

Perception of space and the evolution of the Chinese psyche

Abstract

This paper is intended as an investigation of the conceptualisation of space in the Chinese context. It takes the Kantian “form of sensibility” as a basic framework for the analysis of the specific linguistic and spatial representation of space. Through this investigation, it tries to establish how this accumulated perception emerged and in what relationship it remains with physical and imagined space. In conclusion, it will argue that despite numerous changes and adaptations, core perception remains relatively intact and as such, determines the uniqueness of Chinese psyche and its relation with the spatiality.

Keywords: Chinese culture, intercultural communication, philosophy of culture, space.

Introduction

Since any human activity happens in a more-or-less defined physical space, it is then not hard to conceive that the conceptualisation of space in which the event occurs is one of the factors that signifies the event as such. Whether the notion is consciously perceived or not, some intuition of space is an indispensable factor allowing for an act to be performed. That is precisely why for Immanuel Kant, space, alongside time, is not just a category like some others that determine the way a human experience the world, but an a priori concept that is somehow apprehended before any knowledge of anything else happens. In his own words:

“Space is not something objective and real, nor a substance, nor an accident, nor a relation; instead, it is subjective and ideal, and originates from the mind’s nature in accord with a stable law as a scheme, as it were, for coordinating everything sensed externally.”²

The concept of space, and time, is then a “form of sensibility”,³ an invisible frame of human cognitive activity that negotiates the internal-external interplay.

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2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der reinen Vernunft)*, first published in 1781), as cited in Janiak 2016.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, as cited in Janiak 2016.

Following from Kant's assertion, it becomes apparent that space is anything but an easy-to-comprehend concept. Despite the fact, as Kant rightly pointed out, that space is nothing less than an omnipresent experience, it largely escapes simple generalisations and is hardly reducible to ordinary perception. On the one hand, it "originates from the mind's nature", on the other, it precedes any experience without which the mind is a hardly conceivable reality. The question may then arise about the degree to which this concept is determined by the "mind's nature" and to what is "sensed externally"? Conversely, how the understanding and application of this concept determine the "nature of mind" and affect, or create what is "sensed externally"? Finally, what is the role of socio-culturally determined values in the conceptualisation of space and shaping other perceptions arising from it?

In the following verses, I will limit the investigation to a specific, Chinese, display of this internal-external interplay. I will try to understand what are the sources and consequences of this particular conceptualisation of space for an individual and the society one inhabits. Focusing on the Chinese understanding an application of the concept of space, I will examine the origins and structure of this "form of sensibility" and its significance for the larger structure that we habitually call "Chinese culture".

Method

In the case of cultural studies, analysis of a specific notion cannot proceed without some reference to the context of a larger structure. The notion of space is not an exception here, since, as Henri Lefebvre urges, space is not just a neutral "container" but an ongoing process of socially produced spatial structures that are in an inseparable inter-action with individuals, groups, or social institutions.⁴ Space is then "produced", but is also a "producer". It is an integral element of culture, a larger structure that Geert Hofstede called "programming of the mind".⁵ To conceptualise and access such inter-reactions, that from the Lefebvre's point of view are crucial for the understanding of space, some generalisation of that larger structure is inevitable.

Chinese culture is one of those that due to its longevity and significance for the development of the entire human civilisation deserves particular attention. However, as Arif Dirlik quite interestingly pointed out, despite a tendency to refer to Chinese culture as it were a single entity, even very superficial analysis shows that it is anything but one formation.⁶ Chinese culture, similarly to

4 Lefebvre 1991.

5 Hofstede 2001: 9.

6 Dirlik 2006.

any other “national culture”, is a conglomerate of historically accumulated experiences, perceptions, and memories that has many spatiotemporally different embodiments. In the context of this generalisation, and with the awareness of its vertical and horizontal diversity, the accuracy of Geertz’s assertion that every “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete”⁷ is even more apparent.

Wishing to proceed with an analysis that, despite Geertz’s reservation, is still grounded in a specific cultural context, there is no option but to utilise as researched material cultural products that at least to some degree are shared by different subgroups’ perceptions and images. Amongst them, language (at least the written one), historical and modern dwellings (as shared images) are those that conceal and at the same time disseminate a specific version of Kant’s “form of sensibility”. As diverse they might be, they are negotiated through the same socio-symbolic reality.

The approach is inevitably reductionist, in Geertz’s sense, and the obtained results are rather generic. However, despite not being exhaustive, the proposed generalisations are meant to provide an applicable framework for further, more detailed analysis. An investigation of locally specific instances awaits research that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Space hidden in the language

The very first display of specific perception of space, or as Kant would prefer, “an a priori form of sensibility”, and how it has embedded the Chinese mind can be learnt from the name of the country itself. States’ names often reflect their specific historical roots (Poland – the land of the Poles), geographical features (North Korea), or features of the political system (the United States of; the Democratic Republic of). The name that has been accompanying China for centuries is a display of particular involvement of intuition of space with the individual mind and universalised worldview. *Zhongguo*, or even more *Zhonghua*, as notions associated with the origin, culture and civilisation are one of the first and the most fundamental conceptualisations of space that signified the further external-internal interplay. As Zhou (1122 BC – 256 BC) overthrew Shang (1600 BC – 1046 BC), the notion of the “Centre” (*zhongyang*, *zhongyuan*), has gradually become synonymous of the right to rule widely employed by the ones who claimed rights to govern China.⁸ It is then a quite common, even though not a necessarily correct belief that the term *Zhongguo* denotes the “Middle Kingdom”, which is then associated with the perception of

7 Geertz 1973: 29.

8 Chang 1983.

its own special, physical and symbolic, location amongst others. The physical centrality then was a synonym of specific status, indispensable significance. Factual centrality is rarely sufficient, and often not even present. It had to be established with ideological and political measures, through which it occupies psycho-symbolic space. This emphasis on the centrality and its cultural and political significance was an ideological creation of the Zhou Dynasty. Zhou, trying to establish themselves as an authoritative ruling force, on the one hand, evoked the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), and the historicised myth of Yu on another.⁹ The significance of Zhou is determined by its imagined transmission of culturising power and order. Subsequent states that were soon to emerge, similarly established their status through claiming a part of this imagined centre, the “splendid central civilisation” (*Zhonghua*) in opposition to the “uncivilised outsiders”, barbarians. As a result, the centre, in symbolic and not necessarily geographical terms, is identified as the source of orderliness, as more authority was claimed by the state.

We can imagine that this identification of civilisation with the centre probably had its beginning in actual experience. However, as it was reproduced and constantly recreated it also shaped the application of this a priori “form of sensibility”. For most of the Zhou period, there were “Central Kingdoms” not just a “Middle Kingdom”, even the ambiguous nature of Chinese language, and later amendments of the term’s meaning do not always allow one to see it. For Zhou, the idea of the physical and political centrality of the imperial court had been associated with an image of divinely sanctioned socio-political order. Such arrangements not only legitimised the power of the court but also shaped the way state subjects perceived the relationship between the physical and socio-political spaces in their proximities. Such an approach eventually did pave the way for the notion of the “Central (Middle) Kingdom”, as it has been so vigorously applied for centuries to come.

Despite being challenged by numerous modernisation movements of 20th and 21st centuries, the relation between power and physical and imagined centre, seems to remain a vital factor determining the self-identification and socio-cultural positioning of the individual even in contemporary China. The appreciation of the physical or imagined centrality of the individual and communities that one belongs to is key, seeking justification of actions and behaviours by appeal to the “central sanction” (*zhongyang*).

There are quite a few other features of the Chinese language that demonstrate the nature of the Chinese conceptualisation of space and reveals its involvement with the entire cultural structure. Amongst them, periodisation

9 Dirlik 2006: 420.

of events and their sequences deserves particular attention. First of all, because by applying universal binary oppositions, for instance, a specific, morally loaded message is being delivered. Second, as the particular value system is trying to establish its validity through an appeal to this association, further conceptualisation and their valorisations follow suit negotiating the a priori sensibility of space.

To be more specific, in the Chinese language, an event or an item preceding another one is referred to as *shang*, which also means “something above”. Conversely, the one that comes after as *xia*, that in a similar manner also means “something below”. At the same time, something more valuable, more desired is also being referred to with *shang*, or other words pointing to the location above, *gao* for instance. Similarly, things that are disregarded or of lower quality, less importance are referred to as *xia*, or *di*, low. As the association of quality with the position occupied in space seems to be universal, the association of time with space is somewhat different that can be found in other, for instance, western conceptualisations. Through such examples, it becomes quite clear how an a priori concept of space is an indispensable framework for further cognitions and is being negotiated and amended by culturally specific ideologies and values. If what is above, *shang*, is valuable, and what is below, *xia*, is not, and what is previous is *shang* and what follows is *xia*, then the message about the value of time flow is quite explicit. This spatiotemporal entanglement sheds light on the Chinese perception of history and its moral dimension. Without a doubt, it results from the Confucian admiration of antiquity. However, it requires a spatial metaphor to establish it as an everyday, common perception. By making an appeal to very basic cognition of space, a vivid metaphor, the ideological message becomes “readable” and applicable. And vice versa. As the moral values are associated with the specific location in space, associated places as such are becoming synonymous of specific values. Evaluation of subsequent sets of items then applies a similar code, creating a unique, dynamically developing structure.

This is another case of display, and linguistic codification of values through spatial in nature metaphor is the opposition of *nei* and *wai* as closely associated with greater in scope arrangements of space and human dwellings. The entire plethora of expressions utilise the *nei* – *wai* (internal-external) dichotomy, sometimes in a slightly modified form of *ben* – *wai* (this itself – external foreign), that carries a specific axiology of Chinese culture. *Nei hang* vs *wai hang*, for instance, demonstrates, with a spatial metaphor the difference between legitimate authority in a specific discipline and a laity. *Nei ren* vs *wai ren*, in a similar manner, draws a line between those from the inner

circle, family, clan or a group of individuals bounded by close socio-moral ties, and strangers that are not to be shared with significant resources. An even more apparent embodiment of this perception of social relations in the light of spatial cognition is the *ben di/ben guo* vs *wai di/wai guo* (this vs external/foreign land/country). It is then probably one of the first lessons of the Chinese language that can cause some moral concerns – to learn that that which is *wai*, is also foreign, strange and suspicious. The attitude towards *waidi ren*, lit., “people of an external land”, even slightly improved in recent years is then the most vivid example of such a tendency. *Waiguo ren*, foreigners, are not an exception here. What is interesting, and what differentiates it from the *shang – xia* dichotomy mentioned above, is the fact that the value of the *nei* is not always positive, and in some cases slightly unclear. For instance, *nei ren*, used to be largely an obsolete self-derogatory term used in reference to one’s wife. What is important, it can be used only in reference to the speaker’s wife, never when talking about the addressee’s wife. *Wai*, especially in regards to foreigners and foreign products, has also been to a large degree revalorised. It is largely due to the experience regarding the quality of foreign, mostly American, German or British products in comparison to local Chinese, that *waiguo de* became something more desirable than *benguo de*. Regardless, the *nei/ben* is still largely valued higher than *wai*, and in areas where it is not, authorities work quite hard to reverse the trend.¹⁰

Application of spatial metaphors is a common feature of numerous languages, that proves the accuracy of Kant’s assertion mentioned at the beginning of this paper. However, specific metaphors depict a particular perception and valorisation of space and perceptions conceptualised through these valorisations are products of specific programming of the mind. This specific form of spatial sensibility not only determines the form and value of specific perceptions and metaphors but also contributes to the further replication of particular programming of the mind. Even though it is hardly an unchangeable structure, specific, often unconscious tendencies remain largely untouched. The deviations are then reincorporated or even redefined to fit the basic framework of the larger structure. Spatial metaphors are then an ongoing dialogue between the individual and the larger structure that contributes to the shaping of the former and the further replication of the latter.

10 Promotion of Chinese products as being not only of an equal quality, but also as a “patriotic choice”. “Chinese values” as not only more suitable in the Chinese context but even superior to the Western ones are the concrete cases of such efforts.

Walled city: power and control

Probably the most obvious demonstrations of Chinese conceptualisation of space is the unsurpassed Chinese taste for a clear-cut delineation of social spaces and centuries-present utilisation of walls in Chinese urban planning. The tendency to build walled cities with rectangularly organised inner-city space has been present since the very beginning of Chinese civilisation.¹¹ One of the most striking experiences that one may have visiting the Xi'an museum is the maquette of the former capital, Chang'an. As one looks at the miniature of the ancient city, the complexity and precision of spaces delineation recalls nothing less than a – designed and manufactured with mathematical precision – computer micro-chip. The design that took its beginning in Qin (221-206 BCE), applied a rectangular grid as a model for a new settlement that was fully implemented during Han (220 BCE – 202 CE). During Tang (618 CE – 907 CE), the whole city was then arranged according to the *Lifang* system, with strictly delineated streets, clearly demarking 108 quarters, *li*, that were further divided into smaller wards, *fang*, and courtyards that belong to patrilineal clans.¹² Any specific unit was accessible only through one particular set of closed in night gates (city-, quarter-, ward- and courtyard gate), as the limits of all these units were clearly marked with the walls, *qiang*.

The city as such was then also guarded by several-metre high city walls (*cheng*), the climbing of which was a serious offence. As such, not only the limits of space accessible and used by specific individuals were clearly marked, but the space as a significant determinant of individual psycho-social reality was created. The city – *chengshi* was soon to be identified with its walls that marked the borders between two worlds, the civilisation, and the wilderness.¹³ The city life was happening inside the walls, with subsequent groups occupying designed areas. The world outside the walls, on the other hand, was wild and dangerous, regarded as less, if at all, valuable. For instance, *shang*, merchants, as the lowest social class, were not allowed to live inside the city walls!¹⁴ Space was then created as the answer to humans' needs for safety and socio-cognitive clarity. Especially such a clear delineation of subsequent quarters made a particular contribution to the emergence of specifically Chinese perceptions of space and its significance. They inevitably made the social hierarchy “tangible” and almost omnipresent. The walled cities with clearly marked structures guarded by the controlled by the subsequent levels of authority gates were unbreakably binding the individual with the social

11 Lee-Wong 2018.

12 Duan, Huang & Zhang 2014.

13 Xu 2000.

14 Cotterell & Cotterell 1975: 99.

structure. There was not much room for individuality in such a structure, as everyone belonged, on the one hand, to a specific social group/class, on another, was firmly, and steadily located under the set of control measures that determine his/her movements.¹⁵ The scope of the cognisable, and open for creative activity, space was then quite clearly determined and controlled. By definition, there was way less room for social deviation, and the presence of power, social, political, symbolic is overwhelming and inevitable. Space was then created and re-created as the embodiment and the convenor of power and hierarchy, making it omnipresent and almost omnipotent (climbing the wards' walls was to a degree disallowed).¹⁶ Song Mei Lee-Wong has convincingly argued that the walls in Imperial China functioned mostly as a means of social control, and were proven not to be very effective as protection from external aggression. The case of the Great Wall of China (*Changcheng*) supports such a claim most evidently.¹⁷

Without a doubt, such an arrangement of space, originally being an embodiment of specific aspirations, also had a further impact on the Chinese “programming of the mind”. The fact that the Chinese tend to be referred to as “collective” and “authoritarian”¹⁸ is the idea of a specific association of space with power even in modern times resulting from the high-power distance that characterises Chinese society. It does not mean that there is no resistance and that everything is set up once and for good, quite to the contrary. However, even contestation happens in a specific space, and aims at its own retaking and redefining. No wonder then that an attempt towards redefining one's individual or social identity includes, or even begins with, manipulation of space, turning down or transgressing of the physical or symbolical walls.

In their very informative paper, Jian Xiao and Shuwen Qu¹⁹ analysed a case of such transgression that emphatically illustrates how the perception of space and social actions complement each other. The case of a local artistic initiative that aimed to stop the transformation of a Donghu urban scenic spot in Wuhan city into a commercial district is then presented as a form of protest, contestation of socio-political reality with the available, under specific condition. Xiao and Qu are interested in “the practices of resistance in public spaces, particularly in the context of an authoritarian regime such as China”.²⁰ What is of interest here is the very fact that “architect Li” and his associates

15 Bray 2005.

16 Lee-Wong 2018: 111.

17 Lee-Wong 2018: 109.

18 Pye 1992.

19 Xiao & Qu 2020: 1–15.

20 Xiao & Qu 2020: 1.

chose to contest the “new wall” that the development was about to become, demonstrating its significance as a display of power and dominance. The fact that they “create[d] a personal space by using their own bodies as a means to resist”²¹, and for instance “Mr Ge drank filtered water from Donghu and then drew a 1.1meters long personal coast line by urinating”²² is a display of the same perception. Space does matter, it is related to power, regardless if it is power of coercion or a protest against it.

Moreover, that space comes from the physical or imagined centre, government or an individual conviction of moral righteousness, and its margins must be marked. There does not have to be much deliberation regarding the nature of space. Still, there is a direct, cognitively significant action that is possible due to the a priori form of sensibility mentioned by Kant. One then acts in space, through space and, at least superficially, for space. Through those specific actions, the values are presented and goals claimed. The act is possible due to a priori knowledge of space, but through its specific nature and the creative power mentioned by Lefebvre, it also displays the inner, culturally determined cognition of the acting one.

Gated communities: space and social status

The specific involvement of the Chinese with the concept of space despite inevitable changes and adjustments, in terms of its core structure, remains somewhat intact. The gated communities that took over the landscape of Chinese cities with growing urbanisation are the most visible embodiment of this intertwining of space, power and social status. How then has – in modern gated communities and Imperial China’s – perception of space been embodied?

According to Hongping Yang, gated communities are:

“... residential communities enclosed by a wall, green belt, or construction that restrict the entrance of outside visitors by using security guards, keys, and entrance cards, in which a CCTV system and patrols are usually applied”.²³

The fear of crime and withdrawal of public services are the reasons driving development of gated communities, and the reinforcement of residential segregation and social exclusion that result from their development, are often emphasised in scholarship.²⁴ Without a doubt, they do provide some sense of

21 Xiao & Qu 2020: 3.

22 Xiao & Qu 2020: 10.

23 Yang 2016.

24 Duan, Huang & Zhang 2014; Deng 2017: 233.

additional protection, especially since the memory of turbulent times is still vivid. Yang Hongping can then claim that “To a certain extent, the gated community provides a kind of sanctuary for people.”²⁵ However, housing is not just a dwelling, but a sign of social status, identity and interaction with the “sensed externally”. In other words:

“As a basic space for family activities, the house is not only a physical structure for people to live in, but also reflects people’s social position, identity, taste, and style.”²⁶

Gated communities are visible and clearly marked signs of social status, providing some level of social recognition and a sense of community. They then fulfil, similar to ancient cities, functions by including people of a certain class and excluding those who do not fit the standard. A guarded gate is a visible sign of exclusion of outsiders that are permitted only under specific circumstances and for specific purposes. Even though the strictness of applying this rule varies considerably, the dichotomy of *nei* vs *wai* mentioned above still applies, at least in theory.²⁷ Such inclination towards social isolation can be viewed as a result of a close link between the designers’ own values and experience of space. It is then the designers’ values and socio-historical experience that determine their taste for the safety-guaranteeing and status-marking designs.²⁸ However, in the market economy determined by the interplay of the supply and the demand, the needs, the perceptions of consumers are an equally significant factor. It is rather pointless from the perspective of this paper to argue in favour of the designers or the consumers as the more significant factor in this respect, as their motivations seem to be grounded in similar perceptions. How much these two resonate is convincingly demonstrated by the fact that over 80% of newly built urban communities follow the pattern of the gated community! In the context of the market economy, this stands as sufficient proof in this regard. There is then an a priori sensibility that seems to be largely shared by all parties involved. Even the reasons for designing and desiring living in a gated community may vary, the fact is that this delineated with a fence or

25 Yang 2016: 22.

26 Yang 2016: 25.

27 Observing gated communities in Suzhou for over five years, I have encountered great variety in this respect. While some communities do not bother closing gates and inspecting ID cards, some are accessible only after swapping a card, but security guards still do not bother stopping those without cards following those who have swiped. Some others, usually high-end ones do require external visitors to register at the entrance. Delivery guys and garbage collectors must follow established pattern and can rarely enter as they pleased. The outbreak of Covid-19 certainly made all communities to apply way stricter measure, that were all abolished once the pandemic was under control.

28 Liao, Wehrhahn & Breitung 2019.

even a concrete wall space, providing specific amenities and forms of social interactions, are dominant forms of urban dwellings.

Certainly, the physical scale and the profoundness of, for instance, social isolation are not comparable. However, it still does not nullify the similarities between the modern gated community and the walled city of the ancients. Even though there are significant variations in the actual design, status and governance of specific communities,²⁹ the delineated spaces of a walled city and gated communities share features mentioned above – provide a sense of safety, belonging and social status. Not only the physical structure then but also socio-cultural functions are reminiscent of those of the ancient city. Gated communities are then not only a copy of American patterns brought to China with the advancing modernisation, that in China, to a large degree means “westernisation”. No doubt, gated communities are a product of urbanisation and modernisation. However, being a product of modernisation, at the same time they are a negation of western neoliberal ideologies, that, like urbanisation, are associated with modernisation.³⁰ They are then not a simple replantation of the western urban pattern. They are rather an expression of Chinese conceptualisation of space, Chinese perception of the relation between the physical and the social. The same process modernisation that has enabled constructing privatised housing in China also witnesses the denial of basic modern principles of openness and equality. The values that grew out of conceptualisation of space in Imperial China seem then to resurface despite the progressing modernisation. “The wall that surrounded the city in ancient time now crisscrosses all over the city.”³¹ is then the reality of basically every major Chinese city of the 21st century.

Conclusion

Space, as Immanuel Kant once argued, is an a priori form of sensibility that originating from the mind’s nature and precedes and determines sensual experience and empirical cognition. At the same time, this form of sensibility is affected by the internal-external interplay. As such, it is a unique record of a dialogue between the individual, society/culture and what is “sensed externally”. This record is then not only a product of this dialogue but also a significant tool allowing for further interaction. In other words, as the perception of space is determined by historically accumulated experiences and memories, it finds its expression in the relation with the “world outside the mind”.

29 Lu, Zhang & Wu 2020.

30 Duan, Huang & Zhang 2014.

31 Yang 2016: 22.

As mentioned above, space is not a simple and static concept. It denotes an active force that furtherly reproduces, revitalises and redefines perceptions directly or indirectly associated or evoked in the context of space or through related metaphors. Language, urban planning and declared and practised values through their entanglement with the concept, a sense of space not only finds its realisation but through reinvention and reappraisal further perpetuate it. Space is then “created”, and as such embodies the specific socio-historical experience of those who create and apply the concept. It is a product, but also one of the pillars, a frame of specific programming of the mind. In other words, as the conceptualising of space is a universal phenomenon, conceptualisation as such is an expression of a particular set of experiences, memories and values.

Through analysis of the Chinese conceptualisation of space and the ways it is being applied, I have tried here to, on the one hand, demonstrate how this particular dialogue, entanglement, has been created and recorded. On the other, I wanted to determine the socio-historical experience that determined the specificity of such record and the values that perpetuate through it. Finally, I wanted to grasp the uniqueness of the process in the Chinese context. Due to the rather limited scope of the paper, a full analysis was not possible. However, even such a generic overview allows for some, I believe practically applicable, conclusions.

First of all, from the embodiments of the space conceptualisation and their socio-historical background, the process of value creation and preservation can be encapsulated. The historical experience of the Chinese appreciation of order, as opposed to disorder, was then expressed and solidified by the way space was conceptualised and operationalised. This appreciation of orderliness was then expressed in the urban planning and language of Imperial China, contributing to the emergence of specific acceptance of authoritarian control.

Second, as culture is a dynamic reality, an analysis of specific cultural perception, in this case, the concept of space, the dynamics of socio-cultural change reveal. The dominant in the Imperial China values and their embodiments have gone through significant changes and appropriation. The modern forms of space apprehension are then result of the “space creation” process analysed by Lefebvre. In the Chinese context, gated communities, for instance, are then a record of that struggle between modernisation and the historically determined values, deeply embedded in the Chinese mind.

Third, the impact of modernisation and growing urbanisation on the larger structure, the programming of the mind can be assessed. As the new perceptions and values have been externalised, it is hard to deny the reality

of significant changes in Chinese culture. The resistance and independent re-definition of space became then an element of individual programming of the mind. Nevertheless, some core tendencies such as the *nei-wai* dichotomy or appreciation of status, have remained largely intact, making resistance to trying to establish itself mainly through means that are rooted in contested realities.

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Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures
Polish Academy of Sciences



ACTA ASIATICA
VARSOVIENSIA

No. 33

Warsaw 2020

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*Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia no. 33 was granted a financial support of the
Ministry of Science and Higher Education, grant no. 709/P-DUN/2019*

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Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2020

PL ISSN 0860–6102

eISSN 2449–8653

ISBN 978–83–7452–091–1

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