In Memoriam

Thomas W. Robinson (1935–2006)

Harry Harding, Steven Levine and David Shambaugh

Thomas W. Robinson was born on 9 February 1935 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and passed away on 13 June 2006 in Arlington, Virginia. His passing robs the China field of another of its senior members and contributors.

The Early Years

Tom was raised in a close-knit, church-going, middle-class family in Wisconsin. His strong Midwestern roots were evident throughout his life. Early on he acquired his love of nature and the world of ideas – two lifelong attributes. A man of many talents, he was both musical and athletic – playing the piano and starring on his high school basketball team. He had an affinity for foreign languages – mastering German, Russian, Chinese, and acquiring some Korean. He was incredibly wide-read, and this was reflected in his scholarship. His erudition began with literature in his youth, science and philosophy in college, international affairs and social science in graduate school, history and biography in adulthood. A childhood bout with mumps left Tom deaf in one ear, self-conscious about his disability, and chary of close personal contacts (a trait easily mistaken for aloofness). In reality, he was sociable, extremely warm and solicitous of his friends and family. He cherished intellectual and social engagement with his academic and professional colleagues.

At Carleton College, his alma mater which he so loved, Tom excelled academically, athletically, and socially. Not an ivory tower intellectual, Tom supported himself at college and graduate school by driving trucks in New York, working in a South Chicago steel mill, and returning to Green Bay for a variety of odd jobs during summers.

Tom's interest in international affairs began to develop in his third and fourth undergraduate years at Carleton. The key intellectual turning point occurred during his junior year, when he spotted a flyer in the student union for an organization called SPAN (Student Project for Amity Among Nations), which he recalled had been established by a group of "idealistic veterans" of World War II. With a US$1,000 stipend from SPAN, plus travel expenses, Tom spent the summer between his junior and senior years in Europe, doing a project on the formation of EURATOM, a project which drew on his background in physics, but linked it to the study of international relations. As part of the project, he had the opportunity to interview both Jean Monnet

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and Paul-Henri Spaak, a quite unusual opportunity for an undergraduate student from the United States. Tom also had the opportunity to witness the Bastille Day parade in Paris that summer. It was then that he saw a sign attached to a tourist bus written in what he later learned was Russian. This was, he later said, the first time that he learned that languages could be written in anything but the Latin alphabet. This particular experience marked the beginning of his interest in Russia, just as the summer trip to Europe more generally was his first real exposure to the outside world and to the study of international affairs.

After graduation, to pursue his growing interest in international affairs, but also to earn a deferment from the military draft, he applied to Columbia University for a PhD. In his early years at Columbia he took courses on international politics with (among others) Roger Hilsman, Leland Goodrich and Phillip Jessup. He also began the study of Russian. He favourably impressed key members of the faculty, including William T. R. Fox who asked him to serve as *rapporteur* for the University Seminar on War, and Zbigniew Brezinski who invited him to serve as a student member of his "Orbit Seminar," which examined the situation of countries within the Soviet orbit.

At this juncture, Tom began to explore various forms of government service. He passed the Foreign Service examination, but decided not to join the State Department. He explored a position with the CIA, but this particular opening would have required pilot training, for which he was physically disqualified because of his partial deafness. Ultimately, he entered an Army Intelligence reserve unit located in the New York area, which had the advantage of allowing him to fulfil his military service while continuing to work on his PhD at Columbia. In need of additional financial support, Tom learned that the National Defense Foreign Language programme was offering generous fellowships for students willing to tackle Chinese. He therefore took three years of academic coursework in Chinese at Columbia, with additional language study in the intervening summers, including some time spent at the Union Research Institute in Hong Kong.

Combining his new interest in China with his earlier interest in Russia, Tom now began planning a doctoral dissertation on Sino-Soviet relations. His original plan was to write a thesis on how international relations theory might explain the evolution of the relationship, from alliance to enmity, but as he later explained, "I never got beyond Hans Morgenthau." So what began as a thesis on the relationship between China and the USSR ultimately became a lengthy exegesis and critique of Morgenthau's theories of international politics.

Professional Scholarly Contributions

Thomas Robinson started his professional career at the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, California from 1965 to 1972. He

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began his work at Rand before completing his doctoral training at Columbia, but when Donald Zagoria's position at Rand came open, Tom's PhD supervisor at Columbia (Zbigniew Brzezinski) urged him to apply for it. The dilemma was that his PhD dissertation still needed to be written, and the danger loomed that beginning full-time work (no matter the golden opportunity) would derail his thesis writing. The dilemma was resolved when Brzezinski helped Tom negotiate with Rand to spend the first two years on salary while completing his dissertation.[1]

While at Rand Tom worked alongside several other budding China scholars of his generation – including Tom Gottlieb, Harry Harding, Kenneth Lieberthal and Michael Pillsbury[2] – and more senior Sinologists such as Alice Langley Hsieh and Allen Whiting. There was a similar stellar complement of Soviet specialists, defence experts, intelligence analysts and other components of what became the intellectual epicentre of the military-industrial complex. Rand was a very fertile research environment in those days, and this group collectively produced some path-breaking studies on different aspects of China's domestic politics, military posture and foreign relations.

At Rand Tom found himself embroiled in the charged international and domestic environment of the era, in which several intense and momentous events raged simultaneously: the Vietnam War, China's Cultural Revolution, the escalation of Sino-Soviet hostilities; the strategic opening between China and the United States; and the formation of the Sino-Soviet-American "strategic triangle." Characteristically, Tom dove headlong into researching all of these complex events. In the short space of six years he produced major analyses of each. These included extended political biographies of Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao,[3] studies that reflected his broader interest in Chinese communist elite politics,[4] and the Cultural Revolution (on which he edited a major book).[5] He also explored China's approach to the Vietnam conflict,[6] and its revolutionary diplomacy in the developing world.[7]

1. Discussion with Thomas Robinson, April 16, 2006.

2. Most of these individuals were part-time staff, conducting summer research projects during their Ph.D. programs.

3. *Zhou Enlai in China's Cultural Revolution* (Rand Report RM-6207, 1966); *Lin Biao, Part I: 1907–1949* (Rand Report R-526-PR, 1970); *Lin Biao, Part II: 1950–1971* (Rand draft manuscript, 1971).

4. *The Chinese Communist Politburo and Its Operational Code* (ONR Report, 1967).

5. *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Also see "The Wuhan Incident: Local Strife and Political Rebellion During the Cultural Revolution," *The China Quarterly* (September 1971).

6. "Lin Biao on People's War: China Takes a Second Look at Vietnam" (Rand Report RM-4814-PR, 1966); "Protracted War or Negotiations Now: Some Thoughts on China's Changing Vietnam Strategy" (Rand Report D-15063-PR, 1966).

7. "China's Revolutionary Strategy in the Developing World: The Failures of Success" (Rand Report P-4169, 1969).

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As the Sino-Soviet schism intensified in 1968–69, Tom was well-positioned to become one of the nation's leading experts on the subject. He was able to bring to bear his training at Columbia in both Soviet and Chinese communist politics, as well as his Russian and Chinese linguistic abilities. He produced some significant analyses during the nadir of the conflict,[8] including a landmark analysis on the 1969 border clashes that was published as the lead article in the *American Political Science Review*.[9]

In the wake of the Sino-American *rapprochement*, Tom increasingly turned his attention to the implications for great power relations among the US, PRC and USSR. Here too he was able to bring his training and strengths to bear on pressing policy issues of the era. It was not only Tom's background in realist IR theory and interest in great power interactions, but his expertise in political science methodologies, such as game theory and quantitative analysis, that he brought to bear on the subject. Drawing on his training as a mathematics and physics major at Carleton College, Tom was able to bring his earlier training in quantitative analysis to bear on the "strategic triangle."[10] As Tom later reflected "I believe that a solid course in physics plus calculus and analytic geometry form the basis – along with logic itself – for rational thought in any field. This base carried me far, and my research and writing are, I believe, much better for this background."[11] This came at a time when the "behavioural revolution" was beginning to sweep the social sciences in he Untied States, and Tom was one of the few armed with the requisite training to bring such methods to bear on communist area studies topics.[12] He also co-authored with Nazli Choucri a widely-used text on *Forecasting in International Relations*.[13]

Tom left Rand in 1972 to become a Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, where he chaired a study group on China's foreign relations. At the conclusion of his fellowship in 1974, Tom faced another crucial career choice. He had two opportunities to join the government: one as head of research for the Peace Corps, the

8. "A National Interest Analysis of Sino-Soviet Relations" (Rand Report P-3318, 1967); "The Role of Systems Theory in Communist Orbit Studies" *International Studies Quarterly* (December 1969).

9. "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review* (December 1972).

10. "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict and the Future of Sino-Soviet-American Relations" (Rand Report P-4661, 1971); "The View From Peking: Chinese Interests and Policies Towards the United States, the Soviet Union, and Japan," *Pacific Affairs* (Fall 1972); *China in a Tripolar World*, op cit; "Soviet Policy in East Asia," *Problems of Communism* (November-December 1973).

11. Thomas W. Robinson, "Draft Memoirs," (Fall 2005).

12. "Game Theory and Politics: Some Soviet Views," (Rand Report RM-5839-PR), 1979); "China Data Retrieval: A Method of Computer-Assisted Indexing of English Language Series Translations of Mainland Chinese Material" (Rand Report RM-6332-PR, 1970); "Scholarly Research and Policy Relevance: The Cases of Quantitative International Relations and International Law," (Rand Report P-4622, 1971).

13. Thomas W. Robinson and Nazli Choucri (eds.), *Forecasting in International Relations* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1978).

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other as head of the White House Fellows program. He turned both of them down, despite their relatively non-partisan and apolitical character, because of his discomfort with the policies of the Nixon Administration. He therefore explored several academic opportunities, and ultimately decided to take up a position at the University of Washington, where he served as an assistant professor from 1974 to 1977. Among the highlights of this period of his career was his role in organizing the first University of Washington faculty delegation to China, which visited that country in 1976. But overall, it was a difficult period in Tom's life, which he attributed to deep political divisions within the UW faculty, exacerbated by familiar academic disputes between the area studies programmes and the disciplinary departments.

After Seattle, Tom moved to Washington, DC and continued his teaching career at several local universities, becoming Professor of International Relations at the National War College (1977–81), Sun Yat-sen Professor of Chinese Studies at Georgetown University (1981–84), Chair of the Asian and China Studies Courses at the Foreign Service Institute (1983–2000), and part-time faculty member in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University (1992–95). He ultimately retired from teaching in 2000, at the age of 65.

During his long period of residence in Washington, Tom was struck by the lack of opportunities for specialists on China to meet informally to discuss topics of mutual interest. So, together with Wendy Frieman, they established the "Jiaozi Club" – a series of informal lecture-discussions held over dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Arlington, Virginia. (The Jiaozi Club was took its name from a similar series on Japan known as the "Sushi Club," and there was soon created a similar series on Korea, naturally called the "Kimchi Club.") This reflected Tom's deeply held conviction that academic and policy research should involve a true community of scholars, and that this community should be open to all, regardless of institution or position.

14. "Sino-Soviet Competition in Asia," in Douglas Stuart and William Tow (eds.), *China, the Soviet Union, and the West: Strategic and Political Dimensions for the 1980s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981); "American Policy Toward the Soviet Union and China in Asia," in Young C. Kim and Gaston Sigur (eds.), *The United States, Japan, and Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1982); "China's New Dynamism in the Strategic Triangle," *Current History* (September 1983); "American Policies in the Strategic Triangle," in Richard Melanson (ed.), *Neither Cold War Nor Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the 1980s* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1983); "The United States and China in the New Asian Balance of Power," *Current History* (September 1985); "On the Future of the Strategic Triangle," in Ilpyong J. Kim (ed.), *The Strategic Triangle* (New York: Paragon House, 1987); "Triple Détente? The Strategic Triangle in the Late Twentieth Century," in Jane Shapiro Zacek (ed.), *The Gorbachev Generation: Issues in Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York: Paragon House, 1988); "China Confronts the Soviet Union: Warfare and Diplomacy on China's Inner Asian Frontiers," in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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During his years in Washington, DC, Tom's publications reflected several thrusts—some familiar, some new. While continuing to publish on the strategic triangle,[14] Tom began to branch out into three new subject areas: the politics of the Korean peninsula,[15] Soviet influence in Asia,[16] and China's military modernization.[17]

In the penultimate phase of his career, during his time as Director of Asian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (1988–93), Tom's writings began to reflect even newer interests in East Asian democratization,[18] and China–Taiwan relations.[19] This period also saw Tom's joint editing of a major textbook on China's foreign relations.[20]

In the final phase of his career (1993–2006), during which he established and directed his own consulting firm, American Asian Research Enterprises, Tom's publications dropped off – perhaps because he was concentrating on government-related contract work – although he remained very active in the Washington area scholarly and policy community. His final scholarly publication was an appropriate reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet hostilities and border

15. "South Korean Political Development in the 1980s" (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1983); "How the Changing Asian International Environment may Influence Korean-American Security Requirements During the 1980s and Beyond," in Han Sung-joo (ed.), *U.S.-Korea Security Cooperation: Retrospect and Prospect* (Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, 1983); "Korea 2000: The Political Component," in Han Sung-joo and Robert Myers (eds.), *Korea: The Year 2000* (New York: University Press of America, 1987).

16. "On Soviet Asian Policy," in Robert Donaldson (ed.), *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Success and Failure* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980); "The Soviet Union in Asia," *Asian Survey* (January 1981); "The Soviet Union and Asia in 1981," *Asian Survey* (January 1982); "What Policies Should the United States Adopt to Counter the Soviet Military Threat to Northeast Asia?" *Asian Perspectives* (Spring-Summer 1983); "The Soviet View of the Strategic Triangle circa 1990," in William J. Taylor *et al.* (eds.), *Strategic Responses to Conflict in the 1980s* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1984); "Soviet Policy in Asia: The Military Dimension," in Robin F. Laird (ed.), *Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York: Academy of Political Science, 1987); "The Soviet Union and the Asia-Pacific," (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, 1987); "Japan and the Soviet Union," in Stephen P. Gilbert (ed.), *Security in Northeast Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988); "The Soviet Union and East Asia" in Roger Kenet and Edwad Kolodzieg (eds.), *The Limits of Soviet Power in the Developing World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); "Asian-Russian Relations in Asia: Cooperation or Competition?" *American Asian Review* (Fall 1990).

17. "Should the U.S Proceed with Military Ties with China?" U.S. Congress Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *The Implications of U.S.-China Military Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981); "Chinese Military Modernization in the 1980s," *The China Quarterly* (Spring 1982); "Boosting China's Military: Lessons for Washington," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 13, 1985; "China's Military Modernization: Can the United States Influence the Outcome?" *The World and I* (September 1986);

18. Thomas W. Robinson (ed.), *Democracy an Development in East Asia* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1991)

19. "Beijing-Taipei Relations Approaching the Year 2000," in Denis F. Simon and Michael Y.M. Kau (eds.), *Taiwan: Beyond the Economic Miracle* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992); "Domestic and International Determinants of Chinese Reunification," in Yung Wei (ed.), *Journal of East Asian Studies* (1992); Thomas W. Robinson and Zhiling Lin (eds.), *The Chinese and Their Future: Beijing, Taipei, and Hong Kong* Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1992).

20. Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh (eds.), *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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clashes of 1969 (probably the single topic for which Tom will be most remembered), but based on newly emergent historiographies and archival sources from China and Russia.[21]

In sum, Thomas W. Robinson's scholarly contributions to the contemporary China and Asian studies fields were significant. He was one of the leading lights of his generation, a generation of impressive scholarship. He will probably remain best known for his studies of Sino-Soviet relations, Asian international relations, and Chinese foreign policy – but a careful reading of his intellectual evolution and publications above reveals a lively intellect whose research and intellectual interests were even more wide-ranging than many of his contemporaries.

Indeed what set Tom apart from almost all others in his professional cohort was his breadth of interests and expertise pertaining to China, the international politics of Asia, comparative communism, and international relations theory. Most who worked on China in those days (as today) chose to concentrate on one or the other side of the domestic/foreign policy dyad, and few ranged beyond China to develop serious competence in Northeast and Southeast Asian affairs, as well as the former Soviet Union. Only a handful – including Allen Whiting, Robert Scalapino, Donald Zagoria and Harold Hinton – ranged so widely. Tom belonged in this Pantheon.

Tom also had a longstanding interest in political philosophy and theories and methodologies of the social sciences. He took comparative politics and international relations theory seriously, and regularly sought to situate China in a larger milieu. He was far more than an area specialist, and he rejected the view that China was *sui generis*. While interested in macro processes, such as modernization theory and the evolution of communist states, Tom rejected any form of theoretical or historical determinism. His *Weltanschuaang* was quite eclectic – drawing bits and pieces of theory, history and data from a variety of sources. His intellectual breadth was, in fact, something of a handicap, as he sometimes had difficulty distilling the essence of a situation. He saw international relations as inherently complex, and this required, in his view, multi-theoretical approaches and multivariate explanations. His broad-gauged reading often resulted in his including mammoth footnotes – sometimes occupying more space on the page than the text of his article – because he felt compelled to reference everything he had read on the subject. These mini-bibliographies guided readers to the relevant secondary literature on the subject.

Tom's preferred genre was the academic article or book chapter rather than the scholarly monograph, although he wrote several

21. "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades later," in Mark A. Ryan, David Finkelstein, and Michael McDevitt (eds.), *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

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book-length manuscripts that were never published.[22] In total, his scholarly production included eight edited or co-edited volumes and over 100 articles, book chapters, and reports.

Tom was also a natural Socratic teacher, combining an insatiable curiosity with an unusual degree of patience for those who lacked his ability to see the Big Picture in all its complexity (sometimes he saw too much complexity). He believed in the educability of all those who came within his gravitational pull – from undergraduates at the University of Washington, to graduate students at Georgetown and George Washington, to senior military officers at the National War College, to interns at the American Enterprise Institute, and the many government officials who took his courses at the Foreign Service Institute. He encouraged everyone to examine their premises, to think, to question, and to enlarge their intellectual horizons.

Tom rarely let slip an opportunity to learn from those around him, and he often challenged those around him. At a small private luncheon at the Cosmos Club in Washington in the mid-1980s honouring Chen Yuan, then deputy head of the People's Bank of China, Tom relentlessly queried his guest about how he could reconcile market-oriented changes in the Chinese economy with orthodox communist doctrine. After letting his subordinates field the first few questions, the exasperated banker (and son of Chinese leader Chen Yun) finished a mouthful of Porterhouse steak and abruptly ended the conversation: "Professor Robinson, we are the Communists, not you, and we will decide what Communism is without your help, thank you very much."

Personal Life

Tom was married twice, first to Joan Robinson with whom he had two children – Katya and David – and then to Youngshin Yoo, his widow and mother of their younger son Aaron (currently an undergraduate at Tom's alma mater Carleton College).

Thomas Robinson was a man of deep religious conviction. A devoted parishioner, he personified the ethical norms of his faith and quietly lived the life of a good Christian. He volunteered at the local soup kitchen, gave shelter to the homeless, and taught and counselled fellow parishioners. His was a perpetually questioning faith that sought answers to the eternal questions. He was particularly interested in the connections between Judaism and Christianity, and requested that elements from both religions be included in his memorial service.

Tom had an extraordinarily wide range of hobbies. He had a life-long love of astronomy, reinforced by majoring in physics at Carleton,

22. These include his Ph.D. dissertation *Hans J. Morgenthau's Theory of International Relations* (Columbia University 1969); *Zhou Enlai in China's Cultural Revolution*, op. cit; *Lin Biao, Parts I and II*, op. cit.; *China in a Tripolar World* (Council on Foreign Relations, 1974).

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and he saw a connection between astronomy and his strong religious faith. "When you look into a telescope," he said, "you see the universe. You can see evidence of the 'Big Bang,' and thus perhaps the evidence of God." He was particularly proud of his collections of Russian samovars, Ming-style Chinese furniture, and library collection. But the possession that gave him the greatest pride and joy was his 1962 Mark II 3.8 Jaguar, which he bought used in 1967 and maintained in pristine condition thereafter.

Toward the end of his life, although he maintained his strong interest in international affairs, his intellectual interests ranged ever more widely. It was as if, sensing the approaching end of his own time on earth, he wanted to learn as much as he could about the universe whose mysteries delighted and confounded him to the very end.

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