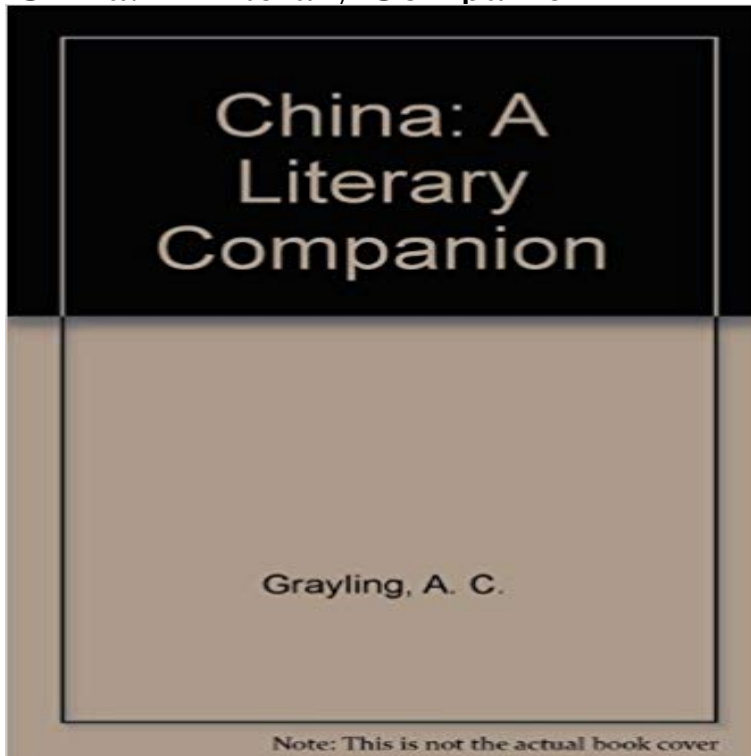


China: A Literary Companion



If China had not been there, wrote Lord Dunsany, this land of dragons, peachtrees, peonies and plum blossoms, with its ages and ages of culture, slowly storing its dreams in green jade, is just the land that poets would have invented. China has indeed been invented many times, in the astonishment of visitors and the dreams of poets; but because of its historical and geographical vastness it accommodates all the inventions as truths. For centuries the elite of Chinas civil service was a class of scholar-gentlemen who gained preferment through education in Chinas literary classics. In consequence it has one of the worlds richest literatures. Its dramatic landscapes and populous cosmopolitan cities invited the wonderment of visitors as various as Marco Polo, Lord Macartney and Noel Coward; but some of the sharpest as well as the most lyrical observations come from the calligraphy brushes of its own writers.;In this book a gallimaufry of missionaries, travellers, exiles, literary tourists and bibulous native poets offers a variety of perspectives on what the eighth-century poet-painter Wang Wei called the magical land.We see rickshaw coolies fighting over Harold Acton, William Empson absentmindedly fleeing an invading army, the drunken poet Li Bo fishing for the moon in a pond, Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden at an ambassadors garden party trying to ignore the most undiplomatic sounds of approaching gunfire, Mao Zedong up a tree threatening suicide, and Bo Ya smashing his legendary zither because his only discriminating listener has died.

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