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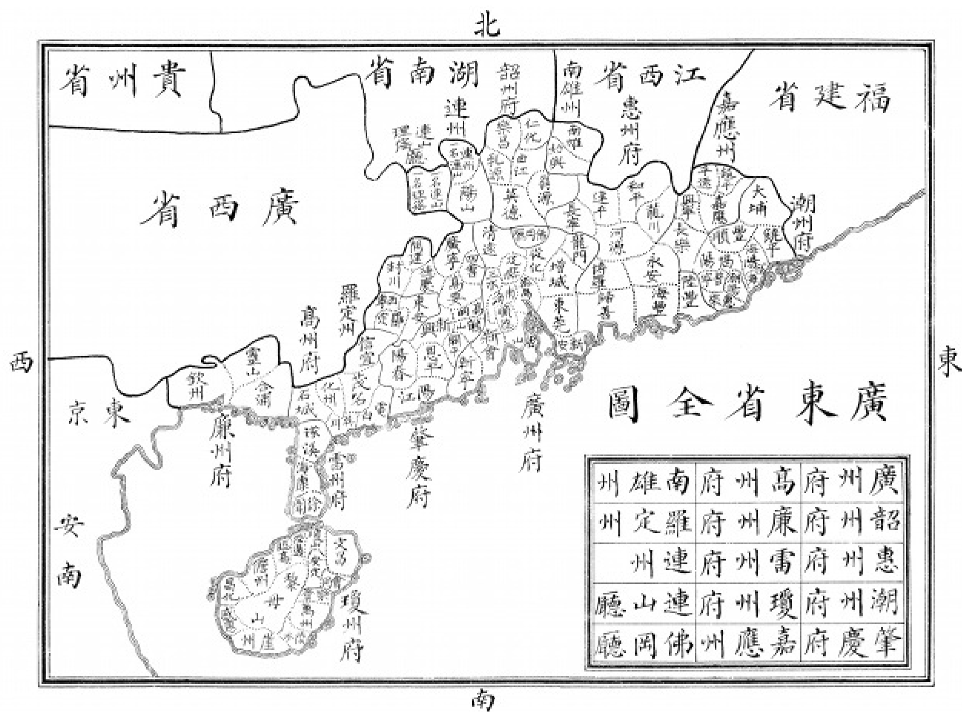

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China in America:

A STUDY IN THE
Social Life of the Chinese
IN THE
Eastern Cities of the United States.

BY STEWART CULIN.

READ BEFORE THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE
(SECTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY), AT THE THIRTY-SIXTH MEETING,
NEW YORK, 1887.

PHILADELPHIA: 1887.

[2]

[3]

Social Life of the Chinese
IN THE EASTERN CITIES OF THE UNITED STATES

The Chinese laborers in America all come from the departments of Kwangchau and Shauking, in the province of Kwantung.

They describe themselves as *Púntí* or "natives," as distinguished from the tribes called *Hákká* or "strangers," and divide themselves into the people of the *Sam Yup* ("Three Towns") and those of the *Sz' Yup* ("Four Towns"), the former from the three districts of Nánhái (1), [1] Pw'anyú (2), and Shunteh (3), and the latter from the four districts of Sinhwui (4), [4] Sinning (5), Kaiping (6), and Ngánping (7). Others from the district of Hohshan (8) include themselves with those from the *Sz' Yup*, and there are a few from each of the districts of Tungkwán (9), Hiángshán (10), Sánshwui (11), and Sinngán (12).

The tract embraced in these districts is little more than 100 miles square, but it exhibits much diversity in its natural features, the northern and western parts being high and mountainous, while those approaching the coast are low and covered with small hills, and the entire region is well watered by numerous large rivers and tributary streams. Large towns and cities, many of them the seat of important manufactures, are found within its limits. The coast is studded with numerous small islands and furnished with safe and commodious harbors.

The people of the different districts show distinctive peculiarities, both in speech and customs. Those from Nánhái and Pw'anyú, the districts within which the city of Canton is situated, partake of the manners of its inhabitants, although few here are from the capital itself, and their language differs little from the dialect of Canton as transcribed by Dr. Williams. The *Sz' Yup* people, particularly those from the maritime district of Sinning, who comprise the greater [5] part, are ruder and more adventurous than those from nearer the capital, and their speech can only be understood with difficulty by the inhabitants of the Provincial City.

The immigrants are much influenced by local traditions and those from different sections keep much to themselves. They establish separate shops when their numbers warrant it, as well as assembly-rooms and guild-halls. The Six Companies in San Francisco, under which nearly all of the Chinese in the United States are enrolled, are the guilds formed in this manner by the emigrants from different parts of the province.

The ties of kindred, preserved with so much care in China, are recognized here, and many of the immigrants claim relationship. People of the same village naturally drift together, and as all the inhabitants of a Chinese village frequently belong to the same clan and bear the same name, it happens that many members of the same family are often found associated here, the numbers of any particular family varying much, however, in different localities. Some thirty or forty of these clans only are represented among the Chinese in our Eastern cities. A Chinese storekeeper in Philadelphia has furnished me with the following list of the names and numbers of each clan among some four hundred and fifty of his acquaintances in that city. It will be observed that the *Lí* clan outnumbers any other. In New York city, [6] the Chiús predominate, numbering some five hundred souls.

區 *Au*, 4 or 5.
陳 *Ch'an*, 30.
周 *Chau*, 15.
張 *Chéung*, 20.
鄭 *Ching*, 2 or 3.
趙 *Chiu*, 10.
鍾 *Chung*, 30.
馮 *Fung*, 10.
何 *Ho*, 20.
林 *Lam*, 10.
李 *Lí*, 120.
羅 *Lo*, 2 or 3.
呂 *Lü*, 10.
馬 *Má*, 4 or 5.
麥 *Mak*, 15.
梅 *Múi*, 80.
吳 *'Ng*, 4 or 5.
伍 *'Ng*, 4 or 5.
譚 *T'ám*, 6.
鄧 *Tang*, 6.
胡 *Ú*, 4 or 5.
余 *Ü*, 10.

王 *Wong*, 10.
黃 *Wong*, 20.
顏 *Yan*, 1 or 2.
楊 *Yéung*, 4 or 5.
易 *Yik*, 1 or 2.

The members of a clan unite when necessary for mutual defense or to redress a wrong done to one of their number; the ties and obligations of the clan, however, are much stronger among the Sinning people than those of the northern districts. Very slight disagreements between individuals among them are frequently taken up by their respective families and made the subjects of long and bitter quarrels—meetings are held, large sums of money subscribed, and feuds perpetuated that may have been carried on for ages at home.

The immigrants are nearly all agriculturists, with a small sprinkling of artisans and shopkeepers, some of whom have served an apprenticeship in Canton or Hong Kong after leaving their native villages. They are nearly all single men, who left their homes at an early age before the usual time among them for contracting marriages. [2] Some have wives and children in China, and many of the more successful go home to marry and then return again to America; but wives and children are never brought with them, and there are few native women among them, except in San Francisco and the cities of the western coast.

The first considerable emigration of Chinese to America occurred at the time of the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Many then sought their fortunes there, and the stream of emigration, once started, was much increased by the disturbed condition of the southern provinces during the next decade. The Triad Society, a secret order opposed to the present Manchu dynasty, seized upon the time when the government was engaged in combating the Tai Ping rebellion in the north and raised an insurrection. This was subdued, but with much bloodshed, and thousands of the rebels sought refuge in America, with many others who were ruined by the outbreak.

The first appearance of the Chinese in any numbers in our Eastern cities dates from about the year 1870. Before that time an occasional Chinaman found his way here as cook or steward on some incoming vessel, and a little colony of such waifs had already established itself in the city of New York.

Upon the completion of the Union Pacific Railway, thousands of Chinese were thrown out of employment. In the absence of women in the mining camps they found a remunerative occupation in the laundry business, and before 1869 they had obtained almost a monopoly of that occupation in the West. Shortly before this time, a Mr. Thomas engaged fifty San Francisco Chinese to work in his laundry at Belleville, New Jersey. They quickly discovered, upon their arrival, the field presented by the neighboring cities for their work, and the news spread rapidly to California and even to China itself. [3] Thousands of Chinese came to the East, until at present there is scarcely a town throughout the whole extent of country where one or more may not be found, while in the large cities colonies have been formed, in which much of their primitive life has been re-established, and an opportunity presented for the observation and study of these interesting people at our very doors.

Little capital is required to start a laundry, one hundred dollars being usually sufficient, and several men frequently associate themselves together and share the profits between them. The owners should each clear from twenty-five to seventy dollars per month, while the hired laborers are paid from twenty-five to thirty dollars per month, with their board and lodging. They rise at daybreak and work until their task is finished, often until far into the night. Two meals a day are provided for them, one at about nine in the morning and another between four and five in the afternoon. These consist of rice, fish and pork, and certain vegetables, and are abundant and palatable. One of the men in the laundry acts as cook, an avocation for which all the immigrants seem to show much aptitude. Sunday and Monday are generally observed as holidays, work being resumed on Monday night. The Chinese New Year is the season for a holiday lasting for nearly a week, and at this time, as upon the occasion of several other principal Chinese festivals, employers are expected to provide a special dinner for their laborers.

The occupation of the laundrymen, both as owner and employee, is a profitable one, but their incessant toil, with their aptitude for combination and freedom from many of the expenses which the family relation entails upon all other classes, may be regarded as the secrets of this success.

The store is the centre around which life in a Chinese colony revolves. As soon as several men have collected in a town or city, one of them will send to the nearest place of supply and purchase such Chinese groceries and other wares as may be needed by the colony. These he will sell to his comrades, without at first discontinuing his usual avocation. If the colony increases in numbers he may rent a small store and with the assistance of some of his friends form a store company. Several men are usually associated in such enterprises, one of whom will be placed in charge as manager. A general assortment of Chinese merchandise is obtained, either from New York or San Francisco or direct from China itself, and an auspicious name is selected for the company and prominently displayed without the store door.

In a short time this place becomes the resort of all the Chinese in the colony, many of whom may have a small money interest in the concern. They have provisions and clothes to buy; news of the outside world and of their own homes may be learned here; and, besides, there is a couch provided for opium smoking, which the immigrant, with newly acquired money to spend, readily practices as the first dissipation at hand. In time the shop-keeper, knowing the advantage of increasing the attractions of his place, may procure a tolerably skillful cook and open a restaurant in an upper story of his building; but at first this will only be kept open on Sundays and holidays.

Other opportunities for making money will not be lost sight of. The cellar will be fitted up with bunks for opium smoking, and tables covered with matting for the convenience of those who desire to play dominoes; and the profit on the opium consumed and the portion of the winnings set aside for the use of the tables soon constitute a more important source of revenue than the store itself.

Thus many interests besides those of the dealer in clothes and provisions grow up under the roof of the little shop. Often a doctor, some poor and broken-down student, dispenses medicines from a supply of drugs ranged along one side of the store; the itinerant barber, an indispensable personage, makes it a place of call; letters for the colony are

directed in care of the store; public notices are written on tablets of red paper and pasted beside the door; Chinese newspapers, both of San Francisco and the native ports, are received; and here, too, interpreters are to be found, who [12] conduct negotiations and adjust differences with the outside world.

As the colony increases in numbers, a kind of society reorganizes, and though at first it may have been composed of laborers engaged as laundrymen or cigar-makers, many of them in time find other employments tributary to the mass, and take up their former occupations or new ones most congenial to them. The modifications and divergences of this society from that of the Chinese at home, due to the absence of native women and the influence of the different and aggressive civilization around it, present an interesting field for study.

Time will not permit me to dwell upon even the characteristic features of the social life of the Chinese in our cities, but there are certain questions connected with their mental characteristics and religious belief which a somewhat prolonged contact with those people enables me, more or less imperfectly, to answer.

Much misconception exists as to character of the Chinese who emigrate to America. They are generally described as the dregs of their people, given up to gambling and opium smoking and distinguished only by their vices. Some, however, who have observed their constant toil, the readiness with which they accept instruction in our language, and [13] their willingness to profess a belief in such religious teaching as is at the same time offered to them, have greatly exaggerated their moral and mental qualities; while others who have questioned them, in the spirit of philosophical inquiry, concerning their religious belief and their knowledge of Confucius and the sages of antiquity, usually in terms quite unintelligible to them, have declared that the popular opinion as to their ignorance is well founded, and that they have little in common with the class of scholars and philosophers who have dignified and adorned the pages of Chinese history from the dawn of their civilization down to the present time.

Nearly all the Chinese in America have passed some of their early years at school, where they learned to write a few of the many characters of their language, and to read it with more or less facility. This is the case even among the Sinning people, few of whom go up at home to the district examinations, and among whom, even in China, there are few literary graduates or persons of distinction—a condition due not so much to their lack of natural ability, as to the extreme and grinding poverty to which they are subjected.

Among those from Hohshan and the country adjacent to the city of Canton are found many of considerable [14] attainments; not men who would be considered scholars at home, or who have even obtained the degree of *siu-tsai* that constitutes the first step to advancement, but clerks who are able to read and understand much of the abstruse classical literature of their country, and whose sympathies and traditions are allied with those of the great literary aristocracy by which their nation is dominated. Many of their country people have attained eminence in the past, and the lists of the successful graduates at the Triennial Examinations at Canton, which are received and posted in the shops here, frequently contain names not only of students from their native villages, but of their own cousins and kindred.

This class forms a small part, however, of the great mass of the immigrants, and their literary ambitions are soon lost here in the struggle for existence, for which they seem less fitted than many of their ruder neighbors.

The latter appear to be little influenced by the classical instruction of the schools. While the books of the sages and philosophers constitute the literature, *par excellence*, of China, there exists a vast popular literature, quasi-historical, imaginative, and romantic, which is read by the mass of the people and more directly controls their minds than the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Within it are enshrined the popular traditions and folk-tales, in many other [15] countries as yet handed down orally, here amplified and embellished, and although written in the vulgar tongue, receiving many charms from their beauties of style and literary execution. Stories of the magician *Chau Kung*, of the heroic *Kwán Kung*, long since deified as the God of War; of *Muk Kwai Ying*, that martial heroine of Chinese historical romance, with tales of the *Pát Sín* (the Eight Genii), and Buddhist legends without number, all go to make up this intermingled mass of romance and tradition.

These wonder tales have fallen upon no incredulous ears in the past. Accustomed to attribute almost every phenomenon of nature to the intervention of supernatural powers, to people every rock and tree with its familiar spirit, "to hear the menace of a god in the thunder, and see the beneficence of a deity in the rain," they have had little reason to question the truth of stories in which the occult and supernatural plays little greater part than it daily appears to in the course of their own lives.

Their religion is not a system which we can define as that of Tao, Buddha, or Confucius, although all these have contributed to give form to ceremonies and observances; the worship of the spirits of the dead, with a kind of fetichism even more primitive, constitutes the principal element of their belief.

[16] We may discover traces of Buddhistic teachings in their worship of Kwan Yin, in their ideas as to the transmigration of souls, and in their abstinence from eating beef; of Taoism, in the spiritual hierarchy under which all of their gods, buddhas, and demons are made to find a place, and of the Literary Cult, in those methods of divination and forms of worship, still practiced as in the times of Confucius and the sages, by whom they were recorded; but deeper and stronger than these is their belief in the continued presence of the spirits of the dead and their controlling influence upon the fortune and destiny of the living. Such ceremonies as are observed by the Chinese here have for their object the propitiation and expulsion of these phantoms; prayers and offerings are made to higher powers, but their aid is invoked for protection against the spirits of the dead and those malignant forces in nature with which they are believed to be often associated.

Contact with our civilization must bring with it a more correct conception of the physical universe and dissipate many of these illusions. A knowledge of our sciences will give China a new place in history, and we cannot fail to look with interest upon these first representatives of its capable and extraordinary people among us, who may some day play no small part in the awakening of their country to a knowledge of the resources of the Western World.

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1 (**return**)

The accompanying map of the province of Kwantung is reproduced from the Ho Hoh T'ung Shú ("the Concord Almanac") for the year 1855. The situations of the several districts mentioned in the text are indicated by corresponding figures in red upon the map. The scale of the map is about eighty-five miles to the inch.

2 (**return**)
Hon. George F. Seward, *Chinese Immigration in its Social and Economical Aspects*, New York, 1881, p. 191.

3 (**return**)
The Chinese in New York, The New York Daily Tribune, June 21, 1885.

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