

Chinese Shadows

by Simon Leys

(Viking: 214 pp.; \$10.00)

Peggy Durdin

Chinese Shadows, published in French several years ago by the Belgian sinologist Simon Leys, and just recently translated into English, is the most illuminating book so far written about the Chinese People's Republic.

There are many reasons for its excellence. Mr. Leys has loved the country as much as his own since he first saw it in 1955, just before, he believes, the forward dynamism of Mao's regime was compromised and then broken. He knows China's history and culture and is fluent in the language. Unlike many of today's "experts," he has long been a confirmed reader of the Chinese Communist press, still one of the best sources on the country. He has made three trips into China.

Leys is also a writer of style, deftly combining personal experience and observation with analysis. Most important he is a humanist and, in the tradition of Orwell (whom he often and aptly quotes), an enemy of totalitarianism wherever it may be found.

At the onset Leys clearly states that he does not intend to deal with the considerable achievements of the regime, often described by "distinguished professionals" such as Han Suyin, Peking's most brilliant apologist. Instead he is "adding some shadows, without which even the most luminous portrait lacks depth." This is understatement. What his "shadows" reveal is a totalitarian regime that tragically resembles Orwell's, not simply in ordering the daily life, but numbing the mind and destroying the spirit of some 850 million people. The trains run on time. What price are the Chinese paying for it?

How is it, Simon Leys asks, that American and European visitors to China, who denounce other dictatorships around the world, become enthusiastic converts to the Peking variety? There are many reasons. Some visitors are simply protagonists of the regime; their accounts of China before and after entering it are identical. Many of these travelers have forgotten that

even Kuomintang China did not—as Peking does—put most of the country off limits to foreigners. If it had, the enormous number of critical articles and books listing the faults of the Chiang Kai-shek regime—and, indeed, Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*—could not have been written.

Some Westerners are so naive or so arrogant that they believe they can arrive at fundamental judgments after only a brief "junket" for which they have done no homework. For example, one of this country's top education officials, the assistant secretary for education in HEW, returned from an eight-day visit to China with a flattering report on education in China—one with which not only American experts, but the Chinese themselves in official statements, disagree. Many visitors, including academicians and journalists, refrain from criticism of China because they do not wish to be barred from future visits by Peking; Simon Leys states he wrote under a pseudonym for just this reason. Other experts, including professors, have been constrained by the fear—well founded, as the experience of a few proves—that honest public appraisal of the China scene would bring condemnation and even ostracism from their peers.

Mao Tse-tung accomplished, says Leys, the almost incredible feat of limiting China for visitors to a "narrow, incredibly constricted area" in which minutely and cleverly contrived "theater" substitutes for and makes possible direct, honest, and warm contact between human beings. Guides chosen first for their political reliability fill a visitor's every waking hour with superbly managed tours to carefully selected cities, communes, schools, factories. ("We couldn't let our foreign friends go to Hangchow [a city built around a lovely expanse of quiet water] because of all the trouble there. So we just told them we were working on the lake," a Peking official reported jovially to a visitor not long ago.)

Sometimes props are added to the scene. Leys notes a simple one: In a commune held up as a model of political purity and extremely sparse living there were a proletarian bowl of gruel and six proletarian eggs on a proletarian tin plate among the plethora of tasty dishes. Sometimes the actors are rehearsed: A college professor recites in a monotone his bourgeois sins and his desire, under

the brilliance of Mao's thought, to eradicate them. But rehearsal is not necessary. Every Chinese knows exactly what he can and cannot say, even to neighbors. ("Don't talk," were the first words spoken by his old father to an illiterate Chinese cook from California, who mistakenly thought he wanted to end his days in the land of his ancestors. "Just don't talk.")

Simon Leys wrote *Chinese Shadows* before the campaign against the "Gang of Four." A fascinating appendix to any new edition would be, first, visitors' accounts over the last three, four, or five years of how fine the situation was in China and how happy the Chinese people were and, second, the picture of that same period now painted by the official Communist press and radio.

According to Peking there were, for instance: strikes, often accompanied by violence, shutdowns of very important factories and paralysis of some important railway junctions; widespread "beating, smashing and looting," including looting of cars and banks; vicious factional fighting, with no holds barred, from the highest Party and government level down to the "grass-roots," paralyzing many administrative bodies and decimating others; collection and falsification of "black" material (unfavorable intelligence items in the personnel file of every Chinese, which accompanies him wherever he goes) against a wide spectrum of persons, including the late Chou En-lai; the humiliation and dismissal—even arrest and imprisonment—of many Communists associated with Mao and the revolution for three or four decades. "Struggle by violence" erupted over the country. According to Peking these and other activities occurred before Mao's final illness. The leader who had not hesitated to purge some of the country's highest officials and oldest "comrades-in-arms" could have destroyed the "Gang of Four" in twenty-four hours. He did not do so.

To Simon Leys it is extraordinary that so many Westerners manage to disregard or characterize as unimportant the mass of evidence available in and outside China on the character of what is certainly one of the world's most all-embracing and efficient dictatorships. It is, after all, no secret that all Chinese—unless they fit into the several categories of nonpersons—belong to Party/government-controlled organiza-

tions. It is no secret that every aspect of the peoples' lives is regulated by a tiny group of men—some of them "brilliant and witty"—who transmit orders (which cannot be questioned) downward through a massive and intricate bureaucracy that has more gradations than that of the Kuomintang, and, Leys adds, is by nature of the system dull, dogmatic, mediocre, arrogant, neurotic, frozen in conformism, and terrified of initiative.

But what Leys sees as the greatest tragedy for China is Peking's unceasing attack on the Chinese mind and spirit. No ruler of our time has seen as clearly as Mao the value to dictatorship of total manipulation of the mind, or worked as cleverly and assiduously to achieve it. Leys rightly points out that Mao set the course for the castration of the intelligentsia—writers, artists, teachers, and so on—in Yen-an in 1942, when he said in a speech, since then yearly acclaimed, that their *sole* function was to be propagandists for the regime. What this thesis—containing the corollary that intellectuals were a permanently suspect class requiring continuous and humiliating "remoulding"—did not accomplish in the great "rightist" purge of 1957 was achieved in the Cultural Revolution and the tragic years following it, when Mao had turned over the entire field of culture to his wife and the three collaborators, now the "Gang of Four." Leys quotes a remark of Mao Tse-tung's during the Cultural Revolution about Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the emperor the Chinese have praised through the centuries for unifying China and have villified for ordering the burning of all but a small category of books and for persecuting scholars. "And what is so remarkable about Ch'in Shih Huang Ti?" Mao reputedly asked. "He executed 460 scholars. We, we executed 46,000 of them."

Not content with the "near extinction of Chinese intellectuals as such," Leys points out, the Communists have destroyed the culture of the past without putting anything of value in its place. They have uglified, materially and spiritually, Peking (once, for this reviewer, the world's most civilized city). Ancient artifacts are exhibited over China solely for the Marxist-Maoist labels accompanying them. For a decade Peking substituted half a dozen incredibly bad propaganda "masterpieces" by Chiang Ching (who was

appointed cultural czarina by Mao himself in 1963 but who is now called a "white witch" renegade) for the entire great heritage of Chinese opera, an art form loved equally by literate and illiterate because it passed down through generations Chinese history and values.

Mao and his collaborators, Simon Leys believes, have "deliberately cretinized" one of the world's most intelligent people by "anesthetizing their critical intelligence, purging their brain and injecting the cement of official ideology into the empty skull." Through every waking hour, pursuing every Chinese to frontier, field, or privy, Peking speaks in one repetitive voice, using what Orwell so rightly feared: a "mechanical and prefabricated jargon that is a substitute for thought...indeed, inhibits the possibility of thinking." This jargon, as Orwell pointed out, substitutes the general for the specific, so that any group in power can twist and manipulate words and slogans at will to serve any purpose.

As Leys notes, in China the word "revolution" or "revolutionary" means simply and solely what has been approved by the regime in power. Individual human beings have been made faceless by calling them "the masses"; the "masses demand" is simply another order from Peking. "Grasp revolution and promote production" is sometimes an order to produce more and sometimes, as the last four or five years illustrate, to produce less. The admonition to be "Red and expert" has suffered the same changes in interpretation. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the Communists'

greatest battle against "culture," and Peking has piled tragedy on tragedy by making "the masses" describe it as "glorious" to this very day. Books, paintings, and plays that are "flowers" today are "big dangerous weeds" tomorrow. "Strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat" is quite simply strengthening the dictatorial powers of the Party. "Following the capitalist road" is a deadly label useful to any group fighting another, as both the Cultural Revolution and the years after it amply illustrate.

"Beat the dog that is drowning in the water." This instruction on how to deal with the bourgeoisie comes from Lu Hsun, a revolutionary writer in the early years of this century. He would certainly have been executed or incarcerated by Mao had he been alive in 1957. He is sanctified by Peking because he is dead and can be safely edited.

Leys reminds us of Lu Hsun's retort to Bertrand Russell's remark that, when, in 1920, the Chinese "coolies" who bore him and other members of his party in sedan chairs over the hills at Hangchow paused for a rest, they "brought out their pipes and began to laugh as though they had not a care in the world." Lu Hsun replied: "As for Russell, who praises the Chinese after seeing smiling porters at the Western Lake, I do not know exactly what he is driving at. I do know one thing: if the porters had been able *not* to smile at those whom they had carried, China would have long since been out of its present rut."

Transatlantic Patterns: Cultural Comparisons of England With America by Martin Green

(Basic Books; 298 pp.; \$11.95)

Robert A. Greenberg

Martin Green is among the most interesting, and is probably the most consistently productive, of the cultural historians attaining prominence during the present decade. That one tends to think of him as a Seventies presence is itself suggestive, since his career has more distant roots, his

first book, *Mirror for Anglo-Saxons*, having appeared in the year of John Kennedy's inauguration. That volume rippled the transatlantic waters on its appearance. Reflecting the tensions of his status as a rooted Englishman expatriate in America, it also managed to bring to the surface