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## THE SHANGHAI MIND

BY

ARTHUR DE C. SOWERBY.

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It has become the fashion for visitors to China, writing for the home papers and magazines, to talk about the "Shanghai mind" in a way that is far from being intended to be flattering. Who coined the term is not known, but it is evident that its inventor was one of the many visitors upon whom has been lavished all the hospitality that only Shanghai knows how to bestow, and who, because he has been dined and wined and taken out to dances night after night during his stay here, has gone away with the opinion that Shanghai life is one continuous round of gaiety like that of the inhabitants of the world before the Noachian flood or of the aristocrats of Paris before the French revolution.

It reminds us of certain travellers in the interior of China, who, having been hospitably entertained by some lonely missionary or other who has dug down into his little store of luxuries to provide the strangers with fitting fare and has given up his time to conduct them on tours of inspection, have returned to the coast and the homelands to report in books or on the lecture platform that the missionary in China lives on the fat of the land a life of ease and luxury.

Point is given to the present remarks by an article which appeared in a recent number\* of *The Sphere* by Lady Drummond Hay in which she refers to the "Shanghai mind" as having been claimed to be an "over-developed provincial mentality," and makes the statements that "Intel-

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\* "The Paris of the Distant Orient," July 16, 1927.

lectual life rarely enters into consideration. Shanghai is dance mad, and the inhabitants never seem to go to bed." She complains that the Shanghai people could tell her nothing of the Chinese and their customs, or even anything about Peking. It is to be regretted that Lady Drummond Hay should have formed such an opinion of the Shanghai foreign community, and we may suggest that she could only have come into contact with a comparatively small circle of pleasure seekers, such as are to be found in every great city in the world, but who in no wise represent either the mentality or the spirit of the place in which they dwell.

Apparently when the term "Shanghai mind" is used it is intended to portray a mentality that is unable to appreciate anything but the grosser pleasures of life—dancing, eating, drinking; sport in its various forms, golf, tennis, riding, polo, swimming; or more sedentary pastimes such as bridge, *ma chang*, the movies, theatres or cabaret shows. It suggests that the life of the Shanghai resident is made up of money grubbing and money spending, without a thought for any of the higher things of life, such as art, literature, music or science. The Shanghai mind is supposed to be completely ignorant of the Chinese, how they live, what they eat, the little ceremonies of their daily lives, their language and, above all, their psychology.

In view of the important place which affairs in China have assumed in the world to-day, and the fact that those affairs more or less centre on Shanghai, it is a matter of interest to find out how such a conception of the mentality of the Shanghai resident has arisen and also whether or not it be deserved.

Let us take the point of view of the round-the-world seeker of copy and local colour for a book on travel, a novel or a series of lectures or magazine articles, for it is undoubtedly from such quarters that the term has come. Such an one is athirst for sensational information. But he or she generally comes to China already full of preconceived ideas. The Chinese are this; the Chinese do that; they eat dogs and rats; they have been served a dirty deal by the aggressive Westerner; the pig-tail has gone and in its place is a new-born spirit of nationalism and so on and so forth. Landing in Shanghai and meeting the local foreign residents he immediately pours forth a flood of questions—"Don't the Chinese do this?" and "Don't the Chinese do that?" He never says "Tell me about the Chinese, how they live, what they think," nor does he ever ask questions in a way that displays a humble spirit of enquiry or a simple desire for knowledge; and the result is that, appalled at the depth of the newcomer's ignorance and utterly unable to cope with the mass of his preconceptions, the wretched victim pleads ignorance of the Chinese and all their ways and strives to turn the conversation into some frivolous vein as more fitting to the real mentality of his interrogator. His attitude is that since the newcomer already thinks he knows so much about China and the Chinese, why worry the poor foreign resident in China with a flood of superfluous questions. Disgusted, he takes no pains to dispel the misinformation with which the visitor is overflowing, nor does he invent something new and sensational to take its place, and so he gains the reputation of being ignorant of the people amongst whom

he lives and works and of caring only for the frivolities of life. But in the seclusion of his room or home the visitor might be surprised to see him lovingly handling some gem of ancient Chinese art or patiently poring over the crooked heiroglyphs of the Chinese printed page.

Of course there are those amongst the residents of Shanghai who frankly neither know nor want to know anything of Chinese art or the customs of the people; but even their attitude is understandable. All day long their work brings them into contact with the Chinese, where they learn to appraise John at his best and worst. When they leave the office they want to forget that such a place as China exists and so their homes are severely Western. No Chinese curio, carving, embroidery or picture is allowed a place in their precincts, and in these sanctuaries they find rest for their souls mid surroundings that remind them of the culture of their native soil. But to say that because they will not, or even, perhaps, cannot, speak with authority on China and things Chinese, they show a provincial mentality or give no heed to the intellectual pursuits of life is utterly unwarranted. Did Lady Drummond Hay fail to discover that Shanghai boasts three learned societies catering to the needs of the foreign community, namely, the China Society of Science and Arts, the Royal Asiatic Society (North China Branch) and the Quest Society; that up to the time of the estrangement between foreigners and Chinese in 1925 there was a very energetic Chemical Society; and that there is a very strong Engineering Society functioning to-day in Shanghai; while there are numerous subsidiary organizations devoted to intellectual pursuits? Did she fail to find out that every year remarkably creditable art exhibitions are held in Shanghai showing that there is very considerable artistic talent in the community; and that any musician worthy of the name who visits Shanghai plays to packed houses? And what about the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, which ranks second to none in the world, and all efforts to dispense with or reduce which at the annual ratepayers' meetings have been overwhelmingly defeated by the ratepayers? Where else in the world could a magazine such as *The China Journal*, which deals entirely with matters of an intellectual nature, exist unsubsidized, paying its own way through the advertising support given by business men who believe in such things, and which has enough local readers to repay those advertisers for their original faith in the intellectuality of the Shanghai community when the magazine was first started?

In failing to mention this side of Shanghai life, Lady Drummond Hay does the Shanghai foreign community the gravest injustice and fails to present the true state of affairs in her article.

We would like to ask whether dancing is confined to Shanghai: how about the night clubs of London? And as for sport, we venture to say that it is only the fact that so much time is devoted to it by young and old alike in Shanghai that keeps the community healthy in a climate so alien to the constitution of the European and American. The Race Club, with its opportunity for healthful exercise calling for a strictly sober life, has been the salvation of many a young man coming to the Far East. Even the dancing in many cases is taken chiefly as a form

of exercise which the comparatively easy hours of business in the Orient make it possible to indulge in.

Finally, does the "Shanghai mind" know the Chinese? Does it? If it does not, how is it possible to carry on business with a race as astute as any in the world? The truth is the "Shanghai mind" knows the Chinese through and through, and, knowing them, it makes its own choice as to how it will react. Some foreigners prefer to remain aloof from the Chinese, keeping strictly to their own particular culture; others admire Chinese art, or find interest in her literature; yet others find their greatest interest in the people themselves. Many a foreign resident prides himself on his collection of some branch of Chinese art, past or present, and in not a few cases the collections are as fine as any in the world. Because the inquisitive visitor fails to lay bare the inner life of the Shanghai resident, there is no reason to dub the latter a provincial or a *dance mad ignoramus*.

Surely the best answer to globe-trotters who ask what Peking is like is to tell them to go and see; or to those who want to know the customs of the Chinese is to suggest that they should go to the Chinese themselves and find out, instead of trying to cull their information easily at second-hand to be retailed in the home magazines as something gathered at first hand on the spot?

And to accuse Shanghai, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, and one where the keenest interest is taken in world affairs, the hub of the Orient, the greatest city and port of the Pacific—to accuse such a city of having an over-developed provincial mentality is nothing short of ridiculous, and suggests that the author of such a statement visited the Far East with eyes that saw not and ears that heard not, or, perhaps it would be better to say, with a discernment that failed to penetrate the merest fraction below the surface.

Unfortunately it is mainly from such sources that the public in the homelands derive what it vainly thinks to be knowledge about China. These writers know the journalistic field: they know the kind of stuff that sells, and that, apparently, is their chief concern. And the fact that it is just that kind of stuff that sells and is read is a significant commentary upon the mind of the public at home and suggests a provincialism that far outranks anything that can be laid against the residents of Shanghai.