

Chinese Paradox: Where are Chinese Monuments?

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Abstract

The bareness of the Chinese monumental landscape is the result of various factors, the analysis of which deserves an inquiry into Chinese *modus vivendi*. Daoist imprimatur and its recognition of nature's superiority is but one. Buddhist sectarianism, Chinese fluid conception of time, Chinese iconoclasm, are phenomena that, largely, have concurred on creating a periodic tabula rasa of cultural heritage. Making sense of this is simply to recognize that artistic representations are not only metaphors for understanding social dynamics, but also a magnifying glass on the relation between people and their past.

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Introduction

I have come to believe that not much the study of China's urban past, but the study of Chinese attitude towards the past is the key to the understanding of present-day China. Why, save a few exceptions, such as the Great Wall, the oldest living civilization on Earth has not left physically visible evidence of the previous thousand years? This means, in turn, that we have to analyze the Chinese heritage on two levels: On the level of the philosophical structure where we find the source of conflict and on the level of social structure where iconoclastic behaviors take place. Neither level is sufficient by itself. Following next, by applying to the wide range of human science, I will try to prey on the Chinese weltanschauung to provide a few answers. If I fail, I will have at least raised a few new questions.

A short tale by Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), describes the struggle of a man who after falling off a horse remains bodily paralyzed but his mind remembers everything.¹ In other words, the trial of a man who cannot forget anything. His mind, his memory had turned into a huge garbage heap from which nothing could be removed and where, as a result, no thinking process could ever take place - for to think is to forget, to put off, to erase the implacability of time. China is like Borges' protagonist, China does not forget. Students memorize ancient idiomatic expressions, Confucian precepts, political jargon, and yet, very little physical evidence is left of Chinese millenarian history in form of monuments, historical buildings, palaces, temples, statues, war memorials, and archaeological sites. A quick objection to moving to this manuscript is that China has several important Buddhist cave temple sites, numerous early brick and stone pagodas, and a vast number of excavated tombs and other archaeological sites. The objection is correct only in part, for a great part of these ancient sites, pagodas and towns have been rebuilt with new materials with the clear purpose to look "vintage." In addition to this, to avoid misunderstanding, I feel the need to be plain in my exposition. What interests me the most is the fact that in China, unlike in Europe, sculpture and architecture were regarded by the elite as artisan activities thus of no great importance. What was then at the basis of such a belief? I am not a historian but I will try to enact as one in Aristotelian terms, I will simply relate what has happened and by so doing, I hope, to gather enough material for a general theory which will have more norms than exceptions.

Do we need monuments? According to the Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl (1858–1905), a monument can be understood in terms of "commemorative value" thus bearer of collective memory. By having "historical value" a monument becomes a historical document and a silent witness, it is saturated with "age value" which I understand in Dilthey's term as *lebensideal* or Hegel's concept of *zeitgeist* roughly translated as 'the spirit of an epoch.'² Age value ultimately transcends other values, because it is not linked to a particular national style, in Riegl's words "Age value is the recognition that memory does not exist in the form of the old, but in the old itself."³ Ergo, time becomes criteria of quality, the viewer is brought into culture, the individual sees in the fading monument evidence of his own mortality. Such a factual historicism is surely affected by some sort of artistic positivism that aspires to detect signs of greatness with scientific evidence. But it is also

well-rooted in the Western project of grandeur in that the age value, the integral aspect of life in any given time (*lebensideal*), has to take shape in the material form of a monument to exist. As anything else in the West, this is also a belief that has a constitutional and legal legitimation. The Athens Charter (1931) and later The Venice Charter (1964) determine an act of preservation of historical monuments and buildings not just from the erosion at the hands of time and men, ergo destruction, but also from contemporary values.⁴ The International Court of Justice parallels the violent annihilation of cultural heritage to a quasi-genocide act:

The destruction of historical, religious, and cultural heritage cannot be considered to be a genocidal act (...) At the same time, it also endorses the observation that where there is a physical or biological destruction there are often simultaneous attacks on the cultural and religious property and symbols of the targeted group as well, attacks which may legitimately be considered as evidence of an intent to physically destroy the group.⁵

The Enlightenment taught us to be tolerant and open-minded. Modern liberal politics, conviction on basic human rights, the conception of crimes against humanity, moral philosophy as a tool for political science; without the Enlightenment none of this would be true. The American historian David Lowenthal traces this phenomenon back to the eighteenth century when Europeans began “to conceive the past as a different realm, not just another country but a congeries of foreign lands endowed with unique histories and personalities. This new past gradually ceased to provide comparative lessons, but came to be cherished as a heritage that validated and exalted the present.”⁶ Thus, there is an association between past and cultural value, the past becomes the insignia of a common identity more than a glorious heritage. And the past is made available by shreds of evidence. However, the impulse to preserve the past in the form of monuments is not universal. Here is where China comes on board. While it is inappropriate to define China as a land of revolutions, it is equally unrealistic to consider China a peaceful society all along. I would start my analysis from its roots; Chinese lack of monumental evidence is to be researched in the roots of its own philosophy. If I were called to explain the reason for such a deficiency, I would theorize over the existence in China of a counterculture, perhaps a variety of countercultures, which did not directly instigate destructiveness, but, because of the ambiguity of their message, have made destruction possible.

Daoism and the Written Word

Let us begin with a comparison. Western art is representational. Art acts as a substitute for human reality, and is thus associated with conveying an impression, a representation indeed of truth. Monuments in this sense embody the spirit of an epoch, while some sort of perpetuity inhabits the monument. On the other hand, Chinese aesthetics had no desire to let art mimic reality; hence a monument is simply an object with no spirit. Nature in Chinese art is not realistically presented but it is spare in details and figurative; nature in Chinese art is symbolic of human character without being transcendent. Although weak as historical explanation and perhaps an oversimplification in cultural terms, the significance of the con-

trast between Chinese and Western aesthetics can be traced back to the Nietzschean distinction of Dionysian and Apollonian values. Dionysian cultures value only those who have touched the limit of existence--the purpose of life can be realized through an extreme psychological event, such as a mystical experience of self's annihilation [ego]. With William Blake the Dionysian man believes that the path of excess leads to the place of wisdom. On the other side of the spectrum, the Apollonian type attributes the highest value to moderation, he values rationality over intuition, sobriety over drunkenness, self-control over instinct, in Nietzsche's words, even in the exaltation of the dance he "remains what he is, and retains his civic name."⁷ Western aesthetics does not fall entirely under the Dionysian cultural character, yet Nietzsche's thesis regarding Greek tragedy suggests that it is a combination of the Dionysian and Apollonian. Meanwhile, at least a major aspect of Chinese aesthetics exhibits an Apollonian logic. Western aesthetics is sin-orientated, it is not beauty itself but the representation of a gap of beauty, it is a perishing beauty. To fill the emptiness of the human condition, Western societies have felt the need to be intoxicated by an idea, Christianity for the slave, Nationalism for the citizen, Communism for the worker, the Enlightenment for the philosopher. Art deals with unrestrained impulses, sudden desires, intense emotions, impossible distress that the artist has to console. It plays out of metaphors and allegories; it lives out of excess in accordance with Western existential demand for inebriety. Because of excessive wisdom, Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx and performed his doom; out of love for humanity Prometheus was tortured; for the sake of knowledge Faust lost his soul; without knowing either God or devil but love the young Werther committed suicide. Man relates itself to God vertically, submitting to an intelligence he cannot comprehend, but challenging it in his most romantic and metaphysical attempts. Man struggles against nature because of curiosity and ambition, pride might as well be the heritage of the fallen human. The universe was first fixed, changeless, and immutable, it became chaos since Copernicus took man out of the center.

Chinese aesthetics does not have a God to refer, thus the notion of an insurmountable fate is rejected. Guilt and tragedy have been sidelined, mysticism ignored, the abstract is absent. Instead, it has a preference for moderation and temperance; unconcerned with the divine, the hereafter, or the unseen, but grounded on human affections and life circumstances. Confucian tradition has placed the meaning of life not in the afterlife but within the sensible world, hence art rarely transcends the limits of secularity but moves within the solid realm of the Euclidean space. It comes with a severe moderation and consequently does not have pretenses of immortality. Inevitably, Daoism has been an earthquake on the plane of Chinese philosophy for it broadened the Confucian world-view by demanding spiritual transcendence. With Laozi (6th century BC) and Zhuangzi (369-286 BC), the transition from "humanization of nature" to "naturalization of humans" is complete. The collective engagement with the social realm, the circus of interpersonal relationships of the Confucian-centered system is replaced by the individual encounter with the universe, man's nature is fulfilled only if he is to follow Nature, hence harmony becomes heavenly rather than human. Daoism has a transcendence that Confucian thinkers did not have, nature or heaven is far superior

to humanity or the artificiality of the human world and that is because one is eternal and the other contingent; unity is attained, but expanded to the cosmos. Human happiness, which is to be found in harmony, is achieved when men follow the social order that is State hierarchy linked to the natural order of the cosmos. A case in point is in the Chinese traditional oil paintings. The endemic subordination of men to nature is represented by the relation between landscapes and people: Bucolic scenes always take the front stage, while human figures, if there are any, appear in a lower focus, quite small compared to the economy of the overall picture. Not surprisingly, this approach had tremendous consequences not just in Chinese art, but for the whole of Chinese civilization. One of the most important scholars of Chinese culture, Li Zehou (1930), observes that in five thousand years, Great Wall aside, China has not left behind physical evidence of human power. Because Daoism comes with an ontological contrast between the eternity of nature and the transience of men, China developed a specific attitude towards material objects which is a disposition not to cling to physical objects. By Zehou's account that is because "Chinese art lacks the artificial, material demonstration of human resistance to or conquest of nature."⁸ Instead, what we have is nature's self-revival, man's submission to it and at last the promise of unity. In short, China did not consider its history being violated when historical buildings collapsed or antiques shattered, as long as they could be replaced with new ones. In fact, as the sinologist Frederick Mote already noticed, a monument, in the Chinese mindset, has never been an epitome of civilization's greatness but of man's caducity:

Chinese civilization seems not to have regarded its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as they would be replaced and restored, and their functions regained. In short, we can say that the real past of Soochow [Suzhou] is a past of the mind; its imperishable elements are moments of human experience.⁹

F.W. Mote presents China and the city of Suzhou as having a tradition for antiquarianism but also rooted in Daoism whose spiritual foundation deeply affects architectural visions. As the everlasting cyclicity of yin and yang is the guarantee for the continuity of history, similarly, old things can perish and be replaced by new ones. My perception is that China contemplates the past as imperishable only when it becomes a mind experience, which is a non-material past, so I justify the confidence behind the Chinese extreme sense of historical continuity. In other words, historically transmitted are not monuments, but ideas. At this altitude we enter another range of issues, how do we objectify ideas and historical achievements if not with architectural structures? Europeans arriving in China for the first time, because of some sort of innate historical sensitivity, feel the absence of historicity. Westerners tend to believe that the past in order to exist, has to be tangible. Ergo it is that according to Alois Riegl's classic essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin" (1903), monuments are not only supposed to be old, but they must show their age.¹⁰ And, I would add, its originality, not in terms of uniqueness and creativity but in terms of authenticity of material and location. The crux of the matter is that the European is looking for bricks and stones, while Chinese sense of continuity and historicity lies somewhere else.

As a matter of fact, the essence of Chinese civilization lingers within the art of writing: “The Chinese language as a factor in Chinese cultural continuity (...) the substance of which has often been said before and suffers from oversimplification.”¹¹ Otherwise stated, the written word exemplifies history. This would explain why the old art of calligraphy is considered in China a supreme artwork, regarded as a spiritual process of harmony and proportion. Unlike printing, it is not a regular structure, but a skillfully composed dance of strikes and dots that combined together define a balanced whole. Due to the structure of Chinese characters, calligraphy mirrors not just language, but beauty and morality; also it is the visual expression of Chinese philosophy of self-cultivation, and of course a form of painting. The image of China as a ‘civilization of writing’ is sustained, among others, in a valuable essay by F. W. Mote, “A Millenium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow,” (1973) whose case study makes my manuscript somewhat less original.¹² Mote reflects on the Suzhou’s Great Pagoda to emphasize how the notion of historical authenticity is different if we move from the West to China or vice versa. The Great Pagoda was built in the third century, 250 feet tall, -the highest building in China at that time,- already collapsed by 1072, and then rebuild over and over again because of continuous damages and destructions.¹³ Today not even a stone of the original pagoda remains: “This history is typical of China's ancient monuments. No building with such a pedigree would count for much as authentic antiquity even in the United States, much less in Rome.”¹⁴ In the Western view, there has been an artistic contamination in terms of material, size, and location in the relationship between the artwork and the surrounding context, which in the end irremediably compromised, if not vanish, its age value. As it is at present-day, the monument is a twentieth century structure, why then the Chinese recognize the building as the very same one built in the third century? That is because China does not recognize the past in material objects but in literary forms, in other words, China, unlike other civilizations, values a past of words and not of stones. Chinese written recorded documentation is dated back to the Book of Documents, one of the five Confucian classics, a collection of speeches, events and rhetorical prose relating as far back as the IV-III centuries BC. On the topic, Mote writes: “China kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind’s documentations of the past. It constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words, and caused it to function in the life of its present.”¹⁵ That is to say that to China the importance of physical objects, as a monument can be, is of secondary importance. A sense of lasting lies elsewhere; immortality can only be achieved through the written word. I believe that by observing Chinese cities at large, it would not be a simplification to claim that Chinese past is a historical event that can be read, but cannot be seen.

Somewhere along the line, the physical absence of the past in China, a history that lacks ancient monuments, is well described by the Belgian-Australian literary critic Pierre Ryckmans (1935-2014), better known by his pen name Simon Leys, in a famous essay “Chinese Attitude towards the Past” (1986). While trying to prove the presence of the past in Chinese present, Leys dusts off the notion that the Chinese language has remained virtually unchanged for the past two thousand years. Whether or not the conclusion is accurate, it can still provide an important

scaffolding for the evaluation I am addressing, namely the coexistence in Chinese history, if not philosophy, of spiritual preservation and material destruction. Leys's theory was inspired by the French poet and sinologist Victor Segalen (1878-1919) who at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) led two long archaeological expeditions in the interior of China to conclude at last that Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable materials. Based on a sort of 'in-build obsolescence,' that was not for lack of techniques or materials, but the need to rebuild frequently.¹⁶ Segalen, synthesizes Chinese aesthetic philosophy by observing that Chinese eternity does not inhabit the building, as it does in the West, but its builder. Otherwise speaking, China evolved the notion that there is no immortality in artifacts or monuments, but in people. Continuity and permanence are not guaranteed by inanimate objects, but by the memory of posterity, and thus by the transition to another generation. In this vein, the ephemeral nature of Chinese architectural constructions is simply a way of accepting the voracity of time. Leys beautifully condenses the Chinese sense of everlastingness with the expression "man only survives in man" which is to say that history, memory survives only through the agency of the written word.¹⁷

Chinese Iconoclasm

By and large, in Chinese context, the fall of one dynasty after another was accompanied by the burning and looting of art treasure and imperial heritage. The fall of the Western Roman Empire suffered a similar fate. When, Rome was ransacked by barbarian hordes with St. Jerome writing "The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken,"¹⁸ the whole West perished with one city. Waiting for the Renaissance, ten centuries of darkness was the price Europe had to pay for the widespread destruction that had reduced Rome's material heritage into ruins. Mindful of the lesson, the modern age had more respect for monuments than for the people. With the due proportion, if we had to imagine the Visigoth's pillage recurring in the nineteenth century, the equivalent would be Napoleon destroying the Sistine Chapel when, in Rome, he crowned himself emperor (1804). It did not happen. Instead, Europe maintains the landmark of each epoch: The glory of Greece and Rome, medieval towns and architecture, cathedrals and palaces of the Renaissance, neoclassic monuments, paintings and sculptures of all ages mark the city as much as modern glassy buildings do. In China, all this is absent. China built no Coliseum, no Parthenon, and no Pyramids; no temple comparable to Angkor Wat or Borobudur. Instead, we recall the destruction operated by waves of internal revolutions. However, describing Chinese iconoclastic motions as representative of some sort of historical instability would not be appropriate. The overheard fact that China constitutes 'the oldest civilization in the world' must logically be attached to versions of stability, continuity, and duration. My understanding is that the willingness to annihilate the past is bound to the belief that a cultural cleansing can somehow accelerate historical development.

Iconoclasm is an extreme response to an event or a thing: "Indeed, it is perhaps the most extreme response: instead of ignoring or adoring the thing, instead of moving or modifying it, iconoclasts destroy it—and for no other reason than it exists."¹⁹ China has historically been a conservative nation, concerned about

enduring rather than developing, and duration is often synonymous with repetition, harmony, equilibrium, and unity. The integrity of a nation was placed at the service of stability. Religious belief, time's conception, Chinese language, Chinese philosophy and society as a whole ably confirm this statement. The 5000-year-old cult for the ancestors, the imperial examination system, the social organization of family clans and kinship, the sense of continuity given by rituals, values that assume hereditary characters as if they were material possessions, the dynastic political apparatus, the extremely complex bureaucracy, the everlasting mandate of party members are all attempts to maintain China as it is. Hence, based on the assumption that repetition brings stability, however overlooking the side effect of economic and cultural stagnation, China becomes iconoclastic when the orthodoxy is threatened.²⁰

Chinese orthodox culture did not engage in violence; in fact, it actively repulsed it. Confucian principles of humanism are not built on transcendental visions of immortality but pragmatic desires of harmonious society and nonviolence, thus a condemnation of war and crime by all means. Political philosophy educated to persuasion rather than force, children were punished even for being hit by others: It indicated their inability to stay out of potentially dangerous instances (Wolf 1972: 66–73). However, modern history seems to challenge this perception. Positioning the discussion in a post-Opium Wars chronological scenario, the Taiping Rebellion or Civil War (1850-1864) in terms of devastation was by far more horrific and radical than what came afterward.²¹ It had multiple significances. Surely, it was a nationalist revolution for it was meant to overthrow the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), thus it was anti-Manchu. It was a religious upheaval for Hong Xiuquan, the self-proclaimed brother of Christ, had planned the conversion of China to Christianity; and it was a socialist mass movement for the rebels asked for fundamental reforms of social and economic institutions, among which land equal redistribution. WWII aside, the loss of life and the sheer destructiveness has no equal in human history. It is estimated that sixteen provinces were devastated, and six hundred cities razed by fire, the cost in lives by far the most dramatic in the nineteenth century. A century later, the May Fourth's project of science and democracy (1919), in its attempt to dethrone *Confucius and His Sons*, perceived tradition as a burden.²² What the May Fourth Movement truly does is tear apart four thousand years of traditions, family systems, old moralities, customs, and institutions. The Historian Lin Yu-sheng defined the anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth era as a 'totalistic iconoclasm' tracking its source in "the necessary priority of intellectual and cultural change over politics, social and economic changes."²³ Intellectually and emotionally, the May Fourth's generation felt to have obligations to the future and assumed that the past had to be rejected as a whole. Written records bear witness to students who rejected their name and their family, denied their fathers, and denounced family bounds as a form of slavery. They proclaimed individual self-expression, gender equality, and women's right including sexual freedom. At stake, thereby is not only the gender dynamic, but also the entire cultural apparatus, which no longer corresponds to the needs of the civil society: Superstitions, divination, geomancy, magic pills for immortality, foot binding, female infanticide, all had to be left behind. The struggle to break free from the past

and traditional values seemed indispensable to individual and national survival; meanwhile, fanatic fervors brought the destruction of manuscripts, texts, archives, artifacts, temples in the name of an abstract commitment to a new 'civilizational discourse.' At last, with the foundation of the People's Republic (1949) the reactionary discourse in Chinese modern era assumes the resemblance of a rough transition from Confucianism to Maoist thought, once again about one emerging form of conservatism taking over a dying conservatism. In historical terms, as during the anti-dynastic rebellions, we have assisted to an adjusted version of the Thucydides Trap that is the quasi-inevitable clash between a rising orthodoxy invading the cultural space occupied by a declining orthodoxy. Such a radicalization culminated a few decades later in the fanatic years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Ideologically thought as an experiment on collective democracy, an alternative way to both capitalism and Soviet socialism, the revolution eventually ended up being an ideological delirium, a political witch-hunt that turned the Chinese clock of history backward. Again, the revolution was extremely iconoclastic in the way it washed away millennia of cultural reference. Everything that had some reminiscence of bourgeois-Western ideology was destroyed, denounced as 'poisonous weeds.' The wreckage was unleashed and extreme. Fashion, in the form of high heels, haircut, skirts, jeans, cosmetics, toothpaste was forbidden. Shops providing services such as tailors, antiques, florist, photographers, suppressed. Domestic animals were slaughtered because symbols of bourgeois decadence introduced by foreigners. Culture, in the form of material objects, the likes of books, music, furniture, and ornaments, smashed to pieces. Public monuments, ancient scripts, museums, churches, temples, pagodas, and graves pulled down. Not to miss anything ninety-seven percent of Tibetan monasteries, as many as six thousand, were demolished. But ravaged was also everything that reminded of the pre-Maoist China in terms of old ideas, culture, costumes, and habits, nominally the 'Four Olds' campaign, for some sort of 'destroying the old to restore the modern.'²⁴ The Nazis did the same in Europe but they stole what they did not burn. The Red Guards left to fester what they did not destroy.

Iconoclasm is of course more than the destruction of objects. The Greek root denotes the smashing of an icon, in this sense the Open Door Policy, besides the well-known economic significance, is no less than another form of destruction acting as a catharsis.²⁵ It is the recent past, in its excess, the icon that is shattered. Post-Maoist cultural production, broadly post-1976 China, is heavily iconoclastic if considered within its historical context, as it tends to wash away what it recalls. The implosion of the Mao-Era, based on egalitarianism, ascetic morality and self-denying modes, leaves room for the routine of globalization, a sociological phenomenon somewhat inevitable in the transition to capitalism. But it is also the dawn of a hedonistic-narcissistic period, an aesthetic moment of disintegration of patriarchal values, a collage of controversial *weltanschauung* assimilated into the global space that China is quickly becoming. In this regard, Confucian philosophy and communist ideology have to coexist with capitalist economy and auto-referential values, all in all a stage of ideological vacuum whose victims feel the need to buy a new iPhone model every six months to satisfy their desire to belong to modernity. It should be self-evident by now that the marketization

theorem framed an additional version of Chinese postmodernity whose outcome was very much unexpected indeed. This is no longer the age of ideology, but that of aesthetic drills. As it happens in a moment of paradigm shift, the iconoclastic expression is not just ethical, but the process of deconstruction is substantially visible, materialistic so to speak. Precisely, in the past decades falling under the incessant march of bulldozer is the fate of Chinese cities. Commercial buildings, boutique hotels, rooftop restaurants replace the one-story courtyard and the traditional *hutongs*; concrete, steel, and bricks are the moving backgrounds shaping post-Mao landscape. Longstanding inhabitants are forced to abandon their houses with pecuniary compensation and relocate out in the outskirts; memories and cultural heritage are torn down to give the city an international standing. High-tech environment is but one aspect of the new urban policy; isolation, wastage, traffic congestion, industrial pollution are the less visible consequences. Thus it happens that in the past thirty years Beijing has been transformed from a cultural relic into a landscape of stones, the traditional horizontal skyline of Chinese cities has been replaced by phallic big towers representing the authority of capitalism and the promise of a better life. Demolition and reconstruction are the Chinese battlefields of the twenty-first century. Once again, the refusal to be moved by the immensity of ancient monuments is the display of a spiritual design, a search for an alternative cultural shelter. The destruction of an ancient building is no more than the iconoclastic extreme response to things, their being nothing but things.

Buddhist Cyclical Karma

China, not as a state but as a civilization in terms of history and size, does not deal with chaos but equilibrium. Western societies relate themselves to God and therefore the philosophical speculation is either a denial or a reaffirmation of metaphysical elements; China relates itself to society itself, therefore the philosophical speculation never engages with metaphysics but social ethics. Harmony is the Chinese understanding of time: No happenings can be erased permanently for once the previous order is split apart, the elements (cosmic forces) adjust themselves in a new equilibrium of eternal, cyclic movements where life repeats itself. Everything comes from being and being comes from non-being is Lao Tzu endorsement of the doctrine of cyclicity, expressed through mystical and cryptic passages: “Being far-reaching means returning to the original point.”²⁶ Stability, I have above mentioned, is the key concept to decode China, but it is also pivotal to the essence of Chinese time. Confucianism is an ethical system concerned about the well ruling of the state, at its best it draws a Plato-like ideal society in which the good relationship between the ruler and the citizens plays out as the main factor to ensure political solidity. So did Mencius (372-289 B.C.) focusing more on the goodness of human nature and people’s right to revolt, yet both of them Confucius and Mencius, are bearers of a philosophy of social organization. The principal aim was to form an ethical stratum of intellectuals who could lead the path for a just and durable government. Mohism (5th century B.C.) enlarged the Confucian filial piety to a message of universal love but simultaneously would emphasize the oligarchic order of the State: Promoting the worthy without regard for their social background. The doctrine for one side was a remedy against nepotism and incompetence in the art of governance, but it was also a reaction against

the proliferation of ideas otherwise tantamount to disorder. Even more radical was the Legalist school in the latter half of the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.): The adherents stressed the standardization of the process, which is devotion to the state reinforced by a system of rewards and punishments. With a lighter approach, Daoism reserved a room for metaphysics dusting off the notion of yin, the female passive pattern, and yang, the male dominating force. The dualist schema is used to explain practically every natural phenomenon: From the alternation of day and night, to the duty of a wife towards her husband, from seasonal changes to the rise and fall of dynasties. On one side, the balance between the two elements maintains harmony, and on the other side it guarantees the permanence of the process. Yet because the constant is the movement itself rather than the changes it brings, nothing is final. Thus, albeit the outcome is a momentary equilibrium, the final goal reveals a society projecting itself into eternity. If we adjust the magic spell of circularity to the course of Chinese history, hence events repeating themselves toward another order, Daoism stands as the ideological justification of Chinese socio-political status.

More precisely, by not having a god to refer to, China has felt vulnerable in front of nature, out of fear China did not challenge it, did not compete against it; rather than that China felt the indispensable need to come to terms with nature. Moved by a principle of stability, history has been deprived of movement, and the universe has been organized as an eternal return of the same. Ancient Chinese thinkers viewed the world as a complete and complex organism where events happen the way they happen because of their position on the ever-moving cyclical universe, thus without chasing after the future they based the core of a civilization essentially on the historical present. The circularity of Chinese time is a chain of events -repeating themselves alike the fluctuation from one dynasty to another-, guaranteed by the ineluctable alternating of yin and yang in which man and nature create a correspondence of laws, constantly changing and constantly equal. Such a philosophical point of view, i.e., cyclical changes, the everlasting coming back of everything, made the Chinese aware that the ambition to overcome the erosion of time, and fight the laws of nature was in fact sheer vanity. When Buddhism arrived in China and much later Christianity with the Jesuit missionaries, they ordered the world religiously and brought along with them the idea of a transcendent deity, hence the impossible gap between men and divine. The credence in the after-life comes with the concept of responsibility, the ability to plan the future and for human beings a chance to foresee themselves in it. But China did not accept it because from the very roots of Chinese philosophy nothing transcends humans, as to say China cannot conceive an existence beyond the realm of nature. Against this background, a monument was not going to change the transitional essence of human beings, nor the futility, stillness of the entire historical process. In this spirit, Chinese iconoclasm, as I have elaborated above, becomes a side effect of some eschatological visions; the explanation for the absence of physical heritage is to be searched in the Chinese ambiguous version of transcendence.

Reason is to be found in the Daoist notion of cosmic crisis and above all the Buddhist conception of karma. The five cardinal precepts of Buddhism are: Not to kill, steal, commit adultery, tell lies, or drink intoxicating liquor (Chen 1973:55).²⁷ But

then, legendary prophecies, the messianic eschatology inherent in classical Buddhism, remind the elite, -the chosen ones, those that will survive to see-, that for the Great Peace to be accomplished, the old world has to be subverted. An apocalyptic battle bringing semi-total annihilation has to be fought, family bonds destroyed to an extent that “Fathers, sons, and brothers did not know one another.”²⁸ Professor Richard Shek reminds us that by the fifth century, a complete eschatology of messianic salvation did develop in China, with sectarian beliefs and groups waiting for the arrival of a messianic figure. Both Daoism and Buddhism in the late Han period (206 B.C.-221 A.D.) moved around the notion of a cosmic crisis, which is a moment of cosmic disasters such as floods, epidemics, earthquakes, but also the moment mankind’s moral degeneration reaches its nadir. Example of an eschatological movement in China, though not fully messianic, is the Yellow Turbans Rebellion (184 A.D.): A peasant revolt against the Han Dynasty in which salvation was promised in exchange for good and moral governance. In the end, the rebels were crushed but they set the path for the messianic scene. Next on the line, the Maitreyan cult led by the monk Faquan (515 A.D.), and the White Lotus Movement of Han Shantong (1351 A.D.) were both major eschatological movements associated with devotionism and messianic dreams of salvation. Their fanatics cry “Buddha should rule the world” ended in failure but not without having left behind anti-dynastic and anticlerical bloody campaigns.²⁹ Yet for our discussion, the attention is less about sectarianism than it is about its drastic consequences. Before the world is redeemed, misery and decay have to be eliminated. Hence, this is the moment the current establishment loses legitimacy, family ties are severed, and the oppressed seize the weapons. The rebellions become anti-clerical, monks and nuns slaughtered, temples are leveled, texts and statues put to the torch, and millions starve to death. The *Longhua jing* (lit. Dragon Flower Sutra) comes with terrifying images containing the horrors of the final judgment: “There will be avalanches and earthquakes; the Yellow River will overflow its banks and multitudes will be drowned. Then the locusts will come and cover the earth, devouring what little crop there remains. Rain will come down incessantly and houses will crumble. . . . In the *guiwei* year, widespread epidemics will occur (...).”³⁰ And because of a universal correspondence between cosmic and human forces, destruction involves also the social contract. The apocalyptic destruction is prophesized as unbearably cruel: “Cruel violence was perpetrated against the officials, who were slaughtered and cut into slices, to be offered as food to their wives and children. Those who refused to eat were in turn dismembered.”³¹ Volens nolens, the violent nature of the rebellion, and the uncompromising attitude of the believers transform the consoling power of religion into an act of fanaticism. By way of example, homicide becomes an act of compassion for to kill a man is to save him from pain, it frees the soul from corporeal burdens; stealing brings equality; the more atrocious death is, the more glorious the reward will be in the afterlife. So it is that death, regardless of its modality, is no more than entrance into Heaven:

“Noncapital punishment will enable one to avoid Hell, but is not enough to reach Heaven. Death by strangulation will ensure one ascent to Heaven, but there will be no red drapes to wear in celebration. Death by decapitation will guarantee one entrance to Heaven, wearing red drapes. Death by slow slicing will ensure one’s entry in a crimson gown.”³²

With this frame of mind, death procured or suffered was disregarded, for in both cases that of the redeemer or that of the victim, death is compensated with the entrance to paradise, the everlasting life, and the final salvation. Hence, when killing is explained as deliverance from social injustice, and death as liberation from existential burdens, there is absolutely no deterrence against violence perpetrated in the name of Heaven, aimed against the state, the individual, or things.³³ At this altitude, given this philosophical-religious imprint, it seems to me that the belief in the inevitable cyclical dissolution of the physical world, and transitional intervening periods of darkness, have relevant implications in the explanation of Chinese loose attention to its monuments. To China the concept of violence was clearly entangled with a global vision of the universe, thus to some degree, destruction in all its facets appeared normal, if not simply banal.

Conclusion

To conclude this manuscript I need to recall the introduction. Behind a civilization's attitude toward the past, there are clearly aesthetics and philosophical beliefs. Referring to Western aesthetics might help to better decipher China. Since at least ancient Greece a metaphysical assumption seems evident: art is an association between beauty and truth. If art reflects the divine nature of human beings, the divine element of nature, and if nature is rational then God must be rational. By the same token, art must be an expression, of course limited, spoiled, somewhat vague, of reason and in the last stance of truth. Western art is then representational and hides a pretense of immortality. On the other hand, in ancient China, art has never been a substitute for the category of 'truth' in the sense of Western aestheticism, but a mimic for goodness and beauty. The image in traditional Chinese aesthetics never transcended the idea to the level of Western abstraction, and that was because the artistic expression bore a social synthesis, rather than metaphysical, between man, reality, and the world. Yet, man, reality, and the world continually change; it becomes difficult to fix them into a static form as a monument can be. "What is the use to the modern man of this 'monumental' contemplation of the past?" wrote Nietzsche in his essay "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life."³⁴ China rejects monuments perceived as no more than a great stone instead of the eternal human moment. Of course, some might look at it as Chinese wisdom: The ability to regard history as an elusive concept rather than a material object. Much research remains to be done, but the lack of Chinese monuments is probably to be found in its philosophical-religious heritage. The iconoclastic aspect is no more than the other face of a tradition that values change as inevitable. And it is on those bases that Chinese history looks more like our own.

Endnotes

- 1 "Funes the Memoriosus"—original Spanish title "Funes el memorioso."
- 2 Published in 1903, Alois Riegl's "Der moderne Denkmalkultus" [The Modern Cult of Monuments] remains the pivotal art-historical text on monuments. Famous is his distinction between "intentional" monuments, monuments built for a specific purpose such as to pass their memory on to descendants (antiquity and the Middle Ages) and "historical" monuments (nineteenth-century on), which belong to the modern era, intentional in their origin but the context, for which they were intended, vanished long ago. Even so, they are still preserved as emblems of a generalized and superseded past.

- 3 In Lampakros (2014), available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/557046>
- 4 Protecting the historical and physical context of a site or building is the common responsibility of nations. The Athens Charter (1931), The Venice Charter (1964) and the Declaration of Amsterdam (1975) are important events of European architectural heritage. Each of them aims at urban planning with a special focus on conservation, protection, and restoration of historical sites. For the past, traditional elements and originality have to be maintained, and for the present, contemporary architecture should be of high quality because it is the heritage of tomorrow.
- 5 Bosnia and Herzegovina vs. Serbia and Montenegro, Application on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ICJ Judgment of 26 February 2007, 4, 124, para. 344.
- 6 David Lowenthal, (1985, xvi).
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche (1999, 43).
- 8 Li Zehou (2010, 96).
- 9 Mote (1973, 51).
- 10 Alois Riegl, (1982 [1901]), 33.
- 11 Derk Bodde (1981, 5).
- 12 On a personal note: The embodiment of Chinese past as a mental experience rather than monumental has already been expressed by Mote, F. W. "A Millenium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow" (1973). At the time of writing my manuscript, I did not know that my intellectual jargon was less original than what I had thought. However, Mote's conclusions are also less sound. By way of illustration, F.W. Mote dismisses the difference between Western antiquity in the form of physical objects, and Chinese lack of monumental past, with a quick note: "A different attitude towards the way of achieving the enduring monument. Chinese civilization reveals very clearly, in its architecture, that the impulse to build in China, and its counterpart in the Western traditions, were vastly different." While the conclusion is correct, Mote seems to ignore the reasons behind such an ontological distinction.
- 13 Mote clarifies in a note that the "Porcelain Pagoda," in Nanking, taken down during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, was taller; statements about its height range from 276 to 300 feet.
- 14 Mote (1973, 50).
- 15 Ibid., 51.
- 16 Somehow relevant is Mote's note on Chinese engineering skills: "The prevailing styles and modes of Chinese architecture appear to represent choices made in consciousness of alternatives. There is ample evidence that Chinese building skills included elements not unlike those of the Greeks and the Romans in areas of engineering, in understanding the principles of the arch and the barrel vault, and in techniques of masonry construction (Mote, 1973, note 18).

- 17 Cf. S. Leys, "The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past," *China Heritage Quarterly*, Vol. 14 (2008). Available online at http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=014_chineseAttitude.inc&issue=014.
- 18 St Jerome, Letter CXXVII. To Principia, s: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series II/Volume VI/The Letters of St. Jerome/Letter 127 paragraph 12.
- 19 In Joseph Leo Koerner (2017) available at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/693701>.
- 20 The new encounter with the West affected China and the pattern of Chinese thinking more profoundly than the previous two thousand years. Whether China is moving out from its conservative realm is to discuss the transaction from socialist to post-socialist China in the age of market economy. I thoroughly discuss the issue in "A Letter to China" (2000).
- 21 The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was an oppositional state in China with capital at Tianjin (present-day Nanjing) that during the middle of the 19th century, led by a pseudo mystic Hong Xiuquan, the self-proclaimed brother of Jesus Christ, attempted, unsuccessfully, to overthrow the Qing dynasty. The bloody civil war produced between 20 and 40 million dead, (more than the entire population of England at that time) by far the largest number of the 19th century, and a wipeout of Chinese material heritage.
- 22 The May Fourth Movement (1919) is a moment of modernization and a significant turning point in Chinese modern history. The cultural campaign, generated by domestic unrest and the encounter-clash with Western knowledge, compelled the intellectuals to identify Confucianism as the main responsible for Chinese backwardness: A discredited moralism, a religious-philosophical system chiefly responsible for turning China into a feudal society. Science seemed to be the key to get access to a new era of prosperity and welfare, and democracy, invoked as freedom from traditional bridles, the tool to achieve it.
- 23 Lin Yu-sheng (1979-26).
- 24 Destroying the four Olds and Establishing the Four News was a campaign launched during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) aiming to destroy elements of pre-communist China (customs, habits, culture, ideas) and replace them with Marxist-Maoist dogma.
- 25 Begun in December 1978, the watershed in China's recent history is Deng Xiaoping's (1904-1997) policy of "Reform and Opening" (改革开放, pinyin: Gaige kaifang), also known as Open Door Policy, the enlightened project of free market economy. In spite of conservative voices within the Party, warning that the country was moving far from the socialist model, in early 1992, (January 18-February 21), Deng Xiaoping made a quasi-imperial tour in Southern China to reinvigorate the country's economic reform agenda based on private ownership, market economy and foreign investment. Some of his speeches later became the backbone of his theory: "Planning and market forces are not the essential difference between socialism and capitalism. A planned economy is not the definition of socialism, because there is planning under capitalism; the market economy happens under socialism, too. Planning and market forces are both ways of controlling economic activity." Due to the relatively low level of material wealth and the high number of the rural population, "Socialism with Chinese

characteristics” became Deng’s definition and present-day Party’s narrative to describe the ideological liaison between socialism and capitalism. In terms of economic development and forces of production, China is now located in the primary stage of socialism but in the turn of 100 years, it shall lead to a more advanced phase, that would be communism as described in the Marxist orthodoxy. However, while the structural changes have brought immense economic development, the formation of new sets of beliefs and values is also evident. For this reason, the fate the Gaigé kaifàn remains unpredictable.

26 From *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1973, 152-25).

27 On the topic I own to R. Shek, *Sectarian Eschatology and Violence*, in J.N. Lipman and S. Harrell (1990, 87-109).

28 *Ibid.*, 101.

29 Maitreya was originally a highly respectable and messianic figure in orthodox Buddhism. His future arrival as a world-redeemer was associated with an age of peace and prosperity. Han Shantong, a Maitreyan believer, at the start of his rebellion seems to have pronounced: “The empire is in utter chaos. Maitreya Buddha has incarnated, and the Manichaeic King of Light has appeared in this world” (Gao Dai 7, cited in Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell 1990, p. 95). However, as fascinating it might be, discussing Chinese sectarianism is not a concern of this paper. For relevant contributions see: Chen Kenneth (1964), Daniel Overmyer (1976), Erik Zürcher (1972), Shi Shaopin (1962).

30 R. Shek (103).

31 *Ibid.*, 104.

32 *Ibid.*, 106.

33 To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not want to suggest that Daoism or Buddhism are violent and subversive beliefs. Nonetheless sectarianism, to any latitude, when practiced outside the realm of legality, because of its inherent nature of clandestinity and eschatological ontology is always potentially subversive.

34 F. Nietzsche (1957, 14).

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