



# **Unbound: A True Story of War, Love, and Survival**

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In October 1934, the Chinese Communist Army found itself facing annihilation, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Nationalist soldiers. Rather than surrender, 86,000 Communists embarked on an epic flight to safety. Only thirty were women. Their trek would eventually cover 4,000 miles over 370 days. Under enemy fire they crossed highland awamps, climbed Tibetan peaks, scrambled over chain bridges, and trudged through the sands of the western deserts. Fewer than 10,000 of them would survive, but remarkably all of the women would live to tell the tale.

*Unbound* is an amazing story of love, friendship, and survival written by a new master of adventure narrative.

## **Unbound: A True Story of War, Love, and Survival Details**

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Author : Dean King

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# **From Reader Review Unbound: A True Story of War, Love, and Survival for online ebook**

## **Jackie says**

nonfiction accounts of women on the long march in China

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## **R says**

"Unbound" is an authoritative account of the Long March, the March that Mao's Red Army took to evade defeat in 1934 (4,000 miles). It is written from the angle of the 30 women who chose to join the march among 86,000 men because they saw communism as a chance to escape a repressive society.

It was a harrowing journey that was marked by hunger and disease with babies born along the way and left behind. These women believed they marched "to advance the plight of the poor and of women in general whose position had remained unchanged in China since the Dark Ages."

King has done an outstanding job of bringing the march to life with vivid accounts and details from interviews with five women and two men who survived the march.

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## **Heather Pearson says**

Step by step, one day at a time, the Red Army marched west and north 4000 miles across the breadth of China. It was October 1934 and the Communist Red Army pulled up stakes in Jingxi province to flee the advancing Nationalist forces.

Prior to reading this book I knew almost nothing about the early twentieth century history of China. Mr. King includes a section on the rise of the Communist party and details on the role of women in Chinese society of that time. Women were treated as slaves, farm labour and when of age to marry as a source of male offspring. They were also subject to the debilitating practice of foot binding. In 1928 at the Sixth Chinese Communist Party Congress the potential of women within society was 'embraced' by the party. They realized that women were a vast untapped resource. That they were capable of being educated and carrying out the same roles as men.

As the communist members moved through out the country side, many women saw the opportunity to lead the lives that they have envisioned for themselves and they immediately enlisted. A core group of thirty of these women fled with 86 000 men of the Red Army. They played key rolls in organizing the medical core (carrying stretchers, caring for the wounded), obtaining supplies, recruiting, etc. At least several of these women had bound feet and spent many agonizing months letting their feet out with the hope they would heal and they would be better able to keep up with their comrades.

I was fascinated by this book. At first I found it difficult to follow as there were so many place names and people name that were unfamiliar to me that it was hard to keep it all straight in my mind. After a while it did get easier as I recognized the individuals and worked out the pronunciations. They story it's self is very

clearly written and easy to follow. The hardships that all the marchers endured was not so easy. I shivered as I read the passages where the scantily clothed soldiers climbed over sky-high mountains. When they huddled together under tattered blankets during driving rain and hail storms. I cringed when the women clawed through manure to pick out the undigested grains so they would have something to eat.

There is so much fact packed into this book that it took me quite a while to read, about three weeks in fact. I don't begrudge a minute of that time. I learned a lot about courage and fortitude. Many of the women could have elected to stay behind at any time. Many were even offered that choice. It appears to me that it was a better choice to stay with the army and it's hardships than it was to return to their homes where many of them were treated worse than slaves.

I highly recommend this book for any with an interest in history or in women's liberation. While it is a long and fact filled book, it is well worth the effort.

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### **Susan says**

In October 1934, the Chinese Communist Army, surrounded by Nationalist soldiers, made a break to escape to safety. Their trek would last 370 days and cover 4,000 miles of rigorous terrain under enemy bombardment. Few of them would survive, but those who did would eventually form the nation of the People's Republic of China. Among them were a relatively small number of women and it through their eyes that this book tells the story of the Long March.

What these heroic women endured is almost unbelievable. For the most part assigned to a convalescent unit, they carried the wounded on stretchers through treacherous swamps and up Tibetan mountains. In addition to all the physical hazards they also had to survive the periodic purges when the paranoid Communist leadership turned on their own. Some of them became pregnant and even gave birth while on the march. A number of them were semi-crippled from having their feet, as the title says, unbound, from the process inflicted when they were children. Two of the most memorable characters, Ma Yixian and Wang Xinlan, were only ten and eleven years old. As well as an impressive amount of research the book contains maps and photographs that help to bring the story alive.

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### **Michelle says**

This is the best book I've ever read on the Long March. Well-researched, well-written, well-footnoted, fascinating read. I loved the emphasis on the stories of several of the women in the various army groups of the Long March. I had a bit of trouble keeping all the names separate and straight in my head---did not detach the included "cheat sheet" bookmark as I was using a library copy. But I'd recommend using that as one reads unless one is very good at Chinese names. I also had trouble seeing all the large maps on the endpapers--the library dust jacket covered up quite a bit of the maps, and most of the ones in the text itself were small. I could have used more detailed "big-picture" maps to help me keep who was where straight. But the book was well worth the effort.

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## **Laura Jones says**

This book is about 30 women who walked the long journey on Mao's March and what they went through. While it does enlighten the reader about the history of this march more importantly for me were the individual women and what motivated them to stay with the Red Army while all around them men died. What struck me most deeply about this book was the extreme suffering and the profound motivation that made them live through it. For many of these women they had a choice and could have left the Red Army and melted into the country side. Granted by melting it would mean absorbed as slave labor but it still meant living. Maybe before that first colossal mountain they had no idea what they were facing but when they crossed it they had to know what the next one meant. A child died of extreme oxygen deprivation yet this was preferable to living the life of a slave. They left their newborns to die along the way yet this was preferable to slavery. They marched with crippled feet that got infected with sores. Again this was preferable to living a life where they were at the beck and beating of another human's whim.

I cried. I couldn't imagine abandoning a baby. The truth is, I also can't imagine being a slave. I've never been abused in such a way that I would chose to walk through starvation, through pain, into the arms of violence, and hallucinations created by disease, fever, or cross an ice laden river naked because I wanted something – anything– so badly I would give up a predictable future for one that holds Death.

I chose this book because I trust the author to tell a good story. He did. What I didn't expect was to feel a connection with women from another era, culture, and even hemisphere. China doesn't interest me. I know it affects me. I know it has a long deep history filled with fascinating people. I had this notion that what I would be reading were stories about women who were camp followers such as the women who followed Washington's Continental Army around. I thought they might be wives desperate to stay with husbands. It never occurred to me that they would be officers in the military. I had no idea this was possible in China. They bound women's feet, they treated them like concubines, killed baby girls because boys were more valued...all kinds of ideas that may or may not even be close to the reality of who these women were but military officers? That was a surprise.

I read in awe of what they suffered, in doubt that I too could have endured as much to achieve a dream, and impressed with their bravery.

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## **Ian says**

Disappointing read, felt like too many assumptions and not enough factual evidence.

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## **Mary says**

Fascinating glimpse of an era of modern history about which I know very little. The maps were particularly helpful.

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## Amy says

Detachable reference bookmark. Three little words that mean a great deal in this non-fiction text about the Long March in China that started in 1934, and this bookmark, as simple as it sounds, provides the key to author Dean King's research. He reveals the story of thirty amazing women in an easy to understand way, despite the mountains of facts and details he uncovers. The bookmark itself is a shortened "cheat sheet" in order to keep track of fifteen of the more notable women. Just by providing it, it shows that the text is going to be accessible and personal. More interestingly is that this book really has nothing to do with politics...it's the story of the desire to escape and finding the power to do so.

First, what was the Long March? Mao's Communist army in China was being threatened by Nationalist forces, and needed to make a quick departure to an area that had Communist allies, some 4,000 miles away from their base of operations. They undertook this migration, one of the most significant in history, in secrecy, putting 86,000 men on a journey in stages that led to the death of most of them. Besides moving the officials and main soldiers, the march also carried valuable documents, funds, printing devices, and a medical core. Thirty women with them carried most of the duties of the convalescent care. Most of the journey was taken at night, in smaller regiments, and it took three weeks before Nationalists realized they were on the move. At times, it seemed that many of the soldiers were disposable, as the treacherous night-time journeys were anything but safe.

Why these thirty women? These women had served the Communist Party as recruiters, and were considered strong soldiers themselves. They were attracted to Mao's Red Party because it freed them from the traditional Chinese way of life, which for women was one full of despair and pain. For example, foot binding, that horrific yet traditional ritual, broke the bones of a girl child's foot, folded the toes under to the heel, then bound them with ribbon. The goal being "lovely" three-inch feet, a sign of nobility and yet sheer mutilation. Women in their traditional Chinese roles were either drowned at birth, sold for money, or used as unpaid and brutalized servants. Therefore, Mao's promises of equality, respect, and the end of peasant traditions appealed to these women, the youngest two being just 10 and 11 years old when they joined the Long March.

Some of the women had been raised in wealth and schooled outside of China. Others were the same peasants described above. Yet they joined as comrades, and the most astonishing fact of the whole book is that all thirty survived, despite the death of the vast majority of the men. Their close ties made them fight long and hard, not just for Mao's goals, but for what they perceived as the benefit of Chinese women in the future. Additionally, they were not used as prostitutes for the Army, but rather as equal soldiers, carrying their own weight in assignments and in battle.

One American observer stated that "their strength lay not in a rigid military hierarchy-although they tended to revere their leaders-but in a democratic structure that made the troops feel responsible for their own and their comrades' actions." Many of the women suffered health problems and difficulties in maintaining their strong tradition of modesty in such conditions. Some women gave birth on the march and left their newborns with villagers to rear. Unimaginable, it seems, yet they were convinced they were contributing to a 'greater good'.

When it was all over, Mao claimed that the Long March was almost 8,000 miles. He inflated the figures for a distinct purpose. He felt that the completion of the march proved the power of Communism. He attempted to

set standards for his soldiers, and provided rules requiring civilized behavior of the marchers towards local peasants they may run across. But as the march continued, it became a reign of terror at times, where any Chinese that they found who had any form of wealth were immediately assumed to be guilty of Nationalistic tendencies, thus their possessions were confiscated. Any kind of disagreement or insubordination among marchers ended with death, and so Mao's ideal wasn't always realistic.

One especially clever woman in Mao's Army was Cai Chang. She and others would question peasants to find out who the wealthy were among them, in order to collect supplies and foodstuffs. Most peasants learned to lie, so she found a craftier means. On some kind of elevated location, she'd overlook the village and look for newer homes. She'd look for especially well-kept cattle pens and signs of status. Then they'd go into the homes and if they found signs of wealth, they would pack these as provisions, feeling completely justified because of the assumed guilt of the householder.

Did any good come out of the Long March, given the future crises to come in China? One example is that "the Communists revolutionized the legal standing of women and children in the Marriage Law of 1950, which banned arranged marriage, child betrothal, concubinage, and infanticide....The law mandated ...the protection of the interests of women, widows, and children. This was a key step in institutionalizing the change in the role of women in China from passive domestics..."

This is a heavily detailed book, and really my only complaint (a minor one really) is that it is so full of names, dates, and facts that at times it gets a bit overwhelming. So it's not simply an easy beach read. Yet King writes in a personable way that draws out the unique characters that make each woman stand out with their personalities and traits. The bookmark helps!

Originally I wanted to read this because of an interview with King, where he describes undertaking the research as the father of young women, and trying to imagine the parallels for women then and today. A link to this interview is provided below.

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## **Alan says**

[spoilers]

Book tells stories of communist women who took part in "The long march". The history of women in China is unpleasant, perhaps from the founding of China thousands of years ago, certainly for several centuries, and on both sides of the communist civil war, continuing today. The book is well researched and provides a great depth of detail on numerous women in the communist ranks. It's not easy or pleasant to read because the state of women before the communists was horrid, and among the communist ranks it was only slightly less horrid, and in the years following the communist takeover, and especially during Mao's Cultural Revolution many of these former heroes of communism were persecuted, tortured and executed. It's kind of like reading a drawn-out account of a train wreck, with car-by-car descriptions of the deaths and injuries, and the very long train never stops wrecking. The women in that culture had no bright shining past to reflect back upon, a horrible present condition, and all their suffering and sacrifice earned them and their nation a dark and oppressive future. They are in the middle of a long dark tunnel and there is no light at the end.

So, I knew that Han Chinese culture was not good for women, but I learned it was worse than I thought. I learned that women were also poorly treated and atrocities committed on the side of the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-Shek. As the communists traversed thousands of miles seeking a new operating base for their recruiting and war efforts, they passed through territories of Tibet, Muslims, and numerous minority tribes,

and in all of these cultures women are treated horribly. The communists offer them a false promise of a better future, which sadly most of the communist women don't yet know was false. The purges by paranoid communist leaders began even during the march, which I did not know, though they got much worse after the communists sealed their hold on the nation.

Despite prohibitions on marriage and sex in the ranks, most of the communist women get pregnant and give birth during the march. Pretty much all of the babies are abandoned where they are delivered, mostly in huts in small villages as the marchers pass through, but some also alongside the path. In order to keep up, the mothers quickly rejoin the march, mostly suffering great medical harm, and a number of them dying. Many of them are taken as wives along the way by leading communist men, including Mao, and later, when the survivors finally settle in a stable location, most of these women are dumped in favor of younger women joining the communist ranks who haven't been ravaged by the hardships of the march. Mao left 1 or 2 wives behind during the march, and swapped the wife who endured the march for an actress.

One aspect I found interesting was the affirmation of things I have read in recent accounts about the physiological effects of "living in the field" and the ground combat environment that America is rushing women into. A large portion of the women became sterile during the hardships of the march - an experience along with other physical detriments recounted by a female Marine officer who served at a forward operating base in Afghanistan ( <https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2...> ). It is saddening that our culture refuses to objectively look at issues like this and even hides lessons already learned with great suffering.

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### **Lenore Webb says**

Well I have found another book to add to that shelf of special books. And since my College Girl trust my taste I was thinking maybe you would also like to share it with me. "Unbound" by Dean King has left me with wonder and awe at the strength of the human race. This is a story of 86,000 Red soldiers who walked over 4,000 miles in 370 days to escape the Chinese Red Army in 1934. Less than 10,000 would survive. Now only 30 of those who escaped were women and amazing that all 30 of those women survived.

Dean King followed this same trek and interviewed those along the way. He followed their story of friendships, perseverance and strength to share with us. I was swept away with this feat. Learning how these women went through hardships and struggles that I could never imagine enduring. Here I was reminded again that the strength in women comes from their hearts and souls not from the muscles of their bodies.

I am often asked by my friend Nessa how I keep going some days. (Not that what I do is in anyway compared to these women). But that no matter how tired I can be or knotted up my hands and knees are that day, I keep on with my daily plans. It is here in that strength women rely on to follow their hearts. Mine is for my family and home. These women also wanted to make a way out, a way to freedom, a way for their families to continue.

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### **Patty says**

Although I possessed a copy of Mao's "little red book" as a flower child in the early 60's, I really didn't know much about Mao and his Communist Party in China who had rebelled against Chiang Kaishek and the



Chinese Nationalists.

Now I have a better understanding of what was going on during this rebellion and in particular why the women of China flocked to the idealism of the Red Army. In 1928 the Sixth Chinese Communist Party Congress was held in Moscow. At the congress, the Party embraced the enormous potential of peasant women in the society that had long oppressed and abused them. Even before this Congress the Chinese Communists denounced arranged marriages, and they had condemned the practice of foot-binding.

The author begins his book with a description of several of the 30 women before they joined Mao Zedong's Red Army in 1934, of 86,000 men on an epic 4,000 mile journey on foot, in a single year, in search of a new place to start their experimental society. This flight from the Nationalist Army became known as the "Long March". At first, the women did not fully comprehend the extent of what they had undertaken. The description of the journey is unbelievable. Yet these women were the "chosen", unbound both symbolically and literally. While Mao's version of Communism would eventually bring its own terrible troubles to China, these women marched to advance the plight of the poor and of women, which had remained essentially unchanged since the Dark Ages.

This is a wonderful historical read which can be daunting because of the names of places and people. The author tried to help with a pronunciation guide and a list with a short description of the main characters. The footnotes and epilogue give the facts but the author gives us the story. Definitely worth the effort.

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## **Louise Leetch says**

Article first published as Book Review: Unbound: A True Story of War, Love, and Survival by Dean King on Blogcritics.

Encarta Dictionary defines "long" as seeming to last forever, beyond what is wanted and extending considerable distance. The Red Army's incredible Long March exemplifies the word. In Unbound Dean King brilliantly renders the histories of the thirty women who joined 86,000 soldiers of the Red Army in a retreat from Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist Army. The majority of the men died on the journey—all of the women survived.

The 5,000-mile trek over 18 months subjected the army to the most wretched deprivations you can imagine. They struggled through unforgiving terrain while Chiang's American-made fighters bombed them and the local warlords attacked. Keeping their promise of equality, the Communists banned foot binding, abandonment of girl babies and the sale of girls into marriage. Communism's initial idealism was degraded by its paranoia. While many were lost to battle, disease and the environment, their own army executed an inordinate number after denouncing them as nationalists.

The thirty women who joined Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in the Red Army ranged in age from 10 to 34. Strong and resourceful, they carried the sick, sewed shoes and clothing, searched for herbs for healing and foraged for food. They even spun and wove wool. The army carried costumes and sets so these women could entertain the troops after a long day's march. Most importantly, they were in charge of propaganda, recruiting hundreds of soldiers along the way as well as women and nurses. As they marched, the men treated the women as equals, and helped them as they would any comrade in arms.

Dean King's scrupulous research includes interviewing survivors of the Long March and actually walking

portions of it. Their story will serve to reinforce the belief that all women have not only physical strength, but emotional fortitude, staunch convictions and a determination to save, not only themselves but their fellow travelers as well. One note, the publishers have very cleverly added a bookmark listing the women of the march. It's a great idea, but they should have put it in the front of the book!

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### **Chris says**

I bought this book with me when I went to my doctor, and she wondered why it had been written by a man. Considering, however, that King points out the influence of his wife, mother, children, and dog are all females. Look at Pratchett's Tiffany vs. Rowling's Harry after all. Additionally, my knowledge of Chinese history is very general. I knew about the Long March, but not that women had gone and not the Long March actually included more than one march. Luckily for me, King makes access to this story very easy, so you don't need to have in-depth knowledge to read this book. Better yet, King doesn't make you feel like an idiot if you don't know something, and he (or his editors) includes a very handy list of the prominent women (to a western, many of the names are very similar) as well as a glossary.

30 women went on the Long March and most survived. In his detailed account, King presents the background of the women as well as looking at what enabled them to keep going, not only in making the march, but in some cases finding themselves as well. Interesting a few of the women were actually girls.

While King points out that the women did have some advantages over the men (for instance, they were not pushed into battle for the most part), he does highlight the almost unique struggles that the women marched through. From walking or running with feet that had been bound (shod in straw sandals), to climbing a mountain with menstrual cramps, to giving birth in the midst of battle, these women faced everything.

This story is awe-inspiring because even with the idea of "equality" the women weren't really equal. There is a disturbing story involving Mao and his wife at the time, who received extra rations (she not only gave birth on the march, but suffered injuries so bad that they thought she would die for a time). Years of tradition are hard to break after all. It is also interesting to note the various reactions of the men to the women in their midst. Yet this book shows you what any one can do, climbing a mountain while holding on to a tail of a horse.

It should also be noted that King's prose is so fine, the reader feels as if she(or he) is with the marchers on that mountain, during that fight. It is totally engrossing.

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### **Hannah says**

Thoroughly researched, well written account of the amazing story of the Long March. King focuses on the stories of the women, who persevered despite hunger, childbirth, betrayal, and insurmountable odds to help unite the Red Army and bring the lives of Chinese women into the 20th century. I found Unbound to be a very well documented, interesting and knowledgeable book. Still get shivers thinking about all these women survived.

