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CHAPTER XIV.

CHINESE INDUSTRY.—ARTS AND SCIENCES.

This is a most extensive field, but it has been very little traversed by foreigners, who have written on China. In going over it ourselves, we shall avail ourselves of the labours of our predecessors, and glean from Chinese works, and add to both whatever has fallen under our own observation.

Industry may be divided into three branches, agricultural, commercial, and mechanical. After having treated of these branches of industry, we shall expatiate on arts and sciences.

GENERAL REMARKS ON CHINESE INDUSTRY.

The same disregard which attached to the merchants and artizans of ancient Greece and Rome, at present attaches to these classes in China. The estimate which government forms of any class of society, is according to the advantage it derives from it. The learned classes give their most talented members to government, as functionaries, and therefore rank the highest; the farmer maintains the state, and is considered as the only productive labourer, and therefore occupies the second and most indispensable rank; the merchant is a mere consumer, and contributes compara-

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tively little to the public revenues; the artizan being occupied with the manufacture of raw produce, is considered to belong to a class almost useless, both to society and the state.

Regular and local occupations like those of agriculture, give a steadiness to character which will always distinguish an agricultural from a mercantile, or nomadic people. The same scenes and pursuits incessantly recurring, produce a tenacity of the existing state of things, which deprecates all change and innovation. It has always been the endeavour of the Chinese government to confirm this habit, and to render it as instinctive as possible; so that man may work as a bird builds a nest, or a mole burrows in the ground, in one uniform way, without endeavouring, by the exercise of reason, to find out a better method. A firm purpose of abiding by every thing once acknowledged as useful and proper, is the leading feature of Chinese industry. The nation excels in that which is to be effected in the beaten track, but it is wretchedly deficient in every thing which requires thought and judgment.

It is difficult to determine how long the Chinese were in raising themselves from a state of barbarism, to that civilization which they have now reached. That they have been in their present condition, however, for centuries, is pretty certain. But it is not very easy to account for the obstacles which arrested their march of improvement, after having arrived at a certain degree of perfection. They must naturally have felt the advantages arising from progressive improvement; for otherwise they would never have emerged from a savage state; nor could their advancement have been the work of a moment. If, however, they were in a fair way of improving their condition, how then could they have suddenly stopped? This question has never been satisfactorily answered. The annals of mankind furnish no case parallel to it. Nations have either pro-

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gressed or retrograded,—only the Chinese have remained stationary.

In every thing the Chinese undertake, time is only a secondary object; the division of labour with them is far less than with us, and the construction of their machinery, tools, and instruments, is rude and primeval. But determined, unwearied industry, remedies all these defects. There are many spare hands, and wages are in consequence very low; numbers, therefore, effect that which amongst more civilized nations is done by machinery. The introduction of machinery, according to the improvements made in Europe, would meet here with far greater obstacles than in any other country; and the loudest cries, that the poor are robbed of their subsistence, would resound from one part of the empire to the other. The immense advantages that would thus arise to the great mass of the people, the facility with which all the conveniences of life would be provided, and the improvement of society, are nothing in comparison of their deep-rooted prejudices. There was a time when Chinese manual industry coped with ours, and their ingenuity competed, in sundry manufactures, with our skill; this time, however, is past; we have excelled them in every point. Our silks, chinaware, and nankeens might now be brought to a Chinese market, where they would undersell their own manufactures. Their superiority, however, lies still in different branches of agriculture, in which we perhaps can never equal them, because we cannot command so many labourers as they can. Supposing the West Indian islands to be cultivated by as many Chinese as possibly could live upon them, they would be enabled to undersell all other countries in the produce of those regions. To verify this assertion, we quote Formosa, as far as it regards sugar. It is perhaps no where in the world produced at a cheaper rate, and the price is kept up only by the ex-

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cessive and constant demand on the Main. How much human misery might have been avoided, if Chinese free labourers from the southern provinces had been prevailed upon to settle at those islands.

The very constitution of the Chinese is framed for hard labour, and they discover an instinctive propensity for work. Such a people favourably located, inhabiting the shores of rivers, and numerous bays, inlets, and lakes, possessed of all the natural and physical advantages for becoming great, must necessarily excel in industry. As far as the inland transport of goods is concerned, they have availed themselves of these advantages to the utmost extent; but in the navigation of the ocean, they are even to this day novices. Had it been otherwise, the western shores of America might have been peopled by the teeming population of China; had foreign intercourse not been foolishly restricted, the islands of the Indian Archipelago might by this time have been entirely Chinese. Enterprize was nipped in its very bud by being confined solely to China itself.

The Chinese possessed one great advantage over other ancient nations, in not considering labour degrading, of whatever description it might be, and in avoiding the division into castes. Every one is at liberty to choose for himself the occupation best suited to his constitution and habits, and no one is degraded because he belongs to a certain class of society.

Where every thing is so much circumscribed by rule, it cannot be expected that industry has entirely escaped being shackled; yet practical political wisdom has fettered it less than we might have supposed. Only merchants form corporations, whilst artizans and manufacturers work entirely free from every restraint. There is only one monopoly—that is, salt; and foreign commerce is also a victim of this hydra; yet there exists otherwise more

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freedom in trade than in any other despotic country. A number of merchants often form a combination amongst themselves for the sole purpose of controlling the market. This, however, must be ascribed rather to Chinese knavery than to national commercial principles.

The regulation of wages may be stated to be the minimum of payment to furnish a human being bare subsistence. Nor does the skilfulness of the workman materially alter this rate; so that a journeyman silversmith, painter, or engraver, does not, on an average, earn more than one pound sterling per month. The cause of this arises naturally from the superabundance of the population, and the facility with which workmen of every description may always be procured. Hence also comes the necessity of employing the whole family, and even children of a tender age, in some work or other; for otherwise the working classes would not find it possible to maintain their offspring. Living, on the other hand, can never be very cheap; for the demand for food not only keeps pace with, but frequently exceeds the production. One stone of rice very seldom costs less than two taels, and a pound of pork generally values about a hundred cash, or one-tenth of a tael.

The use of money, though introduced at a very early period, has not yet entirely done away with barter. The government levying taxes in kind, has thereby established the price of grain as the standard of other commodities, and the farmers of many districts pay their labourers in raw produce, and only a small part in money. The precious metals, and especially silver, are, nevertheless, as in more civilized countries, considered too valuable for exportation and the manufacturing into trinkets, and both are viewed as a very heavy loss both to the nation and the state. Even copper and brass are to be used only for the most indispensable utensils, lest it should be wanted for making

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cash, the current coin. Yet the restrictions regarding these articles are only so far regarded as it suits the interests of the possessors.

Those classes which occupy themselves with the education of the nation, are reduced to the same necessity of being satisfied with the least possible reward. A common schoolmaster earns much, if he gets one pound sterling monthly. In most villages his stipend scarcely amounts to half that sum, and the parents pay him, perhaps by joint subscription, twenty-four dollars per annum. The only scholars well paid are those whose talents have been monopolized by the government.

The government of a country which possesses a very large population must study economy to the utmost, lest profusion render the greater part of the people destitute. It is with this view that sumptuary laws have been instituted, and that even the wealthier classes are obliged to live in a state of comparative wretchedness. Any one who would spend his money in rendering himself as comfortable as his pecuniary resources would permit him, without regard to established custom and regulation, would expose his property to confiscation. The natural consequence is, that capital, instead of being laid out for rendering life more agreeable, is hoarded up in private, and uselessly hid in coffers. Were any person to make a show of his possessions, he would certainly soon attract the notice of the government, and be fined as a transgressor of the law, if even his whole property were not confiscated. Suppose a rich man built a more commodious house than his station in life permitted him, and he were accused at the magistrate's office, he would either have to pull down the building or surrender it to government, and in addition to this, also share his riches with the officers. This circumstance makes the Chinese exceedingly wary of circulating more capital than they can do with safety. Thus the money in

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the market is seldom, if ever, adequate to the demand; interest is high, and credit very low.

Our little knowledge of the agricultural state of the country does not enable us to speak with certainty of the rent of lands. One mow—that is, twelve hundred square covids of good rice land—pays in the neighbourhood of Macao six dollars per annum rent, which may be considered nearly as the maximum. The cultivator obtains from it three crops annually; one of rice, one of vegetables, such as potatoes, onions, cabbage, &c., and one of turnips or wheat. In China rent may be said to be very high, because the immense population enables the farmer to partition the land into small parcels, and to extract from the soil as much as possible. Lands which are made to yield a great quantity, can naturally pay a higher rent than those which are badly cultivated, and the calculating genius of the possessors would not leave the labourers any more than a bare subsistence. Money which yields twelve per cent. profit annually, is often advantageously laid out in the purchase of land. Very little land being appropriated to pleasure-grounds and pasture, it may be said with truth, that the whole arable area of China is more productive than that of any other country, and consequently yields a greater rent. If it were otherwise, the people would not cultivate barren soil in mountain terraces, or by expensive dikes gain lands from the sea and rivers. They would not be paid for carrying earth from a great distance to a rocky soil, or be able to refund the expenses of richly manuring it.

This country had not to pass the ordeal of the feudal system, which, in Europe, for so many centuries, retarded the progress of industry. Though the country was divided amongst many tributary princes, slavery or villany was never introduced. The cause of this exemption from one of the most heavy scourges ever inflicted on mankind at

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large, must be sought for in the populousness of the country, where free labour could be obtained at a less price than forced. Powerful nobles never took entire possession of the landed property. Industry was thus unshackled, and individual power could be developed to the greatest advantage. Had it been otherwise, the population must have been checked, and we might now have found China in a state like that of Russia before Peter the Great. The only drawback on free industry is the government; the people pay much for their protection, and are, nevertheless, much embarrassed in their occupations by the masters whom they must reward so extravagantly.

We are not now able to determine how much the value of the precious metals was lowered by the importation of foreign silver. China has its gold and silver mines in the south-western provinces, which, judging from the revenue raised upon them, do not produce so much as is needed for the currency in so extensive a country. Yet, very little having been exported, and large sums having constantly found their way to Canton from foreign countries, and, moreover, the quantity wrought into plate not being great, the circulating silver must be very considerable. Though there is at present a heavy drain upon this accumulated treasure by the large exportations of bullion, the value of silver has not yet so much risen as to render large importations so favourable as in former times. The country is too large to be easily affected by the loss of 100,000,000 taëls; and Canton furnishes such very great advantages, that a constant flow of capital from the most distant parts of the empire to that place may be always confidently expected. Though silver sold hitherto generally at a higher rate than in Europe, it was with gold quite the reverse. This metal being, until very lately, properly speaking, not a circulating medium, and consequently not so much in demand, its value was thus lowered to the great advantage

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of foreign exportation; yet it very soon found its level, and gold bars of the finest touch, valuing from 180 to 220 dollars, pass in large commercial cities at fourteen times their weight in silver, of the finest quality, which is rather below the European standard.

It is extraordinary that the government should not issue silver coin. Apprehensive of the knavery of its subjects, lest it should soon be debased, and thus be paid back into the treasury, it only receives solid lumps of fine, well-assayed bullion. The loss thus incurred by melting and assaying, is, perhaps, greater than the seignorage of shaped coin; yet the government does not suffer, its subjects paying, above the real taxes, a surplus far greater than a mere compensation of loss. One great waste is the stamping of foreign coin, for very silly reasons. The money is thus soon reduced to pieces, and loses in weight with every stamp, until it is beaten flat, and its value lowered at least 10 per cent. By a late ordinance, in 1836, dollars are to be current coin throughout all provinces.

In the issue of cash, for general use, the greatest economy is observed. Being composed of copper, tin, lead, and zinc, no cheaper, or more durable currency could perhaps be imagined. The Chinese government had to furnish a circulating medium which might be divided into the smallest fraction amongst an immense poor population; and in issuing 1,000 pieces for one taël in silver, it quite accomplished this object. It was, however, soon found that the cost of providing this necessary article exceeded the value paid for it in silver. Thus, false coining was in some measure counteracted, yet not entirely abolished; and not only can unprincipled men undersell the government by counterfeiting cash of smaller weight, but the Cochin-Chinese and Japanese inundate China with cash of an inferior kind, but at one-third cheaper than the government issue.

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If any nation understands how to turn a penny to advantage, it is the Chinese. They are born shrewd and knavish calculators, and study their own interest with a keenness which only wants the aid of western systematic improvement to be invincible. Their trade is indigenous, and flourishes in defiance of all government regulations and restrictions. They traffic for the mere pleasure of it, and if credit could but be established, and a proper currency, with a banking system upon an extensive scale, be introduced, the resources of the country would be enormous. This, however, would require a radical change, both in the public opinion and the system of government, whilst the nation ought to be more enlightened to carry these improvements into effect.

A system of colonization, worthy of so great a nation, has never engaged the attention of Chinese politicians. War and rapine drove the first Chinese settlers to Formosa and Hae-nan, where they lived independent, and without the protection of the mother country. Soon, however, a Chinese government was established in these isles, but, at the same time, full liberty of trading to the maritime provinces was granted; so that both islands stand upon the same footing as the mother country. On the western frontier, the Chinese have always endeavoured to intrude upon the frontiers of their neighbours; and for security, colonized the newly acquired territories in Turkestan. Chinese colonists are prohibited from settling in the Mongol territories; yet the law of necessity, stronger than any other, forces thousands beyond the Great Wall, and wherever there is a cultivable spot, whatever may be the toils of rendering it productive, the Chinese will thrive. It is rather astonishing that no Chinese colonies should have been established in the extensive districts of Tchitchihar and Kirin. We are inclined to account for this by the great distance, and sterile tracts of land which separate these ter-

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