



Title	Agnes Smedley– the Fellow-Traveler’s Tales
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Citation	Agnes Smedley– the Fellow-Traveler’s Tales. In Kerr, D and Kuehn, J (Eds.), A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s, p. 163-176. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007
Issued Date	2007
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/207469
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Agnes Smedley – the Fellow-Traveler’s Tales

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A fellow-traveler is someone who travels along with another. In the nineteen thirties, as the equivalent of the Russian word *popútchik*, the English phrase “fellow-traveler” acquired a more specialized meaning, indicating one who sympathizes with the Communist movement without actually being a party member. It seems an apt sign under which to think about the writings of Agnes Smedley about wartime China in the nineteen thirties and forties. Travel writing, perhaps fortunately, rarely has unmixed motives, and the motives of Smedley’s Chinese travel writing express themselves in the genres of journalism, autobiography, historiography, war reporting, propaganda, ethnography, lyric and, as we shall see, in mythography. But always it is politically committed writing, its author passionately engaged with the ideological and military struggle out of which would be born, in her own lifetime, the People’s Republic. This essay is concerned with the picture of China, the meaning of China, and the truth about China, produced in Agnes Smedley’s writing about the country.

The question of the truth of Agnes Smedley’s life and writing is a contentious one. She was a lifelong radical, and she associated with people whose activities were clandestine, sometimes illegal, and even viewed as treasonable, in America, Europe and China. She was suspected of espionage; in 1949 she was named in a U. S. Army report on a pro-Soviet wartime spy ring in Japan and China, and at the time of her death in London in 1950, she was scheduled to be subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee on her return to the United States.¹ Her most recent biographer establishes that this was not merely Cold War hysteria, and that she really had undertaken spying and covert action on behalf of the Chinese Communists,

the Soviet Union, and (indirectly) the German imperial government.² But if these clandestine activities were necessarily undertaken in the dark, her sympathies were no secret, and are inscribed all over her writing about China. She may have been a spy in secret, but she was a partisan in the open, and all her Chinese writing was done in the service of the revolution, even though her understanding of the revolution's nature and needs shifted.

To further the cause, which she never doubted, it was a moral imperative, as well as a professional commission, to combat ignorance and lies about China by reporting the truth to people overseas who had no other means of knowing it, and if necessary to heighten, dramatize, or even create the truth. Sometimes the truth needed help. And if Agnes Smedley was a kind of Bunyanesque Valiant-for-Truth, writing was her weapon of war. And yet for her, as for the radical puritan Bunyan, writing was also suspect. It had a poor record, giving itself promiscuously to lies and vain display; at best, it stood between the experience and the people to whom it was to be conveyed. Already in her autobiographical novel *Daughter of Earth*, written before her arrival in China, there are signs of a distrust of the verbal medium itself. "I do not write mere words," her narrator says at one point. "I write of human flesh and blood."³ Such a commitment to a demotic plain style for the immediate transmission of personal witness, and the corresponding rejection of vain display and mediated representation, can be located in a dissident and revolutionary English tradition, though in Agnes Smedley's writing it also comes with a specifically American and Emersonian inflection.

The disclaiming of rhetoric is a characteristic of radical writing. It lies behind the equally paradoxical claim of Wilfred Owen, in the draft Preface to his book of polemical war poems, "Above all, I am not concerned with poetry." Owen declared that "the true poets must be truthful"; the rest was literature.⁴ Possessed by the urgency of what they had to say, both Owen

and Smedley were impatient with the language that sometimes seemed inadequate to the task. This exasperation with the limitations of language might be converted into a formal resource (as sometimes in Owen, and in the modernism of T. S. Eliot's Sweeney and his complaint, "I gotta use words when I talk to you").⁵ In Smedley it is a sign of her romanticism, and it leads her in one direction to try to push past language, to communicate reality directly – to "write of human flesh and blood" – and in the other direction towards allegory, an ideal writing in which there is no gap between words and the truth they embody. Like Owen before her, Smedley developed a highly crafted rhetoric while claiming to give a naïve unvarnished report of war.

Agnes Smedley's travels

Agnes Smedley arrived in China, as a correspondent for the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung*, late in 1928. She was a newcomer to China but not to revolutionary activism. She had been writing for more than a decade about the plight of the poor in India, as part of her long-term involvement with the Indian nationalist movement in exile, first in the United States and later in Europe, and she was convinced that China was poised to become the principal theatre of a global war between oppressed peoples and their exploiters.

Her own background had given her first-hand experience of the struggle. Born into poverty on a tenant farm in Missouri, she grew up in very difficult family circumstances in rough settler towns in Colorado, when the American south-west was opening up to the railroad and the mining companies, and, she was to remember, "Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel & Iron Company owned everything but the air."⁶ She worked as a teenage schoolteacher in New Mexico, and carried a gun, according to the account she gives in *Daughter of Earth*, before scraping together a college education in Arizona and California. It was as a student that she developed her

commitment to both socialism and feminism and started to write. She moved East to New York in 1916, immersing herself in the world of political activism, journalism and intrigue, first working for Margaret Sanger's birth control movement, and later involving herself increasingly with the cause of Indian independence from Britain. She was arrested and imprisoned in 1918 as a result of her association with Indian political exiles, and the movement for Indian independence would consume much of the next ten years of her life, in the United States and then in Europe. Her espousal of this cause, which in many ways anticipates her later identification with the Chinese Revolution, grew out of her American loyalties, as she was quite shrewd enough to recognize.

Together with my [Indian] comrades, I was speaking and writing, and I felt that I was molding the native earth of America. In working with them I realized how American I was, how native of my soil, and how I could instinctively appeal to principles, traditions and ideas of the American people, when they could make but an intellectual appeal. *Bahin* [sister], some of them called me, and it warmed my heart and aroused strength and determination within me. For in it was not only love, but comradeship. I loved them with the love I had been unable to give to my brothers, to my father, to my class (*DE*, 358-59).

She contracted a "revolutionary marriage" with Virendranath Chattopadhyaya – "to me he was not just an individual," she said, "but a political principle" (*BHC*, 23) – living with him in Berlin and continuing her studies, her activism and her writing. In Berlin she suffered a breakdown in health, and underwent a period of psychoanalysis which "continued torturously for two years" (*BHC*, 19). The autobiographical novel *Daughter of Earth* emerged from the crisis and introspection of this period, and the journey to China was partly – as every journey is,

according to W.H. Auden's poem "The Voyage"⁷ – an attempt to leave a former life behind, a bid for renewal.

She crossed the Soviet-Manchurian border into China at the end of December 1928; first impressions were not encouraging. "Our luggage stamped, we turned to face – the Middle Ages" (*BHC*, 27). It was an analogy common enough to be cliché, made interesting in Smedley's case because America had not had a Middle Ages; and yet before long she was just as likely to be reminded by China of the exigent and dangerous American West of her own upbringing. After Manchuria, she began to make her way south, visiting Beijing and Nanjing, and settling in May 1929 in Shanghai, then China's most populous city and the largest of the treaty ports. She was to spend longer in the raffish and cosmopolitan city than anywhere else in the country, though she wrote of it disparagingly, for she did not think much of any Chinese city, with the later exception of embattled Hankou. One reason for this predilection was that the Communists had been largely driven out of the Chinese cities and were now a rural movement. Smedley's vision of Chinese modernity was not one of urban sophistication, but of a redemptive puritan plainness to be discovered in the army, the peasants, and the revolution.⁸ In Shanghai she associated first mostly with other foreigners, with German, Indian and American exiles, and with Chinese intellectuals, often overseas-educated. In December 1929 she first met the writer Lu Xun, and became involved with the new League of Left-Wing Writers. She was also busy helping Soong Ching-ling (Madame Sun Yat-sen) with correspondence and speech-writing, especially for the League against Imperialism, and establishing herself as one of the best-informed Western press correspondents in the city.

In 1932 she was putting together the essays, stories and impressions that would be published as *Chinese Destinies* (1933), and beginning her work on the Jiangxi Soviet (the area

under Communist control, which she had not visited), which became *China's Red Army Marches* (1934). Her friends now numbered the writers Harold Isaacs, Edgar Snow, and J. K. Fairbank, and her enemies included the British intelligence services, who knew of her history of anti-imperial activism and kept her under surveillance, and the Kuomintang thugs who made Shanghai such a perilous place for left-wing civilians. In 1936, feeling suffocated in Shanghai, Smedley moved to Xian and had the journalistic good fortune to be on the spot in December when the “Young Marshal,” Zhang Xueliang, kidnapped Chiang Kai-shek and forced him to cease hostilities against the Communist forces and form a united front against further Japanese encroachments in China. Smedley’s print and radio reporting of this momentous development made her famous. A more important consequence for her came in the form, at long last, of an official invitation to her to visit the new Communist headquarters at Yanan.⁹

The journey from Xian took her three weeks, and on arrival in the communist stronghold she lost no time gathering information about the revolution and its personnel, and getting it out to publications in China and abroad. In a roomy cave carved into the mountain walls enclosing the Yanan citadel, she wrote up her lengthy interviews with Mao Zedong, Peng Dehuai, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and other communist leaders, and began the biography of the Red Army’s peasant commander-in-chief, Zhu De, which would be published after her death as *The Great Road* (1956). In 1937 she applied to join the Chinese Communist Party, but was told she would be more useful as an outsider. In the months she spent in Yanan, what might be called her leisure activities included rat extermination, gardening, distributing anti-Fascist pamphlets from Spain, and teaching the Communist leadership dancing, an initiative not wholly popular with the revolutionary wives. The intrigues and quarrels which punctuated and eventually curtailed her stay are not included in her published accounts, and she left to return to Xian, after injuring her

spine in a fall from a horse, in September 1937, a painful journey narrated at the beginning of *China Fights Back* (1938).

She was next invited by Zhu De to join the Eighth Route Army under his command in the field, and she stayed with them for three months, in an interval of peace between the Communists' pact with Chiang and the Marco Polo Bridge incident which led to the declaration of war against Japan. She was then sent to Hankou (part of the conurbation of Wuhan, on the Yangtze), which had become China's new capital after the fall of Nanjing. Increasingly under air attack, Hankou was becoming the focal point of the war and was shortly to strike the visiting Christopher Isherwood as containing "all the clues which would enable an expert, if he could only find them, to predict the events of the next fifty years" (Auden and Isherwood, 50).¹⁰ Arriving in January 1938, Smedley put her considerable energies to work helping to organize the supply of Chinese Red Cross services to the Red Army. She had now become a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, and her work was also appearing in *China Today*, the *Nation*, the *Modern Review* and elsewhere. She stayed for ten months in Hankou, slipping out a few days before the city fell to the Japanese in October. "The last days of Hangkou still remain in my mind as rare, unusual days from the psychological and human viewpoint," she was to recall (letter quoted in MacKinnon, 209); the atmosphere reminded her of Shaw's doomed *Heartbreak House*.¹¹ Now she travelled to join the newly-formed Communist-led guerilla units of the New Fourth Army operating along the southern shores of the lower Yangtze, as a war correspondent and medical worker.

She remained with the Fourth Army in central China from November 1938 to April 1940, much of the time on the move and in grueling conditions, in "the longest sustained tour of a Chinese war zone by any foreign correspondent, man or woman" (MacKinnon, 212). These

travels, if this is an adequate word, are chronicled in *Battle Hymn of China*, her best book, though it omits most of the complexities of her own political and personal life. Unlike her earlier books about China, this one begins with a sketch of her early life, as if to insist on a continuity between her American and European experience and her Chinese wanderings, while its title declares an affinity between this Chinese campaign and a definitive American struggle.¹² Meanwhile its dedication leaves no doubt about its own loyalties – “To the Soldiers of China: Poor, Glorious Pioneers in the World Struggle against Fascism.” Besides her reputation overseas as an authoritative reporter of the situation in China, Smedley had also acquired some celebrity among the Chinese soldiers she wrote about, and her arrival in a unit was often greeted by a request to lecture to the troops on all sorts of matters including Chinese-American relations, the present military situation in China, and “suggestions for improvement” (*BHC*, 319).¹³

After a further breakdown in health, she reluctantly agreed to leave for Chongqing, the latest seat of the Republican government, and in August 1940 she reached Hong Kong, where she underwent surgery (on the gall-bladder) at Queen Mary Hospital. Colonial Hong Kong – where she was forbidden by the police from speaking, writing, or taking part in public life (*BHC*, 354) – joined the list of Chinese cities which felt corrupt and inauthentic to her after the rigorous simplicities and sacrifices of life at the front. In 1941 she returned to the United States, with the aim of recovering her health and helping to sway American public opinion behind the Chinese struggle. This was by no means the end of her adventures, but she was never to return to China. She died in England in the year after the declaration of the People’s Republic. Her ashes were placed in the Cemetery for Revolutionaries in Babaoshan in Beijing.

Propaganda and truth

Agnes Smedley's writing about China at war, and especially her account of her months with the Eighth Route Army and later the New Fourth Army, has no equivalent in English literature. To approach it as a kind of travel writing is indeed willfully to miss much of the point, yet it raises in particularly interesting ways the perennial questions about representation, modality and alterity raised by travel narratives of a less urgent motive. And the question of motive in her writing is certainly crucial, as she reports readily admitting when accused by her fellow American, the military observer Captain Evans Carlson, of not being impartial.

Of course I am not impartial and make no such pretence. Yet I do not lie, do not distort, do not misrepresent. I merely tell what I see with my own eyes and experience day by day. This is the truth. Why am I in this army and not in another? With all my heart, with all that gives me consciousness, I am convinced of the high purpose, the integrity of this army. I know of the great heroism of the Chinese troops that fought from Shanghai to Nanking. But it is with the Eighth Route Army that I want to live and work (*CFB*, 255).

What begins as a justification for her writing ends as a statement of political loyalty and something like vocation. Smedley's writing out of political commitment was perhaps more the norm than the exception among authors of her generation. What is remarkable here – it could be considered exalted, naïve, or disingenuous – is the denial of any conflict, the closing of any gap, between her political loyalties and a truthful report. A few years later George Orwell, looking back on the Spanish Civil War and contemplating the grotesquely biased reporting of that conflict, had started to believe that an objectively true history of even the facts of that war – or anything else – might henceforth be impossible (a fear to be projected into *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).¹⁴ Smedley will admit no contradiction in her own writing, between her heroization of the Chinese revolution and especially its soldiers (and the demonization of their enemies), and the

credit she claims as a faithful and authoritative reporter of actuality.¹⁵ And this denial accounts for the characteristic co-presence in her work of a reiterated revolutionary and puritan commitment to the naked truth, and the deployment of what we can recognize as highly literary and traditional tropes, usually associated with the rhetoric of the heroic, in epic, ballad, and romance. Epic is truth, truth epic.

She was a writer among soldiers, constantly and uncomfortably aware of her own anomaly. She is an extra in the scene of revolution – another meaning for the phrase “fellow-traveler.” Often she feels useless, or worse, an impediment. The feeling is acute in the wonderful opening section of *China Fights Back*, describing her frightful return journey from Yanan to Xian through the mountains. Cold, wet, hungry, weary, and in constant pain from her spinal injury, she registers the beauty of her surroundings guiltily. “I lay on the stretcher and looked at the endless mountain ranges in all directions, at the occasional flames of leaves turning red. The mountain range over which we passed was covered with low bushes and small trees, with a profusion of every kind of flower – bluebells, white daisies, all kinds of yellow and purple wildflowers” (*CFB*, 25). Here was an occasion for what writers, and especially travel writers, are expected to do; but she veers away from the temptation to aestheticize the landscape, for she is only too aware of the hungry and exhausted men, the bearers and the bodyguards, without whose work she would literally not be able to move through it. “I am, and travel like, an aristocrat, in comparison with the simple men of the Eighth Route Army” (*CFB*, 31).¹⁶ Aesthetics were beside the point, if not actually associated with reprehensible luxury, inequality and decadence. After finally reaching Xian, she records her disgust at hearing music from Beijing on the radio. “Or we can get the sickening Shanghai night-club music – about a man handing a woman an orchid. An

orchid in the midst of death and destruction in Shanghai! The gentleman hands her an orchid! Not a bomb, but an orchid!” (*CFB*, 40). A time of bombs was no time for orchids.

She had no patience for beautiful writing; she was also wary of celebrity authors making copy out of their travels, like Auden and Isherwood, and later Hemingway.¹⁷ Yet her own claim to be a simple reporter of facts – “I merely tell what I see with my own eyes and experience day by day” – does not stand up to the evidence of party-line orthodoxy in her work. In her early writing the Kuomintang is described as not much better than a criminal gang, but her hostility to Chiang Kai-shek and his party is suppressed during the years of their alliance with the Communists, only to be resumed after the break-up of the united front. Of greater interest is the way the realism, even naturalism, of her descriptions of Chinese life surrenders from time to time under political pressure to what looks like a quite different mode of writing.

Her first book of impressions of China, *Chinese Destinies*, could be described as a human geography, and is a kind of cinematographic montage of the country, consisting of vignettes of character and the narrative of the lives of usually ordinary Chinese people, caught up in the tumult of national events. Much that is both informative and moving in this volume derives from her scrupulous observation of the conditions of life among very poor peasants and soldiers. And yet her sense of a national teleology, signaled in the title, sometimes leads her to invest these lives with a historical portentousness that makes them exemplary, and even allegorical; the characters start to behave and speak operatically. Here is an example from the chapter “The Revolt of the Hunan Miners,” which climaxes in the execution of two hundred enemies of the revolution. (“Few indeed! For the miners killed only the consciously guilty.”)¹⁸ Yu-kung, a young soldier ordered to give the signal on his bugle for the execution to begin, now recognizes

among the dead his own father, a “yellow labour union leader.” He speaks to a senior revolutionary.

“It was my father – he was also killed out there. I blew the bugle.”

Sung paused and gazed down at the pale, boyish face turned up to him. The big hand of the older man rested on the black head of the youth tenderly, and in the eyes of the lad came an answering gleam of love and confidence.

Sung spoke: “You are not alone. We must all learn that we may have to sacrifice father, mother, sister, brother, in the revolution. But you are a Communist Youth – your life belongs to the Party. You have no family, no father and mother beyond the Party. Is that not right?”

“Yes,” Yu-kung’s voice responded.

“Now keep close to me,” Sung told him. And Yu-kung stood by him through all the times that followed when the mass meeting was held and preparations made for the marching (*CD*, 122).

It is possible this is based on an actual anecdote reported to Smedley in Shanghai by one of her Communist informants, but the narrative itself is certainly fictive and the dialogue as manufactured as any battlefield exchange in *Livy*, whose methods it quite closely resembles. The passage is the more repellent when put alongside more directly observed sketches in the same book of the experience of peasants, students and intellectuals and women of all sorts. The point is that the propaganda motive here guides the pen and dehumanizes both the characters and the narrative which speaks for them. This scene of suffering becomes merely translucent, so that the political light can shine right through it. The gap of representation is closed, leaving no space for

critical assent or dissent.¹⁹ Smedley's Communist discourse comes close to Fascism at such moments – as it does elsewhere, in her rhetoric of blood and earth.

China's Red Army Marches (1936), Smedley's account of the Communist campaigns of 1928 to 1931 of which, again, she had no first-hand experience, contains quite a lot more of this sort of thing. In a method elaborated in *Chinese Destinies*, information is typically mediated through the experiences and memories of individual but representative fighters and peasants, miners and commissars. One chapter is entitled "Ballad of the Seven Bridges," and is indeed a narrative prose version of a ballad, a favorite form of revolutionary expression, which gives an extra license for a frankly epic incident.

Then there was the peasant woman working with the Red Army Medical Corps who saw her own son wounded and dying within range of enemy bullets. Through his blue lips she heard him call her: "Mother! Mother!"

Forgetful of the battle and of enemy bullets, the woman walked right into the open, bent down and half pulled, half lifted her son to safety. But when she looked into his face she saw that he was not her son at all, but Lin Piao, one of the bravest of the Red Army commanders.

Something had happened to this peasant woman in those fierce moments, and the love she bore her own son swept beyond him and embraced Lin Piao and all the sons who fought in the Red Army. The men of the Red Army all began to resemble her son and to bear an echo of his voice in their speech. It was then that this peasant woman became one of the Red Army, and the fate of its men became her fate.²⁰

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with magical representation, or indeed with propaganda, but what rings false about this kind of writing is its inappropriateness to a mode of representation

that makes the truth-claims of documentary realism. But perhaps this points to a feature of social realist representation itself. Realism, like Marxism, grows out of science, and deals with the inference of general laws from the empirical observation of reality; both discourses are drawn to the objective *and* the prophetic, the documentary *and* the visionary. Naturalism in fiction is not a stranger to clumsy propaganda, banal prophecy, clunking symbolism. Such moments might be seen as symptomatic of a crisis within the history of realism itself, in its efforts to show how individual lives are connected to the large patterns of teleology. Smedley's reportorial instinct for unvarnished naturalism and her allegorical transfigurations are after all not in contradiction, but two sides of the same coin: her China is both earthly and visionary, documentary and myth.²¹

We might expect that this allegorizing tendency occurs when Smedley is reporting events she had not experienced first-hand, and there is no observer in the scene. But this is not the case, as we can see by tracing a motif – indeed a genealogy, or at least a family resemblance – in *Battle Hymn of China*. In Shanghai Smedley had known and worked with Lu Xun, and greatly admired him. While in Xian in 1936, she hears that he has died. “The news of my own father's death had reached me shortly before, and I had felt regret and sorrow; the death of Lu Hsün came to me not only as a personal sorrow, but as a national tragedy” (*BHC*, 99). Smedley was not alone in seeing Lu Xun as in some sense both a father and a symbol of the nation, but he has a curious post-mortem manifestation soon after, when she arrives at the headquarters of the First Red Army Corps at Tungli.

This was the first time that I had seen the Red Army *en masse*, and I looked around curiously. I was profoundly impressed by their faces. Instead of the depressed, empty expression characteristic of so many soldiers, their faces had something of the vital awareness that had been so pronounced in the great Lu Hsün (*BHC*, 109-10).

The role of father and national symbol seems to have been inherited by the Red Army itself. The process of transference is complete in the remarkable scene when for the first time she meets Zhu De, the commander-in-chief. “Indeed, he looked like the father of the Red Army.... I flung my arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks” (*BHC*, 118).

And it is not only the great writer and the great general who are epic figures; so too are the anonymous soldiers like those she will later watch hurrying silently along a mountain path at night, in the transfiguring light of destiny. As each soldier steps out of the shadows and passes swiftly before her, it is as if she is witnessing the course of history itself.

The scene seemed unreal, yet as real as the stone cliffs. The iron Chinese people, destined to decide the fate of all Asia and, in countless ways the destiny of mankind, stepped up out of the darkness, passed, and then with swift and silent march, plunged into the darkness again. One big man passed by and I must have exclaimed at something. For he turned his face back toward me, laughing until he was lost in the darkness (*CFB*, 141).

Homer’s heroes consort with and are often related to the Olympian pantheon, ever-present in their affairs. Smedley’s characters are on equally close terms with transcendental presences – history, revolution, the land – and sometimes elicit an equally high style. Their experiences, hardships and triumphs, meticulously reported, cast not merely a national shadow but a universal one. “To me the problems, strength and weaknesses of China seemed to be those of the whole world” (*BHC*, 349). China for Smedley was a revelation, a country in which the truth was manifest.

Naturalization and myth

There is one governing and organizing trope in Smedley's writing that brings together the local and the universal, the documentary and the mythic, while at the same time enabling the repressed aesthetic of China to pour back into her record. We can approach it by taking seriously the title she chose for her autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth*. It is to be found in a passage like the following, her description of awakening with the dawn on her first morning at Zhu De's headquarters in the mountains, to hear the distant strains of music, "something so sweet, so entrancing, that I lifted myself from my bed and strained my ears to hear." She goes outside.

And there I found the orchestra. It was the music of dawn, of the coming of the day. A bird's trill sounded here, sounded there. [...] The faint echo of a dog's bark came, and the low, soft lowing of a cow came like the notes of a distant musical instrument. All the life of the earth was awakening. The forest and the life within the forest stirred. I stood in wonderment and listened to this music, so sweet, so unutterably sweet. Then, through this faint, discernible and yet almost indiscernible music came a new sound. The first bugle call of the day. It came, gentle, coaxing, and it seemed to be shaking the shoulders of the fighters gently, gently, saying, "Come now, get up, do get up, please get up! Comrade, do not be lazy, look, the day is here!" (CFB, 87-8).

Students of literature or music will recognize this as an example of *aubade*, an idealizing and highly conventional evocation of the sights and sounds of dawn, with a long romantic tradition behind it. But the passage, conventional as it is, also denies its artificiality (to do so is of course a convention of *aubade*). It is telling that what at first seemed like an orchestra turned out to be neither artistic nor composed, but nothing more or less than the sounds of the awakening earth itself. And Smedley can allow herself this literary flourish because the dawn of the day is also a

call to the resumption of the life of the revolution. The bugle call redeems her nature-writing from frivolity and mere embellishment, while in the other direction its seamless integration into the scene of nature confers on the revolution the status and inevitability of a natural process. The Eighth Route Army is thoroughly naturalized. In the dawn and in the revolution, the East is Red.

Through its soldiers – most of them, she emphasizes, peasants – the Red Army is not just fighting for the land. It *is* the land. The trope of naturalization, so consistently employed, creates a myth (in Roland Barthes’ sense) of the Communist revolution in which it is represented as a natural force, an expression of the earth itself.²² This helps to explain why for Smedley the real China is to be found in the mountains and not the cities. Her own rural background, as a “daughter of earth,” is her password into this company and her credentials as its historian, and earthy qualities or appearance mark the heroes apart from the rest. In the army itself “was a simple grandeur as fundamental and as undemonstrative as the earth,” she reports. “They belonged to China, they *were* China” (*BHC*, 131). There is a closed circle of identity between the Party, the army, the folk and the earth. On the march, the sound of a soldier’s flute reminds her that in the Chinese masses a stream of folk culture continues to run, “unspoiled by the imitation of Western ‘civilization’ as in Shanghai where many middle-class Chinese have no knowledge of nor respect for the native culture of the people” (*CFB*, 184). Zhu De, the peasant commander, is impeccably earthy, even chthonic, but the test can be applied to anyone: she takes to one general “because he looked like the knot of a tree” (*CFB*, 267); Captain Evans Carlson is treated at first with suspicion, but “when you went walking with him you found that he was as firm as the farmers of his native New England” (*BHC*, 142).

The army and the area it occupies is China, in Smedley’s view, because it embodies both the past and the future of the country. The past contained in folk memory is expressed in its

manners, its language, ballads and music. The future is inscribed in the earth itself as the soldiers pass, “for the Eighth Route Army literally covers the country with its slogans, written by hand – slogans that spring from the hearts and minds of the men in its ranks” (*CFB*, 206). So thoroughgoing is this trope of naturalization, that separation from the army can only be experienced as a kind of death. *China Fights Back* describes how Zhu De and the other commanders ask Smedley to leave the Eighth Route Army and go to Hankou. Her reply – “in words they did not understand” – is couched in the highly poetic language which her upbringing had taught her as the primary idiom of passion and truth. “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God” (*CFB*, 268). The Biblical words – from the Book of Ruth, chapter 1 verse 16 – are the plea of a sojourner begging to be no longer in transit, but accepted into the native community. It is a poignant moment. Her request is denied; she must resume her travels. “It seemed I was bidding farewell to the very earth” (*CFB*, 272). The next dawn, she sets out miserably. A few days later she is watching hungry refugees fighting to board the train to Hankou. In the carriage she encounters other passengers allegorical of republican China’s woes – a rich landlord with his family and mountains of possessions, a cruel mother who strikes her child, a Chinese Christian woman preaching hellfire. She has returned to the other China, the fallen world.

I finish with one last anecdote, to illustrate the account I have given of Smedley’s representations of China, but also to suggest that her material is not always obedient to the political will that structures it. *China Fights Back* is written in the form of journal entries, usually annotated with a place-name and a date. For most of November 1937 she had been on the march

every day with the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army; her journal entry of 21st November is headlined “*A village of unknown name,*” and begins like this.

This is the first time I have slept through most of the night for many weeks. Once in the night I thought the day had come, and rose to see. The moon was nearly full and was shining on the earth covered with its white blanket of snow. It was a scene of indescribable loveliness. The marks of poverty in this poor village were obliterated and the buildings were patches of shining white roofs and of dark, sombre shadows that hid I do not know how many destinies. I returned to the cold *k'ang* to dream of the ruins of Pompeii. For hours it seemed to me I visited the streets and buildings of this ancient city. In the ruins I found pieces of old ivory of many shapes and sizes, and I found bronzeware of great beauty. I was gazing down into a dark pit filled with relics when, aroused by the bugle call, I awoke to a new day (*CFB*, 184-85).

A veteran of psychoanalysis, Smedley set herself to interpret her dream, and concluded that she had been wandering through the “highways and byways” of her own existence as she slept. “It is hardly encouraging to know that your subconscious mind regards you as an old ruined city filled with ancient relics, and with but few things worth salvaging” (*CFB*, 185). Perhaps this is what the dream meant, and it is an interpretation consistent with Smedley’s view that the future of the world was taking shape in China and her own culture with its European roots had had its day. But there may be other ways of reading the dream when we take it in its narrative context.

There are two dreamworks in the account, the first being the transfiguration of the village by moonlight, so vivid – like a dream – that it seems to be really day. The moonlight turns the prosaic village into a picture, aestheticizing it into indescribable loveliness, erasing the signs of its poverty and investing it with a romantic interiority and mystique.²³ Is the dream perhaps an

admonition, warning the dreamer that there are more important, powerful and lasting things than aesthetic objects, which could not save the people of Pompeii and in any case distract us from the truth, as the moonlight tells a lie about the village? Maybe in the dream Smedley's puritan conscience was reminding her that to dwell on the beauties of China was to falsify the country, ignoring its suffering and struggle.

But it is also possible to read the moonlit scene as a prophetic vision, in which the secret ministry of the moon performs a transfiguration that the revolution too promised, a transformation of China into a place where nature and human habitation in harmony create beauty and peace and redeeming purity, and poverty and war have disappeared, and history has been accomplished and transcended. This utopian vision, the imagined end (in both senses) of China's revolution, could be taken as yet another instance of Smedley's desire for closure. But in this case the closure is soon opened up, by the unappeased unconscious, with a dream that supplies its troubling contradiction. Here a dark chasm, a traditional site of prophecy in romantic writing, discloses a different and far from euphoric vision of the future. It is the future not as idyll but as apocalypse, a sobering prospect of the death of a great civilization, its ruins and relics picked over by a visiting tourist in a dream. Where after all, in Auden's words, did the journey look, for China? How secure, in the end, were the great teleological certitudes of the revolution to which Agnes Smedley had committed her life and writing? Aroused from this dream by the bugle call, she would soon be on the march again. But the troubling dream was not forgotten, and its murky shapes remained part of her experience and memory of China, and of the record she left behind.

¹ Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 338.

² Ruth Price, *The Lives of Agnes Smedley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The German connection arises from Smedley's alignment with Indian nationalists in the U.S.A. receiving money from the German government to foment revolution in British India.

³ Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth*, 1929, **Afterword by Paul Lauter** (New York: Feminist Press, 1973). Hereafter *DE*.

⁴ Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto and Windus, Hogarth Press, and Oxford University Press, 1983), 535.

⁵ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), 125.

⁶ Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (London: Gollancz, 1944), 10. Hereafter *BHC*.

⁷ "And maybe the fever shall have a cure, the true journey an end / Where hearts meet and are really true...." Auden wrote the poem on his own journey to China in 1938. W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 17-18.

⁸ Linked to the moral rectitude of the revolution was the sexual restraint of the Red Army, which she was to describe as "largely an army of sexual ascetics." Agnes Smedley, *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army*, **Left Book Club Edition** (London: Gollancz, 1938), 34. Hereafter *CFB*.

⁹ Earlier in the year her friend Edgar Snow had visited the revolutionary base in northern Shaanxi where the Red Army regrouped after the Long March. His extensive interviews with Mao Zedong form the core of his remarkable *Red Star over China* (London: Gollancz, 1937), the first book to introduce the Chinese Communists to a Western readership. It was reissued by Gollancz the following year as a Left Book Club edition.

¹⁰ Auden and Isherwood met Smedley in Hankou. "It is impossible not to like and respect her, so grim and sour and passionate," Isherwood reported. "[S]he sits before the fire, huddled together, as if all the suffering, all the injustice of the world were torturing her bones like rheumatism" (60).

¹¹ The house comes under aerial bombardment in the last act of the play. "Did you hear the explosions?" says one character. "And the sound in the sky: it's splendid: it's like an orchestra: it's like Beethoven." George Bernard Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, 1919, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 158. Smedley may not have seen a performance of *Heartbreak House* but she was aware of Shaw as a socialist writer.

¹² “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is quoted in *BHC*, 143.

¹³ Though she was uncomfortable in the role of foreign expert thrust upon her, on an earlier occasion Smedley found herself explaining that the earth was round, what a piano was, and why the American workers did not have a Red Army (*BHC*, 232-33). Visitors were expected to perform as well as to gather information. Edgar Snow recalled entertaining the troops in Pao An with a rendering of the vaudeville song “The Man on the Flying Trapeze” (*Red Star over China*, 117).

¹⁴ “Looking Back on the Spanish War” in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998) vol. 13, 497-511. Orwell records saying to Arthur Koestler, “History stopped in 1936” (503). He details the fantastically differing “facts” reported as true by adherents of both sides, and concludes: “This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world” (504). The essay, probably written in 1942, is of the greatest importance to students of the historiography of ideological wars.

¹⁵ Smedley’s account is more partisan than that of Edgar Snow in his highly influential *Red Star over China* (1937). It would be equally interesting to investigate the rhetoric of negative accounts of the revolution and its leadership, such as in the unremittingly hostile narrative of Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Untold Story* (London: Cape, 2005).

¹⁶ On this journey she was accompanied by five bearers, two bodyguards and a boy, a translator, and a spare horse.

¹⁷ In Hong Kong, “Ernest Hemingway blew in, offering to stand everybody to drinks with the lucre won in his last literary victory, and entertaining us with tales of far-off places” (*CFB*, 361). Smedley’s scorn for literary travel writers appears to outflank the usual scorn of the literary travel writer for tourists. See Helen Carr, “Modernism and Travel (1880-1940),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70-86.

¹⁸ Agnes Smedley, *Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1934), 121. Hereafter *CD*. Those executed had been identified as police officers, police spies, and officers and members of the Kuomintang. The executioners had no rifles so the condemned men were killed with long knives. “They should die like dogs, for they had betrayed the workers” (*CD*, 121).

¹⁹ There is a similar theme, but a quite different politics of form, in Brecht’s *The Measures Taken*, written in 1929/1930. There, the sacrifice of an individual to the cause of the revolution in China is presented in Brecht’s

version of epic theatre, a form that foregrounds its own artifice and is supposed to invite the audience to study and debate the action. Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 7-34.

²⁰ Agnes Smedley, *China's Red Army Marches* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), 91-2.

²¹ It is not too anachronistic to trace this formula back as far as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* and the Puritan seedbed of English realism.

²² See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 117-174. It may seem perverse to suggest that Smedley's representation of the Red Army is a Barthesian myth, when Barthes defined myth as "depoliticized speech" (155), and wanted to exempt revolutionary language from it: "revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical" (159). But her naturalization of the revolution does depoliticize it insofar as it is represented as organic, inevitable, and unarguable.

²³ Smedley several times writes ruefully of a Chinese subjectivity which must remain hidden to her. "I can never know fully the meaning, the essence of the Chinese struggle for liberation which lies embedded in the hearts of these workers and peasants [...] And I hungered for the spark of vision that would enable me to see into their minds and hearts and picture their convictions about the great struggle for which they give more than their lives" (*CFB*, 123).