

Poems to the New China

All was so peaceful and quiet in the courtyard,
The tiles were scrupulously clean and the flowers were fresh.
Old men puffed at their pipes,
The little children played with decorum;
There were many servants hustling about—
But they counted as nothing.

All is so peaceful and quiet in the courtyard,
The tiles are broken and the flowers have disappeared;
The old men are also gone,
And instead of children, birds are hopping about the ruins.
The many servants have also gone; they have become real men and women.

For thousands of years we paid homage to our ancestors,
And the empire prospered (so we have been told);
There were the multitudes,
Caught between the landlords and the swollen rivers,
And if they had ancestors, nobody cared.

Now we shall pay homage equally to our descendents –
For what better tribute to the ancestors than worthy descendents?
We shall harness the rivers and humanize the landlords,
And help everybody to have worthy offspring,
That their ancestors may be better pleased.

There was always bustle in the cities;
If you wanted solitude you went to the temples.
Little attention is given to the temples today,
For instead of the Perfect Sublime Buddha,
There have been a procession of gods and fanciful creatures,
Who have destroyed the solitude and beauty of the ancient world.

There was always bustle in the cities;
The Emperor and his court of ages were expected to produce harmony therefrom,
But the Emperor became a prey to self-seekers,
And caring naught for his people, lost his throne.
Then there followed processions of war lords and dictators,
Who have destroyed the spirit of universal harmony;
But it is only on the surface—
The soul of China has been enthroned in the human hearts.

The ancient Empire was ruthless to its forests,
But it gave us the peony and pomegranate,
The melon and the tangerine.
The new China will rebuild its forests,

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And give us better peonies and pomegranates,
And still better melons and tangerines.

The ancient Empire gave us porcelain and stoneware,
And silks and lacquer and tea and printed books.
These also will the new China supply,
These and many other blessings
Without destroying tradition,
Without being hampered by tradition.

The old men used to sit in the garden or by the river,
And breathe that atmosphere of calmness
Which is the very spirit of godliness in man.

Then came the foreigner and the machine and opium,
Languid sleep dispossessed the personal calmness,
Until the ancient dragon itself became the victim of lassitude.

But he is not dead; that dragon is not dead!
Neither wars nor warlords, monkey-men nor red-beards can slay the giant.
When the night of terror is over,
The old men shall again sit in their gardens or by the river,
Drinking tea and pouring out that atmosphere of Calmness
Which so typifies China.

Who would think that grass could establish a civilization,
But look what has come from bamboo!
Who would dream that sterile soil contained endless treasures,
But see the procession of good things derived from clay!
Who would say that the machines which have been trampling upon us
Might some day become the servants to raise us to greater heights!

When the soldiers will talk to one another,
It will not be necessary to send foreign diplomats,
Nor ask contending leaders to settle their differences.
The dragon will awaken,
The nation will re-assert itself,
And the truth become manifest.

While the marvels of science encompass the world,
And the wonders of machines are shown to all,
Your greatest thinkers seek the secret of the Golden Flower,
And the key to the Book of Changes.

Western barbarians exult in national boundaries and patriotism,
But we, who seem so swallowed in the tradition of family,
Known that there is a patriotism beyond family
Which needs no propaganda.

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Some day the sword will no longer be used,
The cannonading will be stilled;
Then we may combat the locust in joy,
And triumph in harnessing our great rivers.

Some day the war lords will disappear,
And men will settle their differences in the tea-house.
Then we shall delight even in poverty and famine,
And be most happy in battling filth and disease.

Some day the air-monsters will cease from destroying,
And be carrying merchandise and people;
The five nationals will communicate with one another,
And there shall be no walls between them.

Some day there will be a resurrection,
The peasant and artist and coolie and student will cooperate,
Families will reunite, the village life shall be restored,
And the new, without ceasing to be new, shall assimilate the ancient.

If the soul of men is not hampered by the machine,
If the skillfulness of man is not displaced,
The potter's craft will advance still further,
The earth will soon yield untold treasures,
And what has been done with the soy-bean,
Can also be done with products of field and forest and mountain.

You bring us so much, we seem to give you so little,
You offer us so much, we seem to return so little;
You bring us what we want and what you think we need,
And sometimes we accept and sometimes we refuse;
Often you insist and leave us no choice,
For you live in time and we persist in eternity.

You bring things of the world and presume happiness is stored in them;
We know what has been in the world and have our own values.
You look forward to greater and greater inventions,
While we extolled the days of Shang and Han and T'ang.
You have suffered and we have suffered,
Like the young you forget your pains and go on,
Like the sages we experience our pains and go on,
For you live in time and we persist in eternity.

You live and move and have your being in progress,
We live and move and have our being in patience;
You would ignore the past and cannot,
We would ignore the future and cannot;
We receive your science and machinery,

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But we cannot force our wisdom upon you—
Only deep understanding of suffering makes way for patience.
We have lost our homes, our lands, even our country,
But we have not lost our tradition of patience.
China cannot die.

The next time you sit for a cup of tea,
Carefully regard the cup:
Its texture, its translucency, its colours,
And meditate over the skillfulness put into every stage of fabrication.
Carefully look at the table also and the surroundings,
And when the tea comes,
Smell it, touch it by handling the brimming cup,
And consider how unworthy you are and how thankful
To receive such a gift.
Then you will enjoy the tea-house,
Then you will enjoy the cup of tea,
Then you will feel blessed even with a tiny sip.