

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 V

THE DISREGARD OF TIME

IT is a maxim of the developed civilisation of our day, that "time is money." The complicated arrangements of modern life are such that a business man in business hours is able to do an amount and variety of business which, in the past century, would have required the expenditure of time indefinitely greater. Steam and electricity have accomplished this change, and it is a change for which the Anglo-Saxon race was prepared beforehand by its constitutional tendencies. Whatever may have been the habits of our ancestors when they had little or nothing to do but to eat, drink, and fight, we find it difficult to imagine a period when our race was not characterised by that impetuous energy which ever drives the individuals of it onward to do something else, as soon as another something is finished.

There is a significant difference in the salutations of the Chinese and of the Anglo-Saxon. The former says to his comrade whom he casually meets, "Have you eaten rice?" The latter asks, "How do you *do*?" Doing is the normal condition of the one, as eating is the normal condition of the other. From that feeling which to us has become a second nature, that time is money, and under ordinary circumstances is to be improved to its final second, the Chinese, like most Orientals, are singularly free. There are only twelve hours in the Chinese day, and the names of these hours do not designate simply the point where one of them gives place to another, but denote as well all the time covered by the twelfth part of a day which each of them connotes. In this way the term "noon", which would seem as definite as any, is employed of the entire period from eleven to one o' clock. "What time is it?" a Chinese inquired in our hearing, "when it is noon by the moon?" Phrased in less ambiguous language, the question which he

intended to propound was this: "What is the time of night when the moon is at the meridian?"

Similar uncertainties pervade almost all the notes of time which occur in the language of everyday life. "Sunrise" and "sunset" are as exact as anything in Chinese can be expected to be, though used with much latitude (and much longitude as well), but "midnight" like "noon" means nothing in particular, and the ordinary division of the night by "watches" is equally vague, with the exception of the last one, which is often associated with the appearance of daylight. Even in the cities the "watches" are of more or less uncertain duration. Of the portable time-pieces which we designate by this name, the Chinese as a people know nothing, and few of those who really own watches govern their movements by them, even if they have the watches cleaned once every few years and ordinarily keep them running, which is not often the case. The common people are quite content to tell their time by the altitude of the sun, which is variously described as one, two, or more "flagstaffs," or if the day is cloudy a general result can be arrived at by observing the contraction and dilatation of the pupil of a cat's eye, and such a result is quite accurate enough for all ordinary purposes.

The Chinese use of time corresponds to the exactness of their measures of its flight. According to the distinction described by Sydney Smith, the world is divided into two classes of persons, the antediluvians and the post-diluvians. Among the latter the discovery has been made that the age of man no longer runs into the centuries which verge on a millennium, and accordingly they study compression, and adaptation to their environment. The antediluvians, on the contrary, cannot be made to realize that the days of Methusaleh have gone by, and they continue to act as if life were still laid out on the patriarchal plan.

Among these "antediluvians" the Chinese are to be reckoned. A good Chinese story-teller, such as are employed in the tea-shops to attract and retain customers, reminds one of Tennyson's "Brook." Men may come and men may go, but *he* goes on "forever ever." The same is true of theatrical exhibitions, which sometimes last for days, though they fade into insignificance in comparison with those of Siam, where we are assured by

those who claim to have survived one of them that they are known to hold for two months together! The feats of Chinese jugglers when well done are exceedingly clever and very amusing, but they have one fatal defect—they are so long drawn out by the prolix and inane conversation of the participants, that long before the jugglers finish, the foreign spectator will have regretted that he ever weakly consented to patronise them. Not less formidable, but rather far more so, are the interminable Chinese feasts, with their almost incredible number and variety of courses, the terror and despair of all foreigners who have experienced them, although to the Chinese these entertainments seem but too short. One of their most pensive sayings observes that “there is no feast in the world which must not break up at last” though to the unhappy barbarian lured into one of these traps this hopeful generality is often lost in despair of the particular.

From his earliest years, the Chinese is thoroughly accustomed to doing everything on the antediluvian plan. When he goes to school, he generally goes for the day, extending to all the period from sunrise to dark, with one or two intermissions for food. Of any other system, neither pupils nor master have ever heard. The examinations for degrees are protracted through several days and nights, with all grades of severity, and while most of the candidates experience much inconvenience from such an irrational course, it would be difficult to convince any of them of its inherent absurdity as a test of intellectual attainments.

The products of the minds of those thus educated are redolent of the processes through which they have passed. The Chinese language itself is essentially antediluvian, and to overtake it requires the lifetime of a Methuselah. It is as just to say of the ancient Chinese as of the ancient Romans, that if they had been obliged to learn their own language they would never have said or written anything worth setting down! Chinese histories are antediluvian, not merely in their attempts to go back to the ragged edge of zero for a point of departure, but in the interminable length of the sluggish and turbid current which bears on its bosom not only the mighty vegetation of past ages, but wood, hay, and stubble past all reckoning. None but a relatively timeless race could either compose or read

such histories; none but the Chinese memory could store them away in its capacious "abdomen."

Chinese disregard of time is manifested in their industry, the quality of intension in which we have already remarked to be very different from that in the work of Anglo-Saxons.

How many of those who have had the pleasure of building a house in China, with Chinese contractors and workmen, thirst to do it again? The men come late and go early. They are perpetually stopping to drink tea. They make long journeys to a distant lime-pit carrying a few quarts of liquid mud in a cloth bag, when by using a wheelbarrow one man could do the work of three; but this result is by no means the one aimed at. If there is a slight rain all work is suspended. There is generally abundant motion with but little progress, so that it is often difficult to perceive what it is which represents the day's "labour" of a gang of men. We have known a foreigner, dissatisfied with the slow progress of his carpenters in lathing, accomplish while they were eating their dinner as much work as all four of them had done in half a day.

The mere task of keeping their tools in repair is for Chinese workmen a serious matter in expenditure of time. If the tools belong to the foreigner, however, there is no embarrassment on this score. They are broken mysteriously, and yet no one has touched them. *Non est inventus* is the appropriate motto for them all. Poles and small rafters are pitched over the wall, and all the neighbourhood loins appear to be girded with the rope which was purchased for supporting the staging. During the entire progress of the work, each day is a crisis. All previous experience goes for nothing. The sand, the lime, the earth of this place will not do for any of the uses for which sand, lime, and earth are in general supposed to be adapted. The foreigner is helpless. He is aptly represented by Gulliver held down by threads, which, taken together, are too much for him. Permanently have we enshrined in our memory a Cantonese contractor, whose promises, like his money, vanished in smoke, for he was unfortunately a victim of the opium pipe. At last, forbearance having ceased to be a virtue, he was confronted with a formidable bill of particulars of the things wherein he had come

short. "You were told the size of the glass. You measured the windows three several times. Every one of those you have made is wrong, and they are useless. Not one of your doors is properly put together. There is not an ounce of glue about them. The flooring- boards are short in length, short in number, full of knot-holes, and wholly unseasoned." After the speaker had proceeded in this way for some time, the mild-mannered Cantonese gazed at him sadly, and when he brought himself to speak he remarked, in a tone of gentle remonstrance: "Don't say dat! Don't say dat! *No gentleman talk like dat!*"

To the Chinese the chronic impatience of the Anglo-Saxon is not only unaccountable, but quite unreasonable. It has been wisely suggested that they consider this trait in our character as objectionable as we do their lack of sincerity.

In any case, appreciation of the importance of celerity and promptness is difficult to cultivate in a Chinese. We have known a bag full of foreign mail detained for some days between two cities twelve miles apart, because the carrier's donkey was ailing and needed rest! The administration of the Chinese telegraph system is frequently a mere travesty of what it might be and ought to be.

But in no circumstances is Chinese indifference to the lapse of time more annoying to a foreigner than when the occasion is a mere social call. Such calls in Western lands are recognised as having certain limits, beyond which they must not be protracted. In China, however, there are no limits. As long as the host does not offer his guest accommodations for the night, the guest must keep on talking, though he be expiring with fatigue. In calling on foreigners the Chinese can by no possibility realise that there is an element of time, which is precious. They will sit by the hour together, offering few or no observations of their own, and by no means offering to depart. The excellent pastor who had for his motto the saying, "The man who wants to see me is the man I want to see," would have modified this dictum materially had he lived for any length of time in China. After a certain experience of this sort, he would not improbably have followed the example of another busy clergyman, who hung conspicuously in his study

the scriptural motto, "The Lord bless *thy goings out*!" The mere enunciation of his business often seems to cost a Chinese a mental wrench of a violent character. For a long time he says nothing, and he can endure this for a period of time sufficient to wear out the patience of ten Europeans. Then when he begins to speak, he realises the truth of the adage which declares that "it is easy to go on the mountains to fight tigers, but to open your mouth and out with a thing this is hard!" Happy is the foreigner situated like the late lamented Dr. Mackenzie, who, finding that his incessant relays of Chinese guests, the friends "who come but never go," were squandering the time which belonged to his hospital work, was wont to say to them, "Sit down and make yourselves at home; I have urgent business, and must be excused." And yet more happy would he be if he were able to imitate the naive terseness of a student of Chinese who, having learned a few phrases, desired to experiment with them on the teacher, and who accordingly filled him with stupefaction by remarking at the end of a lesson, "Open the door! Go!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE TALENT FOR INDIRECTION

ONE of the intellectual habits upon which we Anglo-Saxons pride ourselves most is that of going directly to the marrow of a subject, and when we have reached it saying exactly what we mean. Considerable abatements must no doubt be made in any claim set up for such a habit, when we consider the usages of polite society and those of diplomacy, yet it still remains substantially true that the instinct of rectilinearity is the governing one, albeit considerably modified by special circumstances. No very long acquaintance is required with any Asiatic race, however, to satisfy us that their instincts and ours are by no means the same—in fact, that they are at opposite poles. We shall lay no stress upon the redundancy of honorific terms in all Asiatic languages, some of which in this respect are indefinitely more elaborate than the Chinese. Neither do we emphasise the use of circumlocutions, periphrases, and what may be termed aliases, to express ideas which are perfectly simple, but which no one wishes to express with simplicity. Thus a great variety of terms may be used in Chinese to indicate that a person has died, and not one of the expressions is guilty of the brutality of saying so; nor does the periphrasis depend for its use upon the question whether the person to whom reference is made is an emperor or a coolie, however widely the terms employed may differ in the two cases. Nor are we at present concerned, except in a very general way, with the quality of veracity of language. When every one agrees to use words in “a Pickwickian sense,” and every one understands that every one else is doing so, the questions resulting are not those of veracity but of method.

No extended experience of the Chinese is required to enable a foreigner to arrive at the conclusion that it is impossible, from merely hearing what a Chinese says, to tell what he means. This continues to be true, no matter

how proficient one may have become in the colloquial—so that he perhaps understands every phrase, and might possibly, if worst came to worst, write down every character which he has heard in a given sentence; and yet he might be unable to decide exactly what the speaker had in mind. The reason of this must of course be that the speaker did not express what he had in mind, but something else more or less cognate to it, from which he wished his meaning or a part of it to be inferred.

Next to a competent knowledge of the Chinese language, large powers of inference are essential to any one who is to deal successfully with the Chinese, and whatever his powers in this direction may be, in many instances he will still go astray, because these powers were not equal to what was required of them. In illustration of this all-pervading phenomenon of Chinese life, let us take as an illustration a case often occurring among those who are the earliest, and often by no means the least important, representatives to us of the whole nation—our servants. One morning the “Boy” puts in an appearance with his usual expressionless visage, merely to mention that one of his “aunts” is ailing, and that he shall be obliged to forego the privilege of doing our work for a few days while he is absent prosecuting his inquiries as to her condition. Now it does not with certainty follow from such a request as this that the “Boy” has no aunt, that she is not sick, and that he has not some more or less remote idea of going to see about her, but it is, to put it mildly, much more probable that the “Boy” and the cook have had some misunderstanding, and that as the prestige of the latter happened in this case to be the greater of the two, his rival takes this oblique method of intimating that he recognises the facts of the case, and retires to give place to another.

The individual who has done you a favour, for which it was impossible to arrange at the time a money payment, politely but firmly declines the gratuity which you think it right to send him in token of your obligation. What he says is that it would violate all the Five Constant Virtues for him to accept anything of you for such an insignificant service, and that you wrong him by offering it, and would disgrace him by insisting on his acceptance of it. What does this mean? It means that his hopes of what you would give

him were blighted by the smallness of the amount, and that, like Oliver Twist, he "wants more." And yet it may not mean this after all, but may be an intimation that you do now, or will at some future time, have it in your power to give him something which will be even more desirable, to the acquisition of which the present payment would be a bar, so that he prefers to leave it an open question till such time as his own best move is obvious.

If the Chinese are thus guarded when they speak of their own interests, it follows from the universal dread of giving offence that they will be more cautious about speaking of others, when there is a possibility of trouble arising in consequence. Fond as they are of gossip and all kinds of small-talk, the Chinese distinguish with a ready intuition cases in which it will not do to be too communicative, and under these circumstances, especially where foreigners are concerned, they are the grave of whatever they happen to know. In multitudes of instances the stolid-looking people by whom we are surrounded could give us "points," the possession of which would cause a considerable change in our conduct towards others. But unless they clearly see in what way they are to be benefited by the result, and protected against the risks, the instinct of reticence will prevail, and our friends will maintain an agnostic silence.

Nothing is more amusing than to watch the demeanour of a Chinese who has made up his mind that it is best for him to give an intimation of something unfavourable to some one else. Things must have gone very far indeed when, even under these conditions, the communication is made in plain and unmistakable terms. What is far more likely to occur is the indirect suggestion, by oblique and devious routes, of a something which cannot, which *must* not be told. Our informant glances uneasily about as though he feared a spy in ambush. He lowers his voice to a mysterious whisper. He holds up three fingers of one hand, to shadow dimly forth the notion that the person about whom he is not speaking, but gesturing, is the third in the family. He makes vague introductory remarks, leading up to a revelation of apparent importance, and just as he gets to the climax of the case he suddenly stops short, suppresses the predicate upon which everything depends, nods significantly, as much as to say, "Now you see it, do you

not?" when all the while the poor unenlightened foreigner has seen nothing, except that there is nothing whatever to see. Nor will it be strange if, after working things up to this pitch, your "informant" (falsely so called) leaves you as much in the dark as he found you, intimating that at some other time you will perceive that he is right!

It is a trait which the Chinese share with the rest of the race, to wish to keep back bad news as long as possible, and to communicate it in a disguised shape. But "good form" among Chinese requires this deception to be carried to an extent which certainly seems to us at once surprising and futile. We have known a fond grandmother, having come unexpectedly upon the whispered consultation of two friends, who had arrived expressly to break to her the news of the sad death of a grandchild away from home, to be assured with the emphasis of iteration that they were only discussing a bit of gossip, though within half an hour the whole truth came out. We have known a son, returning to his home after an absence of several months, advised by a friend in the last village at which he called before reaching his home *not* to stay and see a theatrical exhibition, from which he inferred, and rightly, that his mother was dead! We once had a Chinese letter entrusted to us for transmission to a person at a great distance from home, the contents of the missive being to the effect that during his absence the man's wife had died suddenly, and that the neighbours, finding that no one was at hand to prevent it, had helped themselves to every article in the house, which was literally left unto him desolate. Yet on the exterior of this epistle were inscribed in huge characters the not too accurate words, "A peaceful family letter"!

The Chinese talent for indirection is often exhibited in refraining from the use of numerals where they might reasonably be expected. Thus the five volumes of a book will be labelled Benevolence, Justice, Propriety, Wisdom, Confidence, because this is the invariable order in which the Five Constant Virtues are named. The two score or more volumes of K'ang Hsi's Dictionary are often distinguished, not, as we should anticipate, by the radicals which indicate their contents but by the twelve "time-cycle characters." At examinations students occupy cells designated by the thousand successive characters of the millenary classic, which has no

duplicates.

Another illustration of this subject is found in the oblique terms in which references are made, both by members of her family and others, to married women. Such a woman literally has no name, but only two surnames, her husband's and that of her mother's family. She is spoken of as "the mother of so-and-so." Thus a Chinese with whom you are acquainted, talks of the illness of "the Little Black One his mother." Perhaps you never heard in any way that he had a "Little Black One" in his household, but he takes it for granted that you must know it. If, however, there are no children, then the matter is more embarrassing. Perhaps the woman is called the "Aunt" of a "Little Black One," or by some other periphrasis. Elderly married women have no hesitation in speaking of their "Outside," meaning the one who has the care of things out of the house; but a young married woman not blessed with children is sometimes put to hard straits in the attempt to refer to her husband without intimating the connection in words. Sometimes she calls him her "Teacher," and in one case of which we have heard she was driven to the desperate expedient of dubbing her husband by the name of his business—"Oilmill says thus and so!"

A celebrated Chinese general, on his way to the war, bowed low to some frogs in a marsh which he passed, wishing his soldiers to understand that valour like that of these reptiles is admirable. To an average Occidental it might appear that this general demanded of his troop somewhat "large powers of inference," but not greater, perhaps, than will be called for by the foreigner whose lot is cast in China. About the time of a Chinese New-Year when the annual debt-paying season had arrived, an acquaintance, upon meeting the writer, made certain gestures which seemed to have a deep significance. He pointed his finger at the sky, then at the ground, then at the person whom he was addressing, and last at himself, all without speaking a word. There was certainly no excuse for misapprehending this proposition, though we are ashamed to say that we failed to take it in at its full value. He thought that there would be no difficulty in one's inferring from his pantomime that he wished to borrow a little money, and that he wished to do it so secretly that only "Heaven," "Earth," "You," and "I" would know! The

phrase “eating [gluttony], drinking [of wine], lust, and gambling” denotes the four most common vices, to which is now added opium smoking. A speaker sometimes holds up the fingers of one hand and remarks, “He absorbed them all,” meaning that some one was guilty in all these ways.

It is an example of the Chinese talent for indirection, that owing to their complex ceremonial code one is able to show great disrespect for another by methods which to us seem preposterously oblique. The manner of folding a letter, for example, may embody a studied affront. The omission to raise a Chinese character above the line of other characters may be a greater indignity than it would be in English to spell the name of a person without capital letters. In social intercourse rudeness may be offered without the utterance of a word to which exception could be taken, as by not meeting an entering guest at the proper point, or by neglecting to escort him the distance suited to his condition. The omission of any one of a multitude of simple acts may convey a thinly disguised insult, instantly recognised as such by a Chinese, though the poor untutored foreigner has been thus victimised times without number, and never even knew that he had not been treated with distinguished respect! All Chinese revile one another when angry, but those whose literary talents are adequate to the task delight to convey an abusive meaning by such delicate innuendo that the real meaning may for the time quite escape observation, requiring to be digested like the nauseous core of a sugar-coated pill. Thus, the phrase *tung-hsi*—literally “east-west” means a thing, and to call a person “a thing” is abusive. But the same idea is conveyed by indirection, by saying that one is *not* “north-south,” which implies that he *is* “east-west,” that is, “a thing”!

Every one must have been struck by the wonderful fertility of even the most illiterate Chinese in the impromptu invention of plausible excuses, each one of which is in warp and woof fictitious. No one but a foreigner ever thinks of taking them seriously, or as any other than suitable devices by which to keep one’s “face.” And even the too critical foreigner requires no common ability to pursue, now in air, now in water, and now in the mud, those to whom most rigid economy of the truth has become a fixed habit. And when driven to close quarters, the most ignorant Chinese has one firm

and sure defense which never fails, he can fall back on his ignorance in full assurance of escape. He “did not know,” he “did not understand,” twin propositions, which, like charity, cover a multitude of sins.

No more fruitful illustration of our theme could be found than that exhibited in the daily issues of the *Peking Gazette*. Nowhere is the habit of what, in classical language, is styled “pointing at a deer and calling it a horse” carried to a higher pitch, and conducted on a more generous scale. Nowhere is it more true, even in China, that “things are not what they seem,” than in this marvellous lens, which, semi-opaque though it be, lets in more light on the real nature of the Chinese government than all other windows combined. If it is a general truth that a Chinese would be more likely than not to give some other than the real reason for anything, and that nothing requires more skill than to guess what is meant by what is said, this nowhere finds more perfect exemplification than in Chinese official life, where formality and artificiality are at their maximum. When a whole column of the “leading journal” of China is taken up with a description of the various aches and pains of some aged mandarin who hungers and thirsts to retire from His Majesty’s service, what does it all mean? When his urgent prayer to be relieved is refused, and he is told to go back to his post at once, what does that mean? What do the long memorials reporting as to matters of fact really connote? When a high official accused of some flagrant crime is ascertained—as per memorial printed—to be innocent, but guilty of something else three shades less blame-worthy, does it mean that the writer of the memorial was not influenced to a sufficient extent, or has the official in question really done those particular things? Who can decide?

Firmly are we persuaded that the individual who can peruse a copy of the *Peking Gazette* and, while reading each document, can form an approximately correct notion as to what is really behind it, knows more of China than can be learned from all the works on this Empire that ever were written. But is there no reason to fear that by the time any outside barbarian shall have reached such a pitch of comprehension of China as this implies, we shall be as much at a loss to know what *he* meant by what *he* said, as if he were really Chinese?

CHAPTER XIV

CONSERVATISM

IT is true of the Chinese, to a greater degree than of any other nation in history, that their Golden Age is in the past. The sages of antiquity themselves spoke with the deepest reverence of more ancient "ancients." Confucius declared that he was not an originator, but a transmitter. It was his mission to gather up what had once been known, but long neglected or misunderstood. It was his painstaking fidelity in accomplishing this task, as well as the high ability which he brought to it, that gave the Master his extraordinary hold upon the people of his race. It is his relation to the past, as much as the quality of what he taught, that constitutes the claim of Confucius to the front rank of holy men. It is the Confucian theory of morals that a good ruler will make a good people. The prince is the dish, the people are the water; if the dish is round, the water is round, if the dish is square, the water will be square also. Upon this theory, it is not strange that all the virtues are believed to have flourished in the days when model rulers existed. The most ignorant coolie will upon occasion remind us that in the days of "Yao and Shun" there was no necessity for closing the doors at night, for there were no thieves; and that if an article was lost on the highway it was the duty of the first comer to stand as a nominal guard over it until the next one happened along, who took his turn until the owner arrived, who always found his property perfectly intact. It is a common saying that the present is inferior to the past in the items of benevolence and justice; but that in violations of conscience the past cannot compete with the present.

This tendency to depreciate the present time is by no means confined to China or to the Chinese, but is found with impartiality all over the earth; yet in the Celestial Empire it seems to have attained a sincerity of conviction

not elsewhere equalled. All that is best in the ancient days is believed to have survived in the *literature* to which the present day is the heir, and it is for this reason that this literature is regarded with such unmixed idolatry. The orthodox Chinese view of the Chinese Classics appears to be much the same as the orthodox Christian view in regard to the Hebrew Scriptures; they are supposed to contain all that is highest and best of the wisdom of the past, and to contain all that is equally adapted to the present time and to the days of old. That anything is needed to supplement the Chinese Classics is no more believed by a good Confucianist, than it is believed by a good Christian that supplementary additions to the Bible are desirable or to be expected. Both Christians and Confucianists agree in the general proposition that when a thing is as good as it can be, it is idle to try to make it any better.

Just as many good Christians make some Bible "text" a pretext for something which the biblical writers never had in mind, so Confucian scholars are upon occasion able to find in "the old masters" not only authority for all the modern proceedings of the government, but the real roots of ancient mathematics, and even of modern science.

The literature of antiquity is that which has molded the Chinese nation, and has brought about a system of government which, whatever its other qualities, has been proved to possess that of persistence. Since self-preservation is the first law of nations as of individuals, it is not singular that a form of rule which an experience of unmatched duration has shown to be so well adapted to its end should have come to be regarded with a reverence akin to that felt for the Classics. It would be a curious discovery if some learned student of Chinese history should succeed in ascertaining and explaining the processes by which the Chinese government came to be what it is. If ever those processes should be discovered, we think it certain that it will then be clearly seen why there have been in China so few of those interior revolutions to which all other peoples have been subject. There is a story of a man who built a stone wall six feet wide and only four feet high, and on being asked his reasons for so singular a proceeding, he replied that it was his purpose that when the wall blew over, it should be higher than it was before! The Chinese government is by no means incapable of being

blown over, but it is a cube, and when it capsizes, it simply falls upon some other face, and to external appearance, as well as to interior substance, is the same that it has always been. Repeated experience of this process has taught the Chinese that this result is as certain as that a cat will fall upon its feet, and the conviction is accompanied by a most implicit faith in the divine wisdom of those who planned and built so wisely and so well. To suggest improvements would be the rankest heresy. Hence it has come about that the unquestioned superiority of the ancients rests upon the firm basis of the recognised inferiority of those who come after them.

With these considerations clearly in mind, it is not difficult to perceive the *rationale* of what seems at first the blind and obstinate adherence of the Chinese to the ways of the past. To the Chinese, as to the ancient Romans, manners and morals are interchangeable ideas, for they have the same root and are in their essence identical. To the Chinese an invasion of their customs is an invasion of the regions which are most sacred. It is not necessary for this effect that the customs should be apprehended in their ultimate relations, or indeed, strictly speaking, apprehended at all. They are resolutely defended by an instinct similar to that which leads a she-bear to protect her cubs. This is not a Chinese instinct merely, but it belongs to human nature. It has been profoundly remarked that millions of men are ready to die for a faith which they do not comprehend, and by the tenets of which they do not regulate their lives.

Chinese customs, like the Chinese language, have become established in some way to us unknown. Customs, like human speech, once established resist change. But the conditions under which Chinese customs and language crystallised into shape are in no two places exactly the same. Hence we have those perplexing variations of usage indicated in the common proverb that customs differ every ten miles. Hence, too, we have the bewildering dialects. When once the custom or the dialect has become fixed, it resembles plaster-of-Paris which has set, and while it may be broken, it cannot be changed. This, at least, is the theory, but, like other theories, it must be made sufficiently elastic to suit the facts, which are that no mere custom is necessarily immortal, and, given certain conditions, a change can be

effected.

No better illustration of this truth could be given than one drawn from the experience of the present dynasty in introducing an entirely new style of tonsure among their Chinese subjects. It was inevitable that such a conspicuous and tangible mark of subjection should have been bitterly resisted, even to the death, by great numbers of the Chinese. But the Manchus showed how well they were fitted for the high task which they had undertaken, by their persistent adherence to the requirement, compliance with which was made at once a sign and a test of loyalty. The result is what we see. The Chinese people are now more proud of their cues than of any other characteristic of their dress, and the rancorous hostility to the edict of the Manchus survives only in the turbans of the natives of the provinces of Canton and Fukien, coverings once adopted to hide the national disgrace.

The introduction of the Buddhist religion into China was accomplished only at the expense of warfare of the most determined character; but once thoroughly rooted, it appears as much like a native as Taoism, and not less difficult to supplant.

The genesis of Chinese customs being what it is, it is easy to perceive that it is the underlying assumption that whatever is is right. Thus a long-established usage is a tyranny. Of the countless individuals who conform to the custom, not one is at all concerned with the origin or the reason of the acts. His business is to conform, and he conforms. The degree of religious faith in different parts of the Empire doubtless differs widely, but nothing can be more certain than that all the rites of the "three religions" are performed by millions who are as destitute of anything which ought to be called faith, as they are of an acquaintance with Egyptian hieroglyphics. To any inquiry as to the reason for any particular act of religious routine, nothing is more common than to receive two answers: the first, that the whole business of communication with the gods has been handed down from the ancients, and must therefore be on the firmest possible basis; the second, that "everybody" does so, and therefore the person in question *must* conform. In China the machinery moves the cogs, and not the cogs the machinery. While this continues to be always and everywhere true, it is also

true that the merest shell of conformity is all that is demanded.

It is a custom in Mongolia for every one who can afford it to use snuff, and to offer it to his friends. Every one is provided with a little snuff-box, which he produces whenever he encounters a friend. If the person with the snuff-box happens to be out of snuff, that does not prevent the passing of the snuff-box, of which each guest takes a deliberate, though an imaginary pinch, and returns the box to its owner. To seem to notice that the box is empty would not be "good form," but by compliance with the proper usages the "face" of the host is saved, and all is according to well-settled precedent. In many important particulars it is not otherwise with the Chinese. The life may have long departed, but there remains the coral reef, the avenues to which, in order to avoid ship-wreck, must be diligently respected.

The fixed resolution to do certain acts in certain ways, and in no other, is not peculiar to China. The coolies in India habitually carried burdens upon their heads, and applied the same principle to the removal of earth for railways. When the contractors substituted wheelbarrows, the coolies merely transferred the barrows to the tops of their skulls. The coolies in Brazil carry burdens in the same way as those of India. A foreign gentleman in the former country gave a servant a letter to be posted, and was surprised to see him put the letter on his head and weight it with a stone to keep it in place. The exact similarity of mental processes reveals a similarity of cause, and it is a cause very potent in Chinese affairs. It leads to those multiplied instances of imitativeness with which we are all so familiar, as when the cook breaks an egg and throws it away each time that he makes a pudding, because on the first occasion when he was shown how to make a pudding an egg happened to be bad; or when the tailor puts a patch on a new garment because an old one given him as a measure chanced to be thus decorated. Stories of this sort are doubtless often meant as harmless exaggerations of a Chinese characteristic, but they represent the reality with great fidelity.

Every one acquainted with Chinese habits will be able to adduce instances of a devotion to precedent which seems to us unaccountable, and which really is so until we apprehend the postulate which underlies the act. In a country which stretches through some twenty-five degrees of latitude,

but in which winter furs are taken off and straw hats are put on according to a fixed rule for the whole Empire, it would be strange if precedent were not a kind of divinity. In regions where the only heat in the houses during the cold winter comes from the scanty fire under the "stove-bed," or *k'ang*, it is not uncommon for travellers who have been caught in a sudden "cold snap" to find that no arguments can induce the landlord of the inn to heat the *k'ang*, because the season for heating it has not arrived!

The reluctance of Chinese artificers to adopt new methods is sufficiently well known to all, but perhaps few even of these conservatives are more conservative than the head of the company of workmen employed to burn bricks in a kiln which, with all that appertained thereto, was the property of foreigners and not of those who worked it. As there was occasion to use a kind of square bricks larger than those which happened to be in fashion in that region, the foreigner ordered larger ones to be made. All that was necessary for this purpose was simply the preparation of a wooden tray, the size of the required brick, to be used as a mould. When the bricks were wanted they were not forthcoming, and the foreman, to whom the orders had been given, being called to account for his neglect, refused to be a party to any such innovation, adducing as his all-sufficient reason the affirmation that *under the whole heavens there is no such mould as this!*

The bearing of the subject of conservatism upon the relation of foreigners to China and the Chinese is not likely to be lost sight of for a moment by any one whose lot is cast in China, and who has the smallest interest in the future welfare of this mighty Empire. The last quarter of the nineteenth century seems destined to be a critical period in Chinese history. A great deal of very new wine is offered to the Chinese, who have no other provision for its reception than a varied assortment of very old wine-skins. Thanks to the instinctive conservatism of the Chinese nature, very little of the new wine has thus far been accepted, and, for that little, new bottles are in course of preparation.

The present attitude of China towards the lands of the West is an attitude of procrastination. There is on the one hand small desire for that which is new, and upon the other no desire at all, or even willingness, to

give up the old. As we see ancient mud huts, that ought long ago to have reverted to their native earth, shored up with clumsy mud pillars which but postpone the inevitable fall, so we behold old customs, old superstitions, and old faiths now outworn, propped up and made to do the same duty as heretofore. "If the old does not go, the new does not come," we are told, and not without truth. The process of change from the one to the other may long be resisted, and may then come about suddenly.

At a time when it was first proposed to introduce telegraphs, the Governor-General of a maritime province reported to the Emperor that the hostility of the people to the innovation was so great that the wires could not be put up. But when war with France was imminent, and the construction of the line was placed upon an entirely different basis, the provincial authorities promptly set up the telegraph posts, and saw that they were respected.

Not many years ago the superstition *fêng-shui* was believed by many to be an almost insuperable obstacle to the introduction of railways in China. The very first short line, constructed as an outlet for the K'ai-p'ing coal mine, passed through a large Chinese cemetery, the graves being removed to make way for it, as they would have been in England or in France. A single inspection of that bisected graveyard was sufficient to produce the conviction that *fêng-shui* could never stand before an engine, when the issue is narrowed down to a trial of strength between "wind-water" and steam. The experience gained in the subsequent extension of this initial line shows clearly that however financial considerations may delay the introduction of railways, geomantic superstitions are for this purpose quite inert.

The union of the conservative instinct with the capacity for invasion of precedents is visible in important Chinese affairs. In China no principle is better settled than that, when one of his parents dies, an official must retire from office. Yet against his repeated and "tearful" remonstrance, the most powerful subject in the Empire was commanded by the Throne to continue his attention to the intricate details of the most important plexus of duties to be found in the Empire, through all the years of what should have been mourning retirement after the death of his mother. No principle would seem to be more firmly established in China than that a father is the superior of

his son, who must always do him reverence. Equally well established is the principle that the Emperor is superior to all his subjects, who must always do *him* reverence. When, therefore, as at the last change of rulers, it happens that from a collateral line is adopted a young Emperor whose father is still living, it would appear to be inevitable that the father must either commit suicide, or go into a permanent retirement. Such, it was supposed when Kuang Hsû ascended the throne, would actually be the end of Prince Ch'un. Yet during the illness of the latter, his son, the Emperor, made repeated calls upon his subordinate-superior, the father; and some *modus vivendi* was arrived at, since this same father until his death held important offices under his son.

As already remarked, the conservative instinct leads the Chinese to attach undue importance to precedent. But rightly understood and cautiously used, this is a great safeguard for foreigners in their dealings with so sensitive, so obstinate, and so conservative a people. It is only necessary to imitate the Chinese method, to take things for granted, to *assume* the existence of rights which have not been expressly withheld, to defend them warily when they are assailed, *and by all means to hold on*. Thus, as in the case of the right of foreign residence in Peking, the right of foreign residence in the interior, and in many others, wise conservatism is the safest defence. The threatening reef which seemed so insuperable a barrier to navigation, once penetrated, offers upon the inner side a lagoon of peace and tranquillity, safe from the storms and breakers which vainly beat against it.