

*“Things About
America
and Americans”*

Xu Zhengkeng, 1918–1921

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Xu Zhengkeng (1898?–?) was educated at two American-supported missionary institutions in China, the middle school attached to St. John’s University in Shanghai and then Nanking University, which graduated him in 1918. He then came to the United States and studied at Cornell University from 1918 to 1920. Before returning to China, Xu traveled around the country for six months and worked for a while at the University of California.

Xu’s book about America, published in 1926, remains one of the most comprehensive in the Chinese literature to date, a 358-page compilation of information about everything from restaurants to Japanese immigrants. Beginning with its copyright page, which bears the English title “Things About America and Americans,” Xu’s text is liberally sprinkled with names and terms written in English characters (here enclosed in guillemets)—an indication that his Chinese readers could be expected to know some English. Although Xu voices reservations about America, he is speaking to an audience he thinks too apt to be “intoxicated with Westernization” (p. 343).

HOW AMERICANS CHERISH TIME

Americans cherish time because of their worship of money. They have a proverb that time is gold. The impatience of their temperament, the hurry and pressure of their affairs is visible in the way they walk. There is no one on the streets anywhere in the country just looking around or

wandering aimlessly like the loafers in China's streets and alleys. Americans have also invented all kinds of labor-saving machinery, such as candy vending machines that a passer-by can activate by inserting coins, making a fixed amount of food jump out. Or stamp vending machines next to mailboxes, in which someone mailing a letter can put two cents, which activates the machine and causes a two-cent stamp to come out of its own accord. Or paper-cup machines that are activated when a customer inserts one cent, making a paper cup drop out. And so on. All have been created because of Americans' idea of cherishing time. In addition, in busy places there are so-called «automat or self-service» restaurants, managed by machines instead of people. Various kinds of food can be taken out of the machine by a customer who pays the price. The cleverness of this makes one sigh ceaselessly with wonder.

A plan for how civilized people should allocate time over their whole lives appeared in an American newspaper. Out of a life span of 70 years, sleep was calculated to take 23 years and 4 months; work, 19 years and 8 months; sports, recreation, and going to church, 10 years and 2 months; eating, 6 years and 10 months; traveling, 6 years; illness, 4 years; and washing and dressing, 2 years. From this we can see the economical attitude Americans have toward time. Every action must be calculated meticulously and no time wasted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MONEY

Americans are adept at the art of doing business and making a profit. Their whole civilization has its origin in this, and they are first among nations in their emphasis on money. Even when friends socialize there is a commercial motive. Americans often haggle over money, creating a rift; this is due to their love of money. The easiest ways to riches in America are banking and railroads. Capitalists in these two industries have great power and prestige. But while power and prestige are easy to gain, they are frequently also easy to lose. Only two men today have been able to maintain their enormous holdings, «Vanderbilt» and «Gould», both railroad capitalists. No one is more highly regarded in the whole nation than these two, who hold the power of life and death over others. Sometimes even the president or a state governor has to bow his head and take orders from one of them.

Apart from these two, the person who can be called the richest man in the world, with incalculable wealth, is the petroleum king «Mr.

John D. Rockfellers», the chief of Standard Oil Company.⁹ Originally from a humble family, he made his mark in petroleum and gained control over the world's petroleum industry. His every move directly or indirectly affects the whole population. One year, taking pity on the poor, he donated a large sum of money at Christmas, to be distributed all over the country. For a time he was lauded in the newspapers, praised everywhere, and had the reputation of being a great philanthropist. But in no more than two months the price of gasoline was increased, revealing his mercenary intentions, and he was castigated all over the country.

In recent years he has made great efforts to aid Chinese universities and, in particular, he has at great expense established a medical school in Peking. On the surface he did it purely for public benefit, but in fact it was a tactic to win people's hearts for the purpose of developing his business. He has never set foot in the political realm, but can be seen as enthusiastic in projects to improve society. The most famous and well-equipped university in America, the University of Chicago, was founded by him alone. He is also an ardent Christian; teaching the Bible to ordinary young people, which he insists on doing himself, is what makes him happiest every day. Apart from him there are many people called the king of this or the king of that. These are titles for people whose financial power controls a whole industry. Since these titles are so common in America, the hope of attaining such a position is deep in everyone's heart. Thus the worship of money becomes even more firmly fixed.

Countries differ in the preliminary expressions used when strangers first meet. In China we begin by asking a person's name, native place, age, and occupation, for we need to know the details of his social background before socializing with him. In England it is most common to ask, «Who is your father?» This represents the national character of an autocracy. If someone's father is an aristocrat, no one will fail to be respectful at once. What Americans ask is «How much have you?» This shows the importance Americans attach to money. This can be seen everywhere. An American newspaper carried an advertisement of a performance by the famous actress «Miss Minnie Palmer» saying, «Minnie Palmer will wear all the diamonds in the third act». The American preoccupation with money is even used by theaters to attract customers.

9. Xu's reference to Vanderbilt, Gould, and Rockefeller as contemporary figures is curious. Gould had died in 1892, Vanderbilt in 1877, and Rockefeller had retired in 1911.

SUPERSTITIONS

Americans have many superstitions. For instance, if a certain kind of bird (similar to an owl) flies by late at night, according to a folk saying, this is a sign that someone is going to die. The number thirteen is also considered unlucky, so in inviting guests you must have either twelve or fourteen and never thirteen.... The reason for this superstition is that Jesus had twelve disciples and the thirteenth was Judas, whose betrayal caused Jesus' death. So people do not like to use the number thirteen. Again, Friday is called «black Friday», and many people who are superstitious do not go out on that day. Anyone who gets sick or has an accident on Friday considers it especially unlucky, because that was the day of Jesus' death. There are techniques of fortune-telling and astrology that rural Americans in particular believe in. They consider the day, month, and year of birth important, but [unlike Chinese] not the hour. Families who raise bees never tell others the exact number of beehives they have, and on President Washington's birthday they must move their hives or it is said there will be a death. Also, if some bees escape while [the hives are?] being separated, then they will ring a bell or beat an oil drum in the belief that the bees will hear it and return—this is really laughable. The United States always brags it is a civilized country and ridicules us as a superstitious one. Who would have imagined that superstition there is more widespread than with us!

INSIDE AMERICAN HOMES

Before marriage most American women learn about household management, and so after becoming wives they can set up an orderly home and handle housekeeping with ease, taking care of even aesthetic, hygienic, and spiritual matters. When you enter the homes of people, no matter of what class, they are always neat and quiet with a dignified charm. The average home has a piano or a gramophone and such items of entertainment. In winter there is central heating and hot water, and some also use gas stoves so that the inside of the house maintains a fixed temperature. Though it may be freezing cold outside, inside it is like spring. At times of leisure husband and wife play the piano and make music—their happiness together is enviable. Because the standard of life is high and labor expensive, they cannot afford servants, so they take care of everything themselves. If they want to buy something, they call the store and ask for it to be delivered. The sound of hubbub or quarreling is never heard inside the house. If on occasion there is an

argument, it is hidden so people do not know. In summer the whole family goes to the country. On Sundays, too, they go for a ride in the car, packing food to take on a walk in the countryside, and not coming back until evening. The American family is indeed the happiest and has the most enjoyment.

BIRTH CONTROL

Because the American living standard is too high, they have various methods of birth control. Ordinarily if there are more than two children, some relatively safe means of contraception will be found. In recent times this matter has resulted in such things as Mrs. Sanger coming to lecture in East Asia.¹⁰ Besides, the expenses of raising a child from infancy to adolescence and then to adulthood are not negligible. And what a burden it is for poor families to be saddled with many births! Eugenicists say that highly educated people bear fewer children. A nation benefits from the production of children with superior inherited characteristics and full education. So are not the material civilization of the United States today and the cleverness of its people due to birth control?

THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

The United States is a paradise not only for women but also for children. Society thinks children important, just as it does women. Municipal governments have «Child Welfare Departments», which intervene with any family that mistreats children or takes insufficient care of them. The government has fixed April 7 of every year as Children's Day. On this day the President opens the White House for children to come in the back garden to play «egg-rolling» [Easter?]. On Christmas and Mother's Day mothers and children give gifts to each other. Every Sunday fathers and mothers take their children to worship in church and then in the afternoon go to the movies and eat candy. Their pleasure is boundless.

The Americans' method of bringing up children combines the three kinds of training [moral, intellectual, and physical] and also self-reliance and independence. When you see children selling newspapers on the street, it is not necessarily because their families are poor. There

10. Margaret Sanger, the pioneering American advocate of birth control, was invited to China in the 1920s, where Hu Shi acted as interpreter for her.

are also children who carry things for people, or deliver telegrams, or raise chickens at home. These activities are to develop their spirit of independence. As for their intellectual side, aside from reading, they are often taken by parents to visit museums or circuses so that they can broaden their knowledge by learning more names of animals and plants.

Attention is also paid to their physical side. Things like driving, horseback riding, baseball, and swimming, which Chinese parents consider dangerous and forbid their children to learn, American mothers and fathers teach their children to do. If a child invents a new toy, various companies will reward him and manufacture it for sale. Even when children bump their heads or cut their hands climbing trees or sledding or such, parents do not urge them to stop. Once in late winter when I was visiting a Western friend, his three-year-old son was standing next to the fireplace playing with fire, and my Western friend seemed to take no notice. Then the boy stuck his hand into the fireplace and was burned and cried. I asked the father why he had not stopped the boy earlier, and he said it was not good to stop him, that he should experience the pain himself and then he would not do it anymore. When a three-year-old boy with his childish understanding is taught by his father this way, it can be imagined what kind of a man he will become.

TRAIN CONVERSATION

Once I had a conversation with an American on a train. I said, "I have been in America for two years and am not too fond of your country." The other looked severe and asked why. "The prosperity of your country is acquired with money. There is nothing in the world that cannot be bought with money. My nation suffers particularly from poverty, so it is all right to call your nation rich. But it cannot be said that your country is totally civilized." At that moment the attention of all the whites in the car was attracted by a person of the yellow race making such a provocative remark. The man then asked me what I admired in his country. I said, "In my view there is only one thing." "Is it the economy? Municipal government? Communications? Industry?" "No, no," I said. "What I most respect are your nation's university professors, who are able to devote their whole lives to scholarship when their salaries are the lowest of any occupation. This is in fact the foundation on which your country stands and the source of its power and prosperity." As soon as the words were out, he indicated his agreement and said nothing more.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

America has a great many universities, large, medium, and small in size. Each state has at least one. They are most admirable educational institutions. Students with motivation and ability are admitted regardless of race, age, or sex. They may be as old as sixty or as young as fifteen. They are white, black, red, and yellow—these universities may be said to be not for one nation but for the whole world. All students are treated the same without distinction. The campus gates are open all day, permitting anyone to come in and listen. America's true republican spirit can be seen in its universities. The ones on the East Coast are the best, and what I have just said applies mostly to those in the northeast. The universities in the west not only are of low caliber but also discriminate against foreigners; except for Chinese, few non-Americans are admitted.