"A very tough egg is Dr. Needham—large, muscular, a chain smoker, with a scalding brilliant tongue and no time for fools," a London newspaper columnist wrote in 1946. After two years in China, as head of the Sino-British Scientific Cooperation Office, Needham, a professor of biochemistry at Cambridge University, could solve just about any riddle—"about sugar beet and foxglove seeds, yeast cultures and wooden shoes for Chinese airmen."

Needham was already launched on his master work, *Science and Civilisation in China*, which ran to eighteen volumes when he died in 1995—and is considered the greatest treatise on China ever written by a westerner.

In *The Man Who Loved China*, Simon Winchester, a masterful storyteller, follows Needham on some eleven expeditions across 30,000 miles of rugged, war-torn terrain in a "damp, damnable" Chevrolet truck, as he searches for the Chinese origin of almost everything, from the abacus to the zoetrope.

The author of nineteen books, including *The Professor and the Madman*, an account of the men behind the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Winchester specializes in eccentric, obsessive geniuses. With Joseph Needham, he's found another splendid specimen. Named a Fellow of the Royal Society after the publication of *Chemical Embryology*, Needham was fluent in half a dozen languages, an avid "gymnosophist" (nudist) and "morris dancer," who sped around Cambridge in an Armstrong-Siddeley Special touring car. Affiliated with the left wing of the British Labor Party, he wrote monographs about socialism under the pseudonym Henry Holorensshaw. His colleagues thought he might become the Erasmus of the twentieth century.
Not "hobbled by sexual fidelity" in his marriage, Needham began an affair in 1937 with Lu Gwei-djen, a biochemist from Nanjing. She taught him Mandarin Chinese and (an almost blind) reverence for Chinese culture.

Needham's experiences in China, bringing laboratory equipment and journals to scientific colleagues and gathering materials for his research, were, alas, not all that dramatic. And the writing of *Science and Civilisation in China* was long and laborious. So Winchester peppers the narrative with delicious digressions. Giving new meaning to the phrase Chinese characters, he profiles, among others, Rewi Alley, the poet, pederast, propagandist, and progenitor of the "small is beautiful" movement, who gave the world the phrase "gung ho"; and Marc Aurel Stein, the English archeologist, who plundered the Mogao caves of twenty-four wagon loads of scrolls and artifacts, as he sought to learn how the Buddha came to China.

Although one of his Chinese names, Sheng Rongzhi, means “the master who is victorious over confusion,” Needham never supplied a satisfactory answer to one of the great mysteries of history: If the Chinese were once "so endlessly inquisitive, inventive, and creative," why did they become so poor and scientifically backward? Nor does Winchester have all that much to say about "the Needham question." But it doesn't really matter. After all, as *The Man Who Loved China* demonstrates, it's all about passion, purpose, and the joys of the journey.

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