

VI - 73 C - 4. Smedley, Agnes "China's Revolutionary Tradition" book  
review of A Short History of Chinese Civilization by  
L. Carrington Goodrich - The Nation, July 8, 1944  
pp. 51-52.

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# BOOKS and the ARTS

## China's Revolutionary Tradition

A SHORT HISTORY OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION. By Tsui Chi. With a Preface by Laurence Binyon. G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$4.

WHEN a modern Chinese sets out to write the history of his country for use in powerful Western countries with records of racial prejudice and national aggression, he might be expected to coat its weaknesses with a liberal layer of whitewash. He might also be expected to become lost in the maze of an ancient civilization that stretches from the first legendary beginnings in 2697 B.C., or earlier, down to the living present. Mr. Tsui Chi, an erudite Chinese scholar, has avoided both pitfalls and has produced a relatively short, graphic, and most interesting volume. Only in the later chapters about modern China and Chinese personalities does he apply whitewash, and even then he tries to be objective.

The first thing that Americans complain about, in books on China, is the names of Chinese cities and towns, and of Chinese personages. However, the Chinese, like Americans, have names, and their use can't be helped. Such names abound here, but it is not necessary to remember more than a few of them, for this book deals not merely with the rise and fall of dynasties, wars and more wars, and revolutions upon revolutions that overthrew decaying and corrupt dynasties; it is primarily a record of Chinese thought and China's civilized achievements in philosophy, literature, art, and science. A sparkling stream of folklore, mingled with social awareness, enlivens the book, bringing it close to the common reader and at times making it as fascinating as a novel. On the social side the book reveals the common man of China rising throughout history to destroy oppression and corruption. This revolutionary basis of Chinese history is not confined to the ancient past but also holds today, and modern Chinese history must be considered in its light. Instead of scaring Americans to death, it ought to bring China closer to us and our own history and illuminate for us the democratic nature of the Chinese people. The words of an ancient historian who explained the downfall of the great Han dynasty in 220 A.D. might be legitimately applied to the present: "When the footpaths of the rich ran across every field and the benefits of streams and mountains were monopolized by them, the poor hadn't enough ground on which to rest the end of an awl."

Mr. Tsui not only justifies the doctrine of Confucianism as necessary during times of decay but also analyzes it for what it is: a feudal, social philosophy of conservatism, heavy with formalism, exaggerated ceremony and ritual, which was fought by the great natural, equalitarian philosophies of Lao-tze and Mo-tze. In brief graphic passages the author also analyzes the social philosophies of other thinkers, such as Hanfei, who advocated a reign of law and the equality of all men before the law.

People interested in the development of painting, pottery,

sculpture, and early Chinese inventions such as printing, paper-making, the compass, and gunpowder, will find this book of great interest. The rise and influence of Buddhism upon China, and the liberality with which Chinese rulers received and welcomed the first Christian priests, are pregnant with meaning. China had no prejudices against Christianity until a Papal Bull attempted to tell Chinese Christians how to conduct themselves. The first Jesuit priests to China were welcomed as the bearers of Western sciences such as astronomy, arithmetic, and cartography. But the impact of Christianity upon China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became intricately mingled with foreign commercial aggression. The early Western business men trading with China were half-pirate, and their true nature was revealed in the British opium wars which forced opium upon China. The unequal treaties which followed gave foreign missionaries special rights and privileges. Had Christianity been as non-aggressive as Buddhism, its influence on the Far East might have been entirely different.

Americans may disregard many of the countless Chinese names in this book, but not that of Wang An-shih, the great reformer, Premier under one of the Sung emperors. Wang An-shih was a man so modern that he might have lived in the present. One century after the founding of the Sung dynasty in 960 A.D., the dynasty was tottering under a burden of decay, with luxury and corruption undermining the country. A powerful landlord class had again risen, and the peasants groaned under fearful burdens, including usurious debts and heavy taxation. There were foreign wars and social uprisings. The story of the rise of the people is preserved for us in the famous Shui Hu tales which Pearl Buck has translated in "All Men Are Brothers." The Sung court turned to religion and pleaded with heaven to save it.

Instead of turning to heaven, Premier Wang tried to introduce courageous and sweeping reforms, such as a national budget, a just taxation system, and the granting of generous loans at low rates of interest to the peasants. He cut down the unwieldy army and created a smaller powerful body of crack troops, and also a universal militia system.

The reforms of Wang An-shih have a modern ring. To his banner flocked all the progressives of his day—young men opposed to Confucian conservatism as well as to the corruption and injustice of the prevailing system—and out of their struggle came the great natural painting and literature of the day. But the conservatives fought Wang, much as American reactionaries fought the New Deal; and they branded him and his supporters as the Chinese equivalent of "visionaries" and "starry-eyed dreamers." Premier Wang happened to have a backbone, however, and he met his opponents head-on. Mr. Tsui says that Premier Wang was too energetic and aggressive and wanted progress too quickly, whereas the Chinese are "by nature conservative." In this respect he takes the view of the ruling class, not of the Chinese common people generally, who most assuredly welcomed every energetic reform

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which Wang An-shih introduced. But the conservatives of the time triumphed and Wang fell from favor; his sovereign soon thereafter died. Reactionaries came to power, and Wang and his supporters dared not raise their heads for many years. By that time, however, social decay had gone so far that they were recalled to power, but too late. The Mongol hordes were already advancing into China, and soon the Sung dynasty was destroyed and the foreign barbarians established the Yuan dynasty until another peasant revolution uprooted it and brought the Mings to power. The Mings in turn degenerated, and in 1621 A.D. fell before the invading Manchus, who ruled until they were overthrown by the followers of the late Dr. Sun Yat-sen in 1911.

The fate of the Chinese Republic is now known to many: years of civil war, in which all the great powers had a finger, each of them supporting any war lord who served their commercial interests. The Kuomintang as the progressive nationalist party became, after 1927, the party of the new ruling class, with the ubiquitous landlord, merchant, and modern banker taking possession and repeating a historical process. This led to the rise of the Chinese Red Army. Mr. Tsui is, I believe, utterly wrong in making a distinction between the Kuomintang and the plutocracy of modern times. They are identical.

Mr. Tsui perhaps throws a sop to America when he says that China's modern army was reorganized and trained by "Europeans and Americans." It was reorganized and trained by German military advisers, one of whom, General von Seeckt, designed the main military campaigns against the Chinese Red Army—which was another peasant revolution. Until Japan forced Hitler to withdraw the German advisers in 1938, General von Falkenhausen was the head of the German military mission. Von Falkenhausen was until recently the Nazi military dictator of the Low Countries. The Soviet Russians took the place of the Germans until recent months, when Americans have had a finger in the Chinese pie.

The description of the New Life movement as given by Mr. Tsui is also beside the point. This is a semi-fascist movement modeled on the similar organization of one Signor Mussolini. Mr. Tsui has tried to walk a tight rope in regard to recent events and personalities, but he makes a mistake when he describes Madame Chiang Kai-shek as the "mother of every wounded soldier in China."

Madame Chiang is a woman of sincere, unpretentious character, and although she learned to admire the American political and educational system, was never captivated by the luxury and superficial brilliance of modern New York. She dresses like a simple and modest Chinese wife, and as one of the leaders of the New Life movement, she has given an example to the women of China to dress plainly, live frugally, and abjure those new-fangled frivolities which are quite out of keeping with their dignified Chinese traditions.

Mr. Tsui perhaps gets his Soong sisters mixed up. That description might apply to Madame Sun Yat-sen, but never to Madame Chiang. The paragraph was perhaps written before Madame Chiang's visit to this country with a retinue of relatives and retainers. Jade and diamonds, mink and sables, silks and satins, do not constitute frugal and plain

living, and are totally out of harmony with the bitter lives of the soldiers and the common people of China.

Discounting Mr. Tsui's account of such incidents and personalities, this book is nevertheless well worth reading.

AGNES SMEDLEY