

# Profiles from China eBook

## Profiles from China

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# Page 1

## The Hand

As you sit so, in the firelight, your hand is the color of  
new bronze.

I cannot take my eyes from your hand;  
In it, as in a microcosm, the vast and shadowy Orient  
is made visible.

Who shall read me your hand?

You are a large man, yet it is small and narrow, like the  
hand of a woman and the paw of a chimpanzee.  
It is supple and boneless as the hands wrought in pigment  
by a fashionable portrait painter. The tapering  
fingers bend backward.

Between them burns a scented cigarette. You poise it  
with infinite daintiness, like a woman under the  
eyes of her lover. The long line of your curved  
nail is fastidiousness made flesh.

Very skilful is your hand.  
With a tiny brush it can feather lines of ineffable suggestion,  
glints of hidden beauty. With a little  
tool it can carve strange dreams in ivory and  
milky jade.

And cruel is your hand.  
With the same cold daintiness and skill it can devise  
exquisite tortures, eternities of incredible pain,  
that Torquemada never glimpsed.  
And voluptuous is your hand, nice in its sense of touch.  
Delicately it can caress a quivering skin, softly it can  
glide over golden thighs.... Bilitis had not  
such long nails.

Who can read me your hand?  
In the firelight the smoke curls up fantastically from  
the cigarette between your fingers which are the  
color of new bronze.  
The room is full of strange shadows.  
I am afraid of your hand....



From  
the  
Interior

Cormorants

The boats of your masters are black;  
They are filthy with the slimy filth of ages; like the  
canals on which they float they give forth an evil  
smell.

On soiled perches you sit, swung out on either side over  
the scummy water—you who should be savage  
and untamed, who should ride on the clean breath  
of the sea and beat your pinions in the strong  
storms of the sea.

Yet you are not held.

Tamely you sit and willingly, ten wretches to a boat,  
lurching and half asleep.

Around each throat is a ring of straw, a small ring, so  
that you may swallow only small things, such as  
your masters desire.

Presently, when you reach the lake, you will dive.

At the word of your masters the parted waters will  
close over you and in your ears will be the gurgling  
of yellow streams.

Hungrily you will search in the darkened void, swiftly  
you will pounce on the silver shadow....

Then you will rise again, bearing in your beak the  
struggling prey,

And your lousy lords, whose rings are upon your  
throats, will take from you the catch, giving in its  
place a puny wriggler which can pass the gates of  
straw.

Such is your servitude.

## Page 2

Yet willingly you sit, lurching and half asleep.  
The boatmen shout one to another in nasal discords.  
    Lazily you preen your great wings, eagle wings,  
    built for the sky;  
And you yawn....

Faugh! The sight of you sickens me, divers in inland  
    filth!  
You grow lousy like your lords,  
For you have forgotten the sea.

Wusih

## A Scholar

You sit, chanting the maxims of Confucius.  
On your head is a domed cap of black satin and your  
    supple hands with their long nails are piously  
    folded.  
You rock to and fro rhythmically.  
Your voice, rising and falling in clear nasal monosyllables,  
    flows on steadily, monotonously, like the  
    flowing of water and the flowering of thought.  
You are chanting, it seems, of the pious conduct of man  
    in all ages,  
And I know you for a scoundrel.

None the less the maxims of Confucius are venerable,  
    and your voice pleasant.  
I listen attentively....

Wusih

## The Story Teller

In a corner of the market-place he sits, his face the target  
    for many eyes.  
The sombre crowd about him is motionless. Behind  
    their faces no lamp burns; only their eyes glow  
    faintly with a reflected light.  
For their eyes are on his face.  
It alone is alive, is vibrant, moving bronze under a sun



of bronze.

The taut skin, like polished metal, shines along his  
cheek and jaw. His eyes cut upward from a slender  
nose, and his quick mouth moves sharply out  
and in.

Artful are the gestures of his mouth, elaborate and  
full of guile. When he draws back the bow of  
his lips his face is like a mask of lacquer, set with  
teeth of pearl, fantastic, terrible....

What strange tale lives in the gestures of his mouth?  
Does a fox-maiden, bewitching, tiny-footed, lure a  
scholar to his doom? Is an unfilial son tortured  
of devils? Or does a decadent queen sport with  
her eunuchs?

I cannot tell.

The faces of the people are wooden; only their eyes  
burn dully with a reflected light.

I shall never know.

I am alien ... alien.

Nanking

## The Well

The Second Well under Heaven lies at the foot of the  
Sacred Mountain.

Perhaps the well is sacred because it is clean; or perhaps  
it is clean because it is sacred.

I cannot tell.

At the bottom of the well are coppers and coins with  
square holes in them, thrown thither by devout  
hands. They gleam enticingly through the shallow  
water.

The people crowd about the well, leaning brown covetous  
faces above the coping as my copper falls  
slantwise to rest.





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Perhaps it will bring me luck, who knows?  
It is a very sacred well.  
Or perhaps, when it is quite dark, someone who is  
hungry....  
Then the luck will be his!

The Village of the Mud Idols

## The Abandoned God

In the cold darkness of eternity he sits, this god who  
has grown old.  
His rounded eyes are open on the whirl of time, but  
man who made him has forgotten him.

Blue is his graven face, and silver-blue his hands. His  
eyebrows and his silken beard are scarlet as the  
hope that built him.  
The yellow dragon on his rotting robes still rears itself  
majestically, but thread by thread time eats its  
scales away,  
And man who made him has forgotten him.

For incense now he breathes the homely smell of rice  
and tea, stored in his anteroom;  
For priests the busy spiders hang festoons between his  
fingers, and nest them in his yellow nails.  
And darkness broods upon him.  
The veil that hid the awful face of godhead from the  
too impetuous gaze of worshippers serves in decay  
to hide from deity the living face of man,  
So god no longer sees his maker.

Let us drop the curtain and be gone!  
I am old too, here in eternity.

Pa-tze-kiao

## The Bridge

The Bridge of the Eight Scholars spans the canal narrowly.  
On the gray stone of its arch are carvings in low relief,  
and the curve of its span is pleasing to the eye.



No one knows how old is the Bridge of the Eight  
Scholars.

In our house-boat we pass under it. The boatman  
with the rat-like face twists the long broken-backed  
oar, churning the yellow water, and we creep forward  
steadily.

On the bridge the village is assembled. Foreign devils  
are a rarity.

The gold-brown faces are not unfriendly, merely curious.  
They peer in rows over the rail with grunts  
of nasal interest.

Tentatively, experimentally, as we pass they spit down  
upon us. Not that they wish us ill, but it can be  
done, and the temptation is too great.

We retire into the house-boat.

The roof scrapes as we pass under the span of the  
Bridge of the Eight Scholars.

Pa-tze-kiao

## The Shop

(The articles sold here are to be burned at funerals for the use of the dead in the spirit  
world.)

The master of the shop is a pious man, in good odor  
with the priests.

He is old and honorable and his white moustache  
droops below his chin.

Mencius, I think, looked so.

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The shop behind him is a mimic world, a world  
of pieties and shams—the valley of remembrance—the  
dwelling place of the unquiet dead.

Here on his shelves are ranged the splendor and the  
panoply of life, silk in smooth gleaming rolls, silver  
in ingots, carving and embroidery and jade, a  
scarlet bearer-chair, a pipe for opium....

Whatever life has need of, it is here,  
And it is for the dead.

Whatever life has need of, it is here. Yet it is here in  
sham, in effigy, in tortured compromise.

The dead have need of silk. Yet silk is dear, and  
there are living backs to clothe.

The rolls are paper.... Do not look too close.

The dead I think will understand.

The carvings, too, the bearer-chair, the jade—yes,  
they are paper; and the shining ingots, they are  
tinsel.

Yet they are made with skill and loving care!  
And if the priest knows—surely he must know!—  
when they are burned they'll serve the dead as  
well as verities.

So living mouths can feed.

The master of the shop is a pious man. He has attained  
much honor and his white moustache droops  
below his chin.

“Such an one” he says “I burned for my own father.

And such an one my son will burn for me.

For I am old, and half my life already dwells among  
the dead.”

And, as he speaks, behind him in the shop I feel the  
presence of a hovering host, the myriads of the  
immortal dead, the rulers of the spirit in this  
land....

For in this kingdom of the dead they who are living  
cling with fevered hands to the torn fringes of the  
mighty past. And if they fail a little, compromise....

The dead I think will understand.



Soochow

## My Servant

The feet of my servant thump on the floor. *Thump*,  
they go, and *thump*—dully, deformedly.  
My servant has shown me her feet.  
The instep has been broken upward into a bony cushion.  
The big toe is pointed as an awl. The small  
toes are folded under the cushioned instep. Only  
the heel is untouched.  
The thing is white and bloodless with the pallor of  
dead flesh.

But my servant is quite contented.  
She smiles toothlessly and shows me how small are her  
feet, her “golden lilies.”

*Thump*, they go, and *thump*!

Wusih

## The Feast

So this is the wedding feast!  
The room is not large, but it is heavily crowded, filled  
with small tables, filled with many human bodies.  
About the walls are paintings and banners in sharp  
colors; above our heads hang innumerable gaudy  
lanterns of wood and paper. We sit in furs,

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shivering with the cold.  
The food passes endlessly, droll combinations in brown  
gravies—roses, sugar, and lard—duck and  
bamboo—lotus, chestnuts, and fish-eggs—an  
“eight-precious pudding.”  
They tempt curiosity; my chop-sticks are busy. The  
warm rice-wine trickles sparingly.

The groom is invisible somewhere, but the bride  
martyrs among us. She is clad in scarlet satin,  
heavily embroidered with gold. On her head is  
an edifice of scarlet and pearls.  
For weeks, I know, she has wept in protest.  
The feast-mother leads her in to us with sacrificial  
rites. Her eyes are closed, hidden behind her  
curtain of strung beads; for three days she will  
not open them. She has never seen the bridegroom.

At the feast she sits like her own effigy. She neither  
eats nor speaks.  
Opposite her, across the narrow table, is a wall of  
curious faces, lookers-on—children and half-grown  
boys, beggars and what-not—the gleanings  
of the streets.  
They are quiet but they watch hungrily.  
To-night, when the bridegroom draws the scarlet curtains  
of the bed, they will still be watching  
hungrily....

Strange, formless memories out of books struggle upward  
in my consciousness. This is the marriage  
at Cana.... I am feasting with the Caliph  
at Bagdad.... I am the wedding guest who  
beat his breast....  
My heart is troubled.  
What shall be said of blood-brotherhood between man  
and man?

Wusih



## The Beggar

*Christ! What is that—that—Thing? Only a beggar, professionally maimed, I think.*

Across the narrow street it lies, the street where little children are.

It is rocking its body back and forth, back and forth, ingratiatingly, in the noisome filth.

Beside the body are stretched two naked stumps of flesh, on one the remnant of a foot. The wounds are not new wounds, but they are open and they fester. There are flies on them.

The Thing is whining, shrilly, hideously.

*Professionally maimed, I think. Christ!*

Hwai Yuen

## Interlude

It is going to be hot here.

Already the sun is treacherous and a dull mugginess is in the air. I note that winter clothes are shedding one by one.

In the market-place sits a coolie, expanding in the warmth.

He has opened his ragged upper garments and his bronze body is naked to the belt.

He is examining it minutely, occasionally picking at something with the dainty hand of the Orient.

If he had ever seen a zoological garden I should say he was imitating the monkeys there.

As he has not, I dare say the taste is ingrained.

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At all events it is going to be hot here.

The Village of the Mud Idols

### The City Wall

About the city where I dwell, guarding it close, runs  
an embattled wall.

It was not new I think when Arthur was a king, and  
plumed knights before a British wall made brave  
clangor of trumpets, that Launcelot came forth.  
It was not new I think, and now not it but chivalry is  
old.

Without, the wall is brick, with slots for firing, and it  
drops straightway into the evil moat, where offal  
floats and nameless things are thrown.

Within, the wall is earth; it slants more gently down,  
covered with grass and stubbly with cut weeds.  
Below it in straw lairs the beggars herd, patiently  
whining, stretching out their sores.  
And on the top a path runs.

As I walk, lifted above the squalor and the dirt, the  
timeless miracle of sunset mantles in the west,  
The blue dusk gathers close  
And beauty moves immortal through the land.  
And I walk quickly, praying in my heart that beauty  
will defend me, will heal up the too great wounds  
of China.

I will not look—to-night I will not look—where at  
my feet the little coffins are,  
The boxes where the beggar children lie, unburied  
and unwatched.

I will not look again, for once I saw how one was  
broken, torn by the sharp teeth of dogs. A little  
tattered dress was there, and some crunched  
bones....

I need not look. What can it help to look?

Ah, I am past!  
And still the sunset glows.



The tall pagoda, like a velvet flower, blossoms against  
the sky; the Sacred Mountain fades, and in the  
town a child laughs suddenly.

I will hold fast to beauty! Who am I, that I should  
die for these?

I will go down. I am too sorely hurt, here on the  
city wall.

Wusih

## Woman

Strangely the sight of you moves me.  
I have no standard by which to appraise you; the outer  
shell of you is all I know.  
Yet irresistibly you draw me.

Your small plump body is closely clad in blue brocaded  
satin. The fit is scrupulous, yet no woman's figure  
is revealed. You are decorously shapeless.  
Your satin trousers even are lined with fur.  
Your hair is stiff and lustrous as polished ebony, bound  
at the neck in an adamantine knot, in which dull  
pearls are encrusted.





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Your face is young and round and inscrutably alien.  
Your complexion is exquisite, matte gold over-lying  
    blush pink, textured like ripe fruit.  
Your nose is flat, the perfect nose of China.  
Your eyes—your eyes are witchery!  
The blank curtain of your upper lid droops sharply on  
    the iris, and when you smile the corners twinkle  
    upward.  
It is your eyes, I think, that move me.  
They are so bright, so black!  
They are alert and full of curiosity as the eyes of a  
    squirrel, and like the eyes of a squirrel they have  
    no depth behind them.  
They are windows opening on a world as small as your  
    bound feet, a world of ignorances, and vacuities,  
    and kitchen-gods.

And yet your eyes are witchery. When you smile you  
    are the woman-spirit, adorable.

I cannot appraise you, yet strangely the sight of you  
    moves me.  
I believe that I shall dream of you.

Pa-tze-kiao

## Our Chinese Acquaintance

We met him in the runway called a street, between the  
    warrens known as houses.  
He looked still the same, but his French-cut tweeds,  
    his continental hat, and small round glasses were  
    alien here.  
About him we felt a troubled uncertainty.  
  
He greeted us gladly. "It is good," he said in his  
    soft French, "to see my foreign friends again.  
You find our city dirty I am sure. On every stone  
    dirt grows in China.  
How the people crowd! The street is choked. *No*  
    *jee ba!* Go away, curious ones! The ladies  
    cannot breathe....  
No, my people are not clean. They do not understand,



I think. In Belgium where I studied—  
... Yes, I was studying in Bruges, studying  
Christianity, when the great war came.  
We, you know, love peace. I could not see....

“So I came home.

“But China is very dirty.... Our priests are rascals,  
and the people ... I do not know.

“Is there, perhaps, a true religion somewhere? The  
Greeks died too—and they were clean.”  
Behind his glasses his slant eyes were troubled.  
“I do not know,” he said.

Wusih

## The Spirit Wall

It stands before my neighbor's door, between him and  
the vegetable garden and the open toilet pots and  
the dirty canal.

Not that he wishes to hide these things.

On the contrary, he misses the view.

But China, you must understand, is full of evil spirits,  
demons of the earth and air, foxes and *shui-mang*  
devils, and only the priest knows what beside.

A man may at any moment be bewitched, so that his  
silk-worms die and his children go blind and he  
gets the devil-sickness.

So living is difficult.

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But Heaven has providentially decreed that these evil  
spirits can travel only in a straight line. Around  
a corner their power evaporates.  
So my neighbor has built a wall that runs before his  
door. Windows of course he has none.  
He cannot see his vegetable garden, and his toilet pots,  
and the dirty canal.  
But he is quite safe!

Wusih

## The Most-Sacred Mountain

Space, and the twelve clean winds of heaven,  
And this sharp exultation, like a cry, after the slow  
six thousand steps of climbing!  
This is Tai Shan, the beautiful, the most holy.

Below my feet the foot-hills nestle, brown with flecks  
of green; and lower down the flat brown plain, the  
floor of earth, stretches away to blue infinity.  
Beside me in this airy space the temple roofs cut their  
slow curves against the sky,  
And one black bird circles above the void.

Space, and the twelve clean winds are here;  
And with them broods eternity—a swift, white peace,  
a presence manifest.  
The rhythm ceases here. Time has no place. This  
is the end that has no end.

Here when Confucius came, a half a thousand years  
before the Nazarene, he stepped, with me, thus  
into timelessness.  
The stone beside us waxes old, the carved stone that  
says: *On this spot once Confucius stood and  
felt the smallness of the world below.*



The stone grows old.  
Eternity  
Is not for stones.

But I shall go down from this airy space, this swift  
white peace, this stinging exultation;  
And time will close about me, and my soul stir to the  
rhythm of the daily round.  
Yet, having known, life will not press so close, and  
always I shall feel time ravel thin about me;  
For once I stood  
In the white windy presence of eternity.

Tai Shan

## The Dandy

He swaggers in green silk and his two coats are lined  
with fur. Above his velvet shoes his trim, bound  
ankles twinkle pleasantly.  
His nails are of the longest.  
Quite the glass of fashion is Mr. Chu!  
In one slim hand—the ultimate punctilio—dangles  
a bamboo cage, wherein a small brown bird sits  
with a face of perpetual surprise.  
Mr. Chu smiles the benevolent smile of one who satisfies  
both fashion and a tender heart.  
Does not a bird need an airing?

Wusih

## New China: The Iron Works

The furnaces, the great steel furnaces, tremble and  
glow; gigantic machinery clanks, and in living  
iridescent streams the white-hot slag pours out.  
This is to-morrow set in yesterday, the west imbedded  
in the east, a graft but not a growth.



## Page 9

And you who walk beside me, picking your familiar way  
between the dynamos, the cars, the piles of rails—  
you too are of to-morrow, grafted with an alien  
energy.

You wear the costume of the west, you speak my  
tongue as one who knows; you talk casually of  
Sheffield, Pittsburgh, Essen....

You touch on Socialism, walk-outs, and the industrial  
population of the British Isles.

Almost you might be one of us.

And then I ask:

"How much do those poor coolies earn a day, who  
take the place of carts?"

You shrug and smile.

"Eighteen coppers. Something less than eight cents  
in your money. They are not badly paid. They  
do not die."

Again I ask:

"And is it true that you've a Yamen, a police judge,  
all your own?"

Another shrug and smile.

"Yes, he attends to all small cases of disorder. For  
larger crimes we pass the offender over to the  
city courts."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Conditions" you explain as we sit later with a cup  
of tea, "conditions here are difficult."

Your figure has grown lax, your voice a little weary.

You are fighting, I can see, upheld by that strange  
graft of western energy.

Yet odds are heavy, and the Orient is in your blood.

Your voice is weary.

"There are no skilled laborers" you say, "Among  
the owners no coöperation.

It is like—like working in a nightmare, here in China.

It drags at me, it drags"....

You bow me out with great civility.

The furnaces, the great steel furnaces, tremble and  
glow, gigantic machinery clanks and in living  
iridescent streams the white-hot slag pours out.



Beyond the gate the filth begins again.  
A beggar rots and grovels, clutching at my skirt with  
leprous hands. A woman sits sorting hog-bristles;  
she coughs and sobs.

The stench is sickening.

*To-morrow!* did they say?

Hanyang

## Spring

The toilet pots are very loud today.  
It is spring and the warmth is highly favorable to fermentation.  
Some odors are unbelievable.

At the corner of my street is an especially fragrant  
reservoir. It is three feet in diameter, set flush  
with the earth, and well filled.  
Above it squats a venerable Chinaman with a face such  
as Confucius must have worn.  
His silk skirt is gathered daintily about his waist, and  
his rounded rear is suspended in mid-air over the  
broken pottery rim.  
He gazes at me contemplatively as I pass with eyes in  
which the philosophy of the ages has its dwelling.

I wonder whether he too feels the spring.

Wusih

## Meditation



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In all the city where I dwell two spaces only are wide  
and clean.

One is the compound about the great church of the  
mission within the wall; the other is the courtyard  
of the great factory beyond the wall.

In these two, one can breathe.

And two sounds there are, above the multitudinous crying  
of the city, two sounds that recur as time recurs—the  
great bell of the mission and the  
whistle of the factory.

Every hour of the day the mission bell strikes, clear,  
deep-toned—telling perhaps of peace.

And in the morning and in the evening the factory  
whistle blows, shrill, provocative—telling surely  
of toil.

Now, when the mulberry trees are bare and the wintry  
wind lifts the rags of the beggars, the day shift  
at the factory is ten hours, and the night shift  
is fourteen.

They are divided one from the other by the whistle,  
shrill, provocative.

The mission and the factory are the West. What  
they are I know.

And between them lies the Orient—struggling and  
suffering, spawning and dying—but what it is  
I shall never know.

Yet there are two clean spaces in the city where I dwell,  
the compound of the church within the wall, and  
the courtyard of the factory beyond the wall.

It is something that in these two one can breathe.

Wusih

## Chinese New Year

Mrs. Sung has a new kitchen-god.

The old one—he who has presided over the household  
this twelvemonth—has returned to the  
Celestial Regions to make his report.

Before she burned him Mrs. Sung smeared his mouth



with sugar; so that doubtless the report will be favorable.

Now she has a new god.

As she paid ten coppers for him he is handsomely painted and should be highly efficacious.

So there is rejoicing in the house of Mrs. Sung.

Peking

## Echoes

### Crepuscule

Like the patter of rain on the crisp leaves of autumn  
are the tiny footfalls of the fox-maidens.

## Festival of the Dragon Boats

On the fifth day of the fifth month the statesman Kueh Yuen drowned himself in the river Mih-lo.

Since then twenty-three centuries have passed, and the mountains wear away.

Yet every year, on the fifth day of the fifth month,  
the great Dragon Boats, gay with flags and gongs,  
search diligently in the streams of the Empire  
for the body of Kueh Yuen.

## Kang Yi

When Kang Yi had been long dead the Empress decreed  
upon him posthumous decapitation, so that  
he walks for ever disgraced among the shades.





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### Poetics

While two ladies of the Imperial harem held before  
him a screen of pink silk, and a P'in Concubine  
knelt with his ink-slab, Li Po, who was very  
drunk, wrote an impassioned poem to the moon.

### A Lament of Scarlet Cloud

O golden night, lit by the flame of seven stars, the  
years have drunk you too.

### The Son of Heaven

Like this frail and melancholy rain is the memory of  
the Emperor Kuang-Hsue, and of his sufferings at  
the hand of Yehonala.

Yet under heaven was there found no one to avenge  
him.

Now he has mounted the Dragon and has visited the  
Nine Springs. His betrayer sits upon the Dragon  
Throne.

Yet among the shades may he not take comfort from  
the presence of his Pearl Concubine?

### The Dream

When he had tasted in a dream of the Ten Courts of  
Purgatory, Doctor Tseng was humbled in spirit,  
and passed his life in piety among the foot-hills.

### Feng-Shui

At the Hour of the Horse avoid raising a roof-tree,  
for by the trampling of his hoofs it may  
be beaten down;

And at the Hour of the cunning Rat go not near a  
soothsayer, for by his cunning he may mislead



the oracle, and the hopes of the enquirer come  
to naught.

China of the Tourists

## Reflections in a Ricksha

This ricksha is more comfortable than some.  
The springs are not broken, and the seat is covered  
with a white cloth.  
Also the runner is young and sturdy, and his legs flash  
pleasantly.  
I am not ill at ease.

The runner interests me.  
Between the shafts he trots easily and familiarly, lifting  
his knees prettily and holding his shoulders  
steady.  
His hips are lean and narrow as a filly's; his calves  
might have posed for Praxiteles.  
He is a modern, I perceive, for he wears no queue.  
Above a rounded neck rises a shock of hair the shade  
of dusty coal. Each hair is stiff and erect as a  
brush bristle. There are lice in them no doubt—  
but then perhaps we of the West are too squeamish  
in details of this minor sort.  
What interests me chiefly is the back of his ears. Not  
that they are extraordinary as ears; it is their  
very normality that touches me. I find them  
smaller than those of a horse, but undoubtedly  
near of kin.

There is no denying the truth of evolution;  
Yet as a beast of burden man is distinctly inferior.



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It is odd.  
At home I am a democrat. A republic, a true republic,  
seems not improbable, a fighting dream.  
Yet beholding the back of the ears of a trotting man  
I perceive it to be impossible—the millennium  
another million years away.  
I grow insufferably superior and Anglo-Saxon.  
I am sorry, but what would you?  
One is what one is.

Hankow

### The Camels

Whence do you come, and whither make return, you  
silent padding beasts?  
Over the mountain passes; through the Great Wall; to  
Kalgan—and beyond, whither?...

Here in the city you are alien, even as I am alien.  
Your sidling jaw, your pendulous neck—incredible—and  
that slow smile about your eyes and lip,  
these are not of this land.  
About you some far sense of mystery, some tawny  
charm, hangs ever.  
Silently, with the dignity of the desert, your caravans  
move among the hurrying hordes, remote and  
slowly smiling.

But whence are you, and whither do you make return?  
Over the mountain passes; through the Great Wall; to  
Kalgan—and beyond, whither?...

Peking

### The Connoisseur: An American

He is not an old man, but he is lonely.  
He who was born in the clash of a western city dwells  
here, in this silent courtyard, alone.  
Seven servants he has, seven men-servants. They  
move about quietly and their slippered feet make



no sound. Behind their almond eyes move green,  
sidelong shadows, and their limber hands are  
never still.

In his house the riches of the Orient are gathered.  
Ivory he has, carved in a thousand quaint, enticing  
shapes—pleasant to the hand, smooth with the  
caressing of many fingers.

And jade is there, dark green and milky white, with  
amber from Korea and strange gems—beryl,  
chrysoprase, jasper, sardonyx....

His lacquered shelves hold priceless pottery—peachblow  
and cinnabar and silver grey—pottery  
glazed like the new moon, fired how long ago  
for a moon-pale princess of the East, whose very  
name is dust!

In his vaults are incredible textures and colors that  
vibrate like struck jade.

Stiff with gold brocade they are, or soft as the coat of  
a fawn—these sacred robes of a long dead priest,  
silks of a gold-skinned courtesan, embroideries of  
a lost throne.

When he unfolds them the shimmering heaps are like  
living opals, burning and moving darkly with the  
warm breath of beauty.

And other priceless things the collector has, so that  
in many days he could not look upon them all.  
Every morning his seven men-servants dress him, and  
every evening they undress him. Behind their  
almond eyes move green sidelong shadows.  
In this silent courtyard the collector lives.  
He is not an old man but he is lonely.

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Peking

### Sunday in the British Empire: Hong Kong

In the aisle of the cathedral it lies, an army rifle of  
the latest type.

It is laid on the black and white mosaic, between the  
carved oaken pews and the strip of brown carpet  
in the aisle.

A crimson light from the stained-glass window yonder  
glints on the blue steel of its barrel, and the  
khaki of its shoulder-strap blends with the brown  
of the carpet.

The stiff backs of its owner and a hundred like him  
are very still.

The vested choir chants prettily.

Then the bishop speaks:

“O God, who art the author of peace and lover of  
concord,... defend us thy humble servants  
in all assaults of our enemies.”

“Amen!” say the owners of the khaki backs.

The light has shifted a little. On the blue steel barrel  
of the rifle the glint is turquoise now.

That will be from the robe of the shepherd in the window  
yonder, He of the quiet eyes....

Hong Kong

### On the Canton River Boat

Up and down, up and down, paces the sentry.

He is dressed in a uniform of khaki and his socks are  
green. Over his shoulder is slung a rifle, and  
from his belt hang a pistol and cartridge pouch.

He is, I think, Malay and Chinese mixed.

Behind him the rocky islands, hazed in blue, the yellow  
sun-drenched water, the tropic shore, pass as a  
background in a dream.

He only is sweltering reality.



Yet he is here to guard against a nightmare, an  
anachronism, something that I cannot grasp.  
He is guarding me from pirates.

Piracy! The very name is fantastic in my ears, colored  
like a toucan in the zoo.  
And yet the ordinance is clear: “Four armed guards,  
strong metal grills behind the bridge, the engine-room  
enclosed—in case of piracy.”

The socks of the sentry are green.  
Up and down, up and down he paces, between the  
bridge and the first of the life-boats.  
In my deck chair I grow restless.

Am I then so far removed from life, so wrapped in  
cotton wool, so deep-sunk in the soft lap of civilization,  
that I cannot feel the cold splash of truth?  
It is a disquieting thought—for certainly piracy seems  
as fantastic as ever.

The socks of the sentry annoy me. They are *too*  
green for so hot a day.  
And his shoes squeak.  
I should feel much cooler if he wouldn't pace so.  
Piracy!

Somewhere on the River

## The Altar of Heaven

Beneath the leaning, rain-washed sky this great white  
circle—beautiful!



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In three white terraces the circle lies, piled one on  
one toward Heaven. And on each terrace the  
white balustrade climbs in aspiring marble, etched  
in cloud.

And Heaven is very near.

For this is worship native as the air, wide as the  
wind, and poignant as the rain,  
Pure aspiration, the eternal dream.

Beneath the leaning sky this great white circle!

Peking

## The Chair Ride

The coolies lift and strain;

My chair creaks rhythmically.

It is not yet morning and the live darkness pushes  
about us, a greedy darkness that has swallowed  
even the stars.

In all the world there is left only my chair, with the  
tiny horn lantern before it.

There are also, it is true, the undersides of trees in  
the lantern-light and the stony path that flows  
past ceaselessly.

But these things flit and change.

Only I and the chair and the darkness are permanent.  
We have been moving so since time was in the  
womb.

The seat of my chair is of wicker.

It is not unlike an invalid chair, and I, in it, am swaddled  
like an invalid, wrapped in layer on layer  
of coddling wool.

But there are no wheels to my chair. I ride on the  
steady feet of four queued coolies.

The tramp of their lifted shoes is the rhythm of being,  
throbbing in me as my own heart throbs.

Save for their feet the bearers are silent. They move  
softly through the live darkness. But now and  
again I am shifted skilfully from one shoulder to  
the other.



The breath of the coolies is short.  
They strain, and in spite of the cold I know they are  
sweating.  
It is wicked of course!  
My five dollars ought not to buy life.  
But it is all they understand;  
And even I am not precisely comfortable.

The darkness is thinning a little.  
On either side loom featureless black hills, their summits  
sharp and ragged.  
The Great Wall is somewhere hereabouts.

My chair creaks rhythmically.  
In another year it will be day.

Ching-lung-chiao

## **The Sikh Policeman: A British Subject**

Of what, I wonder, are you thinking?  
It is something beyond my world I know, something  
that I cannot guess.  
Yet I wonder.

Of nothing Chinese can you be thinking, for you hate  
them with an automatic hatred—the hatred of  
the well-fed for the starved, of the warlike for  
the weak.

When they cross you, you kick them, viciously, with  
the drawing back of your silken beard, your  
black, black beard, from your white teeth.  
With a snarl you kick them, sputtering curses in short  
gutturals.  
You do not even speak their tongue, so it cannot be  
of them you are thinking.





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Yet neither do you speak the tongue of the master  
whom you serve.  
No more do you know of us the “Masters” than you  
know of them the “dogs.”  
We are above you, they below.  
And between us you stand, guarding the street, erect  
and splendid, lithe and male. Your scarlet turban  
frames your neat black head,  
And you are thinking.

Or are you?  
Perhaps we only are stung with thought.  
I wonder.

Shanghai

## The Lady of Easy Virtue: An American

*Lotus,*  
So they called your name.  
Yet the green swelling pod, the fruit-like seeds and  
heavy flower, are nothing like to you.  
Rather, like a pitcher plant you are, for hope and all  
young wings are drowned in you.  
  
Your slim body, here in the cafe, moves brightly in  
and out. Green satin, and a dance, white wine  
and gleaming laughter, with two nodding earrings—these  
are Lotus.  
And in the painted eyes cold steel, and on the lips a  
vulgar jest;  
Hands that fly ever to the coat lapels, familiar to  
the wrists and to the hair of men. These too  
are Lotus.  
And what more—God knows!

You too perhaps were stranded here, like these poor  
homesick boys, in this great catch-all where the  
white race ends, this grim Shanghai that like a  
sieve hangs over filth and loneliness.  
You were caught here like these, and who could live,  
young and so slender—in Shanghai?  
Green satin, and a gleaming throat, and painted eyes



of steel,  
Hunter or hunted,  
Peace be with you,  
*Lotus!*

Shanghai

## In the Mixed Court: Shanghai

Two men sit in judgment on their fellows.  
Side by side they sit, raised on the pedestal of the law,  
at grips with squalor and ignorance.  
They are civilization—and they are very grave.

One of them is of my own people, a small man, definite,  
hard-featured, an accurate weapon of small  
calibre.

Of the other I cannot judge.

He is heavily built, and when he is still the dignity of  
the Orient is about him like his robe. His head  
is large and beautifully domed, his hands tapering  
and aristocratic.

When he speaks it is of subtleties.

But when he speaks his dignity drops from him. His  
eyes shift quickly from one end of their little slit  
to the other, his mouth, his full brown mouth,  
moves over-fast, his hands flicker back and forth.

The courtroom is crowded with ominous yellow poverty.  
The cases are of many sorts.

A woman, she of the little tortured feet and sullen face,  
has kidnapped a small boy to sell. A man was  
caught smuggling opium. A tea-merchant, in  
dark green silk, complains

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that he was decoyed  
and held prisoner in a lodging-house for ransom.  
A gambling den has been raided and the ivory  
dominoes are shown in court.  
The prisoners are stoically sullen. The odor of them  
fills the room.

Above them sit the two men, raised on the pedestal  
of the law, judging their fellows.  
I turn to the man beside me, waiting his case.  
“Tell me” I ask “of these men, which is the better  
judge?”  
He answers carefully.  
“The Chinaman is cleverer by half. He sees where  
the other is blind. But Chinese magistrates are  
bought, and this one sells himself too cheap.”  
“And the other?” I ask again.  
“A good man, and quite honest. You see he doesn’t  
care.”

The judges put their heads together. They are civilization  
and they are very grave.  
What, I wonder, is civilization?

Shanghai