

Environmental history dossier

Dragons and rivers: Latin American travelers in «red» China

Los Dragones y los ríos: los viajeros latinoamericanos en la China «roja»

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Jaime Ortega*

jaime_ortega83@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8582-1216>

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* B.A. in Political Science and Master and PhD in Latin American Studies. Assigned to the Latin American Problems Area in the Department of Politics and Culture at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Xochimilco (Mexico).



Abstract

Between the 1950s and 1970s, dozens of visitors to China recorded the most significant changes they had witnessed. The «travel literature» is an input for thinking about various transformations associated with the revolution. In the case we are interested in here, we place the environmental dimension as one of the most common forms. We analyze two fundamental elements that appear in the different travel diaries as examples of the humanization of the landscape: rivers and insects.

Keywords: travelers, China, rivers, environmental history.

Resumen

A lo largo de las décadas de 1950 y 1970, decenas de visitantes a China dejaron constancia de los cambios más significativos que habían presenciado. La «literatura de viajes» es un insumo para pensar diversas transformaciones asociadas a la Revolución de 1949. En el caso que nos interesa aquí, colocamos la dimensión ambiental en el centro del análisis. Se analizan dos elementos fundamentales que aparecen en los distintos diarios de viaje como ejemplos de humanización del paisaje: los ríos y los insectos.

Palabras clave: viajeros, China, ríos, historia ambiental.

An anecdote told in a classroom at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (The National Autonomous University of Mexico) a few years ago, probably false, serves as an entry into the topic that links together travel journals and environmental history. In it, the leader of the 1949 Chinese Revolution, Mao Tse-Tung, was presenting to a group of foreign journalists a project to build a dam. One of the informants questioned the Chinese leader about the lack of technology and various inputs for the realization of such a project, to which he is said to have replied: “We do not have technology, but we have Chinese.” This anecdote told in a classroom could be interpreted as a despotic act of those who instrumentalize the lives of their subjects. However, over time, with the mediation of perspectives such as those produced by the many travelers who undertook the road to the People's Republic of China and who expressed admiration for the social and environmental transformations they witnessed, it is clear that that fictitious anecdote challenged a more important notion. A large part of what is configured in it is that of an incredible and atypical voluntarism with respect to the relationship of peoples, societies and individuals with the landscape.

In this text, we would like to propose that in that anecdote the journalist who asked for the leader's response was one of the many Latin American travelers who felt shocked by the size and effort (and as we now know today- sacrifice), of millions of people who believed or said they believed, that they were building a new world, at a time when that was also new for their nation. For these millions of human beings the construction of a dam was not an act of technical rationality, nor was it a manifestation of some ideology of progress to which they were subjected to for the “reason of history”, it was the expression of the conviction that “liberation” (as the Chinese called the revolution) was an act that modified their daily lives, insofar as they were participants and not just spectators. And there was no greater modification of life and everyday life, than to establish a different relationship with nature, in this case,

mediated by an eccentric *voluntarism*.

In this text we face two major problems. The first is the reflection that leads us to consider the so-called “travel literature” as an important reservoir, a source, among others, to contribute to the field of environmental history. This body of work feeds on what was produced by intellectuals, academics, journalists and politicians of Latin American origin in previous decades. This implies that in addition to considering it as a flexible and open genre, we must precisely localize the logics of operation that inhabit this type of story, determined, to a large extent, by the historical contexts and the political positions of those who write. The second problem concerns the global links between unique and largely unrepeatable events, such as revolutions, with respect to their impact on environmental history.

We think of environmental history as the record in which various mechanisms of modification of the relationship between human beings and the landscape are contemplated. In other words, it is a matter of capturing the space for reflection on which we can anchor practices, techniques and processes of socio-environmental transformation. Drawing on the ideas proposed by Claudia Leal, we can think about this way of making history from the consideration of the moment in which the humanization of the landscape occurs through different levels of intervention, which can be both broad and poorly technical; later we will give other indications on what is meant by environmental history. These levels are accelerated in the moments when societies arrive at radical transformations where, intentionally, they seek to modify the whole of their interconnections. Revolutions are, by definition, those events.

This text places the focus on one of the central revolutionary episodes of the twentieth century, but from the multiple perspectives of travelers. Our *archive* is limited to the so-called “travel literature”, pointed out by scholars as a flexible and open genre; that is, it adopts multiple modalities: the diary, the report, the journalistic report, the memoirs, etc. For us, “travel literature” operated as the testimony of a set of principles that the process called the *Chinese Revolution* placed in the relationship between human beings and nature, at the center of which was found an *extreme voluntarism* to transform this relationship. By *extreme voluntarism* we mean, the actions that occurred constructing infrastructure in the absence of a process of technification. In this case, by placing at the core of the socio-environmental transformation the cooperative productive force of the work of millions of people. It is an exercise of voluntarism because it placed first the awareness that human activity could make up for the absence of modern technique, and it is extreme because millions of people were intentionally mobilized for certain purposes, despite the disadvantages that this could create.

This article will develop perspectives that will allow access to the understanding of the importance of the productivity *these travelers to the Revolution (viajeros a la Revolución)* made, to the extent that China as an example highlighted a rarity within the socio-environmental transformations of the twentieth century: the centrality of the voluntarism of the “masses” and their leader, and the preeminence of political mobilization before the development of technology, machinery and tools. In Marxist terms the Chinese Revolution placed the predominance of social relations over technical productive forces.

The literature around these episodes of travel and connection has increased in recent years. Matthew Rothwell's study¹ was one of the first to point out the trans-pacific character that brought about revolutionary energies after 1949. Based on transatlantic connections, he places his study in a "transnational" perspective that recovers the links, encounters and crosses of people, ideas and texts. Brenda Rugar² has recently shown the immense weight of the "diplomacy of the peoples" in the Argentine case regarding the revolution in China; that is, showing that links are not limited to relations between states, and that in the modern world connections start from various points in society. Rodolfo Hernández Ortiz³ has done so from the Colombian context thinking about the key to a "popular diplomacy", in a very similar tone; that is, placing the enthusiasm of the political forces and their emissaries in the fabric of networks that were anchored in both China and Colombia. Meanwhile, Luis Abraham Barandica⁴ made a suggestive comparative effort in the figures of Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Pablo Neruda, based on the construction of the notion of utopia that both characters shared in their travel experience.

Finally, the issue of *Transmodernity* coordinated by Jorge Locane and Maria Montt is one of the most significant contributions as it brings together diverse voices⁵. The dossier has works by Monica Ahumada a propósito of the Chilean artist José Venturelli; Rosario Hubert proposes the theme of the trip to China with respect to childhood; Lacone speaks of the passage from Orientalism to the provincialization of Europe; Montt writes about Mercedes Valdivieso; Rothwell takes up the impact of the trip on guerrilla leader Abimael Guzmán, and Wei Teng addresses the travel diary of Eduardo Galeano and José Miguel Vidal and talks about the pro-Maoist Chilean poet Pablo de Rokha. The study of travelers, specifically, to People's China, has been gaining attention in the academic world, generating a broad bibliographic body. The issues of diplomacy and the link with political actors has a lot of weight. But as we have briefly reviewed, artistic themes and involvement of other actors, such as childhoods, also appear. On the other hand, there is no problematization from the environmental dimension. This text contributes to that direction.

Travel literature?

The so-called "travel literature" is very old. Following Juliana González⁶ we can point

1 Matthew Rothwell, *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

2 Brenda Rugar, «Viajeros argentinos a China en el marco de la "diplomacia entre pueblos" (1950-1965)», *Cahiers Des Amériques Latines* 94, (2020): 203-227

3 Rodolfo Hernández, «Revolución de nueva democracia: modelo revolucionario chino para América Latina», *Goliardos* 20, (2017): 92-115.

4 Luis Abraham Barandica, «La utopía y la experiencia de viaje a la República Popular China: el prisma ideológico en Vicente Lombardo Toledano y Pablo Neruda (1949-1951)», *Asia América Latina* 9 (2020): 11-40.

5 Locane, Jorge y María Montt, «El viaje América Latina-China. Una interacción sur-sur sui generis», *Transmodernity* 9, n.º 3 (2020): 1-5.

6 Juliana González-Rivera, *La invención del viaje. La historia de los relatos que cuentan al mundo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2019), 17-34.

out that in the past this literary form functioned as part of the “invention of the world”, until then unknown and inaccessible to the great majority of the global population. Meanwhile, Tatiana Escobar⁷ reminds us that her function has also been to present and build a set of images around the “other”. However, by the 20th century “travel literature” has been subordinated to the ups and downs of new social conditions, which allow for faster access to various testimonies given the increased productivity of written materiality. A growing connection of the world linked to the growth of the productive forces, as well as the emergence of ever wider and diverse audiences, which are possible recipients of these representations. In the “travel literature”, the diversified uses of print are also concentrated, the expansion of access to reading, the use of technique (maritime first, then aerial) to overcome space through time, as Karl Marx once wrote, as well as the slow but unstoppable commodification of the practice of travel that has arrived to contemporary tourism.

However, now we will refer to a peculiar process of the last century, which allowed the creation of a new type of traveler, the one that was summoned by the great socio-political transformations that occurred in different nations: social revolutions. At the beginning of the century, the Russian and Mexican Revolution generated this type of travel, in which their impressions were recorded with the word: the rhythms, problems and perspectives of what was predicted as modifications of the horizon of the meaning of social life.

While it is true that the main objects of description and reflection by travelers were the political dilemmas and the consequences they had on the structure of society; it is also true that over time it made its way to express issues involving everyday life. This is especially true when revolutions began to settle as power structures and implemented ambitious modernization mechanisms that reorganized social relations, modifying the face and body of nations. The travel literature to which we will refer, actually describes the processes of modernization, but captures them in terms of revolutions in action, that is, showing the participation of social groups as a central fact.

To this, in addition, we must add that the twentieth century allowed, with greater clarity, to circumvent European centrality or mediation. The story about the “other” no longer fell exclusively on the nationalities of the old continent that looked to their African, Asian or Latin American “others”. A new perspective that avoided the dominant geoculture was possible and allowed the formation of links with the regions of the third world. This calls for mobilizing an idea that appears repeatedly and that has to do with the search for equivalence between political processes. Travelers felt challenged by the Asian phenomenon for several reasons. Latin American visitors found similarities of their respective countries with China: like the nations from which they originated, Chinese society shared a history of colonial rule. The countries on both sides of the ocean were generally limited in industrialization and were inhabited by a large peasant contingent.

Despite this, although there is a wider range of travelers who register visits to their “others”, without European mediation, the truth is that this remains a very limited and fo-

7 Taiana Escobar, *Sin domicilio fijo: sobre viajes, viajeros y sus libros* (México: Paidós, 2002).

cused core. It is usually composed of personalities from culture, politics and the world of artistic production. Additionally it is also exclusively male. There are several reasons to understand why a traveler left a written testimony. Most of them have to do with the exoticness and uniqueness of a situation, in this case the attractiveness of revolutions, but there is also the constant idea of transmitting favorable impressions, that is, that testimony operates as propaganda. And, of course, the trip supposes prestige, associated with a unique political experience. The “travel literature”, in this case, is halfway between the political pamphlet and the proof that someone experienced, in his own flesh, an exceptional act forbidden by the majority, which gives him prestige. This situation explains why a large number of these books are self-published, but also why the subject of objectivity often disappears in the writing.

The “Travel literature” linked to the socio-political transformation processes of the 20th century is often produced by political activists, journalists and artists. In the case of the revolution in China, there is clearly a diversity of reasons why Latin Americans were able to witness the changes that were associated with it. We suggest an initial periodization: in the 1950s we found mostly travelers of clearly defined left ideas, whether they were socialists or communists. In the 1960s, largely due to diplomatic expansion, but also due to the crisis with the Soviet Union, the spectrum of politicians attached to the different nationalist currents and a greater number of journalists, whose ideological identification became more nebulous. By the 1970s and 1980s, the profile became even more pluralized, as China ceased to be isolated and began to re-establish more diplomatic ties. Presumably, China’s entry into the United Nations and the re-establishment of relations with the United States allow for a greater flow of connections with the globe.

Travel journals allow us to gain an impression of what was generated by the great transformations in the political, cultural and environmental sphere. It also allows us to understand the various ways in which an ongoing modernization was created, the product of a revolution in a country that was considered key in the history of humanity. This generated in more than one instance, the feeling that everything was possible and that that “millennial people” – a phrase that appears with certain recurrence – got up and started to spread, leaving behind a lesson that other peoples could learn or even imitate.

Clearly contemporary studies in historical terms about the process of the Chinese Revolution and the various modernizations that occurred in its name are far less optimistic than what circulated as public information in the 1960s or 1970s. Violence, dispossession, authoritarianism are also indelible marks of this process (or perhaps of any modernization), as well as a permanent conflict within the political structure that sought to strengthen leadership or change it. But like all knowledge, it is always partial. In their own way, travel stories tell us something about what was happening in China, but also about what the socio-political imagination of the second half of the 20th century built as discursive referents and examples of social changes. Of course, like any other literature, this one has its blind spots, but they alert us, when they become recurrent of an epochal spirit of what was considered relevant and what was not.

It is necessary to clarify some elements that outline the type of texts that were revised. They are works published by university journals, private publications, and also some self-published works. The authors and their works come from Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. The trajectories of each of these characters are very variable. To illustrate this diversity, it is possible to highlight the following Mexican figures: Fernando Benitez, a journalist of great importance and the poet Margarita Paz Paredes as well as the economist Moisés T. de la Pena. In the case of Argentina, the writing of Bernardo Kordon was referenced, leader of the Chinese-Latin American Friendship Association, perhaps one of the authors with the most appropriate publications in the People's Republic of China. In the instance of Costa Rica, the testimony of legendary communist leader and writer Luis Carlos Fallas is used, whose visit was in the 1950, but was published 20 years later. In Colombia, the testimonies of the Afro-Colombian writer Manuel Olivella Zapata and that of the liberal politician Diego Montana, during the early years of the 1950 are drawn upon. In the case of Peru, we have the testimonies of university professor Luis Orbegoso and leftist leader César Guardia Mayorga. Undoubtedly, the best-known travel diary writer is Eduardo Galeano, although particularly it is not a work referred to in his extensive bibliography.

All the texts were produced in different contexts, some within global meetings such as the Peace Congresses and others at the invitation of Federations (such as women). They range from 1952 to 1972 and span the years of the greatest isolation of the People's Republic from the world, until its gradual opening. In some of them it is clearer the impact of important events, as is the case of Galeano, which occurs in the middle of the break with the Soviets. The chosen selection is representative to this article, insofar as it expresses convergences of interests, themes and personalities.

Revolutionizing the landscape: Tamed dragons

We cannot move toward the topic that specifically interests us without first problematizing the meaning that makes it possible to understand the travel stories within the context of environmental history. As Claudia Leal⁸ has repeatedly pointed out (both in individual and collective works), the field of environmental history is taking root, encompassing everything related to the humanization of the landscape and the link between the elements of society and its environment. In the sense of conformation of an environmental history, we must emphasize the use of the stories of the travelers, as Stefania Gallini⁹ does, although in this case we will not deal with the “first naturalists”. History, writes Leal¹⁰, is best understood when mountains, rivers, land, wind and earthquakes are incorporated; in this case from the records left

8 Claudia Leal, «Aguzar la mirada colectiva, el gran desafío de la historia ambiental latinoamericana», *Historia y Sociedad*, n.º 36, (2019): 243-268.

9 Stefania Gallini, «Invitación a la historia ambiental», *Tareas*, n.º 120, (2005): 13.

10 Claudia Leal, «Introducción. Lo latinoamericano en la historia ambiental de América Latina», en *Un pasado vivo. Dos siglos de historia ambiental latinoamericana* (Colombia: FCE, 2019).

by travelers, especially interested in transmitting their experience.

The intersection between elements, such as ideology and the environmental, widen the perspective not only to the factual, to the facts, but also to what could have been, what was thought and imagined as a possibility and that in a certain way marked the course of events. In this way, it includes those unfinished projects that stopped or were only partially realized, but that were born from an ideological act that sought to radically modify social relations. This is the case of the relationship between revolutions and the landscape, which involves large projects of transformation, intentionally projected. Some of them were brought to an end, others started and aborted at some point.

As in few cases, revolutions in society are often fully assumed as major transformations in the relationship between human and non-human nature¹¹. It is not by chance that the fathers of modern revolutionary ideology, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, had so much focus on nature, both that which was mediated by human labor (especially Marx) and that which was not (especially Engels). It is not surprising that a concept such as "social-natural metabolism", so common in contemporary ecological criticism, owes its formation to trajectories rooted in Marxist thought. In such a way that, with variations and particularities, the historical processes that were said to be inspired by these ideas found in nature an element to decipher as part of the deployment of great changes within social relations.

Indeed, the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century carried an ambivalent legacy. For while they proposed to modify the social relations prevailing in the modern era, they also inherited an enlightened notion and on track in a certain sense of progress. It was not science, technology or pure mastery of knowledge pertaining to nature that was significant, but the rational and conscious control of modernization processes, where science, technique and knowledge were useful for broader human groups. From the point of view of those who led the social revolutions, it was not progress that led to greater freedom, but the rationalized character of the social projects that directed the technical artifices. This is particularly evident in the triumph of the Soviet revolution, from which Lenin's phrase that socialism was equal to the implementation of soviets or decision-making councils plus electrification was popularized. This element (that of technique) was comparable to the concept of productive forces. A socialist society was only possible in fullness, where reorganized social relations allowed the deployment of the productive forces, particularly those that were strictly technical.

Thus, revolutions walked both on the path of modernization (that is, the acceleration and universalization of impersonal social relations based on technology and science) and through a deep consideration of the role of the environment and the humanization of the landscape in any formulation of a project for the transformation of social relations. An emblematic case was that of Tomas Sankara, iconic anti-colonial leader, who was one of the most

11 José Ferraro, *¿Traicionó Engels el materialismo de Marx?* (México: UAM-I, 1989).

ferocious defenders of the forests¹². In recent times Reinaldo Funes¹³ reminded us of the key projection of the “trip to the moon” that marked the horizon of the Cuban revolution.

In the case that we develop below, the impressions of the travelers of the *voluntarist* spirit that prevailed in the modernization promoted by the Chinese Revolution with respect to nature, particularly rivers, is realized. Modifying the landscape and humanizing it involved a technical and instrumental effort against which China was at a disadvantage because it did not have sufficient instrumental inputs. The ideological necessity that mobilized the revolutionary aspiration was to “develop the productive forces”; that is, the instruments, machines and techniques that would allow greater control over nature. But it met the limitations of a poor and severely backward nation in economic terms. The legacy of colonialism weighed heavily on this projection. How would the Chinese Revolution resolve the contradiction of “developing the productive forces” from a marked situation of scarcity? *Voluntarism*, commonly attached to the thought of the leader of the revolution, Mao Tse-Tung, was the key.

If anything distinguished the modification of the landscape during the Chinese Revolution, it is this meaning of *voluntarism*. The “productive forces” were not above all technical, that is, they did not refer to nuts, screws or machines, but to millions and millions of human beings who, by will, necessity or coercion, responded to the calls of the revolutionary leader, who with some phrases that were used to become popular synthesized a project of broad historical and social significance. This was captured by Latin American travelers, who recorded the very peculiar humanization of the landscape in their different travel journals.

Next, we will develop some of these examples further. Since we consider that the central theme is not the traveler or the travel “diary” (in its different formats) we do not intend to concentrate on the biographies of each of them or their ideological assignments. Because part of the argument is that, for a long period, regardless of writing formats and ideologies of ascription, the theme of the *voluntarist* humanization of the landscape impacted those who visited the Chinese nation. Thus, the period of production of these stories occurs between the decades of 1950 and 1970 and is composed mostly of men and minority of women. All with varied ideological orientations, as well as multiple occupations within politics, journalism, education and the arts.

The River and the Dragon

Travelers who left testimony often refer to rivers as the great calamity in pre-revolutionary China. The water, the river and the dam are constant both in the stories and as a way to verify the advance of the revolution. In fact, in the rivers, the new time associated with social change was counted. What the travelers witnessed with each dam built or with each river

12 Brian Peterson, *Thomas Sankara, A Revolutionary in Cold War Africa* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2021).

13 Reinaldo Funes, *Nuestro viaje a la luna: la idea de la transformación de la naturaleza en Cuba durante la Guerra Fría* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 2019).

controlled was the certainty that the revolution was advancing in a clear sense: Progress was for all the inhabitants and they were part of the construction of it.

Early in 1952, the Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella titled one of the chapters of his story “How the Huai River has been tamed.” The mere image of the “taming” refers to that natural version that is humanized, domesticated and controlled. Zapata Olivella was not the only one, of course, to realize the importance of this situation. The Peruvian César Guardia Mayorga refers to the situation of the rivers with a magical-religious conception: “Since they believed that the rains depended on the Dragon, it was worshiped and the feast of the Dragon Boat was celebrated...”¹⁴. Meanwhile, the Bolivian Gualberto Pedrazas, gave his readers horrifying data: “In 3.000 years there were 1.500 floods¹⁵. Bernardo Kordon of Argentina, laconic but firm says of this subject: “This aquatic world that is China”¹⁶. The Peruvian Manuel Jesús Orbegozo resorts to the resource of quoting his interpreter, whom he refers to speaking when they are passing through the Wuhan River:

Lu told me a story: “A few years ago, Wuhan was going to be devoured by the river just like in 1931 when it flooded twenty-seven million bushels and drowned thousands of people. Of the 300,000 inhabitants in the city, only 80,000 were saved”¹⁷.

Of all the existing testimonies, the Costa Rican Luis Carlos Fallas is the one that best synthesizes what we have been recorded by the other authors:

The horror of the Chinese droughts, which burned the land and starved millions of Chinese peasants, ran on the wings of the story to the most remote corners of the world. And for centuries and millennia, the legendary dragons, those giant rivers of China, periodically and freely flooded vast expanses, razing villages and causing thousands and thousands of victims [...] And with the organized help of hundreds of thousands of heroic peasants, he is performing the taming of the most ruthless dragons, of the most turbulent rivers. [...] And in the not too distant future all those furious dragons, all those huge rivers of China, will be tamed definitively and put at the service of the happiness of the people¹⁸.

The testimony of Fallas (famous writer, author of the famous *Mamita Yunai* that describes the horror of banana plantations), synthesizes the previous testimonies and allows us to discuss the link between environmental history and the temporality inaugurated by the revolution. As is well known, this type of event is usually associated with a new time in which the calamities or grievances of the past begin to be compensated. However, here we are not faced with bandits, bureaucrats, corrupt or bourgeois people placed in the court of “history” or some similar version. The grievance and suffering is caused by the strength and apparent untamed capacity of nature, which condemned the people of China (for millennia) to a double situa-

14 César Guardia, *De Confucio a Mao Tse-Tung: del fuego a la comuna popular* (Lima: Minerva 1960), 200.

15 Gualberto Pedrazas, *China y Bolivia, países agrarios. Observaciones de un periodista boliviano* (Potosí: Universidad Tomás Frías 1959), 102.

16 Bernardo Kordon, *600 millones y uno* (Buenos Aires, Siglo Veinte 1959), 69.

17 Manuel Jesús Orbegozo, *Reportaje a China* (Lima: Chimú 1972), 68.

18 Luis Carlos Fallas, *Un mes en la China Roja* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1977), 6.

tion, contradictory itself: Drought or flood. In these conditions how can one think of environmental history?

The first point is that which refers to the figure of the river as a dragon, supernatural and powerful, to which one must worship out of fear. The second has to do with a previous time, not only associated with mythology, but with the inability of the Chinese, who are portrayed as permanent victims. The third has to do with the need to make a recount of these calamities, opening the way precisely to observe how to compensate for the millennial grievance. Here is the crucial point in the travelers' account: The evocation of this situation finds meaning only as the new time provides the opportunity to "tame" nature that has punished the inhabitants for generations. It is not by chance that Colombian Diego Montana wrote: "In three years of incredible efforts the Chinese people have realized the multi-secular dream of dominating the rivers"¹⁹.

At this moment, the narratives begin to demonstrate the new relationships that have been established between the peasants, the State and the landscape, specifically the rivers. Zapata Olivella comments as follows: "The feat of control and exploitation of the waters of the Huai River is part of one of the great epics made by man in the history of humanity"²⁰. Peruvian Guardia Mayorga writes about a documentary showing the construction of a dam on the Huai River, which had a first period of construction in 1953 and now, in a second period, presents a radically different landscape: "The dammed waters serve to irrigate new lands, move electric turbines and form channels for navigation. The river has been tamed and now serves man docilely, like the ox or the horse"²¹.

Gualberto Pedrazas, the Bolivian, presents a dam built in just 160 days:

Why did this miracle happen? Because the leadership of the party was right and firm, and because the peasants and the workers were freed from the superstition of believing that only engineers and technicians can make weights of consideration, and because they themselves worked boldly and without fear of mistakes. [...] But what he admires and is most excited about, is that this work has been made based on the absolutely free and voluntary work of all the social organizations in Beijing and its surroundings [...] 400,000 laborers contributing in work²².

Here, in this first series of testimonies, the elements that make up the narrative that travelers make of the specificity of the humanization of the landscape begins to appear. For the Colombian, the problem of "control" of nature is read as "epic", that is, as something that should be remembered given the effort generated, since history had been slow to make it possible. The Peruvian follows the same line in claiming obedience similar to that of the horse. In these two fragments the most classic notion of the humanization of the environment is evident: that is, its subordination to exclusively human ends. On the other hand, in the Bolivian's story we

19 Diego Montaña, *Por los caminos de la paz: de Pekín a Viena* (Bogotá: s/e), 44.

20 Manuel Olivella, *China 6 a. m.: relatos* (Bogotá: Ediciones S.L.B, 1954), 97.

21 Guardia, *De Confucio a Mao Tse-Tung...*, 131.

22 Pedrazas, *China y Bolivia...*, 109.

are already beginning to see the notion of *voluntarism*, which implies on the one hand the critique of specialization and technification, and on the other to place at the center the will of workers and peasants to achieve the domination of the forces of nature.

What we call here *voluntarism* to humanize the landscape is but a great detour. In Marxist language we could point out that human beings supplant the scarcity of technical productive forces from cooperative productive forces, as Jorge Veraza calls them²³. The Marxist conception is always torn between an interpretation that places the technical aspect as the central one, and a minority and marginal version that assumes that the "community is the main productive force". Veraza, belonging to this second stream of thought, allows us to think about the transformation of the landscape in China, by presenting another type of productive forces that he calls procreative and that refer to human coordination and cooperation as a fundamental axis. As Peruvian Luis Gordillo says in his travel story: "The productive forces in the Chinese countryside are still based on muscle [...] chinese economic praxis is guided by the principle of "the greatest productive force is the revolutionary class itself"²⁴.

This is clearer in Orbegozo, who in the tour of certain works that are carried out, openly explains the question that would have animated Maoist voluntarism: "Depend on techniques or rely on our own masses?"²⁵. This leads him to point out the concrete ways in which he observes that this dichotomy occurs:

The hydraulic work "Red Flag" that is also a collective symbol such as Tachay and Tachin, is not only the construction of the cross-country channel. It has been necessary to also build aqueducts that are extraordinary works of popular engineering and amazing tunnels²⁶.

There, the point lies in the creativity and ingenuity provided by "the masses." Before the technician and the specialist, before machinery and automation, the ingenuity of the population and its coordination to make possible what for centuries was impossible.

Fernando Benítez, a Mexican, also referred to this, when he wrote: "Twenty thousand men, twenty thousand workers ordered in rows or grouped in the center of the channel, components of the ballet of work"²⁷. Work is not suffering, but artistic enjoyment. The Mexican economist Moisés de la Peña certifies this when he recounts the construction of the dam that "dominated" the Huai River, speaking of "impressive discipline as endless rows of ants [that] divide work by sectors without anyone getting in the way..."²⁸. The Mexican journalist Natividad Rosales, moving away from this playful perspective, underpins the notion of originality, writing: "In many places man replaces the mule. Huge irrigation works, prodigious bridges, boards, buildings, roads, etc., have been built with the help of 'autochthonous' methods, as

23 Jorge Veraza, *Karl Marx y la técnica dese la perspectiva de la vida* (México: Itaca, 2012).

24 Luis Gordillo, *China es Roja* (Lima: Universidad Nacional Federico Villarreal, 1973), 140.

25 Orbegozo, *Reportaje a China*, 180.

26 Orbegozo, *Reportaje a China*, 186.

27 Fernando Benítez, *China a la vista* (México: Cuadernos Americanos, 1953), 151.

28 Moisés T. de la Peña, *Cosas vistas en la URSS y en China* (México: s/e, 1960), 99.

they call them"²⁹.

Thus, we could continue to look for references on the substitution of technique by the way of ingenuity and cunning, but, above all, by the conscious use of a productive force that is not mediated by nuts and bolts: Cooperation. Whether this cooperation was forced or free, it is not clear in any of the accounts. What remains established is that the domain of humanization of the landscape, particularly of the rivers, remained in the hands of voluntarism promoted by the State.

On one side of this aspect of technical substitution for cooperation, stories are observed that place solidarity and reciprocity as elements for survival and then construction. Peruvian César Guardia Mayorga emphasizes solidarity in the face of the “natural” catastrophe: “That is why we had the traditional solidarity of peasant groups. Since ancient times they organized collectively for the tillage of the land and in times of natural calamities they helped each other”.³⁰ Eduardo Galeano, in his text, writes: “By measuring themselves with the gigantic obstacles that nature threw against their passage, the Chinese strengthened the already solid community ties, and nurtured the mystique of collective effort...”.³¹ Olivella Zapata, writes: “The masses began to awaken the millenary reserves of energy asleep in their bosom...”³²

We conclude this section by referring to the brief, but substantial commentary made by former president and revolutionary general Lázaro Cárdenas. On a trip made in 1959, he wrote in his personal notes:

China, too, lacking its ancient forests that suffered continuous logging for centuries, has recorded frequent tragedies caused by torrential rainfall in the waters of its large rivers that exceed its waterways and have devastated entire populations; That is why they call in China their famous and great yellow river, the “river of calamities”. But today the People's China, Mao Tse-tung's China, has undertaken the mobilization of the people for an intense and scheduled reforestation throughout its territory³³.

The appreciation of Cárdenas is striking, because during his mandate in Mexico, he led a policy of forest and water management that did not fall on the concept of “conservatism”³⁴, understood not as the exclusion of human interaction with the environment, but, rather, of the delivery of these spaces to communities with decision-making capacity over them, and with the idea that they would serve as a spearhead for local and national development. The policy of Cárdenas was a novelty and did not fail to resonate that experience with that of the Chinese Revolution. The forest, in this case, was a restraint to the force of water.

In summary, the river and the dragon remained as signs of a new time, where the pop-

29 José Natividad Rosales, *Diario de viaje a China* (México: Costa-Amic, 1961), 77.

30 Guardia, *De Confucio a Mao Tse-Tung...*, 72.

31 Eduardo Galeano, *China 1964: crónica de un desafío* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1964), 54.

32 Olivella, *China 6 a. m....*, 91.

33 Lázaro Cárdenas, *Apuntes: Tomo III* (México: UNAM, 2004), 116-117.

34 Emily Wakild, *Parques revolucionarios. Conservación, justicia social y parques nacionales en México: 1910-1940* (México: La Cigarra, 2020).

ulation finally got rid of the calamities suffered for centuries. To do this, it was only necessary for their cooperation, their sacrifice, their ingenuity and their heroism. The revolution meant a change in the lives of generations, but it was possible thanks to the participation of the “masses”. Maoist voluntarism had its productive, constructive, substituting lack of technique. However, it was not the only example.

Destructive voluntarism: the fight against pests

The travel diaries of revolutions are a melting pot of experiences, happenings and impressions. Some of them are clearly passed through the filters designed by those who financed the trips or by the tastes of the translators and fundamental intermediaries, as we read in different pages of these stories. The difference in language and the presence of local companions (the guides, another recurring figure in the stories) reveals this codification well, because in the absence of direct communication, the figure of the translator acted as a trigger for actions, visits or collection of testimonies.

On some occasions travelers tell about acts of rebellion toward their hosts, as they are willing to attend seemingly prohibited places or at least outside the official itinerary. In addition, political and ideological preferences weigh on his writing. The poet Margarita Paz Paredes³⁵, for example, focuses on the place of women in all the places she visits, with less emphasis on other topics. And while the social situation of women is a recurring theme in all travel stories to China, they are often subsidiary to others, particularly the incorporation of work, obtaining rights or breaking with pre-existing oppressive forms. Other recurring themes that are usually referred to are those that are convened from public health, the universalization of education, the expansion of culture and the expansion of production. Impressions vary depending on the time of the visit. Before 1958 everything was affected by the agrarian reform and Soviet cooperation, after that year everyone visited “popular communes” and observed contempt for the USSR.

In the case of the environment, in addition to rivers, there is another issue that reveals the preeminence of *voluntarism*: the campaign against the different “plagues”. This case reveals not a constructive voluntarism, but a destructive one. This plan was a conscious scheme to kill certain insects that made a torment in daily life. It was an example of humanization of the landscape that starts from declaring as undesirable to living elements and mobilizing a significant amount of human beings to eradicate them.

We can begin with the testimony of the Bolivian Gualberto Pedrazas, who expresses another side of the coin, the destruction of an environmental system:

The Communist Party of China launched the slogan against the four plagues: “mice, sparrows, flies and mosquitoes.” The four plagues were exterminated in a short time. China is a country, where from a specific date, was without mice, sparrows, flies and mosquitoes. But how were these plagues extermi-

35 Margarita Paz, *Viaje a la China popular: crónica* (México: Costa-Amic, 1966).

nated? Using insecticides, poisons or other expensive means? No. The campaign began without missing a single citizen, neither student nor woman, they all undertook the fight killing flies, mosquitoes, mice and sparrows. They used all the weapons and tricks that they could devise to end the plagues. In Beijing they came out armed in slings, rattles, balloons and shrill whistles to blow at sparrows without letting them rest for two days and two nights. A large part of the population was located on the roofs. Fatigue exhausted the animals. They fell dead from starvation. The same thing was done with mice, flies and mosquitoes [...] The fulfillment of these slogans has brought with it the following advantages: a higher agricultural yield and the reduction of diseases and consequent saving of human lives, as well as the strengthening of the hygienic habits of the people. The task is to mobilize the masses³⁶.

The fight against plagues, and their subsequent absence, is an example of how the voluntarism of the Chinese Revolution (here we have said Maoist, since many of the inspirations of collective actions were inspired by his speeches) advanced on a different plane. That of the eradication of elements that were considered harmful. Cabrera Parra, a Mexican journalist, points out: "There are no flies in China. I visited its most populous cities: Beijing, Canton, Shanghai, its most hidden communes, and I did not find a single specimen of the "brown flies."³⁷

But as with rivers, again the subject seems to be of a certain new temporality. The aforementioned Mexican journalist, Fernando Benítez, makes a good point of this situation regarding temporality:

It seems that Beijing was a dirty city full of insects. Now you don't see a single paper in the streets, or a fly in the markets and you can sleep with the windows open, without fear of the lancet of mosquitoes³⁸.

Surprised at the attitude of a child who counts the number of flies he has killed, he writes: "Intrigued I turn to the owner of the store:" does your child carry a list of the flies he kills? "Not only my son," answers the antiquarian, "but everyone in the house."³⁹ Hygienism, voluntarism and rationality are combined in Benítez's writing. The Mexican José Natividad Rosales recounts in the same tone:

First the death sentence was given to the flies. Everyone provided themselves with fly swatters and means of destruction and the ground was blackened with so many corpses that it was then sent to the fire [...] Then the mosquitoes continued on the fatal list. The Chinese went out into the fields and attacked the animals in their places of origin. The task has not been completed and in some places the traveler still has to sleep in mosquito nets [...] Mice have also gone down in history. China was turned upside down to its foundations, so that all the bugs would come out of their burrows [...] The most dramatic case is that of sparrows. The friendly little animals were a constant plague for the seedlings. Each sparrow, when there is grain and is very hungry, is able to eat 50 grams of rice, wheat, sorghum or cereal that it finds⁴⁰.

Rosales' text is one of the most emphasized in this dimension. The slogan launched by Mao-

36 Pedraza, *China y Bolivia...*, 69.

37 José Cabrera, *Dragones, águilas y una que otra serpiente* (México: s/e, 1973), 37.

38 Benítez, *China a la vista*, 70.

39 Benítez, *China a la vista*, 70.

40 Rosales, *Diario de viaje a China...*, 110.

Tse-Tung to fight against these insects had an unexpected response, at least for journalists, that is, that the population will effectively launch itself against the “four plagues”. By describing their techniques, we can get an idea of what this wholesale mobilizing exercise of wills meant: “There was noise in the city, in the countryside and everywhere. Great explosions made the poor birds that began to sleep wake up suddenly, unable to flee to the right place.”⁴¹ Orbeago also records this campaign, when he refers to what his translator and companion tells him: “Li Wen referred to hygiene [...] We have developed massive campaigns of importance such as those undertaken against flies, mosquitoes, mice or cockroaches.” Li Wen said that eliminating those animals meant eliminating the very sources of disease.”⁴²

It is Natividad Rosales who realizes the long-term failure of the mobilizing action of millions of wills against the four enemies:

Months later the peasants began to send complaints to the Central Committee of the Party, claiming that the “measure had been wrong.” And it was true because, having exterminated the enemy of the air, there were now the underground and the surfaces. Millions of earthworms and insects, those that were once eaten greedily by sparrows, now threatened crops⁴³.

Indeed, today it is well known that this campaign did not represent a “leap forward”. In a pessimistic tone, a contemporary scholar such as Frank Dikötter says:

“Mao was fascinated by the power of the masses to impose themselves on nature and in 1958 he called for the elimination of rats, mosquito flies and sparrows [...] The whole country mobilized in open war against these birds, in what was one of the most bizarre and most damaging episodes for the ecology of the entire Great Leap Forward. It is likely that sparrows reached the brink of extinction and very few were seen in the country during the following years”⁴⁴.

Final Notes

Travel literature, a genre considered open due to its multiple formats, is an expression of human beings’ self-awareness of their own present. Recording what is happening in a site from certain premises is key for scholars of the past. Of course, it is a very subjective version of the present, but no less relevant. In the case we have analyzed, we are interested in insisting on its character as a source for Latin American environmental history, in this case in its way of facing the transformations of the landscape in another space.

The travelers we studied here responded equally to the modernizing imprint of the Chinese Revolution. They were surprised that the new time, inaugurated by the Revolution in a poor country, managed to move forward despite isolation, conflicts with former allies – such as the USSR – and without the support of the West. The plot is not minor, and an aspect of

41 Rosales, *Diario de viaje a China*, 111.

42 Orbeago, *Reportaje a China*, 68.

43 Rosales, *Diario de viaje a China*, 112.

44 Frank Dikötter, *La gran hambruna en la China de Mao* (Madrid: Acantilado, 2011), 312-313.

it went through the radical humanization of the landscape and its profound transformation.

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