

CHAPTER XXVI

SOME SOCIAL CUSTOMS—MANCHU AND CHINESE

I MET the wives and families of all the Princes, nobles, and high Manchu officials in Peking, for they came to the Court at stated intervals, besides on many special occasions, when they were invited by Her Majesty. The most frequent of these visitors to the Palace were Prince Ching's wives and daughters, the wives of the Emperor's brothers, his father's secondary wives and their daughters, and the sisters of the young Empress, one of whom is the clever Princess Schun. The widow of the Grand Secretary Yung Lu, who lost, in one year, her husband and a promising son, and who was nearly crazed by grief, also came often. She was not very brilliant, nor the kind of woman to appeal to Her Majesty; but her grief seemed to touch the Empress Dowager, and she received special marks of favor when in the Palace, and came and went as she willed. A step-daughter, whom she had herself brought up through a very delicate childhood, was the wife of the Emperor's brother, Prince C'hun. Should they have a son he will probably be the next heir to the Throne.

On their marriage the brides of nobles of a certain rank go to the Palace to be presented to the Empress

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Dowager. This ceremony corresponds to the presentation, on their marriage, of ladies at the English Court. These brides are always magnificently dressed in embroidered gowns of rich colors, and wear, for the first time, the Court coiffure of the married ladies, the magnificent golden filigree, jeweled construction, which I have already described, and for this occasion they wear a profusion of jewels. The Manchu ladies use much more discretion in wearing jewels than the Chinese ladies. The latter will sometimes wear as many as fifteen bracelets on each arm, and the number of jewels they put in their coiffure seems to be limited only by the space they have at their disposal.

The brides come to the Palace in red satin bridal chairs, accompanied by their husband's mother and his married sisters, if he has any; if not, by his nearest women relations. On their arrival in the Precincts they first go to the Throne-room and make their bows and prostrations before the Empress Dowager, to thank her for the gifts she has sent. Sometimes Her Majesty would speak to them at some length, seeming to give them advice. After making their obeisances to her, they then make their salutations to the young Empress. They spend the day at the Palace, take luncheon with the young Empress and Princesses, and leave about three o'clock. These brides were generally very young girls, though sometimes I was surprised to see that they had well passed the first bloom of youth, for I had thought that all Oriental women were married very young. The young Empress was always charming to the brides, and seemed to watch over their pleasure, and try to make them enjoy this

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rather trying day, when they were the observed of all observers. Among these brides, the winter I was in Peking, was the wife of the Emperor's youngest brother, a charming young girl with sweet manners, far more attractive in every way than Yung Lu's daughter, the wife of Prince C'hun.

The Chinese look upon a daughter, at her birth, as a misfortune, one of the ills that must be endured, and while loving her individually, a daughter is not welcomed into the family nor allowed the privileges of a son. It is, however, quite different with the Manchus. A daughter not being able to sacrifice to the ancestors, even Manchus prefer a son; but a daughter is a welcome member of the family, and she has a distinct and independent position of her own. One of the Chinese ministers to Washington once told me that the only unmarried woman in the world whose position is analogous to that of the "American Girl," in her own family, is the Manchu girl.

As long as the Manchu girl remains unmarried, she is a veritable power in the household. She ranks as high as her brother, and always takes precedence of her brother's wife, even if that wife be double her age and married before she was born. She precedes her mother even, as she is of the Blood and her mother of "another family." Not only has she these social privileges, but she has well-defined legal rights. Her father cannot make a disposition of his property without his eldest daughter's consent. She can go into her brother's house, dismiss his servants, and generally direct his affairs. Her word has more weight as to the bringing up of her brother's children than

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his wife's, as she is a sister, a born relation, and the wife is only an acquired relation. When she marries, however, she becomes a member of the family into which she marries; but even then, such is the ascendancy of the girl in the Manchu family, even after her marriage into another family, she often goes on dictating to her brother's family and her own as before, if she does not find her own household duties and her own family sufficient occupation to keep her from doing so. Such is the force of consanguinity among the Manchus, and the position of the daughter in the family.

The unmarried Manchu girl has not only this liberty in her family; but she has more liberty in the outside world than any other Oriental woman.

They are not so restricted in their social intercourse as any other Oriental women, and while they are not so literary as the Chinese, they have more social qualities and are brighter conversationalists, being both witty and gay.

They are not forced to marry against their inclinations and some remain single to the end of their days, or marry late in life if they so desire. These unmarried ladies are not only looked up to by their own families, but they are not regarded as being objects of commiseration by the world at large. On the contrary, they are rewarded with triumphal arches and splendid monuments if they have passed a long and exemplary life of maidenhood. Although the brides that came into the Palace were generally young, one who came to make her bow to the Empress Dowager, while I was there, was a lady of forty-two summers.

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She had brought up two or three families of brothers' children and directed their households; but she finally succumbed to the charms of a wealthy official, who had lost his wife two years before and who had a number of children on which she could continue to practise her theories as to their bringing up. Had she held out longer and died a maiden, she might have had an arch built to her memory after death and gone down to posterity.

Only ladies, young girls and boys under seventeen were ever guests of the Empress Dowager in her Palace. The Manchu nobles and high officials were invited on certain days to the Theater, but there was always the high intervening screen between them and Her Majesty's and the Ladies' loges. The Princes and nobles who have official positions, see the Empress Dowager in the Audience Hall, and she is now over sixty. She has more liberty than before, but generally their Audiences are with the Emperor alone, and they never come into the Ladies' Precincts. At the performance of the European circus in the Palace grounds I saw, for the first time, nearly all the Princes and Manchu officials.

The Manchus are a taller race than the Chinese and more athletic-looking. They are fond of exercise, indulge in archery, riding, etc., and do not look down upon a military career, as do the Chinese. It is said that polo playing, which the English got from India, originated among the Tartars, and that it is still played in Manchuria. I never saw polo played by the Manchus, but I have seen some daring riding done by the young nobles that would seem to show they could,

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play polo if they would. The Manchu nobles have an inherited military rank, and they also receive military advancement for proficiency in archery and riding. The warlike spirit that prompted the Manchus and their progenitors, the Nu-Chih Tartars, who not only conquered China, but, as "the Huns," almost overran Europe itself, is no longer so militant as it was. The modern Manchu is becoming almost as peace-loving as the Chinese themselves, but there are still qualities which show their descent from a race of warriors.

They wear the ordinary Chinese costume, and though it is said "the shaven head and wearing of the queue" were instituted as marks of degradation for the Chinese when they were conquered by the Manchus, the Emperor himself and all the Manchu nobles shave their heads and wear the queue! They wear satin boots with white kid soles. Their hats, in summer of finely woven straw, and of fur in winter, have the crown covered with a tassel of red silk, surmounted by the jeweled button denoting their ranks. From this button stands out, almost at right angles, a jade-mounted aigret, mixed with the peafowl feathers, if they have attained that rank. In winter, they wear splendid sable short coats. Except these sable topcoats, fur is never worn on the outside of a garment in China, but is used only as a lining.

When I saw the Manchu nobles at the circus at the Summer Palace, they wore the splendid summer Court costume, embroidered in the double dragon, reaching below the knee. They were tightly belted in around the waist, and very full and ample across the shoulders, giving the men the appearance, at least, of broad shoul-

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ders, and enhancing their already fine figures. One could see that the Emperor was the "glass of fashion and mold of form" of the young nobles; for they all aimed, as much as possible, at his slenderness of figure and even imitated his carriage. The young dandies, however, wore a much greater profusion of ornaments than His Majesty ever indulged in. The belt buckle, the handsomest ornament worn, was of carved jade, ruby quartz, or of beautifully chased gold set with precious stones. They were then wearing a profusion of ornaments dangling from their belts—embroidered cases for fans, chop-sticks and knives, and many other ornaments besides the watch, an indispensable adjunct to every Chinese gentleman's costume. This is worn hanging from the belt in a handsome, embroidered case with an open front, so that the elaborate case, generally studded with jewels, beautifully enameled, or curiously incised, could be seen. This case had a sort of fob attachment made of silken cord, woven into quaint designs and finished generally with a wonderfully carved piece of jade, ruby quartz, or some other curious stone.

Manchu ladies wear their gowns long and loose, hanging from the shoulders, and never show the line of the waist, nor the outline of the figure; but the men belt in their gowns tightly, and are very proud of a small waist.

Among the social customs in China, which obtain also among the Manchus, is "concubinage." But it exists in such a form that in its actual state, it might more properly be called "plurality of wives." The concubine, or secondary wife, as I will call her, is

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taken from the bosom of her family, and her position in her husband's family is considered as secure as that of the first wife. Though the first wife only has a legal standing, custom gives the secondary wife equal rights, and she is no more likely to be put aside than the first wife. There are, I suppose, men in China who put away a secondary wife, if they are wealthy enough to have taken one or several, but they would be socially and generally ostracized.

The man marries in China as soon as he reaches manhood. Some young girl who is of the same social standing and has the requisite qualities for his wife is chosen for him by his parents. This is the legitimate wife. She is the first and remains first always, taking precedence of any and all others that may be chosen. The secondary wife is often of the same class as the first wife. She is generally chosen by the man himself, and is taken from some good family who may be poor, and she is an honest young girl.

She is received, on her entrance into the household, by the wife and the man's mother, if she be alive, and her position in the family is assigned to her. While she must pay court and due respect to the first wife, she has her own servants and her own rights, and leads her own independent life. The first wife has entire authority, in certain matters, over the secondary ones, but they generally live amicably together. As the first wife is married several years before any second wife is taken, and as she is also generally their superior in age, this entitles her to their respect, aside from her legal standing and her position as first in the household. The secondary wives stand in

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the presence of the first wife until she asks them to sit. Should they have any children, the latter call the first wife "mother," and though the mother has her part in bringing up the child, it calls her, if she be a secondary wife, by her first name, and, in important matters, her authority over the child must give way to that of the first wife. But the first wife rarely abuses her authority over the children any more than over the other wives, and does not interfere except for, what she thinks is, the child's good.

In theory, according to our ideas, and with American or European women, this would be a sad state of affairs, but practically, as it exists in China and with Chinese women, it seems to work well. The arrangement of the houses in China is also well adapted for this kind of life. There are a number of courts surrounded by pavilions, each court and its pavilions forming a unit—a separate dwelling-place—this unit being a part of a great whole.

The wives live in harmony together, and seem like a family of sisters. The first wife apparently takes pride in the good conduct and handsome appearance of the others, and there seems to be very little jealousy among them.

If this be the position of the secondary wife in the families of the gentry and nobility, one may imagine how much more exalted it is in the Imperial family and how the secondary wife of an Emperor would be considered. To have their daughter chosen as the secondary wife of an Emperor is looked upon as an honor in the highest Manchu families. Of course,

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they would prefer to have her the first wife, for she has more power, but none of them would demur at an alliance of the secondary kind for their daughter, for she may thus become the mother of an Emperor, and she does become, by this marriage, a member of the Imperial family, and is treated as such. She ranks higher than any of the Princesses or Ladies of the Court, and takes precedence of all except the first wife, or a secondary wife, of the Emperor, who may have been married before she was. Her place is at the side of the first wife, the Empress. In the Palace she is called by the same title as the first wife, a Manchu word meaning "Mistress." She cannot wear the Imperial yellow, it is true, but she does wear the Imperial orange, which no other Lady at Court can wear.

These secondary wives are not taken for some physical quality from among the masses; they are not in the Palace as the result of a caprice of the Emperor. They are from the highest families in the land. They are generally chosen by the Emperor's mother, if she be alive, with as much care as the first wife, and her position is inferior, only from an official standpoint, to that of the Empress. She may even become Empress herself on the death of the first wife and those who precede her. The Emperor of China has no "harem," but he may have as many wives as he wishes. His wives never live together in the promiscuity of a harem, where all individuality is lost. Each wife has her own establishment and her own position, and is not dependent on her physical charms for her maintenance in that position, any more than is the first wife. Should she be the mother of children, she may advance

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beyond the others who have none, excepting always the first wife; and even should she have no children, she has always her separate establishment and is considered a member of the family. The Emperor Kwang-Hsu has two wives, both designated by the same title in the Palace. In this account of my experiences I only allude to the first wife, because it would be confusing to speak of two Empresses where there is also an Empress Dowager, and also because the first wife, in this instance, is so much the stronger character and the more interesting personality.