall and the communes specifically were a success, pointing to construction and other investment, plus the GLF's utility as a solution for a tradeoff inherent in agriculture. Family farms, she thought, were too small to take advantage of specialization and had higher transport costs, while big farms incurred high bureaucratic costs, were not conducive to worker discipline, and could not simultaneously take advantage of moral and monetary incentives to the extent that small farms could. Supervised communal production, in other words, struck a proper balance. She wrote that "it was the existence of communes which made it possible for the authorities to see the country through" (ibid.), in contrast to the harrowing accounts of life on them that have emerged in recent historical scholarship. As evidence, she raised the fact that Chinese famines previously would kill 10 million or more people, which is true. But private social organization, and any spontaneous, liberal improvement in agricultural productivity, were not available because the CCP had destroyed these networks after 1949. These networks and a potential for building new ones during crises had already been in evidence in China's response to famine in 1921 (Fuller 2013). The CCP's regimentation of society, notably its elimination of freedom to migrate to cities where famine-relief efforts had in the past been substantial, means that the GLF famine can be judged to have been substantially and unjustifiably worse than the 1921 famine.⁷ Robinson acknowledged that during the GLF there were mistakes, but using her method of seeing everything in macroeconomic terms described the mistakes as "overinvestment...which puts the economy into an unbalanced position," early prioritization of heavy industry, and the government's initial terminological mistake in calling the communes "communist" rather than "socialist" (Robinson 1977/1964, 46–47). She also praised the democracy of the

7. The *hukou* (户口) system had in 1954 eliminated freedom of movement by tying people to specific residences.

communes, but accounts have emerged of horrific abuses including beatings, deaths, and sexual abuse, for perceived malingering, hoarding, or, sometimes, merely violating the arbitrary will of cadres (see Yang 2012; Zhou 2012).⁸ Robinson's tragically erroneous claims continued in a postscript added after the CulRev (Robinson 1977/1964, 53–55). In it she described the toleration of individual efforts to grow food during the GLF as “many concessions [that] had to be made to individualistic sentiment among the peasants; some communes actually disintegrated into private household cultivation” (ibid., 53). In contrast, Dikötter (2010, esp. Ch. 23) has described these efforts, to the extent they were successful despite official opposition, as critical to preventing the famine from being even worse.

Overall, Robinson's attitude toward the famine now was that it was not nearly as bad as Western propaganda claimed, and that it was caused by a combination of weather problems and to a lesser degree planners' mistakes—reallocation of labor from agriculture to industry, starting too many projects at once in 1958, and too much enthusiasm for producing steel in the countryside. But the evidence uncovered by contemporary historians on the GLF and the famine is far too critical of both policy disasters and cruelty from Mao on down to justify her anodyne and even laudatory verdict (Robinson 1977/1964; 1980/1964), which she never meaningfully retreated from.

Visit in 1967

The visit that yielded the most troubling turn in her thinking was in 1967, during the early stages of the CulRev. It resulted in the most thorough work based strictly on her visits, *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Robinson 1970a). The trip took place in the fall of 1967. While it is now believed that Mao had been plotting the CulRev for some time as a means to counter the strong opposition he encountered in the highest circles of the CCP after the GLF, several opening shots of the CulRev proper have been identified. The first was in November 1965, when an article by Yao Wenyan, later one of the Gang of Four, was published in two Shanghai newspapers. It criticized the performance several years earlier of a play by Wu Han called “The Dismissal of Hai Rui” (海瑞罢官). The play lionized a Ming dynasty official who spoke the truth not just to power but to the emperor himself about the extent of corruption among lower officials, and who was thus removed from office. The play was latched onto by Mao as an implicit attack on the Chairman himself. On May 25, 1966, a CCP secretary and teacher in the philosophy

8. Yang's (2012) evidence is voluminous and comes from interviews with survivors and government records, many of which are now off-limits to scholars. Zhou (2012) mostly relies on official documents.

department of Beijing University named Nie Yuanzi placed a big-character poster on a wall specifically identifying several Beijing party officials, charging them with seeking to bureaucratically colonize and therefore defeat what Nie called, based on a term already in use, the “Cultural Revolution” (文化革命). On June 1 the *People’s Daily* printed a now-famous editorial, “Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!” (横扫一切牛鬼蛇神), which contended that while the bourgeoisie and exploitive classes had indeed had their property taken after 1949, the ideological struggle was still ongoing, and these classes were biding their time throughout China, waiting to pounce. Quoting Mao, it said the struggle between capitalism and socialism was unfinished. The next day the text of Nie’s big-character poster was repeated in the same paper. Shorn of many of the details, the basic account in Robinson (1968) is similar to this account.

From there the fanaticism and violence in China escalated rapidly. Teachers, including professors, especially in Beijing, were among the first targets—humiliated, tortured, and sometimes killed by their students. Different factions in government at all levels struggled for power. The CCP Central Committee in early August 1966 issued guiding principles for the CulRev, indicating that those who criticized the masses (indicating ‘rightists’ in the government) should not be trusted. The document is one of several Robinson chose to include in *The Cultural Revolution in China* (1970a, 71–80). On August 18, perhaps one million young people gathered to hear Mao pronounce in favor of continuing revolution, while his deputy Lin Biao argued for the destruction of everything old. Groups of students in middle and high schools then began to form what soon became known as the Red Guards, and they extended the cruelty down the educational ladder to teachers at almost all levels and across the country. People with unsatisfactory class backgrounds, real or imagined, also became targets.

By the end of 1966 the new revolutionary ethos had spread to factories in many large cities. Some workers, often younger, literally seized the means of production, taking over production facilities in objection to management structure and how workers were compensated. Several state media organizations in Shanghai and elsewhere were among them, to the applause of Mao. As 1967 unfolded, military leaders expressed alarm about the rapidly deteriorating situation, and in consequence social order dissolved even more into violence, as young people in the thrall of Mao’s radicalism, along with military units, fought each other and among themselves. Many factories and shipyards across the nation were now hardly functioning, with employees often not bothering to show up. Violence against individuals seemingly randomly targeted as class enemies on the street was common. On August 1, 1967, the radical magazine *Red Flag* ran an editorial urging the new revolutionaries to “take firm hold of the gun” (无产阶级必须牢牢掌握枪杆子) and drive counterrevolutionaries out of the army. Over several months in

1967 several embassies were attacked, culminating on August 22 with the burning of the British Embassy and physical attacks on several people in it, though no one was killed. In September, fearing civil war, Mao, his wife Jiang Qing, and other senior CCP leaders who had promoted the recent agitation temporarily changed position, with Mao personally touring the parts of the country that had seen the most violence and urging peace.

The above narrative describes the China in the grips of the CulRev that Robinson herself traveled to in November 1967. Violence was already rampant and would get worse until mid-1968, when the military and radical CCP leadership reached a *modus vivendi*. By then millions of class enemies and perceived enemies of Mao had been killed or otherwise purged (Chang and Halliday 2005). But while there was a general perception of chaos prominent in contemporary Western media coverage, Robinson dismissed that perception, and in her subsequent work she favorably described new developments in the economy, especially in the communes (Robinson 1981/1979; 1975; 1973).

Robinson's views now transitioned to Harcourt and Kerr's (2009) second phase, where she became as they see it naively radical. But her views about Mao during the CulRev were a natural evolution of her previous views, so perhaps we have naïveté compounded. In *The Cultural Revolution in China* (1970a), her primary goal was to explain and justify the reasoning behind the CulRev. Originally published in 1969, the only change in the 1970 version was the addition of a postscript, taking account of things that had happened since her trip in 1967. It reported remarks by Mao and others, including Marshal Lin Biao, who supported Mao against possible attack from the left on the Chairman as insufficiently pure, and who would die in 1971 in a plane crash over Mongolia. In presenting the statements she received in translation Robinson expressed no doubt whatsoever about their truth, and was equally credulous about quotations in official (there was no other kind then) Chinese media statements, including quotations from ordinary people therein. The book acknowledged but minimized the turmoil between 1966 and 1970, applauded a good 1968 harvest and indicated that "economic development seems to have been running on" (Robinson 1970a, 152).

The book proper had an introductory chapter of roughly 40 pages and then a report by an anonymous leftist participant in the 1967 turmoil in Shanghai, followed by several other documents then already known in the West that had promoted what became the takeover of production facilities in Shanghai and elsewhere, interspersed occasionally with Robinson's analysis. The supplemental documents supported her interpretation of events, in which she agreed with and added to Mao's and the CCP's then-current theoretical argument for the need for the CulRev, which was that, as Soviet history indicated, socialism did not eliminate class conflict between the proletariat on the one hand and the exploitive classes on

the other. In particular, this fight was continuing in the form of socialist bureaucrats forming their own dominant class and passing on membership in this class to their children. Chinese ‘rightists,’ Soviet-style bureaucrats running the party in the factories, defended themselves by saying that they were needed to guide the uneducated masses. But Robinson was having none of that, and was sympathetic with the idea of the need to sweep this new ruling class out of leadership positions—in other words, of a continuation of the 1949 revolution. She believed that the number of people who needed to be scrutinized was small, but they had to be purged. She applauded overall the role played by students, including children, in eliminating the old order, minimizing the violence by saying that it was “not in the rule book, but it broke out from time to time” (Robinson 1970a, 25). As for the Red Guards, she excused them, including their “melodramatic and sometimes farcical aspects” (ibid., 26). Among these aspects were students’ attacks on teachers and principals in Beijing in August 1966, in which perhaps hundreds died, over a year before Robinson’s first CulRev-era visit to China.⁹ Robinson dismissed the violence overall by saying that “perhaps they [rightists] are still wondering what hit them” (Robinson 1970a, 27).¹⁰

When discussing economics, *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Robinson 1970a, 34–39) did not describe in detail how the communes (were supposed to) operate now, although Robinson (1973) did so later. The book did discuss how essential the communes had been during the GLF, and Robinson wrote glowingly of record harvests since the famine’s end. All of this reflected her view of the CulRev as necessary to escape the shackles of the new, Soviet-style ruling class. Referring to CCP documents, which she took at face value, she emphasized the need to get transportation moving again and the avoidance of “interfering with production” (Robinson 1970a, 23) and the need (quoting Mao) to “grasp revolution and stimulate production” by “reducing red tape and reducing the ratio of administrative personnel to production workers” (ibid., 34). She believed that factories now stripped of administrative deadwood and fired by moral purpose would finish the accumulation of a surplus. She again dismissed the violence and destruction launched by the Red Guards and extended her blindness to other conflicts during the CulRev, saying they amounted to “bickering between rebel

9. The stories of some of these victims, who otherwise might have been forgotten to history, were recorded by Wang (2001).

10. So too, in the postscript written for the 1970 edition, Robinson evinced little curiosity about the fate of the ‘rightist’ Liu Shaoqi, Mao’s previous number-two purged in 1967 and previously when in power an advocate for policies to alleviate the GLF famine. She wrote only that “nothing has been said about the fate of the man, as opposed to the symbolic figure” (Robinson 1970a, 150). Liu the man had in fact been arrested in 1967 and would die in prison, emaciated, denied medical treatment—except, when needed for his trial, for Type 2 diabetes, yet while strapped to his cell bed (Chang and Halliday 2005, 524; Dikötter 2016, 235).

groups” (ibid.).

Robinson (1970a) also admired the “Agriculture should learn from Dazhai” (or Tachai) propaganda drive (农业学大寨). Dazhai was a village whose brigade—a collective farm smaller than a commune—was assigned to work low-quality land. Mao in 1963 admired how the communist spirit of the brigade seemed to lead to dramatic increases in production. Robinson transmitted the CCP’s account of the brigade’s experience without skepticism (Robinson 1970a, 36–37). But the nationwide efforts to emulate Dazhai included its techniques and engineering, even when the land elsewhere was not suitable.¹¹ But Robinson felt vindicated, using Dazhai as a jumping-off point for discussion of the theoretical socialist rent proposed in her 1957 lectures and analyzed in Harcourt and Kerr (2009: 148). This was the use of transfers to equalize the geographical inequalities facing brigades, communes or other organizational units. Having modified her view now, she said the fact that the Dazhai brigade refused such payments was evidence in favor of the worth of moral values in moving beyond mere ‘economism’ (经济主义), an ideological target during the CulRev.

So Robinson was a strong believer in the CulRev, at the time, and in both of its official goals—sweeping away the remaining ‘rightist’ and bourgeois threats to China, in particular removing the new bureaucratic ruling class from CCP organizations, and the reorganizing of agricultural and industrial production in a fully cooperative way uncontaminated by monetary incentives. She characterized the CulRev as not only essential, but in fact having already been won, its violence negligible and the work of a small number of extremists (Robinson (1970a, 20). China was now building its economy “in a genuinely democratic manner” (ibid., 42). She pronounced Western media reports that were available to her as deceitful, misrepresenting the revolution “as mere chaos and disintegration,” and added confidently that “[t]o the historian of the future it will appear as the first example of a new kind of class war—a revolt of the new proletariat of workers and socialist enterprises and peasants turned to commune members against the incipient new class of organization men in the Communist Party” (ibid., 28). Having long said she was not a Marxist, she was now a Maoist.

11. Other Western scholarly praise of Dazhai came from Maxwell (1975), who largely agreed with Robinson’s perspective although he did not cite her work. In work Robinson surely would not have agreed with, Marshall (1979) attributed the increase in agricultural production there mainly to mere addition of resources by a government eager to see the campaign succeed, a sort of neoclassical production-function perspective. The brigade was depicted as causing substantial environmental damage by Shapiro (2001) and Dikötter (2016, 219–231). The Dazhai practice of ruling by fear through public arbitration of assertions of inadequate work by brigade members (自報公益) was emphasized by Kuch (2008, 26).

Robinson's views in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution

Robinson had rejected contemporaneous reporting in the Western media of chaos and conflict, and wrote that China was sweeping out the old and bringing in the new, with an eye toward building a better socialism (Robinson 1970c). Harcourt and Kerr (2009) described what followed as the third phase of her Chinese scholarship: a chastened abandonment of a mistaken enthusiasm for Maoist radicalism. But a detailed analysis reveals that after a full-fledged endorsement in *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Robinson 1970a) the scales only gradually began to fall from her eyes and, relative to the scale of the catastrophe of Mao's rule, only modestly at that. A useful way of presenting her evolution is to investigate a series of articles she wrote for *China Now* and *Monthly Review*. The former was a monthly publication of the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU), an organization founded in 1965 by Robinson, the historian of Chinese science Joseph Needham, and the British diplomat Derek Bryan, who had served in both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. From the society's founding until the opening of China to broader foreign contact in the early 1980s it was one of the prime avenues for the British leftist elite to travel to China and engage the country's leaders. *China Now* ran from 1970 to 1995 before being replaced by another publication. *Monthly Review* was and is a left journal of political thought published in New York City.

In her first article for *China Now*, Robinson (1970d) was fully invested. Despite her earlier emphasis on the importance of historical contingency, in this piece she argued that the Chinese model generalized to any "poor peasant society" (Robinson 1970d, 5). Her argument was built around a commentary by John Kenneth Galbraith (1969) and especially Prasanta Mahalanobis's (1969) review of Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. Robinson agreed with Mahalanobis that the key problem for a "poor peasant society" was the mobilization of an agricultural surplus, which was very difficult under capitalist farming because of the incentive to hoard grain in years of good harvest and sometimes to restrain crop production to increase profits. But the CulRev, Robinson wrote, was just the hammer for this nail; in a China of communes and planning this obstacle to generating the surplus would not exist. A commune could produce food rationally, without needing to pay attention to the artificial limits of "family ownership or tenancy" (Robinson 1970d, 5). The lesson from the unsuccessful (as she saw it) Indian experience, Robinson argued, was the importance of "freedom

from private property in the means of production” (ibid.). She quoted approvingly 1956 remarks by Mao arguing for heavy industry, but only in its place. She characterized the GLF merely as “a period of shortages and hardship” (ibid., 6), with bad weather conditions handled much more effectively than in the old China, the only mistake being that peasants had been amalgamated into communes too quickly for them to acclimate to the new environment. The communes themselves “were invaluable in nursing the country through the bad years” (ibid.). Conspicuously and dramatically unlike the cruelty of forced grain procurement later emphasized in the revisionist literature, she wrote: “The manner in which the surplus is collected has removed the burden from the poorest villages and put it where it can be least painfully borne” (ibid.). The strength of Chinese socialism was in its flexibility and open communication between “the masses and the leadership,” and the absence in them of what she called Stalin’s “tyrannous and unsuccessful” collectivization (ibid., 7). Now, socialist China and CulRev China specifically were in her view “the prescription for development” (ibid., 8). Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (2005, 434–435), in contrast, liken the communes to slave plantations.

In a *China Now* article written after an additional visit in 1972, Robinson told a tale that was much the same. This time she only mentioned Mao once, in the very last sentence: “In all these endeavors the unique characteristic of Chairman Mao’s leadership has been to trust the people, and the people are not letting him down” (Robinson 1974, 3). Her admiration for CCP economic policies, which she characterized as giving workers freedom to experiment and solve their problems, Dazhai-style, remained. She described the history of China since 1949 as “startlingly original and yet founded in common sense” (ibid., 2). The agricultural surplus had before 1949 been spent on “rent, usury and plunder,” but now much of it was being redistributed to the peasantry. As for the CCP’s management of the entire economy and society, she still remained amazed: “As the national plan of accumulation proceeds, the area of modern development gradually spreads, but growth of the great cities is checked and production is diffused over the interior, taking industry to the population, instead of dragging the population into the centers of industry. The communes have carried out heroic feats of investment in improving and creating cultivable land, turning what used to be ‘seasonal unemployment’ into a source of wealth” (ibid.). Clearly she was still a firm believer in both the China model, including communes, and in Mao.

By 1978, Robinson did change her view at least of some Chinese leaders, if not of Mao nor of the centrality of state-directed surplus extraction. In *China Now* (Robinson 1978a), she reacted to an article by the French Marxist Charles Bettelheim (1978b) in *Monthly Review* in which he had announced his divorce both intellectually and in terms of activism from Chinese communism in the wake of new reforms, in particular resigning from the Franco-Chinese Friendship Associa-

tion.¹² Robinson began by expressing some regret that Maoism did not work out as well for China as she had maintained it would: “I think we all had a lot of wind in our heads; it was hard to believe that, in a socialist country, policy could have been the sport of personal ambition and it was deflating to be told that the Cultural Revolution is over and that the new aim of policy is modernization. We know only too well what it is like to be modern” (Robinson 1978a, 4). In other words it was court politics, and not the policies themselves, that deserved attention when evaluating the CulRev. She did not say here whose “personal ambition” was in play.

Having written so many times in the past about democratic discussion in China, now she believed there was even more: “There is more frankness of discussion, both amongst Chinese and between Chinese and foreigners, than over the last 25 years” (ibid.). Bettelheim (1978a) had depicted China’s incipient economic reforms as a betrayal of Maoism, in particular the linking of wages to productivity. Robinson (1978a, 5) disputed this, saying the CCP was now merely tinkering with a system that had now been in place for years, although excesses had happened. She asserted that workplace democracy remained, because workers decided among themselves to whom the available new bonuses would be distributed. It was “nothing like a change over to an incentive wage system” (ibid.).

With regard to the nature of the CulRev itself, the chaotic element had by now metamorphosed in her account from “melodramatic and sometimes farcical” (Robinson 1970a, 26) to “the period of anarchy” (Robinson 1978a, 5). To prove that its negative aspects had now been eliminated, she pointed out that unlike during the CulRev the “buses are punctual” (ibid.) and there was politeness between drivers and passengers, unlike the brawling that also took place during the CulRev. Rather than attributing the brawling to the chaos of the CulRev itself, she strikingly attributed it to the demoralizing effect under CulRev wage procedures of drivers “having to examine what type of conduct deserves an award” (ibid.). Factories were now conceded as having during the CulRev fallen into “factional strife,” but this was due not to anything Mao unleashed by design but to the fact that in some places the Gang of Four “was in the ascendancy” (ibid., 6). She ended the essay with words of wisdom from Mao, and the impression left was that the madness of the CulRev happened in spite of rather than because of him (a view also expressed in Robinson 1976a).

The next year, Robinson (1979) wrote again of Bettelheim’s resignation, which had been immediately addressed in Robinson (1978a). She now described Bettelheim’s Maoist purity as “infantile leftism” (Robinson 1979b, 25). While

12. In that issue of *Monthly Review*, Robinson favorably reviewed one of Mao’s books (Robinson 1978b), but apart from confirming her unwavering loyalty to the Maoist project this piece does not directly add to the analysis here.

continuing to criticize China's new emphasis on modernization, Robinson admitted mistakes by China but was forgiving, describing the country as having to choose among several very imperfect options. She cited approvingly an essay in the same issue by Jerome Ch'en that while praising Mao Zedong added that Mao "was no God, his teachings no dogma; to be cool-headed toward his teachings has nothing in common with revisionism" (Ch'en 1979, 23), though Robinson (1979) did not express similar sentiments herself.

The last thing Robinson ever wrote on China was a short introduction to the 100th edition of *China Now* (Robinson 1982). In it, she did not mention any way in which the CulRev went off the rails, but merely repeated without skepticism a 1981 statement from the CCP Central Committee talking of how harvests had increased continuously during those years. Of her visits to China after 1967 she wrote that she "was always fighting off disillusionment until I could no longer accept the obscurantism, the violence and the downright silliness of the last stages of the Cultural Revolution" (Robinson 1982, 3). As for her acknowledged previous enthusiasm for the CulRev, Robinson felt reaction to it in the West was at least as objectionable—"it is absurd to talk of 10 wasted years (1966–76) for a great deal of construction went on in that period" (ibid.). She thought that China's economic problems now emanated from its rapidly growing population—a view which she and many others then held, not just about China but about many developing countries—and doing something about the size of rural families would be difficult. China's one-child policy had only been mandated in 1979. In this very short piece, she said nothing that expressed unambiguous admiration of Mao, and she acknowledged to some degree that real, substantial damage was done during the upheaval, though as the quote above indicates her analysis was still wrong about the chaos of the first two years, including the time she was there.¹³ Still she believed the CulRev to have been essential for China's progress.

Robinson's enthusiastic support for Mao's project from 1949 to his death was continuous, and in this she stood out. Foreign visits to China were very rare prior to 1978, and until 1972 those by Americans almost unknown, so Robinson was in a privileged position to explore what the truth was and then tell the outside world what she saw. After Richard Nixon's visit in 1972 to China, two groups of American academics, self-proclaimed "radical political economists,"¹⁴ were al-

13. The historical record suggests that the greatest and most shocking CulRev violence, including the sometimes-fatal attacks by students on teachers, actually took place in the first two years, including while Robinson was there in 1967. In an effort to control it, senior CCP leadership in December 1968 adopted the policy of sending youth down to the villages to learn from the peasants (上山下乡), after the army in 1967 had been asked by CCP leadership to reestablish control over the anarchy brought about by Mao's deputized agents of chaos, a task accomplished by mid-1968 (Walder 2019; Dikötter 2016).

14. The group called itself the First Friendship Delegation of American Radical Political Economists, and

lowed to visit China. While these American economists praised China's achievements, some also reported that the Chinese economists they met with were only willing to speak in Marxist abstractions rather than discuss the details of economic planning, and many felt that a re-education facility they visited was "outright disturbing" and "simply shocking" (Weber and Semieniuk 2019, 24–26). Another useful comparison to Robinson is Amartya Sen, who in the year Robinson died had (considering the full spectrum of economic ideology) some similar views to a younger Robinson on the weaknesses of liberal economics and the importance of an active state. Nonetheless, even as Sen (1983) praised Mao's China for its achievements in education and health, he noted that China's lack of democracy was a serious drawback. Tom Buchanan (2012, 187) says, in comparison to other British leftists, Robinson provided "[t]he most sustained and immediate defence of the Cultural Revolution."

Economists on Robinson on China

Robinson was one of the English-speaking world's most influential economists, and so it is not surprising that numerous retrospectives of her work have emerged since her death. Her writings on China, both scholarly and non-scholarly, have been little considered in this work, despite the extensive amount of evaluation of her works on development economics and on the legacy of Marxism. The Chinese strand in her scholarship, visible from the 1950s, is either not mentioned or mentioned only cursorily in the wide-ranging assessments of her work by Marjorie Turner (1989) and Thanos Skouras (1981).¹⁵ In their reflection on Robinson's work in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, Thomas Gram and Vivian Walsh (1983) do not discuss her China writings even though, as in the two works cited above, there is analysis of the contributions of her work to how economists subsequently saw Marxist economics and capital (Robinson 1966/1942).

With respect to edited volumes of papers on Robinson, there is one paper on China in the five-volume set edited by Prue Kerr and G. C. Harcourt and published by Routledge, *Joan Robinson: Critical Assessments of Leading Economists*. It is by Harcourt (2002), is found in the fifth volume, concerning "Development," and it merely discusses her three lectures in China, using language also used nearly verbatim in Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr (2002) and Harcourt and Kerr (2009). China

many of the participants were members of the Union of Radical Political Economists. They included Michigan's Thomas E. Weiskopff, Columbia's Carl Riskin, and Stanford's John Gurley. Weber and Semieniuk (2019) provide an account of their visit.

15. Aslanbeigui and Oakes (2009) do not mention China at all either, although their book focuses on her work in macroeconomics and industrial structure rather than development.

is not raised in any of the papers in another edited volume published by Routledge, *The Joan Robinson Legacy* (Rima 1991), and only trivially in three of the papers in yet another Routledge volume, *The Economics of Joan Robinson* (Marcuzzo et al. 1996), which is comprehensive in the sense that it covers her work on macroeconomics, Marx, development economics, and capital theory. One chapter in the latter book, authored by Siro Lombardini, at one point speaks of how Robinson was “interested in the cultural and social-institutional conditions for development, as shown by her interest in the developments in China” (Lombardini 1996, 137). In Lombardini’s concluding paragraph, without going into any detail and citing only conversations he had had with her over the years, he says that Robinson believed that China had already succeeded in industrializing, and would achieve a superior alternative to capitalism “after a difficult transition” (ibid., 144). In the same volume Bertram Schefold (1996, 314) merely likens the “symbiosis” of the ancient Mediterranean world to “that of Red China and Hong Kong a few years ago.” And lastly, Harcourt, whose contribution had the theme of “Robinson’s changes of mind,” described her simply as being “both philosophical and practical about China” (1996, 324).

Among the papers collected in *Joan Robinson’s Economics: A Centennial Celebration*, a volume published by Elgar and edited by Bill Gibson (2005), the paper by Robert Blecker (2005, 343–345) is the only one to look at the success of East Asian economies, including China, in terms of the analysis of what he calls the “new mercantilism” in Robinson (1947/1937). A paper by Harcourt (2005, 26–28) places her views on China in the larger context of her views on development, and notes without criticism her confidence in the agricultural communes established during the GLF.¹⁶

Julian Gewirtz (2017), in a study of the influence of Western economists in China, briefly characterizes Robinson’s work as a substantial failure on her part. But not even Gewirtz examines in any detail how Robinson came to believe that policies under Mao were the engine of China’s ongoing progress, policies now widely thought to have been catastrophic.

In a 31-page biographical work, James Cicarelli and Julianne Cicarelli (1996) only mention Robinson’s China work once, and without citation, but they assert:

As for comforting the afflicted, Robinson published many papers in the 1960s sympathetic to the economic progress being made in socialist countries, particularly China. This sort of attention from one of the world’s foremost economists certainly did nothing to tarnish the image of these emerging socialist nations and probably modified to some extent the negative portrayals frequently appearing in the Western press. Robinson’s infatuation with China

16. Language in Harcourt (2005) is in numerous places taken verbatim from Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr (2002), and much of it is later repeated again in Harcourt and Kerr (2009).

was revealed in many of her writings. She also penned works supportive of Cuba and published a ringing endorsement of North Korea's so-called 'economic miracle.'

Her unflinching support for socialist causes, coming as it did during the midst of the Cold War, was courageous; Robinson paid a high price for her convictions. Western economists were prone to dismiss the value of her work, believing it was all tinted 'red.' This made it easy, and respectable, to ignore her even when she had something of substance to say. In the end, Robinson's affection for socialism, which had its roots in her liberal upbringing, was one of the prime factors that rendered her ineligible for a Nobel Prize. (Cicarelli and Cicarelli 1996, 20)

It is difficult to verify the extent to which Robinson's writings on China were effective in altering the "negative portrayals" of the country in the Western media. But to the extent they did, that cannot be considered a victory for truth.

In all of the work evaluating or memorializing Robinson I have only been able to find three cases in which the author(s) explicitly acknowledge its problematic nature, although in each case very briefly. One is the aforementioned Gewirtz (2017, 56–57), whose background is in history rather than economics and who is not particularly an admirer of Robinson. The second example is the first three sentences of Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr (2002):

Joan Robinson always admitted to a leaven of advocacy in her writings on China because she thought they could do something to offset when she perceived to be the hostility of most other scholars and commentators writing on China. It is true that some of her writings and assessments were far too partial and uncritical, especially during the period of 'Cultural Revolution' when Mao's influence was at its greatest and the spirit of the (radical) age was a yearning for cult figures and the immediate establishment of Utopias. But if we look at the whole body of her writings on China from the early 1950s to the early 1980s (she died in August 1983) we get a more balanced view. (Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr 2002, 267)

Neither citations nor further analysis of impartial or insufficiently critical writing is offered.

Thirdly, George R. Feiwel, a longtime heterodox economist at the University of Tennessee, wrote in the 1989 edited volume *Joan Robinson and Modern Economic Theory*:

Someone once said that there are things about which one ought to write a great deal or nothing at all. Joan's writings on Mao's China are a case in point. Why she was attracted to and fascinated by the possibilities of an alternate social economic design is fairly clear, but why she wore blinkers when she looked

at China is something of an enigma. The puritan in Joan was attracted to the aims of the Cultural Revolution: combat egoism and eschew privilege. One wonders how it is possible that Joan Robinson, the realist, did not perceive the human and material costs of the undertaking in practice. (Feiwel 1989, 94)

Feiwel did not elaborate.

In contrast, in the same 1989 volume—and in tune with the overwhelming majority of the reaction to Robinson’s work on China after her death—Irma Adelman and David Sunding (1989), in a 21-page assessment of Robinson’s work in development economics, devote over three pages to her writings on China. It is mostly a direct evaluation of the academic work, but at one point they write:

As Robinson herself admitted in a postscript to the preface of *Aspects of Development and Underdevelopment* (Robinson, 1981 [1979]), the evidence now coming out of Chinese statistics indicates that her conceptions of China, formed largely during the Cultural Revolution, were idealized. (Adelman and Sunding 1989, 716)

Robinson (1981/1979) was a reprint, and her new postscript in its entirety reads:

News which has come out of China since the death of Mao shows that some of the allusions in what follows to the success of Chinese agriculture were overoptimistic; all the same, the level of production and standard of nutrition favor comparably with those of the third world. (Robinson 1981/1979, x)

This remark was made after Robinson in the original 1979 preface had written, “I do not think that anyone would deny that the Chinese method of organizing a highly labour-intensive agriculture is more successful than any in the so-called free world” (Robinson 1981/1979, ix). Robinson’s 1981 brief addition to the 1979 preface, and Adelman and Sunding’s (1989) evaluation of it, are at best underwhelming as critical reflection. Referring later not to what Robinson had recently learned but to her entire history in China, Adelman and Sunding continue that Robinson’s “exposure to the Chinese case, and her disillusionment with Fel’dmanite¹⁷ development in East European socialist countries, seem to have had a humanizing influence on her development theory” (Adelman and Sunding 1989, 714–715).

One might hope for a lengthier and more nuanced interpretation from the work of Harcourt and Kerr (2009), who have written extensively on Robinson. They do present the most comprehensive account of the evolution of her views

17. Grigori Alexandrovich Fel’dman was a Soviet economist. From 1925 to 1931 he worked in Gosplan, the Soviet economic planning agency.

on China over her career, and when they wrote had far more knowledge about what transpired under Mao available to them. However, much of the section on China, which comes from a chapter on development, uses (verbatim, often) the same language as Tahir, Harcourt, and Kerr (2002). Evaluating Robinson on China, they write:

After Mao's death in 1976, she discovered, to her horror, that the Chinese had not told the truth even to trusting analysts. This discovery marked the beginning of her third phase. As more information became available in post-Mao China, she looked back at her previous writings and put some of the record straight. It was a period of self-criticism; she admitted to having been starry-eyed about the decade of the 'Cultural Revolution' and she returned to supporting Rightist economic reform. Her story was not plausible, even when she was not misled by the Chinese, for sometimes she did not follow the logic of her own argument. Nevertheless it is possible to salvage from her thinking about and enthusiasm for economic development in China, a set of ideas that differ little from the views of those dubbed the Rightists in the so-called two-line struggle of Mao's China. As this set of ideas is now, on the whole, dominant in China itself, it is, as we said, relevant and timely to consider them in our discussion of Joan Robinson's approach and analysis. (Harcourt and Kerr 2009, 145–146)

There is an endnote in the original after the word "reform," but it does not support an assertion that Robinson meaningfully recanted her views. It provides no citations of published work, instead merely recounting a conversation between the authors and Peter Nolan, the topic of which was Joan Robinson's view that capitalist production had a moral foundation insufficient to achieve "full human potential" (Harcourt and Kerr's words; Harcourt and Kerr 2009, 240–241). Exaggerated as it is as an account of Robinson's change of heart, it adds to the impression that the extent of her retreat on China has been overstated by the small number of Robinson scholars who have chosen to raise it.

Conclusion

Intellectuals of the left have a spotty record of critical reflection when it comes to evaluation of leftist totalitarian regimes. Frequent stubbornness with respect to Stalin has been noted by William L. O'Neill (1982) and Amity Shlaes (2007), and with respect to China after 1949 (although without mentioning Robinson) by Paul Hollander (1981, 278–346). O'Neill (1982, 367) argues that much of the support for Stalin even as his crimes became known was motivated

by a belief that when making an omelette eggs have to be broken. O'Neill and Hollander note that dismissal of media reports about cruelties in communist societies was driven by skepticism of liberal societies and a belief that the media in them were servants of business and the government. So it was with Robinson, who was almost until the end in truly irresponsible denial that horrible things happened under Mao, and that Mao was to blame for any of it.

Whatever else may be said about China in 1966, clearly it was not liberal, nor was it bureaucratic in quite the Soviet style. From the first time Robinson went to China until the end of her life, she saw it as praiseworthy, and unique among communist nations. Robinson was guided in her admiration for China by two principles in which she, along with many others, resolutely believed. First, liberal economics was a system with severe moral and economic drawbacks. Second, she thought that the core initial task of any economic system—reaping and redeploying the investable surplus above basic needs generated not by cooperative interaction between entrepreneurs and workers when it was mutually beneficial, but merely by workers themselves, especially agricultural workers—was something that could be done better than had happened under liberal capitalism, with its waste and instability, and Soviet communism, with its blunderbuss implementation and its cruelty. Socialism and communism held promise because they did not have to appeal to greed as a motivation to induce people to work hard enough to generate the surplus, nor did they have to create the surplus inefficiently as entrepreneurs would.

From her first trip to China if not before, Robinson thought that the country, as born anew in 1949, offered the possibility of something better even than socialism or communism as they then existed. By substituting Mao's vision of a just society and how to build it for the capitalist incentives that had made poor countries so wretched, brutal, and corrupt before, such countries could reach a modern standard of living without capitalism's excesses and distortion of human nature. She continued to write about China to nearly the end of her life in 1983, and maintained throughout that through various experiments the Chinese were developing the right way. It is admissible that in the last three or four years of her life she began to sense that she had overstated the achievements of the CulRev, whose dark side went far beyond mere mischief. But she still thought these achievements were many, and never recanted views about the post-1949 Chinese experience more broadly, in particular not with respect to the GLF. And she never doubted in print that Mao and the CCP saw the country's problem properly. Any serious deviations that occurred were the responsibility of renegade party leadership—first 'rightists' like Liu Shaoqi, who had gone Soviet, and then eventually people like the Gang of Four, who were driven by personal ambition.

Starting in 1978, the Chinese prioritized modernization, to the chagrin of

Robinson, and the CCP slowly began to see the value of the chance to make money in motivating the Chinese to go out and develop the country. For long after the GLF, many Chinese in the countryside had remained desperately malnourished, despite the reports of continually increasing harvests in which Robinson placed such stock. A catalyst for reform occurred in 1978 when farmers in the village of Xiaogang in Anhui province secretly agreed to divide parts of their commune, keeping or selling whatever they could produce on their own above their state obligations, and to raise each other's children if some of them were arrested or executed.¹⁸ News of the success of the farmers' experiment came to the attention of first other farmers and then local authorities, who approved similar experiments elsewhere. After that, economic liberalization proceeded (and still proceeds) in stages. State-owned enterprises were first given some management and pricing autonomy, and then small private businesses were tolerated, and then special economic zones were created along the coast. Many state-owned enterprises were then at least partially and often completely privatized, the volume of merchandise trade and financial contact with foreign firms grew substantially, and financial markets were established. The ability of Chinese to live and work where they like, while still not perfect, has become much freer as the CCP's *hukou* system of tying people to particular places of residence has been progressively relaxed.¹⁹ Today's China is in no sense fully liberalized, and it has its share of problems, for example substantial corruption and nearly unprecedented pollution. But there is effectively no one in China today advocating a return to how it used to be. Even government statements now refer to the CulRev as 'ten years of turmoil' (十年动乱) or the 'ten-year catastrophe' (十年浩劫). The balance between statism and voluntarism is something Chinese authorities are still working out, and in that they are to some degree mindful of the views of the newly empowered, significantly freer (at least in an economic sense) Chinese population. And according to government data they have moved substantially in the direction of the liberal economics, the 'capitalism,' that so concerned Robinson.²⁰ Without question the right to earn a living as one thinks best is a foundational human right, and China's economic reforms for that

18. The farmers are now honored in a museum in the village.

19. According to reforms announced in 2019, restrictions on moving to and living in all but the country's thirteen largest cities are to be eliminated, and even in those cities restrictions on obtaining residence permits are to be loosened. Some children of the migrants, however, still do not have equal access to school.

20. The degree to which China is 'capitalist' is a matter of judgment. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018, Table 4.3), in 1995 private-firm employees were 7.4 percent of all employment, while in 2017 they constituted 61.3 percent. The trend in annual investment has been similar. But the CCP still plays a role similar to those of governments in other postwar East Asian societies in guiding the general industrial direction of the economy, even as most production relevant to daily life occurs in the nonminally private sector, substantially though not entirely in response to market incentives.

reason alone deserve praise. But while China has made tremendous progress in this regard since 1978, its hostility to political rights has undoubtedly grown in the years since 1989, with the CCP under Xi Jinping no exception. But of course after 1949 there was no political liberalism whatsoever during any of the years when Robinson was admiring Mao's China, with the possible exception of the brief Hundred Flowers period.

Western reporters were almost entirely unknown in China during this time, and in any event would not have been permitted to travel, engage, and freely observe China. But the GLF famine was reported at least in broad terms in the Western media during and immediately after it. Refugees who made it to Hong Kong told of what was transpiring. Also during the CulRev there were reports in Western media of Red Guard fanaticism and something approaching civil war. But Robinson chose not to believe such reports, dismissing them as substantially overstated, even as propaganda against a better social model. Her defense of Mao and his China was longstanding, comprehensive, and uncompromising. It was until the very end also unreflective, and then only very modestly so.

Robinson had a responsibility to not accept at face value the story as it was told to her by CCP-authorized persons, many of whom she came to know well, during her visits to China, nor to place such blind faith in what she acknowledged (approvingly) to be radical social experimentation. No Western or expatriate Chinese historian today contends that the CulRev and the GLF were anything short of disastrous for the Chinese people.²¹ Robinson interpreted Mao and the CCP's actions in the most charitable ways possible. The gap between what she was allowed to see and what transpired all around was vast, in both the purely economic and broader moral senses she emphasized. Many in the West, especially in the circles of power, were deeply hostile to the international communist movement, and so one can forgive suspicions about the strongest claims made against communist nations. But when push came to shove Robinson seemed to believe completely the information handed to her by officials in a totalitarian state, where independent media, freedom of movement, and other basic features of a free society did not exist.

Robinson only visited North Korea once and only wrote one specific piece

21. It is common for revisionist history to generate criticism by scholars who produced the existing history, and some of the work cited here is of this kind. The criticism that emerged did not deal with any of the claims central to this article. Regarding Chang and Halliday (2005), a collection of mostly critical reviews released soon after the book's release is presented by Benton and Chun (2010). The criticisms almost unanimously accept the catastrophic effect of the GLF and CulRev, and are full of the language of the vast, tragic, or criminal suffering of the Chinese people under Mao. Other criticism of Chang and Halliday (2005) by some historians of China is found in Fenby (2005), along with their response. On Dikötter (2010), see Ó Gráda (2011).

about it (Robinson 1980/1965). But her misreading of that country's likely future was similar to her analysis of China before 1979, and looks equally irresponsible in hindsight. Citing the state of music and the arts, industrialization, electrification in particular, and very equal distribution of income, she described North Korea as a "nation without poverty" (Robinson 1980/1965, 208) whose experience meant that "all the economic miracles of the postwar world are put in the shade by these achievements" (ibid.). Later in this essay she even described how "every service is building up capacity so as to be able to rush aid to the south as soon as communications are opened up" (ibid., 213). South Korea was governed dictatorially and was very impoverished then, although its economic miracle had already begun, and obviously Robinson's analysis proved to be nearly as wrong as it is possible to imagine.

So too it was with China, although with much more of Robinson's theoretical scaffolding, and for much longer. The magnitude of her error, the contrast between the China she saw, the China that actually was during that time, and the China that has developed after Mao, especially given that her errors all followed from assumptions that she brought to her analysis, should be noted in future analysis of her work. In the end, Robinson's writing on China did the Chinese people no favors, and with regard to China she became an example of something she had long criticized: a prisoner of her own models, no matter what that the reality was.

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