

Introduction

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Urbaniana University Centre for Chinese Studies (2007-2017) we are publishing once again, in a single volume, the *Chinese Lessons* that the Centre organized in the period 2008-2015¹.

The *Chinese Lessons* were academic events that gave lecturers and students the opportunity to converse with renowned national and international scholars who, from a historical, philosophical and anthropological perspective, have made an original contribution to our knowledge of the complex Chinese world. In a particular way, the topics of the *Lessons* examined in depth the two main goals of the Centre for Chinese Studies. The first goal is to study the relationship between China and Christianity, paying special attention to its well-structured and manifold missionary history; the second goal focuses on the research on topics concerning Chinese culture and society in its most varied expressions, especially the study of China's religious traditions and anthropology. Since 2007 these two goals have inspired the activity of formation, research and

¹ Founded in 1975, the Centre for Chinese Studies was inactive for about 20 years (1986-2006). It was reborn on 1 February 2007 as part of the Missiology Faculty of the Urbaniana University, which took a keen interest in its development and academic planning. We are grateful to the Urbaniana University Press and the Urbaniana University Journal for publishing individually the various *Chinese Lessons* from 2008 until 2015 and for its generous commitment to the publication of this volume.

cataloging of the unpublished sources in the Chinese language that are preserved in the library of the Urbaniana University.

The wider goal of the Centre is to strengthen, develop and spread a knowledge of China that is constantly founded upon a study of the "local Chinese knowledge", and of the visions of the world and daily practices that differentiate the social, cultural and religious context of China. Thus we made every effort to avoid distorted representations and stereotypes regarding China, which, very often, emerge from a latent attitude of self-reference that, in many different ways, can hide behind the mindset of people and institutions vis-à-vis cultural and religious worlds that are different from their own.

In other words, we have tried to reduce the distance that separates us from the cultural universe of China, which many believe to hold a world vision and systems of meaning that are totally parallel to others, as well as ritual practices that are often looked upon as incomprehensible. This distance is often the result of a simple and banal ignorance of the world of the other, or it is generated by real and proper forms of ethnocentrism and racism, hatred and violence. In different ways, these forms continue to permeate daily life practices and are a threat to peaceful human co-existence. In a world in which physical differences have been reduced, others have been created which are more complex, more devious and more difficult to deal with.

In connection with this, the *Chinese Lessons* attempted to create shared places of dialogue and research between the lecturers and students of our University and scholars hailing from national and international academic institutions, cultivating in every individual event a passion for obtaining knowledge about the diversity of the other. Paradoxically, it is precisely this greater knowledge of social, cultural and religious differences that make us more like each other and, at the

same time, more capable of recognizing and sharing the sense of what it means to be “human beings”, which is one of the topics that are very dear to the Chinese religious traditions².

Browsing the pages of this book, the reader will have also the opportunity to observe that the seven *Chinese Lessons* all share in the difficult and prolonged effort to translate a culture in terms that are comprehensible to another, and make a comparison between cultures that are so different from each other, even though this effort may be limited in its results and, sometimes, even impossible. According to Paul Ricoeur

the translator’s task is not to move from single words to a sentence, to a text, to cultural totality; on the contrary, the translator, imbued with the spirit of a culture through extensive reading, descends from the text, to the sentence, to the single word³.

The different approaches (historical, philosophical and anthropological) that the authors use in these *Chinese Lessons* exemplify the methodological observation of Ricoeur and offer important considerations on the delicate question of translation and cultural comparison. Furthermore, for anthropology, “extensive readings” are, first and foremost, real persons with whom the anthropologist dialogues, compares himself and by whom he allows himself to be guided.

² For a more detailed discussion of these topics, see the introduction to the book by A. DELL’ORTO, *Racconti di templi e divinità. La religione popolare cinese tra spazi sociali e luoghi dell’aldilà* (Collana Asia Orientale 13), Aracne Editrice, Roma 2014, 17-23.

³ Cf. P. RICOEUR, *Tradurre l’intraducibile. Sulla traduzione* (a cura di M. OLIVA), Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2008, 16-17 (quote from Ricoeur translated from the Italian by S. McKend).

The *Lessons*, therefore, are not only *on China*, but also *Lessons from China* which can stimulate us to a cultural self-criticism, challenge our own social practices, rethink our visions of the world and, for those who are engaged in the proclamation of the Gospel, purify missionary models and practices.

In a recently published book, Peter van der Veer examines the complex question of cultural comparison and offers some pertinent ideas in connection with the joint attempt by the authors of this volume in the field of comparison and cultural translation. He writes

comparison is ... in the first place a question not of the right research design, the correct choice of cases to be compared (the "what" and "how" to compare), although this is obviously important, but of an awareness of the conceptual difficulties in entering "other" life worlds. That "otherness" should not be exaggerated, since everyone is in some way interacting and communicating with everyone else. Moreover, anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes⁴.

Although it points out some fundamental aspects of the questions surrounding translation and cultural comparison, the hypothesis of van der Veer limits itself to highlighting the conceptual difficulties that we encounter in entering into the living worlds of others. Nevertheless, these difficulties are not only conceptual, but also experiential: indeed, it is through bodily experience that we enter into contact with different "alterities" which, in their turn, orient our physical and conceptu-

⁴ P. VAN DER VEER, *The Value of Comparison*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC – London 2016, 11.

al journey. A journey which we imagine to be always respectful and dialogical, and which discretely knows how to identify the differences and the similarities between multiple social and cultural universes which today, more than in the past, we can easily encounter and inhabit.

The individuation and analysis of possible connections between different semantic universes is the characteristic that unites the various essays contained in this volume; from different perspectives, each one of them contributes to our understanding of reality, China and ourselves, ever open to new conceptualizations. This is, probably, the principal goal of comparison and cultural translation.

The Seven Chinese Lessons⁵

The first *Lesson*, which marks the official reopening of the Centre for Chinese Studies, is by Professor Lionello Lanciotti, Emeritus Professor of Chinese Philology at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Dean of the Italian sinologists, and bears the date of his 82nd birthday, 12 March 2008. In his enthusiastic *Lesson*, entitled ***Does a Sinology Exist? The Purpose and Importance of Chinese Studies***, Professor Lanciotti examines the most important stages of his sustained commitment to the development of Chinese Studies in Italy; he offers interesting observations on the central question of the *Lesson*, namely, if a sinology actually exists, a question that is quite challenging in the international context of Chinese Studies. In the essay, the

⁵ In this volume, we chose to republish the seven *Chinese Lessons* in the original languages and in the chronological order in which they were presented at the conferences organized by the Centre for Chinese Studies in the period 2008-2015.

author also dwells on the goal and importance of Chinese Studies at a time in which a profound knowledge of, and a sincere dialogue with, the Chinese world are becoming more and more urgent. With an elegantly autobiographical style, the *Lesson* of Professor Lanciotti may be considered the spiritual testament of a life entirely dedicated to Chinese Studies⁶.

Dao-Logos: Laozi and Philo is the title of the second *Lesson* by Professor Bernard Chien-chiu Li in 2009, when he was President of the Fujen Catholic University of Taipei. Professor Li, in the second essay that we present in the volume, begins with a philological analysis of the Chinese character *dao* which is composed of two elements that refer to "head" and "heart"; overall the term acquires the meaning of "something on which one walks, a path or a road", eventually taking on meanings such as "method, norm, principle". These different connotations are well summed up in the Italian term "la Via". Whilst in Confucianism the term *dao* is used with the meaning "the way to heaven or to humanity", in Laozi (VI century BC) and Zhuangzi (circa 4th century BC), *dao* denotes a metaphysical sense. *Dao* is the ultimate reality, but also the first principle that is subject to the form, substance, being and change. Among the Neo-Platonists, Philo of Alessandria (circa 25 BC –25 AD) proposed the theory of the *logos*, a theory that constitutes the nodal point of his entire system of thought. Professor Li postulates a profound affinity between the *dao* of Laozi and the *logos* of Philo and offers elements of comparison between the two philosophers.

To mark the 400th anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci, Professor Nicolas Standaert, of the Catholic University Leuven, held the third *Lesson* in 2010: ***Matteo Ricci and the Chinese: Spaces of Encounter between the Self and the Other***. In the essay, the

⁶ Professor Lionello Lanciotti died in Rome, on 29 June 2015, age 90.

author points out that some characteristics of the life and missionary strategy of Matteo Ricci are seen as fundamental elements of the "Ricci method". For the most part, this method has been presented as the result of the openness and empathy of Ricci himself, thus neglecting the influence of the other. Professor Standaert shows that the role of the Other – in this case the Chinese – in the formation of the missionary's identity, in conjunction with the "spaces of encounter" that are progressively created within this relationship, are two aspects that must be considered at least as equally important as Ricci's activity. We could also say that the Other made it possible for Ricci to become what he became. Without the Other, the transformation would not have been possible.

In 2014, Professor Elisabetta Corsi of the "Sapienza" University of Rome held the fourth *Lesson* entitled *The Mission in Images. The European Figurative Culture and its Spreading in China in Early Modernity*. The essay presented in this volume explores the role that religious images take on as instruments of evangelization, in the context of the missionary strategy adopted by the Jesuits in China. Professor Corsi shows how their commitment is the object of an accurate selection as regards the content and context of the images, in order to regulate their use by the local Catholic communities.

In 2013, Professor Stephan Feuchtwang of the London School of Economics presented the fifth *Lesson* entitled *Hospitality to Ghosts. A Chinese Question and a Challenge to Humanity*. The essay is based upon the observation that hospitality is an anthropological universal. Nevertheless, as it is practiced in the different cultures and societies of the world, hospitality is surprisingly ambivalent. From these initial observations, Professor Feuchtwang explores the particular ambivalence of hospitality which, in contemporary China, is reserved to the divinities and spirits. The essay then illustrates an important prac-

tice of Vietnamese hospitality towards the spirits of hostile foreigners and attempts to verify whether or not it can be interpreted, as the ethnography of Heonik Kwon suggests, as an archetype of international relationships or of universal hospitality. The commemoration – or disowning – of mass deaths, as historical events, is contrasted with the identification of spirits without a name, an aspect that awakens important questions concerning the ethics and the daily and necessarily local conflicts between different forms of the universalization of empathy towards suffering.

Social Ethics and Personal Responsibility in Late Imperial China (XV-XVIII Centuries) is the title of the sixth *Lesson*, held by Professor Paolo Santangelo, Emeritus Professor at the “Sapienza” University of Roma, in 2014. The essay stresses that an anthropological analysis of social ethics and the meaning of personal responsibility in Chinese society from the 15th to the 18th century calls for the identification of the universals and the specific nature of moral emotions and the collective imagination of the Chinese. Professor Santangelo discusses some characteristics of the representation of moral sentiments, the interiorization of sanctions, the role of the sense of personal responsibility, as well as some myths, symbols and values that contribute to how we understand the ethics of late imperial Chinese culture.

The *Lesson* of 2015, entitled *Convergence and Conversion: The Virgin Mary and Mazu as Maritime Patroness in Late Imperial China*, is by Professor Ronnie Po-chia Hsia of the Pennsylvania State University. The essay examines some missionary sources on the cult of Mazu as it was practiced by the sailors of south Fujian, on whose ships many missionaries sailed to China. The author compares the devotional practices dedicated to Mazu with those dedicated to the Virgin Mary as the patroness of sailors, suggesting a theory of cultural convergence that may help us to understand conversions to Christianity.

Acknowledgments

The *Chinese Lessons* organized by the Urbaniana University Centre for Chinese Studies in this first decade, and the essays that we present in this volume, are the result of a collaborative synergy which, over the years, has become more participative and effective. We wish to express our most sincere gratitude to all who, in different ways, have contributed to the realization of the *Lessons* and the production of this collection of essays⁷.

But the most sincere words of gratitude are for Zhao Hongtao, a collaborator, researcher and lecturer at the Centre for Chinese Studies who, since 1 February 2007, has been an irreplaceable and valuable help, he is a tireless and serious scholar, but above all a faithful friend. It has been my privilege to share the work on this book with Zhao Hongtao.

Alessandro Dell'Orto
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⁷ Our special thanks to Steve McKend for translating the introduction.