Proskýnesis in the Euroasiatic Continent: Unity and Diversity

The stories considered to this point narrate the relationship between the common people and their rulers, and especially the relationship among members of the ruling elites. They capture aspects of the daily and institutional life that might seem rather trivial. However, we might suggest that, in actual fact, in all these stories one can find an implicit code governing them. So, for example, trivial actions of everyday life such as greeting one another when meeting, or the ways of relating with people from a lower or a higher standing, are not actions made according to one’s own liking. They are part of a system of rules that must be complied with, since everyone does so, and doing otherwise carries the risk of being censured or, when imposed by higher powers, suffering a punishment. All social actions, even the most insignificant, are part of a symbolic system and a system of rules (a cultural code) that cannot be easily violated. A further effort in this direction needs to be made to understand the social bond shaping the behaviors recounted in the stories. By ‘social bond’ we mean the equality or the inequality in the relationship between individuals. Do men relate to each other as equals? Do they treat women as if they were equal to men or, instead, as inferior even within groups of relatives? Is a wife or a sister treated like a brother or a husband? Or, despite a blood relationship, do women remain inferior? Moreover, a social bond contains a power relationship. Asymmetry in a relationship is not just a generic inequality. It expresses, and at the same time reproduces, a real and symbolic power relationship. In fact, why do the English and the Chinese – at the time of the events told and, even after centuries, on the diplomatic and on the historiographical plane – attach so much importance to Macartney’s koutou? And why does the French historian and diplomat Peyrefitte go to so much trouble to prove that the koutou was performed – if not intentionally then at least involuntarily? What would it mean if Macartney performed the koutou? And what would it mean if he did not? Evidently, accepting one or the other argument is not without implications, even after more than two centuries. Can we ignore the underlying conflict of cultures and civilizations?

Finally, we are speaking here of models. As is known, these may never be found in reality. Moreover, they are easily identifiable when compared with one other. They are even more visible when they are contrasted with one
another. In short, the societies from which these models emerge are not particularly homogeneous – though often alternative patterns of social and power relations to the dominant ones do emerge.

With the help of images and other historical and literary sources, I would like to investigate the convergence between the civilizations of the Eurasian continent and, at the same time, bring out the differences between the various ways of structuring power relations through ritual. The documents gathered lead us to trace the common elements of different forms of power. On the one hand, we find convergences and differences in the structure of power relations in a number of societies and at different times (these are built on a hierarchical and asymmetrical relationship between the elements of the relationship). On the other, we encounter relationships built on a symmetrical and egalitarian relationship between men. The two ways of structuring the relationship are not diachronically ordered. Asymmetrical relationships do not necessarily preclude symmetrical ones. The one and the other might coexist, and this is true, to some extent at least, even today.

The discussion in this chapter will follow a geographical pattern. Let us start from the Middle East and move on to Persia and Central Asia, and to Mongolia and China. Later on we will return to the Mediterranean (Byzantium) and, finally, to Europe.

1 Models of Prostration in Eurasian Societies

1.1 The Persian Model

As we begin this part of our journey, let us turn once again to Herodotus. In the Histories he tells of the Persians:

When two meet in the roads, by this you may discern whether those who meet are of equal rank – for instead of greeting by words they kiss one another on the mouth; but if one of them is a little inferior to the other, they kiss one another on the cheeks, and if one is of much less noble rank than the other, he falls down before him and worships him.

Herodotus, Histories 1, 134

Proskýnesis is therefore part of a greeting ritual structured by social distinctions. Equals kiss on the lips. Individuals who belong to slightly different classes kiss on the cheek. When social distance between two individuals is wide, the one belonging to the lower status prostrates himself before the other. This is the Persian or ancient Iranian model. Obviously, the sovereign,