

Robin Munro, 1952-2021

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Robin Munro, human rights scholar and activist, and the author of pathbreaking studies of human rights abuses in China, passed away peacefully of complications from illness on May 19, 2021.

I

Robin was born in London on June 1, 1952, a brother to 4-year-old Sandra. He had a peripatetic childhood. His father Sandy was at the time a lecturer at King's College London in physiology. When Sandy decided to study medicine, he and Robin's mother, Ailie, sent Robin and Sandra in 1955 to live in Aberdeen for a year with their paternal grandparents and other extended family members, so that Sandy could better focus on his studies. It was a difficult time for both Robin and Sandra, despite the warm care they received, and was the beginning of a special closeness and love between them that lasted all of Robin's life.

After his return from Aberdeen, Robin lived in London until 1958, when his father, who had always wanted to return to Scotland, took up a lectureship at the Veterinarian School at Glasgow University. In Glasgow, Robin went to Hillhead High School, where he flourished academically and personally. In 1962, however, his parents split up and his father moved to Edinburgh. After about a year, Robin asked if he could live with his father because he felt sorry for him and wished to support him, and with the consent of his mother went off to Edinburgh. This move, however, had an unhappy outcome; his father was in an emotionally unstable state and Robin was under unbearable pressure. Nevertheless, he managed to do well academically at George Watson's College and got the necessary qualifications to enter Edinburgh University in 1969.

Like many young people in that era, Robin tried a number of things. His first chosen subject at university was psychology, but neither the subject nor university life appealed to him and he left before the end of the year. He later returned for a second year to study a different subject, but—fortunately for the human rights community—still felt he had made the wrong choice. At some point during his time in Edinburgh, he worked as a bus driver, a job he was proud of and always put in his CV, in addition to regaling friends with tales of Scotsmen on public transportation.

He eventually left Edinburgh again and went traveling around Europe, living rough and eventually settling into a hippie commune in Formentera. New Age dietary practices proved less than salutary for him—he would later wonder with amazement that he had ever thought it a good idea to eat uncooked brown rice at one point, with predictable and unpleasant consequences—and he fell ill,

appearing gaunt and unhealthy when he showed up again in London around 1974.

By this time, he was ready to go back to university, and now he wanted to study Chinese. Could it have been family history? His mother had been born in Swatow in 1918 to missionary parents, as had her mother. His mother's parents stayed in China until 1925, when they felt the political situation was too dangerous and returned to Edinburgh to live. Robin always denied the connection to family members, and rarely if ever mentioned it to friends. Perhaps it was a youthful Marxism—although if, like many of a similar political disposition at that time, he thought of China as a potential model Marxist society, that view did not survive his first few months in China.

Regardless of the motivation, the subject worked for Robin. He was very happy with Chinese, and graduated with First-Class Honours from the University of Edinburgh.

In 1977, Robin went to China for two years as part of a China-UK student exchange program, and there mixed happily with a cosmopolitan group of foreign and Chinese students. That period proved to be a critical turning point in modern Chinese history: Mao Zedong had died just a year before Robin's arrival, and the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping, the pathbreaking 3rd Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, and the rise and eventual crushing of the Democracy Wall all took place while Robin was there. Robin was fully alert to the significance of events as they happened, collecting documents and talking to as many people as he could.

During the 1977-78 academic year, he was at Peking University, where foreign students roomed with the last group of worker-peasant-soldier students to attend Chinese universities. (At the same time, another worker-peasant-soldier student, Xi Jinping, was just down the road at Tsinghua University.) Robin elected to take classes in philosophy, which at the time meant stultifyingly dreary lectures on the intricacies of dialectical materialism, read word for word from a textbook.

The following year at Nanjing University, he shared a dormitory with the first group of students to attend university after the post-Cultural Revolution restoration of the college entrance examination: the famous Class of '77. (Although the Chinese students actually began their studies in the spring of 1978, the class is named after the academic year in which it began its studies.) It was quite a contrast. The classes were quite a contrast as well, with real intellectual content. There he studied modern Chinese history, learning about 19th-century secret societies and the Taiping Rebellion from the renowned scholar Cai Shaoqing.

Robin's time in China shaped the rest of his life decisively. Observing the political ferment, recognizing the special moment in history, collecting documentation, watching the Democracy Wall go up and then come down—all this turned him into a lifelong activist (or perhaps simply solidified an existing predisposition in this lapsed Marxist and ex-bus driver) who felt the suffering of others, waded through mountains of documentation to expose the individual and institutional perpetrators, and did not blink when his help was needed to get people and documents out of China.

After leaving China in 1979, Robin returned to London, where he began working for Amnesty International. While at Amnesty, he laboriously researched

and wrote a report on rehabilitation through labor (*laodong jiaoyang* 劳动教养) in China, a form of administrative punishment that despite its innocuous label involved detention in a camp for years with virtually no meaningful procedural safeguards. But upon handing over the draft, he was told that Amnesty did not work on administrative detention; that it was 'outside the mandate.' It still rankled decades later.

While in London, Robin also amused himself and others with a regular column called 'Monkey Business' in *China Now*, the journal of the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (or SACU, which Robin sometimes referred to as the Society for Accepting China Uncritically). The column typically consisted of translations of, and commentary on, items in the Chinese press that tickled Robin's fancy, such as advertisements for male cosmetics or breast-enlarging machines guaranteed to turn around one's social life,¹ or an account of how Jiang Qing tried to stir up nationalist fervor by seeing a grave insult in a gift of glass snails to a Chinese delegation visiting abroad.²

In about 1987, Robin moved to New York to work for Human Rights Watch. The move proved fortuitous, because it was there that he met Pao-lien Huang, then an aspiring Taiwanese writer and now the well-known author of some sixteen books of fiction and non-fiction, including five published in mainland China. She became his lifelong partner and wife, the serene rock to which his happiness was forever firmly anchored.

In 1989, he moved with Pao-lien to Hong Kong to work as the principal China researcher and director of the Hong Kong office of Human Rights Watch. A major event in Robin's life occurred in May and June of that year, when he was in Beijing for the Tiananmen Square protests and the subsequent June 4th massacre. After almost all journalists and other foreign observers had prudently left the scene, he stayed in the Square for the entire period from the evening of June 3rd until the morning of June 4th, writing a key eyewitness account.³ This account made the important point that it was not in fact students who were massacred in the Square, but rather the citizens of Beijing—the *laobaixing* (老百姓)—who were supporting the students in the streets outside the Square and were slaughtered there. As he wrote,

insisting on factual precision is not just a matter of splitting hairs. For the geography of the killing reveals much about the government's cold political logic and its choice of targets [...] [T]he students and the intellectuals would, by and large, be spared. The *laobaixing*, on the other hand, would be mercilessly punished in order to eradicate organized popular unrest for a generation.

It was during his time at Human Rights Watch that Robin researched and wrote some of his most important work. In 1994, he was already writing about

¹ Munro, Robin (1988) 'Monkey Business' (125) *China Now* 38-39, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/P3R2-V3FA>>.

² Munro, Robin (1987) 'Monkey Business' (121) *China Now* 38-39, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/5YN4-NAXX>>.

³ Munro, Robin (1990) 'Who Died in Beijing, and Why' *The Nation*, June 11, at 811-21, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/84HT-XP2D>>.

organ harvesting in *Organ Procurement and Judicial Execution in China*.⁴ In 1996, he wrote, together with Jeff Rigsby, *Death by Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State Orphanages*.⁵ In 2000—after leaving Human Rights Watch, but based on research he conducted while there—he published *Judicial Psychiatry in China and Its Political Abuses*.⁶ All of these works constituted the first serious and scholarly examination of the problems they addressed.

Doing China-related human rights work takes a heavy toll. In addition to his day job of writing the meticulously researched reports on human rights abuses that constitute the gold standard in the field, he undertook a tremendous amount of individual casework, helping countless democracy activists escape from China to safety. Individual cases are extraordinarily time-consuming and emotionally draining, but he never hesitated to move heaven and earth for those who needed his help. He relentlessly lobbied diplomats so that they would give humanitarian visas and refugee status to individuals. Some people fleeing the post-June 4th crackdown literally showed up at Robin and Pao-lien's doorstep and spent weeks at their place, being fed and accommodated by Pao-lien while Robin tried to find solutions for them.

Thus it was that after several years at Human Rights Watch, Robin was exhausted. Having accumulated an immense amount of material and needing to do something different, he decided to pursue a doctoral degree, and in 1999 entered the Law Department of the School of Oriental & African Studies of the University of London as the Sir Joseph Hotung Senior Research Fellow, where he continued his work on psychiatric abuse in China. This work culminated in his 2005 doctoral dissertation,⁷ published a year later in book form as *China's Psychiatric Inquisition: Dissent, Psychiatry and the Law in Post-1949 China*.⁸

In 2003, Robin went to Hong Kong to join China Labour Bulletin, a labor rights organization founded by Han Dongfang, a railway worker and labor activist Robin had met in 1989 in Beijing. Han had been imprisoned in China for his activities—and not just imprisoned, but held in a cell shared with tuberculosis sufferers, with the evident intention of causing him to become infected. This duly occurred, and he would likely have died—he lost a lung—without Robin's superhuman efforts to get him released and out of China.

The next year, Robin and Pao-lien were married. They lived in a few places in Hong Kong, but their friends best remember their house and hospitality on Lamma Island. Robin's commute often involved him arriving at the pier seconds before the ferry was to depart. He liked living on the edge.

⁴ Munro, Robin (1994) *China: Organ Procurement and Judicial Execution in China* Human Rights Watch/Asia, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/QE5S-WPM2>>.

⁵ Munro, Robin (1996) *Death by Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State Orphanages* Human Rights Watch/Asia, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/C44L-PFS9>>.

⁶ Munro, Robin (2000) 'Judicial Psychiatry in China and Its Political Abuses' (14) *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 1–128, archived at: <<https://perma.cc/P3DD-54ZQ>>.

⁷ Munro, Robin (2005) *A Question of Criminal Madness: Judicial Psychiatry and Political Dissent in the People's Republic of China* (PhD thesis, Department of Law, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London), archived at: <<https://perma.cc/3TBH-LGZE>>.

⁸ Munro, Robin (2006) *China's Psychiatric Inquisition: Dissent, Psychiatry, and the Law in Post-1949 China* Wildy, Simmonds & Hill.

In May and June of 2011, Robin was diagnosed in Hong Kong with carcinoid tumor, a rare kind of cancer that affects the neuro-endocrine system and displays almost no symptoms, and so is rarely detected until it is quite advanced—as it was with Robin. His doctors in Hong Kong expressed sympathy, opined that surgery or other treatment would be pointless, and advised him to settle his affairs expeditiously.

Not being quite ready to go gentle into that good night, Robin managed, through the good offices of Pao-lien's brother, to get connected with a cancer specialist in Taiwan who took a more sanguine view of the possibilities. Before long, Robin and Pao-lien had decamped to Taiwan, where Robin was to spend the rest of his life.

II

In the course of his life, Robin left a deep impression on everyone who got to know him well. He was no Mr. Rogers; not a few of the tributes that poured in after his death mentioned that the writer had on one or more occasions gotten into a fierce argument with Robin.⁹ He could at times be prickly, although he mellowed considerably over the years and particularly after his move to Taiwan. But he was at the same time warm and generous, without a trace of pettiness.

Robin was a passionate and committed human rights activist, but crucially he was also a meticulous and gifted scholar. Some people work on the individual level, some on the systemic level. Robin did both. Many individuals owe to Robin's unstinting efforts on their behalf the fact that they are not in jail in China (or worse). Painting on a larger canvas, Robin identified and wrote pathbreaking reports on key human rights issues in China. He was there first, and his reports were meticulously and irrefutably documented with Chinese sources.

A key part of Robin's success as an activist was his sense of responsibility, as a scholar, to the truth as supported by evidence. Despite his passion—who could make a career out of human rights activism without passion?—he never exaggerated. This is why when he told journalists or government officials that something was happening, they could have confidence that it was the truth.

In an era when the term 'Renaissance man' is overused, Robin truly fit the description. In addition to being both an activist and a scholar, he was a tremendously talented guitarist, largely in the realm of folk music, and a keen student of music history and lover of all kinds of music, from Josquin des Prez to Schoenberg and beyond.

And it must not be left unsaid that Robin was a devoted husband to his equally devoted wife, Pao-lien. It is an unsettled question as to who enjoyed more the many visits their many friends paid them at their home in Taiwan, the hosts or the guests. All remember it as a pleasure.

⁹ A collection of tributes and other related documents, including a bibliography, is available at <<http://bit.ly/munrodocuments>>.

III

Life in Taiwan with Pao-lien was good to Robin. An important part of his new health regimen after the cancer diagnosis was reducing stress. He stepped back from the grind of day-to-day work at China Labour Bulletin, later serving instead with its fund-raising arm, Friends of China Labour Bulletin. He spent countless contented hours over the next decade working on his magnificent audio system. He sawed, sanded, planed, and glued to restore and upgrade his beloved guitars, and read musical supply catalogs for relaxation. (He sometimes felt he had missed his calling as a luthier.) And he spent little time on email debates and no time at all on Twitter.

With the help of his doctors in Taiwan and an experimental treatment that required periodic trips to Germany, Robin managed to shrink the tumors to the point where the cancer could be said to be in remission. He took up biking and rode extensively with friends along the hilly roads around his home. In April of 2021, however, a liver problem put him in the hospital and eventually proved intractable. Because of Covid-19, his sister and friends outside of Taiwan were unable to be with him. But with Pao-lien at his side, he died peacefully on May 19.

For many in the human rights community, his passing marks the loss of a giant figure. For his wife, sister, and friends, it marks the loss of a part of themselves. For everyone, his life is a reminder of what matters in this world. In Shakespeare's words, 'His life was gentle, and the elements mixed so well in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, "This was a man".' *Ave atque vale*.

—Donald Clarke