Ch’ing Ming, which literally means “clear and bright,” is the name given in China to the spring festival dedicated to the honorably buried dead. (A summer festival is dedicated to lost souls and hungry ghosts, those who have died without families to honor them, those whose bodies have been lost in battle or at sea, and those so sad and desperate that they have destroyed themselves.) The festival of Ch’ing Ming is variable in date, coming one hundred and six days after the winter solstice. In the Chinese calendar this occurs early in the third moon or late in the second. This year, for instance, it fell on April 5 of our Western calendar.

It is likely that this festival originated in or takes the place of one of those primitive prehistoric celebrations of life-renewal so dear to those scholars whose great desire seems to be to swing once more upon the Golden Bough. One


The scenes illustrated in the following pages progress, as in the scroll, from right to left, beginning on page 292.
of the customs associated with it is the planting of trees, and it is sometimes called Chih Shu Chieh, or “Tree-Planting Festival.” In this respect it is a Chinese version of Arbor Day. Whatever its origins, however, the Ch’ing Ming long ago became a Chinese version of All Saints’ Day or the American Memorial Day. The symbol hunters, so eager-terrier-eyed in their chase for origins (which almost always arrive at ♂ or ♀), forget that symbols may grow up and become something completely different from what they started out to be. It seems better, therefore, to understand what the Ch’ing Ming now is than what it once was. The sole purpose of the Ch’ing Ming nowadays is to honor one’s family dead, a custom reverent and civilized.

As celebrated in twentieth-century China this festival is a day when many people visit their family graves, to decorate them with prayers written in black ink on white paper and with wands of willow. In the country it is a pretty sight to see—the bright sun shining on the lion-colored hills, the tawny fields, the delicate, sparse tracery of green, and the countless family processions moving in every direction to and fro across the countryside. The families march in single file, usually with the eldest and tallest in front and the children in decreasing size bringing up the rear. All are dressed in garments which may, when the cloth was dyed, have been a consistent, hard aniline ultramarine blue but which, when washed and faded, have turned into a great variety of blues—indigo, gentian, delphinium, morning glory, and robin’s egg. Aside from the ceremonies at the graves, there are feasts and shows and entertainments of every kind for the living.
It is with this latter aspect of the festival that the painting of the Ch'ing Ming on which we are at work is concerned. In fact, in the picture itself there is no hint at all of the purpose of the festival—no tombs, no mounds, no willow wands, no paper prayers; that part must be taken for granted as a ceremony completed, so that the observer may give full attention to the worldly business of the day.

The subject was first ordered by the Emperor Hui Tsung of the Sung dynasty (960-1279) about 1120 from the painter Chang Tse-tuan. The picture was called, and all copies and later versions have been called after it, Ch'ing Ming Shang Ho ("Spring Festival on the River"). It is the painter's representation of a spring festival day in and about a city on the Yellow River. His model would be, of course, the Sung capital Pien Ching (the present-day K'ai Feng). The painting, however, must not be mistaken for an accurate panorama of either the city or the river. But, on the other hand, in its myriad detail it gives a very accurate picture of the life and city of its period, and this is true also of later copies, which, though they may slip into anachronistic detail here and there, on the whole follow the original closely.

In this seeming contradiction—it is not accurate; it is very accurate—lies one of the fundamental concepts of Chinese painting, the spirit, or ch'i, so well described in George Rowley's Principles of Chinese Painting. Take, for instance, the palace scenes: they are not exact as an architect's drawing pretends to be, but they look far more like the real thing than any such drawing or a photograph. This is what is meant by ch'i—the very breath and soul of a thing. Our Western critics get a dusty inkling of the idea when they speak lightly of a "spirited" sketch.
The Museum’s version of this painting, which is from the famous collection of A. W. Bahr, was made early in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). It is optimistically inscribed with the name of the painter Ch’iu Ying, who was active from about 1522 to 1560, but the signature is of scant interest. As painting the picture is the work of a very creditable Ming painter following the traditional style.

It is the amazing content of this work which is its chief interest. The artist has made, in a single scroll, an extraordinarily complete pictorial record of life in medieval China. The historian with all available data at hand, if he wishes to make a picture of a particular time, must reconstruct it from fragments of pictures and bits of written description. In this instance—and so far as I know the work has no parallel in the pictorial records of other civilizations—almost everything that the historian wants to see is here. Here, first of all, are the people of China as they have lived for many centuries and much as they were still living at the beginning of the twentieth century. Life in China as late as 1935 had so much that was like what one sees in this picture that one knows that most of the details are true and believes in the rest.

To begin with, the natural background, the river itself, and the highly colored hills are recognizable, not as in a colored photograph, but in their essential character. So also are the little towns and the great city.

Walls such as we see in the painting still exist. Most magnificent among them are those of Sianfu, in Shensi, and Peking. The walls of Sian, which was the T’ang capital, are rather
stern and bleak; the walls of the present Peking are on a mightier but more gracious scale (if one has seen Peking one is sure of the rightness of the walls in the painting). As for the streets and the shops, one may see them in city after city. Palaces not too dissimilar also remain, but the people who lived in them in very recent years have either vanished from the scene or withdrawn to a less gorgeous mode of life.

Most of the various types of people represented, as has been said, are still to be seen in China, bent on the same activities but in clothes much modified and changed. Here in the painting are the people of China in almost every walk of life: beggars, mendicants, farmers, goat-herds, peddlers, shopkeepers of small shops and great, restaurateurs, jugglers, actors, fortune-tellers (note the number of these), doctors, inn-keepers, teachers, officials (synonymous with scholars in ancient China)—officials small, officials great, officials poor, officials rich—and children, mostly little boys in a diversity of harmless mischief. Here they all are and also their activities.

There are shops of every kind to be seen here: wine shops, a grain market, secondhand shops, crockery shops, bow and arrow shops, lantern shops, a lute-making shop, a gold and silver ornament shop, a dyeing shop, picture shops, a medicine shop, pawnshops, a needle shop, antique shops, restaurants, and more. And not only shops but trades and occupations: millers and metalworkers, carpenters and masons; and the means of transport: river boats and large wheeled wagons, some with an eight-mule hitch, coolies with panniers suspended from poles, donkeys and mules, parade horses and palfreys, sedan chairs and princely chariots, plebian ferrys and aristocratic houseboats—all are here.
Competitions in exhibition riding, archery, and swordsmanship in the grounds adjoining the government buildings (above and opposite). On the terrace a judge, seated at a long table, directs the distribution of prizes to successful contestants, who kneel to receive them.

As to the manner and style of representation, much may be said. The work may be tagged, if one likes, as an academic painting in the blue and green landscape tradition, which dates back as far as the T'ang dynasty (618-907) and has persisted, subject to changes in fashion, until the present day. Its style is delightful in color and capable of many moods—in this case, a mood almost entirely gay and festive, executed by an extremely competent painter. In its interest in crowds and parades it makes one think a little of Jacques Callot or Gentile Bellini and now and then of Carpaccio, but their crowds and processions are confined to a composition rectangular and static, whereas this one goes on and on with the illusion of movement.

Comparisons are not necessarily odious, but they are generally frowned upon—especially when different kinds of sensory experience are involved. (We have five senses and supposedly only one mind.) Those who set up to be critics of the arts, it would seem, do not allow such comparisons. In this most people support them. Most people object to being told that a rose smells pink or that Debussy's music sounds mostly blue and green or that Renoir's brush strokes are luscious, succulent. Most people take their five senses seriously and separately; they do not like to have them mixed. While this is true, writer after writer dealing with Chinese painting falls into a way of speaking of it—particularly in the horizontal scrolls—as if it were a piece of music. The writers apologize, but they do so. They would better come to terms.
Chinese scrolls are painted in a mode unknown in the West; the West has no terms in painting with which to deal with them. Western pictures are set pieces; these scrolls move.

Music moves; on the ear it moves and is never at rest. Westerners have a way of recording music for the eye, and musicians can read a piece of music; the mind of the Westerner, informed by his eye, knows what his ear should hear—isn’t that so? Very well. In the long Chinese scrolls—the Ch’ing Ming, for instance—for which we in the West have no parallels in painting by which to describe them, there is a likeness to music which we can describe. If we analyze the Ch’ing Ming we will find that in its thirty-three feet it plays themes just as a piece of music does. The Ch’ing Ming, of course, is no symphony, no sonata; it is an elaborate tone poem. Its themes and subjects are not static; they change. They begin, develop, and are neatly finished off, as they would be in good music. The themes, while remaining independent entities, balance and interweave.

The subject of the painting is, first of all, a spring festival; the holiday spirit is implicit throughout the composition. There are some thirty-three feet of this composition, but the effect is of some thirty-three miles. It is not a panorama, a bird’s-eye view; it is a kind of moving picture at which the spectator does the moving and has the advantage of being able to turn forward or back.

In this scroll, as in almost all landscape scrolls, there is a road for the spectator to follow. This almost goes without saying—so much so that one could easily forget that it is the road (the first theme) which carries one all the way through; in this case, a country road which soon joins the river (the second theme) and increases in importance until the climax of road...
A street lined with shops and a palace, with its many buildings and gardens, inside the city walls

and river is reached at the bridge, which is the busiest of market places. The road continues as a city street, almost— but not quite— drops out of sight as it passes the military display, proceeds by the hunting party and village scenes, and vanishes at the end with the air of a road that has put in a full day but can go on forever.

The river, the second theme, appears almost at once, increases in importance for nearly a third of the picture, continues as small canals and tributaries for the second third, and vanishes behind mountains until almost the end, where road and river meet again as part of a country landscape. The road and the river are the background for the more spectacular themes of the scroll.

Like the road, the holiday crowd (the third theme) follows from beginning to end. Like the road, people, moving mostly from right to left, are increased in numbers and activity up to the bridge scene, are prominent in the city street, shrink to a few passers-by outside the military scene, leisurely take prominence again in the hunting party and village scenes, and diminish at the end of the picture. It is by intention, for balance, that the movement of human life in the picture is from right to left, while the movement of the river, as may be seen in the way the coolies pull and row, is from left to right.

The road, the river, and men on holiday are the major themes of the picture. They are there at the beginning, fresh at dawn; they are there at the end, tired but tranquil at dusk.

It is a question whether to call the fourth theme architecture or to break it into several. Like the first three, and more impressive, it is always there; but different aspects are so emphasized that it seems clearer to subdivide it.
Dwellings there are from one end to the other of the painting—every conceivable kind from country farm to city house, mansion, palace, and back at last to country farmhouse again.

If we break the theme of architecture, the shops (which are, of course, closely associated with the road and the city street) can be counted as a fifth theme, which begins as we reach the suburbs of the city, continues—after the bridge and river climax—importantly through the city, and recurs here and there until the end.

Sixth are the city walls and gates, with the magnificent pavilions or towers which surmount the gates. These appear twice, and in actual space comparatively briefly, but are most important. In the music of brick and wall they tower up with a triumphal splendor that is akin to that of the more splendid passages of Wagner’s Parsifal. If the bridge and market scene is the peak of the crescendo of the road, the river, and men on holiday, the walls are a majestic statement of what men can build. Their first appearance marks approximately the first third of the scroll. Inside the walls we come upon the grandeurs of the city. At the far end the walls appear again, repeating ever more splendidly the theme. This occurs at not quite the second third of the scroll.

Inside the walls is a splendid street with shops and residences, one a palace. The palace is part of the theme of architecture; yet, like the walls, it should be counted as a separate theme (the seventh). To all intents and purposes it is a royal palace. If we consider the theme of dwelling places, it is to this that it has been building up; it is from this that it will gently diminish. The palace is part of a larger scheme and also a thing in itself—a pretty thing like L’Isle joyeuse of Debussy.

The eighth theme, roof lines, is properly only
a part of the preceding themes, but it is in the repetition of the developed pattern of roof lines that one can see most clearly the way the painter composed his scroll. The roof lines, if one could wash everything else out of the picture, would present an entrancing composition by themselves. Reduced to simplest terms, they are but brief, straight lines of varying length, punctuated at the ends. But they are as alive as dragonflies and, like dragonflies over a summer pond, they appear first two or three at a time and then in increasing crowds with a multiplicity of direction. Could one freeze a dragonfly ballet one might get something like the pattern of these roofs, save that the roofs are deliberately arranged and purposeful. In this picture we are aware of the roofs and their pattern. Something a little like it could be seen in New York several years ago when the lights were blacked out and the moon outlined our very different roofs and towers, roofs and towers which ordinarily we forget. In such great cities as Sian and Lanchow the roofs and walls are nightly in evidence and for a period each month are illuminated by the moon.

When we reach the third part of the picture, a theme seemingly new is introduced—a grand military display (a parade is part of any proper holiday). It is not really new. Just as the palace was a culmination of the dwelling places, just as men at the bridge reached a full tide of human busyness, the military display is a statement of human activity as seen in official holiday spectacle. It becomes a special thing, almost an independent interlude. The gateways of the government buildings have been turned into reviewing stands; before them is the field, where platoons of troops with banners frame
a kind of gymkhana with competitions in archery, swordsmanship, and riding.

The simpler versions of the scroll, which probably follow the original more closely than ours does, move from a brief military display back to the river and a pageant of festival boats. Our painting makes much of the army festival, omits entirely the elaborate dragon and féng-huang boats, and substitutes instead a royal hunt in miniature. One can only guess at the reason, but one can make a good guess: hunting scenes became popular in the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), for one thing. Peking, which became the Ming capital in 1421, has canals and pretty artificial lakes, but northern China, while it has waterways and boats, did not make so much of them as southern China. At any rate the painter of our scroll, although he has multiplied the commercial boats and tucked in one official boat (which resembles the boats used even today on the palace lakes), has omitted the pageant of festival boats entirely.

The hunt which takes the place of the water pageant is a beauty. It has all the aspects of a royal hunt but is, like the palace scenes, carefully anonymous. We come upon it, as we follow the scroll, just as we came upon the palace itself and the military function, by the back door; so we see the most important part of the progress to the hunting field first. Leaving the city is a merry party, a Chinese version of those described in the Morte d’Arthur. In it are two chariots of elegance, one occupied by two beauties with a cavalcade of female riders, the other by an official dressed in brilliant red. Preceding them is a numerous escort of mounted warriors, grooms, footmen, and flag-bearers. The procession leaves the highroad and twists back and forth through mountains (all in the actual space of a few inches) until it arrives at
a remote hunting ground where great silk pavilions have been set up for the hunting party. These tents are gorgeous—gorgeous in the painting and even more gorgeous in fact. Beyond the tents appear glimpses of the hunters themselves, riding armed with spears in pursuit of a tiger, foxes, deer, and scurrying small animals. We must count the hunting party, although less relevant than the missing boat festival, as a tenth theme in the scroll.

The eleventh theme, however, the mountains in which the hunt is set, can be regarded as one of the background motives. They appear at the very beginning of the scroll, come into prominence, vanish at the outskirts of the city, reappear after the gymkhana, and continue to the end, where in quiet, solid masses, like a series of great chords in a musical finale, they conclude the movement of the picture—but not until they have diminished from the hunting scene and become background for a village or two and a very handsome birthday party for an ancient scholar and his wife.

At the very end of the scroll the action quiets down. As at the beginning we are in the country, this time at the end of the day; here are hills again, rice fields, and a relaxed supper party at a farm or country house with a tired, languid dog picking up scraps.

The birthday party surely would count, not as a major theme, but merely as a minor variation or extra decoration. There are many such diversions through the picture, and they are often used to mark a transition from one major theme to another. The various temples that appear are cunningly placed to act as pauses. There are also scenes in miniature that are reminders of famous paintings—the bathing
In the foreground a bride in a sedan chair, preceded by musicians and banner carriers, is moving toward a Buddhist temple. On the farther shore boats are being pulled upstream by coolies.

horses of Chao Meng-fu, the playing horses of Han Kan, for instance, which are tucked in outside the city walls. From one end of the scroll to the other the painter has included bits of reminiscence.

It is a very ambitious thing for any painter to attempt to record the whole world in a single picture, but the painter of our spring festival has recorded the world he knew in a picture which not only turns out to be an invaluable human document (as good in its way as S. Wells Williams's *The Middle Kingdom*) but which has in its conception as a work of art the bones and sinews of a great tradition of painting. Analyze it as we please, before we begin and when we are done, this picture is a song of a whole people tuned to a holiday—a holiday called Clear and Bright—who move from dawn till dusk along a river and a road.

Let there be no confusion about this: the subject of the Spring Festival, once set forth, has been many times repeated. The version from the A. W. Bahr collection, described above, is the most complete and brilliant of all. The Museum is now in possession of two versions of the subject, both of the Ming dynasty. A portfolio of details from the Museum's study copy, which is a very pretty thing in itself, was issued in 1942. In the presentation of the version from the Bahr collection, acquired in 1947, detailed comparisons with the other versions have been purposely avoided, interesting as such comparisons would be.