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MORALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS: THE ORIGINAL FORMULATION

ABSTRACT

A symposium on “morality and religiousness, Chinese and Western” would most probably need to recount the historical context and the pristine philosophical formulation of the debate on the problematic relationships between these two terms, which are to be found in the very first transcultural experience between China and Europe launched by the “accommodation” strategy of the Jesuits in their approach to seventeenth- to eighteenth-centuries Chinese elite values and culture. This presentation will deal with the original formulation of the “morality and religiousness” question as applied to the Neo-Confucian tradition, as well as with its repercussions on later developments down to contemporary debates.

I. THE QUESTION

When we speak of Confucius in a Western context, we can basically distinguish two sorts of Confucius, which correspond to two major periods of universalizing tendencies in Western history: one left to us by the Enlightenment movement, and another which was reinvented following World War II. The first one concerns seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, and most particularly France, when the “philosophers,” as they were then known, used the accounts of Christian missionaries (in particular the Jesuits, who were present in China ever since the end of the sixteenth century) “to invent” a *Confucius philosophus* befitting of the Enlightenment period: rationalistic and even, according to some, agnostic, which foreshadowed the secularized Confucius of Chinese modernizers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Afterward, during the “post-Enlightenment” period, we see a sort of globalization of Confucius, which really gets under way

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after end of World War II when the West (namely, Europe and North America), shaken by conflicts which had for the first time become worldwide, and disorientated with respect to its values, started looking for a new form of humanism.

II. THE JESUIT FORMULATION

“Two great civilizations which had until then been unaware of each other’s existence came into contact for the first time around the year 1600.” This is how Jacques Gernet started his famous book *China and Christianity*.¹ The reference here is to the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in China, thanks to which Confucius entered into the culture and debates of Enlightenment Europe, a dramatic high point being reached with the rites controversy around the year 1700. From then on, Confucius was to have a European calling, as well as a Chinese one.

Confucius owed this prestigious entrance to a phenomenon of a scale rarely attained in the history of intercultural relations: the transfer of knowledge by Jesuit missionaries who started arriving in Canton in 1582, during the reign of the Ming 明 Dynasty Emperor Wanli 萬曆. These missionaries were the Italian Jesuits Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), the latter being known ever since then in China by his Chinese name Li Madou 利瑪竇. As soon as they arrived in China, the Jesuits used (just like everywhere else) an approach which consisted in first of all obtaining a solid foothold in the language and customs of the targeted population. In this way they laid the foundations of what was later to become sinology. They first of all tried to identify themselves with Buddhist monks, so as to be closer to the local population, but realized very quickly that they would be more efficient if they concentrated on the elite class composed of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats. In 1595, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits switched their monk’s habit for that of the literati. However, it was only in 1601 that they were finally allowed to reside in the imperial capital, Peking.

Without losing any time, the Jesuits (with a mission to convert the Chinese to the Christian faith in accordance with the dogmas of the Counter-Reformation) used a strategy known as “accommodation,” a term which was coined *a posteriori* to designate this way of approaching and evangelizing the Chinese empire. In fact, it was a strategy which had already been tested on the great traditions of antiquity, the Greco-Roman one in particular, but also the Egyptian hermetic one. The idea of sixteenth-century Renaissance scholars, in turn adopted by Ricci, was that there had to exist a “*prisca* (or *primaeva*) *theologia*

(or *philosophia*),” that is, a primordial or natural theology or philosophy, which had not yet been altered or distanced from its divine origins and passed on by Greek philosophers. However, the Jesuits discovered that Chinese civilization went much further back, to antediluvian times.²

Ricci and his fellow Jesuits thus did nothing else but apply methods which had long been tested by Christian exegesis applied to ancient sources. In order to do this, they carried out their work in at least three main areas: the task of conversion itself which, however, seemed to depend upon the work of mediation (consisting in translations and “relations”). Thanks to their translations, knowledge of the very basis of Chinese elite culture became available for the first time to European elites: the Confucian Classics, the basis of knowledge necessary for the official examinations used by the imperial state to recruit its finest bureaucrats. At the same time, the Jesuits made the most of their presence in China to send “relations” (accounts) to their correspondents back in Europe, often part of intellectual elite circles, containing information about Chinese culture and customs, or at least what they perceived to be so.

The Jesuits’ translations (Chinese-Latin and Latin-Chinese) were the second case of significant cultural and linguistic transfer, after the translation of Indian Buddhist texts which had taken most of the first Christian millennium to complete. In 1588, Michele Ruggieri, only a few years after his arrival in China, set about translating the Four Books into Latin, just before he was called back to Rome. Five years later, Matteo Ricci finished a paraphrased version of it, which he used as a manual to learn Chinese (both classical and vernacular), so that new missionary recruits could converse on an equal basis with their Chinese scholar “peers.” Between 1588, when Ruggieri finished the first draft of his translation of the Four Books, and the publication in 1687 of the famous *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (which we will come back to further on), a century of translating work had gone by, resulting in the co-option of all of the Confucian Classics, considered as being potential vectors of the Christian faith.

The Confucian sources they used were those that the Mongol Yuan 元 Dynasty had established as state orthodoxy. As paradoxical as it may seem, it was in fact a non-Chinese dynasty which, in the fourteenth century, made the Four Books (chosen by Zhu Xi 朱熹 in the twelfth century to add to the Five Classics used since the second-century BCE Han Dynasty) the curriculum required for the civil service recruitment examinations. The Jesuits made particular use of a recent commented edition by Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1583), the tutor of the young Wanli, crown prince at the time and who was to come to the throne in 1573. The translations used the terminology and themes

typical of Renaissance theology and moral philosophy, in which the Jesuits had been educated. With the help of prominent Chinese scholars who were among the first converts, such as Xu Guangqi 徐光啓 (1562–1633) of the Hanlin Academy and Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1565–1630) of the Imperial Office of Public Works, Ricci accomplished the reverse task of making European classical sources available in Chinese, such as a collection of Stoic-type descriptions of friendship (with the Chinese title *Jiaoyou Lun* 《交友論》) and Euclid's *Elements* (*Jihe Yuanben* 《幾何原本》, published in 1607).

As for the work of “relations,” an example is first of all to be found in Ricci's *About Christian Expeditions to China* (1582–1610), a voluminous work of five books, the first of which deals entirely with his observations of China and the Chinese. In chapter 5, one passage in particular draws our attention, for at least three reasons, which were to be the subject of heated and long-lasting controversies: the latinization of Master Kong's name; the acknowledgment of the existence of Chinese “philosophical morality” guided by the “infuse light of nature”; the use of the term “saint” while referring to Confucius.

Ever since this relation of Ricci's at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, “China” has been treated synonymously with the teachings and legacy of Confucius, the first (and practically only) example of a Chinese name being latinized, in this case from *Kong fuzi* 孔夫子 (Master Kong). In his book *Manufacturing Confucianism*, published in 1997, Lionel Jensen set the cat among the pigeons.³ Pointing out that the term *Kong fuzi* is to be found nowhere in ancient sources, he subsequently jumped to the conclusion that Confucius, as depicted to this day in Europe, is nothing else but a Jesuit “invention”; an arguably somewhat strained theory to which Nicolas Standaert duly retorted in his 1999 article “The Jesuits did *not* manufacture Confucianism.”⁴

The figure of Confucius took on a universal dimension in the strategy used for making converts by the first Jesuit missionaries, who wanted to show the potentially monotheistic character of Chinese religion. In a letter written in 1595, Ricci pointed out a convergence between Confucian canonical texts on the one hand, and the teachings of the Christian faith on the other. The objective was to find (literally “to reveal”) in them the idea of a single God, which could have been the subject of an ancient form of monotheism; a reference to the cults to the “Sovereign from on high” (*shangdi* 上帝) and to Heaven (*tian* 天), which Ricci had often come across in classical Chinese sources. In this way, the Jesuits considered *shangdi* to be the equivalent of their own God, which in Chinese they very cleverly called *tianzhu* 天主, Heaven's Master (hence Christianity's being called *tianzhujiao* 天主教, the teachings of Heaven's Master). It was therefore for them the

basis of a “natural theology” forgotten by the Chinese themselves but which could be rediscovered through the “light of nature.” According to *Tianzhu Shiyi* 《天主實義》 (*The Real Meaning of Heaven’s Master*),⁵ a catechism written by Ricci in 1603 to explain the Christian faith to Chinese literati, the morality described in the *Analects* is similar to that of the Stoics, in two well-known expressions found at the beginning of book 12: “Overcome yourself to return to the spirit of the rites” (*ke ji fu li* 克己復禮) and “Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you” (*ji suo bu yu wu shi yu ren* 己所不欲勿施於人). The latter, considered as being a sort of “golden rule”, seems to have immediately drawn the attention of the Jesuits, for whom it sums up perfectly the philosophical morality of literati won over to natural light. It is easy to see what Ricci’s accommodation strategy aimed at. However, on the other hand, we can also see how Confucius’ “natural morality” was potentially dangerous for Christian theological dogma, dissociating as it does moral virtue from religion.

In fact, the danger was all the more real because Confucius’ teachings were received and understood in the context of debates in Europe about the victory of “reason” over religion: there, too, the Jesuits were somewhat ambivalent, caught between the authority of Rome and their own project of accommodation. On the one hand, wishing to make Confucian literati appear to be advocates of an ancient form of monotheism, they put Master Kong (at the time, the object of an imperial cult) on a pedestal, considering him as being a prophet or “saint,” their translation for the Chinese term *sheng* 聖. However, in the vocabulary of seventeenth-century Italian Jesuits, the term *santo* was used only to refer to the Fathers of the Church like St. Augustine or St. Jerome, whereas *sapientissimo* (of supreme wisdom) was used for Greek philosophers like Plato or Aristotle. The use of “saint” for Confucius was to be at the center of the famous rites controversy, which reached its climax around 1700, Counter-Reformation defenders of catholic dogma arguing that there could only be Christian saints. On the other hand, the Jesuits presented the cults of Confucius as being devoid of any religious content. As Ricci pointed out in his *About Christian Expeditions to China*, the Chinese did indeed venerate Confucius “but, however, as a mortal and not as they worship a God,” pointing out that “they do not consider him as having a divine nature and do not pray to him to obtain anything.”⁶ In this respect, the Jesuits could be said to have invented the notion of a “civil religion” in their undertaking to show the Chinese elites that their religion was potentially monotheistic, but they had only forgotten about the ancient figurehead of *shangdi*. It would suffice to reinstall the cult to the “Lord on high” to realize that the result would yield something very similar to the Christian faith in a single God.

The Jesuits' ambivalence is to be found in the very language they used. As Nicolas Standaert has pointed out, Ricci referred to the Confucians (*ru* 儒) as *legge de' letterati*, translated in Latin as *literatorum lex* or *secta*, both of which were perfectly interchangeable expressions in the seventeenth century. The word *lex* (*legge* in Italian and *ligue* in French) was used to refer to the Society of Jesus itself. As for the word *secta*, it was a purely neutral term meaning a group of people who follow (from the Latin *sequi*) a teaching or a doctrine of faith (which Chinese literati of the premodern era called *jiao* 教). For Niccolò Longobardo (or Longobardi, 1565–1655), Ricci's successor as head of the Chinese Mission, there were basically speaking three "sects" in China: the "Literati Sect" (or Confucians, *ru* 儒), the "Idolater Sect" (*shi* 釋, in reality the Buddhists), and the "Sorcerer Sect" (*dao* 道, the Taoists). For the Jesuits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was first of all true faith (the only one possible, namely the Christian faith) and then false religions; in much the same way, for Confucian scholar-bureaucrats there was but one orthodox school of thought, namely their own, and then all of the various types of deviant and heterodox teachings. Whereas the Jesuits should have considered all three Chinese sects as being false religions, they couldn't help giving the literati sect a separate status, deeming it to possess a form of "philosophy," and describing its rites as being "civil" or "political." They thus allied, on the one hand, their own faith in Counter-Reformation Catholicism and their accommodationist mission to convert the Chinese and, on the other, the "literati religion" which was largely invented for the needs of the cause and supposed to combat the other Chinese "sects," described as being "false religions" or superstitions.⁷ The reception of this representation among European elites transformed the paradigm "true faith against false religions" into "religion against non-religion," the latter being associated with the notion of Reason by Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, who believed that they had discovered in "China" a perfectly rational civilization which had been able to do without religion.

After Ricci's death in 1610, more missionaries arrived in China throughout the seventeenth century, which was marked by a decisive turning-point: the Ming Dynasty known by Ricci and his fellow Jesuits was brought to an end in 1644 by the Manchu conquest of China, giving way to the non-Chinese Qing 清 Dynasty, one of the most long-lasting dynasties in Chinese imperial history (more than two and a half centuries) but also the last one (its collapse in 1911 led to the first Chinese republic). With a scope now going beyond merely pedagogical objectives, the new Jesuit missionaries continued the work of translating Confucian classics, considered as being genuine philosophy, a *sapientia* or *scientia*. In 1662 a *Sapientia Sinica* was compiled by the

Portuguese Jesuit Inacio da Costa (1603–1666), with the help of his Italian colleague Prospero Intorcetta (1626–1696): the work included a Latin translation of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 《大學》, one of the Four Books) passed down by Ricci, as well as the first five books of the *Analects* and an abbreviated biography of Confucius. Several years later (between 1667 and 1669), Father Intorcetta continued the work, publishing *Sinarum Scientia Politico-Moralis* (The Politico-Moral Learning of the Chinese) which included the first Latin translation of the *Zhongyong* 《中庸》 (another of the Four Books) and an expanded biography of Confucius, *Confutii Vita*. This new compilation was somewhat successful, thanks to a French translation, *La Science des Chinois*, which was republished in four volumes in 1672 with a much “catchier” title *Relations of Various Peculiar Journeys*. The Chinese classics were thus presented to the European public in a twofold process of integration into universal knowledge, as *sapientia* or *scientia* on the one hand, and as “curiosities” from far away on the other.

In 1687, the Flemish Jesuit Philippe Couplet (1623–1693), surrounded by a team of twenty-seven colleagues representing seventeenth-century European diversity, published an enormous work whose title alone is a syllabus in itself: *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis latine exposita* (Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese, or Chinese Wisdom Expounded in Latin), printed by order of the King of France Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715). Whereas one century earlier, Ricci and his generation had been pioneers in the acculturation of the Jesuits in China, Couplet and his team now gathered the fruit of their work to present it to the European market, thus managing to include the Jesuits’ China in the intellectual, scientific and religious debates of the Enlightenment period. The *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (CSP) was a truly imposing monument, a large luxury item with illustrations and fleur-de-lis at the head of each section to mark its royal patronage. It included comparative chronologies of Christian and Chinese history, in which the latter was seen to date back to an antediluvian period, and *scientia sinica* appeared to be a precursor of Christianity in a continuous historical schema; a *Proëmialis Declaratio*, a long introduction of one hundred and thirteen pages to the Five Classics and the Four Books of the Confucian canonical corpus, Daoism, Buddhism, the thought of Song Dynasty philosophers, and the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 《易經》), constituting the first extended presentation of Chinese thought for the attention of the European public; a biography of Confucius, with the title *Philosophorum Sinensium Principis Confucii Vita* (The Life of Confucius, prince—literally: the very first—of Chinese philosophers), preceded by a portrait of the sage which was to be the model for the majority of subsequent depictions of him; and finally a Latin

translation of the Four Books (except for *Mengzi* 孟子, later latinized as Mencius). The *Analects* in particular were presented as being “conversations or discourses by people given to reasoning” or to “philosophizing,” in the manner of the Socratic dialogues, and Confucius was clearly identified as being a “philosopher” comparable to those of Ancient Greece.⁸ What’s more, the desire to consider the Confucian classics as being philosophical works was obvious in the choice of translation of certain terms: the *CSP* often translated the Chinese terms *li* 理 or *dao* 道, key notions in the vocabulary of the canonical texts and their commentaries, by the Latin word *ratio*.

The *CSP* was almost immediately a great success all over Enlightenment Europe: a summarized version of one hundred pages appeared in French the following year, in 1668, with the title *La Morale de Confucius, Philosophe de la Chine*. It was itself then translated into English in 1691 as *The Morals of Confucius, a Chinese Philosopher*. These editions in vernacular languages were hugely successful, and were published in numerous reprints, including leather-bound “pocket-sized” ones. The *CSP*, the *magnum opus* of the Jesuits’ strategy of accommodation, thus established Confucius’ centrality not as a religious founder, but rather as a rationalist “ethnic philosopher,” who was the guarantor of an ideal politico-moral order, and to whom the Chinese dedicated a purely “civil” cult. This is precisely how Leibniz (1646–1716) understood it, in a text written in Latin between 1697 and 1699, *De cultu Confucii civili* (About the Civil Cult to Confucius). Leibniz’s reflections came about right in the midst of the rites controversy, caused by the disagreement between, on the one hand, Jesuits like Longobardo, Ricci’s successor at the imperial court in Peking, for whom Confucius and seventeenth-century Confucian literati did not claim to represent any religion whatsoever; and, on the other hand, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries for whom Chinese rites toward their ancestors, Heaven and Confucius were religious cults and thus idolatrous. This well-known controversy reached European elite circles around the year 1700 and ended up being settled in 1724 by a papal encyclical against the Jesuits’ strategy of accommodation and against the practice of ancestral cults by Chinese converts. The consequence of this was the proscription of Christianity by the Manchu Qing emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (reigned 1723–1736) and an end to Jesuit activities in China.

III. CONFUCIUS AS MORAL PHILOSOPHER

Ever since Ricci’s mission, the Jesuits had been responsible for the very first form of mediation between Chinese and European elites,

and for the first globalized version of Confucius, who was given the status of unique and central icon. The teachings and canonical texts which were associated with him coincided with the idea of “China” as an essentialized entity. Traces of this way of identifying them are still to be found nowadays, three centuries later, in the form of deeply enrooted preconceived ideas. In fact, it would seem that the Jesuit mediation was the origin of European (and in particular French) representations of Confucius as the founder of rational ethics at the heart of the Chinese imperial state, and potentially a model for a “Chinese Europe,” a term used by Etiemble (1909–2002).⁹ The Jesuits killed two birds with one stone, with a significant and long-lasting impact both in Europe and China. On the one hand, they reinvented Confucian teachings in the form of natural theology and a cult without religion, which they did not put in the same category as the Taoist and Buddhist “sects,” which were considered forms of superstition. Here, another paradox is rather obvious, in that it was the Jesuits who laicized Confucius, paving the way for his secularization by modern Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the other hand, they invented a “philosophical Confucius” which they compared favorably with other “ethnic philosophers,” Plato and Aristotle in particular. This comparison was taken up again by modern Chinese philosophers at the beginning of the last century, and is still popular in the West today.

Ironically, the Jesuits were less successful in converting the Chinese to Christianity than they were in converting European elites to an out-and-out Sinomania, which all over Europe affected philosophers, scholars, and even monarchs. We have already seen that the *CSP* had received the patronage of Louis XIV, whose reign proper-speaking (from the death of Mazarin in 1661 until his own death in 1715) corresponded approximately to that of the Manchu Qing emperor Kangxi 康熙 (reigned 1662–1722), a fact which led to the latter being nicknamed in Europe “China’s Louis XIV.”

One has to say that the reception of the Jesuits’ mediation made Christianity’s claim to universality (as apparent in missionary activities) backfire altogether. With the discovery of the China described by the Jesuits, Christianity’s vocation as sole true religion destined to prevail worldwide was seriously questioned, and a certain sense of relativity started to make itself felt. First of all, in chronological terms: the synoptic chronological tables which appeared in the *CSP* in particular showed that Chinese civilization went back to long before the deluge described in the Bible (this is at least what canonical sources suggested). In that way, if the Chinese chronology were to be taken at face value, the Bible’s one lost its universal dimension, since it could not be applied to the history of all mankind. The first problem caused

by the discovery of Chinese canonical books was that the ancient events they described (all the more unquestionable, since they were backed up by verifiable astronomical and calendrical observations, which the Jesuits themselves verified) contradicted the Book of Genesis.

This sense of relativity also made itself felt in religious terms. In European countries, especially those marked by Counter Reformation Catholicism, people were struck by China's religious tolerance and the fact that it had not experienced any wars of religion. Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), the son of a protestant pastor and author of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, attributed this to a supposed atheism of the Chinese, leading him to the conclusion that morality does not necessarily depend upon religion, and that the latter is often nothing else but a pretext for intolerance. This argument was put forward in 1641 by La Mothe Le Vayer in his essay *About the Pagans' Virtue*, in which there is a comparison between Socrates and Confucius, two "pagan" philosophers whose merit it was to have "made philosophy descend from Heaven to Earth, by means of the authority both give to morality."¹⁰ On the other hand, Fénelon (1651–1715), in the seventh and longest of his *Dialogues of the Dead* (1692–1696), with the title "About the much vaunted pre-eminence of the Chinese," compared Socrates and Confucius so as to question the veracity of the Jesuits' accounts, which he called mere fables, accusing them of having mystified China.¹¹ The same will to question the Jesuits' indulgence toward Chinese religion was to be found in *Dialogues between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher about the Existence and Nature of God* by Malebranche (1638–1715).¹²

Voltaire (1694–1778), on the other hand, did not hesitate to underline the blatant contrast between the edict of tolerance promulgated by Kangxi in 1692, which permitted Christianity's presence in China, and Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Voltaire compared the wisdom and tolerance which he believed part of Chinese institutions and customs, with royal arbitrariness and the civil and religious wars raging in Europe. Confucius and Chinese literati thus became the incarnation of an ideal of sophistication and integrity, and the emperors of China (in reality, Manchu and somewhat authoritarian), models of well-reasoned classicism and enlightened despotism, readily brandished against monarchical arbitrariness and religious fanaticism, which Voltaire considered as being "infamous." For him, the Confucian religion had the extraordinary merit of fulfilling the functions reasonably expected of a religion (i.e., making people believe in a transcendental form of justice that ultimately punishes evil and rewards good) while at the same time being free of fanaticism and superstition. He advocated a sort of "deism" which later on during

the French Revolution was to be part of the cult of Reason and the Supreme Being.¹³

Finally, it was precisely in the name of the universality of reason that the hitherto monopoly of the Bible started to be questioned. The Jesuit priest Louis Lecomte (1655–1728), in his 1696 *New Essay on the Current State of China*, a work which was condemned in 1700 right in the midst of the rites controversy, concluded his tribute to the thought of Confucius in the following manner: “Reason has existed at all times and in all places.”¹⁴ The Jesuits, and in particular the CSP, had helped to spread the idea in Europe that Chinese “theology” or “natural philosophy” was part of the universality of reason wanted by God. However, such an idea worked two ways: on the one hand, we have already seen that, especially in the case of the Chinese translation of Euclid’s *Elements* by Ricci and Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), the Jesuits’ strategy for making converts included the introduction of large sections of seventeenth-century European knowledge, which meant a considerable amount of work to translate into Chinese treatises on astronomy, calendrical science, mathematics, geography, cartography, hydraulics, and so forth. On the other hand, the Jesuits brought Europeans information about the culture and customs of the Chinese empire, which became part of debates on the relationship between religion and reason, science and theology, and the problem of the origin of languages and writing (which are still a subject of controversy today). They also made “China” (or rather *their* China) part of events in Europe, which was in the midst of a scientific revolution headed toward the modern era. Let us not forget that 1687 was the year that both the CSP and Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* appeared for the first time.

What interests us most right here is how the Jesuits explicitly presented Confucius as being a “philosopher,” praised for his moral thought, which was universally valid for all honest men. This is most probably where the myth of “philosophical China” first came from, a myth which still echoes today. For Voltaire, who was at the forefront of Enlightenment thinkers interested in China, the Jesuits’ translations proved the existence, at the other end of the known world, of an empire whose moral standards were perfectly regulated by a form of philosophy focused on man himself. We are familiar with the sections of his writings in which he talks about China, such as the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* (1756) where we find the following statement: “[The Chinese] have perfected morality, which is the first of all sciences.” For Voltaire, Confucius represented the very prototype of a philosopher, at least as far as this term was understood in the seventeenth century, as can be seen in a 1770 addition to the section “About China” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*.¹⁵

The universality of reason was the foremost principle upon which the German Lutheran philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716) based his hope of religious unity for all of mankind, of which the Sino-Manchu Empire was, in his opinion, an essential part. Unlike a number of fellow European philosophers for whom “China” was but a pretext, he took China’s potential contribution to universal reason very seriously. One of his most important writings in this respect is undoubtedly his “Letter to Monsieur de Rémond” (one of Malebranche’s disciples), written just before his death in 1716. Leibniz himself gave his text the title “Chinese Philosophy” or “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese.” His objective was to find, in Confucian texts, traces of *theologia naturalis* or *philosophia perennis* based solely upon experience and reason, which as far as China was concerned, was considered as being “venerable for its antiquity, established and authorized for approximately three thousand years now, long before the philosophy of the Greeks.”¹⁶

IV. CHINA AS ORIENTAL DESPOTISM

The wave of Sinomania of the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century dropped off significantly around the year 1750, when it started to swing toward its direct opposite, a wave of Sinophobia which was to grow ever larger all throughout the nineteenth century. A number of factors joined forces in this reversal, leading to a significant shift in “China’s” place in Europe’s intellectual geography between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First of all, disenchantment with China started to take shape right at the moment “philosophers” (first and foremost, French) started to focus their attention upon political theory. Along with the *CSP*, one of the most influential and frequently quoted sources of information on China in eighteenth-century Europe was the work of another Jesuit, Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743) whose monumental encyclopedia, *The Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China and Chinese Tartary*, was published in four volumes in 1735.¹⁷ As the sinologist and historian Michel Cartier has pointed out, this source was used from opposing standpoints by two major eighteenth-century French thinkers who were interested in the question of institutions: this is how depictions of China’s political system appeared in a rather negative manner in Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* (first published in 1748)¹⁸ and a somewhat positive one in Quesnay’s *Despotism in China* (1767).¹⁹ In this respect, chapter 21 of book VIII of *The Spirit of the Laws* has attracted particular attention, concluding as it did in a rather

peremptory way that the Chinese Empire was “despotic.” However, it would seem that Montesquieu did seriously delve into the matter and read attentively the sources, first and foremost Du Halde’s *Description*, to which he referred explicitly and accurately, and from which he most probably got his idea of “Chinese despotism.” Without wishing to go too much into detail, let us just say that Montesquieu seems to have found it difficult to make what he saw as being Chinese political organization fit into the mold of traditional categories passed on by the Greeks: aristocracy, monarchy and democracy. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, republics are generally governed by virtue, monarchies by the sense of honor and despotic regimes, by fear. Now, Montesquieu did not really know whether to include the Sino-Manchu Empire among monarchical or despotic regimes, and finally ended up opting for the second type, a concept which was to be extremely successful: “Chinese despotism.”

Concerning the problem of despotism, a reply, albeit posthumous, was made to Montesquieu’s position. In 1767, nearly twenty years after *The Spirit of the Laws* was first published, and twelve years after the author’s death in 1755, Quesnay, the well-known physiocrat, himself seventy-four years old at the time, felt the need to write *Despotism in China*. One may wonder why he made this belated reply, especially at a time when Sinomania had seriously dwindled. In this text, Quesnay explains in a well-researched and well-argued manner the ideal of “enlightened despotism,” embodied, in his opinion, by the China of his day: the ideal of a secular monarchy governed solely by “natural law.” Regardless of whether or not this despotism was “oriental” or “enlightened,” it gave rise to another myth which took the place of that of “philosophical China,” which had been so popular during the first half of the eighteenth century. One consequence of this characterization of China was that after the 1789 French Revolution, nobody thought of referring to it as a model anymore.

We should point out here that the theory of oriental despotism found allies in the British, and more specifically Scottish, Enlightenment movement. The idealized Jesuit viewpoint had been countered ever since the middle of the eighteenth century, not only by their detractors and political thinkers, but also by British accounts of aspects of Chinese reality which were considerably less flattering. In 1748, Commodore George Anson’s *Voyage Round the World in 1740–1744*²⁰ (which was translated into French the following year) constituted an initial attack against the Jesuits’ version of China. Then, in 1795, at a moment when the upheaval of the revolution had calmed down in France, another British account, concerning Lord Macartney’s embassy to the court of Emperor Qianlong 乾隆, further strengthened this negative image of China.²¹ This can at least in part

be explained by the interests of the British, who by the middle of the eighteenth century had started to colonize India, whose image from then on would be constructed in contrast to that of China.

This contrast between India and China, which had until then jointly formed the image of the oriental Other, deepened even more at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Sinomania gradually gave way to an interest in India. The latter had not been given the same role as China by the Enlightenment period, since its so-called caste-based society could not be used as a sociopolitical model. India, whose history, like that of China, went back to very ancient times, was the focus of questions about origins (of civilizations, peoples, myths, or languages). As early as 1784 an Asiatic Society was created in Calcutta, led by British sanskritists William Jones (1746–1794), Charles Wilkins (1749–1836) and Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837), whose mediating role was comparable to that of the Jesuits, as far as the translation of major sacred texts (like the famous *Bhagavad Gita*) was concerned. These translations nurtured a sort of romantic Indomania which affected first and foremost German thinkers and writers, who were in search of a return to primordial purity.

V. EUROPE AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF PHILOSOPHY

This search for origins, which took shape most clearly in German culture, was accompanied by a will to define Europe's specificity in philosophical, and no longer religious, terms. Christian Europe's claim to *religious* universality, upon which doubts had been cast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the discovery of "China," was in fact reasserted in *philosophical* form by a continent which had, within a few decades between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, been greatly transformed. France had been through a political revolution which had taken it from an old-regime monarchy to a republic, and was now actively seeking to spread this ideology across Europe and America. England had experienced an industrial revolution which allowed it to dominate the seas and embark upon its colonial venture. As for the Germans, they sought to enroot European quintessence in origins that they looked for in ancient Greece and beyond, in immemorial India.

In intellectual terms, philosophy was one of the areas which would most strongly determine and reaffirm European identity (and then supremacy). Just as much as China had been at the center of arguments used by those who, like Voltaire, had challenged the universality of the Christian religion, and hence of Europe defined in religious

terms, it was now snubbed by a Europe defined no longer in terms of *religion*, but of *reason*. The latter became the object of a new professional discipline, philosophy, taught in an equally new institutional setting entirely dedicated to it: university philosophy departments. One can rightfully wonder just how, in the space of a few decades, “China’s philosophy” could have gone from the keen interest of people like Leibniz and Voltaire, to its being shunned away from the field of philosophy by those who in the meantime had become professors, that is, professionals, of philosophy, just like their “prototype,” Kant (1724–1804). As early as 1756, in the context of his lecture in Königsberg on “physical geography,” talking of Asia Kant declared that Confucius had had no idea whatsoever about moral philosophy: “In his writings, their Master Confucius teaches nothing else but a moral doctrine for the attention of princes.” He concluded in a somewhat peremptory manner: “the concept of virtue and morality has never sunk into Chinese minds.”²²

Whereas for Enlightenment philosophers China was a noteworthy argument in their fight against the influence of religion, the new “history of philosophy” genre, published for the use of university professors and students which flourished in Germany and France at the start of the nineteenth century, tended on the contrary to define philosophy as being something strictly European, judging nonphilosophical anything which came from outside of the no longer Christian, but Greek, tradition. The German academic Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761–1819) in his *Geschichte der Philosophie* (History of Philosophy) published in Leipzig in twelve volumes between 1798 and 1819, spoke of the “progress of reason which teaches us to know ourselves better day by day. This reflective pursuit is what we call philosophy.”²³ Two criteria linked the emergence of philosophy to Greece, and justified the idea of “oriental decline.” The first one was political freedom “which became real for the first time in the fortunate lands of Greece.” The Indian caste system, and despotism (of which the Chinese Empire had been the favorite example ever since the middle of the eighteenth century), were compared with the emerging myth of the agora and Athenian democracy. What was happening was the out-and-out invention of Greece as the origin of Europe, defined first and foremost by a process of valuing philosophy and democracy, of which China became the designated counterexample.

The second criterion was the creation of a rational discourse which could free itself from the hold of religion (either in the form of Revelation or superstition) and establish itself in a reflective manner. According to Tennemann, philosophical activity was associated with reflectivity and scientism, both of which were declared missing in “oriental wisdom.” This is how China, barely mentioned at all in the

Geschichte der Philosophie, was included in the category of “religious dogmas”—a way of discrediting it compared with the category “philosophy.” This was an important aspect of the transformation of Sinophilia into Sinophobia. Whereas for the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment movement China was the model of an extremely ancient civilization which had accomplished, without resorting to religion, the remarkable feat of putting into place a society governed by morality and civility, and all of this thanks to the teachings of the “philosopher” Confucius, Europe at the very beginning of the nineteenth century turned things right around: China was now relegated to the category of “religion” (and even of, as a result of its ancientness, primitive religion), in contrast to which was established the specifically (and soon exclusively) European category of “philosophy.”

This idea was taken up by Tennemann’s French contemporary Joseph-Marie Degérando or de Gérando (1772–1842), a member of the Institut de France, who in 1804 published a *Comparative History of Philosophical Systems, in Relation to the Principles of Human Knowledge*.²⁴ This text, published as a manual for students of philosophy at the Paris Faculty of Humanities, was translated into German by Tennemann, while his own *Geschichte der Philosophie* was very successful in France thanks to Victor Cousin’s French translation which was published in 1829 as *Manual of the History of Philosophy*: we can thus see how philosophical authority was formed by close contacts between Germany and France, the height of which was found in the philosopher par excellence who dominated the first half of the nineteenth century: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel only started to take an interest in the East (i.e., beyond Persia and Egypt) rather late, during the last decade of his life, when he was giving his lectures on the philosophy of history and religion at the University of Berlin, which led him, probably in order to be systematic, to have a look at India and China. In his notes for these lectures, published as *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, we find a section dedicated to “Eastern Philosophy,” which Hegel rejects as being religion, giving him the opportunity to assert, by means of contrast, the distinctiveness of the Greek and German identity, to the point of proclaiming at the beginning of each and every one of his lectures: “There are two types of philosophy: 1° Greek philosophy; 2° Germanic philosophy.” As a result “everything oriental must therefore be excluded from the history of philosophy.”²⁵ Hegel’s French disciple Victor Cousin went one step further with a duality that we have been stuck with ever since: “The Mediterranean region and Greece are the realm of freedom and movement, just as the high plateau of the Indo-Chinese world [i.e., India and China] is the realm of immobility and despotism.”²⁶ It is easy to understand just how the definition of the realm of philosophy,

with its roots no longer in the biblical Orient but in Greece, found its justification in the expanding Europe of the nineteenth century, and saw in China its “Other” and ideal foil, just as radically as the latter had been a model for Enlightenment “philosophers.”

However, as Joël Thoraval has pointed out, Hegel’s position did evolve between 1821 and his death in 1831. In the continuation of his 1807 work *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, he first of all merely repeated the Enlightenment idea of Chinese religion’s being “natural religion” based upon “an indiscriminate intuition of God.” Ten years later, he discerned three main Asian religions, generally considered as being “pantheistic” and corresponding to three steps of the “division of consciousness-in-itself”: in this schema, Chinese religion came first, Hinduism second and Buddhism, third. In just a decade, Chinese religion had thus been raised from the stage of primitive “magic” (*Zauberei*) where it had until then been placed, just above Eskimo religion, to that of “religion of measure” (*Religion des Masses*). We can also see that, as “religion of being-in-itself,” Buddhism, which had originated in India, represented the last phase of East Asian religions, which is another clear indication of the shift from Sinomania to Indomania which marked the eighteenth century in Europe, and in particular in Germany.

VI. SINOLOGICAL ORIENTALISM VS. EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

Just as the British were pioneers of Sanskrit studies, as a result of their colonization of India starting in the eighteenth century, France can pride itself on having been the first European nation to establish sinology as a scientific discipline in its own right, with the creation in 1814 of the Chair of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu Languages and Literature at the Collège de France, held by Jean Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832). Shortly after, in 1822, the Société asiatique was founded, publishing (right up to the present day) the *Journal asiatique*, and in 1843 a chair of Chinese was created at the Ecole Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, founded in 1795 and nowadays known as the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO).

Therefore, concomitantly and in the context of industrial and colonial expansion in Europe in the nineteenth century, philosophy became a professional and institutionalized university discipline, whereas sinology developed into a specialized field of study on China, which was excluded from *philosophy as such*. In France in particular, philosophy and sinology had remarkably parallel destinies: in 1814, while Abel-Rémusat was inaugurating his chair at the Collège de France, Victor Cousin, Hegel’s disciple and founder of French

university philosophy, was teaching at the Ecole Normale. In the realm of institutionalized knowledge there thus existed an area specifically dedicated to China, and philosophy as a discipline had to account for this. This is what Degérando sought to do, denying as he did in 1804 that China, along with the rest of the East, had its place in philosophy, before reincorporating it into the 1822 version of his *Comparative History*, thanks to the work of the sinologist Abel-Rémusat.

And Victor Cousin, in his second class of April 24, 1828, at the Sorbonne, asked the famous question: “Has there ever been philosophy in the East?” The rhetorical nature of his answer was partly the same as that of Tennemann or Degérando, but was largely in line with Hegel’s theories about the East. He had had the honor and pleasure of meeting Hegel personally during his three trips to Germany (in 1817, 1818, and 1824), and became his fervent and unconditional spokesman in France. It was in response to his invitation that Hegel visited Paris in 1826, and met Abel-Rémusat, a meeting which seems to have had a significant effect upon Hegel’s depiction of Chinese religions. Upon returning to Berlin in 1827, the German philosopher referred explicitly to the authority of the French sinologist, whom he described as being “the foremost expert of the East.”

What radically changed Hegel’s viewpoint was the reversal of hierarchy that French pioneers of secular sinology had carried out for the first time in Europe in their presentation of the three traditional Chinese teachings (*san jiao* 三教). The interpretation used by the Jesuits for their missionary activities, the philosophical pre-eminence given to the Christian faith, and then the Enlightenment rejection of religious obscurantism, had generally speaking condemned Daoism and Buddhism as being mere superstition, giving Confucian teachings the status of rational morality potentially compatible with Christian dogma, the sole form of theology or philosophy worthy of attention. However, Abel-Rémusat, and then Stanislas Julien (his successor at the Collège de France) and Guillaume Pauthier, dedicated their philological and exegetic efforts to a presentation of Taoist and Buddhist canonical texts, so as to give them a “philosophical” status. In the section dedicated to Chinese thought in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel mentions what he perceived (or, rather, what was presented to him) as being its main sources of inspiration: the *I Ching* (*Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*), Confucius and Laozi (which are still to our day a sort of “winning trifecta” for the media). Thanks to Abel-Rémusat’s scientific endorsement, Hegel totally reversed the Jesuits’ values scale: whereas the latter differentiated clearly between the “philosophy” of Confucius and Taoist and Buddhist “superstitions,” Hegel turned Daoism into a religion of Reason, and reduced Confucianism to the rank of formalistic State morality, which ruled out the existence of

subjective freedom and was, as a result, incompatible with philosophy as such. According to Hegel, Confucius' morality was most commonplace, and not even up to the level of that of Cicero, and there was no point translating the *Analects*.

It was obviously Abel-Rémusat who had told Hegel about the existence of “a sect specific to the Chinese, [whose followers] are called Tao-sse [*daoshi* 道士]; those who are part of this sect are not mandarins, are not connected to State religion and do not belong to the Buddhist religion, either. Their main concept is Tao, that is, Reason (*die Vernunft*).” Hegel continued: “Tao is therefore ‘original reason, the *nous* (intelligence) which engendered the world and governs it like the mind governs the body.’ According to Abel-Rémusat, this word would be better translated as *logos*.”²⁷ Translating *dao* 道 with the Greek term *logos* was in fact the same as the Jesuits' use of the word *ratio*. However, Hegel could not help adding: “All of that is still quite confusing. As a result of its grammatical structure, the Chinese language is the cause of numerous difficulties. Mr. de Humboldt recently proved in a letter to Abel-Rémusat just how indiscriminate its grammatical construction was.”²⁸ This is a reference to Abel-Rémusat's “Letter about Chinese Characters.” He had had an epistolary discussion with his German colleague Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), who had replied in his “Letter to Mr. Abel-Rémusat About the Nature of Grammatical Forms in General and the Genius of the Chinese Language in Particular,” published in Paris in 1827.²⁹ This philosophical and grammatical debate sought to determine whether or not the Chinese language, in terms of its very structure, was suitable for philosophical use. The answer to the question “Is it possible to philosophize in Chinese?” could only be negative, because basically speaking there could be no reflection without inflection. The difference was thus no longer philosophical but, more deeply, linguistic, between non-inflectional languages such as Chinese, thus deemed unsuitable for use in philosophy, and European flectional ones, mostly derived from Greek and Latin, for which the nineteenth century came up with a common origin in India, in the form of Sanskrit. The expression “Indo-European” or “Indo-Germanic” appeared for the first time in the work of Franz Bopp, published in 1816, to designate ancient European and Indian languages as a whole. As a result of this relationship which had been discovered between Sanskrit and Greek, China was separated from India, with which it had previously been grouped together as the “East.” The result of the linguistic argument linking Sanskrit to European flectional languages, with it even being their origin, was China's further isolation as the absolute “Other.”

In the second half of the nineteenth century, marked as it was by colonial expansion, China's banishment from the constitutive realm of

European supremacy turned into an outright racist form of sinophobia. According to Frédéric Keck, “in the middle of the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte gave his disciple Pierre Laffitte the task of writing *Considerations on Chinese Civilisation as a Whole* (1861), to confirm his idea that the monotheistic ‘yellow race’ whose active functions are particularly well-developed, can act as a transition between the fetishist ‘black races’, whose affective functions are predominant, and the ‘white race’ which has recently reached the positivist stage of its development.”³⁰ Alfred Fouillée (1838–1912), author of *The History of Philosophy* (1875), written when he was lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and subsequently translated into Japanese, was the husband of the author of the very famous *Tour of France by Two Children*, which became a genuine manual in republican lay schools, without however being exempt from colonialist and racist prejudice commonplace at the end of the nineteenth century. Fouillée himself, although a philosopher, was not left behind in this respect, with a text called *Temperament and Character According to the Individual, Sex and Race* (1895), and his conviction that only European races were “capable of the highest intellectual and social development.”³¹

As Anne-Lise Dyck aptly sums up in an article published in 2005 in a special issue of the journal *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* dedicated to the question “Is there a Chinese philosophy?”³² which I chief-edited, a sort of mutual constraint is thus most clearly shown in the contradictory strategy of excluding China from philosophy as a whole, while talking of China in terms of philosophy. There is also another alternative: China does have its own philosophy, but philosophy apparently does not exist in China. In France, marked as it is by Hegel, and then Heidegger, if the East is not considered as being *previous to* philosophy (cf. Hegel), then it is seen as having *missed* it altogether (cf. Heidegger). This has led to countless theories about China’s being philosophy’s *other*. . . . We have sought to show that, apart from a few exceptions, representations of China, and not China itself, have been interesting European elites for the last four hundred years. We could say that “China” has never been anything else but a pretext, an argument for or against, in various different debates, and Confucius a convenient pawn to be displaced from one category to another, from morality to religion, and back, according to the needs of the day. However, the problem is that this use of China as the *Other*, either as an idealized model or a vilified foil, is still frequent today after so many centuries, and continues to be quite successful, at least among less-informed people.

ENDNOTES

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