

## Newspaper, Confucian Women

This excerpt is part of a serial article entitled “The Natural History of a Chinese Girl,” that ran between July 4, 1890, and July 18, 1890. *The North China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette* was a secular newspaper published in Shanghai between 1870 and 1941, enjoying a wide readership among the foreign communities along the Chinese coast. One might remark on the choice of title for the article—“natural history” implies an anthropological perspective. In the introduction of the article, the Chinese people are described as physically and intellectually superior but morally deficient, leading to the following rhetorical question: “How happens it, then, that the Chinese are almost the only people boasting an ancient and developed civilization who despise their own daughters...?” (*The North China Herald*, 4 July 1890, p. 15). The section excerpted here lays the blame on “the Confucian system,” delineating seven “sins” against Chinese women. With the exception of the last “sin,” this litany is quite representative in rhetorical terms: foreign observers often described Chinese women as objects of oppression.

*Source: North China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette*, “The Natural History of a Chinese Girl,” July 18, 1890.

We must regard the position of women, and especially of wives, in China as the ultimate outcome and most characteristic fruitage of the Confucian system. In our view it has been a bitter fruit; and in recapitulating we wish to lay especial emphasis upon the Seven Deadly Sins of Confucianism in its relation to women.

I.—It provides them with no education. Their minds are left in a state of nature, until millions of them are led to suppose that they have no minds at all, an opinion which their husbands often do much to confirm, and upon which they habitually act.

II.—The sale of wives and daughters. This comes about so naturally, and it might almost be said so inevitably, when certain conditions prevail, that it is taken by the Chinese as a matter of course. Except in years of famine it appears in some parts of the empire to be rare, but in other parts it is the constant and the normal state of things for daughters to be as really sold as are horses and cattle.

III.—Too early and too universal marriages. A considerable part of the unhappiness caused by Chinese marriages may fairly be charged to the immaturity of the victims. To treat children as if they were adults, while at the same time treating them as children who require the same watch and ward as other children, does not appear to be a rational procedure, nor can it be claimed that it is justified by its results. That a new pair constitute a distinct entity, to be dealt with

independently, is a proposition which Confucianism treats with scorn, if indeed it ever entertains such a conception at all. The compulsory marriage of all girls forces all Chinese society into cast-iron grooves, and leaves no room for exceptional individual development. It throws suspicion around every isolated struggle against this galling bondage, and makes the unmarried woman seem a personified violation of the decrees of Heaven and of the laws of man.

IV.—Infanticide of female infants. This is a direct, if not a legitimate result of the tenet that male children are absolutely indispensable, applied in a social system where dire poverty is the rule, and where an additional mouth frequently means impending starvation. In a chapter in her "Pagoda Shadows" on "The extent of a Great Crime" Miss Fielde combines a great variety of testimony taken from several different provinces, in the following paragraph. "I find that a hundred and sixty Chinese women, all over fifty years of age, had borne six hundred and thirty-one sons, and five hundred and thirty-eight daughters. Of the sons, three hundred and sixty-six, or nearly sixty per cent, had lived more than ten years; while of the daughters only two hundred and five, or thirty-eight per cent, had lived ten years. The hundred and sixty women, according to their own statements, had destroyed a hundred and fifty eight of their daughters; but none had ever destroyed a boy. As only four women had reared more than three girls, the probability is that the number of infanticides confessed to is considerably below the truth. I have occasionally been told by a woman that she had forgotten just how many girls she had had, more than she wanted. The greatest number of infanticides owned to by any one woman is eleven."

Infanticide will never cease in China, until the notion that the dead are dependent for their happiness upon sacrifices offered to them by the living shall have been totally overthrown.

V.—Secondary wives. Concubinage is the natural result of the Confucian theory of ancestral worship. The misery which it has caused and still causes in China is beyond comprehension. Nothing can uproot it but a decay of faith in the assumption underlying all forms of worship of the dead.

VI.—Suicides of wives and daughters. The preceding causes, operating singly and in combination, are wholly sufficient to account for the number of suicides among Chinese women. The wonder rather is that there are not more. But whoever undertakes to collect facts on this subject for any given district will not improbably be greatly surprised at the extraordinary prevalence of this practice. It is even adopted by children, and for causes relatively trifling. At times it appears to spread, like the small pox, and the thirst for suicide becomes virtually an epidemic. According to the native newspapers, there are parts of China in which young girls band themselves into a secret league to commit suicide within a certain time after they have been

betrotted or married. The wretchedness of the lives to which they are condemned is thoroughly appreciated in advance, and fate is thus effectually checkmated. It would be wrong to overstate the evils suffered by women in China, evils which have indeed many alleviations, and which are not to be compared to those of here sisters in India or in Turkey. But after all abatements have been made it remains true that the death-roll of suicides is the most convincing proof of the woes endured by Chinese women.

VII.—Overpopulation. The whole Chinese race, is and always has been given up with a single devotion to the task of raising up a posterity, to do for the fathers what the fathers have done for the grandfathers. In this particular line, they have realised Wesley's

conception of the ideal church in its line, where as he remarked the members are 'All at it, and always at it.' War, famine, pestilence sweep off scores of millions of the population, but a few decades of peace seem to repair the ravages of the past, which are lost to sight like battle-fields covered with wide areas of waving grain. However much we may admire the recuperative power of the Chinese people as a whole, and individually, it is impossible not to feel righteous indignation toward a system which violates those beneficent laws of nature, which would mercifully put an end to many branches of families when such branches are unfitted to survive. It is impossible to contemplate with equanimity the deliberate, persistent, and uniform propagation of poverty, vice, disease and crime, which ought rather to be surrounded with every restriction to prevent its multiplication, and to see this propagation of evil and misery done, too, with an air of virtue, as if this were of itself a kind of religion, often indeed the only form of religion on which the Chinese take any vital interest.

It is this system which loads down the rising generation with the responsibility for feeding and clothing tens of thousands of human beings who ought never to have been born, and whose existence can never be other than a burden to themselves, a period of incessant struggle without respite and without hope.

To the intelligent foreigner, the most prominent fact in China is the poverty of its people. There are too many villages to the square mile, too many families to the village, too many 'mouths' to the family. Wherever one goes, it is the same weary tale with interminable reiteration. Poverty, poverty, poverty, always and evermore poverty. The empire is broad, its unoccupied regions are extensive, and its undeveloped resources undoubtedly vast. But in what way can these resources be so developed as to benefit the great mass of the Chinese people? By none, with which we are acquainted, or of which we can conceive, without a radical disturbance of the existing conditions. The seething mass of overpopulation, must be drawn off to the regions where it is

needed, and then only will there be room for the relief of those who remain. It is impossible to do anything for people who are wedged together after the manner of matches in a box. Imagine a surgeon making the attempt to set the broken leg of a man in an omnibus in motion, which at the time contained twenty other people, most of whom also had broken legs which likewise require setting! The first thing to do would be to get them all unloaded, and to put them where they could be properly treated, with room for the treatment, and space for breathing. It is, we repeat, not easy to perceive how even the most advanced political economy can do anything of permanent benefit for the great mass of the Chinese without a redistribution of the surplus population. But at this point practical Confucianism intervenes, and having indeed the begetting of this swarm of human beings, it declares that they must not abandon the graves of their ancestors, who require their sacrifices, but must in the same spot continue to propagate a number their posterity to continue the interminable process.

The world is still large, and it has, and for ages will doubtless continue to have, ample room for all the additional millions which its existing millions can produce. The world was never so much in need of the Chinese as to-day, and never, on the other hand, were the Chinese more in need of the world. But if China is to hold its own, much more if it is

to advance as other nations have advanced, and do advance, it must be done under the head of new forces. Confucianism has been a might power to build up, and to conserve. But Confucianism with its great merits has committed many 'Deadly Sins,' and of those sins it must ultimately suffer the penalty. Confucianism as a developing force is a force which is spent. Sooner or later it must give way to something stronger, wiser, and better.