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THE

DISEASES OF CHINA;

THEIR

CAUSES, CONDITIONS, AND PREVALENCE, CONTRASTED
WITH THOSE OF EUROPE.

BY

JOHN DUDGEON, M.D.,
PEKIN.

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THE subject of the present paper is a large and important one, and the time at my disposal will only admit of a very cursory glance at so large a theme. My object is to point out some of the more obvious of the differences in the diseases of the east and the west, and if possible to indicate the causes that are operating to produce these changes. On account of the great antiquity of the Chinese nation, the vitality of the Chinese, the great population, territory and range of climate, the field in a medical point of view is specially interesting. What, however, is predicated as true of China will hold true to a greater or less extent of all Asia, and so in like manner, we might safely argue from any one European country to all the rest. The question of disease becomes, therefore, of importance in relation to race, so similar and yet so different are the Oriental and Occidental types of disease. The Asiatic customs and social peculiarities, in my opinion, conduce to a higher vitality and a greater freedom from acute and inflammatory affections. On that continent life is more quiet and easy; the Asiatic drinks less stimulating potations, eats simpler food, keeps better hours, marries earlier, takes more care of himself; his passions are more subdued, and his whole life and its actions more under the control of reason and religion. Race thus modifies disease, and *vice*

versá. The climate and physical features of a country, and the food and the diseases which depend thereupon and which destroy or impair vitality, are the principal influences directing the development of the permanent characters of a race, and the chief agents consequently by which race is propagated and type constituted. Physiological peculiarities are more acquired than primitively impressed. The acquired and transmitted qualities, with the existing social customs, are amply sufficient factors for the production of every variety or degree of vitality which may distinguish any race. These peculiarities affecting stature, health, and duration of life are more dependent upon the combined influences of food and customs, acting through many ages, than mere climate alone. Simple hygienic precautions which we find efficacious in one country are useful in others, and with proper attention to such rules the deadly effects of climate disappear. The cultivation of temperance in all things, general soberness of life, and all else that would prove useful to us in Europe in enabling us to remain vigorous to resist malign influences, is of equal value to us in the East. We are in the habit of speaking of a certain invariableness in the type of disease—like causes producing like effects—that disease retains this type in all forms of civilisation, in all climes and all ages. Very few diseases have appeared, very few have disappeared. Some have become graver in certain localities, countries, and civilisations than others, but sporadic cases of any disease assume the same type as the same disease in its epidemic or endemic form. Although this is undoubtedly true, it is nevertheless also true that many diseases which were either rare or almost unknown have sprung into notoriety and have assumed severer forms, and have added greatly to our mortality bills. Although this invariableness of the type of disease still exists in certain nations and individuals, we are accustomed to speak of the rise of such diseases as small-pox, diphtheria, cholera, and syphilis; of the extension of certain diseases to regions where they were before unknown, as, for example, rubeola into the South Sea Islands; and of the entire disappearance or great diminution

of diseases once prevalent, as *e.g.*, ague, leprosy, and small-pox in our own country, by means of drainage, better cultivation of the soil, improved modes of living, discovery of vaccination, &c. And so we find disease bounded by both time and space, developed in some parts of the earth, undeveloped in others; some developed in all parts, some confined exclusively to certain regions and completely absent from others, and all modified by the peculiarities already adverted to. Notwithstanding, however, this amelioration in the symptoms and total abolition of certain diseases, caused by our improved civilisation, this same civilisation, as exhibited in our present modes of life and surroundings—the true causes and explanation of the so-called change of type of which we so often hear—have produced a large train of diseases that either did not exist, or existed only to a very limited extent a century ago, such, *e.g.*, as the various nervous, cardiac, and, generally speaking, acute diseases. It cannot be altogether true, as is sometimes asserted, that these diseases may have existed, but were unknown owing to the imperfect state of medical knowledge and our means of diagnosis at that time. There would seem to be a law of the increase and diminution or total disappearance of certain affections in proportion to the state of civilisation. If this be so, I fear our present review will not prove favourable to our highly civilized and artificial life and its luxuries. The great strides made by European nations, and ourselves in particular, in trade and international intercourse with the ends of the earth, by virtue of our discoveries and inventions, whatever else may have been done in adding to the sum of human happiness and comfort, have not tended, either among ourselves or nations lower in the scale of civilisation, to longevity or the diminution of disease, but rather the reverse. The immediate effect is naturally that of propagating zymotic and other diseases, and that frequently, too, of a more virulent type than may previously have existed, into countries to which the spirit of commerce, colonisation, and civilisation may have led us. The ultimate effect will doubtless be to become better acquainted with the etiology