

# THE CHINESE SPECTACLE

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ABOUT a month ago I attempted to get as near as time would permit me to the menacing Japanese volcano of Asama-Yama. For a few moments, through yielding cloud-banks, from a train-window, I saw a great column of dark smoke rise from the summit and then spread plume-like over the sky. Later I stood on the jagged surface of the vast lava-bed that lies at the base of the mountain, and felt beneath my feet tangible evidence of the reality of a monster which I was no longer permitted to see. Though in this way I had only a fugitive glimpse of the active operation of the volcano, I yet had a vivid and haunting sense that I was in the vicinity of a portentous phenomenon.

For three weeks now I have been in Peking, from the safe vantage-ground of personal comfort examining the fringes and scanning as it were the vast bulk of the phenomenon that is China. As in the case of the volcano, I have the moral sense that I am in the vicinity of an elemental phenomenon. No human spectacle that I have ever before confronted has given me an equal feeling of the primitive, the primordial.

To what, I ask myself, is this impression of the elemental—emotionally produced on me by China—due? I cannot answer the question authoritatively or exhaustively; the suggestions I assemble may be grotesquely inadequate; but I am confident that I am signaling a reality when I affirm that China does produce this effect in a way for me hitherto quite unequalled.

It is due, for one thing, to sheer size. This size is a matter of numbers (perhaps 400, perhaps 450, millions). It is a matter of territory: China, so hard to unify—what wonder?—is almost as large as Europe. I did not experience this exact feeling of the elemental in regard to Russia, because after all there is a big gulf between 120 or 160 millions and 400 or 450 millions. The United States does not produce the same impression because, again, there is a like gulf between the numbers of the two. And then, somehow, the sophistication and standardization of the comfortable material life of America prevents that people from breaking on your imagination in a very elemental way. I suppose India, if I knew it, would strike me similarly.

Secondly, this vast phenomenon of China has had an amazing continuity. Dynasties have been founded and have fallen again and again in the course of 5,000 years of recorded history, often with colossal expenditure of life; alien cultures and religions have been imported again and again; but always the great sea of indigenous life, fertility, and persistence has risen over the scene; the alien elements have been swallowed up; the deep wounds have been cicatrized, so that only the expert can find them.

These four hundred millions of human beings! They include, of course, an elite of refined and subtle individuals who live a highly intellectual and sophisticated life. If the 400 millions were all like that, the collectivity would not have the rank savor I am suggesting that it has, of the elemental. But for the immeasurably greater part, this vast mass of humanity is engaged, as no other population that I have seen, in the primitive, almost animal-like struggle for life. Between the bath-room that I use and a lane-like street there is just the thickness of a wall. I hear all of a sudden a babel of cries. What are these cries? The eager vying of perhaps a score of ricksha-boys for the chance to pull someone a distance that may mean a fee of 20 cents Mex.; for an American or Canadian to-day, about 4 cents. One will get the chance; the cries die away; and 19 pathetically eager men and boys sink back into quiet to rest and wait, and in a stolid way hope.

Yesterday I saw the biggest funeral I had yet seen. Forty-eight men shouldered the great red poles of the catafalque. As I rode to the railway station a few hours later to say good-bye to an old student of mine now working in the interior, I asked him how much the son concerned would have to pay those 48 men who transported his father's body. I cannot go into the details, but he figured out that those 48 men might cost the equivalent of \$12.00 gold. As that same funeral procession halted before a huge mat-shed that had been created on the street-side so that friends of the deceased might drink a cup of tea, I noticed that about three times great showers of white paper disks were thrown into the air, so as to fall about the catafalque. What were these? Paper money, which the dead man was supposed to need beyond the grave. Then, like vultures pouncing on prey, dozens of battered men gathered these disks from the grime and mud. Why? I asked my young friend. "They will sell them for next to nothing to serve as paper-money for poor men's funerals!" And these petty illustrations of urban struggle for trifles are set against the background of still more primitive peasant toil: strained and tugging bodies, vast burdens, infinitesimal rewards—it is the constant sight of things

like these that helps to make this vast population strike you as something primitive, elemental, portentous.

Poverty and filth thrust themselves on your attention almost everywhere. On board the Japanese steamer on which I came from Dairen to Taku, as I looked down on the coolies preparing to spend the night on the open deck, I saw a man deliberately set to work to rid his feet of a thick incrustation of dirt—I should not like to tell you how. Riding some days ago in a dainty ricksha behind a "boy" over six feet tall who is built like a Greek god, I saw, seated in the centre of a vast open field strewn with rubbish, the figure of a man I think that when I persuaded myself that it was a man I had just about the sensation La Bruyère must have had when he saw, raising their faces, the group of peasants whom he etched for all time in one of the most famous of his paragraphs. "And lo! they were human beings!" This man's rags barely hung on his body, and among them he was hunting for vermin. It is a very common sight in Peking to see an ancient woman with a huge open basket on her back fishing with a pronged stick for bits of paper among the noisome debris of nuisance-grounds. Yesterday, again as I rode happily to the pleasant home of a scholar, I saw an old man sitting by the stump of a tree that had been felled very close to the ground. He had evidently been able to make an incision horizontally, by sawing or in some other way. At any rate as my "boy" passed by him, he was splintering off with a hatchet inch-long pieces of the wood, which he was carefully garnering in a bag. Such savage or tremulous clutching at the merest trifles of wage or food is one of the things which, coupled with your sense of the multitude of the people, give you the feeling of portent.

This vast population lies as hardly any other in the world under the imminent and recurrent threat of great natural calamities. The winds from wide northern deserts pile the western Highlands with powdery loess to the depth of hundreds of feet. The rivers carry this down in unequalled quantities. It fills up their beds. The people like ants build up walls to hem in the water that is at once their hope and their terror. The dykes break, and again like ants, the people of the densely-populated plains die. Famine, pestilence, and fighting—three of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse—add their terrors and decimations. The books that I am reading these days suggest that the pacific temper and history of the Chinese is largely a delusion. "Nature red in tooth and claw" is a sort of epitome of their 50 centuries of history. Soothill says that in the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1865) twenty millions of people died. That is double the number reputed to have fallen in the Great War.

The same author says that "In 1877 the province of Shansi was devastated by a terrible famine, when upwards of nine million people perished." This was not many years before the Empress Dowager spent an amount that I have seen put at \$50,000,000 to re-build the Summer Palace.

I am not, it should go without saying, making an indictment against a people. Poverty is not a crime. The fierce struggle for subsistence of a too prolific race is a tragedy, a tragedy in this case played on the grandest scale. I cannot help thinking that the brutality, cruelty, callousness bred perforce among a people too numerous, and throughout their history too exploited, to be able to live decently, counts for much in the sensation of the elemental produced on me by this people. Most of us, living sheltered lives, easily think that, at any rate save in the case of the excesses which occur in war, cruelty is pretty well a thing of the past. I sat in the rockery of a beautiful home here the other day. The daughter of my host said to me: "Did you notice the face of that woman who just crossed the court? She is my amah. She has had the most terrible life. Her mother, neglected by her husband, was in despair over the birth of twin-girls, in the wake of an already large family. This woman was one of those twins. The mother tried to drown the infants. They were rescued by a brother. Later the mother set a fire underneath the bed, put the children on it, and one of the two died of the burns received. This one, again rescued, survived. She married a brutal husband whom she now supports; and her two sons have turned out to be utterly worthless. What a life she has had, and yet her character is perfectly beautiful, her temper unspoiled, her face as gentle as that of a child." I did not feel as if it was possible that I was hearing a tale like this in the year 1932, about a woman who had just walked through a garden before me.

But I fancy I had better desist. I have a little feeling that, especially in the later portions of this at least well-meant article, I have had the air either of speaking superciliously or of blackening a people. I can only say I had no such intention. I simply meant to assemble a certain amount of material to substantiate what I think is a haunting part of the impression produced on a stranger by a people whose territory, whose numbers, whose incredibly protracted history, whose unhappy exploitation by selfish dynasties, whose fierce struggles for subsistence, make it take on the proportions of an awe-inspiring phenomenon.