

## THE LITTLE CRITIC

EDITED BY LIN YUTANG

### An Open Letter to My Chinese Friends

**T**HIS is something I have had on my chest for a long time. Often and often during the long dreary wastes of dinner I have been tempted to break out and talk it all out with you, but to tell the truth I have never at those moments been able to get a word in. I love you all, but you are such a talkative lot! Can it be that you are not really so talkative as you seem to me, locked up as I am in my ivory tower of ignorant silence? Is it merely because at these dinners I have nothing to do but eat?

The trouble is that I am American, not English. Were I English, I should have attended that school in Peiping where all the British secretaries and consuls learn their Mandarin, and by means of my halting Chinese I would be able to force you to speak English in self-defence. But I am not English, I am American, and you know what that means, from the point of view of the linguists you are. Swiss people speak languages, Dutch people speak languages, Russian people likewise, but the average American, like me, is not only ignorant, but so self-conscious that he has never got beyond his high-school French and business-course Spanish.

It is difficult to explain it to you, to you above all people. Anyone brought up on Cantonese or Pekingese or Shanghai dialect will fail to understand that I hesitate in French, quail at German, and flunked my Cicero three times. Even Sanskrit and Greek should be child's play to any Chinese. This is why I feel it incumbent upon me to apologize once and for all if I seem a bit gloomy and stupid at your parties. Perhaps I flatter myself; perhaps you are paying me even less attention than I think you are, but if in the course of one of your interminable orations you might happen to look my way, please do not be disturbed or feel insulted by a certain rigidity of my expression. That is only my Dinner Face. Like a Poker Face, it has its uses. Behind that mask, in the course of the past year, I have written two novels, twenty-eight short stories, a play, and a treatise on philosophy. I have never before had the leisure to think my work out so carefully, and my agent is surprised and delighted with my recent output.

Please, please do not expostulate nor apologize. I do not feel in the least aggrieved at your natural tendency to slip back into one of your six or seven mother-tongues. I suppose that once you have the habit of speaking Chinese, it is difficult to drop it. My only complaint is that you are not absolutely consistent. There are times when you let slip an English phrase, a French quotation, which sticks out of your torrent of monosyllables like a rock or reef upon which my peace of mind is wrecked, my attention is distracted, my train of thought sidetracked.

Suppose I have been invited to an informal luncheon-party at a Szechuen restaurant. The room is filled with guests, old acquaintances with here and there a new face, a returned student or visiting scholar from Peiping. We are introduced all round. We bow. We are wafted to the table, where invariably an argument ensues as to who is

going to sit at my right. I cannot understand what is going on, but obviously nobody wants to sit there. Under the guise of politeness there is a hot argument about it. In the end nobody uses that chair, and our host lifts his wine-cup, we follow suit, and the chopsticks plunge into the cold ham.

Now for it! I sigh deeply and prepare to do my small social duty by the young man at my left. He is looking at me in ill-disguised terror. His fears are justified—I speak to him in English.

"This is a very nice little restaurant, isn't it?" I ask.

He gulps and nods. My heart goes out to him in pity. If only I could explain that the conversation will not continue. If I could only say, "Never mind, laddie, I won't keep this up. I'm an old hand at this sort of thing. I'll go into a brown study long before the fish, see if I don't." Alas, he would not understand me, and at any rate I could not say anything now, for after painful thought he has formulated a sentence; I see determination in his eye.

"How long have you been in China?" he asks.

"A year. I like it very much."

"Yes? That is good."

Silence. He reaches out for some bit of food and puts it on my plate.

"You know how to eat Chinese food?" he ventures at last, with a longing glance at the others, who are chattering and laughing.

"Oh yes." To show him, I reach out airily toward a plate of mushrooms, and spill something goeey on the table half-way back to my place. But it does not matter. The host has addressed a Chinese question to him and now he is free to talk with the others, his duty done, and I am free to ponder, to manage my chopsticks in my own way, and to get drunk quietly and steadily. After the first bottle I am stimulated to try again. They are laughing up-roariously at something, and I feel lonely.

"What is it?" I say to my neighbour.

"Please?"

"Why are they laughing?"

"Oh, it is a very funny thing. Mr. Liang said that the present trend of politics... and then Mr. Chow said—but it is difficult to explain. You see, there are two Chinese words which sound the same, but one means 'North' and one—"

"Never mind," I say, and hold out my cup for more wine.

Time goes on. Dishes come and go. Sometimes you are laughing, and sometimes you are grave. My face is worn out with smiling when the others smile, and looking perturbed when the others are worried. I begin to grow daring. I think about my Chinese lessons, which have already begun to disturb the perfect oblivious peace of mind which I used to bring to these dinner-parties. A word understood here and there perplexes me.

"May I have some water?" I ask my partner.

"Certainly." He says something to the waiter, which I distinguish as "Liang sui".

"Why do you ask for 'Liang sui'?" I demand.

"Please?"

"Why, when you ask for drinking-water, do you say 'Liang sui'?"

"But that is what it is. Drinking water."

"My teacher says that's 'Lan sui'. And you say 'Liang.' Why?"

It is a simple question, but the whole table falls silent, pondering it. There is discussion. There is argument. There is a passionate quarrel, during which I am forgotten, and I forget all about it in my turn and begin to meditate on next month's rent. At last my friend turns to me.

"'Lan sui' is cold water. 'Liang sui' is water which has been boiled, so it was hot, and then it was allowed to get cold, and now it is for drinking. Do you see?"

"Thank you," I say gratefully, and fill my bowl with almond soup.

The meal is drawing to a close at last. Rice has appeared. I brighten up, and resolve to listen to and watch carefully that young man who is talking at such length. A word I understood—a comprehensible expression of disgust on his face—surely he is discussing the Kwangtung and Kwangsi situation? Yes, of course. The others are listening raptly. Now he is talking about his recent visit there—I distinctly heard the word "Kwangtung." And now, because he is speaking of Hu Shih, he must be talking about the peace petition sent by all the professors in China. That tall chap in foreign clothes is disagreeing with him. He is for direct and open action. Now perhaps they are wondering what will be said about them in Geneva. Didn't one of them mention Anthony Eden? Is the man with the whiskers as patriotic as he sounds? Are they going to quarrel in a minute? It looks that way...

My spirits rise. It is possible to get along here, after all, and in another year's time I will be able to join in the conversation. Oh, rapture!

"Well, is it all settled?" I ask brightly. Everyone looks at me blankly. "What were you talking about?" I ask, a little less confidently.

"The gold bar market," somebody says.

Oh, well. I am only trying to explain why I am so stupid, and why one of these days I will turn up for dinner with a copy of Gibbon under my arm. I have always meant to read Gibbon from cover to cover. Still, it is a pity that you will never see me at a dinner-party in New York. I used to be known as a pretty fair conversationalist.

WISTFULLY,

*Emily Hahn.*

## WEEKLY INTERVIEWS

**Kao Chien-fu, Artist (高劍父)**

*Interviewed by LIN YU*

THERE is a saying in Chinese that one's writing looks like the writer. Without going into the question whether this is universally true, we may say that it certainly is true of Mr. Kao Chien-fu, a well known Chinese artist whose paintings are on exhibit at the International Club this week. Short and squarely built like the signature of his name, he is quiet, well poised. And he is ever ready to respond to any question courteously.

"You have now come to teach in Nanking?" I began.

"Yes, two months in Nanking and two months in Canton" was his reply.

Both the Central University in the capital and the Sun Yat-sen University in the birth place of revolution are so anxious to have Mr. Kao as their professor of fine arts that he is now dividing his time every term equally between these two institutions of higher learning. That shows how highly he has been regarded by the public. Behind this success lies a story of a boy fighting against all odds to obtain an artist's education.

Although born of a well-to-do family, his parents died when he was still young. After living with a cousin on a farm for a year, he found himself at the age of 12 virtually an apprentice to the drug store owned by an uncle of his, who was a Chinese doctor and expert painter of bamboo. At the age of 14, he went back to live with his brother in Honan, that delta of the Pearl River south of Canton. Already intoxicated with painting, he sought the tuition of a famous painter in Canton, Mr. Chu Ku-chuan, and obtained it free, because one of his cousins knew the painter. His tutor's home was over ten *li* from his own, and every morning after some light breakfast he would walk there to receive instruction from the old master till in the afternoon, going without lunch, and then would walk home to have a meal. His perseverance won the admiration and sympathy of his teacher, and the latter took him in to live in his house at the nominal charge of \$2.00 per month for room and board. Even that he could not pay. His teacher didn't mind, but other members of the family and the servants did, and they showed Mr. Kao that they did. They went after Mr. Kao's cousin who introduced him until he paid all. Mr. Kao once remarked that he learned in that one year besides the fundamentals of Chinese painting, also a great deal of the ways of the world. More than this, he developed a sympathy for the underdogs.

When I pointed to the photographic reproduction of his painting of a water buffalo lying down after ploughing and remarked that I liked it, Mr. Kao explained simply: "I saw this water buffalo resting after heavy work, and I tried to paint the mute, toiling masses who have no one to whom they may take their troubles."

Just look at those two eyes of the buffalo and who can deny that they have a person to whom they may take their trouble, even though they are mute?

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