

International Dissemination of the Communist Party of China's Revolutionary Discourse Through Foreign Journalists Visiting China in the Early Yan'an Period

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Abstract

During the early Yan'an period, information about the fundamental positions and actual conditions of the Communist Party of China (CPC) remained largely inaccessible to the outside world due to the Kuomintang's military blockade and strict control over news and public opinion. In response to the practical need to break through this news embargo and discursive containment, Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders proactively invited and actively engaged foreign journalists to visit CPC-controlled areas. The visit of the American journalist Edgar Snow in September 1936 marked the opening of the CPC's systematic construction of an external discourse framework. Building on this initiative, Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders subsequently invited a number of influential foreign journalists and intellectuals to Yan'an, including Agnes Smedley of *The Manchester Guardian*, the American freelance journalist Helen Snow (Nym Wales), James Bertram of *The Times*, Philip Jaffe, editor of *Amerasia*, and Owen Lattimore, editor of the American journal *Pacific Affairs*. Through forums and discussions, public lectures, extensive correspondence, and the revision of interview transcripts, CPC leaders articulated the Party's revolutionary propositions to international audiences. In this process, Mao Zedong and other CPC

leaders employed diversified narrative strategies in their external communication, disseminating progressive revolutionary themes at multiple levels and contributing to the construction of the CPC's revolutionary image on the global stage.

Key words: Early Yan'an period; Communist Party of China; Foreign journalists in China; Revolutionary discourse

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INTRODUCTION

Foucault's theory of discourse–power posits that discourse is not merely a form of linguistic expression but a central vehicle through which power operates. Power constructs systems of knowledge through discourse and delineates the boundaries of what can be legitimately said, while knowledge, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy of power; the two exist in a relationship of mutual constitution and co-production. Foucault's discourse theory thus provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the international dissemination of the Communist Party of China's revolutionary discourse during the Yan'an period. When discussing the earliest visits by foreign journalists to the Communist Party of China (CPC), scholarly attention most often turns to Edgar Snow's journey to northern Shaanxi in 1936. This landmark "ice-breaking" visit opened a critical channel for the CPC's construction of an external discourse system. Seizing the opportunity presented by Edgar Snow's arrival, CPC leaders represented by Mao Zedong devoted considerable effort to building institutions and

platforms for foreign engagement, thereby advancing the institutionalization of the Party's external relations. With subsequent visits by journalists such as Agnes Smedley, Helen Snow, and James Bertram, a cohort effect gradually emerged, in which foreign journalists and international sympathizers collectively contributed to the development and dissemination of the CPC's international discourse.

On January 13, 1937, the Central Committee of the CPC formally entered Yan'an. Around the same time, Mao Zedong and Zhu De separately met with Agnes Smedley, a correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, who had come to Yan'an for interviews. As one of the earliest foreign journalists to conduct field reporting in China's northwest, Smedley arrived in Xi'an in September 1936 with the explicit aim of visiting areas under CPC control. Based on her observations, she concluded that the Kuomintang authorities, through mechanisms such as cultural control, press censorship, manipulation of public opinion, and extensive bribery, had effectively prevented the international community from gaining an accurate understanding of the CPC. As a result, foreign news agencies and intelligence services frequently misinterpreted or distorted the Party's political positions, which in turn contributed to the stigmatization of CPC leaders and the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. According to Smedley, on her very first night in Yan'an she met Mao Zedong and Zhu De. During her stay, Mao Zedong proactively sought her out and engaged her in conversations lasting several hours, covering not only current political affairs but also issues related to literature and the arts—an experience that left a deep impression on her as a first-time visitor to Yan'an. In her interview with Zhu De, Smedley noted that his broad, dark face was constantly lit with a smile, conveying an air of ease and openness. Particularly memorable was the interview conducted on October 24, during which Zhu De focused exclusively on military affairs and spoke continuously for several hours.

In May 1937, Helen Snow—Edgar Snow's wife and herself a freelance journalist—followed in her husband's footsteps and arrived in Yan'an. Although her journey was fraught with difficulties due to the Kuomintang's blockade of the area, her eventual arrival and successful interviews with Party, government, military personnel, and local residents in Yan'an brought her considerable satisfaction. Notably, during her interview on June 7 with members of the Yan'an bricklayers' union, she was struck by the warm reception she received as a foreigner from local workers. This experience led her to conclude that workers in Yan'an were noticeably more welcoming than people she had encountered elsewhere in China, and that they exhibited a stronger sense of internationalism and a weaker sense of narrow nationalism—an observation she found entirely intelligible under the circumstances. While conducting interviews in Yan'an, Helen Snow

frequently dined with Mao Zedong and discussed Zhu De's experiences with Agnes Smedley, who was also conducting research in Yan'an at the time, further deepening her impressions of the CPC leadership. In mid-August, when Helen Snow planned to travel to the Eighth Route Army front lines for reporting, Mao Zedong wrote on August 19 to Ren Bishi and Deng Xiaoping, who were responsible for frontline work, explaining that Helen Snow was both the wife of the American journalist Edgar Snow and a journalist in her own right. He emphasized that her reporting for overseas media would be beneficial to the CPC's external communication and therefore instructed Ren and Deng to provide assistance and care in both her work and daily life. By the end of August, Helen Snow's stay in Yan'an had lasted five months—far longer than originally planned—and her funds were nearly exhausted. Under these circumstances, Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders offered special assistance and made prompt arrangements to ensure that she could continue traveling with the troops, providing her with a guard, a horse, and a mule to carry her luggage. These measures constituted an important material guarantee for the smooth conduct of her reporting activities.

In June 1937, on the eve of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Edgar Snow assisted Thomas Arthur Bisson, an expert on Far Eastern affairs with the American Foreign Policy Association, along with Philip Jaffe, editor of *Amerasia*, and Owen Lattimore, editor of *Pacific Affairs*, in making a secret journey to Yan'an. Upon arrival, Bisson and his colleagues were accommodated at the Yan'an Guesthouse. According to Bisson's recollections, Mao Zedong arrived there early on the 21st and, like several others, remained until the very last moment before departure—clear evidence of the importance he attached to the visit. During their stay in Yan'an, Bisson regarded interviews with CPC leaders as a central task, one that inevitably required a significant investment of their time and posed considerable coordination challenges for the guesthouse staff. To Bisson's gratification, however, Mao Zedong and his colleagues proved exceptionally generous with their time. The interview with Mao Zedong in particular was treated as a focal point: on the 22nd alone, Mao Zedong spent an entire afternoon in a Yan'an cave dwelling responding to Bisson's questions, resolving many of his doubts and laying a crucial foundation for Bisson's later work, *Conversations with Yanan, 1937*.

It is worth noting that Agnes Smedley, as one of the earliest foreign journalists to visit Yan'an, not only conducted interviews there with the Snow couple and Bisson's group, but also frequently served as an intermediary for other foreign journalists seeking access to Yan'an. The visit of James Bertram, among others, was facilitated through her efforts. In October 1937, Bertram arrived in Yan'an. Unlike Edgar Snow and Bisson, who

conducted direct interviews with CPC leaders, Bertram attended a speech by Mao Zedong on his second day in Yan'an at the graduation and opening ceremony of the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University of the Chinese people. It should be emphasized that Bertram's participation in this ceremony and his opportunity to hear Mao Zedong's speech in person were likely the result of deliberate arrangements by the CPC. As Bertram later recalled, he was invited early that morning and informed that Mao Zedong habitually worked at night and usually slept during the day, making it particularly rare for him to rise so early. In his speech, Mao Zedong employed a flexible narrative style enriched with peasant humor; his remarks were concrete, accessible, and consistently calibrated to the level of his audience, never resorting to language beyond their comprehension. This audience-oriented mode of address and linguistic style left a lasting impression on Bertram. In sum, the successive visits of foreign journalists to Yan'an during the early period not only laid an essential foundation for breaking the Kuomintang's news blockade and control of public opinion, but also created crucial opportunities for the CPC to disseminate its revolutionary propositions and construct its revolutionary image on the international stage.

FOREIGN JOURNALISTS IN CHINA AND THE EXTERNAL ARTICULATION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA'S REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE

Even before traveling to Yan'an in 1936, Edgar Snow, responding to concerns widely shared by international audiences, raised in written form questions to Mao Zedong regarding the essential nature of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In his reply, Mao Zedong emphasized that the CPC was a revolutionary political party, and that every Party member was, and would always remain, a social revolutionary rather than a reformist. He further pointed out that the Chinese revolution confronted two fundamental tasks: the completion of the national and democratic revolution, and the realization of a social revolution. At the present stage, the character of the Chinese revolution belonged to the former; only upon the successful completion of the latter could China truly enter socialism. In his face-to-face discussions with Edgar Snow, Mao Zedong elaborated that the CPC's current policies could not be socialist, still less communist. What the Party sought was the establishment of a democratic republic of the entire nation. Even after the realization of such a democratic republic, socialism could not be implemented immediately. Chinese communists, he argued, had to adhere to this basic policy, which was determined by the objective requirements of China's War of Resistance and the broader trajectory of revolutionary development.

In May 1937, Mao Zedong expressed similar views in his interview with Helen Snow. He described Chinese communists as advocates of revolutionary transformation, committed to advancing the democratic revolution toward socialism. However, he made clear that this conception of revolutionary transition was fundamentally different from the Trotskyist theory of permanent revolution. Instead, it entailed uniting the revolutionary bourgeoisie in both revolutionary ideas and practice, which Mao Zedong regarded as a necessary pathway toward socialism.

Evidently, against the backdrop of promoting and consolidating a united national resistance, and in response to the objective necessity of mobilizing all social forces to resist Japanese aggression, the CPC could not apply Marxist theory in a dogmatic manner. Rather, it was required to integrate Marxist principles with the concrete realities of China's national resistance and revolutionary practice. When addressing the historical trajectory of the Chinese revolution, the theoretical formulations of the Marxist classics on revolution constituted the fundamental point of departure. As an integral component of the Marxist theoretical system, Marx's theory of transcending the "Caudine Forks" of capitalism not only exerted significant influence on studies of institutional transformation in advanced Western countries at the time, but also provided important guidance for revolutionary movements worldwide. Lenin was the first to translate this theoretical conception into practice. Under the specific historical conditions created by the outbreak of the First World War in the early twentieth century, Russia accomplished a leap beyond capitalism through social revolution without undergoing a fully developed capitalist stage.

On June 24, 1937, in conversation with Helen Snow, Mao Zedong invoked Marx's theory of transcending capitalism to argue incisively that China might be able to enter socialism directly without passing through a full capitalist stage. On the basis of a penetrating analysis of China's revolutionary situation and the global dynamics of revolutionary development, Mao Zedong further stated in the interview that every Chinese communist must recognize that China could avoid capitalism and proceed directly toward socialism. The duration of this transitional period, he noted, would depend on both international and domestic conditions and could not yet be precisely determined. Nevertheless, it would likely be a relatively long period, for which the Party was prepared to engage in prolonged and arduous struggle. At the same time, Mao Zedong explicitly underscored that certain forms of capitalist development would be unavoidable—and indeed necessary—during this process. Through industrial development, such forms of capitalism would strengthen the leadership and power of the proletariat.

Mao Zedong's views were further corroborated in Helen Snow's subsequent interviews. During July and August 1937, she conducted interviews with CPC leaders such as Wu Liangping and Zhang Wenbin, focusing centrally on the relationship between the CPC and the Chinese revolution. After interviewing Zhang Wenbin on August 19, Helen Snow observed that although CPC members had not experienced the European or American industrial revolutions, they nevertheless possessed a distinctly modern outlook and lifestyle. Wu Liangping, for his part, emphasized that one of the CPC's revolutionary objectives was the establishment of a socialist state, and that achieving this goal was not incompatible with promoting the development of national capitalism. This was because revolution necessarily proceeded through distinct stages with different essential characteristics. In particular, in the face of Japanese imperialist aggression, the anti-Japanese and anti-imperialist struggle constituted the paramount task of the Chinese people. At this stage, the interests of the proletariat coincided with those of the nation as a whole; consequently, capitalist development could facilitate a future transition toward socialism. Through these in-depth interviews with CPC leaders, Helen Snow came to understand more clearly that the CPC did not oppose the development of national capitalism. On the contrary, it actively encouraged such development. Indeed, in the view of Chinese communists, socialism could not be established without first completing a bourgeois-democratic revolution—an understanding sharply at odds with the stigmatizing propaganda of the Kuomintang authorities and the misleading reports circulating abroad.

As a revolutionary party, the CPC not only inherited and developed Marxist revolutionary theory, but also placed strong emphasis on the importance of adapting revolutionary practice to the requirements of the times. When Bisson and his colleagues visited Yan'an on June 23, 1937, they observed that in areas under CPC leadership, the radical policy of land confiscation from landlords had already been abolished, and a new agricultural policy had been fully implemented. Under this policy, landlords willing to abide by rent and interest reduction measures were incorporated into the united front against Japanese aggression. Such a policy, they noted, did not weaken the CPC's revolutionary character; rather, it contributed positively to the advancement of the Chinese revolution. This observation echoed Mao Zedong's remarks in his interview with Bisson: within the broader context of promoting and consolidating a united national resistance, the impending socialist revolution in China would necessarily formulate phased objectives in accordance with objective historical conditions—an approach that was not only necessary, but also historically inevitable.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA'S REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE IN ENGAGEMENT WITH FOREIGN JOURNALISTS VISITING CHINA

Taking the visit of Thomas Arthur Bisson and his colleagues as an opportunity, Mao Zedong—grounded in a profound understanding of the objectives and tasks of the Chinese revolution—employed diversified narrative strategies in external communication to systematically explicate the interrelationship between the Chinese revolution and the world revolution, thereby advancing the construction of the CPC's revolutionary discourse system. On June 23, during his interview with Bisson, Mao Zedong noted that although the Chinese revolution possessed its own distinctive characteristics, it should not be viewed in isolation. Rather, the Chinese revolution constituted an integral component of the world revolution. In terms of revolutionary tradition and character, Mao Zedong argued, China's struggle shared fundamental commonalities with the movements in Britain, the United States, France, Spain, and other countries, all of which aimed at the progress of humanity as a whole.

It is noteworthy that Bisson, Owen Lattimore, and others were Americans. From Mao Zedong's perspective, the interview thus represented an important opportunity to engage in a direct dialogue with the American public. Accordingly, Mao Zedong emphasized that the broad sympathy extended by the American people toward China was precisely evidence of this shared revolutionary affinity. "They care about the fate of the Chinese people," Mao Zedong suggested, "and we likewise care about their fate." Clearly, Mao Zedong calibrated his external discourse in accordance with the background of his interlocutors, pursuing a targeted approach to the construction of the CPC's international narrative. In a broader sense, this reflected both the diversity of the CPC leadership's external narrative strategies and a high degree of discursive sophistication. When addressing questions concerning the nature and trajectory of the Chinese revolution, Mao Zedong also invoked Lenin's theory of imperialism, with the explicit aim of conveying to the international community China's need for assistance from peoples around the world. On June 24, in his interview with Helen Snow, Mao Zedong cited Lenin's well-known proposition that revolutions in imperialist countries require the support of the proletariat in colonial countries, just as revolutions in colonial countries require the support of the proletariat in imperialist nations.

In their interactions with foreign visitors, Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders articulated in depth the revolutionary character of the Chinese people's War of Resistance against Japan. They emphasized that the

struggle had entered a new revolutionary stage and called upon the Kuomintang to carry forward the revolutionary spirit of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People. The CPC, for its part, pledged to formulate revolutionary guidelines and implement revolutionary policies, striving to secure leadership in the revolutionary process. This approach revealed a narrative strategy that consciously linked the construction of external discourse with the consolidation of revolutionary leadership.

First, with regard to the revolutionary nature of the Chinese people's War of Resistance, Mao Zedong explained in conversation with James Bertram that the war possessed a fundamentally revolutionary character, manifested primarily in two respects. On the one hand, it was a war waged by the Chinese people against foreign aggression, fostering national unity and laying the groundwork for the Second United Front between the CPC and the Kuomintang. On the other hand, the War of Resistance was not merely a struggle for national survival; it also fulfilled a major responsibility within the global anti-fascist front. It was in this sense, Mao Zedong argued, that the revolutionary character of China's war was most clearly expressed. Precisely because of the revolutionary nature of China's resistance and the outstanding contributions made by other anti-fascist struggles worldwide, China was able to win international sympathy and support, prompting a shift in global perceptions—from earlier contempt for China's perceived non-resistance to renewed respect for China's determined resistance.

Chinese communists, shaped by their experiences in the Great Revolution, possessed a keen awareness of the dynamics of both the revolutionary and wartime situations. On June 18, 1937, Dong Biwu—one of the founders of the CPC and a veteran revolutionary—stated in an interview with Helen Snow that, judging from the trajectory of China's revolutionary development, revolutionary momentum was steadily rising. In the CPC's view, the revolution had entered a new stage and was moving toward victory, making it imperative to struggle resolutely for that victory. Dong's assessment was by no means an isolated one. Li Wei-han, for example, emphasized in his interview the relationship between the student movement and revolutionary development. He observed that youth and students, as a vital revolutionary force, had demonstrated enormous potential since the May Fourth Movement. Following the outbreak of the December 9th Movement in 1935, revolutionary activity—especially the national revolutionary movement—had entered a new stage. Under the conditions of the ongoing national liberation war, Li argued, youth and students were duty-bound to participate in the revolution, and the CPC actively educated and mobilized them to do so. With the intensification of Japanese imperialist aggression and the successive falls of Shanghai and Wuhan, large numbers

of students flocked to Yan'an, and the nationwide student movement continued to gain momentum. It was therefore no exaggeration, Li concluded, to state that the revolution had indeed entered a new stage.

With the advent of this new stage, the CPC was compelled to formulate and implement new guidelines, policies, and objectives in both domestic and foreign affairs. The articulation and implementation of these new orientations became a central concern for foreign journalists conducting interviews in Yan'an, thereby affording the CPC a valuable opportunity to present its revolutionary principles, policies, and goals to the outside world. In his interview with James Bertram, Mao Zedong stressed that in order to resist Japanese aggression and secure the ultimate victory of the revolutionary war, it was essential to establish a genuinely revolutionary political line—one that applied both to revolutionary armed forces and to revolutionary political parties.

On the one hand, revolutionary armies required guidance from a clear revolutionary line. In the prevailing conditions of China, Mao Zedong noted, such a line had not yet been fully grasped by officers and soldiers. It was therefore necessary to cultivate a force that, under the guidance of a revolutionary line, could serve as a model for other armies. The Eighth Route Army under CPC leadership, Mao Zedong argued, was destined to fulfill this role. As a model army guided by revolutionary principles, it should not only set an example in courage and discipline, but also play a leading role in organizing and mobilizing the masses to participate in the revolutionary war. On the other hand, revolutionary political parties were likewise required to uphold and manifest a revolutionary spirit in accordance with this political line. Mao Zedong emphasized that in the face of Japanese aggression, both the CPC and the Kuomintang should cultivate such a spirit and jointly devote themselves to the task of awakening the masses. Reflecting on the historical course of the revolution, Mao Zedong recalled Sun Yat-sen's testament, which lamented that although the revolution had struggled for forty years, it had not yet succeeded because the masses had not been fully awakened. Awakening the people, Mao Zedong argued, was therefore of paramount importance, albeit a long and arduous task. Its fundamental purpose lay in uniting and mobilizing the broad masses to fight for national liberation and democratic revolution—this, he maintained, constituted the true essence of the Three Principles of the People, as well as the genuine spirit of Marxism and of all revolutionary parties.

Clearly, Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders regarded Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People as revolutionary in nature, fundamentally consistent with Marxism in their essential spirit. This theoretical affinity, in their view, provided a solid foundation for cooperation between the CPC and the Kuomintang in

the War of Resistance. On this basis, Mao Zedong stated unequivocally in his conversation with James Bertram that the CPC agreed to adopt Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary Three Principles of the People, the Three Major Policies, and his testament as the common program of a united front encompassing all parties and social strata. Under the intense pressure of Japanese imperialist aggression, Mao Zedong emphasized, the CPC bore the responsibility of persistently explaining and persuading the Kuomintang and the entire Chinese populace, with the aim of ensuring that genuinely revolutionary interpretations of the Three Principles of the People were implemented nationwide, thereby facilitating the formation of a united anti-Japanese national front.

In fact, as early as the period of the First United Front, Mao Zedong had actively called upon the Kuomintang to uphold the revolutionary interpretation of the Three Principles of the People, a position that at the time achieved relatively broad consensus. During the Yan'an period, CPC leaders continued to adhere to this stance, a fact corroborated by Helen Snow's interviews. On June 7, 1937, with the introduction of Liu Qunxian, Helen Snow interviewed members of the Yan'an Bricklayers' Union. In reporting on their work, one representative referred explicitly to the Three Principles of the People, noting that they had originally been revolutionary in character. It was precisely this revolutionary interpretation that underpinned the First United Front based on alliance with the Soviet Union and cooperation between the Kuomintang and the CPC, thereby aligning the revolutionary Three Principles with CPC policies, the Soviet Union's peace policy, and workers' interests. This convergence, the representative concluded, laid the foundation for unity between the two parties in the collective struggle against Japanese aggression.

An examination of Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders' explanations of the Party's revolutionary propositions reveals that one of the central revolutionary objectives was to secure victory in the war against Japanese aggression. The people's armed forces, represented by the Eighth Route Army, were conceived as the principal agents for achieving this objective, becoming a genuinely revolutionary army under the guidance of a revolutionary political line. In formulating and implementing its revolutionary policies around this overarching goal, the CPC regarded the promotion of a comprehensive, nationwide War of Resistance as a fundamental principle, while identifying the seizure of revolutionary leadership as the decisive factor in realizing this objective. In his conversations with James Bertram, Mao Zedong emphasized that the CPC's revolutionary policies were centered on advancing and achieving a united national resistance against Japan, and that the Party consistently adhered to waging the War of Resistance through the formulation and implementation

of revolutionary policies. Bertram was deeply impressed by Mao Zedong's exposition. In his book *The North China Front*, he noted that Mao Zedong provided an extensive and penetrating account of the CPC's program for resisting Japan and saving the nation. Most striking, Bertram observed, was the fact that Mao Zedong—long regarded by the Kuomintang as a mortal enemy—advanced a series of candid and practical proposals, each of which could be traced to the principles of Sun Yat-sen. In essence, the CPC was merely calling upon the Kuomintang to implement policies that had long been enshrined in its own program but had been forgotten over time.

It is important to note that under conditions of intense internal and external pressure, CPC leaders represented by Mao Zedong attached great importance to the question of revolutionary leadership. In articulating and disseminating the Party's revolutionary discourse, they openly presented the historical trajectory of the CPC's leadership in the revolution, along with its commitment to securing leadership in the War of Resistance. This approach reflected a narrative strategy that consciously integrated ideological discursive authority with revolutionary leadership, thereby providing critical support for the preliminary construction of the CPC's revolutionary discourse system. In his interview with Helen Snow, Mao Zedong stated unequivocally that the proletariat must serve as the leading force in the revolution, and accordingly, its political party must also assume the position of leadership. This necessity, he argued, was determined by the nature of the revolution itself and by the essential characteristics of the CPC. On the basis of this revolutionary nature and party identity, the CPC adopted policies aimed at promoting the development of national capitalism. The outcome of such policies, Mao Zedong contended, would be the strengthening of proletarian leadership and power through industrial development. The leading role played by the proletariat in the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolutionary struggle was thus a crucial condition enabling the transition to socialism.

Mao Zedong's views were by no means isolated. In his interview with Helen Snow, Wu Liangping similarly asserted that the CPC was the first to raise the slogans of resistance against Japan and of the united front, thereby establishing its leading position in the War of Resistance. Whether the goals of resisting Japan and building the nation could be achieved, and whether China could ultimately transition toward socialism, depended on securing leadership of the democratic republic within the masses and the armed forces. For this reason, Wu argued, Chinese communists did not oppose the development of national capitalism; on the contrary, if the proletariat could assume leadership of the anti-Japanese movement, such development would facilitate a shift of political power toward socialism. In a comparable vein, Li Wei-han

noted in his interview that although intellectuals—especially youth and students—constituted an important revolutionary force, the leadership of the revolution had to remain firmly in the hands of the proletariat. The CPC, he stressed, must uphold the principle of mass leadership. This conclusion was not only a summary of the CPC's accumulated experience in the Chinese revolution, but also a hard-earned lesson drawn from the bitter failures of the Great Revolution, written in blood and tears.

FOREIGN JOURNALISTS IN CHINA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA'S REVOLUTIONARY IMAGE

An examination of the issues investigated by foreign journalists during their visits to China, as well as the topics discussed between them and CPC leaders, indicates that explicating the Party's domestic and foreign policies and promoting an objective understanding of the Communist Party of China within the international community constituted a central priority for Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders. Above all, the external articulation of the CPC's internal and external policies served as a crucial means of breaking through the Nationalist government's news blockade and strict control over public opinion.

On the one hand, in order to secure legitimate political space within China, Mao Zedong took advantage of Edgar Snow's and other journalists' visits to Yan'an to systematically expound the fundamental content and core objectives of the CPC's domestic policies, while exposing the true nature of the Kuomintang's vilification and propagandistic attacks against the CPC. On July 15, Mao Zedong firmly stated, with resistance against Japan as the paramount task, that in the face of Japanese imperialist aggression, the Chinese people must unite to resist Japan. He further emphasized that the CPC welcomed foreign investment and that an independent and free China would make a tremendous contribution to the world. On July 18, Mao Zedong continued his discussion with Edgar Snow on issues concerning the CPC's domestic policies. In responding to the question of the fundamental differences between CPC and Kuomintang policies, Mao Zedong directed his critique squarely at the Nationalist government, exposing its practice of contracting foreign loans and using them to wage warlord conflicts or suppress the Red Army. He pointed out that foreign loans and investment should be used solely for the development of China's economy, whereas the Kuomintang's actions inflicted severe damage upon China's sovereignty. In contrast to this, Mao Zedong stressed that the CPC categorically refused to recognize any foreign investment that undermined China's sovereign rights.

At the same time, Mao Zedong elaborated in interviews on the relationship between the evolution of the War of Resistance and changes in CPC policy, with the aim of countering the Kuomintang's stigmatization of the CPC and clarifying the Party's fundamental positions to the international community. Mao Zedong explained to Edgar Snow that, in order to unite and mobilize all patriotic forces to form a national united front against Japan, the CPC had introduced significant adjustments in many areas, particularly in its class and land policies. With regard to class policy, the CPC granted political rights to the petty bourgeoisie and independent professionals; moreover, anyone willing to participate in the revolution—whether capitalists or landlords—was likewise accorded political rights, including both the right to vote and eligibility for public office. In terms of land policy, the CPC timely modified its approach to the land revolution: the land of rich peasants was not confiscated, and landlords who supported resistance against Japan were also allowed to retain land. Evidently, these policy adjustments were not only necessitated by the changing wartime situation but also exerted a significant influence on the course of events, especially in terms of consolidating national resistance, winning popular support, and securing legitimate domestic political status.

Furthermore, in order to clarify the CPC's domestic and foreign policies and its stance on resistance against Japan, while refuting the Kuomintang's defamatory practices, Mao Zedong placed particular emphasis on articulating the CPC's commitment to a united war effort. First, he unequivocally expressed the CPC's determination to pursue unity in resistance. Second, Mao Zedong argued that the Red Army possessed not only the will but also the capacity to fight the war to the end. He even suggested that, when conditions were ripe, the CPC could deploy an anti-Japanese force larger and more effective than the entire Nationalist army, with popular support constituting the decisive condition. Mao Zedong stressed that if the masses were granted economic, social, and political freedoms, their strength would multiply exponentially, revealing the true power of the nation. A fully mobilized, trained, and armed people's army, he asserted, would be invincible. Finally, Mao Zedong addressed the core issue underlying CPC-KMT cooperation in the war: the question of leadership. In responding to how the two parties might cooperate, Mao Zedong stated that, in pursuit of national unity against Japan, the CPC was prepared to submit to a genuinely anti-Japanese supreme military council. However, the foundation of such unity, he emphasized, must rest upon the principle of national liberation, whose ultimate objective was the establishment of a unified people's democratic government—an aim consistent with the will of the people and certain to receive their support.

On the other hand, Mao Zedong also seized the opportunity presented by foreign journalists' visits to systematically expound the CPC's foreign policy, thereby advancing its international discourse, dispelling international suspicions, and fostering a favorable global public opinion environment for the Party's development. Addressing doubts regarding the CPC's relationship with the Comintern and the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong stated unequivocally in his interview with Edgar Snow that the Comintern was not an administrative body; its recommendations had no executive authority over the CPC and served merely an advisory function. At the same time, Mao Zedong emphasized that the CPC was a Chinese political party representing the fundamental interests of the Chinese people, rather than those of the Soviet Union or the Comintern, and therefore must act as the spokesperson for the entire Chinese nation and serve only the interests of the Chinese masses. From the standpoint of resisting Japanese aggression, Mao Zedong further underscored the grave threat posed by Japan not only to China but also to world peace. He stressed that Japanese imperialism was an enemy not only of China but also of peace-loving peoples worldwide, particularly those of countries with vital interests in the Pacific region, including the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. In this way, Mao Zedong placed Japan in opposition to China and the major world powers, advocating the formation of a global anti-Japanese, anti-aggression, and anti-fascist alliance to safeguard world peace.

Similarly, in his interview with James Bertram, Mao Zedong elaborated on the CPC's foreign policy. Discussing China's diplomatic principles, Mao Zedong asserted that the fundamental objective of Chinese foreign policy should be to promote the formation of an international united front against Japanese aggression. Distinct from his earlier emphasis on collective action by all countries, Mao Zedong highlighted the particular importance of British and American policies for China. He emphasized that, in opposing fascism, Britain and the United States should not limit themselves to empty declarations or abstract programs, but should prioritize concrete action. On this basis, Mao Zedong stressed that the united front advocated by the CPC was not only essential for China's resistance war, but equally vital for the survival and security of democratic nations worldwide. It is noteworthy that prior to his visit to Yan'an, Bertram had prepared numerous questions reflecting international concerns about the CPC's domestic and foreign policies, including the role of the Chinese Red Army in the War of Resistance and the actions the CPC intended to take under the new wartime conditions. During the interview, Mao Zedong not only clarified the CPC's foreign policy but also demonstrated remarkable confidence and composure in discussing

international affairs—on par with leaders of Britain and the United States. This deeply impressed Bertram, who later remarked with astonishment that although Yan'an was geographically remote, its political leaders were thoroughly familiar with world affairs.

The interactions between Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, and other CPC leaders and foreign journalists contributed significantly to the international community's recognition and understanding of the CPC's positive image. As the first Western journalist to conduct interviews in the northwestern revolutionary base areas, Edgar Snow vividly narrated the story of the CPC through extensive reportage in foreign media and through the publication of *Red Star Over China*, thereby constructing an authentic image of Mao Zedong. When Edgar Snow first met Mao Zedong in northern Shaanxi in 1936, he remarked that Mao Zedong bore a striking resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. In subsequent all-night interviews, Edgar Snow gained a detailed understanding of Mao Zedong's revolutionary experience, particularly his path toward becoming a communist and the growth of the Red Army—laying the foundation for a work portraying Mao Zedong's transformation from a peasant-born intellectual into a revolutionary leader.

In contrast, Agnes Smedley of *The Manchester Guardian* portrayed Mao Zedong through a distinctive female perspective in *Battle Hymn of China*, vividly recording his personality traits and intellectual character. In terms of temperament, Smedley described Mao Zedong as resolute, decisive, and commanding—qualities well suited to a revolutionary party leader. She also noted that Mao Zedong's manner of speech bore the imprint of classical poets, with his poetry reflecting the grandeur of social transformation and embodying a synthesis of revolutionary romanticism and realism. Intellectually, Smedley regarded Mao Zedong as a world-renowned theorist, particularly highlighting works such as *On Protracted War*, *On Contradiction*, and *On Practice* as milestones in Chinese revolutionary thought. These writings, she emphasized, were not products of Soviet-style dogmatism, but rather emerged from China's rich and complex revolutionary practice. During her stay in Yan'an, Smedley attended Mao Zedong's lectures at institutions such as the Anti-Japanese Military and Political University and Northern Shaanxi Public School, as well as mass rallies where Mao Zedong delivered speeches. These experiences demonstrated that Mao Zedong's theoretical work and oratory were deeply rooted in everyday Chinese social life and historical experience. As previously noted, due to the Nationalist blockade of Yan'an, Smedley often served as an intermediary for foreign journalists. On May 31, 1937, she dined with Helen Snow during the latter's interview visit to Yan'an. Through Smedley's introduction, Helen Snow came to understand Mao Zedong as a Lenin-like political leader.

During her stay, Helen Snow perceived Mao Zedong as an erudite and versatile figure and became convinced that he possessed the capacity to lead Asia toward victory.

When Owen Lattimore visited Yan'an, he was deeply impressed by the narratives offered by Mao Zedong, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai, and he highly praised their discursive strategies. Lattimore marveled at Mao Zedong's willingness to spend hours conversing patiently with several American visitors whom he had never met, explaining the CPC's resistance strategy and democratic ideals in a factual and straightforward manner. Lattimore further observed that the CPC's international discourse strategy was distinctive in several respects: first, in terms of objectives, it sought to disseminate the CPC's revolutionary principles through vivid and accessible storytelling—particularly effective under conditions of Nationalist censorship, where any information about the CPC was advantageous. Second, in content, CPC leaders deliberately framed their experiences as narratives, aware that their revolutionary stories would resonate with anti-imperialist audiences worldwide. Third, in method, Mao Zedong and others avoided exaggeration while striving to make their accounts compelling, demonstrating a keen understanding of how to communicate effectively with the American press. Helen Snow, who witnessed Lattimore's visit on June 22, noted Mao Zedong's commanding presence, remarking that his exposition of the CPC's united front policy conveyed a statesmanlike vision characterized by long-term and expansive thinking.

During his Yan'an visit, James Bertram observed that, influenced by Nationalist propaganda, some media outlets had produced distorted portrayals of Mao Zedong and other CPC leaders, even depicting Mao Zedong as an extremist or a radical class revolutionary—representations starkly at odds with reality. Based on firsthand investigation, Bertram reached a conclusion similar to Smedley's: Mao Zedong was the most authoritative spokesperson of the CPC, not by virtue of personal power, but because his thought, will, and revolutionary practice were thoroughly rooted in Chinese conditions. Mao Zedong's profound confidence in the Chinese people and the future of the revolution, combined with his practical understanding of China's problems, endowed him with exceptional resilience, strategic acumen, and the capacity to serve as an effective political strategist.

As commander-in-chief of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, Zhu De had already become widely known during the Long March. Although Edgar Snow did not meet Zhu De during his initial visit, Helen Snow's subsequent interviews in 1937 provided first-hand material for *Red Star Over China*. Edgar Snow portrayed Zhu De as a figure marked by simplicity, generosity, and widespread affection. Though not idealized as a saint,

Zhu De's life was depicted as a story of extraordinary courage, selflessness, and unwavering dedication to national liberation.

Unlike Edgar Snow, Smedley conducted face-to-face interviews with Zhu De in Yan'an and followed him to the anti-Japanese front lines. Initially influenced by Nationalist propaganda, she had assumed Zhu De to be irascible. However, upon meeting him, she found him warm and approachable, possessing a distinctive charisma evident in his voice, movements, and demeanor. Deeply inspired, Smedley resolved to write a biography of Zhu De and followed him to the front despite wartime dangers. These experiences culminated in *The Great Road: The Life and Times of Chu Teh*, which was later translated into eight languages and widely disseminated, further enhancing Zhu De's international image.

Clearly, Zhu De's true character differed markedly from the distorted portrayals propagated by the Nationalist authorities. Anna Louise Strong, who also visited Yan'an, was similarly impressed by Zhu De's modesty and warmth. She recalled how Zhu De, without airs, ran through clouds of dust with local peasants to greet her upon arrival—an act that deeply moved her. Strong firmly rejected the defamatory image promoted by the Nationalists, regarding Zhu De instead as a legendary hero. In addition, Strong observed other CPC leaders and Eighth Route Army commanders, such as the robust and courageous He Long and the scholarly, courteous Liu Bocheng. Smedley, for her part, conducted in-depth interviews with Zhou Enlai, whom she regarded as embodying all the finest qualities of an outstanding communist leader, including erudition, competence, pragmatism, and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing analysis, it is evident that in the early Yan'an period the Communist Party of China, with Mao Zedong as its central figure, adopted diversified external narrative strategies in its outward-facing revolutionary discourse. Through sustained interaction with foreign journalists and international sympathizers, CPC leaders gradually conveyed the Party's revolutionary line and policies to the outside world, thereby disseminating progressive revolutionary themes on multiple levels and facilitating the initial formation of a revolutionary discourse system.

In this process, CPC leaders consciously integrated ideological discursive authority with revolutionary leadership, effectively linking the contestation of discursive hegemony to the consolidation of leadership in the revolutionary struggle. The impact of this strategy was immediate and tangible. It is therefore unsurprising that Bisson, who conducted field investigations in Yan'an

at the time, publicly declared that in Yan'an "we stand at the very center of the revolutionary movement against colonialism and feudalism—not only in China, but throughout Asia." In a certain sense, Bisson's remarks elevated the CPC-led revolution to a central position within both the Chinese and broader Asian revolutionary movements, revealing the inherent dynamism and persuasive power of the CPC's externally oriented discourse system.

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