

China Open – China Closed

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Forbidden areas, i.e. areas (sites, cities, countries) that are inaccessible for topographical reasons or especially because of decisions based on political, religious, or other motivations are usually surrounded by an aura of mystery and almost necessarily arouse curiosity. The dream of generations of explorers was to reach Lhasa. An area can be closed not only to outsiders but also to “insiders:” nobody is allowed to leave for the “outside.” The isolation imposed on Japan by the Tokugawa regime was such a two-way seclusion aided, of course, by geographical conditions and hence easily enforceable. It has been suggested, perhaps not quite seriously, that the famous Chinese wall was meant not only to keep out barbarian invaders, but also to prevent Chinese from leaving. That there was some kind of border control is also suggested by the leger, according to which Lao-tse, before disappearing into the west, committed his teaching, the *Tao-te-king*, to writing at the request of the “gate-keeper.” One may well wonder whether there exists another equally influential text written at the behest of a border policeman!

Since even a closed area is rarely hermetically sealed, our discussion will pivot on two axes. The one is the contacts of the kingdom of the Middle with the outside world to the east (especially Japan) and to the west (the Silk Road as well as the maritime route). The other is concerned with the objects and subjects transported in the two directions: men, merchandise, ideas, and especially religions. I am using here the inadequate term “ideas” since I cannot contrast merchandise and “cultural” goods. For the anthropologist silk and ceramics are no less cultural products than art styles or religious systems. And by mentioning ceramics we have already put our finger on one of the most important cultural goods which shall serve us here as an arbitrary example of Chinese influence.

The kind of kiln-fired earthenware called porcelain is known in English as chinaware or, abbreviated, simply as “china”, and hence we talk about bone-china, Wedgwood-, Sevres-, Dresden-, and Delft-china. The history of European avidity for silk, from which the Silk Road derived its modern name, is well-known and need not be told again. Nor shall we discuss here inventions like printing or gun-powder which were made in Europe independently of China. The example of porcelain, however, deserves some attention because it also illustrates two-way traffic. The city of Fustat (Old Cairo) in Egypt, which flourished especially under Fatimid rule, was burned to the ground by order of the Vizier in 1168, in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Crusaders coming from Palestine. The fire raged for 54 days, but the city was granted a new spell of life after the conquest of Egypt by Saladdin in 1178. Fustat is mentioned here because excavations by Japanese archaeologists have unearthed, next to local pottery of obvious Egyptian and Coptic descent, thousands of shards of Chinese porcelain. Of greater influence on the history of European pottery was the chinaware imported during the late 17th, and 18th centuries; and promptly imitated by western potters. The famous Delft-blue, as well as the polychrome were developed as imitations of the chinaware imported by the Dutch East India Company. Seventeenth century’s Delftware imitated the Chinese *famille verte* and *famille rose* polychrome, but by that time Japan had also entered the competition; and by the end of the century Imari-ware (so called after the Japanese port of export) had reached Europe, where it was promptly imitated. Whether the famous “willow pattern,” designed by Thomas Turner for the Caughley Factory in Staffordshire where he worked 1772-1799, was inspired by Chinese models or is an independent chinoiserie, is still a debated question¹. What matters for our present purpose is the fact that the English willow pattern soon reached China where it was promptly imitated for re-export to the west, the Chinese craftsmen laboriously copying with their brushes the English transfer-printed design. Very well-known in the west was the so-called “Nankin Ware” produced in China early in the 19th century specifically for export. It was imitated in England 1810-1815 by Josiah Spode, II for export to Persia². Remembering the Persian items that reached the Shoso-in

in Nara at the far end of the Silk Road, one cannot but marvel at the curious alternative (maritime) Silk Road: Chinese-style pottery reaching Persia by way of England!

Before turning to non-material culture, let us look at the human map, the variety of which often reflects not merely conquests but, more significantly, migrations. Officially³ China recognizes 56 *minzu* i.e., ethnic groups, sometimes also rendered as race or nation; the official Chinese translation is “nationality.” The largest of these *minzu* are the Han-Chinese—93% of China’s population. Surprisingly, the other 6.5% occupy over 50% of China’s land area mainly to the west, i.e., the habitat of Tibetan, Uighur, and other population groups, some Buddhist and others Muslim. In Guangdong province in south-east China, tens of millions of Han Chinese speak mutually incomprehensible dialects (Cantonese, Hakka, Teochin), which were introduced into the area some 2000 years ago, but the bearers of these dialects, or rather distinct languages, constitute no *minzu* since they assimilated into the Han “nationality.” In fact, the incoming Hakka group soon lorded over the indigenous *pen-ti* people of South China. Most of these *minzu* have territorial concentration and hence enjoy a degree of administrative autonomy.

This, however, is not true of the most important *minzu*, the Muslims, first called *ta-shi* but since the 13th century *hui*. They are spread throughout the empire and have no linguistic distinctness, speaking (next to Mandarin) the local dialects as their mother tongue. Because this most important “national minority” lack territorial concentration, no regional autonomy status can be accorded to them. Although they were once recognized as a distinct minority in the 13th century (Yuan dynasty), there is little doubt that the first Muslims to arrive in China were not Central Asian “infiltrators” (via the Silk Road) but Arab traders coming already in the first Muslim century (which in a Chinese context means the Tang period) via the maritime route and settling in port cities, especially Canton.⁴ Their arrival was not viewed by the Chinese as the coming of another religion, but rather, naturally enough, as that of another bunch of barbarian foreigners. The first explicit mention can be found in the official T’ang histories which report that in the second year of the Yung-hui Emperor (A.D.651), under whose rule the princes of Bokhara and Samarkand also rec-

ognized Chinese suzerainty, an embassy of the third Khalif Uthman appeared at court. The visit almost precipitated a serious diplomatic incident as the embassy refused to "kow-tow" to the Emperor. A Muslim prostrates himself before Allah only! By the end of the century there was a sizable Arab merchant colony, living—like all foreigners—in a separate quarter. There were ups and downs in the relationship. Muslims crossing the steppes and the Pamir inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Chinese at the battle of Talas in North Turkestan (A.D.751), and Persians and Arabs plundered Canton in A.D.758. On the other hand, Arabs helped the government in A.D.757 to recover the capital cities of Ch'ang-an and Lo-yang from the An Lu-shan rebels. In 763 the T'ang court fled ignominiously from the capitals of Ch'ang-an and Lo-yang which were sacked by Uighurs and Tibetans. There were several such Chinese equivalents to the "sack of Rome," which, however, also had a positive effect. These disasters caused an exodus of the elite to the south which had always been a kind of frontier-area. With the elite's southward migration, the area became culturally Sinicized. By way of example we may cite the development of Ch'an (Zen). There was a "Northern School" and a "Southern School," with the latter finally dominating the history of this branch of Buddhism.

The Muslim case also illustrates the connection between developments inside China and events outside. The Chinese Muslims had adapted to Chinese material and general culture (language, dress) but radically isolated themselves spiritually. After all, they belonged to the Muslim *'umma* and this sense of identity agreed well with the Chinese perception of them as foreign barbarians, especially as filial piety was not at the center of their life. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, the Muslims in China became Chinese Muslims. The Jews were probably often identified with Muslims, not because of their monotheism, about which the Chinese could not care less, but because both did not eat pork. But unlike the Jews, the Muslims knew that they had powerful backing beyond the borders: the Islamicized Uighurs as well as the empire of the Abbasid khalifs. With the Mongol ascendancy in Asia and the fall of Baghdad (A.D.1238) everything changed, and the Chinese Muslims realized that they had to cope with a new situation. However, the Mongol conquest of China and the rule of

the Mongol Yuan dynasty brought about an unexpected turn in their affairs. The new rulers, to spite the conquered Chinese and teach them a lesson, adopted a policy of favoring the *su-mu* (non-Chinese population groups) and therefore also made use of Muslim man-power in their civil service—a development which, naturally enough, only increased Chinese hatred of Muslims. Marco Polo has left us an account of the role of Muslims at the court of the Great Khan. With the fall of the Yuan and the ascendancy of the Ming dynasty (A.D.1368) the Chinese put the Muslims back in their place, and the latter reverted to their total spiritual (as distinct from material) isolation.

The Mongols did not, at first, bother too much about Islam to which they converted only in the century after the death of Djengis Khan (1228). Taoism with its promise of the elixir of life was of more immediate interest to the Great Khan. One of the most epic journeys of the period, almost comparable to that of the Polo brothers, was undertaken by the aged second patriarch of the Taoist Ch'uang-ch'un sect, Ch'iu Ch'ang-ch'un, who traveled to Samarkand at the invitation of Djengis Khan.⁵ The Great Khan wanted to hear about Taoist techniques for prolonging life. The patriarch wanted official recognition and tax-exemption for his church, which he obtained as the Khan was greatly impressed by the wisdom of his visitor even without the elixir of life. As regards longevity the Taoist sage warned the Khan against the dangers of the Harem: "Sleeping one night alone contributes more to the prolongation of life than swallowing elixirs for a thousand days".

Islam was not the only religion to enter China. But unlike Islam, which kept itself completely separate, "The Buddhist Conquest of China" (thus the title of Erik Zurcher's classic study), from India via Afghanistan and the Silk Road, resulted in the complete Sinicization of this foreign, and hence by definition barbarian, import, and its total amalgamation with native Chinese traditions. So much so that to this day many Taoist scholars are unable to recognize the Buddhist elements in their system. The region in Central Asia known as Chinese Turkestan, between Kashgar and Dunhuang, from which Buddhism penetrated China, still is the most exciting as well as the most promising area of Buddhist studies (in view of probable new finds). But also the

stretch between Dunhuang and the capital Ch'ang-an was no empty space as regards the history of Buddhism. One example must suffice here. The Russian explorer Peter Koslov, following indications by earlier Russian explorers, succeeded in "discovering" i.e., reaching the Khara Khoto, south of the Gobi desert, the sands of which had covered the "dead" and "black" city. When Koslov approached the ruins he could not yet know that he was the first European after Marco Polo to stand on this spot. Already during his first excavations on the site (1907-1909) Koslov brought to light a unique treasure trove of (largely Tibetan-lamaist type) Buddhist (partly in Chinese but mainly in Tangkut) and iconography. The finds confirmed that the oasis existed already in the 5th century B.C.; it gained in importance in the 7th and 8th centuries as relations between China and its western neighbors extended; and it was conquered by the Tangkuts in 1035. During the next 300 years the Tangkut capital flourished and most of the 3500 items brought by Koslov to St. Petersburg (about 200 paintings on silk, paper, and wood; over 800 written or printed texts, including one in Persian; and, ceramics and pottery fragments) can be dated to the Yuan period (1280-1367). Its conquest by the Chinese in 1372 and a shift of trade from the Silk Road to the maritime route, brought about the decline and end of the city. Khara Khoto ("dead viz. black city") is the Mongol translation of its Chinese and Tangkut names. For about a hundred years Koslov's finds have been sleeping in St. Petersburg. In 1993 art works, from the 10th through the 13th century, stored in the Eremitage were exhibited for the first time, *nota bene* in Switzerland.

We went into some detail regarding Khara Khoto in order to show that Buddhism did not enter Ch'ang-an straight from Dunhuang only. There were other concentrations of Buddhist art and literature, i.e., of Buddhist religious life. Buddhism remained the only foreign religion to take root and become completely Chinese. Other religions also entered China, but always remained "foreign." There were Zoroastrian fire-temples in many Chinese cities. There may have been Jewish communities in addition to that of Kaifeng. Manichaeism spread from the Middle East to the east coast of China where we can still find the (ruins of the) only extant Manichaean religious building. Most of these religions dis-

appeared as a result of persecution (e.g., the Zoroastrians and Manichaeans) or total assimilation (the Jews). The Nestorian church, deriving its name from the Syrian theologian Nestorius (d. about A.D.451) and denounced by the "orthodox" Christian churches as heretical, had sent its missionaries all over Asia and was at first well received and tolerated in Tang China. A Nestorian stela written in Chinese but with additions in Syriac script was erected in 781 and can still be seen in the "Forest of Stela" in Xian as a reminder that China was never hermetically sealed off. But Nestorianism, like Zoroastrianism, was proscribed during the persecution of all foreign religions at the end of the T'ang period. The brutal suppression of Manichaeism in 842-843 was probably connected with the collapse of the Uighurs who had patronized that religion. The Buddhists, who never objected to the persecution of other religions, found themselves in 845 the victims of severe persecution, also described by the Japanese pilgrim-monk, Ennin (in China 833-847) in his diary, from which they subsequently recovered but without ever returning to their former position of power and glory.

We may sum up our incomplete review of what happened on the western frontier: much traffic, goods as well as humans (including military incursions), in both directions, mainly on the Silk Road and on the maritime route. We have not mentioned here the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrims who went to India in search of Buddhist scriptures and learning. But whereas the traffic consisted mainly of goods like silk or ceramics, no Chinese cultural influence seems to have percolated to the west before the 17th century. The cultural baggage brought by many small minority groups, whether they became integrated like the Buddhists, remained "foreign," or assimilated outwardly and remained isolated spiritually, like the Muslims, would seem to be more interesting and more significant than the merchandise that entered China from the west.

If our assertion that before the Manchu period only merchandise i.e., material goods flowed from China westwards, but not non-material goods, then the difference between East and West is noteworthy. No matter what goods were traded, they pale into insignificance compared to the cultural, i.e., political, artistic, and above all religious influences that transformed the areas east of

China. No doubt the region was relatively small compared to the vast expanse to the west: central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe with its *ultima Thule*, England. East of China, there was no immense, almost unending, landmass; but, apart from Korea to the north-east and Vietnam to the south, only islands and ocean.

Chinese culture began to develop (according to the revised chronology) in the second millennium B.C. (Erlitou, the Xia dynasty) and reached unprecedented heights during the Shang (16th-11th century: Erligang culture and Anyang phase) and Zhou (11th-8th centuries B.C.) dynasties, i.e., long before the unification of the empire under a centralized rule (the Han dynasty). Having used ceramics earlier on as an illustration let us now look at bronze instead. Not that fired earthenware was unimportant, and whoever wants to study the history of Chinese ceramics should, instead of reading books, spend some time at the National Museum in Taiwan. But since we are dealing here not with the history of Chinese culture but with its influence on the outside, we may as well mention the stunning collection of porcelain in the National Museum of the Philippines. No doubt these ceramics were not exported to the Philippines but were salvaged from shipwrecks near the islands. Many Chinese as well as Korean tea-bowls are registered in Japan as National or "Important Cultural Property." Korea plays a particularly significant role, as the Japanese, after successful wars against Korea, moved viz. "transferred" Korean potters to Japan. An impressive bronze cauldron, 133 cm. high and weighing 875 kilo was cast in the Anyang period (1300-1030). There were also lighter Anyang products such as a bell and a bronze vessel weighing 154 and 117 kg. respectively. Few brought to Japan but, more importantly, the art of bronze casting was quickly learned, together with other arts and ideas (above all script and literacy) by the Japanese. The bronze art of Japan flourished suddenly, without any preliminaries, as the post-Han cultural invasion. What tourist has not marveled at the giant Buddha statue (Daibutsu) in Nara (8th century), 16m. high and weighing 450 tons? The equally famous Daibutsu in Kamakura (13th century) "only" weighs a hundred tons⁶.

Limitations of space do not permit a detailed discussion of Chinese influence in the East and we shall therefore restrict our-

selves to Japan. But before focusing on Japan a word must be said on the “East Asian Rim” as a whole. The teachings subsumed under the name of Confucianism—and let us not get lost in endless discussions about what exactly this term signifies—seem to have developed in the first millennium B.C. and became official state ideology under the Han. The last, pre-Han, Chin emperor, favoring the “Legalist School”, is said to have persecuted the Confucians and to have burned the Confucian canon, though some scholars believe that the story of the burning of the canon is a later Confucian invention, designed to blacken the image of the anti-Confucian Ching emperor. But this is not the place to go into the history and development of Confucianism. For our purposes it must suffice to say that Confucianism was the dominant state-cult and ideology. Whether Confucianism is a religion or not is neither here nor there in the present context. It certainly has religious dimensions⁷, but above all it served as the official ethos and ideology of the ruling bureaucracy (i.e., the scholarly mandarin elite) and as the legitimation of imperial authority. It is true that some mandarin administrators and officials despised both Buddhism, that foreign barbarian intrusion, and Taoism, the magico-mystical superstition of some intellectuals but mainly of the lower classes. Others felt attracted to these systems, but in a rarely private capacity; their status, sanction and legitimation derived from the dominant state-ideology: Confucianism. It was this system which spread as the official ideology of the rulers and the ruling bureaucracy throughout East Asia. In fact, it is this tradition, even more than the spread of Buddhism, which enables us to speak of East Asia as a geo-cultural unit similar to our notion of “the West.” Germany is not France, and France is not England, yet we consider the concept of the West a valid generalization. Similarly, China is not Korea and Japan is not Vietnam, their Confucianisms are very different; yet we can legitimately speak of East Asia, meaning the underlying unit by “Confucianism”. The subject has acquired new relevance in view of the question, obsessing sociologists since Max Weber, to what extent the varieties of Confucianism (the “canonization of tradition” as Weber called it) obstructs or facilitates modernization. It is enough to compare stagnant China (before the present) with the high-speed modern-

ization of Japan at the end of the 19th century.⁸ There is little to be said on the subject except referring the reader to the landmark study edited by G. Rozman, *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and its Modern Adaptation* (1991). We shall limit ourselves here to a highly suggestive anecdote reported by Hayashi Razan, the great Japanese 17th century neo-Confucian scholar. (The story is told in Razan's biography by Fujiwara Saika and re-told in the 19th century Tokugawa Jikki). Having conquered Japan, the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu is said to have observed: "You can conquer a country on horseback, but you cannot rule it on horseback", implying that for this reason Ieyasu, his Buddhist leanings notwithstanding, found Confucianism indispensable as a legitimating socio-ethical ideology. The anecdote is doubly interesting as it replicates a story told of the first Han emperor Kao-tsu, thereby illustrating the continuity of the Confucian ethos. Impatient with Confucian notions of he rebuked the scholar Chia-I "I have conquered my empire on horseback and I am going to rule it from there", to which Chia-I replied "Your Majesty, one may conquer an empire on horseback, but one can never rule an empire on horseback." A more contemporary illustration of the continuity of Confucianism is provided by the People's Republic of China. After the vilification of Confucius, accompanied by a great deal of violence, during the Cultural Revolution it comes as a bit of a in 1984 the traditional birthday of the great Sage was officially celebrated by the People's Republic.

We have alluded before to the Chinese "cultural invasion" of Japan. This invasion was massive and far-reaching. At the same time it also illustrates one of the most astounding characteristics of Japanese culture: the ability to absorb foreign influences, allowing them to transform Japanese civilization was at the same time transforming these influences and adopting them to Japanese culture. The Chinese "invasion" appears, at first sight, to be a matter for historians of religion, since its bearers were Buddhist monks coming from China and from sinicized Korea. It is impossible in our limited compass to describe the magnitude, both in depth and in width, of this invasion, especially as the Buddhist monks carried not only sutras in their baggage but a whole culture. No doubt Buddhism clashed at first with the native religious tradition, subsequently

called Shinto. But soon Buddhism prevailed at court, and the subsequent history of Japanese religion is that of a syncretistic amalgamation of the two. Occasionally Shinto rebelled (like some Chinese Confucianists and Taoists) against this un-Japanese foreign import, and it is enough to remind ourselves of the violent outbursts during the Meiji modernization when Shinto was (ab)used as a chauvinist ideology: “Down with Buddhism” (*haibutsu kishaku*). There is not a little irony in the very name of Shinto. The original native religion had, as far as we know, no name. The word Shinto, and not only the characters with which it is written, is Chinese and signifies “the way of the [ancient] gods” as opposed to the new Buddhist “deities.” In pure Japanese the characters should be pronounced “*kami* (the original Japanese term for gods and supernatural forces) *no michi*.” The irony is compounded by the fact that the canonical books of Shinto, almost Holy Scripture, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*, edited by imperial order in the 8th century but containing ancient Japanese pre-Buddhist mythological traditions, were written not only in Chinese script (which is obvious since there was no other script) but also in Chinese! The Chinese monks brought not only Buddhist religion; but also script and literacy; Confucian ethics; centralized imperial rule; an administrative system facilitated by the establishment of a network of roads; and a lot more cultural baggage. But the Buddhism they imported from China was not only mixed with Taoist elements but also thoroughly “confucianized”. One example must suffice here. The father of Japanese Buddhism, revered as a saint and a bodhisatva, the prince-regent Shotoku ruled on behalf of the Empress Suiko (592-628). He was the first to draft a set of principles of government and social ethics known as the “Seventeen Articles Constitution” (A.D. 604). Although ostensibly a Buddhist document (the second article explicitly enjoins Buddhism), the first article begins with the words “Harmony is to be valued [above all]”—which is a literal quotation from the *Analects* of Confucius. The Buddhist saint Shotoku Taishi also introduced Chinese court ceremonial (including cap ranks), the sending of embassies to China, and much more. To conclude this particular subject the reader is reminded that the title of the Chinese emperor was “Son of Heaven (*tien*).” The Japanese form of Chinese *tien* is *ten*. There can

be little doubt that the Japanese designation of the emperor as *tenno* is indebted to the Chinese terminology.

Taoist elements, as has been suggested before, came to Japan as part of Buddhism but also in the form of magical practices, as well as cosmological and astrological beliefs. The latter attained official status after divination had become (as in China) a governmental activity affecting major Japanese monks visited China, often staying years with their masters and returning home after having received full ordination. This is particularly true of Zen (Chinese Ch'an), and a few western enthusiasts realize that there is more Taoism than Buddhism in Zen. Many Japanese Buddhist masters wrote their tracts in Chinese. Nevertheless, the teachings and rituals of the institutionalized Taoist church, unlike the "universality" of Buddhism, was too specifically Chinese to be acceptable to Japan. Let another, probably authentic, anecdote illustrate this. The Hsuan-tsung emperor (713-756) greatly favored Taoism. It was a period when Japan increasingly modeled its administration on Chinese patterns. In the year 753 a Japanese embassy appeared at the imperial court and humbly asked His Majesty to allow the Buddhist master Chien-chen (Japanese Ganjin) to accompany them back to the Japanese imperial court. The emperor suggested that instead of a Buddhist master he would send an eminent Taoist sage. This imperial offer almost led to a serious diplomatic incident when the Japanese embassy had to explain, no doubt with some embarrassment, "Our Ruler does not like Taoism." In other words: Taoist elements (medicine, divination, the cult of certain deities) percolated to Japan but not Taoism as a system, whereas Confucianism and Buddhism (in its already taoised and confucianized form) did so in a massive way, influencing not only the religiosity of the common people and of the elite but also the social ethos and the system of government.

West or East, material goods, or art, philosophical and religious ideas, China was both closed and open. Its future seems to lie with increasing openness.

Notes

1. See B. Watney, *English Blue and White Pottery of the 18th Century* (London, 1963), 113.
2. See R. van Gulik postscript to his Judge Dee detective story *The Willow Pattern* (1965), 172-3.
3. See M.A. Yin, editor, *Chinese Minority Nationalities* (Beijing, 1989).
4. The Arab quarter of Canton plays a prominent role in one of van Gulik's Judge Dee stories, *Murder in Canton*.
5. See Arthur Waley, *The Travels of an Alchemist: the Journey of the Taoist Ch'ang-ch'un ... from China to the Hindu-kush at the Summons of Chingiz Khan, recorded by his disciple Li Chih-ch'anq* (London, 1931).
6. (See Wen Fong, *The Great Bronze Age of China* (1980), and Vadim Eliseeff, *Bronze dans l'Art Japonais* (1976).
7. See R.L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (1990).
8. See Kato Shuichi or P.R. Will, *The Resilience of Confucianism in Contemporary Societies* (1991-1992).