

HISTORY OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY.

Lao-Tseu, Confucius, and Buddha.

[From a new French Journal, the 'Revue Trimestrielle.']

UNTIL the present time, we have received very little information on this subject. The missionaries, whose researches have almost always been wanting in impartiality, and to whom it was infinitely more important to know the actual state, than the history of opinions, have generally confined themselves to the examination of that philosophy which existed under the name of Confucius, without seeking to distinguish the different schools and variety of interpreters which have succeeded it. But, latterly, the infusion of a more philosophical spirit into all Oriental researches, the facility which has been given to the study of the Chinese language, and the labours of several learned men, especially those of M. Abel Rémusat, have begun to throw some light on this subject; so that it is already possible to draw a more satisfactory, although still very incomplete, picture of the order in which the different schools have succeeded each other, and the fate which has attended each.

At the present moment we see China divided by three different sects, or beliefs, unequally, in doubt, but still without persecuting each other: 1. The system founded by Confucius, long before our era, and on which have rested, for more than twelve centuries, the institutions by which, without resistance, the whole country is governed: to make use of a European expression, it may be called *the religion of the State*; 2. Bouddhism, which has yielded, after a long struggle, to the doctrine of Confucius, and which, banished to its numerous monasteries, and tolerated, but deprived of power, resigns itself to its fate, and even consents to enter into a diplomatic discussion with the Court of Peking, on the signs to be borne by the infant, the predestined heir to the soul of the Great Lama; and 3, and lastly, a sect of jugglers, magicians, and astrologers, who give themselves the pompous title of *Doctors of Reason*, and justify it by a thousand extravagancies. Moreover, it is not rare, as will be seen further on, to meet with eclectics who profess all three beliefs, in uniting their practices and conciliating their doctrines.

But the last sect which we have mentioned, that of the Doctors of Reason, the least effective from its actual importance, is yet the most ancient of all, and is connected with the first philosophers who have left any traces of their precepts. Amongst these patriarchs of Chinese philosophy, Lao-Tseu is the best known, for which we are indebted to the researches of M. Abel Rémusat; and it is for this reason we have selected his name to characterise this early period.

The opinions then entertained present a singular phenomenon of

metaphysical subtlety, scarcely veiled by the thinnest and most transparent allegories. The philosophical element shows itself entirely free from all disguise, and such appears to have been the dawning of the human mind in China, whilst, in every other country, symbols and mythological legends are only divined by sagacity, and by means of traditions frequently very uncertain. The author of the article attributes this peculiarity to the total absence of priestly spirit, which everywhere, in antiquity, converted opinions into belief, and metaphysics into mythology. It remains to know what can have preserved China from the influence of priesthood, so powerful throughout the rest of Asia.

Be this as it may, we find, in the doctrines of this ancient school, a striking analogy with those professed by Pythagoras and Plato at a later period. It acknowledges *reason, the word, an ineffable and uncreated being, who is the type of the universe, and has no type but himself.* It is only to be doubted, if the philosophers who expressed themselves thus clearly distinguished God from the world he had formed, and the matter he had produced; if they were deists, rather than Spinozists.

Their psychology regarded human souls, as emanations from the ethereal substance to which they would, after death, be re-united. From the necessity of advancing and preparing this re-union on earth, was derived the dogma, so much advocated by Lao-Tseu, of philosophic inaction. Like Plato, they refused to the wicked the faculty of returning to the bosom of the universal soul. Like Pythagoras, they gave the names of numbers to the first principles of things; and their cosmogony was in some degree algebraic. They attached the chain of being to a great *One*, then to two, and afterwards to three, who made all things; and, for the height of singularity, called this mysterious trinity by a Hebrew name, scarcely altered; the very same name which, in our sacred writings, designates him who was, who is, and who shall be, *Jehovah* (J.H.V.).

M. Abel Rémusat does not believe this extraordinary resemblance to have been entirely accidental; he thinks that Lao-Tseu and his school held their doctrines either from the Jews of the ten tribes, which were dispersed through Asia by the conquest of Salmanazar, or from the apostles of some Phœnician sects, to which the masters and precursors of Pythagoras and Plato also belonged. It may be probable, likewise, that these doctrines came from Hindoostan, that ancient country of so many systems; but, whatever may have been their native soil, it is an accredited tradition in China that they are Aborigines.

Such, then, was the height to which Chinese philosophy had reached at this period; and if, in its synthetic obscurity, it sometimes happens that it is incomprehensible, it only submits to a condition imposed by ancient science; it has, at least, advantages as well as disadvantages; it presents 'a rational ensemble of ideas,

often ingenious, and sometimes sublime, on the constitution of the universe ; and the action of the first and second causes on the nature of man and the principle of his duties.'

About five hundred years before Jesus Christ, Confucius appeared ; and what did he substitute for that philosophy which had conceived so many pure and noble ideas on the great questions with which the human mind is eternally occupied ? In considering his entire doctrine, it is impossible not to be astonished at the victory it has obtained, and the unheard of honours with which it has been for so many years encircled. To a system of theology and metaphysics equally incomplete, incoherent, and open to the most opposite interpretations, he unites a still weaker psychology ; and, having reached morality, which seems to be his true title to glory, he interests himself but little on all the fundamental questions on the nature of man, and the various motives by which his conduct on earth may be regulated ; it is only in the details, in the minor applications of this branch of the science, that the purity and wisdom of his opinions merit esteem. In a word, as a learned professor of the College of France has ingeniously remarked, he is a Socrates who has had no Plato.

And yet the doctrine of Confucius, taught and preached with ardour to princes and to men in power, *indifferent to beliefs, because it taught none*, adopting the ceremonies of ancient naturalism, and even the belief in household gods, in leaving to every one the right of attaching to his public or private acts the sense he chose, has had the fate of a reigning religion. Persecuted by tyrants, supported by the friends of order, this system has furnished the basis of those institutions on which, for 1,200 years, the whole social order of the country has reposed. From that time, the sectarians of the ancient philosophy, the Doctors of Reason, denied all public offices, deprived of all the advantages attached to literature, lost their ground in proportion as learning advanced, and, by degrees, fell into such a state of degradation, that the sublime name which they dishonoured by the lowest practices of jugglery, became a term of contempt, and, by an abuse easily to be understood, the idea of their present baseness was reflected back on their most ancient predecessors.

It was some centuries after the appearance of Confucius, and very near the commencement of our own era, and when the struggle between the two systems was but just concluded, that Buddhism was introduced into China, with its train of obscure mythology and religious practices, with its contemplative and figurative doctrines. Buddhism is so well known, that we will only urge two points : First, that mythological forms are in it only the veil of philosophy, as has always been the case in the greatest antiquity, which literature, the enemy of Buddhism, has always well understood ; for it has never stopped to combat the absurdity of symbols, but has always directly attacked the philosophical system which they en-

velop, and the moral consequences of which alone merit attention. In the second place, the sense of the words attributed to Chakia-Mouni, (or the historical personage who afterwards received the name of the god Buddha,) has been wrongly interpreted, *that every thing has arisen out of nothing, and that to nothing every thing must return; and that those who seek for the first principle of things out of nothingness, will deceive themselves.* It is evident, from the Buddhist texts, and according to the general sense of the doctrine, which denies this absurd doctrine of annihilation, that by the word *nothingness* must be understood the absolute Being of the Pantheists, who exists independently of all, and in whom all things exist; which places the sectarians of Buddha on a level with the Brahmins of the school of the Vedanta, Stons, Srofees, the most learned of the Musulmans, and some modern sects among the nations of the West. Amidst inextricable subtleties, the moral result of the whole doctrine is, that the union of matter with the soul being to the latter only a state of degradation, contemplation and enthusiasm are the means most favourable to advancement in the road of perfection; a dogma which, wherever it has prevailed, has favoured inaction, instituted numerous monasteries, introduced governments more or less theocratic, and extinguished all manly and active virtue. But the literary institutions of China have struggled with success against the action of this *disolvent*, which has been exercised without any counteracting obstacle on the people of Tartary and Thibet. As we before observed, these three different systems are not considered, in China, absolutely contrary, nor is it thought necessary that the one should exclude the other. The emperors of the actual reigning dynasty profess all three, no doubt, because they admit, at the same time, the identity of principles, and the indifference of beliefs. All three, in fact, equally acknowledge a *First Cause*, eternal, and distinct from matter, but which is regarded by each in a different light. According to the *Doctors of Reason*, this first cause is above every thing, sovereignly intelligent. Confucius considers it the basis of order and moral good, and Buddhism principally insists on its superiority as regards matter, which it only looks on as a passing change of substance.

It must not, however, be supposed that the Confucian philosophy has remained in the state in which it was left by its founders. Amongst the innumerable interpreters, to which the necessity imposed on all aspirants to public offices of thoroughly understanding and being enabled to explain their ancient books has given birth, one has appeared more skilful and learned than all the others, who has entirely revised and disfigured the doctrines of the master. Tselm-hy, surnamed *the Prince of Letters*, forgotten in our Liographies, nevertheless produced, himself alone, about the eleventh century, an important revolution in the opinions of the literati. In a long commentary on all the classic texts, he has forcibly brought back those texts which often contradict each other, to an identical sense and unity of doctrine; and, in a special and didactic treatise

he has explained the whole of his principles, which reduce themselves to an absolute materialism and atomistic philosophy, in every respect similar to Epicureanism. The simplicity of his doctrine, and the conveniency of a general explanation, and accordance of the innumerable contradictions contained in the Sacred Writings, have shut all eyes to the insufficiency both of the doctrine and the explanation;—they did not perceive that they absolutely denied the vague scepticism of Confucius, and chased from his doctrine all the rational and elevated solutions; and, believing they still followed the sage of ancient times, it is from the modern commentator that the literati have adopted all their fantasies. This explains the errors of certain Catholic missionaries, who, taking the opinions of a scholar of the Middle Ages for the belief of antiquity, have proclaimed, without any reserve, in spite of the ancient texts, in spite of official interpretations, which the Emperor himself has given, that Chinese Philosophy consecrated Materialism and Atheism.

Thus then, to recapitulate, we see what has been the progress of opinions, and the succession of schools. A doctrine, the analogy of which, with those illustrated by Pythagoras and Plato, at a later period, cannot be contested, which, at least, occupied itself with all the greatest questions, and decided them after its own manner, is replaced by an incomplete stoicism; which, making a universal dogma of order, being totally indifferent to beliefs, and not placing itself in hostility against any other, established on its principles a powerful monarchy. Next the Idealists of India, who have carried their allegorical idolatry into twenty nations, degrading some and civilising others, uselessly endeavoured to oppose its power against this victorious doctrine; and, lastly, from the bosom itself of the belief which remained alone in possession of power and honour, was born, to change and disfigure it, new Epicureans, who have never known either Democritus or Epicurus; such appears to be the frame to be filled up by the future researches of our savants.

Is his task reserved for Germany or France? The author of the article we have just analysed, regards it as properly belonging to the disciples of the Fichtes, Schellings, and Hegels. Let us hope that our country, which appears so long to have been destined to make China known to Europe, will be the first in philosophical researches, as it has been in philology, and that, although it is said so, it will not be from the north that we shall obtain this light.

ITALY,—A WAR SONG.

* Nos patriæ fines, et dulcia linquimus arva;
Nos patriam fugimus.—VIRG.

Ah! when o'er our regions, forsaken,
Shall the day-spring of liberty waken?
And when, roused to vengeance, shall freedom once more
Lead her hosts to the fields, where they vanquish'd before?

Then her far-scatter'd children shall rally,
 From plain, and from mountain, and valley !
 And the tyrant shall quail : for the combat again,
 Proud eagle of fame, shalt thou plume thee, and men
 Shall tell how undaunted thou fliest
 Where the smoke of the battle rolls highest !

Though our legions are scatter'd and broken,
 In exile, or chains, and the token
 Of subjection is stamp'd on the brow, and our brave,
 And our noblest, have known the mean lot of the slave,
 Midst scenes which the sun never lighted,
 Where the pride of the spring but falls blighted ;
 Thou hast warriors yet left, and the sword in their hand
 Shall gleam when thy war-cry is heard o'er the land ;
 They shall tread the old fields of their glory,
 Which again shall be famous in story.

Shall the yoke of the stranger and foe-man
 Be stretch'd o'er the neck of the Roman ?
 Ye who vanquish'd a world, shades of heroes long dead,
 Say, was it for this that ye battled—and bled ?
 Ye who struck down the old Carthaginian ?
 But we'll bow to no tyrant's dominion,
 Arise, sons of Italy ! on,—and strike home !
 For vengeance is ready, and glory's to come,
 And yet shall the oppressor lie lowly,
 For our cause is the just and the holy.

Here, glory, and freedom, and science,
 First beam'd in their sacred alliance,
 When the lights and lost arts of the Greeks of past time,
 Rose in splendour anew, in as lovely a clime,
 When learning her laurels replanted,
 And regain'd all the honours she vaunted.
 But the Austrian hath wither'd our pride, and our foes
 Insultingly tread where our mightiest arose ;
 But, though ages and nations may perish,
 Not so the high thoughts that they cherish.

Sons of Rome, a new era draws nigher,
 And the hope of the bondsman beats higher ;
 Lo ! Greece hath rekindled from heaven the high flame
 That glow'd in her heroes, and led them to fame !
 And Freedom ! the Lusian hath named it,
 And the wide western world hath proclaim'd it :
 A land your sires knew not, beyond the far sea,
 Hath told that yon sun was but made for the free ;
 On the night of the slave it hath broken,
 And through Europe it yet shall be spoken !