

CHINESE THOUGHT AND THE BIRTH OF POSTMODERN CULTURE: THE WESTERN MAN'S EARLY ENCOUNTER WITH CHINA

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Abstract

The understanding of another culture leads to both respect for that culture, and a new understanding of one's own culture. Before Eastern thought became popular in the West, there were already Westerners who explored the East and brought back stories about it; scholars and missionaries who began to patiently translate Eastern writings into Western languages. These early Western explorers discovered a new world of understanding which would gradually ignite the European imagination and transform its understanding of itself. This paper wishes to chart the very earliest Western encounters with the thought of China.

Discovering the Culture of China

China was a far-away land to the West, unknown and mysterious. It was a land-source of the great merchandise that inflamed the great courts of Egypt and Rome, the producer of silk that became a sartorial favorite of the great monarchs, and a manufacturer of exquisite porcelain wares that adorned the houses of the Western nobles. The silk-road trade provided the most important signpost to discovering the supplier of these goods. Intrigued by the tales they heard from these merchants and traders, and by the subsequent threat of the conquest of Genghis Khan, European men were gradually drawn to the mysterious land called Cathay. We shall trace the important development by tracing some of the landmark encounters that led to the discovery of Eastern Philosophy and gradually fueled the interest and imagination of the West. If the Medieval Age was

marked by the Western man's (Italian) encounter with the Greek culture through the Arabs, the discovery of the Chinese and Indian civilizations was again fueled by Venetian (Italian again) travelers.

John de Plano Carpini

One of the earliest recorded accounts of the discovery of China by a Western man took place in 1245 when the Roman Pontiff sent the 65-year-old Italian Franciscan monk John de Plano Carpini on a mission to the Mongolian (Yuan) court in China to persuade the Khan to cease his attack against the Christian nations. Suffering terrible hardships on the way, Carpini, ignorant of the Chinese language, arrived in the Yuan court, where he stayed for barely three months. Upon his return, he made an astonishing report to the Pontiff in Rome. Carpini told the Pope that the Chinese had both the Old and New Testaments. He also claimed that the Chinese worshipped one god, had many saints, and love the Christians. To wit:

The men of Kytay (Cathay as China was then known) are pagan, having a special kind of writing by themselves, and (as it is reported) the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. They have also recorded in histories the lives of their forefathers, and they have hermits, and certain houses made after the manner of our churches, which in those days they greatly resorted unto. They say that they have diverse saints also, and they worship one God. They adore and reverence Christ Jesus our Lord, and believe the article of eternal life, but are not baptized. They do also honorably esteem and revere our Scriptures. They love Christians, and bestow much alms, and are a very courteous and gentle people. They have no beards, and they agree partly with the Mongols in the disposition of their countenance, there are no better artificers in the whole world. Their country is exceedingly rich, in corn, wine, gold, silk, and other commodities.¹

Subsequent encounters with China will reveal that Father Carpini made a very superficial understanding of China and the impression he gave to the Pope failed to capture the reality of the vast country. One thing was certain, the image he gave raised curiosity in the Christian corridors of power.

Jacob D'Ancona

The next important encounter with China by a Western man is a recently unearthed manuscript of a Jewish-Venetian merchant named Jacob D'Ancona who claimed to have arrived at the southern coastal metropolis of China called Zaitun, the “City of Light” in 1270. Jacob D'Ancona described China with vivid, and often dramatic prose, always rich in humanity and insights. Jacobs documented account forms great historical significance in that he discovered a great flourishing civilization with vast trade and commerce never before seen in any European center. D'Ancona described the adventures of medieval traders, and the Chinese society and manners through the eyes of European man of learning. The Jewish Italian traveler Jacob provides also an unparalleled account of life in the thriving mercantile economy of Zaitun, amidst vigorous manufacture and lavish consumption that defines a well-developed culture and civilization. The southern Chinese metropolis of Zaitun was to him, a great “City of Light”, a “City of Measureless Trade” peopled by many “Learned Men”, where there is “Law and Freedom” and with vibrant trade and commerce.²

Marco Polo

The third and the most dramatic and picturesque account of the Western man's early encounter with China however came with Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant who arrived in the Yuan (Mongolian) court in 1275. He wrote the most celebrated travelers tale entitled, *The Description of the World*, which described China's Yuan court at the height of its greatness, when it was unrivaled in its cultural attainment, splendor, sophistication, and power.

When one sets out from the city of Ciangan he goes riding three days journeys through very beautiful country where there are found many dwellings and cities and many villages of great importance and of great wealth and of great activity, where they live by trade and crafts. They are idolaters and are subject to the rule of the great Khan. They have money of notes. They have abundance of all victuals for man's body...one finds the very most noble and magnificent cities for its excellence, importance, and beauty is called Quinsai, which means to say in French the city of Heaven...for it is the greatest city which may be found in the world, where so many pleasures may be found that one fancies himself to be in paradise....Quinsai is so large that in circuit it is the common belief a hundred miles round....There are squares where they hold market, which on account of the vast multitudes which meet in them are necessarily very large and spacious. And it is placed in this way, that it has on one side a lake of fresh water which is very clear, and on the other there is an enormous river which, entering by many great and small canals which run in every part of the city, both takes away all impurities and then enters the said lake, and from that runs to the ocean. And this makes the air very wholesome....And the streets and canals are wide and great so that boats are able to travel there conveniently and carts to carry things necessary for the inhabitants.³

This travel story of Marco Polo, together with the things he brought back to Europe that includes gun-powder, used by the Chinese for festivities, (which was to be transformed into use for weapons when they returned to China several years later), the noodle (that was transformed into many pasta preparations), aside from the fabulous goods of silk, porcelain, lacquer-wares, ivory and jade carvings, and many exotic other goods. All these ignited the fertile imaginations of the Europeans that paved the way to the European adventure and colonization of the East few centuries later.

16th and 17th Centuries Religious Missions in China

The account of the early travelers and merchants enflamed the Western man's imagination and drove him to explore and colonize the East. Side by side with the military conquest were the religious missions that were instrumental in making the East known to the West. They were the ones mostly responsible for translating the Eastern manuscripts to the Western languages.

The most consistent and systematic attempt by the West to understand the Chinese culture and civilization came only in the 16th and 17th centuries. It must honestly be said that the early missionaries who were evidently more interested in the spiritual and intellectual life-world of the Chinese than either the merchants or the politicians made the painful work of getting to know China. For the missionaries, understanding a civilization was a prerequisite to conversion. They were facing a formidable work that they had not experienced in the other, still undeveloped, places like most of Southeast Asia, Africa and Arabia.

Matteo Ricci's Early Attempt at Dialogue

A Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci (1552-1611),⁴ was assigned Superior of the first Christian Mission in China. Ricci came face to face with an enormous culture before him: Confucianism, a philosophy that was synonymous with Chinese culture and mores, not to mention its being a spiritual guide. At the center of China's civil and religious life are the Confucian Rites and its philosophical concepts of Ren (Benevolence), Yi (Righteousness), Li (Rite and Propriety), Zhi (Wisdom), Xiao Ching (Filial Piety, central to Ancestor worship), Chi (spirit) and many more.⁵

Facing the European missionaries was the question of how to introduce Christianity to a well-developed culture like China. The mission was unlike the Philippines, for example, where the natives did not have yet a developed written language, nor a written cultural history, and thus no philosophy and literature, no political institution, and neither established religion nor great temples. If the mission in the Philippines was a matter of teaching the natives the Latin script, baptizing them, teaching them Christian

religion, giving them names and surnames, introducing them to the food, the culture and the finer arts of Europe - all that was not the case for the missionaries in China.

Matteo Ricci tried to approach China by showing to the Chinese that there were similarities in their way of thinking and their worship with that of Christianity. A philosophical position that points to the existence of natural theology. But Christianity came with Revelation. For what man can naturally reach by reason has to come to its fullest only in the revealed text. In effect, what Matteo Ricci wanted to do, so as to convert the Confucian Chinese, was to Confucianize Christianity.

Niccolo Longobardi Recoils

Matteo Ricci was, however succeeded by Niccolo Longobardi (1565-1655)⁶ who opposed Ricci's accommodation approach to Confucianism. Longobardi's position was that the Revelation of God was given only to those who were spiritually prepared and baptized. Thus, there could be no accommodation with the Chinese whose object of worship could not be equated with the Christian God. This resulted in one of the most exciting controversies of the Christian mission in China that lasted several centuries. But, as everyone knows, a controversy comes only with the excitement of both proponents and opponents creating great debates. Those who defended Ricci and those who defended Longobardi succeeded in animating the Western world. They both gained many followers. Those who sided with Ricci argued that there is such thing as Natural Theology found in all cultures. It was impossible for a great civilization like China not to have discovered the divine presence by the light of reason, for this was just a matter of trying to find its conceptual equivalence through a dialogical comparison with the Christian God. Those who followed Longobardi were, however, the conservatives. They taught that God had revealed Himself only to those who were baptized, and only the followers of the Christian faith could attain heaven. The great debate illumed some of the most interesting issues about Christian faith and evangelization. The debate was to echo the great divide on the question of evangelization that went all the way to the twentieth century, when Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council.

Initial Translation of Chinese Classics

The controversy caused by the early Chinese mission triggered the Western philosophers to probe into the religious controversies. They started to ask, what is the Chinese concept of truth? What is the Chinese concept of God? What is the Chinese concept of good and evil? What is the Chinese concept of human nature? What is Chinese cosmology? In short, what is the Chinese Weltanschauung? To understand the real Chinese worldview, the Western scholars had to unmask the mystery of the Chinese civilization, first by knowing the unknown language, and then by translating its great literary and philosophical heritage. The Europeans knew that the civilization and culture of China was hidden deeply in the literature and philosophy of its people, and, since they did not understand Chinese, the first task was to learn Chinese and then translate the most important works. What could be a better work to start with than the famous *She Shu*⁷ or the Four Books consisting of *Lun Yu* (The Analects of Confucius), *Meng Zi* (The Book of Mencius), *Da Xue* (The Great Learning) and *Zhong Yung* (The Doctrine of the Mean)? A partial translation of these works came to print. Other missionaries and colonizers, who could not translate, wrote their own impressions and memoirs. These Chinese documents, in spite of the many inaccuracies that came with the initial translations, animated the intellectual life-world of the 17th-and-18th-century Europe.⁸ One can easily see that there is still so much work to do in this regard, for what the early scholars found were only the Confucian teachings as interpreted by the 12th Century Confucian scholar Chu Shi, and Chu Shi; we have to be cautioned, is just one of the several interpreters of Confucianism.

Development of Western Sinophilism in the West

The newfound ideas from China prompted the flourishing of the work on and about China. Some of the earliest works written about China are: “*De Confucio ejusque doctrina tractatus*”⁹ (A Treatise on Confucius and his Doctrine) in 1623, a work that was translated into Spanish in 1676 and then into French in 1701; “*De bello Tartarico in Sinis historia*”¹⁰ in 1654; “*China monumentis qua sacris qua profanes*”¹¹ in

1667; « Tratados historicos, politicos, eticos y religiosos de la Monarchia de China »¹² in 1674; “Confucius Sinarum philosophus”¹³ in 1687, which contains a partial translation of the Four Books; and « **Description de l’Empire de la Chine** »¹⁴ in 1735.

The novelty of Chinese thought triggered some important reactions from the Western philosophical circle. Initial engagements were found in the writings of Voltaire, Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume and Goldsmith. *Description de l’Empire de la Chine* produced reactions from these political thinkers who wrote to underscore the excellence of the Chinese system of government, bureaucracy and administration, as well as the Chinese excellence in education, the civil service examination system, the tax system, the grain storage system and also the quality of the Confucian ethical system on which the Chinese civilization and culture were based. The philosophes of the 18th Century cited the Confucian Chinese Empire, sometimes extolling China to highlight the decadent situation at home.¹⁵

But there was so much more to know about China other than what the scholars had already found out about the Confucian teachings. They had not yet discovered the works of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. The political thoughts of Shang Yang and Han Fei Zi and many others that would preoccupy many Western scholars for many years to come.

It now becomes obvious that there was a great intellectual revolution happening in Europe that came side-by-side with their colonization of the East. The translations that followed the discovery of the cultures and thoughts of China shattered the Western hegemony. The Europeans were now looking at two enormously distinct civilizations, which were different from their Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman roots. If the Renaissance brought Europe back to Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian origins, thereby paving the way for the triumphalistic Modern Age, the European encounter with China and India brought about the emergence of a new intellectual, post-colonial mindset.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Raymond Beazley, *The Texts and Versions of John de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis*. (London: Cambridge University Press.1903).

² Jacob D'Ancona *The City of Light*. David Selborne Tran. (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1997).

³ Cf. A.C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, trans *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1938).

⁴ Cf. Ricci-Trigault, *Expédition chrétienne en la Chine*. (Paris: 1654).

⁵ Matteo Ricci's approach to the Chinese Mission in China was marked by what impact the Chinese civilization had on him. He found natural piety in the Chinese and he wanted to capitalize the innate piety as vehicle to Christianize the Chinese. He was of the assumption that it would be easier if he were to use the homegrown religious conception to translate the Christian ideas to the Chinese. Many of these "semi" religious ideals seem to him to be very close to Christian tenets.

⁶ Niccolo Longobardi succeeded Matteo Ricci and took a completely confrontational approach to the evangelization in China.

⁷ The Writings of Philip Couplet contains partial translations by the Jesuit Missionaries on the *She Su* or the *Four Books*, which comprises *The Analects*, *the Book of Mencius*, *The Great Learning* and *the Doctrine of the Mean*.

⁸ It was *Chu Xii* who insisted in including the three other books with the *Analects* of Confucius to give them equal importance, making their views as official interpretation of Confucius. I take such classification as arbitrary and insist, that Confucianism is not complete without the inclusion of the *Book of Xun Zi*.

⁹ Niccolo Longobardi, “*De Confucio ejusque doctrina tractatus*.” (A Treatise on Confucius and His Doctrine). C. 1623.

¹⁰ Martin Martini, “*De bello Tartarico in Sinis historia*.” C. 1654.

¹¹ Athanasius Kircher, “*China monumentis qua sacris qua profanes* ». Amsterdam: 1667.

¹² Domingo Fernandez Navarette, *Tratadoz historicos, politicos, eticos y religiosos de la Monarchia de China* ». Rome: 1674.

¹³ Philip Couplet, « Confucius Sinarum philosophus ». Paris: 1687.

¹⁴ Jean Baptiste Du Halde, « *Description de l’Empire de la Chine* ». Paris: 1735.

¹⁵ The discourses of the *Période de Lumière* were greatly reflective of the secular political ideals in Chinese Philosophy.