

¶If you want to know why—

CHINESE WON'T SHAKE HANDS

ONE great difference between Oriental and Occidental civilization is that the Westerners shake each other's hands, while we shake our own. Of all the ridiculous Western customs, I think that of shaking hands is one of the worst. I may be very progressive and able to appreciate Western art, literature, silk stockings, Parisian perfumes and even British battleships, I cannot see how the progressive Europeans could allow this barbarous custom of shaking hands to persist to the present day. I know there are private groups of individuals in the West who protest against this custom, as there are people who protest against the equally ridiculous custom of wearing hats or collars. But these people don't seem to be making any headway, being apparently taken for men who make mountains of molehills and waste their energy on trivialities. I am one of these men who are always interested in trivialities. As a Chinese, I am bound to feel more strongly against this Western custom than the Europeans, and prefer always to shake my own hands when meeting or parting from peo-

ple, according to the time-honored etiquette of the Celestial Empire.

Of course, every one knows this custom is the survival of the barbaric days of Europe, like the other custom of taking off one's hat. These customs originated with the medieval robber barons and chevaliers, who had to lift their visors or take off their steel gauntlets to show that they were friendly or peacefully disposed toward the other fellow. Of course, it is ridiculous in modern days to repeat the same gestures when we are no longer wearing helmets or gauntlets.

I object to this custom for hygienic and many other reasons. Shaking hands is a form of human contact subject to the finest variations and distinctions. An original university student could very well write a doctorate dissertation on a "Time-and-Motion Study of the Variety of Hand-Shaking," reviewing it, in the approved fashion, as regards pressure, duration of time, humidity, emotional response, and so forth, and further studying it under all its possible variations as regards sex, the height of the per-

sons concerned, the condition of the skin as affected by professional work and social classes, etc. With a few charts and tables of percentages, I am sure a candidate would have no difficulty in getting a Ph.D., provided he made the whole thing sufficiently abstruse and tiresome.

Now consider the hygienic objections. The foreigners in Shanghai, who describe our copper coins as regular reservoirs of bacteria and will not touch them, apparently think nothing of shaking hands with any Tom, Dick or Harry in the street. This is really highly illogical, for how are you to know that Tom, Dick or Harry has not touched those coppers which you shun like poison? What is worse is, sometimes you may see a consumptive-looking man who hygienically covers his mouth with his hands while coughing and in the next moment stretches his hand to give you a friendly shake. In this respect, our celestial customs are really more scientific, for in China, each of us shakes his own hand. I don't know what was the origin of this Chinese custom, but its advantage from a medical or hy-

gienic point of view cannot be denied.

Then there are aesthetic and romantic objections to handshaking. When you put out your hand, you are at the mercy of the other person, who is at liberty to shake it as hard as he likes and hold it as long as he likes. As the hand is one of the finest and most responsive organs in our body, every variety of pressure is possible. First you have the hearty type of handshaking; the man pats you on the shoulder with one hand and gives you a violent shake with the other until all your joints are ready to burst within you.

Coming down the scale, we find the indifferent handshake which has utterly lost all meaning, to that kind of furtive, tremulous, retiring handshake which indicates that the owner is afraid of you, and finally to the elegant society lady who condescends to offer you the very tip of her fingers in a manner that almost suggests that you look at her red-painted fingernails. All kinds of human relationships, therefore, are reflected in this form of physical contact between two persons.—*Lin Yutang, condensed from "The Importance of Living."*

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