

***A China Past: Military and Diplomatic Memoirs.* By T.G. Li. Written with Roman Rome.** Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, No. 58. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989. 315 pp.

This personal memoir by the eighty-year-old Dr Li is a highly original and valuable vignette of Chinese politics and society during the first half of this century. His story begins with his birth in Belgium in 1909, and ends with his arrival in the United States in 1950. Although described as “written with Roman Rome”, who says in an Introduction that “the words and style are largely mine”, this in no way comes between Dr Li and the reader, and it is clear on every page that “the experiences, thoughts and judgments are always those of Dr Li” (p. xii). It all rings true. Here is a loyal and patriotic son of China whose only wish was to serve his country, though fate decreed that most of his life would be spent abroad. In fact, he has been so mobile that the inclusion of a short chronology would have greatly helped readers to follow his peripatetic existence through the years, as he travelled to and from France, Vietnam, around China, Turkey, China again, and finally to America. His various posts and assignments have been no less numerous, as his qualifications encompass those of engineer, doctor and soldier. He has had a crowded life.

The French connection seems to have been the major context of Dr Li’s career, and it was in that country that he gained all of his professional qualifications — in Paris, Montpellier, and at St Cyr Military Academy. This took eleven long years, and one gets the impression that he was never happier than when in subsequent years he was able to act as a liaison officer or interpreter to the French, in the service of his government. That government was firstly the Provincial Government of Kwangsi (the “Kwangsi clique”), and later the Kuomintang in Chungking. Dr Li does not hide the fact that he felt little sympathy with the Generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, although he recognizes that no one else could have filled his shoes as China’s war-time leader. In other respects, though, he feels that Chiang’s personal style of rule, and the corruption it engendered, must share the responsibility for the eventual success of the communists.

Dr Li has been a great observer. He was in China when Japan attacked in 1937. Sent to Paris in 1940, he witnessed the French collapse, and the setting-up of the Vichy government under Pétain. Back in China again he saw the communist victory in 1949. In between, he flitted about, often to Hanoi to try to establish links with the French for the supply of military aid. Then in 1947 off he went to Ankara as military attaché, with a watching brief for the whole of the Middle East. Recalled to China in 1949, shortly before the communist take-over, he seems surprised that no one

is very interested in his views on the significance of the Titoist defection from the communist bloc.

What did all this travel and activity accomplish? It has to be said in all honesty that most of it seems to have been utterly futile and ineffectual. The ineptness was not his, however, but must be laid at the door of his political masters who sent him running about on all these errands. Their perspective was scarcely a world view, and their war was not a world war. Unconsciously, perhaps, the ground-view given by the author of conditions in China at the time, the authorities, the high command, the muddle and incompetence, cowardice and betrayal, the "old-boy network" (which he was not averse to using himself while otherwise condemning it) and factionalism at every level, amounts to a savage indictment of Chinese life and society at the time. It was rotten to the core.

It scarcely seems appropriate to speak of China's "victory" over Japan. The road was one of retreat, from Nanking to Hankow to Chungking. Dr Li's brief and unedifying military experience in the field, first as a major, then a colonel (later promotion took him to major-general) bears this out. A revealing chapter, "In Search Of A Unit", captures convincingly the atmosphere of colossal muddle that was China's military organization. Unable to obtain a field-map (General Li, the zone commander, could not spare his only one captured from the Japanese!), Major Li sets out for the headquarters of the 31st Army Corps at Peng-pu with a rucksack, suitcase, a pair of pistols, and wearing a French helmet from St Cyr. He travels by train, sampan and on foot. No one knows where the headquarters are since they pulled out, and he meets only refugees, looters and pro-Japanese collaborators. After much wandering around he returns whence he came. More of the same abortive and purposeless wanderings and postings are described in successive chapters. He meets generals who refuse orders to attack the enemy, or are consumed in feuds with each other. Now a staff colonel, Dr Li is sent to Hankow to collect a radio for his commanding officer. Told to conduct a party of junior officers and soldiers there who are retreating from the Japanese, he leaves them to continue on foot while he takes a river steamer, "and we rode the rest of the way to Hankow in fine style" (p. 155). Having all reached Hankow safely, "we were ordered to stay together to await orders" (p. 157). The billet, however, is too uncomfortable, and through the good offices of friends from Paris days, Colonel Li is soon ensconced in one of the best hotels in town. After this, and not feeling too well, he is sent off home on six months sick leave. It was a funny sort of war, and his conduct was not exceptional, but better than many. He was, so to speak, a child of his time. But victories are not won that way.

The glimpses we get of Chiang Kai-shek and his wife are not flattering.

Dr Li's loyalty and sympathies were always with Li Tsung-jen. We are told of Chiang's habit of expressing agreement or satisfaction "by emitting a he-he or ho-ho sound, which came to be a kind of verbal trademark" (p. 179). Mrs Chiang was "extremely proud of her English" (p. 172), but when she decides to learn French from a French Catholic priest Dr Li's ready susceptibilities are offended. "Could it be that Madame Chiang did not wish to be beholden to a mere Chinese?" (p. 188). He suspects her of wishing to displace other interpreters. In this book the author shows himself excessively sensitive to any imagined slight, especially from foreigners (mainly French in this case). The word "chinoiserie" for him indicates some kind of contempt or disdain, instead of *objets d'art* of an oriental kind. "French military men who had served in the Far East were often heard to say that when they had fought Chinese they had too often seen only their backs" (p. 32). He also refers to "the English slang expression 'Chintoc', which probably meant China dog" (a new one to me!). On the other hand, when he receives marks of favour and regard they are very well received, almost to the extent of gratitude, so that one might see him as a Frenchman *manqué*. When he receives the Rosette of the Legion d'Honneur from Marshal Juin in Chungking in 1946, the first member of his class at the Military Surgeons' School at Lyons to be so honoured, and presumably kissed French-style on both cheeks, "I was indeed thrilled by the gesture" (p. 249). The reverse side of the coin of suspected slight is often the wish to be accepted as "one of them".

Basically, it is a sorry tale that Li has to tell, of a country and a government in serious decline. Nevertheless, he himself rose high in the service of the state, a good and faithful servant. With the end of the war, he was given the task of organizing the Foreign Intelligence Section of the government, and became privy to policy-making over a wide area. He was then sent to Turkey for two years as military attaché. When he was recalled in 1949, he became ADC to Acting President Li Tsung-jen in Canton. He made a last journey to Saigon to try to enlist French aid. But it was all too late. Inflation, corruption, fatalism were rampant. The army was deserting to the communists, and Chiang Kai-shek was already in Taiwan. The show was over, and like his patron Li Tsung-jen he made his way to the United States. One is left wondering whether Dr Li will also follow his patron in returning to the land of his ancestors for his final journey.

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