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Ralph Weber  
**All about Fiction:  
European Global Studies, Chinese  
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Ralph Weber

**All about Fiction:**

**European Global Studies, Chinese  
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**Abstract:** In this paper, I want to reflect on an appropriate relational understanding of ‘China’ that departs from but avoids the impasses of area studies and that might provide a sound basis for a future Sinology. I first present some recent developments in European studies, in which ‘China’ too (and with it Sinology and Chinese studies) assumes an important, even a constitutive role. My focus will be on my own university’s new program in European Global Studies. If this endeavor is to succeed, it is crucial, I claim, to avoid some longstanding and misguided uses of ‘China’ and other notions as mere fictions of Europe’s Other. The contribution that I then want to make involves two points: how to think about a future Sinology that is not inversely and equally problematically relying on these kinds of fictions and how to gain conceptual control of relationality in the attempt to add complexity to the understanding of ‘China’ without having to sacrifice one’s subject-matter and eventually see it dissolve.

**Key words:** Vaihinger, Jullien, area studies, European studies, relationality

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\* Despite many differences, the various philologies and area studies populating contemporary academia share one basic problem. This is that they focus on a particular area, say, in Sinology on the area referred to as China (the languages of China, the politics of China, etc.). This is of course also their major virtue. A focus keeps one's study orderly and gives much needed control over the research object. The order and control are made possible because a focus works towards erecting borders defining what belongs and what does not belong to the domain to be studied. With the focus, however, comes the tendency to disregard the research done on other languages and other areas, particularly if they are by some measure considered distant languages or distant areas. Increasing academic specialization has only aggravated the problem, to the point at which today even a discipline has come to be too large a field to be mastered by any one individual specialist. It is unclear whether Sinology and Chinese Studies should be considered disciplines. It has often been said that the philologies and area studies are multidisciplinary by nature, involving linguistics, history, and literary criticism in the former and all the social sciences in the latter case. So there is more than abundant work to do for anyone specializing, say, on early Chinese history, and it is only natural that there would be little or no time and energy left for being overly curious about what is the latest in early Indian history or early Hittite history. If one attends, for example, the Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society, then one notices quickly that the different sections focusing on different philologies function like separate meetings and that there is very little intermingling. Apparently, a panel assembling scholars working within different philologies yet grappling with some similar methodological problem is a rare sight. This is not to say that most philologists or area studies scholars are lacking in intellectual curiosity and interest. In fact, quite the contrary is true. The problem is not at the individual level, but at the institutional and systemic levels. And whoever has participated in the sort of cross-philology, cross-area-study or other inter- or cross-disciplinary academic activities knows well that going home frustrated by the failed attempt to connect might be as usual an experience as being uplifted by the newly gained perspectives.

In short, I believe that the conversation between philologies and between area studies should be institutionally encouraged. Otherwise, important synergies are simply lost. To give an example from my field of specialization: when one travels to conferences on Chinese, African and Indian philosophy, respectively, one is amazed not only to see that each of them takes Europe as a frame of reference to the extent of fashioning itself and only itself as the great Other of Europe, but also to notice the many parallel discussions, say, on the issue of translatability,

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\* This paper is a revised and expanded version of my inaugural lecture.

cultural reification, hermeneutical questions or how to draw the borders of where Africa or India starts and ends, etc. To counter the reificational tendencies of such parallelism, a refashioning of the focuses in relational terms is in order. In what follows, I hence want to reflect on an appropriate relational understanding of ‘China’ that departs from but avoids the impasses of area studies and that might provide a sound basis for a future Sinology and for future Chinese studies. I first present some recent developments in European studies, in which ‘China’ also assumes an important, even a co-constitutive role. Such developments go by many different names and I will concentrate on the one going by the name of European Global Studies. If this endeavor is to succeed, it is crucial, I then claim in the major part of my paper, to avoid some longstanding and misguided uses of ‘China’ as a mere fiction of the Other for Europe.

## European Global Studies

In the last two decades, European Studies have gone through a development which is two-pronged. On the one hand, in the mainstream, European Studies have become little more than a cover for what are really European Union Studies. This can be seen from the many Centers for European Studies that have popped up in the last two decades across the globe with funding from the European Union. In the documents establishing these centers, it is often stated explicitly that the purpose of these academic institutions is to help increase trade relations between the European Union and the respective country. From a legal, economic and political perspective, the focus on the European Union is understandable, but the narrowing of focus is evident. So, on the other hand, all along there have been various advocates for a different sort of European Studies. The many crises in the past few years, which have shaken the basis of the European Union have made these alternative visions move from the periphery to the center of attention.

More than ten years ago, Ian Manners advocated moving beyond an understanding of Europe simply as "a place, a space, a setting", in short, "a category" that is unquestioned with regard to its definition, borders and appropriate ways of being studied.<sup>1</sup> What Manners was aiming at was a more holistic and cross-disciplinary approach of a co-constituted Europe, where Europe is "both the medium and outcome of social practices" and is involved "in processes which both constitute Europe as an entity, and other regions as entities (and vice-versa)", stretching the matter even beyond an anthropocentric vision.<sup>2</sup> He writes: "This means, in particular, that if we are to

<sup>1</sup> Ian Manners: European Studies, in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 11 (2003) 1, 71.

<sup>2</sup> Manners, *European Studies* (2003), 74, 77.

analyze European society, European economy or European politics, it must be within the context of an awareness of the other social sciences and the rest of the world."<sup>3</sup> The vision that Manners proposes to pursue is about a "holistic, contextual, inclusive and global European Studies".<sup>4</sup>

Such an approach has gained more strength with the rise of paradigms in other disciplines during the last decade, for example in history or in anthropology, giving new emphasis to connections and contact zones, transfers, exchanges, and entanglements, all of which redirect our gaze towards the fringes and the borders – not in order to deny that we are still talking about entities but to destabilize their centers and to allow for a more relational perspective. Etienne Balibar's "Europe as Borderland", for example, articulates such an understanding of Europe eloquently. Rather than a center and a periphery, what emerges is a "series of assembled peripheries". Balibar writes against the notion of pureness in cultural identity and highlights how Europe is better understood as "overlapping peripheries", "a mixing of languages, religions, and cultures", "with origins and connections all over the world".<sup>5</sup>

Along these lines, the University of Basel has renamed its former European Institute the Institute for European Global Studies, the "global" functioning as a constant reminder against a blinkered view on Europe. The reproached narrowness of vision in traditional European Studies has a much longer history than the existence of the European Union. In a sense, whereas the Other of Europe has been a constant topic for Europeans and non-Europeans alike throughout the ages of discovery and colonialism, Europe has seldom been fashioned as the Other itself, not to itself, but to others; Europe as the Other of its Others. European Global Studies make this simple point. An appropriate study of Europe today must extend its gaze beyond Europe. What Europe is, where its borders lie, how attractive it is as a normative idea, how much economic and political power its political representations have, all of that is subject to global forces and determinants. Europe is defined and constituted in China, in Brazil, and so on. So, following the example of China, it seems that Sinology and Chinese Studies would be important, even quintessential, partners for European Global Studies. The focus in European Global Studies is thus reset according to the requirements of the particular research problem at hand, if necessary even to the global level, while the object of inquiry remains Europe. This separation of focus and object of inquiry constitutes the major change from European Studies to European Global Studies.

<sup>3</sup> Manners, *European Studies* (2003), 78.

<sup>4</sup> Manners, *European Studies* (2003), 79.

<sup>5</sup> Etienne Balibar: *Europe as Borderland*, in: *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 27 (2009) 2, 200.

# China as a Fiction of the Other and the China of Sinology

If European Global Studies are indeed an innovative and appropriate way of delineating an academic subject-matter without reifying an "area", then the question naturally arises whether or not Chinese Studies and even Sinology could be turned into something like Chinese Global Studies. Before attending to this question in some detail, it might be helpful to take a detour and spend some time thinking about the sort of fiction that "China" has come to serve in the past from a European perspective and how it could be more profitably viewed in the perspective advocated by European Global Studies.

My detour begins with a quote from Hans Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As If*, a book written between 1870 and 1910.<sup>6</sup> The unpretentious "as if" stands in stark contrast with the subtitle, which almost euphorically declares the book to be about "a system of the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind" on the basis – as the German *Volksausgabe* adds – of an "idealistic positivism". In the book, we find the notion of "critical positivism" more often than "idealistic positivism", as in the context of the following passage:

"The human conception of the world is an immense web of fictions full with logical contradictions, i.e. of scientific inventions for practical ends or inadequate, subjective, iconic ways of conceiving. That they match reality is ruled out from the outset."<sup>7</sup>

"Scientific inventions for practical ends"! Nobody would deny that China has come to occupy a central place in our "conception of the world" – the world seems hardly conceivable without China – and it seems safe to assert that China has served practical ends exactly in terms of fiction, be it in the arts, in science or in philosophy. There would be many examples. I only need mention Christian Wolff's *Regenten-Schrift* (Of Regents), in which he saw Plato's rule of the philosopher-kings realized in ancient China, or Voltaire's fascination with the sagely Confucius and the sort of reason that can do without any and all prophecy and transcendence apparently exemplified by Confucius. Of course, Voltaire made use of China in order to fancy a future France, one that would do without abuse of freedom but still does not let go of its monarchy.

The story of this *Europe chinoise* and the shift from philosophical sinophily to sinophobia (culminating perhaps in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*) has been told many times, for

6 Hans Vaihinger: *Die Philosophie des Als Ob. System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen der Menschheit auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus*. Bruchköbel 2014.

7 „Das menschliche Vorstellungsgebilde der Welt ist ein ungeheures Gewebe von Fiktionen voll logischer Widersprüche, d. h. von wissenschaftlichen Erdichtungen zu praktischen Zwecken bzw. von inadäquaten, subjektiven, bildlichen Vorstellungsweisen, deren Zusammentreffen mit der Wirklichkeit von vornherein ausgeschlossen ist“. Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 79.



example, in Eun-Jeung Lee's *Anti-Europa*<sup>8</sup> or in René Étiemble's two volumes from the late 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Étiemble received the Balzan-Price for "Comparative Literature", which is slightly ironic given that Étiemble had restricted his focus to Europe and the European fictions of China. One could therefore argue that he was not comparing at all, or at the very most comparing Europe not with itself (that would be a most useless undertaking) but with its Other, that is, its *own* Other.

Be that as it may, it is easy today to look back at Voltaire and unmask his depiction of China as a fiction. Yet what do we do when we "unmask" in this manner? Is "unmasking" the right word? Is this not a completely mistaken view of fiction? Hans Vaihinger, who distinguishes explicitly between fiction and hypothesis, in his work emphasizes precisely the utility of fictions. That a fiction could possibly coincide with reality is ruled out. That is not what fictions are about, contrary to the case of hypotheses. One of the main tenets of the *Philosophy of As If* is that such fictions and fabrications – Vaihinger speaks also of discursive auxiliaries, devices, art terms, playful terms, transit points for our thought, detours and secret paths<sup>10</sup> – may be consciously missing reality, but by way of them much which is useful and even extraordinary can be achieved. However, this does not imply the inverse situation, i.e. "that one can conclude from the utility of a mental, logical construct its correctness".<sup>11</sup> This puts Vaihinger's philosophy into the right perspective with regard to William James's concept of truth and with classical pragmatism more generally, with which he has sometimes been credited to be closely related.

The philosophy of as if is the simple formula that Vaihinger has used for his philosophy of scientific fictions for practical ends. In his book, he has determined the ends, which such fiction thinking should pursue, within the realm of scientific progress and ethics and on the basis of the recognition of the one and only really existing matter, namely sensations – "that exist and that are given".<sup>12</sup> But what about *practical* ends? They are also traced back by Vaihinger to sensations and nothing else than sensations. In a wonderful passage, he relates these ends to "a facilitation and acceleration of a movement of imagination, i.e. a quick and safe connection and mediation of sensations".<sup>13</sup> That sensations do indeed play this fundamental role is according to

8 Eun-Jeung Lee: *Anti-Europa. Die Geschichte der Rezeption des Konfuzianismus und der konfuzianischen Gesellschaft seit der frühen Aufklärung; eine ideengeschichtliche Untersuchung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutschen Entwicklung*. Münster 2003.

9 René Étiemble: *L'Europe chinoise*. 2 Vol. Paris 1988/89.

10 Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 103.

11 Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 70–71.

12 Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 67, 79.

13 Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 72.

Vaihinger "the only fiction-free assertion in the world".<sup>14</sup> This opens up a rather spectacular range in which contradictory fictions are up to mischief or, as Vaihinger emphasizes, prove their use. If no assertion – with the one exception of the assertion just mentioned – can do without fiction, then the implication of what Vaihinger says is really beyond measure. In his book, he offers a widely ramified division of scientific fictions, for example, classificatory, abstract, schematic, paradigmatic, utopian, typical, symbolic and heuristic fictions.

The China that is made use of as a fiction in philosophy, literature and the humanities more generally, and perhaps also in the social sciences, can with good reasons be categorized as one or the other of Vaihinger's kinds of fiction. It is, however, surprising that Vaihinger has not thought of the fiction of the Other, as I would say it plays an important role in Voltaire and in Chinese Europe more generally (China as the Other). This is of course much easier to come up with for us today, after the topic has received much philosophical attention from many different philosophical quarters, from hermeneutics to phenomenology, but also in poststructuralism and postcolonialism. There are versions of China as consciously deployed fiction in the writings of poststructuralists that seem to be similar to Vaihinger's conception. But their status differs as they come to serve methodically in the effort of deconstruction. An example is Michel Foucault when he writes that China takes place in our dreams or when he declares the famous Borges' Chinese encyclopedia to be a heterotopy in the beginning passages of *Les Mots et les Choses*. Other examples by Jacques Derrida, Philippe Sollers or Julia Kristeva could readily be highlighted. Haun Saussy has remarked that such references might strike readers simply as immodest generalizations from a weak empirical basis. But they are really not about China; they only pretend to be.<sup>15</sup>

A critical reading of Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As If* helps formulate a set of questions for a discussion of China as a fiction of the Other: Is it not also easily conceivable that fictions understood as detours might turn into wrong tracks or dead ends? Should one not equally emphasize possible harm as much as utility? And how is utility recognized, and by whom? It is by no means obvious or generally accepted what should count as "scientific progress" or "ethics". Since the subtitle of Vaihinger's book mentions "the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of humanity", it seems that the question of *cui bono* poses itself quite directly. And given that all of humanity seems to be concerned, it cannot be wrong to relate the matter to China. So, can we claim that China is today thought of in a less fictive manner than in the times of Voltaire?

<sup>14</sup> Vaihinger, *Philosophie des Als Ob* (2014), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Haun Saussy: *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China*. Harvard 2002, 150.

Can China be thought of as something else than a fiction at all? Or should it be thought of as a fiction? Inversely, are we justified to think of it as a fiction or should we try to avoid such thinking? Is a fiction-free China conceivable?

It seems that the conscious philosophical use of China as a fiction of the Other could hardly be the China that sinologists are interested in. Of course Sinology is not fiction-free in the depiction of its discipline-defining research object and some of Vaihinger's mentioned kinds of fictions are readily detectable. But it would be odd if the China of Sinology should emerge as nothing else than a fiction of the Other. More often it seems that in Sinology and surely in Chinese studies, China functions as a hypothesis invested with the claim of capturing reality.

In contrast to the usual advice of choosing some middle way in the face of two extremes, I want to argue that in the question of China's fictionality the two extremes offer the best choices. Whoever wants to fabricate China as a fiction of the other for practical ends should try to avoid any and all references to the China of Sinology. Sinologists, on the other hand, should be careful to keep their research free of China as a fiction of the Other, which – it is worth repeating – is decidedly not about China, but rather about a sort of antitype of what is considered to be one's own. Historically, these two ways of talking about China have not run parallel, but crisscross with considerable overlap and enmeshment. Voltaire was probably convinced that his China was also somehow the China of Sinology, a significant bit at least, and we know that he devoured the available literature on China. Yet, for the practical ends that he pursued, the China of Sinology did not play much of a role. The historical and continuing overlap and enmeshment of these two uses of the term "China" in my opinion lies at the root of much trouble in the specialized academic study of China in philosophy, Sinology and Chinese studies.

## Enmeshments of Fiction: The Example of François Jullien

The Parisian philosopher and sinologist François Jullien figures among the most influential, certainly most published authors in contemporary France and beyond. The double disciplinary background in philosophy and Sinology, which mirrors Jullien's self-understanding, suggests already the risk of a possible overlap and enmeshment of two sorts of China. One of the most famous books written by Jullien is *Le Détour et l'Accès*, detour and access, proposing a philosophical detour through China for the declared purpose of accessing European philosophy. He

thus succeeded in formulating an attractive sounding philosophical program, which he saw as following largely in the footsteps of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, with the important difference that he was after a deconstruction not from within but from without, or in Lyotard's terms "from askance", since European philosophy had lost its capacity for creativity and productive self-deconstruction.

Jullien distinguishes himself by explicitly engaging with the kind of fiction that China should come to serve in his philosophy. He relies on Foucault's notion of heterotopy from *Les Mots et les Choses*, which – as I have underlined – is not dealing with the China of Sinology. Yet, for Jullien, heterotopy comes to mean a reference to another place, an elsewhere, an outside of Europe, which he precisely sees ready and available in the China of Sinology. To corroborate his point, he invokes Chinese language, history and geography, all to be sure relating to pre-Jesuit China. But the matter is more complicated with Jullien, since he is not just relying on this fictive conception of heterotopy based on a concrete elsewhere, but adds on his part a self-conscious gradual construction of alterity in ever more dense coherences. However, we need not be concerned with this at this point.<sup>16</sup> The problem shows itself unambiguously when Jullien congratulates Foucault for his ingenious intuition to apply heterotopy to China. This is probably exactly what Foucault did not want to do. For the practical ends that Foucault was pursuing, he could have appealed to Mesopotamia or the moon, if you like. Foucault's heterotopy in *Les Mots et les Choses* (heterotopy is discussed very differently and in more detail in Foucault's radio lecture and his essay on "Des Espaces Autres", which Jullien seems to ignore) establishes China in almost paradigmatic fashion as a pure fiction of the Other, whereas Jullien's heterotopy serves to enlist the pre-Western China of Sinology in a deconstructivist endeavor.

Jullien's concurrent use of China as concrete elsewhere and construed alterity has received much criticism from sinological quarters, which is easily understandable if one takes Jullien as a sinologist and his references to Chinese history and language as well as his reading of Chinese texts seriously. For his philosophical project that is aimed at Europe, it is worthwhile emphasizing that a fiction of China as the Other without any reference to the China of Sinology would probably do the trick. Yet, what would then happen to the claims of a detour and an access and to deconstruction from without? It seems as if Jullien would not reach anywhere beyond treading water.

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<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed and more comprehensive treatment of Jullien, see: Ralph Weber: Controversy over "Jullien", or Where and What is China, Philosophically Speaking?, in: *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41 (2014) 3/4, 361–377.

The overlap and enmeshment of the two uses of China is particularly clear if one focuses on Jullien's political philosophy and on his thoughts on contemporary politics. In some of his writings, Jullien has tried his philosophical project on questions of political philosophy and has construed some political concepts of pre-Western China, which he has then applied without blinking an eye to contemporary China. So he comes to confirm that today's China still functions without any plan for the future and surely without any pursuance of imperial goals, while simply tapping its situational potential. The expression 'situational potential' is at the center of Jullien's reading of the *Sunzi* 孫子, a reading following his program of a philosophical detour in admittedly constructivist appropriation for the purpose of deconstructing European philosophy – which now somehow comes to have interpretative and explanatory power for contemporary politics in the People's Republic of China. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that Jullien was awarded the Hannah Arendt-Prize for Political Thought in 2010 for his oeuvre, notably with the explanation that in his writings "there is good advice for those Western politicians who fight for human rights in China or for those managers of European companies who negotiate with Chinese partners."<sup>17</sup> Jullien appears to want too much at the same time, to bring both uses of China into one argument, and he ends up off track, in the nowhere – which is somewhat ironical since Jullien more recently has stopped speaking of heterotopy, now presenting his project in terms of another term, also taken from Foucault and enriched with some classical Chinese thought, namely atopy. The term denotes a non-isolatable and non-locatable in-between, which is without essence and quality, but still can be functionally and communicatively deployed. Atopy is a non-place, *de nulle part* and *en aucun lieu*, as Jullien puts it himself. That might be philosophically interesting, but it surely has nothing much to do with the China of Sinology.

## Exploring the Extremes

So what would it mean to follow the extremes instead of mixing both uses of China into one argument? First let us examine the use of China as pure fiction of the Other, which – it is difficult to negate – might have great benefits for the location from which it is fabricated in a critical spirit as an antitype. Utopias and dystopias, which often amplify alterity by temporal distance (be it a long-gone past or a far-away future), have shown this over and again. But I would argue that such fiction should be as poor in references as possible, like the Plato-inspired sketches of Campanella's *La città del Sole* or Montesquieu's story of the Troglodytes. It is of little surprise

<sup>17</sup> Hannah-Arendt-Preisträger 2010: Francois Jullien, in: *Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Die grüne politische Stiftung*, URL: <https://www.boell.de/de/navigation/ehrungen-hannah-arendt-preis-2010-francois-jullien-9853.html> (June 5, 2016).

that similar attempts in Europe, ever since the early modern age and in the face of an accelerated encroachment and conquest of the world, also reduced the now discovered foreign by encoding it simply as the Other. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* are a most famous example. But there would be many more with regard to many places.

The genre is full of critical potential. To give another example: Herbert Rosendorfer's *Letters back to Ancient China* of 1983 report how a 10<sup>th</sup> century Chinese mandarin is catapulted by a time machine into modern Bavaria. What he sees there is what the book is about and it thereby issues a wide-ranging critique of the Federal Republic of Germany and its purportedly blind belief in progress. That such critique is most often found in literature may underline its fictive character. But there is also an important difference between the Troglodytes and the Chinese, if by the former we indeed refer to Plato's cave dwellers and not to Herodotus' Libyan or Ethiopian tribes. To the best of my knowledge, there is nobody who would feel historically related to Plato's cave dwellers, think that their cave is his or her cave, hold a Troglodyte passport, follow Troglodyte tradition or speak a variant of classical Troglodyte. It is today indeed rather difficult to be reproached by Troglodytes for having instrumentalized them, which makes it easy and I would say unproblematic to use, even misuse or abuse them, for one's own ends. If and when however China, Africa, the Russians, the Europeans and so forth are used to designate the Other in fiction, reproaches are near at hand, since all these expressions boast an identificatory potential that Troglodytes lack. It seems utterly unnecessary and hardly persuasive to use such expressions as fictions today if they mean no more than the Other, the antitype of what is taken as one's own. So, as for the first extreme option, which I repeat would be theoretically sound if divested from all reference to the China of Sinology, it is simply historically compromised to the point of being insensitive in many ways, all too easily misleading and straightforwardly unnecessary. It is unnecessary for whoever wants to fabricate China as a fiction of the Other for practical ends has no reason at all to stick to this label. If it were really about a fiction of the Other, then any other label would also do, including the Troglodytes or simply speaking of the Other, *tout court*.

If one were to follow the other extreme, the China of Sinology, it would paradoxically mean stripping off a considerable part of Sinology's past, to disentangle fictions of Otherness from all sorts of other (beneficial or harmful) fictions of China, and to keep guard against the surreptitious ways in which the Other constantly threatens to encroach on sinological arguments. This would free China from its questionable quality as the great Other of Europe (as ironically, Africa or India have been considered to be the great Other of Europe) and open a vista for a more

appropriate future understanding of China in Sinology and in Chinese studies. The postcolonial project of provincializing Europe should be followed through and also extended to the fiction-abused Others of Europe, by turning that non-fictive and name-giving part of the fiction that intervenes and disturbs its status as mere Otherness into a province itself. The China of Sinology must be provincialized, too. All of this requires us to learn much more about the sorts and variety of fictions involved in talk about social concepts. There might be China-specific features of such talk. But it is to be expected that there are also many more general features, so that one could profit from cross-examining the uses of fiction in global terms, looking at Latin American studies and European Studies as much as at Japanology or for that matter Sumerology.

## Political Philosophy and the China of Sinology

Let us again take up the example of political philosophy and examine the ways in which the China of Sinology is currently being related to it in various strands of research and academic endeavors.

In China, political philosophy of course exists as an academic discipline, pursued in teaching and in research. Habermas has his exegetes. Rawls is being critically investigated and innovatively developed. The amount of translations in political philosophy available in the bookstores of Beijing and throughout the country is nothing short of impressive and marks a telling imbalance. The shelves in these bookstores feature not only the canonical works, but also more recent contributions like Philip Pettit's *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, which for example still awaits a translation into German. There are many practical and political – but it cannot be ignored, also lingering philosophical reasons – why the imbalance continues and why little notice is taken of the huge translational efforts.

There is also a strand of literature published in China that runs under the label of "Chinese political philosophy". This includes texts from antiquity as much as imperial, republican and communist China, but more recently it has also come to stand for an undertaking that centers on texts or a tradition that is understood as decidedly "Chinese" (often synonymous with "Confucian"), a category that is given shape in mediating dialogue or in conscious contrast with, say, Habermas and Rawls, or other presumably "non-Chinese" texts and traditions. It is easy enough to detect the practical and political agendas that potentially play into the philosophical motivation to pursue such an undertaking. In any case, in this way new topics or new perspectives on old topics are introduced, which might result in questions such as whether some version of Confucian self-cultivation can serve as the normative basis for a viable political philosophy,

and to what extent it could achieve and guarantee the function that an overlapping consensus plays in Rawls in the face of an increasing pluralism of comprehensive worldviews in China. Is self-cultivation an alternative to the concept of liberty or rather a variant thereof? Currently, there are interesting debates in Chinese political philosophy on topics such as meritocracy and perfectionism, in which we encounter, for instance, arguments for a virtue ethics (in mediating dialogue) as well as for role ethics (in conscious contrast).

Speaking of political philosophy with regard to the China of Sinology, one should of course also take into account the CCP and its theoretical activities, while the continuing presence of Hong Kong and Taiwan and the long stretches of Chinese history before the PRC affirm that the China of Sinology is much broader in scope than a narrow focus on the current political power would suggest. With regard to the CCP, there are evident sociological and ideological-critical aspects of political philosophy to be researched. But the matter should not be restricted to the business of China observers. When influential circles inside and outside of the Party come together to discuss Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss or when Chinese intellectuals debate over Tocqueville's *L'ancien régime et la Révolution* and its thesis that revolutions do not happen when the masses are weak but when their lot is improving, then this is surely also interesting in terms of the reception of these works as much as of the philosophical messages attributed to them.

Also closely linked to politics, but working at a different level of analysis, is a political philosophy that focuses on the local and urban experiments and reforms in the PRC. There are some fascinating cases that have already been taken up by the international academic community. One of this is the Zeguo experiment in the city of Wenling, Zhejiang province, where a procedure called "deliberative polling" was used to decide on the entire budget for infrastructure projects. 276 households were chosen by lot, resulting in a representative sample, to send someone to participate in a day-long "deliberation" on a list of proposed infrastructure projects, alternating between moderated small-group discussions and plenary sessions where competing experts answered their questions. In the end, a secret poll led to a ranking of the projects, which was then passed on to the local People's Congress, which had in advance declared that the chosen list of projects would be adopted. This experiment raises a set of questions falling clearly into the domain of political philosophy, such as whether the use of the term "deliberation" is warranted, whether the sample amounts to a token of civil society or rather is its substitute, and to what extent deliberative polling as practiced in Zeguo can rightly be called an exercise in "democracy". To spin this a bit further, if some of these questions can be answered in the positive, one may venture into the procedure's potential in the context of Switzerland or the European Union.



These are merely some of the avenues in the specific realm of political philosophy that research could take with regard to the China of Sinology without having to rely on China as the fiction of the Other. Fictions of China still play a huge role in all of these approaches. Vaihinger's work can help us differentiate some of them, e.g. "abstractive fictions", in which a series of characteristics is provisionally but purposely ignored while only the most important characteristics are taken into account, or "schematic fictions", which rather than ignoring some characteristics, aim at capturing the bones of a certain reality. Each of these reductions of "the always excessive entanglement of facts", as Vaihinger puts it, proceeds very differently. There are two different dangers with these sorts of fictions, which it seems difficult to circumvent. One is the danger that the fictive character is forgotten and that the assertions turn into hypotheses, that is assertions that possibly could coincide with the facts. The other danger is that the fictive part in these reductions comes to prevail over the non-fictive anchor points and one ultimately arrives at a pure fiction, without referent, at the very doorsteps of a fiction of the Other. The danger is visible, for instance, in He Baogang's writings on the Zeguo experiment and his shift from initially universalist aspirations to claiming essentially different Western and Chinese forms of "deliberation".<sup>18</sup>

## Towards Chinese Global Studies?

The value of a divided image of a China here and a Europe there is today no longer taken for granted. Without further specification of what is meant by "China" and "Europe", it has become a questionable fiction. How should Europe or China be researched today? At the beginning of this paper, I touched lightly on recent developments in European Studies and advocated the new concept of European Global Studies. In conclusion, I should like to return to this programmatic label, about which much more could and should be said, but instead I should like to extend my reflections to Sinology and Chinese Studies, or, more precisely, into the possibility of Chinese Global Studies.

A rough-and-ready answer to what European Global Studies is about points towards the fact that Europe can no longer be researched by simply concentrating on Europe, or worse, the European Union. Europe can be researched in Asia, from Asia, interlaced with Asia, and the same is true for North America and Africa, but also with regard to different and further units and levels of analysis. The point is to opt for a relational approach to social concepts such as

<sup>18</sup> He Baogang: *Deliberative Culture and Politics: The Persistence of Authoritarian Deliberation in China*, in: *Political Theory* 42 (2014) 1, 58–81, and He Baogang: *Reconciling Deliberation and Representation. Chinese Challenges to Deliberative Democracy*, in: *Representation* 51 (2015) 1, 35–50.

Europe or China. Still, I want to end by adding more complexity to this approach beyond the rough-and-ready answer by turning to a famous poem by Su Shi 蘇軾, the famous 11<sup>th</sup> century Chinese poet.

Su Shi was of course a figure somewhere between poetry and politics and as such almost doubly predestined to come up with "fictions for practical ends." In his famous inscription on the walls of the Xilin-Temple – one can easily substitute China or Europe for Mount Lu – he writes:

横看成岭侧成峰，远近高低各不同。  
不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中。

Viewed horizontally a range; a cliff from the side,  
It differs as we move high or low, or far or nearby.  
We do not know the true face of Mount Lu,  
Because we are all ourselves inside.<sup>19</sup>

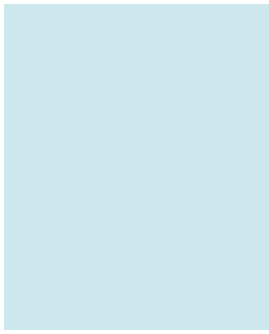
At first glance, the poem could be read as a recommendation for an outsider view, for instance, for a view on China from beyond China. So it could say simply that only from the outside, if one is not inside one's chosen object of inquiry, true understanding is possible. But this is probably not what Su Shi wanted to convey. And this is for the better. The poem speaks much more directly to the programmatic behind European or Chinese Global Studies, and it could be profitably compared and contrasted with Hans Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As If*. For Su Shi – and this is how Wolfgang Kubin describes it – "the human mind is the master of the real, it produces things and their order out of itself. It can do this since it is part of the said structure."<sup>20</sup> Reality here refers to the reality of appearances, of fictive appearances as a person perceives them. Su Shi is a sort of nominalist and speaks out for perspectivism. The appearance, and with it only seemingly the knowledge of Mount Lu, changes according to the perspective of the observer. Hence, it seems – this is also how Zhang Longxi puts it – as if only a continuing change of location and therefore of perspective and a retraction of an absolute view could gradually if inconclusively make the object of inquiry accessible. The poem would problematize the very possibility of a view from elsewhere, since one is always firmly locked in the midst of one's object of inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Zhang Longxi: *From Comparison to World Literature*, Albany 2015, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Kubin: *Die chinesische Gedichtkunst. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende der Kaiserzeit*. München 2002, 269.

<sup>21</sup> Kubin, *Die chinesische Gedichtkunst* (2002), 83–85.

A view from elsewhere is not easy to capture in any direct fashion. Perhaps Su Shi's poem refers to a detour, without final access to be sure, but a detour that has to be pursued over and again. This is not to say that it has to lead to a sort of Buddhist emptiness, as Su Shi saw it. For him, the point was perhaps that Mount Lu is only known by one who succeeds in absorbing Mount Lu into one's own emptiness. By practicing a comprehensive plurality of perspectives, the own body eventually disappears from the landscape and the self is freed from the outer appearances of things. On such a reading, the poem would rather gesture at a final independence from any perspective, a no-view or a view from nowhere, and thereby true knowledge would be made possible. This final goal, however, is avowedly not the goal of European Global Studies and should not be the one of a future Chinese Global Studies, not even in terms of beneficial fiction. The view from outside with a concurrent problematization from the inside and a problematization of what is taken as the inside and the outside is difficult enough and important enough. For it seems that in matters concerning a view on China and Europe, however inconclusive and however restricted by perspective, we should at any moment prefer to have one than to wander around in self-inflicted blindness.



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