

CHAPTER XXIX

RELIGIOUS RITES IN CHINA

THERE are three great religions in China—Buddhism, Taoism, and the worship of Nature. The worship of Nature, in which is embodied their highest idea of an Invisible Deity, is the purest form of religion in China. Its Temples are situated in a magnificent Park in the Chinese City of Peking. The Temple of Heaven, the most imposing of the group, spherical and triple-domed, rears its proud height here and is visible from afar. Its triple dome tiled, without, in the sacred green of Nature and vaulted within in Heaven's own blue, is surrounded by groves of century-old arbor-vitæ. In other parts of the great Park are the scarcely less splendid Temples to the Earth, to the Sun and Moon and to Agriculture, and grandest, most unique of these Temples, is that to the Invisible Deity. Its foundations are the Earth, its walls are limitless Ether, its dome Heaven's own vault! On its great open altar this Nature-worship has its culmination and reaches its highest fulfilment. This altar is the Holy of Holies, the tabernacle of the group of Temples consecrated to the worship of Nature.

It is built in the center of a great marble paved

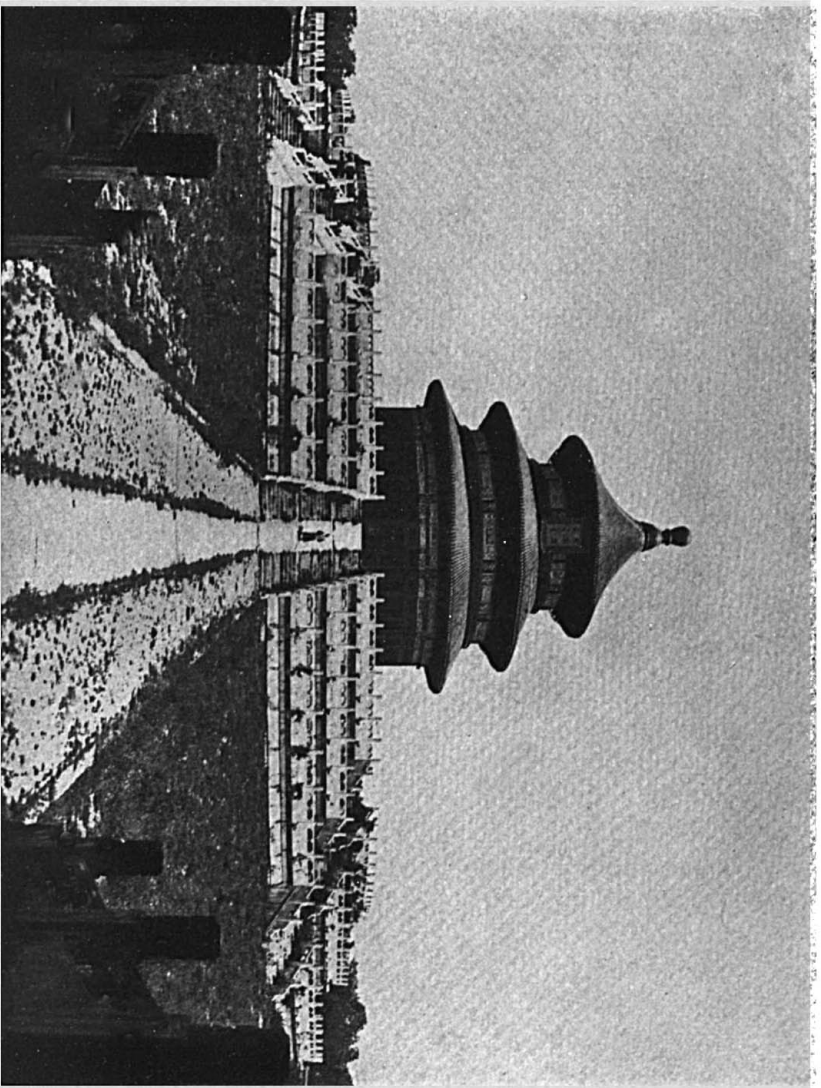
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space with the secular arbor-vitæ radiating therefrom in long concentric avenues. It is of pure white marble, round as is the Earth. The Trinity in Nature and its Infinity are symbolized in its three superposed circles. Each of the circular platforms is surrounded by an exquisitely carved balustrade and approached by flights of nine steps each, to the north, south, east, and west. The central point of the great upper circle thus represents the center of the Universe, accessible from every point of the compass.

Here in this symbolic center of the world, in this great Temple, whose walls are Space, whose towers are Infinity, on this great triple altar, canopied with Heaven itself, the Emperor of China, "Son of Heaven," glorifies the Invisible Deity and sacrifices for the prosperity of "the Great, Pure Kingdom" and his people. This worship of the Invisible Deity has no Priestly Hierarchy. The Emperor of China is its one High Priest. He alone is worthy, as the Son of Heaven, to perform its unique ceremonies, on its one great Altar, in its single great Temple of China.

The Emperor prepares himself for the great ceremony of the semi-annual celebration on this altar by a rigorous fast of three days, spending the final night before the celebration in a vigil in the Great Park of the Nature Temples, where there is a Purifying Palace set aside for his use. This glorification of the Invisible Deity at the summer and winter solstices is the most solemn act performed by the Emperor in his quality of Son of Heaven.

The Emperor is not only the one High Priest worthy to sacrifice on the great altars to the Invisible



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Deity, the Priestly Hierarchy of the whole of this Cult of Nature is vested in his Sacred Person. He alone offers sacrifices in the Temples of Heaven and the other Great Temples, at times set aside in the Book of Rites, and on special occasions. When famine devastates the land, when drought or any other National Calamity is visited upon the Empire, the Emperor prays in these Temples for its cessation, for he is not only the High Priest, but as "Son of Heaven" is the expiator for the afflictions visited upon his people by Heaven, and he publicly holds himself responsible for the misfortunes of the Empire. According to the Book of Rites, he says in time of trouble, "I will purify myself by sacrifice that these calamities may be lifted from the Empire and the people. I alone am responsible."

The great semi-annual celebration to the Invisible Deity is not only the most solemn of the religious rites the Emperor performs; it is at the same time the most formal of his official acts as ruler of the Great Empire. He prepares himself, by fasting and subduing the body, for the religious rite; for the official ceremony as Emperor of China, he is accompanied by all his ministers and the highest nobles of the land and surrounded by splendid pomp and Imperial pageantry.

Though in his triple quality of Emperor, High Priest, and Expiator, he personally sacrifices only in the great Temples to Nature the Emperor has all the religions of his Empire under his protection and is their nominal Head. He assists indiscriminately at Buddhist or Taoist ceremonies, and encourages with

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impartiality both cults. But these religions have priestly hierarchies, and complicated Rituals, and the Emperor is only the "Ex-officio" Head and High Priest. All the festivals and fasts of both are celebrated in the Palace.

The Chinese are not a religious people, though so moral a race. They are rather followers of a philosophy than members of religious bodies. The two most popular religions of China, Buddhism and Taoism, have become more or less outward forms. They are empty shells which may once have contained the Spirit, but have now become mere conventional representations of ancient rites. The Chinese people are really Confucians, and Confucianism is a system of ethics, a philosophy rather than a religion. Whether they be Buddhists or Taoists, they are all followers of Confucius, and live by the rules the Great Sage has laid down for them. The doctrines of Buddha and Laotze have become so incrustated with error in China as to afford no moral or ideal help to their followers. The Chinese participate indiscriminately in either of these religious rites, many of which have become mere outward spectacular ceremonies, where there is a great deal of display and much form, but very little real worship. They get all their moral support from the writings of Confucius and all their ideals from communion with Nature. They are really philosophers and worshippers of Nature, and the Emperor's semi-annual sacrifice on the altar of Heaven and those at the Temples of Nature typify the real worship of the people.

All the religious rites in China have their origin in, or are in celebration of, some natural phenomenon

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or some periodical event in Nature. They celebrate the summer and winter solstices, the equinoxes, the New Year, the awakening of spring, when the sap (life-giving element) begins to mount. The Harvest Moon is the time of the going to rest of this life-giving element. Their complicated ceremonial is but the crystallization of some simple observance of Nature's fundamental laws. This ceremonial has been kept alive all these centuries, because of the vivifying spark of Nature which enkindled them. These rites are now observed without a thought of their origin, but Nature still remains their creative force. In spite of their conventions, the Chinese have kept very near to Nature, and I believe this is the secret of their wonderful vitality. They have been overrun and conquered by many different races, and their assimilation of these conquerors is one of the most astonishing things in the ethnic study of this wonderful race.

No conquering race has ever changed the Chinese. Tartars, Mongols, Manchus have all passed and become amalgamated with them. Their conquerors have adopted the Chinese philosophy and religion, their customs and habits, and even their system of government. And they have never been able to impose any really new system of government upon the Chinese.

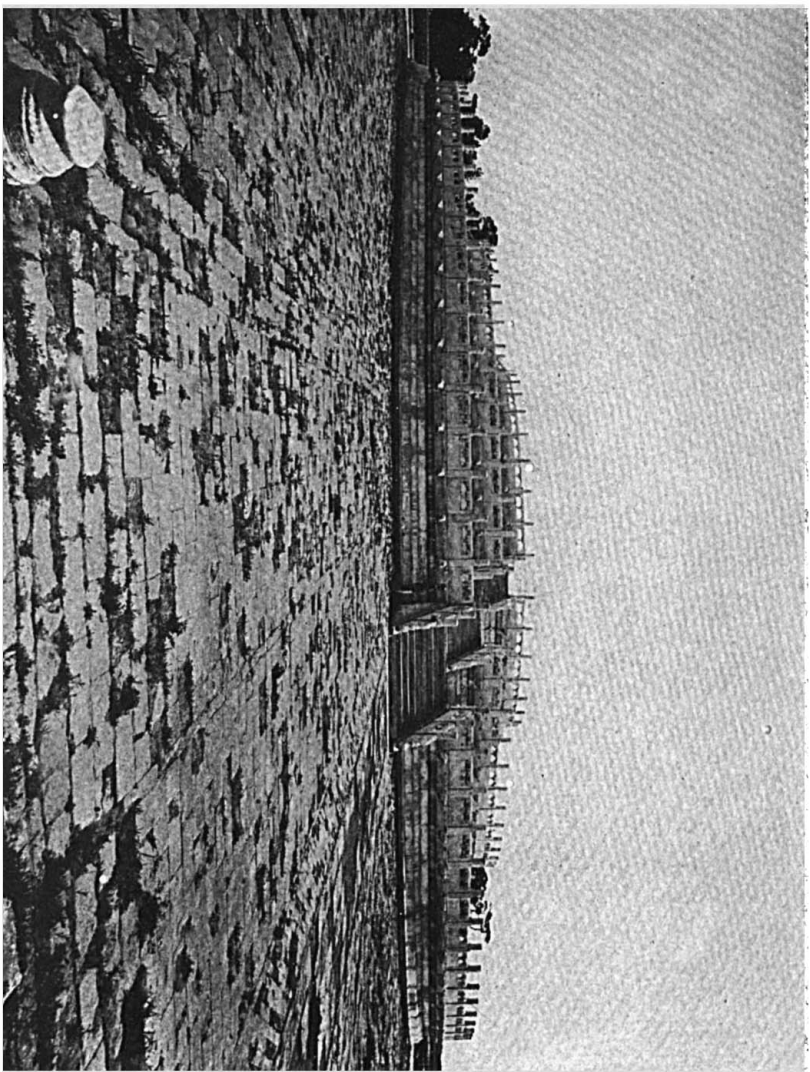
These founders of Dynasties in China have all been "warriors bold" and reckless marauders with little philosophy and no literature to speak of. When the Manchus, the last of these conquerors, founders of the present Dynasty, established themselves in Peking, in 1646, they were a wild and warlike race. They, like all the other conquerors of China, conciliated their

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vanquished foes by all sorts of concessions, and they now rule by Chinese laws, and to-day are hardly distinguishable from the Chinese. They have never made, any more than the other conquerors, the slightest impress upon this calm and passive race; and they have become Chinese. "To-day the Emperor Kwang-Hsu is recognized as one of the best Chinamen in China." The Manchu men to-day wear Chinese dress. The Emperor, himself, shaves his head and wears the queue, the one visible sign of degradation that is said to have been imposed upon the Chinese at the time of the conquest. Oh! Irony of fate!

The Manchus are now as quiet and peaceful a race as the Chinese themselves. They dread war. They live by the laws of Confucius. Though not a race of thinkers or philosophers, they have come to have the same ideals as the Chinese, and this, without the natural amalgamation brought about by inter-marriage, for it is only within the last few years that the Throne has issued an edict, allowing inter-marriage between the Chinese and Manchu, and even, with this edict, up to this time there has been very little mixture, by marriage, of the races. The Chinese seem easily led and conquered, but their national vitality is very vigorous, and has kept them pure in racial characteristics after their thousands of years of national existence.

The Festival of the Harvest Moon, which typifies the season when the life-giving element in Nature goes to rest for the Winter, I have already described. It is intermixed with legends and practices that destroy its original meaning; but the ceremony to the awak-



ALTAR TO THE INVISIBLE DEITY
In the Park of the Temple of Heaven

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ening of Spring has not departed from its original intention, and is simpler and nearer Nature. The awakening of Spring, the day when the sap is supposed to stir from its long sleep and to feel the first throes of renewed life, is commemorated in a pretty, homely ceremony at the Palace. The radish and young shoots of lettuce, the first vegetables to receive the benefit of the rising sap, are presented on a silver salver to Her Majesty by a kneeling eunuch. She partakes of them, and then gives them to the young Empress and Ladies to taste of. When Her Majesty raises the first radish to her lips, the young Empress, Princesses, and Ladies assembled in her Throne-room, repeat the wish for Imperial happiness, synonymous with "National prosperity." This wish is echoed by the high attendants in the ante-chamber, and reëchoed by the eunuchs kneeling in the courts without, and still echoed and reëchoed by every inmate of the Palace, until the waves of sound reach to the outer walls. Then Her Majesty makes a wish that the sap may rise in such abundance as to produce a fruitful season, that all the people of the Great Empire may enjoy peace and plenty.

Thus are these first fruits of the awakening Spring partaken of with a simple ceremony of praise and thanksgiving. Thus are these homely plants consecrated with wishes made for the good of the country and the happiness of its rulers. It was to me a beautiful ceremony, so simple that it brought these people with all their conventions and all their forms very near the heart itself of Nature.

The annual plowing of a furrow and sowing of the

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first seeds of the year by the Emperor, the planting of a mulberry tree (to nourish the silkworms) by the Empress, are other touches of Nature which show how near the Chinese are to the heart of things. One of the honorary offices which is considered a great mark of Imperial favor, and which the highest ladies of the land receive with reverent gratitude, is to be appointed "Guardian of the Cocoons"; for the silk industry is one of the great sources of National prosperity in China. These ladies of high degree, guardians of the cocoons, go in annual pilgrimage to the mulberry groves, where the cocoons flourish, to make sacrifices and prayers for the health and growth of the cocoon. Being so near to Nature, the Chinese are naturally a pastoral people, a race of agriculturists; and agriculture, being thus honored by the Sacred Persons of Their Majesties, becomes a lofty ideal. Labor, which the Emperor publicly performs, loses all taint and grows into an Inspiration.