

ON HER OWN



MILLY BENNETT

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**Journalistic Adventures from
San Francisco to the Chinese Revolution
1917-1927**

MILLY BENNETT

Edited and Annotated by A. Tom Grunfeld

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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

Author's Dedication

For my husband Hans Amlie, who fought in Spain against the brutalitarian [sic] forces of Europe and for the liberty of the Spanish people and is home with me—and for my friends Robert Hale Merriman, Harry Hynes, Wallace F. Burton, Philip Detro, Dave Doran, and two thousand more Americans who fought in Spain for the liberty of the Spanish people and will never come home.

Editor's Dedication

To Alice's patience, encouragement, and faith in my abilities in the early years, without which I could not have taken on this project.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I WILL not soon forget the year 1989. As the dramatic events in China unfolded, escalating from peaceful demonstrations to massive protests to the declaration of martial law and finally the shooting of students and workers, I experienced a growing sense of *déjà vu*. There I was sitting in my living room in New York City watching these events through the eyes—and cameras—of foreign journalists while simultaneously working on this manuscript, which, through the eyes of another foreign journalist, allowed me to view a China in 1927 when students and workers in Hankow joined together to struggle for a more just and democratic nation. In Hankow in 1927, as in Peking in 1989, military forces declared martial law and shot protesters in cold blood.

These events are more than merely coincidental, for both, though separated by sixty-two years, are linked to China's continuing struggle for independence, justice, and democracy throughout this century. These events can be seen along a continuum, as an ongoing search for an acceptable form of government to replace dynastic rule. The search began with the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1911 and has not yet been fully realized despite the social advances the Communist revolution has achieved since 1949.

This book, I believe, will aid in placing the current events in China into a broader historical context. Nominally, this is an autobiography of a remarkable woman and her brief time in China. But it goes beyond the narration of an individual's life by contributing an extraordinarily detailed look at a period of great instability as well as exploring the sensitive topic of the

involvement of foreigners in the internal politics of China.

In 1911 the Ch'ing dynasty collapsed, taking with it a system of government that had survived two millennia. In addition to a loss of political structure, China faced a cultural vacuum as well, for Confucianism had proven incapable of adapting to the twentieth century.

Out of this political, educational, social, and cultural vacuum came chaos. Administratively, for example, China broke up into regional zones governed by warlords, most of whom were rapacious in their treatment of the people they dominated. To fill these vacuums, Chinese intellectuals searched for alternatives and experimented with a host of ideas, organizations, and political ideologies.

Sun Yat-sen, the Western-trained medical doctor turned revolutionary, had finally succeeded in bringing down the imperial system but was having difficulty introducing an alternative republican form of government. His overtures for aid were rebuffed by the United States and Britain but welcomed in Moscow where the newly established Soviet government promised aid and advisers.

Meanwhile, in Shanghai, the Chinese Communist party (CCP) had been established in July 1921 with the assistance of the Soviet Union. It was in opposition to Dr. Sun's Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist party. But now, in spite of considerable opposition from within the ranks of the Chinese Communists, Moscow forced a union—a united front—whereby individual Communists would join the KMT while retaining their membership in the CCP. The Soviets believed the CCP too weak to achieve power by itself. This united front began in 1924, and the goal was to create an army and a political force that would move north out of Canton to overcome the warlords and unite China under one strong, central republican government.

But before this goal could be realized, Dr. Sun died on March 12, 1925, leaving a power struggle over his succession that pitted the political right under Chiang Kai-shek against those on the political left, such as Sun's widow Soong Ching-ling, Eugene Chen, the Soviet advisers, and, for a time, Wang Ching-wei.

To realize Sun's ambitions, his followers established the Nationalist Government of China on July 1, 1925, followed by the founding of the National Revolutionary Army, with Chiang Kai-shek as commander-in-chief, a year later on June 5, 1926. In addition, the decision was made to launch the Northern Expedition.

The Nationalists had eight armies totaling 100,000 men against the warlords Chang Tso-lin, Wu P'ei-fu, and Sun Ch'u'an-fang, whose armies numbered over 500,000.

The Northern Expedition began on July 9, 1926; by March 1927 the Nationalist armies had captured Shanghai, China's largest city and its commercial center. With the expedition an initial success, the struggle over the KMT leadership intensified, and the party split into a Right KMT under Chiang Kai-shek in Nanking and a Left KMT in Wuhan under Wang Ching-wei.

On April 12 Chiang, with assistance from the Shanghai underworld, launched a surprise attack on his Communist allies, slaughtering thousands. Both factions spent much of 1927 trying to woo the various undefeated warlords to their side in an attempt to gather enough military might to gain the upper hand.

In April the Wuhan government launched an attack against Chiang's allies in Honan Province using T'ang Sheng-chih's Eighth Army and Chang Fa-k'uei's Fourth Army. The battle was indecisive until the "Christian General" Feng Yü-hsiang stepped in and occupied a key area of a railway, putting himself in the position of being able to tip the scales of victory in either direction.

Both sides began to negotiate with Feng; the Soviet adviser Mikhail Borodin and his group spent three days (June 8-11) in Chengchow on behalf of the Left KMT while Chiang Kai-shek spent three days (June 19-21) with Feng in Hsuehchow. Feng decided to join forces with Chiang Kai-shek, and the Left KMT's fate was sealed.

To complicate matters, the Soviet advisers were, at the same time, also subject to an intense political struggle going on over their heads in Moscow. This one, between Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky over who was to rule the

Soviet Union, had its consequences in China since the two men differed on the nature of Soviet policy toward China. In China this problem surfaced when loyalists from each side tried to press their conflicting views.

Milly Bennett, for example, discusses one of the major areas of contention between some, like Mikhail Borodin who advocated a gradual process of reform—meaning a temporary alliance with warlords, landlords, and others essential for bringing about some small measure of social reform—and others, like A. Lozovsky and M. N. Roy, who called for immediate revolutionary action to fulfill peasants' and workers' demands for large-scale political and social change—that is, a revolution from below.

On June 1, 1927, Joseph Stalin, who had won the succession battle in Moscow, sent a telegram to his agent M. N. Roy in Wuhan ordering the CCP into action. He demanded the immediate confiscation of property, the creation of a Communist armed force, and the recruitment of more Communists into the KMT. Roy, misreading the loyalties of Wang Ching-wei, showed the letter to him. Wang immediately understood this to be a call for the Communist takeover of the Left KMT at his expense. He defected to the Right and joined Chiang Kai-shek.

The combination of Wang's defection and Feng Yü-hsiang's support for Chiang Kai-shek doomed the Left KMT and the united front. Communists were expelled from the KMT, and there were numerous public executions. T'ang Sheng-chih turned his troops on his erstwhile allies, the unions and peasant associations.

Chiang Kai-shek emerged as the sole leader of the KMT and, by 1928, the president of a country that was united, if only nominally. The Communists, following highly ill-advised instructions from Moscow, proceeded to launch attacks on several cities and as a consequence suffered serious defeats, leaving only remnants of their membership either to go underground in Shanghai or to flee to the safe refuge of the Chinggang mountains. There they licked their wounds and rebuilt their party and army to the point of being able to achieve final victory over the KMT a mere twenty-two years later.

Milly Bennett arrived in China in September 1926 and soon after agreed

to work with the Kuomintang, which in 1926 included all the antiwarlord forces in a united front. As an on-the-scene observer she describes, in this book, the dissolution of that united front and the final failures and eventual departure of the Soviet advisers from China.

This episode is but a brief part of the extraordinary life of a woman largely unknown in her homeland or the countries in which she lived. Fortunately, she left an account of the first thirty years of her life; unfortunately, she left little about the remainder.

Mildred Jacqueline Bremler was born on May 22, 1897, in San Francisco and graduated from Girls' High School on June 4, 1915. We have no record of how she spent the next two years until 1917 when she joined the San Francisco *Daily News* as a cub reporter.¹

In 1921 she traveled to Hawaii where on December 21 she married Mike Mitchell in Honolulu, where both were reporters for local papers. Mitchell was to be only the first of Milly's three husbands, along with numerous lovers, over the next three decades. She left Mitchell in the fall of 1926 and journeyed to Shanghai, arriving almost penniless. She stayed in China until August 1927. It is these first thirty years of her life that Milly has so eloquently and movingly shared with us in the pages that follow.

When Milly returned to the United States in 1927 she again worked for the *Daily News* as well as the Scripps-Howard News Service, United Press, and the Newspaper Enterprise Association. But, as she tells us in her autobiography, after the adventures in China routine newspaper work in San Francisco can seem very dull indeed. So in 1931 she eagerly accepted an invitation from Anna Louise Strong, whom she had initially met in China, to leave "a high paying job"² to work in the Soviet Union for the *Moscow News*, an English-language paper run by another friend from China, Mikhail Borodin.

¹Clippings of her writing from this period are in the Milly Bennett Papers, Hoover Institution Archives [hereafter MBP], Box 6, Fries 6-7.

²Anna Louise Strong, *I Change Worlds: The Remaking of an American* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), p. 312. Milly told an American diplomat she took the job to escape boredom in San Francisco. U.S. Department of State, RG 59, 861.911/1403, February 17, 1933.

In fact, the *Moscow News* came to be a refuge for several people from the Wuhan days, including Percy and Jack Chen.³

While in the Soviet Union she met and married (June 13, 1932) a ballet dancer named Evgeni Vasilivich Konstantinov, who was ten years her junior. She had divorced Mike Mitchell in Honolulu either in July 1926, before she left Hawaii, or in September 1927, on her way home from China.

The marriage to Konstantinov was a fiction, a gesture to give his homosexuality a heterosexual cover. The gesture was futile, and Konstantinov was arrested on a morals charge and sent to a prison camp in Mariinsk, Siberia, for three years. Milly somehow got rarely granted permission to visit him, traveling to Siberia with a considerable amount of food for her husband. Milly continued to send his family money long after she had left Russia.⁴

In addition to work on the *Moscow News*, Milly also free-lanced for the Newspaper Enterprise Association, the *New York Times*, and the International News Service.⁵

Clippings from her Moscow writings, including her articles for *Time* and the *New York Times*, are in MBP, Box 8. They include research and parts of a manuscript of a book about the famous circus animal trainer Vladimir Durov.

In 1936 she left Moscow and traveled to Spain in search of a lover, Wallace Burton, the twin brother of Wilbur Burton, who had been Milly's lover in China ten years earlier. Wallace was a volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of the International Brigades fighting against Franco's Fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War. Not long after she found him, Burton was killed in action. Milly stayed in Spain to report for the *Times* of London,

³For Milly's views on life at the *Moscow News*, see U.S. Department of State, RG 59, 861.911/1403, February 17, 1933, and Daniel James Klotz, "Freda Utley: From Communist to Anti-Communist," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1987, pp. 150-53.

⁴Konstantinov's original arrest warrant is in MBP, Box 1, file 15. Milly explained the arrest to a friend by writing, "he had a past, the tailends of which he frequently allowed to hang around his present." MBP, Box 4, file 22. Seema Allan interview, December 10, 1989.

⁵After an investigation, the U.S. Department of State decided that Milly's activities in Moscow were harmless enough to be "of no importance ... in the international revolutionary movement." Mildred J. Bremner, FBI-HQ 100-124391/SF 100-12592 (hereafter FBI/Milly), July 30, 1951.

the Associated Press, and United Press. She also worked as the press chief for the minister of State of the Spanish Popular Front Government.⁶

Also in Spain she met her third husband, Hansford Amlie, marrying him on September 1, 1937. Amlie, a brother of Congressman Tom Amlie of Wisconsin, enlisted in the U.S. Army at age seventeen before finishing high school and fought in France during World War I, being discharged in January 1919 as a corporal. He enlisted in the Marine Corps in November 1919 and served two years before leaving as a private. From 1922 to 1937 he worked as a miner before volunteering for action in Spain, where he was soon promoted to commander of the Lincoln-Washington Battalion. After being wounded a second time he was sent home as an invalid.

On January 1, 1938, Milly and Hans arrived back in New York City on the *S. S. President Harding* where Hans had his passport confiscated for his involvement in the Spanish Civil War. The United States government had declared neutrality in the Spanish conflict, thereby assuring a Fascist victory. All Americans who broke this "neutrality" by fighting in Spain were persecuted by the American government. Milly and Hans spent the next several months lecturing and raising money for Spanish Relief.

Hans Amlie eventually got a job as an administrator of migratory farm labor camps run by the Farm Security Administration, and for the next decade he and Milly lived in several of these camps throughout the western United States. In December 1949 Hans died tragically in a farming accident in just such a camp in Somerton, Arizona.⁷

Milly was devastated by her loss and moved back to the San Francisco area to be among friends. She tried to write books, including one on an old friend, Judge Sylvan Lazarus, and to work as a journalist, but she found that her poor eyesight and her inability to overcome her loss made that impossible. She became depressed and suicidal and in 1956 checked herself into the Napa State Hospital for the mentally ill.

⁶A U.S. Department of State report cited a rumor that had Milly as "the Spanish Government's best spy." FBI/Milly, May 13, 1942. Clippings from her writings on Spain and mementos such as press passes and safe conduct passes are in MBP, Box 9.

⁷"Three Asphyxiated at Migratory Camp," *The Somerton Star*, December 15, 1949, p.1.

In the hospital she played an active role in her own recovery as well as in patient activities, at one point becoming the editor of the patients' newspaper. Just as she knew when she needed help, Milly also knew when she felt better, and after four months she voluntarily left the hospital a stronger, more resilient woman, resolved to manage her life better in the future.

Now that she had recovered from the trauma of Hans's death, Milly forcefully took charge of herself and enrolled in San Jose College, completing a B.A. degree in August 1959. The following month she enrolled at Stanford University's Graduate School in Communications, but she died of cancer on November 6, 1960, before she could complete her studies.⁸

So evocative is the writing in this autobiography that the persona of Milly Bennett literally jumps off the pages. A vivid picture emerges of a courageous woman with an exceptionally strong sense of herself, a lust for life—a principled person with a passionate commitment to the causes she believed in.⁹

I became aware of this strong personality long before I read this manuscript or knew very much about this remarkable woman. In the course of another research project which included China in 1927, it struck me that almost every memoir of the period had a paragraph devoted to praise for Milly Bennett, regardless of the politics of the memoir. And then in my interviews with those who knew her, the name of Milly Bennett sparked instant recall as faces lit up and out poured a litany of admiring stories. She possessed this wondrous capacity to captivate and charm those she met.

My curiosity was fully aroused and I proceeded to spend three years looking for her records, only to come up with a complete blank. Milly Bennett

⁸The Lazarus papers are in MBP, Box 6. Interview with Seema Rynin Allan, Berkeley, CA, October 28, 1987, and December 10, 1989. Interview with Marion Merriman Wachtel, Palo Alto, December 9, 1989; Richard Hyer, "Russia, Spain and Milly," *The Coast* 1, 9 (August 1938): 32-34.

⁹In 1937, while in Spain, Milly apparently tried to join the Communist Party-USA. She never did, and undoubtedly her attempt to do so was less out of conviction than as a result of the passionate feelings evoked during the civil war. MBP, Box 4, file 23.

left no paper trail, no passports, no police records.

Long after I had given up my quest I was working in the Hoover Institution Archives and received an updated list of their collection. The index cited papers by one Mildred Bremler, who had been a journalist in China in 1926-27. I had never heard of Bremler, but I thought it would be interesting to find out who she was. It was with utter astonishment that I discovered that the Milly Bennett I had searched so long for was in fact Mildred Bremler! After I knew her real name, finding out about this remarkable woman was easy enough.

In 1938 a journalist summed her up well when he remarked that Milly was

a homely woman but one of the most charming. She is small, dark, well-formed, with a shock of unruly black hair She is only spasmodically concerned with clothes. Her eyes are very weak, forcing her to wear thick, double-lens glasses. She is extremely nervous, but gives no outward sign of it.

She has a fine sense of the ridiculous, a rich laugh, a whole-hearted love of life and adventure, and an inevitable sympathy for the underdog. She is innately gentle and sincere. And sometimes profane.¹⁰

Friends often commented on the contradiction between her physical appearance and her strong emotional allure, and especially her strong sexual attractiveness to men. "I must remark," wrote one friend, "that Milly was far from beautiful—in fact almost ugly—[but, at the same time] was also evidently a most attractive or sexually desirable woman."¹¹ Another friend from her days in Moscow described Milly as

a homely woman, but... blessed with an extraordinary figure. She didn't dress in a particular sexy way, preferring the business suits and blouses

¹⁰Richard Hyer, "A San Francisco Newsgal Outsmarts the Tiger," *The Coast* 1, 8 (June 1938): 9.

¹¹Freda Ufley, *Odyssey of a Liberal. Memoirs* (Washington, DC: Washington National Press, 1970), p. 246.

of the scruffy newspaper business. But her shapely figure turned the head of many a man with a roving eye. She was thirty-nine [in 1936] but looked years younger. Her face reflected her travels, her features craggy and rough-hewn. She was regarded as “one of the boys” in the newspaper office and in the café bars where the journalists, a crowd that included few women, gathered.

This friend tried to learn what it was about Milly’s personality that had such a strong appeal to men.

“What is it that Milly has?” I asked one of the newspapermen one evening as we met at a gypsy café for drinks and dancing. I noted that she had been married several times and was then living with a Russian ballet dancer.

“Have you ever danced with her?” the newspaperman asked. “No, of course you haven’t,” he added with a wink that suggested Milly’s charm lay not strictly in her ability to gather and write the news. She was, however, no pushover. She drank whiskey with the best of the correspondents, when they could get it, and vodka with a good portion the rest of the time. Everybody liked Milly, respected her. She was a *pro*.¹²

Milly appears to have made this attempt at autobiographical writing in 1938-39. She was apparently planning a full history of her life and in the process completed parts of several manuscripts. Although she tried repeatedly, she could not get any publishers interested and presumably stopped writing when she got to the end of her China adventures. So discouraged was Milly that she threatened to destroy the manuscript until a friend pleaded with her, “For cripes’ sake save that mss. for fifty years or

¹²Marian Merriman and Warren Larude, *American Commander in Spain. Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), pp. 41—42, 151.