

**Time and occasion (The “occasion”: a temporary matrix analogous of the traditional Chinese thought and the western philosophy pre-Christian.)**

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Process of globalization entails, among other effects, the possibility of visiting cultures far removed geographically and historically. This knowledge may allow a better mutual understanding of institutions, customs, art and economic life. But also gives facilities to compare between matrices that have articulated reflective life of their societies.

Among all these fundamental matrices excel conceptions of space and time ordering uniquely a lot of varied nature phenomena. From this point of view, the comparison between some aspects of conceptions of time from ancient Chinese thought and classical Greek thought is an initial contribution to this mutual understanding and recognition of the globalization era. For this small essay, we have chosen as reference the Chinese intellectual productions of the so-called *Chun Qiu* and *Zhan Guo* period (in entirety whole from the eighth century to III b C.) and Greek respectives (V-IV b. C.), following the trail of working of sinologist and French philosopher François Jullien .

## 1.-Time in ancient Chinese culture.

As noted by Professor Emmanuel Lizcano (1993), traditional Chinese thought has not produced anything like the concept of *time* of western philosophy. Also "for Chinese rationality, space and time form an interdependent unit, the space is full of heterogeneous meanings according to the places and the time appears linked to places and events". The reason why this option has been configured may refer to three aspects that are proper to Chinese thought, which are not expressed in the western culture.

The first aspect is the no linking of temporary phenomena to movement, and therefore to the space phenomena. "In general, if China had not seized the nature in terms of movement it was because it had been designed from reference of correlation factors, which were established as poles and not as individual bodies condemned to the movement: they are *yin* and *yang* energies, from which an endless interaction flows (Hence the devoted attention to the magnetic phenomena, much rather than in Western world) (Jullien, 2001/2005b: 19). Thus, as opposed to the vinculation of the temporary phenomena to the movement, in China they have reflected more on the phenomena of *process* of influence and transformation. So we can read in Confucius III, 21: "What is made is made; it all belongs to the past" (1997/2005: 53).

The second aspect is the absence of an equivalent of the notion of *eternity* in China. "China has thought the absolute, either the *Heaven* of the Confucian or the *Road* of the Taoist, without in fact to thinking of the *eternal*."(Jullien, 2001/2005b: 23). Faced with the notion of eternity, China developed the notion of *constancy*. The difference is important because *constant* means that does not *change* within the variation and the

*eternal* means that does not *become*. Both show a permanence but set in a different way, "while the permanence of the eternal is joined to the being and offered to contemplation (*theory*), the constant refers to the state of things or, as the Chinese say, to their operation (concept of *yong* 恒). The eternal brings us to an essential identity, the constant, on the other hand, is in the order of capacity (notion of *dé* 德). So, "while the *eternal* is beyond time, the *constant* is never interrupted." (Jullien, 2001/2005b: 23-4). About the constant we can read in Zhuang Zi (XXI, 4) "Beginning and End are being developed without interruption" (1983:369). Or, in XXIII, 12, about Dao: "[Dao] has extension or duration and has not beginning or end, it is the time itself" (1983: 396). Permanence can also mean "to forget differences between times" as says Zhuang Zi in II, 12 (1983: 202)

Finally, the third reason is the absence in Chinese language, until relatively recently, of any expression related to being as understood in Western. "One of the most striking aspects in old Chinese language is the absence of the verb *to be* as a predicate; in fact, the identity is indicated by simple juxtaposition" (Cheng, 1997/2002:32-33). Consequently, there was no reflection on the becoming *of being* or any notion similar to the *essence of something*.

In conclusion, we could say that the traditional Chinese culture did not *think* the time and we can find confirmation in the fact that they must translate the word *time* from Japanese when they encountered at the European thought in the late nineteenth century, as reflected in the dictionary *Yinghua Bilingual dictionary* Yan Huiqingen (1908). "Time was translated into Chinese as *between moments* (Japanese *jikan*, Chinese *Shijie* 时间). Space, likewise, was translated as *between hollow* (Japanese *Kukan*, Chinese *konjian* 空间) (Jullien, 2001/2005b: 48-49). In this respect it is significant that Zhang Dainian, in

his book *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* does not make any reference to similar concepts on time or space.

As opposed to time, the Chinese thought the *moment*, understood primarily as a seasonal time. Starting from this notion was developed a phenomenology of temporary being that enabled to reflect better on the *Opportunity* of the time and on the *Availability* (as opposition to the precedence), which have remained in Western in the state of the sub-theory"(Jullien,2005: 10) . And all this linked to one of the matrix ideas in Chinese culture like the idea of *Change*: "In the design Judeo-Christianity which links the existence of a God Almighty, the Chinese understood it as an evolution or change, *Book of Changes* being the origin of Chinese culture "as serves to find the law of evolution of things and affairs "(Shoulin, 2005: 23-4).

We cannot explain here the ideological changes which supposed the introduction of Buddhism in China, particularly about the conception of time, but in the traditional Chinese thought, this ancient temporal dimension has been indicated by several researchers from early sinologist studies.

For example, Marcel Granet, in his famous *La pensée chinoise* emphasized the importance of " the idea of circumstance, the idea of chance (favourable or not to an action) "(Granet, 1934/1988: 79). But also, historians of Chinese philosophy have remarked its validity not long ago: " The requirement to adapt to the mutation leads to the notion of *opportunity* (shí 时), which sees time not as a regular and uniform way, but as a process more or less favourable "(Cheng, 2002/2006: 248 -249).

None of this, however, can be separated from the "mentality which is more practical than speculative" (Gernet: 1993: 100) very typical of Chinese world. Something like this was perceived by Hegel many years ago: "The objectivity here is not the circle of thought, is not the universality that is the way of thought, but an immediate, sensitive

form”, and so “the body of knowledge is therefore of empirical nature, not theoretical” (Hegel, 1830/1982: 247).

Something that was also perceived by Max Weber, who in the excellent essay on Confucianism and Taoism, said: "The impersonal heavenly power *did not speak* to the men. It was revealed in the way the land was governed, in the firmness of the order of nature and the tradition, which was seen as one part of the cosmic order" (Weber 1920/1983: 248).

## 2. - Time in classical Greek culture

In relation to the perception of time, classical Greeks made distinction between *Chronos*, *Kairós* and *Aión*. According to Antonio Campillo "the term *Chronos* designates the unlimited succession of time or times in its more abstract universality, in short, the Time" (Campillo, 1991: 39). To set this temporary dimension that has been predominant in the Western culture, it was necessary to scan time with relevant points of reference, that is, with events. Indeed, the notion of event is intrinsically related to the idea of time and we cannot conceive time without events that might happen. "The nature of time, if it has *nature*, is regarding this possibility" (Jullien, 2001/2005b: 78).

The second form of Greek temporality, the *Aión* - / AEI on (which is always) - passed to designate the major eras or ages of the life of the world, large eons or cycles of the cosmos and even the Time as everlasting living life without principle or end, this is the Eternity, conceived as fully simultaneous of all times" (Campillo, 1991: 40). As a whole, since Plato the *Chronos* has been understood as the moving image of *Aión*.

However, among the Greeks there was a third way of considering the time: it was the *Kairós*. *Kairós* "means a moment, a relatively short time interval, but it is not the present moment: it is neither the objective or physical instant, nor the subjective or psychological present. It is the appropriate time, the favourable occasion, the opportunity "(Campillo, 1991: 60).

The *Kairós* is a form of fleeting and transient temporality and difficult to perceive if there is not some availability. In fact, it was represented by a bald youth covered with a wig that ran in front of an adult who only managed to catch the wig. Furthermore, *Kairós* is both a state of things, something like an offer to the human beings and, simultaneously, an attitude of mind that knows how to understand this offer. Finally, *Kairós* is connected with the opportunity of taking a decision. Therefore, it is what Aristotle called "the good in the category of time ". This art of acting "consists on the adjustment of the logic of processes or external events to the logic of subjective measures, and the guessing of convergence of two lines or curves (Kerkhoff, 1997: 9).

This type of temporality disappeared along with the acculturation generated by the spread of Jewish Christian culture in Western world, however, this culture kept, like in other Semitic religions, modes of chronological and eternal time. Only the application of the *durée* by Henri Bergson (*Essai sur les données immédiates de conscience*, (1888/1991), made it possible to discern a type of temporality in the western culture quite distant from the model of Chronos as well from the Eternity.

### 3. - The time (kairos and shí ji)

As we have seen, there are some similarities between the ancient Chinese conception of time, focusing on the moment and the occasion (shí / shí ji) and this mode of Greek temporality called *Kairós*. As in ancient Greece the concept of *Kairós* coexisted with

Chronos and Aión, nonexistent in the Chinese thought, some researchers have suggested some shortcomings in the Chinese reflexive world.

Thus, these no conceptual notions of time were considered by Durkheim as typical of no developed cultures (Huici, 2007), continuing in the wake of Hegel and Schopenhauer that qualified them as pre-rational modulation.

However, as noted again Jullien, "is not that Chinese do not *know* to think the time, it is rather a more comprehensive elucidation of the concept that was not necessary for the dominant trend of his thought, according to the strategic optical they preferred; the moment- time that we must know to wait for so that we may be led by it in the event has much more interest for them "(Jullien, 2001/2005b: 43).

But now, without ideological and ethnocentric blinkers, it is noted in this example that, for various reasons, far cultures as the ancient Chinese and classical Greek offer similar thoughts, in this case, for some dimension of temporality. The analogy, bordering almost on similarity, because it has been proved "*occasion* responds to *situation* : "The good, when we set in motion it is occasion-time "(Lao zi: 8). This is not the Time but the time of opportunity (the Latin said: *tempus capera*, take this opportunity). "The time you need to know how to expect and not to lose . This is a part of a strategic logic and no longer theoretical and, therefore, we find it, in their verbal use, with the sense (to watch) of (appropriate) moment "(Jullien, 2001/2005b: 40).

#### 4. - Society and temporality.

From the viewpoint of temporal concepts, between the classical Greek culture and Chinese traditional culture there are similarities and differences. Among the differences we could mention the dissimilar notions of time like *Chronos* or *Aión* (or Eternity)

probably vinculating to the late appearance of the verb *to be*. But among the similarities we could affirm the one that links *Kairós* and *shí ji*.

François Jullien asserts that the basis of relational knowledge, "the question of whether a foundation is either sociological (or agricultural) is not my problem "(Jullien, 2005: 54) although this aspect has been noted by several sinologist (Iñaki Preciado in 1996: 22). Jullien prefers to operate with concepts, stripping them of their original meanings and making them move in the Western culture as mental agitation, which could be a commendable philosophical work.

But neither can we abandon the attempt to know the primitive conditions of its formulation and its subsequent reformulations. In fact, applying the criteria of the sociology of knowledge it would be very interesting to investigate if it is possible to establish correlations between the mentioned cultural features and the social structures in a large sense - not, of course, as a reflection or condition. But apart from this perspective, we should analyze how certain conceptions of time, as in classical Chinese culture, may, in its dissemination support the development of certain forms of social relations and social structures and underpin or delegitimize specific social structures. Vicente Verdú states to the effect that such conceptions suggest a background in which "the world is funded on a natural order "and so "for the Chinese mentality it is more difficult to subvert a natural organization, linked to immanence "(Verdú, 1998:147).

Furthermore, from the viewpoint of discourse, "the importance that the Chinese attach to the specific values would depend on inertia in China "(Perelman 1958 / 2006: 139). And, also, in prolongation of the afore mentioned investigations, it would be interesting to detect the influence of European colonization. In a word, it would be very crucial to note what changes have occurred in these classical concepts since the Maoist revolution and after the deployment of capitalism of the era of Deng Tsiao Ping.

Finally it might be more questionable if in a society that has been articulated in the design of Judeo-Christian ( or Buddhism ?) time, with the *Khronos* and *Aión* preponderance , it is possible *to live* other modalities of time and if the dissemination of these other temporary modalities may be effective without social disruption.

In any case, the most noteworthy of all we have said is the possibility of a time without the perspective of death - which is what the chronological time signs – that is time seen as momentary or seasonal. Because with the disappearance of the perspective of death, the transcendence and their religious or metaphysical significance disappear as well.

So all these thoughts can help us answer the Jullien ´s question asked on the first pages of his book *:About Time: Elements for a philosophy of life:* "How to provide theoretical consistency to the *opportunity* like the time that *comes* to us, as to the *availability*, as which we get out to it? “

One question that echoes between East and West, between China and Europe

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