

## CHAPTER VII

### FESTIVITIES AT COURT

**P**REPARATIONS were now beginning at the Palace for the celebration of His Majesty the Emperor's Birthday. This is not celebrated on the anniversary of the day he was born, but two days earlier. His Majesty must make the Autumnal Sacrifices to his Ancestors three days after the real date of his Birthday, and he must prepare himself for these sacrifices by a rigorous fast of three days. As it would be impossible to accomplish the ceremonial prescribed for the Imperial Birthday while fasting, the celebration of the Birthday was advanced, a special edict having been issued by the two Empresses, when Co-Regents for the young Emperor, ordering the Birthday celebrations to be advanced by two days, for the date of the sacrifices could not be changed—the sacrifice to one's Ancestors being the most sacred of obligations to the Chinese, and most rigidly and religiously observed. Even the Chinese Emperor's Birthday is not celebrated for two years after the death of his predecessor, so rigorous are the rules of respect to the dead and the rites accorded to one's Ancestors in China.

I knew no painting could be done during these

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festivities, and I expected to go back to the United States Legation. I never dreamed I should be invited to participate in this celebration, hitherto unseen by any foreigner. A week before the Birthday itself, when out for one of our walks with Her Majesty, she called me up to her side and said the Emperor's Birthday was to be celebrated the next week, and invited me to remain in the Palace for these festivities. I was, of course, overjoyed at this gracious mark of her favor, and delighted to be able to see the Oriental pomp and pageantry that accompanied these ceremonial celebrations in China.

There were to be magnificent theatrical performances, splendid fireworks and decorations, and all sorts of pageants. The Imperial company of actors had already begun rehearsing special poems and plays, written to celebrate the occasion. Eunuchs were constantly bringing Her Majesty specimens of the work of the decorators and painters who were carrying out her designs as to special scenes and tableaux, or coming to ask for further instructions. The literati, who were preparing the original poems, sent in their manuscripts, that she might judge of their merits and make suggestions. She herself overlooked every detail, and seemed most interested and anxious to have everything successful.

The festivities began four days before the Birthday with gala performances at the Theater. Each day the decorations of the buildings, the courts, and gardens increased in beauty. In the principal courts, magnificent bronzes, all sorts of antique instruments of music, used only on these great occasions, were

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brought out as decorations; for music forms part of every ceremonial, official or religious, in China. Among the curious instruments were splendid bronze frames, with several superposed octaves of triangular musical-stones suspended therefrom; elaborately carved supports for different-toned bells; huge "triangles"; immense bronze "tam-tams," curiously and beautifully wrought; big drums on splendid bronze stands; wonderfully chased bells; and many other quaint instruments, used only for official and state processions in honor of Their Celestial Majesties.

The slanting and projecting, upturned roofs of the different buildings forming the Palaces were decorated with scarfs of vari-colored silk, knotted into a curious sort of fringe of rosettes, about two feet long; yellow, the Imperial color, and red, the festive color, predominating, but other colors were introduced into the color-scheme to accentuate these.

The large Square in front of the Imperial gateway, outside the Precincts, was filled with huge, tent-like, yellow satin umbrellas, with deep curtains around the edge. These umbrellas are used for all great festivities in China, and are generally of red. Those for the Emperor's Birthday were, of course, of the Imperial yellow, and were richly embroidered with emblematic designs. Presents for the Emperor were arriving daily from all parts of the Great Empire, and though everything was directed by splendid system the commotion was nevertheless great.

Finally, there was the first gala performance at the Theater. Her Majesty occupied her loge nearly all day, overlooking every detail, sending now and then

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to the stage one of her eunuchs to transmit her Imperial commands as to the speaking of certain lines or the using of certain postures. On the day of this gala performance she invited all the Ladies of the Palace to lunch, for the first time since I had been there, in the court of the Theater. Her Majesty lunched in the Imperial loge, and then ordered our repast to be served in the court, where tables were laid and served with all the pomp and ceremony that characterized the meals at the Palace. Even this "al-fresco" entertainment was ceremonious.

Most of the large courts of the Summer Palace have roofs of matting erected over them, to keep out the sun. These mat-roofs make, of the flower-filled courts, delightfully cool, outdoor parlors. The mat-sheds at the Palace are almost works of art. Tall poles, reaching from twenty to thirty feet above the roofs surrounding the courts to be protected from the sun, are painted in festive designs, and they support transversal beams, also gaily painted. Over these roof-beams are stretched strips of the beautiful matting which the Chinese excel in making. Matting-curtains drop from the roof of the sheds to a level with the Palace roofs. These side-curtains, as well as huge sections of the matting-roof, are movable, and may be opened and raised by means of cords and pulleys attached to the supporting pillars. The whole structure, supporting pillars and transversal beams, is tied together with ropes the same color of the beams, and not a nail is used. The mat-sheds are put up in June and taken down in September.

New ladies were arriving at the Palace every day

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for a week before the Birthday—members of the Imperial Family from a distance, and the wives and daughters of Manchu nobles who were of sufficient rank to present their congratulations in person. The young Empress never failed to introduce me to these ladies. A foreigner in the Chinese Court is a much more extraordinary circumstance than a Chinese at a European Court would be, and this was, in most instances, the first meeting of these Princesses with any foreigner; but they were uniformly courteous and even cordial, never evincing the slightest curiosity as to my dress or my habits. I doubted whether a Chinese at a European Court, or at our White House, would have been treated with the same consideration by all, even to the servants. The children, of whom there were several at Court at this time, were as well-bred as their elders in their treatment of the "foreign lady."

After our first lunch in the court of the Theater, when the theatrical performance of the day was finished and the actors had left, I approached the stage of the Theater and began examining, with interest, its construction and appointments. The Palace Theater is raised about twelve feet from the ground, and its main floor is on a level with the Imperial loge. The building consists of three stories and a cellar. The latter is used for the few pieces of scenery of the scenic plays, and is where the simple devices used for moving it are manipulated. Like the Greek theater, the stage is open on three sides; and the actors come out and speak their parts, their entrance being to the left and the exit to the right of the stage.

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Her Majesty was within her loge while I was examining the construction of the Theater; but she evidently noticed my movements, for the eunuchs soon threw open the great plate doors and she descended the steps of the Imperial loge and came across the court to where I was standing. She asked me if I would not like to go on the stage and look over the building and examine things thoroughly. She added, "You probably may never have such a chance to see a good Chinese theater again." She, herself, went up the steps leading from the court to the stage, and told me to follow her.

The stage is about twenty-five feet square, is roofed over, and projects into the court, its three sides being open. The fourth side has doors and curtains for the entrance and exit of the actors. There are no actresses in China. The men perform the parts of women, and represent them with such success that I was much surprised when I learned there were no actresses. At the back of the stage sit the musicians, who accompany all the theatrical performances in China.

Her Majesty, herself, led the way across the stage and we went behind the scenes. Here, I examined closely a number of "Floats" that were to be used, in the procession in honor of the Emperor, on the day of the Birthday. These floats had all been designed by the Empress Dowager. After we had looked at these, she suggested that I had better see the upper floors. These latter are not in general use in Chinese theaters. The theaters, even at the other Palaces, have but one stage. The steps which lead to the second stage, and thence to the third stage, are behind

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the scenes. The two upper stages are used for spectacular plays and tableaux, when certain of the players group themselves in pyramidal form on these superposed stages and speak their lines therefrom. The upper stages have also trap-doors and pulleys for use in the spectacular plays. Her Majesty went up, herself, to show me these stages. She mounted the steep and difficult steps with as much ease and lightness as I did, and I had on comfortable European shoes, while she wears the six-inch-high Manchu sole in the middle of her foot, and must really walk as if on stilts.

Neither the Empress Dowager nor any of the Manchu ladies bind their feet; that custom prevailed in China before the Manchu conquest. The Manchus have adopted many of the manners and customs of the Chinese, but the Manchu women have retained their own individuality; and to-day, after more than two hundred and fifty years in China, they still wear their native costume, entirely different from the Chinese women. They still dress their hair in the picturesque Manchu fashion. They not only have never bound their feet, but they have as great a horror of it as Europeans have. Manchu ladies are not bound by the same rigid social conventions as are the Chinese women. They are less circumscribed and have more individual freedom than any other Oriental women. In fact, the Manchu woman seems to be, to other Oriental women, what the modern American woman is to her European sisters.