

HEALTH CONDITIONS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

by Dr. L.L. Palmer

In South East Asia there are many cultures of great antiquity. China had a high degree of civilization when the Europeans were Barbarians and North America was not even known. India was one of three areas in the world where metal was first worked and the bronze age began. Japan has a culture that was cut off from the rest of the world for several hundred years and therefore developed in a unique way. Indonesia also went its own way and has traditions, institutions and arts that are entirely different from the others.

Because these countries developed in a way that was completely unlike our own and were well established civilizations before Europe was, it follows that they have been influenced very little by Western ideas.

Consequently, when Canadians go there to live it is often difficult for them to understand the oriental mind. (No wonder it has been called the mysterious orient.) So, while we have a lot to learn from them, we can also expect some adjustment difficulties when our own culture clashes with that of the new host country — culture shock.

The environments in most South East Asian countries differ from the Canadian environment in a number of ways and must be taken into consideration from a health standpoint. Population density is a fact of life and this will give rise to diseases of poor sanitation. Asians have different hygiene habits from Canadians and in South East Asia night soil (human excreta) is used for fertilizer. Precautions must be taken with the drinking water and the preparation of green vegetables. This has been mentioned in a previous article and Health and Welfare has pamphlets on this subject so it will not be discussed here.



Oonagh MacDowell's Chinese painting.

The areas in South East Asia which are tropical may have the problems of malaria and other tropical diseases. Overcrowding may also have psychological implications with mild claustrophobia.

Medical treatment services vary greatly in South East Asia. Medical facilities can be first rate as in Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, Bangkok, and to some extent Seoul and Manila. They can be fairly good as in Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur or they can be unavailable to Canadians because of political reasons, such as in Beijing. The Indian sub-continent has its own problems which are somewhat different from the rest of Asia and the two Medical Officers in New Delhi can be a great help to Canadians in that area.

The individual diseases and public health advice such as immunization, treatment of vegetables and water, avoidance of fresh water swimming, and malarial prophylaxis will not be taken up in detail in this article. They have been discussed before and appear in other pamphlets. This does not mean that these subjects are not important. They are of utmost importance to Canadians in order to stay healthy during their postings. Therefore you are urged to keep these public health measures in mind and seek advice from the Canadian doctors and from the publications which are available to you.

It may be worthwhile to say something here about culture shock. Patterns of culture are complicated and subtle things. They are the ways in which we act, communicate, think and feel. Taking communication alone, it must be realized that this is verbal as well as non-verbal. We have an infinite number of small actions and voice patterns which are signals we expect to be received and understood by another person. Our patterns of culture are so familiar, however, that we are not even aware that they are patterns at all — we do them automatically. Since our own are unconscious, they are felt to be correct and any other cultural patterns are felt to be wrong. In fact, they are only different.

Overcoming culture shock involves two different processes. First we have to see our own patterns of culture as just that — not a God-given way to behave — simply the way that we do it. Second, we must learn the other people's way of doing things so that we will understand them. Learning to understand another culture means we can enjoy it. It also means that the insecurity we feel when we do not understand what is going on around us, will be lessened. Learning the language is probably the most important step in this direction. Studying the arts and the history of the country are also



A Chinese painting by Maree Sigurdson.

positive steps. If a conscious effort is made to understand the people through their art, history and their language then we will have gone a long way towards our understanding of them and in this process we will necessarily have had to understand ourselves because our own culture will have become conscious to us.

In New Delhi, I knew a number of Canadian spouses who organized field trips to historical places in India. Prior to each trip one person would research the history of the particular place and present it to the group. This helped them, not only in their enjoyment of the country but in their inter-personal relationships with each other. In Hong Kong people get to be experts on Chinese food. There is such a richness of culture and art to study that it should be easy to find some hobby that suits your own temperament. Japanese flower arranging helps people stationed in Tokyo to get some insight into the mind of the Japanese people. In Indonesia, the puppet shows and the Indonesian dancing are particularly interesting. In countries with a history as old as these there is no shortage of subjects which can attract an interested person.

In going to South East Asia we have the possibility of expanding our knowledge of other people and other cultures tremendously and in doing so in expanding our knowledge of ourselves. This is an opportunity which should not be missed. It may be difficult but the rewards are priceless.