A COMMENT ON VICTOR H. MAIR’S “RELIGIOUS FORMATIONS AND INTERCULTURAL CONTACTS IN EARLY CHINA”

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While intellectual transfer to China from outside the “East Asian Heartland” after the Qin dynasty is beyond doubt and well-documented, pre-imperial imports are much less easy to identify. Victor Mair is one of the most prominent authors to argue for significant very early intercultural contacts. He not only maintains that such contacts existed to a considerable extent, but that they shaped Chinese “mainstream practice and ideology” and determined the “fundamental nature of Sinitic religion”. In his essay, he focuses only on a selection of phenomena due to influences from the northwest of primarily “Iranian affiliation”. However, he regards these to be examples of a much broader variety of impacts from the surrounding world that substantially contributed to the making of China. For arguments regarding India, the reader can refer to the passages on “Parallels between Taoism and Yoga” in Mair’s famous translation of the Mawangdui manuscripts of the Laozi, with the thesis that this text was not only the product of “internal sociopolitical conditions” but also of “radically new religious and philosophical stimuli from without”.¹

I share Victor Mair’s conviction that Chinese culture – like any culture – has been the constantly changing result of a confluence of knowledge and experience from quite different sources from its very beginnings – any nucleus theory has proven untenable. Many of these influences were met with unspectacular acceptance while others have vanished, and some of them have brought about far reaching change. Yet, this has not forestalled essentialist theories contending a unity of “Chineseness” to the present day. Victor Mair is right in opposing this one-dimensional view. The view of a “culture” as a closed unit with the center of gravity in itself, as was brought forward by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and, in recent times, revived by Samuel Huntington, has never been plausible and should be a thing of the past.

Still, as Victor Mair himself admits, the development of China has not only been instigated from abroad but has also been the outcome of internal experiences, conflicts, crises, and learning processes. In general, and not only in the case of China, it is often hard to decide whether a given phenomenon is of indigenous or of foreign origin. Given all of the commonalities of the mental and physical apparatus of the human being, of the course of human life, of natural phenomena and social structures in general, manifold parallel developments without one-sided dependence also have to be expected. And if there has been a transfer of knowledge and ideas, they have not necessarily been taken over in a passive manner, but productively transformed into something new by the receiving side. Galton’s argument against Tylor, that data gathered from different cultures is not a secure comparative basis for inferences with regard to general cultural evolution unless one has shown the compared items to be genetically unrelated (“Galton’s problem”) can be reversed: one cannot make secure inferences with regard to the existence of transfer unless the respective data is shown to be really genetically related. In many cases, there are clear indications of cultural “borrowings”, above all the peculiarity and perhaps unexpectedness of a phenomenon, provided that the specific intercultural contacts and means of communication are given. On the other hand, Victor Mair would agree that one is well advised to avoid a diffusionism that overstates its case.

Such caution seems especially apposite if one looks for influences not only on the level of material goods but also on the level of more complex social phenomena, let alone comprehensive world-views that might have been transported together with the material borrowings. Victor Mair’s argument with regard to the Chinese “wu” (conventionally but, according to Mair, wrongly translated as “shamans”) is perhaps a rather unproblematic case: here he convincingly combines a linguistic reconstruction – provisional, as it can only be – with archaeological evidence to argue for an Iranian origin not only of the term but also of the corresponding religious practice. Mair’s other examples are less persuasive to this commentator.

As to horses and ovicaprids, it is most probably uncontroversial that they were brought to China via inner Asia, with a key role played by Iranian peoples. But does this mean that along with them pastoralist and nomadic “fundamental ethical, moral, and esthetic concepts”, as the author puts it, were also introduced to China? I do not find corroboration for this far-reaching thesis in Mair’s article. It is difficult