

Leo Tolstoy

Letter to a Chinese Gentleman

1906

Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021. Written in 1899, and translated by Vladimir G. Tchertkoff, this letter was published in 1900 by The Free Age Press.

Dear Sir,

I received your books and have read them with great interest, especially the "Papers from a Viceroy's Yamen."

The life of the Chinese people has always interested me in the highest degree, and I have endeavored to become acquainted with what was accessible in the life of the Chinese, especially with the Chinese wisdom, the books of Confucius, Mentze, Laotze, and commentaries upon them. I have also read about Chinese Buddhism and books by Europeans upon China. Latterly, moreover since those atrocities which have been perpetrated upon the Chinese by Europeans – among the others and to a great extent by Russians – the general disposition of the Chinese people has interested and does yet interest me.

The Chinese people, whilst suffering so much from the immoral and coarsely egotistic avarice and cruelty of the European nations, has, until lately, answered all the violence committed against it with a magnanimous and wise tranquility preferring to suffer rather than to fight against this violence. I am speaking of the Chinese people, but not about the Government. This tranquility and patience of the great and powerful Chinese people elicited only an increasingly insolent aggression from Europeans, as is always the case with coarsely selfish people liviig merely an animal life as were the Europeans who had dealings with China. The trial which the Chinese have undergone and are now undergoing is a great and healy one, but precisely now is it important that the Chinese people should not lose patience, or alter their attitude towards violence, so as not to deprive themselves of all the vast results which must follow the enduring of violence without returning evil for evil.

Only " he that endureth to the end the same shall be saved '* is

said in the Christian law, and I think that it is an indubitable truth, although one which men find it hard to accept. Abstinence from returning evil for evil and nonparticipation in evil is the surest means not only of salvation but of victory over those who commit evil.

The Chinese could see a striking confirmation of the truth of this law after their surrender of Port Arthur to Russia. The greatest efforts to defend Port Arthur by arms against the Japanese and the Russians would not have produced such ruinous consequences for Russia and Japan as those material and moral evils which the surrender of Port Arthur to the former brought on Russia and Japan. The same will inevitably be the case with Wei-hai-Wei and Kiao-chau, surrendered by China to England and Germany.

The success of some robbers elicits the envy of others, and the prey seized becomes an object of dissension ruining the robbers themselves. Such is the case with dogs, so also is it with men who have descended to the level of animals.

II

Therefore it is that I now with fear and grief hear and see in your book the manifestation in China of the spirit of strife, of the desire to forcibly resist the atrocities committed by the European nations. Were this to be the case, were the Chinese people indeed to lose patience and, arming themselves according to the methods of Europeans, to expel from their midst all the European robbers – which task they could easily accomplish with their intelligence, persistence, and energy, and above all by reason of their great numbers – it would be dreadful. Dreadful not in the sense in which this was understood by one of the coarsest and most benighted representatives of Western Europe – the German Emperor – not in the sense that China would become dangerous to Europe^ but in the sense that China would cease to be the main- stay of your true practical national wisdom consisting in living that peaceful agricultural life which is natural to all rational men, and to which those nations who have abandoned this life are bound sooner or later consciously to return.

I think that in our time a great revulsion is taking place in the life of humanity, and that in this revulsion China, at the head of the Eastern nations, must play a grand part.

Methinks the vocation of the Eastern nations, China, Persia, Turkey, India, Russia and perhaps Japan, if she is not yet completely enmeshed in the net of depraved European civilization, – consists in indicating to all nations that true way towards freedom to which, as you say in your book, there is in the Chinese language no other word

than Tao, – the Way, – i.e., an activity in conformity with the eternal and fundamental law of human life.

Freedom according to the teaching of Jesus is realized in this same way. " And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free " is said in that teaching. And it is this freedom, which Western nations have almost irrevocably lost, that the Eastern nations are methinks called to realize.

My idea is this :

From the most ancient times it has been the case that out of the midst of peaceful and laborious people there arose savage men who preferred violence to labor, and these savage and idle men attacked and compelled the peaceful ones to work for them. So it has been both in the West and in the East among all nations who lived the state life, and so it continued for ages and continues yet. But in olden times when conquerors seized vast populated spaces they could not do much harm to the subdued : the small number of rulers and great number of ruled, especially when the ways of communication were very primitive, merely produced the result of bringing a small portion of the population into subjection to the violence of the rulers, whereas the majority could live a peaceful life without coming into direct touch with the oppressors. Thus it was in the whole world, and so until quite latterly did it continue among the Eastern nations as well, and especially in the vast land of China.

But such a situation could not and cannot continue, for two reasons : firstly, because coercive power through its very essence keeps continually becoming more depraved, and secondly, because the subjugated people, becoming more and more enlightened, see with increasing clearness the evil of their submission to power. The effect of this is further increased by technical improvements in the means of communication : roads, the post, telegraph, telephones, owing to which the rulers manifest their influence in places where it could not otherwise have reached ; and the oppressed also interassociating ever more closely, understand clearer and clearer the disadvantages of their position.

And the disadvantages in course of time become so heavy that the subdued feel impelled to alter in some way or another their relation to authority.

The Western nations have long felt this necessity and have long since changed their attitude to power by the one means, common to all Western peoples – by the limitation of power through representatives, that is as a matter of fact by the spreading of power, by its transference from one or a few to the many.

At the present time I think that the term has arrived for the Eastern nations also and for China similarly to realize all the evil of despotic power and to search for the means of liberation from it the present conditions of life having become unbearable.

IV.

I know that in China there exists a teaching implying that the chief ruler, the " Bogdikhán," should be the wisest and most virtuous man, and that if he be not such, then the subjects may and should cease to obey him. But I think that such a teaching is merely a justification of power, and as unsound as the teaching of Paul circulated among the European nations, which affirms that the powers are of God. The Chinese people cannot know whether their Emperor is wise and virtuous, just as the Christian nations could not know whether our power was granted by God to this ruler and not to that other one who fought against him.

These justifications of power could stand when the evil of power was not much felt by the people ; but now that the majority of men feel all the disadvantages and injustice of power, of the power of one, or a few, over many, these justifications are not effective, and nations have to alter one way or another their attitude to authority. And the Western nations have long ago made this alteration : it is now the turn of the East. It is I think in such a position that Russia and Persia, Turkey and China now find themselves. All these nations have attained the period when they can no longer remain in their former attitude towards their rulers. As was correctly remarked by the Russian writer Gertzen : a Gengis Khan with telegraphs and electric motors is impossible. If Gengis Khans or men similar to them still exist in the East, it is clear that their hour has come and that they are the last. They cannot continue to exist both because owing to telegraphs and all that is called civilization their power is becoming too oppressive, and because the nations, owing to the same civilization, feel and recognize with especial keenness that the existence or nonexistence of these Gengis Khans is for them not a matter of indifference as it used to be of old, but that almost all the calamities from which they suffer are produced precisely by this power to which they submit without any advantage to themselves but merely by habit.

In Russia this is certainly the case ; I think that the same is true also of Turkey and Persia and China.

For China this is especially true, owing to the peaceful disposition of its population and the bad organization of its Army

LETTER TO A CHINESE GENTLEMAN. 5^

which gives the Europeans the possibility of robbing with impunity

Chinese lands under the pretext of collisions and differences with the Chinese Government.

The Chinese people cannot but feel the necessity of changing its relation to power.

V.

And now I gather from your book and other information that some light-minded Chinese, called the party of reform, think that this alteration should consist in following the methods of the Western nations, t'.e.y in substituting a representative Government for a despotic one, in organizing an army similar to that of Western nations, and a similar organization of industry.

This solution, which at first sight appears the simplest and most natural, is not only a superficial one, but very silly, and, according to all I know about China, it is altogether alien to the wise Chinese people. To organize such a Constitution, such an Army, perhaps, also, such a conscription, and such an industry as the Western nations have got, would mean to renounce all that by which the Chinese people have lived and are living, to renounce their past, to renounce their rational, peaceful, agricultural life, that life which constitutes the true and only way of Tao, not only for China, but for all mankind.

Let us admit that, having introduced among themselves European institutions, the Chinese were to expel the Europeans and to have a Constitution, a powerful standing Army, and an industrial development similar to the European.

Japan has done this, has introduced a Constitution and extended the Army and Fleet, and developed industry, and the result of all these inseparably interconnected measures is already obvious. The condition of its people more and more approaches the position of the European nations, and this position is extremely burdensome.

VI

The States of Western Europe, externally very powerful, may now crush the Chinese army ; but the position of the people living in these States not only cannot be compared with the position of the Chinese, but, on the contrary, it is most calamitous. Among all these nations there unceasingly proceeds a strife between the

destitute, exasperated working people and the Government and wealthy, a strife which is restrained only by coercion on the part of deceived men who constitute the Army ; a similar strife is continually waging between the different States demanding endlessly increasing armaments, a strife which is any moment ready to plunge into the greatest catastrophes. But however dreadful this state of things may be, it does not constitute the essence of the calamity of the Western nations. Their chief and fundamental calamity is that the whole life of these nations who are unable to furnish themselves with food, is entirely based on the necessity of procuring means of sustenance by violence and cunning from other nations, who, like China, India, Russia and others, still preserve a rational agricultural life.

And it is these parasitical nations and their activity that you are invited to imitate by the men of the Reform party !

Constitutions, protective tariffs, standing armies, all this together has rendered the Western nations what they are – people who have abandoned agriculture and become unused to it, occupied in towns and factories in the production of articles for the most part unnecessary, people who with their armies are adapted only to every kind of violence and robbery. However brilliant their position may appear at first sight, it is a desperate one, and they must inevitably perish if they do not change the whole, structure of their life, founded as it now is on deceit and the plunder and pillage of the agricultural nations.

To imitate Western nations, being frightened by their insolence and power, would be the same as if a rational undepraved industrious man were to imitate a spendthrift insolent ruffian who has lost the habit of work and was assaulting him, i.e, in order to successfully oppose an immoral blackguard to become a similar immoral blackguard oneself.

The Chinese should not imitate Western nations, but profit by their example in order to avoid falling into the same desperate straits.

All that the Western nations are doing can and should be an example for the Eastern ones, – not, however, an example of what they should do, but of what they should not do under any consideration whatever.

VII

To follow the way of the Western nations means to go the way to certain ruin. But also to remain in the position in which the Russians in Russia, the Persians in Persia, the Turks in Turkey, and the Chinese in China are is also impossible. But for you, the Chinese, it is particularly obviously impossible, because you

remaining with your love of peace in the position of a State without an army amid armed States, which are unable to exist independently, will inevitably be subject to plunder and seizure which these States are compelled to have recourse to for their maintenance.

What, then, is to be done ?

For us Russians I know, I most undoubtedly know, what we Russians should not do and what we should do in order to free ourselves from the evils from which we are suffering, and, not to fall into still worse ones. We Russians first of all should not obey the existing authorities, but we also should not do that which is being attempted among us by unenlightened people, as among you, by the party of reform, – we should not imitate the West : we should not substitute one Power for another and organize a constitution, whether it be monarchical or republican. This for certain we should not do, because it would necessarily bring us to the same calamitous position in which the Western nations are placed. But we should and can do only one thing, and that the most simple : live a peaceful agricultural life, bearing the acts of violence which may be perpetrated upon us without struggling against them and without participating in them. The same thing^ I presume, and with yet stronger reasons, should you Chinese do in order not only to free yourselves from the seizures of your land and the plunder which the European nations subject you to, but also from the unreasonable demands of your Government which exacts from you actions contrary to your moral teaching and consciousness.

Only adhere to that liberty which consists in following the rational way of life, z.e.y Tao, and of themselves will be abolished all the calamities which your officials cause you, and your oppression and plunder by Europeans will become impossibk. You will free yourselves from your officials by not fulfilling their demands, and, above all, by not obeying, you will cease to contribute to the oppression and plunder of each other. You will free yourselves from plunder on the part of Europeans by keeping the Tao, and not recognizing yourselves as belonging to any State, or as being responsible for the deeds committed by your Government.

All the seizures and plunder you are subject to from European nations take place only because there exists a Government of which you recognize yourselves as subjects. If there were no Chinese Government, foreign nations would have no pretext, under guise of international relations, to commit their atrocities. And if, by refusing to obey your Government, you will cease to encourage foreign Powers in their acts of violence against you : if you do not serve the Government, either in private, or State, or military service– then there will not exist all those calamities from which you suffer.

VIII

In order to free oneself from the evil one should not fight with its consequences : the abuses of Governments, the seizures and plunders of neighboring nations, – but with the root of the evil; with the relations in which the people have placed themselves towards human authority. If the people recognize human power as higher than the power of God, higher than the law (Tao), then the people will always be slaves and the more so the more complex their organization of Power (such as a constitutional one) which they institute and to which they submit. Only those people can be free for whom the law of God (Tao) is the sole supreme law to which all others should be subordinated.

IX.

Individuals and societies are always in a transitory state from one age to another, but there are times when these transitions both for individuals and for societies are especially apparent and vividly realized. As it happens with a man who has suddenly come to feel that he can no longer continue a childish life, so also in the life of nations there come periods when societies can no longer continue to live as they did, and they realize the necessity of changing their habits, their organization and activity. And it is such a period of transition from childhood to manhood that, as it appears to me, all nations are now passing through, the Eastern as well as the Western. This transition consists in the necessity of freeing themselves from human authority which has become unbearable, and of the establishment of life on foundations other than human power.

And this task is, I think, by historical fate predestined precisely to the Eastern nations.

The Eastern nations are placed for this purpose in especially happy conditions, not having yet abandoned agriculture, not being yet depraved by military, constitutional and industrial life, and not having yet lost faith in the necessity of the supreme law of Heaven or God, they are standing at the parting of the ways from which the European nations have long ago turned, on to the false way in which liberation from human authority has become particularly difficult.

[1]

And therefore, Eastern nations seeing all the calamity of the Western peoples, should naturally endeavor to free themselves from the error of human authority, not by that artificial and delusive method consisting in the imaginary limitation of power, and in representation by which Western nations have endeavored to free themselves, but should solve the problem of Power by another more radical and

simple plan. And this plan of itself appeals to those who have not yet lost faith in the supreme, binding law of Heaven or God, the law of Tao. It consists merely in the following of this law which excludes the possibility of obeying human authority.

If the Chinese people were only to continue to live, as they have formerly lived, a peaceful industrious agricultural life, following in their conduct the principles of their three religions : Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, all three in their basis coinciding : Confucianism in the liberation from all human authority, Taoism in not doing to others what one does not wish done to oneself, and Buddhism in love towards all men and all living beings, then of themselves would disappear all those calamities from which they now suffer, and no Powers could overcome them.

The task which, according to my opinion, is now pending not only for China but for all the Eastern nations, does not merely consist in freeing themselves from the evils they suffer from their own Governments and foreign nations, but in pointing out to all nations the issue out of the transitory position in which they all are.

And there is and can be no other issue than the liberation of oneself from human authority, and submission to the divine authority.

[1] As to why this is so I have stated in detail in my article entitled, "The Significance of the Russian Revolution."