

Correspondence

OBJECTIVITY, SYMPATHY AND PREJUDICE

CARL RISKIN raised an important issue when he wrote (in *The China Quarterly*, No. 44 (October–December 1970) p. 208) that the shortcomings of the book he was reviewing “are not random in their bearing on the overall impression created of Chinese economic performance. They uniformly tend to detract from its successes and exaggerate its weaknesses. It seems probable therefore that they are associated with the basic antipathy with which [the authors] view the subject of their study . . . The narrow-mindedness of these attitudes, besides leading to faulty generalizations and misinterpretations, gives the book an ambiance reminiscent of Cold War scholarship.”

Most students of contemporary China feel either basic sympathy or antipathy towards it. For sympathisers to complain of antipathy (or vice-versa) is hypocritical. To consider that *their* attitude is narrow-minded whereas *our* attitude is broad-minded is naïve. Of course there is Cold War scholarship. There is also People’s Diplomacy scholarship and the scholarship of those who “seek a New Jerusalem in Peking” (as another reviewer expressed it on p. 230 of the same issue). It is so easy to exchange aspersions and arguments *ad hominem*—like (p. 233) explaining that an author “lives in an atmosphere where it is fashionable to disparage modern Chinese drama”—but all it really tells the reader is what side people are on and this can be done with less words and more humility. Otherwise, we shall fall to feuding, judge books more and more by the political stand of the author and end up with each side having its *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.

Although objectivity is the ideal towards which all should aim, the sympathies and even the prejudices of an author help to make his book readable; and without them he might not have written it. Unless he uses bright and dark colours, his writing becomes a dreary grey. This is why I take exception to Keith Pratt’s criticism (p. 235 of the same issue) of an author for “the bright colours in which the Taiwan scene is actually painted. Genuine intellectual and religious freedom, for example, might not be expected, but its absence is worth noting.”

Is it wrong to paint things brighter than they are but right to paint them darker? I have just returned from a visit to Taiwan during which I had the opportunity again to observe religious activities there. The common people, mostly native Formosans, still flock to temples for

CORRESPONDENCE

worship, divination, rites for the dead, healing, exorcism and many traditional ceremonies, often on an impressive scale. The Government is opposed to "superstition" and occasionally interferes; but so far, at least, it is fairly tolerant—certainly much more so than the Government in the Mainland.

HOLMES WELCH

Carl Riskin replies:

As the passage from my review quoted by Mr. Welch makes clear, I believe the attitudes of scholars are relevant in so far as they affect the choice of questions asked and the methods of answering them, and to the extent that they lurk unacknowledged behind conclusions that appear to flow innocently from fact alone. If, as Mr. Welch states, "of course there is Cold War scholarship," then its significance in our treatment of China is a necessary subject of academic discourse. Whatever "People's Diplomacy scholarship" may be, I have no fear that its influence will be overlooked by critics.

Keith Pratt replies:

I agree with Holmes Welch that dispassionate objectivity can detract from the attractiveness of a book. In some cases it is more desirable than in others, for example in a book which will be widely used as an authoritative secondary source of reference. On the whole, as I noted, the book under review was successful in maintaining an impressive degree of objectivity without, as it happens, becoming "a dreary grey." This was precisely what made the "brightness" of certain passages stand out. I have no wish to paint things darker than they really are, and I am glad that Professor Welch mentions some of the continuing religious practices in Taiwan, but I could counter with stories recounted to me there by both Chinese and Western Christians alleging discrimination on apparently religious grounds.

THE INDIA-CHINA BORDER

MAY I refer in your columns to Bruce Burton's review of my book *The India-China Border* which appeared in *The China Quarterly*, No. 41 (January–March 1970)?

My work is devoted mainly to evaluation of historical material on the India-China border question, and I have deliberately refrained from dealing in detail with current aspects of Chinese or Indian policies. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how I could be found fault with for suggesting that the Chinese were disinclined in 1962 to settle the matter through peaceful negotiations. The argument that they first suggested 15 October 1962 as the date for negotiations and that, therefore, they

were not averse to a settlement while the Indians were disinclined to come to the conference table, is too naïve to accept. On the same lines, could one not argue that because Britain did not accept Hitler's "peace proposal" sent through Rudolf Hess during the last War, Britain was a war-monger?

I draw attention to this only to illustrate how biased a reviewer can be when he does not want to accept the factual positions.

G. NARAYANA RAO

Mr. Burton replies:

Naturally Mr. Rao thinks I am a biased reviewer. He is heavily committed to support of the official Indian case on the Sino-Indian border dispute and I am not. I would like to be able to refer him to Neville Maxwell's admirable article in *The China Quarterly*, No. 43 (July-September 1970), "China and India the Un-Negotiated Dispute," because it explores at length the reasons why the Sino-Indian border question was not submitted to peaceful negotiations. But no doubt Mr. Rao would consider Mr. Maxwell to be even more biased than I.