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An Increase in Racism During the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Ontology of Race: Intercultural Comparison of the European and Chinese Traditions

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Abstract

The article treats intercultural problems of global-scale crises, focusing upon the pandemic of the viral disease COVID-19. It deals with the question of whether racism is universal or culturally conditioned, and shows that it is an ideological inheritance of the ontological status of the concept of race, which was developed and established in the context of the European ideational tradition. By presenting traditional Chinese models of relational and anti-essentialist concepts of the self, the article aims to point to new possibilities of understanding interpersonal and intercultural interactions that can help us to develop new strategies against the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Ethics of pandemics, Racism, Racial essence, Substance of race

JEL classification: N45

Introduction

Critical situations always generate fear, especially during pandemics when discriminatory patterns of behaviour such as xenophobia and racism flourish in the population. The period during the global COVID-19 pandemic is no different; it has uncovered and reincarnated many political and interpersonal practices that arose from fear and manifested themselves in hateful reactions, with such hatred directed in most cases against members of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups.

After the dissemination of initial information about the “Chinese virus”, I, as a sinologist, was particularly attentive to numerous latent, sometimes even completely open expressions of xenophobia, which were directed mainly against Asian migrants living in Slovenia and Europe (Rošker, 2020a, 4). Several of my Asian colleagues at the Department of Asian studies, for instance, reported to us that they had experienced

racial incidents in Slovenia. One of them was even exposed to violence, for when he was riding his bicycle from the faculty towards his home, two teenage boys threw a stone after him, shouting “Corona!”. Another female lecturer of the Japanese language reported that a seller in a commodity shop had refused to serve her. Having heard similar stories from Germany, it would certainly be interesting to benchmark such examples of racist behaviour to the EU averages or other countries which have historically similar relations with China (perhaps other countries in Central and Eastern Europe). Nevertheless, this task is a subject of further research, since it would certainly go beyond the scope of the present investigation.

Not long after that, there was news of xenophobic attacks among Chinese people; initially, these were directed against their own fellow citizens from Wuhan¹ and the surrounding regions, and later mainly against internal migrants, who mostly migrated from rural areas to the cities in search of a

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¹ The coronavirus, which causes the COVID-19 disease, was first discovered in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the first epidemic broke out. Wuhan made headlines worldwide as the first city where mass self-isolation of all inhabitants took place.

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better life. Such incidents reached their startling peak in attacks, isolation and detentions of the black African population working and studying in China (e.g. [Boothe, 2020](#); [Pai, 2020](#)). Since these attacks were mostly provoked by the victim's appearance or skin colour, they were undoubtedly racist in nature. Since there is a presumption that xenophobia and racism are based on the “innate” fear of strangers, which is supposedly something “inherently human”, this also opens questions of whether racism truly is something universal.

In the following, I will deal with this question in detail on the basis of a comparison between Chinese and European ideational traditions. I will approach these issues from the presumption that racism is a structural, social phenomenon, which is closely connected to the European (and of course also American) culture and history. As such, it was created and developed hand-in-hand with the centuries-long processes of colonialism, including its modern variations, such as neo- and post-colonialism. Thus, I also work from the presumption that the concept of race and the phenomena of structural racism are closely connected to the economic, political, and axiological dominance of the West over the regions of the so-called Third World and later of the Global South. To a certain degree, all this also applies to my own country, Slovenia. While this small-size Central European state itself has no colonial history, the average world view is nonetheless still strongly influenced by colonialism, and the concept of “whiteness” is, at least unconsciously, still considered superior.

I will examine both assumptions from an ontological perspective and from the viewpoint of transcultural comparisons. Before doing so, I will also present some questions that form the background of the topic in more detail. These are the relation between racism and infectious diseases, the differences between individualized and structured (or political) racism, as well as the concept of race itself with all its ontological foundations and social implications.

1 The increase in racism during the COVID-19 pandemic: the fear of “the other” as a result of fear of the disease

Many researchers, particularly in the field of psychology and to some degree also in sociology and anthropology, work from the presumption that most people react instinctively to infectious diseases in a similar way to animals. This behavioural

“immune system” consists of several psychological mechanisms that first detect the signals indicating the presence of pathogenic infections. When such signals appear, these mechanisms stimulate the corresponding emotional and cognitive responses that stimulate behaviour which safeguards the avoidance of infection. However, this system is designed to trigger mechanisms based on very common signals that can lead to a general aversion towards objects and people who in reality do not pose any risk ([Schaller & Park, 2011](#)). In recent years, such studies have uncovered several problematic implications, expressed in feelings of disgust and hatred towards the “Other”, which naturally reinforces xenophobia and similar prejudices in interactions with people from different cultures.

Perhaps the phenomenon of racism can also be better understood through the lens of Michael Hogg's “uncertainty-identity theory” ([Hogg, 2007](#)), which is based on the social identity theory, and refers to social cognitive and interactive practices that are linked to social identity in order to show how self-uncertainty stimulates group identification, and vice versa, namely how group identification then decreases feelings of uncertainty about oneself. Such an analysis helps us to improve our “understanding of the way in which intense and continuous uncertainty may lead to group ‘extremism’” ([Hogg & Wagoner, 2017](#)). The latter can manifest itself in zealotry, fanaticism, ideological orthodoxy, xenophobia, dehumanization, collective violence, fascism, neo-Nazism, ethnocentrism, and certainly also in racism. Hogg in addition clearly shows (2014) that uncertainty not only drives us toward distinct and clear groups, but also motivates us to defend our in-group against outgroups who we perceive to threaten our group's values and beliefs.

From the viewpoint of the state, however, group identities are important, because they are a basis for national identity, which brings about social interconnection and cohesion. On the other hand, they are also required to incorporate and counterbalance the economic disparities that often come with different geographic origins, so we can still maintain our view that success and failure are in the hands of individuals ([Jensen, 2013](#)). In this regard, race is a significant concept, because it influences the prospects and experiences of individuals, not only due to the social domination of essentialism, but even more because of “historical and social reasons, which no single individual is sufficiently powerful to change” ([Yanow, 2003](#)).

Of course, the prevalence of racism and scapegoating in the face of catastrophes and disasters has a much longer history than the recent outbreaks described above.² This history provides us with an important context enabling us to better understand the connections between social conditions and the arising of such critical situations. It reminds us that disasters and catastrophes are not exclusively natural phenomena, but also a result of the economic, political and social decisions that increase the degree of vulnerability to various risks. It can also illuminate the fact that discrimination, racism and scapegoating have long been used to distract citizens from the underlying economic, political and social decisions that produced vulnerability to disaster and disease in the first place (Pasch, 2020). The historical framework therefore helps us to realize that our understanding of crisis situations is always linked to these decisions, which are often based on specific interests of external political and economic power relations.³

This paper was inspired by the increase in racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to many positive practices that did much to contain the pandemic and were based on interpersonal solidarity and cooperation, the onset of the crisis also revealed the darker side of human reactions to infectious diseases and other catastrophic situations. In many countries this was reflected in the spread of mistrust, fear and open racism. In Europe and America, we have often witnessed the prevalence of stereotypes about the inhabitants of China or Eastern Asia. The Ebola and SARS epidemics were no different in this respect.

As a sinologist I have asked myself many questions regarding the reasons for this situation and the conditions that led to it. It is common knowledge that the emergence or outbreak of the epidemic, which began in the city of Wuhan, inhabited by more than eleven million people, was most likely closely linked to inadequate sanitary conditions in wet markets with living animals, including wild ones. News of this triggered a wave of disgust and indignation directed against the inhabitants of that city and also against China in general. In the eyes of many in the West, the Chinese became the “primitive” people “with a very low level of culture”. This soon led to an explosive increase in sinophobia and other forms of neo-racism

in Euro-American societies that were associated with unreflective prejudices and based on a lack of knowledge of the complex factors that accurately define each culture, its values and the behaviour patterns of the people living there. The understanding of the nature of the “Other” and other generalized views of him/her as the bearer of certain characteristics which are supposedly the consequence of his/her racial or ethnic affiliation have once again come to the forefront. It seems that racism is latently present all the time in Western societies, as it is part of the structured foundations of ideologies, social orders and concurrent cognitive and behavioural patterns that are the consequence of the spread of implicit and explicit ideological messages. At the same time, we have also witnessed xenophobic and racist outbreaks in China, triggered by the fear of a new epidemic or the second wave of COVID-19.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves whether racism is truly a universal phenomenon that arises in crisis situations all over the world, because if we consider the abovementioned assumptions of psychological research, racism itself would stem from the biologically developed instinctive reactions of all members of humankind to the fear of “difference”. However, if we view racism from a different perspective, which also takes into account epistemological and ontological factors of understanding the “Other”, it would also seem that it is much more likely that we are dealing with a specific culturally constructed ideology that can be used as a “considerably effective political mechanism for controlling the wider population and protecting the interests of the financial elites in societies of the centre that build their modernization on colonialism” (Rošker, 2020b).

2 Individual and structural racism and the dichotomy of nature and society

Sociology differentiates between two kinds or types of racism. The first one is individual and manifests itself in racist attacks within inter-human or interpersonal relationships. Such a type of racism pertains to racist presumptions, viewpoints and behaviours of the individual and can be seen as such a form of racist discrimination, which is based upon conscious and unconscious individual prejudices (Henry & Tator, 2006).

² On the other hand, this kind of “history” is—sadly enough—still very much alive. In his article on Brexit, Trump, and ‘methodological whiteness’, Bhabra clearly shows that the rhetoric of both Brexit and Trump campaigns was equally rooted in such a vision of the past that was “constituted by nations that were represented as ‘white’ into which racialized others had insinuated themselves and gained disproportionate advantage” (Bhabra, 2017).

³ This can be illustrated by the example of Dr. Li Wenliang, a doctor who tried to warn the public at a very early stage of the danger of the coronavirus epidemic. Immediately afterwards, he was visited by the police who threatened him with severe penalties, if he did not sign a public statement confirming that his information was false. This example clearly shows that accepting the relationship between economics, politics and the construction of vulnerability to danger obviously implies that such disasters are not only a problem of nature, but also of politics.

The most important fact here is that these kinds of racism manifest themselves on an individual, i.e. personal, level and must be separated from the so-called structural racism, which is the second type. In this latter form of racism, inequalities are rooted in the ideological foundations of the functions of a social system which excludes a significant number of members of certain social groups and discriminates against them when it comes to participation in central social institutions. Of course, we cannot overlook the fact that the origins of this systematic or structured racism are closely linked to colonialism, which was one of the main pillars of Western modernization and its economic and political dominance.⁴ The roots of both colonialism and racism are closely connected to the dominant world views and axiological systems that helped shape European societies since Antiquity.

Furthermore, racism can be divided into the latent and manifested, similar to Said's concept of Orientalism (1995). The first form is the form of visible and blatant belittling, discrimination or violence against members of non-European cultures or people whose appearance differs from the standards of a Western white man. These forms of open racism are based on racist ideologies that are part of an inherent, often even essential part of any discourse of Western philosophy based on the belief in the reality of the concept of “race” as a “substance” defined by determinism, hypostasis and objectivization or concretization of paradigms, based on the primality of the unchangeable and static concept of being, of which I will speak of in the following chapter.

Latent forms of racism are also based upon similar ideologies and worldviews, which are treating the “Other” as inferior. This type of racism is shown in the continued mechanical, unreflected and uncritical tendency to preserve the current condition; its elementary orientation is in contradiction with any kind of autonomy, and conservative in its very nature. In this sense, latent racism is no less dangerous than its candid and manifested forms, because both types contribute to the structural preservation of existing discrimination. We could even claim the opposite, namely that latent (and hence mostly unconscious) forms of racism are often more dangerous (and more persistent) than its manifest practices, because we live in a society in which only a few people in their sane minds would openly

advocate racism. That is why hidden and latent forms of racism are actually more damaging, because they are hard to point out, to directly bring out and fight against. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, a small virus is enough for this underground racism to gain a structural ground and come alive once more, spreading at least as fast as the virus that caused it.

Like the concept “gender”, the notion of “race” is also a socially constructed idea that has no direct connection to the biological make-up of people who are defined as belonging to a certain gender or race. Many theoreticians believe that without an insight into this constructedness, we could not effectively fight against discrimination, which is always connected to such categorizations.

Today's claims that sexual identities are socially constructed and not biologically determined are only possible against the background of Cartesian tradition; there is no modern feminism and anti-racism without Descartes' thought (Žižek, 2020).

Both statements included in this quote are Eurocentric, the first one because it presumes that the dualistic model of Cartesian philosophy is the one and only possible perspective of the real and true understanding of the relationship between matter and idea, or between reality and the comprehension of it. The second statement is Eurocentric, because it stresses only the consequences but not the reasons for the feminist and anti-racist movements. In this way, it emphasizes the positive connotations of the effect, without taking into account the indubitable negativity of the reasons. Just as there is no need for feminism in a society without the domination of the patriarchy, there is also no need for anti-racist measures without the existence of racism. Of course, I am not claiming that the patriarchy is only present in societies in which the philosophy of Cartesian dualism took hold. However, different societies induce different forms of patriarchy; therefore, feminist movements from different societies and cultures also have to react and fight against patriarchy in different ways and with different methods. Ergo, “modern feminism”, which is conditioned (as the name says) by modernization, might not be the best form of resistance against a patriarchy that stems from different social and cultural specifics, unlike the ones that shaped the European type of patriarchy.⁵

⁴ For a very good and informative analysis of this phenomenon see the first chapters of Keegan, 1997 book *The Colonial Roots of Racism: Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order*.

⁵ An excellent essay about the unreflected transfer of the Western model of emancipation and fight for women's rights and equality to Chinese society was written by the female anarchist He Zhen, who lived on the threshold of the 20th century (see He, 1983).

Therefore, the transfer of the concept of racism to other “non-Cartesian” cultures deepens the problem of racism as such, because, as we have shown above, any talk of the existence of structured racism in non-European societies is problematic and rushed, until we produce detailed analyses and gain evidence that it also exists in some non-European cultures which did not have a Western-type colonial history.

However, let us return to the first presumption in the Žižek quote and investigate whether Cartesian dualism is truly the only epistemological model that offers us an insight into the dividing line between body and spirit, and thus an understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. The unspoken basis of the quote is a prerequisite that speaks of the superiority of the dualistic view of the world, which implicitly presupposes that the differentiation between important segments of reality such as biological materiality and its socio-ideational interpretations is only possible on the grounds of the dualistic model. My critique of such prerequisites is based on the basic methodological and theoretical assumptions of Chinese philosophy as an autonomous discourse.⁶ Even though this philosophy is holistic, it is also based on the relational network which is binary structured. This is nothing out of the ordinary, since human thinking is also based on the differentiation of binary contrasts, and the model of Cartesian dualism is but one of the binary structured epistemological paradigms. The classical Chinese model of binary structured relational holism that works in the frame of the so-called binary categories⁷ is based on the principle of complementarity in which both counter poles that construct the binary model are not in mutual contradiction but are merely mutually opposed. However, their position is completely reciprocal. In this model, both counter poles mutually complete each other and are co-dependent. Culture and nature are also two entities in such a model. Being parts of a binary category, they are mutually separated; however, the dividing line between them is not static and fixed, but rather changeable

and dynamic. In such a way nature and culture are in constant interaction and under continuous mutual influence. It is also important to note that in such a model culture cannot exist without nature, and vice versa.

This is why it comes as no surprise that in the frame of Chinese cognitive tradition, the differentiation between nature and culture is common knowledge and has belonged to the basic and commonly valid models of understanding the world since the pre-Qin period.⁸ First, let us see the opinion of Confucius, the most famous representative of ancient Chinese culture and thought, on the subject of nature and culture. Below is one of the most famous quotes, which describes the relationship between the natural and learned elements of the personality:

The Master said, “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart.”⁹ (Lunyu s.d. Yang Huo).

Thus, Confucius clearly denied the relevance of any inborn, i.e. biological, differences between people; this of course is no coincidence, if one considers the fact that one of the main attributes of the Confucian school is its emphasis on the importance of education on the grounds of a worldview that could be seen as a form of social constructivism. Socialization based on education is one of the main positions of Confucian philosophical, social and ethical thought. It is important to note here the universal presumption that such socialization is possible for all people—regardless of their “race” or “gender”. Thus, we read in the Confucian *Analects*: “All people can get educated, regardless of the (social) category to which they belong”¹⁰ (Lunyu s.d., Wei Ling Gong).

On the other hand, structural racism that forms, as we have seen, the ideological foundation of colonialism (and also of modern capitalism), is necessarily based on the concept of race. As revealed by the above quotation from the Confucian *Analects*, and as will be shown in the following section, this kind of conceptualization of the self is not possible within the referential framework of Chinese philosophy.

⁶ This does not by any means mean that Chinese philosophy is the only possible discourse (alongside the Cartesian one) that gives an insight into the dichotomy between nature and culture and offers a rational interpretation of this dichotomy.

⁷ The most well-known and common binary category of the Chinese tradition is *ying yang*, which in essence describes the relationship between the sunny and shady side of the hill. It is a representation of the relation between the latent and manifest or passive and active. However, several other conceptual pairs also belong to binary categories, such as the differentiation between roots and branches (*benmo*), by which we can explore the relationship between the universal and particular or between cause and effect. A well-known and often applied binary category is also shaped by the opposition of essence and function (*tiyong*), which describes the relationship between an object and its application.

⁸ The pre-Qin period refers to the time before the autocratic rule of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), which marked the first unification of an all-Chinese empire. It is a sinological *terminus technicus* and marks the period of the blossoming of ancient Chinese philosophy.

⁹ 子曰：「性相近也，習相遠也。」

¹⁰ 有教無類。

3 The ontology of race

The concept of race as such was developed within the frame of the European ideational tradition. Although it is scientifically completely unjustified, it has had great influence on the history of Western thought as a standard for categorizing human populations.

Although races have neither an ontological status nor a concrete scientifically measurable reality, contemporary Western society tends to believe that the world population can be divided biologically into “blacks”, “whites”, “Asians” and others, and that they are sustainably separated and hierarchically ordered as superior and inferior population types ... Although races do not exist from a biological point of view, the belief that such categorization is useful is still widespread. This conviction has, for example, had grave consequences for the perception of the “white European” and other members of different population groups, and has manifested itself in the subordination, exploitation and even murder of the “inferior” people. In other words, even though races do not exist, racism or the belief in the existence of such biological differences has serious consequences for the behaviour and actions of all social performers at all levels (Gulič, 2015).

The ontological predispositions of the concept of race were problematized in the post-Enlightenment Euro-American philosophy. However, in contrast to the referential frameworks of the classical Chinese philosophy, the blueprint of traditional European thought itself is structured in such a way that allows the existence of the concept of race as a category that is based on substance or essence as a fixed collection of all substantial characteristics.

The traditional European conceptualization defines race as a set of “bio-behavioural essences”, which are based upon natural, that is, biological designations.¹¹ The category of race is still quite common at present and is still—despite its inherent, historically documented problems—widely used in numerous scientific disciplines, such as for instance medicine (cf. Ramšak, 2020). All these practices contribute immensely to a false understanding of “race” as a natural formation. The phenomenon of social racism is therefore based on an outdated biologicistic

assumption of the existence of a biological concept of race and “racial groups whose characteristics have been inherited and passed down from generation to generation and were possessed by all members of the group” (Gulič, 2015). Both the concept of race itself and the existence of the so-called racial groups are devoid of any scientific basis, and there has long been what is known as an “ontological consensus” (Mallon, 2006) among philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists, all of whom agree that there are no behavioural essences. Despite all this, both categories, i.e. the category of race and the category of racial groups, have been preserved in the form of socially constructed entities¹² (ibid.). And notwithstanding the negative ontological status of race, racial essentialism has persisted in such social structures to this day and often plays the decisive role in contemporary philosophical debates on the concept of race (ibid.).

In their criticism of a dichotomist understanding of nature and culture, in which they are perceived as two opposite poles, numerous feminist theories question the foundations of the traditional European ontology and the corresponding metaphysics and expose the fact that such a “pure” ontological category is not possible as such, because the concept of “being” can never really be separated from its social perception (Haslanger, 1995).

Such a view of reality corresponds to the above-mentioned ancient Chinese model of mutually complementary interactions between two conceptual anti-poles, which is also the basis of the specifically Chinese disciplines of onto-epistemology (Tan, 2018) and onto-hermeneutics (Cheng, 2003).

However, in Western intellectual history any kind of being that went beyond the static classical European conceptualizations of being and identity¹³ was generally understood as a mere product of Cartesian paradigms and the later Enlightenment philosophy: “This is why, for a Cartesian philosopher, ethnic roots and national identity are simply not a category of truth” (Žižek, 2020).

Since we are talking about intercultural comparisons here, we must also consider this quote from the point of view of transcultural interactions. Even if the two concepts mentioned above do not belong to the category of truth for Cartesian philosophers, this does not mean that Cartesian philosophy has a monopoly on deciding what belongs to this category and what does not. Besides, the values (and evaluations) of

¹¹ These “endowments” are hereditary, biological characteristics shared by all members of a particular race. They can be used to explain different behavioural, cultural and character predispositions of individuals and racial groups (Gulič, 2015).

¹² As such, they were also transferred to China in the process of modernization of non-European societies.

¹³ Such a view belongs to the ontology of the immutability of being, as defined by the pre-Socratic Parmenides; this type of static ontology became the basis of later developments that dominated the history of European thought.

Cartesian philosophy are completely different from the values shared by most populations in the societies in which it flourishes and in which it was developed. It is important to stress the fact that both concepts, i.e. the concept of ethnic roots and that of national identity, are specific to the Euro-American ideological systems within which they were created. Therefore, the main concerns of the Chinese people—even those critical of the current PRC government—are not related to the existence of such concepts or the struggle against them. This does not mean, of course, that these two concepts do not serve the government well when it comes to the oppression of (mainly Central-Asian and other Muslim) ethnic minorities. We know that they were transferred from Europe to China in the 18th century, together with other ideological constructs, as part of conceptual transfers within modernization processes.

Two further positions are important for an intercultural understanding of the Žižek quotation. First, it is important to emphasize that there has never been a debate about “truth” in Chinese philosophy, since the meaning and sense of this term in the sense of a static and universal unity was already overthrown by the most influential philosophers of the pre-Qin era.¹⁴ This applies not only to the relativistic Daoists and the Confucian representatives of process philosophy, but also to classical logicians like Mo Di (Fraser, 2012), who acknowledged the existence of a pragmatic, normative and even semantic truth, but not its existence as something absolute, as it appears in the theories of correspondence and coherence. The Žižek quotation only speaks of the fact that the concepts of ethnic roots and national identities in the framework of Cartesian philosophy are not real, which means that they do not correspond to the facts, indicating that we cannot equate people with their ethnic roots or national identities in the sense of their substantial characteristics. However, this does not change the fact that the concept of race emerged in the European intellectual history as an ontological category. In this sense, the notion of race was formed as a philosophical concept of substance that could be applied to both biological reality and social theories. Race was understood as a combination of innate characteristics that could not be changed on a personal level. The race of a human being is thus his/her telos, which

determines him/her to a great extent. The secondary characteristics of a particular person have a negligible influence on this type of substance. Within such a logic, the essence of each person takes precedence, and all his or her empirical characteristics, such as cultural competence, education, moral conduct, and historical experience, are of a secondary nature (Xiang, 2019a,b).

Thus, in his work “The Anti-Semite and the Jew” Jean-Paul Sartre describes the fundamental nature of anti-Semitism through the lens of ontological substance and shows that the principle on which anti-Semitism is based works in an almost magical way (Sartre, 1995), because even if a Jew integrates all the characteristics of French culture, he or she will never be able to become a true Frenchman/Frenchwoman, because he or she carries inside the irrevocable essence of Judaism. All this, of course, has clear consequences for racial discrimination, which enables the French to maintain and develop their sense of superiority.

By perceiving the Jew as a less worthy and negative being, I also confirm that I belong to the elite. In contrast to the elite of modernity, which is based on achievement, merit or work, this elite is more similar to the hereditary aristocracy. Nothing needs to be done to strengthen my superiority, and I can never lose it. It was given to me once and for eternity (ibid.).

The concept of race as an essence which defines being was developed within the Parmenidian paradigm, which in principle is still the basis of Cartesian philosophy. In Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, it could never evolve, because the latter was based on the anti-essentialist conceptualization of the self. In the original canon of Confucian texts, for example, the humanness of each individual is defined by the inclusion of cultural norms and appropriate behaviour.¹⁵ The differences between people are not understood as the result of biology, but as the product of differences between different cultures and customs.¹⁶ The process of education that makes such acculturation possible can best be described by the German term “Bildung”, as it is defined by Jean Grondin who

¹⁴ The fundamental question of Chinese philosophy is not “What is truth?”, but rather “What is the Way?” or, translated into the language of today, “What is the method (of discovery)?” (For a more detailed explanation of this distinction see Hall & Ames, 1998). This procedural aspect of onto-epistemology can be found in the works of many contemporary Chinese philosophical theories, for instance in Li Zehou’s system of anthropo-historical ontology (see Van den Stock, 2020).

¹⁵ For an excellent and very detailed analysis of the differences between ontological conceptualizations of race as an essentialist category on one hand and Confucian, culturally conditioned positions of self on the other, see Xiang, 2019a and 2019b. Also, Ames in his article about the issues of “metaphysics” in Chinese philosophy (2020), gives a thorough explanation of the difference between the ancient Greek concept of “the human being” and ancient Chinese understanding of “human becoming”.

¹⁶ The same goes for the infamous Confucian hierarchy, which was solely a kind of social hierarchy and certainly not an ontologically based one.

claims that the essence of humankind is precisely the ability to surpass any essence that could be attributed to them. A person who is constantly learning cannot have a fixed being. One can always upgrade and reshape oneself through Bildung (Grondin, 1995).

Similarly, traditional Chinese thinkers have never raised questions about the final essence, which would define certain individuals.¹⁷ They focused only on the process of his or her learning and personal growth. In contrast to the essentialist personality model, the only characteristic that, according to the traditional Confucian view, is given to everyone from birth is their potential for goodness and morality:

The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is the intuitive ability of being morally good, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is their original knowledge. There is no child carried in the arms who would not know how to love their parents (Mengzi s.d., Ji Xin I.).

人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。孩提之童，無不知愛其親者。

This is of course related to the fact that Chinese philosophy is processual and therefore not compatible with the philosophical systems that have developed on the basis of a static understanding of substance. It is therefore not surprising that ontology, as we have already seen, cannot exist separately from epistemology in Chinese culture.

This is of course also reflected in Confucian ethics, which is based on the assumption that every person can become a highly moral person if he or she cultivates themselves sufficiently. This assumption is diametrically opposed to the very idea of race and racial determinism, and at the same time it has taken on the role of the main criteria for regulating interpersonal relations, including the relationship between people of different countries, cultures or origins. Traditional Chinese ethics is relational, since in pre-modern Chinese society the human self in the sense of personal identity could only be established through the many different networks of relationships with other people. In this sense, the fact that the self cannot exist without participating in interpersonal interactions within a particular culture is also very important. In a positive sense, it is

precisely these relationships that enable each individual to participate on an equal footing in the culture in which he or she lives, and thus become able to change it creatively.

4 Conclusion

As the sociologist Füredi (1998) noted, many studies have clearly shown that the phenomenon of racism is “a major weakness of Western societies that is difficult to refute” (Füredi, 1998). In response to this, a strong tendency to relativize Western concepts of racism has been observed in Western sinology in recent decades, reflected in attempts to reconstruct racism as something universal (Füredi, 1998). In this context, we can mention Dikoetter's book *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, in which the author tries to prove that a widespread concept of race existed in pre-modern China. However, even such works have to admit that racial categorization in China began to develop only after the adaptation of Western thought, when modern scholars such as Fu, Qichao and Youwei deliberately turned against Chinese tradition and tried to replace it with “progressive” Western ideas. However, this article has clearly shown that it is precisely this tradition that could offer us one of the possible different views of the “Other”.

Awareness and study of the different models of understanding of man and humanity can offer us hope for the possibility of building up genuine interpersonal solidarity and cooperation which transcends the limitations of the essentialist understanding of “races” and “cultures”. Ergo, an insight into such models, which is only possible on the basis of free and ideologically unencumbered trans-cultural exchange and cooperation, should be an important part of the strategy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and many other similar challenges that we will undoubtedly face in the near future.

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¹⁷ The abovementioned absence of the concept of race in Chinese philosophy and culture is definitely connected to Chinese history. The Chinese people, who form a fifth of humanity, do not represent one entity, since they developed (and are still developing) as a hybrid result of the amalgamation of originally different people and cultures that inhabited the geographical region which is known today as China. China did not spread through expansive colonization, but rather through the acculturation, assimilation and absorption of originally “foreign” regions.

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