

RESPONSIBILITY AMONG THE CHINESE.



THE recent war between China and Japan has proved many things beyond all question, and among them the almost complete absence of anything like a national spirit among the mass of

the Chinese people, or even among the soldiery. So strikingly has this strange lack been brought out, especially in contrast with the intensity and solidarity of its presence among the Japanese, that one wonders how such a vast body of apparently non-national people can be held together by the handful of Manchu nobles whose forefathers conquered China proper two hundred and more years ago. We do not need to go far afield for some of the reasons. Perhaps the two most apparent causes at work are the mutual suspicions and jealousies of the leading Chinese officials, and their consequent inability to combine, much less to unite; and the stolid indifference of all classes, except the so-called literati, as to whom it is that governs, so long as taxes and interference are not beyond all endurance. But there is one principle which is quite as effective in keeping this mass of human beings in subjection to the powers that be—the principle that everybody is responsible, not only for his own acts, but also for the acts of somebody else.

The question, «Am I my brother's keeper?» is never asked by a Chinese, for the simple reason that an affirmative answer is so emphatically taken for granted that it would not occur to him to doubt it.

I can best illustrate the universality of this principle among the Chinese by giving examples that came under my personal observation, or within my personal hearing, while residing and traveling in the northern part of China during the greater part of two years.

My first trip was taken from Tientsin, the head of steam navigation on the Peiho River, over to Taiyuenfu, the capital of the province of Shansi, a distance of perhaps six hundred miles. The first stage was made by what are called house-boats, up small streams and canals from Tientsin, the great business city of the province of Chihli, to Paotingfu, the capital of the same province.

Traveling by these house-boats is by far

the most comfortable means of getting about in the interior of China wherever steamers cannot take you, provided, of course, you are not in any special hurry. If one gets tired of reading or writing, or watching the monotonous banks, there is nearly always a chance to leave the boat, clamber up the bank, and take a walk along the towpath. Then, too, stops are not infrequent, and afford opportunities for quiet strolls—quiet, I mean, provided one be like the philosopher who declared he was never so much alone as when in a crowd; for it matters very little how solitary the region seems to be, you are sure to be followed by from one to a dozen or more interested Chinese who appear to be going your way, or else have a sudden call to follow at sight of the foreign devil. The fact that there were so many men apparently without anything to do, together with the wholly wrong and exaggerated notion that nearly every Chinese would steal if he had a good chance, at first made me very averse to leaving my boat—at least, until I had gathered everything of value that could easily be carried off, and had placed it under lock and key. Our escort, a resident of China for many years, happened to learn of this fear on my part by my asking him to wait, before going to walk, until I had locked up my things.

«Lock up your things!» exclaimed he, as a quiet smile played about his mouth. «Why, man, you need not take that trouble. Leave your things just where they are; nothing will be touched. Every hand on board knows that the head boatman is responsible, not only for our personal safety and deliverance at the end of the boat line, but for everything that belongs to us also, be it never so trifling; and that he in turn will hold each boatman responsible for any loss while he is on the boat. Moreover, this head boatman not only knows that he is thus responsible, but, what is more to the point, that *I* know he is responsible.»

«But,» said I, «suppose the head boatman does prove false, what could you do?»

«Well,» replied Mr. X., «back of him are the owners of the line of boats from which I hired these with us; they would be held responsible; and ultimately, back of the owners is the head official of the place where they live. Thus each official is responsible for

all below him, so that if anything is stolen or goes wrong, I can always look to some one to pay for it, make it good, or suffer, no matter how far, to our American ideas, he may seem to be from direct responsibility.»

This statement greatly interested me. I understood then, at least from one side, why none of our numerous self-invited inspectors from each village or town where we stopped ever attempted to get on board our boats, either when we were aboard, and could, it would be supposed, look after our things ourselves, or when we were all away, and fear of our presence could not be the deterring cause.

I understood, also, how easy it would be in certain cases to test the innocence of our men. Suppose, for example, that a stranger, or even a relative of a boatman, did succeed in getting on board while we were tied up at or near a village, and should make off with a watch or the like, and our boatmen not know it, nor we discover the loss till we had gone on; then what? The plea of not knowing it, even if urged, would not release the boatmen from responsibility; they ought to know it.

If, however, we were in doubt, and wished to make sure that none of our men had committed or abetted the theft, we could ask them to drop back to the village where the article disappeared, so that we could have the magistrate investigate, and make good the loss in some way. The dread of even the possibility of an investigation under such circumstances would cause the missing watch to be found, if there was any finding it.

After that I left things open and about with a feeling of security greater than I have experienced while traveling in any other part of the world; nor did I ever lose through theft while on the streams of northern China. I found, moreover, that the same law of responsibility governed all men engaged in the work of transportation, whether of people or of goods.

We have heard much, especially of late, of the diverting of public treasure to private gain by Chinese officials of all ranks, and the pitiable evidence of it in the failure of the Chinese army and navy to be ready for the inevitable struggle with Japan is too recent and convincing to be disputed; but on the other hand, we can only wonder at the power of this law of responsibility which, in such a land, enables the remotest province to transport its dues to Peking in solid silver, by the simplest means, without loss by the way and without the protection of a single soldier. Nothing impresses one more with the absoluteness of this power as applied to transpor-

tation than to meet a line of pack-mules, horses, or camels, loaded with silver bullion. The silver is usually confined in rough logs of wood that have been split, hollowed out, and then bound together, and each load is marked with a little flag of imperial yellow, stating the amount and destination. That is all the protection there is except the ordinary drivers, who carry no weapons, and are attended by no guard. In what other land on the face of the globe could the same be done?

My next meeting with this principle of responsibility was when our party stopped at an inn the first night out from Paotingfu, on the ancient government highway between this capital and that of Shansi. After supper, while I was arranging my bedding on the *kang*, Mr. X. came in and said the landlord of the inn desired our permission to take charge of our valuables for the night. This struck me as rather odd, for I knew that he could not have a modern safe, and the sight of his face, caught while coming through the outer gateway of his compound, had impressed me unfavorably; so I asked why.

«Oh,» was the reply, «he knows he will be held responsible for us and all our belongings, and he is naturally a bit anxious, especially since we are foreigners.»

Had I had anything of value, it would have been the thing to put it in his keeping; for his responsibility, in case of theft or robbery, was no mere paper responsibility, but a very stern reality, as I afterward learned.

An acquaintance of mine who had passed over this same road to Taiyuenfu told me that one night a robber managed to climb over the roof into the inn yard where my friend's goods were, and had broken open one of the boxes and succeeded in extracting various articles, valued at about twenty taels, before being frightened away. There was a big hubbub in the morning when the robbery was discovered, and of course the innkeeper tried hard to escape paying what to him was a large sum of money; but he paid it, nevertheless. It is more than likely that he got most of it back from his neighbor or neighbors whose premises joined his own, and whence the robber climbed to the inn roof, as was shown by some broken tiles. That is the way this law is applied, as I learned later on. If a robber gains access to A's compound through or from that of B, then B is held responsible for the damage done.

The compound where our party lived together for several months in Taiyuenfu was surrounded by other compounds on all sides

but one, and this one was the street side, the walls of which were about ten feet high and unbroken by any windows or opening of any sort except in the middle, where were heavy wooden doors, which were usually kept shut and barred even in the daytime. Our premises were therefore undisturbed by thieves, whereas some English people living in another part of the city were robbed several times, simply because their compound stood on the corner of the street and had an alley on the third side. Thus thieves could get in over their wall without involving the neighbors on the fourth side.

Our friends could not appeal to police or city officials, for in Taiyuenfu I never saw any police, except the beggars, who acted in that capacity semi-occasionally; and as for the city officials, what could they do? The thieves did not get in through other premises, but climbed over the outer wall on the alley. There must be a limit to the application of every law, and in this case the street was the limit.

If the theft or robbery had occurred on the street, then this principle of responsibility would have been applied in a way that, to an American, will seem well-nigh incredible, but is not at all strange to a Chinese. One day I went with an acquaintance to a bank in Taiyuenfu to draw some silver bullion. I asked what we should do if we were robbed on the street before we deposited our silver in the cash-shop.

«Well,» was the reply, «if we could not catch the robber before he disappeared, then the entire street would be responsible.»

«The entire street!» I cried. «Why, I thought responsibility stopped with the street.»

«Not a bit of it,» replied he. «I happen to know of such a case. My friend Mr. B—— was carrying some silver home from a bank, when a man suddenly rushed up to him, snatched the bullion out of his hands, and disappeared down a narrow alleyway. Mr. B——, after a vain attempt to learn where the robber had gone, noted the shop before which, or nearest to which, he had been robbed, and went home and had his teacher write out a statement of what had happened and the amount stolen. This statement, properly stamped and sealed, together with one of his big red visiting-cards, he sent by the hand of his servant to the owner of the shop, with the request that he and his brother shopkeepers along the street make good the loss; and they did.»

Now I have little doubt that these shop-

keepers ultimately recovered that stolen money, or the most of it; for, as the reader can readily see, this comprehensive law of responsibility turns, or tends to turn, every Chinese into a detective. This habit of mind, coupled with a wonderfully minute knowledge of one another's doings, characters, and family connections,—also a direct result, by the way, of this law,—makes it easy for them to hunt down a culprit; besides, if they could not find the real thief, but were reasonably sure of the family to which he belonged, or knew where to find some of his relatives, they would be pretty certain of getting either their man or their money.

It is not only in being responsible for human acts with which the individual so held has had no connection that the gross injustice of this law appears. This same principle is applied to natural calamities in ways that to us would appear simply ridiculous and childish were it not for the serious and fatal consequences often following its application.

The hills and mountains of northern China, so far as I traversed them, are denuded of trees, except about temples and monasteries. All shrubs and weeds—the very grass-roots—are grubbed up for fuel, and hence the rains and snows drain off rapidly. Not infrequently the artificial banks made necessary by the silting up of river-beds above the level of the great plains, break under the pressure of greatly swollen waters due to sudden melting of snow or long-continued rains, or these banks are eaten away by the rushing torrents. The result is a loss of life and property and a devastation of land sometimes enormous in extent, as was the case on the Yellow River, in the province of Honan, a few years ago.

The course of that mighty river was changed, it will be remembered, and an attempt was made to reconfine it to its old bed; but the attempt failed, and as a punishment for not preventing the inevitable, or not accomplishing the impossible, many officials, including the governor of the province, were degraded and banished.

In similar calamities of water, fire, wind, famine, pestilence, and the like, officials often commit suicide rather than risk or endure the punishment almost certain to be inflicted upon them on the ground that they were more or less responsible for what they could not possibly help or even foresee. Hence, also, the many cases of suicide by Chinese officers of all ranks, including a well-known admiral, after defeats and capture in the late war with Japan. The degrading of Li Hung Chang was on the same basis.

This is hard and unjust, but as things are in China there is a rough sort of necessity in it; and one can easily see that, but for the tremendous grip this principle gives, the governing of this mighty mass of beings would be a different affair.

I have left myself but little space to speak of other evils besides injustice arising from the solidarity of responsibility in China. By far the most insidious and baneful of its evils is the suspicion it engenders and fosters. Every one knows that suspicion has become second nature to all Oriental peoples; but in China it has been so aggravated and intensified by this law of responsibility as to be almost first nature with the entire nation.

All his lifetime the Chinese is subject to this bondage of distrust of all. Arthur H. Smith, in his wonderfully bright, accurate, and yet somewhat misleading book called «Chinese Characteristics,» quotes the Chinese proverb that «one man should not enter a temple, and two men should not look together into a well,» adding, «And why, we inquire in surprise, should not one man enter a temple alone? Because the priest may take advantage of the opportunity to make away with him! Two men should not gaze into a well, for if one of them is in debt to the other, or has in his possession something which the other wants, that other may seize the occasion to push his companion into the well!»

One dark evening I was returning home from a call on one of our English neighbors in Taiyuenfu. When not far from our compound, the road crossed an open space of several acres in extent. As I was finding my way along by the rather dim light of a Chinese lantern, I nearly stumbled over the body of a man who had fallen by the way. My first impulse was to take hold of the person and ascertain if help was needed; but for some reason I did not, but hurried home to get aid. Mr. X. was still with us, and on hearing my statement said:

«Yes, I know; the man is dead, and it is fortunate that you did not attempt to touch the body. Should we now try to remove it, or even to go to it, we should no doubt be seen, and at once suspicion would attach itself to us, and none could tell the consequences. We might cause a riot before morning.»

¹ Since the above was written, the attack upon Dr. Sheffield in June, 1895, has been reported in the newspapers as though it sprang from Chinese hatred of foreigners. This is most unfortunate, because it is entirely untrue that it had the slightest connection with the murderous attacks upon foreign men, women, and children which aroused so much just indignation throughout the world during last spring and summer.

It should be said that this suspicion would not have been because we were foreigners, for a native under similar circumstances would likewise have run the risk of being charged with the murder. The good Samaritan would have fared hardly in China,—or most likely would have been suspected of doing the kind deed for some ultimate gain,—while the priest and the Levite would have been accounted, not hard-hearted, but prudent.

While staying in Tung-chow, about twelve miles from Peking, I learned of a poor Chinese woman who was blown off a high bank into a stream of water and actually left to drown, though several men saw the woman fall and could have saved her from death had they not been afraid that some one would suspect them of trying to make away with her, or that the woman intended to commit suicide and would avenge her own rescue. A similar case was lately reported by private letters from China, in which a *foreigner* was refused aid because of this same fear of suspicion! The Rev. Dr. Sheffield, of Tung-chow College, was attacked by a half-crazy carpenter and another Chinese workman, and was nearly killed. Dr. Sheffield escaped death only by feigning it, whereupon his assailants left him for dead. The badly wounded man then appealed in vain for help to twenty or more Chinese men who passed by, and had to remain on the ground in great suffering till men in his own employ arrived and carried him home.¹

Even so simple a governmental act as taking a census awakens in the minds of the people suspicions that some other end is in view. Mr. Smith cites a case, known to him, in which the younger of two brothers concluded that taking a census meant compulsory emigration, and if that were so he must go; therefore, rather than take a long journey,—which, be it noticed, was an entirely gratuitous supposition on his part,—he committed suicide, «thus checkmating the government»!

The introduction of modern inventions, modern methods of mining, foreign fruits, investigation in regard to tea-raising and the cultivation of the silkworm with a view to improvement and increased production, and a hundred other things, have been hindered or prevented by this suspicion, first of one another, and then of the government. How

The Chinese people have quite enough to answer for without being held responsible for the acts of a Chinese workman subject to fits of partial insanity, who planned to revenge himself upon a former employer for a fancied wrong, and then bribed or intimidated another workman (who was also a relative) to join him in the attack.

terrible may be the issue of this same suspicion when directed toward the doubly suspected foreigner, let the Tientsin massacre and the atrocities committed but yesterday in the province of Szechuen bear witness.

Paradoxical as it sounds, in a very important sense responsibility in China decreases as it increases; that is, a Chinese acknowledges and acts upon no responsibility beyond or outside of what he will be held to by law or custom.

For instance, I once had occasion to go in a Chinese cart from the main or Chinese portion of Tientsin to that part containing the foreign concession. To do so it was necessary to cross the Peiho River over a bridge of boats. There were several carts ahead of mine, some very heavily loaded with goods. The cart nearest the river was one of these loaded ones, and was unable to get on the bridge, the edge of the first boat being several inches higher than the approach to it. I therefore had plenty of opportunity to watch the proceedings. Had this been the first time I had traveled in China, or had I known nothing of the principle of which I have been speaking, I should have concluded that every one among this dozen or twenty cartmen was crazy or a fool; as it was, their seemingly foolish methods, though short-sighted, had a rational basis and were significant.

The driver whose cart was stuck, after seeing that his mules could not possibly pull the cart up over the edge of the bridge, began backing. After getting his load back four or five feet, he suddenly shouted to his tandem team, and laid on the whip. Both mules sprang forward, bringing the wheels of the cart against the edge of the bridge with a tremendous thump which lifted them clear off the ground, but not quite far enough to get upon the bridge. Again the man backed, this time a little farther than at first, and again made a rush for the bridge. This time the head mule failed to hold on as the cart bumped into the air, so back the load fell. Again, for the third time, the same mad dash was made, this time successfully. The next driver banged up over the edge of the bridge in the same way, and every cartman, my own included, did the same. Some made the ascent with one bump, while others had to try more than once. I expected to see one

or more of the carts break somewhere, for the force with which the wheels, especially of the heavily loaded carts, struck the bridge was very great; and one cart, before we arrived, had had its axle snapped off by the concussion, and lay at the side of the road, a silent witness to the danger of the method.

If it is asked, why in the name of common sense somebody did not lay a plank to help the carts up, I answer, because no one was responsible for the difficulty. The convenience of the traveling public was a matter of too trifling importance to be provided for.

You would naturally think that cartmen belonging to the same firm, or drawing goods for the same business house, would at least unite and help one another; but not so, except in rare cases. I noticed that one man ahead of me who happened to have a stick of wood on his cart did finally use it to help himself up; but I noticed also that he was careful to get it again as soon as he was safely on the bridge.

That this specific case represented a general characteristic or principle, and not an incidental exception, I have no doubt; for on crossing this same bridge several months after, I was bumped up on it in the very same fashion, the only difference being that, as the river was somewhat lower, the road and the bridge were more nearly on a level, and the bump was not quite so violent as before.

The idea or principle of mutual helpfulness, or of doing things out of a general impulse or disinterested desire to perform a public service, is utterly foreign to all habits of thought born and fostered by this overreaching law of responsibility, which is like the huge wooden collars that are fastened about the necks of certain criminals in China, hindering outlook, hampering activity and usefulness, and making the wearer indifferent to all else save the bearing of his own intolerable burden, or the escape from it. Yet, on the other hand, let us not forget that our own more just view of personal responsibility likewise not infrequently issues in no responsibility. Trains are wrecked, buildings burn or fall, and those really guilty of the resulting frightful loss of life and property are never brought to justice, because no one is held responsible for the initial mistake, negligence, or fraud.

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