



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

REVIEW BY SALIKYU SANGTAM

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## O China, Where Art Thou?

Kerry Brown and Gemma Chenger Deng, *China Through European Eyes: 800 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Encounter* (Singapore and London: World Scientific, 2022), 272 pages, US\$88.

The rise of China in the past few decades has brought a renewed interest in its culture, philosophy, people, and civilization. The essential role of China in international politics and international political economy today, with its growing influence in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, has necessitated the need to understand China, in all its civilizational aspects, a prerequisite for cultural, political, and economic purposes. In other words, whether one welcomes the rise of China or looks at its rise with trepidation, knowledge about China becomes essential.

However, the quest to know and understand China is not a recent trend, for numerous European figures in the past centuries have undertaken serious studies to know China, apart from those mentioned in this book. One can think of figures such as Vico, Goethe, Montaigne, Juan Gonazalez de Mendoza, Jean Baptiste Du Halde, Samuel Johnson,

Rousseau, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Needham, Auerbach, Michel Foucault, and Derrida, whose work, approving or visceral, invoke images and representations that continue to be reproduced of what we today label as 'China.' Hence, for the West or the Europeans "... China as a land in the Far East becomes traditionally the image of the ultimate Other."<sup>1</sup> The 'Other' essentially is the alien, the strange, the foreign, the exotic whose culture, values, histories, and worldviews are perceived to be radically different from one's own. All of them stand in stark contrast to that which is familiar, the normal, and the mundane. We can locate here the prevailing dichotomy essential to Western philosophical thought and worldviews, i.e. this or that, either/or. This is visible in one of the Platonic dialogues, *Parmenides*: "... if we are talking about the Others, things that are Others must be different; 'other' and 'different' are two names for the same things."<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps this strange curiosity about China represented as the ultimate 'other' (and thus 'different') that constantly allures the West to understand this ancient living civilization, that is, *Zhongguo*.

Yet, even this effort to understand, on the part of the West or Europeans, is alas inhibited by the cultural, historical, and societal conditioning of our knowledge and how these impinge upon what we understand that which we perceive, which Foucault has done in his writings.<sup>3</sup> Such inhibitions and confinements of our thoughts are difficult to overcome, particularly when one is dealing with a society that

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang Longxi, "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 11 (1988), 110.

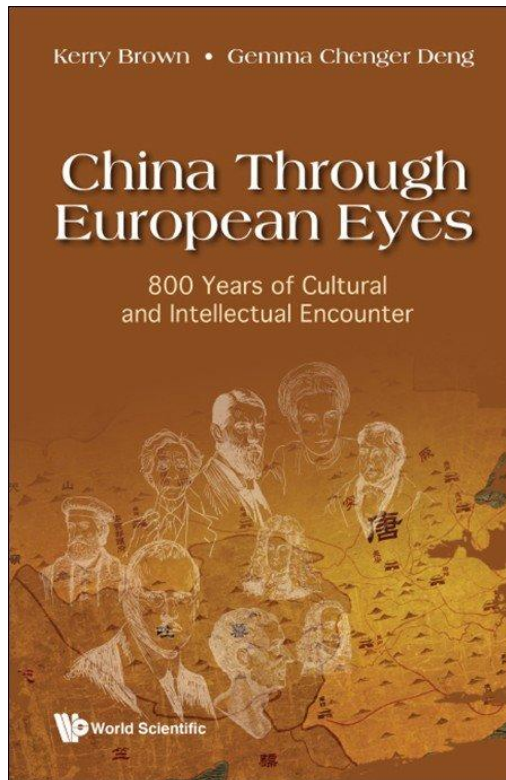
<sup>2</sup> Plato, "Parmenides," trans. F. M. Cornford, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1961), 954.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).



is seen to be the ultimate symbol of difference, which China signifies for the Europeans. A brief passage from Daniel Defoe's celebrated novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, may suffice to illustrate this matter:

. . . what are their buildings to the palaces and royal buildings of Europe? What are their trade to the universal commerce of England, Holland, France, and Spain? What are their cities to ours for wealth, strength, gaiety of apparel, rich furniture, and an infinite variety? . . . Our city of London has more trade than all their mighty empire. One English, or Dutch, or French man-of-war of eighty guns would fight and destroy all the shipping of China.<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Surprising Adventure of Robinson Crusoe, Written by Himself*, new edition (London: Joseph Mawman, 1815), 420.

As we shall see in the following paragraphs, such themes dot the writings of Purchas, Montesquieu, John Barrow, Hegel, Weber, and Barthes on China. Keeping in mind these qualifications or caveats on knowledge and understanding of the ‘other,’ let us proceed to the present book under review.

*China Through European Eyes: 800 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Encounter* is a timely volume about a topic, a nation-state, a civilization that is hard to ignore, given its influential role in the world today. This book is opportune precisely because the shape and structure of the twenty-first-century world will be largely determined by what China does or does not do. Knowing this context will perhaps enable readers to appreciate the annotated anthology of excerpts from European merchants, clergymen, missionaries, priests, philosophers, psychologists, and literary theorists who wrote and had interest, receptive or antagonistic, in China as a culture and civilization. Some of these views continue to resonate and constitute what China is for the Europeans and the West, in general.

The selection contains writings of eminent figures—Voltaire, Hegel, Weber, Matteo Ricci, Leibniz, Montesquieu, Marx, Jung, Bertrand Russell, and Barthes, among others—that have had an enduring impact on European thought and culture, an impact that reverberates in the West even to this day. These extracts, divided into five parts (from the thirteenth century to the end of Mao’s Revolution, a period of about 800 years), from different periods, allow readers to trace the roots of the European (and later, Western) attitudes toward China; some attitudes continue, while others evolve and transform.

This is the strength of the book as it allows for that essential single strand that ties all of these varied writers, thereby clearly locating the historical and cultural roots of the prevailing European and the



Western attitudes about China. At the same time, its strength is also its weakness. Because the book is a compilation of extremely brief excerpts, readers are afforded only a surface-level knowledge about the complexity and magnitude entailed in this task of understanding China for the West/the Europeans. This is fine for those readers indulging in a light read in the evening. But for serious readers interested in the comparative fields and study, the book provides very little substance other than the brief selections (and they are very brief extracts). The authors could have dedicated a lot more pages or contents by either giving sufficient expositions (since the authors' annotations were exceedingly brief), or by including adequate sections/passages from the respective writers. These would have greatly enriched and aided the purpose of the book because the brief passages and annotations seldom suffice to lucidly indicate the various historical, political, economic, and civilizational facets that go into the construction of 'what is China,' for the Europeans. Yet, at the same time, these limitations of the book may perhaps be too insignificant and superfluous.

From the outset, the book is clear about its purpose, as it states, "This is a book about the conceptualisation and understanding of China by Europeans over the last 800 years" (p. xi), and that this "collection is about European perceptions and understandings of China" (p. xiii). In other words, "how best to think about China accurately and honestly" (p. xxxi). Reading into the writings of Marco Polo and Samuel Purchas (an armchair traveler), we find an amalgamation of fantasy and exaggeration that dots every turn of their writing, from brutality to sensuality (pp. 21-23). Only the image of lust, power, docility, and decadence is evident (p. 7-13). On the other hand, we find Ricci and Huc, the former immersed himself to the point of "almost" complete assimilation (p. 30) to understand China. The latter dyed his skin, grew

his hair, and even dressed with utmost piousness to blend in with the inhabitants (p. 131).

In contrast to these rather benign observations (no matter how fantastic), we find the views of Montesquieu, Hegel, and Barrow seem to show an outright disdain (as in the case of Barrow) of Chinese culture with a liberal blend of distrust and suspicion toward the Chinese (pp. 77-81), while both Montesquieu and Hegel view China as an essence of “a despotic state, whose principle is fear” (p. 66), and where human individuality and agency is suppressed absolutely (p. 91). To these readings, one can also include under the same umbrella the readings of Barthes, whose attitude borders on utter indifference, as it matters little to him what China is. Paradoxically, we also find in the readings of Kristeva, the regurgitation, perhaps unconsciously, of the sensuality of Chinese women (pp. 202-205). A subtle suggestion, perhaps about the enduring impact of the conventional narratives about the sensuality of the Orient, is visible in the readings of Marco Polo, Samuel Purchas, and Barrow. Certainly, these views are understandable given, as mentioned earlier, our thoughts and knowledge about the other are conditioned by our cultural and historical givens which are difficult to overcome.

The readings by Weber, Voltaire, Marx, and Jung are all worthwhile observations (except for de Beauvoir with her naive political sympathies for Mao’s China). But it is the reading by Bertrand Russell that is striking, particularly because of the place he occupies in twentieth-century Western philosophy and thought. He admiringly commends Chinese broadmindedness, values, tolerance, and states that the Chinese civilization “is built upon a more humane and civilized outlook than our own” (p. 165).

We have now arrived at an apprehensive crossroads regarding the book’s purpose of “how best to think about China accurately and



honestly” (p. xxxi). Gazing upon these selections, it is difficult to affirm that they accurately and honestly think about China. One theme that perpetually arises, unconsciously perhaps, in this book is the question whether it is at all plausible to “accurately and honestly” think and understand others. A difficult question to answer in the affirmative, indeed! We see time and again, throughout the readings that because China represents for the West the ultimate ‘other’ there is, in addition to admiration and condemnation, “the desire for forms of control and influence over a China that had figured in much of modern history as a place that existed to be acted on, changed, made palatable to the West, rather than as one that could be legitimately understood on its own terms” (p. 185).

Even though, as the authors reasonably stress that the book is “about the conceptualisation and understanding of China by Europeans over the last 800 years” (p. xi), or in other words, “how best to think about China accurately and honestly” (p. xxxi), one can infer that in this quest an opposite verity (or conjecture), that perhaps it is not quite possible to truly understand China, that it is perhaps not tenable to accurately think, comprehend, understand, China or, for that matter, ‘the other’ honestly or accurately. Otherwise, what is the point of spending hundreds of years obsessing and trying to understand China? And given the plethora of information and knowledge about China and ease of accessibility to China today, should not the Europeans (or the West) by now have a better, accurate, or honest understanding of China? Indeed, why is there even a need for such books in the first place, if it is tenable to prudently and honestly understand China? Are 800 years not enough to attain the aims of “conceptualisation and understanding of China”? These questions lead one to postulate that the quest to understand China, specifically, or ‘the other’, in general, will always be a

wish. This drawback is especially fundamental not only concerning those cultures, people, or places which one deems to be not only radically different and, thus, considers them to be the ultimate ‘other,’ but also, most crucially, those that are perceived to provide an alternative worldview, which China does.

In the final analysis, the task to understand and think about China (or the ‘other,’ in general) is like trying to accomplish the task of Sisyphus from ancient Greek mythology. Here, we are faced with the Sisyphean toil, where trying to honestly think about and understand China is similar to the task of rolling an immense boulder up a hill only for the boulder to ceaselessly roll back down every time. Every time just when we think we understand China, we are faced with the realization that we have not even begun to understand China. In such moments, Kipling’s highly recognizable expression from his *Ballad of East and West* is perhaps a sombre reminder to us that perhaps, “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet / Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat.” Perhaps this too is also a hasty statement.

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non-western political theory) and in academic workshops. He was also invited to serve as a panelist on “Nagaland Special Development Zone” at the Business Summit at Nagaland International Trade Expo (NITEX) in November 2017.

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