

## CHINESE WHIMS AND WAYS.



**M**ANKIND, and more especially that fraction of it represented by the inhabitants of the British Isles, are very apt to regard their fellow-beings from their own stand-point exclusively, and so to judge of others by themselves. What they think or do is of necessity *comme il faut* and right; what others think or do must conse-

quently be *outré* and wrong. Our Transatlantic cousins, for instance, are supposed to lead a wretched, vagrant life, flitting about from one huge hotel to another, because with us hearths and homes happen to be an institution, and we find it worth our while to cling to them. We like to see sensible joints on the dinner-table, therefore we look upon the stews and ragouts which other nations affect as so much trash. We delight in sound sherries and fruity ports, and wonder how other people can content themselves with light Rhine wines and feeble clarets. When driving on the high-road, we pass other vehicles on the off side, and meet them on the near side; what geese we make other people out to be for adopting precisely the opposite course! Our lords of the creation do not consider themselves to be properly dressed for the park, or promenade, unless topped by a hideous incongruity called a "hat;" and we stare when told by the Hindoo that his many-folded turban is a more shapely and useful article. We convey our food to our mouths by means of knife, fork, and spoon; what ridiculous and impracticable implements, we thereupon exclaim, the Chinese chopsticks must be! Our fair dames pinch and squeeze their waists into positive and even dangerous deformity, and throw up their eyes and hands in surprise and disgust when shown the compressed foot of the Chinese lady. And so with a hundred other incidents and associations of our daily life. We imagine that we alone do, or can do, this and that thing, forgetting that other peoples have wants identical with our own, and that they can assign, it may be, quite as good a reason for their method of satisfying these wants as any we can quote in favour of ours. Much of this self-satisfaction is due to ignorance, which happily is daily decreasing, thanks to the facilities for travel and the opportunities for acquiring information, which are so abundantly placed

at the disposal of the masses in these enlightened days.

There is perhaps no nation whose customs and ideas one is so prone unintentionally to misconstrue or despise as the Chinese. The very name to most people conjures up instanter the picture of a slant-eyed, pig-tailed creature, who strangles his infant daughters, and feeds incontinently upon dogs, cats, and rats. Question the correctness of the representation, or go further, and endeavour to point out that the Chinaman is a human being not much unlike the caviller himself, or that he is not an entire stranger to heart, mind, cultivation, taste, and so on, and you may rely upon being set down as a partisan, or possessor of a hobby, or perhaps something worse. It is not pretended for a moment that the Chinaman is without defects or objectionable characteristics; nor indeed that he is better than a Hindoo, Persian, Turk, or any other semi-civilised man, although there is something to be said in his favour even *quoad* these other races. But it may be contended that a Chinaman is not only by no means the degraded creature which he is made out to be, but possesses many traits worthy of study, if not of taking copy from, by members of more favoured and better-gifted nationalities.

What these traits are, it is not the purpose of this paper to set forth, but some of the whims and ways peculiar to the Chinese may perhaps repay attention, if only to make us hug our own with the greater satisfaction and content. Assuming our notions as to the fitness of things to be in the main reasonable, if not correct, it is curious to note at what opposite conclusions the Chinese have arrived in maturing their habits and ideas. Sir John Davis, the Nestor of Sinologues, in one of his many excellent works on China, we cannot remember which, has called attention to this peculiar trait of contrariety in the Chinese character, but has quoted only three or four examples in support of his proposition, whereas there is hardly a practice in common life in which the Chinese may not be found to be antagonistic to the European.

In China, for instance, the left hand is the seat of honour, and a Chinese guest in a European's house may often be observed to be uneasy at finding himself, as he imagines, slighted by being placed on the right hand of his host. They are painfully scrupulous about this matter of seating hosts and guests. To a European it is most irksome to have to go through the pantomime of bows and grimaces which always precedes the disposition of guests and host in a Chinese reception room, and it not unfrequently ends in the impetuous Aryan's assuming the seat closest to hand, irrespective of all ceremonial rules, whilst the Turanian sits down in despair and disgust at having to entertain such a hopeless savage. Then, in the matter of costume, a Chinaman, as is well known, is notable for the length and capacity of his skirts, whilst his wife and daughters wear—and not unfrequently display—the breeches. Silk and satin are his favourite materials for clothes,

and the handsomer the pattern, and more heavy and showy the embroidery, the better dressed he considers himself. A necklace of beads forms an indispensable adjunct to the full-dress of every Mandarin, and a fan is rarely out of his hand either when at home or abroad. On entering a room, or receiving a visitor, a Chinaman's first care is to put on his hat, not to take it off; and where a friend in Europe might say, "Keep on your hat, pray," in China the entreaty would be, "Oblige me by dispensing with your hat." In Europe a host begs his guest to take a seat, and suits the action to the word by sitting down himself. In China it would be regarded as the height of rudeness to sit down before every guest is well seated. In Europe friends grasp each other by the hand by way of greeting, whereas a Chinese clasps his own hands together and shakes them *at* his visitor. In the matter of visiting cards the same eccentricity of purpose is observable. A Chinaman uses a small card only when on familiar terms with the person visited, and then it is from five to six times larger than what Europeans are in the habit of employing. When a little more ceremony is requisite, the card is trebled in size; and on very formal occasions it grows into a perfect pamphlet of several sheets, which, by the way, it is considered correct to return to the guest. At banquets or formal dinners the guest brings his card of invitation with him (also a many-leaved pamphlet), and restores it with a solemn bow to the host before assuming his seat at the table. Scarlet is the usual colour for all visiting cards, save during mourning, when purple or lavender-grey paper is used according to the extent of the loss deplored; but the entire card is coloured—

not, as with us, the edge alone. Here we are reminded of another instance of the antagonism of Chinese and Western ideas, plain white being regarded as the colour *de rigueur* for mourning costume, not black. A man mourning for his parent or grandparent, or a woman lamenting the loss of her husband—in both of which cases the code prescribes the deepest mourning—is expected to be clad in white from head to foot; and custom demands that the hat, boots, fan, and everything about the person, even down to the end of silk cord which is plaited into the queue, shall be of the prescribed colour.

Contrariety of purpose extends even to the collocation of some familiar terms; as, for example, in the use of the words "right" and "left" it would be inelegant and even incorrect in China to state or write

them together otherwise than in the shape of "left and right." As regards the points of the compass, too, the Chinese method of quotation is quite different if not contrary to ours. Where we should say, "north, south, east, west," which is our usual form for stating the cardinal points together, a Chinaman would say, "east, west, south, north." With them "north-east" is transposed into "east-north," "south-west" into "west-south," and so on. In giving dates, whether orally or in writing, the latter more particularly, the year is stated first, then the month, and lastly the day. The date, moreover, never heads a letter or formal

document, but is always the last thing appended. Surnames and names go by the same rule of contrary, the surname being written or stated first, the name last. Titles, when set forth formally and in full, always precede the name, instead of following it as with us; and curiously enough, when familiarly used, as for instance when we would say, "Governor Tomkins," "Colonel Jones," and so on, the opposite becomes the rule, and the title comes last.

A remarkable example of the eccentricity of the Chinese turn of mind is noticeable in their schools, where, instead of silence being inculcated, as might naturally be considered so essential, every child is expected to bawl out the lesson that he is committing to memory at the top of his voice; and the babel which is the result may be more easily imagined than described. When a boy goes up to repeat his lesson, moreover, he does not stand facing his tutor, but turns his back upon him, and hence repeating a lesson goes by the familiar name of "backing" it. This method of recitation has an excellent effect



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in keeping the boy on the *qui vive* to avoid mistakes, for no sooner does he commit one than he is called to recollection by a smart tap on his closely-shaven pate, from the metal bowl of the long tobacco-pipe which every pedagogue carries about him. The law of contrariety applies equally to books, and the mode of binding and reading them. In the West the leaves of a book are cut level at the front: in China they are folded in front and cut level at the back. The marginal note of title, chapter, and page is printed in the front fold, so as to show half on one page and half on the other; whilst the title, instead of being placed on the back of a volume as with us, is carefully written on the bottom edge. Books in a library are consequently laid on their sides, with the bottom edge exposed to view. In reading, as is well known, the Chinese character runs

from top to bottom and left to right, so that in the perusal of a book it must be handled in exactly the opposite style to that in which a Western book is manipulated.

Another somewhat curious instance of contrariety of practice is shown in honorary rewards conferred by the State for meritorious service. With us, when a man receives a title of an hereditary character it devolves upon his heirs. In China the case is different. Parents and grandparents benefit by the successful career of a son, and if dead, posthumous honours are decreed in favour of the deceased. The following examples of this eccentricity of habit and purpose may likewise be adduced. A Chinese equestrian would never think of mounting his charger save on the off side. Grown-up men gravely fly kites, whilst the boys look admiringly on. They play at shuttlecock with the feet, not with the hands. They drink their wine boiling hot, and much as a Chinaman relishes champagne when he can get it, he invariably remarks that it strikes him with cold inside. Take up a Chinese-made screw, and the worm will be found to twist the contrary way to that in which European screws are manufactured.

With some research, examples of a like kind, it is confidently believed, might be increased many-fold; but the above will suffice to show in how abnormal a mould the Chinese mind is formed as compared to ours. Not the least remarkable trait in their character is their deliberateness and self-possession. It is rare to find a Chinaman at a loss when surprised into a position for which he had not prepared himself. His ready wit or, failing that, his aptitude for taking refuge in an untruth, invariably enables him to recover himself when run to earth, and hence he is always a difficult person to deal with when diplomacy is the ground on which he is encountered. And yet, to those who understand him, it is seldom difficult to detect whether

he is speaking the truth or no; and the only weapon that will foil him successfully is plain downright straightforwardness. A curious story *apropos* of this peculiarity may be told in conclusion. A gentleman who has resided many years in China, and has fathomed the character of the people to a hair's-breadth, was once consulted by a late arrival as to the best method of recovering a valuable ring which had suddenly been missed from off his dressing-table. "Parade your servants," he said, "and I will inevitably find the thief if the ring has been stolen by some one in the house:" his theory being that a Chinaman cannot tell a lie without simultaneously swallowing something imaginary. The servants were paraded as requested, and the expert proceeded at once to question each one in a sharp, authoritative tone, whether he had taken the ring. The interrogator had not proceeded very far down the row before the expected act of involuntary deglutition betrayed the real culprit, when, seizing him roughly by the shoulders, the gentleman exclaimed, "Down on your knees, you rascal! you, and you alone, are the thief." The suddenness of the attack, and the directness of the charge, together proved too much for the unhappy culprit, and before many minutes were over he had confessed how he had purloined the ring and where it was to be found. The expedient may not be a bad one, but it would scarcely serve a minister's or a consul's purpose where he had to do with a tricky or mendacious Mandarin, and at the same time to bear in mind the stereotyped injunction of the Foreign Office to be cautious and conciliatory in all his dealings with the native officials. Many a serious difficulty nevertheless, in our relations with the Chinese, might have been prevented from acquiring inconvenient proportions, had a judicious and energetic shake been administered at the right time and in the right quarter

W. H. MEDHURST.



"THE COMPRESSED FOOT OF THE CHINESE LADY" (P. 15).