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CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

Arthur Henderson Smith

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Within the Four Seas all are brethren.

Confucian Analects, XII. , v. 4

The scientific study of Man is the most difficult of all branches of knowledge.

O. W. Holmes

We are firm believers in the maxim that for all right judgment of any man or thing it is useful—nay, essential—to see his good qualities before pronouncing on his bad.

Carlyle

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I	7
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	24
CHAPTER V	29
CHAPTER VI	35
CHAPTER VII	44
CHAPTER VIII	50
CHAPTER IX	57
CHAPTER X	64
CHAPTER XI	71
CHAPTER XII	77
CHAPTER XIII	84
CHAPTER XIV	91
CHAPTER XV	99
CHAPTER XVI	115
CHAPTER XVII	122
CHAPTER XVIII	131
CHAPTER XIX	138

CHAPTER XX	151
CHAPTER XXI	158
CHAPTER XXII	177
CHAPTER XXIII	185
CHAPTER XXIV	198
CHAPTER XXV	218
CHAPTER XXVI	236
CHAPTER XXVII	259

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INTRODUCTION

A WITNESS when put upon the stand is expected to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Many witnesses concerning the Chinese have told the truth, but perhaps few of them have succeeded in telling nothing but the truth, and no one of them has ever told the whole truth. No single individual, whatever the extent of his knowledge, could by any possibility know the whole truth about the Chinese. The present volume of essays is therefore open to objection from three different points of view.

First, it may be said that the attempt to convey to others an idea of the real characteristics of the Chinese is vain. Mr. George Wingrove Cooke, the China correspondent of the London *Times* in 1857–58, enjoyed as good an opportunity of seeing the Chinese under varied circumstances, and through the eyes of those well qualified to help him to a just understanding of the people, as any writer on China up to that time. In the preface to his published letters, Mr. Cooke apologises as follows for his failure to describe the Chinese character: “I have, in these letters, introduced no elaborate essay upon Chinese character. It is a great omission. No theme could be more tempting, no subject could afford wider scope for ingenious hypothesis, profound generalisation, and triumphant dogmatism. Every small critic will probably utterly despise me for not having made something out of such opportunities. The truth is, that I have written several very fine characters for the whole Chinese race, but having the misfortune to have the people under my eye at the same time with my essay, they were always saying something or doing something which rubbed so rudely against my hypothesis, that in the interest of truth I burnt several successive letters. I may add that I have often talked over this matter with the most eminent and candid sinologues, and have always found them ready to agree with me as

to the impossibility of a conception of Chinese character as a whole. These difficulties, however, occur only to those who know the Chinese practically; a smart writer, entirely ignorant of the subject, might readily strike off a brilliant and antithetical analysis, which should leave nothing to be desired but truth. Some day, perhaps, we may acquire the necessary knowledge to give to each of the glaring inconsistencies of a Chinaman's mind its proper weight and influence in the general mass. At present, I, at least, must be content to avoid strict definitions, and to describe a Chinaman^① by his most prominent qualities."

Within the past thirty years, the Chinese has made himself a factor in the affairs of many lands. He is seen to be irrepressible; is felt to be incomprehensible. He cannot, indeed, be rightly understood in any country but China, yet the impression still prevails that he is a bundle of contradictions who cannot be understood at all. But after all there is no apparent reason, now that several hundred years of our acquaintance with China have elapsed, why what is actually known of its people should not be co-ordinated, as well as any other combination of complex phenomena.

A more serious objection to this particular volume is that the author has no adequate qualifications for writing it. The circumstance that a person has lived for twenty-two years in China is no more a guarantee that he is competent to write of the characteristics of the Chinese, than the fact that another man has for twenty-two years been buried in a silver mine is a proof that he is a fit person to compose a treatise on metallurgy, or on bi-metallism. China is a vast whole, and one who has never even visited more than half its provinces, and who has lived in but two of them, is certainly not entitled to generalise for the whole Empire. These papers were originally prepared for the *North-China Daily News* of Shanghai, with no reference to any wider circulation. Some of the topics treated excited, however, so much interest,

① It is a matter of surprise, and even more of regret, that this barbarous compound seems to have rooted itself in the English language, to the exclusion of the proper word *Chinese*. We do not know of a foreign periodical in China in which natives of that country are not constantly called "Chinamen," nor of a single writer in the Empire who consistently avoids the use of the term.

not only in China, but also in Great Britain, in the United States, and in Canada, that the author was asked to reproduce the articles in a permanent form.^①

A third objection, which will be offered by some, is that parts of the views here presented, especially those which deal with the moral character of the Chinese, are misleading and unjust.

It should be remembered, however, that impressions are not like statistics which may be corrected to a fraction. They rather resemble photographic negatives, no two of which may be alike, yet each of them may present truthfully something not observable in any of the rest. The plates on which the photographs are taken differ; so do the lenses, and the developers, and the resulting views differ too.

Many old residents of China, whose knowledge of the country is very much greater than that of the writer, have expressed themselves as in substantial agreement with his opinions, while others, whose judgment is entitled to equal respect, think that a somewhat lighter colouring in certain parts would increase the fidelity of the too “monochromatic” picture. With this undoubtedly just criticism in mind, the work has been revised and amended throughout. While the exigencies of republication at this time have rendered convenient the omission of one-third of the characteristics originally discussed, those that remain contain nevertheless the most important portions of the whole, and the chapter on Content and Cheerfulness is altogether new.

There can be no valid excuse for withholding commendation from the Chinese for any one of the many good qualities which they possess and exhibit. At the same time, there is a danger of yielding to *à priori* considerations, and giving the Chinese credit for a higher practical morality than they can justly claim—an evil not less serious than indiscriminate condemnation. It is related of Thackeray, that he was once asked how it happened that the good people in his novels were always stupid, and the

^① “Chinese Characteristics” was published in Shanghai in 1890; after being widely circulated throughout China and the East, the edition was exhausted more than two years ago.

bad people clever. To this the great satirist replied that he had no brains above his eyes. There is a wood-cut representing an oak tree, in the outlines of which the observer is invited to detect a profile of Napoleon on the island of St. Helena, standing with bowed head and folded arms. Protracted contemplation frequently fails to discover any such profile, and it would seem that there must be some mistake, but when once it is clearly pointed out, it is impossible to look at the picture and not see the Napoleon too. In like manner, many things are to be seen in China which do not at first appear, and many of them once seen are never forgotten.

While it has been impossible to introduce a qualifying clause into every sentence which is general in its form, the reader is expressly warned that these papers are not intended to be generalisations for a whole Empire, nor yet comprehensive abstracts of what foreigners have observed and experienced. What they are intended to be is merely a notation of the impression which has been made upon one observer, by a few out of many "Chinese Characteristics." They are not meant as a portrait of the Chinese people, but rather as mere outline sketches in charcoal of some features of the Chinese people, as they have been seen by that one observer. Taken together, they constitute only a single ray, of which an indefinite number are required to form a complete beam of white light. They may also be considered as studies in induction, in which many particulars taken from the experience not of the writer only, but of various other individuals at various times, are grouped. It is for this reason that the subject has been so largely treated by exemplification.

Mr. Meadows, the most philosophical of the many writers on China and the Chinese, expressed the opinion that the best way to convey to the mind of another person a correct idea of the genius of a foreign people would be to hand him for perusal a collection of notes, formed by carefully recording great numbers of incidents which had attracted one's attention, particularly those that seemed at all extraordinary, together with the explanation of the extraordinary parts as given by natives of the country.

From a sufficient number of such incidents a general principle is inferred. The inferences may be doubted or denied, but such particulars as

are cited cannot, for that reason alone, be set aside, being so far as they go truthful, and they must ultimately be reckoned with in any theory of the Chinese character.

The difficulty of comparing Chinese with Anglo-Saxons will be most strongly felt by those who have attempted it. To such it will soon become evident that many things which seem “characteristic” of the Chinese are merely Oriental traits; but to what extent this is true, each reader in the light of his own experience must judge for himself.

It has been said that in the present stage of our intercourse with Chinese there are three ways in which we can come to some knowledge of their social life—by the study of their novels, their ballads, and their plays. Each of these sources of information doubtless has its worth, but there is likewise a fourth, more valuable than all of them combined, a source not open to every one who writes on China and the Chinese. It is the study of the family life of the Chinese in their own homes. As the topography of a district can be much better understood in the country than in the city, so it is with the characteristics of the people. A foreigner may live in a Chinese city for a decade, and not gain as much knowledge of the interior life of the people as he can acquire by living twelve months in a Chinese village. Next to the Family we must regard the Village as the unit of Chinese social life, and it is therefore from the standpoint of a Chinese village that these papers have been written. They are of purpose not intended to represent the point of view of a missionary, but that of an observer not consciously prejudiced, who simply reports what he sees. For this reason no reference is made to any characteristics of the Chinese as they may be modified by Christianity. It is not assumed that the Chinese need Christianity at all, but if it appears that there are grave defects in their character, it is a fair question how those defects may be remedied.

The “Chinese question,” as already remarked, is now far more than a national one. It is international. There is reason to think that in the twentieth century it will be an even more pressing question than at present. The problem of the means by which so vast a part of the human race may be improved cannot be without interest to any one who wishes well to mankind.

If the conclusions to which we may find ourselves led are correct, they will be supported by a line of argument heretofore too much neglected. If these conclusions are wrong, they will, however supported, fall of themselves.

It is many years since Lord Elgin's reply to an address from the merchants of Shanghai, but his words are true and pertinent today. "When the barriers which prevent free access to the interior of the country shall have been removed, Christian civilisation of the West will find itself face to face not with barbarism, but with an ancient civilisation in many respects effete and imperfect, but in others not without claims to our sympathy and respect. In the rivalry which will then ensue, Christian civilisation will have to win its way among a sceptical and ingenious people, by making it manifest that a faith which reaches to heaven furnishes better guarantees for public and private morality than one which does not rise above the earth."

CHAPTER I

FACE

AT first sight nothing can be more irrational than to call that which is shared with the whole human race a "characteristic" of the Chinese. But the word "face" does not in China signify simply the front part of the head, but is literally a compound noun of multitude, with more meanings than we shall be able to describe, or perhaps to comprehend.

In order to understand, however imperfectly, what is meant by "face," we must take account of the fact that as a race the Chinese have a strongly dramatic instinct. The theatre may almost be said to be the only national amusement, and the Chinese have for theatricals a passion like that of the Englishman for athletics, or the Spaniard for bull-fights. Upon very slight provocation, any Chinese regards himself in the light of an actor in a drama. He throws himself into theatrical attitudes, performs the salaam, falls upon his knees, prostrates himself and strikes his head upon the earth, under circumstances which to an Occidental seem to make such actions superfluous, not to say ridiculous. A Chinese thinks in theatrical terms. When roused in self-defence he addresses two or three persons as if they were a multitude. He exclaims: "I say this in the presence of You, and You, and You, who are all here present." If his troubles are adjusted he speaks of himself as having "got off the stage" with credit, and if they are not adjusted he finds no way to "retire from the stage." All this, be it clearly understood, has nothing to do with realities. The question is never of facts, but always of form. If a fine speech has been delivered at the proper time and in the proper way, the requirement of the play is met. We are not to go behind the scenes, for that would spoil all the plays in the world. Properly to execute acts like these in all the complex relations of life, is to have "face." To fail of them, to ignore them, to be thwarted in the performance of them, this is to "lose

face." Once rightly apprehended, "face" will be found to be in itself a key to the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese.

It should be added that the principles which regulate "face" and its attainment are often wholly beyond the intellectual apprehension of the Occidental, who is constantly forgetting the theatrical element, and wandering off into the irrelevant regions of fact. To him it often seems that Chinese "face" is not unlike the South Sea Island taboo, a force of undeniable potency, but capricious, and not reducible to rule, deserving only to be abolished and replaced by common sense. At this point Chinese and Occidentals must agree to disagree, for they can never be brought to view the same things in the same light. In the adjustment of the incessant quarrels which distract every hamlet, it is necessary for the "peace-talkers" to take as careful account of the balance of "face" as European statesmen once did of the balance of power. The object in such cases is not the execution of even-handed justice, which, even if theoretically desirable, seldom occurs to an Oriental as a possibility, but such an arrangement as will distribute to all concerned "face" in due proportions. The same principle often obtains in the settlement of lawsuits, a very large percentage of which end in what may be called a drawn game.

To offer a person a handsome present is to "give him face." But if the gift be from an individual it should be accepted only in part, but should seldom or never be altogether refused. A few examples of the thirst for keeping face will suffice for illustration. To be accused of a fault is to "lose face," and the fact must be denied, no matter what the evidence, in order to save face. A tennis-ball is missed, and it is more than suspected that a coolie picked it up. He indignantly denies it, but goes to the spot where the ball disappeared, and soon finds it lying there (dropped out of his sleeve), remarking, "Here is your 'lost' ball." The waiting-woman who secreted the penknife of a guest in her master's house afterwards discovers it under the table-cloth, and ostentatiously produces it. In each case "face" is saved. The servant who has carelessly lost an article which he knows he must replace or forfeit an equivalent from his wages, remarks loftily, as he takes

his dismissal, "The money for that silver spoon I do not want," and thus his "face" is intact. A man has a debt owing to him which he knows that he shall not collect; but going to the debtor, he raises a terrible disturbance, by which means he shows that he knows what ought to be done. He does not get the money, but he saves his "face" and thus secures himself from imposition in the future. A servant neglects or refuses to perform some duty. Ascertaining that his master intends to turn him off, he repeats his former offence, dismisses himself, and saves his "face."

To save one's face and lose one's life would not seem to us very attractive, but we have heard of a Chinese District Magistrate who, as a special favour, was allowed to be beheaded in his robes of office in order to save his face!

CHAPTER II

ECONOMY

THE word “economy” signifies the rule by which the house should be ordered, especially with reference to the relation between expenditure and income. Economy, as we understand the term, may be displayed in three several ways: by limiting the number of wants, by preventing waste, and by the adjustment of forces in such a manner as to make a little represent a great deal. In each of these ways the Chinese are pre-eminently economical.

One of the first things which impress the traveller in China is the extremely simple diet of the people. The vast bulk of the population seems to depend upon a few articles, such as rice, beans in various preparations, millet, garden vegetables, and fish. These, with a few other things, form the staple of countless millions, supplemented it may be on the feast-days, or other special occasions, with a bit of meat.

Now that so much attention is given in Western lands to the contrivance of ways in which to furnish nourishing food to the very poor, at a minimum cost, it is not without interest to learn the undoubted fact that, in ordinary years, it is in China quite possible to furnish wholesome food in abundant quantity at a cost for each adult of not more than two cents a day. Even in famine times, thousands of persons have been kept alive for months on an allowance of not more than a cent and a half a day. This implies the general existence in China of a high degree of skill in the preparation of food. Poor and coarse as their food often is, insipid and even repulsive as it not infrequently seems to the foreigner, it is impossible not to recognise the fact that, in the cooking and serving of what they have, the Chinese are past-masters of the culinary art. In this particular, Mr. Wingrove Cooke ranked them below the French, and above the English (and he might have added the Americans). Whether they are really below any one of these nationalities

we are by no means so certain as Mr. Cooke may have been, but their superiority to some of them is beyond dispute. In the few simple articles which we have mentioned, it is evident that even from the point of view of the scientific physiologist, the Chinese have made a wise choice of their staple foods. The thoroughness of their mode of preparing food, and the great variety in which these few constituents are constantly presented, are known to all who have paid the least attention to Chinese cookery.

Another fact of extreme significance does not force itself upon our notice, but can easily be verified. There is very little waste in the preparation of Chinese food, and everything is made to do as much duty as possible. What there is left after an ordinary Chinese family have finished one of their meals would represent but a fraction of the net cost of the food. In illustration of this general fact, it is only necessary to glance at the physical condition of the Chinese dog or cat. On the leavings of human beings it is the unhappy function of these animals to “live,” and their lives are uniformly protracted at “a poor dying rate.” The populations of new countries are proverbially wasteful, and we have not the least doubt that it would be possible to support sixty millions of Asiatics in comparative luxury with the materials daily wasted in a land like the United States, where a living is easily to be had. But we should like to see how many human beings could be fattened from what there is left after as many Chinese have “eaten to repletion,” and the servants or children have all had their turn at the remains! Even the tea left in the cups is poured back into the teapot to be heated again.

It is a fact which cannot fail to force itself upon our notice at every turn, that the Chinese are not as a race gifted with that extreme fastidiousness in regard to food which is frequently developed in Western lands. All is fish that comes to their net, and there is very little which does not come there first or last. In the northern parts of China the horse, the mule, the ox, and the donkey are in universal use, and in large districts the camel is made to do full duty. Doubtless it will appear to some of our readers that economy is carried too far, when we mention that it is the general practice to eat *all* of these animals as soon as they expire, no matter whether the cause of death