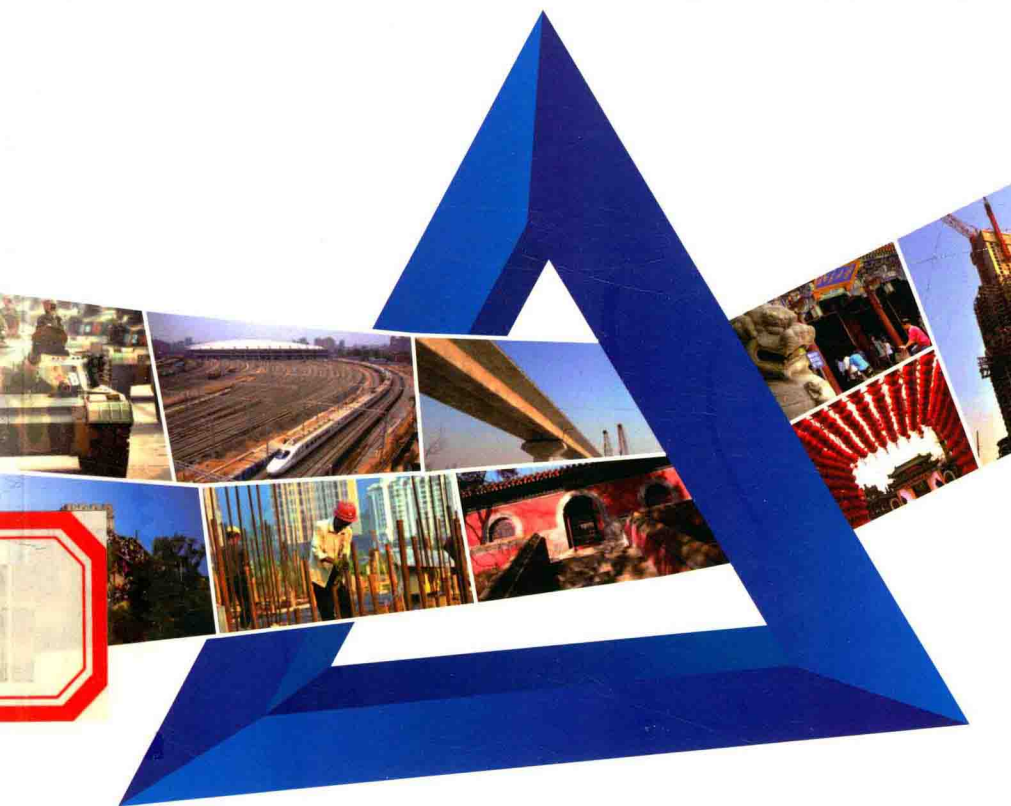


View from  
Latin  
America

Albino Chacón (Costa Rica)

# IMPRESSIONS OF CHINA

IN THE EYES OF A COSTA RICAN



China Intercontinental Press

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## IN THE EYES OF A COSTA RICAN

Albino Chacon (Costa Rica)

Translated by Amanda Leigh (UK)



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## Prologue

In his biography of Marco Polo, Maurice Collis relates how, back then, the city of Hangzhou, quite apart from being a delightful place to live, with good shops and roads, effective policing and plenty of entertaining things to do, was the leading artistic and intellectual hub of the entire world, far superior to any city before it (including Ancient Rome) or after it (including London and Paris) “because its culture was rooted in a far lengthier and more robust evolution of the mind”.

Collis points out that if Marco Polo, instead of travelling in the company of a rich merchant, possibly a foreigner like himself, had struck up friendship, on equal terms, with the cultured intelligentsia of Hangzhou (also known for being scholars of Confucianism), he might have come to understand the depth of the spirituality which prevailed in that city. Collis then pictures how, once that ideal of friendship had been established, the Chinese might have shown the Venetian, in the privacy of their libraries, the uninterrupted development of their culture over thousands of years, and the accumulation of thinking which that brought in its wake. He concludes by saying that, with a greater degree of “understanding, sensitivity and imagination”, Marco Polo could have

learned far more from the Chinese which, ideally, would have transformed him from “a medieval merchant into a man of culture, but neither his sensibility nor his imagination were sufficient to allow this transformation. Nevertheless, his personality did develop, as a result of his travels and experiences, to a point where it was only with some difficulty that his western contemporaries came to fully comprehend what he wrote, although he did not sever the mental ties of his European education as much as he might have done had the Chinese succeeded in raising him to their own level”.

Fortunately, the *Impressions of China* presented here have been written not by a merchant but, quite the reverse, by a man who has dedicated his life to developing understanding, sensitivity and imagination. Albino Chacón graduated in Comparative Literature in Canada and has since worked as a university academic, in Costa Rica as well as in China and other countries. He observes, but from the viewpoint of someone appropriately prepared and with the refined culture of the radical humanist and advocate of ‘pluriversity’, as he himself expresses it in his lecture *El asedio de las diversidades: de la universidad a la pluriversidad* (*Diversities under siege: from university to pluriversity*), where he reminds us that: “not only are we diverse from each other, but also each one of us is in himself an agglomeration of diversities”.

Therefore, in view of this meeting of cultures put forward by the author, it seems to me to be important



to point out the difference between universalism and pluriversalism, as proposed by the philosopher and legal expert Danilo Zolo, who explains in an interview:

*Two philosophies exist concerning international order, indeed a world order in general. One which aims towards the unification, homologation and simplification of symbolic universes and of values, and which clings to the hope that world unity could eo ipso bring about peace, justice, progress and happiness. It is a vision which is elementary, simplistic, dare I say childlike in its theology and rigidly 'monotheistic' in a Weberian sense. Then there is the other world vision which takes into account pluralism, difference, confrontation within diversity and complexity as part of the cherished evolutionary heritage of the human experience. The ideal upheld by adherents of world unification is universalism. The idea supported by defenders of complexity is what I suggest should be called pluriversalism.*

Zolo adds that "those who are advocates of complexity aspire towards achieving peaceful interaction between different cultures and civilizations, defending the right to teach about pluralism and relativism of values and about their historic, dynamic

and evolutionary characteristics”.

In my opinion, these *Impressions of China* champion that cultural pluriversity and are written with the intention of achieving rapprochements, understanding and better relations between East and West.

George Orwell, in 1984, explains that, if the governments depicted in this novel were to allow the average citizen to have contact with foreigners, the closed world in which they live would break open, and this might dispel the fear, hatred and fanatical inflexibility which form the basis of their morality. Unfortunately, not all of us are able to ‘live the Chinese experience’ by travelling all the way to that country and living there for long enough to fully understand the true scope of its culture. However, to paraphrase Lin Yutang, reading empowers us to escape from our physical prison, our limited contact with just a handful of people who live close by, and break free of our immediate world, in time no less than in space, to find ourselves in a totally different world.

In my case, reading these *Impressions of China* has had the effect of opening up my mind to a culture which I knew little about and has also made me eager to seek out other books which might enable me to travel ever further in discovering this other world of possibilities. I believe the author finds a way to help us embark on this journey which then becomes a personal adventure. That is why his *impressions* can be

seen as a doorway which, when opened up, presents us with a choice of pathways which we can explore on our own account. My thoughts turn to that clear insight the author offers us in *La literatura china de hoy* (*Chinese literature today*), where those of us who like to call ourselves lovers of the art of the written word will find an illuminating analysis of themes explored by contemporary authors, as well as some important references to their more noteworthy novels.

Alternatively, we can follow a different route which the author sketches for us with suggestive, delicate brushstrokes, contrasting with light and shade, the differences between ancient and modern China. He does this by leading us towards a series of “paths which fork in different directions” and which prompt us to keep following them in order to investigate further what lies behind these *impressions*, a rich synthesis of subjects such as history, politics, economics, philosophy, traditional civic celebrations, scientific and technological advances, the environment and human rights, to quote just a few of the topics mentioned in texts like: *First impression*; *The first of October*; *The way the pendulum swings*; *Beijing, on the eve of a new year*; *Yesterday's China, today's China*.

But if we took the notion, we could also travel down yet another pathway relating to the meaning of words, where the author reveals to us just the tip of the iceberg made up of traditions, symbols and values which underlie terms such as *mianzi*; or that brief but caring greeting which translates as: *Hello, have you*



*eaten yet?*

And speaking of eating, another fascinating path which we can certainly continue to explore on our own account is gastronomy, to which we are first introduced in *Freshness is everything*, with its truly memorable description, including a wealth of detail, of one of the most exotic dishes of the Chinese people and indeed of the whole human race.

But just in case the topics already mentioned are not enough to whet the reader's appetite for this huge country and its wonderful culture, I would recommend losing no time in reading *Gaokao: the university entrance exam*, an account which presents the path (it is worth remembering that the word 'Tao', on which Taoism is based, literally means 'the path', 'way' or 'route', and can also be translated as 'the method'), along which the Chinese people first began to advance from the moment when, two and a half thousand years ago, Confucius taught about the benefits of a meritocracy in governing a nation.

Herrlee G. Creel, in his book *Chinese thought from Confucius to Mao Zedong*, is of the opinion that the solutions which have worked for China may not be applicable in exactly the same way to our circumstances, but he has no doubt that we can learn a great deal from the Chinese people, and adds:

*This may well be the greatest benefit  
that a knowledge of China can give us.  
We are very wrapped up in ourselves;*

*we find it impossible to exist outside our own skin, our own civilization. Do we do the things we do because they are the only sensible things, the only 'humanly possible' things that can be done? Or do we do them because many centuries of social custom and the pressure of our living circumstances compel us to act as we do. How can we tell? One way of shedding some light on this matter is to look at how the same problems have been resolved by other peoples who have different social customs and whose lives are governed by different circumstances.*

The author of these *Impressions of China* arrived in that country, for the first time, in 1976, the year of Mao Zedong's death; on that occasion he was invited to spend two years as a lecturer at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Beijing. He returned in September 2009 and spent his sabbatical year, up to the end of 2010, as a lecturer at the University of International Studies in Beijing. In the meantime, he also had the opportunity to visit Taiwan twice, invited the first time by Providence University in Taichung, and the second by Fu Jen University in Taipei.

These stretches of time, with a gap of more than thirty years between the first and the last, enable the author to show us the dramatic changes that ancient society underwent as soon as it began to be

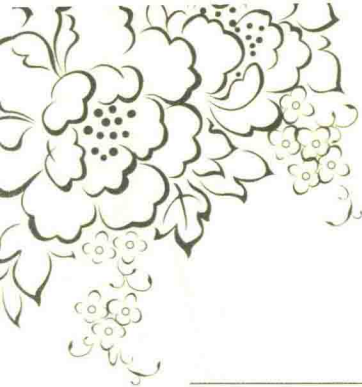
transformed into “market socialism, also known as ‘one country two systems’”. This may be difficult for us to understand in the West, especially if we consider it within the bounds of ‘Aristotelian logic’ which has prevailed in this part of the world and according to which “A cannot be A and non-A at the same time”. However, as Erich Fromm explains in *The art of loving*:

*In contrast with Aristotelian logic is what we may call paradoxical logic, which supposes that A and non-A are not mutually exclusive as predicates of X. Paradoxical logic predominated in Chinese and Indian thinking, as well as in the philosophy of Heraclitus and, latterly, under the name of dialectics, became the philosophy of Hegel and of Marx. Lao-tsé clearly formulated the general principle of paradoxical logic: ‘Words which are strictly true appear to be paradoxical’. And Chuang-tzu: ‘That which is one is one. That which is non-one, is also one’.*

China, ‘one country two systems’, lives out paradoxes which the author of these stimulating *impressions* allows us to observe through immense transformations, accompanied by the equally immense contradictions inherent in them. We will observe, along the way, that these *impressions* have been written from a standpoint of great respect for the identity and dignity of this admirable people who, in pursuit of

'harmony', assert themselves through their own logic and remind us, on a daily basis, that the world consists of very much more than the West.

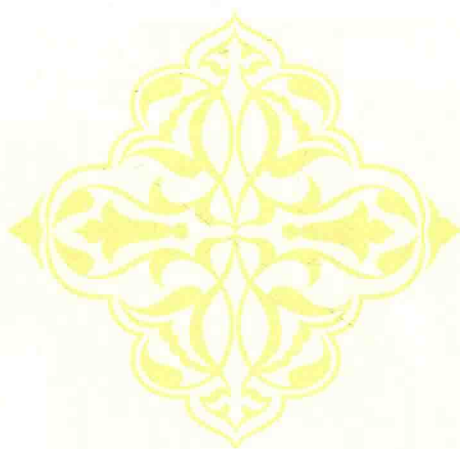
*Nuria Rodríguez Gonzalo*



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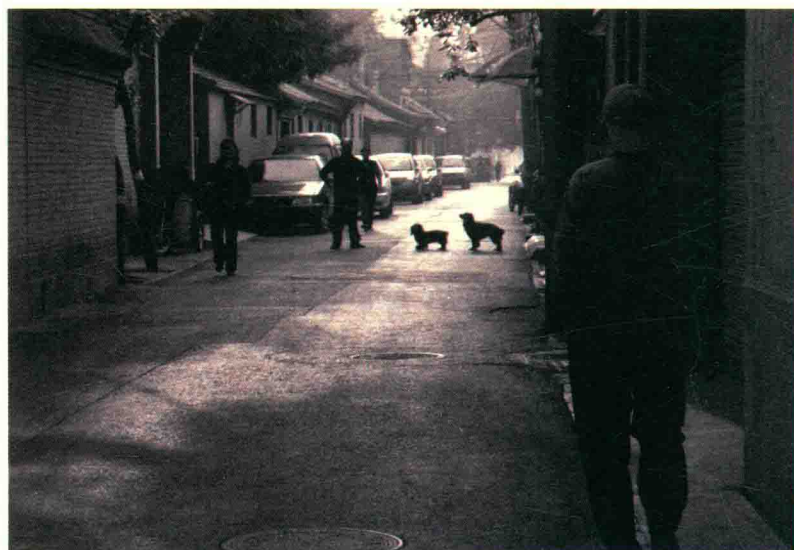


## **First impression (arrival)**

I am writing from China, where I am spending my sabbatical leave at the invitation of the University of International Studies in Beijing. I will be here, with my family, for a year. We have already been here for a month and we have now settled in a little better, although it would be more appropriate to use a gerund: we are settling in little by little, because this is a society into which you never completely settle. The sensations, smells and sounds engulf you constantly, as part of a lifestyle which you either embrace or you do not, and therein lies the answer to whether you enjoy or reject everything this country-continent has to offer.



Albino Chacon with students in Beijing(1977)



Beijing's Hutong

Beijing, which epitomizes everything that is going on in cities throughout the country, is a city which is steeped in tradition and yet hurtling frenziedly towards Modernity, whose narrow alleyways in the *hutongs* are surrounded by ultra-modern motorways and gardens which are magicked up in an instant by labourers slaving away like ants. One morning recently, when we were on our way to our daughter's school, they were just getting started on clearing the ground for a garden at the side of the main road. By the evening, on our return, the garden was already finished, as if it had always been there. That is how China is, that is how it builds its skyscrapers and roads (the map of Beijing gets updated every few months), at a crazily dizzy



Viaduct construction



Construction workers

pace. That is how it is in Beijing, Shanghai is even more modern, and Canton is beginning to compete with Shanghai, in spite of the pockets of poverty and backwardness which are still in evidence.

You could say that China gives the impression of a nation which is under siege from itself, proud of its traditions dating back thousands of years, but at the same time yearning to outdo the West just where the West has always outdone China: in the symbols of Modernity. The tranquility and beauty of its palaces and temples are nowadays disturbed, threatened, cornered no less, by traffic, pollution, noise and thousands of tourists who, doing their utmost to discover this new China – the ‘must-visit’ country of the moment – are