

China in the Euro-American esoteric imagination

Contouring a lacuna

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European images of China and the esoteric lacuna

Due to various recent political and economic developments, the question of how to deal with modern China from a Western perspective is becoming an object of growing public and intellectual interest from various perspectives and across diverse academic disciplines.¹ Part of such a discourse is also intrinsically related to the general perception about China and its millennia-old cultural tradition. The way non-Western cultural contexts – particularly Asia – are perceived is naturally closely aligned to various developments and constellations that are constantly changing. Presently, the idea that China sooner or later might prevail over Europe and the ‘West’ is a persistent subject in public and intellectual debates. From a broader historical perspective, this is only one of many other notions that developed in the course of the ongoing contact with and the growing knowledge about China.

There are many studies examining the European encounter with China, which has a long history of its own, going back to antiquity as the Roman Empire maintained commercial and even diplomatic relationships with China (for an overview, see McLaughlin 2010: 120–40; also Raschke 1978). These were continued during the medieval times (Reichert 1992), but it was mainly during early modernity in Europe that substantial contacts were established. Prior to the sixteenth century, only a few Europeans managed to overcome the geographical distance, thereby most of the knowledge about China was rooted in legends and myths. Several factors formed the conditions for the subsequent interest in China and the Chinese religious traditions in the early modern period. The sixteenth century was the starting phase of a large-scale expansionist, colonialist agenda in Europe, which included missionary endeavours all over

the (then known) world, but also had a strong commercial aspect that aimed at increasing the financial and economic power of the countries involved. New intellectual concepts triggered by a fresh reading of ancient sources during the Renaissance as well as the recent scientific discoveries at the time transformed the way the world and its history were seen. Such changes posed a challenge to traditional interpretations that were closely aligned to specific readings of the Christian Bible, but had seemingly no place for accommodating the surge of new insights and developments. David E. Mungello points to several specific junctions in this vast cultural transformation process in early modern Europe that became particularly important with respect to China. These relate to the search for a universal language coupled with new insights in the sciences and also includes the history of Hermeticism, which became an important intermediary in the reception of the religious culture of China (Mungello 1985: 23–43).

The transformative trajectory of Europe distinctively shaped the encounter with China. The Portuguese arrived in 1557, and it was due to their lasting presence in the country and under their patronage that the first Catholic missionaries embarked on their pioneering intellectual assessment (Latourette 2019: 78–101). In spite of their failure to create a sizeable Christian community, let alone evangelize the whole of China (Latourette 2019: 185–98), the reverberations of this encounter were immense. Particularly in its first phase and under the Jesuit banner, knowledge of Chinese cultural traditions and related religious and literary materials were for the first time made accessible to the Western public (Brockey 2007). Western reception commenced with reports and 'letters' sent to Europe by the missionaries, which contained primary materials and insights into this hitherto virtually unknown country (Mungello 2009: 81–112). Soon the first (partial) translations and appraisals of major textual sources – such as the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes) and the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and Virtue) – were added, growing significantly in number in the following centuries (see, e.g., the detailed study by von Collani 2007). A number of Jesuit theologians also started their own attempts to integrate elements of the Chinese tradition into a seemingly coherent system of interpretation, whose main features developed into a current known as Figurism (Wei 2020; von Collani 2010). All the new information made it obvious that China possessed an immense cultural, literary and religious tradition and concomitantly raised the need for thorough contextualization and assessment.

The Jesuit missionary encounter was indeed the starting point for a deeper understanding of the country. Evidently, the portrayal of China in the Western

imagination was extremely diverse. Whereas some Enlightenment philosophers, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Voltaire (1694–1778), who based their approach mainly on the Jesuit accounts, introduced China as a veritable utopia and a rational and ordered society centred on meritocracy (Perkins 2004), others like Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) and Montesquieu (1689–1755) were critical and pointed to China's strictly hierarchical and despotic emperor system or its society being prone to polytheism and other sociocultural atavisms.² Hence, there were two extremes – namely, Sinophilia and Sinophobia – that became dominant in the subsequent perception of China (Mungello 2009: 125–30). An important element for the further reception of China was the emergence of the academic discipline of sinology, which was pioneered at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) who held the first chair for the study of Chinese at the famous Collège de France in Paris from 1814 (Cheng 2019; Will 2015). The establishment of sinology led to a much more nuanced view of China, gradually professionalizing the interaction with and reception of the country's history and culture.

The contributions of this volume are concerned with one specific area in the reception history of China that has hitherto hardly been of any scholarly concern – that is, the Euro-American esoteric encounter.³ The main focus of the contributors is the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a network of esoteric movements and individuals emerged sharing a common interest in extra-European sociocultural traditions and, specifically, their spiritual contribution.⁴ Interest in China and East Asia⁵ was intrinsically connected to fundamental presuppositions marshalled by these actors, such as the idea of a universal truth comprising the core of the world's religions. Involving 'foreign' traditions was particularly important as it was meant to serve as validating evidence for such claims. Asia had particular significance as it comprised cultures that extended over millennia and developed a rich and distinct cultural productivity, more specifically by having generated an extensive corpus of religious literature that started to become broadly accessible at the time.

Predictably, the esoteric interest in Asia had two favourites: China and India. Both underwent individual stages of reception and interpretation, shaped by varying perspectives and shifting historical contexts across the centuries. Knowledge of the respective languages was one key factor why India received both early and more attention,⁶ for (most of) the relevant Indian languages make up part of the Indo-European linguistic repository and were previously accessible to the intellectual public (see Halbfass 1990: 36–83; as for the early history, see Windisch 1917: 26–73). Especially facilitated by the Romantic

tradition (Halbfass 1990: 69–83), this led to an immensely positive reception of India more often than not resulting in an idealized depiction as a stronghold of religion and (as it would be later called) ‘spirituality’ – a general perception that is prevalent to this day (King 2013).

Another crucial aspect why India became more important – especially in (but not limited to) the esoteric reception history – is related to the influence of the Theosophical Society which enthusiastically engaged with Indian traditions under the aegis of its foundress Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–91) and especially by her immediate successors (Rudbøg and Reenberg Sand 2020). The Theosophical Society’s Indophilia had Blavatsky even relocate its headquarters to India.

Therefore, most of the scholarship dealing with the relationship between esoteric movements and Asia is expectedly focused on India (e.g. Djurdjevic 2014; de Michelis 2004). Related research also includes studies on the influence of Indian religious traditions (Hanegraaff 2020; Strube 2022; Urban 2003) or the concrete networks developing between Europe and India in this particular religious area (Čapková 2020b; Cox and Turner 2020; Myers 2020).

The interest in China and East Asia has its own specific history within the wider context of Euro-American esotericism. The most eminent early intermediary was the famous German Jesuit polymath and prolific writer Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), who had access to a copious treasure trove of materials, both due to his standing as one of the chief intellectuals of his time and because he was located at the Jesuit Collegium Romanum. His approach was mainly informed by a unique fusion of Christian and Hermetic ideas (for an overview, see Trompf 2011). Consequently, Kircher focused his attention on Egypt and its tradition. But alongside, China – where he reportedly wanted to go as a missionary (Fletcher 2011: 20–1) – became his object of interest owing to the pioneering accounts that arrived from early missionaries at the time (Mungello 1985: 135–73). All this culminated in the publication of the seminal *China illustrata* (1667). Although therein he reduced China to the status of a stale imitation of the great Egyptian culture (e.g. he thought of Chinese characters as being pale copies of the hieroglyphs), the portrayal of China as an eminent cultural tradition remained important in the course of its further reception (Stolzenberg 2013: 50–1). Kircher was a crucial precursor of the later esoteric interest despite the peculiar information in *China illustrata* which was criticized already at the time of publication (on early critics, see Fletcher 2011: 179–80). As already pointed out by Mungello (1985: 29–31), the connection with Hermeticism was an important catalyst for the incipient esoteric interest. In the (esoteric) search for a universal language, Chinese always had a special place

(Mungello 1985: 34–5; Kern 1996: 68–101). In addition, elements of Kircher's approach became relevant for the early Figurists within their integrative approach towards China. In her concise characterization of Figurism, Claudia von Collani (2010: 668–9) isolated three traits: (1) a typological exegesis, which is bound to reveal alleged hidden meanings in the Old Testament; (2) a *prisca theologia* frame, which presupposes the idea of some type of 'divine revelation' by non-Christian figures (with Melchizedek, Pythagoras, Plato, Orpheus and Zoroaster being some of the 'usual suspects', a list that can be readily extended); and (3) a reference to the Christian Kabbala as an overarching concept or interpretative tool. The latter two characteristics became also important in the early esoteric perception as they were easily integrated into a wider framework beyond the confines of the biblical context.

The far smaller appreciation of esotericists vis-à-vis China is also related to a major shift in the overall perception. The said ambiguity, viz. Sinophilia versus Sinophobia, was to be resolved by clearly shifting towards the latter during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mungello 2009: 81–145; Dijkstra 2022: 266; Osterhammel 2018: 372). One major factor for this development was the emergence of racial theories: whereas India remained part of the presupposed Aryan sphere, the Chinese were racially inferiorized.⁷

Contouring the Euro-American esoteric reception of China and East Asia

In the last two decades, a growing number of scholars have embarked on exploring both the impact-cum-reception (e.g. Akai 2009; Yoshinaga 2009; Wu 2018) and transplantation (e.g. Čapková 2020a; Chuang 2020; Jammes 2020) of Euro-American esotericism as well as the formation and expression of the esoteric current in East Asia (e.g. Gaitanidis and Stein 2019; Yoshinaga 2021; Junqueira 2021). So far, the study of 'occult East Asia' has engaged specifically with the case of Japan since the late nineteenth century (and less so with China, Korea and Vietnam). Yet, whereas there is an increase in studies that examine Japan et al.'s reception of esoteric themes coming (back) from the Euro-American context, the 'other end' of this entangled phenomenon, that is, the Euro-American esoteric reception of East Asia, remains a desideratum.

One of the guiding principles of the present volume is to contextualize the approach towards East Asia with a focus on China within a broader cultural and historical framework. This is closely aligned with the idea that esoteric

and occult traditions constitute part of basic cultural, religious as well as social developments. Indeed, the history of esoteric currents is undoubtedly a vital aspect of the religious history of Europe and beyond – therefore, they must not be regarded as instances of isolated curiosities or some sort of negligible peculiarity. On the contrary, the immense cultural influence of esotericism has been highlighted by many scholars. One of the seminal features of the esoteric current is the appreciation, integration and promotion of extra-European cultures and traditions. In fact, from early on, esotericists have been important advocates for and facilitators of a particular interest in non-European religious and cultural traditions. Often this was accompanied by a pronounced idealization of ‘the other’, which was presented as a superior alternative. The reception of India and its image as the supposed ‘home of ideal religion and spirituality’ in the twentieth century owes therefore much to its overall positive early reception within the esoteric milieu.

Another subject to which the volume contributes refers to the question found at the core of an ongoing debate within the academic study of esotericism, namely, how (if at all) to apply the designation ‘Western’ in the umbrella term ‘Western Esotericism’. In the founding days of the discipline the use of this compound was deemed imperative as it was understood to clearly spell out crucial boundaries defining the very scholarly field, thereby keeping at bay the emic discourse. As the contributions in the volume demonstrate, the ‘East–West’ logic cannot be upheld with a view to the formation and identity of the global esoteric current, which is indeed not monolithic but intrinsically entangled (Asprem and Strube 2021).

The chapters of this volume highlight the vibrant, multifaceted and intricate esoteric reception of China and Chinese thought, a process still reverberating to this day. Moreover, this collection contours – admittedly not exhaustively – major discursive trajectories and influential figures in this particular thread of reception history pertaining to China and East Asia. Today’s popular imagination about China and East Asia would not have been the same without these individuals – including many others as well, whom future scholarship will need to properly introduce. The esoteric contribution, especially to the formation of the popular appreciation of the Chinese and overall East Asian religious thought and philosophy, can hardly be overstated.

Julian Strube illustrates an early network of relations that are centred on the interpretation of the European tradition of mesmerism in comparison with Chinese concepts such as the *yin-yang* 陰陽 dyad. Strube’s major focus is a most fascinating exchange between Beijing and Paris in the eighteenth

century, namely, between the French Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–93) and (his friend) the Chinese prince Hongwu 弘晬 (1743–1811) but also including the famous Huguenot masonic author Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725–84) and a French lieutenant general-cum-Mesmerist. This transcultural contact exemplifies the close entanglement of individual actors, thereby dissolving the classical ‘East–West’ binary.

Franz Winter deals with one of the most eminent figures in the history of esotericism whose influence is conspicuous even today. Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810–75), better known by his later pen name Éliphas Lévi, virtually fathered the modern notion of ‘magic’ through his seminal writings. References to China, particularly to the *Yijing*, neatly fit into his design of ‘magic’ as an all-encompassing, transcultural current whose traces could be explored ubiquitously. Winter interrogates these references within a wider cultural and historical context while considering Lévi’s biography, which includes a training at a Catholic seminary and intense involvement in early socialist movements in France. Notably, Lévi approaches China, among others, through a Figurist lens.

Lukas K. Pokorny investigates the early translation history of the *Daodejing* with a focus on the Theosophical reception and contribution towards the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, he traces which translations and verses were employed by Theosophical writers at the time and what status they assigned to this Daoist classic. He pays special attention to the first two full renditions crafted by the well-known Theosophists Walter Richard Old (1864–1929) and Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) – both being in circulation to this day. Pokorny notes that their Theosophically minded translations were essentially an exercise in creative (Old) or blunt copying (Hartmann).

Davide Marino explores another key figure of the early esoteric reception of East Asian religious concepts in Europe, whose publications were formative for the French esoteric imagination of East Asia: the Martinist Eugène-Albert Puyou de Pouvoirville (1861–1939) who spent several years in French Indochina (modern-day Vietnam) and began to publish works on East Asian religions or the ‘Far-Eastern metaphysics’ under the nom de plume Matgioi. Marino engages with the question of authenticity regarding de Pouvoirville’s Vietnamese informant but also interprets his work in relation to major patterns of European colonialism.

Johan Nilsson introduces another chief protagonist of the early esoteric interpretation of Chinese religious thought: the Danish-American Carl Henrik Andreas Bjerregaard (1845–1922), a Theosophical connoisseur of Daoism. Nilsson places Bjerregaard’s writings in the context of the early twentieth-century

esoteric fascination with China, which was also formed and transformed by his writings.

Gordan Djurdjevic turns to the landmark figure of occultism Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who immersed himself in (what he understood as) Chinese wisdom at least in his self-perception. Crowley went so far as to publish his own ‘translations’ of important Chinese classics, including the *Daodejing*. In addition, he was deeply intrigued by the idea that there was a correlation between the eight trigrams of the *Yijing* and the occult model of the so-called Tree of Life. Djurdjevic intimately follows the biographical genesis of Crowley’s views on China and its alleged wisdom, underlining the importance of this largely uncharted area of the history of esotericism.

In his second contribution, *Johan Nilsson* deals more generally with the question of the ‘spiritual East–materialistic West’ binary in esoteric depictions of Chinese culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He argues that, contrary to the wider public image of China, the esoteric perception indeed employed this binary to some degree but did not do so vigorously. The esoteric reception of Chinese wisdom was many-layered, involving educational, social and political issues alongside the spiritual dimension.

Karl Baier meticulously studies a pivotal figure for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century esoteric reception of Chinese thought – the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Jung’s encounter with Daoism and the *Yijing* (but also Zen Buddhism) proved enormously influential for the area of alternative religiosities from the 1960s Counter Culture to the present-day holistic milieu. Baier sheds light on the fruitful relationship between Jung and his chief sinological informant, Richard Wilhelm (1873–1920), and scrutinizes Jung’s orientalist understanding and integration of Daoism and the *Yijing*.

Finally, *Tao Thykier Makeeff* navigates into more recent times in his discussion of the esoteric entanglement with Chinese martial arts. More particularly, he draws on the martial artist legend Bruce Lee (1940–73) and various Hermetic Taijiquan 太极拳 masters. Makeeff stresses that these agents’ identities and self-conceptions are the complex result of globally enmeshed reception processes which clearly defy the ‘East–West’ binary stereotype. He rightly alerts that one runs the risk of reductionism or outright misattribution when trying to capture the formative elements of these figures and traditions.

As stated at the beginning, this volume is a first attempt to explore in a more focused manner a thus far highly understudied subject. Admittedly, this can only be a humble attempt, opening the field for much-needed further elaborations and more detailed studies. As mentioned, whereas the Euro-

American esoteric prism of the reception cast upon India has received relatively wide attention in recent years, China and East Asia remain a veritable *terra incognita* in this respect. Being the first of its kind, this collection attempts to remedy this scholarly lacuna by sketching chief contours of the Euro-American esoteric reception project. However, many topics of interest remain to be explored, such as, for example, Japan and Japanese religions, which are only mentioned in passing. Likewise, with the exception of one chapter, emphasis is clearly put upon the long nineteenth century (and slightly before and beyond). The subsequent period, especially from the 1960s onwards, led to a surging esoteric interest in things East Asian. Austrian-born Fritjof Capra's (b. 1939) influential *The Tao of Physics* (1975) is such an example, spearheading an entirely new book genre in which modern-day science and East Asian religious thought were esoterically appropriated (Clarke 2000: 75–6). For this collection, we designated a regional and temporal focus, for China represented the uncontested centre of the Euro-American esoteric interest involving East Asia for the longer part of its reception history. Follow-up research will need to fill the remaining gaps and thoroughly expand on the directions set by the contributions of this volume.

Notes

- 1 'Euro-American' is a qualifier that is intended to *geographically* delimit the globally entangled esoteric discourse. That is, the contributions in this volume predominantly refer to sources that were crafted (however globally intertwined the production processes may have been) by individuals who lived or (originally) resided in precisely this geographical context (i.e. Europe and North America). Moreover, the writings of these individuals were primarily addressed to and/or received by a likewise European/North American audience. Of course, many of these sources circulated globally and found interested audiences around the world. The use of the term 'Western' in this volume has to be understood in the same vein as an admittedly vague geographical limitation and not as a (cultural) essentialist category.
- 2 On Bayle and Montesquieu, see Kow 2017: 41–78, 135–99; see also the concise overview of French Enlightenment philosophers and their take on China in Pinot 1932.
- 3 Rare exceptions include Irwin 2004; Sacco 2008; Nilsson 2013, 2020; Paolillo 2013; Statman 2019; Faxneld 2021; and Redmond 2021. Moreover, the subject is touched upon by Cohen 2022. A follow-up to this collection is the special issue on 'Euro-American Esoteric Readings of East Asia' (Pokorny and Winter 2024a; for the

- individual contributions, see Marino 2024; Nilsson 2024; Pokorny 2024; Strube 2024; and Winter 2024).
- 4 In this volume, and in line with our definition given in Pokorny and Winter 2024b: 3, “esotericism” is understood as an umbrella notion comprising largely non-hegemonic teachings and currents with shared structural features, foremostly centring on the idea that higher or special (practical) knowledge distilled from a discourse deemed secretive can be (incrementally) utilized by its practitioners to salvific or otherwise self-cultivational ends, thereby uncovering ulterior dynamics of life, nature, and/or the cosmos at large.
 - 5 Drawing on our definition (Pokorny and Winter 2018: 4–6), we understand ‘East Asia’ to comprise today’s nation-states of China (excepting Tibet) and Taiwan, Japan, South and North Korea and Vietnam.
 - 6 Adding to this, of course, is the fact that the European encounter with India preceded that with China (also due to the lesser travel distance), rendering the former ‘more familiar’. China’s sheer vastness and the general impression of a more closed and alien society likewise favoured India’s reception.
 - 7 On the transformation process that eventually also led to the idea of the Chinese as ‘yellow’ race, see Demel 1992.

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