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## “Orientalism” Dossier

# The Western Representation of Modern China: Orientalism, Culturalism and Historiographical Criticism\*

**David Martínez-Robles**

Lecturer, Department of Languages and Cultures (UOC) and Department of Humanities (Pompeu Fabra)  
dmartinezrob@uoc.edu

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### Abstract

The West's perception of China as a historical entity has evolved over the centuries. China has gone from a country of miracles and marvels in the medieval world and a refined and erudite culture in early modern Europe, to become a nation without history or progress since the Enlightenment of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The first historians of China were, in fact, representatives of the great Western empires at the end of the 19th century and their work perceives China from epistemological positions that clearly form part of the Orientalist and colonial thought that was characteristic of the period. History written throughout the 20th century, despite the efforts made to overcome the prejudices of the past, was unable to distance itself completely from some of the resources used in representation or the stereotypes that the Western world had come to accept about China and East Asia since the Enlightenment. Only in recent decades has a critical historiography appeared to denounce the problems inherent in the discourse produced on China, and even this has failed to address them fully.

### Keywords

historiography, Orientalism, paradigms, representation, China

### Resum

La percepció que des d'Occident s'ha tingut de la Xina com a ens històric ha evolucionat al llarg dels segles. La Xina va passar de ser un país de prodigis i meravelles en el món medieval i una cultura refinada i erudita al començament de la modernitat

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europèa, a convertir-se en una nació sense història ni progrés amb el pensament il·lustrat del final del segle XVIII i començament del XIX. Els primers historiadors de la Xina són, de fet, representants dels grans imperis occidentals del final del segle XIX, i la seva obra percep la Xina des de posicionaments epistemològics que s'inscriuen molt clarament en el pensament colonial i orientalista característic d'aquell període. La història escrita durant tot el segle XX, malgrat que s'ha esforçat a superar els prejudicis del passat, no s'ha deslliurat completament d'alguns dels recursos representacionals i els estereotips que el món occidental ha assumit sobre la Xina i l'Àsia oriental des de la Il·lustració. Només en les últimes dècades ha aparegut una historiografia crítica que ha denunciat les problemàtiques inherents del discurs elaborat sobre la Xina, tot i que no ha aconseguit resoldre-les completament.

### Paraules clau

historiografia, orientalisme, paradigma, representació, Xina

In 1922, in a work entitled *The Problem of China*, after having lived in Beijing for about a year and having visited other Chinese cities, philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell wrote:

China, like every other civilised country, has a tradition which stands in the way of progress. The Chinese have excelled in stability rather than in progress; therefore Young China, [...] perceives that the advent of industrial civilisation has made progress essential to continued national existence. (Russell, 1922, p. 26)

As with other leading intellectuals of the 1920s (J. Dewey, H. Driesch, R. Tagore), Russell was invited to Peking University to give a series of courses about what in China was perceived as "Western knowledge", at a time when this institution had already become one of the leading exponents of the New Culture Movement which crystallised around the time of the 1919 Versailles Conference, when at the end of the First World War, German concessions on the Chinese coast were handed over to the Japanese in one of the most visible gestures of disrespect observed in Western imperialism for decades in China and one of the most transparent displays of the weakness of the Chinese republican government. It was in this context, during the academic year 1921-1922, that Russell lectured on philosophy, logic and sociology at the renovated university and came into contact with many of the new Chinese intellectuals of the age: Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, etc. (Ogden, 1982, pp. 533-539). Even Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, who would decades later become the most important leaders of the People's Republic of China, attended some of his lectures. (Clark, 1976, p. 639).

In *The Problem of China*, Russell offers a very critical look at the actions of the Western powers in China and tries to distance himself from the ethnocentric perspective which at the time characterised the majority of publications about Asian countries reaching the European public. At the same time, he showed his sympathies and admiration for the Chinese culture and people,

which he described as having a conscious desire to distance themselves from early 20th-century stereotypes about China and East Asia in general. Russell is particularly critical of some of the more fundamental principles of Western modernity, such as the idea of progress, which is viewed from the prism of the disastrous events that had gripped Europe in the preceding years. In 1916, this critical attitude towards the West had led him to be imprisoned for six months; the result of his anti-war stance. Despite this effort, however, Russell was a man of his time and, as such, persists in some of the stereotypes, which, for almost two centuries, have defined and driven the historical discussion about the Chinese world, as we see in the citation at the start. In fact, some of the ideas referred to by Russell (tradition, a lack of progress, the stability of the Chinese world) became –by taking them on, justifying them or reinterpreting them– the intellectual scaffold with which the majority of Western analysts and historians from the late 18th century to the 20th century have tackled the Chinese world.

One of the most significant and authoritative examples is that of John K. Fairbank (1907-1991), probably the most eminent historian on China of the 20th century, who in 1989 reissued a revised version of his work, *China. Tradition and Transformation*, originally published eleven years previously (in collaboration with E. Reischauer). When it refers to the significance of the First Opium War (1839-42), which represented the defeat of China by the British Navy and the start of the semi-colonial European dominance of important areas of Chinese sovereignty, Fairbank says:

In demanding diplomatic equality and commercial opportunity, Britain *represented* all the Western states, which would sooner or later have demanded the same things if Britain had not. It was an accident of history that the dynamic British commercial interests in the China trade was centered not only on tea but also on opium. If the main Chinese demand had continued to be for Indian raw cotton, or at any rate if there had been no market for opium in late-Ch'ing China, as there had been none earlier, then there would have been no "opium



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war". Yet probably some kind of Sino-foreign war would have come, given the irresistible vigor of Western expansion and immovable inertia of Chinese institutions. (Fairbank, Reischauer, 1989, p. 277)<sup>1</sup>

Even though this text was written half a century later, Fairbank goes much further than Russell in the assumption of some principles (such as the immobility and inertia of the Chinese world compared with the vigour of the West, the impossibility of avoiding conflict, the communion of Western interests, China's inability to respond), which, as we will see over the coming pages, are the result of an intellectual tradition that has its roots in the Enlightenment thought and expansionism of the great European empires. A tradition which, though with different nuances and perspectives, is based on the same sources as Orientalist thought, as described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), and, indeed, is one of the most obvious examples of such in academic study.

## The formation of a historical discourse on China

Ever since the mediaeval period, China has been an empire of mythical characteristics in the European imagination: the utmost representation of the so-called *Far East*. Marco Polo had defined a number of traits that would remain unaltered for centuries in the European portrayal of the Chinese world: the luxury and refinement, the culture of exoticism, the mysterious nature of the women, the unheard-of ingenuity and invention, etc. make China an unknown, distant and mysterious world, yet one that is admired and attractive, as suggested by one of the titles of the work by the Venetian, *The Book of Wonders*.<sup>2</sup> The lack of direct contact between the two ends of the Eurasian continent, as a consequence of the fall of the Mongol Empire, which had managed to unify this vast area, contributed to the reification of these ideas, which were applied to everything that extended from the east of the Mediterranean, beyond the known world.

The 16th century represented a point of inflection in this trend. The Portuguese route that had led Vasco da Gama to the coast of India skirting the African continent and which continued as far as the ports of Japan and China brought Europe and East Asia into contact once again. And it was by this route, which was completed by the one that the Spaniards opened up through America and the Philippines, that not just goods but cultural products and ideas, including religious ones, circulated. For almost two centuries, the

Catholic missions acted as the utmost exponent of the relations between the Chinese Empire and Europe. The missionaries, especially those of the Society of Jesus, became high-level cross-cultural agents, to the point where some of them attained a position of privilege and entered the court of the emperor as astronomers, engineers or painters.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they offered China the friendlier face of the European world, that of the arts and sciences, which they used as an advertisement to spread Christian doctrine among Chinese intellectuals, at the same time conveying to the West a benevolent and friendly view of the Chinese world, interested in justifying their mission and their method. The Jesuits believed that the most effective way of entering the Chinese world meant first converting its governors to the Christian cause; the people then converting should only be a question of time. To do this, they had to adapt to an elaborate and complex culture like that of the Chinese. Consequently, they abandoned their religious habits to adopt the ceremonial robes of the Chinese officials, they learned cultured language, they studied Chinese history and they analysed and translated the Confucian classics. We should not be surprised, then, that the treatises that they wrote about the Chinese world were extremely well documented and that, moreover, they often portrayed the reality of East Asia in sincerely laudatory terms. Confucianism, for example, reached Europe as a moral philosophy that predated the values of Christianity, an idea that was very well received among some 17th-century intellectuals who began to preach the need for a natural religion outside the domain of the Church and who saw in Chinese thought a source of inspiration. (Zhang, 1988, p. 118).

This perception gave birth to the Sinophile thought of the 17th and early 18th centuries, which boasted representatives of the intellectual stature of Leibniz, Wolff, Rousseau and Voltaire, who, in their works, praised very diverse aspects of the Chinese world, such as the language, the political system and education. In their works, China became a country governed by a philosopher king with the assistance of literati who are selected by taking into consideration nothing more than their intellectual and moral standing. The respect for laws, the tolerance in ideas and the political excellence are virtues that eclipse the shortcomings—which, nevertheless, did not go unnoticed by some of these thinkers. However, circumstances changed radically in the second half of the 18th century, in both Europe and China, and the Western portrayal of the Chinese world underwent a radical volte-face.

On the one hand, the method of the Jesuits of fitting in with Chinese culture was strongly criticised by the other orders, giving rise to the so-called *Rites Controversy*: the Society of Jesus ended

1. My italics.

2. Polo's work has been published under a number of titles. The most usual, *Il Milione* (1298), probably refers to the author's tendency to state that everything in China has a grandeur and occurs with an extraordinary abundance—there is "a million" of everything—a topic that many of his successors would pick up and which lasts until today.

3. For the role of the Jesuit missionaries as intercultural mediators, see Golden (2000).



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up being dissolved by the Papacy, and the less tolerant Catholic orders expelled by the Chinese emperor. Meanwhile, in Europe the ideas of rationalism gave way to the crystallisation of the enlightened thought of modernity, with its faith in progress. Leibniz and Voltaire were concerned with showing the universality of reason and China was an ideal example of their proposals. Yet, from this point on, enlightened Europeans submitted China to their ideas on historical progress: the stability that had previously been interpreted as an example of the virtues of its political system would become regarded from the mid-18th century onwards as a sign of its lack of evolution and modernity.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most classic formulations of this Sinophobic thought is seen in J. G. Herder, who in his *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1787) said: "The [Chinese] empire is an embalmed mummy painted with hieroglyphics and wrapped in silk; its internal life is like that of animals in hibernation" (XIV, p. 13).<sup>5</sup> For Herder, Chinese culture is one that has not evolved for centuries, the vestiges of a distant past, a country without a present, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, which belong to a dead culture. And it was this stereotyped vision that, reproduced and amended, resonated throughout the work of most European intellectuals at the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, from Adam Smith to Marx. However, the one who best defined it was Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1840), in which he dedicated an entire section to China.

Hegel feels that China represents the starting point of the history of humanity, in a formulation that we can consider one of the intellectual bases of the Orientalist representation of Asia: "The History of the World travels from East to West; for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia is the beginning" (Hegel, 2004, p. 13). And he adds:

Early do we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at this day; for [...] every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually takes the place of what we should call the truly historical. China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World's History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute vital progress. (Hegel, 2004, p. 29)

Hegel clearly defines the mechanisms of representation of the Chinese world and East Asia, which remained in force for many decades: China is an empire that remains outside historical

processes, with neither evolution nor progress, inert, passive and unable to assume Western modernity by itself. And it is the West that can make the Chinese emerge from this lethargy. The Western world, therefore, becomes a factor –a necessary and sufficient factor– in the transformation of East Asian countries, which becomes the intellectual justification for the colonial actions of the great Euro-American powers in the Pacific and Asia. All the texts which, from the second half of the 19th century, attempt to analyse the modern history of China share this epistemological paradigm, which turned China into an apprentice of the civilising lessons of Western countries.<sup>6</sup> China –and East Asia in general– is always described as the passive and feminine part in the relationship it has with the civilised and masculine West (Guarné, 2005). And it is from this perspective that, in the colonial context of the nineteenth century, the Chinese are described as inferior and barbarous, narrow-minded and xenophobic. This is how one of the few texts of the time published in Spain about China describes them, introducing the Fu Manchu stereotype that first literature and then cinema would feed off for decades:

El carácter [of the Chinese] en la apariencia es muy afable, humano y modesto; en realidad son vengativos y crueles. Son muy ceremoniosos y corteses, y sobre todo observadores exactos de sus leyes, sobre lo cual se vela con mucha severidad; su genio y talento son vivos, espirituosos, animados y penetrantes, y poseen más que ninguna otra nación el arte de disimular sus sentimientos y deseo de venganza, guardando tan bien todas las apariencias de humildad que se los cree insensibles a todo género de ultrajes; pero si se les presenta la ocasión de destruir a su enemigo, se aprovechan de ella con ahínco y precipitación hasta lo sumo. (Álvarez, 1857, pp. 93-94)<sup>7</sup>

Despite everything, critical voices could be heard regarding the colonial actions in East Asia, which attempted to overcome this strongly Eurocentric, even racist, view and during the last decades of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th an effort was made to transform China into an object of academic study. Oxford University, to offer a distinguished example, was the first to offer Chinese classes in 1876.<sup>8</sup> The first lecturer was James Legge, a Protestant missionary who led an ambitious translation project of the great Chinese classics and is the embodiment of the erudite Western figure who approaches Chinese culture with honesty and passion.<sup>9</sup> These first Sinologists, despite the fact that they do

4. For the change in European thought from Sinophilia to Sinophobia, see Zhang (1988, pp. 116-123).

5. For an analysis of Herder's representation of the Chinese world, see Goebel (1995).

6. For an analysis of the history of Euro-American aggressions in China in the 19th century, under the banner of educating and civilising, see Hevia (2004).

7. See translation at the end of the article, cit 1. (Editor's note).

8. In fact, the first Chair in Chinese Studies in London was significantly earlier and dates from 1837, and held by Samuel Kidd. In Cambridge, in 1888, former diplomat and interpreter Tomas Wade became the first to teach Chinese. In France, courses in Chinese had begun much earlier, in 1815 at the Collège de France run by Jean-Pierre-Abel Rémusat. For the origins of Sinology in the West, see Honey (2001).

9. Legge's translations, over 7 volumes, were published in 1861 under the title *The Chinese Classics: with a translation, critical and exegetical notes, pro-*



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not actively participate in the colonial intellectualism defined by Said, do unconsciously assume the epistemological categories that drive the colonial discussion of the age in which they lived. It is significant, for example, that the renowned translation by Legge of the Chinese classics should be financed by Joseph Jardine, a member of one of the most important British merchant clans working in China in the 19th century, whose fortune was linked directly to the lucrative opium trade.<sup>10</sup>

These experts in the Chinese world, of which Legge is only an example, take on a dual function of representation: on the one hand, they become the authorised ambassadors in the West of Chinese civilisation, spokespersons and often defenders of the cultural principals that they take from the Chinese world, even though, on the other hand, they do so always clinging to their own almost pedagogical stance as standards of Western enlightened ideals. This is how a figure still around today was born: that of the expert in the Chinese world, which constitutes a discipline different form – apart from – the other academic disciplines, which generally left the Chinese and the non-Western world beyond their sphere of research.

The study of Chinese history in the early decades of the 20th century was in the hands of these Sinologists, missionaries, diplomats and functionaries who knew the Chinese world in person, in the hands of more or less well intentioned representatives of the imperial powers in Asia. It is a history that is clearly centred on the actions of the Western countries in the Chinese world, which are interpreted, albeit often critically, as the unleashing that allowed the Chinese to enter modernity, admitting the technological and scientific superiority of the West, which emerges as a civilising model and pedagogue. The same historical processes are sought in Chinese history that affected the Western countries: for this reason, these historians reflect on the non-development in China of a European-style industrial revolution or on the reasons for the lack of capitalist-oriented forms of economic organisation. The West, then, is the norm and yardstick of historical progress, and in this comparative perspective, Chinese history shows a series of shortcomings and anomalies in its development.<sup>11</sup> In spite of everything, however, this paradigm that we could call *imperialist* makes China a historical object in its own right and, therefore, overcomes the Sinophobic thought that we can still find in some writers at the start of the 20th century.

## The sociocultural approach

After the Second World War, a new generation of completely professional historians began to emerge, who had studied at the modern universities of the United States and Europe, with a much more solid and attentive training in the discipline, and this led to the modern development of the history of China and East Asia. However –despite the systematic study of Chinese archives, the application of scientific text analysis and less Eurocentric comparative research methodologies– emphasis continued on the role of Western aggressions in China. The whole of Chinese history was interpreted on the basis of the significance of these aggressions by studying the impact of modernisation imposed by Euro-American countries –viewed as a necessary phenomenon for the activation of Chinese history– in traditional East Asian societies, despite certain aspects of Western imperialism being explicitly criticised. In fact, concepts such as *change* and *transformation*, true emblems of enlightened modernity, took on an extraordinary cultural value for the historians of the time, forming the basis for their entire research and the interpretation of Chinese history. This had a perverse effect, as numerous aspects of the history of Chinese society that have nothing to do with the colonial aggressions of Western nations disappear from historical contemplation and, therefore, are implicitly denied. Required reading for this historiographical context is the text quoted above by John K. Fairbank, the leading Chinese historian from the mid-1940s to the late 1980s, a long period during which modern Chinese history took on meaning on the basis of the question of its response to Western aggressions.

This perspective throws up a number of quite obvious problems. On the one hand, it takes on an active role for the West compared with a solely reactive China. In other words, despite the fact that it was no longer a question of the passive reality as discussed by the enlightened figures of the 19th century, China continued to be denied the possibility of acting for itself, without stimulation from the West. In addition, as we saw in the text cited above, the West was seen as a reified entity, a block with very few differences, that shares unique aims and the same colonial enterprise and whose spatial and temporal complexity is often overlooked. Likewise, China was, in the work of the historians of the time, a construct, a simplifying abstraction that sidelines the exceptional diversity of the Chinese world, which puts the validity of a large part of the generalisations made about it in doubt. This explains the fact

*legomena and copious indexes*. Despite one and a half centuries having passed since its publication, Legge's translation still enjoys a renowned reputation for its accuracy among specialists. For information about Legge, see the extensive biography by Girardot (2002).

10. William Jardine, patriarch of the clan and co-founder of the Jardine-Matheson firm, which is still trading today as one of the most high-profile companies in Hong Kong, was the driving force behind the Sino-British war of 1839-42.

11. A more extensive analysis of the role that the West has played as a benchmark for modern Chinese history and of how this has been perceived as a problem can be found in Cohen (1984, 3 *et seq.*).



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that in the historical discourse maintained during these decades, a significant number of the historical processes that affect modern Chinese history go unnoticed and are not studied by historians, simply because they have nothing to do with the presence of foreign countries on the Chinese coast. Some events are even interpreted as a reaction to Western actions that were in fact an evolution of internal forces and processes with their origins in a period long before the arrival of foreign powers in China.

With this approach, the cultural, intellectual and even psychological aspects of the Chinese world are of such specific importance that, all too often, they sideline the political or economic factors (which are the foundations of historical research with regards to Western countries). It is assumed that traditional Chinese culture –which at this time was almost synonymous with Confucianism– was not simply the brake that impeded the modernisation of China from the inside, but in fact the reason for the supposed attitude of closure, denial, rejection, or, at least, resistance to the influence and modernisation arriving from the West. Political or economic questions, therefore, are relegated to the background. This sociocultural approach, as it is often called, does not cease to be an academic and sublimated form of the Orientalisation of the Asian cultures discussed by Said: China is different *per se*, an ontologically different entity, by non-Western definition, and therefore the categories with which the Chinese world should be analysed and understood are specific and inherent to it, radically different from those applied to other historical realities. This explains for these historians that contact with the West has inevitably been antagonistic and not due to political differences; it is rather a cultural shock between European universalism and that which in this representation of the Chinese world is understood as Sino-centrism. Armed confrontation was inevitable, as we see above in the citation by Fairbank, which in turn acts as justification for the actions of imperialism in the Western Pacific.

The 1970s represented a challenge to these ideas with the appearance of a new generation of historians, especially in America, who brought into doubt some of the assumptions of the dominant historiography regarding China. The first critical voices focused on denouncing the “apologetics of imperialism”,<sup>12</sup> in the context of the protests against the war in Vietnam and the appearance of a critical conscience that was not only concerned with the historical facts, but also with how these are read, interpreted and articulated.<sup>13</sup> The historian as a questioning figure takes on

a relevance that had not been made explicit until then: facts are not objective, unquestionable and transcendent, but something problematic and subject to the interpretation of whoever analyses them. As a result of this evolution, after 1980 historiography followed very different paths that were much less clearly defined and secure.

The history of China has currently moved –a great deal– away from the (meta)narratives of just a few decades ago, if only at a theoretical level. Historians are obliged to act with the caution required by the historical and regional diversity of the Chinese world. Methodologically, many problems are posed in extrapolating what the research shows about one Chinese region for the others. And this regionalisation of history, which is no longer based on the traditional administrative divisions, also has a temporal dimension: what is stated of a specific period of history cannot be stated *per se* of other moments in history, as had unfailingly been done by a great many historians until a few decades ago.<sup>14</sup> This represents a much broader recognition of the dynamism of the intellectual, social, political and economic life of China in all periods. An example will allow us to grasp this: when historians had posed the reasons that explained the outbreak of the opium wars, the Chinese intellectual and functionary class had always been seen as a homogeneous group of representatives of the most orthodox Confucian or neo-Confucian thought, supposedly hostile to any change to the Chinese political and administrative system. Research in recent years, however, has shown that among the Chinese intellectuals of the period there were highly contrasting factions and parties which show that what we call *Confucianism* is a political, philosophical and intellectual project that cannot be shoehorned into the categories that Western analysts –on the basis of the characterisation made by the Jesuit missionaries who first presented it to the European world in the 16th and 17th centuries– have tried to apply to it.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, some of the most basic formulae of the sociocultural approach have survived this criticism, both within and beyond the work of historians. One of the most visible and well-known examples is the so-called *Asian Values Debate*, which attempts to recognise and, indeed, demand the validity of cultural values common to the countries of the Asian continent that can be compared with “Western values”. These Asian values have often been identified as supposedly Confucian values despite the evident contradiction represented by attributing to a continent of the human and geographical extent of Asia, or to a significant part

12. Most notable among the first criticisms of the imperialist approach were the contributions of Nathan (1972), Esherick (1973) and Lassek (1983), who published a number of articles in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, which was founded precisely as a reaction to the major North American research institutions that focused on East Asian countries.

13. It should be remembered that leading figures of 20th-century intelligentsia who had a huge influence over their peers, such as Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Jacques Derrida, Edward S. Said, Jean-Françoise Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, etc., published some of their most fundamental and referenced works in the 1970s.

14. For the regional analysis of Chinese historical reality, see Skinner (1977 and 1985).

15. For the different factions of Chinese intellectuals at the Imperial Court in the context of the First Opium War, see Polachek (1992).



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of it, a unity based on cultural values that originate, in fact, from a specific region and very specific period of the past. We will not enter here into evaluating the bases of this debate, which despite the political manipulation to which it is subjected, would allow us to reflect on a number of fundamental issues regarding how we understand alterity and project our epistemological categories on to other realities without having first evaluated their suitability. In any event, it is important to understand how far, in the majority of formulations that have been made, it is based on culturalist reasonings that contradict the historical and social reality of the countries to which it refers.<sup>16</sup>

## Criticism and post-paradigmatisation

However, criticism of imperialist apologetics and the sociocultural approach, or recognition of the diversity of China, geographically and historically, is one thing and it is quite another to overcome the problematicity of the historical discussion about the Chinese world. Therefore, far beyond the revisionist tendency of the 1970s and 1980s, the last two decades have seen a whole range of proposals, some more successful than others, which have attempted to replace the old paradigms that had marked the development of the historiography for almost two centuries with new formulae more suitable to getting to grips with the history of China.

One of the first was drawn up by US historian Paul A. Cohen. He proposed changing the focus of the history of China, which until then had been centred on the activity of foreign countries in China, for what he called a *China-centred history of China*. This was a history that took China, not the West, as its starting point, and –on an epistemological level– has to be deployed using Chinese criteria, not those imported from the West (Cohen, 1984). Cohen's proposal is a coherent response to the situation of historical Chinese studies, which coincided with the extraordinary rise of local studies in the 1970s and 1980s, and which recognises the dynamism and diversity of the Chinese world. Proposing a series of criteria derived from the Chinese world means, among many other things, assessing the validity and legitimacy of some of the categories applied to the analysis of Chinese history, which, in fact, have their origins in certain historical processes exclusive to Western countries, such as modernity or contemporaneity. However, using these "China-centred history" approaches also lead to certain doubts about the methodology which are hard to

resolve. Cohen explicitly rejects external visions of Chinese history, and in fact establishes a somewhat inaccurate distinction of what external and internal focuses are. This is an approach, which, as with the Asian Values Debate, still has Orientalist echoes: China has remained isolated in universal history, clearly following different historical development guidelines, which need to be known from the inside, starting with the Chinese language and culture. In other words, despite explicitly rejecting the sociocultural approach, he reaches a series of similar conclusions, which, in short, do not help break away from the historical alienation of China.<sup>17</sup>

Another trend in the historiography that has been developed in recent years points in the opposite direction to the one outlined by Cohen and consists of integrating Chinese history into world history, not so as to enhance the latter, but as an essential part thereof. It is a question of understanding Chinese history from a broad perspective. China, particularly over the last five centuries, has not only participated in, but has also contributed to the development of some of humanity's great historical processes. The work of historian and sociologist Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998), is probably the best known in this inclusive understanding of history. For Frank, our representation of the Asian world has to overcome the Eurocentrism that has characterised it for centuries to accept the important role that the continent of Asia has played in world history: in his own words, history has to "reorient".<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that Frank's work is unable to overcome some of the most basic premises with which enlightened thought had approached the Chinese world (progress, development),<sup>19</sup> it has had an important influence on other authors who from both Chinese history and a more global approach have attempted to carry out this integrating project.<sup>20</sup> These are works which, generally speaking from an economic history perspective, try to show the "Oriental" roots of Western civilisation, or at least show the influence that the Asian world has had, so as to challenge the ethnocentric approaches that have always dominated our perception of history.

However, this comparative perspective is not free from methodological risks. In spite of the fact that some of these writers are aware of it, others fall into the trap of attempting to establish correlations in an insufficiently critical manner. That is, there is the danger of looking, *a priori*, in Chinese history for processes and problems that are alien to it, or of which it is at least pertinent to question their legitimacy as a basis for comparison. In other words, the danger of falling into the same ethnocentrism –now more

16. The value of the Asian Values Debate lies more in its criticism of the supposed universality of the enlightened values than in the definition or justification of values applicable to the Asian continent.

17. For a critical analysis of Cohen's approach, see Dirlik (1996b, pp. 262-268).

18. Beltrán (2006, esp. §27-35) analyses the contributions of Frank's work and contextualises it within the production of knowledge about East Asia in the academic world, in both the West and Asia.

19. For a critique of the Eurocentrism implicit in the critique of Eurocentrism by Frank, see Dirlik (2000, 73 *et seq.*)

20. Highlights include the work of a number of specialists in Chinese history, such as Pomeranz (2000), Wong (1997) or Waley-Cohen (1999), or that of historians with a more global perspective, such as Bayly (2004) or Hobson (2004).



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furtive— to be found in the historians of the first half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the recovery of China and Asia in general for the construction of a truly universal history represents a step forward in the creation of a non-exclusive and integrating history.

This rejection of the forms of Eurocentric thought, in which the work of experts in subaltern studies such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha have had a notable influence, has led to another of the shifts seen in recent decades. That is, some historians paying greater attention to the methodological contributions of other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, literary studies, political science, etc. Without a doubt, the development of the ideas of postcolonialism, postmodernity and cultural studies has been a key factor in this trend, which has not always been sufficiently balanced.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, some of the most challenging historiographical proposals have seen the light in this setting, which reflects on the articulation of such concepts as power and domination, imagination, culture and representation. One of the leading names in this field is that of Turkish historian Arif Dirlik, concerned with questions of an epistemological nature that are not usually part of the agenda of the majority of historians. A large part of Dirlik's reflections revolve around the concepts of progress and modernity: according to this historian, despite the critical evolution in recent decades of part of the historiography, a radical challenge to the teleological representation of the history inherited from the European Enlightenment has not been seen. For Dirlik, "it is necessary to repudiate this historical teleology in all its manifestations" and to identify "alternative modernities", not to fall into a return to the reifying impetus of the sociocultural approach (as Cohen did), an approach that must finally be overcome, but to recover "historical trajectories that have been suppressed by the hegemony of capitalist modernity" (Dirlik, 1997, p. 127). In fact, according to Dirlik, the disturbing influence of Eurocentrism cannot ever be completely overcome unless the very idea of "development" is challenged at root. It is not a question of rejecting modernity *per se*, an attitude that would lead us to a certain self-Orientalisation, but, while recognising it, creating alternative modernities that overcome the narratives of the Enlightenment that still dominate historians daily activities (Dirlik, 1996, pp. 277-278).

## Conclusions

A paradigm is not a simple theoretical proposal, instead it has an epistemological dimension that affords it all of its regulatory capacity. It is a sieve that sets the possibilities for knowledge: whatever does not meet the rules set by the paradigm cannot

be considered, and therefore does not exist, is not historical, as we have seen with part of the Chinese reality for centuries. Nonetheless, the strength of a paradigm is not limited to a culture or borders. It sets what is true and scientific, has a universal nature, such that everything with pretensions of science must meet its specifications if it does not want to be excluded. The history of China is no exception. The historical paradigms that have dominated the Western intellectual tradition have ended up being imposed on China as though it were another form of imperialism. Despite the fact that in this article we have limited ourselves exclusively to the Western representation of Chinese history, it should be taken into account that, to give a clear enough example, Chinese Marxist thought has ended up assuming some of the more basic principles of the imperialist approach of which it is the sworn enemy: according to Marxist historiography, only the Chinese Communist Party managed to end the backwardness and lack of modernisation of China, a backwardness and a need for modernisation that are the same starting point of the imperialist approach that we have analysed. When all is said and done, Marxism is deeply rooted in the teleological thought of European enlightened modernity.

Indeed, it is Arif Dirlik, aware of the strength of the historiographical paradigms, among other proposals, who rejects any attempt to establish new paradigms that set out and demarcate our approach to Chinese history (and non-Euro-American history in general), as this would mean repeating the same mistakes and vices of historians throughout the 20th century. In fact, since the development of the critical historiography that began at the end of the 1970s, no great new paradigm has appeared to replace the previous ones.

However, the fact that after the appearance of a critical historiography no new paradigm has imposed itself does not mean that the old paradigms have been completely overcome. We have already seen that some of the attempts to reposition Chinese history in world history have not been able to avoid the ethnocentric approaches despite their aim of constructing a markedly non-Eurocentric discourse. Likewise, many of the theoretical reflections mentioned in the preceding pages have gone unnoticed by a significant number of historians, which helps us understand why so many books still being published today on the history of China continue to be rooted in the premises of the old, theoretically, superseded paradigms; or why that which students learn in our universities unfortunately often maintains a marked Orientalist tone.

In fact, China historians have an educational responsibility with a social aspect that reaches far beyond their research tasks. In a society such as ours, in which Asian studies have just begun

21. For a critical reading of the influence of cultural studies on the historiography of modern and contemporary China in 1980s and 1990s, see Huang (1998).



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and where the interest of public opinion in East Asian countries is very recent, this pedagogical task takes on greater relevance. Orientalist clichés and stereotypes are present in almost every activity connected to Chinese culture, from cinema festivals to academic conferences, or popular celebrations and exhibitions by prestigious museums. The imperialist and Orientalising perspective, although very often explicitly rejected, is repeatedly seen implicitly in the majority of these activities. This is why education is required: not only does the historian, or the specialist in East Asian art, literature or economics, have to try and convey knowledge, but they also have to denounce explicitly the discursive anomalies that have traditionally determined our way of representing the reality of East Asian countries.

Cit 1.

The character [of the Chinese] appears to be very good-natured, humane and modest; in reality they are vengeful and cruel: they are very ceremonious and courteous, and above all follow their laws to the letter, which they do with great severity: their genius and talent, lively, spiritual, animated and penetrating, and more than any other nation, they possess the art of disguising their feelings and desire for revenge, hiding all appearances of humility so well that one believes them to be insensitive to all types of outrage; but if you offer them the opportunity to destroy their enemy, they eagerly and hastily take advantage of it to the full.

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## David Martínez-Robles

Lecturer, Department of Languages and Cultures (UOC)  
and Department of Humanities (Pompeu Fabra)  
dmartinezrob@uoc.edu

Graduate in Philosophy (University of Barcelona) and PhD in History (Pompeu Fabra University). He is a lecturer in the UOC's Languages and Cultures Department and Pompeu Fabra's Humanities Department. His research centres on modern and contemporary history of China and its representation in the Western world. He has published articles and works on a range of aspects of Chinese history and culture; the most recent being *La lengua china: historia, signo y contexto. Una aproximación sociocultural* [*The Chinese Language: History, Sign and Context. A Sociocultural Approach*]; (Editorial UOC 2007).



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