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GEOGRAPHY AND TRADE IN THE EAST.

BY JOHN GEDDIE, F.R.G.S.

NOTHING is more noticeable, in an analysis of current problems of foreign politics and foreign trade, than the intimate way in which every one of them has combined in it an element of geography. This has, of course, been more or less true at all periods of history, but the tastes and necessities of our own time would seem to demand every day a stronger blend of geographical knowledge, in order to make questions of over-sea politics or commerce appreciated. There are explanations of this which we need not stop here to discuss. One, no doubt, is to be found in the fact that the world, so far as concerns the expansion of trade in the old channels, appears for the time to have reached a stage of arrested development; that commerce is eagerly looking for new outlets and markets in quarters hitherto neglected; and that Governments are eagerly assisting the search by the acquisition of colonies. If zeal has in some cases outrun discretion, and blunders have been committed, it has been because the merchant and the politician have not taken sufficient counsel with the geographer before entering on their adventures, or because the latter has been himself remiss, and is void of information. To geography should be assigned the honourable function of acting as torch-bearer in the new departure that is being made in so many branches of national enterprise abroad. A "forward policy" in exploration is good at all times; at a time when diplomacy and trade seem not only inclined but compelled to embark in discoveries and experiments, it becomes an essential part of political action.

Materials for a fresh start are being sought chiefly in two directions—in Africa, and in the far East. Africa—at all events, the kernel of that dusky shell—is a present which geography but the other day opened to the view of commerce and politics. For their part, the traders and the statesmen, after some hesitation, are eagerly stretching out hands for the gift. National, international, and individual action is being taken in the basins of the Congo, the Niger, and the Zambesi, and on the east and west coasts of the continent, which will have immense influences in the sphere of politics and of trade. There is in it all, however, a good deal of the spirit and the risks of gambling. No one can calculate, because there is no exactly analogous experience in the past to guide us, what may be the profits or the losses of bringing the barbarous millions of the African interior into contact with the civilisation of Europe. In the East we tread on surer ground.

The subject of the enormous field for the development of trade that exists in China and the adjacent regions, and the desirableness of initiating a bold and definite line of national policy on the subject, has been brought forcibly before the country in an able paper which Mr. A.

R. Colquhoun has addressed to the Chambers of Commerce. In a variety of other ways it is being pressed upon our notice. Above all, the action of France in Annam and Tonquin has infinitely modified the conditions of the political and commercial problem in the East, and has raised to a position of general importance questions in which, until recently, the geographical specialist alone took any interest. From another point of view, the changes and developments that are going forward in the Middle Kingdom and its borders—over the whole vast territory indeed, from the Bramaputra to the Amur—have an intimate bearing on the great Asian Question—the rivalry of Britain and Russia in the Eastern continent. There is a third leading factor in this problem—the existence, the persistent coherence, in spite of all the forces acting towards disintegration, of the Chinese Empire; and France desires to make a fourth. Japan also occupies a peculiar position, and will play an essential part in the unfolding of this plot of Oriental destiny. Another important element is the growing share which Germany is taking in Chinese trade.

For the present, however, Britain holds an easy lead of all competitors in the field of Eastern commerce. Not only does our part in the traffic of China and Indo-China exceed that of any other Western nation—it vastly surpasses in value and bulk the trade carried on in these seas by all of them together. Somewhere about 70 per cent. of the export and import trade of the Chinese treaty ports is with the United Kingdom and its dependencies; still larger is the share of this commerce carried on British bottoms. The maintenance and strengthening of this dominant position, the multiplying of the facilities for entering the country, and the opening up of the interior with its population of hundreds of millions of industrious people, hitherto shut out by national prejudice and the jealous exclusiveness of their rulers rather than by physical obstacles—these have become more than ever objects of prime importance to British statesmen and merchants. The value of our trade with these countries of the far East considerably exceeds £50,000,000 sterling. As yet, however, they have been “tapped” only at some points on the coast. There remain for exploration the grand channels of inland navigation; and the Irrawady on the one side and the Yang-tze on the other are already yielding evidence of the important part the rivers will play in the development of Eastern trade, as soon as the artificial barriers that have so long shut out the commerce and products of Western civilisation are removed.

There remain also the various lines of land approach, especially those from the side of India. These were once of much importance. Even with the slow and cumbrous means of transport in use in Eastern countries—the pack-saddle, the bullock-wagon, and the porter—a considerable volume of trade flowed backwards and forwards by way of Bhamo and other trade routes, between China and its tributary states in the Trans-Ganghetic peninsula, and even between China and India. For many years past these old arteries of commerce have been practically closed; but with a

change of policy on the part of the Chinese authorities, with a termination of the disorders that have so long prevailed in Upper Burmah, the Shan States, and Yunnan, they might again become worthy of the attention of the British trader and the Anglo-Indian administrator. China and its neighbour countries have still to feel the magic influence of the railway; the enormous mineral resources they contain are as yet practically untouched. The frank adoption by the Pekin Government of a policy of railway construction, such as is now being initiated in Japan, would unquestionably work a revolution in the social and commercial condition of the country. It would also produce a revolution in British trade and intercourse with the East. The question of securing and improving old means of access to China, of penetrating to its back countries, and there creating and developing commercial wants, is thus one of incalculable importance to British manufacturers. It is, if possible, of still higher significance, looked at from the point of view of the interests of our Indian Empire and subjects.

There are signs not a few that the present advisers of the Dragon Throne, driven thereto more by force of circumstances than by free will, are meditating a reversal, or at all events a modification of the traditional policy. It is certain that "circumstances"—represented by French, Russian, and British pressure at different points on their frontier, and by the pouring in through the treaty ports, through the channels of the great navigable rivers, and along the tracts followed by consular officers, missionaries, and other agents of civilisation, of that new wine of Western influence which is gradually permeating the interior—will, at no distant date, open up China, with or without the consent of its rulers. Hence the necessity, strongly insisted upon by Mr. Colquhoun, in his paper, of carefully reviewing the situation, and of determining on some clear and definite course of action, in prospect of the fresh dangers and opportunities that have arisen in Eastern trade, politics, and geography. From each of these three points of view, this country occupies a position of great strategic strength—a position that is, at the same time, capable of being made much stronger than it is at present.

As a base of operations for commercial, political, or geographical enterprise, in the direction of China and Indo-China, we hold an almost unbroken line of territory from the Himalayas to Singapore. The eastern seaboard of Indo-China, the outlets of the great rivers of the region that find their way into the Bay of Bengal, are in British hands. In Upper Burmah, in spite of the hostility of its ruler, in spite of our own wise disinclination to interfere in its affairs, so long as it was possible to refrain from interference, we hold a dominating position by sheer force of geographical relationship and of the development of British Burmah under our rule. In Siam the preponderance of British influence and commerce has until lately been unquestioned. Hong-Kong and North Borneo are British territory. Hong-Kong, in particular, is one of the miracles of modern commerce; in the course of the forty years it has been

in our hands, it has grown to be one of the most important spots in the Eastern world, as an *entrepôt* of trade and an advanced post of civilisation. At Shanghai, Canton, and other treaty ports, we have long had an established position and recognised rights; within the "concessions," these are, to all intents and purposes, small self-governing European colonies. The opening of the port of Newchang, in the Yellow Sea, has enabled us, in the van of other foreign countries trading with the East, to take an important share in the wonderful work of development and colonisation which has since the last Chinese war, and more especially since the famine of 1877, been proceeding in Manchuria. Exclusive of the junk traffic, the value of the exports and imports at Newchang have increased from £15,000 in 1861, the year when the port was opened, to £2,154,116 in 1884. Of the tonnage employed in this trade, some 60 per cent. is under the British flag. In this direction there is a tempting and inexhaustible field for geographical research and commercial enterprise; and the political importance of Manchuria, lying as it does between the Russian outposts on the Amur and the Chinese capital, is also very great.

From an interesting report by Mr. Christopher Gardner, the British Consul at Newchang, we learn, among other things, that the total area of the consular district is 300,000 square miles, and that the population, as estimated by the Roman Catholic missionaries, is at least 15,000,000, and is rapidly increasing through constant inflow of emigrants from China, who are rapidly superseding the Manchu inhabitants, and are penetrating and occupying the extreme northern province of Heh-lung-Kiang, and the "debatable land" between the Palisades and the Yalu River and Corean frontier. Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, are doing good work in this region, not only in their own special sphere of labour, but as geographical explorers and pioneers of mercantile enterprise. All this is true also of Corea, whose long and strict isolation is at length being broken up. Commercial treaties have been concluded, and the beginning of what in time promises to be a valuable commerce has already been made at Chemulpo, the highest point on the Han River that can be reached by sea-going vessels, and the port of Söul, the Corean capital. Interesting reports on journeys into the interior of this little-known country, and on the gold-washing and other native mining operations carried on in the northern mountainous region, have been made by Mr. Aston, Mr. Carles, and other energetic consular officers; are they not to be found written, by those who choose to look for them, in the volumes of Blue-books annually laid before Parliament? In Corea, also, diplomatic action has not been idle. We have heard tell of Russian intrigue, and of efforts made at Söul to secure for the Czar by negotiation those rights of suzerainty and of exclusive commercial privileges in Corea, which France has obtained in Annam and Tonquin, only after a costly war. Not unnatural or unjustifiable these, considering the great importance which Russia attaches to the possession of open winter ports in

the Pacific; and of course equally justifiable, or more so, considering the vast interests she has at stake in these seas, was Great Britain's endeavour to safeguard her position, and provide against eventualities, by occupying Port Hamilton, in the Korean Archipelago.

Having glanced hurriedly along the lines that converge on the centres of trade in Eastern Asia—and, after all, the ocean must always afford the infinitely best line of approach, and that from which Britain's preponderating advantages must be chiefly derived—we must hark back again to the Indian frontier, and say something about the commercial projects and political difficulties which have within the last week or two brought Burmah and its geographical features prominently before the public. The shortest road, in a bee-line, from India to China is, of course, to be sought for in Assam and the upper valley of the Bramaputra—in that direction they may be said to touch. It is a region, as every one knows who has paid any attention to geographical discussions, full of the most puzzling and intricate questions in physical geography and ethnology—questions that at most are still only in a state of semi-solution. But the idea of a possible highway of commerce being found through it has generally been given up in despair, although the Bengal Chamber of Commerce have recently commended to the Indian Government the survey of a route of railway from the Bramaputra, having as its objective the town of Li-Kiang-fu in Western Ssu-chuan.

A scheme that gives better promise of an ultimate practical issue is that which contemplates forming a connection between the Indian system of railways and those of British Burmah, by a line starting from Dibrugarh, or some other point in Assam, and crossing the territory of the independent or semi-independent tribes on the North-East Frontier to the upper valley of the Irrawady. Available routes are known to exist through this mountainous tract, though at present very little commerce passes over them; armies have even traversed them in recent times, on their way from Burmah to Assam. Whether a paying line of railway can ever be carried across this line of country is, however, a question on which we have as yet no means of forming an opinion. Here, as elsewhere, geographical research and diplomatic action are needed to clear the way for commercial enterprise. In any case it is a project that must wait for solution on the settlement of the difficulty between the Indian Government and King Theebaw of Mandalay, which has just now reached the stage of acute crisis, and on the development of the trade of the Upper Irrawady.

This great river—an East Asian Nile—undoubtedly marks, with its grand navigable channel, its fertile alluvial banks, and the mineral resources of the ranges of mountains bounding its valley, one of the fields in which Eastern commerce can confidently look for large future expansion. The political and scientific interest attached to it as a probable line of approach to the south-western provinces of China has also been long recognised. In the thirty-three years during which the delta of the river

has been in our hands, the portion of the old Empire of Ava under British control, has prospered amazingly, in spite of occasional bad harvests and periods of depressed trade. Rangoon and Moulmein have become busy commercial cities and marts of the rice and teak trades. The native race have been found to be a people easy to govern, with a talent for trade and barter, and with this great advantage over the bulk of the inhabitants of British India, that they are not handicapped by a system of caste. The finances yield a handsome annual surplus, which, as the province is for administrative purposes attached to the Presidency of Bengal, goes to make up deficiencies in the Calcutta budget. A flotilla of river steamers plies on the Irrawady, and the construction of a railway system has been successfully initiated. Besides the natural increase of population, it is recruited year by year by refugees from King Theebaw's anarchic realm, this infatuated ruler having apparently no other notion of government than that of handing over towns and districts to be "eaten up" by greedy officials and court favourites. Besides the natural growth of its internal trade, British Burmah profits by being the sole channel and intermediary by which the Independent State can hold intercourse with the outside world.

Since Theebaw came to the throne of Mandalay, and signalled his accession by the massacre of all his relatives on whom he could lay hands, the Irrawady traffic has been in a critical state. An entire rupture of relations between Mandalay and Calcutta has only been avoided by the prudence and forbearance of the Indian Government; Theebaw, moved by dynastic alarms as much as by any other motive, has for seven years done all he could to provoke it. At last he appears to have trespassed beyond the bounds of long-suffering. He had been watching, no doubt with mingled feelings, the approach of France from the side of Tonquin. M. Haas, an enterprising French consular agent and commercial speculator at Mandalay, seems to have been able to afford the Burmese King the opportunity he has been looking for of playing off another Power against that of his too powerful neighbour. Theebaw seized it with an eagerness which M. Haas and himself have already cause to repent. A diplomatic mission has been sent from Mandalay to Paris, and a commercial treaty has been concluded, and awaits only the final sanction of the French Chambers. Large and wide commercial concessions and monopolies have been, it would seem, secured by French syndicates in Upper Burmah; they include, among other things, the foundation of a banking monopoly, and sole rights of building railways and of exploiting the forests and minerals of the country. The Bombay-Burmah Trading Corporation—a British company—have for some years held a lease of the teak forests of Ningyan, and have carried on an immense trade, employing thousands of coolies and hundreds of elephants in the transportation of timber. It was necessary, for King Theebaw's purpose, to discover some pretext for ousting the Corporation. It was found or made in charges brought against the company of illegal cutting of timber; these charges were brought

before what, at Mandalay, stands for a court of justice ; and the preposterous fine of twenty-three lakhs of rupees (some £200,000) was imposed.

With this last action the cup of Theebaw's offences nearly ran over. Representations were made at Paris, and the French Government promptly disclaimed any intention of disputing the paramount political influence of Britain in Upper Burmah, and M. Haas was recalled from the scene of his activity. King Theebaw, however, was in nowise disposed to give way. To the request of the Indian Government that the claims against the Bombay-Burmah Corporation should, according to treaty stipulation, be tried by a mixed court, or settled by arbitration, he has returned an insolent answer. Should he remain deaf to the ultimatum sent to him demanding the reception of an envoy and military escort at Mandalay, the only means left of bringing him to his senses will be that which proved effectual with his predecessors—namely, armed force.

The solution of the Burmese difficulty will have a necessary and immediate effect on the conditions of the problem of the opening of land routes into South-Western China. Whether annexation or some form of protectorate is finally determined upon, the result will be to place India in a new commercial and political relationship with the Chinese Empire. The two countries will in effect be coterminous over several hundred miles of border ; and North-East Frontier affairs will take a new complexion and interest. A wall—a series of walls and fosses—will still separate the two teeming Eastern populations ; but there will be gates and windows in it. They will see each other, though with difficulty ; they can hold intercourse and barter wares across the frontier, though with much toil and scrambling over mountain pass and river gorge.

The best-known of these gateways to South-Western China—in point of fact the only one that has been examined in such a way as to enable us to judge its capabilities as a route of commerce—is that which is found by ascending the Taping branch of the Irrawady from Bhamo, and which leads by way of Momein and Yung-chun to Tali, the capital of the Panthay "Sultan" during the period of the Mohammedan rebellion in Western Yunnan. The labours of a series of exploring expeditions and commercial missions have made this route familiar. Margary, Browne, Sladen, Gill, Cooper, Baker, Mackenzie, and Colquhoun have been among those who have passed over or approached it from one side or the other. The physical difficulties are of the most formidable kind ; high mountain ranges have to be surmounted, and the deep gorges formed by the Shweli, the Salween, and the Meikong Rivers have to be crossed. The bridges and other works constructed by the Chinese in earlier times for the accommodation of the traffic have fallen into disrepair or complete ruin. The district of South-Western China to which the route gives access is rugged and mountainous, and of naturally poor soil, and it has been depopulated and impoverished by long-continued anarchy and rebellion. Other obstacles in the way are the independent hill tribes on the frontier, and the robber bands that infest the line of route.

Mr. Colquhoun's opinion is that it is impracticable as the route of a railway into Western China. Nevertheless, with a strong and civilised government established in Upper Burmah, a considerable amount of traffic may be expected to flow through this old channel—always provided that the Chinese authorities abandon their old traditions of exclusion and obstruction, and regard with a friendly eye the establishment of British rule or a British protectorate at Mandalay. Mr. Colquhoun's journey across the border-land of Southern China led him to the belief that the really fertile and valuable part of Yunnan—the part with which an important trade might spring up, and might ultimately be found to afford access to a large area of the interior of the Middle Kingdom, is to be sought in the south of the province, about Pu-erh, and adjoining the Burmese-Shan States on both sides of the Meikong. These Shan principalities, which have in quite recent years thrown off their allegiance to Burmah, of themselves, promise to afford an excellent market for European goods, if safe and easily traversed roads could be opened up. Whether such a route can be found, either from the side of Tonquin or of Upper Burmah is a moot question; in both cases the known physical features of the intervening region render the prospect a very dubious one.

Mr. Colquhoun, who, on account both of his personal researches and the special study which he has given to the subject, is entitled to be heard with respect, contends strongly that the true line of approach must be sought for further south—in British Burmah. His idea is that a trunk line of railway should be constructed, which, starting from the British Burmah system—from the line just completed from Rangoon to Toungoo—should be carried north-westward and “tap” China somewhere about the town of Ssu-mao. He believes that the physical obstacles to be encountered would not be serious, or at least would not be insuperable; while both the region traversed and the country to be tapped contain a large and industrious population and great natural resources, and are capable of immense development.

Mr. Colquhoun must be content to wait a while before seeing his full project of a “trunk railway to China” in the way to be realised—for this, among other reasons, that the line of country over which he proposes to carry it has never so far been traversed throughout by a European explorer. It is different, however, with that part of his scheme recently so ably advocated by himself and Mr. Holt Hallett, which contemplates the junction of Rangoon with Bangkok, by means of a railway, which, so far as within British territory, would be guaranteed by the Indian Government, while the Siamese Government would undertake the construction of the section on their side of the frontier. This line has been carefully surveyed, and has been found to present no great engineering difficulties, the highest ridge to be crossed being of only moderate elevation above the sea. A trade of no insignificant amount already passes by this route between Burmah on one side and Siam and the Shan States on the other, in spite of the great delays and dangers attending on the present means of

transport. There are numerous towns and villages and much cultivated land on or near it, and at the south-eastern extremity is Bangkok, a city of half a million inhabitants. As to the importance of retaining by all means in our power the share we possess of the trade of Siam, Mr. Satow's last report on the commerce of that country may be consulted with profit. From the returns for the year 1884 the Consul-General shows that "the commercial interests of Great Britain in Siam, as compared with the rest of the world, are:—In fixed capital, as 2 to 1; in steamers, as 8 to 1; in exports, as 9 to 2; and in imports, as 2 to 1;" further that "nine-elevenths of the total export trade of Bangkok, valued at nearly £1,650,000, is with Hong-Kong and Singapore."

Mr. Colquhoun's proposals are therefore worthy of the careful consideration of the Indian Government and of the British nation. The projected line would, as far as Raheng, be part of the trunk line to China, and the section from Raheng to Bangkok would be a feeder; it would be the base of operations, the first step in one of the boldest and not the least promising of the enterprises in the history of Eastern commerce. Whatever may be said of it from a political, commercial, or financial point of view, Geography must desire that the surveys may be completed and the work of penetrating China by railways successfully begun.

REPORT TO COUNCIL.

BY MR. COUTTS TROTTER, THE SOCIETY'S DELEGATE TO THE
BRITISH ASSOCIATION, 1885.

GENTLEMEN,—As you did me the honour of appointing me to represent our Society at the recent meeting of the British Association at Aberdeen, it appears desirable that I should lay before you a short notice of the geographical work which was done on that occasion. We are now affiliated to the Association as a Corresponding Society, and as such are represented on the General Committee; but our more immediate and intimate relations are, naturally, with the Geographical Section, and, as will be seen from the following list, our Council was adequately represented on the Committee of the Section—the President being also a distinguished member of our Society.

SECTION E.—GEOGRAPHY.

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