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PREVIEW

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

UNDERSTANDING CHINA THROUGH THE HUMANITIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE PH. D. DEGREE  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

BY  
DOROTHY P. JAMES

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND  
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SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## UNDERSTANDING CHINA THROUGH THE HUMANITIES

### Abstract

This study examines the educational value of the humanities in reaching a comprehensive appreciation of China both as an ancient culture and as an important world power. Through the humanities we can begin to understand the essential qualities of a people—what they value, how they think, and how they express themselves through religion, philosophy, art, and literature. The importance of examining China's heritage in its historical and geographical context is further determined by global pressures.

In a world of rapidly changing technology, of shifting ideologies and growing economic rivalries, the practical application of this approach to international understanding demands serious consideration. Today China gives every evidence of becoming a dominant economic force in the world, but her relations with the United States and other concerned countries continue to be plagued by misunderstanding and conflict. Both China's military power and environmental problems raised by massive industrialization continue to disturb her Asian neighbors and the world.

Many Westerners are only superficially aware of the way an age-old civilization has shaped the Chinese character and attitudes. Even in academia, research and teaching in this area are often limited to a graduate specialty, but this study suggests that a humanities curriculum on China would offer a pragmatic response to this academic deficiency. The means proposed for this course of study is to examine the major elements of the humanities in the Chinese culture to discover the basis for insight and understanding. This method will give the nonspecialist an appreciation of this civilization's humane and liberal learning that will foster comprehension of humankind's similarities, compatibilities, and linkages. To highlight the relevance of this method, a comparative study of the diverse cultures of Russia and the United State in relation to China will further demonstrate the value of this approach.

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Dorothy Patricia James

## INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the way that cultural differences impact on international relations in a world that increasingly demands mutual understanding. This quest for global peace and harmony represents a search for an ideal that has never been entirely realized. History bears witness to the age-old hostilities and conflicts bred by xenophobia, racial rivalry, and cultural disparity. Today, in spite of our efforts to achieve understanding between countries, we remain caught up in dangerous crises in international relationships—and this unhappy situation remains especially true of relations with China in recent decades.

Cultural differences are a basic cause of conflict between societies. International understanding depends on an appreciation not only of the basic attributes that unite us but also a recognition of the cultural traits that separate and often bitterly divide the human race. It is important to discover how to prevent these misunderstandings by clearly defining the cultural themes that motivate a people most strongly.

International relations can be studied from many viewpoints—from the purely economic to the strategic. The basis for this investigation is the academic disciplines known as the humanities. A study of the religion, philosophy, history, and arts of a nation offers a synthesis of how a country perceives itself in relation to others. The humanities offer a framework upon which a systematic view of not only a society's cultural tradition but also of its inbred values, its psychological make-up, and its method of crisis resolution can be constructed.

The humanities also define and shape the basic aspirations of mankind; they represent qualities that shape us, fulfill us and inspire us. They reflect our cultural history, values, assumptions and norms. If such a

demonstrable entity as a national character does exist, then the humanities may present us with a valuable tool with which to discover the traits that motivate a people. The humanities, the manifestations of our culture, create areas where one society touches upon another. They reach beyond social differences to create a convergence of universal emotions. They are integral to an understanding between nations.

This examination of Chinese culture as expressed through the humanities has a direct educational focus. Today there is an emphasis in American schools on multiculturalism. This initiative raises many problems on the choice of countries to be included, but one pedagogical principle remains paramount: if teaching an appreciation of ethnic and racial diversity is to succeed, then the curriculum must go beyond the superficial aspects of diversity to examine the profound beliefs, cultural values, and forms of self-expression that we associate with the humanities. In other words, the educational assumption of this study is that authentic multiculturalism must center on the humanities.

On a practical level, and in recognition of the extraordinary heritage of China, this study proposes that courses or a program in Chinese culture be offered on a regular basis in American colleges and universities. While China has long been the subject of specialized graduate programs at larger universities, the proposal here is that Chinese culture be given wider exposure in undergraduate education. An in-depth look at China would then be readily available to future teachers—as well as to potential leaders in government, industry, and commerce. The humanities approach would allow for a comprehensive classroom conceptualization of how a rich and significant civilization has much to teach us in the arts of living. Furthermore, the inevitable future of China as a dominant economic and cultural world power is a sober inducement to increase our global

understanding through effective education in its character and contributions. The student who is exposed to China studies early in the educational process becomes the expert of tomorrow as other academic disciplines are added. Courses in government, foreign policy, education, languages, environmental and business studies would individually or in concert enhance the impact of China studies for the student who wanted to bring about change on an international level.

The challenge of interpreting an ancient, complex, and exotic civilization for American students remains a formidable one, and several U.S. conferences on China studies have focused on these academic problems. The basic methodology of this study will consist in examining salient aspects of Chinese life and thought to determine what is educationally feasible. The objective here is not to establish absolute standards or a rigid curriculum but rather to set general guidelines and to suggest priorities that can be applied in various academic settings. Specific suggestions will be made in the course of the following chapters, and a general exploratory curriculum will be provided in an appendix.

It is understood that this dissertation is written from a Western perspective and adapted to serve as an introduction to China for American students. Many of the topics on religion, philosophy, ethics, history, and aesthetics will require more comprehensive treatment for advanced students. Other themes on contemporary issues must further establish a balance between Chinese principles and Western issues to provide a fair and sympathetic appreciation of the context that China must contend with today to preserve its integrity and ancient values. This dissertation does not pretend to be a comprehensive examination of the Chinese culture. It represents an attempt to identify the basic areas of Chinese studies that American students can realistically assimilate and represents a

circumscribed attempt to test the validity of the humanities' approach to cross-cultural understanding.

While it is impossible to study all cultures, it is certainly practical to study in some depth one culture in relation to others and thus to discover the common values of society. The plan adopted for this cultural investigation is to examine certain characteristic aspects of China and then to refer to a further two national cultures, Russia and the United States, by way of similarities and contrasts. The major focus here will be on China, because of the extraordinary depth and profundity of its culture. It represents one of the oldest continuing cultural traditions in history with a 4,000 year old recorded story. By a contextual study of the Chinese civilization, this study's thesis proposes that the humanities as they are imbedded in the geographical setting, historical past, and today's events provide a more profound understanding than can be achieved using other methods. Certainly China has been examined through its scientific, military, and technological achievements but the humanities provide insights that can be gained in no other way.

Parallel references will be made to Russia and the United States, because these three countries have reached extraordinary international prominence in this century. In addition, their cultures can offer both striking differences and interesting similarities.

One feature that is common to all three countries in their 20th century rise to power is the influence of technology. With the use of capital, "Technology means the systematic application of scientific or other organized knowledge to practical tasks" (Galbraith 1985, 12). Thus technology refers not only to scientific progress and military might, but it also includes manufacturing potential and governmental systems. In this

comprehensive sense, technologies have strongly impinged on national culture.

For example, the most recent ideology to affect the Chinese people is Marxism, which can be seen here as a technology—a scientific system based on the rules and regulations of a totalitarian society. Chinese Communism was imposed in the interest of a better economy, but in recent decades it has become recognized as a policy of rigidly centralized control that did not work. A melding of the influence of market economics and traditional Chinese values in recent years is one of the most interesting and important examples of the enduring power of a country's cultural heritage.

This study does not ignore the benefits of technology, but it does recognize the influence of commercial interests and material values that tend to dominate our lives. Societies today often consider an economy driven by technology as beneficent, although the consequences to the environment, to social values, and ultimately to our quality of life as human beings may be deleterious.

Through this research it may be possible for American students to appreciate why and how an enduring culture has fixed the historical pattern of China and to what extent it may influence the future of that nation, and the rest of Asia. This investigation will also illuminate by way of contrast how the resurgence of a culture affects the United States, Russia, and the rest of the world—what the positive and negative effects of cultural ideals and attitudes may have upon our small and fragile planet in the years ahead.

Note:

The translation of Chinese logographs or word symbols presents difficulties. The pinyin system of writing Chinese words to approximate the sounds of the English language is now employed by the People's Republic of China and is used in this study—except where a direct quotation must retain an earlier spelling. The pinyin system was introduced in Western journalism and publications in the 1980's, when it generally replaced the earlier Wade-Gilles system of transliteration. The Chinese national spoken language, which is based on the Beijing dialect, was formerly called Mandarin and is now referred to as Putonghua or common speech.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 1

### THE HERITAGE OF CHINA

This study will be concerned with how to teach an appreciation of an important foreign civilization through the humanities. Through studying the cultural ideals of an age-old society and the heritage that underlies its international posture, we can achieve a deeper understanding of what motivates a people. In this examination, the humanities will serve as a chief investigative tool.

Some American students may assume that the humanities are exclusively a product of Western civilization because the humane studies and the concepts of liberal education in the West are derived from Greek and Roman sources. Formulated as academic disciplines during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the humanities have largely reflected European culture. On the other hand, it can be argued that humane studies by definition transcend specific cultures. They contribute the basic sources of our appreciation of any civilization, and they are especially important as an approach to interpreting the divergent cultures in the world today.

#### Definition of a Civilization

To analyze a civilization in the context of the humanities, it will first be necessary to consider some basic terminology in relation to the scope and focus of this study. The word "civilization," for example, is not always synonymous with "nation" or "culture." We can speak of Western civilization without alluding to a particular country, and we can refer to a primitive culture in contrast to an advanced or civilized one. In reference to China, however, we are addressing a unique national culture that more

than four thousand years ago first began to develop into an authentic and enduring civilization.

A civilization can here be defined as a national entity or state that is marked by advanced social, political, cultural, and technical development. Such a state is distinguished by widespread literacy, by artistic and intellectual achievements, as well as by social institutions established for the common good. While these characteristics may well represent civilization at its noblest, history has also demonstrated the long-term instability of prominent civilizations—their almost inevitable decline, stagnation, or eventual extinction. Some famous civilizations were tainted by official injustice, oppression, and cruelty; but these failings do not negate the fact that the ideals of this civilization still remain a beacon for the human race.

In identifying a civilization with a particular country such as China, we are not implying that our modern notion of nationalism was always a strong factor here. A national consciousness was impossible in early China—a vast land with few travel facilities and slow communications. People naturally tended to owe allegiance to local rulers or to trust to family relationships. It is remarkable, however, that in succeeding centuries an unique sense of Chinese identity, and indeed superiority, became an integral part of the culture. At the same time, we must also note the economic factors associated with the growth of a national culture. The important impact on Chinese civilization of the national development of agriculture, industry, commerce, and trade will be underscored in this study.

To appreciate the enduring tradition of Chinese culture, it is necessary to understand the civilization in its historical context:

Although the West has influenced modern China, the nation cannot be understood without reference to all the major phases of its historical past. We are here dealing with the evolution of a proud and largely self-sufficient civilization. The attitudes of Chinese alive today are, to an unusual degree, rooted in a history consciously present to their minds (Morton 1980, 1-2).

Arnold Toynbee believed that two conditions fueled the birth of a nation or state: first, sufficient markets and sources of supply that enable the populace to live by commerce and industry in addition to agriculture, and second, a balance or stalemate between neighboring national powers. He posited that nations developed through challenge and response to the demands of their environments. Each civilization was, however, unique through its different ways of responding to experiences—depending on “outlook and aptitude and ethos” (Toynbee 1934, 377). The assumption of this approach is that individual societies are best understood by their formative development—the original philosophy, religion, literature, art, and the social thought that shaped their outlook—as well as by the state of the environment and the pulse of the economy. Other societies such as the ancient Greeks and Romans have been studied in this manner. Greater human understanding has been achieved through these studies.

### Geographical and Historical Background

Today China covers almost four million square miles, occupying an area slightly larger than the entire United States. Two-thirds of the land is mountainous or desert and only one-tenth can be cultivated. There is a temperate climate in the north with cold winters, while it is almost tropical in the south. China is the world’s most populous country, but despite absorbing bordering tribes such as the Mongols and the Manchus, the Chinese remain remarkably homogeneous. Some 92% of the people are by racial origin Han Chinese. While various dialects characterize areas of this vast country, the written word is universally understood, and

Mandarin has been widely established as the official language. In its modern form it is the most widely used language in the world today.

China was originally composed of associated agricultural communities that developed a feudalistic society profoundly different from the West in concepts of law and private property. Early China was historically a contemporary of Pharaonic Egypt and Babylonian Mesopotamia, and it was comparable to these early civilizations as typified by wealthy rulers and impoverished masses. Feudal lords controlled agricultural production, land, manpower and the water supply. Once this pattern was established in the early China, it continued to expand along these feudal principles of administration. The tribal chiefs became the ruling class, with dual economic and political roles as landowners and office holders.

China as a nation grew from small principalities along the Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers. The dominant rulers won feudal allegiance from lesser lords and established greater degrees of national control until a succession of emperors assumed power. The essential history of China then became a record of these successive dynasties. As with other ancient countries, some long regimes represented periods of great civic progress, cultural development, and artistic expression. Other eras were weak, anarchic, or stagnant periods.

Recorded history describes the Shang Dynasty (c.1850-1100 B.C.) as a bronze-age civilization. During the Zhou Dynasty (1027-221 B.C), the concept of "Under Heaven all One Family" (*tsung-fa*) created the political structure determined by filial rule of succession. The concept of a hierarchical, ruling family structure culminated in the belief of a central kingdom (*Chung-kuo*), which first created the sense of geographic exclusiveness that was characteristic of later China. In this period of