

Nels Abrams
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Professor Goss
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A Long Time Coming: Developments in Understanding of the Long March

Communist China's formative years have been problematic for Western academics. In the past, Chinese prohibition on foreign visitors precluded research, while today the difficulty lies in the scarcity of primary sources from that era. In addition, because the communist party is still in power, gaining access to materials that undermine their authority remains a challenge. In the face of these difficulties, however, generations of Westerners have attempted to understand China and its history. One episode in particular, the Long March, has compelled sustained interest. The earliest Western examination of the Long March occurred in 1937 when journalist Edgar Snow introduced Mao and his fellow revolutionaries in his influential book *Red Star Over China*. Since that time other scholars have unearthed details about the Long March that complicate the official story line of the Communist Party. This study intends to analyze the development of scholarship on the Long March as it has moved from Snow's largely favorable depiction of Mao towards contemporary research that emphasizes previously untold aspects of the march, some of which are increasingly critical.

The primary reason for Western research into the Long March is obvious upon close inspection; it was during this episode that Mao Tse Dong achieved leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Before the march began in 1934, Mao had lost support from the Politburo due to his excessive use of violence in purging supposed counterrevolutionaries in Jiangxi Province. Favorable public opinion was essential to the communist strategy for revolution and Mao's

predilection for spilling blood was alienating the local community. It has been speculated that the reason so many of Mao's supporters—including his brother—were left behind to defend Jiangxi when the First Army began the Long March was to punish Mao and weaken his power.¹ How, then, did Mao emerge from the Long March as the undisputed leader when he began the trip as a scapegoat of the party? This is the question that has driven scholars to the Long March. And, given Mao's incredible influence on Chinese history since 1949, it is imperative to understand his rise to power if we are to understand China as a whole.

Indeed, the Long March has a special place in both Chinese history and modern culture. Because many survivors of the march became prominent politicians, the Long March has become a founding story for the country. Chinese students learn to admire the heroism of the communist founders while also recognizing ideals of sacrifice and loyalty they can aspire to. For Americans, Paul Revere's courageous ride through town to warn about a British invasion, or George Washington's not telling a lie about cutting down an apple tree could serve as stories with a plausibly similar cultural role. However, author Sun Shuyun makes clear in her book *The Long March: The True History of Communist China's Founding Myth* that the Long March occupies a greater place in the consciousness of the Chinese people than the corresponding American morality tales. This greater weight is due to both the incredible accomplishment that was the march, and also the strictly controlled propaganda of the Communist Party. Shuyun explains that films about the march are classics and that a primary lesson as she started school was "if you find (life) hard, think of the Long March; if you feel tired, think of our revolutionary

¹ Wilson, Dick. *The Long March 1935* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 63

forebears.”² Like many others Shuyun’s father was in the military. Therefore, at home as well as school, she “grew up with stories” of the Long March.³ And they are truly incredible stories.

The Long March began on October 16th, 1934. Chiang Kai Shek, using advice from his German advisor, had spent the previous months surrounding the communist forces with an increasing number of blockhouses. These blockhouses served several purposes; for one, they prevented the communists from engaging in guerilla warfare—a tactic they had used successfully; in addition, they also created an economic blockade that eliminated essentials such as salt. Under these circumstances the march can be seen as a tactical retreat. In what proved to be successful propaganda, communist leaders presented the decision to leave Jiangxi as a nationalist movement to fight the invading Japanese troops. The march lasted until October 20th, 1935, over a year after it began for the First Army. During that time the army marched an average of 24 miles per day and fought a skirmish an average of *every day*.⁴ Deaths mounted, as warlord armies, the nationalist army, starvation, Tibetan attacks, and inclement weather all took their toll. Through harsh grasslands and snowy mountains, the epic struggle of the Long March created a narrative of Odyssey-esque proportions. Over the years Western scholarship has not wavered on the heroic physical aspects of the march—those are without question. Instead, the political motivations of its leaders and the communists’ relationship with the people have been increasingly scrutinized as the writing on Mao’s China has evolved from journalism to academic studies.

² Shuyun, Sun. *The Long March: The True History of Communist China’s Founding Myth* (London: HarperPress, 2006), 2

³ Shuyun, 1

⁴ Snow, Edgar. *Red Star Over China* (New York: Random House, 1938), 204

Edgar Snow introduced Mao and the Chinese communist party to the West. Working as a journalist for the *Daily Herald*, Snow ventured into the remote Shensi province to write the first story on Chiang Kai Shek's hated rivals. He met Mao in 1936, soon after the completion of the Long March when the troops were exhausted. Mao provided him with relatively luxurious accommodations—in this case, a nice cave—and tried to communicate the ideals driving the communist revolution in China. Snow was very impressed by his reception and the men with whom he spoke. His subsequent writing depicted the revolutionaries as heroic and disciplined humanitarians. Through his ground-breaking book, *Red Star Over China*, Snow unraveled the image of communists as blood-thirsty savages that Chiang Kai Shek had spent years creating. Years later, after Mao's human rights abuses began to become understood, Snow's work would be criticized as too one-sided, for glorifying Mao and ignoring the contradictory evidence.⁵ There is some truth to this argument, as Snow in large part described events as Mao told him; however, Snow's unbalanced writing is in large part due to the nature of his sources—Mao and his followers. In *Red Star Over China* it is clear that he recognized the limitations of his sources and he demonstrates journalistic integrity by communicating to the reader that there is more to the story than he is able to cover at that point.

Snow's major contribution to the Chinese communist revolution was to humanize an army that had been demonized by Chiang Kai Shek and feared by millions of citizens. In lieu of pillaging villages and eating babies, as had been depicted, the communist party's objectives are described as land distribution and the lightening of taxes.⁶ Mao was not described as a

⁵ Shuyun, 3

⁶ Snow, 185

murderous dictator, but a “rebel who could write verse as well as lead a crusade.”⁷ In the wake of the communist party was not blood and sorrow, but the beginnings of a better life. Snow writes, “[u]nemployment, opium, prostitution, child slavery, and compulsory marriage were reported to be eliminated, and the living conditions of the workers and poor peasants in the peaceful areas greatly improved.”⁸ These were not the savages the Chinese people had been led to believe. After Snow, the communist party became a more viable alternative to the Chiang Kai Shek’s nationalist party. But had he gone too far? Snow’s writing has been viewed by many as merely a reiteration of Mao’s propaganda due to his loyal descriptions of events.

Snow did not venture through China to meet Mao on his own accord. The meeting was largely orchestrated by Mao, as some of Snow’s earlier writing was sympathetic to the movement and Mao thought he could utilize Snow’s pen to his advantage. In addition to Snow only receiving the communist version of events, Mao reserved the right to edit Snow’s writing until it fit with his agenda. The result is *Red Star Over China* lacks the critical voice necessary for balanced research. For example, Snow writes that during the beginning of the Long March, serious loss of life was the result of poor military tactics. This analysis was given to Snow by Mao, and it corroborates Mao’s ascendancy to power as justified through military necessity. Further, it is in this book that the legend of the crossing of the bridge at Tatu River first appears in print. The reality of this crossing is that there was no major battle—only a loss of four lives—and that the communists met limited resistance from light weaponry. Because Mao had taken power recently before, it was important for him to establish his leadership credentials with a significant military victory. Unfortunately, the communists had lost the skirmishes they engaged

⁷ Snow, 206

⁸ Snow, 186

in after he took the reins. Mao crafted a story of heroic fighting full of machine gun fire and dramatic courage to create an image of success not based on reality. Snow, not privy to alternative accounts, faithfully recounted Mao's fabrication as fact and the myth of Tatu River continues to this day. In other instances, however, Snow demonstrates his journalistic instincts by subtly questioning the official line he is being delivered. It is because of his efforts to communicate this doubt that Snow should not be seen as an American puppet of the communist party.

Although Snow echoes many of Mao's sentiments in *Red Star Over China*, a careful reading of his analysis reveals that he attempts to provide a subtle dissenting opinion through disclaimers and indirect remarks. It must be remembered that this work was being reviewed by Mao and his advisors, and any critique would have to pass through his censors. In the end, this interpretation of Snow's work is given credence due to the fact that Mao himself later had Snow's book banned in China. Snow uses a number of methods to communicate his reluctance to accept the official communist line. When discussing the communists' relationship with the peasantry, for example, Snow prefaces the phrase "they were welcomed everywhere" in the country side with the disclaimer that this is what "the Reds told me."⁹ A communist interpreter might not be able to understand the difference that disclaimer makes, but an educated Westerner sure could. When mentioning communist politics Snow places in parenthesis that "there was plenty of room for argument."¹⁰ Numerous other examples of Snow's critical voice appear throughout the text. In retrospect it seems that Snow's supposed glorification of the communists must be seen in the context of the era; communism was seen as an unambiguous evil by many

⁹ Snow, 201

¹⁰ Snow, 205

during this time period and any opinion outside complete denunciation was recognized as too sympathetic. Later analysis of Chinese communists and the Long March would attempt to remove indications of excessive sympathy for Mao while also striving for greater academic recognition.

Dick Wilson was the first Westerner to write a book exclusively on the Long March. He did so in 1971 with *The Long March 1935: The Epic of Chinese Communism's Survival*. Like Snow, Wilson was a journalist. Academic historians were reluctant to tackle the scarcity of primary sources and difficulty of access to China. There was, however, a more academic leaning in Wilson's writing compared to his predecessor, Snow. For example, Wilson's account of the Long March features more than four hundred footnotes. This attention to detail and citation of sources would later earn Wilson the position of editor for "The China Quarterly." For all his efforts at academic standards, Wilson's *The Long March 1935* ultimately falls short of true academic scholarship. Instead of producing a new argument or idea about the Long March, Wilson simply provides the reader with new information. This classification of Wilson's work is not meant to be disparaging, his contributions on Mao's rise to power and the history of the March form an important part of the early historiography of the Long March, but it seems his journalistic instinct to "get the story" won out over the academic pursuit of new interpretation.

Wilson provides an incredible wealth of detailed information in *The Long March 1935*. For the first time, the myriad hostile threats to the communist army were discussed. In addition to the nationalist troops, Wilson introduces the hostile regional peoples such as the Tibetans and Lolos. These people had a long history of oppression under the Chinese and they were prepared to fight for the continued independence. The communists eventually were able to secure a truce

with the Lolos, but the Tibetans proved intractable. Warlords and their armies were shown to be another serious obstacle to communist travel. Truly Mao and his comrades were facing a daunting challenge. Wilson provides further depth of Western understanding of the Long March when he explains that the original intention of the communists was not to march to Shensi province, but Szechuan. The Long March is now known to be not a single plan of escape but rather a result of impromptu decision-making in the face of obstacles. Wilson confirms that Mao “had cited as the immediate task the establishment of a new base area in the Szechuan-Kweichow-Yunnan region.”¹¹ Led by Chang Kuo-tao, the formidable Fourth Army was located in Szechuan and Mao hoped to unite forces. Also, Chang Kai Shek was less powerful in Szechuan and the warlords were fighting amongst themselves. By exposing the attempt to establish a base in Szechuan, Wilson successfully denies Mao’s claim that the intention of the march was to fight the Japanese troops in the north.

Perhaps the biggest contribution of *The Long March 1935* was Wilson’s examination of the Tsunyi conference of 1935. It was during this conference that Mao gained leadership of the Chinese communist party. He achieved this by criticizing the military decision-making of Bo Ku and Otto Braun, the two Politburo leaders. It was not until 1969 that the resolutions of this conference were known to the Western world and Wilson demonstrates that the military inexperience of Braun and Bo Ku enabled Mao to assert himself. As Soviet-trained revolutionaries, Braun and Bo Ku were essentially urban intellectual revolutionaries. When the communist party began the Long March, military skill and rural familiarity became more necessary than urban organizing and theorizing. The tremendous loss of life leading up to Tsunyi—most estimates at this time were over half the army—made clear to communist leaders

¹¹ Wilson, 110

that a change of tactics was necessary. Mao immediately changed the look of the army. The first thing he ordered was to leave behind much of the heavy and burdensome items such as x-ray machines that had impeded their progress and allowed the nationalist army to attack from the rear. Also, Mao began marching the army in non-sensical directions in an attempt to prevent the nationalists from correctly inferring their next location. The Tsunyi conference marked a turning point in both the Long March and the history of China. Wilson's detailed descriptions of the Long March exemplify Western attempts at understanding China before Nixon and Mao normalized relations and academics were allowed to begin research.

Stanford University's Helen Praeger Young examined the Long March through an academic lens in 2001. Primarily a researcher of Chinese and cross-cultural history, Young sets out in *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March* to bring to light the women's role during this crucial episode in Chinese history. Until her publication, women's experience in the Long March had been largely ignored. In part, this negligence is understandable, as women comprised less than one percent of the traveling communist party. Young, however, argues that the inclusion of women is necessary because "when history focuses on women, traditional historical boundaries may change."¹² In other words, women's history does not merely add to our understanding, it can change the way something is understood. In *Choosing Revolution* Young does an excellent job describing the additional difficulties for women soldiers in the march. She also provides a convincing argument that many women were attracted to communism because of the increased opportunities for females in the party compared to traditional Chinese society. For these contributions alone *Choosing Revolution* is an important

¹² Young, Helen Praeger. *Choosing Revolution: Chinese Women Soldiers on the Long March* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 245

work; however, Young falls short of her stated goal of changing the way the Long March is understood through the inclusion of women. Her history provides important insights, but she does not demonstrate how this new history changes the earlier scholarship on the march. Perhaps her background in Chinese history, as opposed to women's history, has left her without the tools to utilize the stories of these women to their fullest potential.

The extreme hardship of the Long March has been documented by many writers. Young argues, successfully, that the women on the march had it even harder in many ways. Perhaps most incredible and heart-wrenching are the stories about women who were pregnant. These women were responsible for keeping up with a marching army through nearly impossible conditions. Babies were delivered in open fields and without material comforts or sanitary conditions. Then, almost immediately after the baby was born, the women needed to begin marching with troops in order to keep ahead of the Nationalist army. Tragically, these babies had to be left behind—with strangers if they were lucky or simply exposed on the ground to die if there was no possibility of outside care. Being a woman also meant enduring monthly menstrual cycles while marching. The women were without supplies, and in the frozen tundra of Western China the results were at times fatal. Many women's bodies simply lost the ability to menstruate and they were prevented from having children later in their life. Rape was another horrible reality exclusively suffered by women. In addition to being captured or killed in combat, the women feared sexual abuse by combatant troops. The entire women's troop in the 4th army, for example, was captured by muslim soldiers in the Gansu province. Although the communists and Nationalists had agreed to cease hostilities at this time in order to fight the Japanese, all the women were forced to marry their captors.

Women were willing to endure these hardships because their living conditions at home were deplorable. In Chinese society during the 1930's women were less valued than men. Because girls left their family at marriage they were seen as an economic drain on the family. Poor families would often sell their daughters at young ages to act as a servant and bride. Girls in this situation were often beaten, malnourished, and forced to perform hard labor. These forced marriages were often cited by the women in Young's book as the reason for leaving for their past life and joining the army. The communist party provided opportunities for a better life. During the Long March women were treated with greater respect; foot-binding was forbidden and marriage was voluntary. But women's liberation only went so far. Although they were theoretically viewed as equals, that equality was similar to the now-discredited "separate but equal" policy of the United States before the 1960's. Women were only allowed leadership of other women. Their responsibilities were restricted to supposedly feminine tasks such as nursing and propaganda. In addition, the top male leaders maintained almost exclusive sexual rights to the few women on the march. In the end, the communist party deserves tremendous credit for advancing women's rights, but their uneven application of the May 30th principles revealed hypocrisy and injustice within the party.

Sun Shuyun's book, *The Long March: The True History of Communist China's Founding Myth*, was published in 2006 and reflects contemporary Western criticism of Mao's lack of concern for life and strict control of information. Although born in China, Shuyun was educated at Oxford and her professional career is based out of London. For *The Long March* Shuyun was interested in telling the "untold" stories of ordinary soldiers. To accomplish this, Shuyun's methodology was to interview elderly survivors of the march who performed ordinary duties and were not part of the leadership. Her interviews are with veterans from all the communists armies

that participated in the Long March because, although the 4th, 6th, and 2nd armies marched further, the “official history of the Long March was...dominated by Mao and his 1st Army.”¹³ The history that she uncovers paints a vastly different picture than the one-dimensional heroic tale endorsed by the communist government. The leaders, Mao especially, are portrayed as duplicitous and power-hungry. However, this negative portrayal of early communist leadership does not diminish the accomplishments of the soldiers; if anything, Shuyun’s scholarship indicates that the average soldier had to endure yet another hardship—political deceit—during their epic struggle.

As a child, Shuyun grew up with the myth of the Long March. What she uncovered during her research called into question the black-and-white morality tale she had grown up believing in. Contrary to communist claims that the peasants were volunteering for the army out of support, Shuyun’s interviews reveal conscription, blackmail, and kidnapping were common methods for recruiting soldiers. Many families sent their men into the hills to hide when the communists came into town. Mao’s justification for taking power during the Tsunyi conference has always been that Braun and Bo ku’s tactics were resulting in high numbers of deaths on the battlefield. Archives now reveal that in August of 1934 “three-quarters of the militia mobilized for the recent battles in the whole Soviet region ran away within the first few days, leaving barely a quarter.”¹⁴ So it appears that desertion, and not military defeat, caused the dramatic loss of soldiers. This fact undermines both Mao’s critique of Braun and the communist claim to loyalty among the people. Mao’s reputation is further damaged by Shuyun’s argument that Mao abandoned the 4th army because of a rivalry with its leader, Zhang Guotao, and also deceived

¹³ Shuyun, 125

¹⁴ Shuyun, 35

Marshal Zhang Xueliang after he kidnapped Chiang Kai Shek under the assumption that he was supported by the communists. Shuyun's powerful indictments complete the trajectory of the historiography of the Long March from idealized journalism to critical scholarship.

The Long March is slowly emerging from the clouds of myth into the light of open debate. It is no longer possible to depict the march as a simply a righteous crusade, pure in motivation and application. The introduction of communist interparty political struggles, women's history, and conscripted soldiers all complicate the official narrative. In spite of the increased scrutiny, however, the accomplishments of the Long March remain unscathed. The hardships endured by the Chinese communist army from October 1934 until the following year almost defy belief. In an ironic twist of history, the narrative of the Long March that Mao tried so hard to control in order to compel respect has emerged even more inspiring since dialogue has been allowed to flourish.