

The Chinese Language

THE Chinese language is like no other on the globe; it is said to contain not more than about 330 words, but it is by no means monotonous, for it has four accents, the even, the raised, the lessened, and the returning, which multiply every word into four; as difficult, says Mr. As-tle, for an European to understand, as it is for a Chinese to comprehend the six pronunciations of the French E. In fact they can so diversify their monosyllabic words by the different tones which they give them, that the same character differently accented signifies sometimes ten or more different things.

From the twenty-ninth volume of the *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses* I take the present critically humorous account of this language.

P. Bourgeois, one of the missionaries, attempted, after ten months' residence at Peking, to preach in the Chinese language. These are the words of the good father. "God knows how much this first Chinese sermon cost me! I can assure you this language resembles no other. The same word has never but one termination; and then adieu to all that in our declensions distinguishes the gender, and the number of things we would speak: adieu, in the verbs, to all which might explain the active person, how and in what time it acts, if it acts

alone or with others: in a word, with the Chinese the same word is substantive, adjective, verb, singular, plural, masculine, feminine, &c. It is the person who hears who must arrange the circumstances, and guess them. Add to all this, that all the words of this language are reduced to three hundred and a few more; that they are pronounced in so many different ways, that they signify eighty thousand different things, which are expressed by as many different characters. This is not all: the arrangement of all these monosyllables appears to be under no general rule; so that to know the language after having learnt the words, we must learn every particular phrase: the least inversion would make you unintelligible to three parts of the Chinese.

"I will give you an example of their words. They told me *chou* signifies a book: so that I thought whenever the word *chou* was pronounced, a *book* was the subject. Not at all! *Chou*, the next time I heard it, I found signified a *tree*. Now I was to recollect, *chou* was a *book*, or a *tree*. But this amounted to nothing; *chou*, I found, expressed also *great heats*; *chou* is to relate; *chou* is the *Aurora*; *chou* means to be accustomed; *chou* expresses the *loss of a wager*, &c. I should not finish, were I to attempt to give you all its significations.

“Notwithstanding these singular difficulties, could one but find a help in the perusal of their books, I should not complain. But this is impossible! Their language is quite different from that of simple conversation. What will ever be an insurmountable difficulty to every European, is the pronunciation: every word may be pronounced in five different tones; yet every tone is not so distinct that an unpractised ear can easily distinguish it. These monosyllables fly with amazing rapidity; then they are continually disguised by elisions, which sometimes hardly leave anything of two monosyllables. From an aspirated tone you must pass immediately to an even one; from a whistling note to an inward one; sometimes your voice must proceed from the palate; sometimes it must be guttural, and almost always nasal. I recited my sermon at least fifty times to my servant, before I spoke it in public; and yet I am told, though he continually corrected me, that, of the ten parts of the sermon (as the Chinese express themselves), they hardly understood three. Fortunately, the Chinese are wonderfully patient; and they are astonished that any ignorant stranger should be able to learn two words of their language.”

It is not less curious to be informed, as Dr. Hager tells us in his *Elementary Characters of the Chinese*, that “Satires are often composed in China, which, if you attend to the *characters*, their import is pure and sublime; but if you regard the *tone* only, they contain a meaning ludicrous or obscene.” He adds, “In the Chinese *one word* sometimes corresponds to three or four thousand characters; a property quite opposite to that of our language, in which *myriads* of different *words* are expressed by the *same letters*.”