

## Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective

Ming Dong Gu

*University of Texas Dallas & Yangzhou University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Gu, Ming Dong. "Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2213>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 1751 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 15 Issue 2 (June 2013) Article 2**  
**Ming Dong Gu,**  
**"Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/2>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.2 (2013)**  
Thematic Issue **Asian Culture(s) and Globalization**  
**Ed. I-Chun Wang and Li Guo**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective" Ming Dong Gu discusses how the West formulated its ways of observing China and how the rest of the world and the Chinese themselves view Chinese culture through the Western lens. Gu discusses the thought of selected scholars in Western history who have contributed to the formation of Sinologism and explores the motivation, logic, rationale, epistemology, methodology, and characteristics of the West's long-term endeavor to incorporate China into the Western-centered world system.

## Ming Dong GU

### Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective

Since Marco Polo's time, the West has made numerous attempts to bring China into its conceived intellectual and material system, which has eventually evolved into what is nowadays called "globalization." In the service of this long-term endeavor, a series of ideas, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual models have been conceived and proposed to address the dazzling complexity of Chinese culture. Western theories, approaches, and models are dominated by epistemological and methodological problems, which are distinctly reflected in Western scholarship on China. As these problems are intimately related to Sinology, they may be subsumed collectively under a conceptual category called "Sinologism," a term employ to cover the motivation, logic, rationale, epistemology, methodology, and the characteristic features of the long-term endeavor to incorporate China into the Western-centered global world system (see Gu). In the study at hand I examine the historical rise and development of Sinologism in the larger context of globalization, but do not attempt to offer a full historical account nor do I aim to provide a description of its historical formation. Rather, I examine some crucial stages in its development and critique the thought of selected Western scholars, who have made fundamental contributions to Sinologism. My study is not so much a historical review of Sinologism as a critical examination of the problematic viewing of Chinese culture in Western history.

Unlike Orientalism, Sinologism arose as an intellectual by-product of Western efforts to build a global intellectual system incorporating China and there is a world of difference between its present and past forms. In the beginning, Sinology was very much like Hellenism dedicated to the study of Greek antiquity, then extending to a broad spectrum of ancient, medieval, and modern Greek culture. I am inclined to regard the early periods of Sinologism as a golden time when knowledge about China was pursued almost for its own sake and alienation of knowledge scarcely touched it. At least it was not contaminated by political ideologies of imperialism and colonialism. Clear signs of alienated knowledge did not appear until the turn of the twentieth century and coincided with the spread of capitalist and colonialist expansions. Sinologism in its earliest form, though distorting the real picture of China, was guided by an epistemology relatively free from overt hegemonic motives, because China was then perceived to be the West's equal, superior in many aspects of life. Sinologism took a benign form that attempted to accommodate the vast differences of Chinese life, religion, and thought into a broad intellectual system guided by an accommodationist policy. This can be seen in the Jesuits' efforts to convert the Chinese to Christianity. Faced with a deeply entrenched Chinese culture, early missionaries like Matteo Ricci adopted an accommodationist approach. Guided by this approach, Ricci did not explain the Catholic faith as something foreign or new, but made use of existing Chinese ideas and concepts to explain Christianity. To bring the Chinese into his conceived Christian system, he argued that the Chinese culture and people had always believed in god and that Christianity is simply the most perfect manifestation of their faith. He went so far as to identify the Chinese Lord of Heaven with Jesus Christ and tolerate the Chinese practice of ancestor worship as a religious practice not incompatible with Christianity (see, e.g., Cronin; Spence). The accommodationist policy may be the first Western effort to fit Chinese culture into a Western intellectual system in a way relatively free from Western cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, even Ricci's approach was not entirely free from the Western-centric epistemology that was to dominate all Western encounters with China: "I make every effort to turn our way the ideas of the leader of the sect of literati, Confucius, by interpreting in our favour things which he left ambiguous in his writings" (Ricci qtd. in Rule 1). Its eventual demise was not an accidental event, but signals the setting in of Western-dominated ideology and epistemology and anticipates the rise of "Sinologism": the ideological dominance of Western intellectual habits vis-à-vis China.

The accommodationist system was endorsed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz when he attempted to fuse European and Chinese cultures into a global intellectual system in terms of language, religion, science, and metaphysics. In Leibniz's works concerning China we see clear signs of Western cultural hegemony and intellectual habits: while admitting that China is about equal to the West in arts and the practical mastery of natural objects, he considered the West to be superior to China in intellectual pursuits: "In profundity of knowledge and in the theoretical disciplines we are their superiors. For

besides logic and metaphysics, and the knowledge of things incorporeal, which we just claim as peculiarly our province, we excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the materials, i.e. in things mathematical, as in truth demonstrated when Chinese astronomy comes into competition with our own. The Chinese are thus seen to be ignorant of that great light of the mind, the art of demonstration, and they have remained content with a sort of empirical geometry, which our artisans universally possess" (46). Here, we see signs of a tendency in Western knowledge production about China: with a limited knowledge about Chinese tradition, Western scholars would not hesitate to draw conclusions about China and claim that China lacks this or that.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the endeavor to place China in a Western system of the world became a primary concern in the minds of major Western thinkers. For example, Voltaire and Montesquieu made systematic attempts to incorporate China in separate ways. Voltaire carried on the romantic tendency initiated by Marco Polo and developed it into an early romantic tradition of Sinologism and invented an idealized image of China both in his literary work *The Orphan of China* and in his grand work on world history. In perhaps the first universal history, Voltaire gave the pride of place to China by opening his grand work with two chapters on Chinese civilization. He praised China, but presented it as a changeless civilization: "This state has subsisted in splendor above 4000 years without having undergone any material alteration in law, manners, language, even in the mode of fashion and dress" (9). As one of the earliest European thinkers to inquire into the cause of Chinese retardation in development, Voltaire attributed stagnancy to a reverence for the past and the nature of Chinese language, but he was free from Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism typical of later thinkers.

By contrast, Montesquieu had already gone through the infatuation with China and became disillusioned. By this time, the view of Chinese as an old, stagnant, and exhausted culture resistant to any change appeared and has since occupied the Western thinkers who attempted to bring China into the Western world system. Along with it we see the intellectual habits that would dominate China-West studies and eventually develop into what I call Sinologism. Being among the first to extend comparative methods of classification to the political forms in human societies, Montesquieu may be the first Western thinker to formulate a Sinological approach to Chinese civilization and was certainly a pivotal figure in the transition of Sinologism from its early romantic idealization to realistic denigration in its mature stages. Montesquieu devoted a great deal of time to learn about Chinese culture and even made friends with a Chinese person named Hoange who was brought to Europe by a French missionary (927). Characteristic of later Western thinkers' approach to China, Montesquieu had his interest in China not for its own sake, but for the sake of conceiving and constructing a global political and intellectual system. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, the first consistent attempt to survey the varieties of human society including China, Montesquieu classifies governments of the world into three main categories: monarchies (free governments headed by a hereditary figure, e.g., king, emperor), despotisms (enslaved governments headed by dictators), and republics (free governments headed by elected leaders). Each of these systems of government was operated on the principles of honor, fear, and virtue. The principle of honor drove monarchical governments to establish a strict hierarchy of institutions. The principle of fear impelled despotic governments to enforce a social order of unquestioned loyalty and submission. The principle of virtue led republics to promote equality among the citizens (21-30). Montesquieu rejected the missionaries' characterization of China as an ideal state and put China into the category of despotisms in his conclusion to his study of the Chinese empire: "China is a despotic state whose principle is fear" (128).

Anyone who has sufficient knowledge of Chinese history would agree that the three principles of honor, fear, and virtue were all present in Chinese dynastic governments, but this recognition would make untenable Montesquieu's constructed grand system. Anticipating challenges to his formulated theory, he took a preemptive move: "Our missionaries speak of the vast empire of China as of an admirable government, in whose principle intermingle fear, honor, and virtue. I would therefore have made an empty distinction in establishing the principles of the three governments" (126-27). He mounted his defense and rejected the missionaries' view by recourse to the realities of Chinese society, which he perceived to lack in idea of honor central to a monarchy in his conception: "I do not know how one can speak of honor among peoples who can be made to do nothing without beatings"

(126). On the matter of virtue that he considered to be paramount to a republic government, he thought that China was also deficient, because "our men of commerce, far from giving us an idea of the same kind of virtue of which our missionaries speak, can rather be consulted about the banditry of the mandarins. I also call to witness the great man, Lord Anson" (127). It was a great irony that he should have distrusted missionaries who stayed long in China and had ample time to observe Chinese society, and trusted merchants and seamen who came to China for profits or conquest. It was a greater irony that he should have cited as an authority on China, George Anson, a British naval commander who was treated badly by Chinese officials for his unauthorized intrusion into China. In a way, his calling Anson to witness was not a random act, for Anson, "personified the newly assertive side of an expansionist Great Britain, self-confident, bellicose, swift to condemn the weak, impatient with delays" (Spence 54). In his comparison of Chinese and Western rulers, Montesquieu wrote that the Chinese emperor "will not feel, as our princes do, that if he governs badly, he will be less happy in the next life, less powerful and less rich in this one; he will know that, if this government is not good, he will lose his empire and his life" (127). Ignorant of Chinese ideas about the next life and retribution, he seemed to have known nothing about the cardinal political principle of government in traditional China: the Mandate of Heaven, which explain how a virtuous ruler gains power and a despotic one loses it.

Montesquieu's analysis of China in terms of his political theory reveals an important dimension of the Western epistemic ideology in the process of being formed: a teleological approach derived from the studies of Western nations. In his formulated theory, the nature of a government is determined by the size of the state: a small territory gives rise to a republic; a medium size territory is a monarchical state; and "a large empire presupposes a despotic authority in the one who governs" (124-6). Since Chinese states through history are generally large-scale empires, China must have been a despotic state founded on the principle of fear rather than those of honor and virtue. According to his theory, "there must be no censors in despotic governments" (71). But here again, China does not fit into his theory, for a distinctive feature of Chinese dynastic government is the system of appointed censors whose primary duty is to criticize the ruler's wrong policies and conduct, and recommend corrective measures. As a distinct Chinese political institution, the system of censors played a significant role in Chinese dynastic governments and became an integral part of Sun Yat-sen's five-power constitution for the Chinese republic. This fact totally contradicts Montesquieu's view of Chinese government as despotic. He therefore had to make the concession by admitting that the Chinese case poses some exceptions to the rule. On the issue of punishment by the government, Montesquieu noted the Chinese preference of moral education to punishment because "the more severe the punishments, the nearer the revolution" and he had to make another concession in a note: "I shall show later that China, in this respect, is a case of a republic or a monarchy" (82, note 25). Having put Chinese government into the category of despotism, Montesquieu again and again discussed China in the category of monarchies (116, 209).

Spence offers an apt summary of Montesquieu's relation to China: "Montesquieu's numerous comments on China ... added up to an indictment of China" (92). Indeed, on numerous occasions, Montesquieu expressed blatant attacks. For example, he wrote: "It is strange the Chinese, whose life is entirely directed by rites, are nevertheless the most unscrupulous people on earth.... In Lacedaemonia, stealing was permitted; in China, deceit is permitted" (321). After examining all the places concerning China in Montesquieu's book, however, I have found a pattern in his characterization of Chinese civilization. His distortion of Chinese things was not made, as some scholars believe, in accordance with the changing trend in Europe from sinophilic to sinophobic stance, but dictated by his desire to construct a grand intellectual system of world civilizations, which necessitates a way to contain the bewildering complexity of Chinese civilization through a constructed theoretical framework and to explain the differences from the Western counterparts in terms of conceived theories. Placing China into the pigeonhole of despotism is a good example. Despite his years of devotion to the study of China, his knowledge of China was not sufficient for him to account for the vast differences between Chinese and Western civilizations. For another example, he noted a property peculiar to the government of China, i.e., the conflation of religion, laws, mores, and manners (318). Although his claim is not totally groundless, it nevertheless reveals his inability to

understand the inner workings of Chinese society. He viewed this conflation as a bad thing because "it is almost impossible for Christianity ever to be established in China" (319). He attributed the Christian impossibility to expand itself in China to the fundamental differences between Christian religion and Chinese rites. While the former requires that everything be united, the latter orders that everything be separate. Here again, he shows a contradiction in his view. If China requires that religion, laws, mores, and manners be the same thing, how could he draw a conclusion of separateness in Chinese rites? Then, he further attempts to wrap up his contradiction by recourse to his theoretical framework: "And, as one has seen that such separation is generally linked to the spirit of despotism, one will find in this a reason why monarchical government, indeed any moderate government, makes a better alliance with the Christian religion" (319).

After Montesquieu pioneered the tradition of grand intellectual system that incorporates China thereby laying the foundation for Sinologism, in late eighteenth-century Germany, Johann Gottfried von Herder followed suit by producing a grand philosophy of the history of mankind which contains a chapter on China, and further broadened the scope of Sinologism. In comparison with Montesquieu, Herder's approach evinces some new directions, which are demonstrated in the preface as well as the chapter on China proper. First, he departed entirely from any positive view of Chinese civilization generally embraced by the thinkers before him. With the imagination of a poet, and writing in a tone bordering on caricature, Herder filled the chapter with unreliable and erroneous information on almost every aspect of Chinese culture, including geography, population, government, family life, morals, customs, language, arts, inventions, and religions, and even national character. Instead of presenting the information in a factual manner, he could not help but pass judgment on almost every piece of information. It is unnecessary to recount his biased presentations of facts about Chinese civilization. I cite a conclusion of his study to show his value judgment: "Swelling with tatarian [Tartarian] pride, she [China] despises the [European] merchant, who leaves his own country, and barter what she deems the most solid merchandize for things of trifling value: she takes his silver, and gives him in return millions of pounds of enervating tea, to the corruption of all Europe" (298). An overview of his chapter tells that China was ruled by semi-barbarian despots, its cultural institution was childish, there was no science or invention in this land, the Chinese had no taste for arts and beauty, they were vainglory, cupidity, and hypocrisy personified, their morals were dominated by childish submission, their language was but a primitive form of hieroglyphics, and as a whole China "stands as an old ruin on the verge of the World, in it's [*sic*] semi-mungalian [Mongolian] form" (297).

Now in its more mature form, Sinologism became ethnocentric and Eurocentric with a tinge of racism. Herder's approach evinced blatant ethnocentric and even racist tendencies which were to develop into Western cultural imperialism. In his magna opus that collects his thoughts on the nature of humanity and history, Herder attributes Chinese cultural inferiority to the weaknesses of Chinese national character: "The character of this people is a remarkable point in history, for it shows what a mungal [Mongol] nation, unmixed with any other, can or cannot be rendered by political cultivation carried to the highest pitch" (294). His ethnocentrism fills the whole chapter and is most tellingly reflected in the images and metaphors he employed to describe China. Comparing China to "a dormouse in its winter sleep," he described the Chinese nation in even more striking images: China is "an embalmed mummy, wrapped in silk, and painted with hieroglyphics," governed by "unalterable childish institutions" (296). Perhaps for the first time in Western intellectual thought, the racial inferiority of the Chinese appeared: in Herder's opinion, even if the Chinese wished to be culturally superior, they "could never become Greeks or Romans. Chinese they were and will remain: a people endowed by nature with small eyes, a short nose, a flat forehead, little beard, large ears and protuberant belly" (293) and Chinese education accentuates the inferiority of national character: "the mode of education pursued by the Chinese conspired with their national character, to render them just what they are, and nothing more" (294).

Herder did not notice his biases and prejudices as he had the full confidence in Western knowledge about China: "I had read almost every thing [*sic*], that was written upon the subject, and from my youth every new book that appeared, relative to the history of the man, and in which I hoped to find materials for my grand work, was to me a treasure discovered" (vi). What is ironic is that he regarded his observations on China and Chinese people as free from animosity or contempt: "This exhibition of

the peculiarities of the Chinese [*sic*] has not been coloured by enmity or contempt: every line is taken from their warmest advocates, and might be supported by a hundred proofs from every class of their institutions" (297). His remark reveals a crucial point: by his time, an epistemological pattern in the study of China had already been formed and was on its way to become an epistemic ideology in the West's knowledge production about China.

Historically, Sinologism was not a sudden phenomenon but a gradual process that took many twists and turns in a variety of directions, all of which serve the agenda of absorbing China into the Western-centered intellectual and material system. Thus, Sinologism needs to be understood in the larger context of the Western efforts since the sixteenth century to build a global intellectual system that incorporates China. From the beginning, China figured prominently in the globalizing project and without it the global system would be incomplete. The earliest forms of globalization were essentially different forms of colonization. Whether initiated by the Mongol empire or other European empires, globalization was driven by an engine of violence of physical, material, emotional, and spiritual forms. As an intellectual system, Sinologism is bound with Western efforts to construct a universal history for humankind. Western scholars used Chinese materials to advance their ideas of universal history, but in the formulation of Sinologism, Montesquieu and Hegel may be the most important thinkers, because while the former may be viewed as its founder and the latter was perhaps the theoretical formulator. Montesquieu certainly had exerted a visible influence on Hegel who as a philosopher in world history inquired into the human condition and laid the epistemological foundation for Sinologism. In the nineteenth century, Hegel was the most influential Western thinker who attempted to incorporate China into an intellectual system of the world. In his philosophical inquiries into Universal History, he used China either as evidence or as an anomaly to support his system of ideas about historical movements of the world. Although he thought China came onto the world stage earlier than many other civilizations, it had managed to stay outside of the main developmental lines of human progress and was left out of the march of history owing to the dominance of tyranny of its emperors and its lack of native impulses for individual freedom. He envisioned China becoming part of the world system only after the dynamic forces of the West forcefully brought it into the development of modern history.

Hegel examined Chinese history, historiography, government, population, family, morality, law, religion, science, language, and art in terms of his own conception about the freedom of spirit and Western conceptions of life. With the confidence of a Western intellectual armed with a strong sense of cultural superiority, he made observations of and critical comments on Chinese civilization which were replete with ignorance, biases, and prejudices. For example, Hegel viewed China as a theocracy: "The Emperor, as he is the Supreme Head of the State, is also the Chief of its religion. Consequently, religion is in China essentially State-Religion" (131). After examining Chinese religion in terms of Western religion, he came to a preposterous conclusion that "Chinese religion, therefore, cannot be what we call religion. For to us religion means the retirement of the Spirit within itself, in contemplating its essential nature, its inmost Being. In these spheres, then, man is withdrawn from his relation to the State, and betaking himself to this retirement, is able to release himself from the power of secular government. But in China religion has not risen to this grade, for true faith is possible only where individual can seclude themselves — can exist for themselves independently of any external compulsory power" (131-32). Because of his meager knowledge of Confucianism, he totally ignored Taoism and Zen Buddhism, which privilege introspection, contemplation, spiritual freedom, and seclusion from secular life. His ignorance of basic facts about Chinese civilization led him to numerous low-level mistakes. For example: "they [the Chinese] know nothing of movable types. Gunpowder, too, they pretended to have invented before the Europeans" (137). China was an immoral land with no honor and with ever-present deception: "As no honor exists, and no one has an individual right in respect of others, the consciousness of debasement predominates, and this easily passes into that of utter abandonment. With this abandonment is connected the great immorality of the Chinese. They are notorious for deceiving wherever they can. Friend deceives friend, and no one resents the attempt at deception on the part of another" (131). Here, we can see Montesquieu's influence as we can recall how the French thinker viewed China as a land with no honor (*Spirit of Laws* 126-27). Hegel did not know the Chinese language, but he regarded himself as a specialist of Chinese and passed

value judgment on Chinese language both written and spoken, entirely in terms of Western theory of alphabetic languages. He contrasted the simplicity of alphabets with the complexity of the large number of Chinese characters, as if Chinese characters were the equivalents to alphabetic letters. He considered the Chinese language as an immature language in contrast to the sophistication of Western languages because the former does not employ letters and syllables nor use symbols to represent sounds: "The Chinese, to whom such a means of orthoepic development is wanting, do not mature the modifications of sounds in their language to distinct articulations capable of being represented by letters and syllables" (135). In the domain of art, he observed that the Chinese "have not yet succeeded in representing the beautiful, as beautiful; for in their painting, perspective and shadow are wanting" (135).

In his comments on Chinese historiography, jurisprudence, and ethics, Hegel wrote that "As to the science themselves, History among the Chinese comprehends the bare and definite facts, without any opinion or reasoning upon them. In the same way their Jurisprudence gives only fixed laws, and their Ethics only determinate duties, without raising the question of a subjective foundation for them" (135-36). Here, Hegel's remarks not only expose his ignorance of the conditions of Chinese historiography, jurisprudence, and ethics, but also reveal a larger problem in the epistemology of knowledge production: his privileging of subjective manipulation over objective observation and description. In the areas of jurisprudence and ethics, his remarks imply that the ancient Chinese had prescribed legal codes and moral codes arbitrarily and without a rationale for those codes, a view that ignores the factual conditions of the legal and moral codes throughout the Chinese dynasties. In historical writing, Chinese historians recorded mere facts and expressed no opinions of their own in the documentation of historical facts. Hegel ignored the tradition of history writings pioneered by Confucius who employed specific wording to impart his praise and criticism and further promoted by Qian Sima who did not hesitate to voice his commendation and condemnation of historical figures including the rulers of his own time. Moreover, Hegel was advocating a method of historical writing which may be characterized as "emplotment" proposed by Hayden White who suggests that historical writing gains their explanatory power by successfully making stories out of mere chronicles through an operation which he calls "emplotment." White argues for essentially no difference between history and fiction because most historical sequences can be emplotted in a variety of different ways which give rise to different interpretation of the same events and endow them with different meanings. White's view exposes the claimed scientific and objective nature of history writings and confirms the Chinese method of chronologies as more objective than Hegel's theory of history animated by subjective opinions and views. We need to note that Sima examined the same historical person or event from more than one perspective with different accounts, thereby anticipating the New Historicist approach that challenges a single, unified worldview of Old Historicism.

By the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Sinologism developed into its full-fledged form. Leading European thinkers and scholars like Adam Smith, George Macartney, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Max Weber, and others left their marks on its modern forms. A distinctive feature of modern forms of Sinologism is a passionate ambition to build grand systems, prevalent in works by thinkers from Marx to Karl Wittfogel. According to the theory of environmental determinism, the decisive reasons for the rise of an Oriental government were climatic and territorial ones, which made artificial irrigation by canals and water works the basis of Oriental agriculture. Marx made a distinction between Western and Eastern uses of water and regarded it as the economic basis of centralized government of the East: The "prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association ... necessitated in the Orient where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government" (37). Marx did allude to the centralized government as "Asiatic despotism," but he also regarded the British rule of India as despotism (36).

Among world system builders, Wittfogel is the sole thinker who had a working knowledge of the Chinese language, studied Chinese civilization as an academic subject, and went to China to observe Chinese society at first hand. Influenced by Montesquieu, Hegel, Marx, and other Western thinkers, he formulated his own system of universal history and produced *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative*

*Study of Total Power*, a book which draws a large amount of materials from Chinese culture and brings China into a world system. However, his study carries problems symptomatic of numerous modern Western studies of China: the domination of Western ideologies and perspectives. For Wittfogel despotism is primarily a non-Western phenomenon and it originated from Oriental societies with a hydraulic mode of production. This thesis is indebted to Marx's theory of the "Asiatic mode of production," a theory of "hydraulic thesis" that explains the rise of "Oriental Despotism." But as Jack Goody observes, tyranny is not alien to Europe and it is even found in ancient Greece where the West have found Athenian democracy as a model (52). Wittfogel argued that if there existed despotism in the West, it was not originally Western but learned from the East. Thus he endorsed the view to distance despotic rule of prehistorical Greece from the Western tradition: "the Minoan civilization was essentially non-European"; the Minoans were connected through a "few clear and even close bonds with Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt"; and "the sultan-like life of the kings of Cnossus and Phaestus, their courts, their officials, their economy, displayed features which were similar to those of their opposite numbers in the Near East; they were equally unlike anything Western" (195-96). With regard to despotism in Russia, he argued that it was introduced from the Orient into Russia (219-25). He even suggested that it was learned from China through the Mongol conquerors: "Was Ivan's autocratic control over land and people due to external conditions, namely to a continually fought-over frontier? Or was it due primarily to the influence of the Mongols who in Russia applied despotic methods of statecraft learned in several hydraulic countries of Asia, particularly China?" (120). Wittfogel's equation of the Mongol reign with the Chinese rule of government is of course a distortion to say the least. His distortion is simply surprising because he completely forgot that the ideal form of Chinese government is the Confucian idea of benevolent government. True, in Chinese dynastic history, there were many despotic rulers, but the majority of dynastic governments were founded on the Confucian concept of benevolent government. Those dynastic rulers who were despots were without exception overthrown by uprisings or coup d'états. The short-lived dynasties of the Qin, Sui, Yuan, and other despotic rules speak against Wittfogel's characterization of Chinese dynastic rule as an epitome of Oriental despotism. Wittfogel's view of China has been criticized by prominent Sinologists like Joseph Needham who dismissed Wittfogel's view of China as based on ignorance of rudimentary knowledge of Chinese history. Needham argued that the traditional Chinese governmental bureaucracy was as a whole not despotic or dominated by a priesthood and that Wittfogel's study does not take into account similar bureaucracy in modern Western civilization (61-65).

In conclusion, Sinology posed an obstacle to the process of inclusive globalization. Without overcoming them, globalization will become essentially "Sinologization" and continue to be an overt or covert form of Westernization. Despite controversies, globalization nowadays is generally viewed as a positive development in the rapid process of modernization of world cultures. From the perspective of Sinologism, however, I can see why the opponents of globalization are so vehemently opposed to this process. Globalization brings with it potentials of cultural conflicts, i.e., Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations." In my opinion, the clashes brought about by globalization in the East-West encounter are not so much in the nature of civilizational conflicts as ideological conflicts. In East-West studies, the conflicts of ideas across cultural traditions are largely in the nature of epistemological conflicts. The underlying driving force for cultural conflicts in the East-West encounter is the dominance of Western ideology in epistemology in the West's approach to non-Western cultures and traditions. In terms of my conception of Sinologism, globalization is largely a process of modernization predicated on Western models of development with little attention to the vast differences between cultures, traditions, and regions, still less attention to the differences in social conditions, moral consciousness, life styles, and cultural values in different societies. Wei-ming Tu points out that because of the overwhelming presence of the West in all aspects of Asian life, modernity in East Asia is substantially "Western" and "modernization, in theory and practice, is synonymous with Westernization" (9). In the mind of many Chinese intellectuals, Westernization has universal value and is the right direction for the whole world and humanity.

## Works Cited

- Cronin, Vincent. *The Wise Man from the West: Matteo Ricci and His Mission to China*. London: Harvill P, 1999.
- Goody, Jack. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Gu, Ming Dong. *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Hegel, Georg W.F. *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Wiley Book Co., 1944.
- Herder, Johann Gottfried. *The Outline of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Trans. T. Churchill. London: Luke Hansard, 1803.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Krader, Lawrence. *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Sources, Development and Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975.
- Legros, Dominique. "Chance, Necessity and Mode of Production: A Marxist Critique of Cultural Evolutionism." *American Anthropologist* 79.1 (1977): 26-41.
- Leibniz, G.W. *Writings on China*. Trans. Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont. Chicago: Open Court, 1994.
- Marx, Karl. *On Colonialism & Modernization*. Ed. Shlomo Avineri. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Montesquieu. *Oeuvres Completes de Montesquieu*. Ed. André Masson. Paris: Nagel, 1955
- Montesquieu. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Ed. and Trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Needham, Joseph. "Review of Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*." *Science and Society* (1958): 61-65.
- Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.
- Rule, Paul K.T. *K'ung-Tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986.
- Spence, Jonathan D. *Chan's Great China: China in Western Minds*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Tu, Wei-Ming, ed. *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.
- Voltaire. *An Essay on Universal History, The Manners and Spirit of Nations from the Reign of Charlemaign to the Age of Lewis XIV*. Dublin: J. Nourse, 1759.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002. 191-210.
- Wittfogel, Karl. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1957.

Author's profile: Ming Dong Gu teaches literature at Yangzhou University and comparative literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. In addition to numerous articles in Chinese and English, Gu's book publications include *Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing*, *Chinese Theories of Fiction*, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*, and *Anxiety of Originality: Multiple Approaches to Language, Literature, and Cultural Studies*. E-mail: <[mdgu@utdallas.edu](mailto:mdgu@utdallas.edu)>