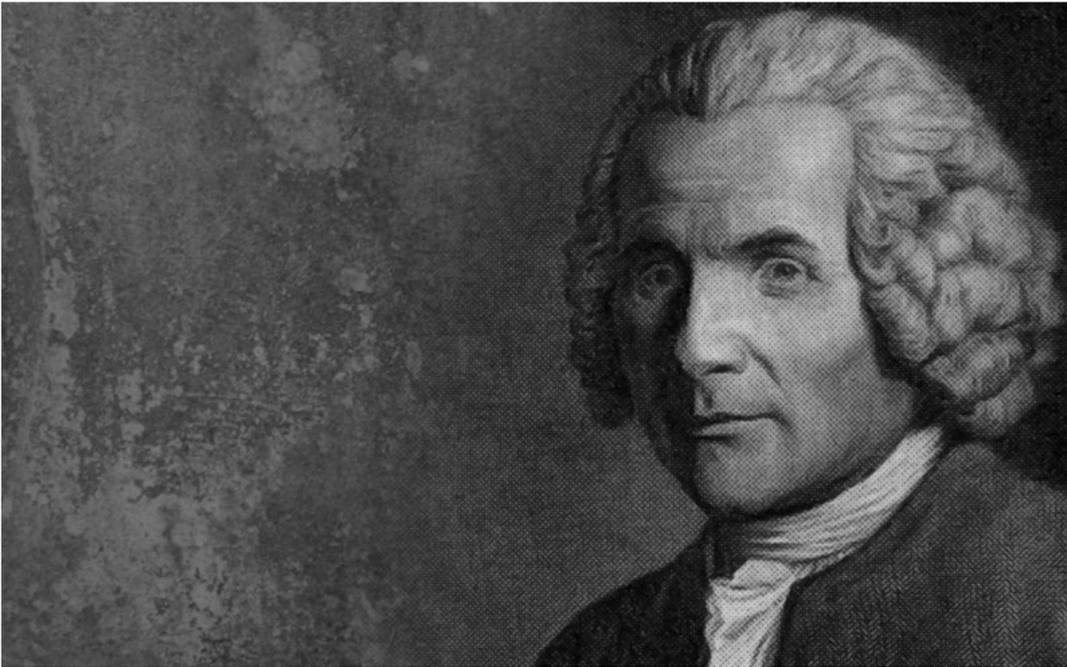


18th century philosopher's thoughts on Chinese people stir debate



Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Genevan philosopher, writer, and composer. (Source: Wikipedia)



By Andrew Jones
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A description of Chinese people purportedly made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau has sparked debate online in China.

A post widely shared last week on Sina Weibo, a Chinese Twitter-like service, containing the philosopher's description of Chinese people is believed by some to have captured their characteristics - despite the fact that the sage's words are over 200 years old.

Genevan philosopher **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712 - 1778), celebrated for his contributions to modern political, sociological and educational thought, apparently made the short critique of the Chinese in the 18th century.

According to the text below the portrait, Rousseau said, roughly translated: "The Chinese are excellent people, but happy being enslaved. They say a lot, but do not illustrate the problem. They are full of knowledge yet cowardly, without even the courage to sigh. They are polite, but don't know what humanity is."

Rough generalization or accurate depiction?

The post, which was re-posted over twenty thousand times and attracted over four thousand comments, garnered widespread interest among China's online community. While many dismiss the seemingly harsh words as a rough generalization, others believe that Rousseau truly understood the Chinese people.

Between the dismissive and supporting comments, some netizens said that although the words are partly true, the Chinese people are 'reforming' all the time, and discussed the influence of Confucian culture on China, which is considered to promote submission in sons to fathers, wives to husbands and, ultimately, subjects to ruling classes.

Related to this, some claimed that Rousseau's apparent words simply relate to the Confucian teaching the '**Doctrine of the Mean**' (zhōng yōng), which states that everything has two sides, and that a balance between these binaries is desirable.

The debate also included a book titled 'Chinese Characteristics' by **Arthur Henderson Smith**, written in 1894 and popular among foreigners in China until after the First World War, with some feeling that both the writer and philosopher grasped the 'internal contradiction' of the Chinese character.

No humanity?

The clause claiming that the Chinese have no idea of humanity in particular drew attention. According to the Chinese text, Rousseau writes that the Chinese don't know what '人性' (Rénxing) is, which translates to 'humanity'. Drawing from recent events, commentators offered supporting evidence for Rousseau's indictment.



The Weibo post, above, states that Rousseau described the Chinese as having no understanding of humanity. (Source: Sina Weibo)

Incidents presented by netizens as evidence backing Rousseau's view included the recent case of **Xiao Yue Yue**, a badly-injured toddler ignored in the street, and the soul-searching this prompted. The Cultural Revolution and the detentions of the blind rights lawyer **Chen Guangcheng** and the wife of **Liu Xiaobo** were also cited.

The unfairness of the university entrance examinations system and hospitals' 'no money, no treatment' policies were also mentioned, as was the fact that medal-winning national team athletes must first thank the country before thanking their parents.

Debates on characteristics common

Debates on Chinese characteristics are common in China. A book titled 'Ugly Chinese' by a Taiwanese writer **Bo Yang**, first published in 1992, also incited controversy years later, despite being banned until 2008 in the People's Republic of China. In the book it is claimed that the Chinese people are predisposed to being enslaved due to thousands of years of feudal rule. On the perceived duality of the Chinese people, Bo claims the Chinese are experts in internal strife, as Chinese history itself is a long history of internal strife.