

# Some of Asia's Many Faces

NATHANIEL PEFFER

**SCRATCHES ON OUR MINDS: AMERICAN IMAGES OF CHINA AND INDIA**, by Harold R. Isaacs. *John Day*. \$6.75.

**THE SOUL OF CHINA**, by Amaury de Riencourt. *Coward-McCann*. \$5.

It has not been proved that what the people of one country think of the people of another country has a direct effect on the relations between the two countries, especially in the larger concerns of peace and war. As between East and West, however, a case can be made, as is testified by the evidence all about us these years in Africa and Asia. The strident voices and irrational, almost hysterical acts and emanations of the former colonial peoples do not arise from political and economic impositions alone; they express a long-cherished bitterness at the former rulers' racial prejudices, their treatment of "natives" as inferior—the white's attitude toward the nonwhite.

On what beliefs was this attitude based and how was it formed? Harold Isaacs, who has himself had long experience in the Far East, set out to learn in an unusual enterprise. In a book with an unfortunate title, he reports his findings. He chose a panel of 181 Americans, more than half of whom had been professionally concerned with China or India. They were not the usual sample of the pollsters. They were of the upper strata economically, culturally, and professionally—in academic life, in mass media (press, radio, and tele-

vision, writers, publishers) in government, business, the church. And Mr. Isaacs did not approach them with the customary pollsters' questions. These were extended conversations rather than interviews, in which he sought by discussing each man's experience, career, and views of life to elicit his opinions and feelings about China or India.

**T**HE FINDINGS throw revealing psychological sidelights, but they are inconclusive. There are opinions, feelings, biases. In some cases they lie in close, analytical observation, while in some they derive from an early experience or incident, perhaps trivial in itself but leaving a mark in memory. In others they are the expression of an individual's temperament—say an attitude toward religion, toward sanitation, toward efficiency. The caste system, for instance, prejudiced many against India. Chinese *savoir faire*, with its agreeable code of manners, won the favor of some and in others left an impression of insincerity. But on the whole Mr. Isaacs found that what matters most is some early experience developing slowly in "a process of enlargement whereby we people our world with caricatures."

Clearly the Chinese stimulate "liking" more than the Indians do. As Mr. Isaacs puts it, "The Chinese stood highest in the esteem of those who had most contact with them and

lowest (though never very low) among those who knew them least. On the other hand, Indians scored better among those who knew them little." This will hardly surprise those who know Asia well. The Chinese are more outgoing, more suave, and they have more highly cultivated the art of softening human contacts, more highly perhaps than any other people in the world. They are in their inner being no less arrogant toward the white man than the Indian (and both are as arrogant toward the white man as the white man is toward them, though both have until now been too weak to show it), but the Chinese are skillful at concealing their arrogance.

What this study shows more than anything else is that just as it is futile to generalize about people as a whole, it is almost as futile to try to know what lies behind the generalizations that men make about other peoples. Through a man's windows we see what a man sees, says Mr. Isaacs, "but little of how he sees it." Probably we can conclude from this, as Mr. Isaacs seems to, that what a man sees reflects his personality. As long as this remains individual and subjective, it does no particular harm, but if massed in a people to form a basis for collective action toward others, it can be dangerous. This point Mr. Isaacs develops with a good deal of acumen. What he has done here is to give an anatomy of attitudes to the outer world. It has its limitations, but it is interesting as a case study.

**M**R. DE RIENCOURT'S BOOK is of another order. It, too, is unfortunately titled. It is concerned not with the "soul" of China, whatever that may mean, but with the development of Chinese culture. On the breakdown of the traditional culture and the probable causes he is astute. The effects of the western impact, of western science and technology in particular, are analyzed concisely and with insight. In some ways this analysis is more literary than historical, and patterns are made more neatly than the life of countries permits—a weakness of much European writing about the East. But Mr. de Riencourt's book has the merit that it puts China in its setting in time and the world.

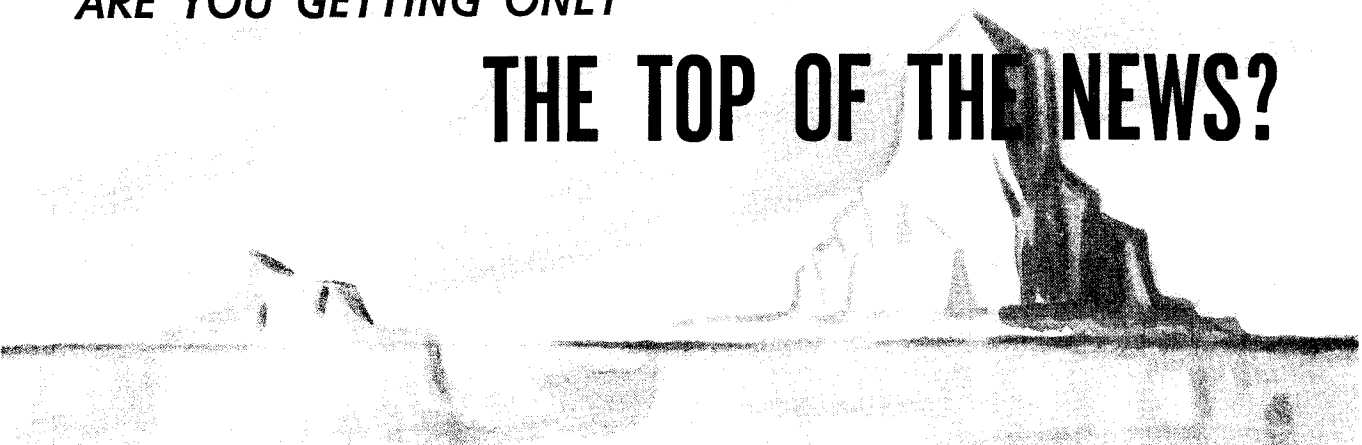
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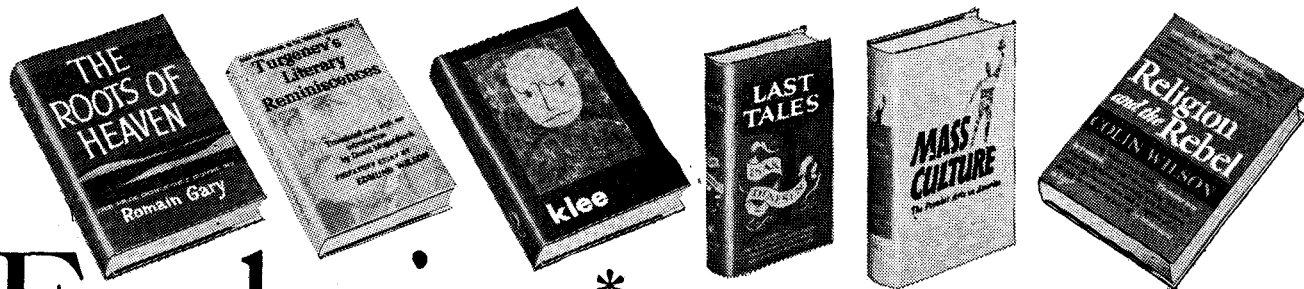
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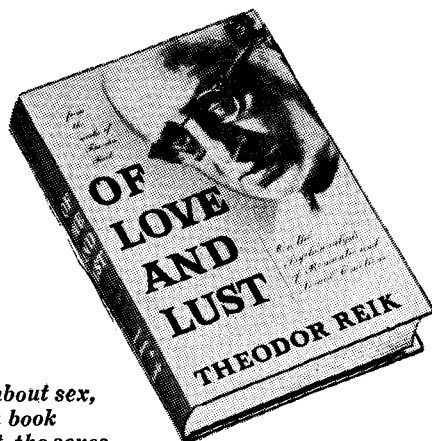
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