

THE NEW YEAR IN CHINA.¹

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THE very first aspect in which Chinese New Year presents itself, no matter in what part of the world we happen to meet it, is that of noise. All night long there is a bang! bang! bang! of firecrackers large and small, which, like other calamities, "come, not single spies, but in battalions." The root of all this is undoubtedly connected with religion, as in other similar performances all over the world. But though the explosion of gunpowder is the most prominent, it is far from being the most important, act of New Year worship. There is the dispatch of the last year's kitchen-god, generally on the twenty-third of the twelfth moon, and the installation of his successor at the close of the year. On the last evening of the year, there is the family gathering either at the ancestral temple, or should there not be one, in the dwelling-house, for the worship of the tablets of the past few generations of ancestors. In some parts of China ancestral tablets are comparatively rare among the farming and working people, and the place of them as regards the practical worship at New Year's eve, is taken by a large scroll, containing a portion of the family genealogy, which is hung up, and honored with prostrations and the burning of incense. On the morning of the second day of the new first moon, perhaps at other times also, all the males of a suitable age go to the family or clan graveyard, and there make the customary offerings to the spirits of the departed. There has been considerable controversy among foreigners expert in Chinese affairs as to the true value of these various rites from a religious point of view, but there is no doubt on the part of any one that they constitute a most essential ingredient in a Chinese New Year, and that in the present temper of

¹ From *Village Life in China*. A Study in Sociology. Fleming H. Revell Co., Publishers of Evangelical Literature. New York, Chicago, Toronto. 1899.

the Chinese race, a New Year without such rites is both inconceivable and impossible. We do well, therefore, to place Religious Rites prominently in our catalogue.

It requires but a slight acquaintance with the facts, however, to make us aware that while the ceremonies connected with the dead are important, they are soon disposed of once for all, and that they do not form a part of the permanent New Year landscape. It is quite otherwise with the social ceremonies connected with the living. The practice of New Year calls, as found in some Western lands, is a very feeble parody of the Chinese usage. We call on whom we choose to call upon, when we choose to go. The Chinese pays his respects to those to whom he must pay his respects, at the time when it is his duty so to do, and from this duty there is seldom any reprieve. For example, not to press into undue prominence local practices, which vary greatly, it may be the fashion for every one to be up long before daylight. After the family salutations have been concluded, all but the older generation of males set out to make the tour of the village, the representatives of each family entering the yard of every other family, and prostrating themselves to the elders who are at home to receive them. This business goes by priority in the genealogical table, as military and naval officers take rank from the date of their commissions. Early marriages on the part of some members of a collateral branch of a large clan, late marriages on the part of other branches, the adoption of heirs at any point, and other causes, constantly bring it about that the men oldest in years are by no means so in the order of the generation to which they belong. Thus we have the absurd spectacle of a man of seventy posing as a "nephew"—or, if worst comes to worst—as the "grandson" of a mere boy. One often hears a man in middle life complain of the fatigues of the New Year time, as he being of a "late generation," is obliged "to kotow to every child two feet long" whom he may happen to meet, as they are "older" than he, and in consequence of this inversion of "relative duties," the children are fresh as a rose, while the middle-aged man has lame knees for a week or two!

If the first day is devoted to one's native town or village, the succeeding ones are taken to pay calls of ceremony upon one's relatives living in other towns or villages, beginning with the mother's family, and branching into relationships the names of which few foreigners can remember and which most cannot even comprehend. That all this social ceremony is upon the whole a good thing cannot be doubted, for it prevents many alienations, and heals in their

early stages many cases of strained relations. Yet, to us such a formal and monotonous routine would prove insufferable.

To the Chinese, these visits are not only an important part of New Year, presumptively they are in real sense New Year itself. Every visit involves a "square meal," and (from the Chinese point of view) a good time. To omit them, would be not only to deprive oneself of much pleasure, it would be to commit a social crime, which would almost certainly give great offence.

The customs of different parts of the wide empire doubtless vary, but probably there is no part of it in which either dumplings or some similar article are not inseparably associated with New Year's Day, in the same way as plum-pudding with an English Christmas, or roast-turkey and mince pie with a New England Thanksgiving. As compared with Western peoples, the number of Chinese who are not obliged to practice self-denial either in the quantity or the quality of their food, and in both, is small. The diet of the vast mass of the nation is systematically and necessarily abstemious. Even in the case of farmers' families who are well enough off to afford the year round good food in abundance, we do not often see them indulging in such luxury. Or if the males of the elder generation indulge, the women and children of a younger generation are not allowed to do so. Hereditary economy in the item of food is a marked Chinese trait. To "eat good things" is a common phrase denoting the occurrence of a wedding, a funeral, or some occasion upon which "good things" cannot be dispensed with. To eat cakes of ordinary grain on New Year's Day, and not to get any dumplings at all, is proverbially worse than not to have any New Year.

No feast-day in any Western land—the two previously mentioned not excepted—can at all compare with Chinese New Year, as regards powers of traction and attraction. We consider the gathering of families on these special occasions as theoretically desirable, and as practically useful. But we have this fatal disadvantage; our families divide and disperse, often to the ends of the earth, and a new home is soon made. Whole families cannot be transported long distances, especially at inclement seasons of the year, even if average dwellings would hold them all.

But in China, the family is already at home. It is only some of its male members who are absent, and they return to their ancestral abode, with the infallible instinct of the wild fowl to their southern haunts. If vast distances should make this physically impossible—as is the case with the countless Shan-hsi men scattered over the empire doing business as bankers, pawn-brokers, etc., or as happens with many from the northern provinces who go "outside the Great Wall,"—still the plan is to go home, perhaps one year in three, and the time selected is always at the close of the year.

A cat in a strange garret, a bird with a broken wing, a fish out of water, are not more restless and unhappy than the average Chinese who cannot go home at New Year time.