

Reviews

Confucius, by Betty Kelen, Sheldon Press, London, 1974. 154 pp., 95p.

Taking the Shang (*circa* 1600-1028 B.C.) as the first dynasty in Chinese history, there have been at least eight important dynastic revolutions prior to the communist one in 1949. All these revolutions followed a similar pattern: the changeover from one dynasty to another witnessed only the termination of one line of rule and its replacement by another. The political, social, economic and overriding cultural structures remained basically the same. This was due to the philosophy, rules and principles under which China had been governed – namely, Confucianism. It is this philosophy, these rules and principles which are now under such intense attack throughout China today.

Confucius, born in 551 B.C. expounded *the* philosophy, with additions by his disciples, notably Mencius. This philosophy was basically a *way of life*, derived from the rules and principles laid down by the founders of the Chou dynasty, which had supposedly brought about peace and happiness. It governed the individual person, but also, by extension, the family, the clan, the village, the province, the entire country and ultimately the world. The basic precept was the “Rectification of Names” or the strictest adherence to the proper interpretation of words. Stated simply, it meant that every individual should maintain his exact position in life and society by doing the right things and obeying the correct orders. Cardinal importance was attached to proper relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend. Likewise, ancestral worship or reverence for the dead was of the utmost importance. When the application of this precept became universal, there would be peace and order, prosperity and happiness everywhere.

In practice this meant, of course, that Chinese abstract ideas, following the law of concrete Chinese thinking, became composites of two concrete qualities. Thus, the word for “size” is *big-small* (“What is the big-small of the diamond?”), “length” is *long-short*, “weight” is *light-heavy*. Still more difficult to a Westerner is the word for “thing” – *east-west* (“Have you got any east-west to eat in the fridge?”). As for philosophical concepts, such as “right”, “justice”, “loyalty” and so on, they became cryptic monosyllables which tended constantly to resemble one another.

While this led to endless ambiguities and unresolved discussions, it also was responsible for forming that down-to-earth pragmatism in the Chinese people for which they are justly renowned.

Betty Kelen's *Confucius* is a very simple description of this very brilliant, highly complex man and his teachings. There is no indication about the type of audience for which the book is intended, but its simplicity is such that I would guess it must be intended for the sixth-form or thereabouts. If this is so, then it has done a good job, for it should give any schoolboy a reasonable knowledge of the subject. But if it was intended for any other section of the reading public, then the book is a failure – and at times comes close to being an impertinence. For example :

The black-haired people at large were goods-and-food suppliers to this weighty feudal and fat-cat superstructure. Usually they were artisans, farmers, herds-men, peasants, servants – in fact, they were serfs. As you might guess, it was hereditary to be a serf, also. (p. 11)

Or, again :

We are accustomed to hearing that the Chinese invented just about everything in the course of their long history, and sometimes it is said that they invented the public school also. It probably was in the first public school in the world that Confucius learned his lessons. He may have paid his aged teacher as best his small means allowed, or not at all. (p. 24)

The text of the book covers 154 pages, divided between fifteen chapters – an average of some ten pages to a chapter. These are divided into three sections: *The Man*, *The Teaching*, *The Master*. The last chapter, entitled *The Years After*, is only two pages long.

Perhaps I do the author an injustice. After all, it was the famous disciple of Confucius, Mencius, who said, "The great man is one who has not lost the heart of a child," and that the essence of self-cultivation, of preserving one's moral character, consists merely in "finding the lost heart of the child". If this is so, then the simplicity of the book might well be a virtue.

GEORGE PATTERSON

The Traitor, by Lavr Divomlikoff, Heinemann, 1974, £2.50.

Fiction can sometimes bring us closer to the heart of truth than the documentation of facts. This novel says both the first and the last word about one of the most controversial aspects of church life in Eastern