

FOREVER CHINA



by ROBERT PAYNE

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To ALAN

PREFACE

THIS is an account of one man's experiences in China during the years when she was cut off from the world. Like all diaries it is incomplete—it is too personal to offer more than a cross-section of the kind of experiences that might have been encountered, and men with different experiences might have recorded a different story. It is inevitably one-sided. I lived with professors and students and farmers, and after the first few weeks saw little of the soldiers. At the battle of Changsha I saw the Chinese soldier in his glory, and long months in the Universities taught me to respect the professors and students. If this book does nothing else, it will have served its purpose if it turns men's minds to the achievements of the Chinese Universities, whose obscure sufferings during seven years are so far unrecorded. One day a Chinese novelist will write a novel about their epic journeys across the width of China, and like those other books which are being written in Europe and the South Seas now, it will show man's pride and greatness reaching to the stars. Today the Chinese Universities, which once occupied the palaces of princes, are living in poverty. They were too proud to ask help from abroad. At the mercy of a continually changing battle-front, without security of tenure, with bombardment and hunger facing them at every turn, they continue quietly and unobtrusively to fulfil their allotted tasks. From the small mud-houses of the Universities, from the damp unheated cubicles where the professors and students shiver like Diogenes in his tub, while the paper windows flap in the wind, a revolution is sweeping over China. Unlike other revolutions, it has its source in the spirit, in rigorous scholarship and in an understanding of the passions let loose by the War. China, the first to be invaded, may yet be the first to achieve a just peace. From the earliest times this country of continual wars has produced prophets of peace. Today the prophets of peace are gathering their strength for the final battle which will prove whether their philosophers are justified by their fruits.

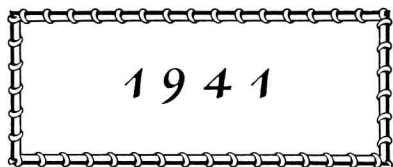
When I came to China, the islands of the Indies were already being invaded by the Japanese; Burma and the Philippines were at the mercy of the Japanese; Hongkong was being bitterly contested, but there was no doubt of the end. I arrived in Kunming on the day after the "Flying Tigers" had landed. This journal ends on Easter Day, 1944. In these two and a half years I have seen more miracles accomplished than at any other time of my life. China changed beyond recognition. With the fall of the Far Eastern Empires, the Chinese did not panic: they had other things to do, and went on quietly doing their job. It was the first time for fourteen hundred years that they had been cut off from the outside world. Later historians will relate that this was a blessing in disguise, for having no assistance from outside, they were forced to find refuge in themselves, and having found it, to make out of expediency a weapon of steel. They had little arms; the best food-bearing lands were in the occupation of the enemy; prices were mounting at the rate of a thousand per cent a year. Yet the scholars, the farmers and the soldiers carried on, proving that "faith can move mountains and lakes across ten thousand *li*".

China was once a country in mythology: it is now an arsenal. At the Naval Base in Singapore I watched virgin earth assume the colours of an industrial city. There is enough virgin earth to make China in the next fifty years one of the greatest industrial powers on earth. And there is an essential purity in the minds of the young Chinese which will make her formidable only to the enemies of good will. The old China has gone for ever, and the *taipans* and the legation officials who came to China before the war had better not return, for they will be hopelessly lost in this new, vigorous world of young China. There are evils in China—officials and merchants whom the Government would willingly grind to dust—but the heart of China lies in her youth, and her youth is clean-limbed and handsome, determined to do away with the past. Those who are concerned with the future of the peace of the world would do well to read the Chinese philosophers and take a glance at her vigorous youth. One day, at the castle of Fontainebleau, Napoleon turned to a globe of the earth and pointing to the yellow square of China, which stretches like a golden fleece nailed to the furthest extremities of Asia, remarked: "China is a vast slumbering lion which will astound the world when it awakes." The lion is awake now. In all the vigour of his untrammelled youth, he goes in pursuit of his inheritance.

In this diary I have been concerned with the small details which make up the whole. There is nothing of politics here, or so little that it may pass unobserved. I have used initials rather than names only because a page filled with Chinese names is confusing to the reader. The story of Bergery is true; but here again the names and a few dates including the date of his death have been changed. This is a rough sketch of a landscape, and how it seemed in the lonely years when only a few aeroplanes and camels brought evidence of the existence of an outside world. But here and there you will hear the authoritative voices of the Chinese.

ROBERT PAYNE.

FOREVER CHINA



1941

December 16th . . . It was dark when we crossed the airfield at Lashio, but suddenly the searchlights went on, and we saw a ring of machine-guns trained on us, moving and following us as we moved across the silver field. In the darkness of the journey from the railway station to the airfield we had seen nothing except clumps of trees and houses, but in the sudden brilliant light of the searchlights we saw one another more clearly than we ever shall again, shining with a kind of metallic sheen which poured out of our dark overcoats. Blinded, we walked in the direction of the D.C.3, and Bergery kept on whispering: "In Germany, when you are about to be shot, they have the kindness to blind you with searchlights." But the machine-guns were as silent as the dark aeroplane on the edge of the field, and here and there were guards with fixed bayonets.

We are high above Burma, but one half of my mind is still on the landing-ground at Lashio. I remember we crossed the field very slowly. The searchlights went off, there was a faint spluttering as of a fire being damped down with water, and then there was only the blue light of the aeroplane to guide us across the frozen ground. The moment of glory, when we saw each other as figures of heraldry, was extinguished so quickly that it seemed to have been a dream. Meanwhile the propellers were slowly revolving, shining with thin silver rings of light, and a comforting blue light from the cabin shone in the faint snow.

All over Europe, Africa, America and Asia men are walking across dark fields to waiting aeroplanes. The rustle of grass, the frost melting on trees, the whistle of unseen leaves and the sudden apparitions of silver moonlight—coming from the sky or from

the earth or from a secret river—are taking possession of men's minds, and perhaps there is a new reverence for the silence of the night . . .

As we climbed into the aeroplane, Bergery said something to this effect, but I was too drowsy and cold to understand what he was saying. He stood there, on the folded steps, his great cape billowing in the wind, looking out over the darkness of Asia with eyes which were dusted with snow. The blue light shone on one half of his face, and the silver light from the propellers shone on the other; and he smiled grimly, like a man stepping up to the scaffold. "A journey into the interminable darkness," he murmured and was silent, for some birds flying low had disturbed the machine-gunners, who thought they were enemy planes. In the shadow of the aeroplane the snow melted from our coats, but inside the cabin we could still hear the wind blowing. I am writing in the dark. They have turned out the lights. A few moments ago, while I was writing this, the engine began purring and two immensely powerful searchlights from the wings illuminated the propellers still more brilliantly, so that they resembled two immense stars revolving close to our eyes. A few moments later the searchlights were switched off again, the aeroplane left the earth, the bumpy field died away and we were moving suddenly into something smoother and softer than silk. It is a dark night, murderously cold, with a howling wind shaking the wings, and now that the propellers no longer shine like immense stars, the faint white towers of the clouds rush purposefully towards us and we seem to be imprisoned in their grasp. We flew low over the fields three times, catching glimpses of the customs shed and the trees bending in the wind, but the clouds are low and it is difficult to see clearly—a few stars, a ghostly mist, the earth rushing below and a few dark trees. We are travelling on a dark ribbon of air, high above the uplands of northern Burma, and it is strange to think that only a few hours ago we were flying over the Irrawaddy delta, looking down at golden rice-fields and the spires of gilt temples. The blinding light of the searchlight at Lashio has cut us off from the past.

I can hear the soft purring of the motors, and very faintly the whistle of the wind. The night is so thick that even the few stars disappearing in the haze of mist comfort us. Outside the blue windows snow is falling silently, and there is no comfort in the

ice-cold world beneath. Snow everywhere, and on the wings are faint layers of ice.

Bergery has just turned the little bell-shaped ventilator, and the wind begins to ruffle his grey hairs. He looks old and worn in this light, which softens all outlines but changes the colour of flesh until it resembles those curiously veined bluish rocks which are found in deserts.

"What is so extraordinary is that we haven't seen Lashio," he said. "It might have been anywhere—some European houses, taxis, a station courtyard, dark trees, a few faint lights burning behind shuttered doors. It's exactly like all the cities in Europe. From Berlin to Lashio—everywhere black-out!" A little while later he said: "In the future the historians will say that we were afraid of the light, and they will be wrong. What we are afraid of is the blinding light of an explosion, and the still more blinding light of truth." He was silent then, gazing out of the blue window. It was very warm in the aeroplane—too warm. He smiled, settled himself comfortably in the arm-chair with *The Statesman* and went to sleep.

He is asleep now, but even in sleep he looks weary—the weariness which comes to all war correspondents in time, for travelling is the most rigorous occupation in the world and leaves its stigmata, as the years leave rings on trees. I met him first in Munich, in the summer of 1938. Nine months later we were together in Austria, taking part in some absurd scheme to kill Hitler. I met him again in Spain. I had not expected to meet him on the wind-swept aerodrome in Lashio on his way to Kunming. He is sleeping lightly, his ears keened to the vibrations of the aeroplane, and I remember his saying in Austria that he had seen too much of war ever to sleep perfectly again. "When I am sleeping, I think I can always see what is happening all round me, and I am sure I can hear everything. I sleep deeply—with one eye open. It is not a question of nerves. It is a question of being eternally vigilant." Sometimes he smiles in his sleep, and sometimes he seems to be about to cry; and it is always curious to watch him as he sleeps, his head bent a little to one side—that immense head with the iron-grey hair—his silk scarf fluttering in the wind from the bell-shaped ventilator. Bergery was one of the greatest of the American war correspondents during the Great War. Retired, he lived in a small flat in Florence or in a grey stone building in Peking, entirely absorbed by the world but completely remote

from it, until the Greater War caught him up in its folds, and once more he began to fly across continents in aeroplanes at night.

I am quite sure I have not slept. The starlight has come out, thick waves of clouds appear from the direction of China and the small moon, curving and diving among the clouds, is so beautiful that I cannot take my eyes from the window. Gradually the moon grows brighter, and a thick white light falls on his sleeping head.

"Where are we?" he awoke suddenly. "Oh yes, I remember. We are on our way to Kunming. Perhaps Kunming has already fallen, perhaps at this very moment the Japanese are entering the North Gate. The trouble about being a war correspondent is the remorseless uncertainty. We can never know if we can get there in time. The situation is terrible. The Japanese can come in at any time they please. I remember Kunming in 1917, when poppies were growing in all the fields, and the mountains were purple and red with poppy-flowers. The local warlord had just sent a punitive expedition against Szechuan and returned with so many dancing girls that he had no idea what to do with them. He offered some of them to me. I remember how beautiful the place was—the lakes and the sunlight and the mountains and the blue heavens. There is no more beautiful place in the world." He began to talk about the eagle which alighted on a milestone at Maymyo just as the train was leaving the station. "The eagle—it was red and blue, with great streaks of violet on the breast. And a bronze beak. And quite timeless. It did not fall out of the sky, it came through the sky, through the spaces in the sky. And there was blood on the bronze beak." It was as though now he were suffering from a passion of the past. Stage by stage he went over the journey from Rangoon. He had come down from Calcutta in a small tramp steamer, which churned up all the mud of the Indian Ocean. Calcutta, where he had stayed a week, was dark, vicious, and somehow disappointing. "The black-out—that was terrible! Not because it was dark, or because of the heat, or because of the presence of the thieves at night, but because for the first time I experienced a black-out in tropical weather. In the heat darkness is worse. It must have been terrible in Singapore." I nodded, though it was no more terrible in Singapore than in Barcelona. "In the beginning the earth was dark and without form and void . . ."

He is not sleeping, but whenever he talks he seems to be talking from a great distance away. There is a story that during a rail-

crash in Germany he walked among the survivors all night, in the rain, with a smoking lantern, while jets of boiling steam made the scene resemble a phantasmagoria of Hell, and simply by his presence he made people conscious of their human dignity. They did not scream when he had passed by. And perhaps they were terrified, for that enormous head and those square shoulders comfort people with their strength, and sometimes they terrify for the same reason. He gazes out of the window like someone obsessed with the immense depths below. It is difficult to believe that people are dying and giving birth in the darkness and immensity of this night. The wind is coming up, the aeroplane is shivering and gliding in gusts of snow, a wing dips and the ice is brushed away with invisible finger-tips. We are flying high. A small lake shines in the moonlight, and since half the lake is in shadow it resembles a reflection of the young moon in the old moon's arms. Yet the moon is nearly at the full. We can see the faint courses of rivers below, the shadows of clouds. The aeroplane, buffeted by the wind, drops a hundred feet, regains height, slews sideways, and still the engine purrs gently and solemnly. We do not hear the wind, for we are enclosed in a hollow tube, but we feel it lapping the ailerons and the wings, as a fisherman sitting in the bottom of a boat will hear the waves on the strakes.

I must have fallen asleep. It is broad daylight. Green fields, red hills, small thatched houses with yellow roofs and long purple shadows—and the blue sky, this above all. The blue of a thrush's egg, but deeper, an immensity of sky, falling or sweeping to the earth like a blue coat or curtain, and like a curtain rippling as it falls. I do not think that this is an inaccurate description. Imagine an immense blue silk tent and the wind rippling the surface, its coolness and the faint ripples on the surface. It glitters with silver while in Malaya the sky glitters with bronze. Perhaps the colour of the sky is due to the reflected colour of the earth—a deep red, with here and there a few patches of green rice. We are already flying over Kunming. The walls of the city throw long purple shadows, and over the airfield there are small white objects glittering in the sun. Are they pebbles?

Bergery says quietly: "There is smoke over the city. She is burning." He looks pale, his face pressed against the window-glass.

A moment later: "There are nearly a hundred aeroplanes on the airfield. Where have they come from?"

In the dazzling blue sunlight aeroplanes lie on the aerodrome to the north-east of the city. The city is blood-red and biscuit-yellow, the walls very high. And beside the city, stretching towards the bronze hills in the distance, lies an almost circular lake the colour of emeralds dipped in milk. They have asked us to pull the curtains over the windows. Why? No one knows. Or perhaps the pebbles are really aeroplanes?

There are hundreds of aeroplanes on the field, painted dead white, the fuselages inscribed with the teeth of tigers. As we step out of the aeroplane someone says: "Haven't you heard? We were bombed yesterday. Four hundred were killed. There are no shelters. You have to run into the country, outside the walls. Twenty-seven aeroplanes—always twenty-seven in three groups of nine—came over in the morning. The 'Flying Tigers' came in the afternoon." He pointed to the aeroplanes lined up on the tarmac, the young Chinese mechanics in blue overalls, the armourers with their immense serpentine belts of silver-and-bronze machine-gun bullets. He said slowly: "Waal, I guess the tiger is growing wings."

The air is so pure that we can see the faintest incisions in the distant mountains. We are a mile above sea-level. My heart is thumping. There is a lane of poplars leading from the airfield to the city. In the mist-laden morning, the roads and the poplars and the small wooden carts driving down the shadowy road remind me of France. We have spent a few minutes in the *estaminet*, where there is a girl who is obviously French, though her features are Chinese and she wears a pair of dark blue slacks. Drinking hot coffee out of enamel mugs, we envy the American airmen in their heavy furs. They call themselves "Flying Tigers", as though they were acrobats taking part in an aerial tournament. Stamping the blood back into our legs and breathing the cold frosted air, we dare hardly go out into the frozen field. And when at last we return to the waiting aeroplane, we watch the milk-white mist rising about the long rows of planes. The mist is like silk; you can touch it and it flows in your hands. Suddenly, out of this mist, a silvery-white aeroplane begins gliding over the field. I have taken up a handful of Chinese earth. It is red like blood, the same colour as the earth in Catalonia, Cornwall and Malava.

We are flying again. The blue lake mysteriously turns red. Small fishing vessels glide over the lake, their orange sails turning an even deeper red than the lake. Sunlight is coming over the

hills, and behind us Kunming sparkles like orange juice. Everything red—bare foothills, faint tracks curving over the summits, small houses, gardens, peasants working in the misty fields; and then for some reason the earth's redness disappears and everything is blue. It is like looking through a stereoscope—the patterns in the bright liquid colours of China. Blue everywhere—the blue lake, the blue city, the long stretches of blue fields the colour of the sea. We have been seeing the earth through the shadow of the aeroplane's wing, which cuts out the sun, but even now, with the sun ahead of us, the colours are so clear they appear to have been painted. On the horizon a great white cloud like a sea of milk is slowly moving towards us.

We are still in the cloud. According to Bergery we shall be in the cloud until we reach Chungking. It is pure white, and here and there faint rainbows springing from the wing-tip and following us relentlessly colour the cliffs of the cloud. For though the cloud is shapeless, there are occasional immense cliffs, vertical darkneses, and we look down through the cliffs at the misty green world beneath. In this whiteness we travel the road to Chungking.

When I was a child, I was always dreaming of China, but I never dreamt of anything so beautiful as Kunming. And yet the moment I saw it, I knew I had been perfectly familiar with it since the earliest days. The high biscuit-coloured walls were the fortresses I played with; the temples and the lakes accompanied my dreams. Somewhere, perhaps in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, I read of an old man who kept a princess of China in a bottle at the bottom of a deep well, and I would think of her late at night when my mother brought the night-lamp into my room. She was small and perfectly formed, with waxen features and oiled black hair, dressed in a gown of some delicate silk material, and there were glass slippers on her feet and roses in her hair. Later I discovered that there were no longer any princesses in China, and the highest aim of the Chinese poet or scholar was to marry the daughter of a Prime Minister, and particularly his youngest daughter. Then, surrounded by courtiers in silk, with jade bracelets on their wrists and jade necklaces hanging over their shoulders, writing delicately with an ivory brush while one of the courtiers laid a chrysanthemum on the table in order that his handwriting should imitate the softness and strength of the petals,

he would write a few lines of greeting to the bride he had never seen.

I have been thinking of this legendary China as we ride through the white cloud, wondering whether it still exists and whether I shall ever again see it in my lifetime. In the ancient dynasties of China there existed an ordered beauty of gesture and benevolence which has disappeared from the rest of the world, and may have disappeared still more completely in China herself. I remember an old man in Singapore, who would talk at length of the last days of the Ch'ing Dynasty, for he had taken part in the political manoeuvres of the time, financing Sun Yat-sen's revolutions, devoting himself to the care of the dispossessed and the exiled. A few days ago I saw him for the last time, and as we walked along the muddy beach at Tanglin, he asked me what I thought I would do in China. I told him I wanted to see everything there was to be seen, because I wanted to exorcise the demons and fairies who tormented and delighted my youth.

"But China has changed—changed—changed——" He repeated the words perhaps twenty times. "There is no longer grace in my country. The reverence and love for things has gone from the earth. It has disappeared even from China. This war has made us all soldiers."

"Do you regret the change?"

He said nothing, though there was pain in his eyes. He asked me about the future of Singapore.

"I am quite sure it will hold out," I replied. "The best roads are in the south. We have the communications, and we have learnt a lot from the loss of Penang. In a week or so we shall drive them out again."

"It is like the wars in China," he smiled, and nodded his head in agreement. "A village is captured, the people flee to the mountains, a week later it is recaptured and then the village is forgotten. Perhaps it is mentioned in a military communiqué, but more likely it is wholly forgotten—it is always so!"

We walked back to the small white house on Amber road. The fishing-smacks were still riding among the islands, and they shone for a moment like those jewels of the sea, for which an early Chinese Emperor sacrificed his kingdom, since so much wealth was expended on these expeditions. In the Mongol dynasty Malaya paid tribute to the Emperor in Peking, and the Chinese who work in the rubber fields of Malaya are only returning to a country

over which they once possessed sovereignty. Singapore was so peaceful that it was easy to understand the Chinese philosopher who said he could recapture the atmosphere of the T'ang dynasty more easily in Malaya than in Peking, for it was easier to contemplate under a living palm-tree than in the decaying dust of the Chinese capital.

"I refused to return to Peking when Feng Yu-hsiang deprived the last Emperor of his rights. He abdicated. The revolutionaries promised him dignity and freedom. This is a promise we have failed to keep." A little later he said: "A new China is being born here. Have you noticed the influence of the overseas Chinese? It is growing every year, every month, every hour. It was the overseas Chinese who made the revolution of 1911 possible. You cannot understand the new China in China, for there is still corruption which we thought had ended with the Ch'ing dynasty. China must be tested against all the other nations of the earth, not against her rapacious officials. And so you will see the new China in Singapore and Java and the Philippines, and you will see it better here than anywhere else."

A few days before I left Singapore, I went to see Dr. George Yeh of the Chinese Ministry of Information. He lived in the immense white building called the Cathay, for it was built by an enormously wealthy Chinese merchant. At the beginning of the war it was taken over by the Singapore Government, and down one of the long white corridors, where you feel as lost as I feel in this white cloud, I found him in a small bare room—a table, two chairs, a few books and little else. He was once head of the Foreign Languages Department of Tsinghua University, which has moved from Peking to Kunming. He has been editor of a newspaper in Shanghai and the trusted adviser of many high officials within the Kuomintang party.

"There is a new China," he said. "You will not find it in the pages of Lin Yutang or in the ancient classics. The new China is vigorous and strong. She has turned her back on the past and is making an effort to grasp the future. We do not call the war a war against the Japanese only. It is also a war of reconstruction—an implacable war fought against the earth and ourselves, against the shoddiness of our ancient customs, and their inadequacy. *China is tough!* If you understand this, you will understand China better. Think of our coolies, stripped to the waist,