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Some Account of Korea: Volume 1

Alexander Williamson

Excerpt

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# JOURNEYS IN NORTH CHINA, MANCHURIA, AND EASTERN MONGOLIA.

## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS BEARING ON THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF CHINA.

Extent of China—Varieties of Soil and Climate—Mineral Resources—  
Water Communication—Mental Capacity of the People—Written  
Language—Education—Untouched Resources—Deplorable Condi-  
tion of the Chinese—Memorial to the Emperor—Intrigues of Can-  
didates for Office—Lying and Deceit Universal—No Hope for  
China in Herself—Mr. Hart's Opinion.

“DESCRIBE to me,” says Cousin, “the geography of  
a country, and I will foretell its future.” Applying this  
principle to China, the future of that country stands out  
clearly before us.

China Proper extends from about the 19th to the  
41st parallel of north latitude, and the 97th to the

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## INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS.

122nd of east longitude. It comprises an area of 1,300,000 square miles, or nearly 832,000,000 of square acres. Within these limits are embraced every variety of soil and climate. There are tracts of champaign country like France and Belgium; swampy districts like Holland; and mountainous regions like Switzerland. Advancing within the tropic of Cancer three degrees, and extending northwards towards Mongolia—including every degree of altitude from the sea-level to the perpetual snow-line, and every variety of conformation of hill and valley, land and water—it yields everything that can be desired for the sustenance, comfort, or luxury of man. Its mineral resources are very great, surpassing those of Europe and Australia, and rivalling those of the Western States of America. Professor Ansted, in his official catalogue of the Great Exhibition in 1851, gives the area of the coal-fields of Great Britain at 12,000 square miles, and that of the United States of America at 130,000 square miles, whereas that of the North of China alone—not to speak of South China or Western China—is estimated by W. S. Kingsmill, C.E., at 83,000 square miles. Iron-ore and iron-stone, of various descriptions, are found in every province, in many places in great abundance, and, what is most noteworthy, the black magnetic ore—the finest ore in the world—is the kind in common use, so much so, that the Chinese seldom work any other in the manufacture of iron. Copper, lead, tin, silver, and gold are plentiful, scarcely a district of China being without one

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## MENTAL CAPACITY OF THE PEOPLE.

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or other of them. The water communication is extremely well distributed—in this respect superior to that of most countries, and surpassed by none.

The mental capacities of the people are of no inferior order. Their administrative powers are remarkable. Sir Frederick Bruce is reported to have said that “Chinese statesmen were equal to any he ever met in any capital in Europe.” This may, or may not be. Certain it is, they hold their own with our British diplomatists. Chinese merchants cope successfully with our own in all departments of trade; in fact are gaining ground on them.\* Their literati are equal to any intellectual task Europeans can set before them; and Chinamen have carried off, in fair and keen competition, high honours in British and American universities. The number of high-class books mastered by not a few is quite surprising. The common people are shrewd, painstaking, and indomitable; and the more I have travelled among them the more have I been impressed with their mental promise, docility, and love of order.

The Chinese have a written language co-extensive with their vast dominions, and although there are many varieties of spoken dialects in the South, yet from the Yang-tsi-kiang to the Amoor, and from the Yellow Sea to India, one speech obtains, viz., the Mandarin colloquial, which has also the immense advantage of being

\* See Consul Medhurst’s “Report on the Trade of Shanghai”—*Blue Book* (China) No. 7, 1870.

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## INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS.

a written language. Education prevails extensively, and the minds of the youth are all directed towards moral excellence as the acme of their ambition. Here, then, we have all the elements needful to success and dominion: no end of coal for steam purposes, abundance of iron for machinery, facility for cheap and rapid communication, capacity to govern, brains to plan, hands to work, and a will to put everything in motion, subservient to their own interests.

Now, when we consider that the soil is as rich and fertile as ever; that the mineral resources not only of North China but of the West and the South—*equally great*—are all *practically untouched*; when we add the varied promise and mineral wealth of Manchuria and Korea, the extent of the population, the ability and enterprise of the people as attested by a consecutive history of four millenniums, and the general character of the race, who does not see that the Chinese nation is destined to rise and dominate the whole of Eastern Asia?

The Chinese have always been the imperial race in the far East; and they are as able as ever to exercise dominion, and will assuredly do so. It is true that at present they are in a most deplorable condition. Their old principles of government are disregarded; the maxims of their classics utterly ignored by the generality of their rulers; rapacity and corruption pervade every department of the State, even to a far greater degree than foreigners ever imagined. Witness their

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## MEMORIAL TO THE EMPEROR.

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recent memorials to the throne published in the *Peking Gazette*; as a sample of which, a few sentences may be quoted here from the memorial of Ting-ta-jen, the governor of the province of Kiang-su, a man of great authority and position. In regard to the men who now aspire to office, he says:—

“That men bent on speculation, not only those of but moderate circumstances, but even the naked poor, come knocking at the door for office. Those who have no means of making a living, gather a little here and a little there, in order to make merchandise of office—thinking that with an office bought for a thousand some hundred taels,\* on their arrival at their station, they can draw several tens of taels per month, and at once receive a good percentage on their investment. And if, perchance, they get temporary charge of an office, or full possession of a vacancy, whether they make the less sum of some thousands, or the greater sum of some tens of thousands, they seek only their individual advantage, regardless of the injury to the public welfare;” and, further on, he slyly assumes that, “it is known that these men who thus receive their appointments from the Board of Revenue, can henceforth fraudulently appropriate the government revenues, can henceforth plunder and oppress the people; *in hearing a trial can make the wrong appear the right; in the pursuit and apprehension of criminals can cause it to be falsely testified that virtuous men are robbers.*” Referring to the results of the present public examination system, he says: “To speak, for example, of the one province of Kiang-su, of the office of *Tau-tai* there are only two or three vacancies which can be filled apart from the throne. Of the offices of *Chih-fu*, *Chih-chow*, *Chih-hien*, *Tung-chih*, and *Tung-pau*, only some tens can thus be filled, while there are about sixty or seventy men expectants of the office of *Tau-tai*, and more than a thousand for the other offices. But to put a thousand and more in several tens of offices must be the work certainly of a distant and undetermined future. Even in the selection, according to the order of time, and the fulfilment of requirements for temporary posts, unless it be those who have been expectants for more than ten years, none can get a single year’s office. Those who are nimble-footed and manage to advance sooner, must either be clever in boring and scheming their way, or have friends in a position to help them forward. How can such a class, by nature unreliable and sordid,

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\* Tael, equal to, say, 6s.

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## INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS.

be expected to cherish the people? Supposing that, in the course of ten or more years, they obtain one year's office as a substitute, out of this one year must come the expenses of the preceding ten and more years for clothes and food, the cost of maintaining a family, and returning favours; and besides, in this one year of temporary office, provision must be made for the future. *To place dogs and sheep before a hungry tiger, and expect him not to seize and eat them, although you should make a show of preventing him with a stout bow and poisoned arrows, would certainly be to expect an impossibility.* And so these men, having no fixed source of income, and consequently no fixed purpose of heart, are not simply villains; *their very penury is the reason of their becoming so.*"\*

This testimony is true, not of Kiang-su alone, but of the whole Empire. Poverty, on the part of the Government, has induced them to depart from their old plan of competition, and dispose of their magistracies for money. This accounts for the evils above described, and explains their apprehension of the advance of European civilization. These are the literati who stir up the common people against missionaries and foreigners. These are the men who, with the threat of reporting them to the mandarins, annoy and squeeze Christian converts, and such native merchants as may be seeking to introduce improvements. These are the men who, at every point, retard the advancement of western civilization, and in whose favour so much has been spoken in our highest circles and best literature. Clearly there is no hope from such men.

But the most melancholy fact is, that there is about as little hope apart from these "hungry tigers." Superstition clouds the finest intellects, as we have

\* See translation in *Supreme Court and Consular Gazette*, Sept. 11, 1869.

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## NO HOPE FOR CHINA IN HERSELF.

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repeatedly witnessed ; a low and mean spirit has crept into the homes even of the higher classes ; squalor and filth are often barely concealed beneath the grand silks and embroidered dresses of the wealthy ; opium is gnawing at the vitals of the Empire, and destroying thousands of its most promising sons. And, worst of all, there is no truth in the country. Falsehood and chicanery are their hope and their weapons. Scheming has been reduced to a science : deceit and lying placed upon the pedestal of ability and cleverness. The common people know not when they may be pounced upon by their own protectors ; and so a paralysing sense of insecurity pervades the country throughout its whole extent.

As far as we can see, there is no hope for China in China herself. We have, at different times and in different connections, inquired separately of the ablest Europeans and Americans in Peking,—men who had the best opportunities of knowing the true state of matters,—whether they had ever met a man in official circles who *understood the times*, and was likely to put forth some intelligent effort to raise his country, and the reply has invariably been in the negative.

Mr. Hart, the Inspector-General of the Chinese Customs—a gentleman in constant personal communication with the highest mandarins in the Empire, and in respect of this matter the best European authority in China—holds the same opinion. “ Out of the thousands of officials in the Empire,” he says, “ only some forty

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in the provinces, and perhaps ten at Peking, have a glimmering notion of what it is that the foreigner means when he speaks in general terms of progress, but of those fifty not one is prepared to enter boldly on a career of progress, and take the consequence of even a feeble initiative.” \*

This accords with my own observation. There is not a man at present within the field of view in China of whom anything towards the reorganization of the country and the elevation of the people can be expected. The nation, therefore, must become more and more corrupt, unless some external element be introduced to save it. This is clear; but here lies the difficulty. There are, in addition to the preceding facts, certain formidable barriers in the way of European intercourse, and the introduction and action of foreign ideas.

\* See Ross Browne’s *Correspondence*.



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## CHAPTER II.

## BARRIERS IN THE WAY OF PROGRESS IN CHINA.

Pretensions of the Emperor—His Titles—Duration of his Assumed Greatness—Conduct of the Government towards Prince Alfred—Lord Elgin's Policy—Conceit and Ignorance of the People—Their Estimate of Foreigners—Chinese Maps—Mr. Hart's Testimony—Worship of Ancestors a Form of Idolatry—Evils resulting from it—Chinese Emigrants—Horrible State of Society in Manchuria and Mongolia—The Fung Shui Superstition—Solutions of the Difficulty—The Opium Traffic—Universal Untruthfulness and Deceit—What the Chinese need to Reform them.

FIRST among these barriers stands the position and pretensions of the Emperor. This is the backbone of Chinese exclusiveness. He claims to be the representative of God upon earth; the source of law, office, power, honour, and emolument; the possessor of the soil; the owner of all the resources and wealth of the country; and entitled to the services of all the males between the years of sixteen and sixty.

In perfect consistency with these prerogatives, his government assumes control over "*T'ien hia*," or all under heaven; or, as it is sometimes put, all within the "four seas." The "*nui-fan*" and the "*wai-fan*"—that is, the interior and outside foreigners, or, more offensively,

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and in reference to more remote tribes, the “*nui-i*” and the “*wai-i*,” *i.e.* the internal and external barbarians—are all under his jurisdiction. So clearly is the uniqueness of his position understood that he is acknowledged and called the “Tien tsze,” or *the Son of Heaven*, and sometimes *the Holy Son of Heaven*. He also calls himself, and is designated by his subjects, as the “*Kwa jen*,” the “*man who stands by himself*,” or the “*Kwa kuin*,” “*solitary prince*.” He thus recognizes no equal upon earth, and scouts the very idea of being placed on a footing of equality with any royal family. The usual apothegm is, “There cannot be two suns in the heavens, or two (Whang-ti) Emperors in the world.”

This assumption is no modern invention. It is one of the most elemental ideas of the Chinese system. It has lived through many revolutions, and gathered strength by the triumphs of four thousand years. It is supported by tens of thousands of men distinguished for ability and a certain culture of intellect, and is proclaimed in all quarters of the Empire by a three-hundred-million-tongued voice.

This most exclusive claim stands before us as firmly as it did centuries ago. Witness the Imperial edicts,—the reference made by the late Emperor to the President of the United States, *viz.*, that “the idea of his equality was a subject to be relegated to the regions of laughter;” and, above all, the conduct of the Chinese Government in reference to the visit of H.R.H. Prince Alfred to