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Enlightenment and extra-European cultures

European perspectives on China: a prescriptive turn

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Abstract. From the mid-1770s onwards there was a clear shift in perspective in the way European commentators looked at China, a subject that, especially in an era defined by Paul Hazard as the crisis of European consciousness, had long appealed to Western culture as both a cognitive and more generally an intellectual challenge. The contrast between sinophilic and sinophobic attitudes, which often characterized the evolution, even temporal, of the eighteenth-century perception of Chinese reality, cannot alone explain the shifts in interest and changes of opinion that occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century. What this contribution aims to highlight is how, in some key observers of and commentators on China between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century – from Adam Smith, Abbé Raynal and Denis Diderot, to Lord Macartney and John Barrow – one can detect perspectives and reflections that cannot be due to a simple descriptive register or to attempts at apologia or devaluation, but rather to approaches tending to include China in global comparative historical or socio-economic reasoning. And how, with that reasoning, the assumption of the superiority of the European model leads to China being seen no longer as a mere object of admiration or a source of inspiration, but as a new actor with a new role in global history. The discourse thus tends to take on, in various ways, prescriptive overtones, aimed at identifying the internal and external changes necessary for the part that, from a Western perspective, China could play in a connected world.

Keywords. Europe, China, missions, Enlightenment, Sino-western relations.

In his 1969 book *To Change China. Western Advisers in China*, Jonathan Spence argued that the idea of ‘change’ – naturally referring to particular moments and aspects of Chinese history – has often inspired Western action towards China¹. He advanced his argument by considering individuals who he felt played an important role in this sense and who could be considered examples of the European push for ‘change’, for ‘changing’ China. He started with the Jesuit missionary Adam Schall von Bell, active in China from 1618 to 1666, continued with Peter Parker, an American evangelical missionary, doctor and diplomat in China from 1834 to 1857, and then moved on to other figures such as the American adventurer Frederick Townsend Ward

¹ J. Spence, *To Change China. Western Advisers in China 1620-1960*, Little, Brown and co., Boston-Toronto 1969.

at the time of the Taiping revolt, Charles George ‘Chinese’ Gordon, the British officer later known as ‘Gordon pasha’, protagonist of the Second Opium War, and Robert Hart, who would become head of the imperial customs service. These were all figures who in various ways had profoundly influenced events in the late Qing period in China, helping to change its course. However, for Westerners who have had to deal with China in the modern era, what more specifically could ‘changing’ this immense country have entailed, what might this goal of change have variously consisted of, and what kind of mental and practical attitude was required to set such an ambitious goal? And above all, in the history of relations between Europe and China, when and how can one discern a drive in the will of the former to induce changes in the latter? We believe that by applying Spence’s perspective to the re-reading of various Western testimonies, especially those from the eighteenth century and at the turn of the nineteenth century, these questions can help clarify the evolution of how Europe has seen China, focusing on the problem of the relationship between China and the Western vision of modernity, time and history².

² For a general overview of the problem, see D.E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (1999), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham (MD) 2012⁴. In this essay I elaborate and develop reflections on the evolution of European knowledge and representations of China between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that I had the opportunity to form during 2000s. I therefore draw extensively on my previous works such as G. Abbattista, ‘*Quand a commencé leur sagesse? Il Journal des Sçavans e il dibattito su antichità e civiltà della Cina (1754-1791)*’, in *Saggi in onore di Antonio Rotondò*, ed. by H. Méchoulan, et al., Olschki, Firenze 2001, vol. III, pp. 975-1007; Id., *At the Roots of the Great Divergence. Europe and China in an eighteenth Century Debate*, in *Cultural Transfers in the Global eighteenth Century*, ed. by M. Middell, Leipzig University Press, Leipzig 2014, pp. 113-162; Id., *China, the West and the “Commercial Enlightenment”* (unpublished paper for the conference «Global Perspectives in a European “Long Enlightenment” 1750 to 1850», Turin, Accademia delle Scienze and Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, 24-25 March 2016); Id., *Europe, China and the Family of Nations 1780-1840*, in *China’s Development from a Global Perspective*, ed. by M.D. Elizalde and J. Wang, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2017, pp. 122-192; Id., *Chinese Law and Justice: George Thomas Staunton (1781-1859) and the European Discourses on China in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, in *Law, Justice and Codification in Qing China. European and Chinese Perspectives. Essays in History and Comparative Law*, ed. by G. Abbattista, EUT, Trieste 2017, pp. 1-135; Id., *How to deal with China. New questions in the 1780 edition of the Histoire des deux Indes*, in *Autour de l’abbé Raynal: genèse et enjeux politiques de l’Histoire des deux Indes*, éd. par A. Alimento and G. Goggi, Centre international d’étude du XVIIIe siècle, Ferny-Voltaire 2018, pp. 171-187; Id., *The Despotism of the Plough Throne and Tradition. Commercial Enlightenment and China in the Histoire des Deux Indes*, in *Qu’est-ce que les Lumières? Nouvelles réponses à l’ancienne question*, Kurator tematičeskoj časti S.Ā. Karp, Naouka, Moscou 2018, pp. 84-109. The English text has been revised by Vanessa Di Stefano, whom I would like to thank for her careful and competent work.

1. HOPES AND ATTEMPTS AT CHANGE

That the Catholic missionaries intended to change China profoundly is quite obvious³. That their Protestant emulators, when they went into action in the early 1800s, wanted to do the same, with even greater determination, is beyond dispute. They wanted to bring China into the realm of world Christianity, defeating paganism and ousting Buddhism, the doctrines of Lao Tze, and at most tolerating aspects of Confucianism. They differed, the former also among themselves, and the latter in terms of methods, also because of the different periods and historical circumstances in which they found themselves operating. The Catholics had either no or very limited freedom of movement in the country, while the Jesuits were focused on dialogue with the top mandarin class from the end of the sixteenth century onwards. By contrast, from the early nineteenth century the Protestants, both British and American, had a much greater possibility of social and territorial interaction with the Chinese reality and much more intense and diversified forms of enterprise in different sectors of social and cultural life. The fact that the primary desire to convert the Chinese was the driving force behind all activities in both communities and the inspiration for all their initiatives in areas that were not strictly religious – scientific, cultural, technical, medical, welfare – is clear. No matter how many important intellectual contributions they may have made to the knowledge and understanding of Chinese civilisation, stimulating attitudes of

³ There is an extensive bibliography on the history of Catholic and Protestant missions in China. A very up-to-date discussion of sources and critical literature is R. Po-chia Hsia, *Imperial China and the Christian Mission*, in *A Companion to Early Modern Catholic Global Missions*, ed. by R. Po-chia Hsia, Brill, Boston 2018, pp. 344-364; two important general accounts are D.H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2011, and P.A. Cohen, *Christian missions and their impact to 1900*, in *Cambridge History of China. X: Late Ch’ing 1800-1911*, part 1, ed. by J.K. Fairbank, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1978, pp. 543-590. Two classic studies are J. Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme: action et réaction*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1982, and D.E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1989. On Protestant missions, especially British and American, see J. Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700*, Routledge, London, 2007; A.N. Porter, *Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004; M.A. Rubinstein, *The Origins of the Anglo-American Missionary Enterprise in China, 1807-1840*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham (MD) 1996; D. Cheung, *Christianity in Modern China. The Making of the First Native Protestant Church*, Brill, Boston 2004; *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914*, ed. by A. Porter, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids (Mich.), Cambridge (UK) 2003.

respect or even admiration for China, their fundamental aim remained that of changing one of its most important aspects, that is, its beliefs, rituals and religious life, trying to convince the Mandarin elite of the monotheistic potential of Confucianism and to undermine idolatrous religion and magic cults.

What constituted a real design for radical change, even more daring and long term, was the «*empresa de China*», that is the Spanish plans for military conquest from Mexico or the Philippines, which, not surprisingly, involved enterprising Jesuits in the 1580s, such as Alonso Sánchez⁴. Had they been successful, a great change for China would most probably have followed, and the Chinese would most likely not have been able to do with the Spaniards what they had done with the Mongols and later with the Manchus, that is to keep their institutions and their social and cultural foundations substantially unchanged. However, the plans for conquest were not followed through and China never knew, not even in the ‘century of humiliation’, a European territorial domination of a properly colonial type, with the partial exception of Hong Kong and some extraterritorial urban areas⁵.

From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, relations between Europe and China offered no possibility for Westerners to bring about any change in the Chinese reality. Furthermore, with the Russian and Dutch embassies having been sent to Beijing during that period, they could only obtain some temporary relaxation of the regulations for trade relations, compared to the consolidated practices of tributary relations between the Middle Kingdom and foreign ‘barbarians’. The missionaries, divided among themselves and with Rome over the question of Chinese rites, achieved swinging progress, and conversions concerned only a very limited proportion of the Chinese population until the formal banning of Christianity in 1724. The possibility of exerting any influence on the court in Peking, while theoretically feasible given that the Jesuits were in Peking as advisors to the emperor, was limited to secondary practical aspects such as astronomy, painting, architecture and cartography.

The goal of exerting even limited changes in both trade and diplomatic relations with China naturally continued to inspire the few unsuccessful European initiatives during the eighteenth century. The well-known

Macartney mission (1792-1794) aimed to establish relations with China that were different from the traditional ones and that were based on European concepts such as the stability and residency of diplomatic representation and the regulated freedom of trade, aligning the two countries on a level of mutual recognition. Of course, what Britain wanted by way of a diplomatic agreement would have been a significant departure from centuries of Chinese relative closure to the West, if not to other Asian countries. It would also have entailed the Chinese abandoning established practices, moreover at the high cost of opening their doors to Western foreigners whose naval and military strength was feared and who had been importing Indian opium on a massive scale for the last twenty years⁶. In fact, Macartney’s mission completely missed its mark, as did the subsequent ones by William Amherst (1816-1817) and William Napier (1833-1834), as well as the Dutch one by Isaac Titsingh (1794-1796) and the Russian one by Timkovski (1820-1821). No change came about through negotiation, even in the limited sphere of trade and diplomatic relations, let alone in spheres that would involve China opening itself up to a more widespread and pervasive Western cultural influence. This, however, did not mean that Europe, and Great Britain in particular, did not persist in trying to obtain a change aimed – in short – at getting China to accept, by hook or by crook, full adherence to what was officially described as a recognised system of international economic and political relations. Indeed, it mattered little if afterwards, when the facts came to light, China’s forced entry into this system did not take place through recognition, equal dignity, exchange and reciprocity. China was forced to change, a change that certainly could not be seen as a voluntary participation in the global world of a Montesquieuan ‘*doux commerce*’, regulated by the «gentle civiliser of nations»⁷, but rather as subservience, limited sovereignty and economic and financial subjugation.

2. RENEWED ATTEMPTS AND EVOLVING IDEAS IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Far from being able to bring about changes in China that would achieve the desired objectives – be it con-

⁴ M. Ollé, *La empresa de China: de la Armada Invencible al Galeón de Manila*, Editorial Acatilado, Barcelona 2002, and Id., *La invención de China: percepciones y estrategias filipinas respecto a China durante el siglo XVI*, O. Harrassowitz Verl., Wiesbaden 2000.

⁵ V.J. Osterhammel, *Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis*, in *Imperialism and After: continuities and discontinuities*, ed. by W.J. Mommsen et al., Allen & Unwin, London 1986, pp. 290-314.

⁶ H. Harrison, *The Qianlong Emperor’s Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China’s Foreign Relations*, «*American Historical Review*», 122, 2017, 3, pp. 680-701; F. Wood, *Britain’s first view of China: The Macartney Embassy 1792-1794*, «*RSA Journal*», 142, 5447, 1994, pp. 59-68: see p. 61.

⁷ M. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-1960*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009.

version to Christianity or the opening up of ports and Chinese internal market – it was the Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that felt the influence of China deeply rather than the other way round. China was at the heart of a long and instrumental cultural process of discovery and mythization by Jesuits and sectors of the Enlightenment, especially French opinion. The Middle Kingdom, as we well know, was proposed by many as a model of political, administrative and economic organisation, worthy of appreciation and even imitation. Not only was there no question of changing China, but if anything, it was the Chinese example that fed critical readings of the European reality and acted as a reference for hoped-for changes in Europe, for example in the field of agrarian policies or the care of public works. In this sense, the cosmopolitan intellectual attitude of the Enlightenment culture certainly played a role, as it was open to receiving stimuli from outside that questioned several religious, social or economic aspects of Western society and gave it useful reference models to highlight the shortcomings, limits and defects of the Christian West. So, it was Europe that had to learn how to change in the light of the Chinese example, and not the opposite. However, this attitude gradually fell out of favour towards the end of the eighteenth century, driven away by new questions, new perspectives, new ways of looking at the ‘China’ issue, no longer motivated by admiration or even a sense of inferiority, but rather induced by a growing sense of diversity, divergence and superiority in favour of Western Europe with respect to a Chinese empire that was looked upon with diminishing favour and increasing impatience. It should not be forgotten that, in parallel with all this, knowledge of China – of its cultural traditions and its historical past more than of its present conditions – built up significantly throughout the eighteenth century. This was thanks mainly to the progress of a nascent sinology, especially in France, but also in Germany and Russia, which added to the impressive flow of materials fed by the Jesuits until the end of the century, and thanks to which knowledge on many aspects of Chinese civilization became available, independently of any apologetic intentions. However, it is not within this sphere – which continued to produce extraordinary results from the time of Fréret and Fourmont to that of de Guignes, and up to Rémusat and Julien in the first decades of the nineteenth century – that we should look for the signs of the shift in opinions that interests us here.

This change in attitude and perspective has been described, for example by Etiemble⁸, as a shift from the

sinophilia of the early eighteenth century to the sinophobia of the later part of the same century. Sinophilia and sinophobia have become established categories to describe the different attitudes and the evolution of the Western view of China during the eighteenth century. What we want to highlight, however, is more the specific content and meaning than the general outlook of these intellectual attitudes and, above all, how, in the wake of a growing intolerance and accompanied by much more critical than admiring opinions of the Chinese empire, distinctly new elements appeared, firmly rooted in some of the most advanced European cultural expressions and such as to produce a real relational turning point. It was not China to inspire Europe, but Europe, due to its peculiarities and its now clearly visible divergence from China, that had both a duty and the right to induce changes in the latter, even of epochal proportions. When and how did such a point of view emerge?

To address this question correctly, it is essential to keep in mind the changes that took place in the overall historical context of relations between Europe and East Asia in the second half of the eighteenth century. After the Seven Years’ War, Britain established itself as the leading commercial, naval and military power on the Asian scenario, towards which it progressively redirected its interests, especially after the end of the American War of Independence. First India and then China, linked by a circularity of strategic commercial and financial interests, became and remained for a long time the focus of British engagement. The volume of business with China multiplied exponentially in the final twenty years of the century, led by tea and opium, and there was growing impatience with the trade restrictions and obstacles to accessing the Chinese domestic market imposed by the imperial government of the Qing, which were perceived as unduly restricting trade between peoples. The change of heart in European opinion towards China cannot be understood without taking this larger picture into account.

The increasingly widespread criticism of China in the second half of the eighteenth century, especially of its political-administrative system, was part of the Western split between apologists and detractors. These were divided between «extravagant praise and exaggerated blame», to use Herder’s words, and tended to construe positively or negatively aspects such as the so-called ‘paternal’ nature of the imperial government, the industriousness of the population, the great regard for agricultural work, the respect for ancestors, the meritocratic principles underlying the administrative hier-

⁸ R. Etiemble, *L’Europe chinoise*, I. *De l’Empire romain à Leibniz*, Gallimard, Paris 1988; Id., *L’Europe chinoise*, II. *De la sinophilie à la sinopho-*

bie, Gallimard, Paris 1989.

archies and the absence of hereditary nobility. Or they might highlight other aspects, such as the delays in scientific knowledge, the closure to the outside world, the corruption of justice and administration, the obstacles that a difficult language might pose to the advancement of knowledge. Or they might focus on the despotic nature of the government and the paralysing effects it had on the conditions of individuals, stifling all initiative, hindering relations with the outside world and generating widespread uncertainty about private fortunes and wealth. These criticisms could be expressed with effective and imaginative metaphors, such as those offered by Herder, Volney or Benjamin Constant, which certainly contributed to fixing in European opinion an image of China as a static, immobile reality, outside of history, inserted in a time flow of its own, separate and different from that of Western Europe. For Volney, the Chinese were a «civilisation avortée [...] immuable», the people, «un peuple automate»⁹. An «embalmed mummy wrapped in silk and painted with hieroglyphics» or even «a dormouse in its winter's sleep» for Herder¹⁰. Prisoner of an «immobilité effrayante» for Constant. A «living fossil», was Marx's later oxymoron. Observers of lesser literary prestige, but capable of influencing public opinion thanks to their own direct experience on Chinese soil, had long continued to use expressions revealing a widespread point of view, evoking «the stagnant pool of Chinese life [that] has poisoned all the springs of human conduct and passions»¹¹.

Condorcet had not reserved any space for China in the future of progress he envisaged. He could not conceive how China could take part in it. The Middle Kingdom was out of time and history: despotism and immobility, a «honteuse immobilité», were its destiny. Some, like Herder, linked this destiny to a complexity of factors that we could define as racial, to what he referred to as a «genetic character», an «innate character» resulting from «race» and «natural conformation», referring to the Mongolian and Tatar elements, concluding simply that «Chinese they were, and will remain»¹². However, there were those who tried to go beyond mere rhetorical representations and catchphrases, who questioned the

occasional or remote causes of China's stagnation and tried to imagine possible ways of change: what did China being in a state of stagnation and immobility actually mean? And how could it get out of it? What kind of change could be imagined? Induced by whom and by what? And above all, why?

Prospects for change could take on different scopes, meanings and consequences. As mentioned above, a limited and relatively superficial form of change could relate to the modalities of commercial relations between the West and China; and one might think, not entirely erroneously, that it could be achieved through normal diplomatic practices, consolidated in international relations, at least from the West's point of view, that is, without violent pressure, without threats of force. However, none of these, either during the eighteenth century or at the beginning of the nineteenth, could work. Nevertheless, different perspectives of change could be envisaged, based, for example, on endogenous factors, rooted in the socio-political foundations of the empire or deriving from the particular historical conditions in which it found itself at the end of the eighteenth century.

Who, for example, had something interesting to say about change in China was Lord Macartney, considering the essential characteristics of China and without thinking of hetero-induced change. In his travel report, George III's ambassador clearly expressed his understanding of the conflictual relationships between the Chinese Han and the Manchus. The government of the empire was certainly despotic, but while for the Manchus it was a «domestic despotism», for the former, used to an ancient tradition of «government by the law», it was the «tyranny of a handful of Tartars over more than three hundred million Chinese»¹³. He saw this dichotomy as a potential factor leading to the collapse of the empire, for which he foresaw a future full of uncertainties. He believed that the Qing had been able to assert themselves both because of the inability of the Chinese to recover from the violent Manchurian conquest and the immediate establishment of despotic rule, and because of the great skills of four successive emperors who had been able to maintain control over the great structure of the Middle Kingdom. However, that control now seemed to him to be on the verge of breakdown due to insurrections in provinces further away from the centre, such as Sichuan, the flourishing of secret societies and riots fomented by the Chinese Han. The Chi-

⁹ C.F. Volney, *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires*, Desenne, Volland, Plassan, Paris 1791 p. 120.

¹⁰ J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, bei J.F. Hartknoch, Riga und Leipzig 1784-1791, 4 vols. I quote from the English translation by T. Churchill, J.G. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, Printed for J. Johnson, London 1800, book XI. «China», p. 296.

¹¹ J. Slade, *Notices on the British Trade to the Port of Canton; with Some Translations of Chinese Official Papers*, Smith, Elder, & Company, London 1830, p. 43.

¹² Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, cit., p. 293.

¹³ G. Macartney, *Journal of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, in J. Barrow, *Some Account of the Public Life, and a Selection from the Unpublished Writings, of the Earl of Macartney*, printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1807, vol. II, pp. 441 and ff.

nese seemed to have recovered and regained a spirit of independence, while the empire had swelled, including demographically, to the point where it had become difficult to keep under the control of a single, centralized government: a situation that inspired Macartney to make the following consideration: «I should not be surprised if its dislocation or dismemberment were to take place before my own dissolution. Whenever such an event happens, it will probably be attended with all the horrors and atrocities from which they were delivered by the Tartar domination»¹⁴.

Macartney imagined that the empire might be shaken by a violently anti-despotic Chinese reaction against the Manchu rulers. He believed no positive consequences could be expected from such an abrupt change, since without due preparation no quick transition from slavery to freedom could take place without terrible convulsions that would be worse even than the evils it was supposed to remedy. So, although it might be desirable that Manchu despotism should cease and the Chinese recover their freedom, such a prospect seemed to him full of very serious dangers – as the cases of France and St. Domingo clearly demonstrated – unless it resulted from a slow process of maturation, for which he seemed to vaguely imagine an external guiding force.

*[...] the Chinese, if not led to emancipation by degrees, but let loose on a burst of enthusiasm, would probably fall into all the excesses or folly, suffer all the paroxysms of madness, and be found as unfit for the enjoyment of freedom as the French and the negroes*¹⁵.

Elsewhere in his *Journal*, Macartney used an effective seafaring metaphor to describe the likely near future of the Chinese empire in terms of disintegration. He likened it to a large man-of-war, old and «crazy», kept afloat only by the temporary skill of a few commanders, but at great risk of falling prey to indiscipline and disorder, without necessarily sinking immediately, but perhaps drifting like a wreck, only to be broken upon the shore¹⁶. This metaphor led to two hypotheses for change, both based on the conviction that, in any

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 448.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ «The empire of China is an old crazy first-rate man of war, which a fortunate succession of able and vigilant officers has contrived to keep afloat for these hundred and fifty years past; and to overawe their neighbours, merely by her bulk and appearance; but whenever an insufficient man happens to have the command upon deck, adieu to the discipline and safety of the ship. She may perhaps not sink outright; she may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed in pieces on the shore; but she can never be rebuilt on the old bottom» (Macartney, *Journal of an Embassy*, cit., p. 398. The following quotations come from the same Macartney's text).

case, China would not emerge from the present crisis in the same condition as before. The first was that China would undergo a «breaking up of power»: not an unlikely event, but not a desirable one either. According to Macartney, who must be credited with a remarkable capacity for global vision, the result would be not only a profound disruption of trade in Asia, but «a very sensible change in the other quarters of the world». The balance of power between the many participants in trade with China would be shifted, resulting in a real assault on the Chinese market. Britain would probably end up being the main beneficiary of such a «revolution», maintaining its role as the «first political, marine and commercial power on the globe». Abandoning the realm of speculation and probability, and moving into the realm of actual reality, Macartney felt that it was in no way advisable to take any initiative that would hasten a «revolution» which would be full of uncertainties. In words that ought to be weighed carefully, in his view «interests», «reason» and «humanity» suggested that any «offensive» action should be avoided. It was absurd to even think of establishing a territorial dominion on the Chinese continent, of the kind Robert Clive had achieved in India. The second hypothesis, instead, held that it was necessary to continue to hope for a «quiet» change, produced by «gentle» measures. In short, even in the face of the failure of his mission, he still trusted in the positive effects of the personal exchange that had begun in Peking, in the reciprocal knowledge that had resulted from it and in the dialogue and negotiations that could continue.

Similar opinions in terms of diagnosis, but less optimistic in terms of forecasts, were expressed a few years later by the authoritative voice of another eyewitness, the companion and treasurer of the Macartney mission and future high official of the Admiralty, John Barrow, who also penned one of the most read and influential books on China of his time¹⁷.

Although it was true that China had suffered «commotions» throughout its history, mainly in the form of revolts or «partial insurrections» due to the extreme poverty of the inhabitants, Barrow reported on the information he had received – evidently from the same source as Macartney – about the existence of secret societies that planned the overthrow of the «Tartar» government in the name of ancient Chinese national glory. However, Barrow went beyond a mere political evalu-

¹⁷ J. Barrow, *Travels in China: Containing Descriptions, Observations, and Comparisons, Made and Collected in the Course of a Short Residence at the Imperial Palace of Yuen-Min-Yuen, and on a Subsequent Journey Through the Country from Peking to Canton*, Printed for T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1804, p. 396.

ation of the immediate situation and developed a more historical reasoning than Macartney, whose caution he shared in any case. As we know, he argued in no uncertain terms that there was a graduated scale of civilisation, with Britain at the top and China languishing at the bottom. Despotism, lack of individual freedom, lack of a middle class capable of pursuing its economic and political initiatives in safe conditions were the causes of this backwardness. It was certainly desirable that this distance be bridged. Without developing a systematic or even programmatic discourse, his perspective took on normative overtones. What was needed was a change in the Chinese political and institutional system that would bring China into line with Western Europe and, above all, encourage free trade and cultural exchange with the outside world. Barrow did not offer any suggestions on how this could happen and, as we have seen, he was very cautious about any radical changes in the political regime in China. But certainly his point of view was increasingly taken up and articulated in Britain in the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century by the free-trade, interventionist and evangelical opinion.

The Canton-printed journal «Chinese Repository» (1832-1850), which was the most important periodical of the Sino-Western Macao-Canton community at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the voice of free-trade and missionary circles and the proponent of a true civilisation project for China based on free trade, education and assistance, expressed this concept effectively in 1836: «The pressure of civilization was until two centuries ago, perhaps from China outwards; it is now from other countries into China»¹⁸.

China's long-standing charisma and influence due to the attractiveness of its civilisation had ended, and so had its ability to offer positive examples for reflection. In the «Chinese Repository» these ideas were underpinned by a representation of China based on the opposition between a despotic and oppressive Manchu government, a veritable Chinese *ancien régime*, and the people, the civil society who, unlike the former, would be ready and eager to see profound changes in their relations with the West. Ideas similar to those already present in Macartney and Barrow, but now embedded in interventionist perspectives based on modernizing plans for China. However, before such prospects could reach the dangerous extreme of invoking military conflict, how else, other than by diplomatic action, had thoughts about a possible, necessary change in the relations between

the West and China previously been expressed? And in what contexts of reflection? The two cases that seem particularly significant in this regard, and which have not always been perceived as such, are those of Adam Smith and Diderot. Almost contemporaries and, unlike Macartney and Barrow, neither personally involved in Chinese affairs in any public role, Smith and Diderot both reveal uncommon, very interesting original perspectives on the historical processes underway in the relations between Europe and China, such as to overcome the sterile comparison between admiration and contempt. In their writings, they show that they are able to ask new and important questions and to offer very lucid and acute answers, each according to his own position as a man of letters and a European observer capable of tackling high-level problems.

3. LATE-ENLIGHTENMENT CONCERN FOR CHANGING CHINA

What makes the words that Smith and Diderot dedicated at almost the same time to China so interesting is the very fact that they both placed themselves in a problematic perspective revolving around the theme of change, deriving from the very clear perception of the absolute centrality that Europe-China relationships had assumed in a truly global economic and historical framework¹⁹. It can be summed up in the questions of 'what would have to change' in the relations between Europe and China and 'how China itself would have to change' for this relational transformation to take place.

In his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, right at the beginning of the period that witnessed a noticeable change of opinion on China, Smith repeatedly makes very interesting remarks about the latter, based on an extensive knowledge of relevant European literature²⁰. He was one of the first, if not the first, to declare China's economic condition literally «stationary» and to address

¹⁸ R.I. [Robert Inglis], *Notices of Modern China: the influence of foreign commerce considered, first in connection with European Nations, and then with those coterminous with this empire*, «Chinese Repository», V, 1836, 5, pp. 202-212, see p. 206.

¹⁹ On the complexity of European discussions on Chinese economy and specifically on Chinese trade during the Enlightenment, see A.E. Millar, *A Singular Case: debating China's Political Economy in the European Enlightenment*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2017; more particularly on Adam Smith and China, Ead., *Your beggarly commerce! Enlightenment European views of the China trade*, in *Encountering Otherness. Diversities and Transcultural Experiences in Early Modern European Culture*, ed. by G. Abbattista, EUT, Trieste 2011, pp. 205-222.

²⁰ A. Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. by R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1981, 2 vols. On China: book I, chap. 3, 7, 9, vol. I, pp. 110-111 ff.; book III, chap. 1, vol. I, p. 311; book IV, chap. 4, vol. I, p. 404; book IV, chap. 9, vol. II, p. 104 ff.

the idea that this could be remedied by embarking on a path of economic development according to the mechanisms he considered natural, based on the European experience. That China was a country of great size and population, one of the most fertile and best cultivated in the world, industrious, prosperous, with enormous economic potential, was not in doubt. However, Smith declared that it had long been «stationary»: not progressing nor declining, but stationary, «still»²¹. This meant that the country's resources were used exclusively to reproduce themselves, without growth. In this he saw a clear divergence from a Europe that had been expanding for more than two centuries. The causes of this phenomenon were neither natural nor anthropological, and did not lie in the characteristics of the language, traditionalism or the supposed Chinese inability to develop the arts and sciences. The causes were instead all historical and political-institutional. China, in his view, «had probably long ago acquired that full complement of riches which is consistent with the nature of its laws and institutions»²². This phrase, with its complex implications, clearly stated that Chinese institutions were not suited to sustaining the development of society and the economy beyond mere reproduction and subsistence, in other words to encouraging the creation and use of any surplus for investment in economic progress. More specifically, the excessive parcelling out of land ownership, agricultural production at the level of mere subsistence for the population, low remuneration for labour, that is, limited domestic demand, and usurious interest rates all contributed to this effect. In short, the low income of agricultural workers, which, unlike Malthus later²³, Smith did not attribute to demographic causes, did not allow for the growth of manufacturing and was rooted in economic, political, legal and financial causes such as excessive inequality, the high cost of economic risk and inadequate protection of contracts and property. A real possibility of breaking this vicious circle could come from opening up to foreign trade. China's future economic development depended on external trade and shipping, which would add the global market to the domestic one, allowing for growth in manufacturing production as well as favouring the formation of

an entrepreneurial class and increasing the circulation of goods, people and knowledge. This would certainly have required broader institutional and cultural changes, as opening up to commercial relations with the rest of the world meant that China would have to abandon its traditional attitude of hostility towards foreigners. In conclusion, for Smith the stationary condition of China certainly demanded 'change', a change of an overall economic, institutional and social nature clearly shaped on a European model of development, but for which the Scottish philosopher did not venture to conjecture the springs, methods or mechanisms. There was little doubt, however, that the breakthrough, according to Smith, would come from what today we call 'globalisation':

*A more extensive foreign trade, however, which to this great home market added the foreign market of all the rest of the world – especially if any considerable part of this trade was carried on in Chinese ships – could scarce fail to increase very much the manufactures of China, and to improve very much the productive powers of its manufacturing industry. By a more extensive navigation, the Chinese would naturally learn the art of using and constructing themselves all the different machines made use of in other countries, as well as the other improvements of art and industry which are practised in all the different parts of the world. Upon their present plan they have little opportunity except that of the Japanese*²⁴.

Denis Diderot, too, thought of China in terms of 'change', as can be seen from his contributions to the *Histoire des Deux Indes*²⁵. Merely taking a stand in the controversy between approval or disapproval of the features of Chinese civilisation was clearly not enough to deal with problems that were not simply a sterile intellectual dispute at all, but concerned the structures of the great global trade, the balance of world power and the role that China might play in them. That he had no patience with sinophilic forms of admiration is clear from his repeated declarations of opinion and especially from the addition he made to the third, 1780 edition of the *Histoire* of a specific chapter dedicated to China's «detractors» that would act as a counterbalance to the openly sinophilic pages present in the two previous, 1770 and 1774 editions of the work. This intervention of completion and enrichment is in itself indicative not only of

²¹ Ivi, book I, chap. 7, vol. I, pp. 110-111: «China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in world. It seems, however, to have been long stationary».

²² Ivi, book I, chap. 9, vol. I, p. 126; same concept in chap. 8, p. 111: «It had perhaps, even long before this time, acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire».

²³ A. Bashford, *Malthus and China*, «The Historical Journal», 63, 2020, 1, pp. 63-89.

²⁴ Smith, *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, cit., book IV, chap. 9, vol. II, p. 105.

²⁵ The question of Diderot's contribution to the famous work of the abbé Raynal is presented in a systematic and definitive way in the critical edition of Abbé G.-T. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, critical ed. ed. by A. Strugnell et al., Centre international d'étude du XVIIIe siècle, Ferney-Voltaire 2010, vol. I.

Diderot's thought, but also of his desire to record, in a widely known and vastly circulated work, a change in European opinion about China that he was able to grasp very well²⁶. What interested Diderot above all, however, was to try to ascertain and explain the same paradox noted by other observers of his time: that is, the unique example of a country with an ancient and precocious civilisation that seemed, however, to have stopped in its historical development. To realize this turn of affairs it was sufficient to make a comparison with the history of the European West that for at least two centuries had been steadily proceeding along a road of intellectual and civil progress. In Diderotian terms, it seemed to be a twofold problem: theoretical, needing an adequate explanation, but also practical, because it concerned a system of trade relations on a global scale and how this would evolve in the future.

For Diderot, the basic explanation lay in China's closure, in its refusal to open up and take part in the network of international trade and, in general, to receive stimuli from outside. He likened China to a cloister shrouded in darkness, into which external light could not penetrate. Not that the metaphor of an isolated, closed, darkened China, deprived of external light was in itself original: it can be found in various commentators, from the Jesuit Le Comte to the authors of the English *Universal History* (1736-1765), from de Pauw to Grimm. Mably went even further in his anti-physiocratic *Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes* (1768), even forecasting destabilising consequences of a possible «enlightenment» of China from outside²⁷. However, it is clear, first of all, that for Diderot 'a light', or, in other words, a factor of change necessarily had to come from outside: on its own China would never have changed, and only an unpredictable «hasard que le tems peut amener ou ne pas amener»²⁸ could draw it from its «médiocrité». Secondly, the impetus for change could only come from the civilising energy of trade, exchange and intercourse, of what he had elsewhere called the «esprit d'Occident»

as opposed to the «esprit d'Orient»²⁹. There was a risk of importing corruption from outside through trade, of course, but the history of Europe was there to prove that the 'barbaric' Western nations had taken that risk and eventually reaped the benefits of prosperity and civilised development³⁰. For Diderot, then, as for Smith, Europe provided the key to understanding China's possible fate. But there was more in Diderot's pages on China.

In other texts that he contributed to the *Histoire* (but already present in the 1774 edition), Diderot posed a question he considered very important for the future of relations between Europe and the East: «Que deviendra le commerce de l'Europe avec la Chine?»³¹. The restrictions imposed on trade with the West by the Qing administration – what came to be known as the “Canton system” – constituted in his eyes «gênes humiliantes», something unnatural and unacceptable, which led him to ask «Quels moyens pourroit-on employer contre un état dont la nature nous a séparés par un espace de huit mille lieues?». What could be done to remedy an intolerable situation? And indeed, what could be done «against» – this is the exact preposition Diderot uses – a state like China? That conquest or violent coercion were out of the question was clearly stated from the first edition of the work, even if for technical-logistical reasons rather than legitimacy³². Yet it was appropriate to raise

²⁹ Diderot, s.v. «Chinois, philosophie des», in *Encyclopédie, ou, Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, t. III, Paris 1753, pp. 347-348.

³⁰ «On imagineroit sans peine que ce dédain d'un peuple pour les connoissances d'un autre peuple est un des principaux caractères de la barbarie, ou peut-être même de l'état sauvage. Cependant, il est aussi le vice d'une nation policée. Un sot orgueil lui persuade qu'elle sait tout, ou que la chose qu'elle ignore ne vaut pas la peine d'être apprise. Elle ne fait aucun progrès dans les sciences; & ses arts persistent dans une médiocrité dont ils ne se tireront que par un hasard que le tems peut amener ou ne pas amener. Il en est alors d'une contrée comme d'un cloître; & c'est une image très-juste de la Chine que la lumière environne, sans pouvoir y percer: comme s'il n'y avoit aucun moyen d'en bannir l'ignorance, sans y laisser entrer la corruption. Où en seroient les nations de l'Europe, si infectées d'une vanité masquée de quelque préjugé, elles ne s'étoient éclairées réciproquement? Celle-ci doit à celle-là le germe de la liberté; l'une & l'autre à une troisième, les vrais principes du commerce; & cette espèce d'échange est bien d'une autre importance pour leur bonheur que celui de leurs denrées»: Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes*, cit., book V, chap. 24; see the critical ed., cit., vol. I, p. 542 (my italics).

³¹ Ivi, chap. 32; see the critical ed., vol. I, p. 564.

³² «Si les ports de la Chine étoient une fois fermés, il est vraisemblable qu'ils le seroient pour toujours. L'obstination de cette nation, ne lui permettroit jamais de revenir sur ses pas, & nous ne voyons point que la force pût l'y contraindre. Quels moyens pourroit-on employer contre un état dont la nature nous a séparés par un espace de huit mille lieues? Il n'est point de gouvernement assez dépourvu de lumières, pour imaginer que des équipages fatigués osassent tenter des conquêtes dans un pays défendu par un peuple innombrable, quelque lâche qu'on suppose une nation avec laquelle les Européens ne se sont pas encore mesurés. Les coups qu'on lui porteroit se réduiroient à intercepter sa navigation dont elle s'occupe peu, & qui n'intéresse ni ses commodités ni sa subsistance»

²⁶ G.-T. Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes*, Pellet, Genève 1780, book II, chaps. 20-21: see now in the above mentioned critical edition, vol. I, pp. 102-124. On Diderot's opinions on China see H. Cohen, *Diderot and the Image of China in Eighteenth-Century France*, «Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century», 242, 1986, reprinted in *Facing Each Other: the World's Perception of Europe and Europe's Perception of the World*, ed. by A. Pagden, Aldershot, Avebury 2000, pp. 421-432.

²⁷ «Permettez aux Chinois d'acquérir de nouvelles lumières, & de juger avec justesse de leur situation & vous verrez sur le champ le despotisme devenir soupçonneux; ensuite timide, & enfin furieux», G.B. de Mably, *Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes, sur l'ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques*, Nyon Veuve Durand, Paris 1768: I quote from Id., *Œuvres complètes de l'Abbé de Mably*, London 1789, vol. XI, p. 107.

²⁸ Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes*, cit., t. I, book V, chap. 24, p. 645: see now in the above mentioned critical edition, vol. I, p. 542.

the issue of a change that would lead to an opening up, and Diderot explicitly acknowledged this when he considered the traditional Chinese viewpoint – which tended to consider other peoples only in terms of China's interests – and suggested its replacement with the opposite one, synthesized by the question «à quoi les Chinois sont-ils bons pour le reste de la terre?»³³. This question very clearly assumed a state of affairs in which China was, willingly or unwillingly, an integral part of a system of global relations from which, in the name of the «commun avantage du genre humain» recently evoked by Vattel, it could not escape, except for exceptional reasons³⁴. Therefore change was necessary for the good and general interest of mankind. However, if coercion was to be ruled out and the «hazard» was most evidently unpredictable, how could such a change be achieved? Diderot was openly doubtful about the ability of the Chinese to open themselves up to change and to emerge from what elsewhere – again referring to China – he had called the «état stationnaire»³⁵. All that remained was to trust in the effect of time, that is, of history: a solution that appeared to be interlocutory, but which went hand in hand with Diderot's conviction that the impulse, the light, could only come from outside, meaning, in all likelihood from Europe, from the civilising, albeit dangerously corrupting, force of commerce, or rather of the great global trade, exchange and intercourse. Ultimately, China was not going to change on its own, it had to 'be changed' and, either way, it had to come out of its condition of closure and immobility.

Although they did not have a direct, personal involvement and were observers from a distance, commentators of uncommon insight such as Adam Smith and Denis Diderot, when reflecting on the state of the

Chinese empire and its relations with Western Europe, considered China a protagonist – admittedly, still reluctant – of global trade relations by the late 1770s. And they both believed that, in the near future, the great Middle Kingdom should undergo changes that would make it a full participant in a world trade system. In this sense, we believe we can speak of a perspective on China that is distinctly different from the one that, in the decades between the end of the seventeenth century and the second half of the eighteenth century, had given rise to the production of new, original knowledge but also of mythical representations: a new outlook was emerging that expressed a change of opinion and that we can define as 'prescriptive'.

As we have shown, a relatively short time later other commentators with direct – however limited in time and space – experience of China were able to discern the existence of even more complex dynamics of change in the Manchu empire of the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Inducing change in China became an absolutely tangible and immensely important objective in the decades that immediately followed for the commercial powers operating in the East, especially for Great Britain. This was pursued by different means: approaches made through various forms of legal and illegal trade, repeated diplomatic initiatives, the propaganda action of free-traders and the adventurism of Protestant missionaries. For all these actors, the agenda was not simply to increase knowledge – an objective that never failed to be achieved in any case³⁶ – but to change a reality as complex as China and to suggest possible means of attaining that. Initially, these means consisted in changing, preferably in a peaceful way, Chinese traditional forms of external political and economic relations, and later, as the nineteenth century progressed, changing various aspects of its economic, social and cultural life, even by means of aggression and less peaceful means. Western pressure to change China was one of the contradictory and controversial aspects of nineteenth century globalisation and of what was and has long remained and still is for the Chinese people the 'century of humiliation'.

(Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes*, cit., book V, chap. 24; see the critical ed., t. I, p. 565).

³³ Ivi, book I, chap. 21; see the critical ed., vol. I, p. 120.

³⁴ E. de Vattel, *Le Droit des gens ou principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des nations et des souverains*, London 1758, vol. I, book I, chap. VIII. «Du commerce», par. 88-93, pp. 83-88: «Observons seulement que les Nations, comme les particuliers, sont obligées de commercer ensemble, pour le commun avantage du genre humain, à cause du besoin que les hommes ont les uns des autres (Prélim. §§ 10. 11. & Liv. I. §. 88.): Mais cela n'empêche pas que chacune ne demeure libre de considérer, dans les cas particuliers, s'il lui convient de cultiver, ou de permettre le Commerce: et comme les devoirs envers soi-même l'emportent sur les devoirs envers autrui; si une Nation se trouve en de telles circonstances qu'elle juge le Commerce avec les Étrangers dangereux pour l'État, elle peut y renoncer, & l'interdire. C'est ainsi que les Chinois en ont usé pendant longtemps. Mais encore un coup, il faut que ses devoirs envers elle-même lui prescrivent cette réserve, par des raisons sérieuses & importantes; autrement elle ne peut se refuser aux devoirs généraux de l'humanité».

³⁵ Diderot, *Sur les Chinois*, in *Œuvres de Denis Diderot. Mélanges de littérature et de philosophie*, J.L.J. Brière, Paris 1871, t. III, pp. 492-497: p. 493.

³⁶ On this I permit myself to refer to my *Chinese Law and Justice: George Thomas Staunton (1781-1859) and the European Discourses on China in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, in *Law, Justice and Codification in Qing China*, cit.