

Red Star Over China and Black Reconstruction, Anna Pugsley

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Edgar Snow was a journalist and the first American to bear witness to the revolutionary struggle of the Communist Party of China and share the truth with the rest of the world. He first did so with his publication of *Red Star Over China* in 1937 after spending months interviewing CPC leaders, fighters, and peasants in Bao'an after they completed the Long March. The Red Army continued to Yan'an after his departure.

Snow originally arrived in China in 1928 to seek adventure, by his own admission. He began his career there as a supporter of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang but eventually found himself on assignment through the famine-stricken Northwest China. He wrote that peasants in Northwest China, and indeed in most of the country, lived under brutal repression and abuse by feudal landlords, subject to excessive taxation, bonded in debt, illiterate, and kept barely at subsistence levels. The famine exposed him to even further indignities, but Snow noted that the worst crime of the famine was not the sheer starvation and death, but that landlords lived and ate lavishly in the midst of the dying peasants. It was here that the Red Army passed through on their Long March.

Snow stumbled upon masses of miserable peasants, who at first glance seemed to accept their situation with passivity. But later upon speaking with Red Army members, he makes an admission to readers:

"I was mistaken. The Chinese peasant was not passive; he was not a coward. He would fight when given a method, an organization, leadership, a workable program, hope - *and arms*. The development of "communism" in China had proved that. Against the above background, therefore, it should not surprise us to learn that Communists were popular in the Northwest, for conditions there had been no better for the mass of the peasantry than elsewhere in China."

This is precisely what was so revolutionary about the Red Army; they presented to the peasants a path to a future in which every human lived in dignity, equality, and flourishing. This contrasted heavily with the Kuomintang, the nationalist army, which only perpetuated the landlords' oppressive rule and committed unspeakable crimes of their own; they looted, killed, raped, and burned their way through conquered villages. The Red Army, on the other hand, adhered to their principles of transparency, respect, and uplift with astonishing discipline. More remarkable still is that inherent in the Red Army's purpose is its role and duty to be made up of and serve the people. The Army was made up of mostly peasants and workers from all over China who so readily sacrificed their lives to become a part of this positive vision forward. The Party, and its intimate connection with the people, demonstrated something unprecedented in Chinese history. For emphasis, Snow describes:

“But how did the peasants feel about this? The Chinese peasant was supposed to hate organization, discipline, and any social activity beyond his own family. The Reds laughed when that was mentioned. They said that no Chinese peasant disliked organization or social activity if he was working for himself and not the *min-t'uan* - the landlord or the tax collector. And I had to admit that most of the peasants to whom I talked seemed to support the soviets and the Red Army. Many of them were very free in their criticisms and complaints, but when asked whether they preferred it to the old days, the answer was nearly always an emphatic yes. I noticed also that most of them talked about the soviets as *woment'i chengfu* - “our government” - and this struck me as something new in rural China.”

It was here that Snow realized he had an opportunity to be a witness, and that his ultimate responsibility as a journalist was to record the truth and spread it to the people. At the time of his book's publication, there were no reliable reports about the goings-on in Communist-controlled areas, and certainly nothing truthful about much of the leadership of the Communist Party. Thus his interviews with the leadership have proved an invaluable contribution to our understanding and clarity on the Party's early days. Snow's coverage of Northwest China's famine was twofold; beyond faithfully fulfilling his duties as a journalist, he also set the background for the Red Army's enthusiastic welcome in the region, as emphasized the centrality of the peasant, the worker, in China's revolutionary struggle. Understanding the condition of the Chinese peasant is vital to understanding the success of the Party.

China's population at the time was about 80-90% peasantry, so for the Red Army's communism to have any chance at effecting change, the leadership needed to creatively synthesize Marx and Lenin's ideas with both China's material conditions and inheritance of 5000 years of civilizational history. Snow writes that in the West, there was much confusion as to the nature of the Communist Party of China's nature and mission, with many mistakenly classifying it as simply a movement of agrarian egalitarianism or reform. The dogmatism of many Western observers trapped their minds in established Marxist orthodoxies and prevented them from understanding the Communist Party and its implications not just for China, but for the world. According to Snow,

“Chinese communism as I found it in the Northwest might more accurately be called rural equalitarianism than anything Marx would have found acceptable as a model child of his own. This was manifestly true economically, and although in the social, political, and cultural life of the organized soviets there was a crude Marxist guidance, limitations of material conditions were everywhere obvious... in the rural areas their activity centered chiefly on the solution of the immediate problems of the peasants - land and taxes. But Chinese Communists never regarded land distribution of anything more than a phase in the building of a mass base, a stage enabling them to develop the revolutionary struggle toward the conquest of power and the ultimate realization of thoroughgoing Socialist changes.

... The immediate basis of support for the Reds in the Northwest was obviously not so much the idea of ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ as it was something like the promise of Dr. Sun Yat-sen: ‘Land to those who till it.’”

The task of the Communist Party to synthesize Marxist ideas with China and its people are the direct roots of the Party's trajectory as well as task today. This is why China cannot, and does not want to export its model worldwide. As Americans today our job is to distill the values and principles of the Chinese Revolution and adapt them to our society and our people. Through

Edgar Snow's contribution we are able to get a clearer picture of what the process and approach was, which remains a record of China's invaluable gift to humanity.

However, in this country, we have a history and a precedent for this type of people's revolution, a record of which would not be possible without the work and witness of W.E.B. Du Bois in his book *Black Reconstruction in America*. Central to Du Bois's thesis and mission of this work is the very notion that the worker, when given the opportunity, has the capacity to be an agent of his own destiny, a maker of history, and the most concrete example in this country is that of the slave during and after the Civil War. He reconceptualized the slave as the black worker and challenged the notion that these workers were passive, inactive actors during the Civil War and the Reconstruction period immediately after. In fact the slave lived in conditions not too dissimilar to the Chinese peasant, as evidenced in the chapter "The General Strike":

It must be borne in mind that nine-tenths of the four million black slaves could neither read nor write, and that the overwhelming majority of them were isolated on country plantations. Any mass movement under such circumstances must materialize slowly and painfully. What the Negro did was to wait, look, and listen and try to see where his interest lay. There was no use in seeking refuge in an army which was not an army of freedom; and there was no sense in revolting against armed masters who were conquering the world. As soon, however, as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army. So that in this way it was really true that he served his former master and served the emancipating army; and it was also true that this withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war.

And when they spotted a ripe opportunity for freedom and dignity, they mobilized and collectively worked to achieve freedom even at the cost of their lives. We see here, in the words of Zhu De, that the poor of the world are one big family, and that the Long March and Reconstruction, while not identical, serve as a basis for intercivilizational unity in their struggles for freedom and self-determination.