

The management of cultural diversity is the real challenge of this century and the comprehension of other civilisations alone will make it possible to build bridges among peoples and understand the changes in the political

Why to place Asia at the centre

FAR EAST

edited by Maria Elena Viggiano

and economic world. This is the theory outlined in the book *Asia al centro* by Franco Mazzei and Vittorio Volpi, scholars and experts on Japan. The former teaches at Naples University and the latter is the head of Ubs Italia

When Francis Xavier reached Japan in 1549 and began his missionary activity, he described the Land of the Rising Sun in the letters he sent to Europe as a very beautiful place and expressed enthusiasm for his work of evangelization. There were indeed a number of conversions, but the Jesuit realised that the Japanese he baptised secretly went to Shinto shrines, following their own customs and traditions and not respecting the first commandment of Catholicism. Francis Xavier put the blame for these misunderstandings on the Japanese language, which he called a strange and indecipherable tongue because the concepts it expresses seem clear, but are not really so. Franco Mazzei, a professor at the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" (Naples University for Eastern Studies), co-author, with Vittorio Volpi, of *Asia al centro* and chairman of the board of directors of Ubs Italia, tells this anecdote. Both men are Japan experts and have a deep knowledge of the country; their book is the result of considerable study and research and, above all, their own experience. The book's scope is to offer a fresh interpretation of the changes in the political and economic world and

analyse the reality of Eastern Asia not only through statistical data but also by trying to understand human thought and culture. Thus the reader discovers that the real challenge of the 21st century is the management of cultural diversity, and that it is only through the comprehension and knowledge of other civilisations that it is possible to increase one's own competitiveness. Going deep into the past and history of the East, it is easy to find similarities with current problems and situations. There is "something antique", the authors say, about current concerns relating to the invasion of Chinese textiles and clothing, "which goes back to the time of Pliny the Elder, who complained in his *Natural History* about the draining of millions of sesterces from the Treasury of Rome because of competition from silk garments reaching Rome via the Silk Route". An awareness of the principles and behaviour the missionaries adopted during their work of evangelization in the 16th century could be useful when doing business today. The West tends to see Asia as being homogeneous, but India, China and Japan are actually very different in terms of culture and history, and have responded



differently to the challenge of globalisation. Western and Eastern businessmen also have different approaches to drawing up contracts or handling negotiations. Like Francis Xavier in his time, we do not understand that Asian cultures are cultures of the unsaid; that it is the context rather than the text that matters, and that “Yes” sometimes means “No” or “Maybe”.

What is it that drove you to write this book?

MAZZEI: A historiographic problem – trying to understand the differences in the ways the Asian powers have responded to the challenges of the past few centuries, modernisation and globalisation. Why is it that China is at ease with globalisation and has managed to draw the greatest benefits from it while Japan is finding it hard to manage and control this phenomenon? The reaction was totally different when the West launched the challenge of modernisation to the Asian countries. Then, the Land of the Rising Sun gave an extraordinary response, transforming itself in the space of twenty years from a land of geishas and samurais into a modern power capable of destabilising the Chinese empire and defeating one of the great European powers, Tsarist Russia, in 1905.

What was your approach?

VOLPI: We tried to analyse the reasons for the different responses that Japan, China and India have given through the reconstruction of cultural processes. The moral is that we must make a great effort to understand others and create a dialogue among cultures, because the push towards the radicalization of civilisations is underway and the consequences are visible and tangible in the events that have taken place in the former USSR, Asia and the Far East.

You start with a geopolitical and geo-economic analysis in order to emphasise the specificities of individual countries.

What is the main difference between Japan and China?

MAZZEI: One has to start from the basic geopolitical asset: the territory. It is immediately obvious that the Japanese archipelago is small and circumscribed, while the Chinese continent spreads over a vast expanse. By definition, Japan is a country-state-nation, while China is immense because it also has a multi-dimensional concept. The greatness of a country is defined not only by the vastness of its territory, but also by two other elements:

time and Man. And China has a five thousand-year-old history and a population of one billion, three hundred million. To this we should add the self-perception of centrality, as can be seen from China's own definition of itself as *Zhongguo*, "Middle Kingdom". China's universalism contrasts with the particularism of Japan. This very characteristic encouraged Japan's push towards modernisation in the 19th century, while the Chinese response was slow and ambiguous and cost the country a century of humiliation, which ended in 1949 when Mao Zedong proclaimed the birth of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square. Conversely, Japan's particularism now prevents it from acting, while China is more fit, i.e. better able, to respond to the challenges of globalisation and transform them into opportunities.

What is the relationship between the two countries?

VOLPI: China has capitalised intelligently on globalisation – a phenomenon that has already been accomplished considering that 60% of Chinese exports are directed at the rest of the world. Last year, trade between China and Japan was \$260 billion, the highest figure worldwide and more than the economy of the average European country. The two countries are trade partners because they are trying in a pragmatic way to solve the problem of poverty, and it is foreign investment that allows China to progress and ensure that the 800 million Chinese living at subsistence levels get their two bowls of rice a day.

What are the consequences of China's entry into global capitalism?

MAZZEI: Globalisation is a straitjacket. For example, the geo-economic and geo-strategic relationship between China and the United States is paradoxical, but their interdependence is so strong that it guarantees the two powers stability. Chinese growth is based on investments, both foreign and domestic, and on the use of a high savings rate. The enormous quantity of money has made it possible for China to underwrite U.S. Treasury bonds, thereby financing the U.S. deficit. The People's Republic of China, one of the 40 poorest countries in the world, finances the U.S. and



shores up American consumption; in particular, it allows the purchase of products imported from China. The new Left is critical of this policy and proposes to use the reserves for welfare policies, to improve the quality of people's lives, but China is a "development-oriented" State and as such every choice of socio-economic policy is subordinate to the development of the country. The current objective is to transform hundreds of millions of workers from the backward rural areas, where people live on the threshold of poverty, into tertiary sector workers. The problem is to understand how long this relationship between the People's Republic of China and the U.S. can last; right now, there are fears that America is entering a grey area of development.

The economic centre of gravity continues to shift eastwards.

MAZZEI: One efficient way to put it would be that China is the world's "factory" while India is its "office". Among other things, the shift is demonstrated by the fact that in 2006 the so-called "dynamic" Asia, centred on China and Japan, produced more wealth than the other two leaders of the global economic triangle, i.e. the U.S. and Europe. We can therefore say that all in all,



_The book by Mazzei (left) and Volpi (right) seeks to understand the different ways in which China and Japan, two great powers, have responded to the challenges of the past few centuries, modernisation and globalisation

the trans-Pacific relationship is in some way marginalizing the trans-Atlantic relationship.

VOLPI: The global economy is divided into two parts, Asia and the West. Canada, the U.S. and Europe produce as much as the economies of India, China and Japan, but in the coming years this balance of power is destined to change very quickly; it is easy to hypothesise a 60:40 or 70:30 ratio, because Asia's economic growth cannot be compared with events in the new world. According to Nobel Prize winner for Economics Michael Spence, only eleven countries have continuously registered a growth rate of over 7% for at least two decades. Eight of these countries are in Asia.

How is the world balance changing?

MAZZEI: Japan is the major beneficiary of Chinese growth because it has been pulled out of the dark tunnel of crisis, while

China's universalism contrasts with the particularism of Japan. This very characteristic encouraged Japan's push towards modernisation in the 19th century and now prevents it from acting. China, on the other hand, is better placed to respond to the challenges of globalisation

India is becoming the pivot of new strategic relationships since it has drawn closer to China and Russia. In fact, Putin is beginning to make himself heard; he opens and closes taps, showing that Russia has a strong autonomy and wishes to replace the old balance of terror of the Cold War with a new strategic balance based on energy. Europe seems to be immobile and risks being marginalized. Relations between the EU and eastern Asia are currently inexistent, a fact confirmed by a comment by Jiang Zemin during a well-publicised meeting with Romano Prodi, then president of the European Commission: "Our problem is to recreate the old Silk Route" – with modern technology and the progress achieved, of course.

VOLPI: Italy and the other European countries are making the mistake of forgetting about Japan, but the Land of the Rising Sun cannot be wiped off the geo-strategic and geo-economic map; it is one of the main players in the Asian economy. The Japanese are wealthy; they sell technology, invest \$7-8 billion each year in China, were the first to realise the enormous new potential of the "Middle Kingdom" and could decide to strengthen their alliance with the United States.



Gratia Neri_China photo press

What is the major challenge of the 21st century?

VOLPI: Geo-culture; the management of cultural diversity. Our youngsters must make a huge effort to understand what is happening in the world so as to successfully co-exist with very different heritages of knowledge and learn to build bridges among cultures. Globalisation, as seen on a planet-wide scale and aimed at harmonising the entire world into a single culture, is not real. The homogenisation of cultures has not taken place and never will; rather, we are witnessing the often-violent radicalization of identity-related processes that originate from religion, tradition and the re-evaluation of cultures. In his book *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen puts forward a very interesting theory. He believes it is necessary to consider the plurality of identity – a person can simultaneously be American, Caribbean, Christian, progressive, female, a marathon runner, a historian, a teacher, a novelist and a feminist. These categories exist in nature and,

if well utilised, will allow the world to have a less schematic and dangerous approach, thereby avoiding a clash of cultures.

MAZZEI: China, for instance, is simultaneously capitalist and Communist. It is an oxymoron but, according to the Chinese dialectic of yin and yang, there is interaction, not opposition. Western civilisation is based on the “either/or” concept, while Chinese civilisation is defined as being the “and/and” type; there is *tetratemma*, not dilemma. Western society has absolute values that express a culture of blame with the consequent mechanisms of remorse, forgiveness and salvation, while in Chinese education it is the system of shame that has a predominant role and social censure is the worst punishment. This is why multiculturalism, understanding others without sacrificing one’s own values, is important and helps to be less afraid.



_60% of Chinese exports are directed at the rest of the world. The challenge of China's economy is to transform workers from the backward rural areas, where people live on the threshold of poverty, into tertiary sector workers

VOLPI: I recommend a book titled *Il Cerimoniale per i missionari in Giappone* by a great Italian, the Renaissance genius Alessandro Valignano. In 1574 the Jesuit set sail from Lisbon towards the East, where he drew up his method of evangelization, which provided for adapting his own behaviour to the customs of the place and thoroughly learning the local language and culture. Anticipating the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council by centuries, Valignano did extraordinary missionary work, making full use of his great gift of empathy. He had understood that dialogue could only be established by entering the other's cultural mapping, seeking points of contact and mutually enriching each other without forgetting one's own values. When Valignano

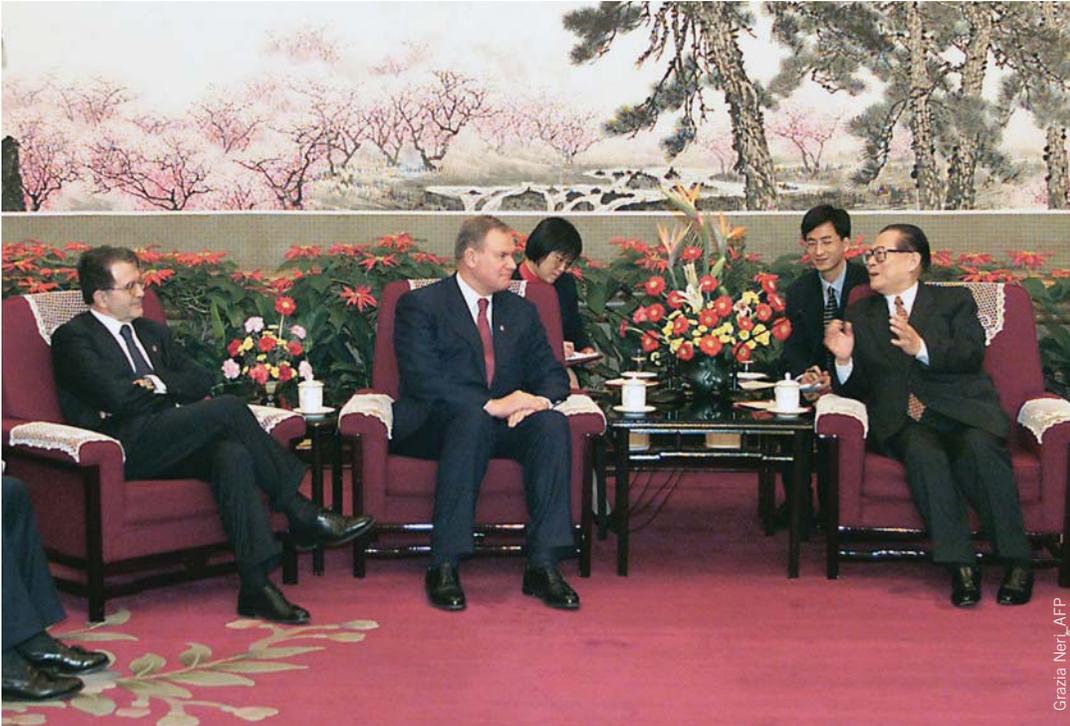
By definition, Japan is a country-State-nation, while China is immense because it also has a multi-dimensional concept. The greatness of a country is defined not only by the vastness of its territory, but also by two other elements: time and Man.

And China has a five thousand-year-old history and a population of one billion, three hundred million

left Japan in 1603 to go to Macao, where he died, what happened was absolutely extraordinary: he ended his mission with a Christian population of from 300,000 to 500,000 people. Valignano has left a great source of inspiration based mainly on three major pillars: enculturation, an effort to adapt due to the awareness of one's own identity and the diversity of thought of others; reinventing a new *pietas*, a model of comprehension based on the respect of other cultures and finally, the need to understand who, by dint of the wealth of resources, is destined to be the new.

How can we apply these principles?

VOLPI: Through "enculturation", i.e. studying and making an effort to



Grazia Neri/AFP

understand, because only in this way will we be able to adapt ourselves without losing sight of our principal values. Schools must, of course, do a great deal, particularly at the university level. For example, Valignano's work on the criteria of adaptation should be used in the management courses of every business school; in fact it could be an excellent textbook to learn how the Jesuit encultured and adapted. I recently read an essay in the Harvard Business Review titled "Cultural Intelligence": this is becoming a central theme.

MAZZEI: With the end of bipolarism and the great ideologies on the one hand and the accentuation of globalisation with its impressive migratory flows on the other, instances of interculturalism are becoming increasingly frequent and important: at the interpersonal level (encountering a non-EU citizen on a tram), at the international level (when human rights are discussed) and in business. Therefore, intercultural approaches should be part of many courses in university curricula: not only courses in communication and international business but also courses on international relations, in which not only "safety" but also "identity" should be given importance. Some steps are being taken, but with difficulty.

_In 2006 the so-called "dynamic" Asia, centred on China and Japan, produced more wealth than the U.S. and Europe. Above: Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, on a visit to Japan in 1999

VOLPI: I arrived in Japan with no knowledge of it at all, because I had been sent there by the Banca Commerciale Italiana to open its first operations branch there. When I first met some clients, I asked: "How are you?" and they replied, "I'm very busy". I looked at them and said, "I'm sorry for you", because I'm a well-brought-up Italian. A colleague of mine went red in the face and, scratching his head the way the Japanese do when they have a problem, told me to stop talking rubbish. Being busy is a gift of God; it's a fantastic thing, and here I was telling them that I was sorry business was so good. So, from the next day onwards, I would ask: "How are you?" and when they said: "I'm so busy", I would reply: "I'm so happy for you!"