

Chinese custom. This passport was sent to meet me by the Chinese authorities and created a situation that was difficult to explain. The consul had given me two interpreters. One of them, Gui, an elderly Chinese official, is the president of the so-called Russo-Chinese Commission, an institution established in all towns in which there is a Russian consul resident. He learnt Russian in Peiping and speaks the language with thoroughly Chinese precision, pronouncing each letter clearly. Although he has a small vocabulary, he knows the language well in comparison with the so-called dragoman, Dju, my other interpreter. The latter has a comical pronunciation and mangles the language to such an extent that it is difficult to understand his fancy expressions. He has a curious way of saying »my guo» »my excellency» etc., when speaking of high officials. With their help I tried to explain the reason for my change of name. Anxious to display their knowledge of Russian in the presence of their superior, they vied with each other in rapid translation. I was by no means sure, however, that the old man understood, for they frequently failed to catch my meaning, and though I paraphrased my sentences, I never got anything out of them but »khorosho» (very well). After drinking two cups of tea, filled with lumps of sugar which my three neighbours very kindly put in with their fingers, decorated with incredibly long nails, and emptying a couple of glasses of warm champagne, I took my leave of the hiccoughing old gentleman.

At the house of the Fantai Van I found that my two interpreters had preceded me. Van, a tall, thin Chinaman of 57, made an excellent impression on me. Thanks to his intelligence and exhaustive studies he had had an unusually rapid career and had been promoted from Shenguan directly to Taotai in Penlian (Kansu) and soon after to Fantai in Sinkiang. He knew of Sweden, Charles XII, his war with Peter the Great and much besides. He had some idea of Finland's position, though he believed that Finland had been united with Russia since the days of Peter the Great. He questioned me closely as to the relations between Finland and her powerful neighbour. In spite of being highly educated he is said to be one of the most ruthless when it comes to extorting money. The Chinese explain this by saying that he has a very old mother. This is an ample explanation, for, when his mother dies, he will have to retire (in two years?). While we were conversing, he received a Herr Bauer, who has been here for some time with a view, he alleges, to selling machinery for cleaning cotton. He is here with his cook and interpreter, known as a comprador, and came from Eastern China by the Siberian railway. The interpreter who accompanied him, wore the official headgear and was invited to sit at table like Bauer himself. When I left, the Fantai Van gave me his book in 6 volumes dealing with wars between European states (Persia figures as a European power). He inscribed a lengthy dedication before handing me the work.

The supreme judge of the province, the Njetai who also occupies the office of Taotai, was also dealt with to-day. Outwardly he rather resembles the Fantai, the same tall, exceedingly thin figure, with an emaciated face and clever eyes, and thin moustaches hanging from the corners of his mouth, such as Europeans imagine every Chinaman to wear. He was recently appointed to his present post from Lanchow.