## XXII. The Road

W. Somerset Maugham

It is not a road at all but a causeway, made of paving stones about a foot wide and four feet broad so that there is just room for two sedan chairs with caution to pass each other. For the most part it is in good enough repair, but here and there the stones are broken or swept away by the flooding of the rice fields, and then walking is difficult. It winds tortuously along the path which has connected city to city since first a thousand years ago or more there were cities in the land. It winds between the rice fields following the accidents of the country with a careful nonchalance; and you can tell that it was built on a track made by the peasant of dim ages past who sought not the quickest but the easiest way to walk. The beginnings of it you may see when, leaving the main road you cut across country, bound for some town that is apart from the main line of traffic. Then the causeway is so narrow that there is no room for a coolie bearing a load to pass and if you are in the midst of the rice fields he has to get on the little bank, planted with beans, that divides one from another, till you go by. Presently the stones are wanting and you  travel along a path of trodden mud so narrow that your bearers step warily.

The journey, for all the stories of bandits with which they sought to deter you, and the ragged soldiers of your escort, is devoid of adventure; but it is crowded with incident. First there is the constant variety of the dawn. Poets have written of it with enthusiasm, but they are lie-a-beds, and they have trusted for inspiration to their fancy rather than to their sleepy eyes. Like a mistress known in the dream of a moonlit night who has charms unshared by the beauties of the wakeful day, they have ascribed to it excellencies which are only of the imagination. For the most exquisite dawn has none of the splendour of an indifferent sunset. But because it is a less accustomed sight it seems to have a greater diversity. Every dawn is a little different from every other, and you can fancy that each day the world is created anew not quite the same as it was the day before.

Then there are the common sights of the way-side. A peasant, thigh deep in water, ploughs his field with a plough as primitive as those his fathers have used for forty mortal centuries. The water buffalo splashes sinister through the mud and his cynical eyes seem to ask what end has been served by this unending toil. An old woman goes by in her blue smock and short blue trousers, on bound feet, and she supports her unsteady steps with a long staff. Two fat Chinese in chairs pass you, and passing stare at you with curious yet listless  eyes. Everyone you see is an incident, however trivial, sufficient to arouse your fancy for an instant; and now your eyes rest with pleasure on the smooth skin, like yellow ivory, of a young mother sauntering along with a child strapped to her back, on the wrinkled, inscrutable visage of an old man, or on the fine bones, visible through the flesh of the face, of a strapping coolie. And beside all this there is the constant delight with which, having climbed laboriously a hill, you see the country spread out before you. For days and days it is just the same, but each time you see it you have the same little thrill of discovery. The same little rounded hills, like a flock of sheep, surrounding you, succeeding one another as far as the eye can reach; and on many, a lone tree, as though planted deliberately for the sake of the picturesque, outlines its gracious pattern against the sky. The same groves of bamboo lean delicately, almost surrounding the same farm houses, which with their clustering roofs nestle pleasantly in the same sheltered hollows. The bamboos lean over the highway with an adorable grace. They have the condescension of great ladies which flatters rather than wounds. They have the abandon of flowers, a well-born wantonness that is too sure of its good breeding ever to be in danger of debauchery. But the memorial arch, to virtuous widow or to fortunate scholar, warns you that you are approaching a village or a town, and you pass, affording a moment’s sensation to the inhabitants, through a ragged line of sordid hovels  or a busy street. The street is shaded from the sun by great mats stretched from eave to eave; the light is dim and the thronging crowd has an unnatural air. You think that so must have looked the people in those cities of magicians which the Arab traveller knew, and where during the night a terrible transformation befell you so that till you found the magic formula to free you, you went through life in the guise of a one-eyed ass or of a green and yellow parrot. The merchants in their open shops seem to sell no common merchandise and in the taverns messes are prepared of things horrible for men to eat. Your eye, amid the uniformity, for every Chinese town, at all events to the stranger’s eye, much resembles every other, takes pleasure in noting trivial differences, and so you observe the predominant industries of each one. Every town makes all that its inhabitants require, but it has also a speciality, and here you will find cotton cloth, there string, and here again silk. Now the orange tree, golden with fruit, grows scarce and the sugar cane makes its appearance. The black silk cap gives way to the turban and the red umbrella of oiled paper to the umbrella of bright blue cotton.

But these are the common incidents of every day. They are like the expected happenings of life which keep it from monotony, working days and holidays, meetings with your friends, the coming of spring with its elation and the coming of winter with its long evenings, its easy intimacies and its twilight. Now and then, as love enters  making all the rest but a setting for its radiance and lifts the common affairs of the day to a level on which the most trifling things have a mysterious significance, now and then the common round is interrupted and you are faced by a beauty which takes your soul, all unprepared, by assault. For looming through the mist you may see the fantastic roofs of a temple loftily raised on a huge stone bastion, around which, a natural moat, flows a quiet green river, and when the sun lights it you seem to see the dream of a Chinese palace, a palace as rich and splendid as those which haunted the fancy of the Arabian story tellers; or, crossing a ferry at dawn you may see, a little above you, silhouetted against the sunrise, a sampan in which a ferryman is carrying a crowd of passengers; you recognise on a sudden Charon, and you know that his passengers are the melancholy dead.