

THE LITTLE CRITIC

EDITED BY LIN YUTANG

IT is dangerous now even to write travel sketches, or sing praises of nature and poultry. The danger lies in this: that you are bound to offend some people, if you honestly record your own impressions. I once honestly recorded my impressions of the beautiful Nanking ducks and the not so beautiful Chungshan Mausoleum, lamenting the fact that the present decade is certainly not a great period of Chinese architecture, and that we do not have an architectural genius great enough to be worthy of our deceased national leader. The editor of a southern English paper has taken me to task for such an unpatriotic statement. I assume that he expects me to say that the Chungshan Mausoleum is good enough for Dr. Sun Yat-sen. I wish I were a diplomat, and could shove all responsibility for honest opinion to "my distinguished friend and colleague, H. E. Ferdinando Venezuelo, the Minister from Portugal." As I have no such distinguished colleague, I can only rely on the opinion of the foremost experts, to convince the editor that I am in good company. E. Boerschmann, recognized as the foremost expert on Chinese architecture, writes in his article *Die chinesische Architektur* in the new German *Lexikon der Baukunst*, "*Vermischungen der europaischen und altorientalischen formen angestrebt, doch ansaetze misglueckt, wie das Grabmal des Dr. Sun Yat-sen.*" The Mausoleum as an example of failure! Either great minds think alike, or, what is more likely, the architectural mistakes of the Mausoleum, such as the lack of proportion, and want of either grace or power, are of such an elementary nature that even a layman like myself may safely trust his own intuitions. I am happy that I have not gone on record for saying that the Mausoleum is an architectural success, which the said editor wants me to do. His accusation is that I am thus unconsciously playing into the hands of the imperialist die-hards! . . .

It is useless to argue that, because the Mausoleum represents an effort to combine eastern and western artistic traditions, there is an excuse for its failure. There are excuses for vice, but for ugliness, none. One who cannot produce a thing of beauty should let beauty alone. It is true that architectural form is determined by the material of construction, and that modern architectural ideals require that the form should be directly and genuinely developed out of the nature of the material. It would seem that the failure to reproduce the classic sag of the Chinese roof and the consequent cramping effect are due to the use of stone or cement in place of wood. It is clear that

there is a problem to be solved here, but it is equally clear that the young designer has chosen to die without solving it.

I am inclined to think that the artistic flaws of the edifice are of a far simpler nature. In the first place, it cannot be denied that, when artistic genius is present, beautiful Chinese forms can be, and have already actually been, developed with stone and other material. One need only think of that marvel of Chinese architectural beauty and skill, the grand stone pailou at the entry to the Ming Tombs. There the little rows of roofs on the top of the pailou are made in a straight line, instead of a curve to fit in with the stone material used. That has not prevented the pailou from being, till this day, one of the masterpieces of Chinese architecture. In the second place, its lack of massiveness and strength cannot be attributed to either German influence or Chinese tradition. As I have insisted, the building is in the style of the new German school of reinforced concrete, *minus its suggestion of power, which should be its characteristic*. It has, therefore, not even tried to suit the form to the material. Nor need one doubt that Chinese architecture has also its forms giving massiveness and strength, as in the Peking city towers, or sublimity, as in the Temple of Heaven. In the third place, its utter lack of architectonic conception, giving the impression of an enormous rectangular white space with a disproportionately small top building, is an artistic sin of the first order. The long flight of steps is not brought into artistic and organic relationship with the top building. Even such a simple thing as the addition of two lower halls at the sides of the main hall would help to relieve its monotonous and mediocre effect. The Mausoleum isn't simple; it is just bare, rickety, undistinguished, and oppressing to the eye.

No, it is not technicalities that we have to deal with here. The Mausoleum is characteristic of our age, a sign and symbol of the utter lack of critical taste and sense of proportion in the transition between the old and the new. One needs only to think of the current Sun Yat-sen dollar, as bad, artistically considered, as a school drawing on the wall. Few Chinese statesmen are gifted with the noble features of a Sun Yat-sen, and yet, by looking at the dollar design, one would have thought that he had a lump on his back, and had paid only ten cents for his hair-cut. Discussions of technical points are futile, for even the characters on the design are vulgar calligraphy. (I am willing to let my reputation as a judge of handwriting stand or fall with this statement). Certainly China is not yet so far gone to the dogs that she cannot find better writers of *li-shu* than the fellow who wrote those few characters on the dollar. Compare, for contrast, the characters and the design on the Yuan Shih-kai dollar. Can one any longer doubt that it isn't a question of technicalities?

L. Y.