

YLIPAINOS

SUOMALAIS-UGRILAISEN SEURAN TOIMITUKSISTA LXVII

---

EXTRAIT

DES

MÉMOIRES DE LA SOCIÉTÉ FINNO-UGRIENNE LXVII

---

## The Swing in China

by

BERTHOLD LAUFER.

The swing in its relation to magical and religious practices has been the subject of several studies. From the general ethnological viewpoint it has been treated by J. G. Frazer, »Swinging as a Magical Rite» (in *The Golden Bough*, 3d ed., pt. III, vol. IV, 1914, 277—285). The swinging ceremonies of the Indo-European nations have been comparatively set forth and ingeniously interpreted by Leopold von Schroeder in his work »*Arische Religion*», vol. II »*Naturverehrung und Lebensfeste*» (1916). A very critical investigation of the Greek swinging festival is due to F. Boehm, »*Das attische Schaukel-fest*» (in *Festschrift Eduard Hahn*, 1917, 280—291), with whose conclusions I find myself entirely in accord. The famous swing festival of Siam has been described by Gerini (*Encyclopaedia of Religions*, V, 870), but this article is now superseded by the book of H. G. Quaritch Wales, »*Siamese State Ceremonies*» (London, 1931), who has devoted an entire chapter to the swinging festival of Siam (238—255) with a detailed analysis of the ceremonies, also in their relations with those of India. No one, however, has as yet made the faintest allusion to the swing in China; and as far as I am aware, no sinologist has ever dealt with the subject.

The first surprising fact about the Chinese notices of the swing is that a foreign origin is ascribed to it, while to my knowledge no other nation has a tradition to this effect; all others simply take the swing for granted and claim it as an old national property of their own. It is still more amazing that it is a tribe of »northern

barbarians» which receives credit for having transmitted the swing to China. If it were credited to India or Siam, where from ancient times the swing has played a prominent part in religious and other ceremonies, we would easily understand and naturally regard this as a logical consequence of the long and intimate cultural contact between these three countries.

Almost all Chinese authors who have written on the swing quote the *Ku kin i shu tu* 古今藝術圖, a work now lost, which seems to be the oldest source to make mention of the swing. This book was still extant under the Sui dynasty (A.D. 590—617), for it is listed in the catalogue of Sui literature (*Sui shu*, chap. 34, p. 5) as »*Ku kin i shu*, consisting of twenty chapters» in the division of light literature called *siao shwo* 小說. The author's name is not given. As far as I am aware, this work is not cited in the literature of the Han (*Ts'ien Han shu*, chap. 30), so that the supposition may be warranted that it must have been written some time between the third and fifth century A.D. A certain difficulty arises from the fact that various authors cite the text of this book in a different manner and that it is thus not entirely clear what was contained in the original text and what may be due to interpolation. Perhaps the oldest source quoting the *Ku kin i shu tu* is the *King ch'u sui shi ki* 荆楚歲時記 by Tsung Lin 宗慄 assigned to the Tsin or the Liang dynasty (Wylie, Notes on Chinese Literature, 56). Referring to football after Liu Hiang, this author continues, »According to the *Ku kin i shu tu*, the swing is a sport of the Shan Jung (Mountain Jung 山戎) of the northern region, who practise it for the purpose of gaining lightness and agility of the body» (ed. of *Han Wei ts'ung shu*, p. 9).

The same sentence, and this one only, is likewise quoted in the *Sui hua ki li* 歲華紀麗 by Han Ngo 韓鄂 of the T'ang (ed. of *T'ang Sung ts'ung shu*, chap. 1, p. 17) and in the *Tsing k'ang siang so tsa ki* 靖康相素雜記 by Hwang Ch'ao-ying 黃朝英 of the Sung (ed. of *Shou shan ko ts'ung shu*, chap. 8, p. 3b). K'ang-

hi's Dictionary quotes the same text from the *Tsi yüan*, a dictionary of the Sung period, but curiously enough omits the Shan Jung, making the swing simply »a sport of the northern regions.»

The *Sui shi kwang ki* 歲時廣記 by Ch'en Yüan-ting 陳元靚 of the Sung (chap. 16, p. 7b, ed. of Lu Sin-yüan; cf. Pelliot, *Bull. de l'Ecole française*, IX, 1909, 224—225) cites the *King ch'u sui shi ki* as follows: »At the spring festival they suspend long ropes from high trees. The daughters of the officials, in festive attire, are seated or standing on the rope and push it forward and backward. This is called the swing (*ts'iu ts'ien* 鞦韆). In the vernacular of Ch'u 楚 it is named *t'o kou* 拖鉤 ('pulling the hook'); in the Nirvāṇa Sutra, *küan-so* 罽索.»

The same work quotes the *Ku kin i shu tu* directly as follows: »The swing, used on the day of the cold provisions (*han shi* 寒食), in its origin was a sport of the Mountain Jung of the northern region for the purpose of gaining lightness and agility of the body. Later generations took advantage of it and on every day of the cold provisions amused themselves with this sport. Subsequently Chinese girls learned it. Colored ropes were suspended from a tree and a framework set up, called a swing (*ts'iu ts'ien*). Others say that since the time that Duke Hwan of Tsi 齊桓公 annihilated the Mountain Jung, this sport began to spread in China.»

The *Shi wu yüan shi* 事物原始, by Sü Kū 徐炬 of the Ming, quotes the *King ch'u sui shi ki* as follows: »At spring time they suspend long ropes from high trees. The daughters of the officials, clad in colored dresses, are seated on the rope and push it forward and backward. This is called swinging (*ta ts'iu ts'ien* 打鞦韆).» Again, this work is credited in the *Ko chi king yüan* (chap. 60, p. 4) with the following: »The swing in its origin is a sport of the Mountain Jung of the northern region, who practise it for the purpose of gaining lightness and agility of the body. Subsequently Chinese girls also learned it. They suspend a wooden board from colored ropes and erect a framework above it. The girls in

bright attire mount the swing, seated or standing, pushing it forward and backward. This is called 'the swing' (*ts'iu ts'ien*). In the vernacular of Ch'u 楚俗 it is also called *shi-kou* 施鉤. The Nirvāṇa Sūtra calls it *küan-so* [as above].» It would lead me too far to enter here into a discussion of the game *shi-kou*, *shi* being probably a wrong reading for 拖 *t'o* (»pulling the hook») offered by Lu Sin-yüan's text. It has nothing to do, however, with the swing. It is a sort of tug-of-war. The confusion between the two was obviously brought about by the fact that they were practised on the day of the cold provisions (*han shi*) and on Tsing-ming day.

The term *küan-so* ascribed to the Nirvāṇa Sūtra means literally »suspended ropes» and apparently is not a transcription, but represents the literal translation of a Sanskrit term that appears likewise in Tibetan *dpyañ-t'ag* or *ap'yañ-t'ag*, which has the same meaning. What the Sanskrit equivalent is I do not know at this moment. The common Sanskrit words designating the swing are *dolā*, *dolikā*, *hīndola*, *preñkhā*, *preñkholana*. None of our Tibetan dictionaries assigns to *dpyañ-t'ag* the meaning »swing», but it is defined by them merely as »a cord or rope by which a thing is suspended, as a plummet, a bucket, a miner.» The meaning »swing» is clearly indicated by the K'ien-lung dictionaries in four and five languages, where Chinese *ts'iu-ts'ien* is rendered by Manchu *čeku*, Tibetan *dpyañ-t'ag*, Mongol *degüdzing*, Turkī *ilānggü*; the verb »to swing» is *ta ts'iu-ts'ien* (as above), Manchu *čekudembi*, Tibetan *ap'yañ-mo nyug*, Mongol *degüdzingnemüi*, Turkī *ilānggü ujadu*.

Jung was a general term for barbarian tribes. The Mountain Jung (Shan Jung 山 戎) are identified by Legge (Chinese Classics, V, 904b) with the Northern Jung (Pei Jung), and inhabited the present department of Yung-p'ing in Chili Province (*ibid.*, 118). These were possibly tribes akin to the Hiung-nu (Chavannes, Mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien, I, 31 and Laufer, Sino-Iranica, 203). The *Ch'un ts'iu* and *Tso chwan* do not mention Duke Hwan's invasion of the Shan Jung, but an officer of Tsi invaded them in the thirtieth year of Duke Chwang (Legge, p. 117). Se-ma Ts'ien (Chavannes, Mémoires historiques, IV, 136) refers to an invasion

of the Mountain Jung in 664 B.C. when Duke Hwan of Ts'ï routed them. In another passage (*ibid.*, 564, and III, 425), the Duke boasts of this victory.<sup>1</sup> This apparently is the event alluded to in the above tradition allegedly recorded in the *Ku kin i shu tu*. It is no wonder, of course, that there is no contemporaneous record anent the introduction of the swing preserved in the historical books of the period if such an introduction should then have really taken place. A swing was not a matter serious and important enough to arouse the interest of a dry chronicler of the Confucian school. If the swing should have gradually been diffused over China ever since 664 B.C., it is curious, of course, that we hear nothing about it during the centuries that follow. Another gap in the tradition is that no word for the swing is recorded for the time of its adoption and after. The common designation *ts'iu-ts'ien* is traced, according to another tradition, to the Han period (see below), so that the swing must have been known under a different name in pre-Han times. Be this as it may, devoid of chronological value as the above tradition may be, it remains, nevertheless, one of folkloristic value to us interested in culture-historical movements.

Personally I believe that Chinese memories are excellent and capable of retaining traditions through the centuries. Such traditions are not altogether to be discarded in dealing with a subject as the one under discussion where the sober historian naturally leaves us in the lurch. The author of the *Ku kin i shu tu* was the first who took an interest in a minor affair such as a swing, and made inquiries among the people as to what was known to them about it. I do not believe that he invented his story. I do believe that he placed on record a popular tradition current among his contemporaries. There are two salient points to be retained in this tradition: first, that the swing was believed to be of foreign origin, and second, that it was received from some tribe of northern barbarians in a period anteceding the Han. The combination of this tradition with Duke Hwan's expedition against the Shan Jung (it is not even certain that this

---

<sup>1</sup> For concise biographies see Mayers, Chinese Reader's Manual, No. 211, and Giles, Chinese Biographical Dictionary, No. 841.

item was contained in the original text of the *Ku kin i shu t'u*) savors strongly of a learned interpretation or afterthought, and in all probability may not have formed part of the oral popular tradition.

It is clear that the text of the *Ku kin i shu t'u* has suffered from the inevitable fate of interpolations. The *Shi wu ki yüan* 事物紀原 (chap. 8, p. 20), written by Kao Ch'eng 高承 of the Sung and published in 1472 by Li Kwo 李杲, quotes under the heading »swing» solely the work in question, saying that the Jung and Ti 狄 of the northern region, who were fond of practising swinging in order to gain agility, made swings whenever the day of the cold provisions appeared 每至寒食為之. It is manifest that the latter clause is plain absurdity; for this holiday is a purely Chinese institution which was assuredly not adopted by the barbarians. The Ti are likewise interpolated in the text. Again, the *T'u shu tsi ch'eng*, in reproducing the passage of the *Ku kin i shu t'u*, does not give the word *küan-so* from the Nirvāṇa Sūtra, but credits the latter with a pompous definition of the swing, with the wrong addition that it is a kind of *shi-kou*. Aside from such minor details and the reference to Duke Hwan, however, we might say that we have the text of the *Ku kin i shu t'u* before us in as good a form as might be expected under the circumstances and that it imparts to us a bit of useful information on the subject.

According to another tradition, swings are ascribed to the emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (140—86 B.C.), under whose reign they are said to have been popular in the apartments occupied by the women. This is explained by the fact real or alleged that the emperor was in the habit of praying for a lifetime of a thousand autumns 漢武祈千秋之壽. *Tsien ts'iu* 千秋 (»a thousand autumns») then was a phrase used in praying for long life. This phrase was made to serve as a designation for the swing, evidently prompted by the belief that swinging as a wholesome sport was apt to prolong one's years. It happened that for some reason or other, which is not explained, the two words were interchanged,

and the swing was then called *ts'iu ts'ien* 秋千. In fact, the term is thus written in the ancient texts, and is also entered in Giles' Chinese-English Dictionary. The original meaning of the term was subsequently forgotten, and the classifier 177 革 (»hide») was added to each character, then written as also at present 鞞鞞, although hide does not enter into the making of a swing. Thus far the Chinese.

The tradition that swings were in vogue at the court of Wu, however, is not contemporaneous, and is not contained in the literature of the Han, but first crops up under the T'ang in a *fu* 賦 written by the poet Kao Wu-tsi 高無際. Practically the same information is given in a *Ts'ien ts'iu fu* 千秋賦 by Wang Yen-shou 王延壽, cited in the *Sui shi kwang ki* (chap. 16, p. 9). Afterwards it was repeated in several books, e.g. in the *Tsing k'ang siang so tsa ki* (chap. 8, p. 3b) and in the *Fu ku pien* 復古編 by Chang Yu 張有 (eleventh century).

The value of a T'ang tradition pointing to an event under the Han with a gap of several centuries between the two dynasties is difficult to determine. The proposed etymology, however, is suggestive and presumably correct. The swing was regarded as a life-prolonging instrument, and it is quite plausible that it received the designation *ts'ien ts'iu* (»a thousand autumns»), implying the wish that a person who would indulge in the sport of swinging might live a thousand (i.e. numerous) years. The same term, at a later time, was applied to the heir-apparent, in the same manner as *wan sui* (»ten thousand, i.e. numberless, years») referred to the emperor. An inscription on a cast-iron bell with date corresponding to A.D. 1595 (obtained by me in Shansi for the Field Museum) begins: 皇帝萬歲太子千秋, »Numberless years to the emperor, a thousand autumns to the heir-apparent.» Giles registers *ts'ien sui* (»a thousand years») as title of a prince. The main point, however, is that the formula *ts'ien ts'iu wan sui* and the two phrases *ts'ien ts'iu* and *wan sui* separately appear on the roofing-tiles of the Han period (see A. Forke, *Inschriftenziegel aus der Ch'in- und Han-Zeit*, 72, 73, 96, 97).



Leaving aside the retrospective traditions, this much can be formulated from a purely historical standpoint. The swing is not mentioned in pre-Christian literature, nor is any term on record that might be thus interpreted. I feel almost certain that it is not referred to in the literature of the Han. The *Han tsien* 漢書 does not list any term for a swing. The *Ts'ue yüan* writes that »swings were much used in the palaces of the Han and T'ang»; however, this assertion can be positively made solely for the court of the T'ang. The possibility, of course, remains that the swing may have been known at the Han court; this depends upon the critical attitude we may adopt toward the tardy tradition to this effect. The earliest dictionary that registers the word *ts'iu-ts'ien*, according to K'ang-hi, is the *Yü pien* of Ku Ye-wang (A.D. 523). The *Sui shi kwang ki* quotes a dictionary, *Tse shu* 字書, the date of which is not known to me. The definitions of the swing by the lexicographers are simply »rope sport», 繩戲 *sheng hi*. The word *hi* designates any kind of play or amusement, a game as well as a stage play.

Under the T'ang dynasty swinging was an entertainment enjoyed by the ladies of the palace. The *K'ai yüan tien pao i shi* (chap. B, p. 19b) has this notice: »In the period T'ien-pao (A.D. 742—755), whenever the festival of the cold provisions 寒食節 [on the day preceding the Ts'ing-ming festival] arrived, they vied in the palace to erect swings 秋千, so that the ladies of the seraglio might have an occasion for pleasure and rejoicing. The emperor [Hüan Tsung] called it the 'game or play of the half fairies' 半仙之戲 — an expression adopted by the literati and people in the capital.» The idea underlying this poetic phrase is not hard to understand. The fairies or immortals of Taoism when their earthly career had come to an end were able to ascend heavenward. The ladies rising into the air in their swings looked to the monarch like fairies ready for their aerial journey, but swinging back they returned to earth — hence not full-fledged but merely »half» fairies.

As regards the Sung period, references to the swing are numerous. Mong Yüan-lao 孟元老, in his *Tung king mong hwa lu*

東京夢華錄 (p. 10 b of the edition in *T'ang Sung ts'ung shu*) points it out for K'ai-fung, capital of the Northern Sung. In a verse of Su Shi (A.D. 1036—1101) maidens swing in a garden on a moonlit evening of the spring to the accompaniment of music (Admiral Ts'ai Ting-kan, *Chinese Poems in English Rhyme*, 1932, No. 42). The praise of the swing is sung in many other poetical compositions, some of which are reprinted in the *T'u shu tsi ch'eng* XVII, chap. 804, and *Yüan kien lei han*, chap. 187, pp. 21—22.

Under the Sung, the swing makes also its appearance in pictorial art. In the Pictures of a Hundred Boys 百子圖 ascribed to the painter Su Han-ch'ên 蘇漢臣, the sympathetic exponent of children's life, swinging as a pastime of lads is always in evidence. A passage in the *Sui shi kwang ki* (chap. 16, p. 9b) points out that people were in the habit of buying small swings to give pleasure to their boys; the swings were made of wood skilfully painted in bright colors.

The *Ming kung shi* 明宮史 (chap. 5, p. 3) by Liu Jo-yü 劉若愚 (cf. Hirth, *T'oung Pao*, 1895, 440—446) contains this notice: »On the fourth day of the third month the eunuchs set over the women apartments don Lo-han (Arhat) garbs. The Ts'ing-ming festival is the swing festival. They carry willow twigs in their hair. In the rear of the K'un-ning Palace 坤寧宮 and in every palace they erect a swing.» In Peking the women put willow-catkins in their hair on Ts'ing-ming day (Grube, *Zur Pekingger Volkskunde*, 64); in central China, the houses were decorated with willow branches on the same day.

»During the Ts'ing-ming festival it was formerly customary in the Peking palaces to erect swings with colored cords. Those who participated in the ceremony of swinging donned a special garment which consisted of a gold-embroidered jacket and a girdle provided with a smelling pouch. Those on the swing were grouped in pairs opposite each other. Specially palatable morsels were served at the banquet which surpassed other festive occasions. In the houses

of the well-to-do arrangements for the feast were not inferior to those in the palace. In the mansions of the high palace officials, the eunuchs, and the nobles, swinging was regarded as capable of warding off evil spirits and simultaneously as a pastime» (W. Grube, *Zur Pekinger Volkskunde*, p. 65, quotation from *Si tsing chi* 析津志).

At present swinging is still a pastime of Chinese youngsters as among us (compare, for instance, I. T. Headland, *The Chinese Boy and Girl*, 1901, with reproduction of a photograph of a lad standing on a swing suspended from the branch of a tree).

Chinese records attribute the swing also to barbarous tribes; e.g. to the land of the Se-lo 廝囉 north of the Yellow River, whose customs in general were like those of the Tibetans; they lived in block houses, while the rich had tents of felt; they frequently practised the sport of swinging (*Sung shi*, chap. 492, p. 6b). An album depicting in water-colors the life of the aboriginal tribes of Yün-nan (雲南百蠻圖, 2 vols., about K'ien-lung period) contains the picture of a swing consisting of a rope suspended from a wooden framework which is surmounted by three little flags. There is no seat, and a woman simply stands on the rope. According to the legend added to the picture swinging is practised on New Year's day in order to »gain lightness and agility of the body» (using the same phraseology as the *Ku kin i shu tu*) and with the idea of praying for long life.

Like the Chinese, the Koreans delight in swinging, but do so on the festival of the fifth day of the fifth moon. H. B. Hulbert (*The Passing of Korea*, 1906, 279) writes, »Sometimes the lofty branch of a pine-tree is used, but more often two great poles are erected for the purpose. These are held in place by guys, and are variously ornamented. The Koreans are adventurous swingers, and accidents are not infrequent. The rough straw ropes break sooner or later, and some one gets a nasty fall, which terminates the sport for that season.» Again, he writes (p. 371), »Korean girls are very fond of swinging, and on a certain day in spring there is

a swing festival in which men, women, and children participate. Huge swings are arranged in public places, but these are used only by men and boys.» As to the swing in Korea compare, further, Koike in *Int. Archiv f. Ethnographie*, IV (1891), 10 and Schlegel's note, *ibid.*, 121; Rockhill, *Am. Anthr.*, 1891, 185; S. Culin, *Korean Games*, 1895, 34—35. As the Korean designation for the swing is *chyu-chyen* identical with the Chinese word, there can be no doubt as to the derivation of the Korean swing from China.

Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, writes, »The custom of swinging has been practised as a religious or rather magical rite in various parts of the world, but it does not seem possible to explain all the instances of it in the same way. People appear to have resorted to the practice from different motives and with different ideas of the benefit to be derived from it. . . . The Letts, and perhaps the Siamese, swing to make crops grow tall. . . . People swing in order to procure a plentiful supply of fish and game as well as good crops. In such cases the notion seems to be that the ceremony promotes fertility, whether in the vegetable or the animal kingdom; though why it should be supposed to do so, I confess myself unable to explain.»

In China, swinging was not associated with any magical rites or fertility ideas. It was chiefly practised to promote long life, a notion peculiar to China and not to be found among any other nation (therefore not registered by Frazer, who makes no reference to China). No other nation has expressed its yearning for longevity so fervently and intensely as the Chinese, and has devised so many hundred ways and means of obtaining it. The swing was added to the long catalogue of these recipes. Only one text, and a recent one (*Si tsing chi*), alludes to warding off evil spirits in connection with swinging. Frazer remarks, »Swinging is sometimes resorted to for the purpose of expelling the powers of evil.» Nothing like the mythological significance of the swing in India and Siam is met with in China. What China shares with other nations is the feature that swinging was restricted to, or rather with predilection practised on, certain holidays in the beginning of the spring. This, of course, is not due to historical contact, but is the outcome of conditions.

Swinging is an outdoor sport which naturally hibernates in the winter and awakens in the spring, and on holidays there is more leisure and opportunity for play and games of all sorts. Thus the Chinese also had a »swing festival«, a term used in the *Ming kung shi* with reference to the court of the Ming, but apparently no ritual was connected with it — our sources at least are silent as to this point. Swinging in China was a festal sport surrounded by splendor and merry-making, not, however, a festal rite.

Chicago.