

The Gospel with Chinese Characteristics

by a China Pilgrim

Translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.

The Art of Eating

It's not enough for a dish to be nourishing; it must also be tasty. Truths as large as the universe can bore us stiff; little truths no bigger than a mustard seed can stir up the world. The danger for us, specialists in the Gospel, is sometimes to be so sure of possessing the truth that our eyes no longer marvel before the truth that gently grows by itself just beneath our noses.

My brother Gerard wrote me, "From what I was able to see on TV, the Chinese can turn any kind of "bug" into a special steak!" He is not mistaken. China, which has known terrible famines, has developed, in fact, and perhaps for that reason, one of the choicest cuisines in the world. The plate is so nicely set up, so pretty and appetizing that we eat until we're full without sometimes knowing what we're eating. It can be a delicate dish of bears' paws or a pheasant's neck, as well as the heart of a dog, or a rat fillet or the tail of a snake.

China, out of necessity, has learned to make marvels out of nothing. This is how the Chinese, enjoying fantastic health, have become as numerous at the stars in the heavens and the sands of the seashore.

Surely, truth without art can nourish, but who wants any of it? And who can possibly want a Gospel without beauty or taste? A Gospel which is dry, cold, sterile, bland, without salt or pepper, or spices cannot be Good News.

One need not be rich or a specialist in art or magic to make of the Gospel a thing of beauty. It's enough to open one's eyes wide enough to read life between the lines to discover what we are and the great Reality which surrounds us and who hides there. If we cast only a superficial glance, we will never discover more than the shadow. It's a matter of listening to the words and things rather than getting caught up in and grabbing hold of them with this terrible mania we have of

dissecting and emptying in order to try to understand and define everything. It's a matter of letting them speak, of entering into dialogue with them, like children are wont to do for hours with pieces of strings, a few little pebbles, a little branch, a little water, a bit of sand. It's a matter of knowing how to make something out of nothing, the way the Chinese do. Like God does, God the Beautiful, the Good, the True, the All, too great to be comprehended. God permits us to discover him in what is small and at hand, somewhere within us, or in others. For all that is, including what seems to be nothing, is filled with God's Presence and overflows with dazzling grandeur,

Paper, Painting, Poetry and Ink

While talking and enjoying themselves, the Chinese, who long ago invented paper, make lace, sculptures and ingenious things with a simple page of a calendar and a pair of scissors. To pass the time away in winter, peasants with big rough hands busy themselves painting life, their life, in colors and in forms that the heart alone can know. From their mindset, they gather the courage to confront with a smile the grayness of the cold, long and monotonous season. They do not deny their reality; they transfigure it.

Chinese, who do not know the most famous verses of the great poets of China by heart, are few indeed. It is as though these geniuses, often one or two thousand years old, had the evening before passed through the neighborhood. There is not one little Chinese child, at night under the light of the lamp, who does not take a pen to practice writing carefully the thousands of characters that will open up the doors of the vast universe of their country's calligraphy.

The Supreme Art

Chinese characters are sheer wonders. They are little images, almost alive, which have the tremendous power to link 5,000 years of history and to put a person in contact with thousands of years of literature and millions of books of poetry, wisdom, science, knowledge of every kind.

In spite of the impressive diversity of languages, religions, and cultures, and the apparently impenetrable barriers of geography and of politics, the fifty-five nationalities of China, through the magic

of the characters, communicate with each other and consolidate themselves into one great people.

When it is impossible to communicate with words, they communicate through images, because words are not always understood. Everyone understands a picture. Pictures and signs are different from words and doctrine. Jesus is an image; He is a sign.

The Chinese civilization is a civilization of images. The little “television” of former times was the character. It still is today and probably will be for a long time to come.

Chinese characters are so wonderful and precious, and so much at the heart of China, that the sign used to express it is that of a little child under a roof. Like a child it is loved, cared for, caressed, surrounded like a new born. The character is called “ZI” and it is written like this:

字

Calligraphy, character writing, is China’s supreme art. At first glance a foreigner like me sees nothing but scribbling. But in observing how people, often very ordinary people, and even the trendy young, resonate to calligraphy, I decided there must be something there that I had to discover at any cost.

What? I’m not sure. However, I am beginning to guess. I will not explain. It is impossible, I will only say that I have just seen a calligrapher at work on TV. He was a simple peasant who has now become famous and lately has been concentrating his eight hour days on one character only: dragon or “Long”

龍

Next to him is a mountain of big white sheets of paper. The brush runs over the paper with the speed of lightning. The sheets are stained with splatter and fly in the air. Big drops of perspiration fall from the man’s face. He is frenetic. He works like one possessed. He has an open face, however, and there is ecstasy in his eyes.

In a few months he has given birth in this way to the character for “dragon” 10,000 times. According to him, only about 500 are worth anything. People grab at them and put a price on them. As for

him, he is sure that he is still far from perfection. He thinks of working at this for another dozen years.

I then understood that this man was doing more than just drawing a letter. A character is more than a word; it is a very special image, filled with enormous content. For example, in this image of “long”, which is so simple, and reduced to four little lines and a dot, lies the very root of Chinese identity. What in China people call “the dragon” is, in reality, a synthesis of the horse, the tiger, the eagle, the serpent and the goat: totems of the five primitive tribes from which the Chinese people originated. Later, it became the symbol of the great cosmic powers: air, earth, water, and fire and from that, the symbol of the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of China.

According to legend, one day, after exhausting wars, these tribes decided to form an alliance. To seal this intent and to perpetuate the memory of the occasion, they took a part of the totem from each tribe and put them together in such a way as to represent the new people being born through the union of the five. From the totem of the horse tribe, they took the head, from the eagle tribe, they borrowed the wings, from the goat tribe, the horns, from the serpent, the body, and from the tiger, the claws. Thus with the head of a horse, the wings of the eagle, the horns of the goat, the body of a serpent, and the claws of a tiger, the “dragon” was born, the emblem of a new people, today called the Chinese people.

In the calligrapher’s character, there is then a great deal more than a few brush strokes. There is energy, the “dao”, I would say, even the “spirit” of what the character signifies. Such a character becomes in some way, a “sacrament”. A sign which effects what it signifies, an efficacious word.

Printed characters do not produce the same effect. To communicate life, the character must pass through a hand, a heart, a body and a human spirit. The character must be experienced, lived and suffered. One must “become” the character. The Chinese say, “If you wish to paint bamboo, you must first become bamboo.” We must become what we mean to witness to.

A Church of “Characters”

I would like the Church in China to develop a real devotion to characters, for Christians to practice calligraphy, and on their altars,

in their churches, in the little corners of their houses, in the light of a lantern, to venerate the word of the Gospel and contemplate it in their own calligraphy and that of their masters. I would wish them to preserve it as they preserve their dearest books, in their chests covered with silk and kept as treasures. I would like the Word of God to penetrate their heart with all the energy of the Spirit of the Word-Image become character.

I would also like to see the old picture catechism and the Little Catechism of the old missionaries put to rest for a while. I would like to see the rugged hands of the peasants begin to depict the Gospel with the eyes, the hearts, the vision of the little ones of China.

Finally, I would like to see the people animated to translate the language of Jesus and the prophets, into quatrains, to sing it accompanied by their bamboo clappers, their festal trumpets and their one string violin which tickles the belly.

The Gospel in the Style of the Chinese Opera

Crowds beyond number, shades of papal Masses, remain standing outside for hours, even in the cold of winter, in order not to miss the spectacle of the Chinese opera. How I would love to see the great message of consolation, love, justice, liberation, mercy, hope and of peace, which flows from every pore of the Bible, be transposed into a Chinese opera. How wonderful it would be to see the great exploits of the biblical heroes, of prophets and of Jesus himself, depicted with long beards, wearing clogs half a foot high, ghostly make up, kilometers of robes, of feathers, of flags, of spears and of wigs, and in addition to have hosts of traveling acrobats, lots of martial arts, the din of cymbals, voices in falsetto tones and cacophonous chords to make the whole cosmos tremble! I seem to see, drowned in the immense crowd of peasant spectators, God himself, clapping like mad.

The Parables as Art

Jesus was oriental. His parables are popular works of art with an oriental flavor. Like characters, they belong to the world of images, which is China's world as well as Asia's, and of all cultures close to nature. The parables of Jesus are an inexhaustible gold mine,

which, to my way of thinking, we ought to capitalize on better by using them more for themselves, rather than jump too quickly to the “lessons” they teach and to conclusions.

We, Westerners, like shortcuts. Eastern peoples like “ways”. They like to walk, to take time along the way, to stop, to think, enjoy, contemplate. They don’t always reach their goal, but they’re happy in the length of road they travel. The parables are “signs”; the images are the roads to travel step by step. We cannot skip over anything, if we wish to discover the lengths to which the roads lead.

The parables of Jesus are jewels of light which we discover little by little, when we take the time to “walk” through them one after another, thousands of times, stopping at the details, and “facing” without fear all the things they speak about.

The Art of Living

Not everyone can be an artist, a singer, an actor, but all can practice the art of living and the art of eating. There is an art to taking a meal which is a meal, where neither time nor the number of dishes are of the essence, where we do not only gulp down proteins at a counter in order to run against time, to arrive on time for a divorce, in order not to keep the psychiatrist waiting, and then eventually, to die of cancer or boredom.

When it comes time to retire, the elderly in China do not seem to be bored. They know how to enjoy doing nothing. They know how to enjoy a cup of tea with an old neighborhood friend, under a tree. They love trees. They scrape a little corner of dirt, plant onions, flowers, cabbage. They read; they adore reading. When there is no one to chat with, and the TV does not interest them, they have their birds. They talk with the birds. They treat them like little children. They also love to go to market themselves where everything is not yet all wrapped up in plastic. The market is not only a place to buy things; it is a place to see people. There are people to see for onions, nails, lettuce, wine, mushrooms, chicken feet and sandals. In fact there is not one thing we might need that does not pass through human hands and different faces, some familiar, some well-known and on whose face we can still find the fresh imprint of wind, sun, earth and water. This is a lot healthier than vitamins, home care, and talk shows.

On Sunday, children come to visit their parents. They bring big bags of vegetables. The children do the cooking, not the elderly, and often it is the men. They eat around three o'clock in the afternoon and hang around the table until supper time. They play chess, checkers and cards. The young with the old.

The young have an great veneration for the elderly. It's not a penance for them to come and visit. Still these same young people dance to rock music in discotheques just as noisy as ours. They also greet the stranger in the street with their three English words: "I love you".

Or else they go as a family for a stroll in the parks.

Parks and Skies as Art

Parks in China are not decorations where only the lawn mower has a right to run over the grass. Parks are nature and the skies brought into the heart of the city, a sanctuary for strolling on the grass, on the water's edge, in the woods. There is always a lake, for the most part dug by hand by men and women, one or two little islands with bridges, leading to them, bridges all around with two, three, five, or six arches. On the water there are hundreds of barges, launches, canoes full of screeching people. Nowhere is there a sign that says, "danger". It's natural for these people to like to play on water. It is not dangerous. The danger is never to play on the water, never to climb trees and never to lie down in the grass.

The park is heaven, as conceived by the Chinese. A winding way, a route that can only be discovered by walking it, a little bridge, and an island. On the island there is a rock. On the tip of the rock, there is a small pavilion. That is where the spirits of the Immortals reside in eternal happiness. The picture of paradise is at the heart of the city and of life. This whole life of struggle, fatigue and sweat leads somewhere: to an island of dreams where we will be eternally happy. The Park with its lights and shadows, its paths, little bridges and its island, is the image of a life that leads to heaven. That is where people go on a Sunday afternoon to find refreshment.

It is also on the shores of a lake on a Sunday morning that the embarrassed disciples had the joy of finding once again the one they thought they had lost. Without this lake, what would be left of the Gospel?

The Tai Ji Liturgy

In the parks, on the sidewalks, on street corners, at the entrance of public buildings, in the alleys and on construction sites, in early morning, or evening, people of all ages, but especially the elderly, roll their hips, stretch their hands, arms, neck, legs slowly forming big circles in the void, eyes fixed on the infinite. Sometimes they walk backwards, massage each other while leaning against a postal box, a pole or a tree. They peacefully read their newspaper with their legs at right angles, one foot firmly fixed on the ground and the other set against the wall or an old fence, at 90 degrees at shoulder height. They do this all the while breathing with full lungs, slowly and without noise.

China, a civilization of body and of breath, constantly tries to maintain the harmony between the two. Jesus has also left us his Body which is the Church and his breath who is the Spirit. It's not always easy for us to harmonize the two. The Church in China is no exception. Its wounded and divided body does not easily allow itself to be drawn into the great breath of the Risen One. It has breath but not enough to find its lost unity once again. The non-Christian populace that daily practices the art of breathing and body integration should be a source of inspiration for the Church, for its prayers, its liturgy and its own ecclesial practice.

The Pilgrimages in the Mountains

Then there are the sacred mountains, five for the Buddhists and five for the Daoists. Scattered throughout the country, they belong to everyone. They are visited by climbing five, six, ten thousand stone steps that lead to the "Door of Heaven", to the Way of Eternal Life where ancestors, heroes, the wise and saints live. Along the journey, there is a temple hanging in the mist, covered with clouds, under a clump of fat pines, a waterfall and more temples for fertility, serenity, longevity and peace. They are Chinese before they are atheist. To be Chinese is to believe in a heaven, one beyond but not too far from the here and now. They are more or less stuck to each other like a garment to its lining

The Buddha who found deliverance from suffering shows others the way. He is the enlightened one, He is not separated from

life, He is riveted to it and to nature. Thousands and tens of thousands of his likenesses are sculptured even in the rock of the mountains. In Leshan, he is 71 meters high. The nail of his big toe measures 1.8 meters long and is big enough to seat half a dozen persons. The Buddha is one with the world, but he does not belong to the world for he has overcome the slavery of desire that kills the world. He speaks neither of soul nor of God. He leads others out of the prison of appearances which we mistake for reality. He leaves the rest for us to discover ourselves, without naming it since it cannot be named.

The great art which the Buddha inspires is nothing more than respect, tolerance, compassion, purity, liberation from falsehood, sovereign liberty, absolute detachment, great humility, a return to the source of the one reality which has no name. The image of "the Enlightened One", reproduced hundreds of thousands of times on the face of China, quietly announces to all that it is possible to overcome suffering, to go beyond it and to be freed from it.

A Church of Mountains and Gardens

I long for the Church of China to find the mountain road once again, the road traveled by the spiritual Chinese. I long for her to have its "high places" of prayer, of hospitality midway between earth and heaven, to have her tent planted under the pines and the cypresses, beside the rocks, above the clouds, near the sun by day, and the moon by night. I long for her to rediscover the Horeb of Moses and Elias, the Carmel of the prophet of fire, the mount of the prophet of the great wind and the breeze that whispers, the Mount of the Beatitudes, Thabor, Calvary, the humble mountain of the Man-God, I would not want her to have her own holy mountains, but rather that she would find her place near her Buddhist brothers, and the searchers of Dao in the mountains already inhabited by them, where God has been present to thousands of generations since the dawn of China's long history and before the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

A Feminine Church

For the Non-Christian Chinese, Nature is the spouse of heaven and she is mother. For all Christians the Church is also

Mother and the sign of humanity and nature, reconciled redeemed, espoused by God. The Church is feminine. China is feminine. We Westerners have developed the male aspect of our nature a bit too much. We like swords, canons, guns, bombs, skyscrapers, tanned bodies, obelisks, pointed belfries, crosses and straight lines, dogmas and laws. We like to build with stone, and in re-enforced concrete. China also likes these things, but her soul always prefers curves, and rounds, the hollow of the valleys, grottos, clouds, luxuriant forests, temples and palaces made of wood, roofs with turned up corners, gardens full of zigzags, secret corners, hiding places and surprises. China likes clear colors, loves the moon and goes crazy over firecrackers. She makes laws but pays little heed to them. She is very open to all truths. The dogmatism of certain schools has never really attracted her and the most recent one, Marxism, now in total confusion, is a pure Western import.

The Church in China must deepen its feminine identity, round its corners, lose itself a bit more in the landscape. It must let itself desire more, renounce the Gothic arches, its pointed belfries, its "square" parishes and its Roman legalism. It must seek to find a style which is the fruit of the union of the masculine and the feminine rather than an almost exclusive expression of masculine and Western imperialism.

The Church must allow the Great Transcendent God to rest a bit. God is very good; we know this well. But God is from above. God comes from outside and grounds himself in humanity. This is something the Chinese find very difficult to conceive. For the Chinese, if God does exist, he is up there surely, but above all, God is here below and here below from the beginning of the ages. God cannot be beyond reality, for God is reality and the heart of all reality. God is at the center, at the source, at the root of the world. God is in the entrails of Nature and humanity.

That God should be born in human form in the womb of a woman is acceptable. This seems a bit astonishing no doubt, but more or less normal, even natural when we stop to think about it. What seems really absurd, however, is to say on the one hand, that the world cannot exist outside of God; and on the other, to affirm that for us to be saved, God enters into the world from outside.

For the Chinese this makes no sense. From what they see, life always comes from below and from inside: from inside the earth, the flower, fruit, a woman, man, humanity.

If we say to a Chinese that he is filled with God, that the earth overflows with God, that the Church herself is filled with God, they can go along with that. If we assure them that the Kingdom is already in the world like a child in the womb of its mother, they might find this interesting, even fascinating. If we tell them that they must enter in their chamber, close the door and blinds, go down to their center, since that is where God will be found, they would not find themselves uprooted from the great spiritual traditions of their people.

Mystery Depicted in Paintings

Since the Chinese justly feel that everything is mysteriously “impregnated” with a reality larger than the eyes can see, they are not in the habit of settling questions with a simple yes or a no. Their intuition tells them that Truth always goes beyond what we can perceive or say about it. This is why Chinese painting is so simple, even naive and transparent. Except for the basic structure Chinese painting never pretends to reproduce reality as it is. The artist only skims the surfaces with very delicate touches that leave the door open to all possible interpretations. Each one can see there what he/she wants.

The Church in China must learn from the school of the Chinese painters, that Mystery cannot be drawn, photographed, nor explained; it can only be hinted at. It can never be presented without the Mountain and the Water, the Flower or the Bird; and never without poetry. According to ancient tradition, the artists were first of all poets; they used painting as a help to their poetry. The Church in China must learn from them and from icons, that are also Oriental, that within the Infant God, the Lord is already present, that in the Crucified One the Resurrection already shines through and that in the world, the Kingdom is already in process of becoming. China must not imitate Western artists, who generally paint the skies as skies the earth as the earth, the saint as a saint and the sinner like a sinner. China does not dichotomize in this way. Why should the religion, that seeks to save by reuniting, dichotomize them?

Revolutionary Art

Suddenly came the deluge! There was a whole new plan. China decided to take on more virile characteristics. No poet presided at this apocalyptic birth. Hundreds of millions of peasants and workers, who until now counted for almost nothing, take their place. Muscles replace lace. Iron becomes more important than wood. Factories become substitutes for temples. Poetry gives way to mathematics. Night descends on art.

There was one night and there was one day... From the hands of the great Potter, little by little emerges a new vase, still humid, fragile not yet kilned. It has a different shape. The first was curved at the base, with a slender neck, and a very fine opening. The new has a very large opening, no neck and a base which is not yet very stable. The vase is not finished. The work of creation is still only in its first day.

It was like this also on a day before a certain Friday. The stone tomb had replaced the breeze on the lake. The dreams of the Kingdom had come to nothing. But it is precisely at this moment that an unheard of event took place, there that the construction of the world's greatest wonder began; a work not built on rites, on gold or silver but on the man on the cross. It is there that people were enabled to walk again, those whom the Temple with its meager donations did not permit to beg as they dragged themselves on their knees.

The Church in China, fiercely battered in the storm, must not insist in erasing the traces of the great revolutionary upheaval by trying to become once again what she was before. She must get used to the new dynamic of after the tomb, and discover the splendor found there. She must contribute creatively to the stabilization and the completion of the vase. This last, without any doubt will be more beautiful than the first.□

