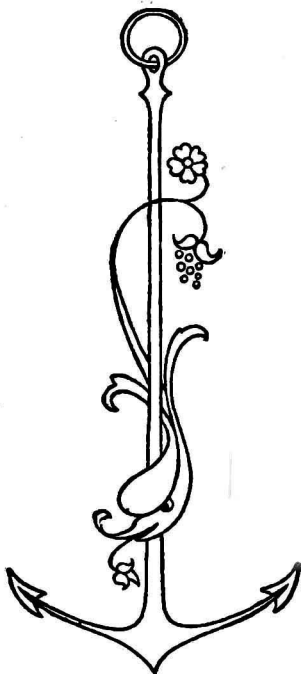


LETTERS FROM
A CHINESE OFFICIAL
BEING AN EASTERN VIEW OF
WESTERN CIVILIZATION



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**INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN
EDITION**

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In venturing to lay the following letters before the American public, I feel that I may be expected to preface them by a word of explanation, if not of apology. Written originally for the English, they touch upon specifically English institutions: and the few references they contain to contemporary history and politics are such as would naturally be of interest rather to European than to American readers. Regarded from this point of view, their publication in the United States might seem to be irrelevant, and even impertinent. And yet I venture to think that, if they have any significance, it is of a kind that should appeal with a peculiar force to Americans. For their interest, such as it is, depends, not upon topical allusions, but upon the whole contrast suggested between Eastern

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and Western ideals. And America, in a pre-eminent degree, is representative of the West. For a century past she has drawn to herself, by an irresistible attraction, the boldest, the most masterful, the most practically intelligent of the spirits of Europe; just as, by the same law, she has repelled the sensitive, the contemplative, and the devout. Unconsciously, by the mere fact of her existence, she has sifted the nations; the children of the Spirit have slipped through the iron net of her destinies, but the children of the World she has gathered into her granaries. She has thus become, in a sense peculiar and unique, the type and exemplar of the Western world. Over her unencumbered plains the Genius of Industry ranges unchallenged, naked, unashamed. Whereas, in Europe, it has still to fight for its supremacy; for there it is confronted with the débris of an earlier society, with ideals, habits, institutions, monuments, traditions, alien to its achievement and incomprehensible to its aims. Cathedral churches, gray in the north and sublime as the cliffs and the

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clouds, exuberant in the south with color and form like the lovely landscape they adorn, testify to the passage of a religion which, whatever its defects, had at least the merit of spiritual audacity. Splendid palaces, manors, and parks, ancient moss-grown cottages, perpetuate the tradition of ranks and orders, ancient, hereditary, and fixed. Titles, forms, manners, habits, a whole ritual of life, proclaim a standard, vanishing no doubt, of merit and of duty, not yet convertible into terms of money. A conception that leisure may be noble, and that activity may be base, that there is an inner, as well as an outer life, and that the latter, on any reasonable estimate, has value only as minister to the former, such a conception still survives, efficient in individual lives, and embodied in works of literature and of art. In Europe, in a word, the modern spirit has to contend with an ancient culture; and its methods and results are modified and transformed by the conflict. But in America it is free; and whatever truth there may be in my analysis of its character and operation, should

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be illustrated, one would expect, on a larger scale, in bolder and more uncompromising manifestations, on this continent than in any of the countries of Europe. Whether that be so or not, I must leave to the candor of my American readers. But if it be, then, as I cannot but think, a serious issue is raised as to the future not merely of the United States, but of the whole Western world.

For it is impossible not to recognize that the destinies of Europe are closely bound up with those of this country; and that what is at stake in the development of the American Republic is nothing less than the success or failure of Western civilization. Endowed, above all the nations of the world, with intelligence, energy, and force, unhampered by the splendid ruins of a past which, however great, does but encumber, in the old world, with fears, hesitations, and regrets, the difficult march to the promised land of the future, combining the magnificent enthusiasm of youth with the wariness of maturer years, and animated by a confidence almost re-

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ligious in their own destiny, the American people are called upon, it would seem, to determine, in a pre-eminent degree, the form that is to be assumed by the society of the future. Upon them hangs the fate of the Western world. And were I an American citizen, the thought would fill me, I confess, less with exultation than with anxious and grave reflection. I should ask myself whether the triumphs gained by my countrymen over matter and space had been secured at the cost of spiritual insight and force; whether their immense achievement in the development of the practical arts had been accompanied by any serious contribution to science, literature, and art; whether, in a word, the soul had grown with the body, or was tending to atrophy and decay. And looking back over the long history of mankind, considering the record of the nations who have borne in succession the torch of civilization which England, even now, is handing across to America, considering all that is disappearing in Europe and all that has not yet begun to show itself here, I should feel

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that Humanity is standing at the parting of the ways, that it is confronted with an issue of a gravity and importance unparalleled, perhaps, since the fall of the Roman Empire. That issue I would put somewhat as follows: Is that which created the religion, the art, the speculation of the Past; that insatiable hunger for Eternity which, by a sacramental mystery, has transubstantiated into the heavenly essence of the Ideal, the base and quotidian elements of the Actual; that spirit of unquenchable aspiration which has assumed, in its tireless quest for embodiment, forms so alluring, so terrible, so divine, which has luxuriated in the jungle of Hindoo myths, blossomed in the Pantheon of the Greeks, suffered on the cross, perished at the stake, wasted in the cloister and the cell, which has given life to marble, substance to color, structure to fugitive sound, which has fashioned a palace of fire and cloud to inhabit for its desire, and deemed it, for its beauty, more dear and more real than kingdoms of iron and gold; —is that hunger, in the future as in the past,

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to harass and hunt us from our styes? Is that spirit to urge as of old the reluctant wheels of our destiny? Or are we to fill our belly with the husks of comfort, security, and peace? To crush in the dust under our Juggernaut car that delicate charioteer? Are we to be spirits or intelligent brutes; men or mere machines? That is the question now put, as it has never been put before, to the nations of the West, and pre-eminently to the people of these States. Doubtless, were I an American, I should not question the capacity of my countrymen to answer it, and to answer it in the best and most fruitful sense. Yet the consciousness of the immensity of the problem would, I think, check at the birth any tendency which I might otherwise have indulged to premature exultation. For I should feel that the work had hardly been begun, that the foundations were barely laid; nay, that the very plan of the building was not yet drawn out. And looking across the ocean, to Europe and to the far East, I should be anxious, not indeed to imitate the forms, but to appropriate the inspira-

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tion of that ancient world which created manners, laws, religion, art, whose history is the record not merely of the body, but of the soul of mankind, and whose spirit, already escaping from the forms in which it had found a partial embodiment, is hovering even now at your gates in quest of a new and more perfect incarnation. Will you not receive it? I do not doubt that you will, if not to-day, then to-morrow, if not to-morrow, then the day after. And if, in any smallest way, these few imperfect pages may contribute to prepare for it a welcome among you, you perhaps will pardon their defects, in recognition of a sincere intention, and will tolerate, even from a stranger, a certain freedom of speech which otherwise you might not unnaturally resent as an impertinence.

LETTERS FROM A CHINESE OFFICIAL

I

Recent events in China have brought into new prominence at once the fundamental antagonism between Eastern and Western civilization, and that ignorance and contempt of the one for the other which is mainly responsible for the present situation. In the face of the tragedy that is being enacted, I have long held my peace. But a growing sense of indignation, and a hope, perhaps illusory, that I may contribute to remove certain misunderstandings, have impelled me at last to open my lips, and to lay before the British public some views which have long been crying for utterance. Of the immediate crisis I do not propose to speak. It is my object rather to promote a juster estimate of my countrymen and their policy, by explaining, as far as I am able, the way in which we regard Western civilization, and the reasons we have for desiring to exclude its influences. For such a task I conceive myself

to be not altogether unfit. A long residence in England gives me some right to speak of your institutions; while absence from my own country has not disqualified me to speak of ours. A Chinaman remains always a Chinaman; and much as I admire in some of its aspects the achievement of Western civilization, I have yet seen nothing which could make me regret that I was born a citizen of the East. To Englishmen this may seem a strange confession. You are accustomed to regard us as barbarians, and not unnaturally, for it is only on the occasions when we murder your compatriots that your attention is powerfully drawn toward us. From such spasmodic outbreaks you are apt overhastily to infer that we are a nation of cold-blooded assassins; a conclusion as reasonable as would be an inference from the present conduct of your troops in China to the general character of Western civilization. We are not to be judged by the acts of our mobs, nor even, I may add, by those of our Government, for the Government in China does not represent the nation. Yet even

those acts (strongly as they are condemned by all educated Chinamen) deserve, I venture to think, on the part of Europeans, a consideration more grave, and a less intemperate reprobation, than they have hitherto received among you. For they are expressions of a feeling which is, and must always be, the most potent factor in our relations with the West—our profound mistrust and dislike of your civilization. This feeling you, naturally enough, attribute to prejudice and ignorance. In reality, I venture to think, it is based upon reason; and for this point of view I would ask the serious and patient consideration of my readers.

Our civilization is the oldest in the world. It does not follow that it is the best; but neither, I submit, does it follow that it is the worst. On the contrary, such antiquity is, at any rate, a proof that our institutions have guaranteed to us a stability for which we search in vain among the nations of Europe. But not only is our civilization stable, it also embodies, as we think, a moral order; while in yours we detect only an economic

chaos. Whether your religion be better than ours, I do not at present dispute; but it is certain that it has less influence on your society. You profess Christianity, but your civilization has never been Christian; whereas ours is Confucian through and through. But to say that it is Confucian, is to say that it is moral; or, at least (for I do not wish to beg the question), that moral relations are those which it primarily contemplates. Whereas, with you (so it seems to us) economic relations come first, and upon these you endeavor, afterward, to graft as much morality as they will admit.

This point I may illustrate by a comparison between your view of the family and ours. To you, so far as a foreigner can perceive, the family is merely a means for nourishing and protecting the child until he is of age to look after himself. As early as may be, you send your boys away to a public school, where they quickly emancipate themselves from the influences of their home. As soon as they are of age, you send them out, as you say, to "make their fortune";