

# Behind “Two Chinas”: Orientalism in Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*\*

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With the publication of *Red Star over China*, Snow became the premier interpreter of 1930s’ China for a generation of American readers. Taken it as political travel writing, this essay focuses on the ideological approach of “two Chinas” Snow described in this book. Orientalism is considered as the dominant and only ideology through the comparative reading of *Red China and White China*. However, Snow complicates Said’s orientalism and adopts Pratt’s “anti-conquest narrative” strategy when describing “two Chinas”. This essay explores the textual representation of “two Chinas” through unpacking issues such as political condition, historical context and ideological approach. It also examines the literary techniques involved in the textual construction of both Red and White Chinas in the same Chinese territory in late 1930s.

*Keywords:* orientalism, two Chinas, *Red Star over China*

## Introduction

Upon the 1937 publication of *Red Star over China* (1937), which sold twelve thousand copies in its first four weeks (Israel, 1978, pp. 107-122) and was subsequently translated into more than ten languages, Snow became the premier interpreter of 1930s’ China for a generation of American readers. Often taken as political reportage, Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China* (1937) can also be read as travel writing since it does recount part of Snow’s journey around China. Although it aims to produce a China for Western reading public, *Red Star*, which was first translated into Chinese in 1938, did attract many young Chinese readers. And greatly influenced by this book, “tens of thousands of young people traveled long distances to reach Yan’an to join the revolution, many becoming members of the armed forces” (*China Daily*, 2006).

*Red Star* is Snow’s “eyewitness account of China,” which contains “an admixture of travel notes, interviews, and biographies of members of the Red Army” (Lye, 2005, pp. 224-225). Snow is the first foreign correspondent to go to the headquarters of the Chinese Communists, and therefore his *Red Star* is considered by many to be the “classic account of the birth of Chinese Communism” (Lye, 2005, p. 224). In this essay, I ignore the distinction, which is quite blurry, between *Red Star* as a travel narrative and as a political reportage. I intend to read it as

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political travel writing, because at that time (late 1930s) he was a foreign correspondent with political assignment and, he was a traveler to China as well.

Quite interestingly, “two Chinas”—Red China and White China—appear in Snow’s *Red Star*. What are they? How does Snow describe both Red and White Chinas? What is behind “two Chinas” in Snow’s famous book? I try to answer these questions in this essay. The comparative reading of Snow’s descriptions of both Red and White Chinas enables me to probe the issues of historical context and political conditions in 1930s’ China, the modes of representation Snow uses and, ideologies involved in textual representation.

This essay focuses on both Red and White Chinas. It explores the textual representation of “two Chinas” through unpacking issues such as political condition, historical context and ideological approach. It also examines the literary techniques involved in the textual construction of both Red and White Chinas in the same Chinese territory in late 1930s.

In Snow’s *Red Star*, Red China and White China appear as contrasting entities. Snow employs two different modes (languages and emotions) of representation to construct these two worlds. However, a scrutiny of his text enables me to figure out two types of colonization under the same ideological pattern. When describing White China, Snow falls easily into the classical discourse of Orientalism and presents a semi-colonial China to his Western readers. It seems that when describing Red China, a China contrary to White China, he presents an anti-Orientalist ideology. But, his praise of Red China goes too far that, perhaps unconsciously, falls into imaginative colonization of China with the dominant ideology of Orientalism. Thus, I wish to argue that Orientalism serves as the dominant and only ideology for Snow to represent “two Chinas” though different modes of representation are employed by him to describe both Red and White Chinas. In what follows, I try to explain my argument from three sections. First, I draw an outline of the general ideological framework implicit in Snow’s *Red Star*. Second, I analyze Snow’s Orientalist ideology in describing White China with regard to the historical context and political situations in late 1930s. In the third part, I aim to subvert Snow’s seemingly anti-Orientalism, which can be easily misunderstood out of his “positive” representation of Red China.

### **Genre and Ideology in *Red Star over China***

Snow’s two-characters, both traveler and journalist when he was in China, enables his *Red Star over China* (1937) been read either as travel narrative or political investigating reportage. In this essay, I consider it mainly as travel writing, mixed with political investigation, which I call it “political travel writing”.

Usually, the main descriptions of travel writing concern “other” places and peoples—otherness and the unfamiliar are its major themes. Setting foot on this “other” land of China in 1928, Snow began his thirteen-years’ journey through China “looking for the ‘glamour of the Orient’” (Snow, 1968, p. 214). Like every other Western traveler coming to China, Snow was “full of curiosity and wide open to the world” when first arriving in Shanghai (Israel, 1978, p. 111). Soon after his arrival in Shanghai, he became a journalist. In June 1936, Snow was recommended by Madam Soong Ching Ling to visit northern Shaanxi to report Red Army’s resistance to Japanese aggression to China.

With one Chinese interpreter<sup>1</sup> and another Western friend George Hatem,<sup>2</sup> Snow started his political investigating travel to Chinese Communist areas in Yen’an with a list of *ninety* questions, which we can see at the very beginning of his *Red Star over China*. Such a long list of questions mirrors Snow’s unfamiliarity with CPC (Communist Party of China) on the one hand, and on the other, it reflects his strong interest and curiosity about “politics and the quickening history of the Orient” (Snow, 1968, p. 35). While White China, the China of treaty ports and foreign settlements controlled by Chiang Kai-shek, is introduced to rest of the world through books, newspapers and even *National Geographic*, it is still the *other* country located in the Far East. And Red China, the China under the lead of Mao Tse-tung, remains unknown or known little because of the news blockade done by White China’s Nationalists after 1927. Therefore, for Snow both Red and White Chinas are other places, which are quite different from his own country.

To probe Snow’s ideology behind his presentation of two Chinas, I would like to first examine the literary genre of *Red Star*. Colin Thubron, a professional travel writer, points out in his “Travel Writing Today” that “a travel book... is one civilization reporting another” (Thubron, 1986, p. 168). *Red Star*, a travel book written by an American correspondent, can thus been taken as American civilization reporting Chinese civilization. Snow’s representation of two Chinas is, of course, affected by his American culture and ideology. Different representational modes Snow uses to describe both White and Red Chinas do indicate the existence of specific ideology(s) behind two Chinas on the one hand, and on the other hand, they can mislead readers to simply think that two different ideological patterns work respectively behind two contrasting Chinas. While Thubron’s travel writing theory may arouse our attention to the implicit ideology in Snow’s political travel writing *Red Star*, its limitation may cause misunderstandings of Snow’s book at the same time. Nevertheless, Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism sheds light on the exploration of Snow’s ideology behind his representation of two Chinas.

One of the directions in cultural studies frequently emphasizes difference, especially with respect to East/West encounters. Snow’s *Red Star* can be considered belonging to a Western discourse in which American difference is constructed both through and against the “otherness” of China. Edward Said’s influential work, *Orientalism*, has done much to bring this discourse and its links with imperialism and colonialism to our attention. Said’s Orientalism is a systematic Eurocentric construction of Self/Other constituted in the binary of Christian/Muslim. The particular Orient—China—in Snow’s book is more diverse than Said’s paradigm. Two small Chinas, White and Red, are described to construct America’s different identity as Said says “the Orient has helped to define... the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1978, pp. 1-2). In *Orientalism*, Said only points out that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off *against* the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 1978, p. 3 emphasis mine). However, in Snow’s *Red Star*, while American difference is constructed *through* the “otherness” of White China, it is built *against* the “otherness” of Red China.

This representational issue in *Orientalism* proves to be useful to explore Snow’s ideological approach in *Red Star*, and another point Said mentions—knowledge and power—is also worthy to be re-examined. In the second

<sup>1</sup> This interpreter is Huang Hua. He was a senior student at Yenching University in Beijing in 1936 when Snow asked him to be his interpreter to head for northern Shaanxi. He requested Snow not to mention him in the first edition of *Red Star over China* (1937).

<sup>2</sup> George Hatem (1910-1988), an American physician. At his request, he was not explicitly mentioned in the first edition of Snow’s *Red Star over China* (1937).

part of “Introduction,” Said claims that Western study of the Orient as an exercise in knowledge is also, by implication, an exercise in power. He says that “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power... The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, 1978, p. 5). Hence the Occident demonstrates an authority and a will to power over the Orient. Said also introduces Gramsci’s definition of “hegemony” to further explain the relation between knowledge and power in the Western discourse about the Orient as he says:

In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far... it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness. (Said, 1978, p. 7)

In Snow’s *Red Star*, such Western “hegemony” to the East is complicatedly reflected. It is explicit in his presentation of White China and, implicit in describing Red China. The strategy Snow employs in representing Red China is what Pratt calls “anti-conquest narrative”, which refers to “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (Pratt, 2007, p. 9). So, from both the travel writing theories and Said’s *Orientalism*, we can clearly identify Snow’s orientalist ideology imbued in his description of wartime China in late 1930s.

Yet, it will make my argument more convincing to examine Snow’s descriptions of both Chinas into details. Constructed as contrasting entities, White China is portrayed as a semi-colonial country, which it really was; and Red China is described within the framework of imaginative colonization. It is orientalist ideology that shapes Snow’s such representation of “two Chinas”.

### **Orientalism in White China**

In Snow’s *Red Star*, White China refers to Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist Party of China, which began to be controlled by Chiang Kai-shek after the death of Sun Yat-sun in 1925. And Red China refers to Communist Party of China (CPC), which was under the lead of Mao Tse-tung when Snow visited its headquarters. For a brief period in the mid-1920s, KMT and CPC did work together. The first cooperation between KMT and CPC came to an end when Chiang Kai-shek turned on the left to savagely purge the Communists who had been allied with the KMT in the spring of 1927. By the time Snow arrived in Shanghai in 1928, Chinese Civil War, sparked by Chiang’s bloody purge, were still going on. When Snow started his political investigating travel to northern Shaanxi in 1936, both Chinas temporarily stopped Civil War and were negotiating to unite again to fight against Japanese aggression. However, regional conflicts between two Chinas occasionally occurred during their negotiation. Hence, the image of China in 1936 in Snow’s book is a divided one with two contrasting political entities.

White China, the China of treaty ports and foreign settlements, was well known to the West through books, newspapers and even *National Geographic*. It was Western model of China in early twentieth century.

Geographically, White China located to the east of America (the West), and it also lay in the east part of China. It was the most frequent part Western visitors first arrived when coming to China. Such positional superiority of White China is indicated in its emergence at the beginning of Snow’s *Red Star*. In his book, White China obviously appears as a negative entity, on which Snow could do his orientalist work and against which he may construct his American difference. As the orientalist ideology in Snow’s description of White China, Clifford explains that:

In writing of White China, he [Snow] fell easily into the classical discourse of Orientalism. “Many of the worst rogues, scoundrels and traitors,” he warned his readers, “have climbed to power under cover of respectability, the putrid hypocrisy of Confucian maxims, and the priestcraft of the Chinese classics...and all this is still more or less true today.” (Clifford, 2001, p. 136)

Snow’s narrative of White China serves the ideological function of othering China: China needs to be a country inferior to the industrial, capitalist West and a place geographically, temporally, and most of all, epistemologically remote. His presentation of White China as a chaotic, hierarchical, exotic, extravagant and sensual world not only authenticates the image of China in Western publications, but also re-emphasizes the “otherness” of China through the gaze of his American eyes and the interpretation of his American mind. Behind this “otherness” of orientalized White China is Snow’s inherent Western superiority, which builds upon the power, the Western hegemony.

White China, with which most Westerners are quite familiar, is not the central object Snow intends to explore, but it does serve as a starting point and play an important role in the whole book of *Red Star*. To this point, what Nicolas Clifford says makes sense. He points out that the real purpose of Snow’s presentation of White China is “to emphasize his real point: that there was another China besides this one, a China that at long last was awake, at long last distancing itself from the formless past of tradition to enter real history” (Clifford, 2001, p. 137). Based on his explanation, I would like to mention two other points.

First, White China is one inseparable part of whole China. No one can ignore White China when describing the whole China in 1930s. Admittedly, after the breakout of Chinese Civil War, the KMT and CPC confronted each other for quite a long time. But, there exists only one China in history once and for all. In the wartime China in 1930s, we refer what Snow calls “White China” only as white *region*, indicating the existence of an integrated China. Second, the purpose of Snow’s travel to northern Shaanxi was to search “Red China” that he had long heard and had lots of unanswered questions. His portrait of White China as a negative entity paves the way for his later discovery of positive Red China, which sharply contrasts White China. And at the same time, the clear distinction between White China and Red China can more easily arouse the admiration and sympathy of his Western readers to Chinese Communists. So, like other Western travelers on China, Snow encapsulates his orientalist ideology into his representation of White China. However, unlike many Western travelers who arbitrarily generalize China—apply what they saw in White China to the whole China, Snow complicates his representation of China, trying to show his Western readers an integral image of China in late 1930s.

### **Orientalism in Red China**

Departing from White China, Snow moved westward to head for Red China. And after staying in that Red Eden for almost four months, he returned to White China again. From White China to Red one than to White

again, though it was Snow’s real travel route, it can also be understood as Snow’s indication that surrounded by White China, whose strength was huge, Red China seemed quite difficult to survive. But, at the end of his book, Snow expresses his firm belief that Red China under the leadership of communists would one day success as he says:

Neither could the democratic Socialist ideas for which tens of thousands of youths had already died in China, nor the energies behind them, be destroyed. The movement for social revolution in China might suffer defeats, might temporarily retreat, might for a time seem to languish, might make wide changes in tactics to fit immediate necessities and aims, might even for a period be submerged, be forced underground, but it would not only continue to mature; in one mutation or another it would eventually win, simply because (as this book proves, if it proves anything) the basic conditions which had given in birth carried within themselves the dynamic necessity for its triumph. (Snow, 1968, p. 409)

Why does Snow hold such a positive attitude to Red China’s future even though at that time America officially supported Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party and Communist Party suffered serious economic problems, lack of military equipments and other necessary supporting materials?

For above question, I intend to approach it only from the relationship between Snow’s ideology and his textual construction of Red China, rather than from other aspects. Snow’s *Red Star* is always considered to be the first text “for Chinese Communists to finally speak to the outside world after having completed the Long March from southwest China to the remote sanctuary of Yen’an in the northwest” (Lye, 2005, p. 224). And also his book “played an instrumental role in dispelling the notion of the Communists as bandits and in building Mao’s persona and prestige in China, the rest of Asia, and the West” (Lye, 2005, p. 224). What Snow describes about Red China is sympathetic and generally accurate. One of the good qualities Snow figures out among people in Red China is egalitarianism, which we can see from his description of “Red Theater”:

Cadets, muleteers, women and girl workers from the uniform and shoe factory, clerks from the cooperatives and from the soviet post office, soldiers, carpenters, villagers followed by their infants, all began streaming toward the big grass plain beside the river, where the players were performing...

No tickets were sold, there was no ‘dress circle,’ and there were no preferred seats... I noticed Lo Fu, general secretary of the Politburo of the Central Committee, Lin Piao, Lin Po-chu (Lin Tse-han), the commissioner of finance, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and other officials and their wives scattered through the crowd, seated on the springy turf like the rest. No one paid much attention to them once the performance had begun. (Snow, 1968, p. 119)

Western readers who never came to Red China and who are not familiar with the Soviet China soon get an impression that everyone in Red China is equal, just like equal rights are given to everybody in their own country. Snow himself also expresses such same feeling as he says: “‘Our’ army, a peasant child talking about ‘his’ army? Well, obviously it wasn’t China”. And even more, when leaving Red China, Snow felt that “I was not going home, but leaving it” (Snow, 1968, p. 368).

One could argue that Snow’s such feeling is due to his deep love and great admiration to the Red Army, with whom he establishes friendship. If this argument is valid, I want to ask, then, why did Snow make friends with people in Red China, rather than in White China? The reason I wish to provide is that the virtues Snow found among Red Army are those that Western readers can recognize among themselves. For this, actually, the strategy Snow uses in representing Red China is to implicitly assert his orientalist ideology and cultural hegemony behind

it. His American superiority in Red China is built against the conventional “otherness” of China, rather than through that “otherness” when describing White China.

To be more specific, when writing Red China, Snow falls into “what Levi-Strauss calls ‘ethnocentrism thinking itself anti-ethnocentrism’” (Clifford, 2001, p. 141). His representation of Red China “participates in the tradition of Pratt’s ‘anti-conquest narrative,’ using European bourgeois ‘strategies of representation’ to secure [his] own innocence while simultaneously asserting a Western hegemony” (Clifford, 2001, p. 142). Snow takes those Chinese virtues, such as enthusiastic, honest, frank, diligent, cooperative and independent, as un-Chineseness. Why un-Chinese? Are Chinese inherently too inferior to possess such good qualities? What is mirrored behind Snow’s such spontaneous feeling is his orientalist ideology. He, perhaps unconsciously, falls into an imaginative colonization of Red China. When representing Red China as a promising entity, a contrast to degenerate White China, he shows his American superiority and advanced civilization through this imaginatively colonized Red China. The Western hegemony over Red China is reflected by Snow through his imaginative cultural colonization of the Soviet China. Hence, Snow seems to stand as an anti-Orientalist when describing Red China with optimism, but unfortunately, his over-praise of Red China in late 1930s traps him involved in imaginative colonization with the strategy of “anti-conquest narrative”, hiding himself invisible after the assertion of Western hegemony.

### Conclusion

It has been more than seven decades when *Red Star over China* was first published in 1937. Snow became well-known all around the world after the publication of this book. Often studied as a political reportage, *Red Star* is considered to be “an important document in the archive of international Marxist debates about ‘permanent revolution’ in the semi-periphery, [illustrating] the present of a significant American contribution to this debate” (Lye, 2005, p. 229). In recent studies, Nicholas Clifford puts *Red Star* into his great book as one of the important American travel books in China. Based on previous studies done by some many famous scholars, I reread *Red Star* from the ideological approach to examine Snow’s description of “two Chinas”.

Edward Said’s influential theory of Orientalism and Mary Louise Pratt’s “anti-conquest narrative” serve as starting points for my analysis of Snow’s ideological approach to two contrasting Chinas in late 1930s. Through careful close reading of Snow’s narrative of two Chinas, I recognize his ideological approach, which complicates Said’s Orientalism and adopts Pratt’s “anti-conquest narrative” strategy, in *Red Star over China*. Establishing on theoretical studies and textual close reading, my essay presents my viewpoint on the exploration of Snow’s orientalist ideological approach when representing China in late 1930s.

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