

Reference Materials

The Position of Chinese Women

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“Weakness to be worth with weakness. Women’s pleasure, woman’s pain.
Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain.

Women is the lesser man, and all thy passions, match’d with mine.
Are as moonlight unto sunlight and as water unto wine.”

This is most exquisite language, but like the language that is found and permitted often in poetry, it is apt to be somewhat exaggerated when applied to the position of English women at the time that “Locksley Hall” was penned by the late Lord Tennyson. It was an unfair comparison between the two sexes drawn by a lover who had been spurned and rejected by the young lady upon whom he had set his heart and affections.

But tell me seriously if the above lines from “Locksley Hall” do not contain the very thoughts that would arise in the minds of, and the very words that would be uttered by the Babas (or Straits-born Chinese) if they were asked to make a comparison between themselves and their women whom I shall henceforward in this paper call the “Nyonyas”? Was it not some Baba who supplied this piece of information which I find in Mr. J. D. Vaughan’s *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese*? Referring to their domestic habits, the author says “Men take their meals alone, women and children take theirs in an inner chamber; there is no social intercourse between sexes. Women are treated by the Chinese, like all Eastern nations, as inferior to the lords of the creation.” Bearing in mind that I am dealing with the women of the Baba community, is this picture of the inferior social status or position of the Nyonyas true to life? If it is, then how unfavourably does it compare with the status of women in China if what Colonel Tchong-ki-tong says in his work *The Chinese painted by Themselves* is true. “The Chinese women” says he, “can replace their husbands in every circumstance of ownership, and the law recognises their right to sell and to buy, to alienate common property, to draw bills, to give their children in marriage and give them what dowry they please. In a word they are free.” And again he adds “Family life is the education which forms the Chinese women, and she only aspires to be learned in the art of governing her family. She superintends her children’s

education, and is content to devote her existence to her family. If fate gives her a good husband, she is certainly the happiest of women.”

Not having had the advantage of going to China, I cannot say whether the above description is generally true or is an exaggeration, perhaps excusable, on the part of a writer somewhat offended at the unguarded statements made and hasty judgments formed about China by travellers whose knowledge of the country, the people and their manners and customs, is lacking in depth and anything like scientific investigation. But be that as it may. I presume that although the above description may not be absolutely or even generally accurate; it is not far from the truth with regard to Chinese women in the higher ranks of life in China. This therefore places the social status of the women in China on a much higher plane than that of their sisters in Singapore. If true, what is the significance of the boast and pride and self-glorification, O Babas! that you assume, and the meaning of the airs that you give yourselves when you speak of possessing higher intellects, better education and the advantages of Western thought and culture and despise your fellow countrymen, the “Inche Eropas” as you term them. If true, then what a standing rebuke this degraded social status of the Nyonyas is to the boasted superiority of the Straits-born Chinese over their fellow countrymen from China! Thus far I have only ventured to make general remarks, but I shall now come to deal with the subject in detail.

FIRSTLY — *the present position or status of the Nyonyas in Singapore*

I have advisedly confined the scope of my subject to this settlement, as I must confess my ignorance of the real social position of the Nyonyas in Penang, though I may remark by the way that I am informed the Babas there hold more liberal views with regard to the position in society of their Nyonyas. I have further to put aside as beyond the scope of this subject their legal position or status. So far as the married women are concerned, the law stamps their status during coverture or marriage with incapacity; but this is a disqualification which they should not take to heart, because married women of all nationalities in this Colony, save Mohamedan women, are in the same plight. It is the social status or the position in society of the Nyonyas that I have to deal with and desire to draw your attention to.

(a) Ignorance

The present generation of Nyonyas, with a few exceptions, is a generation of illiterate and uneducated women. The only form of education that they do get is of a purely domestic character. That of course must be supported, and must ever form one of the phases or branches of the education which should be imparted to the Nyonyas. But that is far from being the whole duty of a Chinese women. Not being taught to read or write in Chinese, English or Malay, they are deprived all through life of the ordinary means of gleaning or obtaining knowledge from newspapers or journals, or of benefitting by the experience of other people recorded in books and other documents. Anything like an accomplished education is not only denied them but

decried and denounced by their parents and husbands as being inimical or opposed to the best interests of the women themselves. The usual argument against their having any knowledge of reading or writing is that they will become Christianised or be guilty of writing love letters. Thus their souls, or, what is best and purest and noblest in them, become, to use the words of Shakespeare, “cribb’d, cabin’d and confin’d.” They become selfish and careless and ignorant, with a propensity for gambling and some even for drinking for the sake of something that gives them temporary excitement, and in some cases, apparently preferring now and again to have an audience of the Police Magistrate rather than to be occupied with the training, moral and mental, of their children, or to study to make their houses and their surroundings real homes for their husbands and grown-up sons, to wean them and draw their attention and desires away from the temptations and vices and evil companions that dog their every step and to woo them to the comforts and the pleasures of an ideal family circle. I cannot blame them, for they are objects rather of pity than of censure. They are the products of a system for which their fathers, husbands and brothers are responsible.

To their ignorance is attributable, to a large extent, the superstition that troubles and haunts them in each event and concern of their daily life. Superstition is, as you well know, the twin sister of ignorance. That they are full of superstitious ideas and beliefs you will readily admit. Is it a condition in life that is at all worthy of being envied or desired? Anything and everything that occurs to them which is beyond the range of their previous experience is put down as the work or influence of some evil spirit which has to be propitiated. And I suppose none of us so much as our Chinese friend Dr. Lim Boon Keng, as their medical adviser, appreciates fully what a fearful prejudice there exists in the minds of the Nyonyas to the use of and belief in anything that is strange and foreign to their limited experience, although most beneficial to themselves or favourable to their interests.

(b) *Dependence*

The second deplorable thing about the present social status of Chinese women is their utter dependence on the male sex. No doubt from one point of view unmarried girls should be dependent on their fathers and brothers, and married women on their husbands. Under the existing state of society, some of them can be independent and earn their own livelihood, or help a father or a brother himself but poorly educated, struggling bravely along to maintain a large family, to add a few dollars to the family income by doing embroidery work, by sewing or by making pastry or cakes to sell. And this is about all that they can do. Thus sense of their absolute dependence has, I believe, led some of the women both unmarried and widows, to take for a life of shame and vice, not always by inclination but by force of adverse circumstances and from sheer inability to shift for themselves when suddenly thrown upon a cold and unsympathetic world.

(c) *Lack of liberty*

Other circumstances may occur to your minds which show that the present status of the Nyonyas does not tend to reflect credit on the taste and the higher qualities of the Straits-born

Chinese community, but I shall refer only to one more, viz; the *zenana* system, if I may borrow the expression from India. What is this system? It is that of keeping the Nyonyas, more particularly the unmarried girls, confined within the four walls of a house, be that house a palace or a hut. It is the practice that prohibits any social intercourse between them and the male sex until marriage, and that prevents them from receiving visits from and paying visits to others of their own sex who do not come within the immediate family circle. Whether this custom is one that deserves praise or condemnation, I will discuss later on, but I state this as a patent fact.

Now I am most anxious to know what is the origin of this custom, and whether it obtains to the same extent in China. Turning once again to my authority Tchong-ki-tong, I find him saying that although in a sense the Chinese women are free, they have not the same liberty of amusement as in Europe. They do make visits to their friends and receive theirs in return, but these re-unions are not open to men. And again “the institutions in China have but one aim — the organisation of social tranquility, and to assure its realisation, the only infallible principle has been — to avoid giving opportunities. Hence it is probable that the Chinese legislators in diminishing as much as possible the number of occasions for men and women to meet have acted in the interests of the family.” This is a laudable principle, but it looks only on one side of the picture. But I cannot find any direct reference to the custom of seclusion as it affects the unmarried girls. I have tried to get information from Chinese people here, and I have been told that although custom absolutely prohibits a young man to speak to an unmarried girl, it gives the latter more healthful liberty in another direction, viz: that of walking out during the day-time under the protection of the mother or some other relative, and of breathing the pure air of heaven, and thus of adding more vigour and health and enjoyment in her life.

What do you say to these things? Is my description of the present status of the Nyonyas one that tallies and lites in with your experience? If it does, do you favour it to such an extent that any attempt at improvement will mean to you a backward instead of a forward step?

I address you thus as an advocate of some measure of improvement to the present status of the Nyonyas. I may be charged with having too much of western thought, and with being imbued with western ideas, and it may be said that I represent in the views I am about to put forward to you too faithful a picture of *John Coming Chinaman*. Therefore it is well for me before proceeding further to warn you that if I hold liberal views with regard to the position of the Nyonyas, I am not a radical; in other words I do not advocate thorough and tremendous and revolutionary changes because I know that such changes, if suddenly brought about and based on other than sound foundations, will bring nothing but disaster in their train. Having given you this note of warning, I shall now proceed to discuss the second part of my subject.

SECONDLY — *Reasons for Improvement*

I shall put it in this form. The present social status of the Nyonyas being one in which ignorance, superstition and prejudice largely prevail, and in which there is absolute dependence on the male sex, and in which our Nyonyas are injuriously fettered in their movements, ought

not something to be done towards improving them, and that done by men who are the leaders and the lights of the Straits-born Chinese community? I contend that something ought to be done for the following reasons:

(a) The judgment of History has been that no community, no people, no country has ever reached a high stage of civilization whose women have been kept and forced to remain in a low and degraded condition of life and morals. Turn where you will, the countries that have attained a high degree of civilization are the countries where the women are held in honour and deep respect. Are we not desirous that the Straits-born Chinese community shall be looked upon as an educated and enlightened people? Then let us look after our women, and help them all we can to be themselves more enlightened, more perfect, more noble in their thoughts and aspirations, and more fit to be the worthy mothers of the future citizens of this Settlement. Far be it from me to cast a slur on the women of this generation. We have men in our midst who are able and energetic, philanthropic and useful, qualified and competent by their experience and ability to undertake and discharge public duties with credit, but they attained to these positions by their own efforts and not in any way by the inspiration of their wives and mothers. Are we ambitious if we plead for the next generation of mothers to be so educated in literature and the fine arts, besides their necessary domestic education as to enable them to inspire in their children of both sexes from their childhood a love for moral excellence, and high and lofty ideas of life both in the home and in the state of which they are to be dwellers and citizens? Are we ambitious and proud if we desire for our children good and respectable and honourable positions and appointments in the community or state wherein they may take up their abode? This is ambition indeed, but it is the right sort of ambition to cherish. It is at present very much a dream, but if “the dreams which nations dream come true, and shape the world anew” so shall our dream be realised if we work and labour for its realisation. And we must expect our Chinese women, our Nyonyas, to play an important part to bring about this improved state of things.

(b) The second reason is this. In any country where the inhabitants are natives, i.e. are born and live and die there, it has been observed that the women outnumber the men and that the disproportion increases as time goes on. In a place like Singapore you may be led to infer that the above rule finds a departure and an exception. But the inference would be wrong. You must not take the whole community (because of its cosmopolitan character) to judge this rule by. You must not even take the Chinese section of it, but you must confine your calculations to the Baba sub-section, — that class which regards Singapore as its home and native place. A comparison of the figures in the Census for 1881 and for 1891 will show that the excess of Straits-born women over men which was 1,632 in 1881 had increased by 411 in 1891. Apart from that, as a matter of general observation you are aware that the number of Nyonyas is slightly greater than that of Babas. As time goes on, this disproportion will be more marked for various reasons, such as the greater exposure of men to accidents, liability to diseases, and the consequences of unhealthy occupations. Other reasons which do not exist now will crop up in time. Emigration to the Native States and elsewhere will be an important factor in the

life of the community at no distant date, because Singapore is limited in its area and in its clerical appointments. For these reasons, therefore, as I have already remarked, the numerical disproportion between the Baba women and men will become more strongly marked, and we must calculate and make provision for the consequences with statesmenlike eyes and foresight. In this calculation, we must not lose sight of the women. So long as you allow them to remain absolutely dependent on the men, so long will their position be extremely unsatisfactory. There will be nothing they could look forward to, except marriage, to give them the highest form of happiness or satisfaction or to enable them to escape from a father's indigence or poverty. But even assuming that each girl does get a husband, there will be hundreds who can never hope to marry, or have at best a faint chance of getting married. And what is to become of these latter? Having been trained by their mothers to regard marriage, especially into a wealthy family, as the one aim and object of their little pent-up lives, and having received no education to encourage and embolden them to strike out an honourable and useful path for themselves, when disappointment comes, they fall easy victims to scheming and unscrupulous persons who lead them away from the paths of virtue and honour.

When a little while ago I read this essay to the Chinese Philomatic Society, it was pointedly suggested that the distinction between the Straits-born Chinese and the immigrant Chinese has been too nicely drawn and that there is frequent intermarriage between these two sections of the Chinese community, and that the excess of the Nyonyas over the Babas is an advantage as it gives the immigrant Chinese an opportunity of finding his wife and of settling down here. This doubtless is an advantage, even though in a great many cases of such intermarriages, the Nyonya wife finds that she is only the junior wife. It would be also an advantage as the means of infusing a new spirit of enterprise and adventure into the lethargic blood of the Straits-born Chinese. But if this particular difficulty is to be faced the intermarriages, I referred to above which at present are certainly not held in favour, will have to be strongly encouraged.

(c) There remains another reason for the question which I have put before you in the second part of this subject. Mr. J. D. Vaughan in the book from which I have already quoted, says of the Nyonyas, "Females are shorter than those of the European races, pretty when young, but soon become ugly and repulsive," and further, in drawing a comparison between the Babas and the Chinese from China, he says "Teeth regular and strong, except in Babas. A European dentist informed the writer that they as a rule have bad teeth. Babas are not so robust as the real Chinese, but resemble them in every other particular." How far these statements are consistent with truth I cannot say, as I have not made sufficient comparisons myself, but with regard to the features of the Nyonyas, I believe there is a great deal of truth in the remark of Mr. Vaughan. Now the quality of beauty happily is not the monopoly of any particular race or people. There are pretty faces to be found amongst our Nyonyas, and if we agree with the poet Keats that "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," should we not concern ourselves to let the beauty and bloom of youth remain with their possessor as long as Nature permits it? But we are doing nothing to

realise this. And surely also, beauty is created in order that men may admire and satisfy, their aesthetic minds by, whether that beauty is imprinted on a rose or a lily or on the features of a young woman. But we have allowed the rough hand of custom and prejudice to come in our path, and to confine youthful beauty within the four walls of a house to bloom and languish and die unnoticed and unadmired.

Believing or assuming that women do not require to train their intellects, we further assume that they do not require to train their bodies and develop their muscles, and so we leave them entirely to themselves. Are we sincere? Are we true to our experience and best judgment, or to the best interests of our women? Let us consider that point for a moment. Some of you are fond of gardening. There is a rose bush or a jasmine plant or a “chickoo” shrub in that garden which you much prize. Do you allow that plant to look after itself, and do you simply admire the rose or the jasmine flower or eat the “chickoo” fruit? Ah, you know better than to do that! If you take me round to your garden, I shall be certain to see the rose leaves clipped off, the delicate jasmine plant well propped up, and the white parasites carefully removed therefrom, and the “chickoo” tree pruned and the fruit protected with the greatest care. All these little attentions have been paid by you to these objects that give you but temporary pleasure and delight in order to ensure the best results. Are we not willing and concerned that our girls should receive equal, if not better, care and thoughtfulness at our hands? But I must not weary you and will therefore now deal with the last part of my subject.

THIRDLY — *Plan suggested*

If you have followed me so far and agree that we come far short of the ideal in the present status of the Nyonyas, the next question that arises is:— How and in what direction should we sanction improvements? This is a practical matter, and I expect to receive suggestions and helps from you as practical men in answering that question.

The women must in the first place be educated, and that education must be of a wholesome character. It should consist of elementary subjects such as Reading, Writing (whether in Chinese or English or both) and Arithmetic up to the work of Standard IV, Sewing and embroidery work under competent Nyonya mistresses, Domestic and household management, lessons in hygiene, in nursing and the laws of health, Music and singing, Painting &c. It would be preferable to have public classes where these subjects can be taught, as the spirit of competition would thus be generated, and the keener the competition, the more excellent and satisfactory would be the productions. In Christian schools, the Bible is and will continue to be read and taught, but in these other schools, general rules of morality or the Confucian ethics might be taught and explained. I would lay special stress on some form of moral education, so as to render these girls, when they become mothers, competent to impart to their children some elements of moral truths at a time of life when their minds receive the deepest and most vivid impressions. How often have we come across and read of the greatest and best and noblest men

attributing their success and greatness in no small measure to the early training they had once received at their mothers' knees!

Then, as I have already remarked, we must not neglect their physical training. It is not necessary for them to indulge in violent forms of exercise, such as cricket or football, but they can develop their muscles in gymnastic exercises which will induce gracefulness in their figure, as well as give strength and grit to their muscles. They ought to be taken out of the house as often as possible for a walk and for a blow of fresh air, especially in the morning, and live a freer and more open-air life. These and other forms of exercise would keep them in good health, and drive away that unhealthy paleness which is seen on the features of so many Chinese girls, and fit them to perform more satisfactorily their duties of maternity, and enable them to preserve their youthful appearance for a longer space of time.

Again, as their mental and physical education will be the means of supplying them with other pursuits and pleasures than those of gambling, opportunities should be given them of freer social intercourse among themselves, and you may depend on it that such meetings will by no means be dull. I have not time to give you a detailed illustration but I may mention in passing, that that is just what the Parsee ladies have been doing among themselves in India, and they, I believe, are the only women among Oriental races whose attainments and accomplishments have been spoken of in high terms by their European sisters. No member of the opposite sex is admitted to these social meetings, but report has it that they are of a most enjoyable and elevating character. We need not be jealous or saucy because we would not be allowed to take part in their amusements, but we shall have the satisfaction of knowing that we have been laying the foundations of happy and bright homes and families.

One more remark before I close. To my mind, it will be necessary that these various reforms should be undertaken at one and the same time. Half the value of the mental education given to our girls will be lost if we continue to keep them as we have done in strict confinement. It is an axiom of education that we learn by imparting our knowledge to others, and there will be great intellectual gain when one keen mind comes into contact with another. So with physical education.

But as I have already said in different parts of this paper, nothing in the direction of improvement in the social status of the women will be of permanent value or give really satisfactory results unless the movement originates from the Babas themselves and finds strong and continued support from that quarter. For, believe me, the father who is not himself convinced of the importance and value of education whether moral, physical or intellectual, will regard such education for his girls as mere waste of time and frivolous waste of energy. This is a subject which we Babas ought to ponder in our minds carefully, and if we appreciate the value of such education to our boys, let us be prepared to go a step further and give the benefit of it likewise to our girls. Success depends on our united effort and support. No private or public institution, no private individual or society can hope to succeed unless it is backed up by the co-operation and support of a large body of enlightened and thoughtful Babas.

And when by our farsightedness and wise policy we have brought about this state of things, the husband of the Nyonya of a future generation, in lamenting her loss, may be even constrained to say with Tennyson in his *Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After*:

“Gone with whom for forty years my life in golden sequence ran,
She with all the charm of woman, she with all the breadth of man,

Strong in mind and rich in wisdom, Edith, yet so lowly sweet,
Woman to her inmost heart, and woman to her tender feet,

Very woman of very woman, nurse of ailing body and mind,
She that link'd again the broken chain that bound me to my kind.”

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