

FIRST ACT IN CHINA: THE STORY OF THE SIAN MUTINY. By James M. Bertram. New York: Viking Press. 1938. pp. xviii + 284. \$3.00.

THIS book, written with much penetrating understanding and a very fascinating style, has, as its author professes, a twofold purpose. The main one is to throw light on a complicated and critical moment in contemporary Chinese history, on that world-famous but peculiarly Chinese armed protest against Generalissimo Chiang K'ai-shek's policy towards Japan, during the 59 days of revolt and counter-revolt, from December 12, 1936, to February 4, 1937. During this period the "Red terror" was a myth but the "White terror" was real enough. As a subsidiary purpose, the book furnishes an outline picture of China today. This is perfectly justifiable, because the "Sian mutiny" brought into play nearly all the vital social and political elements in China. The characteristic features of each group were brought to culmination in the thrills of the time. The outline picture of China today, furthermore, has been usefully clarified by this New Zealand author, a former Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He has given the reader all the data really necessary to appreciate the spirit of Chinese history during the past decade, throughout which the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communists fought bloody civil wars. Sian, as so ably analyzed by Mr. Bertram, represented the definite termination of this internecine fight and an equally definite embarkation upon a national revolutionary war against the Japanese domination and invasion. <sup>114</sup>

Bertram has accomplished his twofold purpose, and more. He throws light rather incidentally on three types of Occidental residents in China. Among many curious people on the roads, there are the missionaries. "The size of missionary families in China is a perennial source of wonder to most travellers. Perhaps it is most easily explained on economic grounds—there is usually a mission subsidy for every child." Only one out of the many mission-workers in Sian seemed to have any real feeling for the issues that had been put forward so dramatically in China's Northwest. When this British missionary was asked what he thought of the mutiny, he replied with some deliberation, "The violence, of course, I regret. But much good has come of this already. We have learnt something about the Communists. . . . I think Chiang K'ai-shek learnt much, too, in Sian—much that it was necessary for him to know. Certainly the prospects for real unity in China are more favorable today than they have ever been." <sup>114</sup>

The foreign community of Peiping in general and the typical Shanghai mind, or what is called by the author the "Peter Fleming mind," are the other two types. The former has been regarded as "an anachronism," or "a picturesque survival like the foreign colony in Florence before the World War." To these ladies and gentlemen of leisure an invitation to a cocktail party, or a moonlight visit to the Temple of Heaven, were serious events. "All that had happened since the Manchus seemed to them a mistake of history. They were interested in China as pattern, not in China as change." The foreign press in Shanghai, on the contrary, was so much interested in the Sian affair that it deliberately painted a false picture of "Red terror" and "Red imperialism." An English newspaper mailed to Sian elicits from Bertram the terse comment that "it was an initiation into imaginative journalism at its raciest." Such journalism, especially exemplified by the Japanese news reports during those days, was responsible for bringing about a general confusion worse confounded. <sup>115</sup>



China is still a semi-colonial country and its free economic and political development has long been hindered. Moreover, as Bertram points out, it has the geographical misfortune to be neighbor to the youngest and most aggressive of imperialist powers. Japan is threatening to reduce China to the status of a mere colony. "Until this danger is removed, until the National Revolution is completed, the normal development of Chinese society can never continue." Certainly it was the realization of this basic problem that brought the troops of Chang Hsueh-liang and of Yang Hu-cheng to adopt the policy of a national united front against Japanese aggression and its tools in China. This policy was first advocated by the Chinese Communist Party, which early in 1932 directed the Chinese Soviet Government in Kiangsi officially to declare war on Japan (p. 102). The Communists suggested the release of Generalissimo Chiang K'ai-shek because, in line with that united front policy, they wished to rescue Chiang from the pro-Japanese group and make him lead a national army to resist foreign invaders. The Generalissimo was forcibly detained by Generals Chang and Yang, as there was at that time no other effective way to bring good advice to him; but after nearly two weeks' detention he returned to Nanking safely. Chou En-lai, the Communist commissar in Sian, a cool, level-headed, persuasive man and, according to Bertram, a master of strategy, was "the most successful advocate for Chiang K'ai-shek's release." In Bertram's opinion, "so long as Chiang had to depend for political power on what were classed as the 'anti-Japanese elements,' the united front against Japan was not impossible" (p. 250). "As an intelligent man he was open to conviction, and could appreciate the strength of an argument—especially when it vitally

affected his own political position" (p. 147). That argument, of course, was both simple and real: namely, to turn the 10 Divisions of Nanking troops near Sian and the 200 bombers at Loyang, which threatened the destruction of China's Northwest, into a central force against the Japanese military invasion in North China, the focus of which at that time was in Suiyuan. 116

With the first news from Sian, the Japanese campaign in Eastern Suiyuan came to a sudden halt. Thus the pro-Japanese clique in Nanking was given ample opportunity to launch a civil war. Thirty Nanking planes bombed the railway station at Weinan on December 16, 1936, and killed many Chinese workers; and in the yards of the cotton-packing plant nearby, the earth was stained with blood. "Silver bullets" were used simultaneously, for the venerable Chairman of the Control Yuan, Mr. Yü Yu-jen, rushed to Shensi in a luxurious private car to present General Feng Ching-tsai, a former subordinate of General Yang Hu-cheng, with a million Chinese dollars. It was the very doubtful status of this General Feng that heightened the anxiety of the author and his Chinese companion when they were travelling in his territory, in a narrow river valley between snow-streaked cliffs of loess, approaching the end of their very precarious and adventurous journey to Sian. 116

Bertram describes both nature and human nature with a rare artistic touch. The sickly-looking moon dancing vaguely across the Huto River, the morning sun flashing through the mist, the towers and trees of the Fen Valley, the evening clamor of blackbirds at the T'aiyuan railway station, and above all, the mountain pass leading from the east into Shansi, the Niang Tze Kuan, painted by him as "a line of masonry curved along the shoulder of the hills, with fortresses that cut the sky, and far below, the snow-water ran green against the rocks." These and many other scenes rival some of the best Chinese brush-work. To name General Chen Chi-tang, now retired, as "one of the most notorious grafters in China," or to fix Yen Hsi-shan as "the type of the pure individualist in Chinese politics," is nothing ingenious. But few indeed could be so gifted as to understand Wang Ching-wei as a "shoddy Robespierre of the Chinese Revolution." 116

There are several small errors in the book, such as calling the 29th Army "the 29th Route Army"; and spelling Chien Ta-chun as "Chen Ta-chun." Typographical mistakes are not few (pp. 18, 23, 44, 59, 66, etc.), but perhaps all of no consequence. What is baffling to me is the author's statement that the revolutionary years 1925-27 in China may be regarded, along with the days of the T'aipings and the Boxers, as "move-

ments of a blind instinctive fury" (p. 25). Let us not forget that the shoddy Chinese Robespierre won his political distinction as long as 10 years ago. (117)

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