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William John Gill

Excerpt

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THE RIVER OF GOLDEN SAND.



CHAPTER I.

‘ A RICH AND NOBLE CITY.’

Account of Ch'êng-Tu, as given by Marco Polo—And by Padre Martin Martini—Description of the Modern City—The Rivers, and Probable Changes—Destruction of Documents—Arrival of Mr. Mesny—Political Aspects compel Change in Traveller's intended Route—Decision to Travel Homeward *viâ* Bat'ang and Bhamo—The Bridges of Ch'êng-Tu—Chinese Temples and Notions of Worship—Ancient Inscribed Stone—The Heaven-Tooth—The City Walls—Visit to the Great Monastery of Wen-Shu-Yüan—Its Buildings and Curiosities—Chapel of Meditation—Antiquities of Ch'êng-Tu—Memorials of Early Events—The History of the Emperor Liu-Pi—Invitation to a Picnic—Notable Guests—The Dinner and its Peculiarities—Table Manners and Customs—Threatenings of Drought—False Notions about the Traveller—The Provision of Currency for the Journey, and Tedious Banking Business—Adieux at Ch'êng-Tu—‘ Organisation of Departure ’—Concluding Notices of Ch'eng-Tu and the ‘ Province of Four Waters ’ (Ssu-Ch'uan).

MARCO POLO thus describes the plain and city of Ch'êng-Tu-Fu :

‘ When you have travelled those twenty days westward through the mountains, as I have told you, then you arrive at a plain belonging to a province called Sindafu, which still is on the confines of Manzi, and the capital city of which is also called Sindafu. This city was in former days a rich and

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noble one, and the kings who reigned there were very great and wealthy.

‘It is a good twenty miles in compass ; but it is divided in the way that I shall tell you.

‘You see, the king of this province, in the days of old, when he found himself drawing near to death, leaving three sons behind him, commanded that the city should be divided into three parts, and that each of his sons should have one ; so each of these parts is separately walled about, though all three are surrounded by the common wall of the city. Each of the three sons was king, having his own part of the city and his own share of the kingdom, and each of them in fact was a great and wealthy king. But the Great Kaan conquered the kingdom of these three kings, and stripped them of their inheritance.

‘Through the midst of this city runs a large river, in which they catch a great quantity of fish. It is a good half-mile wide, and very deep withal, and so long that it reaches all the way to the Ocean Sea—a very long way, equal to eighty or one hundred days’ journey ; and the name of the river is Kian-Suy. The multitude of vessels that navigate this river is so vast that no one who should read or hear the tale would believe it. The quantities of merchandise also which merchants carry up and down this river are past all belief. In fact it is so big that it seems to be a sea rather than a river.

‘Let us now speak of a great bridge which crosses this river within the city. This bridge is of stone ; it is seven paces in width, and half a mile in length (the river being that much in width as I told you), and along its length, on either side, there are columns of marble to bear the roof—for the bridge is roofed over from end to end with timber, and that all

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richly painted ; and on this bridge there are houses, in which a great deal of trade and industry is carried on. But these houses are all of wood merely, and they are put up in the morning and taken down in the evening. Also there stands upon the bridge the Great Kaan's Comerque, that is to say, his custom-house, where his toll and tax are levied ; and I can tell you that the dues taken on this bridge bring to the lord a thousand pieces of fine gold every day, and more. The people are all idolaters.'

Ritter thus writes :

' Father Martin Martini, who gives us his account of China from the time when the Ming were still reigning, previous to the conquest by the Manchus, and might well have good information regarding Tsching-tu-Fu, since the Jesuits had a mission in that city, which was only abandoned by the fathers in consequence of the advance of the Manchu army, says :

' It is a much frequented commercial city ; the palace of the king was magnificent ; it was four miles in circuit, having four gates, and was placed in the centre of the town. From the southern gate extended a broad street, containing many arcades artistically built of stone.

' Throughout the city are navigable canals, revetted on each side with square and cut stones, and crossed by many stone bridges.

' One of the rivers, the To (or Tu-Kiang?) says Father Martini, is a branch of the Min-Kiang, excavated and led out of its course by the order of the Emperor Yvo [presumably Yau, the famous semi-mythical emperor, *circa* B.C. 2300], as a remedy against the outbreaks and inundations of the Kiang.

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‘Thus many of the broad pieces of water and lakes, which in the neighbourhood serve as moats and trenches to the city, have been artificially excavated.’¹

The city of Ch’êng-Tu is still a *rich and noble* one, somewhat irregular in shape, and surrounded by a strong wall, in a perfect state of repair.

In this there are eight bastions, four being pierced by gates. It is now three and a half miles long by about two and a half miles broad, the longest side lying about east-south-east, and west-north-west, so that its compass in the present day is about twelve miles. A stream, about thirty feet wide, runs through the city from west to east; parts of this are embanked with perpendicular revetments on either side.

At one point it is spanned by three bridges close together, each of stone with a single arch. The one in the centre has at one time evidently been larger and of more importance, for on the other side of the road that lies between the water and the houses, almost buried in the buildings, there is a stone lion with his back to the brook. This has clearly been the former end of the bridge, so that the houses must have advanced some yards since this was built. This bridge, which is near the southern gate of the imperial city, probably led in former days to the broad street spoken of by Martini.

The city is well laid out, the streets, straight and at right angles to one another, well and carefully paved.

One of them is very pretty, and runs by the side of the stream that flows through the city. Looking in at the doors of the fine shops on the right, respectable old gentlemen can be dimly discerned in the

¹ See Ritter, iv. 415–416.

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semi-obscurity smoking their long pipes. Overhead a bamboo matting, or a bit of trellis-work covered with creepers, shelters the street from the glare of the sun ; while on the left hand is a strip of garden a yard wide, enclosed on either side by trellis-work, covered with scarlet-runners, whose small red flowers form a pleasing contrast to the fresh green foliage, and through the leaves the brook is seen sparkling in the sun. The shops in Ch'èng-Tu are very good, with handsome fronts ; every description of goods is sold in them ; there is especially a very large trade in silk, and Ritter quotes Martini as saying :

‘In the river Kin, which flows on the southern side of the city, they wash the silk, which thereby attains an extraordinary brilliancy.’

The main river still runs at the south side : it is about a hundred yards wide, and crossed by many bridges ; one of them, ninety yards long, has a roof, and, as is the case on nearly all covered bridges, hucksters sit down under the shelter on both sides, as in the days of the old Venetian traveller, and sell whatever they can to passers by.

There are still large numbers of junks on this river, which come up from Ch'ung-Ch'ing, and possibly some from the ‘Ocean Sea.’

It is difficult to account for the great difference between the state of the city as it was in the time of the early writers, and the present condition of Ch'èng-Tu.

The hills, however, that enclose the plain of Ch'èng-Tu are of sandstone, and are of course easily worn away by water.

The drainage of the basin is by a river of considerable size, which must in the course of five centuries have deepened its bed at its point of exit from the

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plain where it is closed in on both sides by the sandstone hills. At the same time it would seem probable that the *débris* brought down by numerous streams from the surrounding mountains would rather have tended to raise than to lower the general level of the plain itself. Anyhow, when we consider how very flat the plain now is, we should, without the aid of the historian, be almost driven to the conclusion that it was in former ages the bottom of a lake.

Martini, in the passage above quoted, tells us that some of the ponds, lakes, rivers, or canals were artificial; and the river full half a mile in width spoken of by Polo may, in reality, have been a shallow fleet crossed by a causeway, or even by a long bridge such as he describes.

In the course of the last five centuries, as the bed of the river at its exit has been deepened, the plain has gradually been drained: and thus will nature have performed her part of the change.²

It is an historical fact well-known at Ch'êng-Tu that the city formerly covered a very much larger area; for in olden days, the temple of Wu-Ho-Tzu, now a mile or two outside the city to the south-west, was within the walls.

Since the days when Marco Polo travelled this way, the times have been turbulent indeed: the city has been pillaged, lawless bands have roamed with fire and sword across the fertile plain. In the early part of the Ming dynasty (commenced A.D. 1368), the whole province was overrun by a brigand named Chang-Shien-Chung; he went about ravaging and

² The fact that an actual bifurcation of waters seems to take place near Ch'êng-Tu (see Richthofen's *China*, p. 327)—one branch flowing south, as the Ta-Kiang, Min-Kiang or what not, to Siu-Chou-Fu, and the other south-east, as the To-Kiang or Chung-kiang of maps, to Lu-Chou—renders change in the distribution of the streams about the city highly probable.—Y.

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CH. I. MESNY ARRIVES. CHANGE OF PROJECT. 7

destroying everything, and is pictured as a devil incarnate; amongst other things he destroyed all the books, so that the ancient written history of the place is lost; there is therefore nothing improbable in the total disappearance of the fine works spoken of by Polo. Thus may the hand of man have combined with nature to change completely the appearance of the city of Ch'êng-Tu.

June 21.—On the day after my return to the provincial capital, I called upon the French missionaries in the afternoon, and when I went home I found that Mesny had at length arrived from Kwei-Yang-Fu, where he had been living for many years.

Now the very serious question presented itself, whether I could carry out my intention of travelling through Kansu to Kashgar.

My whole difficulty lay in European politics. Supposing that I had found myself unable to proceed any further towards Kashgar than Urumchi, I could have passed through Russia, if there had been no danger of England being entangled in a war with that country.

But with England and Russia at war, this of course would have been impossible; and if unable to enter Kashgaria, I should have had no choice but the dreary journey in mid-winter back to Peking; and even should the road to Kashgaria have been clear, the mountain passes would not have been open, and I must have waited north of the Himalayas until the spring.

This would not have deterred me for one moment, but for the critical state of affairs between our country and Russia; in the event of war it was equally my duty and desire to be somewhere within hail, and I could not feel myself justified in running the risk of being buried for so many months in Central Asia.

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8 DECISION FOR EUROPE VIÂ BAT'ANG. CH. I.

This was the more disappointing, as I had everything prepared for this journey, provisions, clothes, and about three thousand taels in silver. I was very loth to give it up ; but after anxiously reading every word in the scanty items of European news that were available, and after thinking over the matter night and day, sorely against my will, and with a heavy sigh, I at last determined to come home with as much speed as possible, but at the same time to travel by some new road.

The only route left was that by Bat'ang and A-tun-tzũ ; for the objections that applied to the Kashgar route applied equally to the only alternative, a journey *viâ* Lassa, which might or might not have been practicable.

The die was cast at length. I made up my mind that I would travel with the utmost speed *viâ* Bat'ang. My desire to get on was ably seconded by Mesny ; and considering the nature of the country, and the difficulties always to be encountered, the journey actually was a very fast one, and we had the satisfaction of thinking that during the whole sixteen weeks we never lost a single hour.

June 24.—The mosquitoes had already often sounded their warning notes, and although they had not yet given me any trouble, Mesny had been so devoured that I thought it advisable to see about mosquito curtains. The Chinese have a capital arrangement for travelling curtains. The top is made with a little triangular pocket at each corner. The ends of four light bamboos are joined together by two brass tubes, and the other ends of the bamboos inserted in the small pockets stretch the top of the curtain. One nail in the wall or the ceiling is all that is required, and the curtain

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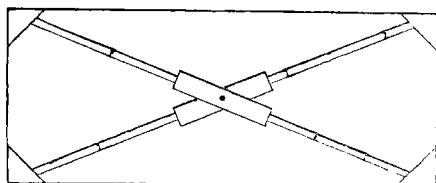
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can be put up or taken down in a few minutes. The bamboos being of no great length are easily carried. I bought one of these, and found some regular Indian mosquito-gauze in a shop in the city

FIG. 1.



with which some curtains were made that served me in good stead. I used them almost every night throughout my journey, and they effectually kept out not only mosquitoes, but insects of many other kinds.

As Mr. Wylie³ in recent days had said that Polo's covered bridge was still in its place, we went one day on an expedition in search of it. Polo, however, speaks of a bridge full half a mile long, whilst the longest now is but ninety yards. On our way we passed over a fine nine-arched stone bridge, called the Chin-Yen-Ch'iao.

Near the covered bridge there is a very pretty view down the river.

On the left there is a brick wall, by which the river runs, and here all the houses built close to the edge have wooden projections overhanging the water. On the right the bank is shelving, and there is a pretty flat landscape, with crops and plenty of trees, and of course a temple adjacent.

These temples do not correspond in any way to European churches, for in China people do not go to church in Western fashion.

³ Colonel Yule's *Marco Polo*, vol. ii., p. 31.

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But if a Chinaman wants anything in particular, such as wealth, children, success in business, or the like, he goes to a temple and makes a bargain with the deities, promising to give money, build a bridge, or a triumphal arch, or do some other good deed, if he gets what he wants ; not altogether an illogical proceeding. The men of Kiang-Si, like the Pharisees, make long prayers ; they take their incense-sticks or candles, light one before one god, and while this is burning, pray with many words that this particular deity will cast blessings on their kitchen. They then move on to another god, and with another bit of incense exhort him to look favourably upon some money transaction in which they have just embarked ; a third is supplicated for blessings on the family ; and so on till they have exhausted their candles and list of desires.

On the other hand the Shen-Si man says little, but sits down and waits until the other has finished, when he, with one candle, invokes all the gods at once, and says, 'Oh! all ye gods of whom my friend of Kiang-Si has just been asking so much, I pray you to give me all the blessings he has begged for.'

Near this there is a stone, on which there is an ancient inscription, which I was told contained references to the Christian religion.

Thinking that I had alighted on another stone like the celebrated one at Si-^{Ngan}-Fu in Shen-Si, I obtained a copy of the inscription. It was exceedingly difficult to translate, but Mr. Douglas, of the British Museum, most kindly undertook the task. It contained no reference whatever to the Christian religion.