

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT AUDIENCE HALL—SOME OFFICIAL CUSTOMS

WHEN His Majesty the Emperor reigned alone, he was in the habit of holding his Audiences as early as three o'clock A.M. It is said, however, that this custom was owing as much to his personal shyness as to his love of early rising, for at these Audiences he would allow but two candles on the Throne-table in front of him, and the Great Hall was lighted elsewhere only by the beautiful Chinese lanterns, which shine with but a dim brilliancy and are not very effective as lights. Thus his face could not be seen if an official should so forget the Proprieties as to raise his eyes to the Imperial Person.

Their Majesties' Audiences are held in the Great Audience Hall, a detached building apart and quite distinct from all the other buildings of the Palace inclosure. The inscription over its great doors points out that it is the "Hall where Industry is to be applied to State Affairs." In all the Palaces the Audience Hall is nearest the outside walls and entrances, so that the officials who are privileged to have Audiences must only pass through the outer courts to reach the hall—Their Majesties' Palaces with their private apartments

The Great Audience Hall

being at some distance beyond. At the Winter Palace, where there are so many walls within walls, each of Their Majesties' Palaces is surrounded with walls, and the Audience Hall is also in a walled-in inclosure near one of the Great Gates, but at the Summer Palace there are no walls except the exterior ones!

The interior of the Audience Hall, at the Summer Palace, is not by any means bare or austere. It is furnished in the same style as the Throne-rooms, with splendid ornaments, curios, tea-tables and chairs, and, curious anachronism, there are here three pianos! The walls are hung with ornamental scrolls, as well as with those bearing some gigantic character traced by an Emperor's hand or some condensed bit of philosophy of the Sages. One of these scrolls has an admonition to the Emperor to remember that "he is responsible to Heaven for the happiness and prosperity of his people."

There is a great dais in the center of the hall, on which stands the Throne, with its table, behind which is the three-, five-, or seven-leaved screen. The ancient dais was lower than those now used, and the antique Throne, with its capacious size and cushions, was more like a lounge than the modern Throne. This seems to indicate that the administration of justice by the Emperor was in ancient times less formal and more patriarchal than to-day. In former times the Emperor could lounge upon his Throne at his ease when seeing his Ministers, and they could approach nearer the Sacred Person, as the dais was not so large nor so high as that in use to-day.

Heads of departments and Princes with honorary

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official positions have Audiences on certain days of the month, to report upon affairs of their Boards or to pay their respects to His Majesty. Every day Their Majesties hold Audience and see the Prime Minister and Grand Secretary, and there are frequent meetings of the Grand Council. The Prime Minister, Prince Ching, has the last Audience of the day, and business reported on during the other Audiences is then discussed.

All telegrams and despatches go to their respective Boards, and are, except in cases of extreme gravity, only reported to Their Majesties at the Audiences. After eleven all State business is supposed to be finished by Their Majesties. They are then free from State worries and cares until the following day. During the times of the rebellion in the Province of Kwang-Si, when the Russian evacuation of Manchuria was expected, and at the time of outbreak of hostilities in Manchuria (the three grave events occurring during my stay in the Palace), telegrams and despatches were constantly being sent to Her Majesty out of Audience hours. They were brought to her Throne-room, and sometimes even during her walks in the gardens they would be handed her. These despatches were sent over to the Palace from the Wai-Wu-Pu on their arrival. Of course, it was by Her Majesty's express command that her privacy was thus infringed upon. No official would otherwise have dared transgress the prescribed rules. The despatches were received at the entrance of the Palace by the eunuch whose province it was. He placed them in the yellow-covered, silken-lined box, in which they were presented to Her Majesty on bended knees.

Some Official Customs

In front of the Throne dais, during the hours of Audience, there are five cushions placed on the floor for the members of the Grand Council to kneel upon when they are memorializing Their Majesties. The Prime Minister's cushion is nearest the Throne. A cushion to kneel upon is a privilege only granted members of the Grand Council. Any other official, when making communications to Their Majesties, must kneel upon the bare marble floor, and must kneel beyond the space occupied by these five cushions. He is thus placed at a disadvantage. The distance at which he is from Their Majesties may prevent his hearing some of their words, especially the Emperor's, whose voice is very low and without any carrying quality. The official may overcome this difficulty and shorten the distance by paying the eunuch who conducts him to the Audience Hall, to remove some of the cushions, so that he may kneel nearer the dais. The Prime Minister's and Grand Secretary's cushions may on no condition be removed, but the other three are subject to the will of the introducing eunuch. If this latter be sufficiently paid, and there is a fixed price for each cushion, he will remove the three of the lower members of the Cabinet.

When the official who has been granted an Audience is conducted to the Audience Hall by the eunuch appointed for the purpose, the latter throws open the great doors, falls upon his knees at the threshold, and announces the name and position of the official, gives the hour and minute of his arrival at the Palace, and, before he rises, he has deftly removed the cushions for which he has received the

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required sum. After his name has been announced, the official enters and kneels as near the dais as is consistent with his rank and the sum paid the eunuch. When the eunuch has introduced the official, he turns from the door and must run away as fast as he can. Officials and eunuchs stationed at some distance watch his departure. Should he linger or transgress this law, capital punishment is the result. This is to avoid eavesdropping and the possible transmission of State secrets.

When the official granted an Audience hears the last echo of the steps of the departing eunuch, he falls upon his knees and begins the relation of his business. Their Majesties question him, if necessary, to elicit further explanations. When the Audience is finished, the official rises and walks out. The Chinese never back out of the Presence, and it is not considered a breach of etiquette to turn their backs upon Royalty!

The officials who are obliged to go often to Audiences resort to an amusing subterfuge to protect their knees from the marble floor. They strap heavily wadded cushions around their knees before they go in, and they can thus kneel in comfort. The long Chinese gown worn by the men, of course, hides these knee cushions.

His Majesty assumed the cares of State at an early age, when he was still filled with boyish spirit. Many of the heads of departments are old men, and some of them doubtless most tiresome in reiterating facts and dwelling upon details. When the young Emperor first took over the direction of affairs and held his Audiences alone, he would get very impatient at



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hearing several of these old men go over tiresome details. As it is not "according to the laws of propriety" for the official to raise his eyes to the Sacred Person, while the old man rambled on, with prosy detail, the young Emperor would slip off the Throne and quietly descend from the dais, and when the poor official raised his eyes to make his obeisance to the Emperor, he would see only the vacant Throne! His Majesty had been in the rear of the hall behind the screen for perhaps five minutes smoking a cigarette or otherwise diverting himself!

I noticed a curious fact as to the quality of the sacredness of the persons of Their Celestial Majesties. This sacredness seems to belong to them as rulers and not as individuals. In the Audience Hall when administering justice, they are not approached nor addressed, except upon bended knee. In the Palace, in their own privacy, when they give an order or any command touching upon official affairs, this order is received by the attendant, be he courtier, high official or great prince, on his knees. When any official communication is made to Their Majesties, in private or elsewhere, it is made kneeling, but when Their Majesties are in their private capacity and spoken to on ordinary affairs, they are addressed almost familiarly, and the courtier or simple attendant stands while speaking to them. If, however, in the midst of a familiar conversation an order is given, the attendant immediately drops upon his knees to receive it.

The kow-tow (pronounced ker-toe and meaning literally to bow the head) is used as a form of thanks, and is not a manner of greeting. The actors kow-

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tow to Their Majesties at the beginning and end of each performance at the Theater, first to thank for the honor they are to receive in being allowed to act before them, and at the end to thank for the privilege granted. The officials "bow the head" to thank for an Audience or any favor or gift they have received or are to receive from Their Majesties. The kow-tow is not only made by people at the Palace and at Imperial Audiences: it is sometimes used by equals to each other as a proper manner of thanking for some great favor. To make the kow-tow, the person kneels three times and each time bows his head three times, touching the ground with it. The kow-tow could not be made by a foreigner without looking most awkward and appearing most servile, but the Chinese do it with dignity, and it is neither ungraceful nor degrading-looking. It is a time-honored manner of giving thanks, a Chinese tradition surviving from a time when the courtiers were perhaps like slaves, but at present it does not imply any slave-like inferiority on the part of him who performs it.