

Chinese Humanism

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To understand the Chinese ideal of life one must try to understand Chinese humanism. The term “humanism” is ambiguous. Chinese humanism, however, has a very definite meaning. It implies, first a just conception of the ends of human life; secondly, a complete devotion to these ends; and thirdly, the attainment of these ends by the spirit of human reasonableness or the Doctrine of the Golden Mean, which may also be called the Religion of Common Sense.

The question of the meaning of life has perplexed Western philosophers, and it has never been solved — naturally, when one starts out from the teleological point of view, according to which all things, including mosquitoes and typhoid germs, are created for the good of this cocksure humanity. As there is usually too much pain and misery in this life to allow a perfect answer to satisfy man’s pride, teleology is therefore carried over to the next life, and this earthly life is then looked upon as a preparation for the life hereafter, in conformity with the logic of Socrates, which looked upon a ferocious wife as a natural provision for the training of the husband’s character. This way of dodging the horns of the dilemma sometimes gives peace of mind for a moment, but then the eternal question, “What is the meaning of life?” comes back. Others, like Nietzsche, take the bull by the horns, and refuse to assume that life must have a meaning and believe that progress is in a circle, and human achievements are a savage dance, instead of a trip to the market, but still the question comes back eternally, like the sea waves lapping upon the shore: “What is the meaning of life?”

The Chinese humanists believe they have found the true end of life and are conscious of it. For the Chinese the end of life lies not in life after death, for the idea that we live in order to die, as taught by Christianity, is incomprehensible; nor in Nirvana, for that is too metaphysical; nor in the satisfaction of accomplishment, for that is too vainglorious; yet in progress for progress’ sake, for that is meaningless. The true end, the Chinese have decided in a singularly clear manner, lies in the enjoyment of a simple life, especially the family life, and in harmonious social relationships. The first poem that a child learns in school runs:

*While soft clouds by warm breezes are wafted in the morn,
Lured by flowers, past the river I roam on and on.
They’ll say, “Look at that old man on a spree!”
And know not that my spirit’s on happiness borne.*

That represents to the Chinese, not just a pleasant poetic mood but the *summum bonu* of life. The Chinese ideal of life is drunk through with this sentiment. It is an ideal of life that is neither particularly ambitious nor metaphysical, but nevertheless immensely real. It is, I must say, a brilliantly simple ideal, so brilliantly simple that only the matter-of-fact Chinese mind could have conceived it, and yet one often wonders how the West could have failed to see that the meaning of life lies in the sane and healthy enjoyment of it. The difference between China and the West seems to be that the Westerners have a greater capacity for getting and making more things and a lesser ability to enjoy them, while the Chinese have a greater determination and capacity to enjoy the few things they have. This trait, our concentration on earthly happiness, is as much a result as a cause of the absence of religion. For if one cannot believe in the life hereafter as the consummation of the present life, one is forced to make the most of this life before the farce is over. The absence of religion makes this concentration possible.

From this a humanism has developed which frankly proclaims a man-centered universe, and lays down the rule that the end of all knowledge is to serve human happiness. The humanizing of knowledge is not an easy thing, for the moment man swerves, he is carried away by his logic and becomes a tool of his own knowledge. Only by a sharp and steadfast holding to the true end of human life as one sees it can humanism maintain itself. Humanism occupies, for instance, a mean position between the other-worldliness of religion and the materialism of the modern world. Buddhism may have captured popular fancy in China, but against its influence the true Confucianist was always inwardly resentful, for it was, in the eyes of humanism, only an escape from life, or a negation of the truly human life.

On the other hand, the modern world, with its over-development of machinery, has not taken time to ensure that man enjoys what he makes. The glorification of the plumber in America has made man forget that one can live a very happy life without hot and cold running water, and that in France and Germany many men have lived to comfortable old age and made important scientific discoveries and written masterpieces with their water jug and old-fashioned basin. There needs to be a religion which will transcribe Jesus' famous dictum about the Sabbath and constantly preach that the machine is made for man and not man made for machine. For after all, the sum of all human wisdom and the problem of all human knowledge is how man shall remain a man and how he shall best enjoy his life.