TRANSPORT IN CHINESE ART

Transport in Chinese art is not as common as might be expected of a race as practical as the Chinese; but there is enough to show that this is a matter that has always been of great importance to this people.

In paintings, bas-reliefs, sculptures and stone engravings dealing with Chinese legends and myths one finds a number of strange creatures figuring as transport animals. Laotze, for instance, is frequently portrayed riding on a sika deer, which carries a branch of Prunus or some other flowering shrub in its mouth. This is a subject that is particularly common in brass or bronze work, but may be found in embroideries, on porcelain and in paintings.

Fabulous animals are also often used for the purpose of transporting sages or supernatural beings in Chinese art, amongst these being creatures somewhat resembling lions, unicorns (chi-lin or kirin), tigers, the so-called Chinese phoenix (feng-huang) and the like.

The elephant frequently appears in Chinese art carrying on its back some sort of howdah or pavilion, but seldom with a human burden.
Incidentally it is always a white elephant and is very much conventionalized. The elephant’s head is not infrequently used in decorating the ends of out-jutting beams and cave-poles in temple buildings; while well modelled figures of it, along with figures of other animals and of human beings, frequently adorn the ridge tiles of the roofs.

But these are all mythical, and there is no indication that in the case of animals that actually exist, such as the deer and the elephant, they were ever used in China for transport purposes, at least during historical times. That the elephant existed in China in a wild state up to the time of the Hsiang Dynasty is indicated by figures of this animal which appear in the inscriptions on the old oracle bones from Honan ascribed to that period and a piece of a tooth of a young elephant discovered along with deer horns, turtle shells, implements and other relics from the Waste of Yin in that province.

Turning to that phase of Chinese art which deals with reality and not legend, that attempts to depict the every-day life of the people, or takes for its motifs subjects which the artist actually sees and knows to exist, we find that in various ways a very clear idea is given of how China has got along in this most important matter throughout the ages.

Very early in the art of the country we find mounted men, warriors, kings and sages, figuring. And the remarkable thing is the quality of their mounts. These are by no means the familiar China pony of to-day, but veritable horses, a little heavy in the body, perhaps, but of large size and with long arched necks. In the Tang and other early tomb pottery the horse is very prevalent, and here we have an animal along the lines of a European thorough-bred, long-limbed, long-necked, slender-headed, graceful creatures that leave us wondering how the Chinese could have had such magnificent horses at that distant date so long before the thorough-bred had been evolved in Europe, and what has become of this fine breed of horses. There are some very famous paintings and bas-reliefs of these fine horses, perhaps the best known being the painting by Li Kung-lin of the 11th Century A. D. known as “The Five Horses” or Wu Ma, which is in the Government Museum at Peking, and the stone bas-reliefs of five Imperial horses at Si-an Fu in Shensi.

In bas-reliefs and steles of an even earlier date, notably of the Han Dynasty, we find the saddle horse much in evidence. But this is not all, for we find also the chariot depicted, that is to say, two-wheeled vehicles drawn by one or more horses, and used apparently both for war and peaceful transport. Except that they have but two wheels, these in no wise resemble the modern Chinese cart. They are of light build, more like such Western vehicles as dog-carts, traps and even handsome cabs. One shown on a stone stele at Fei-ch’eng Hsien in Shantung is particularly like the latter vehicle, except that it is drawn by four horses abreast. What might well be a hooded dog-cart, drawn by a single magnificent steed prancing along in fine style appears in relief

* Die Kunst Indiens, Chinas und Japan, by Otto Fisher, pl. 315.
on some bricks in a wall at Chao-hüa Hsien in Szechuan. * But in this there is a faint suggestion of the modern Peking cart, although it is a much lighter vehicle.

Amongst other interesting pottery tomb figures and pieces that have been discovered of late years are models of carts, chiefly drawn by oxen, which are not very different from those in use at the present time, and it might be suggested that the works of art already mentioned showed the vehicles and mounts of the idle rich, the officials and the military, while the more practical vehicles of the work-a-day world were only placed in the tombs for the use of the deceased in the next world. A fine example of a pottery model of an ox-cart appears in the accompanying illustrations. According to Dr. J. C. Ferguson in his article on “Transportation in Early China” landscapes of the Northern Sung Dynasty often have carts which are of the same type as those now in use.

Strangely enough, the pack animal does not appear in early Chinese art, with the exception of the camel amongst the pottery tomb figures of the Tang period. In later paintings, however, the pack-mule or donkey is introduced. The accompanying illustration is a section of a long horizontal scroll showing a number of pack-donkeys with their drivers on a highroad through mountainous country.

The water buffalo, often with a child, a herder or a field worker on its back, is very common in paintings of rural life and scenery, especially in modern Chinese paintings, while this animal is a favourite subject of wood carvers and brass workers. Amongst the so-called tea-root carvings for which Foochow is famous, the buffalo and boy motif appears frequently, the work often being exquisitely done, especially in the larger pieces, in which every hair on the animal is indicated.

On the whole it may be said that water transport much more frequently forms a motif or an element in Chinese art compositions, especially in paintings.

Hills, trees, human dwellings and water are each almost a sine qua non in a Chinese landscape, and the Chinese artist apparently succumbs as readily as his Western colleague to the temptation of putting some kind of craft on any piece of water he depicts. But, as pointed out by Dr. Ferguson in the preceding article, the boat is not found in early Chinese paintings, and it is only in more modern works of art that it appears. It must be further admitted that the use of the boat in Chinese painting has not progressed much beyond the introduction of small fishing punts or sampans, and it is to the so-called “Coramandal” and lacquer screens and cupboards of the present date that we have to look for a development of this motif to the point where sailing vessels in the distance are introduced. This is rather surprising considering to what an extent water transit is used in China, and must have been used even in the olden days of the great painters, not to mention the way the Chinese had developed their maritime trade, and, in their stout sea-going

junks, had pushed their way to Malayan regions and even to the coasts of India.

One cannot leave the subject of transport in Chinese art without making reference to the marble boat that lies on the lake at the Summer Palace near Peking, which was built at the instigation of the late Empress Dowager, Tzu Hsi, as a safe means of taking a water voyage. This has the typical square bow of a Chinese boat, but there is a paddle wheel carved in stone on each side. A two-storied, glassed in pavilion provides shelter and entertainment for the passengers, and the marble blocks that form its hull, resting firmly on the bottom of the lake, no one is in danger either of the unpleasant effects of a rough passage or of finding a watery grave. For the rest, it stands a monument to the decadence of Chinese art towards the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty, and indicates what may be expected from the impact of the machine civilization of the West upon age old civilizations and artistic traditions of the East.