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THE ECONOMY OF CHINESE LABOUR

IN the three successive winters of 1869, 1870, 1871, it was my lot to travel about 2,500 miles on horseback in the province of Chih Li, and to spend three summers entirely amongst the rustic Chinese of the Peking plain. In 1872, I walked about 200 miles from Kewkiang to Hankow; in 1880, I covered, on foot and by chair, about 2,000 miles in Sz Ch'wan, Hu Pêh, and Kwei Chou provinces, besides journeying over 1,000 miles in boats; in 1883, I must have travelled, chiefly on foot, but also by boat and chair, some 1,500 miles in Fuh Kien and Chêh Kiang; and, besides all these tours, I made a number of short journeys from time to time in Kwang Tung, Hai-nan, Kiang Su, and An Hwei. Finally, during 1888, I undertook a special study of emigrant Chinese in Tonquin, Cochin-China, the Straits Settlements, Siam, Burma, Sumatra, Java, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, the United States, and Japan. In 1885-7, I spent two years in Corea; in 1892-3, a year in Burma. I introduce the subject with these preliminary remarks, partly in order to justify my presumption in writing at all, and partly in order to show how hopeless it would be to include specific evidence¹ upon Chinese labour from all these places within the short limits of this paper.

Roughly speaking, I have found that the average cost in China of unskilled labour is about 100 copper cash a day; of skilled labour anything from that sum up to 300 cash a day. In spite of the fact that "copper cash" has no definite meaning, and that silver has no definite quality or weight; that there are base cash, fine cash, nominal cash, paper cash, imaginary cash, clean dollars, "chop" dollars, Government and local taels, different touches of silver, and so on; still, the broad fact remains that "300 cash" means from a franc to a shilling *per diem*; and "100 cash" thus means about fourpence. Inland, where money

¹ Evidence of the most detailed description is given in a report (No. 24,867) printed for the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office in 1888; and also in a book (published and sold in Hong Kong only) entitled *Up the Yangtze*, 1881.

is scarce and little used, it is usual for the fourpenny-man to receive his food, and, in addition, 1,000 to 1,200 cash a month : in other words, a sum of from 60 to 70 cash, or, say, threepence a day, is ample wherewith to provide a healthy labourer with solid wholesome meals. If he has a family, he probably also owns a patch of land : in any case, he must use the cash balance according to his own lights. Just as our clerks are expected to keep up respectability on salaries little, if anything, in advance of fitters' or boiler-makers' wages, so in China the literary man not yet *arrivé*, the schoolmaster, the scribe, the fortune-teller—all these—can and do live on much the same pay as the workman or agriculturist, except that their sedentary life enables them to economise a trifle in food in order to launch out in "respectability." I have never had any difficulty in engaging good scholars at from six to ten Mexican dollars a month, nothing found. The fact that a Mexican was once worth 4s. 2d., like the American dollar, scarcely affects the economy of internal China, although it has recently fallen to the neighbourhood of eighteenpence : cash have become dearer, as I once explained in the *Economist* ; but, after all, things have shaken down much on the old lines.

Of course, life at the treaty ports, and notably at such great centres as Shanghai, Tientsin, and Hankow, has seriously affected this primitive condition of affairs. And long before the wages of artisans, servants, masons, and builders went up, Chinese sailors had already for years been drawing huge pay : for instance, I distinctly remember, thirty years ago, signing on the roughest class of seamen at \$16 or \$20 a month, or about double the pay of the highly-educated Chinese gentleman who was at the moment assisting me to ascertain their names. Since the "Boxer" wars, the awakening of China, the enormous demand for Chinese labour created by the Russians and by the different railway syndicates, of course the market must of necessity be still more disturbed ; and it is an undoubted fact that, all over the Far East—in China, Japan, Corea, Annam, and Manila—prices are rapidly going up all round ; luxury is increasing, and life assumes a broader scope upon a more expensive scale. Still, it must be remembered that (apart from Manchuria) there are not 10,000 adult civilian Europeans in the whole of the five countries named, and consequently the artificial demands created at a few oases in the vast desert of poverty cannot have a very widely extended effect upon the average simplicity of Chinese life.

I have often watched the hundreds, and even thousands, of return emigrants from Siam and "the Straits," landing in boats

quite close to my window, from the steamer in the offing at Hoihow. The same scene may be witnessed almost daily in the season at Swatow and Amoy. Hongkong is so busy and miscellaneous a place, that a proportionate or even larger number landing also there, is quite swamped amid the gigantic daily passenger traffic by junk and by steamer, with Canton, Macao, and the mainland. No matter where a coolie goes to, and what he does, he earns abroad at least ten, and usually nearer twenty Mexican dollars a month. America and Australia are rather out of court now, and, at any rate, the special restrictions they impose call for a special class of emigrants, who circumvent the law in special ways. But, apart from these two places, all Chinamen may be said to emigrate to rice countries, where rice is even cheaper than at home. Moreover, there is a steady "chow" trade with China, *i.e.*, an enormous export of "trash," destined for the coolie consumer abroad. Besides, the *ngapi* of Burma, and the corresponding fish sauces of Annam (*nuoc-nam*) and Siam (*nam-keng*), are agreeable to the Chinese palate, and are healthy withal: hence the Chinaman abroad lives very well on the same 60 cash a day—or its equivalent—that he needs at home; moreover, he gets—in most places—opium, gaming, theatre, and other indulgences; he enjoys a free, varied, and active life, beyond the reach of squeezes; and he invariably comes home with his \$200 a year tied round his waist. (Hence the extraordinarily heavy loss of Chinese life whenever there is a shipwreck.) He may come home on a visit once a year; or he may come only once in ten years; but, unless he founds a house abroad, his savings are certain to average about \$200 on the year. For 30,000 return emigrants every year, this means six million dollars, or £600,000, at least. Chinamen are slow to "found cemeteries" abroad, and they will never do so unless (as is the case in many English colonies) they feel permanently secure. A cemetery means, in effect, also a Chinese wife, and a legitimate one too; a solid house; investments; naturalisation; change in attire; but, strange to say, in spite of disloyalty to the dynasty, *never* the abandonment of the purely Manchu pigtail.

As the question of Chinese labour in the Transvaal is now occupying general attention, I may specially recall my visits to the Chinese-worked tin mines of Perak (Malay Peninsula) and Maliwun (Burma); also to the gold mines of Ballarat, some of which were under Chinese management. The impression left upon me in each instance was admirable. So long as agreements are kept, and Chinamen are treated with good faith and justice, there is no fear whatever of strikes or malingering. There are

dangers of "rows" (several of which I have myself witnessed) owing to family, "ancestral," and tribal feuds; or, too often, in consequence of some stupid foreign official suddenly and peremptorily introducing new regulations, without giving adequate notice, or without considering and allowing for the Chinese religious and social prejudices. I take it the German-Jew element in South Africa would require particularly close Government supervision in order to make sure that the Chinaman's stipulated rights and privileges were in no way evaded by the cosmopolitan millionaire, for it was precisely amongst the Germans in Sumatra that I noticed, in 1888, a tendency to be overbearing, and to take advantage of unprotectedness. Possibly this is not so any longer. If Chinamen are imported, there ought to be imported with them an English official akin to the Protector of Chinese in Singapore, speaking the dialect or dialects of the coolies, and totally independent of the moneyed magnates of the Rand, and of their favour. Moreover, there ought to be a Chinese consul, and precautions should be taken that he be not of the "squeezing," or money-making order. The best way to teach China self-respect is to respect her, and leave to her a legitimate control over her own destinies. The English Protector should have a small staff of clerks and writers, capable of issuing and printing the requisite notices, proclamations, and agreements in the Chinese language. Arrangements should be made for the importation of rice and "trash" free of duty. By "trash" is meant paper-money for the dead, incense sticks, spatchcocked ducks, preserved eggs, bamboo shoots, sea-slugs, seaweed, dried and salt fish, and all the innumerable curiosities, edibles, medicaments, and condiments in which Chinamen delight. Chinamen require no priests; they rear their temples and manage them in their own local way. It will be impossible to exclude opium; the only thing is to minimise the evil by placing it under Government control, and giving the labourer a bonus on the profits made out of him to take back home with him. The greatest precautions should be taken to facilitate the temporary and respectful stowage of coffins in properly protected places; and, when the relative is prepared to take the corpse home, to make reasonable, safe, and cheap arrangements for the carriage. There are many other points connected with Chinese fads and prejudices which it is impossible to enumerate here, but which should be most carefully placed in the hands of experts.

It is popularly supposed that Chinese miners object to working underground; if it occasionally be so—which it is—it is on account of their ignorance in the past of the precise effects of fire-damp;

for this reason they *prefer* surface work if they can get it; but I have seen native-worked coal-mines at several places in Hu Pêh and Sz Ch'wan, where the shafts, though not perpendicular, ran sloping for considerable depths into the earth. The passages were ventilated by an ingenious system of water-wheels, fitted with "cog-fans," and the coolies wore ordinary oil-lamps made fast round their foreheads. The foremen, who seemed to understand something of the principle of fire-damp, said that these lamps were perfectly safe so long as the ventilators were kept active. But, besides these native mines, I have seen hundreds of cheerful Chinese "operating" the various French coal-mines in Tonquin and Annam, where the shafts were perpendicular.

Interest is remarkably high in China. In country villages there is no difficulty in getting 15, 20, or even 30 per cent. on money carefully lent out. Land is also cheap, and for \$200 a Chinaman can purchase or rent enough to live on. But, in addition to that, every Chinese is a born huckster, and with a capital of from \$200 to \$1,000 he can even set a whole family or tribe upon its legs. It is by no means unusual in many parts of China to invest money in another man's shop or trading-junk, sharing the profits *pro ratâ*. Or there is a system of mutual loans, under which each person of ten or more contributes, say, \$100; and each takes his turn, by lot, to enjoy the use of the whole \$1,000 for one year. Consequently the return coolie with a bladder of dollars tied round his waist has a grand future in store; and so cognisant has the Chinese Government become of this, that within the past two years official rules for the protection of return coolies "with their pile" have been put in force at Amoy and other places. Women can be bought for a few shillings apiece, and on two occasions when (in Hankow and Hainan) I have engaged literary men at \$10 a month, they have invested their first month's savings in a wife. It may, therefore, be imagined what a harem \$200 would buy, were the returned wanderer uxoriously inclined.

E. H. PARKER