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THEME : Core values in Chinese and European traditional and modern cultures
and their impact on shaping society
on "HUMANISM"

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Core European Values Past and Present

Humanism

Equality

Human rights

Fairness

Science

Beauty

Love of nature

On Humanism

One could call "humanism" the core value of the European Renaissance (14th to 16th centuries). It was a vast shift of emphasis from the medieval world view that preceded it, a shift in which the human person came to center stage and affirmed her/his creative potential. It was accompanied by a sense of exhilaration, a widening of horizons, a newfound trust in human nature, a rediscovery of the wealth and wisdom of our classical (Greek and Roman) past and the sense of an unlimited potential for human evolution.

The dominant narrative in Europe throughout the Middle Ages was that of the Christian scriptures. In this narrative the human world is indeed imagined at the center of a cosmic drama - but the drama is shaped not by man but by God: humans are swept along by powerful cosmic forces and can only be redeemed by supernal intervention.

On the contrary in the 13th-14th centuries a new consciousness of the human beings' role as co-creators of the world dawns in the European spirit. The human person is called to play a larger part in the cosmic drama and takes on a larger creative responsibility. In many ways it is like a coming of age, in which human beings assume responsibility for the search for truth and the creation of beauty in the world.

The search for truth from now on will be conducted from the human perspective - and it is no accident that at the same time painters discover the laws of visual perspective. The world is now imagined in a different way, there is no longer a single, flat, universal, pre-destined story: there are as many stories as there are perspectives, as many stories as there are people, and each human being is responsible for her or his contribution to the whole.

In the mythical dimension this shift of perspective brings about something like a rediscovery and a new

appreciation of the ancients' polytheism. It is not literally a return to pagan beliefs or rituals. It is rather an intuition that the divine, the transcendent, what we could call the magical dimension of existence is all around us. The whole of nature is magic, and the universe is brimming with the divine. Springs are nymphs, rivers are gods, existence is divine through and through.

In this divine concert human beings are the most sublime instrument, and it is the task of each human being to fully express the music he or she has inside. To the Renaissance humanist developing intellect, seeking truth, creating beauty and developing the angelic potential in human beings are one and the same.

The best known aspect of the Renaissance is in fact a tremendous flowering of thought and the arts, an explosion of creativity in many dimensions (painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, philosophy). And the creation of beauty is not confined merely to the outside: the person herself or himself is the highest masterpiece, a well-rounded human being, who is simultaneously artist, philosopher, scientist and mystic - the ideal of a balanced or complete human being that has come to be known as "Renaissance man".

The ideal includes also a new sensitivity towards the balance of the masculine and feminine components in human nature: already in the 13th century the poetry of the troubadours and the tradition of courtly love has developed an entirely new appreciation of women, of femininity and of the more gentle and sensitive aspects of men.

I guess if one should try to summarize in a few words the ideal of Renaissance humanism, one could speak of balance and harmony, of a rediscovery of nature and the feminine, of the identification of truth, beauty and the yearning for the highest development of the human potential.

As we consider this humanistic ideal in the context of our present world, what can we learn from it? What aspects we need to remember, recover, develop, and what, if any, we need to drop or correct?

On the learning side, I would include the sense of nature as a living entity of which we are part, the sense of this vast mystical magical universe as a great concert of innumerable voices, each one contributing in its own unique way to the beauty of the whole.

I would certainly include the balance of the masculine and feminine, both in the relation between genders and in the inner development of the individual. This is not simply a matter of having more equality in the workplace or in government. It is a matter of listening (all of us, women and men) much more carefully to the feminine voice of love, nurturance, pro-social behavior, communication, intuition.

And I think we have much to learn or rediscover about the creation of harmony and beauty and about the importance of a rounded humanistic education. The modern specialized "one dimensional man" is ill equipped to make wise decisions about the vast issues we are confronted with, and is ill equipped to create and to enjoy beauty. A world of mere specialists is one of the worst nightmares we face. We need to recognize that only a vast spread of general education can support authentic democracy and a more beautiful world.

Furthermore, in a global context in which various fundamentalisms, various "single stories" oppose each other as "the Truth", in the peculiar resurgence of "medieval values" we are witnessing, it will be good to remember the lessons of perspective and to be a bit more "polytheistic". The world is wonderfully complex, and there is no single myth embracing it all, no single truth surpassing all other narratives.

Finally, is there something we should rather leave behind or correct? While the affirmation of human dignity and potential is certainly one of the great gifts of Renaissance's humanism, we should watch out for the risk of *hybris*, of excess or arrogance, it contains. Human beings are wonderful, but we should not forget that we are just one voice in the vast concert of nature and that this one voice does not necessarily have sense apart from all the others. Knowing our smallness in the vast plan of things is the necessary premise to expressing our greatness.