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978-1-108-07385-1 - Things Japanese: Being Notes on Various Subjects

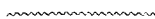
Connected with Japan

Basil Hall Chamberlain

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.



To have lived through the transition stage of modern Japan makes a man feel preternaturally old; for here he is in modern times, with the air full of talk about Darwinism, and phonographs, and parliamentary institutions, and yet he can himself distinctly remember the Middle Ages. The dear old *samurai* who first initiated the present writer into the mysteries of the Japanese language wore a cue and two swords. This relic of feudalism now sleeps in Nirvâna. His modern successor, fairly fluent in English, and dressed in a serviceable suit of dittos, might almost be a European, save for a certain obliqueness of the eyes and scantiness of beard. Old things pass away between a night and a morning. The Japanese boast that they have done in twenty years what it took Europe half as many centuries to accomplish. Some even go further, and twit us Westerns with falling behind in the race. Not long

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ago, a Japanese pamphleteer refused to argue out a point of philosophy with a learned German resident of Tōkyō, on the score that Europeans, owing to their antiquated Christian prejudices, were not capable of discussing such matters impartially.

Thus does it come about that, having arrived in Japan in 1873, we ourselves feel well-nigh four hundred years old, and assume without more ado the two well-known privileges of old age—garrulity and an authoritative air. We are perpetually being asked questions about Japan. Here then are the answers, put into the shape of a dictionary, not of words but of things,—or shall we rather say a guide-book, less to places than to subjects? The old and the new will be found cheek by jowl. The only thing that will not be found is padding; for padding is unpardonable in any book on Japan, where the subject-matter is so plentiful that the only difficulty is to know what to omit.

In order to enable the reader to supply deficiencies and to form his own opinions, if haply he should be of so unusual a turn of mind as to desire so to do, we have, at the end of almost every article, indicated the names of trustworthy works bearing on the subject treated in that article. For the rest, this little

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book explains itself. Any reader who detects errors or omissions in it will render the author an invaluable service by writing to him to point them out. As a little encouragement in this direction, we will ourselves lead the way by presuming to give each reader, especially each globe-trotting reader, a small piece of advice. We take it for granted, of course, that there are no Japanese listening, and the advice is this:—

Whatever you do, don't praise, in the presence of Japanese of the new school, those old, quaint, and beautiful things Japanese which rouse your most genuine admiration. The Japanese have done with their past. They want to be somebody else and something else than what they have been and still partly are. When Sir Edwin Arnold, the illustrious author of the "Light of Asia," was entertained at a banquet in Tōkyō by a distinguished company including officials, journalists, and professors, in fact, representative modern Japanese of the best class, he made a speech in which he lauded Japan to the skies—and lauded it justly—as the nearest earthly approach to Paradise or to Lotus-land—so fairy-like, said he, is its scenery, so exquisite its art, so much more lovely still that almost divine sweetness of disposition,

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that charm of demeanour, that politeness, humble without servility and elaborate without affectation, which place Japan high above all other countries in almost all those things which make life worth living. (We do not give his exact words, but we give the general drift.)—Now do you think that the Japanese were satisfied with this meed of praise? Not a bit of it. Out comes an article next morning in the chief paper which had been represented at the banquet,—an article acknowledging, indeed, the truth of Sir Edwin's description, but pointing out that it conveyed, not praise, but condemnation of the heaviest sort. Art forsooth, scenery, sweetness of disposition? What care we for art, scenery, and sweetness of disposition, cries this editor?—and he is a representative man. Why did not Sir Edwin praise us for huge industrial enterprises, for commercial talent, for wealth, political sagacity, strong armaments? Of course it is because he could not honestly do so. He has gauged us at our true value, and tells us in effect that we are pretty weaklings.

Yes, reader, we—we now mean our own little “we,” not the editorial “we” of the disappointed Japanese journalist—we have seen this sort of thing over and over again. We can even sympathise with

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it, or at least try to do so. For after all, Japan must be modernised if she is to continue to exist. Besides which, our new European world of thought, of enterprise, of gigantic scientific achievement, is as much a wonder-world to the Japanese as Old Japan can ever be to us. There is this difference, however. Old Japan is to us a delicate little wonder-world of sylphs and fairies. Europe and America, with their railways, their telegraphs, their gigantic commerce, their gigantic armies and navies, their endless applied arts founded on chemistry and mathematics, are to the Japanese a wonder-world of irresistible genii and magicians. The Japanese have, indeed, little or no appreciation of our literature. They esteem us whimsical for attaching so much importance as we do to poetry, to music, to religion, to speculative disquisitions. Our material greatness has completely dazzled them, as well it might. They know also well enough—for every Eastern nation knows it—that our Christian and humanitarian professions are really nothing but bunkum. The history of India, of Egypt, of Turkey, is no secret to them. More familiar still is the sweet reasonableness of California's treatment of the Chinese. They would be blind indeed, did they not see that their only

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chance of safety lies in the endeavour to be strong, and in the endeavour not to be too different from the rest of mankind; for the mob of Western nations will tolerate eccentricity of appearance no more than will a mob of roughs.

Indeed, scarcely any even among those who implore the Japanese to remain as they are, refrain, as a matter of fact, from urging them to make all sorts of changes. "Japanese dress for ladies is simply perfection," we hear one of these persons cry; "only don't you think that gloves might be added with advantage? And then, too, ought not something to be done with the skirt to prevent it from opening in front, just for the sake of decency, you know?"—Says another, whose special vanity is Japanese music (there is considerable distinction about this taste, for it is a rare one),—says he,— "Now please keep your music from perishing. Keep it just as it is, so curious to the archæologist, so beautiful, for all that the jeerers may say. There is only one small thing which I would advise you to do, and that is to harmonise it. Of course that would change its character a little. But no one would notice it, and the general effect would be improved."—Yet another, an enthusiast for faience,

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wishes Japanese decorative methods to be retained, but to be applied to French forms, because no cup or plate made in Japan is so perfectly round as are the products of French kilns. A fourth delights in Japanese brocade, but suggests new breadths, in order to suit making up into European dresses. A fifth wants to keep Japanese painting exactly as it is, but with the trivial addition of perspective. A sixth—but a truce to the quoting of these self-confuting absurdities. Put into plain English, they mean, “Do so-and-so, only don’t do it. Walk north, and at the same time take care to proceed in a southerly direction.”

And can it be wondered at that the Japanese are bewildered? On the other hand, must it *not* be wondered at that any one can expect either Japanese social conditions or the Japanese arts to remain as they were in the past? All the causes which produced the Old Japan of our dreams have vanished. Feudalism has gone, isolation has gone, beliefs have been shattered, new idols have been set up, new and pressing needs have arisen. In the place of chivalry there is industrialism, in the place of a small coterie of aristocratic native connoisseurs there is a huge and hugely ignorant foreign public to satisfy.

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All the causes have changed, and yet it is expected that the effects will remain as heretofore!

No. Old Japan is dead, and the only decent thing to do with the corpse is to bury it. Then you can set up a monument over it, and, if you like, come and worship from time to time at the grave; for that would be quite “Japanesey.” This little book is intended to be, as it were, the epitaph recording the many and extraordinary virtues of the deceased,—his virtues, but also his frailties. For, more careful of fact than the generality of epitaphists, we have ventured to speak out our whole mind on almost every subject, and to call things by their names, being persuaded that true appreciation is always critical as well as kindly.



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THINGS JAPANESE.

Abacus. Learn to count on the abacus—the *soroban*, as the Japanese call it—and you will often be able to save a large percentage on your purchases. The abacus is that instrument, composed of beads sliding on wires fixed in a frame, with which many of us learnt the multiplication table in early childhood. In Japan it is used, not only by children, but by adults, who still mostly prefer it to our method of figuring with pen and paper. As for mental arithmetic, that does not exist in this archipelago. Tell any ordinary Japanese to add 5 and 8 and 7: he will flounder hopelessly, unless his familiar friend, the abacus, is at hand. And here we come round again to the practical advantage of being able to read off at sight a number figured on this instrument. You have been bargaining at a curio-shop, we will suppose. The shopman has got perplexed. He refers to his list, and then calculates on the instrument, which of course he takes for granted that you do not understand, the lowest price for which he can let you have the article in question. Then he raises his head, and, with a bland smile, assures you that the cost of it to himself was so and so, naming a price considerably larger than the real one. You have the better of him, if you can read his figuring of the sum. If you cannot, ten to one he has the better of you.

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The principle of the abacus is this:—Each of the five beads in the broad lower division of the board represents one unit, and each solitary bead in the narrow upper division represents five units. Each vertical column is thus worth ten units. Furthermore, each vertical column represents units ten times greater than those in the column immediately to the right of it, exactly as in our own system of notation by means of Arabic numerals. Any sum in arithmetic can be done on the abacus, even to the extracting of square and cube roots; and Dr. Knott, the chief English, or, to be quite correct, the chief Scotch, writer on the subject, is of opinion that Japanese methods excel ours in rapidity. Perhaps he is a little enthusiastic. One can scarcely help thinking so of an author who refers to a new Japanese method of long division as “almost fascinating.” The Japanese, it seems, have not only a multiplication table, but a division table besides. We confess that we do not understand the division table, even with Dr. Knott’s explanations. Indeed we will confess more: we have never learnt the abacus at all. If we recommend others to learn it, it is because we hope that, for their own sake, they will do as we tell them and not do as we do. Personally we have found one method of ciphering enough, and a great deal more than enough, to poison the happiness of one life-time.

Book recommended. “The Abacus, in its Historic and Scientific Aspects,” by Dr. C. G. Knott, F. R. S. E., printed in Vol. XIV, Part I, of the “Asiatic Transactions.”

Abdication. The abdication of monarchs, which is exceptional in Europe, has for many ages been the rule in Japan. It came into vogue in the seventh century together