



## **SINOLOGY, CHINESE STUDIES TO A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS: STUDYING CHINA IN EUROPE**

**Speaker:** Dr. Ravni Thakur

**Chair:** Dr. Madhavi Thampi

**Date:** 2 September 2020

**Venue:** WebEx Webinar

**Time:** 3:00 PM

The talk was divided into two parts. The first part focussed on the historical context – the non-secular approaches leading to the birth of Sinology. The second part focused on the discursive shifts that occurred in the imagination of China

### **Historical Context, Positive Image of China, and Birth of Sinology in Europe**

Dr. Thakur started with the works of Mateo Ricci, the Jesuit Priest who arrived at the court of Wan Li in 1601 and started introducing China to the European world. The Jesuits in China were important in introducing various aspects of China to Europe. She went on to explain attempts to study China in various European countries such as Netherlands, Germany, France etc. The most recent research on Sinology in Europe includes a two-part report from the 1992 conference on the history of European Sinology. The first part of the conference volume, *Europe Studies China* (1995) is the best introduction to traditional European Sinology. The first part of this report deals with developments in different countries such as France, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and Sweden. The second part of this report has essays on topics such as drama language and translation by Soren Egerod, Jesuit Studies by Erik Zurcher, Manchu Studies Taoist Studies by Kristofer Schipper and Tun-Huang Studies by Jean-Pierre Prege.

These studies highlight three aspects of Chinese Studies in Europe. First, chronologies of development from missionary Sinology to secular Sinology to Chinese Studies/area studies/role of the social sciences in Sinology etc.; second, identifying changing perceptions and shifts in the image of China from Chinoiserie to ‘the failed process of modernization and nation-building’, and analyzing and referencing reasons for these shifts; third, studies of famous Sinologists, Jesuits, etc. The first impression in China was made by Jesuit missionaries. The Jesuit missionaries gained permission to establish a residence in Guangdong Province in the early 1580s. This is during the Ming period (1368-1644). Their first task was the study of Chinese language literature and culture and they became a crucial link in the transfer of knowledge between China and Europe in the seventeenth century. The missionaries believed that to convert people you must first know them, hence, the emphasis on learning the language and culture of Chinese people.

Furthermore, Dr. Thakur introduced Mateo Ricci and his works to the audience. Ricci provided the first accurate description of the Chinese language and writing system. He arrived in China in 1601 at the Ming Court of Emperor Wan Li and worked with Xu Guangqi - his language teacher, translator and later, a high official and a Christian convert. The book, 'The Memory Palace', points out how Ricci first gained the attention of the Nanchang elite, where he had settled through teaching 'memory training'. He deciphered the meanings of rituals at court and the life of the elite literati to whom he was introduced by Xu. He was fascinated by the language, by the order of the Ming court, the administrative elite and Confucianism. Ricci loved the pomp, the rituals, and the 'chopstick' which went on to become a major curiosity in Europe. However, Ricci was bothered with the sexual climate, in elite houses, polygamy, homosexuality. The idea of socially sinful practices bothered him and Dr. Thakur observed that the Christian moral contempt of sexual mores and relations was a continuous trope in the criticism of non-Christian societies. Moreover, he attempted to translate Euclid's Elements of Geometry one of his first exercises in writing Chinese but found it too difficult. It was only years later that he was able to complete this work in collaboration with "Paul" Xu Guangqi (1562-1633). Together, they also wrote *Celiang Favi* (Methods of Measurement Explained). As Xu rose to high office and converted to Christianity, he used his influence to aid his Jesuit friends. In subsequent decades, other Jesuits such as Adam Schall (1591—1666) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623—88) were appointed as court astronomers and reported directly to the emperor.

In her analysis of Ricci's description of China, Dr. Thakur observed that his description displayed positive impressions of Chinese elite culture, with its precise sense of order and form, their wealth and literacy. It showed the elegant difference of its language, its logic and historical continuity. Ricci's China exhibited the depth of Confucian teaching and the complexity of Chinese classics, with its clear articulations of morality and principle. Overall, the Jesuit scholars who dominated the Western Thought on China initially portrayed a positive image of early China, a society that was essentially Confucian. The Chinese were said to devote all their resources, and piety to the earth and agriculture. Chinese civic morality was described as rational and tolerant, despite a lamentable absence of Christian faith. Leibniz, Voltaire, Hume, and many others promptly accepted the image of a tolerant China, using it to criticize European intolerance and religious rigidity. Chinese society was said to be tranquil, thanks to a benign and all-powerful patriarchy. They displayed keen interest for history, record keeping, efficient administration and the overall system of governance - harbinger to Western modern political systems, something that Europe will not recognize openly. Chinoiserie represented the idealized vision of the Chinese Empire that began with the publication of Confucius teachings in 1687 as pointed out by Spence. This was accompanied by an elite curiosity, especially in France, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy with all things Chinese. Chinoiserie sums up the Jesuit contribution to the making of the early, positive, and civilization-based image of China. As a civilization, a vast cultural domain, it was seen as superior to Europe.

Apart from the curiosity about China, Dr. Thakur gleaned three key intellectual ideas that fascinated the European intellectuals: 1) the idea of an ordered unitary Empire. This is found in the works of the Catholic church that yearned for unity under its leadership and envied the number and size over which the Chinese emperor ruled. This search and appreciation of order influenced their positive reading of the Chinese imperial system; 2) the logic of the language and its rationality, according to Bacon, allowed China to escape the 'chaos of Babel'; 3) emphasis on

learning and public education as seen during the Song dynasty and the idea of a meritoriously selected state bureaucracy.

Furthermore, Dr. Thakur elaborated upon the birth of Sinology in Europe. The credit for the first Sinology school goes to Naples. In 1732, a Chinese Institute was established by the priest Mateo Ripa (1692-1746). In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Oriental and Chinese Studies started in most of Europe. In 1814, a Chair of Chinese and Manchu studies was founded at the College de France. Jean Pierre Abel-Remusat (1788-1832) was the first professor of Chinese in Europe. James Legge (1815-1897) was one of the most famous scholars of this period. He was a missionary who also set the standard for the translations of Chinese classical texts into English. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, secular scholars gradually came to outnumber the missionaries who had earlier dominated the Western Thought on China, and slowly gained a substantial presence in Western universities.

### **Discursive Shifts in Imagining China**

Dr. Thakur noted that the field of Sinology became more rarefied and stereotyped gradually. China became a subject of public discourse, especially in England. The growth of its industrial economy and increasing trade advantages also changed the self-perception of the European civilization. Intellectual ideas around political economy dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century England. The public perception of China started to differ slowly. Just after the turn of the nineteenth century, two richly illustrated compendiums of Chinese clothing and manners by George Henry Mason and William Alexander appeared in England. The two publications amount to a great exhibition of the social categories of eighteenth-century China. From beggars to mandarins, from grand dames to prostitutes and from peasants to criminals, these pictures portrayed all walks of life with an eye on social stratification. These publications gave the British reader an ‘oriental’ land that was much more vivid, differentiated, and ‘realistic’ than that of the Jesuit accounts. Public perception about China, as a result, also started to shift.

New intellectual tropes of the superiority of European civilization and therefore, its mission to civilize the rest of the world started to become apparent. The early Sinologists such as the Jesuits were blamed for romanticizing China. Europe had trouble imagining the ‘other’ civilization superior to their own. The disenchantment of China in the eyes of European scholars is exemplified in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s vehement criticism of the China empire and his conviction that the jump from absolutism to tyranny was not that far. Quoting Spence, Dr. Thakur explains that the speed with which the change in perceptions towards China took place is also astonishing and is evinced by Montesquieu’s switch from admiration to disdain of China after 1717 when he began to view China as simple despotism rather than an idealized mixed and balanced polity composed of democratic, aristocratic and monarchical elements maintained through a separation of powers. Another major discursive shift in Europe was the rise of Political Economy. For example, Adam Smith saw in Asia a set of backward societies whose failure to rival European greatness had to be due to stagnation. Dr. Thakur explained that this shift in European perceptions of the Middle Kingdom from admiration to disdain has been described as the “schizophrenic aspect of the enlightenment”.

Dr. Thakur stated that the primary scholarly arguments about the causes behind this shift in the paradigm are made by scholars such as Raymond Dawson and David Jones. Jones argued that there are two primary causes behind this reversal from positive to negative perceptions of China. First, the rise in trade created a growing need to bring China into the global trading system,

thereby exposing traders and Protestant missionaries to a different view of China so that by 1794, they were producing a “more capacious assessment of China”. The second cause stems from broader socio-political changes, particularly the American and French revolutions, that radically revised European self-understanding and engendered a new concern for “history, self-determination and progress at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century [therefore promoting] a generally negative assessment of Chinese civilization and government”. She quoted Dawson who remarked, “No longer did Europe feel the need to understand and adapt to a land that they now believed was greatly inferior; the era where Europe chose to dominate using force had begun”. Thus, changing European self-perception, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, form the discursive shift in approaches to China. Donald Lach further identified intellectual changes stemming from the growth of Romanticism after the French Revolution. He says, “disillusionment with rationalism as the key to universal understanding also precipitated a reaction in Europe against China as the rational model of political and social organization”. Some scholars such as Jürgen Osterhammel argue that the development of political economy contributed to the shift in European opinions toward China. He argued that knowledge systems played an important role in British worldviews.

The McCartney Mission in 1792-94, according to Dr. Thakur, represented the beginning of the end of non-Western intellectual traditions and political systems. This mission to the court of Manchu Qian Long Emperor was a failure but its approach and records of China are highly instructive. Two chroniclers of the mission and their works are particularly important as they represent the discursive change that begin to dominate the representation of China in the West. First, are the diaries of George Staunton, published as ‘An Authentic Account to the Embassy to China’ that long-served as the basic English-language source to China and second, are the works of John Barrow.

Discussing Barrow’s works in details, Dr. Thakur noted that he primarily focused on the social ills such as slavery, infanticide, the position of women, social inequalities etc., but most importantly, despotic governments which would soon become the main frame for pillorying China’s political system. He compared Chinese and European spirit of individuality and deduced that Asian society has no individuality. The Christian morality between the sexes, with monogamous patriarchy rather than polygamous patriarchy and the existence of sexual laxity-another major trope to denigrate Asian societies - was also reflected in his works. His key criticism is of Chinese science wherein he argues that China’s science and mathematics have remained static and stuck in the past and it summed up the stagnation of intellectual and social growth in China. He blames the Jesuits for not teaching Arabic numerals to Chinese. In her analysis of Barrow’s works, Dr. Thakur believes that his works are representative of the new mode of European knowledge systems and the changing appreciation of the meaning of civilization and the progress of nations. Grounded in science and discourses of modernity, China became the model of stagnation/unscientific and despotic societies while Europe represented a progressive society.

Dr. Thakur observed that Chinese historical stagnation became a cliché over the following century, a cliché that European social theory mobilized to develop its understanding of capitalism. In this, the Jesuit representation of China as stable over centuries now gets read as stagnation, serving as the antithesis to Europe’s growing definition of itself as progressive and thereby, superior. Unlike Marco Polo’s fabulous Orient or the Enlightenment Philosophers’ readings of Chinese high culture, this new mode of sociological thinking tended to pin down the

“problems” of Chinese society: “absence of ideas of liberty”, “absence of a middle class”, “suppression of the lower classes by their superiors” etc. were identified as problems to be solved. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European societies had changed irrevocably and had started reshaping others. They brought in the discourses of equality and individual rights as markers of progress.

In conclusion, Dr. Thakur noted that China was now not a high cultural civilization but a failed one, incapable of transformation and of absorbing the Enlightenment and its fruits. Its very strengths, unity, language and continuity came to be perceived as the shackles that will not allow capitalism and therefore, modernization to emerge. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the negative comparison with Europe remained the norm and such ideas of European superiority and negative Asian stereotypes played an instrumental role in legitimizing Western imperialistic expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*This report was prepared by Megha Pardhi, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*

**Disclaimer:** This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood as those of the Speaker and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.