



The Spirit of the Chinese People (Abridged)

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What is the real Chinese? That, I am sure, you will all agree with me, is a very interesting subject. Now the first thing, I think, which will strike you in the old Chinese type of humanity, is that there is nothing wild, savage or ferocious in him. Take a man of the lowest class of the population in China and, I think, you will agree with me that there is less of animality in him, than you will find in a man of the same class in a European society. In fact, the one word, it seems to me, which will sum up the impression which the Chinese type of humanity makes upon you is the English word “gentle”. By gentleness I do not mean softness of nature or weak submissiveness. But by the word “gentle” I mean absence of hardness, harshness, roughness, or violence, in fact of anything which jars upon you.

There is in the true Chinese type of humanity an air, so to speak, of a quiet, sober, chastened mellowness, such as you find in a piece of well-tempered metal. The real Chinese may be coarse, but there is no grossness in his coarseness. The real Chinese may be ugly, but there is no hideousness in his ugliness. The real Chinese may be vulgar, but there is no aggressiveness, no blatancy in his vulgarity. The real Chinese may be stupid, but there is no absurdity in his stupidity. The real Chinese may be cunning, but there is no malignity in his cunning.

I say that the total impression which the Chinese type of humanity makes upon you is that he is gentle, that he is inexpressibly gentle. When you analyse this quality of inexpressible gentleness in the real Chinese, you will find that it is the product of a combination of two things, namely, sympathy and intelligence.

There is an indescribable something in the Chinese people which, despite their many defects, makes foreigners like them as foreigners like no other people. This indescribable something which I have defined as gentleness, softens and mitigates, if it does not redeem, the defects of the Chinese in the hearts of foreigners. This gentleness is the product of what I call sympathetic or true human intelligence — an intelligence which comes not from reasoning nor from instinct, but from sympathy. Now what is the secret of the power of sympathy of the Chinese people?

I will here venture to give you an explanation — a hypothesis, if you like to call it so — of the secret of this power of sympathy in the Chinese people and my explanation is this. The Chinese people have this power, this strong power of sympathy, because they live wholly, or almost wholly, a life of the heart. The whole life of Chinese is a life of feeling — not feeling in the sense of sensation which comes from the bodily organs, nor feeling in the sense of passions which flow, as you would say, from the nervous



system, but feeling in the sense of emotion or human affection which comes from the deepest part of our nature — the heart or soul. The Chinese people, I say, have the power of sympathy because they live wholly a life of the heart — a life of emotion or human affection.

Now we have got, I think, a clue to the secret of sympathy in the Chinese people — the power of sympathy which gives to the real Chinese that sympathetic or true human intelligence, making him so inexpressibly gentle. Let us see whether with this clue that the Chinese people live a life of the heart we can explain general characteristics which we see in the actual life of the Chinese people.

First of all, let us take the Chinese language. As the Chinese live a life of the heart, the Chinese language, I say, is also a language of the heart. In fact, the reason why educated foreigners find it so difficult to learn Chinese, is because they are too educated, too intellectually and scientifically educated.

Next, let us take another well-known fact in the life of the Chinese people. The Chinese, it is well-known, have wonderful memories. What is the secret of this? The secret is the Chinese remember things with the heart and not with the head. The heart with its power of sympathy, acting as glue, can retain things much better than the head or intellect which is hard and dry.

Let us next take another generally admitted fact in the life of the Chinese people — their politeness. The Chinese are, it has often been remarked, a peculiarly polite people. Now what is the essence of true politeness? It is consideration for the feelings of others. The Chinese are polite because, living a life of the heart, they know their own feelings and that makes it easy for them to show consideration for the feelings of others.

Last of all, let us take another characteristic of the Chinese people, by calling attention to “want of exactness”. Now what is the reason for this want of exactness in the ways of the Chinese people? The reason, I say again, is because the Chinese live a life of the heart. The heart is a very delicate and sensitive balance. It is not like the head or intellect, a hard, stiff, rigid instrument. You cannot with the heart think with the same steadiness, with the same rigid exactness as you can with the head or intellect. At least, it is extremely difficult to do so. In fact, the Chinese pen or pencil, which is a soft brush, may be taken as a symbol of the Chinese mind. It is very difficult to write or draw with it, but when you have once mastered the use of it, you will, with it, write and draw with a beauty and grace which you cannot do with a hard steel pen.