

CHINESE NOVELS,
TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINALS;
TO WHICH ARE ADDED
PROVERBS AND MORAL MAXIMS,
COLLECTED FROM
THEIR CLASSICAL BOOKS AND OTHER SOURCES.
THE WHOLE PREFACED BY
OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF CHINA.

By **JOHN FRANCIS DAVIS, F.R.S.**

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.
1822.

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OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
OF
CHINA.

AMIDST the general progress which has been made by our countrymen in knowledge, their advancement in subjects connected with the Chinese empire, and its literature, has been very inconsiderable. One is at a loss to account for the almost total ignorance, which previous to the embassy of Lord Macartney prevailed in this country, respecting a people with whom we carried on such large dealings, while the French, for nearly a century before,

had been prosecuting their researches with diligence and success. It is not easy to explain this singular listlessness, by saying that the subject was devoid of interest, for whether we consider the extraordinary nature of the government of China, or the no less extraordinary structure of its language, it would seem that it had been necessary only to know that "such things were," in order to produce much industry in their investigation.

Those of our own nation, from whom the first information on these subjects was to have been expected, were, without doubt, the agents employed by us to superintend our affairs in China. Were it under no other consideration than that of policy, that these persons had regarded the literature of that empire as deserving of notice, this consideration alone, when we remember the magnitude of the commercial rela-

tions, which as long ago as the middle of the last century subsisted between the two countries, would seem sufficient to have given it an interest, fully adequate to induce research. But either the fancied, or the real difficulties of the language, or both together, effectually prevented its acquisition; besides which, the Chinese themselves were disposed to throw discouragements in the way. As it was necessary, however, that one of the parties at least should understand sufficient of the language of the other, to facilitate their mutual intercourse, the Chinese were content to acquire as many words of English, as would barely serve the purposes of commerce; and thus by degrees arose that base and disgusting jargon, which still continues to be spoken and understood at Canton. This, which was at first a consequence of our general ignorance of their tongue, is now the great

cause that tends to perpetuate it ; for most persons find it more convenient to avail themselves of such an imperfect and confined medium, than put themselves to the trouble of acquiring the language of the country. The natives themselves hand it down from generation to generation in a printed vocabulary, wherein the sounds of our words are imitated, as nearly as they can contrive it, by their own characters.

Thus it was that little or no addition was made for years to our general stock of information regarding China ; and until the embassy of Lord Macartney, an imperfect translation of a novel was the only specimen of Chinese literature for which we had to thank our own countrymen. That embassy, however, had its full effect in clearing away much of the obscurity which involved the subject, not only immediately, through the personal observations of those

who composed it, but also by its more remote tendency to awaken a general curiosity, and a desire to know something concerning so singular a people. It is to the embassy, perhaps, that we may consider ourselves indebted for that valuable translation of the Penal Code of China, whose author has an undisputed claim to the honour of being the first Englishman, who ever gave to his country a genuine specimen of the most interesting province of Chinese literature.

The first thing needful in our inquiries was to divest the picture of all that false colouring, which had been so plentifully bestowed on it by the Romish missionaries, who for certain good reasons, stated by Sir Geo. Staunton in his elegant preface to the Penal Code, modified their most authentic accounts of China in such a way, as tended rather to mislead, than to inform; and it

remained for the English to give the first correct account of a nation, whom they discovered to be neither perfectly wise, nor perfectly virtuous, but who were occasionally reduced to the necessity of *flogging* integrity into their magistrates, and valour into their generals.

If, however, the particular situation and prejudices of the Jesuits occasioned the information, which they transmitted to Europe, to be on some points both scanty and unfaithful, they must still have their due praise for being the first who told us any thing on the subject. We seem, indeed, to be particularly indebted, for our knowledge of China, to that zeal for spreading Christianity through the world, which has prompted so many to devote their lives to the cause; and it must be allowed, that to men who have such a purpose in view, there is at first sight something peculiarly

encouraging in the character of the Chinese. The bulk of the people have all that ignorance of devoted attachment to old, and that indifference with regard to the introduction of new, religious doctrines, which usually attends a spirit of Polytheism, where the priesthood have little influence.* The general depravation of their moral character may be attributed to their total want of any thing like religious feeling. If it were left to their own choice, they would probably adopt the mere outward forms of Christianity with as much readiness, as the Romans enlisted the German deities among the gods of the Republic; and the rapidity with which the missionaries advanced, as long as they were unmolested by the government (though *they*, of

* In *India*, the Priesthood have the greatest influence, and their jealousy is unbounded.

course, made the total abandonment of old superstitions a *sine quâ non*,) afforded abundant proof of this. At the same time, the acquisition of such blind and ignorant converts could hardly be considered as a gain to the cause of Christianity. When, however, the jealousy of the ruling power was once excited, the 十字教 or “Religion of the Cross,” experienced the same persecution in the Chinese empire, that it had formerly met with in that of Rome, and was prohibited among the unlawful doctrines. There is the following mention of it in the seventh section of the Shing-yu, a book composed by the Emperor Yung-ching for the instruction of the people.

又如西洋教宗天主亦屬不經
因其人通曉曆數故國家用之
“The religion of the Western ocean, which
reverences the Tien-chu, or Lord of Heaven,
also appertains to the number of those

which are not to be found in the ancient books; but as its followers are thoroughly acquainted with astronomical science, the government on that account employs them.” The late unsettled state of the empire has greatly added to the rigour of the prohibitions against introducing Christianity, and it may be questioned whether any success would just now attend a violation of them. Several catholic priests have recently obtained the crown of martyrdom in the interior, and lost their heads in their zeal to make proselytes.

But to return to our subject. One of the most effectual means of gaining an intimate knowledge of China, is by translations from its popular literature, consisting principally of drama and novels. With reference to the former, the writer of this perfectly coincides in opinion with Sir G. Staunton, that “the dramatic works of the

Chinese are certainly less calculated, on the whole, than their novels, to reward the labour of the translator. Too local and national to please as mere compositions, and their minute beauties of style and language necessarily in great measure lost in the translation, the remaining sources of interest are but slender. The dramatic dialogue drily rendered, and unaided by the talents of the actor, can convey, generally speaking, no more than a very imperfect outline of that interesting picture of life and manners, which, in their novels and romances, is filled up in its minutest details."

It was with a similar partiality in favour of the latter species of composition, that the tales, contained in the present volume, were translated. Of the first of these, "The Shadow in the Water," it may be observed, that the principal incident, whence it derives its name, is pretty and natural, and

that, in the conduct of the different persons, there is just what might be expected from human nature, in that particular state of society. Although the circumstance of the hero espousing two wives may certainly appear strange and uncouth to European readers, yet, as is justly observed in the *Quarterly Review*, "in the translations of foreign novels, it is information that is sought, and not a correspondence of feeling." Those very incidents constitute, as objects of curiosity, the chief value of such translations.

The most remarkable circumstance in the second novel, "*The Twin Sisters*," (though there again, the hero espouses two wives,) is the power, which the distributor of public justice seems to possess, of interfering in domestic matters of the first importance. However consistent such a power may be with Chinese notions of policy, it must cer-

tainly appear to us strangely ill calculated to promote the happiness of society.

The third and last tale was translated some years ago, and a very few copies were printed in China, under the title of the "Three dedicated Rooms." It has also made its appearance, in fragments, through the medium of a periodical journal. The translator has always thought that in this, his first effort, he adhered too strictly to the Chinese idiom, and that a less verbal rendering would not only make it more agreeable to the English reader, but also convey far better the spirit of the original. He has therefore subjected it to a complete revision. As a picture of manners and opinions it is fully equal, if not superior, to the two which precede it.

The Tales are succeeded by a collection of Proverbs and Moral Maxims, which were selected, (as the best, with regard either to

originality or point,) from a variety of sources. Judging of these by the European standard, they deserve but little attention in the abstract, and indeed their only claim to notice rests on their intimate connexion with national manners and ways of thinking. They cannot pretend to much novelty as ethical discoveries, for the day has long been passed (if it ever was) when Europe could have looked to the Chinese for instruction in moral science. The most surprising feature of such translations, from the languages of remote nations, consists occasionally in the curious resemblance, as well of the maxims themselves, as of the modes of illustrating them, to what we meet with nearer home; a resemblance which is only to be accounted for, by the identity of human nature every where, as well as the similarity of situation, in which mankind all over the world are placed, in respect to

the motives and consequences of their moral actions.

If it be true, that "the excellence of aphorisms consists, not so much in the expression of some rare or abstruse sentiment, as in the comprehension of some obvious and useful truth in a few words," the language of the Chinese may be considered as admirably fitted for being manufactured into proverbs. It possesses from its peculiar structure a brevity and pointedness of expression, which no degree of care or pains can convey into a Translation, and which those only can feel who understand the original. A great deal of the beauty of a sentence arises often from the selection of the words, or from their mere collocation; and if the influence of such apparent trifles be allowed in a syllabic language, how much more in one which speaks, as the Chinese does, to the eye.