



CONFRONTATION AND COOPERATION

1000 YEARS OF POLISH–GERMAN–RUSSIAN RELATIONS

VOL. I(IV)/2018: 11–15

DOI: 10.2478/conc-2018-0002

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The Phenomenon of Chinese Culture

Key words: Silk Road, Chinese culture, Confucian humanism, Chinese society

Abstract

The aim of the presentation is to **Define the scope of Chinese Culture** 正確的說明中國文化 and to introduce Chinese civilization, history, Chinese religions, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (in general but also specific meaning), the concept of Chinese archeology, *Beijing man* – 北京人, including discoveries like: china-ware, powder, silk 生絲, (Kung-fu, *zhongguogongfu* 中國功夫, Tai-chi-chuien, *taijichuen* 太極拳, and famous Chinese medicine, *zhongyiao* 中藥. Chinese Anthropological philosophy, Confucian ethic – 孔夫子的倫理. Silk road which linked Rome 羅馬 to Xian – 西安. The idea of harmony 和諧: joy of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism 佛家, 道家, 孔教 is included in Christianity. Taking into account Confucian humanism and traditional Chinese society 傳統的社會... Summing up everything is embraced by the definition of Chinese culture 中國文化.

The Chinese culture, apart from other ancient cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia or India, is one of the world's oldest civilisations, as it has endured basically in a continuous way, greatly transforming since the beginnings of its existence, yet preserving many features directly reaching back to earlier, or even the earliest periods. „Unfortunately, we are unable to exactly specify the time when it happened: it might have been around 1000 and 500 years before Christ”¹. The continuum of historical evolution is one of the essential features of Chinese historical process with its unique character. No

other civilisation has ever been the factor holding the society together for so many centuries. The civilisation that originated in China beamed to the whole Far East. The way of life, taught by sages, became the nation's strength. This pure culture of the first centuries became a basis for a perfect union. The greatest China is the oldest China. Its unity flourishes under the influence of civilizational order which is basically unchangeable².

Chinese archaeology remains under the influence of suggestions implied in documents which do not allow to reproduce minor historical events, to describe material aspects of Chinese civilisation more or less accurately. We do not know any details concerning wars and political intrigues, administrative habits, economic prac-

¹ J. Danecki, *Jedwabny Szlak*, Warsaw, 1996, p. 16. I invite all, who are interested, to read this interesting and well-documented book about the history of silk, that is the history of China. W. Rodziński, *Historia Chin*, 2nd ed., Wrocław, 1992, p. 11.

² M. Granet, *Cywilizacja Chińska*, Warsaw, translation and Sinological elaboration M.J. Kunstler, p. 13.

tices, ways of dressing, but we have the abundance of valuable testimonies referring to various attitudes, both in the sphere of feelings and theories that sustained in different environments in China about outfit, wealth, administrative arts, politics or war. We have mainly the information about those attitudes, that were patronised by Confucian orthodoxy, at our disposal.

Archaeological research of the beginnings of ancient Chinese civilisation point to the basin of the Yellow River, *Huang Ho* 黄河 – as the main cradle of Chinese civilisation, and show evidence of human inhabitancy from the earliest times. Undoubtedly, the greatest discovery of archaeological finds from 1927 was that of the first remains of Peking Man (*Sinathropus Pekinensis* or *Homo erectus Pekinensis*³, 北京人), whose beginnings reach the early or middle Pleistocene, i.e. from 500 000 to 400 000 years B.C. *Homo Pekinensis*, however, was a representative of the *Hominidae*⁴ family.

The Chinese civilisation arose on the intersection of very important old routes, crossing the Eastern surfaces of the Asia continent, and it undoubtedly created one of the most interesting and richest cultures of the world. It is over 5000 years old⁵. The peoples living in the middle course of the Yellow River were civilisationally ahead of neighbouring tribes, that were still living in Palaeolithic and Microlithic culture, and entered into the Neolithic age at the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C. The culture that developed there was not free from the influence of foreign civilisations, including aggressive nomadic tribes. The following process of partly giving in to, but also eagerly absorbing, foreign cultures and ideas had an influence on keeping the civilizational advantage. It was kept over the centuries and was the reason for Sinocentrism which, for a long period of time, allowed the Chinese to believe that everything that existed beyond their civilization was a 'barbarian' province of the world. It is worth noticing that, from the very beginning, the Chinese called their country a *zhongguo* 中國⁶ – the Middle Kingdom, the one in the centre of the world, remaining unshakably certain that they rule the central part of the world. What is interesting, that name has never been changed. During that long period of uninterrupted development, the Chinese not only invented gunpowder, porcelain, silk, but they

also developed literature, philosophy, painting, carving, martial arts (Kung-fu, *zhongguogongfu* 中國功夫⁷, Tai-chi-chuien, *taijichuen* 太極拳,) and famous Chinese medicine, a *zhongyiao* 中藥, including acupuncture that until the present day has a prominent place in medicine, not only in China or Asia but also in the USA and Europe. The Chinese medicine, 中國茶⁸, comparable to some degree to folk medicine, originates from Taoist philosophy and identifies with it.

The Chinese undoubtedly have many reasons to be proud of their cultural achievements. One of them may be the fact that they built the Great Wall of China which is one of the greatest tourist attractions of modern China. The Great Wall of China⁹, 長城 – is the symbol of the Middle Kingdom. The beginnings of the Wall – one of the Seven Wonders of the World, reach the 7th century B.C., the time when the United Empire did not even exist yet. The Great Wall of China owes its current appearance to the emperors of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The Chinese call it the Wall of Ten Thousand *li* (it is an old Chinese unit of length, being an equivalent of ca. 0,5 km). It is presently thought that its length is over 6000 km. Even though the Great

⁷ The original name *wa wu shu* – 武術 (one of the well-known schools of martial arts). Nowadays, it is commonly said *kung – fu* 功夫 which also has many varieties, e.g. one of them, the soft *kung – fu*, is a currently popular in Poland *tai-chi-chuen* – 太極拳, based also on the elements of Taoist philosophy.

⁸ The Chinese *materia medica* consists of herbs, roots, twigs, leaves, flowers, seeds, grass and fruit. V. Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West, The true story of the man who first brought the message of Christianity to the fabled Cathay*, Dutton, New York 1955, p. 96.

⁹ According to the traditional Chinese historiography deriving from Confucius' teachings, the founder of the empire was the Yellow Emperor *Huangdi* 皇帝 – the first of the mythical *Five Emperors*. The Wall is about 90 km to the north of Beijing. See also, B. Kozakiewicz, *Wielki Mur Chiński*, in: *Królowa Apostołów – Miejsca Święte*, KA, Warsaw, pp. 27–28. Some of the following fragments come from that article. The Great Wall of China 長城 owes its current appearance to the emperors of the Ming dynasty 明 (1368–1644), who, when taking reign after the victory over the Mongolian Yuan dynasty, wanted to reinforce the defence lines on the north of the country. Depending on the profile of the terrain to which the Wall is adjusted, it is from 3 to 10 m high. Its thickness starts from 7 m at the base, and narrows to 4–6 m at the top (six horse soldiers or ten foot soldiers in attack formation had to fit in there). Every several kilometres (up to maximum 17,5) there were military towers, where military troops, being self-sufficient units, resided. It is not visible from the Moon, contrary to what is being said or written.

³ W. Rodziński, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ M. Chang, *A historical sketch of Christianity in China*, Taipei, 1985, p. 1.

⁶ From *zhong* 中 – middle, *guo* 國 – nation.

Wall of China did not save the empire from defeat, it was necessary to the Chinese themselves. It held a nation, that despised everything that was foreign and external, in its own country. It contributed to creating a strong feeling of national unity. *The Great Wall of China*, symbolising the greatness and power of China, became a sign of separation and isolation from other countries. It became a picture of Chinese mentality, fear, and defence, self-sufficiency, but at the same time, their own insecurity. The symbol of power that nevertheless did not save the Middle Kingdom from invaders. For the Chinese, it remained the symbol of the empire's greatness, sustainability, and invulnerability. And for the rest of the world, it is a unique attraction, because, as the Chinese saying goes: 'Only he saw China who climbed the Great Wall...'.¹⁰

Religion has a very important, if not the most important, place in all cultures of the world. It is similar in Chinese culture. The *Tetralogy* called the *Chinese Bible* does not include the history of the creation of the world nor any mention of heaven, purgatory or hell. There is hell in Buddhism, but Buddhism is not originally a Chinese religion.

Chinese philosophy is a philosophy of nature. It is a product of reflective thinking about life and nature – about man who is a part of it. According to this philosophy man is a part of the universe (cosmos). Rightfully noted by M.J. Kunstler: „In China, man has never been a measure of all things, he was always just a particle of all things”¹⁰.

Religion is interconnected with life, and philosophy is in the heart of every religion. Chinese philosophy is essentially anthropological. Confucian ethics is the foundation of Chinese civilization. Its ideas have never been the object of worship, and Confucius' teaching could not be considered as a form of religious ideology although it later became a form of state ideology, which prepared a fertile ground for the distant in time development of communist ideology in China in the twentieth century. This ideology has become the cause of political disintegration, destruction of culture with the greatest of all bestialities that the so-called „Cultural Revolution” brought in 1966. The „Revolutionary Rebels” inspired by slogans calling for destruction of the Traces of the Four / culture, customs, tradition, views/ caused unpredictable, enormous damage on cultural monuments.

Another significant idea Taoism can be regarded as a philosophy of opposition to injustice, but the solution it sees in the withdrawal of society and contemplation of nature. The purpose of life should be to achieve harmonious compliance with *Tao*. Its contribution resulting from the attitude to nature is a powerful influence on the development of Chinese culture, especially poetry and painting. Taoist ideas have found their most beautiful embodiment there.

We must also point out the great influence of Buddhism, which reached China already in the first century, on the transformation of self-developing then Chinese culture. It influenced all the spheres of life resulting in profound transformations which have been reflected in the emerging art, thought and way of life. An interesting example of the appearing changes may be that in China, for the first time in history, the country that has so far supported the model of a large family, with a large number of male descendants who could sustain the continuity of ancestral sacrifices /which was a condition of existence after death/ the ideal of religious celibacy emerged, quite contrary to the ideals of Confucianism. There appeared monks, female and male monasteries and priests who worshiped in temples.

Chinese understanding is done through symbols and images¹¹ rather than through logical arguments¹² as in the Western world. So we can generally say that the man of the East speaks what he sees, and the man of the West speaks what he thinks. Therefore, it is not easy to the people of the East to express the thought of Aristotle or St. Thomas Aquinas. It is remarkable that children learning the rules of Chinese calligraphy, which has been known in China for millennia and which is close to painting and graphics, learn the perception of the world in images. In a word, they learn to think about philosophical origins. Despite the growing dominance of American culture, this way of thinking by the Chinese is also present today.

¹¹ Hence the Chinese pictorial writing.

¹² M. Ko, *Ways to Christian Identity in China Today*, in: *European Ecumenical China Communication*, No 5, *Papers and Materials of the Third European Catholic China Colloquium The Catholic Church in China: Message, Response, and Commitment*, Krynica Morska, Poland, 15–18 September 1999, China Zentrum, Sankt Augustin 2003, p. 116.

¹⁰ M.J. Kunstler, *Sztuka Chin*, Warsaw, 1991.

Silk Road

„The earliest contacts between the East and the West were one of the puzzles of human history ... colonial expansion of Europeans has long attracted interest in the history of other regions of the world”¹³. Not until the nineteenth century did European culture researchers begin to pay attention to other, little-known to the science, regions of the world.

Despite the damage, the *Chinese Wall* has survived to this day, while the *Silk Road* has disappeared from the horizon. In the historical city of Xian, which I was visiting and where the *Silk Road* started, I felt the heritage and prophecy had met. While the road does not exist physically, it exists in the desire for the future, in search of harmony, reconciliation, and unity of China, of both the Chinese society and the Church.

The dynamic experience of communion of cultures, sharing and engagement can be combined in a *silk thread* building the *Silk Road* again on a platform created by people of good will in the east and west.

For us, the Christians, the symbol of the *Silk Road* can become a symbol of life in harmony, beauty, unity, and joy. And the new ways of evangelization, inculturation in China should find their specificity in the *Silk Road*, on the winding roads, on small steps in the hills, in humility, in deep implantation in the ground so often trampled, a delicate but strong as silk, narrow but far-reaching path.

It is also a *silk thread* way for the Western culture that is in the period of intense transformations, a meeting with sophisticated, rich culture of China with extraordinary sensitivity to beauty, although subject to other aesthetic criteria, the one that offers other permanent values, in contact with which we can not only enrich the scale of our experience but also grasp the relativity of our certainties. Understand and appreciate the difference.

„China, like the West, is looking for happiness, but their methods are fundamentally different. In general, we (the Chinese) try to limit our wishes while the Westerners are busy expanding the means to satisfy their desires, „writes J.C.H. Wu in his book *About joy*”.

The Pope Benedict XVI warns against another threat to the West by writing: „and the danger of falling into dehumanization is never simply dismissed: as is evident in the panorama of present history! The dan-

ger of the Western world – to limit it only to this – is that man, precisely because of the acknowledgment of the greatness of his knowledge and power, surrenders when faced to the question of truth. At the same time, it means that intellect ultimately succumbs to the pressure of interests and exploits of utility, forced to recognize it as a definitive criterion”¹⁴.

Easterners are increasingly discovering Christian culture of the West and Westerners are fascinated by the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Far East. When we meet East and West face to face, in view of *psyche and soma* fundamental harmony it is hard to disagree with Henri Bergson saying: „What we need is a new reserve of potential energy – moral energy this time”¹⁵. How can the distant Orient enrich us and how can we enrich it? „...the joy of Confucius springs from the love of science, harmony in human relations and realization of humanity and humanism. Taoist joy (...) is based on the realization through losing oneself. Joy in Buddhism can be found through the insight into one's own true nature, that is, by attaining enlightenment, by a pleasant surprise of self-discovery, by harmonization of this world with “another world”.

THE IDEA OF HARMONY IS KEY TO THESE THREE TYPES OF JOY. Where there is harmony, there is joy (...). Christian joy encompasses all three types of joy”¹⁶.

In its highest ideals, the Confucian vision embraces humanity in unity: „the whole world” as „one family, with China as an element of this family” Divisions and barriers, walls and boundaries are broken.

There is „joy in the harmony of the individual with the cosmos” in a Confucian man and in Taoist – a *Tao* man „the unity of all creation”.

My desire is that the 21st century be a time of searching for what connects us, finding joy and power in unity. „Remember that water must fill the cruses before it can be transformed into wine”¹⁷.

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¹⁵ J.C.H. Wu, *About joy...*, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹⁷ J.C.H. Wu, *About joy...*, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

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