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Stanford University Press

The Year of the Swedes in China

by Jerome A. Cohen


China in Crisis, by Sven Lindqvist. Translated by Sylvia Clayton. Crowell, $5.95.

For Chinese this is the year of the snake. But for students of contemporary China this may become the year of the Swedes. At least Myrdal and Lindqvist get their country off to a fast start in the annual "China As I Knew It" publication derby. Their accounts nicely complement each other and, together, reveal many facets of Chinese life, vintage '62.

Westerners who seek to live in China are, of course, carefully screened. Of the small group who have obtained residential visas, very few have been allowed to stay in the countryside. Yet rural China holds 80 per cent of the population and is the key to the country's future. Late in the summer of 1962 Jan Myrdal, son of the famous social scientist, had the exceptional opportunity of spending a month in a village of fifty families in North China. There, with the permission of the local Communist Party Secretary and the aid of two official interpreters, he systematically conducted lengthy interviews with most of the adult villagers. He wanted to...
use their life histories and perceptions of reality to enhance our understanding of the predominantly agrarian Chinese revolution. His book records these autobiographies and adds an introduction in which he properly disclaims expertise in affairs Chinese.

China hands are likely to find Myrdal more interesting than will that amorphous creature, the general reader. The flat, simple, somewhat repetitious vignettes give some of the flavor of contemporary village life—growing up, attending school, farming collectively, marrying, etc. Yet, by the critical midway point through which every book must pass, all but China specialists, who thrive on setting tedious pieces into a fascinating construct, may be bored. The specialists, although impatient with peasant parroting of Party explanations and with Myrdal's failure to ask "the right questions," will be compensated by occasional informational nuggets, ranging from records of the village production teams and production brigade to tales of intrigue from pre-World War II days when Communist, Nationalist, and various local forces struggled to control the area.

Sven Lindqvist's book offers many contrasts to Myrdal's. Lindqvist spent 1960-62 as a student at Peking University and as cultural attaché to the Swedish Embassy. He focuses on city life and the plight of the educated. Since he is fluent in Chinese, he had a good many unsupervised contacts with people. Drawing on these experiences, as well as on both Chinese and Western publications, he seeks to interpret rather than to record. The book includes a devastatingly accurate analysis of Chiang Kai-shek's de-moralized military dictatorship on Formosa.

Although little is new in Lindqvist's interpretation, it is a readable, balanced, and useful contribution to the popular literature. In some respects his comments are dated. For example, the hopeful signs of relaxation in Communist control of the intellectuals soon disappeared amid an intensive and still continuing "socialist education" campaign. Also, the economic situation on the mainland has shown significant improvement since his departure. Unfortunately, the last few chapters are little more than digests of well-known academic studies.

One of the most cordial of literary ententes exists between the editor of a magazine such as this one and the book publisher. An article in Harper's may foreshadow a book to come and happy the book editor with a well polished crystal ball. It can even happen that an entire magazine may be reflected in those Sibyline depths. Out of such a revelation came the Daedalus publishing project. Houghton Mifflin proposed to produce twelve issues of Daedalus in the permanence of hard covers, the editors of Daedalus thereby exercising the rare prerogative of editorial hindsight, for in book form the original material could be increased by new articles germinated by the old, the whole then indexed for scholarly convenience, and jacketed to tempt the bookstore browser.

The first title in the Daedalus Library A NEW EUROPE? edited by Stephen R. Graubard appeared about a year ago ($8.95). The critics liked it. "Finally there is the bulky tome assembled by Dr. Stephen Graubard: with contributions from so many prominent historians, economists, sociologists, philosophers, and even theologians, that it would be invidious to single out individual names. It is a most impressive collection of learned papers, and perhaps the only possible summary is to the effect that A NEW EUROPE? merits its title: it is unique in covering almost the entire field — there are even some photographic illustrations of recent Western European architecture ... If there is such a thing as the intelligent general reader, here is the book for him." — The New York Review of Books.
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These two books add to the evidence suggesting that George Ken- nan's recent characterization of Chinese life—"a sort of gray, joyless hell"—is incomplete. Surely Myrdal would agree, as I do, with Lindqvist's conclusion that "the Chinese on the mainland are having a very hard time, but they are working for the future, they believe in the future." That, as Chiang Kai-shek can attest, makes all the difference.

Mr. Cohen is professor of law at the Harvard Law School and a specialist in Chinese law and government. He spent 1963-64 in Hong Kong interviewing former residents of Com- munist China.

In the Sun, by Jon Godden.

As usual in Miss Godden's novels, background and climate emerge almost as characters, surely as part of the plot. The sun, the midday heat, the exotic beauty of the seaside resort on the Spanish coast lend as much presence and pressure to the story as any of the people involved. And the people, alas, seem to me less convincing and satisfying than those in some of her other novels. There is the English lady, heiress to a modest fortune, escaped at last from family involve- ments (so she thinks), who owns the villa. There is the handsome blackmailing nephew who turns up unex- pectedly, the pretty young girl, and several interesting background figures who never are fully realized. But it is still a perfect setup for an enthralling subterranean plot of suspense. It turns out to be subterran- ean, all right, and the suspense is there, but because the main characters in conflict are unsympathetic the reader doesn't care much who wins. It's one of those stories where one feels a word or two could have set it all straight. But of course Miss Godden didn't want it set straight too soon.

Knopf, $4.95

Absent Without Leave, by Heinrich Böll.

Here, by the author of that post-World War II classic, The Clown, and the story "Like a Bad Dream" in this issue of Harper's, are two novelettes. The title story he treats in a most elaborate but effective way, relating with the invited help of the reader, all scenes and characters to pictures in a child's coloring book. It is a distracting device at first but cumula- tively gives sharp outline to every- thing involved in this complicated story of a rebellious German soldier who wants more than anything to