CHAPTER NINE

The Land of Temples

As I sit down to write of Chinese temples, it is not the great and celebrated shrines I would depict. I am not, therefore, going to describe the blinding marble glory of the Heaven Altar, or Heaven Temple as it is called by foreigners in a less faithful translation. Neither shall I descant on the elegant repose of the Temple of Confucius or the fantastically rich decorations and wild ritual dances of the neighboring Lama Temple. Nor shall I expatiate about the great tomb temples at the Ming graves, or Hsi Ling, where they stand as a guard of honor over the earthly remains of the great emperors.

No, it is of *my* temples I would tell, the small village temples where I rested a night or two and where I learned to love the unique repose which rests over Chinese temple enclosures.

During my first excursion in China, exploring the coal fields at Chai T'ang, I chanced to make an amusing statistical observation. In the detail mapping of the mine field on a scale of one to ten thousand I had occasion to put in all the temples: many of them small simple altars, *t'u ti miao*, dedicated to the divinities of the soil; others quite important village temples. In this way I found that in this district there was an average of one temple, greater or smaller, to every square kilometer. If we consider that these

Chinese country temples are always fitted with unfailing taste into the landscape, that with their walls and firm gates they enclose a pure and inviolate space in the midst of the village noise and dirt, and that they not seldom conceal an interior of startling beauty, we may well unite in the thought which came to me as I looked out from my measuring board across the hilly country at Chai T'ang: This is the land adorned with temples.

If, moreover, we observe how the Chinese temples are only the culmination of the rural architecture and that the village walls and private houses repeat in similar form the same architectonic ideas which the temple structures develop most richly, we must concede that, despite the dirt and decay, the Chinese have been masters in beautifying their land.

There are in particular two features which have contributed to the harmony with which the Chinese temples fit into the landscape. Partly the temples — like the tombs — are combined with groups of trees or an environment of virgin forest, partly the passes through the mountains are crowned at their highest point by a gatelike wayside shrine. From the roof of this one may look down into two separate valleys and obtain an unusually vivid impression of how completely the Chinaman has brought the land under his control.

Let me now give a few memory pictures of one or another of the temples in which I chanced to rest during my journeys.

My second excursion was to the iron ore fields of Luanchow in the northeast part of the province of Chihli. Here too I was attended by the same congenial assistant, Mr. Chang Cheng Kuang, who was with us at Chai T'ang. For several days we had night quarters in a little temple which lay in the midst of the ore fields. It was a very poverty-stricken temple, consisting of a couple of houses with some painted idols of clay and straw, a wall that had partly collapsed from the weakness of age, and a little garden plot where the single ancient priest raised his cabbage and onions.

The temple offered us nothing more than a scanty covering above our heads. But it stood on a little hill, and in front of the outside wall was a terrace where we used to sit in the evening after work.

One evening as we sat there in company with the old priest, while the day swiftly changed into dark night, a form came silently around the wall and sank down on the stone terrace. A conversation ran on in an undertone between Mr. Chang and the newcomer. Gradually I perceived that the stranger was a beggar, who came to the temple to sleep the night out on the terrace. Mr. Chang questioned him on villages, roads, officials and bandits. The answers came through the dark with the same calm dignity as that with which the official's questions were put. Then gradually there was quiet. A little later, when we rose to go to our sleeping room in the temple, Mr. Chang softly laid some coins on the sleeping beggar's head.

Chou Kou Tien is a small industrial town west of Peking at the foot of the so-called Western Mountains. Endless files of camels pass up and down through the valley to bring jet from the mines in the mountains, and at Chou Kou Tien itself there is an extensive lime industry. In one of the lime diggings there was discovered in the summer of 1921 a grotto filled with earth. In this, during extensive excavations, we found rich remains of early tertiary mammal fauna. During our long and repeated visits to Chou Kou Tien we always lived in a little temple on the eastern bank of the river which ran out of the mountain valley. The temple was very insignificant and it had recently suffered the same fate as many others of China's small country temples and been turned into a village school. Several idols still stood in one of the temple houses, and an old attendant lighted sticks of incense and rang the temple bell. But in addition to him there was an active little schoolteacher, a man with horn-rimmed spectacles, on the precincts, and it was through his favor that we got a large and comfortable room at our disposal.

In the outer court, overspreading the temple like a mighty world-tree, stood an old giant specimen of the *ginkgo biloba*, a tree which with its mighty trunk, its great crown of boughs and peculiar two-lobed leaves, supple as tiny fans, immediately attracted my attention. Before I came to Chou Kou Tien the ginkgo had been but a very casual acquaintance,

which I had known only from some hothouse specimens with the botanical tag saying that the tree was native to China and Japan.

But I knew the ginkgo better from another point of view in that I had collected imprints of its leaves in carboniferous layers of the Jurassic period at Spitzbergen. The ginkgo is one of those rare long-lived organisms which, while the remaining plant and animal world has entirely changed form, lives on unaltered from the Mesozoic age. And here above this little village temple a huge specimen of this ancient family spread its vigorously sprouting branches toward the sunny heavens of northern China.

We went into the inner temple court and took possession of the room which my boy had previously put in order. From an adjacent temple building came with a rising and falling murmur the sound of the school children at their reading lesson. I asked my assistant, Mr. Yeh, what they were reading. "The teachings of Kung Fu Tze," he replied.

Confucius, prince's son, official and teacher of morals, was born in the sixth century, B.C. His words still live on the lips of his people, just as his family still lives honored in his native district in the province of Shantung.

So here were the ginkgo and Kung Fu Tze, two ancient and mighty world-trees with their roots deep in the past. In this little temple I perceived them for the first time as a vital weft in the fabric of modern existence. These two relics of worlds long dead

overshadowed here the play and work of the growing generation in the same way that China's mighty past raises itself everywhere high above the present.

One winter when the Chinese New Year's Day fell in February, I took at the time of that holiday a little pleasure trip to the warm springs of Tangshan, thirty kilometers north of Peking. The plain of Peking lies framed in a bend of mountains, and the border between the mountain country and the plain is marked by a jagged semicircular line, within which the champagne area slopes down a thousand meters or more.

Along this crack in the earth's surface warm springs break out in certain places, and the most famous of these are the Tangshan Springs. They lie at the foot of a little limestone hill enclosed within two marble basins, which are a memorial of imperial days when His Majesty visited Tangshan in his own high person, attended by his court. They resided in the beautiful pavilions which stood among the ponds north of the hot springs.

The springs have now been made accessible to the public. Some of the beautiful but dilapidated buildings of the imperial days have been torn down, and a hotel with long low ranges of buildings has been put up by the springs. In the newly constructed bathhouses the hot, as it is said radio-active, water is conducted into basins of larger and smaller sizes.

This time I did not choose the new automobile road from Peking to Tangshan but rode, followed by

my groom, on narrow paths straight to Tangshan. My favorite horse, Anton, was young at that time and we had a pleasant ride over cultivated land, sandy plain and small valleys with brooks running through. At that time of year the baths are little frequented, and I had several quiet days, during which, alternating with the hot baths, I took all-day rides up to the mountains north of Tangshan. My small horses, which had to live a long while on stable fodder, were wild with delight when they could graze on the dry winter grass on the mountain slopes.

Wonderful marble formations, limestone springs that poured in mighty torrents out of their marble beds, — these were some of the notable sights on such trips.

One day we came to a splendid park with cypresses and other trees, which in perpendicular rows flanked the approach to a tomb temple. On the northern edge of the park stood the temple buildings with a dwelling house for the guards and truncated cones painted red to mark the graves.

This tomb temple, resting in seclusion and deepest peace, had the name of Lin Yeh Fen Ti, which may be translated "The Tomb of the Sixth Sublimity." It is a minor member of one of the old dynasties who with his family has his grave here.

In the late autumn of 1918 we settled in the mountain tract between Peking and Kalgan to chart the iron ore fields of Hsuan-Lung. We worked at a height of eight hundred meters above the sea. The

November frost was beginning to penetrate the earth, and a great snowfall came very inopportunely for my work at the measuring board.

The Spanish influenza was now devastating these regions. In the little mountain village of Shang P'o Ti we found nearly all the people sick or dead. After a night there we were forced to go straight on, for we could not get the accommodation we needed. In the district capital, Hsuan Hua Fu, it was impossible to get trays for our collections, because all the joiners were making coffins.

One evening we had found our way into a little village temple at the foot of Huang Yong Shan (Antelope Mountain). The temple lies in a valley terrace, at whose foot a little river, dry in winter, winds its way. High above us to the south the dark angular contour of Antelope Mountain was outlined against the bright starry heavens. To the north we had a clear view across a treeless desert of drift sand, which extended far down to the Hun River.

I had eaten my late dinner and was standing a while at the gate of the temple court, looking out across the silent region, where the only sounds were the chatter of my men, the stamping of the horses and the chill whimpering of a dog down in the village. With that I heard the soft and distant hammering of drums and the continuous muffled note of trumpets, which gradually drew nearer. It was a band of priests and peasants coming up to the temple to make a sacrifice for the averting of the terrible visitation, the pest, as they called it.

Slowly the procession passed into the temple court. The doors of the temple were opened, sticks of burning incense were stuck in the sand in bronze bowls before the idols, and a great bonfire of twigs was kindled out in the court, while a priest beat on the temple bell and the drums and trumpets resounded.

Then all grew quiet and the men sat down to gossip in the temple, while the fire died down.

I had been sleeping a while, when the ringing of the bells again gave the signal for fresh music and a new fire out in the court. I lay in a half doze, while the fire flamed up time after time to the clangor of the bells, the thumping of the drums, and the dull bellowing of the trumpets.

But while the poor superstitious folk were working for dear life to chase away the evil spirits, the foreign devil lay secure and comfortable in his tent-bed, wondering whether he ought to be annoyed at the loss of his sleep or yield himself to the enchantment of the nocturnal sacrifice.

In the mountain region of southern Shansi we came one evening to a wretchedly poor little village, where the temple was our only possible refuge. It was so little that Mr. Cheng, my assistant, my boy and I could just manage to find room with our instruments, beds and cooking utensils.

That reverence for learning had reached even this little spot we discovered when the village schoolmaster came to Mr. Cheng with some long paper sheets and asked him to write a couple of "scrolls",

that is, artistically executed maxims in mammoth characters in vertical rows. Mr. Cheng sat out in the temple court and there wrote in a crowd of village folk, among them my insignificant self, some caligraphic masterpieces which greatly raised us in the popular estimation. The Chinese characters are formed with brush strokes which hardly permit of any retouching, and when, as in this case, the characters are each and all some three inches high, it requires an unusual *sang-froid* to execute such patterns in public, where the slightest fault would be unmercifully criticized. Mr. Cheng's masterpiece, well backed with silk, doubtless adorns the teacher's room to-day.

Darkness had fallen and we were sitting in the little temple room at our supper, when my boy came in and asked us to excuse the fact that a woman and her son had come to make an offering to the memory of the lately deceased father of the family.

A young woman of dignified bearing with handsome regular features and bright intelligent eyes entered the temple, leading a half-grown boy, the stamp of whose aspect showed the dead father to have been a worthy mate to this mother, so radiant with health, energy and intelligence.

The woman lighted the sticks of incense at the altar, then they both fell on their knees and touched the floor with their foreheads while the mother made her invocation.

When the memorial service was completed, mother and son stood still for a time, while the mother gave

concise and lucid answers to Mr. Cheng's questions. Her husband had been the headman of the village, and as a mark of honor toward the deceased and his widow, the boy, the eldest of the children, had been made his father's successor in the office with his mother as assistant. She looked fully able to manage both children and village.

During the early days of September, 1924, I was journeying in the southern section of the Gobi Desert north of the city of Liangchow in Kansu. We lived in the very smallest desert village and made all-day excursions to necropolises and ancient dwelling places. The desert surrounded us on all sides, except where the subsoil water rose near to the surface and gave moisture enough for some patches of tilled ground.

After a long desert march we came one evening to a fairly large village, where we received permission to put up at the temple. There was a small temple court shaded by abundant foliage, a glorious contrast to the empty desolation of the desert only a few hundred meters away from this idyllic shrine. My tent bed was within the temple and my table out in the open on a stone terrace which formed the front of the temple building. The darkness came with the chilly starlight of the desert night, and I sat meditating, while my men made merry around a little fire in the court. Then footsteps pattered, the door of the court was opened, and a troop of men with lanterns came in. They were villagers coming for a special late temple service.

"We shall not disturb you," they assured us affably, whereupon they lighted their incense sticks and rang the bells. Quiet and considerate, with an obvious effort to leave me in peace, the troop went by, and while the odor of the incense lay upon the court and the clang of the metal vibrated through the still night, I sat thinking on the power of Chinese culture to show even out here on the rim of life its best features: the deep peace of the temple and the quiet considerateness of the worshippers.

Now that I have set down these, to me, colorful memories of tree-shadowed Chinese temples, I may perhaps close this chapter with a recollection of a merrier sort from a Tibetan temple at Kokonor. By the western end of Kokonor Lake we found a band of Mahometan builders from the city of Tangar in process of putting up for the Tibetan lamas a new temple by the name of Gardense. The chief building was finished and was still quite clean and fine. The lamas had had letters from General Ma at Sining as to my proposed visit and were extremely agreeable. I was conducted into a stately reception room, in which was a great low *k'ang* covered with handsome rugs. The front wall was provided with shelves, on which the artistic treasures of the temple, many of them very wonderful, were arranged. There were many vessels of simple Chinese cloisonné, three foreign storm lanterns of copper, and two objects of enameled sheet iron which are known by the name of *vase de nuit*.