

How to Read the News from China

By RAYMOND T. RICH

With photographs taken by the author

“TAKE taxi to Hankow and cable full report latest developments.” So read the instructions which a foreign correspondent in Shanghai received over the wire some months ago from one of New York’s most famous daily papers. It was a gloriously fine spring day, the office and typewriter had never seemed less alluring, news was dull in Shanghai, and there were indeed fascinating movements astir in Hankow. For two days the correspondent had been tingling to go there. But he had not, and he could not. He blessed his New York boss, looked wistfully out across the river with its craft of every sort and nation, and resumed his uninspired hammering on the typewriter. And we must confess he had some reasons.

Was it an attack of that persistent Oriental desire to do nothing, and to do that very slowly? No. Insubordination? Business? Previous engagement—such as a baseball game or a fair companion? No, it was none of these. The simple fact was that the taxi wouldn’t make it. And this, in turn, was based upon the phenomenon in Chinese geography which separates Hankow from Shanghai by 585 good English miles, plus no roads as we know them, and not even a railroad for a large portion of the distance! But the New York editor was in earnest!

One of America’s most famous weekly magazines reaches my desk. I notice that it contains a story about China, and, feeling deliciously indolent, I pause to read the author’s impressions of the country in which I am living. Will her views be something like my own? A few sentences from her article strike my attention.

“I climbed aboard the train at Shanghai in the evening, obtained a comfortable berth, and slept soundly until the train boy awakened me in the morning at Canton”—this is the substance of one particular sentence. It forces me to the conviction that her opinions and mine vary most profoundly.

My reasons for disagreement are rather elemental. In the first place, there is no railroad from Shanghai to Canton; in the second place, if there were one, the journey would probably require three days at least; and, finally, I am certain that she traveled from Shanghai to Hongkong by boat (from



A typical Chinese aim!

two to three days), and thence to Canton. Now, assuredly, there is a railroad from Hongkong to Canton, but, unfortunately, for several months previous to her arrival in China no trains had made the run. The last attempt to defy the war lords and the bandit chiefs was eminently unsuccessful, as a friend of mine, who was kidnapped from the train, will stoutly testify.

I read further in the article, and suddenly find the assertion that people in Canton ride through the narrow streets in great baskets suspended from a pole carried by two coolies. As it happens, vegetables do travel that way; people do not.

It is often difficult for persons in China to know whether to laugh or cry when they witness such evidences of gross ignorance and conscienceless inaccuracies as are respectively portrayed by these two illustrations—illustrations which are by no means unique. If they were in the American yellow press, they would be quite unworthy of attention. But when they occur in connection with papers and magazines having a circulation of hundreds of thousands, even millions, they cause amazement and consternation.

To speak very frankly and boldly, most of the news from China is not true to the real situation. But this statement must not be interpreted as meaning that most of the news is deliberately fallacious and misleading. The assertion is in no way a slander against the foreign correspondents of American newspapers in China, for I am confident that *most* of them want to tell the truth. But they are often prevented from doing so by circumstances which will be mentioned below. And, of course, there are a few who care more for a story than they do for a fact, more for color than they do for accuracy. “The streets of Canton were under a cloud of smoke and a hail of cannon shot this morning,” is an illustration of this well-known tendency, which appeared last October. I know, from actual presence in Canton, that they were not.

Probably the most persistent cause of inaccuracy in news despatches from China is the fault of the newspapers themselves in America. Oftentimes their correspondents cable news which is perfectly true in and of itself, but which is not true to the real situation. In other words, it is only a half-truth, not the *whole* truth. Who is guilty? No one, probably, is guilty of willful intent to deceive, but many are guilty—if that is the proper word—of insisting upon the sensational, and of lacking the courage to print (or the willingness to read) the somewhat less striking descriptions of situations in all their aspects. There is a vast difference between news being true and being true to a situation.

News from China is peculiarly susceptible to this distortion by false emphasis for a very important physical and economic reason. Reference is made to the fact that there is at present only one cable connecting China with America. This connection is via British lines to the island of Yap, and thence via the Commercial Cable Company’s line to the relay station at Midway, to Hawaii, to the American coast. As will be remembered from the famous discussions during the Washington Conference, a great portion of this route (from Yap to America) must also serve for connection with Japan and with the Philippines. Furthermore, commercial wireless service from China to the United States has not yet been developed. (Indeed, by terms

of the Washington agreement, wireless stations in China are permitted at present to send only Government messages.) Consequently, it is readily apparent that the China-America cable capacity is severely limited, with the result that cable tolls are well-nigh prohibitive. But sensational "spot" news gets cabled because it is deemed worthy of "big space." And, since there seems during these years to be an almost unending supply of wars, piratings, mutinies, and kidnappings on hand for startling copy, the average American newspaper has few funds remaining available for cabling more significant reports.

Of course the mails remain, but there are few newspapers indeed which are willing to wait for them. Light news has a touch of decided antiquity about it after being in a mail bag for a month, and the heavier news which will well withstand a month's delay without losing much importance is generally regarded as too dull for a daily's lively tastes. Hence the sensational regarding China predominates, almost to the complete exclusion of other types of information. There are, however, it should be needless to add, some laudable exceptions in the American newspaper world.

While speaking of the news which does receive cable attention, at least a few words should be added concerning Chinese war news, for it is obvious that such reports have constituted a very large proportion of the total regarding China during many months past. They should be read only against the background of typically Chinese conditions. Primarily, without considering the moral issue involved in war, it should be remembered that war in China does not have the vital significance of war in Europe, as a great determining force in history. If Chinese wars were truly important and decisive, there would not be so many of them. The very fact that they continue demonstrates their ineffectiveness.

War in China, moreover, seldom—almost never—signifies a fiercely sanguinary battle, because what I should call the firecracker habit still persists. The noise of rifles and of cannon sounds heroic, and sounds as if something must be in the way of accomplishment. To the naïve reasoning process of most Chinese, this is sufficiently convincing. It is difficult for them to see any difference between what ought to be or what must be and what actually is. Therefore, since the noise of shells undoubtedly sounds like a battle, it must in very truth be a battle, irrespective of whether the bullets hit anything or not. "Quibbling over the minutiae" of aiming, con-

sequently, to quote in part from that famous "I. D. R." of pre-Armistice days, "is indicative of failure to grasp the spirit" of a Chinese war.

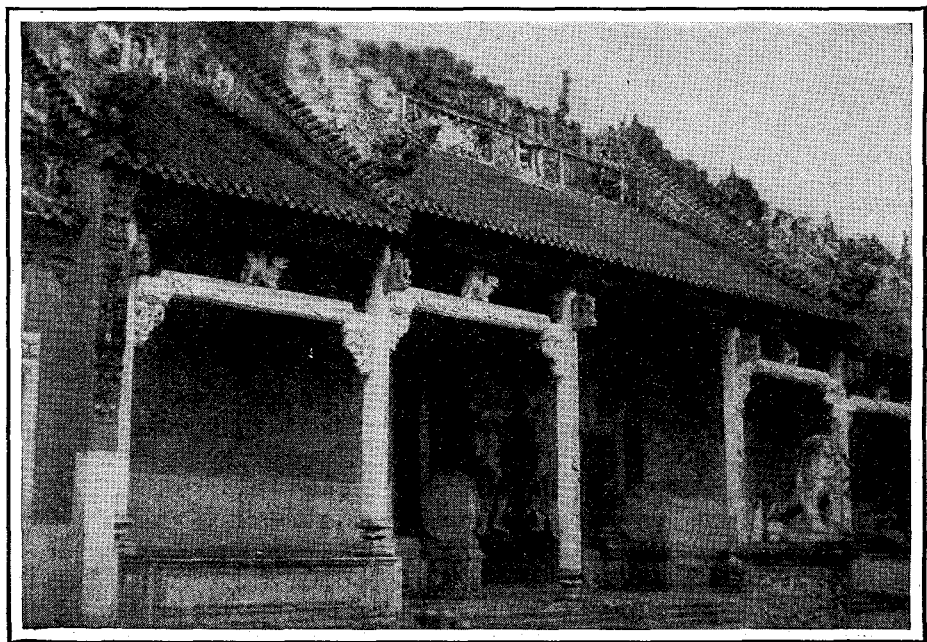
To watch a Chinese army is oftentimes the most amusing pastime that could be desired. Of course it is well known that the average soldier in warm weather carries not only a bayonet scabbard but also a fan, and oftentimes not only a rifle but also an umbrella! And many a time is it possible to witness an evening parade in which each soldier gleefully carries a Chinese lantern dancing gayly from the tip of a sprightly bamboo branch.

The topsyturvydom of Chinese military methods occasionally reaches even more ludicrous proportions. For example, on a scorching, blistering day last summer I encountered a coolie soldier staggering along a cobbly street beneath mounds of impedimenta which well-nigh obscured him from all recognition as a human. There were a heavy blanket-roll, a rifle, scabbard, fan, umbrella, and a kettle or two—all as part of his more or less regular equipment. To this was added a typical Chinese carrying-pole, slung across one shoulder and supporting two ponderous bunches of straggly hay. But that was not all, by any means. He was a cavalryman, and from somewhere amid the baggage a knotted string led backward to his peaceful mount, following, dozing, stumbling, and blissfully unencumbered by so much as even a saddle-bag!

But such and many other tales of Chinese soldiering should not lead to a complete disregard of all the warfare. Even although the battles be indecisive and often little more than mimics, the

existence of persistent civil war in China is intensely serious from a social point of view, if not from a military standpoint. It is serious because it is the symptom of profoundly difficult and critical social and economic conditions. The real reasons why China is in chaos lie much deeper than the rivalries and greed of belligerent *tuchuns*. The forces at work are fundamental, and they would seem at present to show little prospect of being soon brought under control. Still, these forces are the determining factors in the situation.

Hence, to the writer's mind at least, the most vital news from China is not regarding the vicissitudes of generals in the field, but regarding the policies which they represent; not news of civil wars, but of reasons for them; not reports of banditry, but of why it will probably long exist and what is being done to combat the cause; not news of democratic institutions, but of why democracy is not working; not items concerning the rapid spread of Western influence, but rather concerning the consequences of that influence; and, in short, not so much the "spot" news which must be cabled to prevent obsolescence, as the less spectacular news which is so deeply true that it will be worth as much a month from now as at this moment. Of course it is not meant to be implied that cabled news is valueless, for some of it is of the greatest moment. The point is simply that, given the present cable situation, spectacular despatches, which tend on account of limited space to be only half-truths, crowd out the more vital reports. Also, that very few American papers have the



A famous Chinese family temple of the sort which is rapidly disappearing before the advance of Western influence



General Lei Fuk-lam visiting the hospital at Canton Christian College. It is he who rescued the thirty-seven students and Faculty members kidnapped last December. But the constructive work of such generals seldom gets into the news

courage to print the mailed reports, which are heavier reading and which consume nearly a month in transit. You and I and our generation will not have to live very long with the conditions outlined in the *cables* from China, but we probably must live our whole lifetime in the same world with the conditions described in the slower despatches. Furthermore, we shall inevitably be confronted by many of the appalling problems arising from these conditions.

Although volumes might easily be written on this point, it must suffice here to mention one particularly momentous situation. The introduction of Western industrial methods into China has unavoidably brought with it all the social and labor problems which are so sorely vexing America and Europe. At the same time the pressure of foreign governments upon China has given rise to resentment and to charges of crass imperialism (often only too well founded). In this state of affairs Soviet Russia, of course, recognizes a likely field for agitation, since there is both capitalism and imperialism to combat. Hence they begin their propaganda, and this, being anathema in America, makes good news for the cables. The wires buzz with reports of plotting, of demonstrations, and of the imminent danger of China "going Bolshevik."

Now there are, to be sure, agitations, and there are demonstrations. But it is not with these actions, but with their meaning, their consequences, that you and I must live the major portions of

our lives. What are they thus far, and what are they likely to be? Since careful judgments on such questions cannot be compressed into a few hundred words, they are seldom, if ever, cabled. Only guesses seem to receive telegraph attention, and these are entitled to little or no consideration, especially if they forecast positive success or failure. The outcome is not in the hands of a Soviet ambassador and his agents, nor is it in the control of Western representatives. It is bound up with the whole stuff and attitude of the Chinese people themselves, and particularly of their future leaders—to-day called students.

Returning to the question of the truth of news from China, it is possible to make several observations. Even the best and most experienced correspondents are certain to have a rather high percentage of inaccuracies, not only because of the conditions already outlined, but also because of other circumstances. In the first place, it is exceedingly difficult to procure facts in China. They simply do not exist as in the United States or in European countries, and every leader and investigator in the country is almost overwhelmingly handicapped by this very fact alone. About even the most important conditions no one has anything more than an approximation to the real truth.

In the second instance, one tremendous obstacle to procuring facts, or even to making fairly sound guesses, is the mighty size of China and the dearth of adequate communication and transporta-

tion facilities. China, exclusive of the great reaches of Mongolia and Tibet, with about eighty-three per cent of the area of the continental United States, has at least three times as many people! At the same time it does not possess three per cent of America's railroad mileage, and in point of telegraph lines and of post offices has scarcely twenty-one per cent of the United States totals. It is not easy to procure adequate news in such a situation.

Again, there are deep differences of dialect, of environment, of background, and of economic and temperamental interest separating the various provinces and districts from one another. Furthermore, the Chinese sources of news are both undependable and inadequate, because the Chinese press is limited, untrained, and venal. This means that foreign correspondents are severely handicapped in the field which would, in almost any other country, be the most valuable source of information available. It is a cramping limitation—made all the more difficult by the language barrier—which is inevitably reflected in a narrower view-point of Chinese affairs and a pronounced tendency to conceive all China in terms of the treaty port or metropolis in which the correspondent is stationed.

Finally, a comprehensive understanding of the broad background of present-day China is necessary in order to distinguish between the true and false reports which assail a correspondent from every side. It is possible to hear anything in China and solemnly to be told any fact whatsoever. Especially is this true if your informant thinks that you wish to be told something unusual, for his aim is more often to meet your fancies than to increase your sum total of accurate knowledge. He is an expert at making your wish father to his thought. The only satisfactory criterion, therefore, by which to judge the truth-probability factor is a knowledge of Chinese habits, mental attitudes, traditions, and social, economic, and political problems. Even then it is amazingly easy to be misled in the midst of conditions which are so totally dissimilar to Western life.

Clearly, all of these pitfalls await the present writer as well as every other person seeking to learn something about the East. He hopes to avoid their dangers, but certainly does not pretend to the claim of completely doing so. A lifetime in China would not be adequate to that end. He has, however, endeavored to follow the admirable example set by research workers in the physical sciences, the method of preceding each investiga-

tion by an attempt to calculate the probable percentage of error in the results. It is a custom which doubtless detracts from the appearance of finality which might otherwise wait upon the findings, but it would also seem to be essential to rendering full justice to the reader.

In the present instance the most likely sources of error on the writer's side have been frankly stated, with the hope that they will suggest certain correctives which the reader, on his part, can frequently utilize. Thus in reading the news from China, if the cabled news tends to overemphasize certain aspects, the resultant error in impression can be neutralized, at least in part, by reading

the less striking reports which come by mail. If, as is likely, his local papers do not carry such items, he must seek for them in the standard magazines. Again, if he observes only reports of surface happenings, he can be certain that he is not reading all the truth, or even the most important aspects of the truth. If he finds sweeping assertions made about China with all finality, he can be reasonably confident that there is little real authority behind the bluster; if he beholds a vast array of figures and purported facts, he can most wisely mobilize a stout supply of skepticism; and if he tends to heed the words of only one writer, he can be positive, indeed, that

there are also vastly different points of view held by other persons, and perhaps with no less evidence in support. Finally, if he would really be well informed, he will construct for himself a sound knowledge of the fundamental facts in China's life, and then utilize current news as indications of the tendencies at work and the policies which are being followed. Such study, although possibly rather arid at first, will soon pay high dividends indeed, because our own future is in no small measure bound up with the destiny of that East which is to-day criticising, testing, and often directly challenging the very basic concepts of the civilization of the West.

Are Long-Range Weather Forecasts Possible?

By Professor ROBERT DE C. WARD, of Harvard University

DURING one week last autumn there came to my desk three letters. One was from a lumber dealer; another, from a manufacturer of overshoes; the third, from the owner of a woolen mill. Each letter contained the same question: "Will the coming winter be mild or severe?" Would logging operations be difficult and expensive? Would there be unusually large sales of rubbers and of arctics? Would people buy heavy woolen clothing? If the question could have been definitely and positively answered, my three correspondents would doubtless have profited very handsomely thereby. Indeed, it is impossible to overestimate the money value that definite and detailed long-range weather forecasts would have for all classes of people, in all sorts of occupations.

Man naturally craves advance knowledge of coming events. His many attempts at long-range weather forecasting are manifestations of that craving. Not having the necessary foresight himself, he has imagined animals to be endowed with some peculiar sense which enables them to know, weeks or months ahead, what the weather will be. Thus the large group of animal weather proverbs has come into existence. Millions of people believe that the thickness of fur on a muskrat, or the number of nuts stored by a squirrel, or a supposedly early migration of certain birds, indicates a severe winter. Yet it is certain that animals have no such foresight. Their habits, the thickness of their fur, and

other characteristics depend upon their health, the food supply, and many other conditions which have preceded.

Again, certain almanacs contain what are popularly thought to be forecasts of the weather a year ahead. These are, however, merely statements of the average weather conditions of each month. If, for example, the words "Severe cold, snow, and high winds" are printed opposite a week or ten days of January in an almanac, the statement is sure to be true for certain sections of the country. A random assignment of a "severe storm" to some particular day in winter will often "hit." To those who do not consider the matter, this looks like a clever long-range forecast. By remembering only the occasional "hits" and disregarding the "misses," as most people naturally do, such almanac statements appear to be correct most of the time. But they are in no sense forecasts. Nor are they usually correct. Any one familiar with the average weather of his locality can make up such an almanac years in advance. Not long ago a widely known American "weather prophet" died. It is reported that when his health was failing a certain patent-medicine company, which had in the past used his prophecies for advertising purposes, offered him a considerable sum of money if he would make forecasts fifty years in advance!

THEN, again, there are the individual so-called long-range forecasters who, sometimes using scientific facts as a

basis, but drawing unwarranted or at least unsafe conclusions from them, make weather predictions several months ahead. These "forecasts" are expressed in very general terms, as that "the winter will be long and severe." Over an extended area like that of the United States the winter is sure to be "long and severe" somewhere, and it is equally sure not to have those characteristics everywhere. Such a forecast may thus easily be verified in some localities. Even where and when it happens to "hit," it is far too vague and general to be of any real value. Furthermore, these forecasts are so broadly generalized and cover such large areas that no rigid and adequate verification is possible. Hence the author of the predictions is left to make his own verifications in his own way—obviously, a very unsafe proceeding. His self-determined percentages of verification are not likely to run too low.

Occasionally, for a limited and variable period, very general forecasts based on sequences in the character of the seasons may be possible. Thus there may be a series of successive winters slightly warmer than normal or a series of summers somewhat wetter than normal. Indeed, some investigators have thought that they found cycles in these trends towards warmer or cooler, wetter or drier seasons. Yet just when a definite sequence seems to have started the chain breaks, the sequence ends; forecasts based upon it go into the discard. In time, with further study, something more