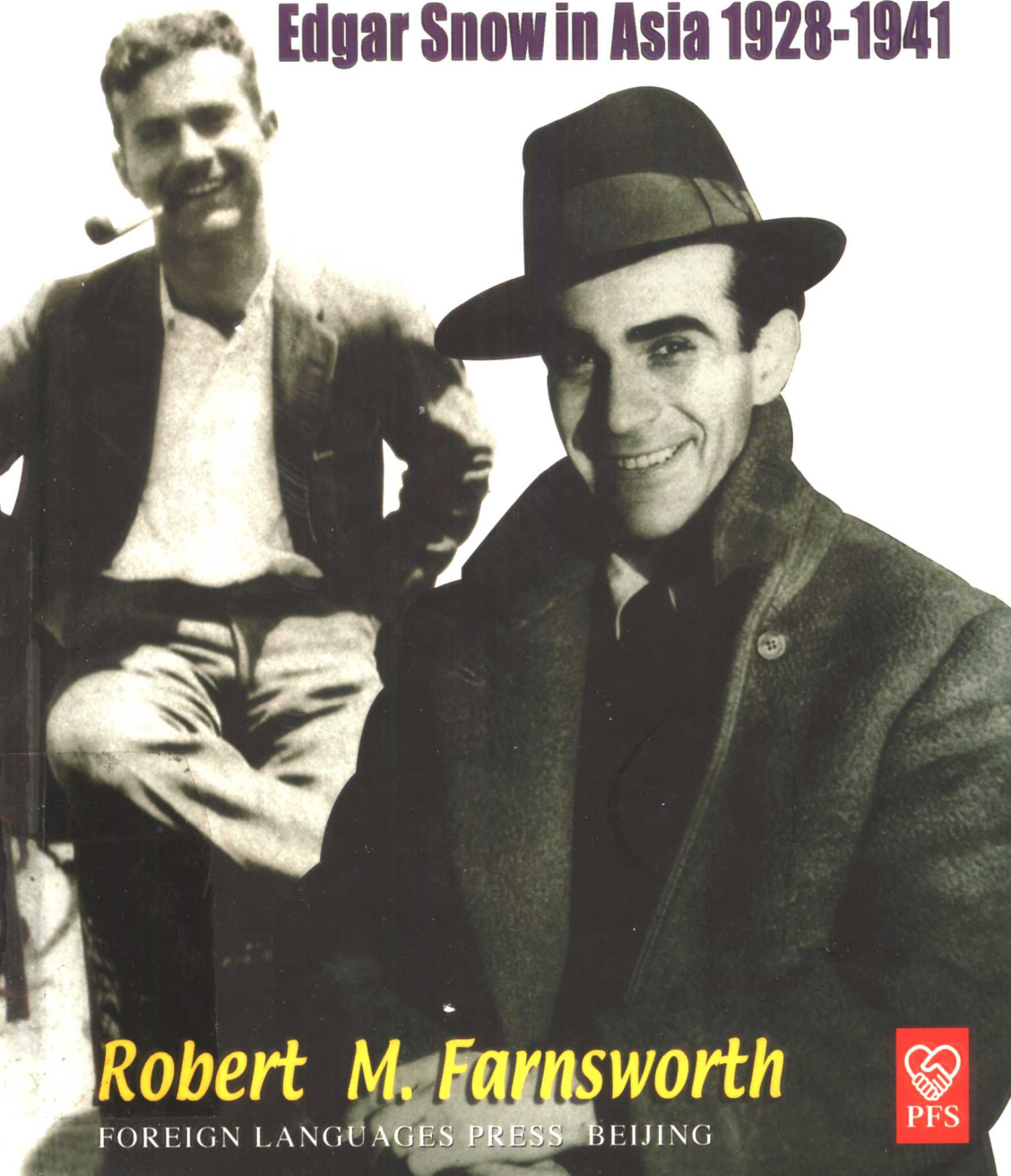


From Vagabond to Journalist

Edgar Snow in Asia 1928-1941



Robert M. Farnsworth

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS BEIJING



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in Asia
1928-1941

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PREFACE

Huang Hua

It is a great honor for me to write a preface for the new, PFS (China Society for People's Friendship Studies) 50-book series under the general title of *Light on China*. All these books were written in English by journalistic and other eyewitnesses of the events described. I have read many of them over the seven decades since my student days at Yenching University. With some of the outstanding authors in this series I have ties of personal friendship, mutual regard, and warm memories dating from before the Chinese people's Liberation in 1949.

Looking back and forward, I am convinced that China is pursuing the right course in building a strong and prosperous country in a rapidly changing world with its complex and sometimes volatile developments.

The books in this series cover a span of some 150 years, from the mid 19th to the early 21st century. The numerous events in China, the sufferings and struggles of the Chinese people, their history and culture, and their dreams and aspirations were written by

foreign observers animated by the spirit of friendship, equality and cooperation. Owing to copyright matters and other difficulties, not all eligible books have as yet been included.

The founder of the first Chinese republic, Dr. Sun Yat-sen wrote in his Testament in 1925, “For forty years I have devoted myself to the cause of the people’s revolution with but one end in view: the elevation of China to a position of freedom and equality among the nations. My experiences during those forty years have convinced me that to attain this goal we must bring about an awakening of our own people and ally ourselves in common struggle with those people of the world who regard us as equals.”

Chairman Mao Zedong declared, at the triumphal founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, “The Chinese people have stood up.” Today, having passed its 53rd anniversary, we see the vast forward strides that have been taken, and note that many more remain to be made.

Many foreign observers have traced and reported the real historical movement of modern China, that is: from humiliation — through struggle — to victory. Seeking understanding and friendship with the Chinese people, their insight and perspective were in basic harmony with the real developments in China. But there have been others who viewed China and the Chinese people through glasses tinted by hostile prejudice or ignorance and have invariably made irrelevant observations that could not stand the test of time. This needs to be better understood by young people and students, at home and abroad. The PFS series *Light on China* can help them gain an overview of what went before, is happening now, and will

emerge in the future.

Young students in China can additionally benefit from these works by seeing how foreign journalists and authors use fluent English to record and present historical, philosophical, and socio-political issues and choices in China. For millions of students in China, English has become a compulsory second language. These texts will also have many-sided usefulness in conveying knowledge of our country to other peoples.

Students abroad, on their part, may be helped by the example of warm, direct accounts and impressions of China presented by their elders in the language that most readily reaches them.

Above all, this timely and needed series should help build bridges of friendship and mutual understanding. Good books long out of print will be brought back to strengthen the edifice.

My hearty thanks and congratulations go first to ex-Premier Zhu Rongji, who has been an effective supporter of this new, PFS series. They go to all engaged in this worthy project, the Foreign Languages Press, our China Society for People's Friendship Studies, and others who have given their efforts and cooperation.

Chairman Mao Zedong has written: "So many deeds cry out to be done, and always urgently. The world rolls on, time presses. Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour."

The hour has come for making these books available to young people in China and abroad whose destiny is to build a better world together. Let this series add a small brick to that structure.

Beijing, Autumn 2003

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I BEGAN RESEARCHING THIS BOOK in 1984, just before going to China for an academic year as a Fulbright lecturer in American Literature. It has taken long to write in part because the history Edgar Snow lived through is not part of the general education of a professor of American Literature. I had much learning to do. I should also note, however, that approximately two of the intervening years were spent editing a collection of Snow's early travel articles throughout Asia, *Edgar Snow's Journey South of the Clouds*, which was published in 1991.

I was well aware that Edgar Snow held a very special role in Chinese history and politics; nevertheless, I was unprepared for much that quickly followed after my wife and I arrived in China in 1984. I was almost immediately invited to become a member of a new society honoring the roles of Anna Louise Strong, Agnes Smedley, and Edgar Snow in China's national revolution. Liu Liqun, then secretary of that society, arranged a memorable tour for me to Yen'an and Pao An. He also introduced me to many who once knew Edgar Snow and now were honored for their own achievements in China. Rewi Alley opened his private library to me and over lunch often tried to straighten out the confusing tangle of history and politics that marked Snow's China years. Irving Epstein lived in the same hotel compound as we and was generously ready to answer questions. George Hatem was a friendly

but more elusive and distant presence. Huang Hua shared memories of his student days at Yenching when he first met Ed and Peg Snow in a private interview in a spacious chamber of the Hall of the People. I was invited to numerous conferences and public receptions.

But looking back at these early days of research, I am a little embarrassed by the opportunities wasted, because I was yet so ill-prepared. My awareness of modern Chinese history, like that of most Americans, was vague and confused. My principal job at the time was to teach Chinese students about American literature. To heighten my sense of frustration it was obvious that the memory of Edgar Snow was frequently evoked for contemporary political purposes that were not always clear to me. Too often the conferences I attended seemed more obviously public showpieces than serious efforts at historical inquiry.

I returned to the University of Missouri-Kansas City to work among the papers of the Edgar Snow Collection with a sense of relief. Slowly but surely I found my story there. Meanwhile I continued to read as widely as I could in the writings of Snow's contemporaries who viewed the same historical events but from different personal angles. I was surprised and gratified by the talent and achievements of many about whom I previously knew so little.

But there was yet another reason why this book took so long to write, and that had to do with Edgar Snow and his profession. Throughout his career Snow felt a close kinship between journalism and literature. He occasionally tried his hand with fiction and certainly read widely and enthusiastically among novelists and short-story writers, not just for personal enjoyment but also for instruction about the art of writing itself. But his claim to fame rests upon his ability to explain complex historical events in a foreign land in passionate words that a concerned, intelligent American citizen can understand and feel. This task carried for him a lode of civic urgency. Democracy does not work unless the people care and are informed.

As Snow's deep professional pride became clear to me, it became more and more a conscious challenge to my own long-engrained academic habits of writing. I slowly learned a new respect for the achievement of clarity in

the face of the confusion and ambiguity that commonly clouds trivial as well as historical events. I also learned a new respect for an honest balance between recognizing that writing is intrinsically and inevitably personal, and hence editorial, but that a reader's trust depends upon his faith in the journalist's willingness and ability to report events fairly and objectively. Establishing a trusted personal perspective for a journalist is the task and challenge of a lifetime. That trust may be damaged, even destroyed, by factual mistakes or faulty arguments, but in the long-term it is even more deeply challenged by the danger of contradiction from history with all its surprisingly abrupt twists and turns. As my respect grew for the skill and passion needed to communicate with an intelligent, concerned popular audience, I tried to discipline my own writing accordingly.

Thus I have many debts of gratitude to acknowledge. Three times I have been privileged to live and work in Asia as a Fulbright lecturer in American Literature: in India, 1966-1967; in Turkey, 1974-1975; and in China, 1984-1985. I have not become an academic expert on Asia, but I believe these experiences prepared me to read the story of Edgar Snow's Asian journeying with an unusual empathy. And I shall always be grateful to the Fulbright program for these opportunities.

Closer to home Mary Clark Dimond and her husband, E. Grey Dimond, founder and respective chairs of the Edgar Snow Memorial Fund, were responsible for bringing the collection of Edgar Snow's papers to the University of Missouri-Kansas City. For several years before and during my research on Edgar Snow I served on the board of the Snow fund. My association with the fund made many of my contacts with Snow's friends possible both here and in China. But it is chiefly for the presence of the Edgar Snow Collection at the university that I am most indebted. I could not have written the story I have drawn from the Snow papers without the ability to return to the papers again and again to check the significance of information I did not immediately understand. I owe a special thanks to Marilyn Burlingame, archivist of the Edgar Snow Collection, who frequently found what I could not and sometimes led me to material whose value I did not recognize.

When I began this project, the late Henry Mitchell, another board member and associate vice chancellor of the university, was to coauthor this book with me. He early located and acquired important Snow documents and encouraged my early efforts to put our research into writing. Under the press of his administrative duties and probably impatient with my slowness at putting the story together, but before learning of his fatal illness, he withdrew from the project. His encouragement and continued support meant much to me.

I early met Helen Foster Snow and corresponded frequently with her over the years of my research. The collection of her papers at the Hoover Library and her voluminous writing about her years in China when she was married to Edgar Snow are a major source for the story I have written. However, even as I have written a story that differs from that of her husband, so does my story differ from hers.

Lois Wheeler Snow figures far less prominently in my story since it principally focuses on Snow's years in China before he met her. However, she has been very generous in granting me access to and use of her husband's papers and photographs, and my account of Snow's final days draws heavily from her book, *A Death with Dignity*.

After I had written a great number of pages, but still had not completed a first draft, I strongly felt a need for assurance from someone knowledgeable that what I was writing was worth continuing. I asked John S. Service to read my manuscript, and he graciously consented. At that point Service pointed out that my story badly needed shape and focus, but he also took the trouble to correct some minor geographical and historical mistakes and even to suggest added information and to encourage me. He has since read the revised manuscript, and his advice and encouragement have been invaluable. A. Tomas Grunfeld also generously provided useful advice.

I am also indebted to the Faculty Research Council of the University of Missouri-Kansas City for the travel grants that made much of my early research possible.

It would be an imposition on readers and the publisher to list all to whom I owe gratitude. I hope the published book offers some return for their gener-

osity and courtesy, but I also retain many vivid memories that someday I hope to translate into more private opportunities to show my thanks.

Since my story is so heavily concerned with Snow's years in China from 1928 to 1941 when the Wade-Giles system was the most commonly accepted method of representing Chinese words in English, I decided it was appropriate to use that system consistently rather than to change all of Snow's references to pinyin.

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INTRODUCTION

IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Journey to the Beginning*, Edgar Snow declared he had already lived three lives. The first, in Kansas City, where he was born and grew up, also included early adult years in New York, where he followed his older brother to pursue a career in advertising.

The second began at twenty-three, when he abruptly left New York to sign on board a freighter bound for the South Pacific, the first stage of a journey around the world to satisfy a craving for adventure and test his ability to earn a living as a writer. His journey stalled in Asia for thirteen years, during which he wrote his way to world recognition in the *Saturday Evening Post* and four books, *Far Eastern Front*, *Living China*, *Red Star over China*, and *Battle for Asia*.

His return to the United States in 1941 began a third life as a popular and distinguished foreign correspondent during World War II for the *Saturday Evening Post*. But following the war the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a Cold War that Snow considered a tragic mistake. He dropped from public favor and published his autobiography in part to reclaim his public authority.

Snow recognized in his autobiography that his second life was the key to the Edgar Snow the world once knew and was then in danger of

forgetting. He minimized the story of his first life in Kansas City and built the story of his third life during World War II and the Cold War that followed on what he had learned during his maturing years in Asia from 1928 to 1941. Even during the Cold War, his *Red Star over China* continued to win recognition as a classic of historical journalism.

Since Snow published his autobiography, John Maxwell Hamilton has written a distinguished and detailed biography of Snow. With these two books published, the question arises why yet another about the life of Edgar Snow.

Hamilton's book is the result of years of painstaking research and mature consideration. Often insightful biography, it focuses principally on the difficult dialogue the mature Edgar Snow had with American public opinion and foreign policy. Inherently this makes Snow's formative and most productive years in China incidental to Snow's long struggle against American foreign policy in later life. Hamilton treats Snow's personal life with marked reticence, minimizing the role it played in his professional development. Perhaps as a by-product of his respect for Snow's privacy, Hamilton also accepted what Edgar Snow publicly wrote about himself, particularly in *Journey to the Beginning*, as if it were fact.

A close examination of the very extensive personal papers of Edgar Snow and his first wife, Helen Foster Snow, housed respectively at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and at the Hoover Library on the campus of Stanford University, has made clear to me Edgar Snow was in fact more troubled, vulnerable, and consequently more interesting, than the poised, purposive, but often too blandly romantic persona Snow created in *Journey to the Beginning*.

The Kansas City family in which Snow grew up was always important to him, but he had great difficulty acknowledging some of his negative feelings about that family. His lengthy and detailed letters to father, mother, sister, and brother, particularly during his first few years abroad, are rich in sentiment, but in frequent contradiction to his behavior. He promised

repeatedly to come home, but after New York he never seriously considered living in Kansas City again. In *Journey to the Beginning* he acknowledged his youth was troubled by the conflict between his father's atheism and his mother's Catholicism. The pain of this memory became fixed in his memory by the circumstances of his mother's death while he lingered in faraway Shanghai. He still found this story too painful to tell in *Journey to the Beginning*.

During Snow's Asia years his elder brother, originally a role model for his independence from his Kansas City family, worked his way toward the middle-class conservative success from which Snow fled when he left New York's advertising community. He married, established a family, and moved into a notably responsible position in the American business world. Their contrasting success made the brothers a little competitively suspicious for a time, yet on Snow's return to America they readily restored their close fraternal bond.

The marriages of both Snow's brother and sister followed close upon the death of his mother and his own renewed determination to resume his world journey homeward. But eighteen months later in India, struggling to understand the history of yet another ancient and proud civilization's rebellion against European colonialism and its own feudal past, and burdened with more and more foreboding news about the prospect of a job in a United States mired in deep economic depression, Snow precipitately decided to return to Shanghai. The bachelor apartment he once shared with his brother in New York was no longer available, and silently he admitted he felt no desire to return to his family in Kansas City.

Instead he returned to Shanghai lonely, suffering from malaria, and questioning his own bachelor's life following his brother's and sister's marriages. His ego was soothed and restored when a bright and beautiful young American woman, who landed in Shanghai only a few days after he did, arranged to be introduced to him and unabashedly declared herself a fan of his writing.