

**THE POLITICAL  
OBSTACLES TO  
MISSIONARY  
SUCCESS IN CHINA**

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The Political Obstacles to Missionary Success in China by Alexander Michie

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BY  
ALEXANDER MICHIE

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*"The Englishman in China,"*  
*"The Siberian Overland Route," etc.*

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1901

**The Political Obstacles**  
TO  
**Missionary Success in China.**

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On the 16th April, 1901, Mr. ALEXANDER MICHIE delivered a lecture on "The Political Obstacles to Missionary Success in China" in the St. Andrew's Hall, Hongkong, under the auspices of the Hongkong Odd Volumes Society.

H.E. Sir HENRY ARTHUR BLAKE, K.C.M.G., Governor of Hongkong, presided.

Mr. MICHIE said:—

With the exception of a few extremists who glory in the contemplation of martyrdom, who regard the effusion of blood as no drawback whatever to the propagation of their faith, men of all classes must deplore the violence which attends missionary operations in China. Periodical outrages, destruction of life and property, savage passions incessantly inflamed spreading like a bush-fire among the Chinese people, holocausts of adherents to foreign sects: such things are all too frequent and too wide-spread to be attributed to local or accidental circumstances. The root causes of these ever recurrent phenomena must be constant, and they must be general. And so long as the root causes remain it is obvious that similar effects must be expected to show themselves. How far the ramifications of these untoward effects extend is probably but faintly realisable by persons at a distance from the scene. The

world resounds with the cries of persecuted missionaries, but grievous as are their woes, the sufferings of foreigners can bear little comparison with the miseries entailed on the natives who have to bear the brunt of the onslaught. The foreigners concerned are not only few in number, but they have means of escape, and it is in their own choice whether they remain at or return to the theatre of danger. But their native disciples having no such option are tied to the soil, and are as helpless as sheep before their shearers. Of their griefs the outer world hears virtually nothing.

The common sense of mankind must recognise this state of things as an evil. Those who are the most sincerely devoted to Christian teaching must feel poignant regret that its introduction to the richest field in the whole world should be associated with outbursts of cruelty, and the letting loose of the fiendish passions of men. If it be presumed that the most ardent proselytiser—always with the special exceptions referred to at the outset—would prefer that his religion should make a peaceable, and not a stormy entrance into the empire of China, it follows that the lay world stands on common ground with missionaries in viewing with consternation the bloodshed which stains their path.

Unfortunately, however, the acknowledged evil is one which, like bubonic plague, is practically without a remedy, since no two sects, scarcely any two men, could ever be got to agree upon measures either of prevention or cure. But though, under these circumstances, discussion on the subject may appear to be idle, yet people can no more refrain from discussing it than they

can avert their thoughts from other irreparable calamities. Go where one will, the missionary question is in every mouth: it is a standing topic for the forum as well as for the study. There may be regions of the earth where religious propagandism is properly left to the care of its professional sponsors, but so far as the missions in China are concerned, their operations fill too large a place in the world's affairs for the consideration of them to be relegated to tattered monks or to *ex-officio* theologians, no matter of what sect. For the truculent feelings which these missions have aroused in China raise questions of international ethics which threaten to upset the political equilibrium of the globe, to embitter inter-racial relations, and even to threaten the world's peace. Were it merely the progress of Christianity as a religion which was being obstructed by the opening of the flood-gates of savagery, its self-constituted guardians might, like other corporations, resent the intrusion of outside opinion. But the gravity of the matters at issue is such as to override mere professional scruples, since it is not religion alone—important as that is—which is affected by the course of events, but the wellbeing both of the people of China and of the Western States.

And as it is the civil power of Christendom, with the military force controlled by it, which is responsible for the introduction and maintenance of missionaries in China, every subject and citizen of these States shares a responsibility of which he can be no means divest himself. It seems, therefore, the bounden duty of the public at large to exercise their minds on this Mission question, to observe where it trenches on the rights and liberties of the Chinese people



and the sovereignty of their Government, to examine dispassionately the various claims set up by the propaganda, and to come to some conclusion as to the extent to which the military forces of Christendom may be legitimately used to support a course of procedure which is calculated, if not intended, to overturn the existing polity of China.

We are justified in assuming from the history of missions in past centuries, as well as from all contemporary experience, that the Christian religion, as such, has never provoked the Chinese Government or people to acts of violence; and that their real objection to the propaganda has been, and is, primarily political, and only incidentally religious. Missionaries of all denominations and in all ages have testified in the amplest manner to this fact. A French missionary in the 14th century wrote from Central China:—"In this empire there are men of all nations under the sun and monks of all sects; and as every one is permitted to live in whatever belief he pleases, the opinion, or rather the error, being upheld that each one may effect his salvation in his own religion, we are enabled to preach in perfect liberty and security." Five hundred years have worked no change in the Chinese attitude. Mr. Ross, the well-known Scotch missionary of Manchuria, says:—"As far as religion is concerned, the Chinese are not only reasonable, but extremely tolerant, till the professed religion assume, or is believed to assume, a political aspect."

But, that being the case, the so-called persecutions and martyrdoms of Christians lose all their religious significance: the very terms by which they are commonly described are misleading. For assuredly no heavenly vision

has ever said to a Chinese, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." We may without injustice to either side assume the practical and secular standpoint of the Chinese, for though it be true that we of the lay community might take exception to much that is presented to the Chinese in the name of Christianity as having little relation or resemblance to the gospel of Christ, yet our consideration of the missionary question will be conveniently simplified by leaving the subject-matter of its religious teaching on one side. We can do this on the double ground that what is beyond our ken is also outside of our responsibility, and that it is not the doctrines of the missionaries, whether pure or corrupt, which are the inciting causes of hostility.

But if not their doctrines, then it is something else that brings down Chinese vengeance upon the missions; and that something is not far to seek. It is writ large over the whole history of mission work in China, so that he that runs may read it. What the Chinese object to in foreign missions, and will resist to the death, is their political pretensions, applying the adjective in its widest sense, so as to include the sphere of social relations. For the most important politics in China are family and village politics; and it may safely be said that if missionaries could live on good terms with the local communes, and keep clear of tribal feuds, the higher Chinese authorities would be only too glad to leave them unmolested.

On the other hand, an attitude of brusque hostility towards rural observances, of open derision of time-honoured superstitions, and such like, necessarily generate resentment, and

resentment is apt to gather strength, and under stimulating conditions, may easily develop into ferocity, especially where an outlander is the object of it.

The claims of the Roman Catholic propaganda are so notorious that it would be superfluous to recapitulate them before an audience like this. To put the matter concisely, they would convert the population of China into French citizens, thus constituting an *imperium in imperio*, subversive of the authority of the native Government. All Protestants recognise, most of them deplore, and many of them denounce this state of things, while the Chinese are driven by it to despair, or to desperate reprisals.

It is argued, however, on behalf of Protestant Missions, that they are innocent of the charges which lie so heavy against their Catholic rivals; that as they do not assume official rank, nor directly interfere in the administration of justice, their proceedings are void of offence. This plea, which has been put forth by English secular journals of the highest repute, does not cover the ground, and even within its narrow limits it is unsubstantial. Granted that Protestant missionaries do not publicly assume official functions, yet their active interference in native courts and in native quarrels is beyond question; it has for years been one of the recurrent subjects in their periodical literature. I have often seen it debated in these journals to what extent it is politic or consistent with the missionary profession to support their adherents in litigation or in village feuds, the actual existence of the practice being always taken for granted. Indeed it is not easy for the missionaries alto-