Rural China

Evelyn Speiden

The "Garden Spot of China" is the area near the coast of Chekiang Province, just south of the Yangtsze River. In contrast to the great, dusty, treeless stretches of the north, this area gives the impression of great fertility with its endless small patches of varied green. In this section, too, China's best known products are grown—rice, tea and the mulberry groves for silkworm feeding. It is a level land bordered by green foothills. Seen from the temple-crowned peak of one of these, it appears to be largely water covered. Ancient canals thread out from the lakes and streams, themselves so old and well-fitted into the landscape that they seem more like natural waterways than partially man-made channels. Ridges line the water's edge, and from a boat are visible only the lines of mulberry trees crowning the ridge, forming good wind breaks and holding the soil with their wide-spreading roots. Such queer, misshapen plants as these trees are! The trunks, rising to shoulder height, end in a great knarled fist. Slender switches sprout from this in all directions. Mulberry trees are never allowed to grow old in natural dignity, for each spring as soon as these switches put out leaves they are cut off at the base and taken indoors, a few at a time, to feed the hungry silkworms. Sometimes even a second crop of small branches is cut in one season, so that the trees become queer, deformed features of the landscape. They are characteristic only of this section, however, for the silkworms of the north are fed on oak leaves. There the worms are taken out to the oak groves and placed upon the trees, while guards watch night and day during the feeding season, so precious is this crop which produces our pongee silk.

A planting of mulberries sometimes extends back from the canal, and between its precise rows space is always left for the lines of cabbage plants, carefully set so that cultivation is possible in both directions. They are more naturally formed plants than our cabbages, with their smooth green leaves and curved white stalks and midribs, from which comes their name of "White Vegetable." One can get them often in good Chinese restaurants in this country. In the Freer Art Gallery in Washington, D. C., is also a sample—a picture on an old scroll—an enlarged and glorified cabbage, but true to form. The artist-farmer knew his cabbage as well as he knew beauty of form and line when he saw it even in the commonplace. He might have made many other cabbage pictures, for the Chinese farmer cultivates a larger variety of them than we know—some heading; some loose-leaf; one open, flat-topped head with a curly, yellow center; some quite dwarf. Other members of the cabbage family commonly grown include mustard greens, turnips, the yellow rape used for oil and often cultivated in carefully-made, raised beds with paths at regular intervals. Radishes, large or long, and with skins of white, red or black, add attractive color to the produce piled on the little rowboats passing into the city gates at dawn. Common too are several varieties of beet greens, as well as greens belonging to the spinach family, with stalks of bright red or

green or white. Besides the soy beans grown in such variety and for so many uses, there are shell beans of numerous colors, sizes and shapes; also green beans similar to ours, others quite strange in appearance with flat, hairy pods but a delicious flavor. The great broad or fava bean is used in different ways, according to its stage of growth. Tomatoes have been unknown until recently introduced. Eggplant is inferior to ours, also some melons, while others are delightful both in appearance and flavor. Cucumbers and sweet potatoes are common articles of diet. Pumpkins and sunflowers, as well as melons, are raised also for their seeds. These are prepared in special ways and eaten much as we would eat peanuts, which with certain dried and salted beans are often eaten with rice for breakfast. Altogether the very poor, who can afford little or no meat, need not suffer for lack of a good variety of vegetables. All of these and more are to be found in the small holder's garden in China, usually in alternating rows, for mixed cultures are valued in these small gardens. They are often on raised beds with walks between for better drainage during the rainy season. Then the nearby streams may rise to inconvenient levels so that the mulberry-crowned ridge of land is scant protection for any lower-lying garden patches. Irritated farmers often throw stones at passing rowboats when their waves are just enough to send water over the ridge.

Beyond the ridges are often found the rice paddies and at the proper season water is pumped by simple treadmills over into them. Rice grains are first sown broadcast into a small seed bed. When the larger field has been partially flooded and plowed by the water buffalo, the young grasslike plants are set out by hand. The farmer wades ankle deep in the soft mud and water, planting the seedlings more by the sense of touch than by sight. Yet the resulting straight rows of waving green form a beautiful and even pattern over the water. Viewed from either of the two railroad lines that pass through this rice country, the landscape is a patchwork quilt of small shining fields, each with its own ridged border and textured surface that varies with the stage of development of the rice plants.

Other water cultures are common in this countryside. One is the "Ling" or water chestnut (Trapa biconis), growing like a large, two-horned bulb on the undersurface of the floating rosette of leaves. This quickly covers the surface of a quiet pond. In spite of the filthy water in which it usually grows, it is often peeled and the crisp meat eaten raw as a delicacy. The bulb of the Eleocharis dalcis, a rushlike plant, and the Colocasia, a tuber-rooted member of the taro family, related to our Elephant's Ear, are both cultivated in wet land for their edible roots. Water oats or wild rice, Zizania palustris, is probably better known and more used than in this country. All of these we could well make use of in suitable climates here. Best known of all is the lotus, grown in quiet pools or often even in a large crock in the courtyard garden. The lotus is a food plant as well as an ornamental one; the white powder from the roots grown in slimy black mud, a symbol of purity as well as the principal ingredient of lotus root jelly.

Fruit is a somewhat more expensive and rare treat for the poor farmer, but a large and interesting number of kinds are available in season, including most commonly the banana, the large red persimmon, the pumeloe (somewhat

like our grapefruit), the delicious "Honey orange" (sometimes called temple or king or mandarin orange), various plums, the fresh lychee (much better than the dried one we know in America), the papaya, occasional peaches, pears and cherries of mediocre quality, besides other fruit known only by Chinese names. Apples and strawberries are strangers.

Cattle are practically unknown in this section, likewise beef, milk and cheese. The latter, in fact, is particularly abhorent to the Chinese, who often say that foreigners have a peculiar odor because of their consumption of cheese, and even milk which has never been a common article of diet among the Chinese. The powerful water buffalo serves on occasion as a milch cow, but mostly as a plow horse and beast of burden. Between the Chinese New Year celebration and the coming of warm weather it is possible to get lamb or mutton. Fishing is a common and productive occupation for the farmers who live along the canals, and fish is a valued food among all classes. When ice can be cut from the canals and stored during the winter, it is to be found in the fish shops as long as the supply lasts. The word "nyioh," for pork, is also the general term for meat, any other kind of meat having a qualifying adjective before it. Thus pork is to many the only kind of meat available, as pigs are for the small landholder the only livestock, except perhaps chickens. Ducks and geese are occasionally kept and duck eggs are more highly valued than chicken eggs.

Having, therefore, little of animal manure to supply the humus needs of his soil, the farmer relies all too generally on human excreta. This is collected from villages and carried to the countryside, there to be stored in great half-buried earthenware jars or kongs. Dipped up as needed and spread on the garden, it spreads disease through the soil, making it very unsafe to eat uncooked garden products. This practice results in the most unpleasant feature of Chinese rural life, especially during hot weather—the overpowering odor that has often been called the "National Air of China." Besides the spreading of intestinal diseases and parasites, the close circuit from human excreta to the soil and directly back to human food again is doubtful in its health value. It is, in any case, an indication of a very low standard of living if human beings have to live on their own excreta. Human excreta would need a far longer process of decomposition.

Rural life is not confined to the open country in China, although there are many distinctions between those who dwell "within the walls" and "outside the walls" of the cities. Walls within walls have given an added sense of security and during past ages did give actually greater protection. The Great Wall, winding its way over ridge after ridge of northern mountains, was the effort of one emperor to shut out barbarians from the whole of China. Each city or town has in turn built its own wall to shut out soldier bandits of some other provincial war lord. And within the towns, those who have wealth enough build walls around their own estates. City walls enclose many tilled fields and truck gardens to provide for the inhabitants in case of siege, when city gates would perforce be shut against the farmer and his produce. Nanking's 22 miles of wall enclose many rural areas, and Nanking has lived through several sieges. Peking's outer of three concentric walls is 13 miles around,

with an adjoining section nearly as large on the south. Smaller cities everywhere each have their distinctive wall. According to the spacing of the breaks and gun holes in the parapet, the initiated could tell what city their boat was approaching by the design thus formed in the wall structure. Alas, many of these picturesque features of the landscape have recently disappeared before modern engineering projects such as road and bridge building, but this is, no doubt, at a standstill since war has covered all this region.

Even the innermost walls surrounding leisure and culture have not withstood the assault of today's war machines and many a lovely courtyard garden is deserted and decaying. Wealthy family clans all had their city residences and to overlook the walled-in area of one of these from a vantage point on the city wall was to be struck by the amount of foliage between and above the one-story buildings, graceful weeping willows and bamboos, rare flowering trees, fruit blossoms and others with far-spreading fragrance.

Many smaller plants, too, the Chinese have valued and cultivated especially for their fragrance—jasmine, Meratia precox, cassias and citrus plants, especially the fingered citron. During the winter festival times, the tiny green orchids which smell so sweet are worn against the smooth black hair of the ladies. All these, of course, would be below the reach of vision from the city wall, but after visiting a few of these residences and gardens one's imagination can fill in the plan. The entrance court is a small rectangle. On one side it is walled and pierced by the entrance gate. The other three sides are rectangular buildings, usually with roofs projecting far enough for a columned passage around the court. The farther side of each of these buildings will also open on a court, similar but larger. Increasingly large are the ceremonial courts on the central axis of the plan. The mass of buildings and courts thus spreads out in three directions with repetitions of the rectangular scheme. Each court has some planting, perhaps a balanced arrangement around a central specimen, a sun dial, a pool, a special plant or a beautifully water-worn rock. There may be flower borders or perhaps only two particularly lovely plants flanking the main doorway. The heavenly bamboo, which is not a bamboo at all but Nandina domestica, is often used in these courts, where its evergreen leaves and bright red berries are attractive so much of the year.

The large pleasure gardens are likely to be off to one side where the general scheme of rectangular buildings and courts can be varied. Within this garden, too, the symmetrical balance becomes a more subtle kind. Here is a great irregular mass of weathered rock with passageways through it and paths across its peak, shaded by an old spreading pine; there a naturalistic pool of lotus or water lilies reflecting a magnolia, a bridge or a pergola dripping wisteria into the water. During the round of the seasons there may be potted freezias or water-fairy flower (the sacred lily), masses of peonies, oleanders, cape jasmine, chrysanthemums. Some quotation from the old classics was probably in the mind of the designer of such a garden, "An old pine on a dangerous cliff, and the sound of moving water! What spot could be so tempting to fairies or the recluse?"

As coastal plain merges into foothills there are stony hillsides that flame with a cover of wild azaleas in April. Farther inland the more fertile slopes

are contoured with lines of tea bushes. Here is the famous Dragon Well Valley, home of some of China's famous teas, where the tea is grown and cured in a variety of ways.

Farther inland hills become mountains and the vegetation changes. Civilization seems left behind except for miles of somewhat overgrown but well-paved paths, where ancient traffic frequented this mountainous region, going to a pagoda-topped peak or a quiet temple hermitage, extensive in area and including land enough to make itself a nearly independent unit. If we have admired the bamboos in the lowlands, here we stand in wonder at the mighty plumes of green, high as tall trees, with stalks thicker than an ankle, growing wild over slope after slope. From here come the best of the bamboo shoots we like for dinner, even the delicate winter bamboo that is dug underground as the sprouts form on the spreading roots. The small bamboos grow in spring at the rate of nearly a foot a day; these must do much better, for a bamboo culm reaches its full height in one season's growth. Occasionally small villages nestle in the mountain valleys, quite isolated and independent, with persons living there who have never been away from this place of their birth. Perhaps they are the most fortunate of all rural groups in this part of China, for it has been said that the Japanese control points and lines (of communication), not areas. The very insignificance of such small communities probably means that in many of them life goes on still much as it has for hundreds of years in the past.