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Europe Refracted: Western Education and Knowledge in China

Abstract

European educational knowledge and practices have been deeply impacted by the colonial experience. While hegemonic knowledge was exported to the colonies, practices of teaching and governing colonial subjects were tested in the periphery and then re-imported to the center. This contribution looks at a case of European education outside Europe that did not take place, at least not entirely, in a colonial setting: China. It argues that the (at least potentially) non-colonial encounter with societies that presented possible alternatives to European civilization was as important in refracting and reframing European knowledge, education, and identity as was the colonial encounter. European education outside Europe was not only enacted in settings of hegemony and resistance but also in more subtly nuanced spaces of encounter.

The article explores these dimensions of educational encounter by selectively recapitulating the Jesuits' China mission mainly in the seventeenth century, the inversion of enlightenment enthusiasm about China in Johann Gottfried Herder's account of China in the eighteenth century, the semi-colonial experience in China and its effects for education in the nineteenth century, and some China-Europe educational alliances vis-à-vis America in the early twentieth century. Rather than presenting in-depth historical analyses of the given time periods and processes under way – there exists a large body of literature for each period – such historical snapshots serve to illuminate how European education has been mutually co-constructed both by Europeans and their non-European counterparts.

It is by now an interpretative commonplace to identify the colonial viewer as Euclidean emissary: the man who sits at Europe's cartographic tables, who grids and tabulates, and who confirms his authority over foreign space through the power-technologies of sight. As such, we have become attuned to the provocation of post-modernity that "*the map precedes the territory*"; that a certain highly mediated perception of space and sight constructs the colony in anticipatory prelude to its practical possession.

(Dubow, 2000, p. 89)

Prologue: China through the looking glass

Civilizing missions—both religious and educational in character—are deeply intertwined with the history of Western colonization. These missions were justified on the moral grounds of uplifting “inferior races” (Conklin, 1998, p. 420), thus obliterating the contradiction between, on the one hand, the values of liberty and enlightenment that were to be exported and taught and, on the other, the colonial act of oppression itself. Although it was essential for the civilizing mission to keep up, in Kenneth Pomeranz's (2005) words, the distinction between a “civilized core” and a “backward periphery,” this distinction could, at least potentially, be abolished in a more or less distant future, due to the educational character of these missions. As Prasenjit Duara (2004, p. 2) notes, “what distinguishes the civilizational idea from nationalism is its appeal to a higher, transcendent source of value and authority, capable of encompassing the Other,” instead of just suppressing or eliminating it. Civilizing missions constituted the moral mouthpiece of the colonial project.

In the wake of Edward Said's orientalism debate (1978), postcolonial research has sought to reveal the explicit and implicit hegemonies within a colonial/civilizational project that has been marked by a male-centered, Western-focused exoticization of what was construed as the “Oriental.” Going beyond Said's exploration of orientalist discourses and practices, scholars have been increasingly concerned with decentering the colonial project and giving voice to the marginalized, unrepresented and underrepresented, spurred by Gayatri Spivak's widely known book chapter “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). Yet much scholarly literature that explores Western educational and religious missions overseas, frames the outcomes of these missions within the dichotomy of success or failure. Those to be missionized are confined to the roles of either acceptance or resistance—or, at most, indigenization.¹

In the field of adventure literature, a whole range of “exotic” novels deal with “Europeans who have ‘gone native’ or ‘Fantee’ in the jungle” (Ruppel, 1988, p. 5). Such accounts point to the transformative power of the indigenous on the colonizer. One of the most fascinating examples of this is the figure of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1989 [1899]). The idea of the “periphery” having some sort of backlash on the “center” was taken up within anthropology (see e.g. Mintz, 1985, on the impact of sugar) and by now constitutes an important, if controversial, subfield also in historical research (see e.g. Hall & Rose, 2008; Ward, 2001). It is a consensus within that field that “colonialism has been an interconstitutive process that shaped [the colonizers'] society and culture” (Woollacott, 2001, p. 9). Interestingly, this aspect has often been underexplored in scholarly literature on civilizing/educational missions, with a few notable exceptions.² While clearly critical of the colonizer, much of this literature, as Jessica Dubow (2000, p. 92) argues, “tends to take its ‘subject’ for granted; tends, indeed—and paradoxically—to perform on the colonizer its own brand of naturalizing operation.” Colonialism is mainly envisioned “centrifugally,” as emanating from the center to the periphery: “a radiating mechanical embrace” with a brutalizing impact on the colonial subject (Trotter 1990, p. 3). Outcomes of colonization—or, as in this case, educational-*cum*-religious missions—are thus conflated with the original intention of the colonizer/missionary, without “any

disturbance en route” (Dubow, 2000, p. 92). Deviations from the colonizer’s map are termed as either failure (from the colonizer’s point of view) or resistance (from the view point of those to be colonized/missionized), but rarely do they lead to the question of “what precedes the map?” How may we understand colonial sight and space not merely as self-confirming, but as things that might require their own ‘rites of confirmation’?” (ibid., p. 89)

What does Dubow mean by these “rites of confirmation”? As Trotter (1990, p. 4) argues, the essence of the colonizer did not come into being naturally but was marked by “a thoroughly problematic beginning: a renewal of ‘persona’ [of the colonizer] so far from ‘self-confirming’ that it required an extensive array of rites of confirmation.” These rites drew on symbolic resources, such as “the ideals and fantasies which made it, for so many people, the right (indeed the only) vocation to pursue” (ibid.), but these “fantasies” could only be upheld on the basis of the above-mentioned distinction between center and periphery, leading to further dichotomies, such as barbaric and civilized or progressive and backward. These rites of confirmation then did not result from an absolute idea of progress and civilization for example, but emerged in dialectic relation to an imagined, backward “Other,” which was made essential with the help of an increasingly refined apparatus of theological and scientific theories.

The Jesuit mission to China is a good starting point to illustrate how religious-cum-scientific knowledge is not simply transferred from Europe to other regions, but also how the nature of this knowledge is transformed as are the carriers of this knowledge—the Jesuit missionaries and their competitors—while they are being embedded in their new surroundings. In Dubow’s words, these transformations occur while the Jesuits “yield into world” and “come to be wrapped and surrounded by its spaces” (2000, p. 92). It is not a mere juggling of words if one links Dubow’s above-cited “rites of confirmation” to the Chinese Rites Controversy triggered by Jesuit practices in China. Rites constitute crucial instruments of organizing individual and social life. When the Jesuits, and in particular Matteo Ricci, arrived in China, they encountered rites that seemed different yet compatible with how they understood the Christian religion. It was precisely the ensuing rites controversy that marked the major “disturbance” in the Jesuit China mission: should the Christian mission accommodate Chinese (i.e., pagan) rituals and beliefs, in order to spread the religion in China, or was that tantamount to heresy? The dispute was eventually decided to the disadvantage of the Jesuits, but in the course of the Rites Controversy, the conflict revealed fascinating openings in the above-quoted “renewal of ‘persona’”: the Jesuits reconstituted themselves in relation to their China experience, and these experiences had a profound impact on developments in their homeland—developments that eventually called into question the supremacy of the Christian religion and the church.

To be sure, many of the conflicts within Catholicism—including the struggle between the Society of Jesus and the orthodox Catholic establishment—were homemade and had to do more with Europe and the Counter-Reformation than with China. However, China—or what the missionizing Jesuits discovered as Chinese culture and rites—is no arbitrary fellow player in this game about the true and proper way to evangelize. The Jesuit China mission is neither, as Liam M. Brockey argues, “in the main a European story” (2007, p. 12) nor is it just part of a Chinese tale;³ rather, it is a genuine piece of entangled history, both on Chinese and European terms. It is also to a certain extent a precolonial story although colonization was well under way at the time that the Jesuits started their mission in China. It is precolonial in the sense that at the beginning of this encounter, the Chinese civilization was perceived on a par with European culture and in some aspects even superior to the latter.

In this article, I will argue that the potentially noncolonial encounter with societies that presented possible alternatives to European civilization was as important for refracting and

reframing European knowledge, education, and identity as was the colonial encounter. European education outside Europe was not only enacted in settings of hegemony and resistance but also in more subtly nuanced spaces of encounter. I will therefore explore these dimensions of educational encounter by selectively recapitulating the Jesuits' China mission mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the inversion of Enlightenment enthusiasm about China in Johann Gottfried Herder's account of China in the eighteenth century and the semicolonial experience in China and its effects for education in the nineteenth century; and, finally, some China–Europe educational alliances vis-à-vis America in the early twentieth century. Rather than presenting in-depth historical analyses of the given time periods and processes—there exists a large body of literature for each period⁴—such historical snapshots serve to illuminate how European education and knowledge production have been mutually coconstructed both by Europeans and their non-European counterparts.

China and European knowledge between the Jesuits and the Enlightenment

When in 1582, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) arrived in China at the age of thirty, he was witness to a time that would later be called the age of discovery voyages. Not only was there an expansion and intensification of global trade, but there was also a surge of Christian overseas missions, with Spain and Portugal taking the lead. Ricci's death in 1610 was followed by devastating wars in seventeenth-century Europe, among them the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). The time after his death also saw a stronger centralization of missionary activities under Rome, with the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith being established in 1622. Following this, more focus was put on developing indigenous clergy and adapting Christianity to the “indigenous cultures of foreign people rather than imposing European manners and customs” (Mungello, 1985, p. 24). This can still be considered a legacy of Ricci's approbation of the Chinese rites as issued in his 1603 directive. However, in the subsequent decades, Rome grew more and more suspicious of this accommodation of pagan beliefs and practices. The Holy See's uneasiness with this arrangement culminated in the papal bull *Exquo singulari* of 1742, in which Benedict XIV condemned the accommodation of rites and thus brought the controversy to an official close (Luttio, 1994).

To the Chinese upper strata and in particular the imperial court, the Jesuits represented valuable knowledge carriers. “Western studies,” or *xixue* in Chinese, contained theological, moral, scientific, technological and artistic knowledge (Zürcher, 1995, p. 264). It was the Jesuits' scientific and technological knowledge and skills that their Chinese counterparts were interested in, while they were indifferent or even hostile to their religious motives. By the time of its China mission, the Society of Jesus had standardized methods that were used for teaching grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology; most of the China Jesuits went through these programs twice, once as students and once as teachers, and were thus highly versed in the systematic mediation of knowledge (Brockey, 2007, p. 8). Additionally, and in contrast to other missionary groups, the Jesuits came to stay (Mungello, 1985, p. 49): they knew that once they were shipped to China, they would probably spend the rest of their lives there—unless ordered otherwise by their Society. Consequently, in order to win the trust of the local elites, the Jesuits reached a remarkable mastery of the Chinese language and most often dressed Chinese as well. This enabled them, in combination with their much-sought-after scientific knowledge, to become appointed as officials and join the ranks of the Chinese bureaucracy.

Thus, much in contrast with later missionary-educational efforts that were largely directed toward the common (and often poorer parts of the) Chinese population, the Jesuits targeted the elites to win the country for their cause. This strategy was mirroring the peculiarities of the then existing Chinese educational system, which was less a school

system than an examination system. Official schools served mainly as sites of examinations, whose functions were to select potential candidates for imperial officialdom. Education itself took place mainly at private schools run by families or clans. These would sometimes also run winter or charity schools for the peasant population. Despite the absence of a public education system, the official examinations at various administrative levels throughout the country ensured a rather high degree of curricular homogeneity. Even though the system was potentially open to all strata of society, it was above all the Confucian-educated gentry who profited from it. Besides these official schools, there were the Confucian academies and a range of Buddhist and Daoist monastery schools, which were all-important sites of knowledge production but offered no pathways into officialdom. Hence, the Jesuits' choice to engage with the imperial bureaucracy—that is, with those who had already gone through the Chinese examination system—rather than with alternative seats of knowledge reflected their will to obtain access to the heart of governmental power. At the same time, their strategy differed greatly from later missionary movements with distinctly civilizational goals. It was not their aim to turn barbarians into civilized humans, but to convert humans whom they accepted as already belonging to a civilization. They thus operated without a distinction between “civilized core” and “backward periphery.”

Ironically, the Jesuits' knowledge in astronomy that was so valuable to the Chinese was beginning to become outdated when they started their China mission. Although the Jesuits brought highly developed skills and instruments (e.g., to predict eclipses, which was important to the Chinese imperial court), they also brought with them a cosmological conception that was illogically geocentric, and that was already under debate in Europe at the time. It was also a conception that lay at odds with the Chinese conception of a fluid cosmological order—which would have been more compatible with Copernican heliocentrism (Mungello, 1985, pp. 26ff.). Nonetheless, both Jesuits and Chinese elites entered a symbiosis that seemed mutually beneficial: while the imperial court opened its doors wide enough to gain additional skills, particularly in mathematics and astronomy, the Jesuits thought themselves closer to their aims of winning over Chinese souls to the Christian cause.

Both intentions, Chinese and Jesuit, sprang from the fallacy that knowledge and religion/worldview were clearly separable from each other. On the one side, the Chinese elites thought that they could sift out precious technological knowledge while staying immune to the accompanying theories and values—a plan that failed utterly at the latest in the nineteenth century, as will be illustrated below. On the other side, the Jesuits accommodated themselves to Confucianism while, deliberately or not, ignoring its religious dimensions. Confucianism was interpreted as nonsuperstitious (and thus nonidolatrous) rites that had only civil, not religious, significance. Or, as Zürcher (1995, p. 271) writes: “Confucianism remains the matrix in which Christianity is inserted, and that process of contextualization works in two ways: the Christian message is cut to size, and the Confucian ideology is stretched to its outer limits of tolerance.”⁵

The Jesuit accommodation under Ricci and his followers has been largely interpreted to be strategic: winning over Chinese souls and outplaying competing missionaries by getting access to the highest-level officials (see Cummins, 1993). However, if the depiction of Chinese society as basically irreligious had no effect on the missionaries themselves—which is debatable—it certainly left its traces on the Jesuits' homeland, Europe. The Jesuits' accounts of China were *the* source of information on this distant but intriguing country in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.⁶ The publication of these accounts preceded the beginning of the Enlightenment period, in which the place of god and the church was to be rethought and renegotiated. Both the search for alternative models of society and for the origin of mankind spurred interest in China. The Chinese state seemed

to quintessentially prove to European enlightenment philosophers that a state and a society could be built on a foundation that was not Christian or even religious. Thus, China was upgraded from the noble pagan status (see Franke, 1995, p. 12 on “baroque sinophily”) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to the prototype of a state that was ruled by wise emperors and philosophers.

Hence, the initial European interest in China—called “proto-sinology” by Mungello (1985, p. 13)—was driven by distinctly European motivations. One of the more famous figures to have taken an interest in China was the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). In his preface to the *Novissima Sinica* published in 1697–99, he wondered, with regard to China, “who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life?” (translated in Lach, 1957, p. 69). He then goes on to acknowledge the superiority of Chinese laws, which he sees as being directed to the “achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible” (ibid., p. 70). These achievements he values much higher than those by “the founders of religious orders” (ibid., p. 70) in Europe; in fact, he attributes (not incorrectly) a quasi-religious character to Chinese social relations and thus clearly deviates from the Jesuit interpretation.⁷

To be sure, Leibniz’s description of Chinese social life, in its eagerness to contrast it to the European lack of civility, tends to over-rationalize Chinese social relations:

Thus it happens that scarcely anyone offends another by the smallest word in common conversation. And they rarely show evidences of hatred, wrath, or excitement. . . . Neighbors and even members of a family are so held back by a hedge of custom that they are able to maintain a kind of perpetual courtesy. (Ibid., pp. 70–71)

The Chinese elites of the time were not keen on having their values and worldviews replaced by their Western counterparts. Likewise, their Jesuit contemporaries were not interested in, or even aware of, triggering a discussion in Europe about the necessity of god and religion in governing human society. Both groups would, in the course of history, counter the emerging danger. The would do so by distinguishing between “Chinese essence and Western functions” (*zhongti xiyong*), which attempted to keep up the illusion that Western education could be divided into knowledge with and knowledge without ideological baggage. The Jesuits would do so by attesting the Chinese lack of transcendental philosophical reasoning, which was seen as the privilege of Western philosophy and religion. Even Leibniz, in his appraisal of the Chinese art of maintaining social order, judges that “we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences” (ibid., p. 69).

However, neither attempt at disentangling what had already grown together would be successful in the long run. Just as China went through a fundamental modernization process that equally transformed the social and moral foundations of its society, European thinkers repeatedly questioned god and religion, often with reference to what they perceived as a superior Eastern spirituality.⁸ Yet, it took several centuries after the Enlightenment period for China to reemerge fit enough to provide Europe with such positive references—to be discussed toward the end of this article. Following the rather favorable accounts by the Jesuits and Enlightenment thinkers, China leaped backward in European imagination. Particularly during the nineteenth century, it was the European, not Chinese, civilization that served as “silent referent” (Chakrabarty, 1992, p. 2) against which China was to measure its success or failure.

From the wise emperor to the sick man of Asia: With Herder into the nineteenth century

From a European point of view, China steadily transmuted from an enlightening agent to a patient to be enlightened in the course of the eighteenth century. The noble pagan was vulgarized into a target of civilizing activity: it was from now on the “noble burden” (I borrow this term from Watt, 2011, p. 8) of Western powers to lift the periphery up from its barbarism. This foreshadowed the colonial-cum-racist discourse so prevalent in the nineteenth century, in which China was moved toward the bottom scale of civilizational achievements and geopolitical power. While more favorable reports saw China as merely lagging behind and in the need of catching up with a modernization and industrialization process that the West had already gone through, other accounts essentialized Chinese deficiencies as inherent characteristics of region and race. A prevalent example of this latter discourse is the philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder’s idea of a *Volksgeist* was based on an idealized, overtly homogeneous understanding of culture. Ironically, Chinese intellectuals of the 1990s often used Herder’s *vVolksgeist* to “preserve or (re-)create the unity of Chinese culture, but also [to differentiate] it more sharply from other, particularly ‘Western’ cultures, which are depicted as disjointed and chaotic” (Schulte, 2004, p. 318). It is questionable if these intellectuals ever read Herder’s chapter on China in his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, first published in 1784 (Herder, 1966).

In this treatise, Herder reiterates widely known tales about Chinese skills in infrastructure, agriculture, architecture and acknowledges, following in Leibniz’s footsteps, how the Chinese live peacefully through mutual respect and by following rites and customs. However, when he begins to talk about the “obstacles” of the Chinese people—obstacles in character, geographic space, race, and the political system—his language turns outright racist:

. . . so this race of men, in this region, could never become greeks or romans. Chinese they were, and will remain: a people endowed by nature with small eyes, a short nose, a flat forehead, little beard, large ears, and a protuberant belly: what their organization could produce, it has produced; nothing else could be required of it. (Herder, 1966, p. 293)

He then goes on to dismantle what hitherto has been noted positively, namely Chinese customs and social relations, as, at most, superficial and even false. While Leibniz still maintained that “[to] us, not enough accustomed to act by reason and rule, these [customs] smack of servitude; yet among them, where these duties are made natural by use, they are observed gladly” (Lach, 1957, p. 70), Herder simply discards these practices as “false, enfeebling customs” (Herder, 1966, p. 295) which “accustom the real hearts of men to falsehood” (*ibid.*, 294).

What has changed to give way to such a devastating critique? Three tropes stand out in Herder’s argument: profit versus sincerity; the power and honesty of nature; and stagnation versus progress. The first trope can be considered the most cynical one: in an age when European trading companies sailed under the sole flag of profit and exploitation, their own lack of morals was generally projected onto the indigenous population and its alleged greed and cunning. Herder presents the image of a people that is “[e]ternally moving, eternally occupied, . . . for ever going and coming, in quest of gain” (294), with the only aim of making profit and cheating on others. Second, as a fervent defender of emotions against reason and a vanguard of the Romantic Movement, Herder heralds the power of nature and despises rules that he considers unnatural. Consequently, Chinese filial piety is depicted as nothing but artificial and therefore false in his eyes. Third, he lays out the global model of stagnation and progress that came to be the dominating characterization of West–East relations in the nineteenth century. China, an “embalmed mummy, wrapped in silk, and painted with hieroglyphics,” (296) is contrasted to a thriving, progressing Europe.

Clearly, the eighteenth century was witness to a disqualification of China as an equal

partner or even possible alternative to the Western civilization. Against this unfavorable backdrop, the above-mentioned papal condemnation of the Jesuit accommodation of Chinese rites is not surprising. Europe had emerged, at least in its self-understanding, as the leading power among the world's civilizations. A "modern global hierarchy" (Bryant, 2006, p. 435) had unfolded, replacing the old polycentric world; Europe, and in particular European science, was made "the point of reference," with everything else "bound to seem deviant, as lacking something" (Goody, 2006, p. 153). What role did this Europe play in nineteenth-century China, and what effects did this have for education?

The Opium Wars, which started in 1839, marked a pause not only in diplomatic and trading relationships between China and the West, but also in China's growing self-understanding as nation and civilization. Among Chinese historians, this break is generally considered the beginning of the modern (*jindai*) period (Schulte, 2008, p. 43). Both bureaucracy and intellectuals were confronted with the scandalous discovery that, as Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a famous reformist politician, quoted from a Chinese diplomat's diary of the late nineteenth century, the "barbarians today are not the same as in earlier times, they also have a civilization that is more than two thousand years old" (Liang, 1989, p. 43).⁹ Within a few decades, China's self-understanding underwent a tremendous transformation: while Chinese rulers and intelligentsia had for centuries placed Chinese empire and culture at the center of the universe, the Chinese nation was now degraded to the "sick man of Asia" (*Dongya bingfu*) (Callahan, 2004, p. 202), in parallel to Turkey as the "sick man of Europe." Western education was to cure China of its weaknesses and backwardness.

War, or military supremacy, were pivotal means to push through European hegemony, both in countries that were formally colonized (e.g., India) and those spared the formal act of colonization (e.g., China). At the same time, however, brute force came hand in hand with the soft power of the civilizational project, exemplifying "the desire not (simply) to conquer the Other, but to be desired by the Other" (Duara, 2004, p. 2).¹⁰ Increasingly, Chinese intellectuals and reformers saw the Western world as superior not only in weapons technology and ship building, but also more generally in terms of knowledge and even world view. New ideas of knowledge and schooling were transported into China, and it was above all education—as the base and source of all knowledge—that reformers saw in need of a fundamental reconceptualization and transformation. This shift became most obvious with the abolition of the centuries-old examination system in 1905,¹¹ and was further pushed forward by the inclusion of new, "modern" school subjects into the existing curriculum, the foundation of Western-oriented schools and universities (with some of them emerging from earlier missionary schools), and the establishment and massive expansion of overseas study programs for Chinese students.¹² Initially, students traveled mainly to the United States, England, France, and Germany, but following the Japanese victory over China in 1895, increasing numbers of Chinese students chose the nearby, "Eastern" but modern Japan as their study destination. Japan had emerged as a new, powerful enemy and important mediator of Western knowledge at the same time (on the role of Japan as mediator of knowledge in China, see Schulte 2012).

Thus, as regards European or Western education outside Europe, it materialized in China in multiple guises: in the form of new books and curricula; through newly founded, Chinese and non-Chinese, denominational and secular, educational institutions; and embodied by non-Chinese teachers/missionaries and returned Chinese overseas students. Especially at the beginning of China's modernization in the second half of the nineteenth century, the reformers' take on Western knowledge and education was rather indiscriminating. Following the above-mentioned maxim of "Chinese essence and Western functions," as coined by the reformer Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), every kind of knowledge that was considered applicable and suitable to advance China in technological

terms was considered as essentially Western. While Chinese reformers made attempts to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the producers, users, and mediators of this knowledge—such as Germany versus France or Japan versus Russia after their respective victories in 1871 and 1905—the knowledge itself remained strangely homogenous and intact in the Chinese imagination, irrespective of the diversity of its carriers. Thus, Zhang Zhidong (1998, p. 117) was convinced that the Chinese could “reap twice the results with half the effort” if they acquired Western knowledge from the Japanese (instead of traveling the long distance to Europe or America), since the Japanese had already “sifted through these [Western books], [and] have weeded out the less important works.”¹³

This often uncritical embrace and homogenization of anything Western can be understood as a process of reverse essentialization, with considerable consequences also for the “West.” Not only did many Chinese intellectuals internalize their characterization (originally imposed on them by the West) as “oriental” and thus indulge in what the anthropologist James Carrier calls, with a wink, “ethno-Orientalism” (Carrier, 1992, p. 198). By constantly opposing the East to the West, they in turn reified, essentialized and occidentalized the West itself. While this ethno-Occidentalism, to follow Carrier’s logic of terming, did not come along with colonial subjugation as did Orientalism, it still helped contribute to the constitution of the Western Other, as defined mainly by rational thinking and technological progress. To be sure, this eclipsed many (equally “Western”) traditions that did not fit this imagery of a Western antipode to the East.

Carrier points to the dialectical nature of the process of Orientalism since it is not merely a Western imposition of a reified identity on some alien set of people. It is also the imposition of an identity created in dialectical opposition to another identity, one likely to be equally reified, that of the West. Westerners, then, define the Other in terms of the West, but so Others define themselves in terms of the West, *just as each defines the West in terms of the Other*. (ibid., p. 197; added emphasis)

As Carrier (ibid., p. 199) further notes, these dialectic processes pervade Western thinking, such as in Marx’s distinction between precapitalist and capitalist societies, Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic societies, and Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between hot and cold societies. Thus, the encounter with the dialectically opposed Other has had a deep impact both on Western identity construction and on the formation of Western social science knowledge.

Europe and China united—against the American model

In the first decades of the twentieth century, this dichotomous assessment of the West as progressive and promising, and the East as backward and stagnating could not be upheld any longer. While East and West continued to persist as categories, the examples of both a rising Japan and World War I pointed to the possibility that these categories did not necessarily and completely exclude each other; and that these categories needed to be reevaluated.

Japan’s victories not only over its Asian neighbor China in 1895, but also over the “European” empire of Russia in 1905 gave rise to a new perception of Asia, both within and beyond the continent. The successful example of Japan’s modernization seemed to prove that Asian countries were principally capable of modernizing without subjecting themselves to a wholesale westernization. What’s more, Japan’s development showed that an Asian country could indeed outperform a Western country. In the wake of this newborn Asian consciousness,¹⁴ two seemingly contradictory developments took place. On the one hand, crucial institutions of Western nation states were emulated (such as the school and the military) as they seemed to provide the key to avoid or escape colonial oppression and attain national sovereignty. On the other hand, local rulers and intelligentsia turned the tables on the hitherto unquestioned advantages of Western civilization by challenging the

universal validity of the Western model of progress. This paved the way for the ensuing currents of, for example, modern Neo-Confucianism, Hinduism, Pan-Islamism, or Pan-Asianism, which are laid out as antimodern alternatives but, as Shmuel Eisenstadt (1999) correctly points out, are projects that are deeply embedded in modernity. The emerging modern world began to be characterized by multiple modernities (in Eisenstadt's terming) or multiple civilizations (Duara 2004), bringing the relatively short intermezzo of a monocentric world to a close (if not the accompanying power asymmetries and inequalities within that world system).

The events during and in the aftermath of World War I spurred the view, also on the European side, that Asia had much more to offer than exotic goods and cheap labor. To many European intellectuals, World War I was deeply unsettling in ethical and philosophical terms, since it revealed the abyss of advanced war technology when combined with lacking ethics, or the lethal duo of technological progress and moral-spiritual regress. Also Michael Adas (2004, p. 41) argues that

the coming of the Great War and the appalling casualties . . . made a mockery of the European conceit that discovery and invention were necessarily progressive and beneficial to humanity. The mechanized slaughter and the conditions under which the youth of Europe fought the war generated profound challenges to the ideals and assumptions upon which the Europeans had for over a century based their sense of racial superiority and from which they had fashioned that ideological testament to their unmatched hubris, the civilizing mission.

Among European intellectuals, there was a great disillusionment with the project of modernity, whose pitfalls and dark sides, especially those of intense industrialization and exceeding materialism, had now come to the fore. This disappointment with outer developments induced a search for inner values and alternative wisdoms, which made "Eastern" civilizations like China, because of their alleged spirituality unspoiled by modernity, interesting cases for the European thinkers of the time (see Spengler 1981 [1918] on the demise of the Occident).

Ironically, the war had the opposite effect on many Chinese intellectuals, who were still engaged in the search for exactly the modernity that the Europeans began to despise. World War I offered itself as a chance to the Chinese to come closer to this modernity. As Xu (2008, p. 110) points out, the "coming of the Great War was the first major world event to engage the imagination of Chinese social and political elites, generating great fascination and excitement." The above-mentioned reformer Liang Qichao even saw the war as a "once-in-a-thousand-year opportunity" that would help China to "finish the process of becoming completely a qualified nation-state' and prepare the way for its rise in the world" (Liang in Xu, 2008, pp. 113–114). Although China attempted to take part in the war—arguably to join the international community and gain protection against Japanese aggression (Xu, 2008)—it remained by and large an outsider to the war, at least as regards the participation of the Chinese army.¹⁵

A colorful figure of the time was the intellectual Zhang Junmai alias Carsun Chang (1887–1969), a friend of Liang Qichao's, who had spent several years of study in Germany and later founded the Chinese Social Democratic Party as a so-called "third force" (between the communists and the nationalists).¹⁶ Well-acquainted with the situation in Germany, Zhang urged Chinese political leaders to declare war on Germany and thus enter the global conflict, since in his view China would profit from becoming a member of the Allied forces and thus the global community (Xu, 2008, p. 114). Zhang's stance on this matter did not keep him from cooperating closely together with the German philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Rudolf Eucken (1846–1926). Together they developed a philosophy of life that attempted to assess the advantages and disadvantages of Eastern and Western thinking (Eucken & Chang, 1922). Modestly calling the book an attempt to establish an "intellectual connection of China and Germany" (ibid., p. iii), the authors

continue to argue along the dichotomy between a spiritual East and a materialist West—however, with rather favorable conclusions regarding China. They diagnose a

wide gulf between the modern way and the Chinese one. The former has directed aspirations increasingly toward the future, from which is expected an incessant elevation. However, by this we [i.e., the Westerners—B.S.] increasingly run the risk to sacrifice the present to the future and to downgrade one's own life to a mere pretage to real life, we become prey to a restless, often meaningless hunting and hurrying. The Chinese, in contrast, attempts to draw the past into the present in order to, if possible, expand [the present], he has more tranquility and stability in life, he views life not from the future but from the present. (ibid., pp. 133–134)

However, as the authors maintain, if what the Chinese call “meditation” is “too persistent, man loses his sense for the study of nature and neglects material life; therefore, China is backward in this respect” (ibid., p. 118).

It is conspicuous in this remarkable Sino–German joint venture that the roles of teacher and learner are no longer fixed upon the players involved. In fact, the book is diametrically opposed to Herder's condescending judgment on the Chinese when, for example, the authors emphasize that the core of Chinese philosophy are honesty and the lack of artificiality (ibid., p. 129). Obviously, the distinction between “civilized core” and “backward periphery” has been suspended, and the former civilizing missions have truly become civilizational exchanges: exeunt missionaries and barbarians, enter global citizens. For the first time in centuries, China is granted again a constructive perspective on European modernity. Eucken and Zhang even warn explicitly against an adoption of Western knowledge that is too uncritical since “China must not simply absorb, [but] it has to perform its own way [of reception] on the things adopted” (ibid., p.183).

The authors cement their newly forged alliance by noting the parallels between German and Chinese concepts of education, or *Bildung*, which targets the inner parts of human beings (ibid., pp. 189–190). Although they deem the practical applicability of education important, such an approach, they maintain, should not become the dictate of education. In particular natural science education, albeit necessary, was not to occur “at the expense of the human whole and the formation of his intellect”; exceeding specialization of knowledge and labor induces “the danger of an enfeeblement of the human whole, the danger that the separate parts of a soul win but the whole loses” (pp. 190–191). As these passages already intimate, this Sino–German critique of modern science and education (or even of a technology-driven modernity as such) cannot do without a bogeyman. Obviously, the verbal barbs against too much emphasis on the practical applicability of knowledge result from a more fundamental critique of both the positivist tradition (particularly in the natural sciences and increasingly in the social sciences) on the one hand and, on the other, so-called pragmatism in education, which its critics blamed for reducing the metaphysical world to its directly applicable constituents. Both approaches were strongly associated with the North American intellectual tradition.

Pragmatism in education was a common source of disagreement among German and American educationists and philosophers at the time, and had also divided Chinese intellectuals into proponents and opponents of this approach. While John Dewey (1859–1952), the most important representative of American pragmatism in education, was generally welcomed and firmly integrated into China's pedagogic scene during his China visit between 1919 and 1921, the changes that resulted from his influence were not always greeted with enthusiasm (on Dewey and pragmatism in China, see Schulte 2011). For instance, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), the Chinese Republic's first minister of education and an ardent admirer of Germany, articulated his disdain for the tendency to render every kind of knowledge applicable. Although in principle an advocate of pragmatism—at the time still termed “utilitarianism” in Chinese—he admonished that there were more dimensions to this approach, such as the aesthetic and ethical development of the

individual (Cai, 1912, p. 25).¹⁷ Above all, skeptics were afraid that the human being as such would get lost in the scientification of education, in particular through the rising importance of psychology, which was seen as reducing humans to stimulus-response machines. Much in line with this, the German Carl Heinrich Becker, leader of the 1931 League of Nations' commission for reporting on the Chinese educational system, voiced his concerns that these American-induced changes would result into "the dissolution of all real knowledge into gibberish on the method and psychology of education" (Becker in Kuß, 2004, p. 133). His disdain for these new methods was shared by some Chinese educators with regard to the mushrooming of Dewey-inspired "laboratory schools," which led a commentator to ask: "as far as the laboratory character is concerned, could it be that what is laboratory is the method of copying America?" (Zhao, 1929, p. 7)

Eucken and Zhang picked up on this critical stance toward North American science and presented American scientists and intellectuals as uncompromising and exclusive in their approaches, in that they devalued or ignored science traditions that did not fit into their scientific landscape:

In particular the Anglo-American way of thinking tends to present its way of life as the only possible one, which is taken-for-granted and superior to all other ways; also China must be on guard, lest alien and shallow ways of thinking are imposed on her against her desire and will." (Eucken & Chang, 1922, p. 193)

Thus, the American model, the quintessential blueprint for progress and success in the modern age, is dismissed as a danger to the free, intellectual, and moral, development of other nations. Additionally, it is depicted as superficial in relation to German idealism or Chinese Confucianism/Daoism. Chinese thinking has been successfully woven into European (in this case, German) currents of thought in order to break the United States of its monopoly on dictating modernity. What added to the Chinese–German feeling of congeniality was the view of Germany as a "nation of education" (Lu, 1916, p. 15). These soft qualities—instead of hard knowledge like the natural sciences—made China and Germany virtual brothers in spirit, and also gave new hope to the Chinese. After all, Germany had succeeded in modernizing itself in spite of—or probably because of—its tradition. The cultural, holistic approach toward education and knowledge made Germany, in the view of its Chinese admirers, stronger than other countries also in technology and engineering, at least in the long run, since the engineers' knowledge went beyond mere paper knowledge or learning by doing (see Zhuang, 1913, p. 109).

The 1920s and 1930s were for China, in spite of global and civil wars, the most vivid and multifaceted period of educational exchange. After 1949, the brothers in spirit were exchanged for brothers in arms: the Soviet Union, who became the new hegemon in the communist world, emerged as a major reference for China, if only for a short period. Soon, it was independence from foreign rule or interference that became the most important criterion for Chinese policies of knowledge transfer. The "sick man of Asia" had clearly learned his lesson.

Conclusion: projections and refractions

Past research has mainly focused on how the "Western" experience has transformed China and Chinese education from the mid-nineteenth century onward. With this contribution, I have tried to reconstruct these developments as more encompassing processes that began much earlier and impacted both sides of the game: China and Europe. Both players were engaged in mutual projections upon the alleged Other, which, as these projections became lived realities, had far-reaching repercussions also on the Self. As is common with intercultural encounters, perceived character traits and "traditions" were stereotyped, resulting in abridged traditions and condensed cultural essences of the respective Other

(such as the introverted, intuitive East vs. the extroverted, rational West). Along with these “traditions,” knowledge and education became refracted through the prism of mutual observation. While researchers have justly pointed to the asymmetry of these processes— with the “West” in charge of the whip hand—they have tended to neglect how the whip also changes its holder: “Western” knowledge, as presented authoritatively to the assumedly inferior opposite, became *the* defining characteristic of the “West,” thus excluding potentially competitive Western interpretations and identities.

This reverse essentialization was challenged when the hegemony of the West was felt to be distributed unevenly among its members, as was the case, for example, with Germany vis-à-vis the United States. In the cases that I have highlighted here, China was made a German spiritual ally against the powerful American intellectual tradition. The United States, in turn, became a kind of “third man” or negative “silent referent.” Even without direct interference, its strong authority in science (or more generally, knowledge production) impinged on the mutual perceptions and co-constructions of China and Europe.

Notes

1. On indigenization, see, e.g., Jana Tschurenv (2011) in her study on how British educational initiatives met with a “grammar of difference” in early colonial India in the course of which educational goals were compromised. Resistance has also been taken up in a number of more anthropologically oriented case studies, e.g. on the exoticization and commodification of ethnic minorities (see, e.g., Schein, 1997).

2. See Harald Fischer-Tiné (2011) on the British concerns about the Salvationists “going native” in colonial India and about British degenerates in the “urban jungle” of “Darkest England”; or Tim Allender (2009) on the Indian colony as educational laboratory. Traditional accounts of, e.g., Europe’s encounters with or “rediscovery” of the East concentrate mainly on how scholarly disciplines or intellectual figures incorporated their knowledge of the East into their thinking (Pinot, 1932, Schwab, 1984); they are less about how these experiences fundamentally challenged and transformed European identity, although Schwab grants Eastern cultures “the power to question us” (Schwab, 1984, p. 19). Furthermore, these more historiographical accounts tend to overemphasize the scholarly or scientific character of these learning missions and neglect the continuing influence of religion and theology (on the role of religion in framing the non-Christian world, see, e.g., Kidd, 2006).

3. Brockey, in his very readable study on the Jesuit mission in China, writes against the hitherto dominant conception that the mission is largely a Chinese story. Conversely, he argues, the China mission was an integral part of changing Catholicism, and not “some exotic experiment cut off from the rest of the world. . . . [As] generation after generation of missionaries journeyed to Asia, the cultural baggage they carried with them shifted along with the movements within the Roman Church and Europe itself” (Brockey, 2007, p. 5). While I do not want to challenge the notion that the Jesuits were part of a larger European ecclesial-political landscape, it would be equally shortsighted to uproot the Jesuit missionaries from their distinctly Chinese experiences.

4. I have already mentioned Schwab (1984), Brockey (2007) and Pinot (1932); other important (non-Chinese) works include Cummins (1993), de Bary & Chaffee (1989), Elman (2005), Maverick (1946), Mungello (1985, 1999), Pomeranz (2000), Wilson & Cayley (1995), and for more recent historical periods (nineteenth century onward), Bailey (1988), Biggerstaff (1961), Buck (1980), Cheng (2000), Curran (2005), Franke (1960), Harrell (1992), Hayhoe & Zhu (1992), LaFargue (1987 [1942]), Liu (1995, 2004), Lutz (1971, 1977), Reardon-Anderson (1991), Reynolds (1993), Shiu (1990), Weston (2004).

5. The reverse matrix holds true as well: Confucianism was cut to size by stripping it off its religious dimensions, while the Christian ideology was stretched to its limits in order to make room for Confucian philosophy and rites.

6. And also some reports by other missionaries: the China report by the Dominican Friar Navarrete, one of the most fervent critics of accommodation but otherwise an admirer of Chinese culture (except for religion), became *the* China book in seventeenth century Europe (Navarrete, 1676).

7. “So great is obedience toward superiors and reverence toward elders, so religious, almost, is the relation of children toward parents, that for children to contrive anything violent against their parents, even by word, is almost unheard of . . .” (Lach, 1957, p. 70).

8. For more information on China as a model for Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see the detailed although dated account by Lewis A. Maverick (1946).

9. Here and in the following, translations from Chinese and German into English are my own unless indicated otherwise.

10. An illustrative example is the aftermath of the Chinese boxer rebellion, a home-grown revolt against foreigners on Chinese soil at the end of the nineteenth century. While Pomeranz (2005, p. 41) uses this example to showcase how the West used the tremendous indemnities that China had to pay to teach China a hurtful lesson, it was exactly these indemnities that laid out a truly civilizational program: namely the U.S.-American Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program, which enabled more than one thousand Chinese students to pursue their studies in the United States. Britain embarked on a similar strategy of handling the indemnities.

11. On the decline of the Chinese examination system, see the seminal work by Wolfgang Franke (1960).

12. On the different phases of adopting and transforming Western knowledge in China following the Opium Wars, see also Schulte (2012).

13. The translation of this passage is taken from Reynolds (1993, p. 44). In a similar vein, the chief propagandist Chen Boda (1905–1989) argued in 1953 that “the good things in British and American science have already been absorbed by the Soviet scientists; hence, the quickest and best way is to learn from the Soviet Union” (quoted in Price, 1987, p. 161).

14. On the rise of Asian nationalisms, see, e.g., Leifer (2000); on the discursive negotiation of self-imposed Asian identities, see, e.g., Lackner (2008).

15. As compensation for the failed attempt to participate directly in the war, China sent mostly illiterate peasants as laborers-soldiers to work in the French frontlines; thousands of them lost their lives.

16. On Zhang Junmai, see Jeans (1997). Zhang (Chang, 1952) also published a book on his third force.

17. Cai was not without critics. The educator Wang Maozu (1891–1949), a follower of the American model, blamed Cai for instrumentalizing education and the human body, transforming the natural sciences into “slaves of industry,” images into “slaves of advertisement,” and music into “slaves of ethics and religion” (Wang, 1920, p. 5).

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