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BORDERS BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA: WHY DO EUROPEANS (MIS)UNDERSTAND CHINESE CULTURE?

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The article goes deeper into the dialogue of inter-cultural Chinese and Western civilizations. It is analyzed how the Westerners perceive Chinese civilization and culture. The methods used here are the comparative and hermeneutical ones, as it is aimed to compare two different cultures and to penetrate the problems of understanding. The problems of understanding are not new, they have been analyzed a lot. The novelty of this article is determined by the fact that these problems are investigated in the outlooks of the understanding of Chinese culture and, especially, landscape aesthetics. Thus, the objects of this research are an inter-civilization dialogue and an inter-civilization conflict. The author of this article discusses why often it is difficult to develop a meaningful cultural dialogue between China and Europe, why this dialogue is relevant and how it could help Europeans to understand the Other and themselves. The idea presented in the article is that the Westerners are often mislead by a Chinese traditionalism, which is ambivalent and closely related to creativity and constant change, thus it should not be identified with stagnation and dogmatism. One more aspect of Chinese culture, which Europeans find difficult to understand, is its unity, which has deep philosophical implications and ability to connect the opposites. The author assumes that Western-Eastern Europe has many distinctive features, but the inhabitants of this region view classical Chinese culture and an art in a similar way as the inhabitants of the rest of Europe: all Europeans have similar stereotypes and difficulties to understand separate aspects. This allows us to speak about a common European approach.

Keywords: Chinese culture, otherness, inter-civilization dialogue, problems of understanding, landscape aesthetics.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is the quest for an answer to such question: according to which criteria is it possible to distinguish European and Chinese civilizations? Why do European interpreters misunderstand so often traditional Chinese culture? Recently, when the controversial Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "Conflict of Civilizations" has gained ground, this topic has also become particularly relevant. Contemporarily, according to Huntington's interpretation, most of the conflicts grow from cultural dif-

ferences and particularities; his well-known thesis says that "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among human-kind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (Huntington 1993: 22). Nowadays, a dialogue between Chinese and Western cultural and philosophical approaches could be treated in a global context. Thus, currently, the cultural dialogue becomes particularly important. This paper deals with the notion of art and culture – mostly in its aesthetic aspect. Thus, various economical and political aspects will be here suspended. We will not search the answer for another weighty question: why should Western culture learn from Chinese? We will simply try to highlight some particularities and difficulties of such understanding. The problems of understanding come from the fact that Western and Chinese cultures are obviously different. Chinese culture was frequently thought to differ from European on both approach and content. There are numerous concepts and approaches in traditional Chinese culture that do not have any equivalents in Western culture, and *vice versa*, several Western concepts have no real equivalents in Chinese tradition.

Perception of a different culture: specificity and difficulties

Adopting new ideas from Chinese culture is not simple because it requires evident changes in Western way of thinking. In a certain case, we are unable to find appropriate equivalent for some Chinese ideas or terms that are essential to that culture. To do that, one has to understand how important these concepts are to Chinese philosophy. The next question that imposes itself is: could Chinese philosophy be treated in isolation from these concepts? Bryan W. van Norden claims that when one is trying to adopt the concept, one has to answer the following question: "If it turns out that we cannot seriously entertain the possibility of adopting certain concepts, and if it also turns out that Chinese philosophy cannot be done without these concepts, then we cannot seriously entertain the possibility of adopting Chinese philosophy" (van Norden 1996: 226–227). This quotation refers to philosophy, but such limitation is typical of Chinese culture in general. Thus, there are many reasons that make the dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures problematic. However, such dialogue exists and its voice becomes more and more significant. Despite difficulties and a danger of misunderstanding, adepts of anthropology and culture studies try to comprehend different cultures, among which singularly popular become exotic cultures of the Far East.

It is hard to say precisely how different our experience of Chinese culture is from a perception of a true-born Chinese. The same work of art for a Chinese participant is an artwork grounded in his/her own culture, while for us it remains barely "a certain Chinese masterpiece". This supposes a fundamentally different point of view. Are we, then, doomed to incapacity of understanding another culture? It is proper to quote at that point a famous story from Daoist classic Zhuangzi: "Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, *See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!* Huizi answered, *You're not a fish – how do you know what fish enjoy?*" (Watson 1968: 188–

189). How can one speak about fish when one is not a fish? In other words – how can one acquire knowledge about the Chinese when one is not Chinese? Following such logics the Europeans could neither understand the Chinese, nor criticize or interpret them. Whatever Europeans try to undertake, they will always remain in the wrong position.

Do we have to accept such point of view? One must not say anything about Chinese culture? Maybe we could find the answer simply by continuing reading Zhuangzi story about "happiness of fish". Answering the above cited remark of his opponent Zhuangzi said: „*You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy*? Huizi said, *I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish – so that still proves you do not know what fish enjoy!* Zhuangzi said, *Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy - so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao*" (Watson 1968: 189). Thus, we see that it could be even appropriate claiming about fish's disposition. This allegory helps us understand that if one's vision of the Other is based on his/her own feeling, not on the *a priori* stereotypes and pre-suppositions, she/he could pass on to another, more general subject such as understanding other cultures.

Considering that matter, Wolfgang Kubin points out that we are not capable of understanding ourselves in a self-referential way, but only in reference to the Other, to something different. Self-consciousness,of what we *are not* could help us understand what we *could potentially be*. "In a certain sense, we can now say: only another can understand me, only a non-Chinese can understand China and, conversely, only Chinese do not understand China" (Kubin 1999: 56). Someone who has studied Chinese culture possibly knows more about Chinese paintings than simple native does, and *vice versa*. But the Westerner will never be given an insight into the wealth of associations that the Chinese have. Our knowledge and perception of Chinese art will always be an expression of European imagination, reflection of Western view on Chinese culture. No matter if we do mean a particular person or a culture in general: "The individual and the nation are analogical when interacting as the participants of existence" (Kačerauskas 2008: 13).

Let us try to explain in what way our point of view is different. Western scholars quite often are not interested in the evolution of Chinese painting but tend to concentrate on *what makes the painting Chinese*. Consequently, when Western people look at Chinese artwork, they usually suspend (*reduce*) the work's prior history, its historical and cultural context, connotations with the style (and also previous and later periods, influences etc.). European people concentrate their attention on the *otherness* of the work of Chinese art.

The roots of dialogue between the European and the Chinese cultures

The contemporary dialogue between European and Chinese cultures does not appear from nowhere though. Therefore, it is legitimate to turn towards the roots of such dialogue and show how the borders between Chinese and European cultures were broken

in the past and how early Chinese artworks appeared in Europe. We find it justified to delineate a brief history of the European imagination regarding Chinese art and the influence of it on Western people, who will permit us to look on the past anew. It is popular to draw binary distinctions between Orient and Occident. Needless to say, quite often such distinctions are misleading or superficial.

Let us look how in the past times a European perceived the Eastern world. In this case, the concept of East (Orient) includes China, India or the Arabic world as well. The early European image of the East was quite peculiar and queer. Since the Middle Ages, China has appeared as a fantastic wonderland. The vivid description of imaginary China can be found in writings of the most famous medieval traveller Marco Polo. The magnificence and beauty of China impressed him and inspired his stories about incredible reaches of the Far East which probably were a great encouragement for the subsequent voyagers. During Renaissance and New Ages, the Europeans continued perceiving oriental articles as something exotic and desirable. Chinese imports and their copies, called *Chinoiseries,* can help us understand the transformation of the past European vision of Chinese culture and art. In Western museums and art galleries there are numerable works of art which reflect the rich artistic exchange between Europe and Asia. In 17th and also 18th century Chinese imports into the Western world were very fashionable and popular. Europeans imported mostly Chinese porcelain. Later, when trade between China and Europe was suspended and it was impossible to satisfy the great demand for Chinese artisanship, European artists and craftsmen began to imitate works, based on Chinese style and decorated with Eastern motives. Quite often such copies were manufactured in accordance with appropriate Chinese technologies. Consequently, *Chinoiseries* are not objects actually made in China, but the European works based on the Western imagination of how Chinese things were supposed to look like. Porcelain and other kinds of *Chinoiserie* met the taste of Western aristocrats but they were popular also among the bourgeoisie. The great demand for *Chinoiseries* shows that European was attracted to Chinese craftwork. The Chinese always attached importance to beautiful things: their furniture, pottery and porcelains are often fascinating and sophisticated works of art. They tend to show elaborate care and creative imagination in the smallest details. Apart from Chinese, probably only the Koreans and the Japanese devoted such attention and care to articles of everyday use.

Essential differences in perception of surrounding world are illustrated by comparative analysis of Chinese and Western landscape painting. The importance of landscapes is a relatively new concept in Western art. In Europe, only in the 17th century the realism of the Flemish masters had made the landscape one of the most important subjects of art. During the earlier periods (the Middle Ages and even Renaissance) landscapes in Europe were not popular: they appeared sporadically and were used only as a background for religious or genre painting.

In the stark contrast, Chinese landscape painting has a long and distinguished history; it has played a really important part in their national aesthetics since the Tang period. The main components of Chinese landscape are mountains (chinese *shan*) and

water (chinese *shui*). For this reason, even Chinese name of landscape is *Shanshui*, which translated literally means "Mountains and Water". Fascination with mountains and water has a philosophical dimension that grows naturally out of the Daoist celebration of the grandeur of nature in contrast to the poverty of a man and the products of his activity, as well as the Daoistic idea of *Yin-Yang* opposites. Hard, solid mountains symbolize masculine *Yang* force, while yielding, moving, changing water symbolizes feminine *Yin* force.

Hence, while the main focus of Western painting was human figure, for the Chinese it was landscape or its details by themselves. There are also important differences concerning the representation of nature, which would complicate our understanding of Chinese landscapes aesthetics. The Western landscape with the possible exception of wild landscapes in romantic works represents nature cultivated by human hands. Chinese landscape shows nature without significant traces of human interference, but some architectural details such as pavilions or bridges etc. Human intrusion into the natural world seems to be maximally limited.

Unity of subject and object, heart and mind as one of the main inscrutabilities of Chinese culture

The European understanding of Chinese culture is quite often superficial, tendentious or even wrong. Yet before we begin to speculate about the most pressing difficulties and common misunderstandings typical of European interpretations of Chinese art, it may be wise to reflect on their *unity* – in other words, a capability to transcend all oppositions. The unity of world view is compared with the unity of technique and style, and in a comparison with European painting, in Chinese painting it is much more obvious. Such unity is typical for a pantheistic worldview. As Fritz van Briessen states, the Western "lost its magical elements at an early date because of the influence of Christianity" (Briessen 1999: 27).

Thus, the basic *unity of subject and object* probably presents the greatest obstacle for Western people who seek to understand and talk about Chinese thought in general, and Chinese painting in particular. The Chinese painter communed with the landscape he painted; he lost himself in the surrounding world, whether it was a monumental landscape with huge mountains or just the smallest flower or butterfly. Tendencies of such identification arise as far as from most famous Daoist text *Daodejing*: "One who follows the Way (Dao) identifies with the Way. One who follows Virtue identifies with Virtue" (Ivanhoe 2002: 23). To the Western mind based on the distinctions between subject and object, such Chinese approach seems to be quite strange. The unity and completeness of Chinese culture and art require appropriate understanding and, where we seek complete understanding, it is necessary to have the complete vocabulary in mind. As Friedrich Schleiermacher points out, "it is also part of this completeness of understanding that we make a provisional survey of the whole. But this provisional hermeneutic process is not possible and necessary in every case" (Schleiermacher 1998: 38).

Reduction of rational and empiric approach as the way to proper understanding of the Chinese culture

Right attitude to Chinese culture should not be only complete, but also intuitive. Western people look at works of art with an intellectual or empirical approach. For this reason, it could be difficult to understand certain aspects of Chinese art which needs not just *empirical* or *intellectual* experience, but primarily *intuitive* experience.

Chinese discourse is difficult to understand because it comes before knowledge, before understanding and could not be explained intellectually. When Archie Graham explains how we should understand Chinese painting, he says: "It is not that we cannot understand, in any sense, but that we must *understand that we don't need to understand in the epistemological sense and that such understanding is not necessary* in order to encounter the Way, attain peace of mind or to act rightly" (Graham 2004: 37).

Therefore, Chinese culture is based on a pre-scientific mode of thinking. Intellect may tell us more and more about the external world of science and knowledge, but, as George Rowley points it out, "will never reveal the inner reality of spirit or the secret of living <…>" (Rowley 1974: 27). That being so, Chinese and Western cultures are thought to differ in their methodologies, especially in the extent to which the two employ reason and rational argumentation. For modern Westerners it is not easy to accept the incomprehensible truth embodied in Chinese culture and art.

Western perception of culture and art most often is based on an analytical approach: we are inevitably used to looking for a clear distinction between painting and poetry, religious and secular artwork, landscape and portrait etc. The result is that our comprehension of Chinese painting is awkward, that will not surprise us if we remember that literature, poetry, calligraphy and painting in China are closely related and very often one enlightens another. One might understand poetry through the masterpieces of painting or painting through the works of literature or calligraphy. They all have common foundation in reality: each of this virtue follows the teaching of mysterious *Dao*.

Chinese culture is also much more traditional than the Western one. It seems that Western interpreters cannot understand Chinese traditionalism in the appropriate way as Chinese traditionalism is ambivalent: it used to be mixed with great originality and creativity. In Chinese culture, main principles of the past were graciously used and interpreted to meet the present and even the future. As Confucius once remarked, they re-animated the old in order to know the new: "if a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others" (Legge 1971: 149).

Flexible, constantly changing traditionalism of Chinese culture as another obstacle to understanding it

Hence, we return to the main differences between Western and Eastern thought: the first is based on opposites and dualities, the second - on binary complements and the

unity of oppositions. Flexible, constantly changing traditionalism of Chinese culture does not contain any fixed object or principles. One has to keep in mind such particularity of Chinese culture, because, as Kubin states, "It would be a grave error to assume that there was a fixed object, China, which was to be understood by all people at all times in the same way" (Kubin 1999: 50).

The creative traditionalism of Chinese culture is quite different from the creative spirit of the Western world. On that account, the Chinese follow suggestion of Confucius and rework early principles and styles to meet ever-changing needs. In the Western world, with each new period, artists forget or abandon the principles and achievements of the past. For example, the antique Greeks forgot archaic lines, Byzantine and Romanic artists forgot Greek ideals, and the painters of the Renaissance refused entire heritage of the Middle Ages, which they contemptuously called "Gothic art". Chinese culture developed differently. As Rowley remarks, in China new principles of nature and new principles of art "were discovered without sacrificing continuity with the past" (Rowley 1974: 28).

Let us imagine such Western painters as Leonardo da Vinci or Paul Rubens, cultivating the spirit of the Middle Ages and, at the same time, developing humanism of the Renaissance and the main values of Baroque art. It is difficult for us even to imagine such blending of past and present, and yet, that is exactly what the Chinese civilization achieved. Thus, such specification of ambiguous traditionalism of Chinese culture is one of the common disadvantages that should be passed over on the way to its proper understanding.

Paradoxically, obstacles and misunderstandings could be useful on the long and sophisticated way to proper understanding. In a way, all understanding is therefore also a non-understanding, and *vice versa* – every non-understanding is also an understanding. "When one speaks of understanding in the purlieu of hermeneutic thought, one speaks at the same time of non-understanding, even occasionally of a wished-for non-understanding, for here in the context of the process of understanding, the difference is of crucial importance" (Kubin 1999: 55).

When the Europeans speak about traditionalism in culture, they tend to imagine rigidity of Byzantine dogmatism or the mummified spirit of Egypt. In contemporary Western mode of thinking, traditionalism tends to be identified with dogmatism or lifelessness. Such approach does not work with Chinese culture. Chinese traditionalism should be rather associated with creativity and dynamism; mix of themes and styles.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this paper are that the basic *unity* of the subject and the object, which is typical of the Chinese culture, is one of the biggest difficulties for Western people who seek to understand and talk about Chinese thought in general and Chinese painting in particular.

Another problem in such cultural dialogue is a specific *traditionalism* of Chinese culture. For Western scholars it is quite strange due to its ambivalence – Chinese traditionalism was often mixed with great creativity. Chinese art relies upon a fundamentally different conception of traditionalism – the Westerners tend to associate traditionalism with dogmatism, while Chinese traditionalism should never be thought of apart from creativity.

Another aspect of Chinese culture, particularly difficult for Western people to understand in the right way, is the *unity* of Chinese culture: Chinese works of art display a unity of basic oppositions (*yin-yang*, etc.), which comes from the very specific philosophical background.

Our view of the Chinese culture will always be a view from the outside, a gaze of a stranger. It will always keep comparative background of our own culture. That being so, we regard Chinese as something exotic. Our attention is concentrated not upon a question of the development of Chinese culture, but on what makes it *Chinese*.

All above mentioned differences and obstacles do not mean that we cannot understand Chinese culture or that our approach is necessarily superficial or wrong. In the postmodern world, the dialogue between different cultures becomes our everydayness.

Europe is definitely a big and varying entity. And the North-East part of Europe has its own identity, different from that of Western Europe, it is *in-between* (between East and West), but in dimension of approach to classical Chinese culture and Art, we could see various resemblances. This allows us to speak about the whole European (mis)understanding of Chinese culture.

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EUROPOS IR KINIJOS RIBOS: KODĖL MUMS SUNKU SUPRASTI KINŲ KULTŪRĄ?

Agnieška Juzefovič

Santrauka

Straipsnyje gilinamasi į tarpkultūrinį kinų ir Vakarų civilizacijų dialogą. Nagrinėjama, kaip vakariečiai suvokia kinų civilizaciją ir kultūrą. Čia taikomi komparatyvistinis ir hermeneutinis metodai, nes siekiama palyginti dvi skirtingas kultūras ir įžvelgti supratimo problemų. Supratimo problemos nėra naujos, jau yra daug tyrinėtos, bet šio straipsnio naujumą lemia tai, kad jos gvildenamos kinų kultūros ir ypač kinų peizažinės estetikos supratimo perspektyvoje. Todėl šio tyrimo objektai yra tarpcivilizacinis dialogas ir tarpcivilizacinis konfliktas. Straipsnio autorė svarsto, kodėl dažnai sunkiai sekasi plėtoti prasmingą kultūrinį Kinijos ir Europos dialogą, kodėl jis yra aktualus bei kaip jis galėtų padėti europiečiams suprasti Kitą ir save patį. Išsakoma mintis, kad vakariečius dažnai klaidina kinų tradicionalizmas, kuris yra labai ambivalentiškas bei glaudžiai susijęs su kūrybingumu ir nuolatine kaita, todėl neturėtų būti tapatinamas su sąstingiu ir dogmatizmu. Kitas europiečiams sunkiai suprantamas kinų kultūros aspektas yra gilias filosofines potekstes turintis jos vientisumas, gebėjimas jungti priešybes. Autorės manymu, šiaurės rytų Europa turi daug savitų bruožų, tačiau šio krašto gyventojai į klasikinę kinų kultūrą ir dailę žvelgia panašiai kaip ir likusios Europos dalies gyventojai – visiems europiečiams būdingi panašūs stereotipai ir dėl jų kylantys sunkumai suprasti paskirus aspektus. Tai leidžia kalbėti apie europiečiams bendrą pasaulėžiūrą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kinų kultūra, kitoniškumas, tarpcivilizacinis dialogas, supratimo problemos, peizažinė estetika.

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