

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LIVING MIDDLE AGES

WHEN on Trinity Sunday the folk of the Malar region crown with leaves the old holy wells or when on Walpurgis Night we of the suburbs kindle brush heaps in our gardens, we are repeating customs which had their roots in the ancient past. Research has shown that even in a festival so apparently Christian as Yule are mingled numerous elements from the heathen festival of midwinter, and in the names of places such examples as Torsvi and Frosvi indicate places of sacrifice to the ancient gods.

When the modern life of such a people as the Swedes can preserve so many remnants of prehistoric times, it is not surprising that so conservative and in many ways primitive a people as the Chinese carries with it many reminiscences of the dimly veiled past.

In Kansu up in the northwestern corner of China proper one sees everywhere in the villages men (oddly enough, spinning is there a masculine trade) going about spinning wool into yarn on a distaff of the most simple construction with a stone disk, which in no way differs from the spindle disk used five thousand years ago by the people of the polished stone age. This is, however, not so especially remarkable, for in the Nordic Museum we may see that our own folk a few generations back spun yarn on a distaff of about the same construction.

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More interest was roused among our archaeologists when I was able to show that the carpenter's ax used throughout northern China was the groove ax, that is, the type of ax in common use in Europe in the bronze age, but which in the iron age was superseded by the form which we are accustomed to think of as the normal. The groove ax is merely an edge of metal, in the grooved hollow of which a wooden helve is set. It is evident that such a type of ax was especially useful to our forefathers, when it was important to be as saving as possible with that costly metal, bronze. For the economical Chinaman it is worth while to save even so cheap a metal as iron; he therefore uses regularly a groove ax of iron, giving it the required driving weight with a long and heavy knob of wood.

A still more remarkable relic of an ancient type was verified as the so-called rectangular knife which we found wrought of limestone and slate in dwellings of the Chinese stone age. It still exists in iron as a harvest knife commonly used by women in northern China to cut off the ears of the *kaoliang*, a tall-growing kind of grain which we know by the name of durra (Indian millet).

At about the time of the birth of Christ, that is in Chinese reckoning under the Han dynasty, the custom obtained of placing in the grave with the corpse the clay effigies of various useful things, such as cattle, urns with grain, ovens and even whole houses. Some of these gifts, which were supposed to be for the support of the deceased in this new life,

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had the form of an entire farm in miniature, with a wall around it and a little house in one corner. I puzzled a long while over that house, which stood like a watchtower in the corner of the enclosure and which to me seemed to lack resemblance to the types of building one now meets in the Chinese landscape. But on my last trip one day in a mountain tract in the middle of Kansu I came down into a farm which had precisely that little watch house, but in two stories, at one corner of the surrounding wall — a complete replica of the miniatures from the graves of the Han period.

All the ancient traits which I have thus far instanced in the material life of modern China go back to the stone age or, as in the case of the farm with the watch house, to an early historical time. The interested observer will, however, discover in China, both in the country districts and in the cities of the interior which have been relatively little touched by foreign influence, such numerous and striking resemblances to the life of Europe in bygone generations that I do not hesitate to describe the folk life of China as it is still lived in large parts of the empire as the living Middle Ages.

First among these, to our notion, ancient traits, I would mention the fondness of the Chinese for enclosing themselves and their activities in protecting walls. The Chinese Wall has become in Western speech a figurative expression for a spiritual isolation, which has its basis less in reality than in our habitual ignorance of Chinese conditions. Neverthe-

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less it is a striking characteristic of the industrious, peace-loving Chinaman that in all sorts of communal association down to the family he tries to obtain protection behind walls of the greatest possible strength.

Nearly every Chinese city is surrounded by a defensive wall, crenelated and reinforced by projecting towers, from which the moat and the far side of the wall can be protected by an enflaming fire. In construction and appearance the walls of our Visby are essentially like those of Peking, the main difference being that the towers of Visby soar high above the wall, whereas those of the Chinese city are of the same height with it. In addition the Chinese gateways have a construction which makes them into small independent fortresses, a feature to which the mediaeval towns of Europe, so far as I know, have nothing to correspond.

The predilection of the Chinese for walls has among other things produced the phenomenon that the imperial city of Peking has no less than three walls, one within the other. On the outside is the great and powerful Tatar wall, which encloses the whole Tatar city with a circumference of twenty-three and five tenths kilometers. In the center of this city we had until very recently the red wall, a comparatively weak structure without ditch; and farthest within, the moated wall which surrounded the special imperial section of the town, the Forbidden City.

It is not only the cities that are surrounded by walls, the villages also are commonly defended by

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ramparts which are often crenelated and provided with reinforced gates. The separate farms too have each its wall and stout door, which is barred at the coming of darkness. In various places in Shantung I saw out in the country where the rich men, besides the defensive wall around the whole estate, had constructed the dwelling house so that it was a veritable fort of most interesting construction and considerable military strength.

It is natural that country places, which are often isolated or enclosed within a relatively weak village wall, should have this special protection. It is remarkable, however, that all houses — great and small, the rich man's palace along with the poor man's dwelling — in the great well-fortified cities should have each its wall. As one passes through the streets of Peking, therefore, one sees only outer walls and well-secured, often very handsome gates. To get an idea of the Chinese home one needs special recommendations or ties of friendship. Only after the great cloudbursts of summer rain, when the small walls which surround the houses of the less well-to-do fall down by the dozen in nearly every alley, may one — before the damage is repaired — get an intimate and often comic look at the life behind the walls, as one roams through the poorer quarters.

The most curious point to the Westerner is perhaps the fact that in the large places there are even party walls between different sections of the same estate. It is especially apt to be the case that the

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servants' quarter is divided off from that of the owner in this fashion.

Within the complications of the large establishments, for instance, the extensive quarters of the Ministry of Agriculture, which are laid out quite in the old Chinese style, one finds a large number of inner party walls, often broken by round, very picturesque passages without doors. Because of these manifold walls, passages and corridors, a yamen (official building) of this sort is a veritable labyrinth, which, however unpractical, is rich in deep perspectives of exquisite beauty and quiet nooks that conduce to repose and meditation.

With the striving for isolation and defense which is expressed in city and village walls is combined the frequent phenomenon of toll barriers of divers sorts. The reason for this is that, besides the foreign customs office, which controls the duties to and from other lands, there is also a "native customs" institution, which collects imposts within the country. When for instance I sent our collections via Tientsin and Chenwangtas to Shanghai and on by a Swedish boat to Gottenburg, I had of course a special permit made out by the General Tariff Bureau at Peking, but it was still necessary to follow the shipment through the various stages of tolls to see that it did not get stuck anywhere, and in particular the internal tariff office at Tientsin proved to be a constant source of trouble.

Besides the foreign and domestic tariffs there is a particularly hated institution, the *likin*. This with

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its countless offices spread over the whole country obstructs communication, especially commerce and industry, which are actually throttled by an enormous tax. Public opinion demands with increasing firmness the liquidation of the *likin* duties. Such a reform is the more desirable because the *likin* is one of those local imposts which have served as test cases and pretexts for a whole mass of irregular taxes — taxes, that is, not sanctioned by the central government — which local authorities, especially military leaders, have laid upon the unfortunate population.

When the traveler has survived the ordeal of passport inspection and the ensuing police and military scrutiny at one of the gates of a city in the interior, where automobile and other modern inventions have not yet transformed the scene, he will come upon a prospect that reminds him strangely of mediaeval European towns. One may fairly say that the whole life of the people is on the street. Whereas private dwellings, as just described, are fast shut against the street by means of strong gates, the artisans' and merchants' houses have a front open to the street, being shut in at night with wooden slides. When these are taken off in the morning, a colorful and teeming life surges through the open workshops and booths out on the street.

The joiners and coffin makers lay their logs on a sawhorse, so that one end rests on the ground while the other points up at an angle. Then a man standing on the log and another on the ground work a

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big saw, which with unflinching accuracy cuts the logs into planks or joists. The booths of the undertaker are among the most imposing of their kind, thanks to the solid piles of coffins and splendid canopies, together with the great red-lacquered poles, that belong to their paraphernalia.

And as the joiner does much of his work on the street or at least so that every one can watch it, so the smith often sets his bellows and forge out in the open, and the sparks from his blows fly far across the roadway. There is good reason why the smith should work outdoors, but I was really surprised when I saw at Lanchow, in the middle of the winter, that the goldsmiths sat at a little table outside the entrance to their booth, perhaps to get better light for their delicate craft.

The dyers also work to a large degree under the public eye, and a dyer's booth makes itself evident from far off in that great strips of newly dyed blue material (blue is the most usual color) are hung straight across the street to dry, so that it is sometimes hard to pass under the lines of cloth. The paper makers stick up their wet sheets to dry on the walls of the surrounding houses, so that whole rows are plastered over with them. Another product which is dried on the streets is the sticks of incense which are burnt at the temple altars, and as they are used in enormous quantities, this occupation is a really important industry.

Speaking of industries, it may be in place here to mention the inns, where the food is spread and to a

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large degree consumed out in the open. To see a Chinese cook, naked to the waist, kneading out the macaroni dough into thin strips or to hear the smart blows with which he beats time to his labor is an experience one does not soon forget.

As the artisans work on an open stage, so do the merchants to the best of their ability spread out their wares for the eyes of their customers. Trade is carried on over a counter which is freely accessible from the street, and even in front of the counter, on the steps and the projecting side walls the merchant's wares are displayed to the public. For example, on the wide steps of a grain-dealer's shop all sorts of grain and beans, etc. may be exhibited in great wicker vats.

Hitherto I have only mentioned the tradesmen who are stationary. But the street is likewise thronged by itinerant vendors, who try to attract attention by performing each upon his respective instrument. Thus the lemonade seller clatters with two small brass bowls, which he handles as castanets; the cloth seller bangs a sort of gong, which he swings deftly in his hand, the scissors grinder rattles some bundles of iron or blows a long trumpet, and the barber announces his approach with a great tuning-fork. He carries along a stand with all the implements he uses and a little stool to sit on.

In every small space where one can be undisturbed some little artisan or merchant settles down. Here will be a traveling shoemaker or a mender of china; there an antiquary, who spreads out on a cloth a



THE SCISSORS GRINDER PROCLAIMS HIS TRADE
(Drawing by the Artist Li)

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mass of indescribable junk; yonder an old man who peddles groundnuts, whose entire stock in trade represents less than the value of a dollar.

Amid this motley business life the street is thronged with beggars, who run along pursuing their vocation with shrill lamentations, exhibiting their deformities. There are blind men blowing the flute or playing some sort of stringed instrument, bearers who lope to rhythmic cries, and officials, who go about on foot or in palanquins with a dignity which befits a position exalted above the common herd. With this chorus of divers human voices blends the deep clank of the camel caravan's bells, the rattle of wagons, the Bray of asses, and the bark of dogs.

But high above the clamor and dust of the street life the attentive listener may often catch from the sunny sky a faintly vibrant celestial music. It comes from a flock of flying doves, which have tied to the base of the tail pan pipes of various sorts, and it is these which by the wind of the flight produce the music.

In the evening, when the street life dies away and darkness falls over the alleys, a new picturesque figure appears, the solitary night watchman, who passes along his apportioned beat while he beats with a stick on a wooden drum to announce his approach. There is something comically tragic about this lonely figure, and it is said that once some sportive house-breakers threw tiles on the old man's head to put a stop to his tapping.

Of all the picturesque types in the street the beggars and the blind folk are the most conspicuous.

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The dust, which in northern China nearly always befouls the eyes, in conjunction with the wide prevalence of trachoma¹ and venereal diseases, gives rise to the fact that the number of blind folk is fearfully high.

The blind man is a constant feature of the street life, as he plays his little flute and, carrying a long stick which he holds obliquely in front of him, feels his way forward with a surprising faculty of finding his way even in the thick of the crowd.

The beggars are a great force in Chinese street life. They are, in Peking for example, closely combined in a beggars' guild with its director and yearly assembly. Under the protection of this association they make themselves felt, especially in opposition to the merchants, upon whom the beggars levy a substantial tax. The police dislike to interfere with their activities, and they have therefore liberty to use very drastic measures of compulsion against an unpopular tradesman. It may happen, for instance, that a little group of beggars, mostly in wretched attire and with open sores, will come and sit on a tradesman's doorstep with piercing wails. Customers

¹Trachoma, perhaps the worst of China's eye diseases, is spread in a curious way. In all public gathering places, inns, theaters, railroad trains and the like, steaming towels, often with a delicate perfume, are passed around, with which the guests or travelers may dry their faces. The process is very refreshing but extremely unhealthy, for the towels are used over and over again by various persons after being dropped into a great kettle, where the water is warm but seldom boiling. By means of these towels the trachoma parasite is conveyed to healthy eyes. According to the Chinese ideas of sanitation and cleanliness it is considered proper after the meal or at various times during an evening in the theater to refresh the face in this way. In the theaters it is a clever and admired trick of the attendants to roll up the used towels and fling them straight across the hall to the man at the kettle.

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cannot get in or out, the business is jeopardized by this demonstration, and the best thing to do is to come to a friendly agreement with the malcontents as soon as possible.

A still more drastic method was used by a beggar who went early one morning to the booth of an unpopular merchant and with the help of a comrade nailed one of his hands to the door. The terrified merchant hastened to the plucky beggar and implored him to depart.

There are of course many real sufferers among the beggars one sees on the streets of Peking, but it is evident that the trade of beggary, often very cleverly carried on, flourishes to a degree hardly paralleled in the West.

The war equipment of dirt, sores and old newspapers tied with a string around the body, which is carried by some of the beggars is quite overpowering. Other beggars appear almost naked, clearly for the purpose of arousing compassion for their thin and trembling bodies. Young and strong women with little children in their blouses run a long distance after people riding in rickshaws, beseeching them for a coin to give food to a poor mother. The most picturesque of all the mendicant types I saw in Peking, was an old woman, who combined the beggar's trade with that of a ragpicker. Her dress was so much in keeping with the contents of her basket that it was impossible to decide where the woman began and the rags ended.

Besides such extraordinary guilds as associations of

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the beggars and the blind men, there are others of many sorts among the productive trades, and there are also in the larger cities provincial guilds with special houses and a considerable organized influence, which are meant to hold together the officials and other persons coming from a certain province. These provincial guilds in Peking often make political demonstrations, particularly when there is a question of getting rid of an unpopular provincial governor or of protesting against an appointment which does not accord with the sentiment of the province.

As this widespread guild system is mediaeval to our Western way of thinking, so too is the case with the Chinese Government, especially in its lowest branches, the *hsien* or district, the administrative unit corresponding somewhat to our township but with a far-reaching and many-sided separate existence. The district magistrate is a sheriff, who appoints and pays his subordinates and the police, administers justice, and builds roads, bridges and schools to whatever extent he is forced by circumstances or driven by his own initiative, in case he is a forceful and conscientious fellow. In many cases, however, the system leads to grave mismanagement. The magistrate may as a rule hold his position for not more than three years, with the prospect of going without employment for a longer or shorter time, according to whether he has influence in the governor's *yamen*. Under these conditions he has hardly any other choice than to save as much as possible at the public expense to anticipate the coming

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bad times. These district *yamens* are filled with an astonishing number of under officials, assistants, clerks, tax collectors, etc. It is in the nature of things that many of them are a terror and a scourge to the unfortunate peasant or huckster who comes into conflict with the law. The difficulty for him often is to get any access to the magistrate, and the unlucky suppliant has reason more than once to remember the old saying that one can always get along with His Majesty Satan, the trouble is with the smaller devils.

One evening at the district *yamen* in Wen Hsi Hsien in the province of Shansi I witnessed a judicial hearing. More than an hour before the arrival of the magistrate, the police and other subordinates were assembled together with, of course, the parties to be heard. Darkness fell while the people were slowly gathering, and finally lights were lit in a couple of big paper lanterns set on tripods. Then the great middle doors reserved for persons of rank were opened and the magistrate took his seat on the dais of judgment.

The parties to the first action were summoned and fell on their knees before the judge, who instituted a short hearing, the suppliants, still bowed to the earth, replying with querulous voices. The judgment was then pronounced and the next case called. The whole produced a very old-fashioned effect. Under a good and intelligent judge the procedure may be excellent, but naturally it leaves a very wide margin at the mercy of his caprice.

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One afternoon I came into a *yamen* in Honan, where I saw in the fore court a strangely loathsome gray mass covering a considerable surface. At first I could make nothing of it, though I saw human faces here and there in the rag-gray mass, till all at once I realized that these were convicts let out to take the air. Everything — garments, faces and hands — had the same color, with which only the black of the heavy chains contrasted.

One morning I came out of another *yamen* in Honan, where I had spent the night, and saw in the fore court the corpse of a man completely naked with the feet in rough chains. It was a convict who had died in the night and been despoiled of the rags of clothing in which he died.

The incidents just related took place ten years ago, and there is no doubt that the administration of justice and the treatment of convicts have been greatly humanized since. Nevertheless I believe there is still much room for reform in this department.

The Revolution of 1911 and the bitter disillusionment of the progressives which followed led to the breaking up of the central power and the division of the realm into spheres of influence, each under a military governor or some other strong military leader. During a succession of years the government in Peking existed more or less merely by the grace of the dictators. The various marshals, Chang Tso Lin, Wu Pei Fu, Feng Yü Hsiang, etc., appointed and deposed presidents and ministers in such a kaleidoscopic manner that the whole has been hard to

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follow and hopeless to remember. It is a rebirth of the ancient period of petty kings, to the great harm of an unlucky people. This people now anxiously awaits the great leader who shall come sooner or later to strike down his rivals and set up once more the broken power of the government.

There are many dark traits in present-day China which I must touch on in this description, but through the whole of Chinese history we can follow one noble characteristic which makes the Chinese very appealing in comparison with the barbarism of the West. This is the extraordinary tolerance of the race as to religious questions.

Republican China has no state religion, since the attempt to establish Confucianism as such was abortive. This religious neutrality is not a modern radical phenomenon, as with Bolshevistic Russia. It is only in the most recent years that in connection with a more or less Bolshevistically inclined student propaganda an active hostility to religion has appeared.

From the times of earliest tradition various religions have been treated in China with a broadminded tolerance which caused the educated modern Chinaman to learn with wonder of the barbarous crusades, religious wars, the Inquisition, modern intolerance, even the various forms of the Christian religion, which have flourished in the West.

Nestorians and Manichaeans won entrance into China in the early centuries of our era, and in Kaifeng in Honan there was for a while a Jewish colony with

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its own synagogue. Even Mahometanism, which in point of intolerance even surpasses the so-called Christian religions, has been allowed to make deep inroads in northwestern China.

That wild and devastating wars have raged between the Chinese and the Mahometans in the northwest came from the fact that the latter invaded the Chinese empire with far-reaching political designs. That the Chinese have at times turned against the Christian missionaries was because Western politics, with its greed for power and sordid material objectives, forced the Chinese to desperate measures. Tolerant as the Chinese naturally are in spiritual matters, they will be found equally ruthless if they are made to fear that their country's welfare is in question.

But he who comes to them with a new form of belief will always find a patient and considerate listener in the Chinaman, even if the representative of the new faith has as his greatest merit a holy simplicity.

It is hardly an accident that the foreign religion which has penetrated most deeply into the folk-soul of the Chinese, remodeling the whole of Chinese art, is that which is never diluted with political motives, the transcendental teaching of the Indian lord, Gautama Buddha.