

Voltaire's Analysis of Chinese Civilization. A Model for a "Better Europe"

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Voltaire is a famous thinker who has been considered the founder of the conscience of Europe. He did this by evoking the example of Chinese civilization, and by focussing on Chinese civilization he sought a better Europe by using a critique of the vices of Europe comparing with the values of Chinese civilization.

The seventeenth and eighteenth century is considered the period of the crisis of European consciousness. One of the elements of this crisis was the triumph of Europe. From now on, the notion of Europe has taken precedence over "Christianity".

It was in terms of Europe that all sovereigns, ministers and writers analyzed the situation. If for Montesquieu Europe is the land where law, if not freedom, dominates, while Asia is despotic, Voltaire will have another perspective by glorifying ancient China. In his work "Essay on Morals" in two volumes, he put as subtitle "and the spirit of nations and the main facts of history from Charlemagne to Louis XIII".

As a philosopher he wants to show that we have never finished with history. If this work is considered as a Philosophy of History, this explains why Voltaire no longer follows the order of a chronological relation. Flying over time and continents, he examines the question of origins, and if the initial chapter is about China, he wants to show that history starts in non-history.

In the *Introduction* and the first two chapters he deals with China. We must take into consideration the fact that he organizes his history of the Middle Ages around the conflict of the priesthood and the empire. It is without doubt that such a conflict was of primary interest to all "enlighteners": around 1760, at the initiative of the various enlightened despotisms, the struggle began in Europe between the secular power and the clerical power. At the same time, from morals he grasps "the spirit of men". The customs take on a meaning, becoming then an object worthy of attention, as the historian goes back to the ideas from which they proceed. That's why he wrote:

"Dare we talk about the Chinese without referring to their annals? They are confirmed by the unanimous testimony of our travelers of different sects, Jacobins, Jesuits, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans..."

“Only of all peoples, they have constantly marked their epochs by eclipses, by the conjunctions of the planets; and our astronomers, who have examined their calculations, have been astonished to find them almost all true; and the Chinese wrote their history, pen and astrolabe in hand, with a simplicity of which we can find no example in the rest of Asia”[1].

Voltaire wants to emphasize that in this vast country, it is the reason and the science that they are at the base of the Chinese institutions. This scientific exactitude is even based on their history that contrasts with the contradictions of the European chronologies that contradict each other.



He gives the example of the wise **Emperor Kang-hi** for whom he said that when he heard the European missionaries that they showed considerable variations in the chronology of the vulgate, the *Septuagint* and the *Samaritans*, Kang-hi replied to them: “Is it possible that the books you believe in are fighting each other?” And it is Voltaire that comments:

“The Chinese wrote on light bamboo tablets, when the Chaldeans wrote only on rough bricks; and they even have these old tablets that their varnish has preserved from rot: they are perhaps the oldest monuments in the world”[2].

According to him, as soon as this people write, they write reasonably.

China differs especially from other nations in that their history makes no mention of a college of priests who never influenced laws. The Chinese do not go back to the wild days when the men needed to be deceived to lead them. According to him, there were the other peoples that began their history by the origin of the world, as for example the Zend of the Persians, the Shasta and the Veidam of the Indians, finally until Hesiod, all go back to the origin of the things, to the formation of the universe.

“The Chinese did not have this madness; their history is only that of historical times. It is here that we must above all apply our great principle that a nation whose first chronicles attests to the existence of a vast empire, powerful and wise, must have been gathered together in a body of people for centuries past”[3].

According to him this civilized people were civil when we were wild. Their annals have an assurance character then no one else. "Finally, writes Voltaire, it is not up to us or the end of our West, to dispute the archives of a nation that was all civilized when we were only savage"[4]. The most important is the fact that the Chinese people organized themselves as a body of people (*en corps de peuple*).

What are the reasons that the Chinese succeeded in raising as a body of people? The reason is that they perfected the moral, which is the first of the sciences. Here is the description of Voltaire who, at the same time, aims the default of Europe.

"Their vast and populous empire was already governed as a family of which the monarch was the father, and of which forty courts of law were regarded as the elder brothers, when we were wandering in small numbers in the forest of the Ardennes. Their religion was simple, wise, august, free from all superstition and barbarism, when we did not even have Teutates, to whom druids sacrificed the children of our ancestors in great wicker manna"[5].

We know the anticlerical attitude of Voltaire and especially his fight against intolerance and fanaticism. Let us not forget that the Europe just sorted out of the wars of the religions. That's why Voltaire glorifies public life in China.

"Never has the religion of the emperors and the tribunals been dishonored by impostures, never troubled by the quarrels of the priesthood and the empire, never charged with absurd innovations, which fight each other with arguments as absurd as they are. They, whose insanity ended the dagger in the hands of the fanatics, led by factious men. It is especially here that the Chinese prevail over all the nations of the universe"[6].

Hence the glorification of the great Chinese thinker, **Confucius**. According to Voltaire, Confucius imagined neither new opinions nor new rites. He made neither the inspired nor the prophet; he was a wise magistrate who taught the ancient laws. He recommends only virtue; he does not preach any masters. In his first book, he says that to learn to govern you must spend all your days correcting yourself.

In the second, he proves that God himself engraves virtue in the heart of man; he says that man is not born wicked, and that he deflects him by his fault. The third is a collection of pure maxims, where you find nothing low, and nothing of a ridiculous allegory. According to Voltaire, he had five thousand disciples, he could put himself at the head of a powerful party, and he liked better to teach the men than to govern them. After his death his disciples were emperors, the *colao*, that is to say the mandarins, the scholars, and all that is not peoples.

At the same time, Voltaire is strongly opposed to the idea of attributing to him atheism, because a Frenchman called Maigrot treated Confucius as an atheist, based on the words of this great man: *heaven gave me virtue, man can not harm me*.

According to Voltaire, Confucius, who lived two thousand and three hundred years ago and shortly before Pythagoras, restores this religion, which consists in being just. He began by saying, in his book, that whoever is destined to govern "must rectify the reason he received from heaven, as one wipes a tarnished mirror; that he must also renew himself, to renew the people by his example." Everything tends to this end; he is not a prophet, he is not

inspired; he knows no inspiration but the continual attention to repress his passions; he only writes in sage, and he is regarded by the Chinese as a sage.

“His morality, writes Voltaire, is as pure, as severe, and at the same time as human as that of Epictetus. He does not say: Do not do to the others what you would not want to be done to you; but: “Do to others what you want us to do to you. He does not recommend the forgiveness of insults, the memory of benefactions, friendship, and humility. His disciples were a people of brothers. The happiest and most respectable time ever on the earth was when one followed his laws”[7].

It is evident that Voltaire wanted to show the greatness of Confucius’s thought by contrasting with the fanaticism and idolatry of the Pope who reigned in Europe.



According to Voltaire, Confucius has all the honors, not the divine honors, that no man owes, but those who deserve a man who has given by the Divinity the healthiest ideas that can form the human mind.

“This is why, writes Voltaire, the P. le Comte and other missionaries write, that the Chinese have known the true God, when the other people were idolaters, and sacrificed to him in the oldest temple of the universe “[8].

Voltaire has mentioned an author that has written a work, *New Memory on the State of China*, (*Nouveaux mémoires sur l’état de la Chine*), published in 1697, where he wrote that China has kept over two thousand years the knowledge of the true God and practiced the maxims of the purest of the morals, while Europe and almost all the rest of the world was in error and in corruption. These memoirs were condemned by the court of Rome in 1702.

One thing that has fascinated Voltaire about religion in China is the fact that this religion does not admit eternal punishment and rewards. It is Voltaire that he writes: “It is true that their religion does not admit of eternal punishment and rewards; and that is what shows how old this religion is. The *Pentateuch* does not speak of the other life in his laws: the Sadducees among the Jews never believed it”[9]. It should be emphasized that in the *Introduction* of this work, Voltaire had highlighted all aspects of religion in China and its beneficial effects in social life. “It is true that, he wrote in the *Introduction*, the laws of China do not speak of penalties and rewards after death; they did not want to affirm what they did not know. This difference between them and all the great civilized peoples is very surprising. The doctrine of hell was useful, and the government of the Chinese never admitted it. They just exhorted men to reverence heaven and to be fair”[10].

Voltaire is very critical of the idea that Chinese scholars do not have a distinct idea of an immaterial God, but according to him, it is unfair to infer that they are atheists. To support this idea he quotes Archbishop Navarrete, who has said that, according to all the interpreters of the sacred books of China, the soul is an airy, igneous part which, by separating from the body, meets at the substance of the sky. But this feeling is the same as that of the Stoics. According to Voltaire, all this is in the sixth book of the *Eneide* of Virgil, and the *Manual of Epictetus*, and these works are not infected with atheism. All the early fathers of the Church thought so.

“We have slandered the Chinese only because their metaphysics are not ours; we should have admired in them two merits which condemn both the superstitions of the pagans and the morals of the Christians. Never did the religion of the scholars be dishonored by fables, nor defiled by quarrels and civil wars”[11].

By criticizing prejudices and misunderstandings about religion and rites in China, we have given a very important methodical principle. We must not judge the uses of others by ours, because we carry at the end of the world the prejudices of our contentious spirit.

Justice, morality, and adoration for the heaven and the father of the family, such are the moral foundations of China. This is why the king is considered the father of the empire, and the mandarins as the fathers of the cities and provinces (it meant that everyone was based on the idea of paternal authority). We must add the role of science, and especially of astronomy, which explains its very exact chronology. The virtues and science is seen, for example at the Emperor Hiao. That’s why his name is still venerated in China, as in Europe that of Titus, Trajan, and Antonine.

“If, wrote Voltaire for emperor, for his time, he was a clever mathematician that alone shows that he was born in a nation already very civilized. We do not see that the old chiefs of German or Gaulle towns had reformed astronomy: Clovis had no observatory”[12].

It is the perfect example of the idea of the enlightened king that was dreamed by the Enlightenment philosophers.

Voltaire’s sympathy goes to the newspaper of the empire. Voltaire’s sympathy for the annals of the empire has been seen in the *Introduction*. In the newspaper of the empire we find the daily life of the Chinese empire.

“The Journal of the Chinese Empire, writes him, is the most authentic and useful journal in the world, since it contains the details of all the public needs, resources, and interests of all the orders of the State”[13].

Descriptions of the forces of the state, cities, the army, and the fortifications prove the greatness of China. Even the great wall is the highest monument compared to the pyramids of Egypt, by its utility as by its immensity. Voltaire found in the third book of Confucius, a peculiarity that shows how much the use of armed carts is old. In his day, the vice-king, or governors of the provinces, were obliged to furnish the head of state, or emperor, a thousand chariots of war with four horses in front. Homer, who flourished long before the Chinese philosopher, never speaks of anything but of two or three horse-drawn chariots. In addition, China has almost all the fruits transplanted in our Europe, and many others we miss. The precious insect that produces the self is native to China, and these fabrics were so rare, even in the time of Justinian, that the self was sold in Europe at the weight of gold. The fine, bright white paper was made by the Chinese from time immemorial. It was made with nets of boiled bamboo wood. The printing press was invented by the Chinese at the same time. We know that this printing works is an engraving on wooden planks, such that Gutenberg practiced it first in Mainz in the 15th century. They cultivated chemistry; they invented powder; but they used it only in festivals, in the art of fireworks, where they surpassed other nations. These are some Chinese inventions.

But, according to Voltaire, what they know best, most cultivated, and most perfected is morality and laws. Respect for children for their fathers is the foundation of the Chinese government. This is why

“The fundamental law being that the empire is a family, we have looked more than elsewhere, the public good as the first duty. From this comes the constant attention of the emperor and the courts to repair the highways, to join the rivers, to dig canals, to favor the cultivation of lands and manufactures”[14].

In emphasizing the public good, Voltaire aimed at European despotism, in general, and French despotism, in particular, where the public good was in the service of the prince’s caprice. Did the Chinese people have vices? Yes, tell us him. All the vices exist in China as elsewhere, but certainly more repressed by the brake of the laws, because the laws are always uniform. Voltaire mentions a story of an author of *Memoirs* of Admiral Anson, that a little people in Canton deceived the English,

“but, writes Voltaire, must one judge of the government of a great nation by the customs of the populace of borders? And what would the Chinese have said about us if they had been shipwrecked on our seacoasts at a time when the laws of the nations of Europe confiscated the shipwrecked effects, and that custom allowed the owners to be slaughtered?”[15].

There is a very close link between virtues, morals, and laws. Voltaire, as a son of the time of Illuminist, sees the law as a factor that influences the cohesion of the society. The laws represent the spirit of the people, and they should not shock society. At the same time, the law must not be based solely on the logic of punishment, but must contribute to the strengthening of virtue. By glorifying the legal reality of China, he wants to criticize the despotism that reigned in many States in Europe.

“In other countries laws punish crime; to China they do more, they reward virtue. The sound of a generous and rare action spreads in a province; the Mandarin is obliged to inform the Emperor of it; and the emperor sends a mark of honor to the one who has deserved it so well”[16].

We have to reflect on these ideas of such a great cosmopolitan philosopher in our time when intolerance and fanatic movements threaten the coexistence of the peoples in many regions of the world.

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Notes

[1] Voltaire, Essai sur les mœurs, T.I, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1990, p. 66-67.

[2] Voltaire, Essai sur les mœurs, T.I, p. 67.

[3] Voltaire, Essai sur les mœurs, T.I, p. 67.

[4] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 208.

[5] Voltaire, idem, p. 69.

[6] Voltaire, idem, p. 69.

[7] Voltaire, idem, p. 220.

[8] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 220.

[9] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 221.

[10] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 71.

[11] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 222.

[12] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 206.

[13] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 210.

[14] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 216.

[15] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 217.

[16] Voltaire, idem, T.I, p. 217.

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