

Sitting on the bank of the quiet river, we decided to go to Wei Shan (Mount Wei), which was famous not only for its beautiful scenery but also for the big Buddhist temple built on the mountain side. This temple, or monastery, well-known since the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618–905), was very rich and its Abbot, Fang Chang, had won renown as a great scholar. We had two good reasons for visiting the monastery: we wanted to study the organization to see how the monks lived, and we were anxious to make the acquaintance of this famous Fang Chang. Since we were in no hurry, we wandered along, chatting on a variety of subjects and admiring the scenery and changing views which presented themselves.

About twenty miles from Ningsiang we climbed an unknown, not-very-high mountain with a wide rocky front which could be seen from a great distance. On its slope was an ancient spreading pine tree with dense fan-like lower branches opened up on each side like wings forming a shady arbor, and with many large stones strung out like a chain around the trunk. We set down our bundles and umbrellas and sat on this "chain" with our backs firm against the tree. Here we relaxed in a pleasantly cool perfumed atmosphere. Because it reminded me of the happy afternoon we spent with Old Ho, I said, "Old Ho ploughs his fields for a living. He gets up at sunrise and works till sunset. Don't you think he is happy?"

"He often said he was happy," answered Mao. "It's a pity he didn't have a chance to study when he was young. You can see he's not had much education."

"His hard physical work produces a happy mind. That's why he's contented and healthy," I said. "You remember the saying, *wei ku jen tan yu* (why seek useless worry)? If Old Ho had studied, he would probably not be so happy now."

"Yes," agreed Mao, "knowledge is a good thing but sometimes it is better to be without it."

"The only things he has to worry about are the yield of his rice crop and fattening his pigs. When he has enough to eat, he's happy."



But remember, he's a small landowner. He works for himself. That's why he is happy. Farmers who suffer are those who must work for others. They toil from dawn to dark and then they have to hand over the fruit of their labors to the owner of the land!"

"Yes," Mao said, "and still worse are those who want to work on the land but can't find employment. There are many of them in China."

I did not agree. "The majority of those are happy all the same," I said. "The poor are happier than the rich, and healthier, too."

"You're right there," Mao agreed. "We can call that the destiny of the rich and poor."

As we talked, a cool, gentle breeze caressed us and we were so relaxed and comfortable that we fell off to sleep. I slept more than half an hour, but Mao was still sleeping soundly with mouth open when I wakened. Soon he opened his eyes and smiled, "I feel lots better for that sleep."

I suggested, "What do you say to our spending a few days here meditating like Buddha under his Bo tree?"

"If I were to sit here like that, I'm sure I'd fall asleep again," Mao said.

"But quite seriously, would you like to stay here for a few days?" I wanted to know.

"First I want to see the monks in Wei Shan Monastery. Let's see how they meditate and then we can come back here and imitate them," Mao replied.

I agreed and remarked that I was hungry and suggested that we go down and beg for some rice. We were reluctant to leave the shelter of the old pine, but we hitched our bundles on our shoulders, bowed to the tree and to the chain of stones which had served us as a seat, and set off down the hill. Near the foot we saw a big house and hurried toward it.

Everything was quiet. Apparently they had no dogs. As we wondered if the house was empty, a cross-looking old man came out and we concluded that Liu's dogs gave a more cordial welcome. When he heard that we were beggars, not only did he refuse to give us food but he began to rail at us. Annoyed, we answered in the same way.



"We have nothing to give to beggars," he said. "You're wasting your time here."

"What sort of house is it that can't afford to give food to beggars? It's not even worthy of the name of house."

"Shut your mouths and get off with you!" he shouted.

We told him we would not leave till he explained why he should not give us food, and we seated ourselves in the entrance so that he couldn't close the door, but held our bundles tightly lest he try to grab them. When he saw that we would not move, he became furious. His face was almost purple and his neck seemed to swell with the anger he was choking down. "Are you really not going?" he asked unbelieving.

We tried to bargain: if he told us why he gave no food to beggars, or if he fed us, we might go. "We've been all over the world, but we've never come across a house where they refused to give food to beggars," we explained. "What sort of family do you belong to? Begging food is not against the law. Only cruel and unkind persons refuse to give beggars something to eat."

The old man saw that we were not afraid of him, so he tried to conjure up a crooked smile. "I have no cooked rice," he said, "but if I give you some grains will you go away?"

"Only if you promise to treat other beggars who come to your house well and to feed them," Mao insisted.

The old man did not reply. He sat as if he had not heard, but when we repeated our conditions, he finally said, "Yes, yes! All right!"

We picked up our bundles, thanked him with exaggerated politeness and turned away with the words, "When we come back this way in a few days, we'll call again to ask for food."

At the next house, only half a kilometer away, a kind old couple gave us a plentiful supply of rice and vegetables and we had an interesting conversation with them. His name was Wang and he told us, "I have two sons. The older went to Sinkiang ten years ago but we have not heard from him for about five years. The younger has opened a teashop in Ningsiang District. He's not doing too badly and we do have two grandsons. They live in Ningsiang Town."

I commented, "You appear to be a very distinguished person, sir. Are you a scholar?"

"I was very keen on studying," he replied, "but my family was poor and I was able to go to school for only four years. Then I became an apprentice to a tailor, and later I was fortunate enough to obtain a job as concierge in the yamen of a district magistrate. There I picked up quite a bit of money! But you two young fellows? You don't look at all like beggars. How is it that you have to beg for a living?"

"Our families also are very poor," Mao explained, "but we want to travel and the only way we can do it is by begging."

"There's nothing wrong with begging," he said, "beggars are quite different from thieves!"

"Beggars are the most honest of men," I contended. "Much more honest than state officials."

"You're absolutely right there!" he exclaimed. "Those officials are very dishonest. When I was concierge in the yamen, the magistrate thought of nothing but money! When he judged a case, the one who gave him the most money won. It was quite useless to approach him without being prepared to grease his palm generously."

"I suppose, being concierge, you received a lot too?" asked Mao.

"Just a bit of pocket money. Nothing like what the magistrate received!"

"But how did you know when they gave money to the magistrate?" I wanted to know.

"They told me," he said.

"If both the plaintiff and the defendant gave him money," I asked, "what did he do then?"

"It just depended upon which one gave him the most. The more generous one always won the case. The one who lost was very annoyed and he always told me about all the palm-greasing."

"Wasn't the magistrate afraid?" asked Mao.

"Of what?" asked our host.

"The one who lost might lodge an accusation against him with the high court in the capital of the province," explained Mao.

"Little fear of that!" said our old man. "To take a case to the capital takes much more money than in the district, if he were to have any hope of success. And if he couldn't afford to pay the magistrate enough to win in the district, much less would he be able to pay the officials in the capital. Anyway, magistrates and other officials almost

always back each other up, as everybody knows.”

“What a situation!” exclaimed Mao.

“That doesn’t mean that there are not some good officials,” the old man hastened to add. “I was concierge for seven or eight years and I worked for three magistrates. The first was grasping; the other two really did their best to be just. But people seem to have no conception of what is right or wrong. There was no justice in the community! You can imagine how the people complained of the magistrate who based his verdicts upon the generosity of his clients; but they complained as bitterly about the two who refused to accept bribes. I told the people it was no good to offer money but they wouldn’t believe us. ‘What sort of magistrate is he, who won’t accept a gift?’ they asked. It wasn’t worth while trying to be honest. No one believed it and they thought even worse of them than of those who made no bones about what they wanted. Wasn’t it better under those circumstances to take the money and have done with it? That’s probably why there are so few honest officials.”

We agreed that his conclusions were probably correct and after a few minutes of talk, we bade the old couple goodbye and continued on our way, talking further about the deplorable state of affairs. The majority of the lower classes were ignorant and believed whatever they heard, playing into the hands of unscrupulous officials who were supposed to administer justice.

In the distance we could barely make out the Wei Shan, looking like a low cloud, but gradually it took on the form of a mountain as we drew nearer.

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### *The Buddhist Monastery on Wei Shan*

In the evening we arrived at the Wei Shan and as we approached, the uniform green background gradually resolved itself into trees surrounding the great white Buddhist temple. Soon we arrived at its foot and started up the slope.