

# SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR— OR THE REAL MANDARIN

Etiemble

I

In the time of the war lords and of the Koumintang, it was not so hard for leftists, even Stalinists, to write something readable about China. Your leftist went there in person, and afterwards reported frankly what he had seen in Shanghai—or even here, there, or elsewhere in China during those happy years when the banking family which, joined with Chiang Kai-shek, still considered “the interior of the four seas,” that is to say, China, its private domain, and the five hundred million Chinese as its pre-destined slaves. Thus we had the *Shanghai* of Andrée Viollis and the *Secret China* of Egon Erwin Kisch, two books which one can reread after twenty years without being forced to question the favorable judgment of them one formed when they appeared. One might infect one’s judgment of certain details, at the most.

But ever since Mao Tse-tung became President Mao, and our Stalinists began making pilgrimages to Tien Ngan Men, the lucidity which enabled them to evaluate the old China at one glance is simply gone. How is it, for instance, that in illustrating his *Open China*, the fellow-traveler, Pierre Gascar, has set down (or allowed someone else to insert this for him) the legend represented by the photo on page 48: A grandmother holding a child in her arms: “Two faces of China: one lined with the fatigue of ages, the other, bursting with health and testifying to a new young life which, with clenched fists, affirms itself . . .” Rather than the stigmata of the fatigue of ages, the lines I see on the face of the grandmother are precisely the ones one can expect on a woman her age; and I should like to know in what country of the world infants of this age do not curl their fingers into fists.

In defense of our travelers, in China, Stalinist or otherwise, it might be argued that they are simply at the mercy of their informers. Yet neither Andrée Viollis, nor Egon Erwin Kisch spoke Chinese. But if only our new tourists would abstain from peddling their ideas about the Chinese language! For Mr. Adalbert de Segonzac, Chinese is the only

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NOTE: The above is translated from the French publication *Evidences*, from which it is reprinted with permission of the author.

language "which does not allow one to discover the general meaning of a conversation: because of its intonations, it is impossible, for anyone who does not understand it, to define the end of a phrase or to recognize an interrogaiton." (*Visa to Peking*.) He concludes that one ought to Romanize this perverse tongue. From its surprising character, Mr. Gascar draws a subtle effect: "it is a language which phonetically often resembles hesitant speech, a stumbling speech which lacks the tone of affirmation and which is most discomfoting to the traveler debarking in Peking in 1954." What kind of whoring is this? Can anyone who knows the iron laws under which the Chinese lived in 1954 and the dogmatism then reigning everywhere, which tolerated nothing but certitudes ("we were beasts, robots" a scientist told me, when able to breathe two years later), can anyone who knows the facts accept the judgment of Mr. Gascar? It is all the less acceptable since it follows from an error about the nature of the language.

But if only this ignorance of Chinese had led our lovers of progress to be more careful in their judgments! The thought has not occurred to them.

FRENCHMEN TODAY, tens of thousands of them, have discovered China through Mr. Claude Roy (I happen to know what cultivated Chinese think of him); tens of thousands are going to read *The Long March* because this wearisome trek was authored by the winner of a Goncourt prize, the writer of *The Second Sex*.

By a strange effect of ballistics, the law governing which I certainly would like to be able to formulate once and for all, the mud of *The Long March* only bespatters those persons who have never compromised—and never will, no matter what medals are offered them—with tyranny.

In fact, what is the long march really? Is it a sort of *China Day by Day*? A book of notes taken while traveling, reportage? By no means. "The reporter explores a stable present, whose more or less contingent elements serve each other as keys." Thus you are to understand that an existentialist thinkeress, who takes this role of hers with such seriousness—it never strikes her that she bores us—could scarcely limit herself to exploring the present far from stable state of China, all of whose elements are promoted to the dignity of necessary components. Having thus motivated her modesty, Madame de Beauvoir proposes to make clear in the light of the China of yesterday all the information she was able to pick up there. Rather than a metaphysically impossible reportage, what she offers us is an essay on China.

Let us hail such courage. Mme. de Beauvoir ventures only timidly beyond the three Manchu centuries and those Ming periods which towards the end of the 15th century, followed the Mongol conquerers. I do not know whether in the course of her journey she studied the Neolithic sites, examined the carved bones of Ngan Yang, visited the

tombs of Han, or handled some objects of the Fighting Realms. The few things that she wrote about Tang or Sung would be enough to break the heart of a cultivated Chinese.

This briefly is the position of our neo-sinologist: the Chinese future about which as an existentialist thinkeress I can say nothing, I shall nevertheless explain to you by means of the Chinese past about which, being Simone de Beauvoir, I know very little. Example, page 387 (the French text), about the frescoes of Touen Houang: "the artistic value of these works is not extraordinary, but all epochs of this civilization have left traces in them." In one sentence two howlers! One concerns the judgment of fact, the other the judgment of value.

## II

Despite the many mistakes with which Mme. de Beauvoir motivates her scorn for Chinese culture and her hope for a country soon to be peopled with displaced illiterates, a country which only geographers could still call China, it does happen that once in a while she makes some judgment I can approve. While I doubt that in the place of the Communists "any regime would act as they do"—I do think, as many other people who are a little better informed than Mme. de Beauvoir, that today, things being as they are in Asia, only the Communists are ready to lift China from the mud, poverty and degradation which the imperialisms of the West forced it to wallow in, for the benefit of a dynasty of bankers. No, certainly "China is not a paradise; she will have to become richer and more liberal; but if one considers with impartiality what she is leaving and to what she is going," one can hardly argue against the view that the present dictatorship is for the people at least by far the least bad of all those, military, civilian or Manchu, it has suffered under for a century. There is another page in *The Long March* which I can applaud: "I am particularly irritated by the a priori benevolence which leads certain travelers to admire in an absolute way achievements which make sense only in the light of what they will become. It is not true that a Chinese village is richer or more comfortable than a French; what is remarkable is the progress it shows with respect to what it was. It is false to say that the Chinese woman is generally speaking the most emancipated in the world. It is naive to marvel at the fact that the Archbishop of Peking openly approves the regime. If he opposed it, he would no longer be archbishop. This kind of enthusiasm shocks me not only because of the errors it leads to, but also because China deserves to be recognized for what it is; not to see the difficulty it faces, is to underestimate its efforts. I suspect that the propaganda of these zealots will work against them." What a pity that ideas so banal though true still do not prevent Mme. De Beauvoir from falling victim to the very error she has condemned.

AFTER HAVING EVOKED in idyllic terms the public park that has been made of the former imperial park of Peking—pioneers, canoeists and picnickers—why does she feel forced to add that in France there is nothing more “depressing than a public park.” Capitalist or socialist, a ball is a ball, a picnic a picnic, a fair a fair.

The zealotism of Mme. de Beauvoir is even less excusable when she rails against the homosexuality which stained feudal China. In condemning “the puerile and complicated eroticism depicted in the old novels, and the vogue of homosexuality,” Simone de Beauvoir must feel that she has uncovered in these some vice of thought: the refinements of Chinese eroticism scarcely camouflaged “the monotony of a civilization limited to immanence.” Surely these are big enough words to make a little brain reel, but I would have preferred if instead of vaguely referring to old novels, which she could not have read in their entirety (for they do not exist in any language accessible to her in any edition that I know of) I would have preferred, I repeat, if she had consulted the serious works which treat this subject. I should also like to know why the famous author of the pages in *The Second Sex*, devoted to the glory of Lesbos, and of the article on Sade, should suddenly play the conformist. Out of philosophical scruple? Because she has discovered in Sade what Jean-Paul Sartre has found in Genet, a man who “freely assuming” the given, “avoids being bad by *making* himself such,” a man who is “entirely committed” to the problem which haunts us: “the real relation of man to man?” But if she only studied Chinese eroticism a bit, she would discover that it is no less thought out, no less “freely assumed” than that of the divine marquis. The truth is that Chinese eroticism treats both saphism and pederasty with a wise indulgence, advocates neither sadism nor masochism, and, faithful to the philosophical logic of Yin-Yang, does not reject with disgust even those tricks of feminine sexuality which can result in death. I see nothing “puerile” in this; and if Mme. De Beauvoir insists on regarding as “puerile” the compression of the spermatic canal so familiar to Taoists anxious to conserve their *Yang* principle, I can only assure her that our own adolescence is no less “puerile.” Is Mme. Beauvoir’s denigration of Chinese eroticism really necessary for the defense of socialism?

HER ZEALOTISM becomes really intolerable when she writes that Peking “gives a perfect image of a society without classes. Impossible to distinguish an intellectual from a worker, a poor housewife from a capitalist.” I will freely grant that at the time she crossed China, everybody was dressed in “the classic outfit of blue cotton cloth,” and that in 1957, when I myself was in Peking and elsewhere in China, the degree of uniformity everywhere bordered on the fantastic. But one should add this: the quality of the cloth, its shade, the cut of the vest, the fit of the trousers were able to inform one at a glance of the social position of the wearer. Admitted that I am

perhaps a little too sensitive to elegance; but the fact is that many of my companions not so sensitive reacted as I did. It is true that I never saw in Peking a single man whose refinement of dress equalled that of the Chinese diplomats we entertain in Berne; certainly, a street in Peking does not exhibit the variety still surviving somehow or other in Shanghai; but, to say that a poor housewife differs in no way from a capitalist, one has to have gone over once and for all to the side of pious mendacity.

The zealotism borders on baseness when Mme. de Beauvoir dares affirm that "on the whole, the richest Chinese lead a life almost as simple as that of the poor. First of all, they do not dare make a show of their wealth for to do so would be to excite severe criticisms, and many disdain to do so quite spontaneously. Moreover, there are few privileges that can be bought with money today. Autos are working tools. There are no pleasure spots. Going to the theatre or a restaurant, eating well, wearing fine silk clothes, buying fixtures, furnishings, nicknacks: this is the maximum luxury possible today. Besides, the inequalities inherent in capitalism are being made to disappear rapidly... the best paid are those who work hardest..." I visited Kouo Mo-jo, who has his own house and Pa Kin, whose vast home is surrounded by a carefully kept garden; also Fong Yeou-lan in the villa which the University of Pei Ta gave him; also other teachers and responsible Communists, among them an old militant who for years led a clandestine life and who showed us with a joy I well understand the well furnished rooms and quite modern comfort that had finally been granted him. To be sure, all these men have a right to live and work in quarters better than a mudhut or even the model apartment of a working class family! But neither Kouo Mo-jo, with his shining face, nor Pa Kin, with that independence of judgment I know him to have, nor Fong Yeou-lan, who knows by heart the chapter on the proper conduct for a man of letters, nor the old and courageous militant of whom I spoke above, ever gave me to understand that they "lead a life almost as simple as the poor."

To be sure, if one were to divy-up among the six hundred million Chinese the 150 exquisite ducks which every Sunday are served up in special restaurants, if one were to divide equally among everybody the wealth of pigs, chickens, fish, bears' feet and sharks' lips, the poor would be no better fed than now. That goes without saying but the fact is that nowhere else, except perhaps in Egypt, have I had the feeling of a more unjust inequality between my own lot, let's say, so as not to speak of that of the really rich, and the lot of the poor. With my apartment, my cook, my car, with all the palaces within reach of my purse and all the nightclubs—each day of this Egyptian life I led there, I suffered from contact with the poverty which Cocteau calls "splendid" but which I felt each day I was guilty of insulting. Now in six weeks, Mme. de Beauvoir did not manage to see the atrocious condition which the rulers of China to-

day regularly admit remains the lot of the Chinese people. As long as the leaders do not resolve by draconian measures the problem of the birthrate, I do not see how they will ever be able to feed the poor.

I must regret that in her humanitarian and progressive jargon Mme. de Beauvoir betrays a disquieting lack of feeling and imagination. So then, to eat till one bursts, and of the most delicate foods, to go to restaurants and these the best in the world, to collect works of art, and these among the most rare that exist, to dress in brocaded silk and this the most expensive to be had—is that what it means to lead a simple life in China? “Almost as simple” as that of the five hundred million poor! What servility she shows in pretending that this survival of a somewhat less simple life is a vestige of capitalism! The fact is I myself did not meet a single capitalist—only bureaucrats, artists and writers—and I had the same feeling in Peking that I had in Moscow in 1934—and in 1947: in every regime, no matter how Stalinist, no matter how Communist, there is a privileged class, or if you prefer another word, caste. The lives of those who belong to this caste—in Peking as in Moscow—have nothing in common with those led by the workers. I do not see very well how this scandalous fact can be blinked at. Have I myself a right to give myself a better conscience by affirming that by living as a bourgeois in a capitalist country, I lead a life “almost as simple as the poor?” At the risk of being considered a fascistic mandarin by our gracious Lady Beauvoir, I admit that the words *poor* and *destitute* are for me full of painful meaning.

IN THE PEJORATIVE SENSE of the term, only he can be called a mandarin who chooses to further the interests of the prince rather than those of the people, who puts profit or fame above truth. Something more is required of a person than ignorance of Chinese if he—or she—is to escape the just charge of mandarinism: one must not be afraid to displease. Among those Confucians whom Mme. de Beauvoir execrates with a feeling as profound as her ignorance, I learned once and for all the proper conduct for a man of letters: “Can one impose on a man of letters by rich gifts? Can one tempt him with pleasure, with love? Recognizing these as goods, he will not impair his virtue. The crowd may threaten him with violence, and soldiers come to arrest him. Even threatened with death, he will not change his conduct. The man of letters lives among the men of his time and reflects on those of former times. He acts in accordance with his age but in such a way that future ages will imitate him. Should he displease his contemporaries, should his superiors not elevate him, should his inferiors not praise him, should flatterers and calumniators unite to bring about his ruin, they will no doubt be able to prevail against him; but they will not be able to deflect his will. His aims are not forgetful of the sufferings of the people.” Very good that! But in *The Long March*, Mme. de Beauvoir does not stop forgetting the sufferings of the people and constantly betrays the truth.

Based on ignorance and presumption, garnished equally with errors and pious lies, *The Long March* is worth exactly nothing. One final example: We are informed in it that the Western powers "have filled their museums with the treasures of Chinese art." The question is not a simple one, but there is this fact to be considered: the only country in the world which has had the cynicism to exhibit works taken by force around 1920 from the frescoes of Touen Hounag, is neither France nor the United States. Before she gives us lectures, let our mandarinist go to Leningrad and pay a visit to the Hermitage Museum. I cannot resist adding another example: According to our eminent sinologist, "2,300 Houei families in Peking follow the Moslem faith." Marvelous! Houei in Chinese, means Moslem.

I have said only a small part of what I meant to say about *The Long March*, which will continue to sell for a long time, simply because "a tale full of the crassest ignorance is as likely to excite the passions as one told with historic exactitude," as Pierre Bayle said in his *Dictionary*, which alas, we no longer read.

**Among our contributors . . . Richard Lowenthal whose essays have been published in DISSENT before, lives in England. His articles, which are easily among the best on international affairs and politics, appear in many publications, among them the London "Observer." . . . Ben Seligman's articles on economics and economists have regularly enriched our pages. He too writes frequently for such other publications as "Commentary." Another article by him, "Socialism Without Marx" is scheduled for a coming issue. . . . Lionel Abel, poet, critic and playwright, has translated material for us before. In this issue he appears as both translator and writer. His play, "Absalom" was presented in New York (off-Broadway) last year. . . . Etiennele is a French literary critic, teacher and Sinologist. . . . Boris Souvarine's "Stalin," written in the middle-30s, was a pioneer document in the dissection of Stalinism, and remains an important political-ideological work. With a background as a leading Communist, Trotskyist and socialist, Souvarine writes frequently on Russia and Communism. . . . Dwight Macdonald's "Memoirs of a Revolutionist" was reviewed in our Spring issue. He was publisher and editor of "Politics" in the U.S., is today on the staff of *The New Yorker*. . . . William Heald teaches English and the humanities at Ohio Wesleyan . . . AND A CORRECTION:**

**Georges Ketman, author of the study of Egyptian intellectuals published in the Summer 1958 DISSENT, writes to advise that we were in error in describing him as a citizen of Israel: "I would be flattered to be one, but the fact is that I am not. I am Afghan through my father, but the passport I hold is German through my mother. I suspect that what led you into this error was the Middle European sound of my name."**