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978-1-108-02185-2 - Primitive Civilizations: Or, Outlines of the History of
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BOOK IV.

OWNERSHIP IN CHINA.

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THE head of the Ka family was richer than the Duke of Chow had been, and yet K'ew collected his imposts for him, and increased his wealth.

The Master said, "He is no disciple of mine. My little children beat the drum and assail him."—*Confucian Analects*.

Yao went to visit Hua. The border-warden of Hua said, "Ha! a Sage. My best respects to you, sir. I wish you a long life."

"Don't!" replied Yao.

"I wish you plenty of money," continued the border-warden.

"Don't!" replied Yao.

"And many sons," added he.

"Don't!" replied Yao.

"Long life, plenty of money, and many sons," cried the warden; "these are what all men desire. How is it you alone do not want them?"

"Many sons," answered Yao, "are many anxieties. Plenty of money means plenty of trouble. Long life involves much that is not pleasant to put up with. These three gifts do not advance virtue; therefore I declined them."

"At first I took you for a Sage," said the warden, "but now I find you are a mere man. Heaven, in sending man into the world, gives to each his proper function. If you have many sons, and give to each his proper function, what cause have you for anxiety?"

"And similarly, if you have wealth, and allow others to share it, what troubles will you have?"—*Chuang-tze*.

"I have heard of men using the ways of our great land to change barbarians, but 'I have not yet heard of any being changed by barbarians.'"—*Mencius*.

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PRIMITIVE CIVILIZATIONS.



CHAPTER I.

THE LAND AND ITS HISTORY.

THE natural history of Egypt may be said to begin and end with the inundation of the Nile, but it is impossible to give so compendious an account of the conditions which enable the soil of China to maintain one-third of the human race. The fortunes and history of China are mysteriously linked with the geology of Central Asia; and the interdependence of the different members of the favourite Chinese triad—Heaven, Earth, and Man—is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the experience of the Chinese people. Chinese history traces the fortunes of a race, with qualities determined by one set of conditions, in a country with qualities determined by another set. So far as the character of the Egyptian race is the product of the sun and the inundation, the history of the land and the people have a common cause. But there is no such natural connection between the inexhaustible fertility of the loess districts in China and the character of the Chinese race, for the former is the result of causes which ceased to work long before the ancestors of the latter came into being.

The two great tracts of ceaseless sun, which are barren both of civilized human life and vegetation, are the deserts of Central Asia and the Sahara. Both these deserts occupy the site of a dried-up inland sea—dried up because, in the course of ages, the waste by evaporation from its wide surface was greater than the reinforcements brought by the streams debouching into it. The Nile flows from the mountains of Abyssinia and the equatorial highlands round Lake Victoria,¹ the Tigris and Euphrates from the highlands of Armenia and Kurdistan, all alike outside the rainless regions. The streams which may once have fed the inland African sea had no such sheltered sources, and have hardly left a trace behind. The sea of Central Asia existed perhaps to a more recent date, and there still survives, to show how it was fed, the Yarim or Yarkand River, which flows into Lop-nor, after a course of 1,150 miles, longer than that of the Rhine, and through a river-basin larger than that of the Danube. But

¹ In the latter region the annual rainfall sometimes reaches 100 inches.

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with this exception, the streams that flow from the little lakes still scattered through the desert, lose themselves in the sand; others, rising in the sand, flow only into lakes, which year by year waste and dwindle, like the larger sea of which they once formed part, while the surrounding mountains have long since ceased to nourish tributaries of sufficient volume to reach them.

When, from whatever cause, the amount of evaporation over a given area comes to exceed the rainfall, the radiation from the heated, barren surface, of which more and more is left permanently dry, tends to disperse the summer rainclouds, and so extends and intensifies the drought. Prejevalsky saw this process at work in the desert of Gobi, between Alashan and Naga, where a dog, which had been his companion for years, died of the intense heat. No dew fell, and the rainclouds dispersed without sending more than a few drops to earth. "We observed," he says, "this interesting phenomenon several times, particularly in Southern Alashan, near the Kansu mountains, where the rain, as it fell, met the lower heated atmosphere and passed off in steam before reaching the earth."¹

The drying-up of an inland sea extends the area over which moisture is absorbed or dissipated, quite apart from the causes which have led to its own contraction. This in Central Asia may have been due partly to the gradual elevation of the sea bottom, which leaves the plateau of Gobi three or four thousand feet above the sea level, as well as to the insufficiency of its fresh-water feeders. After wringing their last drops of moisture from the currents of air flowing towards the interior, and already desiccated by long journeys overland, the great mountain ranges surrounding the central basin send all the drainage of their high lakes or snow-capped summits outwards to the distant ocean, instead of towards the Mediterranean sea of sand. They intercept, instead of storing up, the rainfall which might replenish the central basin.

The fact is that Central Asia presents too large and solid a surface to be uniformly watered. Northern Africa is riverless except for the Nile, which does but skirt its eastern edge; the solid interior of Australia is barren; Europe and North America are perforated with seas and gulfs, though the latter is not without an example, in the Great Salt Lake district, of the way in which deserts may be formed. South America at its widest is narrow enough for such a river as the Yang-tse-kiang to almost traverse its whole breadth, while its mountain system allows the middle of the continent to be watered by streams flowing north and south with overlapping sources. In Asia alone we have a continental block, extending over some sixty degrees from north to south, and as much from east to west. The Indus, the Oxus, the Obi, the Yenisei, the Lena, the Amour, the Hoangho, the Yang-tse-kiang, the Brahmapootra, and the Ganges are all streams, for length and volume, of continental importance; but, with the one ex-

¹ *Mongolia, the Tangut Country and the Solitudes of Northern Tibet, being a narrative of three years' travel in Eastern high Asia.* Lieut.-Col. N. Prejevalsky (Eng. trans., 1876), p. 267.

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ception of the Yarkand River, these streams, while fringing the central plateau with their sources, contribute none of their waters to replenish the Mediterranean Sea.

Thus year by year the sea has narrowed; and as streams dry up and showers grow scantier, the process of deterioration accelerates itself. The dwellers in the few oases only hasten by their labours the encroachments of the sandy tide, for irrigation works increase the surface of the water exposed to evaporation, and the crops that are consumed each season make no return of moisture to the air equivalent to that which they absorb. The scanty streams, unfed by rain or snow, prove unequal to the constant drain, and with the exhaustion of the water supply the last remains of vegetation fall an easy prey to the encroaching sands. This has been the history of Central Asia ever since the present races of mankind have inhabited or crossed it. Five thousand years ago, doubtless, lakes and oases were more numerous, those still existing larger and more fertile, and parts of the present desert perhaps not without a steppe-like vegetation. The vales of Cashmere and Yulduz, the plains of Bokhara and Khokan had counterparts, no doubt, within the mountain circle, which, like the present Ili, Khami, Yarkand, and Khotan, were each the centre of a principality of respectable size and enviable fruitfulness.

In comparatively recent geologic time it is supposed that changes of an opposite character to these took place in China proper, that an increased rainfall brought fertility to once barren steppes, filled the water-courses with continuous streams, and carved for the latter an outlet into the sea. But in Baron von Richthofen's admirable work on China, it is shown that the effects of a period of rainlessness make themselves felt upon the soil, and through the soil upon the climate, long after the great geologic or climatic changes have been accomplished, which cause the district in question to be no longer either riverless or rainless.

The work of water is not unmixedly beneficent, and we can judge how much of the natural richness of the soil is carried off by an average rainfall, from the treasures of fertility hoarded up in regions of perennial drought. The natural fertilizers of an uninhabited and untilled country consist of all the decomposed animal and vegetable matter deposited on its surface; and when this is carried away by streams into the sea, it is obvious that the soil must be proportionately impoverished. On the other hand all these elements are retained on the surface, and tend to fill up its hollows, when the streams charged with them gradually disappear by evaporation instead of finding an outlet to the ocean.¹ Hence the potential fertility of all deserts and the ready transformation of any such tract into fertile land as soon as art or nature provides the means of irrigation.

In China a fertilizing dust is sometimes carried by the wind in quantities equal to that which darkens the air in the desert sand-storms, and this dust is found to produce exactly the same effect upon the soil as similar

¹ *China: Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien.* Von Ferdinand Freiherrn von Richthofen, 1877, vol: i. p. 8.

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deposits left by the overflow of rivers ; and this is not the only respect in which aerial currents are found to produce effects analogous to those usually attributed to water only. An ancient Chinese ode contains the couplet "Great winds have a path ; they come from the large empty valleys," and the action of these winds is as irresistible as that of a mountain torrent in its bed. The Chinese poet evidently had in his mind experiences like that of an unsuccessful Mormon colony in an exposed part of the Salt Lake district. A recent writer,¹ after describing how the settlement is swept by winds from a great canon, adds : "One year they sowed three hundred acres with wheat, and the wind simply blew the crops away. The people live for part of the year in a ceaseless dust-storm, and what is not actually displaced is kept rubbed down to the ground by the perpetual passage of waves of sand." Similarly, according to Prejevalsky, in the Mongolian deserts, "The winds of winter and spring blow with such violence that you see even the humble shrubs of wormwood uprooted by them and rolled into bundles, and driven across the barren plain."² General Gordon, noting the same phenomenon in North Africa, was reminded that it must also have been familiar to the Psalmist of Palestine, who desired to see his enemies made "like a wheel, as the stubble before the wind."³

Air, like water, scours the channels in which it flows, and carries with it all the lighter particles of the objects in its path, and like water also, it deposits in one place what it has swept away from another. A recent English traveller in China observed at Ichang, on the Blue River, that on a calm, mild, sunny morning in March, the sky was obscured by clouds of otherwise invisible dust,⁴ and he adds that the dust-storms, which the north-west gales of winter bring from the Mongolian deserts, carry the fine sand particles for an incredible distance. The deposits thus left would tend to raise the level of the lowlands more rapidly in proportion than is done by the Nile flood, for in Egypt some of the surface soil would be washed up and carried away down stream, whereas in China the wind would not touch the soil of the valleys at all, except to raise them by depositing its burden of sand, while it would tend to denude any hill tops not protected by vegetation, and thus operate doubly in reducing the face of the country towards the dead level which characterizes most of it.

The inexhaustible fertility of the loess districts in Northern China has been accounted for by the supposition that the whole formation consists of pulverized rock and pulverized fertilizers, as if the richest alluvial land had been heaped up for ages without the intervention of water. Perfectly dry earth or sand drifts before the wind like snow, and if the air currents have an uniform direction, it will spread itself gradually like a sheet of water or mud, filling up the hollows of the valleys, and leaving no irregularities be-

¹ *Simmers and Saints*. By Phil Robinson, p. 209.

² *L.c.*, p. 20.

³ Ps. lxxxiii. 13.

⁴ *Through the Yang-tse gorges, or Trade and Travel in Western China*: By A. J. Little, 1888, p. 88.

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yond the surface undulations of a sandy sea or snow-drifts. The loess of China is a calcareous loam, wholly unstratified, extremely porous, consisting of innumerable vertical tubes, so friable as to crumble between the fingers, and yet with enough cohesion to form vertical cliffs two hundred feet in height, in which dwellings can be carved as substantially as in the Old Red Sandstone.

The porousness of this formation is explained on the hypothesis that an increased rainfall has dissolved the greater part of the saline incrustations which form upon the steppes during the period of rainlessness; ¹ its thickness and extent have been accounted for by the joint ingenuity of German and American geologists in the following manner. As long as the surface of the ground is covered by vegetation, the elements of the undersoil remain *in situ*; the disintegration of the rock beneath goes on to an extent which varies with its chemical composition, but may reach, as in the case of granite or gneiss, a depth sometimes of several hundred feet. If, however, this surface vegetation is destroyed, as by a period of rainlessness, the layer of decomposed rock is at the mercy of either ice or wind, though the more familiar action of water is excluded. Now in Northern China there are no signs of a glacial period, and its felspathic rocks show no traces of decomposition such as are met with in Southern Asia, where they have been protected from erosion. Neither, during the period of loess formation, was there any denudation of the rocks by water; both denudation and deposits here being the work of aerial influences alone. Inequalities in the surface of the rock, and the existence of basins and channels, where water can never have lain or flowed, are attributed to the unequal rate of disintegration, and the distinction already made between lands that retain their surface fertilizers, and lands in which these are washed away by rain and rivers, repeats itself in the distinction between regions where the bare rock is exposed by æolian influences, and those in which the same influences bring fresh deposits. As examples of such sub-aerial deposits, it is enough to mention the still sandy deserts, steppes, not yet free from salt, savannahs, the loess in China, Bavaria, and Missouri, and at least three other soils of phenomenal fertility, the Russian black earth, the Indian cotton soil, and the *terra roxa*, or red coffee lands of Brazil, consisting of decomposed trap reaching to a depth of from twenty to thirty feet.

China is only singular in the vast extent of the exceptionally fertile soil, which stood ready to the hand of the first skilled agriculturists who might claim it. The area of China is estimated at 1-33rd of the habitable globe; its present population includes about one-third of the human race. Some of its most fertile spots have unquestionably been under cultivation for upwards of 4,000 years; and though the whole region now known as China

¹ *China, l.c.*, p. 126. The whole of chap. ii., *Die Löss-Landschaften im nördlichen China und ihre Beziehungen zu Central-Asien*, and chap. iii., *Bildung und Umbildung der Salzsteppen Central-Asien*, are full of interest, not merely to geologists. Cf. also Pumpelly, *Geological Researches in China, Mongolia and Japan*, 1862-5. *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, vol. xv. part iv.

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proper has not been occupied by the Chinese for so long as that, most of the remarks that would apply to the large empire of to-day would be equally true of the first settlements of the spreading black-haired people.

Nowhere else within the temperate zone do we find a continuous tract comprising an equal area of equally fertile soil, a country where the variety of temperate, and the abundance of tropical, climates are combined in the natural produce, and where benignant nature has set the fashion of good government by making the struggle for existence so easy to her children. The soil of Egypt might be equally fertile, but the requisite culture was monotonous, and servile labour was skilled enough to sow before and reap after the inundation. To profit by the varied productiveness of China, the inventiveness of private enterprise stimulated by the institution of private property was necessary; but some of the phenomena generally associated with these phrases in the west are missing, for the end aimed at by the economic system is substantially the same as in Egypt, though the method is different.

In Egypt, as we have seen, the base of the industrial order was formed by a system of forced labour and subsistence wages. In the Middle Kingdom, free labour and sufficient food would be the corresponding formula. As in Egypt, for many ages food was normally so plentiful, by the pure bounty of nature, that dearth appeared only explicable as the result of bad government; and so, while reserving the right of the people to earn their own food in their own way, the duty of their rulers was conceived to consist, chiefly, in making not only such arrangements as should secure the free labourers in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour, but also such as should make the labour itself as remunerative as possible.

Political liberty for the masses did not exist, and they had no right to criticise the imperial measures, but all the more ruthless was the judgment passed on the results of such administration. Was food abundant? The government was good, and the people orderly and contented. Was there famine in the land? The Emperor and his officers had neglected the duties of their station; they and not the people were to blame for the crimes which followed invariably on the heels of misery. At the present moment all we have to do with this ideal of the ruler's duties is to point out that it could not have been formed, except in such an agriculturist's paradise as Egypt, Mesopotamia, or China; so that, even if formed in the golden age before the dawn of history, it would have had to be renounced or modified in China, but for the singular homogeneity of the region gradually incorporated in the empire.

Surrounded almost exclusively by the sea and the desert, backed by great blocks of cold highlands, the climate of China is as regular as the seasons, each of which takes its character from broad cosmic influences, which are not in this case materially modified by any local cause. There is a regular season of rain and sunshine, each brought by winds from the appropriate quarter, so that travellers can tell in advance at what time of year to start for a voyage up or down either of the great navigable streams.

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The succession of the seasons is almost the same throughout the country, though the dates of each particular phase may vary.¹

Another peculiarity of structure, which has facilitated the establishment of a uniform and centralized government, is the relation of the rivers and mountains, more particularly in the south. Not only has every river of importance numerous tributaries flowing into it more or less at right angles; but even when no tributary stream divides the mountain ridges, these still run at right angles to the river valley, not as a barrier across it. Though the area of China is equal to that of all Europe, without Russia, and, though it is by no means wanting in mountainous districts, none of these make an internal barrier, separating one district from another as the Alps separate Italy and Switzerland, or as the Kwen Lun and the Snowy Mountains separate the Chinese Empire and Tibet. The main streams of China flow from west to east, and each of them is fed by more or less important tributaries flowing south and north; hence the means of communication are much greater, even through difficult country, than when the main streams flow in opposite directions and every source is a water-parting separating at once and for ever the chief river systems of the continent.

The valley of the Rhine and the valley of the Ticino are politically separate in a way that the valleys of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Yellow River never are, even when the distance between them is much greater than that from Basle to Pavia. The main river systems are thus only divided by chains of secondary importance, and the same peculiarity makes it possible in many cases to establish artificial means of communication between them by canals, connecting the tributaries of different main streams. This characteristic is most marked in the southern and eastern provinces, which, as the last to be occupied, would hardly have become so thoroughly incorporated with the older parts of the empire, if the means of communication had not been so much better in their case, as to compensate for the greater distance from the capital.

The prevailing absence of natural barriers between the course of different streams has, however, another and less beneficial consequence. Nowhere else within historic times has a stream of the importance of the Hoang-ho changed its course so materially, when its proper outlet becomes too shallow and confined to allow the passage of its waters. The consequent inundations made the embanking of the natural watercourses a necessary precaution, and the habit of "regulating the waters" of the largest rivers no doubt prepared and encouraged the agriculturists to undertake on its actual scale the not less beneficial, voluntary work of canalization.

¹ M. Biot concludes from a comparison of the flora of the Classics with the crops cultivated in different parts of China at the present day that there has been no considerable change in the climate of the country within historical times. "Recherches sur la température ancienne de la Chine," *Journ. As.*, 3me ser., vol. x. (1840), p. 530. A translation of what is called, "The little Calendar of the Hia," is appended (p. 552). This is an almanack poem,—in the style of the Yueh Ling (*Sacred Books of the East*, xxvii. p. 249), and the first ode of Pin (Shi-king, *Chinese Classics*, iv. Bk. xv.),—supposed to have been found in the tomb of Confucius about the 6th century A. D.

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While the course of the rivers is such as to facilitate and promote inland traffic, the conformation of the coast is the reverse of favourable to foreign commerce. Harbours are few and bad, the mouths of the rivers are silted up with sand; there is but one bay of any importance, and none of those gulfs and indentations which invite and almost compel the dwellers on the coast to carry on their traffic by help of short cuts across the water. The inferiority of their neighbours on the north and south prevented any equality of intercourse, either political or commercial; while the industrial instincts of the people found ample satisfaction in the production of native articles of use and luxury, which each province could exchange as far as needful with other parts of the empire.

In no other civilized country in the world could it have been seriously proposed, as a defence against piracy, to lay waste a strip of ground a few miles wide all along the coast; but the sacrifice involved by this curious measure was, after all, inconsiderable. The great lines of traffic are all inland, and, for commercial purposes, the coast of the provinces on the east of the Great Canal is to be found on its banks rather than by the real seashore. In fact, the inundations, which were the one danger to Chinese agriculture, served indirectly to stimulate and promote Chinese commerce. The cuttings, which were necessary for drainage and useful for irrigation, served also to provide water-ways for trade, and so to prevent the exclusive dependence on agriculture which has a cramping effect on natural development.

The political history of China has been much simplified by these features in its physical geography. The only natural barriers which are formidable enough to serve as the frontier of an important State are the Yellow River, the Yang-tse-kiang, and the mountain ranges on the east and north of Sz'chuen, which isolate that large and fertile province. But the empire was never divided for long together into four great States, of Northern, Southern, Central, and Eastern China. The great dynasties ruled over the whole territory annexed by settlers of the dominant race. After the fall of one of these dynasties, the political disorganization of which this fall was the result manifested itself in the formation of a number of minor kingdoms or feudal principalities; then the process of integration commenced afresh, and the smallest States were absorbed, until there remained only three or four rivals powerful enough to aim at restoring the unity of the empire.

The official histories of China never recognise more than one Imperial dynasty at a time, though the Imperial dynasty did not always govern the whole empire, sometimes hardly a quarter of it; but the slightness of the barriers between one part of the empire and another was seen when any of the rival States began to grow in power. Any moderately strong Government found it easy to overstep either or all of these natural landmarks; and as soon as one was overstepped, there was seldom any halt till the next was reached. For a time the Hwai might serve as a division between north and south; but that was only a stage in the process by which