

LEARNING CHINESE CIVILIZATION AT RUSSIAN PEDAGOGICAL HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF MORDOVIAN STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY NAMED AFTER M. E. EVSEVIEV

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Acknowledgements: The research has been performed with the financial support of the network grant provided by Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseviev and Chuvash State Pedagogical University named after I. Ya. Yakovlev partner universities for the topic "Methodological and content-related aspects of learning Chinese civilization within the system of higher education".

Abstract: The objective of the paper is to find out content-related and methodological particularities of learning Chinese civilization at Russian higher educational institutions. As an example, the experience of teaching history and culture of China to students of Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseviev was taken. Methodologically, the paper relies on the dialectic, comparative historical, and hermeneutic methods; as applied to this topic, they help detail specific features of the way history and culture of China are taught in the Russian system of higher humanitarian education. Materials of the paper are of practical importance for improving the academic process at higher educational institutions in terms of methodology and content.

Keywords: China, Confucianism, civilization, history, culture, higher educational institutions, teaching.

1 Introduction

The relevance of the topic of this paper is first of all associated with the growing geopolitical importance of China in the contemporary world, as well as with the strategic nature of the partnership between the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China.

So, the necessity for Russian students of the humanities and social sciences to learn the history and culture of China seems a rhetorical question. In fact, this question is answered by the special and unique world of Chinese civilization in all its diversity, with its fundamental stratum of cultural heritage. China is a world counting the centuries-long history and representing one of the most influential powers within geopolitical realities of today at the same time. This is a world to have created a culture which is unique in its richness and intellectual sophistication. Finally, it is a world to closely interact with Russia as the country's historical and very important neighbor.

With regard to the above, it seems completely obvious that specialists in humanities (historians, political scientists, social scientists, philologists, lawyers – the list can be continued) must find their bearings in the features of Chinese civilization which has played and continues playing such an important part in the history and culture of mankind.

Touching on the question of the scope in which Chinese civilization is taught in the Russian higher school, as well as the academic subjects within which it is taught, one has to take into account the specific circumstances of particular higher educational institutions. So, Russia has scientific research institutes, higher educational institutions, and faculties which train professional Sinologists in various domains of humanities – historians, philologists, political scientists, diplomatic officials, etc. However, fundamentals of China's history and culture are taught at most small-town higher educational institutions, too. This paper presents the relevant experience of one of the leading pedagogical higher educational institutions of the Volga Region – Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseviev.

2 Literature Review

For students learning about China, a great help is the monographic and reference literature which is truly immense and widely available in libraries (both in the local ones of higher educational institutions and the public ones). The authors believe that here, an important task of teachers is to help students orient in this endless sea of collections of papers, author research works, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. For instance, there is a sort of "canonic" (let this name not be taken totally seriously) list of authors whose works are perfect to introduce readers to the "boundless and brilliant" world of Chinese civilization – by giving them the most essential knowledge, without which it is difficult or even impossible to find one's way in the history and culture of the "Celestial Empire". To name a few such authors, for example, this is R. Kruger (2014), V. V. Malyavin (2011a), L. S. Perelomov (2011), and C. P. Fitzgerald (2014).

Further on, students can expand this list on their own, depending on the topic they are working on. So, as for China's medieval culture, it is a good idea for one to consult works of the above mentioned V. V. Malyavin (2011b) first of all; concerning the phenomenon of the "Chinese dream" of today – works of Z. Xinmin (2018) and so on.

In this ocean of books, a separate place belongs to personalia dedicated to "giants" of the contemporary history of China – Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong (e.g., fundamental works of J. Fenby (2006) and P. Short (2005)).

In this relation, sources on China's classical culture are quite important, too; they are also published and represented not only in readers. So, there are Russian-language translations of "Analects" of the great Confucius (2013), Taoist treatise "Tao Te Ching" (2013), and many other pearls of Chinese intellectual culture having determined the image of this civilization.

3 Research Methodological Framework

The objective of the research is to analyze particularities of the way the history and culture of China are taught at Russian higher educational institutions (using the case of Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseviev). Tasks of the research are to find out the content-related segment of subjects "The ancient history" and "The modern and contemporary history of Asian and African countries" associated with China, to analyze methodological support of teaching this topic, as well as individual controversial issues in China's history of the 20th-21st centuries which can become the subject of debate at seminar classes.

In terms of methodology, the paper relies on the dialectic, comparative historical, and hermeneutic methods; as applied to this topic, they help detail specific features of the way history and culture of China are taught in the Russian system of higher humanitarian education. So, the dialectic method allows viewing Chinese civilization in its development on the understanding that basic attributes conditioned by the influence of Confucianism have been there for millennia. In this case, the comparative historical method implies focusing students' attention on succession of individual epochs in the history of the "Celestial Empire". Finally, the hermeneutic method as that of analyzing written sources is critical because one cannot gain an insight into Chinese civilization without studying its classical texts.

4 Results and Discussion

The typical case of the way the history and culture of China are taught in the Russian system of higher education is Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseviev to which the authors of this paper are linked by many years of

work. Here, China is studied chiefly by students of the faculty of history and law, as well as of the philological faculty.

First of all, Chinese civilization is viewed within the basic academic subjects of "The ancient history" (year I of the full-time and part-time departments of the said faculties) and "The modern and contemporary history of Asian and African countries" (years III-V of the full-time department; years IV-V of the part-time department of the said faculties).

At the ancient history classes, students learn features of the ancient Chinese civilization. Here, one has to take into account the limited scope of academic hours allotted for this subject which involves covering an immense material – the history of civilizations of the Ancient East, as well as of Classical antiquity (Ancient Greece and Rome). This is why, given such rigid timing, the Ancient China is fit in one or two classes only, dealing with the first empire in the history of the "Celestial Empire" (Qin) and with Confucianism as the spiritual basis and foundation of this great Far-Eastern civilization.

A slightly larger scope of classes on further centuries-old history of China is provided for in "The modern and contemporary history of Asian and African countries". However, it has to be noted that while this is a smaller "introductory" course at the faculty of philology, various departments of the faculty of history and law have quite a lot of academic hours allotted for the history of the East.

In spite of the above name of the subject, its structure incorporates a topic on the history of the late Chinese Middle Ages – "The Manchu Conquest of China and the formation of the Qing Empire", discussing the events of the 17th century, – as a sort of introduction to "The modern and contemporary history".

The modern history of China covers the following topics: "The Open Door Policy of China, the Opium Wars and the Taiping rebellion"; "The Qing Empire in the 1870s – 1890s: first attempts of modernizing China (the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred Days' reform)"; "China at the beginning of the 20th century: from the Xinhai Revolution toward the World War I".

The relevant problems of the contemporary China are detailed in the final part of this basic subject of the course, i.e., "The contemporary history", as follows: "China in 1918–1949: from the formation of the united national front to the formation of the PRC"; "People's Republic of China in the epoch of "the great experiments"; "The "Chinese way" and "Chinese dream": market reforms and enhancing the geopolitical influence". The specific features of the said academic subject implies (which is clear from the names of the topics outlined) the priority attention to questions of China's political and social-economic history. Regrettably, it has to be stated that questions of the Chinese culture, both intellectual and artistic, are only viewed here passingly, as a sort of "lyrical digressions" designed for keeping the student audience interested. The cause of such an approach is but on the surface: this is the lack of study time, as one has to fit an immense stratum of the material into a limited number of lectures and practice classes.

Some words must be said about what materials (course and further ones) are currently used for teaching the history of China at higher educational institutions (again, let an average Russian higher educational institution be used as a case, and not the elite RAS institute training professional Sinologists).

To begin with, as of today, there are quite a lot of high-quality, sound textbooks and study guides for higher educational institutions on the history of China. The first one to be mentioned is the large-scale multi-volume educational edition "The history of China from the earliest times up to the early 21st century": without overstating it, all the leading Sinologists of Russia have contributed to creation of the series (The history of China, vol. 1, 2016; The history of China, vol. 2, 2016; The history of China, vol. 3, 2014; The history of China, vol. 4,

2016; The history of China, vol. 5, 2016; The history of China, vol. 6, 2014; The history of China, vol. 7, 2014; The history of China, vol. 8, 2017; The history of China, vol. 9, 2016). Notably, the last volume of this project, dedicated to the PRC of the second decade of the 21st century, is currently being prepared. There is also a textbook "The history of China" by L. S. Vasiliev, A. V. Meliksetov, Z. G. Lapina, and A. A. Pisarev (2007), plus M. E. Kravtsova's author textbook of the traditional Chinese culture (2003). Alongside the above, the history of China is described in higher educational institution textbooks on the ancient history (The Ancient History, 2019; Perfilova, 2018; The History of the Ancient East, 2003) and on the modern and contemporary history of Asian and African countries (Safronov & Losev, 2019a, 2019b).

It must be noted that the content of the educational material on China for Russian higher educational institutions has undergone certain transformation in the recent decades. This is associated with the verge of the 1980s – 1990s seeing drastic, revolutionary changes in the Russian humanitaristics. They involved separation from the monopoly power of the Marxist methodology and the contemporary Russian historians, philosophers, and political scientists' embarking on a challenging but, definitely, creative, and extremely interesting search for new conceptual approaches.

With regard to this, the Russian China Studies were no exception, too. So, certain changes are confirmed by publication of new textbooks on the history and religions of the East (including sections about China, among others) in the 1990s – early 2000s; these textbooks presented various approaches to the history of African and Asian societies. In particular, penned by the prominent Russian Sinologist, professor L. V. Vasiliev (1983, 1994), "The history of the East", the two-volume author work, and "The history of Eastern religions" supplementing it relies on the variant of civilization methodology which is close to A. J. Toynbee's interpretation (2019) given in "A Study of History", his classical work. By contrast, "The modern history of Asian and African countries" (in three parts) (2004) and "The contemporary history of Asian and African countries" (in three parts) (2018) prepared by the academic and teaching team of the historical faculty of Moscow Pedagogical State University and edited by A. M. Rodrigues (2004, 2018) presents a view of the history of this region in terms of formations, i.e., from the standpoint which is largely consistent with the Soviet historiography of the question.

When teaching the history of China, at the beginning of working with virtually any student audience, one has to face the fact that this great Asian civilization is a terra incognita for the vast majority of the present-day young people. Admittedly, "every second one" of them knows that it is the Chinese who invented gunpowder and compass. Many have heard something about Confucius and Mao Zedong but it is only individual students who have an idea about doctrinal features of Confucianism and Mao's "great experiments". This kind of information vacuum appears to be all the more surprising if one recollects that China is one of Russia's most important neighbors with whom a strategic alliance has been formed in fact over the latest decades.

This is why, when working with students, one has to draw their attention to the basic, fundamental, pivotal aspects of Chinese civilization above all and to keep returning to revising them – because without knowing them, further discussion of the topic makes no sense at all.

With regard to this, what has to be spoken about most importantly is Confucianism, the philosophy and doctrinal ideology to have been determining the image of this great Far-Eastern civilization for millennia, from the oldest times to the present day. The doctrine of Confucius (2019) worded in the famous "Analects of Confucius" ("Lun Yu") has become the quintessence of the Chinese cultural code and Chinese ethos, the way being is perceived and experienced.

So, the most important task of teachers seems to be presentation of the topic in question in the form of a vivid story containing

curious and entertaining details alongside the scientese notions and complicated terms which are compulsory for learning. This can be achieved quite easily, as Chinese history and culture is abundant with interesting figures, tragic, or, by contrast, amusing stories, and curious facts. It is Chinese culture that yields a rich material in this aspect: stories about Taoist men of wisdom, real or mythical, with their paradoxical thinking and sophisticated idea about fluctuation of being (a classic example is Chuang-Tzu's butterfly dream) spark excitement in the student audience unflinching. Characters of the contemporary history of the "Celestial Empire" evoke as lively a reaction, too, especially Mao Zedong – who is not only the colorful but also the major figure in China's political life of the 20th century, to say the least of it.

Speaking about issues in teaching the history of China to student audience, it has to be stated that for many (if not most) students, Chinese names and individual terms present certain difficulties in memorizing. Anyway, it is merely impossible to find one's bearings in the history and culture of this country without many of them. So, in one respect, personal abilities of individual students have to be taken into account here (for the so-called "strong" students, just the above terms turn out to pose no special difficulty for learning). The authors of the paper are far from holding a snobbish attitude to their younger colleagues getting to grasp the boundless world of Chinese history and culture (be it with varying success in this field, even). One must remember that it is students who are most important, if not the most important, participants of the work on the subject under consideration. Basically, it is to them that the entire immense layer of factual and theoretical knowledge is addressed.

5 Conclusion

On the one hand, at the majority of Russia's higher educational institutions (except the few higher educational institutions and faculties of the Orientalist focus), China's history and culture are taught in a rather limited way. This is first of all true for the faculties of history, where students get acquainted with this great Asian country at the classes of "The ancient history" and "The modern and contemporary history of Asian and African countries". On the other hand, the authors of this paper believe that even in such a format, high-quality teaching of the history of China still can give the future specialists a quite relevant idea about the particularities of Chinese civilization from the oldest times up to nowadays. As for more profound knowledge of this topic, students can get it when writing their bachelor's and master's theses and within the student science (preparing papers and presentations for round tables and student conferences). On top of this, the methodological support available for teaching the history and culture of China (study texts, multivolume ones included) is of quite a good quality as of today.

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Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: AA, AM