

[p.86]

## *China: Past and Present*

**The Rev. John Ross**

### **I**

If the changes introduced into the polity, education and manners of the Chinese are less startling and revolutionary than we have seen in the neighbouring kingdom of Japan, they are none the less real or potent, nor will their issues in the future be less far-reaching. The cautious conservatism which forms so large an element in the national character of the Chinese makes it impossible for them to adopt important changes into their political and social life with the facility so characteristic of their light-hearted neighbours. In studying their ancient books, reading the story of the intercourse of Europeans during the past few centuries and observing the Chinese of the present day, one is particularly struck with the little difference observable in the people, mentally, socially or physically. Even the great upheaval consequent

[p.87]

on the introduction and spread of Buddhism, like their changes of dynasty, was but the sudden rising of a great wave subsiding quickly, leaving everything at its former level, rather than an earthquake shock pushing up rocks into permanent heights.

From what part of the west the original Chinese migrated, and how they established themselves on the banks of the Yellow River, where the foundations were laid of the present empire with its customs and manners, must ever remain a mystery. But that they attained to a high degree of civilisation at a period when every other existing nationality was still in the grossest barbarism is matter of history. From the earliest recorded times they were surrounded by people and nations who were their mental and social inferiors. How far their settled agricultural life will account for their superiority over houseless nomads is a subject of interest, though not now demanding investigation. The fact remains that up to and long after the time of Confucius, the Chinese came, whether in peace or war, into contact with peoples from whom they were never able to learn anything valuable, and to whom they always taught whatever amount of civilisation these were capable of adopting. The Chinese did not in those very ancient times know anything of Europe, but had they been brought into familiar contact with European peoples they would have encountered, beyond the borders of little Greece, only savages like their own neighbours.

With the exception of the Mahomedans, through whom the Chinese acquired a knowledge of so much mathematics as was of considerable utility to them in their much-loved astronomy, the middle ages contributed no more than the earlier to impress upon the celestials the superiority of western people.

Marco Polo found the Chinese burning a "black stone" before the name of coal was known in his own country. Printing from blocks of wood resembling stereotyped plates was general in China while books were laboriously if beautifully written out by hand in Europe. Gunpowder was used

for fireworks long before its discovery in Europe, where it was utilised for a far more barbarous purpose. And though from ignorance of geography and "navigation" the compass never guided the Chinese seaman far from known land, its properties were put into requisition many centuries ago. Barrow wrote accurately that "when the King of France introduced the luxury of silk stockings, the peasantry of the middle provinces of China were clothed in silks from head to foot; and when the nobility of England were sleeping on straw, the peasant of China had his mat and his pillow, and the man in office enjoyed his silken mattress." And every close observer of the Chinese will bear out the character given them by Dr. Morrison in his day, of "mildness, urbanity, docility, industry, subordination of juniors, respect for the aged and for parents, and acknowledging the claims of poor kindred."

When the nobles of the west left learning to the monks as a thing beneath the notice of a gentleman, the Chinese gentlemen were diligent students of their classics, to pass degrees in which was the opening of the entrance-door by which they could gain admittance to magisterial office. Even yet European nations have not wholly unlearned the barbaric and brutal idea that the soldier, or fighting, or killing man is the first citizen, and not a few nations still place at the head of society those who are engaged in what they are pleased to style "the noble art of war" The Chinese have long rid themselves of this barbarism, if they ever were much under its influence. The civil official invariably has precedence over the military official of the same nominal rank. The greatest reward conferred on the successful soldier is the bestowal of civil rank, and however high he rises there is always a stigma attached to his rank as compared with the same rank enjoyed by the civilian because of his scholarly attainments and intellectual abilities.

Degrees in literature are obtained after long and searching examination, frequently repeated under the supervision of imperially-appointed examiners. They are conferred irrespective of the place, time or mode of acquiring knowledge. The people would not tolerate the monopoly in the hands of special men or bodies of men to the right of conferring degrees. Some of the noblest mandarins, and many of the most brilliant scholars have been, and are, the sons of labourers earning less than sixpence per day, who under our systems could never possess a degree. The real nobility of China is a nobility founded on literature.

The formal yet graceful etiquette of the Chinese, so generally and punctiliously observed that it is the only police force known, and their studious politeness, would gratify the most ardent admirer of Mr. Matthew Arnold. To this same politeness, by the way, I am inclined to credit the universal habit of lying, which more frequently proves rather the desire to avoid giving offence than a supposed self-interest. The rude man disgraces himself. The striker not the struck is insulted. The man who under provocation manifests self-control is highly respected.

Taking all these matters into consideration, and leaving out of count as having no practical bearing upon our present subject the vices peculiar to China, it will be apparent that the Chinese are not destitute of reasonable apology for "thinking of themselves more highly than they ought to think," and for the conceited arrogance which partly led to, but has not been cured by, their various wars with western nations. And from what has been stated, it may perhaps appear that physical force and skill in war will never remove that belief in their own superiority which has prevented the rapid march of western ideas, for that belief is not based on or affected by anything belonging to mere physical force.

It is more than three and a half centuries since Portugal began to commerce with, Canton, and a

full century later British ships were turned away as enemies. The Dutch were certainly not eager that British ships should share with them in the lucrative trade of the east, but the influence of the Dutch was small compared to that exerted by the Roman Catholic priests in the Observatory

[p.88]

at Peking. According to Ogilby, in his history of the Dutch in Formosa, one pious priest thanked God that the measures of the Pekinese priests to keep out English ships were successful. What the character was of those measures may be guessed at, when it is stated that they were grouped round the statement that England consisted of hosts of people who lived in ships because they had no country to support them. They therefore wandered in their ships all over the world, plundering and robbing where they went, and seeking for some land on which to rest. It is possible that the story then set afloat, is still holding its own in some parts of China, for the first mandarin with whom I ever had converse, after a time exclaimed, "Then you do eat grain?" "You do not all live in ships?"

It may be true that free commercial intercourse tends to soften down national animosities, but with the possible exception of those directly engaged in commerce and reaping palpable advantages therefrom, it is questionable whether our commercial intercourse with China has tended to remove their earlier prejudices against us. From the rigorous Canadian climate of Manchuria to the torrid climate of Canton, the Chinese are able to produce so great a variety of both food and clothing that they are independent of the world, and the history of the opium traffic has long taught them that commerce has sought their shores with no desire after the amelioration of their condition or to secure their goodwill. Commerce per se would never introduce radical changes in the relations between China and the West. "You make better soldiers and superior mechanics, but you have no literature!" was the constant cry in my earlier days among the Chinese.

Whether rightly or wrongly, I believe that official intercourse has done more than war or commerce in teaching the Chinese more accurately to estimate the character of Westerns. The Dutch believed it politic to conform to the Chinese modes of obeisance, and the Romish priests, as an inevitable consequence of their position at court, could not avoid the kowtow. Lord Macartney was the first who was able to make a favourable impression in a dignified manner. In the time of Kienlung, he was presented to the emperor, after long and doubtful debate, making the obeisance he would to his own sovereign. And though Lord Amherst was unceremoniously kicked out of Peking, mainly because he refused to kowtow before the emperor Kiaking, the influence of his visit was not lost if it proved that foreigners demanded at least equality.

But far more influential though less ostentatious than commerce, war or diplomacy, in the way of teaching the Chinese that all wisdom was not born in the Flowery Land, has been the action and instructions of missionaries. The one great defect in Chinese learning is caused by the absence of mathematical and logical training. The Jesuits of three centuries ago, sent by the King of France, some of them from the professoriate of the Sorbonne in Paris, after a brief struggle succeeded by their mathematical knowledge in gaining and retaining an influential position and great honour. The influence thus gained by their learning they subsequently lost by their politics, but the respect due to learning has always remained theirs. In recent years Protestant missionaries have superseded them both in place, learning and respect. Intelligent missionaries are wherever they go a power, for they are able to explain much of the mystery which to the Chinese mind

enshrines nature around him. By the scientific knowledge which by means of missionaries is finding its way into all parts of China, the people, and especially the literary classes, are beginning to perceive that Europeans excel not only in war, and in mechanics, but in sound knowledge, mental activity and true literature. The great changes both necessary and ultimately inevitable in China are thus already well begun by missionaries and will by their means be carried on further and further. Only those who come into close contact with the people in their social and mental life, as missionaries alone do, can properly gauge the changes already effected, and the process of gradual leavening, which is surely though slowly going on in the mental attitude of Chinese towards Westerns.

---

This document is in the Public Domain. Prepared for the Web by Rob & Michelle Bradshaw.

<http://www.victoriansunday.org/>

---