MONARCHIST PLOTS HAVE CHINA SEETHING

The Date for a Restoration Has Been Set, According to the Summertime Gossip in the Tea Shops. Republican Officials Are Sympathizers with Royalty

Anomalous Conditions in Peking, Where the Boy King Is a Prisoner but Still a Son of Heaven, and Where the Manchu Nobles Drink the Dregs of Poverty

By Nathaniel Peffer

PEKING.

A DEPOSED emperor pleading to be spared restoration, a member of the imperial household even seeking the good offices of the foreign legations to prevent a monarchist coup in its favor, where except in the topsyturvydom of China could such a reversal of the natural order of things be possible?

In the majestic pavilions of the Purple City, where the sixteen-year-old Son of Heaven receives the homage of the shriveled remains of what was only a few years ago probably the most gorgeous court in the world, there is quaking now with the advent of summer. For summer is the season of political unrest in China, and with unrest come always whispered rumors of plots to restore the Manchu rulers.

There are such rumors now. The date for the restoration, one hears in the teashops of the poor and the feasting halls of the mighty, has been fixed. The pseudo military powers that be have been holding conference, making and unmaking intrigue, threatening and maneuvering toward battle. Out of the turmoil, one hears, will come a monarchy for the third time in ten years.

There is ground for the rumors. The most powerful military man in the country, the ex-bandit Governor of the Manchurian provinces, Chang Tso-lin, is generally accepted to be a monarchist. And since he emerged victorious in the civil war a year ago, his word is practically decisive. So also is the President, Hsu Shih-chang, a monarchist. If there is anything anomalous in a republican president being a monarchist in his sympathies, that, too, is merely China. And certainly a majority of the older officials are monarchist at heart.

There is reason, then, for the Manchu court to quake and to send emissaries to the legations asking the representatives of foreign powers to use their personal and official influence to prevent the Emperor from being put back on the throne.

The court has had experience of restorations. It has aching memories of the nine-day fiasco monarchy of 1917, when the truculent Chang Hsun—also an ex-bandit—who had entered Peking victorious at the head of his famous pigtailed troops after another summer skirmish, awoke the sleeping boy Hsuan Tung in the middle of a tremulous June night, marched him through the silent moonlit courtyards to the throne room and proclaimed him ruler of the Middle Kingdom, the while the frightened child wept petulantly at being pulled out of his bed and confronted with all the ominous stirring and kowtowings. Nine days later the republican troops marched into Peking and the boy and his court awaited piteously their dispatch. It never came, for a variety of reasons, chief of which was that those who would have had to pass sentence were all implicated in the conspiracy; but the experience put terror into the imperial hearts.

Even in China, though rulers propose people dispose, and for better or worse the majority of those Chinese who constitute public opinion want no restoration. A republic they have not assuredly, and the meaning of a republic they may not understand nor be fitted for its responsibilities, but none the less they want no more of monarchy, least of all rule by an alien dynasty. The future may hold reaction and the chaos of a few more years, such as these ten since the republic was proclaimed, may bring a reversion to monarchy and stability, but now, at least, any attempt to foist an emperor on the Chinese is an invitation to disaster. As well as anybody else do the Manchus themselves realize this.

Nor have they any stomach for the use of their dynasty as a football of politics. A football it conveniently makes. It is something to intrigue with, inversely and obliquely, as an Oriental intrigues. It is a potent weapon in the execution of the double-cross. A general, say, emerges out of the military welter of overpowering strength. He becomes an object of terror to the opposition party. He is even more an object of terror to his own party. Balance of power is carried out to its most delicate niceties in China. Even one's allies must not be too strong. The word is whispered to the general by other generals that the time is propitious for the solution of China's problem, for the consolidation of their own strength; that time has come, in other words, for restoration. Who more fitted than he to lead, he with his power and his wisdom and his glory? And his shall be the power behind the throne.

The blandishment is sweet. Strong of will and discerning of discretion is he who resists. He is given guaranties of support. He casts the die, there is a monarchy. Whereupon ally and enemy alike, proclaiming to the people by the spirits of their ancestors their loyalty to the people, raise the standards of the republic, cast out the usurper and restore the rule of the pai hsing—the race of the hundred names. And the general, he of overweening military strength, feared alike by political friend and foe, is shorn of his army, his fortune and his reputation, relegated to oblivion. Friend and foe, now more evenly balanced again, resume the intrigue with merely normal complications. That is the history of the restoration of 1917, that was the background of that puzzling (to Occidentals) episode. It will be quite likely the history of similar episodes of the future.

Well content, then, is the Manchu house to remain in the comfort and security of its corner of the Forbidden City, living modestly on its annual pension. Of the once hallowed Forbidden City a large part is now trod by profane feet. Where once the tribute bearers of half the Eastern Hemisphere entered bringing the choicest wares and the most precious jewels of their realms to the feet of the Son of Heaven is now a public park, and there Peking's near-aristocracy—Peking society, if you like—comes for its tea and cakes in the shade of century-old trees; and sometimes—such is the execrable way of modernity and the ruthless price of progress—for pseudo-American sandwiches and even more pseudo-American beer.

A still larger part is given over to the crass ways of republicanism, to vice-presidents and ministers of commerce and senators and publicity bureaus and things. And in the grottos and rookeries where the Dowager Tzu Hsi, the glorious "Old Buddha," sat in her yellow silk and dragon-carved sedan chair, attended by her courtiers, her noble ladies and her eunuchs, and sipped tea out of precious jade cups and dreamily heard the ancient melodies played on priceless ancient instruments, and possibly decreed the yellow silken cord and the imperial boon of suicide by strangling for a minister out of favor—there energetic young secretaries, wearing baggy Western trousers and talking indifferent English, now rush about bearing telegrams and dispatching special delivery letters.

Or maybe even of Wednesday mornings receiving resident foreign correspondents thither come to give skeptic ear to the official lies and near-lies there disseminated once a week in the fond—but vain—hope they will be spread to the waiting millions of Europe and America with their bacon and eggs next morning. Vain, vain hope! Traveling correspondents may come and traveling correspondents may go, interviewing as they run, taking their continents on the flit, cabling much and writing more wrong, always wrong and ever foolish. (Oh, the tales one could unfold!) They may come and they may go, but we of the Wednesday morning sessions, we listen respectfully, but we do not cable; and we may cable but we do not believe—we never, never believe.

One part of the Forbidden City is yet preserved inviolate. There the young Emperor Hsuan Tung and his court live, a few yards from the base of the famous Ching Shan, or Coal Hill, where the last of the Ming emperors, the last Chinese Emperor, hanged himself in despair as the hordes of the Manchu conquerors poured in through the city walls three hundred years ago. What thoughts must lie in the minds of the Manchu imperial family as they look out over that hill from the prison of their courtyards, before them on the hill the beginning of their glory in the bitter death of the ruler of the vanquished, behind them its end in the courtyards, where functions the government of this strange new thing, the republic.

It is a curious, anomalous existence the Emperor lives and a more curious, anomalous position he holds. He lives to-day with his family and his court not half a mile from what was his throne room, the magnificent hall where his subjects appeared before him prostrate. He is still within the pink walls of the Forbidden City. Only a wall separates him from the offices where the clerks of the republican government work.

But he is a prisoner. Never has he emerged from the courtyards in the corner of the Forbidden City allotted to him for his palace. Probably he never will. He knows of life only what is encompassed within these courtyards and what comes to him in the gossip of his family and his eunuchs — and the books he is allowed to read. The new wonders of railway and motor car and machinery, more powerful and skillful than human, are as unknown to him almost as to his great ancestors in the golden era of his race 300 years ago. Aside from the imperial household, his servants, his auto, and a half dozen of the privileged officials of the imperial regime he is cut off from human-kind.

He is a prisoner, but still occupant of the Dragon Throne—still Son of Heaven. He is permitted to retain his title. In fact, he never relinquishes it. He never has abdicated. When the revolution took place in 1911 the dynasty was not overthrown. The Emperor—that is, the regent—proclaimed a republic in obedience "to the mandate of Heaven" and the will of the people and ordered a president to wield the rule of the empire and a constitution to be drafted. Always the paradoxical, the fantastic, the unique touch of the East!

So Emperor and Son of Heaven he remains by consent of the republican government and the Chinese people. And in the little corner of the Forbidden City, the tiny spot that is all that is left to him of the Middle Kingdom, he holds his court as did Kang Hsi and Chien Lung, his great ancestors, two of the greatest monarchs known to history. The old court ceremonial is still performed and all the old ritual enacted, though shorn of the glory of its background. Six hundred eunuchs still attend him. At sunrise each morning there is still the procession of his advisers and his ministry to give counsel on the conduct of the realm. Tradition enforced early rising on the Chinese emperors. They held their counsels of state between 3 and 7 o'clock in the morning. It was the pleasant theory that the emperor, shepherd of his flock, was too pressed with its care to have time or desire for sleep. The tradition was obeyed. The court sat before sunrise, then slept till early afternoon. Thus tight are the bonds of tradition and convention in China, and thus easy its evasion.

The gorgeous robes of olden time are still worn and the nine kotows performed. The jealousies and intriguery of the court, one hears, still prevail. And the festering corruption of old cats as ever into the slender fortunes of the imperial house.

One insistent modern note has entered. The boy emperor has a foreign tutor, R. F. Johnston, a British subject, formerly one of the British consuls. Every human being with whom the emperor has contact approaches him on his knees and prostrates himself. When the foreign teacher enters the imperial presence it is the emperor who bows and remains standing until the teacher is seated. In China from time immemorial only one man has been entitled to claim respect from the ruler. That is his teacher. To him the emperor even makes obeisance. Such has been always and still is the nation's reverence for learning. Let them who come to convert the heathen Chinaman from lands where the teacher is paid less than the street cleaner and respected not much more always bear that in mind. How much, how infinitely much have the civilized people still to learn from the heathen East!

To all his other tragic trials there is added unto the Emperor that of mastering English grammar. That and rudiments of other Western learning are the subjects of his instruction by the foreign tutor. The Emperor is said to be an intelligent lad, without the signs of decadence of the last generations of his house. He has an eager curiosity concerning modern, and especially Western, institutions and aspects of life. Thus he plies his tutor with naïve questions: How do foreigners live, what are their houses like, what do they eat, what are their amusements, why are so many of them unmarried and why do they marry so late, when twelve to sixteen is the age proper to betrothal and sixteen to twenty proper to marriage? Also he is reported to be surprisingly modern in his ideas, especially of government; ideas widely radical to those who have preceded him and even now surround him. And what he has been told of what has befallen him has sobered him beyond his years. And if that did not his experiences would.

His experiences are far from easily borne. The rightful heir to the untold millions of a fabulously rich court must scrape for means of subsistence. When the republic was proclaimed a yearly pension of 4,000,000 taels was voted to him (about $2,700,000 at normal exchange). This was later reduced to $4,000,000 in silver. It was still later reduced to a Pickwickian sense. The Chinese government in the last two or three years has been on the edge of bankruptcy. It has not even paid the salaries of its own officials. Naturally, it has not paid the court its pension. And the court has had a hard lot, and its creditors an even harder one. For the poorer of those attached to the court, the lesser eunuchs and the like, it has been desperately hard. Surely here is the outstanding example of general poverty.

If hard has been the lot of the imperial household, bitter has been that of the Manchus living in Peking, most of them former officials. Since their conquest of China in the middle of the seventeenth century the Manchus have lived on the country as parasites. Thousands of civil officials and many more of soldiery have been quartered on the country at its expense. All were alloted annunities, even when not in service, and all had some connection with officials or official life. The old Banners, the Manchu corps d'élite, had become a mere shell, but the descendants of those who composed them continued to receive government pay. To all intents and purposes there were no Manchus who were not officially supported out of the national exchequer.

Suddenly they were cut off. No pension has been given them. Nor have they means of subsistence. In the generations of parasitism they had become decadent. Occupation of any kind except in the official yamens was beneath their dignity. The perquisites of office, the limitless opportunities for corruption, made occupation unnecessary. Even the lesser breed had enough for sustenance. An extravagant and luxury-loving people as the result of their generations of idleness, those who had wealth squandered it, recking little of the lean days to come.

The result is incredible out of the pages of fiction. The overwhelming majority of Manchus in and around Peking live in the most shocking, direst of poverty. They have no skill, they know no trades, most of them are too weakened by lazy living to do physical work. They exist on the perilous road from hand to mouth on the sharp dividing line between life and death as only Orientals can exist. The garishly painted and powdered Manchu ladies with their huge silk-and-cardboard scaffoldings of headdresses daintily tread the most noisome alleys and spend their days in the meanest of hovels.

The broad stream of mandarin coats, snuff bottles, porcelains, jades and what tourists call curios that has found its way into American shops of recent years all has its source in Manchu poverty. The wealthiest of the Manchu families, the higher nobility, sell their treasures to support themselves. When the treasures are gone——

There was one prince who had one of the most famous palaces in Peking, hard by the Hsichimen, the northwest gate. It was a fairyland, famed over Northern China, dazzling in the riches it held. And the riches were scattered with the lavish hand of the Manchu aristocracy. Four years ago the prince died. He left three sons. One is now a ricksha coolie. During the day he remains in seclusion, his pride greater than his hunger. At night he prowls the lanes for a chance fare, content with a few coppers for the most back-breaking work known to man, a human horse. Another son is a buyer and seller of junk and old rags. The third, an emaciated opium smoker and morphine addict—morphine is cheaper than opium—lives off the dubious earnings of his wife.

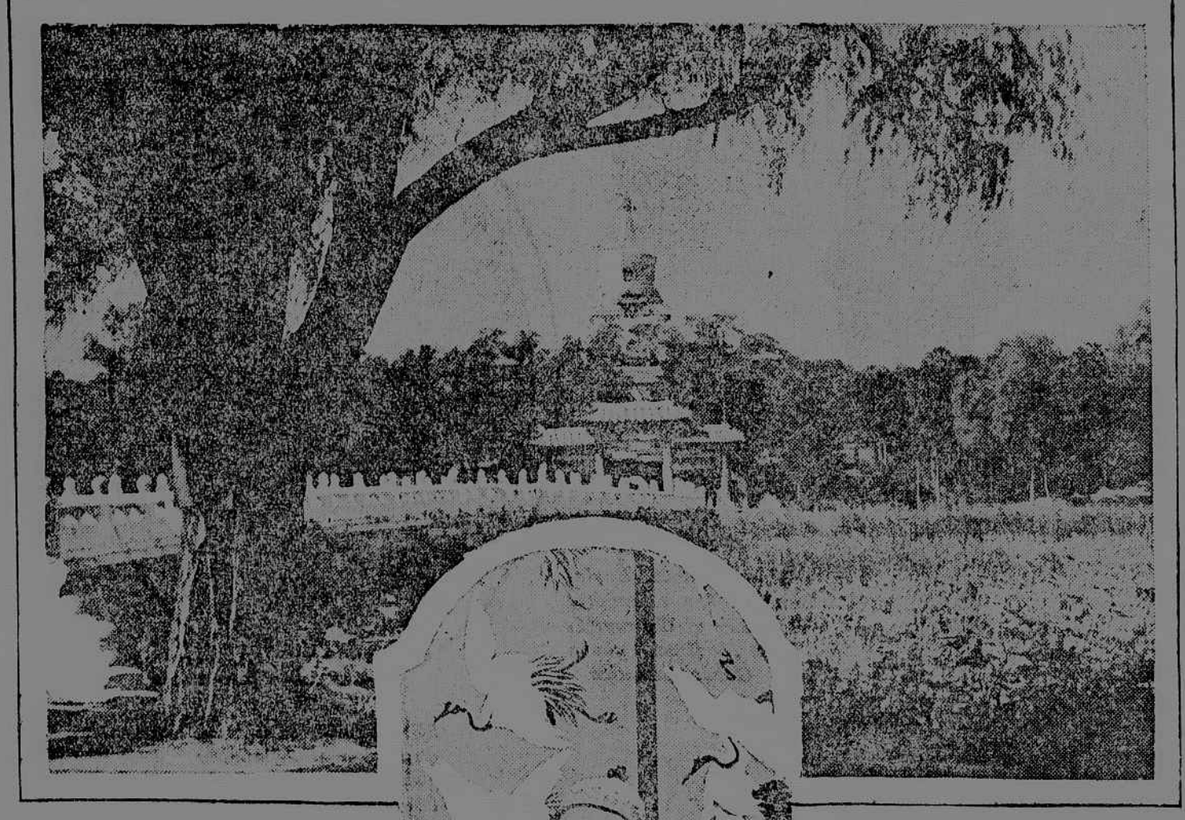
In this there is nothing uncommon. One of the kitchen helpers in one of the foreign hotels here is a descendant of an iron-capped prince. The translator of one of the foreign correspondents is the son of a noble. The nephew of a member of the one-time privy council is garden coolie for one of my neighbors. Such is the fate of the descendants of Nurhachu, Cæsar of the Manchus, one of the world's great warriors, who led his race through the Great Wall and left them to make themselves masters of one-third the world's population. In their end is infinite pathos. It is one of the lesser tragedies of man's history.

The path of the conqueror in China leads but to ruin, as Asia's chronicles for twenty centuries attest. Mongols, in whose veins runs the blood of Kubla Khan, who put a world under his heel, now beg for alms outside the Lama temple here, or carry staggering loads on bamboo poles. Manchus, but a few years' span from the Emperor, who spurned the ambassadors of European states, now pull shopkeepers in rickshas. Tokio statesmen please note.

In the pavilion at the end of this wavering path the last Emperor of the Mings hanged himself in despair, 300 years ago, at the coming of the Manchu conquerors. The hill on which the pavilion stands is artificial and is reputed to have a foundation of jewels

Bronze incense burners in the Forbidden City, Peking

Famous stone tortoise, emblem of longevity, Peking



Lotus Lake, in the Winter Palace

Bottle Pagoda at the bridge's end

Hsuan Tang, the last Emperor of China, from a photograph taken shortly after he was dethroned. This is the last picture of him that has been taken, though he is now fifteen years old