

**LETTERS TO A CHINESE
OFFICIAL BEING A
WESTERN VIEW OF
EASTERN CIVILIZATION**

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Letters to a Chinese Official Being a Western View of Eastern Civilization by William Jennings Bryan

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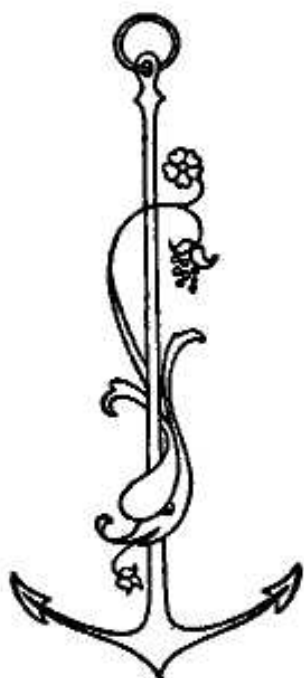
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PREFACE

Three years ago a little volume entitled "Letters from a Chinese Official, being an eastern view of western civilization," was published by McClure, Phillips and Company and at once had a large sale.

The author discussed Christian civilization as he found it in England, but in the introduction to the American edition he explained that the arguments presented by him applied with equal force to the United States. His indictment of the inconsistencies of Christians contains so much of truth and his arraignment of the conduct of Christian nations at home and abroad is in some respects so just that his words were received not only with appreciation but with gratitude. I recall how deeply I was myself impressed and how many Americans commented favorably upon his letters. It struck me at the time as a favorable omen that so frank an arraignment of our national sins of omission and commission by a foreigner should be so kindly welcomed, for a willingness to admit

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faults is the first step toward improvement. To desire "to see ourselves as others see us" indicates an humble ambition for self-betterment, and in holding the mirror up to us, this nameless Chinese official has not only rendered a real service but has also given our people a chance to prove their good intentions.

Never having visited China and never having acquainted myself with Chinese philosophy, the absurdity of his contrast between Chinese life and American life was not apparent. Now that I have had an opportunity to test his description by personal observation, I feel that a reply is due to him as well as required from us, for the hostility manifested in China toward American ideals is evidently founded upon the same misconception of our purpose which he betrays, and upon a self-sufficiency which his little book, if it has been translated into Chinese, would naturally encourage.

He rightfully estimates the importance of the struggle between Eastern and Western civilization although he does not always comprehend the principles which underlie it. It is, as he says, a conflict between ideals, but he misrepresents the Christian nations, exaggerates Chinese virtues and shows

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himself ignorant of the spirit of our religion. He defends the policy of national seclusion, finds fault with labor-saving machinery, belittles our governmental methods, and speaks of both the Christian and the Christian home in a way that proves that he has never become acquainted with either.

While he has clothed his opinions in language which is for the most part considerate and polite, he can see nothing outside of China worthy of imitation or respect, and his conclusions are calculated to mislead his own people. It may not be out of place for an American to supplement his work by pointing out the errors into which he has unconsciously fallen. This is undertaken in the hope that those of my own countrymen who read these letters may have their interest quickened in the spread of Christian ideals and that the Chinese into whose hands they may fall may contemplate more calmly the inevitable transition through which their nation must pass from the dead stagnation of years gone by to the living future upon which it is even now entering.

In the same friendly spirit with which I credit him, I desire to point out some of the advantages of our civilization which he overlooks and some of

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the defects of his own to which his eyes have been closed, and I shall be content if these lines receive from his people the generous consideration shown his letters in our country.

William Jennings Bryan

P. S.—The letters were written on ship-board and the preface in quarantine at Suez, Egypt; they were sent to my home at Lincoln, Nebraska, with instructions to have them published. Just as they are about to appear I learn that instead of being written by a Chinaman, the original Chinese letters were written by an Englishman from material furnished him by a Chinaman. Had I known this earlier, I might have changed the language of some of the paragraphs, but as it is not an individual but an argument that I am combating, I leave the letters as they were written.

W. J. B.