A SON OF THE ROADS

A Shansi Muleteer, the type of China’s millions of transport workers—hardy, kindly, uncomplaining, his face furrowed from exposure and a song always upon his lips.

From the Water-colour Study by Arthur de Carle Sowerby.
Transportation is to a country what the circulatory system is to an individual body. Roads and waterways form the arteries and the means of transport form the blood. Just as the functions of the blood are to carry food supplies, oxygen and other necessities of life and health from those parts of the body where they are taken in and prepared for use to those where they are needed, and to carry away waste products and deposit them where they can be expelled from the system, so the chief tasks of the various agencies of transport in a country are to carry food and other supplies from the ports of entry or the factories to the consumers, and to carry away refuse.

If the circulatory system of a living body is in good order and functioning properly, the whole body is in a healthy condition; but if for any reason it breaks down and does not function properly, the whole body very soon feels the effect and a state of ill-health ensues. So with a country: the inefficient working or disruption of its system of internal communications very soon upsets the well-being of that country as a whole, tending to produce a state of disorder and chaos that is analogous to illness in an individual.

For this reason the very life of a state or a community depends upon its system of transportation and internal communications, which, therefore, must be considered by far the most important part of its whole organization.

China is no exception to this rule. An enormous country with a huge population, she contains immense areas that are not readily accessible from seaports or by rivers, and must therefore be reached by overland
methods of transport. Unfortunately for the country, the chaos that has been produced by the civil wars and banditry of the past few years has resulted in a very extensive breaking down of her system of internal communications, and many of the interior areas not accessible by water have become practically isolated. Famine has followed as a natural sequence, and its horrors are accentuated by the fact that it is almost impossible to send food to the stricken areas owing to the lack of adequate transport. The distant province of Kansu constitutes one such area. On the one hand, while people are dying by the thousand and cannibalism is rampant, on the other the normal means of communication have become so disrupted as a result of military activities that neither food nor money can be despatched to the sufferers with any certainty of reaching them. Kansu is not alone in this condition. Considerable areas in Shensi and North Shansi are similarly affected; and, if matters go on as they are, it will not be long before other extensive areas in China will come to the same pass.

Even in more favoured areas considerable distress is being felt by the merchant and artisan classes owing to the wholesale interruption of inter-provincial trade and the extreme difficulty that is being experienced in getting goods and merchandise to interior districts from the seaports, and vice versa.

Indeed, so bad has been the interruption to normal trade conditions, and for so long a period, that even with the cessation of hostilities and the suppression of banditry a very considerable period would necessarily elapse before pre-civil war conditions could be restored with the old methods of transport.

Those who have studied the situation and conditions most carefully realize that there are two things China needs more than anything else to set her on the road to peace and prosperity. These are honesty and integrity amongst her rulers and official classes, and a good and up-to-date system of internal communications. It lies with the Chinese people to supply the former, since no one but themselves can help them in this; but with regard to the latter a great deal can be and is being done from outside to put this country on her feet.

For millenniums the Chinese have been content with a system of roads and waterways and methods of transport that, while excellent in their time and day, have now become, or are fast becoming, obsolete. Throughout the world machinery is rapidly taking the place of human and animal labour. The emancipation of the labouring classes demands the substitution of the motor-lorry for the wheelbarrow, the motor-car for the rickshaw, the railway engine and wagons for the mule-cart and pack train and the steam-launch and motor-boat for the sampan and junk.

In the last issue of this journal we had occasion to dwell upon what has picturesquely been called China's wheelbarrow civilization by one of the country's foremost thinkers of the day. Let there be no misunderstanding our attitude in this: we are not in any way indulging in carping criticisms in discussing the present position of this great country with regard to modern economic developments. On the contrary, we have
called attention to the present state of affairs merely with a view to
arousing interest in the subject and paving the way to what has long been
in our mind, the devotion of a complete issue of this journal to the subject
of transport in China in all its phases, past, present and future, with the
ultimate object of contributing our quota to the great and laudable task
of placing this country on a sound economic basis.

We believe that what will be found in the following pages will prove
not only of interest to our readers, but of value to all who are in any way
connected with transport in this country. We have been fortunate in
securing the assistance of experts in writing up the various phases of
our subject, and we are confident that the information here offered is
both up-to-date and accurate.

Our subscribers will, we feel sure, excuse the omission of certain
regular features of this journal from this issue, such as art, scientific,
educational and other notes and reviews, the kennel and garden sections
and reports of the meetings of societies: these will appear in our next
issue, the June or special summer number.