

## Nothing as Deep as the Unspoken (China, Modern Success, History, Stereotypes and Prejudice)



*Picture above: Swearing in the witnesses during a trial against a 'triad' in Amsterdam in 1922 takes ridiculous proportions. In the first explanation of the procedure the Chinese are explained to stick to fingers in the air before taking the oath. The first witness looks up in the air trying to understand what is up there, were he is supposed to point. In the end the court decides to introduce a bizarre ritual. Two candles are place on each side of the witness stand. The interpreter invents a testimonial, he tell the Chinese to say: May the gods perish me if I do not speak the true, after which the witnesses are supposed to blow out the candles. The court transcript reads as follows: The interpreter reads out the testimonial, which was repeated by the Chinese, who blows out the candles on*

*either side of the witness stand. In response to the question of one of the lawyers which religion he upholds, the witness gives a confused answer. Het Centrum (Dutch Newspaper) 1922, 17 October. My comment: Who would not be confused?*

The Chinese year of the Monkey is here and this might be a good time to highlight the fact that the Chinese have come a long way in the most positive sense of the word! Yet still frequently the fear of upcoming Chinese influence in the world creates a stereotypes in 'hidden policy agenda's', but also images of a modern Chinese world in which the strive for success and money seems to have become a dominating urge among the Chinese population. In the West papers write on yearly increase of the amount of Chinese millionaires, fear of bubbles in the Chinese economy, world stock exchanges being destabilized as a result of fluctuations from Shanghai exchange and such. There seems to be a strong separation between economy and culture were China is concerned, a separation which is usually not highlighted in Western cultures.

A famous American linguist, Edward Sapir did comparative language research around the turn of the former century. He discovered that all languages have categories which more or less discriminate based on irregular external characteristics. These external characteristics are usually linked to all kinds of value judgments in everyday communications and are connected with all kinds of 'so called' inner characteristics. 'So called', because they are seldom true.

Such characteristics en physical images are not necessarily xenophobic, meaning, they do not necessarily point towards the fear of strangers. No, it concerns all kinds of irregularities or particulars, red-haired persons, handicapped persons, young persons, old persons, femininity, masculinity, other genders, but also characteristics given to animals, all are part of the domain of categorizing and form establishing within language.

Sapir arrived to the conclusion that these categories on the one hand help us in identifying and formulating the world around us, but that, on the other hand these categories make us blind and backwards because of our prejudiced anticipation of communication. Sigmund Freud went even a bit further and focused on the process of 'transference', meaning, one has a tendency to

transfer one's own faults and misconceptions onto another person as a result of these blind spots.

Focusing on the history of Western prejudices towards the Chinese it is interesting to wonder about these blind spots. How come the Western world is so much focused on the Chinese economy now? One might conclude this is because the economy is the most important thing in the world today. But is this the origin of the current stereotypes as well?

If we look at history, f.i. the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century especially the British appointed themselves as the converters of the so called barbarian habits of the Chinese (and in this they included Tibetan Lamaism) people. This critique concerned the magical practices of Buddhism which were considered rather 'un-Christian'. Rather coincidental this period synchronized a period in Europe of diminishing church influence and spiritual release from citizens no longer interested in the traditional Western religions. It might be called a Western blind spot on homegrown secularization. The trial against the Triad, or Tong, as they were called in Holland, also show a flagrant example of the complete lack of knowledge concerning Chinese religion and the strange Western believe that such would determine the "reality of truth" in those days.

Another stereotype concerned the idea that Chinese were prone to being addicted to opium. This is remarkable as it were both the British and the Americans which imported opium into China with tons at times, enslaving the Chinese population on a massive scale for purposes of economic dominance. When the Qing government finally had enough of this British American strategy and destroyed 20.000 boxes of opium, it led to a series of "opium" wars between 1839-1842, after which the Nanjing dictation forced the Chinese government to hand over the harbors of Hong Kong and Shanghai as part of a treaty ensuring safety zones for opium import. Western homegrown addiction one might call it.



Chinese cartoons from those days shows how the Chinese experienced foreign intervention. In a famous one China is depicted as a big pie from which all the Western powers want to take a piece. And true, Western powers maintained their supremacy well into the 20th century. During the entire period China was accused of isolationist politics, especially by the United States, which, many decades thereafter, lingered itself in what was called 'splendid isolation'. In name the USA confirmed itself as a non-colonial state, yet it aimed as one of the first to dictate legislation onto the Chinese during the period of mixed court and its dominance in a.o. Shanghai. One could call it homegrown isolation in fact.

When the Chinese set out to discover the rest of the world, there were already many prejudices against them. These prejudices also existed in the Netherlands. Long before the Chinese came to the Netherlands various newspapers wrote about the customs in China. One of the presumptions being that there were no differences in the various layers within the Chinese population in fact the culture of the Chinese was limited to the contacts between officials and evermore the contacts and stories conveyed by British officials. The "Groene Amsterdammer" (1982) published one such article coming from the British governor Lord Ellison:

May 25 1892

*On the value of women:*

*One of the Western customs in the beginning which were most strange to the Chinese, was the respect with which the European treated their spouses. Their love-ones (which appearance amazed the Chinese in general) were allowed to appear at the table. The Chinese believed this to diminish the self-esteem of any one man. When the first governor of Hong Kong, Lord Ellison, brought his wife to Hong Kong in 1841 he received a visit from a rich Mandarin. The Mandarin looked attentively at the young English women, following her every move. When she left the room he said to the governor in stuttering English:*

*How much did you give for that women?*

*“Oh,” answered the lord, who did not feel like giving any explanation about the European customs: “2000 dollar”*

*“Well then”: the Mandarin said, taking out his wallet, “when you would like to transfer her to me, I will give you 5000 dollar.””*

*The Mandarin was serious, but the governor refused politely. However the Mandarin continued and increased the amount to 7000 dollar. In the end Lord Ellison had to confess that the English did not sell their wives. The Chinaman could not believe it.*

#### **Het Santarenfeest der Chineezen.**

**(Bijzondere medewerking.)**

**Amoy, 10 Januari.**

Dit feest, dat gevierd wordt op den 15den van de eerste Chinese maand (de eerste vollemansnacht in 't nieuwe jaar) geeft een eigenaardig kijkje op 't Chinese volkskarakter. Teruauwernood onder de verleidelijke bekoring der speeltafels vandaan, waar zo vooral hier in Amoy bij het begin van 't jaar dagen lang achtereen hun geluk beproefd hebben, en nog half dommelig van hun pas genoten vacantiédagen, de eenigste die zo in 't jaar hebben, willen de Chineezen, alvorens voorgoed te beginnen, alles wat maar enigzins doet denken aan doukerto en verdriet negeren. En hun zorgeloosheid en onbekommerde vreugde moeten een bonum omen zijn voor 't verdere gedeelte van 't jaar. Het licht, het geluk

Around 1911 articles appeared in the New Rotterdam Paper (De Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant, 1911) which suggested that the Chinese spent most of their time gambling. The tone of the articles were still somewhat lighthearted, as well as mild. The atmosphere in the Netherlands, before the arrival of Chinese shipping laborers seemed rather cheerful, yet with a sting of laziness, so often addressed by the Dutch as ‘kissing the devils ear’:

*The lantern celebration of the Chinese:*

*This feast is celebrated on the 15th of the first Chinese month (the first full moon night in the Chinese new year), and it gives a peculiar outlook on the Chinese folk character. On just escaped from the temptation and attraction of the gambling tables, were they, especially here in Amoy, the Chinese trial their luck in gambling sometimes days in a row, and still rather sleepy from the holidays....”*

And of course, the Dutch were never lazy, neither gambled as they would make anyone believe!

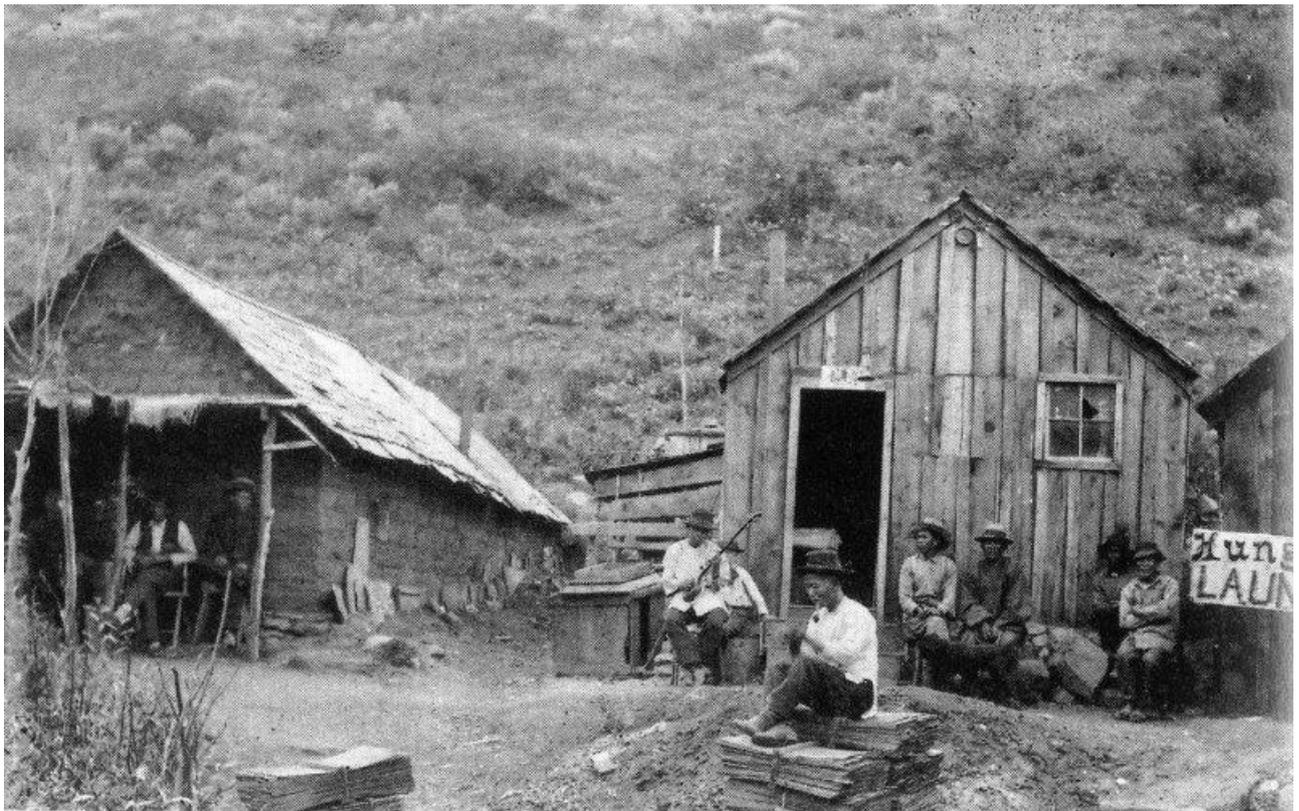


Strangely, these lazy habits of the Chinese seem to disappear as soon as Chinese become en-cultured into the American way of life. Illustrated articles in the United States appeared in Frank Leslie Illustrated Newspaper (Dong et al, 1994). Though quiet patronizing and moralistic, they show Chinese people in their daily lives, work, school and festivities, and of course Christening activities; A citation from May 1870 joyfully describes:

The Chinese are tractable, industrious and thrifty; and , although they never aspire to office, or influence “political rings”, will, if not persecuted beyond human endurance, make intelligent law abiding citizens. Give them an opportunity “to work out their salvation.” If this is granted, we are quite sure they will soon slough off all that is hurtful that comes to them from old

civilization and readily adapt themselves so that newer and higher life which finds its birth in this century of our era.

Chinese getting rich became a stereotype which dominated rather ridicule stories of “hidden ways” of obtaining riches. One persistent story claimed that the Chinese were getting rich as a result of their laundry business during the Californian gold rushes. The reality of course being that these flourishing laundries was of course hardly profitable, even less sustainable.



This particular xenophobia of labor versus capital became labeled: ‘the Chinese question’ and not much later, ‘the yellow peril’. The debates would dominate more than 60 years of American politics; they were racist in nature and established white superiority over yellow inferiority. A fragment of a silent movie from 1922 shows which contempt befell the Chinese workers, and implied that their illegal status immediately implied they would also be smugglers and bandits.

1922 SKY HIGH

*Tom is an undercover cowboy who investigates the smuggling of Chinese workers over the Chinese border. The fragment you will view suggests the*

*smuggling occurs by taxi, consisting of Chinese dressed up as old ladies. The fact that it is a silent movie is no obstacle for its language. Might anyone believe this is not about non-English speaking Chinese, Chinese characters will appear randomly on the screen. In the following fragment Tom's superior tells him he does a wonderful job. All these Chinese are but mere Chopsuey eaters which overflow the country without Uncle Sam's permission. If Tom fulfills his duty properly, he will be recommended for real, "respectable" work.*



It is rather ironic that the most successful projects in the USA, for instance the American railways could not have been accomplished without the Chinese laborers and it is even more ironic that they were paid less than subsistence.

In conclusion, when expressing that the Chinese have come a long way, maybe it would be fair to acknowledge that they have a right to be rich also, even that they have the right to own cars, houses, to be economically successful and to take a lead in some of the world's bigger questions. They

might also have the right to an economic crisis of their own, one, not caused by Western powers for a change! Because after all, did the West really do such a good job? Within stereotyping and transference are we all able to learn from the past?

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