The Problem of China

By

Bertrand Russell

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CHAPTER

The Ruler of the Southern Ocean was Shû (Heedless), the Ruler of the Northern Ocean was Hû (Sudden), and the Ruler of the Centre was Chaos. Shû and Hû were continually meeting in the land of Chaos, who treated them very well. They consulted together how they might repay his kindness, and said, "Men all have seven orifices for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing, while this poor Ruler alone has not one. Let us try and make them for him." Accordingly they dug one orifice in him every day; and at the end of seven days Chaos died.--[Chuang Tze, Legge's translation.]

CHAPTER I

QUESTIONS

A European lately arrived in China, if he is of a receptive and reflective disposition, finds himself confronted with a number of very puzzling questions, for many of which the problems of Western Europe will not have prepared him. Russian problems, it is true, have important affinities with those of China, but they have also important differences; moreover they are decidedly less complex. Chinese problems, even if they affected no one outside China, would be of vast importance, since the Chinese are estimated to constitute about a quarter of the human race. In fact, however, all the world will be vitally affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may well prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries. This makes it important, to Europe and America almost as much as to Asia, that there should be an intelligent understanding of the questions raised by China, even if, as yet, definite answers are difficult to give.

The questions raised by the present condition of China fall naturally

into three groups, economic, political, and cultural. No one of these groups, however, can be considered in isolation, because each is intimately bound up with the other two. For my part, I think the cultural questions are the most important, both for China and for mankind; if these could be solved, I would accept, with more or less equanimity, any political or economic system which ministered to that end. Unfortunately, however, cultural questions have little interest for practical men, who regard money and power as the proper ends for nations as for individuals. The helplessness of the artist in a hard-headed business community has long been a commonplace of novelists and moralizers, and has made collectors feel virtuous when they bought up the pictures of painters who had died in penury. China may be regarded as an artist nation, with the virtues and vices to be expected of the artist: virtues chiefly useful to others, and vices chiefly harmful to oneself. Can Chinese virtues be preserved? Or must China, in order to survive, acquire, instead, the vices which make for success and cause misery to others only? And if China does copy the model set by all foreign nations with which she has dealings, what will become of all of us?

China has an ancient civilization which is now undergoing a very rapid process of change. The traditional civilization of China had developed in almost complete independence of Europe, and had merits and demerits quite different from those of the West. It would be futile to attempt to strike a balance; whether our present culture is better or worse, on the whole, than that which seventeenth-century missionaries found in the

Celestial Empire is a question as to which no prudent person would venture to pronounce. But it is easy to point to certain respects in which we are better than old China, and to other respects in which we are worse. If intercourse between Western nations and China is to be fruitful, we must cease to regard ourselves as missionaries of a superior civilization, or, worse still, as men who have a right to exploit, oppress, and swindle the Chinese because they are an "inferior" race. I do not see any reason to believe that the Chinese are inferior to ourselves; and I think most Europeans, who have any intimate knowledge of China, would take the same view.

In comparing an alien culture with one's own, one is forced to ask oneself questions more fundamental than any that usually arise in regard to home affairs. One is forced to ask: What are the things that I ultimately value? What would make me judge one sort of society more desirable than another sort? What sort of ends should I most wish to see realized in the world? Different people will answer these questions differently, and I do not know of any argument by which I could persuade a man who gave an answer different from my own. I must therefore be content merely to state the answer which appeals to me, in the hope that the reader may feel likewise.

The main things which seem to me important on their own account, and not merely as means to other things, are: knowledge, art, instinctive happiness, and relations of friendship or affection. When I speak of knowledge, I do not mean all knowledge; there is much in the way of dry

lists of facts that is merely useful, and still more that has no appreciable value of any kind. But the understanding of Nature, incomplete as it is, which is to be derived from science, I hold to be a thing which is good and delightful on its own account. The same may be said, I think, of some biographies and parts of history. To enlarge on this topic would, however, take me too far from my theme. When I speak of art as one of the things that have value on their own account, I do not mean only the deliberate productions of trained artists, though of course these, at their best, deserve the highest place. I mean also the almost unconscious effort after beauty which one finds among Russian peasants and Chinese coolies, the sort of impulse that creates folk-songs, that existed among ourselves before the time of the Puritans, and survives in cottage gardens. Instinctive happiness, or joy of life, is one of the most important widespread popular goods that we have lost through industrialism and the high pressure at which most of us live; its commonness in China is a strong reason for thinking well of Chinese civilization.

In judging of a community, we have to consider, not only how much of good or evil there is within the community, but also what effects it has in promoting good or evil in other communities, and how far the good things which it enjoys depend upon evils elsewhere. In this respect, also, China is better than we are. Our prosperity, and most of what we endeavour to secure for ourselves, can only be obtained by widespread oppression and exploitation of weaker nations, while the Chinese are not strong enough to injure other countries, and secure whatever they enjoy

by means of their own merits and exertions alone.

These general ethical considerations are by no means irrelevant in considering the practical problems of China. Our industrial and commercial civilization has been both the effect and the cause of certain more or less unconscious beliefs as to what is worth while; in China one becomes conscious of these beliefs through the spectacle of a society which challenges them by being built, just as unconsciously, upon a different standard of values. Progress and efficiency, for example, make no appeal to the Chinese, except to those who have come under Western influence. By valuing progress and efficiency, we have secured power and wealth; by ignoring them, the Chinese, until we brought disturbance, secured on the whole a peaceable existence and a life full of enjoyment. It is difficult to compare these opposite achievements unless we have some standard of values in our minds; and unless it is a more or less conscious standard, we shall undervalue the less familiar civilization, because evils to which we are not accustomed always make a stronger impression than those that we have learned to take as a matter of course.

The culture of China is changing rapidly, and undoubtedly rapid change is needed. The change that has hitherto taken place is traceable ultimately to the military superiority of the West; but in future our economic superiority is likely to be quite as potent. I believe that, if the Chinese are left free to assimilate what they want of our civilization, and to reject what strikes them as bad, they will be able

to achieve an organic growth from their own tradition, and to produce a very splendid result, combining our merits with theirs. There are, however, two opposite dangers to be avoided if this is to happen. The first danger is that they may become completely Westernized, retaining nothing of what has hitherto distinguished them, adding merely one more to the restless, intelligent, industrial, and militaristic nations which now afflict this unfortunate planet. The second danger is that they may be driven, in the course of resistance to foreign aggression, into an intense anti-foreign conservatism as regards everything except armaments. This has happened in Japan, and it may easily happen in China. The future of Chinese culture is intimately bound up with political and economic questions; and it is through their influence that dangers arise.

China is confronted with two very different groups of foreign Powers, on the one hand the white nations, on the other hand Japan. In considering the effect of the white races on the Far East as a whole, modern Japan must count as a Western product; therefore the responsibility for Japan's doings in China rests ultimately with her white teachers. Nevertheless, Japan remains very unlike Europe and America, and has ambitions different from theirs as regards China. We must therefore distinguish three possibilities: (1) China may become enslaved to one or more white nations; (2) China may become enslaved to Japan; (3) China may recover and retain her liberty. Temporarily there is a fourth possibility, namely that a consortium of Japan and the White Powers may control China; but I do not believe that, in the long run, the Japanese

will be able to co-operate with England and America. In the long run, I believe that Japan must dominate the Far East or go under. If the Japanese had a different character this would not be the case; but the nature of their ambitions makes them exclusive and unneighbourly. I shall give the reasons for this view when I come to deal with the relations of China and Japan.

To understand the problem of China, we must first know something of Chinese history and culture before the irruption of the white man, then something of modern Chinese culture and its inherent tendencies; next, it is necessary to deal in outline with the military and diplomatic relations of the Western Powers with China, beginning with our war of 1840 and ending with the treaty concluded after the Boxer rising of 1900. Although the Sino-Japanese war comes in this period, it is possible to separate, more or less, the actions of Japan in that war, and to see what system the White Powers would have established if Japan had not existed. Since that time, however, Japan has been the dominant foreign influence in Chinese affairs. It is therefore necessary to understand how the Japanese became what they are: what sort of nation they were before the West destroyed their isolation, and what influence the West has had upon them. Lack of understanding of Japan has made people in England blind to Japan's aims in China, and unable to apprehend the meaning of what Japan has done.

Political considerations alone, however, will not suffice to explain what is going on in relation to China; economic questions are almost

more important. China is as yet hardly industrialized, and is certainly the most important undeveloped area left in the world. Whether the resources of China are to be developed by China, by Japan, or by the white races, is a question of enormous importance, affecting not only the whole development of Chinese civilization, but the balance of power in the world, the prospects of peace, the destiny of Russia, and the chances of development towards a better economic system in the advanced nations.

The Washington Conference has partly exhibited and partly concealed the conflict for the possession of China between nations all of which have guaranteed China's independence and integrity. Its outcome has made it far more difficult than before to give a hopeful answer as regards Far Eastern problems, and in particular as regards the question: Can China preserve any shadow of independence without a great development of nationalism and militarism? I cannot bring myself to advocate nationalism and militarism, yet it is difficult to know what to say to patriotic Chinese who ask how they can be avoided. So far, I have found only one answer. The Chinese nation, is the most, patient in the world; it thinks of centuries as other nations think of decades. It is essentially indestructible, and can afford to wait. The "civilized" nations of the world, with their blockades, their poison gases, their bombs, submarines, and negro armies, will probably destroy each other within the next hundred years, leaving the stage to those whose pacifism has kept them alive, though poor and powerless. If China can avoid being goaded into war, her oppressors may wear themselves out in the end, and

leave the Chinese free to pursue humane ends, instead of the war and rapine and destruction which all white nations love. It is perhaps a slender hope for China, and for ourselves it is little better than despair. But unless the Great Powers learn some moderation and some tolerance, I do not see any better possibility, though I see many that are worse.

Our Western civilization is built upon assumptions, which, to a psychologist, are rationalizings of excessive energy. Our industrialism, our militarism, our love of progress, our missionary zeal, our imperialism, our passion for dominating and organizing, all spring from a superflux of the itch for activity. The creed of efficiency for its own sake, without regard for the ends to which it is directed, has become somewhat discredited in Europe since the war, which would have never taken place if the Western nations had been slightly more indolent. But in America this creed is still almost universally accepted; so it is in Japan, and so it is by the Bolsheviks, who have been aiming fundamentally at the Americanization of Russia. Russia, like China, may be described as an artist nation; but unlike China it has been governed, since the time of Peter the Great, by men who wished to introduce all the good and evil of the West. In former days, I might have had no doubt that such men were in the right. Some (though not many) of the Chinese returned students resemble them in the belief that Western push and hustle are the most desirable things on earth. I cannot now take this view. The evils produced in China by indolence seem to me far less disastrous, from the point of view of mankind at large, than

those produced throughout the world by the domineering cocksureness of Europe and America. The Great War showed that something is wrong with our civilization; experience of Russia and China has made me believe that those countries can help to show us what it is that is wrong. The Chinese have discovered, and have practised for many centuries, a way of life which, if it could be adopted by all the world, would make all the world happy. We Europeans have not. Our way of life demands strife, exploitation, restless change, discontent and destruction. Efficiency directed to destruction can only end in annihilation, and it is to this consummation that our civilization is tending, if it cannot learn some of that wisdom for which it despises the East.

It was on the Volga, in the summer of 1920, that I first realized how profound is the disease in our Western mentality, which the Bolsheviks are attempting to force upon an essentially Asiatic population, just as Japan and the West are doing in China. Our boat travelled on, day after day, through an unknown and mysterious land. Our company were noisy, gay, quarrelsome, full of facile theories, with glib explanations of everything, persuaded that there is nothing they could not understand and no human destiny outside the purview of their system. One of us lay at death's door, fighting a grim battle with weakness and terror and the indifference of the strong, assailed day and night by the sounds of loud-voiced love-making and trivial laughter. And all around us lay a great silence, strong as death, unfathomable as the heavens. It seemed that none had leisure to hear the silence, yet it called to me so insistently that I grew deaf to the harangues of propagandists and the

endless information of the well-informed.

One night, very late, our boat stopped in a desolate spot where there were no houses, but only a great sandbank, and beyond it a row of poplars with the rising moon behind them. In silence I went ashore, and found on the sand a strange assemblage of human beings, half-nomads, wandering from some remote region of famine, each family huddled together surrounded by all its belongings, some sleeping, others silently making small fires of twigs. The flickering flames lighted up gnarled, bearded faces of wild men, strong, patient, primitive women, and children as sedate and slow as their parents. Human beings they undoubtedly were, and yet it would have been far easier for me to grow intimate with a dog or a cat or a horse than with one of them. I knew that they would wait there day after day, perhaps for weeks, until a boat came in which they could go to some distant place in which they had heard--falsely perhaps--that the earth was more generous than in the country they had left. Some would die by the way, all would suffer hunger and thirst and the scorching mid-day sun, but their sufferings would be dumb. To me they seemed to typify the very soul of Russia, unexpressive, inactive from despair, unheeded by the little set of Westernizers who make up all the parties of progress or reaction. Russia is so vast that the articulate few are lost in it as man and his planet are lost in interstellar space. It is possible, I thought, that the theorists may increase the misery of the many by trying to force them into actions contrary to their primeval instincts, but I could not believe that happiness was to be brought to them by a gospel of

industrialism and forced labour.

Nevertheless, when morning came I resumed the interminable discussions of the materialistic conception of history and the merits of a truly popular government. Those with whom I discussed had not seen the sleeping wanderers, and would not have been interested if they had seen them, since they were not material for propaganda. But something of that patient silence had communicated itself to me, something lonely and unspoken remained in my heart throughout all the comfortable familiar intellectual talk. And at last I began to feel that all politics are inspired by a grinning devil, teaching the energetic and quickwitted to torture submissive populations for the profit of pocket or power or theory. As we journeyed on, fed by food extracted from the peasants, protected by an army recruited from among their sons, I wondered what we had to give them in return. But I found no answer. From time to time I heard their sad songs or the haunting music of the balalaika; but the sound mingled with the great silence of the steppes, and left me with a terrible questioning pain in which Occidental hopefulness grew pale.

It was in this mood that I set out for China to seek a new hope.