## LIV. The Question

W. Somerset Maugham

They took me to the temple. It stood on the side of a hill with a semi-circle of tawny mountains behind it, staging it, as it were, with a formal grandeur; and they pointed out to me with what exquisite art the series of buildings climbed the hill till you reached the final edifice, a jewel of white marble encircled by the trees; for the Chinese architect sought to make his creation an ornament to nature and he used the accidents of the landscape to complete his decorative scheme. They pointed out to me how cunningly the trees were planted to contrast with the marble of a gateway, to give an agreeable shadow here, or there to serve as a background; and they made me remark the admirable proportion of those great roofs, rising one beyond the other, in rich profusion, with the grace of flowers; and they showed me that the yellow tiles were of different hues so that the sensibility was not offended by an expanse of colour but amused and pleased by a subtle variety of tone. They showed me how the elaborate carving of a gateway was contrasted with a surface without adornment so that the eye was not wearied. All  this they showed me as we walked through elegant courtyards, over bridges which were a miracle of grace, through temples with strange gods, dark and gesticulating; but when I asked them what was the spiritual state which had caused all this mass of building to be made, they could not tell me.