

Introduction

A Mysterious Image of Mao Zedong

The official gazettes published by governments provide one link in the process of promulgating laws, regulations, and the like. As such they are dry as dust, utterly without flavor of any sort. By the same token, a playful spirit or tang inserted in an official gazette might actually pose a problem. While extremely rare, intriguing, even interesting, reports may occasionally be carried in a country's public relations bulletins. A photograph of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976) included in the appendix of a prewar official gazette offers a perfect instance of just this.

Attached to a supplement to an August 1937 issue of *Shūhō* 週報 (Weekly report), the official Japanese gazette which appeared each week, was the photograph in figure 1. The original caption reads: “Chūka Sovieto jinmin kyōwakoku chūō seifu shuseki, Mō Takutō” 中華ソヴェト人民共和國中政府主席毛澤東 (Mao Zedong, chairman of the central government of the Chinese Soviet People's Republic). How can this possibly be Mao Zedong? It looks much more like a member of the bourgeoisie or the chairman of some corporation than it does like a revolutionary. How could such a mistake have been made? It honestly seems more like some smart aleck suddenly decided to make a joke—very strange indeed.

The article carrying this photo—entitled “Shina Kyōsan gun o kataru” 支那共産軍を語る (Discussing the Chinese Communist army), *Shūhō* 44 (August 18)—concerned the most recent movements of the Chinese Com-

munist Party (CCP) and its army. The author is given as “Gaimushō jōhōbu” 外務省情報部 (Public Information Office of the Foreign Ministry). This office in the Foreign Ministry was at the time responsible primarily for “public relations and publicity” both domestically and abroad. From its name, the “Public Information Office” may give the impression of an intelligence organization gathering secret reports on foreign states, but this was somewhat different from its actual nature. That said, as a bureau tasked with sending messages abroad on Japan’s diplomatic position and domestically on foreign affairs, it needless to say did devote its energies to collecting materials on foreign countries.

As circumstances would have it, war—dubbed an “incident” (*jihen* 事變)—had broken out one month earlier at the Marco Polo Bridge and was steadily expanding as far as Shanghai on all fronts. Given the emergency time frame, the public relations department of the Japanese government’s Foreign Ministry whose mission it was to acquire and communicate accurate information on foreign states had included this photograph of Mao Zedong in an article reporting on the government’s publications. In prewar Japan, study of China was second to no country in the whole world, as it prided itself on understanding China better than the Chinese people themselves. And that was that. Had it been some third-rate magazine, the joke might have ended there, but this was an official gazette, albeit the appendix, so the situation is slightly different. Nowadays, this would certainly be the laughingstock of the media, a hilarious piece, pillorying a people. And, it would be quite a mess for a professional gatherer of information.

No one at the time would likely have objected to seeing this image of a chubby Mao Zedong. The Japanese people generally had no idea what Mao actually looked like. Nowadays we would laugh at such a photo, because Mao would later become exceedingly famous as the great leader of the Chinese revolution, and we have come to see his photographs and portraits *ad nauseum*. In other words, people born later are merely laughing at the ignorance of people in the past.

In August 1937, not only in Japan but most Chinese would not have known what sort of person Mao was, and furthermore would not have had reliable information about the Chinese Communist Party. This was because

the Chinese government at the time (the Guomintang government in Nanjing), which regarded the Communist Party as the enemy and was in the process of thoroughly suppressing it, was strictly blockading reports and introductory materials concerning the Communist Party. The CCP was a criminal organization which they dubbed “Communist bandits” or “red bandits” (outlaws manipulated by the Soviet Union). Mao was the “bandit chief” (*hishū* 匪酋), in other words the head of a gang, yet whose personal history and appearance remained completely mysterious.

As the highest commanding officer of the Communist-led military, the Red Army, the man who worked together fist-in-glove with Mao was, as everyone knows, Zhu De 朱德 (1886–1976). They were so well known together by their joint surnames as “Zhu-Mao” 朱毛 that the name spread as that of one single bandit, synonymous with the Red Army itself. Like Mao, though, Zhu De was a mysterious leader. In “Shina Kyōsan gun o kataru,” right next to the photograph of a chubby “Mao,” there is a photo with the caption: “Chūgoku kōnō kōgun kakumei gunji iinkai shuseki, Shu Toku” 中國工農紅軍革命軍事委員會主席朱德 (Zhu De, chairman of the revolutionary military committee of the Red Army of Chinese workers and peasants) (fig. 2). For reference, take a look at a genuine photo of Zhu De from 1937 (fig. 3). Again, the image is shrouded in mystery. Whether or not this portrait is Zhu De, I intend to gradually unravel in this book. At a glance, the figure here looks like a rather frightening ruffian—in a certain way, not so dissimilar from Dr. Frankenstein’s monster.

As noted above, we can now be amused looking at the portraits in *Shūhō*. Perhaps we can make this judgment, because, be it Mao or Zhu, they would eventually become widely known to the world and ultimately conquer the entire country. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (July 7, 1937), their Communist Party would join forces with the Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石, 1887–1975) to launch war against Japan, after that war win victory in the civil war with the Nationalists, and then establish the People’s Republic of China in 1949. As everyone in the world knows, to this day a portrait of Mao hangs over Tian’anmen Square in Beijing. Who, then, was the first to introduce Mao’s unembellished visage and career to the world? Who took Mao’s photograph and disseminated it? It was, of course,



Figure 2. "Zhu De," as published in *Shūhō*



Figure 3. The real Zhu De (1937)

the American journalist Edgar Snow (1905–1972) (fig. 4) and his book *Red Star over China*.¹

In order to collect information on the Communist Party's activities and its leaders, both wrapped in mystery, in the summer of 1936, Snow succeeded in making his way from Xi'an to enter "red China," the revolutionary base area in northern Shaanxi Province. He was permitted to gather information for three months, and during that time he not only took photographs of the leaders of the Communist Party from Mao on down, but also was fortunate enough to extract an autobiography from Mao concerning Mao's life to date. As a result of this data collection, including Mao's autobiography, in the fall of 1937 in England and early the next year in the United States, *Red Star over China* was published and became a bestseller. Based on this masterpiece of reportage, the unadorned appearance and careers of the leaders of the CCP, Mao Zedong's autobiography, the legend of the Long March, and vivid images of the people living in the Communist base area became known to the world for the first time; those images were greeted by readers throughout the world with tremendous surprise from the time the book was initially published.



Figure 4. Edgar Snow during his investigative reporting in northern Shaanxi

1 There are numerous English and Chinese editions of *Red Star over China*, and as explained in the latter half of this book, there are many differences among them. Unless noted otherwise, when cited in this book, I shall be referring to the "revised and enlarged [English] edition" (New York: Grove Press, 1968). As for the Chinese edition, I will be using: Dong Leshan 董樂山, *Xixing manji* 西行漫記 (Record of a journey westward) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1979), originally entitled *Hongxing zhaoyao Zhongguo* 紅星照耀中國 (The red star shines over China).

Until the present day, Mao’s biography has been the subject of an international mountain of commentary in China and elsewhere. From highly subtle studies to a pack of utter lies, it is a thoroughly mixed bag, but biographies praising Mao and those slandering him are all based on Snow’s account in *Red Star* for the route Mao traveled from early childhood through his youth. Depending on the author’s perspective, some of these episodes are inflated, others distorted, and in the process of changed episodes being cited from one secondary source to the next, exaggerations ensue. If we trace them back to the source, ultimately these usually lead us to *Red Star*. The reason for this is that, after Snow collected all his information, Mao left no other coherent biographical account behind. Something close to an autobiography was an interview in May 1939 he gave with Xiao San 蕭三 in which they reminisced about the past. Xiao San recorded the conversation’s contents, and one portion of it he apparently included in a biography of Mao he later wrote.² Unlike Snow, however, Xiao did not publish the fragmentary, old reminiscences themselves. *Red Star* is thus treasured because Mao’s autobiography in it is unique.

As for photos of Mao, Snow took what may be called the definitive one, promptly published it, and stunned the world. It was effectively a scoop photograph. As for a photo of Mao which is most widely known throughout the world, it would be the one atop Tian’anmen in Beijing, but that is a photo taken after he had become the leader of the country.³ The two photos (figs. 5

2 Wang Zhengming 王政明, *Xiao San zhuan* 蕭三傳 (Biography of Xiao San) (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1996), pp. 282–89. That Xiao San took down such a record he made clear in his memoirs years later: “Yaodong cheng—Xiangei dang de liushi zhounian danchen” 窯洞城——獻給黨的六十週年誕辰 (Cave town, a gift to the Party on its sixtieth birthday), *Shidai de baogao* 時代的報告 2 (1981). In this connection, Xiao San was celebrated as the author of the Mao biography: *Mao Zedong tongzhi de qingshaonian shidai he chuqi geming huodong* 毛澤東同志的青少年時代和初期革命活動 (The youth and early revolutionary activities of Comrade Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1980); as an old acquaintance of Mao’s, he was an appropriate person to ask about Mao’s autobiography.

3 There have been many studies of the portrait of Mao Zedong hanging over Tian’anmen. Here I shall mention only one, the work of a scholar working out-



Figure 5. Mao Zedong in a photo taken by Snow



Figure 6. Mao Zedong in a photo taken by Snow

and 6) first made known to the world were both taken when Snow was gathering his material in 1936. In particular, as a photo of the young Mao, figure 6 with his intrepid face and wearing the Red Army cap appears with high frequency as a sort of “Mao goods”—like amulets and stickers—and many will likely recognize them. In other words, the image that we have of Mao in his youth is almost entirely due to the work of Edgar Snow.

This book will introduce the image of Mao and the biographical information made known to the world through the publication of *Red Star*, and with its publication the circumstances which they fundamentally undermined. Of course, there is no reason that Mao Zedong the person himself would completely change by virtue of the publication of *Red Star*. However, the external image surrounding him did completely change from before. Perhaps this is like a favored child who says, “when I wake up one morning, I will become famous.” Before he was introduced by Snow, though, what was the image of Mao? We just don’t know, and there are no studies to examine.

We do now know in great depth biographical details about Mao—what he did when and where—before 1936 (he was forty-three years old at the time). We have *Mao Zedong nianpu* 毛澤東年譜 (Chronological biography of Mao Zedong) in nine volumes, published in China under the editorship of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Documentation Research Office, and Snow’s book covering through the summer of that year runs to 550 pages. The details here are not fragmentary. Take, for example, the year 1916 when Mao was twenty-three. The name of the journal he lent a friend and the issue numbers (*Jiayin* 甲寅, issues 11 and 12), the person to whom he lent it (Xiao Zisheng 蕭子升, also known as Xiao Yu 蕭瑜), and the day he lent it to him (February 19)—of course, not everything—are clear, and the date while in school he returned home (June 26) have been investigated and clarified.⁴ Fittingly incredible for Mao Zedong and for China, but before

side China: Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

4 CCP Central Documentation Research Office, ed., *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1893–1949* 毛澤東年譜(1893–1949)(Chronological biography of Mao Zedong, 1893–1949), rev. ed., vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2013), pp. 22–23.

he was acknowledged as a great revolutionary, the chronological biography scarcely touches on what reports we have of him and what his biographical or photograph image was then. Of course, there is certainly no reason to expect that a photo which may or may not have resembled Mao carried in an official Japanese gazette of 1937 would be anything more than a “trivial” matter.

In the first half of this book, I shall be dealing with the Mao Zedong whom Chinese people and scholars—and, indeed, Mao himself—who have produced a voluminous quantity of books, visual materials, and commercial items about the great man would likely never have seen or heard. Using the metaphor of *Red Star*, introduced above, this will be Mao Zedong “before *Red Star*”; and likening it to this single volume, we can say that we are investigating on the level of images of “how the red star rose.” In fact, my title *Akai hoshi wa ikan ni shite nobotta ka* 赤い星は如何にして昇ったか (How the red star rose) is an imitation of *Hong taiyang shi zenyang shengqi de* 紅太陽是怎样升起的 (How the red sun rose) (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2000; English edition, 2018), by Professor Gao Hua 高華 (1954–2011), a historian of China who passed away at the young age of fifty-seven on December 26 (ironically, Mao’s birthday), a man who had earned accolades for his research on Mao Zedong. Gao’s book is a masterful work of scholarship focusing on the Yan’an Rectification Campaign of the early 1940s and depicting the process by which Mao became absolute leader of the Party. Needless to say, the title draws on the “red sun” metaphor of Mao in the People’s Republic.

I have nothing but respect for both Edgar Snow and Gao Hua. It is thus awe-inspiring to make use of the title or phrases from these two important works, and I wish to pay homage to both of these works and their authors. In my work, though, I have dug up images and biographical details about the early Mao that even these two authors may not have known. If I am able to delineate how sometimes bizarre and sometimes unusual images and biographies took shape, how they were manufactured, and how they became (or did not become) fixed, perhaps both men who knew Mao well might forgive me, saying: “Of course, that’s it!”

Thus, most importantly, clarifying Mao’s image and the process of its development is tied to our recognition that all manner of information,

knowledge, and images we know of have been formed historically—be it Mao or other historical personages, be it correct or distorted or even wrong. Being formed historically means that, at a certain stage in the past, it took shape as it went through processing and revision based on a distinctive historical perception (or misconception), and then changes and alterations ensued. In this instance, this information and image was: (1) cases created as a kind of strategy by the person himself and the group to which he belonged (in Mao’s case, the Chinese Communist Party), and (2) cases formed of a certain necessity by those other than the person in question (namely, the group). If we are speaking here of Mao Zedong, then many studies in the category of (1) have already been published. For example, from all manner of works of art worshiping Mao in the People’s Republic of China (propaganda art), there are as well studies that closely analyze the process of creation, the valuation, and hence the image strategy. In the realm of icons and portraits alone, we have research by Julia F. Andrews, Barbara Mittler, Yan Geng, Yang Haocheng 楊昊成, Hu Guosheng 胡國勝, and Maki Yōichi 牧陽一; and including the methods of cultural studies, there have been many explanations added.⁵ In the contemporary reform period, many sorts of works of propaganda art which have swept the world (including China) have appeared on the art mar-

5 Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Yan Geng, *Mao’s Images: Artists and China’s 1949 Transition* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2018); Yang Haocheng 楊昊成, *Mao Zedong tuxiang yanjiu* 毛澤東圖像研究 (A study of images of Mao Zedong) (Hong Kong: Shidai guojì chubanshe, 2009); Hu Guosheng 胡國勝, “Geming yu xiangzheng: Mao Zedong xingxiang de chuanbo yu yingxiang (1937–1949)” 革命與象徵：毛澤東形象的傳播與影響 (1937–1949) (Revolution and symbols: The dissemination and impact of the image of Mao Zedong [1937–1949]), *Dang shi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* 黨史研究與教學 6 (2013); Maki Yōichi 牧陽一 et al., *Chūgoku no purōpaganda geijutsu: Mō Takutō yōshiki ni miru kakumei no kioku* 中国のプロパガンダ芸術：毛沢東様式に見る革命の記憶 (Chinese propaganda art: Revolutionary reminiscences as seen in forms of Mao Zedong) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2000).

kets as commodities out of nostalgia or matters of taste, making it rather easy to collect them, but this is background to the currency of research in this area.

By contrast, studies in category (2)—namely, studies concerning what sort of images are embraced (or spread) by other realms or adversaries—in particular, of Mao Zedong are lagging behind. Concretely speaking, this involves analyzing the situation prior to 1949 of publicity and reports that existed within China by forces other than the CCP. The object of analysis would be how the Guomindang (Nationalist Party and government) and the popular media reported on the image of Mao. In addition, it would involve how the foreign media reported Mao's image, and the extent to which the reporting agencies of various countries accurately grasped information about Mao (and the Chinese Communists). Among studies in category (1), matters concerning category (2) will be referred to in ancillary fashion, and it cannot be avoided that the selection of objects to analyze (which countries spread which images) will be somewhat arbitrary and limited. In fact, explaining in a comprehensive manner “image” in foreign countries in which the terminology in use is different is impossible.

Furthermore, even in category (2), just like (1), the hunt for early images of Mao is not easy. During the era of the Nationalist government, reports on the Chinese Communists were tightly controlled, and unique intelligence that could be obtained domestically would have been impossible to obtain abroad. It was extremely difficult outside China to garner early reports and images from the early years, and ultimately the image of Mao Zedong reflected in Snow's eyes after the publication of *Red Star* spread far and wide.

In sum, the more we deepen research on images from the early years, we come to understand the immense significance of *Red Star* all the more; at the same time, the mystery of the image of Mao before *Red Star* only deepens, and the desire to unravel that mystery will only grow stronger. Perhaps, those of us who study Mao Zedong, including the origins of *Red Star*, have our own image of Mao that we wish to learn the origins of. Thus, when we know the particulars and the mechanisms of the image production, including its artificiality, those who discuss Mao Zedong will recognize the precariousness of their own image of Mao, constructed as it was on the basis of an “image”