

REPORTS/OPINIONS

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REPORT ON THE FIRST EU-CHINA HIGH LEVEL CULTURAL FORUM IN BRUSSELS: REFLECTIONS OF A PARTICIPANT

On the occasion of the 13th EU-China Summit on October 6 – 7, 2010, probably upon the initiative of the Transcultural International Institute and its Chinese counterpart in the agreement with the President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso and Premier of the People's Republic of China Wen Jiabao, a cultural forum was held in the Berlaymont building of the European Commission as an attempt to promote cultural understanding and future cooperation between the countries of the European Union and Mainland China. A letter distributed to the participants on their arrival stated that it “aims to bring together key researchers and theorists – both European and Chinese – to engage in cross-cultural reflection as to what might provide the foundation for an alliance between the European and Chinese civilizations.” The organizers even had an idea to conceive it as a “Cultural Davos”. In some respect it could be similar to Davos, since the organizers and their sponsors intend to make it durable, to proceed in the future in the form of annual meetings held alternatively in China and in Europe.

It is true that this was an unprecedented opportunity for European scholars, artists and sociologists both from China and Europe to meet with the financial help of the highest representatives of both political bodies, but the short hint concerning the exchange of ideas about their respective political systems, was probably a compromise from the European side.

The topic and themes of the forum may have been prepared at the beginning by the International Transcultural Institute and its Chinese counterpart, but from the correspondence the future participants received, and from the changes in the lists of the names, it was clear, that in the last stage of preparations, the Chinese Ministry of Culture exerted pressure, and the outcome was that preference was given to the political scientists. If among the European participants there were two, among the Chinese there were three political scientists. Instead of the Chinese Transcultural, the most influential body in selecting and sending the delegates to the Brussels forum was the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

This accent on the political aspect of the problem in relation to the Chinese initiatives and more liberal reforms was an important result of the new socio-political development in China at that time. Wen Jiabao was highlighted by many as a reformer, but he, as one

Taiwanese journalist said, was a “sole crusader”¹ and not supported by other members of the Politburo Standing Committee. Just three weeks after the end of the 13th EU-China summit the *China Daily* published an editorial entitled “Political orientation crucial. Actively, steadily and prudently push forward reforms in the political direction for stability and prosperity.”² This article appeared under the name of Zheng Qingyuan 郑青原, which may be a pseudonym. In China some commentaries expressing the opinions of political leaders are often published under pseudonyms, such as Liang Xiao 梁效 during the Cultural Revolution. The aim of this article is “to stick to the correct political direction. Only by upholding the correct political direction can we effectually ensure the realization of the goals of political reforms, and provide strong political support for the Party’s and country’s prosperity and long-term peace and stability.” It is necessary to ensure that “people are the masters of the State, and the aim is to enhance the vitality of the Party and the country, to mobilize the people’s enthusiasm. In accordance with the law, we carry out *democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision* (underscored by me, M.G.)” It is probably necessary to point out the way the PRC goes and wants to go is not the Western way of democracy and all these proclamations should be regarded as a speech typical of Chinese high level politicians.

Even if this comment has been published three weeks after the Brussels October meeting, it expressed to a great extent the situation before it. It was necessary for all who are for the reforms and advocating their necessity to be on the alert and vigilant not to commit any mistakes on the way to “a prosperous and strong, democratic, civilized and harmonious modern socialist state...” Probably therefore the changes in the team of participants.

The forum was opened by the key speech of Umberto Eco, entitled: “Globalization – Gaps, Melting Pot or New Game.” The famous Italian semiotician, philosopher and writer tried to explain globalization in its broader meaning as a phenomenon produced already in the 19th century and probably he found the sympathies of the Chinese participants when his first quotations were from the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, that so early the situations arose that “immensely facilitated means of communication” and the “intellectual creations of individual nations become common property.” This “prophetic insight” by the two Marxist classics was a bit exaggerated in Eco’s conception, since this idea was discovered at least twenty years earlier by Johann Wolfgang Goethe.³ Otherwise his speech was an interesting essayist’s exposé of the negative and positive sides of globalization: the problems of immigration, the displacement of manufacturing and service jobs from high cost locations to those

¹ Peh Shing Huei. China to Do Reforms Their Way. In *The China Post*, October 30, 2010, p. 4.

² *China Daily*, October 28, 2010, p. 8.

³ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, “*Gespräche mit Eckermann*”. In Ernst Merian-Genast (ed.), Vol. 1, Basel, 1945 p. 214. On January 31, 1827 Goethe said the following words: “National Literature has little meaning today; the time has come for the epoch of world literature to begin, and everyone must now share in hastening its realization.” *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* was published in 1848.

with the lowest wages, the exploitation of the foreign workers, the internationalization of crime and the drugs market, international terrorism on the one hand, and the rise and development of the new more liberal democracies on the other. The overthrowing of the undemocratic regimes in the 20th century (he probably meant the case of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and its satellites), spreading of tourism and of travelling as a means of international communication. He mentioned his Chinese experiences when recalling the Chinese bookshops full of translations of Western writings, but he probably did not realize that these translations are not always good, hence not always valuable, or at least not reliable. Probably Eco would have done better if he had chosen the “concept of Beauty” as a subject of his talk.

The second speaker who originally should have dealt with the problems of globalization was Qiu Xigui 裘锡圭, a well-known paleographer. Why he was chosen for the Chinese delegation after the intervention of the Ministry of Culture, is difficult to deduce. His talk: “Lao Tzu and Nietzsche” had a philosophical orientation and only with reservations could it be included in the section “Worldviews” that was put on the program of the conference. Probably it was his *Belesenheit* in much of what have been written in China since 1980 about Nietzsche, and the atheistic spirit both thinkers proposed in their writings. In his paper there was no hint about the Western works on the subject. Professor Qiu does not speak any foreign languages.

Julia Kristeva, another well-known French-Bulgarian semiotician, psychoanalyst and also writer, read a paper: “Europe/China: les axes de l’échange.” Julia Kristeva is a China fan, she is a licenciate of Chinese studies, but she does not regard herself as a Sinologist. She looked at this forum from two angles: the political philosophy in which this forum took place and what could be the results of this historical encounter. Its aim was “to rehabilitate culture in the new political philosophy” and “how to *fédérer* (to ally) universal humanity through and in multiculturalism.” Certainly it is a kind of Utopian dream not possible to realize in the near future, or probably never. It was the only paper of the forum I found on the web: <http://www.kristeva.fr/europe-china.html> with the photo of young Kristeva, now *Professor Emerita*, with the Chinese national flag, Tiananmen with Mao Zedong, and other impressive buildings of China today. Was it because the Chinese appreciated this as the new political philosophy? What new political philosophy should it be? The one advocated by the anonymous Zheng Qingyuan?

The next speaker Professor Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳, Philosophical Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, would probably agree with many of Kristeva’s opinions, especially about the need to formulate a new political philosophy, although he did not highlight such a philosophy in his contribution: “To Deepen Enlightenment: From Methodological Individualism to Methodological Relationalism.” Zhao Tingyang wrote about the new political philosophy for the contemporary world in his last book: *Huai shijie yanjiu. Zuowei diyizhexue de zhenzhi zhaxue* 坏世界研究。作为第一哲学的政治哲学 *Investigations of the Bad World: Political Philosophy as First Philosophy*.⁴ Did Kristeva read this book? In Zhao’s speech no new political philosophy is specifically mentioned but the stress is put on criticism of the “methodological individualism” of the

⁴ Peking: Zhongguo Renmin daxue chubanshe, 2009.

scholars and philosophers, economists and political scientists from Thomas Hobbes to John Rawls. He characterizes it as a descriptive methodology not leading to the problem-solving methodology which could help to stop “military and economic wars, usurpation of resources, social struggles, international disputes and intercultural clashes” and other evils of our global age. He supposes that the biggest mistake is the “rationalization and justification of selfishness,” although what has been done in the realm of the individual rights should be regarded as a great success. Zhao proposed to develop a Confucian methodological relationalism, where relations rather than the individuals should be stressed and priority should be given to relational rather than to individual security and interests. This kind of relationalism (a new term in English?) means a “new universal approach to analysing human actions and values in terms of *relations* rather than *individuals*.” According to Zhao it will bring not only relational security but also ensure self-interest and happiness. But who could believe this after reading Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子 (fl. 298 – 238 B.C.) and the Chinese practices connected with the concept of *guanxi* 关系 (relations), nepotism and bribery?

Similarly to Zhao Tingyang, Professor Zhou Hong 周弘, Director of the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences spoke on the theme: worldviews, especially connected with the so-called harmonious society *hexie shehui* 和谐社会 now propagated by the Chinese in China and abroad. This is much idealized in China. Zhou Hong bypassed the contemporary problems and devoted her attention to some of the worldviews from Plato’s *Republic* to Tommaso Campanella’s (1568 – 1639) *The City of the Sun* and from the ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi 墨子 (5th – 4th cent. B. C.) to Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 (1613 – 1682) but she did not proceed further and if she did suggest something it was the same harmonious society as a hope for the future. Similarly Professor Lu Jiande 陆建德, Director of the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, escaped the problem of worldviews when in his paper he discussed the so-called “Esperanto Dream” of the Chinese radical intellectual to destroy the Chinese language as a tool for communication and to replace it with Esperanto.

Modernities as a theme for this high level forum were a better choice than worldviews. Worldviews are many and they are difficult to define. Apart from finding some different patterns of world views in this changing world of overall globalization which will proceed in the future, it is an impossible or Sisyphean task to more closely analyse them for such socio-political entities as the EU and China. Modernities, or the multiple modernities, that comprise the “many different kinds of practices of modernization around the world” (see the programme of the EU-China high level cultural forum) were more suitable and brought more concrete and useful information. The best contribution, at least according to my opinion, was that by Professor Björn Wittrock, Swedish sociologist, who certainly by mistake, was put into the worldview section of the programme. An abstract he presented to the participants and to the audience was probably the whole paper to be published later in the proceedings now in preparation. As a pupil of the famous Israeli scholar Shmuel Eisenstadt, together with the Sinologist Benjamin Schwartz, the main theoretician of the ancient Axial Age in the last decades, was very well prepared to offer his own vision of the “emerging paradigm of multiple modernities” of our time. It is necessary to agree with him that much of

what has been done in the study of the modernization processes was focused on “technological and narrowly existential change” and neglected the cultural underpinnings and premises of the changes in the social sphere. The development of the societies along the lines of the “industrial revolution”, “democratic revolution” are to some extent similar, although at different times in different countries, when we have in mind the West only, but even more when we take into account other parts of the world. “The modern world” according to Wittrock “emerged out of the process of industrialization, urbanization, and political upheaval on the north-western edge of the Eurasian landmass.” Some important changes, of course, not as important as in Europe or in America, also came into being in Ming China, Tokugawa Japan or in Mogul India. The modernization process in Europe, starting from the 14th – 18th centuries was different and more consistent and perseverant in the field of human rights, academic freedom and gradual secularization of the religious life. The liberal market economy took the place of the regulated mercantilist one already in the 18th century, constitutional republics instead of the absolutist monarchies, a legal order and protection for all citizen of the state, although even in Europe not everywhere. As to the question of one modernity or many, Wittrock supposes that it is not possible to expect that the “liberal democracy and market economy”, as these are obvious in North America and Western Europe, are “the sole legitimate models of social organization.” On the other hand he thinks that “there is no reason to expect any fundamental institutional innovation that would transcend these types of liberal institutional arrangements.” One and the same political and social order will not be possible in this world. The indigenous traditions in different parts of the world are so strong that they will not fully disappear. More European collaboration in the study of modernities is inevitable. Closer programmes of scholarly studies and collaboration within the framework of the European Research Council should be considered. Wittrock does not take into account the Chinese possibilities, but together with Julia Kristeva he called for more active participation of Sinologists in these discussions and in the research. By the way, I was the only one Sinologist present in this forum!

The most interesting among the contributions to this forum was a power-point lecture by the eminent Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. He is an unconventional, controversial and eccentric visionary, not always caring for the aesthetic needs of customers and connoisseurs, but always provoking with the creation of new mammoth buildings. In contradiction to Wittrock, Koolhaas did not present an abstract, similarly to some other participants, mostly Chinese political scientists. It was probably because much about him was known both in Europe and in China due to his work on designing the Central China TV buildings; he regarded a short introduction to his work in China as a waste of time.

The most clear and comprehensible for the audience was the exposition of Professor Piotr Sztompka, a sociologist from Poland, who spoke about the lessons from Europe and China of our days in relation to trust, cultural values and the economic crisis of our days. His main interest was to show the causes of the global financial crisis. He supposes, following the teaching of Adam Smith and Benjamin Barber, that the collapse of trust was the main reason. The spirit of collectivism, group solidarity, respect for family and education, helped the countries like China, to overcome the difficulties

better. It is at least a slightly idealistic view on the whole problem. Sztompka did not take into account the other aspects of the problem: the poverty of the masses on the great part of the Chinese territories, low wages, migrant workers, imperfect legislation, abuse of power, bribery, a still unfinished international currency battle, just to mention some of them. On the other hand he is right to assert that cultural values are extremely important for our globalized world.

Professor Xu Bing 徐冰, Vice President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Peking, whose works of art are rated highest among the Chinese artists at the international auctions, also presented his paper without an abstract. He is as unconventional as Koolhaas, but more enigmatic, since up to now nobody was able to analyse satisfactorily his works, especially his most famous Tian shu 天书 Book from the Sky which became a milestone of the modernist '85 Movement. Two Chinese scholars in this field: Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, Co-Director of the Visual Centre of the China National Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, and Zhu Dongli, another expert on art, originally expected to participate, did not come. From the Chinese participants apart from Xu Bing, Professor Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生, alias Lao Zhu 老朱, from Peking University, tried to explain "the Chinese perspective" in re-evaluation of the European art preserved in the Musée du Louvre. The paper by Han Shaogong 韩少功, a well-known Chinese writer, was more connected with the last theme of the forum: "trans-culture and trans-subjectivity" than with the "concept of Beauty" where it should belong according to the wish of the organizers. I was also asked to contribute to this theme, although it is not my field of study. My paper: "*Quo vadis ars sinica?* Reflections on the Sino-European dialogue," is misleading to some extent. It does not say much about where modern Chinese art is tending, but it analyses the interflow between European and Chinese art from around the half of the first Christian millennium up to our days. Nobody can foresee its further development in the future, although it is possible to ponder over the ways to enhance it.

The last theme was well treated by Professor Alain le Pichon on the basis of his not "*modeste*", as he mentions in his abstract, but very rich experience of more than a quarter of a century in different countries of the Western world, Africa and Asia.

The Chinese political scientists spoke in the session "modernities", without presenting their abstracts, or presenting only a "catalogue of questions" as Wang Shaoguang 王绍光, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a non-official member of the Hong Kong Government's Commission on Strategic Development, in his "From 'Modern' to 'Potential Modernities'", where according to him, "a certain new type of socialist modernities" may be found among these "potential modernities."

Most active among the Chinese participants was Professor Huang Ping 黄平, Director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Peking. He was a Chairman of Modernities and of the Conclusion (the last together with Alain le Pichon). From his many contributions to the discussions, I claim that not Qiu Xigui, but he was the factual head of the Chinese delegation. From the year 2008 Huang Ping is also a Vice-President of the International Transcultural Institute.

According to the objectives of the EU-China high level cultural forum the participants received on the first day, this meeting was "designed to be the framework

for an open dialogue on the ancestral values of two civilizations, on their models of society, their different patterns of knowledge, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic. It has to be forward-looking, taking into consideration the changes in the world.” The organizers wanted us to be critical and constructive.

For the next high level meeting it is necessary to start with preparation much earlier than than in 2010. More attention should be given to selection of the invited personalities and more representatives from outside the Western European countries should have the possibility to participate. Among 13 EU active participants 5 were from France and from other countries (Italy, Germany, Sweden, The Netherlands, Greece, Poland and Slovakia) only 1 participant was present from each. It is necessary that more Sinologists should be invited. The stress on the epistemological, ethical and aesthetic aspects was not pointed out in vain. Even if the “whole field of human sciences and anthropological knowledge” may be the target of this common endeavour, I suppose that the more than necessary stress on the political aspects by the Chinese scholars was one of the weak points of this forum.

One more remark: Attached to the first letter addressed to the participants written on July 28, 2010 and undersigned by Alain le Pichon, Director of Transcultural International Institute was a Draft Project Plan for a China-Europe Cultural Summit (中欧文化论坛草案), where China and Europe are stressed, and not the PRC and EU. “In history, China and the countries of Europe made great contributions to both the social progress of human beings and the development of civilizations; and they are the birthplaces of many eminent thinkers, philosophers, and artists whose great achievements have become part of the spiritual wealth of human society. Some of their achievements are still playing a fundamental role of great importance in the development of society and evolution of critical thinking even nowadays.” The PRC is not the whole of China and the EU is not the whole of Europe. Why not try to find in the future an appropriate way that the whole of China and the whole of Europe can participate in the cultural exchange between these two great cultural “commonwealths” of our world?

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