

Caught between truth and image

THE CHINA HANDS. By E.J. Kahn, Jr. Viking; \$12.95.

Reviewed by James D. White

Half a century ago the State Department set up a special training program in which its young men destined to serve in China were educated in the language, history and culture of that country. The result was that by World War II we had in China what Eric Sevareid called "the ablest group of young diplomats I have ever seen in a single American mission abroad."

The China Hands is a fluid account — often ironically funny as expertise abroad mires down in domestic ignorance and prejudice — of what happened to roughly a score of these trained men. Their problem was that they did their job as they had been trained to do it, reporting the Chinese scene realistically and accurately, and had their careers wrecked for their pains.

When, for example, they reported that Chiang Kai-shek's corrupt Nationalist government was losing the support of the Chinese people and opening the way for a Communist triumph, and when their warnings were borne out by history, they were blamed by the Cold War mentality in the United States for "losing China."

E.J. Kahn's story is poignant, consuming reading for anyone who was there at the time and knew and worked with many of the men involved. For anyone else, it is that and much more — a detailed illumination of a now-fading period, critical in our history, in the same way a microscope focussed on a drop of water discloses a teeming community of activity.

The shabby treatment meted out to the young diplomats of the China service was rooted in the same reservoirs of ignorance, prejudice and political avarice that locked the United States into two decades of Cold War, the McCarthy period and two wars. The probability is that if the diplomats in China had been listened to, Communist China would have been at least neutral at the start, because Mao Tse-tung, like Sun Yat-sen before him, turned to Soviet Russia for aid only after being rebuffed by America and the West. Equally arguable is the proposition that if Washington had listened to its own experts in China there might never have been a Korean War — at least not one involving the Peoples Republic of China — or the even deadlier American misadventure in Vietnam.

But the China specialists were not listened to. Too

many Americans had the fixed idea that Chiang Kai-shek could do no wrong. To the China hands, Chiang was more interested in fighting the Communists — when he had to — than the Japanese, and after the war could be seen clearly to be losing the Chinese popularity contest. When Chiang finally fled the mainland in 1949, the China hands were punished with a peculiarly American form of bureaucratic and political harassment which suggests nothing quite so vividly as the ancient Persian practice of beheading the messenger who brings the bad news.

Some were "lucky" and got shunted off to posts around the world — anywhere but Asia — to serve out their careers in places like Reykjavik, Tangle, Dusseldorf or Rome, where their Chinese experience was safely insulated from Asian affairs. Others were less fortunate. Jack Service was fired finally by Secretary of State Dean Acheson. During the John Foster Dulles era others were driven into early retirement. John Paton Davies Jr. quit in disgust and turned to making fine hardwood furniture in Peru to support his wife and seven children.

Kahn presents these men in the same human terms one remembers them personally — not as heroes, although they accepted danger routinely and without complaint — but as trained specialists who enjoyed their work and did it well as a matter of course.

One of those forced into early retirement was Ed Clubb, whose second career has been as a New York writer and academician. In 1932 this quiet, studious man had written the first serious assessment by any American of the largely unknown Chinese Communist movement. Yet in 1937 at Peking he acted quickly to save a squad of mounted U.S. Marines from the Chinese garrison which mistook the Leathernecks for part of the encircling Japanese Army. Shouting in Chinese that the Marines were friends, Ed dashed between them and the Chinese garrison to stop the shooting. One Marine was nicked, and it was Ed who drove him to the hospital after talking the squad through the Chinese lines. Like most correspondents there at the time, I dealt with Ed for years, but never heard of this incident until I read Kahn's account of it.

John Davies was a suave and sophisticated type who, with Eric Sevareid, made his first parachute jump from a stricken transport plane flying over the Hump during the war. Sevareid credits Davies with being the coolest head in the crowd as the survivors fought their way through the Japanese-held jungle to safety.

Then there was George Acheson, who simply lost his life after the war when his plane ditched in the Pacific.

And Jack Service, like Davies born in China, probably saw more of Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai during the war than any other American. He was fired but fought back, taking his case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to win reinstatement. He

ended his career at Liverpool as consul. He lives in retirement in Berkeley, and twice has visited the Peoples Republic since the 1972 rapprochement.

Finally, Kahn includes such nice bits as the time in Chungking when Ambassador Pat Hurley, the fast-draw general from Oklahoma, pulled a gun on Art Ringwalt because he didn't like a report Art had written. Hurley is the same "diplomat" who greeted Mao Tse-tung at Yenai with a Commanche war-whoop. In Washington, in 1945, I actually heard Hurley describe the Chinese Communists as "agrarian reformers" whom he likened to Republicans in Oklahoma because they were the party out of power.

Hurley and his ilk prevailed. Service, Davies, Clubb, Ringwalt and more than a dozen others did not, with results we now are beginning to summon up the courage to examine with some objectivity.

We have much to study. *The China Hands* is a brisk and illuminating exploration of the field to be examined — a period in which a new superpower developed warts along with its muscle. The tour is conducted in superb company, that of good and true men who were assessed brutally for mistakes they never made and sought only to prevent.

James D. White was AP correspondent in Peking, 1936-41, and revisited China briefly in 1948-49.

Pacific Sun, Week of May 21-27, 1976

Dear both,

9/29/76

The forgotten-daily 3cl mailing went out this morning. Sorry about the delay. Some may be of no value and are included as a record of the fact only on the chance there was no reporting elsewhere. Some for laughs.

I've packed a heavy bag for tomorrow in court so I'm as ready for that as I can be, it is a bit early for bed, and all the nuttiness over the House Committee, like Hoch's proposals for ~~xxx~~ disasters, have been worrying me.

It is not that I didn't expect the general situation, for I did, long ago and continuously except for a brief Church period. But once it is here it does get more troubling.

I've carboned you on just about if not all I've sent on it. I do not ask any time of you unless you have criticism. That is always helpful. Generally I lack it. Unless, of course, you can see a way out of a cul de sac, as I really do not.

I have an agreement for a responsible approach. I'm to be the witness on the medical and ballistics and ballistics-related evidence.

I did not ask a confrontation arrangement at the outset so it was not agreed to at the outset. I think it is likely that there will be some discussion on this. I'm not inflexible on that. I do not think we should testify simultaneously to ~~ga~~ begin with. I do think I should go first to give the others less free range in ~~xxxx~~ wanderings into the irrelevant and something to have to face. This would also serve as an evidentiary primer for the Members. Afterward is when I think there should be the confrontation.

While I did not expect Bud to call me after his today's meeting with Downing I do think he should have. We have little to do with each other except when he has the need.

I had an apologetic call from Whitten this afternoon. We are to try to get together tomorrow but it looks unlikely with him having to do Anderson's work and also get the column out. He said I was unfair in blaming him for the inaccuracy of which I wrote Bradlee, where it turns out they have some problems. I did not recall that I'd blamed him personally but I took his word and offered to write Bradlee. He said not to. I'm sorry if I did give him personal blame. I know that Anderson dictates, as Pearson did, and the others have no choice. He did not dispute the inaccuracy charge. I have a hunch there will not be less liberty with fidelity to fact.

They lead terrible lives, even for that business. He says his working day is not from about 8 in the am to 11 pm. I guess they take turns at speaking engagements. This means one has to get it out and supervise the carrying on of all other work. Including Jack's regular TV work.

If you did not watch the CBS TV news tonight, we supped to it. Cronkite apologized in response to a complaint by Schorr about their reporting of his resignation. Cronkite said Schorr was right, that they had erred in saying his suspension was over blaming another CBS reporter. It was not that at all. That was the cause of the internal friction. He did not blame another reporter. This is the classic knife retraction. CBS drew the wrong conclusions ~~xxx~~ from his silence. This led them to suspect ~~xxx~~ eslie Stahl. Therefore he did it. But he's fixed because he had a contract, flat annual ~~xxx~~ unlike most.

They've fired my friend Roger over his refusal to take the graveyard shift. It is to go to arbitration. They were real crazy to do this just when they need an in-house expert on assassinations and they have no diggers in Washington with Schorr gone. Graham is a handout artist who gets an occasional leak.

Jimmy Ray came ~~xxx~~ through with the required affidavit. He accompanied it with a letter to JL including some cracks about my having written him a turgid letter (he used the word but probably can't pronounce it - he not quite Agnew). He added something to the effect that I must think he is of the Gay Liberation Front. Whatever that means. JL told me by phone. But the cracks are not what counts. I've heard them before. What counts is that Jim has it filed and can file the petition cert in typed form rather than printed. Some progress. Best,