

Book review: Kerry Brown, Gemma Chengger Deng: China Through European Eyes - 800 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Encounter

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version of Kooria's PhD thesis at Leiden University. Every chapter could serve as a basis for further studies into one or the other subject, sometimes sparking a desire in the reader for more information. From my own perspective, this is particularly true of the final chapter, which deals with a large number of translations, especially Muslim ones, in a somewhat summarily fashion. This is hardly avoidable in a single volume, but it might have been helpful to give one or two Muslim translations the same space as the colonial translations. The mere thirteen pages dedicated to Muslim translations, versus more than 33 pages on European colonial translations, somewhat reinforce the notion that translation acts primarily as a tool of colonial subjugation rather than as a means for Muslims to engage with a sometimes highly parochial "*shāfi'ī* cosmopolis", as exemplified by Ibn Ḥajar's *Tuhfa*, which Kooria himself dubs "chauvinistic" (p. 194). Indeed, as much of the book's value derives from Kooria's persistent endeavour to "provincialize" (p. 382) Islamic law – by paying close attention to contexts and contestations in the texts he discusses – some attention to the operation of these texts beyond the limits of Arabic would have been helpful. But this should in no way distract from the fact that *Islamic Law in Circulation* is a wonderful and important book that should be read not only by scholars of Islam, but by anyone interested in Indian Ocean studies and in the methodology of global legal and intellectual history.

Thorsten Tschacher

KERRY BROWN / GEMMA CHENGGER DENG, *China Through European Eyes: 800 Years of Cultural and Intellectual Encounter*. London: World Scientific, 2022. 272 pages, GBP 75.00. ISBN 978-1-80061-097-2 (hb)

Kerry Brown is best known for his work on Xi Jinping and contemporary China and a current project on China–United Kingdom relations. This book of writings about China by some of the most influential European thinkers has been compiled with the assistance of a postgraduate colleague, Gemma Deng, and is fully annotated with thoughtful introductory commentaries to provide context. The authors argue that, given the increasing global reach of a newly wealthy and powerful China in the twenty-first century, some understanding of "the ways in which it has figured in [the] Western imagination" (p. xxx) is essential. It is a salutary reminder that while much has changed, much has stayed the same, and that jumping to conclusions – especially for politicians, diplomats or the military – is potentially dangerous.

The body of the book is structured chronologically, beginning with some of the earliest documented encounters between Europeans and China. Whether

or not the universally recognised Marco Polo really travelled where he claimed, his description of the impressive Xanadu is convincing. Matteo Ricci's main theoretical work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* highlights the beginning of Jesuit engagement with Chinese religious beliefs. The attempt to accommodate Confucianism and Catholicism ended in the prolonged Rites Controversy, a dispute over the primacy of spiritual loyalties, and the proscription of Catholicism by the Yongzheng Emperor in 1724. The virtually unknown Samuel Purchas is an oddity in that his early seventeenth-century travelogue is entirely imaginary and probably based on the publications of the genuine traveller Richard Hakluyt, but it provided some of the inspiration for Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan".

Some of the great names of European Enlightenment thinking were fascinated by China. Towards the end of his life, Gottfried Leibnitz, like the Jesuits, grappled with the problem of accommodating Chinese and Christian worldviews; his tolerant and open-minded account was based on a close study of the Confucian texts available in translation. Voltaire, denigrating European Catholic teachings, formed a positive view of "the religion of [China's] learned ... free from superstitions, from absurd legends, from dogmas insulting both to reason and nature" (p. 57). In *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu was less enthusiastic about China, concentrating on negative aspects of Chinese imperial despotism.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, John Barrow was private secretary to Lord Macartney, whose eponymous and ill-fated expedition brought home the problems the British would later have in their relations with China. Barrow studied the Chinese and Manchu languages, and this informed his understanding of the diplomatic codes and their limitations. Hegel and Marx need little introduction, but their philosophies affected European views of China profoundly, and in ways they could not have expected, as China would later embrace Marxism as dictated by Lenin and Stalin. Neither Hegel nor Marx went to China, but the nineteenth century travels of the Abbé Huc, who did, introduced the West to the sheer size and complexity of this great east Asian empire.

Max Weber's sociological studies included *The Religion of China*: he analysed Confucianism in terms of sociological concepts, notably bureaucracy and hierarchy. In the 1920s, the philosopher, mathematician and political activist, Bertrand Russell, taught in China: his *The Problem of China* engages with the country's emergence from a stagnant imperial past and the interference of foreign powers. Carl Jung, the psychoanalyst, was fascinated by the ancient divination text, the *Yijing* (*I Ching* or *Book of Changes*), with its insights into the unconscious mind.

China's twentieth-century revolution attracted enthusiasm, criticism and wishful thinking from Europe. Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist writer and partner and collaborator of Jean-Paul Sartre, saw in Mao's China the popular democracy and liberalism she hoped to find there. The Eastern European background of Julia Kristeva, French of Bulgarian origin and also a feminist writer,

gave her useful points of comparison for her writing on the progress made by Chinese women. The once fashionable Roland Barthes, a French polymath whose name will always be associated with semiotics, was intrigued by written Chinese characters. He was an ambivalent admirer of Maoism, as his confusing, and confused, selection of jottings suggest.

These writers and thinkers were attempting to explain their impressions and understanding as they engaged with the society and civilisation of China. Superficially alien and forbidding, it was nonetheless a land and culture facing problems similar to their own. The variety of their assessments and judgements is accounted for partly by the dates of their encounters with the Middle Kingdom, but also by what they expected or hoped to find.

Europeans continue to scrutinise China with certain expectations, and are often disappointed when these expectations are confounded. Sometimes the alien or “other” China is only too similar to their own European experience. Alternatively, they find it impossible to see China through Chinese eyes, often fearing that they will be classified as panda-huggers or dragon-slayers – too soft or too hard on the country.

This collection of responses by Europeans to their first contact with China is timely, well organised and presented with great clarity. At the time of writing, Xi Jinping has entered his third five-year term as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of China. China is being pressed by international commentators to clarify its stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and, in maintaining its strategic neutrality, Beijing is obliged to engage with political actors and thinkers in Europe as well as in the United States and the countries of the global South. The attitude of European countries towards China has never been consistent; the approaches of Eastern and Western Europe reflected very different relations with China during the Soviet period, and some of those differences remain today.

In this context it is useful to consider the historical experiences of Europeans in their dealings with China and their conclusions about Chinese society and polity. The selections by Brown and Deng reflect the variety of encounters and the diverse insights that these generated: the detailed commentary is most helpful, particular for readers who are not already familiar with such diverse writers as Matteo Ricci and Roland Barthes. It would have been possible to choose other writers but those selected offer sufficient evidence of the challenges faced by Europeans attempting to understand an attractive, apparently alien and often frustrating culture. Similar challenges face twenty-first century Europeans, and this book is a salutary reminder that such issues are far from novel or unusual.

Michael Dillon