

*The Posthumous Life of Agnes Smedley,
a Cosmopolitan “Spy”: China’s Cultural Memory and Amnesia*

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Introduction

Agnes Smedley (1892-1950) was one of the most significant American women writers in the 20th century. She spent 13 years in China from 1928 to 1941. In Japan, she is remembered, if at all, as a principle member of the Soviet Spy Ring headed by Richard Sorge. She is known to have introduced Ozaki Hotsumi, a Japanese correspondent for the *Asahi Shinbun*,¹ to Sorge in 1930. In the United States, Smedley, an American journalist and writer, was typically regarded as a “traitor” to the American nation in the early Cold War period. In October 1947, she was accused of alleged Communist espionage by General Douglas MacArthur’s intelligence chief, Charles Willoughby.² In order to survive the predicament, she left for London in November 1949 and died there on May 6, 1950.

One year later, on May 6, 1951, in the Babaoshan Revolutionaries Cemetery³ in Beijing, Zhu De,⁴ a Chinese general, held the urn burial ceremony for Smedley. The Chinese national anthem “March of Volunteers” was played at the occasion. On the tombstone, Zhu De himself wrote an inscription: “In memory of Agnes Smedley American Revolutionary writer and friend of the Chinese People.” Mao Dun,⁵ a novelist and cultural critic, was deeply grieved and read the valediction: “Your lifetime of contribution for the Chinese revolutionary career made us never ever forget you... now you and our revolutionary martyrs live together, and you will live in the hearts of the Chinese people forever.”⁶

As it turned out, Smedley did not “live in the hearts of the Chinese people” long. After the solemn ceremony, Smedley was virtually forgotten. Indeed, during the following 30 years, almost no one in China showed any interest in her. She and her books seemed to have evaporated from China. It was not until the 1980s that Smedley was resurrected from oblivion. In the 1980s, she re-emerged as an unforgettable friend to Chinese and even became the focal point of the academic research.

The purpose of this paper is to try to answer the following perplexing questions about Smedley: despite the fact that Smedley supported the Chinese Communist Party before and after World War II—resulting in her burial in the Babaoshan Revolutionaries Cemetery in Beijing to commemorate her contributions to China, why did she become an object of cultural amnesia for almost 30 years after her death? And why is it that in the 1980s, she was suddenly resurrected from historical oblivion? I would argue that the Chinese cultural amnesia and memory involving Smedley are inextricably linked with the Chinese domestic and foreign policies.

Smedley’s enduring supports for China

Smedley came to Shenyang, China, in 1928 as a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in November 1928. The following year, she moved to Shanghai, where she covered many topics including the Chinese Civil War.⁷ She was also busy helping Song Qingling⁸(Madame Sun Zhongshan⁹) with correspondence and speech writing, especially for the League against Imperialism. In December 1929, she first met the writer Lu Xun¹⁰ and Mao Dun and became involved with the League of Left-Wing Writers¹¹ that was formed at the instigation of the Chinese Communist Party. During this period, it is known that Smedley introduced Ozaki Hotsumi to Sorge as a Japanese informant.

In December 1936, Smedley went to Xi'an and became the first one to report Xi'an Incident¹² to the world. Subsequently Smedley left for Xi'an to rejoin the new Eight Route Army. She worked with Zhu De on seeking medical aids from India for Chinese. In January 1938, she went to the city of Hankou and devoted her energies to raising funds for the Chinese Red Cross and publicizing the misery and heroism of the Chinese wounded.

When Hankou fell to Japanese invading troops, Smedley remained with the Fourth Army in central China till April 1940, much of the time on the move and in grueling conditions, making "the longest sustained tour of a Chinese war zone by any foreign correspondent, man or woman."¹³ Smedley came to the front, where she stayed together with the armies, and worked with the wounded.

In September 1940, she moved to Hong Kong and in the following year, she decided to go back to the United States with the hope "to tell the truth about China, how the Chinese had fought and were still fighting."¹⁴ Thus, Smedley returned to the United States but after World War II, she left the United States for London in 1949. A Communist sympathizer in the Cold War era, Smedley was accused as a Soviet spy in America. She eventually died in London on May 6, 1950, after surgery for an ulcer in the year after the declaration of the People's Republic of China.

Thus, Smedley devoted most of her life in China. In her life, she wrote six books, and five of them are thematically connected with the Chinese Communist Party. Because of her career and writings, she became a scapegoat in the Cold War era—resulting in her lonely death in a foreign land.

Oblivion and Resurrection of Smedley

According to Smedley's last wishes, her ashes were buried in China and thus she chose to "stay" in China forever. However, as mentioned, she was soon to be forgotten by her trusted Chinese people. Typing her name as the key words into the China Integrated Knowledge Resources Database of the China National Knowledge,¹⁵ I accounted the numbers of theses and research papers on Smedley. During the first 27 years after her death, there were published only three academic research papers on her. But for the next 33 years (that is, from 1979 to 2013), the number jumped to 124. The data can make two things clear: 1. Smedley had been ignored for 27 years after her death; 2. The first wave of researching peak periods about Smedley appeared in 1979.

Periods	1951-78	1979-89	1990-99	2000-13
Numbers	3	35	23	66

Why had Smedley been forgotten for almost 30 years? I would suggest that she was not so much forgotten but she disappeared into the socio-political and historical context because of the Chinese domestic and foreign policy. In other words, from 1951 to 1978, the Korean War (1950-53), the fraternal relationship between China and the Soviet Union (1950-1969) and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) affected Chinese cultural orientation, which precipitated the oblivion of Smedley. The Korean War happened twenty days after her death, in which China was involved to

fight against the United States. Domestically, America, which was called as the most powerful imperialist state in China then, became the huge enemy to China. During the Korean War period, the Chinese government sought to remove American culture and ideology from Chinese minds and territory.¹⁶ Besides, during the earlier period of the Cold War, China depended a lot on the Soviet Union for the scientific development, keeping close relationship with Soviet Union. For instance, from 1949 to 1957, China imported 1309 films from abroad, two third of which came from the Soviet Union. Because the most important cultural media then was the film, the abundance of the Soviet films served to create an anti-American mindset, leading the Chinese people to fight against American imperialism and capitalism, and this shaped the popular Chinese concept of self, nation and history.¹⁷ In the traditional Chinese dichotomous ideology, the U.S., as the leader of the capitalistic bloc, was the “enemy” in Chinese mind because the Soviet Union was China’s big brother then. Given this, it is not surprising that there was no cultural space available in China to accommodate, much less commemorate, Smedley the American “friend.” This situation was aggravated by the domestic Cultural Revolution that cost all the energy of every Chinese. It was a well-planned drive to mobilize the people, to make them more vigilant and tackle the enormous national cultural problems of China. But it also made intellectuals timid and overcautious about what to write and what to research. Thus, from 1966 to 1976, the indigenous eminent intellectuals disappeared in that period—which might be one of the reasons why the number of publications on Smedley was small.

And yet, Smedley came back in the 1980s. Why was she resurrected from China’s cultural amnesia? I would argue that the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) needed Smedley, as an American citizen, to appear on the Chinese political stage because the CCP wanted to use Smedley for a political purpose. She suddenly became one of “Old friends of China”—a phrase that masks the ideological exploitation of foreigners.¹⁸ In December 1978, Chinese Economic Reform¹⁹, also called Reform and Opening-up Policy, was carried out to shorten the distance between China and the world economically, and culturally strengthened the desire to communicate with the open world. As Zhang Qingmin, a professor from the Department of International Relationship of Beijing University, once said, China needed old foreign friends to fully restore diplomatic relations, or to struggle out of the diplomatic stalemate.²⁰ In the meantime, the frozen Sino-American relationship began to thaw in the midst of the Cold War. In January 1979, officially, the diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States were established. On the account of these factors, any sort of cultural media and culture carriers, like the newspaper, the posters, the films, the book publishers, the academic area, extolled the virtue and the bright future of the Sino-American relationship. It became extremely urgent to find a stand-in for America as a “friend,” someone who could play the role of the Chinese People’s old friends. Smedley exactly fitted this role, and took center stage as the one who once built the bridge between China and the United States.

Thus Smedley was, dramatically and abruptly, resurrected from oblivion. In the 1980s, four of her books were translated into Chinese and republished. In 1984, the SSS Society of China (Now it is called China Society for People’s Friendship Studies) was set up to memorize Smedley-Strong²¹-Snow²² as Sinophile journalists. In 1985, China issued commemorative stamp²³ honoring Smedley for promoting “understanding and friendship between the people of China and other countries.” In the same year, the Chinese movie, *Zhu De and Smedley*, was released by August First Film Studio, in

which she was portrayed as a “Chinese patriot” fighting for the Communist Party and against the American government who played a dastard role. Moreover, it is interesting to notice the poster of this movie. She wore the same military uniform as General Zhu De’s, and the exciting and happy smile under her cap was conspicuous in the grey tonal poster. It was impossible to ignore Smedley’s face, which was the topical Western face rather than Chinese one. The strong contrast manipulatively implanted the idea that she was a believable friend of China despite she was a foreigner. Smedley entered the cultural stage and she performed the role of an old friend of Chinese as she had done in the past while she was alive.



From http://colnect.com/en/stamps/stamp/197711-Agnes_Smedley_1892-1950-Personalities-China_Peoples_Republic (accessed 05/03/2013)

Nonetheless, today Smedley is relatively unknown to Chinese. In 2009, in order to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the PPC, a network selection called “Chinese Connection-Top International Friends Selection” was held by the China Radio International²⁴ and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.²⁵ The selection was to commemorate the international friends, who contributed to China in the past 100 years. Curiously enough, Smedley didn’t enter the top ten group; instead, she ranked top 24 out of the 51 international friends who are still be remembered by Chinese people. It is interesting to note that Edgar Snow wins the top 4. I got the following data by using the same search engine as I researched on papers on Smedley. From 1951 to 1978, the number of the academic research papers on Snow was the same as that of Smedley. However, after 1979, it increased to 382, over 3 times as the number of the papers on Smedley published in the same period.

Periods	1951-78	1979-89	1990-99	2000-13
Numbers	3	79	58	245

It is clear that more attention was paid on Edgar Snow than Smedley. This result cannot simply be accounted for by the fact that he wrote the famous *Red Star Over China* (1939). In fact, this popularity can be partly attributed to his friendship with Mao Zedong. It is Mao Zedong who promoted Snow’s success to a certain degree. According to a poll, “Who is the hero in your heart,” conducted by *People’s Daily* in 2007, more than sixty percent of the people who took part in the poll thought Mao was the hero.²⁶ It is the relationship rather than Snow’s works that made him alive in common Chinese people’s memory. In China there is a proverb “love me love my dog.” It would be easier to remember Snow whose best friend is Mao, than Smedley whose best friend is General Zhu De. Consequently, Smedley did not gain wide reputation. In the end, I would argue that the Chinese cultural memory was closely bound up with the great man effect, or say, the heroism effect, that constitutes one aspect of the Chinese heroic ideology.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this paper that the Chinese cultural memory and amnesia are inextricably linked with the Chinese domestic and foreign policies. The posthumous Smedley thus went in and out of the Chinese cultural memory, and today Smedley is once again “obscure” as biographer Ruth Price observes. She remarks, “Today, Agnes Smedley is obscure. The chill in Sino-U.S. relations has made a less useful ‘friend of the Chinese’.”²⁷

However, I think the life of Agnes Smedley—a cosmopolitan writer, journalist, feminist, and a “spy”—is memorable. She deserves a serious recovery today, and her reputation should not simply be a reflection of the Sino-America relations. I hope that this paper will inspire other scholars to recover Smedley in China and abroad.

¹ The reference of the celebrities and the toponymies in the article consult the Wikipedia. Asahi Shimbun is the oldest and largest national newspaper in Japan.

² Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Time of an American Radical* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 318.

³ Babaoshan Revolutionaries Cemetery is Beijing's main resting place for the highest-ranking revolutionary heroes, high government officials and in recent years, individuals deemed of major importance due to their contributions to society. In Chinese, Babaoshan literally means “The Eight-Treasure Mountains.” The cemetery is located in the Shijingshan District, a municipality located in western Beijing (from wikipedia)

⁴ Zhu De (1886-1976) was a Chinese Communist military leader and statesmen. He is regarded as the founder of the Chinese Red Army (the fore founder of the People's Liberation Army) and tactician who engineered the victory of the People's Republic of China during the Chinese Civil War. Agnes Smedley wrote a bibliography of him, *The Great Road: The Life and Times of Zhu De*.

⁵ Mao Dun (1896-1981) was the pen name of Shen Yanbing. He was one of the best novelists in Modern China. He was also a cultural critic, and the Minister of Culture of China from 1949 to 1965. The first time Mao Dun and Smedley met was in the autumn of 1930 in Shanghai.

⁶ <http://dangjian.ccnt.com.cn/jcdj.php?col=147&file=29880>(accessed 04/27/2013)

⁷ The Chinese Civil War (1927-1949) was between the Kuomintang (KMT), the governing party of the Republic of China, and the Communist Party of China (CPC), the governing party of the People's Republic of China.

⁸ Song Qingling (1893-1981), known as Mme. Sun Yatsen, was one of the China's most significant political figures of the early 20th century. She was the Vice Chairman of the People's Republic of China, who was the first non-royal women to officially

become head of state of China, acting as Co-Chairman of the Republic from 1968 until 1972. She again became head of state in 1981, briefly before her death, as the Honorary President of the People's Republic of China.

⁹ Sun Zhongshan (also spelt as Sun Yatsen, 1866-1925) was a Chinese doctor, revolutionary and political leader. As the foremost pioneer of Republic of China, Sun is referred as the "Father of the Nation." He was also the first provisional president of the Republic of China in 1912.

¹⁰ Lu Xun was the pen name of Zhou Shuren (1881-1936), one of the major Chinese writers of the 20th century. Considered by many to be founder of the modern Chinese literature, he wrote in baihua (the vernacular) as well as classical Chinese. He was a short story writer, editor, translator, critic, essayist and poet. In 1930s, he became the titular head of the Chinese League of the Left-Wing Writers in Shanghai.

¹¹ League of Left-Wing Writers are an organization of writers of writers formed in China in 1930 at the instigation of the Chinese Communist Party and the influence of the celebrate author Lu Xun. The League articulate the theories on the political role of literature that foreshadowed the influential "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art" of Mao Zedong, and engaged in running debates with the "art for art's sake" Crescent Moon Society.

¹² Xi'an Incident happened on 12 December 1936 was an important turning point to lead a truce between the Nationalists and the Communists so as to form a united front against Japan. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was arrested by Marshal Zhang Xueliang.

¹³ MacKinnon and Mackinnon, *Agnes Smedley*, 212.

¹⁴ Agnes Smedley, *Battle Hymn of China* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2003), 465.

¹⁵ See http://oversea.cnki.net/kns55/support/en/about_cnki.aspx (accessed 05/01/2013)

¹⁶ Charles K. Armstrong, "the Cultural Cold War in Korea, 1945-1950," *the Journal of Asian Study* 62, 2003, 71-99.

¹⁷ Tina Mai Chen, "Internationalism and Cultural Experience: Soviet Films and Popular Chinese Understanding of the Future in the 1950s," *Cultural Critique* 58, 2004, 82-114.

¹⁸ Fang Kecheng, "Who are the 'Old Friends of China'" (Shui Shi Zhongguo Renmin De Laopengyou in Pinyin), *Wanqing* 7, 2012, 35-38.

¹⁹ Chinese Economic Reform is program set in 1978 in China. The main theme is to do reform domestically and facilitate the open-policy abroad.

²⁰ Fang Kecheng, "Who are the 'Old Friends of China'" (Shui Shi Zhongguo Renmin De Laopengyou in Pinyin), *Wanqing* 7, 2012, 35-38.

²¹ Anna Louise Strong (1885-1970) was an American journalist and activist, best known for her reporting on and supporting for the Communist movements in Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

²² Edgar Snow (1905-1972) was an American journalist known for his books and articles on Communism in China. He is believed to be the first Western journalist to interview Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, and is best known for *Red Star Over China* (1937), an account of the Chinese Communist movement from its foundation until the late 1930s.

²³ http://colnect.com/en/stamps/stamp/197711-Agnes_Smedley_1892-1950-Personalities-China_Peoples_Republic (accessed 05/03/2013)

²⁴ China Radio International (CRI), established in 1941, is a state-owned radio station to broadcast to the world.

²⁵ Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), established in 1954, is one of the foreign affair organization to promote the understanding between China and foreign countries.

²⁶ Wen Sonhui, "The Ordinary People Moved Me Most" (Pingfan De Ren Gei Wo Zuiduo Gandong in Pinyin), *People's Daily*, May 9, 2007, P. 11.

²⁷ Price, *The Life of Agnes Smedley*, 423.

