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Article



With What Voice Does China Speak? Sinology, Orientalism and the Debate on Sinologism

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Abstract

The arrival of postcolonial theory in China and the country's global rise came with the realization that its self-image is often distorted by Western ideological discourse, conveyed through Western Sinology. Drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, some Chinese scholars have classified the ideological dimensions of Western Sinology as Sinologism, and have pointed out its implications for China's capacity to think of itself on its own terms. The concept has sparked debate mainly inside Chinese academia about the objective quality of Western Sinology. This article will attempt a critical overview of two major formulations of Sinologism, underlining its major presuppositions and placing the notion in the broader context of China's anxieties of "academic colonization" by Western intellectual practices. It will conclude by arguing that attempts to discredit Western Sinology rely on some problematic assumptions and suggests East-West comparative studies as an alternative way of dialectically constructing Chinese identity.

Keywords

Sinology – Sinologism – Orientalism – academic – colonization

In recent decades, new perspectives on the implications of politics, colonialism, and power in the field of epistemology have exerted a profound influence amongst scholars and researchers of the cultures of the so-called “Orient.” The objectivity and even the validity of academic discourses on civilizations such as the Egyptian, Indian, and Chinese have been the object of increased scrutiny, to the point that it is now impossible to employ the term Orientalism in a neutral way.¹ At the same time, the gradual and seemingly inexorable rise of the East and the decline of the West² bring the need for Eastern nations to reshape their self-image and take control of an academic discourse that has, until now, taken place in Western terms. Such a reaction is especially noticeable in China, where efforts to rebuild the country’s self-image and achieve cultural self-confidence have received increasing attention in political and academic circles. The realization that China’s self-image is often distorted by Western discourse and that China speaks about itself using a “Western voice” by employing Western concepts and methodologies has led Chinese academics to wonder about the ways Western hegemonic discourse makes its way into China’s self-image. Western Sinology, understood as the production of knowledge about China by Western scholars, cannot but be an object of scrutiny.

One of the laudable achievements of Edward Said’s (1935–2003) *Orientalism*, which first came out in 1978, is that it provided a preliminary framework for the analysis of past and present Western discourse about the Orient. A multitude of critical theories regarding Western knowledge of oriental cultures has sprouted from this seminal work, some heavily based on it, others more indirect and creative. The same has happened in China, where a number of theories have appeared in recent years that try to shed light on perceived biases and misperceptions in past and present Sinological discourse, as well as on the way these have contributed to create a distorted image of China. It is the purpose of this essay to make a critical presentation of one of these theories, that of Sinologism (*Hanxue zhuyi* 漢學主義). In doing so, we shall take as our point

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 341.

2 While the author is aware of its simplistic and essentialist nature, he shall, in this article, consciously follow the example of the majority of the authors cited and employ the term West (and its adjective Western), without quotation marks, to signify Western European countries, as well as the United States and Canada.

of departure the post-modernist thought on the interpenetration of knowledge and power that serves as the basis for Said's *Orientalism*. We shall proceed with a critical description of the concept of Sinologism by two of its major proponents and analyze a couple of problematic assumptions that underlie it as a critical theory, namely that Western methodology is an obstacle to the formation of China's self-image, and that it is possible to make a clear-cut distinction between Chinese and Western studies of China. We argue that both assumptions are problematic and propose, as an alternative to Sinologism, studies of the sort practiced by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) and, more recently Zhang Longxi 張隆溪, that place both traditions on equal terms and in a mutually illuminating dialogue, free from ideological and political prejudices.

1 Orientalism and the Postmodern Take on the Possibility of Objective Knowledge

The notion that truth is a social construct and not found like a nugget of gold in nature is one of the most famous and polemical aspects of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). It is not surprising to find the German thinker at the source postmodern thought, just as it is no coincidence that postmodern thought makes up the theoretical foundations not only of Orientalism and postcolonial theory, but also of all modern thinking about discourse and power in the humanities and social sciences. By turning its efforts to thinking historically, to “take the temperature of the age without instruments,”³ postmodern thought serves as the basis for challenging dominant discourses and structures of power and for questioning established narratives. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard's (1924–1998) *The Postmodern Condition* signaled a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology in metanarratives and set out to uncover the problems of legitimacy within the discourse of human-engineered progress led by science. Even scientific discourse, he said, was unable to find legitimation within itself and had to resort to the same sort of metanarratives it once discredited and suppressed for not obeying scientific regimes of proof.⁴ The epistemological condition of postmodernity, for Lyotard, would be characterized by an evaporating of “grand narratives,” “the overarching ‘story line’ by

3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xi.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, vol. 10 of *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 27.

means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future.”⁵

Taking a discursive approach to the formation of culture, thinkers like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) focused on representation as a source for the production of knowledge. Even if the way we represent our reality is showcased by language, it must be noted that at any given moment in history, some people have more power to speak than others.⁶ As such, reality, including our understanding of the past, is a place of war and conflict, not only of peoples but also of discourses. Far from being a mere utterance that can be analyzed by itself, a discourse can be detected because it displays a certain systematicity of ideas that result from a particular historical context and produce certain effects on human behavior.⁷ The effects of discourse are interlinked with what we consider to be truth and knowledge. For Foucault, “Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints ... Each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth ...”⁸ Foucault’s idea that nothing exists outside discourse, instead of denying the existence of the materiality of things, denies the possibility of their intrinsic meaning. And since we can only have knowledge of things if they have a meaning, it is discourse, not the *things-in-themselves*, that produces such meaning and, by extension, knowledge. It follows that, since discourse is subject to the structures of power and the ways of thinking (*episteme*) of a given time, knowledge is subjected to power.⁹ The linking of knowledge to power not only allows the formation of “regimes of truth” (the closer to “Truth” we can get), it also allows power to enforce itself as truth. As Stuart Hall (1932–2014) summarizes “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,

5 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 2. That the end of all narratives constitutes a narrative in its own right is an irony that is not lost on authors like Frederic Jameson and betrays a tendency for theories to turn into “theories of themselves.” This is a problem that, as we will see later, is not unrelated to the debate of Sinologism.

6 Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 7th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 42.

7 Sara Mills, *Discourse*, 2nd ed., *The New Critical Idiom* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 15; Heath Massey, “Archaeology of Knowledge: Foucault and the Time of Discourse,” in *Understanding Foucault, Understanding Modernism*, ed. David Scott, vol. 1v of *Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 80.

8 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131.

9 Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 45.

nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, ‘power relations.’”¹⁰

Foucault’s theory of Power/Knowledge, along with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s (1891–1937) thoughts on hegemony, is widely recognized as one of the main conceptual pillars of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In short, Said argues that Orientalist knowledge offers us not a true picture of the Orient but a *representation*, a *re-presentation* and a *reconstruction* of it, created by the colonizers to make sense of the colonized and designed to confirm the West’s own distinctive identity and superiority. The production of Orientalist knowledge had as its analogue in the world of empirical politics the exercise of colonial power over the Orient and its “acquisition by Europe.”¹¹

The philosophical developments above, belonging to what we now consider postmodern thought, contribute to the impression that Western historical consciousness may be little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to the cultures and civilizations that preceded it, but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space.¹²

2 From Sinology to Sinologism via Orientalism

If we started our discussion with a survey of postmodern thought on truth and knowledge, it is because proponents of Sinologism believe that a critique of Sinology can only be made alongside the critique of the discourse of Modernity, in other words, through postmodern discourse.¹³ By Sinologism we understand a form of critique of the production of knowledge about China in its different aspects by Western scholars, which we will call Western Sinology. Although different proponents of Sinologism have their own variations, they take Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as the point of departure and direct their criticism to the political and ideological grounds that sustain Western discursive

10 Cit. in *Ibid.*, 49.

11 Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 1 (1985): 93.

12 Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2.

13 Zhou Ning 周寧, “Hanxue huo ‘Hanxuezhuyi’” 漢學或“漢學主義”, in *Hanxuezhuyi lunzheng jicui* 漢學主義論爭集萃, ed. Gu Mingdong 顧明棟 and Zhou Xian 周憲 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 33; Zhou Ning 周寧, “Xifang de Zhongguo xingxiang” 西方的中國形象, in *Shijie zhi Zhongguo-yuwai Zhongguo xingxiang yanjiu* 世界之中國——域外中國形象研究, ed. Zhou Ning 周寧 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 4.

hegemony. New theories arise in response to new problems and changes in the intellectual milieu, and it is in light of their ability to address these problems and changes that they should be evaluated. For this reason, it is important to start by trying to understand the intellectual context from which the notion of Sinologism emerged.

The need for a critical view of Western production of knowledge about China came about in the context of the academic globalization of the 1990s. The arrival of postmodern and postcolonial theories in China, along with an awakening of “cultural consciousness” that is part and parcel of an increasingly globalized world, triggered the need to reevaluate the state of the intellectual relationship between China and the rest of the world (particularly with the West).¹⁴ Moreover, the increasing influence of China on the global stage has led to the need to rebalance its relationship with the West, including in terms of knowledge production. The increasing attention Chinese academia has dedicated to Western knowledge of China, alongside a kind of reflective criticism over the biases and misperceptions contained in this knowledge, can be viewed as part of an effort to establish China’s self-image. This reflective exercise has triggered what has been called an “anxiety of the thinking subject”¹⁵ derived from the prevalence of Western academic practices in Chinese academia. At the same time, the increasing popularity of the study of Western Sinology in China, particularly with the translation of an increasing number of works into Chinese, sparked fears of “academic colonialism” within Chinese academia. A number of critical frameworks thus appeared which attempted to make sense of the discrepancy between ontology and epistemology in the study of China.

Sure enough, when taking Western Sinological production as an object of study, one would be tempted to arm oneself with the theoretical framework provided by postcolonial theory and analyses of Orientalist discourse. In truth, although the current state of the debate on Sinologism has already vastly outgrown the theoretical framework laid out by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, we can still say with confidence that without Said’s work, critical scrutiny of Western knowledge of China would not have taken its present form. Professor Zhou Ning 周寧, one of the scholars we will examine below, takes Said as his point of departure in claiming that Sinology fits within the Orientalist critique, and he is far from being the only one to believe so. In Zhou’s understanding, Sinology, as a field of inquiry that has as its object an Eastern civilization, has

14 Zhou Xian 周憲, “The Problems of Sinologism and Strategies to Cope with Them,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 1 (2018): 71–72.

15 Zhou Yunlong, “‘Sinologism,’ or Anxiety of the Thinking Subject,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 1 (2018): 13–14.

no way to escape Said's critique. However, applying it wholesale to the analysis of Western discourse about China ends up making us feel like we are trying to fit a foot inside a glove. As a great number of Chinese scholars, including some proponents of Sinologism, recognize, Orientalism poses important questions for Sinology, but it also has limitations when applied to the Chinese context.¹⁶ Therefore, even if we agree that Western discourse on the Orient (including Sinology) in the 18th and 19th centuries was produced over a background of colonial expansion and is part of an epistemology of power,¹⁷ some aspects of Said's *Orientalism* do not fit well when applied to Sinology. Local circumstances and the particular history of engagement between China and the West need to be taken into account.

There is no lack of reviews of Said's work, ranging from lavish praise to complete rejection, and such a task will not be pursued in these pages. Be that as it may, we cannot move forward without pointing out some of *Orientalism's* limitations when applied to the Chinese case.

We can start by recognizing that Said considers Sinology a part of Oriental Studies because, despite almost exclusively targeting French, British, and American Orientalism towards the Middle East, "the scope of Orientalism exactly matched the scope of empire."¹⁸ Moreover, the book contributes to the perception of Orientalism as a consistent and monolithic discourse that is geographically homogeneous and historically continuous, which is remarkable coming from someone so heavily influenced by Foucault. It also omits the agency of the "Oriental" in its response/resistance to orientalist discourse, something Said himself would later recognize.¹⁹ By taking hegemony as a unilateral and overarching relation of domination and not as a process, he seems to omit all possible counter-hegemonic thought both in the West and in the colonized East. This last point is particularly important because, as we will see below, the proponents of Sinologism also seem to take Western ideological discourse as monolithic, all-encompassing, and incapable of being permeated by

16 See, for example, Zhang Kuan 張寬, "Sayide de *Dongfangzhuyi* yu xifang de Hanxue yanjiu" 薩伊德的《東方主義》與西方漢學的研究, *Liaowang xinwen zhouban* 瞭望新聞週刊, no. 27 (1995): 36–37; Zhang Songjian 張松建, "Zhimin zhuyi yu xifang Hanxue: yixie youdai taolun de kanfa" 殖民主義與西方漢學: 一些有待討論的看法, *Zhejiang xuekan* 浙江學刊, no. 4 (2002): 191–96; Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, "Hou zhimin lilun de quehan yu Hanxue zhuyi de tidai lilun" 後殖民理論的缺憾與漢學主義的替代理論, *Zhejiang daxue xuebao (Renwen shehui kexue ban)* 浙江大學學報 (人文社會科學版), no. 1 (2015): 179–88.

17 Arlif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 98.

18 Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 104.

19 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xii.

other subaltern discourses. It is thus easy to fall into the temptation of conceiving China simply as an “object” free from an ideology of its own and that offered itself passively to Western reading and interpretation.

It was precisely the need to acknowledge that Sinology constitutes “a set of ‘knowledges and assumptions’ about the study of China,” alongside the recognition that Orientalism showed inadequacies when applied to China, that led Bob Hodge and Kam Louie to propose the term “Sinologism” as a replacement for Sinology, which they considered obsolete.²⁰ These “knowledges” and assumptions consist, namely, in taking “major tendencies within Chinese culture” and turning them “into absolute values, essential truths about ‘chineseness’ or ‘sinicity.’”²¹ One of these is intimately related with the Chinese language. Its cultural status as the “true Wall of China” is not only brandished by foreign Sinologists as the key that grants access to all things Chinese, but it was also understood by the Chinese themselves, especially those that resisted its reform in the recent past, to be the very essence of “Chineseness.”

Assumptions like these, Hodge and Louie claim, are still felt in the relatively secluded corners of Chinese departments in universities, although the tendency is for new and more diverse generations of researchers to replace the older Sinologists, in whose minds these assumptions are deeply rooted. In this, the two authors are more optimistic than the Chinese proponents of Sinologism we will see below.

3 Questioning the Objectivity of Sinology: Zhou Ning’s Sinologism

Zhou Ning, of Xiamen University, is one of the earliest and most vocal proponents of Sinologism in China. His formulation of Sinologism has deep similarities with Said’s Orientalism, his project being to relate Sinology to Orientalism in order to challenge the former’s claim as a legitimate form of knowledge. Unlike Hodge and Louie, he does not use the term Sinologism as a substitute for Sinology, but rather states that Sinology is trapped within Sinologism and “comes closer to a narrative, a type of discourse that dynamically

20 Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, *Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: The Art of Reading Dragons* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 12–13.

21 *Ibid.*, 13. For example, Michael Puett points out a persistent tendency to attribute to China and the West two different and irreducible cosmologies: in opposition to Western thought, it was believed that Chinese thought had no notion of abstractions and of transcendental realities. See Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2002), 7–8.

and actively selects, expresses, structures, and generates meaning.”²² Although it is generally accepted as a branch of knowledge and learning, it is still an ideology and an instrument for the exercise of power.

A first consideration has to do with what Zhou Ning understands by Sinology, which he conceives in a broad, as well as in a narrow sense.²³ He calls “Sinology in the broad sense” the knowledge of China “that failed to break free from fantastic and exotic ‘imaginings’” and that drew heavily on reports from merchants, diplomatic envoys and, more importantly, missionary writings.²⁴ On the other hand, “Sinology in the narrow sense” pertains to “studies of China and Chinese culture as part of Oriental studies, within the modern Western discipline system.”²⁵ In doing this, Zhou seems to closely follow Said, who conceived of Orientalist scholarship and the mainstream image of the Oriental “other” as two overlapping dimensions of Orientalism. The problem lies in the fact that Zhou’s conception of Sinology is too broad and ends up creating confusion between these two overlapping but ultimately distinct dimensions. In practice, he equates scholarship on China penned by Western scholars specializing in Chinese history, culture and, above all, language, with literary works and works of social thinking that mention China as part of broader, often global, enquiries. Thinkers ranging from the Baron de Montesquieu²⁶ (1689–1755) to Johann von Herder (1744–1803) and from Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) to G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), in attempting to formulate social and historical theories through which to understand Europe’s development and place in the world, were forced to consider and account for the “non-synchronous experiences of Europe’s Other,”²⁷ namely China, but could only do so through second and third-hand sources. It seems dubious, to the author of this article, to consider works of this order, such as Montesquieu’s *Le Esprit des Lois* or Max Weber’s (1864–1920) *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* under the label of Sinology,

22 Zhou Ning 周寧, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 1 (2018), 10; Zhou Ning, “Hanxue huo ‘Hanxuezhuyi,’” 22.

23 Although the conventionalized equivalent of the term “Western Sinology” in the Chinese language is 漢學, the latter’s existence precedes Western Sinology by more than a millennium and was used to refer to the classical philology of the Han dynasty practiced by Chinese literati.

24 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 8.

25 *Ibid.*, 9.

26 Montesquieu, for instance, relies heavily on Jesuit sources, particularly Father Jean Baptiste du Halde’s (1674–1743) *Description de l’Empire de la Chine*, for his commentaries on Chinese society and political system. See Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127.

27 Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” 101.

much less to use the distortions of such works, borne out of a very superficial understanding of the subject matter, as a reason to attack Western Sinology as a whole.

It must be conceded that the writings of these philosophers and social thinkers are the reflection of an intellectual *zeitgeist* and are at the root of the shifts in European images of China.²⁸ However, we should not let these works represent Western Sinology as a scholarly field. To be sure, a degree of complementarity can be seen between Sinology itself and the larger scholarly discussion that happened to mention China, such as when Hegel modified his outline of Chinese religion to include Taoism and Buddhism after he met French Sinologist Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) in Paris in 1826.²⁹ This complementarity seems to indicate that, even in the earliest stages of the discipline, Western Sinologists were more knowledgeable about China than other philosophers and social thinkers who wrote about it.³⁰

In a long article titled “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’”³¹ first published in 2015 in the *Journal of Shanghai Normal University*, Professor Zhang Xiping 張西平 emphasizes the need to distinguish between the myths and fantasies that circulated in cultural thought at a given point in history and that are not academic in nature, and professional Sinology. According to Zhang, by placing both of these under the umbrella of Sinology, even if “in the broad sense,” Zhou

28 Hung Ho-Fung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900,” *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 3 (2003): 254–80; Gregory Blue, “China and Western Social Thought in the Modern Period,” in *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*, ed. Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue, Studies in Modern Capitalism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

29 Anne Cheng, “Philosophy and the French Invention of Sinology: Mapping Academic Disciplines in Nineteenth Century Europe,” *China Report* 50, no. 1 (February 2014): 26.

30 In his essay submitted for the degree of B. Litt at Oxford in 1935–1937, Qian Zhongshu also seems to suggest a distinction between “humanistic” and “pragmatic and philological” interest in China, stating that, had the latter been established earlier, “China could not have appealed to seventeenth and eighteenth century English writers so much as a country to which distance and ignorance had conspired to lend enchantment.” See Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, “China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *A Collection of Qian Zhongshu’s English Essays*, ed. Yang Jiang 楊絳 (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005), 85.

31 Zhang Xiping 張西平, “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 1 (2018): 36–54; Zhang Xiping 張西平, “Guanyu ‘Hanxue zhuyi’ zhi bian” 關於“漢學主義”之辨, *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao (Zhhexue shehui kexue ban)* 上海師範大學學報（哲學社會科學版） 44, no. 2 (2015): 21–36.

Ning creates unnecessary conceptual confusion around Sinology as an object of study.³²

Zhou Ning argues that the “imaginings” that constituted mainstream images of China can be traced back to the works produced by Jesuit missionaries, which he considers to be eminently theological in nature and mainly preoccupied with finding points of contact between Christianity and Confucianism for the expansion of the former.³³ These missionary works were to become the foundation of Sinological studies in subsequent centuries, both in terms of methodology and of study materials. But while it is true that the Jesuits’ need for support and patronage from Europe was a real concern and accounts for the images of an immensely rich and populous China ripe for conversion, we find it somewhat debatable that these first works about China could be classified as mere “imaginings.” Jesuit missionaries received rigorous humanistic training and were, in earlier stages, highly committed to a policy of accommodation that, although at the service of European Christian ideology, privileged close contacts with the Chinese literati.³⁴ It is this accommodation policy that leads Arthur Wright (1913–1976) to argue that the missionaries did not have total control over the image of China they transmitted to Europe.³⁵ The civilization amongst which they lived had its own intellectual tradition, to which the Jesuits had to conform and adapt to if they wanted their mission to succeed. In studying the Chinese language and classics, mingling with Chinese intellectuals and even living in the Imperial Palace, the missionaries acquired a positive image of China that was, to a great extent, a reflection of the Chinese literati’s positive image of their own civilization. To fail to acknowledge that China, as the West, also had its own form of ideology risks taking the former as a passive object that simply presented itself to the “reading” of Western missionaries. It seems appropriate to understand the encounter between China and Europe as a process of mutual interaction in which the object bears a relationship with the subject’s cognition. The image the Chinese intellectual elite had of China colored the missionary’s understanding of it and provided the techniques and the textual references through which Chinese civilization was to be studied during the following centuries.

Thanks to Jesuit missionary accounts, it was as a utopian civilization that China first became a part of European commonplace knowledge and,

32 Zhang Xiping, “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’” 42.

33 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 8.

34 David Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 17.

35 Arthur F. Wright, “The Study of Chinese Civilization,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 2 (1960): 233.

subsequently, of Enlightenment culture. As early as the 1590s, the assumption of the superiority of the Chinese political system was pretty much established³⁶ and, half a century later, China had also become the prime example of morals, a trend that saw its peak with the publication of the Latin translation of the Confucian classics in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. However, views of China often reflected the ideological stance of their author, and China itself was understood in relation to political and social circumstances in Europe. It should come as no surprise that, in a given historical period, we see praise for China side-by-side with its demonization. When sinophobic discourse finally gained the upper hand, a phenomenon that Zhou sees happening around the 1750s, China was still the same China, but Europe was no longer its former self.³⁷ Due to the ambivalence of Europe's self-image since the Renaissance and, particularly, the Reformation, images of China changed accordingly: in times of insecurity and instability, China's stability provided a positive example; in times of confidence and progress, and since every positive stereotype bears within it the possibility of a negative alternative, this stability came to be seen as "backwardness."³⁸ Consequently, as far as "Sinology in the broad sense" is concerned, there is merit in Zhou Ning's understanding of Western Orientalism as comprising both "utopian" and "ideological" variants, particularly when he points out the dialectic relation between the political situation in Europe and shifts in European images of China. This duality of Western Orientalism also overlaps nicely with the distinction between "utopia" and "ideology" proposed by Karl Mannheim (1893–1947):³⁹ when the political and social situation in Europe called for change, a utopian image of China emerged to serve as a role-model; when the intellectual climate changed and Europe became sure of its path of development, ideological thinking took root in order to preserve the *status quo*, and the China of the Enlightenment narrative was reimagined as the losing pole of three different historical struggles: freedom vs. despotism, progress vs. stagnation, and rationalism vs. empiricism.⁴⁰ In short, images of China were used to establish and reinforce European identity in contrast to the Chinese "other." We can thus say Zhou Ning is mainly right in classifying these images as dependent on the West. However, we must bear in mind that

36 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), 103.

37 Zhou Ning, "Xifang de Zhongguo xingxiang," 4.

38 J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 32.

39 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, 7th ed., trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge, 1959).

40 Zhou Ning, "'Sinologism': Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge," 8; Zhou Ning 周寧, "Zongxu" 總序, in *Shijie zhi Zhongguo—Yuwai Zhongguo xingxiang yanjiu*, 1–2.

such images are but one dimension of the phenomenon of Orientalism, one which overlaps with, but is distinct from, academic Sinological studies, which Zhou Ning calls “Sinology in the strict sense.”

Regarding what Zhou Ning has to say about academic Sinology, he defines it as “studies of China and Chinese culture as part of Oriental studies, within the modern Western discipline system.”⁴¹ We have seen above that, as China is encompassed by the Western concept of the “Orient,” Zhou likewise includes Sinology in “Oriental Studies” in the European academic system. As such, according to him, the critique of Orientalism cannot but also apply to Sinology, and the methods and concepts of Sinological discourse are also permeated by a colonial ideology that ultimately alienates its object of study.⁴²

It is recognized that the official “birth” of European academic Sinology took place in December 1814 with the foundation of the *Chaire des langues et de littératures chinoises et tartares-mandchoues* (Chair of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu Languages and Literatures) in the Collège de France. This first wave of scholarly construction was made, says Zhou, over a purely textual and “dead” China, reflecting the way Europe saw China as a civilization stagnating in the past and with no present reality.⁴³ He points out that the place of Sinology in the Western disciplinary system, separated from the rest of the social sciences and their spatial and temporal dimensions, reveals the “ideological or discursive elements” hidden within that disciplinary system and unveils the “implicit ideology of institutionalized Sinology in the narrow sense.”⁴⁴ In accordance with this scheme that alienates China both geographically and historically, Zhou Ning claims that Sinology “resembles a narrative, a type of discourse which dynamically and actively selects, expresses, structures, and generates meaning (...) within a specific cultural and ideological context.”⁴⁵ This “context” is, of course, that of European colonial expansion and domination, which Zhou understands as the background to the development of Sinology as a branch of academic knowledge, as well as the factor behind Sinology’s position within the Western academic system.

Be that as it may, simply equating the practice of Sinological studies with colonial discourse does not seem adequate, because while Oriental Studies is a purely Western academic field, practiced and monopolized by Western scholars, the study of China has much deeper roots and is based in well-established

41 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 9.

42 Zhou Ning, “Hanxue huo ‘Hanxuezhuyi,’” 30.

43 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 9.

44 Ibid., 9; Zhou Ning, “Hanxue huo ‘Hanxuezhuyi,’” 24–25.

45 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 10.

canons and practices, most of which originated in China itself. In a classic answer to Said's *Orientalism*, renowned Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (1935–2014) also mentioned that “Western Sinology in its entirety is a mere footnote appended to the huge Sinological corpus which Chinese intellectuals have been building for centuries up to this day.”⁴⁶ What this meant in practice is that when Abel-Rémusat first occupied the chair of Sinology in the Collège de France, he already had at his disposal methods of inquiry and a large quantity of scholarly instruments developed by Chinese intellectual elites through the centuries.⁴⁷ When observing the practices and materials employed in these earlier stages of Western Sinology, it is illuminating to see how close they are to Chinese traditional intellectual practices. For instance, the methods employed belonged to the philological and commentarial traditions,⁴⁸ and Abel-Rémusat's lectures during his tenure at the Collège de France consisted of grammar and explication of texts mainly belonging to the Confucian canon. This clear prevalence of Confucian texts over Daoist and Buddhist ones, inherited from the Jesuit missionaries who in turn inherited it from the Chinese intellectual elites, reflects the significant role Chinese intellectual culture had in shaping the object and practice of Western Sinology.⁴⁹ Moreover, if the study of China managed to develop beyond the philological and textual tradition that Zhou finds typical of the study of dead civilizations, it was thanks to the Western Sinologists who started joining hands with the then-emerging social sciences.⁵⁰

With this we try to show that Western Sinology cannot be discounted as simple “imaginings” or Western ideology. Of course, this is not to say Sinology, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, was any different from other Orientalist disciplines in that it fell prey to unconscious assumptions and a romantic tendency to establish farfetched parallels between Chinese culture and, for instance, the Egyptian one.⁵¹ However, while most civilizations of the Middle East studied under the aegis of Oriental Studies were effectively interrupted civilizations, the same cannot be said of China. As Zhang Xiping points

46 Pierre Ryckmans, “Orientalism and Sinology,” *Asian Studies Association of Australia. Review* 7, no. 3 (April 1984): 19.

47 David B. Honey, *Incense at the Altar: Pioneering Sinologists and the Development of Classical Chinese Philology*, ed. Paul. W. Kroll (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2001), 19.

48 Cheng Zhangan also notices that the philological methods employed by these Sinologists were reminiscent of those practiced by Chinese literati. See Cheng Zhangan 程章燦, “Hanxue zhuyi, Zhongguoxue zhuyi yu guoxue zhuyi” 漢學主義、中國學主義與國學主義, in *Hanxuezhuyi lunzheng jicui* 漢學主義論爭集萃, ed. Gu Mingdong 顧明棟 and Zhou Xian 周憲 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 110.

49 Wright, “The Study of Chinese Civilization,” 233.

50 Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, 330–31.

51 *Ibid.*, 35–39.

out, “Westerners were never the creators or discoverers of traditional Chinese culture, nor did they build its systems of knowledge.”⁵²

Moreover, one has to keep in mind that, when considering Western Sinology, we are not looking at a closed, self-contained, and purely “Western” system. There was also a considerable degree of dialogue and cooperation between Western Sinologists and Chinese intellectuals. Abel-Rémusat might have never set foot on Chinese soil, but his successor Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) made use of recent Chinese scholarship on his studies of Chinese grammar.⁵³ It is also well known that James Legge’s (1815–1897) landmark translations of the Confucian canon resulted from his cooperation with Wang Tao 王韜 (1828–1897).⁵⁴ Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918), Henri Maspero (1883–1945), Marcel Granet (1884–1940), Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), and Joseph Needham (1900–1995), among other renowned Sinologists, have also, to different degrees, maintained close contact with Chinese intellectuals.⁵⁵ Thus by discounting Western Sinology as ideological imaginings created in the service of imperialism, without taking into account the complexity of the methods, historical conditions, geographies, and individual practitioners involved, one runs the risk of failing to recognize that Western scholars produced a number of invaluable insights that are far more than lies and fabrications. For example, the aforementioned translations by James Legge were based on glosses by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), while Karlgren’s achievements in historical phonology and Paul Pelliot’s (1878–1945) research on Dunhuang manuscripts are all undeniable contributions to global Sinology.

Zhang Xiping summarizes his critique of Sinologism by saying that its proponents “lack knowledge on the history of Western Sinology,” and “have clear inadequacies in the application and analysis of cross-cultural theory”; moreover, the “theoretical foundation upon which [Sinologism] relies is Said’s *Orientalism*,” with no awareness of the limitations of Said’s and postcolonial theory.⁵⁶ His comments clearly sum up some aspects in which Sinologism oversimplifies the history of Sinology and of the intellectual relations between China and Western countries. However, we believe his criticism ends up

52 Zhang Xiping, “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’” 41.

53 Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, 31.

54 Norman J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge’s Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Ben Hammer, “The End of Western Sinology,” in vol. 46 of *Chinese History and Society*, ed. Mechthild Leutner and Hauke Neddermann (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2015), 39–40.

55 Sang Bing 桑兵, *Guoxue yu Hanxue – jindai zhongwai xuejie jiaowanglu* 國學與漢學——近代中外學界交往錄 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 41.

56 Zhang Xiping, “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’” 45.

missing the bigger problem behind the proposal of Sinologism: it is not so much about proving the ideological properties of Western knowledge production about China as it is about finding a way to come to terms with Western Sinology while drawing a boundary between Western discourse and Chinese identity. We will return to this topic in the last part of this essay.

4 “An Alternative to Orientalism”: Gu Mingdong’s Sinologism

Although our discussion so far has focused on Sinologism as understood by Professor Zhou Ning, we deem it necessary to make a brief detour in order to give due attention to the treatment of Sinologism by another prominent scholar, Professor Gu Mingdong 顧明棟. Also a proponent of Sinologism as a critical framework for the study of Western Sinology, Professor Gu has, in recent years, published so far the only major work in English regarding Sinologism, titled *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*.⁵⁷

From the title of his book, we can easily conclude that Gu is aware of the limitations of Orientalism and postcolonial theory when applied to Western Sinology and sees the need for an alternative to apply to the Chinese context. For him, Sinologism is not merely Orientalism applied to Sinology, but a form of academic knowledge, as well as a practical theory of knowledge production.⁵⁸ He justifies divorcing Sinologism from its origins in Orientalism by addressing a problem we mentioned above, namely the particular position of Sinology amongst the other Orientalist disciplines: while Orientalism refers to Oriental Studies as a mainly Western field of inquiry, the object of Sinologism is Sinology itself, the knowledge accumulated by Chinese and non-Chinese thinkers during thousands of years of continuous civilization.⁵⁹ It intends to be a much less politically-charged concept than Orientalism, since it does not conceive of a clear-cut separation between the subject and the object of Sinology: its roots are not to be found in Western imperial bureaucracies, but in the Chinese practice of *guoxue* 國學 (Chinese learning), an intellectual tradition of more than 2000 years.⁶⁰

57 Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013).

58 *Ibid.*, 6.

59 Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, “Hanxue yu Hanxue zhuyi: Zhongguo yanjiu zhi pipan” 漢學與漢學主義：中國研究之批判, in *Hanxuezhuyi lunzheng jicui* 漢學主義論爭集萃, edited by Gu Mingdong 顧明棟 and Zhou Xian 周憲 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 49.

60 *Ibid.*, 49.

While Zhou is more focused on the ideological properties of Sinology throughout history, Gu is more directly concerned with the praxis of contemporary Sinological production. He asserts that, when speaking of “ideology,” we need not have in mind the strictly political, Marxist use of the term, but a broader and epistemological one, namely “a series of positions, convictions, views and methods of scholarship arising in the field of China-West studies that influence scholars in the production of China knowledge.”⁶¹ In taking this much broader definition of “ideology” as an operative concept, Gu is trying to transcend the opposition between subject and object of representation that we find in Said’s *Orientalism* and to focus on an epistemological critique of scholarship, taking Sinologism as an “intellectual ideology centering on academic research, particularly with respect to epistemology and methodology.”⁶²

Briefly, the two ideas that constitute the conceptual grounding of Gu’s Sinologism are “cultural unconscious”⁶³ and “alienation of knowledge,” the former being the source and the latter the end-product of Sinologism. “Cultural unconscious” is connected with Gu’s broader understanding of “ideology,” as per the following definition:

Sinologism is primarily an implicit system of ideas, notions, theories, approaches, and paradigms, first conceived and employed by the West in the encounter with China to deal with all things Chinese and to make sense of the bewildering complexity of Chinese civilization. As the political and intellectual spectrum has been dominated by the West, and the world has to observe China and consume knowledge about China through the Western lens, Sinologism has been complicated and enriched by the non-Western peoples’ perceptions, conceptions, and evaluations of Chinese civilization. Because the ways of observing China and producing knowledge and scholarship on China are controlled by an inner logic that operates frequently beyond our conscious awareness, Sinologism is basically a cultural unconscious in China-West studies and cross-cultural studies.⁶⁴

61 Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, “The Theoretical Debate on ‘Sinologism’: A Rejoinder to Mr. Zhang Xiping,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49, no. 1 (2018): 59.

62 Ibid., 60.

63 The term draws heavily on Fredric Jameson’s “Political Unconsciousness,” only with more emphasis placed on cultural, instead of class, divisions. See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*; Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, “Zhongxi yanjiu de zhengzhi yishi” 中西研究的政治無意識, in *Lishi yujing yu wenhua kongjian* 歷史情境與文化空間, ed. Zhou Xian 周憲 and Cong Cong 從叢 (Nanjing: Sanlian shudian, 2015), 16.

64 Gu Mingdong, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, 7.

Gu's "cultural unconscious" is an attempt to provide a deeper explanation to the superiority/inferiority complex that he says plagues thought about China and that is at the source of tendencies to either beautify or demonize it. He sees these two opposite tendencies as the result of the pervasiveness of Western models of thinking which, as we have seen above, have a direct correspondence with the tendencies of sinophilia and sinophobia in European views of China. In practice, there is a tendency either to idealize and exaggerate the value of Chinese traditional culture, or to demonize it when it deviates from a "Western norm" of Modernity. In both cases, Western standards are being applied, often unconsciously but with a concrete impact on the concepts and methodologies we use to understand China. What is important to note is that this is not a phenomenon exclusive to Western academia, as "it is also the Chinese who employ Western epistemology and methodology to look at the world, their own culture, and themselves."⁶⁵

Gu also states that the defining characteristic of Sinologism, what sets it apart from Sinological knowledge itself, is its alienating quality: "Sinologism should be redefined as alienated knowledge in general and alienation of Sinology and China-West studies in particular."⁶⁶ Here, he admittedly follows Hegel, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804–1872) conceptions of "alienation" as something that, being created but then separated from its creator, ends up controlling him. Alienation is thus "self-alienation," separation from one's nature and one's work. Applying this concept, Gu believes that the original purpose of Sinology was the production of "scholarship and knowledge on China for information and education."⁶⁷ However, due to the influence of "various forces, political, ideological, ethnic, and academic," this knowledge and scholarship on China became an intellectual commodity that deviated substantially from this original purpose. The appearance of Sinologism coincides, says Gu, with the spread of capitalism and colonialism, as missionary writings about China, although also distortive, were not as stained with hegemonic intentions and China was even, in most aspects, seen as superior to the West.

Gu's Sinologism aims to deconstruct the current practice of Sinology and expose the inner logic behind what he sees as the "cultural unconscious" that afflicts its methodological and epistemological foundations. It tries to go against the phenomenon of "self-colonization" that he calls Sinologization

65 Ibid., 6.

66 Ibid., 216.

67 Ibid., 217.

漢學主義化,⁶⁸ that is, the “undeclared but tacitly administered institutionalization of the ways of observing China from the perspective of Western epistemology that refuses, or is reluctant, to view China on its own terms, and of doing scholarship on Chinese materials and producing knowledge on Chinese civilization in terms of Western methodology that tends to disregard the real conditions of China and reduce the complexity of Chinese civilization into simplistic patterns of development modeled on those of the West.”⁶⁹

Although he takes pains to avoid the political implications of Said’s Orientalism, Gu’s notion of Sinologism is still very much political in his demand to study China using Chinese methods and his warnings against intellectual colonization.⁷⁰ Therefore, Gu’s is also not without methodological issues that arise from Sinologism’s emphasis on ideology, which will be developed below.

5 Transcending Sinologism: the Alternative of East-West Studies

As seen above, the common problem both proponents of Sinologism try to address is the perceived influence of Western discourse in the way China thinks itself. This is, in the opinion of this author, where the main point of discussion lies. It is no surprise that both Zhou Ning and Gu Mingdong voice concerns regarding the pervading influence of Western theories when one talks about China, speaking respectively of “academic colonialism”⁷¹ and “intellectual colonization”⁷² in Chinese thinking. That such a state of affairs triggered an “anxiety of the thinking subject” is an indication that, in Said’s formulation, “discourse is not only that which translates struggle or systems of domination, but that for *which* struggles are conducted.”⁷³

However, rejecting the totality of Western Sinology as an ideological narrative would entail the rejection of all Western contributions to knowledge of China, something that would be detrimental to the search for objective

68 Gu Mingdong, “Hanxue yu Hanxue zhuyi,” 69.

69 Gu Mingdong, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, 218–19.

70 See a similar critique in Viatcheslav Vetrov, “China’s New School of Thought-Masters (Xinzixue): An Alternative to Sinologism?” *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques* 70, no. 3 (2017): 743–44.

71 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 11.

72 Gu Mingdong, “Hanxue yu Hanxue zhuyi,” 68–69.

73 Edward Said, “Foucault and the Imagination of Power,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 4th ed., ed. Edward Said (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 243. Italics in the original.

self-knowledge and lead to sinocentrism.⁷⁴ Despite often applying its own methods and concepts to China, Western Sinology, and Western theories and methodologies more broadly, need not be seen as a danger to the construction of Chinese national self-image. They can, in contrast, be an important instrument for doing so critically. The ironic fact that Sinologism relies heavily on Western theories⁷⁵ to challenge dominant Western-centric discourses on China seems to indicate that Western theoretical contributions can be applied productively in different contexts and geographies. When two cultures meet, it is expected that one – normally the one that is dominant at the time – will exert a disproportionate amount of influence over the other. Still, this does not mean this influence has to be absorbed and adopted passively. As Wang Ning 王寧 pointed out some decades ago, through cultural translation, dynamic reception, and creative construction (not to mention application), these theories and concepts can be “metamorphosed” and used to challenge any underlying bias and ethnocentrism.⁷⁶ The fact that China itself still embraces as its political orientation its own version of a Western theory, namely Marxism, should serve as a clear example of this potentiality.

As such, proponents of Sinologism seem to overlook the possibility of Chinese scholars employing Western discourse in order to make their own voices felt. In doing this, they replicate one of the problematic aspects of Said’s theory, namely that in participating in Western discourse, the subaltern cannot but participate in its own Orientalizing.⁷⁷ They also seem to understand Western discourse as something reified and monolithic, continuous (to the point of becoming unconscious), and impenetrable to other discourses. Such understanding seems to exclude the possibility of the existence of “intermediaries,”⁷⁸ scholars and intellectuals who, versed in both the Western and their native traditions, are able to break the illusion of the impenetrability of the dominating discourse by engaging actively in the Western-dominated academic milieu and making their own voices felt. Curiously, Gu Mingdong

74 Zhang Bo 張博, “Hanxuezhuyi’ ji qi fansi” “漢學主義”及其反思, in *Hanxuezhuyi lunzhengjicui* 漢學主義論爭集萃, edited by Gu Mingdong 顧明棟 and Zhou Xian 周憲 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 219.

75 This fact is not lost on Zhang Xiping, who mentions it in his critique of Sinologism. See Zhang Xiping, “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism,’” 51.

76 Wang Ning 王寧, “Identity Seeking and Constructing Chinese Critical Discourse in the Age of Globalization”, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 23, no. 1 (1996): 537–38.

77 Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 325.

78 This notion was partly inspired by that of “contact zones” employed by Mary Louise Pratt. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

could be considered an example of such a scholar, as his recent work on comparative poetics and aesthetics is a prime example of how to address Western misconceptions regarding Chinese language and literary criticism through pure scholarship instead of ideology.⁷⁹ The excessive emphasis placed on ideology by the proponents of Sinologism seems to the author of this essay a way of perpetuating the very problem it seeks to overcome. Taking as a starting point the inferiority of a civilization in relation to another is conducive to reinforcing such inferiority, not to overcome it.

The impenetrability of Western discourse to which we alluded above has another problematic implication when transposed to the context of Sinology and the study of China. At a certain point of his defense of Sinologism, Zhou Ning concludes that “[i]f Western Sinology is a certain form of truth, then the divisions of Chinese and Western learning are meaningless. If, however, Western Sinology, as a constituent part of Western learning, is itself a discourse reflecting Western cultural hegemony, then it is not only necessary to differentiate between Western Sinology and *guoxue*, but also to assume competition, conflict, criticism, and supersession.”⁸⁰ However, if we take into account not only the current context of globalization but also the history of extensive intellectual contacts between China and the West in the domain of Sinology which we briefly touched upon above, we might ask whether such a division between Western Sinology (*hanxue*) and *guoxue* is productive or even tenable. Borrowing the question posed by the Indian philosopher Anindita Balslev to Richard Rorty (1931–2007) on the possibility of comparative philosophy, is “the cultural boundary between the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ of a given intellectual tradition so conceptually conditioned that it automatically transcribe[s] itself into a disciplinary boundary?”⁸¹

As Benjamin Hammer noted in a related essay, a dichotomy between an “insider” *guoxue jia* 國學家 and an “outsider” *hanxue jia* 漢學家 presupposes not only a difference in the concepts and methodologies employed by its practitioners, but also the very incommensurability of the cultures involved. The opposition of East and West once celebrated by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and still actively applied by thinkers like Francois Jullien might be appealing to those who dream of the Orient as an exotic *heterotopia*, but in intellectual terms, this distinction has long stopped making sense. During the past

79 Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, *Fusion of Critical Horizons in Chinese and Western Language, Poetics, Aesthetics* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021).

80 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 11.

81 Zhang Wei, *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern Thinkers: A Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Understanding*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 13. Slightly modified by the author of this essay.

century, thinkers like Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) or even Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) himself would give us pause should we try to insert them in either the *guoxue* or *hanxue* camp. They would fit somewhere in between, and once several examples of such scholars have been found, we have reason to be suspicious of a clear-cut distinction between a “pure” *guoxue* and an ideologically tainted *hanxue*.⁸²

Another major example of such a scholar that defies distinctions of *guoxue* and *hanxue* is Qian Zhongshu. In his scholarly masterwork *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編, Qian places the Chinese and Western literary and intellectual traditions on an equal footing and makes extensive comparisons between them, thereby constituting a truly “unsystematic system.”⁸³ What results from these exercises is the realization that many ideas and concepts deemed Western can also be found in ancient Chinese thought and that there is much of what is universally human to be found in Chinese letters. In *Du La'okong* 讀拉奧孔 (On Reading Laokoon), for example, Qian points out that the ancient Chinese had already come to the conclusion that painting, as spatial art, is able only to represent moments, while poetry, as temporal art, can compose pictures that transcend visual representation, which is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's (1729–1781) main thesis in *Laokoon*.⁸⁴ At other times, the investigations in *Guanzhui bian* end up exposing Western misconceptions about China, such as Hegel's claim that the Chinese language was not suited for logical thinking and, unlike German, was unable to contain opposite meanings in a single word.⁸⁵ Taking as point of departure the potential of both cultures for “mutual illumination,” Qian Zhongshu's writings challenge the presupposition of the incommensurability between China and the West. Moreover, the fact he applies Western concepts to the Chinese tradition (and vice-versa) while writing in classical Chinese and in the form of reading notes (*zhaji* 劄記) extends this commensurability to the linguistic and formal domains.

82 Hammer, “The End of Western Sinology.”

83 Yao Hongwei 姚洪偉, “Lun Qian Zhongshu de ‘Datong’ shuo” 論錢鍾書的“打通”說, *Neimenggu nongye daxue xuebao* (*Shehui kexue bao*) 內蒙古農業大學學報 (社會科學報) 13, no. 2 (2011): 198.

84 Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Patchwork: Seven Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Duncan Campbell, vol. 1 of *East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 79–113.

85 Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, “Characters with Multiple Meanings Used Simultaneously: On the Title of the ‘Book of Changes,’” in *Guanzhuibian* 管錐編, trans. Ronald Egan (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998); Gong Gang 龔剛, *Qian Zhongshu yu wenyi de xichao* 錢鍾書與文藝的西潮 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2014), 48.

Zhang Longxi has also long been militating against the notion of incommensurability between East and West. In such works as *The Tao and the Logos* and *Unexpected Affinities*, Zhang makes Zhuangzi join ranks with Heraclitus (544–483 BCE) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in affirming the pragmatic quality of language,⁸⁶ applies Jacques Derrida's (1930–2004) *Grammatology* to the Chinese language in a productive way,⁸⁷ and compares the use of similar metaphors in works of Western and Chinese literature.⁸⁸ Such exercises go beyond understanding China through western theory and place East and West in a dialogue of equals. Such a dialogue, more than highlighting differences and affinities between both traditions, signals above all the possibility of constructing Chinese identity without the need to clearly separate it from the West as implied by Sinologism.

6 Conclusions

The debate on Sinologism is still ongoing and the concept is being expanded and explored by scholars from various academic backgrounds. This naturally influences the channels through which these scholars become aware of Sinologism, as well as their definition of the phenomenon and of the ways it makes itself manifest. Although we chose to start with Zhou Ning's Sinologism and followed through with Gu Mingdong's own interpretation, this by no account implies that the second represents a higher degree of perfectibility or sophistication over the first. However, both scholars meet at the same point, that of the need to counter "Sinologization" and academic colonization in knowledge about China.

To conclude, some points must be made. Firstly, when talking about Western Sinology, one must have a clear awareness of what one is talking about. It is debatable whether, like Zhou Ning, we should consider as Western Sinology the works of social thinkers that, while a product of the Western "image" of China, cannot represent the seriousness and engagement with Chinese language and culture of Western scholarly Sinologists. Regarding the latter, their contributions to knowledge about China cannot be dismissed even if it is imbued with ideological properties as the proponents of Sinologism convincingly point

86 Zhang Longxi 張隆溪, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West, Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 30.

87 *Ibid.*, 32.

88 Zhang Longxi 張隆溪, *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 29–63.

out. Even if a certain degree of bias and prejudice is always present when the West looks at China, this should not serve to completely discard the validity of Western Sinological knowledge, just like a reader's prejudices do not, by themselves, invalidate the product of the interpretative process.⁸⁹

That said, if we admit that ideological prejudice is inevitable in the production of knowledge, trying to defend or attack Western Sinology based on this fact seems to serve little purpose. What one cannot do is let such prejudices and biases become unassailable under pretenses of science and objectivity.⁹⁰ One would do well to take Hans Hägerdal's advice regarding Orientalism: "what matters is having a *consciousness* about the problem, being constantly prepared to pose questions on the presence of an 'Orientalist' style of thought, whether we like Said or not."⁹¹

The question of Sinologism is relevant to the current state of Chinese studies because it emerged not as a mere epistemological problem but as a result of the country's fear of academic colonialism. The present article, however, has tried to show that one should not base a critique of Western Sinology on ideological grounds. The myths of cultural reification and incommensurability must be overcome and Chinese and Western scholarship past and present must converge in order to compose a complete understanding of China that avoids the Scylla of Sinologism and the Charybdis of Sinocentrism. To this effect, it is important not only to be receptive to various theories and methods but, above all, to apply them critically.

A couple of final comments are in order. Both formulations of Sinologism display a somewhat unsettling tendency to employ the abstraction "the West." One should be careful of such generalizations in order to avoid falling in the opposite practice of "Occidentalism." Moreover, dealing with "the West" as a totality raises a number of questions: can we find discursive properties specific to the Sinology of certain Western countries? How do we define "Western scholars" in a context of increasingly complex and elastic identities? What do we make of Western scholars, for example Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, that write about Sinologism? As Benjamin Hammer once noted, one should avoid

89 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum Impacts (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 277–304.

90 Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, "Hanxuezhuyi: Zhongguo zhishi shengchan de fangfalun zhi pipan" 漢學主義：中國知識生產的方法論之批判, *Qinghua daxue xuebao (Zhaxue shehui kexue ban)* 清華大學學報（哲學社會科學版）26, no. 2 (2011): 140.

91 Hans Hägerdal, "The Orientalism Debate and the Chinese Wall: An Essay on Said and Sinology," *Itinerario* 21, no. 3 (1997): 37–38. Italics in the original.

judgements based on superficial assumptions or on nationality or political affiliations.⁹²

Finally, care must also be taken so that Sinologism does not suffer the same fate as Orientalism and become a weapon of political correctness, or a way of policing adherence to politically enforced official narratives. An impartial and uninterested scholar (if indeed there is such a thing) should not be blindly subservient to official narratives, and Sinologism must take caution not to stand in the way of free and standard-based inquiry on all sorts of topics. In other words, Sinologism must not, like Orientalism, be placed at the service of cultural relativism or exceptionalism. Tainted with political and ideological connotations, Sinologism risks becoming part of the problem instead of an attempt at a solution.

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92 Ben Hammer, "Guoji shiye yu hanxue xingtai" 國際視野與漢學形態, *Yunmeng xuekan* 雲夢學刊 29, no. 3 (2008): 16–18.

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