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Henry Luce and China

Prelude to an American Crusade

Soon after the second atomic bomb fell on Japan, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek decided to launch an offensive aimed at postwar American public opinion. Chiang was determined to counter the growing number of Americans who accused China's government of corruption and worse. As part of its campaign, Chiang's government invited Henry R. Luce, head of Time Inc., to visit China. In the words of the Chinese ambassador, the influential publisher's return to the land of his birth would be "of mutual benefit to China and the United States."[1] The Beijing *Chronicle* was more direct: Luce, the paper commented, published "articles on China which greatly influenced American public opinion in favor of China."[2]

Henry Robinson Luce (1898–1967) was the man who had cofounded the powerful newsweekly magazine called *Time*. His *Fortune* was the leading business magazine, and everyone read *Life*, America's weekly picture book. The *March of Time* newsreels were the best of their day. Henry Luce the would-be traveler, however, was aware of a potential problem. Harry S Truman detested *Time* for its Republican bias. As a result, a nervous State Department official decided to ask the White House about Luce's request for a revalidated passport. Much to Luce's relief, Truman's aide Charles Ross voiced no objections, perhaps because Chiang himself had invited Luce to China.[3]

Harry Luce, who was then forty-seven years old, left the United States on 29 September 1945 on a plane provided by General Robert B. McClure, head of the Chinese Combat Command. On 6 October, for the first time in more than four years, Luce saw the land where he had been born in 1898. After his plane landed near Chongqing, this devout son of Presbyterian missionaries attended church services at U.S. Army headquarters, once the site of a Methodist missionary compound. Luce was in a marvelous mood. American soldiers thanked Harry Luce for the "pony," or wartime overseas editions, of *Time*. Their gratitude moved Luce, but he most enjoyed his meetings with the men who ran China. Luce took tea with Nationalist financier Dr. H. H. "Daddy" Kung and

dined with Chiang and his beautiful wife Mei-ling Soong, known to Americans as Madame Chiang.

Luce, the ever serious guest, discoursed with the Generalissimo on the nature of freedom. Chiang believed that freedom consisted of behaving in accord with one's nature, like a fish in water; he added that people sometimes needed to be told how to act. Luce overlooked the disturbing implication of his host's simile: Despite demands for liberalization, Chiang Kai-shek would not easily surrender his role of tutor to his people.[4] In the face of demands for land reform, democracy, and multiparty governance, he intended to stand firm. To Chiang, the most dire threat was the burgeoning Communist insurgency. Instead of liberalism, Chiang would face down the Reds with weapons and propaganda. Americans, he worried, did not understand the Chinese Communists. They were not, Chiang knew, "agrarian reformers," eager to bring democracy and reform to the impoverished millions. Because of American pressure he had to negotiate with the Marxists, but the Generalissimo knew that he could count on the support of Henry Robinson Luce and his powerful network of philanthropic and political contacts. They formed the heart of what would soon become known as the "China lobby."

The latest American-mediated attempt to reunite China had reached a dead end. The Communist delegation would soon return to its wartime base, in the remote northern outpost of Yan'an. At the farewell banquet for the Communist leader Mao Zedong (then known as Mao Tse-tung), Harry Luce found himself the only foreigner among the three hundred assembled guests. His hosts had seated him on the dais, near Mao, where Luce examined his heavy, peasantlike face and his "sloppy blue-denim garment." He noticed that when Mao spoke to the gathering, he started slowly and then engaged in a "full-voiced shout." Perhaps Mao needed to convey sincerity, for he was making an unlikely pledge to support "unity under Chiang Kai-shek." Later, Luce and Mao met face to face, and the Communist leader expressed surprise at seeing the American in Chongqing. He gazed at Luce, Luce wrote in his diary, "with an intense but not unfriendly curiosity." The two men had little to say, however, and Luce soon found himself listening to Mao's "polite grunts."

Luce also renewed his acquaintance with Zhou Enlai. The two men had first met in 1941, when Luce was gathering information about China's resistance to the Japanese invader. At that time, Zhou invited the Luces to dine with him at the Guangdong (then Kuang-tung) restaurant, in this same city of Chongqing.[5] Zhou traded on his famous charm, but he was wasting it on Harry Luce, who disliked that quality in men – and especially in a Communist. On 10 October, when the two men met at the banquet for Mao, Zhou complained to Luce about Time Inc.'s coverage of China. *Time*'s editor-in-chief responded heatedly and denounced the current "world-wide left-wing propaganda" campaign against Chiang. But Luce, who would soon be traveling to Communist-infested Shandong, nonetheless professed his interest in meeting rural Communists in the field. Zhou promised to oblige Luce, but Chiang Kai-shek would have viewed

any such visit as apostasy. Luce never visited Yan'an, nor did he ever review Communist units in the field.

Luce's tour only underscored his lifelong isolation from the great masses of China's people. He had spent his boyhood in a missionary compound in Shandong province and had later attended a British-run school. In his relative isolation, Harry had followed in the footsteps of an earlier generation: "The missionaries," one historian has written, "made little attempt to understand what we might broadly call the social structure of Chinese life."[6] As Luce admitted when a young man, "I know nothing of their [Chinese] social life aside from the formal feasts & holidays."[7] In 1945 Luce still viewed China from the vantage point of a Christian missionary compound.[8] Though famous for his curiosity, Luce relegated journalistic inquiry to a distant second place, behind his moral commitment to Chiang's Nationalist cause. As Luce defined it, China was America's ward. Step by faltering step, China would enter a marvelous new age in which Christianity, modern science, and the American big brother would bring the blessings of liberty and salvation to 450 million Chinese. Chiang welcomed his American visitor in ways calculated to please him.

Wes Bailey, Luce's personal aide, did not think that "any foreign visitor" had been "so welcome in China since Marco Polo." Indeed, Chiang's government turned Luce's tour into one long celebration.[9] Everywhere Luce rejoiced in the smiling faces of cheering schoolchildren, self-important governors, decorated generals, deans of Christian colleges, Buddhist monks, and government-approved newspaper editors. He was unaware that the citizens and children who cheered him in October 1945 were really actors playing roles in Chiang's version of Potemkin's village.

Despite the pleas of at least one prominent Chinese liberal, Luce refused to pressure Chiang into embracing democratic reforms. Instead, he agreed that "lawless military activity of every sort" must first be vigorously suppressed.[10] The publisher had come to strengthen and celebrate China and not to criticize its leaders. He came not as a journalist, but as a pilgrim. Luce returned to his boyhood haunts in Shandong for the first time in thirteen years and then traveled to Beijing. There, Luce inspected his father's old campus at Yenching University, where the Reverend Luce had once served as vice-president. Luce's Christian conscience was gladdened. In Beijing, the mayor hosted a fabulous banquet in the publisher's honor, and Luce, who was usually a moderate drinker, emptied many a glass filled with a highly potent local beverage. True to form, he was up and about early the next morning, resuming his tour. Eventually, Luce boarded a U.S. Navy ship docked in the harbor at Tianjin and visited the nearby Marine headquarters, where the local people, he believed, rejoiced in the presence of one thousand U.S. Marines.

In Tianjin, a homesick, disturbed Marine decided that Luce's magazines were responsible for his postwar duty in China. For years, they had argued for intervention, for war, for what Luce had in 1941 called the "American Century."

One day, this Marine saw Harry Luce in the distance. After loading his M-1 rifle, the soldier took aim at the back of Luce's neck. Fortunately for his would-be victim, another Marine dissuaded his buddy from firing the weapon. Years later, Luce learned about the incident and thanked his benefactor for his "interference in changing the signals."[11]

Saved from an early death, Luce arrived in Qingdao, where he had passed many summers as a child. He again admired its "magnificent port" and swam in the blue Pacific, which had recently been stained with the blood of American soldiers. Luce dined aboard the USS *Alaska* in the light of a full moon and basked in the fullness of American power. At times, Luce seemed entranced, as when he wrote that "incredible military power" was "represented by the Stars and Stripes." He later recalled that evening off Qingdao as part of "an autumn so rare and bright [that it] makes the heart joyful." Luce had surrendered to a sentimental euphoria generated by his hosts. "Problems [in China] are terrific," Harry Luce admitted, but he quickly added that they were "by no means insoluble."[12] By late November 1945, Luce predicted, "crack government armies, mostly U.S.-equipped and U.S.-trained, will have arrived in North China." This reoccupation of China "by the Chinese with American aid is something . . . unique in history," he added. Yet some observers urged caution: *Time*'s Bill Gray warned against overestimating the firepower of Chiang's vaunted American-trained and -equipped divisions.[13] Luce ignored him.

In a telegram home, Harry Luce cabled that China needed only "three or four ships to carry coal from Manchuria to Shanghai to get the wheels of industry started there."[14] He would send a hundred American businessmen to China, where they could help to restart the economy. But Luce also favored dispatching ten missionaries to that garden of souls. All that was required, he believed, was what his father had called "Lucepower," but on a grand scale: more money, more missionaries, more technicians, more modern weapons, more ships. Luce's thoughts raced ahead to glorious projects, such as restoring Christian missions and colleges disrupted by the terrible war. A proud alumnus of Yale College, Luce intended to reactivate Yale-in-China, an educational program that dated back two generations. Luce also hoped to do even more for United China Relief, the highly successful private aid program that he had founded in 1940.

The United States, *Time* pontificated, had "gone too deeply into the China affair to duck all responsibility for what may ensue."[15] Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce, Harry's second wife, captured his mood when she wrote that he had sent "a note of urgency concerning immediate aid for China" but seemed "cheerful about the long term chances of our friends there." She added, "How well Harry and his father built in this matter of our friendship and understanding with the Orient!"[16] Never was such confidence so misplaced. In fact, Henry Luce's Chinese acquaintances were members of a beleaguered elite. Many of them had converted to a religion alien to their compatriots. Luce had few if any recorded contacts with poor peasants or struggling urban workers, whose misery and aspirations offered Communism its chance. Even as a teenager, Luce had recognized the problem of his cultural isolation: "I have talked with our

servants and a few others," he wrote, "but usually in such circumstances that *I* created the conversation – In other words I have never been in a Chinese 'crowd' using the word in the collegiate slang sense."[17] As a journalist, Luce failed to visit Communist-controlled regions, and he rarely conversed with peasants, radical students, underpaid civil servants, dissidents, or opposition politicians. Stubbornly, Luce continued to insist that Chiang spoke for the masses both men failed to understand.

Though personally immune to the seductions of luxury, Henry R. Luce took for granted a lifestyle alien to all but the wealthiest of Chinese. When Luce mused about spending the next summer in Qingdao, he spoke to an aide about his modest housing needs. The place "need not be swank," wrote Luce, but the house should include "three or four bedrooms, a living room, dining room and something to serve as a library or study." He added, "I presume there will be no great difficulty in getting adequate servants."[18] In fact, Luce would never rent that non-swank home on a China sea.

Sadly, Henry Luce was visiting a dying, mythical China that was the product of his own imagination and upbringing. He misjudged his hosts, but another factor also blinded him to Nationalist China's grim prospects. Luce worshipped American power and could not imagine that a country that had produced more than 299,000 military aircraft during World War II could fail in China. Long after history had played a terrible trick on Luce's China, he argued wistfully that if he and Major General Lemuel Shepherd, the Marine commander in Shandong, had made China policy in 1945, then "China would not now be Communist."[19]

China: The Challenge

For years Luce had agonized over his media's coverage of China. He wanted to inform Americans about the problems facing Chiang without undermining support for the Chinese leader. This was proving to be impossible. Theodore H. White, a young, ambitious, and increasingly radical *Time* correspondent, tried to warn Luce against making myths about China. Americans, he warned, would learn the truth about a corrupt regime and would turn against it. *Time*'s credibility, White added, would suffer. But Luce intended to stand by Chiang, and he had already made sure that White had been sent home, pending reassignment. Luce also wanted to rid himself of Teddy White's colleague, Annalee Jacoby.

Luce's meeting with Jacoby went badly; Luce sourly concluded, "We should not have allowed this situation to continue so long."[20] After that "painful" discussion, Luce laconically noted, "She returns tomorrow to U.S." Having rid himself of Jacoby, Luce noted, "We have a great opportunity here to offset much mediocre reporting and to develop journalistically new territory."[21] A crack young reporter named Bill Gray could help *Time*, but Luce wanted to make sure that he did not have a second Teddy White on his hands: Without a trace of irony, Luce told Gray that *Time* was nonpartisan – but supported

Chiang. He added that *Time* favored the liberal elements in China, *as long as they were loyal to Chiang's government*.[22] But signs of trouble could not be ignored or played down forever, and even Charlie Murphy, a pro-Chiang man, admitted that the Communist forces were "pressing tirelessly into north China."[23] His editors insisted that he find better news.

In the middle of November, *Life* published Murphy's long article "China Reborn."[24] This glowing account of the American redemption of China lived up to its title.[25] Charlie Murphy insisted that in the event of full civil war, Chiang's modern divisions would prevail. That test might come soon, for *Time* suddenly sounded an alarm about new Communist offensives launched from bases in Henan and Shanxi.[26] In November Zhou Enlai warned an American diplomat that the Communists did not want a civil war, but if forced to fight, they would prevail.[27] Soon after Henry Luce left China in that autumn of 1945, Bill Gray cabled, "We are confronted with the ugly fact of civil war."[28]

Luce responded by launching a campaign for the retention of American troops in China; *Life* praised the Marines, who had a "clear right and duty" to guard Chiang's railroad lines against possible Communist attacks.[29] "Unless something else turns up in the next one or two days," Luce told a senior editor, "this [China] is No. 1 subject for TIME this coming week." Certainly, much depended upon Truman's policy. The new president had taken office only in April, and Luce carefully monitored interesting news from Washington. "For the American government," cabled *Time*'s well-informed James Shepley, "the hour of decision on China had arrived this week."[30] America, Luce believed, should continue to train Chiang's divisions and assign U.S. military advisers to Chinese field units. Nor did Luce rule out the eventual deployment of American combat forces. In *Life*'s hyperbolic words, "We need regret nothing if we stick by our friends in Asia, the best friends now and the greatest friends-to-be a nation ever had."[31] The two years that followed World War II would sorely test this assumption.

A Troubled Marriage

In the Luce home, things were going poorly. Former congresswoman Luce was tiring of her brief career in the House of Representatives (she would refuse to run in 1946). Luce no longer spent much of the year in her luxurious Wardman Park suite in Washington. Instead, she came home to Harry in New York and Connecticut to an uncertain reception. Luce's infatuation with Clare Boothe had long since cooled; according to editorial director John Shaw Billings, the two sometimes seemed to "hate each other."[32] After Clare's much publicized conversion to Catholicism, Luce resented her scheme to have his first marriage annulled; nor did her health problems make things easier. She showed troublesome symptoms that ultimately necessitated a hysterectomy.[33] Company gossip C. D. Jackson related one scene in which Clare was in tears, lying on the floor, crying to Harry, "It's all because I couldn't give you a baby that you don't love me anymore." This was too much for Luce, who told her to get up and stop

1.1 The Luces in mid-century. (Library of Congress)

the nonsense. Clare retaliated by denying him sexual relations and even asked Jackson to find a woman for Harry. Nothing serious, of course, just a sexual outlet for a clumsy lover with a strong libido. C. D. Jackson, who thought Clare was a "bitch," did not wish to add pimping to his long list of accomplishments at Time Inc.

Seeking escape from Clare's melodramatic outbursts and inner coldness, and riddled by a guilt that he refused to confront, Harry Luce fell into affairs with anyone who wanted him. At one point in 1947, a woman Harry had evidently bedded in California refused to be fobbed off as a one-night stand. According to C. D. Jackson, "The little bitch really has Harry by the short hairs and every time she pulls 'em, it costs Harry another $100,000."[34] Luce was making long, private phone calls from his office, probably to lawyers. The unfortunate woman threatened suicide and had to be hospitalized.[35] (With his usual bile, John Shaw Billings observed, "Sex makes more damn fools out of more people than liquor.")[36] For a time, Luce was involved with Jean Dalrymple, a lively theatrical agent whom he had met during the war.[37] Luce's interest soon dissipated, however, and he started to complain that Jean would not let him go. "What

a hypocrite [Luce] is," wrote John Shaw Billings, "preaching great Christian virtues and then practicing just the opposite!"[38] "How pretentious and hollow sound all his great morality and idealism," added the cruel Billings.[39]

Luce sometimes confided in Clare, who, unlike her errant husband, enjoyed analyzing such affairs. Ultimately, Clare, a new but fervent Catholic, made one thing clear: no divorce, no matter what the circumstances. Clare pledged herself to chastity – although sexual passion had long since departed from her marriage. (Feigning indifference, she wickedly wrote, "Lie where and with whom you can.") After this or that revealed affair, Harry's mumbled regrets and professions of love would leave Clare triumphant but unmoved; they lacked "substance" and follow-through, she declared. And in an amazing bit of irrationality that revealed how difficult she could be, Clare blamed her husband for *not* opposing her conversion to Catholicism in 1945–1946. She reasoned that his acceptance betokened indifference and, ultimately, a desire to divorce her. He could then argue, she believed, that "the Catholic Church broke up our marriage." Perversely, Clare Luce then thanked her husband, for however unworthy his motives, Harry had helped to guide her toward the path to salvation. One can sympathize with the beleaguered Harry Luce.

Clare Luce then decided that she and her errant husband were both "moral lepers." Yet she also admitted, "I have never had the courage or wisdom or patience to live well with you." She then bemoaned one's inability to enjoy a "happy sexual life, a *married* life with the partner of our choice."[40] But she added, "I would with the utmost joy die for you this or any other night." Most moving was Clare's admission, "I never loved another, except [for my late daughter Ann, killed in an auto accident in 1944], so deeply." But despite these sentiments, Luce's marriage was evolving into a rivalry and partnership, or what Clare called a friendship.[41] The crusade against global Communism would cement their alliance.

Always on stage but never satisfied with her performance, Clare Boothe Luce perplexed her contemporaries. The fault was not entirely her own. She once declared, "Thought has no sex," and she added, "Either one thinks, or does not think."[42] But a woman who skewered her enemies, including FDR, with dazzling relish, was bound to make enemies and endure pain. Later, bright, attractive women who were outspoken earned the plaudits of the media. But American culture in the 1940s was boldly sexist, and Clare Boothe Luce was something of a freak. She was widely admired, but she remained a freak nonetheless: After she gave an important if nasty speech on foreign policy, a House colleague rushed to congratulate her – for her beautiful legs. At Time Inc., Harry's colleagues gossiped about her; some called her a drunk, and others claimed that she had lost her mind.[43] But Luce himself treated her as his intellectual equal, and he never condescended to her. For this reason, their political and intellectual partnership survived both Clare's emotional storms and the dalliances of her strange, driven husband.

As their love cooled, the Luces found common ground in anti-Communist politics. Clare Luce had played small roles when Luce sketched out his wartime

1.2 Fund-raising for China: The Luces (center and right, with an unidentified guest) host a tea, 1947. (American Bureau for Medical Aid to China Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University)

ideas on the American Century and the reorganization of the world. After 1944, however, they coordinated their campaigns on behalf of Chiang and against Communism as these passions superseded earlier, more personal ones.

A Driven, Lonely Genius

Henry Luce's relationship with his colleagues mirrored his troubled marriage. Although he really loved Time Inc., the atmosphere around him lacked joy: "I never saw Harry happy," recalled longtime senior editor Dan Longwell.[44] Tom Matthews observed, "He never did anything for pleasure, or perhaps it would be fairer to say that the business of journalism was his only pleasure."[45] Eager to make history and influence events, Luce felt stimulated by challenges and crusades. "This is a wonderful world," he once blurted out, "and I wouldn't miss being in it for anything."[46] But when it came to dealing with human beings, the results were less ecstatic. Visitors and colleagues commented on Luce's "remarkable gaze" and upon his "total absorption of what's going on in a given moment."[47] John Billings observed that Luce seemed to feel "happily useful" only when he was on "large tours of inquiry, shooting through the firmament like an inquisitive comet."[48] Yet what absorbed Luce? Certainly not the personalities nor problems of the people around him. John Shaw Billings,

for example, saw Luce as a "strange lonely fellow" who didn't "know how to have fun and rest."[49] Billings also noted, "There's no place he really wants to go and nobody he really wants to go with." Not content with that jab, Billings added, "I'm getting a little bored with being his father confessor, the only guy in the company who will listen to his long-winded stammering."[50] Writer Emmet Hughes recalled Luce as a "lonely man" but also a "clumsy, graceless man" who showed "no capacity for human relationships."[51] And Bea Grover, wife of a top Luce lieutenant, observed that Luce had "the worst natural bad manners I've ever seen."[52]

An anecdote enjoyed by generations of Time Incers (as Time Inc.'ers called themselves) laid bare this side of Luce. One morning, he entered an elevator before ascending to the thirty-third floor of the Time-Life Building at Rockefeller Plaza. Luce expected to be the sole passenger, the way he preferred it. Suddenly, however, a young woman joined him, whereupon the elevator operator shut the doors and the brief ascent began. Luce stood there, glumly staring at his shoes. His companion broke the awkward silence and asked the middle-aged man if he were ill. "I'm Henry Luce," he growled. "Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of," the employee supposedly answered.[53] To avoid such spontaneous contacts with impudent inferiors, Luce thereafter insisted upon riding up alone each morning. His aides put out the word that he liked to pray before beginning his long workday.

Luce's nervous energy and brusque questions meant that editors needed to be fast on their feet. They were there to answer a myriad of Henry Luce's queries, and woe to the man who tried to bluff his way through an incompetent response. Luce focused upon one subject at a time; the boss alone decided when to change the subject or terminate the conversation. Leaning forward in his chair, Luce would slap his knee, and that was the end of it.[54] He remained impossibly restless, whether pacing about his large, mahogany-paneled office or scrawling one of his famous penciled memos. Peculiar habits added to Luce's reputation as a difficult colleague. Often inarticulate, he relied heavily upon gestures and expressions, which only a "sound movie could capture."[55] (It was said that after years of being around Luce, associates unconsciously mimicked his nasal monotone and slight stammer.)

Behind all the quirks and the harsh voice lurked a formidable intellect, a trait that made Harry Luce even more feared. This, after all, was a man who called himself "more intelligent than 90% of the reading public" (never a braggart, Luce was being modest). No wonder that one close associate complained, "[Luce] hurts my feelings the way he never talks to me – as if he didn't consider me intelligent enough to be responsive."[56] "I suppose he's the nearest I'll ever come to associating with a genius in my time," recalled senior editor Dan Longwell, in a grudging compliment.[57] Senior associates often preferred to communicate with Luce through memoranda to avoid having their heads "snapped off."[58] Certainly, Luce's journalists and business managers did their very best work, for they feared doing anything less.

At times, Luce seemed to be oblivious of the sacrifices made by others on behalf of their common enterprise. Corinne Thrasher, Luce's long-serving