

China: Past and Present

The Rev. John Ross

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It may be interesting to note some changes which have taken place in China within recent years affecting her commercial relations with western nations. In the port of Newchwang, with which I am more familiarly acquainted, there were fifteen years ago four wholesale houses, three British, one American, through which large business was being done. There is now not one. That business has passed entirely into the hands of the Chinese who deal directly with Shanghai, but the volume of business in British and American goods, chiefly cotton stuffs, is greatly increased. In Shanghai it was stated that this great and flourishing port had passed through a similar experience, western merchants being mainly shipping and commission agents for the Chinese. The telegraph, which a few years ago seemed a thing which China would never utilise, now stretches from Canton to Siberia. A few years ago there was a constant outcry against the stupid conservatism of the Chinese which clung so tenaciously to the clumsy and unsafe junk and refused to own a single steamer. The Chinese now own and utilise so large a fleet of steamers that the outcry is against the threatened absorption by them of most if not all the best trade. The very eagerness of speculators to secure concessions for railways has doubtless postponed the laying of long lines of rails, but their day is also fast approaching. By a misunderstanding, a short railway was established between Shanghai and Woosung, much to the chagrin of Chinese officials, though much patronised by the Chinese people. Opposition to it became so unpleasant that it was agreed to sell the railway and plant to the Chinese government, on condition that trains should be run as formerly for a full year. This was done, and on the completion of the year every rail was torn up, and, with the railway plant, sent over to Formosa, where the valuable material is probably at this moment rusting away in the open air. Recently, however, the Viceroy of Chihli laid a short line of rails by which to transport coal from mines worked in European fashion to Tientsin. So useful did that line prove, that it has been extended, so that Tientsin is now in railway communication with the seaside, and the trains are crowded each way by Chinese passengers. If the proposed Russian line is extended through Siberia to touch the northern edge of Manchuria, the Chinese will, in self-defence, be compelled to build one uniting the capital with northern Manchuria. That railways all over the country. would be successful, cannot be questioned by anyone knowing the enterprise and energy of the Chinese, while they would produce great wealth in making accessible the unlimited stores of good coal and rich iron spread over all China and Manchuria, and be extremely useful in transporting grain to localities threatened with famine.

On one occasion there was a rising under the Dutch against Chinese coolie emigrants and some of these were slain. The Dutch were in a state of anxiety lest the Chinese authorities should retaliate upon them in China proper. They

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therefore apologised for the murders. But the emperor, instead of manifesting any anger, stated

that those who had left their own country deserved no better fate. We find now the Chinese Government sending a commission to enquire into the condition of Chinese emigrants both in Asia and America. And they refuse to ratify a treaty drawn up by the United States, which was intended to shut out the Chinaman from America.

Not many years have elapsed since ambassadors from the west were publicly notified in China as "Tribute-bearers." Now we see Chinese embassies acknowledging the equality of European nations, in the principal capitals of Europe, whose presence will unquestionably influence European politics which are constantly gravitating eastwards.

The swaggering and bluster characteristic of Chinese treatment, till very recently, of western ambassadors cannot be accounted for by their assumptions of superiority. Loud defiance is rarely the sign of a consciousness of strength, and real bravery is accompanied almost invariably by unassuming quietness of manner. Demonstrative braggadocio is usually resorted to in order to hide a sense of weakness. Hence we must look elsewhere for the key to the solution of Chinese conduct in the past. This we find in Fear. The Chinese Government has always been afraid of the unknown barbarians of the west; and as these were reckoned nothing but barbarians, astute Chinese officials believed that an aspect of disdain and assumed contempt might overawe them. It was from fear that Europeans were confined for centuries to Canton. War was required to open up other ports. When these were increased in number it was by another war. And it was a panic caused by threatened war which made accessible to western shipping the ports opened a few years ago. This conduct becomes intelligible when we understand that Chinese policy demanded the fewest possible points of contact with Europeans in order to minimise the danger of conflict.

The governmental opposition to the introduction of railways can be explained only in this manner; for both officials and people are well aware of the many advantages which railways would confer upon the whole country. But, as long as the apprehension exists that the making of railways would be but paving the way for foreign armies to take easy possession of Chinese territory, we need not be surprised if the "iron horse" makes little progress in the land. Let this fear of foreign aggression, of foreign armies overrunning China be removed, let the ruling powers become convinced that they are fully able to defend their own country against any foreign attack, we shall hear no more of imperial opposition to the use of railways, nor should there be further serious obstacles in the way of opening up the country to foreign activity.

The Chinese have attained the initial stages of this confidence. The late French war taught them that Europeans are not invincible. They have armies fairly well drilled after European fashion, and a rapidly increasing fleet of small and well-armed warships. All the raw material of a powerful warlike nation the Chinese possess in abundance. Than their people no nation owns better stuff for soldiers, endurance and obedience being their commonest qualities. They lack officers, and, if they only had officers to lead, they have men who will go anywhere, and face any danger, as recent campaigns testify. Their numbers are inexhaustible, and their resources really great.

The actual public resources of the empire are not now under the free control of the Central Government, which is weak on account of the practically autonomous government in the provinces. The telegraph has already done a good deal towards strengthening the Central Government; railways will do the rest. Provincial governors have no great love for the telegraph, and they will doubtless manifest no eagerness in pushing on railways, for every step in the way

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of strengthening the Central Government means the loss of some power on the part of the provincial official. All that is needed to make China one of the most formidable powers in the world is a strong will at the helm of affairs who will compel the unwilling obedience of the provincial satraps.

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