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Mao's Rise to Power: To what extent did Mao Zedong utilize Edgar Snow's Red Star Over China to consolidate power?

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Extended Essay: Mao's Rise to Power

To what extent did Mao Zedong utilize Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* to consolidate power?

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Abstract:

Mao Zedong's rise to power has been viewed through many lenses, such as through the downfall of the Kuomintang or through his opportunism, but this paper examines: to what extent did Mao utilize Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* to consolidate power? This question is answered by looking at Snow's work, other historians' view of Snow's work, and reviews of *Red Star* when the book was first released in 1937. Snow's work was used to determine his aims in interviewing Mao and whether he intended to be a "mouthpiece" for Mao. Other historians' views were used to research Mao's previous foreign relations and his ties to the Chinese Communist Party; and to examine Mao's manipulative techniques in controlling his image. The latter reason is valuable because it proves that Mao went to great lengths in depicting himself and making himself appear as the best option for leadership over China. Reviews from periodicals and *The Saturday Review* were useful in evaluating whether or not Mao was successful in convincing Chinese civilians and the Western world of his views and policies. Also, the reviews were used to determine the book's audience and the popularity of the book. In conclusion, to consolidate power, a leader needs support, which is exactly what Mao received after the publication of *Red Star*. Mao certainly utilized Snow's work primarily for domestic support, and the foreign support he also received was unprecedented yet it strengthened his position and made him more powerful because he essentially had more than just the CCP backing him; the Western World also supported him.

Word Count: 261

Introduction:

Mao's rise to power was long and unsteady, but his ascent first caught international attention during the Long March, which started 1934 (Naden 129). By 1949, China became the People's Republic of China under Chairman Mao (Naden 130). In between these two events, Edgar Snow, an American journalist, went to Xi'an to interview Mao Zedong, the leader of the CCP during the Long March. In 1936, Mao related his childhood past to Snow and answered many of Snow's questions. The following year, Snow published *Red Star Over China*, an account of his conversations with Mao. His work was virtually the only reference to Mao that the United States had, so many Americans' understanding of Mao came from Snow's book. This meant that what Snow wrote had a very large influence on shaping Americans' view of Mao during his rise to power and his reign. While Snow's work may have shaped many Americans' view of Mao and Chinese Communism, to what extent did Mao utilize Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* to consolidate power?

The question at hand attempts to examine how Mao may have used a foreigner to help himself rise in power. Many historians have looked at the issues in China, especially among the peasants and with the Chinese civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists; and world events, such as WWII and Japan's invasion of China, to have helped Mao rise in power. However, seldom has one looked at Mao's rise in power due to Snow's work, most likely because *Red Star* seemed insignificant and the likelihood that an American journalist helped a Chinese Communist out of his (the journalist's) own volition seemed highly improbable. Nevertheless, the latter is what happened because Snow had a hand in shaping U.S. foreign policy toward China as well as informing Chinese citizens of the CCP's objectives under Mao. Through a critical

examination of *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow, of reviews upon the release of the book, and of other historians' works, this essay intends to uncover whether or not Mao utilized Snow to consolidate power.

In the years since Snow's publication of *Red Star Over China*, Snow's book has been critiqued for glorifying Mao and for not getting the complete story. In 2005, Jung Chang published *The Unknown Story: Mao*, which tries to depict Mao from all perspectives, not just that of a reporter, by incorporating interviews with people close to Mao and people who followed him.

Mao and Foreign Support:

Before the Long March in 1934, China was inundated with foreigners coming in to spread propaganda and to convince Chinese citizens of other nations' policies.

However, Chinese Communists were most excited over support from the USSR. When the lines “*proclaims the Soviet Union...to be [the Soviet Government in China]'s loyal ally*” of the Constitution was read to the first All-China Soviet Congress, the Reds “deeply cherished [the idea of having behind them a great ally]” and shouted, “Long Live the World Revolution!” (Snow 353, *Red*). By being excited, the Chinese demonstrate that the Soviets' support was much needed because with it, they believed that there was hope for a more successful future where there were no social classes.

Likewise, Mao himself had received support from the USSR. Even though Mao had unnecessarily rampaged a village, his actions had been excused and supported by Moscow (Chang 63). He was “cheerful [because]... Moscow's acceptance of his demands showed that he could get his way,” and he could potentially receive Soviet aid for “Moscow was arranging military aid specifically for... [Mao's] force[s]” (Chang 65). Here, Mao experienced the effects of foreign support, which gave him power to lead

more people. Thus, Mao learned that in order to assert power, it was best to have foreign support, especially since “the real decision-makers were operatives sent by Moscow” (Chang 69).

However, the USSR had its reasons for supporting Mao. In order for Soviet troops to invade further in China, “Moscow wanted the Chinese Communists to create some diversionary military pressure” (Chang 72). The USSR, then, put its own interests first supported Mao to extend some of its power into China. Another reason that Mao was well-supported was because “Moscow’s agents in Shanghai were concerned that Mao might side with [the Trotskyists]” (Chang 73). In order to gain Mao’s loyalty, the USSR backed Mao and gave him a boost in power so that he would be more inclined to support Stalin. However, in consequent years, Mao did not have strong ties to the USSR as he looked to other nations for support. In other words, Mao may have been aware that he was merely a tool of the Soviets, a position too “low” for Mao because he sought for more power. In addition, Mao disagreed with many of the Soviets’ plans, such as allying with the Kuomintang to inhibit a Japanese-KMT alliance (Thomas 139).

The amount of foreign support Mao received also frustrated many of his contemporaries. When Mao received support from the USSR, Zhu De, the commander-in-chief of the Red Army at that time, “grumbled...that he was ‘just a plaything in Mao’s hands... Mao just toyed with him’” (Chang 74). Because Zhu De could only complain, this meant that Mao was quite well protected by Soviet support, which gave Mao plenty of power to move forward in his plans, even though the Soviets may have been using him.

In *Red Star*, Snow reveals that Mao kept up with world politics. This signifies that Mao may have planned on gathering foreign support because if he knew other countries' politics, then he would know how to interact with that country and accordingly adjust his policy to the country that he wanted support from. During the Long March, China faced a growing threat from Japan, and if Mao detested an alliance with the Nationalists, then he had to appeal to other nations for support against the Japanese invasion. One such country was the United States, where Mao "thought that China could cooperate with [Franklin D. Roosevelt]" because Roosevelt was "similarly anti-Fascist" (Snow 94, *Red*). Through presenting his view to Snow, Mao shows how he was trying to get the United States' support with a common ground (anti-Fascism), perhaps for future endeavors, such as a joint effort in fending off the Japanese. Overall, Mao wanted foreign support because of his past dealings with the USSR and thought to translate that experience into obtaining support from the U.S.

Mao and Snow:

During the Long March, Mao had kept in mind of the usefulness of foreign support, a thought that eventually led him to invite Edgar Snow to Zhidan, the Red Capital at that time. However, despite Mao's intentions of using Snow to gain American support, Snow himself did not go to Zhidan to be Mao's pawn. On the contrary, Snow was driven by his desire to have his questions answered, evident in his first chapter, which was dedicated to explaining his aim, and he was curious about Mao as a person (Snow 37, *Red*). Also, a decade later, Snow believed that he "simply wrote down what [he] was told [by others]" (Snow 16, *Red*). Snow's work was biased solely because others' stories were more sympathetic to Mao, which meant that Snow's work was also

seemingly favorable to Mao. Snow, then, had no ulterior motives for accepting Mao's invitation because he merely did so to satiate his own curiosity.

However, the words that Snow used made it seem as though he were writing an advertisement for Mao. The American journalist described Mao as "Lincolnesque" (Hamilton 76), "very interesting and complex", his laughter as "boyish", and his relationship with the peasants as benign (Snow 92, *Red*). Even though Snow's intent was not to promote Mao, his language and descriptors would have turned the Western world into supporting Mao, especially the U.S. because of its pride in Lincoln. This, then, would mean that Snow's work was influential in garnering support for Mao, most likely for a battle against Japan. Snow even described Mao's policy as merely "agrarian reformers with no Marxist objectives" (Hamilton 86), a point similarly emphasized by *The Saturday Review*, that "the Reds... made rural equalitarianism their first goal" (Popper 6). The notion of agrarian reform would have been misleading to Americans because such a plan did not entail dictatorship; it merely seemed that Mao was making rabble to bring the government's attention to an issue. However, Mao's intent was not in mere "agrarian reform"; he desired social reform and power for himself as the head of China. By having Snow believe and write that Mao was just pushing for reform, Mao demonstrated that he used Snow to secure power because from misleading Snow, he was able to gain some sympathy from Americans.

Mao, on the other hand, was not as innocent as Snow. He specifically chose Snow because the journalist was "a trustworthy non-Communist Western journalist... [who] had extraterritorial protection for what he wrote... [and] his independence from Communist ties made him more likely to grasp the broader implications of the message

Mao wished to convey” (Thomas 131). By inviting Snow based on his status as a foreign reporter, Mao demonstrated that he was planning on using Snow’s work to gain foreign (specifically American) support, which would have been powerful enough for Mao to seize control of all of China. Furthermore, Mao wanted his message conveyed to the Chinese citizens, who were censored by the Kuomintang from Mao and the CCP, and make his ideas appealing to them, which would have garnered domestic support for Mao, broadening his base of support.

How Mao controlled his image:

One method Mao used to ensure that Snow’s work would paint him in a good light was for Mao himself to lie to Snow. In *Red Star Over China*, Snow described Mao’s living quarters as a “two-room *yao-fang* with bare [and] poor walls” (Snow 93, *Red*). From this depiction, one would assume that Mao lived austere and did not lavish himself with any treasures he amassed from the banditry of previous years. However, Mao actually lived a far more comfortable lifestyle than the peasants, but he did not show this aspect to Snow, effectively tricking the journalist. Mao, then, was able to benefit from this because to the outside world, he was the victim of not only the Nationalists but also his status. This would have evoked sympathy from some and would be more likely to side with Mao because of his humble lifestyle, which was revealed by Snow’s exaggeration of “poor living conditions”. Another way Mao deceived Snow was by not telling Snow everything that was going on with the CCP; in other words, Mao kept some secrets from Snow. “Snow was not privy to Mao’s political downgrading before his comeback at the Zunyi conference [in January 1935]... nor of the continued challenges to Mao’s leadership” (Thomas 137). If Mao were to reveal to Snow that some were dissatisfied with Mao, then he would appear weak in others’ eyes because he could not

even get Chinese communists to follow him. On the other hand, Snow may truly have not been at the right place at the right time and was thus ignorant of dissent against Mao, so Snow did not write of any objections to Mao's leadership because he did not encounter nor observe any and was ignorant of such critiques. By concealing some of his less appealing aspects, Mao made it so that Snow could only write praises of Mao because there was nothing negative or troubling to record.

Not only did Mao trick Snow with how he lived but he also put on many different acts for Snow. Sometimes, as Mao recounted his past to Snow, “[Mao's] eyes moistened... when he was speaking of dead comrades... [or] when starving peasants were beheaded... for demanding food from the [landowner]” (Snow 95, *Red*). This would have portrayed Mao as someone who reflected on his past and remembered past injustices; in other words, Snow's words made Mao quite human and sensitive. However, “Mao [had] covered up years of torture and murder, such as the Anti-Bolshevik purges” (Chang 192). This meant that in reality, Mao did not care much for others' pain because he did not stop the torture and deaths, so those acts did not perturb him. Mao's true character did not truly care for his “dead comrades” or “starving peasants”; he only acted that way to elicit empathy from others, which would then turn into support for Mao because he appeared to understand others' pain and wanted to make their deaths worthwhile. Through acting, Mao gained support from foreigners because Snow merely wrote what he observed, which was Mao's play-acting, not what others whispered about behind Mao's back nor what atrocities he committed.

Another way Mao could portray himself as a positive influence was by restricting foreigners' access to him. Snow prided that he “was the first foreign newspaperman to

interview [Mao]" (Snow 91, *Red*). However, despite Snow's joy at being the first foreigner to interview Mao and make him known to the world, he was the only one to have done so. Because of the fighting between the Nationalists and Communists in China, no outsider could make contact with Mao, or he simply refused to see anyone. Either way, there was very limited access to Mao, so Snow's work "remained a unique source" for many years (Snow 16, *Red*). Mao benefited from this because it meant that the world (namely the United States and Great Britain) only knew about him through Snow's work, and since *Red Star* had portrayed Mao as a positive and friendly force in China, the other nations would be far more inclined to support him in comparison to any other CCP leader. This was especially true in the United States, where President Franklin D. Roosevelt made Snow his "unofficial wartime overseas source of information", a position from which Snow could influence the President into supporting Mao. Through Snow's work, Mao received sympathy from readers around the world for it "played a big role in swaying Western opinion in favor of Mao" (Chang 192).

Throughout Snow's introduction of Mao, he hardly mentions Mao's shortcomings, a possible result of Mao censoring Snow. Snow could not hide Mao's ruthlessness, but he softened the description with phrases such as "a power of ruthless decision when he deemed it necessary" and wrote that Mao "had a deep sense of dignity" and was not a "megalomania" (Snow 94, *Red*). By writing these words, Snow compared Mao to a radical and showed how Mao was not an extremist; instead, he was rational and took necessary action. This notion of taking necessary action was not a foreign idea to the world, so readers would view Mao as a man to be trusted to achieve the best future for China. But were these truly Snow's words? As Chang reveals, it was Mao who "took

the added precaution of checking everything Snow wrote..., amending and rewriting parts” (Chang 192). Mao, then, censored Snow to make himself appear in a softer light, which would then make the Western world see Mao in a more positive manner and be more likely to support him. Furthermore, readers would not have viewed *Red Star Over China* as a work censored by Mao because Snow wrote, “He never imposed any censorship on me [and] in my writing..., courtesies for which I am grateful” (Snow v, *Random*). By including this line, Snow’s audience would be reassured of the authenticity of the book and read it as though it was an unaltered work while simultaneously feel awed at Mao’s truthfulness. This would have been another boost to Mao’s character and would have thus generated more foreign support for himself. Through making a conscious effort to censor Snow, Mao demonstrated just how valuable Snow’s work was to him in eliciting foreign aid, especially from the United States, for future endeavors because effectively, the book was Mao’s writing.

Because Mao could control his image, Snow’s claim that *Red Star Over China* as an unbiased piece of work seems incredulous. Snow “was willing to censor himself for the sake of China,” as he did when he omitted Zhou En-lai’s critique of Chiang Kai-shek (Hamilton 94). If Snow had deleted something for one person, he may have done so other times, all for the sake of making *Red Star* appealing to Mao, who wanted these omissions in order to appeal to the Chinese citizens and thus elicit domestic support to consolidate power. The summation of these omissions for Mao’s sake makes Snow’s book unreliable in that it does not give each individual’s beliefs within the CCP; instead, the work glosses over personal beliefs and reshapes the ideologies into one beautiful phrase that would tap into the Chinese’s desire for a better future, a future not under

Chiang Kai-Shek. By having Snow omit some controversial statements, Mao's ideologies were more appealing to the Chinese, gaining him more supporters and providing him the basis for consolidating power.

Effect of Snow's work:

The years after the publication of *Red Star Over China* are also crucial in determining whether or not Snow's work helped Mao consolidate power. Essentially, the world's perception of Mao came from this book because after its publication, China became inaccessible to outsiders, making it very difficult (and dangerous) to interview Mao and his actions in China. Snow was lucky to have contacted Mao in a period of less fighting, and "for five years, while no foreign newsmen were able to reach Yen-an, these reports remained a unique source" (Snow 16, *Red*). Furthermore, *Red Star* had a "wealth of material on a social movement... denied by most 'experts' in China" (Yakhontoff 21). When Snow's work came out, not many people knew about Mao; once people read it, their interests were piqued and questions were answered, but they could not gather more information due to the quick and violent changes occurring in China. When Mao emerged as the leader of a communist China, all that the Western world knew about him was through Snow's book. Because *Red Star* had portrayed Mao as one who could be friendly to the West, those who had read the book saw Mao's new position as the leader of China as positive, which meant that Mao had some supporters around the world.

Red Star Over China was quite popular around the world. Wang Rumei, Snow's interpreter during the Long March, wrote, "After [*Red Star's*] publication in Britain, it had five reprints within a month. It truly was a book that shook the world" (Wang 3). The book's popularity in the Western world demonstrates how appealing Chinese Communists were, so much so that the text was reprinted five times in a month. Because

the book was popular, people must have liked it and, thus, also Mao's ideologies. Mao, then, received support from the Western world through *Red Star*, which helped Mao secure power because readers outside of China, to some extent, were drawn into his vision and would thus be more likely to support his actions and policies.

Mao himself was pleased with *Red Star* because he believed that it would reach out and obtain domestic support. He stated "that the book 'truly represented [the Communists'] situation and introduced [the] party's policies to the world'" (Thomas 138). The Red leader's satisfaction came from how well Snow's book conveyed the Communists' ideologies, which was done in a manner that Mao believed would have convinced Chinese (peasants) of the Communists' cause, adding more supporters under Mao. Furthermore, Snow "express[ed] views that [Mao] could not... openly articulate" (Thomas 188). Where Mao was restricted by politics to not share his true ideologies, Snow, as a foreign journalist, was free to write whatever he wanted, and by clearly conveying Mao's views, Snow had a hand in influencing people being drawn toward Mao if they agreed with his beliefs. Not only did *Red Star* gather more followers, but it also "had wide currency within the CCP and helped advance Maoist domination of the party" (Thomas 188). It was one thing for Mao to get civilians to follow him; it was another to have the core decision-making group to be entirely supportive of one leader. This significantly helped Mao to secure power because as a future dictator, he needed a loyal group of followers to carry out his orders for he would be the head of the state. In regards to consolidating power, a leader needs people to support him and his ideals, and if *Red Star* helped to gather followers, then through *Red Star*, Mao was able to consolidate power because influenced Chinese citizens into joining the Communists.

This could also have translated into eliciting foreign support if readers in different countries also liked the CCP's policies, especially since Mao wanted those policies "introduced... to the world." Mao, then, would have further consolidated power through foreign support, something that would be unique only to him and make him more powerful because with that support the KMT would have a much harder time challenging his leadership.

Snow's work did not come with critiques, though. According to Carl Crow, a businessman in China, *Red Star* "gave the comparatively small communist group in China an importance which is out of all proportion to the facts" (Crow 13). Crow believed that Snow had exaggerated many aspects and depicted Mao as far too idealistic. However, it is the exaggeration that made Mao much more attractive to Chinese civilians and the Western world, which means that Snow's misrepresentation of Mao gained Mao much domestic and international support, support that he could then use to gain power.

Conclusion:

Mao used Snow to consolidate power in China and within the CCP, and the effect on foreign relations was, most likely, unprecedented yet highly beneficial to Mao because it secured more supporters for him. Before, Mao had experienced Soviet aid, which gave him the power to move forward with his plans (not necessarily the Soviet's plans) and protected him from attacks, keeping him safe in a period of war. During the Long March, Mao seriously considered having American support and thus invited Edgar Snow to interview Mao and to reveal to the world of a potential leader. It was not Snow's intent to advertise Mao; instead, Mao used him to gain support by having Snow write observations. These observations were, for the most part, construed so that Mao would appear in a good light and could therefore attract more support. Mao made a conscious

effort to control his image, which demonstrates that Mao believed that it was worth investing time and energy into Snow because he knew that the journalist's work would be more effective than meeting with other leaders to get foreign support. Mao's deep satisfaction of Snow's work is further evidence of Snow's usefulness to Mao for Mao's happiness came from benefiting from *Red Star*. Finally, the effect of Snow's work was that it helped shape the Western world's view of Mao because his work was the only biography of Mao available; no other publications were made due to hostile conditions. To consolidate power, a leader needs support, which is exactly what Mao received after the publication of *Red Star*.

This investigation can be further carried out to explore longer-term effects of Snow's work or how Snow's work may have initially shaped the United States' foreign policy toward China. If *Red Star Over China* did have a hand in the U.S.'s attempts at a friendly relationship with China, Snow's work, then, had been so influential as to shape some history. There should also be an investigation on Mao's relations with the USSR to answer the question of to what extent Mao relied upon foreign acknowledgement to maintain power. If Mao did rely on such recognition, then his interviews with Snow were for political gains; if he did not, then there should be further examination on his purpose for Snow, not just of Snow's purpose as revealed through his book.

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Appendix of Names and Abbreviations

- CCP = Chinese Communist Party
- Chiang Kai-shek = Jiang Jieshi
- KMT = Kuomintang = Guomindang = Chinese Nationalist Party
- Mao Zedong = Mao Tse-tung
- Xi'an = Sian (capital of Shaanxi province)
- Yen-an = Yan'an (celebrated as birthplace of Chinese communist revolution)
- Zhidan = Pao An = Bao'an (Red capital during Long March)
- Zhou En-lai = Chou En-lai (later served as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of China, close to Mao)
- Zhu De = Chu Teh (Commander-in-chief of Red Army during 2nd Sino-Japanese War)