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INTRODUCTION.

GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE, PRODUCTIONS, LANGUAGE, ANCIENT INTERCOURSE WITH EUROPE.

IN extent, in square miles, and in gross amount of population, China is not only one of the greatest empires in the world, but one of the very greatest that has ever existed, or, rather, that has ever cohered for so great a length of time. With all its dependencies and tributary states, it may be considered as extending from the north of the sea of Japan to the river Sihon in the west—a space of 81 degrees, equal to 4900 British miles. From north to south, it stretches from the Ural mountains, in north latitude 50°, to the southern border, about latitude 21°, being twenty-nine degrees, or nearly 2300 British miles. Of this immense area, China Proper measures about 1200 geographical miles in length, and not much less in average breadth. Beyond the widest limits are other regions, professing dependence on the Celestial empire, or whose populations have the laws and manners, and speak or read the language, of the Chinese; with whom, in fact, their own are almost identified.

The climate of China presents every variety of temperature, from the snows and chilling blasts of Siberia to the scorching heat of the torrid zone, on its southern

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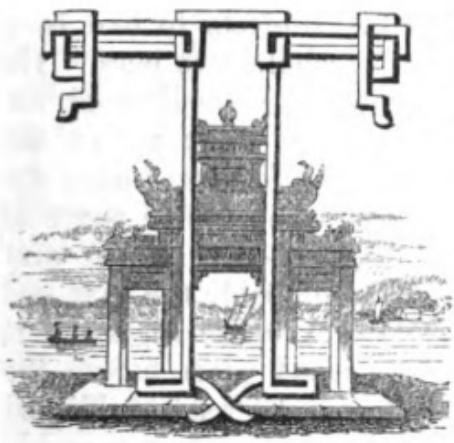
CHINA.

EARLY HISTORY.



HE origin of the Chinese monarchy is unknown, but its high antiquity is too well attested to admit of the slightest doubt. Some native historians, who have been followed without any examination, or even reflection, by European writers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, place the foundation of the empire in the third century after the deluge; but it is now universally admitted, on the testimony of the most respectable Chinese historians, that this is a point which has been very much exaggerated.* Their earliest traditions, like those of the Japanese, the Siamese, and all the neighbouring nations, are wildly and extravagantly fabulous. All their first sovereigns are described as mighty giants, taller than the loftiest pagodas, as beings endowed with all manner of miraculous powers, and gifted with a longevity,

* "The Chinese," by Sir John Francis Davis.

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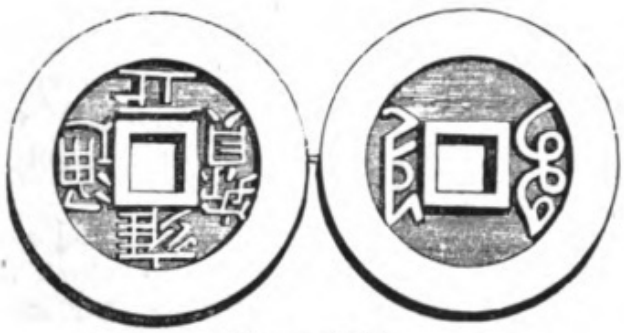
orders in feudal countries, where the mass of the people were vassals and slaves. The peasants of China, therefore, appear to have been at that period in a better condition than those of any other part of the world, working for themselves, and paying taxes to their respective princes, who by that means raised the tribute which the emperor claimed of them.

At the time of Confucius all taxes and tribute were paid as they are at present, chiefly in kind; but it is supposed there was always some sort of coined money current among the Chinese; and that at a very early period of the monarchy they had coins of gold and silver, as well as of lead, iron, and copper: but many ages have elapsed since any other than



Copper Coin.

copper money has been in use among them. A very usual medium of exchange was silver beaten out into thin sheets, or cast in small bars, the buyer cutting off so much as was required to pay for his purchase, which was weighed by the merchant, who was always provided with a small pair of scales for that purpose. Their reckonings were, and still are, made by means of a machine (the Chinese abacus), which is still in use for buying and selling, and answers all the purposes of numerical figures. It consists of a number of little balls of various colours, strung upon wires fixed in a box and divided into compartments; the balls in one division being units, in another fives; and with these they add up and multiply with as much facility as we do by the aid of figures. This is the Chinese system of arithmetic, and has been so long practised that its invention is attributed to the emperor who succeeded the "Divine Husbandman," and the same who is said to have found his way through the

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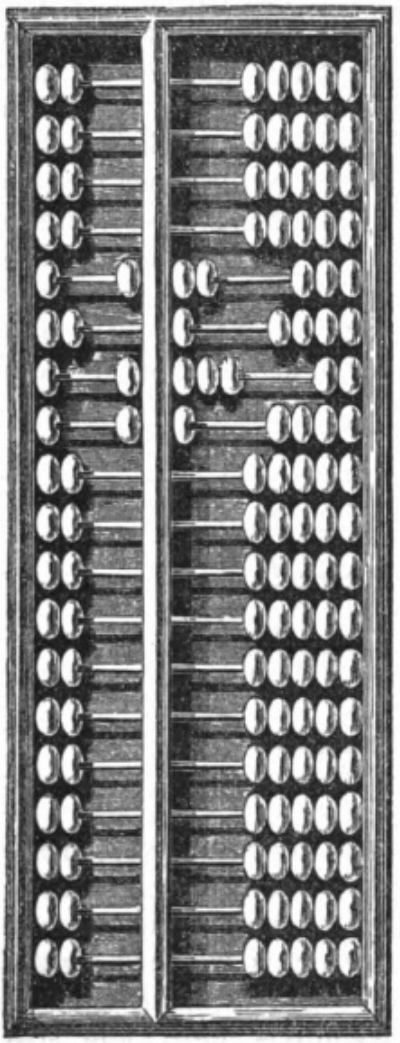
forests by means of the compass. Their arithmetic, as well as their weights and measures, proceed universally on the decimal scale; and decimal fractions are their *vulgar* fractions, or those in common use. It is remarkable that the single exception to this consists in their *kin*, or marketing pound-weight, which, like ours, is divided into sixteen ounces or parts. The Chinese had and have no algebraic knowledge. In the science of numbers, and in geometry, they never had anything to teach us. On the contrary, within the last two hundred years they have borrowed largely from the Europeans.*



There were public markets in the towns, to which the people generally resorted about noon; and there were shops also, where the artizans pursued their various callings, and sold, or exchanged with the farmers, the produce of their labours for rice and other commodities of which they stood in need. Beyond the cultivated lands were pastures for sheep; and the rest of the country generally consisted of extensive forests, inhabited by tigers and other beasts of prey, which were so destructive, especially among the flocks, that great hunting-parties were made every spring for the purpose of destroying them; and this dangerous sport seems to have been the favourite amusement of the sovereigns and great men of the land.

For a long series of years, trade, even with foreign nations, appears to have been remarkably free. The markets of China

* Sir John F. Davis.

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pired, but which were never bestowed on any but such as had studied profoundly, and given proofs of their knowledge. Subordination, passive submission to the law, to parents, and to all superiors, and a peaceful demeanour, were strictly inculcated. This instruction has continued unchanged. "The Chinese," says a modern writer, "teach contempt of the rude, instead of fighting with them; and the man who unreasonably insults another has public opinion against him; whilst he who bears and despises the affront is esteemed . . . . . A Chinese would stand and reason with a man, when an Englishman would knock him down, or an Italian stab him. It is needless to say which is the more rational mode of proceeding." But, on the other hand, it cannot be doubted that this training and these habits have deprived the Chinese of valour and military virtue.

Among the arts that are held in high estimation among the Chinese is that of writing, which was known at so distant a

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