

THE MEANING OF THE CHINESE BUTTON.

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OTH the Chinese and the Japanese have in the past exercised a kind of fascination over European minds, partly, no doubt, on account of the strangeness to us of their manners and customs, the utter unlikeness of their ways to all that we are familiar with at home.

Japan is bidding fair to become commonplace by overlaying her national life with a thin veneer of Western manners, even modifying her art to the demands of the Western market; but China remains largely where she was when Great Britain first forced her, much against her will, into the comity of nations—a country in which everything seems different from, almost opposite to, what we, according to our standards, think it ought to be.

The outbreak of hostilities in the Far East has been filling our daily papers with information about Buttons and Peacock's Feathers, and even Riding-Jackets, which appear as strange to us on this Western verge of the Old World, as to the Chinese appear the Crosses and Stars and Garters which we assume to be the only orthodox forms of decoration for the acknowledgment of merit.

It is to her present Tartar dynasty that

China owes the adoption of the peacock's feather as a mark of merit, and the use of distinctive balls upon the hat to indicate the rank of a mandarin. Mandarins of the highest rank wear a purple robe, on which is embroidered a fung—a fabulous bird of astonishing form and colour, judging from its pictures—and have the hat adorned with a ruby-coloured ball, or button, as it is usually called. Princes, outside the imperial family, belong to this class, and wear this dress, but are



PRINCE CHUN'S IMPERIAL SUMMER COSTUME.



THE IMPERIAL FIVE-CLAWED DRAGON.

(Copied from a tile at the Imperial Palace, Peking.)

entitled to wear a yellow girdle over their purple robe. Yellow is the imperial colour, not to be desecrated by common use. Imperial buildings are roofed with yellow tiles. The *Peking Gazette* is issued in a yellow cover; the national flag has a yellow ground; and the Emperor's own robe is of yellow silk, embroidered with a gold five-clawed dragon. (The dragon of the people is only allowed to have four claws.) The monarch's state-dress, indeed, has four of these dragons embroidered upon it: one is depicted wriggling on his breast, another on his back, while one is clambering up each shoulder.

As a sign of imperial favour, than which

none can be greater, an emperor has sometimes presented to a subject a yellow robe. The great viceroy of the north, Li Hung-Chang, was the fortunate recipient of this mark of imperial regard, but—

“Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.”

The gift in his case has, at any rate, waxed poor enough, since it has been taken back again, and the deprivation of Li's right to wear his yellow riding-jacket has been counted worthy of a prominent place and much comment in our daily newspapers. The significance of this act of the emperor was not fully apprehended by the person who said he supposed that it simply involved the necessity of the distinguished statesman's henceforth conducting the affairs of his high office in his shirt sleeves. Had our own Queen Bess been fully, instead of half, minded to “unfrock”



MANDARIN OF THE SIXTH CLASS (WHITE BUTTON)
IN SUMMER COSTUME.



THE BUTTON.

her insufficiently deferential bishop, the effect would have been of more than sartorial import, and it is so in this instance.

But to return to our buttons. The mandarins of the second class wear a button of coral red, suggested, perhaps, by a cock's comb, since the cock is the bird that adorns their breast. The third class are gorgeous, with a robe on which a peacock is emblazoned, while from the centre of the red fringe of silk upon the hat rises a sapphire button. The button of the fourth class is an opaque, dark purple stone, and the bird depicted on the robe is the pelican, though whether the legend of this bird's feeding its young from its own torn breast is current in China for the inspiration of her mandarins who reach or pass through this fourth class, I do not know. A silver pheasant on the robe and a clear crystal button on the hat are the mark of the fifth class. The sixth class are entitled to wear an embroidered stork and a jadestone button;

the seventh, a partridge and an embossed gold button. In the eighth the partridge is reduced to a quail, and the gold button becomes plain, while the ninth-class mandarin has to be content with a sparrow for his emblem, and with silver for his button.

Men who have been successful in passing the appointed examinations, and are thereby eligible for office, but who have not had the fortune so far to receive appointments, wear buttons of chased or plain gold or silver according to their position, but of smaller size than those worn by the officials.

The military mandarins are divided into classes corresponding to those of the civil mandarins, and wear the same buttons as the civilians of the same rank. They are adorned, however, with a different and more appropriate selection from the zoological world. The robe



MANDARIN OF THE FOURTH
CLASS (BLUE BUTTON) IN
WINTER DRESS.



MANDARIN OF THE SECOND CLASS—WINTER COSTUME.

of the first class has on it a kelin—a quadruped as fabulous as is the bird on the robe of the civil mandarin of the first class. Then follow in order a lion, a panther, a tiger, a bear, a second but smaller tiger, and rhinoceroses—the distinguishing mark of the official in these cases being in the buttons.

The great changes of temperature experienced in many parts of this great empire, and especially the searching cold of winter in Peking, necessitate corresponding changes being made in clothing. The light silks of official summer wear make way for wadded and fur-lined robes, and the delicate, roof-like hat is replaced by a thick felt with reversed brim, as shown in the illustrations. In so ceremonial an empire, such changes as these are of course subjects of official sanction or instruction. Thus, in the *Peking Gazette* that I have at hand at this present writing, I find that a Court Circular was issued on the 18th of September, according to our calendar, directing that, on what would be our 11th of October, the winter hat be substituted for the summer one.

In China, as elsewhere, the sovereign is accounted the fountain of honour. With the exception of the family of Confucius, which enjoys hereditary privileges, the Chinese do not expect to inherit titles conferred on fathers and ancestors. What reflected glory there is moves in the other direction, and posthumous honour is sometimes conferred on a father in recognition of the merit of a surviving son. In fact, not only the deceased fathers of his Majesty's subjects, but the canonised saints and deities of the land are supposed to look to the Emperor for such favours, being from time to time honoured with fresh titles and promotion in rank. Thus the god of war, Kwang-ti, ever one of the most popular gods but, probably, just now receiving special attention, is said to have been a military commander, who distinguished himself in the wars of the troublous, but heroic times, known as the period of The Three Kingdoms. He has been raised in saintly and divine rank by favour of various emperors, and within the present half century has been promoted to equal rank with Confucius himself.

The pretensions of the Emperor of China are stupendous. A man who can make gods is no ordinary being. He claims to be the earthly representative of Shang-ti, the supreme deity. He is the Son of Heaven, professing to recognise no equal among the royal families of other kingdoms, over all



THE GOD OF WAR.
(From a native drawing.)

which, indeed, he claims to have suzerain rights. The national proverb says, "There cannot be two suns in the sky, nor two emperors on the earth."

But though the dragon throne of China is thus accounted the centre of power and the fountain of honour, the very magnitude of the claim introduces an element of instability into the position of any particular occupant of it. The democracy in China has to be reckoned with. The Emperor claims to be the "Son of Heaven," but if his behaviour be such as does not comport with this claim, he therein disproves it and shows that he cannot be the legitimate sovereign, and justifies his own deposition by his subjects.

Some anxiety on this point in the heart of the sovereign seems the most natural explanation of the Emperor's recent nervous impatience and interference with those in high and responsible command, such as the reported removal of Admiral Ting from the head of the Pei-yang fleet, with the loss of his peacock-feather, and the stripping from Li Hung-Chang of his yellow jacket, as we must suppose *pour encourager les autres*.