

## SNOW'S DREAM OF RED CHINA

On Rereading *Red Star Over China*

Chin Liyan

(Department of Chinese, Peking University)

July 2011

*[This is a mildly disparaging appreciation, of such a concept be allowed, of the work of Edgar Snow (1905-1972), author of the first at-length English-language description of the Chinese communist movement. Snow's book also includes a lengthy reconstruction of Snow's interviews with Mao Zedong, and this has been treated as Mao's "autobiography." The author's theme seems to be that while Snow was a true friend of China, he was selective in his perceptions. He was sympathetic to the Party line and silent about the unattractive aspects of it; but he also never gave himself over completely to the Party. He remained a "bourgeois" writer, a "friend," not a "comrade"—always an outsider. The Party used Snow for its own ends, and Snow used the Party for his. An interesting thing about this essay is that not so long ago its tone alone would have earned the author a lengthy term of reform through labor. It might be interesting to know more about the circumstances surrounding its publication. The title of the piece is probably a play on the classic Chinese novel, Dream of the Red Chamber.]*

The American reporter Edgar Snow was 30 years old in 1936. One may say that 10 June of that year was the watershed of his life, and also his life's high tide. With two cameras and 24 rolls of film he journeyed into the Red Areas of northern Shaanxi. He

interviewed the Chinese communist leaders Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Peng Dehuai, along with various Red Army warriors, guerillas, and ordinary people. He examined military, production, educational, and entertainment activities under the Red administration. Everything else in his entire life was related to those four months. His life was defined by the stories and adventures of those four months. He became a firm supporter of the Communist Party of China. For various reason his ardor weakened during the 1960s and 1970s, but his attitude of support did not change.

Returning from Shaanxi to Beijing, in 1937 Snow published *Red Star Over China* in 1937 (the Chinese edition was called Full Account of a Journey to the West 西行滿記). It ran through at least three printings in one month and within a few weeks had sold over 100,000 copies. It aroused the attention of the whole world. While the CPC and its leaders had already been struggling for many years, they were still unknown to the outside. Not a single foreign reporter had interviewed them in the Jiangxi Soviet Area. Mao Zedong and other leaders had been reported dead several times. According to an English-language review in 1938, “Snow was the first foreigner to penetrate into northern Shaanxi and he was the first person, Chinese or foreign, freely to report on what he had seen and heard.” Snow himself said, “Before this book, the original materials from 1921 to 1937 were basically blank.” However, the significance of this book is not simply in the individual report, filling in blanks; it is even more in its extrapolations of the future. In the book it was already possible to see the steps China would take in the future—that is, the rule of the CPC.

Snow's ardent support for the Communist party came directly from his interviews and observations. He accepted the stories told him by the Communist personages fully and without skepticism. But in telling their stories to this American reporter these Communist personages were like all other artists: they necessarily exercised selectivity. By means of a collective artistry they built up a particular image. Moreover, Snow's idealism worked as a magnifying glass. In his narrative and construction individual stories were built into a collective image of cohesion, cooperation, and organization. But we cannot say that Snow was immature. He was a reporter with a sense of social responsibility and had already lived in China for seven years. He had seen and heard a lot and it was these experience that caused him to be concerned about China's future. The year 1936 was a time of glory for the CPC. The Long March had just been completed and the Red Army had settled in northern Shaanxi. The capital of the Red government was still in Baoan. While it was still weak in terms of the country as a whole, the Red political forces had ideals and a future and things were getting better every day. The Red Army had just adopted the slogan that the whole country should unite to resist Japan, and was itself very inclusive and democratic and had a deep appeal to the hearts of the people. In his chapter, "The Red Stage," Snow described the army and people in northern Shaanxi watching a play together. Men and women, young and old, people of all sorts and kinds sat together scattered on the ground. As sheep casually munched on grass, Mao Zedong and Lin Biao sat together with the ordinary people. Once the show started, no one paid any attention to Mao Zedong and the others. The freedom and equality greatly exceeded that in the KMT areas. There was a genuinely idyllic and pastoral atmosphere. Zhou Enlai said to him, "You write down anything that you see. We'll help you in investigating

the Soviet area.” In fact, at that time lots of people, not simply Snow alone, evaded the blockade to come to the Soviet area, and many of them declined to go back. One of those on the trip with Snow was an American doctor, George Hatem (Ma Haide, 馬海德, 1910-1988), a travelling companion not mentioned in *Red Star*. Snow later left the Soviet area and wrote a book in support of the CPC. Hatem remained behind, joined the Party, and held important positions after the establishment of New China.

Although Snow was a reporter, he was entirely different from contemporary professional journalists. Professional journalists today, to minimize any subjective coloring to their stories, report what they consider to be the “objective facts.” For Snow, journalism was a convenient job and status. He himself had a great deal of concern and enthusiasm about the future of China and the future of the world. He wanted to have his own impact and was willing to throw himself into the tasks that he himself considered to be valuable and worthwhile enterprises. In his book he did nothing at all to conceal his own subjective perspective. This is also reflected in the variety contained in *Red Star*: it includes description, color stories, autobiography, travelogue, and a diary of miscellany. Snow not only wanted to know about news events. He put even more energy into painting a picture of the Soviet area. He not only interviewed leaders but also lower-grade army officers, ordinary soldiers, and peasants. He would also often voice his own enthusiastic evaluations, prefacing many of his reports with his personal take on things.

Snow’s journal to Shaanxi was an exploration of a mystery, a search for an epic—and, indeed, an epic is what he found. Under Snow’s pen Shaanxi became a newly-discovered country displaying its glories to an unfamiliar newcomer. As Snow saw it,

Shaanxi was an optimistic, free, equal, energetic red utopia. He respected, revered, appreciated the people of that place. In evaluating the CPC leadership he often used the terms *extraordinary* or *legendary*. He not only described the once-wounded Mao Zedong as “godlike”; Liu Zhidan<sup>1</sup> was a “modern Robin Hood”; He Long<sup>2</sup> was “legendary.” As we can see, Snow had an extremely romantic nature. In the opening chapter of his memoirs, *A Journey to the Beginning*, he describes his arrival in Shanghai in 1928: “I was 22 years old. I’d made a little money speculating on Wall Street, giving me what I figured to be just enough capital to take a year for a very economical journey around the world. I planned to return to New York and make more money before I was 30 so I could spend the rest of my life studying and writing.” Someone that young who decides to take a trip around the world cannot but be considered a romantic. But his experience in Shaanxi and what he saw and heard were not merely a romantic adventure. They were like a red dream, beyond his wildest expectations.

The Long March, as described in *Red Star Over China*, is a model of a romantic adventure, very much bearing the stamp of Edgar Snow himself. The chapter on the March goes far beyond interviews and description. The materials come from Snow’s numerous interviews with Long March veterans, but as written up they sound like a novelistic account. Snow has combined the original materials into a narrative that comes out as a kind of legend, a moving song of salvation. In Snow’s account of Mao Zedong, the words of the person being interviewed are put in quotation marks. But in the chapter

---

<sup>1</sup> 1903-1935; a communist guerilla leader in northern Shaanxi.

<sup>2</sup> 1888-1969; communist soldier, promoted to Marshal in 1955. Prior to joining the Red Army he had been a bandit.

on the Long March there are no quotations; it's as if Snow himself were an eyewitness. His narrative spares no words of praise. In order that westerners might understand the scope of the Long March he compares it with things they are familiar with, but in each particular the achievements of the western example are diminished. "Compared to the Long March, Hannibal's crossing of the Alps was like a summer's day stroll. A more interesting comparison would be Napoleon's retreat from Moscow: but his Grand Army was utterly destroyed, its morale smashed." In the subsequent histories of the Long March published in Red China, the climax and turning point is the Zunyi Conference.<sup>3</sup> But the Zunyi Conference concerned a transfer of power within the CPC, and when Snow was in Shaanxi he did not have much information about this. Rather, he spent his attention on the crossing of the Dadu River. "The forcible crossing of the Dadu River was the most important incident on the Long March." His account of the crossing is exciting and moving, full of heroic flavor. Snow's enthusiastic description of the Long March greatly moved western readers. A 1938 review of *Red Star Over China* by [Edward C.?] Carter said: the account of the Long March alone "makes this book this year's greatest adventure story."

As Snow saw it, although the CPC was still not the ruling party, it could represent China: it was the orthodox inheritor of Chinese history. It brought together the past and the present, and it owned the future. Although there were many fewer soldiers in the Red Army than in the KMT army, he believed that the Red Army was much more

---

<sup>3</sup> Held January, 1935; the meeting is conventionally regarded as marking the beginning of Mao Zedong's ascent to supreme leadership of the CPC. Zunyi is a town in Guizhou province.

representative, since the Red Army included men from every province. The other Chinese armies were generally divided according to province, such as the Northeast Army or the Northwest Army. The Red Army, however, broke through the provincial barriers. “The Red Army may well be China’s only true National Army.” The chapter describing how the Red Army began the Long March in Jiangxi is entitled “A Nation on the Move.” It does not regard the Long March as the activity of a political party or political force. At the same time, Snow linked the CPC to the glories of Chinese history. In the book he wrote about various miraculous historical events. His understanding of Chinese history was not necessarily correct; the main thing for him was to be able to link China’s ancient history with contemporary Red China. As he saw it, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia soviet base area was “exactly at the place of origin of China’s beginnings.” The first time he ever saw a real Chinese Communist, Deng Fa, it was at the site of the palace of the Martial Emperor of the Han. He regarded his trip to Shaanxi as the equivalent of travelling back through China’s past. Red China was not only part of China’s interior; even more it represented China’s past and present. It was where the spirit of China resided, its soul.

Snow was able to get to Shaanxi and interview Mao Zedong because he had previously shown inclinations toward Red China. The first chapter of *Red Star* is entitled “Some Still Unanswered Questions.” It described his curiosity about the CPC before he went to Shaanxi. The number of questions raised in that chapter about Red China cannot really be called “some”: they run to more than one hundred. The questions were many-sided and linked together and urgently in need of answers. Snow had long been eager to find an opportunity to visit the Communists. In his raising of various questions he had

already prepared the answers, signaling his approval of the Communists: “How can they be so enduring, so strong, so brave. . . What kind of men are these invincible warriors?” This kind of enthusiasm and curiosity is not the way a professional reporter goes about the pursuit of news. He was a youth with a sense of responsibility seeking the truth about China. He had already been in China for seven years and had seen frightening scenes of hunger and death. On the one hand people were starving to death and on the other hand there were the rich in the cities eating, drinking, and playing. In his memoirs Snow wrote that at the time he wondered “why the poor did not rebel.” Obviously, even before his trip to Shaanxi his mentality was close to that of the Communist party. His enthusiasm and approval of Red China was obviously related to his loss of hope concerning conditions in the white areas. In comparing the two zones, there was clearly greater expectations from the red areas.

In Snow’s eyes, the most impressive thing about Red China was not its military or political achievements but its nurture of a new humanity, a mass of “new people” who represented the ways in which China was not going to be the same as traditional China. These people were honest, enthusiastic, open, vigorous—in all ways different from what Snow considered ordinary Chinese to be. The first Communist Snow met was Deng Fa.<sup>4</sup> When Deng was held hostage during the Xi’an incident he gave no thought at all about his own safety but remained lively and enthusiastic. Snow marveled: “How could this sort of person be Chinese! How could he be a Red Bandit!” Later, in the Red zone he was amazed by all sorts of people that he met. In the persons of the little warriors of the Red

---

<sup>4</sup> 1906-1946; an early CPC organizer.



Army he saw Chinese youth no longer infected by a cowering fear of authority. The peasants in the rural co-ops had self-respect and were open in their natures, no longer the typical timid Chinese peasant. The Red Army warriors were genuinely happy, and this also went against Snow's understanding of China: "Passive satisfaction is very common, but a more joyful happiness . . . is very rare." Snow often linked this "new man" together with children. As he saw it, many people in the Red area had a childlike nature: honest, curious, free of burdens of the past, full of hope. Very many of the officers in the Red Army were only in their twenties and a large portion of the men were in their teens. The Little Red Devils were actually children.<sup>5</sup> Under Snow's pen, the relatively more aged Red leadership also had a childlike nature. Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong both had a "boyish air." The old Comrade Xu Teli also was like a child. Peng Dehuai "had a great liking for children; I noticed that wherever he went he was followed by a crowd of children."

One may say that in reporting the things that caused him wonder and amazement, there were also times when he had to suppress his own occasional doubts and unpleasant experiences. He said very little about defects in the Red area. And whenever he did mention defects, his general custom was to make excuses. After mentioning the defects,

---

<sup>5</sup> These were children who accompanied the Red Army, performing fatigue and auxiliary services. The most famous is probably Hu Yaobang (1915-1985, formal head of the Party organization from 1982-1987).

there would be a “however” (但是)<sup>6</sup>, providing reasons and explanations. What he was unable to explain away he would forget or cover up, avoiding directly facing into them.

Before he arrived in Xi'an Snow had never met a Chinese Communist; he only had his enthusiasm about China and his curiosity about the Party. His several months' stay in Shaanxi left him with a wealth of information and a profound impression, laying a basis for all his future attitude toward Red China. Into his old age his support for Red China did not change. However, as he grew older, the situation in China continued to change. As more information began to appear, by the 1960s, although he continued to support Red China, it seems that his degree of enthusiasm moderated somewhat. *Red Star Over China* was published in 1937, and in 1968 Snow revised it for the first time. In that edition he made few changes to the original text but added a number of notes. These additions show an increased self-awareness and identify certain defects in the original text. There were adjustments in the praise of the Long March. His first note in the chapter on the “Long March” reads: “This was the first detailed published account of the Long March. It relies mainly on the personal memories of many of the participants (reflecting their heroic perspective on that retreat).”

The part of *Red Star Over China* that has attracted the most attention are the interviews with Mao Zedong, to the extent that later references to the book stress Snow's relationship with Mao—defining it as one between friends but even more as one between

---

<sup>6</sup> Danshi is one of the words for “but” or “however.” In communist writings the term is conventionally taken to mark a discontinuity: what follows danshi serves to qualify or even negate what has been said before. For example: “The implementation of our policy has basically successful, danshi there are still many defects and shortcomings.”

an admirer and his guide. Snow's many interviews with Mao draw attention to his role as a foreign reporter, with the advantages of an outsider. *Mao Zedong's Autobiography*, published in 2008 by the People's Publishing Company, brings together the accounts of the conversations between Mao and Snow in 1936, 1939, 1965, and 1970. It seems that Mao could tell his story only to someone like this eager listener from the outside and reminisce about his personal experiences. In *Red Star Over China* Snow says that when Mao told the story of his early life also present was a professional stenographer, that is, Mao's wife He Zezhen. Naturally, this was also the first time that she had heard these stories. Snow's interviews not only allowed foreigners to understand Mao Zedong but also served to allow Mao's countrymen and his comrades in the Party to understand him. But apparently it was not easy to tell these autobiographical tales to Chinese reporters or to comrades in the Party; and also, perhaps, it would have been improper to do so. As Snow saw it, the Communist party played down the role of the individual, focusing on the collective. Each Party member had his own stories about an earlier life, but once the member had joined the Party the personal stories were gathered into the general current. But Snow came from a nationality that emphasized the individual and was avid to hear stories about distinct individuals. It may be said that Mao Zedong's memoirs were instigated by Snow, produced under Snow's guidance. Mao Zedong's personal oral history was relatively honestly told. These rich personal experiences established him as an individual, not as a god or a symbol. Aside from a good many words of praise, Snow also said, "He has not yet set himself up as an idol to be worshiped by those around him"—"not yet." This little phrase seems to reveal a hidden worry. In his conversations with Mao Snow remained a reporter, a participant in a dialogue. He set the theme for the

story about an individual. In the 1960s Snow held another interview. Because he remained an “outsider,” this kind of honesty could remain compatible with continued friendship.

Snow described Red China, but Red China also described Snow and left its impression on all facets of him. When Snow arrived in Shaanxi, it was not merely a matter of a reporter discovering Shaanxi; it was also a matter of those in Shaanxi discovering him, even arranging his trip from Beijing to Shaanxi. The CPC naturally understood that among the foreign reporters in China that Snow was one with leftist leanings. He came to Shaanxi under the auspices of the CPC’s “united front” against Japan; he could be understood as an “object of the international united front”; and there is no doubt that this united front work was very successful. Snow’s tomb at Peking University has an inscription by Ye Jianying<sup>7</sup>: “American friend of the Chinese people.” This formula had already been established in a telegram from Mao Zedong to Edgar Snow: “Mr. Snow is a friend of the Chinese people. His whole life long he tirelessly promoted mutual understanding and friendship between the people of China and the United States. He made an important contribution. He will live forever in the hearts of the Chinese people.” “American friend of the Chinese people” represents Red China’s definition of Edgar Snow. Snow visited the revolution, but did not join in the revolution. He was an observer, not a participant. He was also a bourgeois, not a proletarian. He was Red China’s American “friend,” a fellow-traveler, but not a “comrade.” Red China seemingly kept up its friendship with Snow, but also kept a certain distance. Snow was a

---

<sup>7</sup> 1897-1986; communist soldier; promoted to Marshal in 1955.

bourgeois author; he remained in the west and used language the west could understand to tell the story of the Communist Party of China. This is the function he served.

The first Chinese translation of *Red Star Over China* saw light in 1938, published by the Restoration Society, only a year after the original had appeared. The translation was the work of Communist party members in Shanghai. One of these was Hu Yuzhi, who discussed the process of translation. The reason for this translation was the hope of using the neutral pen of an American reporter to achieve the goal of rectification of names and propaganda. At that time Snow was clearly not famous and *Red Star Over China* was even less well-known. Hu Yuzhi especially emphasized Mao Zedong's role in educating Snow: "Snow was a bourgeois news reporter. His ability to write this book cannot be separated from the education and help given him by Chairman Mao. Chairman Mao spent a lot of effort on Snow, changing his bourgeois thought. It was only then that he was able to write this book. Otherwise, what he wrote would not have been so moving." What's interesting is that in 1971 the Sanlian Book Store published *Essays by a Friendly American, Edgar Snow, Concerning His Visits to China*. At the end of the book is the following sketch of Snow: "Snow is a relatively serious bourgeois writer and journalist. For along time he has sympathized with our revolution, respected Chairman Mao, and has given attention to the study Chinese issues." Evidently, despite Chairman Mao's education and help, Snow remained a "bourgeois" and did not undergo any change.

*Du Shu* (The Reader), July 2011