

Lady Xian's Cosmology and Philosophy as a Masterplot of Modern Chinese Culture

Sergii Rudenko

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor,
Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology
(Maoming, Guangdong Province, China);
Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine)
Email: rudenkosrg@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9069-0989>

Changming Zhang

Director of International Office, Associate Professor,
Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology (Maoming, China)
Email: zhangchangming@gdpu.edu.cn
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6218-8526>

Rudenko Sergii, Changming Zhang (2022) Lady Xian's Cosmology and Philosophy as a Masterplot of Modern Chinese Culture. *Philosophy and Cosmology*, Volume 29, 116-124. <https://doi.org/10.29202/phil-cosm/29/10>

This article presents the results of the authors' research on cosmological and philosophical narratives related to the personality of Lady Xian and her cultural heritage, and on their function in the contemporary cultural practices of Guangdong Province and the whole modern Chinese culture. The authors systematise Lady Xian's corpus of cosmological and philosophical narratives, reconstruct Lady Xian's main cosmological concepts and philosophical ideas, and reveal their specific features as well as their differences with Western cosmology and with cosmological narratives in Western culture.

The authors show that Lady Xian's philosophical and cosmological ideas function as the masterplot of modern Chinese culture, which comprises such essential components of China's international cultural policy as cultural identity, cooperative attitudes to other cultures, the dissemination of Chinese traditional culture in the world, peaceful coexistence, and soft power.

The authors argue that Lady Xian's cosmological concepts are an essential component of the implementation of the cultural aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative and that they can be used as an effective and helpful tool in the spread of modern Chinese culture in European countries. The article concludes that Lady Xian's cosmological concepts are an essential method for deepening the understanding of China's international cultural policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative in European countries. In addition, Lady Xian's culture can be used as a counter-narrative in overcoming some

© Rudenko, Sergii, 2022

© Zhang, Changming, 2022 (corresponding author)

negative stereotypes about China's international cultural policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative present in the information space of European countries.

Keywords: Lady Xian's culture; Lady Xian's masterplots; Lady Xian's cosmology; Lady Xian's philosophy; Chinese philosophy; Chinese culture; Guangdong Province culture; the Belt and Road Initiative.

Received: 29 July 2022 / Accepted: 1 September 2022 / Published: 10 October 2022

Introduction

Lady Xian is a well-known and respected figure in the history of Chinese culture, philosophy, and political thought. Lady Xian's life and historical deeds developed to the level of a complex of cultural practices, which in modern Chinese culture were called "Lady Xian's culture." The peculiarity of Lady Xian's figure and Lady Xian's culture is that historically it arose and developed as a local culture in Guangdong Province, in particular within the culture of the city of Maoming, but it later acquired a national status in China. In 2000, the President of the People's Republic of China, Jiang Zemin, assessed Lady Xian and Lady Xian's culture as models to teach and imitate by modern and future generations (Lu, 2013).

The second notable feature of Lady Xian's culture is that despite being universally recognised, systematically researched, and widely practised in modern China, it remains in our opinion, insufficiently researched by Western scientists and little known in the broader cultural practices of Western countries. This is evidenced by the analysis of recent scientific publications on Chinese philosophy and culture in Western academic publications.

The third feature of Lady Xian's culture is that at the heart of its core values and outlook there is a specific cosmology, which in our study, we term *ethical cosmology*. The cosmological concept of Lady Xian's culture is virtually unexplained both in China's corpus of academic literature and in the writings of Western scholars. This circumstance is not a problem for comprehending Lady Xian's culture in China, since the cosmological concept of Lady Xian's culture is self-explanatory for the carriers of Chinese culture. However, in the academic environment of Western countries, the lack of understanding of cosmological culture is a significant obstacle to the Western world's understanding of both Lady Xian's culture and many national and international cultural practices in modern China.

The aforementioned features of the status of Lady Xian's figure and culture became one of the main motives for conducting our research. Lady Xian's culture, in our opinion, is one of the fundamental components of modern China's national and international cultural practices. Moreover, Lady Xian's culture functions not only as a system of values and cultural practices but also as a basic narrative of modern Chinese culture, the core of which is the cosmological narratives of Lady Xian's culture. The analysis and explanation of the main cosmological and philosophical narratives of Lady Xian's culture and the functions of Lady Xian's culture as a basic narrative of modern Chinese culture can become an effective tool for spreading Chinese culture in Western countries, improving the understanding of modern China's international cultural policy, implementing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), deepening a mutual understanding and international cooperation of China with European countries, and overcoming cultural stereotypes in the perception of modern China's culture in European countries. That is why this study focuses on the study and

analysis of the cosmological and philosophical narratives of Lady Xian's culture, as well as on the analysis of the functions of Lady Xian's culture as a masterplot of modern Chinese culture.

The objectives of our study are the following: 1) a description of the modern corpus of narratives reflecting the figures of Lady Xian and Lady Xian's culture; 2) substantiation of the system of cosmological and philosophical narratives of Lady Xian's culture as one of the basic narratives of modern Chinese culture; 3) an identification of the possibilities of applying the cosmological and philosophical narratives of Lady Xian's culture in the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative in European countries.

The methodology of our study is based on the results of a study on the functioning of narratives in cultural practices by H. Abbott (Abbott, 2020) and J. Halverson (Halverson, 2011), modern studies in the field of cosmology and the correlation of cultural practices by O. Bazaluk (Bazaluk, 2021) and Y. Sobolievskiy (Sobolievskiy, 2019), and research on the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative by D. Svirydenko (Svirydenko, 2019), F. Cai (Cai, 2019), and J. Berlie (Berlie, 2019).

Corpus of Lady Xian's Cultural Narratives

Lady Xian's culture includes a large number of tangible and intangible objects of culture. According to Zhang Junshao, the study, analysis, and development of Lady Xian's culture began in China at the time of Lady Xian's life and continues until now (Zhang, 2012). In the 20th century, research on Lady Xian's figure and cultural heritage became more systematic. Numerous research groups were formed to investigate material aspects of Lady Xian's culture as well as its historical, normative, religious, legal, and social components. The study of Lady Xian's culture continues at the present stage, considering the needs and current tasks of modern Chinese culture.

In this study, however, we consider it appropriate to focus on the description, not so much of the works and texts dedicated to the figure of Lady Xian and Lady Xian's culture as of the body of Lady Xian's cultural narratives, at work in modern cultural practices in China. Undoubtedly, the generalisation of Lady Xian's cultural narratives can be carried out based on current research on Lady Xian's culture.

The following narrative presents the core historical plot of Lady Xian's culture.

During Lady Xian's lifetime, the southern territories of China were plunged into great schism and chaos. In the south, separatist uprisings often took place. The local ethnicity to which Lady Xian belonged was the most numerous among others and spread throughout Lingnan. In the face of the uprisings, Lady Xian could support the separatist movement and secede. However, instead, she decides to recognise Lingnan and Linbei as one and implements the idea that all Han ethnic groups and local ethnic groups of the South of China live in the same country; all of them are citizens of the same country and must resolutely protect the unity of the country.

Historically, ethnic contradictions in Linnan are mainly rooted in ethnic minority discrimination by Han nationalism. Representatives of China's dominant Han ethnicity disdained Linnan's ethnicities. However, thanks to the efforts of Lady Xian, Linnan's national integration into China took place, resulting in the integration and reconciliation of the dominant Han ethnicity and the local

ethnicities of the South of China. Lady Xian took advantage of this historic opportunity strategically and promoted national unity. She adopted a "marriage method" to resolve ethnic conflicts. She took the initiative in marrying Feng Bao, a Han official, which fostered Linnan's ethnic integration and accelerated the Chineseization of local ethnicities. At the same time, she also took advantage of the conditions of migration of Han people from the central plains to Linnan to promote a mixed residence of Han ethnicity and their ethnic groups, which contributed to the integration of the Chinese language. (Lu, 2013)

The key components of this narrative are the following: 1) the integration of ethnic groups of the South of China into a single state and state life; 2) the avoidance of a forceful path to integration through armed confrontation in favour of the use of "soft power" or "cultural force" (in particular, the "marriage method"); 3) the affirmation of equality between local Lingnan ethnic groups and the dominant Han ethnic group after integration through the rule of law, love for the people, personal authority, and political wisdom.

Several other components formed around the above narrative, which determined the development of the system of Lady Xian's cultural practices. These include the following: 1) the value of unity in contrast to separatism; 2) peaceful coexistence against war; 3) strong force against coercion; 4) the dominance of the law over ethnic differences; 5) the preservation of the values of local cultures within a multi-ethnic state; 6) a friendly and loyal attitude to the Other in culture.

In modern scholarly literature devoted to studying and analysing Lady Xian's culture, these narratives continue to be reflected in different authors' variations. For example, Lu Cheng outlines four aspects of Lady Xian's "cultural spirit:" patriotism, love for the people, national unity, and the rule of law. With different variations, similar aspects can be seen in other modern authors, including Deng Chunling (Deng, 2020), Chang Junshao (Chang, 2012), Zhong Wei (Zhong, 2019), Lü Shuyi (Lü, 2019), Zeng Lirong (Zeng, 2021), and Tong Aozhou (Tong, 2018).

An influential group in Lady Xian's cultural narratives are the statements of famous Chinese political leaders who have become a part of these cultural practices. Zhang Junshao (Zhang) systematised them in some detail. In the 1970s, the Premier of the People's Republic of China hailed Lady Xian as the first Chinese heroine (Chang, 2012). A key statement among China's political leaders is a speech by President Jiang Zemin delivered in 2000 at the Xiantai Temple in Gaozhou.

In those years, Lady Xian tried her best to overcome resistance without division, insisted on maintaining national unity, strengthening national unity, and allowing the people of all ethnic groups in Lingnan to live and work in peace and contentment. No wonder Premier Zhou praised her as the "first woman in China." To this day, she is still a model for future generations to learn forever... Lady Xian is a model for building a harmonious society. Publicising Lady Xian's historical achievements and patriotism is necessary to build a sizeable cultural province and a harmonious society. This work must be strengthened. (Chang, 2012)

Another group of narratives reveals the relation of Lady Xian's culture to contemporary values and practices in Chinese culture. They are important for understanding contemporary

interpretations of the figure of Lady Xian and her cultural heritage. These include the following narratives:

- (1) *Lady Xian's culture reflects the fundamental traits of the Chinese people and Chinese national culture, which include tolerance, the desire for peace and peaceful coexistence, and respect and loyalty to the Other and other cultures and peoples.*
- (2) *Lady Xian's culture expresses the indissoluble unity between traditional (e.g. Confucianism) and contemporary culture in China's current development.*
- (3) *Lady Xian's culture reflects a unique, distinctive understanding of family and family values in modern Chinese culture (Deng, 2020).*
- (4) *Lady Xian's culture reflects the model of political governance and the modern political culture of China, which focuses on the ideal of the harmonious development of society.*

The corpus of Lady Xian's cultural narratives testifies to the deep integration of Lady Xian's cultural heritage into modern China's system of values and everyday current cultural practices. These narratives are implemented in educational, familial, religious, social, artistic, and political practices. It can be preliminarily argued that Lady Xian's cultural narratives serve as a cultural identity and provide cultural mechanisms for the unity of the state and culture based, not on ethnicity, but on a civilisation- and state-based identity.

Lady Xian's Cosmology and Philosophy as a Masterplot

The analysis of Lady Xian's cultural narratives allows us to conclude that they are based on a particular system of cosmological representations and that they can be defined as cosmological. We believe that Lady Xian's culture is based on a specific cosmological concept, thanks to which Lady Xian's life and deeds have become a model for developing broad cultural practices and a particular culture. We believe that Lady Xian's cosmology had an original character; it was culturally associated with Pan Maoming's cosmological teachings and became its theoretical expansion and practical development within the historical development of the culture of Guangdong Province. The authors of the present article have studied the philosophical and cosmological views of Pan Maoming as well as Pan Maoming's culture and its functioning in modern cultural practices in Guangdong Province. The results of this study are published in Volume 25 of the *Philosophy and Cosmology* journal.

At first glance, the claim that the central narratives of Lady Xian's culture are cosmological may seem premature and too hypothetical, but, in our opinion, such doubts can arise only in the framework of the reception of Lady Xian's culture by Western cultures. The results of our study indicate that in the framework of Chinese cultural practices, Lady Xian's understanding of culture as a system of cosmological narratives combined with cosmological and philosophical ideas is self-evident.

To justify our point of view, we give the following arguments.

First, it is generally accepted that understanding cosmology in Chinese culture differs significantly from the theories and concepts developed in Western cultures. Therefore, we argue that Lady Xian's culture is a typical example of non-Western cosmology.

Second, most researchers on Lady Xian's culture directly relate its emergence and development to the broader culture of Guangdong Province and Pan Maoming's culture in

particular. For example, Deng Chuling links the figure of Lady Xian and Lady Xian's culture to the Maoming culture (Deng, 2020). Lu Cheng characterises patriotism as the ontological basis of Lady Xian's culture (Lu, 2013).

Third, modern Western academic literature features thorough studies of the differences between the development of cosmology in Chinese culture and Western cultures. These differences are recognised as significant and fundamental.

J. Henderson described the most specific features of cosmology in Chinese philosophy and culture.

The word "cosmology" in modern usage generally denotes a science devoted to articulating the large-scale properties of the astronomical and physical universe. As such, cosmology in our own time is primarily in the domain of astronomers and astrophysicists. The cosmologies of premodern civilisations were, by contrast, somewhat more "cosmic" in scope and appeal: they referred not so much to a special science as to a more general view of the ways in which the components of the world were arranged and ordered. These components do not just include the objects of physics and astronomy, but items of almost every scale and realm of being, from the architectural to the zoological.

... What type of order did these premodern cosmologists conceive (or perceive) in the universe, if not one of scientific laws and mathematical relationships? For Chinese cosmologists and their counterparts in other premodern cultures, correlative thinking was the key to understanding order in the universe. In general, correlative thinking draws systematic correspondences among various orders of reality or realms of the cosmos, such as the human body, the body politic, and the heavenly bodies. It assumes that these related orders are homologous and that they correspond with one another in number, in structure, in kind, or in some other basic respect. Correlative thinking may assume diverse forms and expressions, such as totemism (in primitive cultures), allegory (in medieval cultures), and to some extent, even scientific models (in modern cultures). (Henderson, 2013)

To sum up, cosmology in Chinese culture relies on correlative thinking, so it is a correlative cosmology that involves a wide variety of ways of expressing cosmological concepts. In addition to Henderson's position, we can argue that Pan Maoming's cosmology can be characterised as *alchemical* cosmology before Lady Xian's cosmology, which we may define as *ethical cosmology*.

In this context, the narratives of the civilisational unity of different ethnic groups, peaceful coexistence, a tolerant attitude to the Other and other cultures, love for the people, soft cultural force in opposition to military confrontation, the rule of law over ethnic customs, and the harmonious development of society are a typical expression of a model of peacebuilding extrapolated to society and culture.

These narratives function in modern China not only in the historical context or in narrow religious and social practices but also in national and cultural, educational, scientific, social, religious (Tong), and political practices. Therefore, we assume that Lady Xian's culture functions as a masterplot.

H. Abbott defines masterplot as "*recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in issues of identity, values, ideology, and the*

understanding of life. Masterplots can also exert an influence on the way we take in new information, causing us to overread or underread narratives in an often unconscious effort to bring them into conformity with a masterplot” (Abbott, 2020).

Based on the above definition, Lady Xian’s cultural narratives have the properties of a masterplot. They are deeply embedded in Chinese culture; they “recur in the narrative after narrative;” they touch upon questions of identity, values, ideology, and the understanding of life. Consequently, it can be argued that Lady Xian’s culture functions as a masterplot of modern Chinese culture.

Lady Xian’s Masterplot and the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Europe

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a well-known international economic cooperative project proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 (Xi, 2014). However, apart from the economy, it includes a fundamental cultural part aimed at strengthening mutual understanding and cultural exchanges, including educational, scientific, and cultural cooperation between China and countries involved in the BRI.

However, the implementation of the cultural part of the BRI in Europe has many difficulties (Berlie, 2019; Cai, 2019), associated with significant cultural differences between the West and China, as well as with many stereotypes taking place in the perception of modern Chinese culture in general and the BRI in particular.

One of the stereotypes of perception of the BRI is the interpretation of this initiative in the terms “strategy,” “expansion,” “expansion,” etc. In our opinion, one of the reasons for this misunderstanding is the reception of modern Chinese culture through the historical and civilisational optics of Western civilisation, as well as the West’s lack of knowledge about modern China’s culture, values, and worldview. In particular, this applies to fundamental cultural mechanisms such as national identity, the experience of the Other and other cultures, and the relationship between the state and the citizens.

In this context, we believe that the dissemination of knowledge about Lady Xian’s culture in Europe can become an essential and effective tool for improving the understanding of the content and objectives of the cultural part of the BRI, other international cultural initiatives in China, and the fundamental cultural values and worldview of the Chinese people at the present stage. Also, Lady Xian’s culture can be used as a compelling counter-narrative in overcoming the stereotypes of modern Chinese culture that exist in the information space and everyday cultural practices of European countries.

We are conscious that the theses are only the beginning of a fundamental discussion that requires the involvement of a wide range of specialists and a number of additional studies. However, such a discussion would be useful and might contribute to improving the mutual understanding and cultural cooperation between China and European countries.

Conclusions and Discussion

As a result of this study, we come to the following conclusions. Lady Xian’s position, life, and deeds are an essential component of contemporary Chinese culture, a contemporary cultural practice that has a significant impact in China but that remains little known in the international academic environment. The key narratives of Lady Xian’s culture are (1) the value of unity as opposed to separatism and the peaceful coexistence against war; (2) soft power against coercion; (3) the dominance of the law over ethnic differences; (4) the

preservation of the values of local cultures within a multi-ethnic state; (5) a friendly and loyal attitude to the Other and to foreign cultures.

The main narratives of Lady Xian's culture are based on the concept of ethical cosmology, which is the result of the development of Pan Maoming's cosmology and philosophy. The cosmological and philosophical narratives of Lady Xian's culture are deeply integrated into everyday cultural practices. They are variously repeated in diverse cultural narratives. Hence, Lady Xian's culture functions as a masterplot of modern Chinese culture.

A study of Lady Xian's culture invites a discussion about the most effective ways to implement the BRI in European countries. The authors estimate that Lady Xian's culture is an essential method for deepening the understanding of China's international cultural policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative in European countries. The authors believe that Lady Xian's culture can be used as a counter-narrative to overcome negative stereotypes about China's international cultural policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative present in the information space of European countries.

References

- Abbott, H.P. (2020) The Cambridge introduction to narrative. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108913928>
- Bazaluk, O. (2021) The idea of “philosophy-as-a-way-of-life” in Plato's Dialogs. *Filosofiya-Philosophy*, 30(3), 223-231. <https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2021-03-01>
- Berlie, J.A. (2019) The New Silk Road. *China's Globalization and the Belt and Road Initiative*, 13-40. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22289-5_2
- Cai, F., and Nolan, P. *Routledge Handbook of the Belt and Road*. Oxon.
- Chang, J. (2012) On the inheritance and development of Mrs. Xian's cultural research. *Lingnan Culture and History*. Retrieved January 3. <https://wh.cnki.net/article/detail/LLWS201204004>.
- Cua, A. S. (Ed.). (2013) *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. Taylor and Francis.
- Deng, C. (2020) On the inheritance of Mrs. Xian's family style. *Comparative Research on Cultural Innovation*, 15, 161–162. (邓春玲.论洗夫人家风的传承[J].文化创新比较研究, 2020, (15): 161-162.)
- Halverson, J. R., Goodall, H. L., and Corman, S. R. (2011) Master narratives and Strategic Communication. *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 179-205. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-11723-5_15
- Halverson, J. R., Goodall, H. L., and Corman, S. R. (2011) What is a master narrative? *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 11-26. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-11723-5_2
- Henderson, J. B. (2013) Cosmology. In Cua, A. S. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. Taylor and Francis. 187-194. Taylor and Francis.
- Lu, Cheng (2013) On Mrs. Xian's cultural spirit and contemporary values in Lingnan. <https://doi.org/10.16653/j.cnki.32-1034/f.2013.12.016>
- Lü, S. (2019) Research on the Integration of Cultural Resources of Madam Xian under the Background of the Belt and Road. *Journal of Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology*, 29(6), 83-92.
- Sobolievskiy, Y. (2019) Philosophical ideas of Roger Williams in the treatise “A key into the language of America.” *Future Human Image*, 11, 98-103. <https://doi.org/10.29202/fhi/11/11>

-
- Svyrydenko, D., and Fatkhutdinov, V. (2019) The Identity Issues at the Perspectives of Chinese Geopolitical Strategies. *Studia Warmińskie*, 56, 81-94. <https://doi.org/10.31648/sw.4599>
- Tong, A. (2018) The Formation and Characteristics of Madam Xian's Belief in Lingnan. *Journal of Hainan Tropical Ocean University*, 25(6), 82-87. <https://doi.org/10.13307/j.issn.2096-3122.2018.06.14>
- Xi, J. (2014) *Xi Jinping, the governance of China: The Governance of China*. Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press.
- Zeng, Lirong (2021) A Study on the Worship of Lady Xian Based on the Reception Level. *Art Research* (02), 38-40. <https://doi.org/10.13944/j.cnki.ysyj.2021.0076> (曾丽容.(2021).基于接受层面的洗夫人女神崇拜研究. 艺术研究(02), 38-40. <https://doi.org/10.13944/j.cnki.ysyj.2021.0076>.)
- Zhong, W., and Xiang, W. (2019) Brief analysis of the profound connotation of Mrs. Maoming Xian's cultural heritage. *Southern Journal*, 3, 8-102.