



# About Pawnshops in China

By EVA SAXL

**T**OWERING above low-lying dwellings and pierced by a row of small, well-protected windows, the massive, square pawnbrokers' strongholds are seen dotted here and there throughout Chinese towns and the more important villages.

If you have once seen the typical building occupied by a pawnbroker's establishment, you will recognize other pawnshops right away. They look alike all over China.

In material substance they are conspicuous, but they also hold an equally prominent position in the social economy of the curious and complex product of Eastern life and prudential economy, which constitutes the average Chinese life.

You must dismiss from your mind all preconceived ideas of pawnshops and pawnbrokers. The position these latter hold in China is highly respectable and the business is one in which a wealthy man is glad to invest. In fact, Chinese pawnshops can even be compared to small banking establishments.

Nobody is shy about entering a pawnshop in Cathay. These establishments are usually situated on the busiest streets. They always occupy a massive house, which looks somewhat like a fortification from the last century. The walls are extra thick; the windows tiny and barred. The entrance door is ridiculously narrow, and on the flat roof of the two-story building, heavy blocks of stone are kept ready for emergency.

Pawnshop-keepers have to take every kind of precaution to guard against robbers, bandits and other unruly elements, of which China has more than its just share. When robbers attack a pawnshop, the owner rushes up on the roof and starts to throw the heavy blocks of stone down on the heads of the assailants.

The pawnshop-keeper in the village of Feng Hwa told me that with the aid of his son he had once ward off an assault on his shop by throwing the stones on his roof down on three bandits. He even killed one while the other two fled.

"Pushing the stones down was easy. But to bring them up the narrow staircase was another matter," the shopowner complained. "I had to hire several coolies and pay them a tidy sum of money for carrying the stones up on my roof again. These heavy blocks had never been moved since the time my father built the house fifty years ago. Labor was cheap then; my father did not care how many coolies had to carry one block, but I did!"

WHEN one enters a pawnshop by the narrow front door, one is confronted by a counter about six feet high. There is little in the room except some ready cash in drawers behind the counter. Names and addresses of pawners are required in some parts of China, as in Canton, when articles are left. Thus when stolen goods are located in the shop, the thief is often found by some clue contained in the name given.

The old-fashioned pawnshop is barren of goods, but modern ones in large Chinese cities have started to display unredeemed goods. The limit of the redemption period is eighteen months, after which the pawnner cannot secure the goods unless he again pays interest of approximately 25 per cent per year.

The clientele of the pawnbrokers does not consist alone of the spend-thrifts and the hopelessly impecunious. About fifty per cent of those who frequent pawnshops come from the most respectable classes.

The Chinese, unlike Occidental, have nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, any idea of such a thing as shame with regard to such a common and honest business transaction would not enter their minds.

The pawnshop is a safe depository for the gentleman's or lady's furs in summer, where they will be well taken care of and preserved from moths. In winter, summer garments of thin, delicate silks may be carefully housed in the same storage.

Important customers are usually invited into the inner room, so that business may be transacted over a cup of tea. A cigarette or a water pipe is often offered.

The pawnshops always have spacious storage rooms with compartments for jade, pearls, diamonds, silver or gold ornaments, clothing and furs. Each article is neatly wrapped and tagged.

Some pawnshops in the interior of China have additional warehouses where cotton may be pawned and stored. Some even take furniture.

In important cities there are pawnshop guilds to which qualified shops belong. Three pawnbrokers, duly elected by their guilds, look out for matters in the territory affecting the interests of shops and guild members.

The pawnshop holds to customs of doing business practiced hundreds of years ago. In fact, long ago the pawnshop proved itself one of the most conservative business institutions in China.

# CONVICTS

## *Take the Cure*

By GEORGE DOLAN

IT ISN'T easy for a guy to go on a bender while he's in prison. Inmates figure all their weekends behind bars are lost — but not because they've fallen off the wagon.

Still, in Huntsville, Texas, an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter flourishes in "The Walls" — prisoners' tag for the main unit of the Texas prison system.

"There's no problem here of a man going out on a drunk," admits the sponsor, Howard L. Sublett, "but liquor is the reason they're here. They were slaves to a bottle."

The AA members behind prison walls are trying to condition themselves mentally for a return bout with the free world when — and, in some cases, if — they leave.

Sublett, the chapter's sponsor, is the 28-year-old assistant director of the prison system's Bureau of Classification. A thin, dark, intense

young man, he donates his time and is one of the few non-alcoholics in the world able to take part regularly in an AA movement. He's as wrapped up in the program as are the alcoholics. His only "pay" comes from results.

A 35-year-old Dallas ex-convict paid him a bonus early this year. The former prisoner, who joined the chapter in "The Walls" while serving a ten-year robbery term, rejoined his wife and two children when he was released.

"You'll never know how happy I am," he wrote Sublett. "I'm working every day in a machine shop. And every night I drop on my knees and thank God I was able to find myself through Alcoholics Anonymous."

He was a member of the original group organized in June, 1948, at the penitentiary. Inmates them-