

# The True China

MY COUNTRY AND MY PEOPLE. By Lin Yutang. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. A John Day Book. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by NATHANIEL PEFFER

LET me say at the outset that this is the best book on China in the English language. I say it with mixed feelings: with a little of envy, because I have myself written books on China, and with more of a sense of vindication, since I have always believed that a truly revealing book on China could be done only by a Chinese, one who had a background of Western culture without at the same time having had his native cultural roots withered in the shallow sterilities of missionary colleges at home or the artificiality of undergraduate "courses" in America. Thus could be circumvented the two main causes of the deficiencies of all foreign books on China. The majority of foreigners come to China too late to get more than an intellectual apprehension of the spirit of China and the feel of Chinese life. And many of them have left their own countries so early that they have not been deeply enough imbued with their own culture to be equipped for comparative judgments. In consequence they rush into glib comparisons, which have no merit or meaning.

This book proves my thesis. Mr. Lin is such a Chinese. He has lived in Europe and America and measured the ways of the West with a critical eye. He is widely read in Western literature, has an impressive erudition, and has not only "learned" Western culture but understands it. Withal he has the mellowness, the wisdom, and the humor of his race. As I say, his book is therefore the best that has been written on China in English, and I recommend it to all those who want a true and sensitively perceived picture of China. I recommend it also for its acute insight into Occidental institutions, ideas, and ways of life. Mr. Lin says of foreigners who want to write of China that they "must feel with the pulse of the heart as well as see with the eyes of the mind." He himself feels us with the heart.

It is difficult to sum up or characterize the contents of his book. He follows the precepts of the philosophy of Chinese art as he describes it—conveying the whole and the reality by the evocation of a mood with a few impressionistic strokes. In the best sense of the word his book is impressionistic rather than analytical or schematic. Lin Yutang tries to give a sense of why Chinese are different from others and why they are as they are: their attitude to life, their conception of society and men's relation to each other, their arts and literature. Without rigid plan or argument he makes

you understand why they are what is miscalled "fatalistic," why they find efficiency uncongenial, why and how they get at least as much out of living as any other race despite their poverty, grime, misgovernment, and lack of comforts, even why they have rapacious militarists, crooked politicians, and civil wars.

What stands out mainly is, first, the essential humanism of the Chinese people and, second, their love of nature, their inseparable-ness from nature. The end of living for the Chinese is to get as much enjoyment as possible out of the fleeting span between birth and death. To that end all religion, philosophy, esthetics, and social organization are bent. The Gothic spirit, the aspiring toward heaven, *per aspera ad astra*—all that means nothing to the Chinese. Still less does the otherwordliness of Occidental religions. You're human and

fallible; the universe is all-powerful and nature invincible; the world is old and not very much has changed or ever will change or can change; progress is an illusion; you have so little time to live and you can spend that time so pleasantly—why worry? You need only be urbane and civilized and a gentleman and enjoy what nature offers. Men are mortal and never will be gods. The heavens never will bend to their will. Wisdom lies in mellowness and understanding and a just measuring of proportion, not in brilliance. There are the arts for your fulfillment.

It is unusual and refreshing to read a Chinese on China who does not have a sense of inferiority before the West and at the same time does not idealize China. There are no illusions in Mr. Lin. He is as aware of what is wanting in his country as any Shanghai reporter. The difference is that he understands causes. Like all thinking Chinese today he is despondent over the tragic plight of his country and the suffering of its people. I must, however, disagree with him on the causes and the remedy. To Confucianism and its exaltation of family and family obligations he attributes the lack of social consciousness. To the Confucian philosophy of government, which is based on the rule of superior men unguided and

unchecked by impersonal law, he attributes the corrupt and oppressive government under which China suffers.

The lack of social consciousness in China is admitted. But the lack is not Chinese. The social consciousness he admires in the West is not a racial or cultural characteristic of the Western peoples. It is a product of the time, of the social integration made possible by communications. There was no more social consciousness in Europe before the industrial revolution than there is in China now. In fact there was less in seventeenth century Europe than in seventeenth century China. It was just the relatively greater sense of collective trusteeship in China that impressed the first European travelers and inspired Voltaire to encomiums. There can be no social consciousness when the village is the social unit. And as you look at the Western world in 1935 there is not so much social consciousness when the nation is the social unit. What Mr. Lin bewails in this connection is really the fact that

China has not yet mechanized, a fact which I do not think he bewails in general.

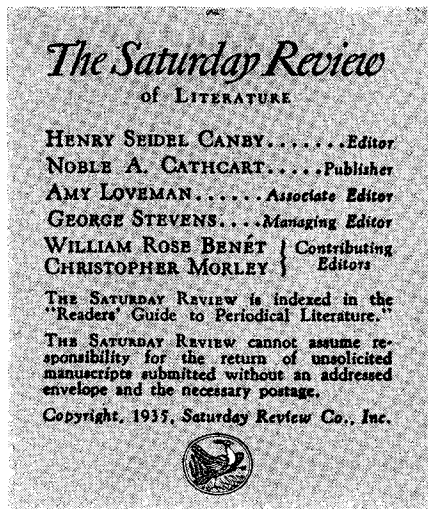
When, further, he sees China's hope in the institution of government by law instead of by men, he is only clutching at a straw in desperation. I am afraid that when he was in Europe and America, he did not observe the workings of government by law closely enough. For whether you have an avowed government by men or an ostensible government by law you get government by men anyway, or, at the most, government by lawyers in the interests of powerful men. Government by the kind of men who now govern China is suicidal, but so long as such men are in power laws will only serve as their protective coloration.

Disagree with Mr. Lin or not over minor points, you will get a more veracious idea of China from his book than from any other book ever written, more perhaps than you will get by just living there and depending on your own faculties to grasp the untranslatable. And you will be stimulated and refreshed by a great deal of wisdom about life and, incidentally, by an English style of charm and occasional distinction.

Mr. Pepper's own book, "China: The Collapse of a Civilization," is one of the best informed books on that country.



LIN YUTANG



## Reporter's Heaven

IT would be interesting to know just how many successful contemporary authors have had a training, or at least an experience, in journalism. In fiction and in drama doubtless the percentage would be high, but that need surprise no one. A writer who wants to tell stories cannot sell them until he learns how, and eight times out of ten gets a journalistic job to earn something while he is maturing his talent. The journalists who emerge as authors are usually would-be book writers who became journalists in order to become authors.

If statistics were available as to the number of ex-journalists among historians, biographers, and writers of serious books on topical subjects like economics, the figures would be surprising. This accounts for the superior quality of interest in recent books of this kind, and also for the superficial character of many of them.

The journalist-author is responsible also for one earmark of the modern novel, modern history, modern biography done by ex-journalists that begins to grow annoying in the extreme. It might be called the reporter-habit. The supreme example is, naturally, to be found in a well-written book, Thomas Wolfe's "Time and the River" (although Wolfe, we believe, was never a reporter), but the taint is in the air, and examples are multitudinous both here and in England. The novelist does not think of himself as an interpreter endeavoring to give an intelligible shape to the complex called life. He regards himself as a reporter with an assignment to report behavior. Life is a story, which, if he can make what happened or was heard seem like news, is sure to be printed, because news, that is, what has just happened and seems important because it has just happened, is what we are all conditioned to read. Hence a novel ceases to be a plot in the old sense, ceases to be a presentation of character, ceases even to have an atmosphere; relies instead upon a vivid transcript of recent conversation somewhat edited, and a chronological development from what they did yesterday to what they did today, very

much like a long news story in a daily paper, but much freer to get in background and the mannerisms of personality. The novel thus takes up behaviorism where the scientists dropped it.

As for the journalist-historians and journalist-biographers, they have borrowed the legitimate methods of the novelist and made them illegitimate. Their scholarship is often good, but only the best of them can resist the temptation to go beyond scholarship. It is not enough that the Brontë children were known to have worked together, or that Josephine tried to wheedle favors from Napoleon. They must write the scenes, invent a dialogue, supply fancy where the facts only point the way. It is true that Thucydides wrote speeches for his characters, but his object was to typify their action—these short-story episodes in journalistic history are clearly designed for a different purpose, to make history read as if it might be happening today, as if it were news. A good ambition if nothing more important is sacrificed. But something highly important is lost, the confidence of the reader, his belief. And so able and well-informed a journalist-biographer as Zweig will go further along these fictional lines and construct a plot. It was sexual maladjustment that ruined Louis XVI, uncontrollable passion that wrecked Mary Queen of Scots. To this theme, this plot, all the rest of the biography will be subordinated, as in a novel.

We have charged journalism, or rather a training in journalism, with these serious faults. Probably the real cause lies deeper, lies behind journalism, not in it. Probably it is the philosophic chaos of this period which is most responsible. Presumably it is our passionate desire to have everything pattern itself in the concrete diagrams of natural science which makes us so curious as to behavior and so willing to be content with news. A hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, the writer saw his subjects in terms of a theory of living, which was not rigidly dogmatic like Marxism, but speculative, inquiring. Today he is inclined to stop with the facts, which seem to him sufficient. Which is right, who can say? But the first makes the best fiction, and the best history.

**Politician in Homespun** If Huey Long did not belong in the line of homespun philosophers discussed recently in these columns, he was certainly a near relative. His philosophy was instinctive and vague, for he was emphatically a man of action, the most recent, the ablest, but by no means the last of those statesmen-demagogues who hear the call of the poor-white to be rescued from his century-long exploitation, and see their opportunity in his plight. But a homespun orator he certainly was, and here he touches literature and the American tradition. His speeches were not brilliant; his epigrams, though quoted up and down the country, were not particularly

good, and depended much more upon their impudence than upon their wit or wisdom for success. They make a sorry show beside Lincoln's equally homely epigrams or Theodore Roosevelt's pungent quotations. Huey Long's art was different. It was not the art of using language to conceal thought, but a variation of that ancient trick,—the art by which language hides the character, and especially the ability, of the speaker. Senator Long spoke before the Dutch Treat Club last year, where he was in no danger of being reported, and so was not afraid to be his real self. He is not being reported here, but this much can be said with propriety. The man who orated that day was clearly educated, self-educated but well educated, a man widely if irregularly read, a man quite capable of analyzing his own statements in social philosophy, who certainly knew which were true and which were intended to make an audience believe what was necessary for his own practical purposes. But, since Federalism and its intellectual aristocracy crashed among us, that kind of a mind has had to veil its power before the American public, or give up appealing to the masses. It has had to deal in generalities easily understood (like the speeches of Wilson and the President), or pretend to be simple, homely, low-brow. Long chose the latter course, and, like Artemus Ward, resorted to the old trick of semi-illiteracy. Artemus misspelled, Huey raised a camouflage of aints. He was a shrewd politician who dressed his language in homespun because that was the way to get it over to his constituency. He kept his poor-white manners to conceal the fact that his was no poor-white mind.

## Ten Years Ago

The Saturday Review recommended "The Tragedy of Waste" by Stuart Chase in the Fall of 1925. W. E. Woodward, who reviewed the book, wrote: "Mr. Chase points out that the main cause of our stupendous waste of commodities and man power is a natural result of the anarchy of commerce and industry. Industrialism is continually running in head-on opposition to the needs of society. . . ." At that time Mr. Chase maintained that a day of reckoning was in the offing.

## Today

In this issue A. A. Berle, Jr., reviews Stuart Chase's latest book, "Government in Business." The reviewer, making the prediction that the economic climax is nearly here, proceeds to quote Mr. Chase: "The essential strategy of the next decade . . . is to accept the aim of an adequate standard of living" and to promote it "with every available law, constitutional revision, administrative technique."