

THE MIND-READING OF THE CHINESE.*



URING a visit, in the summer of 1888, to San Francisco, I made the acquaintance of Sing Fon, a Chinaman who combines the two occupations of priest and merchant. Finding him to be a very entertaining and intelligent gentleman, I cultivated him until we became good friends. He told me many strange things about Chinese manners and customs, but the strangest of all was an exhibition he gave me of mind-reading.

He required some ten days for preparation. At the appointed time I called for him at his store, and, going with me to the Joss House, we each of us removed our shoes, and put on in place of them a pair of white satin sandals. He enveloped himself in a white satin robe which reached almost to the floor. We were shown into a small room behind the platform upon which the three idols were seated, and from which daylight was entirely excluded. It was lighted by what seemed to be a hundred candles suspended from the ceiling by some invisible means. The walls were entirely concealed by silk hangings, beautifully embroidered, and the floor was covered with matting ornamented with grotesque and fantastic figures. The only furniture in the room was a bamboo table, upon which stood two flat, covered vases and a lamp.

As soon as we entered the room he required me to sit cross-legged on the floor, close to the table. He then blindfolded me, and asked me not to move or speak until he told me to do so.

I heard him remove the covers from the vases, felt him wetting the hair on the top of my head, and smoothing it down close and flat. Then he seemed to be putting a cloth on it, which he touched here and there with his fingers, as though he were applying a plaister to a wound. Putting his open hand on the top of the cloth, and pressing my head with considerable force, he instructed me to think of some church I had seen, and to make as distinct a picture of it in my mind as possible. The Joss House being near by, I naturally fixed my mind upon the interior of it, and for perhaps two minutes there was absolute silence in the room.

He then removed the bandage from my eyes, and, at his suggestion, I stood up beside him. Both vases were open on the table; in one of them was a number of pieces of very thin white paper, about three inches

square; in the other was a single piece of paper, of like size, colour, and shape, immersed in what seemed to be water. This the priest took out and held over the flame of the lamp. As it became dry, there appeared upon it a faint outline picture of the Joss House. It was blurred and indistinct, but it was beyond question a picture of the room I had in my mind while sitting blindfold on the floor.

The trick was a simple one, and I saw through it at once. I told Sing Fon that, of course, he knew I would have in my mind the room through which we had just passed, and he had his picture prepared beforehand. He smiled in a good-natured way, and, taking a powerful reading-glass from a drawer in the table, he bade me examine the picture more closely. I found it to be a picture, and a perfect one, of the Joss House, not as it really is, but as I had thought of it, and pictured it to myself from memory—for, on second thought, I could see where I had omitted many details.

The priest suggested that we should try again, and I was more than willing. My theory was so far wrong that I abandoned it, and wanted the opportunity for further investigation. Repeating our former preparations, I this time brought to mind a church more than two thousand miles away, that I was absolutely certain the priest had never seen or heard of. To my utter astonishment, as the paper dried the church appeared, almost perfect in every detail.

Sing Fon was as much pleased as I was astonished. He asked me to sit down again, suggesting that this time I bring to mind the face of some woman or child. After blindfolding me as before, he arranged the hair low down on the back of my head, and applied the paper close to my neck. While he applied the pressure of his hand I thought of Mary Anderson. In a few moments I was released, the paper was dried, and through the glass could be seen a good likeness of the great Parthenia, at that time in England.

We repeated the experiment over and over again, and numerous pictures of faces and places were produced. I found, however, that no faces of any but the living could be made to appear.

As a final test I tried to remember the verses so popular with the boys of a former generation, beginning—

“Oh! were you ne'er a schoolboy,
And did you never train?”

Upon examining the paper, the verses appeared as they were printed in the Second Reader, and above them was a copy, in faint outline, of the illustration showing the boys marching in uniform, and in the distance the flock of geese and the “sturdy gander that stopped to show us fight.” Several lines of the poem that I had been unable to remember were missing in the picture; and in one place where I had

* The author of this paper is alone responsible for the statements therein contained.—Ed. C. M.]

misquoted a word, my mistake was shown on the paper.

The priest declined to tell me how the paper was prepared, or how the pictures are produced. The manner of their production is a secret known only to the priesthood—a sacred mystery over three thousand years old.

Professor Durand, to whom I related my singular experience, read a paper on the subject at the annual meeting of the Eclectic Psychological Association, in Boston, on the 23rd of December, 1888. The professor, in his statement of the facts, made some slight errors, which the members of the association who read this article will discover. But he was so far correct that, from a scientific standpoint, and for the purposes of investigation, the professor's errors are harmless. His paper led to considerable discussion. Those of the members inclined to be materialistic insisted that the thought matter filtered directly through my skull, and was impressed upon the prepared paper. Some of these held that thought is a mode of motion, as light is, and that the pictures are produced by its rays, as an image is formed upon the sensitive plate in a camera. Others, who are true psychologists and believers in the spiritual, reasoned that the brain of the Chinaman was the medium through which the thoughts were filtered and by which the picture was produced.

With the former, it was held that all that was necessary to produce the pictures would be a knowledge of how to prepare the paper. The latter insisted that not only must the paper be properly prepared, but the operator must possess peculiar gifts.

There were still others who, following the teachings of the late Mr. Braid, of Manchester, the leading investigator of hypnotism, held a middle course, insisting that by a continual fixation of the mental eye upon an object, with absolute repose and general quietude, the special senses are exalted, and the impression is made upon the motor, sentient, and sympathetic nerves; that upon the brain, as the centre of the nervous system, the impression is most distinct, and, by reason of the close proximity of the prepared paper, the brain imparts the impression thereto, and the picture is formed.

They agreed with the spiritualists that more was necessary than a proper preparation of the paper, but they differed from them in this: that while it was not necessary for the operator to possess peculiar gifts, it was necessary that the subject operated upon should be of peculiar temperament, and should be both mentally and physically in proper condition.

Over all the pictures produced during my interview with the priest there ran a number of fine lines, tending to blur them slightly, and make them seem as if printed on shaded paper. The priest explained that my dark hair had made these lines, and that the grey hair, which predominates with me, had produced no such effect. He further told me that in pictures made

from the head of a Chinaman no such lines are seen, there being no hair on the head of a Chinaman at the points where the papers are applied. This seems to indicate the correctness of the materialistic theory, and leads to the supposition that dark hair is not a good conductor of thought-rays.

It is to prevent the appearance of these lines upon the pictures that Chinamen are required to keep their heads closely shaven. In fact, where dark hair is so plentiful as to entirely conceal the skull whereon the prepared paper is placed, no picture will be produced.

This singular art is utilised by the Chinese Government in many ways: as, for instance, the detection of crime. The prepared paper is applied to the head of a suspected criminal. Even against his will he may be made to think of the location where the crime was committed, with all its surroundings, and the picture formed is a silent but certain witness against him. Prisoners taken in battle are made to think of the forts, and camps, and troops they have just left behind them, and accurate plans of them all are drawn by this wonderful and certain process. The heads of prisoners whose custom it is to wear their hair are carefully shaven before the papers are applied.

Any subject of the Emperor may be required at any moment to appear and take part in the sacred mystery, and it is thought wise to have the people always in readiness. The queue worn by all of them is regarded as sacred, and this belief is encouraged by those in authority. It is really a matter of minor importance; there is no objection to it; and while the closely shaven head without the queue would present an unpleasant and unfinished appearance, as they are now combined, each makes the other a by no means unbecoming ornament.

Sing Fon showed some crude knowledge of phrenology. In explaining why, in the different experiments, he had changed his manipulations from the top to the lower back part of my head, he told me that pictures of sacred things only were produced on the top of the head, while those of women could be had only from near the nape of the neck. These locations correspond with "veneration" and "amativeness" in modern phrenology, and add another to the many proofs of the exactness of that science, besides showing its great antiquity.

Unfortunately, no way is known to the Chinese to preserve these wonderful photographs of the mind. They gradually fade away, and in half an hour disappear entirely. Indeed, when subjected to any light but that of such candles as were burning in the room where we were, and the component parts of which are kept secret, they disappear instantly.

The Mongolian is not a progressive race. It remains for the Caucasian to discover for himself, or learn from the Chinese, this beautiful and useful art, and further to discover some way to give permanence to the wonderful pictures.

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