

China and Journalism

The journalism on China has always been bad and now some people think it is worse than ever. The picture is more of a mixture and more complicated than ever.

The chief problem is that the individuals are not capable of judging China by its own background and situation in world history. They see things exactly as if they had never left home, from their own local viewpoint and system of values. They do not even try to get the perspective necessary even to understand what they are seeing and learning about. For example, a foreign correspondent will waste time writing about how crowded the buses are! Others will waste quantities of paper on how many bicycles there are on the streets, with a billion people each trying to exist on the same spot as any number of others, why is this a new item?

Of course, there are various kinds of journalism. As it has always been said—either you write your book the first year, or you will never do it for ten or twenty years, the outside view of the first-time traveller and explorer is very precious as a form of entertainment as the reader can identify with all these new experiences. On this level, all you do is to compare and contrast conditions in the foreign country with your own native place. You never get outside this limited perspective or beyond it. A city person usually cannot possibly understand the China syndrome even in the cities of China—and that is the kind of reporter who gets a job in China and other third world areas. It is possible that two persons are needed on any reporting job in any foreign areas—*Time* is now doing this, with several researchers and a “writer.” I would call this gung ho journalism, meaning teamwork, all-out. Gung Ho only means “working together” in Chinese, or cooperative.

One person can have the kind of mind capable of research and accurate observation. The other could be capable of communication, of researching the public, which is one of the great arts, a gift rather than something to be cultivated. It saves a great deal of money, time and energy if these two are married, even if divorced after the assignment is over. In the case of the Snows, I was the incessant researcher and student of various subjects, but I never tried to communicate with the Big Public,

which was difficult for me to do, though I believed in literary quality and quantity as a form of communication. How dearly I have paid for doing all this immense quantity of research and study, which did not reach the public. I never wrote the “one good book,” which is essential to build up your public, as Edgar Snow did in *Red Star Over China* in 1937-8. His book is a great classic for more than one reason.

First, it was a true exploration and has all the charm and immediacy of a travel book. Second, it was an enjoyable and worthwhile trip, and this psychology comes through, he had a good time and so did his subjects. Third, he had the natural American likableness, which is the result of our generations of true democracy and good-will toward man—we have had to learn to co-exist with weird new immigrants and their anti-American traditions and ideas, whereas these foreign elements ended up regressing into their original tribal-clannism abrasively infuriating each other at all points. The natural American psychology was exemplified in Edgar Snow of Kansas City, Missouri. He took for granted that the Chinese were human beings, not only not “like us” but in their own image. Mao Tse-tung understood him instantly and took a liking to him—so that he was Mao’s Mr. America from that time on, the only foreign friend Mao ever made worthy of that name.

It is no accident that the University of Missouri had monopoly more or less over journalism in China. It got there fustest with the mostest. Only one was an Edgar Snow (yes he has become a common noun) but all of them had this special American quality of establishing a kind of rapport at first acquaintance, which is the bridge for a real interview. To a real American, it does not even occur to him to be repulsive and disagreeable—he has been trained from childhood in a special form of civilization, which is open, natural, extremely naive and generous, but remarkably competent, quick and easy.

When I arrived in China in 1931, no one was known as a famous China author or journalist—Pearl S. Buck had only just arrived on the scene with the *Good Earth*, earlier in 1931. I had letters from my father’s Stanford University alumni to the old China hands and other alumni—all part of the President Herbert Hoover syndromes in China. The “best” book was *Tortured China* by Stanford’s Hallett Abend,

correspondent of the *New York Times*, which told the truth unvarnished and was totally negative. The only name known well was that of Thomas Fairfax Millard, who had published a long string of deadly dull books with long unpronounceable names. He had sponsored J. B. Powell, the No. 2 dean of all American or foreign correspondents in the Far East, and together they established The *China Weekly Review*, the best foreign journal in the Far East, and sponsored Snow. All three were alumni of the School of Journalism, University of Missouri. I had letters to all but Snow of the above from members of the board of directors of the American Mining Congress, on which I was secretary, the “Silver Lobby” concerned with wanting China to keep on using silver and to stay off the gold standard (England left it on my 24th birthday, September 21, 1931.) The smaller Missouri potatoes had jobs with United Press or other newspapers and had the Yenching School of Journalism in Peking, where Snow taught in 1934-5.

At that time, no woman in the world was known as a famous journalist, much less a foreign correspondent, and only a few names were even recognizable by a few readers. A few were editors, such as Snow’s sponsor, Mrs. William Brown Meloney of the *New York Beraid-Tribune Magazine*, owned by Mrs. Ogden Reid. I had been influenced by Ida Tarbell’s books, not her magazine work. She interviewed Owen D. Young, the admired success story of American business and asked his secret. He replied: I never repeat my own mistakes and I find out the mistakes others have made and don’t repeat those either. That impressed me and I strictly followed staying out of messes usually that other people had got into. However, I did repeat my own mistakes — beginning with writing *Inside Red China* I wrote as fast as I could not trying to make the book saleable, but only to get it published. I got into this habit, so that I even now never even re-read my writing, much less editing and changing it — except of course for articles intended to be published for certain. This I call “do-gooderist” journalism, meaning it is written as a public service, not to build up the reputation and readership of the writer herself. I always intended to be careful later but that time never came. Instead of my original idea from the age of eight, when I read *The Wizard of Oz*, to become a Great Author, I ended up as a Long letter Writer, using at least four

carbons on my electric IBM. I once wrote a big book, *China Builds for Democracy*, for only half a dozen people to read—that is a true do-gooder project.