

J. Prip-Møller:
Chinese Buddhist Monasteries.

By Gøsta Montell.

Fresh tidings reach us daily of the unhappy fate which has overtaken China. Slowly but surely railway and river discharge fresh enemy hordes upon the land, and the destructive powers of modern warfare are made apallingly clear. In all probability no one can tell, with any degree of certainty, the full extent of the devastation, but that irreparable damage has been done to works of inestimable artistic and cultural value seems, unhappily, to be an incontestable fact. When hostilities cease and the accounts are made up, the final balance will doubtless reveal a melancholy state of affairs.

Future Chinese research will assuredly owe a heavy debt of gratitude to the extensive salvage work which foreign scientists have carried out on the spot during the last few decades. Among them all, the Danish architect, Mr. J. Prip-Møller has won for himself a prominent position, thanks to his exhaustive investigations of Buddhist building art, which has culminated in the magnificent work, "Chinese Buddhist Monasteries, their plan and its function as a setting for Buddhist monastic life".

With admirable foresight both the Carlsberg Foundations have supported the labours of the author, both in the field and in the study. Through his position as consulting architect in Mukden, he had conceived a lively interest for Chinese architecture, which caused him to commence a radical study of its history. Research work of this kind, if it is to be thorough, requires considerable pecuniary assistance, and this Mr. Prip-Møller received from the above foundations, and was thus enabled to undertake several expeditions to various parts of China during the years 1929—1933, in the course of which he made a large number of measurements. The material amassed is overwhelming; it would be impossible even to mention all that is contained in the imposing volume, the visible outcome of his researches.

The architecture alone as an independent style of building was not the sole object of the investigations carried out with such perseverance by Mr. Prip-Møller. From the very outset he has clearly realized the importance to be attached to an intimate acquaintance with teaching and cult in grasping the significance of outward forms and plans, and has accordingly, with patient persistence, threaded his way into this, for western peoples, so inaccessible a world. The reward of his pains has been the acquisition of deep insight into the history and beliefs of Chinese Buddhism, its sects and organisation. In the preface, the author defines his task as follows: "The pages are intended to make more vivid the picture of a monastery as an organism living in the present, but with its roots deep in the past". The association of ideas, then, is what the author has endeavoured to grip and for which he strives to find expression; he has sought to discover the fundamental principle on which the whole structure and its manifestations in art and architecture rest. He has convincingly proved the truth of the saying that Chinese art can only be judged by those acquainted with the intellectual basic values.

The first main section of the book is an extremely detailed and intensely interesting account of the plan upon which the Buddhistic monasteries were built. In the course of time many changes have taken place and various modifications have developed. War, plunderings, and conflagrations have destroyed the ancient temple and the new buildings have, on the whole, no doubt followed the old rules, but with modifications determined by changes in ritual. In extreme cases, temple architecture may, as the author points out, go back to pre-buddhist national traditions which developed at any rate as early as during the Han dynasty. The oldest types of Indian monasteries were undoubtedly introduced into China in a similar manner, but met with opposition there, and disappeared without leaving tangible traces. That these latter were able to establish themselves in the then uncivilized countries of Korea and Japan is an interesting point.

Buddhism is, as we know, split up into various sects, and certain idiosyncrasies in cult peculiar to each are reflected in their temple architecture. The contention held by the school of meditation with regard to the importance of music during the temple service has favoured the appearance of the stately bell and drum towers peculiar to the northern districts of China. They appear to have been placed originally in the inner courts, but in the course of time

would seem to have been moved farther and farther outwards, and were henceforth placed as close to the entrance as possible.

The plans of monasteries visited by pilgrims and of those used for the ordination of monks were of course affected by the special requirements the circumstances entailed. Ancient Chinese ideas respecting Feng-Shui, i. e. the principle of balance in Nature, has become blended with new religious conceptions and absorbed. Prip-Møller relates an instance, which proves that the China of to-day is still under the influence of these ideas. In Hui Chü Ssu, in 1931, on the south-west of the monastery, the foundations were laid of a pagoda which was to be of 7 storeys, and the function of which was to restore the balance which had been disturbed by the erection of a lecture-hall on the south-west. Failure to do so would have incurred too great a risk of evil influences penetrating to the lower south-west and west wing. The degree in which such traditions still persist in profane building will be within the experience of many Europeans in China.

An extraordinarily interesting portion of Mr. Prip-Møller's book discusses the connection between the images and the building plan of a temple. That the gods must be arranged and set up according to a certain system was, of course, already realized, but the author's explanation of the arrangement of the figures, room by room and group by group, is especially instructive and gives us much fresh material. In each individual case an historical summary is given beginning with the first known appearance of the god in question in Chinese Buddhism together with such literary sources as might be calculated to supply the reason. In the course of their long history, many of the gods have, as we know, undergone a process of internal development and modification, which has also found expression in sculpture and painting and in the placing of the images in the temple. Especially remarkable is the change which Maytreya — Mi Lo Fo — has undergone. He has rightly been regarded as the Messiah of Buddhism, for he is supposed to have selected by Sakya-muni, the "historical" Buddha, as his successor, and his re-appearance on earth has been the hope of believers for the last 1500 years. The cult of Mi Lo is supposed to have been introduced into China during the latter half of the third century A. D. In proof of his enormous popularity and importance, we have the gigantic sculptures executed during the following 3 centuries. Gradually he was displaced by a current of fresh influences, and the central position was now occupied by O Mi T'o Fo, who, thanks to the influential Ching T'u (the pure land) sect, was now given a standing of similar

importance. But Mi Lo Fo was not yet entirely defunct: it is related that at the beginning of the year 900 a begging monk, one Pu Tai, on his death-bed made the following allusion to Mi Lo: "From time to time appearing among men he proclaims the truth to the men of that era, but they naturally do not recognize him."

The belief arose that Pu Tai was in reality Mi Lo Fo himself, and pictures and sculptures were made of him; thus was gradually evolved the figure, known to all the world, of a fat, half-naked monk, his mouth stretched in a cackling laugh, the exuberant symbol of earthly prosperity and luxury. The celestial Maytreya had been coarsened and altered out of recognition, and his image was no longer worthy of a place in the central hall of the temple, but was moved out into the entrance hall among the tutelary gods. Benevolence and dignity have yielded to vulgarity and an air of hail-fellow-well-met-with, so that one is in danger of forgetting his true signifiacance. "Few people have any idea of the fact that some of the deepest thoughts and liveliest hopes of Buddhism are bound up with this figure", quotes Prip-Møller after Reichelt.

In a special section arranged from the architectonic point of view, all the greatest figures in Chinese Buddhism are passed in review. One obtains a powerful impression that the gods live and evolve, slowly accomodating themselves to the vicissitudes of time. Pathos and fanaticism are nowhere much in evidence; equipoise, calmness, and clarity are the qualities desired. In a few chosen words and with aptly selected historical retrospects Prip-Møller has succeeded in imbuing us with deeper knowledge of the figures, one by one. For instance, does not his reference to the legend in the Lotus-sutra give one a better comprehension of the, otherwise, monotonous series of 1000 or 10,000 Buddhas one encounters of times in frescoes or sculptures upon temple walls? — The Enlightened One, Buddha, was once sitting surrounded by disciples, gods, and bodhisatvas, who were reverently listening to the expounding of the text of the Lotus-sutra, when suddenly a pagoda appeared in the midst of the assembly and a Voice confirmed the truth of the exposition. The Master now explained that once, at the beginning of Time, the first Buddha made a vow that he would appear in his burial "stupa" whenever the Lotus-sutra was read. He further explained that the first Buddha was unable to manifest himself unless all the Buddhas from later periods were present as well. To render this possible, the 10,000 and the 1000 Buddhas were summoned, and before the eyes of all the first Buddha then materialised himself, sitting in his burial "stupa". Sakyamuni now placed himself beside the first

Buddha and raising the whole assemblage into the void proceeded to explain more explicitly than before the task that was laid upon him of redeeming the world. — "Such a hall is an attempt to express the truth that Buddhism embraces the whole universe. It also creates a background for the lives of the monks which gives eternal meaning, cosmic width and spiritual bearing to their own religious calling which is, in accordance with the third part of their ordination, to become Bodhisatvas and as such to bring insight and health to mankind. To be surrounded by the representations of myriads of Buddhas, perfected spirits which fill the universe, should remind the monks of this calling and make them look more steadfastly towards the goal which is set before them", writes the author.

After becoming thoroughly acquainted with the arrangements of the temple halls proper, where the logical sequence can, as a rule, be followed, we are led through every nook and corner of the monastery buildings. Here, naturally enough, there is greater scope for variations and adaptations to special circumstances. The plan, however, is based upon ancient tradition and practical considerations. The whole life of the monastery is reflected in this intricate system of courts and halls, passages and walls: Kitchens and storehouses, refectories and dormitories, infirmaries, wash-rooms, and the like are only what one might expect; but at times more special demands arise which also must be taken into account. The apparatus necessary for the accomodation of the several hundred monks, whose one abiding place for life this is to be, is, in truth, no small matter.

Chinese monasteries must also fill the rôle of caravansary and hotel on a large scale. An interminable stream of guests pours in through the gates, and everyone must be admitted. For the great festivals, many hundreds of pilgrims must be lodged and fed, all of which entails extensive catering, even with a minimum of comfort and convenience. One is undoubtedly surprised to find in the description of a Chinese Buddhist monastery the following excerpt, "One cook for the preparation of cooked meat for Tibetan lamas". A tolerant spirit made it desirable to offer these brethren an opportunity of obtaining the food which for them was a vital necessity, but which for the inmates of the monastery is strictly prohibited.

We also find schools of various descriptions, libraries, and sometimes presses for printing the holy writings, solitary peaceful courts, where former abbots may devote themselves to the further pursuit of their studies, etc. Smaller monasteries and lonely hermit

huts will sometimes join company with the large establishments. From the prosaic plans we can read the whole life-story of the monk, from his first ordination to the inevitable finis. The author, moreover, has it in his power, by scattering here and there a greater wealth of intimate detail, to deepen and enrich his narrative.

It not infrequently happens that opprobrious remarks are heard concerning the laziness, ignorance, and immorality of the monks. Mr. Prip-Møller's work by no means confirms such stringent findings. The interesting account of a meditation hour gives one a convincing insight into the strict discipline taught and expected. The young novice who evinced a tendency to slumber during the absolute stillness and silence was roused by a stinging cut over the shoulders, and the man who inflicted the punishment and who was doing duty at the moment as overseer, was finally himself forced to his knees and received six hard blows "for having made too much noise in walking round the hall". The author bears witness that he glided forward in such a manner that it was almost impossible to hear his footsteps.

When the monk closes his eyes upon a life of prayer, strict meditation, and pilgrimage, his body is taken to the monastery crematorium and the husk deserted by the soul is incinerated. To the Chinese the idea of cremation was revolting, and years elapsed before the Indian custom became general amongst Buddhists. Several interesting proofs are here adduced that the rite was brought to China by immigrated Indian monks. Grinavarman, for instance, who died in 431, is reported to have desired the outlandish custom to be employed upon himself. There are several reports in literature of fanatics causing themselves to be burned alive.

Another much discussed custom is that of preserving the earthly remains of holy men by mummifying them. In many temples, especially in Central China, such mummies will be found placed with gilded features in a sitting posture upon an altar, before which prayers are recited. The best known example of a "Jou Shen" of this kind is to be found in the temple of T'ai Shan in the Peking district, where a mummified Emperor has been enthroned upon the altar for nearly 300 years. The fundamental idea in the custom of mummifying the bodies of men renowned for holiness is no doubt that beneficent powers continue to emanate from the dead man. "Jou Shen" relics are, in fact the most perfect that can be procured.

This long and painstaking classification of the plan and main conformation of the monastery building is followed by an extremely

detailed account of Hui Chü Ssu upon the Holy Mountain Pao Hua Shan in the province of Kiangsu. Here we have an instance of a monastery where regard to the ordination of monks was to a large extent responsible for the organisation and building plan. For three months every year the number of inmates was swelled by several hundred novices who were to be subjected to a thorough final course of examination and training before being allowed to take the sacred vows. At the same time the monastery had to admit within its walls large numbers of pilgrims and devout laymen. The reading of ceremonial masses for the souls of the dead is another of the specialities of this temple, which likewise attracts many visitors to the spot. Historically speaking, this is the most important part of Mr. Prip-Møller's work. This must be the first time that a large monastical establishment has been subjected to such minute examination, measured, and illustrated. It is almost superfluous to add that in this section also all accessible historical notes have been collected and published.

Hui Chü Ssu is situated at a spot which did not attain notoriety as a place of pilgrimage until relatively late. These districts are known with certainty to have witnessed the activities of many hermits and holy men, but not until about 1600 did its true period of greatness begin. A specially prominent figure was the stout architect and bronzefounder, Abbot Miao Feng, whose memorable influence upon temple construction is closely described by the author. It is, in fact, striking to note the influence attaching to the position of abbot in a Buddhist monastery. Around one man endowed with religious zeal and the gift of leadership are gathered large numbers of novices and monks; the reputation of the monastery increases, and with it its wealth; follow fresh building projects and enlargements. Hui Chü Ssu became famous as an ordination monastery in the middle of the 17th century through the labours of its eminent abbot Shien Yüeh, who erected the magnificent ordination platform. After a heavy conflagration in 1734, 192 halls of various kinds were built, and the fame and glory of the monastery became greater than ever. In common with nearly all other monasteries in Central China, Hui Chü Ssu was destroyed during the T'ai Ping rising, but rose again from the ruins and is still flourishing to-day.

In his account of the above famous temple the author adds a full description of the ordination ceremonial. The reader, in following the various stages of the ordination ceremony in the passages from Mr. Prip-Møller's diary, cannot fail to be gripped by the affecting,

solemn ceremonial. One receives an impression of the whole strict, prescribed training, designed to inculcate, not merely the pursuit of knowledge, but also the qualities of discipline and submission. The various stages of the ordination ceremony comprising confession, profession of faith, prayers and vows, chanting and recitation, culminate in the curious branding rite, which in all futurity is the indelible outward token of the dignity attained and of the sacred vows taken. In his description the author has succeeded in identifying himself with his material without sacrificing scientific exactitude. Those who have once experienced such a ceremony will be enabled to envision once again the long rows of solemn novices, to hear the sound of chants rising and falling beneath the shade of the tree in the temple court.

It has been said that the course of the narrative is often interrupted by historical retrospects which explain the origin and development of special peculiarities. Together with his description of the painful branding on the crown of the head which the monks undergo at ordination, the author furnishes a whole series of historical instances of various kinds of self-mutilation and suicide in Buddha's honour which have taken place in the past and still occur. Fanatics have, as we have said, climbed the funeral pyre or hurled themselves over the brinks of precipices in the holy mountains, while others again have contented themselves with hewing off one finger after another. That the State authorities regard such extravagances with considerable misgiving and endeavour, by means of regulations and supervision, to keep a certain check upon the monasteries, is not surprising. A reference to conditions in Tibet and Mongolia are sufficient to make the danger apparent. Nevertheless, the occasional occurrences of this nature within the realms of Chinese Buddhism are unable to cast a shadow upon the truth of Mr. Prip-Møller's own words, "... within the architectural frames of the Chinese Buddhist monastery ... sincere religious thinking and living have been foremost among the forces which brought these frames into existence and gave them a history."

The last section of this book is devoted to a statement regarding the organisation, powers, and responsibilities of the monastery officials, the liturgical vestments, etc.

The above must suffice to give an inkling of the enormous material regarding the knowledge of Chinese Buddhism contained in this work. Without risk of exaggeration, it may well be said that Mr. Prip-Møller's researches have resulted in a monumental work which, in its own sphere, has no rival at the present time, and is

hardly likely to encounter one in the future. Everyone who interests himself in the history of Chinese culture is certain to discover in this volume a wealth of fresh ideas and new material. For all museums and institutes occupied in East Asiatic research this work is indispensable.

It redounds to the credit of the Carlsberg Foundation that they have been such generous supporters of the undertaking. That the pecuniary assistance rendered has been especially liberal can be judged by the whole get-up of the book, which is lavish to the verge of extravagance. The illustrations are magnificent and portray every side of monastic life. Besides the author's own exceedingly numerous and instructive sketch-plans, the illustrative matter consists of numerous reproductions of photographs taken by himself.

In this introduction, Mr. Prip-Møller expresses his deep gratitude to the well-known Norwegian Buddhist missionary, Mr. K. L. Reichelt, whose inspiring interest was of the greatest assistance to him in his researches in this field. It is also a source of pleasure and thankfulness to note on every page the same sympathetic understanding, the same striving to penetrate to the historical context which were characteristic of Reichelt's epoch-making studies.
