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Becoming "Chinese"

This selection provides some insight as to the way a Westerner would assess Chinese culture as compared to his own. Taking the position of a Chinese, Goldsworthy L. Dickinson highlights the differences between "East" and "West," using his depiction of China to comment on his own culture.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the writer identify as the key values and institutions of the Chinese? How does Dickinson characterize European values and institutions? Does he necessarily see them as superior?

2. How does Dickinson define the European idea of "progress," and what does he say is the Chinese view? What is at stake in this characterization? How does the purported European obsession with "progress" help us better understand the implications of Dickinson's characterization of China as "stable," "antique," and rooted in history?

3. Why do you think Dickinson chose to speak for "the Chinese" rather, for example, than asking a Chinese individual their opinion?

Reading

From Goldsworthy L. Dickinson, *Letters From a Chinese Official: Being an Eastern View of Western Civilization*, (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1907). Published in 1901 (London: R.B. Johnson), as *Letters From John Chinaman*.

Our civilization is the oldest in the world. It does not follow that it is the best; but neither, I submit, does it follow that it is the worst. On the contrary, such antiquity is, at any rate, a proof that our institutions have guaranteed to us a stability for which we search in vain among the nations of Europe. But not only is our civilization stable, it also embodies, as we think, a moral order; while in yours we detect only an economic chaos. Whether your religion be better than ours, I do not at present dispute; but it is certain that it has less influence on your society. You profess Christianity, but your civilization has never been Christian; whereas ours is Confucian through and through. But to say that it is Confucian, is to say that it is moral; . . . Whereas, with you (so it seems, to us) economic relations come first, and upon these you endeavor, afterward, to graft as much morality as they will admit.

This point I may illustrate by a comparison between your view of the family and ours. To you, so far as a foreigner, can perceive, the family is merely a means for nourishing and protecting the child until he is of age to look after himself. . . . As soon as they are of age, you send them out, as you say, to "make their fortune"; and from that moment, often enough, as they cease to be dependent on their parents, so they cease to recognize obligations toward them. They may go where they will, do what they will, earn and spend as they choose; and it is at their own option whether or not they maintain their family ties. With you the individual is the unit, and all the units are free. No one is tied, but also no one is rooted. Your society, to use your own word, is "progressive" you are

always “moving on.” Everyone feels it a duty (and in most cases it is a necessity) to strike out a new line for himself. To remain in the position in which you were born you consider a disgrace; a man, to be a man, must venture, struggle, compete, and win. To this characteristic of your society is to be attributed, no doubt, its immense activity, and its success in all material arts. But to this, also, is due the feature that most strikes a Chinaman—its unrest, its confusion, its lack (as we think) of morality. Among you no one is contented, no one has leisure to live, so intent are all on increasing the means of living.

Now, to us of the East all this is the mark of a barbarous society. We measure the degree of civilization not by accumulation of the means of living, but by the character and value of the life lived. Where there are no humane and stable relations, no reverence for the past, no respect even for the present, but only a cupidinous ravishment of the future, there, we think, there is no true society.