

Matthias Middell (ed.)  
Cultural Transfers, Encounters and Connections in the Global  
18<sup>th</sup> Century

# Global History and International Studies VIII

Edited by  
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# **Cultural Transfers, Encounters and Connections in the Global 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

ed. by Matthias Middell



Leipziger Universitätsverlag 2014

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

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[www.univerlag-leipzig.de](http://www.univerlag-leipzig.de)  
ISBN 978-3-86583-754-7  
ISSN 1863-2289

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# At the Roots of the “Great Divergence”: Europe and China in an 18<sup>th</sup> Century Debate

Guido Abbattista

## 1. Introduction

Kenneth Pomeranz’s book on the diverging economic courses of China and Western Europe in the decades between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is a great symphony in two main movements: exposition and fugue<sup>1</sup>. In the exposition, Pomeranz illustrates a selective and comparative plan concerning the economic and social conditions of China and Western Europe in the central decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, he argues that the overall situation of the two countries was essentially akin, as far as the economic preconditions for growth are concerned. On the other hand, he cannot find in enough differences to explain the divergent path that led Europe to enter a phase of dramatic economic transformation and social change while China lagged behind, seemingly entangled in a condition that did not allow the country to fully make use of its possibilities. It is well known that this interpretation is antagonistic to Jones’ essentialist explanation of the “European miracle”, due to its focus on the circumstantial facts of the availability of New World resources and energy sources for Europe that proved of crucial importance for the industrial take-off. Pomeranz’s book is largely based, besides an enviable personal research experience, on second-hand information drawn from the best available scientific literature. This method is perfectly compatible with the scope and ambition of a strongly interpretive work. It may be observed, though, that among Pomeranz’s sources there is a quite surprising absence. He almost never avails himself, when describing the social, economic and institutional conditions of 18<sup>th</sup> century China, of the contemporary European travel literature, which is only cursorily – and not always properly – quoted. Again, this could be considered as a reasonable choice on the part of an economic historian who has chosen not to trust the impressionistic, often amateurish, European travellers’ testimonies, which are sometimes markedly ideological in

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<sup>1</sup> K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy, Princeton 2001.

character. Travel accounts are seldom employed and with just a descriptive and accessory function, which, as refining brushstrokes, do not demand strict observance of philological rules. Pomeranz has recourse to second-hand quotations from some certainly important travellers and authors, but without enquiring about the value of their testimonies, he has demonstrated an apparent lack of awareness concerning their roles and importance, while sometimes describing them in a plainly erroneous way. A few examples can support these comments and we will try to justify these remarks as not being overly trivial as they might appear at first.

It is not particularly relevant that the important testimony by the Portuguese Galeote Pereira<sup>2</sup> is quoted just once from the Charles Boxer's 1953 edition:<sup>3</sup> still, Pereira, a mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese sailor and smuggler that was taken captive and brought into the interior of China, was an interesting witness of Chinese society as well as one of the three sources of the best-seller Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres del gran Reyno de la China* (History of the most notable matters, rites and customs of the great Kingdom of China) (Rome, 1585), in fact the most widespread 16<sup>th</sup> century book on China among educated Europeans. The Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz, another important source of Mendoza, is again indirectly quoted second-hand from Boxer's anthologised edition of the *Tractado em se cotam muito por esteso as cousas da China* (Évora, 1569–1570). No mention at all is made of the third of Mendoza's sources: *Relación de las cosas de China que propriamente se llama Taybin* by the Augustinian Martin de Rada (1533–1578). Less pedantic and more to the point is to observe how the quotation, again second-hand, of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde<sup>4</sup> is entirely wrong. To Du Halde, who Pomeranz falsely considers a missionary and eyewitness, is attributed information on the Chinese environment and natural resources, which he simply could not have personally observed. The Jesuit Father Du Halde (1674–1743), the 'gatekeeper' and broker in Europe of Jesuit intelligence on China, never travelled himself to China. He was the well-known chief editor of the great collection of the Jesuit *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* and the compiler of the most famous *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de*

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<sup>2</sup> Galeote Pereira was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese soldier of fortune and author of one of the earliest accounts of life in China's Ming Dynasty after Marco Polo's. His account has been published as *South China in the Sixteenth century: being the narratives of Galeote Pereira, Fr. Gaspar de Crus, O.P., Fr. Martín de Rada, O.E.S.A., 1550–1575*, ed. by Ch. Boxer, London 1953.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xci, 388.

<sup>4</sup> Pomeranz, *Great Divergence* (Italian translation, p. 356).



*l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*. The latter work, being published in 1735, was perhaps the most important single compilation on China in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which contained an impressive, even if biased, amount of information on contemporary China – really worth much more than a single, random quotation. Never mentioned throughout Pomeranz’s book are some of the primary sources represented by the published accounts of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch ambassadors or of travellers such as those by the Spanish Dominican missionary Domingo Fernandez Navarrete (1676), the Neapolitan magistrate Giovan Francesco Gemelli Careri, the Russian envoyé Laurent Lange; or, again, by the Jesuit missionaries Gaubil, Bouvet, Martini and Le Comte (to quote just a few of those who were active in China at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and wrote authoritative mémoires and lettres), or the papal envoy Ambrogio Mezzabarba; or finally, the still more relevant accounts by the 18<sup>th</sup> century navigators and travellers George Anson, Pierre Poivre and Pierre Sonnerat, authors of rightly admired travel relations. Only episodic quotations are made of one of the most important and richest accounts of China ever published during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that is to say the *Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* by the colonial administrator, fellow of the Royal Society, friend of Edmund Burke and diplomatist George Leonard Staunton (1737–1801), principal secretary to Lord Macartney’s embassy in China from 1792 to 1794. This is unfortunate as Staunton’s account, very favourably received throughout Europe with French and German translations, distinguished itself from contemporary travel accounts for its effort of providing quantitative records and for its extremely interesting, and quite unusual for late 18<sup>th</sup> century standards, tables of data: taxes and public revenues, geographical measurements, population, names, ranks and wages of imperial functionaries, volume of Anglo-Chinese commercial exchanges and naval traffics.

If this amounted to saying that Pomeranz’s documentation would have been more complete if he had fully exploited travel literature, a quite obvious answer would be that a modern historian working on a synthetic historical interpretation is perfectly right in choosing to make use of the more recent and dependable scientific literature. But it is not just travel literature that is not taken into consideration in *The Great Divergence*. What is missing in this book is the awareness of the very rich, not just historical nor political, literature that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century continued to keep alive the attention of European public opinion on the Chinese empire, its society, economy, and civilisation. The 18<sup>th</sup> century *hommes de lettres*, from Sir William Temple to Leibniz and Christian Wolff, from Voltaire to Montesquieu and d’Argens, from the

Physiocrats to Linguet, from Raynal and Diderot to Adam Smith and Herder, from de Pauw to Bailly, Volney and Condorcet, shared Justi's view that there hardly existed a country worthier studying than China<sup>5</sup>. They splitted between "panégyristes" and "détracteurs,"<sup>6</sup> and stimulated a continuing reflection on Chinese history, politics and civilisation and gave birth to a set of images, ideas and representations to be transmitted to Hegel, Malthus, Ranke and John Stuart Mill. This lack of awareness is not a capital fault in a work that is not a history of European images of or debates on China. Still, such an information gap keeps Pomeranz from realising that European 18<sup>th</sup> century observers had come very close to formulate his very historical problem. Many of them asked when, how and why an evident divergence had occurred between Europe and China from the viewpoint of both material and cultural progress, while only differing among themselves on the breadth of such a divarication that is either partial – in other words, involving particular sectors of the collective life – or general. What Pomeranz describes as Western Europe's entrance into an epoch of dramatically fast economic growth and social change, many commentators had observed through the whole 18<sup>th</sup> century. And they posed the question of the nature and causes of what to their eyes appeared as an essentially different historical pace of European and Chinese civilisations – an awareness that they diversely expressed by referring to terms such as "progress" and "immobility."

Two recent studies have devoted particular attention to the concept of "immobility" with regard to 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Western images of China.<sup>7</sup> Both studies are very thought-provoking contributions, dwelling on important points and raising interesting questions. Ohno's essay, in particular, situates Benjamin Constant's view of China in the context of a much longer 18<sup>th</sup> century European debate with Sinophile Sinophobic manifestations, while accurately connecting the idea of Chinese immobility to the 18<sup>th</sup> century development in European culture of the idea of progress and its related philosophies of history. Although valuable as they are, in both Pagden and Ohno's contributions the concept of "immobility" seems to be taken as an immutable one. They do

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<sup>5</sup> J. H. G. Justi, *Vergleichungen der europäischen mit den asiatischen und andern vermeintlich barbarischen Regierungen*, Berlin 1762.

<sup>6</sup> Abbé Raynal, *Histoire des Deux Indes*, Genève 1780, book I, chapt. XX.

<sup>7</sup> A. Pagden, The Immobility of China: Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Enlightenment, in: *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. by L. Wolff and M. Cipolloni, Stanford 2007, pp. 50–64; E. Ohno, Benjamin Constant et l'immobilité de la Chine (Le groupe de Coppet et l'histoire, 8<sup>ème</sup> Colloque de Coppet, 5–8 juillet 2006), in: *Annales Benjamin Constant*, 2007, n° 31–32, pp. 273–293. See also D. E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800*, Lanham 2005 (1999).

not try to discern its exact meaning and nuances, its different uses, its varied reception in both Sinophile and Sinophobic contexts, and the linguistic complexities as well as variations underlying it. A more careful reading of a greater number of sources over a longer span of time could reveal how the concept of “immobility” made appearance and evolved as a way – not at all univocally negative – of describing the historical peculiarities of China in respect to Europe. From this standpoint, the present contribution is directed not at criticising or replacing Pagden’s and Ohno’s interpretations, but rather supplementing and completing them.

To this effect, this paper will show the implications, variations and evolution of the notion of “immobility” together with other related concepts. Moreover, this examination will illustrate how these concepts served to substantiate 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas that parallel Pomeranz’s “great divergence,” while taking into consideration factors and aspects that may be capable of complementing Pomeranz’s analysis itself.

## 2. Immobility, stability and the problem of chronology

What has perhaps not been noted clearly enough is that the idea of “immobility” in 18<sup>th</sup> century European images of China was compatible with positive Sinophile representations of Chinese civilisation, and to this purpose was associated with such concepts as “durability,” “ancientness,” “permanence” and “stability.” China had been an object of high regard since the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a civilisation notable for its longevity, continuity and cohesiveness.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that such qualities, arising from the capacity of a collective entity – a nation, an empire, a people – to resist the eroding agency of historical time, could be the basis of a lasting admiration in a Europe devastated by religious wars, international instability, major civil conflicts and by bitter religious and philosophical dissensions fostered by both Protestant and Catholic intolerance. A China stable through the centuries could therefore provide a model capable of favourably being contrasted with a cruel, violent, war-like, inhuman Europe that was ripped by strife, hate as well as the absence of humanity, benevolence and justice. This representation of China was formulated in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century by the most influential Jesuit compilation on the Chinese empire, the already mentioned *Description de la Chine* by Père du Halde. Du Halde begins his great work by distinguishing two prominent interconnected characteristics of China

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<sup>8</sup> D. Lach, China in Western Thought, in: *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, New York 1968–1973, vol. I, p. 355.

as an ancient and a venerable civilisation: continuity and self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency demonstrated that, owing to the wisdom of its social and economic organisation as well as its institutions and internal regulations, China did not have to imitate foreign countries nor import foreign goods and ideas. Continuity was a clear evidence that Chinese precocious wisdom had given stability to laws and institutions, while avoiding any need to change. Wisdom, solidity, continuity, “uniformité” and self-sufficiency were indeed the main features of Chinese civilisation.

La Chine a cet avantage sur toutes les autres nations du monde, que durant plus de 4000 ans elle a été gouvernée presque toujours par les princes naturels du pays, avec la même forme d’habit, de mœurs, de loix, de coutumes et de manières, sans avoir jamais rien changé à ce que ses anciens législateurs avoient sagement établi dès la naissance de l’empire. Comme ses habitans trouvent chez eux tout ce qui est nécessaire aux commodités et aux délices de la vie, ils ont cru se suffire à eux-mêmes, et ont affecté de n’avoir aucun commerce avec le reste des hommes [...] Cet éloignement de tout commerce avec les étrangers, joint au génie ferme et solide de ces peuples, n’a pas peu contribué à conserver parmi eux cette constante uniformité de leurs usages.<sup>9</sup>

The original virtues of Chinese institutions and laws explained also why that empire was capable of enduring the periods of rebellions and civil struggles, while assimilating foreign invaders without being significantly altered by them. Eastern conquering barbarians coming from outside of China produced an opposite effect when compared to what barbaric invading peoples had caused in the history of the Western world. In the latter case, the invaders introduced radically new institutions and deeply influenced European society and legal and political systems. In China they had rather adapted and acculturated themselves to Chinese laws, society and traditions, whose superiority was demonstrated by their resistance and capacity for assimilation. The Chinese empire was unique in world history. Whereas ancient empires had completely disappeared, it subsisted during the centuries without losing anything of its splendour and greatness: “semblable à ces grands fleuves, dont on a de la peine à découvrir la source, et qui roulent constamment leurs eaux avec une majesté toujours égale” (“like those great rivers, whose source is difficult to discover and which flow constantly and with unchanging magnificence”).<sup>10</sup> Du Halde’s description contained some

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<sup>9</sup> *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, Paris 1735, 4 vols, vol. II, pp. 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> *Description de la Chine*, vol. II, p. 2.

elements which could be interpreted as an inherent logical explanation of China’s stability. The Chinese people showed a strong sentiment of respect for traditions, for their ancestors, for paternal authority. The State and imperial power were objects of veneration comparable to the filial respect that sons and daughters owed to their parents. At that time, the Chinese showed a typical “esprit d’obéissance et de soumission” and an attitude of deference – particularly of women toward their husbands – that generated a natural propensity for conservatism that was the foundation of the political stability, or a “gouvernement tranquille.”<sup>11</sup> Du Halde’s critically remarked Chinese inferiority to Europe as far as the arts and sciences were concerned – particularly the scientific and technological gap caused by their different capacities to make the arts and sciences progress. He underlined Chinese’s excessive regard for their traditional practices and the related difficulty to persuade them to adopt European technologies<sup>12</sup>. Such a critical attitude, however, did not diminish the Jesuit’s overall favourable view of China, especially its solidity and time resistant characteristics.

Jumping ahead a few years into a different cultural context, we can observe how several qualities, such as durability, stability and permanence, were praised and admired by Sinophiles as the Marquis d’Argens author of the *Lettres chinoises*:<sup>13</sup> The marquis d’Argens’ fictional Chinese traveller in Europe comments the “éloge magnifique de notre Empire, de notre gouvernement” pronounced by an English author. The latter was John Milton who in a letter of his had praised “Sinensia Regna [...] quae immota manent semperque manebunt.”<sup>14</sup> In d’Argens’ paraphrase, Milton’s letter “parloit avec admiration de l’ancienneté de notre Monarchie, qui a subsisté sans changemens et sans altérations durant tant de siècles.” The Chinese empire presented a striking contrast with the Roman Empire, which Jupiter was not able to protect from the wear and tear of time while the city of Rome became a scene of “immenses débris et [...] ruines.” The question to be asked was which God had preserved China “contre les injures du tems” and from revolutions. In comparison to Europe, that was negatively perceived as the domain of perennial instability, revolutions, conflicts and quarrels between political

<sup>11</sup> *Description de la Chine*, vol. III, pp. 129–130.

<sup>12</sup> See Ohno, Benjamin Constant, p. 283.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens, *Lettres chinoises: ou Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique, entre un Chinois voyageur à Paris & ses correspondans à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse et au Japon*, La Haye 1755, 6 vols [1<sup>st</sup> edition La Haye, 5 vols, 1739–1740], vol. III, pp. 311–312.

<sup>14</sup> *Miltonis Epistola ad Pollionem. Edidit & notis illustravit F. S. Cantabrigiensis*, Londini 1738, pp. 4–5.

nations and religious faiths, China offered an enviable picture of unity, order and harmony. This raised the problem of explaining such a remarkable difference that had grown into a real Sinophile myth. Durability was taken in the case of China as a synonym for the solidity of political and social foundations, accepted institutions, laws, social values and beliefs that made continuity a distinctive feature of the Chinese empire. According to this view, Chinese civilisation had precociously attained a high point of maturity in every field of collective material, cultural and spiritual life; and had continued for centuries without changes, corruption or any historical period of decadence.

These ideas, partly under the influence of the Jesuits' *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, had aided the emergence in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century of an influential current of Sinophilia tending to weigh China very favourably against Europe and stressing China's civilisation anteriority and greater antiquity, albeit admitting that history had produced a limited cultural – sometimes philosophical, sometimes scientific – variance.<sup>15</sup> One among the most prominent spokesman for Sinophilia was undoubtedly Leibniz, especially in his 1697 preface to the *Novissima Sinica*.<sup>16</sup> Here Leibniz, while comparing Europe and China,<sup>17</sup> considered the outcome of an ideal challenge between the two civilisations uncertain.<sup>18</sup> He maintained the opinion that Chinese versatility in practical, “industrial arts” made them “equal” to Europe. Europe was certainly superior in the theoretical

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<sup>15</sup> See for example P. Louis Lecomte, who maintained that “il n' est pas inutile de sçavoir jusqu'où elle [China] a autrefois porté la perfection des sciences, dans un temps où tous les autres peuples du monde étoient encore ignorans ou barbares” and still specified: “quoique toute la philosophie de cette fameuse nation ne soit pas à present capable de nous instruire” (*Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*, Paris 2 1697, 3 vols., vol. I, p. 296 ff.).

<sup>16</sup> Benevolo lectori, in *Novissima sinica historiam nostri temporis illustratura* [...] edente G. G. L., English translation in: G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on China*. Translated, with an Introduction, Notes and Commentaries by D. J. Cook and H. Rosemont Jr., Chicago/La Salle 1994, pp. 45–59: quotations, accompanied by page number, are from this edition; on Leibniz and China see D. Lach, *Leibniz and China*, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6 (1945), pp. 436–455, P. Riley, *Leibniz's Political and Moral Philosophy in the Novissima Sinica, 1699–1999*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), pp. 217–239, and now F. Perkins, *Leibniz and China: a Commerce of Light*, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>17</sup> “I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and in Tshina (as they call it), which adorns the Orient as Europe does the opposite edge of the earth” (p. 45).

<sup>18</sup> “Now the Chinese Empire, which challenges Europe in cultivated area and certainly surpasses her in population, vies with us in many other ways in almost equal combat, so that now they win, now we” (p. 46).

sciences – including metaphysics, logic, mathematics and astronomy – and also in military arts, although he admitted that the Chinese neglected them not out of ignorance but “by deliberation.” The Chinese appeared to him undoubtedly superior for the understanding and practice of the precepts of moral and civil life. Chinese civil laws were excellent for their capacity of yielding a much higher degree of public tranquillity and social order than any rule prescribed by known established religion. Social manners and familiar customs were inspired by a mutual respect, sense of duty, cult of tradition and of the ancestors, and “a kind of perpetual courtesy” that contrasted with the European propensity to litigiousness, reciprocal contempt and disposition to conflict.<sup>19</sup> The extensive authority of the emperor was employed to promote the welfare of the subjects and to gain the approbation of posterity. He encouraged so much arts and sciences, especially through the assistance of Western academics and scientists, that, “I fear – Leibniz said – that we [Europeans] may soon become inferior to the Chinese in all branches of knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Looking at the present corrupt state of Europe Leibniz ironically hoped that a regenerating effect might derive from the work of Chinese missionaries in the West who could transmit to the Europeans themselves “the use and practice of natural religion” and the benefits it had procured to the Chinese. In conclusion, the German philosopher believed that, out of a comparison between China and the West worked out by an imaginary jury from the viewpoint of the welfare of the people and of good government, “the golden apple would be awarded to the Chinese.”<sup>21</sup>

China’s persistence and stability were frequently highlighted by many authors as positive and typical characteristics of that civilisation, which positively distinguished it from an unstable, inconstant, troubled and restless Europe. For example, it is the case of the French traveller Le Gentil la Barbinais, who in 1728 in his *Nouveau voyage autour du monde*, pleaded for a relativistic attitude towards different cultures, religions and civilisations. He also praised the Chinese for their disposition to constancy as well as stressed as worth of notice the permanence and attachment to traditions as being part of Chinese national character.<sup>22</sup> As to the supposed European superiority in arts and sciences, Le Gentil adopted again a relativistic outlook. Although claiming no inten-

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 50–51.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Le Gentil de la Barbinais, *Nouveau voyage autour du monde*, Amsterdam 1728, 3 vols, vol. II, pp. 99–109, quoted in V. Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l’esprit philosophique en France, 1640–1740*, Genève 1971, pp. 414–415.

tion to deny Europe's overall advantage, he contrasted European superiority in the arts of war – meaning its inclination to internal strife – with Chinese greater inclination towards peaceful and useful activities and for domestic unity and concord, while emphasising China's higher understanding of the ways to ensure good government as well as the subjects' protection and welfare.

Such ideas had seeped into some early 18<sup>th</sup> century popular general histories containing large sections on China. This is the case of *A Compleat Universal History, of the Several Empires, Kingdoms, States throughout the Known World*, by B. Le Stourgeon.<sup>23</sup> In its opening lines we read that, "China, of all Dominions of the Earth, is celebrated as well for politeness and civility, for grandeur, for riches and magnificence, as for Arts and inventions." China was described as an ancient civilised country: large, plentiful, with great cities, a marvellous system of canals and roads, all sorts of riches, arts and manufactures, an admirable agriculture and a lively commerce, a good and just idea of government and of monarchical authority. In a word, a country not only deservedly comparable, but possibly superior, to Europe. However, Le Stourgeon admitted the weakness of the Chinese in the theoretical sciences, such as metaphysics, mathematics, physics. Still, he frankly admired China's antiquity and its respect for traditions, for political and parental authorities, which accounted for the solidity of its institutions and society.

It cannot be said, however, that at the time there existed an undisputedly positive vision of China as a venerable, ancient and durable civilisation. By many European observers of Chinese matters, stability came soon to be associated with a negative connotation, evoking immobility. Even an admirer of China like Leibniz praised, the Chinese for their talent in practical forms of knowledge, and admitted that they had surpassed the Europeans in politics and ethics. Still, he underlined their poor skills in the theoretical sciences, like geometry, physics, astronomy, whose limited advancement had prevented a more general intellectual progress of society.<sup>24</sup> Even more critical and less positive accents can be found in some later important works. For example, the *Introduction à l'histoire de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et de l'Amérique* (1735) by Bruzen de la Martinière, and its enlarged 1753–1759 edition by the royal censor and under-secretary to the French *Académie des Inscriptions*

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<sup>23</sup> London, printed by Benjamin Baddam, 1732–1738, pp. 967: this work was published during six years in weekly instalments. The author's name can be deduced from the Proposals for printing by Subscription, Weekly, *A Compleat Universal History* [...] by M. Le Stourgeon, advertised in *The Present State of the Republick of Letters*, vol. X, September 1732, pp. 238–239.

<sup>24</sup> Leibniz, Preface to *Novissima Sinica*.



Thomas François de Grace (1714–1799)<sup>25</sup> refused ancient Chinese chronology, while agreeing with De Guignes’s thesis of an Egyptian origin of the Chinese and spoke of the Chinese empire as one which “a souvent éprouvé de grandes révolutions, occasionnées tant par les Chinois mêmes, tantôt par les différentes nations Tartares qui se sont emparées du throne, et qui en ont été chassées. Cet Empire a plusieurs fois été démembré et il s’est formé à ses dépenses un grands nombre de petits Etats.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the *Modern History: or, the Present State of All Nations* by Thomas Salmon, an overall positive account of China did not result in an overt attitude of Sinophilia.<sup>27</sup> On the contrary, a clearly negative opinion was expressed about an allegedly traditional contempt by the Chinese towards foreign nations, peoples and cultures. This was the reason, as Salmon described it, that they progressed so little in the speculative sciences, albeit great advances had been made in other aspects of technology, manufactures and engineering. An unreserved admiration for China’s antiquity, stability and even superiority to Europe was not a matter of fact in early 18<sup>th</sup> century European writings, which elaborated upon the notion of a cultural, or specifically scientific, gap between Europe and China. The former was seen as being capable of recovering the time lag and then holding firmly the torch of progress, while the latter was regarded as a loitering backward country.

When referring to critics and sceptics on the matter of China in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one cannot avoid quoting the name of Montesquieu, to which we cannot devote much consideration, even if it is well known that his interest towards China was intense, prolonged and nourished by several readings, encounters and interviews.<sup>28</sup> In his masterpiece the *Esprit des Lois* (1748) such interest was concentrated on several aspects of contemporary Chinese institutions, laws, economy, society and religion, together with his reflections on despotism. The *Esprit des Lois* looks at the actual working of the Chinese society and

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<sup>25</sup> Bruzen de la Martinière, *Introduction à l’histoire de l’Asie, de l’Afrique et de l’Amérique*, Amsterdam 1735, 2 vols and, *Introduction à l’histoire générale et politique de l’Univers où l’on voit l’origine, les révolutions, l’état présent et les intérêts des souverains* commencée par le baron de Pufendorff, complétée et continuée jusqu’à 1743 par Bruzen de la Martinière, Amsterdam 1739–1743, 10 vols. and *Introduction à l’histoire générale et politique de l’Univers [...] nouvelle édition revue, considérablement augmentée [...] par M. De Grace*, Paris 1759, vol. VII, pp. 619–620.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> London, printed for James Crockatt, 1727–1735, 26 vols., see. vol. I, pp. 1–34.

<sup>28</sup> G. Barrera, “Chine,” in: *Dictionnaire électronique Montesquieu*, mis à jour le: 13/02/2008, URL: <http://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lsh.fr/index.php?id=319>, par. 20.

state. Montesquieu does not directly express his thoughts on Chinese antiquity, stability or immobility, although he grasped the importance of Chinese attachment to traditions that produced a peculiar national spirit. His interpretation of Chinese government as a form of despotism that generally caused inertia, passivity, lack of initiative and finally degeneration, should be considerably qualified in the light of his acknowledgement that the safe establishment of landed property in China preserved its government from decay more than in other Asian countries.<sup>29</sup> His *Pensées* reveal however his attention to problem of duration and stability in Chinese history. On this aspect in a pre-1748 *Pensée* he adopted a critical standpoint towards any representation of China as an ancient and stable empire: “La merveille de la durée de l’empire de la Chine s’évanouit lorsqu’on en approche de près.”<sup>30</sup> It was unthinkable that China would not have known barbaric ages in its past. China too had had to emerge from barbarism through historical mutations. China’s long isolation from the rest of the world had been the sole reason why it had been considered as a special form of empire belonging to a different historical category and with a diverging historical fate from that of all other empires. In other words, prolonged duration was a mirage, the effect of a distorted perspective: a conclusion which we will find again later on in Mably.

### 3. Stability implications and aporias

Since the publication of Martino Martini’s *Historiae sinicae decas prima* (1658) and of Isaac Vossius *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi* (The Hague, 1659), another crucial aspect of Chinese civilisation had emerged: its supposed antiquity, and then its abnormally long historical chronology. Debates on this point were to continue very lively between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is well known, and has not to be reminded here, how deeply the question of Chinese chronology intersected those of Jewish and Christian universal history as well as the authority of the Bible as a veritable account of the origins of mankind, the peopling of the earth, and the history of the early empires. Suffice it to say that to uphold the antiquity of Chinese civilisation and its chronological priority to Jewish history, as narrated by the Scriptures, was equal to adopting a critical stance toward the authority of both Protestant and Catholic orthodoxies, and was normally associated to attitudes favour-

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<sup>29</sup> *Pensées*, Paris 1991, n. 1839, p. 569. On the importance of private property of lands in China as a cause of industriousness see also *Esprit des Lois*, book XIX.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 234, p. 255.

able to tolerance, Deism, liberty of conscience, or even rationalism and religious scepticism. Asserting a chronological priority of China with respect to the rest of the ancient world meant moreover to claim an earlier process of civilization in that country. A precocious start implied, according to this view, the attainment of earlier results. This was true as far as social and political organisation was concerned and also from the standpoint of the progress of knowledge, arts and sciences, religion, morals and politics. This view received an influential endorsement by the *Encyclopédie*. This great literary symbol of the French Enlightenment, in an article that appears as an epitome of Sinophilia, defined China:

[L]e pays le plus peuplé & le mieux cultivé qu’il y ait au monde; il est arrosé de plusieurs grandes rivières, & coupé d’une infinité de canaux que l’on y fait pour faciliter le commerce. Le plus remarquable est celui que l’on nomme le *canal royal*, qui traverse toute la *Chine*. Les Chinois sont fort industrieux; ils aiment les Arts, les Sciences & le Commerce: l’usage du papier, de l’Imprimerie, de la poudre à canon, y étoit connu long-tems avant qu’on y pensât en Europe.<sup>31</sup>

In another article dedicated to the philosophy of the Chinese, Diderot, an author better known for his later Sinophobia, openly evoked the possibility of a Chinese superiority to Europe:

Ces peuples qui sont, d’un consentement unanime, supérieurs à toutes les nations de l’Asie, par leur ancienneté, leur esprit, leurs progrès dans les arts, leur sagesse, leur politique, leur goût pour la Philosophie, le disputent même dans tous ces points, au jugement de quelques auteurs, aux contrées de l’Europe les plus éclairées.<sup>32</sup>

On chronological matters he decided against the Chinese when faced with the alternative “qu’il faut ou abandonner la chronologie des livres sacrés, ou celle des Chinois.” Still, Diderot accepted the idea that civilisation in China had started in times immemorial owing to the work of its first emperors who, independently on when exactly they lived, very early put into practice “la science de civiliser les peuples, d’adoucir leurs moeurs, & de les accoutumer aux chaînes utiles de la société.” Nevertheless, with a reluctant and doubtful attitude, he stressed that, if the Chinese empire had undeniably ancient origins and development, this fact

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<sup>31</sup> Article “Chine.” Quotations from this and other articles from the *Encyclopédie* and the *Supplément* come from the CD-ROM edition of the *Encyclopédie* par Diderot and D’Alembert by Les Éditions Redon, 26740 Marsanne, version 1.0.0.

<sup>32</sup> Article “Chinois (philosophie des),” by Diderot.

should raise the question about the unsatisfactory progress of their language, writing, literary productions and physical sciences – physics, astronomy, mathematics, anatomy. The backwardness of their knowledge in the field of natural sciences besides had been evident on the basis of the extreme favour with which the Chinese welcomed the arrival of the Europeans and accepted Western scientific teachings. It is worth remarking how these traces of scepticism in Diderot's article were later transformed in Panckoucke's *Supplément* (1776), where a question was clearly formulated touching on the reverse aspects of stability, constancy and attachment to traditions: "L'on a recherché quelles étoient les causes qui avoient retardé le progrès des sciences à la Chine". In other words, what had caused "l'état de langueur où sont les sciences à la Chine" and "pourquoi leurs progrès ont été si lents?"<sup>33</sup> Diderot considered unsatisfactory the traditional answer to this question, according to which there had been a conservative effect owing to institutional constraints, to the modest opportunities for scientists, to the more rewarding character of the study of laws and morals and to the modest material advantages awaiting scientific expertise. Such particular conditions could be discovered also in ancient Greece or in modern Europe. The author of this article rather considered decisive the "faute de ce génie inventeur" that in recent times had showed itself in Europe and "le respect extrême qu'ils [the Chinese] ont pour leurs ancêtres". Such respect represented a degenerate form of that fruitful attitude to tradition which, when distorted and reduced to a blind veneration, could become "le poison des sciences."

Clearly visible here is the problem that had been most interestingly discussed decades earlier by Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, the successor of Fontenelle as secretary of the French Royal Academy of Sciences, and R. P. Dominique Parrenin, missionary in Peking from 1698 to 1741. They had an epistolary exchange between 1728 and 1740, which was partially printed in 1734 in the 21<sup>st</sup> *Recueil des Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* and in 1735 in the *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences*. Finally, it was published in 1759 in a separate volume restoring Mairan's text to authenticity after its manipulation by Du Halde as an editor of the *Lettres édifiantes*.<sup>34</sup> The central question, on which Dor-

<sup>33</sup> Article "Chinois (Littérature des)," signed (+), in: *Supplément Panckoucke*.

<sup>34</sup> *Lettres de M. de Mairan au R. P. Parrenin, missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus à Pékin, contenant diverses questions sur la Chine*, Paris 1759, new edition Paris 1770 (subsequent quotations are from this edition); a selection of these texts is also available in: *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des jésuites de Chine: 1702–1776*, choisies et présentées par I. Vissière et J.-L. Vissière, Paris 2002. On Du Halde interventions on Mairan's text published in the *Lettres édifiantes* see Pinot, pp. 416–417.

tous felt himself torn and “flottant” between “l’admiration et le doute,” was that of the antiquity of the Chinese monarchy, with its centuries-long permanence and the “esprit d’ordre et [...] constance inébranlable de la Nation dans son attachement aux Loix et aux anciennes Coutumes.”<sup>35</sup> He admired not only the ancient Chinese political constitution and laws, as well as the justice and wisdom of the emperors, but especially the beneficial consequences of this psychological attitude of respect for traditions, which when common to a whole people produced the subjects’ obedience to the government and its stability. At the same time, the academician avowed his scepticism about the antiquity and reliability of Chinese chronology, as well as his astonishment for the fact that the Chinese seemed to have been uninterruptedly cultivating the theoretical sciences for four thousand years without any capacity to make their knowledge progress. As a staunch supporter of the Moderns’ in the “querelle des Anciens et des Modernes”, he admitted that Chinese capacity for scientific matters in the present was far inferior to the European one; however, the latter had been hindered by long intermissions of ignorance and barbarism.<sup>36</sup> Despite their skill in practical matters of government and administration, the Chinese were lacking “cette sagacité [...] cette ardeur [...] cette inquietude qu’on nomme curiosité et qui fait avancer à si grands pas dans les sciences.” As this kind of conclusion was applicable to other scientific disciplines, like geography and cartography, Dortous deduced – with a rather surprising inversion between causes and effects – that this could explain the poor propensity of the Chinese for navigation, exploration, discovery and long-distance trade; thus, highlighting a clear difference with respect to the European genius. That the Chinese were a people “le moins heureusement né pour les arts et les sciences, aussi incapables de perfectionner que d’inventer”<sup>37</sup> was similarly demonstrated by their incapacity to move forward from the knowledge of gunpowder to manufacturing the gun and from the knowledge of engraving and printing to movable types. Chinese language and writing were certainly responsible, according to Dortous, for the scanty progress of scientific and technical knowledge. Without denying specific aspects of Chinese superiority – as far as the practical arts of government, administration, husbandry and manufactures were concerned – Dortous expressed to the Jesuit missionary Parrenin his surprise and his incapacity to fully explain the negative attitude towards innovation and scientific progress that certainly kept China, with respect to Europe, in a state of specific inferiority.

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<sup>35</sup> *Lettres au R. P. Parrenin*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Father Parennin, for his own part, in a long letter quite closer in dimensions to an essay, tried to answer in detail Dortous' queries, introducing a thesis which would be taken up later in the *Supplément* to the *Encyclopédie*. To this purpose he explicitly contrasted the early, or very ancient, "cultivation" of scientific learning in China and its incapacity of refining, improving, or making progress through the ages. Parennin was not inclined to attribute this to a supposed lack of intellectual vivacity and capacity to study in-depth scientific matters.<sup>38</sup> He resorted rather to the socio-cultural causes connected to the social position of the scientists. According to Parennin, some of the most important socio-cultural and institutional reasons for the lack of scientific progress in China were the poor rewards for astronomers and mathematicians in the imperial service, their exclusion from the decision-making process at the top of the empire, the conservative drive governing such institutions as the Peking observatory and the Tribunal of Mathematics, their hostility to the introduction of new technologies, and the absence of a politics of support for innovation on the part of the emperors.<sup>39</sup> The unwillingness to communicate with the outside world and the absence of comparison with neighbouring countries were additional obstacles that hampered the rise of a spirit of emulation in China. The same result derived from the circumstances surrounding the access to social and political honours as well as preferment, which was conferred upon humanist studies – law, ethics, history and writing – to which the ambitious candidate administrators and civil servants devoted themselves exclusively. To humanities, not to sciences, went the public recognition. A further problem derived from the fact that the humanist studies were not useless in themselves, although they were cultivated in a particular way that based them on the employment of memory and not on the spirit of innovation and creativity. Quoting approvingly Dortous' words, Parennin, who nonetheless refused the ideas of the academician on the hampering effect of Chinese language and writing, reinforced them by making reference to a general mental disposition typical of China:

Ils n'ont pas, comme vous l'avez fort bien remarqué, cette sagacité, cette inquiétude qui sert à avancer dans les Sciences, mais encore parce qu'ils se bornent à ce qui est purement nécessaire, et que, selon l'idée qu'ils se sont formée du bonheur personnel et de la tranquillité de l'Etat, ils ne croient pas qu'il faille se morfondre, ni gêner son esprit pour des choses de pure spéculation, qui ne peuvent nous rendre plus heureux ni plus tranquille.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 93: "je n'en accuse pas le fonds d'esprit des Chinois."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 95–98.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 107–108.

The last line of this passage alludes to a point worth stressing: Parennin’s opinion about the Chinese inclination for the application-oriented, rather than the theoretical, aspects of learning. In Parennin’s view, what we would term as basic or pure research, and 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century authors called “speculative sciences”, attracted Chinese’s interest and efforts only as far as their practical, technical, utilitarian applications, not theoretical value, were concerned..

The Dortous-Parennin debate, that was prolonged through an epistolary exchange until 1740, provided the opportunity to focus on some of the most relevant interpretative problems raised in European culture concerning Chinese civilisation and culture, as well as the social and economic structures of China. Furthermore, this debate contributed to fixing the image of a very ancient civilisation, with an uninterrupted historical course in addition to such a high degree of cultural and material achievements as to make China not at all inferior to Western Europe but possibly superior to her in certain regards. At the same time a distinctive conservative penchant, a sort of national genius or spirit opposed to the restlessness, love of novelty and innovation, creative attitudes typical of the Europeans, was seen as systematically checking China’s opportunity for development. According to this view, China and Europe had proceeded for long time on a same level, with China perhaps preceding and surpassing the West from several standpoints while continuing on a firmly held high degree of development. But at a certain period in history – no author tried to be exact on this – Europe had taken the lead while China had lagged behind, most visibly in sciences and technologies. A divergence had occurred, causing a transformation of virtues into vices, of stability into immobility, of continuity into mere conservation, of respect for traditions into blind attachment to past usages, of self-sufficiency into self-retreat, narrow-mindedness and a haughty unwillingness to communicate with outside. A marked difference was emerging from the European viewpoint between a country as the Chinese empire, characterised by an inability to progress, and Europe, which increasingly projected outwards, towards expansion and conquest of the world. Admirers of China had to come to terms with this paradox. They had to find a satisfactory explanation for Chinese backwardness in scientific knowledge – an aspect not yet considered as a cause of an overall backwardness, but which soon was to be connected to the wider problem of China’s capacity for “politeness” or for civilisation and progress as such. This is apparent, for instance, with a prominent European philosopher who explicitly expounded this paradox. In his 1742 essay “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science” David

Hume observed: “In China, there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science, which, in the course of so many centuries, might naturally be expected to ripen into something more perfect and finished, than what has yet arisen from them.”<sup>41</sup>

The Scottish philosopher, who elsewhere defined China as “one of the most flourishing empires in the world,”<sup>42</sup> was interested in pointing out the “natural causes” of this paradox. Of these causes one was the great extension of the empire and the other its inner cohesion. Correspondingly, these same causes facilitated the propagation of identical laws, customs and beliefs throughout its territories; and the formation of a “torrent of popular opinion” that acted as a powerful spring towards uniformity, conservation and the respect of ancestral traditions, which were hard to defy or change<sup>43</sup>. Stability over the centuries and internal calm had generated an “uniformity of character,” even within such a diversified empire, and aided the formation of a “national character.”<sup>44</sup> Still, that same uniformity also had a negative effect on the progress of arts and sciences. This environmental and political explication Hume confirmed in respect to the history of Europe and of Greece, in particular, where arts and sciences had always flourished and found “constant habitation.”<sup>45</sup> First, the geography of the Western world offered the scene of territories divided, fragmented, and broken into naturally distinct governments. Second, European history had been positively characterized by discontinuities more than by continuity, even as far as the “periods of learning,”<sup>46</sup> were concerned. These political and cultural discontinuities, according to Hume, had produced positive effects. On the cultural level such discontinuity “would be rather favourable to the arts and sciences, by breaking the progress of authority, and dethroning the tyrannical usurpers over human reason”<sup>47</sup>. On the political one it had allowed the alternation of governments: and both had prevented the

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<sup>41</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science,” in D. Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. by E. F. Miller, Indianapolis 2005, pp. 111–137, see p. 122.

<sup>42</sup> “Of Commerce,” *ibid.*, see p. 264.

<sup>43</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science”, p. 122.

<sup>44</sup> “[...] where a very extensive government has been established for many centuries, it spreads a national character over the whole empire, and communicates to every part a similarity of manners. Thus the Chinese have the greatest uniformity of character imaginable: though the air and climate, in different parts of those vast dominions, admit of very considerable variations,” in “Of National Characters”, *ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>45</sup> “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science”, p. 123.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



continuation of servile submission to political authority. Therefore, for Hume it was political continuity and stability by themselves that had debilitated the progress of sciences in China. Yet if these causes explained “so slow a progress” of sciences, how could it be explained that, as a matter of fact, the Chinese lived in plenty, “happiness, riches, and good police”<sup>48</sup>? Did not China present a second paradox consisting of the existence of “happiness, riches, and good police” under a monarchical government, while in the absence of “an idea of a free government”<sup>49</sup>? Hume’s answer to this was based on the idea that the Chinese monarchy was not absolute. It was put under the restraint of the threat of popular rebellion and was obliged to place provincial governors under the control of general laws. Again, the paradox involved in the past attainment of a high level of civilisation and an apparent deficiency of progress in the present had been at the heart of Hume’s reflection, which led him to conclude, even if with a residual hesitation, that “the skill and ingenuity of Europe in general surpasses perhaps that of China, with regard to manual arts and manufactures.”<sup>50</sup> In Hume’s view, indeed, Western superiority was granted in scientific matters, but still with reservations in productive arts, in which the two civilisations could still appear essentially on a par with each other.

An interesting attempt to synthesise and locate within a philosophical-historical scheme the puzzling case of Chinese civilisation was made by the Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot in his early writings, such as the 1750-52 dissertations on universal history and his considerations on *Les progrès de la décadence des sciences et des arts*. These contributions are particularly compelling because they call into question the concepts of antiquity, stability, progress, and immobility and put them in relation with a more general tentative interpretation –. Turgot, with a richness of metaphorical expressions, clearly viewed China as a civilisation paralysed by its very precocity. Such early development had turned into stability, and then into an immobility involving incapacity for further progress. In this way the early progress, “une maturité précoce,” was not to be considered a blessing, but rather a handicap, as if such an early development had exhausted all fertility: “Ces tiges, trop fécondes en branches dès leur origine, cessèrent bientôt de s’élever.”<sup>51</sup> As in the case of China, antiquity meant continuity in time, which in turn gave birth to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 122, note n. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 122, note n. 13

<sup>50</sup> Of Balance of Trade, *ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>51</sup> A.-R.-J. Turgot, *Second discours sur les progrès successifs de l’esprit humain*, in: *Oeuvres de Turgot*, édition E. Daire, Paris 1844, 8 vols., vol. II, pp. 597–626, see p. 602.

traditions that ended with sanctifying ancient wisdom, giving it a sort of resistance to change. Europe and China demonstrated this by exhibiting the different historical paces of civilisations. As a latecomer Europe brought with it a powerful impulse towards progress which China had lost in the long course of its century-old history. Such a weakening and finally inhibiting effect was clearly visible in particular aspects of Chinese culture, such as language and scientific knowledge, which Turgot – even if not out of unsympathetic attitude – considered confined to mediocrity because of an insistent, continual interference of the imperial power.<sup>52</sup>

This paradox – a Chinese civilisation interrupted, missed or unequal to expectations and which aroused, in Durtous de Mairan's words, at the same time "l'admiration et le doute" –, was nowhere better expressed than in the writings of the patriarch of 18<sup>th</sup> century Sinophilia: Voltaire. Voltaire was a staunch enthusiast, "immodérément amoureux,"<sup>53</sup> of China and it is not surprising to find in many of his writings the idea of an ancient, venerable, continuous and uninterrupted civilisation in China. China offered him the example of a country that had known an earlier process of civilisation: a process that chronologically preceded the world accounted for by Jewish and Christian Scriptures and reached maturity earlier than any known Western cultures.

The whole range of motives of Voltaire's admiration for China are so well-known that a very short summary will be sufficient.<sup>54</sup> He appre-

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<sup>52</sup> "Une nation qui a pris une trop prompte stabilité peut, par une raison semblable, être comme arrêtée dans le progrès des sciences. Les Chinois ont été fixés trop tôt; ils sont devenus comme ces arbres dont on a coupé la tige et qui poussent des branches près de terre. Ils ne sortent jamais de la médiocrité. On a pris chez eux tant de respect pour les sciences à peine ébauchées, et l'on en a tant gardé pour les ancêtres qui leur avaient fait faire ces premiers pas, qu'on a cru qu'il n'y avait rien à y ajouter et qu'il ne s'agissait plus que d'empêcher ces belles connaissances de se perdre. Une maturité précoce, dans les sciences ou dans les langues, n'est pas un avantage à envier. L'Europe, plus tardive que l'Asie, a porté des fruits plus nourissants et plus féconds. L'instrument que les langues grecque et latine, et nos langues modernes, lui ont offert et nous offrent, est plus difficile à manier, mais il peut s'appliquer à un bien plus grand nombre d'usages et de travaux". *Plan du second Discours sur l'histoire universelle* [1751], in : *Oeuvres de Turgot*, édition E. Daire, vol. II, p. 662, same text in the electronic edition in *Eliohs* <http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/700/turgot/discours.html>. See also the *Plan du Discours sur le progrès et les diverses époques de décadence des sciences et des arts*, in *Oeuvres de Turgot*, éd. Daire, vol. II, pp. 668 ff.

<sup>53</sup> Etiemble, *L'Europe chinoise. II. De la sinophilie à la sinophobie*, Paris 1989, p. 208.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, "Voltaire sinophile", pp. 207–306. Cf. for example the article "Chine, de la", in: *Dictionnaire philosophique* (VE, XXXV, pp. 539–540): "la constitution de

ciated a government capable to protect its subjects in a true paternal spirit and to win their obedience out of benevolence. Chinese emperors were perfect models of kings-philosophers, devoted to support the welfare and happiness of their subjects, while taking care of agriculture, roads and canals together with the good government of their provinces. Under their paternal and rational authority the four thousand year old Chinese empire continued for centuries as a stable, tolerant, and wise regime. Virtue and merit, not birth and heredity, had served as the main criteria for the selection of functionaries and for advancement in the public offices. Confucian teachings had inspired a social order built on rational, tolerant, respectful principles, as well as on harmony and civility of manners. As Voltaire declared in his *Lettres chinoises*:

Si je creuse dans le fondement de leurs lois, tous les voyageurs, tous les missionnaires, amis et ennemis, Espagnols, Italiens, Portugais, Allemands, Français, se réunissent pour me dire que ces lois sont établies sur le pouvoir paternel, c'est-à-dire sur la loi la plus sacrée de la nature. Ce gouvernement subsiste depuis quatre mille ans, de l'aveu de tous les savants, et nous sommes d'hier; je suis forcé de croire et d'admirer. Si la Chine a été deux fois subjuguée par des Tartares, et si les vainqueurs se sont conformés aux lois des vaincus, j'admire encore davantage.<sup>55</sup>

The concept of an uninterrupted historical continuity of China, since the most remote antiquity, had for Voltaire a crucial presupposition and an important consequence. On the one hand, it derived from the idea of the trustworthiness of Chinese historical chronology that went back before the would-be universal Deluge; therefore, it was incompatible with the Biblical epochs. On the other hand, it aided in supporting the notion of Chinese precedence and superiority over Europe, which in his eyes was still groaning in the darkness of barbarism and ignorance, while China – “le royaume le plus beau, le plus ancien, le plus vaste, le plus peuplé, le mieux

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leur empire est à la vérité la meilleure qui soit au monde, la seule qui soit toute fondée sur le pouvoir paternel (ce qui n'empêche pas que les mandarins ne donnent force coups de bâtons à leurs enfants); la seule dans laquelle un gouverneur de province soit puni, quand en sortant de charge il n'a pas eu les acclamations du peuple; la seule qui ait institué des prix pour la vertu, tandis que partout ailleurs les lois se bornent à punir le crime”. Where not otherwise specified, quotations from Voltaire's works are from the electronic edition *Voltaire électronique* Full-text Database, Cambridge, Chadwyck-Healey Ltd, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation Ltd, 1998, indicated by the abbreviation VE and followed by the volume and page number of the Oeuvres complètes, Voltaire Foundation).

<sup>55</sup> *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares, à Monsieur Paw* [1775], Paris 1776, “Lettre V. Sur les lois et les moeurs des la Chine,” pp. 53–54.

policé de l'univers"<sup>56</sup> – had already attained a high degree of cultural, social and political progress. Continuity and stability through the ages had worked as an emery wheel. Civilisation could be metaphorically described as the result of a refining, dressing, polishing process that occurred within the “vaste empire de la Chine, le plus ancien du monde entier et le mieux policé sans doute, puisqu’il a été le plus durable.”<sup>57</sup>

These ideas Voltaire constantly maintained and reaffirmed in the face of both De Guignes’s thesis on the Egyptian descent of Chinese civilisation couched in 1758 and 1759, and, later on, of Cornelius de Pauw’s devastating attack against all aspects of the Chinese myth.<sup>58</sup> Too tempting to him was the possibility to support the historical existence of a society civilised in times and ways which so clearly did not fall within the Scriptural schemes. Moreover, stability to Voltaire did not mean so much lack of change, but rather solidity, strength and concord: those qualities which permitted him to say that,

Il y a sur la terre un exemple unique d’un vaste Empire que la force a subjugué deux fois, mais que l’opinion n’a changé jamais: c’est la Chine

and to conclude that,

le corps de cet État subsiste avec splendeur depuis plus de quatre mille ans, sans que les lois, les mœurs, le langage, la manière même de s’habiller, aient souffert d’altération sensible.<sup>59</sup>

However pervasive his admiration for an ancient and stable China, Voltaire could not help to report the same problem noted by previous authors and to proclaim that “il ne faut pas être fanatique du mérite chinois,”<sup>60</sup> In the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, he concluded:

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<sup>56</sup> Voltaire, *De la gloire, ou entretien avec un Chinois* [1738].

<sup>57</sup> Remarques pour servir de Supplement à L’Essai sur les Mœurs, “Première Remarque. Comment, et pourquoi on entreprit cet essai. Recherches sur quelques nations,” VE.

<sup>58</sup> See especially S. Rotta, Egiziani e cinesi a confronto. Intorno alle Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiens et les Chinois di Cornelius de Pauw (1773), in: *Scritti scelti di Salvatore Rotta*, [http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/rotta/rotta\\_pauw.html](http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/900/rotta/rotta_pauw.html), originally published in: *La geografia dei saperi. Scritti in memoria di Dino Pastine*, ed. by D. Ferraro and G. Gigliotti, Firenze 2000, pp. 241–267, quotation at p. 264.

<sup>59</sup> Remarques pour servir de Supplement à L’Essai sur les Mœurs, “Sixième Remarque. Du pouvoir de l’opinion. Examen de la persévérance des mœurs chinoises,” and *Essai sur les Mœurs*, ch. I, “De la Chine, de son antiquité, de ses forces, de ses lois, de ses usages et de ses sciences,” VE.

<sup>60</sup> Art. “Chine, de la”, in: *Dictionnaire philosophique* (VE, XXXV, p. 539).

tout cela n’empêche pas que les Chinois il y a quatre mille ans, lorsque nous ne savions pas lire, ne sussent toutes les choses essentiellement utiles dont nous nous vantons aujourd’hui,

but he acknowledged the existence of a “tout cela”, in which he listed the fact

que dans les sciences, les Chinois sont encore au terme où nous étions il y a deux cents ans; qu’ils ont comme nous mille préjugés ridicules, qu’ils croient aux talismans, à l’astrologie judiciaire, comme nous y avons cru longtemps.<sup>61</sup>

China seemed then unable to go beyond a certain stage of advancement: Voltaire’s view and that it appeared incapable of developing the arts and sciences as it might have done was reinforced in later years. Despite China’s early progress and civilisation, Voltaire was struck that it had reached a sort of stalemate and in this passage of the *Lettres chinoises*, ideally addressed to the Sinophobe De Pauw, he revealed to be hesitating, again in Durtous’s words, between “l’admiration et le doute”:

Ce qui étonne plus, c’est qu’ayant si longtemps cultivé toutes les sciences, ils [The Chinese] soient demeurés au terme où nous étions en Europe aux Xe, XIe et XIIe siècles. Ils ont de la musique, et ils ne savent pas noter un air, encore moins chanter en parties. Ils ont fait des ouvrages d’une mécanique prodigieuse, et ils ignoraient les mathématiques. Ils observaient, ils calculaient les éclipses; mais les éléments de l’astronomie leur étaient inconnus. Leurs grands progrès anciens et leur ignorance présente sont un contraste dont il est difficile de rendre raison. J’ai toujours pensé que leur respect pour leurs ancêtres, qui est chez eux une espèce de religion, était une paralysie qui les empêchait de marcher dans la carrière des sciences. Ils regardaient leurs aïeux comme nous avons longtemps regardé Aristote [...] On ne menaçait pas à la Chine de faire pendre les jeunes lettrés qui inventeraient des nouveautés en mathématiques; mais un candidat n’aurait jamais été mandarin s’il avait montré trop de génie, comme parmi nous un bachelier suspect d’hérésie courrait risque de n’être pas évêque. L’habitude et l’indolence se joignaient ensemble pour maintenir l’ignorance en possession. Aujourd’hui les Chinois commencent à oser faire usage de leur esprit, grâce à nos mathématiciens d’Europe. Peut-être, monsieur, avez-vous trop méprisé cette antique nation; peut-être l’ai-je trop exaltée: ne pourrions-nous pas nous rapprocher? *Virtus est medium vitiorum et utrimque reductum.*<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. (VE, XXXV, p. 541).

<sup>62</sup> *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares*, pp. 58–60.

Even if Etiemble, in his magisterial work on Enlightenment's views of China, seems convinced that Voltaire during all his lifetime maintained a prevailing attitude of admiration and an enduring will of extolling the Chinese,<sup>63</sup> the above quoted passage shows that in the mid-1770s the philosophe was indeed toning down his Sinophilia, at least regarding the state of scientific knowledge in China. If, concerning other aspects of the Chinese institutions, he still admitted that "j'ai peine à me défendre d'un vif enthousiasme," on this point he seemed to subscribe to Parenin's reasons for the paradoxical standstill of sciences in such a rich, powerful, well-governed and civilised country. He admitted that China had not showed the same capacity to shake traditions and old opinions as that which had put Europe in motion towards modernity. In previous works he had already resorted to arguments close to those of Dortous de Mairan:

Si on cherche pourquoi tant d'arts et de sciences, cultivés sans interruption depuis si longtemps à la Chine, ont cependant fait si peu de progrès, il y en a peut-être deux raisons: l'une est le respect prodigieux que ces peuples ont pour ce qui leur a été transmis par leurs pères, et qui rend parfait à leurs yeux tout ce qui est ancien; l'autre est la nature de leur langue, premier principe de toutes les connaissances.<sup>64</sup>

Something in China had hindered a progress comparable to the European one while insensibly transforming permanence and stability into immobility. China had remained entrapped in a sort of medieval obscurity. In a word: a divergence had occurred in history between China and Europe, even if its perception seemed to regard just the state of sciences and not to involve the general economic and political conditions of the country. Etiemble may be right to show his surprise concerning what he calls the European 18<sup>th</sup> century disregard for Chinese sciences.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, in the history of ideas it happens to also record misjudgements and misinterpretations that resulted from misinformation or intentional distortion, but still contributing to a general attitude and to a representation that was capable of influencing public opinion. This is the case with the increasingly widespread interpretation of Chinese inadequacy in scientific matters and its specific inferiority to Europe, which for some authors (not Voltaire) was attributed to a general, national spirit comprised of a lack of creativity, initiative and love for genius that had

<sup>63</sup> *L'Europe chinoise*, II., pp. 280–282.

<sup>64</sup> *Essai sur les moeurs*, ch. I. « De la Chine, de son antiquité, de ses forces, de ses lois, de ses usages et de ses sciences », paragraph 700; see also *Dictionnaire philosophique*, art. "Chine."

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

caused a sort of scientific freeze in an albeit extremely ancient and refined culture. It is still undecided the question whether or not that supposed freeze could be a phenomenon extending itself to the whole of Chinese society, thus leading to the notion of a total divergence between China and the West.

#### 4. Admiration, doubts and questions

As a matter of fact, around the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century such a skeptical view of China could coexist both with marked Sinophile attitudes as well as an increasingly unfavourable, unsympathetic interpretation of Chinese society and civilisation, resulting in open Sinophobia.

Two very influential historical works with extensive sections on Oriental history should be remembered here: the *Histoire moderne des Chinois, des Japonnois, des Indiens, des Persanes, des Turcs des Russiens*, a continuation of Charles Rollin’s *Histoire ancienne*, by the Abbé François-Marie de Marsy and Adrien Richer;<sup>66</sup> and the English *Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time* that includes two extensive sections on China, one in the so-called *Ancient Part* (vol. XX, 1748) and the other, more considerable one in the *Modern Part* (vol. VIII, 1759). Both works are worth to be briefly mentioned here owing to the fact that their diffusion contributed significantly to shaping the current image of China in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century learned Europe. The first, inspired mainly by the Jesuit Du Halde, offered an overall positive picture of the Chinese empire, moulded by the paternal government of an emperor watchful of his subjects’ welfare while ensuring that the mandarins engaged in the proper working of the provincial administration. China possessed an admirable system of government in every branch. Filial respect regulated private and public behaviour. Merit and competence were the main criterion for employment and career advancement, while laws were just and moderate, leading the author to conclude that “il n’est point d’empire mieux policé que celui de la Chine. C’est peut-être le plus beau gouvernement de l’Univers”. This was demonstrated virtuously by its centuries-old continuation: “la même forme d’administration subsiste depuis plus de quatre mille ans.”<sup>67</sup> This long duration contributed to a rich agriculture, an active commerce and well-developed manufactures that exceeded the quality of any European

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<sup>66</sup> *Histoire moderne des Chinois, des Japonnois, des Indiens, des Persans, des Turcs, des Russiens*, Paris 1755–1778, 30 vols; volume I was devoted to Chinese history and was the work of the abbé Marsy.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 229.

competitor. Scientific learning also had been a mark of ancient distinction in the Chinese empire, where it had been cultivated long before Europe started its own scientific advancement. Only on this particular topic the otherwise very positive image of China was partially belittled. One more, it was the capacity for scientific progress that had distinguished a precocious, but slowing down, China from Europe, which as a latecomer had more than filled the gap and taken the lead, thus making in three hundred years more scientific progress than China in four thousand.<sup>68</sup> China had met a significant setback in this regard, also because of its poor propensity for theoretical sciences as well as its education system that did not encourage enough speculative sciences over the practical and literary ones. Permanence and continuity of this civilisation were therefore basic positive characteristics, which in one particular field – scientific knowledge – had given way to immobility and the incapacity to make progress.

Much less benevolent towards China was the *Universal History* for the plain reason that the English authors refused, while addressing an English audience, to share the Jesuits' eulogistic point of view. Therefore, we can read the *Universal History* as a rebuttal of the Jesuit writings as well as one of the earliest and most complete 18<sup>th</sup>-century dismissals of the Chinese myth. In its sections on China, characterised by a remarkable mastery of the best available literature, the idea of a tenacious attachment to ancient laws and traditions was accepted, but without any admiration for the supposed continuity and stability of the empire. China's ancient history offered indeed a picture of many fragmented petty states as well as conquests and revolts. Even if there had been continuity, this continuity concerned a monarchical power actually exercised in harsh despotic forms, even if its current working was reported by many witnesses in a positive way: "the government is one of the most regular in the world, in which the tribunals and magistracy are established in the most exact and uniform manner that human prudence can contrive."<sup>69</sup> In contradiction to this account, the provincial administration and the judiciary were described in very negative terms, according to their suffering under the oppression of rapacious mandarins and corrupted magistrates who controlled a whole system based on extortion and fraud. This was much worsened by the need to gain public support not through the virtue of a hereditary nobility, but through gifts, favours and bribes, so that "there is scarce any country in the East,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>69</sup> *The Modern Part of an Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time*, London, printed for S. Richardson, T. Osborne, C. Hitch, A. Millar [and others], 1759, 47 vols, vol. VIII, pp. 144.



where oppression, corruption and all manner of fraud is more universally practiced.”<sup>70</sup> The image of an ancient and continuous civilisation was repeatedly rejected. The “excellent model” and the moderate constitution, for which the Chinese government was praised by many contemporary authors, were the not the results of an early process of refinement consolidated over the centuries, but possibly of very recent reforms introduced by single wise emperors, yet incapable of permanently altering “the corruption and depravity which still reign among them.”<sup>71</sup> Regarding Chinese learning and proficiency in arts and sciences, the *Universal History* remarked how the idea of an early progress was incompatible with the lack of improvement over many centuries, and the quick reception of recent European teachings. This was a demonstration not of the Chinese lack of genius for arts and sciences, but of the effects both of isolation from the rest of the world and of the clear superiority of an expanding, active, and vigorous civilisation as the European one. Nevertheless, the Western teachings had not been sufficient in filling the gap still separating Europe from China, such as in the theoretical sciences and several technical arts as well as medical, literary, historical, linguistic and musical learning. As to China’s economy, the picture of a country very well-endowed by nature, widely cultivated, and animated by perpetual industry as well as exchange frenzy was not accompanied by an image of prosperity. On the contrary, China was described as being distressed by a continual disproportion between population and subsistence, which lead consequently to frequent famines. In conclusion, the *Universal History* denied China the status of an advanced civilisation with ancient origins, while striking down continuity and the great capacity of permanence, and refusing to consider Chinese society in any way comparable to the European one. Furthermore, the great historical work’s thesis in favour of the Noachic origins of the peopling of China and the validity of the Biblical chronology also dissolved any unorthodox view of Chinese civilisation. China had indeed a common descent with the Western nations. But it had been gradually supplanted by a divergence occurring throughout the centuries. While the latter had been able to develop and attain a visible superiority, the former had hardened into a society, far inferior to the European one and without any apparent chance to make up for its delay. Chinese reverence for traditions as well as attachment for parental forms of authority and social relationships revealed their continuing proximity to ancient times and patriarchal society; thus, implying an essentially immobile condition.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., see also p. 155.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

This idea of China mirroring the first ages of human history, owing to its reverence and conservation of ancient manners and institutions, also characterised Nicolas Boulanger's 1761 view of the Chinese empire, notable for its attempt to connect in a coherently comprehensive view China's past, present and future. China was an "empire extraordinaire" because of its unlimited respect for its original civil and political institutions. Such a veneration had mitigated the evils of a despotism which was not an original form of government, but a later development. At the same time, it had preserved the ancient laws defined by the pattern of a household economy centered on the family and the respect for older generations.<sup>73</sup> This attitude for continuity was a true "esprit national." It derived not from racial causes, for the Chinese were not "une espèce d'hommes particuliers."<sup>74</sup> Instead, it was a consequence of environmental specificities and of an isolation from outer influences that had resisted "pendant une très longue succession de siècles" and was "la seule cause par laquelle l'esprit primitive du Genre humain s'y est conservé et fait encore aujourd'hui l'esprit national de cet empire extraordinaire."<sup>75</sup> Boulanger saw in the ancient Chinese government the typical example of how ancient theocracies could be characterised by a rational use of authority: "une précieuse image des siècles primitifs et de cet âge d'or si fameux, où la raison étoit encore la première et la seule loi du genre humain."<sup>76</sup> This was not at all a sufficient reason for uncritical admiration. "Loin [...] de nous aveugler sur le compte de ce peuple fameux,"<sup>77</sup> Boulanger was able to see both the positive and negative consequences of such stability and continuity. In fact, China offered the picture of a mixture "de sagesse et de folie," of wise emperors and cruel tyrants, of political changes and revolutions and of the degeneration of a fatherly king to a despot, which was the unfailing sequel of any theocratic form of government.<sup>78</sup> From this standpoint, Chinese history had nothing exceptional and was not different from that of any other great empire of the antiquity. Yet Boulanger was also interested in conjecturing the possible future consequences of Chinese enduring attachment to national traditions, which he defined as an "esprit plus machinal que raisonné."<sup>79</sup> On this point he explicitly believed that such an attitude

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<sup>73</sup> N.-A. Boulanger, *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental*, 1761, p. 380 sq.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 383–384.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

“met obstacle au progrès de l’esprit humain.”<sup>80</sup> But he could not envisage the possibility of a simple standstill. The absence of progress could not but cause, in fact, a regression leading Chinese people toward an unhappy end:

Comme [...] ce qui n’avance point dans le moral & dans le politique, comme dans le physique, recule réellement, il arrivera que les Chinois seront un jour le peuple le plus malheureux peuple du monde; ils seront les plus malheureux, lorsque ceux qui le sont aujourd’hui plus qu’eux, se seront perfectionné par l’usage de la raison.<sup>81</sup>

What Boulanger envisaged was indeed a representation of future revolutions in which China would lose its ancient institutions without the capacity to make any progress under the guide of rational faculties. In summary, China, as the antithesis of reason and progress, was condemned to decay by its incapacity to advance; it was confined to a parallel, yet diverging, perhaps dead-end track with respect to other, more dynamic parts of the world.

It must be said that such a compelling interpretation of China’s historical course and future destiny, as the one propounded by Boulanger in the early 1760s, was still a relatively unusual instance. While the idea of an immobile – not just stable, ordered and constant – China had begun to gain currency among Western views, such an idea does not seem to have entailed, with the possible exception of the English *Universal History*, any general reversal of interpretation in a negative sense. It was compatible with representations of China with the following positive characters: a prosperous economic system, with a numerous and hard-working population, an ingenious and well maintained water and ground communication system, a fruitful agriculture, refined manufactures with high-quality sectors as porcelain and silk production, a large and lively domestic market, political institutions and a monarchical authority devoted to the promotion of economy (agriculture) and of merit and virtue among its subjects. From an economic, administrative, social and political standpoint, in fact, a well-defined school of Sinophiles led by the Physiocrats, especially since the mid-1760s, propounded again a very strong image of China as not only not inferior but possibly superior to Europe.<sup>82</sup> Authors such as Quesnay, Turgot, Mirabeau, Dupont de Ne-

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>82</sup> The classic studies on this subject are V. Pinot, *Les physiocrates et la Chine au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, VIII (1906–1907), pp. 202–214; and Etiemble, *L’Europe chinoise*, II, pp. 322–333. See also L. A. Maverick, *Chinese Influence upon the Physiocrats*, in: *Economic History*, IV (1938) 13,

mours, Pierre Poivre are representatives of an interpretation pointing to Chinese economic, social and political institutions as a model of rationality for European governments and public opinion. The 1760s seem consequently to have coincided with the peak of European infatuation with China. What is remarkable about the well-known Physiocratic Sinophilia is its adherence to the idea of Chinese continuity, positively interpreted as a demonstration of rationality. François Quesnay, in his *Despotisme de la Chine* (1767) written in direct response to Montesquieu,<sup>83</sup> subscribed to the idea of the inalterable continuity through many centuries of the wise government and laws of China, while extolling their “immobilité” as an evidence of their virtues. He mentioned *en passant* the common opinion concerning the little progress of the Chinese in theoretical sciences, but he deprived this idea of any general negative implication and never alluded, to such a phenomenon as a drawback and the cause of harmful immobility. Such a feature he introduced as one that had not prevented the development of government and society, also on account of the cultivation of some scientific disciplines particularly relevant from the standpoint of their practical value.<sup>84</sup> The acknowledgement of just a slowed, rather than a failed, progress in sciences coexisted with an idealised historical image of the Chinese civilisation, capable of competing with, or even surpassing Europe, offering itself as the model of a perfect polity:

Quoiqu’il en soit du temps oh les Européens ont donné ce nom de Chine à cet empire [...] on ne peut disconvenir que cet État ne soit le plus beau pays de l’univers, le plus peuplé et le plus florissant royaume que l’on con-

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pp. 54–67; Id., *China, a Model for Europe*, San Antonio 1946 and M. Lutfalla, La Chine, vue par quelques économistes du XVIIIe siècle, in: *Population* (French Edition), 17 (1962) 2, pp. 289–296.

<sup>83</sup> F. Quesnay, Despotisme de la Chine, in “Ephémérides du Citoyen,” Mars-Juin 1767, in: *Oeuvres économiques et philosophiques de F. Quesnay*: accompagnées des éloges et d’autres travaux biographiques sur Quesnay par différents auteurs, publiées avec une introduction et des notes par Auguste Oncken, Francfort s. M. 1888, pp. 563–660, see in particular p. 592.

<sup>84</sup> “Quoique les Chinois aient beaucoup de goût pour les sciences et d’excellentes facultés pour réussir dans tous les genres de littératures, ils n’ont fait que peu des progrès dans les sciences de pure spéculation, parce qu’elles ne sont pas animées par des récompenses; ils ont cependant de l’astronomie, de la géographie, de la philosophie naturelle et de la physique les notions que la pratique des affaires peut exiger; leur étude principale se tourne vers les sciences plus utiles.” Anthony Pagden seems to attribute to Quesnay himself a more neatly negative idea of the lack of progress and of the immobility of Chinese civilisation, than it may seem supported by Quesnay’s text, see his *The Immobility of China*, p. 59.

naisse; en sorte qu’un empire comme celui de la Chine vaut autant que toute l’Europe, si elle était réunie sous un seul souverain.<sup>85</sup>

From the present point of view what is worth noticing is that the Physiocrats admired not only some features of Chinese economy and society – large population, industriousness, flourishing agriculture, mutual assistance and absence of poverty and mendicity among the people, administrative ranks filled with persons of merit and a society modelled upon the natural order founded on landed property. What they admired most was China’s stability.<sup>86</sup> This stability, they understood, was due to the virtuous proximity of Chinese laws, economy and customs to nature and reason. As Poivre maintained, the reasons for Chinese agriculture prosperity lied first in the form of a government rooted in the “raison seule” and in the

lois dictées par la nature aux premiers hommes et conservées précieusement de génération en génération depuis le premier âge de l’humanité, dans tous les coeurs réunis d’un peuple innombrables, plutôt que dans des codes obscurs, dictés par des hommes fourbes et trompeurs.<sup>87</sup>

A second reason was the unrefined character of customs whose naturalness had remained unchanged since immemorial time and which derived from the noblest and worthiest of arts: soil cultivation. Another explication for China’s conservative character, that is to say a character not corrupted by time and history, was the absence of nobility of blood, a social institution the Physiocrats considered against nature, unknown to most of the ancient peoples and typical of the peoples “nouveaux et barbares” of the feudal age.<sup>88</sup> With the Physiocrats, in short, an enthusiastic admiration for Chinese economy, society and political order was associated with the perception of the virtues of stability. For this reason, society, institutions and economy in China seemed contrived to ensure permanence and conservation of that natural order, which the Physiocrats considered metahistorical and thought had to be defended by means of a policy based on the laws of nature. Stability derived also from the right management of the landed tax. It was the only kind of tax existing since the origins of the monarchical institution, which only the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>86</sup> For an interesting and very competent synthesis on China’s economy from a physiocratic point of view see P. Poivre, *Voyage d’un Philosophe ou Observations sur les Mœurs et les Arts des Peuples de l’Afrique, de l’Asie et de l’Amérique*, Maestricht, 1779 [Yverdon 1768].

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

emperor had title to, whose amount was fixed inalterably by tradition and whose collection was guaranteed by the religious respect for traditions. In conclusion, a perfect eulogistic picture, by all means, of material prosperity joined to stability, without any more reservations about Chinese incapacity to develop sciences, arts and learning in general.

That this representation still kept undoubtedly mythical characters, scarcely related to reality, is revealed by one of the contemporary, most interesting texts concerning China, in some way inspired by Physiocracy, and one that completely eschewed disputations about stability or immobility in favour of a more technical and realistic attitude. Its author was Turgot, who had come to intellectual maturity in 1766. He showed a clever way of approaching Chinese economy and society. He was driven by the will to leave aside myths and generalisations favouring a realistic, practical understanding of the several sectors making up the Chinese economy: not just agriculture and its technical or juridical aspects, but also commerce, manufactures, finance, labour, banking, monetary and political economy issues.<sup>89</sup> Turgot is an example of how, to the eyes of an attentive and acute European observer, contemporary China evoked several questions regarding its economic potential: only by reliable data and information could it be possible to grasp the real conditions and future possibilities of a great country that was certainly perceived as holding a major position in the balance of global economic and political powers.

Still, to many European analysts the current opinion concerning Chinese continuity and stability continued to appear perfectly compatible with the image of a great country: a large, rich, prosperous and well-governed empire, whose refined philosophical culture was extremely attentive to the possible improvements that could be derived from Western science and technology. What one can observe in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, partly in reaction to the Physiocrats' Sinophile infatuation, was a sharp shift from still positive ideas – such as those of stability and continuity – to thoroughly negative Sinophobic interpretations that variously drew inspiration from Montesquieu, the main critic of Chinese despotism in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### 5. Reversal: from stability to stationariness

Clearly inspired by Europe's relentless spirit of initiative and capacity for expansion and progress, was the new interpretation of Chinese civili-

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<sup>89</sup> Questions sur la Chine, adressées à MM. Ko et Yang, in: *Oeuvres de Turgot*, éd. Daire, vol. I, pp. 310 sq.

zation that focussed with renewed vigour on concepts strongly marked by negative connotations – such as stillness, immobility and perpetual uniformity – together with the new attributes of “stagnant” and “stationary,” which were used in direct reference to the Chinese economy.<sup>90</sup> This shift belongs to the larger story concerning the emergence and spread of European Sinophobia that became the ever more dominant attitude towards China in the late 18<sup>th</sup> into the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This negative view of China, decade after decade, became ever more contemptuous and arrogant. It had its key concepts exactly in the ideas of immobility and stationariness. At first they were used with particular reference to the economic sphere, but subsequently they turned to denote the whole of Chinese society and civilisation: finally, they ended to express a sort of indelible stain on a supposed Chinese national spirit. It was on the basis of such concepts that, at the end of the 1760s and in the early 1770s, a clear view took shape about a cleavage between diverging perspectives of Western Europe and China. It is worth remarking that during the same period the case of China, as an example of historical immobility, paralleled that of the American savage peoples, themselves an illustration of the incapacity to progress: the former was a case in point of the incapacity to advance towards a fully mercantile society that would rightfully belong to the international circle of commercial powers; the latter was an example of the incapacity to progress beyond the condition of a nomadic society of hunters towards an agricultural stage of civilisation.

Take for example the Abbé Mably’s *Doutes proposés aux Philosophes économistes sur l’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1768) that expressly addressed a counter to Quesnay’s eulogies, manifested in the title with the word *doute*. He doubted that China was a society to be admired for its long historical persistence. The so-called stability and the uninterrupted continuity of its government under the guide of wise emperors looked rather as immobility: “tout reste depuis quatre mille ans dans une perpétuelle immobilité”<sup>91</sup>. And, in addition, such a perpetuity was an unlikely condition:

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<sup>90</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary attests “stagnant” since 1749, “stagnation” since 1732 and “stationary,” with specific reference to economy, since 1776, in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. In French the words “stagnant” and “stagnation” appear as neologisms with an economic meaning only in J.-F. Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française*, Marseille 1787–1788; “stationnaire,” with a figurative meaning and with reference to historical, social and economical phenomena, appears in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 1832–1835, but is employed by Diderot in 1772 (see further on).

<sup>91</sup> *Oeuvres de l’abbé Mably*, Londres 1789, t. XI, p. 77.

il m'est impossible, Monsieur, de m'accoutumer à quatre mille ans de perpétuité dans le gouvernement de la Chine; tant de constance n'est pas faite pour les hommes.<sup>92</sup>

Mably, with an avowed intention to dispute the “fables” of the missionaries, reversed the image of a permanent sage and virtuous government, refusing the idea itself of immobility; and insisting that China’s history could not have been different from that of other peoples and empires and could not therefore have been immune from transformations, changes, crisis and discontinuities. It had known tyrannical emperors that had corrupted the subjects’ habits, while being agitated by political turmoil, civil wars, rebellions and revolutions, not differently from any other known country:

[T]out est inintelligible dans l’histoire de la Chine, dès qu’on prétend que son gouvernement, toujours le même depuis quatre mille ans, n’a souffert aucune révolution.<sup>93</sup>

In conclusion, according to Mably the doubts concerning the history and the present character of Chinese society and institutions – in particular the poor credibility of a positive historical image of stability and continuity – were so strong as to deny any possible Chinese model to be proposed to Europe for imitation.

One contribution that propounded an original viewpoint concerning the main questions under discussion – and especially notable on account that the author was of Physiocratic sympathies – was the Abbé Roubaud’s *Histoire générale de l’Asie, de l’Afrique et de l’Amérique*, whose first and second volumes were published in 1770.<sup>94</sup> For the purpose of the present discussion particularly valuable are the first two volumes, dedicated to describing China according to an ‘heliodromic’ view of universal history, centred on the idea of the Asiatic origins of civilization, and with a remarkable effort for objectivity supported by knowledge of the best available sources. This outstanding work applies a universal historical outlook and, consciously aims at improving this

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>94</sup> P. J. A. Roubaud, *Histoire générale de l’Asie, de l’Afrique et de l’Amérique*, Paris 1770–1775, 15 vols, vols. I–II are dedicated to Japan and China. Roubaud (1730–1792), whose interests went mainly to political economy, was also editor of the *Journal d’agriculture, du commerce et des finances* (1764–1774) first with Quesnay, Mirabeau and Dupont de Nemours and later with Ameilhon (1779–1783), and author of *Le Politique indien, ou Considérations sur les Colonies des Indes occidentales*, Amsterdam, 1768.



historiographical genre in comparison with the widely known English *Universal History*.<sup>95</sup> In essence Roubaud refused as mythical the idea of the ancient origins and continuity of the Chinese empire and dismissed it as a retrospective interpretation, a “système illusoire” contrived for eulogistic purposes. In China’s remote past there were a multiplicity of small monarchies, not just a single unified empire, which only subsequent history had gradually produced.<sup>96</sup> The empire had not been “immuablement fondé” in the more ancient antiquity: “douze siècles avant J. C. la plus grande partie de son [of the Chinese nation] pays étoit entièrement barbare”. While refusing De Guignes’ thesis on the Egyptian direct filiation, still Roubaud believed that China had been civilized later than Egypt and that “la nation a été lente à sortir de l’obscurité,” civilising itself.<sup>97</sup> Still more explicitly, Roubaud denied the idea – a prejudice in fact – that China had been a reign of peace, tranquillity and stability.<sup>98</sup> He also refused the positive image of contemporary China. How could the idea of an industrious country with a rich agriculture be reconciled with the attested fact of frequent famines? There was a permanent imbalance between population and subsistence, caused also by the fact that, contrary to another mythical idea, many lands were still “en friche.” From these circumstances derived the impossibility of China developing great external commerce and navigation, which would deprive agriculture and primary subsistence of the necessary manpower. It was inadequate and deceitful to deduce the practice of government from the philosophical texts; accordingly, the Chinese government had been guided not by virtue and honour, but in the Montesquieuian way, by the stick of a despotic power. Still, it was a particularly efficacious variant of despotism, which he defined “le meilleur des gouvernements orientaux” and “le chef-d’oeuvre du despotisme,” because it had given birth to a large and powerful empire<sup>99</sup>. In such a situation, what someone admired as continuity was actually complete immobility. Roubaud did not interpret this concept in the sense of the capacity to survive the course of historical accidents. He meant rather a general veneration for traditions, respect for authority, perpetuation of inherited knowledge,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Préface, p. XVIII.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., vol. I, p. 316.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., vol. I, pp. 324, 326, 329.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 146: “Un préjugé nous a longtemps trompé, ça été de regarder cet Empire comme un pays qui a toujours joui de la paix, ou du moins comme le pays du monde qui a joui d’une paix la plus constante. Cette contrée de l’Asie a été plus sujette aux révolutions qu’aucune autre contrée de la terre. Elle n’a presque jamais été en paix avec ses voisins, elle y a rarement été avec elle même.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 387.

lack of innovating genius and excessive self-pride, not denied by whatever recent advancement in the physical sciences – astronomy, geography, cosmography, mathematics and physics – which had been entirely due to European impulse and assistance.<sup>100</sup> In conclusion, the Chinese nation was “sans génie et sans vertu”: from no point of view – politics, morality, justice or economy – it was comparable, and still less capable of propounding a positive model, to Europe and Europe was undoubtedly far ahead in the march of progress.<sup>101</sup> Even in the early 1770s, Roubaud is an interesting example of the reconsideration of the Chinese myth in the name of critical and rational understanding, all the more so as he was close to intellectual circles with strong sympathy for China and favourable attitudes to making of it either a yardstick or an alternative to the European standards. In a way, he anticipated several elements on the basis of which the idea of a divergence between Europe and China was later built.

It is not accurate to assert simplistically the substitution of Sino-phililia with Sinophobia<sup>102</sup> – to put it in rough terms. These two attitudes rather coexisted in tension throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>103</sup> with fervent admirers and resolute detractors alike: among the latter were voyagers like the English navigator George Anson together with philosophers like Montesquieu and Rousseau. But a real turning point, marked by a decisive change of tone, was the publication in 1773 of the *Recherches philosophiques sur les Égyptiens et les Chinois* by Cornelius de Pauw, that was directed at dissolving the “enthousiasme répandu en Europe par la voix des Missionnaires.”<sup>104</sup> To this purpose, De Pauw operated a total reversal of judgement. The Chinese had only made “peu de progrès,” were even inferior to the other peoples of Asia, and had not been anciently civilised. On the contrary, the father Gaubil<sup>105</sup> was wrong in his opinion that “les anciens Chinois étoient très-éclairés” and that “leurs descendants insensiblement abrutis sont tombés dans la nuit de

<sup>100</sup> “Il semble que les sciences soient chez eux comme un dépôt qu’ils ne peuvent faire valoir, ou que leur génie, comme l’instinct des animaux, ait atteint, à son premier effort, les bornes de sa capacité naturelle” (Ibid., vol. II, p. 391).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 480.

<sup>102</sup> This process has been summarized by Etiemble, *L’Europe Chinoise*. II, pp. 334–347.

<sup>103</sup> See D. E. Mungello, Confucianism in the Enlightenment: Antagonism and Collaboration between the Jesuits and the Philosophes, in: *China and Europe. Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. by T. H. C. Lee, Hong Kong 1991, p. 99.

<sup>104</sup> C. de Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Égyptiens et les Chinois*, Berlin 1773, 2 vols.

<sup>105</sup> *Histoire abrégée de l’astronomie chinoise*, Paris 1732, t. II, p. 2 ff.

l’ignorance,” because they had always remained “dans une éternelle enfance.”<sup>106</sup> But what is interesting, more than the individual details – astronomy, chronology, agriculture, population, religion, cults, customs, arts, sciences and politics – reviewed by De Pauw in his assault on the Chinese civilisation<sup>107</sup> is his complete reversal of the image of stability. De Pauw accepted to speak not of an ancient state of civilization remained stable over several centuries, but overtly, of immobility, lethargy and inability to rise up from a primordial state of society and culture. The main reason for this, according to De Pauw, was clearly derived from Montesquieu. The primordial pastoral condition, when people gathered into hordes under the dominion of chieftains or into small states governed by petty sovereigns, had been followed in relatively recent times by despotism within large empires and it was exactly despotism that had impaired any chance of progress. Despotism was a synonym for inertia as well as the lack of incentives to improve society, in turn condemning China to a perpetual immobility. There was no need to explain the paradox of an ancient refinement gradually waning through the centuries and finally coming to a halt. The divergence between Europe and China was not the product of history, but was original and essential. Immobility was not just in the present, but in the very beginning too. A similar interpretation would be given later on by Volney in his *Ruines* (1791), again with a direct Montesquieuian inspiration. Political and moral despotism, according to a view that extended to the whole of Asia, had hindered any progress of society or the individuals. China, in particular, was a “civilisation avortée” and its people a “peuple automate.”<sup>108</sup>

The idea of immobility relating to China was adapted with a specific economic content, on the basis of detailed economic analysis and even by linguistic innovation in the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>109</sup> In the case of Adam Smith, what is to be stressed is that he was not a Sinophobic critic animated by an anti-Jesuit spirit. Smith had no interest in entering into this very French and continental polemic. He can be defined neither as an admirer nor a detractor of China, but most of all as an analyst with a specific interest in economic matters, even though it would probably be too much to grant him a complete “scientific” detachment given the growing British commercial interest in getting into the Chinese domestic

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 7.

<sup>107</sup> For this see Rotta, *Egiziani e cinesi a confronto*, pp. 249–254.

<sup>108</sup> Volney, *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires*, Paris 1791, p. 120.

<sup>109</sup> On Adam Smith’s view of Asia in general see W. W. Lockwood, Adam Smith and Asia, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23 (1964), no. 3, pp. 345–355.

market. What is particularly relevant in the present context is not Smith's supposed contribution to reversing the positive image of China, but his discussion of the economic conditions of this country, an original interpretation of the concept of immobility and final metamorphosis of it into the idea of a "stationary" state in economic terms.

Smith, who concentrated his attention – much in Pomeranz's way –, on the "eastern provinces" of China, admitted that in ancient times agriculture and manufactures in China had been improved mainly under the impulse of internal demand and the domestic market, that was made accessible by efficient transports and communications ("inland navigation").<sup>110</sup> He had no difficulty to accept the picture of China as one of the most fertile, best cultivated, richest, most prosperous and populous countries in the world. Such it had been since Marco Polo's times and it still was. But its main characteristic seemed to Smith neither progress nor decline: China had arrived at a stalemate. It "may perhaps stand still," neither progressing nor regressing, as he underlined: it was stationary.<sup>111</sup> There was neither depopulation nor desertion of the cities or abandonment of cultivation, just mere reproduction of a static condition. Smith's explanation for this was based on the idea of the inadequacy of internal demand, the low reward of labour, the low wages of the workers; in a word, he pointed out the low family income, both in agriculture and manufacture, and the consequent lack of initiative in a context of too strong social inequalities. But when did this occur, when had China reached such a stationary state? According to Smith this was not too recent an event. It had occurred quite a long time before and seemed to depend on a sort of physiological relationship between the total attainable wealth and the political institutions of the country, as he repeated in two distinct passages with almost the same words: "China seems to have been long stationary, and had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions."<sup>112</sup>

Smith then focussed his attention on what implicitly was a cleavage or a divergence between a progressive, expanding and dynamic Europe;

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<sup>110</sup> *Wealth of Nations*, Book I, ch. iii., in: The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence, ed. by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, 2 vols., Indianapolis 1981, vol. II (An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Vol. I and II), for this citation see vol. I, p. 75.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, book I, ch. vii, vol. I, pp. 110–111: "China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary."

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, book I, ch. ix, vol. I, p. 126; see also ch. viii, p. 111: "It had perhaps, even long before his time, acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire."

and a closed, withdrawn into itself and stationary China. Apparently, such a divergence had occurred, at least, since the beginning of what in European history was described as the beginning of the modern age, when Europe had started to improve and to expand around the world. The root of the evil was politico-juridical. Smith’s distance from De Pauw is the greatest in postulating historical and juridic-institutional causes for what De Pauw attributed to inherent, anthropological characteristics. China exhibited for Smith defective laws and inadequate policies. The key was civil jurisprudence and, more particularly, the lack of encouragement for foreign commerce. Small stock owners were not protected enough from usurers. Inequalities compressed low income potential entrepreneurs. Contracts were not adequately protected by law. The cost of economic risk was too high, and this was reflected by the interest rate.<sup>113</sup> On the basis of the idea that the lack of juridical tutelage for contracts is a sign of barbarism, Smith drew an implicit rapprochement between China and “the barbarous nations who overran the western provinces of the Roman empire.”<sup>114</sup> In short, present day China was comparable to the state of the Western nations created by the barbarous invaders of the Roman empire. Consequently, China’s economy and institutions presented a strong resemblance to medieval Europe. What appeared paradoxical, according to Smith, was China’s “very high degree of opulence.”<sup>115</sup> It was an even richer country than those of Europe: provisions were more abundant, the price of subsistence in a “rice country”<sup>116</sup> was lower, population more numerous, manufactures cheaper and workshops not remarkably less productive than in Europe. If such a “high degree of opulence” had been reached in past history without resorting to foreign trade, this was due to the great extension of the domestic market, which had allowed for a wide division of labour and the improvement of manufactures.<sup>117</sup> According to Smith, the main reason

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<sup>113</sup> The case of China demonstrated that “A defect in the law may sometimes raise the rate of interest considerably above what the condition of the country, as to wealth or poverty, would require. When the law does not enforce the performance of contracts, it puts all borrowers nearly upon the same footing with bankrupts or people of doubtful credit in better regulated countries. The uncertainty of recovering his money makes the lender exact the same usurious interest which is usually required from bankrupts” (*Wealth of Nations*, book I, ch. ix, vol. I, p. 127).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, book I, ch. ix, vol. I, p. 127.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, book III, ch. i, vol. I, p. 311.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, book IV, ch. iv, vol. I, p. 404.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, book IV, ch. ix, vol. II, p. 104: “The perfection of manufacturing industry, it must be remembered, depends altogether upon the division of labour; and the degree to which the division of labour can be introduced into any manufacture is necessarily regulated, it has already been shown, by the extent of the market. But the

for the Chinese stationary state was represented by the shrinking of the domestic market: the low income of the agricultural labourers did not permit the growth of manufactures and it could not rise because of the economic, political and financial causes indicated above: excessive socio-economic inequalities, usury, uncertainty of contracts. Only foreign trade would have broken this vicious circle; therefore, China had to open itself to commercial relationships with the rest of the world. Its future economic development consisted of external trade and navigation together with the consequent rise of manufacturing production. In short, the solution was globalization, which meant that China could no longer keep itself closed to the outside and had to abandon its traditional attitude of hostility towards strangers:

A more extensive foreign trade, however, which to this great home market added the foreign market of all the rest of the world – especially if any considerable part of this trade was carried on in Chinese ships – could scarce fail to increase very much the manufactures of China, and to improve very much the productive powers of its manufacturing industry. By a more extensive navigation, the Chinese would naturally learn the art of using and constructing themselves all the different machines made use of in other countries, as well as the other improvements of art and industry which are practised in all the different parts of the world. Upon their present plan they have little opportunity except that of the Japanese.<sup>118</sup>

In conclusion, Adam Smith's analysis shows how China in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was considered as a country with still an enormous economic potential deriving from its past history, but that had reached a critical point. Its "stationary" economic state seemed not to have anything to do with a supposed inability to develop arts and sciences, or with its traditionalism, language, writing and philosophic culture. Its apparent divergence from Europe did not depend so much on a difference of national genius with respect to a dynamic, enterprising and inventive West. Such divergence was a matter of fact, for Smith, but it could be overcome by such politics and legislation which would stimulate the extraordinary economic potential of the country, inducing its

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great extent of the empire of China, the vast multitude of its inhabitants, the variety of climate, and consequently of productions in its different provinces, and the easy communication by means of water carriage between the greater part of them, render the home market of that country of so great extent as to be alone sufficient to support very great manufactures, and to admit of very considerable subdivisions of labour. The home market of China is, perhaps, in extent, not much inferior to the market of all the different countries of Europe put together."

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., book IV, ch. ix, vol. II, p. 105.

opening to external relations and its full entrance into the circle of the commercial powers of the world.

If we look more generally at the state of European public opinion, it appears indisputable that since the early 1770s the climate was changing with regard to the perceptions of China. Among the soon prevailing critical attitudes, contemptuous and violently Sinophobic feelings emerged that put forward, as a matter of fact, the total divergence between the Chinese and the European economies, societies and civilisations. According to such Sinophobic outlooks, China and Europe could not even be compared. All reasons for elevating China to the status of a model worth imitating simply evaporated, with the two parts of the world assuming, from a philosophical-historical viewpoint, radically different positions and meanings. There is one particular work, that circulated throughout the 1770s and gained an enormous international reputation, in which this shift towards a negative interpretation of the Chinese world is especially visible owing to the contribution one of the most eminent 18<sup>th</sup> century Sinophobes.

The first edition of the *Histoire philosophique et politique des Deux Indes* (1770), directed by the Abbé Raynal, contained an ideal synthesis of all the motives of admiration and praise for the Chinese empire as 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially Physiocratic-inspired Sinophilia ion could conceive.<sup>119</sup> All its Sinophile enthusiasm notwithstanding, this influential historical work did not eschew the by-then classic question concerning the poor progress in China of scientific learning, or what was rather hastily called “la plupart des connoissances un peu compliquées.”<sup>120</sup> This was defined “un énigme” that, anyway, “n’est pas inexplicable.”<sup>121</sup> A difficult language, a laborious system of writing, an education privileging the cultivation of memory, an inclination for the practical things of life, as well as an overwhelming respect for tradition had extinguished any spirit of invention and imagination in the Chinese, to the point that their arts and sciences were comparable to the European ones three hundred years before. Nonetheless, if this meant to fix with quite chronological precision the start of the divergence between China and Europe, such conclusion neither did weaken the extremely eulogistic representation of the economic, political and civil conditions of the Chinese empire nor involved any allegation of general inferiority with respect to Europe. Whereas these pages remained unaltered in the sec-

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<sup>119</sup> *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et des commerces des Européens dans les Deux Indes*, La Haye 1770, book I: quotations are from the Amsterdam 1772 edition, 5 vols., vol. I, pp. 82–99, see in particular p. 99.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 99.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 99.

ond, 1774 edition of Raynal's work, the third (and fundamental) 1780 Genève edition, with Diderot's important contributions, completely rearranged the section of book I on China in two chapters, number XX and XXI, respectively dedicated to the "État de la Chine selon ses panégyristes" and to the "État de la Chine selon ses détracteurs."<sup>122</sup> The latter was an original addition by Diderot and was motivated not only by the wish to offer a fuller view of European opinions on China, but, in particular, by the will of an outright detractor to completely unveil his own Sinophobic reasons.<sup>123</sup> These reasons had already emerged occasionally through Diderot's thinking since the early 1760s during discussions in the salon of Baron d'Holbach, documented by Diderot's correspondence.<sup>124</sup> They were described in the early 1770s in two texts, the *Satire contre le luxe à la manière de Perse* (1771) and the *Fragment politique sur les Chinois* (1772).<sup>125</sup> It is noteworthy that in the latter text Diderot characterised Chinese sciences together with figurative and literary arts as being in a "état stationnaire."<sup>126</sup> He saw the cause of this in the excess of population and the consequent exhaustion of all human energies employed in providing subsistence and inventing small useful tools for everyday life. These points he took up again in his addition to book I of the *Histoire des Deux Indes* in 1780, which provides a summary of the negative arguments concerning China. Here Diderot reversed all the typical attitudes of the Sinophile arsenal and tried to offer the image of a country whose institutions and manners could be better explained by invoking necessity, rather than virtues or "prudence." This resulted from the examination of the problem of demography and population density, so prominent in pro-China panegyrics. The state of Chi-

<sup>122</sup> See now the new critical edition *Histoire philosophique et politique de l'établissement des Européens dans les deux Indes*, ed. by A. Strugnell (dir.), A. Brown, C. P. Courtney, G. Dulac, G. Goggi et H.-J. Lüsebrink, Ferney-Voltaire 2010, vol. I, p. 113.

<sup>123</sup> On Diderot's opinions on China see H. Cohen, *Diderot and the Image of China in Eighteenth-Century France*, in: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century*, 242 (1986), reprinted in *Facing Each Other: the World's Perception of Europe and Europe's Perception of the World*, ed. by A. Pagden, Aldershot 2000, pp. 421–432.

<sup>124</sup> On Diderot's discussions on China with d'Holbach and company, see for instance "Lettres à M.lle Volland", Septembre 1760, in: *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Assezat-Tourneux, t. XVIII, 1876, pp. 464–465: "On dit [...] à l'honneur des Chinois [des] choses qu'on ne me trouva disposé à croire." I have been directed towards these sources of Diderot's ideas on China by Gianni Goggi, whom I'd like to thank for having shared with me his incomparable knowledge on Diderot and Raynal.

<sup>125</sup> See the *Satire in Salon de 1767*, in: *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Assezat-Tourneux, t. XI, pp. 89–95 ; and the *Fragment sur les Chinois*, *ivi*, t. IV, pp. 45–48.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.



nese agriculture, the lack of uncultivated lands, and the obsessive exploitation of the soil were not due to industriousness, but to the need to provide for a surplus population. All human energies had to be devoted to this primary objective and nothing remained to be employed in arts and sciences nor in inventing, innovating and making progress of any sort. Diderot believed that the capacity to promote the “*recherches curieuses*,” and to go beyond the immediately profitable research “*utile*,”<sup>127</sup> (useful research) was typical evidence of an advanced and civilized society, which in turn was characterised and made possible by a reasonable ratio between population and resources. On the contrary, the prevailing propensity for practical applications, as a response to the overwhelming demographic pressure and elementary economic needs, was one of the causes of Chinese immobility. More factors brought about the same effect, such as the Chinese prejudicial attachment to their own culture, the excessive respect for tradition and for imperial authority – even when clearly tyrannical – and the absence of freedom of movement as well as of exchange with foreign countries. Consequently, general inactivity followed and no perspective existed for individual betterment, so that social and economic development was hindered.<sup>128</sup> Diderot concluded by representing China as located in the primordial historical ages. He ably underlined the paradox in the attitude of the admirers of the so-called patriarchal character of the Chinese government. This resulted in the notion that “*la Chine est revenue par une suite de révolutions à l’état dont les autres contrées se sont éloignées*,”<sup>129</sup> which seemed to imply an idea of a regression in history, more than of proximity to nature. Moreover, the idea of patriarchal government presupposed “*un petit peuple Nomade renfermé sous des tentes*,” not a large empire and a “*contrée immense*,” as well as a republican government that was applicable to “*une contrée assez étroite pour le prompt &*

<sup>127</sup> *Histoire des Deux Indes*, critical edition, book I, ch. xxi, p. 115.

<sup>128</sup> “[chez les Chinois] la vertu [...] est, non pas étouffé, mais totalement détruit. Ajoutez à la dépravation & à l’ignorance de ce peuple la vanité la plus ridicule. Ne dit-il pas qu’il a deux yeux, que nous n’en avons qu’un, & que le reste de la terre est aveugle? Ce préjugé, l’excessive population, l’indifférence pour les souverains, qui peut-être en est une suite, l’attachement opiniâtre à ses usages, la loi qui lui défend de sortir de son pays: toutes ces raisons doivent le fixer pendant une suite indéfinie de siècles dans son état actuel. Apprend-on quelque chose à celui qui croit tout savoir, ou qui méprise ce qu’il ignore? Comment enseigner la sagesse à celui qui s’estime le seul sage? Comment perfectionner celui qui se tient pour parfait? Nous osons le prédire, le Chinois ne s’améliorera, ni par la guerre, ni par la peste, ni par la famine, ni par la tyrannie plus insupportable, & par cette raison même plus propre que tous les fléaux réunis à régénérer leur nation en l’accablant” (ibid., p. 120).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

facile concert des volontés.”<sup>130</sup> Yet in fact, for Diderot, China belonged to an even more backward state than that of the barbarian, nomadic and pastoral nations. Barbarian societies possessed seeds of virtue capable of blossoming into a real progress of conditions. On the contrary, China – only half-civilised and paralysed by the tyrannical powers of the “despotisme civil” – while far from being any longer a paragon of civilisation, was presently sunk and immobilised as if in a marsh:

Le Chinois, à demi civilisé, est à nos yeux un barbare à prétentions, un peuple profondément corrompu, condition plus malheureuse que la barbarie pure & naturelle. Le germe de la vertu peut se développer dans le barbare, par un enchaînement de circonstances favorables; mais nous n’en connoissons pas, nous n’en imaginons point qui puissent rendre ce grand service au Chinois, en qui ce germe est, non pas étouffé, mais totalement détruit.<sup>131</sup>

It deserves to be stressed that two of the outstanding voices of the European Enlightenment, Adam Smith and Denis Diderot showed independently the abandonment in French and British cultures of any form of admiration toward China, both focussing on concepts of historical, social and economic immobility and of a general stationary state. They both believed that China had reached a completely diverging condition with regard to Europe. Even if Europe itself was far from being an ideal of civilization, China was certainly not the right model for a “philosophical” inspiration. From this standpoint, expressions of admiration for China in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were certainly against the mainstream interpretation. In the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (1784) the author Guillaume Grivel (1735–1810) took up again all the fundamentals of China’s admirers. China was described again as an empire of great antiquity, much more ancient than Rome, that had its foundations in natural laws, with an excellent constitution, while supporting good government, administration, useful learning and the welfare as well as the wealth of its subjects. All these, and many more positive qualities, had rendered the empire extensive, prosperous and capable of resisting during forty centuries the corroding effect of time. In short, Grivel’s was an authentic delayed summary of Physiocratic pro-Chinese arguments, uncritically repeating ideas that went against the trend and without any reference to a European debate in which the alternative paradigm of Chinese immobility had taken the lead.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> “S’il est, & s’il fut jamais un gouvernement dans le monde, qui mérite l’attention du philosophe & l’étude de l’homme d’état, c’est sans doute celui de ce vaste empire établi sur les loix naturelles, plus de quinze cent ans avant la fondation

## 6. Conclusion: stationariness, a stiffening stereotype

These kind of positive attitudes had become by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century clearly anachronistic. The transition from an appreciative, even deferential, perspective to a critical and finally unsympathetic, frankly disparaging, attitude towards China in about the last twenty five years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the refinement and reinforcement, also in a linguistic and rhetorical sense, of the idea of Chinese immobility. In turn, this was accompanied by the emergence of stereotype formed by a series of concepts inspired by and deriving from that fundamental idea. We have already recalled the case of Volney who, under the inspiration of Montesquieu and Diderot, referred to political and moral despotism as the main cause for the downright apathy of the individual in Oriental political regimes. Volney also expressed his ideas of the position of China with respect to historical progress by making use of metaphors and adjectives such as “civilisation avortée,” “immuable” and being entrapped in abyss of darkness.<sup>133</sup> Some of Volney’s contemporaries produced not less negative sophisticated images conveying the idea, sometimes expressed in almost racial terms, of the divergent historical destinies of China and the Western world. Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791),<sup>134</sup> for example, intended to react once more to the eulogistic reports of the missionaries, which had spread in Europe an “advantageous picture of the Chinese government” and aroused in philosophers as well as statesmen admiration for “a masterpiece of policy.”<sup>135</sup> Herder recognised that the “tide of opinion,” during his times, was flowing in an opposite direction; thus, denying China a “high degree of civilisation.”<sup>136</sup> He proclaimed to be looking for “some medium between extravagant praise and immoderate blame.”<sup>137</sup> Chronological disputes seemed far less in-

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de Rome, contemporains des anciens empires de Babylone & d’Egypte, & qui par la force de sa constitution subsiste florissant depuis plus de quarante siècles, après avoir vu tomber autour de lui tous ce colosses brillans au bras de fer & aux pieds d’argile” (*Encyclopédie méthodique. Economie Politique Diplomatique* [...] par Dêmeunier, t. I, Paris 1784, pp. 544–573, see p. 545. On Grivel, see *Biographie Universelle*, Paris 1817, t. XVIII, p. 517.

<sup>133</sup> Volney, *Les Ruines*, p. 120.

<sup>134</sup> I quote from the second English edition translated by T. Churchill, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, London 1803 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1800], 2 vols., see vol. II, book XI, “China”, pp. 3–18. All the following citations come from these pages.

<sup>135</sup> Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History*, p. 6.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

teresting to him – from the standpoint of a philosophical inquiry into the history of mankind – than the causes of those “obstacles that prevented its farther advance.”<sup>138</sup> Those obstacles he saw in the remote “mungal”<sup>139</sup> origins of the nation and in the “semitarian despotism” and the “tatarian feudal constitution” that was at first erected in China.<sup>140</sup> Herder adopted a clearly racial interpretation when stating that the “northeastern mungal nation” had brought with it a “genetic character” – an “innate character” produced by “race” and “complexion” – which had been stamped on the Chinese nation and was not modifiable by any artificial regulations: consequently, he concluded in a quite simplistic way that “Chinese they were and will remain.”<sup>141</sup> It was nature that had refused them “great invention in sciences,” granting instead an inclination for imitation. Education had reinforced a tendency of the subjects for passive obedience or “childish submission”<sup>142</sup> to political, administrative and domestic authorities, that led to blind acquiescence to conventions; therefore, preventing the free development of rational faculties. All this supplemented by deterrence from establishing external contacts and by contempt for foreigners, caused the fact that China “has remained for some thousands years at the same point,” in striking contrast with “the European standard”,<sup>143</sup> with particular reference to the European propensity to innovation and progress in scientific knowledge. Confucian education was a system which presumed a state of infancy of human reason and appeared as a “mechanical engine of morals forever checking the progress of the mind.”<sup>144</sup> Despite its ancient industry, China lacked any “spirit of improvement”. Everything contributed to the depiction of a scene of stillness that no human intervention seemed capable of altering. Such a picture offered certainly no appeal for Europe and still less motives for imitating institutions which Herder condemned as “infantile”, that is to say, framed in a very early and immature stage of social and political development, when the total submission of the children to their parents provided the model for despotic government:

The work of legislation and morals possesses no where upon Earth such stability as in China, where the human understanding appears to have

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 7, 9–10, 33. Herder by “mungal” and “tatarian” is making reference to a supposed northeastern Asian origins of the Chinese, stressing their roots in a barbarian, nomadic culture and in feudal (or “semi-feudal”) customs and institutions.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

framed it as an infantile essay: there let it remain and may Europe never rear a sister realm equally full of filial submission to its despots.<sup>145</sup>

Herder’s rhetorical conclusion was contained in the metaphor of a rigid or lethargic organism: “The empire is an embalmed mummy, wrapped in silk and painted with hieroglyphics: its internal circulation is that of a dormouse in its winter sleep.”<sup>146</sup>

Herder did not singled out for China’s immobility one only and exclusive cause, racial, economic, political or whatever else. This immobility depended on a long series of linked factors which, when considered jointly, described the very essence of Chinese civilisation. However, in the last resort Herder seemed to allude to natural, genetic – that is to say racial – and unchangeable characteristics that, according to him, all East Asian countries shared.

It is no surprise that the strongest characterisation of China as an immovable country – being in opposition to a lively, active, energetic and enterprising world represented by Western Europe – is to be found during the late Enlightenment, in the context of progressive and providential philosophies of history, like that exposed by Condorcet in the *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795). China was evoked in this text as an example of the corrupting agency of the “castes”. These were closed social groups of inventors and defenders of the religious systems who were established during Condorcet’s third epoch, when large agricultural societies (“peuples agriculteurs”) evolved more regular forms of legislation and policies.<sup>147</sup> To the corruption of the human mind provoked by religious tenets and superstitions Condorcet attributed the enslavement and annihilation of human intellectual faculties, with the interruption of whatever progress had been carried out before in the arts and sciences. The substitution of knowledge with “absurdes préjugés,” for power’s sake, condemned the whole society “à une éternelle médiocrité” that made the early possession of such important arts as printing entirely useless. Condorcet – having committed himself to a somewhat voluntaristic idea of historical change – seems to ascribe a direct, individual responsibility for this decline to the political, religious and intellectual élites in despotic governments, such as he undoubtedly considers the Chinese. It was the explicit determination of these interested groups to consolidate their dominion over the ignorant

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>147</sup> *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain; suivi de Réflexions sur l’esclavage des Nègres*: par Condorcet. Nouvelle édition, Paris 1829, 3<sup>ème</sup> époque, pp. 57–58; see the comparison with Islam *ibid.*, 6<sup>ème</sup> époque, pp. 128–129.

subjects. They intentionally obstructed any progress in knowledge and condemned their country to a servile stationary state:

Dès lors tout progrès dans les sciences s'arrêta; une partie même de ceux dont les siècles antérieurs avaient été témoins se perdit pour les générations suivantes; et l'esprit humain, livré à l'ignorance et aux préjugés, fut condamné à une honteuse immobilité dans ces vastes empires, dont l'existence non interrompue a déshonoré depuis si longtemps l'Asie.<sup>148</sup>

This historical consequence conferred to China, and to Asia as a whole, a special position in universal history. The Chinese, and the Oriental peoples in general, had become a unique, unequalled example of civilisations bending towards decadence. They had emerged from a savage state, which was observable in other parts of the globe where humanity was still in its infancy. But at the same time, they had been expelled out of the historical course of progress, where the white Europeans were unquestionably the leading actors. In the succeeding historical epochs, in which he schematised his philosophy of history, Condorcet offered no more place or mention of China, which had disappeared from the history of the progress of the human intellect and from the main path to modernity.

A key event in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century added new elements to the stereotype of China as a stationary country, and helped consolidate the concept of a total divergence of historical destiny between previously comparable societies. It was the well-known British embassy of Lord Macartney to the Emperor Qianlong from 1793 to 1794, whose details and results were made known throughout Europe and America by the journals and reports written by George Staunton and John Barrow, members of the diplomatic mission.<sup>149</sup> How this event contributed to fixing the image of an immobile and closed empire – that refused contacts on an equal footing with the Western world and retreated behind its traditionalism – has been diffusely recounted by Alain Peyrefitte, who in Macartney's visit to Peking saw the instance of a "choc des mondes," which opposed two radically different kinds of civilisations as well as

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>149</sup> G. L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China; including cursory Observations made, and Information obtained, in travelling through that Ancient Eempire, and a small Part of Chinese Tartary. [...] Taken chiefly from the Papers of His Excellency the Earl of Macartney, Ambassador [...] Sir E. Gower, Commander of the Expedition, and other Gentlemen in the several Departments of the Embassy*, London 1797, 2 vols.; J. Barrow, *Travels in China*, London 1804.

conceptions of the world, of history and of time.<sup>150</sup> This obviously exonerates us from taking into a deeper consideration the two published works resulting from that fundamental event. Therefore, we can just limit ourselves to point out that at this time the perception of a divergence between Europe and China – regarding their respective position along the progress of history, economy, society, politics and international relationships within a global context – was firmly rooted in the Western mind, as a result of more than one century of controversial reflections and analysis on the Chinese civilisation. Important studies have shown how this perception not only recurred, but was reinforced and put at the basis of complex philosophic-historical interpretations by 19<sup>th</sup> century political thinkers, philosophers and historians, such as Benjamin Constant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Leopold von Ranke.<sup>151</sup> The dilemma concerning the causes and the nature of the divergence between the European and the Chinese civilisations – perceived for a long time as providing two separate but comparable models, each capable of attaining high results in terms of social, political and economic organisation – continued to be an object of inquiry in the West. With the dawn of a new era, marked by the first steps of the Industrial Revolution and of the following transformation of European society, the idea strengthened of an irreconcilable dualism between a dynamic West – capable of making its own history and playing a leading role in the world towards a seemingly endless material progress – and a traditional, static, closed society as the Chinese one. It was John Stuart Mill who coined a new expression, not just as a tool for identifying specific characteristics of Chinese society, but as a sort of general category of the political and historical language. “Chinese stationariness,” which he used for the first time in his 1838 essay on Bentham and elsewhere afterwards, was to him an emblematic, dangerous condition distinguished by lack of diversity, domination of a single class, absence of opposition and checks by the public opinion, as well as by an enervating equality of status that possibly lead to stagnation.<sup>152</sup> This was perceived as a risk to which the evolution of modern society was exposed. It can also be seen as a sign of those anxieties about “stagnation,” which repre-

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<sup>150</sup> A. Peyrefitte, *L'empire immobile ou le choc des mondes: récit historique*, Paris 1989.

<sup>151</sup> E. Ohno, Benjamin Constant, in: E. Schulin, *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke*, Göttingen 1958.

<sup>152</sup> On this see M. Levin, *John Stuart Mill on Civilisation and Barbarism*, London 2004, ch. 6, “Standstill: the Case of China,” p. 99. J. S. Mill used the expression first in his essay on Bentham (1838) and then in a review of Tocqueville in: *The Edinburgh Review*, LXXII, 1841, p. 35 (October 1840).

sented a note of psychological stress in British and European political culture “in the three decades or so after 1850.”<sup>153</sup>

The greatest part of the writings taken into consideration especially in the fourth and fifth parts of this contribution were published just at the beginning of that epoch in world history, from 1780 to 1914, which saw the European supremacy replace the poly-centrism that had more clearly characterised the preceding eras.<sup>154</sup> This was an epoch of major European expropriation at the expense of several peoples of the world, and of the consolidation of Western economic and political ascendancy on a global scale. The hierarchisation of both anthropological and civil diversities in the European self-consciousness was the cultural reflection that accompanied such a process. Some key notions aided the strengthening of the awareness of the superiority of a white, Christian, male, capitalist and industrial Europe. Race, in its strongest biological meaning, was one of them. Progress and economic growth were others. Backwardness or incapacity to progress, and later on underdevelopment, were the mirror ideas that contributed to the schematisation of a new conceptual arrangement of the world and of global history. The evolution of the European, particularly of the Enlightenment, image of a once potent and awesome rival as the Chinese empire during nearly one hundred years may offer a useful insight into such a transformation. To think back over its most significant passages helps us better understand how the need to interiorise as well as categorise historical and civil global diversities was a major driving force in European intellectual history.

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<sup>153</sup> S. Collini/D. Winch/J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics. A Study in Nineteenth Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge 1983, p. 203.

<sup>154</sup> C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, Cambridge 2004.