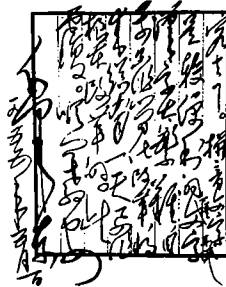


laborers or factory owners, rewrite their lives, rejecting bits of the past and present, literally "making a living." Whether this inventiveness makes them liars or creators appears irrelevant to Green. What matters is that they keep going. Green himself led a quiet, relatively uneventful life. (Born in Birmingham, he was educated at Oxford and returned to the family engineering firm where he worked until his death.) Green has become a "writer's writer," admired for his subtle characterization and spare style by such fellow craftsmen as V. S. Pritchett, John Updike, and Eudora Welty. North offers an excellent introduction to the uninitiated.

**THE CHINESE
LANGUAGE:**
Fact and Fantasy
by John DeFrancis
Univ. of Hawaii, 1984
330 pp. \$20



Everybody "knows" things about the Chinese language that are not strictly true: It is the oldest written language in the world; it has ideographic, not phonetic, characters; it is one of the most difficult languages for native speakers of English to learn. DeFrancis, a professor of Chinese at the University of Hawaii, clarifies matters. Sumerian, he relates, was actually written a millennium and a half before Chinese, though among scripts still in use today, Chinese is the oldest. Chinese characters are phonetic, although certain ones were originally pictographs; in fact, as DeFrancis explains, the notion of a strictly ideographic script is a linguistic myth. Also only half true is the much-vaunted difficulty of learning the language: Studies reveal that spoken Chinese is only five percent more difficult than French for the average English speaker to learn. *Written* Chinese is about five times as hard to master as written French. But what does it mean "to speak Chinese"? Of the one billion natives who do, roughly two-thirds speak Mandarin and are incomprehensible (except in writing) to the other third who speak Cantonese, Hakka, and Min. To the amateur linguist, DeFrancis offers a wealth of lore on everything from the evolution of Chinese characters to the many (and as yet unsuccessful) 20th-century attempts at speech and writing reform.