



## REFERENCE MATERIALS

### The Straits-Born Chinese

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I feel I have ventured upon a task somewhat beyond my powers in undertaking to address you upon this subject and I unfortunately have not the time at my disposal to deal fully with the question.

The few straggling remarks I however wish to make are intended to promote discussion and are subject to your correction and to such experience as each of you possesses. You must pardon me if my remarks seem like a sermon, and you must not think that I am unaware of the faults and shortcomings of other peoples because I do not mention them. My only reason for attempting to point out some leading characteristics of the Straits-born Chinese is that I have studied the Chinese in China and in some of the other colonies where they have settled and have acquired some experience that enables me to form an opinion, a very imperfect one I admit of yourselves.

Now the chief feature that strikes me in reviewing your lives is that you are placed in a very trying and exacting position. It is one which few Europeans understand, and one which I do not think you yourselves all fully realize the difficulty of. As you are well aware, you are British citizens enjoying by right of birth all the privileges and advantages that this birthright gives you. On the other hand you are a minority amongst the China-born Chinese with whom you are connected by descent, traditions and customs. You are trained and educated in a British colony and brought under the influence of a British Government that does its best, however much it may fall short of the ideal, to teach you to love the principles of liberty and freedom, and appreciate the benefits of having equal justice and equal rights. But the Straits-born Chinese colonists here are, compared with the China-born Chinese, is a great minority. You are, being permanent residents here, brought much more into contact with the China-born Chinese than with Europeans. In your daily life, in business and in pleasure, in all the walks of life, you meet the China-born Chinaman at every step. This, therefore, makes it necessary that you should be like a man, so to speak, with two faces and two natures. You have to present one face to the European and one face to the China-born Chinaman. In consequence of this double position, you cannot help being largely influenced by the Chinese who are in the great majority. Now you have in the Straits Settlements being of Chinese descent, in my humble opinion, very wisely followed the customs and habits of the China-born Chinese, and in many respects you

have very greatly improved on them. But though you retain the Chinese national customs and dress, it is very necessary to remember that the China-born Chinaman has a very different view of Government from, what you have been taught and see in practise in this Colony. I think a word of warning here will not be out of place. You should as Chinese born British citizens remember that you have great rights and privileges here, institutions that you may well be proud of, for they have only been won by the British people after many centuries of struggle and sacrifice of many noble lives. I would warn you not to be influenced by the Chinese view of Government. In China, as you know well, Chinese citizens do not exist. The Chinese people are constitutionally slaves. They have no political rights and very few privileges as citizens. Their one duty is to obey. We all know what the result of that system is mutual distrust among the people, dishonesty and extortion among the official classes, endless disorders everywhere. All the Chinese, rich and poor, that come to this colony from China, have suffered from the effects of this system; and they bring the same ideas that they have in China about government and officials to bear on our own Government here and its officers. They cannot realise (till they have lived here many years) a different state of things. In their intercourse with you they are inclined to treat the Colonial Government as they do their own Government in China. They will have nothing to do with it for fear of getting into trouble. This feeling has to some degree reacted on you, and explains why it is so difficult to get Straits-born Chinese to come forward in public life. You are too much influenced by the China-born Chinese in this respect.

There is another rock which I think you should be warned off. Although bound by customs, traditions and often by relationship and connections with China, I would advise you not to attempt to serve two masters. Any attempt to sail under two flags is always a mistake. Be the best of friends with your Chinese neighbours, but do not try to be a Straits-born British citizen in Singapore and a Chinese subject in China. The China-born Chinese here may be in the majority but I can tell you they really in their heart of hearts envy you all the advantages you enjoy by being Straits-born Chinese citizens. I need not point out to you that any attempt to play a double part and owe a double allegiance like this, is doomed to failure. In the first place, the British Government would not tolerate any open interference with you by the Chinese Government. Nor would the Chinese Government venture to patronise you except indirectly and in an underhand manner. Remember therefore that any see-saw wobbling up and down between England and China like that can only make you ridiculous in the eyes of your rulers and a subject of contempt on the part of the China-born Chinese.

I will now venture to pass from your political position and offer a few criticisms on the social and professional sides of your lives.

I am of opinion that nothing better illustrates what the Chinese people (I say really of Chinese officials, for fine men as some of them are, they are all the victims of a corrupt system that ruins the country) in China might develop into under another form of government than a glance at the Straits-born Chinese citizens in the Straits Settlements and in our sister colony – Hongkong. It is a most interesting comparison. Your successes in commerce, in business, in nearly every walk of life only bear out what is I think the conviction of the few who really attempt to understand Chinese life,

namely that the heart and mind of China is sound but that the body corporate suffers from a vicious system of misgovernment which prevents the healthy instincts of the people from having free play.

To come back to yourselves. One of the first things that strikes an observer who knows China well is that the Straits-born Chinese is clean. This seems a small thing to say, but it means a great deal. The Straits-born Chinese has been affected by his surroundings. He has cultivated and loves cleanliness from having all things about him whether in school, in business places, in public offices or godowns kept decently and in order. With a love of cleanliness, has come a desire for neatness, tidiness and comfort in all things. In China, as you know well, the Chinese are far too indifferent to externals, and their idea of comfort and ease is very elastic. Straits-born Chinese houses are models of cleanliness and good order compared with the dwellings of the China-born Chinese; and the example set by you in this way has done great good in teaching the Chinese from China the benefits of keeping their homes clean and tidy.

I do not think in your social intercourse you are as polite to one another and to others as the Chinese are in China. Chinese are perhaps excessively polite. This politeness partly arises from a dread of giving offence. The Chinese are afraid of getting into trouble with their neighbours or with the officials. The Straits-born Chinese has no troubles of this kind to bother him, and necessity therefore does not drive him to be so tediously polite. But, on the other hand, I think you are in danger of being too unceremonious – a little bit too rough. In Penang, in particular, so overweening are your manners both towards Europeans and other Chinese that they are often stigmatised as insolence. For the intolerable pride of the Chinese prig in China there is some excuse. He knows no better. I need not tell you, however, that China is no better than her neighbours and that she has no reason to treat the rest of the world as beneath her. On the whole, I think you would be the better for showing more attention to social forms. Remember too that it is possible to be independent in thought and bearing without being rude. It is the excessive independence in language and bearing that you require to guard against. It springs from the liberty you enjoy here. I do not urge you to be less practical or business like. I only point out to you that your free and easy code of manners has dangers. I would advise you to cultivate politeness more, to show greater civility and more modesty to all men.

I would say one or two words on your religion. I have heard it said that the Straits-born Chinese have no religion, neither Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism nor Mohamedanism. As far as I know, this is untrue. The worship of ancestors, – the national religion of China – with all the religious obligations and observances attached to it is, I believe, allowing for circumstances, as strictly carried out here by you as in China. Possibly some Malay customs and local “*adat*” have been introduced as well. Taken as a whole, however, your religion is for all practical purposes the same as that of the great majority of China-born Chinese. Now you all know well what bitter hatred and ill feeling exist in China over the attempts of missionaries to introduce Christianity there. That bad state of feeling I think is due chiefly to other causes than religious ones. There is no country in the world where greater toleration exists in religious matters than in China. The massacres, riots and disturbances that break out from time to time there are sometimes brought on by indiscretions, mistakes and impossible claims of the missionaries; they are sometimes to be ascribed to national prejudices

and to the not unnatural objection the Chinese have to the Gospel being forced upon them by foreign powers. Here however, circumstances are different Law and justice are too strong to tolerate anything in the form of religious coercion. You therefore can afford to treat Christianity in a broad and liberal spirit. At any rate, escape from the blight of religious hatred and ill-will. Be good friends to and live in peace with the missionary Christianity you find here. Remember that the missionary bodies come here to do good works. You can afford to be generous, for Christian proselytism makes even less way here than in China. Be therefore fair towards missionary enterprise. Study their views as well as follow your own. In time both you and Christian ministers will in this way learn to know one another better. Each party will be more disposed then to make allowances and weld into harmony what is best in each other's religion. It rests with you who have greater experience of the West than the China-born Chinese around you to set an example in this matter. In China, as you know well, it is war to the bitter end with Christianity. It is open to you in these Settlements to show the Chinese that it is possible to live on terms of friendship with Christian missionaries and derive benefit from their work without giving up, if you do not see fit to do so, your own religion. It is true that the Colonial Government does not interfere in religious matters. All it asks of you is to "fear God and honour the king," to believe honestly in whatever you believe and live the life of a law-abiding citizen. It is however this free trade in religious matters that should make you the more charitably disposed towards others, as your responsibility is the greater.

And not only in the matter of religion does this obligation rest on you. People who like you stand, as it were, half-way between East and West can do much to promote better feelings between the Europeans resident here and the other Chinese. You can interpret China to Europe, and Europe to China. The contempt for foreigners and their unintelligible and unreasonable ways that is so strong in China, finds veiled expression here. It lies in your power to do much to remove these prejudices to explain what is misunderstood and to foster and promote better relations between two peoples that do not understand one another fully.

And now in conclusion a few words on the subject of your education. In this Colony there seems to me to be a great deal of hesitation on the part of most of you as to what education you shall give your sons. You seem unable to make up your minds whether the education is to be English or Chinese. It often ends in giving the youthful citizens a mixture of English and Chinese that neither satisfies you nor does much good to them. I think your present system a hail measure. The Anglo-Chinese education that many Straits-born Chinese children get now is very superficial. The result is that the young citizen knows neither Chinese nor English well. He has a scattering of both, but an intelligent understanding of neither. In after life, the boy so educated reads neither Chinese nor English. This is a matter that requires more consideration at your hands than it now gets. It is to my mind absolutely necessary for you to make up your minds on this very important subject before you think of educating your sons. I know perfectly well that it is almost necessary for the majority of your boys here to know something of both English and Chinese. But decide beforehand which of the two, English or Chinese, you intend your sons to make use of chiefly as a means of gaining a livelihood. When you have settled that, if it is English, then let your son have as good and as long an

English schooling as you can afford for him. So too with Chinese. If circumstances make it necessary for your son to learn Chinese, let him learn it as thoroughly as possible and he will do that better in China than here. If you wish your son to have an intelligent understanding of both languages, it is, I am afraid, necessary to make the boy learn Chinese first. It is nearly twice as difficult to learn to write Chinese as it is to learn to write English and the strain on the memory is so great that Chinese is never learnt well except by those who have studied it in their early youth. There are hundreds of Chinese boys who have learned Chinese for six or eight years and then studied English at school for three or four years and then improved their English by private study afterwards. On the other hand, very few Chinese ever succeed in learning Chinese well after leaving English schools. As an illustration of what I mean, I might point out that there are perhaps only half a dozen Europeans who can write Chinese even tolerably well, while the educated Chinese who, in addition to writing Chinese, can read and write European languages, can be counted by hundreds. You may, I think, take it for granted that Chinese can never be learnt thoroughly except in youth, and that if your son is to have much to do with China-born Chinese, he should have his grounding in Chinese first and learn as much English as may be necessary to him after.

While on the subject of education I wish to direct your attention to a very important point. There is a great difference between schoolmasters in China and schoolmasters in English schools. In China, the schoolmaster is practically responsible for the moral training of his pupils. For this reason he is invested with great powers and administers punishment severely when it is deserved. European schoolmasters naturally cannot do much in this way. They cannot, like the Chinese teacher, pretend to control the boys' character. The difference between China-born schoolboys and Straits-born Chinese schoolboys is marked. I am of opinion that the Straits-born Chinese parents greatly neglect their duty in this respect. Many of your sons grow up wild and impatient of all restraint. You cannot be too firm or too severe with your children even in little things, such as bad languages. This failure to exercise a strict family control over the children is mistaken kindness. If your sons grow up having no fear of correction at your hands, they will be easily led into all kinds of trouble.

A few words more in reference to the education of your daughters. I venture to think that the social position of Straits-born Chinese women is a peculiar one. You know perfectly well that in the East generally and in China in particular woman, as woman, is expected to live in retirement in her home. She does not go out in public and associate with strangers like her Western sisters. But I would ask you to bear one thing well in mind. In the West women enjoy great liberty of action. But they are educated and trained to live in public as well as to take their places as mothers in the privacy of their homes. I foresee a possible danger to your family life in the Straits Settlements in this matter and wish to utter a note of warning and advice. What I wish to point out clearly is this. You know that the wives and daughters of Straits-born Chinese are given very much greater liberty (except perhaps just before marriage) and allowed to go about much more than Chinese women in China. This is partly in consequence of the different conditions of life under which they live here and partly due to the influence of western ideas about the liberty of women. In my opinion it will be a great mistake if you let your wives and daughters follow European customs, unless you train and



educate them first to take up such a position.

I have often heard the China-born Chinese say that the Straits-born Chinese cannot control their women folk. By that I suppose is meant that the mistress of the household is not so submissive as the Chinese wife. If it is true that the Straits-born Chinese wife has too much her own way in the family, it is only another argument in favour of a better education for her. I would urge you to pay more attention to the education of Straits-born Chinese girls, and to use all your influence to persuade your friends to give those girls as much education as they can. They should all be able at least to read and write Romanised Malay. Rest assured that the education will make them better daughters and more obedient wives. At any rate, look facts in the face. If you do not approve of female education then keep your family folk at home. If you decide to allow them to go abroad in public, then in fairness prepare them for such a life so that they may be an honour to you.

I trust that there is nothing in these strong remarks to cause resentment. They are solely intended to promote discussion and invite correction. I hope they may do some good.

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