

MACKINNON, STEPHEN R. and ORIS FRIESEN. *China Reporting. An Oral History of American Journalism in the 1940s.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987. xxx+230 pages. Map, photographs, glossary, index. n.p. ISBN 0-520-05843-7.

War and revolution in the 1930s and 1940s attracted an extraordinary number of gifted reporters to China: Joseph Alsop, Brooks Atkinson, Jack Belden, John Hersey, Harold Isaacs, Edgar Snow, Agnes Smedley, A. T. Steele, Theodore White, to name only the best known. When combined with a group of young diplomats and O.W.I. employees that included John Davies, John Fairbank, John Melby and Jack Service, these on-the-scene China-watchers were unmatched by any subsequent generation of that breed.

In November 1982, some thirty-five "old China hands" and fifteen scholars gathered in Scottsdale, Arizona, to reminisce to discuss the import of their work in China. Stephen MacKinnon and Oris Friesen have ably collected, edited and introduced their comments into this useful volume on American *China Reporting*.

The book's chronological treatment begins with the "muckrakers and adventurers" (30) who came to China, in the 1930s, several (like Jack Belden and the *New York Times'* Tilman Durdin) working their way across the Pacific on steamers and jumping ship in Shanghai. Some thirty were graduates of the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, the most famous being Edgar Snow and J. B. Powell, editor of the *China Weekly Review*. In this period, reporters were mostly concentrated in Westernized Shanghai, and Durdin notes that it took a trip to the interior to politicize Harold Isaacs (33). But when the Japanese invaded and war came in 1937, virtually all the journalists moved inland—and most were also caught up in the complex politics of the day.

The bulk of this volume covers the wartime period: first "Romantic Hankow, 1938" (37-47), and then the more depressing view from the dank and increasingly corrupt wartime capital of Chungking. In discussing these years, a number of critical issues come under consideration: the impact of Chinese and American censorship, the effect of the correspondents' generally poor Chinese language skills on the quality of their reporting, the influence of the close cooperation between reporters and U. S. government officials, the political objectivity of reporting on Kuomintang and Communist areas, and the effect of foreign editors and other "gatekeepers" in getting the China story before the American people.

Oral history like this is extremely valuable—not so much for answering questions, as for raising them. This volume has performed the admirable service of raising several key questions about the quality and impact of the reporting from wartime China. John Fairbank, for example, calls the journalists' inability to educate the American people, especially about the revolution growing in the countryside, "one of the great failures in history" (184). As several contributors point out, the journalists' poor language skills made them inordinately dependent on English-speaking intellectuals and civil servants, and tended to preclude any extensive attention to the rural scene. But it is equally clear that China news rarely got off the inside pages of even the largest metropolitan newspapers; and peasant stories were even less likely to get past editors looking for saleable copy. A book like this can hardly provide a definitive analysis of the dynamic which perpetuated American ignorance of China, but it can provide some helpful clues. Several correspondents describe the public disinterest in China that they encountered on their home leaves. Henry Lieberman provides one of the nicest anecdotes. His mother introduced him to a neighbor, an educated reader of the *New York Times*: "'He just got back from China.' She said, 'Oh, isn't that nice. Did you drive?'" (170)

Ironically, the most influential journalist seeking to break through the American curtain of ignorance on China was undoubtedly Henry Luce. This son of a China missionary, publisher of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune*, tirelessly labored to bring news of China before the American people. He hired some of the ablest journalists—Theodore White, John Hersey, Annalee Jacoby—to report from the field. John Hersey (whose comments, throughout this volume, are superb) recounts how by the end of the war, *Time*'s Foreign News Editor, Whittaker Chambers, was so consistently blocking and butchering White's reports to conform to Luce's anti-Communist pro-Chiang Kai-shek line that the issue was raised with the management executive committee. The outcome was far from satisfactory. White was cabled "to report not political China . . . [but] mainly small indigenous colorful yarns" (20). Soon White would quit and, with Jacoby, recount in *Thunder Out of China* the terminal decay and corruption of Chiang's regime—the story that Luce and Chambers would not permit on the pages of *Time*.

Though the informal prose and first-person style that fills this volume is refreshing, most of the stories (including those of Chambers' re-writing at *Time*) are not new. But there are a few fresh morsels to chew on. Two of them, both served up by Annalee Jacoby Fadiman, illustrate the value and the dangers of oral history. In one (141–144), she describes how F.D.R.'s representative General Patrick Hurley lapsed into "premature senility in full view of most of the Chinese government" as he launched into an extended toast to Jacoby as his wife! The story was left out of her book with White because the publishers feared a libel suit; but is an important one for understanding the uniformly pernicious role of Hurley in Sino-American relations in 1944–45.

Her second tale concerns Chambers' role at *Time*. Jacoby describes "an innocuous little interview" with Chiang Kai-shek which became, in the pages of *Time* "several pages of an interview full of questions I did not ask and with answers Chiang Kai-shek did not give Whittaker Chambers had sat in New York and made up a dialogue to put in the mouth of the head of one of our allies" (138). This sounded so extraordinary that I went through *Time* for the years Jacoby was in China and could find no such extended interview. The closest was a four-page cover story on September 3, 1945, which includes a lot of anti-Communist diatribe that surely came from Chambers, but only a few innocuous quotes from the interview with Chiang.

Oral history is an important but tricky genre. Because editors like Chambers make it impossible to accept the authenticity of published news stories, and the raw copy from the field is often lost, oral history sometimes provides the only information we have on important questions like Hurley's senility. On the other hand, oral history depends on often faulty recollections of events long ago, and some of the tales may have been told many times before the historian records them. As such, they have become a sort of folklore—important for the historian to consider, but something rather different from a contemporary first-person account.

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