

## EDGAR SNOW'S SECRET OF SUCCESS

Helen Snow

I think Edgar Snow was probably the most successful of any left-wing journalist at any time. By that I mean he had more real influence on the history of his time all things considered. When he died the article in the *Christian Science Monitor* said he was “the best journalist of his time.” This newspaper is very honest and careful. We can try to figure out what the combination of circumstances and ability was behind this remarkable career.

**1. His book *Red Star Over China* was his life achievement.** I read it over not long ago and was enchanted by it. It has real communication in all ways. At that time the Chinese Red armies under Mao Tse-tung were in their classic Valley Forge period, the “pure and noble” time as Timothy Tung calls all of us involved in this early period. His subject was caught just at this one precious moment in history. Nothing in North Shensi in 1936 had any element of the bad qualities of human nature and the human experience. All the dross had been tempered out by the Long March and also by the uncertainties, both political and military. Mao Tse-tung felt the same way about Edgar Snow—he understood why he made the trip and what kind of person he was. Mao himself would have liked to do such a thing when younger and he was himself a journalist and also a pilgrim in search of the truth. This shows the genius of Mao Tse-tung, but also that he had a healthy, sane, normal mind and psychology. There is proof of this at that time.

Edgar Snow was a success with the Chinese as well as with his own American constitutions. The reason why Mao liked Ed is the reason Ed was a success. He was able to draw out his subjects and to win their cooperation. In that way his work had sparkle, spontaneity and charm on both sides.

In 1972 a Yugoslav Marxist of distinction said to me: There can never be any Edgar Snow but an American Edgar Snow. In Europe we have no such person. We do not even know what the aspirations of the Chinese are. Now that brings up the

important thing about Americans as a civilization. We have cultivated the art of human relationships as no one else ever has, though the Chinese have had to do this in order to survive, but it was largely a kinship relationship not with strangers so much.

Ed was likeable at first sight, easy-going, always late (the Chinese loved that), friendly, casual, careless, with no subterranean guile at all. He was a natural reporter and he never intruded his personal attitude on other people, nor his personal ideas. He never published his private opinions and political views to speak of.

We can compare interviewers like Oriana Fallaci who is abrasive and frightening, with an intention of finding anything she can to denigrate and “humanize” her subject. Barbara Walters, who gets a million a year, achieved success by always managing to ask questions that should be either taboo or now asked by any civilized person. She has majesty and authority but she is in no way likeable—she frightens everyone in sight, yet her publicity is so important they cannot refuse. Ed would have been poor on television. He did not project personality and hated public appearances. He was quiet, well-bred, polite and good-natured. No one but Edgar Snow could have got Mao Tse-tung to tell his story and no one else ever did, including any Chinese.

**2. Ed was always communicating with his readers.** He re-wrote endlessly to make his writing readable, clear, entertaining and to give it flow. He had certain rules: he tried to have no more than 7 pages to a chapter. He cut out all Chinese names possible, which damaged the historical value of his writing. He carefully avoided using any kind of jargon, especially Marxist terminology—which was and is still detested by nearly all Americans, especially the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the largest circulation in the world. He knew he was writing for them and he knew this was Middle America. Nevertheless, his writing was successful with everyone from Mao Tse-tung to Richard Nixon and Mahatma Gandhi.

**3. He always had the best possible conditions for writing in China.** I had to make sure of this. In the mornings he never saw anyone usually. This is the secret of all kinds of art. You must immediately go to work upon waking up, so the psychology is fixed on that subject. Any kind of distraction such as even eating breakfast and reading the newspaper is harmful. I mean eating with another person, even if no

conversation is had. It took me 15 years of wasted opportunity to write before I realized this—I did the opposite. I always cleared off my desk from “urgent” things and made time to write then—but by then I did not want to. Ed always had a separate building for his office and no one was allowed to interrupt him. All writers find this is indispensable. The chief reason why the Chinese have done so little important writing is LACK OF PRIVACY. They do not even know what it is and never have. It is the psychology of BEING ALONE which makes the writer want to communicate ON PAPER, instead of verbally. Ed would never talk about anything he was writing before he wrote it—he was superstitious about this. That is because as soon as it has been said once YOU DO NOT WANT TO SAY IT AGAIN. Nearly all writers learn this, though a few are able to write in any kind of situation. This only means that they might have done masterpieces in privacy.

**4. The main reason Ed was so successful during the China years was his wife.**

I was the one who believed in books and writing and I made sure Ed got into the groove. He never worried about anything. I took entire charge of the household and everything else, except that he earned the living and paid the bills. The husband or wife IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR in the success of a writer—it is easy to ruin a writer. Divorce is basic to the psychology. I mean the choice—the possibility.