Strangeness and Charm
The majority of the first impressions of Japan recorded by
travellers are pleasurable impressions. Indeed there must be something
lacking, or something very harsh, in the nature of which Japan
can make no emotional appeal. The appeal itself is the clue to a problem; and that problem
is the character of a race or of its civilisation.

My own first impressions of Japan, — Japan as seen in
the white sunshine of a perfect spring day, — had doubtless
much in common with the average of former experiences. I remember
Especially the wonder and the delight of the vision. The wonder and the delight have never passed away; they are often revived for me even now, by some chance happening of the fourteen years of sojourn. But the reason of these feelings was difficult to learn,—or at least to guess; for I cannot yet claim to know much about Japan. Long ago the best and dearest Japanese friend that I ever had, said to me, a little before his death:—

"When you find, in four or five years more, that you cannot understand the Japanese at all, then you will begin to know something..."
about them." After having realized the truth of my friend's prediction, after having discovered that I cannot understand the Japanese at all, I feel better qualified to attempt this essay.

As first perceived, the outward strangeness of things in Japan produces (in certain minds, at least) a queer desire impossible to describe, — a feeling of weirdness which comes to us with the perception of the totally unfamiliar. You find yourself moving through queer small streets full of odd small people, wearing robes or sandals of extraordinary shapes; and you can scarcely distinguish the sexes at first. The houses are constructed and furnished in ways
again 3 all your experience; and you are
amused. I find that you cannot con-
ceive the use or meaning of numero-
less things on display in the shops.
Food-stuffs of unimaginable derivation;
incantations of mystic forms; emblems
incomprehensible of some mysterious
belief; strange masks and toys
that commemorate legends of gods
or demons; odd figures, too, of the
gods themselves, with monstrous ears
and smiling faces—all these you
may perceive as you wander about;
though you must also notice
telegraph-poles and tele-writers,
electric lamps and sensing machines.
Every where on signs and hangings,
and on the backs of people passing
by, you will observe wonderful
Chinese characters; and the wizardry
of all these things makes the dominant
tone of the spectacle.
Further acquaintance with this fantastic world will in no wise diminish the sense of strangeness evoked by the first vision of it. You will soon observe that even the physical action of the people are unfamiliar—thair work is done in ways the opposite of Western ways. Tools are of surprising shapes, and are handled after surprising methods: the blacksmith squats at his anvil, wielding a hammer such as no Western smith could use without long practice; the carpenter's putter, instead of pincers, his extraordinary plane and saw. Always the left is the right side, and the right side the wrong; and keys must be turned, to open or close a lock, in what we are accustomed to think the wrong direction.

Mr. Percival Lowell has kindly observed that the Japanese speak
backwards, read backwards, write backwards, and that this is only the abc of their condariety. For the habit of writing backwards there are obvious ... tional reasons; and the requirements of Japanese calligraphy suffice to explain why the artist pushes his brush or pencil instead of pulling it. But why, instead of pulling the thread through the eye of the needle, should the Japanese maiden slip the eye of the needle over the point of the thread? Perhaps the most remarkable, out of a hundred possible examples, is furnished by the Japanese art of fencing. The swordsman, delivering his blow with both hands, does not pull the blade toward him in the moment of striking, but pushes it from him. He uses it indeed,
as other Asiatics do, not on the principle of the wedge, but of the saw; yet here is a pushing motion where we should expect a pulling motion in the shape... These and other forms of unfamiliar action are strange enough to suggest the notion of a humanizing even physically, as little related to us, as might be the population of another planet, — the motion of some unknown animal unlikeliness. No such unlikeliness, however, appears to exist; and all this opposite unlikeliness really implies, not so much the outcome of a human experience entirely independent of any other experience, as the outcome of an experience evolutionally younger than our own.
Yet that experience has been one of no mean order. Its manifest-
feelings are not merely sterile: they also delight. The delicate
perfection of workmanship, the
teger strength and power of objects,
the power manifest I obtain the
best results with the least ma-
terial, the achieving of mecha-
nical ends by the simplest possible
means, the comprehension of irre-
gularity as aesthetic value, the
beauty and perfect taste
of everything, the sense displayed
of harmony in lines or colours,—
all this must convince you at
once that our Occident has much
to learn from this remote civi-
Jization, not only in matters of
art and taste, but in matters
likewise of economy and utility.
It is no barbarian fancy that appeals to you in thoseuming porcelain, those astonishing embroideries, those wonders of lacquer and ivory and bronze, which educate imagination in unfamiliar ways. No: these are the products of a civilization which became, within its own limits, so exquisite that no one but an artist is capable of judging its manufacture—a civilization that can be termed imperfect only by those who would also term imperfect the mental civilization of three thousand years ago.

But the underlying strange—ness of this world, the psychical—logical strangeness, is much more startling than the visible and superficial. You begin to suspect the range of it after having dis-
covered that no adult Occidental can perfectly master the language. East and West the fundamental part of human nature — the emotional bases of it — are much the same: the mental difference between a Japanese and a European child is mainly potential. But with growth the difference rapidly develops and widens, till it becomes, in adult life, unmeasurable. The whole of the Japanese mental structure evolves in forms having nothing in common with Western psychological development: the expression of thought becomes regulated, and the expression of emotion inhibited in ways that bewildered and astounded. The ideas of this people are not our ideas; their sentiments are not our sentiments; their ethical life represents for us regions of thought and emotion yet unexplored, or perhaps long forgotten. Any one of their ordinary phrases, translated in Zo
Western speech, makes hopeless nonsense; and the literal rendering in the Japanese of the simplest English sentence would scarcely be comprehended by any Japanese who had never studied a European tongue. Can you learn all the words in a Japanese dictionary, your acquisition would not help you in the least to make yourself understood in speaking, unless you had learned also to think like a Japanese, -- that is to say, to think backwards, to think upside-down and inside-out, to think in directions totally foreign to your habit. Experience in the acquisition of European languages can help you to learn Japanese about as much as it could help you to acquire the language spoken by the inhabitants of Mars. To be able to use the Japanese tongue as a Japanese uses it, one would need to be born again, and to have one's mind completely
reconstructed, from the foundation upwards. It is possible that a person of European parentage, born in Japan, and accustomed from infancy to use the vernacular, might remain in after-life that distinctive knowledge which could alone enable him to adapt his mental relations to the relations of any Japanese social environment. There is actually an Englishman named Black, born in Japan, whose proficiency in the language is proved by the fact that he is able to earn a fair income as a professional story-teller (hanashika). But this is an extraordinary case. As for the literary language, I need only observe that to make acquaintance with it requires very much more than
a knowledge of several thousand Chinese characters. It is safe to say that no Occidental can understand a reader at sight any literary text laid before him — indeed the number of native scholars able to do so is very small; and although the learning displayed in this direction by various Europeans may, justly, compel our admiration, the work of none could have been given to the world without Japanese help.

But as the outward strangeness of Japan proves to be full of beauty, so the inward strangeness appears to have its charm, — an intellectual charm reflected in the common life of the people. The attractive aspects of that life do not indeed imply, as the
ordinary observer, a psychological difference
and a difference measurable by score of
centuries: only a scientific mind, like that of Mr. Percival Lowell,
immediately perceives the problem pre-
sented. The less gifted stranger,
if naturally sympathetic, is merely
pleasant and puzzled, and his is
explained by his own experience of
happy life on the other side of
the world, the social conditions
that charm him. Let us suppose
that he has the good fortune of
being able to live for six months
or a year in some old-fashioned
down of the interior. From the
beginning of his sojourn he can
scarcely fail be impressed by
the apparent kindness and friend-
ness of the inhabitants about him.
In the relations of the people to each other, as well as in all their relations to himself, he will find a constant amenity, a fact, a good-nature such as he will elsewhere have met with only in the friendship of exclusive circles. Everybody greets everybody with happy looks or pleasant words; faces are always smiling; he communauté incident of everyday life are transformed by a courtesy as once so aridly so faultless that it appears to spring directly from the heart, without any teaching. Under all circumstances a certain outward cheerfulness never fails: no matter what troubles may come, storm or fire, flood or earthquake, he laughter of pleasing voices, the bright smile as peaceful bow, the kindly inquiry and the wish to please. Continue
To make existence beautiful. Religion brings no gloom to the sunshine:
before the Buddha and the gods folk smile as they pray; the
Temple courts are playgrounds for
the children; and within its
enclosure of the great public shrines
which are places of festivity
rather than of solemnity—dance-
platforms are erected. Family
existence would seem to be everywhere
characterized by gentleness: there
is no visible quarrelling, no loud
shouting, no tears or reproaches.
Cruelly, even to animals, appears
to be unknown: one sees farmers,
coming to town, burdening patiently,
beside their horses or oxen, aiding
their dumb companions to bear
the burden, and using no whips
or goads. Drivers or pullers of
cards will turn out of their way,
under the most provoking cir-
stances, rather than over-
run a lazy dog or a stupid
chicken... For we in considerate
 dine one may live in the midst
of appearances like these, and
perceive nothing to spoil the
pleasure of the experience.

Of course the condi-
tions of which I speak are now passing
away; but they are still to be
found in the remoter districts.
I have lived in districts where
no case of theft had occurred
for hundreds of years,—where
the newly-built prisons of
Meiji remained empty and use-
less,—where the people left their doors un-

fascinated by night as well as by day.
These facts are familiar to every
Japanese. In such a district, you
might recognize that the kind-
ness shown to you, as a stranger,
is the consequence of official com-
mand; but how explain the
goodness of the people to each
other? When you discover
no harshness, no rudeness, no
dishonesty, no breaking of laws,
and learn that this social con-
dition has been the same for
centuries, you are tempted to be-
lieve that you have entered into
the domain of a morally superior
humanity. All this softness,
impeccable honesty, ingenuous
kindness of speech and act,
you might naturally interpret as
conduct dictated by perfect
goodness of heart. And the
Simplicity that descends you to no simplicity of barbarism. Here everyone has been taught; everyone knows how to write and speak beautifully, how to compose poetry, how to behave politely; there is everywhere cleanliness and good taste; interiors are bright and pure; the daily use of the hot bath is universal. Has refuse I be charmed by a civilization in which every relation appears I be governed by altruism, every action directed by duty, and every object shaped by art? You cannot help being delighted by such conditions, or feeling ashamed at hearing
them denounced as "heathen". And according to the degree of altruism within yourself, these good folk will be able, without any apparent effort, to make you happy. The mere sensation of the milieu is a pleased happiness: it is like the sensation of a dream in which people greet us exactly as we like to be greeted, and say, "We all had we like to hear," and do for no all that we wish we have done,—people moving soundlessly through spaces of perfect repose, all bathed in vapoury light. Yes— for no little line these fairy-folk can give you all the soft bliss of sleep. But
sooner or later, if you dwell long with them, your sentiment will prove I have much in common with the happiness of dreams. You will never forget the dream—never; but it will live at least, like these vapours of spring which lend pretense—natural loveliness to a Japa-
neso landscape in the fore-
oon of radiant days. Really you are happy because you have entered bodily into Fairyland,—it is a world that is not, and never could be your own. You have been transported out of your own century—over spaces enormous of vanished time—into an era forgotten, into a vanished
age, — back to something ancient as Egypt or Nineveh. That is the secret of the strangeness and beauty of things, — the secret of the thrill they give, — the secret of the elfish charm of the people and their ways. Fortunate mortal! The tide of Time has turned for you! But remember that here all is enchantment, — that you have fallen under the spell of the dead, — that the lips and the colours and the voices must fade away at last into emptiness and silence.
Some of us, at least, have often wished that it were possible to live for a season in the beautiful vanished world of Greek culture. Inspired by our finer acquaintance with the charm of Greek art and thought, this wish comes to us even before we are capable of imagining the true conditions of the antique civilisation. If the wish could be realized, we should certainly find it impossible to accommodate ourselves to these conditions, not so much because of the difficulties of learning the environment, as because of the much greater difficulty...
of feeling just as people used to feel some thirty centuries ago. In spite of all that has been done for Greek studies since the Renaissance, we are still unable to understand many aspects of the old Greek life: no modern mind can really feel, for example, those sentiments and emotions to which the great tragedy of Oedipus made appeal. Nevertheless, we are much in advance of our forefathers of the eighteenth century, as regards the knowledge of Greek civilization. At the time of the French revolution, it was thought possible to re-establish in Greece the conditions of a Greek republic, and to educate children according to the system
of Sparta. Today we are well aware that no mind developed by modern civilization could find happiness under any of those \textit{socialist} despotisms which existed in all the cities of the ancient world before the Roman conquest. We could no more mingle with the old Greek life, if it were resurrected for us, — no more become a part of it, — than we could change our mental iden\textilites. But how much would we not give for the delight of beholding it, — for the joy of attending one festival in Corinthe, or of witnessing the Pan-hellenic games?...
And yet, to witness the revival of some portion of Greek civilization, — to walk about the very grounds of Pythagoras, — to wander through the Syracuse of Theocritus, — were not any more of a privilege than is the opportunity actually afforded us to study Japanese life. Indeed, from the commercial point of view, it were less of a privilege, — since Japan offers us the living spectacle of conditions older, and psychologically much farther away from us, than those of any Greek period with which art and literature have made us closely acquainted.
The reader scarcely needs to be reminded that a civilization less evolved than our own, and intellectually remote from us, is not on that account to be regarded as necessarily inferior in all respects. Hellenic civilization at its best represented an early stage of sociological evolution; yet its arts which we developed still furnish our supreme and unapproachable ideals of beauty. Do, too, this much more archaic civilization of Old Japan attain an average of aesthetic and moral culture well worthy of our wonder and praise. One a shallow mind—a very shallow
mind — will pronounce the best of
that culture superior. But Jap-
ese civilization is peculiar to
a degree for which there is perhaps
no Western parallel, since it
offers us the spectacle of many
successive layers of alien culture
superimposed above the simple
indigenous culture, and forming
a very bewildering mass of complexity.
Most of this alien culture is Chinese,
and bears but an indirect rela-
tion to the real subject of these
studies. The peculiarity and
surprising fact is that, in spite
of all superimposition, the
original character of the people
and of their society should have
been so little changed. The wonder
of Japan is not in the countless borrowings with
which she has cloaked herself,—
merely as a princess of the older
line would adorn twelve ceremonial
robes, of diverse colours and
qualities, folded one upon the
other so as to show their many-
folded edges at throat and
sleeves and skirt; — no, the
real wonder is the wearer. For
the interest of the costume is
much less in its beauty of
form and hint than in its
significance as idea,—as repre-
senting something of the mind
that devised or adopted it.
And the supreme interest of the old Japanese civilization lies in what "expresses of the race-character, that character which yet remains essentially unchanged by all the changes of Meiji.

"Suggests" were perhaps a better word than "expresses," for that race-character is rather to be divided than recognized. Our comprehension of it might be helped by some definite knowledge of origins; but such knowledge we do not yet possess. Ethnologists are agreed that the Japanese race has been formed by a mingling of peoples, and that the dominant element is Mongolian;
but this dominant element is represented in two very different types,—one slender and almost feminine of aspect; the other, robust and powerful. Chinese and Korean elements are known to exist in the population of certain districts; and there appears to have been a large infusion of Aino blood. When there is any Malay or Polynesian element also, has not been decided. Thus much can be safely affirmed,—that the race, like all good races, is a mixed one; and that the people, who originally must have formed it, have been so blended together as to develop, under close social discipline, a tolerably uniform type of character. This character, though immediately recognizable in some of its aspects, remains (to Western observation at least) mysterious, enigmatic, inscrutable.
Nevertheless, it is understood it better has become a matter of importance. Japan has entered into the world's competitive struggle; and the worth of any people in that struggle depends upon character quite as much as upon force. We can learn something about Japanese character if we are able to ascertain the nature of the conditions which shaped it, — the general facts of the moral experience of the race. And these facts we should first express or suggest in the history of the national beliefs, and in the history of those social institutions derived from and developed by religion.