

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DRAGON IN ICHANG

The discovery in China of immense fossils of marine reptiles presents many points of interest, more especially at the present acute stage of the country's political history.

"Good Joss" and "Bad Joss" always figure largely in the Chinese mind, and the discovery of fossils which may clearly indicate the region of the Imperial Chinese Dragon may well be considered "Good Joss" at the present time when the restoration of the Monarchy seems imminent and is indeed practically *un fait accompli*.

J. O'MALLEY IRWIN
in the *Far Eastern Review*, December, 1915.

At the close of 1915, when the monarchistic movement in China was at its height, there appeared in the newspapers various accounts of a remarkable find which had been made near the city of Ichang in the middle part of the Yangtze valley. There in a grotto had been found the well-preserved remains of an immense dragon, and since in China from immemorial times the dragon had been the heraldic emblem of the imperial glory, it was considered to be a significant and good omen that the dragon had thus appeared at just the time when the first emperor of a new dynasty was about to ascend the dragon throne.

That the old mystical ideas should revive around an occurrence of such deep historical importance as the institution of a new dynasty was only natural. But it was also a sign of the times that many foreigners, among them first of all the American adviser of the constitution maker Yuan Shih Kai, Mr. Goodnow,

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was assisting or at least smoothing the way for the monarchistic propaganda. It was characteristic therefore that a society of foreigners had the honor of discovering the dragon and that they at once described the find as "Good Joss" for the new imperial régime.

The matter was presented in an article, "Fossils of the Chinese Dragon", in an excellent and reputable magazine, the *Far Eastern Review*, December, 1915. The author, Mr. O'Malley Irwin, was clearly entitled to the chief credit in making the find.

Mr. and Mrs. Irwin had undertaken a voyage from Kwei Chow Fu down through the famous rocky defiles of the Yangtze River, and at the upper end of the gorge of Ichang Mr. Hewlett, the English consul at Ichang, and his wife had joined them. Mr. Hewlett had been telling of a large grotto on the right side of the river a mile above the customs station at Ping Shan Pa. Hereupon was conceived the idea of a visit, which Mr. Irwin describes:

A great boulder is visible at the entrance to the grotto and about eight yards further in is a curious rock formation like the tail of a great reptile. This resemblance, imperfect as it is, appears to have impressed the Chinese imagination, for we were told that this cave was sometimes called the Dragon's Grotto and that it was supposed to go on for thirty kilometers and lead to Lung Wang Tung (The Dragon King's Grotto) which is near Ichang.

On various occasions previously strangers have penetrated the grotto far beyond the place where the fossils are now plainly visible, for which reason it

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seems probable that they have been recently exposed, perhaps by some heavy flood in the grotto.

When with lighted lanterns we had proceeded about a hundred yards, we found ourselves going along a ridge of rock to escape some pools of water, and it was the peculiar winding course on this ridge which roused our attention and led to more careful scrutiny. This scrutiny revealed the fact that we were going along the back of, as we first conceived it, a Chinese dragon cut in the rock, and we furthermore observed that there were six or eight of these stone "dragons" lying curled together. Further lighting in the form of flames from bamboo rope together with the investigation of loose pieces of the beasts' armor convinced us that the supposed sculptures were in reality fossils.

As we had no way of measuring the specimens, we decided to come back to the grotto early the following morning to make measurements and such superficial observations as the short time at our disposal would allow. The following calculations and observations were made on our second visit: The length of the largest fossil was between sixty and seventy feet from a point where the head was partly covered by the wall of the cave to the first point of contact with the other specimens. Its length must therefore have been at least sixty to seventy feet and seemed as if it extended another sixty to seventy feet, but because of the intertwining of various reptiles at this point a mistake may be possible and the final figure must be left to some experienced observers with plenty of time at their command.

The height of the exposed part of the body was two feet. Two partly exposed extremities were visible twelve to fourteen feet from the head and another pair forty to fifty feet from the same point. The

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head appeared large and flat. It seemed probable that the specimen examined was a fossil of a *Morosaurus*¹ *Camperi* and that it, together with the other reptiles, must have got lost in the grotto long ages ago and died of hunger. A comparison of the reptile's length and the thinness of its body suggests the leanness of hunger.

There is much in his description which warns us to proceed cautiously. Aside from such unlikely notions as that Mesozoic saurians could have gone astray in a modern grotto and there starved to death and become petrified, it is hardly credible that a whole group of genuine saurian fossils should have become so freed from the living rock that the head and extremities could be distinguished. In general the directly visible parts of genuine fossils are not conspicuous, but on the other hand the eye of the uncritical amateur has a — to the specialist — amazing faculty of seeing in unorganized formations complete examples of all sorts of remarkable organisms.

The four photographic reproductions which illustrate Mr. Irwin's article also demonstrate quite clearly that the objects here in question are stalagmites of a kind which often forms into the most fantastic shapes through the deposits of limestone from trickling water. The editor of the *Far Eastern Review* has informed me that other persons have also called attention to the stalagmite nature of these supposed fossils.

To get further light on the matter I wrote to

¹ Should be *Mosasaurus*.

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Consul Hewlett at Ichang, who had the kindness to send me a piece of the "fossil" for inspection. But while this sample was on the way from Ichang, I was called up on the telephone by my friend Chang Yi Ou, General Director of the Division of Mines, who asked if I would like to go with him and call on an officer who had gone down by the order of the emperor to Ichang to get the facts about the imperial dragon. We rolled along in our rickshaws to a little Chinese house like thousands of others. But the master of the house was all the more remarkable and well worth seeing on his own account: a powerful military figure with full but handsome features, a splendid blue-black beard, and a jovial manner that was wholly attractive. This gentleman described with vivid gestures his visit to the grotto and inspection of the twining "dragons." But he evidently believed that there was something queer about the affair and was therefore very cautious in what he said about the nature of the phenomena in question.

After we had drunk tea and chatted with him an hour, the great moment came. He went into another house and returned with a piece of the "dragon", a fragment of limestone in all essentials like certain specimens of calcareous tufa in Sweden. The stone was presented to Mr. Chang and now holds an honored place in the curiosities section of the new geological museum.

I later received the sample sent by Consul Hewlett, which only served to strengthen further the proof as to the stalagmite character of the formations.

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The good old legends end when the dragon has been conquered and the young knight has been rewarded with the princess and half her father's kingdom, and so perhaps this modern saga should end when the strange monster of the Ichang grotto was duly slain. But there is a Chinese document in this affair, which, because of his fine style and sureness of treatment in dismissing the whole matter, deserves to be brought to the reader's notice. It is the imperial mandate published in the middle of January:

Wang Tsan-yuan and Tuan Shu-yun have stated in a telegram that they have received from the bureau of trade, the schools and various persons of authority, etc., in Ichang a petition to the following effect: "Certain Europeans while investigating the grotto of Sheng Hsi at Ichang have found a stone dragon, which is fifty chang (about five hundred feet) long. It has been proved that this is the fossil of an ancient dragon. At this moment, when a monarch has arisen like a dragon and the foundations of a dynasty of ten thousand years are being laid, a Divine Dragon has appeared in the region of the Yangtze River as a symbol of Heaven's protection and the people's joy. It has therefore been proposed that a telegram should be sent to the Throne to bring to the knowledge of all this discovery of the stone dragon at Ichang. It is further requested that this discovery should be taken to the Historiographic Bureau to be preserved for the enlightening of posterity. In this way the sign of Heaven for the prosperity of the nation shall be duly appreciated and the desire of the people gain fulfillment, etc."

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From the beginning the efforts of the government to improve the administration of the realm and to encourage the enlightenment of the people have been the only warrant for the rise of a new dynasty. The government must provide occupation for every man in the realm. No improvements can be made in the administration if the people begin to talk openly of signs from Heaven, such as magic birds, yellow dragons, etc. In these days science has reached a high development and learned men have sought to discover the true causes of things. It is therefore meaningless to make words about things which one cannot comprehend and to seek to explain everything as signs of peace and prosperity. The request that the fossil in question should be transferred to the Historiographical Bureau cannot be granted. Since, however, ancient fossils which are preserved in mountain caves may serve as material for investigation, the following military and civil governors are herewith empowered to make the local officials responsible for preserving the fossils, so that scientists may have access to them and study them.

When I arise early in the morning to labor and plan, just as when at night I lie down to rest, the thought of my people's weal and woe is continually foremost in my mind, and the only sign from Heaven which I seek is my people's happiness. I hope that all my generals, officials, learned men and nobles will understand how to treasure my thoughts.

Let us assume now that everything had gone as the monarchists hoped in January and that thus Yuan Shih Kai, The Mighty Emperor, had come to rule over the Middle Kingdom for many fortunate years. Might it not then have happened that a plodding

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professor at some Western university, some time about 1970, in a treatise on "Modernism in China at the Foundation of the Hung Hsien dynasty" might have produced this most dignified mandate as a proof of Yuan Shih Kai's advanced mode of thought. As it is, we may perhaps modestly content ourselves with tracing back to some little unknown clerk in Yuan's office this unimportant document, to which the ruler in the midst of his toil and ever-increasing problems once gave a hasty perusal.

During that momentous year of 1916 there was much that seemed great and promising in January, which in June already lay in fragments. Thus it befell that Yuan Shih Kai never became a real emperor, that the dragon of Ichang never became a real dragon, and that Mr. O'Malley Irwin never was hailed as the founder of the new science whose vague contours we dimly perceive in his article, a science which we may perhaps tentatively call heraldic paleontology.