

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: EAST

WEST
18

比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature
Institute of Comparative Literature
Sichuan University, China



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Chinese Influences on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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中文摘要：本文讨论了法国汉学家德日进（1881—1955）的中国学研究。德氏系法国耶稣会士、哲学家、神学家、人类学家及古生物学家，于1923年首次入华，后于1926年至1946年生活在中国，主要居于天津、北京两地。在1926年至1946年间，他也亲眼见证了中国社会的动荡，并在书信中屡有谈及。在华期间，他在全中国开展科学考察，特别是在西藏、内蒙古和新疆。他最大的科学贡献之一即关于“北京人”（*Sinanthropus Pekinensis*）的著作。同利玛窦、汤若望和南怀仁等前辈一样，德日进也是一位耶稣会士科学家，但他的主要兴趣不在于中国文化，而在于人类起源以及从史前视角看待中国人同其他民族的关系。他的研究领域为跨文化研究提供了一个独特而富于创发性的前景：从人类在地球上出现开始，分析人种的差异。德日进的某些理论日后广为人知又极富争议，特别是在天主教会内部。因为他关于人类起源的研究对关于“原罪”教旨的一些肤浅的讲授方式构成了挑战。同样，他的进化理论也在哲学家和人类学家中间激起了巨大争论。本文旨在介绍德日进的中国回忆以及中国之于他的思想影响，同时探讨古生物学和人类起源研究在跨文化研究领域所扮演的角色，以及“人类拥有共同起源”这一事实如何有助于以更深的敬畏感处理文化差异。

Introduction

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was a French Jesuit, philosopher, theologian, anthropologist and paleontologist. He went to China for the first time in 1923, then he lived there from 1926 to 1946, mostly in Tianjin and Beijing. He also travelled in various regions of China for scientific expeditions, especially in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. One of his greatest scientific contributions to the

world is the research on the *Sinanthropus Pekinensis* (the so-called “Peking Man”).

In the years from 1926 to 1946 he also witnessed first-hand the turmoil of Chinese society and in his numerous letters described the situation and his own feelings of being part of a historical social upheaval. De Chardin was a Jesuit scientist, like his illustrious predecessors Matteo Ricci, Schall von Bell or Ferdinand Verbiest. Yet, in a way, he was different from them, since his main interest was not in Chinese culture but in the origins of human beings and the relation between Chinese and other people from a pre-historic, and therefore, pre-cultural, point of view.

His area of research offers a unique, original and creative perspective to cross cultural studies: the differences between people and races are analyzed by looking at the first human beings who appeared on earth. Does the human race have a common origin? Where do cultures come from? How deep really are cultural differences in comparison with a common human species?

Some of Teilhard de Chardin’s theories became both famous and controversial at the time, especially within the Catholic Church. Indeed, his studies on the origin of man were a challenge to some superficial teaching on the Christian dogma of Creation of man and Original Sin. His theory of evolution and progress provoked great debate among philosophers and anthropologists.

Teilhard de Chardin was one of greatest European thinkers of the 20th century. However my article presents only some of his memories of China and the influence that China had on his ideas. I also briefly discuss the role of paleontology and the research on the origin of man in the field of cross cultural studies and how the fact of a common origin of man can help deal with cultural differences with a deeper sense of respect and awe.

I . Teilhard de Chardin and China: Biographical Facts

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in Sarcenat, not far from Clermont-Ferrand, France, in 1881, in a well-off French family, devoutly catholic. He was the fourth of eleven brothers and sisters. Very early in his life, his parents sent him to study at the renowned Jesuit school near Lyon. Here he developed a keen interest in natural sciences. At the same time he felt the calling to the priesthood and he joined the Jesuits, who allowed and encouraged him to pursue his scientific interests.

His first contact with China was during his time as a seminarian, in the Institute of Hastings, England. Her sister Francoise, who was a nun, was sent to work as missionary to China. She lived in Shanghai and was delighted by this new work

among the urban poor. In her letters she expressed her strong dedication to China. In 1910 she was appointed mother superior of the community but sadly in 1911, at the age of 32, she caught smallpox and died suddenly.^[1] Teilhard de Chardin wrote a touching letter to console his mother, in which he said: “Francoise had found indeed just the death she wished for above all: in China and for China. [...] We have no right to regret the good she would have done had her life been longer. A good life is life that fulfills God’s plans.”^[2]

In 1905 he spent one year in Egypt and the Middle East for geological and naturalistic researches. Later, after more studies in England, as he was preparing to obtain a degree in natural science, World War I erupted. He volunteered and in 1916 joined the French army as a stretcher bearer at the front line.^[3] He was present at some of the bloodiest battles of the time, showing great courage and receiving a medal for his heroic behavior. After the war, in 1920 he was able to get a formal degree in geology, botanic and zoology. His great passion was the study of minerals (geology), but later also the study of fossils (paleontology).

Teilhard de Chardin’s first journey to China was in 1923. He had been invited by some colleagues to join a geological expedition in Inner Mongolia and lived in Tianjin, in the so-called “British Concession”, for one year. By then Teilhard de Chardin had developed a sense of the world as a great living being, a breathing mass of energy, where thinking man as a unique and mysterious role to play. During his travels in the Chinese deserts of the West (Ordos desert, 鄂尔多斯沙漠) he composed “The Mass of the World”, one of his many articles half theological, half naturalistic, where he described the world as an evolving situation of universal offering, a kind of “world Eucharistic sacrifice” where the priest was a representative of this natural evolution: “I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world...You know how your creatures can come into being only, like shoot from stem, as part of an endlessly renewed process of evolution.”^[4]

In his early works his language seemed to border on pantheism and soon some of his papers were considered not in conformity with the accepted standard of Catholic tradition, although he insisted that he was writing as a natural scientist and not as a theologian. It was a situation similar to Galileo, centuries before. Teilhard de Chardin was a very capable scientist who claimed that natural empirical sciences could shed light on the real meaning of the Bible and Christian Revelation. This was not a problem. But, like Galileo, he overstepped the line between offering a

contribution to the understanding of Scriptures and Revelation and offering an interpretation of Scriptures and Revelation. You cannot claim to be a geologist instead of a theologian, and then write about God. For the Catholic Church, any scientist can write about natural science, this is never a problem. But if you write about God or Creation or other contents of faith you have to accept, if you are a Catholic, the supervision of the so-called *Magisterium*, the official authoritative teaching of the Church promoted by the Pope and the Bishops, it matters.

In the 17th century the scientist Galileo claimed to interpret correctly the meaning of the Bible, in an age when the Reformation was challenging the Catholic Church precisely on the issue of “who” can interpret Scriptures and “how”. In the 20th century the scientist Teilhard de Chardin claimed to interpret the meaning of the Bible (Creation of Man and Original Sin), in an age when Marxism and Darwinism were challenging the Catholic Church precisely on the issue of evolution and progress. For both scientists, it was probably just a matter of *bad timing*.

The main problems in Teilhard’s writings came from his vision of evolution: a vision of humanity where spirit and matter seemed to mix into some kind of energy; a vision of history as necessary movement forward, a position nearer to Marxism than to biblical theology. The Christian tradition had never seen earthly progress as a necessary historical movement. In the Bible the first historical movement is actually a regress, from Eden to the corruption of sin. Human freedom is not seen as necessarily improving. From David to Salomon, all the way to Judas Iscariot, the Bible presents characters who become worse with time. The question of Jesus, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke, 18:8) represents the terrible possibility of a total regress.

Because of his writings, Teilhard’s teaching position at the Catholic Institute in Paris became unacceptable to the authorities. His theological opinions were too controversial. He was asked to clarify and retract his mistakes. Like Galileo, he could not see any. He was in good faith, in the conscience that he could not retract. The school authorities withdrew his teaching permission. Those were days of inner suffering. Eventually his religious superior advised him to go somewhere else, for example, China. “To go to China” for Teilhard de Chardin was not a long awaited dream of missionary work, but a disciplinary measure, practically a punishment. His “Chinese exile” lasted more than 20 years but had a profound impact on his life and thinking. He worked first in Tianjin, then in Beijing, mostly as a researcher for the Paris National Museum, but eventually cooperating also with the Chinese

Geological Survey and the Peiping Union Medical College.^[5]

His most important contribution to universal science is his studies on the so-called “Peking Man”. From a group of fossils found in Zhoukoudian (周口店), near Beijing, the researchers were able to find traces of one of the oldest human being. The excavation was started by Swedish geologist Johan Gunnar Anderson in 1918. In 1921 American paleontologist Walter W. Granger identify another location for excavation. In 1921 Otto Zdansky from Austria discovered more material. Then Canadian paleoanthropologist Davidson Black obtained some funding and with Chinese archeologist Li Jie continued the research at the Peking Union Medical College. Teilhard de Chardin joined the ongoing excavations of the “Peking Man” Site at Zhoukoudian as an advisor in 1926. The result was the precise identification of what is known as “Peking Man” (北京猿人), an example of *Homo erectus* who was “faber”, tool worker and controller of fire, so not a kind of ape as previously thought. The “Peking Man” was considered certainly a direct ancestor of modern human beings and for some time the hypothesis was made that he might be the earliest human being.^[6]

Teilhard immediately realized the importance of the discovery: “The famous Sinanthropus skull is proving more and more to be a find of the first order, a solid fact that’s going to be highly embarrassing to many out-of-date minds.”^[7] The next scientific breakthrough was to find the connection between this man in China and similar discoveries in Africa: “Africa and central and eastern Asia are the great laboratories in which humanity must have been made. Europe was never in the past anything but a blind alley in which the great movements of life, born in the broad continents, came to die”.^[8] Teilhard was confirmed advisor for the Beijing Cenozoic Research Laboratory of the Geological Survey of China following its founding in 1928. In the words of U. King: “Teilhard now became more and more a Chinese geologist.”^[9]

Were all these discoveries a challenge to the Christian teaching on God’s Creation of man? Was there any contradiction with the teaching of Genesis? The Catholic Church had always read the book of Genesis as a poem about Creation, not as a scientific treatise. Actually the story of Original Sin and rebellion against God’s order looks much more real when applied to a *Sinanthropus* than to those Adam and Eve of Renaissance paintings who look like they are having a picnic among fruit trees.

In 1929 he was given an office in Beijing and invited to become a corresponding

member of the Academia Sinica and the National Research Institute in Nanking. He joined an expedition to the West of China with the archeologist Emile Licent, then stayed in western Shanxi and northern Shaanxi with the Chinese paleontologist C. C. Young and with Davidson Black, Chairman of the Geological Survey of China. These two became his friends. After a tour in Manchuria in the area of Great Khingan with some Chinese geologists, Teilhard joined the team of *Center-Asia American Expedition* in the Gobi, organised in June and July by the American Museum of Natural History, with Roy Chapman Andrews.

In 1935 Teilhard took part as a scientist in the famous Yellow Cruise in Central Asia, financed by the car maker Andre Citroen to test some of his vehicles.^[10] He remained with his colleagues for several months in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang. In 1937 the Sino-Japanese war began. Despite the dangers, Teilhard de Chardin joined also some explorations in the south of China, in the valleys of Yangtze River, in Sichuan, then in Guangdong. Unfortunately the relationship with Marcellin Boule was disrupted; the Paris Museum cut its financing on the grounds that Teilhard worked more for the Chinese Geological Service than for the Museum.

He was in Beijing during the war with Japan and in 1946 finally returned to France. His writings were even more controversial than before. He had become both famous and controversial for his philosophical and theological approach to evolution. From evolution of man to evolution of the entire cosmos, bordering, according to some critics, pantheism. He moved to a Jesuit house in the USA, where there was greater tolerance for new ideas. Here he died in 1955.

II. China Impressions

1. China Impressions: a Detached View

Teilhard de Chardin's approach to Chinese culture was quite unusual and indeed different from previous Jesuits scientists' experiences. He received his first impression of China while working in the desert, the second impression as he lived 20 years in China almost as an exile. Moreover, as a scientist, he specialized in pre-historic, and so pre-cultural studies and this, too, was not really the traditional approach of a sinologist to Chinese culture. Meanwhile, all these things made his observation on China quite unique in the history of sinology.

Because Teilhard went to China not as a missionary but as some kind of exile, his first reaction to the country was neither awe and admiration, nor high expectations, as it had been for Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit companions in the 17 century. In one

letter he described his first idea of China: “My strongest impression at the moment is a confused one that the human world is a huge and disparate thing, just about as coherent as the surface of a rough sea.”^[11]

He felt the cultural power of China but could not see at the time how China culture might be a significant contribution to Western decadence. “I have not found in China (so far as I have seen) the ferment whence I hoped we might draw the generous wine that would reinvigorate our West.”^[12] Actually the awareness of a contribution from China culture to the entire world is a very recent phenomenon, since only in the last few years there has been a world-wide movement to export Chinese culture abroad. Teilhard saw Chinese culture mostly as a gigantic clash between historical immutability, something unchanged within the depth of man since pre-historic times, and a revolutionary energy that seems to pass through the entire Chinese people as an electric power. Before the birth of the new China, he described it as “still Neolithic^[13], not rejuvenated, as elsewhere, but simply interminably complicated in on itself”. Here the full passage about China in his “Phenomenon of Man:

“Either by its own genius or as an effect of immensity, China (and I mean the old China, of course) lacked both the inclination and the impetus for deep renovation. A singular spectacle is presented by this gigantic country which only yesterday represented, still living under our eyes, a scarcely changed fragment of the world as it could have been ten thousand years ago. The population was not only fundamentally agricultural but essentially organised according to the hierarchy of territorial possessions, the emperor being nothing more than the biggest proprietor. It was a population ultra-specialised in brick work, pottery and bronze, a population carrying to the lengths of superstition the study of pictograms and the science of the constellations; an incredibly refined civilisation, admittedly, but unchanged as to method since its beginning, like the writing which betrays the fact so ingenuously. Well into the nineteenth century it was still Neolithic, not rejuvenated, as elsewhere, but simply interminably complicated in on itself, not merely continuing on the same lines, but remaining on the same level, as though unable to lift itself above the soil where it was formed.”^[14][...] “And while China, already encrusted in its soil, multiplied its gropings and discoveries without ever taking the trouble to build up a science of physics, India allowed itself to be drawn into metaphysics, only to become lost there.”^[15]

2. China Impressions: Historical Changes

Teilhard happened to be in China during some of the most significant years of changes in the nation’s history. He witnessed first-hand the modernization of China: “The Chinese now definitely have the self-awareness, if not the capabilities, of a modern nation.”^[16] Talking about the clash between different parties and ideologies

he said: "There is going on here at this very moment, a human development of almost geological dimension; to participate in it would be a rare chance indeed."^[17]

Beautiful was this image of a change of "geological dimension", considering the time of changes for stones and minerals! However, he also had a detached vision of those epochal changes. His interest was man in the natural sense of the human species, not man as a political animal. He saw the "people" as a "Yellow Mass", a phenomenon involving an entire nation and not just few individuals: "I do not regret the last six months spent in Peking, at the hot point of treble contact between Communism, Democracy and the rising Yellow Mass. I saw, I thought and I learned a lot."^[18]

He saw history not as a clash between justice and injustice, or as a walk towards freedom, or as power struggle between rival leaderships, but always and only as humanity moving forward towards a greater *hominisation*. In *The Phenomenon of Man* he writes: "Basically can we not say that the essential thing in history consists in the conflict and finally the gradual *hominisation* of these great psycho-somatic currents?"^[19] Sadly in those same years, in the Europe from which he was so far away, the Nazi concentration camps were experiments in the complete de-humanization of men. The idea of a necessary progress forward of humanity found here an evident contradiction. But Teilhard was too far away.

3. China Impressions: Chinese Intellectuals and Scientists and the City of Beijing

He worked at close contact with Chinese intellectuals and scientists, researchers and professors, and appreciated their openness. Once again the idea of "change" struck him, also "because of his Chinese friends, looking for a better future, preparing perhaps the new China of 1949"^[20]: "One feels that the country's intellectual elite is casting its skin. In a century the change will have happened. What will it give? A China capable of helping the West in its research or merely an imitative China? [...] I find it more and more difficult to form any exact idea as to what sort of greatness or renewal we should expect from the New China. Sometimes I feel pessimistic. What seems clear to me is that we must look with favor on the birth of a new human group that nothing can prevent. [...] Look: we can't just breathe in our different compartments, our closed categories. Without destroying our more limited organisms, we must fuse them together, synthesize them: the human being, nothing but the human being as the context of our ambitions and organizations."^[21]

When he was not travelling, he spent much of his time in Beijing. He liked Beijing: "What I like at Peking is the feeling of being at the heart of old China. My

finest memories of the place may be the recollections of coming home at night sometimes in a rickshaw through dark and twisting little streets under magnificently starred skies...^[22] Strolling in spring through an imperial park, he saw “all the cherry trees showed pink against the grey earth, under a dust dimmed blue sky. A real Chinese spring, unconscious of the troubles of war”^[23].

He was in Beijing during the Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese occupation of the city. As a foreigner he had a less hard life, yet it was not easy: “these seven years [in Peking] have made me quite grey, but they have toughened me, not hardened me, I hope, interiorly.”^[24] He had seen war before, in the front line, during the World War I, from 1916 to 1918, when he had served as stretcher bearer showing amazing courage and earning official recognition. However the Japanese occupation for the foreigners was not a big difference, his life of studies and research went on as usual and *The Phenomenon of Man* was begun in Beijing precisely during Japanese occupation. Many foreigners were leaving, as he wrote in May 1941, “people are leaving Peking one by one”. Moreover, one of the consequences of the Japanese war was the physical disappearance of the remains of the “Peking Man” from the museum.^[25]

III. Chinese Influence on His Writings

What was the influence of Chinese culture on a man devoted to study the common origin of the human species rather than its various geographical and cultural differentiations? On one hand he lived in China for twenty years; on the other hand his mind was focused on prehistory, not on culture or literature.

For some commentators and scholars, China gave him an attraction towards Eastern religiosity.^[26] However, according to my understanding, the greatest influence of Chinese environment on him was in other areas.

First, it strengthened his need and desire to re-elaborate the Christian doctrine of Original Sin within the context of his discoveries on evolution, with the sense and feeling of a mass of people diverse and confused but united towards a common goal. The starting point of his reflections were his paleontological discoveries, but life in China, immersed within the life of a culture that has no concept of a “Original Sin”, probably was a true challenge to concentrate on this issue. The presence of the idea of Original Sin is a very Western characteristic. This idea of a primordial disobedience to God Creator belongs to the Biblical tradition. Then, from Paul to Augustine, from Luther to Kierkegaard, much of European culture is marked by the

awareness that there exists an original fault in human being, an original defect, a radical corruption within man that no social system can change. In China, there is no imperfection that cannot be overcome by study (Confucius), by purification (Buddhism) or by the right formulas (Taoism). According to Christianity, Original Sin can only be denied or won by Christ. In Chinese tradition the idea of an “original sin” is absent. Teilhard de Chardin met some of the strongest critiques and opposition to his writings precisely on this subject.

Second, he felt very strongly the issue of “race”. This is a scientific mystery and he often discussed the mysterious passage from a common origin of mankind to the reality of different races. “Man of the Lower Quaternary period, the contemporary and the author of these earliest tools is only known to us in two fossil remains. We know them well, however—the *Pithecanthropus* of Java, long represented only by a simple skull, but now by much more satisfactory specimens recently discovered; and the *Sinanthropus* of China, numerous specimens of which have been found in the last ten years. These two beings are so closely related that the nature of each would have remained obscure if we had not had the good fortune to be able to compare them.”^[27]

In the Western world the emphasis on race is always seen as negative (racism). Classical tradition likes to boast its “internationalism”: we are all human beings, we have much in common. While in China, de Chardin was faced every day with the awareness of race. He was a “laowai”, a foreigner, and this was reminded to him at any step. All foreigners experience this characteristic of China: you are “seen” as foreigner even before you speak. Your broken Mandarin simply confirms the impression. There is no hostility, but an acute and persistent feeling of “being different”. De Chardin had a real passion for “man” as “human being”, yet he acknowledged the mysterious fact of racial differences between people and the almost natural tendency to gather together by race.

Assuming one can trust bones to give us an idea of flesh and blood, what were in fact those first representatives, in the age of the reindeer, of a new human verticil freshly opening? Nothing more or less than what we see living today in approximately the same regions of the earth. Negroes, white men and yellow men (or at the most pre-negro, pre-white and pre-yellow), and those various groups already for the most part settled to north, to south, to east, to west, in their present geographical zones. That is what we find all over the ancient world from Europe to China at the end of the last Ice Age. Accordingly when we study Upper Palaeolithic man, not only in the essential features of his anatomy but also in the main lines of his ethnography, it is really ourselves and our own infancy that we are finding, not