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Chinese Prisons, and the Treatment of Prisoners.

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It is impossible to contemplate the prisons and the punishments awarded to human beings in China without a shudder. On the other hand, egotistical self-laudation over our own human treatment of prisoners is hardly justified, for not so very long ago the conscience of England showed no uneasiness, though the prisons of the country were "dens and caves of the earth," theatres of every barbarity, breeding-holes of every vice. When in 1773, Howard began his investigations in Bedford, of which he was sheriff, he beheld "scenes of calamity" from which he turned away in horror. In 1775 he visited Paris, and after much perseverance, and in spite of stupendous difficulties, he secured permission to visit the prisons of the French metropolis. The gaols, he wrote "were beyond imagination horrid and dreadful." The great philanthropist, before he died of plague, on the shores of the Black Sea, managed to rouse the conscience of England, and many salutary reforms were introduced, and sundry of the more glaring abuses were removed. Then Charles Dickens, by his quick perception, his imperial imagination, his facile pen, his cutting sarcasms and irony materially assisted in the good work. A prison, even in his day, was no paradise. But, by his writings, which were no "reports" or "observations" or "findings" the facts became known, not only to "royal commissions" and the compositors who put up the "copy" of their dry "recommendations," but to the reading public, throughout the length and breadth of the land. Men were amazed that such terrible places existed.

Within prison walls a rich man, like Mr. Pickwick, could do pretty much as he liked, unless he were a criminal of the worst class; whilst poor men could be trodden under foot of jailors and left to die broken-hearted. It stands charged against the House of Lords of Great Britain that during the early years of last century it persistently rejected all attempts to lessen the number of offences of which capital punishment was the award. But public

opinion was ultimately omnipotent. In 1829 hanging at Tyburn was disallowed. Since 1868 all executions have been carried out in private, within the prison precincts. This brief sketch gives point to the suggestion that not so long ago Christian nations were, in their punishment of offenders, barbarous.

Of ancient times, though the ordinary reader knows little of the number and conditions of their prisons, he may ascertain, if he will, the punishments which were meted out to offenders. The laws of the Hebrews were for the most part severe, though the accused was allowed a fair trial, and was confronted by adequate witnesses. Still, measured by our modern standards, the criminal law was severe. Death was the doom of those who ventured to transgress. A strict Sabbath observance was demanded, "Whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people." Unchastity, too, in all its forms, was punishable with death. "The adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."

But when the student becomes acquainted with the punishment inflicted on criminals in ancient China, he learns to appreciate the comparatively merciful laws of the early Hebrews. It is recorded that a thousand crimes could be punished by the excision of the nose, and a thousand more by the cutting off of the ears. There were no less than five hundred prohibited acts for which a man must suffer castration. A breach of another three hundred might brand the offender; whilst there yet remained two hundred which were punishable by death. It seems incredible that there could have been three thousand possible acts which would bring a man within the grip of the law, and such a grip too. Surely, outside of these, there would be little that he could do except breathe and sleep, and in attempting these he would be in great danger. This ancient régime was modified during the reign of Muh, of the Chow Dynasty (B.C. 1001-946). These awful punishments might be avoided by the payment of a fine. It does not appear, however, as if the dawn of a more humane sympathy was the spring of this modification of the ancient régime, so much as the desire to secure funds for the imperial exchequer. The ghastly cruelties of some of the most disreputable monarchs of that time make us shudder even now. We think that even to-day we can hear the screams of those who suffered. In order that it might be ascertained why, in wading through cold water in winter, old men seemed to suffer less than young men, their legs were opened, and the marrow examined. We still see the look of horror depicted on the faces of those who were condemned to walk across a copper pillar, well greased, placed horizontally over a pit full of red-hot gleaming charcoal.

Such in brief were some of the punishments which were meted out to offenders in China's golden age, of which they boast so loudly, if ancient documents are in any sense reliable.

Many of these barbarous enactments have fallen into desuetude, or have been modified. Yet to-day the laws are terribly severe, and the administration thereof, which is often committed to the hands of unscrupulous and avaricious underlings, deplorable. No Howard has ever inspected the prisons of China, no Dickens has ever depicted the woes and intolerable agonies of the accused; no public opinion has ever been roused by an adequate knowledge of the terrible facts. A deplorable barbarism continues, though there are indications that a new era is approaching. Recently, the local native Press of Canton published a series of articles describing the terrible cruelties to which prisoners—both uncondemned and condemned—were subjected at the hands of subordinate officials, and, at the same time, pointed out that steps were to be taken to mitigate the misery and lessen the abuses to which all kinds of prisoners whether proved guilty or not were exposed. Some of the data of these leaders will appear in this article. That this was a mere local sporadic effort of a local newspaper, which will accomplish little beyond bringing the gruesome facts to the passing notice of minds which appear to be instinctively callous to suffering, remains to be seen.

The first thing which impresses the European visitor to the Chinese prison, is the absolutely flimsy character of the structure itself, in which so many ruffians are incarcerated. Prisons in the West are imposing structures with massive masonry, barred windows, and iron doors with ponderous locks. Nothing of the kind meets the eye in China. One stands in the courtyard of the District Magistrate, and is told that there are hundreds of men in durance within the confines of the *yamên* somewhere, and yet there appears to be no wall which a blow from a sledge hammer would not at once demolish; no door which a bit of timber used on the shoulders of men as a battering-ram would not burst open; no roof more than a dozen feet from the ground through the tiles of which a prisoner could thrust his head without any fear of concussion of the brain. If one get permission to visit the prison in Canton, over which the District Magistrate has supreme control—and it is visited, for shoals of globetrotters wend their way thither, quite solemnly, after they have seen the execution ground, ingress to which may be secured by a *douceur* of a few ten-cent pieces to the chief warder—it will be found to be a ramshackle building of no pretence whatsoever. Often enough prisons are in the same condition of disrepair as characterizes most other buildings in China, and for the same reason—money will not be forthcoming to effect any repairs till the structure

is literally falling to the ground. The wards—there appear to be no such things as private cells, or solitary confinement—will hold, perhaps, twenty or twenty-five prisoners, and open into a courtyard which is generally of the nature of a quadrangle. These wards are little else than sheds, and if they could be cleansed, each might pass muster as a cowhouse in which a couple of animals might be housed with comparative comfort. There is generally but one means of ingress into this courtyard from the outside, a low door, through a narrow passage, on each side of which are the dens in which crowd the warders and their retainers. Indeed, there appears to be little to choose between the compartments allotted to the prisoners, and those occupied by the warders, except that, in the case of the latter, no lock nor bolt hinders them from going in and out as they list. Having passed through this straight and filthy passage, which is flanked with the warders' rooms, one enters into the inner quadrangle, and may peep into one or more of these wards allotted to the prisoners. Those which we have examined will be, perhaps, about thirty feet long and twenty feet wide. On each side is a wooden platform—there are therefore two of these with an aisle between them—which is raised about a foot from the ground, and on these low wooden tables, so to describe them, the prisoners are chained with heavy fetters, specially for safety during the night. In a prison which I recently visited, in a big market town, there were three of these wards for men and one for women. They were exactly alike except that in the women's ward there were less barbarous arrangements for securing the female prisoners during the night. All were abominably filthy; none was efficiently ventilated; each was woefully dilapidated; all were horribly repellent.

The question will be entertained—"By what means are the prisoners held in safety, if the structures in which they are incarcerated are so flimsy and insecure?" The answer is brief and may be compressed within a line. Without exception the prisoners are fettered. The quantity and weight of the chains depends upon the heinousness of the crime of which each is supposed to have been guilty, and the degree of ruffianism which lies hidden in the heart of the warders. As far as I have observed, however, each bears on his limbs manacles of some sort.

The prisoners wear chains night and day, and though the lightest appear to cause comparatively little hardship, the burden must be felt and the inconvenience chafed under. Many have chains on the legs only. These are the less dangerous and have been guilty of the less important crimes. Others, in addition, have fetters on the arms, which make it impossible for them to escape. Lastly, a few prisoners were not only manacled on the ankles, but wore a chain round their necks, at the

dangling end of which was attached a block of granite. This stone was not fixed in the ground, but acted as a deep-sea anchor acts on the movements of a drifting ship. The prisoner would walk from place to place within the courtyard, but ere he could move beyond the limit and length of his chain, he must stop and lift the stone, and, carrying it in his shackled arms, drop it again whither he wished to stop. In a word, as a donkey is tethered by the hinder leg to a block, which makes it difficult for it to stray far, so some of the prisoners were fastened by the same means and with the same intention. Thus the courtyard was full of men and women, all of whom, as far as I noticed, were shackled, and these manacles made any attempt at escape fatuous, and escape itself quite impossible. In addition to the chains worn by day, at night all the male prisoners are further shackled. By means of two heavy beams, which rest on each other, in which holes have been made for the ankles of the prisoners, after the manner of stocks at home, a rude but effective and cruel method is discovered for detaining the prisoners in absolute security. The prisoners, who during the day have been loafing in the courtyard, are, in the evening, driven into the wards, and made to lie side by side on the raised platform mentioned above. The upper of the two beams is then raised, and each man is then compelled to place his ankle into the hole made to receive it, whereupon the upper beam is replaced and the prisoners are held by the feet in these rude stocks. There is no possibility of escape. They lie side by side as thickly as the space permits, like rows of cattle in a trans-Atlantic liner. They are allowed bricks for pillows and in this uncomfortable situation they pass the hours as they are able. It must be said that no provision was made for detaining the female prisoners by this crude and cruel method. Apparently they are shut up in the ward and it is assumed that they will make no effort to escape. Such in brief are the means adopted to keep the prisoners in safety within prisons which are so flimsy. The fetters rivetted on the limbs of the prisoners, men and women alike, as well as the general publicity of the situation, make escape difficult if not impossible. Yet in the face of all this there are not wanting examples of those who have attempted it, and their latter end is worse than their first. I saw one man literally bound hand and foot, as much so as an Egyptian mummy, and though he yet breathed, he was on the verge of death, covered with flies and vermin, and yet the warders were as callous as I should have been looking on a mummy.

At times, and not infrequently, when the central prisons in Canton are full, prisoners are detained in the guard-rooms of the soldiers on the city wall. Frequently I have seen batches of these men lying on the bare ground, heavily manacled. Often enough, as the guard-room is a most

fragile structure, a number of men are manacled to a long, heavy iron rod, to which, perhaps, ten or a dozen men were fixed. Whilst detained in these guard-rooms the hardships must be greater than when in the regular prisons, for then men cannot move about as they do in the prison yard, and during the cold season I have seen them lying on the ground, with chattering teeth and shivering limbs, on the verge of collapse from cold alone. This overcrowding, moreover, is not an infrequent experience. It is rare that the visitor, who takes a walk on the city wall, and elects to pass the guard-room over the Gate of the Five Fairies in Canton, does not encounter a crowd of these wretches, who scowl at the foreigner, and would blow him to pieces with a bomb were the means at their disposal.

Of the usual punishments meted out to prisoners outside the prison walls little need be said here. Petty thefts are punished by the wearing of the cangue at the scene of the pilfering. Sometime, though probably not so frequently as aforesaid, because of the influence of public opinion and foreign ideas which are beginning to be felt even in China, men are engaged, and are so placed that they can relieve the strain on their necks only by standing on tip-toe. They are then left to die. Everybody has read Stent's weird poem, "Entombed Alive," which describes the assumed emotions, sufferings, and ultimated agony of a Chinese maiden, who was so far forgetful of the customs of her country as to fall in love and elope with the carter of the house.

"Break down these walls! What if my crime was great,
Say, could it merit such a death as this!
Kill me at once—if death *must* be my fate;
The hand that strikes the welcome blow, I'll kiss."

The idea of solitary confinement, which is said to be so terrible, does not appear to have occurred to the Chinese as a method of punishment. Schiller says that "It is the monotony of his own nature that makes solitude intolerable to a man." Lady Montagu affirms that "Perpetual solitude in a place where you see nothing to raise your spirits at length wears a man out." Those who have passed through this ordeal of solitary confinement confirm these suspicions that, of all punishments, a long period of solitude and inactivity is the most intolerable. This in China does not appear to have been understood. Moreover, the Chinese are so accustomed to crowd together, and to tread one upon another, both night and day, in their social life, that it is but natural that they should allow their prisoners to herd in the same way. So it comes to pass that they crowd the courtyard of of the prison, and there is no let or hindrance to conversation and general

intercourse. Indeed, not infrequently, they are allowed to attempt some kind of work, whereby to pass the time, and add a little to the petty allowance made by the government for daily rice, which, alas! is often curtailed through the avarice of the jailor. In a prison which I inspected a few weeks ago, some of the prisoners were offering for sale crudely-made implements indispensable to the needs of the opium smoker. In order to sell these manufactures they were allowed, still bearing their fetters, to emerge into the common yard of the *yamên*, which was open to the street. In this way the monotony of the life was relieved, and a few cash were earned, of which, as hinted above, a fair or unfair percentage went into the pockets of the warders.

In addition to this, however, special cruelties are perpetrated on certain prisoners, who, for some reason or other, are exempted from capital punishment. It is years ago since I saw a man in a native prison who was doomed to suffer the most excruciating agony. The calf of his leg was drawn up, and fastened under his thigh, in the position in which it would be in the act of kneeling, except that it was drawn more tightly. It was fettered in this position, and all movement and relief were an impossibility. Prisoners there are whose appearance becomes as wild as the beasts of the forest, who, with heavy cangues on their shoulders, are incarcerated in a filthy dungeon for the term of their natural life. I have seen them moving to and fro like caged hyænas in their dens at a menagerie. Their appearance is revolting. Their natures were transformed into that of brutes.

Night and day, as far as I remember, both asleep and awake, this heavy burden rested on their shoulders, though how it was possible to sleep therein I was unable to understand. On the other hand, in a prison I visited a few weeks since, I was informed that the cangue was removed at nights that the prisoners might sleep. A crowd in the prison quadrangle, with their unshaven heads, their unwashed faces, their clanking fetters, their hopeless looks, their diseased bodies, and their bebruted souls can never be forgotten. The memory, like a nightmare when one awakeneth, is repulsive and appalling.

But although under the recognised system of punishment Chinese prisoners must live a life which to us of the West would be unbearable, it would not be so to them, if they were fairly treated, and were saved from the exactions and barbarities to which they stand exposed at the hands of their rapacious keepers. I hinted, earlier in this article, that some revelations had recently been made in the pages of the native Press which revealed a condition of things compared with which our prisons in the days of Dickens were pleasant tea-houses, and the lives of the prisoners a round

of daily pleasure. The writer asseverated that he spoke what he knew, because he himself had been exposed to part of the disabilities and cruelties which he therein made public. In a word then, the real sufferings of Chinese prisoners do not arise from official treatment which the government subjects them to, bad as we should regard it to be, but from unofficial exactions, and unrecognised tortures, from which, were they known, the prisoners would be exempt. Much of the quintessence of their misery arises from the inflexible determination of the warders and the jailors to exact money for their own use. The warders appear to have been allowed considerable latitude as to when and to what extent the whip and the bamboo may be used, and therefore they use them to terrorize the prisoners into submission to the most outrageous demands. It appears that, when a prisoner first goes into the wards, the warders claim his clothes and his money, and he is left with the barest rags to cover his nakedness, and is robbed of all his cash, as a matter of course. Moreover, those who are condemned are compelled, under a threat of the whip, to write begging letters to their relatives, requesting them to forward money. If the unfortunate man hesitates to accede to this demand, means are to hand, it is said, which will induce him to comply. In the night the warders, assisted by some of the oldest prisoners—for it appears that inmates of over twenty years' residence have accorded them certain privileges—take the man in hand. The hands of the prisoner are fastened by a rope, and the other end of the rope is then passed through a ring which hangs from the roof of the ward. The warders then hoist the unhappy wretch, who is left hanging in mid-air by the hands like the pendulum of a clock. Should he attempt to cry out in his indescribable excruciating pain his mouth and throat are filled with ashes so that no sound can escape his lips. When the breath has almost left his body and he is choking, he is lowered, and under the terror of renewal of this torture he is eager to promise almost anything. Many die under this ordeal. But as it assumed among the mandarins that mortality must be high, and as no official probing is ever dreamt of, a general statement as to natural death is sufficient to satisfy all parties. The warders have a proverb "If the grain is not pressed, the oil will not ooze forth; if the blister is not painful, the silver will remain hidden." It would seem incredible that such barbarities should be perpetrated, and if attempted, should pass unchecked. Such, however, is affirmed to be the case. With the view of extracting money from the empty purses of the prisoners, the warders will mix sand with the daily rice of the wretches so that it cannot be eaten. Moreover, at times, prisoners are compelled to stand for hours in a filthy latrine, excluded from every breath of fresh air, till they are

exhausted and about to collapse, when, of course, they will promise anything in order to escape the disgusting situation. These tactics are pursued with the same end in view and form no part of the authorized punishment to which the culprits have been sentenced.

We have already stated that a daily quantum of rice is allowed by the government, which is just enough to support life, if little or no exertion is demanded. But the warders take a percentage thereof, in any case. Those who have bribed the jailors, when they entered the prison, are mulcted only to the extent of about twenty per cent, whilst those, who at first declined to comply with the unjust demands of their keepers, are afterwards robbed of about one-half of their daily rations. They are, therefore, on the point of starvation, and are ever the victims of a gnawing hunger.

Gambling, it appears, is allowed by the police within the prison walls. For the privilege the prisoners must pay the warders twenty per cent of their winnings, so that in any case a rivulet of silver is constantly flowing into the pockets of the jailors. The warders will also lend money to the prisoners with which to gamble, at a very high rate of interest, and when the gamblers lose, both principal and interest must be forwarded from their relatives, otherwise the unfortunate wretch is hauled up by the hands through the ring in the beams, and beaten. Should he by any means complain to his friends, and should they make complaints, the jailors explain and justify the punishment to which the prisoner may have been subjected, by explaining that he has been obstreperous, and that, therefore, coercion and even torture were necessary in order to bring him to his senses.

It is affirmed that the virtue of the female prisoners is in extreme danger of being tampered with. Sometimes a young and good-looking woman, for some reason, is condemned. A warder will seek to obtain her that she may become his temporary concubine. That the other warders or older prisoners may not oppose through jealousy, he will prepare a feast and invite all those whose interference he may dread to partake thereof, whereupon they will promise acquiescence. Should the woman herself decline to accept the advances of the warder she is tied up till she consents. At times, apparently, women are not confined in the main prison, whose wards open out into the common courtyard. In that case bribes and dinners will effect the transference of the victim to the desired ward and so the result will be the same. What value the female prisoners place upon their virtue it is difficult to say. It is quite possible that many of those who have been incarcerated for thefts and other offences will shrink from this further degradation with a loathing dread.

Lest any complaints should reach the ears of those outside who would

be likely to help strict precautions are taken. As in the British army, an officer is told off at stated times to visit the men and to inquire of they have any complaints to make, so a Weiyuen is told off to visit the prisons and receive complaints. But the prisoners are terrorized into silence beforehand, and therefore dare not utter a word. Moreover, all letters sent by the prisoners are opened by the warders, and no letter which contains a complaint is allowed to pass through the prison doors. Should relatives visit the prisoners the same care is taken, for some third person is always present at any interview, whose duty it is to listen to all that may be said.

Therefore, it is impossible for a breath of what is transpiring within the prison walls to reach the ears of those without, who might be interested enough to interfere on behalf of the sufferers.

Enough has been said, if the information herein translated be approximately reliable, to substantiate the truthfulness of the affirmation made above, that much of the extreme misery under which the prisoners in China groan is heaped upon them not through the authorized punishments—severe as they often are and revolting—but by the heartless cruelty of the warders, whose duty it is to see that the prisoners receive what the government allows them. Knowing as we do the natural indifference of the Chinese mind towards the sufferings of others, when their own interests are at stake, and their own purses may be replenished, there would appear to be no reason to doubt the substantial accuracy of the terrible charges brought against those whose duty it should be to see that the prisoners get what is allowed them by the government.

This article is already too long. The descriptions here delineated are the result of personal observations, or compressed from native sources which may be assumed to be reliable. It is clear, therefore, that there is reason enough for the agitation which is now on foot to initiate reform in regard to the treatment of prisoners, and for the improvement of the prisons in which they are incarcerated. A tinge of shame, apparently, is on the official cheek, as the facts are becoming known to the outside world. How any reform can be effected without beginning *de novo* it is difficult to see. The very prisons must be demolished and reconstructed. The warders must be cashiered and other men must be trained, whose hearts are less hard than the nether mill-stone. It is impossible to effect a transformation so radical with a stroke of the pen. But inasmuch as reform of prison discipline is in the air, and is occupying the attention of those who are responsible, we would fain hope that they will not be deterred by the magnitude of the task from attempting some amelioration of the miseries which have been heaped upon the prisoners, nor palsied in mind by a tacit acceptance of the fatal aphorism—"What satisfied our fathers will satisfy us."