

VI - 73 E - 6. Agnes Smedley, Battle Hymn of China, The Evening Sun, Baltimore
October 23, 1943.

Books:

He hath never fed of the dainties that are bred of a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink; his intellect is not replenished; he is only an animal.—Shakespeare.

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Smedley On China

BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA, by Agnes Smedley. 528 pages. Knopf, \$3.

Out in the Far East nobody is neutral about Agnes Smedley. She is either the one true ambassador of white civilization to the Chinese or she is a fellow-traveler and troublemaker without morals or scruples. Whatever else she is, Agnes Smedley is a courageous woman who wants none of the best of it in a battle and for whom no task is too revolting or menial if it helps the Chinese. Miss Smedley approaches most things from the Communist point of view and she is not ashamed of her emotions which are aroused by the sufferings of the Chinese people and what she considers the colossal indifference of the West to the meaning of events in the Orient. Her account of life with several Chinese armies makes an indelible record of human suffering and endurance, plus human greed and cruelty.

These latter qualities are, of course, generally discovered among the Japanese invaders, but Miss Smedley makes no effort to conceal them when she finds them shared by the Chinese. In the struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communists of the north, Miss Smedley makes no effort to preserve an aloof impartiality. The Chiang Kai-shek faction represents to her an accumulation of greed, intrigue and low cunning. The indifference of the rich Chinese to the lot of the poor has appalled many Westerners; to Miss Smedley it is a cancer in the body

politic which only pressure from the ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed masses of the Left can remove. And, of course, Miss Smedley is not the only witness of the fact that Chu-teh's Communist army has led in the effort to inform an illiterate people sufficiently to enable political ideas to circulate at all. As the Governor of Kwangsi province told her, "Our chief gain (from education) is national consciousness. Our troops know that this is a life-and-death struggle for the entire country, not just for Kwangsi." After all, it is only about ten years since the Nineteenth Route Army fought the Japanese in the suburbs of Shanghai with no support from the Central Government and very little consciousness by anybody that the battle involved China as a nation.

Miss Smedley has been in China since 1928. Before the Japanese war she was among the phenomena pointed out to tourists. She probably has a better understanding of the point of view of the poor people of China than most of the Sinologists who write "policy stuff" about the Far East. Perhaps she oversimplifies and extols the virtues of the humble while exaggerating the malignity of the rich and great. But the reader of this book is certain to concede that any errors she makes are errors of judgment and not of intent, because it is plain that as a connoisseur of human beings, Miss Smedley sees no point in hiding the unattractive side of some Chinese in order to give them a good character. She reports that in Anhwei province there are still "baby ponds" where girl babies are drowned, and mothers-in-law still abuse the child brides of their sons. Maybe this is all capitalism or feudalism, but Miss Smedley, while attributing most of the advance in China to the Reds, is wise enough to make it evident that she suspects a lot of low human nature will survive the revolution.

After all, the main thing is that the people of China are beating out their salvation on the terrible anvil of war, having endured to the utmost hardships and tortures which put Miss Smedley to shame when the American magazines arrive with their advertisements of fur coats and powder compacts. Perhaps in her less emotional moments Miss Smedley doesn't blush, because, after all, the demonstrated ability of men to organize their labor for the production of comforts and luxuries—not to mention planes for China—is not to be sneezed at.

FREDERIC NELSON.