Chinese Influences on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Michele FERREROF(麦克雷)
National Research Centre of Overseas Sinology,
Beijing Foreign Studies University

Introduction

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881—1955) was a French Jesuit, philosopher, theologian, anthropologist and paleontologist. He went to China for the first time in 1923, then he lived there from 1926 to 1946, mostly in Tianjin and Beijing. He also travelled in various regions of China for scientific expeditions, especially in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. One of his greatest scientific contributions to the
world is the research on the Sinanthropus Pekinensis (the so-called "Peking Man").

In the years from 1926 to 1946 he also witnessed first-hand the turmoil of Chinese society and in his numerous letters described the situation and his own feelings of being part of a historical social upheaval. De Chardin was a Jesuit scientist, like his illustrious predecessors Matteo Ricci, Schall von Bell or Ferdinand Verbiest. Yet, in a way, he was different from them, since his main interest was not in Chinese culture but in the origins of human beings and the relation between Chinese and other people from a pre-historic, and therefore, pre-cultural, point of view.

His area of research offers a unique, original and creative perspective to cross cultural studies: the differences between people and races are analyzed by looking at the first human beings who appeared on earth. Does the human race have a common origin? Where do cultures come from? How deep really are cultural differences in comparison with a common human species?

Some of Teilhard de Chardin's theories became both famous and controversial at the time, especially within the Catholic Church. Indeed, his studies on the origin of man were a challenge to some superficial teaching on the Christian dogma of Creation of man and Original Sin. His theory of evolution and progress provoked great debate among philosophers and anthropologists.

Teilhard de Chardin was one of greatest European thinkers of the 20th century. However my article presents only some of his memories of China and the influence that China had on his ideas. I also briefly discuss the role of paleontology and the research on the origin of man in the field of cross cultural studies and how the fact of a common origin of man can help deal with cultural differences with a deeper sense of respect and awe.

I. Teilhard de Chardin and China: Biographical Facts

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in Sarcenat, not far from Clermont-Ferrand, France, in 1881, in a well-off French family, devoutly catholic. He was the fourth of eleven brothers and sisters. Very early in his life, his parents sent him to study at the renowned Jesuit school near Lyon. Here he developed a keen interest in natural sciences. At the same time he felt the calling to the priesthood and he joined the Jesuits, who allowed and encouraged him to pursue his scientific interests.

His first contact with China was during his time as a seminarian, in the Institute of Hastings, England. Her sister Francoise, who was a nun, was sent to work as missionary to China. She lived in Shanghai and was delighted by this new work...
among the urban poor. In her letters she expressed her strong dedication to China. In 1910 she was appointed mother superior of the community but sadly in 1911, at the age of 32, she caught smallpox and died suddenly.\[1\] Teilhard de Chardin wrote a touching letter to console his mother, in which he said: “Francoise had found indeed just the death she wished for above all: in China and for China. [...] We have no right to regret the good she would have done had her life been longer. A good life is life that fulfills God’s plans.”\[2\]

In 1905 he spent one year in Egypt and the Middle East for geological and naturalistic researches. Later, after more studies in England, as he was preparing to obtain a degree in natural science, World War I erupted. He volunteered and in 1916 joined the French army as a stretcher bearer at the front line.\[3\] He was present at some of the bloodiest battles of the time, showing great courage and receiving a medal for his heroic behavior. After the war, in 1920 he was able to get a formal degree in geology, botanic and zoology. His great passion was the study of minerals (geology), but later also the study of fossils (palaeontology).

Teilhard de Chardin’s first journey to China was in 1923. He had been invited by some colleagues to join a geological expedition in Inner Mongolia and lived in Tianjin, in the so-called “British Concession”, for one year. By then Teilhard de Chardin had developed a sense of the world as a great living being, a breathing mass of energy, where thinking man as a unique and mysterious role to play. During his travels in the Chinese deserts of the West (Ordos desert,鄂尔多斯沙漠) he composed “The Mass of the World”, one of his many articles half theological, half naturalistic, where he described the world as an evolving situation of universal offering, a kind of “world Eucharistic sacrifice” where the priest was a representative of this natural evolution: “I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world...You know how your creatures can come into being only, like shoot from stem, as part of an endlessly renewed process of evolution.”\[4\]

In his early works his language seemed to border on pantheism and soon some of his papers were considered not in conformity with the accepted standard of Catholic tradition, although he insisted that he was writing as a natural scientist and not as a theologian. It was a situation similar to Galileo, centuries before. Teilhard de Chardin was a very capable scientist who claimed that natural empirical sciences could shed light on the real meaning of the Bible and Christian Revelation. This was not a problem. But, like Galileo, he overstepped the line between offering a
contribution to the understanding of Scriptures and Revelation and offering an interpretation of Scriptures and Revelation. You cannot claim to be a geologist instead of a theologian, and then write about God. For the Catholic Church, any scientist can write about natural science, this is never a problem. But if you write about God or Creation or other contents of faith you have to accept, if you are a Catholic, the supervision of the so-called Magisterium, the official authoritative teaching of the Church promoted by the Pope and the Bishops, it matters.

In the 17th century the scientist Galileo claimed to interpret correctly the meaning of the Bible, in an age when the Reformation was challenging the Catholic Church precisely on the issue of “who” can interpret Scriptures and “how”. In the 20th century the scientist Teilhard de Chardin claimed to interpret the meaning of the Bible (Creation of Man and Original Sin), in an age when Marxism and Darwinism were challenging the Catholic Church precisely on the issue of evolution and progress. For both scientists, it was probably just a matter of bad timing.

The main problems in Teilhard's writings came from his vision of evolution: a vision of humanity where spirit and matter seemed to mix into some kind of energy; a vision of history as necessary movement forward, a position nearer to Marxism than to biblical theology. The Christian tradition had never seen earthly progress as a necessary historical movement. In the Bible the first historical movement is actually a regress, from Eden to the corruption of sin. Human freedom is not seen as necessarily improving. From David to Solomon, all the way to Judas Iscariot, the Bible presents characters who become worse with time. The question of Jesus, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke, 18:8) represents the terrible possibility of a total regress.

Because of his writings, Teilhard’s teaching position at the Catholic Institute in Paris became unacceptable to the authorities. His theological opinions were too controversial. He was asked to clarify and retract his mistakes. Like Galileo, he could not see any. He was in good faith, in the conscience that he could not retract. The school authorities withdrew his teaching permission. Those were days of inner suffering. Eventually his religious superior advised him to go somewhere else, for example, China. “To go to China” for Teilhard de Chardin was not a long awaited dream of missionary work, but a disciplinary measure, practically a punishment. His “Chinese exile” lasted more than 20 years but had a profound impact on his life and thinking. He worked first in Tianjin, then in Beijing, mostly as a researcher for the Paris National Museum, but eventually cooperating also with the Chinese
His most important contribution to universal science is his studies on the so-called “Peking Man”. From a group of fossils found in Zhoukoudian (周口店), near Beijing, the researchers were able to find traces of one of the oldest human being. The excavation was started by Swedish geologist Johan Gunnar Anderson in 1918. In 1921 American paleontologist Walter W. Granger identify another location for excavation. In 1921 Otto Zdansky from Austria discovered more material. Then Canadian paleoanthropologist Davidson Black obtained some funding and with Chinese archeologist Li Jie continued the research at the Peking Union Medical College. Teilhard de Chardin joined the ongoing excavations of the “Peking Man” Site at Zhoukoudian as an advisor in 1926. The result was the precise identification of what is known as “Peking Man” (北京猿人), an example of Homo erectus who was “faber”, tool worker and controller of fire, so not a kind of ape as previously thought. The “Peking Man” was considered certainly a direct ancestor of modern human beings and for some time the hypothesis was made that he might be the earliest human being.\[6\]

Teilhard immediately realized the importance of the discovery: “The famous Sinanthropus skull is proving more and more to be a find of the first order, a solid fact that’s going to be highly embarrassing to many out-of-date minds.”\[7\] The next scientific breakthrough was to find the connection between this man in China and similar discoveries in Africa: “Africa and central and eastern Asia are the great laboratories in which humanity must have been made. Europe was never in the past anything but a blind alley in which the great movements of life, born in the broad continents, came to die”.\[8\] Teilhard was confirmed advisor for the Beijing Cenozoic Research Laboratory of the Geological Survey of China following its founding in 1928. In the words of U. King: “Teilhard now became more and more a Chinese geologist.”\[9\]

Were all these discoveries a challenge to the Christian teaching on God’s Creation of man? Was there any contradiction with the teaching of Genesis? The Catholic Church had always read the book of Genesis as a poem about Creation, not as a scientific treatise. Actually the story of Original Sin and rebellion against God’s order looks much more real when applied to a Sinanthropus than to those Adam and Eve of Renaissance paintings who look like they are having a picnic among fruit trees.

In 1929 he was given an office in Beijing and invited to become a corresponding
member of the Academia Sinica and the National Research Institute in Nanking. He joined an expedition to the West of China with the archeologist Emile Licent, then stayed in western Shanxi and northern Shaanxi with the Chinese paleontologist C. C. Young and with Davidson Black, Chairman of the Geological Survey of China. These two became his friends. After a tour in Manchuria in the area of Great Khingan with some Chinese geologists, Teilhard joined the team of Center-Asia American Expedition in the Gobi, organised in June and July by the American Museum of Natural History, with Roy Chapman Andrews.

In 1935 Teilhard took part as a scientist in the famous Yellow Cruise in Central Asia, financed by the car maker Andre Citroen to test some of his vehicles.\cite{10} He remained with his colleagues for several months in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang. In 1937 the Sino-Japanese war began. Despite the dangers, Teilhard de Chardin joined also some explorations in the south of China, in the valleys of Yangtze River, in Sichuan, then in Guangdong. Unfortunately the relationship with Marcellin Boule was disrupted; the Paris Museum cut its financing on the grounds that Teilhard worked more for the Chinese Geological Service than for the Museum.

He was in Beijing during the war with Japan and in 1946 finally returned to France. His writings were even more controversial than before. He had become both famous and controversial for his philosophical and theological approach to evolution. From evolution of man to evolution of the entire cosmos, bordering, according to some critics, pantheism. He moved to a Jesuit house in the USA, where there was greater tolerance for new ideas. Here he died in 1955.

II. China Impressions

1. China Impressions: a Detached View

Teilhard de Chardin’s approach to Chinese culture was quite unusual and indeed different from previous Jesuits scientists’ experiences. He received his first impression of China while working in the desert, the second impression as he lived 20 years in China almost as an exile. Moreover, as a scientist, he specialized in pre-historic, and so pre-cultural studies and this, too, was not really the traditional approach of a sinologist to Chinese culture. Meanwhile, all these things made his observation on China quite unique in the history of sinology.

Because Teilhard went to China not as a missionary but as some kind of exile, his first reaction to the country was neither awe and admiration, nor high expectations, as it had been for Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit companions in the 17 century. In one
letter he described his first idea of China: “My strongest impression at the moment is a confused one that the human world is a huge and disparate thing, just about as coherent as the surface of a rough sea.”[11]

He felt the cultural power of China but could not see at the time how China culture might be a significant contribution to Western decadence. “I have not found in China (so far as I have seen) the ferment whence I hoped we might draw the generous wine that would reinvigorate our West.”[12] Actually the awareness of a contribution from China culture to the entire world is a very recent phenomenon, since only in the last few years there has been a world-wide movement to export Chinese culture abroad. Teilhard saw Chinese culture mostly as a gigantic clash between historical immutability, something unchanged within the depth of man since pre-historic times, and a revolutionary energy that seems to pass through the entire Chinese people as an electric power. Before the birth of the new China, he described it as “still Neolithic[13], not rejuvenated, as elsewhere, but simply interminably complicated in on itself”. Here the full passage about China in his “Phenomenon of Man:

“Either by its own genius or as an effect of immensity, China (and I mean the old China, of course) lacked both the inclination and the impetus for deep renovation. A singular spectacle is presented by this gigantic country which only yesterday represented, still living under our eyes, a scarcely changed fragment of the world as it could have been ten thousand years ago. The population was not only fundamentally agricultural but essentially organised according to the hierarchy of territorial possessions, the emperor being nothing more than the biggest proprietor. It was a population ultra-specialised in brick work, pottery and bronze, a population carrying to the lengths of superstition the study of pictograms and the science of the constellations; an incredibly refined civilisation, admittedly, but unchanged as to method since its beginning, like the writing which betrays the fact so ingenuously. Well into the nineteenth century it was still Neolithic, not rejuvenated, as elsewhere, but simply interminably complicated in on itself, not merely continuing on the same lines, but remaining on the same level, as though unable to lift itself above the soil where it was formed.”[14][…]

“And while China, already encrusted in its soil, multiplied its gropings and discoveries without ever taking the trouble to build up a science of physics, India allowed itself to be drawn into metaphysics, only to become lost there.”[15]

2. China Impressions: Historical Changes

Teilhard happened to be in China during some of the most significant years of changes in the nation’s history. He witnessed first-hand the modernization of China: “The Chinese now definitely have the self-awareness, if not the capabilities, of a modern nation.”[16] Talking about the clash between different parties and ideologies
he said: "There is going on here at this very moment, a human development of almost geological dimension; to participate in it would be a rare chance indeed." [17]

Beautiful was this image of a change of "geological dimension", considering the time of changes for stones and minerals! However, he also had a detached vision of those epochal changes. His interest was man in the natural sense of the human species, not man as a political animal. He saw the "people" as a "Yellow Mass", a phenomenon involving an entire nation and not just few individuals: "I do not regret the last six months spent in Peking, at the hot point of treble contact between Communism, Democracy and the rising Yellow Mass. I saw, I thought and I learned a lot." [18]

He saw history not as a clash between justice and injustice, or as a walk towards freedom, or as power struggle between rival leaderships, but always and only as humanity moving forward towards a greater hominisation. In The Phenomenon of Man he writes: "Basically can we not say that the essential thing in history consists in the conflict and finally the gradual hominisation of these great psycho-somatic currents?" [19] Sadly in those same years, in the Europe from which he was so far away, the Nazi concentration camps were experiments in the complete de-humanization of men. The idea of a necessary progress forward of humanity found here an evident contradiction. But Teilhard was too far away.

3. China Impressions: Chinese Intellectuals and Scientists and the City of Beijing

He worked at close contact with Chinese intellectuals and scientists, researchers and professors, and appreciated their openness. Once again the idea of "change" struck him, also "because of his Chinese friends, looking for a better future, preparing perhaps the new China of 1949" [20]: "One feels that the country's intellectual elite is casting its skin. In a century the change will have happened. What will it give? A China capable of helping the West in its research or merely an imitative China? [...] I find it more and more difficult to form any exact idea as to what sort of greatness or renewal we should expect from the New China. Sometimes I feel pessimistic. What seems clear to me is that we must look with favor on the birth of a new human group that nothing can prevent. [...] Look: we can't just breathe in our different compartments, our closed categories. Without destroying our more limited organisms, we must fuse them together, synthesize them: the human being, nothing but the human being as the context of our ambitions and organizations." [21]

When he was not travelling, he spent much of his time in Beijing. He liked Beijing: "What I like at Peking is the feeling of being at the heart of old China. My
finest memories of the place may be the recollections of coming home at night
sometimes in a rickshaw through dark and twisting little streets under magnificently
starred skys..."[22] Strolling in spring through an imperial park, he saw "all the
cherry trees showed pink against the grey earth, under a dust dimmed blue sky. A
real Chinese spring, unconscious of the troubles of war"[23].

He was in Beijing during the Sino-Japanese war and the Japanese occupation of
the city. As a foreigner he had a less hard life, yet it was not easy: "these seven years
[in Peking] have made me quite grey, but they have toughened me, not hardened me,
I hope, interiorly."[24] He had seen war before, in the front line, during the World
War I, from 1916 to 1918, when he had served as stretcher bearer showing amazing
courage and earning official recognition. However the Japanese occupation for the
foreigners was not a big difference, his life of studies and research went on as usual
and The Phenomenon of Man was began in Beijing precisely during Japanese
occupation. Many foreigners were leaving, as he wrote in May 1941, "people are
leaving Peking one by one". Moreover, one of the consequences of the Japanese war
was the physical disappearance of the remains of the "Peking Man" from the
museum.[25]

III. Chinese Influence on His Writings

What was the influence of Chinese culture on a man devoted to study the common
origin of the human species rather than its various geographical and cultural
differentiations? On one hand he lived in China for twenty years; on the other hand
his mind was focused on prehistory, not on culture or literature.

For some commentators and scholars, China gave him an attraction towards
Eastern religiosity.[26] However, according to my understanding, the greatest
influence of Chinese environment on him was in other areas.

First, it strengthened his need and desire to re-elaborate the Christian doctrine of
Original Sin within the context of his discoveries on evolution, with the sense and
feeling of a mass of people diverse and confused but united towards a common goal.
The starting point of his reflections were his paleontological discoveries, but life in
China, immersed within the life of a culture that has no concept of a "Original Sin",
probably was a true challenge to concentrate on this issue. The presence of the idea
of Original Sin is a very Western characteristic. This idea of a primordial
disobedience to God Creator belongs to the Biblical tradition. Then, from Paul to
Augustine, from Luther to Kierkegaard, much of European culture is marked by the
awareness that there exists an original fault in human being, an original defect, a radical corruption within man that no social system can change. In China, there is no imperfection that cannot be overcome by study (Confucius), by purification (Buddhism) or by the right formulas (Taoism). According to Christianity, Original Sin can only be denied or won by Christ. In Chinese tradition the idea of an “original sin” is absent. Teilhard de Chardin met some of the strongest critiques and opposition to his writings precisely on this subject.

Second, he felt very strongly the issue of “race”. This is a scientific mystery and he often discussed the mysterious passage from a common origin of mankind to the reality of different races. “Man of the Lower Quaternary period, the contemporary and the author of these earliest tools is only known to us in two fossil remains. We know them well, however—the Pithecanthropus of Java, long represented only by a simple skull, but now by much more satisfactory specimens recently discovered; and the Sinanthropus of China, numerous specimens of which have been found in the last ten years. These two beings are so closely related that the nature of each would have remained obscure if we had not had the good fortune to be able to compare them.”

In the Western world the emphasis on race is always seen as negative (racism). Classical tradition likes to boast its “internationalism”: we are all human beings, we have much in common. While in China, de Chardin was faced every day with the awareness of race. He was a “laowai”, a foreigner, and this was reminded to him at any step. All foreigners experience this characteristic of China: you are “seen” as foreigner even before you speak. Your broken Mandarin simply confirms the impression. There is no hostility, but an acute and persistent feeling of “being different”. De Chardin had a real passion for “man” as “human being”, yet he acknowledged the mysterious fact of racial differences between people and the almost natural tendency to gather together by race.

Assuming one can trust bones to give us an idea of flesh and blood, what were in fact those first representatives, in the age of the reindeer, of a new human verticil freshly opening? Nothing more or less than what we see living today in approximately the same regions of the earth. Negroes, white men and yellow men (or at the most pre-negro, pre-white and pre-yellow), and those various groups already for the most part settled to north, to south, to east, to west, in their present geographical zones. That is what we find all over the ancient world from Europe to China at the end of the last Ice Age. Accordingly when we study Upper Palaeolithic man, not only in the essential features of his anatomy but also in the main lines of his ethnography, it is really ourselves and our own infancy that we are finding, not
only the skeleton of modern man already there, but the framework of modern humanity. We see the same general bodily form; the same fundamental distribution of races; the same tendency (at least in outline) for the ethnic groups to join up together in a coherent system, over-riding all divergence. And (how could it fail to follow?) the same essential aspirations in the depths of their soul. [28]

Third, the humanity of daily life goes deeper and beyond cultural and historical changes. This too is a very “Chinese” characteristic: something in the culture seems beyond the changing of times and the technological progress. The variety and importance of food, the writing system, the family ties, the hierarchical organization of society, and the power of assimilating elements coming from outside. For Teilhard de Chardin this began at the dawn of humanity: “With man (at all events with Post-Neolithic man) simple elimination tends to become exceptional, or at all events secondary. However brutal the conquest, the suppression is always accompanied by some degree of assimilation. Even when partially absorbed, the vanquished still reacts on the victor so as to transform him. There is, as the geologists call the process, endomorphosis—especially in the case of a peaceful cultural invasion, and yet still more with populations, equally resistant and active, which interpenetrate slowly under prolonged tension. What happens then is mutual permeation of the psychisms combined with a remarkable and significant interfecundity. Under this two-fold influence, veritable biological combinations are established and fixed which shuffle and blend ethnic traditions at the same time as cerebral genes. Formerly, on the tree of life we had a mere tangle of stems; now over the whole domain of Homo sapiens we have synthesis.” [29]

Yet even after twenty years in China he was not so much fascinated by culture, as by “human beings”. His main interest was man, human being, human species. Someone asked him to write something about China, since he lived so long in such a fascinating place. “The only book I want to and need to write would not be the book of China, but the book of the Earth.” [30]

IV. Legacy and Critics

Teilhard de Chardin’s works received a lot of attention, especially in the period between 1950—1970, including a Church’s prohibition to allow students to read his books, [31] but there was no explicit connection between reactions to his works and his 20 plus years in China.

As far as supporters and admirers are concerned, the renowned British sinologist
Joseph Needham greatly admired Teilhard de Chardin. In later years Needham, out of concern for reconciliation between science and religion, assumed the Presidency of the *Teilhard de Chardin Centre for the Future of Mankind*. Needham has always been a friend of Teilhard and greatly helped him to spread his ideas within the Anglo-saxon academic world. Teilhard’s influence is commemorated on numerous collegiate campuses. A building at the University of Manchester is named after him, as are residence dormitories at Gonzaga University and Seattle University. His stature as a biologist was honored by George Gaylord Simpson in naming the most primitive and ancient genus of true primate, the Eocene genus *Teilhardina*. Many groups and associations are inspired by him, like the British Teilhard de Chardin Foundation and the American Teilhard Association.

However, although for some he was a prophet, for others he was a false one. Dietrich von Hildebrand was one of his most vocal critics. He says that he met Teilhard once and found out that Teilhard had a deep adversity toward Saint Augustin and the concept of supernature and original sin. We mention this as one of the position of the French scientist that might have been influenced by China.

Even after his death, in 1955, the works of Teilhard continued to receive the special attention of the authorities of the Catholic Church. As far as my article is concerned, we clearly see that nowhere in these condemnation there are references of some influence from Chinese culture.

The first warning to Catholic readers came in June, 1962, by the institution of the Catholic Church in charge of checking the orthodoxy of teachers, teaching and publications, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. This office issued a formal warning, called “Admonition”, in which it said: “Several works of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, some of which were posthumously published, are being edited and are gaining a good deal of success. Prescinding from a judgement about those points that concern the positive sciences, it is sufficiently clear that the above-mentioned works abound in such ambiguities and indeed even serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine. For this reason, the most eminent and most revered Fathers of the Holy Office exhort all Ordinaries as well as the superiors of religious institutes, rectors of seminaries and presidents of universities, effectively to protect the minds, particularly of the youth, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and of his followers.” In 1963 the local church authorities in Rome issued a decree requiring that Catholic booksellers in Rome should withdraw from circulation of the works of de Chardin, together with those books which favour
his erroneous doctrines. The text of this document was published in daily L'Aurore of Paris, dated 2 Oct. 1963, and was reproduced in Nouvelles de Chretiente, 10 Oct. 1963, p. 35.

In 1981 the Secretary of State Agostino Casaroli (who is the second most important authority in the Roman curia), sent a message on the occasion of the 100th birthday of Teilhard. The letter appeared on the front page of the official Vatican newspaper, “L’Osservatore Romano”, on June 10, 1981. In it he said:

The international scientific community and, more generally, the entire intellectual world is preparing to celebrate the centennial of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin’s birth. The astonishing resonance of his research, as well as the brilliance of his personality and richness of his thinking, have profoundly marked our epoch. In him, a powerful poetic intuition of nature’s profound value, a sharp perception of creation’s dynamism, and a broad vision of the world’s future join together with an incontestable religious fervor. Similarly, his unremitting desire to dialogue with the science of his time and his bold optimism about the evolution of the world have given his intuitions—through the rich variety of his words and the magic of his images—considerable influence. Completely turned to the future, this synthesis, often lyrical and animated with passion for the universal, will help to restore hope to those assailed by doubts. At the same time, the complexity of the problems he analyzed and the variety of approaches he adopted raised difficulties that understandably called for a calm, critical study—in the scientific, philosophical and theological realms—of his extraordinary work. There can be no doubt that the celebrations of his 100th birthday—at the Catholic Institute of Paris, the Museum of Natural History, UNESCO, and Notre Dame of Paris—are an occasion for an encouraging evaluation of his work using a just methodological distinction of procedures in order to achieve a rigorous epistemological study. What our contemporaries will undoubtedly remember, beyond the difficulties of conception and deficiencies of expression in this audacious attempt to reach a synthesis, is the testimony of the coherent life of a man possessed by Christ in the depths of his soul. He was concerned with honoring both faith and reason, and anticipated the response to John Paul II’s appeal: “Be not afraid, open, open wide to Christ the doors of the immense domains of culture, civilization, and progress. I am pleased to communicate this message on behalf of the Holy Father to you and all the participants of the conference over which you are presiding at the Catholic Institute of Paris in homage to Fr. Teilhard de Chardin.”

One month later an official communication of the Holy See appeared on the same newspaper:

The letter sent by the Cardinal Secretary of State to His Excellency Mons. Poupard on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin has been interpreted in a certain section of the press as a revision of previous stands taken by the Holy See in regard to this author, and in particular of the Monitum (“warning”) of the Holy Office of 30 June 1962, which pointed out that the work of the author contained ambiguities and grave doctrinal errors. The question has been asked whether such an interpretation is well founded. After having consulted
the Cardinal Secretary of State and the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which, by order of the Holy Father, had been duly consulted beforehand, about the letter in question, we are in a position to reply in the negative. Far from being a revision of the previous stands of the Holy See, Cardinal Casaroli’s letter expresses reservation in various passages—and these reservations have been passed over in silence by certain newspapers—reservations which refer precisely to the judgement given in the Monitum of June 1962, even though this document is not explicitly mentioned. [39]

Until today the figure of Teilhard de Chardin is still controversial, especially within the Catholic Church. Yet to answer the question we put at the beginning we can say that nowhere in the critics of his writings from the Church there is any explicit reference to Chinese influence. Unlike the theological debate during the time of the “Rites Controversy” or the opinions of the Figurists (18th century), there is no connection between the conclusions of Teilhard considered erroneous and Chinese culture.

Reading his works, one had the impression not so much that 20 years in China deeply influenced his thought, but rather that his thought found a suitable environment within Chinese tradition. In other words, Teilhard’s scientific and philosophical arguments reflect something of Chinese culture but in a mysterious and profound way, in which there is no explicit trace of “reciprocal influences”, but rather a common search for answers to the meaning of life and the mystery of man.

Notes:
[1] Ursula, King. Spirit of Fire. The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 33.
[2] Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, Lettres d'Astings et de Paris, Paris, editions Beauchesne, 1975, letter. n. 176.
[3] King, p. 52.
[4] The full article is reproduced in Thomas King Mulvihil, Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to the Mass of the World, New York, Paulist Press, 2005, p. 159.
[5] King, p. 126.
[6] See: Amir D. Aczel, The Jesuit and the skull, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007, pp.4-7.
[7] Teilhard, “Letter to L. Zanta”, 3 april, 1930, in Letters from a Traveler, London, Collins, 1966.
[8] Teilhard, “Fossil Men: Recent Discoveries and Present Problems”, a lecture given on the 26 of March 1943, at the Catholic University of Peking.
[9] King, p. 127.
[10] Bede Benjamin Bidlack, “Teilhard de Chardin in China: Challenge and Promise”, in China Heritage Quarterly, The Australian National University, n.23, September 2010.
[11] Teilhard De Chardin, Letters from a Traveler, London, Collins, 1966, n 73.
[12] Quoted in King, p. 95.
[13] Neolithic, beginning about 10 000 years BC, is considered the last part of the stone age. From this age only one human species (Homo sapiens sapiens) existed.

[14] The Phenomenon of Man, book 3, chap. 2, paragraph 5, at <http://arthursbookshelf.com/other-stuff/phenom10.html>.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Letter to Joseph Teilard the Chardin", 1931, quoted in King, p. 135.

[17] Quoted in Claude Cuenot, Teilhard de Chardin, a Biographical study, London: Burns and Oates, 1965, p. 77.

[18] King, p. 186.

[19] Ibid, paragraph 5.

[20] According to Bede Benjamin Bidlack, "Teilhard de Chardin in China: Challenge and Promise", in China Heritage Quarterly, The Australian National University, no. 23, Sep. 2010.

[21] Teilhard de Chardin, Letters to Leontine Zanta, London, Collins, 1969, p. 70.

[22] Quoted by Claude Cuenot, Teilhard de Chardin, a Biographical study, London: Burns and Oates, 1965, p. 48.

[23] Claude Cuenot, Teilhard de Chardin, a Biographical study, London: Burns and Oates, 1965, p. 240.

[24] Teilhard de Chardin, Letters from a Traveler, 1923-55, UK: Collins; VS: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 290.

[25] Amir D. Aczel, The Jesuit and the skull, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007, p. 7.

[26] King, Ursula, Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern religions. Spirituality and Mysticism in an Evolutionary World, with a foreword by Joseph Needham, New York: Paulist Press, 2011.

[27] The Phenomenon of Man, book 3, chap. 2, paragraph 1, at <http://arthursbookshelf.com/other-stuff/phenom10.html>.

[28] Ibid, paragraph 3.

[29] Ibid, paragraph 5.

[30] Teilhard de Chardin, Letters to two friends 1926-1952, London, Collins 1972, p. 44.

[31] See also: Amir D. Aczel, The Jesuit and the skull, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007, prologue.

[32] King, p. 187.

[33] <http://www.teilhard.org.uk/teilhard-association/booklist/>.

[34] The definition was given by Dietrich von Hildebrand, see: Dietrich von Hildebrand, Teilhard de Chardin: a False Prophet, New York: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970.

[35] "This remark confirmed the impression I had gained of the crass naturalism of his views; but it also struck me in another way: the criticism of St. Augustine, the greatest of the Fathers of the Church, betrayed Teilhard's lack of a genuine sense of intellectual and spiritual grandeur. It was only after reading several of Teilhard's works, however, that I fully realized the catastrophic implications of his philosophical ideas, and the absolute incompatibility of his theology-fiction (as Etienne Gilson calls it) with Christian revelation and the doctrine of the Church." Dietrich von Hildebrand, The Charitable Anathema, Roman Catholic Books, 1993, chap. XX, p. 1.
[36] “Warning Considering the Writings of Father Teilhard de Chardin”, Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, June 30, 1962, available at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/dechardin.txt>.

[37] The text of this document was published in daily L’Aurore of Paris, dated 2 Oct 1963, and was reproduced in Nouvelles de Chrétiente, 10, Oct 1963, p. 35.

[38] L’Osservatore Romano, June 10, 1981.

[39] Communiqué of the Press Office of the Holy See (appearing in the English edition of L’Osservatore Romano), July 20, 1981, available at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/dechardin.txt>.

Michele FERRERO, Master (Laurea) in Classics Latin and Greek, State University of Torino; Master in Theology (S.T.L.), Maynooth Pontifical University; Doctorate in Theology (S.T.D.), Taipei Fu Jen Pontifical University. From 2009 to present he serves as teacher of Latin and Classics at Beijing Foreign Studies University, National Research Centre of Overseas Sinology. He is also part-time teacher of Latin at the following: Chinese Academy of Social Science; National Chinese Catholic Seminary; Italian Embassy School of Latin for Italian students and from 2012 to present Director of Latinitas Sinica, Centre for Latin Language and Culture, Beijing Foreign Studies University.

His major publications include the following:

“Il prato dell’arco-baleno” (Torino: LDC, 1991).

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