





A TRAVELLER'S IMPRESSIONS OF HINDU- BUDDHIST RUINS IN CAMBODIAN CHINA.

BY

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Once the Cambodian-China border is crossed, the autocar speeds for hours across flat colourless country until at last it follows a road cut through dense entangled forest. Monkeys leap from branch to branch and scowl irritably at our intrusion. Then night falls, the birds cease their short cries, the jackals end their long howls, the cicadas drop their brittle chirping and the foxes call no more to their cubs. All-embracing silence entombs the jungle's diurnal noises.

The quietude lengthens. In this darkness the wheels must run more slowly. And after the moon's arc rises triumphantly in the sky and countless stars have appeared to keep it company, there break suddenly upon my straining eyes the shadowy silhouettes of prodigiously-tall towered buildings. Their heads top the forest trees abruptly and are spread out over a wide area.

The lonely jungle road leads for miles through uninhabited and uncleared tracts, and then without warning skirts these gigantic deserted monuments of a dead city that once held a million living men and women.

These vast ruins of Angkor lay forgotten in their hidden lair amongst virgin vegetation, until not much more than two generations ago. Then they were discovered accidentally by Mouhot, the French naturalist-hunter, whilst collecting specimens of tigers, leopards and apes for scientific purposes. Even so it was not till the opening years of the twentieth century that European hunters of lost Asiatic culture were able to set to work in real earnest. They dug

out of their tombs in the soft red North Cambodian soil these dulled architectural gems which had been waiting for time and man to disinter them.

Where the four main roads of the vanished town converged on a common centre, there stood and still stands the amazing temple of Bayon. Where on this world's surface exists another precisely like it? Grim, grotesque, fantastic, monstrous ultra-primitive, benign, or beatific—each on looker interprets at his will and carries away a different impression according to his taste, temperament and knowledge. For the first eye-arresting features of the Bayon are four titanic heads which are repeatedly carved on every one of the fifty domed towers which themselves rise about fifty feet into the air above the corridors they crown, except the central summit which is nearly one hundred feet higher still. Each of the four giants' faces varies but slightly from the other in its tremendously powerful expression. The grandiose features are heavy, the full cheeks and thick lips, the large flat semi-negroid nose belong to a type of race which is neither Mongol nor Aryan but to my mind, definitely Dravidian. The general effect of these domes with unfamiliar human visages is to bring me back again to Egypt, to set me down once more within the sandy precinct of the colourful Sphinx.

Forest, brush and creeper still half hold the Bayon in their grasp. As in so many other important Oriental temples, the side which greets the dawning sun is the most honoured; so here the entrance is wider, the stone steps more numerous, and a specially decorative setting of lion-guards and serpent-balustrades greets the visitor. The sandstone lions half-squat on their hind legs angrily and show their teeth. Carvings are everywhere, on pillars, walls and porticoes. Life-like pictures represent the home, market place, battlefield and sports ground; the pleasures and histories of kings and commoners—the world of ordinary

everyday life of a people whose close-cropped hair and distinctive features label them as the Khmers. That there is a definite plan behind this arrangement of themes become clear when I ascend to the second storey, where the scenes change their character and unroll a beautiful tableau of religious story and mythical incident from the Hindu epic "The Ramayana."

I wander out of the sanctuary through a door which opens on a high-vaulted passage and proceed thence through antechambers and porches till I find the friendly light in a carved stone window. Here I stand for awhile to survey the forest and jungle remnants of the city wall and its gates. The encircling road alone is about sixteen miles in length. A medieval Imperial Chinese envoy to the Cambodian Court estimated the population of the town as being not less than one million inhabitants. Caesar's Rome was smaller and less populous. The lightly-built wood, grass and mud cottages of the common herd have disappeared into dust to-day under the attack of strong winds, rains and sun, but I see numerous relics of larger stone buildings profusely piled—palaces, temples, royal terraces and monasteries—which have withstood the action of time since the rest of the town was abandoned to the invasion of thick forest trees and thorny jungle bushes. Angkor is now a dead city and tropical torpor holds these half-buried monuments in its paralyzing arms.

The most marked feature of the Bayon—the four gigantic mask-like faces which adorn each of the other domes as well as the central cupola itself, totalling two hundred heads and altogether appearing like an assembly of the gods—what do they mean? Archaeologists at different dates have named them Siva, Brahma, Lokesvara and Buddha. All these have indeed been honoured or worshipped in ancient Cambodia by turns.

On a man-made hill is the battered and broken fragment of the main porch of a thousand-year old pyramidal house of God—the Baphuon, which came second in importance to the Bayon and therefore received much of the best efforts of Khmer artists and architects. Tcheou-Ta-Kwan, the Chinese scholar, visited Angkor during the thirteenth century and mentions the Baphuon in his diary as providing one of the most impressive views in the city. But fate and time brought medieval invading troops from east and west, from Annam and Siam who, brutalised by the passions of war, desecrated the flower-filled gardens in its tranquil courts and dismembered the stone blocks of its rising tiers and turrets. Yet enough of its charm remains to attract me inside.

This four-hundred foot long building is simpler than the Bayon and similar in possessing three lofty storeys, several towers and a central dome covering the chief sanctuary. But the motif of the faces of four gods is entirely absent here. I climb the ancient stone steps and make my passage along a terrace which leads to a broken gallery pathetically lined with leaning and half-tumbled columns. Little yellow lizards with long tails stuck upright in the air fix their quaint gaze at me. Blue and gold-coloured butterflies cross and re-cross the deserted thresholds. Vegetation has forced its way into the building, but its invasion now holds firmly together what the earlier human invaders had endeavoured to tear apart. Giant tortuous banyan and fig trees imprison floors and walls and terraces—even the summits of half-tottering towers—in their monstrously thick roots and creeping branches of white wood. Such is their tremendous strength and age that these tentacles cannot be pulled away and they appear to have embedded themselves in the very stones.

Thus both man and Nature have tried to squeeze and crush the body of the Baphuon like serpents attacking a

defenceless beast. They have maimed it but the soul is still untouched, the majestic atmosphere remains, the superb carvings of the sacred epic of Rama, the divine avatar, done in low relief on plain panels are unforgettable, whilst inside the austere holy of holies the haunting echo of its best days withdraws my mind into a state of unearthly felicity.

Yet I leave the Baphuon with the depressing memory of that terribly significant verse penned by the poetic Tent-Maker of Naishapur :

“They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshed gloried and drunk deep;
And Bahram, that great Hunter—
The Wild Ass stamps o’er his Head,
But cannot break his Sleep”.

As if to impress the lesson of these lines I find the adjoining ruins to be those of the vast royal palace, which is enclosed within a wall two-thousand feet long. Its one-time luxury is now mocked by the few cows and buffaloes which wander lazily to feed on the grass that grows around its fallen stones. Almond-eyed Tcheou-Ta-Kwan saw window frames made of solid gold when he sat in the palace audience chamber nearly seven hundred years ago but I, alas! perceive only crumbling grey walls and aimless wandering ghosts.

A great paved platform, shaped like a gigantic fallen cross, suddenly thrusts itself up amongst all this tangled forest of slender areca-palms, dark banana trees and feathered doco-groves whose foliage hems me in like an encircling wall. A sandstone stela still remains to tell unwittingly the mournful story of life’s impermanence. It is carved with lengthy inscriptions which cover each of the four sides in the usual style of the country. Two

languages are used, the one Sanskrit and the other, old Khmer. It bears a thousand-year old date and narrates the foundation by king Yasovarman of the Buddhist monastery of Tep Pranam which stood upon this platform. The refuge was clearly a wooden and brick structure for nothing at all remains to-day; the monastic hall has crumbled into dust, the monk's houses have vanished and their little chapel is as dead as themselves.

Yet one thing was not made of such perishable stuff and has therefore lived to appear to modern gaze. It is an enormous isolated statue of the teacher Gautama, well preserved and calmly defiant of the test of time. Some pious living monks of the neighbourhood have built a tiled roof to protect the enduring granite of their Master's head, but their act seems more a gesture of reverence than one of need. The woolly curls of hair are arranged, according to the stiff conventional fashion, in regular rows all over the Buddha's head. The cotton monk's robe hangs tightly and assumes the mould of the body's lines. The mild gently-expressive stone lips speak to me silently with a message that comes like an unexpected voice out of the Infinite. The legs are crossed upon a lotus-shaped throne. The left palm is placed on the folded knees, but the fingers of the right hand point downwards, for Gautama is thus symbolically taking the whole earth as a witness that Nirvana has truly been attained, that the baffling mystery of the finite ego has been solved.

The Wat is the best preserved and the least ruined of all the Khmer fanes. I pass under the pediment and project a torch light upon the carvings of men, beasts and gods which ornament the wall in crowds. Here are fragments of the old Indian epics unrolled as storied tableaux whilst I walk. They run in a continuous frieze, not in panels, and bear the appearance of time-blackened tapestry. And they run for not less than half a mile

around the temple. The Cambodian sculptors clearly worked on these walls after the blocks were already in position. They cut delicately and shallowly into the fine sandstone to make these polished low reliefs and they worked so hard that hardly any available surface was left untouched. Valmiki's verse is re-inscribed here as a wordless mural and appears in a tumultuous profusion of chiselled pictures, once painted and gilded but now bereft of all original colouring. The Mahabharata and the Harivamsa are here too. I observe the familiar faces of ancient gods—Yama and Siva and Surya and Vishnu. A vestibule leads to open courtyards, alleys and shrines. In one sanctuary an assemblage of many statues lies scattered; it is the Shrine of the Thousand Buddhas. The place is torpid; environed by vague silence and undefined sadness.

At its farthest end is the penumbral shrine, the holy of holies of Angkor Wat, placed as in all Khmer-built fanes in the precise centre of the topmost tier. Over its head rears the sumptuously ornamented central cupola, two hundred feet high and shaped like a delicate lotus bud. The Chinese envoy who visited Angkor more than seven hundred years ago, found the tower covered with gold and noticed that its gleaming height could be seen from any point in the vanished town.

Other wanderings on other days bring me to many ruins which lie within and beyond Angkor. Hundreds of miles away there still remain imprisoned in the jungle which spreads with such swift and extraordinary abundance here, many scattered ruins of this lost Khmer world. But I must keep my pen within the bounds of Angkor and tell briefly of two more places that impress themselves upon memory. The first is a group of old buildings, the Ta prohm, whose ruins the sun has burned for eight hundred years. Here a mossy Buddhist temple, a crumbling house

and a treasure depository combine with invading forest to present a truly picturesque scene. The builders were wise enough to put up an inscription from which one may read that more than forty thousand precious stones were kept in the treasury and that no less than two thousand resident priests officiated in the rites. The grounds are encumbered with thickly-growing tropical vegetation, with half-buried displaced blocks of stone, with limbless statues, carved fragments and mere rubbish. A figure of the dying Buddha lies on the grass-grown paved floor. A stray chink of light caresses his brow. The silent sage rests in his final meditation.

When the inhabitants fled from endangered Angkor the city deserted by men began to be inhabited by Nature. White ants, dampness and heat gradually destroyed the wooden homes which survived the invaders' fires. Finally vegetation wrestled with stones—and won. The leafy bo—tree, octopus-like, a yard in girth, now creeps slowly to certain victory over most buildings in Ta prohm, insinuating its ashen-white paper-thin roots between stones and around columns. They grow, extend and thicken into masterly rulers and handsome jailers who hold the structures in their grasp.

At Pre Rup is a grandiose temple topped by a terraced pyramid and stretched on an elaborate base four hundred feet long. A long flight of wide steps intimidate me with their steepness, but once climbed I stroll between carved goddesses into a shrine of the pyramid. A couple of lacquered Buddhas fit with some uneasiness into this Brahmanically-styled fane. The sun, which gleams so weakly near the forest-filled horizon, has passed eleven hundred times around the Zodiacal circle since Pre Rup was planned. A few broken standing columns alone remain of the sanctuary in which a royal sarcophagus was confined and guarded. The queer Khmer roof famed for

its tortuous jutting horned cornices set at odd angles, has vanished and the centuries of mystic rites with it. I leave through a doorway fringed with creepers and bearded with moss. The air of neglected loneliness lies pathetically on this place, now abandoned to snakes which hide in dark holes and to centipedes which creep under mossy stones.

Such is the city of ruins which I find in Northern Cambodia; but seven centuries ago the capital of a great empire and now silhouetted on the nightly horizon of tigers when they emerge from their diurnal sleep.

I turn my steps away, conscious that these silent monuments are not so silent after all. Their own fallen grandeur constitutes a solemn warning to every modern civilization which would pin its happiness within the circumscribed limits of a sensuous life alone. They have spoken too in their own mysterious way of that ultimate reality which, once glimpsed intuited or affirmed for even a moment, explains to man why he is really here on earth, what is the glorious task which he has to accomplish and whither he must look to gain a true profit from his passage through the tribulations and temptations of his all-too-brief existence. This is the final message of Angkor.



