

A Chinese View of Life

by T. C. Young

Introduction

I intend to present to you the Chinese view of life which may have some bearing on our present way of life. Needless to say, it is not my intention to propagate Chinese culture nor to denigrate any other culture, all of which have their merits and values.

I should like to make it clear that the so-called Chinese way of life does not reflect the views of anyone contemporary individual, but rather the collective views of the past.

Time passes but human nature does not change. Whether we are living in primitive society or living under the threat of atomic destruction, human beings remain imperfect - aggressive, creating trouble. In fact, the technological advances gained have made this more apparent. And whether the Chinese view of life provides remedies for this aggravated situation remains to be seen.

A Realistic View

The Chinese view of life is deeply rooted in the belief that the universe is an inn and human beings the transient guests. Was not the great poet right, when he said that floating life was like a dream, and that life passed like a spring dream leaving no trace?

At the same time, we recognize, naively if you wish, that man has passion, lecherous desire and noble ambition. He knows sexual desire, hunger, fear, and anger, and is subject to sickness, pain, suffering and death. The recognition of this provides the Chinese with a realistic view of life, neither romantic nor fictive. Life is to be lived to the utmost; that is to say, we should expect neither too much nor too little from it because we must live with lofty ideas and base passion - between idealism and realism. It is human to have a thirst for knowledge and at the same time be thirsty for water. It is human to admire noble deeds and at the same time to love passionately. But we must realize that the moon cannot always be round and the flowers cannot forever look so fair: the sadness which penetrates throughout human existence.

It is this feeling of the impermanence of human existence; the knowledge that we will be extinguished like the flame of a candle, that makes us sober; it also compels us to arrange our lives sensibly and to live truthfully. This, in the last analysis, gives humanity peace.

It is in this human dilemma and under such imperfect conditions that we must live and die. Therefore, the sum of all human wisdom and of human knowledge is not to teach us how to live princely in a dream world, but rather how to remain human and how best to enjoy life.

Do One's Best

It has often been said that the Chinese view of life springs largely from their belief in fatalism. True perhaps. But to someone who has sprung from Chinese soil this reveals only a partial truth. Was not Mencius correct when he stated that we should observe the natural laws by doing our best and by resigning ourselves wholly to the will of heaven in regard to the result? In short, it is to do one's best which really counts in our conduct since, given the complexity of events, we cannot possibly be sure as to the result of our conduct; hence we have to leave the outcome to the divine will.

Furthermore, it is not the Chinese view that there is a predetermined destination for anyone, because the gods rarely make up their minds and can always be effectively moved by our sincere efforts. Did not Confucius himself say that the absolutely sincere man can move heaven and earth and influence the spirits? May I quote another example to illustrate this? :

Han Yu, the great Confucian of the Tang Dynasty, was officially reprimanded and compelled to go to a town in South China to serve as its magistrate. When the district was suffering from an invasion of crocodiles, he read a high flown sacrificial appeal to the crocodiles and they seemed to be so moved by his sincere appeal that they disappeared from the district.

All of us can recall sleepless nights during our short life, laying wondering what might be the results of some enterprise or another, whether a proposal of marriage, the conclusion of a business contract, or the purchase of a piece of property. For the Chinese, if in searching our soul, we are sure that we have done our very best, we should not wonder about the results, but leave things to the gods. This is why Confucius summarized his teaching in one word "CHU," which means "one must fulfill one's duty to the best of one's ability"; he also taught that if we look within ourselves and are convinced that we have done right, then there is nothing to worry about. I think that this is the only reasonable expectation that one can hope for; this is a realistic approach to life and, if I may add, this is one of the keys to happiness.

Contentment means Happiness

This leads me to another topic - the contented mind is always a happy mind. Happiness is relative, and the Chinese do not think that there is perfect happiness anywhere at any time. This may be illustrated by the following story:

There was a man in hell about to be reincarnated, and he said to the King of Reincarnation, "If you want me to return to earth as a human being I will go but only on my own conditions." "What are these conditions?", asked the King, and the man replied, "I must be born the son of a Cabinet Minister and I must have 10,000 acres of land surrounding my home and a fish pond and fruit trees of every kind and a concubine and rooms stocked to the ceiling with gold and pearls and I must be a Duke of the first rank and enjoy renown and prosperity and live until I am 100 years old." The King of Reincarnation replied, "If there was such a lot on earth I would be reincarnated and take it myself and not give it to you."

We all realized that perfect happiness is not attainable; why then should we attempt to attain the impossible. Once we have reached the peak of a mountain, we always feel that there is another higher mountain to be climbed. This, you may say, is the basic motive to the human progress. But is it not also the fundamental cause of human misery?

Human life reads almost like a poem; it has its own rhythm, its cycles of growth and decay; its brightness and its shadow. We must sense the beauty of this rhythm, appreciate its main theme, its strains of conflict and the final resolution, as we do in great symphonies.

In some souls, the discordant notes become harsher and harsher and finally overwhelm and submerge the melody, and so they become slaves to ambition. Whose fault? We have a maxim which says: "One who is content is always happy." It is also said that one who is content will not meet with difficulties for the question of happiness is always reduced in the last analysis to the question of one's wants. Therefore to seek happiness, we must reduce our wants to the attainable. Otherwise, we will be constantly hungry and always in a state of anxiety.

The world is pretty much like a restaurant where everybody thinks the food at the next table is more appetizing than their own. Wives are always better if they belong to others, although we always prefer our own writings to those of others. In this sense, there is no one completely satisfied in this world; everyone wants to be somebody so long as that somebody is not himself. Therefore we must stop somewhere and somehow. This is the road which leads to happiness.

Middle Road Approach

One of the fundamental approaches to life may be called that of the middle road approach, or the spirit of moderation. To the Chinese, we should be neither too rich nor too poor; neither too busy nor too idle; neither too happy nor too sad. In short, nothing should be too much or too little, because in our view this is only natural: if it is too hot or too cold, plants will not flourish; so it is for the human being. Also, this is the best approach if we are to preserve life and perpetuate the human race; if everyone became a Buddhist monk or nun what would become of the world? It is a practical and realistic approach. It would be foolish to assume that all of us could become millionaires and all our children future Prime Ministers; we know that this will not happen, why not boldly recognize it and live with it.

To a Chinese, we simply cannot afford to be extreme in one way or another; logically all men should be equal but practically all men are not equal, so we teach authority and obedience. Theoretically, man and woman should be different but practically they are, so we teach about the difference of the sexes. One of our ancient philosophers taught love for all and another taught self-love. Confucius condemned both merely saying that we should love our own parents. One philosopher believes in suppressing human passions and another believes in fornication, but Confucius counseled moderation in all things.

With this view of life in mind, it is no wonder that a Chinese scholar-general, after he had achieved rare national fame and secured the highest rank in the Central Court, put up a placard in his room which read "Seeking Defect Hall," for to him such a perfect state of life should have been reserved for the gods and not for a human being in this world.

It is equally true that the Chinese, when they meet good fortune, do not partake of all of it, when advantages come their way they do not take all of them, because to be overassertive and to take full advantage of one's position is not only base taste but the very sign of a downfall.

It therefore follows that the ideal life of a Chinese is to live in half fame and half obscurity, to be half lazily-active and half actively-lazy; not so poor that he cannot pay his rent and not so rich that he has to worry about his investments. Because, in the Chinese view, he who is half-drunk is mostly wisely drunk; flowers which are the prettiest are in half bloom; life is sweetest when we live half wisely and half foolishly.

I think we all agree that the happiest soul in the world is one whose life is fairly carefree and yet not altogether carefree; one who has done a little for mankind, just a little; one who is slightly distinguished in his community but not too distinguished that he has too little time to enjoy his own life.

Wisdom of Stupidity

To any westerner, one of the strangest views of life held by the Chinese is that called the wisdom of stupidity. To a Chinese, it is difficult to be clever but still more difficult to be stupid, for the wise man is often one who pretends to be a damned fool. Let us illustrate this with a story which is recorded in a famous Chinese book:

When Confucius was hemmed in between Can and Tsay and had passed seven days without food, the Minister Jen wishing to console him said, "You were near, sir, to death". "I was indeed" replied Confucius. "Do you fear death, sir" enquired Jen. "I'd do" said Confucius. "Then I will try to teach you the way not to die" said Jen. "In the eastern sea there are certain birds; they behave themselves in a modest and unassuming manner as though they possessed no particular ability; they fly together and they roost in a body; in advancing, none strive to be first; in retreating none venture to be last; in eating, none will be first to begin; it is considered proper to take others' leavings. Therefore, in their own ranks they are at peace and the outside world is unable to harm them and thus they escape trouble. Straight trees are the first felled and sweet wells are soonest exhausted, and you sir, you show your knowledge in order to startle fools; you cultivate yourself in contrast to the degradation of others; you blaze along as though the sun and moon were under your arm, and consequently you cannot avoid trouble."

In this way, we see in Chinese history the curious phenomena of higher intellect growing suspicious of the clever and developing the wisdom of stupidity as the best weapon in the battle of life.

In both the east and in the west, we hate a man who is too smart in his dealings with his fellow men. Likewise we always see the wise man choosing a not too-smart wife and the wise girl choosing a not too-smart husband as a life companion.

A Mental Reservation

A mental reservation provides the Chinese with elasticity in life, as a valve provides safety in a mechanical or electrical system. This mental reservation may be seen in the fact that we recognize there is no such thing as good fortune or bad luck. An automobile accident that has cracked up the car but left the driver and passengers

unhurt is bad enough, but to a Chinese it could have been much worse. This attitude provides room to live with the vicissitudes of life; it makes life bearable.

I was reared with this mental readiness; each time there was thought of trouble in my family, such as illness, my mother taught us to accept it as the natural course of events because, in her view, if it were otherwise everybody would be rich.

At school, we were taught a famous parable, which runs something like this:

An old man was living with his son at an abandoned fort on top of a hill; one day he lost his horse and his neighbours came to express their sympathy for this misfortune. "How do you know that this is bad luck" asked the old man. A few days later, his horse returned with a number of white horses in its trail, and his neighbours again came, this time to congratulate him on this stroke of fortune. "How do you know that this is good luck" asked the old man. With so many horses around his son began to take to riding and one day he fell and broke his neck. Once more the neighbours came around to express their sympathy and again the old man asked, "How do you know that this is bad luck". The next year, there was a war but because the old man's son was crippled he did not have to go to the front where many soldiers were being killed."

Evidently this kind of philosophy enables a man to stand a few hard knocks in the belief that there is no such thing as bad luck without advantages following. A medal has two sides. You may say that this explains why the Chinese have suffered so much and still stand so firmly on their own ground in history.

Social Order

What is the social order expected by the Chinese? In a word, to a Chinese the ideal social order is "everybody and everything in its place." Confucius replying to a question as to what is government said, "There is government when the prince is a prince and the minister is a minister; when the father is father, and the son is son." To amplify this rather ambiguous expression he said: "To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me; to serve my sovereign as I would expect a minister under me to serve; to act toward my elder brother as I would expect my younger brother to act toward me; to be first to behave toward friends as I would expect them to behave toward me." He also taught that we should conform to our own life circumstances and should not desire anything outside or above our position. If we find ourselves in a position of wealth and honour we should live as becomes one in such a position; if we find ourselves in a position of poverty and in humble circumstances, we should live as becomes people in such conditions; if we find ourselves in uncivilized countries, we should live as becomes one living in uncivilized

countries; if we find ourselves in danger and difficulty, we should act according to what is required of men under such circumstances; if we occupy high positions, we should not dominate our subordinates; if we occupy subordinate positions, we should not court the favour of our superiors; we should be careful of our own personal conduct and seek nothing from others; in that way, we have no complaints to make either against the gods or against men. In short, we should not find ourselves in any situation in life in which we are not masters of ourselves.

I realize that you may still feel that this gets us nowhere - so evasive and vague are these expressions. But have we ever had a manual to teach us how to conduct ourselves in life? We have to live our own life. However, may I conclude this talk by quoting a few Chinese maxims which may have some bearing on our daily life:

Whenever you do a thing, act so that it will not give your friends the occasion for regret and your foes cause for joy.

Poverty is not a disgrace; disgrace lies in poverty without ambition. A low position is not reason for contempt; contempt pertains to one in a low position who is without ability. Old age is no cause for regret; regret is reserved for having lived in vain. Death is no cause for sorrow; sorrow is reserved for having lived without benefitting the world.

Virtue in a rich person is the ability to give; in a poor man, it is the refusal to beg; in a man of high position, it is an attitude of humility toward his fellow-men; and in a man of low position, it is the ability to see through life.

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