CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS.

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In China there is much to blame, and perhaps something from which to learn. A good writer² has remarked that the Christian spirit is very different from what may be called the heroic spirit; it is of a more tame, gentle, and submissive cast. It is matter of regret how little, in this particular, it has moulded the public feeling of Europe, and how much we yet overvalue a high, proud spirit, with a bold disregard of consequences, and prefer it to a rational, meek, unaspiring, and humble spirit. Nothing can be more unchristian than the stern resentment of insults cherished by Europeans.

The Chinese teach contempt of the rude, instead of fighting with them. And the man who unreasonably insults another, has public opinion against him, whilst he who bears and despises the affront, is esteemed.

The Chinese are fond of appealing to reason. They have their "Men of a high-spirited sense of right," and who manifest a bold adherence to it, but still such characters are at great pains to show that reason is on their side. They have no conception of that sullen notion of honor, that would lead a man to prefer being shot, or shooting somebody else, rather than explain and prove the truth and reasonableness of his words and actions.

Even the Government is at the utmost pains to make it appear to the people, that its conduct is reasonable and benevolent on all occasions. They have found by the experience of many ages that
it is necessary. To make out the argument, they are not nice about a strict adherence to truth; nor are their reasons or premises such that Europeans would generally admit: but granting them their own premises and statement of facts, they never fail to prove that those whom they oppose are completely in the wrong.

A Chinese would stand and reason with a man, when an Englishman would knock him down, or an Italian stab him. It is needless to say which is the more rational mode of proceeding.

Were the religious and moral writings of Europeans considered by a person living in China, as a faithful delineation of their character, how much would he be mistaken! And on the other hand, if he formed his opinion from the follies and vices recorded in the daily papers, whilst he would form a quite opposite opinion, it would be equally unfair. We should guard against judging of the whole by a part only. The European student must not consider what the Chinese teach, and what they do, as always the same. Their moral maxims are as ineffectual in regulating their hearts and conduct, as the moral maxims of Christendom are with respect to Europeans. This, knowing what is right, and doing what is wrong, can be accounted for only on the principle that human nature is depraved, or fallen from its original purity and rectitude.

The millions of China, whom, on principle, we must recognise as children of the same Almighty Father (for God hath made of one blood all nations of men), are rendered by the strong arm of power, exerted by the magistrate, the parent, or guardian, more afraid of telling truth than Europeans. They are vastly prone to prevaricate, to deceive, to lie. Superstition and idolatry usurp the place of true religion; and, Chinese, like the rest of mankind, are inclined to be satisfied with external observances, instead of religious and moral rectitude.

The affairs of Europe are of comparatively no importance whatever to China; and on the other hand, the affairs of China do not much concern Europeans. There exists mutual indifference.

The Greeks and Romans were the ancestors of Europeans. The scenes of their battles; the situation and antiquities of their cities; the birth-place of their poets, historians, legislators, and
sands fought and died; the situation of splendid courts; the tombs of monarchs; the abodes of historians, moralists, and poets, whose memory is dear to them, and which interest their hearts in the antiquities of their fathers. But what they look on with interest and pleasure, can certainly have few charms for a foreigner, who is excluded from their families, and passed from Peking to Canton in a boat, under military escort. Still from this to deny that the country does not possess any of the charms of Europe, does not seem a fair conclusion. If the reality of things is to be judged of by the feelings of the inhabitants of a country, every region of the world, and every state of society, would in its turn assume the place of high superiority. Europe, which is the most scientific portion of the globe, is not yet free from selfish and narrow prejudices; and to a person placed on the Eastern verge of the Asiatic Continent, who hears little of the nations of Europe, but the distant rumour of their perpetual wars, with all their advantages, they appear still as rancorous against each other, as if they possessed no great principles of equity and justice to appeal to, or were too selfish and barbarous to do so.

There are certainly not many things in which the Chinese are worthy of imitation: there is, however, one benevolent cause, which a Chinese would never think of opposing, but which has yet to struggle with much unreasonable opposition in modern Europe, viz., that of making education as general as possible, and giving to moral science a decided preference to physical science, in the education of youth. To honor virtue more than talent. It is painful to hear a smattering of astronomy and geography, together with a little music, drawing, and dancing, which can be of very little use in the regulation of the heart and life, considered of great value, whilst instruction in relative and religious duties, on which depend the peace and happiness of families and of nations, is lightly esteemed. To utter a moral or religious sentiment anywhere but in the pulpit is esteemed perfectly insufferable. Every benevolent Englishman must wish to see the reasoning faculty more called into exercise, than it generally is amongst the poor of his own country, and to hear duty to parents, with a rational and religious self-control, quite as much honored in general conversation as those attainments and accomplishments, which may confer elegance on a dwelling, and give grace to a person, but which have no influence on the springs of human action, morally considered, nor feed the sources of real heart-felt human bliss.

1 This was in 1817.—Ed.
The writer, however, means not to insinuate, that in morals we are inferior to the Chinese; he believes the fact to be very far the reverse. Their advantages indeed have not been equal to ours; and our public morals are still greatly below what our acknowledged standards require. As, "Fas est ab hoste doceri," so probably in some things, nations denominated Christian, may yet learn from Heathens. As Confucius taught, our dislike of a man’s vices should never be carried to such a height as to make us blind to what is really good about him.

The good traits in the Chinese character, amongst themselves, are mildness and urbanity; a wish to show that their conduct is reasonable, and generally a willingness to yield to what appears so; docility; industry; subordination of juniors; respect for the aged, and for parents; acknowledging the claims of poor kindred: these are the virtues of public opinion, which, of course, are, in particular cases, often more show than reality. For on the other hand, the Chinese are specious, but insincere, jealous, envious, and distrustful to a high degree. There is amongst them a considerable prevalence of scepticism; of a Sadducean, and rather Atheistical spirit; and their conduct is very generally such as one would naturally expect from a people whose minds feel not that sense of Divine Authority, nor that reverence for the Divine Majesty and Goodness, which in Sacred Scripture is denominated the "Fear of God." Conscience has few checks but the laws of the land; and a little frigid ratiocination, on the fitness and propriety of things, which is not generally found effectual to restrain, when the selfish and vicious propensities of our nature may be indulged with present impunity. The Chinese are generally selfish, cold-blooded, and inhumane.

Perhaps the behavior of no people amongst themselves and towards foreigners is exactly the same. With the Chinese it is exceedingly different. When interest or fear do not dictate a different course, they are to strangers, haughty, insolent, fraudulent and inhospitable. A merchant will flatter a foreign devil (as they express it), when he has something to gain from him; then he can be servile enough; particularly if he is not seen by his own countrymen; for the presence of a menial servant of his own nation will make him more on his guard in yielding his fancied superiority. Europeans are secluded from general intercourse with natives of different ranks; which affords great facilities to merchants and native domestics to combine and impose upon them, which they usually do. Few instances of gratitude or attachment have ever
occurred on the part of servants to their European masters. The Chinese study to get the better of those with whom they have to contend, by bringing the other party into a dilemma, like the king in chess, who is reduced to checkmate; and they become apprehensive, when their opponents maintain calmness and an apparent indifference; they remember their own maxim, "He that has reason on his side, need not talk loudly."

Love to one's own country is perfectly compatible with benevolent feelings to all mankind; and the prosperity of this nation, with the prosperity of that. It seems quite a mistake to think that attachment to one's own people is manifested by a violent dislike of others.

Will the day ever come when the various tribes of men shall live together as brothers? When they shall not hurt, nor destroy each other any more? When Truth and Knowledge shall universally prevail? Let us still cherish the pleasing hope, that so desirable a state of society will finally exist, and whilst cherishing this hope, every serious mind will readily join in the King of Israel's Prayer to the Almighty, "O God, let thy ways be known upon the Earth, and thy saving health amongst all nations."