YAMEI KIN AND HER MISSION TO THE CHINESE PEOPLE: BY JAMES KAY MACGRE- GOR.

T is precarious business to predict history. But those who live to read a history of China for the first quarter of the twentieth century should look for the name of Yamei Kin. If it is not there, the signs will have failed.

Yamei Kin is a Chinese woman who has already been hailed as a second Aspasia. Awhile ago she came to America to live and look about her and learn. Now she is going back to China to live and look about her and see how she can best use what she has learned. Men’s heads have come off in China for less than Yamei Kin proposes to do; for with half a world between her and the Dragon throne she frankly avows a purpose of helping to shape the destiny of China. It may be, as Yamei Kin avers, that the Empress Dowager is less constrained by hidebound conservatism than we think, but it is none the less true that she and her counsellors are jealous of their prerogative and have hurried into a limbo more or less final many who have presumed too far.

For any other woman than Yamei Kin, then, this purpose might sound over-bold. But Yamei Kin is no ordinary woman. To begin with, she is a woman of rare mental gifts. Added to this she has had rare advantages of education, and still more rare opportunities to further her education by observation and intimate study of conditions not only in her own country, but in Japan and America. She has a natural charm of manner combined with the art of the politician and the tact of the diplomat. Those who know Yamei Kin best will doubt least the outcome of her purpose.

Fate has dealt whimsically with Yamei Kin. In the beginning she was given parents who dared think their own thoughts in China a hundred years ago. Her father was one of the early converts to Christianity, though Yamei Kin herself has gone back to the teachings of Confucius. Her mother, a little-foot woman, had the unusual advantage of a seminary education, and flew in the face of Chinese tradition by choosing her own husband.

They went to the same mission church, these two,—a church where boys and girls were divided by the centre aisle, Quaker fashion. But Chinese eyes were not set aslant for nothing, and soon a fine flirtation was in progress, with love notes on strips of rice paper hidden
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under the doorstep by each. And by the time one of these notes, too hurriedly placed for concealment, fell into the hands of the missionary’s wife, it was too late to do anything. The girl’s mind was made up. As a matter of fact the missionaries winked at the match when they knew, for the boy had decided to become a minister and, in the opinion of missionaries, a minister should have a wife.

Such were Yamei Kin’s parents, people of the mandarin class, the division of brain-workers, which constitutes the aristocracy of China. And right here, listen to what this Chinese woman says of the tendency toward the establishment of caste in the United States:

“It is shocking, the contempt your rich have for the poor. I have heard women speak most contemptuously of the serving classes, referring to them as menials, with their own servants standing behind their chairs. In my country a rich merchant of the educated class may be seen at New Year’s time playing poker with his porter, as pleased to win five cents from him as a larger stake from a man of his own station. We have rank, but not snobbery; and China is to-day a much more democratic country than the United States. Any man may rise to any position if he works to deserve it, and while he is working his way up he is not treated with contempt by those who have already risen above him.”

IN the matter of parentage Fate was kind to Yamei Kin. Independence was her birthright, a free mind her heritage. Then Fate took a cruel turn. At the age of two the child was left an orphan. An epidemic of fever swept over Ning-po, her birthplace, and she was bereft in a few short weeks of parents, relatives, friends.

This did not mean as much to the child of two as it has meant to the woman, and there is something wistful in the voice of Yamei Kin as she says:

“I have no home. I have headquarters here and there as I travel, but I can call no place home. It must be that I was born under a wandering star, and in my Chinese heart is a longing for a home where my ancestors have lived and died before me.”

The little Yamei was adopted by the late Dr. D. B. McCartee and his wife, the missionaries who had abetted her parents in their marriage, and who afterward served a long term in the diplomatic service of this country in Japan.
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Her foster parents took the greatest care with the child’s education, and were wise enough not to Americanize her too much. She did not have to give up her chopsticks for knife and fork. She was allowed to wear her hair oiled flat to her head in front and in shiny braids behind, and run about in the quaint little embroidered breeches of Chinese girlhood. And before she was taught any of the English branches she was given the regular course in the Chinese classics and a course of study in Japan. Then they brought her to America to complete her education, for it had been decided that she should study medicine. She was still too young to enter college when she came to the United States, so she took a course at a preparatory school before entering the Woman’s Medical College of New York, which is affiliated with Cornell.

“I did not exactly choose my profession,” says Dr. Kin. “It was the result of my study of natural sciences, in which I became interested through my foster father’s researches.”

She says this as though it were a common enough thing for a Chinese girl in her teens to dabble in sciences. This is because she belongs to the literary or student class of Chinese, to which learning is the sine qua non of life. She admits it was something new for a Chinese woman to take a degree, and indeed Dr. Kin was the first one to do it, and that at a time when there were very few American women in the professions. She was graduated at the very earliest age at which a diploma could be granted by the college.

“I had the rather unusual advantage, too, of clinical practice,” she added. “I have been surprised to learn on my return to this country that there are only two hospitals in New York where women are allowed as interns. Your men have allowed women to be stenographers and clerks and some other things that they do not care particularly about being, but they still guard the professions by seeing to it that they alone have such opportunities in education as that which clinical practise gives to medical students.”

After a couple of years spent in special courses in Philadelphia and Washington, Yamei Kin returned to China with a well-earned M. D. to her name, there to compete with practitioners of the Oriental school who to this day dose their patients with decoctions of pulverized spiders and lizards and tiger’s teeth.

Her medical practice brought her into close touch with her own
people, and she was now competent to draw comparisons between what she found there and what she had found here. Yamei Kin has a sense of humor as keen as a zero wind and a mind wholly free from prejudice. So fairly has her education been divided between East and West that she has two distinct, antipodal viewpoints. With the Oriental half of her she finds much to smile at, much to condemn, in us of the West. With the Western half of her she finds much to smile at, much to deplore, in her own country. She sees where each can teach, each learn. With this conviction she came again to America, this time not to study books, but people and things, to observe more closely the conditions of Western life.

And she has found that she can give knowledge while she gets. Already she has done much to give Americans an appreciation of a civilization which antedates their own by so many centuries, yet which from being too little understood is often undervalued. She began by giving talks before women’s clubs in San Francisco and other western cities on the picturesque side of China, the home life, the arts, the literature, the religion of the Chinese. Gradually she found a larger audience, an ever-broadening interest. From San Francisco she went to Chicago, Boston, New York, where she gave talks in private houses and before serious-minded clubs and educational leagues, where people were more interested in hearing of the problems than of the pretty things of China. And in answer to the demand Yamei Kin talked less of the fans and embroideries and wedding ceremonies, and more of the raison d’être of this empire so paradoxical in its potentiality and its passivity.

"CHINA," says Yamei Kin, "has but now emerged from an ordeal similar to that which caused the downfall of the Roman empire. As the Goths and Visigoths swarmed down upon the Romans, so the Monguls and Manchus overwhelmed China, and it has taken all of the nation’s strength for centuries to assimilate these two savage peoples, leaving none for China to keep up with the onward march of other countries. The country that stands still is left behind; but not going forward is not going backward. The Chinese are not degenerate, either physically, mentally or morally, and having completed this process of assimilation of alien peoples China is now ready to go forward."
"We have many problems in China, but we must work them out for ourselves. The Westerner cannot do it for us because he cannot understand the Oriental temperament. Of late many Chinese have visited Europe and America to study Western conditions. The result is that for the most part they have been swamped by this aggressive Westernism which insists upon being swallowed whole.

"Western civilization, particularly as developed in America, cannot be applied in its entirety to China. We must take into consideration the difference in temperament of the two peoples. China cannot turn her back on her centuries of history and tradition, even if she would. We must consider what she is and follow a constructive policy. We must not destroy to build anew. We cannot break up the family into individuals and work back again from the individual to the family. Conditions favored this re-constructive policy in America, but China cannot wipe out her past.

"Therefore it is necessary to select carefully and apply thoughtfully that which we need of western civilization and leave the rest to the West.

"Above all, I would have China cling to her own philosophy, which makes the individual not the center of the universe, each the axis on which his own little world revolves, but rather a part of the whole, in part the spiritual embodiment of one great spiritual whole. Thus the individual is free for unlimited development.

"Missionaries to China have meant well, and have done no harm. The positive good they have done has been rather physical than spiritual. In his habit of thought the Chinese is essentially spiritual. We live closer to Nature than you of the West. The commonest coolie can get something from Nature, a spiritual uplift, a strength and inspiration that the Westerner scarce understands. Here people take Nature according to their own moods. You go to the woods or stand before a mighty mountain, and if you are happy you find beauty and grandeur there. If your mood is awry, it means nothing to you. The beauty of Nature is merely subjective, gauged by your own feelings at the moment. I would not have the East learn from the West to measure a tree by the feet of lumber it will make, or a mountain by an engineer’s chain.

"The first great lesson the East must learn from the West is political organization, the administrative function. China has a strong
social organization, but no political organization whatever. Our social strength is evidenced to some slight degree by the fact that with the thousands of Chinese in this country you never find one in your almshouses. No one ever sees a Chinese in a free soup booth, or standing in the bread line. At home we have our professional beggars, a regular band of them with a king for every village, and beggary is handed down from father to son. But away from home we take care of our own poor,—a thing which no other class of foreigners in this country can claim. Yet the Chinese in this country, like the people of other nations, are recruited from the ranks of the poor and unsuccessful at home.

"And here let me explain why these Chinese, poor and unsuccessful though they be, prove such powerful competitors to your own laborers. They have what we boast as a national trait,—thrift. A Chinese can live, and live well, on what the average American wastes. Chinese food is prepared with a view to economy and nutriment, as well as taste, and not with thoughtless extravagance. Then, too, pleasure is not a passion with the Chinese as it is with Americans. We have our pleasure-loving, pleasure-seeking classes, but the great mass of people does not strain every nerve to ape the pleasures of those who can afford to indulge themselves. The American masses are always straining for more money—why? That they may have more pleasure. They are always battling for shorter hours of labor—why? That they may have longer hours for pleasure. We like pleasure, too, but we take it in moderation, and I would not have China take this lesson from the West.

"After political organization our greatest need is in the solving of economic problems. Nor would I have China adopt wholesale American methods, but rather adapt those which suit their needs. For example, I should be sorry to see the introduction of machinery destroy the individuality that has marked our hand-made goods. And again, I should be sorry to see women crowded out of their rightful employment. Up to this time, where factories have been established in China, that part of the work which has always been women's work is still given to the women and they have not been left stranded without employment. This has not been the result of concerted action, but simply a natural and unconscious recognition of woman as an economic factor."
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These are some of the doctrines that Yamei Kin is going back to China to teach, after several years of study of our social, political and economic conditions. She has made a systematic study of the United States and knows it as few foreigners have opportunity of knowing it. Her winning personality and her brilliant intellect have proved an open sesame all the way from the slums to the official circle in Washington. She has met and discussed these questions with many of the leading thinkers and doers, supplementing her own observations by the results of their extended study.

When Yamei Kin first conceived the idea of having an active part in the rehabilitation of China, she believed the most could be accomplished by seeking a position that would bring her into close and intimate relation with the Empress Dowager, and to this end she secured the influence of the Chinese minister at Washington, backed by that of President Roosevelt. Maturer consideration, however, has brought the conviction that the changes in China must be brought about not by working downward from the Dragon throne, but upward from the mass of four hundred million people, who are after all the real power in China.

"China," says Dr. Kin, "is a pretty democratic country. We blame everything on the governmmt, just as you do, but after all the people are to blame if they do not get what they want. You say the people rule this country, yet why did it take so long to get the Panama canal when everybody wanted it? Why did it take so long to get the subway in New York when everybody wanted it? You say it is the fault of the government, when the trouble is that the people have not wanted them hard enough. Some one has said that great minds have wills; feeble ones only wishes, and the fact is that 'we, the people,' seldom get beyond wishing, and 'we, the people' are the same in China, America and the rest of the world."

To rouse the people of China to a sense of their needs will be the first work of Yamei Kin. She goes from here to Chefoo where she will begin the dissemination of her ideas, helping the people to grasp and understand the problems which she holds must be solved from within and not from without.