

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## American Self-Fashioning in Helen Foster Snow's *My China Years* Constance J. Post

*My China Years* chronicles the remarkable exploits of Helen Foster Snow during one of the most tumultuous decades in modern Chinese history. When Snow arrived in Shanghai in August 1931, domestic revolutionary war continued to be waged between the Nationalists (Guomindang) and the Communists (Gongchandang) and within a month the 'Mukden Incident' sparked the beginning of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.<sup>1</sup> By the time Snow returned to the United States in 1940, the Anti-Japanese War brought Communist and Nationalists forces together again as a 'United Front.' The union, however, did not last because of renewed fighting between the Communists and the Nationalists from 1945 to 1949, a period widely referred to as the Chinese Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Although Snow was not present at the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, she participated in major events leading up to it, interviewed top Communist leaders at Yan'an after the Long March, and led the Gung Ho effort to establish industrial cooperatives in China.

Out of the four extraordinary months she spent in Yan'an in 1937 with Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai came her first book, *Inside Red China*, which was published under the name, Helen Foster Snow, as was her last, *My China Years*. For other books she used the pseudonym, Nym Wales. Snow's many books and numerous articles as well as *Democracy*, the magazine she co-founded with Edgar Snow and Ida Pruitt, demonstrate that she contributed to New China chiefly by writing about it while she was in China and long after she left. Gathering material on one occasion involved a daring escape from Xi'an in order to reach the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party in Yan'an. Most of the time, however, the oral histories collected by Snow required no derring-do, and she produced a manuscript in fairly short order – usually in a matter of months and rarely more than a couple of years. Over half a century, however, elapsed between her arrival in Shanghai from the United States in 1931 that she describes at the start of her memoir and its eventual publication as *My China Years* in 1984. In the memoir Snow also writes about the American journalist Edgar Snow whom she married in Tokyo on Christmas Day in 1932. The marriage ended in divorce in 1949, the year of the founding of the PRC.

The long passage of time between the events in the memoir and the publication of *My China Years* may account for the disjuncture Snow creates between herself as she was then (1931-1940) and the self she is now, a gap in time that suggests the two selves separated by more than half a century are firmly fixed. A second gap, that of distance, separates Snow's experience as a resident of Shanghai and Peking during these years from her recollection of them that she recalls as a long-time resident of Madison, CT where she completed her

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Snow identifies two civil wars before the founding the People's Republic of China in 1949: the First Communist-Nationalist Civil War (1927-47) and the Second Communist-Nationalist Civil War (1946-49) in the revised edition of his 1938 classic, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 22, 24. The second of these wars is what most historians of China today refer to as China's Civil War (1945-49). See, for example, Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> 'Yan'an' is spelled 'Yenan' in the Wade-Giles system that Helen Foster Snow chiefly uses in her memoir. In this essay Chinese names and places appear in Pinyin with the following exceptions: (1) 'Peking,' for 'Beijing'; (2) the spelling of the names of Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, and Chiang Kai-Shek, head of the Nationalist Government in China from 1928 to 1949; and (3) names and places as they appear in direct quotations from Snow's text.

memoir in the 1980s. Although return visits to China in 1972-73 and 1978 may have sharpened her awareness of the gaps in time and space between then and now in her life, Snow acknowledges that the death of Edgar Snow in 1972 prompted her to take another look at the manuscript of the memoir that she had begun years before (327). The process of writing the memoir over a period of many years therefore problematises her use of 'I' in *My China Years*, making it difficult to identify whether the 'I' occurs in a portion of the manuscript written in China that she left untouched, a part written after she left China in 1940 but before 1972 when she decided to work on the manuscript again; sections that underwent substantial revision between 1972 and 1984, or new material for the memoir that she wrote during that fourteen-year period. The finished manuscript of *My China Years* nevertheless reveals a consistently bifurcated 'I' between the girl Snow depicts herself as in the 1930s and the woman reflecting on that experience decades later.

Snow's memoir offers a distinctive example of American self-fashioning in which the author casts her years spent in China within an interpretive framework distinctively rooted in the literature and culture of the United States. As Stephen Greenblatt reminds us in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the development of selves capable of being fashioned can be attributed to the rise of an autonomous self in the early modern period, a self that is always dialectical and usually rendered in language. To engage in the act of self-fashioning, moreover, requires an Other, 'something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile.'<sup>3</sup> For Snow, the Other can be aspects of Chinese culture that she found to be strange in comparison with her own or elements in her own that she now found to be alien. Often, though, she struggles with a Puritan element in the Chinese Revolution that she recognises as an integral part of her own upbringing and her understanding of capitalism. As a result, the self that Snow constructs in *My China Years* situates her memoir within the mainstream of American autobiography, a performative act of American self-fashioning accomplished with verve but also with nuance.<sup>4</sup>

In the epilogue of *My China Years*, Snow states that 'Like the old Chinese, I worship my ancestors, wear baggy pants, and drink tea.' She prefaces the statement with the declaration of her support 'for the Human Achievement, for space exploration, invention, and originality' and other matters, not the least of which is the affirmation of her belief that conditions in the United States make it possible for an individual to achieve the highest development. She concludes with the following,

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 9.

<sup>4</sup> My reading of Snow's memoir considers *My China Years* within a critical framework about American autobiography as a whole rather than an exclusively feminist reading of her text, in part because of the essentialist view that dominates much of the discourse about women's writing. According to Estelle Jelinek, women's lifewriting is episodic and anecdotal, lacks chronology, appears disjunctive, emphasizes personal matters, and downplays the individual 'I' by stressing relationships with family and friends (*The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986] xiii). Patricia Meyers Spacks locates the difference between male and female autobiographers in the mantle of modesty they assume, noting 'the striking degree' to which they 'fail directly to emphasize their own importance' ('Selves in Hiding' in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980] 113-14). Other feminist critics disagree. According to Domna Stanton, it is difficult to establish 'a manifestation of female difference' (*The Female Autograph* [New York: New York Literary Forum, 1984] 14).

I love tiger cats, my little 1752 house, Robert Redford, Bruce Jenner, my old IBM typewriter, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, British movies on public television, fluffy blouses, the nuclear family, the English language as it used to be, trains, the Parthenon, American history (up to 1960), pizza, Coca-Cola, tuna fish sandwiches on rye, Westminster Cathedral, Delphi ... and Pao-an.<sup>5</sup>

The sharply contrasting elements of these sentences constitute a dominant modernist note that Helen Snow strikes in the book, combining, as she does in this passage, the high and low, the sublime and the ridiculous, the broad generalisation and the concrete particular. Reminiscent of the disjunctures in the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot, the pairings also evoke an earlier American, Walt Whitman, whose *Song of Myself* contains numerous catalogues of the disparate strands in the American experience to which the poet bears witness in his vision.<sup>6</sup>

The content of Snow's pairings evokes yet earlier Americans. Central to Snow's long lists is the admission that she worships her ancestors, in particular the Puritans, whose influence on *My China Years* owes as much to the decades she spent researching her seventeenth-century forbears after she returned from China in 1940 as it does to an intellectual understanding of the Puritan movement that she gained while she was there. Perhaps the greatest tribute paid by Snow to her Puritan ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic is their influence on the way she fashions an American self, a debt that becomes increasingly apparent throughout her memoir.<sup>7</sup> Absent from the pages of *My China Years*, however, is an acknowledgement of her roots in the Church of Latter-Day Saints and the compelling interest in family history fostered by the Mormons, an interest she shared as her numerous research notes and unpublished volumes of genealogical studies attest.<sup>8</sup> In one of these, 'The Christopher Foster Family History, 1603-1953,' she establishes her Puritan ancestry by tracing her father's family first to Massachusetts and later to Southampton, Long Island where Christopher Foster died in 1687.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Foster Snow, *My China Years: A Memoir* (New York: William Morrow, 1984) 330. Subsequent references to the text will be placed within parentheses in the essay. Pao-an refers to the area that includes Yenan where Helen Snow interviewed Mao Zedong and other leaders in 1936. Snow revisited the site in 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself in Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin Books, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> In *Helen Foster Snow: An American Woman in Revolutionary China* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006), Kelly Ann Long notes that Helen's mother Hannah was active in the Church of Latter-Day Saints but that her father, John Foster, was not (21).

<sup>8</sup> Snow's extensive research notes and unpublished manuscripts about early American history, Puritan history on both sides of the Atlantic, and her Puritan ancestors constitute a small portion of the vast archive of her work at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. For 'The Root and the Branch,' a 600-page manuscript in the collection, Snow prepared a detailed study about the seventeenth-century English leader Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army which he led during the 1642-1651 English Civil War.

<sup>9</sup> According to Snow, who completed the Foster Family History in 1953, Christopher Foster (1603-1687) arrived in 1635 aboard the 'Abigail,' on which Hugh Peter (or Peters) also sailed. Peter, who helped to organize the church in which Foster served as a member, later returned to England to become chaplain to Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and other Puritan military forces. Meanwhile Foster, after two years in Boston, moved to Lynn, Massachusetts and in 1645 sold his home there to settle on Long Island, first in Hempstead and finally in Southampton where he died in 1687 ('The Christopher Foster Family History, 1603-1953,' 1). Snow's Puritan ancestry thus can be traced back to the Great Migration of 1630-1635, a period that saw a tremendous influx of immigrants to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It should be noted that another source mentioned by Snow dates the arrival of Christopher Foster before the settlement of Naukeag [Salem] in 1628, which would link Snow's Puritan ancestry to the Plymouth Colony. Snow notes that according to the *Foster Genealogy* by F.

In *My China Years* the influence of the Puritans on Snow's American self-fashioning reflects the secularisation of the Puritan experience delineated by Max Weber in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R.H. Tawney in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. The historical process whereby Puritanism became secularised did not come to Snow's attention, however, until she studied Tawney's book on capitalism as well as his *Land and Labor in China* under the instruction of Harry Price at Yenching University (now Peking University) where she enrolled in several courses in 1934-35.<sup>10</sup> Often paired with Max Weber's 1904 study, Tawney's 1926 book concentrates on the link between English Puritans and the rise of capitalism, whereas Weber examines the link between Continental Pietists as well as English Puritans with capitalism. Although Snow's memoir claims that 'strict puritanism accounted for the success of the Soong sisters and was the foundation stone of American civilization,'<sup>11</sup> Weber's 'foundation stone' of capitalism by way of a secularised Puritan is Benjamin Franklin whom Snow mentions early in her memoir. Franklin was 65 and a celebrity on two continents by the time he began his memoirs in 1771 whereas Snow was 77 and had been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize when *My China Years* appeared in print in 1984.<sup>12</sup>

Like Benjamin Franklin whose *Memoirs* were published in 1815, Snow continues the Puritan tradition of self-fashioning, albeit in secularised form, in ways that have come to define American life-writing: first, her belief in the power of an individual exemplary life, including her confidence in the capacity of individuals for extraordinary achievement; second, her conviction that action is an option, affirming the ability of human beings to exercise free will despite the struggle that may accompany it; third, her firm embrace of optimism; and fourth, her way of representing failure and success.<sup>13</sup> These characteristics intersect at many points with the view of the self as a morality play and the self as a person in control of her or his own fate delineated by Diane Bjorklund in *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography*. According to Bjorklund, the idea of an evolving self in the nineteenth-century America rivaled the view of the self as a morality play that was rooted in Puritanism.<sup>14</sup> In *Natural Supernaturalism* Meyer Abrams attributes this change to the English Romantic writers who radically transformed the pattern of Christian conversion whereby the individual no longer stands in need of a redeemer outside the self but instead

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C. Pierce, Christopher Foster and John Foster were part of a company led by Roger Conant, who sought to establish a settlement at Cape Ann (54).

<sup>10</sup> P. 135. Harry Price received his M.A. from Yale University in 1932 and began teaching at Yenching University the same year. He became the Executive Director of the Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression in 1937 while Helen Snow was still in China. He assumed the position of Deputy Director of the United Nations as Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1944.

<sup>11</sup> P. 61. Ailing married H. H. Kung, a wealthy industrialist who later became Hong Kong's finance minister; Chingling married Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic; and Meiling married Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek. Had the sisters been educated in Germany or France, Snow insists that their training would not have been strictly Puritan. The three sisters attended Wesleyan College in Macon, GA.

<sup>12</sup> The complete text of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* did not appear in print until 1818. Started in 1771, Franklin returned in 1784 and again in 1788 and 1789 to the writing of his memoirs, the title he originally gave to his reminiscences.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to J. Leo Lemay, 'Franklin's *Autobiography* and the American Dream in *The Renaissance Man in the Eighteenth Century* ([William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1978] 21-33, 41-4) for his delineation of five defining characteristics of the American Dream. I have collapsed his five into three and added a fourth: how a writer deals rhetorically with failure and success.

<sup>14</sup> *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

becomes the agent of redeeming the self.<sup>15</sup> Failure or success rests exclusively on the individual, something which Snow alternately accepts and rejects in her memoir. *My China Years* also exhibits characteristics of the uncertain self and the self as beleaguered, two additional ways of viewing the self in Bjorklund's schema that I shall explore as further evidence of the secularisation of the Puritan self.

The first defining characteristics of American autobiography, the belief in the power of an individual exemplary life, appears in the earliest American Puritan spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth century as well as secularised variants starting in the eighteenth that uphold the value of a good example as an inspiration for others.<sup>16</sup> Embracing this aim, Helen Foster Snow asserts at the beginning of *My China Years* that 'This is a parable of one small individual, on the edge of nowhere yet reaching out to steal the Promethean fire that lights the future' (68). Snow's choice of a parable to represent her life invokes the teachings of Jesus whose use of this literary genre established it as a vehicle to disclose a spiritual truth to the discerning ear but conceal it from others.<sup>17</sup> Among the things that Snow conceals for the most part in her memoir is her Mormon background, in an effort perhaps to strip away any features that might undercut her effort to seem typical. By offering up her life as a parable, Snow hopes it may reveal to others that they too may accomplish great things, finding in her example a route to success that may be difficult but within their reach.

In the Yan'an section of *My China Years*, Snow declares that her book *Inside Red China* made her life accessible to others who literally wanted to follow in her footsteps in reaching the revolutionary stronghold established after the Long March. 'All over China,' she writes, 'young students read the translation and set out for the city, feeling confident that if an American girl could make her way there, so could they' (232). Here the literal contrasts with the mythological by way of Snow's identification with Prometheus, the hero who defies the gods and steals the sacred fire for humankind. Describing her life as a Promethean parable is one of many ways that Snow conjoins seemingly disparate strands, classical and Christian, for which the end result is a modern parable in which Snow boldly acts in defiance of the gods. She does so, however, not just to benefit others but also as an act of empowering herself by stealing the sacred fire.

Snow eschews a Puritan self in other ways as well. Instead of a typical example of a sinner turned saint, Snow fashions herself in the pages of *My China Years* as an example of a typical American. When Paul Houston, senior U.S. consul in Shanghai, told her shortly after her arrival in 1931 that 'There is nothing you can't do,' she replied, 'I'm a typical American, only more so,' adding, 'Why not do the impossible?' Houston responded that 'typical Americans never came to China,' noting that what ails most writing about China is that 'We

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<sup>14</sup> In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), Meyer Abrams traces the way Romantic writers 'recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise' (29).

<sup>16</sup> Cotton Mather's autobiography, which he began after the birth of his son Samuel in 1699, underscores the importance of example by conflating 'father' and 'pattern' in the title, *Paterna* (Ronald Bosco, ed. [Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1976]). For the importance of example or pattern in American Puritan autobiography, see Constance J. Post, *Signs of the Times in Cotton Mather's Paterna: A Study of Puritan Autobiography* (New York: AMS Press, 2000), especially xiii, xviii, xxv, 34-35, 57-58, 75-76, 123-26.

<sup>17</sup> See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) for a discussion of the varying degrees of narrativity and opacity in parables (25).

only get the peculiar ones – or they wouldn't have come here in the first place.'<sup>18</sup> Snow, who credits Houston as the first person she knew with direct knowledge about the Communists, confidently asserts that 'Only Americans could have done the things any of us did,' referring to her husband Edgar Snow and herself among U.S. writers publishing articles and books about China at the time (66). In depicting herself as a typical American, however, Snow placed great stress on youth.

To the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, she says, she 'became a kind of guinea pig, to try out his complicated philosophy on a youthful, Protestant-secular type of mind. In China Teilhard de Chardin worked as a paleontologist at the Peking Man excavation site in Zhangjiakou at the same time that he continued to develop his abstruse philosophical ideas about the evolving of the universe towards an ever higher consciousness, an attempt to reconcile science and religion that occupied his scholarly research for many years.'<sup>19</sup> Snow felt especially drawn to the Jesuit philosopher's emphasis on the power of an individual 'to develop by use of the mind, by 'thinking energy,' into God, and thereby order the universe,' especially his assertion that 'becoming God was the nature of man, his special phenomenon, a part of the natural Darwinian evolution' (102). The idea reinforced Snow's belief in the importance of gradual development and the ability of an individual to bring that change about by relying on the self instead of a God outside the self, a major shift that Snow reflects in her memoir as a thoroughly secularised Puritan. Snow, who views the achievements of Teilhard de Chardin in science and philosophy as part of the contributions to Asia made by earlier Jesuits such as Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci, marvels at his apparent willingness to pass over 'young French or English people' in order to pass on to herself and her husband Edgar Snow 'the palladia of French power to Young America in the East, not by wish and will but by premonition' (103).

Teilhard de Chardin's observation about Snow closely resembles the observation Mao Zedong made about her. According to Snow, 'For Mao Tse-tung, I was also Young America in search of the truth – and confronted by the contradictions in China, which he undertook to explain to me.'<sup>20</sup> Helen Snow had jumped at the chance to gather oral histories from him and other leaders after her husband returned in October 1936 from Yen-an where he was the first Western journalist to interview Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Peng Dehuai. Reading Edgar's stories convinced Helen that she 'had to make a similar trip at any cost' (202), a decision prompted in part by her identification of the Communist struggle with that of the soldiers in the Revolutionary War: 'I was Young America of the 1930s, still fighting the Revolution of

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<sup>18</sup> P. 60. Snow's regard for herself as a typical American is sometimes gender-inflected, a topic worthy of a separate essay. Comments about the American journalist Agnes Smedley suggest that Snow believed Smedley to be one of the peculiar Americans Houston had in mind. In a later passage Snow states that 'The women of Yen-an approved of my modesty and shyness in public.' Snow mentions additional views of hers that met with the approval of Zhu De's wife Kang Keching and the other women at Yen-an. In fact, says Snow, the only women who 'dared to disagree with them, especially over the issue of free love versus marriage' were Ding Ling and Agnes Smedley, 'and they were ostracised. The women simply did not understand Miss Smedley at all' (278-79).

<sup>19</sup> Teilhard de Chardin worked out his views about evolution from 1938-1940 long before they saw the light of print in French as *Le Phénomène Humain* in 1955; an English translation was published as *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1959.

<sup>20</sup> P. 106. According to Helen Snow, 'Of all the people I have known, two turned out to be the most important. Both have been virtually deified. The first, Mao Zedong, she says, 'became the embodiment of Asia in revolution'; the second, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'became the spirit of European civilization.' Although Helen Snow viewed them as opposites, she believed it was possible to resolve the contradictions in their philosophies.

1776' (94). Of herself and David Yui, an activist in the student movement, Helen Snow remarks that the two of them 'seemed to represent Chinese-American youth of the 1930s, leagued together by history' (210).

Youth serves as the common denominator in the reflections about Snow by de Chardin, Mao Zedong, and Snow herself, a feature she links with an openness to radical change not only on an individual level but also on a national level. As a self-acknowledged representative of American youth, Snow identified with the youth of China in the December 9, 1935 Student Movement as well as other Chinese youth whom she considered the necessary key 'to build a whole new world' (68). Snow recognised, however, that the world the Chinese Revolution built posed a uniquely difficult situation never encountered by the United States, which fought three separate wars 'to establish the American experiment and its principles – the Puritan civil war between Englishmen in the seventeenth century which destroyed feudalism, the Revolution of 1776, and the Civil War of the 1860s' (147). In contrast, says Snow, 'China had to fight all three wars at the same time,' an extraordinary challenge that also required its engagement in a fourth: the war against modern imperialism.

The conviction that action is a viable option is a second characteristic of American life-writing that surfaces in Snow's memoir. The confidence that the exercise of free will may require intense struggle becomes evident in Snow's admission that the desire to develop her abilities fully came with a high price tag. Looking back at herself as a young girl in *My China Years*, she notes that 'This girl gave up material things and never counted the cost' (34). This consisted chiefly of putting a stop to buying clothes for herself so that she could afford to buy them for Edgar, whom she considered to be sartorially challenged. Pointing out that she did not buy much of anything for herself from 1932 to 1939, Snow acknowledges that the four evening gowns she brought with her from the U.S. made the purchase of a new gown unnecessary (74, 86). (Some of the four gowns may have been in the wardrobe trunk she brought on her honeymoon, a case of not packing lightly that elicited scorn from her husband.)<sup>21</sup> Moreover, instead of buying new clothes she sometimes wore new clothes on loan from Helen Burton, owner of The Camel's Bell, who arranged for Snow to wear cloaks and fancy ball gowns from her shop to attend cultural events in Peking as a way of drumming up business whenever tourist groups were in town. Snow's sense of deprivation during these years was also mitigated by gifts from Edgar that included an expensive leopard coat that cost \$200, close to half the sum of \$500 that she claims a Westerner could live on quite comfortably for two years in China (76).

In *My China Years* Snow questions whether giving up material things has been worth it: 'What did the girl get in exchange? In 1931 I intended maximum development of the individual in all ways, but I was torn away from my goals by the typhoons of history. Or was I?'<sup>22</sup> Giving up material things in order to develop her full potential did not work for her either, says Snow, who finds that goal impossible to achieve because of forces over which she had no control. Concluding that in her case that 'the individual was sacrificed for the common good,' Snow understood that China's insistence on the need to serve the people represented a higher priority than her embrace of a secularised Puritanism that valorised individual growth. To Snow, seventeenth-century Puritan history provided numerous parallels for China's revolution, including Cromwell's New Model Army that emerged

<sup>21</sup> Helen Snow reports that her wardrobe trunk caused Edgar Snow to exclaim on their honeymoon as they neared Borneo, 'You may think yourself a born explorer ... but you are no traveler' (76).

<sup>22</sup> P. 34. Snow's question raises anew the issue of the autobiographical 'I' as a single self a multiplicity of selves. *My China Years* suggests that her response to this question varied throughout the course of her life.

victorious in England's Civil War because of its willingness to sacrifice all for what it conceived to be the common good.

Elements in the Red Army at Yan'an that Snow identifies with Puritanism cover a broad range from cosmetics to confessions. Wearing make-up invited the suspicion that you were politically unreliable, according to Snow; hence the unspoken edict against it. Although Snow admits she was willing to go without make-up, she drew the line at lipstick.<sup>23</sup> She also reports that male and female Communists alike wore baggy pants, a mark of the working class, and adopted the same hair style. Little differentiated women from men at the Red Army camp except for the slightly longer length of their haircuts. Of far greater consequence at Yan'an were romantic relationships. Such entanglements, observes Snow, 'had to be avoided in this Puritan, Spartan army, which sacrificed everything for the Revolution' (275). Snow willingly conceded, however, the usefulness of extending many of the prohibitions beyond Yan'an as a means of winning over the people. Strict morality included an insistence on telling the truth, another example cited by Snow as evidence of the Communists adopting the Puritan ethic (217).

'Confession,' which Snow highlights by placing it in quotation marks, played a central role in Chinese Communism that she admits she found repugnant. A reference to the Marxist-Leninist practice of criticism and self-criticism developed further by Mao, 'confession' required individuals to criticise their own conduct and that of others. In this matter Snow, who disliked the practice because she considered it an invasion of privacy, aligned herself more closely with her Puritan forebears who promoted self-examination as a spiritual discipline but did not require that it be conducted in public. Snow seems keenly aware of the value of group 'confession' in China as a means of reinforcing the Puritan ethic of telling the truth both within the army and in the villages where the army sought to enlist the support of the people. These examples explain, at least in part, Snow's conclusion that 'The chief Communist characteristic was puritanism in all ways, and this is still true of the New China' (275).

The Puritanism Snow found in Chinese Communism at every turn bears a much greater resemblance to the communitarian values of seventeenth-century Puritanism than it does to the secularised Puritanism she found congenial because of the importance it places on the individual. As a result, Snow's willingness to question whether 'the typhoons of history' had thwarted the achievement of her personal goals reveals a deep ambivalence about Puritanism. On the one hand, she finds that the fervour of Cromwell's New Model Army also animates the Chinese Communist Army; both depended for success on the collective sacrifice of its supporters. To some degree, the fervour had her in its grip as well. Noting that Christians of all affiliations in China refused to take part in the revolution, Snow faulted Christianity for its failure to be the 'revolutionary and progressive religion' she believed it to be. That said, Snow declares that she did not 'wish to be a Christian martyr or any other kind,' even though she was firmly convinced that '*Someone* had to act' (143,146). The decision therefore to assume an active role in the December 9 Student Movement is something Snow claims she did not seek but had been thrust upon her.

In daring to act, however, Snow believed she was doing it at great personal cost that diminished the concept of herself that she had been working hard to create:

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<sup>23</sup> Right before Snow met Mao Zedong and Zhu De in Yanan, she vacillated between applying more lipstick or removing it; unsure about what to do, she decided against both (265). Elsewhere in her memoir Snow views lipstick as an example of transgressive adaptability: wearing enough of it to satisfy herself but not enough to attract the notice of others (275).



History was squeezing out of me, like wine from new grapes, the surplus I had by nature and development. This wine was being handed out to the Chinese to intoxicate them with will and determination to act. I was still developing intellectually, but history was channeling my studies into narrow paths, contrary to my whole nature. I, who set out to be the Renaissance woman, was being cut down to size as a worker in the vineyard – a researcher on the nature of revolution in China. (146)

As exhilarating as it was to participate in the movement, Snow soon discovered that putting together pamphlets and news releases at a moment's notice for the students required that she set aside larger writing projects to which she wanted to devote her attention. The needs of others, including leaders of the student movement, made claims upon her time that left little to spare for anything else, let alone the broad array of pursuits that would qualify her as a Renaissance woman of the twentieth century. The dilemma, she believes, is borne especially by women who jettison their plans in order to accommodate the needs of others. Snow's assessment, however, obscures her evident desire to be many things at the same time – not just an activist and not just a writer – that made a singular achievement elusive. For this Snow believed she paid a high price, first, by failing to achieve immortality by writing 'the one classic book'; and, second, by allowing her individuality, what she called her sense of 'self-preservation,' to be destroyed. Acting individually and collectively continued to be a problem, for Snow, who was drawn to both in China. Before she left the country in 1940, she faced a similar dilemma when she tried to balance her active collaboration with others to promote industrial cooperatives through Gung Ho with the solitude necessary to do her writing.

A third characteristic of American life-writing evident in Helen Foster Snow's *My China Years* is her deep-seated optimism. The American writer Lewis Gannett told Snow at a dinner party that 'there must be something about China to produce Pollyannas such as herself, who 'seem to think it's still the best of all possible worlds.' In her response to Gannett, Snow ignored the allusion to *Candide* to concentrate on the reference to Pollyanna, the title character in Eleanor H. Porter's immensely popular 1913 novel: 'It wasn't China,' says Snow, who insisted, 'I had taken the Pollyanna-ism to China in 1931. It was in my marrow bones. But after the China experience, you never forgot that things could be a lot worse' (101). In China her optimism was fueled in part by the warm reception citizens from the United States were given at the time. 'It was great to be an American in Asia in those days,' marvels Snow. 'The waves parted before us as before Moses at the Red Sea – especially a *red* sea. We were welcome everywhere. An American was likely to be looked upon as the next best thing to Roosevelt himself' (194). Reading the story of Moses and the Red Sea typologically situates Snow within a tradition rooted in Puritan ways of expressing the self, although the figural meaning of Moses is all but lost in the pleasure Snow takes in the pun. The appeal of Americans to the Chinese she traced to the American persona, 'one great monument to the human endeavor' by way of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

For Snow, the source of the enduring appeal of America for China for was the Revolutionary War of 1776. Five years after the young woman of 23 organised the Fourth of July celebration at the American Consulate in Shanghai in 1932, she found herself

interviewing Mao Zedong, at her specific request, on 4 July 1937 in Yan'an.<sup>24</sup> Japan attacked China on 7 July so Mao assigned Wu Liangping and Lo Fu to complete the interview he started with her (269). The interviews she conducted in Yan'an with Mao and others after the Long March deepened her conviction that the Communists would succeed. Her optimism about China, however, extended well beyond its military achievements. Its achievements in art, for example, put the United States to shame, according to Snow, who believed China had done more in the thirty years since the revolution in 1949 than the United States had managed to do in its first 150 years. Snow also praises the connection forged between art and work in China. 'Marxism glorified labor,' she writes, 'not only because it was productive but also because it was beautiful esthetically,' yet another parallel Snow identifies between Chinese Communism and seventeenth-century Puritanism (118).

In comparing China with the United States throughout *My China Years*, Snow establishes many similarities between the revolution in China and what she calls the American experiment. Although the United States has not managed to produce many deities, says Snow, 'we have produced millions of individuals working hard for the highest standard of living ever known, and developing at the same time a high 'spiritual' worth in the sense of maximum generosity, kindness, friendliness, good humor, and true democratic instincts for judging by merit' (147). Snow's observation about the United States gathers a number of ideas together, including the belief that an individual can simultaneously attain both a high standard of living and high 'spiritual' worth. On a personal level, however, the ideal remained out of reach for Helen Snow, given the straitened circumstances in which she found herself in the years following her divorce in 1949 up until her death in 1997. Although she lacks Ralph Waldo Emerson's scepticism that the twin aims can be combined, she nevertheless shared his conviction that we are the creators of our worlds and therefore should build our own.<sup>25</sup> The genius of America, argues Snow, is that the country has produced millions who have developed themselves on their spiritually by looking within. On this score and many others, Snow apparently took the advice she gave to Dr Frene: 'You should read Emerson, instead of Kant and Freud' (61).

How very Emersonian too is the special delight Helen takes in finding herself identified as the teacher and the older, superbly educated man the pupil. That delight, read large, can also be understood as Helen's fervent desire that a young country like America, through her as a Young American, might be an example to China's much older civilisation even though she recognises the impossibility of importing the American individualism that she sees as the defining characteristic of American culture. Snow asserts that she 'would not give up the real American people for all the Parthenons, all the Beethoven symphonies, all the English literature, all the French cuisine, all the Taj Mahals, and all the Russian and Chinese revolutions, all combined' (146). *My China Years* attests that Snow's experiences sharpened her understanding of the similarities and the differences between Chinese culture and American culture, including the shock of recognition about the ways in which the Chinese Communist Revolution resembled aspects of the Puritan origins of the United States, origins that shaped her ancestors on both sides of the Atlantic. Although Snow could not

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<sup>24</sup> P. 268. The deliberate choice to interview Mao on Independence Day for the United States, recalls a similar choice by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (New York: Penguin, 1986), who claims that his decision to take up residence at Walden Pond on Independence Day, July 4, 1945 was quite by accident (128). Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, a nineteenth-century American writer whom Snow read extensively, were close friends.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature' in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings* ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), 42.

imagine how American individualism could become a part of China, she remained optimistic about the enduring appeal of the United States and about China capacity for change.

The representation of failure and success in *My China Years* is a fourth feature of American life-writing that demonstrates a secularised Puritan influence. Throughout the memoir, Helen registers some of her failures and successes and does so in a manner similar to Franklin. Unlike their Puritan forbears, who referred to their mistakes as sins, Franklin employs a term from his trade as a printer for his 'errata' while Snow calls hers 'stupid things.' Two of them she considered especially stupid: the first, her mistake in failing to understand Chinese hiring practices; the second, her mistake in letting other things put her writing on the back burner. Snow, who accepted blame for the first of these mistakes, explains that it happened when she attempted to circumvent the Chinese guarantor system by arranging to have one of two rickshaw men in her employ serve as a houseboy. The mistake deeply offended the cook, who refused to allow Snow to bypass the Chinese custom of only hiring those who come recommended by someone in the same occupation.<sup>26</sup> Her second mistake was to let everything else she needed to do take priority over her writing, something Snow says she could have learned from Ed who never allowed that to happen. 'All my best creative energy, my morning energy, went into do-gooding for others,' she laments.<sup>27</sup>

Snow's depiction of success is much more complicated. In traditional spiritual autobiography, giving all the glory to God obviates the need to boast about one's achievements. Those who write secularised narratives do not feel obligated to account for their achievements in that manner even if they offer a perfunctory acknowledgement of outside help, as Benjamin Franklin does in expressing gratitude for the favor of Almighty Goodness in his life. Nevertheless, even in his secularised account, there was a strong inhibition against boasting about his accomplishments, considerable though they were. An easy way for him to solve the problem was to include letters of lavish praise from others. In Franklin's narrative, these were supplied by two of his friends, Benjamin Vaughan and James Abel.<sup>28</sup> Further precedent for the practice can be found in the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Jane Addams. Washington, the African American founder of Tuskegee Institute, not only included many letters from distinguished Americans in *Up from Slavery*, but also the complete text of his most famous speech, a review of it in the newspaper, and other articles about him as well.<sup>29</sup> Addams, founder of a settlement house in Chicago, inserted numerous statistics reports gathered from sociological investigations and even the complete text of one of her lectures in *Twenty Years at Hull House*.<sup>30</sup> These autobiographers as well as Snow were unlikely to express the matter as candidly as the American humorist

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<sup>26</sup> For this blunder, Snow refers to herself as 'Doña Quixote' in the chapter that recounts the episode about the Chinese guarantor system (107).

<sup>27</sup> P. 125. Snow's use of the idiom 'do-gooding' is a variant of the phrase 'doing good' in which the object 'work' has been omitted. For the origin of this idiomatic phrase, see Acts 10:38 in which Jesus is described as someone 'who went about doing good' (KJV).

<sup>28</sup> The letters from Benjamin Vaughan and James Abel are placed by Benjamin Franklin at the start of Section II of his *Autobiography* in *Classic American Autobiographies*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Mentor, 1992) 135-41.

<sup>29</sup> Booker T. Washington includes a variety of testimonials in *Up from Slavery* in *Three Negro Classics* ed. John Hope Franklin (1901; New York: Avon Books, 1965); among them are letters from President Grover Cleveland (151) and D. C. Gilman, President of Johns Hopkins University (154) and a newspaper account of Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address by James Creelman (157-59).

<sup>30</sup> Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House, with Autobiographical Notes* (1910; New York: Penguin, 1981), includes the text of 'The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,' a lecture she gave at the Ethical Culture Society in 1892.

Mark Twain, who likened his memoir to a mirror: 'I am looking at myself in it all the time. Incidentally,' he added, 'I notice the people that pass along at my back ... and whenever they say or do anything that can help advertise me and flatter me and raise me in my own estimation, I set these things down in my autobiography.'<sup>31</sup>

Helen Foster Snow follows that tradition in *My China Years* by letting others toot her horn instead of doing it herself. When Dr Victor Frene is amazed at her brilliance, she reports that he 'was so astonished he actually kowtowed three times, head to floor. "You are the teacher. I am the humble pupil,"' he said (61). Her poem on Peking, according to Helen, was considered proof of her literary genius by her husband Edgar Snow (153). Helen also quotes sources such as Dr Hu Shih (137) and the Japanese press (172) identifying her as the person behind the student movement. The most outstanding example in *My China Years* of how Snow uses the remarks of others to praise her achievements is a passage from the forward Edgar Snow wrote for her book, *China Builds for Democracy* (first Hong Kong edition, 1940). In it he remarks that 'It was she who first interested Rewi Alley in the possibilities of industrial cooperatives,' noting that without 'the soundness of her original concept, and the genius of her faith and enthusiasm, the movement might never have come into being at all.' Edgar Snow also credits her creative thinking in getting the movement started and in inspiring others 'by the example of her own tireless and unselfish labor and devotion' (307).

Occasionally Snow dispenses with this convention altogether by boasting about her own accomplishments, although she somewhat undercuts them. Of the two nominations she received for the Nobel Peace Prize, she explains that both were 'not for any particular achievement, but for the potential that my ideas and world view hold for peace and progress in the world' (329). In another instance she informs the reader that Ed found himself a big celebrity in Hollywood and enjoyed it immensely whereas 'I was the Number 2 celebrity, to my surprise' (325). Occupying the second spot was not without its own reward for Helen, who notes that J.A. Piver wanted to take her photograph and display it because of her resemblance to the movie star Joan Bennett. (The photograph is one of many reproduced in *My China Years*). Helen also reports that the blue gown she had on the day she was taken off the train from Xi'an and returned to that city is now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York along with the sandals she wore in Yan'an (291). Snow, moreover, claims bragging rights for her 1939 book *Inside Red China*, noting that it 'was the first on Yan'an' and 'for many years the only one' about the place *after* it was captured by the Communists' (104; emphasis mine). Adding the latter qualification, enabled Helen to rule out Edgar Snow's immensely popular 1937 *Red Star over China* about his visit to Yan'an and the surrounding region before it became a Communist stronghold.

In assessing Helen Foster Snow's construction of an American self in *My China Years*, the importance of Yan'an cannot be overestimated. Not only does it occupy a special place in Snow's memoir as a pivotal moment in her development as a journalist, it also functions as a synecdoche for her representation of the years of revolutionary change that she witnessed in China from 1931 to 1940. Yan'an became a Rorschach inkblot test for her impressions about China and about herself that she examined and re-examined through the prism of traditional Puritanism and its secularised variant for most of her life. Snow, who

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<sup>31</sup>Mark Twain's *Autobiography*, with an Introduction by Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924) 2: 312. Twain sets his autobiography apart from every other – with the possible exception of Cellini's – by noting that unlike 'the conventional biography of all the ages,' his does not present 'an open window' (311).

relished her role in providing an insider's view of China's leaders while the revolution was in its infancy, viewed her participation in it and that of other Westerners as 'the great adventure of our generation' (182). Snow's use of Puritanism to bridge the cultural divide between China and the United States as she recounts the adventure in her memoir provides insight into her views of the American character in the 1930s; it also raises the question of her degree of self-awareness in advancing an imperialist agenda by superimposing a Western intellectual framework on Chinese revolutionary experience. Whether she was oblivious to this or not, Snow's experiences at Yan'an had the added advantage of bringing into sharp relief another divide: the need to find a middle way between the 'tough, hard, aggressive' Westerners such as Agnes Smedley and the Chinese among whom she did not feel that she belonged. Unsure of where she did belong, Snow affirms that 'There was a special place for me, right on the cusp of change, between two worlds, between two eras, between the old and the new' (269). Snow sought to answer that question in *My China Years* by fashioning an American self that negotiates an old Puritanism with the new by way of a triangulation with China. The mix is a pioneering memoir by Helen Foster Snow that charts new territory, not entirely unlike her ancestors who made the voyage from England to Massachusetts before pressing onward to Utah.

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Constance J. Post, associate professor of English at Iowa State University, is the author of *Signs of the Times in Cotton Mather's Paterna: A Study of Puritan Autobiography* (2000) and the editor of Hannah Mather Crocker's *Observations on the Real Rights of Women and Other Writings* (2011). Her current project is a biography, 'Making Revolution: Isabel Brown Crook and the Rise of Modern China'. Professor Post co-chairs the Literature and Culture section of the Transatlantic Studies Association.