

THE PRAYING MANTIS IN CHINESE FOLK- LORE.*

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER.

TS'AI YUNG (133-192 A. D.)¹ a scholar and statesman of the Han dynasty, was once invited to a party, and on reaching the house, heard the sound of a lute played inside. It was a tune to a war-song expressing a desire for murder. Ts'ai, for fear of being killed, at once returned. The host and his guests pursued him, and when questioned, Ts'ai gave the reason for his retreat. The guests said: "When you approached, we seized the lute, as we noticed on a tree in the courtyard a mantis trying to catch a cicada; three times the mantis had reached it, and three times it failed in its attack. We feared that the mantis might miss the cicada (and therefore played the warlike tune)." Ts'ai was thus set at ease.

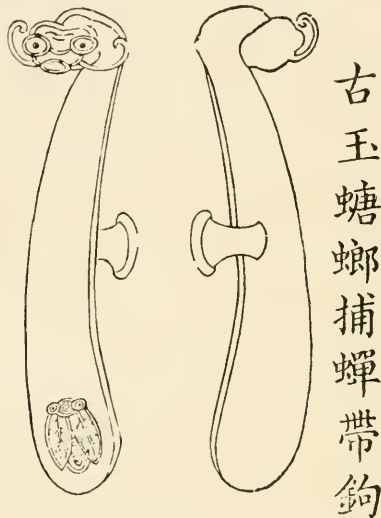
This story is the outcome of popular notions regarding the mantis which is looked upon as a formidable warrior endowed with great courage. The habits of the mantis are well known: the so-called flower-mantis in tropical regions resembles the flowers of certain plants, and in these flowers it lurks awaiting smaller insects upon which it feeds. What we term the "praying" attitude of the mantis in which its knees are bent and the front-legs supported on a stem, is nothing but this lying in ambush for other insects. Good observers of nature, the ancient Chinese were very familiar with its peculiar traits; they called it "the insect-killer" (*sha ch'ung*) or "the heavenly horse" (*t'ien ma*) from its speed, and greatly admired its bravery.² Its eagerness to catch cicadas is repeatedly emphasized, and above all, immortalized by the famous story of the philosopher Chuang-tse.

* See the author's book, *Jade, A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion*.

¹ Giles, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 753.

² Compare the Chinese drawing of the mantis.

“When Chuang-tse was wandering in the park at Tiao-ling, he saw a strange bird which came from the south. Its wings were seven feet across. Its eyes were an inch in circumference. And it flew close past Chuang-tse’s head to alight in a chestnut grove. ‘What manner of bird is this?’ cried Chuang-tse. ‘With strong wings it does not fly away. With large eyes it does not see.’ So he picked up his skirts and strode towards it with his crossbow, anxious to get a shot. Just then he saw a cicada enjoying itself in the shade, forgetful of all else. And he saw a mantis spring and seize it, forgetting in the act its own body, which the strange bird immediately pounced upon and made its prey. And this it



MANTIS CATCHING THE CICADA.
On jade buckle.

was which had caused the bird to forget its own nature. ‘Alas!’ cried Chuang-tse with a sigh, ‘how creatures injure one another. Loss follows the pursuit of gain.’”

Surely, this pretty allegorical story has impressed the minds of the Chinese people deeper than the insipid account regarding Ts’ai Yung; and the Han artists, it is more credible, drew on Chuang-tse as the source for the motive of the mantis struggling with the cicada. Also Giles comments in his translation: “This episode has been widely popularized in Chinese every-day life. Its details have been expressed pictorially in a roughly-executed wood-cut, with the addition of a tiger about to spring upon the man, and a well into which both will eventually tumble. A legend at the side

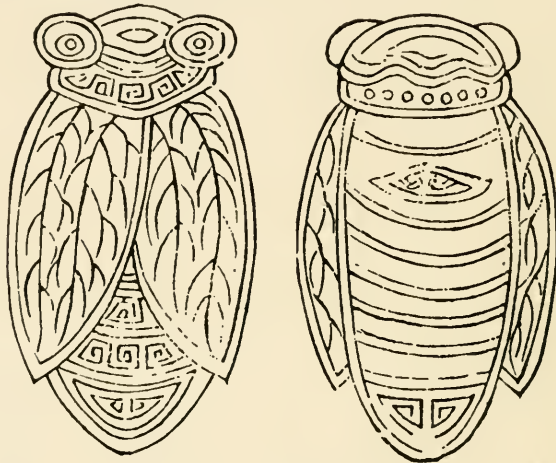
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reads,—All is Destiny!" And in this thought, I believe, we should seek also the explanation of the motive on the Han jade buckle. Certainly, it does not mean such a banality as that frigid "kill!" intimated by the philistine scribbler of the *Ku yü t'u p'u*, but it was a *memento mori* to admonish its wearer: "Be as brave as the mantis, fear not your enemy, but remember your end, as also the undaunted mantis will end!"

In another passage Chuang-tse exclaims: "Don't you know the story of the praying-mantis? In its rage it stretched out its arms to prevent a chariot from passing, unaware that this was beyond its strength, so admirable was its energy!"



JADE GIRDLE-PENDANT, CICADA.
Showing upper and lower surfaces.

This is an allusion to another famous story contained in the *Han shih wai chuan*, a work by Han Ying who flourished between B. C. 178-156. It is there narrated: "When Duke Chuang of Ts'i (B. C. 794-731) once went a-hunting, there was a mantis raising its feet and seizing the wheel of his chariot. He questioned his charioteer as to this insect who said in reply: 'This is a mantis; it is an insect who knows how to advance, but will never know how to retreat; without measuring its strength, it easily offers resistance.' The Duke answered: 'Truly, if it were a man, it would be the champion-hero of the empire.' Then he turned his chariot to dodge it, and this act won him all heroes to go over to his side."