

## SINO-AMERICAN POINTS OF CONTACT\*

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER

**A**BOUT a hundred and fifty years ago Americans first came in direct contact with Chinese when the American ship *Empress of China*, sailing from Boston and rounding the Cape of Good Hope, cast anchor in the harbor of Canton. This occurred in the year 1784, under the reign of the great Emperor Ch'ien Lung, who was a contemporary of George Washington. Thus Americans were late arrivals—in fact, the last of foreign peoples to enter into commercial and political relations with China. Europeans, first the Portuguese, then the Spaniards, Hollanders, British, and French, had preceded them by several centuries. It is no empty saying that from the first days of Sino-American intercourse the two great countries have been linked by bonds of sympathy which have not existed and do not exist between China and any European power. These bonds of sympathy and friendship have been strengthened from year to year, as witnessed particularly by the ever increasing number of Chinese students and scholars annually flocking to our universities athirst for knowledge.

What, then, have Americans and Chinese in common? I think, a goodly number of very fine traits. First, the spirit of democracy, which has pervaded China for more than two thousand years, ever since the First Emperor Ch'in Shi smashed the old feudal system. The principle of government for the benefit of the people certainly is American, but it is equally Chinese and goes back to the fourth century B.C., when Meng-tse (Mencius), the most gifted of Confucius' disciples proclaimed the doctrine, "The people are the most important in a nation, and the sovereign is the least important of all." Second, the spirit of religious tolerance. I know of no more tolerant nation than the Chinese. Third, the lack of a caste system and lack of a hereditary nobility. China was always guided and governed by an aristocracy of intellect, not of birth; the old system of free competition by civil service examinations recruited the best talent from all ranks of society. Fourth, Americans and Chinese do not suffer from the obsession of that great evil, the race superiority complex; they are averse to armed force; they are friends of

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peace, and are animated by a deep sense of justice and fair play toward all, regardless of race, color, or creed. Fifth, and this is the greatest asset that the two nations have in common, they have an unbounded, almost religiously fanatic, faith in the power of education and knowledge as the best guarantors of progress, as the best possible safeguards of the permanence of their social structure and institutions. With this capital of a common historical tradition and mentality—democracy, tolerance, equality, justice, and education—we are well prepared to stand the test and storms of the time.

Aside from these ideals, there are culture elements inherent in the two civilizations that establish a common basis for a harmonious social life and sympathetic fellowship among representatives of the two nations. In reflecting on cultural similarities between Americans and Chinese, it is advisable to proceed from realities and direct observations. A white man who is in a good state of health is able to live in China in a house of Chinese style, in a purely Chinese surrounding, on Chinese food, in every fashion exactly like a Chinaman, not only for years, but a lifetime, without suffering impairment or injury to his health. Chinese houses are very much like our own; their plan of arrangement comes very close to that of the ancient Roman house. Rooms are airy, spacious and well ventilated, and comfortably stocked with tables, chairs, armchairs, settles, and sofas. There is no other nation in the world whose house furniture offers so complete and striking a coincidence with our own. In fact, it is one of the amazing points of culture history that of all nations of Asia the Chinese is the only one that takes its meals seated on chairs around a table, in the same manner as we do. This custom was acquired by the Chinese only in comparatively late historical times. The ancient Chinese, down to the epoch of the two Han dynasties, used to squat at meal times on mats spread over the ground, in the same way as it is still customary with the Japanese and the peoples of India. The remarkable step leading to the use of raised chairs and high tables was taken in the period between the Han and T'ang dynasties, as a sequel of many foreign influences that came from Central Asia at that time, and speaks volumes in favor of Chinese adaptability and readiness to adopt foreign institutions. The Japanese, with all their temperamental changeability, still adhere to the old primitive custom of sitting cross-legged on the mats covering the floors of their rooms; and while an American, for the sake of curiosity or experience, may enjoy living in a Japanese home for a few

days or weeks, he will never acquire the Japanese mode of sitting, which is a source of physical discomfort to us.

The objection may be interposed that many travelers and adventurers in almost all parts of the world have conformed to the life of the natives whom they set out to explore. Such examples indeed are numerous. Any normal individual of good physique and temperate habits is able to live wherever other human beings of whatever race can exist, whether they be Eskimo, American Indians, South Sea Islanders, Pygmies or Negroes, Berbers or Beduins; but such adventures are usually transient, and the explorer will always be glad, once his task is accomplished, to return into the harbor of "civilization." Speaking of myself, it fell to my lot to live for many months among such primitive folks as the Gilyak and Ainu of Saghalin Island, the Golde and Tungusian tribes of the Amur region, sharing their huts or spending the night in the open, sleeping on a bearskin, living like them on salmon and game, even amid smallpox and trachoma epidemics, without any harm to my health, save a temporary discomfort from parasitic insects. I could not, however, have stood this sort of life for a number of years, and while I enjoyed studying these tribes and gathering data concerning their daily life, languages, folk-lore, and religion, I can not say that I felt at home with them, at least not so intimately as I do feel at home with the Chinese. It was also my good fortune to spend a year and a half among the Tibetans, both the nomads and the agriculturists, just living like one of them; and while the Tibetans have my unstinted sympathy, the time I should be willing to dwell in their midst will always be one of restricted duration. The lesson to be retained, therefore, is that a robust man with a definite object in mind may live anywhere without hazard of life and welfare within a limited period, whereas no such time limit is attached for us to China. Again, it can not be doubted that many white individuals have settled among Indians, Eskimo and other primitive peoples, taking native women as their wives, even adopting native speech, clothing and habits, and thus ending their days. Examples of this kind are not typical, however, and such individuals have usually been fugitives, castaways, tramps, derelicts or sailors cast adrift.

In order to settle among the Chinese, no foreigner need feel anxiety about his health, at least no more than if he stayed at home, nor does he require the explorer's physical fiber. China beckons to

the man of culture, and the more cultured he is, the more welcome and the happier he will be there, since the Chinese are highly cultured, well-bred and well-mannered people. Even most Chinese farmers and laborers are gentlemen, and from many of them many a so-called gentleman in our midst could learn a useful lesson in good manners or etiquette.

One of the most remarkable inventions ever made by the Chinese is the chopsticks, "the nimble ones," as they are called in Chinese, the invention of which goes back to the days of the Chou dynasty. Chopsticks are not only characteristically Chinese but also set the Chinese people clearly off from other nations of Asia that are still in the habit of taking food to their mouth with their fingers, which is even done by so highly civilized people as those of India. Annamese, Koreans, Japanese, and other peoples who came under the spell of Chinese civilization adopted from the latter the use of chopsticks. It is self-evident that these make for good table-manners, which are the first criterion of a civilized individual; and whatever opinions we may hold on the Confucian system of ethics, it is undeniable that it has at least brought about the one good effect to transform the majority of the people into a body of highly decent, respectable and well-bred men. The sanctity of the home and the purity of family life belong to the greatest achievements of Confucian social ethics. For all these reasons, official and personal intercourse of Americans with Chinese is easy and a source of pleasure. Their sense of humor, their delight in story-telling, their conversational gifts and oratorical power are other qualities that will not fail to make a strong appeal and endear them to us the closer we get acquainted. At Chinese parties there is less formality and conventionality than in our country.

Their eminent faculty of assimilating and absorbing foreign racial elements has struck many observers. In fact, the Chinese no more than any other nation represent a pure race. The northern Chinese have a strong admixture of Tungusian, Mongol and Turkish blood; the southerners have to a great extent intermarried with the aboriginal tribes which preceded the Chinese as owners of the country. The question of intermarriages of Chinese and whites is naturally a delicate one, and it would be futile to generalize on so vital and large a problem; but if limited personal experience and observation may count a little, I may say that many happy marriages of Euro-

peans and Americans with Chinese women have come within my notice. There is no gulf separating the two races, and there are no obstacles of a racial or cultural character in the way of such unions. The offspring of American fathers and Chinese mothers belong to the best citizenry of China, and commanding the two languages as they do, they make the best liaison officers to maintain and strengthen the bonds between East and West. Many of these Eurasians are splendid fellows, and I have found in them the most willing and enthusiastic helpmates in scientific investigations.

As an analyst of human nature I should be the last to deny that there are psychological differences between Chinese and ourselves. These, however, do not spring from a basically divergent mentality or psyche but are merely the upshot of a distinct set of traditions and education based upon the latter. As the grasp of ancient traditions upon their minds will gradually loosen and as the best in our institutions and inventions will be adopted (I advisedly shun the ambiguous and much misused word "progress"), these small divergences will gradually disappear or be reduced to a minimum. The abandonment of foot-binding and opium-smoking may be cited as relevant instances. The student of anthropology who has learned to fathom and to understand the customs and usages of every people knows only too well that the Chinese are not different from other peoples but are just human and humane. There is no custom in China that in one or another form would not appear among other peoples or even among ourselves. The Chinese worshiped their ancestors and to a large extent still do so; they are justly proud of their ancestors, and in their modesty attribute their own good luck and success to their ancestors' virtues and beneficent influence. We with our pride in ancestors and with our passion for genealogical quests, are no less ancestor worshippers; our "worship" has merely assumed a different form.