

## CHAPTER XII

### THE CHINESE CHARACTER

There is a theory among Occidentals that the Chinaman is inscrutable, full of secret thoughts, and impossible for us to understand. It may be that a greater experience of China would have brought me to share this opinion; but I could see nothing to support it during the time when I was working in that country. I talked to the Chinese as I should have talked to English people, and they answered me much as English people would have answered a Chinese whom they considered educated and not wholly unintelligent. I do not believe in the myth of the "Subtle Oriental": I am convinced that in a game of mutual deception an Englishman or American can beat a Chinese nine times out of ten. But as many comparatively poor Chinese have dealings with rich white men, the game is often played only on one side. Then, no doubt, the white man is deceived and swindled; but not more than a Chinese mandarin would be in London.

One of the most remarkable things about the Chinese is their power of securing the affection of foreigners. Almost all Europeans like China, both those who come only as tourists and those who live there for many years. In spite of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, I can recall hardly a single Englishman in the Far East who liked the Japanese as well as the Chinese. Those who have lived long among them tend to acquire their

outlook and their standards. New arrivals are struck by obvious evils: the beggars, the terrible poverty, the prevalence of disease, the anarchy and corruption in politics. Every energetic Westerner feels at first a strong desire to reform these evils, and of course they ought to be reformed.

But the Chinese, even those who are the victims of preventable misfortunes, show a vast passive indifference to the excitement of the foreigners; they wait for it to go off, like the effervescence of soda-water. And gradually strange hesitations creep into the mind of the bewildered traveller; after a period of indignation, he begins to doubt all the maxims he has hitherto accepted without question. Is it really wise to be always guarding against future misfortune? Is it prudent to lose all enjoyment of the present through thinking of the disasters that may come at some future date? Should our lives be passed in building a mansion that we shall never have leisure to inhabit?

The Chinese answer these questions in the negative, and therefore have to put up with poverty, disease, and anarchy. But, to compensate for these evils, they have retained, as industrial nations have not, the capacity for civilized enjoyment, for leisure and laughter, for pleasure in sunshine and philosophical discourse. The Chinese, of all classes, are more laughter-loving than any other race with which I am acquainted; they find amusement in everything, and a dispute can always be softened by a joke.

I remember one hot day when a party of us were crossing the hills in chairs--the way was rough and very steep, the work for the coolies very severe. At the highest point of our journey, we stopped for ten minutes to let the men rest. Instantly they all sat in a row, brought out their pipes, and began to laugh among themselves as if they had not a care in the world. In any country that had learned the virtue of forethought, they would have devoted the moments to complaining of the heat, in order to increase their tip. We, being Europeans, spent the time worrying whether the automobile would be waiting for us at the right place. Well-to-do Chinese would have started a discussion as to whether the universe moves in cycles or progresses by a rectilinear motion; or they might have set to work to consider whether the truly virtuous man shows complete self-abnegation, or may, on occasion, consider his own interest.

One comes across white men occasionally who suffer under the delusion that China is not a civilized country. Such men have quite forgotten what constitutes civilization. It is true that there are no trams in Peking, and that the electric light is poor. It is true that there are places full of beauty, which Europeans itch to make hideous by digging up coal. It is true that the educated Chinaman is better at writing poetry than at remembering the sort of facts which can be looked up in Whitaker's Almanac. A European, in recommending a place of residence, will tell you that it has a good train service; the best quality he can conceive in any place is that it should be easy to get away from. But a Chinaman will tell you nothing about the trains; if you ask, he will

tell you wrong. What he tells you is that there is a palace built by an ancient emperor, and a retreat in a lake for scholars weary of the world, founded by a famous poet of the Tang dynasty. It is this outlook that strikes the Westerner as barbaric.

The Chinese, from the highest to the lowest, have an imperturbable quiet dignity, which is usually not destroyed even by a European education. They are not self-assertive, either individually or nationally; their pride is too profound for self-assertion. They admit China's military weakness in comparison with foreign Powers, but they do not consider efficiency in homicide the most important quality in a man or a nation. I think that, at bottom, they almost all believe that China is the greatest nation in the world, and has the finest civilization. A Westerner cannot be expected to accept this view, because it is based on traditions utterly different from his own. But gradually one comes to feel that it is, at any rate, not an absurd view; that it is, in fact, the logical outcome of a self-consistent standard of values. The typical Westerner wishes to be the cause of as many changes as possible in his environment; the typical Chinaman wishes to enjoy as much and as delicately as possible. This difference is at the bottom of most of the contrast between China and the English-speaking world.

We in the West make a fetish of "progress," which is the ethical camouflage of the desire to be the cause of changes. If we are asked, for instance, whether machinery has really improved the world, the question strikes us as foolish: it has brought great changes and

therefore great "progress." What we believe to be a love of progress is really, in nine cases out of ten, a love of power, an enjoyment of the feeling that by our fiat we can make things different. For the sake of this pleasure, a young American will work so hard that, by the time he has acquired his millions, he has become a victim of dyspepsia, compelled to live on toast and water, and to be a mere spectator of the feasts that he offers to his guests. But he consoles himself with the thought that he can control politics, and provoke or prevent wars as may suit his investments. It is this temperament that makes Western nations "progressive."

There are, of course, ambitious men in China, but they are less common than among ourselves. And their ambition takes a different form--not a better form, but one produced by the preference of enjoyment to power. It is a natural result of this preference that avarice is a widespread failing of the Chinese. Money brings the means of enjoyment, therefore money is passionately desired. With us, money is desired chiefly as a means to power; politicians, who can acquire power without much money, are often content to remain poor. In China, the tuchuns (military governors), who have the real power, almost always use it for the sole purpose of amassing a fortune. Their object is to escape to Japan at a suitable moment; with sufficient plunder to enable them to enjoy life quietly for the rest of their days. The fact that in escaping they lose power does not trouble them in the least. It is, of course, obvious that such politicians, who spread devastation only in the provinces committed to their care, are far less harmful to the world than our own, who ruin

whole continents in order to win an election campaign.

The corruption and anarchy in Chinese politics do much less harm than one would be inclined to expect. But for the predatory desires of the Great Powers--especially Japan--the harm would be much less than is done by our own "efficient" Governments. Nine-tenths of the activities of a modern Government are harmful; therefore the worse they are performed, the better. In China, where the Government is lazy, corrupt, and stupid, there is a degree of individual liberty which has been wholly lost in the rest of the world.

The laws are just as bad as elsewhere; occasionally, under foreign pressure, a man is imprisoned for Bolshevist propaganda, just as he might be in England or America. But this is quite exceptional; as a rule, in practice, there is very little interference with free speech and a free Press.[96] The individual does not feel obliged to follow the herd, as he has in Europe since 1914, and in America since 1917. Men still think for themselves, and are not afraid to announce the conclusions at which they arrive. Individualism has perished in the West, but in China it survives, for good as well as for evil.

Self-respect and personal dignity are possible for every coolie in China, to a degree which is, among ourselves, possible only for a few leading financiers.

The business of "saving face," which often strikes foreigners in China as ludicrous, is only the carrying-out of respect for personal dignity

in the sphere of social manners. Everybody has "face," even the humblest beggar; there are humiliations that you must not inflict upon him, if you are not to outrage the Chinese ethical code. If you speak to a Chinaman in a way that transgresses the code, he will laugh, because your words must be taken as spoken in jest if they are not to constitute an offence.

Once I thought that the students to whom I was lecturing were not as industrious as they might be, and I told them so in just the same words that I should have used to English students in the same circumstances. But I soon found I was making a mistake. They all laughed uneasily, which surprised me until I saw the reason. Chinese life, even among the most modernized, is far more polite than anything to which we are accustomed. This, of course, interferes with efficiency, and also (what is more serious) with sincerity and truth in personal relations. If I were Chinese, I should wish to see it mitigated. But to those who suffer from the brutalities of the West, Chinese urbanity is very restful. Whether on the balance it is better or worse than our frankness, I shall not venture to decide.

The Chinese remind one of the English in their love of compromise and in their habit of bowing to public opinion. Seldom is a conflict pushed to its ultimate brutal issue. The treatment of the Manchu Emperor may be taken as a case in point. When a Western country becomes a Republic, it is customary to cut off the head of the deposed monarch, or at least to cause him to fly the country. But the Chinese have left the Emperor his

title, his beautiful palace, his troops of eunuchs, and an income of several million dollars a year. He is a boy of sixteen, living peaceably in the Forbidden City. Once, in the course of a civil war, he was nominally restored to power for a few days; but he was deposed again, without being in any way punished for the use to which he had been put.

Public opinion is a very real force in China, when it can be roused. It was, by all accounts, mainly responsible for the downfall of the An Fu party in the summer of 1920. This party was pro-Japanese and was accepting loans from Japan. Hatred of Japan is the strongest and most widespread of political passions in China, and it was stirred up by the students in fiery orations. The An Fu party had, at first, a great preponderance of military strength; but their soldiers melted away when they came to understand the cause for which they were expected to fight. In the end, the opponents of the An Fu party were able to enter Peking and change the Government almost without firing a shot.

The same influence of public opinion was decisive in the teachers' strike, which was on the point of being settled when I left Peking. The Government, which is always impecunious, owing to corruption, had left its teachers unpaid for many months. At last they struck to enforce payment, and went on a peaceful deputation to the Government, accompanied by many students. There was a clash with the soldiers and police, and many teachers and students were more or less severely wounded. This led to a terrific outcry, because the love of education in China is profound and widespread. The newspapers clamoured for



revolution. The Government had just spent nine million dollars in corrupt payments to three Tutchuns who had descended upon the capital to extort blackmail. It could not find any colourable pretext for refusing the few hundred thousands required by the teachers, and it capitulated in panic. I do not think there is any Anglo-Saxon country where the interests of teachers would have roused the same degree of public feeling.

Nothing astonishes a European more in the Chinese than their patience. The educated Chinese are well aware of the foreign menace. They realize acutely what the Japanese have done in Manchuria and Shantung. They are aware that the English in Hong-Kong are doing their utmost to bring to naught the Canton attempt to introduce good government in the South. They know that all the Great Powers, without exception, look with greedy eyes upon the undeveloped resources of their country, especially its coal and iron. They have before them the example of Japan, which, by developing a brutal militarism, a cast-iron discipline, and a new reactionary religion, has succeeded in holding at bay the fierce lusts of "civilized" industrialists. Yet they neither copy Japan nor submit tamely to foreign domination. They think not in decades, but in centuries. They have been conquered before, first by the Tartars and then by the Manchus; but in both cases they absorbed their conquerors. Chinese civilization persisted, unchanged; and after a few generations the invaders became more Chinese than their subjects.

Manchuria is a rather empty country, with abundant room for

colonization. The Japanese assert that they need colonies for their surplus population, yet the Chinese immigrants into Manchuria exceed the Japanese a hundredfold. Whatever may be the temporary political status of Manchuria, it will remain a part of Chinese civilization, and can be recovered whenever Japan happens to be in difficulties. The Chinese derive such strength from their four hundred millions, the toughness of their national customs, their power of passive resistance, and their unrivalled national cohesiveness--in spite of the civil wars, which merely ruffle the surface--that they can afford to despise military methods, and to wait till the feverish energy of their oppressors shall have exhausted itself in internecine combats.

China is much less a political entity than a civilization--the only one that has survived from ancient times. Since the days of Confucius, the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman Empires have perished; but China has persisted through a continuous evolution. There have been foreign influences--first Buddhism, and now Western science. But Buddhism did not turn the Chinese into Indians, and Western science will not turn them into Europeans. I have met men in China who knew as much of Western learning as any professor among ourselves; yet they had not been thrown off their balance, or lost touch with their own people. What is bad in the West--its brutality, its restlessness, its readiness to oppress the weak, its preoccupation with purely material aims--they see to be bad, and do not wish to adopt. What is good, especially its science, they do wish to adopt.

The old indigenous culture of China has become rather dead; its art and literature are not what they were, and Confucius does not satisfy the spiritual needs of a modern man, even if he is Chinese. The Chinese who have had a European or American education realize that a new element, is needed to vitalize native traditions, and they look to our civilization to supply it. But they do not wish to construct a civilization just like ours; and it is precisely in this that the best hope lies. If they are not goaded into militarism, they may produce a genuinely new civilization, better than any that we in the West have been able to create.

So far, I have spoken chiefly of the good sides of the Chinese character; but of course China, like every other nation, has its bad sides also. It is disagreeable to me to speak of these, as I experienced so much courtesy and real kindness from the Chinese, that I should prefer to say only nice things about them. But for the sake of China, as well as for the sake of truth, it would be a mistake to conceal what is less admirable. I will only ask the reader to remember that, on the balance, I think the Chinese one of the best nations I have come across, and am prepared to draw up a graver indictment against every one of the Great Powers. Shortly before I left China, an eminent Chinese writer pressed me to say what I considered the chief defects of the Chinese. With some reluctance, I mentioned three: avarice, cowardice and callousness. Strange to say, my interlocutor, instead of getting angry, admitted the justice of my criticism, and proceeded to discuss possible remedies. This is a sample of the intellectual integrity which is one of

China's greatest virtues.

The callousness of the Chinese is bound to strike every Anglo-Saxon. They have none of that humanitarian impulse which leads us to devote one per cent. of our energy to mitigating the evils wrought by the other ninety-nine per cent. For instance, we have been forbidding the Austrians to join with Germany, to emigrate, or to obtain the raw materials of industry. Therefore the Viennese have starved, except those whom it has pleased us to keep alive from philanthropy. The Chinese would not have had the energy to starve the Viennese, or the philanthropy to keep some of them alive. While I was in China, millions were dying of famine; men sold their children into slavery for a few dollars, and killed them if this sum was unobtainable. Much was done by white men to relieve the famine, but very little by the Chinese, and that little vitiated by corruption. It must be said, however, that the efforts of the white men were more effective in soothing their own consciences than in helping the Chinese. So long as the present birth-rate and the present methods of agriculture persist, famines are bound to occur periodically; and those whom philanthropy keeps alive through one famine are only too likely to perish in the next.

Famines in China can be permanently cured only by better methods of agriculture combined with emigration or birth-control on a large scale. Educated Chinese realize this, and it makes them indifferent to efforts to keep the present victims alive. A great deal of Chinese callousness has a similar explanation, and is due to perception of the vastness of

the problems involved. But there remains a residue which cannot be so explained. If a dog is run over by an automobile and seriously hurt, nine out of ten passers-by will stop to laugh at the poor brute's howls. The spectacle of suffering does not of itself rouse any sympathetic pain in the average Chinaman; in fact, he seems to find it mildly agreeable. Their history, and their penal code before the revolution of 1911, show that they are by no means destitute of the impulse of active cruelty; but of this I did not myself come across any instances. And it must be said that active cruelty is practised by all the great nations, to an extent concealed from us only by our hypocrisy.

Cowardice is *prima facie* a fault of the Chinese; but I am not sure that they are really lacking in courage. It is true that, in battles between rival tuchuns, both sides run away, and victory rests with the side that first discovers the flight of the other. But this proves only that the Chinese soldier is a rational man. No cause of any importance is involved, and the armies consist of mere mercenaries. When there is a serious issue, as, for instance, in the Tai-Ping rebellion, the Chinese are said to fight well, particularly if they have good officers.

Nevertheless, I do not think that, in comparison with the Anglo-Saxons, the French, or the Germans, the Chinese can be considered a courageous people, except in the matter of passive endurance. They will endure torture, and even death, for motives which men of more pugnacious races would find insufficient--for example, to conceal the hiding-place of stolen plunder. In spite of their comparative lack of active courage, they have less fear of death than we have, as is shown by their

readiness to commit suicide.

Avarice is, I should say, the gravest defect of the Chinese. Life is hard, and money is not easily obtained. For the sake of money, all except a very few foreign-educated Chinese will be guilty of corruption. For the sake of a few pence, almost any coolie will run an imminent risk of death. The difficulty of combating Japan has arisen mainly from the fact that hardly any Chinese politician can resist Japanese bribes. I think this defect is probably due to the fact that, for many ages, an honest living has been hard to get; in which case it will be lessened as economic conditions improve. I doubt if it is any worse now in China than it was in Europe in the eighteenth century. I have not heard of any Chinese general more corrupt than Marlborough, or of any politician more corrupt than Cardinal Dubois. It is, therefore, quite likely that changed industrial conditions will make the Chinese as honest as we are--which is not saying much.

I have been speaking of the Chinese as they are in ordinary life, when they appear as men of active and sceptical intelligence, but of somewhat sluggish passions. There is, however, another side to them: they are capable of wild excitement, often of a collective kind. I saw little of this myself, but there can be no doubt of the fact. The Boxer rising was a case in point, and one which particularly affected Europeans. But their history is full of more or less analogous disturbances. It is this element in their character that makes them incalculable, and makes it impossible even to guess at their future. One can imagine a section of

them becoming fanatically Bolshevist, or anti-Japanese, or Christian, or devoted to some leader who would ultimately declare himself Emperor. I suppose it is this element in their character that makes them, in spite of their habitual caution, the most reckless gamblers in the world. And many emperors have lost their thrones through the force of romantic love, although romantic love is far more despised than it is in the West.

To sum up the Chinese character is not easy. Much of what strikes the foreigner is due merely to the fact that they have preserved an ancient civilization which is not industrial. All this is likely to pass away, under the pressure of the Japanese, and of European and American financiers. Their art is already perishing, and being replaced by crude imitations of second-rate European pictures. Most of the Chinese who have had a European education are quite incapable of seeing any beauty in native painting, and merely observe contemptuously that it does not obey the laws of perspective.

The obvious charm which the tourist finds in China cannot be preserved; it must perish at the touch of industrialism. But perhaps something may be preserved, something of the ethical qualities in which China is supreme, and which the modern world most desperately needs. Among these qualities I place first the pacific temper, which seeks to settle disputes on grounds of justice rather than by force. It remains to be seen whether the West will allow this temper to persist, or will force it to give place, in self-defence, to a frantic militarism like that to

which Japan has been driven.