China and Germany

While Chinese publications on the history of Sino-German relations during the last two decades have been rapidly increasing, research on the German side has been somewhat limited. Chinese research more often than not stretches unflinchingly from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, and topics like the economy, politics, military affairs, missionaries, and culture are at the forefront.[1] A recent preoccupation with the Other clearly shows an ideological shift from a nationalistic, patriotic approach during the 1970s when any foreign political, economic, and cultural activity became an act of “imperialistic exploitation” and “foreign aggression,” toward a more pragmatic approach in the 1980s when “modernization theory” became the order of the day. At the beginning of the twenty-first century “comparative culture perspectives” took over; China no longer perceived itself as a passive entity “responding” to the West but as an equal actor. Nevertheless, the international research landscape of Sino-German encounters is still somewhat patchy. To understand Sino-German encounters as transnational narratives emerging from distinct contextualization shaping both the German/European and the Chinese/Asian cultural spheres, this research will need a joint Sino-German effort based on well-grounded resources and a multidisciplinary investigation by scholars fluent in several languages.

Investigating Western (mainly German) texts and an impressively diversified amount of resources and archival material, Germany and China: Transnational Encounters since the Eighteenth Century is a Western view on how German discourse has been shaped by and has shaped the image of China over time and in various fields. While the editors, historians Joanne Miyang Cho and David M. Crowe, seem perfectly aware of the “paucity of English publications on Sino-German relations” and the “relatively few books that cover the broad topical range” (p. 9), they are hardly aiming at a transnational encounter in regard to Sino-German research cooperation and exchange.[2] This being said, what remains is to praise their endeavor in the highest of terms; this is a collection of mainly case studies that leads us into undiscovered realms, tests innovative approaches, sheds new light on historical presumptions, makes exceptional connections visible, shows the workings of “Orientalism/Occidentalism” as well as “Sinocentrism/Eurocentrism,” and, without exception, contains outstandingly well-researched and well-written essays. Probably due to the editors’ firm grasp and tight leash, Germany and China is a clearly structured but nevertheless wide-ranging volume mapping German-Chinese encounters from the century of Enlightenment to German reunification.

In the excellent introduction, which includes a brief overview of German-Chinese relations since the eighteenth century, a historiographical repositioning, and a literary review, the editors position their book in a transnational framework “wherein cultural transfer moves in both directions” (p. 1). The tripartite volume is organized in chronological order and ends with short biographies of the contributors and a serviceable index.

In five individual chapters, the first part of the collection follows the well-known alternating pattern of dealing with China, oscillating between Sinophilia and Sinophobia from the eighteenth century up to World War I. In his essay “Leibniz and Wolff on China,” Peter K. J.
Park offers a historical and historiographical reading of the early German Enlightenment’s discourse on China by mainly focusing on two of its most prominent advocates: the Sinophiles Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754). Park’s epilogue, however, recollects the fact that notwithstanding the philosophers’ admiration for the Chinese language and thinking, by the mid-eighteenth century, Europe’s attitude toward China had turned almost instantly negative and was downright unfair—strangely enough against better knowledge.

Nicholas A. Germana explores G. W. F. Hegel’s (1770-1831) interest in China, which serves as a backdrop of his understanding the nature of the state and how it made its members realize genuine freedom and morality. Hegel disagreed with Voltaire and Leibniz who argued that the familial principle of Chinese government promoted morality; he offered in response that only by growing out and away from familial limitations were men put into a state of being where they were able to realize themselves as free moral beings. Hegel linked this to his view that China could not progress but remained at the beginning of the course of world history.

Martin Rosenstock follows the life and work of the Prussian missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803-51) who examined China not from a philosophical ivory tower but from a more pragmatic viewpoint. By way of incredible luck and sheer coincidence, he escaped his destiny as a belt maker in Stettin and instead spent many years in China spreading the Christian message by distributing Bibles—where required, in combination with opium. In a close reading of Gützlaff’s “The Life of Taou-Kwang” (published posthumously in 1852), a biography of the eighth Qing emperor, Rosenstock makes Gützlaff emerge as a “transitional figure in the European intellectual climate of the nineteenth century ... on its way to developing a virulent Sinophobia” (p. 67).

When examining German-Chinese relations from 1871 to 1917, Crowe not only gives a detailed overview of both countries’ transnational relations but also shows convincingly what lay at the bottom of their special relationship after 1919. Despite having declared war on Germany in 1917, the Treaty of Versailles created a sense of disappointment and isolation in China and Germany and paved the way for a new axis of the betrayed and humiliated parties.

In chapter 5, Lydia Gerber offers an eye-opening case study of transcultural encounters based on documents from the archives of the Weimar Mission featuring the Western-trained Chinese physician Li Benjing and his employer, the Protestant missionary Richard Wilhelm. In the German-controlled territory of Kiaochow in the Shandong Province (from 1897 to 1914), medical care became visible as a contact zone in the colonial space that offered opportunities for learning and collaboration. This space makes us rethink colonial territories not simply as places of relentless confrontation between colonizers and the colonized but also as spaces of negotiation, transcultural networking, and mutual empowerment.

The second part of the volume proceeds until the end of World War II, confirming that prewar ties between the two countries, as well as their common sense of betrayal, were a sort of prelude to their post-1918 relationship. In their historical follow-up of Sino-German relations between 1918 and 1941, Christine Swanson and Crowe illustrate how these relations were very much based on mutual political, military, and economic interests and on the pursuit of two outsiders to redefine their international roles and return to the global stage. The significance of the Treaty of Versailles cannot be overestimated in order to explain the cooperation of the Weimar Republic (much pressed as it was domestically by arms manufacturers and dealers and externally by Versaille’s restrictions) and Republican China seeking to modernize its economy and to prepare for the Northern Expedition. Clearly, both countries teamed up for opportune reasons, and their diplomatic ties and relations are understandable within the context of their infamous domestic and international history.

One of the exceptional essays, one that undertakes a study of mainly Chinese sources, is Shellen Xiao Wu’s investigation of the wartime periodical (appeared 1940-42) Warring States Policies (Zhan Guo Ce). The essay serves as a sort of intellectual platform for discussing geopolitical issues in metaphorical disguise. Above all, it reflects an unexpected flow of ideas and the high profile of German intellectual influence in China during the Republican era. While German geopolitics was discredited by World War II, its core ideas started their career in China at that time, stretching all the way into the twenty-first century. While members of the Warring State Clique in the late 1940s promoted the idea of China as Tianxia (all-under-heaven) to be transformed into a geopolitical state, or explained that China could not let go of Xinjiang due to it being a "necessary Lebensraum," one might nowadays think, for example, of the heavy state-sponsored archaeological undertakings done in order to prove China’s existence in extended time and space.

Volker Wehdeking offers an intertextual reading
of German writer Hermann Hesse’s novels Siddhartha (1922) and The Glass-Beads’ Game (1943), tracing influences of Chinese philosophy and thought in these books. Responding to the intellectual crisis of modern Western culture (signified by Spengler’s The Decline of the West [1922]), Hesse (1877-1962) turned to Eastern models and partly created counter-images of a self-destructive West, which had lost its values and spiritual orientation during the First World War.

Not unlike Hesse, Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) discovered and favored China as a promised land in the face of irrational tendencies in the West. Cho follows Schweitzer’s intellectual journey and uncovers his politics of civilization, in which he put China at eye level with the West, while Africa and India were clearly relegated to the bottom of this hierarchy. His enthusiasm for Confucianism, which he basically equated with Chinese philosophy that he put on an equal footing with Christian thought, and his interest for Daoism, which he liked for its mysticism that he thought could cure modern Europe, did not, however, prevent this Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from advocating a colonial and paternalistic stance toward India and Africa (where he spent most of his life).

Lee M. Roberts discusses a rather absurd phenomenon that one more time demonstrates the efficaciousness and power of the construction of the Other. In a close reading of memoirs of European Jews who took refuge in the Shanghai ghetto, he shows that the notional fear of Asia not only made people reluctant to flee the very real danger of the Holocaust but also precluded any human encounter between “Shanghailanders” and the Shanghainese. Roberts brings to light vestiges of prewar “Yellow Peril” discourse in Shanghailanders’ memoirs that had been circulating in interwar German-language texts and creating “fear of China as the home of lawless savages who hated white people” (p. 195).

The last four chapters of part 3 are dedicated to different aspects of German-Chinese encounters after the end of World War II. David Tompkins shows how the East-German government took pains to fabricate a positive vision of China to mobilize its own population and to boost its own image. While this inspiring symbol quickly developed a momentum of its own—fuelled by pamphlets praising Mao and the victorious revolution, stamps, music, films, cultural exchange, etc.—the emerging Sino-Soviet split at the end of the 1950s, however, demanded an abrupt change of track. Interestingly though—and once more proof of the power of images—Tompkins concludes, “the disappearance of this positive image became a serious challenge to the [Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands/German Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party in East Germany] SED’s legitimacy and vision of itself and for its citizens” (p. 225).

Investigating the role of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in West German Cold War politics, Sebastian Gehrig shows that for different reasons and for different political camps, the PRC became an ideological pilgrimage site for West Germans, too, as well as a potential strategic ally. True to the Cold War maxim “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” West German conservatives, being suspicious of East Germany as well as of the Soviet Union (USSR) on the one hand and left-wing radicals inundating their frustration over USSR’s “social imperialism” on the other hand, turned to Mao’s China either as a potential political ally or as the driving motor for the world revolution. However, it was only a short flirt that ended abruptly when Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms transformed the Cold War ally into a potential market while opening up policies allowed for a first vague notion of the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution.

Min Zhou builds on this fascination with China by analyzing the travel writings of Adolf Muschg (born 1934), Max Frisch (1911-91), and Günter Grass (1927-2015); however, she comes to the conclusion that none of these authors succumbed to China’s state-controlled self-presentation, nor to the notion of exoticism. In an intriguing reading of these travelogues based on Victor Sengalen’s idea of exoticism, she reveals that each of the texts shows an awareness of the European gaze as well as its limitations. The Other becomes not just another exotic object or a recycled popular image but it gazes back and thereby reveals the self’s impact on it. By not trying to give a definite, complete portrait of China, these authors achieved subjective authenticity and actually transformed travel literature as a genre, as well as enhanced the reader’s perception of a complex contemporary China on its way from a burdened past into an unknown tentative future.

Last but not least, Michael Mayer takes us back to a critical turning point in Chinese and German history, into the spring and early summer of 1989. Based on diplomatic files of West and East Germany as well as those of the French Foreign Office, his essay provides a unique perspective on how the PRC dealt with German unification against the background of the Tiananmen protests. German unification was something of a bitter pill Beijing had to swallow, and it would take years to achieve a sort of normalization of bilateral relations.
In sum, this publication truly achieves the editors’ claim to provide “a more comprehensive presentation and a broader analysis of Sino-German relations from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century than any existing volume on this topic” (p. 15). I highly recommend this excellently edited volume to students and scholars of IR studies, to historians and literary scholars advocating global history/literature with an emphasis on the history/aesthetics of contacts and interactions, and to anyone who is interested in German-Asian studies or in transnational approaches in general.

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