

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ARD-3.

51, Guilford Street,
London, W.C.1.
14th November 1963.

Sinologues in Turin.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr Nolte,

At first sight there was not much in common between the Exhibition of Piedmontese Baroque Art and the XV Congresso Sinologi Juniores except, perhaps, that I was drawn to visit both of them. In fact both of them must have attracted to Italy's second largest industrial city a number of people who otherwise would never have dreamed of visiting it, for, although quite a centre of a rather provincial baroque style, Turin is not in the mainstream of tourist Italy; as for sinologues the ratio to the population is apparently 1:1,000,000, which is considerably lower than that of a dozen other European cities, though it is more than twice as high as the Italian national average. There was one facet of both events, however, that was particularly noticeable - both were intended to be encyclopaedic. The Exhibition was a comprehensive survey not only of the painting and sculpture of the area and period, but also of its architecture, furniture, decoration, textile design, printing and illustration, theatrical design, costume, metalwork, ceramics, coins, and, in fact, every imaginable branch of the fine and applied arts. Through it ran the influence of a small number of particularly talented artists who seem to have been as much at home when designing a coin or a jewelled pendant as a monastery church.

The Sinologues' Congress was even broader in scope. It was open to anyone with the remotest interest in anything connected with China, and it attracted a wide variety of people from some fifteen countries, mostly European. The subject matter of the papers given varied from modern Chinese society to early Chinese music, and they were all given to an audience which was not divided into groups on the basis of interest or specialization.

In the present age of specialization, even in 'area studies', such a polymath congress might well seem an anachronism, despite the fact that the majority of participants clearly found it stimulating. It clearly represents a traditional classification of learning of a kind which, while it persists in the organization and curricula of most universities, at least in Europe, is often criticized. Of course a large number of learned societies and congresses are still organized on similar or even broader lines, and many learned periodicals must of necessity cater for very diverse readerships. But it proved much harder to find a commonly accepted definition of the word 'sinologue' than would be the case with even such blanket words as 'sociologist'.

It was rather disconcerting, in fact, to discover that the majority of participants clearly regarded one as a sinologue simply on the basis of having turned up; it had always seemed a special accolade reserved for the most eminent, or at least the most elderly.

Leaving aside the broader questions of academic policy, it seemed to me that such a meeting served several useful purposes. In the first place, it is probably true to say that there is still far less specialization in Chinese studies than in many comparable fields of study. Chiefly, no doubt, because of the difficulty of mastering the language or languages needed, the number of people engaged in the study of China from any particular point of view is still small when contrasted with the numbers involved in comparable studies of Europe or America. As a result, there is a closer and more readily perceptible community of interest which bridges the gap between the various disciplines. The very factor of having survived a training in Chinese, and often Japanese as well, probably plays quite an important part in bringing these scholars together. It was certainly noticeable that there was a greater degree of enthusiasm for developments in other disciplines than I have seen at other scholarly gatherings.

It might almost be said that the disciplines had not fully separated in Chinese studies, for there is still a significant number of more or less polymath scholars, chiefly amongst the older generation who are able to contribute to the discussion of a surprisingly large and varied number of subjects. It was certainly impressive, not to say inspiring, to see some of these heavier guns in action. Without them much of the discussion which followed the papers would have been unable to steer a course between monopolization by a few experts and a descent to the merest generalities. As it was a certain amount of continuity was possible, and in some cases a context was found in discussion for a paper that would otherwise have left 90% of the participants baffled. This mechanism makes it possible to present at such a conference papers on subjects that would otherwise find some difficulty in getting a hearing elsewhere.

This dependence of the Congress on its more seasoned members makes it relevant to ask how much longer it can continue to function at all in its present form. How far is the younger generation of scholars prepared to assume the role at present accepted by the senior one? It seemed to me that on the whole few of the younger people at the Congress believed that this sort of scholarship was any longer possible, or were even prepared to attempt it. While there was a convention in operation that obliged each speaker to apologize for the specialized nature of the paper that he was about to read, no one hesitated to read a specialized paper - and it could hardly have been otherwise. There was a widespread feeling that it would just be impossible for anyone to encompass 'all sinology' ever again; there are now too many fields and sub-fields, an already large and ever growing body of secondary literature. While at one time attention was focussed on a fairly small number of Chinese literary sources, yielding a relatively circumscribed body of knowledge which owed its selection probably as much to Chinese scholastic traditions as to

Western methodology, and to which a scholarly knowledge of classical Chinese and skill as a textual critic provided the most important keys, the more rigorous and ambitious application of the questions and methods of the Western social sciences have called in aid a much larger range of primary sources, as well as a much wider secondary literature, and it is not surprising that the older type of scholarship is disappearing.

This is not, of course, a problem unique to Chinese studies, or to area studies in general. But it may be that the existence of such a general body as the Junior Sinologues' Congress does something to counteract the tendency to separation of interests, and the lack of mutual awareness that has resulted in some disciplines when they have diverged.

A function of the Congress of more obvious value was that it enabled its members to meet each other, quite simply. This was of particular value to those who, like myself, were newcomers to the field and who had yet to meet many scholars in it. It struck me that this was specially useful for fairly junior students, of whom there were quite a number from France and Germany, who as yet owed no allegiance to any particular discipline beyond the Chinese language. They were enabled to get a reasonably wide view of the various fields to which their qualifications would admit them, and of the personalities involved. This is important in a field where, as with Chinese studies in European universities, the majority of students make up their minds to embark on the long language course for their first degree without necessarily having decided what to do later.

Judging by the delegates' addresses the Congress was very much a European affair, though it served a subsidiary object as a meeting place for Chinese intellectuals living in Europe, of whom there were between thirty and forty in a total membership of about one hundred and sixty. One member each from the U.S.A., Canada and Turkey, with two from Japan, comprised the entire non-European contingent. There was some surprise at the small number of people from the U.S.A.; mostly it was thought to be a result of greater specialization in Chinese studies in American universities and a certain reluctance to take part in an old style conference of this sort. Several members to whom I spoke adduced this as evidence of the downward trend in the Congress's fortunes which they regarded as inevitable.

By contrast, there were twelve delegates from Eastern Europe, which was perhaps surprising in view of the reluctance of the U.S.S.R. to support meetings of Chinese scholars in the last few years. While there were no Russians, there were six Hungarians, five Czechs and a solitary Pole. Perhaps in view of the political situation, there seemed little reluctance to discuss modern Chinese questions, and an anthropologist from Prague gave a paper on "Some Aspects of the Chinese Influence in West and Southwest China after 1949" which drew on personal experience and which struck me as quite controversial. In

all, I was struck by the absence of awkwardness in contacts between the Eastern and Western members, but I was not in a position to say whether this was a usual feature of the Congress or whether it owed something to the special atmosphere of the Sino-Soviet dispute.

Although they have sometimes been present in the past, there were no members of the Congress from either China or Taiwan at Turin. Invitations had certainly been sent to Peking, but these were turned down in a letter to the organizing committee of the Congress which was apparently quite remarkably violent in tone. Exception was taken to the discussion of modern Chinese subjects in papers. After some discussion a carefully worded and conciliatory letter was sent in reply. To date I have heard nothing further on this subject.

Only a small proportion of the papers given in fact related to the present day. Out of twenty only five related to the 20th century, unless one includes a paper on linguistic logic. The rest were a mixed bag of history, literature, linguistics, philosophy and musicology. This reflects, I suspect, a certain reluctance on the part of a lot of established European scholars to enter into the study of modern China, at any rate on the formal level, for the modern papers invariably gave rise to much the most lively discussion, and clearly a large number of members followed events in contemporary China carefully. I should be surprised if this were the case at a comparable meeting in the U.S.A., and it will probably not apply in Europe much longer, for there is a growing interest, I think, in a more explicit involvement in modern studies.

This will doubtless shift the centre of gravity away from events like the one I have just described, though they will probably always continue to cater for the older, gentler forms of learning about China. They will be overshadowed by more more modern and specialized conferences, just as the Turin of Guarini and Juvarra has been overshadowed by the impressive works of the Fiat company, (to which the Sinologues made a mass visit, perhaps appropriately, on the final day of their Congress) and it would no doubt be just as sentimental to regret the decline of the former as that of the latter. But it would be a pity if such meetings as this died out altogether.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony R. Duke