

Teilhard de Chardin in China

Thomas Franklin O'Meara

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was at work in China from 1924 to 1945, the years in which Chinese communism emerged. The Jesuit scientist saw this struggle for mastery in a way almost unique for a Westerner. After only a few years in China Teilhard could write: "Politically the situation is more troubled than ever with the Bolsheviks gaining the upper hand on the Yangtse. I am beginning to believe that their success will be the signal for the reorganization of China—but at the expense of the Europeans."

Teilhard was pulled by both East and West; from Europe and America came the flow of discovery, and yet Western churches and nations disparaged the new movements under way. While Mao Tse-tung was perceiving in the 1930's that China's future had to be distinctly Chinese and human as well as Marxist, Teilhard wondered if the evolving world could achieve unity without mass destruction. How was socialization to be achieved without sacrificing the person? This massive country, tradition-bound and seemingly inert, posed in strokes of agony and hope for both Mao and Teilhard the question of evolving mankind. As difficult as these years were, Teilhard was excited and proud to be present at the "event of the individualization of Asia."

Few people, East or West, saw what was at stake in this twenty-year conflict. The Christian missionaries in China found it hard to see beyond their divisions, beyond institutions serving the cause of salvation yet impotent before material wretchedness. Teilhard wrote:

There is a current of opinions and of desires too strong on the side of stabilization and progress not to survive the rest, little by little. But too many of the missionaries are still skeptical and mischievous

—visibly happy when a local disorder seems to justify their pessimism in the face of the new China. I think this attitude is harmful. We must always "believe in the spirit," i.e., in the triumph of that which is *better* and of that which is ahead of us.

Teilhard's work, his theological futurology, was a different venture. Ideas unpublizable during his lifetime now reach an audience wider than ever. Essays hastily written thirty or even fifty years ago are diffused through a hundred thousand paperbacks. What is less known is that China—the China of Malraux's novels and Mao's revolutions, China in its antiquity and vastness—was the milieu for his synthesis: an evolutionary vision of everything social and personal, everything secular and sacred.

"I have landed in a China more unsettled than ever, almost everywhere at the mercy of gangs of insurgent troops. The train I took from Nanking to here had been held up and robbed a fortnight before (and it is the biggest mainline train)." Teilhard, encouraged by the Institut Catholique and the Museum of Natural History in Paris, had accepted the invitation of a fellow Jesuit to take part in an expedition. Teilhard's knowledge of geology and paleontology and his gift for synthesis were needed to compliment the vigorous researches into Asian prehistory begun by his fellow Jesuit, Licent. Major expeditions covered the area surrounding Peking in a five-hundred-mile arc. Other expeditions gave him access to Manchuria, and the "Yellow Crossing" sponsored by Citroën led hundreds of miles beyond Mongolia into Sinkiang. For the 42-year-old Jesuit the Chinese period was the most significant for his paleontology and the most fertile for theology.

The view of races and peoples beyond Marseilles revealed the complexity of the world. "Really, a journey to the Far East seems to represent a sort of temptation of the multiple. . . . I am persuaded that at all costs we must cling to a faith in some direction

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an obscure affinity of the Red Army with his own ideas

Leon Trotsky, "a fictionalized chronicle of the Chinese revolution during its first period, the Canton period." Teilhard described his impressions:

The atmosphere, the sounds, the Chinese impressions are evoked in it with an accuracy and intensity which is terrific; nevertheless, it is the tonality of the entire book which enchant me. The tension and energy in a work controversial yet conceived on a large scale; the pursuit of a great ideal yet within a supremely tangible context. A weak point: the anarchical individualism of Garine. I do not see how the kind of Canton he is dreaming about would be superior to the kind of Hong Kong which he destroys. The mystique of destruction is a very curious and complex phenomenon.

The war years gave Teilhard the leisure for writing down thought-forms which had been germinating for decades:

I am reserving this extra time for my personal work in philosophy and religion, which is very close to me and which I have always considered to be my prime enterprise. Time for meditation in the trenches in the war of 1914 had expanded my thought. The free time of my present exile in Peking is allowing me to make a synthesis of forty years of study, experience and reflection. So I continue to follow the routine of my two laboratories. . . . The continental geology of China that is gradually being sketched in; and *The Phenomenon of Man* progresses at the rate of a page or two a day.

The form of *The Phenomenon of Man* had grown during his experiences in China. In 1927 he proposed to undertake a study of Man going beyond prehistoric Man to Man as the greatest telluric and biological event on our planet. He was convinced that until now we have been as blind to the terrestrial layer of Man as our forefathers were to the mountains and oceans. Over these next ten years the form began to take shape. Economics, political science, psychology must go beyond the problem of balance, giving to each his rights, his territory. The problem of energy is central, the search for the fullest spiritual energy. By Christmas, 1936, he could outline a new function for religion in this world. It would super-animate human effort by presenting it with a limit-

less outlet, beyond the narrow circle of present cosmic dimension. This outlet is a superior personal center, one not only theoretical, but partly perceptible in the domain of facts. The incarnation of Christ would be verified in the future of the human race, building up a body—persons emerging through evolution and joined through love.

And so, in 1942 Teilhard arrived in Shanghai after a difficult wartime trip by train to give conferences about his new work. A close friend, Claude Rivière, the directress of the French radio in Shanghai, describes their reunion. "The tall silhouette of Teilhard dominated the crowd at the railroad station. Followed by Father Leroy, he came forward thinner than ever. His face was lined with fatigue and his clothes were stained after a voyage of a day and two nights in a third-class car. It is really necessary to have lived in China to know what it means to travel third-class there. . . . Teilhard carried carefully in his arms a cardboard box practically falling apart enclosed by a string—*The Phenomenon of Man* in manuscript."

The final victory of Mao Tse-tung in 1949 could not have surprised Teilhard, for ten years earlier he read Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* and agreed with its conclusions. After the intervention of China in the Korean War, Teilhard still refused to believe that China would remain the pawn of Russia. "It is not possible to have any equilibrium in the world until the white race leaves Asia (and that includes Indo-China, Hong Kong, and Japan) . . . and the Russians—are they not also included in what we mean by the white race?" He emphasized the Asiatic mission and distinctiveness of the Chinese and of Mao. He also refused to give credence to the slogan of "Asian peril," an idea to reincarnate itself in the "domino theory." China cannot be equated with Asia, and although different, Asia is not necessarily wicked. "It is my opinion that the Asiatic peril is not a real peril because it is not an action of the masses. Only 'ideologies' are dangerous, and unless something new happens, I do not see any 'Asiatic ideology.' At present Asia would not know how to menace the world."

Political moralism fashions crusades for free, democratic, Calvinist utopias. Its language includes religious terms such as God, immorality and fellowship, and nourishes an American civil religion lying beneath Protestant, Jewish or Roman Catholic faiths. For the United States to attain a new understanding of Communist China it must overcome the prejudices nourished by the churches' "pulpit diplomacy." Teilhard de Chardin looked away from the apparent into that particularly religious dimension, the future. His faith, his vision, as well as his personality were transfixed by what could happen to nations and movements in the future. Our times can only alter his vision with a nuance: creating a global future is not an option but a necessity.

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