Heritage, Pandas and the Limits of War

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Wars are truly a foolish, costly, and profoundly discouraging solution to any problem facing the human species. It is true that, as organized chaos, destruction, plunder, and blackmail, they are probably the most profitable "business" in the world. Yet violence itself is already repellent to any educated person — and when violence becomes an institution, a plan, and a profession, it ceases to be a deviation and becomes a civilizational failure.

In this sense, it is no coincidence that Sun Tzu, often mistakenly celebrated as a strategist of war, was in fact the author of one of the earliest anti-war texts. *The Art of War* is not a manual for victory, but a warning: the highest skill lies in breaking the enemy's will without fighting, because war means the loss of resources, people, and meaning. Lao Tze goes even further — every violent imposition of will runs counter to the Tao, the natural course of things, and in the long run always returns as destruction. Confucius, for his part, sees war as a sign of the moral failure of rulers: where justice, measure, and ritual order prevail, weapons are superfluous.

This line of thought is important because it shows that Chinese resistance to the glorification of war is not a contemporary political tactic, but a deeply rooted civilizational intuition: force produces short-term order, but long-term disorder. War is tolerated only as an ultimate rupture, never as a desirable condition.

From this horizon one can also understand the contemporary practice of so-called panda diplomacy. For more than half a century, China has neither traded nor gifted giant pandas, but has loaned them to countries with which it seeks to build stable, predictable, and long-term relations. In doing so, neither the pandas nor their offspring born abroad ever cease to be Chinese heritage. This detail is not a bureaucratic triviality, but a symbolic

message about responsibility, trust, and the reversibility of relations.

The examples are numerous. After the normalization of relations with the United States in the 1970s, pandas arrived in Washington. The same occurred with the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Austria, Australia, and others. In all these cases, panda diplomacy was not a reward for obedience, but a sign that relations had entered a zone of predictability and mutual interest.

The case of Japan is particularly telling. With the restoration of diplomatic relations in 1972, China offered pandas as a gesture of trust and reconciliation — following the historically brutal Japanese occupation of parts of China. It was a powerful civilizational signal: the past is not forgotten, but it is not used as an excuse for permanent hostility. However, as Japan in recent years has been rapidly remilitarizing and increasingly signals readiness for military intervention over Taiwan — an island it once violently occupied itself, and whose sovereignty it had for decades formally recognized as Chinese — the pandas were “taken home.” Without threats. Without weapons. But with a message that even a child can understand.

Many mock panda diplomacy, seeing it as infantile or sentimental. Yet it is precisely such gestures that sometimes reveal the true content of political maneuvers more clearly than military parades or diplomatic notes. They affect the consciousness of ordinary people, not just the tables of strategic analysts. In this sense, pandas become a moral barometer of relations: a quiet indicator of whether we are still in a zone of cooperation or have slipped into the logic of threat.

At this point, Chinese practice also touches on Western pacifism — from Stoicism and Christian ethics, through Kant and his idea of “perpetual peace,” to Gandhi and Martin Luther King. What they share is the conviction that force does not produce a just order, but only the temporary silence of the defeated.

The difference may lie in the fact that China, unlike the Western tendency toward moralizing, implements this idea pragmatically: through trade, exchange, infrastructure, education — and, yes, pandas.

It is also important to note another dimension: China systematically insists that the knowledge contained in heritage — natural, cultural, and historical — not be understood as mere decoration or an academic archive, but as wisdom, that is, as practical knowledge oriented toward the future. Knowledge that does not lead to responsible action is, for them, unfinished knowledge. In this sense, heritage becomes a development strategy: both for the state and for a world facing ecological, demographic, and political ruptures.

After the Cultural Revolution — a typical product of an unrestrained bureaucracy that ultimately always becomes criminal — Chinese leadership had to acknowledge the extent of self-inflicted damage. It was precisely for this reason that the administration of Xi Jinping, together with the circles involved in thinking through long-term development strategies, clearly recognized the potential of soft power. A unique continuity of five millennia was re-established, and without war or threats a form of strength began to emerge that only culture can create.

For more than a century, China had, as they rightly emphasize, been humiliated precisely because it could not free itself from a Western cultural and economic template alien to it, plundered and exploited as it was. At the moment when, on the wings of decades of economic progress, its president proposed the revival of the Silk Road, a precedent occurred. It is difficult to find an example of a country that has transformed its own ancient tradition — which in the meantime had become a living cultural fact, a true heritage — into such a powerful and convincing stimulus for economic development.

At the same time, this new use cast additional light on heritage itself. Chinese culture once again became a discovery — not as an exotic backdrop, but as an active civilizational resource. There are, admittedly, still some steps that can be taken, but the direction has been unmistakably set.

Heritage is one — whether it concerns calligraphy, philosophy, technological knowledge, or pandas — and it possesses an almost unimaginable potential. It would go beyond the scope of this essay, in which the unique pandas are merely a reminder, to discuss everything that heritage can do when it is technical and scientific: when, through a kind of cultural alchemy, it becomes a legitimate, convincing, and even binding right to innovation. But in that domain as well, as we know, China has not failed.

On an ever smaller and more vulnerable planet, it is becoming obvious: wars may produce profit and the illusion of power, but they do not produce wisdom. And without wisdom — without knowledge understood as responsible action — no civilization, however heavily armed, endures for long.