Mr. & Mrs. Sidney Webb on China.

Extracts from the article by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, which we print this month, were recently published in the Daily News. Readers who happen to have seen these should note that they were extracts, and that the whole article is now published for the first time. Mr. and Mrs. Webb are now in India, and are expected to be back in London in the latter half of May.

Forthcoming Lectures at 37, Norfolk Street.

The weekly "At Homes" at the London office on Tuesdays are being continued this month with lectures on alternate Tuesdays as follows:—

Tues., March 26th.—Eugenics and Destinution. Dr. J. Lionel Tayler.

Tues., March 26th.—Unemployment and the Land Question. Mrs. E. R. Pease.

Dr. Tayler's lecture begins at 4.30 instead of at the usual hour of 5.30.

CHINA IN REVOLUTION.
By SIDNEY and BEATRICE WEBB.

We had not contemplated a "China in Revolution" as part of our holiday experiences; and though this has occasionally added to the excitement, it has a little detracted from the equanimity of our travels. The scanty alarmist telegrams that we saw in the Japanese newspapers during September and October made us afraid that we might not be able to visit China at all; or that, if we got into Peking, we might not be able to get out again! But Mukden was quiet; the railway to Peking was running smoothly; the Revolutionary forces were a long way off, and the British Consul-General saw no reason why we should not proceed. But as we neared Peking we passed trains packed to overflowing with terrified Chinese—trains packed in a way that we had never seen before—with every carriage filled to overflowing, so that there was no more standing room; men riding on the roofs; men, women, and children crowding the platforms at either end of the American carriages; and men and boys clanging to the sides, sitting on the steps, and even standing on the buffers. These were fugitives from Peking fleeing in blind terror from something—they knew not what: it might be a massacre of Chinese by the Manchu soldiers; it might be a massacre of the Manchus by a Chinese uprising in Peking; or it might be an outbreak of the starving mob of the great capital, in which no life would be secure, and no house safe from incendiarist fires. We found the same panic during our ten days at Peking. As a matter of fact, nothing untoward did happen at Peking; and in the three weeks that have since elapsed, nothing has happened, to justify the panic. But it went on unabated. Every day the trains leaving the capital were filled with fugitives. More than a hundred thousand people are said to have fled from Peking. We found the University, the Colleges, and even the elementary schools, either closed because their students had fled, or else diminished to such tenuity that the classes numbered only three or five students. Our own friends among the younger Chinese officials were themselves placing their families in security, and running off to Tientsin now and then in a renewed panic; or else lingering in other cities rather than return to their duties at the capital. The two foreign hotels in Peking were filled to the roof with the wives and children of Manchu and Chinese dignitaries who had been placed there for safety; and even princes and officials did not disdain to come in secretly at night, lest their houses should be burnt before morning. One great Chinese noble, a highly placed official to whom we had a letter of introduction, invited us to lunch at his own hotel, explaining that his own palace was in the hands of the builder for repairs! As a matter of fact, he was hiding (with his four wives and a waggon-load of valuables) in the compound of a French banker within the Legation quarter, whence he saluted forth furtively in the middle of the day to put in an appearance at his office.

Peking was, in fact, full of alarmist news (nearly always untrue), and of "camp rumours" of the most exciting kind (which always proved to be baseless). Every day we heard that the rising (of the Chinese against the Manchu dynasty) was definitely fixed for the coming night. Nearly every day we were told on good authority that the little boy Emperor, with the Prince Regent, the Prime Minister, and the Count, were to flee that night, in the long string of native carts that were already packed with their possessions, to Mukden, to the recesses of the most western province, or to Jehol, beyond the Great Wall, in the deserts of Mongolia. What was interesting to us in this universal panic was its revelation of Chinese character, the capacity for almost hysterical fear, and the estimate put by the Chinese themselves both on the probable brutality of their compatriots and on the incapacity of any conceivable Chinese Government, whether Manchu or Revolutionary, to protect the harmless, unoffending citizen against the worst manifestations of barbaric warfare.

Yet, from first to last of our glimpse of Peking, the duly constituted Governmental authorities were in full force and activity. Every street had its post of Manchu soldiers, ostentatiously armed with ball cartridge; the daily uniformed Chinese police, bearing loaded rifles, was everywhere to the fore; and ten or twenty thousand Manchu troops were encamped around the Forbidden City, their tents filling the vacant spaces between the inner and outer walls of the Imperial City. Meanwhile, so far as the tourist was concerned,
everything went on as usual. We, like other foreigners, went all over the densely populated city in the universal "rickshaw"; visiting the sights or lunching and dining with friends; penetrating into all the recesses of the Chinese City or the Tartar City; and coming home at midnight under the stars through the silent streets, without insult or molestation. We even had a couple of days' excursion a hundred miles into the interior, making the usual trip to the Ming Tombs, the Great Wall, and the Nankow Pass without any danger. The Legation professed to be quite unalarmed so far as foreigners were concerned. But they were quietly taking a few precautions. The number of their armed guards was increased, and these were kept on the alert. Troops were accumulated at Tientsin and other conveniently near ports. A few soldiers were lent at night to Roman Catholics and other large missions in the depths of the Tartar City; and in the case of the American Missions rifles and revolvers were served out to the missionaries by the American Legation, in order that they might be able if necessary to defend themselves and their converts from attack.

Meanwhile, more by the absence of resistance than by reason of their own strength, the Revolutionary forces were steadily overrunning all the rest of China. At Peking we had less real news than London heard day by day in the cablegrams. But city after city "went over," usually quite quickly—even Shanghai and Canton and Tientsin. Province after province declared itself independent or neutral (the delightfully vague Chinese language left it uncertain which was meant); Viceroy's and other officials left their posts; everybody put up something purporting to be the Revolutionary Flag (often with eighteen stars on a red or blue field, intended to signify "the United States of China"); no more tribute was remitted by the Provinces to the Court at Peking. Presently there was (as at Shanghai and Canton) a general cutting off of pigtails (the pigtail being the three centuries old mark of subjection to the Manchus), any hapless wight who hesitated finding himself insulted and mobbed, and summarily docked of his queue by whatever chopper or knife came handiest to the mob. In city after city the prisons were opened; every sort of male person, whether convict or brigand or pirate, was enlisted in the Revolutionary army, decorated with a white rag armlet, and given a rifle, a bright new revolver and a beltfull of ball cartridges to play with; and here and there we used to read of indiscriminate fighting, promiscuous looting, and cases of piracy in the rivers. Trade, it is needless to say, came to a standstill. Out of all the eighteen provinces and four hundred millions of people, the Imperialist troops hold only Peking and Nanking, with the

railway line from Peking, through Paotingfu, towards Hankow. It is at Hankow and Nanking that the only real fighting has taken place; and at this moment the issue is still undecided.

Unfortunately, it was exactly to Paotingfu and Hankow and Nanking that we had intended to proceed on leaving Peking, so that the indecisive fighting, the successive capture and recapture of Hankow, and the burning of that city, with the consequent complete interruption of the passenger traffic, were both interesting and inconvenient to us! In the end we were driven, in order to keep our engagement in Calcutta, to join the crowd of fugitive Chinese fleeing to Tientsin, just gaining standing room in the train, crowded as already described, by favour of the English guard, who turned out to be an enthusiastic member of the I.L.P. and subscriber to the Labour Leader; and whose fraternal intervention proved of more practical use in the terrified mob than all the efforts of a high Chinese dignitary from the Ministry of Railways, who had come down to the station to befriend us.

By this time practically the whole empire has slipped away from the Manchu dynasty; millions of men outside Peking and Nanking have been cutting off their pigtails; no compensating success of the Imperial troops is reported; and whether the Imperial Humpty Dumpty can ever be set on the wall again—that wonderfully picturesque, high wall that encircles the yellow-tiled roofs rising out of the mass of green foliage that characterises the million-peopled Peking—seems extraordinarily doubtful. It is, for the first time in three hundred years, more than a revolt: it is a popular revolution. Nor is it against any particular measure, nor any new or exceptional oppression, that all China is revolting. From end to end of China the people want simply to get rid of their existing Government, with its ubiquitous corruption and amazing inefficiency and futility. The leaders of the Revolution, like the rank and file of its adherents, declare their intention of entirely clearing out the Manchu dynasty, and with it the Manchu troops and the Imperial throne; and of setting up a federal republic on the model of North America, Mexico, or Brazil, under the title of the United States of China.

It must be remembered in this connection that the eighteen provinces of China—not to speak of Manchuria, Mongolia, and Turkestan—are each of them as large as a European state, and contain an average something like twenty millions of people. What is more important still is that they, for the most part, speak languages unintelligible to each other; and they have been for centuries accustomed to separate laws and customs, separate treasuries and taxes, and practically distinct

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administrations. Each has had its own autocratic Viceroy or Governor; and each has now its own Provincial Assembly. When we remarked to one of the Revolutionary leaders that a federal republic for one-quarter of all the world’s inhabitants was the most difficult of political organisations to construct, he replied that “all great achievements were difficult; but the Chinese would be equal to the task.” He said, however, that it was only in outward form that they intended to imitate the United States; and that he much preferred the English Cabinet system of responsible government. He eagerly accepted the suggestion that the Australian Commonwealth Act supplied a convenient model, with merely the substitution of a President for a Governor-General. But the Australian Constitution includes woman suffrage. It would indeed be curious if the women of China find themselves in possession of the vote before the women of England!

What are we to think of the capacity of the Chinese, and of the prospects of a peaceful re-organisation of that great empire? We cannot pretend, from our mere five weeks’ glimpse of only half a dozen cities, to anything like an independent judgment. But we have seen something of not a few prominent Chinese men, young and old, high and low. We have read diligently the testimony and the experiences of missionaries, travellers, business men, Consular agents, and diplomats of more than one nationality, some of whom have lived in China all their lives. And we have lost no opportunity of questioning and cross-examining any number of such persons from Mukden to Canton. As the outcome we impart our views to our fellow-members merely as the irresponsible first impressions of two unbiased observers.

We record, to begin with, an almost universal testimony of those who have lived among the Chinese that they “like” them, and think well of them. We are always assured that they are a “great” people, full of possibilities. The Chinese, to judge from what is said of them, are honest, industrious, sober, docile—and you presently realise that your informant is thinking of them as house-servants! As a matter of fact, the Chinese have so little of what the Norwegians or the Bavarians call honesty that every growing crop must be watched continuously night and day to prevent it from being stolen; whilst in every form of internal trade false weights and measures and counterfeit coin are employed and looked for as a matter of course. You are told that they are peaceful, law-abiding, frugal, thrifty, and skilful—and you find that what is referred to is the untiring industry of the millions of petty cultivators, anxious only to be left alone in their rice-fields. So far are the Chinese from being peaceful and unaggressive that highway robbery with violence, murder, and piracy are extremely rare; whilst as for “law-abiding,” it is admitted on all hands that no Chinese person ever dreams of obeying a law merely because it is a law, or, indeed, of obeying any new or unaccustomed law whatsoever, if it can possibly be evaded.

But the European in the Far East is not, as a rule, thinking of these things. Of any vision of the Chinese nation as an organised, civilised state, on a par with other civilised states, to be judged by the same standards, and weighed in the same balances, the English resident in China has not a glimmering. When he realises that what you are asking is whether the Chinese are at all equal in their social or political capacity or in their industrial or commercial achievements to the English or the Americans, or even to the Spanish or the Portuguese, he will sometimes quite angrily resent the idea that a “coloured” people can ever be admitted into the comity of civilised nations. And you presently realise that what the European in the Far East likes in the Chinese is not their virtues, still less their intellectual capacity or practical achievements, but their virtual admission of their inferiority to himself—their docility as servants; their willingness to content themselves with the position of clerks or coolies under European managers; their cession to the Europeans of all the organisation of foreign trade; all the international banking; all the management of ships and railways and telegraphs and post office and customs; all the direction of mines and manufactures; and, in short, all the positions of profitable “exploitation.”

Moreover, you are not long in discovering that this universal profession of “liking” for the Chinese character, and of admiration for the Chinese capacity—which never, by the way, leads to any real social intimacy, even with the Europeanised Chinese—is only by way of contrast with the Japanese, who are universally disliked in the Far East. It is not so much that the Europeans actually love the Chinese as that they emotionally do not love the Japanese! And though the Europeans do not analyse their own feelings, we hazard the opinion that their dislike of the Japanese proceeds fundamentally from the fact that the Japanese, unlike the Chinese, claim to be regarded as equals, and to be treated as the equals of any other nation; and are making good their claim, in war and in peace, in army, navy, and civil administration, in literature, science, and art, in international banking and shipping, in internal manufactures and foreign trade. To be faced by this determined assertion of co-equality by a “yellow” race, and to feel themselves now and again actually beaten by the Japanese (as is happening to the English and American and German business men in the Far East), is gall and wormwood to the Europeans, and even more to
their wives. And, by contrast, the Chinese, who put forward no such claim to equality; and who (if they speak English and come at all into contact with Europeans) take up a position of conscious inferiority in all that the European regards as important in life, seem an agreeable and a "likeable" race.

If, however, we abstract ourselves from this subjective influence, and consider the Chinese objectively, in the dry light of scientific inquiry, we find them a striking example of arrested development. A biological analogy may help to make the position clear. The highly developed insect has gone very far, but it is along a line in which further progress seems to be impossible. The lowly vertebrate may be less highly developed, but has greater potentialities. The Chinese have perhaps pushed to a high point the virtues of the self-regarding individual producer; the little cultivator in his paddy field is perhaps as industrious, as skilful in his own hereditary business, as frugal, as sober, and as faithful to his own standards as any human being in the world. Moreover, he is, by long family training, courteous and even polished— with an unreasoning respect for literature. The Chinese artisan, money-changer, shopkeeper, merchant, and banker seems to us to have, in a very high degree, qualities and capacities analogous to those of the rice-growing peasant. These blue-clad three hundred millions, whether rural or urban, are bound together in a "family system," which (as it is piquant to be told by Christian missionaries) is the most potent obstacle to any progress. Moreover, they display a capacity for combination in guilds and secret societies of all sorts. Beyond this, they seem incapable of constructing any social organisation, either commercial or governmental. The Chinese Empire—even the Chinese City or the Chinese Province—can hardly be said to exist as an organism. The family system and the guild comprise all that really exists in China in the way of social organisation. Beyond these two imperfect developments of social life the rice cultivator or the shopkeeper has nothing but, on the Governmental side, a horde of officials who rob him; and, on the business side, a crowd of foreign bankers and merchants who exploit him. The whole Chinese nation reminds us, in fact, of a race of ants or bees of gregarious habits, but incapable of the organisation of the ant-hill or the hive. They show us, indeed, what homo sapiens can be if he does not evolve into the social organism.

If in the same dry light we ask what signs of capacity the Chinese exhibit, we find a remarkable phenomenon, for which our sociologists should be invited to account. The Chinese, we are told, used to be a "great" people. They certainly built up a civilisation of their own, inadequate as we may think it, at a time when our own forefathers were painted savages. They made inventions and discoveries which Europe painfully worked out a thousand years later. They had a highly evolved and very extensive literature, however little we may to-day find in it to satisfy our intellectual curiosity; and an art in painting and carving which has, in its own handicraft way, never been surpassed. They gave civilisation, art, and letters to the neighbouring peoples, even to Japan. They were able to construct a social organisation and an administrative system which, however imperfect we may now reckon it, has, unlike those of Babylon and Nineveh, Egypt and Judea, Greece and Rome, at least endured. All this, we freely admit, entitles them to be regarded as one of the "greatest" nations of the past. But within the last two or three centuries something has happened to this "great" people, by reason of which it has become sterile and barren. It is not merely that, in marked contrast with Japan, China has shown no capacity for adopting Western organisation and an administrative system which, however imperfect we may now reckon it, has, unlike those of Babylon and Nineveh, Egypt and Judea, Greece and Rome, at least endured. All this, we freely admit, entitles them to be regarded as one of the "greatest" nations of the past. But within the last two or three centuries something has happened to this "great" people, by reason of which it has become sterile and barren. It is not merely that, in marked contrast with Japan, China has shown no capacity for adopting Western learning. It has shown, so far as we can discover, no capacity for anything. Let us begin with intellectual things. For a hundred years or more no Chinese person seems to have written an original book on any serious subject whatsoever. Even the flow of commentaries on the ancient classics, and of ephemeral poems in classical style, appears practically to have stopped. Apart from a few translations, some doubtful novels, and mere journalism of no lasting worth or intellectual dignity, we cannot learn that, from one end of the three hundred millions to the other, China is in this generation producing anything whatsoever. Experts tell us that the same is true in painting and porcelain, in bronzes and carving—there has been no good work for at least a century. There has certainly been no revival in religion or metaphysics. The race has, in the meantime, been accomplishing nothing in political or social administration, or in manufactures or international finance. They have accomplished nothing in law or in philosophy. They have done no better in war than in the pursuits of peace.

The Chinese are commonly said to be unrivalled in business; and they are certainly skilful enough at keeping a shop or a money-changer's office. But we could not learn that the Chinese had come to the fore, even in their own country, in any of the more highly evolved forms of business enterprise. Unlike the Japanese, we do not find them organising and managing extensive lines of passenger steamers (there is one small Chinese line, which was established by Americans and is now officered by Englishmen); they direct no railways; they develop no mines; they administer no banking or commerce or anything like an international scale; indeed, after many inquiries, we do not feel sure that, in all China, there exist
more than a handful of Chinese business firms that have risen above the status of the local store or bank, in such a way as to have branch establishments in other cities than those in which their principals live. And even in their own staple products, their incapacity stands revealed. We were told that the quality both of the tea and of the silk has, in the past generation, markedly deteriorated, owing to faulty cultivation, careless preparation, and fraudulent packing. Certainly, the net result seems to be, as one thoughtful Chinese put it to us, that China, as a whole, is, so far as can be estimated, actually producing less year by year, even of material products; and that the nation is really poorer to-day, in wealth as in everything else, than it was a century ago.

To sum up, this so-called "great" race, whose capacity is so much extolled by those who profess to admire them, and whose reputed achievements in the distant past claim our respect, is, to-day, by all the available evidence, capable of nothing! Its sole achievement in the past few centuries is that it has endured. But persistence or endurance or survival is, as every biologist knows, no proof of quality or excellence. A race, like a species, may endure and survive by reason actually of its low quality; and may, in fact, further degrade in surviving (vide the Esquimaux, and all the parasites).

We cannot here even hazard a suggestion as to the causes of the sterility or decadence which seems to have fallen on the Chinese people. But we realise, as we never realised before, the imminence and the gravity of "the Yellow Peril." Not that this peril bears any resemblance to the absurd bogey that is usually meant by that phrase. Europe need have no apprehension that its civilisation will be endangered, or its military supremacy imperilled, by a nation, however numerous, which is wholly lacking in intellectual or practical capacity. It is a strange delusion that millions can effect what brains cannot. Numbers, without capacity, are only an added impediment. Nor is the danger one of economic competition. It is a fundamental truth that no country need ever be afraid of a low-waged nation; it is the relatively high-waged nations like the United States and Germany—and just in those industries in which they pay the highest rates—that England finds its most dangerous competitors. No lowness of wage will ever make Chinese labour cheap—even if it were by cheapness of labour, and not by productive capacity that nations industrially thrive. All such apprehensions of China are born only of economic ignorance. The real Yellow Peril is the moral and intellectual decadence into which this vast empire has fallen; the helpless incapacity of its people to create even a decent social organism; their failure to develop the vast natural resources of their country, which are perhaps as extensive as those of the United States; their abject inability even to train their rivers so that agriculture (and with it foreign trade) may not be disastrously interrupted. The serious evil that China does us is not to undersell our artizans, but to lower the tone and coarsen the fibre of the European in the Far East. "This living with inferior races"—meaning races whom we think inferior—"is a terrible business," records one intelligent observer.

But the Yellow Peril is graver still. China lies, like a stranded whale bearing the costly ambergris, before the greedy eyes of the civilised Powers; tempting them, almost beyond their power of resistance, to an armed intervention, and a scramble for annexation, which is only too likely to light the torch of European war, in the course of which (as markedly happened in Germany in the seventeenth and to all Continental Europe in the eighteenth century) our own civilisation and morality may retrograde to a lower level. The best defence against this real Yellow Peril is the elevation and training of the Chinese themselves. Those are doing more to ward off from Europe what would be an incalculable disaster who are helping the Chinese to raise themselves. The new schools and colleges of the Chinese Government, the educational and medical work of the missionaries, the instruction of Chinese students abroad, all the efforts that are now being made to improve Chinese administration—everything that tends to raise China from its humiliating degradation before the Western Powers, and to restore to the educated Chinese their national self-respect—is tending to diminish the Yellow Peril that we have reason to fear. The new Government University at Hongkong, which Sir Frederick Lugard is organising for the use of all South China, may prove in this way, if given time, a more potent bulwark of the West than either tariffs or battleships.

It is from this standpoint and in this sense that the present Revolution is full of hope. Whether the decrepit and decadent China of to-day can pull itself together, and take the same sort of new start that Japan has taken, is, however, more than doubtful. And as for the Yellow Peril that is so commonly feared by those destitute of economic knowledge—the victorious industrial competition of three hundred millions of docile yellow men living on twopence a day—all that need be said is that if this would be a peril to Europe, which we do not ourselves believe, it cannot possibly come into existence as a peril until the really existing Yellow Peril—that of a decadent, incapable, helpless China, exciting the greed of the world—has passed away.

November, 1911.