

Land of Wonders – Land of Monsters

The image of China – Past (in Europe) and Present (in Germany)¹

Karl-Heinz Pohl, Trier

A history of the image of China in Europe is also a history of the encounter between Europe and China: the nature of the encounter – friendly or unfriendly – determines the image of each other: positive or negative. However, the image is also determined indirectly – above all by one's own cultural desires and fears. Thus, in the following, a fluctuation of the image of China from antiquity to the present will become clear, namely an ambivalence between an ideal world assumed in China (everything is better – a land of miracles) and a terrible world also seen there (a land of monsters and inhumanity). The latter view of China, in particular, seems to be firmly entrenched for decades till the present. Another constant is that China has always been a counter-world to Europe and has thus retained the aura of the "mystery of the East" to this day – which has also made China the epitome of incomprehensibility.

1. From indirect knowledge in antiquity to first direct contacts with China in Mongol times

In ancient times, there was no direct contact between China and Athens or Rome. However, due to indirect trade between Europe and Asia, people had a name for the distant but unknown land: in Hellenistic Greece, the Chinese were called *Sinai* (probably derived from the name of the first united dynasty of the Qin). Word of it reached the Greeks via maritime trade. The Romans, on the other hand, knew about the Chinese through intra-Asian land trade on the Silk Road. They named China after a product they imported and highly valued: *Serica*, and the people *Seres* – the "silk people" (*sericum* = silk; possibly derived from the Chinese expression for silk; today's pronunciation: *si*). For the Romans, silk was a luxury product that had its price: a real one (it was weighed in gold) and a moral one: The garments made of silk for Roman women obviously revealed more than they concealed. Wearing silk thus became a manifestation of social decadence in Rome, and so it is not surprising that the Senate issued a ban against wearing silk in 16 AD. However, this did not mean any damage to the image of the Seres. The silk, which was still densely fibrillated in China, was only frayed and made into transparent gauze in Rome. Rather, the Seres were considered morally exemplary – an idealisation (with a hoped-for exemplary-didactic effect), as we know from Tacitus with regard to the Germanic tribes.

The first direct contacts between Europe and Inner Asia were made by two friars (Franciscan): John Plano Carpini (1185-1252) and William of Rubruk (1220- ca.1275), who were sent by the Pope and the French King respectively to achieve a political rapprochement with the Mongols against the background of the Mongol invasion of Europe (Genghis Khan died in 1227) and the Islam threat. They arrived in the Mongol capital (Karakorum) in the

¹ This is an updated version of an article that first appeared in German: "Land der Wunder – Land der Monster: Unser Chinabild in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart", *minima sinica* 32 (2020), p. 13-42.

middle of the 13th century. Through their reports from the threshold of China, and on the eve of the establishment of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), China now acquired a dimension of reality – instead of just myth or legend. But the perception still remained much distorted, i.e. it was primarily determined by the religious perspective of the two Franciscans. During this period, a new name for China emerged that bears a relationship to historical developments: Cathay. It refers to a nomadic tribe called Khitai, which ruled northern China long before the Mongols came to power and established the Khitan dynasty (Chinese: Liao dynasty, 907-1125). William of Rubruk was the first to suggest that the land of Cathay must be the land of the Seres. In any case, Rubruk reports the use of paper money in China, which was a novelty for Europe at the time. He also writes that the Chinese used a brush to write, like painters, and that in a picture they would draw several "letters" that signify a word.

Rubruk and Carpini's perspective, however, remained determined by their religion: They were primarily concerned with converting the Mongols who adhered to "idolatry." Rubruk is said to have put on his chasuble when he met the great Khans, his companion swung an incense burner and both are said to have sung "*Salve Regina*" by stepping into the yurts; for the ladies he is said to have left an illustrated book of Psalms as a gift...² Thus, a lasting pattern of intercultural encounter can already be noted here: The perception of the other is distorted by an ethnocentric attitude, namely determined by the ideological framework (religion, politics) of the observer. Thus, the foreigner is judged according to one's own ideals, and one's own cultural views are transferred to the foreigner. As we will see, this pattern has persisted in intercultural encounters between China and Europe until today.

During the Mongol period, the legendary journeys of Marco Polo and his father to China are said to have taken place (between 1260-1295). They were to "discover" China (or the land of "Cathay") for Europeans in the 13th century. Marco Polo was a merchant, not a religious representative, so his perspective on China was quite different from Rubruk and Carpini: everything there was wonderful and many times better and greater than in his native Venice. His influential report of this "counter-world" of Europe circulated under various titles that conveyed his assessment already in the headings: "Book of the Wonders of the World", but also "Il Milione" – the latter a title that gave its author his nickname as a bragger. His account, which he did not write himself, but told to a fellow prisoner during the time of his own imprisonment in a war between Venice and Genoa (Rustichello of Pisa, who recorded it), appeared before the invention of printing (1452) and circulated in many different manuscripts and versions. As influential as his account was at the time – it is said to have been authoritative reading for Christopher Columbus, who tried to calculate the length of the voyage to India on the basis of Marco Polo's book – it was controversial for some time among researchers, for his description lacks any mention of such typical Chinese features such as writing, chopsticks, the Great Wall of China, women's bound feet, etc. Nor is there any indication anywhere in the Chinese historical records that he was – as he claims – in the service of the ruler Kublai Khan.³ Other events, however, such as the circumstances and companions of his journey home, are historically attested; and finally, the Sinologist Hans Ulrich Vogel from Tübingen has impressively shown that his precise knowledge of the salt

² Sykes 1938.

³ Sykes 1938.

trade and much more almost certainly indicate that Marco Polo experienced these things first-hand.⁴

After Marco Polo's sensational account of China, other travelogues appeared which, however, already hint at the reversal of the image of China, such as the extremely popular folk book "The Travels of the Knight Jean de Mandeville" (written 1357-71), which describes in first person legendary journeys to the Holy Land and Cathay. Strange one-legged or headless monsters appear in the illustrations, so that the earlier fairy-tale land begins to take on ghostly features, as it were.

All in all, however, a rather positive image of China was conveyed to Europe over several centuries, with the 15th century marking the change from the age of miracles and legends to the age of discoveries. This is accompanied by a development from fantasy to reality, from fiction to fact. In 1494, after the discovery of America, Pope Alexander VI divided the world into two halves, one belonging to Spain (west) and the other to Portugal (east) (Treaty of Tordesillas). In this era of colonisation, not only were the hitherto unknown parts of the world subjugated by the Europeans, but the colonised peoples underwent Christianisation – often in a militant manner. In the wake of this development, the Portuguese penetrated first as far as India (Goa) and later as far as China, where they founded a settlement in Macao in 1557 without a treaty, but with the acquiescence of the Chinese authorities. Due to their – from the Chinese point of view – "uncivilised" appearance, the Chinese at the time constructed an "image of Europe", which we encounter now and then into the 20th century, namely of "devils coming across the ocean" (*yang guizi*).

2 The Jesuit "China understanders" and the admired land of high morals

An enlightened moment in this era of colonialism was the Jesuit mission in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Jesuits pursued missionary interests, but they were educated and interested also and especially in spiritual questions. In this respect, they endeavoured – above all Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) – to understand the spiritual foundations of China for the purpose of the Christian mission, whereby they were greatly taken with the moral sophistication of the officials educated in Confucian thought. They were also impressed by the fact that the country was not ruled by an aristocracy of birth and clergy, but by a civil service that came to office through universal examinations without regard to birth. The Chinese emperor seemed to them like an enlightened monarch – a philosopher-king who, through his officials, guaranteed a harmonious, civilised and non-belligerent polity. In addition to their interest in spiritual subjects, the Jesuits were adept in many practical-technological areas; thus they knew how to cast cannons, knew something about cartography and mastered the difficult mathematical calculations involved in recording astronomical data and compiling a calendar. With this knowledge, they were highly esteemed at the Chinese court – where astronomical events as omens were of special importance and the ceremonial of the emperor (as an expression of the unity of the cosmos and the human world) had to strictly adhere to the calendrical sequence of days and seasons. There, the Jesuits even reached the highest offices. Besides Matteo Ricci, the German Adam Schall von Bell (1592-1666) stands out, who

⁴ Vogel 2012.

was even promoted to Official of the First Rank by the first emperor of the Qing Dynasty. Finally, as far as the method of missionary work is concerned, the Jesuits did not advocate the forced Christianisation of the indigenous population (as was the case with South America, for example), but adaptation ("Accommodation") to Chinese conditions, including the toleration of Chinese customs such as the cult of Confucius and ancestors. However, it should also be noted that although they wanted to convert the Chinese, they were, as it were, also "converted" in reverse by the Confucian-cultivated Chinese.

It is interesting that some European thinkers of the Enlightenment (e.g. Leibniz and Voltaire) were highly influenced by the Jesuits' image of China, so that China served them as a positive foreign image for their critique of the church, clergy and nobility that ruled European countries at the time. It proved to them that the highest morality was also possible without biblical tradition and divine revelation. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who was in close correspondence with Jesuits in China, even recommended that one should not only send Christian missionaries to the Chinese, but also receive their missionaries in Europe, where they could contribute to the spread of a virtuous and common good-oriented way of life, in view of an unprecedented "moral decay" that he was not alone in deploring. So he wrote in his book *Novissima Sinica (The Latest on China, 1699)*:

At any rate, the situation of our conditions here, in view of the moral decay which is growing immeasurably, seems to me to be such that it seems almost necessary that missionaries of the Chinese should be sent to us, who could teach us the application and practice of a natural theology, in the same way as we send people to teach them revealed theology. I therefore believe that if a wise man had been chosen as an arbiter not of the beauty of goddesses but of the excellence of nations, he would give the golden apple to the Chinese if we did not surpass them in precisely one respect, which admittedly lies beyond human possibility, namely through the divine gift of the Christian religion.⁵

Hence, in Leibniz's writings we first encounter the idea of the equality of cultures, as China was for him "an empire that adorns the opposite end of the earth, as it were, like a Europe of the East". With astonishing foresight, Leibniz wrote in a letter to Adam A. Kochanski in 1691: "In the meantime the Chinese will learn our sciences, they will bring over to themselves all those things in which alone (if one excludes religion) we Europeans were superior."⁶ In 1687, the French Jesuit priest Phillipe Couplet (1623-1693) produced the first translation of the Confucian classics of Confucianism into Latin (*Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*)⁷, thus strongly influencing not only Leibniz but also his student Christian Wolff. The latter became famous for his "Speech on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese" at the University of Halle in 1721, in which he spoke of the equivalence of Confucian and Christian thought. However, this was too revolutionary for the time, and so he was expelled from the university town and banished from Prussia. Voltaire (1694-1778), finally, commented on the problematic basic pattern of intercultural encounter (mentioned in connection with Wilhelm von Rubruk's journey to the Mongols), namely the clouding of our perception of the foreign

⁵ Leibniz 2010, 19.

⁶ Leibniz 2010, 92.

⁷ Heyndrickx 1990.

by our own ideological sensitivities, as follows: "The great misunderstanding over Chinese rites sprang from our judging their practices in light of ours: we carry the prejudices that spring from our contentious nature to the ends of the world."⁸ It is an insight that, as we shall see, also has relevance for today's encounter with China.

Sensational for the time were also reports that the Chinese emperor took up the plough to make a furrow once a year at the earth sacrifice. In the wake of these news reports, there were pictures of this remarkable event, such as by Bernhard Rhode; European kings also soon had themselves depicted behind the plough. Ambivalent about this lofty image was, at best, the lack of warlike orientation and peace-loving attitude of Chinese scholar-officials. Thus the French Jesuit Louis Daniel Le Comte (1696) wrote warningly: "Sino-Chinese policy, by this discipline [love of peace], prevents much inward unrest; but at the same time it puts the people in danger of foreign wars, which are even more dangerous."⁹ This assessment was confirmed by reality only 150 years later in the Opium Wars.

In the wake of the Jesuits' reports – they were, as it were, the early "China understanders," and still in the positive sense of the word – a number of influential works on China appeared in Europe, such as Athanasius Kircher's documentation with the long title *China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis [...] illustrata* (1667) and Jean Baptist du Halde's *Description de la Chine* (ca. 1730). The authors of these richly illustrated books, which conveyed an image of China of high morality, rational order and "enlightened monarchy" – in short, of a utopia ruled by enlightened scholar-officials – were also Jesuits, but those who did not know China from their own experience, but relied entirely on the reports of their colleagues working in the mission. The "China Fever" of the time was also reflected in the artistic style of the Rococo period, which was largely influenced by "Chinoiserie." Tea pavilions and porcelain with idyllic scenes of China were now commonplace at European royal courts (as, for example, in the palace gardens of Sanssouci in Potsdam).

For large parts of the Church, however, the Jesuits' way of missionising, namely adapted to Chinese conditions, was a nuisance. The conflict erupted in the so-called Rites Controversy, which was hotly and controversially debated throughout Europe at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century. The Vatican was intransigent towards the Jesuits, who were interculturally open-minded and willing to make concessions to Chinese customs. The Chinese emperor, who was also sympathetic to the Jesuits, reacted to this intervention in his empire without further ado by expelling the missionaries (1721). Only a few, who did excellent service as court astronomers, were allowed to stay.

3. From Sinophilia to Sinophobia – or from "China understanders" to China bashers

The termination of the Jesuit mission due to the rite controversy led to a considerable deterioration of the image of China in Europe. After the final end of the Jesuit mission through the dissolution of the Jesuit Order (1773), the image of China was now determined by seafaring merchants whose more superficial knowledge of the country and its people was

⁸ Spence 1990, 4.

⁹ Le Comte 1699, II, 90-91.

limited to contacts in ports. This marked the beginning of a phase of China bashing. The merchants interpreted the ritualised and face-saving polite behaviour of the Chinese as a sign of dishonesty and insidiousness. Reports of cruel legal practices (in the case of maritime accidents) and other misunderstandings, which were widely publicised in Europe, contributed to an increasingly negative image of China. An example of this is the book by the British navigator George Anson (1697-1762) *Voyage around the World* (1741), which states:

Indeed, thus much may undoubtedly be asserted, that in artifice, falsehood, and an attachment to all kinds of lucre many of the Chinese are difficult to be paralleled by any other people.¹⁰

Around the same time, the English author Daniel Defoe had his famous novel hero Robinson Crusoe stop-over in China, among other places, on his way back from his island to England in the second part of his classic work for young people, *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1731). Robinson describes China as "a land of superstition and idolatry, of barbarism, primitiveness and childish ignorance, of filth, of the most abject poverty, and of a downright ridiculous military system that falls short of European standards."¹¹ Thus, at every turn, the novel's hero exposes the admiring image of China of the Jesuit-influenced early Enlightenment as a "mirage" – such as the supposedly magnificent cities, which he sees only as a teeming mass anticipating the blue ants of the Mao era. According to Robinson's impressions, the learning of the Chinese is pure superstition, their religion idolatry, their moral teachings mere externality, and their mandarins are only eager for their own enrichment. One should therefore wonder why China has caused such a stir in Europe, as the Chinese are only a "contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant sordid slaves, subjected to a government qualified only to rule such a people."¹² Defoe speaks of the cultural arrogance of the Europeans, which was to replace the open-mindedness and tolerance of the early Enlightenment as an attitude from the 18th century onwards. It should be emphasised that the change in the image of China was not due to a change in conditions in China itself, but to massive changes in Europe: the rise of European nations as central powers of imperialism and colonialism, as well as political and industrial revolutions.

Thus, after the French Revolution and with the proclamation of the Republic, the model of an "enlightened monarchy" had become, as it were, the shopkeeper of history, and China was seen – in the face of the industrial revolution taking off in Europe – as hopelessly outdated, even incapable of development. This negative image was "scientifically" underpinned by correspondingly pejorative comparisons by Hegel and Marx, who saw China as an "oriental despotism." Moreover, instead of political progress, only ridiculous backwardness was observed there. Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744-1803) image of China as an "embalmed mummy" that would disintegrate at the slightest touch of fresh air became popular throughout Europe. And for Hegel, the most influential German philosopher of the 19th century, China, as a land of eternal stagnation, had no part in world history. His comments on China can hardly be surpassed in terms of cultural arrogance.¹³ For him,

¹⁰ Dawson 1967, 193f. Anson, 359

¹¹ Berger 1990, 91.

¹² Defoe 1927, 153.

¹³ Hsia 1985, 141-188.

Chinese philosophy is "only a provisional thing, of which we speak only in order to give an account of why we do not occupy ourselves with it more extensively, and in what relation it stands to thought, to true philosophy."¹⁴ Thus, "everything that has to do with spirit [...] is foreign to the Chinese" ...¹⁵ And Karl Marx, finally, welcomed the first Opium War (which England started in 1839 in order to be able to continue to distribute the opium extracted in the British colony of India on a large scale in China and thus to improve the negative English trade balance with China) because thereby "the barbaric hermetic closure from the civilised world [...] was broken": China finally became, in Hegel's sense, part of world history, and Marx added – in a telling "historical-philosophical" way, explaining the opium addiction caused by the British – "It seems as if history had to make this whole people drunk before it could rouse them from their inherited stupor."¹⁶

However, it is also interesting to note that some influential figures underwent a change in their image of China. First and foremost, Goethe, who initially, namely in his early phase of *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), fought against the rational, enlightened world view and the frills of the Rococo that went hand in hand with Chinoiserie, but in his late phase, in which he embraced the idea of a "world literature" and wrote the "Chinese-German Seasons and Days", he arrived at an extraordinarily positive image of China. Even Herder was to revise his image of the "embalmed mummy" in his old age. And finally, the change can be observed most impressively in Karl May's (1842-1912) books, the German writer with the highest book circulation of all time. In his *Der blaurote Methusalem. Eine lustige Studentenfahrt nach China* (1892 – The blue-red Methuselah. A joyful Journey to China), China is still portrayed as a country of ridiculous backwardness, but in his book *Und Friede auf Erden!* (1904 – *And Peace on Earth*), published twelve years later, we are confronted with a diametrically opposed, extremely positive image of China. In a certain sense, Karl May was also writing against a *zeitgeist* with the latter work. After all, the two Opium Wars that England (later alongside France) fought with China had already contributed significantly to creating a mood in Europe against the danger allegedly emanating from China; the image of China in Germany, and Europe in general, reached its nadir with the Boxer Rebellion (1900). China was now perceived as a threat to Western civilisation, as a "Yellow Peril." In his late work, Karl May clearly took a stand against the jingoistic enthusiasm for Kaiser Wilhelm's imperialist and colonialist policies, especially in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. Thus, with his infamous "Hun Speech", delivered in front of soldiers sent to put down the uprising, the German emperor branded himself the saviour of the Christian West:

Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Etzel [Attila] made a name for themselves that still makes them appear formidable in tradition, so may the name of Germany become known in China in such a way that never again will a Chinese dare to look at a German even askance.¹⁷

The German emperor's arrogance was not to last long, for in the First World War his dream of a great colonial empire like that possessed by the English was shattered. This was what he

¹⁴ Hegel 1964-74, 151.

¹⁵ Hsia 1985, 188.

¹⁶ Hsia 1985, 244-45.

¹⁷ Leutner 2007, 188.

had been striving for even shortly before the Boxer Rebellion, namely in 1897, when he used the murder of two German missionaries (Kaiser Wilhelm: "A gift from heaven!") to send gunboats to China and acquire a colony – Tsingtao (Qingdao) – for the German Empire, saying at the time: "Hundreds of thousands of German merchants will cheer in the knowledge that at last the German Empire has found a firm foothold in Asia."¹⁸

4. Positive images of China in the first half of the 20th century

After the catastrophe of the First World War, the image of China became positive again. In view of the collective suicide of European civilisation, there were not only culturally pessimistic voices such as those of Oswald Spengler, who predicted the downfall of the Occident; in a fundamental questioning of European cultural arrogance, many German poets and thinkers (Hesse, Klafund, later also Brecht) saw the mysterious "*Tao*" (*Dao*) of the Chinese as the salvation of Europe, which was threatened by its own civilisational progress. A *Tao* fever broke out in Germany. In his 1919 pamphlet "Hör es Deutscher!" (Listen, German!), the poet Klafund (1890-1928) called on the defeated of the World War to live according to the "Holy Spirit of the *Tao*" and to "become the Chinese of Europe."¹⁹ Now the positive image of China conveyed by the Jesuits was taken up again, although the attention was not so much on the society-oriented Confucian tradition but on the timeless Taoist wisdom. Inspired by Richard Wilhelm's translation work, philosophers and psychologists also became aware of China: Graf v. Keyserling, C.G. Jung, Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger.

Irony of history, however: after the First World War, at the time when the *Tao* fever was reaching its first peak in Germany, the May 4th Movement of 1919 broke out in China, which is considered the beginning of Chinese modernity, namely as a movement against classical Chinese culture with its demand for "total westernisation." In this period, Lu Xun (1881-1936), the most famous writer of early Chinese modernism, coined the figure of Ah Q ("The True Story of Ah Q") – a despicable figure who always knows how to reinterpret his humiliations and defeats into psychological victories – a self-image of the Chinese that largely corresponded to the European image of China as ridiculously backward and the "sick man of Asia."

The *Tao* fever was preceded by an extremely positive reception of Chinese poetry, albeit in an unprecedentedly alienated form – such as the adaptation of poems by the famous Tang poet "Li T'ai-po" (Li Bai, 699-752) and others in Gustav Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" (The Song of the Earth) of 1909. Mahler's work was primarily based on versions from Hans Bethge's collection *Die chinesische Flöte* (1907 – The Chinese Flute). However, these rewrites are so disfigured that they have little in common with the originals (some of which were therefore difficult to track down). This is a cultural and *zeitgeist* conditioned appropriation of Tang poetry, which is aesthetically completely different (with features such as ego-lessness, restraint regarding direct expression of feeling, simplicity of language, strictness of form, unity of scenery and feeling), into the sometimes turgid, emotional and ego-obsessed mode of expression and *fin de siècle* mood of the epoch between late Romanticism and German

¹⁸ Fesser 1997.

¹⁹ Bauer 1984; Fang 1992, 279ff.

Expressionism. It is only Gustav Mahler's grandiose music and reinterpretation that justifies this appropriation in the form of a brilliant creative misunderstanding.

The image of China in exoticism in the 1920s with its unreal worlds and operetta-like clichés, for example in Franz Lehár's operetta *Land des Lächelns* (1923 – Land of Smiles) or Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* (1926), also corresponds to this misunderstanding. In the latter, the emperor's mandarins are called Ping, Pang and Pong, which today reminds one more of Donald Duck comic books than of China. After the People's Republic of China had banned the performance of this opera for a long time, as it was felt that this opera did not portray China in a favourable light (the title character is a cruel Chinese princess who has her suitors beheaded if they cannot solve the riddles she sets them, until a hero changes her mind through love), a performance of *Turandot* has by now (1998) even been permitted against the backdrop of the Forbidden City (with Zhang Yimou as director) and filmed.

Franz Lehár's operetta *Land of Smiles*, on the other hand, is set in the last days of the Manchu dynasty and was one of the most successful operettas of its time, also internationally (it is about the unhappy love between a Chinese prince and a Viennese woman). At the end of the probably most famous aria from it, "Immer nur lächeln, immer vergnügt" ("Always smile, always happy"), it says significantly: "...but never show your true face" ("doch niemals zeigen sein wahres Gesicht"), whereby – through the back door, as it were – insidiousness enters the actually positive image of China of that epoch.

While the operetta-like cliché was still a mixture of sinophilia and exoticism, the song line just quoted indicates a change in the image of China, namely to a mixture of sinophobia and exoticism, exemplified in the extremely popular novels about the "insidious Dr. Fu Manchu" by the Englishman Sax Rohmer (actually: Arthur Henry Ward, 1893-1959). With his long, drooping, thin moustache as his trademark, and wearing traditional Chinese garb and a Chinese hat, Dr. Fu Manchu appears as "the Chinese devil" who strives for world domination. However, this quest is then repeatedly stopped by a valiant Scotland Yard officer. The thirteen novels were published from 1913 until Rohmer's death in 1959 (the equally popular films were made from 1929 to 1980) and evoke the "Yellow Peril" that had been manifest since the Opium Wars and the Boxer Rebellion. However, they also led to political controversy. The Chinese government, for example, protested against this kind of national denigration in the 1930s and 40s (when the Republic of China was allied with the USA); even the Japanese objected to a disparaging portrayal of Asian Americans brought about by the films in the 1970s.²⁰

The Nazi regime originally maintained positive relations with the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek, who was quite attracted to European fascism. However, the moment Hitler's Germany allied itself with Japan – which waged a merciless war against China on Chinese soil during World War II – China no longer played a role in Germany. This was different in America, where, on the one hand, Edgar Snow's bestseller *Red Star Over China* (1937) glorified the communist movement under Mao Zedong, and, on the other, a positive image of China was created by the works of Lin Yutang (*My Country and My People; The Importance Living*) and the Nobel Prize winner in literature Pearl S. Buck (*The Good Earth*).

²⁰ Frayling 2014.

This tendency was reinforced, at least during the Second World War, by the enmity with Japan after Pearl Harbor.

5. From Tao to Mao – and back and forth: The ups and downs of the image of China from the 1950s to the present day.

After the Second World War, the image of China, now shaped by the Korean War (1950-1953) and the East-West antagonism (and the accompanying communist phobia), initially went downhill again. Mixed in with this was the idea of a mass of "blue ants" brought into line under Mao, reminiscent of the "Oriental Despotism" and the "Yellow Peril." This was reinforced by Mao's rhetoric of the "victory of the east wind over the west wind."

For the student movement of the 1960s, on the other hand, cultural revolutionary China was the real-life utopia of a classless society. Whereas, at the beginning of the 20th century, interest was still focused on the *Tao*, the *zeitgeist* inspired by the student revolt now turned with power to Mao. This tendency was "philosophically" underpinned by the writings of authoritative French intellectuals such as Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who saw Mao's China as the Promised Land. Thus, for a long time, Mao and *Tao* remained almost the only points of reference for the image of China in the West – with the corresponding consequences of a cut-out perspective on China for the European intelligentsia. The fact that the country threatened to sink into chaos during the Cultural Revolution was, strangely enough, hardly noticed by the West at the time.

Six years after the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, on the contrary, Nixon's visit to China in 1972 conveyed an image of Mao Zedong as an "enlightened ruler", reminiscent of the China images of the Enlightenment. In contrast, Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent fall of the "Gang of Four" caused perplexity and frustration among the many Mao supporters (especially students). If the Cultural Revolution was already not understood, the events of 1976 again conjured up the idea of a "secret of the East." It was to take a few years for the reform phase that began in China and the accompanying departure from Maoist politics to be accepted among its followers in the Western world.

The ambivalence of the images of China at the time is vividly conveyed, not without a self-ironic wink, in the beginning of Günter Grass's book *Kopfgeburten oder die Deutschen sterben aus* (1980 – Headbirths, or The Germans are Dying Out):

Walking between cyclists who repeat themselves endlessly in posture and dress, in the middle of the cyclist jungle, in Shanghai, the city where eleven out of nine hundred and fifty million Chinese live, strangers in the masses, we were suddenly struck by an inversion as speculation: in the future, the world would have to reckon with nine hundred and fifty million Germans, while the Chinese people, according to the count of Germans living in two states, would have to be numbered with just under eighty million Chinese. [...] We were frightened in the midst of the cycling people. Can one make this up? Is it possible to imagine it? Is this world imaginable: populated by nine hundred and fifty million Germans who, with a strictly observed growth rate of only 1.2%, nevertheless grow to over one billion and two hundred

million Germans by the year 2000? Would the world be able to cope with that? Wouldn't the world have to fight off (but how?) this number? Or could the world tolerate as many Germans (Saxons and Swabians included) as it currently tolerates over nine hundred and fifty million Chinese?

As is well known, Günter Grass's prognosis regarding China's population development has come true in the meantime. And as far as the image of China is concerned, this had also risen again at the beginning of the 1980s due to Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening up. Two aspects should be emphasised here: On the one hand, the decline in politicisation at universities was accompanied by a trend towards the esoteric that was perceptible in society as a whole, so that in the 1980s an enthusiasm for Buddhism, *Tao*, *Taiji*, *Qigong*, *Fengshui*, *Kungfu*, *Zen*, etc., coming from the USA (where this had already begun during the hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s), also took hold of ever wider circles of the population in Europe. China now lost its significance as a "left-wing utopia"; instead, it became (similar to the 1920s) the promised land of those who expected the salvation of the world from the East: Interest thus evolved back again – dialectically, so to speak – from Mao to *Tao*. On the other hand, the economic and touristic opening of China led to an unprecedented China euphoria in Germany, of course also fuelled by the idea of a huge market: the "cheering" of German merchants expected by Kaiser Wilhelm – now in view of "a billion toothbrushes and two billion armpits" – was now clearly audible after a delay of almost 100 years.

This image, which like its positive and negative predecessors was essentially based on wishful thinking or projections, shattered with the violent suppression of the student demonstrations in June 1989. From then on, the image of China remained in the cellar. While Russia's gross domestic product halved during the 1990s and China's doubled during the same period – bringing with it an improvement in human living conditions (in numerical terms) the likes of which had never been seen before anywhere in the world – China became the favoured object of criticism on human rights issues, even though the situation in China in this regard had improved considerably compared to the 1980s.

The tension between politically conditioned perceptions of China in the media and its reality during the past few decades was once summed up by the US author William H. Overholt: For any historian it would remain a mystery why the world outside China failed to appreciate the positive aspects of development within China. The leadership of any Eastern European country would have been praised as brilliant had it implemented one or another of China's achievements of 1994-95; quite the contrary, however, most of China's achievements did not attract any attention in the Western press. As far as the average American could have judged from the media, China had accomplished little more during this period than oppress its people and prepare an attack on Taiwan.²¹

Even if this assessment was made for America, it probably largely corresponds to the image of China in Germany in the 1990s. In the latter, for example, China had a bad press across party lines during the 1990s. On the occasion of the celebrations on 1 October 1999 for the 50th anniversary of the PRC, there was only criticism and malice. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: "This is not a nation celebrating, this is the rulers celebrating themselves." And the

²¹ Overholt 2010.

Standard in Vienna said: "50 years of the PRC are synonymous with 50 years of violence by the CCP against its own people." Nor was there any understanding of Chinese outrage at the bombing of their embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo war in the same year. Meanwhile, the perspective has been added that the country, which is in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom – in a world war for prosperity (Gabor Steingart) – is perceived as a threat to Germany as a business location, because, in Steingart's intellectually simplistic words: "Their rise is our fall." This assessment was echoed in American policy towards China under Donald Trump, particularly after Peter Navarro, the author of *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon – A Global Call to Action* (2011, subsequently made into a film by Martin Sheen), became Trump's Trade Advisor in 2016 – with corresponding political consequences in the bilateral relationship between the two superpowers extending into the Biden era.

Thus, in recent years, China has produced only negative headlines, such as in recent times: "exploitation" of Africa ("hunger" for energy and raw materials); "aggressiveness" and striving for military "hegemony" (e.g. in the South China Sea); trade dispute with the USA; controversy over Huawei (accusation: espionage); "social credit point system" and surveillance; the harsh dealing with Hong Kong protests (security law); treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang; violation of human rights; covering up the outbreak of the Corona epidemic (Corona virus = "China virus" – "Kung flu"); Confucius Institutes as CCP "propaganda institutes" and calls for their closure; China as a new "challenge" to NATO and the EU; portrayal of Xi Jinping as the "new Mao" and would-be "world ruler", etc. pp.

The cover pictures of the most important German magazines have for decades been designed with a correspondingly lurid-suggestive effect – especially in *Spiegel* and *Stern*. As early as 1990 (No. 28), the cover of *Stern* read: "World power China. The hungry giant." The title was illustrated by a Chinese-looking male face holding a globe to his mouth with chopsticks. This motif seems to have stood the test of time, because in 2019 we see a new edition of it in *Focus* (No. 5) (albeit without a face in it). In 1996, the cover of *Stern* read: "China. Reportage from a murderous country". The 2005 *Spiegel* cover (No. 42) read "China. Birth of a world power", illustrated by a fearsome dragon hatching from a globe egg. In 2006, *Spiegel* reports on the cover of an "Attack from the Far East" as well as Gabor Steingart's "World War for Prosperity", illustrated by metallic-looking terracotta warriors who, however, instead of traditional weapons, carry laptops, cars etc. in their hands. Inside, one can read about a "Red China Inc." as a "termite state" and about "modernisation for the purpose of maintaining the CCP's power". In the Olympic year 2008, *Der Spiegel* (No. 15) has the headline "The Lords of the Rings. How China's regime oppresses its people – and betrays the Olympics." The five Olympic rings are depicted in barbed wire. Let's jump to recent times: in 2018, the *Stern* (April) refers to Xi Jinping on the cover as "The Ruler of the World" – a revenant, as it were, of the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu. In the Corona year 2020, the *BILD* newspaper – probably inspired by Donald Trump – presents China with a bill entitled: "What China already owes us now." In the same year (6/Feb.1), *Der Spiegel* publishes a headline about the Corona virus as "Made in China" – and to remind us of the "Yellow Peril," the lettering is printed in bold yellow and illustrated with a Chinese man wearing a gas mask and protective coat. "*Novissima Sinica*" – the "latest from China", as it were – is published by *Der Spiegel* in 2021 (4/Jan.23), again illustrated with a terrifying red dragon opening its mouth with the title: "The triumph of the dragon. How superior is China really to us?"

What conclusion can be drawn from this – only cursory – portrayal of the image of China in the German media in recent times? Three tendencies can be identified:

1. Simplification in the media, reduction to certain topics and confirmation of common prejudices and views.

In 2010, the Heinrich Böll Foundation had already published in a special volume (5) an investigation called *China Reporting in the German Media* (by Carola Richter and Sebastian Gebauer). The study concludes (p. 10):

[...It] emerges from the analysis of all identified contributions on China in 2008 that slightly more than half of these contributions refer to China only in allegorical and stereotyping form. This means that [...] certain obviously socially inherent ideas and clichés about the country are spread without reflection. [...]. All in all, however, we can speak here of an ongoing dissemination of existing stereotypes by the media, which tend to orient themselves to socially anchored symbols and phrases instead of performing their actual task of questioning these images. There is a danger that these stereotypes, most of which are extremely simplified and truncated, will become entrenched in the German public [...].

This result is particularly remarkable because the party "Bündnis 90/Die Grünen" (The Greens), to which the Heinrich Böll Foundation belongs, is by no means known for being China-friendly.

The telecommunications company Huawei, which has since fallen into the clutches of American politics, also did a study on the image of China and Germany in 2012, 2014 and 2016, entitled "Germany and China – Perception and Reality" (in cooperation with the GIGA Institute, the University of Duisburg-Essen and TNS Emnid/Infratest). The 2014 study came to the conclusion that China is perceived in Germany primarily as an economic power. Many Germans are concerned about China's political power and military strength. China's rise was perceived as a threat. The effects of Chinese investments in Germany are predominantly viewed positively. For the vast majority of Germans (84%), German economic relations with China are just as important (57%) or more important (27%) than those with the USA. The best-known Chinese in Germany are Mao Zedong (54%) and – at a considerable distance, but significantly – Ai Weiwei (8%).

Mark Siemons wrote in the *F.A.Z.* (Nov. 17, 2011) about the interest in Ai Weiwei, who is perceived as a dissident, and the lack of interest in China's struggle for its future:

One could argue, not without reason, that the Western public is not particularly interested in the details [of China's struggle for its future] and rather appreciates in Ai Weiwei the symbolic figure who allows it to reduce complexity and still be on the morally and politically right side in any case.

Thus, during this period, one figure advanced to become the favourite of the German media: the Chinese dissident. The singer-songwriter Funny van Dannen commented on this development in a satirical song entitled "Chinese Dissident" ("Chinesischer Dissident"), in which he sings: "I'd like to have a steady pen pal, [...] / He may also be third world, from a country nobody knows, / But most of all, I'd prefer a Chinese dissident [...]."

Finally, the reductionism in the perception of China is also evident in the fluctuation of the reference points Mao and *Tao* that has been pointed out. Mary Erbaugh wrote about the consequences of such a narrowed perception:

When Mao and *Tao* are almost the only [terms] often cited, a universe of art remains closed, invisible and unheard, along with much potentially valuable Chinese theoretical influence.²²

2. Demonization of China

The aforementioned lurid and tendentious layout of the magazines speaks for itself and does not really need any further comment. As the Sinologist Wolfgang Kubin put it: "After the fall of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China is now known as the new evil empire. No country in the world has such a bad press in Germany."²³

China has thus become the new bogeyman of our media. For most, it represents a monster, as it were, so that Rey Chow spoke of the "King Kong syndrome" in 1998 in connection with the takeover of Hong Kong (in 1997): "China – a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism makes it seem necessary for its people to be rescued from the outside."²⁴

During this period, an expression became popular in Germany, "*China Versteher*" ("China understander"), with a decidedly negative connotation, namely in the sense of someone who tries to excuse Chinese human rights violations. In this political environment, it is not surprising that the title of an online article in the influential weekly *DIE ZEIT* (May 2, 2020) on the Corona outbreak in China reads: "China understanders make things worse: In politics and the media, there is a tendency to appease criticism of Beijing. But this harms all those in China who courageously oppose the regime dictate." Whether "China understanders" or "China bashers" make "everything worse" is certainly a matter of debate; however, the subtitle seems to suggest a reversal of the actual situation in order to criticise it, because a tendency in politics and the media to placate criticism of China cannot actually be observed here anywhere.

3. China policy is German domestic policy

Thus, to a certain extent and first and foremost, Germany's China policy has become Germany's domestic policy, for again, a few years ago (2.9.07), *DIE ZEIT* wrote: "Anyone in China [as a politician] who calls for the observance of human rights is regarded as courageous in Germany. Those who don't, as failures." And on the role of the media and politicians in creating a distorted image of China, today's President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier once said (then still as Foreign Minister, *F.A.Z.*, Nov. 23, 2007):

At the moment, we have many here in Germany who are venting their anger towards China, resorting to grand gestures and symbolic actions. This way secures the

²² Erbaugh 2002, 210-11.

²³ Kubin 1998, quoted in Trampedach 2000, 9.

²⁴ Chow 2005, 304ff.

attention of the mass media, connects to common prejudices and confirms existing fears. It is, so to speak, yellow press compatible. And that is not unimportant, especially for politicians. Unfortunately. [...] For the most part, this approach – at best – only contributes something to the portrayal of the problem in Germany. But nothing to the solution in China. I, for one, do not believe that the Chinese reality is guided by a meter for applause of the German press.

So one has to ask whether the China-critical perspective that dominates today is the necessarily correct view of China. One would have to answer the question in the affirmative if one considers the understanding of the media on the part of journalists as a control organ and a primarily critical reporting as essential. Moreover, the negative image of China that is presented only reflects the *zeitgeist* or the political-moral mainstream (so called "North Atlantic values"), valid in this country today. Thus, China's actions in Hong Kong or Xinjiang simply do not correspond to the ideas of a "value-oriented policy." As is often heard, one only criticises the CCP and its misguided policies, but not the Chinese people or China... However, the question could just as well be answered in a negating way, because the negative is also only one possible perspective on China – with a highly selective perception and evaluation of world problems.

At this point, it would be worthwhile to change one's perspective, namely to consider how China is seen from China – and to look at what here is usually not taken into account in reporting about China. The first thing to mention is the increase in prosperity and the fight against poverty over the last 40 years. In this regard, China has achieved astonishing things by lifting 600-700 million people out of abject poverty during this period – an achievement that has also been recognised by the UN and of which China can be justifiably proud. Kishore Mahbubani speaks of the last decades as the "best 30 years" China has ever had in its history.²⁵ Furthermore, the geopolitical rivalry with the USA plays a role, namely that China's rise is perceived there as a challenge to its hegemonic world position²⁶, which has led to unjustifiably restrictive, if not destructive, measures against China's high-tech companies and to an economic and military containment policy. Islamist and separatist terrorism in Xinjiang has also largely been absent from news coverage in Germany, but it is a problem that has become of paramount importance for the Chinese with over 400 deaths from terrorist acts since 2000 in China. Significantly, the US has never recognised the 2014 Kunming attack, which killed 31 people, as an act of terrorism. It also removed the separatist movement ETIM (Islamic Turkestan Party), listed as a terrorist organisation by the UN Security Council since 2002, from its list of terrorist organisations in October 2020. And finally, recent history plays a role in the consciousness of the Chinese that is apparently given little thought here, namely the history of humiliation by European colonialism and imperialism. Harvard historian J. K. Fairbank once pointedly remarked that "trying to understand the Chinese Revolution without considerable knowledge of Chinese history is like flying blind among mountains."²⁷ The fact that, for example, Hong Kong had to be ceded to England with the first "unequal treaty" in 1842 is universally present in China – combined with a lack of understanding regarding the political support of the protest movement by the

²⁵ Mahbubani 2020, 11, 140.

²⁶ Mahbubani 2020.

²⁷ Fairbank 1989, 11.

West. It is likely that a Chinese politician who appears pliant in the conflict over territories that were once snatched from China at the time of its greatest weakness in the 19th century would suddenly lose his support at home.²⁸ Thus, there is no understanding here for the "Chinese Dream," namely the wish for a renaissance of China as a prosperous and strong country that will never again be bullied by foreign powers.

The negative reports about China in the West have not gone unnoticed in China itself. On the contrary, they are widely received there and have led to the fact that the formerly rather positive, namely exemplary image of the West in China is now also increasingly changing in a negative direction. These effects are obviously not even considered here, but they are serious and worrying. They also lead to an ideational decoupling between China and the West, which many see as even worse than the impending economic decoupling.²⁹

Finally, the question arises as to why the image of China has become increasingly negative over the past three decades. Kerry Brown, author of *The World of Xi Jinping* (2018), has tried to answer this in an interview, comparing the situation today with the post-1989 period:

Then (1989) China remained relatively backward and marginal. Now it is the world's second biggest economy and a far greater geopolitical actor. It stands poised to become the world's largest economy in gross terms some time in the next decade. This is really the last outcome to the "end of history" narrative that people thought possible in the 1990s when the USSR collapsed and there was a sense that Communism's days were over. China is the ultimate "inconvenient" fact – a place that resolutely sticks to its political system, and which adds to the effrontery of this by also making that system seem to deliver outcomes which are competitive with capitalist systems in terms of delivering growth, etc. I think that drives some of the resentment that is felt towards China. China on the verge of perpetual collapse was always something the outside world was comfortable with. China as a winner – that's a far trickier proposition!³⁰

Thus, three constants of the image of China in the course of history can finally be noted:

1. The image of China was subject to great fluctuations during the period shown here: A period of several hundred years of a positive image of China was followed by a reversal at the end of the 18th century, during which China had a decidedly bad image for about a good hundred years. During the 20th century, it went up and down at increasingly rapid intervals, with these rapid fluctuations leaving the impression of an ambivalent image in recent times. Richard Dawson therefore aptly describes the phenomenon as a "Chinese chameleon."³¹ The fluctuation between ideas of a "land of wonders" and a "land of monsters" has, in any case, persisted over centuries to the present day.

2. China still forms a counter-world to Europe. Everything is different there: The writing has no letters and appears to us like "hieroglyphics;" writing used to be done vertically instead of horizontally (today only optional, as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan), so people also open

²⁸ Mahbubani 2020, 22.

²⁹ Personal communication with Prof. Sun Jin of Peking Normal University.

³⁰ Brown 2020.

³¹ Dawson 1967.

books from the back instead of the front; people used to shake their own hands to greet someone; they wear white instead of black mourning clothes; the compass does not point to the north but to the south – at least if you know its literal meaning in Chinese (*zhinanzhen* – needle pointing south) ... Basically, the inhabitants of China are our antipodes; so the world there is, as it were, upside down for us: That is, China represents for us, in the words of Michel Foucault, the "heterotopia" – the "other." So writes Mobo Gao in his book *Constructing China*:

Conceptualising the "Chinese" means that they represent the "Other," in whatever sense. They were the Other before, from the point of view of race and culture, and they are the Other now in political terms. There is no moral basis for the "Chinese" to say anything positive about China. [...] The West only accepts them when they act as dissidents to the Chinese state.³²

Thus Mobo Gao states that we "construct" "our China" on the basis of centuries of Western "discourse hegemony."

3. China is still the epitome of incomprehensibility. This is associated with ideas of the Chinese "always smiling" but "never showing their true face." It remains the "secret of the East." Our understanding of this foreign country oscillates a little, at best, between the reference figures *Tao* and Mao ... The German humourist Loriot once summarised the events in this enigmatic country, which are difficult for us to understand, in the following meaningful four-part caricature (called "The Commentary" and probably created around 1976, i.e. at the time of the arrest of the so-called "Gang of Four"):

The situation in China would be clearer if it were possible... ..not only to replace Tschang Tschiao and Tschiang Tsching... ..with Tscheng Tschiao Tschung and Tschin Tsching Tschiao, but also... ..to replace Tscheng Tschang Tschiao with Tschung Tsching or Tsching Tschung.

It was already mentioned in the context of the 19th century that the changes in the image of China had not so much to do with changes in China itself, but with the political and social changes in Europe. Today it is no different: the image of China actually says little about China itself, but rather something about our own national sensitivities and our own political preferences and fears. Back then, in the time of William of Rubruk, who only made it as far as the threshold of China, it was the effort to proselytise and religiously convert the pagans; in Marco Polo's time, it was the desire for a better world; the vision of enlightened rule in the Age of Enlightenment; the ridicule of backwardness in times of political and industrial revolutions; and now, in recent times, with China as the "winner" and the "ultimate 'inconvenient' fact," the fears about the economy and the focus on democracy, plurality and human rights, driven by a political – rather than religious – sense of mission.

Thus, even today – despite increasingly comprehensive information about the country – China forms a projection screen, as it were, of our own political preferences and prejudices. This confirms an old wisdom, as formulated e.g. in the Jewish Talmud: "We do not see things as *they* are, but as *we* are."

³² Gao 2017, 207.

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