

A CURTAIN OF IGNORANCE

China: How America is deceived

Person Told Red China a May Collapse Soon

May 15 months due to internal stresses. The views were reported Peiping hierarchy over on beliefs that coexistence doctrine of peaceful existence.

RED CHINA'S
WAR AGAINST GOD

Starving China
Seeks U. S. Grain

By Albert Ravenholt
Chicago Daily News

Manila, the Philippines

Communist China has approached Middle Western and Western wheat growers and the States Government about buying American surplus.

Destroy U.N.

Russ Plan Studied

S.F. News Call Bulletin

10/3/61

FELIX GREENE

Red Chinese Eating
Babies

1980—Red 'Bleed' China
Food
Plan Reading
U.S. Bl...

oted reporter assesses the rising tensions that
building toward a blowup of Mao's iron rule.

Coming Explosion

in Red China

Confucius Say---2,400 Years Ago

China Faces Worst Crisis

arriman Sees
evolt in China

clusive Report
China Could



SIGNS OF A CRACK

RED CHINA
Merry-Go-Round

Starving Chinese
A...

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A CURTAIN OF IGNORANCE

In this book the author of *The Wall Has Two Sides* exposes the errors and false predictions which, he maintains, have been given to the American people and have seriously distorted their picture of Communist China.

Citing chapter and verse from publications of all kinds, including eye-witness reports of journalists and experts from other countries who have had more opportunity than Americans to see China—and also including his own first-hand observations from three recent visits there—Mr Greene has compiled a scorching indictment of the American press and so-called China experts.

He analyses the role of the China lobby, the myths of Chiang Kai-shek sympathizers, the facts behind the China-Tibet episode and the China-India border dispute, as well as exploding the wishful thinking behind the American idea that the Chinese are starving or in revolt, and their supposition that the Communist regime will one day 'pass away'.

Mr Greene has written a book of first importance to the West, for American misconceptions could lead to a third world war or at least to America's political isolation. *A Curtain of Ignorance* is written with vigorous and witty conviction, and is certain to provoke controversy on both sides of the Atlantic.

By the same author

THE WALL HAS TWO SIDES
LET THERE BE A WORLD

FELIX GREENE

A
CURTAIN
OF
IGNORANCE



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE LONDON

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FELIX GREENE
Palo Alto, California
September 1963

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All references in the text to other books are to the American editions. *Awakened China* by Felix Greene is published by Jonathan Cape Ltd. under the title of *The Wall Has Two Sides*.

Whenver I am asked what nationality I am, I find myself hesitating because nothing I can say would be really true.

I was born and educated in England—formally educated, that is. My education about the modern world we live in began after I left Cambridge and came to this country where for nearly two years (it was during the Depression) I drove trucks, picked fruit, and for a few painful months I tried to become interested in the advertising business. I then went back to England where I ran for Parliament (and was soundly trounced) and joined the B.B.C. I did not live in America again until I returned to New York to head the B.B.C. office there, which I did for five years.

Since those far-off days I have lived most of the time in the U.S., but finding all kinds of good reasons for returning to Britain at least once a year. Technically, I am still British. I traveled to China on both my visits on a British passport and could not have gone on an American. When I add it all up I find, however, that I have now lived almost half my life in America; my wife is American, my home is here, my child goes to school here. I am tied to America (as I am to Britain) by countless affectionate associations of friendship and work. So what am I?

This rather rambling personal note is necessary to explain what might otherwise appear puzzling—why, though formally British, I have written this book as if I were an American. I wrote it this way

because the book is about America and because I feel so much a member of the family that I cannot bring myself to write about this country as if I were merely a visitor looking in.

The truth is that I can never think of myself as exclusively either American or British. I am both. If in a more enlightened period a dual Anglo-American citizenship is evolved for those in my predicament, I will be first in line to claim *that* passport—for that is what I really am.

FOREWORD

This book proposes to challenge the accuracy of some of the reports about Communist China conveyed to the American people by the press, the experts, and by public officials.

Most people in the United States—certainly the majority under thirty—if they have relied on our press for their information about China, can have come to only one conclusion: that China's backwardness, her shortage of food, and what is thought of as the prevailing misery of her people, are due to the Communists; that during the civil war in China evil men threw out the good men; and that though the good men were defeated and are now in exile, it is America's moral obligation to support them against the ruthless and aggressive tyrants who have reduced the Chinese masses to unspeakable indignities and suffering.

Having been twice to China in recent years, I believe this is not a true picture.¹ It is not the picture accepted by others in the Western world who have had a far closer and more continuous contact with Communist China than we have had. It is a concept that I believe the best intelligence in our own country knows is not true. And yet this picture governs our actions. In many significant ways we are basing national policies on a concept of China that is unreal.

¹ Since this was written, I returned to China for a third visit. See "Postscript from Peking."

To say that those who control our press, the specialists and the politicians have misinformed the public in regard to events in China, is a very grave charge. In this book I propose to give what I believe to be evidence in support of this charge. It does not imply that these men have combined in any conscious conspiracy. It does not imply that they are disloyal or unpatriotic. But it does imply in an area where great passions are aroused, those responsible for providing reasonably authentic information have failed in their duty. On an issue which involves our future security, our lives, our commerce, our national honor, the American people have been misled.

This is not a new phenomenon in our history.

In 1920 Mr. Walter Lippmann and Mr. Charles Merz submitted the news that readers of the *New York Times* were receiving about events in Russia to a very detailed scrutiny. (They chose the *New York Times* as being one of the best newspapers in the United States.) Their conclusion was that as far as professional journalism was concerned the reporting of the Russian Revolution was "nothing short of a disaster." They thought that on the essential questions the net effect of the reporting was "almost always misleading, and misleading news is worse than none at all. . . ."²

This book will examine the reporting and interpretation of events in China over a much longer period. The conclusions reached are precisely the same.

Mr. William Lederer has called this country "A Nation of Sheep." I reject this title as a slander. I know of no other country with as high a proportion of intelligent and concerned citizens as the United States. The American people are basically generous, genuinely wanting to find their way through the hazards that beset them in the world in as decent a way as possible. The people of America have responded to world events in a perfectly rational

² "A Test of the News," a supplement to the *New Republic*, August 4, 1920.

and predictable way given the information with which they have been provided. Certainly in regard to China we are not a nation of sheep, but a nation that has been profoundly misinformed.

The circumstance which impelled me to write this book can easily be described. I am one of the very few American-based correspondents who have been to China during the past fourteen years. I am the only one who has been there twice. (Since this was written I have been for the third time.) I went to China first in 1957. As a correspondent I had kept myself—or I thought I had—reasonably well informed of developments throughout the world. I first went to China carrying with me all the assumptions that any careful reader of the American press would have carried. I went expecting to find a country of vast squalor and disease; I prepared myself to see a people embittered and resentful, living under the rigid coercions of a police state. I expected to see fear as I had seen it in Russia and in Hitler's Germany. This was the country I expected, but it was not the country I found. The discrepancy between what I had been led to expect and what I saw was bewildering and shocking.

I went to China again for a much longer visit in 1960. Between these two visits great changes were taking place in China. Knowing I was returning, I read carefully every account I could find of the commune development and the "great leap forward." I read Mr. Joseph C. Harsch's graphic accounts of the communes (written for *The Christian Science Monitor*)—"the greatest mass sacrifice of human heritage, human comfort and human effort in all time." I read about the barracks into which the peasants were being herded. I read about the children being torn from their mothers' arms. I read Mr. R. H. Shackford's articles written for the Scripps-Howard newspapers entitled "Chain Gang Empire"—the "first serious effort in history to put a whole nation on what amounts to a prison chain gang." In *Life* I saw artists' drawings of burning villages and weeping mothers. After my experience of 1957 I read these accounts with caution and skepticism, but I was nevertheless influenced by them.

I returned to China in 1960 with anxiety as to the new devel-

opments which I would find there. And again I experienced the same bewilderment and shock at finding a country so greatly in contrast to what I expected. I traveled widely through China, thousands of miles. I saw no barracks, and found no Westerner who had; I could see no evidence that children had been torn from their mothers' arms; and I learned that the foreign embassies in Peking had no belief in those stories either. I found that in all significant respects, the accounts of the commune development appearing in the American press had been misleading. During the five months I lived in China, American newspapers were sent to me. It was a curiously disturbing experience to read reports, even in some of our most responsible press, that seemed to bear so little relationship to the country I was in and the people I was moving among.

In the fourteen years since the Chinese Communists assumed power, countless myths about events in China have been implanted in the public's mind. This book has required a long and meticulous examination of news reports, editorials, analyses, commentaries, magazine articles, and books. Literally thousands of items have been read and classified. And yet I cannot claim that this is an exhaustive book. It is only a beginning. The sheer volume of material prevents thorough analysis in a single volume. So here I have dealt with only a handful of instances and examples.

I do not claim that my findings are completely free of error, though the checking has been careful. Some readers may consider that I have overstated my conclusion; others with more information may think that I could have presented my case more effectively. Whatever its failings, I hope that this book will succeed in establishing at least a *prima facie* case that reporting and expertise on China in this country has been on a deplorably low level.

I wish to make one thing clear. It is not the purpose of this book to examine the defects or virtues of the present system in China. That examination I have made in another book.⁸ It may

⁸ *Awakened China: The Country Americans Don't Know* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); published in paperback edition under the title, *China, the Country Americans Are Not Allowed to Know* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962).

appear to some that I am out to make a case for China—and they would think this for an obvious reason. As almost all so-called information about China in the United States has been adverse, any correction of information can very easily be misconstrued. The examination of adverse reports may very easily appear as an attempt to present China in a more favorable light, and I do not see how this impression can be avoided. But if such an interpretation is placed on this book, it would be a wrong interpretation. My purpose is not to examine China but to examine ourselves; to show how step-by-step misleading reports have created deeply set images in our minds and established firmly held convictions that are often unrelated to realities.

Readers of the press in every country must always remain skeptical and vigilant. It is certainly not my intention to suggest that the Chinese press is presenting a less distorted picture of the United States than our press frequently presents of China, and we know how erroneous the statistical information in Chinese newspapers has been (though these errors were often later admitted by the Chinese). The ideas in the minds of the ordinary Chinese about life in America are wildly inaccurate. But we can do nothing about their ignorance while we can perhaps do something about our own. If we do not we shall remain, in the words of the poet, "strangers shouting lies to each other across a sea of ignorance."

In examining reports about China, certain things became clear quite soon. One is that newspaper writers and experts are very prone to draw information from each other. They thus form a kind of self-validating society. One consequence of this is that a single news story can quickly be disseminated and may soon become "hard fact" because of nothing but sheer repetition. For example, millions of Americans today believe that Mao Tse-tung is not only prepared to engage in a nuclear war, but would indeed welcome one because "there would still be 300 million Chinese left." A thorough search through the Chinese press has not revealed any speech or comment of this kind by any Chinese leader. Its origin? A comment by Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia in 1958 at a time when Belgrade and Peking were engaged in verbal assaults

against each other. Of several Western correspondents present at the time, only one apparently thought Tito's remark sufficiently interesting to report. But it was quickly seized upon and disseminated. The original remark was embroidered and enlarged. I found that before long it was being mentioned in literally hundreds of editorials and newspaper articles and in analyses by the China experts. It has now become unshakably embedded in our over-all thinking about China.

I had hoped originally to limit the range of my examination to the years since the revolution. But another surprising fact emerged as I began to look through the material. In all the thousands of reports about Communist China appearing in the press there were very few references to conditions in China *before* the revolution. If there was a food shortage or a setback in industry or a change in government policy, these were (if one was to judge by some of the press and specialists) all new phenomena in China and therefore clearly a result of the blunderings or malevolence of the present regime. Many of the correspondents who have been reporting mainland China from Hong Kong and the United States since 1949 had witnessed—and understood the causes of—the downfall of the Kuomintang. Yet it is an astonishing fact that few real attempts have been made to compare the lot of the Chinese today with their lot under Chiang Kai-shek. To the Chinese, a comparison of their standard of living with that in the far more prosperous West is obviously meaningless—the only thing that matters to them is whether they are worse or better off than they were before. Such an avoidance of comparison with China's past is itself a serious omission, for no understanding of China is possible unless we see her in terms of her own historical development.

Finally, I have attempted (not always with success) to keep out of this account a note of personal indignation. There is much to be indignant about when one sees a people among whom one has made one's home and of whom one is fond and proud, given misleading reports and being denied access to information to which they have a right. "Misleading reporting," Walter Lippmann wrote, "is worse than no reporting at all." And I agree. Something large is at issue here—for the reliability of information is the

premise on which democracy proceeds. A democracy will not long remain a democracy if the people are kept in ignorance. It is not a question merely of an adjective here, a caption there—that in itself would be of little consequence. But misleading reporting if it continues and is consistent may have a cumulative effect that is disastrous. Even small omissions and small distortions may together result in a single large untruth that will mislead a whole nation. And readers of this book will see that the omissions and distortions have not always been small.