

Conceptualizing China in Modern Europe



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Abstract Understanding China is a challenge, not least because we tend to become involved in contradictory past understandings. From the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century there is a curious oscillation in Western ideas of China from the strongly positive to the equally negative. Thus, for Leibniz, on the threshold of the Enlightenment, China was defined positively as what Europe was not, whereas for Herder and Hegel China was immune to progress. Ferdinand von Richthofen displaces the myth of stagnation and sets the pendulum swinging towards a China full of the promise of an industrialized future. This study takes a fresh look at the views on China by some prominent European intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and argues that China's changing image from a utopian model of statecraft to a senile and corrupt culture results from the process of sanctifying the idea of "progress" as the telos of human history in modern Europe.

Keywords China · Europe · Enlightenment · Nineteenth century · Leibniz · Herder · Hegel · Von Richthofen · Utopia · Progress

1 China: History of a "Confusion"

Understanding China is a challenge. It becomes more so at a time when China's rise to a world power is indisputable, especially in the balance sheets of many economic experts and political strategists. While China delivers a seemingly endless supply of consumer goods and infrastructure investments around the globe, large parts of the Western world remain suspicious of China's intentions and values. Is China's rise beneficial to the rest of the world or does it constitute a threat to the "free world" of democracy? To take one example: when Australia's former Prime Minister Tony

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Abbott addressed the Japan Institute of International Affairs in Tokyo, he delivered this assessment of Australia's relationship with China:

While we now have more flights from China than from any other country and while our economy is more closely tied to China's than to any other, it's still an "interests" partnership rather than a "values" one. [...] But we aren't entirely confident that, when China's interests differ from Australia's, there is a shared set of values that will allow a mutually satisfactory outcome (Abbott 2016).

Mr. Abbott's feeling of alienation from China finds expression in his suspicion that there is no "shared set of values" on which trust between the two countries could be based, although he did not elaborate what such values might be. However, the unease expressed here, and the nebulous suspicion of mutually incompatible values, is nothing new in Western perceptions of China—indeed it is much more the rule than the exception.

The eminent American scholar of Chinese history, Jonathan D. Spence, writes in his book of 1992, *Chinese Roundabout. Essays in History and Culture*, the following:

If we are unclear today about our feelings for China, we should not worry over much. Westerners have been unclear about China since they first began to live there in any numbers and to write about the country at length. The history of our confusion goes back more than four hundred years [...] (Spence 1992, pp. 78–79).

While agreeing with the basic point made here, it is perhaps an exaggeration to speak so offhandedly of "the history of our confusion", as if Western thought on China were endemically confused and incoherent. What Spence means, I think, is that if we take an aggregate of Western views on China over centuries, the result appears confused, but if we look at individual views within this mass, then they reveal themselves to be quite precise and well defined. One reason for the effect of apparent confusion is that views of eminent European thinkers on China may not really be about China at all, but rather target some group close at hand in Europe which the author wishes to scarpify, using the Chinese as a rhetorical device to contrast with the European practice which the author opposes. Another reason may be that the view may have been formed on the basis of very little direct knowledge of China, and tailored to suit the structure of a distinctly European discourse (Mungello 1985).

Clearly, such discourses have a history, and it is this history that I will discuss here. Looked at more closely, the "history of our confusion" could be resolved into intelligible patterns. In the eighteenth century, views of China become an arena for conflicts within the Enlightenment. In the nineteenth century, we may observe how aspects of the Enlightenment pave the way for the ideologies of colonialism. After reviewing a sampling of differing and changing views on China, we shall ask if there is any master narrative we may use to structure any apparent confusion. I suggest that Western ideas of China have a different historical trajectory from that other history of factual encounters between Europeans and Chinese, and that China's changing images in Western discourses are the results of sanctifying the idea of "progress" as the telos of human history in modern Europe.

2 Leibniz: A Utopian View of China

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, we find a vision of China refreshingly free from mistrust and suspicion in the writings of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This mathematician and philosopher advanced an ideal of Europe that opposed intolerance and sectarianism. Leibniz had studied in Paris, had declined the post of Vatican librarian and maintained a wide network of correspondents throughout Europe. Leibniz's knowledge of China was the best available to someone who never left central Europe, for he was immersed in the works of the Jesuits who had a long-standing presence at the Chinese court. He also corresponded with those active in the field (Perkin 2007). As the Jesuits found much to admire in Chinese culture and society, so also did Leibniz. Indeed, he saw China and Europe for all their differences as complementary pinnacles of civilization. So, he writes in his tract *Novissima Sinica*, first published in 1697:¹

I believe it has come about through a unique decision of Fate that the highest culture and the most advanced technical civilisation are today collected, as it were, at two extremes of our continent, namely in Europe and China, that like a Europe of the East adorns the opposite end of the Earth. Perhaps Divine Providence is pursuing the aim of gradually leading the lands that lie between to a more reasonable way of life, while the civilised peoples at the two extremes, which are most distant from each other, are reaching out towards each other (Leibniz 1697/2011, p. 9).

Leibniz then enumerates the areas in which Europeans are superior to the Chinese: abstract thought, mathematics, the science of warfare and, of course, the Christian religion. But then the Chinese have their own areas of superiority:

Certainly, they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of morals. Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquillity and the establishment of social order so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible (Leibniz 1697/2011, p. 11).

Leibniz opposes the stability of the vast Chinese empire to the condition of Europe, divided by the hostility between Catholic and Protestant and given to warfare between states. Moreover, in 1692 the Chinese emperor, who had a very positive view of the Jesuits, had accorded Christianity equal status with other religions. Leibniz is convinced that “each people has knowledge that it could with profit communicate to the other”, envisaging a harmony of the best of European and Chinese attributes and achievements under the guidance of Divine Providence. For him the fusion of Chinese and European cultures had in it an enormous potential for progress. This utopian ideal would be united in the Christian religion—provided, of course, that Christians could overcome their own internecine quarrels. For Leibniz, the two civilized extremes of the Earth would thus be united in progress—not the

¹I use the edition by Heinz-Günter Nesselrath and Hermann Reinbothe (Leibniz 1697/2011). All translations from German sources are my own.

secular idea of progress that was to come to the fore later in the eighteenth century, but one willed by Divine Providence, albeit dependent on human good will and cooperation. Following the Jesuits, who were willing to adapt Christianity to some extent to Confucian rites, Leibniz found much to admire in Confucianism:

To offend Heaven is to act against reason, to ask pardon of Heaven is to reform oneself and to make a sincere return in word and deed in the submission one owes to this very law of reason. For me, I find all this quite excellent and quite in accord with *natural theology*. [...] It is pure Christianity, insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts [...] (Leibniz 1697/2011, p. 11).

Leibniz singled out another positive quality of the Chinese that later writers were to turn into a negative, namely their unquestioning obedience to superiors, to the aged and within the family. This would later be seen by the French philosopher Montesquieu and others as suppressing individuality and inhibiting all kinds of freedom, thus enjoining servitude and ruling by fear. But at the beginning of the eighteenth century it was an aspect of Chinese society that Europe would do well to emulate. In the conclusion of *Novissima Sinica* Leibniz's doubts sit firmly on the European side:

May God let it come to pass that our joy [in the Christianizing of the Chinese] is well founded and lasting and not destroyed by imprudent religious fanaticism or by internecine strife among those who have taken the mission of the apostles upon themselves or by our countrymen setting bad examples (Leibniz 1697/2011, p. 31).

The century that followed was to see Leibniz's vision unravel. Quarrels among Christian missionaries saw the Chinese Emperor forbid the religion once more. Some travellers were less than impressed by the Jesuit image of China, derived mainly from attendance at the Imperial Court and contact with high officials. The British commodore George Anson visited Canton in the 1740s and found it an abominable place, the Chinese officials corrupt and the merchants untrustworthy. In his published account of his travels, he refutes the Jesuit image of China in scathing terms:

And from the description given by some of these good fathers, one should be induced to believe that the whole Empire was a well-governed affectionate family, where the only contests were who should exert the most humanity and beneficence. But our preceding relation of the behaviour of the Magistrates, Merchants and Tradesmen at Canton sufficiently refutes these Jesuitical fictions. [...] Indeed, the only pretension of the Chinese to a more refined morality than their neighbours is founded, not on their integrity or beneficence, but solely on the affected evenness of their demeanour, and their constant attention to suppress all symptoms of passion and violence (Anson 1748, p. 543).

Anson's book became a bestseller, was reprinted many times and included throughout the nineteenth century in most compilations of the history of voyages and travels. It would be fair to say that Anson's travel accounts contributed to and sustained a negative view of China in Europe. However, it should be pointed out that Anson himself did not write the travelogue. It was compiled by the chaplain on his ship. The European image of China fragmented—not as a result of Anson's travel accounts, but rather from a general awareness that China was so vast and

multifarious that many different images of it were viable. Anson's book aimed at refuting the Jesuits' positive image of Chinese society, but in fact served mainly to add another possible version to the Chinese enigma.

Leibniz's utopian view of a China that could progress and develop in peace and harmony with Western Europe was, at least, based on the best contemporary reports of China available. There were no alternative versions of China in competition with the reports and letters that Leibniz used. As the century advanced, more information on China became available, with some, like Anson's, sharply dissenting from the glowing accounts by the Jesuits still in circulation and very influential. What followed after Leibniz's vision of a future harmony of East and West, with each party's best qualities contributing equally, was effectively a *choice* as to what reported aspects of China were to be singled out and used. It must be said that the choice as to which vision of China was to be accepted has very much to do with differing views between Enlightenment thinkers. In fact, the Enlightenment was alive with agendas, and images of China were deployed to advance or oppose widely differing causes.

Certainly, Leibniz had had an agenda in attributing to China's state religion a totally European rationality. His greatest hope was to see the breach between Catholics and Protestants healed, which had seen so much blood spilt in Europe. Thus, his projection of a thoroughly European "natural religion" on China's monolithic state was unashamedly utopian. Compared with some later agendas, this was quite innocuous. For the Enlightenment at large, the main advantage of images of China was that they could not be refuted by empirical evidence. The Jesuits had reported on only one stratum of Chinese society. Accounts by travellers were likewise piecemeal. There was still room for sweeping assertions about China that were safe, because no one could verify or refute them. No one could take the time to go there or, once arrived, acquire the language skills to support or deny a specific claim.

3 The French Enlightenment: Clashing Agendas

Voltaire, who was educated by the Jesuits, adopted and enhanced their positive image of China, but then used it to assail European Catholicism (Rowbotham 1932). He insisted on the antiquity of Chinese civilization at the expense of the Judeo-Christian tradition. When a work by the Catholic theologian Bossuet entitled *A Discourse on Universal History*, first published in 1681, was reprinted in 1738, Voltaire borrowed from Montesquieu the device of inventing a naïve Oriental to comment on European manners and customs for purposes of satire. Voltaire's imaginary Chinese is puzzled to find that, in Bossuet's history of the world, the vast Chinese Empire is not mentioned at all. Bossuet was concerned solely with history as it figured in the Biblical tradition and thus omitted all mention of China and India. Voltaire then went further, and, in his treatise on world history, the *Essay on the Customs and Spirit of Nations*, he began not with Biblical antiquity, but with

Chinese antiquity—a provocative innovation that shocked his readers. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* he summed up what he had written often elsewhere:

The constitution of their empire is the only one entirely established upon paternal authority; the only one in which the governor of a province is punished, if, on quitting his station, he does not receive the acclamations of the people; the only one which has instituted rewards for virtue, while, everywhere else, the sole object of the laws is the punishment of crime; the only one which has caused its laws to be adopted by its conquerors, while we are still subject to the customs of the Burgundians, the Franks, and the Goths, by whom we were conquered (Voltaire 1752, §II).

Voltaire's agenda is to have in his image of China a frame of reference in which there is always a praiseworthy alternative to the abuses he castigates in Catholic Europe. In the same article of the *Philosophical Dictionary*, he concedes—in a more realistic mode—that the Chinese common people are no more virtuous than the French, that they are full of prejudices and superstitions, and that Chinese science lags behind that of Europe (Voltaire 1752). But when it comes to public institutions, Voltaire's freely improvised version of China is unfailingly superior to its European counterparts.

Given the enormous influence the thought of Rousseau was to have on later generations, it is surprising to find that in the 1300 pages of his writings on society and politics, China is mentioned just once, and this in a highly polemical context. In Rousseau's *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* he pursues the agenda of proving that literate civilization has corrupted great nations and sunk them in decadence. After citing various examples of societies brought low by their own culture, he happens on China:

There is an immense country in Asia in which literary culture is the path that leads to the highest offices of state. If the sciences purified human behaviour, if they taught men to spill their blood for their native land, if they incited men to be more courageous; then the peoples of China ought to be wise, free and invincible. But there is no vice to which they are not prey, no crime which is not common among them [...]; neither the wisdom that is claimed for their laws, nor the multitude of inhabitants within this vast empire were able to protect it from subjection by the ignorant and crude Manchus—so what use to it were all of China's scholars? What benefit did China derive from heaping honours upon them? Would it not be to be inhabited by slaves and lowlives? (Rousseau 1750/1964, p. 11)²

There is no sign that Rousseau had ever studied the history and culture of China. China gets exactly the same treatment as Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and Byzantium. Empires tend to decline and fall with time. For the purposes of Rousseau's *Discourse*, they fell because of their own literacy. His remarks on China are the culmination of a rhetorical tirade that pays scant attention to historical fact. For the Enlightenment in general, the Chinese examination system could seem superior to the widespread practices in Europe of simply buying or inheriting offices, with no criteria of fitness or expertise. In terms of Rousseau's agenda, literacy—and the arts and sciences it makes possible—is a primary evil. Thus, while Voltaire could find no fault with the institutions of the Chinese state, Rousseau

²Translation by Anthony Stephens.

could find nothing good about them. Looking at the whole context of Rousseau's condemnation of China, it is clear it would make little difference to his rant if he had stopped at Byzantium and left China out altogether. For Rousseau, China was simply not a prime target. Voltaire had observed how China had assimilated its conquerors into its culture and ruling structures. Thus, the Chinese state had survived the Manchu conquest, and the Chinese Empire in 1750, the year of Rousseau's *Discourse*, was clearly not lying in ruins and populated largely by slaves. But to suit Rousseau's agenda, it had to be. Contemporary China had to have gone the way of Rome and Byzantium, perhaps because Voltaire, Rousseau's constant target for rhetorical gibes, was so convinced it was a well-functioning state whose organization was superior to those of Europe.

It must be stressed that Rousseau had little interest in China. Nowhere else in his writings does he enlarge on the subject, whereas for Voltaire his own selectively positive version of China is a constant point of reference. But what Rousseau had written seemed to accord with the convictions of those who contested the rosy images of China the Jesuits had put in circulation, and its questionable context was soon lost to sight. The myth of Chinese decadence had no single point of origin, but the tenor of Rousseau's rhetoric was to recur in subsequent decades. As George Steinmetz observes in *The Devil's Handwriting*, "the theme of Chinese stagnation and decay that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century condemned Chinese civilisation as a geriatric ruin, lacking all internal dynamism and capacity for development." (2007, p. 393) It is characteristic of the Enlightenment that agendas could clash for their own sake, especially if their subject matter was non-verifiable, as was largely the case with images of China.

4 The German Enlightenment: Herder's Diatribe

If we look to Germany, then it is no surprise that Voltaire's friend and sometime host, King Frederick II of Prussia, should have imitated the device that Voltaire had borrowed from Montesquieu of having an imaginary Chinese comment on European customs and institutions. Thus in 1760 he circulated a satirical pamphlet entitled *Report of Phihihu, Emissary of the Emperor of China in Europe*. The text tells us very little about Frederick's image of China. Rather, the papacy in particular and the practices of the Catholic Church in general are held up to ridicule by the staunchly Protestant king. Once more, the image of China is pressed into the service of an agenda that has nothing specifically Chinese about it.

From Germany comes one of the strangest, most negative and most influential images of China to emerge from the Enlightenment, namely the violent condemnation in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas Towards a Philosophy of Human History*, a massive work, published between 1784 and 1791.³ Herder had no special

³ Cf. Goebel (1995).

knowledge of China. He had obviously read Leibniz, the Jesuits and Voltaire, and his discussion of China begins by conceding some of those positive aspects of Chinese society in their accounts: the absence of a hereditary nobility and the institution of a nobility of merit; the respect for elders and superiors in Chinese social organization; the religious tolerance that enabled the peaceful coexistence of various sects. For no apparent reason, he then turns on the Chinese and blasts them with all the rhetoric he commands. The Chinese Empire—so Herder affirms—“is an embalmed mummy painted with hieroglyphs and shrouded in silk; its inner circulation is that of hibernating animals” (Herder 1784/1985, p. 129). For Herder, genetics and climate determine cultures, and the Chinese are descended from Mongols, one of the “ugly peoples”, about whom nothing good can be said. From then on Herder’s diatribe spares nothing Chinese at all. Herder’s rhetoric is reminiscent of Rousseau’s, but whereas Rousseau limited himself to one paragraph in his entire work, Herder’s castigations extend over several pages, attacking the Chinese character, the Chinese language, and the Chinese script with much vitriol. The word Herder applies repeatedly to the Chinese is “childish”—they are unpleasant children, for they are hypocrites, by nature corrupt, incapable of doing good. The state they have themselves invented is a mechanism to ensure slavery, and in it all are slaves.

Scholars have attempted to explain Herder’s fanatical denunciation of everything Chinese, pointing out that the Jesuits had been disestablished by the Pope in 1773, not long before Herder began to write his *Ideas*.⁴ It may thus have seemed opportune to this staunch Protestant to be rid of the Jesuit heresies on China once and for all. Moreover, he had the one clear agenda of depicting the Germanic peoples as being close to nature in their development and “authentic”—and, needing a complete antithesis, he made China embody all that is artificial and false. In short, the Germanic peoples have as their destiny to be young and progressive—so the Chinese are chosen to be senile and stagnant.

Herder derived his ammunition for the destruction of everything Chinese from the writings of the Jesuits, but he turned everything on its head. As was common in this century with sweeping generalizations about China, no evidence is adduced in support of Herder’s claims, and dogmatic statements alone suffice, for who could prove them wrong? Herder’s extraordinary demolition of China would probably have been forgotten, were it not that the drift of his thinking accords with the intellectual climate of the late eighteenth century. For Herder writes: “[...] ancient China on the edge of the world has stood still in time in its half-Mongol constitution like a ruin from a past age” (Herder 1784/1985, p. 133). Whatever historical forces may be at work—and Herder is by no means clear what these may be—they have bypassed China and left it isolated in a state of “childish slavery” immune to progress. This figure of thought was to find an echo in the image of China that later appears in Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of history.

⁴Cf. Hsia (1985, p. 383f).

I do not suggest that Herder invented this image of China. Rather, he has selectively exaggerated much that was being said of China by others towards the close of the eighteenth century.⁵ In this sense, his books were a symptom of the changing intellectual climate, rather than a revolutionary advance. The century had begun with Leibniz's vision of a golden complementarity of East and West and of human progress guided by Divine Providence. By the century's end, little remains of this optimistic synthesis. The issue of Chinese despotism, first raised by Montesquieu, bulked larger as the century drew to a close and individual liberty became a foremost preoccupation in Western Europe. The unchanging quality of Chinese society was found to be in opposition to those ideas of progress that became dominant as the century drew to a close. Once most thinkers of Western Europe had subscribed to ideals of progressive change as something to be actively striven for, then China, through a process of Othering, was found to be in a state of stagnation. Thinking in binary opposites with corresponding emotional weighting was as common in the Enlightenment as it is today, and, as the nineteenth century began, it seemed to be China's turn to embody all the negatives.

5 Nineteenth Century: Hegel's Metaphysics of History

A further impetus to this trend came from Lord Macartney's embassy to the Chinese Emperor in 1793–1794. The embassy failed to secure the treaties with China on access and trade that were its goals, but it was widely publicized throughout Western Europe.⁶ One of the books that emerged from the expedition, John Barrow's *Travels in China* of 1804, was a best seller and did much to confirm the negative image of China that was now dominant. Barrow's book showed China as a "stagnant and regressive despotism" (Kitson 2013, p. 193). His account enjoyed the advantage that had previously been that of the Jesuits' reports: Barrow had actually been in China for some time, and had been able to observe Chinese society from the humblest workers to the Imperial Court at first hand. As in Anson's book, the Jesuit depictions of China are contested and dismissed by Barrow as fictional. Whilst Barrow's book claimed to be wholly empirical, it contained many distortions of fact and false conjectures. But, once more, no one was in a position to refute Barrow's claims, as China remained largely closed to European merchants and travellers.

The philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel has become famous, or notorious, for placing China outside the movement of world history:

History must begin with the Empire of China, for it is the most ancient state of which history makes report [...]. In early times we see China develop into that condition in which it remains today, for as there is as yet no opposition between objective being and subjective motion, so there is no possibility of change, and the static quality that constantly reappears

⁵ Cf. Steinmetz (2007, pp. 361–432).

⁶ Cf. Peyrefitte (1993).

replaces that which we would term the historical. China and India lie, as it were, outside world history, representing the precondition of those factors whose coming together is necessary for history to begin its living progress (Hegel 1837/2017, p. 147).⁷

Hegel uses “history” in two senses. Initially, it is used in the conventional sense of human records of the past. Later it signifies a dynamic and quite abstract process by which the World Spirit—*Weltgeist*—attains full self-awareness. The World Spirit may attain its full potential only in the Christian/Germanic world. China, in Hegel’s terms, has been frozen in a state before the dynamic of world history begins, so that the Chinese cannot develop that reflective subjectivity that manifests itself as freedom.

Hegel’s vision of world history was so emphatically Eurocentric that all the possibilities for the unfolding of creative subjectivity that were given in Europe must needs be lacking in China. Hegel enumerates and explains these deficiencies. Like Herder, Hegel was thoroughly acquainted with the Jesuit reports on China and reproduces material from them in his account, including extracts from early Chinese history. But for Hegel, history had come to a stop in China before it had really begun, and thus progress there was impossible. Such subjectivity as might develop in China could not be the real thing, since China lies outside world history and world history is essentially the moving forward of the World Spirit, powered by the unfolding of genuine, Western subjectivity.⁸ As Steinmetz observes, for Hegel “the distinguishing feature of the ‘character of the Chinese people’ was that ‘everything that belongs to Spirit [...] is alien to it.’” (2007, p. 402) Hegel’s arguments have in common with images of China in the Enlightenment that they are immune to any questions of verification. The highly abstract motions of the World Spirit took precedence over any merely empirical events. The philosopher Karl Löwith sees the secular idea of progress that becomes dominant in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as deriving from the indisputable developments in the natural sciences in Europe and forming an analogy to these. He then asserts that for Hegel “the ancient peoples of the East did not achieve a world-historical existence as they lacked the self-awareness of the Spirit that attained its peak and depth in Christian Western Europe” (Löwith 1983, p. 415). While Leibniz had recognised the West’s superiority in the sciences, but seen it as balanced by China’s excellence in social organization, by the time of Hegel’s metaphysics of history little remained of Leibniz’s utopian view of Chinese society. China’s deficiency in the sciences could appear to be in parallel with a social decrepitude, the twofold negativity excluding it from the progress of the World Spirit.

⁷I use the edition by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Hegel 1837/2017).

⁸Cf. Francke (1970) and Bernasconi (2016).

6 The Late Nineteenth Century: The Ideology of Colonialism

The gap between metaphysical and secular ideals of progress was to be filled by the ideology of colonialism in the later nineteenth century. A certain irony surrounds the fact that, within metaphysical conceptualizations of progress, the image of China should shift from the ideal complementarity to Europe that Leibniz envisaged to the negative opposition posited by Hegel. The Opium Wars were to reveal a China at the mercy of predatory powers. In fact, the nineteenth century came to be dominated by that secular idea of progress that had taken shape in the latter part of the nineteenth century and from which China was just as firmly excluded as it was from Hegel's metaphysical version. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* were delivered between 1822 and 1830 and published posthumously in 1837. In them the image of China is still monolithic and the focus is on Chinese religion and culture. China was still closed to the West, with the exception of trade in Canton. But in 1839 the first Opium War begins, and at its conclusion there are five treaty ports and the image of China as an intact entity is shattered. Karl Marx wrote of China in 1853, three years before the beginning of the Second Opium War of 1856:

Complete isolation was the prime condition of the preservation of Old China. That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air. Now, England having brought about the revolution of China, the question is how that revolution will in time react on England, and through England on Europe (Marx 1853, para. 7).

It is interesting that Marx takes up once more the image of China as a mummified corpse that had been used by Herder a good 70 years previously. Elsewhere Marx praises and condemns European capitalism at the same time. Asia needs to be exploited by capitalism to be brought out of its stasis; on the other hand, the colonialism that ensues is unpardonable aggression.

During the Enlightenment, vulnerability had not been part of the image of China. Up until the first Opium War it had been thought that China could defend itself. Thereafter, China appears as prey at the mercy of predators. Stasis equates to senility, and the colonial mindset sees no chance of regeneration. The new Western image of China is that of a helpless victim to be exploited piecemeal. After the second Opium War, the Western image of China could scarcely sink lower, and yet: in the area of German interest in China a significant change of image did occur.

Germany was to acquire one colony in China in 1897, the port of Qingdao in Shandong. But before this, a colonial mentality was well established in the German print media in anticipation of a widely extended German Empire that was never to come about. With China now open to Western travellers, and the conviction that Karl Marx had aired in 1853 that Asia was ripe for an economic revolution to be driven by Western capital, many German scientists and engineers traversed the vast land on the lookout for opportunities for exploitation. From today's perspective, the most interesting of these was Ferdinand von Richthofen who explored much of

China in the years 1868–1872.⁹ The vigour and lucidity of his contributions to German geographical writings on China may be seen to bring about a paradigm shift within the genre. For his vision of China displaces the myth of stagnation and senility in favour of an industrialized future in which China is full of youthful promise. It is as if he could not see a Chinese landscape without envisaging a railway network to exploit its industrial potential, especially its coal reserves.¹⁰

Richthofen saw that China was ripe for an industrial revolution, the only question being which European nation would provide it with the necessary external stimulus to set the whole process going. He recognized the enormous potential latent in Chinese labour—something his contemporaries largely ignored in their search for mineral deposits. In one report from the province of Shansi, he praised the hospitality of the nomadic tribes, but continues: “yet one glance suffices to perceive the superiority of the industrious Chinese, although the stage at which this race has come to a halt on its previous march towards progress is indeed a low one” (Richthofen 1873, p. 142). Here we may recognize Richthofen as a reader of Hegel, fully conversant with the myth of China having succumbed to stasis in the distant past. But Richthofen’s innovation is to see that this stasis need not be permanent, that China was ripe for a process of industrial modernization, needing only appropriate investment and knowhow from the West. Richthofen’s vision of a fully modernized and productive China was not to become a reality for a hundred years, but this image of China stands out from the many accounts of China’s stagnation and immobility in the nineteenth century as one pointing to China’s future.

7 Conclusion

To summarize: I suggest that what one scholar has termed the “history of our confusion” with regard to Western perspectives on China can be seen to be made up of many different images that are quite precise in themselves because they embody clear agendas. In general, these agendas have more to do with European controversies than with any Chinese reality. If we still look for any common thread, any master narrative to structure successive visions of China, then I suggest we might consider changes in the European idea of progress. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, what Leibniz sees as the best of Chinese culture and civilization ideally complements what is best in Western Europe. Divine Providence will propel both halves of the enlightened world forward in harmony for the betterment of humankind. As the century progresses, various alternative versions of China become prominent. In some of these, Chinese society appears less than ideal, subject to tyranny, frozen in time. In parallel to this, progress becomes less a function of Divine Providence than a quite secular process, driven by technological advances,

⁹ Cf. Osterhammel (1987).

¹⁰ Cf. Lu (2016).

social upheaval and the thirst for individual liberty. In this perspective, China no longer complements Europe at its vital best, but drifts into becoming its negative opposite: static, “mummified”, marginalized.

Thus, in the early nineteenth century, China is stranded somewhere outside the dynamics of history. A proof of this is then apparently given by the ease with which the vast empire is defeated in the two Opium Wars. After the second, China appears ripe only for dismemberment and colonization by European powers. One German colonialist visionary, Ferdinand von Richthofen, is then able to reverse the image of China as mere prey waiting passively for predators. For he sees, as do many other European adventurers, the enormous mineral wealth awaiting exploitation in China. But he sees also—and more significantly—the great potential latent in Chinese labour and creates a powerful image of an industrialized China to come—albeit one needing the stimulus of colonial powers to come about.

In all of these alternative versions of China, we cannot help but see the dominance of Western concepts over whatever Chinese reality they may claim to encompass. The nineteenth century sees an enormous growth in the amount of empirical knowledge of China available to Western thinkers, but the transition from an idealist ideology to a colonialist one seems scarcely affected by this. Again and again we perceive Western thinkers apply a small number of concepts to encompass the vast diversity and complexity of China. In conclusion, I suggest that, for as long as the Chinese enigma is seen as yielding to a few basic concepts, then it will remain intractable. We may smile at some of the simplifications current in the middle of the eighteenth century, but we should also ask: are we really any further advanced today?

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