

Exhibit Shows Chinese Purgatories

Ethnology



ONE OF THE TEN COURTS OF THE CHINESE PURGATORY, as depicted in an exhibit at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, showing how they are represented in a Chinese morality drama. Each court has its own list of tortures meted out as punishment for the sins under its jurisdiction. The various deities and devils are shown sitting as judges. In the left foreground are seen the legs of a mortal who is being ground between two stones, on the right another being pounded, though the lily sprouting from his breast indicates his innocence. (Photo by courtesy Field Museum.)

In the belief of the Taoists of China there are ten purgatories through which the shades of the dead pass. Eight of these have sixteen wards each, and a separate torment is inflicted in each ward. Many of these surpass anything conceived in Dante's "Inferno." However, a certain grotesquely humorous flavor is lent to the Chinese purgatories as depicted in the morality drama, the Ten Courts of Purgatory, popular on the stage in China. For example, many of the puppets representing souls undergoing the most horrible tortures have blandly smiling faces. A reproduction of scenes in the ten purgatories drama forms an interesting exhibit at the Field Museum of Natural History, in Chicago.

In the first court, the Chinese believe, every man and woman must ap-

pear after death, and if their tale of good and evil works is equally balanced they are returned to life, according to Dr. Berthold Laufer, curator of anthropology at the museum and noted Orientalist.

While the great sins are essentially the same as those usually recognized as such by western civilization, the Chinese include also among the crimes for which terrible punishments are meted out after death, such things as falsely stating one's age to marry for gain; repudiation of a betrothal; slighting of husbands by wives; finding fault continually with the weather; promotion of litigation; tax dodging, and getting deeply into debt. The drama warns against race suicide by depicting a hungry shade—a man who died without issue, and consequently has nobody to feed him after death

with the prescribed ancestral sacrifices. He is a vagabond in the other world, begging alms of other souls.

Here are a few of the many forms of torture to which culprits are supposed to be subjected in the various purgatories: they are ground in a mill composed of two large stones; they are stretched on a rack; they are roasted by being tied to a fiery pillar; they are forced to climb a hill bristling with knives; their hearts are scratched and squeezed with pincers; their feet are chopped off; their sinews are cut and their bones pulled out; they are choked with fire; they are rolled and flattened on ice; they are boiled in oil, stewed, and wrung out like clothes. In the end all the shades are reborn on earth either as animals or people.

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