



The Nerve-Wracking Sect

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The Nerve-Wracking Sect

'Sir Isaiah Berlin OM replies to a letter from the Editor', *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 November 1971, 35



Colonel Cheng-Ki-Tong by Nadar

TO THE EDITOR, *JEWISH CHRONICLE*

You will not be astonished to hear that I have absolutely no thoughts about the year 2000. As a futurologist I am quite hopeless: the crystal ball becomes clouded over immediately; I fall asleep and dream about the past, and a pretty imaginary past, sometimes. The only thing of which I am absolutely certain is that your valuable publication will still exist then – of course it may have to be printed in Chinese characters, but what is that to us? Did not Colonel

THE NERVE-WRACKING SECT

Tcheng-Ki-Tong, Chinese Military Attaché in Paris in the 1880s,¹ in a book called *Les Chinois peints par eux-mêmes* (Paris, 1884: Calmann Lévy) write: “Take all the peoples you want: at the end of four or five generations they will be completely naturalised; the Jews never! They remain what they are everywhere they go, attached to their religion, their character and their customs, and from the point of view of general history it is a fact not without importance that there is a particular species which remains unaltered in the midst of a population of four hundred millions?”

The entire passage is found on pages 273–6, and is worth looking at. If someone translated it for you, it might be worthy of appearing in the pages of your periodical.² All I know is the extract quoted to me in a letter from an old friend. The amusing thing in the whole passage is that the sect of, I suppose, Jews is called Thiao-Kiu-Kiao and this is translated as ‘la secte qui arrache les nerfs’.³ In this respect at least it seems to have remained unaltered.

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¹ [IB ascribes the passage to an unidentified eighteenth-century Jesuit quoted by Tcheng-Ki-Tong, but in fact it appears outside the quotation and was therefore written by the author.]

² [An English translation by James Millington, *The Chinese Painted by Themselves*, was published in London in 1885 (see pp. 192–4).]

³ [‘The sect that tears out the sinews’, from Genesis 32:32: ‘Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew that shrank.’ IB perhaps understands the phrase to mean ‘the nerve-wracking sect’. It occurs in the quotation from the Jesuit (note 1), and the translation may be his rather than, as IB states in the published text, Tcheng-Ki-Tong’s.]