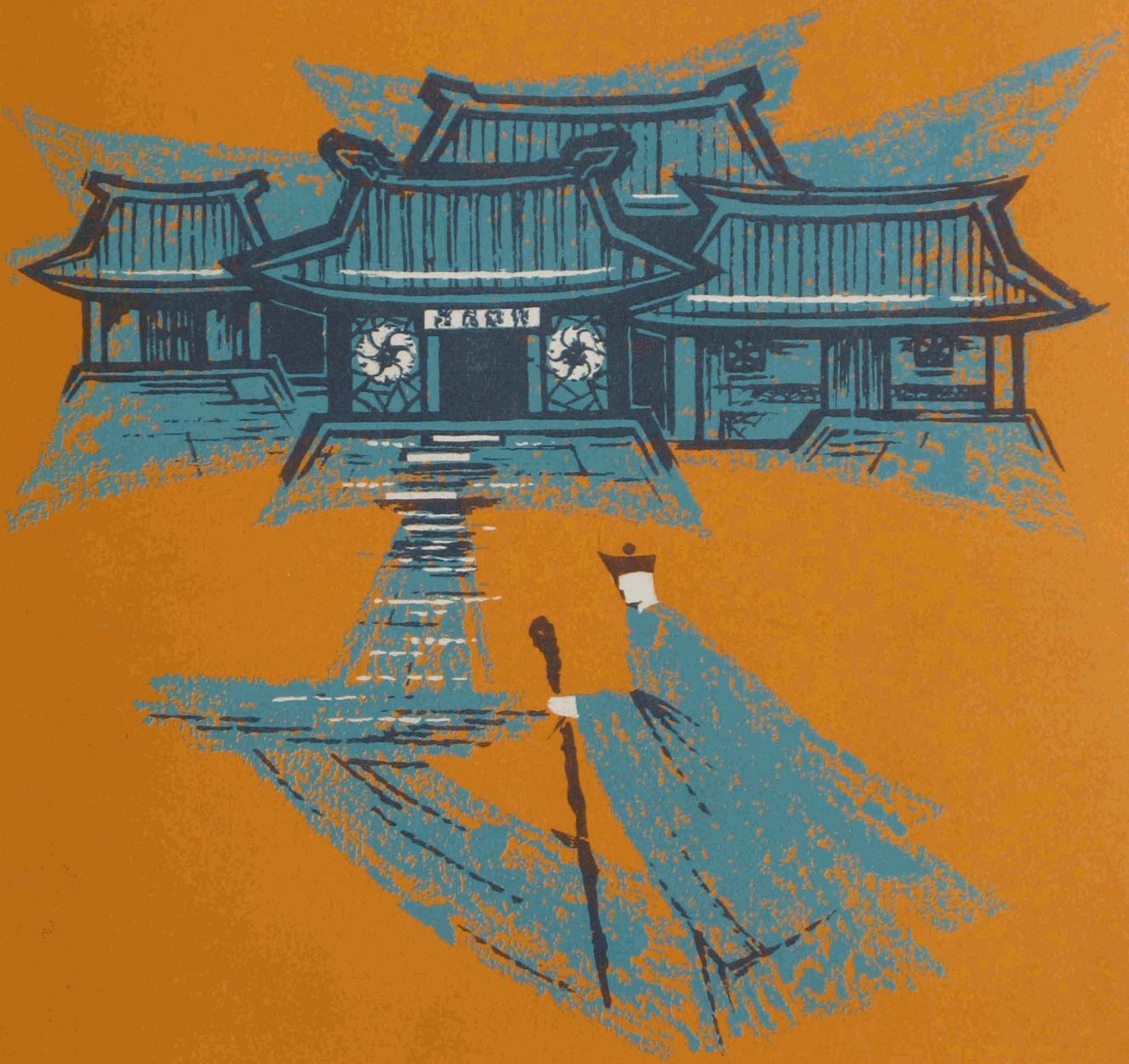


THE
MONASTERY
OF JADE
MOUNTAIN



PETER GOULLART

By the same Author

FORGOTTEN KINGDOM

PRINCES OF THE BLACK BONE

PETER GOULLART

The Monastery of
Jade Mountain

John Murray

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This book is dedicated to

DESMOND NEILL

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Preface

THE quest for a philosophy that brings spiritual assurance and peace of mind is a struggle that many people have to accept throughout their lives. Those who have written about such struggles have usually described them in the content of Christianity, though many Westerners have travelled the more devious routes of Hinduism and Buddhism, for these religions have in recent years become increasingly understood in the West. Had I stayed all my life in my own country I would probably have followed one of these three paths. At an early age, however, I was uprooted by the Russian Revolution and spent the next thirty years—the most fruitful years of my life—in China. There I came by chance into personal contact with another of the world's great religions—Taoism; lesser known outside China, but no less profound than Buddhism.

I came to appreciate and value Taoist teaching, until finally I became a practising Taoist. Yet, as every Taoist knows, the hardest thing about Taoism is to define precisely what a practising Taoist believes, thinks and does. Perhaps, therefore, my best way will be to write simply about my life, in the hope that from this it will become plain how I accepted this little-known philosophy and how it has affected my whole life.

Mother and Son

MY father died before I was two years of age and I do not remember him. He was of foreign extraction and an intellectual, and my mother married him when already thirty-two years old, in spite of fierce opposition from her brothers, who detested the idea of sharing the family fortune with a total stranger. My mother's family were Russian merchants who for generations had traded with the Orient. It was a large family, divided into several feuding factions, all of which had their own set notions about my mother's marriage. When she became a widow, not much sympathy was wasted on her, except by her two sisters, Tatiana and Marie. She disliked Moscow and other big cities, and most of her childhood was spent in a small town south of the capital, where we had a rambling house in Main Street with a large garden behind full of apple and cherry trees. This old house was shared with my grandmother Pelagie and Aunt Tatiana. The *ménage* was rustic and we had our own cows, pigs and chickens, and a kitchen garden which we cultivated with great care and enthusiasm. The town was surrounded by wooded hills and forests which stretched for miles in all directions. A clear and pretty river, overgrown with white nenuphars and yellow water-lilies, wandered through the meadows below the town.

My mother never tried to remarry, and instead, poured out all her love and devotion on me. As I came to realize later it was a potentially unwholesome situation for me, but in this respect, my mother, if not unique, at least differed from the majority of women in similar circumstances. As soon as I had grown up sufficiently to take an intelligent interest in the world around me, she exchanged her role of loving nurse into that of a friend and confidante. She did not pamper me in any way, neither did she

hesitate to punish me. She avoided those peremptory commands to do this or that without explaining why. Then she would seat me beside her, and gently tell me what would happen to me if I disobeyed her. Neither was she unduly protective, letting me go alone or with friends to roam in the forest or swim in the river. When she had to go away she would leave me in the charge of her elder sister, Tatiana and Grandmother Pelagie. Once, when I was only eight years old, she put me on a night train from the Crimea to Moscow, a terrifying experience for a small boy who had never travelled alone so far. She used to say she believed a child should not be too dominated by his mother lest his character be completely submerged by hers.

Since she did not intend to remarry for my sake, she made it quite plain that it was my duty to co-operate with her in bringing me up to be a comfort to her in her old age and a satisfaction to myself. She explained that we had only a modest income and that we could not expect much assistance from relatives, as they were not particularly fond of her, considering her an impractical idealist. They complained that by her intimate discussions with me of our problems of everyday life, including the family skeletons-in-the-cupboard, she was turning me into an unnatural monster at an age when I should still be an innocent angel of a child. She always laughed and said that a goodly dose of precociousness was desirable in a boy who had to start to rely on himself to earn a living in a hostile world. She was not so impractical an idealist.

I was not too naughty as a small boy but I always embarrassed my aunts, when visiting them, by asking awkward questions and making comments which deeply shocked them. I remember once, shortly after the wedding of my cousin Viacheslav to a Volga merchant heiress, I asked Aunt Marie, at a solemn family dinner, whether it was a marriage of convenience. It was like a thunderbolt, and they were quite speechless for some time, while Uncle Alexis jerked me off the chair and put me in a corner. They all said what an *enfant terrible* I was and prophesied that I would surely come to a bad end. I did not lack manners, but I was so accustomed to being treated almost as a grown-up by my

mother that my startling incursions into the elders' conversation were spontaneous and unpremeditated when I felt that the subject was not beyond my comprehension. My mother detested hypocrisy and always resisted the temptation to present me as a model child. She wanted me to acquire tact not so much by lecturing me as by my developing the perception to realize when I was wrong.

My mother was a well-educated woman and an avid reader. This passion she had communicated to me, and by the time I was thirteen I had to wear glasses because my eyes were weakened by too much reading. She was a dilettante in painting and poetry. It is true that her pictures never went farther than our living-room and her poetry never reached a publisher, but she created around her an aura of culture and refined sensibility which earned her the friendship of a number of intellectuals. Some of them were professors, one or two of them quite eminent in their day, philosophers, a theologian, a well-known theosophist and many brilliant conversationalists. With true feminine ingenuity and practicality she utilized them as unpaid tutors to myself, rewarding them with dinners and teas, caviare and champagne. Most of them were retired or independent gentlemen and as ladies were not excluded I owe much to these charming and refined *grandes dames* for their affectionate concern in giving me that necessary polish.

My inner life, however, became attuned to my mother's views from my earliest days. She was a protagonist of a simple and unaffected life, a being utterly and passionately absorbed in the moods and beauties of nature, whose essence she always strove to capture and understand.

Often in summer Mother would pack up a small picnic basket and hand in hand we would walk through the green rye fields towards a distant village. We would drink tea at some farmhouse and afterwards wander in the cool green shade of a near-by forest. My mother had her own favourite nooks hidden away in secret places. I loved one particular spot where there was a small spring gurgling out of a wooded knoll, with forget-me-nots growing near the water, white ground orchids climbing the

slopes and, hiding in the dark, mossy places, luxuriant lilies of the valley.

Another mysterious and romantic spot was called the 'Three Virgins', this was a small mound deep in the woods which, it was said, contained the mortal remains of three beautiful sisters who rather than submit to the amorous attentions of enemy officers during Napoleon's advance on the town, ran away and hid themselves in the forest. They died for lack of food and were found lying together with their arms locked in a loving embrace. The unnamed grave was always overgrown with beautiful wild flowers and in the ravine below grew a mysterious plant called Solomon's Seal, bunches of which we always gathered and took home.

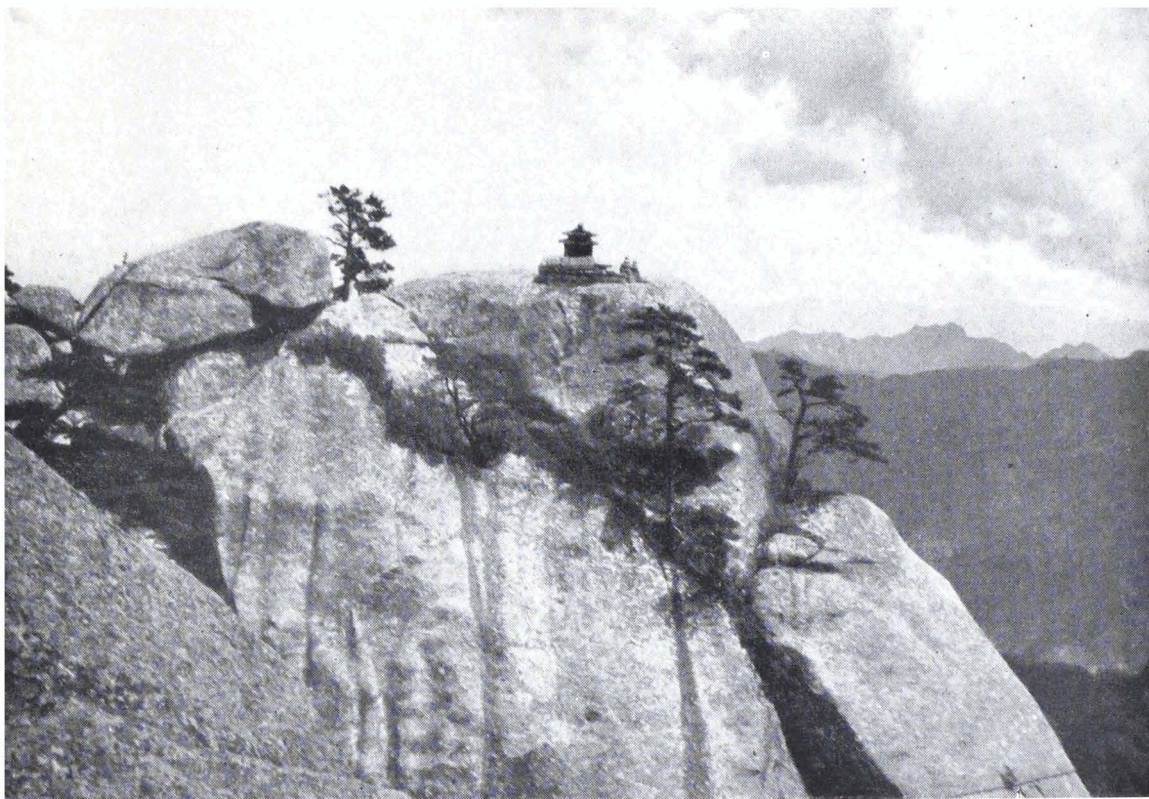
At the height of summer many ladies left the town on expeditions to gather wild strawberries and mushrooms, armed with ample baskets and pitchers. This afforded the satisfaction of a bloodless hunt and an innocuous adventure. My mother was an ardent devotee of this hunt for berries and mushrooms and always took me with her until I grew as excited by this pleasant outing as she herself. My mother would get me out of bed before dawn so that we should be amongst the first in the forest, but we always found that Aunt Tatiana had got there before us as she was a veteran in such campaigns and never let any sisterly affection interfere with this important business. She was such a fanatical hunter that, if we met each other later in the forest, she would either ignore us and disappear in some other direction amongst the trees or outwit us by collecting the biggest mushrooms right under our noses. She always returned home triumphant with her heavy baskets.

Whenever I found a particularly large mushroom my mother was as happy as if I had presented her with a diamond. Then in our wanderings we would come on a secondary growth, where the old trees had been cut down. Such spots abounded in luscious and fragrant wild strawberries glowing like rubies against the old stumps. It was a joy to drop them into the cool depths of a long earthen pitcher.

There were terrors and mysteries hidden in these great old



Summit of Mount Hwa (Hwasan)



A Taoist tomb on Mount Hwa
A Taoist monastery in the mountains

forests and although my mother was not unduly superstitious she believed in certain phenomena which the older generation claimed to be real. For example, it was believed that when the sun was at its zenith between noon and one o'clock in the afternoon, the forest became a playground for the *lieshy*, a sylvan spirit, the Puck of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To my mother it was a sort of collective exteriorization of half-perceived forces of nature at this magnetic hour at the spot least disturbed by the activities of men. She doubted whether it could materialize into a visible form, as others claimed, but it could affect man emotionally, inducing hallucinations and thought forms of that primordial consciousness which all living nature possesses. At this hour she would make me sit down with her and not attempt to walk back through the forest lest we get lost in its depths.

Actually no one took the spell too seriously and we tried to leave the forest many times at this particular hour, but somehow we could not remember or recognize familiar landmarks and invariably found that we were walking round and round in circles. A curious sensation that we were being watched by a myriad eyes always assailed us during these wanderings.

There were wild animals, bears, wolves, foxes, elks and badgers, but these were not very numerous and in summer they had so much food that they were not considered dangerous. They never molested us, though once a large brown bear ate up all the strawberries we had collected but turned up its nose at the sour pumpkin we had in our basket.

Unlike Aunt Tatiana, who spent hours in prayer in the evening, my mother was not devout. However, she had her simple faith and discharged her duty to society by giving me a conventional religious education, which was later supplemented by my reading a very ancient, unexpurgated and unabridged Bible in archaic Slavonic, on parchment paper, wonderfully illuminated and bound in heavy leather with ponderous brass clasps. This precious book came into the possession of my mother's branch of the family during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, and was a direct translation from the ancient Greek manuscripts brought to the Grand Duchy of Muscovy by the Byzantine ecclesiastics who

accompanied Princess Sophia Paleologue on her way to Moscow to marry Grand Duke Ivan III. The rugged grandeur and majesty of this remarkable book forever impressed my young mind and paved the way to understanding certain limitations of the modern editions of Holy Writ which tend to bow to the prevailing ideas of morality of different sects and races. There was another book called *Lives of the Good* which was much read in monasteries and convents by the monks and nuns, both in the seclusion of their cells and publicly during monastic meals. It was non-canonical but much revered nevertheless. I read only parts of it, as it was too huge and difficult to obtain. It described the struggles of the men and women in search of God since the earliest days of Christianity, and how they succeeded in attaining sainthood. It is this venerable book which made a strong impact on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and several other celebrated Russian authors, subsequently colouring their writings.

There was no dearth of saints in Russia, and many of them had lived in the forests within a hundred-mile radius from Moscow. From all accounts, both official and private, they were pleasant and even jolly men, who preferred the solitude of the great forest to a noisy life in a big town. In their little huts they read, meditated and prayed during long winter months, with oil lamps gently flickering before the icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary. In summer some devout peasants sought out their hermitages and brought them small offerings of flour, salt, oil and other edibles, asking for a blessing. It is said that many of them enjoyed the friendship of wild animals. The most famous of the recent saints was Seraphim of Sarov, who was befriended by a big bear. Whenever a visitor arrived, the saint instructed the animal to bring some wild honey to entertain the guest. This saint had a great fascination for me, as he was a brilliantly educated and cultured officer in Tsar Nicholas I's Imperial Guard. His wit and charm had made him the darling of the Court and the most exclusive salons in St Petersburg. Then, suddenly, he threw up everything and, as a penniless wanderer, settled for ever in the almost inaccessible depths of a forest. He wrote some remarkable treatises on mysticism, but unfortunately they were destroyed after his death

by the emperor's order because, being clairvoyant, he predicted the end of the dynasty, with details which shocked the Tsar.

Splendid monasteries had sprung up on the spots where these saints lived, and we often visited those near Moscow and our town. After a whole day in a horse-trap, it was sheer delight to see from an elevation a cluster of golden cupolas floating above the green forest, while the crenellated walls of the enclosure glowed soft pink or blue. On arrival we saw some elderly monks, who conducted us to the common mess, a vast vaulted hall pleasantly cool after the day's travel. We sat on a wooden bench by a long table and ate tasty fish soup, with pumpernickel and pickled cucumbers, while taking sips of *kvass*, a home-made sour ale. If it was a feast day, we usually attended the high service, which began at six in the morning and continued till one in the afternoon. On such festive days it was usually the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom which I loved, with its sonorous singing and mystical invocations. In the Russian churches people had to stand during the whole length of the service, and sometimes I felt very tired. There were a few benches by the wall for the very aged and infirm, but sitting on them for a long time was not encouraged, being considered indecorous in the extreme. I also liked ordinary church services, especially vespers, and joyous paschal liturgies. Generally speaking, the yoke of the Orthodox Church has always been light, no one being required to go to church regularly; this matter was left entirely to one's conscience and inclination. People were not permitted to sing during the services, the music was provided by a well-trained choir, and there were no sermons except on exceptional occasions. These silken ties, I still believe, have worked better in retaining the faithful in the fold than any priestly vigilance, persuasions, admonitions and other forms of coercion, however mild.

Of our relatives I liked Aunt Marie best. She lived twenty miles away at another small town. In winter the trip was made by train to a mean station and thence by diligence—twelve miles through a wolf-infested forest. The attacks by these ferocious beasts were infrequent, but they always inspired terror in our hearts. Some miles from the town was a graceful pink monastery

with battlements and gold and azure cupolas crowning its churches and shrines. We rested there and prayed a little before the tomb of St Pafnoutius, a local saint, who, it was said, was related to our family. Then there were other churches on the way, and more churches in town, attesting not so much, my mother informed me, to the people's piety as to the local merchants' wealth. They always thanked God in this manner after some extra big and successful business coup. The town was a stronghold of Old Believers, a curious and, to me, repulsive sect, with their men growing enormous untrimmed beards and collecting their nail parings to put into their coffins with them, enemies of education and all progress. It was they who had prevented the railway passing the town, by paying an enormous bribe to the construction engineer to arrange for the necessary deviation. But they were enormously rich and poured their money into building two stupendous 'prayer houses' of their own, each of which looked like a cross between the Paris Opéra and a mosque. Their womenfolk were kept in seclusion and permitted no education except to be able to read their scriptures; no other books were allowed in the house. Aunt Marie's son tried to capture one of these heiresses, and a matchmaker had duly arranged an interview with one of the richest. He found her, in the presence of her mother, in a drawing-room sitting demurely under an icon and twirling her thumbs. No one said a word for an hour or two. Finally my cousin gathered enough courage to ask the girl:

'Do you always pass your time this way?'

She blushed and stammered:

'No, sometimes I do it the other way,' and began twirling her thumbs in the opposite direction. He left in disgust.

Aunt Marie was a fat and jolly woman who had produced seventeen children before she was forty. A few had died and others were married and scattered, leaving only two young girls, Anna and Nadine, at home. They were much older than myself but great fun, and I enjoyed their company immensely. The household was presided over by Uncle Alexis, who so much resembled the celebrated French novelist Jules Verne, that Mother

and I called him Uncle Jules Verne to his face. He was a wealthy pawnbroker, the only one in fact for miles around, and he also had a good-sized department store on Strasnoy Square in Moscow, the hub of the capital. It was at his flat that we always stayed when in Moscow.

I must confess that the main attraction for me in visiting Aunt Marie was neither she nor her family but her wonderful house. It was an enormous white building four storeys high, with balconies, in a wide courtyard facing one of the main streets. It stood on an eminence, with a marvellous view of the town, the winding river, and all the monasteries and churches and forested hills beyond. The building was old and its origins veiled in mystery. Uncle Alexis had bought it from government trustees as the family who had owned it became extinct during the Napoleonic wars. It was a castle in every meaning of the word. Its walls were incredibly solid and so massive, secret passages had been found, together with underground dungeons or cellars, and we children surreptitiously looked for hidden springs and levers for concealed doors or panels. The family lived on the second floor, the rest of the rooms being used as storage space for pawned articles, and offices. There was a huge ballroom and a drawing-room, with parquet floor and old Dutch stoves in the corners decorated with figured porcelain tiles, while a veritable forest of potted palms, ficus and philodendron nearly concealed all the walls. It was in this ballroom that Anna and Nadine taught me dancing to the tunes of a big gramophone or a large grand piano.

In addition to its physical attractions the house was haunted. The Emperor Napoleon, during his advance on Moscow in 1812, had used it as his headquarters for a considerable period of time, and it is said that he slept in the corner room on the second floor, which was always allocated to my mother and myself during our visits. It was connected to the rest of the house by a long vaulted passage passing a small room which contained a very old and massive writing table. My mother and cousins were addicted to spiritualism and, when the moon was full, we all expected phenomena. What they were I am not sure, but some people said Napoleon could be seen passing through the passage or entering

the corner bedroom. In spite of all the delicious terror with which we patiently waited for something to happen, I only came across two things that might be considered odd. One was that exactly at midnight we could hear someone turning the pages of a large book at the desk in the small room in the passage, and the chair at the desk slightly creaked. We always watched but could see nobody in that room. The other curious occurrence was the frenzy of a huge sheep-dog which was always chained at night to a thick wire so that he could run between the house and the gate. He seemed to see some spectral shape in the moonlight and was always chasing it up and down with a tremendous uproar.

Autumn days in central Russia were depressing in the extreme. Low, leaden clouds blanketed the sky and thin but penetrating rain fell for weeks on end, turning town streets and country roads into quagmires of black, slippery mud. Darkness came early in the afternoon, and the only refuge was to sit at home near the big Dutch stove and prepare lessons or read something by the mellow light of a kerosene lamp. My mother and Aunt Tatiana usually read the books or magazines borrowed from a local library. Grandmother Pelagie was over ninety years old and walked with difficulty because of rheumatic pains and failing eyesight. But her mind was as clear as that of a young woman and, when I became tired of figures and tenses, triangles, pyramids and the Wars of the Roses, I asked her to tell me stories of the days when her husband was a great merchant in cattle and tea. She disliked the living-room and always retired to our spacious kitchen where the huge Russian oven spread a pleasant warmth all over the place. I sat on a small stool by her feet and gave her a lead by asking her the history of the Mongol samovar upstairs, or the painted China tea-chest, or other oriental curiosities accumulated over many years. She sat for a while reminiscing and then began to talk in a clear warm voice adjusting her cashmere shawl from time to time. It was all about tea and how difficult it was to transport it in those days by caravan via Kiakhta, and about strange cities and customs of China as related to her by her husband and sons who accompanied him. She was full of respect when speaking of China, saying what a wonderful land old Cathay was, its people

courteous and hospitable, law-abiding and scrupulously honest in business. She spoke of mysterious Tibet, where all the people were pious and built great monasteries amid snow-covered mountains, and of the Mongols who lived in *yourts*, and of their *shamans* and strange customs and *koumiss* drinking. Grandfather's cattle business was very profitable there, but hazardous, for the place was full of brigands and cattle thieves. But the most dreaded risk was the prevalence of anthrax, a deadly disease easily caught from the cattle and for which in those days there was no known cure. Her son Theodore caught it in the steppes near Kobdo, and was soon on his deathbed with the horrible black pustule on his arm, the Siberian Ulcer, as anthrax was called there. Abandoned by his terrified assistants, he lay in a lonely hut when a Mongol *shaman* called. He baked a big onion, danced and drummed a little, muttering incantations, then cut the soft bulb in two, tying one half to the ulcer. When he left, my uncle became very thirsty. But for some reason, probably a *fantaisie du malade*, he did not want water or tea, but craved *kahor*, that sweet red Greek wine which is used by the Orthodox Church for Holy Communion. As it was a Russian settlement where he stayed, there was a church, and the priest sent him two bottles. This was not enough to appease his thirst, and he consumed eight more. Then he fell into a drunken coma and during the night literally flooded the hut with urine, waking at noon next day much improved. In a week or so the ulcer disappeared and he became well. These stories of Grandmother Pelagie, both tragic and comic, excited my interest in the Orient, and in journeys to China, Tibet and Mongolia. I little thought then that circumstances would force me to spend years of my life in China.

Our infrequent trips to France and Italy were thrilling to me only because I had the opportunity of seeing new places and fresh scenery. As far as the people were concerned, I never felt that I was not at home. The only difference was the language, but that was not a barrier. Few people of the present generation will believe me when I state that the Russian *milieu* of pre-World War I, as far as upper and middle classes were concerned, was in no way different from that of the West. The living standards were the

same, and the food and clothing. An intelligent person in France or Italy could hardly be distinguished from his Russian counterpart. Both were familiar with the literature and art of each other's country. The Russia of those days was full of French, English and other foreign residents and travellers, and we could hardly find any difference between them and ourselves, except perhaps in the matter of accent. When we were in Western Europe, we went to the same restaurants, shops, libraries and theatres always feeling ourselves on familiar ground. It was only after the Revolution, when the upper and middle classes had been utterly destroyed or scattered, that Russia became a sort of *terra incognita* belonging neither to the West nor to Asia, without any social standards of its own. The present efforts of the Soviets to implant culture by *fiat* cannot be successful, since the matrix of the present-day Russians is too coarse and there is no tradition to fall back on. I think that there is hardly any person in the new generation in Russia who is 'to the manner born'. When I returned to Europe recently after many years in China, I felt I was back to my childhood days with the same type of people, in the same old cafés and exchanging the same small courtesies. Nothing had changed for me in Europe, except that there were neon lights and more cars in the streets.

Retreat to the Monastery

THE days of my childhood and youth were happy, with a loving and prudent mother to guide me, who, at the same time, was able to win and hold my confidence as my intimate friend and adviser. Many people, brought up in the lap of nature, take for granted the beauty and freedom of forests, hills and rivers, and the glory of wild flowers and fragrant air; and their appreciation of these blessings comes to them only a long time afterwards, in retrospect, or as an afterthought when they have become tired drudges in a big town. My mother in her wisdom taught me to enjoy them to the full while they lasted, and not to wait for some hypothetical future joys. Even now I have twinges of cold horror when I reflect that I might have been born and brought up in the slums of a great city with the foetid air of small and gloomy rooms, potted geraniums for flowers, and some distant dusty park to play in.

As I grew older, I was sometimes seized with an inchoate presentiment that this happiness could not continue for ever. This feeling, as I see it now, was perhaps natural to me, my mother being very sensitive and credited with clairvoyant powers. It seems I have inherited this mysterious faculty, which is now fashionably called *Psi*, and it has helped me on a number of occasions to extricate myself from situations of considerable danger. My forebodings were realized when World War I had been declared. The first blow was to my further education. My mother had arranged for my entrance to a special lyceum where youths were trained for the diplomatic service. Now it was all off, the school having been temporarily suspended. Then Grandmother Pelagie died; she was ninety-seven and quite helpless. Looking back on subsequent events I thank God that she passed away when

she did, thus escaping many intolerable sufferings which it was our fate to undergo. The Revolution brought chaos in its wake, when the Bolsheviks had concluded the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Millions of soldiers rushed home wrecking all transport. Deprived of flour and other necessities from the Ukraine, a terrible famine seized central Russia. We were starving for weeks, an experience I shall never forget. So acute were the pangs of hunger that even a morsel of bread, made of old buckwheat with sawdust and straw to add to its bulk, appeared a wonderful delicacy. Ever since those frightful days I have a profound respect for food; its waste distresses me and whenever I see a piece of bread carelessly thrown on to the pavement I always pick it up to tuck away somewhere for a hungry dog or bird rather than see it trodden under foot. At the same time I dislike persons who make a fuss over their food. They would eat anything, were they really hungry.

The world continued to crumble about us. It seemed that all reality had disappeared and that we were emerging from a pleasant dream into a monstrous nightmare. Where there was order and honour seemingly only yesterday, now there was chaos, brutality and sheer barbarity. My mother and I could not stand it, neither could we fit into the new bestial set-up. We packed in a hurry all we could and, with enormous difficulties and dangers, made our way to Turkistan hoping to escape into India. Horrible adventures awaited us in Samarkand and Bokhara, and the road through Afghanistan was blocked by bloodthirsty bands of robbers. It took us many weeks to retrace our steps until we found ourselves in a train for Vladivostok, only to be blocked again by the Czech uprising in Siberia. It was a terrifying journey but we survived and, when Vladivostok was about to fall to the Reds again, we sailed for Shanghai.

Shortly after arrival I was fortunate to find an accounting job with a Greek cigarette factory. The salary was small, but we were given a spacious and comfortable apartment in the factory owner's house. I liked China at once and thought it was all as Grandmother Pelagie had described to me. I liked to mix with the workers at the factory, both men and women, and I soon

picked up the rudiments of the Chinese language. A few years later I improved it by staying for some time at a Chinese school in Soochow. My mother, however, never fully recovered from the sufferings we had undergone and from the realization that we had lost everything. Now and then she was seized with fits of despondency and nostalgia. Her depression was made worse by her isolation from people, as she did not know English and was too old to learn it. We had occasional letters from Aunt Tatiana who wrote to report, two or three years later, that Uncle Alexis had died, then shortly afterwards that Aunt Marie had followed him to the grave, and again, to our great sorrow, that my Cousin Nadine had died of typhoid. The last letter was from Cousin Anna to say that Aunt Tatiana had also passed away, and that she herself was leaving Moscow. We never heard from her or anyone else again. It was the end of our large family.

It was with a sense of utter helplessness that I watched my mother slipping into melancholia. I earned barely enough for our ordinary living, and there was nothing left to provide her with little luxuries or distractions. I wanted to take her on trips to beautiful places like Soochow or Hangchow, or buy her interesting Russian books or other things. Alas! our budget did not permit it. She lived entirely in the past, the strange and fascinating oriental life around her leaving her cold. Only cinemas seemed to hold her interest, and we went to one almost every evening.

The beginning of the end came in a macabre manner. Almost every week we had seances with an ouija-board, merely for pleasure and not for any necromantic purpose. We always had responses from a certain spirit called Omar, who amused us by spinning all sorts of interesting stories about an old Roman treasure buried on an island somewhere off the Philippines or Celebes. One evening Mother asked him how long she was going to live. The ouija-board spun madly for a while and then clear, firmly written words were produced: 'A year from now you will be dead.' After this shock we discontinued the seances. I do not like to pronounce any judgement on this prophecy, but the fact is that in a week or so my mother was suddenly convulsed with terrible pains at night and had to be rushed to hospital for

an operation. The operation was not a complete success—the surgeon frankly told me to expect her death within a day. With my heart in my mouth I rushed out to buy three quarts of Mumm champagne and let her sip it whenever her heart began to palpitate. She rallied, to the doctor's astonishment and relief, but never completely recovered. She said she felt she would not live long. In her agony of spirit she went to Harbin to savour for the last time of things Russian, for Harbin at that time was essentially a Russian town. I had a dreadful shock when she came back after three months. She had been rather tall and full-bodied. Now I was confronted with a small and withered old woman whom I could hardly recognize. Nothing helped her; she began to feel pains every night, and could not sleep. I looked after her as best I could, sometimes suffering as much as she because there was not a thing I could do. She had an incurable illness. At last, after Christmas she was moved to a hospital only to be permitted after ten days or so to come back home to die.

The poignancy of my grief, when I realized that she was leaving me, can only be imagined, but it was the manner of her dying that inflicted a lasting wound on my mind through the sheer terror I experienced. The last night she slept peacefully, all her pains having left her. In the morning she looked more fragile and her face was luminous and peaceful, as if she had realized that her losing struggle for survival was at last over. She beckoned me to her side and pointed out to the far corner of the room whispering that a group of her dead parents and relatives was standing there waiting for her. She said they did not speak but made signs that it was her last day on earth. I believed her, as her mind was very clear and also the room became appreciably colder, in spite of the blazing fire in the grate, which to me indicated at least a partial materialization of some spirit entities. Through my tears I smiled and bowed in the direction indicated, and Mother said that I was recognized and the relatives smiled in return. Then she firmly told me to stop snivelling, as we did not have much time left and she wanted to give me her last advice and admonition. In the evening she began sinking, and about ten o'clock she drifted into a coma. I thought she was already dead. Then sud-

denly, without the least warning, she sat bolt upright in her bed, her arms extended in front of her and her hands twitching in the manner of claws. A sort of animal growl issued from her throat and she croaked 'Where are you, wretch? Where are you?' Her eyes, apparently unseeing, were bulging and her mouth became square like a mask of Greek tragedy. Terrified out of my wits, I shouted for a Russian lad I had engaged to assist me in these harrowing days and he rushed into the room, still dazed with sleep. We both tried to make her lie down again, but her strength was enormous and the hands like steel. She gashed him deeply in the arm, croaking again 'Just let me find you! I will tear you apart limb from limb!' With a scream of terror he bolted from the room, leaving me alone with the monster. In my horror I sank by the bed unable to move. Then, just as suddenly, she fell back on her pillows and soon opened her eyes, smiling gently. She was my poor, dear mother again.

'Where was I?' she whispered. 'I do not seem to remember what happened to me.' Then she uttered her last blessing and farewell, promising to come back to me and let me know if indeed there was no final extinction of her personality. Then she said she felt very, very drowsy, closed her eyes, and in a few minutes the ordeal was over. I was a wreck, utterly crushed by my sorrow and by the brief demoniac possession so clearly manifested. I was left alone in the world, without parents, relatives or friends. I felt as if I had stepped into a void.

Spring came, yet I still could not shake off my despondency. Seeing little improvement in my condition, my employer suggested a holiday in Hangchow. It was a lovely place on the West Lake, he told me, and a holy one. It was to the Chinese what Jerusalem was to the Christians. I accepted his offer gratefully.

I boarded the train early in the morning. I was full of anticipation, this being my first trip out of the great grey city into the mysterious interior of the vast country. Soon the moving panorama of pretty hamlets of thatched huts half-concealed in green bamboos and blossoming peach trees, vermilion temples by the canals and pagodas on distant hills absorbed my attention and I hardly noticed when we arrived. There were so many touts at

the station, all shouting the excellence of their hostelries at the tops of their voices, that I did not know where to turn, until a bolder fellow snatched my bag and pushed me into a waiting rickshaw. Through a maze of narrow but amazingly clean streets, paved with stone slabs, we came to a small inn where I was allocated a cubicle. At that time I knew nothing of the quality of Chinese hotels and thought this place to be all right, seeing that the price was low and all other hotels had been occupied by holiday-makers. But as night fell, all the remaining rooms were taken by unattached men and, in due course, giggling prostitutes began to stream in followed by their *mamans*. I could not sleep until the small hours of the morning. The whole flimsy hotel was continuously shaken by the violence of amorous combats going on in each room, accompanied by screams, squeals and gurgles.

After an early breakfast at an old-style eating shop, where I was served roast eels, 'old' eggs, a bowl of steaming *congee* (thin rice porridge) and a pewter pot of warmed Shao-hsing wine, I strolled to the water front and stood there for a long time admiring the unsurpassed loveliness of the famed West Lake. It was a vast artificial body of water, surrounded by high mountains on three sides, which it took Chinese aesthetes, from the emperor down to humble poets and monks, centuries to transform into the acme of a Chinese landscape, in which no one can say with certainty where nature ends and human ingenuity begins. To avoid the barren effect of a huge expanse of water, the lake was made intimate and mysterious with little enclosed lagoons, lakes within a lake, surrounded with weeping willows, in the midst of which stood beautiful pavilions and temples on stone piles, connected to each other by intricate zigzag walks with carved balustrades. Long causeways, also with weeping willows, crossed the lake in two or three places, pierced by many graceful camel-back bridges. Islands were burdened with old palaces, terraced gardens and elegant villas of bygone potentates, now museums or else still inhabited by generals or rich merchants of this century. Temples and monasteries with their vermilion or gamboge walls and yellow tiles discreetly peeped out of

age-old trees on the shores. More monasteries were visible on the slopes of the hills and the air was heavy with the fragrance of incense and reverberating with the sound of distant temple bells.

Elegant boats with awnings were massed along the waterfront, suitable for three or four passengers. For bigger parties there were large, beautifully decorated barges, miniature floating palaces with cosy dining-rooms, with carved panels embellished with gold and silver and pink silk curtains. They were poled about by a group of men and boys, while one or two of their women cooked delicious meals for the guests. I was lured into one of the small boats and spent the whole morning lazily moving over the limpid water from island to island, visiting famous pavilions and water palaces, and enjoying the reflection of old willows, which encircled the lake like a shimmering band of jade-green chiffon.

After lunch I walked to the lake-side promenade again undecided where to go next, and not knowing my bearings, despite a popular guide-book. A rickety green bus stopped by the kerb bearing a legend 'Jade Spring Monastery' which I heard was one of the places to see. I boarded it and found inside five or six other passengers. On the bench opposite sat a young monk with an expensive camera in his lap. He wore a black silk robe with immense sleeves, white silk socks and well-made black satin slippers, while on his head rested a stiff silk cap with an aperture at the top, through which protruded a tightly-coiled chignon with a massive pin of pure white jade. I was already versed enough in Chinese religions to recognize that he was a Taoist priest. He looked very elegant and distinguished, and I thought to myself how interesting it would be to make his acquaintance. Noticing my stare, and as if reading my mind he gently smiled at me. I seized the opportunity and addressed him with an inane query, 'Is this bus going to Yuchuanssu (Jade Spring Monastery)?' knowing full well that it was. He started slightly, not expecting a foreigner to speak Chinese, but his surprise was only momentary. He got up and sat next to me, explaining with a good deal of animation that indeed we were going to Yuchuanssu, and that that was where he was bound for, intending

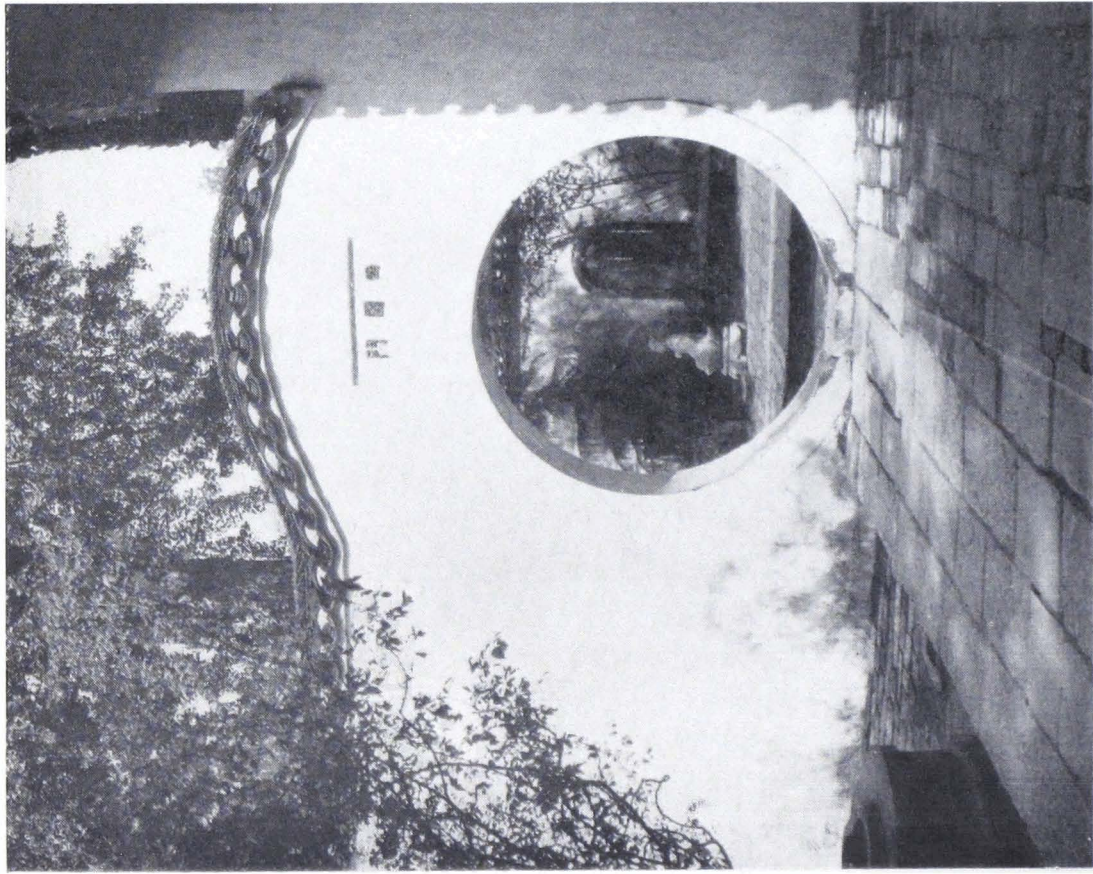
to take some pictures. I offered him a card with my Chinese name, and he gave me his, which stated that he was Lui Chungan, from the Monastery of the Lucky Star on the Yuhuangshan (Jade Emperor's Mountain), near West Lake. Not finding the place in my itineraries, I asked him where it was.

'Right there!' he exclaimed, pointing out of the window at a very high mountain on the other side of the lake. On the top of the peak I could see a clump of trees and a group of buildings clinging to a cliff, like an eyrie.

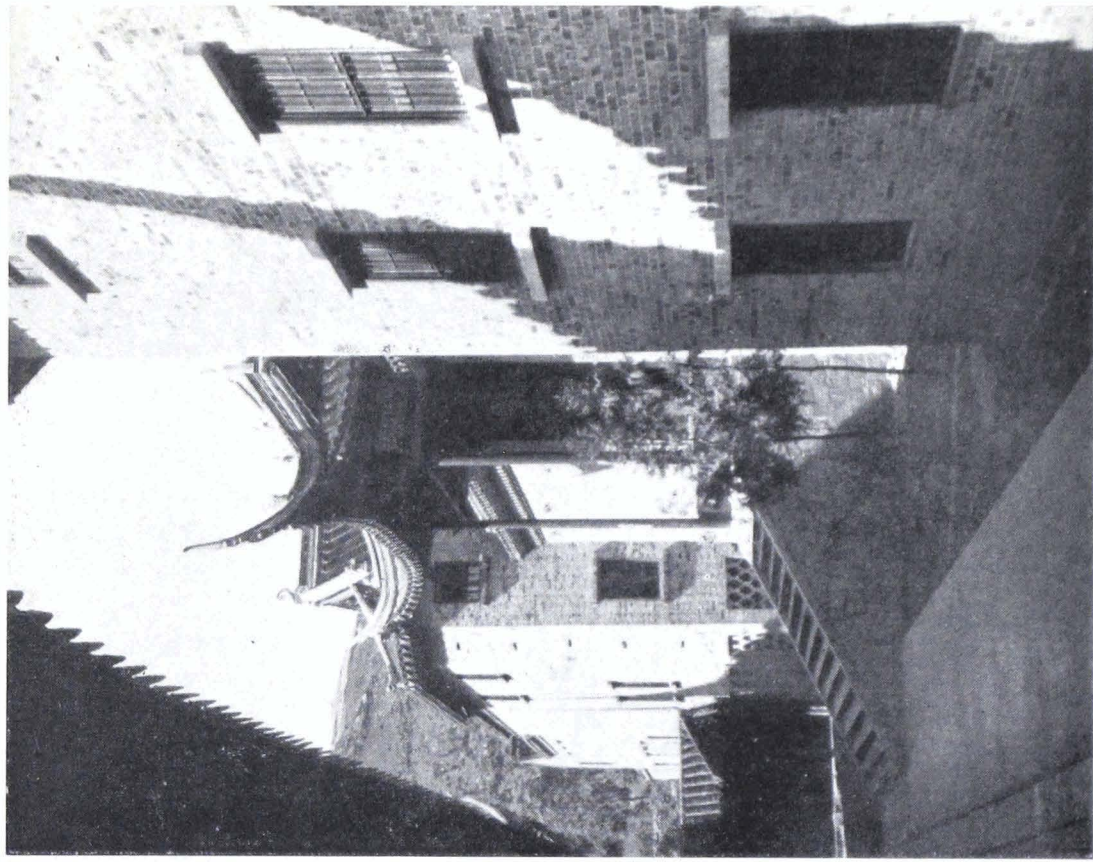
The bus rounded a bend and stopped before the gates of a large monastery. Entering it we found a big quadrangular pool, fed by a warm spring, in which big and small sacred carp were feeding on pieces of bread thrown in by pilgrims. A broad gallery ran around the pool, with tables and chairs for those who wished to rest. I selected a table and asked Chungan to sit down, ordering a pot of tea. We felt an immediate affinity after our talk in the bus and already looked upon each other as old friends. Now there was no question of our sight-seeing separately.

After admiring the carp and taking some photographs, my new friend continued his tactful inquiries about myself and my affairs in that discreet and oblique manner which is so characteristic of well-bred Chinese who, when very curious, do not deem it polite to attack a person with direct questions. It was cool and pleasant in the austere monastic gallery and we were practically alone, so I poured out to him much of the story of my life and of my recent blow. I was so pent up with my sorrow and worries that it was a relief to relate them to someone who appeared sympathetic and interested. He listened with a rapt attention and, when I finished, he remained silent for a long time, sipping his tea and ruminating. At last he asked me where I was staying. I told him, not omitting to enlighten him how discomfited I was by all the ventry that was going on at the inn at night. He burst out laughing, his manner gay and indulgent.

'You evidently like it,' he teased me, 'else why did you choose such a hotel?' I felt the colour rising to my cheeks as I protested that I did not know anything about Hangchow hostleries, and that my present mood was the very opposite of all frivolities. He



A Taoist monastery garden



A passage in a Taoist monastery



A Taoist monastery courtyard

became serious again and then, evidently arriving at a decision, he took my arm and spoke in a firm voice.

‘We are going back right now. I will pick up your bag and take you with me to my monastery.’ He spoke with authority and the usual disparagement, ‘Ours is a poor and mean place but it is quiet and beautiful, and you may stay as long as you like.’ I was not ignorant now of Chinese etiquette and made the usual polite protestations. He brushed my feeble objection aside as he rose from the table. I was touched by this spontaneous offer of hospitality, although I knew that guests did stay in Chinese temples and that each self-respecting monastery had a number of guest-rooms, but they were kept for the patrons—regular pilgrims and wealthy Chinese tourists, who spent considerable sums on incense and prayer services. To invite an unknown foreigner, on the spur of the moment, was an act of extreme generosity and of no mean trust on the part of my new friend. I timidly reminded him that his Superior might not like my presence, but he assured me that his own position at the monastery was high, and he was always relied upon to do the right thing.

In an hour’s time we were riding in rickshaws along the left shore of the lake towards a very ancient pagoda beyond which loomed the Jade Emperor’s Mountain. Soon we turned into a side lane paved with smooth, stone slabs, and after another long ride came to a large gate with shrines on each side. My polite friend wanted to engage one of the sedan chairs waiting there for me, but I firmly overrode him, expressing my great desire to make the ascent on foot.

The stone steps led gradually up and we came to a small temple where two Taoist monks greeted Chunguan affectionately. He explained, as we were sipping cold tea at a stone table, that it was their subsidiary ‘Half Way’ temple where pilgrims always had a long rest before attempting the last stage of the ascent.

The remaining climb was indeed long and steep, between boulders and scattered pines, until we reached the Cave of the Purple Cloud, above which a stone pavilion provided an opportunity for another halt. The sun was setting when at last we arrived at the gates of the monastery and stepped into a courtyard

with two stone wells and an antique incense burner. I followed Chungan inside and through another courtyard from which he stepped into a corridor. At the end of it there was a nice, clean room which he said would be mine during my sojourn. Then he left me alone.

I strolled to the window, opened it and gasped. A precipice gaped at me. Down below there were tops of giant bamboos and other trees waving in the evening breeze. As the dusk deepened, the great disc of a full moon, orange and sinister, rose from behind the mountain range. Strange odours came to my nostrils—of bamboos, wild flowers, decaying leaves, and of incense from distant temples. An owl was hooting somewhere. I could see from a corner window lights of the distant city sparkling across the lake in whose placid waters they were reflected like tiny stars.

A slight knock at the door made me turn. Chungan entered, together with a servant who brought a tray with food. Chungan had a bottle of whisky in his hand and a bottle of soda water. I was surprised, but he smiled reassuringly.

'We do not drink, but we keep this for those sophisticated guests who do,' he said in a matter of fact voice, pouring me a peg as the servant spread the bowls of mushrooms with bamboo shoots, steaming beancurd soup and bean sprouts on the table. He sat down watching me eat and drink. The meal over and the table cleared, we sat back in rattan chairs enjoying the peace and quiet of the beautiful night. The full moon was shining in the cloudless sky. Lights in the cottages below had been extinguished and the odour of smoke came up no longer. Even dogs ceased their barking, and only a nocturnal bird, concealed in the trees, gave its sharp musical call from time to time. I felt utterly relaxed and drowsy, and we did not speak much. After a while he rose to go, and I stretched on the immense bed with its thin mattress, spread on smooth wooden planks.

I had an unusually peaceful and restful sleep. Even the sounds of bells and subdued chanting in the pre-dawn hours failed to awaken me completely. They seemed to come from a great distance, and their soothing rhythm gently blended with the fantasy of my dreams. A breakfast of *congee* and pickled vegetables was

brought to my room and, when I had dressed and shaved, Chungan came in. We went out on the terrace and sat there for a while, watching the distant mountains, below which mist lay in white bands. Peasants in blue tunics and straw hats were trickling into their checkerboard fields, some of them leading fat, grey buffaloes. Again the blue smoke of morning fires began to rise from the huts in the valley.

Looking at his watch, Chungan finally rose and bade me follow him inside. He led me behind the left wing of the temple, where a small courtyard was transformed into a garden. Gardenias were there in full bloom and a trellis of bamboo was covered with varicoloured convolvulus and sweet-smelling honeysuckle. Seeing us enter, a Taoist priest, who was seated in a long chair sipping tea, rose and advanced to meet us. I was struck at once by his unusual personality. He was of a slightly more than average height and dressed in a black silk robe. On his head he wore a flattened black silk cap with an oblong plaque of pure white jade attached in front. It was his face that was so arresting. He had a beard, quite thick and black. His eyes bored into mine, dark, commanding, and full of intelligence and fire. He seemed to appraise and weigh me up, and at the same time communicate to me his sympathy and understanding. I bowed deeply and he took me by the arm leading me to a chair.

'This is Lee Lisan, our abbot,' murmured Chungan, seating himself. I was thrilled and flattered to be introduced to the head of so powerful and wealthy a monastery. I gave him my card, while Chungan put a bowl of fragrant tea by my side. With a warm smile the abbot made all the polite inquiries about me as prescribed by etiquette. This was purely a matter of form as, of course, he had been previously informed about all these things by my friend. In fact, he would not have received me at all unless he was sure of my bona fides. Abbots of great Taoist and Buddhist monasteries, Chinese generals and bankers can be very elusive with importunate visitors or people who are likely to waste their time. That I was received by Abbot Lee on the second day of my arrival was a considerable honour in itself. I might not have met him for weeks, if at all.

Evidently satisfied with what he had heard, and with my appearance and manners, he leaned back in his chair meditatively sipping his tea and still looking at me with his magnetic eyes. Then he spoke in a slow, pleasant voice.

‘I am sorry that your bereavement weighs so heavily on you. You look indeed tired and dispirited,’ he said stroking his beard. ‘I am glad that Fate brought you to our hermitage. It is poor and insignificant and we lack the amenities suitable for a European,’ he continued, ‘but you may stay here as long as you like, and we will try to cheer you up.’ He became silent, sipping again some tea. These words were spoken with warmth and sympathy, and I was convinced they were forthright and sincere. My friend looked pleased and his face beamed with polite appreciation. The silence became longer and the abbot continued sipping tea; I noticed his bowl was almost empty—a polite Chinese signal that the interview was about over. I took the hint, unhurriedly emptied my own bowl, rose and bowed to him, expressing my thanks.

Chungan led me back across courtyards and corridors to another part of the monastery which I had not yet seen. There were several small rooms along the passage and he opened the door into one of them. A young priest was sitting by a small desk near the window reading.

‘This is my friend and room mate, Ko Tsungpoo,’ he exclaimed as the monk rose, with a broad smile on his face, extending his hand. He was athletically built, with a square, powerful face. The room had two beds with mosquito curtains, a table, two chairs and a collection of books and manuscripts on a camphor-chest in one corner. The other corner was occupied by a wooden stand with an enamel basin for washing, with a few towels on the rack. A wide window opened on another glorious view—the small temple and gate below and the winding path to town with its groves of giant bamboos. After some polite small talk with Tsungpoo, my friend led me to another room, also containing two young monks. One, who was called Huang, appeared to be ill and emaciated, and afterwards Chungan confirmed my suspicion that he had the beginnings of tuberculosis. The

other monk was a strange young man. He looked mousy and weak, apparently without strength or stamina, with dreamy eyes and a guilty, ineffectual smile on his classically Chinese face. Somehow I immediately felt sympathy for him mixed with pity. My surprise was very great indeed when Chungan introduced him to me as his elder brother. What a contrast to my tall, well-built and energetic friend! After some appropriate remarks Chungan led me again to call on some other monks, both old and young, completing the tour with a visit to the ample kitchen with its large rice boilers, and stocks of pickled vegetables in big earthen jars.

At noon I was in my room expecting the usual tray with food. Instead, Chungan came in and made a mysterious sign to follow him. We entered a large guest-hall richly adorned with jade and porcelain antiques and old scrolls. Around a big table in the corner sat all the elder priests of the monastery, whom I had not met, together with Abbot Lee Lisan. He motioned to me to sit next to an old monk who immediately engaged me in conversation. He was the living image of an ancient anchorite as portrayed in Chinese classical writings and paintings, and reminded me at once of Laoshouhsing, the Spirit of Planet Venus—that old man with a crook standing together with a deer and attended by a beautiful maiden and a small boy who holds a tray of Peaches of Immortality. Many porcelain teapots in China carry this picture. Or he looked like one of those immortals in Sung paintings showing a group of such joyous ancients enjoying a secret picnic in the fastnesses of blue mountains. His face had no wrinkles and his cheeks glowed like red apples, framed in long white whiskers. His snowy beard fell almost to his knees in long silvery wisps, and merry, roguish eyes twinkled below bushy white eyebrows. Like the ancients, he was bald, with a high forehead. Unlike the others, he did not wear the black Taoist robe, but a typical Chou dynasty long garment of some grey material, which was not unlike the Taoist dress, but had still wider sleeves and clung to the body in really pure classical lines of great beauty and elegance. He was like a baby, joking and chirping all the time, and sipping something out of a porcelain cup. I thought it was wine, but actually

it was a kind of apple juice. We had it too with our meal of exquisitely prepared vegetables. Some of the dishes served resembled roast duck or pork chops, but were compounded out of browned beancurd layers or beancurd, beans and ground walnuts suitably disguised by sauces and spices. Altogether it was a pleasant and friendly meal, and after it I felt I already belonged to the monastery. Now I could circulate freely through the courtyards, temples and halls without meeting raised eyebrows or questioning glances.

After lunch, when we were seated together on the terrace outside, I asked Chungan about Abbot Lee Lisan and the old Taoist.

'Your abbot is quite young,' I observed. 'He must be exceptionally clever and able to attain to so high an office.' Chungan smiled as he replied.

'There you are mistaken. He is indeed extremely clever, able and saintly, but he is not so young as you think.' He paused to enjoy my surprise. 'He is about sixty years old.'

'Impossible!' I cried. 'He looks about thirty-five or six, if a day.' But Chungan made it clear he was not joking.

'What about the old man?'

'He is seventy-four years of age,' Chungan replied, 'but he is stronger and younger than all of us here except Abbot Lee. You should see him walking up the mountain; no one can keep pace with him.'

'What wonderful people!' I exclaimed, silently thanking Fate for bringing me to such a remarkable refuge.

At the Monastery

AS each tranquil day succeeded the other, my spirits began to revive, my lethargy to disappear, and I was able to think more coherently. I took stock of my surroundings, which still appeared dreamlike to me, and realized what a treasure trove of serenity and friendship I had stumbled upon in such an unexpected and gratuitous manner. We all meet sometimes, in a bus or train or perhaps at a cocktail party, a person who smiles at us and tries to convey a friendly disposition by a polite word or inquiry. Sometimes we are too shy or too reserved to respond or else we are suspicious of them—suspecting that they will touch us later on for money, or may be a person an association with whom would be detrimental to our social position. A good deal of perception is needed in such cases, and an open-mindedness free of inhibitions and preconceived notions. I flatter myself that I have acquired a measure of these qualities, perhaps through heredity or through my rather unusual upbringing. Such encounters are rare, but they do occur and, if followed up at the right time and in the right spirit, one may find that they may turn into real and lasting friendships.

With such reflections passing through my mind, I became determined not to make this monastery and its kind monks just a casual episode in my life, a banal picnic for a few days, to be dismissed and forgotten after my return to the hustle and bustle of the great city. I now wanted to study and learn the secret of their contentment and serenity, to enrich and calm my troubled spirit.

I felt that the key figures, from whom I should seek enlightenment and spiritual help, were my friend Chungan, Abbot Lee Lisan and the ancient Taoist. What Chungan had told me about

the ancient one's prowess in walking was strikingly confirmed. Sitting one afternoon at the small temple at the base of the mountain, I saw how he came in having walked all the way from town. He was dressed in an old robe of faded blue with picturesque patches of a lighter material here and there, and wore a huge straw hat with a tip in the shape of a miniature pagoda, the usual head-covering of an itinerant Taoist. He carried a long and twisted wooden crook. We agreed to walk together to the monastery, and in spite of all my efforts I could not keep up with him. With a sly wink he continued the ascent, his immense sleeves billowing in the breeze like wings. He soon disappeared among the boulders while I sat down exhausted, my heart pounding, for a brief rest. I found him later in the afternoon at the back of the monastery where there was a tea plantation. Wearing only a short jacket and wide trousers, he was putting around a tea bush loosening the soil. Wiping sweat from his rosy cheeks he sat down on a stone leaning his chin on a mattock. Now is the time to ask him something about Taoism, I decided, and I poured out my questions. He looked up at me with his innocent, childish eyes, his smile gentle but, I thought, slightly ironical.

'Take time, observe and learn,' he said simply. 'Words spoken in haste will not stick; a cup of water splashed into a parched field will do it no good. It is only a slow and gentle rain that will saturate the soil and produce life.' He became silent ready to resume his work.

His rebuke abashed me. I saw what he meant. He probably thought I was an idle tourist, or worse, a young writer, who wanted to learn something about Taoism in an hour or so, and then write a smart article, boasting of the mysteries revealed to him. Seeing my obvious confusion, the old man relented. His face was all smiles now, but his eyes became thoughtful.

'If you want to learn about the Eternal Tao, do not be casual and in a hurry. Don't glean too much from too many books, for each book is full of opinions, prejudices and corruptions. Read only one book and only one—our Old Master's Taoteking, and then try to understand it, not by juggling the words and mean-

ings, but intuitively, through your heart and spirit. Don't ask too many questions, but patiently watch what we Taoists do, and perceive the hidden motives of our actions, and not that which is only for display. Do not be guided so much by your intellect as by faith, love and your heart, which is another name for understanding and compassion. What you need is wisdom, and not knowledge; for if one has wisdom, knowledge will come naturally. Always remember that the Eternal Tao is Infinite Wisdom, Infinite Love and Infinite Simplicity.' And with this the old man took up his pickaxe and resumed his hoeing of the bush.

It was only at night, when I lay sleepless in my room, owing to over-indulgence in the excellent Dragon Well tea, product of the monastery, that I understood the full import of the old Taoist's words. I realized that his short admonition was not a mere device to get rid of me, but a spontaneous revelation of how to proceed on the road to acquiring Tao. I wondered why he had given me his advice so quickly, and decided that he must have realized my sincerity at the moment of my genuine embarrassment at his rebuff. With his acute perception he must have thought it was appropriate to sow a seed at the right time and place. If I was as sensitive and prepared to receive it as he thought me to be, well and good; if not, not much harm had been done. That very night I made a resolution to seek for Taoist wisdom—slowly and patiently, gleaning a piece of advice here and a morsel of revelation there, unhurriedly and without bothering my friends too much, building up the whole bit by bit like a bird constructing its nest.

The height of the festive season, Ching Ming (Clear Brightness), aptly called Chinese Easter, made Abbot Lee Lisan and Chungan very busy, as hordes of pilgrims and tourists filled the city to overflowing. Some came to visit and sacrifice at their ancestral tombs, others wanted to visit famous monasteries and temples to burn incense, but the majority just wanted to enjoy a change of scenery after the drabness of Shanghai. 'Clear Brightness' was an appropriate appellation for this time of the year, as indeed the sun was bright and warm, the air sweet and limpid,

and flowers were everywhere. The Chinese loved to travel in family groups, if they could afford it, and many barges on the lake were taken up by such parties, while smaller boats carried either romantic couples or companies of young men—probably students or employees of big firms. Now and then in the morning, I could see from my vantage point on the terrace, a file of sedan chairs wending its way up our mountain. On arrival, Chungan or Tsungpoo would meet the family and courteously shepherd them into the guest-hall where, over a cup of Dragon Well tea, prayers and ceremonies were discussed. After a while there would be heard the boom of the bell, a clang of cymbals, and the sound of chanting as clouds of incense rose over the roof and were wafted through the gates. Although it was not prohibited to strangers to watch these services, I never went to gape at them, unless specially invited. Chinese of such a refined and educated class as my Taoist friends undoubtedly would expect some delicacy on my part, and I, therefore, did my best not to appear inquisitive. Anyway, Chungan promised to call me if there should be some special and spectacular prayers, which were comparatively rare.

When Chungan was free, especially in the evening, we talked together and I asked him many questions about Taoism and the organization of his Church. He laughed at my term and said it was a purely Christian conception. However, for want of a better description, we agreed to use it. Then he became serious and told me that their monastery belonged to the Lungmen (Dragon Gate) Church. They were the true spiritual heirs of the Old Teacher Laotse, who himself had laid the foundation of the first Taoistic retreat in Lungmen, a series of grottoes near Loyang, the then capital of China. They practised meditation, existed on a vegetable diet and lived a celibate life. They never cut their hair which they wore in the style of those ancient days.

The Chengyi Church, second in importance, was quite similar to the Lungmen but somewhat more worldly as the monks ate meat, drank wine and sometimes on the sly married outside the monastery. They practised spiritism and exorcism, studied magic, love lore and ancient herbal medicine.

Finally, there were the Changtienssu (Heavenly Teacher Chang's) Taoists who lived mostly in towns. Their occupation was the writing of talismans and charms, black magic, fortune-telling and mediumistic phenomena. They openly married, cut their hair, ate and drank everything, and generally there was little of the spiritual about them. Chungan advised me also to visit the monasteries of the Chengyi Taoists and the temples of the Changtienssu sect, and make my own comparisons.

Then I confided to him my intention to become a Taoist, if such a thing was at all possible. I asked him whether I had to eschew Christianity, take vows and pass through special initiations. He smiled and then explained that they themselves were bound by no vows, and were held together only by the pledges of chastity, honesty and loyalty to the monastery. Taoism was more a philosophy than a religion. It was a religion when they practised it, with appropriate ritual, for the sake of pilgrims and other supplicants, but it was a philosophy which led to the attunement with the Divine Tao which they followed themselves. Taoism was in sympathy and affinity with other great religions and did not seek to convert any of their devotees. A man could be influenced by and practise the Taoist teaching and still remain a good Christian or Buddhist. There were no initiations. Taoists tried to make life on this plane of existence fuller, more pleasant and beautiful, and prepare a peaceful transition into the Beyond. But they did no proselytizing like the Buddhists, Christians and Mohammedans.

One evening I told Chungan that, although I had read the Taoteking in translation, I did not seem to have grasped much. He smiled and said that the old man was right and I had, so to speak, to 'live the book', in order to understand it. He went to the camphor-chest and produced his own copy of the Holy Book, and by the flickering light of the oil-lamp we pored over it together.

He read and explained the meaning of each paragraph as I sat enthralled. When we had finished it, I experienced a kind of shock, like that which one feels after a gulp of strong wine. So terse was its style in Chinese and so much meaning had been

compressed into its 5,000 characters that it burned the brain and blunted my powers of understanding. It appeared as a condensed essence of many holy books and yet was distinct and unique. We read it over and over again—now quickly and now slowly, until the veiled truths seemed to separate and line up along the misty path which led on and on into the blue void of Infinity. They were like milestones with luminous writing which we were able to read and, if only I grasped the meaning, I could follow the path towards the realms of the Ultimate Reality.

Unlike the Bible and the Koran, the Taoteking does not refer to the historical processes which led men, or rather a particular tribe among men, to the idea of One God. Neither does it describe in detail how this planet of ours came to possess plants, animals and men. According to the Taoteking the *prima causa* of 'existence' is unknowable and hidden in a mystery more profound than all other mysteries. An ineffable rhythm had filled the Void and the interplay of its opposites, Yang and Yin, produced 'Ten Thousand Things'. The Void of the Taoteking is not 'nothing' but, on the contrary, a 'Mother' of all seen and unseen; the container of all possibilities, all forces, all dimensions of time and space and all spiritual and physical phenomena. It is the God-head or Primordial Buddha of Ashvagosha, the great Patriarch and interpreter of Mahayana Buddhism, and the Brahma of Hinduism. All and everything issues from the Void, plays its appointed role and returns into the Void. This objectification of the Void in time and space or 'being'—the Maya of Buddhism—is through and in Tao which is the Logos and Providence of the Christians and the Vishnu of the Hindus. This Divine Current is above time, space and 'existence' itself but It fills, guides and nourishes all the Universe according to Its own laws. It is Infinite Love, Infinite Wisdom and Infinite Simplicity and contains all infinite potentialities. It is beyond all the attributes known to human mind and, therefore, Its nature is beyond all comprehension. It is the Divine Will in action.

Laotse called it Tao, a word which, he himself admitted, he chose for convenience sake. That of which he wrote has no name, being infinite and indescribable in earthly language. He had

refrained from using the word 'God' because in Chinese connotation it always denotes some anthropomorphic deity, more often than not of a comparatively low rank. The word 'Tao' means 'Way' or 'Road' and it conveys a more sublime idea to the mystic who can thus imagine the Divine Spirit as a majestic road along which the world and our lives are moving.

Being a profound mystic and a shrewd observer of nature and men, Laotse evolved during his long life a definite concept of the laws according to which the Divine Tao acts in the world. He found out, undoubtedly from personal experience, that if man closely followed these laws, he would find a wonderful comfort and happiness in his identification with the Divine and that the Gates of Nirvana, the ultimate bliss and a key to the meaning of life, would be opened to him at the end of his peregrinations. He penned his observations with such economy of words that the Taoteking reads more like an index of what Tao is and what man should do to merge himself into It rather than a book. Generally speaking, in my opinion, the Taoteking enunciates the Divine Laws as applicable to the whole Universe, while Christianity demonstrates the working of these laws as applied to the planet Earth.

One day Chungan showed me some old drawings of Laotse and I gathered from him much interesting information about the Master. Contrary to the assertions of a number of foreign savants that Laotse was a mythical, nebulous person, all Taoists believe him to have been a real living man. And who should know better than the Chinese themselves? Their known history begins with the Five Rulers in 2852 B.C., and by the time the illustrious Chou dynasty (*circa* 1122 to 254 B.C.) had reached its zenith, the compilation of records had reached a highly efficient stage. Laotse flourished, together with his younger contemporary Confucius (*circa* 600 B.C.). Although almost nothing is known of his private life, he held the important post of the Chief of the Imperial Archives, in other words Librarian-in-Chief who controlled the greatest accumulation of historical records and books known at that time. Tradition relates that he was born with grey hair, hence his appellation 'Old Boy', which also has the meaning of

'Old Master or Teacher'. Again there is nothing supernatural or fantastic about this legend. He may have been an albino or naturally blond. Blond Chinese, though very rare, do exist. At that time what is known as China was slowly coalescing from innumerable tribes and to this day, many mountain tribes in China have in their midst people with blond or auburn hair and grey or green eyes, such as Chiangs, Sifan, Lifan and Nakhi.

In his life-time his beloved Chou dynasty, the longest in China, lasting nearly a thousand years and with thirty-four emperors, was slowly decaying. He saw the writing on the wall only too clearly for he was clairvoyant and shrewd, and knew that natural processes of human destiny could not be reversed. It grieved the old man to see the empty pomp and glitter of the Imperial Court, with a decadent sovereign and all sense of statesmanship and direction gradually ebbing away. Finally, seeing the futility of implanting his teaching among the dissolute and happy-go-lucky courtiers and sycophants, he decided, with a sorrowing heart, to follow the dictates of Tao and disappear for ever into the anonymity of nameless space and time. He was in no hurry to get anywhere and time in those days did not have the money value of our era, neither was it empty of content, especially to this Prince of Tao, who loved nature and the simple and sincere countryfolk. He departed from the Imperial capital without pomp or undue haste mounted on his favourite 'green ox', a sturdy, tame buffalo with a hide of greenish-blue tint still found in the valleys of west China. We can picture him as a majestic old man with long snowy-white beard and whiskers, clad in a classically beautiful robe with immense sleeves, seated on the broad back of the faithful animal while a couple of devoted young servants or disciples walked behind with the baskets containing their master's simple baggage. Of course, being a trusted Imperial servant of high rank, he carried a special 'passport', probably an ivory plaque, with the Imperial seal or an Imperial signet ring to ensure free passage through and beyond the confines of the mighty empire, and official courtesies and supply of food. His fame, of course, preceded his unhurried progress and

it is possible and very probable that a small crowd of admirers and disciples accompanied him on his way within the boundaries of the realm. He stopped for a while at Lungmen (Dragon Gate) Caves, a complex of caverns around a beautiful lake, near modern Loyang. The quiet inaccessibility of the place appealed to him. Some of his disciples must have stayed behind to found a Taoist hermitage.

It is from this first Taoist monastery, with the teaching handed by the Master himself, that the appellation Lungmen has since been applied to all esoteric Taoist hermitages where Laotse's philosophy is practised in all its purity. Following westwards the Master came to Mt Hua, a wonderful peak in the shape of an unopened lotus flower. Laotse climbed its almost perpendicular sides to find a small bowl-shaped plateau, with the world stretching far and wide in the breathless abyss. Again he was impressed with its possibilities as a perfect retreat from the entanglements and strife of worldly life. Again his disciples followed his indications and founded a hermitic Taoist colony, between heaven and earth, on that stupendous stone column of nearly 8,000 feet in height. On and on he plodded stopping overnight at some farmer's hut. It is impossible to imagine him, as some savants aver, as a surly, morose person, aloof and immersed all the time in his lofty thoughts. Were he of such a disposition he could not have been a Taoist. It is right and proper to think of him as rather like the old man I met at the monastery—cheerful and lively, with a merry twinkle in his eye, always ready to share a pot of wine with the farmer and his wife and a wholesome joke while waiting for a frugal meal. I can see him gently patting his green ox and giving him an extra bunch of grass and admiring his humble host's pigs and cows, while little children tugged at his voluminous robe. It was in the towns that he was dignified and grave while an obsequious magistrate and local *literati* went out of their way to arrange a formal feast for such a distinguished personage from the Imperial Court, probably trying to outdo each other in impressing him with their own learning.

At last he came to the borders of the empire, a customs and

garrison post in charge of an officer named Yihi. He was an intellectual himself and Laotse's reputation was not unknown to him. He wept as he realized what a giant of philosophy and sanctity the country was losing. He prayed the old man to desist and turn back, but to no avail. Then, as a last measure, he implored him to write down the tenets of his philosophy. The kindly old man could not refuse the plea for he was neither stubborn nor insensible to a sincere request. Also he did not wish to be ungrateful for the last generous hospitality on Chinese soil. It is said that he retired to his room and, by the flickering light of a candle, wrote down the 5,000 characters of his Taoteking.

Then he left early in the morning, probably with his servant only, climbing into the fastnesses of the great Tsingling mountains on his way to the west in search of the abode of Hsiwangmu, mysterious Goddess Mother of the West, whose home is ever open to all true Taoists. He went and none saw him again, and none knew where he died. Some savants say that he went to Khotan and onwards. There is no evidence to support the theory. If he wished to retire from the known civilization for ever, there was no reason for his following a caravan trail to all sorts of places which were also civilized and noisy markets. Rather he may have struck west directly, slowly moving across primeval and beautiful forests, eating chestnuts and wild honey and fishing in clear mountain streams. As a holy man he had no fear of wild animals. We have ample evidence from the Bible and Chinese scriptures that no savage beast would attack a saintly man. He probably met some strange, childlike tribes who were glad to have him stay with them. Perhaps he went to the mysterious Tebu land, the most beautiful country in the world, unexplored even to this day, between Szechuan and Tibet, where isolated peaks, topped with forest, rise like mammoth columns to 18,000 feet out of enchanting woods full of flowers, while streams and waterfalls tinkle everywhere. The abode of Hsiwangmu is a Taoist symbol for a perfect retreat where both spirit and body find a common focus of joy and happiness, where an earthly paradise ineffably impinges on and fuses into that other Heaven, just visible through a veil to a real Taoist. To us it is a Shangri-

La, and the Tibetans call it Shambala. Sometimes we do not search for it and find it by chance; then we do not recognize it and it is gone. Sometimes we look for it and do not find it because we lack courage and faith. But when we desire it and find it, then it is the abode of Goddess Hsiwangmu and the way from there is open to the Portals of Nirvana.

Pilgrimages

ONE day during the last week of my stay at the monastery Chungan and his friend Tsungpoo took me on a pilgrimage to some famous Buddhist temples. Also, Abbot Lee Lisan found time to talk to me about my personal problems and, probably as a result of his mystic influence, I underwent a psychic experience which not only changed my outlook on human existence but, in addition, gave me the peace of mind which I badly needed.

On the day of our excursion the dawn was breaking when I opened my eyes. Outside the world was awakening. A bulbul's sweet call, like the sound of water falling into a silver basin, came from the bamboo thicket below. It was answered by a chorus of other birds. Then, the deep tones of a big bell sounded through the morning calm. The service at the temple was beginning. Tinkling of bells blended with the hollow voice of a large prayer block. Nasal chanting superseded the bell as the monks began their incantations.

The door of Chungan's room was open. I knocked and came in. He was already up, but Tsungpoo was snoring in his bed. Chungan went out and brought an enamelled basin of hot water from the kitchen. Having soaked a towel in it he carefully wiped his face, brushed his teeth, gargled and washed his mouth. Hearing us talk, Tsungpoo opened his eyes, jumped out of bed and also rushed with the basin into the kitchen. Their ablutions finished, we all stepped into the mess hall. Then my friends brought three bowls, filled with *congee*, and some pickled cabbage, bamboo shoots and cold mushrooms. In five minutes our simple meal was over, and we went out and sat on the steps of the terrace.

Red, pink and gold tints were merging into each other in the

east. The sky was pale blue and the mist, lying heavily in the valleys, slowly began to rise. The air was cool and intoxicating in its freshness. We sat watching the mist rising from the valley and spreading into light downy clouds and slowly disappearing in the distance. New mists came up and sometimes enveloped the whole monastery in their milky shadows. The clammy cold made us shiver as if from a ghostly breath. Soon, however, the whole sky was clear and the radiance of the sun, yet invisible beyond the distant mountains, was flooding the east.

At last we got up and went along a small path that led into the dense bamboo grove behind the monastery buildings. Having followed it to the end, we emerged into a vegetable garden with its neat rows of beans and cabbages. The soil was red and rich, and the crops looked good. Farther down were the monastery's tea gardens. Dwarf tea trees were covered with oily dark green foliage glistening in the morning radiance and dripping heavily with dew. The path continued to descend, winding among mossy rocks. Almost half-way down the slope was a large pavilion built by the monastery for the rest of the heat-tortured pilgrims. Tsungpoo paused to examine one of the inscriptions carved on a pillar of white stone. 'Clouds caress the face of the mountain,' he said, reading aloud the first stanza of a famous classic verse. After a short flight of stone steps, the descent was more gradual and soon we reached the bottom of the valley. A brook was running alongside the path on one side and on the other were squares of rice fields planted, at this season of the year, with legumes.

Hidden in dense groves of bamboos and in the shade of persimmon trees were the thatched huts of peasants, with doors and unglazed windows wide open. Blue smoke curled from the stoves and the pungent smell of burning straw tickled both nostrils and eyes. The neat courtyards were full of early risers. Women in bright purple clothes were washing rice in the clear waters of a brook. Cocks crowed and mangy dogs barked at passers-by and at each other. Country boys, with immense conical hats of bamboo leaves, were sitting on the backs of water-buffaloes, the unwieldy animals slowly walking towards the

fields, kind and obedient to their masters. Little children smiled as we passed by, elders greeted us courteously, simple men and kindly folk in their coarse blue pants rolled above the knee and their bronzed bodies naked above the waist.

Soon the path brought us to a temple entirely concealed in the green semi-darkness of a vast grove of giant bamboos. It was a Buddhist hermitage called the Monastery of Resting Clouds. There is a legend that many centuries ago a saintly Buddhist monk was meditating in the seclusion of this isolated spot. Lifting his eyes he saw five beautiful and iridescent clouds gently floating down from the sky and coming to rest where he was praying. Immediately he built a small shrine to commemorate this unusual manifestation and never afterwards left this felicitous place. A number of disciples attached themselves to him and built this charming monastery. Chungan and Tsungpoo knew the monks and we were warmly welcomed by them. We chatted for a while, sipping tea, and then walked to the motor road and soon picked up a bus for the Lingyin monastery which, they told me, was the place above all others to see. It was a long drive around the lake, but at last the bus stopped before an immense arch with great gold-emblazoned characters. The inscription enjoined reverence, for, it declared, the place which we were about to enter was in close proximity to Heaven itself. We descended and walked up an avenue of tall, shady trees which led onwards to a bridge over a stream, with a pavilion in the centre called the Pavilion of the Running Waters of Spring.

On the left side was a densely wooded rocky hill. Its steep slope was carved into fantastic figures of unicorns, leogryphs and other mythological animals, and statues of gods and saints. They had been fashioned out of rock by the monks more than fifteen centuries ago. Under the hill were grottoes and caves filled with Buddhas and genii, where pilgrims were burning incense. Mantras in Sanskrit and archaic Chinese adorned the rocks, chiselled by the long departed hermits.

Walking a little farther we came to the spacious entrance hall of a monastery which was unique in China in its grandeur and sanctity.

'The Monastery of the Spirit's Retreat,' softly exclaimed Chungan pointing to the three huge golden characters over the wide-open doors of the hall.

'What a deep and secret meaning these words possess!' he continued. 'It is a fitting name for this place, for it is difficult to conceive a better hermitage for the spirit of a man tired of the world and seeking concealment amidst the beautiful and tranquil.'

Having emerged from this hall with its golden statue of Maitreya, the Lord Buddha of the Future, we stepped out into a large stone-flagged courtyard bounded by ancient trees. In front of them, on a high stone platform, flanked by two small pagodas and with a massive bronze incense burner in the middle, stood the main temple hall. Its great height and immense size dwarfed all other buildings around it. The roof rose in three nobly curved tiers supported by colossal red wooden pillars.

The latticed gates of the hall were open as we came in. A mysterious semi-darkness, heavy with the odour of sandal-wood incense, pervaded the place. Right in the middle of the vast temple sat three golden Buddhas of such unbelievable majesty and of such gigantic proportions that when I saw them I was astonished. The images rested on lotus flowers which, in turn, were supported by stupendous stone pedestals. A colossal lantern, richly carved and decorated, with a perpetually-burning oil-lamp within, was suspended in front of the Trinity.

The central figure was that of the Lord Buddha himself with his royal coiffure and a sign of urna on his forehead. With the eyes turned inwards, gazing not at the world outside before him but at the world within himself, with his enigmatic smile, he sat there a true image of the man that he once was, but who had transcended all human emotions, desires, all suffering and mundane joy; who had found the lost path to Heaven and shown it to suffering mankind, and who at last had entered Nirvana and became himself a God. I gazed enchanted at the mystic statue. I felt mesmerized by the utter stillness of the temple. Clouds of incense floated in spirals towards the lofty ceiling and gently

dissolved there in the golden rays of the sun coming through the narrow windows. The very silence was pregnant with the meaning of things unsaid, of prayers uttered and of petitions yet un-offered.

After we had finished our tour of the golden statues of *arhats*, lining the walls, and paused before an enormous image of the gentle Goddess Kwanyin, which stood against an altar piece representing the Western Paradise, we made our exit by a side door into a commodious guest hall where a young novice brought us cups of the monastery's own tea. He smiled at Chung-an and Tsungpoo, evidently recognizing them as frequent visitors. After a good rest we were ready to proceed to the next famous temple.

It was a long walk between mulberry gardens, tea plantations and clusters of bamboo, although my friends called it a short cut. The path twisted now far to the left, now far to the right, following the contours of the valley, and we had to cross a brook several times before we reached the mountain-side which we had to climb.

Below, in grotesque formations, towered the roofs of another monastery which we decided to visit some other time. Another brook was leaping and gurgling beside our path. Curiously connected pipes made of bamboo trunks branched off here and there from the stream, delivering its crystal-clear water to the temples below. It was delightfully cool. The air was permeated with the rich smell of earth and grass as we plodded up the mossy stone steps. At last we reached the pass on the ridge. There was a small pavilion on a jutting rock and we enjoyed the superb view from the ridge. Long mountain ranges ran to left and right, covered with feathery bamboo and dark green pines. Exquisite temples, like jewels, with orange and vermilion walls shone out of the dark foliage. Some of them nestled almost on the very mountain-top, others were set in the midst of secluded valleys. Directly in front, beyond the woods, fields and gardens, lay the marvellous West Lake of turquoise blue and contrasting wonderfully with its jade-green shores. The Jade Mountain on which we stayed was just across the valley, and the monastery was visible

half hidden in a grove of tall bamboos like a huge white and black heron's nest. Far away across the ridges of lower hills, the great river could be seen in the distance. The quiet was absolute and peace reigned supreme here, as bumble-bees droned from flower to flower, birds chirped and monster black butterflies floated unhurriedly in the shimmering air. Sometimes the booming of a big bell at one of the large temples below would pass like a wave, and resounding from hill to hill would smother itself in a valley.

When we descended we found at the end of a narrow lane an imposing gate, the golden characters of which proclaimed the precincts of another famous Buddhist hermitage, Hupaossu—the Monastery of Tiger Run. Before us were a succession of vast stone-flagged courtyards, great halls with majestic Buddhas, terrifying avatars and benign genii. A flight of stone steps led to a beautiful pavilion built on a rock. Behind this structure was a cave which, according to tradition, once housed a small dragon, and behind the main temple ran the guests' apartments connected by endless corridors and passages.

We were met and welcomed by an assistant abbot and, while preparations for lunch were being made, he conducted us to a roofed stone terrace, calling a novice to bring cups of their own famed tea, brewed with the water which trickled out of a stone gargoyle into a small square tank below the terrace. The bottom of the tank was covered with small coins, like that of the Trevi Fountain in Rome—donations to the spirit of the spring. The abbot told me the well-known legend of how a hermit had settled here many centuries ago. He liked the spot, but suffered greatly from the lack of drinking water. Instead of removing himself to a more favourable location, he prayed for a miracle. One night he dreamt that a tiger had appeared out of the thicket and had clawed the ground until a spring of clear water gushed out. Awakening from his slumber, the hermit found that indeed a beautiful spring was gushing out of that very spot. Disciples came in crowds to the miraculous place, and a great monastery was born.

A good lunch was served, again composed of all kinds of

vegetables and mushrooms, but no wine was offered. After the meal we wandered around the picturesque and historical grounds admiring the gardens and grottoes.

'Is there anything more to see here?' I asked Chungan.

'Would you like to see Chikung's pagoda?' he asked. He led me up the steps to an adjoining stone terrace on which a short, squat wooden pagoda was situated. It was pleasantly cool inside. An oil-lamp burned before the golden image and funerary tablet of Chikung. There he stood in his patched-up robe and wearing a peculiar two-humped cap like a boat, holding a tattered palm-leaf fan. There was a perpetual smile, bold and cynical, on his forceful rugged face and his penetrating eyes gazed both into space and at the intruders with wisdom and knowledge, roguish challenge and infinite kindness and sympathy. After this we climbed up to our monastery and arrived, hot and exhausted shortly before sundown.

One morning, as I was crossing the courtyard to go out on the terrace, I saw Abbot Lee Lisan sitting alone in his little garden. He waved to me to come to him.

'I heard you are leaving us soon,' he said pleasantly, inviting me to sit down and offering me a cup of fragrant tea. 'Why not stay a little longer?'

I shook my head. 'I am so thankful to you for keeping me here for so long,' I said, 'but I must go back to earn my "bowl of rice".'

He smiled. 'You must come again soon. Come as often as you like. Make this humble monastery your home, your real home, even if you cannot stay here continuously.' His eyes were kind. 'There is something in you that is akin to us,' he continued. 'You may become a good Taoist later on.'

I was a bit startled by this. The idea was already in my mind. Seeing my slight embarrassment he laughed.

'You need not dress like us. We dislike any masquerade and believe that it is a sincere conviction and real understanding of Tao that makes one a Taoist, and not clothes. And we do not require any conversion; your Christian truths, as you will realize

later, are also our truths. And the same can be said about the highest forms of Buddhism. It is only evil and ignorance that have many shapes. Truth and wisdom are one and the same.' He became silent, slowly sipping his tea. Then his manner changed, becoming more intimate as he leaned towards me.

'Do not give way to your grief,' he said softly. 'Your beloved mother is not dead. Because you cannot see her, it does not mean that she is utterly extinct or has become nothing. Life, once created by the Eternal Tao, lasts for ever. Men and all intelligent forms of life, sustained and nourished by Tao, are ever ascending in a mighty spiral from the low towards the high. With every turn their consciousness expands and their very forms evolve. This expansion or projection into a new shape of existence we call death because the old vehicle is discarded and we are unable to see with our mortal eyes the new one. But as the whole universe, both visible and invisible, is the projection of the Eternal Tao, One Mind, and their substance is nothing but Divine Imagination, it is clear that these worlds are interconnected and overlap each other. Therefore, if we are pure and properly attuned, we can sometimes catch a glimpse of those to whom we are bound by love or affinity, and, at all times, we can feel their nearness and the warmth of their affection, for the mind knows no barriers or time. Therefore, do not weep, fret or rave against the Divine Wisdom of natural processes, but be calm, peaceful and have faith; and you will feel that all your loved ones, who have departed, are always by your side and wish to help you. If we are wise we realize that each of us has to live fully and fruitfully, both in spirit and body, during the duration of our present life. We must not attempt to outstrip nature by putting one foot prematurely into the mode of existence which is not ours yet. If we are thus divided, we lose the reality of both worlds and eventually become insane.' He stopped and looked at me with his penetrating eyes. Then he emptied his cup, and I knew that the interview was over.

I had a curious sensation, as if something of the greatest importance had happened to me. A mild exultation filled me.

Every moment I expected that something extraordinary and recondite would be revealed to me, either clairvoyantly or clairaudiently, and that reality was just around the corner, if only I could lift the veil.

That night I slept unusually soundly, and I dreamt that I fell into a second sleep during which I realized that I was in a dream state. In other words, I became conscious. I clearly remember that some sort of milky mist was all around me. There was a bench, and on that bench a figure was sitting which I immediately recognized as my mother. I was at once overcome with an intense emotion. I could say nothing, hemmed in by the excess of my feelings. But my consciousness became stronger and my mother's face became blurred as the mist closed in again. I felt that I was pulled back into a sort of second sleep, then a moment of blackness and I opened my eyes, my cheeks wet with tears.

In the morning Chungan noticed my shaken condition, and I told him about the dream. He was not in the least surprised, and said I should expect more visions, since evidently my mother wanted to tell me something. However, that night nothing happened.

It was on the third night that the strange double sleep was repeated. This time I found myself in a small meadow, which was covered with daffodils and white flowers. I was conscious again that I was in a dream when I saw my mother, youthful and radiant as she once had been. With the greatest effort of will I controlled my emotion as she came near to me smiling sweetly. It was as if she were reminding me of her promise to come back to me and my thoughts raced on as if she were telling me that it is still possible for the living and the dead to meet in sleep. It seemed that she told me that the existence of the dead is no more real than a dream to us. I suddenly realized that it was as if I were seeing myself in a mirror, both standing before it and reflected in it and that both were myself and that there were two of me. And yet the one who is in the mirror, though having form and colour and movement, has no substance, so the dead are to us, yet now I knew that my mother was still near me and

that indeed I would never lose her. Her face became blurred as I experienced the same sensation of being pulled through another dream state and then I opened my eyes. I felt exhilarated and happy. All my grief was gone and only a sense of sweet sadness remained.

I left the monastery two days after this.

Monastery of Purple Bamboo

IT was a dull winter day; the clouds hung heavily over the Jade Emperor's Mountain and snowflakes gently fluttered down among the pines like tiny white moths. The courtyard of the monastery was crowded with Buddhist monks and nuns. Some were old and wizened, some in the prime of life and some still young. In their thin, grey robes, they all felt the cold and shivered visibly. They milled about stamping their feet and rubbing their benumbed hands. Many of them wore thick, knitted black caps or padded cowls which protected their necks from the biting wind. Almost all looked underfed and some emaciated but their manner was animated and joyful, and their eyes shone with pleasurable anticipation as long tables and low benches were set out and arranged in neat rows by the monastic servants. Clusters of steaming bowls were placed on each table and heavy tubs of rice in the centre. The clashing of cymbals and the tinkling of bells in the main temple had stopped and the abbot emerged out of the gate accompanied by Chungan and other priests. They were respectfully and even affectionately greeted by the assembled Buddhists. Abbot Lee invited them to be seated and begin their meal. Then, walking from table to table, he and Chungan handed to each guest a small *hungpao*, a ceremonial red packet containing a gift of money.

Afterwards Chungan came up to me and explained that it was a yearly festival arranged by the monastery for their Buddhist brethren, especially the poor ones. The monastery demonstrated its sympathy and solidarity with other religions through providing a hot meal during the seasonable cold weather and monetary assistance to these impecunious monks. As the monastery was one of the wealthiest in China, he felt it was their bounden duty

to help the less fortunate religious of whatever faith they might be. They would treat in the same manner, he assured me, any Christian monk or priest if he came to them in need.

'Alas,' he remarked to me with a sigh, 'many Christian missionaries come here to visit our temple. We always discern in their outwardly polite attitude more of a snickering contempt and disapproval of our "idolatry" than the desire for genuine brotherhood with us. They have their own material symbols of the Divine so why do they condemn ours? Both are mere physical objects and both serve only as signposts to indicate the road to spiritual reality.'

As we were talking, the meal had come to an end, and a tall Buddhist monk rose from the table and advanced towards us. I seemed to remember him. Chungan stepped forward drawing him to me.

'This is Abbot Mingzing,' he said warmly as we bowed to each other with the palms of our hands joined together, murmuring '*Nanmu Amithaba*'. Before my eyes suddenly floated the picture of a delightful little hermitage with vermilion walls.

'Yes, of course!' I exclaimed brightly. 'From the Monastery of the Purple Bamboo Grove.' Abbot Mingzing was delighted that I remembered my previous visit to the Monastery and clasped my hands.

'You must come! You must come and stay with us for a few days,' he insisted. With my powers of perception already considerably accentuated during my long sojourn on the Jade Mountain, I felt at once that the invitation came from the depths of his heart.

'I will come tomorrow,' I said impulsively, and he went down the path with a smile, accompanied by one of his novices.

The sun shone brightly the following morning as I set out from my monastery, and the dazzlingly white blanket of fresh snow covered everything. There was snow on the grey rocks, on the pines and on the feathery bamboos, which bent slightly under its weight. All the mountains around were white and the lake appeared as green as an emerald. The pillars of monasteries and temples glowed like polished cinnabar. Weeping willows along

the causeways sparkled with myriads of brilliants, dipping their snow-burdened branches into the placid waters of the lake. There was joy and exhilaration in the keen air, and the sound of farmers playing on their *huching* violins sitting outside their wattle huts.

A rickety bus brought me to the Monastery of the Spirit's Retreat. As I was walking past the magnificent Hall of the Maitreya, the boom of a great bronze bell rent the air and a cornice of sparkling snow, dislodged from the roof, slid down in a white cascade almost on my head. The deep sound, concentrated in that narrow valley, reverberated to and fro, now loud and sonorous and now a mere whisper. I turned right into a narrow passage and, reaching the end of a cul-de-sac, knocked at a small gate in the vermilion wall. It was opened by a young novice and I stepped into a small courtyard adorned by creeper plants, chrysanthemums in stone and pottery vases and a picturesque clump of bamboos with purple stems in the corner. It was this rare kind of bamboo that gave the monastery its unusual name.

Abbot Mingzing rose from a seat by the round stone table in the centre and led me to a chair of honour, while a little monk brought a pot of tea and cups. After some polite conversation and a few cups of tea he got up and showed me round his monastery. Although it was a small establishment it was well known for the reception hall contained many photographs of prominent Buddhist prelates and wealthy businessmen from Shanghai, Singapore and Penang, who had visited the hermitage and were evidently so pleased with its spiritual comforts that they had put it on their permanent contribution list. The prayer hall was of modest size with a statue of Buddha in the middle and a few *arhats* along the walls. The remaining rooms were intended for visitors and each had a wide bed with a coarse mosquito net, a small oblong table, a chair or two and a washstand. One of the best rooms was immediately allocated for my use. Then the abbot and his assistants disappeared and shortly afterwards I heard the sounds of sizzling and frying from the near-by kitchen.

The meal was served at noon on the round stone table in the

little garden. It was not so elaborate as the wonderful food to which I had become accustomed at my Taoist monastery, but quite appetizing and wholesome. Abbot Mingzing's novices were as unsophisticated as they looked, and had not tried to imitate roast duck, fried chicken or ham in their cooking. There was a small pewter jug of steaming hot rice wine and this the abbot took in both hands and poured me out a drink into a porcelain cup. It was an act of exquisite courtesy as, not drinking alcohol himself, he wanted to please his guest. He apologized profusely saying how poor monastic fare was and, of course, just as vehemently, I praised his monks' culinary attainments.

Actually I felt happy and at peace at this small retreat, with the sun playing on the purple bamboos and flowers, and on my friend's ascetic face. He was a tall and handsome man of thirty-four, as he himself had told me. He had a thin, refined face with a short, straggling beard, and large expressive eyes. He had indeed an atmosphere of saintliness about him—a sort of Chinese Jesus in appearance, if I may put it this way. He spoke in a subdued voice, calmly and gently, as if loath to offend me with some unexpectedly harsh tone or expression. I sat quietly sipping my wine and watching his long sensitive fingers as he wrote a character or two to illustrate his meaning. I told him about the pleasant time I was having on Jade Mountain. His eyes sparkled.

'Wonderful men! What good friends they are!' He commented enthusiastically, 'Especially Chungan who is like a brother to me.' He sighed. 'The Lungmen Taoists live with one foot in the fullness of this terrestrial life and with another in the kingdom of the spirit.' He became silent again regarding me kindly with his great earnest eyes. This was the ideal time for confidences and I plunged boldly.

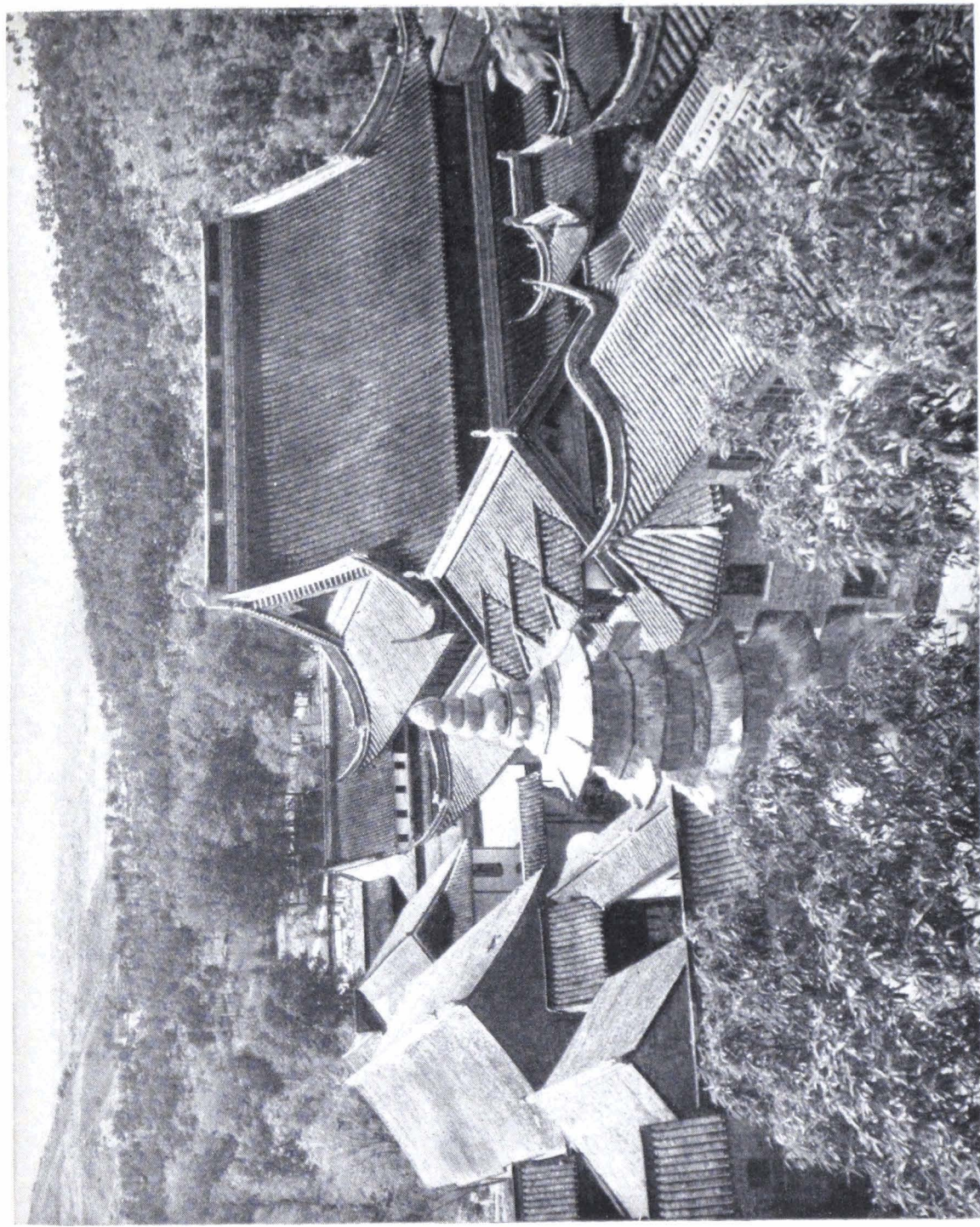
'I have studied Buddhism for some years, and now my visits to Jade Mountain have given me a glimpse of the graces of real Taoism. Please tell me whether the gulf between your religion and theirs is very wide?' And I looked at him expectantly. My candid query pleased him and his face became animated with a touch of colour on his hollow cheeks.

‘We do not look for gulfs when we compare religions, rather we try to find similarities and unity. This is the essential difference between the Chinese and Western view points. We firmly believe in the truism that all faiths are the paths leading towards the Ultimate Reality, just as the spokes of the wheel converge to its axis. When the people are too immersed in the dogmas and rituals of their chosen religion, it appears to them to be the only one worth following and they defend their own particular faith. However, when they have acquired enough wisdom, charity and discernment, they too are bound to perceive that the road to Heaven is nobody’s monopoly and that the divine laws apply equally to all. It is the dogmas, ritual and the mode of worship that divide the faiths and not the basic essence of their beliefs.

But I am not in favour of conversion from one faith to another, neither do I believe in the fusion of all religions into one. The Ultimate Truth is one, but it has an infinite number of aspects and what is more beautiful than that each faith should reflect only one facet of the Divine, all of them together creating a shining gem of beauty. Would the world be more beautiful if all the flowers on earth had been blended into one uniform colour or all mountains razed to make the globe monotonously flat? Each religion offers something glorious, peculiarly its own, to point out the road to the Ultimate Reality. What man or group of men would be able to prescribe a single form of religion that would satisfy all and everybody? That would be an attempt to give a finite concept of the Infinite and, of course, it would fail.

‘Taoism and Buddhism are very close to each other, so close indeed that we have borrowed a number of their saints and deities, not to speak of the monastic architecture and, in turn, they venerate many of our symbols of the Divine. But it would be wrong to imply that we had fused together or that we are more or less the same.

‘Taoism is a purely Chinese philosophy which developed into a religion. It is practised nowadays in all its purity by the Lungmen Taoists, i.e. our friends on Jade Mountain and their allied monasteries. There are also Chengyi and Changtienssu Taoists, but they are very different as you will learn later and cannot be



An esoteric Buddhist monastery



A Buddhist monastery garden

regarded as true Taoists. China has been an ideal country to produce and develop such a sublime teaching. It was always tranquil and fertile, and populated with a particularly reasonable and intelligent people—law-abiding, practical and devoted to peaceful agricultural pursuits. In the West the knowledge of God has been imparted amidst the flashes of lightning and peals of thunder on Mt Sinai against the long and painful background of war, struggle, treachery and misery. In the China of those ages the calamities of war, on the scale waged by the Assyrians, Babylonians and Egyptians, were unknown, and spiritual awakening came in the paradisaical atmosphere of green hills, lush fields, clear streams and the uncomplicated labours of simple and happy farmers and soul-satisfying discussions with congenial friends over a bowl of rice wine and pigs' trotters at a village tavern. Thoughtful and intelligent men had time to observe nature and her slow and wise work and correlate it with human activities. They pondered upon what they had seen and meditated in the quiet seclusion of their mountain caves until, at last, a revelation of the Reality underlying the world had been vouchsafed them. Then the great Teacher Loatze succinctly wrote down the doctrine of the Divine Tao and the new religion made its appearance. It teaches that, if man merges himself into Tao, his peace and happiness are assured here and now and shall remain with his spirit when his physical body has been dissolved.

'Our Buddhist faith also originated in the peace and calm of rural India but, unlike Taoism, it did not grow up spontaneously out of the meditation about nature and the guiding wisdom behind it. India already possessed at that time a very ancient and profound religion with its well-established dogmas of Karma and Reincarnation. Prince Gautama never questioned the validity of this ancient teaching. In his meditations he sought the way out of the appalling misery and suffering which afflicted humanity from birth to death. A flash of Divine Wisdom during his Illumination revealed to him the path to Nirvana—the Ultimate Salvation and Bliss. He realized that man's real self was a spirit, a spark of the Divine Flame, a drop of the Boundless, Shining Ocean, imprisoned in the illusory world of Being. Attached to

existence, bound by his senses and desires and dragged from life to life by his evil Karma, man wallowed in Ignorance like a pig in mud. Prince Gautama found the liberation for himself and became Buddha, the Enlightened One, and, full of compassion, showed the Way to his fellow man so that the "drop" could slide back into the Shining Ocean and be free for ever from the Wheel of Life.

'To us Buddhists it is a sorrowful world as men are born, sin, suffer and die to be reborn again and again to expiate the evil deeds committed by them in previous lives. Nothing can be done for them, for Karma is an Immutable Law and each man must reap what he has sown before he achieves his Liberation.

We monks can only advise and exhort, and show Lord Buddha's Way by the example of our own monastic life. Alas, few people in this modern world of ours care to undergo the rigours of sacred vows or lead the life of poverty and austerity. And thus the Wheel of Life goes on revolving and sweeping with it all humanity—a king in this life and, perhaps, a beggar in the next—all and each according to his deserts—without pity, without mercy and without grace.

'Our friends, the Taoists, also believe that the process of Being, or to put it another way this world with its many planes of existence, has issued from the Void, i.e. the Infinite Spirit corresponding to our Adi Buddha, The Primordial Buddha, The Godhead. This Divine Mind, objectified as Tao, became relative to Itself as Yang and Yin and began to flow in series and numbers which produced The Ten Thousand Things. Naturally the phenomenal world of forms and appearances is illusory to the Taoists too, but they do not regard it as a place of sorrows and suffering. They argue that as the world is the creation of Tao it cannot be evil in its essence. To make the world live and move, the interplay of the Duality Principle, Yang and Yin, is a prerequisite—light and shadow, warmth and cold, sadness and joy; otherwise the Universe would become static and, if everyone was uniformly happy and content, all human progress and initiative would cease.

'The Taoists do not believe in the Wheel of Life to which all

living beings are chained. Instead, the existence is visualized by them as a glorious, ever-ascending Spiral of Evolution. The whole Universe, they teach, is a marvellous, vibrant Unity wherein everything, visible and invisible, pulses with life and consciousness. As consciousness develops through the experience of existence, its vessels—man and other sentient beings—are swept onwards and upwards by the mighty stream of the Eternal Tao to higher forms of expression and activity. Man does not die; he merely extends into new fields of expanded consciousness. Nothing is lost and nothing is dead in the Divine economy and no being is left in unhappiness and suffering for ever by the Infinite Love. Like us Buddhists, the Taoists teach that the end of man is his return to the Ultimate Reality—our Nirvana and the Moksha of the Hindus. Like a happy traveller after a very long voyage, he shall come back home and lay on the altar of the All-Highest the rich spiritual gifts he has acquired.'

It was a long and exhilarating talk and the sun was setting as Abbot Mingzing rose and went to supervise an early evening meal. We ate in silence watching the evening shadows creep into the little garden. It became damp and cold, and I shivered as I sipped cup after cup of steaming rice wine to warm myself up. After dinner the abbot excused himself and I was left alone in my room. Soon I heard the sounds of subdued chanting and afterwards the monotonous drone of my friend's voice reciting the Diamond Sutra to the rhythmic tinkling of a small bell. Then there was utter stillness. I knew that it was his time of meditation and I forbore to disturb him much as I wanted to talk to him again. Instead, I unlatched the gate and stepped into the gloom of the passage leading to the great Lingyin temple.

A side door was open and I entered the great hall and sat down on a bench by the counter on which piles of incense sticks lay ready for the pilgrims in the morning. An old monk glided, like a shadow, out of the corner and poured me a cup of tea out of a large porcelain pot kept warm by a bamboo cosy. I looked at the colossal golden images of the Trikaya—the Trinity representing the Primordial Buddha, the Buddha of Heavenly Spheres and the Buddha of this Illusory World. A huge oil-lamp of purple

glass, burning in front of them, barely lit the outlines of their faces making them seem more mysterious, majestic and beautiful. I slowly lapsed into meditation, Mahayana-style, concentrating on all known attributes of their Divinity.

How clever Chinese artists were in making these statues in the likeness of the human body and yet, at the same time, so majestically divine. It was right, I meditated, to imagine the Deity in human form for is He not the source of all forms? In all ages and in all sacred scriptures we read that gods and archangels appeared to man also in human guise. How else could the Infinite Love manifest Itself without inspiring terror in man? Surely not in the form of geometrical symbols or some mythical animals. Man cannot conceive spirit without a form; neither can he connect intelligence, understanding and love with some cold, remote and impersonal source. I am sure that as long as humanity exists, man will always long for a vision of an effulgent and transcendently beautiful Person to whom he can direct his love, adoration and prayer. God said that he created man in His own image. This indication is clear enough that that is the form in which the Creator desires to be known to man, until the end when all humanity has entered Nirvana which is the original home of all forms, phenomena and possibilities.

As I sat there reflecting on these things, the golden radiance on the great faces seemed to deepen as warmth and well-being began to flow into me. Their inverted gaze beckoned to me to look into my own heart and the enigmatic smile promised great understanding through peace and repose. This was the prayer and the response, and I felt strangely comforted and exhilarated. Wonderfully relaxed and inspired, I made my way back to my room.

Next morning I related my experience to Abbot Mingzing and he was very pleased with my spiritual progress. He told me that, as I was still in the world, meditation should be practised by me only infrequently and sparingly, as sublime refreshment for the soul. Too much of it would prematurely detach me from my ordinary existence—a step very unwise to take without due preparation, both spiritual and material. To devote myself to meditation at all times I must either enter a monastery, which

takes care of the monk's bodily needs or I must have sufficient means to dispense with all other activities and devote myself to holy life and meditation. Since I was not inclined to be a Buddhist monk and at the same time was poor, he advised me to stick to my Taoists where spiritual development was a woof to the warp of mundane life.

Quest in Shanghai

WHEN not on Jade Mountain, I continued my researches into Taoism in Shanghai. I concluded that reading the Taoteking in all possible translations was not enough. I felt I would lose what ground I had gained so far in my studies by abandoning myself entirely to the inertia of doing my job and nothing else. As Taoism had originated among the Chinese and was still a living force among them, it was to the common people that I had to turn to find further truths and sustenance in my new beliefs. I was prepared to learn by trial and error, and pay the cost if I had made a mistake in the proposed approach. I knew, by now, a lot about China and Chinese, but was aware how pitifully small my stock of knowledge about them still was. Every day revealed some new facet of their character and a new and unexpected side of Chinese life. I was sure that, if I could get, so to speak, under their skin, I would learn much to my eventual profit and pleasure. Away from my own country and alone, I decided to identify myself as much as possible with the Chinese people, who had treated me so kindly and hospitably. It did not mean that I had abandoned all connection with the European colony in Shanghai, but I ceased to take part in various social activities and sports which bored me anyway. Perhaps, on account of my retiring disposition, I was thought eccentric and *déclassé* by local snobs but this attitude, because of my newly-acquired Taoistic humility, did not bother me at all. I just wanted to be myself, do what I liked and have the time to study things Chinese as long as this did not interfere with my job.

In order to have the opportunity of making friends with the Chinese in all walks of life, I found, quite by chance, a spacious apartment over a Chinese haberdashery store in the centre of the

town. I decorated it with Tientsin carpets, Chinese paintings and scrolls, and installed a small altar at one end on which I placed a beautifully carved statue of the god Doudoufo, which I found in an obscure curio shop. The statue had upraised arms and an enormous round belly and every evening I put sticks of fragrant incense before it, not out of piety, but because I liked it.

For my meals I used to go to a large Chinese restaurant, called Great China, just next door. I was always served there by a young waiter named Koueifo, who was most courteous and helpful. Little by little he initiated me into a multitude of Chinese gastronomic *chefs-d'œuvre*. When he was not busy he would tell me about Chinese life and customs, revealing new facets of their etiquette or usage. We discovered many points in common. Like myself, his father had died when he was a child, and he had an old mother whom he supported; he liked to visit monasteries and temples, and loved the country-side. He was an expert on Chinese gastronomy both by virtue of his profession and by natural inclination and, like myself, he was fond of a bottle of beer or a pot of Shaohsing wine when off duty. The food at the restaurant was very good and cheap, and it was a favourite place with politicians, the military, and many powerful figures in the Shanghai underworld. Some of them later became important figures in the National Government. They all liked Koueifo and, serving them, he could often learn about impending political moves, which I presume must have been meant to be secret. He usually warned me when to expect a *coup d'état* or some other exciting event. He was gentle, polite and possessed great delicacy of feeling and excellent manners. So, little by little, we drifted into a firm and indissoluble friendship which has endured to this day.

Koueifo soon introduced me to one of the greatest pastimes and delights of Chinese life—the public bath. Some evenings, after dinner, we went to one of the largest and most sumptuous. In a great well-heated hall there were rows of comfortable couches, mirrors and spittoons. As soon as we had entered, we were led to one of the seats, undressed by the attendant, laid on

the couch and served tea. When we had rested, we proceeded to a large marble-lined steaming pool where we soaked ourselves in hot water until a bath-boy stretched us on marble slabs, giving us a vigorous rubbing and massage. Returning to our couches, we had iced beer and small plates of delicious cold duck and chicken while a pedicurist worked on our feet. He twirled little wooden sticks between our toes, a ticklish and exquisitely painful procedure but at the same time quite pleasant. After more violent massage we were left to rest in peace. As the baths were always full, we talked to many and listened to their tales. To the Chinese these baths were not only a hygienic necessity, but also clubs where business was discussed with friends and new acquaintances made, quite in the best Roman tradition.

During week-ends or short holidays I usually went to one of the small towns not far from Shanghai, accompanied by Koueifo who, working in a Chinese establishment, could always obtain leave for a day. I enjoyed these trips because they revealed to me so much of the real China. There was also the possibility of making interesting friendships and discovering some new culinary delicacy. As all Chinese are born gourmets we were not alone in such gastronomical pilgrimages. Every little town had something to offer in this respect, perhaps a dish or two which you could not find in Shanghai in spite of all the sophistication of its varied restaurants.

One of the most frequent and thrilling expeditions was to Kading. It was only twenty miles away, but the complications of getting there made it seem remote and mysterious. We took the morning train to Nansiang, a small town reached in half an hour. Then we walked through its narrow streets to an old canal to catch the 'water train'. It consisted of picturesque covered boats each divided into cosy compartments with sliding windows, lacquered tables and benches, and elaborately carved panels. There was a shrill whistle and an ancient steam launch proudly chugged ahead, pulling five or six of these boats, crammed with passengers and goods, in addition to one or two private boats hitched on behind. Old trees met overhead, converting the canal into a cool, green tunnel. We passed under beautiful camel-back

bridges and sometimes the trees receded to open up a vista of thatched huts or vermilion shrines hidden in the clusters of bushes or giant bamboos. The water in the canal was clear and sparkling, with the strands of water plants waving to and fro underneath as we passed. Then, after an hour or so, we came to grey crenellated walls and a tunnel-like old gate. Beyond was a narrow street paved with flagstones and lined by low houses with grey curving roofs and carved doors. On the right there was a small lake with age-old cypresses surrounding it and an island on which a vermilion pagoda stood in dreamy isolation. In front there was an ancient Confucian temple with red doors and massive weather-beaten arches. Farther on the street became livelier with its two-storeyed shop-houses. The hub of the place was a square seven-storeyed pagoda where four streets converged and crossed a canal over a graceful stone bridge. Right by the pagoda was the restaurant. It was a wonderful experience to sit by the window in the upper storey looking at the boats silently gliding through the canal lined with the houses—an Eastern Venice. A pewter jar of heated wine was placed on the table, accompanied by sizzling roast eels garnished with chopped garlic, ham and chicken, and 'drunken' shrimps—the famed specialities of this little town. The 'drunken' shrimps were fresh, live shrimps which had been placed in a bowl with wine, vinegar, ginger and spices, covered with another bowl and allowed to stand for a while. You took one, dipped it into soya sauce, put it into your mouth, squeezing out the jelly-like insides and ejecting the spiny head and tail. Some were not so 'stupefied' and just as you put them into the sauce, up they would jump, splashing the black sauce on your shirt. Sometimes there was the sound of a conchshell horn and a narrow green boat with a green flag, furiously paddled by one man, would pass swiftly; it was the postal boat delivering mail to outlying villages, and also it was a signal to us that the next 'water' train was leaving in an hour's time to connect with the evening express to Shanghai.

There were a number of similar small towns, all linked by canals and boat trains, each of them walled, with two long, main streets, crossing each other in the middle and leading from south

to north gates and from east gate to the west, some with pagodas, but always with a few picturesque old temples. Each had a restaurant which offered a special *pièce de resistance*. Tachong specialized in the pork served in a water-melon; Nanzing, with its lovely old gardens, had fresh-water crab caviare cunningly prepared; Kunshan, with its pretty pagoda and a Buddhist monastery on a high hill tempted gourmets with its duck noodles, and Changshu, on the beautiful Yangtsang lake was a paradise for the lovers of piquantly fried pine mushrooms and its 'beggar's chicken', wrapped in clay and slowly cooked in charcoal pits.

To me, in addition to gastronomy, these towns were a great attraction because they were the essence of the real, unchanging China. They were very old and yet they were ageless. An expert might argue that some of the houses and shops lining narrow, stone-paved streets were new and others perhaps fifty or a hundred years old. What did it matter? They were all of the same style, with beautifully carved doors and panels and latticed windows of exquisite design, set in translucent shells instead of glass. All the roofs were curved, covered with tiles, with decorations at the end. There were small gardens with grotesque rocks, ponds with gold-fish or carp, miniature clumps of feathery bamboos, bridges and a moon gate. The vermilion and orange temples had their stone lions and carved columns in front with golden buddhas or gods inside. Who cared whether all this was the Han dynasty or Tang or built just yesterday? It was done according to an immemorial pattern, repeated over and over again, connecting all ages and periods; a blending of subtle lines and pastel colours. It was all Chinese and it was China, peopled by pleasant, unhurried men and women of dignity and poise, each going about their daily tasks with a smile and the still cherished courtesy and decorum of olden times. There were modern buildings but not hideous concrete box-like houses, ugly factories and raucous and smelly motor transport. Electric lights were there, but their weak bulbs glowed like the old oil-lamps, and some were concealed in the depths of beautiful lanterns. Manufacturing processes were carried on at home, cheerful girls clicking away on their handlooms, making towels or reeling silk.

These small towns of China were also democratic and comparatively free of serious crimes and gangsterism. The very rich and the most successful had moved to Shanghai, to be close to their factories and banks, and those who had the mind to make money on a grand scale by swindling, violence or vice also went the same way, finding the smaller places too limited for their activities, the pickings too poor. The wealthy in these towns were the shopkeepers or country squires who had lands and better houses, but they were by no means millionaires. Both they and their poorer cousins walked the same narrow streets, shopped in the same little market, or bought vegetables, pork and fish together by the side of a canal. There was no opportunity of showing off by arriving or departing in limousines or in any other manner. And if one was rude and overbearing, the public opinion in so small a town could have a chastening effect on the offender. No one wanted to be called a pig to his face.

In China, since immemorial times, the tradition was to regard the *literati* and farmers as the most aristocratic classes in the realm. This was natural, as the country depended entirely on agriculture for its survival and prosperity. The man who was able to improve the methods of food production was worthy of the highest honours and, therefore, it was not surprising that the first and foremost agriculturist was asked to assume the dignities and responsibilities of an emperor. This Emperor Shun, who reigned in remote antiquity, transferred his powers in turn to Yao, who was the first engineer to build irrigation canals and erect dykes along the unruly rivers. Later on, when knotted cord records appeared and afterwards the art of writing, the emergence of a class of people skilful in the compilation of calendars, manuals of ceremonies and sacrifices and chronicles of historical events was inevitable. But the background of this literary class was firmly rooted in the peasantry from whose *milieu* these clever men had been recruited. History tells us how many times in ancient days an emperor, finding a clever farmer or fisherman, became friendly with him and would offer him office as a minister in his government. Such dignities and the artificial glitter of the Imperial Court were not always highly thought of by such clever and

independent men, who preferred the simplicity and freedom of their bucolic life, and many a time the appointment was declined. Generals and soldiers, merchants and barbers, did not produce any food and, therefore, in principle they were parasites on the community of hard-working farmers. Generals and soldiers, being men of war and destruction, were rough and tough, presumably without any need to learn or adhere to the ceremonies and proprieties which guided the life of peaceful people. Merchants were bent on making profits out of their fellow men, and some of their methods could not bear close scrutiny; therefore, they were a repository of crookedness and rapacity, which they always tried to camouflage by the vulgar display of wealth and arrogant manners. They had no time to learn any ceremonial, and their account books sufficed for literature. Barbers, pedicurists and manicurists and a few other professionals were often shifty fellows of low taste; they stood at the very bottom of the social scale.

It was out of these considerations, to which the ancient law-makers must have given centuries of thought and research, that a legal tradition had been evolved which reserved the whole of China's civil service only to the *literati* and farmers, excluding the other classes. This was done through the Imperial examinations, to enter which the young candidate had to prove his *bona fides* as regards his origins.

Although the general was feared and respected by the populace for his power and the merchant for his riches, both were conscious of their social inferiority. To improve his standing at the Court or in society the general sedulously studied classics and Taoism, and took up calligraphy or painting, or wrote poetry. He impressed people with his ultra-simplicity, appearing to visitors in his drawing-room in a shabby, even patched-up robe or long gown, a symbol of his professed humility and nearness to common peasant folk. The merchant impressed the officials with his Lucullan feasts and the local people with munificent donations to building funds for pagodas, temples, city walls and schools. He also appeared to visitors in a cheap, worn-out cotton gown, but for a different reason; no one in China flaunted his

wealth before ordinary people lest he be deluged with requests for loans.

The general at that time was a definite type conditioned by the old military tradition, as expounded in classical literature, by Taoism and rigid Confucian precepts. As he acquired a considerable power, influence and wealth during his career, we may imagine him to be the embodiment of a duke, earl or marquis, the tithes now abolished in China, but whose substance has survived. He controlled his own army, had his own means of income and a mansion in the capital of the day in addition to a palatial home in the town of his birth or at some beauty-spot. The sobriquet of War Lord, applied to such puissant generals, had more meaning in it than many people thought. Being powerful, wealthy and independent, such a man could well be magnanimous, tolerant and hospitable to any person properly introduced to him. He did not care whether the visitor was rich or poor, but he was not insensible to his civilities, charm and education. If he was satisfied that the man was frank, sincere and not a fool, the general usually did not hesitate to take him under his wing, both as a friend and a protégé.

The merchant was a different creature altogether. He trusted only the men with money and to him the hallmark of respectability was the possession of a fine car. Whenever a new friend was introduced to him he made exhaustive inquiries about his financial standing and, if it failed to measure up to his standards, the visitor was feasted once or twice, to save face, and then discouraged to come back again. Even if this person was well gifted intellectually, was a scientist, writer or artist, these qualities weighed nothing in his favour; he might come later on for a loan, reasoned the wily merchant. It is for this reason that no merchant or banker would ever give his card to a new acquaintance, fearing that the man might utilize it to obtain some money by false pretences. I found this particularly true years later among the overseas Chinese, almost all of whom were engaged in mercantile pursuits. No man could penetrate their circle unless he had a showy car, stayed at a large hotel and could make some display of his fortune.

Since I liked China and intended to make my home there, being aware of these facts helped me in establishing interesting and abiding friendships with the Chinese, and in the study of Taoism in a practical, everyday manner in addition to my readings of the *Taoteking* and visits to Taoist monasteries. I felt that the truth of life in China could not be found in the glittering vortex of the Shanghai mercantile community, either Chinese or foreign, but rather among the simple peasant folk, in the *milieu* of educated but unostentatious men and women and genuine Taoist and Buddhist monks.

Monastery of Heavenly Vault

IT was my new friend Koueifo who suggested a trip to a large Taoist monastery somewhere beyond Soochow. He had never visited the place but heard from his friends that it contained five thousand and forty-eight rooms. I grasped at his offer with alacrity as my imagination began to run riot, picturing a colossal structure on a Tower of Babel model, adorned with curving roofs and dragons. He obtained leave of absence and we both boarded an express train for Soochow on a hot summer morning. Arriving there two hours later we engaged two rickshaws. We did not enter the town, but continued along the ancient walls to the West Gate which opened on a broad canal leading towards the Taihu Lake. It was still early and Koueifo led me into a dark eating shop inside the Water Gate for breakfast. We sat on a veranda overlooking the green water and ate barbecued eels and *congee* while sipping rich, heavy wine served warm in large pewter jugs. Koueifo's inquiries about the great Taoist monastery elicited the information that we must go either by boat or 'water train' to Jenjenkiao (Good Man's Bridge) and thence climb the Kiunglun Shan (Heavenly Vault Mountain). We decided to go by boat as it would be a new and delightful adventure for me. Koueifo spent a few minutes bargaining with the boatman, and then came back. 'It's all settled,' he said, 'we may go now.' Just at that moment a couple of other passengers came along and offered to share the boat. We were glad to have our expenses shared so providentially and accepted them. One of them, assisted by a boy, started to carry his packages into a spacious native houseboat which awaited us. It was beautifully gilded and lacquered on the outside, with carved red doors and picture panels enclosed in glass. Inside there were two rooms with couches, square

lacquered tables and a number of small stools. The sliding windows were shaded by silk curtains, which were gathered in graceful folds. Behind these rooms there was a small kitchen and a room for the boatman and his family which consisted of himself—a middle-aged, brown-skinned man—his wife and two boys and a girl.

When the loading of the baggage had been completed, the boat put off and in a little while the boys, under their father's direction, hoisted a great brown sail which swelled in the gentle breeze. The broad boat creaked and glided forward with little greenish wavelets softly lapping its varnished sides. We leaned back contentedly in the rattan chairs, which we had asked the boatman to place in front of the cabin on the little deck.

The fragrance of the flowering gardenias on the banks came in scented waves. The sun was warm and the faraway hills, dotted with pagodas and temples, were wrapped in a bluish haze offering peace and isolation after the bustle of the plains. Now and then we approached old camel-back bridges and the boys pulled down the sail and the mast just before we glided under the arches, pulling them up afterwards. Sails, white and brown, appeared here and there on the blue ribbon of the canal only to vanish beyond a bend. Clumsy junks, heavily laden with quarried stone, moved slowly forward pulled by cheerful but sweating men walking along the banks. Plaintive peasant songs, accompanied by the melodious strains of the *huching*, a native fiddle, came from passing boats and from the farms along the canal.

About noon the boatman's wife laid out the table in the main cabin and brought a pewter jug of *focheng* wine, made only in those parts. It tasted like high-grade Tokay. She also placed on the table a local speciality—the snapping turtle stewed in a marvellous gravy of pork fat, wine, soya sauce and herbs, together with chicken, ham, pork and big cloves of garlic. For *hors-d'œuvres* there were spiced and sliced cold eggs and 'drunken' shrimps. Lulled by the sound of lapping water and made drowsy by the excellent wine and food, we lost count of the hours, content and happy to glide on and on amidst this peace and beauty.

It was late in the afternoon when the boat reached the Good



A Buddhist Eucharist



Abbot Lichun, Monastery of Heavenly Vault

Man's Bridge village, with its quaint little houses on piles, the back-doors opening on to the stone steps leading down to the canal. Women, washing clothes on long stone slabs, looked at our boat with interest and curiosity; two or three idle youths sat on a stone balustrade, flanking the canal, in front of a large soya sauce shop, dangling their feet. Farther down, on an ancient bridge boys chattered and laughed pointing towards us.

The boat slowly pulled up to the bank and we settled with the boatman for the trip and food. Immediately a crowd of country women in their home-made blue tunics surrounded us, offering sedan chairs. With considerable difficulty we managed to decline their offer, while our boat companions selected some of the strongest. The chosen ones giggled contentedly and ran away as fast as their legs could carry them, returning in a little while with light bamboo chairs. It was the strange custom here for the women, instead of the men, to be the chair-carriers. They set off at a brisk pace, almost running, towards the mountains.

We went to an old eating shop, the only one of note in this hamlet, and spent over an hour enjoying a long drink of the wonderful *focheng* wine and eating 'drunken' shrimps, to brace us up for the ascent. This wine continued to be a new and delightful experience to me, and I was told that it was produced only along this canal, between the Taihu Lake and Soochow. It was not made of grapes and the formula for its preparation was an ancient secret; yet it tasted like some of the best Hungarian and Spanish wines. The great Emperor Chienlung, while travelling in these parts, became so fond of this drink that he ordered it to be delivered regularly to the Forbidden City of Peking. What was good for an emperor was good enough for me, and afterwards I always longed for a drink of this heavenly wine.

Later, at peace with the world, we started on our walk to the Mountain of Heavenly Vault, passing through the narrow streets and lanes of the village. Children played on the doorsteps and country girls inside the houses were busy with crawling silkworms in broad wicker trays which they fed with mulberry leaves. They smiled at us as we passed them, showing their white teeth.

Following a path constructed of bricks, remnant of an Imperial road, we came to some mulberry groves. At a Buddhist temple by the roadside some pilgrims were burning incense. Beggars squatted around the entrance and Koueifo gave each a small coin. Now the path began to ascend and the first sign that we were approaching a sacred mountain was a rest pavilion with its curved roofs and stone benches. A few beggars came with outstretched hands; here they were very picturesque, wearing huge round hats woven of bamboo and clad like the ancients in broad-sleeved tunics. They were a good-natured crowd and one could imagine them as a group of philosophers in the days of Laotse, who himself preferred the company of such simple, carefree men.

The path wound uphill through a densely-wooded narrow and sheltered valley—and the air was filled with the fragrance of trees and shrubs. Soon we reached an orange-coloured temple with a winding passage cut right through the middle of a rock. We passed this almost deserted gateway shrine and there in front of us rose the huge pile of the monastery itself. Right from the summit of the peak it tumbled down in a medley of orange-coloured walls, curved roofs, courtyards, gardens and galleries. The steps to the main entrance were crowded by peasant women selling home-made wooden toys, vases, nutcrackers, and gardenia blossoms in tiny baskets—flowers which Chinese women loved to wear in their hair. Small boys and girls played games and their loud screams mingled with the voices of vendors and pilgrims who flocked in and out of the monastery.

We passed in and stopped in the hall not knowing which way to turn. And then I had a brilliant idea. I noticed one or two Taoist monks and went up to one of them, a pleasant-looking young man with a rounded face, and handed him a card given me by my friend Chungan before I left his hermitage. Koueifo joined us.

‘This gentleman is a great friend of the Taoists on Jade Mountain,’ he explained, ‘and we are coming here to see your famous monastery and rest a while.’

Seeing the card, the young monk’s face was transformed with recognition and joy.

'Why, Chungan is my old friend!' he exclaimed. 'So you know him?' and, before we could utter another word, he pulled us into a gallery, then through a courtyard and another corridor into a vast hall where he seated us ceremoniously at a table and handed us cups of tea.

'My name is Lichun,' he explained, 'and I am the abbot of this section of the monastery which is called the Upper Tower of Literature.' We were longing to see the vast monastery but the proprieties had to be observed. An elderly woman, whom Lichun introduced to us as his aunt, brought us a dish of 'drunken' plums, soaked for months in strong wine. She wanted to cook us another meal at once, but we protested pointing out that we had had an ample lunch on the way. Then we were shown our bedroom, a cheerful room overlooking the temple wall and a part of the valley. Only then did Lichun consent to show us round.

Up and down, through endless corridors, staircases and underground passages Abbot Lichun led Koueifo and myself. On and on we walked through big and small rooms, in some of which little novices, with tiny knots of hair on their heads, recited in unison passages from sacred books. In other halls we came across many monks—mostly men in their thirties and younger. All of them ceremoniously bowed when we passed. I observed that they were all well dressed in new, black, silk robes wearing traditional knots of hair with white jade pins. An atmosphere of kindness, courtesy and goodwill pervaded the monastery. I did not hear a single harsh word nor the breath of a quarrel or dispute. Now and then we heard singing, and sometimes bursts of subdued laughter came floating down the corridors. Occasionally the sweet music of a *pipa*, an ancient guitar, mingled with a distant chanting of monks. At last we reached the Central Hall. There on a glass-enclosed dais sat the golden image of the Jade Emperor, the chief Deity of the Chengyi Taoist Church. It was dark in the temple and I could only make out the god's eyes, two huge jewels sparkling in the shadows like flashes of green lightning. Big pearls covered his embroidered robe and hung in strands from his crown. I looked around in the dim light and saw other gods too along

the walls. Each wore a rich red, silk robe embroidered with seed pearls. Placidly they smiled at me whilst the abbot explained to us their powers. There were the gods of birthdays and then the gods of lightning and thunder and the old, benign-looking man with the bald, elongated head who ruled the South Star, Venus. A strange god with a very wrinkled red skin proved to be that of smallpox. Hosts upon hosts of other gods waited for us in dimly-lit halls, where clouds of incense diffused a soft fragrance and hung in a blue haze in the corners.

On and on we went through the never-ending labyrinth. Some galleries led past the half-open doors of sections similar to the one we were staying in, and they were usually reserved, Lichun explained, for wealthy pilgrims or patrons of the monastery. In some of these I caught glimpses of finely-clad men reclining on long chairs. In other apartments we came across well-dressed women surrounded by their amahs and male servants. We went up a wooden staircase and entered another gallery. Through cunningly cut lattice windows we could see vast stone stairways with carved balustrades running in different directions, interspersed with wide terraces ornamented with huge incense burners and clumps of pines in the corners. The tall buildings of individual temples, glowing in warm shades of orange, stretched in tiers towards the top of the mountain, and, like a fantastic cascade, the slate-coloured curved roofs, the white and vermilion halls and miniature courtyards with green bamboos just visible beyond the walls, flowed back from the peak down the slope and stopped at the entrance to a verdant valley, dammed by a three-storeyed gate—a whole temple in itself.

Koueifo and I gasped at the sheer beauty of it all. We had never before seen such grandeur in temple construction, the outstanding feature of which was this gloriously contrived effect of apparent disorder. It was an architectural symphony and we both gazed at it spellbound. What a remarkable man he must have been who conceived and executed this masterpiece. Abbot Lichun, with a sweep of his hand, told us that, when built many centuries ago, the monastery was much vaster—a labyrinth said to have contained thousands of rooms, counting, of course, all

the big and little courtyards and secret nooks. Now it was partly ruined and he thought no more than a thousand rooms could be counted—still an enormous establishment which required much money and devotion to keep it in even a minimum state of repair.

We finished our tour of the monastery rather late and when we got back to the Upper Tower of Literature, Lichun's aunt had prepared our dinner. It consisted of roast pork with salted cabbage, steamed fish from the near-by Taihu Lake, stewed chicken with water chestnuts and a good beancurd soup.

Afterwards, drinking tea, we had a long talk with Abbot Lichun. He told us that they were indeed the Chengyi Taoists and this was one of the largest monasteries of the sect in this part of China. He was unable to estimate with certainty how many monks they had but thought there were about a hundred and sixty. There was no central authority in the shape of Chief Abbot, although in the past there always had been one. All important problems, affecting the whole of the monastery, were discussed and resolved jointly by the sectional abbots and elder priests. Not all the monks were actually in residence as they were travelling in Shanghai, Nanking and Soochow collecting donations and subscriptions for various repairs and the maintenance of this huge building. They also had a number of what may be termed subscription members of the monastery, *tsaikung* or laymen who practised Taoism, sent donations but stayed here only during certain big festivals. All the monks, he assured us, were devoted and loyal to the beautiful old monastery. It had been built during the Tang dynasty but rebuilt and enlarged to its greatest size, with Imperial assistance, during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Emperor Chienlung, when he came to Soochow, admired the place greatly and made an important contribution to its restoration. Alas, these were lean days as there were no more emperors, and the new Republican Government had no truck with temples.

Reverting to religious matters, he told us that they were in close affinity with the Lungmen Taoists, also upholding and practising Laotse's teaching, but admitted that the Chengyi Taoists

seemed less spiritual as they all ate flesh and drank wine. However, they atoned for their indulgences by their special sacrifices and devotions, although there was less control over the monks here; they came and went as they liked. Although they all were celibates, he confessed some might even have a sweetheart in Soochow or Mutu; theoretically this was a punishable offence but, in practice, it was very difficult to trace such a clandestine affair. They were young and all too human, and had their faults. It was the old monks who had no difficulty in maintaining their chastity.

Later, when we had retired to our room, Koueifo confided to me that, in his opinion, this place was not so strict as the monastery on Jade Mountain. However, the vastness of the monastery excited me and I was determined to learn all about its mysteries.

Jade Emperor's Birthday

THE following day was a great festival at the monastery, the birthday of the Jade Emperor, and I thanked Fate for bringing us here at such an opportune moment—or was it Koueifo's stratagem to arrange our trip at such a time? Actually it was not the Deity's birth; the Jade Emperor did not become incarnate in a human body like Christ. Rather it was a theophany, his visible manifestation to an Emperor of the Sung dynasty. He also told the Emperor that He was the Logos, i.e. the externalized actively expressed and revelatory thought of the Divine Tao, at once distinguished from and yet identified with Him.

After an early breakfast Lichun led us to the crest of the mountain and from that point, as far as the eye could see, stretched a range of densely-wooded hills. Vermilion temples, like huge flowers, bloomed among the dark green trees and beyond sparkled the great Taihu Lake, its blue waters melting into the azure sky. Jade-green islands, like jewels, were scattered on its placid surface. The canals, straight as a ruler, ran towards the lake, their silvery ribbons covered with a multitude of brown-sailed junks. The sound of distant bells and peasants' songs echoed from the narrow valleys below. We sat down on a stone bench under a shady old tree facing the approaches to the monastery—and waited for the festive crowds.

Lichun had gone to assist his friends in the preparations for the night's services and we sat enjoying the freshness of the morning and watching the first crowds pouring through the wide-open gates of the monastery. These early pilgrims were villagers from the Good Man's Bridge and mountain hamlets around. It was an age-old custom in these parts for the women to put on full court dress for the occasion. Middle-aged matrons wore heavy

pleated skirts of red silk, intricately embroidered with floral designs and silk jackets of dark blue or turquoise colour and their feet were encased in antique shoes with red tops and thick soles which added to their height by at least a couple of inches. The old ladies were similarly attired except that, instead of jackets they had longer coats of purple, plum or black silk reaching almost to the knees. Their hair was carefully done into tight buns at the nape of the neck and decorated with fresh flowers. The men too wore court shoes but their garments were less elaborate.

This pilgrimage was looked upon by these simple people not only as an occasion for mere worship and incense-burning but also as an audience with the Majesty of the Jade Emperor—a real court function which included an appropriate royal feast which followed the reception. Hence the atmosphere was not only religious but also courtly and the women especially were acutely conscious of their dignity in their court dress and took great care to maintain the required etiquette and deportment, even to walking in that measured, stiff, mechanical fashion which was the prescribed mode of approach to the Presence.

On and on they came and disappeared into the labyrinthine vastness of the monastery to seek out the bejewelled image of the Jade Emperor and reverently prostrate themselves before him, prior to their search for their favourite deities.

As the sun rose higher another type of pilgrim began to arrive. Sedan-chair women deposited well-dressed and elegant ladies, accompanied by male and female servants, and gentlemen in long, silk gowns and even in European clothes. These new arrivals stared curiously at us before they were swept by the human current through the gates. Although they seemed to be people from high society, I had my doubts and whispered to Koucifo to enlighten me.

‘These are the concubines of very rich men,’ he said. ‘This is their favourite temple and they visit it regularly. There is a reason for it and our friend Lichun will tell you about it later when you can see for yourself. The men are not their husbands, as you may think, but their lovers and many of them are big *liumon*—bad

men.' He looked around to see if we were overheard. Then he went on:

'Yes, these gangsters come here with famous sing-song girls.' He paused looking intently and then whispered:

'Like that one . . .' I looked and saw a gorgeous, bejewelled girl in a dark green gown alighting from a chair; she looked as hard as nails. A husky, tall man in a pearly-grey silk gown and a Panama hat ushered her inside the gate.

It was near noon and we got up reluctantly and also went inside. The whole of our Upper Tower of Literature and all the other sections in the vast monastery, had been taken over by the pilgrims. Dusty side rooms and closets had been opened and swept and peasant families had installed themselves there, spreading rush mats on wooden bedsteads and floor. One dark and narrow room had tiered wooden bunks, like those on a steamer, and a gay company of men took possession, unpacking baskets of provisions and jars of wine while they sang. All the tables in the hall were occupied by men and women busy eating, laughing and talking, while screaming children added to the general uproar. After a hurried meal Koueifo and I wandered around hoping to see parts of the monastery we had not yet visited. The place was a mad-house with all the galleries and corridors packed with people and burning incense which gathered into suffocating clouds. We met the elegant women we saw arriving in the morning and almost every one of them was accompanied by a good-looking monk. Turning several corners we entered a narrow, dark corridor at the end of which was a small, rickety door. We pushed the latch aside and entered a tiny garden with a clump of bamboos in the corner and a pleasant shady tree in the centre. It was totally enclosed by towering stone stairways and temple buildings and we felt as though we were at the bottom of a deep well. There was an old stone bench under the tree and we sat, exhausted by all the jostling and pushing we had endured. It was cool and peaceful here and we decided to spend the afternoon in this secret retreat.

It was already dark when Abbot Lichun called for us and led us to the top of the monastery to enable us to see the climax of

the festival. From the little upper terrace it looked as if the whole immense structure was on fire. Long tongues of flame shot from the great incense burners in front of the Jade Emperor's Hall as more and more incense sticks and joss paper were thrown in by hundreds of worshippers. Masses of paper money and paper representations of earthly objects, offerings for the gods and the departed, were burning in huge heaps, sending sparks into the night sky, and smoke rose in dense columns. There was the sound of drums and bells and the deafening hubbub of milling crowds. Thousands of red candles burned in the halls and galleries before the different deities, and the waves of heat and the smell of incense were carried upwards on the breeze. Priests in red vestments began a slow dance on the terrace of the main hall, each holding a red paper lantern in the shape of a lotus flower. There was a clashing of cymbals, a wail of trumpets and flutes and the tinkling of innumerable little bells.

We went down to join the religious procession which was slowly forming around the dancing monks. Down the galleries it started and through lesser courtyards; rich and poor, peasants and city dwellers all followed in one happy, excited crowd, some men playing flutes, others clashing cymbals or strumming on *pipas*. As there was no lighting, most people carried candles and lanterns. The monks stopped now and then before bebies of gods and chanted a short litany followed by a ritual dance. Country-folk gaped good-naturedly at elegantly dressed and bejewelled Shanghai ladies and whispered to each other on seeing smartly clad men and well-groomed monks accompanying them. There was no malice in the looks of the simple people; only a naïve admiration for the beautiful women and handsome men who made the occasion of the gay festival also one for a few amours on the side. These provided an endless and delicious topic for gossip when the simple folk returned to their villages and drab lives. Everybody could enjoy himself according to his lights, provided he kept within the well-defined standard of behaviour and etiquette.

The procession now turned down into the subterranean passages under the monastery. It was dark and suffocatingly hot here

from so many burning candles, but the people happily jostled along together. Unescorted ladies got a few winks from some braves in smart hats but they did not seem to mind, and some merry widows purposely walked close to Koueifo and myself, pressing themselves close against us in the recesses of the cave. Now and then, I noticed, some couples quietly drifted into narrow and unlighted branch passages. Soon we emerged on to an open platform outside the monastery, where the priests sang and danced a short compline and then dispersed.

We were asked to join in the dinner which was provided for the pilgrims and guests staying at the Upper Tower of Literaturc. It was a sumptuous feast as befitted the dignity of a reception at the Jade Emperor's Court. Of course, the ingredients were all donations from the villagers, pooled together, and the wine, decanted from a battery of jars standing by the wall, flowed freely.

Due to a lack of tables and space, we were seated together with local farmers and rubbed elbows with people sitting at surrounding tables. There was little room, but everybody was in good humour and nobody complained. There were dishes of live and cooked shrimps, turtles and eels roasted with garlic and ham, chickens and ducks and traditional roast pork. In this Chengyi Taoistic establishment there was no ban on meat and wine and its superb chefs utilized everything which was good to eat or to drink.

Koueifo and I loved to eat together with simple farmers, as did most of the well-born Chinese, and to eat here, together with the peasants of the Soochow countryside, was an honour and a privilege for they were the true aristocracy of the country. Here was the seat of real Chinese civilization and culture and it was these same people who had produced the men who had ascended high in the Imperial Government, during so many centuries, and returned to the soil to surrender their rank and power in exchange for the peace and beauty of village life. Not a mile away was an estate where a retired Prime Minister of China was living in rural simplicity.

There was great hilarity at the dinner-table and we were

toasted and urged to drink not only by our immediate neighbours but also by men and women at other tables. Some succulent pieces of a duck or chicken were placed in our bowls and there was much laughter and talk in the sonorous dialect of the place. It sounded to me like music to hear these people speak so softly and melodiously. The decorum and propriety of their behaviour was so correct and yet so free and natural that nothing better could be observed in any of Shanghai's drawing-rooms.

There was a noise of similar festivities coming from other sections of the monastery. The crops had been bountiful and the weather good. All these people were gathered not to pray to the gods for any favour but in gratitude for the continued flow of the good things of life, for the virility of their lovers and the apparent constancy of their husbands, the fruitfulness of their wives and the goodly number of their offspring. The concubines thanked the gods for the possibility of a child from their old and seemingly sterile masters, a blessing which might be realized after their visit to the monastery. The sing-song girls were grateful for the secrets of a new bliss which they would carry to their jaded patrons.

In this upsurge of joy and content, amidst these simple pleasures of eating and drinking, I felt that all sense of time and reality had disappeared. I looked at Abbot Lichun, he appeared carefree and gay and his face was pink. Lifting his cup he toasted all of us.

'Drink, drink!' he exclaimed. 'A happy moment of life, like tonight, which may never be recaptured again, is pure meditation according to our Taoistic concept,' and he emptied the cup. We all followed suit.

After the tables had been cleared, some people produced mah-jongg chips and KouEIFO joined a group. I retired, but outside the gambling, music and laughter continued until the small hours.

Exorcism

NEXT morning, as an anticlimax to the festival, there was to be an exorcism ceremony at ten o'clock, Abbot Lichun informed us. As it was only eight and we had already finished our breakfast, he made a sign to us to follow him. Again we walked up and down dark stairways and along dimly-lit galleries. I noticed that the windows did not have glass panes in them but, instead, each leaf of the window consisted of numerous latticed squares with a translucent oyster shell cunningly inserted. Now and then I caught a glimpse of a bamboo grove or a pine tree in a tiny garden concealed between the twists of a corridor and some hidden apartment.

We entered a large hall, furnished with long chairs and carved tea-tables. Lichun invited us to sit down and ordered a novice to bring tea. I looked around with curiosity and my gaze was arrested by a long row of large photographs running the whole circumference of the hall. Each represented a young Taoist priest, formally dressed in a black silk robe, with a square cap adorned with a plaque of white jade. None of them could be more than thirty-five years of age, some were younger and many were good-looking with large penetrating eyes. In the centre was an outsize portrait of a very old man with a long beard. He was attired in ritual vestments and wore a small lotus-shaped crown on his bald head. His obesity was phenomenal and he sat there in the picture like a monstrous mountain of flesh, but his eyes were gimlet-like and had a tremendous power in them. I looked at Lichun questioningly.

'Are these the monks of the monastery?' I inquired. Lichun nodded his head and his eyes became clouded.

'They were. These are the pictures of the departed abbots,' he said with a note of sadness and reverence.

‘Do you mean to say that they all died so young?’ I exclaimed looking incredulously at the photographs and then at Linchun.

‘They all died in the prime of their life,’ murmured Lichun lowering his head. ‘They were sectional abbots and they sacrificed their life just as the living ones are sacrificing theirs.’ He straightened up, sipping tea, and looked at me wistfully. ‘Most of the senior monks here are doomed men and must die in the flower of their manhood.’ I put down my cup mechanically, gazing at him in silent horror.

‘Lichun,’ I stammered. ‘What . . . who . . . kills them so young?’ He looked at me calmly but his eyes were half-closed.

‘They dedicated themselves to exorcizing evil spirits; this is their work of love and their chosen path to the Throne of the Almighty.’ He spoke in an even tone not looking at me. ‘But for every energumen, cleansed by them of his terrible possessors, a number of years is deducted from their earthly lives.’ He paused and sipped tea again. ‘The more successful exorcisms an abbot has to his credit, the sooner his own end comes.’ Still in the grip of horror, I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

‘But this can’t be!’ I cried vehemently. ‘It is impossible. Science says there are no possessions; it is only some mental disease from which people suffer. Why don’t they send their patients to mental hospitals, to good psychiatrists in Shanghai?’ I stopped and looked at him, my indignation had made the blood rush to my face. Lichun was silent, contemplating me placidly with his half-closed eyes; he was thinking. At last he spoke quietly and in a soft voice, carefully choosing his sentences:

‘We have great respect for Western science but, compared to our esoteric tradition, it is still new and its main preoccupation is with materialistic phenomena. Ever since the birth of Christianity your churches arrogated to themselves the privilege of dealing with and interpreting all spirit manifestations, prosecuting and severely punishing those engaged in metaphysical research. We Chinese have never been handicapped in this respect and there were periods in our long history when the Imperial Government itself saw fit to encourage our efforts to learn more about

the denizens of the unseen world. In the meantime, for centuries, your Western world had to rely on the scraps of illicit information gleaned here and there by alchemists, black magicians, fortune-tellers and other charlatans. Only now have your scientists taken the right direction with their delving into the powers of the mind, but your science is still too young and immature to comprehend the mysterious workings of the spirit universe, which has its own laws and its own mode of being.' He rose from his chair and stopped in front of me.

'You should not think that all our work in monasteries is founded on superstition and we are not so naïve or stupid as to deceive ourselves with hocus-pocus or lull ourselves into false security with sham doctrines. We also seek illumination through research and prayers and there is a basis for our actions and faith.' He looked at me strangely. I was impressed by his sincerity.

After this we went out into a long gallery and turning a corner Lichun opened a door into a small apartment simply but comfortably furnished. It was a small study with a blackwood desk and an altar on which from a brass incense burner issued a thin wisp of fragrant smoke. A curtained door led into an adjoining room. We seated ourselves on the chairs by the door. The curtain, hiding the doorway into the next room, was pulled aside and a youngish Taoist monk entered the room greeting us warmly. Lichun introduced him to us as the friend with whom he used to stay. I looked at him with interest. He was about the same age as Lichun and was almost as tall, but his body was much more fragile. He was pale and his skin had a strange luminosity. His eyes were unnaturally brilliant as if he had a touch of fever. His lips were very red, their colour deepened by the pallor of his face. He appeared to be pleased with our visit and his manner towards us was deferential. We exchanged the usual pleasantries and then Lichun murmured something into his friend's ear; he nodded in assent. Lichun then turned to me.

'My friend is going to conclude an exorcism service this morning and, if you are really so interested, he hopes you can come and witness it.' He paused uncertainly. 'But I must warn

you that it is not a pretty sight. Really it is most unpleasant, disgusting and revolting. . . .’ He paused again. ‘It is to some extent dangerous, but it depends on the potency of the demon who is in possession of the energumen.’ My curiosity was too great to back out and I promised, with great enthusiasm, to attend as we bade good-bye to Lichun’s friend.

Abbot Lichun called for us after ten o’clock to take us to the exorcism ceremony. He said it had been going on for two days but today would see the final effort, made by his abbot friend, to dislodge the recalcitrant spirit or spirits who had taken possession of a young farmer a year ago. He enjoined us not to be afraid and, above all, not to upset the ceremony by talking aloud or asking too many questions or by screams of fright.

We arrived at a medium-sized stone courtyard, half-way up the hill, situated in front of a temple. There was a small group of onlookers standing in corners in the shadow of the walls, among them a distracted couple who, Lichun pointed out, were the energumen’s parents. The energumen himself, a rather emaciated man of about twenty-five, clad in white jacket and trousers, lay on an iron bedstead on a rush mat. He was very pale and there was a wild, roving look in his fevered eyes. The priest, Lichun’s friend, was attired in full ritual robes and stood before a portable altar on which was an incense burner, the small image of a god, a vase with holy water, a ritual sword and other articles and a book from which he was reading. Two monks were assisting him, whilst four muscular men watched the prostrate demoniac.

The abbot was reading the scriptures in a monotonous, droning voice, repeating *mantras* over and over again with a great deal of concentration. Then he stopped and, taking an elongated ivory tablet, the symbol of wisdom and authority, he held it ceremonially in both hands in front of his chest and approached the bed slowly. There was a visible transformation on the energumen’s face. His eyes were filled with malice as he watched the priest’s measured advance with a sly cunning and hatred. Suddenly he gave a bestial whoop and jumped up in his bed, the four attendants rushing to hold him.

‘No! No! You cannot drive us out! We were two against

one. Our power is greater than yours.' The sentences poured out of the energumen's distorted mouth in a strange shrill voice, which sounded mechanical, inhuman—as if pronounced by a parrot. The priest looked at the victim intensely, gathering all his inner strength; beads of perspiration appeared on his thin face.

'Come out! Come out! I command you to come out!' He was repeating in a strong metallic voice with great force. 'I am using the power of the One compared to whom you are nothing. In His name I command you to come out.' Immobile, he continued to focus his powers on the energumen's face. The man was struggling in the bed with incredible strength against the four men who held him. Animal growls and howls issued from time to time from his mouth which became square, his teeth gleaming like the fangs of a dog. Now his face became purple, now white, like paper, or covered with red blotches which appeared and disappeared with bewildering rapidity. I had the impression that a pack of wild animals was fighting inside his body. For a moment the struggling ceased and the energumen turned his baleful eyes on the monk with such a look of unearthly hatred that involuntarily I shrank into the shadows. Terrible threats poured out of the contorted mouth, now fringed in white foam, and interspersed with such incredible obscenities that women had to plug their ears with their fingers; they did not dare to look at the priest or the people around them. But the uncontrollable curiosity and desire to see this dreadful and macabre business to the end kept them rooted to the ground.

Again the abbot cried his command to the unseen adversaries to leave the prostrate man. There was a burst of horrible laughter from the victim's throat and suddenly with a mighty heave of his supernaturally strengthened arms he threw off the men who held him and jumped at the priest's throat like a mad bloodhound. But he was overpowered again. This time they bound him with ropes and fastened the ends to the bedposts. The energumen, evidently exhausted, closed his eyes and there was a deathly silence. The abbot, still immobile, continued his conjurations in

a metallic voice, his eyes never leaving the body. With unutterable horror, we saw that it began to swell visibly. On and on the dreadful process continued until he became a grotesque balloon of a man.

‘Leave him! Leave him!’ cried the monk concentrating still harder. A novice handed him the book and he began to read again in a strange, unintelligible jargon, the words of power and release. Convulsion shook the monstrous, swollen body, and the things that followed were disgusting and revolting in the extreme. It seemed that all the apertures of the body were opened by the unseen powers hiding in it and streams of malodorous excreta and effluvia flowed on to the ground in incredible profusion. Not only I but also Lichun and KouEIFo and others were overcome by the stench and sight of these loathsome proceedings and became nauseated. For an hour this continued and then the energumen, resuming his normal size, seemed to come to rest, with his eyes watching the unmoved priest who was still reading. The attendants untied the demoniac and, forming a screen with bed-sheets, hurriedly washed him, changed him into another suit of coarse pants and a jacket and cleaned up the mess.

It was already long past lunch-time but none of us could even think of food. The priest stopped reading; with sweat pouring down his face, he backed down to the altar, laid down the tablet and took up the ritual sword. Threateningly and commandingly he stood again over the energumen.

‘The struggle is useless!’ he cried. ‘Leave him! Leave him in the name of the Supreme Power who never meant you to steal this man’s body!’ Another scene of horror evolved itself before our dazed eyes. The man on the bed became rigid and his muscles seemed to contract turning him into a figure of stone. Slowly, very slowly, the iron bedstead, as if impelled by an enormous weight, caved in, its middle touching the ground. The attendants seized the inert man by his feet and arms. The weight was such that none of them could lift him up and they asked for assistance from the onlookers. Seven men could hardly lift him for he was heavy as a cast-iron statue. Suddenly he became light again and they put him on a wooden bed which had been brought in. A

long time passed with the abbot reading and commanding interminably. At last he sprinkled the inert man with holy water and advanced to him again with a sword. His concentration was so deep that he did not seem to see anybody. He was utterly exhausted and swayed slightly. Two novices came up to support him.

'I have won!' he cried triumphantly in a strange voice. 'Get out! Get out!' The energumen stirred and fell into dreadful convulsions. His eyes rolled up and only the whites were visible. His breathing was stertorous and he clawed his body until he was covered with blood. Foam was issuing from his mouth and a loud gurgling sound. He wanted to shout something but could not control his vocal cords. The abbot raised his sword threateningly, making mystic signs with it.

'Damn you! Damn you!' came a wild scream from the foaming lips. 'We are going but you shall pay for it with your life.' There was a terrific struggle on the bed, the poor man twisting and rolling like a mortally-wounded snake and his colour changing all the time. Suddenly he fell flat on his back and was still. His eyes opened. His gaze was normal and he saw his parents who now came forward.

'My parents!' he cried weakly. 'Where am I?' He was very feeble and they carried him out in a specially ordered sedan chair. The abbot himself was in a terrible state of prostration and was half-carried and half-dragged away by his novices and Abbot Lichun. Koueifo and I, shaken, scared and very sick could hardly walk back to our apartment.

Although we were expecting Abbot Lichun early next morning, he appeared only during lunch and joined us in our simple meal. He looked worried and sad and Koueifo could not resist asking him what was the matter.

'My friend is utterly exhausted after yesterday's seance and cannot get up,' Lichun explained. 'I have been staying with him the whole morning. He can hardly eat anything.' After the meal we insisted on going together with Lichun to visit his sick friend. We found the young abbot in bed sitting propped against the

pillows. He smiled when we entered and made an attempt to get up but I restrained him.

‘I shall be all right in a day or two,’ he said confidently, but he looked much weaker than when we first saw him. I really wondered how long a man could last after such superhuman exertions. There was no doubt that he had evicted the demons but at great sacrifice of his own vital forces, and I now implicitly believed Abbot Lichun about the killing effect of exorcisms.

Love Elixirs and Nostrums

I was surprised to note how many Shanghai ladies and their escorts remained at the monastery after the festival as Koueifo and I wandered over and over again through the labyrinthine structure during the last two days of our stay. In each 'tower' there was an atmosphere of gaiety and enjoyment as mah-jongg chips clicked amidst loud conversation and laughter. There was singing to the accompaniment of *pipas* and flutes, and even the latest dance music was supplied by portable gramophones. Smiling monks came in and out of the apartments or sat together with the guests, sipping tea. Of course, anyone was free to stay at the monastery as long as they liked as, at this time of the year, it was a desirable resort in which to escape the heat of the overcrowded Shanghai. Still, Koueifo and I thought that there might have been other reasons for their remaining here. Perhaps in addition to the conventional incense-burning there was some mysterious attraction in the shape of recondite rites or practices which were not apparent to our unsuspecting eyes.

However, we did not want to pry surreptitiously into the monastic affairs lest we offended our hospitable friend, Abbot Lichun. He was not particularly busy once the festival period had come to an end, and we took this opportunity to question him as diplomatically as possible. I could clearly see from his expression that he was in some doubt whether it was wise to tell a strange foreigner too much about the esoteric life of their community. Understanding this, Koueifo quietly reminded him that I was Chungan's trusted friend and that he himself knew me very well. In fact, I was described to him by Koueifo as discreet, understanding and not given to gossiping.

'Actually we do not do anything of which we should be

ashamed,' the abbot began, sitting at a table in our bedroom and, as usual, drinking the local tea out of a bowl. 'But some of our practices, beside exorcism, are considered too archaic, superstitious and downright immoral. They are not, as you yourselves will see later. But many people, especially the Western-educated Chinese, think so and take every pretext, every scrap of evidence they can find to persecute and humiliate us and our religion.

'Frankly, most of our clientele, except the village folk, whom for courtesy's sake let us continue calling "guests", are not such a credit to our religious establishment as those who patronize our brethren on Jade Mountain. There you always find, as you know, affluent merchants, retired generals and high-class politicians. Even, rumours say, some members of the government are not loath to travel there incognito for special advice. That wealthy monastery has built for itself a fine protection from all possible troubles. As you know, protection in these turbulent times means much even to a temple.

'Our guests are well-off concubines and sing-song girls and their patrons who can be described as big and small *liumon*—which definition covers all sorts of men living by their wits. They are small political bosses, protection-racket gangsters, card-sharpers, successful gigolos and many other things. They come here peacefully and we are friendly to them. But sometimes they make trouble among themselves, perhaps out of jealousy and for other reasons. We never know whether such a man comes here for worship and recreation or to hide from justice. We have had several such cases in the past, and our monastery has been raided by the police from Soochow twice already. But we cannot be choosers as we must have income to maintain this vast establishment and ourselves.

'We would prefer to deal only with the farmers and peasants here rather than with these Shanghai tigers. They are kind and generous to us for they trust us. We are of their kin and we understand and love them.' His eyes sparkled as he spoke and KouEIFO nodded appreciatively as his own home village was visible from the mountain, being only some ten miles away on an island in the Taihu Lake. I also warmly agreed with him as

my affection was constantly growing for the peasant folk of China.

He rose and, taking me familiarly by the arm, led us slowly down the galleries and stairways for a considerable distance until we came to the part of the building which we had not seen before. There were no guest-chambers here and everything was quiet and peaceful. A few priests looked at Lichun questioningly, he nodded and they let us pass. We entered a long room with a musty smell of old paper. There were yellowed books and manuscripts all over the place, and some diagrams of the human body pinned to the walls. In the corner was a well-made dummy of a man who had long needles stuck all over his body. This I already knew was for practising the art of acupuncture, or the cure by sticking gold and silver pins into a patient. It was a popular method of medical treatment in China and its origins were buried in the mists of the distant past. A student first learnt how to prick the dummy in the right spots; then he had to do it when covered with a sheet of cloth and still not make any mistakes. Afterwards he was allowed to treat sick humans.

The adjoining room was large, square and well lit by shell-studded latticed windows. To me it was the replica of a medieval alchemist's secret laboratory that I read of in the treatises of Paracelsus and other old books. The only exception, I imagined, was the absence of a furnace for the transmutation of the elements. Otherwise, everything else was there—retorts, mortars and pestles, apothecary's scales, stoppered flasks and bottles, jars and crocks, and all the paraphernalia for making medicines, while bunches of dried herbs and roots hung from the ceilings and walls. Also there were dried lizards and snakes, centipedes, armadillo skins, tiger bones and claws, and desiccated cantharides and other insects in shallow porcelain bowls on shelves. Inorganic substances stood in small tubs along the walls.

There were two elderly Taoists in the room, assisted by three or four young monks, their students. They were busy decocting some herbs in a briskly boiling pot, while one of them was pouring an infusion into glass bottles. A concoction of other ingredients was cooling in a small basin by the window. Abbot

Lichun introduced us and they bowed. One of the elders was a quick-witted man with bright penetrating eyes. He smiled at me as he spoke.

‘We are not distilling an Elixir of Immortality as you might think. That foolish attempt definitely belongs to the remote past. Emperor Chin Shih Huang, builder of the Great Wall, wanted to live for ever and ordered the poor Taoists to find this elixir under pain of death. A human body cannot bear the burden of many ages and nothing material, for that matter, is everlasting. The mountains themselves are worn out and die. It is only a question of the duration. Only the human spirit lives for ever because it is a part of the eternal essence of Tao.’

Abbot Lichun then took up the conversation and explained, with the others’ assistance, some of the activity which was going on in this medieval laboratory. He began with the description of the aims and aspirations of the Chengyi Taoists, who believed in a peculiar way of achieving the graces of Tao by self-sacrifice, as was the case with exorcisms, and by ministering to those who were unhappy and miserable in their love life. The last course, although not fatal like the first, nevertheless brought them more opprobrium than repute.

The exorcizing of the demons, who had taken possession of a human body, he told us, was a genuine sacrifice of the monk’s own life. His life-force was depleted so greatly after such ceremonies that gradually he lost his health, literally wilted and died. Was it not the highest form of love to lay down one’s own life for the poor suffering humanity? Surely this was one of the surest ways to merge into the Divine Tao. It was true that not many people believed nowadays in spirit life, and certainly not the medical profession. They did not mind that as it was exactly in the sphere where medical science failed that Taoists came in with their ministrations. Therefore, no physician had any right to accuse them of competition. Of course, doctors lumped all energumens together with the insane, but Taoists had a much greater experience in judging such cases and could see almost at a glance whether a man was suffering from the deterioration of his brain or was possessed by a malignant entity, which had broken

through his psychic protective mechanism. This could happen during a long illness, when the body was greatly weakened, or through the addiction to drugs or through a deliberate surrender to persistent evil thoughts, which finally breached the man's reason.

Such cures did not bring wealth or fame to the monastery. Their clients were usually poor peasants, unable to contribute much. The wealthy people in Shanghai scoffed at their knowledge and preferred to send their sick either to mental institutions or to specialists abroad. Because so little was known about their work, people believed they were sunk in superstition and magic, and this attitude was emphasized and given credence in the writings of authors who knew about them only through hearsay. They did nothing to vindicate themselves because that would have been contrary to the teachings of Laotse, who enjoined that all good deeds should be done in great secrecy.

Then he went on to say that the elegant ladies and gentlemen we saw at the 'towers' were very generous with their donations and, in addition, they spent a lot of money on 'incense and oil'. They liked to eat well and kept the monastery's cooks busy; they did not spare expense on the local delicacies, such as roast turtles or 'drunken' shrimps.

There were several rich men's concubines but the rest were high-class sing-song girls. Some came accompanied by their men friends, others arrived alone, bringing only their amahs or trusted menservants. In addition, there were unattached men among these guests, who were tired and spent, and sought rest and seclusion in rustic surroundings.

The lives of these sing-song girls, he told us, appeared glamorous, but theirs was a very exacting profession for they had to please men of position, education and experience. To be able to do this, they had to learn, at an early age, much about China's history and literature. Music and singing, of course, were the main items in their upbringing, but they also had to know to perfection how to play mahjongg and cards. They might not be beautiful but, if they possessed plenty of charm, their career was secure, for men did not really come to stare at their looks but

to find sympathy and relaxation from their business cares and worries.

Their reward was great as they daily received gifts of money and precious stones, but they had to be very shrewd. The cost of running their luxurious establishments with a host of servants and private rickshaws, was also very great. As evening fell their working day began. Drinking, feasting and mahjongg playing continued past midnight and then they had to go out to dance until the early hours of the morning. They were exhausted by that time from all the talk and chatter, and the colossal efforts to keep amused, perhaps, some dull and uninteresting banker or merchant. It is true they were courtesans too but they played that role shrewdly and circumspectly. It took a rich man a long time and a lot of costly presents before he could say that a sing-song girl was his.

At last the time came when they felt utterly exhausted mentally and physically by the gruelling routine of gaiety and dissipation which, to most of them personally, was artificial and debilitating. And they came to the monastery for a rest.

They did not come here to look for new amours for the Monastery of Heavenly Vault was not a brothel. They were sick and tired of the everyday pretence of love. They craved simple friendship, sympathy and understanding and they wanted a rest, special diet and recuperation for their worn-out nerves under the guidance of the monks versed in medicine. Some of them, however, desired a rejuvenation of their fading charms.

Lichun at last stopped his lengthy explanations and motioned us to walk together with him past various retorts and containers. 'This is an infusion called *Kingninghualou*—Gold and Silver Flowers, which cools the stomach and brings its activities to normal after months of rich and greasy food. That bitter concoction contains *Artemisia* and promotes appetite.' Pausing before a small basin with brown liquid and jellied nuts he explained that it was *Bongdahai*—a nut boiled with sugar, which was a sovereign remedy for hoarse throat and loss of voice. 'It is for a sing-song girl here who had lost her voice owing to a bad cold.' He went on and on describing the action of other preparations.

Most of them were good for disordered heart, congested kidneys or inflamed liver, or soothing in cases of nervous exhaustion. Some, like aconite in combination with other herbs, restored man's virility. They also had subtle and attractive scents each destined for some specific purpose. There was one made of coreopsis which was guaranteed to attract a man to the woman who wore it. Finally there were real love elixirs which, perhaps, were more efficacious as a form of suggestion rather than on account of their intrinsic properties.

The library, to which we returned afterwards, contained many ancient works on the subject of love. Abbot Lichun explained to us that the only security for a woman in the position of a concubine lay in her ability to retain the love and interest of her husband, which was not an easy matter. Most of the wealthy men who went in for concubines were libertines of the first water and they became easily tired of their liaison, ever seeking some novelty to excite their jaded appetites. The women knew this, if they had any brains at all, and, when they had perceived that their man's interest in them was cooling, they came to the monastery, ostensibly on a pilgrimage but actually to learn more about the arts of love from the old priests who had made this science their life's study. These monks furnished them with appropriate recipes gleaned from the ancient manuscripts, advised them and supplied them with the elixirs and potions which restored in them that subtlety of passion which enthralled their lovers.

In the late afternoon, when the sun was setting behind the mountains and the air was getting cooler, Abbot Lichun took us round some of the 'towers'. Finding some doors open he entered and introduced us to the inmates as his good friends. Some of the Shanghai enchantresses were very kind, inviting us to have a drink of tea or a glass of wine, while offering us cold chicken, duck and sweetmeats. They were curious about me and I had to tell them a condensed story of my life in Shanghai. One of the men, staying alone in a room very much like ours, was evidently waiting for his evening meal as we peeped in and we tried to retreat. However, he insisted that we come in and invited us to eat together with him. He introduced himself as a Mr Lin. He

was young, tall and good-looking, with big dreamy eyes but appeared rather thin and emaciated. He wore an expensive tunic of the best white silk and black silk trousers while a large diamond ring glittered on one of his fingers.

We sat down and he offered us tea. We talked and joked, and in a short time became quite intimate with him. Evidently he placed great trust in Abbot Lichun's introduction. He told us that he felt weakened by Shanghai's heat, too much mahjongg playing and the hectic night life in general. Soon the dinner was served. It was sumptuous, considering that it was intended for his sole consumption. There were 'drunken' shrimps, also shrimps *sauté* in sauce, richly prepared snapping turtle, roast chicken with mushrooms and plenty of wonderful, fresh roast eels. And, of course, we had a lot of warm *focheng* wine. Eating this rich food, KouEIFO winked at our new friend and asked 'Do you have such meals every day here?' Mr Lin pretended to be somewhat taken aback but admitted that it was so. The abbot and KouEIFO then began to laugh immoderately. Finally they told me the joke. Abbot Lichun explained that all the dishes, except the chicken, had aphrodisiac properties and a regular course of such meals, during one or two weeks, was guaranteed to cure even the most stubborn case of impotence, provided its cause was not some organic changes in the body. Continuing, the abbot told us that their cooks specialized in diet. Before treating their guests with their concoctions, they always tried to accomplish the cure of certain ailments by special foods. If the body was clogged and overheated, they served cooling meals. In China all eatables were divided into hot and cold ones, not by their actual temperature but by their inherent properties. For example, fish, crabs, clams and certain vegetables and fruits were cold, and meat, onions, garlic, ginger, etc., were hot. A man, to be healthy, should eat enough hot and cold things to balance each other. Any predilection for cold food alone, might upset a man's health and the same was true about hot food. For the old people the monastery had a special diet for the prolongation of longevity. It was mostly vegetarian with the judicious addition of rare fungi and wild fowl's lean meat.

As we were walking back from the hospitable Mr. Lin's room through dimly-lit passages, Abbot Lichun whispered that our young host was a lover of a certain wealthy widow in Shanghai. 'She certainly keeps him in clover,' said Koueifo, alluding to his expensive ring and the money he was spending on his physical rehabilitation.

Our holiday was over and we left the monastery next morning with regret. Even the professional 'sinners' at the 'towers' had made us happy with their hospitality and little kindnesses. We could not and did not want to judge them. They were just human beings, with the same weaknesses as ourselves, and it was the prerogative of Higher Power to punish or reward them. We felt sympathy for them and also for the monks who were attempting so much.

I must admit I had learnt a great deal at this monastery about new and unconventional approaches to Taoistic truths, but I still felt that my loyalty to my monastery on Jade Mountain and Lungmen Taoists in general had not been shaken. I was not sure at all that, if I had chosen to study Taoism in this type of monastery, I might not have succumbed to the insidious atmosphere of demonism and sex which percolated through its vast mysterious labyrinth like a thin, poisonous cloud. I was not yet strong and sophisticated enough to hold my own against the powers I did not understand, and, instead of a willing helper, I might have become a victim myself. It was a monstrous battle against Beelzebub and his hosts waged by a band of young and immature monks amidst beautiful and idyllic surroundings, while another band was enmeshed in their unending struggle with the awful powers of Ashtaroth. They suffered casualties and my heart bled for them but, alas! I was not brave enough to join my forces to theirs.

I visited the Monastery of Heavenly Vault many times afterwards but only as an ordinary guest and friend of the priests.

Return to Jade Mountain

I RETURNED to my great Taoist monastery on the Jade Emperor's Mountain in the middle of July and remember particularly well one of the days there which will always remain to me an epitome of the peaceful and inspired life as led in that hermitage.

I sat with my friend Chungan on the uppermost stone terrace looking at the world stretching far and wide below. In the vast panorama at our feet we could watch the broad Chientang River flowing towards the distant sea. Boats with brown sails, like tiny shells, were slowly passing to and fro amongst green islands and peaceful villages which dotted the banks of the stream here and there. Occasionally there appeared the smoke of a steam launch laboriously towing a train of junks, and far, very far away, the mighty river disappeared in the shimmering haze. On one side the mountain sloped gently down, covered with low trees and tea bushes. A winding path, paved with stone slabs, descended on the other side through some groves of pines and bamboo to a little temple half-way down. Then, like the sinuous curves of a dragon, it ran along the bottom of the valley.

It was a sultry summer day and the heat enveloped the valley in quivering waves. Bees buzzed around the flowering plants set out on the terrace in pottery vases, while the fragrance of pines was mixed with the smell of burning straw. Small snakes and lizards enjoyed themselves among the grey rocks. From time to time the sound of a bronze bell floated up from a distant temple and slowly dissolved into soft echoes reverberating and gradually dying in the hills.

Another monk, called Tsungpoo, came on to the terrace. He was dressed like Chungan, in a black silk robe with immense

sleeves lightly thrown over a spotlessly white silk tunic. His face was rounded, with prominent cheek-bones and a powerful jaw. He looked down at us and smiled.

‘Chungan!’ he called. ‘The noon meal is ready. Let us go in.’

We passed through the gate and entered a hall with two rows of avatars—the elemental gods, some of terrifying aspect, with claws and beaks, others dignified and gentle. Emerging from this temple we paused for a moment in the spacious, stone-flagged courtyard in the centre of which stood a huge ancient incense-burner of bronze. On each side was a deep well with an octagonal balustrade of age-worn greenish stone. Towering over the courtyard, directly in front, was the main temple with its curving tiled roof. To the right was a large guest-hall with square, lacquered tables and desks on which lay heaps of yellow-coloured prayer slips and books. The two monks led the way to the left and we entered a similar hall with crimson pillars, where long wooden tables were set out on the stone floor. The walls were bare with the exception of scrolls containing the sayings of Laotze and Tikwanli. In the centre was a small shrine. Together with the other monks, we seated ourselves on narrow benches at one of the tables.

After a short time a distinguished-looking monk entered alone. He was of medium stature and dignified bearing, and had a short black beard, with his hair wound in a tight knot, like all Lungmen Taoists, and covered with the traditional black cap. He was the powerful Abbot Lee Lisan and was respectfully greeted by the assembled monks. Leisurely seating himself at one of the tables, he gave the anxiously awaited sign to bring in the food.

Clumsy rustic servants, recruited from poor peasant families, came in bearing large blackwood trays with bowls of food which they placed one by one in the middle of each table. There were bold, boiled bamboo shoots in oil, stewed bamboo shoots and mushrooms, beancurd cunningly fried in such a way as to resemble roast duck, fungi fried with cabbage and, finally, mushroom soup. Large wooden rice containers were placed near each table, and we each helped ourselves with a wooden spoon. The meal was a merry affair. Although the older monks ate in silence,

the younger members exchanged stories and polite jokes. Some competed with others in the number of bowls of rice they could consume. Others loudly discussed plans on how to spend the afternoon, and at the end of the meal servants distributed hot towels to refresh our faces.

Chungan, who was one of the first to get up from the table, asked me to follow him. Others came also, and we all filed through the back door into the garden. There was an artificial pile of rocks and boulders with a grotto and an immense round well, deep and sinister-looking, whose stagnant waters were blanketed with green vegetation. A little novice brought two ancient swords, and Tsungpoo and one of the others started to fence, providing an after-lunch spectacle. The fencers jumped and paused. Their swords clashed. Sweat poured down their foreheads as the audience became excited. They followed closely the traditions of fencing handed down from the days of Kwankung, the great warrior of the period of the Three Kingdoms (*circa* A.D. 221-265) and now revered throughout China. Their postures and lunges, their fine performance, evoked loud acclamation, even earning the congratulations of the abbot, who commended their dexterity and adherence to the best traditions of Taoism—of which they all were knight-monks.

In the afternoon the heat became oppressive and most of the monks retired to their rooms. The abbot himself went to his favourite haunt, at the left wing of the temple where a small courtyard had been transformed into a garden. Gardenias were there in full bloom, and a trellis of bamboo was covered with multi-coloured convolvulus and sweet-smelling honeysuckle. A chaise-longue stood in the shade and on this he reclined sipping fragrant green tea produced from the monastery's own plantation. Tsungpoo went to write a letter to one of his friends, a monk who lived on the distant and sacred Tao Mountain. Chungan and I resumed our reverie on the balustrade outside the temple, enjoying now and then a faint breath of breeze. Soon our eyes closed as we leaned against the wall in drowsy relaxation.

When I opened my eyes the sun was setting over the distant hills, its last rays casting a rich gamboge light on the monastery.

Deep purple shadows were creeping into the valley below where the bamboos trembled and whispered as cool breezes rose up from the river. Cicadas and grasshoppers voluptuously intermingled their rhythmic chirping welcoming the twilight.

Chungan was awake and looking at his watch. He pulled himself to his feet, stretching, and was about to go in when, turning around, his keen eyes descried a movement on the distant road. He shaded his eyes with the palm of his hand and looked intently. I followed his gaze. Far down, along the path leading from the valley, was moving a procession of sedan chairs. As we watched their progress we had no doubt that they were coming to this monastery. We were wondering who these people were, for the regular pilgrim season had ended almost two months ago.

Mere specks against the green rice fields, the group reached the great gate thrown across their path and stopped for a brief rest. We waited with interest, as we felt the drowsy peace of our afternoon disturbed. Suddenly, on the stone stairway below us, appeared a little monk with bright eyes, rosy cheeks and a round, cheerful face. He was gentle and shy, and looked more like a nun. Chungan called him.

‘Tsuei, go and tell our abbot that visitors are coming.’

The little monk nodded shyly and disappeared in the gateway. The party below was moving again, and passed the mirror-like paddy fields to start the ascent. Step by step sturdy coolies climbed the mountain, their bamboo sedan chairs swinging slowly and rhythmically on their experienced shoulders. Soon they were at the small temple where the chairs were deposited near the well surrounded with stone benches and surmounted with a large stone tablet. Dripping with perspiration they drank the cold water and washed their hot faces. None of their passengers left their chairs, and in a few minutes the coolies resumed their slow progress upwards. This section of the path twisted between huge boulders on which were carved well-formed hieroglyphics extolling purity of heart in a thousand ways. Far down they could see the colossal statues of the gods, hewn out of living rock, several of them only half-finished and others broken. A little farther, near the banks of the great river, lay a rice field

in the form of Pakua—the mysterious trigram. The river itself, touched by the dying rays of the setting sun, flowed like molten gold at the foot of the purple mountains. The path now passed through scattered pines and soon the coolies were gasping on the last and most difficult ascent to the terrace on which we were sitting. They were now near enough for us to see that the first chair contained a young man clad in Western clothes. On his lap was an expensive camera and in his hands a pair of powerful field glasses. His face was kind though somewhat haughty. The second chair was occupied by a pretty but tired-looking young woman. In the third chair sat an elderly lady, very stout, kindly and jovial. She was looking around with keen eyes and, when she perceived Chungan, nodded to him. The last two chairs were occupied by two women in sombre dress. Both were middle-aged, one of them being unmistakably a servant. A man concluded the cortège, carrying a basket and two vacuum flasks.

Chungan thought that the opportune moment for greeting the party had arrived. He advanced towards the old lady and politely remarked that the day was very hot.

‘The sooner we arrive the better,’ she agreed in a shrill voice. ‘I can scarcely support this unbearable heat.’ Nodding and smiling, she fanned herself with an immense paper fan and now and then wiped her fat purple face with a lace handkerchief, as she watched Chungan walking slowly by her chair. When at last the gasping coolies set their burden in front of the gate, she extended her plump hand, glittering with rings, and Chungan helped her out of the chair. The young man paid off the coolies, who thanked him and the ladies for the generous wine money added to their regular fare. Chungan let them rest and enjoy the cool evening breeze until their family servants approached, carrying heavy baskets filled with preserved fruit, biscuits in tins and a variety of provisions to supplement the vegetarian diet of the monastery.

The guests stepped into the front hall, dim and mysterious at this hour. Candles threw their flickering uncertain light on the deep crimson-coloured god, whose eyelids seemed to tremble and his inward-gazing eyes to look straight at the visitors. The old

lady piously paused before him. Then they all passed into the courtyard and through the little garden into the grand reception hall, with myself following at a discreet distance. It was a vast place with white-papered pillars and many windows. Heavily carved blackwood chairs and tea-tables were ranged along the white washed walls on which several fine scrolls were hanging in symmetrical order. Before the main door was a huge character Shou (Longevity) embroidered in gold on red silk. A large incense-burner of dark grey jade was standing before the altar. To the left stood an immense round table of heavy yellow teak, with a set of round stools. Flowers were everywhere in profusion. Some blooms were still on the bushes in delightful porcelain pots set on ornate blackwood stands; others were cut and filled the vases of porcelain, agate and cornelian. Bronze lanterns of an intricate design were suspended from the ceiling and innumerable antiques distributed all over the hall. There were ponderous swords made by the craftsmen of bygone dynasties, resting against the walls in a position of honour. Long bookcases supported urns made of a translucent, milky jade and of turquoise carved with grotesque symbols. Along with them were displayed crude discs and jade bangles that used to be buried with the dead in the days of the glorious Han dynasty. All these ornaments showed the rusty blood spots which jade always absorbs in contact with a dissolving body. Curious bronze mirrors of Chou were half concealed behind silk curtains in the corners. Embroideries of mellow colours and matchless workmanship covered the altar and some of the blackwood couches were encrusted with mother-of-pearl and ivory.

The abbot was standing in the middle of the hall and welcomed the guests courteously with great cordiality.

‘May I know your honourable name?’ he asked the young man with the camera in his low musical voice.

‘My humble name is Liang,’ the young man replied, proffering his card with both hands; it also bore the name of a great banking house in Shanghai. He bowed slightly, the abbot did likewise and took the card with both his hands. Turning to Chungan, he told him to go and make ready two of the best rooms and order

a select supper. Then, with another bow, he withdrew. Two boys entered with large pressure lamps one of which they placed on the big table and another on a side-table. The great hall now came to life, glittering and sparkling like the throne-room of an imperial palace. Another novice brought steaming hot towels, then bowls of fragrant tea on a large red tray. The old lady was still wiping her perspiring face, whilst the young woman applied some powder to hers from an elegant toilet case. Mr Liang meditatively sipped his tea, his eyes wandering with slight curiosity over the swords and other antiques in the room. Their servants were unpacking some baskets, setting on the table cans of preserved peaches, pickled ginger, lichees and other delicacies.

In a little while Chungan returned with the abbot to say that the accommodation was now ready for the honourable guests. Mr Liang, thanking him, explained that the old lady was his mother. She was a widow whose husband had died three years ago. The young lady was his wife, the woman in sombre dress his aunt, His mother, he continued, was very pious, and as Shanghai was in the throes of the 'Great Heat' season, they had had the idea of coming to the mountain on the recommendation of a friend, both to rest and to pray. As far as prayer was concerned, he confessed a desire to leave this to his mother. I rose and left the room as the abbot and Chungan became engrossed in earnest conversation with the old lady.

Not long afterwards, as I was about to change into my pyjamas for the night, there was a light knock at my door and Chungan entered, his eyes twinkling.

'Don't go to bed yet!' he whispered mysteriously. 'There is going to be a magnificent service, specially ordered by the old lady, for the repose of her dead husband. Now I must run to make myself ready,' and he left the room in a hurry.

I went out and sat on the stone terrace enjoying the stillness of the night. Shortly after eleven o'clock a bronze bell pealed forth its call to prayer. Its slow measured booming filled the big courtyard with a strange and stately rhythm as a long procession of priests issued from aisles on the left and right and moved towards the temple. Each priest was robed in flowing vestments of a rich

crimson colour and wore a black silk cap. At the end of the file walked the abbot in a heavy robe of cloth of gold, on his head a gold tiara set with precious stones. It was shaped like a half open lotus on a short stem and in the middle of this mystic flower glowed a magnificent jewel.

Silently they filled the great hall and stood on both sides of the abbot. The god Shang Ti, the All-Highest, smiled on them benevolently and enigmatically from his canopied throne. His face, unearthly and serene, was lit by an oil-lamp and a dozen big red candles set on ornate pewter and bronze candlesticks. His eyes, ever looking inwards into himself, seemed to flash and glance at the assembled monks in the flickering light of the candles. Other deities along the walls smiled or grimaced threateningly in the semi-darkness among the red pillars. Blue clouds of incense slowly ascended towards the gilded and painted ceiling. The silence became oppressive and pregnant. It seemed that the temple was full of unseen presences and that a wrong move or an inapt word would bring, by a force beyond comprehension, annihilation to the wretched mortals standing within. Hollow and weird sounds came from a massive wood block beaten by a priest, followed by the rhythmic chiming of a small silver bell.

Old Mrs Liang entered accompanied by her family and servants. A small, square table, chairs and stools were brought for her party by a novice, and as she sat down heavily on a chair she greedily sipped some tea. Outside the night deepened and closed in upon the sleeping mountain.

Holding with both hands his white jade sceptre, the abbot made a deep obeisance before the Deity. His voice rang sharp and clear chanting an invocation :

‘O Shang Ti—the Mightiest Emperor over all Heavenly Kings!

Thou, who dwellest in the Jade Hall of the Western Heaven,
Thou, who art remote from this poor earth and yet so close
to us,

Thou, who enjoyest wondrous harmonies of Heaven and yet
hearkeneth to discordant prayers of humble mortals,

O Almighty Spirit, Thou sitteth on the throne of glory and yet dost condescend to help poor mankind,
We pray Thee and beseech Thee to hearken to our humble petition.'

Slowly he rose to his feet. Jewels sparkled as incense rose in blue spirals. The flame of the candles fluttered. Young priests' voices, vibrant and passionate, mingling with the rhythmical tinkling of bells, the clanking of gongs and the beating of drums and blocks, sang the refrain of the invocation. Gods, in thickening shadows, smiled and frowned—benevolent and sinister, grotesque and beautiful.

The chanting became monotonous and more rhythmical. The monks, who stood on the left side, knelt down and prostrated themselves before the Deity, then slowly rose, while those on the right side prostrated themselves in their turn. The eyes of the abbot burned like coals as eerie sounds came from some mystical musical instruments.

'O Shang Ti!' he cried in a ringing voice. 'Here is Thy humble slave, Mistress Liang, who cometh here to pray to Thee for her departed husband. Thou art great both in this world and in the one beyond. And Thou alone knowest how to cherish and comfort those who have passed into the Unknown.'

Slowly he sank to his knees. His forehead lightly touched a cushion placed on the stone floor and nothing was heard but the waves of chanting coming from the group of priests. Their fingers gleamed white in the subdued light when they shook their little bells, and incense in fragrant clouds hung like a veil over the faces of many gods. Time passed unheeded.

With his jewelled mitre scintillating in the uneven light of candles, the abbot stood erect before the altar. Then, with a slow step, he moved around the temple with all the priests following him, then disappeared into the shadows. For a while the temple was silent.

Suddenly the cymbals clashed again and the plaintive sound of flutes mingled with a subdued chanting. Out into the soft gloom of the great courtyard filed the procession of monks, each of

them holding a red paper lantern shaped like a lotus flower. Walking two paces forwards and one pace backwards, turning around each other to form the mystic sign of yin-yang, the monks merged into the rhythm of a strange, sacred dance. Stars twinkled in the purple sky, bats darted amongst the tiled roofs and heavy clouds of incense floated over the dancing priests.

The throbbing music ceased. All the monks stopped before a specially erected high dais, resembling a camel-back bridge, under a magnificent canopy of red satin, for now, the most mysterious and important part of the ceremony was to begin.

At a sign from the abbot, Chungan slowly ascended the dais and stood there motionless. Now he himself wore, like his abbot, glittering vestments of cloth of gold, and on his head rested a gold mitre shaped like a lotus flower. With his youth and good looks, he appeared as a vision of a god come to earth.

The abbot, remaining below, took from a priest a petition beautifully written with a delicate brush on yellow silk in the name of old Mrs Liang. He started reading it very slowly, very clearly and solemnly, with his face turned towards Chungan. Immobile as a statue, Chungan repeated word for word the petition, with his eyes lifted to Heaven. For, now he had become an intermediary between men and gods, his standing high above on the bridge mystically symbolizing direct approach to the Highest. His eyes, wide open, glowed with inward fire, for was he not communing with the eternal gods, and was there any honour on this earth greater than his? Caught by the strange magic his expression imparted, I watched his face. It was now austere and immobile. Only his lips moved. His voice was clear and ringing like a clarion. His eyes were directed into the starry space to the west where the sun had disappeared. There lay the Western Paradise and the sacred abode of Hsiwangmu—Goddess, the Mother of Mystery. Perhaps there, in the purple space filled with glittering stars, he saw with the eyes of his spirit, in the vast palace of emerald jade, a Radiant Presence reposing on a flaming throne.

It was clear Chungan strained all his will in order to enable his spirit to present at the feet of God the supplication of old Mrs

Liang. The monks' chanting broke out again, sonorous and beautiful. Then it became again more monotonous as, by degrees, they and the guests, not excluding myself, fell into a sort of trance. Borne on the rhythmic waves of the music, I lost all sense of space, time and of the ceremony being performed for the old lady. An hour passed without a change in the manner of chanting or in the rhythm of the music. The whole temple became an enchanted domain charmed and mesmerized by the vibrating sound and colour, filled with the unseen presence so persistently invoked.

Abruptly the chanting became violent. Cymbals clashed louder and flutes wailed. Then all stopped and there was silence. Slowly Chungan descended from the dais. A neophyte approached the abbot with a large paper image of a horse with a rider mounted on it, all set on a light bamboo frame. With a deliberately protracted movement, the abbot carefully attached the petition on yellow silk to the back of the rider. Then, lifting the horse high, he proceeded, followed by the monks, to a bronze tripod specially installed. Light was applied to the image and, burning fiercely, the rider and his message were soon a mass of flames. Charred remnants, amid a cloud of sparks, floated high up into the air, borne on the column of heat. This signified the acceptance of the petition by the All-Highest. Everybody was now happy. Heaps of incense were thrown into the bronze burner in the middle of the courtyard, followed by subdued prayers. The service was over. Tired priests divided into two groups and gradually disappeared into the dark corridors behind the temple. Old Mrs Liang, tired but exhilarated by the success of the prayer, leaned affectionately on her daughter-in-law's shoulder and, followed by the others, proceeded slowly to her apartment.

Road to Western Capital

I WAS given my first long holiday in several years and, on the advice of my Taoist friends on Jade Mountain, I decided to spend it in West China, in those very regions where Chinese civilization had been born and reached its finest flowering. Animated by a sense of high adventure combined with the humility and simplicity I was learning at the Taoist monastery, I bought a third-class rail ticket. Another reason was my growing affection for the ordinary Chinese folk and a desire to make new friends among them. Actually I did not dislike people travelling in higher classes; they were usually government officials and merchants but, as a class, they were slightly suspicious of contacts with strangers and, therefore, apt to be dull and uncommunicative.

Thus, one bright summer morning I found myself ensconced on a hard seat in an express bound for Nanking. At last I was on my way. The train swayed restfully as its heavy wheels clanked rhythmically against glistening rails. Fresh breezes came through the open windows of the carriage, bringing with them the smell of fields and burning straw. The creaking of water-wheels, driven by water-buffaloes blended with the lusty croaking of innumerable bullfrogs in the paddy fields. As far as the eye could see towards the horizon, it was rice, its lush jade-green being almost too strong for the eyes to bear. Here and there, right in the midst of the fields, were ancestral tombs. Clumps of richly-leaved trees broke the monotony of the endless plain, whose fertile soil rewarded the toil of men unfailingly and bountifully. All kinds of vegetables, planted on small plots, edged the rice fields. The thatched huts of farmers peeped out of trees and bamboos, and men, naked to the waist, were working knee-deep

in the water pulling out weeds. Everywhere was a sense of peace and contentment.

Presently I turned away from the window and looked around. As usual there were many passengers travelling on this fast train between Shanghai and Nanking. Next to me was a village teacher going to Chinkiang, a shabbily dressed man of about thirty years of age, reading a book entitled in bold characters *The Life and Deeds of Dr Sun Yat Sen*. Almost opposite to him were sitting three ladies, apparently quite well off. One of them was fat with a placid face, and dressed in a long grey gown. Her friend was a small, slim woman not much over forty, I thought. Her dress was fashionably cut and a high collar effectively hid her withering neck. A thick layer of powder covered her still smooth face. Their third companion was an old woman, probably a widow, dressed in sombre black. They all fingered sandalwood rosaries, repeating now and then in subdued voices the merit conferring mantram '*Nanmu Amitabha*'—'We Trust in you O Buddha' and hypocritically lowering their eyes. At the same time they were sipping tea, which was being served throughout the journey, and gossiped endlessly. It appeared that they were returning from a pilgrimage to Shanghai's temples and were well pleased with their visit. This type of female pilgrim was well known to me, a woman starving for love or adventure, married to an impotent old husband, perhaps an opium smoker, or a man who had dissipated all his vitality on numerous concubines. Feeling that her life was passing and that bleak winter days were ahead, she longed for a few rays of sunshine, a few more gulps of the wine of life. Boldly she would step out and ask her husband for permission to go on a pilgrimage. Of course, at first he would probably refuse, saying that it was not correct for a woman to travel alone. Not daunted by such a rebuke, the wife would call on her friends and they would form a party. All objections overruled, they would travel from town to town, from temple to temple and have the time of their lives. The younger women encountered romantic situations, which were bound to arise sooner or later, and the older ones were only too delighted to share their secret. Ever praying for elusive happiness in this life

and ever seeking the pleasures that had been denied them at home, these women were the most welcome and respected patrons of temples, both Taoist and Buddhist. They were generous and easy going, and their pilgrimages were nothing but glorified picnics.

Two of the women looked slyly at me and whispered among themselves. One of them giggled. I turned away. My other neighbours were soldiers going on leave or, perhaps, returning to the army. Several peasants in their purple tunics were returning from Shanghai where they had gone to sell produce. There were some factory workers in blue blouses and trousers and a fat merchant in the corner was talking to an old man with a long pipe. There were two *liumon*—gangsters, going to Wusih. I had soon recognized them as such, for they were dressed in flowing black silk trousers, almost transparent, with the loose ends of a broad sash hanging down on their side. Their black, round caps were rakishly perched on their sleek well-groomed heads and the sleeves of their short jackets were rolled high, almost to the elbow. Their arms were tattooed with flowers, dragons and naked women and their faces were slightly powdered. They talked in loud challenging voices constantly cracking indecent jokes. At this moment the train was passing Soochow, the lovely city of canals, pagodas and beautiful women. One of the rascals laughingly asked the other in such a way that the old man in the corner should not fail to hear:

‘Mokou, do you know that old men in Soochow never eat turtles?’

‘No, but why?’ the other inquired with an air of innocence.

‘Because the old men there are called turtles.’ All the people around them burst into laughter. From time to time a man would appear with a tin bucket on his arm and cry out ‘Spiced eggs, beancurds’. People eagerly bought the eggs, hard-boiled in soya sauce, and some little brown squares of beancurd cakes. Everybody was chewing something.

The heat, in spite of the open windows, was almost unbearable. Perspiration ran down everybody’s face in streams. The monotonous rolling of the train induced drowsiness, and people were

leaning against each other as sleep overcame them. A few struggled against it, sipping cheap tea brought in small pots by a train attendant and fanning themselves languidly. For three coppers I bought a local newspaper and tried to read it, but soon felt as drowsy as the others.

In the evening the train arrived in Nanking, as crowds of porters ran alongside shouting and pushing each other. The human stream from the train rushed to a steamer lying at the wharf near by. The evening shadows were lengthening when they cast off and the waters of the great Yangtze river took on a mysterious light blue tint. The golden disc of the sun, still hot, hung low over the chimneys of factories and mills on the opposite bank, and the grey forms of men-of-war were silhouetted against the receding city of Nanking. Amidst much shouting the steamer touched the other side of the river and again people fought and pushed and shouted, rushing towards the ticket gate.

I, carrying my suitcase myself, was pushed along with the others and was glad to get into the first coach I saw. I found a seat next to a soldier and opposite was a middle-aged shopkeeper with a pockmarked wife and two noisy boys. I could not pay much attention to my neighbours, for I was too tired and the heat in the river valley was stifling. Dark clouds were coming from the east and the distant rumble of thunder could be heard. Darkness descended and the conductor lighted tiny electric lamps which were so dim that the passengers could hardly see each other in the train. Vendors invaded the carriage selling eggs, cakes, pork chops and roast chickens. I bought some sweetened rice and a piece of roast chicken, and ate it slowly as the train sped northward into the night. My head soon felt heavy and I leaned against the hard back of the seat and remembered no more.

It was morning when the weary train rolled slowly to the platform of a sprawling, dirty city. It was the Hsuchowfu junction and I had to change here and take another train just across the platform. It was very hot. There were numbers of dirty, unkempt soldiers loitering around, as hawkers sold dumplings, water-chestnuts and cold tea. The hour that we had to wait

seemed very long but finally the train began to move. Westward, ever westward, we travelled. The intensity of the heat increased with every hour. The earth was dry and cracked, with its withering crops thirsty for rain. Big cicadas were flying, like bullets, from tree to tree and some even invaded the carriage.

Towards evening the character of the country began to change. Instead of endless plains with scattered villages and rare shrubs, low hills appeared. The soil was of a rich yellow colour and very compact. Its formation was grotesque in the extreme. There were terraces superimposed one upon another facing ravines of undefined depth. Some of the people were living in caves instead of houses, and weird gorges extended into narrow valleys where little sunshine could ever penetrate and there, on the narrow ledges, were fields and trees. Here were these children of the earth—the real Chinese. Mother Earth fed them, clothed them and gave them shelter in her very womb. This strange golden soil—loess—was everywhere around them, at the side of them and even above them. The very colour of men was like the soil—pale golden, and the air was filled with golden dust. As the train sped westward, past caves and through ravines, stars began to twinkle in the darkening sky. Smoke from the cooking of evening meals penetrated into the open windows of the carriage. Pangs of hunger assailed all passengers; some munched dry cakes, others ate eggs and, when their simple meal was over, they stretched themselves on the hard seats and slept. Only I found it hard to sleep that night. My heart was beating heavily. Odours, strange and yet familiar, filled my nostrils evoking forgotten memories and sensations. This was the holy ground. Here the whole race of Han—the core of China—had come into being. All that was most glorious in the history of the country had been enacted here. My eyes became dim. I fell into a dream-like state of remembrance, as my soul seemed to flutter between the past and the present, and who could tell which was more real to me now. The train existed no more—it was a chariot that was transporting me through the land of my dreams. The bright disc of the moon was rising over the horizon. It was the same moon that had shone in the days of the benevolent Yellow Emperors,

of the great Teacher Laotze and of the heroes of the Three Kingdoms and their gallant fights with the enemy and his hosts.

Yet another morning came as I had spent the whole night sitting by the narrow window of the carriage. The first thing that met my eyes was a wonderful river—sinuous, murmuring and alive. It was the Huang Ho—the Yellow River, joy and sorrow of the land. A dragon spirit, it is said, dwelt in the mighty stream. Between great mountains, hills and cliffs it ran swiftly on its long course with orchards decorating its banks. In and out of tunnels thundered the train penetrating deeper into the land of golden soil. And never for a moment did the sight of the great river leave my eyes. At about ten o'clock the train was swallowed by a very long tunnel. When it emerged again, I saw a vision of high crenellated walls, great towers and battlements. It was Tungkwan, the terminus of the railway line. I took my suitcase and walked out of the station. Three husky soldiers busily examined my things, and in a few minutes I was permitted to go.

I stepped into Great East Street, the shopping centre of this small town and, after a few judicious inquiries at the stores, was shown a small hostelry, artfully concealed by a tailor's shop. Entering through an inconspicuous door, I found a row of tiny wooden cubicles ranged along a narrow stone-paved courtyard. The room I was given had a narrow plank bed with a straw mattress, a small wooden table and a chair, and a washstand with an enamel basin and a tiny cheap mirror hanging from a nail in the wall. A muscular attendant prepared me a bath in a special cabin in the courtyard, rubbing off the accumulated dirt from my body with great application while pouring nearly boiling water over me from a large dipper until I almost screamed with pain. I felt wonderfully refreshed afterwards, and decided that I was ready to explore Tungkwan and stepped out.

Great East Street was filled with people. Sunburnt peasants carried bundles of dried garlic or baskets of water-melons, while some led goats and pigs to the market. Large two-wheeled carts were coming from North Gate, filled with coal brought across the river from the neighbouring Shansi Province. Cloth dealers yelled at the top of their voices offering bargains, and children

played on the huge stone blocks with which the street was paved. Green trucks, covered with dust, rumbled through the street towards the post office, bringing mail from the distant provincial capital. Merciless sun beat through the thin golden haze upon the grey tiles of the houses, but the street was cool as shopkeepers had put up white cloth awnings making the thoroughfare look like an avenue of tents.

At last, tired of gazing at the shops, I started towards North Gate. I passed many stalls with luscious water-melons, both whole and sliced, attractively displayed under gauze cages recently introduced to defeat the swarms of flies. A few beggars squatted in the coolness of the massive gates. Outside flowed the river, with its sandy banks, and I sat down on a boulder overlooking it, while the silt-laden yellow waters rushed past me. In some places the current flowed peacefully and in others it formed foam-capped whirlpools. Like a mighty dragon the vast stream writhed and twisted in its mad rush to the east. The spirit of this strange, whimsical river fascinated me. I saw it as a mighty warrior, clad in golden armour, fighting through the colossal castles of mountains towards the calmly beckoning arms of the ocean. Dark waves, like the hordes of brown soldiers, pushing each other, sped downwards in the wake of their leader. From the unnamed wastes of Tibet and out of a beautiful blue lake in snowy mountains this mighty river ran and played and tossed about the boats which were brave enough to cross its broad bosom. These immense craft with flat bottoms and almost square, were tied near the bank. Small pieces of metal, shaped like a cross, hung on their masts and, when the breeze played with them, they tinkled sweetly. All the boatmen, who were on them, were stark naked. Some of them slept in the sunshine, stretched on deck, others walked along the bank or sat on the warm sand. They were handsome men, strong and brawny with bronzed skins. A number of their women were sitting about sewing simple garments. From remote antiquity, when mankind wore few, if any, clothes, came this custom of the boatmen working naked in summer. I marvelled greatly how tradition survived through so many ages. A shout came from the middle of the river. Men came into view

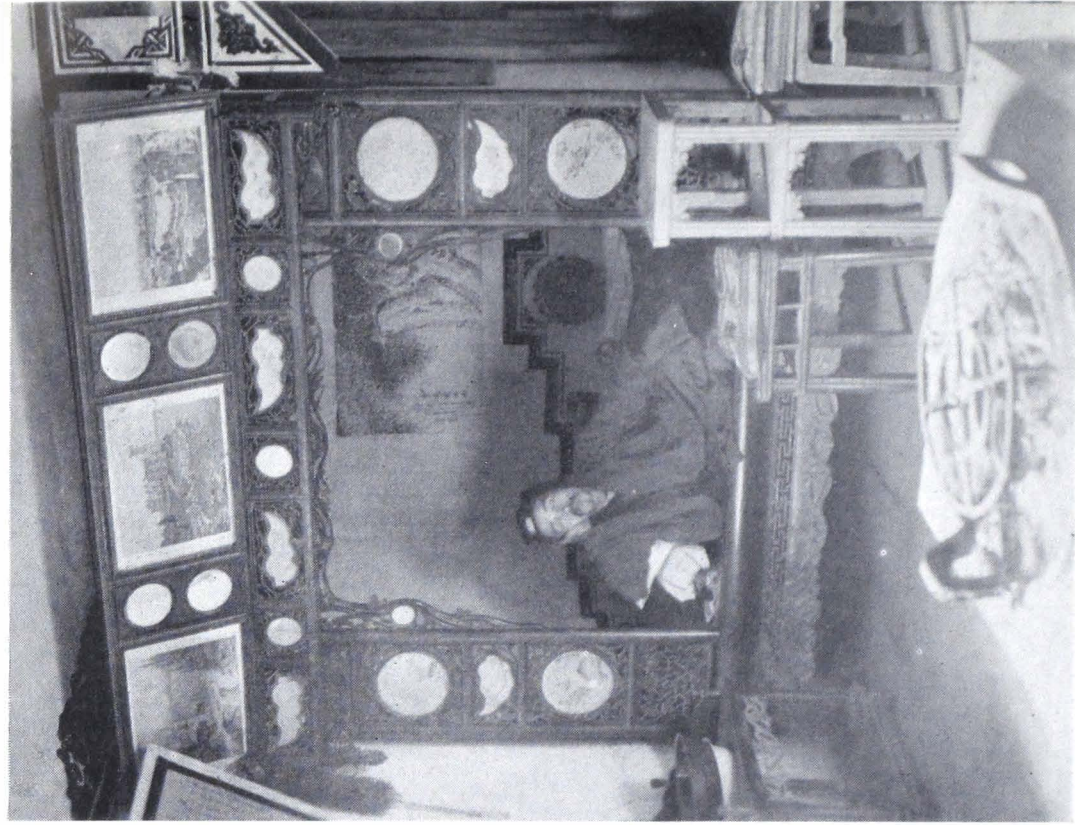
pushing and pulling a boat. They walked up to their waists in the muddy, swirling water and finally made the cumbersome vessel fast not far from the bank. Big water-melons were brought ashore in baskets and carried away towards the town. I walked slowly back past vast heaps of glistening black anthracite watched by fierce dogs and women with many children. On I walked through the main street towards West Gate.

Near the yamen there was a great commotion. Straining my neck I saw a prisoner, a bandit of yesterday, standing in the courtyard. Then the guards pulled him about and all started walking to the gate behind which the execution ground lay. I slowly followed them and passed through the enormous double doors. The dusty road led towards the station. Many beggars lay on the ground imploring alms, while others sat gloomily in the caves excavated by the roadside. Engulfed by the stream of humanity, I was pushed towards the edge of the road. The pitiless sun was blinding. An acrid smell of perspiring bodies made me involuntarily recoil, and I decided that I would not watch the execution. I had seen one before and it left a devastating impression on me. I would not let anything revolting disturb me just now, I said to myself. Immersed in deep thought I walked along a street of the suburb. All side-walks were covered with stalls. Many curio dealers spread their wares on the hot ground and squatted behind them under the shade of huge cloth parasols. One could buy here any kind of gods, made of pottery, and reputed to be hundreds, even thousands of years old. Incense-burners and snuff-bottles attracted prospective buyers among the passengers who, while waiting for buses, slowly promenaded along the sun-baked street. I paused before a stall on which were displayed two delicately carved stone images. Both were male fairies of the classical group of 'Eight immortals'. The old marble seemed to be alive and the little figurines looked out at me with lively and enigmatic smiles. I bought them there and then.

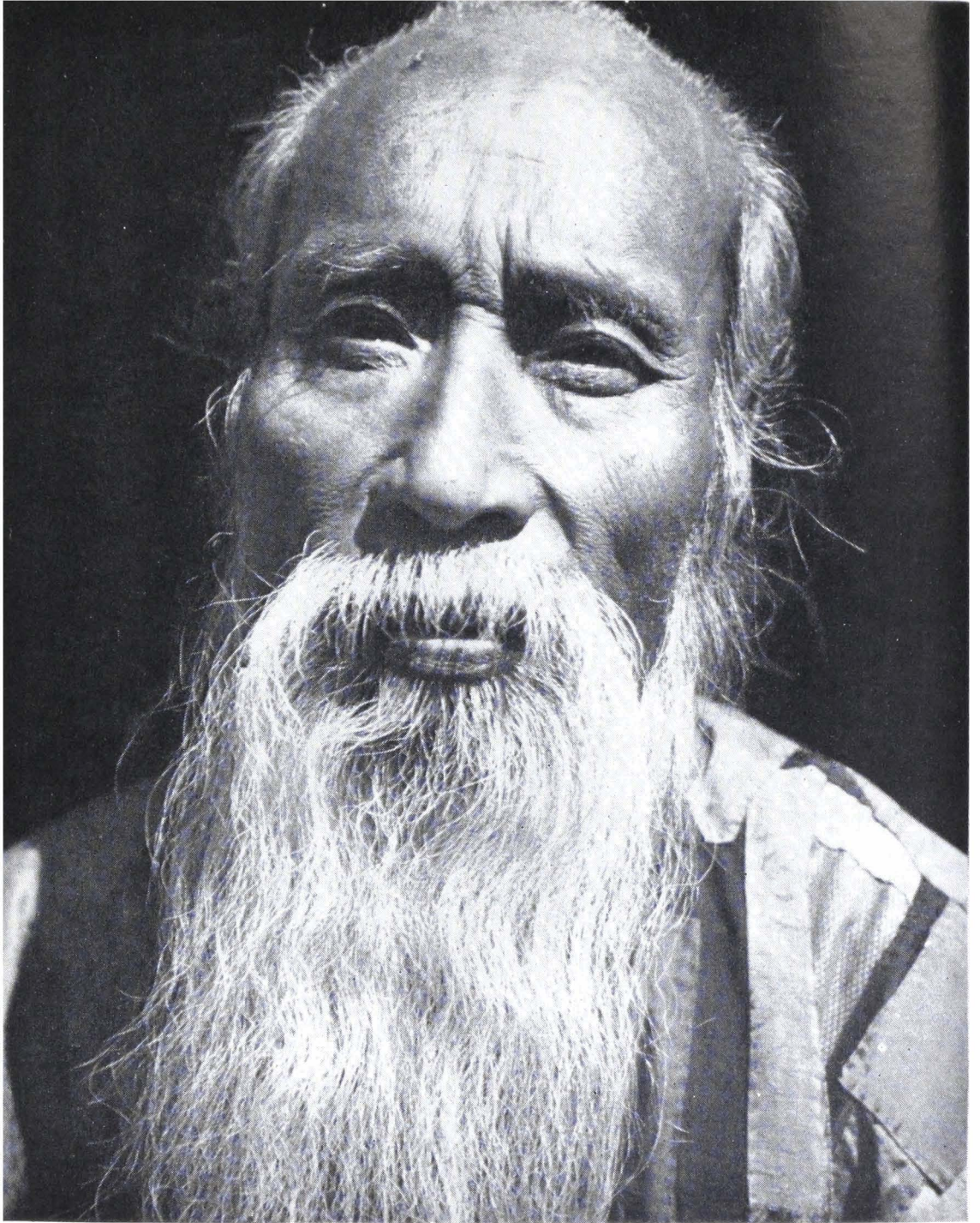
On my way back to the hotel I wanted to buy a cake of soap and entered one of the shops near by. It was an ordinary store dealing in sundry goods. On the shelves one could see many kinds of soap, hair oil in ornate bottles, matches, cigarettes,



The Author with the monk Chungan



A Taoist hierarch in meditation



An old Taoist priest

incense sticks, electric torches and boxes with sewing thread and needles. From the ceiling hung oil-paper umbrellas, packages with cotton-wool for quilts and kerosene-oil lamps, and the floor was covered with baskets and sacks of potatoes, onions, garlic, slabs of rock salt and many other things needed by housewives. The front of the store was protected from the still glaring sun by an awning made of discarded flour bags. Directly behind the counter was a partition plastered all over with old newspapers which separated the shop from the living quarters.

Presently a youngish man, naked down to the waist, emerged from behind the partition. He was of an athletic build, with broad shoulders, and a shining golden skin. His face was extremely powerful and rugged, as if hewn out of rock, with its square jaws, high nose, a great open forehead and intelligent black eyes. The mouth was finely-shaped with a set of perfect white teeth. 'What an unusual figure for a shopkeeper,' I thought; to me he appeared a personification of the true Chinese race, an archetype of Han.

I greeted him and asked him for a piece of toilet soap. He looked at me with some puzzlement, seeing that I was a foreigner, and then a warm smile lit his face. Instead of handing me the soap, he drew me to a table, made me sit down and poured me a large bowl of cold tea and with charming courtesy gave me a small towel to wipe my overheated face. We talked for a long time as I told him about my life in Shanghai and my desire to visit Sian and, if possible, the holy Mt Hwa. He listened with sympathetic interest. At the end of an hour I knew that I had acquired a new and fast friend in this unusual shopkeeper whose name was Chen Chingwei. He promised to come to my hotel for a drink in the evening.

To enjoy the coolness of approaching dusk I went out on the back terrace of the hotel which was almost level with the roof and a wonderful view of the town, the walls and the river opened before me. Soon my new friend Chingwei joined me. I ordered some sliced roast pork, garlic pickled in sugar and a few bottles of the excellent Peking beer. We ate and drank and talked while reclining in comfortable rattan chairs. The sun had already sunk

below the horizon but the sky was still burning red. The silhouette of the massive gate stood dark and sinister against the crimson flames of the sunset. Soldiers, armed with rifles, looked like black gargoyles ornamenting the crenellated walls. The mournful notes of a bugle were a fitting accompaniment to a dying day. Twilight was coming; the red in the west merged into purple which imperceptibly paled into azure. The yellow expanse of the river became shimmering gold which soon turned into a mantle of silvery blue. Long shadows stretched from one cliff to another, and the people living in the caves appeared like black ants crawling in and out of the red ground. The drabness of the little town and the meanness of its poor houses vanished. Every temple, every house was painted purple, vermilion and gold. Gathering shadows concealed collapsed roofs, broken tiles and paneless windows. The spirits of antiquity came out at this magic hour and the place looked once more the glorious fortress of the mighty empire—impregnable, proud and terrifying.

Before he left Chingwei discussed with me the prospect of my visit to Mt Hwa.

‘I do not advise you to make the ascent alone because lately a number of bandits have appeared in the countryside. One or two monks from Hwashan usually come here once a week for provisions. Why not go with them? Surely a day or two would not make much difference to you.’ I readily accepted his prudent advice and he promised to assist in making all necessary arrangements.

Actually the two Taoists from the mountain arrived next evening and we left together at daylight on the following morning. We travelled in a two-wheeled passenger cart protected from the sun by a hood of blue cloth. It was a slow journey over a deep-rutted country road which ran over hillocks and dived into canyons. The jolting and shaking was so great that we had to stop from time to time at wayside villages to refresh ourselves with a bowl of tea and give a little rest to our aching backs. The holy mountain loomed in front of us seemingly so near and yet many miles away. It was in the shape of a lotus bud. The lower, flanking foot-hills seemed to open up from the

centre, like half open petals, and the main peak forming the closed blossom, rose sheer into the sky—a stupendous pillar of rock. Temples, looking tiny and unsubstantial from the distance, covered the summit and peeped out between the crags at the base.

I sighed with relief when we reached the foot-hills and paid off the cart. I loved walking and it was a joy to climb higher and higher over the crudely-hewn stone steps. It was a weary ascent but the grandeur of the unfolding vistas compensated for the bodily exertions. Hours passed and still we were climbing along the stony path winding around the precipitous mountain, resting now at a shrine and now at some cavity in the rocks. It was already late afternoon when we reached the final stage of the journey which I greatly dreaded. The top of the peak was a sheer cliff hundreds of feet high and almost perpendicular. There were footholds carved in the living rock but no one could possibly climb unaided. Therefore, centuries ago the Taoist hermits had affixed iron chains, anchored to the rock at convenient places and the pilgrims climbed slowly, clinging to the links for dear life. There had been dreadful accidents when some visitors, especially women, overcome by giddiness after seeing a yawning abyss under their feet, lost their grip on the chains and plunged to their death on the rocks below. Many pilgrims could not climb at all, overwhelmed by the same terrors. Now there were strong men who for a fee assisted the weak-willed ones to make the perilous ascent. I must shamefacedly admit that I have always been a poor mountain climber and eagerly allowed two husky men to literally drag me up like a sack of potatoes. Even so my heart had almost failed me in the process. The provisions for the monasteries and the pilgrims' baggage, I learnt, were lifted up in baskets on ropes.

It was a vast relief when we at last emerged on the top of the holy peak. It was a very extensive platform with several monasteries and a sheer drop of thousands of feet on every side. These monasteries were in no way so large or pretentious as the Monastery of Jade Mountain but the marvel was that they were there at all. It took much loving and devoted labour for the

hermits to haul materials and furnishings up this precipitous column of rock, 8,000 feet above sea-level, and excavate cisterns for rain water. And yet they were happy and contented in this awe-inspiring isolation.

My Taoist friends brought me to their monastery which, they told me, was a sort of branch temple of my monastery on Jade Mountain. Indeed, when I showed the abbot a visiting card with Abbot Lee Lisan's name on it, he received me with open arms and allocated to me a small but very clean room, the back windows of which overlooked a precipice. The temple was rather dilapidated and the old monk complained:

'Alas, we do not have many pilgrims these days and those who come do not seem to have much money for contributions.' He sighed and then brightened up. 'Nevertheless we are happy here and our wants are small.' He pulled me by the sleeve into the back-yard. 'You see we even have our own vegetables now,' and he pointed to a tiny plot planted with cabbages and turnips. Then he led me to a hall where the rest of the monks were waiting for us. Cut off from the world they all questioned me about Jade Mountain, events in Shanghai and other things until well into the night.

I spent two days on the mountain going from temple to temple, talking to the monks or simply enjoying the view from this immense height. I loved the nights and spent long hours in solitude sitting on a rock and gazing at the summer sky and the incomparable panorama of hills and plains below shrouded in translucent darkness. So high was the mountain and so perfectly isolated by its precipices that I always had difficulty in associating the little temple community here, so harmonious and friendly, with the earth. I always had an illusion that I was somewhere else—perhaps in a little private haven or on some other planet which floated in the starry sky over a sea of variegated shadows and islands of silvery clouds. I experienced profound peace here. It was not only a state of the heart and mind, but an indefinable sensation that the peace was a tangible thing, like an essence, which pervaded this place and affected all who came here. Even my Monastery of Jade Mountain seemed to be remote and almost

unsubstantial. There was complete detachment from all places and people in the outside world, and the spirit of the Great Teacher Laotze seemed to be near. The tradition is that he used to stay on this mountain. Some of the greatest emperors of by-gone dynasties also used to come here to sacrifice and pray for divine guidance and enjoy the beauty of the landscape, the freshness of the air and the perfect, absolute stillness, broken only by the music of wind and waterfalls.

Upon my return from Hwashan, Chingwei made a modest feast for me at the back of his shop to seal our friendship. Early next morning he accompanied me to the compound of the Tungkwan-Sian Bus Company. Dilapidated and dirty vehicles in a long row were ready to receive a large crowd of passengers, who were waiting outside the gate. At last it opened and there was a general rush for the seats. Several soldiers with armbands, accompanied by others with rifles and revolvers, blocked the entrance and started to search the baggage and passengers. I opened my suitcase and, after a perfunctory glance at the contents, the soldiers told me to move on. I reached the first bus and plunged quickly on to a vacant seat behind the driver. People continued streaming into the vehicle—a woman with an infant, a fat soldier with many bags who plopped down heavily on a back seat in the corner, then a dozen merchants, stout and greasy, who clambered in with kerosene tins, sacks of flour, blocks of soap and bundles of cloth. There followed more women, old and young, alone and with babies, until there was no more room. A heavy trunk was then passed through the window and put on the floor. A man sat on it in the middle of the passage. Cakes and loaves of bread were hurriedly bought by some who had had no time to take breakfast at home or at the hotel. After much shouting and amidst the protests of those who were left behind, the vehicle shook, groaned, spluttered and finally moved away on its uneasy journey.

Up and down on the deeply-rutted and almost unpaved road the bus jumped and swayed, and the clouds of yellow dust enveloped us more thickly with each turn of the wheels. Soon a

long chain of mountains came into view, dark green lofty peaks concealed by clouds. By the time we reached Hwayin temple the mists had risen higher and Mt Hwa stood revealed in all its glory. Majestic and serene rose the peak which I had just visited, with its temples and shrines.

On and on rolled the creaking wooden cage with its cargo of packed human beings—past the ruins of marble columns and stone animals on the forgotten tombs of great men of antiquity and past streams, fringed with green poplars, gurgling merrily under the centuries-old marble bridges of the Old Imperial highway. This plain was the holy ground where the civilization of China had come into being. About noon we reached the Hwaching warm springs where the Tang Emperor Minghuang had built an exquisite villa for his beloved Yang Kweifei, the woman whose beauty toppled an empire. It was at this spring, sumptuously lined with marble and coloured tiles, that the infatuated ruler watched his love take her bath in the tepid waters. Farther along, on the distant horizon appeared stupendous mounds of yellow earth; these were the tombs of the emperors and empresses who had gone to the Yellow Springs, the abode of their imperial ancestors, long ago but whose fragrant memories still lived among the people. We travelled until evening when the sun hung like a lantern over the horizon, enveloped in the mist of fine dust. Long, mauve shadows projected from the mountains, and the sound of tinkling bells came from roadside temples and pagodas. Warily the bus crossed a long marble bridge and rolled through an avenue of tall poplars. Yet another bridge lay ahead and after that another plain. Then suddenly the massive crenellated walls of Changan, the ancient capital, blocked the horizon and the sun disappeared beyond the vast gate towers. We had arrived.

Monastery of Eight Fairies

AS was my custom, when arriving at a new place, I went out next morning to survey the city which I had so often dreamt of seeing and which bore such beautiful and dignified names—Changan (Long Peace), Siking (Western Capital) and Sian (Western Peace), the latter being a current appellation. During the heyday of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) it was known as Changan and, when the capital had been moved to it from Loyang, it became also known as the Western Capital while the older city retained the title of Eastern Capital. Changan became the centre of great wealth, a citadel of Buddhism and it was here that printing had been first invented. It was one of the most splendid capitals of the world of those days, rivalling the magnificence of Constantinople of the Byzantine era.

I walked the length of the main streets—one connecting North Gate with South Gate and another running from east to west, with a huge Bell Tower at the intersection. Poor, insignificant and decrepit shops and houses lined these historical thoroughfares, instead of palaces. People, who passed to and fro in front of mean, dark shops, looked miserable and downhearted. Beggars infested all corners and nooks and went around in an endless procession imploring alms. They were not really professional beggars but people who had seen better days, mostly of good birth and who had lost everything through a series of famines and civil wars which had ravaged this ancient paradise. I explored the narrow side streets and invariably found that they led to open ground which stretched to the walls. Soon I realized that proud Changan, the wonderful capital, was no more. It was true that its haughty walls, impregnable and awe-inspiring and its great towers still defied time, but they enclosed only a space full of

poignant memories but devoid of substance. Like a poor widow, aged and alone, with her crown of glory shattered and trampled into dust, this royal city, impoverished and tortured, and with all hope gone, lay waiting to die.

As twilight put a mantle of pastel colours on Sian, painting the tops of its towers with a pale gold and making the vermilion walls glow with a soft pink, I entered the shadows of the great Temple of Light Flower, in the middle of the city, and wandered through its spacious galleries and corridors. There, along the walls, lay huddled together hundreds of inveterate opium smokers. Covered with filthy rags they were quite immobile, stirring only to refill their pipes. Farther along in a broad courtyard the same scene greeted my eyes. I tried to blame them, to condemn them for their weakness but the inner voice of Tao spoke within me and I could only pity them. Sometimes tears filled my eyes and yet I knew how utterly helpless I was to do anything for them. They were rickshaw coolies, former soldiers, garbage collectors and beggars. Day after day they earned or begged only enough money to keep their bodies and souls together. Every day they ate the same poor and monotonous food and every day they trod the same dingy and dusty streets. When they had a little extra money, they could not enjoy themselves as the city offered no amusement and no relaxation whatsoever either for them or even for their more prosperous brothers. To escape this eternal hopeless drudgery of life, almost everybody turned to the domain of delusions and illusions. The fumes of the drug rose sweet and nauseating at this twilight hour out of every shop and every house. Women and even children smoked it. This town depressed me as no others did. This life without aim, without hope appalled me. I dreamt of those soul-satisfying days on my Jade Mountain, away from the cesspools of life, of the peaceful retreat where I had walked with the gods.

I visited the Museum, where delicate sculptures of the Tang dynasty and wonderful bronzes of Shang enthralled me. In those days even the humblest vessels were works of art, made with loving care and matchless artistry not only to serve but also to

please, to add more joy to eating and drinking. Finally, I found Peilin—the Forest of Steles, the world-famous collection of ancient stone tablets and sculptures which contain a vast treasury of material on the history of China. The pearl among these big stone slabs with archaic characters was the so-called Nestorian Tablet, expounding the history of the arrival of the Nestorian missionaries from Baghdad and the gradual spread of Christianity throughout China. The Tang emperors looked with favour on this new religion and it is recorded that one of the Imperial concubines was converted and assumed the name of Helen. The weakness of the first Christian Church in China was that they had to refer everything to the Patriarch in Baghdad and when Baghdad had been cut off by the Arabic invasion, the contact ceased and the new faith, lacking support, withered away before the onslaught of Mohammedanism. Most of the places, between Sian and Lanchow, including the famous Iugur Kingdom of Hsia, staunchly Buddhist and Nestorian Christian, gradually became Muslim. Sian itself had a beautiful mosque said to have been founded by the uncle of Mohammed himself.

Having seen Sian, I engaged one of the carts with a blue hood and asked the driver to take me outside the town. We visited Taiyuent'a—a tall and solid pagoda built by a devoted Buddhist monk, and the ruins of the ancient Tang palaces. Carved marble columns and balustrades were all that was left of those magnificent edifices. On the way back I was brought to a large Taoist monastery, called Pahsienkung—Palace of Eight Fairies, which was actually not far outside the town gate. It was extensive and well preserved but, being so near the town and on the plain, it was not so beautiful as the monasteries and temples built on the top of hills and mountains. This was the monastery which I particularly wanted to visit during my stay in Sian in search of more enlightenment on Taoism.

I entered and walked across a broad courtyard to the main temple where I sat down on a chair near the counter. The monk, in charge of incense sticks and prayer slips, smiled at me and at once questioned me. I told him of my connection with the

monastery on Jade Mountain. Of course, he inquired my name and I handed him my business card. He took it and went out through the rear door. Presently, a fat, jovial monk emerged who, judging by the white jade tablet on his cap, was the abbot. He advanced towards me with outstretched hands.

‘Do you remember me?’ he asked excitedly, pressing me to sit down again. I peered at him intently in the semi-darkness. Of course, I remembered. He was a sort of Assistant Abbot on Jade Mountain, like my good friend Chungan. However, I had never had much opportunity of talking to him there as he was always busy with arranging prayers, talking to worshippers and with numerous administrative duties which devolved on him since he was responsible for managing the household of that great monastery.

‘Dear Chushen!’ I exclaimed, very pleased to find him here. ‘Of course. But I had never expected to see you here. What a promotion to be an abbot of so illustrious a temple!’ He smiled contentedly.

He took me through a long passage to his private apartments, classically but austere furnished with old carved chairs and tables. There we continued our reminiscences over a pot of fragrant tea. Finally I rose, intending to go back for lunch, but he restrained me.

‘No, you eat with us. Of course, our food is simple and poor, and also we did not know you were coming.’ The invitation was so spontaneous and cordial that it would have been bad manners to decline. The meal, however, was excellent and he ordered, specially for me, a pot of kaoliang wine. It was a fiery spirit, distilled from sorghum, and it went to my head quickly, also producing excessive perspiration. After the lunch I rested in a comfortable long chair while my friend attended to his monastic business. In the late afternoon, when I was ready to go, I found a young novice waiting for me.

‘He will go with you to assist you to pack your baggage,’ declared Abbot Chushen. I mildly protested but Chushen was firm. ‘Two days or three days makes no difference. You must stay with us.’ And so I moved to the monastery in the evening.

When I entered the abbot's study in the flickering light of tapers and oil-lamps, a majestic figure rose out of the shadows from the long chair to greet me. It was so unexpected, so unusual and so out of this world that I involuntarily stepped back. I remembered paintings and pictures in old Bibles depicting the old Patriarch Abraham, and the vision that stood before me surely was Abraham himself. Tall and extremely dignified, the old man had a powerful and noble face of slightly Semitic cast, framed in white hair while his grey beard fell down to his ankles. His eyes were keen, alert and like those of a young man. On his left hand he wore a signet ring with a finely cut peridot, and on his right wrist a broad and massive gold bangle. In his flowing robe with wide sleeves and a peculiar cap he indeed resembled a patriarch from the Old Testament.

As I shook his hand, the abbot intoned, 'Meet my good friend, Rabbi Wong Levy, the leader of the Chinese-Jewish colony in Kaifeng.' The rabbi also spoke, to my surprise, in a guttural, old-fashioned English, confirming the abbot's words. I had read of some Jews being in China since time immemorial but I could never imagine that I would meet their head under such circumstances and, above all, at a Taoist monastery. Rabbi Wong spoke most enthusiastically about his friendship with Abbot Chushen and the Taoists in general. It appeared that such a happy relationship between the leaders of two religions had existed for ages. He thought that Taoism was nearest to Judaism despite the wide diversity in theological doctrine and practices. He considered the belief in Tao to be identical with the belief in One God, notwithstanding terminology. He informed me that the present Jewish colony in Kaifeng was quite small and that it was gradually disappearing. This was not due to any increase in the death rate or persecution but, with the decline of Kaifeng's importance as a trading and cultural centre, the young Chinese Jews were migrating to other parts of the country where better opportunities existed for making a living. He himself, he said, was going to Shanghai to seek assistance for his small community from rich and influential Arabian Jews there. Altogether we had a very pleasant evening meal, Rabbi Wong was able to eat everything

as the food was all vegetables, cooked in vegetable oil, and, therefore, quite kosher in Jewish eyes. Raising his cup of wine he complimented our host in Chinese.

‘I almost wish I could be a Taoist monk myself but I am too old and I am a Jew. Truly, the Taoists of the Lungmen creed to which you, Chushen, belong are the quintessence of all that is best in Taoism; they are the true Taoists, faithful followers of the great Laotse. The cleverest, most intelligent and most educated men comprise their saints. Nowadays especially, with all the unhappiness and turmoil growing in the world, due to mankind’s departure from the ways of Tao, most of the intelligent men seek to retire to quiet monasteries with their beautiful and serene existence. However, this is regrettable for if all the best brains of this country become hermits, the inferior men are left to govern the people. Laotse said, “When good sages rule, people do not notice them; when lesser sages rule, people praise them; when inferior sages govern, people despise them.” Although this state of affairs means unhappiness for the people of China, yet it has ever been so, since remote antiquity, that our best minds always seek to retire from public life; this trait has become an outstanding characteristic of the Chinese race.’

Next day, when I was walking together with Chushen outside the monastery enjoying the beautiful view of the green Tsingling Mountains which tower to the south of Sian, he reminded me of the Rabbi’s speech at the evening meal.

‘What he said is true. Look at those mountains; they are full of small Taoist shrines and temples and some very brilliant people live out their declining years there—famous generals, eminent scholars and politicians. Once a man is out of the limelight he is quickly forgotten. Few people know that they are there or even their names.’ He sighed and pointed to a large log of wood on which we sat down, admiring the panorama. ‘I would like to take you out to some of these retreats—some of them are so beautiful but, as you say you are leaving the day after tomorrow, there would not be enough time.’

‘Alas, I am a working man and my time is not my own. This

leave of mine is only a short one.' As I said this, I felt very regretful that I could not go with him.

He continued gazing at the majestic range and then asked: 'Do you understand the meaning of the worship of Hsiwangmu—Goddess Mother of the West?' I urged him to go on for I was anxious to hear some new angle on this fascinating legend.

'Our tradition says that the goddess had been a mortal who attained divinity thousands of years ago and that her abode was in Kuenlun Mountains of which that range is but a branch ridge. The profane, especially the modern young people, have declared it to be a mere fairy tale. Let them think so, but between us I must tell you that there is some basis for this classical story. There exists a monastery hidden in one of the most beautiful and least accessible valleys of the mighty Kuenlun range. I have not been there myself but the tradition is that it can be found. When the monks have understood the meaning of Tao and fully mastered their body and spirit, they can travel there if they will. Not only the Taoist monks but any man, whatever his religion, who has found the truth. Yes, her abode exists on earth but you need perception to discover it. Even the gods disguise themselves in matter in this world and reveal themselves only to those who seek them earnestly. You cannot have true perception and discover them except by divine love, meditation and the understanding of beauty. You must not seek the gods with intellect but through faith and love, and they will lead you to themselves. A temple is nothing but a man-made house and what it holds can only be appraised with the eyes of the spirit. To the profane and the ignorant the Monastery of Hsiwangmu would be nothing but one of the shrines to be passed by or entered for a while for curiosity or rest.' He was silent as if absorbed by some mental vision.

'Laotse himself, when he had passed the customs gate on his green ox, went to the abode of Hsiwangmu and was never seen by men again. When you know that you have fulfilled life in the outer world, forsake everything and go to seek the wondrous temple where the rewards of the spirit will be yours until the

end of your days on earth. As your friend, I wish you the riches of the spirit that belong by right to the one who dwells in Tao. Mysterious are Its workings and inscrutable are Its ways. Sometimes, when we believe we are already lost, we are saved and when we think we have committed a sin, it is turned into a blessing.' Filled with emotion I pressed his hand and slowly we made our way back into the monastery.

In the afternoon Chushen showed me his little 'museum', as he called it. Actually it was only a small room with shelves filled with Tang pottery horses and vases, Han funerary statuettes and a few antique bronzes. There was also a collection of ordinary pottery and chinaware, not because it was ancient but because it was extraordinarily well made and artistic. I commented on China's immense contribution to the arts of the world, especially in the field of architecture, sculpture, painting, ceramics and glyptics. His eyes sparkled.

'Perhaps you know that the entire development of Chinese art has been influenced by the Taoists almost since its inception. The Taoists were the first to study nature, her forms and phenomena, and her rhythm and flow, and discovered that she abhorred straight lines. Naturally enough they advised and directed the artist. As a matter of fact, a position has always existed where every artist, or even artisan of ability, was a Taoist at heart and all Taoists, with a few exceptions, were artists. Even architects went to Taoists for guidance, and the great capital Peking was built according to a plan prepared by a young Taoist who happened to be a close friend of Emperor Yunglo of the Ming dynasty. That young monk, truly inspired, had even designed the principal palaces and temples. No modern architect, whether Chinese or foreign, could have conceived anything so grandiose and majestic.

'However, we believe that human art can never outdo nature because man is weak, confused and full of aberrations, while nature moves strictly in and with the flow of Tao and partakes of Its wisdom. An artist produces a perfect statue or painting of a human form. He thinks there can be nothing more beautiful than his masterpiece and then, lo! he goes to some mean village

and meets there, by chance, a living maiden or youth of far greater beauty. That is how, for example, the Beauty of Beauties Hsi Shih has been located—more glorious than all the statues or paintings hitherto produced. We know that nature is full of hidden surprises and secrets; when we think we have mastered or conquered her, she turns around and produces something to mock our efforts. She cannot be mastered but only humbly followed and studied, and then she showers her blessings on man. However, if some great art seems to overstep nature, it does not mean that it is not true art. It is simply that the artist's mind, in his creative ecstasy, has extended and caught something not yet found on this plane. Man's imagination can never outdo divine imagination for the latter is infinite and contains all possibilities. Modern man's imagination strives for uniformity and conformity while divine imagination produces an interplay of Yang and Yin principles, which produces diversity. Diversity increases man's perception, opens his eyes to greater beauty and develops his consciousness. No man who disobeys the divine designs of Tao, singly or collectively, and makes the world uniformly ugly and flat, can hope to survive for long. The Divine Tao, as we can see from the history of mankind, can stand no stagnation or perpetual congealment of forms and phenomena, and ever shatters all obstacles to the evolution of man's mind. Tao never sleeps or tarries; it ever sweeps onwards and upwards carrying the world with it to a higher Fate.'

During the morning of my last day in Sian, I bought the antiques I had previously seen. One was a large scroll containing a painting of Goddess Kwanyin, done in the fifteenth century from an original by a famous Tang artist. I fell in love with it and since it has remained one of my most treasured possessions. Another was a wooden statue of a funny, pot-bellied god, called Doudoufo. Then I selected some old white jade and a few cornelian and agate snuff-bottles. I saw some attractive Tang pottery figurines and Shang bronze vessels but could not persuade myself, somehow, that they were genuine. My sense of caution had warned me that they might be clever fakes. Already I had seen in Shantung how they manufactured such imitations. The

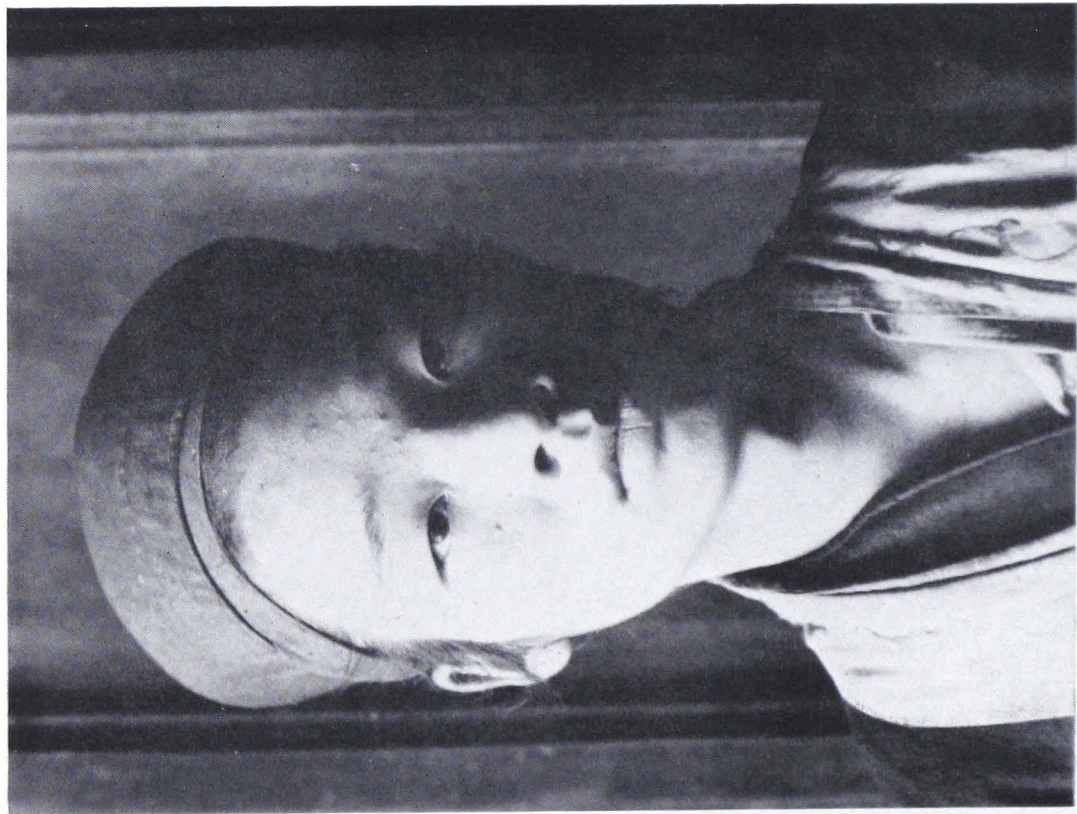
pottery figures had been made in exact likeness of the original articles, baked, buried for a few months in the ground and then rolled in the dust to give them an appearance of recently excavated antiquities. The copies of Shang bronzes were also buried and then the whole family and workmen of the forger urinated over them for at least six months to produce the much-sought-after patina.

As soon as I had finished my packing, I went out and found Abbot Chushen and some monks in the little courtyard between their private apartments. They had cut up a huge, luscious watermelon and I was just in time to enjoy it with them and then Abbot Chushen led me into his study to have a last talk with me. He made another attempt to persuade me to stay longer but I knew this was out of politeness as I had already made all preparations to depart. I thanked him and told him that I intended to spend an extra day at Tungkwan; I related to him the story of my new friendship. He was enchanted.

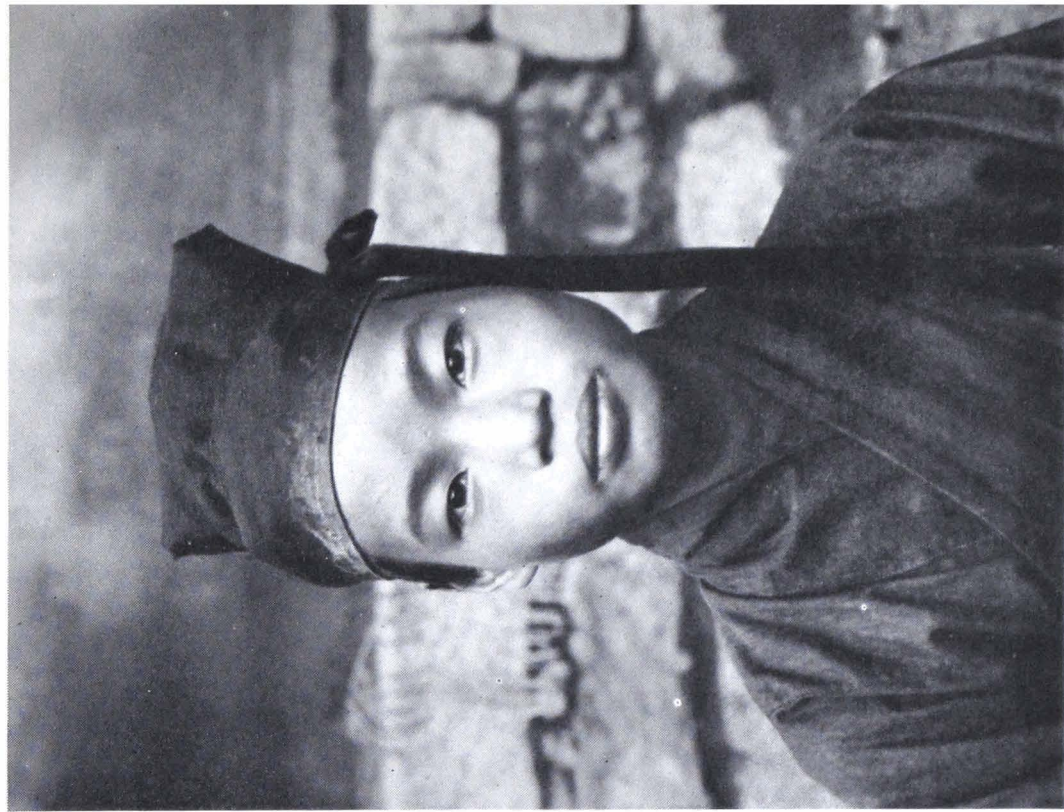
‘I have been observing you these few days—the way you speak to people, the sympathy with which you treat them and the manner of your travel. You have come a long way and suffered many grievous discomforts, and yet you do not complain. Now you say you have made a new and enduring friendship. All these things show that you have made progress since I saw you last on Jade Mountain. You are rapidly becoming a real Taoist, nay, in fact you are already one.

‘As your understanding grows, you become tolerant; you begin to realize that many people, who seem boorish and uncouth, are not really so by their nature. It is only that they are ignorant through lack of proper training and education when they were children. The things that irritate you may have been well meant but spoiled through ignorance or stupidity. Two of the greatest disabilities a man can be born with are stupidity and stubbornness. A stupid man can still learn something, but if he is also stubborn not much can be done for him because he thinks he is always right.

‘So, with understanding and tolerance, come calm and serenity. The real calm is a state of mind which rejoices in following the



A young Taoist monk



A Taoist novice



Taoist monks fencing

course of the Divine Tao. When you feel you are doing the right things and have little or nothing to be ashamed of in your actions, or even in your inner impulses, you earn peace of mind. However, be warned that sometimes the calm and serenity some people claim as theirs, may be merely indifference and callousness. This is often the case when people follow false teachers or cults. Through supposedly mystic exercises and exhortations they are persuaded that they must not be excited about anything—right or wrong. Such an attitude, artificially induced, is harmful. It is not an enrichment or an addition to a man's character, it is a detraction from it and a man becomes, in the course of time, less than a whole. A true Taoist fully rejoices at any happy event and weeps when a disaster overcomes his relatives or friends. These emotions are pure and holy; they sublimate man and bring him nearer to Tao, which is not a half dead, tepid thing but seethes with the incandescence of Divine Love.'

He became silent while we sipped fragrant Dragon Well tea. Then he looked at me again with his lively, dark eyes and went on.

'I am glad you have the ability to inspire sincere friendship. This is a rare gift which we Taoists are particularly at pains to cultivate. True friendships are like beautiful blossoms in the garden of our life. What a poor place a garden would be without flowers! At our monasteries we rely on friendship and mutual respect and understanding to bind us together.

'How wonderful it is to travel to far places and acquire new friends! Lonely indeed is the life of a man, who has no family and who lacks good friends, for he will pass away unregretted and unmourned. You will never lack friends if you remain sweet, sincere and generous all your life. Our Master Laotse said "Before you receive you must give". If you do give your friendship, you must do it spontaneously and with a glad heart. If you are too parsimonious in your affections, your friendships will not last.

'When you travel, you must take discomforts and troubles with good grace and a smile, and not complain overmuch. Laotse said that, if a man does not quarrel, no one can quarrel

with him, and if he does not contend, no one will contend with him. Is there a better way of ensuring safety on the road and in strange places?’

I left Sian and then Tungkwan, but did not forget those wise words of Abbot Chushen, my friend.

Taoism of Teacher Chang

WHILE my affections belong entirely to the monastery on Jade Mountain, my interest in other forms of Taoist religion has never flagged. Shanghai had a considerable number of small Taoist shrines, tucked in between shops and scattered in the bazaars of Native City. They looked occult and mysterious at night-time, whenever I passed through a street, with their golden deity sitting, half hidden, in a deep recess behind the altar. The offerings of fresh fruit stood before the god on porcelain dishes, flanked by vases with fresh flowers while red candles burned among the clouds of incense. Each little temple had one or two priests, usually wearing everyday clothes but their heads were decorated with peculiar caps in the shape of scoop or shovel. These shrines and priests belonged to the Third Taoist Church—Changtienssu—Heavenly Teacher Chang's.

My attempts to make friends with these priests had been rather frustrating. Almost without exception they appeared to be wily and shifty persons whose main interest lay in trying to garner as much money as possible from all and sundry. As soon as I began asking them questions, they started pressing me for a contribution; the more curious I appeared the bigger the amount they wanted. Their very appearance suggested meanness and greediness and they were ever ready to dispense, at a price, a talisman or a charm.

It was about that time that I began to delve into Shanghai night life—not the life of cabarets and dance halls, patronized by Europeans and well-to-do Chinese of a new generation, but the places of amusement where the Chinese of the lower and middle classes flocked. One such place was the 'Great World'. It was an immense, rambling structure in the middle of the city, adorned

with towers, pagodas, and sky-terraces and inside subdivided into halls, passages, corridors and dark nooks. It contained a cinema and a huge theatre, always filled to capacity, in which a Chinese classical drama, called *The Burning of Red Lily Monastery* had been running for over five years, with all the prospects of running a further period of five years, as more and more episodes and interpolations were being introduced. Heroic actions in this drama were interspersed with light comedy as, for example, when a beautiful widow, artfully wooed at night by a Buddhist monk under her balcony, at last succumbs to his ardent appeals only to discover that he is baldheaded. In addition to the theatre, there were halls with variety shows and sing-song girls, restaurants, tea, billiard- and mah-jongg-rooms. Among the gay crowds of country yokels, factory workers, taxi-drivers, rickshaw coolies and the nondescript medley of small crooks, pick-pockets and gangsters, all bent on pleasure and adventure, promenaded painted, rouged and perfumed *filles de joie* together with their amahs. A fellow could choose a girl and joke with her for a while, even to the extent of inviting her to a cup of tea, but the final arrangements were always made with the accompanying amah for it was against all etiquette to speak to the girl direct about such sordid matters. Having concluded the bargain, the amah led the customer and the girl to a small, cheap hotel near by where people asked no questions.

In this welter of popular amusement, cheap love, dissipation and ill-concealed poverty and degradation, I found in an out-of-the-way room, a curious Taoist shrine. What attracted me most, was a large painting of Chikung, the mad monk, whose tomb I had visited at the Tiger Run Monastery in Hangchow, together with my friend Chungan. So alive was the rugged face, with its cynical smile, and so fierce and commanding his eyes, that I felt pursued by his gaze wherever I went in that room. A great purple lamp was hanging before the image. The walls around were covered with charcoal drawings and spirit photographs of the remarkable monk, some extremely lifelike and powerful. Sceptical though I was, I had to admit that they looked genuine enough.

A stout Taoist monk, with bright and kindly eyes, sat at the

table in front of the altar, helping himself from a big pot of tea. As I continued strolling around, looking at the photographs and asking questions from bystanders, he invited me to sit down and quickly filled a cup with tea for me. We had a friendly talk, and I did not make too many inquiries beyond asking him whether it was a Changtienssu temple. 'You are a bit naïve,' he chuckled, 'a practised man would have instantly recognized it as Teacher Chang's place.'

Then I returned one day together with my good friend KouEIFO, who was as interested as I was and we had a further talk with the priest. He told us that the wonderful painting of Chikung was done by his friend, also a priest, over twenty years ago. That friend was a trance medium and Chikung himself possessed his body and manipulated his hand and brush as the monk himself was no artist. Therefore, this picture should be regarded as Chikung's self-portrait. Whenever there was a serious-minded group of men, prepared to hold a seance, or a good medium was present, Chikung has never been loath to manifest himself if earnestly and respectfully invoked. He wrote poetry, drew his own likeness with charcoal or crayon or even permitted himself to be photographed. He also dispensed advice, usually wise and helpful, to those who had asked for it. Sometimes he was accompanied by his companion and secretary, Paiyun—White Cloud—who also wrote poetry.

Our new friend told us that Chikung was a Buddhist monk, who lived at West Lake during the sublime Sung dynasty (A.D. 960-1126). However, he acted as a Taoist would do or, perhaps, he was a Taoist who had assumed the garb of a Buddhist monk. In modern parlance he could be described as a great eccentric. His contemporaries thought he was mad, and affectionately called him the Mad Monk. But there was method in his madness, and it was that which endeared him so much to the people of not only his own generation but even to posterity. Although he had taken priestly vows, he could not tolerate monastic discipline or hypocritical conventions. He outraged and scandalized his superiors and other monks by eating meat and drinking wine whenever he felt like it, and did many other unorthodox things.

He wrote poetry and meditated and prayed, but not to excess. He loved the poor, simple peasant folk, and he also loved nature. Every tree was a brother to him and every squirrel or bird was his child. It is said that even the fishes rose to greet him when he approached a pond or stream. He believed that everything in nature had its own mode of existence and its own consciousness, and that he could establish an intelligible contact with it. All his life he helped the oppressed and the unhappy, comforting the melancholy sufferers and those who were oppressed by great sorrows. Whatever he received by way of donations, he spent secretly to assist those who were poorer than himself. He would cheer up at a road-side wine shop the men who had lost hope and the desire to live. He was said to have incredible understanding of human nature, and was so attuned to the unseen forces that people could not distinguish which of his acts were natural and which miraculous. Even after his death his personality continued to live and linger, not only in the places he loved, but also in those where men earnestly invoked his memory.

I was fascinated by the personality of this unusual saint who appealed so much to my inner nature. Here was the picture of a man who knew life as it really was and not as we imagined it to be. I seemed to feel his warm and sympathetic presence drawing near and was filled with a strange exhilaration.

Afterwards I was always reminded of the mad monk by his statues in every Buddhist temple. Many years later I found the Chikung cult vigorously flourishing in Malaya. Once, in Muar, I was invited to one of these shrines, or rather an occult club whose members gathered every Saturday evening to invoke Chikung's presence. It was a commodious room on the first floor, tastefully decorated with silk scrolls, with Chikung's poetry in bold characters, and a blackwood altar with vases of flowers and statuettes of gods. A large table, covered with fine sand, stood in front of the altar. After a short prayer and an invocation, two mediums approached the table, each holding a branch of a bifurcated twig. As they fell into a light trance, the twig began making rapid circles in the sand and then paused. Then the point

touched the sand again and, with amazing rapidity, Chinese characters began to pour out, one man transcribing them in shorthand and the other continually smoothing the sand. If it was Chikung himself, who was present, the violence of his writing process was incredible, the point plunging into the sand like lightning and scattering it in a storm of passion. It was mostly poetry and answers to the disciples' questions.

When I entered that particular temple for the first time I was startled almost out of my wits when the sand flew up to the ceiling as the characters started streaming out . . . all about myself.

'This is my friend Kou Peitak (my Chinese name) whom I know well,' proclaimed the magic hieroglyphs, as the story of my visit to his tomb and to the shrine at the Great World in Shanghai was revealed and the particulars of my life in China and of my travels. No one could have known so much about me since I was a new-comer to Muar. Afterwards I was present at several more seances and some eminently good advice was given me. At the last seance some other entity manifested itself, saying that Chikung could not be present this time as he was much in demand elsewhere. Instead, a friend of his, Paiyun—White Cloud—was introduced and told me many interesting things. It was certainly an unusual experience.

During another visit to the Great World temple, again with my friend KuoEIFO, the priest invited us to a small feast and this time he told us more about his Taoist Church.

It was during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 25) that a certain Teacher Chang had evolved this particular brand of Taoism. As he was on friendly terms with the emperor, who was very superstitious, he had little trouble in persuading him that this new type of Taoism had been divinely revealed to him and, therefore, should be officially recognized. This request was duly granted and the emperor showed a particular predilection for it.

While the monasteries of the Lungmen and Chenyi Taoists were autonomous, each with its own elected abbot and with no central unifying ecclesiastical authority, Teacher Chang had established a definite hierarchy of priests with himself as Supreme

Priest and, hence, became a sort of Taoist Pope. All the temples and shrines of this sect throughout China were under his direct control and, naturally, a part of their income went to him.

While venerating the Taoteking as a sacred book and paying homage to Laotse, Teacher Chang's doctrine was based mostly on magical practices, found in ancient non-canonical books and oral tradition transmitted from dim ages. The universe was pictured as being absolutely jammed with spirit entities of all sorts but mostly unfriendly or malignant genies. Every calamity, misfortune or illness, happening to man, was not recognized by these Taoists as a result of natural combinations but as a result of the malignant and mischievous influence by the evil spirits. But, they claimed, they had studied all about these spiritual miscreants and also they knew what gods could influence a better fortune and so, if only the poor man could make a suitable contribution, they would cause his ill fortune to depart, his illness to vanish and ensure happier days to come. The methods, employed by the Changtienssu Taoists, to achieve favourable results were special prayers at the shrines of the deities, which controlled that particular kind of misfortune or happiness, and mantram, written on a piece of yellow or red paper and pasted on the door or in the room of the afflicted person. In some cases, the mantram were burned, their ash dissolved in water or tea and then drunk by the sick man. In the event of advice being urgently needed on some serious matter, a priest would go into a trance and another priest would interpret the incoherent utterances coming from the tortured throat of the medium.

These mediums were employed widely at the Taoist temples and on special festive days large crowds gathered to watch the priest go into a trance. I myself liked to watch these unusual exhibitions. An altar was usually erected on a lawn outside the shrine and a ritual sword placed on it together with a statue of the patron deity; then a large pile of straw paper cut into squares. A simple music of flutes, small drums and bells was monotonous but strangely exciting and titillating. The priest began to gyrate slowly at first then faster and faster as his face became flushed and eyes glassy. His feet and arms jerked as he fell into a trance-like

condition. Then suddenly, with a whoop, he rushed to the altar and ran the sword clean through his tongue. Blood gushed out. Seizing the straw paper piece by piece he started writing characters on them with his bloodied tongue while two men supported him. By the time he finished and came out of the trance, a heap of the papers with his utterances had accumulated. These were reverently taken into the temple to be translated. Afterwards there was a wonderful feast, prepared for the guests, to which I was also invited. We ate roast ducks and chickens and fish, and the priest joined us in good humour, joking, laughing and helping himself to food and drink as if nothing had happened. The blood had stopped running as if by magic and he said he did not feel any pain in his tongue whatsoever.

On another occasion and at a different temple I saw an energumen being brought in. He was not a violently possessed man and the only thing unusual about him was his behaviour. He whimpered and looked around with much fear in his eyes as if he expected any moment to be beaten up. An old priest began to invoke the God of the Northern Star, to whom this shrine had been dedicated. Soon another priest started to play a soft tune, rhythmical and rather pleasant, on a flute while someone accompanied him on a little drum. Gradually the old man was falling into a trance while a couple of his assistants prepared a brush and pieces of paper. In a paroxysm of ecstasy the old priest got up suddenly from his kneeling position before the altar of the god, ran to the table and wrote a character or two on each piece of paper. Then he slowly collapsed and was assisted to a comfortable armchair. The paper with the characters was burned and its ashes given to the afflicted man to drink. The priests' assistants patted him on the back, spoke soothingly to him and, when he had quietened down, pronounced him free of the evil spirit which had possessed him. I examined him and, to my mind, his relief was only temporary. If it was a real possession, and not a mental case, the method employed appeared to be too simple and casual and I do not think any self-respecting spirit should have been affected by it. I remembered the titanic struggle between the Taoist monk and the energumen at the Monastery of Heavenly

Vault. That was a genuine exorcism, I thought, if ever there was one.

The Heavenly Teacher Chang, being a clever and wise man, had included the doctrine of Reincarnation in his teaching and thereby perpetuated the control of his sect, like the Aga Khan, by his family. Upon his death, it is said, he was discovered, as he had predicted, incarnated in the body of his infant nephew, and so it continued throughout the centuries up to this day. Rivalling only the Confucius' family at Koufou in antiquity and aristocratic lineage, the Taoist Pope and his family live in Lung Hu Shan (Dragon and Tiger Mountains) in Kiangsi, one of the most central of China's provinces and also one of the most picturesque.

There in a beautiful valley on a sloping hill-side is the Teacher Chang's palace, surrounded by a magnificent park. In addition to the splendid pavilions where the Pope and his family reside, there are large halls with chief deities and innumerable shrines with local gods and those created by the fertile imagination of the founder. The Pope's apartments are luxurious in the extreme in an old Chinese classical style. They are filled with priceless porcelains, jades and ivories, brought during the centuries by the patrons who had benefited by the Master's magical practices or through his influence in the spirit realm. In the park around may be seen thousands of large and small sealed jars in which the malignant genies, after having been conjured by the Pope and overpowered by his psychic might, are confined. Should these vessels be ever unsealed, by chance, design or natural forces, as great a calamity would occur as the opening of Pandora's Box as thousands of powerful and mischievous demons would swell the ranks of the evil spirits with which this world is already filled to excess.

The priests of the Changtienssu sect are not monks in the strict sense of the word. They can marry, cut their hair, eat anything and amuse themselves in any manner they prefer. As their living comes from magical practices, fortune-telling, etc., it is only natural that their temples are almost always in towns where they can easily net their customers. Clad in gay red-embroidered

robes, they accompany funeral cortèges to administer on arrival at the burial ground the last protection against the evil spirits that may wish to entice the soul of the departed man to perdition. This type of Taoist, immersed entirely in demonism and magic, with its talismans and amulets, is not interested in the pure philosophy of Laotse or, for that matter, in contemplative life. I am glad I had realized all this early enough in my quest for Taoistic truth.

Divine Tao

EVER since my first visit to Jade Mountain I had read and re-read the Taoteking many times until its meaning, so difficult to grasp by mere intellect, has penetrated my inner understanding through intuition and with the sympathetic assistance of my Taoist friends. I used to pore over the Chinese text together with them, and study the archaic characters with their intense hidden message. I also read over and over again as many translations as I could obtain of this remarkable book. Just as profound as the New Testament, I believe it conveys a special communication to each student of it and enriches his spiritual nature through his intuition, appealing direct to his heart rather than to the more critical brain.

While Jesus Christ did not write Himself, He had around him intelligent and observant disciples who have clearly and concisely described His pilgrimage on earth, His ministrations and His teaching in four separate books, checking upon and supplementing each other. The same is true of Confucius who was also surrounded by a large group of students who faithfully recorded practically every word spoken by the Master during his life-time. Unfortunately, Laotse did not have an academy, like Plato, and kept his accumulated wisdom largely to himself, in accordance with his own dictum 'He who knows does not speak'. Having reached a high spiritual authority, he also did not care to confide in anyone, again according to his conception that 'The man of highest "power" does not reveal himself as possessor of "power".' It was only at that customs pass, when he was leaving China for ever and where he was held in 'polite duress' for the night, he had to agree to set out his teaching in writing. Naturally, the old man only had enough time to state the essence of

his doctrine, which he did practically in shorthand, in the form of terse aphorisms which came in to his mind in no particular order. Thus we are fortunate to have even that much. Being one of the most ancient of documents, it has undoubtedly suffered some misinterpretations in the course of ages. However, while leaving to the learned the attempt to reconstruct the original text, we can enjoy the gems of his wisdom, intuitively separating the husk from the kernel.

In the beginning of his manuscript, Laotse describes the origin of the Universe, as from the Eternal Non-Existence (Non-Being or Void) came the first mysterious rhythm, profound and incomprehensible, which resolved itself into Ten Thousand Things. This was the Divine Tao—Will of God—which had manifested Itself, and which could be equated with Logos of Christianity. The Absolute, the Dark Flame burning in the supra-dimensional Void, had burst into Creation. Laotse, in his *Taoteking*, devotes the greater part of it to making clear what Tao is, as he himself understands it, and the other part describes the relationship existing between Tao and mankind, and how man can so identify himself with Tao that he attains happiness and contentment in this world and is carried away with Tao, which knows no death, to higher realms of immortality and bliss. At the same time the Old Teacher is very careful not to confuse the Divine Tao with any anthropomorphic deity. Hence he chose, as he himself admits, the word Tao-Way for want of a better term, for something that cannot be named at all. We must remember that the time when he was living was two thousand five hundred years ago and the world of those days, not excluding China, teemed with all sorts of gods, all being national deities of countries, city states and even particular localities. To define Tao as God would at once imply Its recognition as a paramount God of China. How could that be when, what he had discovered, was the Father of the whole Universe, not only of the earth and much less of China alone? Also he could not concede that Tao may be imagined as a glorious man-like being abiding somewhere in the abyss of space. That would imply an idea of shape and distance of what was limitless and incommensurate. If we take into consideration

that, until recently, Christian faith has been concerned exclusively with the affairs of this little planet only, Laotse's conception of the Universe, its origin, management and moral laws, is not only modern but even up to now still ahead of the times.

However, although not anthropomorphic, his Tao is not something impersonal, unconscious, ruthless and remote. It is, on the contrary, Supreme Wisdom, for the whole Universe has been planned with great order, precision and infinite beauty. It is governed with Infinite Love so that every living being has its own appointed field of existence, where it finds security and nourishment. Thus Tao is not only the Mother of all Existence but also our Mother and, if we realize it, we should know her other children, i.e. the rest of the Creation. If we cling to Tao, we shall obtain, through Its Wisdom, the true knowledge of the world. Learning is adding to one's stock day by day. The practice of Tao consists in subtracting day by day from the mass of accumulated empirical knowledge and separating dross from gold until false theories are dissipated and truth is revealed. In the ultimate count it will be found that Infinite Simplicity is at the foundation of all the phenomena of existence.

Tao is invisible and yet is the matrix of all visible forms. It is intangible and yet there is substance in it. It is a subtle essence which contains the eternal truth. It is the Infinite Spirit whose imagination gives birth to forms which then are projected into this material world and given substance by the power of Its will. The matter is thus thought solidified for a certain duration. It is not permanent and in due course dissolves and disappears into its source. But Laotse makes it definite that it is Divine thought alone which has such properties. Man can create nothing by mere thought as his thoughts shift from moment to moment and have no stability or permanence. He can only create with the material already given him, laboriously with his hands, like a child playing with building cubes. The forms which Tao produces come out of the same mould for ever, but the greatest mystery is that no two things are ever alike. However similar an object may appear to another object or a man to man, for example, twins, there is always some difference between them

however infinitesimal. Because of this, everything Tao does is unpredictable, profoundly mysterious, and we can never give it any definite name or formula. The diversity of its Creation is infinite and contains all possibilities. And yet, the Divine Tao, having created things does not dominate them and leaves them free to work out their destinies according to their own lights. This is what we call Free Will. It does not apply to man alone but to all creatures however minute their consciousness may be. Actually, according to Taoist belief, everything created has a measure of consciousness, even the things which we call inanimate—mountains, rocks, minerals, etc. Earth herself has consciousness, for the Taoist teach she reacts violently when deeply injured and, on the other hand, is connected to the sun and other planets of the solar system by delicate bonds of affinity and sympathy which, strangely enough, are now getting scientific recognition as all kinds of magnetic and electronic waves and rays circulating between celestial bodies. Nature is the wisdom of the earth, and it is through nature that Tao slowly builds the unfoldment of consciousness among Its creatures.

Man in Taoism, like in Christianity, is considered to be very important in the Divine scheme of things and is equated with the roles of Heaven and Earth in the Universe. This is because of his consciousness and ability to apprehend the Divine directly by his critical faculties. Tao wants him to understand and love It consciously and without compulsion, and to realize that all mankind, though relative to its Creator, is nevertheless His child. Tao desires man to work together with It, as Its partner, in making the world perfect in beauty and happiness. It has taken Tao many millions of years of experimenting with other creatures to evolve man and, therefore, man is precious. Man, attuned to Tao and Nature, can assist in improving the Divine handiwork instead of debasing and destroying it through his ignorance and stupidity. Tao loves man and all created things. It is immeasurably great and it is also small. It is low and humble, and is man's loving friend and protector. If man keeps Tao, he can never be lost in the world. Spirits and gods will do no harm to the man identified with Tao.

The Taoists take it for granted that a vast spiritual universe exists, of which this visible world is an integral part. It is invisible to us only because we lack the necessary perception which only comes when our consciousness has become properly expanded. Men, identified with Tao, whom we call saints, have glimpses, in their visions, of that universe where they pass at the end of their days. Beings of immense intelligence, love and spiritual splendour are among the inhabitants of that extra-dimensional realm. Their very nature is so blended with the Divine Tao that they are able to understand and follow the Will of the Creator in guiding the world in its evolution towards the ultimate Reality. Some of them are of non-human origin, and the Taoists style them gods, while our Scriptures call them archangels; others are the saints of the highest order. The essences of the universe, invisible but palpable such as electricity and other forces, some not yet known to humanity, originate in the spiritual domain whence all impulses of life also issue. There are also lower spirits, called 'small gods', not of human origin, which are neither good nor bad *per se* but, if angered and irritated by the humans, by design or through ignorance, can cause havoc with man's plans. However, if man follows in the path of Tao, they become helpful and man prospers.

Neither the Taoteking nor other Taoist scriptures refer to any incarnation of the Divine Wisdom on earth. Laotse himself had never claimed that he was of supernatural origin, and his disciples venerate him as a man of Tao, a saint and nothing more. He cannot even be regarded as a prophet as he only stated what had been known before his days. However, Taoist tradition affirms that since Tao is the container and originator of all forms, it may become objectified in this world in an anthropomorphic shape. Such an objectification happened to an emperor of the Sung dynasty, who claimed that a dazzling god had appeared to him in a dream and proclaimed himself as Jade Emperor, Master of Heaven and Earth and Incarnation of Tao. However, as that was only a subjective vision, to that emperor alone, we can only believe that it was so. The Jade Emperor is worshipped by the Chenyi sect of Taoism and is given only a secondary place in the

temples of the Lungmen Church. Another interesting apparition was to a Tang emperor who saw, also in a dream, a regal and handsome old man with a flowing beard. He had a long conversation with him during which the visitor disclosed that he was the God of the planet Venus. By implication, he also was an objectification of Tao. Unofficially, so to speak, the Taoists believe that the Divine Tao did indeed incarnate in Jesus Christ and in Buddha Gautama as Tao was not a monopoly of the Chinese race alone.

Having described the omnipotence and omnipresence of Tao, as the concept of a truly Universal God—a task difficult even now and how much more onerous in those old unenlightened days—the Taoteking dwells at length on the man who has identified himself with Tao and on the ways and means by which others can acquire It. As Laotse lived during the time when the long and illustrious Chou dynasty was already decaying, he was not at a loss to point out how the emperor and feudal kings could yet repair the deteriorating situation. If they had embraced Tao, cut out their luxurious extravagance and reduced their appetites for rich food while people were starving, everything might yet have turned out right. It is only natural that Laotse preoccupied himself with emperors and kings, for that was the only known form of government in the China of those remote times and he could not foresee any other, just as we cannot divine what government our earth will have two thousand five hundreds years from now.

The man, who possessed Tao in full measure, was described by Laotse as The Sage. This term was not inappropriate as it applied to a person filled with Divine Wisdom. The Sage always keeps to Tao and, therefore, he becomes the paragon of the world. Though full of knowledge, gleaned from Nature and intuitively imbibed from the Divine Tao through meditation, he does not display himself in any manner by walking about with a grave mien, hinting that he is a philosopher and a deeply learned man. However, because he is genuine, people perceive his worth and, in the end, he is accorded the honourable reception which he so richly deserves. But even so, he avoids speaking of his merits or qualifications but does everything in a manner which does not

seek approbation. He does not compete with any other philosopher or men who think they know more, and so no one envies him and tries to injure him. He is humble and retiring and, therefore, he remains entire. This means that he does not disturb his equilibrium by insisting too much on his point of view and thus getting into all sorts of disputations and, perhaps, quarrels. He carries on his business without action and conveys instruction without words. It does not mean, as so many people think when studying Taoism, that a perfect man is one who sits all day long without doing anything or without saying a word. This is a great calumny on Taoism. The Sage has moral principles, is without guile or cunning and possesses unimpeachable honesty, integrity and a quiet and steady faith in Tao, i.e. in the Divine guidance. Therefore, he arranges his affairs, even if he is only an ordinary shopkeeper, lovingly in such an order that they do not cause any harm or loss to anybody and then waits for the outcome with confidence and a light heart. He is not grasping or greedy, therefore, he does not have to plot and scheme to increase his profit; he is just, so he does not plan to cheat anybody and he is not apprehensive of failure as he leaves his business to take a normal course without indulging in undue speculation. In other words, he does not fuss, worry and rush about which, as we all know, may lead to confusion and loss of health and fortune. This attitude may be termed inaction as against too much action to complicate an already confused state of affairs.

The Sage does not go about telling people what to do or forcing his unsolicited advice on them. Rather he guides people by his warm goodwill and simplicity. He does not overwhelm friends and neighbours with discussions about lofty ideals but, instead, invites them to an intimate meal, listens to their problems and helps them. He dissuades them from foolish and rash actions and shows his concern about their well-being and health. He does not lend his ears to evil talk and does not preach the attainment of good things by evil means. People learn a good deal through contact with such a man, and this may be called instruction without words.

The Sage, if he is a head of state, does not interfere unneces-

sarily with the old-established ways of life of his people and, therefore, his government is so light the people almost do not notice it. As he himself is not burdened with desires, the people remain simple in their habits. We read about the rulers, from antiquity to the present day, who have vied with each other in introducing more and more luxuries into their country, thus corrupting their people's sense of proportion and making them want things which they could ill afford.

The Sage lives quietly and unostentatiously and, if he is a ruler, the people partake of the sweetness and tranquillity of his character. He makes no fuss about his people's prosperity and they become wealthy of themselves. Too many laws, Laotse teaches, are a curse as they produce more thieves, crooks and criminals. The more restraints are introduced, the more character and stamina the people lose. The rectifying process produces the stratagems to foil it. There is good on the surface and evil underneath.

The Sage, as conceived by Laotse, is not, as some people may think, a mild, self-effacing and ineffectual weakling. Quite the contrary, he is a spiritual giant, but so wise and polished that he goes about amongst people without overaweing or irritating them by his importance. He is square but he does not cut others. He himself is straight but he does not stretch others. He is angled but does not chip others and, although he is bright, he does not dazzle others. He leads but remains behind and, though he is above people (by his intellect and virtue), he stays below them. He never wrangles with anybody and, therefore, no one likes to wrangle with him. Therefore, the world esteems him and never gets tired of him. He is a saint but does not let people have an inkling of it. 'Sainthood' is easy to conceal in Taoism as it does not differentiate between 'clean' and 'unclean' food and, as a matter of fact, does not mix religion with stomach. There are no ceremonial ablutions, mortification of the flesh, prayers, public fasts or any other strictures. Thus, the Sage is a mysterious, profound person, loaded with immense spiritual power and authority, who does not show it or speak of it. He is gentle, sweet, understanding, diplomatic and can be a congenial and a

true friend. No wonder his hierarchy has survived thousands of years and is still with us—unmolested, unsuppressed and indestructible.

A man, who desires to identify himself with Tao, should as the first step, discard all prevailing notions about life and nature and observe things for himself, as the Taoteking teaches. This is the basis of its dictum 'Be vacant and you will be full'. Some heads are so cluttered with preconceived ideas and false knowledge that, before studying such a profound philosophy as Taoism, it is best to discard everything and start anew. Instead of knowledge, one will soon acquire wisdom and then the right knowledge will come naturally. So, a 'vacant' man will be supplied more abundantly than ever. There are people in this world who seem to know everything even before you open your mouth to tell them something. Taoism is founded on humility and the desire to comprehend, and shall ever remain a closed book to such know-alls. Man should live as close to Nature as possible and study her. If he observes diligently, he will notice that where there is light, there is shadow; short is derived from long; water ever seeks to be below the mountains and that, what he considers to be beautiful is so in contrast to ugliness. In this manner he will realize that all phenomena have a dual aspect which is called Yang and Yin, but both of them come from the same source which is Unity. There is method in all manifestations of Nature and it is best for man to follow it lest he gets hurt. Excess in food will sooner or later ruin him. Being too active may kill him; it is no good rushing around all day long in pursuit of business. A man may thus make a fortune but he will not enjoy it, if he becomes ill. A man on tiptoe cannot stand long. This also refers to building up tensions and stresses in one's life. Sooner or later the man must collapse from overstrain. A man astride cannot walk, implying a man who puts himself by his actions into a false position or has pretensions to be what he is not, cannot be a Taoist. A man who glories in himself cannot succeed. This type of man is over-confident in his abilities and talks too much about himself and his plans. He is a first-class bore and no one takes him seriously. A truthful man does not talk too much and

the man who speaks in excess is always suspected of not being truthful. Neither should a man boast about his knowledge. Knowledge is not any man's monopoly and he may meet a man who knows much more and can easily call his bluff. Many learned people are not wise as they do not have the knack or ability to use their knowledge with tact and apply it where it is needed most. There are many simple country people, who had accumulated so much wisdom from observing and following Nature that they can often beat a university graduate in the solution of many problems of life. A man who is virtuous does not dispute as he is secure in his inner convictions. It is only a man, who is unstable within, who needs to prove by violent disputation that he is right about his point of view.

Man must return love for great hatred because, when hatred is reconciled, something unpleasant will still smoulder afterwards. In patching up hatred or a great quarrel, a virtuous man will always do it by private agreement and will not mind if its terms are not wholly to his advantage but the man without virtue would rush to the court of law and try to obtain a full compensation. Thus, much bitterness will still remain.

The highest goodness is like water because it benefits all things. Therefore, the man who wishes to conform to Tao, must keep on good terms with all men. If he makes friends, he must have a really deep feeling for them. He should always speak the truth and have confidence in his own words. If he is a ruler, he must keep everything in good order. If he is a businessman, he should take things easy. This does not mean slothfulness but good and honest arrangements so that his affairs may flow smoothly, without any complications to cause worry. In motion he must use opportunity. In other words, he will always find chances, which do not clash with his conscience, and these he should grasp for they will assure him prosperity and good repute. In this way, he will avoid all contention and unpleasantness, and there will be no question of blame to put on anyone.

If man knows others, he is wise, for such knowledge helps him to deal with them justly and in harmony, according to each man's character. But if he knows himself, he is enlightened because he

will understand his abilities and limitations, and approach his fellow men with full confidence that he will not offend them or make himself ridiculous. If he conquers others, he is strong but, if he conquers himself, he is mighty. The most difficult thing is to suppress one's passions, desires and unpleasant characteristics. It takes a great and sustained effort of will. But the results will endear the man to others as he will become mellow and understanding. He who knows contentment is rich. A man, in a modest house and with a loving family, with enough food and wine, is sometimes happier than a millionaire with his palaces, and does not covet more money or unnecessary and debilitating luxuries. A man who keeps on his course with energy has will, but he who does not deviate from his course has greater chances of endurance. This means that the principle of keeping steady on one's chosen path is better than sporadic bursts of energy which may propel man in some directions which may not be to his advantage. He who may die but not perish has longevity. If a man is so integrated in Tao and loved by people, he may die but he continues to live beyond the grave and also in the affectionate memory of his numerous friends.

In general the Taoteking calls attention to the fact that all living things in nature are soft and pliant, while they are alive, and it is only in death that they become hard and brittle. Also Laotse points out that the tallest trees are either cut down by the carpenters or are broken by the elemental forces. Man, therefore, all his life, should remain soft and pliant, not only in his physical body but in his spiritual faculties too. He must not become congealed and hardened in his prejudices, phobias and preconceived ideas. All the time he must strive to acquire wisdom, and change his ideas and attitudes as he discovers more truth. He must not grow proud, arrogant, intolerant and spiteful or else something will bring him down with a crash. If he seeks power, he must do it according to the principles of Tao, which alone can keep him in his high position. We have before us the example of Alexander the Great and Napoleon who were cut down by Tao in the prime of their life because of their excesses with the power they had acquired.

However, like Jesus Christ, Laotse directs his biggest guns at hypocrisy which he considers to be the main bane of the world. A real man of Tao should never be even conscious of his wisdom and virtue. He possesses them naturally and people hardly notice or suspect it. The man, who had not succeeded in following Tao, relies on practising virtues and does it in such a subtle way that people somehow must needs notice it and give him their acclaim and approbation. Having thus secured his position as a Wise Man, he proceeds to pontificate on what people should do and what they should not. This is an artificial process and leads to deterioration sooner or later. Then comes benevolence which means that the man, who practises it, gets more praise, although he may have accumulated his fortune by unscrupulous means.

A genuine Taoist should help other people in a very secret and roundabout way to avoid recognition and praise. Like the dictum in the New Testament, his right hand should not know what his left is doing. He must abandon all pretence or even inner feeling of being righteous, virtuous and benevolent; become natural, simple and plain, like a babe, and then he will be at one with the Divine Tao.

The Last of Jade Mountain

It was late in the spring and the whole country was in upheaval before the imminence of a new Sino-Japanese war. While the railway remained still open, I took a chance to visit Jade Mountain again. It was a sentimental journey as I felt I might be separated from my friends for years by the chaos of hostilities, even perhaps for ever, if something happened to me in the besieged Shanghai.

I reached the monastery in the evening and was joyously received by my friend Chungan. As soon as I had deposited my meagre baggage in his room, he led me to call on Abbot Lee Lisan who greeted me affectionately, and then, in the dining hall, I saw Tsungpoo and other monks who also warmly welcomed me. However, I was quick to notice that there was an undefinable atmosphere of gloom and restraint around me, and was soon told that the poor, consumptive monk Huang was not expected to live long.

Later, after dinner, I went to the small room, where the sick man lay, and sat quietly by his bedside. At first I hardly recognized him, so great were the changes wrought by the unchecked progress of his implacable disease. He was yellow and thin, and his cheeks were hollow. The feverishly burning eyes had sunk deep into their sockets. He breathed with difficulty. Through a half open window the gentle evening breeze carried in the delicate scent of wild flowers, and the call of night birds came as a distant echo of haunting sounds. Now and then the booming of temple bells in the valleys reached the invalid, and tears of regret and happiness would slowly course down his wasted cheeks. He was not afraid of death, for what was it but a change of the planes of existence. He still lingered for a while yet for he desired to see

more of Chungan, his best friend, before his departure for that other mysterious world. Two small novices were in attendance on him because the elder brethren were busy with their spiritual duties. These small boys had instructions to inform Chungan or the Abbot at once should his condition change for the worst. They took good care of him, seeing that he was properly covered, for the night air was cold. Now and then they brought in a bowl of medicine or a cup of fresh green tea.

The air was heavy with the odour of incense which drifted in from the temple. Outside the mists began to envelop the mountain and the patter of gentle rain could be heard on the tiled roof. There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor and the door creaked. Huang was in a slight delirium and it was only when Chungan bent over him that he recognized him. In his rapture he tried to sit up but Chungan took his cold and clammy hand and gently restrained him. He sat on the edge of the bed and, with tear-dimmed eyes they looked at each other for a long time. Their lips remained silent for their friendship, sympathy and understanding were so deep that there was no need for words.

'My brother,' gasped Huang at last, 'I feel I am going soon. . . .' He pronounced the words with difficulty between the spasms of a choking cough. Chungan made a movement with his hand, he wanted to protest, say something cheering under the cloak of refined Chinese etiquette but the truth of his friend's utterance was too apparent, his end so plainly written on his face that the words stuck in his throat and he bowed his head to hide his tears.

'My heart is breaking over the coming parting,' Chungan spoke at last with a catch in his voice, 'but, my dear brother, it is but the beginning of another life. Death is a dream like those dreams in which we live when we are asleep. Only from that dream there is no awakening. The dream of life and the dream of death are but the same state of our minds. If we have committed sins, made enemies and have a troubled conscience, our life would be a bad dream, whether we are awake or asleep. You have no enemies and you have committed no sins; your conscience is untroubled and you have hope. Hope is the food

of imagination and the imagination is the mother of dreams. What you dreamt here will be a reality where you go. You have always dreamt of the Jade Paradise and there you will find it waiting for you, with all your hopes granted, desires assuaged and a serene peace for ever and ever until the end of the cycle when the old world with its earth, sun and stars is dissolved by Shang Ti, the One Mind, in Whom we are and Who is in us. And when the new cosmos is created, my prayer is that you will be one of the gods charged with the direction of new forms of life.' He stopped, his eyes burning with a prophetic fire. Then his head dropped on the prostrate form of Huang, who was greatly moved, and he wept silently as if his heart would break.

Huang lingered on for two days more and on the morning of the second day he rallied a little. Chunguan remained with him all the time, leaving him only to take a hurried meal. Towards midnight Huang's breathing became difficult. He was slowly choking. Chunguan sent for the abbot, Tsungpoo and the other monks. They gathered in the little room, their faces sorrowful. In the small hours of the morning it was clear that Huang was going. The monks gently lifted him up and began to dress him in his best robes. They put fine white silk underwear on him, then a black silk robe, a pair of black satin shoes and a black cap with a plaque of white jade. When, after a rainy night, the pearly colours of dawn began to appear in the east, Huang passed away.

After he had been laid to rest, Chunguan had more time to be with me. The very next day we went to the Monastery of the Purple Bamboo and had a very pleasant lunch with Abbot Ming-zing.

One or two days afterwards Chunguan came out on to the terrace where I was sitting, watching the pilgrims slowly climbing up the mountain. He was unusually excited:

'You will be able to see a very interesting and mystic rite,' he said. 'Tonight the monks Tsungpoo, Liu and I are watching the Lamp of Life. A rich tea merchant in Shanghai is at death's door. We had a telegram from his family this morning and we will set up the lamp at eight o'clock.'

Shortly after supper, Chungan and I proceeded to a hall behind the main temple and, opening a heavy, curtained door, entered it cautiously, tiptoeing softly to the centre where I saw the dim glimmer of a lamp and the faces of Tsungpoo and Liu peering out of the darkness. Silently Chungan joined them. The lamp consisted of a deep, wide, glass vessel set in a still wider and deeper brass bowl to protect the flame from air currents. The hall was tightly shuttered and all doors curtained to exclude a draught. It was perfectly still and the silence oppressive. A cork float with a brass tube supported a cotton wick burning with a tiny, flickering light on the broad expanse of vegetable oil. The tiny flame was further protected from the priests' breathing by a low silk screen. The lamp stood on a round brass tripod. The two monks nodded on seeing Chungan and me but said nothing. The three of them formed a circle round the lamp, muttering mantrams and prayers, and concentrating hard.

'Who is ill?' I inquired in a whisper. Tsungpoo answered back quietly:

'Old teaman Wang's eldest son. He has been ill for weeks and the foreign doctors have given him up. They said he would die tonight. His family telegraphed imploring us to help.' He became silent, resuming his prayer and watching the lamp. The little flame flickered uncertainly and, although it was perfectly still in the room, glided slowly from one side of the bowl to another in an erratic pattern. Sometimes it seemed that the little float trembled and towards midnight the flame grew dim and was sinking, flickering unsteadily.

'He is going,' whispered Liu in awe, nudging Chungan.

'No, brothers, no,' whispered Chungan back, "it is the crisis. Let us pray harder.' They joined their hands concentrating until beads of perspiration dropped from their foreheads. I tried to visualize the patient—an exhausted man, lying in bed, struggling for breath. My sympathy for the poor man made me wish for his recovery, a new strength to overcome the crisis. I imagined him slowly filled with the vital force that the monks were trying to give him. I felt that a current was passing through their hands making them tremble slightly. The flame continued to diminish

until it was a tiny bright spot about to expire. They stood breathless and motionless, their thoughts withdrawn deep into themselves.

After midnight the little bluish tongue of light began to splutter, the float coming to rest in the centre of the bowl. I thought that it was brighter and very slowly, hour by hour, the light grew until it became a steady golden tongue, still small, but bright and even.

'The crisis has passed. He is sleeping,' murmured Chungan. The monks sat wearily on stools, jubilant for they knew that they had assisted in saving a life. I left the hall as Chungan, unable to sleep in his exhaustion, remained behind to relax in meditation.

Afterwards he confided to me that he had, during those hours of dawn, one more of his religious experiences. He felt his strength gone after the rite of the lamp. He was emptied and had no more will-power even to pray. His mind was blank and he did not even know where he was. And then . . . It came. He did not know how It came or whence nor how long It lasted. Perhaps one brief moment. A clear blue light, effulgent and dazzling, seemed to sear his whole being, and there was sweetness and music in it and something so intimate, so precious that he felt as if he was a tiny child in his mother's arms. Suddenly he knew . . . he understood . . . he was wonderfully comforted and he was strong again. Radiant with a strange joy he got up and rushed out of the hall into the glow of a new day.

He felt so invigorated and fresh after this mystical experience that he did not go to bed at all after his sleepless night, and we waited together for breakfast sitting on the terrace outside watching the pastel tints of early morning slowly change into the deeper colours of the day.

Next evening a telegram came from the Wang family saying that the patient was recovering, and thanking the monastery. In this connection, Chungan related to me the story of Old Wang, the sick man's father. He and Abbot Lee Lisan were great friends and one day the old tea merchant, who lived in a beautiful villa

on the West Lake just below Jade Mountain, confided to the abbot that he thought he had a very happy life on the whole. Now, being so full of days, his only desire was to die happily and he implored his friend to assist him in bringing about this desirable end by his prayers and spiritual influence. The abbot promised to do his best for his old friend and patron. A few months later, as Mr Wang was sitting in the garden of his villa, enjoying the mild weather, the flowers and beautiful vistas of the lake, he saw a white rabbit coming towards him out of the bushes. As the rabbit ran about at his feet, he tried to catch it but it was elusive and led Mr Wang a chase all over the garden. At last it hid in a pavilion and there the old man cornered it, grasping it and pressing it to his breast. The excitement was too much for him and they found him lying dead with a serene smile on his face. There was no trace of a rabbit anywhere.

Abbot Lee was quite free for the last three days and, when not reading, he often invited me to his little garden for a friendly talk over a cup of tea. I always took the opportunity of asking him questions about those aspects of Taoism which I had not as yet understood. Sometimes the conversation was about the significance of the images in temples. Of course, I was familiar with the icons in the Orthodox Churches and the statues of the Madonna and the saints in the Roman Catholic ones, but I did not wish to take for granted that they could be compared to the Taoist approach to the Divine. Stroking his black beard, the Abbot remained pensive for some time and then spoke :

‘Yes, our Taoist and Buddhist temples are full of gods which foreigners usually call idols. That term is both offensive and untrue. An idol is thought to be a god in its own right, possessing powers and magic properties. How can it be since it is a mere figure made of stone, wood or clay? It is a false god, and the man who had conceived it must indeed have a very primitive mind. In Christian churches, the icons and statues are supposed to represent the likeness of the Divine personages and saints who have lived on earth, and they serve as a reminder that these holy persons still exist in their abode on high. Sometimes Christians use symbols to represent some particular aspect of the Divinity such as a

bleeding heart for compassion or a lamb for meekness and gentleness. In Taoism and Buddhism we do likewise. Shang Ti is the All-Highest, the Godhead from Whom the Divine Tao issues and nourishes this world. Jade Emperor is one of the objectifications of Tao on the spiritual plane; Chikung's statue is a portrait of that genial saint, dear to both Taoists and Buddhists. The avatars and elemental gods are symbols of Tao's omnipotence in different aspects of nature.

'We Taoists would have gladly dispensed with all images, as we deal with the spiritual world direct, but common man is unable to imagine a spirit without a visible representation. He cannot pray to someone whom he cannot even conceive. Therefore, the images in the temple attract and fix his attention, and condense and direct his devotional thoughts. Also he cannot pray with proper confidence unless the spirit is represented in an anthropomorphic shape for man craves for sympathy and help from a god who has human compassion and understanding. How much harder it would be to pray to a spirit pictured as a ferocious tiger or a lifeless cube, ball or some other geometrical abstraction.

'Thus, an image, properly fashioned, sanctified and reverently set up in sacred surroundings can indeed serve as a channel or a magnet which attracts piety and prayer to the divinity it represents. There is nothing fantastic or even supernatural in it, for on earth the spirit manifests itself through matter in one form or another. People come, generation after generation, to a visible symbol of the Deity to communicate to Him in person their grievances and petitions; they pray and leave there the best of their hearts. Please do not think that all these prayers and all these beautiful expressions of their spirits have vanished, gone into thin air and dissolved there. Oh no! The name, once uttered, exists in space; things called for do come and the prayers of the just and of the sincere go straight to the throne of the Most High. And, because all these appeals are directed to the image, as a medium, they concentrate there, transform its very materiality and surround it with an invisible aura of power and goodwill of the Deity invoked through it. The miracle-working images do not work

miracles or grant prayers of themselves but because of the Divine Spirit or the saint they represent, who is attracted to the spot by the force of passionate prayers and invocations of the faithful. It is for this reason that temples and churches, where faith and devotion are still sincerely practised, become sanctified and the towns around them possess a peaceful and serene atmosphere of quiet happiness and contentment not of this world.' He rose, as a novice entered to tell him that a party of pilgrims had arrived and wanted to arrange for prayers next morning.

My next session with the abbot took place on the following afternoon. I felt very depressed over the war news and told him how uncertain the future appeared for me should the Japanese occupy Shanghai again. He looked at me strangely, as if he saw me for the first time, studying me with his magnetic dark eyes. Then he leaned back in his long chair, closed his eyes and appeared to go into a light trance-like state. When he opened his eyes again, there was a mysterious gleam in them and his voice assumed a soothing, affectionate quality as if he were addressing a favourite child. He sipped his tea for some time and then proceeded to outline my future, giving me his practical advice:

'Do not think of leaving Shanghai at this time for unknown places. Your job is good and pleasant, and you should cling to it as long as possible. Later on you will receive an offer of a very good position, as a secretary or something—I cannot see clearly—from or through a very powerful and influential woman. It will take you to West China and you will find there all that you have been desiring for so long. You will be happy although you will meet discomforts and dangers. In the meantime, exercise patience and prudence, and remain at peace.' Having uttered this prophecy he relaxed and patted my hand.

'Do not worry at all,' he added kindly. 'You are now one of us. Practise no action when no action is indicated but grasp the opportunity when it comes. You will see how things will be shaping slowly in your direction. Wherever you go our spiritual support and prayers will always follow you. You will be received, as one of us, at every Lungmen and Chenyi monastery as they will

discern that you are a Taoist, not by your clothing or any special signs but by your spiritual equipment. It is not necessary for you to don our Taoist garb; that would be a masquerade. You can always remain a *tsaikung*—a Taoist monk in mufti and at large—which is as meritorious as being a regular member of our monastery.'

And on this I took my leave of him.

Before my departure for Shanghai two things had happened which caused me anxiety and grief. The matter did not concern me personally at all but I was so integrated into the happy life of the monastery and knew so many monks intimately that any disruption in their well-being affected me deeply.

Tsungpoo, who like Chungan, was one of the faithful lieutenants of the abbot, declared that he was leaving the monastery for good. He wanted to join the Chinese Army, which was already fighting the encroaching Japanese in the north. He set his heart on becoming a military telegraphist somewhere at the front. The abbot and Chungan, as well as the other monks, were appalled and tried their utmost to dissuade him from his decision but he was determined to go. There was nothing to be done about it; the man was a patriot and bent on contributing his life, if necessary, to defend his beloved China. Sorrowfully the abbot made him a gift of money, as was the custom in the case of poor monks leaving the priesthood, to set him up in the outer world, and he packed his meagre belongings into a small, worn-out suitcase. He left early in the morning and there were tears in Chungan's eyes as he was losing a very close and intimate friend.

I had been quite unaware of the other sad affair until Chungan told me that his brother had also left the monastery a few months before. I had always paid little attention to the retiring mousy fellow when visiting the monastery, as I considered him to be quite dumb. I had not even noticed his absence this time. Chungan told me the whole tragic story, his face clouding with pain and distaste. He and his brother were the only children of an old-fashioned father. He had always been against both of them becoming Taoist monks, saying that one of them should have

stayed at home and married so that their line should not die out with them. This Confucian viewpoint, which obsessed most of the Chinese, occupied his mind to the exclusion of everything else. Before he died, he made them promise that one of them would leave the monastery and marry or else they would be cursed as unfilial sons. After brooding over the situation, Chungan finally let his brother go into the world, consoled by the thought that he was not a truly dedicated monk with a strong sense of his vocation. Now his brother was in Shanghai and married.

After some hesitation, Chungan told me that both his brother's desertion of his monkhood and the departure of Tsungpoo had been preying on his mind, as he was sure both ventures would end in disaster. The Taoist tradition averred that everyone was free to leave the monastery but, sooner or later, would meet with ill-fortune as it was a breach of that delicate connection with Tao which alone assures happiness and well-being. I tried to console him as best I could although, also, I had my forebodings. Finally he handed me a letter and a small packet of money which I was to take to his brother. 'He is very poor and miserable now,' Chungan confided with a sad smile.

A few days after my return to Shanghai, I called on Chungpi, as Chungan's brother was called, and handed him the letter and money. He was very pleased and flattered that I came and started fidgeting about, with his shy and guilty smile, trying to make me comfortable in his tiny cubicle. 'What a come-down,' I thought, 'after the elegance and spaciousness of the monastery,' surveying the dingy room and ugly broken furniture. The only imposing piece was a large double bed, which occupied three-quarters of the space, with its coarse, patched-up covers. He himself was sitting on an empty soap-box. He looked thin and unkempt in his working-class cotton suit and he even had no tea and, instead, offered me some boiled water out of a cheap thermos flask. His dwelling was in one of the slum areas—airless, without sanitation, proper water supply and electricity. He had no work so far, he admitted ruefully, but hoped to get a job later on. Soon his wife came back from the factory where she worked on a daily wage basis. She was a large, husky girl of the type, I

thought, that works either at factories or becomes a prostitute. She was loud, coarse and vulgar, and treated poor Chungpi with a good deal of disdain and contempt. Indeed he looked a miserable, ineffectual little shrimp of a man beside this village virago. I saw at once that there was no love lost between these two, although she was already pregnant. She treated me with respect but all the time I had to listen to the torrent of abuse and reproach with which she regaled her husband. 'He is a useless fellow,' she wailed. 'I am the only one who is working and keeping the rice bowl full. He cannot do anything. Good for nothing he is!' Chungpi only smiled weakly and apologetically, and appeared to be utterly terrified of her. However, she was mollified by the sight of the money I had brought. I gave her a dollar and she fetched a couple of bottles of beer and some salted peanuts. After that we had a modicum of peace.

I visited them afterwards several times. Usually he came to summon me to some family meal for a birthday or festival. It was a delicate hint, and I always made a present of money, usually appraising the cost of the meal with my eye and giving a red packet containing at least twice as much. Of course, Chungan continued to assist them but even he could not, with propriety, ask for more monastic funds from the abbot than it was considered customary. At last they had a baby. She was unable to work for some time and their situation became even worse because of their debts.

Of course, he was never able to find any work being utterly unsuited to worldly activities. I heard later that she left him to live with a richer fellow. Soon there came changes in my life and I lost sight of Chungpi for ever. What a hell he had created for himself by leaving the monastery.

The undeclared war at last came to Shanghai and surrounded the great city with a steel wall of Japanese bayonets. No more travel was possible to Hangchow and Soochow, at least for foreigners. My connection with Jade Mountain seemed to be definitely at an end.

Then, almost two years later, sitting one day over a bottle of

beer at Koueifo's restaurant, and talking to him about the old days and our adventures together, I saw the door open and Chungan walk in. Our delight was unbounded and, in my enthusiasm, I poured him a glass of beer. He smiled deprecatingly and ordered a cup of tea instead. He said he had been staying in Shanghai for some months commuting between Hangchow and this city, bringing their furniture and other effects for, he confided to us, they had opened a branch monastery here. Having finished his tea, he offered to take us with him to the new temple. As Koueifo was still on duty, I went with Chungan alone.

The monastery was rather difficult to find. It was located in an alleyway off Seymour Road, behind a vast Buddhist temple. It was a spacious and rambling private mansion which the Taoists had hastily converted to religious use. The statues of deities, sitting in large and small living-rooms, appeared to be somewhat out of place. At first I could not account for this impression and then suddenly realized that it was the white ceilings which marred the atmosphere. Every object, every image looked grander and in its proper place when they were in their red-lacquered halls with a curving roof, without a ceiling, suggesting the immensity of space above. However, with their usual impeccable taste in arranging such details, the monks put many vases with flowers all over the place. Some of the old treasures had been brought from Jade Mountain and were discreetly distributed among the various rooms. The priests' quarters were in the small back rooms. The kitchen was ample and well equipped but they lacked a good dining-room. The place was full of worshippers, and Chungan told me they had never been so busy as now with the requests for prayers to be said for the relatives and friends who had died or were missing in the holocaust of this senseless war. A few refugees were permitted to stay temporarily at the monastery, and the cooks were busy preparing food not only for the patrons of the temple but also for some penniless people outside.

Abbot Lee Lisan remained behind in Hangchow to look after the mother monastery while Chungan was an abbot of this branch. However, new responsibilities did not seem to daunt him, and I always found him as charming and attentive as ever.

Sometimes he invited me to stay for a day or two at the monastery and, after the horrors of the war outside, it appeared to me a haven of serenity and tranquillity, as the monks glided silently from altar to altar while the soft murmur of prayers came from the naves where the refugees implored divine succour in their tribulations. At night, the glow of purple lamps before smiling gods, the soothing odour of incense and the subdued sound of a prayer block brought a special peace to my anxious heart.

All that Abbot Lee Lisan had predicted to me several years ago, came true. In 1939, through Madame Kung, the most powerful and influential woman in China at that time, I was sent to the Tibetan border to pioneer Chinese Industrial Co-operatives and found in those fabulous 'Western Regions' adventure, soul-satisfying work and happiness among the simple and unaffected tribal folk whom I came to respect and love. In 1946, after VJ-Day, I was summoned to Shanghai for a brief conference and then saw Abbot Lee and Chungan again at their Seymour Road monastery. There was no time to go to Hangchow and, they told me, the monastery there had suffered considerably during the long hostilities and the Japanese occupation. Abbot Lee gave a splendid party in my honour at which most of my friends were present, including the faithful Alice who had previously introduced me to the powerful Mme Kung. Afterwards he made another prediction and told me that my life ran in cycles, each of seven years' duration and, at the end of each cycle, I should always expect a change for the better.

We had a touching farewell as I got ready to return to my Tibetan mountains. Afterwards owing to great political changes I never saw my Taoist friends again.

Summing-up

REFLECTING on my sojourn at the Monastery of Jade Mountain and my happy and enduring connection with the Taoist monks, I try to analyse, to my own satisfaction, the motives and reasons which finally led me to adopt their philosophy and become a practising Taoist. The primary factor was, as I have already explained, the unusual and spontaneous friendship of Chungan and the warm concern of Abbot Lee at the time when I was overcome with grief and desolation. This, I did not fail to perceive, was clearly an act of subtle intuition and discernment on their part. Also it was a genuine and childlike trust in human nature to have me as a guest at the monastery for so long, without a previous inquiry as to my character and integrity. And what great tact and wisdom the abbot had shown in curing my depression and sadness. If I had received such kindness and generous hospitality from Christian or Buddhist missionaries, an attempt would surely have been made sooner or later to convert me to their particular faith, as had been my experience in the past. Although I had been daily expecting approaches, however diplomatic, extolling the advantages of Taoism, with subtle hints on the desirability of its adoption by me, to my surprise and even disappointment, no such approaches had ever been made. Even when, half in earnest, I had proposed myself as a candidate for a Taoist monk, they only shook their heads and smiled. Finally they explained that Taoists were made and not converted. A man had to learn about their philosophy by precept and emulation, and when he had understood its essence, he became a Taoist whether he joined the monastery or remained outside.

A Taoist monastery could be described as an association, or even a club, of those men imbued with Taoistic ideals, who had

combined together to live in a place of their own, usually quite a distance from the densely populated towns, and located in beautiful surroundings, preferably on a mountain.

Contrary to my earlier assumption, Lungmen Taoist monasteries were not welded into one central organization, like Christian churches or sects. There was no Pope, Archbishop, Synod or Council to co-ordinate and direct their activities. Instead they were all united by common ideals and a sense of brotherhood, and it was possible for a deserving priest in one monastery to be invited or transferred to another to act as abbot. Wealthier monasteries were always ready to come to the help of poorer ones or finance the building of new temples in some desirable locality.

The discipline was mild but strictly enforced. The abbot, elected for life, was the master of his monastery. In addition to his thorough knowledge of Taoteking and other Taoist scriptures and Chinese classics, he was chosen for his spiritual attainments and sound judgement. As the monastery owned a sizeable property in the shape of fields and shops in the town, he had to be a shrewd and practical man to deal with financial matters. Also as the monastery was dependent on the donations and contributions of wealthy patrons, it was essential for him to be diplomatic, tactful and pleasant in his address. The welfare and guidance of the monks in his charge required great insight into human nature and a good deal of adroitness in the solution of many problems which usually arise in cloistered communities.

Unlike some great Buddhist monasteries, which had hundreds of monks, not to speak of Tibetan lamaseries with their thousands of lamas, trapas and dopdops, the Lungmen hermitages never had large populations. This limitation in the number of priests was deliberate in order to create and maintain an exclusive and easily manageable community where it was possible for members to know each other intimately. In addition, more money could be expended on the comfort and well being of the monks and on the maintenance of the buildings and ceremonial fittings.

Any unattached Chinese male of good family was eligible to join a Taoist monastery. It sounds simple but actually it was not

so. First of all the man had to be unmarried or a widower. He had to be a good scholar, versed in the Chinese classics. He had to have a natural predilection or predisposition for a contemplative life, be gentle and courteous, and scrupulously honest and sincere; his aesthetic sense also must be well developed. An outright admission of a total stranger, even if he satisfied all requirements, was unlikely unless specially sanctioned by the abbot. The postulant must be well-known to several monks, who then recommended him to the abbot, who closely scrutinized and tested him, examining his mental faculties in order to make sure that he had a true sense of vocation and no false motives for wishing to enter the monastic life. I came to the conclusion that the applicant was little short of being psycho-analysed. It was usually from impoverished families of *literati* or country squires that such dedicated youths were recruited as new monks. They were idealistic and devout, and, instead of spending their lives as minor clerks in stuffy offices, preferred to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of eternal truths.

There are no such awesome and binding vows in Taoism as those exacted by Christian monastic orders and in the monasteries I knew only pledges of obedience, chastity, sincerity and honesty. The long hair of a Taoist was the hallmark of his renunciation of the world. It was a gentleman's agreement between a man, who sincerely believed that he was able to renounce the world, and a community of other men who already practised this ideal. If the new monk was able to abide by this agreement, well and good for all concerned. If later on it was found that he was a hypocrite and a fraud, out he would go without much ceremony. If, after some years, he found that he had no true vocation, he frankly said so and the monastery let him leave, with regret, but also with a blessing and perhaps a small gift of money or a little dowry if he intended to take a wife. There were no heart-rending scenes, no broken vows and no anathema—just a plain and practical solution to a human weakness. It was extremely rare that monks were ever ejected from a monastery for a misdemeanour. The abbots were usually too shrewd to make a mistake in admitting a misfit in the first place. Voluntary exit from

monastic life was also rare but, as I have already mentioned, it did happen. However, it seems that such renegades were usually pursued by ill fortune afterwards, and in the light of my past experience, I can confirm that this was true.

The monks were permitted not only to keep whatever private effects they might possess but also their own money, if they had any. Also they might ask the abbot for small sums to remit to their parents, if they were very poor, or for sending a small brother to school or even for visiting another monastery or a relative. If they were ill, the monastery would pay their medical expenses. They were also entitled to entertain their parents, relatives and friends when they visited the monastery.

Chastity was maintained not by mortifying the flesh with flagellation, wearing hair shirts or iron chains, as was done in some Christian orders, but by a highly scientific diet. The food was entirely vegetarian. It was never spiced and pungent and heating vegetables, such as onions and garlic, were never used. Alcohol was not prohibited *per se*, but was avoided as an undesirable stimulant. With early morning prayers, exercise and studies, a balance was eventually reached when the flesh was guided by the spirit rather than by suppressed desires.

All wealthier monasteries employed lay cooks and other servants, but the monks were required to assist in certain agricultural pursuits, such as planting their own vegetables, tending tea gardens or gathering bamboo shoots and fuel.

Abbot Lee was kind and attentive to me when I had something to ask him, but generally he was too occupied with his religious and administrative duties to spare me much time. Since it was Chungan who had first befriended me, he took it upon himself to guide me, affectionately and gently, towards the understanding of Tao and Taoism. Although all the monks were so busy they would spare the time to give me encouragement and advice. The monastery was not a business enterprise where everybody kept specific hours, nor were the monks unduly burdened with set hours of prayer as in Christian monasteries. No one tried to capture faith or sanctity, so to speak, by force, and everyone was free to pursue his studies of the scriptures, meditate in his

room or, more formally, at a secluded shrine, tinkling a small bell or rhythmically beating a tiny prayer block to assist concentration.

Sitting on the veranda and contemplating the superb scenery in front of us, Chungan always called my attention to the beauty of the world. 'It is the vessel of Tao and when man tries to shape it against its Divine design, he damages it. He can improve it only if he follows its nature,' he paraphrased the Taoteking. To learn about nature, he told me, was to sympathize with all things and realize their essential unity. Man must understand first the nature of the thing before he touches it and, when he does, he should do it lovingly so that the result is as near perfection as possible. That which is already lovely cannot be altered or added to without spoiling its character. It is for this reason that Taoists practised their arts in such a way that they blended with nature. They always build their monasteries in such a style and manner that they not only embellished the natural setting around them but also seemed a part of it. Therefore the Chinese countryside was always harmoniously beautiful with its temples and pagodas judiciously and carefully built on hill-tops and slopes, among the trees or between the rocks.

It was only after my stay at the monastery that I came to realize that animals and plants were not a world apart from us but closely united to us by their consciousness. That life, being part of Tao in any manifestation, is one, and that kindness, gentleness, understanding and sympathy always result in harmony.

Laotse taught that if a man climbed high he could fall. In my worldly affairs I always tried to consolidate foundations, afterwards climbing a step further and consolidating again. Thus my achievement was always positive and could not by any change of circumstances be totally destroyed.

Taoism taught that, in relations with men, one must be sincere and unpretentious. Following my Taoists' example, I learned friendliness and consideration not merely for courtesy's sake but under all circumstances. This was in accordance with Laotse's saying that, in order to receive, you have first to give. From actual experience I found that few acquaintances reciprocated

friendly advances but these the monks advised me to leave alone, while remaining on as good terms with them as I could. I was enjoined not to waste my affection on the people who did not need it, but instead to show affection to those who required sympathy and understanding.

Watching the world and its affairs, both at the monastery and without, I did not feel envy of other people's worldly success. Being poor I learned to be perfectly content with my circumstances and surroundings and with the food I ate and a few simple pleasures. I remembered the Taoist saying that the man who is content, is already rich. I tried to conduct the business entrusted to me with a sense of order and responsibility and to the best of my ability. This gave me a tranquillity because my work, though important to me, was only one aspect of my life.

Learning the precepts of Taoism, I found also by practical experience that it was necessary to develop a faculty of receptiveness so that I could absorb wisdom and knowledge from the things and people about me. I ignored what I already knew, and listened to the people who were better informed than myself. I developed, by the exercise of careful observation an intuitive ability to discern the worthwhile and the good. Laotse preached moderation in speech and when in the company of brilliant and intelligent people, I listened to their conversation and talked little myself. It was the people who knew everything whom Laotse condemned in his writings—idle philosophers and the men who possessed only half-knowledge and yet acted on their false precepts.

The abbot and the monks of Jade Mountain always practised charity yet it was always individual, except at certain festivals for poor Buddhists. The world was too full of misery and poverty, and they felt that collective action for relief was only possible by Government and by those associations well endowed by wealthy patrons. This individual help was quite in the spirit of Jesus Christ, who dispensed His ministrations to those near Him. It was the habit of the abbot and monks to visit in secrecy some family that was in distress and, while drinking tea with them to offer a small red packet of money, as a gift of ceremony, using as

a pretext the advent of a new baby or some other family event. Such charity was never mentioned nor was it regarded as a way of virtue and in following this example it had to be realized that it must be done for Tao alone, even as Jesus taught.

What attracted me most in Taoism was the sense of informality, friendliness and goodwill. There were no morose, pedantic or introvert men among the Taoists whether at the monasteries or at large. I never found any Taoist who was pompous, self-important or dull. They lived life to the full, being in conscious harmony with each other, with the people around them, with the natural world and the intangible but ever present world of spirits. Laotse himself intensely disliked phariseeism in all its forms and all restraint on personal freedom by artificial codes and laws. He taught that all moral laws were inherent in Tao, and if only men took heed of them, they would be perfectly happy and law-abiding by themselves. He did not deny a need of government but imagined it consisting of true Taoist-Sages as he called them, who could inspire people more by their unobtrusive and just conduct than by hemming them in on all sides by decrees and force of arms. He made distinction between his Sages and those who were full of formalism and hypocrisy. The latter constantly invented laws and regulations to bind the strong and active to make them no more than the equals of the weak and indolent. Tradition has it that when he met Confucius he reproached him for trying to impose on people the onerous code and ceremonial he was preparing. In the struggle between these two colossal minds, Confucius won his point and made China an etiquette-conscious country. Laotse, on the other hand, had transformed the soul of the Chinese and made them a gracious and tolerant people, conscious of beauty and imbued with peace, tranquillity and goodwill. It was these qualities, engendered by Taoism, which enabled that vast and crowded country to survive for thousands of years in unbroken continuity, and accumulate untold treasures of art and culture.

I already knew the rudiments of the Buddhistic way of meditation, but my friends on Jade Mountain introduced me to their own practices. Their first step was to deepen my sensitivity and

develop my perception of the reality. They told me that most people lived in a grey, colourless world and even their dreams were grey and unexciting. If only they had grasped this fact, they would see things in a different light. The Divine Tao had created the universe with ecstasy and continues to unfold its splendour and beauty with each passing day. Our eyes were blind and directed aimlessly on the ground. Had we but lifted them up we would see miracles and wonders. Man must observe nature and her phenomena not only with his physical sight, but also with the eyes of his spirit and imagination in order to apprehend her full glory.

Poets and painters always saw the world in a different, more magnificent light and, on my part, I delighted in being called a poet. It meant to me that my powers of perception and observation were really growing stronger. Imagination was one of the Divine attributes and embraced all possibilities. If a man loved his humble hut in the forest and imagined he lived in a palace, it was indeed a palace for it gave him sublime joy to stay there. My monastery on Jade Mountain was a palace to us all and we wanted nothing better. It is the power of the mind that creates its environment.

Formal meditation was a withdrawal to some quiet room or shrine from mundane activities and affairs. Gradually it became easier to concentrate and settle down to tranquil appraisal of the problems of life and past actions. Problems which appeared terribly important, now became trivial and easy to solve. Behaviour and activities were assessed and evaluated, and then laid aside as tangible and satisfying profits of the day. Thoughts were then directed to friends, their well-being and the manner in which to please them. Sins were admitted in the innermost heart with prayers for forgiveness and the strength to overcome them.

As the mind turned inwards towards a state of semi-trance, the Divine Tao was visualized not as a remote, wrathful and vengeful Deity but as a Friend, gentle, intimate, loving and understanding Companion who was really present, listening and ever ready to help. Prayers were full of love and the passionate desire to be near Him and with Him. There was no need to pray for anything

else for the earth was already encircled in our petitions. He knew our wishes and expectations and would help in His own inscrutable way, one Friend quietly helping another. And He would answer our prayers more satisfyingly and abundantly and sometimes rather surprisingly since He is Master of infinite possibilities.

The Buddhist Meditation of the Mahayana School is more rigid as the mind is fixed by concentrating on the meaning of some sacred text or word, like *Aum*, until a direct illumination is attained. Since the Divine Tao is Infinite Spirit, invisible and without a form, so it is all forms and always manifested in the anthropomorphic shape expected by the devotee. For example, St Theresa of Avila had visions of the Holy Family and, naturally, Buddhists visualized It as a Buddha or the Goddess Kwanyin. The southern Buddhist meditation was different. They relaxed the mind, while sitting immobile, until the outer consciousness had been obliterated and the mind touched the very depths of the Primordial Mind, which Dr Jung called the Unconscious. This was a real withdrawal from this plane of existence and, in my opinion, the return to this world brought a certain mental dislocation. Such profound ascetics would be happier if they remained in their seclusion for ever. I practised the southern Buddhist meditation several times and let my mind slip into the unconscious state only to return with my mental faculties temporarily weakened by the total loss of contact with the physical universe. The Taoists in their communion with the Divine, never let themselves slip into the unconscious state before their appointed time.

In addition to the above method of meditation, Taoists also recognize certain states of the mind which, to them, also constituted an approach to the Divine. To westerners such occasions would have appeared too worldly and frivolous, and even sinful. Sometimes, when the autumn moon was high, my friends and I would gather in a village pavilion by the canal or river and eat fresh water crabs, which the Chinese considered a great delicacy. We drank cups of hot rice wine as we talked, joked and laughed. We felt young, full of hope and in harmony. What else could we desire on those glorious evenings? We were uplifted and

thankful for all the blessings of life. And for a brief moment, we felt a Divine Presence amongst us, who was our Friend and who silently blessed our joyous feast. The Taoists thought of such moments as also a meditation, for our souls had momentarily merged into Tao in our spontaneous onrush of affection and simple joy. The sunsets and the serenity of the dark peaks gave these occasions a special significance of unity with Nature and the Divine Tao; so Abraham must have felt when gazing at the vault of heaven in the desert at night.

The concept of the Divine Tao as man's intimate Friend and Companion is not generally accepted in the West. Western mysticism speaks of graces received and of joy vouchsafed but seldom of divine friendship. Yet it is not new. The Sufis of Persia compared God to the dearest, most desirable friend and lover, and in the Bible we read of Enoch, Moses and Elijah who had become so intimate with God that they were taken up into Heaven alive. Western prayers are mainly supplications but Taoists simply offer to Tao their sincere friendship and do not necessarily ask for returns.

Of course, the objective of the Taoist is to reach sanctity—that mystic state when man's consciousness has been so expanded that, while still on earth, he is already able to understand and move in the spiritual world through the power of Tao with which he has become identified. This is a long and arduous way, not necessarily of renunciation and self-torture, as Christian mystics preferred, but rather a complete transformation of the man's inner being, his essence. As I have already explained, the Taoists did not fast because their vegetarian diet, although well balanced, was already meagre. The monks did not flagellate or mortify themselves as they believed, like the Lord Buddha, that it was against nature and they had no doctrine of original sin.

The zenith of spiritual attainment was to become as a small child, even as Jesus taught. This is a difficult concept and does not mean the reversion to childhood. Life and its tribulations, sinning, scheming, pretending and cheating in pursuit of material success must be passed through. But wisdom must be garnered and once the realization has come, as it did with Solomon, that

all is vanity, then the way is open for the longing for peace and contentment, the fulfilment that Taoists call 'hunger for Tao'. The giving way to this longing is to return to the source of all happiness, to the state of grace that is indeed 'as a little child', trusting, tranquil and in harmony.

A Taoist saint was careful not to display his virtues and righteousness lest he be showered with praise and approbation, and did his utmost to conceal his spiritual attainments, like the hermit Chikung, under the guise of unorthodox behaviour. He never interfered in people's lives by giving good advice. He did not proselytize and never extolled the virtues of Taoism. He was not necessarily even a reputable looking person, and often only an initiate could recognize the gold underneath the dross of his shabby clothes and uncouth manners. That was how Chikung looked and acted. But there was an ineffable quality of sweetness in his speech and he radiated goodwill, as he offered a drink of tea from his rustic flask, before setting off with his dog to his hidden hermitage in the hills.

The ideal existence for a saint was to live in a small hut or a cave far from human habitation, in the company of animals, wild and domestic, tilling a small plot of ground to grow his vegetables. There he meditated and prayed until his last breath. As he became more spiritual, he was sometimes levitated during his prayers, as was the case with St Theresa of Avila and a host of other saints. My friends at the monastery explained to me that it was not a special 'fakir's trick', as many people thought, but a natural phenomenon. As matter in the physical universe was a congealed mind force, the human body became unstable in the presence of higher spiritual powers and temporarily lost its physical properties. Thus the more spiritual a person became, the more was his body liable to transformation. Jesus Christ's body became quite different during His Transfiguration and after His Resurrection. Taoist saints, it is related, were able to undertake spiritual journeys. One of them, Tikwanli, tarried too much on one of his journeys and found on his return that his body had already perished, and he had to enter the corpse of a lame beggar who had just died.

However, some Taoists preferred to remain in the world. This was considered very meritorious as they were subjected to all sorts of temptations and had to exercise all their will power to remain chaste and unpolluted.

The prayer in a Taoist monastery was formal only when ordered by pilgrims, as I have already described. Otherwise it was little distinguishable from meditation. Each monk confided, alone and in seclusion, his hopes and desires to his Loving Friend and Companion, the Divine Tao, and let It act in accordance with Its Divine Will. In this connection, I should mention that one of the most important features of Taoism is the constant expectation that something miraculous might happen at any moment. And indeed, wonders and miracles did happen, as I could attest. But one had to be very sensitive and clairvoyant to recognize them as such. They happened and still happen all around us, to us and our friends, but in our matter of fact world people often fail to perceive them. They are too busy with mundane affairs. But we always watched for mysterious signs and sometimes actually felt the coming of good things, but as these matters were very subtle and delicate, we always kept them to ourselves lest we profaned the deep and mysterious currents of which our hearts alone knew.

Conclusion

IF I could prepare a balance sheet of my life, I am sure it would show considerable spiritual assets accumulated through my practice of Taoism. While in the west one seldom heard of it, a study of this profound philosophy, as I see it now, should have been essential for a man who wanted to live in China. As for myself, I always wanted to remain in that fascinating country and had to leave only because of the advent of the Communist regime, which threatened both the religion and the freedom of the individual. Taoism was a key which opened the doors to the understanding of life, and particularly of the life that was led by the Chinese. To the foreigners, who were unaware of this philosophy and had never stayed at a Taoist monastery, the Chinese always remained an inscrutable and mysterious race whose ways and customs were strange and incomprehensible, and sometimes seemed irrational. To me this was a sheer delusion as, after my sojourn at the monastery, I began to discover the treasures of affection and friendship, and infinite delights of the existence among these congenial people.

I certainly had to rid myself of all wrong ideas and found that we all looked at the world not as it really was but as we thought it should be. This ability to see the most vital points in our existence was, to my mind, essentially Taoistic. Nothing was condemned or despised by the Taoists until an actual observation had been made of the subject, or its properties learned from a reliable source. It came to light, for example, that the places, reported by all as unliveable and dangerous, were found, upon inspection, eminently suitable and safe. Many kinds of food and fruits, proscribed by certain religions as polluted and unfit to eat, were edible and delicious if they had been properly cleaned and

well-prepared. Men, reputed to be snobbish and ill-tempered, when approached with humility and simplicity, were found charming and kindly. Some primitive tribes, described as ferocious and intractable, were hospitable and kindly if treated with genuine friendship and sincerity.

God, morality and saints were claimed by each segment of humanity as peculiarly its own, and similar beliefs among others were regarded as false, immoral, untrue and sinful. The Taoists did not try to usurp the place of any other religion. They saw much goodness in each and their variety did not disconcert them. They had early perceived that there was only one unifying Reality behind all the phenomena of existence and it was nameless and inexpressible. It did not matter a whit whether this Infinite Spirit was called God, Tao, Jehovah, Allah, Viracocha, Buddha or Great White Spirit. Since He was all forms and all names, each man and nation visualized Him according to their imagination and its limitations. Neither did the Taoist object to the rituals and rites, however diversified they were, for these all expressed the desire to honour and fix attention on the spiritual realities which were invisible.

They never tried to interfere with the life of man or his nature by introducing their own moral code or imitating those of other nations. They concentrated exclusively on man's spiritual content and were bent on harmonizing it with Tao, which had nothing to do with men's laws and codes. A man, marrying one wife only, was morally correct but, if he made her life a misery, he was a sinner. On the other hand, a man with several wives might have been a model husband, good provider and kindly father to his children. He was a good man in Taoist eyes just the same, although a breaker of man-made law. The Taoists, like most of the mystics, were practical men and did not attempt to strain human nature with too drastic strictures. Unlike Jesus, they never enjoined wealthy men to distribute all their riches to the poor, nor did they advocate universal poverty and renunciation like Buddha. What they wanted was to make men decent, not necessarily in their outward behaviour but in their hearts. By making man 'vacant', empty and simple, they desired to fill him

with the graces of the spirit and real virtues which would not fail to instil a new vigour into his life. What they preached was not spiritual indolence and artificial idiocy but a spiritual renaissance by the identification with the Divine Spirit who had infinite gifts to impart. By acting with love, sympathy and a fresh understanding of nature, man's life became richer and fuller. He was happy at home, jolly with his friends and congenial with his neighbours. He perceived new beauties, new values and new perspectives for his abilities. A way was open for him to prosperity through this gift of a mellow disposition and friendly, unselfish attitude. Everybody wanted to be with him and help him and, thus, he conducted his affairs with non-action, and his fortunes were steadily improving.

It must not be thought that Taoists are indolent, flabby creatures—self-centred, introvert and lacking in bravery or courage to meet the harsh problems of life. It must be admitted that a few monks were weak, shy and retiring men who had purposely retreated from the world to the protective walls of the monastery. There was a small minority allowed, out of love and compassion, to live out their lives peacefully, not much being asked of them. The others exerted their mental and physical faculties to the utmost, and the history of China records famous generals, poets and painters who were Taoists. Peace and calm cannot be acquired by purchase and possessions but comes gradually and imperceptibly, as the heart is cleansed of dishonesty and evil thoughts. It is possible to be passionate, active and even ebullient; to dislike snobs and bores and stupid people with no thought of harming them in any way and it is possible to maintain that essential kindness towards others that emanates from the true Taoist. Then there are no grounds for regret, no shameful action or thought and the heart becomes tranquil and peaceful.

Superstition was described by these Taoists as an irrational and abject attitude of mind towards the supernormal, nature or God proceeding from unreasoning fear of the unknown and mysterious. By this measure, my Taoist friends were not superstitious as they possessed the wisdom of Tao and much intuitive knowledge. Neither Taoism nor Confucianism and Buddhism

have placed any interdict on the study of matters which could be called occult or supernatural. The Chinese always recognized a densely populated world of spirits, and both Laotse and Confucius enjoined men to deal with them, if occasion offered, with civility and consideration. They were imagined as persons, some with a great degree of wisdom and puissance, and others very primitive, simple and almost of subhuman intelligence. Treated with respect and goodwill, they might be useful and helpful but, if reviled and despised, they might prove harmful. The good ones among them could be invoked by men in certain emergencies and the bad ones should always be severely left alone.

The Lungmen Taoists did not try to specialize in contacts with spirits and did not practise black magic. These matters were left to the Chengyi and the Chantiensuu churches. But they were always bent on the expansion of their consciousness by practising perception and awareness. In modern parlance, they were acquiring the *psi* faculties. They believed that Tao, though not objectifying Itself to man, nevertheless indicated Its pleasure and imminent help to the good by certain indirect and oblique signs; by a clairvoyant feeling or vision or by a particular sort of ecstasy when man, suddenly uplifted, saw at least a glimpse of things to come. These signs happened frequently and everywhere but an ordinary man, with his lack of observation and a sense of being too busy with his affairs, seldom took notice of them. Also they always needed each man's own particular interpretation. For example to me personally, among other things, the unexpected descent of a butterfly on my head or hand, a peculiar call of certain birds or a rare flower in the forest were always the messages of good fortune.

Clairvoyance was a double-edged gift. I always had a presentiment when things would go well. When they did, my pleasure was not so unexpected as it should have been. Conversely, if a misfortune was in store, I suffered before it happened and then again when it actually occurred. I learned to sense when a man was insincere and crafty however cleverly he had concealed these defects but, on the other hand, I acquired the ability of picking out good and faithful friends.

Sometimes, uplifted and carried away by a particularly perfect hour in the mountains or an old temple, I knew reality to be there and felt transformed in the expectation of a mystery. As my eyes were filled with the beauty around me and my heart with ecstasy, I suddenly knew it was a miracle, as if a soundless still voice promised joy and happiness.

A real test of my Taoistic attainments came when, at the beginning of World War II, I went to live and work on the Sino-Tibetan border. This was a fulfilment of Abbot Lee's prediction. The difficulties and dangers of travel and the war conditions were formidable but I took them lightly, dealing with each problem as it occurred, and in the end I arrived safely in Sikang. I became popular among the common folk, both Chinese and tribal, because of my simplicity, friendliness and hospitality, but the provincial authorities viewed me with suspicion and distrust as they did not desire the Central Government to meddle in their affairs. Charming as the Chinese people were in general, the official classes, I soon found out, preserved their superiority complex towards all foreigners. Those westerners who were too clever and showed too much initiative and zeal in their work, were especially resented. To protect myself from possible trouble, I practised inaction, i.e. I kept quietly in the background, did what I was told to do and never tried to compete with my Chinese colleagues. My knowledge of Chinese etiquette enabled me to maintain correct relations with the authorities who, therefore, could not complain of me that I was a rude and crude 'barbarian'. I did not quite play the role of a fool but, instead, assumed an air of ingenuousness and meekness. This probably staved off for a considerable time the decision of the local government to get rid of me. Unfortunately, my headquarters, after having sent me to Sikang, seemed to have forgotten my very existence. Seeing me without any support and becoming sure that I had no *raison d'être* to remain in the province, the authorities finally arrested me and soon afterwards I was recalled to Chungking. When I complained to a Taoistic friend of mine of my misfortune, he consoled me by saying that I should not lament about what I had not achieved but be satisfied about what I had

not lost. My very life had been at stake, and he was certain that it was my Taoistic disposition which prevented the Sikang militarists from doing away with me altogether.

It was while I was staying in Chungking that I met a remarkable Lamaist dignitary, Shenlou Hutuktu of Likiang, a town in North-western Yunnan, also on the Tibetan borderland. It seemed a miracle when this famed Incarnation recognized at a glance my Taoistic qualities, befriended me and finally prophesied that I should soon go to his native place. In my dealings with Chinese officials I had to be very careful not to speak about being a Taoist. Some of them were fanatical Christians and one especially was so intolerant that he laid plans to clean up our huge organization of all non-Christian Chinese and had early marked me for dismissal because of my 'pagan' beliefs. Fortunately for me, he was replaced just in time.

In the welter of Chinese politics, intrigues and the scramble for influence and jobs I was very unhappy in Chungking and silently prayed for a miracle which would remove me again to some remote corner of China where I would be alone and free. And then, almost without a warning, it happened and I was sent to Kunming and, after a comparatively short stay there, to Likiang.

When on arrival I set my eyes on that lovely valley, snow-capped mountains and the sea of great, fragrant forests, I felt that, at last, I had reached my Shangri-La, and the retreat of Goddess Hsiwangmu was there before me—veiled in physical reality. The golden-coloured people, children of nature and yet steeped in the traditions of Laotse, opened their hearts to me, for they recognized in me a kindred spirit. Treasures of affection, devotion and friendship were soon laid at my feet. My spirit seemed to unfold and grow, and a wonderful sense of utter peace, serenity and contentment enveloped me. The Divine Tao flowed by me and through me in an almost palpable current of grace. All problems were always solved lightly and almost miraculously while my body seemed to grow younger and stronger. All the difficult journeys on foot and on horseback through most dangerous places appeared pleasant, safe and joyful. I was never conscious of the toughness of what I was undertaking and my mental

faculties appeared sharpened and my capacities expanded. The more I gave of myself to those remarkable people, the more I received; the more I was in the background, the more I was honoured and loved. The world of man, nature's world and the spirits' world converged there on each other and were interwoven, as men smiled and laughed, nature showered her bounties and the spirits communicated good tidings and took part in human affairs. We all felt them by our side and used to get in touch with them by simple seances. In one remote and beautiful lamasery I recognized a temple I often saw in my dreams. I spent my happiest hours there afterwards.

I wanted to remain in Likiang forever, as it was a place after Laotse's own heart. It was there that I fully realized that my quest for Taoist wisdom and philosophy of life had been successful. To my great sorrow, I was driven out of the enchanted place by the Communist Revolution, but its warmth and beauty are still with me and inspire me in my struggles in the outer world. As a Taoist I accept calmly the mysterious and inscrutable way of Tao, and as I had learnt, miracles and wonders are possible and therefore I hope that Tao may yet bring me back some day to that paradise.