A Ride in the Streets of Peking

Genevieve Wimsatt

A STEP, and you are in; a good puller between the shafts, the ebullition of the streets about you, an easy pace that does not whirl you past the very thing you want to see before you can cry "Stop!", a pleasant jog insinuating you into the life current of the city—that is the rickshaw, the yang che of Peking.

Greek mythologies tell us that heavenly visitants to earth can be recognized by their gait, their mode of progression being unlike that of mortals inasmuch as gods do not set foot in front of foot, but glide forward without steps. Not until I rode in a rickshaw did I realize fully how noble was that godly course.

In Peking, the natives speak of the rickshaw as a yang che, or "foreign car." This seems odd to the visitor to China who, never having seen rickshaws at home, regards these vehicles as indigenous to the Orient. However, as usual, the Pekingese are right, for the jinrickshaw, to give it its full title, is the invention of a missionary to Japan, and its very name embodies its oriental origin—jin, man; riki, strength; sha, carriage.

The motion of the rickshaw is soothing, bland, and the little vehicle itself, with its cushioned seat, its bright rug showing dragons, or birds, or the character for long life, its trim, exotic air, entices the newcomer to China on many a ride that has no other object than the enjoyment of a novel experience; but, after all, it is the thrill of contacting the torrents of human traffic, of being part of the flood, of having a place in the street life of the teeming city that is the prime benefaction of the "foreign car."

Like everything else in China, the rickshaw ride starts with conversation. Just as I am about to seat myself in my "five-colored chariot" I notice, protruding from under the cushion, the foot of a calf! With a shriek I leap from the rickshaw, pointing to the object in loathing. What is the foot of a calf—hoof, ankle, skin and all—doing in my rickshaw? Is there a calf concealed under the seat?

Sun, the rickshaw boy, tries not to laugh, for in China it is a discourtesy to laugh at another's mistakes; but he hastily pulls out the calf's foot, and shows me that this desiccated member is merely the handle of the duster with which he flaps the rickshaw. When serenity is again restored, and the duster disposed of, we are off.

Once under way, it occurs to me that I'll "lose face" with Sun if I take him out merely to "look-see." So, speaking purposefully, I direct him to go to the Eastern Peace Bazaar, which as yet I know only by report.

At the Eastern Peace Market, the Tung An Shih Ch'ang, I have a striking illustration of the wonders of the Chinese underground secret service. "The Chinese know all about you as soon as you alight at the station," an old-timer in China has told me. "They seem to have a sort of telepathic medium by which they communicate. If you were smitten speechless in the remotest quarter of Peking the first rickshaw boy who passed would know where you belonged and promptly take you home, without a word of direction." These, and many other claims of the all-knowingness of the citizenry of Peking have stirred my curiosity, and roused my doubts. Now I am to witness an example of the cryptic dissemination of news among the masses.

Leaving my rickshaw at the entrance of the Eastern Peace Market, I enter into miles and miles of labyrinthine aisles between booths and stalls, and leisurely make my way into the deepest of the maze. In the busy bazaar crowded with native shoppers there is not one person I have ever seen before, I tell myself. There are no foreigners in sight. After ten minutes of aimless strolling I go into a cloisonne booth to buy a pepper-shaker, and overhear a native customer inquire of the clerk, "Who is the foreigner?"

"Ha," I chuckle to myself, "what a foolish question! How can the Chinese know anything about me?"

"That is Wên Ku Niang," the shopkeeper answers...
without a moment’s hesitation. “She has lately come up from Peking, and now has a house at No. 5 Hou Chao Chai Lou. She is an American, and attends the Yen Ching School of Chinese Studies. She . . .”

But, before the well-informed cloisonné dealer can relate the rest of my biography, I turn and flee.

It is distressing enough to be an open book to the eyes of the angels; but who knows what chapter of my past the Peking merchant will divulge to the world?

“Out beyond the Ch’ien Men!” I cry to the rickshaw boy, hastily quitting the precincts of the uncanny Eastern Peace Market. “The holiday is near, and there will be festivities near the Wall God’s temple.”

Through narrow hu ŭungs, jogs the rickshaw, and past the old-clothes vender’s stand where in impromptu rhymes and witty couplets the hawker auctions off secondhand garments; past the barber, shaving a customer’s head; past eating houses carved and lacquered and gilded and fretted like museum curios, where the patrons dine at little tables set out before the shop and take no heed of the dust blowing over their po pos and tea. Here in the narrow lane I meet a group of small boys singing opprobrious satires at the water-seller pushing his heavy tanks mounted on wheels, and carrying two great wooden buckets swung from the yoke across his shoulders. They are telling the water man that he is a turtle—than which there is no more abusive epithet in Chinese—caroling that he has green moss on his back, that when it rains he crawls into his hole, and when it is fair he comes out and suns himself.

The scandalous sonneteers cease their jibes at the patient water carrier only when diverted, as I am diverted, by the sight of the kite display making giddy with color one of the long, drab walls of the hu ŭung. Such kites! At my gasp of admiration, the rickshaw puller comes to a halt just as though I had cried, “Whoa,” eases the shafts to the ground, and ceases to be steed in order to become informant.

Yes, he tells me, these are very fine kites. See this one, its wings decorated with the Five Bats of Happiness, its face featured with auspicious symbols. The eyes are two butterflies, the mouth is a Bat of Good Fortune, the cheeks bear Lucky Cash, and there is still another Cash on the forehead.

Truly exquisite are some of these paper creations, with wide, brilliant wings and bodies representing famous personages and gods. What, for instance, could be more consoling than to look up into the azure sky and behold the form of the Heavenly Mother, upheld on cloud-like wings? Ha, but if my conscience were the least bit uneasy I should not like to see that demon-headed kite shadowing me in the twilight!

Sun, who, like so many of his fellows, can neither read nor write, yet knows by sight all the heroes of the most popular novel ever written, the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, tells me that the two companions on the great double-bodied kite represent the tyrant Ts’ao Ts’ao and his friend Ch’en Kung. Finding this bit of information cordially received, Sun goes on to narrate the tale of the cunning general, Liu Pang, who in a titanic struggle with invading Tartar tribes made use of the boyish toy, the kite, in dispersing the enemy.

Unable to seduce his rival’s captains with bribes of gold and promises of high position in his own armies, Liu Pang ordered an enormous kite constructed, a kite capable of lifting a man’s weight. Then at dusk he directed that one of his musicians be fastened to the body of the kite. With the help of a favoring wind, the general succeeded in sending the kite aloft and floating it above the camp of his foes. There, poised between heaven and earth, the musician played on his flute the melodies of the invading armies, the Home, Sweet Home and St’wanee River of the wild tribes from the North, until one by one the simple barbarians, homesickness gnawing at their hearts, deserted the standard and crept away, back to their native land, and the wily Liu
Pang was able to take the camp without the loss of a man. The ruse was at least as original as that of the wooden horse with which the crafty Greeks took Troy.

But, however useful in war these kites may be, just now they are getting us no closer to the Ch'ien Men; so, with many backward glances at the k'ung where they glow, we leave the paper-winged monsters and proceed toward the Front Portal of Peking. As we near the p'ai lous beyond the Ch'ien Men, I notice a crowd of people pouring down the way.

First comes a large mule cart filled with Chinese soldiers; this is followed by a merry, good-tempered, chattering mob of citizens, laughing and joking, for all the world like a circus crowd at home. Sun moves slowly now for he wants to be on the fringe of the fun.

I have not mentioned this point, for up to the moment it has not struck me as worthy of mention; but today I am wearing a dress brought from the States, a silk frock quiet enough in color, but printed in a geometrical pattern unfamiliar to the Chinese who eye it with some wonder. As I stare at the cart, trying to make out what all the jollity is about, I notice two men, soldiers without coats, seated on the floor of the wagon. As I look at them they stare back at me, and one nudges the other and grins broadly, pointing to the foreign woman in the outlandish raiment.

"Sun," I inquire, "who are those two in the bottom of the cart?" Obligingly, Sun informs me that these two are disorderly soldiers who, even now, are on their way to the execution ground at the Temple of Heaven, to be beheaded!

I shiver in the frock which has provoked the mirth of the condemned men, and urge Sun to hurry on—

The Old-clothes Dealer Auctions Off His Wares

The boat? Ai, ya, last year there had been a girl in those dark streets, the most beautiful of the girls outside the Walls. She had been sold by her peasant parents in a time of famine, this Wang Kuei Ying, and because she brought her false mother many gold pieces she had been dressed in silks and fed on sharks' fins and pigeons' eggs and chicken-velvet and had been given rose-scented wine to drink. Ai, she was one of those who ride in rickshaws with three lights!

But last year Wang Kuei Ying had heard the summons of Yen Wang, the Ruler of the Dead. . . . K'o hsi, k'o hsi, when a true daughter dies she is given a thick coffin and buried in a deep grave; but a girl who has only a false mother is placed in a thin coffin, hardly stouter than paper, and left in a shallow hole in an abandoned field. . . .

"But, look, Sun," I object, "the false mother must have remembered little Wang Kuei Ying, for today the priests chant Sutras for her soul, and the spirit boat is ready to carry her to a new birth."

The Barber Is an Itinerant Practitioner

Turning off from the Ch'ien Men Tu Chieh, the Front Portal Great Avenue, Sun now trots slowly toward a large open field not far from the Temple of the Wall God of the Southern Provinces, where a temporary shed has been erected around which the loiterers thicken like flies around spilled sugar. At a little distance from this rush-and-bamboo shelter, there is a sight I must see before going further.

Many a spirit boat have I beheld in China, but never before one so large and magnificent as the stately junk in this vacant lot, carefully railed off from the ruinous fingers of the children crowded near. Sun has been gossiping with some strollers from the mat-shed shrine where three Lama priests in rich vestments are chanting Sutras, so, when he has finished his inquiries, I start mine.

"Sun," I question, "who gives this fine boat to what dead man? And those priests over there, they sing scriptures for what spirit?" Hu! Everyone in Peking had heard that all this was for Wang Kuei Ying! Did the Ku Niang not know that in this part of the capital beyond the Ch'ien Men, dwelt those maidens who were not maidens, with their mothers who were not mothers? Yes, yes, the Ku Niang was not wrong, there behind us was the well-known quarter of the city where lived many unhusbanded women.

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"Not the ch'ai ti mu ch'in," asserts the rickshaw puller firmly. "It is not the false mother who does that, but a Peking merchant who dearly loved this Wang Kuei Ying! Consider, Ku Niang, a whole year she has been dead; yet the man has remembered, and today sends this boat for her spirit, and pays the priests to chant for her soul's release."

I look at the paper demons skulling the paper boat; at the small figure on the highest deck, the figure robed in mourning white, with unbound hair, protruding tongue, and uplifted hands from which hang broken shackles, all symbolic of the soul in the torments of Hell. Tonight or tomorrow, I know, the spirit boat will be burned, setting sail in a sheet of flame to carry to a new reincarnation the soul of motherless little Wang Kuei Ying who had dressed softly, and drunk white-rose wine, and been remembered a whole year.

Fearing to meet another execution party on Ch'ien Men Avenue, I tell Sun to take me home by way of the Hata Men Gate to see the pottery displays turned out by the near-by factories. As we roll slowly through the dusty streets, I forget the pathos of Wang Kuei Ying's boat in smiling at that fat restaurant keeper standing in his doorway wielding a fan which measures at least a yard across. First he fans the nape of his neck, then his ankles, then his back. Someone calls for his attention, and he furls the monster fan and deftly disposes of it by thrusting it down the back of his shirt collar, the customary place for fans with gentlemen who have no pockets in their baggy trousers.

Noting my interest in the fan and the fanner, the rickshaw puller takes care to point out that the restaurant keeper who afforded me so much amusement is, in reality, very bad form. The size of the fan was offensive, and the man's violent motions in fanning very low, indeed. A gentleman does not wield his fan in that manner, but waves it gently to and fro. Moreover, and this is a matter of great importance, fans that open out to form a half circle are strictly reserved for the use of ladies; a gentleman's fan forms an arc of less than a hundred and fifty degrees.

Fans still holding my attention, I notice the sentry on duty as the rickshaw rolls through the Hata Men Gate. This soldier in full uniform holds a pipe in one hand and a fan in the other, while beside him stands a small boy who is keeping himself cool and at the same time improving his mind as he alternately fans himself and studies the map of the Eighteen Provinces printed on his fan.

Keeping cool during the Great Heat of the Peking summer is no easy matter, and the sight of the fan naturally leads the mind to interest in other cooling devices. Here we are at the pottery works, amid acres of earthen articles, glazed and unglazed, colored and uncolored, jars, bowls, goldfish kangs, tables, roof tiles and garden ornaments; but immediately the eye rests on the cats. There they doze, rows and rows of pottery pussies, life-sized, lightly glazed, comfortable looking cats who perform, apparently, no useful function in life.

In China, as elsewhere, appearances are deceiving, for these somnolent tabbies are useful adjuncts to the summer sleeping quarters of numberless Chinese who at night fill these hollow feline forms with cold water and use them as pillows.

Some of the earthen seats here, too, are hollow, and I recall what I have heard of the wealthy Peking compradore who, during torrid August days, works calmly at his accounts, enthroned on an earthen stool filled with ice!

But look! While I have loitered beyond the Walls the clouds have thickened, and now heavy drops of rain fall like bullets into the deep dust of the street.

'Oh, hurry along, Sun!' I cried in alarm. 'I left my new lanterns hanging from the Ts'ao tree, and I fear the rain will ruin them!'

Sun, who knows very well that all my agitation is needless, that the good house boy has snatched those lanterns under shelter at the first hint of rain, pulls the canvas raincloth from under the seat and spreads it across the front of the rickshaw, smiling as he quotes the old Peking proverb on the circle of fears:

'The mouse fears the cat; the cat fears the dog; the dog fears the cook; the cook fears the master; the master fears the wind; the wind fears the wall corner; and the wall corner fears the mouse.'