

**THE CHINAMAN IN
HIS OWN STORIES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649297771

The Chinaman in his own stories by Thomas G. Selby

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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London

CHARLES H. KELLY

2, CASTLE ST., CITY RD., E.C. ; AND 66, PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

1895

THE
MUSEUM
OF
ANTHROPOLOGY

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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	7
II. KINSHIP AND KINDNESS	17
III. THE GOOD GRADUATE	48
IV. THE HAUNTED MELON GARDEN	80
V. THE DASHING WIFE	87
VI. MADAM CROSS-GRAIN	106
VII. THE NINE DEMON INCARNATIONS	171
VIII. A BUDDHIST'S VISION OF PURGATORY	181

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THESE translations are presented to the English reader with the idea of giving a brief glance at Chinese life through Chinese fiction. In plot the stories are primitive and puerile, and the translator has sometimes doubted whether it was worth while to print them. Chinese names always ruin a Chinese story for the average reader, and yet to give English equivalents is to destroy the piquancy of the narrative, and load it with an insufferable burden of grandiose Johnsonese. In some cases, where it has been possible, the English equivalents of the names have been given, and in other cases the Chinese forms of the names are retained. Over against the simplicity and febleness of the ruling plots and motives of the tales must be set the fact that they contain a very percep-

tible salt of humour, and the descriptive power is not infrequently keen and graphic. If the reader should fail to realise this, the fault must be put down to the clumsiness of the translator. The stories may at least amuse children, and if any one will take the trouble to look beyond the elementary art, he will gain some little insight into the thought and life of the wonderful populations of Eastern Asia. Perhaps one of the quickest and most accurate methods of picking up a knowledge of the manners, family and social habits and traditions, philosophies and religions of a foreign nation is to study, as opportunity may offer, its novels and novelettes. Chinese fiction is not rated highly by the Chinese themselves, and hitherto has not attracted to its pursuit minds of genius such as Scott, Eliot, Thackeray, Hawthorne, in the West. Perhaps one explanation of this is the limited repertory of motives with which a Chinese story-teller has to deal, as well as the comparatively narrow range of knowledge and interest in a country where each individual life is lived in a groove occupied by precisely similar lives for thousands of years.

The movement of a Chinese novel does not centre in courtship and marriage, for the simple reason that marriage without courtship is a proceeding in which romance other than that of the lottery is all but impossible. The sexes are rigidly separated, and young men and maidens never meet in drawing-rooms or at picnics, and discover each other's affinities in conversation which starts in metaphysic and ends at the

very opposite pole of thought. All marriages are arranged by brokers or go-betweens, who are employed by parents to discover suitable alliances for their children, and who transact the preliminaries of the betrothal. Boys and girls are pledged by their parents to marriage, sometimes within a year or two of their birth, and such covenants are inviolable. The present writer has met with cases in which it has been held illegal to break off the engagement when signs of leprosy or some other loathsome disease had appeared in one of the contracting parties. No misconduct, however flagrant, on the side of the youth at least, is held to be a release from the covenant. The go-betweens consider the status of the families they represent and seek equal status, and the correspondences between the horoscopes of those about to be betrothed are looked upon as conclusive arguments for the union. The children are supposed never to meet or speak to each other, and it would be taste unpardonably bad were the parents representing the one side ever to discuss the subject with those of the other side. These marriage customs despoil the Chinese novelist of his most promising materials. He has to make a picture of family harmony the climax of his tale, and the ingenuities of providential retribution his chief plot. The Chinese Competition Wallah is a wonderful piece of machinery put at the service of the gods; and the man of virtue, heroism, and filial piety always distinguishes himself in the imperial examinations. The reader will not fail to