## LV. The Sinologue

W. Somerset Maugham

He is a tall man, rather stout, flabby as though he does not take enough exercise, with a red, clean-shaven, broad face and grey hair. He talks very quickly, in a nervous manner, with a voice not quite big enough for his body. He lives in a temple just outside the city gate, inhabiting the guest chambers, and three Buddhist priests, with a tiny acolyte, tend the temple and conduct the rites. There is a little Chinese furniture in the rooms and a vast number of books, but no comfort. It is cold and the study in which we sit is insufficiently warmed by a petroleum stove.

He knows more Chinese than any man in China. He has been working for ten years on a dictionary which will supersede that of a noted scholar whom for a quarter of a century he has personally disliked. He is thus benefiting sinological studies and satisfying a private grudge. He has all the manner of a don and you feel that eventually he will be professor of Chinese at the University of Oxford and then at last exactly in his place. He is a man of wider culture than most sinologues, who may know Chinese, and this you must take on  trust, but who, it is lamentably obvious, know nothing else; and his conversation upon Chinese thought and literature has in consequence a fullness and a variety which you do not often find among students of the language. Because he has immersed himself in his particular pursuits and has cared nothing for racing and shooting the Europeans think him queer. They look upon him with the suspicion and awe with which human beings always regard those who do not share their tastes. They suggest that he is not quite sane and some accuse him of smoking opium. It is the charge which is always brought against the white man who has sought to familiarise himself with the civilisation in which he is to pass the greater part of his career. You have only to spend a little while in that apartment bare of the most common luxury to know that this is a man who leads a life wholly of the spirit.

But it is a specialised life. Art and beauty seem not to touch him, and as I listen to him talk so sympathetically of the Chinese poets I cannot help asking myself if the best things have not after all slipped through his fingers. Here is a man who has touched reality only through the printed page. The tragic splendour of the lotus moves him only when its loveliness is enshrined in the verse of Li Po and the laughter of demure Chinese girls stirs his blood but in the perfection of an exquisitely chiselled quatrain.