

Of Surface and Depth: Agnes Smedley's Sketches of Chinese Everyday Life

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Abstract

This article focuses on American author Agnes Smedley's creative non-fiction writings on China, seeking to recover her as an important transnational figure in light of an uneven reputation. For while Smedley is known and read in China, she is virtually forgotten in the United States. To reassert her relevance, and to balance her reputation, I employ the 1933 work *Chinese Destinies* as a case study to discuss Smedley's interest in everyday life as a site of socio-political analysis, a mode of inquiry that anticipates later methodologies in the social sciences.

I begin by establishing how *Chinese Destinies* maintains a surprising focus on everyday life, despite the wartime setting. Emphasising her background as a novelist, I then explore how Smedley is able to thematise everyday life in two different ways: first as a site of trauma, and then as a space of resistance. In this way, I argue, her work has historiographic implications, and I go on to situate her engagement with everyday life within a broader debate about historical agency and causality. As part of my conclusion, I speculate as to why Smedley's creative brand of literary non-fiction is not as recognised as similar work by her contemporaries.

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In the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery outside of Beijing, the ashes of American writer Agnes Smedley lie buried under a tombstone that describes her as 'a friend of the Chinese people.' Among the American writers who covered China in the interwar period (Pearl Buck, Edgar Snow, Anna Louise Strong), Smedley occupies the curious role of being almost forgotten in the United States, while at the same time being taught and studied in China. The discrepancy is not only striking, but also ironic: the cross-cultural currents which so fundamentally characterised Smedley's work have, in her posthumous reception, come to largely flow in only one direction.¹

This article seeks to redress some of the imbalance in Smedley's reputation by focusing on what her American perspective allowed her to see in revolutionary China, while also positing her as an overlooked pioneer in literary non-fiction. Concentrating on her ostensibly minor 1933 work *Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China*, I want to argue that Smedley's originality as a writer derives from her critical engagement with the surface familiarities of

¹ For an account of the disparity in Smedley's reputation between the United States and China, see Florence Howe's afterword to the anthology *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*, ed. Jan and Steve MacKinnon (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1976) 167-69. In recent decades, two English-language biographies and a critical reappraisal of *Daughter of Earth* have helped to raised Smedley's profile in the United States; however, none of the five books on China published in her lifetime are currently in print in English. In China, on the other hand, Smedley's friendship with General Zhu De has been turned into a major motion picture (1986's *Zhu De and Smedley*), her likeness has appeared on a postage stamp (repr. in Price 422), and most recently, a bust of the author was unveiled at the Lu Xun Museum in Beijing (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/04/content_11651587.htm).

everyday life. For despite the epic associations given by its title, the individual pieces of *Chinese Destinies* are often anchored in an ordinary or even mundane situation, such as a restaurant visit or a walk in the street. Yet in what seems a conspicuous pattern, these quotidian scenes are often interrupted by a sudden action of significance or a moment of intense meaning. Just as quickly as they appear, however, they recede again – back into the familiar texture of everyday life. Such moments were of course common in modernist literature (Joyce, Woolf, Proust); however, what makes Smedley unique is that, inspired by the literary milieu from which she emerged, she deploys such moments in a real-life context – that is, in her analysis of this crucial period in Chinese history.

Central to my argument, then, is the novelistic quality of Smedley's writing, even as she operates in the domain of non-fiction, and how this generic ambiguity in turn allows her to defamiliarise everyday life. Closely linked in my analysis, these two aspects of *Chinese Destinies* should be situated both within the author's body of work and in the broader literary culture of which she was part. First, it is important to note that Smedley began her career as a novelist, publishing the semi-autobiographical *Daughter of Earth* in 1929. Although well-received by critics at the time, Smedley's striking combination of proletarian themes with modernist introspection never reached a wider audience, nor gained a subsequent place in the canon. Combining race, class, and gender in her cogent analysis of power, Smedley is able to show how the interaction of these factors severely limits if not disables social and political agency in early twentieth-century America. These weighty issues, however, she grapples with not through political theory nor through any violent confrontations; rather, her focus is on how these limiting mechanisms operate at the level of everyday life, and also how they essentially remain the same regardless of context, whether in rural Missouri or in urban New York.

But even though *Daughter of Earth* is definitely an original novel, it did not exist in a vacuum; rather, it still has certain affinities with other works of the period. In fact, earlier in the 1920s, everyday life had already become an important representational terrain for certain writers on the left, as they sought to expose the sordid side of that decade's economic boom. Here, we may think of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, which depicts an unforgiving urban landscape through a conspicuous focus on everyday life, or Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, where middle-class conformity, ingrained through everyday practice, negates any departure from the status quo. During the following 1930s, the literary focus on everyday life intensified, as it became an even more pressing site of inquiry for a whole host of socially conscious writers: most notably John Steinbeck and James T. Farrell, but also proletarian writers like Michael Gold and Robert Cantwell. In contrast to the realist novel, where the minutiae of bourgeois life exist to produce what Roland Barthes calls 'the reality effect,'² everyday life for these Depression-era writers functions as something interesting in and of itself, as a level of social reality where ideology both manifests and consolidates itself. For example, in Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, we are made to understand that everyday life forms something of a closed system for the title character, and that everything of which it is made up – pool-room antics with his friends, conversations at the family dinner table, the consumption of mass culture – leaves little room for critical thinking, and as such forecloses his development of a political consciousness.

The French philosopher and literary critic Henri Lefebvre once commented that American interwar novelists, such as Steinbeck and Dos Passos, had been able to 'open their eyes to what is nearest to them – everyday life – and to find themes in it which amaze us by their violence and originality.'³ Against this background, it is possible to see what Smedley brought with her to

² Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect.' *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 141-48.

³ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Introduction* (London: Verso, 2001) 151.

China from the contemporary American literary scene. For like her fellow Depression-era writers, she too approaches everyday life as a conceptual category, as a level of social reality often neglected, yet more than worthy of critical attention. Specifically, as I will argue, through using techniques borrowed from the domain of fiction, she is able to thematise everyday life in two different ways: first as a site of trauma, and then as a space of resistance. In doing so, she anticipates post-Foucauldian theories of everyday resistance, of finding gaps and fissures in seemingly closed systems of control. Taken together, then, Smedley is on the one hand before her time, yet on the other hand, she is also profoundly *of* it, in ways that have yet to be fully appreciated.⁴ Ultimately, as I will suggest, we may see Smedley as a kind of modernist-materialist historian, whose findings are drawn from the plain and plebeian of everyday life rather than from the official decrees and documentations of traditional historiography. As a result, she is able to not only give a voice and historical agency to ordinary people, but also to predict with surprising accuracy the developments that lay ahead for China.

Based on her experiences in China between 1929 and 1932, *Chinese Destinies* depicts the chaotic period of the civil war, focusing on the human dimensions of the conflict. While scenes of battle and violence are presented in key parts of the book, they do not take centre stage in the narrative as a whole. Instead, there is an emphasis on ordinary people, places, and situations – only occasionally interrupted by the realities of the war. In terms of structure, the book is made up of 30 chapter-like segments, each of varying length: some merely a few pages, while others run up to 20. It also includes 28 accompanying photographs, which add to the documentary feel of the work and as such help to conceal its novelistic impulses. Indeed, reviews at the time tended to emphasise the book’s elements of reportage without detecting the aestheticised nature of the everyday scenes it depicted. In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, George E. Sokolsky suggested that the book acts as a contrast to ‘the elegiac works of Pearl Buck or Nora Waln,’ offering as it does ‘pictures of stark, ugly, unrelieved realism,’⁵ and in his review for the *New Masses*, G.F. Willison assured the readers that although Smedley is a novelist, ‘*Chinese Destinies* is no anemic fiction.’⁶ Recent years, however, have seen a growing recognition of the ways in which Smedley uses the tools and techniques of fiction in her reportage work. In her discussion of *Chinese Destinies* and Smedley’s other writings on China, Mari Yoshihara takes note of the intricate use of focalisation in a non-fiction context; these ‘unique narrative strategies,’ she suggests, allows Smedley to remind the reader of ‘[the] mediated, performative nature of the text.’⁷ More recently, Douglas Kerr has described *Chinese Destinies* as ‘a cinematographic montage,’ highlighting the creative nature of the work as well as its stylised quality. For Kerr, however, the combination of fiction and reportage is a problematic one. As he suggests, Smedley tends to invest the lives she depicts ‘with a historical portentousness that makes them exemplary, and even allegorical; the characters start to behave and speak operatically,’ which in turn makes the text cross over into propaganda.⁸ ‘[T]he propaganda

⁴ In a chapter on Smedley in his recent *Transpacific Community* (2016), Richard Jean So suggests that the author’s lack of canonical standing even within the American proletarian tradition is the result of a retrospective inability to fully situate her work in the context of its times. Focusing on Smedley’s prolific use of the telegraph and her involvement in the campaign to free Chinese writer Ding Ling, he argues that ‘[i]t is precisely her commitment to causes and forms of expression that only in retrospect appear foreign to the American Cultural Front that has led to her scholarly exclusion’ (3).

⁵ George E. Sokolsky, ‘China’s Other Half,’ *Saturday Review of Literature* 4 November (1933) 238.

⁶ G.F. Willison, ‘Revolution in China,’ *New Masses* 4 March (1934) 25.

⁷ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 140.

⁸ Douglas Kerr, ‘Agnes Smedley: The Fellow-Traveler’s Tales,’ *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s* ed. Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2007) 169.

motive ... guides the pen,' he writes, 'and dehumanizes both the characters and the narrative which speaks for them' (179). Earlier, historian Kenneth E. Shewmaker had gone even further in his criticism, describing Smedley's *modus operandi* as that of a 'proselytizing novelist,' whose 'fictionalized characterizations and extreme bias render *Chinese Destinies* an ineffectual instrument for relaying either information or propaganda.'⁹

Yet propaganda, it needs to be remembered, did not become a pejorative until after World War II, only then picking up its connotations of artful ruse and manipulation. But Smedley is not trying to fool anyone here: her stance is clear at all times, and there is no doubt that her sympathies lie with the communists. Indeed, Lewis Gannett called the book 'hot blooded and partisan and honest' in his review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, emphasising Smedley's unapologetic subjectivity and commitment to her own position.¹⁰ While Kerr's point about the occasionally stilted and theatrical mode of characterisation is well-taken and may illustrate why the work has not aged well, I do take issue with Shewmaker's claim that the book offers no insight or information. For while her background in fiction may lend an undeniable subjectivity to her work, it also allows her to open up everyday life as a thematic and interrogative space in a manner otherwise reserved for novelists.

From the very first page of *Chinese Destinies*, it is clear that Smedley is careful to anchor the book in everyday practices. For it is surely not a coincidence that the opening piece begins with the author entering a restaurant, and does so furthermore, by stressing the element of ritual. This is the first line: 'We entered the old-style Shantung restaurant through the kitchen, as is the custom, because the kitchen is in front so that guests may look at the food being cooked on the earthen stoves. For such is the practise in a land where cooking is an art.'¹¹ In other words, there is a sense of Smedley taking us by the hand, enveloping us in the safety and familiarity of customs and manners. Soon, however, through a shift of perspective, we find that the actual focus of the piece is not the author's culinary experience, but rather what she overhears from a group of peasants at the neighbouring table. At first, the middle-aged family men talk about fairly typical things: disobedient sons and daughters, who do not respect the old ways. Yet as the men continue to have their meal there emerges a fearful undercurrent to the conversation, and we are made to understand that this is not just a story of generational conflict. One of the men mentions his sons having new ideas, talking about exploitation and landownership, 'squeeze[ing] the life from the poor,' as he puts it (7). At this point, another man breaks in to acknowledge what has just been gestured towards, as he mentions the execution in a nearby town of a young man accused of being a communist. After this, the men around the table cautiously exchange a few words about the subject, 'as if treading on dangerous grounds' (8). Are these new ideas just youthful idealism, or could there be something to them? The men are unsure. In any case, surely young people should not have to pay so dearly for expressing them? The man who is worried about his sons becomes distraught, as he realises that they may have turned to communism: 'May the gods protect me – can it be that my sons! ...' (8, ellipsis in the original). From this point of despair, Smedley abruptly brings us back to the normality of everyday life, by noting that new guests are arriving: 'From below in the restaurant came the great noise of new dinner guests arriving. The yell of greetings soon drowned the voice of the men' (8). And so, in a way, the story ends up where it started: in the safety and familiarity of customs, as new patrons arrive

⁹ Kenneth E. Shewmaker, *Americans and Chinese Communists, 1927-1945: A Persuading Encounter* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971) 38.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Ruth Price, *The Lives of Agnes Smedley* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 251.

¹¹ Agnes Smedley, *Chinese Destinies: Sketches of Present-Day China* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1933) 3. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

and take part in the dining rituals previously outlined. In other words, the ending suggests a continuation of the status quo, of things going on as usual despite terror and persecution. In this sense, there is a disturbing irony at work in this passage, a sense of terrible things lurking under the surface of normality.

In the third story, 'Peasants and Lords in China,' Smedley travels to Wuxi in Jiangsu province. From her account, Wuxi appears to be a deeply polarised city, reminiscent of both Benjamin Disraeli's and Friedrich Engels's description of Victorian England as two nations – that of the rich and that of the poor. While travelling into the countryside to see rural conditions, Smedley and her party draw attention to themselves, and soon, they are invited to the mansion of the largest landowner in the area, a man named Chu. For fear of disrespecting this local potentate and so as to be able to continue her reportage, Smedley pragmatically accepts the offer. At the mansion, the guests are treated to an extravagant dinner, with each one in the party expected to give a toast as a sign of gratitude. When it comes to Smedley's turn, however, something strange happens – a little sign of something being kept just below the polished surface:

As we all stood, our cups of rice wine held before us, there came a shuffling of feet and the rattling of chains from a corner of the great hall. The surrounding crowd and the dim light from the candles prevented us from seeing far, and we uneasily resumed our dinner. (30-1)

After the dinner, Smedley asks the landowner's guards about the sound she had heard. As if it was nothing out of the ordinary, the guards explain that it was just some peasants being arrested. At this point, Smedley comes to realise that the mansion has its own prison. As if wanting to show off their catch, the guards then bring their guest of honour to the cold and dark dungeon room, where two peasants lie chained hand to foot on a pile of straw. At the sight of this, Smedley exclaims: 'And all the time we were feasting!' (31).

That is, while Smedley and the travelling party have enjoyed the hospitality of the landowner, these peasants have been shackled and humiliated elsewhere in the house, as part of Chu's anti-communist crusade. There is much that could be said about this episode, and how the mansion might be seen as a microcosm of society as a whole – certainly, there is the element of allegory. In this sense, the episode thematically evokes W.H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', published later that same decade, which describes how 'suffering ... takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.' Auden's poem, as we know, was inspired by Breughel's *The Fall of Icarus*, in which 'everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster.'¹² As such, the painting touches on a theme that is both timeless and universal: the frequent disregard towards others' suffering. But can Smedley really be faulted for enjoying her dinner while others lie in chains? Everyday life often blinds us, after all, with its routine and repetition; as such, its surface familiarity can be deceptive. As Henri Lefebvre once put it: 'The everyday is a kind of screen, in both senses of the word. It both shows and hides.'¹³

But how can people be roused from this indifference? How can the veil cast by routine and repetition be lifted? As Smedley knew from her contemporaries, it had to be done through aesthetic means. So far, I have focused on content; now, however, it becomes necessary to consider its intersection with form. For as I have already indicated, the power of Smedley's writing in large part derives from her use of novelistic techniques in a non-fiction context. Consider her exclamation 'And all the time we were feasting' – it is a combination of modernist

¹² W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 2007) 179.

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, 'Towards a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death,' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988) 78.

defamiliarisation and the proletarian call-to-action, designed to cut through the routine of everyday reality. In a well-known turn of phrase, Viktor Shklovsky suggested that art ‘exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.’¹⁴ What Smedley knew, then, was that it could also make cruelty *cruel*.

In what is undoubtedly the most formally inventive piece in the book, Smedley uses a montage technique to edit together fragments of urban life in Shanghai. Appropriately titled ‘A Moving Picture of Shanghai’ and reflecting the influence of Chinese modernist Lu Xun, she here gives us 29 snapshots ranging from a handful of lines to a few paragraphs – but none longer than a page. What emerges is a top-to-bottom, gutter-to-gala composite picture, reminiscent of the then-contemporary collective novel: we see rickshaw drivers, government officials, foreign diplomats, and ordinary factory workers. Fragmented as they are, these snapshots all have one thing in common: their ostensible unimportance, as none of the scenes or incidents would ever merit inclusion in a newspaper. They are too ordinary. Yet in bringing them together in this way, something interesting happens, and the relationship between form and theme becomes clearer. Smedley’s account, it seems, hinges on the idea that that the whole can be assembled from its parts – that snatches of everyday life can shed light on social reality as a whole, on the totality of its relations.

This becomes evident in the final snapshot of the piece, which stands out due to the sudden burst of direct and forceful authorial commentary at the end. In this episode, taking place in the French Concession, a rickshaw driver fails to observe a minor traffic regulation and is as a result severely beaten by a policeman. The incident takes place right out in the open, and so it reinforces the theme of injustice and oppression being perpetrated in the midst of everyday life. Unlike in the previous examples, however, there is a clear and immediate reaction here: a foreign couple observes what happens and tries to intervene. Together, they all walk to the nearest police station, where the foreign couple speaks up in defense of the rickshaw driver. However, it is to no avail, as the French police sergeant tells them they are too soft and sentimental, and that they furthermore should not meddle in domestic affairs. Upon meeting this resistance, the foreign couple relents and then leaves the station.

In a sense, the scene stands out from the other displays of everyday brutality we have seen, in that someone actually reacts. But that reaction does not seem sufficient; rather, it is a little too reminiscent of the surface benevolence of colonialism. This also seems to be Smedley’s point, for as the foreign couple walks away from the station, the woman comments: ‘I want to leave China – I can endure it no more.’ To this, Smedley retorts, inserting herself in the piece: ‘But there is no leaving China for the masses of the oppressed ... The foreigners can run away; or those who do not, remain and join the ranks of those who do the beating ...’ (25). So, we see, European imperialism and domestic repression go hand in hand – all contained in that everyday episode, and it is that realisation which also allows us to make the connections between the diverse fragments we have just seen.

As we come to realise the extent of Smedley’s novelistic influences, we also begin to appreciate the structure of the book. For in the middle of the volume, as if marking a turning point, stands ‘The Revolt of the Hunan Miners,’ which continues the theme of repression normalised as routine, but also goes on to suggest that everyday life is the site from which revolutionary change may spring. Here, the conditions are similar to those in ‘Peasants and Lords in China,’ with the mud huts of the mine workers being contrasted against the warm and comfortable houses of the mine owners. A few years earlier, Smedley explains, communist

¹⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique,’ *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965) 12. (emphasis in the original)

sympathies had taken hold in the mining community, but this had been violently pushed back by the owners of the mine, and as we step into the story, it is made clear that suspected communists still face persecution. Despite the harsh conditions and control, however, the miners seem to have located a space of potential resistance: ‘Down in the tunnels, before the open surface hearths, over in the electric motor rooms, and around the gambling tables, groups of miners gathered together, talked in low tones, and then flowed apart again’ (122). During the small spaces of the day, the miners are able to plan the revolt. Notably, none of these are really secluded spaces – they are at work and at leisure, never sneaking away to some secret meeting hall or otherwise. Drawing on simultaneity, another modernist staple, Smedley is then able to show how the uprising is able to succeed precisely because its planning has been hidden, as it were, in plain sight.

At night, the miners sound off a signal – inauspicious enough not to disturb the sleep of the mine owners, but clear enough to mobilise the miners:

The guards did not hear, the police did not hear, the bosses in their comfortable beds did not hear, the police officers and Kuomintang officials sleeping in the beds of their concubines did not hear. But every miner in Shuikoushan who was supposed to hear, heard. (127)

With the flair and gusto perhaps only a novelist can bring, Smedley then describes how all the miners rise at the exact same time, overpowering all of those lulled by sleep. Here, one formulation in particular stands out: ‘From all sides came the soft thud of hundreds of feet running ...’ (127). ‘Soft thud’ – the sound of hundreds of people running should not be soft by any stretch of the imagination. Still, there is something appropriate about it, in the sense that it conveys how that movement has been built up in a clandestine manner, as it has been woven into everyday life, and so takes the mine owners by surprise.

Here, a reversal is enacted: from everyday life as a site of trauma to a space of resistance, anticipating the theories of Michel de Certeau and his subversive practices of everyday life. In his landmark 1986 work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau sought to nuance Foucauldian determinism, by locating resistance against seemingly monolithic regimes of control in the ‘clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and, makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline.”’¹⁵ This counter-activity, which Certeau calls tactics, depends on the amorphous quality of everyday life for its deployment. ‘[A] *tactic*,’ he writes,

is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus ... It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse.¹⁶

In ‘The Revolt of the Hunan Miners,’ the everyday is a space of resistance, of revolutionary potential – it has a certain formlessness which makes it dynamic. Like in Certeau’s thinking, it is a social space that cannot be fully policed by the dominant order, and so proves essential for the emergence of the uprising. The encounter with China, then, allows Smedley to move beyond the alienation of everyday life so often found in the novels of her American contemporaries, to instead locate forms of agency and resistance where it may be least expected: in the humdrum of daily routine.

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) xiv-xv.

¹⁶ de Certeau 37.

In uncovering the kernel of revolutionary potential within the deep structures of everyday life, Smedley's work also amounts to a form of historiography. For even though her role is ostensibly that of a contemporary chronicler, her work and method nonetheless have implications for the discipline of history.¹⁷ In 1878, Friedrich Engels wrote: 'The idea that political acts, grand performances of state, are decisive in history is as old as written history itself,' a conception that he suggests has left us with little recorded knowledge about that 'which has taken place quietly, in the background, behind these noisy scenes on the stage.'¹⁸ What Engels describes here is something that has interested thinkers across the political spectrum, for even someone as diametrically opposed as Karl Popper could later make a similar point. In his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Popper laments what we talk about when we talk about history, arguing that what is generally known as history – what is taught in schools and treated in books under that name – is actually only one specific form of history, namely that of political power. Open any book purporting to chronicle the history of the world, he argues, and what invariably unfolds across those pages is a story of political dominance told through a succession of empires and superpowers, from the Egyptians and Babylonians to the present day. Somehow, at the expense of other histories, the history of political power has become synonymous with history itself. The gravest consequence of this semantic confounding, Popper argues, is that the most important of histories has remained underwritten: the concrete history of mankind, as he terms it. 'The life of the forgotten, of the unknown individual man; his sorrows and his joys, his suffering and death, this is the real content of human experience down the ages,' he argues. 'But such a history does not and cannot exist; and all the history which exists, our history of the Great and the Powerful, is at best a shallow comedy ...'¹⁹ This history, however, does exist for Smedley, and it is the one she records in *Chinese Destinies*. In doing so, she anticipates later developments in historiography, which would all in different ways answer to Popper's appeal: E.P. Thompson's 'history from below,' Howard Zinn's 'people's history,' and perhaps most significantly, Fernand Braudel's three-part *Civilization and Capitalism*, which sought to 'introduc[e] everyday life . . . into the domain of history.'²⁰

Nevertheless, despite her predominant focus on everyday life, Smedley still manages to include the 'Great and the Powerful' of traditional historiography in her account – albeit in an indirect way. As I have already noted, in situating the revolt of the Hunan miners as the first sign of a turning point in the narrative structure of *Chinese Destinies*, Smedley anticipates the historical development that would follow. Yet 'The Revolt of the Hunan Miners' is prescient in more ways than one, for not only is Hunan the home province of Mao Zedong, but the future chairman was also inextricable from the larger revolutionary activity in the area, as he had led the so-called Autumn Harvest Uprising elsewhere in the province only a few months earlier. Still, there is more: for in the last major piece of the book, 'The Fall of Shangpo,' Mao actually makes a short appearance, in what is likely his earliest portrayal by a Western writer or

¹⁷ In his chapter on Smedley in *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (1993), Peter Hitchcock is interested in how she 'negotiates the fraught relationship of the individual to historical change,' as part of his larger Bakhtinian exegesis of the author's political commitment (129). Yet it is clear that Hitchcock's main concern is not that of historiographic practice. 'How does one represent the vertiginous confrontation in the narrative of history?' he asks at one point, after quoting Smedley's meditations on being caught up in the midst of historical change – only to then note that the answer to the question lies beyond the compass of his study (158-9).

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, 'Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science,' *Collected Works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, Vol 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987) 147.

¹⁹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2002) 476-7.

²⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible* (London: Collins, 1981) 29.

journalist.²¹ Towards the end of this story, dealing with the siege of Shangpo in Jiangxi province, Smedley listens to Mao as he delivers a brief speech following the communist victory, advocating leniency towards the defeated. Naturally, had this account been published 20 years later, it would have come across as generic agitprop. After 400 pages of terror, persecution, and all manner of hardship, Mao appears as the saviour at the end; the narrative logic is predictable, as if borrowed from the most formulaic of proletarian novels. Yet here, in 1929, Mao was only one of many in the Communist Party leadership, and even at the time of Smedley's publishing the account in 1933, the Long March was still a year into the future. In addition, Mao's position at the time of the story was not only modest; it was also precarious, as the result of tensions with party leader Li Lisan. Indeed, although she herself is sympathetic to him, Smedley observes a less than positive response to Mao from the crowd, with some openly challenging his authority: 'From the audience men angrily accused him of trying to protect the landlords from the peasants,' she writes, noting his struggle to respond to the criticism (360). Thus, at the time, Mao was only one of several commanders, his standing uncertain, and so it is only in retrospect that his brief appearance becomes of interest. For any reader after 1949, the appearance of Mao is any number of things: conspicuous, jarring, even uncanny. It is the striking and revelatory detail observed in a photograph only decades afterwards.

The effect of Mao's appearance on the contemporary reader, I would suggest, is a little like that which the sight of Napoleon famously had on Hegel. In an example often used to explain the German philosopher's view of history, Hegel in a letter describes observing Napoleon on horseback in the aftermath of the battle of Jena in 1807. As he writes: 'I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it.'²² Without drawing any other parallels between the two historical figures, it could be said that Hegel and Smedley both observe Napoleon and Mao in the wake of decisive victory and on the cusp of making further history. Yet in the case of Hegel, he could of course appreciate the importance of the moment, given that Napoleon was the most powerful leader in Europe at the time. Smedley, however, had no apparent way of knowing the eventual ascent of Mao, which would only start in earnest with the Long March in late 1934. So, it is the post-1949 readers – not Smedley – who get to experience something similar to Hegel's reaction: sensing the movement of history condensed into one person, who would eventually stretch out over China to dominate it. Yet the difference is that in Smedley's account as a whole, Mao is contextualised as being part of a larger historical process, and not actually driving that process himself, as in the case of Hegel's view of Napoleon. What Smedley does, then, is to elucidate the foundations of that process in everyday life. By keeping her ears close to the ground and her eyes open for the strange in the familiar, she is able to apprehend the historical forces around her, and with the perspective of time, the foreshadowing glimpse of Mao could be seen as confirming the value and validity of her historiographic method.

Conclusion

How can one disengage literary form from politics? In *Chinese Destinies*, Smedley arrived at a literary method that allowed her to at once document and diagnose a complex period in Chinese history, in the process predicting the eventual outcome of those tumultuous decades. At the same time, we must acknowledge, it was also the outcome she hoped for. This explains, of course,

²¹ He is introduced by Smedley as 'the Secretary of the Communist Party in the Army, the commander Mau Tse-tung' (306).

²² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 114.

why her work was shunned in the United States following the proclamation of the People's Republic in 1949 and the accompanying debate of 'who lost China,' which ruined the reputations of those diplomats and intellectuals who had predicted a communist victory. In the case of Smedley, her predicament was also exacerbated by allegations of espionage for the Soviet Union. Thus, at the time of her death from post-surgery complications in 1950, her legacy was doubly stigmatised, with the result that she fell victim to McCarthyism even in her posthumous life. As biographer Ruth Price reveals, Smedley's work was 'burned in a "cleansing campaign"' directed by the Wisconsin senator himself, initially targeting government libraries abroad.²³ Soon, the campaign widened in scope, and as Price explains, '[Smedley's] books disappeared from libraries,' and 'publishers allowed her books to go out of print,' while at the same time showing no interest in bringing out her posthumous work.²⁴ As a result, her name eventually disappeared from public view, buried under the weight of the Red Scare. Yet what this purge conveniently obscured was the fact that Smedley's work had only ten years earlier been used as official World War II propaganda in the United States. For in 1943, the Council on Books in Wartime – a governmentally funded organisation – had promoted the author's then-current *Battle Hymn of China* as recommended reading on the war,²⁵ and later that year, the book was turned into a radio program by the same group.²⁶ Dealing with the Second Sino-Japanese War, the book was no less sympathetic to Chinese communism than Smedley's other work, yet the alliance between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek combined with the larger threat posed by Japan had now turned her into an officially sanctioned voice. Ten years later, however, it was this very same book – along with *Daughter of Earth* – that was targeted by Senator McCarthy, demonstrating with great irony what a difference a decade makes.

In conclusion, then, it would seem that the demands of *realpolitik* have diminished Smedley's innovations in literary non-fiction. Had her work been considered on formal merits alone, I believe she would have stood comfortably next to other writers mining similar literary territory in the same decade, such as John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, and Erskine Caldwell. But today, when Cold War anxieties have on the one hand passed and we are on the other hand seeing a number of generically ambiguous narratives on the 2008 financial crisis – epitomised by Michael Lewis's *The Big Short* – perhaps the time is right for a rediscovery of Smedley's idiosyncratic yet potent brand of literary non-fiction, along with its validation of everyday life as a site of socio-political and historical inquiry.

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²³ Price 420.

²⁴ Price 420.

²⁵ 'Books on the War: Recommended List No. 6,' Series VI. Posters; dates not examined; Council on Books in Wartime Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

²⁶ 'Words at War, Episode 16: *Battle Hymn of China*,' NBC 30 September (1943)
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