

# THE GREAT ROAD

The Life and Times  
of **CHU TEH**



*Agnes Smedley*

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS BEIJING



# THE GREAT ROAD

*The Life and Times of Chu Teh*

by

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Foreign Languages Press

First published by Monthly Review Press, New York, USA, 1956.

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ISBN 7-119-03472-3

Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2003

Published by Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

*Printed in the People's Republic of China*



CHU TEH, 1937



AGNES SMEDLEY, 1937

## PREFACE

*Huang Hua*

**I**t 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*



## Prelude

**T**HIS is the story of the first sixty years of the life of General Chu Teh, commander in chief of the People's Liberation Army of China. Though General Chu authorized me to write it, it is not an official biography. Time, distance, and the world-shaking work of the Chinese revolution of which he is one of the chief leaders have precluded any final check by him of my facts and interpretations.

This book was first conceived in January 1937, when I arrived in the ancient town of Yen-an, northwestern China, where the old Chinese Workers and Peasants Red Army, and the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party which guided that army's destiny, had just established headquarters. Throughout the seven years which I had lived in China up to that time, the official Chinese press, echoed by the foreign press both in China and abroad, had described General Chu Teh variously as a "Red bandit chieftain," a "Communist bandit," a murderer, thief and arsonist. They had, however, never attempted to explain why millions of honorable and hard-working peasants, workers, idealistic students and intellectuals had been willing to fight or die for the cause which he espoused.

A thousand legends had been woven about his name, so that I expected, upon arriving in Yen-an, to find a fiercely heroic and fire-eating figure, an iron

revolutionary whose eloquent tongue could set forests afire. Consumed with curiosity, I went with two friends to his headquarters on the first evening of my arrival in Yen-an, and stepped inside the door to his private room.

The first thing I saw was an unpainted table lit by candlelight and piled with books, documents and papers, and the dim outline of a figure in blue-gray cotton uniform who had arisen as we entered.

First, we stood appraising each other. I knew already that he was fifty-one, but I now saw that his face was heavily lined, his cheeks sunken, and that he looked at least ten years older. He had but recently completed the epic Long March of the Red Army and the marks of undernourishment and suffering were on him.

In height he was perhaps five feet eight inches. He was neither ugly nor handsome, and there was nothing whatever heroic or fire-eating about him. His head was round and was covered with a short stubble of black hair touched with gray, his forehead was broad and rather high, his cheekbones prominent. A strong, stubborn jaw and chin supported a wide mouth and a perfect set of white teeth which gleamed when he smiled his welcome. His nose was broad and short and his skin rather dark. He was such a commonplace man in appearance that, had it not been for his uniform, he could have passed for almost any peasant in any village in China.

Men had told me that he was a simple, kindly and very commonplace man, hard-working, and without any interest in making himself a personal hero. All that they said seemed true, yet that term "simple" seemed true only after a fashion. His eyes, gazing at me, were very watchful and appraising. Unlike the eyes of most Chinese, which are black, his were a deep and soft brown, large, and gleaming with intelligence and awareness. I knew that a revolutionary leader of such long and bitter experience as his could not have remained so very simple and yet survive.

One thing I sensed at once: every inch of him was masculine, from his voice and movements to the flat-footed way in which he stood. As my eyes

became accustomed to the murkiness of the room I saw that his uniform was worn and faded from long wear and much washing, and I noted that his face was not immobile, but exceedingly expressive of every emotion that passed through him.

Still recalling the many tales circulated about him I told him of the charges of banditry against him, and expected him to laugh as I did. Instead of laughing, he fell suddenly silent, lowered his head and stared at the earthen floor, and his face became drawn and stark as if from tragedy. In that brief moment I caught a glimpse of some deep and tragic emotion seldom seen by his friends and comrades who spoke of him as a perennially optimistic man. The moment passed, he raised his head and looked at me with level eyes and said:

“Banditry is a class question.”

I thought of one line in a Western American folk ballad, “Some rob with a gun, some with a fountain pen,” but held my peace and was soon asking him something about his life. No, he replied to one question, he was not a rich landlord by origin but, instead, the son of a poor peasant family of Szechwan Province. I was to learn later that few or none of his own comrades knew much about his life and that none of them had had time to sit down and write books about him or anyone else.

It was while he was speaking that I conceived the idea of writing his biography, and when he asked me what I wished to do in Yenan I replied:

“I would like you to tell me the story of your whole life.”

“Why?” he asked, curiously, and I answered:

“Because you are a peasant. Eight out of every ten living Chinese are peasants. Not one has ever told his story to the world. If you would tell me your life story, a peasant would be speaking for the first time.”

“My life is only a small part of the life of the Chinese peasants and soldiers,” he remarked. “Wait a little, look about and meet others before you decide.”

I did as he suggested, and indeed met many men of more dramatic char-

acter than General Chu, men whose lives are the stuff from which great literature is made. Chinese peasants, however, are not dramatic, and I clung to my original idea, and in March 1937 we set to work.

As the weeks and months passed, with two or three evenings a week spent writing down what General Chu told me, I sometimes despaired of my task. He came of obscure, illiterate people and there were no letters, books, documents, or diaries to consult. He could not always remember exact dates and, until he was past forty, there was almost no public mention of his existence. He was a very busy man and often seemed to think the details of his childhood unimportant. Chinese family life, his military career, and, finally, his Communist Party discipline and life, had moulded him into a collectivist until it was sometimes difficult to know just what he as an individual had thought or done, or just where he left off and the revolution began.

The anti-Japanese war began while we were in the midst of his life story and he went to the front. I therefore put the book aside, but soon left for the front, not only to write a different book but also to observe him in action in so far as this was possible. Therefore, for one year I was able to watch him at work, at play, and at war with Japanese imperialism.

Apart from his multifarious military and political duties, it seemed to me that I had never known any human being with such a tenacious lust for life, nor one so basically democratic. There seemed no aspect of human existence that he did not long to explore and understand. Apart from the evenings of regular work with me in Yen-an, he would sometimes drop in to talk with me and with other people who gathered to drink tea in the sunny courtyard of the place where I lived, to eat peanuts, tell tales, sing songs and, as he sometimes said, "to boast."

During such idle, friendly moments I would often line everyone up and teach them the Virginia reel. Nothing on earth could keep General Chu from taking part in such dances, and he would swing his partner, *do-si-do*, and kick up the dust with a gust as great as that of the youngest guard in the line.

When I had taught him all I could of folk dancing, he asked me to teach him Western social dancing, which I did.

He danced as he worked—plugging at it patiently, convinced that it was just another means of breaking down old Chinese feudal customs. He liked it, too, but he was not the sort of which great dancers are made, as was one of his generals, the colorful Ho Lung.

Prowling around to see what General Chu was doing, I sometimes found him lecturing in the Red Army Academy, renamed Kangta—the Anti-Japanese Resistance University—or playing basketball with the cadets in the courtyard of the academy. At the front later I often sat on the sidelines as a critic and watched him and his staff officers compete in basketball with some of their headquarters guards. General Chu would often shake his head a little wistfully and remark that the young guards never liked him to play on their side because he wasn't a very good player.

He loved the theaters and he loved singing, and only necessary work kept him from theatrical performances in Yen-an or at the front. In the last years of the Second World War, when the American Military Observer Group in Yen-an gave showings of American movies, he was seen at almost every showing, howling at Abbott and Costello who, incidentally, are in the tradition of Chinese clowns and slapstick artists.

On the first evening that he was to work with me I stood with Lily Chang, a young actress who was my Chinese teacher and secretary-interpreter, and waited for him on the terrace before the loess cave rooms which we occupied. Lily was to interpret when I failed to understand Chinese or when the German which both General Chu and I spoke, to some extent, broke down—which was often. As we waited we looked down on the small town of Yen-an in the valley below with the Yen River flowing beyond its ancient walls and, beyond the river, the high pagoda on the loess cliff and the broad flat in the valley where the Yen flowed eastward to join the Yellow River, China's Sorrow. The broad flat, now a drill ground soon to become an airfield, had but recently been

turned into a race course. That was when a party of hard-riding, tough Mongols came riding down from the north for a conference with the Red Army, an occasion which caused General Chu to issue warning advice to all women and girls to make themselves scarce or to become very formal lest the guests misunderstand their welcome.

Yet the women and girls, I among them, turned up on that broad flat to watch the horse races between the Mongols and the Red Army cavalry and we wondered at the Mongol riders who had trained their shaggy mounts in swift trotting while they bent far back in the saddles until they were all but lying down on the backs of their horses. A Red Army rider had borrowed my swift pony, given me by General Chu, for the races, and Lily and I had yelled ourselves hoarse as we watched the little pony, like an Arabian steed, falling behind the tank-like Mongolian pony with his flying mane and long tail. The Mongols had now returned to Inner Mongolia, taking Red Army military and political advisers with them. War with Japan was being prepared and the revolution was lapping over into Inner Mongolia.

On the hour set, for he was a punctual man, we saw General Chu coming through the streets of the little town in the valley below. His guard was behind his undistinguished figure and General Chu was turning his head as if in conversation. He walked bent forward a little from the waist and his legs moved in a pumping gait that had carried him over untold thousands of miles of the paths and roads of China. He came up the loess cliff, coughing the hoarse bronchial cough that he had contracted in the mountains of eternal snow of Sikang Province. He halted once and he and the young guard with the automatic at his hip stood looking up the Yen River valley, pointing as they spoke. There was talk in the town of building a dam up the valley to prevent floods and provide irrigation, and to reforest the naked hills and valleys. Their voices came up to us, his deeper and a little hoarse, mingling with the higher and fresh voice of the tall and handsome youth by his side. It occurred to me that three generations were involved in this vast Chinese revolution: General

Chu's, the young guard's, and the young generation below the teen age.

General Chu and the young guard came on up the hill to our terrace. The peasant family that shared the terrace with us, hearing his voice, came out and greeted him with a loud welcome, peasant to peasant; and he went among them, patting the head of a little boy and taking the baby from the arms of the mother to lift it in the air above him and laugh with it.

In such a manner, and in such a setting, this book began.

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