THE CHINESE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

We have already taken note of the very wide diversity of race and custom found in China. This is accentuated as one moves out from the central province to the periphery. But even in China proper, north varies from south, and the region at the mouth of the Yangtse differs from that of the upper reaches. It is hard to make comparisons, but European races do not seem to differ more widely than do the various types of Chinese.

Attention has also been called to the fact that usage varies even more than does race. Practices differ widely, even in adjoining provinces. It is, however, true that underneath the surface there is identity of custom in the fundamentals of life. This is equivalent to saying that below superficial distinctions in European countries there is agreement upon essential factors. These are comprehensively stated as being comprised in "western civilization." Europe has perhaps a more unquestionable basis of unity in its science and in its religion. The Chinese can understand the unending dissensions and conflicts of the West only by postulating an unquenchable ferocity.

Here, therefore, is a people in which some ground-work of unity is unmistakably deep and durable. It is not race, it is not patriotism or political organization. In spite of the Chinese saying that all between the four seas are brothers, there is no recognized general obligation, no sense of the public welfare. What then holds these people together?
East and West in China

It is partly the universality of usage in respect to the more immediate relationships. It is also acceptance of a certain kind of teaching about these relationships. Community of conduct and community of belief about conduct, provide at least a condition favorable to social cohesion. But this is not necessarily positive in its action. We have had too many civil wars in the West to believe that conduct and the theory of conduct provide a binding force. It is true that in China the ethical system has found a rational and practical way of eliminating the causes of dissension. There would in this case be peace simply through lack of conflict.

In China there does seem to be something more positive. This I believe to be found in the dominating philosophy of life and in all that which we commonly designate as culture. We are very likely to describe our own civilization in terms of its makers, its great exponents and examples. We are very likely to limit the term to a small class of the elect. In China this matter of personal excellence hardly comes into view. Civilization there is largely anonymous. To us a culture means the joint result of many personal impulses. In China it stands as something independent in which men may participate and which confers benefits and satisfactions. That which to us seems necessary to make a culture vital is almost wholly lacking. It is stronger and more binding in proportion as it is free from fortuitous change. It is not a thing with which individuals may presume to take liberties. It is something which expresses itself in personal life; something in which participants have no intentionally creative part. It is far greater than the greatest of men.

These attitudes produce that inertia and seeming stagnation which in our eyes condemn Chinese civilization. We conceive personality as projecting itself through and beyond
all cultural forms. In our history, the religious civilization of medieval Europe had much that is analogous with Chinese culture. Men could never reach its heights or sound its depths. The best anyone could do was to realize in himself as much of it as possible. In medievalism, too, there were fixity of form and finality of conception. But there was undoubtedly a contained and realized adequacy of life which the modern, assaulting the ramparts of infinity, has never experienced.

To be sure, much that we esteem highly is lacking in a life bound by that type of philosophy. Our business man labors from an inner compulsion and with the belief that success in his occupation gives him his personal and distinctive grade in the scale of existence. Hence the irresistible energy and the unmeasured achievement of the Westerner. The Chinese are the most industrious people in the world. One of their towns has the appearance of a nest of ants. It seems to be with them, as with ants, a matter of mechanical adjustments. Here are no driving ambitions nor alluring ideals. A Chinese works because it is something appointed for him to do in the general scheme of things. It is necessary to sustain his life and support his family. There is little incentive to improve his methods. His participation in labor is identical with that of his fathers and all of his kind.

The result of labor is expressed simply in means to live. Efforts focus into the hard practical terms of money. Undoubtedly, the almost universal poverty of China, from the rigors of which very few escape, has aided in the translation of work into the mere means to live. The same servitude to necessity is apparent with the Westerner when his labor brings him a bare subsistence. But as soon as he rises above absolute necessity, the Western worker looks upon even a
slight margin of economic resources as a vehicle of self-expression. Our business men want money because it is the symbol of personal success, and because it puts them in command of personal influence and power. This is not absent from the Chinese, but we are dealing with a difference of accent and degree which amounts to a difference in the type of civilization.

We perceive the same characteristics in Chinese art. Its forms are of the highest refinement and nobility. But for us it lacks the lift and drive of personal creation. The Chinese seem to be engaged in an endless reproduction of beautiful forms designed centuries ago and held in an inviolable sanctity. They come to-day by routine from the hands of little apprentices. It is not that China has been without her periods of rapid innovation, periods when forms were broken and remolded under the pressure of her vitality. But it is doubtful if this creativeness has ever been like our own. Her greatest artists were, compared with our smallest ones, mere anonymous vehicles of great moving conceptions. The Chinese artist regarded himself as but a humble spokesman, and the imprint of his seal merely meant that he had done his best.

This kind of corporate anonymous art has not been unknown in the West, especially in decoration and architecture. Where symbolism enters, the measure of man seems to grow small. It might be questioned, too, whether personal creation is not with us more a cult than a reality. The conventions of painting allow but little variation from type. But in that margin of freedom is to be found the great difference between Chinese and Occidental art. There is with us, at any rate, so great dependence upon personal creativeness that when it fails, our art slumps into degeneration. Where an art is something in which men participate
and which they are permitted to represent, there may be
the stagnation of dry routine, but the level is maintained
and there is no decay.

That a culture can provide social cohesion is illustrated
by nothing more effectively than the Chinese language. The
spoken idiom displays a diversity so great that the inhab-
itants of one area may be barred from communication with
those of another. A Cantonese limited to his own dialect
is unable to make himself understood in central or north
China. Even the Mandarin which commands more general
use than other dialects varies so widely from one province
to another that missionary students require special training
for the districts they expect to serve. The Shanghai dis-
trict has a language all its own which when learned hinders
rather than helps the acquisition of other dialects. It is
said that when personal communication becomes necessary
between Chinese of the north and of the south there is
frequent recourse to "pidgin" English as a medium of
expression. This situation blocks all efforts to give the
language a phonetic basis. Attempts have been made to
invent a syllabary, but they always seem to fail. Roman-
ized Chinese seems useless and absurd to those who know
the language.

For the Westerner possessed of an alphabetical method
of representing sounds, the Chinese language seems almost
unusable. It requires years of study, lacks flexibility and
precision, and lends itself with great difficulty to mechani-
cal forms of writing. Instead of a stenographer to operate
a typewriter, one has to employ a learned scholar to draw
the characters.

When it is said that the Chinese written language con-
sists of ideographic characters, the statement is likely to
mean little to a Westerner. The character symbolizes an
idea and not a sound. It can be translated into the sounds of any one of the dialects. Our Cantonese in north China has merely to write down what he wishes to say and it as fully and immediately understood as English would be by all who read it. The difference is that educated users of English would never be so far apart that the spoken language of one would be wholly unintelligible to the other, since the writing is based upon sounds. With Chinese there is no such relation. It is similar to our use of numerals. The figure representing two is read as *deux* by the Frenchman and *zwei* by the German. An algebraic expression is equally intelligible in all languages since it represents ideas and relationships instead of sounds. But comparison with the language of mathematics can be carried no further than to illustrate the difference between the ideographic and the phonetic basis. Our symbols of quantity and its relationships are objective and precise, merely serving a technical convenience. The Chinese character translates itself into an idea so that reading and thinking become a single process. One might suppose that this kind of language would become extremely formal and devoid of feeling. Here is the real importance and the great distinction of Chinese character writing. Our alphabetical languages of the West are thin and dry in comparison with Chinese. The character symbolism does not cover merely objective things and their relationships, but is a subtle vehicle of feelings and values. Not only the idea but its peculiar atmosphere is represented. Somehow Chinese character has caught that quality of symbolism by which it opens all the possibilities of suggestiveness. Its use presents all that is not said but implied. We are acquainted with this quality in poetry. Even when translated into English we catch something of the atmosphere, the elusive spirit, of the Chinese verse
The Chinese Philosophy of Life

which is nothing more than a group of image characters. It is said that this quality enters into the everyday use of character writing. Somehow the Chinese puts into his manner of drawing the characters suggestions and shadings of meaning that are incapable of direct expression.

Probably in course of time, when Chinese classical scholarship has been trampled by the westernized teacher, some more generally available form of writing will be devised. In time a standardized Mandarin, incorporated in a system of universal compulsory education, will be forced upon all China. It will probably be phonetized and syllabized to enable the business men of the new China to use typewriters. But this will not be an unqualified gain. Here is the vehicle of a vast and varied literature accessible by image and idea and feeling tone to all who are trained in its mastery. The learning of character is itself a literary education. Even Western students for whom the penalty of learning is a heavy one have felt themselves abundantly rewarded.

The central and animating principle of the Chinese philosophy of life is probably to be found in its conception of, and attitude toward, nature. This seems so completely in contrast with the Occidental view that we can perhaps state it most easily in terms of the difference. Apart from special and limited periods of Western history, our civilization has persistently emphasized man's enmity with nature. The forces which play upon us are unkind rather than favorable. Nature has had to be fought, evaded, subdued. Material civilization has meant a protective wall to hold off the hardest attacks. The relationship has been one of unremitting struggle, the end of which has been the attainment of freedom. Man strives to lift himself to a region of independence and mastery.

This hostility is most pronounced in his attitude toward
the nature within himself. Recognizing the derivation and character of his motives, he has waged incessant warfare upon them. The natural man is, if possible, to be destroyed. That which is immortal in him is the spiritual man which derives from a rebirth after impregnation by the Holy Spirit. Only in this way can the foul and sinful elements in life be cast aside to enable one to climb by slow degrees into spiritual excellence. The doctrine of original sin defines the Westerner's fundamental attitude toward nature and the natural world. Short of that extreme and at its best, nature is so much raw material to be given form in the growth of human personality.

We believe that above nature is found the region of freedom. We resent everything that holds us to the lower sphere, that interferes with our choice, that determines our conduct. This is the price we pay for maintaining the royal prerogative of free personality. Moreover, the choice is a thing of great importance. It involves one's only opportunity to attain salvation. The alternative is eternal misery. Confronted by a matter of such infinite concern, is it a wonder that the Westerner should fight his own nature to the death, and see it his highest duty to snatch other brands from the burning? Life is a tragic dilemma, for, alas, no man can escape from himself. But the result of the struggle is not merely a belief in freedom but its attainment in considerable measure!

In proportion as nature is overcome and repressed, the life of freedom finds itself deficient in motivation. The man who has successfully carried out his world flight has nothing left but to die and go to heaven. His religion becomes a universal negation so far as this world is concerned. There is then a reversion to a kindlier regard for nature and the natural in man. Not only is existence revivified,
but new and joyful and creative motives come into play. But for a time only. The Westerner, prizing freedom beyond all things, seeks again his isolated peak, and as complete removal as may be from the world to which he is held by fleshly chains.

The Chinese conception of and relation to nature has no such motive of conflict. There is no region of freedom which man attains by struggle. The human and natural do not stand in contrast, but are one and the same. Man coöperates with natural forces and is, indeed, ultimately to be regarded as one among them. The powers of heaven conjoin sun, rain and human effort, to bring out of earth by growth the things needed to sustain life. In man nature reaches a further statement of herself. Man attains to civilization not by a revolt from and contest with nature, but by the expression of a more complete unity.

Nature is always good. If evil appears it is due to disharmony through man's disregard of the natural conditions of living. With harmony preserved or achieved, human and social existence is one with the movement of the stars, the procession of the seasons and the beauty of water and mountain. To man is given the conscious realization of natural harmony.

This naturalism is, of course, pervaded by determinism. It enables one to meet life with a vast capacity for acceptance, an enduring patience in the face of hardship. Only a Chinese knows how insignificant is a human being and how futile to require the universe to step from its appointed way to treat him as a thing special and unique. The Tao or “way” of life is the attainment of harmony with nature. This leads, with Lao-tse and his followers, to acceptance by retreat, to quietism or negation of effort. Man realizes most when he exerts himself least. Effort involves conflict
and is thus a departure from harmony. On the other hand, with Confucius, realization of natural good comes with the conscious attainment of harmony through exertion, by arranging human and social affairs so as to eliminate disturbances and conflicts. The difference is merely one of emphasis laid upon the different factors of external nature and human nature. The Taoists, following the path of complete determinism, have deteriorated into mere geomancers, experts in all the superstitious practices by which man thinks he is enabled to get along with nature. The Confucianists emphasize social harmony reached through the practice of propriety, open to the accusation of being a mere empty formalism. These two aspects of Chinese naturalism have undoubtedly been useful each to the other. Taoism is fundamentally a kind of vital mysticism, able to provide a needed corrective to a doctrine of which the spirit can be lost in dry observance. But behind these differences and in final intent, the two conceptions are identical. Man is a part of nature, social life is continuous with all life, and if natural law displays itself as universal harmony, human conduct can apply to itself no more valid test. This appears to be the meaning of Chinese naturalism.

The Chinese conception of superiority is of a piece with the doctrine of nature. The superior man is he who most fully realizes in his person and expresses in his conduct the qualities of learning and virtue. This means superiority within the type, not that of a variant. It is man's privilege and duty to embody that which is good for all, and the degree in which this is accomplished marks his grade on the scale of excellence.

In the West a conception similar to that of the Chinese, rules in most of our practical affairs. But it has been overshadowed and is constantly being modified by factors from
The Chinese Philosophy of Life

our social history. Feudalism left the modern world with the remnants of an aristocracy, and it also left it with some deeply ingrained traditions based upon class distinctions. While it held sway, an aristocracy fully believed and taught the view that social distinctions are distinctions of nature. In a country where the tradition is strong, the firmest believer in equality is in time affected by it just as he is by the air he breathes. These members of the upper classes really seem to be made of a different clay.

When political organization changed, through the revolutions of the eighteenth century, before the new individualism which expressed itself as equality, the old view of human differences found another refuge in the doctrine of genius. This was reinforced by a most potent example in the person of Napoleon. Who could believe that here was a normal man? The cult of the great man as variant from type grew into general acceptance during the nineteenth century. It was, of course, an exaltation of individualism into a kind of mythology. Soon our growing biological knowledge provided what seemed an assured basis for the interpretation of differences. Men are accounted for by their inborn capacities, and therefore superiority is measured by its distance from the type. Hence the superman.

Western thought has never fully confronted the issue of its ultra-individualism as expressed in the conception of natural differences. It has a fatalistic side, abhorrent to our belief in progress. It provides a ground for the fixation of classes, abhorrent to our belief in equality. Progress and equality are still cardinal portions of our democratic creed. Consequently in practice we disregard the theory of superiority. It is being continuously demonstrated that the masses reject the leadership of the superior when it is felt that there is a decided difference in quality. We prefer
to trust the ordinary normal man with the conduct of our affairs rather than the person of great ability. If this ordinary man has his place of secure prominence, we are quite willing to believe that he is constituted of different and better natural material. The doctrine of natural superiority is a very powerful social force even in the tradition of the old rigid aristocracy. Nothing is so reassuring as to feel one’s self the child of destiny. In these days of economic domination, wealth not only marks off social classes but it is readily taken as marking off natural differences. Every wealthy man favors the idea that nature implanted in him a greater capacity measured by the degree of his financial success. What was really planted in him, when he was just a very ordinary little boy, was a sharp little trading attitude through which he came to look upon every situation solely from the point of view of extracting something from it. But his courage is enormously enhanced by the belief in his natural superiority.

The doctrine also works adversely. Few things are so discouraging as the conviction of one’s natural inferiority. This is now being regarded almost as a psychical disease. Where social arrangements accord with the cult, one finds great stability of class just as the cult of equality produces the contrary effect. If a cockney girl marries into a higher class, she carries the marks of her origin to the end of the chapter. If an American girl of ordinary derivation marries a duke, she quickly remakes herself into a very passable pattern of a born duchess. It is a question of the dominant beliefs and attitudes that constitute the mental environment in which the personality develops.

No Chinese feels himself marked off by nature as either superior or inferior. Certainly he never uses station or wealth as a scale for the measurement of his capacities.
He feels inferior as an ignorant man in the presence of learning, and he is willing to bow in respect before those whose conduct is more virtuous than his own. A man may be a menial in the household of another, but it never occurs to him that this implies anything more than a practical business arrangement. It may be that China has far to go in the production of a political democracy, but the psychical atmosphere of democracy is far more indubitably ingrained than it is in the West.

The standard of excellence, which could never be met without learning, brought to scholarship a respect which it has received nowhere else. Here is a whole population with so much veneration for knowledge that even discarded paper on which appears the written or printed characters cannot be treated as trash, but must be carefully collected and reverently burned. In the old days before a public system of education, it was extremely difficult to secure the benefits of teaching. Only the most promising boys could be given a chance to climb the long hard road of scholarship. But all the members of the clan would give their backing and feel themselves vicariously participants in the high privileges of the scholarly life. Moreover, this favored one might become a high official, in which case all their fortunes would be made!

It can also be readily appreciated that social amelioration would, in China, link itself with education. With us, some modification of conditions in the direction of comfort, or at any rate, the removal by sanitation of some of the more serious forms of disease, would probably have first consideration. In China, hardship is something to be endured, and disease has always been present without destroying the race. Why not, then, use any chance to improve conditions, by doing that which is most universally desired, by
making learning available? Since the standard of excellence is of the type, it is not limited to the special few, it should be available for all. The Chinese estimate of superiority, when given an opportunity as a social force, would, therefore, effect improvement by raising the masses through education.

There has been no reform in modern China which has had a deeper accord with age-long Chinese aspiration than the development of a school system. Immediately after the edict of 1905, which created a Western curriculum, the whole country embraced the opportunity. The instruction was poor; the Western learning a thin veneer, but none the less, a few years saw China making learning available to her children throughout the Empire. Even through their difficulties of the past several years, when the payment of teachers was always uncertain, and often failed entirely, the schools have gone on with an amazing persistence. Whatever else China may do, she is intent upon educating herself.

Nor did the impulse cease with provision for the children. China made an attack upon the great body of adult illiteracy. Lecture halls were opened in every city, and accredited speakers provided. The audiences consisted of ordinary working people, and the addresses covered topics from the problems of ethics to the politics of the modern world.

Soon methods were proposed by which the common people could be taught to read. A thousand characters were chosen as covering the vocabulary in most general use, simplified as much as possible, and presented in a series of graded lessons. Through these, ordinary coolies learned to read in a few months. Papers and books were printed, using only these thousand characters. So that wonderful thing, the exclusive prerogative of scholarship, the use of
character-language, began to be available to the common people.

These efforts at popular education could not fail to involve criticism of the classical style as being too stilted and archaic for the vital expressiveness now required. Writing shifted toward the basis of the vernacular, and a modern literature, said to be of high stylistic quality, is coming into being.

The revolt from classical style was of a piece with the revolt against other traditions, felt to be too restricting. These young men set themselves to a critical survey of the whole field of Chinese life. They initiated what they called the Renaissance in the period about 1919, when student influence reached its highest point. The object of the movement was to "remake civilization." This group, deeply patriotic, impregnated by Western learning, has seemed to visitors from this country to present the most promising aspect of change in China. It is easy to expect too much, for China is old and tough throughout her social fabric, but if the heart of the nation can be reached, there is no more certain road than that of education.

The widest contrast between Eastern and Western philosophy of life is to be found in the practical effects of the two types of culture. For the Westerner, man himself is primary and his civilization something which he may accept, reject, or modify as suits his personal motives. It is, therefore, always something external to his personality. As for himself, he exists by his own independent right under whatever form fortuitous circumstance has happened to give him. For the Chinese, his civilization is integral to his personality, his personal realization is identical with it. The ends of all ambition are perfectly defined. Self-realization is within proved forms of excellence. It is fair to
say that the Westerner is the more civilized, and the Chinese the more cultured, if we use these terms as emphasizing respectively external and internal aspects. The distinction is indicative only of general and usual attitudes, not as applying to special cases. We also have had defined types which fixed the ends of personal development as the filling of accepted form. The French aristocrat of the old régime was born to a fixed and specific task of self-realization. He never for a moment doubted his standards or the kind of perfection which it was the special duty of his class to embody.

There is still within the memory of some an old but prevalent conception of what constituted a cultivated man, before the days of so much technology, of high-powered scholarship. It was not necessary for this cultured individual to hold office or write books. It was not even necessary for him to be known beyond a few associates. He simply was something; he had undergone a personal development by which the ends of life were satisfied by association with great thought and noble expression.

These examples which, together with that of the saintly personality, are the most striking cases of cultivation of accepted and approved type forms, may assist us in understanding the Chinese ideal of development. We have swept them aside in the universal gold rush of the past generation. Practical achievement is the accepted Western standard, and this in the field of external things. Culture depends upon stability of conditions, and to change conditions is our ambition. The rule of being is replaced by that of doing.

It may be that intensive cultivation within accepted boundaries may imply narrowness of content, but after all, the adjustments of life in any society carry a fixation of limits somewhere, for everyone. Is it well for him whose
actual life is that of a gardener, to keep himself persuaded that he has the soul of a president? What will his presidential soul do for him except to keep him miserable? Is it not better to find the conditions of a gardener's life and make the best possible adjustment to them? The Chinese would answer the question with an unfailing affirmative.

We somehow feel the inadequacy of our philosophy of life when carried to the individualist extreme. This is shown in the efforts we make to find and apply standards in education and in professional life. Our host of practical performers are every year less satisfied with mere performing, and would like to know where the performance is leading. We are not quite so certain that it is the duty of every man to try to usurp the place of providence, or that it is a laudable ambition in a toad to expand to bovine dimensions. Culture is the counterpart, and in some respects, the antithesis of practical achievement. The former satisfies, and the latter leads to a greater discontent. Are we now so certain that discontent is divine?

For me, the most interesting things in China were not curios or customs, but the faces of the old men. One found there a glowing serenity never seen in the West. One realized that life for us is unending struggle, that we are condemned to grapple with fate until broken, crushed, and thrown aside. Is this really the final meaning of life? It is not necessary for us to become Chinese, but do not let us too readily depreciate a culture which can provide a happy old age. The Confucian doctrine of the mean was taught us by the Greeks, but we lost it as the secret of living when we started groping into the great uncontained. It may seem strange that here is a people for whom the mean has been, for three millennia, a constant and universal rule of life.