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978-1-108-04556-8 - Address to the People of Great Britain, Explanatory of Our
Commercial Relations with the Empire of China

Anonymous

Excerpt

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A D D R E S S,

&c. &c.

CHINA, exclusive of its possessions in Tartary, which spread over seventy degrees of longitude, comprises, within the circuit of its proper territories, a superficies of nearly one million three hundred thousand square miles, or upwards of ten times the computed area of the British isles.

Nor is the vastness of this empire to be estimated merely by the space over which it spreads, since in point of extent, China Proper yields to the Russian empire, which stretches from the shores of the Baltic to the sea of Kamtschatka, and from the Caspian to the Polar ocean. In the number of its inhabitants, however, it surpasses Russia and all other countries.

The immensity of its population indeed, as reported in the official returns made to government, may well stagger belief; but the correctness of those statements need not here be made a subject of disquisition. Suffice it to observe, that we have the concurrent testimony of almost all travellers, from the time of Marco Polo to the present hour, that the number of cities, towns, and villages, great as it is

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in all the provinces, is, in many, almost inconceivable.

The report made to Sir George Staunton, states the population to be three hundred and thirty-three millions; nearly one-third of the number of human beings supposed to exist over the whole face of the globe. In fact, we have no record of the existence of a country so densely populated, subject to one government, using one language, and observing one system of laws and institutions.

Nor does the population, as under some other despotisms, consist of only two classes, the lordly and wealthy tyrant, and the wretched slave. There is in China every gradation of society that is met with in Europe; and, though there are certain privileges exclusively pertaining to the members of the Imperial family and the functionaries of government, wealth is distributed also among the private gentry, as well as among a very numerous and enterprising mercantile community; nor are the manufacturers and artisans denied the reward of ingenuity and industry. Money, indeed, is not often in China withdrawn from circulation for the purpose of being hoarded; in fact, the habits of the Chinese are not parsimonious. Though the most actively industrious race of beings in the world, they are sensual and luxurious. Unlike the priest-ridden Hindoo, the son of Han pays but few taxes to the gods. Births, marriages and funerals, are in this country indeed, as elsewhere, made occasions of expense, but it is only at the death of a parent, when the property of the deceased furnishes the means, that institutions of a religious character are attended with any very

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considerable cost. Official rapacity renders the accumulation of wealth a dangerous experiment, while filial duty imposes on children the charge of maintaining their parents, and thus the Chinese are more distinguished by industry and enterprise in acquiring wealth, than by parsimony in the use of it. With this general inclination to spend, and the means of indulgence in the hands of so many members of the community, there is no want of commercial activity in bringing from abroad such objects of luxury as their own country cannot supply.

Mercantile speculation, indeed, accords well with the gambling disposition very generally prevalent among this people. The factors of the East India Company, writing to their employers in the year 1622, inform them in the quaint style of the day, that “Concerning the trade of China, three things are especially made known unto the world. The one is the abundance of trade it affordeth. The second is, that they admit no strangers into their country. The third is, that trade is as life unto the vulgar, which, in remote parts, they will seek and accommodate with hazard and all they have.” The interesting and instructive narratives of Lindsay and Gutzlaff prove, that, after the lapse of two hundred years, those *three things* are, at the present hour, as strikingly characteristic of the nation as they ever were.

This commercial disposition is favoured by the possession of a range of sea-coast, which, stretching in a curvilinear course from the Island of Hainan on the south-west, to the Gulf of Leautong, through

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twenty-three degrees of latitude and thirteen degrees of longitude, presents to the mariner, in an extent of upwards of two thousand five hundred miles, numerous convenient harbours or safe roadsteads, whose shores abound with marts for every variety of merchandise, while the magnificent rivers and canals of the interior afford admirable facilities, not only for the interchange of domestic productions, but for the transport of foreign commodities to the most remote parts of the country.

Unlike the climate of Hindostan, that of China is subject to extreme vicissitudes of cold and heat. In the northern half of the empire indeed, the rigour of winter is as intense as in most parts of Europe, rendering similar precautions necessary to guard against its severity. But while warm clothing would be insupportable under the burning sun of the summer months, the Chinese does not, on that account, like the Hindoo, discard all covering from his body, but is content to wear fewer or lighter garments.

In a commercial point of view the political situation of China is more advantageous than that of Hindostan, inasmuch as the country is self-governed. Its produce is not sent abroad to defray the expense of a foreign government, but to be given in exchange for commodities which may administer to the wants or comforts of its own population, or to be returned with profits that increase the capital of its merchants.

With reference therefore to the importance of the trade with China to manufacturing interests, we cannot but feel regret as well as astonishment, that the apathy or indecision of our statesmen should

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have left our commercial relations with that nation in the deplorable state in which they are found at the present moment.

The British cotton manufacturer cannot forget that even the once far-famed fabrics of Bengal have given place to his superior skill, not only in the general market of the world, but in the very field of its production. Already have the nankins of China itself almost ceased to be numbered amongst its staple exports, unable to compete with the nankins of England. It seems, indeed, impossible that, drawing a part of his raw material from India at a very enhanced price, while the cost of his labour is more than double that of the Hindoo weavers, the Chinese could, any more than his Indian neighbours, clothe himself so cheaply or so well, in articles of his own manufacture as in those from the British loom, were the latter fairly placed within his reach. A population far exceeding that of all Europe is ready and able to purchase the productions of the British weavers. ONE MAN* has been induced to say they shall not, and England has kissed the dust from his feet and acquiesced in humble silence.

Should a brighter day arrive, and the ports of China be freely opened to our woollens, it must be the fault of our manufacturers if they do not obtain possession of the most extensive market that has been ever presented to them; for China possesses neither the materials nor the skill that would enable it to compete with us. Unless, however, great exertions are made, continental Europe, by supplying

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our many fabrics at a lower price, is not unlikely to occupy the better part of this vast field. Of glass ware in any shape there is no manufactory in China that deserves the name, so that in this branch also an almost boundless field is unoccupied. It is to be hoped that when the paralysing touch of the excise is withdrawn from our glass-works, we shall cease to be, as hitherto, undersold by competitors of other countries far less skilful than our own manufacturers.

The Chinese employed in our Indian foundries and dockyards have proved to be excellent workmen; but mere manual labour cannot compete with the powers of the steam-engine. The hardware of Sheffield and Birmingham must therefore one day supersede the native tools and cutlery of China. Surpassing, in short, the Chinese in every branch of art and science, as well as in capital and machinery, there is scarcely an article, food excepted, that can administer to the wants or tastes of man, that the manufacturers of England may not supply to them of a quality and at a price that will ensure an almost unlimited demand. It does not, indeed, seem too much to expect that even the porcelain of Keang Se may, at last, in China as in Europe, give place to the stone-ware of Worcestershire or Staffordshire; or that English silk stuffs may, at no distant period, be bartered for the raw silk of Kyang Nan.

Against the reality of such brilliant prospects, it may perhaps be urged, that experience shows them to be illusory. The East India Company say they made the most patriotic efforts to introduce British goods into China, but were unable, even at the willing sacrifice of large sums in the experiment, to force

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any considerable quantity on that market. Nor is it a sufficient answer to this fact, to allege, in explanation, the want of skill and economy that pervaded every part of the trading system pursued by those merchant-sovereigns. The enterprising traders of the United States have also failed in this object, though neither prudence nor judgment was wanting in the attempt.

To this argument, there is an obvious and conclusive reply. Neither the East India Company, nor any other merchants, have as yet been permitted, correctly speaking, to trade with China. Their dealings have been conducted with about a dozen individuals, whose residence, indeed, is in that country, but who ought to be considered rather in the light of slaves to the officers of the local government, than as merchants. The experiment cannot be regarded as fairly made, till the free-trader can legitimately pursue the natural liberty of trafficking where, with whom, and in what objects of commerce may best suit his interest; secure from all molestation so long as he offends against no rational law of the country, and sure of redress should wrong be offered to him.

How different from such conditions are those under which commerce with China has hitherto been conducted! Obligated to limit their resort to a single port, lying at a distance of fifteen hundred miles from the capital, foreigners are even there prohibited from dealing with any native who is not of the privileged number of hong merchants, half of whom are believed to be in insolvent circumstances.

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It is found convenient by the officers of government to assume as a general axiom, that all foreigners are to be included among those who are described in their classical works as barbarians, incapable of appreciating the laws and institutions of a civilized people. They are, therefore, to be denied access to the regular tribunals of the country, and are placed under the guidance and control of those very men with whom alone they are allowed to have any dealings,—the merchant who buys from them, the comprador or steward who supplies their wants, and the linguist who interprets for them. As a counterpart arrangement flowing from the same principle, those hong merchants, linguists, and compradores are, in their turn, made responsible for the conduct of foreigners. The arbitrary system of authority under which they are from infancy brought up, makes those men far more submissive and tractable subjects to deal with than free-born Englishmen. Nor is there wanting a share of plausibility for this arrangement. Foreigners are ignorant of the laws of China, and may therefore chance to transgress them, though they can have no wish to infringe on the ordinances of the country which they make their temporary residence. It is the duty of those natives who are about them, and who are authorised to transact business with them, to direct them how to avoid such infringements. If foreigners err in this respect, it is from want of good advice, or from following bad advice; and, therefore, it is but just that their officially appointed advisers shall be punished. But, from the use that is made of those provisions, it is easy to distinguish between their ostensible and their real pur-

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pose; and what the latter is, will be but too well developed as we proceed. In the mean time, we may state that it is an avowed maxim of their commercial policy to prevent foreigners from acquiring a knowledge of the real state of the market; as it is the anxious care of the local authorities to stifle their complaints: both which objects the arrangements referred to are well calculated to secure. The limited number of those sponsors makes it at once easy to select any individual among them, when a victim to rapacity is required; while the monopoly they enjoy is supposed also to contract into a focus, as it were, the means of gratifying that cupidity. Nor is a plea for extortion ever wanting. Even to be liable to the imputation of intimacy with foreigners is constructive treason; so that, between the jealousy of rivals and the extortions of his rulers, it is difficult for a hong merchant, who aims at giving satisfaction to those with whom he has dealings, to escape imprisonment and torture, except by the sacrifice of all he may possess. It is not, therefore, surprising that respectable persons can seldom be persuaded to place themselves in a situation of such danger; but it would be truly astonishing, if, under such circumstances, commerce could be conducted with vigour, or be pushed to the extent of which it is capable.

But to see more clearly the position of the Chinese, with respect to the foreign trade at Canton, the British merchant has only to figure to himself the consequences that would ensue to him, were the Grand Seignior to become emperor of all Europe, and to rigorously enjoin that its trade with the rest of the world should be conducted at

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the Porte, and no where else; that all transport of British goods by sea should be prohibited, lest foreigners might by that means receive their supplies without going to Constantinople, and that to carry on direct correspondence with an American or East Indian merchant should be deemed treasonable. Let him then imagine that, even after he has carried his goods up the Rhine, and down the Danube, and along the shores of the Euxine, till he has landed them at Constantinople, he is allowed to select, from among only a dozen privileged merchants, the one through whom he may choose to deal, and that he is entirely at the mercy of this man, both for the price which he may obtain for his goods, and the rate at which he must pay for his returns. This is precisely the position of the country merchant at Canton.

To the situation of the foreign merchant there, a parallel may be drawn, by supposing the American, in the preceding case, to be an object systematically held up to popular scorn, in public proclamations issued by the effendi; to be described in these as addicted to every vice, and to be of a class of beings with whom it is pollution to hold social intercourse; to be forbidden even to assume the appearance of fixing his residence in Turkey, by bringing to it his wife and family; to be debarred from quitting, for air or exercise, the barrack allotted to himself and his fellow-merchants, except at long intervals, and under the charge of a special guide, made responsible for his conduct; to be denied the privilege of using a conveyance in case of illness; to be precluded from hiring warehouses for his goods, and from