

Women of the Orient

MY OBSERVATIONS ON WOMEN OF THE ORIENT

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WHEN we returned from our trip 'round the world, one of the very first questions asked was, "What did you think of the women of the Orient?" I stopped to think—what *did* I think of the women of the Orient?

My mind flitted to Japan first, and there I saw the little Nipponese mother, rosy cheeked and smiling, trudging along with her baby on her back; or the geisha girl, in the best years of her life entertaining with dances and smiles, and again I saw her in old age, discarded, a poor old lady begging in the streets, for, should you ask what becomes of the geisha girl when she grows old, they will answer, "Ask us as well where goes the autumn leaf or last year's fans."

Then I see the Korean mother, rather short and fat, with shiny yellow face and almond eyes, approaching me, and when I talk with her she smiles and we both talk to one another in our "pidgin" English a while. She then shifts her baby to the other side and walks on, looking back over the baby's head, still smiling, and whispering to the baby (no doubt), "She's a funny woman, wonder if she thinks you are as lovely as I do. I hope so."

Then I see coming toward me another type of Korean woman in a red-lined palanquin being carried by four bearers, two men in front and two behind. She is wearing wide, white baggy trousers, much larger than those worn by the Chinese, and is evidently going to an afternoon tea, and so I carry just a mental picture of her as she passes by and contrast her with the little mother I had just talked with before.

And then I am in China, hastily thinking of the intelligent Chinese woman—her pride in her tiny feet and the handsome embroidered shoes she made, or the high headdress of the Manchu lady, or the sleek black hair and lovely ornaments of the Peking lady, her keen mind and frankness in talking with me; then the Filipina, with her very pretty costume of large puffy sleeves, and proud of her good English; then the Annamese woman of Indo-China with her wide trousers and narrow sleeves; then the Malaya woman who believes that all play and no work is more to her way of living; then the bright energetic Siamese woman who works side by side with her husband; and the Indian woman, the

secluded one of the harem, the Hindu of the street, the child mother, the "untouchable," the pariah, or the intelligent Parsee; the pretty little Singhalese of Ceylon, selling pretty laces in the hotels, or the mother with her little brood that you meet on the way to the hills; or the veiled lady of Egypt and Palestine, and I sum it all up in this way: whoever would attempt to know them and to understand them must first divorce from his mind nine-tenths of the frothy nonsense written about them by enthusiastic and inexact impressionists and consider them just as they appear to be—intensely human, earnest, industrious, proud, clever, amiable, non-snobbish, courteous, helpful women, many of them who are cheerful but not always happy.

When we want to know the women of the Orient, we must go there with a non-prejudiced mind and in an appreciative mood. We will be not only more tolerant in our views but we are able to bring back more pleasant memories of it all. It is true that there is a racial dislike for the occidental which lies near to the heart of the oriental, for one must consider that many of their customs are the result of more than 3,000 years of inheritance and, therefore, it is hard for them to break away from these ideas, but underneath it all, there is a woman's understanding, and a mutual exchange of mental confidence, even if we do not clasp hands across the way, for we find them with the same ideals, loves, and ambitions hidden away in their hearts as we have here at home.

They are not all butterflies in the flowery kingdoms of Japan and China, nor are all artists and poets. Neither are all the women of India stupid, ignorant, and listless, for we find the genteel woman, polished and cultured, exists side by side with the uncultured and depraved, for there as well as here the good is mixed with the bad in a thoroly human proportion.

They possess qualities that are peculiarly endearing to the sympathetic occidental who reads in their faces the intelligent impression what many centuries of strange history has left upon them. While the traveled Japanese, and Chinese, and Indian women, as well as those of other countries, are as broadminded as any other keen observer, and appreciate the advancement of the West, yet the innocently hidebound who stay at home or those who have been dragged down into hopeless despair, consider their customs probably superior to all others and any attempt to change them or their ideas would be like arguing to change the wind in its course.

In China they say, "Oh, you in America stride like a young boy and China creeps along like an old woman, but then, China is a wise, wise old woman," and so they champion the Western world and at the same time uphold all the traditions of the East.

It was interesting to watch all these women size up American women, but they did. They looked us over from head to toe and in their own way decided whether we were strange looking, and whether they liked our bobbed hair, style of dress, etc.

JAPAN

Japan is known as "The Land of Sunrise." Its flag shows a brilliant red ball on a white background, symbolic of the purity of the land of sunrise. In Japan there are 60,000,000 people and in China 400,000,000, and so many a mother's life has been given for propagating the many of her flesh and blood in these countries. There are thousands of children.

In Japan the little ones, with their soiled faces and unattended noses, are seen upon the streets (which are the open air nurseries of Nippon) in hundreds, and we are told the infant mortality is high; in China, the black-eyed children, begging or trudging along the streets, and the innumerable little folks in India, clothed in Nature's dress only, make one wonder where they all came from.

In Japan, it is compulsory that children attend school, being under the supervision of the government. One sees the little folks, whole schools of them, in the parks, on the hillsides in the country, and in the city, going to and from the various factories, gathering their practical education as they go, with their teacher as a guide and preceptor.

Many of the customs we had to learn after rather exasperating experiences, but our friend, Tad, a native Japanese, made it somewhat easier for us than the average tourist who goes to Japan and China alone. We soon learned that one should never enter a Japanese house or temple with shoes on. Mats take the place of our chairs and couches, and what would we say to a person who trod on our chairs with dirty shoes? The little homes are very simply furnished. Mats, with probably a vase and a taboret in the corner and a miniature tea set would be the only furniture in the room. The bedding, made up mainly of layers of thick and padded rugs, is concealed in large cupboards in the outside of the house.

We learned to sit on the mats in correct Japanese fashion, having our legs crossed until they fairly ached or became numb, and we learned to bow as low as the others when meeting our friends, becoming so efficient that we found ourselves acquiring the bowing habit of the Nipponese. They bow low many times and the long lines of the kimono lend to them a peculiar grace in making their bow.

We learned to drink tea, quantities of it, every kind from the thick ceremonial green tea of Japan, the various jasmine and rose-perfumed teas of China, to the orange pekoe in Ceylon, and we also indulged in the poor coffee that we were obliged to drink, if we had coffee at all, including the thick syrupy kind in Egypt, for to refuse to drink the tea or coffee offered you when a guest is a most discourteous thing to do.

The dress of the Japanese woman attracted my eye in Nippon, being so gay and butterfly like. The married women wear a plain blackish brown kimono with a broad sash, called the obi. The young girls wear bright-colored kimonos with cherry blossoms or wisteria designs, with floating pink petals round the skirt and on the bottom of the long and exaggerated sleeves. The elaborately-embroidered kimonos one sees in this country are not worn by the Japanese ladies—they are made and sold in Japan for the foreigner only.

husband has to reside for a time several hundred miles distant from her. In such case, should she wish to write to him, she will cover her face and go to a priest and tell him what she wants to have written to her husband. He then writes the letter for her and she pays him for it. When she receives a letter from her husband, she again has to go to the priest or someone else that can read and have them read it for her.

The women cannot enter the mosques at prayer time.

The Mohammedan women dye their hair with henna and plait it in many long braids. They wear necklaces and chains around their necks, and bracelets and glass bangles on their arms. Quite a number of them smoke pipes. Most of the ladies of the higher classes are idlers. They invite each other to parties by turns. Often ten or fifteen of them may be seen in the streets attended by servants going to parties. Where women are gathered, no men appear, and where the men are, no women come. Fashions among Mohammedan women do not change as a rule, as they do among the women of our country; there a costume that was worn by a woman twenty or more years ago is just the same as those worn by their sisters today.

The Mohammedan women cover their persons when they go out. They are never seen bareheaded, and their voice must not be heard in the streets. If two ladies wish to speak to each other in the streets, they must step aside where they cannot be seen by the passers-by. Women of the poorer classes work very hard. Peasant women rise early in the morning and do their milking and general housework, and then, with short-handled hoes, cut weeds in the cotton fields. In the evening, when they come home, there will be seen on their backs a five-foot square canvas filled with fresh grass for the cows and buffaloes and their young. Widows do harvesting, weeding, sewing, weaving, and spinning. During wheat harvest they go to the fields and glean, but they are seldom allowed to follow the reapers. They glean after the wheat is stacked; gathering the heads one by one, they take them home and thresh them and in this way add to the store of grain for the winter.

Dish washing is a very small item with them, for they use very few dishes; after some meals there are none to wash. They very seldom wash clothes either; when they do, a certain plant and the bark of the soap tree are used for it and very little soap—they look it too.

The Mohammedans marry very young, that is, from the age of twelve years upwards, due to the early age at which they reach their maturity and the desire on the part of their parents to have them marry as young as possible. Sometimes parents betroth their children while they are quite young.

After the engagement has taken place, it is customary among the Mohammedans for the affianced boy and girl or their parents to choose each a representative, who meet, or else the parents themselves meet, and decide what or how much money the boy shall pay to his intended wife so that if at any time after they are married he may wish to put her away by divorce, the amount paid will be a matter of record.

A Mohammedan bride is not allowed to speak with her mother-in-law or father-in-law or any member of the family who is older than herself and very little with their neighbors. Neither she nor her husband ever address each other, except when quite alone, by their names. Nor do they ever speak of each other in that way, but use the personal pronoun instead, as "he" and "she."

At home the bride must have her head covered with a veil about two yards square, one end of which covers her mouth close up to the nose. When she goes out, her entire person must be covered.

If asked anything by her father-in-law or mother-in-law, she must answer them either by signs or else, if her husband or a small child is present, she may speak to them and they repeat her answer to the person who asked the question. Neither is she allowed to eat with her father-in-law or mother-in-law, but must serve them, not that they regard her as a slave, but because the customs of the country require it. When they have finished eating, she will eat either alone or with some of the younger members of the family. In this way, every bride must live for a few years, after which she becomes more familiar and is allowed to talk with a good many persons with whom conversation was forbidden before. And after several years she may even speak with her mother-in-law, but never with her father-in-law.

When a child is born to a newly-married couple, as is usually the case within a year or two, if it happens to be a boy their joy is beyond measure, and the young mother is greatly praised and considered a very fortunate woman. Should the child be a girl, the rejoicing is not so great, but they will say, "That is all right. The next one will be a boy, and it is good



Egyptian Women of the Lower Types at the Doors to Their Mud Huts at Luxor, Egypt