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## TWO HIEROCRATIC PARADIGMS OF VISUALITY CONFUCIANIST CHINA — ORTHODOX BYZANTIUM<sup>†</sup>

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### Abstract

In the rich Christianity-in-China debate, an Orthodox perspective is largely missing. Starting with sinology's founding fathers — 16<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit missionaries — controversies have focused on the Catholic (*Tianzhu jiào* 天主教) and Protestant (*Jidu jiào* 基督教) branches, quasi-unanimously taken to account for practically all of Christianity, while references to Orthodox (*Dōngzhèng jiào* 東正教) tradition have been rather absent. A possible strategy for placing Orthodoxy (and Byzantium) in a context more culturally attractive to Chinese and Western scholars is to link Chinese with Byzantine studies, providing ample scope for comparative approach, while building on the Ricci-Legge tradition of stressing archaic Chinese monotheism. That is the acknowledged agenda of this paper. In pursuing it, the complex religious-ideological matrix allows for legitimate parallels — including an exploration of 'iconic thinking' implicit in Chinese 'optocracy', explicit in Byzantium.

*Keywords:* Shang Di (上帝 God), Dao (道 Logos), Ling (靈 Spirit), optocracy, iconocrats

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### 1. Introduction: Byzantium's late 'revenge'?

This paper explores two Oriental *universal empires*, equally *exotic*: "there is no other field of European history as alien to scholars, as dim and remote as Byzantium" (Curtius). "Orthodoxy hardly exists for westerners: Europe is the West, Charlemagne's Empire. Everything lying geographically behind it is *terra incognita*." [1] And if Byzantium is so unfamiliar, China is the extreme *alterity*.

Their historic continuity has been misconstrued as stagnant immobility, incapable of evolution. Yet, far from signifying fossilised cultures petrified for centuries in sterile mannerism, I claim that their *stability* resulted from political thought being structured by consistent sets of religious principles, lending it legitimacy and resilience, and lasted only as long as the fidelity of their political praxis to these principles.

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The two civilizations are seen as case studies illustrating the role of religious systems in justifying political models. I am linking their dominant religious paradigm to the political one, highlighting the contextualization of power configurations, with their underlying metaphysical and symbolic mediations [2]. Both were “ideologies of normative empire sustained by transcendent powers” [3] which legitimized state authority.

*Insufficiently explored hidden connections seem to exist between the two empires.* The Marxist system was exported to China via USSR — heir of Russian Empire — heir to Byzantium. *Could today’s (re)configuring Russia–China alliance be Byzantium’s late ‘revenge’?* Such geopolitical speculation alluding to *secret Byzantium–China contiguity* is not fortuitous. I am proposing an unsettling hypothesis: *the forceful infliction of the Marxist totalitarian model on Russia and China was chosen* because they had both inherited centralized hierarchic-ideological models in which a bureaucratic state played a strong role inducing collectivist-obedient social reflexes with a religious foundation (see Weber’s concept of *Herrschaft*). Byzantium and dynastic China were traditional *hierocratic paradigms* inseparable from an ethos of self-submission [4]. Their pre-existent theocratic models facilitated the violent enforcement of a Marxist secular religion upon their offsprings: *communist ideology* acted as atheist dogma, the *nomenklatura* as an anti-hierocracy, the *Party* as a secular church, religious self-submission was hijacked into ideological subservience.

As the ancients said: *corruptio optimi pessima.*

## 2. The Chinese Trinity

Now more than ever, Chinese history needs to be reinterpreted from a Christian theological perspective.

In *Chinese Confession* Yuan Zhiming argues that, through the Bible, the Chinese can reconnect with their roots and rediscover God. He says: God has been present in China, worshipped by the Chinese in most ancient times. The Chinese worshipped the ‘God of Heaven’ *Shangdi* long before the missionaries’ civilizations existed.

“Five thousand years ago the Chinese were monotheists; not henotheists but monotheists” says Legge [5, 6]. Giles also speaks of “the pure monotheism of a personal God” [7]. The ancient Chinese called their Supreme Divinity *Shang Di* (上帝 *Lord Above*) and *Tian* (天 *Heaven*): “Heaven is styled *Shang Ti*, and frequently *Ti* alone without *Shang*. That addition, meaning *Supreme*, individualizes and exalts the *Ti*; throughout the ancient books of *History* and *Poetry* the names *Tien*, *Ti* and *Shang Ti* are constantly interchanged in the course of the same chapter or paragraph, often in the same sentence.” [5, p. 9] Besides, this Divinity manifests clear personal attributes.

The “progressively secularized Western study of Chinese tradition” [8] denies the monotheistic character of archaic Chinese religion, claiming it is a 19<sup>th</sup> century construction. Thus, H. Fingarette [9] deplores the ‘anthropological unsophistication’ of Catholic and Protestant translators of Confucius, seeing the

disappearance of “the specifically Christian element in recent translations” as a step in the right direction. I claim it’s a step precisely in the *wrong* direction, since such views express only the presuppositions of a secular modern paradigm built on an atheist methodological postulate [10]. Thus, there is abundant textual evidence in the *Classics*. *Tian* showed benevolence or hostility. The *Shu Jing* 書經 speaks of the “favour and will of August Heaven (*Tian*)”: Emperor Shun was: “wise, mild, respectful, sincere. The report of his mysterious virtue was heard on high and he was appointed to take the throne. One of his first public acts was to sacrifice to Shang-te, the Supreme Ruler or God... The worship of Shang-te had previously existed. To this Supreme Being the highest forms of adoration were offered. By His decree kings were made. In all probability there was a time when the worship of Shang-te was the expression of the pure monotheistic faith of the Chinese. By degrees, however, corruption crept in, although Shang-te always remained the supreme object of veneration.” [11]



Figure 1. Names of God.

The seal from Figure 1 depicts, by archaic pictographs, the mystery of the Trinity (three ancient names for God):

- *Shang Di* (上帝 Lord On-High): God the Father;
- *Dao* (道): God the Word, or *Logos*, through Whom all was made;
- *Ling* (靈 Spirit): in *Sheng Ling* — Holy Spirit.

Today Orthodox Christians in China use these terms (and the *Shang Di* version of the Bible) remaining tied to Chinese religion’s primeval roots while embracing Biblical revelation [12].

Around this core was organized a coherent network of interwoven metaphysical-moral concepts which *normed* traditional Chinese society: *Tian Dao* 天道—God’s Law, *Ming De* 明德—Light of Grace, *Yi* 義—Righteousness, *Cheng* 誠—Sincerity, *Zhong* 忠—Loyalty (for all Confucian concepts see [13,14]), presiding over a *Tao-centric* culture and a *Taonomic* (a name I coined from *Tao* 道 and 天/天, for the religious-political paradigm dominant in China from prehistory to modernity) State.

Confucianism (*Ru* 儒) and Daoism were rooted in the same source: the archaic *Ru* tradition. Confucius remained faithful to the *Ru* orthodoxy to which he belonged; Lao Zi created Daoism out of it (much as Buddha made Buddhism

out of Hinduism). Influenced by Buddhism, Daoism became syncretistic and deviant from *Ru*. The religious dimension of Confucianism is now recognized: “Approaching Confucianism as a lived and living faith rather than a philosophy or an ethic is still uncommon, but it’s no longer as lonely a path as it was” [15].

The model kept its prestige through its schools: 1) pre-Confucian era — the *Ru/the Classics*; 2) classical age of preimperial founding masters (Confucius, Mengzi); 3) Han—Tang canonical age of commentators: empire-state ideology; 4) Song—Ming Neo-Confucianism (Zhu Xi’s syncretism); 5) Modern/New Confucianism. “It’s to the Confucian ethos that the Chinese state owed its bureaucratic stability... Yet the reverse is not true; Confucianism was less dependent on the state for survival than the state on it.” [16] Its influence amounted to a *confucianisation* of politics. As Taylor says: “All too infrequently have Confucian teachings and their roots been presented in the framework of a religious superstructure that views humankind as a mirror of the ways of Heaven, source of religious authority. It is, however, from a religious context that Confucians have called upon political rulers to emulate the Way of Heaven... This involves components of faith not often understood for the central role they play even in political decision-making.” [17] “Confucianism was not a passive tool of government. Rather, it functioned as a watchdog for ruling activities”, applying “its principles to shape political structure” [14, p. 5].

The organic link between religious and political legitimacy was confirmed by the Empire’s collapse in 1911 after the meritocratic Confucian examination system for selecting the administrative hierarchy (its backbone for 2 millennia) was abolished in 1906 [18].

## 2.1. *Epiphanies of grace*

Though Confucianism only became the official paradigm in Han, its structures date from the Legendary Emperors’ age. They were wise, virtuous, altruistic: Yao abdicated in favour of Shun, who gave the throne to Yu [19]. The *sage kings* set up a governance archetype which became, in the next millennia, a norm for emperors to model their behaviour by their example. The *Shi Jing* says about Wen: *As silky light King Wen’s virtue /coming down in the sunlight,/what purity!* [20] The source of the sage kings’ virtue was transcendent: *De* 德, divine uncreated *Grace* (Christensen). For isn’t virtue always a gift of the Paraclete? “*In the light of light is the virtù /as of Shun on Mt Taishan /the paraclete that was present in Yao, the precision, / in Shun the compassionate, / in Yu the guider of waters.*” [21] The ‘light of light’ (*Lumen de luminæ*) is, of course, Christ. And *De* is the uncreated light or energy through which divine providence sustains the world. By an accomplished *mimesis* they became pure mirrors in which God was contemplated: transparent recipients of grace.

## 2.2. Moral entropy and revolutions

The *Classics* assert history's *descending* course. In the beginning people had pure hearts, sovereigns ruled in harmony with *Dao*; Pristine Virtue was unimpaired, the Earth — enlightened. Then “the Great Disorder occurred Under Heaven”. By spiritual decline dynasties degenerated.

The last *good king*—the Duke of Zhou—revealed the Heaven's Mandate concept *Tian ming* 天命: God brings virtuous rulers to power. If they become corrupt calamities warn of their imminent fall. Power legitimization remains transcendent, yet its expression is now semiotic: cosmic signs whose prophetic reading is turned into political action. The *change of mandate* — *geming* 革命 — is a symbolic shift at socio-cosmic level. This doctrine justified dynastic succession for the next 3,000 years. Its collective subconscious endurance is still shown in present day use of *geming* for *revolution*: another change of mandate!

## 2.3. Emperor - the unwobbling cross

Sub-heavenly world (*Tian Xia* 天下) reflects its Heavenly model (*Tian Shang* 天上) coinciding with the *Celestial Empire*. *Tian Xia* — a metaphysical concept — legitimized a political one: the Emperor had to harmonise terrestrial and heavenly order, unify the world (China) and bring-Peace-Under-Heaven — *ping Tian Xia* 天下. The ideogram for *King* (*Wang* 王) shows the Sovereign 王 (middle line) as Heaven—Earth mediator. The vertical indicates him connecting celestial and mundane reality. An immoral emperor failed to fulfil his sacred role, blocking God's communication with the realm below and disturbing cosmic order. *Wang* 王 summarizes a cruciform semiotics, placing the sovereign at the symbolic intersection of worlds. By omitting the extremes, 王 becomes a cross 十. The emperor *is* his own cross, the *sign* of a crucial position *at the crossroads of the seen with the unseen*, between which he is enthroned as a *sui generis* figure of the Incarnation.

“Any power only becomes rightful by being sacralised; most of all royal power... whose every manifestation is a theophany.” [22] Dynastic China was a *covert theocracy*: supreme religious — political authority coincided in the Son of Heaven. His *filiation* was conditional; but a distinction between spiritual—temporal power was unconceivable. A conception like the king's two bodies (a natural and a political one [23]) could never arise there. A single God-entrusted power existed, with no conflict or cleavage, fully personified by the sovereign.

Here it must be observed that turning man into a source of power legitimization was unimaginable in traditional societies. The contemporary paradigm of cultural death of metaphysics has set up the individual as ultimate source of political/moral authority [9]. Modern revolutions have replaced royal

power by republics: a model based on *transcendent* legitimacy of power was supplanted by one based on *immanent* legitimacy. We can assume that, after *divine* and *human*, the last stage will be the *infrahuman* grounding of power.

In China the emperor had to be *Inward Sage/Saint — Outward Emperor* (*nei sheng wai wang* 外聖之王). His role prescribed him to cultivate virtue, wisdom and saintliness, manifested through righteous leadership and ritual: a *religious* ideal. He had to become a *Saintly Sage* (*sheng* 聖), attain enlightened wisdom, consonance between inner self, outer world and *Dao* (*He nei wai zhi Dao* 和內之外道), ensure Heaven-Earth consonance and pacify the empire [13].

#### 2.4. *The prayer*

The Son of Heaven (*Tian Zi* 天子) had the exclusive prerogative of presiding over sacrificial rituals to the Supreme God. They culminated in the solstice worship of *Shang Ti* in the Temple of Heaven. The prayers read by the Ming Emperor at the altar on behalf of the empire show the persistence of monotheistic faith [5, p. 40-51].

However incredible their monotheism, such are the ritual prayers the Chinese emperor made, as ‘parent of the people’, to *Shang Di*, asking His blessing for the empire. We recognize in his faith and emotion an intense liturgical aspiration, a humbleness of service recalling David’s *Psalms*.

That explains Confucian emphasis on *Li*: in the form of ritual worship monotheism was preserved down to the last dynasty. Any separation between the Emperor’s cultic role and that of state ruler disappears therein (in fact it never existed in China). Generally, the separation between state and religious institutions “is not a natural phenomenon but a legacy from history, therefore problematic. Many are the human societies where there is no sign of this separation.” [22] China was such a case.

#### 2.5. *The symbolic and the diffused*

The emperor was invested with sacred attributes; whatever touched him was contaminated by the numinous. The Forbidden City’s symbolic topology was a universe inaccessible to common mortals, subject to taboos, mythologized through recondite numerology and metaphoric names with mystical resonance. The compound was designed based on laborious codification evoking concentric levels of power around the Emperor. It reflected a strict hierarchy presided by an invisible supreme authority. Architecture gave shape to enciphered structures; space was rigorously organised along perpendicular axes on astrological and geomantic criteria; the throne was at the centre of successive enclosures with military and ceremonial role. The various edifices’ ritual symbolism of names and functions made up an anagogical contraption. Mirroring the Empire’s power structure, the Forbidden City was a *semiosis* of the sacred: a huge hieroglyph of brick, enamelled tiles, wood and marble, words and symbols, a complex signifier

pointing to a transcendent referent. The centre of imperial command was made to exert amazement and awe, to be tremendous and terrifying like the numinous it stood for: a *tangible hierophany*.

If China was a theocracy in disguise, its main form of religion was *diffused*: “a religion having its theology, cultus and personnel so intimately diffused into secular social institutions, they became part of the concept, rituals and structure of the latter, having no significant independent existence” [24]. The cause may have been the Emperor — who assumed early in Chinese history the priestly role of worshipping *Shang Di*, “vicariously debarring the millions of his subjects from direct worship of God” [5, p. 70].

## 2.6. A quasi-sacerdotium: the Graphocracy

This pervasive religion meant not only the Emperor acting ritually as High Priest, but also that there had to be a class of sacerdotas sharing the same diffuse features. And indeed such a class existed: the *Ru* — ancient masters in divination and rituals. In Shang they were a social category of scholars competent in religious rites, writing, astrology, court etiquette. Refined, civilised, polite and learned, they were an erudite intellectual nobility acquired through study and virtuous polishing of moral character. *Ru* were associated with ritual purification for ceremonies performed as ‘priests’ during the Zhou; a *soft* nature, kind, courteous, contrasting with rough commoners. Confucius himself was a *Ru*. They sought to make the Way of ancient sage-kings prevail: a society of harmony, rules of propriety, virtues and benevolent government [14, p. 22]. *Ru* were a quasi-sacerdotal caste, keepers of an archaic *gnosis* — inseparable from knowledge of hieroglyphic writing. This hermetic art, inaccessible to prophane categories, was assimilated to an *initiatic* craft, reserved to the educated few. Hence the importance of calligraphy, painting and graphic arts, the value of humanistic studies and the key role — as Ricci was the first European to realise — of the *Ru* as true *elite*. Bureaucracy was built on this class acting as symbolic apparatus of imperial power. They exerted their charismatic dominant role by virtue and graphical competence: a power to decipher — and draw — what seemed *holy* signs to the uninitiated. If Chinese writing was originally a *graphophany*, a brush-work revelation of the sacred, then I may also coin for their power the term *graphocracy* — the power of the connoisseurs of hieroglyphs or masters of written signs. Given the visual nature of these signs, the *Ru* were implicitly masters of the image, of iconic signs: *iconocrats*.

## 2.7. China - an optocratic civilisation

“The soil of Chinese life seems entangled in the roots of its language.” [25] Ideographic writing favoured an essentially visual culture, generating a mental pattern operating with concrete associations rather than abstract notions. We may speak of a culture of *optocracy* [26]. Visual perceptions are preferred to

conceptual thinking.

### 3. Iconic empires

Fenollosa's demonstration, integrated by Pound in his poetic art, is classic. But it has never been related to the iconic mental cast typical for Orthodoxy. Does the Chinese thought pattern, imbued in and inseparable from its ideographic written character, have a similarity to Byzantine iconic prevalence?

We find the same sacred-profane ambivalence in Chinese writing, which evolved from "schematic logographs originally endowed with the sacredness associated with certain forms of pictorial representation. These protographs were "highly iconic logograms, on the borderline between pictorial representations and writing... There may well have been a play between the phonetic and the iconic, and that may have resonated with a particular religious significance." [27]



**Figure 2.** (a) Trinity: The apophatic Allegory of the Trinity forming a graphic circle; (b) Saint John the Baptist's angelic wings, the stylized mountain scenery of his ascetic life, the executioner's axe, the beheaded body, triumphant Salome carrying his head on a plate (appearing twice: the icon is a narrative); (c) The Resurrection: The angel sitting by the empty tomb, pointing at the shroud, telling the myrrh-bearing women the Resurrection; (d) The 1<sup>st</sup> Council of Nicaea with the Emperor among the bishops, holding the Creed: an icon of *synergeia*.



Making a brilliant case for the Chinese hieroglyph, Fenollosa makes an indirect case for iconic thinking. For what does the icon do, if not “cross from the minor truth of the seen to the major truth of the unseen?” “Had the world not been full of homologies, sympathies and identities”, iconic thought would have been impossible and Saint Paul could never have said *videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*: there would have been no mirror and no enigma. It would have been impossible to “interpret the obscure from the known, pass from the seen to the unseen”. We would have seen it all or nothing at all. More likely, the latter: there would have been no visible creation, no world to be seen and no one to see it. This is the stake of the body of the image, of iconic *mimesis* [26, p. 209] and of the Chinese written character as a visual symbol of the unseen, in our image-dependent civilisation of simulacra.

Christ’s parables ‘teem with examples’, concrete stories, visual imagery (Figure 2). Could the Chinese be predisposed by their mental frame to naturally grasp His none too abstract teachings, particularly as illustrated by Orthodox icons?

### 3.1. *Oikoumene* — a Byzantine ‘*Tian Xia*’

Byzantium was a theocentric culture and theonomic society [28]. All its concepts were derived from Orthodox theology [29]. *Taxis* (τάξις) is the universal principle of divine creation, God-established *order*. In its absence universal laws would cease to function [26]. It is maintained according to the principle of *oikonomía* (οἰκονομία) / *وفاة* — wise thoughtfulness, judicious adaptation to circumstances, discernment, also the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation, the divine plan for mankind’s salvation, providence operating in history. Being shaped *economically* (*kat’oikonomian*), human order is only the best arrangement possible in our fallen world. A particular case of *taxis* was *hierarchia* — or *taxiarchia* — governing the world. The *oikoumene* coincided with *Basileia*: a kingdom of all the Earth—celestial kingdom’s reflection, ruled by a sovereign here below — provisional delegate of the One on high [22, p. 22]. *Synergeia*—*oikonomic* collaboration between Church and Emperor — reflects *synergy* in Orthodox soteriology. The *Basileus* was lord of the created world—*Kosmocrator*; everything linked to him was *theios*/holy. Any impairment to *theia oikonomía* was not just state felony, transgression of *peitharchia* (obedience) but blasphemy. Democracy was usurpation, sacrilege to the legitimate king. If he strayed from the best possible order he became unworthy of divine trust. [...] The *Sobornost* (synodal) model of the *Imperium*—*Sacerdotium* relation was more finely tuned than the caesaropapist prejudice suggests. It bore no resemblance to the “two swords” [30] western model, where Emperor and Pope were bound to compete, locked in an *institutionally designed* competition for domination (a duelistic-dualistic view of structural adversity). Based on *synergic* solidarity/complementarity, the Byzantine model favoured spiritual—temporal integration and conversion of the latter. The conversion of whoever occupied the throne was a ‘conversion’ of the state. Through the ‘most

Christian Emperor', the State was 'absorbed' into the Ecclesial body, included in the 'synodality' of a theandric institution.

### 3.2. *The Akakia - a metaphor*

A method for the Emperor's conversion was "the *Mirror of princes*, whose function was not to articulate theories but formulate moral advice". Missing their concrete focus, Dagron complained these books didn't "offer a political ideology..., nor did they amount to a theoretical reflection on the nature of power." According to them the Emperor had to "be an image of God... see himself as his subjects' 'companion in earthly slavery', made of the same dust, as he was reminded by the pouch filled with earth he held in his hand, the *akakia*." The *Mirrors* aimed to "provide whoever exercised power with an antidote to protect him against the dangers to which he was inevitably exposed...a cure for the inevitable diseases of absolute power, not by a change of the political system but by the prince's personal conversion." [22, p. 22]

We note their resemblance to the Chinese mental cast. Rather than develop a political theory, they tried to make the king a good Christian. He was after all a mortal man and had to consider his salvation. The silk bag of dust he held on celebrations like Easter [31] was an iconic symbol, a powerful material statement, memento of his mortality.

*No ideas but in things* an American poet said. And we come full circle: when W.C. Williams voiced the *Imagist* movement poetics he followed Ezra Pound, who initiated *Imagism* after having discovered Chinese poetry and Fenollosa's essay.

And isn't that exactly what the Byzantines were doing? Thing and action are not separated; the *akakia* is a tangible metaphor. It reminds the emperor of death 'with more vigour and vividness' than a treatise. Absence of theoretical works on politics was pinned on Byzantine 'inability' of abstract thinking. But, like the Chinese, the Byzantines adhered to a different thought pattern: "Show, don't tell!" said the Imagists — and that was the Byzantine way, as well as the Chinese, whose 'telling' was a 'showing' in itself.

Like the ideogram, the earth-bag was an *iconic bridge*, helping the *Basileus* 'cross from the seen to the unseen'.

## 4. Conclusion

Did these highly sophisticated political and religious paradigms, with their subjacent thought pattern of visibility and intuitive, direct appeal to concrete symbol, work? Arguably yes. The long history of these empires suggests so. Could they have done better? No doubt. But after all, are we doing better? The 'Enlightenment project'— the 'heart' of postmodern discourse — has failed. Its attempt to rationally legitimize an ethical framework and a political model without transcendent grounding is a dead-end. In the face of radical anti-traditionalism, Byzantium and Confucian China offer coherent spiritual

paradigms with a strong metaphysical foundation — civilisational contexts which may serve to emulate a renewal of our own.

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