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Stephen R. MacKinnon

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STEPHEN R. MACKINNON

AGNES SMEDLEY'S
HANKOW, 1938

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Agnes Smedley's Hankow, 1938

by

Stephen R. MacKinnon
Department of History
Arizona State University

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Stephen R. MacKinnon holds a B.A. and M.A. from Yale University with a Ph.D in Chinese History from the University of California, Davis. He is the author of Power and Politics in Late Imperial China: Yuan Shi-kai in Beijing and Tianjin, 1901-1909 (Berkeley, 1980) and numerous articles. At present he is executive secretary of the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies and Associate Professor of History at Arizona State University.

AGNES SMEDLEY'S HANKOW, 1938

When she arrived in Hankow in 1938 the American journalist Agnes Smedley (1892-1950) had been in China for nine years. She had already published three books and dozens of articles in German, English, and Chinese about her experiences in cities like Shanghai and in the countryside with communist led guerilla units of the Eighth Route Army. Although not a communist, her politics were certainly left of center. The focus of her writing was always the plight of the downtrodden. By 1938 her name was well known to Chinese intellectuals, especially those of the left. Abroad she was known for her daily broadcasts during the Xi'an incident of December, 1936, when Chiang Kai-shek was kidnapped by two of his generals. Smedley was there at the time and became famous or infamous, depending on one's point of view, because her live broadcasts from Xi'an contradicted the official pro-Chiang reports emanating from Nanjing.¹

Hankow (Hankou) was and is part of the tri-city industrial complex known as Wuhan which straddles the Yangzi River midway down its long meandering course from the Himalayas to the sea. With the famous Japanese capture and rape of Nanjing in December, 1937, Hankow became China's capital. Helped in part by a major victory at Tairizhuang in April, the Chinese were able to hold onto the city until mid-October, 1938. In January, the international community joined Nationalist and Communist politicians in descending on the city. Spirits were high. For the first time in a decade there was a semblance of unity of purpose in China. Hankow seemed to represent a fresh start. In retrospect the next ten months were the most romantic of China's wartime experience.

General Francisco Franco's victory in Spain focused international press attention on Hankow as the new arena in the world wide struggle against

Fascism. In the process Hankow became almost a tourist stop for journalists, diplomats, and the politically radical clique. Hankow attracted veterans of the Spanish Civil War, notably the Canadian doctor and communist, Norman Bethune. Movie figures Joris Ivens and Frank Capra were there representing Hollywood. Major literary figures like W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, passed through and wrote a book about their experiences. Parading through as well were a number of leaders of the U.S. communist movement--like Earl Browder, Mike Gold, Manny and Grace Granich. Anna Louise Strong had just arrived from Moscow. Finally, adding yet another international dimension were the German, Italian, and Russian military officers advising Chiang Kai-shek. The last were particularly important. Russian planes and pilots provided the only airborne defense cover against increasing Japanese bombing raids. Needless to say, it was an exciting, heady atmosphere, amidst which Smedley thrived, and, because of her myriad Chinese contacts, enjoyed a near celebrity status. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to meet her or use her as a go-between.²

Agnes Smedley arrived in Hankow on January 9, 1938. Her first stop was the U.S. Embassy where she delivered a letter from military intelligence officer Evans Carlson and briefed the Ambassador and assorted military attaches on the activities of the Eighth Route Army in northwestern Shanxi province. This was the first in a series of visits to the U.S. Embassy and the beginning of regular contact with figures like John Davies, Frank Dorn, Joseph Stilwell, and Claire Chennault--all of whom were important later to the shaping of the U.S.-China policy.

Such intimacy with official America represented an about face for Smedley. For years she had had difficulties with U.S. consular officials in Berlin,

Shanghai, and Canton. It was the political situation in Hankow and the anti-Japanese war which made the difference. The war created a new, open environment in which Smedley and her diplomatic friends could interact. For the first time the Embassy was interested in contact with the Chinese Communists, and Smedley seemed the ideal go-between.

The humble headquarters of the embryonic Chinese Red Cross was Smedley's second stop in Hankow. She brought the director, Robert K. Lim, news and requests for medical supplies from the Eighth Route Army. Since her first contact with units of the Red Army in 1936, Smedley had felt overwhelmed by the plight of wounded Chinese soldiers. She had quickly acquired paramedical skills. And in Yan'an in 1937 she had focused as much attention as possible on health conditions by trying to attract medical supplies, organizing an Indian medical mission and establishing delousing stations.³

In the months ahead Smedley devoted most of her organizing energies in Hankow to raising funds for the Chinese Red Cross and bringing attention to the plight of the Chinese wounded. She wrote as widely as possible on the misery and heroics of the Chinese wounded. Her first articles for the Manchester Guardian and the ending of her book, China Fights Back, are on the subject. Later articles appeared in China Weekly Review, China Today, Modern Review, Nation, Asia, and even Vogue. Her other focus was fund raising. Smedley ferreted contributions out of every conceivable source in Hankow. Her victims included the U.S. and British embassies, Standard Oil and high government officials. A big coup came the night of a dinner party when she publicly shamed Finance Minister H. H. Kung (Gong) into contributing ten thousand Chinese dollars to the cause. Her journalist friends remember

being dragooned on several occasions into visiting hospitals--singing songs to the wounded and leaving monetary contributions. She also wrote to the U.S and Hong Kong appealing for help for Dr. Lim and the Chinese Red Cross. The lion's share of aid in money and medical supplies were effectively solicited from overseas Chinese--especially those in Hong Kong. By mid-spring Lim and Smedley had the support of the British Hong Kong medical establishment in the person of Hilda Selwyn-Clarke, wife of Hong Kong's medical director and an able fund raiser, and by then a fervent convert to the cause of the Chinese Red Cross.⁴

Smedley had arrived in Hankow penniless and homeless, looking "ill and half starved, with her cropped sun bleached hair and intense blue eyes set off by a faded cotton Communist uniform. When friends pooled some money for a change of clothing, she bought the reddest jacket and shirt she could find in Hankow."⁵ Smedley stayed at first at the home of the Episcopalian cleric, Logan Roots, who was known at the time as the "pink" Bishop because of his contacts with the Chinese Communists and visitors like Smedley. The atmosphere at the Roots' compound was extraordinary. Zhou Enlai paid regular visits with other comrades like the Moscow-oriented Wang Ming. At lunch there was a steady stream of Guomindang officials, missionaries, diplomats, and journalists of various political persuasions. Other missionaries called the Root's luncheon table the "Moscow-Heaven Axis." Sharing the spotlight on a daily basis with Smedley was Anna Louise Strong. At lunch the two women put on quite a show. Smedley held forth on the exploits of the Eighth Route Army while Anna Louise analyzed the international situation from Madrid to Moscow. The two women differed sharply in background and style, with Strong still

still very Moscow-oriented and ideological and Smedley much more down to earth in terms of her concern for the wounded and the details of the war itself. But both women seemed to respect one another and did not directly clash. Strong wrote an introduction for China Fights Back, to which Smedley was putting the final touches, and she may well have been responsible for its speedy acceptance and publication.⁶

Neither Strong nor Smedley were with the Roots for more than a few weeks. Strong soon left for the U.S. and the Soviet Union. With money borrowed from a Chinese engineer friend from Shanghai on the promise of an advance for China Fights Back, Smedley rented a small apartment in town. From there she began to write for the Manchester Guardian, an assignment which by the summer turned into a regular salaried position.

Smedley also began to have some fun socially. Take her "date" with Captain Frank Dorn, General Stilwell's debonair alter-ego, as recalled here in his memoirs:

Getting in touch with Chou Enlai was a tougher nut to crack since I felt it was essential that I meet him under auspices acceptable to him. So Bosshard arranged for me to meet Agnes Smedley at a luncheon at the YMCA dining room. She was now a correspondent for the Manchester Guardian--when she took time off from her aggressive assaults on the foreign community for money and hospital supplies to alleviate the neglect with which the Chinese treated their sick and wounded soldiers. She was without much conventional charm or femininity; her face was squarish, as was her figure. Her blond hair streaked in shades of sun-scorched yellow, was cut in an indifferent bob; she wore clothes for the sole purpose of covering her body, with no thought for fashion. . . . She had little use for most military officers, except of course her beloved Chinese Reds. In her eyes the military were all politically naive, an opinion she promptly stated in an abrupt and somewhat harsh voice. But after this initial phase of putting me in my place, she settled down and we got along pleasantly enough. During coffee I invited her to have Wiener Schnitzel the next evening at the Austrian-Chinese restaurant. Though her eyes widened momentarily with surprise, she accepted. That evening, after the third gimlet, Agnes set her glass down with a thump and said flatly:

"What's this all about, Captain Dorn? I know damned well I'm not the type that your type asks out for a date."

"I want you to introduce me to Chou Enlai and to ask him to be frank with me."

"Well, at least you're honest about it. That's to your credit . . . aside from all these drinks. I like honesty. Even though I think I'm being taken in, I'll see what I can do. I've got an appointment with Chou tomorrow morning."

We frankly shook hands across the table and I began a long friendship with this intense, unhappy woman. A radical with a great heart, she refused to submit to any form of discipline and distrusted all political leaders.

One of Smedley's closest friends and confidants in Hankow was Freda Utley. As a British Communist and Oxford graduate she had gone to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and married an official. After he disappeared in a purge in the mid-1930s, she made her way with a small son to Tokyo and began working as a journalist. She arrived in Hankow in 1938, fiercely anti-Russian but not anti-Chinese Communist. Her knowledge of the Chinese situation hardly compared to that of Strong or Smedley. But Utley had written lucidly about the Japanese as fascists and saw the Chinese struggle as a prelude to World War II.

Freda Utley was fascinated by Smedley, showering her with adulation.

No picture of Agnes can do her justice. A high, broad forehead with soft brown hair falling over her right temple, a wide generous mouth, candid pale blue eyes which could wrinkle up in laughter, or look upon the world with passionate pity or fierce and scornful anger. She was one of the few people of whom one can truly say that her character had given beauty to her face, which was both boyish and feminine, rugged and yet attractive.

One of the few spiritually great people I have ever met, Agnes Smedley had that burning sympathy for the misery and wrongs of mankind which some of the saints and some of the revolutionaries have possessed. For her the wounded soldiers of China, the starving peasants and the over-worked coolies were brothers in a real sense. She was acutely, vividly aware of their misery and could not rest for trying to alleviate it. Unlike those doctrinaire revolutionaries who love the masses in the abstract but are cold to the sufferings of individuals, Agnes Smedley spent much of her time, energy, and scant earnings in helping a multitude of individuals.

My first sight of her had been on the bund in Hankow, where she was putting into rickshaws and transporting to the hospital at her own expense, some of those wretched wounded soldiers, the sight of whom was so common in Hankow, but whom others never thought of helping. Such was her influence over 'simple' men as well as over intellectuals that she soon had a group of rickshaw coolies who would perform this service for the wounded without payment.⁸

Flattered, Smedley was attracted to Utley by a shared radical background and the quality of Utley's first book, Japan's Feet of Clay. Both women had lost husbands to Stalin's purges and this too was a bond. Utley was also younger, more attractive, and leading a very complicated love life (in opposition to marriage). Possibly then Smedley saw in Utley a faint reflection of herself ten years earlier. At any rate, by summer the two women were the center of a high-powered, tight social circle of foreign diplomats and journalists (nearly all male).

The international press corps at Hankow developed a unique sense of camaraderie. Perhaps, as Frank Dorn has written, it was the increasing number of Japanese air raids and the waiting for the inevitable fall and pillage of the city which created the atmosphere. Another factor was work conditions which in terms of censorship were freer than in any Chinese capital before or since. Moreover there was consensus about the writing job that needed to be done: report the struggle of a united, heroic Chinese people against the villainous, fascist-minded Japanese. The result was much camaraderie and romance. Symbolic indeed of the convivial spirit was the formation during the summer of 1938 of the Hankow Last Ditcher's Club. The group assembled regularly with much rhetorical flourish at farewell dinners to see off "deserters." The idea was to see who would hold out in Hankow the longest. One such dinner in September was staged as a trial of the guests of honor, Carlson and Freda Utley, who were about to leave for Shanghai.⁹

Smedley's Chinese associates in Hankow seemed to share the same sense of hope and exhilaration produced through crisis which infected the foreign community. Politically the united front was at its most cordial state. Chiang Kai-shek's secret police or Blue Shirts were relatively quiescent by comparison to earlier or later periods. Relatively speaking, it was the freest atmosphere Chinese intellectuals had seen in years. Communists Zhou Enlai and Guo Moro held high government posts. As a result, Hankow buzzed with intellectual activities--new magazines, plays, art exhibits, and so forth. A number of important writers who arrived from Shanghai, like Mao Dun, were old friends of Smedley's. The poet scholar Guo Moro presided generally over the cultural scene, meeting and marrying a new wife in the process. Years later he would devote a volume of poems exclusively to the "spirit of Hankow."¹⁰

Smedley was interviewed often by the Chinese press and made friends amongst a new crop of young journalists who today run the contemporary press of the People's Republic of China. She also wrote articles expressly for the Chinese press. Lu Xun, Japanese prisoners, and the Chinese wounded were favorite subjects.¹¹ But her greatest contact was, not surprisingly, with the medical men and women of Hankow and most importantly with Dr. Lim. Smedley made regular trips to Changsha (a day's drive to the south) in order to deliver medical supplies and ambulances--as well as to monitor conditions there for Dr. Lim.

About fifteen years later a former YMCA worker named Liu Liang-mou recalled in the Chinese press Smedley's appearance at a large fund raising event in Changsha. He served as her translator and remembers how Smedley rose with difficulty to speak. She spoke quietly at first of the Eighth Route Army's victories over the Japanese. Her voice rose gradually. Then,

with a passion that seemed to transform her physically, she described the needs of the wounded, ending with a dramatic appeal for funds. Abruptly, she sat down, exhausted, and there was a long silence. Then the response began coming--in money. Liu was amazed; it was the most successful fund raising event of the year.¹²

Hankow fell on October 17, 1938. A few days earlier, Smedley had slipped out of the city, going south to Changsha and onward to join the newly formed communist-led guerrilla units of the New Fourth Army. There she began a new life, achieving a great deal in terms of writing and the medical relief effort. But privately her mood was one of melancholy and longing for the magic of Hankow. Out of the loneliness, in June 1939, she wrote Freda Uteley a revealing, sad letter:

Dearest Freda:

The last days of Hankow still remain in my mind as rare, unusual days from the psychological and human viewpoint. I still think of Shaw's "Heartbreak House" when I recall them. As you remarked at the time, no person on earth is more charming than the American journalist abroad, particularly the cultured series minded ones. But I wonder what it would be like were I to meet those same men on the streets of Chicago. Gone the magic! The only ones who have maintained some contact with me were Evans and Frank. Evans wrote me a short note from Shanghai and sent it here by Belden who came here for a week. Then Evans remembered to send me a copy of one of his articles in Amerasia. And, as Frank Dorn returned to America, he wrote me a long, human letter from the ship. But then a ship is much like Hankow--an island on which one is thrown back upon oneself. I suppose he has forgotten me by this time. Once Durdin asked someone in Chungking where I am--so he remembers I am somewhere in the land of the living.

I sort of pine for the magic of Hankow. It was the bright spot in one decade of my life. There I met foreign men, some of them rotters, but most of them with the charm that belongs to many men of the Western World. They themselves do not know how very different they are from the Chinese. Though I have never liked to be treated as bourgeois women are treated still the foreign men from England, America, and perhaps France, have a deep and unconscious attitude of respect for women; a little feeling of protection for women; of

helping a woman; and a kind of gentleness toward her. Often his kindness blended a bit with tenderness or a breath of romance. It is difficult to explain, because it is there as an atmosphere. In the Chinese men this is totally lacking in all respects. There is not even friendship and comradeship between men and women in China. The foreign word "romance" has been taken into the Chinese language and means promiscuous sexual relations. And "love" means sexual intercourse in its usual use in China. For a Chinese man to even touch a woman's arm or hand means something sexual and arouses shock.

So, for ten years I lived in this desert, and because of this, I found a magical place. Since then I have thought much of this. Shall I return to the western world, or shall I remain here? I fear I must remain in China. Hankow was a rare exception, and I believe all of us felt the same about it. I wish to retain it as a precious memory. I think often of the play in which many persons of different classes are on a foundering ship in mid-ocean. Class distinctions fall away as they face death together, drawn closer by humanity. But when the storm passes and the ship is saved, the old cold and cruel class distinctions returned. I believe that to be Hankow.

Love,

Agnes¹³

Over time absorption in her work overcame the sense of isolation expressed in this letter. Smedley spent the next two years in the hills of central China with guerilla units of the New Fourth Army. In 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor, she returned to the U.S. and wrote up her experiences, including Hankow, in book form. The success of Battle Hymn of China (Knopf, 1943) attracted attention in the press and invitations to speak publically as a China expert. But by the late 1940s, Smedley's popularity had waned, chiefly because she had been targeted by J. Edgar Hoover and the "China Lobby" and accused by General Douglas MacArthur of being a Soviet spy. In 1949 she fled to England and died suddenly there after an operation in May 1950. Her last book, The Great Road, a biography of Marshall Zhu De, was published posthumously.

In retrospect it is easy to see how Hankow was so special to Agnes Smedley. Personally it had been a "romantic" interlude in the sense expressed in her letter to Freda Utley. Professionally Hankow was important as the beginning of international recognition beyond left wing circles of her expertise about China. Finally, it was the buoyant, united front spirit of Hankow which pervaded Smedley's most polished and influential work, Battle Hymn of China.

Endnotes

1. On Smedley's pre-1938 background, see Janice R. and Stephen R. Mackinnon, Woman of Will: A Biography of Agnes Smedley (University of California Press, forthcoming) as well as their introduction to Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution (New York, 1976).
2. On Smedley the celebrity, see New York Times, 1938: January 13, 5:3; February 5, 2:2; and March 28, 1:2.
3. On Smedley in Yan'an see Mackinnon, Woman of Will, chapter XVIII, and Smedley, Battle Hymn of China (New York, 1943), pp. 151-204. For the Indian medical mission, now known as the "Kotnis" mission, see Jawaharlal Nehru, Bunch of Old Letters (Delhi, 1958), pp. 260-262; Basu diaries, handwritten in Calcutta, 1977 (Basu is the last surviving member of the delegation); also Kotnis memorial committee, Jinian Kotihua (Beijing, 1982), has a picture on page 129 of Smedley with the mission in Hankow.
4. Battle Hymn of China, pp. 212-31. Interviews with Randall Gould, August, 1976 and Israel Epstein, June, 1980. John P. Davies, Dragon by the Tail (New York, 1972), p. 195. Robert K. Lim or Lin K'osheng, had quite a remarkable career, originating with Peking Medical College in the late 1920s; see Howard Boorman, Biographical Dictionary of Republican China (New York, 1967-71), vol. III, pp. 373-374. Also interview with Zhang Wenjin in November, 1983. Zhang worked closely with Robert K. Lim in the late 1930s and early 1940s.
5. Paul Frillman and Graham Peck, China: The Remembered Life (Boston, 1968), p. 22.
6. On Anna L. Strong in Hankow, see Tracy Strong and Helene Keyssar, Right in Her Soul (New York, 1983), pp. 176-82 and preface to Smedley, China Fights Back (New York, 1938).
7. Frank Dorn, The Sino-Japanese War (New York, 1974), p. 190.
8. Freda Utey, Odyssey of a Liberal (Washington, D.C., 1976), pp. 200-201. After Hankow, Utey moved to the right politically. By the mid-1940s she was a sometime paid participant in Alfred Kohlberg's "China Lobby" and active in the early 1950s in the McCarthy hearings against Owen Lattimore and others. Thus her retrospective portrait of Smedley is all the more a testimony to their special relationship and friendship in Hankow. The latter was confirmed by an interview with Utey in January, 1976.
9. Documented as mock formal charges, see Fisher papers, Arizona State University. The presiding "judge" was A.T. Steele.
10. Guo Moro, Hong Boqu (Tianjin, 1959).
11. Renmin ribao, March 11, 1979; Kangri wenyi, May 4, 1938; interviews with Go Baoquan in March, 1978, and Gong Loushan in April, 1978.

12. Shimo telai Zhongguo renmin zhi you (Beijing, 1950), pp. 40-44.
13. Utley, Odyssey of a Liberal, pp. 206-207.