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"In China They Eat the Moon": Western Images of China from the 19th to the 21st Century

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“In China They Eat the Moon”: Western Images of China from the 19th to the 21st Century

Monika Gaenssbauer

The opening, in October 2009, of the Frankfurt Book Fair, which had China as its national Guest of Honour, prompted the German weekly *Die Zeit* to feature the image of a curious Chinese porcelain figurine on its front page. The headline the editors placed beside this image ran: “Reading China in a New Way”. But, in my view, the figure, and the commentary which *Die Zeit* provided on it actually evoked a very old image of China presenting “the Orient as a living ‘curio cabinet’” (Said 2009, p. 125). The figurine featured dates, in fact, from around 1740. It was a creation made by the sculptor Johann Friedrich Eberlein for the famous Royal Porcelain Factory at Meissen in Saxony. In *Die Zeit*’s accompanying interpretation of the image, penned by the German author Brigitte Kronauer, there is also repeated recourse to stereotypical images of China such as that of the “Land of Smiles” established almost a hundred years ago by Franz Lehár’s immensely popular “China”-set operetta of the same name. Kronauer comments on the bobble-headed, “pagoda-like” porcelain figurine, saying “these little creatures from the Far East really are quite bizarre!”, and concludes her text with the rhetorical question as to whether it is not perhaps the intention of this “porcelain Punch from the Orient” to “make a meal of us Westerners” (*Zeit Literatur*, 8 Oct. 2009).

A very similar figure – two-faced, inscrutable, but endowed with an unnatural number of hands with which to lighten the Westerner’s pocket or otherwise seal his fate – appeared in 1885 as a caricature of the “typical Chinaman” in the American magazine “The Wasp” (Choy and Dong 1995, p. 55). It may appear astonishing at first that two such representations of China should resemble one another to the point of being almost identical, despite their lying over a hundred years apart.

In the following analysis, however, I wish to show the reader – with particular reference to the images of China developed by Western authors in the 19th century – how certain stereotypes of China have managed to perpetuate themselves over time – not just over a century, but over several hundred years. I shall refer here to work done not just in the field of sinology, but also in that of post-colonial and cultural studies. The announcement in the title of my article that its theme is “Western images of China” may appear to imply a certain “essentialist” approach to “the West” as an entity, but titles in general have the unfortunate quality of having to be short and thus of distorting their subject matter by abbreviation. My paper will

involve me discussing specific authors from the United States and Europe, hence the overarching concept of “the West”. My analysis of the “images of China” developed by these various authors will also identify and emphasize the respects in which the representations they each provided differ from one another – much as Andreas Nehring, the scholar of religious history, did for India (Nehring 2003). As in the case of India, the American and European authors who expressed their views of China in the course of the 19th century came from a wide range of backgrounds. A number of them were missionaries, others spoke from the position of consulate employees or interpreters, and yet others were present in China in the capacities of businessmen or of collectors of botanical specimens. In the 19th century, “Chinese studies” was not yet a field dominated or determined by specialists. In this period, in which sinology was only just emerging as an academic discipline, it was entirely possible that a former missionary should become a university professor of Chinese, or that a man like Karl Neumann, a former school teacher who had originally been an expert on Armenian, should eventually attain the position of curator of the Sinological Library of Munich University.

What’s more, no consideration of the images of China current in the 19th century is really possible without looking simultaneously at the images of China that were circulated in preceding centuries. In fact, many of today’s images of China turn out to have originated much earlier than the 19th century.

In his analysis of images of China in the writings of the Jesuit missionary Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), sinologist Michael Lackner has pointed out that Valignano was less concerned with portraying Chinese realities than he was with constructing a certain idea of China’s essential “otherness”. Lackner even speaks of a “purely European history” in which China merely played the role of a pawn in an intellectual game known only to the West (Lackner 2009, p. 123). A different case was that of Matteo Ricci, who was also a Jesuit missionary, but one who enjoys high esteem and respect in China today. In a study she published in 2007, the literary theorist Lavinia Brancaccio has given an account of Ricci’s “view of the Other” as a view characterized by openness, attentiveness and *curiositas*. Ricci, she suggests, was genuinely prepared to adapt himself to the “Other” and thereby to relinquish a part of the identity which had hitherto been his (Brancaccio 2007, p. 242). This quality of *curiositas* is only rarely encountered in other authors who were writing about China at the time.

In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant believed himself justified in stating the following: “The Chinese ... never reveals his own thoughts and yet is always seeking to penetrate into the minds of others... In deceit, they are extraordinary artists” (i.e. extraordinarily artful) (Hsia 1985a, p. 96). It is Kant’s slightly younger contemporary, Johann Gottfried Herder, who conjures up the image of China as a “mummified” nation. Herder predicted that China’s condition as a “totally isolated” culture was likely to persist for several centuries to come (Hsia 1985b, p. 117).

From the 18th century onwards, Asia was constructed as Europe’s great counter-principle, and in the 19th century stereotypes regarding Asia gradually gained a firm hold. Few Western authors managed to avoid involvement in this process of stereotyping. “Both the manner of living and the manner of thinking of the Asiatic diverge from our own”, we read in the programmatic preface to a new magazine on Asian matters from 1806 (Osterhammel 1998, p. 55). The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has described a stereotype as a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated (Bhabha 2007, p. 66). The historian Benjamin Schmidt has pointed out that the concept of a “stereotype” is drawn from the craft of printing. The very life of a stereotype depends upon its being fetched forth, printed and repeated again and again. It is only through this repetition that it acquires its appearance of truth and authority (Benjamin 2009).

One important genre of writing on China in the 19th century was travel writing. “Travel books”, writes Mary-Louise Pratt, “created a sense of curiosity, excitement, adventure and even moral fervour about European expansionism. They ... made people ‘at home’ in Europe feel part of a planetary project” (Pratt 2008², p. 3). In the 18th and 19th centuries it was possible to achieve fame in the quality of a “traveller”. Such “travellers” tended to be scholars and members of the social elite. The aims with which they undertook their journeys were often of a scientific or missionary nature so that they received the patronage of their respective governments. The knowledge they gathered was useful for the various national imperial projects.

One traveller who acquired great fame was Evariste Regis Huc (1813-1860), who published a work entitled *A Journey Through the Chinese Empire* (Huc 1855). Huc was a French Roman Catholic missionary and is often called a “discoverer” inasmuch as he presented to the Western public two accounts of journeys through China and Tibet which received much attention in their day. In the 18th and the first half of the 19th century, there were no rival media that could challenge the monopoly of such books on the representation of distant parts of the world. The images of Asian civilizations which were created stemmed solely from these texts, drawings and – in some cases – woodcuts.

Huc describes China as a “colossus ... sunk in the most profound political apathy....” (ibid., p. vii) which had now, however, “been suddenly shaken to its very foundations by the Taiping movement”. The Taipings were a rebel movement inspired by Christian ideas and images which almost brought about the collapse of the Qing Empire around the time of Huc’s writing. Huc endeavoured to “correct as much as possible the erroneous and absurd ideas that have prevailed from time immemorial concerning the Chinese people” (ibid., p. xvi). In his view, the 16th-century Jesuit missionaries had “often published ... descriptions of China that were much too flattering to be correct” (ibid., p. xvii). As a first blot on this overly

attractive picture, he identified the “mockery of justice” applying everywhere in China. In his account of his journeys, he repeatedly – and proudly – records the extreme audacity with which he defied the officials of the Chinese state, deliberately refusing to acknowledge their authority. In the first chapter, for example, he explains how “being strangers ... we were not bound to conform to the ritual of the empire” (ibid., p. 31). Elsewhere he writes: “We were ... obstinately ... bent on never going the way they wanted to drive us” (ibid., pp. 64-65). He feels constantly challenged to impart a lesson to the Chinese and to show them just who is in charge in each particular situation. When some Chinese interlocutors happen to ask him about his reasons for coming to China and about what he hoped to gain by doing so, what Huc launches into is rather a long list of all the things which China could allegedly gain from them: Christianity as well as the schools and charitable activities that went along with it, but above all “the truth”. That Huc might himself have something to gain from his time in China was an idea which never entered his mind. He saw his journey through China rather as making a sacrifice – a “taking up”, in Kipling’s famous phrase, “of the white man’s burden”. The English author’s poem encouraged the emissaries of Western empires to “fill full the mouth of Famine, and bid the sickness cease” even in the face of the “heathen folly” that would bitterly resist all these well-intended efforts (Kipling 1899).

The historian Jürgen Osterhammel notes that China had very little interest in the West up until the 19th century. But the civilization which looked upon itself as the most capable and humane civilization on earth – namely, Western civilization – did not wait patiently until Asia began to take an interest in it. It prescribed its own laws to Asia. In an era dominated by the idea of a ‘mission to educate’, the tone became strict and serious, indeed schoolmasterly. Asia had to be governed and enlightened, economically exploited and scientifically investigated. Asia became something to be worked on (Osterhammel 1998, p. 403).¹

This is also the point on which Edward Said focuses some of his most justified critical remarks. Said argues that many Western authors considered the Orient as a region of the world that stood in need of “correction”, which is why it tended to be placed within such frameworks as the classroom and the courtroom.

The question has not yet been clarified of whether Evariste Regis Huc really did visit the places which he describes in those accounts of his travels which brought him fame and profit in his day. There is a great deal in these accounts which appears, from our present viewpoint, to lack sense and therefore verisimilitude. It is

¹ Economically, there also existed fear and scepticism on the European side. For example, in 1886 the Austrian anti-Semite Karl Beurle published a pamphlet in which he ascribed to the Chinese “Jew-like greed”. He also complained about the Chinese conquering whole city quarters, “undercutting Christian labour” and monopolizing certain business branches (Kaminski 2007, p. 30). The English philosopher of history, Brooks Adams, also emphasized the economic threat posed by Asia. In 1895 he wrote: “Asia is cheaper than Europe ... Therefore Asia tends to survive and Europe to perish” (ibid., p. 23).

undeniable, however, that Huc had a significant influence on other authors of his own and the following generation, for example on the popular German writer Karl May (1842-1902), whose novel *The Kiang-Lu* was inspired by Huc's dramatic accounts of his journeys. We read in this latter work:

China! The most marvellous country of the Orient! A gigantic dragon made of soil and rock, which bathes its serrated tail in the deep Pacific Ocean, while one wing touches the icy regions of Siberia, the other the steaming jungles of India, and which, driven to shore by the raging typhoon...climbs over mountains and valleys toward the West, its mighty head looming over even the most colossal of our mountains...Do I dare to approach you? Will my barbarian eye be able to withstand your hostile basilisk glare? (Koppen 1986)

Another author who lived in China in the 19th century and wrote about the country was Thomas Taylor Meadows (1812-1854). Meadows was first a translator and later became British Consul. He spent over ten years in Canton and Shanghai. Meadows's writing on China presents quite a different picture from Huc's. His judgment of China is a significantly more nuanced and differentiated one than one finds in most of his contemporaries' works. In his book *Desultory Notes on the Government and People of China*, he consciously refuses to draw generalizing conclusions from individual cases and to condemn, for example, all Chinese as sly and devious simply because it may once have happened that he was the victim of deceit on the part of an individual Chinese (Meadows 1847). Meadows attempts to identify the specific motives of the individuals involved in each of the many encounters he experienced without leaping to condemnatory conclusions. For example, he describes how Chinese who pass on information to foreigners run the risk of being seriously punished for this by officials of their government. This, he suggests, may be an important reason why Chinese tend not to “lay all their cards on the table” in their dealings with foreigners (ibid., p. 188). Meadows is clearly annoyed at the fact that the habit easily arises of saddling whole nations with certain perceived general characteristics. Such negative descriptions, he warns, cause the mutual perception of the nations concerned to deteriorate and might conceivably even lead to war eventually. He also refuses to concur in the general view of the Chinese government in the 19th century as a despotic one, arguing that it was rather based, in principle, on a certain fundamental moral authority. He even recommends that a system similar to the Chinese examination system for the selection of state officials might be usefully adopted in Britain.

The French missionary Huc did not give his mission work pride of place in his writings, but other authors of the day did devote themselves more fully to the question of the Christian mission in China. In the writings of missionaries in 19th-century China, we often see a clear discrepancy between the conception of universal human equality to which the Christian faith of these writers ought by rights to have committed them and the racist ideas which were in circulation in their age. After all, in this period of the late 19th century, racism was considered to be a self-evidently

correct way of looking at the world by Europeans and Americans of every political persuasion (Osterhammel 2009, p. 113).

This discrepancy is especially evident in one work published by the American missionary Robert Maclay. The book in question bears the title *Life Among the Chinese: with Characteristic Sketches and Incidents of Missionary Operations and Prospects in China*. In the very first chapter, which deals with the population of China, Maclay exclaims: “Four hundred millions! Who are they? ... Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. What are they? Heathen, athwart whose gloomy night of error no ray of light ever shines; idolaters, bowing down to senseless images ... What are they? Men, created by God; fallen, ruined, helpless ... sinking into guilt ... immortals, objects of the divine compassion” (Maclay 1861, p. 19). We often observe a constant and fundamental shifting back and forth between different genres of writing in the works published by the missionaries. Sober descriptions of daily Chinese life give way suddenly – often almost without a transition – to religious sermons characterized by language and imagery of extreme emotivism. Such writing raises the question of what audience these writings were intended for. The missionaries were writing primarily for a readership in their own home countries, and primarily for their fellow Christians and congregations. Their eloquence always aimed both at religious edification and fundraising for the continuation of their work.

As if it were a problem with the solution of which he had been personally entrusted, Maclay poses the question: “How are we to classify the Chinese? What character and position shall we assign them among the nations of the earth?” He gives his own answer: “They are not savages, they are not barbarians. We must call them a civilized people“ (ibid., p. 20). China, after all, was the country in which book-printing, gunpowder and the compass had all been invented. This does not, however, prevent Maclay from going into the “defects of the Chinese character” at some length later in the book.

Western authors in the 19th century were almost unanimous in according a higher cultural rank to Chinese civilization than they accorded to the civilizations of Africa, for example. For the most part, they ranked it only slightly below the civilization of the West. Many Western writers also deplored China’s alleged “mummification” or condition of decline – almost with one voice, in fact. Whatever its specific content, however, almost every single Western author who expressed any view on China in the 19th century felt both obliged and qualified to present his readers with a “master narrative” about the “essential nature” of the country and its people. Many sentences begin with the words “The Chinese is...”. In the majority of works about China which have come down to us from this period, we see the same tendency to a discursive essentialism as Edward Said has noted in the writings on “the oriental mind” published by Lord Cromer, a colonial official deployed to Egypt. In his work “Egypt”, Cromer enunciates the conclusion: “A certain tendency to imprecision,

which can easily degenerate into out-and-out dishonesty [...] is the predominant characteristic of the oriental mind [...]. The European is a human being guided, in essence, by reason...The mind of the oriental, however, is as marked by an essential asymmetry as are his picturesque roads” (Said 2009, p. 51). Many authors of the day attempted to find such snappy, all-explanatory formulae for China and the essential character of “the Chinese”, too (Lackner 2008).

Significant differences can be seen between the various Western missionaries in China as regards the picture they chose to present of the country and the way in which they perceived and understood their own mission work. An instance of the achievement of a reflective and self-critical stance in matters of Western missionary methods specifically in the inter-cultural context is to be found in the work of Samuel Wells Williams (1812-1884) – at an unusually early date. Williams had originally wished to become a botanist, but submitted to the wishes of his father, who sent him to China as a printer in the service of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Williams was to enjoy a varied career as a linguist, publisher and sinologist. Towards the end of his life, he was appointed to the chair of Chinese Language and Literature at Yale University, the first academic professor of this subject in the USA.

The posthumously published *Life and Letters of Samuel Wells Williams* contains many highly personal reflections by this author. He describes his attendance at church services during his youth with remarkable frankness, for example:

When I went to Paris Hill ... Mr. Weeks was pastor. I listened to his preaching without much relish, for the church was cold, the seats hard, the service long, the preacher monotonous, and the subject distasteful. Religion was not pleasing to me when young. (Williams 1889, p. 27)

Despite this experience, Williams holds true to his Christian identity and is concerned that the faith should be spread and transmitted. He soon takes his distance, however, from any conception of a “fast-acting” practice of Christian missionary conversion founded on the distribution of ready-made tracts, such as was practised by the Prussian missionary Karl Gützlaff in China, for example. Williams writes at one point:

To-day I went aboard some of the junks in the harbour ... and we were well received ... The polite celestial then ... invites you to a pipe, a segurillo, or a cup of tea. After this what comes? One talks to them of the things in the tracts and scriptures, but they are deaf ears which hear; they listen in silence ... The subject is strange, the speaker is strange ... But when you pause for a reply, they ask how old you are or what country you come from ... Ask them about profitable voyages, ... inquire after their families ... you then touch a string of responses, you find real listeners. (ibid., p. 80)

The development of “Chinese studies” in the 19th century is not just determined by the contributions of missionaries, diplomats and travellers. Other professions such as commercial traders or botanists also played their role here.

The Chinese-American scholar Fan Fa-Ti, for instance, has done some work on the history of the study of nature in China in the 19th century (Fan 2004). In this field we see the interplay between the discourse of natural history and that of horticulture, of Chinese visual art, of Chinese folk knowledge and of sinology. Fan's aim in his book on this subject is to explain the formation of scientific practice and scientific knowledge in those discursive border regions in which culture encounters culture. From the 19th century onwards, many animals from China came to enrich both the zoos and the agriculture of England: pigs, turtles, dogs and geese. And there was great demand for certain Chinese flowers on English flower markets, e.g. the "China aster", the camellia, the lily, the chrysanthemum and the peony.

In his research on the 19th century, Fan adopts an analytical approach based on the idea of cultural "contact zones" which was developed by Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt 2008², p. 7). This concept does not presuppose the existence of any rigid, inflexible cultural boundaries. It enables us to see mingling, interaction, accommodation, hybridization and confluence as well as conflicts across borders of many kinds. Fan criticizes the fact that "so much scholarship tends to dichotomize and essentialize power relations between the West and the Rest". Like Homi Bhabha, Fan draws attention to the fact that the colonizers and the colonized were dependent on one another. Colonial identities were in a constant state of flux. Bhabha speaks of "in-between" spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of "selfhood" and initiate innovative sites of collaboration and contestation (Bhabha 2007, p. 2).

It is Fan Fa-Ti's thesis that, while the collection, classification and denomination of Chinese plants and animals by British naturalists might indeed be seen as an aggressive expansion of cognitive territory as defined in cultural terms, the role played by the native population of China in all this was far richer and more complex than mere reaction or resistance. Fan characterizes the situation in China in the 19th century as a situation of an "informal empire". The control which the Western powers were able to exert over China was an economic control which extended well beyond the actual occupied territories, "treaty ports", etc. For all that, however, the British naturalists doing research in the various provinces of the Chinese interior required support networks in order to be able to carry out their work, viz. collection and analysis. They relied very heavily on the knowledge and the ancillary labour of local Chinese during their fieldwork.

To mention just one example, in botanical research conducted in this period, an important role was played by hand-produced drawings of plants. Native Chinese painters and artisans were often employed for this purpose. Fan argues that this preparation of British scientific drawings by Chinese craftsmen tended to lead to a hybridization of the visual cultures of Britain and China. The style of the images exported from China in the context of this research work was a mixture of Western pictorial realism and Chinese genre painting. Such Chinese genre pictures tend to concentrate on aesthetic effects rather than on the scientific exactitude of the

reproduction. At the request of the British naturalists, the Chinese artisans adopted certain Western ideas regarding picture construction and perspective in their scientific drawings of plants. Fan’s conclusion is that these products of Chinese painters and artisans were able to acquire a visual authority which was recognized and acknowledged by the scientific community in Europe.

Many works on China by 19th-century Western authors also portray everyday life in China and Chinese customs and practices. While the missionary William Charles Milne vigorously denied that “rat ragout” was a regular feature of Chinese cooking in his book *La vie réelle en Chine* (Milne 1860), Karl Neumann does report that Chinese pirates “eat rats ... as great delicacies; in fact, there are very few creatures they will not eat” (Neumann 1831, p. 128).

This *topos* of strange exotic Chinese eating habits is a constantly recurring one in Western perceptions of China. As a mixture of *tremendum* and *fascinosum*, this body of anecdotal evidence tends to be laid before professional sinologists again and again with the request that they take some position on it. “In China things are different” was the title chosen by Herbert Balk for a book he penned describing his experiences in the “Middle Kingdom” (Balk 2007). The title of my paper is also drawn from a recently published book, “In China they eat the moon” by Miriam Collée. The author, who recently spent a year in Shanghai with her family, recollected her experiences there and came to this conclusion (Collée 2009).

On the Chinese side, there has been no lack of generalizing statements either regarding the alleged “essential character” of occidental countries and their citizens. During the course of my studies in China in the 1990s, I remember often encountering works on sale in various Chinese bookshops which enthusiastically offered their prospective readers “enlightenment” regarding the characteristics of foreign nations such as the French, the British or the Germans. Even a book which appeared in China in 2009 entitled *Deyizhi Zhizao (Made in Germany)* still contains the following confident declaration: “Beer is an extremely important component part of German culture. If a German has his supply of beer cut off, this can have very serious consequences. His life would be in danger of falling completely apart” (Xie and Li 2009, p. 167).

Michael Lackner has noted that “[in] cultural comparativism there may be a preference for the easier bilateral relationship (China and India, China and the West) rather than for one that reflects the existence of a multilateral level” (Lackner 2009, p. 137). For this reason, I would like to briefly address this multilateral aspect here. In a short story from 1928, the well-known American author Thomas Wolfe once described a visit to Munich’s traditional *Oktoberfest* in terms that come close to a report about an ethnological expedition. His account closely resembles the accounts of travels in China left by 19th-century Western writers in many respects; these consist in large part of encounters with heroes and villains, with amazing events and tragic-comic anecdotes:

We seated ourselves triumphantly, panting victoriously, and immediately ordered two litres of dark beer and two plates of schweinwurstl and sauerkraut. The band was blaring forth the strains of 'Ein Prosit! Ein Prosit!' and all over the room people had risen from their tables and were standing with arms linked and mugs upraised while they roared out the great drinking song and swung and rocked rhythmically back and forth.

The effect of these human rings all over that vast and murky hall had in it something that was almost supernatural and ritualistic: something that belonged to the essence of a race was enclosed in those rings, something dark and strange as Asia, something older than the old barbaric forests ... The hall was roaring with their powerful voices, it shook to their powerful bodies, and as they swung back and forth, it seemed to me that nothing on earth could resist them ... And then we left them ... people from the mass of life and from the heart of Germany ... And from the distance came the last and muted murmurs of the fair. And we went home (Wolfe 1987, p. 313).

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