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### American Radical Economists in Mao’s China: From Hopes to Disillusionment

*by*

Isabella M. Weber

&

Gregor Semieniuk

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Department of Economics

Department of Economics  
SOAS University of London  
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK  
Phone: + 44 (0)20 7898 4730  
Fax: 020 7898 4759

E-mail: [economics@soas.ac.uk](mailto:economics@soas.ac.uk)  
<http://www.soas.ac.uk/economics/>

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## **American Radical Economists in Mao's China: From Hopes to Disillusionment\***

Isabella M. Weber<sup>†</sup> and Gregor Semieniuk<sup>‡</sup>

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### **Abstract**

American radical economists in the 1960s perceived China under Maoism as an important experiment in creating a new society, aspects of which they hoped could serve as a model for the developing world. But the knowledge of ‘actually existing Maoism’ was very limited due to the mutual isolation between China and the US. This paper analyses the First Friendship Delegation of American Radical Political Economists (FFDARPE) to the People’s Republic of China in 1972, consisting mainly of Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) members, which was the first visit of a group of American economists to China since 1949. Based on interviews with trip participants as well as archival and published material, this paper studies what we can learn about the engagement with Maoism by American radical economists from their dialogues with Chinese hosts, from their on-the-ground observations, and their reflection upon return. We show how the visitors’ own ideas conflicted and intersected with their perception of the Maoist practice on gender relations; workers’ management and life in the communes. We also shed light on the diverging conceptions of the role for economic expertise between URPE and late Maoism. As the first in-depth study on the FFDARPE we provide rich empirical insights into an ice-breaking event in the larger process of normalization in the Sino-U.S relations, that ultimately led to the disillusionment of the Left with China.

**Keywords:** China; socialism and capitalism; transition economics; Maoism.

**JEL classification:** B24, N15, N45, O10, P21, P32.

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<sup>†</sup>Address for correspondence: Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, UK. Tel: +44 7296 7141. Email: [i.weber@gold.ac.uk](mailto:i.weber@gold.ac.uk).

<sup>‡</sup> SOAS University of London.

## 1. Introduction

In the wake of the founding of the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) fifty years ago, the hope was to provide economic expertise in the Left's search for participatory socialist alternatives. In this context, China under Maoism was perceived as an important experiment, aspects of which could serve as an example for the developing world. However, the inspiration by China was largely theoretical at the time, as little factual information had penetrated the frosty US-China relationship. In particular, the famine (1959-61) as a result of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) was largely unknown until the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The official visit to China in 1972 by the Left's nemesis, President Nixon, put a sudden end to the isolation. It marked the resumption of diplomatic ties and just six months after the President's visit a group of economists set foot on China's ground for the first time: the First Friendship Delegation of American Radical Political Economists (FFDARPE) to the People's Republic of China in August 1972. The FFDARPE was not an official URPE delegation, but several members were affiliated with URPE, others were sympathetic to radical political economy more broadly. Greatly interested in Maoism as an alternative model of development, they set out on a study tour to challenge the Western Cold War view of China and find out about "really existing Maoism" for themselves.

This paper conducts a case study of the FFDARPE as an important event in the American radical political economists' fascination with Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Western Leftists who toured Maoist China have often been portrayed as "political pilgrims" (Hollander, 1998) or "fellow travellers" (Gewirtz, 2017). Left scholars looking back at times ridiculed their own earlier enthusiasm for Maoism as "infantile enthrallment" (Lanza, 2017, p. 8), others seem to be captured by a certain nostalgia (Hinton, 2004; Pugh, 2005). This paper aims to avoid both mockery and romanticism. We also do not seek to understand China through the lens of Western visitors or trace their influence on the Chinese hosts. Instead, this paper broadly follows Lanza (2017) in the attempt of taking the study of Maoism and Maoist China by American left scholars seriously as formative for their research and political ambitions at the time. In this close analysis of FFDAPRE we ask what we can learn about the engagement with Maoism by American radical political economists from their dialogues with the Chinese hosts, from their on-the-ground observations, and their reflection upon return, then and now.

To address these questions, the first author has conducted semi-structured interviews by phone or skype with five FFDARPE members out of a total of 18; one person responded in writing. Interviewees were chosen based on the snow-balling principle with Carl Riskin as the initial point of contact. All participants whose contact details could be identified were contacted and five out of six responded. Drawing on Mata and Lee (2007), we use these oral history interviews to study the delegation as part of the broader community of URPE and left economists. We are interested in FFDARPE in the context of American radical political economists' engagement with Mao's China more generally, but we do not seek to create the impression of a uniformity of thought across the delegation or the community at large. The delegation was organised around a shared left political orientation, but its members held a diversity of views. To reflect this we rely on numerous direct quotations from delegation members to represent a variety of voices and to show that we are interpreting individual not necessarily representative views.

46 years have passed since the FFDARPE. Hence, the interviews serve as a form of retrospective reflections, which help us to understand the significance of the China trip on a personal and collective level. We complement the interviews with recent published memoirs by FFDARPE members (Wachtel,

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<sup>1</sup> This was the greatest famine in Chinese history which caused upwards of 15 million deaths (see Wemheuer 2014, pp. 11-12, for a discussion of different estimates).

2008; Weisskopf, 2014). In addition to this retrospective material, we study the following contemporary documentations of the FFDARPE and archival materials: 1) The Collective Notes of the FFDARPE (123 pages in typescript, edited by Tom Weisskopf), which contain a diligent documentation of their travel plan and all meetings and fieldtrips<sup>2</sup>, and 2) David Gordon's personal FFDARPE diary (55 typescript pages) and letters in relation to the trip planning from the Gordon papers. Finally, we consider publications and speeches by FFDARPE members just before or after the China trip to gain an understanding of their views and scholarship on China at the time (e.g. Garlin, 1973; Gurley, 1976a,b; Riskin, 1973; Zaccone, 1975).

This paper aims to make the following three contributions. First, we show how the American visitors' own ideas conflicted and intersected with their perception of the Maoist practice around the following issues: overcoming sexism and equal gender relations; revolutionary workers' management in coal mining as one of the most hazardous industrial sectors; and a new form of society in the communes. Second, through our analysis of the FFDARPE's meeting with Chinese economists, we bring out the contrast between the abandonment of economics as an academic discipline during the Cultural Revolution and URPE's mission to create an alternative to mainstream economics. Third, the FFDARPE was the first delegation of American economists to China, even before a delegation of the American Economic Association (Galbraith, 1973a). Thus, as the first in-depth study on the FFDARPE we provide rich insights into an ice-breaking event in the larger process of normalization in the Sino-U.S relations.

## **2. American Radical Economists and Mao's China**

### **2.1. URPE, the New Left and Maoism**

One aspect of the rise of the New Left was a search for alternatives to an unsatisfactory political, social and cultural status quo (Selden, 2018). A number of young economists radicalized and shared the New Left's political outlook. The American economics establishment supported the Vietnam War (Reich, 1993, p. 45), and the rational, ahistorical agents of neoclassical economic theories omitted the rich, structured context in which actual economic activity took place. Economics teaching appeared out of touch with the questions URPE grappled with (Wachtel, 2008) and the curriculum in US institutions was just then in the process of becoming more focused on tools rather than substance (Reich, 1993, p. 44; Foley, 2009, p. 22). As more traditional Marxist themes of exploitation and class struggle were interwoven with a concern for power relations, gender and race, underdevelopment and imperialism many left economists regarded themselves as neo-Marxists (Weisskopf, 2014, p. 439). URPE members and sympathizers were motivated not only by a search for better theories to explain or critique the prevailing economic conditions but asked "how the new social movements could build a better society" (Reich, 1993, p. 45). Radical economists believed that their "work as economists should be helpful ... ultimately to establish an alternative truly democratic, and truly participatory, system. [They] envisaged a revolutionary transformation of American capitalism into a distinctively new form of socialism" (Weisskopf, 2014, p. 439). But their interest was not limited to the United States. In their concern for the fate of developing countries they looked to Mao's China where "the Cultural Revolution appeared to herald a much more egalitarian socioeconomic system" (Weisskopf, 2014, p. 438).

However, Westerners, and Americans in particular, had little access to reliable information or first-hand accounts from China. Crucially, the most cruel aspects of Mao's political rule and the famine resulting from the economic collapse under the Great Leap Forward were largely unknown at the time. As Riskin

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<sup>2</sup> The first and second parts of the Collective Notes of the FFDARDPE are available online on Tom Weisskopf's dropbox (see list of references).

(1998) points out: “Outside of China there was not even general awareness that [China’s great famine (1959-1961)] had occurred until almost two decades after it ended” (p. 111). The victory of the Communists in mainland China in 1949 had estranged the US and China, and McCarthyism was in important ways about holding someone responsible for losing China (Wachtel interview). For example, the economists Frank Coe and Solomon Adler, two prominent victims of McCarthyism exiled in China with connections with the *Monthly Review* (MR), had no way to return to the U.S.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, tensions between the two countries, not least through their confrontation in the Korea War, had made China inaccessible to most Americans. A travel ban had been erected by the U.S. under Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: restrictions preventing all Americans to travel from China were imposed threatening the withdrawal of passports, fines and even imprisonment to those who would dare to set foot on red Chinese soil (Snow, 1971, p. 26).<sup>4</sup> During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1977) the Chinese were in turn unwilling to grant visa to foreigners, even to loyal Maoists like William Hinton, another well-known victim of McCarthyism (Hinton, 2003, 1983, p. xiv).<sup>5</sup>

Information on the Cultural Revolution was mostly limited to outlets like the Little Red Book, Chinese newspapers or government documents (Eckstein, 1968, p. ii). The few direct accounts of the Cultural Revolution included the famous Cambridge economist Joan Robinson’s (1969) sympathetic sketch based on material from 1967, and a high-level description of Chinese economic organization by the Australians Wheelwright and McFarlane (1970) who had visited a couple of months each in 1966 and 1968. When Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s engaged with Mao’s China of the Cultural Revolution, it was an abstract idea (Delaurier, 1996, p. 134).

## 2.2. Images of China from Afar and the End of Isolation

*“We are Americans. We too have been shut off from China for most of our lives... until this summer, 1971, when we walked across a bridge from Hong Kong over the Shumchun river, and entered the People’s Republic of China.”*

(Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1972, p. 1)

In 1970 Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai decided to break the isolation and invited old American ‘friends of China’ including Snow and Hinton (Hinton, 1983, p. xiv). During Snow’s 1970 interview with Mao for *Life* magazine, the chairman broke the news that President Nixon would be welcome to China (Snow Papers, 1994). With scarce information on the inaccessible Maoist China, it was unexpected when Howard Wachtel received a call from Paul Sweezy not too long after Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972, asking him to help put together a delegation of radical American political economists to go to China. Wachtel was one of URPE’s founding members and had recently been hired by American University. He remembers this to be an unbelievable opportunity (Wachtel, 2008; interview). In spring 1972 American left economists were given a chance to explore really existing Maoism for themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> They were close friends who had both worked under Harry Dexter White at the Treasury from the 1930s onwards, Adler as Treasury representative in China. Coe was Secretary of the International Monetary Fund when he was accused of espionage and forced to resign. Both found exile in China working as advisors to the Chinese leadership (Boughton, 2000; Grutzner, 1952; Rittenberg & Bennett, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Edgar Snow, the legendary author of *Red Star over China* (Snow, 1972 [1937]) and the first foreign journalist to interview Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai at their revolutionary base in 1936, recounts great difficulties in re-entering China in 1960 (Snow, 1971, p. 25 [1962]).

<sup>5</sup> Hinton was the author of *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (1966), influential in Maoist circles in the U.S. He had been denied the right to a passport altogether for having stayed in China beyond the revolution of 1949. When he returned to the U.S. in 1953 he had all his notes on China’s revolution confiscated and became subject to McCarthyist persecution (Hinton, 2003, 1983, p. xiv).

This was only one year after the US Ping Pong team was the very first American delegation to visit China since 1949 and one year after a delegation of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), a group of left Asia scholars, had first been invited to visit China. Ironically, the visit was possible thanks to the rapprochement policy of the radicals' greatest enemy, President Nixon.

The MR editors around Paul Sweezy had long cultivated an active interest in China.<sup>6</sup> MR was unsympathetic to the orthodox Marxist notion that a communist revolution must happen in advanced capitalist countries. Instead, they set their hope on underdeveloped countries, first and foremost China and Cuba. MR had well established connections with American leftists who pioneered the study of China's revolution. Snow and Hinton had both published articles and books with MR, and Sweezy counted Solomon Adler among his close friends (Baran & Foster, 2017, p. 493). Now Sweezy functioned as intermediary for the arrangement of the FFDARPE. He had been invited to join a delegation of *The Guardian*, a radical left magazine and outspoken supporter of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution (Garlin interview). Sweezy was in favor of the delegation to China, but unwilling, as America's foremost Marxist economist, to be a member of a delegation of *The Guardian*. Sweezy passed the invitation on to URPE and others (ibid.).

The invitation came at shortest notice but there was a great sense of enthusiasm to realize this trip. Wachtel was joined by Tom Weisskopf, another founding member of URPE and then about to join the faculty of the University of Michigan, to reach out to American radical political economists and organise the delegation (Wachtel interview; Weisskopf interview). David Gordon, a founding member of URPE and researcher at the National Bureau of Economic Research, was among those who joined FFDARPE. Other members of the delegation remember him as 'brilliant, handsome and charismatic' and the natural choice as the de facto leader of the delegation (Garlin interview; Riskin interview). The Chinese were keen to present their progress to American economists and the China International Travel Service sponsored the travel expenses within China (Weisskopf interview). But the international airfare, booked through *Special Tours for Special People, Inc.*, a leftwing agency specialized in arranging political travels, was expensive. It cost USD 654 in 1972 dollars or about USD 4,000 in current dollars<sup>7</sup> and made the journey only affordable to those with sufficient private funds (Gordon, 1972b, p. 17).

The delegation counted 18 members and consisted mainly of academics.<sup>8</sup> They included political economists of different generations but were somewhat older and more academic than the average URPE member (Weisskopf interview). As many other leading figures in URPE, the members of the delegation came from some of the most prestigious economics programmes in the U.S., trained by first rank members of the profession. Some had a distinguished pedigree. Frank D. Roosevelt III was the grandson of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and then a graduate student in economics at The New School for Social Research, Thomas Weisskopf the son of the famous physicist Victor Weisskopf, and David Gordon the son of two well-known economists, Margaret S. Gordon and Robert A. Gordon (the

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<sup>6</sup> The interest in China's Cultural Revolution among the MR readers, is illustrated by the demand for a 1967 report by the editors, Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, in which they speculated about the reasons for its outbreak. So great was the demand for this content that, three issues later, the journal's backmatter requested readers to send back their used copies of the January 1967 issue in exchange for a free book or magazine. The Chinese Central Committee seemed to speak directly to American radicals, when proclaiming that the aim of the Cultural Revolution was to "struggle against and crush those persons in authority" (Huberman & Sweezy, 1967, p. 5). The method of struggle was declared to contain emancipatory and basic-democratic values: the masses needed to "liberate themselves and any method of doing things on their behalf must not be used" (ibid., p. 6) while debates "should be conducted by argument, not by coercion or force." (ibid., p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> Price reflatd using the CPI less food and energy (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See FFDARPE (1972, p. ii) for the list of members and their institutional affiliations at the time of travel.

latter president of the American Economic Association in 1975). Non-academic members were the long-time labour organiser Harry Kelber, the activist and journalist Robb Burlage and Barry Rubin, a representative of *The Guardian* (Garlin interview; Riskin interview), as well as the businessman Stanton Smith – who seemed to be traveling to China to make business deals (Weisskopf interview).

The delegation members were familiar with the broadly pro-Mao literature on China such as the writings of Hinton (1966), Snow (1971, 1972 [1937]) and Robinson (1966), followed the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars and had consulted the CCAS' (1972) travel book *China! Inside the People's Republic* (Wachtel interview; Weisskopf interview; Zacccone interview). Even though FFDARPE included non-URPE members, the academics shared URPE's goal of providing economic analysis for the promotion of a progressive political project (Weisskopf interview). They travelled to China as academic visitors, but they were 'concerned scholars', their motivation was also political. Reflecting the mood of the New Left, among the motivating questions was whether aspects of China's Maoist model might prove useful for other developing countries (Riskin interview). But there were also delegates who had not given up on the Old Left, such as Harry Kelber and Lynn Turgeon, an URPE member at the Department of Economics of Hofstra University (Garlin interview).

Many on the delegation placed great hope in China's experiment. China promised to be based on democratic planning from the bottom up, corrupted neither by the market nor an authoritarian bureaucracy (Weisskopf interview). Weisskopf (interview) recounts: "We had the hope that studying China could help find a good viable model – if not for the rich than at least for poor countries." Similarly, June Zacccone, a member of URPE and at the time assistant professor at Hofstra University reports:

*"Though I didn't see Chinese socialism as a model for the U.S., I, and I believe other socialists, admired its egalitarian ideals, and were very sympathetic to the struggles of a poor, exploited country to improve its condition. I was excited by the Maoist model for developing countries, and at first believed its claims."*  
(Zacccone interview)

Others remember to have been somewhat more sceptical, for example the formal leader of the delegation and only Chinese speaker, Carl Riskin. At the time, Riskin was a young faculty member at Columbia University. Riskin had learned Chinese at the University of California studying Mao's political economy texts and stood out for his broader and deeper knowledge of China compared to other member of the FFDARPE (Garlin interview). He was invited to join the FFDARPE as a CCAS member and China expert 'with the right politics' despite not being an URPE member. Riskin stresses that he "never formulated the idea that China could serve as model for the US" (Riskin interview).

Beyond the enthusiasm for a socialist alternative the lack of reliable data from China made the FFDARPE an exceptional opportunity for economists to collect on the ground information on basic economic indicators, such as growth rates, investment levels, prices, wages and living standards. In their work on the U.S. they could draw on readily available data for analytical exercises. But for China they had to go out and collect information by seeing for themselves, by talking to people about their expenses and living conditions, and by observing prices on real markets. They went out to visit institutions most delegates had never set foot on in other countries and to approach people in occupations they hardly interacted with in other contexts. Riskin (1968, p. 45) summarises the desperate state of the economics literature on China:

*"Economists, forced to view the Chinese economy from afar, have often resembled the proverbial blind men describing an elephant. Moreover, as the*



*elephant has grown, even less of it has been revealed until some have been tempted to cease groping altogether, invoking instead ideal conceptions of elephant nature as substitutes for unavailable facts.”*

But the groping in the dark was more than an unfortunate situation for scientific enquiry. Riskin (1970, p. 19) pointed out in an assessment of the latest estimates of China's growth rates by the Rand Corporation: if it could be shown that China had failed to achieve substantial economic development over the 1949 level, those “convinced of the ineptitude of Communist systems would be rid of an embarrassing counter-example”. Estimating China's economic performance would give an answer to whether China was devising a superior economic path to development which could outcompete the capitalist one.

Victor Lippit, another member of the delegation who researched China and was an assistant professor at the University of California, Riverside, published a paper right before the China trip which went a step further in challenging the ‘orthodox’ view of China's development. Instead of pointing to the lack of reliable data, Lippit claimed that evidence of great achievements of the Chinese revolution were consciously ignored:

*“For most people in China, and particularly for the poorest, the revolution brought an unmistakable improvement in living standards. Despite the ample empirical evidence which supports this view, many prominent scholars in the field of Chinese economic studies have chosen to close their eyes to it, relying instead on theoretical arguments of dubious validity to maintain that the Chinese people have been the victims of their own revolution rather than its beneficiaries.”*  
(Lippit, 1972, p. 76)

The theoretical argument Lippit sought to challenge was that in a poor country, high levels of investment as in China could only be achieved at the expense of essential consumption. This relied according to Lippit on a static view of the economy and underestimated the contribution investments made to the enhancement of consumption.

John Gurley was the most senior member of the delegation and notable for having turned to radical political economics as a famous mainstream economist with important contributions in monetary theory and finance (Garlin interview; Riskin interview). A professor at Stanford University, former editor of the *American Economic Review*, and would-be vice president of the American Economic Association (in 1974), Gurley had turned to questions of comparative systems analysis in the late 1960s and gone through a semi-religious conversion to Maoism (Garlin interview; Golden, 1975; Mata, 2006, 85-86). He had taught himself how to read Chinese to study Mao's writings and was deeply fascinated with the Maoist outlook on development (Riskin interview). Gurley set out to attack the mainstream of China studies head-on:

*“...most studies by American economists of Chinese economic development are based on the assumption of capitalist superiority, and so China has been dealt with as though it were simply an underdeveloped United States – an economy that “should” develop along capitalist lines and that “should” forget all that damn foolishness about Marxism, Mao's thought, Great Leaps, and Cultural Revolutions and just get on with the job of investing the savings efficiently.”* (Gurley, 1970, p. 38)

Gurley's critique that China is treated as an underdeveloped America resonates with parts of the China studies literature until today, yet in his analysis of Maoist development his hopes were later proved to be out of touch with Chinese reality. Gurley argued that Maoist development was based on the creation of a new socialist man. Instead of pursuing economic development for its own sake, Maoism was based on the primacy of egalitarianism and the realization of humans' manifold creative powers, which also promised to achieve better development results than the capitalist path. Gurley (1970, p. 38) suggested that for "Maoists, correct ideas can be transformed into a tremendous material force to push socialist construction to ever-higher levels." To unleash these forces experts and technicians should be replaced by the wisdom of the masses. This was in Gurley's eyes the core of the Maoist model and judging from afar he thought it worked:

*"The Chinese – all of them – now have what is in effect an insurance policy against pestilence, famine, and other disasters. In this respect, China has outperformed every underdeveloped country in the world; and, even with respect to the richest one, it would not be far-fetched to claim that there has been less malnutrition due to maldistribution of food in China over the past twenty years than there has been in the United States."* (Gurley, 1970, p. 44)

Besides Riskin, Lippit, and Gurley none of the other delegation members held any prior research knowledge of China. Some did however have a background in comparative economic systems. Lynn Turgeon, an older member of the delegation and professor at Hofstra University, was broadly sympathetic with the attempt of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European peoples' democracies to replace capitalism and focused on technical aspects of economic planning (Garlin interview; Zaccone interview). Wachtel had conducted fieldwork on workers' self-management in Yugoslavia as part of his PhD research and had travelled to several Eastern European countries (Wachtel interview). But even those without any specific research interest in China were thrilled at the prospect of visiting China and intent on using the trip for their various academic enquiries. David Gordon noted in his visa application that he was hoping to learn from his visit of China for two research projects: one on a radical theory of labor market stratification and one on the political economy of American cities. Regarding the former Gordon noted: "China, along with Cuba, now represents the only society in which significantly different working experiences [from the capitalist one] are being developed – in which workers find opportunities to participate in decisions about work and to share less specialized, less alienated working roles" (Gordon, 1972b, p. 27). Regarding the latter, he hoped that China had the potential to "develop decent cities, modeled to the needs of people" (ibid.). The examples illustrate that there were varying degrees of hope in the Maoist model. Yet, as Wachtel (interview) points out: "In retrospect, a certain degree of romanticism with Maoist revolution was impossible to avoid as a lefty at the time, and some of us had a big dose of that." But Wachtel also emphasizes: "Nevertheless, we wanted to be academic visitors asking tough questions and collecting data."

### **3. Encounters with Maoist China**

*"We are the First Friendship Delegation of American Radical Political Economists. (...) We are united in our belief that political economists have much to learn from the people of China, who are solving their society's problems in historically unique ways. We hope to bring information about China to the radical movement in the United States and to help correct the misinformation that we and many other Americans have about the Chinese people. Finally, because we reject bourgeois economics and seek analyses that serve people's needs, we would find it*

*especially useful to exchange information and ideas with the Chinese people.”*  
(FFDARPE, 1972, Statement of Introduction)

In preparation for the trip, Riskin consulted with Gurley to devise questions which were “still unclearly answered regarding China’s economy” (Riskin in Gordon, 1972b, p. 19). All questions were about the basic organisation of the economy and society and reveal the limited knowledge of China watchers at the time.<sup>9</sup> Riskin (ibid.) asked the travel agent in a letter to visit “three kinds of institutions”: “national economic and planning organs”, “local governmental counterparts of these organs”, and “individual industrial and agricultural units ... with poorer as well as richer enterprises included”. Special interest was expressed in local enterprises which were found to “perhaps represent some of China’s most interesting social and economic innovations” (ibid., p. 18). With hindsight Riskin (interview) reflects, “we asked to see things we had never seen in the U.S. such as factories and mines.”

The schedule the Chinese hosts had arranged for FFDARPE roughly reflected the guests’ wishes. The delegation shared the Chinese criticism of “*narrowly specialized ‘experts’*” (ibid., emphasis added) but nonetheless hoped to meet “responsible persons” (ibid., p. 17) rather than only ordinary people. Maybe against the background of the CCAS meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai, there was a certain disappointment that no meetings with high level planners were scheduled for the 16 days trip around China. The closest the delegation came to the top were representatives from the Ministry of Commerce (Gordon, 1972a; Garlin interview). Nonetheless, when the delegation arrived in Guangzhou via Canada and Hong Kong, and found that there were too many tourist elements included, some suggestions of the American guests were accommodated. Even a visit at a May 7 Cadre School was granted, an institution for the ‘re-education’ by hard physical labour and the study of Mao Zedong which was central to the project of revolutionising the bureaucracy (Garlin interview; Wachtel interview).

This paper cannot recount the whole schedule of the FFDARPE.<sup>10</sup> Rather we will briefly discuss the general pattern of interactions and then highlight four particular visits, namely to a Chinese hospital, a model commune, the Tangshan coal mine, and the economics departments of Peking and Fudan Universities and May 7 Cadre School. Those four were picked since they serve to bring out more general characteristics of the encounters of FFDARPE with Maoist China. They speak to shared and conflicting understandings of sexism and gender, the commune as encapsulation of a new society, workers’ self-management and finally the status of economic expertise.

The Chinese institutions had a general routine in receiving foreign visitors and had sponsored similar delegations for Europeans (Weisskopf interview). Gordon (1972a, p. 54) described in this regard a “certain sameness” in his diary:

*“There is usually a welcoming delegation which claps as we get off the bus (and which we return in Soviet fashion). We are led into a reception room with the inevitable five pictures on the wall [Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao]. Tea is served constantly during our visit... The RP*

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<sup>9</sup> The questions listed in the letter were: “How does the planning system actually work? How is central planning reconciled with stimulation of local initiative? What is the breakdown of authority as between central and local organs? What is the theory of national income accounting in China? What are the chief methods by which ‘surplus’ resources are mobilized for development and how are these related to the questions of incentives? How important and permanent a feature do planners think the now mushrooming local industries will be? What is the current size of China’s national income, the current average rate of growth, the accuracy of Chinese statistics?” (Riskin in Gordon, 1972b, p. 19)

<sup>10</sup> The full schedule and detailed notes on all visits compiled collectively can be accessed at Tom Weisskopf’s website: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/tomweisskopf/>.

*[responsible person] gives a brief (sometimes) review of the history of the organization and economic facts.”*

The welcome speeches at all organizations pointed to the great importance of the Cultural Revolution. Where previously bureaucrats had prevented full flourishing, now the people had taken over and steered on the right, revolutionary path (Garlin interview). For example, at the Peking No. 1 Machine Tool Factory the delegation was told during the introductory briefing:

*‘Before the Cultural Revolution (CR), because of Liu-Shao-Shi [Liu Shaoqi] revisionist interference, we did not reach capacity. With the CR there was a spiritual outburst, with technological innovation including new machines and equipment, stimulating production and bringing process. In 1968 a Revolutionary Committee was set up. We then achieved our highest production record in history.’*  
(FFDARPE 1972, p. 17)

After the briefings the delegation could ask questions. With an aim to get as much information as possible, the group assigned a chairman who would ask follow-up questions until a line of questions was exhausted (Garlin, 1973). To the bemusement of the Chinese tour leaders, the role of the chairmen was rotated among the delegation for egalitarian reasons (Zaccone interview). The delegates remember an atmosphere of honest exchange, even though frank and sensitive questions were asked and not all of them were answered.<sup>11</sup>

After a guided tour of the organization, the delegation had a chance to interview whomever they chose to approach. They found these side-interviews most useful (Weisskopf interview; Garlin, 1973). Gordon (1972a, p. 51) noted: “We seemed to learn most by talking to people at the grass-roots level.” And Weisskopf (interview) remembers: “Once we were out in the field and speaking with individuals, the conversation was quite open.” The delegation was also free to stroll around the local neighbourhoods, where they aroused great attention with their foreign looks. Garlin (interview) recalls how Roosevelt’s 6.5 feet tall and fair-haired attracted enormous attention. In fact, many Chinese they met were aware of his ancestry and whispered excitedly to each other in Chinese, “Roosevelt’s [Luosifu in Chinese] grandson!” (Riskin, interview). But despite these freedoms, Riskin (interview) emphasizes that there was no question that “they were being managed”. Most delegation members could only communicate through translators and they were thus rarely unaccompanied.

### **3.1. The Public Provision of Healthcare and the Absence of Crude Sexism**

With 16 male members out of the total of 18 delegates the FFDARPE was a far cry from being gender balanced. Yet, the collective notes show an acute sensitivity of gender representation in China throughout the study tour. For all visits and discussions it is explicitly noted how many women participated, in what roles and in which ways they got to speak or were listened to. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they found that overall, women were underrepresented in responsible positions and tended to have less voice. Nevertheless, they were impressed by the absence of crude sexism, some individual women leaders, and the positive role that the provision of public health played in the

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<sup>11</sup> In a 1973 talk describing the trip, Garlin reported: “At times the question periods took on some thing of a tone of a cross-examination but I cannot remember a single incident of direct refusal to answer, although there were some evasive answers.” Similarly, Gordon (1972a, p. 54) remarked: “I personally didn’t ever tailor my questions, but asked the most sensitive questions I could think of – not all were answered, but one got the impression that they were trying to answer even when they were unprepared.” Although trying to ask tough questions, the delegation also aimed to “avoid premising their questions with foreign propaganda and ask as neutrally as possible” (Wachtel interview).

redistribution of reproductive labour. Creating the new socialist man envisioned in Maoism required healthy people, while the New Left's concern with gender equality linked directly to the distribution of care work. Thus the delegation paid great attention to the provision of public care and healthcare and in this realm they found China to have made great progress.

The expectations for healthcare were high. The barefoot doctors were greatly admired in the West. They were mainly peasants who had received basic medical training and supplies to treat the local population or refer more serious cases to county hospitals. Joan Robinson had observed already in 1953 in her *Letters from a visitor to China* that in New China "hygiene is very much a matter of public duty" and the "results are remarkable" (Robinson, 1977 [1953], p. 9). The delegation received a first-hand impression by visiting hospitals and health care centres both as visitors and as patients<sup>12</sup> and experiencing the legendary Maoist breakthroughs in public health for themselves. From a nurse at the Shashiyou Brigade, the FFDARPE learned the guiding slogans for public health: 'serving the people, everything for the people's health, revolutionary humanitarianism, sacrifice, and that Chinese medicine and pharmaceutical knowledge are a great storehouse to be used and raised to higher levels' (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 82). The great achievements of acupuncture were demonstrated when the delegation attended a caesarean section without anaesthesia (Garlin interview). As example for hygiene work it was explained that before Liberation many people did not know about dental care, but now thanks to great propaganda efforts brushing teeth was common practice. Barefoot doctors played a critical role in improving sanitation standards and eliminating flies to avoid the spread of diseases (ibid.). Robinson (1977 [1953], p. 9) had famously remarked: "It is quite true what we were told about flies having been eliminated." Gordon (1972a, p. 54) somewhat qualified this: "It is wrong to say that flies had been eliminated in China, but they are comparatively few." Irrespective of the precise number of flies, had China previously been literally the "sick man of Asia", the visitors observed great progress in public hygiene especially when contrasted with the situation in India (Weisskopf interview).

In a conversation with barefoot doctors at the Sha-Shih-Yu commune, the progress in China's health system was juxtaposed with the challenges for health care in the U.S. Garlin, a health economist, pointed to the high prices of American healthcare, the crisis in the countryside, the mentality of providing emergency treatment without prevention, the prejudices against male nurses, and the problem that health care was organised as a business and not as a service for the people. The barefoot doctors responded that "[t]his account of U.S. medicine today reminds us of Chinese medicine before the Liberation!" and illustrated: "People here were exploited ... They suffered all diseases, and many died from them. The ruling class looted people not cared for them. ... Before the People's Republic, one spring here 20 children died of measles. Never again!" (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 83) Putting the U.S. public health situation in the 1970s as equal to that in China before 1949 must have appeared as an exaggeration, but the delegation could not help being impressed with the high standards of health care and more generally the high rate of public good provision (Gordon, 1972a, p. 51).

The doctors at a Chinese hospital did not know how to deal with questions about sex education and homosexuality (Garlin interview; Gordon, 1972a). Yet, a Chinese nurse reported about family planning propaganda and the distribution of pills and IUDs. The FFDARPE was told that some men

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<sup>12</sup> Dawn Day Wachtel stayed in a Chinese hospital for seven days due to illness and commented on her stay: "I was in the hospital seven days, and the care I was given was excellent. ... it was very difficult for me to discern the division of labor. ... The nurse regular activities were performed by both men and women. ... it seemed to me that whenever I needed help, the same people would appear at all hours of the day and night. With their long hours, the good humor with which the hospital workers consistently treated me and each other is all the more remarkable." (FFDARPE, pp. 48-49)

still objected to contraceptive measures hoping for more sons to be born, but women could sometimes persuade their husbands that they should contribute to production goals instead of giving birth (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 83). June Zaccone, one of the only two female members of FFDARPE, reflected on this in a talk about her China trip to a women's group:

*“Probably the chief social support to the improved status of women is that China doesn't need babies, but desperately needs to increase production. A decline in the birth rate and an increase in production can both be accomplished by encouraging women to work outside the home. The women workers we questioned had small families or no children, and a few commented that children are too much work.”* (Zaccone, 1975)

Women were further enabled to participate in production work through the collective organization of reproductive work. Zaccone (interview) was fascinated by the fact that urban women could outsource many household services “such as laundering, clothes-mending, caring for the sick, even making bank account deposits, all done by other women.” This extended even to food preparation: “I was delighted with the semi-prepared food in a market – vegetables cut in uniform pieces all ready to stir-fry, eliminating the most time-consuming part of Chinese cuisine to help out working women,” while she acknowledges that she had “No idea how common this was.” (Zaccone interview)

Beyond what appeared overall a relatively progressive division of labour between the genders, the delegation was struck by the “apparent lack of crude sexism” compared to the American society at the time (Zaccone interview). Zaccone reported to her women audience:

*“There are no massage parlors in China, nor as far as one can tell are women an important part of the entertainment program for out-of-town guests. Their forms are not used to sell bicycles, Mao jackets or egg foo young ... . The absence of sexual titillation in the relationship between men and women is what immediately astonishes and delights a U.S. visitor to China, especially one recently in Times Square. ... The de-emphasis of sexual attributes is reinforced by the baggy, unisex clothing, absence of makeup, and simple hairstyles.”* (Zaccone, 1975)

In a similar vein, David Gordon contrasted his experience in the PRC with that of the British colony: “When one gets into Hong Kong, he is keenly aware of the lack of emphasis on sex in China. In Hong Kong, there is much provocative sexual attraction which is reciprocated by young males.” (Gordon 1972a, p. 55)

The liberation of women and the hope for the real possibility to create an economy, society and culture which would treat people of all genders equally was pivotal to the attractiveness of the Maoist experiment among the American Left. What the FFDARPE saw was clearly not perfect: Several incidents are cited in the collective notes and memories when women though members of the Revolutionary Committee would not speak, or that even though women were holding important management positions they were still in a minority. But URPE itself was strongly male dominated (Mata & Lee, 2007) and so was FFDARPE. By comparison with their experience of a deeply sexist American society and economics profession, some delegates were impressed with the signs of progress they observed in China. Looking back after 46 years, Zaccone (interview) stresses: “I was very pleased with the range of work we saw women doing” and remembers in detail her favorite examples of women in male connotated occupations and positions of power: “the overhead crane operator in a machine factory, the forklift driver at the Shanghai docks, the young woman instructing

a man at a lathe, women grinding ball bearings, and the production manager of a factory discussing its problems.”

### 3.2. An Actually Existing Model Commune

*“We were most impressed with the Sha-Shih-Yu [Shashiyu] Model Brigade. Most of our visits were in urban settings. We were aware that the model communes were not typical or poor. But it was so very different and also appeared successful.”*  
(Weisskopf interview)

The greatest fascination on the delegation at the time as well as in retrospect exerted the communes as the encapsulation of bottom-up Maoist agricultural socialism and local self-sufficiency. As the introductory quote to this section points out, they were aware that they only saw the best of its kind, yet to see an actually existing commune in reality was in itself spectacular. In fact, the whole notion of a commune in China and the Marxist tradition more broadly is inspired by one unique historical case, the Paris Commune. It became the representation of an entirely different form of political, social and economic organization (Meisner, 1999, pp. 225-7). In the wake of the Great Leap Forward rural communes came to collectively organize agricultural and industrial production, reproduction, politics, military, education, health, and culture in China. They were envisioned as “vehicles for a general reorganization of rural life” aimed at the accelerated transition to communism (Riskin, 1987, p. 123). As urban industrial and rural agricultural, mental and manual labor were all united in the commune, they were to serve Mao’s goal of overcoming the cleavages produced by a functional division of labor (ibid., p. 124). For the end of the 1970s, Riskin (1987) estimated that there were around 50,000 communes with an average membership of 15,000 people (p. 124). The communes were again structured into production brigades at the intermediate (on average 160 households) and production teams at the lowest level of organization (on average 40 households). The accounting unit on which the productive efforts were assessed and the income determined was initially the commune but later shifted downwards to the production team (ibid.).

FFDARPE visited two model communes, Dali [Tali in the FFDARPE notes] in Guandong [Canton] and the Shashiyu [Shai-Shi-Yu] Brigade close to Tangshan. At Dali the delegation was introduced to the general organizational structures of a commune. They learned that a commune runs “not only agriculture, but also industry and trade, undertakes education and public health, and organizes the militia” (FFDARPE 1972, p. 5) and also functions as local government. If before the Cultural Revolution the line of capitalist roaders was gaining traction (i.e. implementing external bureaucratic control), the commune was now firmly committed to self-sufficiency they were informed. The task of the commune was described as doing all that which the lower level production brigades and production teams could not accomplish, in particular guide large-scale basic improvements and fight disaster. On each level ownership was collective. The principle of distribution was summarized as “to each according to his work” and men and women received equal pay for equal work (FFDARPE 1972, p. 12). In the typical self-critical tone, the responsible person told the guests: “There still exist some feudal cases where men look down on women, but these cases are very few” (ibid). Besides collective production, the visitors learned, private plots were allocated which the peasants could cultivate either for their personal consumption or for sale on a local fair. While investment decisions were taken by the commune, lower levels could decide under the leadership of the Revolutionary Committee how to distribute between current income and production inputs (FFDARPE, 1972, pp. 5-9).

But even more impressive to the FFDARPE than the visit to Dali, where they had learned about the basic organization of a model commune, was the experience of the Shashiyu Brigade of 681 people

which as the name indicates was located in a sandstone gulch. The hosts recollected, before Liberation peasants had fled from the landlords to work this land with hardly any soil and had to carry water from 5 km away. But thanks to the persistent collective efforts the brigade had installed rain water tanks and pipelines to drain water from behind the mountain and store it inside the mountains. Learning from Dazhai [Tachai], the brigade praised by Mao as a national model, they said they had built terraces which greatly expanded the cultivable land. Not only could the people now provide for their subsistence and store grain and save money for times of bad harvest. The people had also constructed a school, a cooperative medical system, 400 new housing units and most peasants had new bicycles, some even sewing machines and radios (FFDARPE, 1972, pp. 70-2). According to the vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Committee:

*“The peasants were very happy to do all this when they recalled their past conditions and compared them with the present. They were very proud. Unity means strength.”* (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 72)

A feminist angle challenged the rosy picture of the brigade to some degree. Garlin (1973) reflected:

*“We didn’t have to ask about child care at Sha-Shih-Yu [Shashiyu]; we could observe that practically every women of child-bearing age, or of grandmothering age had children around her. And although women were available to answer questions about the status of women at the commune, the fact that those questions were answered by men told us more about the status of women there than any formal answer.”*

Zaccone’s (interview) recollection of the visit to Sha-Shih-Yu some 45 years later make a similar point:

*“There were two women cadres on the commune management committee, neither of whom spoke except sometimes when directly addressed. I asked the older woman about the lack of a communal dining room even during the busy agricultural season. The committeeman replied that people preferred eating at home. I repeated the question to the woman, and though she gave the same answer, after the meeting, she hugged me.”*

Nevertheless, for Zaccone as for Weisskopf the visit to the Sha-Shih-Yu was the highlight of the trip. The model brigade appeared like the realization of what was commonly perceived impossible. Sha-Shih-Yu was a tale of how sandstone was turned by the force of collective organization into a flourishing agricultural community with apple and walnut trees, a local new society created out of dust. There was no question that this was not representative, but the mere existence of Sha-Shih-Yu seemed to demonstrate the possibility of an alternative social organisation not based on pecuniary incentives but communal efforts even under the most difficult natural conditions.

### **3.3. Tangshan’s Revolutionary Coal Mines**

FFDARPE visited many national and local level production plants and factories including an iron and steel plant, the Shanghai Machine Factory, a light bulb factory, the Peking No. 1 Machine Tool Factory and many more. In general, the relatively great degree of egalitarianism in the industrial workplaces, the engagement of cadres in manual labor, the comparatively equal wages for different positions, and the fact that women were doing ‘men’s work’, such as operating cranes and driving forklifts, were stressed in the recollections of the members of the delegation. Zaccone (interview) adds ‘the rather relaxed attitude of factory workers on our visits – they looked up from their work and talked freely, without seeking permission.’ For the purpose of this paper, we highlight the visit to the Tangshan Coal Mine. At the time of the visit great hopes were projected on this place which seemed to have emerged from British colonial rule to a modern facility under revolutionary management.



The Vice-Director of the Revolutionary Committee, Mr. Dong, introduced the Kailan Coal Mine at Tangshan as a formerly colonial British institution liberated in 1948:

*“Before liberation, the workers were exploited by the imperialists and the reactionaries at home and abroad and all their running dogs. The British used all sorts of methods and measures to exploit the Chinese workers. Because they did not care about the lives of the workers, accidents were frequent, and many workers died in the pit.”* (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 55)

After liberation, the delegation was told, great efforts had been undertaken to put in place safety measures and improve the health conditions of mine workers. This included a minimum of fresh air per worker, temperature control, limits on gas contents in the air, water to absorb the coal dust. Young workers did not contract lung diseases any longer and there had been no more gas explosions (ibid.). Great breakthroughs were also reported in rail transport. The mine was praised as being amongst the technologically most advanced ones and all tools were produced locally. Thus it also fulfilled the Maoist ideal of self-sufficiency. By 1970, the Vice-Director claimed, the mine had managed to surpass its designated output and continued to increase production (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 51).

After the introductory briefing the delegation “all got dressed up in miners’ clothes and went down [into the mine] to inspect the work” (Gordon, 1972a, p. 23). Riskin (interview) remembers this as a very frightening experience and Zaccone (interview) as “hot and noisy”. Probably not many of the visitors had ever descended into a coal mine anywhere else in the world, let alone a developing country. Gordon (1972a, p. 24) notes in his diary on this experience: “It was quite a physical ordeal but it does make one appreciate the difficult work involved.” Probably the only member of the delegation with some personal experience related to coal mining was Robb Burlage, a founding member of Students for a Democratic Society, a graduate of the University of Texas and at the time a researcher at the Institute for Policy Studies, a progressive think tank (Chowkwanyun, 2011). He had come on the delegation not as economist but invited by *The Guardian*, the radical magazine and point of contact for the China trip. His political engagement with the Chinese miners described in the collective notes contrasts with the somewhat more distant attitude of observation documented for other visits. As a farewell from the mine Burlage made a personal statement to the hosts:

*“I come from West Virginia an area of coal mining in the United States. A few days before our trip to China nine people I knew were killed in a mine fire and explosion in West Virginia. The contrast between the conditions and organization here and my experience back home is very dramatic in emphasizing how-well organised you are here. In our area, some of the mechanization techniques appear to be very advanced and some of the machinery is very large-scale. But there are two major contradictions: (1) The mines are owned by outside companies ... (2) There is more concern for speeding up production than for the welfare and survival of the workers.”* (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 54)

Burlage thanked the hosts by handing over not only the ‘PRC URPE 1972’ button which was given to all organizations, but also a button saying ‘Stop Murder of Coal Miners’ and posters and newspapers of American miners. Burlage is described by Garlin (interview) as having been a ‘cultural outlier’ compared to the academics on the delegation. Burlage, too, was a Harvard economics graduate but he came to China as an activist. The contrast between his attitude reflected in the above quote and that found elsewhere by other FFDARPE delegates brings out the latter’s research driven interest in China. Nevertheless, the hope expressed in Burlage’s statement that if industries were organised in the interest

of workers rather than capital working conditions could be improved even in the dirtiest and most dangerous sectors such as mining, was likely of broader appeal amongst the FFDARPE.

### **3.4. Exchanges with Chinese Economists and Re-education**

The meetings with economists at Peking University and Fudan University in Shanghai were a historic encounter. During the Cultural Revolution economics as a scientific discipline had been condemned as ‘economism’, meanwhile exchanges between Chinese and American economists had been interrupted since the 1949 revolution. FFDARPE was the first delegation of economists to China after Nixon’s visit and these meetings marked the first Sino-American exchanges amongst economists (Perkins, 2016). The members were excited about the opportunity to talk to central planners, the ‘responsible persons’ of their profession. However, and perhaps unsurprisingly in light of the long period of radio silence, the meetings with Chinese economists turned out to frustrate the delegation. In general, they had found during their trip that the higher the official the worse the discussion (Weisskopf interview), and the exchanges with university economists marked a low point.

The Americans called their field Radical Political Economy. For the Chinese, they found, this simply meant Marxism. But even within the field of Marxist economics the Chinese and American economists struggled to find a common language. The Chinese hosts were very much in Cultural Revolution mode. In sharp contrast with the American academics’ elite education, the Chinese teachers at Peking University emphasised that students were now selected from workers, peasants and soldiers, while following Mao’s instruction schooling had been revolutionized and simplified cutting down the years of study. Theoretical and practical training were integrated and students combined learning with productive labor in factories and research in the countryside (FFDARPE, 1972, pp. 27-8). For the Chinese, the economics education during the Cultural Revolution relied centrally on education by the masses. The American visitors were disappointed that they were not received by any of the central leaders or by more leading officials, which they had expected to be most educational.

The American economists had hoped to learn from their Chinese counterparts about the technical details of central planning or about theoretical work. But they had to find that the economists at Peking University were mainly concerned with interpreting classics of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong-Thought and responded to questions of economic practice with general principles, such as “the development of heavy industry contributes to light industry, which contributes to accumulation and therefore to the development of heavy industry; heavy industry serves agriculture” (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 30). When asked about any original work on Marxist economics the rather generic answer was: “We discuss and study different topics in classical Marxist works. For example, we discuss the theory of surplus value, the theory of accumulation, etc. from Capital.” (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 29).

The FFDARPE realized that the Chinese so-called ‘economic workers’ – stressing that academics were not superior to other workers – had almost completely detached themselves from the Western profession and in fact from any kind of academic economics. In contrast, URPE and radical American economics more broadly wanted to break away from the discipline’s mainstream, but they did not strive to overcome economics altogether. Rather they critiqued economics and aimed to change its orientation. The FFDARPE observed that in both Beijing and Shanghai there were some remnants of teachings of Western economics, for example a course on doctrine history which included reading Keynes, theories of People’s Capitalism, and Libermanism (Gordon 1972a, p. 33). But they were told that in recent years no Western books had been translated and after they visited the library at Peking University, Gordon (1972a, p. 16) noted: “There was nothing in the way of up-to-date Western books to speak of.” This

included Western Marxism. For example, a look at the stamps in Sweezy's *Theory of Capitalist Development* revealed it had not been borrowed since 1959 (ibid.).

Overall, the American economists experienced this first exchange with Chinese 'economists' as "a long period of fruitless discussion at a very long table" (ibid., p. 15). This was followed by discussions in small groups where the Americans mainly answered questions on capitalist economies – not Western Marxism or developments in economic theory. Gordon noted in his diary, that the FFDARPE had used this opportunity to give their Chinese counterparts "some insight into Western thinking" (ibid.). In contrast, the collective notes judged the answers provided by their hosts to their questions as "non-answers" (FFDARPE, 1972, p. 31).

The complicated nature of this meeting reveals a deeper difference between the American economists and late Maoism. While the FFDARPE aimed to "get away from being prisoners to disciplinary labels" (Riskin in Gordon, 1972b, 19) and were critical of narrow conceptions of expertise, they did not reject the usefulness of economics as an academic discipline. By the time of the Cultural Revolution, Mao had come to condemn both Soviet-type central planning and market socialism (Riskin, 1998). Left with no mechanism of national economic coordination he propagated local and regional self-sufficiency. The coordination between the economic units envisioned as self-sufficient was to be guided by political mobilization rather than technical economic instructions. Mao's vision was that the economy should be propelled forward by unleashing local initiative and the enthusiasm of the masses. In this context, the Marxist tenet that the development of the forces of production drives historical progress was reversed: Under late Maoism a revolution of the relations of production should instead elevate the forces of production. The latter were thus to some extent reduced to a derivative of the former and what mattered for economic development was believed to be political, social and cultural relations rather than technical economic considerations (Riskin 1987, pp. 163-164, p. 7). During the Cultural Revolution the study of the forces of production as a subject of analysis in its own right was declared illegitimate and Mao sharply criticised economists.<sup>13</sup> Economics as a discipline was deprived of its institutional foundations (Lin, 1981). The delegation did not meet and discuss with China's great economic thinkers, like Sun Yefang or Xue Muqiao, since they were banished from the centres of research and undergoing 're-education'.

If the exchanges with 'economic workers' were frustrating because of the devastating state of economics in China at the time, the visit at the East is Red May 7<sup>th</sup> Cadre School of Chou-Ling district set up in 1968 was experienced by many delegation members as outright disturbing. The May 7<sup>th</sup> Schools were set up during the Cultural Revolution all across the country and on the provincial and local levels (Li 1995, p. 484). The official mission of the school visited by the FFDARPE was introduced by the deputy chairman of the local Revolutionary Committee. He explained that the school had been established in 1968 and had since graduated 2200 cadres. The basic goal was described as transforming the students' ideology by studying Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought but, equally importantly, by practicing manual labor and learning from poor peasants (FFDARPE 1972, p. 32).<sup>14</sup> 'Re-education' had occupied a central position in the Maoist ideology of People's Democratic

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<sup>13</sup> Gurley (1976, p. 284) discusses in an essay written after the return from China how Mao held economists in general in low esteem. Gurley explained that in Mao's eyes economists "were members of that community of city-bred or foreign-educated intellectuals who constantly aroused his suspicions and sometimes his wrath. ... Mao characterized some of these intellectuals as 'walking dictionaries,'" and found them unable to recognize or let alone solve any real problems. "'The more you study [books],' Mao admonished, 'the more stupid you become.'"

<sup>14</sup> See for example Wang (1973) for a contemporary detailed report on the visit to a May 7 Cadres School in the outskirts of Beijing.

Dictatorship and the mass-line since the early days of the revolutionary base in Yan'an. In theory, the masses were meant to actively participate in a centralised system, a dictatorship over all those who did not belong to 'the people', like counterrevolutionaries, capitalist roaders, bourgeois intellectuals etc. Yet, the latter could be enabled to become part of the masses through self-transformation in 're-education' (Karl, 2010, pp. 65-67, 74-76). The Cultural Revolution had the party and state bureaucracy itself as target of its struggle. In what was meant to be a renewal of the initial revolution, the divide between cadres, experts and the masses, between urban elites and peasants should be overcome. To this ideological end but importantly also as a tool to ban enemies in violent factional struggles cadres on all levels were sent into institutionalised 're-education' camps such as at May 7 schools. In fact, many of the political leaders and economists of reform underwent such 're-education', including Deng Xiaoping (Pantsov and Levine, 2015, p. 199-216).

The theoretical notion of breaking up established hierarchies and overcoming the division between rural and urban populations as well as across social classes might have had a certain appeal to some of the visitors. Yet, seeing what 're-education' meant in practice was simply shocking. Looking back, Riskin (interview) suggests that when watching the furious faces of some of the intellectuals and cadres the "Potemkin Villages of the red book fell apart". Those being 're-educated' were "displayed like animals in a zoo" and wanted nothing to do with the visitors touring their camp. It became clear that the May 7 Cadres School was an institution for punishment and repression not re-education. Yet, Gordon's diary entries and the collective notes remain neutral and descriptive on the visit at the May 7 Cadre School. These notes were compiled to document what the delegation saw and heard not to evaluate or reflect their experience.

#### **4. 'We have seen the future and it works'**

The FFDARPE members experienced their trip to China as an event of biographical importance (Garlin interview; Wachtel interview). And they were intent on sharing their experience. Upon their return, the members of the delegation diligently transcribed their trip notes, and the compilation of a summary report was coordinated by Weisskopf. The collective notes, cited here as FFDARPE (1972), were deposited in the library of the University of Michigan and distributed by mail on request but never officially published (Weisskopf interview).

Yet the members of FFDARPE disseminated reports from 'inside red China' via public talks to various academic and activist audiences. Zaccone (interview) and her colleague Turgeon were interviewed by the local radio station and newspaper, she gave a talk on Chinese women at Hofstra and on Chinese economic development for a NYC teachers course. Weisskopf gave lectures at the University of Michigan on China and India from a comparative perspective and published a paper on this topic in the AER (Weisskopf, 1975; interview). Garlin, Gurley and Riskin gave joint presentations at the Stanford University and the University of California, Riverside, and Garlin and to the 1973 annual conference of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast (Garlin interview). Among the publications of FFDARPE members after the China trip were several essays by Gurley in praise of the Maoist strategy which were collected in a book by Monthly Review Press (Gurley, 1976a) and an article by Riskin (1973) on "Maoism and Motivation" in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars.

The overall message brought home by FFDARPE was positive: "China seemed energetic and self-critical" (Garlin interview). It was clear that one had to "assume that those institutions to which travellers are taken by the Chinese are the best of the set. That is, one sees a cross-section of the best that the society has to offer." (Garlin, 1973) Nonetheless, it was impressive that these institutions existed at all and operated in radically different ways while appearing economically very successful. Gordon's

(1972a, p. 52) impression was of a booming economy. And he even adopted a critical stance on the benefits of technical economic expertise: “An economy which never has to worry about the lack of effective demand, and which has released the energies of the ordinary people, seems to be able to function very well (at least in the short run) without the imaginative services of its intellectuals” (ibid). Gordon singled out “the extremely high moral standards” as “one of the most impressive things about China” (ibid., p. 55). Similarly, Riskin (1973, p. 10) wrote: “Visitors to China invariably comment on the energy and zeal of the people they met there.” Clearly, the trip confirmed the formerly vague positive associations with Mao’s China on the American Left.

The Chinese development success was typically compared with other Asian countries. Gordon (1972a, p. 52) observed: ‘As for the standard of living, it is low by [Eastern European] standards, but rather high by Asian standards (except for Japan). A great deal of the standard is “invisible” showing up as free education, medical care, and very good care for retired persons. As in all socialist countries, begging is non-existent and there are few signs of disguised unemployment such as no shoe-shiners.’ And concludes: “...in general, the Chinese seem to have put a broad floor at the bottom through which very few persons could fall.” Weisskopf (interview), who had extensive experience in India, was impressed with the absence of overt poverty in China: “China was a very controlled society, with less freedom than India. But China had better health provision and living standards. This was such a contrast with India. In India, there was no escape from mass poverty. In China mass poverty was at the very least hidden.” He remembers that China was culturally much more uniform than India, and there was a dullness to the monotony of the surroundings and the blue suits.

Overall, according to Weisskopf (interview), during the trip they had the summary impression that “the Maoist experiment was successful. In the economic sphere we thought things were going well, we saw the problems more in the cultural and political domain.” Similarly Wachtel (interview) recalls: “what we saw in China was vastly different from India, another vast country in the primitive accumulation stage of development: Chinese institutions were working better in terms of the elimination of poverty.’ Thus Wachtel came back thinking “this place is working, Mao’s revolution is working”. In the early 1970s the conclusion was, as Zaccone points out, that China could be considered “something of a model for other poor countries” (interview). She adds, in her view, in particular the “egalitarian ideals” and “the struggle of a poor, exploited country” were admirable, while the attempt to combine “employing everyone, using low-tech methods and land reform to raise rural living standards while developing a modern industrial sector, and providing basic services (health care, literacy) to all” seemed promising as an approach to development.

While the FFDARPE trip reinforced on the Left the abstract projection into China of a successful alternative with supportive empirical evidence, it is critical to understand that the members of FFDARPE, traveling to China with a considerable portion of goodwill, were by no means an exception in their positive evaluation of Maoist China. Rather, Lincoln Steffens’ famous statement after returning from a trip to the early U.S.S.R., ‘I have seen the future, and it works’ (Hartshorn, 2011), emerges as a general theme in the reports of American pioneer travellers to the P.R.C. There was a glut of American visitors to China after the Nixon visit and most came back publishing articles which the conservative journal *Commentary* criticized as offering ‘a heady mixture of their personal reactions and enthusiasms’ (Johnson, 1973, 37).

Most remarkable for the discipline of economics, is a delegation of the then president of the AEA, John Kenneth Galbraith, joined by two distinguished predecessors and later Nobel Laureates, Wassily

Leontief and James Tobin (Galbraith, 1973a), shortly after the FFDARPE visit.<sup>15</sup> FFDARPE had just been a prelude compared to these great men of letters and world-renowned economists (Garlin interview). But, Garlin adds, they did not invite Milton Friedman – this had to wait until 1980 (Weber, 2018, p. 225). Galbraith was known for his ambitions to contribute to co-existence with the Soviet Union, even though a liberal, not a socialist. Upon their return from China Galbraith published a book (Galbraith, 1973a) on their 15 day journey and an article for the New York Times Magazine titled: ‘*Galbraith has seen China’s future – and it works*’ (Galbraith, 1972). Therein he proclaimed: ‘There can now be no serious doubt that China is devising a highly effective economic system’ (ibid., p. 38). He cautioned “The Chinese economy isn’t the American or European future.” But confidently concludes, “it is the Chinese future. And let there be no doubt: for the Chinese it works” (ibid., p. 94).

Similarly, Leontief (1973) began an article in The Atlantic Monthly titled *Socialism in China* with: ‘*It works. This is the conclusion that I brought home*’ (p. 74, emphasis added). Another economist who was to receive the Nobel Memorial Prize afterwards and visited China in July 1972 as part of a delegation of computer scientists was Herbert Simon. Simon (1973) started his piece on Mao’s China with a sceptical theorem: ‘Anything that can be learned by travel, can be learned faster, cheaper, and better in a good library’ (p. 1). Although he questioned the use of travel observations, he still used eye-witness accounts to validate the insights of the “China watchers” (ibid., 3). Simon’s conclusion was ultimately in agreement with Galbraith (1972):

*“The Chinese people, except for a very few of them, are better off than they have ever been in modern times – and by no small margin. (I guess this is what Galbraith, a 10-day expert, meant when he wrote in the New York Times that the system “works”.)”* (Simon, 1973, p. 4)

Even Fortune magazine, which had previously been challenged by the MR on its view that “the Mao Tse-Tung version of Communist theory and practice has failed catastrophically” (Huberman & Sweezy, 1967, p. 1), published an article by Louis Kraar in August 1972 titled “*I have seen China – and they work*” (Garlin, 1973). Garlin reviewed the cited and further contributions by travellers to China in his 1973 talk. He concluded there was no dispute any longer among foreign observers that since the revolution in 1949, the Chinese Communists had overcome all major problems identified by the World Bank for the developing world.<sup>16</sup> In sum, FFDARPE was in the mainstream of China travellers when they concluded from their trip that Maoist China worked.

## 5. China’s Departure from Maoism and Disillusionment

*“I think very likely, we were all living in a bit of a dream world when we imagined that the Communist movement in China had developed in the masses to the point of changing popular consciousness and class consciousness and so on. That came from other models and not from reality, I think.”* (Sweezy in Savran and Tonak, 1987, 10)

The FFDARPE projected great hopes in their observations in Mao’s China, yet the reason for their travel already foreshadowed the change to come. They were able to travel to China as part of the rapprochement arranged by their political enemy President Nixon. At every Chinese institution, the FFDARPE members were greeted with a ritual praise of Nixon for having opened up relationships

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<sup>15</sup> We are grateful to Victor Garlin for pointing us to the visits and publications of the Nobel Laureates.

<sup>16</sup> The problems were ‘severely skewed income distribution, excessive levels of unemployment, high rates of infant mortality, low levels of literacy, serious malnutrition and widespread ill-health’ (Garlin 1973).

between the PRC and the US. But for left Americans “there was no one more hated than Nixon, other than maybe Robert McNamara” (Weisskopf interview).<sup>17</sup> The American Left had long pushed for normalization of American-Chinese relations. In this spirit, the CCAS’ book on their 1971 trip was prefaced with a quote from their interview with Zhou Enlai which stresses the promotion of the “normalization and improvement of the relations between the two countries” (CCAS, 1972, Preface). But with hindsight, rapprochement was the beginning of China’s retreat from Maoism, the very model that had excited many on the Left in the U.S. It seems that as part of the larger diplomatic effort towards regularization of relations, the Chinese first invited those whom they saw as ‘friends of China’ and who could be expected to spread positive messages about Maoist achievements. In that regard, FFDARPE was just “one small hole in the dyke” (Garlin interview).

Looking back, Riskin (interview) identifies 1976 as a watershed: chairman Mao Zedong, the P.R.C.’s first premier Zhou Enlai, and the great leader of the Red Army, Zhu De, all died that year; the Great Tangshan Earthquake destroyed significant parts of China’s industrial base<sup>18</sup>; and the Gang of Four who had led the Cultural Revolution were arrested. Subsequently, the Cultural Revolution policies were denounced as grave mistakes and the Gang of Four accused of having attempted to undermine the foundations of Chinese socialism and to subvert the dictatorship of the proletariat. Even the model brigade Dazhai, which had served as example for the communes that had so greatly impressed FFDARPE, was denounced as “ultra-left” (Maxwell, 1979, p. 2). This had almost immediate repercussions with Western intellectual Maoists. Charles Bettelheim, a leading figure of the Maoist movement in France, resigned as president of the Franco-Chinese Friendship Association in May 1977. His resignation letter, published in the MR (Bettelheim, 1978a), set the tone for the Western Maoists’ disappointment with the Chinese reform leadership’s alleged revisionism even before Deng Xiaoping’s official rehabilitation and ascent to power (Sigel, 1982, 55). When challenged on his propositions, Bettelheim responded with a 93-page long rebuttal titled “The Great Leap Backward” which analysed a great amount of Chinese sources to demonstrate that with the return of the ‘capitalist roaders’ China had set foot on a path of transition to capitalism (Bettelheim, 1978b).

But most members of FFDARPE were not as dedicated Maoists as Bettelheim and they were less invested in China’s path into the future. For them disillusionment prevailed over disappointment. When the end of the Cultural Revolution became known and China was moving away from the high ideals of late-Maoism many American scholars on the Left simply lost interest in China. As Wachtel (interview) remarks, “I lost interest in China when Deng Xiaoping reorganised the system, China did no longer seem to provide an alternative”. Any sense that Maoist China could serve as a model for a socialist alternative vanished when the brutal reality of the Cultural Revolution became more widely known. Weisskopf (interview) explains, when they went to China “we had no way to understand the horrors of the CR and were quite oblivious to that”. Garlin (interview), when asked about his disillusionment with Maoism, recalls how he learned in conversations with Nancy and David Milton about the realities of the Cultural Revolution. The Miltons had experienced the high-days of the Cultural Revolution when they lived in China (1964-1969).<sup>19</sup> The more general conclusion Garlin drew from his engagement with China was that the pursuit of laudable revolutionary goals was bound to be excessive, this was the case with Robespierre, Stalin and Mao.

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<sup>17</sup> Ironically, McNamara, too, came to play a critical role as president of the World Bank when China joined the bank in 1980 (Lim, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> The earthquake in Tangshan is considered one of the deadliest natural disasters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and took an estimated 242,769 lives (Sheng, 1987),

<sup>19</sup> They also published a book on the Cultural Revolution (Milton & Milton, 1976).

The traction of the idea of Maoism as a socialist alternative was finally finished for most when the death toll of the Great Famine (1959-1961), currently estimated at between 15 and 45 million people (Wemheuer, 2014, p. 12), was acknowledged by the Chinese leadership. Riskin (interview) recalls the famine to have been the “single most important event that affected [his] perception of Maoism”. The West had been vastly ignorant about the severe hunger in China following the Great Leap Forward. Joseph Alsop, a journalist, had early put forward in the pages of *China Quarterly* the proposition that China was suffering from ‘creeping starvation’ and ‘persistent under-nourishment’ which brought China beyond the brink of famine in a ‘descending spiral’ (Alsop, 1962, pp. 21, 24). But he had been challenged by some of the most prominent mainstream scholars of China such as Alexander Eckstein (Eckstein et al., 1962). By the early 1980s however, on top of the knowledge of the political violence of the Cultural Revolution, the assessment of Maoist development as economically successful was fundamentally questioned. One of China’s most famous economists, Sun Yefang, released mortality statistics in a provincial journal in 1981. Sun concluded that China had paid “a high price in blood” for the economic policies of the Great Leap (Sen, 1994, p. 224). The Maoist development approach had held the promise of combining the political ideals of participation, emancipation, and egalitarianism with an economic progress superior to the capitalist path. Most of America’s radical economists now reached the conclusion that the Maoist politics were much worse than imagined while the economic track record was at best mixed.

Only those economists who were professional China scholars continued to work on China but had to deal with a complicated relationship with their subject of study. From FFDARPE, the China scholars were Lippit and Riskin. Lippit actively distanced himself from the Cultural Revolution and argued it “was anything but utopian” (Selden & Lippit, 1982, p. 22). But he simultaneously cautioned against the ramifications of capitalist tendencies in the new Chinese reforms for the prospects of socialist development (ibid., p. 23). He was thus left merely with a stance of critique towards China. Riskin (interview) acknowledges that the disillusionment resulted for him in an “emotional withdrawal”. Earlier, he had experienced great involvement when he thought he was on to something of greater historical significance with his work on China. But subsequently his research was primarily a professional academic endeavor.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has conducted a case study of the FFDARPE as an important event in the American radical economists’ fascination with Mao’s China during the Cultural Revolution. The guiding question was what insights could be gleaned about the engagement with Chinese Maoism by American radical political economists from the documentation of their experiences during the trip as well as their subsequent reflections. Based on interviews, recent memoirs, and contemporary documentations we have shed new light on three issues, and identify an open research question.

First, we have traced how political economists’ own ideas intersected and conflicted with their perception of the Maoist practice around issues key to American Leftists. The FFDARPE members and the New Left more broadly pinned varying degrees of hopes on China from afar. Especially for the developing world, aspects of China’s model promised a viable socialist alternative. For most, seeing really existing Maoism for themselves reinforced rather than shattered these hopes. Their observations of Chinese public health provision, the absence of crude sexism, the collective achievements in the model communes, and what appeared as modern, safe and socialist coal mining resonated with their own political ideals. Some critical observations concerned the lingering gender inequality higher up in the political hierarchy, the apparent lack of economic research and scientific planning, and a certain monotony. The most unsettling experience was to face the reality of a May Seven Cadres School, a



camp for re-education by physical labour and ideological training. But overall the message they brought home was that “China works”. This was in fact in line with the judgment of various contemporary American China travellers of diverse political orientations.

Second, we have analysed the FFDARPE interaction with ‘economic workers’ in late Maoism to draw out the divergence in their stance on the role for economic expertise. Mao at the time pursued the slogan ‘politics in command’ and proclaimed the primacy of a revolution in the relations of production over an advancement of the forces of production. The eminently Marxist view and key tenet of historical materialism that the forces of production require economic analysis was rejected by Mao and the left faction during the Cultural Revolution, and economics as an academic discipline was discredited. Consequently, when the FFDARPE visited Peking University and Fudan University they did not get to meet China’s great economists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and found little economic research to speak of. This abandonment of economics under late Maoism contrasted sharply with URPE’s mission which was to create a radical political alternative to neoclassical mainstream economics not to abolish the discipline. The FFDARPE academics were concerned scholars who travelled to China to collect basic economic data as the foundation for economic research and to see the reality of the Maoist model for themselves.

Third, we situated the FFDARPE in the larger process of normalization in Sino-U.S relations. We observed that their enthusiasm about China was shared by other less radical visitors that increasingly poured in after the FFDARPE, China’s song seemed to be sung by a surprising range of American visitors. But after Mao’s death in 1976, the reform leadership distanced themselves from late-Maoism, and the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution and the calamities of the Great Leap Forward became gradually known. Simultaneously, the new leadership under Deng Xiaoping tread a path that seemed more compatible with Western capitalism as China’s emphasis shifted from aiming for a continuous revolution of the relations of production to one on building up the forces of production by whatever means it would take. This resulted in a pragmatic reform approach of ‘groping for stones to cross the river’ and brought economics back centre stage in defining China’s path (Riskin, 1987, 163-4; Weber, 2019). While American radical economists might have found more common ground with Chinese economics in the 1980s, the muddled search of the early years of reform did not lend itself to serve as an inspiring paradigm. Many economists on the Left lost interest in China just when economics was reinstated as a primary tool of governance. The double blow of the disenchantment with Maoism and the reform agenda of the new leadership had led to a deep disillusionment with China on the Left.

It is an open question for research to what extent this disillusionment with China played a role in the American Left’s turn away from the search for a socialist alternative and towards a critique of capitalism and neoliberalism. Certainly, some FFDARPE members narrate their intellectual biographies in ways that suggest the disillusionment with China was a turning point. The New Left had started as reaction to the disillusionment with the Old Left in support of the Soviet Union and was to some extent driven by the hopes projected on Maoism. The loss of the Maoist alternative just precedes the American left economists’ shift from their concern with the Third World to more domestic issues and the withdrawal to a critique of capitalism rather than aiming to devise economic expertise for a future society.<sup>20</sup> What is relatively clear with hindsight, however, is the impact on Left scholarship on China: If China was subsequently researched by American left scholars, it was increasingly in a mode of critiquing the rise of capitalism.

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<sup>20</sup> There was also some convergence with parts of an increasingly diverse ‘mainstream’ of economics (Reich, 1993; Weisskopf, 2014).

**Interviews (all held in 2018):**

Garlin interview. *Interview with Victor Garlin*, April 20, 2018.

Riskin interview. *Interview with Carl Riskin*, April 10, 2018.

Wachtel interview. *Interview with Howard Wachtel*, April 12, 2018.

Weisskopf interview. *Interview with Tom Weisskopf*, March 27, 2018.

Zaccone interview. *Interview with June Zaccone (answers via email)*, April 8, 2018.

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