

A CHINESE NEWSPAPER.



THE *Peking Gazette* is as unlike a Western newspaper as its contents are unlike Western news. It is an oblong book of a few thin leaves, printed with downward lines of word-characters. In shape it is like our cash-books, but so narrow and flimsy that it could be curled round a finger; strings of twisted paper, run through the back, fasten it into paper covers of the national yellow, besmeared with dim red letters—and there is the whole thing complete, the organ of the Chinese Government for publishing Imperial decrees, official changes, memorials and reports from the

provinces; and to thousands of pigtailed gentlemen, in and out of office, it is that indispensable luxury, the daily paper. We shall glean some idea of its curious contents from the collected issues of two notable years—1875, when a new Emperor ascended the throne, and 1877, a year of war and famine.

His Majesty the Emperor having “ascended upon the Dragon to be a guest on high” in the twelfth moon of the past year, or early in our January, the opening news of the year deals largely with Palace affairs. The new Emperor—the adopted successor of him who had ascended upon the Dragon to be a guest on high—publishes such protestations of grief and of devotion to the Empire, that it is with a shock we discover afterwards his mature age of three years. The Empress Dowager and the Empress Mother govern for this imperial wisacre, and issue such “benign decrees” as the disgrace of His late Majesty’s physicians by the immediate forfeiture of their buttons and peacock feathers—for having let him die. The peacock feather which is worn hanging from the cap, and the top button which by its colour marks the grade of rank, are often the subject of decrees.

Memorials from the provinces are constantly printed. A minister asks for retirement on the grounds of ill-health, begging that His Majesty’s “slave” be given rest, so that he may, though useless and wasted, continue his existence on the face of the earth. The Governor of Kiang-su, on being appointed Governor-General at Nanking, declares that he sent up a memorial last year, begging leave to retire on account of his infirmities, but as the courier rode to Peking he was so drenched by rain and snow, that the wet penetrated the despatch-box and the many folds of oiled paper, and reduced the letter of entreaty to pulp, by the jolting of the horse. And thereupon does not the Governor of Kiang-su exultingly state that the courier has been repaid with the bamboo, and brings now another despatch, which will inform His Majesty that he, the injured Governor, will take command at Nanking, although his rheumatism is hard to bear?

It is strange to find, in columns of news, reference to the search for a child in whom the soul of a Nomen 'Han of Tibet has been reborn. The Nomen 'Han in question died in exile seventeen years before. A youth of seventeen is now discovered in an obscure village, and it is stated that he is the re-embodied spirit. A petition is forwarded in favour of this remarkable young man, who—if the reader wishes to remember his name—was Awang Chiamubalch'u'ch'engchatso. But he is refused re-instatement at Tibet, and disowned officially, as he had been “forbidden for ever the privilege of reappearing again on earth.” But such news is not alarming to readers who have come across the predictions of the Board of Astronomers, and read of the assistance in public works vouchsafed by the river gods, the Yellow Great King, the Vermilion King, the Nine Dragon General, and several more.

The famine of 1877 furnishes us with terrible pictures of human misery, but it brings forward also the benevolent efforts of those who were charged with the perishing multitude at their doors. The police censors of the western district of Peking memorialise, stating that last winter they saw in the streets the unsheltered lying dead, and the cold and hungry huddled together in heaps. They quote a former decree declaring that the police ought to be the protectors of the poor, and they call attention to a hospice at the gate of the city, and tell how a body of unemployed officials have subscribed for the erection of another hospice to shelter a thousand of the destitute, sick, and aged.

The accounts from the famine-stricken districts tell dire tales. The Governor of Shansi writes time after time, telling how the people have stripped the bark off the trees for food, and even swallowed pellets of earth; and at last “there remain neither the bark of trees nor the roots of wild herbs to be eaten, and ordinary food supplies have absolutely disappeared. The land is filled with the sound of lamentations, and the corpses of the starved are to be seen on every hand by the waysides.” The great work of providing shelter and relief for myriads is, according to these reports, energetically taken up, even a war being abandoned that all attention may be given to the nation’s needs at home. The few glimpses that we get of war are even more horrible than the famine reports. Here, for instance, is the discovery of a Chinese secret society. Hwang-Shing-ling-Ta and about forty associates are arrested and punished by law, on the charge of having met in a secret society, probably for seditious purposes. From their confessions, most likely given under torture, it appears that Hwang-Shing-ling-Ta was the Elder Brother, and their luckless society was inaugurated at a feast, at which this gentleman with the long name constructed a bridge of tables and chairs, and a bamboo archway at the end, and bade them pass through into the Wood Willow City—little dreaming that the Wood

Willow City led to the prisons, tortures, and bamboos of a Chinese criminal court.

Reports of other cases lead us to suspect that Justice is particularly blind in China. The punishment for atrocious crime—the *ling-ch'ie*, or slicing to death—is by no means uncommon; but the most horrible part of this pitiless justice is that the insane criminal, whether man or woman, must suffer the same punishment as the sane. From these reports it seems that the escape of prisoners is frequent, and takes place in many curious ways: the prisoner, in transit from town to town, breaks out of his wooden cage in the night; or he scrapes and digs a hole in the wall of his prison, or during a wet and windy night, when the warders are taking shelter elsewhere, the prison wall falls down, and in the morning the birds are flown.

When Chinamen talk about "the vicious habit," they refer to opium-smoking. The culture of poppies is here reported as destroying the ground for crops, and therefore in some places conducive to famine. Elsewhere we come upon reports of another offence of a far different kind—the false personation of candidates in the Government examinations, a most ingenious improvement upon Western cramming and forgetting, since one who is crammed to professional perfection can make his living by surreptitiously sparing the brains of others. It is more curious still to read the Censor Kwoh Ts'ung-ku's report on the disorderly conduct of the graduates at a then recent examination at Peking. These enthusiastic students, when they were assembled for the Palace competition, before the ceremony of prostrations was completed, "sprang to their feet in wild confusion, and began to scramble for the blank essay forms. The Secretary of the Board of Ceremonies, who was in attendance, in endeavouring to quell the riotous proceedings, and to keep possession of the papers, had the back of his hand lacerated by the finger-nails of the contending graduates. Such want of reverence as this for the Imperial halls has surely never before been displayed by the lettered class!"

But if there are thefts, murders, and misdemeanours, prisons, fearful executions, and the bastinado, in the Celestial Empire, there is also the Virtue Reward Office, and its reports are frequent in the *Peking Gazette*. What manner of virtue is rewarded, we shall glean from a few examples. A petition with a long list of influential names is sent up to the Throne, praying that a monument be erected to immortalise the name of the Lady Ho. The Lady Ho had been married, at eighteen, to Lu Shu-yung. When he was seized with his last illness, the lady, "although occupied every night in secretly burning incense and offering up tearful prayers, maintained during the day a cheerful countenance, that the parents might not be overcome by dejection. For months she changed not her raiments, but devoted herself sedulously to administering to the wants of her husband; and finally, as a last resource, she cut from her arm a piece of flesh to mix with the medicine." But it was all unavailing: Lu Shu-yung died. Ho fainted several times with

grief. "But she had already resolved not to outlive her husband, and after privately writing to her sister-in-law to come and attend upon the two parents, already advanced in years, she swallowed a gold ring, and at the age of thirty-four thus sacrificed her life." And we should certainly add our stone to her cairn but for that little business of the ring, which, though prettily devised and according to Chinese notions virtuously done, sounds badly to Western ears.

Another lady, by name Wu-chang, is to have a memorial arch erected to her for a similar suicidal sacrifice. Her husband having died before one year of marriage, she was dissuaded from killing herself only by the hope of serving his parents, which duty she carried out with truly praiseworthy faithfulness for many years, until after their death she declared she would follow her husband, and refusing all food, died after seven days. A third lady, by name Wang, residing at Choh Chow, not only chopped herself on all occasions in the most frightful manner, but applied burning incense-stick to her arms, to provide cures for her relations. Under all these overcharged examples we must not be blind to the true national virtue of the Chinese, their devotion to parents; and the ladies who are faithful to "one love in a life" are worthy of all honour; but it troubles us benighted Westerners to read of the fair wee-footed creatures burning, starving, and cutting themselves, or even swallowing gold rings. The Virtue Reward Office has often better work than this to do; fidelity, filial devotion, the bravery of soldiers who die in battle, the virtue of women who sacrifice life rather than honour—these are things to be rewarded with more than posthumous titles and memorial arches.

One of the strangest pages that yet remain for us to glance over, is the letter and tribute of the King of Burmah to the Emperor of China, who was at the time, we must not forget, however patriarchal in official documents, in reality a mere baby of between three and four, oddly destined to have gravity, ceremony and splendour, instead of natural childhood. Meng-tun, King of Burmah, sends a letter written in gold to be laid before the Throne of the Great Emperor of the Heavenly Dynasty. He calls himself his vassal, his insignificant slave, and paints poetically how, as the sunflower bows before the sun, all mankind turns with adoration towards the Imperial person; and his letter ends by wishing to His Imperial Majesty "long life for ten thousand—for ten thousand thousand years." The list of tribute presents, which were to be delivered at the Palace gate, includes—this letter written in gold, a Burmese image of the god of longevity, five tame elephants and an immense pair of ivory tusks, rings and jewels, thousands of sheets of gold-leaf and silver-leaf, heaps of sandal-wood; and, in the same wonderful catalogue with the elephants and the jewels, fifteen peacocks' tails, twenty bottles of scent and pomade, several pieces of thick heavy shirting (no doubt from Manchester), and—last, not least, and decidedly useful for an Emperor—"twenty foreign carpet-bags."