
EACS AT FIFTY: RESEARCH ARTICLE

The History Behind Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*

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This article reexamines the production and reception of *Report from a Chinese Village* (1965) by Jan Myrdal, one of the most influential Western accounts of Maoist China. Long regarded as a pioneering, quasi-anthropological portrayal of rural life in the People's Republic, the book shaped a generation's understanding of Chinese communism at a moment when the Soviet model had lost much of its moral authority. Drawing on previously unexplored archival materials in Sweden and China, this study reconstructs the political and institutional context in which Myrdal's report was conceived, researched, and written. Myrdal arrived in Beijing in 1962, shortly after the catastrophic Great Leap Forward, which resulted in tens of millions of deaths. Yet the famine is entirely absent from his account of Liulin village and from his later China writings based on the same visit. Using correspondence, diaries, and Chinese Foreign Ministry documents, this article shows that Myrdal's trip was carefully orchestrated as part of a broader effort to counter Soviet criticism and shape foreign perceptions. His access, travel, and interviews were mediated by state-controlled organisations, and the village he studied belonged to a model revolutionary landscape near Yan'an. The article further argues that Myrdal encountered rumours and signs of severe rural distress but chose neither to investigate nor report them, in order to avoid damaging China's international reputation.

本文重新考察瑞典作家揚·米爾達 1963 年出版的《來自中國農村的報告》的成書過程及其歷史影響。該書長期被奉為西方理解毛澤東時代中國農村的典範之作，在蘇聯模式信譽式微之際，塑造了一代人對中國共產主義的認知。借助新發掘的瑞典與中國檔案，本文揭示米爾達的寫作深受政治與制度框架制約：米爾達 1962 年訪華時正值大饑荒餘波未息，卻在其記述中全然回避饑饉問題。檔案顯示，其行程與訪談均由中方官方機構精心安排，所考察的村莊亦屬延安附近的“革命樣板”區域。儘管在京期間曾聽聞農村困頓之狀，米爾達出於維護中國國際形象的考量，主動放棄查證，轉而將官方及“友人”敘述奉為事實。本文由此揭示該書作為冷戰時代意識形態敘事的知識邊界與政治底色。

Keywords: Propaganda, Great Leap Forward, fellow travellers, Sweden, Sinology

關鍵詞：宣傳，大躍進，同路人，瑞典，漢學

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Introduction

When *Report from a Chinese Village* was published in English in 1965, it quickly became one of the most influential Western accounts of the People's Republic of China. Its author, Jan Myrdal, was widely regarded as a rare Western witness from within Mao Zedong's China; a mediator of a reality largely closed to outsiders. Translated into more than twenty languages and adopted in university courses worldwide, the book acquired remarkable authority. Readers travelled to the village of Liulin (柳林) with the volume in hand, and major newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* praised it in their reviews. At a moment when Soviet communism had lost much of its moral legitimacy following the revelations of Stalin's terror, Myrdal's portrayal made China appear as a more humane and hopeful socialist alternative.

By the early 1960s, Myrdal was an established Swedish intellectual and a member of the Communist Party of Sweden (Sveriges kommunistiska parti). The son of Alva Myrdal and Gunnar Myrdal, both prominent figures in Swedish public life, he brought considerable symbolic capital to his engagement with China. After spending several years in what he termed "poor Asia," deeply affected by conditions in countries such as India and Afghanistan, he was invited in 1962 to spend a year in the People's Republic to produce a series of reports.

Myrdal arrived in China in the immediate aftermath of one of the worst famines in world history, triggered by the collectivisation drive of the Great Leap Forward (Da yuejin 大躍進). Yet this catastrophe, which had devastated the countryside between 1958 and 1962, is entirely absent from his depiction of rural life.

The book was received with enthusiasm, often with near-scientific authority. The historian Jacques Gernet described it as "the best book I have read on Communist China," while Claude Lévi-Strauss praised it as a pioneering anthropological account of contemporary history. For the Chinese authorities, Myrdal represented an ideal intermediary: a respected Western intellectual with anti-colonial sympathies who appeared to convey the Maoist development model in an objective and credible voice.

Blending reportage, ethnography, and social analysis, *Report from a Chinese Village* presented itself as a documentary account based on interviews with villagers who, in their own words, described revolution and socialist transformation. Myrdal cast himself as a spokesman for the rural poor, a mediator of reality rather than its interpreter.

Later on, however, doubts were raised about the book's claims to authenticity. It portrays a harmonious collective of peasants enthusiastically building socialism, yet makes no mention of the famine that claimed tens of millions of lives. The China specialist Nils Olof Ericsson argued that the account was scarcely distinguishable from official propaganda, and the historian David Caute asserted that "no Western writer embodied the fellow-traveller's

double standards more powerfully than the radical Swede Jan Myrdal.” Neither scholar, however, had access to evidence concerning the concrete circumstances under which the book was produced, and, as I will show, seems not to have read the book as carefully as it deserves.

This article reconsiders the making of the *Report from a Chinese Village*. On the basis of previously unexplored archival materials, it examines why Myrdal was invited to China in 1962, under what political and institutional conditions he worked, and how the book was actually produced. To what extent were the interviews conducted freely? Was Liulin selected by Party authorities? Did cadres supervise the conversations? The most important question, I would argue, is what did Myrdal know, or not know, about the recently concluded famine, and why does it remain absent from his narrative?

The analysis draws on extensive new archival evidence, including the Jan Myrdal Society's collections in Varberg, which contain tens of thousands of letters and documents, among them Gun Kessle's detailed travel diaries from China. Additional sources include papers held at the Labour Movement Archives and Library (Arbetsrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek) in Flemingsberg, materials from the National Library of Sweden (Kungliga biblioteket), and documents from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive (Zhongguo waijiaobu dang'an 中國外交部檔案) in Beijing. By reconstructing the planning, fieldwork, and publication process behind the book, the article offers a more historically grounded account of how one of the twentieth century's most influential works on China came into being.

Asian poverty and the Myrdal family

It has been estimated that 30–40 million people perished in the politically induced famine of the Great Leap Forward (Dikötter 2010. Yang 2013). Several million more were beaten to death as “counterrevolutionaries” and “saboteurs (Dikötter 2010).” Yet the outside world remained unaware of the scale of this disaster. Amid the chaos, the propaganda and censorship apparatus functioned as intended. Instead of addressing the famine, the *Communist Party* concentrated on concealing that starvation and death were occurring.

The problem was compounded by the deepening conflict with the Soviet Union, which had warned against the Great Leap Forward and now viewed Mao as a lunatic causing a disaster (Radchenko 2009. Lüthi 2009). Since all of China's previous contacts with foreign communist parties and sympathizers outside East Asia had been mediated through Moscow, Beijing found itself with few direct allies abroad. A crisis of confidence arose as communists around the world heard from Moscow how disastrously the Chinese revolution had failed.

To present its own version of events and counter rumours of a total disaster, China began at the very height of the crisis to invite foreigners: students, language teachers, editors, journalists, and writers. Until then, the regime had been highly restrictive in allowing outsiders in. Forced to change course, it carefully selected invitees who were not only sympathetic communists but also ignorant of China and unable to speak Chinese (Becker 1996). This made it easier to control the country's image abroad and reduced the risk of espionage. It was also considered best if the longtime guests came as married couples, to avoid romantic entanglements between foreigners and Chinese citizens.

Neutral Sweden attracted particular interest. It had good relations with China and had been the first Western country to recognise and establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic. Until the late 1950s, relations between the Chinese and Swedish Communist Parties had mostly been channelled through Moscow, but in 1952 China had sent an acrobat troupe on a month-long propaganda tour of Sweden to improve its image during the Korean War.

Within Sweden's Communist Party (SKP), many members viewed the People's Republic of China favourably. In September 1960, SKP chairman Hilding Hagberg was invited to a private meeting with China's ambassador, Dong Yueqian (董越千). Notes from the conversation, preserved in files at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs—briefly open to researchers affiliated with Chinese institutions—reveal that Ambassador Dong reported to Beijing that Hagberg did not believe the rumours of a famine disaster in China. Having visited the country the previous year for the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic, Hagberg had seen nothing of the sort (Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive). The ambassador assured Hagberg that Soviet claims of famine were in fact lies. Hagberg seems to have accepted this readily. The ongoing Great Leap Forward, Dong told his Swedish counterpart, “was a great advance on all fronts.” The Chinese ambassador claimed to have toured the countryside himself and seen how well everything was going.

This was, of course, a blatant falsehood. The Great Leap Forward had already turned into a catastrophe. Nor was the embassy unaware of this. The embassy cook, Hsiung Chang-shui, for example, received letters from relatives describing how desperately they were starving. When he read one of these letters inside the embassy, he wept openly in front of his colleagues (“Red Diplomat Defects”).

At the same time as Dong Yueqian's meeting with Hagberg, China was preparing for the National Day celebrations of 1 October 1960. Even as vast parts of the country starved, the regime launched plans to invite over 2,000 foreign guests. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, warned internally that “the task of providing food will be extremely burdensome. Recently, due to tensions in food supply, bad elements have broken into food trucks delivering provisions for foreign guests (Lovell 2015).”

Among the “foreign guests” arriving for the celebrations was C. H. Hermansson, who in 1964 would succeed Hagberg as SKP chairman. At the time, Hermansson headed the Party organ *Ny Dag* and travelled to Beijing with a Swedish cultural delegation that spent a month touring the country by air, train, and boat. The Chinese authorities took exceptional precautions to ensure that no visitor could suspect that the worst famine in human history was under way. “Reduce as much as possible the number of cities visited by foreign guests,” instructed internal directives. Any difficulties encountered were blamed on Moscow’s obstruction. “The Soviet embassy looked shuttered and closed,” Hermansson noted, as he was carefully shown incomplete steelworks and other facilities abandoned by recalled Soviet experts (Hermansson 1993, 168, 208).

China’s collaboration with the Swedish Communist Party continued that November, when Moscow hosted a major meeting of the world’s communist parties. During the conference, the Swedish delegation was approached by the Chinese delegation, which expressed dissatisfaction that Moscow wanted a passage in the final communiqué to be binding on all participants (Hagberg 1995). The Swedes sided with the Chinese, opposing Moscow’s demand and helping to have the wording removed. Possibly as a gesture of gratitude for this kinship, the Chinese delegates told Hagberg that they wished to invite Swedish communist writers and journalists to China. Hagberg found the idea excellent.

Plans to identify suitable candidates began immediately thereafter. Chinese officials from the Stockholm embassy visited the editorial offices of *Ny Dag* in person to look for journalists who might be invited. One staff member suggested his son, Per Olof Leijon, who subsequently became a student in Beijing for three years. The journalist Sture Källberg was invited, along with his family. Nils Holmberg—who would later break with the SKP and lead a pro-Beijing splinter party—had already been recruited by the Chinese the previous year, together with his wife. Officially, they were to assist with the Swedish edition of the propaganda magazine *Bildtidningen Kina* and with the translation of Mao Zedong’s writings into Swedish. Such work involved as much ideological training as linguistic assistance. Foreigners officially designated as “translators” or “editors” were permitted only to polish the Chinese texts, not to translate or write them independently.

China also needed its own language specialists for diplomacy and intelligence in countries where it had previously relied on Soviet help. Swedish was among the languages to be learned. Thus the couple Vivi and Jan Ingvar Löfstedt were invited to teach at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. Yet the true prize of China’s campaign to establish Western contacts and promote international propaganda would prove to be Jan Myrdal.

Jan Myrdal was the only son of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, two of the most influential figures of Swedish Social Democracy and foremost among the intellectual architects of the Swedish welfare state. Both also had international careers. Gunnar Myrdal, was professor of economics and a leading representative of the so-called Stockholm School. He had held

ministerial posts in the Swedish government, but in the late 1930s was invited by the Carnegie Foundation to the United States to direct a major research project on racial segregation. The result, *An American Dilemma*, became an international success and left a deep imprint on the American public debate. After the Second World War, Gunnar Myrdal was appointed head of a United Nations agency in Geneva, tasked with contributing to Europe's reconstruction and managing the growing divide between East and West in the conflict with the Soviet Union.

Alva Myrdal, Jan's mother, was among the first women to serve in the Swedish government. She pursued an international career within the UN system, holding leadership positions in agencies dealing with population and social policy. Later she became a specialist in disarmament issues and a prominent voice in the international peace movement. From the late 1950s she served as Sweden's ambassador to India. Gunnar lived with her in India during this period, working on his monumental study of the political roots of poverty in Asia. With parents like these it is not surprising that first Moscow then Peking invested heavily in getting Jan Myrdal on their side.

Jan Myrdal's education became difficult. He left school at the age of sixteen and joined the youth section of the Communist Party of Sweden (*Sveriges kommunistiska parti*, SKP) the same year. From an early age, he resolved to become Sweden's greatest author, but after four unsuccessful novels, although they were allegedly extremely well received in the Soviet Union, he abandoned that ambition. In 1958, together with his new partner, the artist Gun Kessle, he left Sweden (and his children with two former wives) instead heading eastward toward South Asia in a small Citroën.

In 1960, while SKP chairman Hilding Hagberg was in Moscow discussing with Chinese representatives, and as the international Communist movement was beginning to fracture, Jan and Gun, with Soviet support, toured Soviet Turkmenistan. Enthusiastic about what they had seen in the Asian Soviet republic, they returned to Sweden for the Christmas holidays more loyal to Moscow than ever. During this visit, Hagberg called Myrdal to the party headquarters on Kungsgatan 84. In consultation with the Chinese, Hagberg proposed that Myrdal be sent to the People's Republic of China to observe developments firsthand and write about the country (Myrdal, Jan. E-mail correspondence).

Myrdal had earlier been one of three members of the party's youth league who assisted the Chinese cultural delegation on its propaganda tour of Sweden in 1952. The Chinese ambassador's report to Beijing had praised the Swedish youths for their exemplary conduct; remarks that Beijing underlined approvingly in the margins (The Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive). Myrdal, however, had paid little attention to China since that tour. By the early 1960s, he still knew little of the country or of the ongoing revolution there. Yet he was clearly interested in the proposal: a year in China would allow him time to write and gather unique

material. Negotiations with the Chinese embassy followed, and Myrdal submitted his ideas for potential books and reportage projects he might produce during a longer stay.

Before their departure the couple had a farewell dinner with friends in New Delhi featuring both Swedish dishes and roast suckling pig (Jan to Alva, 2 April 1962, JMA). Soon after, Jan and Gun boarded a train to Calcutta, from where they planned to continue east. Alva had already informed the Swedish consulate in Calcutta of her son's arrival. Jan himself wrote to Consul General Tham requesting assistance with hotel arrangements (Jan to W. Tham, 30 March 1962, JMA). Unable to find a ship sailing directly from India to Beijing, Alva arranged passage from Calcutta to Hong Kong and from there onward to Tianjin, Beijing's port city. The couple thus spent several days in Hong Kong, enjoying food, drink, and shopping.

The Myrdals hoped to bring their car into China, intending to drive across the country as they had done in Afghanistan and India. Myrdal discussed this with the former leader of the Young Communists, Urban Karlsson, who appears to have been SKP's intermediary with the Chinese embassy (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 1 April 1962, JMA). The Chinese authorities, however, categorically refused. They would not allow foreigners to drive at all. In spring 1962, they set out from Victoria Harbour as M/S Poyang's only passengers. The cargo hold was nearly empty: as Myrdal later remarked, the People's Republic was facing economic hardship and could afford few imports.

Peking 1962

When Jan and Gun arrived in Beijing in April 1962, they were unaware that the so-called "Conference of 7,000 Cadres" (*qiantuan dahui* 千團大會) had just concluded. Dissatisfaction, indeed panic, was spreading throughout the country. Rebellions and banditry had followed in the wake of the deadly mass famine. Everything seemed to hang in the balance, while Chiang Kai-shek, in his exile on Taiwan, contemplated a counterattack. The Communist Party leadership urgently needed to rectify ideological deviations and rally local *cadres* behind the central party line.

To deflect criticism for the famine and sustain the now disastrous Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong drafted the main speech for the meeting, expecting President Liu Shaoqi to deliver it obediently. Yet Liu, having just visited his home village, had heard firsthand accounts of starvation and of peasants' hatred for the Party. Concluding that the Leap must be suspended to preserve the Party's rule, Liu set Mao's text aside and publicly blamed him and the party leadership, including himself, for the catastrophe. Mao protested, claiming that only "one-tenth" of the Leap had failed while "nine-tenths" were successful, but Liu's rebuttal humiliated him before the Party elite.

In Mao's propagandistic state, no one would, however, tell Jan Myrdal what was really happening in the country—neither about the masses of people dying of hunger nor the political struggle underway. Not even his “friends” from the 1952 Chinese cultural troupe, whom he now met again, said a word. But, as Myrdal recalled, “we had a wonderful evening together; we kissed and talked about these ten years (Jan to “Kamrat”, 20 April 1962, JMA).” In a letter to his old comrade Folke Eriksson, who had also taken part in the 1952 tour, Myrdal wrote that he had met Wang Dizi (王地子), Cheng Menggeng (張夢庚), and Wu Tong (吳佟) (Jan to Folke, 20 April 1962, JMA). “They send you their warm regards,” he wrote, “and greetings especially to our driver and to Vinnå.” Wang had been ill for a year, Myrdal noted, and came out of bed that evening only to meet Myrdal. “They were just as open and good as I remembered them from 1952,” he continued. Cheng Menggeng had been promoted to oversee all cultural affairs in the capital.

Encouraged by these reunions, Myrdal wrote to friends in Sweden that everything in China seemed fine and that rumours of famine were false. Within ten days, he and Gun had been assigned housing and began planning travel across the country. The couple were some of the first Westerners to reside in the People's Republic for such an extended period and, as Myrdal was keenly aware, to receive “permissions that others did not (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA).” He was even approved to work in a *people's commune* (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). As he explained to his parents, he had obtained these permits “not by intrigue, not through ‘pull,’ but by speaking plainly and justifying my requests (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA).” “I have a devilish contempt,” he continued, “for all those cowardly hacks who demand caviar and champagne for their private lives but dare not demand anything of their own work. Of course, working on a commune will be hard. Pushing wheelbarrows and digging ditches for a month in the heat is no joke. But one meets people that way!”

Wu Tong, one of the political officers responsible for the 1952 cultural delegation, now worked for the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Zhongguo renmin duiwai wenhua xiehui* 中國人民對外文化協會), was assigned to assist Myrdal during his visit (Jan to Urban Karlsson, May 1962, JMA). Jan found this reassuring: knowing each other, he thought, would prevent misunderstandings.

After a few weeks, during the May Day celebrations, they partook in the crowds saluting Mao Zedong. “The city had burst into green,” Myrdal wrote, “and hundreds of thousands thronged the streets. The people dance without police or soldiers, perfectly disciplined without command.” That evening's fireworks display impressed him deeply, and he was told that discussions with Mao might follow (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA).

The welcome was overwhelming. Even the National Library had prepared for his visit. Swedish literature, he noted, was underrepresented. But, to his amusement, they had a copy of his failed 1957 novel *The Bathroom Faucet* (*Badrumskranen*), which had even been

checked out (Jan to Lasse Bergström, 3 May 1962, JMA). “Imagine,” he mused, “there they sit under the wall reading *Badrumskranen*—peculiar indeed.”

Myrdal's “Indian depression,” as he called it, now lifted completely. He admitted that “things are difficult here; the disasters are immense. But people work, struggle, make mistakes and succeed. The situation is far better than described in the world press. Rationing is strict, but no one starves to death like in India (Jan to Gunnar and Alva, 30 April 1962, JMA).” China felt “fresh and healthy, has no corruption, and people walk upright.” Even the highest officials lived simply. “It was, of course, a blessing for the Chinese that they could physically sweep away the corrupt bureaucratic class,” he wrote approvingly. Above all, China was a “rational society,” unlike India (Jan to Alva och Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). “India lies behind us like an evil dream. This nightmare, this Asia's Weimar just before the July elections of 1932, if you know what I mean,” he wrote to his mother, who had just completed her posting as ambassador in New Delhi. “There are no flies in China,” he added. He and Gun felt they had “escaped the Swedenborgian excremental hell that is India.”

What made Beijing seem so clean and orderly—a fact Myrdal never reflected on—was that cities and countryside were separated by watertight administrative barriers. There were simply no truly poor and severely starving people in the cities. Internal travel permits (*hukou* 戶口) confined the impoverished rural population to the countryside. The *hukou* system not only kept slums, excrement, and flies out of the capital; it also confined hunger and death to the exploited countryside. In much of the rest of the developing world, as in India, cities served as a safety valve where rural migrants could survive famine. But in Beijing, as we shall see, the train stations were guarded by soldiers with submachine guns. Those who managed to sneak into the city were coldly sent back to the realm of famine from which they had fled. Why did Myrdal not apprehend this fact?

The Small Foreign Enclave

When Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle arrived in Beijing, there were scarcely more than a hundred Westerners residing in the People's Republic (Hooper 2016). Most, like Myrdal, had been invited as part of the ongoing ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. But some had lived there and worked as paid propagandists longer. Among them Sidney Rittenberg, Rewi Alley, and Israel Epstein. Perhaps the most significant of all. Alley, a New Zealander, had arrived in China already in the 1930s and acted as a kind of unofficial ambassador, receiving various foreign friendship delegations in Beijing (Brady 2003). Myrdal and Kessle socialised frequently with “Rewi,” but they also came to know “Sid” and “Epi (Jan Myrdal in conversation with the author, summer of 2016).”

Myrdal was not the only Swede in Beijing there to learn and write about the country. His friend Sture Källberg, whom he had met in Gothenburg in 1951, worked as correspondent for *Ny Dag*, the Swedish Communist Party's newspaper. Another Swede, Per Olow Leijon, was studying art history in Beijing. On Sundays, Jan and Gun would often join Leijon at the Xinqiao Hotel restaurant to discuss Chinese art (Kessle, Myrdal 1983). Another Swedish communist, Karl Staf, had arrived in the summer of 1960 to work for the newly launched Swedish edition of the propaganda magazine *China Pictorial*. Staf had previously served for ten years as *Ny Dag*'s Moscow correspondent and had once been Myrdal's editor on the newspaper's night desk in Stockholm.

Also present in Beijing was the writer Sven Lindqvist, accompanied by his wife, Cecilia. Both initially studied Chinese at Peking University. Later, Sven took a post at the Swedish embassy as translator and interpreter—though under the more dignified title of “cultural attaché.” The small Swedish community of communists and sympathisers in Beijing was, relative to Sweden's size, unusually large. Källberg, Leijon, and Staf were all key party members. Vivi and Jan Ingvar Löfstedt, who were teaching Swedish at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages (*Beijing Waiguoyu Xueyuan* 北京外國語學院), had arrived before Myrdal who knew Vivi from earlier youth-communist activities.

Sven and Cecilia Lindqvist were something of an exception within this Swedish enclave. Though socialists, they were not members of the Communist Party of Sweden (SKP), and were therefore not briefed by the Chinese on political matters (Myrdal 2008). Myrdal found it difficult to relate to his more polished compatriot. “He is younger,” Myrdal wrote, “and belongs to the well-groomed, smooth-faced academic types with their thin blond Jesus beards (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 April 1962, JMA).” Myrdal resented much about Lindqvist: not only did he enjoy a steady income and a comfortable position, but he was also employed by the Swedish Foreign Service, just as Myrdal's own mother had been in India. “I have looked more closely at Lindqvist. He is so happy. He earns so well and mingles with fine people. We cannot talk to him. He understands no allusions, no irony. He is one of those unreliable fellows who speaks well of everyone,” he wrote home to his mother (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 21 May 1962, JMA). “He speaks Chinese passably,” Myrdal reported bitterly, “but works at the embassy and is not allowed to speak with people (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).”

Sven and Cecilia had studied Chinese already in Sweden and continued their studies in Beijing. Myrdal himself never attempted to learn the language. “We considered studying Chinese,” he later wrote, “but decided against it. It would take terribly long before one reached a usable level, and besides, the languages and dialects differ so much (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).”

Rumours, Lies, Silences

That the world remained largely unaware of the catastrophic famine death unleashed by the Great Leap Forward was due to the hermetic isolation of the People's Republic—much like that of present-day North Korea. The few independent journalists in China had no access whatsoever to affected villages or rural populations. Those allowed into the young People's Republic were confined to Beijing and could not expect travel permits to places beyond the four designated showcase cities: Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Other permits were issued only to trusted sympathisers, like Myrdal.

Myrdal himself described the situation in a letter to party comrade Folke Eriksson. Even compared to the Soviet Union, he wrote, there were “very few foreign journalists in China. A handful from the Eastern bloc, three left-wingers from the West, one from Reuters, one from AFP, and one from Tanjug (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).” He mentioned social democratic *Stockholms-Tidningen's* correspondent Håkan Hedberg, who had been based in Beijing a few years earlier: “He sat at the foreigners' hotel here and was treated as if he were air (bad air) by the Chinese and developed a foreigner's paranoia.” Journalistic work in China is extremely difficult, Myrdal concluded (to Folke from Jan, 30 July 1962, JMA).

Few foreign reporters even made it through the first needle's eye of obtaining a visa to China. The American Edgar Snow had provided one of the Chinese Communist Party's greatest propaganda coups with his 1937 book *Red Star over China*, which managed to create an image of the communist guerrillas in Yan'an as foremost agrarian reformers and not part of any world communist threat. Yet despite his service to their cause, Snow was repeatedly denied re-entry after 1949. Only in 1960, when rumours of famine began circulating internationally, did the Chinese once again seek him out. But even then, the authorities were wary. In internal reports, they speculated that Snow's motives were “first, to win fame and fortune by writing a book; second, to carry out strategic espionage (Lovell 2015).”

The Chinese Foreign Ministry thus laid down a strategy for Snow's 1960 visit: “In hosting him, we should be superficially friendly...On the surface we should seem relaxed; inside, we must be tense, to increase our vigilance. We should intensify our control of his activities (Lovell 2015).”

The Chinese officials continue to describe to those involved who will guide, lead and supervise Snow during the visit that: As regards his interview and writing requests: “We should satisfy them according to our needs: we will let him see some of the things that we allow him to see, to bring him to understand a few things that we have prepared for him to understand (Lovell 2015).”

The main goal, they specified, was to “propagate the dazzling achievements of socialist construction in every area and the great victory of the General Line, the Great Leap Forward,

and the people's communes (Lovell 2015).” There is little reason to believe that Myrdal's treatment differed in substance from Snow's.

From much of the literature about the famine it seems China had managed to dupe the world about the severity of the situation. So what did the Swedes living in China experience of the deadly tragedy played out in the countryside? Nothing directly of course since they were not allowed to go there and find out for themselves. But, according to Karl Staf, who was then working for *China Pictorial*, rumours of “hunger marches” began circulating in spring 1962, just as Myrdal arrived (Staf, 1973). Authorities had secretly expelled an estimated twenty million peasants who had fled to the cities in desperation. Staf later recalled seeing, near railway junctions, “columns upon columns of emaciated, apathetic men and women carrying their few belongings in small bundles (Staf 1973).”

Cecilia Lindqvist recorded similar impressions in her private diary. Soldiers armed with submachine guns patrolled railway and bus stations, preventing rural refugees from entering the cities. From her classroom window she could see students climbing trees “to pick the newly sprouted leaves and eat them as delicacies (Lindqvist 2015, 5).” When she protested that they were damaging the trees, her teacher replied simply: “There is famine in the country. Since last autumn, none of us have had any fresh vegetables (Lindqvist 2015, 6).” The foreign students, like herself, were given vitamin-B injections to prevent their hair from falling out.

Myrdal, of course, heard such stories but dismissed them as the “miserable gossip” of prejudiced Westerners. He refused to take sides in what he perceived was mainly a Sino-Soviet dispute: “I will not get involved in this,” he wrote. “And damn me if I admit that one must be either one or the other (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 3 maj 1962, JMA).” The Chinese “friends,” he reported, had not raised the subject of famine but assured him that they would be happy to give an “explanatory discussion” if he had any questions (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 3 maj 1962, JMA). Three weeks later, he received such a briefing and summarised it in a four-page letter to his party leaders back in Stockholm (Jan to “kamrat”, ND, 1962, JMA).

For four hours, the Chinese cadres had explained the economic situation in what Myrdal considered a “completely open and honest” conversation (Jan to “kamrat”, 1962, JMA). They claimed that the introduction of communal kitchens—the so-called “free meals”—should be seen in the light of China's “millennia of peasant hunger.” In 1958, they told Myrdal, “hundreds of millions of peasants had moved forward with a single thousand-year-old wish in mind,” making it politically impossible to refuse them (Jan to “kamrat”, ND, 1962, JMA). “It was the peasants themselves,” they concluded, “who decided this.” Myrdal accepted the explanation and repeated it faithfully in his reports home.

This all placed him in a difficult position. His sympathies lay with the poor of the Third World, yet he was also a member of a Moscow-aligned communist party. The Soviet Union had furthermore always treated him well and rewarded him generously. “You know how it is

when loyalties are divided,” he wrote to his Soviet friend Pavel Toper, “I try to keep a clear head (To Pavel from Jan, 23 May 1962, JMA).” He detected racism in Western criticism of China and stopped associating with other foreigners in Beijing. “Their behavior is childish,” he told Toper. “Never will I, laughing, tell that the Chinese have a new famine (To Pavel from Jan, 30 Juni 1962, JMA).”

In his letters home to Sweden and also to his Eastern European contacts, Myrdal was uniformly optimistic. “Hard rationing and they work like hell. Western reports are exaggerated,” he wrote to one communist friend (to Knut from Jan, 23 July 1962, JMA). “Corruption, flies, and rats are gone”, Myrdal reported to another (Jan to Nils, 25 May 1962, JMA). He insisted in the letters that the Chinese had faced floods and droughts but had managed through “strict rationing and solid planning (to Knut from Jan, 23 July 1962, JMA).” “It is not as bad as the Western press claims,” he reassured his politically influential parents. “China is hungry, but not starving (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).”

Myrdal maintained that he never believed in rapid progress and that difficulties were natural in a vast country like China. His old acquaintance and now minder Wu Tong told him he was glad Myrdal had come “during our hardest time since Liberation (to Pavel from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).” Wu wanted him to witness “how difficult, yet how successful, the rebuilding was.” “The time in China has taught me much,” Myrdal reflected. “Above all, nothing is more harmful than cheap optimism. If one begins instead with a tragic awareness and compassion within a long-term optimism, even the great difficulties appear natural (to Pavel from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA).”

Wu Tong proved a diligent minder. His task, beyond concealing the famine, was obviously to convert visitors from Moscow-aligned parties like Myrdal. In autumn 1962, in the small frontier town of Mangshi in Yunnan, Myrdal recalled a late-night argument with Wu: “Until then,” he wrote, “I had maintained that the Soviet Union was still socialist at its core (Myrdal 1964). But Wu argued that the West, including the Soviet Union, instilled in us a false superiority, teaching us to believe that Western civilization was always higher, and China, or Asia or Africa, always lower.”

By the end of his year in China, Myrdal was fully won over. He showed little understanding of the fact he was simply a brick in a rhetorical dispute between two sides. What most impressed him, he later wrote, was the “honesty and firmness” of the Chinese (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA). The Chinese, he now believed, possessed “self-respect and national consciousness” and had achieved all their transformations “without the harsh (shooting) Soviet methods of the 1930s.” In Myrdal’s view, there was no corruption in China; citizens lived simply and equally, and “democratic possibilities” existed (to Alva and Gunnar from Jan, 22 July 1962, JMA). “I am often at home with Chinese families sharing their turnips,” he added; an embellishment at best.

The Village of Liulin

The first assignment given to the Myrdal couple outside Beijing took them to Inner Mongolia. Shortly after their return, it was decided that they would be allowed to remain for a longer period to study a village named Liulin, “carved into the yellow loess hills west of the Nan River, just south of Yan’an in northern Shaanxi.” Several pages in Edgar Snow’s 1960 book had been devoted to his own visit to this very village; a fact of which Jan Myrdal was fully aware. Even so, the experience at Liu Lin would prove transformative.

The journey to Liulin went by way of the ancient imperial city of Xi’an. After several days there, they flew on to Yan’an, and from there took a short car ride to the village. It is often said that Myrdal spent a full month in Liulin; a claim of symbolic importance, since he was sharply critical of Western writers who, as he put it, “fly to some place in Asia and stay there at most three weeks, then write as if they truly knew the place.” Yet, if one follows Gun Kessle’s travel journal, the couple arrived in Liulin on 20 August and left again on 9 September (Gun’s travel diary from 1962, JMA). Including both arrival and departure dates, their stay lasted only nineteen days. Not a full month, as Myrdal himself always claimed and as nearly every later writer on *Report from a Chinese Village* or on Myrdal has repeated. Not even three weeks.

The Chinese People’s Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries initially wanted the couple to conduct their interviews in Liulin during the day and return each night to stay at a hotel in Yan’an. But the Party Secretary of the commune, Li Youhua (李有華), proved hospitable. He insisted that his village could accommodate the two foreigners as well as any hotel in town (email correspondence with Myrdal). When Myrdal added that he also wished to work alongside the peasants, however, the village headman did not reply. He merely looked Myrdal up and down, then let his gaze wander across the steep hills where the village’s parched fields lay under the blazing sun (Myrdal in Gäst hos Hagge, SVT, 21 March 1986). Myrdal would never join in any harvesting work; neither in Liulin nor anywhere else during his many journeys through the socialist world.

Here, among North Chinese men and women, weather-beaten, austere, yet warmly welcoming, the Myrdals settled down to study rural conditions and gather material for a book. Gun wrote to their friend Sture Källberg in Beijing that they had been lodged in the village’s finest dwelling: one of the distinctive cave houses carved directly into the loess hillsides. “It is both functional and beautiful,” she wrote, “an upper-class cave with room for ten people on the great heated kang bed (Källberg 1964).” The Swedes were even given their own cook—an advantage, Gun noted, since his dishes were not as greasy as those they had been served in Beijing. Each morning breakfast was brought to them, including coffee which was a costly rarity that at the time could only be obtained at certain luxury hotels in China. During their

stay, they also made brief trips into nearby Yan'an to stay at a hotel, shop, wash, shower, and go to the cinema (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA).

While Myrdal conducted interviews assisted by the female interpreters, Pei Kuangli and Jing Qi, Gun wandered the village with her camera. "Everything is perfect here," she wrote in a letter home to her world-famous parents-in-law, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. Jan was hard at work, she explained, and had "a young girl who is as good and devoted as Gunnar's secretary (Gun to Alva and Gunnar, September 1962, JMA)." She admitted she had not been happy in Beijing, where the leadership "had not seemed very successful." But "here in the village everyone is cheerful, because everything is going well this year."

Myrdal sat with his interpreters and recorded the peasants' stories. They spoke willingly, at length, and in detail. At times someone began to cry, but Myrdal pressed on with his questions. The tales were harrowing, heroic, and uplifting all at once and he felt he now possessed entirely unique material. "This history has not been told before," he declared. In the evenings, he and Gun walked along the river, discussing how to structure the book he was to write about Liulin.

Myrdal had to fight, however, to obtain the commune's financial records and statistics. Throughout the stay he pressed for them, to no avail. As their departure drew near, the tougher Gun Kessle intervened. She bluntly threatened interpreter Pei Kuangli: unless the records were provided, Jan would write in his book that the figures had been withheld, perhaps even that no proper records existed (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA). Pei looked shocked, Gun later recalled, but the next day, which was their last in Liulin, Myrdal was finally allowed to interview the commune secretary, and the ledgers were produced. He was satisfied. That evening, a surprise farewell banquet was arranged for the two Swedes. A goat was slaughtered in their honour. The following day came the final parting, and in Communist fashion Gun was asked to offer her "criticism" of what had not gone well during their visit (Gun's travel diary 1962, JMA).

Back in Beijing, Myrdal described what he had just experienced as something almost religious. "Something tremendous is happening here in China. It is the victory of socialism. Nothing can shake my faith in the Chinese Revolution now," he told Urban Karlsson, then the financial officer of the Swedish Communist Party (Jan to Urban Karlsson, 21 September 1962). He also replied to a letter from C. H. Hermansson, soon to become chairman of the same party, writing tersely: "Have been among the peasants. Am happy (Myrdal 1987, 227)."

Myrdal was now filled with confidence. Among the peasants, he believed, democracy was working. The peasants themselves had made the revolution. They were not lethargic, corrupt Party bureaucrats, but the real thing. He was convinced he had learned everything: "the kilos, hectares, yields, and who was executed by whom (Myrdal 1987, 227)." Myrdal was deeply inspired by what he called "the hard popular control in China, the totally de-bureaucratized

base,” which, in his view, concentrated real power in the hands of the people (Jan to Urban, 21 September 1962).

The Report Book

Soon after returning from northern Shaanxi, Myrdal wrote to his parents, Alva and Gunnar, that he possessed absolutely unique material. “No truly objective book about a Chinese village has yet been written,” he declared. “Now I have this village completely—all life stories, all aspects, everything. I’ll work like an animal to finish the manuscript by Christmas. Present it as it is, a report (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA).” He planned an introduction explaining how he had worked and what questions he had asked, but otherwise intended to refrain from commentary: “Let the peasants speak for themselves, with all their contradictions and differences.” Once published, he insisted, “no serious writer on China will be able to discuss Chinese agriculture without citing it.” It was essential, he urged, that the report be made available on the world market: “Russian/Polish and German editions are already arranged. But English etc. NECESSARY (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA).”

Together with Gun, Myrdal began drafting the manuscript in a wintry September Beijing. The air was dry, the yellow loess dust already sweeping into the low-built capital. The Myrdal couple had insisted they pay for everything themselves. Since the hotels were heavily overpriced to foreigners they were staying, against the authorities wishes, in the five-room flat of their friend Sture Källberg in the diplomatic quarter, and it was bitterly cold. The Great Leap Forward had wrecked the economy, and even coal was rationed. Gun worked in her embroidered Afghan coat, its long white dog hairs showing around the sleeves and collar. Jan wore a wool sweater and a knitted cap that could be pulled down over his ears. His large moustache provided some warmth. Still suffering from amoebic dysentery contracted in India, he could write only ten minutes at a time before needing to lie down and rest. But when he wrote, his right index finger hammered the typewriter keys like a machine gun. In his left hand, a cigarette always burned. On their travel gramophone, a Jimmy Rodgers record—the “yodeling brakeman”—played on repeat (Ekdahl and Floren 1973). As the pages accumulated, Myrdal grew paranoid that someone might steal his precious manuscript. He carried it with him everywhere, tucked inside his jacket (Hasse from Jan, 11 December 1962, JMA).

On 1 October 1962, at the National Day reception where select foreigners were invited to meet the leadership, Myrdal was drawn aside for a brief audience with Mao Zedong. He

immediately began to speak about Liulin. Mao, however, teased him for having chosen so poor and backward a village as his subject (Myrdal 1965, xxxii):

- Myrdal:** I have just returned from a trip to the Yan'an area.
- Mao:** That is a very poor, backward, and undeveloped part of the country.
- Myrdal:** I stayed in a village... wanted to study the changes in the countryside...
- Mao:** Then it was clearly a bad idea to go to Yan'an. Yan'an is only poor and backward. Not a good idea to stay in a village there.
- Myrdal:** But the area has a proud tradition—revolution, the war—I mean, in fact, the village is where it all began.
- Mao (interrupting, laughing):** Traditions—(laughter). Traditions—(laughter).

Among the villages offered to him, Myrdal had chosen one that had earlier served as a revolutionary model. Mao himself had first visited it in the 1930s, and, as noted, Edgar Snow had stayed in the same village just two years before.

In their study *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, David E. Apter and Tony Saich show how the CCP used language, myth, and texts to recast Yan'an from a military base into a moral centre, constructing a "revolutionary simulacrum" that generated symbolic capital and underwrote the party's legitimacy. The villagers of Liulin, at the outskirts of Yan'an, had early been under the influence of this discursive regime and were able to reproduce convincingly their lived experiences in a way that fitted the morality of Mao's revolutionary discourse. On the other hand, here we also have the subaltern speaking, in the language of Maoism and Party-speak certainly, but also able to express things that had been before unspeakable or even unthinkable, and to appear to themselves, and others, like Myrdal, as real political subjects.

A photograph was taken of the brief encounter: Mao smiling slyly, Liu Shaoqi demure, Myrdal standing stiffly in a thick tweed jacket, slightly unkempt. Though broad-shouldered and tall, he still looked like a schoolboy beside the old guerrilla leader.

As he approached a final draft, the writing became increasingly difficult. He rewrote the book three times and at one point doubted he would finish it at all. A rash broke out on his hands from the strain—what he later called a "typewriter allergy (to Hasse from Myrdal, 11 December 1962, JMA)."

Yet the intellectual groundwork laid through his years of failure in India now bore fruit. "Two great books on India exploded—one in 1960 and one in 1962," he recalled. "Three years of

work yielded only a few articles and some pages in *Samtida Bekännelser*. But precisely because I failed so thoroughly and so often in India, I was now able to find the perfect form to render what would become my successful village book (Myrdal, 1983, 158)."

In a lucid and perceptive foreword anticipating the criticism he suspected would follow, Myrdal explained his motives and influences (Myrdal 1967, 7, 8). The method he had chosen "to depict an Asian reality for a 'Western' audience," he wrote, was the outcome of his experiences in Afghanistan and India. Literature about contemporary Asia, he argued, revealed "a terrifying gulf between reality and the described reality (Myrdal 1967, 7, 8)." The reports and portrayals of India had been inadequate—speculative, impressionistic—and had prevented him from drawing sound conclusions. Time and again he had been forced to set his Indian manuscript aside.

This reasoning echoed that of his father, Gunnar Myrdal, in *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*. That vast study, too, had stalled in India in the late 1950s, when Gunnar realised that the conceptual tools used by Western sociologists, politicians, and economists to describe development in the Third World were entirely unsuitable. They had been devised to explain a European reality rooted in utterly different historical foundations. At his father's direct urging, Jan added a note to the preface: Gunnar had told him that "the introduction must be as absolutely scientifically cautious and skeptical as possible." Jan had intended to reserve such discussion for his next book, *Chinese Journey*, but now saw he must hint at it already. "Put it in!", he instructed his publisher, Lasse Bergström (Jan to Lasse, 29 mars 1963, JMA).

In the introduction, Myrdal acknowledged his intellectual debt to both his parents. His perspective, he added, had also been shaped by long discussions in India with his friend Bertil Mattsson (Myrdal 1967, 7–8). He saw Kusum Nair's *Blossoms in the Dust: The Human Element in Indian Development*, published in 1962 with a foreword by Gunnar Myrdal, as written in the same spirit as his own *Report from a Chinese Village*.

The final manuscript, nearly four hundred pages long, was rich in people, politics, everyday life, revolution, history, and economics. It began with a portrait of northern Shaanxi's harsh natural conditions and its effect on the people: "The climate is severe, every third year brings crop failure, and the people are known to be tenacious, hardworking, and rebellious (Myrdal 1967, 16)." Through a sequence of autobiographical monologues ranging from two to fifteen pages each, the villagers told their life stories. Myrdal described the village's location, landscape, climate, dwellings, and population, and from the peasants' accounts reconstructed the "liberation" and how the revolution unfolded. He then portrayed daily life and the organisation of work as shaped by the Great Leap Forward's collectivisation. The village appeared through its production units: the Liulin work teams and the Liulin production brigade. There was an entire chapter on women, another on education, and a section on

“strangers”: urban middle- and upper-class people sent to Liulin to “transform themselves through manual labor and attain the working people’s outlook on life.”

The book’s strength lay in its portraits of individuals: short biographical sketches of agricultural labourers in one of China’s tens of thousands of small villages. Pai Yu-teh, an old *ganbu* (cadre), sixty years old and now director of the Yan’an Water Conservancy Bureau, recounted his own experiences of the revolutionary years, the civil war, and the heroic guerrilla struggle that, with meagre means but with the peasants’ wholehearted support, crushed the tyranny of the landlords (Myrdal 1967, 52–65). Tung Yang-chen, “martyr’s son, KMT deserter, aged 35,” described a working day that began at 4:30 a.m. and ended only at eight in the evening (Myrdal 1967, 86–93). The labour was hard, but, he said, the Party’s collectivisation policies brought ever greater productivity and prosperity. Feng Chang-ye, head of Liulin’s production brigade, explained how the people’s communes had been established in 1958, at the onset of the Great Leap Forward, and how the cooperative had been transformed into a brigade within the “The East Is Red” commune.

Throughout the book—even in its themed sections—it is the villagers who speak, while Myrdal’s own voice is largely absent, appearing only in the foreword. Yet, as he later acknowledged, he himself provided the style by reconstructing the interviews from terse notes, primarily to ensure factual accuracy. The result is a work that reads as oral history. Myrdal’s material for this was particularly compelling: North Chinese farmers recount lives marked by severe hardship in pre-revolutionary China, including beatings, humiliation, starvation, and loss. While the collectivisations beginning around 1956 are narrated in a largely passive voice, as processes that befall the village, the earlier agrarian reforms are presented with greater nuance, depicting debates among villagers and arguments both for and against, even if the narrative ultimately frames the outcomes as correct and beneficial.

Some of the most compelling passages described the historical conflicts with the regular Kuomintang troops and the rise of the Red Peasant Army from nothing to a force to be reckoned with. Mau Ke-yeh gave the following account (Myrdal 1967, 67–68):

“In 1935 an army came that called itself the Red Army. It was out in the countryside. In the towns sat the KMT. The Red Army made propaganda and said: ‘The Red Army is good; we will divide all the land and you will no longer pay rent or taxes to anyone.’ That was in February 1935 when I first met Communists. They were Li Wen-yuan and Wang Hsiao-kang, both in their thirties. I met them again later, but whether they are alive or dead I do not know. They came to us one night and said: ‘We are propagandists from the Red Army, and now you shall make revolution.’ We answered: ‘Yes, we shall,’ but we did nothing—we did not believe they had much power.

But in March they came again. They called us all to an outdoor meeting and said we must form a Poor Peasants’ Association and elect a chairman. The others pointed at

me and said: 'He is calm and sensible, never hasty.' So I was elected chairman. Li Wen-yuan and Wang Hsiao-kang gave speeches and said: 'Why do you pay taxes to the KMT?' We replied that we were afraid; that the KMT had real soldiers. But they said: 'Just stop paying taxes, and don't be afraid; the Red Army has its ways of dealing with the KMT.' Their headquarters was in Luochuan then, and the Red Army was led by Liu Chih-tan. At first people were afraid and said the Communists were killers, but when they came, they were ordinary people and said: 'Divide the land and fight the landlords and tyrants.' They held many meetings, and we would shout: 'Yes! Yes!' But in truth we did not believe them. Then in April 1935 the Red Army defeated a counterrevolutionary landlord militia ten *li* from here and killed the leader of the Southern District, Mu Hsin-tsai, taking a great haul. After that they came more often and killed other counterrevolutionaries. Then the people saw that the Red Army had power, and we stopped bringing taxes and goods into town. Instead we organized ourselves into guerrilla units—eight to ten men in each."

The book's distinctive method lay in how Myrdal allowed the villagers to recount their own lives, the revolution, and the transformation of the countryside. The *Report* could thus be read as a form of social anthropology, where China's previously silenced subalterns spoke for the first time to Western readers.

Myrdal was, at heart, a literary writer. He had also worked as a journalist and written a travel book, but now declared that travel writing was false and unscientific. With this *Report*, he sought something different—to be as objective as possible. As Agneta Edman has suggested in her study of Swedish travel writings, the criticism of Artur Lundkvist's China book as the work of "a parrot of the Chinese regime" likely spurred Myrdal's drive toward objectivity (Edman 2017, 196). Yet, as he explained in a letter to his parents, he did not see the *Report* as a departure from his fiction. "There is," he wrote, "no difference between lyric poetry, novels, and an absolutely sociological, field-study-like, if you will, representation of reality (Jan to Alva and Gunnar, 19 September 1962, JMA)."

For a Communist regime such as China's, however, talented literary writers, just as in the early Soviet Union (Kenez 1985), were precisely those best suited to render the communist propaganda persuasive and credible.

Immediate Reception and Impact

Jan Myrdal's report ultimately became highly influential on the international stage. The Australian historian Colin Mackerras explains how Myrdal's report had a decisive impact on him and his entire generation, arguing that it was Jan Myrdal who revealed "the human face"

of Chinese communism (Mackerras 1991). After Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's terror and mass killings, the Soviet model had been discredited. China, thanks in part to Myrdal's account, thus appeared as the saviour of the communist idea itself.

The book's success extended well beyond the community of China specialists, scholars, and journalists. It appeared at the coldest moment of the Cold War, in a deeply anti-communist Western world. Few could yet foresee the emergence of a radical counterculture, but *Report from a Chinese Village*—published in French in 1964, in Italian and American editions in 1965, and in German in 1967—arrived at precisely the right moment. It became one of the sparks that ignited the radicalism of the Third World movement in the West.

The reception in Paris, then the intellectual capital of the Western world, exceeded all of Myrdal's expectations. After visiting publishers and newspapers there in 1964, he could report to friends in East Germany that his book was regarded as "SCIENCE," praised not only for its empirical value but also for its literary and epic qualities (Jan to Willi and Maj Bredel, 14 October 1964, JMA). Myrdal was taken to be both a sociologist and an anthropologist and was even confused with his world-famous father, Gunnar Myrdal.

The English edition appeared in 1965 through Pantheon Books, whose back cover featured an excerpt from a review by *New York Times* journalist Harrison Salisbury. Salisbury compared Myrdal's report to three other works that had rendered new and complex societies intelligible to a puzzled and often hostile public: Alexis de Tocqueville on the United States, George Kennan on the Soviet Union, and Gunnar Myrdal's study of the political economy of American racism. Now, he wrote, Jan Myrdal had done the same for contemporary China—"making it credible and alive for the first time." "Just like his father before him," Salisbury concluded, "Jan Myrdal has created a classic of the social sciences."

Pantheon editor André Schiffrin was so exhilarated by the success of Myrdal's English edition that he launched an entire book series on village studies. The *Pantheon Village Series* appeared in collaboration with prominent publishers in England, West Germany, Italy, France, Sweden, and Denmark. The influence of Myrdal's report was therefore extensive. The acclaimed American writer Studs Terkel later credited *Report from a Chinese Village* with teaching him the oral history techniques that he would use so effectively in his own studies of the American working class.

Following the success of the English edition Myrdal was invited to a major China conference in Chicago in 1966; a three-day event held across several cities. Among the presenters were leading Sinologists such as Roderick MacFarquhar, Ezra Vogel, and C. P. Fitzgerald. After the conference, Myrdal embarked on a twenty-two-day lecture tour across the United States, holding seminars at various universities and appearing on both radio and television.

Conclusion

When Jan Myrdal travelled to China in 1962, he did so at a time marked by both personal and political reorientation. It was during the intensification of the schism with the Soviet Union. Chinese top leaders urged Sweden's Communist Party to send its members to work and live in China. In this way they could see for themselves that things were not so bad as Moscow claimed. Myrdal was a perfect choice for a long-time guest. Not only had the Chinese had first hand and close contact with him earlier and could trust him. His parents were furthermore incredibly important people both in Sweden and internationally. To get such a promising individual as Jan Myrdal on their side would be elite capture at its best.

Jan Myrdal's own journey expressed a growing desire to find a social system capable of reconciling equality with modernity—a system that could appear as an alternative to both Western capitalism and Soviet bureaucracy. In Myrdal's eyes, China offered precisely this "third way." Yet his journey took place under conditions that made independent observation effectively impossible. All his contacts with the People's Republic were mediated through organisations such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, whose mission was to shape foreign opinion. His itinerary was strictly planned, and those he met were carefully selected to convey the narrative the regime wished to project.

At the time of Myrdal's visit, China was in the midst of a profound crisis. The Great Leap Forward had resulted in one of the worst famines in human history. An event that could neither be mentioned publicly nor hinted at before foreign guests. Simultaneously, the Party leadership launched an intense campaign to restore an image of progress and national unity. The political and social situation was thus defined by a paradox: a society in ruins, striving by all possible means to appear successful.

Within this context, Myrdal conducted the interviews that would form the basis of the *Report from a Chinese Village*. Myrdal interpreted the conversations as authentic voices of the people, which they to a certain degree were, but they were also part of a pedagogical performance designed to confirm the official narrative of the new China as egalitarian and harmonious. His text, while based on real testimonies, drew on stories that the peasants had long since learned to adapt to the dominant discourse about liberation and progress under the Communist Party.

The absence of any reference to the famine in *Report from a Chinese Village* should not be understood as a mere oversight by an individual author but as the result of an interplay between censorship, selective perception, and ideological loyalty. Myrdal wished to see a China realising the liberation of the socialist man. Anything that contradicted this vision was dismissed as either temporary hardship or Western prejudice. His hosts, in turn, understood that a sympathetic foreign observer would be especially receptive to the version of reality they

had crafted. Silence about the famine thus became part of the tacit contract that made both propaganda and Myrdal's narrative possible.

Myrdal misunderstood, and misrepresented, what he saw in Beijing as evidence that suffering had been eradicated in China. During his long stays in New Delhi and Kabul, he had witnessed immense misery; beggars, even children, dying in the streets during winter or outbreaks of disease. Beijing appeared entirely different: there were no beggars, and the city was clean. Having lived so long in Asia and being familiar with conditions in other communist states such as the Soviet Union, he should have recognised that the difference lay in the regime's methods of social control. Beijing was guarded against its poor by armed soldiers stationed at rail junctions and roads; one needed a Beijing residence permit to enter the city, without which one was sent back to die in the countryside. In Kabul or New Delhi, the rural poor could at least migrate to the city slums to survive through work or begging. Western readers, lacking Myrdal's frame of reference, naturally overlooked such circumstances.

After the success of *Report from a Chinese Village*, Myrdal returned to Liulin repeatedly and wrote several subsequent books about the village. During some of his last visits in China, as from others reporting from the village it becomes evident that not everything had been as well as Myrdal reported in his first report.

As a privileged "friend of China," Myrdal was also granted, earlier than any other Western writer, permission to travel through Xinjiang to write a book about the Chinese Silk Road, a project in which he denounced the Soviet Union as imperialist, echoing Beijing's line. Myrdal was frequently featured in *People's Daily* and on Chinese state television. In 1975, for example, he appeared in a televised discussion with Tan Zhenlin (譚震林), one of those most responsible for the mass of deaths caused by the Great Leap Forward. As a trusted friend of China, he was also invited in 1978 to Cambodia, where he conducted a long television interview with Pol Pot.

Myrdal never acknowledged the famine for the horrendous catastrophe it was, even after the truth began to emerge in the mid-1980s. He instead distrusted Deng Xiaoping's capitalist reforms, seeing them as the cause of the 1989 student protests. Myrdal initially condemned the Tiananmen Square massacre as an act committed by a Communist Party that had, in his words, become "fascist." Later, however, after receiving an honorary doctorate in China in 1993, he changed his position and said he understood that using force had been necessary at the time. Myrdal remained a Maoist and supporter of Chinese nationalism until his death. The year before he passed away, China's controversial "wolf warrior" ambassador, Gui Congyou (桂從友), travelled all the way to Myrdal's home in Varberg to pay him a final visit.

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