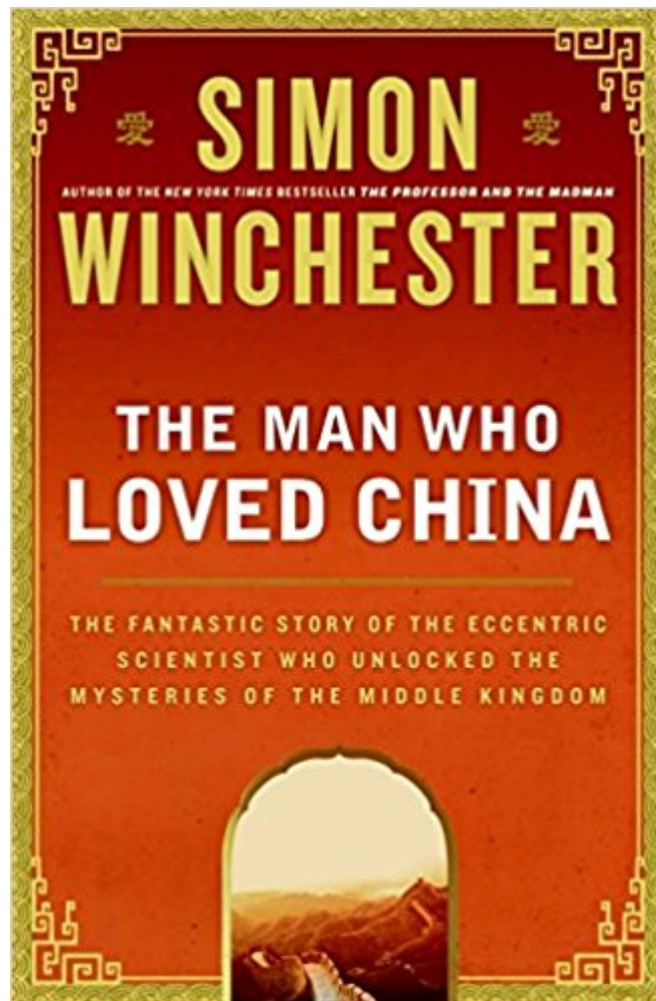


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The Man Who Loved China: The Fantastic Story Of The Eccentric Scientist Who Unlocked The Mysteries Of The Middle Kingdom



Synopsis

In sumptuous and illuminating detail, Simon Winchester, the bestselling author of *The Professor and the Madman* ("Elegant and scrupulous"â*New York Times Book Review*) and *Krakatoa* ("A mesmerizing page-turner"â*Time*) brings to life the extraordinary story of Joseph Needham, the brilliant Cambridge scientist who unlocked the most closely held secrets of China, long the world's most technologically advanced country. No cloistered don, this tall, married Englishman was a freethinking intellectual, who practiced nudism and was devoted to a quirky brand of folk dancing. In 1937, while working as a biochemist at Cambridge University, he instantly fell in love with a visiting Chinese student, with whom he began a lifelong affair. He soon became fascinated with China, and his mistress swiftly persuaded the ever-enthusiastic Needham to travel to her home country, where he embarked on a series of extraordinary expeditions to the farthest frontiers of this ancient empire. He searched everywhere for evidence to bolster his conviction that the Chinese were responsible for hundreds of mankind's most familiar innovationsâincluding printing, the compass, explosives, suspension bridges, even toilet paperâoften centuries before the rest of the world. His thrilling and dangerous journeys, vividly recreated by Winchester, took him across war-torn China to far-flung outposts, consolidating his deep admiration for the Chinese people. After the war, Needham was determined to tell the world what he had discovered, and began writing his majestic *Science and Civilisation in China*, describing the country's long and astonishing history of invention and technology. By the time he died, he had produced, essentially single-handedly, seventeen immense volumes, marking him as the greatest one-man encyclopedist ever. Both epic and intimate, *The Man Who Loved China* tells the sweeping story of China through Needham's remarkable life. Here is an unforgettable tale of what makes men, nations, and, indeed, mankind itself greatârelated by one of the world's inimitable storytellers.

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Customer Reviews

Simon Winchester certainly has the creative power to immortalize anyone or thing he writes about, and so it is with the life of Joseph Needham (1900-1995), a Cambridge scholar polymath. Needham is probably obscure to most people, but among his Don peers he is a legendary as the writer of a massive encyclopedia on Chinese science and civilization designed to answer that great question: Why was China the mother lode of scientific and cultural innovation for so long, and why did it come to a stop by the 15th century - why didn't the Industrial revolution happen in China? At one point China was making 15 great innovations per century (paper, compass, stirrup, etc..), according to Needham, but then the country stagnated and for the last 500 years or so had a reputation for backwardness and poverty. Similar to Jared Diamond's "Yali Question" (why did Europe have "cargo" and Yali didn't?), Needham set out to find answers by cataloging the history of Chinese innovation. He created a massive multi-volume encyclopedia of such prodigious learning, value and length it has been compared with James Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary, or Sidney Lee and the Dictionary of National Biography. I've now read all four of Winchester's biographies (The Professor and the Madman (1998), The Map That Changed the World (2001),

This is a most timely biography, its publication coinciding with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and a disastrous major earthquake, which have together turned the eyes of the world's media onto the "Middle Kingdom", as the Chinese have confidently called their country for 5,000 years, believing throughout this time that it is indeed the centre of the world. It now seems that China's (and Needham's) time in the spotlight has come at last. I remember Joseph Needham as the Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University when I matriculated there as a young man in 1975, though he retired from the Mastership one year later. The Needham Research Institute at Cambridge for the study of East Asian history, science and technology preserves his name, while in China he is known as Li Yue-se, the name given to him by the woman who later became his second wife at the outset of his Chinese language studies "[i]n order to commingle her pupil's identity with his linguistic passion, and thus more effectively bind him to the wheel" (p. 40). The descriptions I heard as an undergraduate of Needham as a "Marxist Catholic" [sic.] and "a great Chinese scholar" barely do justice to the man. Though I never remember having a conversation with the Great Man

and was quite in awe of him, I often saw his slightly stooping figure - crowned somewhat mysteriously by a beret - walking in the old courts of the College. (He also sent me a telegram which I remember verbatim and treasure to this day: "Elected Scholarship Caius College. Congratulations Needham Master.") Needham was - as Winchester says - a sociable man and invited us freshmen (including Alastair Campbell, later spin-doctor to Tony Blair) to meet him once in the Master's Lodge.

I have decided to elevate Joseph Needham to the ranks of my primary heroes. That means he joins Vinegar Joe Stilwell (the American General who tried to teach Chiang Kai Shek how to run an army so that he might win a war; he failed, as you probably know) and Alfred Russell Wallace (the man who found that evolution works via natural selection, but had a marketing disadvantage to his colleague Charles Darwin; the theory is called Darwinism, not Wallacism, as you might know). Needham wrote close to 20000 pages on the history of Chinese science and civilization, he was a most amazing allround scientist. The 'book', or should we call it a library, is unsurpassed in his subject - but have you ever heard of it? I mean you, the non-expert on China. Let me know. I suspect very few people outside an inner circle ever heard of it. Winchester has published quite a few books on diverse subjects. I mainly like his travel books: first a walk through South Korea, then a ship ride up the Yangzi. Given that he is an experienced travel writer, I am a bit puzzled by some of his geographical gaffes: flying over the hump from India to Kunming, the connection from British India to National China during WW2, W. claims the plane had to cross glaciers. Well, not likely. Better look it up on a map. Glacial melting can't have progressed that much since then. Or: Needham's first stop in China is Kunming, where he allegedly watches the sun set over the distant Tibetan hills on his first evening after arriving. Odd in view of the hundreds km distance from Kunming to Tibet and the fact that the city has its own hills to the West.

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