

## HANGCHOW

On the evening of March 17th we took train in a south-westerly direction to Hangchow, arriving after a journey of four hours. This town is as charming as it is famous in history, both in ancient and modern times. Its most flourishing period was under the southern Sung dynasty (1127—1279), when it was a large commercial centre. MARCO POLO's description of Hangchow is classical. He loved this town better than any other in China and gives enthusiastic accounts of its magnificence, its stately palaces, its streets, canals, bridges, and the busy colourful life both on land and on Hsi-hu, The Western Lake. In no other town did he stay so often or so willingly. He was several times sent here, as he himself relates, by The Great Khan (KHUBLAI KHAN, who conquered the town in 1269); and he thus had ample opportunity of studying it. It was from here, too, that he set out on his return journey to Venice.

MARCO POLO is not the only traveller from older times who has been impressed by Hangchow's greatness and glory. The monk ODORICO DE PORDENONE, who travelled between the years 1316 and 1330, joins his voice to MARCO POLO's in declaring it to be the greatest city in the world. And the widely travelled Moor IBN BATUTA, who visited Hangchow in 1347, expressed himself in a similar vein.

According to available statistical reports, Hangchow, the capital of the province of Chekiang, is one of the seven largest cities in China, with a population of above 900,000. And yet it is now only a shadow of what it was in MARCO POLO's time. But an aura of vanished greatness still hovers over it, and it is no exaggeration to call Hangchow one of the rarest pearls among China's cities.

Only the West Lake and its surroundings, one would imagine, still look more or less as they did then, even though the magnificent palaces have vanished, to be replaced by unpretentious villas and restaurants. In the temples, that especially attracted our attention, MARCO POLO took no interest. He merely mentions them in passing.

We toured about as long as the daylight lasted, now on the lake, now on shore, tormented the whole time with a feeling that we were only skimming the place of superficial impressions, and that we ought to return sometime for a more leisurely visit.

Everything is neat and beautifully kept. Roads, houses, booths and shops all give the impression of cleanliness and order. The inhabitants themselves wear nice clothes and seem to thrive in their beautiful old city.

At one place in the hills beyond the West Lake there is an idyllic road leading between rocks and ledges. In olden times a famous priest from India declared that these mountains had in some mystic way come here from his home country. One wanders under *p'ai-lou's* of stone, passing numerous booths and stopping