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Gail King

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THE HELEN FOSTER SNOW COLLECTION
IN THE BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY HAROLD B. LEE LIBRARY
L. TOM PERRY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Gail King
Brigham Young University

Helen Foster Snow (September 21, 1907- January 11, 1997) was born in Cedar City, Utah. She was the oldest child, and her parents moved frequently in the early years of their marriage, first to Chicago, then to Idaho, and then back to Cedar City in 1917, when her father set up a law practice. Helen attended high school in Salt Lake City and after graduation studied for a time at the University of Utah. She then worked as a secretary in Salt Lake City before, drawn by the lure of adventure and distant places, she went to China in 1931. She worked first as a secretary for a group of industrial bankers in Shanghai and later as social secretary at the U.S. consulate in Shanghai, all the while exploring the city and snapping photographs. Shortly after her arrival she met the journalist Edgar Snow, who had arrived in China in 1929, and the two were married December 25, 1932.

A few months later the Snows moved from Shanghai to Beijing (then known as Beiping). From January 1934 they lived near Yenching University, where Edgar taught journalism and Helen attended classes. Through this connection they came to know some of the students involved in social and political events of the time in the Chinese capital, including some students in the Chinese Communist party. While neither Helen Foster Snow nor Edgar Snow ever joined the Communist Party, they were sympathetic to the radical students’ desires to help their country and resist the Japanese. The students, many of whom later held high office in the government of the People’s Republic of China, gathered at their house where they had the freedom to express their ideas in wide-ranging discussions. As a foreign observer Helen Foster Snow wrote about the students’ activities and participated in marches and demonstrations.

In the spring of 1937 Helen made her own trip to the Communist stronghold in Yan’an in northwest China, following Edgar’s earlier trip there in 1936, and the material she gathered formed the basis for her book Inside Red China (Doubleday, 1939). After her return from Yan’an, Helen and Edgar Snow joined with Rewi Alley and others to organize the Chinese Industrial Cooperatives (industrial worker cooperatives) in Shanghai in 1939. The cooperatives, often called the Gung-Ho (work together) cooperatives, had the support of both Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek, then President of the Republic of China.

Helen Foster Snow returned to the U.S. from China in December 1940 and spent the rest of her life in Connecticut, visiting China in 1973 and again in 1978. With the improvement of relations between the US and China, China began to acknowledge the contributions of an earlier generation of Americans to China, and Helen Snow was honored as a friend of China by many of the students she met and championed in the 1930s. The Edgar and Helen Snow Studies Center in Xian, China was opened in 1986, and in 1993 the Chinese Writers’

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1 This paper is a revision of a portion of the presentation by the author titled “East Asian Primary Sources in the BYU Library—Treasures from the Harold B. Lee Library L. Tom Perry Special Collections” given as part of the panel “Teaching, Research, and Library Resources” at the annual meeting of the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies in Tucson, Arizona, October 23, 2009.
Association made Helen Foster Snow the first recipient of its literary award. In 1996 China named her a Friendship Ambassador, one of the highest honors for a foreign citizen. Following her death, a commemoration of Helen Snow, held in Beijing in the Great Hall of the People, was arranged by the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China Society for People’s Friendship Studies. A statue of Helen Foster Snow was dedicated at the Heritage Center in Cedar City, Utah, on November 11, 2009, with dignitaries from China and the U.S. present.

After Helen’s death the bulk of her personal and professional papers were donated by her literary executors to the Brigham Young University Harold B. Lee Library, where they are now housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections. A symposium held in October 2000 at BYU commemorated the donation and the life of Helen Foster Snow. Her experiences in China were featured in a 57-minute documentary film "Helen Foster Snow: Witness to Revolution" (Combat Films and Research, 2000). She was also the subject of the biography by historian Kelly Ann Long, Helen Foster Snow: An American Woman in Revolutionary China (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006), who conducted extensive interviews with her before her death. According to Dr. Long, “Although not a diplomat, missionary, merchant, or militarist, Helen Snow offers an important viewpoint precisely because she was not one of the typical sources that scholars often used to learn about China and U.S. relations with that nation. She was not an academic affiliated with an institution of higher learning nor a professional journalist compelled to conform to an editorial policy or stance other than her own. As an independent thinker and self-trained journalist who did not write for an official, governmental, or diplomatic audience, Helen reminds us that public discourse about other people and nations is not always shaped by leading authorities and intellectuals of a given time period. Often, it is in the popular press and through informal mechanisms that prevailing images of others and our selves are reproduced and changed, over time.”

A detailed inventory of the Brigham Young University Harold B. Lee Library Helen Foster Snow collection can be found by going to the L. Tom Perry Special Collections EAD Search page (http://ead.lib.byu.edu:8080/Ead/ead_search.jsp) and entering the search term “Helen Foster Snow.” Of most interest and historical significance in the collection are the photographs and writings coming out of Helen’s China years. According to Eric Hyer, BYU Political Science professor who has worked extensively with the collection, the China materials can be divided into four groups: 1. Helen’s early years in Shanghai and meeting Edgar Snow; 2. Her years in Beijing, including her involvement with Chinese students and protests against Japan; 3. Helen’s visit to Yan’an, incorporating interviews with high-level Chinese Communists and their wives; social programs (Inside Red China and Yanan Notebooks resulted from these experiences); 4. The return to Shanghai and the Gung-ho Coop Movement, when with Edgar Snow and Rewi Alley she began industrial cooperatives; industrial products for Chinese army produced by refugees (Helen’s book China Builds for Democracy, which analyzed the movement and what people learned from it, resulted from this experience.).

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3 The remainder of Helen Foster Snow’s papers are housed in the library of Stanford University.
5 Eric Hyer, Campus lecture “Discovering Revolutionary China through the Eyes of Helen Foster Snow,” October 22, 2008.
Notable China-related items in the Helen Foster Snow Collection include\(^6\)

- **Book Draft of Inside Red China (Box 36)** Includes the original handwritten and typed drafts of Helen’s most famous work, Inside Red China.

- **Pamphlets From China (Boxes 185-189)** Helen collected a large set of official Chinese pamphlets that contain political speeches, attacks on capitalism and the West, and nationalist propaganda—all directly from China. This series offers a rich understanding of Chinese political thought, ca. 1930s-1970s.

- **Historically Significant Manuscripts**
  - *Letter from Mao Zedong to Helen Foster Snow (Box 175, fd. 4)* Includes the original letter, dated 3 January 1973, given to Helen, on the occasion of publishing Inside Red China. English translation also included.
  - *Interviews With Student Movement Leaders (Box 24, fds. 1-3)* Notes from interviews with students who staged the December 1935 Student Movement.
  - *Interviews With Early Chinese Communist Leaders (Box 25, fds. 2-4 & Box 169, fd. 12)* The first section contains Helen’s notes from interviews with such notable figures as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De. The second section contains Edgar Snow’s notes from similar interviews with Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, and other Red Army Commanders.

- **Photographs (Series V & VIII)** The largest and most historically significant section of Helen’s collection, this series contains some of the earliest known photographs of the Chinese Communist Party and its leadership. The photographs number in the thousands, and most are black and white. Some notable examples include:
  - Mao Zedong (items 2575-2603, 3314)
  - Zhou Enlai (items 2602-2603)
  - Zhu De (item 2597)

The Harold B. Lee Library Digital Lab will begin work to digitize the Helen Foster Snow photographs in February, 2010. The goal is to digitize 5,500 images from the Helen Foster Snow’s Photographs of Asia Sub-series, which is made up of photographs taken by or collected by Helen Foster Snow 1931-1940. All indications of names, locations, events, and dates provided will be included. Extensive work on formatting and updating metadata for these images must precede digitization, but it is hoped that the images will be available on the Harold B. Lee Library Digital Collections page at [http://www.lib.byu.edu/digital/](http://www.lib.byu.edu/digital/) by May or June 2010.

\(^6\) From the Helen Foster Snow Collection description and overview on the L. Tom Perry Special Collections page, [http://lib.byu.edu/sites/muw/20thcentury/bibliographies/snow/](http://lib.byu.edu/sites/muw/20thcentury/bibliographies/snow/)