

THE INTERPLAY OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE CHINESE CULTURE

互相作用中國哲學宗教和文化

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to present the interplay between philosophy, religion and culture in China, to give a clear picture of philosophical, religious and cultural aspects of Chinese culture. What do we understand by Chinese culture? What is the role of Religion and Philosophy in Chinese Culture? The goal of this presentation is to present a deeper account of the philosophical, cultural and traditional differences and similarities between the Chinese and the Western World. What is the meaning of Chinese philosophical ideas? How do we understand and interpret Chinese thought? How do we build a bridge between East and West focused on cultural, philosophical and religious aspects? What has the West done for China and what has China done for West? Are we partners in inter-religious, cultural and philosophical dialogue?

I. Sources of the Chinese Culture

中國文化的資料

Chinese culture, with the exception of the ancient cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia and India, belongs to the oldest of world cultures since it has survived, uninterrupted, from its beginnings. It has changed significantly through the ages but has retained many features from the early or even the earliest period of its history (Chang 1990, pp. 1-18). „Unfortunately, its genesis cannot be determined exactly – it could be between 1000 and 500 years before Christ” (Danecki 1986, p. 16).

The continuum of historic evolution is one of the main features of the unique Chinese historic process. No other civilization has unified a nation for so many ages. Its cultural roots arose in China and radiated to the Far East. This ‘pure culture’ of the first period formed the basis of a perfect

bond. The oldest China was the largest in terms of physical size. Its unity flourished under a civilized order which was generally immutable (Granet 1973, p. 13).

Chinese archeology is supported by hints in written documents which are not in themselves sufficient to reconstruct minor historic events, but which, more or less accurately describe central aspects of Chinese civilization. Written materials are sources for Chinese civilization. As Patricia Buckley Ebrey wrote: „For a civilization such as China’s, which has left an enormous quantity of written records, the most obvious first step is to read what Chinese have written” (Ebrey 1981, p. 30). Westerners have analyzed what the Chinese have said and done but not what the Chinese have written. Written documents are fundamental to understanding Chinese thought. Without knowing the meaning of the Chinese written sources there can be no understanding of the Chinese in general and in particular. We know none of the details of wars and political intrigues, administrative customs, economic practices or dress codes but there is plenty of valuable evidence regarding different attitudes both in the emotional sphere and in the theories that impacted on dress code, wealth, administrative art, politics and war in different Chinese societies. We have, at our disposal, chiefly information about the attitudes existing under the patronage of Confucian orthodoxy.

Archeological research into the history of the emerging ancient Chinese civilization indicates the area of the Yellow River basin *Huang Ho* 黄河 as the main cradle of Chinese civilization and shows traces of human habitation from ancient times. Undoubtedly, the biggest archeological discoveries in 1927 tell us about the remains of Peking man (*Sinathropus Pekinensis* or *Homo erectus Pekinensis*) 北京人 (Rodziński 1992, p. 11), originating from the early or mid Pleistocene period, i.e. from 500 to 400 thousand years B.C. *Homo Pekinensis* represented however the family of *Hominidae* (Rodziński 1992, p. 12).

A new discovery described in Polish newspapers¹ on the 24th of January 2007 of an almost complete human skull from 80-100 thousand years BC was made on the 17th of Dec 2007 next to Xuchang, in Henan province. „It has been the most important discovery in China since the discovery of a Peking man (*Homo erectus*) in the Zhoukoudian cave.”²

The Chinese civilization that emerged at the intersection of very important, ancient routes through the Eastern stretches of the Asian continent,

¹ See *Rzeczpospolita* (The National Polish Newspaper), 24. 01. 2008, *Pracznik za Wielkim Murem*, p. 21.

² Ibid. The position of researchers from the Institut of Paleontology and Paleoantropology in Pekin.

undoubtedly created one of the most interesting and richest cultures in the world. It is already over 5 thousand years old. The people who settled in the middle reaches of the Yellow River were more advanced than the surrounding tribes living in Paleolithic and Mesolithic cultures, and entered the Neolithic Age at the beginning of III millennium B.C. The culture that developed there was not free of influence from other civilizations, including aggressive nomad tribes. The process of partial succumbing to but also eager absorption of other cultures and ideas helped to maintain its cultural advantage. This was maintained throughout the centuries and was the cause of the Sino-centrism which allowed the Chinese people to believe that everything existing outside their civilization was part of the „barbarian” province of the world. It is worth noticing that from the very beginning Chinese people called their country *zhongguo* 中國³ the Middle Kingdom 中國, that is, the one in the middle of the world and they were sure they ruled the central part of the world. It is interesting that the name has never been changed. Throughout this long period of continual development the Chinese not only invented gunpowder, porcelain and silk⁴ but also developed literature, philosophy, arts, sculpture, martial arts (Kung-fu, *zhongguogong-fu* 中國功夫⁵, Tai-chi-chuien, *taijichuen* 太極拳,) and the famous Chinese medicine *zhongyiao*, including acupuncture, which has an important place in medicine not only in China and Asia but also in the USA and Europe to this day. Chinese medicine 中國茶⁶ comparable to a certain degree with folk medicine has its genesis in Taoist philosophy and is considered to be equivalent to it.

³ From *zhong* 中 – centre, *guo* 國 – state. In fact an Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (Li Matou 利瑪竇) presented the first Chinese geographic map of the world 中國地圖. He was the one who showed the Chinese where their country is located and that although it is called the Middle Kingdom it is not in the middle of the world nor at its center, which the Chinese strongly believed. Ricci did it on purpose to show the magnitude and power of China expecting that the Emperor would in return accept religious freedom and allow the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴ „Silk is as old as chinese culture”. Silk was extremely important in art, i.e. paintings were made on it already during the Chou dynasty. See Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler, *Sztuka Chin*, Warszawa: Dialog 1991, p. 66.

⁵ The original name was *wu shu* – 武術 (one of best known schools of martial arts techniques). Currently it is commonly called *kung – fu* 功夫 which also has many versions, for example, one is a gentle *kung – fu* which is now very popular in Poland *tai-chi-chuen* – 太極拳, based on elements of Taoist philosophy.

⁶ Chinese *materia medica* includes herbs, roots, barks, branches, leaves, flowers, seeds, grass and fruit. See Vincent Cronin, *The Wise Man from the West, The true story of the man who first brought the message of Christianity to fabled Cathay*, New York: Dutton, 1955, p. 96.

The Chinese have undoubtedly many reasons to be proud of their cultural achievements. One of these achievements is the construction of the Great Wall of China, the biggest tourist attraction of modern China. The Great Wall of China 長城⁷, 長城 is a symbol of the Middle Kingdom. The history of the Wall, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, began in the VII century B.C when the united empire did not yet exist. It owes its present shape to the Emperors of the Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644). The Chinese call it The Wall of Ten Thousand li (an old Chinese measure of length, equals 0.5 km). Today it is considered to be over 6000 km in length. However, The Great Wall of China did not save the empire from military defeats, though it was needed by the Chinese themselves. It ‘contained’ the nation and everything outside was strange and contemptible. It created a strong feeling of national unity. The Great Wall of China, a symbol of the grandeur and power of China was also a sign of separation and isolation from other countries, defining the Chinese mentality of fear and defense, self-sufficiency, and at the same time uncertainty. It was a symbol of power that did not save the Middle Kingdom from invaders. To the Chinese it is a symbol of a great empire, its stability and indestructibility. To the rest of the world it is an enormous attraction, as the Chinese saying goes „Only the one who has climbed The Great Wall has seen China...”

II. The Role of Religion and Philosophy in Chinese Culture

在中國文化中哲學宗教文化的角色

Religion has a very important, if not the most important role in all the cultures of the world. This is also the case in Chinese culture. The Confucian teaching contains: *Wūjīng* 五經 – *The Five Classics*; *Shījīng* 詩經 – *The Book of Songs*; *Shūjīng* 書經 – *The Book of Documents, Classics of History*; *Yījīng* 易經 – *The Book of Changes „I Ching”*; *Lǐjì* 禮記 – *The Book of Rites*; *Chūnqiū* 春秋 – *The Spring and Autumn Annuals*. The Four Books: *Sìshū* – 四書, *Dàxué* – 大學 *The Great Learning*, *Zhōngyōng* – 中庸 *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Lúnyǔ* 論語 – *The Analects of Confucius* and *Mèngzǐ* 孟子 (*Mencius*). These texts, comprising the ‘Bible’ of the Chinese, do not

⁷ According to traditional Chinese historiography deriving from Confucian teachings the founder of the Empire was the Yellow Emperor *Huangdi* 皇帝 – the first of *five mythic Emperors*. The wall is 90 km North of Pekin. See also B. Kozakiewicz, *Wielki Mur Chiński*, in *Królowa Apostolów – Miejsca Święte*, Warszawa: KA 2002, pp. 27-28. Some excerpts below are from the same article. Emperors of Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644) shaped the Great Chinese Wall 長城.

include the history of the creation of the world, nor any mention of heaven, purgatory or hell. The concept of hell exists in Buddhism but it does not have its origins in Chinese religion. Chinese philosophy is a philosophy of nature. It is the result of contemplative thinking about life and nature – and about the human being who is a part of nature. According to this philosophy the human being is a part of the universe (cosmos). As M. J. Künstler aptly stated: „In China the human being has never been a measure of the Universe, but always a part of it.” (M. J. Künstler, *Sztuka Chin*, Warszawa 1991).

Chinese philosophy is anthropological in principle. What is Chinese philosophy? The Chinese scholars don't say much about the definition of Chinese philosophy. Simply, Chinese philosophy contains „the critical-historical spirit of ancient Chinese thought” including Confucianism and Taoism. If we want to understand the general idea, first, let's look at the Chinese characters: *zhe* 哲 and *xue* 學. *Zhe* 哲 means „wisdom” and „knowledge” 學 (or the capacity to obtain knowledge). This orientation is given by the ancient Chinese thinkers by means of ethical questions about human life. From the beginning of Chinese civilization an ancient Chinese saying has been known: *life is good*, 生活是好的. Another meaning of *xue is* 學 – learning. Now the two Chinese characters: *zhe* 哲 and *xue* 學 mean „learning to become a wise and knowledgeable person”. So, learning, loving, and practicing together to obtain experience. Chinese philosophy is the love of wisdom which „reflects the Confucian concern with practice or application of learning” (Cua 2003, p. 5). In the Greek sense *philosophia* is interpreted as *phronesis*⁸ φρόνησις (practical wisdom) and *sophia*⁹ σοφία (philosophical wisdom). Both, the Chinese and Greek meanings are close to each other. As John Passmore said: „The Greek word *Sophia* is ordinarily translated into English as ‘wisdom’, and the compound *philosophia*,

⁸ According to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: „*Phronesis* is the capability to consider the mode of action in order to deliver change, especially to enhance the quality of life. Aristotle says that *phronesis* is not simply a skill, however, as it involves more than simply the ability to decide how to achieve a certain end”. See more: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, dual text, with translation by H. Rackham Harvard University Press 1934. See online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phronesis> [accessed 27 April 2009]. „Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found. The reason is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a).

⁹ *Sophia* – „is the ability to think well about the nature of the world, to discern why the world is the way it is (this is sometimes equated with science). *Sophia* involves deliberation concerning universal truths. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phronesis> [accessed 27 April 2009].

from which ‘philosophy’ derives, is translated as ‘the love of wisdom’. But Sophia had a much wider range of application than the modern English ‘wisdom’. Wherever intelligence can be exercised – in practical affairs, in the mechanical arts, in business – there is room for *Sophia*”. Chinese thought is different from the Greek way of thinking and not so easily compatible with Western philosophy. As an example: *esse* is very difficult to translate into Chinese, Japanese or even into Korean. Why? In Oriental civilization, specially in Chinese, Japanese and Korean culture, there was no room to think in an abstract way.

Confucian ethics *rujialunli* 儒家倫理 form the basis of Chinese civilization *wenhua* 文化. Confucianism *rujiasixiang* 儒家思想 as a moral philosophy could be summarized as a philosophy of *ideal personhood* (Liu 2006, p. 19) and of human societies (the sages, superior people, petty people, tyrants and crooks). According to Confucius and his followers the most important thing is to maintain good family relations, „then all societal problems, large and small, would dissolve”. In fact, it is a very optimistic theory based on social philosophy. How to reconstruct the social order? In the Confucian conception the project begins always from the ruling class. This is why, for Confucius the ideal ruler is someone who has acquired wisdom (who has perfect virtue – *de* 德). No wonder, that a common saying expressing the Confucian political view states „internally a sage; externally a king”). The political philosophy of Confucius is divided into three principles: (1) manifest a clear character, (2) show concern for people, and (3) aim for the highest good (Liu 2006, p. 17). In this sense morality and politics are inseparable. One of the most important tasks of a man is self-improvement in order to become a superior person, a man of virtue, of humanity, even „for as short a time as that of one meal”.

Due to the fact that this ethical ideology has never been a source of worship, it cannot be regarded as a form of religious ideology. It did, however, contribute to the later development of the communist ideology of China in the XX century. The so-called „Cultural revolution” in 1966 was an ideology that was the cause of political disintegration, the destruction of culture and the greatest possible act of bestiality. It caused inestimable, gigantic harm to the monuments of culture, spurred on by calls on the part of the „Revolutionary Rebellion” to destroy the Four Traces (culture, customs, tradition, views). This way of accepting Communism, „although no less costly than the building of The Great Wall” (Olszewski 2003, p. 6) was, according to some researchers of Chinese history, justified.

Another important current, Taoism 道教, can be treated as a philosophy of opposition to injustice that sees the solution in a withdrawal from society

and in the contemplation of nature. The aim of life should be the acquisition of harmony with *Dao* 道. One benefit of Taoism, deriving from its attitude towards nature, was a strong influence on the development of Chinese culture and especially poetry and painting. The ideas of Taoism were most beautifully incorporated in these areas.

In the 1st century, Buddhism 佛教 reached China and it had an enormous influence on the shaping of Chinese culture which by then was developing independently. It influenced all aspects of life and caused great changes, reflected in the arts, thinking, and way of life. An interesting example of these changes can be seen in the fact that for the first time in the history of China the ideal of monastic celibacy appeared, totally in conflict with Confucian ideals. Until then, families usually had many children, many sons who could guarantee the continual making of offerings to the ancestors which was a condition of life after death. Monasteries appeared for both men and women, as well as priests who held prayers in temples.

Chinese thinking is conveyed through symbols and pictures¹⁰ rather than through logical arguments (Ko 2003, p. 116) as in Western culture. Metaphysics seems to be the domain of the Western mind. The Chinese are characterized by a specific philosophy of nature and naturalistic thinking. It can be generally stated that a person of the East says what he sees and a person of the West says what he thinks. Therefore it is not easy to explain Aristotle or Saint Thomas Aquinas to people of the East. What is interesting is that children who learn Chinese calligraphy – an art known in China for thousands of years, which is close to painting and drawing – learn to see the world through pictures. In one word they learn to think about philosophic provenience. Despite the increasing domination of American culture the Chinese way of thinking still prevails.

¹⁰ This is the Chinese pictorial writing. The Chinese language (Mandarin) is not a phonetic language but an ideographic and melodic one with a tonal scale (4,5 tones). The meaning depends on the intonation of a syllable. From 1958 *pinyin* 拼音 is used in the transcription system. See more: M. Künstler, *Jezyki chińskie*, Warszawa: Dialog 2000.

III. The silk route¹¹ 絲路 – a cultural and commercial bridge between East and West

„The earliest contacts between the East and West have always been one of the riddles of human history...the colonial expansion of the Europeans for a long time aroused interest in the history of other regions of the world” (Uhlig 1966, p. 7). As late as the XIX century, European researchers of culture began to pay attention to other, less known parts of the world.

The ‘silk route’ was the name given by the outstanding German geographer and geologist Ferdinand baron von Richthofen, to an ancient line connecting the cultures of East and West. Not only did this route create trade and mutual contacts between nations but also provided good conditions for the merging of different cultures and an exchange of religious and cultural achievements. It was also a miracle of engineering technology and a big achievement for human thinking at that time.

The Great Wall of China 長城, despite some damage, has survived to this day but The Silk Route has disappeared altogether. When I visited the historic city of Xian 西安, where The Silk Route began I had a feeling that it was the meeting place of a legacy and a prophecy. Although the Silk Route does not exist physically it does exist as a hope for the future, as a search for harmony, reconciliation, the unity of China, both in society and church (Benedict XVI, 27 May 2007; and 12 Friday 2008).

The dynamic experience of sharing and being engaged in a communion of cultures, can form a silk thread that will once again rebuild the Silk Route into a bridge connecting people of good will from the East and the West. For us, Christians, the symbol of The Silk Route can become a symbol of living in harmony, beauty, unity and joy. Moreover, new ways of evangelization, shaping culture in China, should find their specifics in The Silk Route, on the curved lanes, on the small steps of mountains, in humility, taking a strong hold of the earth, trodden so many times, soft but strong like silk; a narrow lane, reaching far. It is also a lane which can be

¹¹ The name *Silk Road* was first used by „an outstanding German geographer and geologist, Ferdinand baron von Richthofen” in an introductory book about China over a hundred years ago, „in which he presented for the first time detailed information about Western China based on results of his own expeditions. From that moment on the name *Silk Road* is used by everyone involved in over a thousand year old trade contacts between The Middle Kingdom and the West”. The Silk Road was not one road but „rather a net of roads connecting the East and the west and the North and the South. It was a complex arrangement of specific relations between different towns, countries and nations; they served not only peaceful trading but also, very often, the worst forms of violence”. See more: H. Uhlig, *Jedwabny szlak*, with Polish translation J. Danecki, Warszawa: Książka 1966.

trodden in a period of intensive change for Western culture. Here, the West can encounter a rich, Chinese culture which is sophisticated, imbued with exceptional sensitivity to beauty but with different aesthetic criteria, offering other, permanent values. Thus, our experience can be enriched and we may comprehend the relativity of our certainties. It will be an opportunity to understand and value „otherness”.

J.C.H. Wu writes in his book, about joy: „China like the West looks for happiness but her methods are fundamentally different. Generally we (the Chinese) try to limit our wishes while people of the West are busy with extending the means that lead to fulfill their desires”.

Pope Benedict XVI alerts us to a different danger threatening the West when he writes: „And the danger of falling into inhumanity is never totally overcome, as is only too evident from the panorama of recent history! The danger for the western world – to speak only of this – is that today, precisely because of the greatness of his knowledge and power, man will fail to face up to the question of the truth. This would mean at the same time that reason would ultimately bow to the pressure of interests and the attraction of utility, constrained to recognize this as the ultimate criterion” (Benedict XVI, 17 January 2008).

Conclusion

The East and the West need each other. People of the East discover more and more of Western Christian culture and people of the West are fascinated by the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Far East. When the East and the West meet each other, [taking into consideration the fundamental harmony of psyche and soma] it is hard not to agree with Henri Bergson when he says: „What we need is new reserves of potential energy – this time moral energy (Wu 1987, p. 71). How can the far East enrich us and how can we enrich it? „Confucianism delights in science, the harmony of relations between people, humanity and humanism. Taoist joy (...) relies on realization through self-distraction. Jesus’ words come to mind when He says that the one who loses his life for him will save it. Joy in Buddhism can be found through looking into one’s own, real nature: that means through gaining Enlightenment, through a pleasant surprise of self-discovery, through the harmony of „this world” with „the other world”. „The idea of harmony is a key notion with respect to the three types of joy”. The joy is where the harmony is. Christian joy includes all three types of joy.

Ideally the Confucian vision includes humanity in unity: the „Whole world”... as „one family, with China as a member of this family”. It was the family, that was the unifying and sealing element of the fundamental and social unity of the Chinese nation. This idea breaks divisions and barriers, walls and borders. For Confucianism there is „joy in the harmony of the individual and the cosmos”; for the Taoist – the man of Tao is the „unity of all creation”.

For people who look for a better future the common desire is to make the XXI century a century of searching for the unity of things, for gaining joy and the power of unity. In the face of the Third Millenium it seems reasonable to return to the Chinese roots, looking for new values. An example is given to us by Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 (1552-1610) who first looked at Chinese culture in terms of everything that linked the two cultures of East and West, and which was not at odds with the teachings of the Church in those times.

The ancient Chinese word *sheng* 聖 – saint, (sainthood), consists of two components: first it is *eras* 耳 – literally the ear, listening, straining the ears, and *cheng* 呈 – to propose, to submit (to prefer) the request, to witness. That is sainthood, in accordance with the sign, one submits {one prefers} first to listening, and later on requests the presence. China needs the objectivization of its own history. Only the true objectivisation of the history of China, can serve as an element uniting Chinese culture. Two bridges are necessary. One going out from Christian European roots towards China, and a second going out from China to meet Christian Europe, and to exchange spiritual, philosophical and cultural gifts, as in ancient times on the *Silk route*.

In the cultures of the Eastern world philosophy and religion have always played, and still play, a key role. Philosophy and religion have always interpenetrated, forming a self-regulating system. Thus it can be said that we possess a tremendous wealth of wisdom and knowledge, both in the Christian religion with its philosophy of God and man, and in Chinese religions and their ancient Confucian philosophy, where the *ren* 人 man is in the centre. Another Chinese sign of the same *ren* articulation but written differently 仁 – means humanity, love, mercy. Does our mutual cognition assume relations open to cultural, religious and philosophical dialogue? What barriers should Christianity and the Chinese world overcome to make our dialogue a place of unity, mutual respect, and being always more ready for what unites than for what divides? In this place let me quote Leo Tolstoy, a Russian novelist, who said: „Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself”. Perhaps here is the key to the gate of dialogue between a Western man and an Eastern man.

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