

Helen Foster Snow in Revolutionary China, the Cold War, and Contemporary America

By Kelly Ann Long

Life stories about individuals involved in US–China relations offer compelling ways to engage students. These narratives demonstrate historical concepts such as change over time, interpretation, perspective, and subjectivity. They also invite consideration of how the past is used in different historical periods.¹ Although these life stories are often unlikely to affect large-scale political and international strategic security concerns, some demonstrate how individuals have influenced positive regard between nations and heightened concern for the welfare of those in other countries. Subjects of memoirs and those who celebrate their lives thus can play an important role as informal diplomats between nations. It is essential, therefore, that historians continue to offer interpretations and participate fully in events staged around “Old China Hands” and other historical figures.

The life of Helen Foster Snow (AKA Nym Wales) provides a good opportunity to explore these themes. An unofficial goodwill ambassador, her story has been evoked in the name of international friendship by groups in the US and China.² Her story provides a lens on international relations and the historical setting for US–China relations from the early twentieth century into our own time. It illustrates shifts in US policy and public sentiment during critical periods: the interwar period and World War II, early stages of the Cold War, the US–China rapprochement of the 1970s, the post-Tiananmen 1989 era, and contemporary relations with China.³

Early twentieth-century Utah and China formed the historical settings in which Snow’s story unfolded. In Cedar City, Utah, her birthplace (1907), mining and agrarian roots were prevalent, and the community also boasted a branch college. Helen’s mother, Hannah, graduated from Rick’s Academy, supported women’s rights, and served on a number of women’s committees. Her father, John, graduated from Stanford with a science degree and later earned a law degree in Chicago. The family moved to Rexburg, Idaho, and tried farming before they returned to Cedar City, where John practiced law. Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was prominent in the area and influenced Helen’s upbringing, and her mother was actively involved in church affairs, she recalled her father as antagonistic toward religion. The oldest child of four, Helen helped with household tasks and care of younger brothers until high school, when she lived in Salt Lake City with a grandmother and aunt. Thereafter, she briefly attended college and worked. In 1931, Helen took the unlikely step of seeking work in the struggling nation of China.

Americans like Helen Foster Snow were interested in China for a variety of reasons, even though natural disasters, foreign imperialism, poverty, and other challenges beset the nation. Following the collapse of the centuries-long Chinese imperial system in 1911, years of civil strife ensued, and by the 1930s, two major political factions had emerged, although regional warlords held sway in vast areas of the country. Yet within the international sectors of large cities like Shanghai, Westerners enjoyed benefits of extraterritoriality that sometimes meant better lifestyles than they might have experienced in the US. Americans found motivation in hopes of economic profit, missionary ambitions, or humanitarian impulses that included contributing to advances in health care, women’s concerns, and help



Helen Snow (right) and student activist Li Min visiting the Temple of Heaven in Peking. Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

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for refugees. Some Americans such as Edgar Snow, Theodore White, Jack Belden, Agnes Smedley, and Tillman Durdin gained fame for chronicling civil strife in a world moving toward World War II.

As the US confronted its own Depression-era financial and political challenges, some of these American journalists supported the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist positions of the Chinese Left. The Chinese Nationalists and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) joined forces in a 1926 United Front Northern Expedition to eradicate the warlords. However, the Nationalists followed with a series of encirclement campaigns against the Communists, and by 1934, the Communists fled across China on the infamous Long March (October 1934–October 1935), consolidating forces in the northwest near Yanan. Official US support aligned with the Nationalists and their leader, Chiang Kai-shek, who professed Christianity and secured a power base through marriage within the influential Song family.



Edgar Snow plays at taking a picture of Helen Snow and Rewi Alley during a meeting.
Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Helen's most formative friendship in China was with another American shortly after she entered Shanghai, the "Paris of the Orient," in 1931. She quickly won the affection of Edgar Snow, a Missouri newspaperman. They married and worked together to advance what they perceived as social and political causes of the Chinese thereafter, interacting with Chinese literati, including author Lu Xun, a moving force behind the modern Chinese literary movement, and Song Qingling, the widow of Sun Yatsen, who had advanced Chinese Nationalism. Helen and Edgar Snow moved to Peking, where they became friends with students who planned the 1935 December Ninth Movement, which protested against imperialist aggression and the Nationalist government cooperation with the Japanese. Both Snows viewed the Communists as challenging "feudalism" and imperialism, offering hope for what they perceived as social justice and economic progress. Although she was never a member of the Communist Party, Helen Foster Snow idealistically viewed the party as having potential for the US and China to become cultural as well as diplomatic allies, embracing the "gung ho" spirit, which implied working together toward common ends.⁴

Along with other journalists, Edgar and Helen Snow communicated within China and across the Pacific, seeking to enlist American support for Chinese causes.

In 1936, Edgar Snow acted on an invitation to the northwestern territories where the Communists were encamped after the Long March. After months there, he wrote *Red Star over China*, and his biographical account made an international audience aware of Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Helen Foster Snow's subsequent boundary-breaking journey in spring 1937 was daring because the Nationalists had imposed martial law in Xi'an and established a blockade to isolate the Communists in the northwest. Confronting disease, inadequate food supply, and possible arrest, she witnessed the growth of the Chinese Communist power base and the transition of the Red Army to the National Revolutionary Army as the Communists and Nationalists formed a second



Communist General Peng Dehuai with Helen Snow, taken in Yanan, 1937. Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

united front after war erupted between Japanese and Chinese forces in July 1937, creating a crisis that rocked the entire nation. Helen Foster Snow fled Yanan in September 1937, having collected plentiful autobiographies and photographs that enabled her to write about Communist cadres, women, children, and leaders in her book *Inside Red China*. She also contributed photographs and interviews of important Communist leaders to Edgar Snow's more famous book.

Along with other journalists, Edgar and Helen Snow communicated within China and across the Pacific, seeking to enlist American support for Chinese causes. Both Snows gained some fame and notoriety for their reporting and for encouraging potential alliances with Mao and the Communists. Yet by 1939, the American popular front supporting left-leaning and Communist international efforts eroded, in part due to news of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. Nonetheless, during her evacuation to Manila in the Philippines, Helen Foster Snow joined others in supporting the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives, known as Indusco, to help rebuild China's wartime industries. She continued to write books about, advocate for, and befriend the Chinese even after she returned to the US in 1940.⁵

The Snows continued their efforts to garner help for war-torn China throughout World War II and thereafter. The US State Department and Army formed the US Army Observation Group, known as the "Dixie Mission" (July 1944–March 1947), that traveled to Yanan to explore potential US alliances with the Communists. The Snows maintained hope that others would see in the Communists what they had perceived. During the postwar period, General George Marshall, serving as President Harry Truman's special envoy, created the Marshall Mission to China (December 1945–January 1947), seeking to form a coalition between the Nationalists and the Chinese Communists. When that effort did not succeed, however, the US abandoned efforts to facilitate negotiations between two sides that continued to engage in the conflict that would determine who would control China.

Increasing anti-Communist fear in the US dictated an ongoing American alliance with the Nationalists. When Mao's Communist Revolution claimed the mainland in October 1949, American fears of a Communist bloc between China and the Soviet Union heightened. The Nationalists established the Republic of China (ROC) on the island of Taiwan, and formal



Red Academy officers pose with Helen Snow in Yen-an in 1937. From left to right: Bien Changlou (Bian Zhangwu), Nieh Hotingwu (Nie Heting), Helen Snow, and Ho Changkung (He Changgong). Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.



Mao Zedong and Zhu De are seated; a "Little Devil" looks on from the background. Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

relations between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland ended by 1950.

Their writing in support of the Chinese Communists placed the Snows and other China Hands on the wrong side of emerging mainstream American sentiment. US reaction to the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, the Korean War, and burgeoning anti-Communist zeal stimulated increasing criticism and denigration of the work of journalists who had supported Communists in earlier decades. Viewed as helping ease Mao into power, the Snows' influence on public dialogue narrowed. As the US government ousted experienced China Foreign Service officers or assigned them to duties outside of Asia, House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations muted voices of American friends of the Chinese Communists.

Following the Snows' divorce and his remarriage, Edgar moved from his native land in the 1950s, living out his remaining years in Switzerland. Helen directed her writing toward ancestral and American history, short stories, and poetry, interests she pursued until the end of her life. Both Snows maintained the belief that US support and alliance with the Communists during World War II might have averted subsequent disasters in China, even as other voices asserted that Chinese Communists had manipulated left-leaning journalists into supporting the advance of the Communist regime.⁶

Surprisingly, even in the era of McCarthyism, Helen Foster Snow published through Stanford University Press *Red Dust* (1952), a book of autobiographical portraits of the Chinese Communist leaders.⁷ The Hoover Institution Archives's acquisition of Snow's early papers in 1958, forming

CHINA IN FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

A People's History of Revolution and Everyday Life
Translated by Ed Krebs and Hanchao Lu

This book is a collection of translations from *Old Photos*, a Chinese bimonthly launched in 1996 that presents photographs and narratives from ordinary readers telling the stories of their lives. The magazine has become a forum and archive for people's experiences and reflections on their lives in decades of trauma and great change. Introductions and notes for each selection provide historical background and context.

"These open and basically uncensored accounts reveal in powerful and striking ways the responses of everyday citizens to the tumultuous events of twentieth century China. These highly personal photographic essays provide a wide-ranging and multifaceted perspective on Chinese society and a magnificent illustrated record of daily life..."
— Richard J. Smith, George and Nancy Rupp Professor of Humanities Emeritus, Rice University

"This will be a welcome publication for students of China and readers interested in photography as well as questions of historical memory and everyday life. I look forward to using it in my courses."
— Joshua H. Howard, author of *Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenals, 1937-1953*

<http://www.bridge21.us/china-in-family-photographs.html>



At home in Madison, Connecticut, Helen looks up from her old manual typewriter and stacks of works in progress. Source: With Permission of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

the Nym Wales Collection, indicated perceived value in her writing, collections, and perspectives. She hoped that the book and archive would help others see the Chinese Communists as potential friends. Even as Mao moved the PRC into a series of failed five-year plans, including the Great Leap Forward that resulted in the deaths of approximately thirty million people and eventually the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution disaster (1966–1976), Snow was able to publish *Women in Modern China* (1967), another work that depicted Chinese as people worthy of American support and admiration.⁸

The early 1970s brought indications of possible warming of relations and eventually brightened the future for Snow. The PRC gained a seat on the UN Security Council, leading to the 1971 ouster of Taiwan, since only one government could represent China. Edgar Snow played a pivotal role in relaying an invitation for President Richard Nixon to visit Mao in China. Plans secretly set in place for a meeting of officials of the US and China led to the February 1972 visit of President Richard Nixon with Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing, and harkened a rapprochement. Relations between the two nations warmed, and by the end of the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter worked with Communist leader Deng Xiaoping on reopening diplomatic relations. Cultural exchanges, improved trade relations, and renewed tourism ensued. In the mid-1980s, the Chinese pursued a strategy of embracing “old friends of China” as a means of fostering international and internal goodwill. Events focused around former friends from the revolutionary era provided a way to direct positive regard toward regained allies. The Three S Society formed to honor the memory of Edgar Snow; Agnes Smedley, known for her journalism and autobiographical novel *Daughter of Earth* (1929); and American journalist Anna Louise Strong.

Left out of that triumvirate of esteemed friends, perhaps because of the divorce, Helen Foster Snow eventually gained support of influential people in China. Invited to return to China, she engaged former child actor Tim Considine in a plan to film a documentary of the trip. Snow’s opportunity to renew contact with old friends in China, and to meet new ones, resulted in two unpublished manuscripts, *Return to China* and *Mao Country*, and footage for a never-completed documentary film. Considine captured some important moments, including Snow talking with



An Wei in Cedar City, 2017. Source: Kimberly Long Singleton.

her interpreter, An Wei. Having been sent down during the Cultural Revolution to learn from the rural people in Yenan, An Wei was assigned to work in the library and thereafter gained a position that allowed him to work with foreigners and eventually travel to the US. In the late 1980s, he served as a visiting scholar at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. An Wei interviewed Snow in her home in Madison, Connecticut, and launched an effort to resurrect her story within China. Renewed interest led Snow to write her autobiographical work, *My China Years*, which establishes the dominant motifs explored by others in many subsequent accounts.⁹

Yet, in the late 1980s, circumstances within China once again put its government at odds with the international community. Amid increased optimism about China’s opening outward, Chinese anti-spiritual pollution campaigns pushed against domestic Westernization. When the Chinese government violently suppressed the democracy movement that unfolded around Tiananmen Square in spring 1989, it shook the world. In its wake, Western scholars recontextualized their view of the Chinese, interpreting those events as reflecting upon leadership that had directed the Great Leap Forward, the subsequent disaster of the Great Famine, and the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Historians and China watchers directed increasingly negative scrutiny to the 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution, rushing to criticize China’s historic and contemporary transgressions of human rights.

Even amid those tensions in international relations, An Wei and others in the Peoples Friendship Associations strove to keep the memory of former American friends alive within China. Their focus on the romantic tale of the Snow marriage and their commitment to Chinese students provided safer terrain than more politically controversial topics. In the area of Xi’an and Yenan, sewing associations, photo exhibitions, literary society awards, museum exhibits, and a school named for Nym Wales were created in her honor. The Shaanxi Peoples Friendship Association celebrated Snow’s eightieth birthday with a public ceremony that included television coverage and museum displays about her life. The August 1st Film Studio in Xi’an produced *An American Woman’s Adventures*, based on Snow’s journey from Xi’an to Yenan. In 1991, the Chinese Writers’ Association celebrated her contributions to friendship between nations by making her the first recipient of a literary award. In 1996, China bestowed one of its highest honors for a foreigner by naming Snow a Friendship Ambassador.¹⁰



The Dream of Helen—post-production Wuhan, 2011. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

The story of an American woman who made an unusual journey and befriended the Chinese Communists, yet whose husband's story overshadowed hers, captured my interest in the early 1990s. I met Snow in her home in Madison, Connecticut, learned about An Wei, and traveled to Xi'an to interview him and others who had known Snow in China. My dissertation evolved into the first full-length English-language biographical account, *Helen Foster Snow, an American Woman in Revolutionary China* (2006).¹¹ That work sought to rectify the omission of a woman's story in the narrative of US–China relations and offered a literary analysis of Snow's writing.

Commemorations of Snow's life and contributions to US–China relations have grown. Chinese events honor her as an Old China Hand who played an important role in events that have become part of the PRC national founding myth, one depicting heroic Chinese and foreign friends who worked together to provide a foundation from which the modern nation developed. Events in the US focus on her American individualism and humanitarianism, seeking to connect her to locales in the US and China. Snow has been the central subject in a memoir, a biography, three films, a Chinese TV production, and numerous commemorative events. Following her death in 1997, her family, serving as executors of her literary trust, donated her papers to the special collections archive at Brigham Young University.

Drawing upon the Snow collection, Eric Hyer, BYU Political Scientist, hosted a symposium about Old China Hands, that included the premiere of *Helen Foster Snow: Witness to Revolution*, a documentary directed by Dodge Billingsley.¹² In reviewing the documentary, historian Charles Hayford observed an ongoing neglect of Snow within the narrative of an important era in US–China relations. Challenging the historical community to rectify the omission, he also cautioned against fully embracing the sunny view presented in her memoir or the film. Hayford also noted a push to situate Snow's accomplishments within Mormon tradition, noting claims that a "background of Mormon community cooperation, strong leadership, and paternalistic family values set her up to perceive these qualities in Yan'an," even though Snow embraced Unitarian Congregationalist traditions during her years in Madison and indicated that her father was not religiously observant. Hayford also observed that focus on the marriage

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resulted in a story in which "the China of the 1930s appears mainly as background."¹³

Groups in Utah embraced this twentieth-century native daughter in events that followed, emphasizing the Snow marriage and Snow's familial roots in Utah. Officials and guests in Cedar City honored the legacy of Snow with a symposium, unveiling a bronze statue depicting her, which now stands in a prominent location near a public park. Personal and institutional connections led to a collaboration between Southern Utah University (SUU) and members of the Hubei National Dance Drama Company for the production *The Dream of Helen*. Xun Sun, Shawna Mendini, Kay Andersen, and others from SUU embraced the potential of performance art to communicate a story set to music by Keith Bradshaw and Yi-Lin Luo. Set in China's revolutionary period, the dance drama included seventy-three dancers, with American students playing the lead roles of Helen and Edgar Snow. Codirector Mendini acknowledged that "the performance piece doesn't attempt to tackle controversial issues related to China's revolutionary period."¹⁴ For conductor Xun Sun, it centered on the ways a story such as Snow's could engender goodwill among peoples of both nations. He observed that "today, as the world becomes smaller, to understand each other is very important."¹⁵ Indeed, the production forged cross-cultural friendships, as students from SUU lived in China and rehearsed with Chinese professional dancers and directors.¹⁶ Some sets and costumes evoked Mormon pioneers, and a *Salt Lake Tribune* article suggested that Snow and, by implication, the production were "planting Utah ideas in Chinese soil." Subsequent accounts argue that Snow's affinity for the Chinese Communists, who undertook the Long March and rallied the poor as their power base, emerged from childhood stories of Mormon pioneers. Similarly,

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proponents of this view argue that Indusco efforts were influenced by her awareness of Mormon women's collectives and communal structures.¹⁷

Younger generations are indicating interest in Snow. In 2016, students from Orem, Utah's Lakeridge Junior High School received fifth place in the junior group website category at the contest for National History Day with their website entry *Helen Foster Snow: American Journalist in the Chinese Revolution*.¹⁸ At a symposium in Xi'an in 2016, American and Chinese scholars gathered to celebrate the role of Old Friends narratives in ongoing contributions to informal cultural diplomacy. In 2017, a representative of the newly formed Snow Studies Center within Northwest University helped develop a symposium at SUU honoring Snow, while also recognizing An Wei's efforts to illuminate her contributions to Sino-American friendship.¹⁹

As groups and individuals reveal ongoing interest in Snow's story, Hayford's concern that we focus not just on the sunny side of the story remains germane. The ongoing involvement of scholars who offer critical assessments and perspectives, who help expand the focus of future work, and who analyze how the story is used in contemporary contexts is also essential. Scholars can probe challenging questions about the role of informal diplomacy and engage criticism that those who honor "friends of China" are unwitting pawns of organizers or governments that use soft-power mechanisms to encourage publics to overlook more pressing concerns or transgressions.²⁰ Scholars are paying attention to things Snow observed during her explorations of China's northwest, where she learned about local cultural arts and performance techniques employed to educate the people. Snow witnessed strong Chinese traditions of revering poetry, calligraphy, and music even while immersed in rough surroundings. She was interested in the power of literature to evoke empathy, compassion, and her conception of social justice. Other fruitful avenues for exploration are reflected in the work of historian Richard So, who considers the communities China Hands and Chinese formed, transcultural collaborations that bound people together in support of a cause.²¹ These international communities are the forbearers of friendships that continue to draw people together today to commemorate the lives of individuals who worked toward shared goals in the past.

Securing Snow's wish that her story not be lost like salt in water, accounts of her life continue to be shared in events focused on finding commonality among common people. Those who devote their scholarly and creative work to examining the lives of these individuals have become part of a history of ideas, and thus an extension of earlier communities of shared interest. In this way, scholars who contribute accounts of China Hands serve as informal cultural diplomats, as did Snow. As scholars continue to focus interest on individuals who connected China and the US in the past, their retrospectives may offer something useful for the present. As new work recognizes ideas that transcend national boundaries, and relies on free and open communication, it can help us create our own transcultural scholarly communities and serve the cause of friendship between our nations. ■

NOTES

1. See Hayden White, "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," in *Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 280–310. White argued that "any attempt to describe events . . . must rely on various forms of imagination" and that all historical accounts include a "fictive, imaginary dimension." See also Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), <https://tinyurl.com/y8zt94qp>.
2. Helen Foster Snow used a variety of names throughout her life and writing career. She was known as Helen in conversation, but also sometimes as "Peg" to those who knew her well. She wrote under the pseudonym Nym (for pseudonym) Wales in China and sometimes thereafter. She also used Xue Hailun, Chinese phonetic approximation of her given name.
3. The seminal account of shifting public opinions about China is Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds* (New York: The John Day Company, 1958).
4. Marine Officer Evans Carlson employed the phrase in commanding his 2nd Marine Raider Battalion, and Rewi Alley, a founder of Chinese industrial cooperatives, used the phrase to describe the Indusco cooperatives that Helen and Edgar Snow were instrumental in helping form in China.
5. Among Helen Foster Snow's China-focused books are *Inside Red China* (1940), *China Builds for Democracy* (1941), *Red Dust* (1952), *Women in Modern China* (1967), *The Chinese Communists: Sketches and Autobiographies of the Old Guard* (1972), and *My China Years* (1984).
6. See Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and Steven W. Mosher, *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
7. Nym Wales, *Red Dust* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1952).
8. Nym Wales, *Women in Modern China* (Mouton, 1967).
9. Helen Foster Snow, *My China Years* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984).
10. See Helen Foster Snow's obituary in *The New York Times*: "Helen Foster Snow, 89, a Founder of Industrial Co-ops in China," January 14, 1997, <https://tinyurl.com/y8k3vb95>.
11. Kelly Ann Long, *To the Yenan Station: The Life and Times of Nym Wales* (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1998). Kelly Ann Long, *Helen Foster Snow, an American Woman in Revolutionary China* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006).
12. See J. Lee Simmons, "Helen Foster Snow: Enigmatic Heroine," *BYU Kennedy Center*, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://kennedy.byu.edu/helen-foster-snow/>.
13. Charles W. Hayford, "Review of Helen Foster Snow: Witness to Revolution," *H-Asia Reviews*, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y8lr6qgf>.
14. Celia R. Baker, "Helen Foster Snow: Remembering a 1930s Cultural Pioneer," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 25, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/y9364axn>.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. In 2015, Chinese CCTV undertook a television production about her years in China.
18. Daniel Nelson and Spencer Standing, "Helen Foster Snow: American Journalist in the Chinese Revolution," *Utah Department of Heritage and Arts*, accessed March 25, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yd4t7cou>.
19. Interest recently emerged in An Wei's unusual life and his devotion to an international friendship. Nancy Pine, who has taught and written about comparative education, is working on his biography.
20. Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).
21. Richard So, *Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

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