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Agnes Smedley's Battle Hymn of China, New York Times,
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Books of the Times

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

WHEN Theodore White, one of the more knowledgeable American correspondents in China, was last visiting the United States, he walked about with a troubled frown on his face. For people kept asking him for "the truth about China," and he didn't quite know how to tell it. "I want you to love China," he said, "and if I tell you the truth about China I'm afraid you will misunderstand me."



Agnes Smedley

What he meant to imply was that China was a land of lurid contrasts, a land of "squeeze" and bribery and war lords and political dictatorship on the one hand, and a faith and devoted courage and democratic feeling on the other, and he was afraid that if he told the truth about the first China the second would be forgotten. "China," he said, "is fighting for the right to have her own civil war when the war against Japan is over." He didn't say that a civil conflict was inevitable, merely that it was possible. But even if a truly peaceful China is still a generation away Mr. White wanted all his friends to love the Chinese.

The terrific contrasts of China show on every page of Agnes Smedley's "Battle Hymn of China,"* which is written very much in the spirit of Mr. White's conversation. Not that Miss Smedley is a person of all-embracing sympathies. In her passionate concern for the under dog everywhere, Miss Smedley is often guilty of thinking that middle-class origins and interests are ipso facto proof that one is a potential Fascist, or at least a hypocrite.

Oil to Japan Touchy Subject

Miss Smedley thinks that only a rarefied diabolism could have ever countenanced selling oil to Japan, and she would snort if you argued that Cordell Hull's motive in permitting the sales was to delay the Japanese attack on Borneo and Sumatra. Nevertheless, when it comes to writing about the Chinese, Miss Smedley is usually magnificent.

Miss Smedley boasts about her neuroses, and she is wise in so doing. For it is her yearning to embrace the sufferings of millions, her almost masochistic will to expose every nerve to the tortures visited upon the lowliest Chinese coolie or peasant, that makes Miss Smedley such an absorptive and sympathetic student of China at war. In part this book is autobiography, the personal history of a Colorado coal-town girl whose interest in Asia was first aroused by contact with exiled Indian revolutionists in New York and Berlin. Miss Smedley went to China just after Chiang Kai-shek had turned on the

Communists in 1927, and her first experiences of the land made her think of the Middle Ages in Europe. Everywhere she went she witnessed the feudal contrasts of great families living on walled estates and the innumerable, omnipresent poor who begged on the outer side of the walls.

Aroused by Coolie's Work

Once, after eating duck and drinking cold beigar wine with the patricians of Peiping, she rode home in a ricksha. The heaving shoulders of her ricksha coolie suddenly reminded her of her coal-miner father. "Listen, you," she screamed at her hosts, "get out and pull your ricksha coolie home. Let's prove there are no classes in China." It probably would do no good to suggest to Miss Smedley that her attitude may have been an insult to the coolie. A more generous approach would have been to pay the coolie well for his job. After all, the inverted snobbism of taking over his work wouldn't have bought the coolie any rice, to say nothing of roast duck.

Miss Smedley was anti-Chiang Kai-shek until the Sian kidnapping incident, which put the Generalissimo solidly behind the idea of national resistance to Japan. But even today she has little good to say for the Kuomintang, which she fears as a "reactionary" clique. Maybe Miss Smedley is right in her fears, but the fact remains that Chiang Kai-shek has kept the Kuomintang in the war in spite of the many years of suffering since 1936. The "Red" armies of the Eighth and the Fourth Routes are undoubtedly as courageous as Miss Smedley paints them in her glowing, richly informed pages. But the Kuomintang-led armies have done their job, too. To judge by her emphases, Miss Smedley would like to see China jump overnight from feudalism to socialism. She seems unduly quick to resent the persistence of forces that might give China a long period of middle-class development if only these forces could be released and liberalized.

"Harshly Exalted Reporting"

Aside from its underlying theory, which is at least debatable, Miss Smedley's book is a remarkable piece of vivid, sympathetic, harshly exalted reporting. Her stories of the guerrillas, her personal portraits of people like Lu Hsun, "The Voltaire of China," or Dr. Lim of the Red Cross Medical Corps, or the girl silk "filature" workers of southern China, are at once vigorous and deeply moving.

"Battle Hymn of China" is violent and prejudiced. But it leaves the reader with no doubt whatever that China is worthy of all the love that Theodore White wished to invoke for it even when he was reciting its sins and shortcomings, to which Miss Smedley would rightly add that love is not enough; there must be military and financial support as well. Miss Smedley's dedication, "To the soldiers of China, poor, glorious pioneers in the world struggle against fascism," would indicate that if there are debts to be talked about, it is the United States that it the debtor. We already owe the Chinese more than we can repay, as Miss Smedley makes plain in many ways.

*BATTLE HYMN OF CHINA. By Agnes Smedley. 328 pages. Knopf. \$3.50.