

The Spirit of the Chinese People

Ku Hong-Ming (辜鸿铭)

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First published in 1915, *The Spirit of The Chinese People* is a collection of nine articles which aim to explain what the Chinese spirit is. Its author, Ku Hong-Ming (Gu Hongming, 辜鸿铭, 1857-1928), known in China as an eccentric, was a famous cultural figure worldwide. Born in Penang, British Malaya (present day Malaysia) Ku's ancestral hometown was Tong'an Fujian Province, China. Ku travelled to Scotland for education at the age of ten; obtained his M.A. in 1877; went to China in 1885; and in 1915 became a professor at Peking University. In the introductory essay, 'The Religion of Good Citizenship', the author probes why it was time to re-evaluate the concept of a Chinese spirit. Ku dedicated his book to Europe's involvement in the First World War which he believed generated the dilemma of how to deal with 'the passions in the heart of man' (p. 1), a force more dreadful than Nature itself. The first article, 'The Spirit of the Chinese People', constitutes the work's major theme. For Ku, it is 'a state of mind, a temper of the soul', and 'imaginative reason' (p. 49, p. 50). The real Chinaman is 'a man who lives the life of a man of adult reason with the simple heart of a child, and the Spirit of the Chinese people is a happy union of soul with intellect' (p. 48).

A key characteristic of the Chinese type, gentleness, is 'the product of a combination of sympathy and intelligence' (pp. 2-3) and can be observed in the characters of the Chinese language as well as in Chinese people's memories, politeness and their want of exactness (pp. 6-7). The Chinese spirit is one of perpetual youth and national immortality (p. 9). Ku then discusses where and how the Chinese people acquired this spirit by comparing European and Chinese civilizations. European civilization is a battlefield for science and art, religion and philosophy, which implies the constant conflict between the head and the heart, or the soul and the intellect. However, there

is no such conflict in Chinese civilization; the Chinese do not feel the need of religion, which mainly feeds mental needs (p. 10). They have instead in Confucianism, 'a system of philosophy and ethics, a synthesis of human society and civilization which can take the place of religion' (p. 12). Just as religion does, Confucianism provides for the mass of mankind a sense of security and permanence (p. 13). What is more, Confucianism succeeds in becoming a social rather than a personal religion because it gives people a true idea of the state, teaching them how to be a good citizen by following the 'Law of the Gentleman', which is based on a human's sense of honour (pp. 17-21). Finally, Ku talks about the system of the teachings of Confucianism with regard to school and family; these inspire people to virtue by respectively introducing the works of great literature, especially poetry, and encouraging the practice filial piety (pp. 45-47).

The next two articles, 'The Chinese woman' and 'The Chinese Language', further the argument about the Chinese spirit. In 'The Chinese Woman', Ku specifically discusses the quality of Chinese women, their selflessness, which usually is summarized as 'Three Obediences' (三从) and 'Four Virtues' (四德) among which the most important can be described by the two Chinese words *yu hsien* (*you xian*, 幽闲) which mean modesty and cheerfulness (p. 53, p. 68). 'The Chinese Language' discusses whether Chinese is a difficult language. After looking into colloquial and written forms, Ku points out that the Chinese language is both difficult and not difficult: it is not difficult because it is without grammar such as case, tense, regular and irregular verbs; whilst it is difficult because it expresses deep feeling in simple language, just like poetry. This explains why Chinese is especially hard for modern Europeans who are well-educated, for modern European education principally develops intellect only while Chinese, especially 'the full court dress Chinese', requires the equally developed heart and head, or soul and intellect (p. 71, p. 74).

Ku expresses his views about Chinese scholarship in Europe in four articles. 'John Smith in China' and 'A Great Sinologue' focus on European misunderstandings about Chinese culture and spirit, where some European scholars' works and ideas exert a negative influence. In 'John Smith in China', Ku argues that the problem for the west in understanding and dealing with the east derives from some scholars who though they are considered to have apprehended the essence of Chinese culture and spirit in actuality are far from having achieved this (pp. 80-81, p. 83). In 'A

Great Sinologue', Ku shows in detail why he has come to this conclusion by commenting on two articles by a Dr. Giles whose mistake is to have paid too much attention to translation whilst ignoring philosophical insight, with the result that his work lacks both human and practical interest (p. 84, p. 86). 'Chinese Scholar' Parts I and II, together evaluate current Chinese scholarship in Europe from four perspectives: i) to what extent if any knowledge of Chinese among Europeans is undergoing change, ii) what has already been accomplished in Chinese scholarship in the past, iii) what the actual state of Chinese scholarship is at the present day, and iv) what the state of Chinese scholarship should be (p. 91). While the difficulty of acquiring knowledge of the Chinese language has been removed, this does not necessarily indicate a change in foreigners' knowledge about China. For example, a number of European scholars have studied and translated Chinese literature, but few of these translations are satisfying. Their studies are not systematic but fragmentary, without plan or order (p. 99). Scholars should study Chinese history first so that they can gain conversance with the primary principles and notions of the Chinese people; they should then direct their study to their social relations and how these principles can be applied (p. 101).

The appendix, 'The Religion of Mob-Worship or the War and the War out', a reprise of the introduction, asserts the Chinese spirit could have helped stop World War One. Refuting the popular view that the War was caused by the rulers, soldiers and diplomats (p. 104), Ku argues that it is the plain men and women who should be blamed, for the rulers, let alone the soldiers and diplomats, are 'bound in hand and foot and gagged by the mouth as they all are by Constitutions and Magna Chartas of Liberty', while the plain men and women have every power to decide what should be done (pp. 104-106). The problem here is that these ordinary citizens, who own the power to do so, are so selfish, cowardly and panicked that they despair of the possibility of making peace (p. 108, p. 110). In Ku's opinion, rulers of countries now at war should be invested with absolute power to stop the war. This goal can only gain force by invalidating the Magna Charta of Liberty and making a new Magna Charta of Loyalty, just as the Religion of Good Citizenship in China (p. 109, p. 111, p. 115, p. 117).

From a current perspective, it could be argued that Ku's theory is limited by the time of writing. For example, his view of Chinese women is now outdated and he clearly misunderstands the

western concept of liberty. However, one has to admit that he has made a fascinating contribution to the early comparative study of Chinese and western culture: some of his arguments are quite inspiring, especially when considering the historical background again which they were composed. His book still deserves to be consulted by people who are interested in Chinese culture.

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