

SHOVELS FOR THE DYKES OF CHINA

A "Listener" Interview

AS guarded on Chinese Government policy as one would expect, the Senior Secretary of the Chinese Ministry of Economic Affairs to be, Dr. A. C. Hou, interviewed by *The Listener*, spoke freely on the mission which brought him last week to New Zealand.

"We need right away ten million tons of supplies—say £800,000,000 worth—to start rehabilitating China. Two-thirds we are determined somehow to raise ourselves. But for the other third we have to look to UNRRA. New Zealand can supply only a drop in the bucket, of course, but a particular drop that we cannot do without."

"To get that drop is why you are here. I take it," said *The Listener* representative. "Only I cannot see what it can be."

"It is two things," said Dr. Hou. "Tools and people. The tools are just ordinary farm and garden ones—I've ordered 170,000 shovels, for instance, and lots of hoes and light ploughs—but the people have to be experts. You may have noticed that one New Zealand doctor and two highly-skilled railwaymen have joined UNRRA in China."

"You want the doctors, I suppose, to stop epidemics, the tools to start up farming again, and the railways to carry your refugees back home."

Thirty Millions on the Move

"Well, actually, we'd be even more glad to find some way to stop our refugees from going home. The trouble is that about 30,000,000 of them started evacuating themselves the moment the war ended. Imagine them now on the roads—or where the roads used to be before we destroyed them in order to bog the mechanised Japanese down in the fields. They are swagging their way in families and droves, tramping barefoot and in rags through winter weather, begging food as they go (and not always getting it), and just spreading disease from one end of China to the other. We have never had enough doctors and those we have are rusty after eight years shut away from the world. Eight hundred foreign doctors are needed right away to give these men refresher courses or take charge in liberated cities and towns. Fortunately, we fall heir to very much of the U.S. Eastern Armies' medical supplies, but they are still using their doctors in occupying Japan or in demobbing. When New Zealand can spare us more doctors China will be very grateful indeed."

Transport Above Everything

"So health measures come first on your programme?"

"I would not say that, certain though epidemics are to spread. Transport is what China needs above everything else—because everything else depends on Transport. The roads and railways are left in Europe—they just have holes in them. But China's roads and railways have disappeared—destroyed first by our retreating armies, then by guerrillas bit by bit as the Japanese rebuilt them bit

by bit, and finally (in some cases) by the Japanese themselves when they found them useless except as scrap-iron. For the Japanese stripped China bare of metal for their foundries, even tools from the fields and door knobs from the houses. Until we can restore a skeleton of communications we can restore nothing else."

"Cannot you use the rivers?"

"We are using them. But the whole of free China had, when I left, only 17 ships fit to run to Chungking on the Yangtse. We have bought Liberty Ships—but need many more than we can get! And we are building ships—but can do it only slowly. Actually our rivers are at present more liability than asset."

"How is that?"

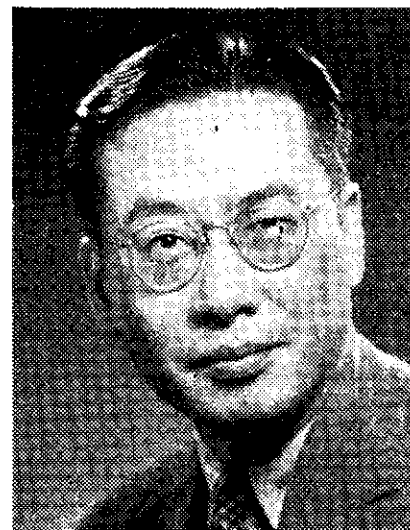
"Well, to begin with, the Yellow River to-day has no mouth. War operations and wartime neglect breached the dykes—you know how in places the bed was up to 40 feet higher than the surrounding country—and instead of flowing north to the sea has poured south into the interior of the country. In one place a huge lake stands—13,000 square miles of water where formerly were fertile farms. And then the water, flowing further, has backed up into other rivers, breaking their dykes

and forming more lakes. Our first job after controlling epidemics and after building railways and roads and buying waggons and lorries to run on them, is to restore the main river dykes. That is why we want your shovels—to do work equivalent to building a wall from here to Australia 20 feet high and 50 feet across. It will maintain our homeless millions (for we are determined to have no 'dole' in China) and it will make homes, too, for many millions of them."

"We Are Truly Grateful"

"But how will you feed and clothe these people meanwhile?"

"It can only be on imported food, I am afraid. Pre-war China imported two million tons every year, mainly rice and wheat. We are not asking more than this from UNRRA—in fact we have asked only a quarter of it so far. But obviously, if we need food from overseas when China was a going concern, we certainly cannot get on without it now that she is a wreck. As for clothes—well, if every third factory in the world worked on nothing but Chinese clothes for a whole year it would not reclothe China. All the same, lend us only some engineers and some key machinery and we'll build up our factories



Spencer Digby photograph
DR. A. C. HOU
Wants a drop for the bucket

again—the Japanese took 98 per cent. of them—and reclothe ourselves.

"For China is not asking for world charity. To support 400 million would break even the world bank, I guess. We just need the push off that will start transport and farming and industry all going again, and then we'll look after ourselves. For New Zealand's share in that push-off—what we've had already and what is to come—believe me we are truly grateful."

When Father Christmas Retires

AFTER 17 Christmases Auckland's best-known Santa Claus, a tall and thin and soft-voiced man, has retired. We called to see him at a department store the other day after he had given up his regal chair to his younger successor, whom he had been coaching in the art of Father Christmas-ing for the last few weeks.

"There's not much coaching in it really," he said. "The new man is sympathetic to children and has a love of children in his heart and with that the rest comes easy. He's got six children of his own, so he knows all about them. Of course I've got eight children and nine grandchildren, so I know even more."

The old one was thin, and the new one is fat. Our thought was answered.

"Oh, yes," said the Old Father Christmas, "they had to do a lot of dressmaking. Sixteen years ago, or rather 17 years ago now, I had a wonderful red gown, fur-trimmed, falling from the shoulders. But the modern style tunic and trousers came in years ago and we cut down the gown—for me, but not of course for him."

We went away upstairs with the Old Father Christmas, listening to his reminiscences.

"There are people in this town, well-known, very well-respected people, who are bringing their children to visit Santa to-day and they were coming to see me themselves 14, 15, 16 years ago when they were so high. In fact, the last few years I've had quite a few children of my original children being brought in to

see me. Now I can tell you of a case of one little boy, a regular little chap he was, who used to come to see me, year after year, even when he was at Grammar school and last year in he came one day to say Merry Christmas to me and what do you think? He had just been sitting his university examinations. What do you think of that? He's just the same, I don't even know his name, but he never forgets me. Very touching. Others like that too—girls who would say to me each year 'Well, I won't be coming next year, I'm getting too old,' but back they'd come and now they're bringing their children."

It's a Strenuous Business

"So you're missing it?"

"Yes I am. I'm missing it more than I thought I would. But I couldn't go on indefinitely. Forty years ago I came to New Zealand with 18 months to live and although I'm still going I'm not going very strong. I found each year that when it came to Christmas Eve I was just a rag, no use for anything. It's a strenuous business being Father Christmas. You can't exactly call it acting, because you enjoy talking to the children, and it is easy to be so friendly with them; but when you have to smile all day and say something new to each child, it does become a strain. Oh I liked it more than you can imagine, but I just had to give it up and that was that."

Tricks of the Trade

We asked about the tricks of the trade and were told that there were only two: not to let the parents in for too much and not to disillusion the children about Santa Claus.

"They'll ask for an aeroplane or some such expensive toy and we have to take a sly look to see if Mummy nods or shakes her head and then we answer accordingly. I think it's a shame to spoil their fun—goodness knows there are enough disillusionments and sadness in life. Let the little things enjoy their fairyland while they can. If they told me 'a boy at school said there was no Santa' I would say 'but there is! You're looking at me and touching me. Of course there is!' It used to break my heart in the last few years when they used to tell me 'I want my Daddy home for Christmas.' The war years were sad. But things will be better again now we hope."

"BACK IN TEN MINUTES. SANTA."

This was printed in red on a big placard on the noble throne of the new Father Christmas, who had dashed out back for a quick cup of tea while there was no queue. He doesn't get many chances during the hours of his attendance from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.

He came back and sat in his chair, stroking the long white beard that was made by a famous firm of London wig-makers 17 years ago. His tunic and trousers were of red flannel with white fur edging and his wonderful boots were scarlet and lined with lambswool.

The first in the queue was a very small, very dark little boy, perhaps four, perhaps less; one word from Father Christmas and he set up a howl that made all the other children giggle. It was only after three or four bolder

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