

THE LONG MARCH: THE TRUE HISTORY OF COMMUNIST CHINA'S FOUNDING MYTH

by Sun Shuyun (Doubleday, 2007)

A Book Review by Robb Moss

Freedom of speech is one of the enduring principles of the United States, whereas suppression of dissenting opinions has been an enduring policy of the communist party governing China. *The Long March: The True History of Communist China's Founding Myth*, by Sun Shuyun, is a personal voyage of discovery through the mythology of the founding of modern China. This mythology is the "official" story of how Mao lead the communist army on a two-year, 12,500-kilometer trek from southern to northern China in 1934, and how the Communist Party came to power over the ruling Nationalists. As the Chinese-born author travels back along the route and talks to the men and women soldiers who were on the march, she finds inconsistencies, factual errors, and fabrications that lead her to question the "official" story. Shuyun becomes incredulous and disillusioned with each interview, and increasingly suspect of the mythology she was brought up with.

Reading this book is akin to witnessing the painful emergence or rebirth of the author from a closed and controlled political environment to one in which dissent can be voiced and printed. This well-researched and simply written book provides a fascinating perspective on propaganda, politics, and human nature.

Having traveled to China for research, I have had many opportunities to discuss politics with colleagues there. Although I find the day-to-day wranglings of politicians droll, the history and political make-up of a country is interesting to me because that framework exerts a subtle but pervasive influence on how people view themselves and how they conduct their lives. Moreover, the more I learn about other nations' geo-political

and historical foundations, the greater my understanding—and appreciation—of my own freedoms. In America, for instance, our right to freedom of speech makes critique a requisite, if not always fashionable, activity. In China, there is rampant economic freedom, but speech is still curtailed, and critique of the government is forbidden and enforced on an ad-hoc basis.

The Long March reflects the author's perspective of being brought up under communist rule through her college years, and then relocating to a free country to pursue an advanced degree and take up writing as a career. The mythology that she was indoctrinated with as a child appears to me as overly simplistic and obviously unrealistic. But we are all blind to our own childhood myths in some form or another. In this case, her childhood myth was one that was foisted on the entire country: every child learning about the heroic march, about Mao's daring and resourcefulness, about how the peasants were liberated and the wealthy oppressive nationalists were overthrown. There is truth in all these stories, but as Sun Shuyun found out, there are many facts that were omitted, many half-truths that were embellished, and some stories that were excised from the "official" party story.

Mao was a brilliant propagandist, who made sure that the "official" story was internally consistent and enrapturing to all who would subscribe. The soldiers who survived the march, however, are still around to present their own rendition of events that often contradicts the "official" story, as the author discovered. With each interview the veils fell. In the end, the events of the long march sounded similar to war stories the world over and dissimilar to the mythology that the current communist government claims as their origin.

The lesson in this book for me was how I take freedom of speech for granted. The author's viewpoint seems inordinately naïve from my perspective, but that is because I've been brought up questioning authority, second-guessing my elders, critiquing our leaders, and critically reading history and media. The political situation that defines my identity and lifestyle is in juxtaposition with Sun Shuyun's. A free country is vastly different from a closed country in some fundamental and pervasive ways. And as much as I may disagree with any current political situation, I am always free to speak out about it and work for change. This unfortunately is not the case in many places around the world, which is a point that those of us who reside in a free country need to be reminded of on a regular basis. ☹