

MARCO POLO'S FABULOUS IMPERIAL CONNECTIONS

From the very earliest, travel writers have felt the need to secure their credibility with readers. For adventurers it has always been important that their stories were believed. The farther the journey and the stranger the location, the more authors struggled to establish the plausibility of their narrative. If distance and unfamiliarity were inversely related to the likelihood that a travelogue would be believed, they were also directly connected to the audience's eagerness to enjoy the tale. All narratives are caught in the paradox that the more an author insists on the truth of his tale, the more readers question its veracity. At every stage, the accuracy of one traveler's account is measured against previous texts. The possibility of a text's fictionality creeps through all early travel literature. From the first, thoughtful readers struggled with how to treat the possibility that an emotionally engaging travel narrative did not correspond to the lived reality of foreign places. To sooth these contradictions, travel literature was required to balance the urge to narrate a compelling

epic with accurate and insightful description of the strange peoples and places encountered along the way.¹

As much as European writing about China suffered under the suspicion that the stories told about the Middle Kingdom were invented, readers never wanted the stories to end. Any examination of relations between China and Europe must also include the history of credibility and how it was established. The history of information, goods, and people flowing between cultures also includes a nuanced record of how plausibility was asserted or denied. Did this person really travel to China? Are his stories to be believed? How was this silk spun? Where was this tea cup manufactured? The notion of authenticity became important only in the mid-eighteenth century. Before that, institutional authority and rhetorical strategies were more likely to determine whether a traveler's tale was considered believable. In the face of the uncertainty almost any travel narrative creates, comparing one travel text with another became the stay-at-home scholar's best method for detecting exaggerations.

Very early on, in the first Italian compilations of travel writing, this comparative approach tried to test the truthfulness of a description and plausibility of a narrative by reading one text against another. Thus, an empirical problem was addressed philologically. In writings about China, fables were intertwined with history from the earliest. As fiction came to be distinct from ethnographic and geographic description and the genres separated, truthfulness was nevertheless evenly distributed among all of them. Later readers recognized that fictional writing often conveyed more insight into a society's hidden structures than a traveler's hastily composed observations. By the end of the eighteenth century, fables and romances from Asia were recognized as privileged sources of information. The challenge for Europeans was to find means of negotiating through a foreign story's strangeness to recognize basic similarities. Marco Polo's *Travels* was the first attempt at such a mediation.

1. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Zum Erzählproblem des utopischen Romans im 18. Jahrhundert," in *Gestaltungsgeschichte und Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Helmut Kreuzer and Katie Hamburger (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1969), 79–114.

Well into the nineteenth century, Marco Polo's work served as the baseline for determining what stories and descriptions were within the realm of the possible.² Giovanni Botero, for example, in his 1589 comparative study of world governments defends his own description of China: "These things I here deliver ought to be not thought by any man to be incredible. For (thanks that Marco Polo in his relations affirmeth far greater things) these things I speak are in these days approved to be most true by the intelligences we do receive continually both by secular and religious persons, as also by all the nations of the Portuguese."³ Still, a critical reader might wonder if Botero's reliance on *parekbaze*, an author's direct address to the reader, undermined precisely what he sought to accomplish—acceptance. The first-person narration invited the reader to judge the author's character as if the text were a person. Although many of the first books about sea journeys were cobbled together from the recollections of ships' crews by scribes who had never left home, these texts adopted a single authorial voice. When Arnold Montanus compiled an illustrated volume about Dutch embassies to the Japanese shogun, he arranged at least four separate seamen's journals into a single line of observation, with the presumption that readers were more likely to accept the truthfulness of one voice rather than a string of recollections.⁴

Although Marco Polo's *Travels* has often been challenged as filled with exaggerations, it remains the first book to read for Europeans curious about the China.⁵ Its lingering authority may stem from the

2. Folker E. Reichert, "Marco Polos Buch. Lesarten des Fremden," In *Fiktion des Fremden. Erkundung kultureller Grenzen in Literatur und Publizistik*, ed. Dietrich Harth (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994), 180–202.

3. Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State*, trans P. J. and D. P. Waley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), 266.

4. Arnold Montanus, *Denckwürdige Gesandtschafften der Ost-Indischen Gesellschaft in den Vereinigten Niederländern an unterschiedliche Keyser von Japan* (Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs, 1669); Reinier H. Hesselink, "Memorable Embassies: The Secret History of Arnoldus Montanus' *Gedenkwaardige Gesantschappen*," *Quaerando* 32.1 (2002): 99–123.

5. For a recent summary of these doubts, see Kim A. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245–1510* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 54–60.

narrative's muted tone, a surprising quality given the remarkable events it recounts. Polo's book conveys the practicality of a merchant's handbook. While he justifies his traveling to China with the possibility that the Mongols might be converted to Christianity and brought into an alliance against Islam, there is little indication within the many chapters that he and his companions put much effort into this plan. Polo characterizes the religious practices in the many cities along his route as so many forms of idolatry and maintains a consistent antipathy for Islam, but he does not try to incorporate them all into a single Christian tale of salvation. In the end, Polo shows a practical appreciation for the Mongol policy of allowing subjugated nations their religion so long as they obey and pay taxes. The khan himself appears at least curious about Christianity, yet over the course of its episodic movement, the travelogue eventually settles on the material wealth and military prowess of Kublai Khan as its center of interest.⁶ While Polo includes a handful of stories about magic and sorcerers, they do not come close to the wild fantasies of John Mandeville's *Travels*, Europe's other popular medieval romance about the East. Time and again the splendor and extravagance of Kublai Khan's court are shown to be the true marvel in Polo's narrative.

Marco Polo initiates a European tradition of understanding China and its culture that focuses on the emperor and his administrative elite. What appears in Polo's story as a successful feudal relationship becomes the myth that justifies European approaches to China. Even though the physical boundaries, religions, languages, and populations of China were unfamiliar to Europeans, the basic presumption from the start was that China has a single emperor, who rules completely and unopposed over this territory. Thus if knowledge of China was to have any security, it inevitably had to be routed through imperial channels. Whatever ambiguities prevailed within China, Europeans oriented their diplomacy, com-

6. Hermann H. Wetzel, "Marco Polos *Milione* zwischen Beschreibung und Erzählen," In *Beiträge zur sprachlichen, literarischen und kulturellen Vielfalt in den Philologien: Festschrift für Rupprecht Rohr*, ed. Gabriele Birken-Silveman and Gerda Rössler (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 533.

merce, and discourses around the figure of the emperor.⁷ In setting up this paradigm, medieval and early modern travelers were hardly inventing a new understanding of China; rather, they were following Confucian protocols and ideology. Nevertheless, a tone of implicit inter-imperial competition between China and a variety of European monarchies generated a succession of strategic and symbolic comparisons that would last until the end of World War One.⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam refers to the synchronic “transfer of imperial models and notions, in the sense of movement across a group of competing empires.”⁹ As a merchant, Polo could barely disguise how pleased he was to have entered into the service of such a supremely wealthy and powerful master. He was particularly proud of his ability to inform and entertain the khan with his observations about the people he encountered along his journeys. Polo could show Europeans that he attended the emperor of China and that his connection was direct and personal, and in the process he set a very high standard of what it meant for a traveler to successfully reach China. Like a good merchant working both ends of the supply chain, Polo could offer up his experiences moving across Asia at both ends of the journey. Kublai Khan was no different than any European reader. He was also curious to know more about foreign lands, and Marco Polo could offer him stories just as well. The emperor was both the center of the story and the perfect audience. Most importantly, the emperor stood as the ancient, stable ontological and political center of China, suggesting a coherence and continuity that Europeans thought they had lost with the demise of the Romans. The impression left upon Western readers about the unquestioned centrality of the emperor's authority was considerable. Throughout this book, I will show that European

7. Ge Zhaoguang, *What Is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture and History*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

8. My understanding of the concept derives from Laura Doyle, “Inter-Imperiality,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16.2 (2014): 159–196.

9. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500–1640,” *American Historical Review* 112.5 (2007): 1360.

identification with China was routed through the figure of the emperor and his Confucian administration. This imperial identification was most visible in European courts as they formulated complex rituals of conspicuous consumption, drawn from accounts of the entertainments, festivities, and hunting expeditions undertaken in the Mongol courts, but it extended much farther into the most complex corners German intellectual philosophy and poetry.¹⁰

So obvious was Polo's delight in the millions of gold coins collected for the khan's court that early Italian readers teasingly referred to the *Travels* as *Il Milione*.¹¹ Giovanni Battista Ramusio, the translator and compiler of first-hand travel writing, explained the tendency for readers to wonder about Polo's numbers: "And because in the continual repetitions of the story which he gave more and more often when speaking of the magnificence of the Great Khan, he stated that his revenues were from ten to fifteen millions in gold, and in the same way in speaking of many other riches of those countries he spoke always in terms of millions, they gave him as a nickname, Messer Marco Millioni."¹² Polo's nickname points to the suspicions that arise when a description's scale reaches unfamiliar heights—just how vast was the wealth, territory, and population of Kublai Khan's empire? In his lectures on China and world history, Hegel underscored how Polo's text presented Europeans with a scale that they considered fabulous at first, only to later learn from other travelers that it was accurate: "In the thirteenth century, a Venetian, Marco Polo, was the first to explore China. Still, his conclusions were considered to be fables. Later everything he stated about its expanse and size was fully confirmed."¹³

10. Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, 65, 169.

11. As with all matters in Polo scholarship, this nickname has been much debated. See Marina Münkler, *Erfahrung des Fremden, Die Beschreibung Ostasiens in den Augenzeugenberichten des 13. Und 14. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 123.

12. Quoted in Henry H. Hart, *Marco Polo: Venetian Adventurer* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1967), 251.

13. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 12:149.

Augmenting the European reader's concern about the accuracy of Polo's measurements was the all-too-familiar tendency for storytellers to exaggerate. After all, Polo's manuscript was recounted orally during his imprisonment in a Genoese prison, written down by his fellow inmate—a classic setting for storytellers to pass the time by embellishing their past. In the vague border between fiction and truth, readers might expect a traveler to exaggerate, but they would hope he did not lie completely about ever having made the journey. Not only did one have to travel for years to reach China from Italy, but the entire trip involved scalar quantities far greater than anything in Europe: farther distances, more people, denser cities, overwhelming armies, fabulous levels of concentrated wealth were just some of the topics in which the scale of Asian social units exceeded the levels familiar to Europeans. Given the differences, it was easy for readers to conclude that Polo had simply gone from description to fantasy. The doubts about Polo reveal the scalar limits of early modern European imaginations. Up until the nineteenth century, the average European traveling by foot could cover no more than twenty-five miles in a day; a rider in a hurry might reach thirty to forty miles so long as the horse held out. The range of Europeans' geographical identities did not extend out to the breadths Polo claimed to have traversed.

For a Venetian, it was quite understandable that Polo organized much of his travel by concentrating on cities and the spaces in between them. The territories between cities are described often in terms of the time required to traverse them. Eventually, in his narrative of his initial journey to the khan's court, Polo replaces his sequential recitation of cities and provinces through which he passed with a general description of the Mongol messenger relay system, thereby suggesting that his travel was sped up or at least facilitated by being taken up by the imperial couriers. Early on in his narrative, geographical description gives way to postal logistics. "I do not propose to enumerate the provinces at this stage, as I shall be giving a full account of them later in the book. Let us turn now to the system of post-horses by which the Great Khan sends his dispatches."¹⁴ Suddenly, the mode of

14. Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), 150.

transportation has become more interesting than the places through which one travels. Given the narrative drive to reach the khan's court, it comes as no surprise that Polo shows a particular fascination with the Mongolian postal system, which sends riders and runners between stations—many of them located in regions with sparse settlements. For modern scholars, Polo's detailed description of Yuan administrative-geographic structures reinforces his claim to have made the journey.¹⁵

The possibility that political agents could have different scalar allegiances was well understood in feudalism. The Holy Roman Empire consisted of dispersed territories. Sovereignty was rarely concentrated in a single unified territory. A lord would have obligations scattered across the map, to kings, bishops, larger territories in his immediate proximity and then to distant rulers who never showed themselves. Proximity was important in the face of so many relations, because rulers exercised power by being in a particular location—hence the many itinerate kings. From Charlemagne on, the emperor above the alps could expect trouble when he went off to Italy, for his absence allowed the Saxons, the Hanoverians, and the Bavarians, among others, the time and space to rebel. Empires generally require logistical networks that allow information, troops, and goods to travel across dispersed spaces. In Polo's narrative cities within the empire exist as nodes in one or more networks. His view of Asia as a series of centers reflects his commercial attitude.¹⁶ His networked string of spatial connections also reveals a strategy for empires to regulate their diverse populations by linking them together “as webs or networks with diverse morphologies, connect-

15. Hans Ulrich Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 7.

16. “Towns and cities can be regarded as nodal points in a series of networks, which belong to several different categories. At the highest level, we may identify: international trading networks by water; international trading networks by land; major communications routes between administrative centres; major communications routes between religious centres; routes between educational centres” (Alex Cowan, “Nodes, Networks and Hinterlands,” in *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Donatella Calabi and Stephen Turk Christensen [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 2:29).

ing people and events in one node to others near and far.”¹⁷ How China maintained such systems was a central question well before Mongol rule.¹⁸ Marco Polo was the first European to answer how such vast empire could be held together.

The single most imposing fact China impressed upon the first European visitors was its continued existence as a coherent empire, composed of diverse populations and languages stretched across very large territories. Whether this image was completely accurate may be open to debate, but medieval and post-Reformation Europe had no political entity on its scale and antiquity. China's expansiveness impressed Jesuit missionaries longing for a reunified Christianity, just as it had stirred Marco Polo, a city-state native. For classically trained humanists, the obvious comparison was with the Roman Empire. China's imperial coherence impressed Leibniz, as well as many European princes eager to acquire a similar grandeur. The Jesuit plan for converting China to Christianity focused on the institutions that made empire possible—the administration, the exam system, the imperial court, the overarching official language, the print culture, the information networks. Having recognized the mechanisms by which the Chinese empire operated, the Jesuits often felt relieved of the task of preaching to the populace.¹⁹ They were often accused of having an elitist orientation but in the case of China, the example of the Roman Empire's conversion from the emperor Constantine on downward seemed most apt. Early visitors to China were compelled to ask: What makes empire possible? How does it hold itself together? Why to people obey? The 1644 defeat of the Ming dynasty struck European readers as a stunning event, and they wrote a string of texts about the collapse and the subsequent violent reformulation of the unified empire under the Manchu invaders. With the reign of the Kangxi emperor, only the third

17. Patsy Healey, “Relational Complexity and the Imaginative Power of Strategic Spatial Planning,” *European Planning Studies*, 14.4 (May 2006): 526.

18. Hilde de Weerd, *Information, Territory, and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

19. David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 79.

in the new Qing dynasty, China seemed to have restored its imperial order. The aura of China's structured civilization lasted well into the nineteenth century. When Napoleon smashed the Holy Roman Empire, Goethe thought to flee to China.

A long tradition of Western commentary on China juxtaposes the regulation of space and the passage of time. China is perceived as having organized the geography of its empire, though at the expense of temporal advancement. In writing about China in *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault reiterates the fables about China as an idealized space: "In our dreamworld, is not China precisely this privileged *site of space*? In our traditional imagery, the Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls."²⁰ Foucault reveals that the orientalist fantasy of China is grounded in a European projection about its spatial organization.²¹ By reaching back to Marco Polo, Foucault identifies a critical apparatus to examine writing about China. He isolates the conceptualization of space and its administrative regulation as central to Europe's fascination with China as a government that rules over vast area and many peoples.

We can critically examine this fable by using Foucault's own theoretical remarks on space, for they help explain what drives Marco Polo's concerns as a travel writer. In his Berlin lecture "Of Other Spaces" Foucault explains that when a new space or site is delineated, this new discovery immediately raises the need for information.²² Who lives in the space? How are the sites within related to one another? Do they form a constellation? Are they linked together in a series? When Marco Polo describes Central Asia as an expansive space, extending farther than anyone in Europe had hitherto

20. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), xix (emphasis in the original).

21. Zhang Longxi, "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West," *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (1988): 108–31.

22. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22–27.

imagined, he also feels compelled to explain what kind of humans fill it. He becomes a rudimentary demographer, obliged to classify the population within this enormous territory. Information was just as important for medieval Europeans as it is today. They too sought to classify and organize people by types, to understand their movements, and, most importantly for Polo, to learn about their logistical infrastructure. Polo like Foucault keeps coming back to the problems of traffic when representing Asian spaces. By understanding China, Asia, or the Mongol Empire as a network of cities with long distances in between, he also answers the question of how these sites relate to each other—in other words, how movement between them is defined.

The rigors and technologies of travel have long been functioned as tropes in attesting the authenticity of any travelogue. Late medieval and early modern travel literature could not help but foreground the strange and wondrous means, such as magic carpets, used to move between Europe and Asia. If industrial media technologies seek to hide the methods of transmission so that messages can more effectively convey their illusion of immediacy,²³ early modern missives and commodities proudly bore the scars of their transportation. Almost every travelogue written after the Portuguese rounded the southern cape of Africa to make their way to India devoted its opening pages to the trials of such a long ocean voyage. Recounting its misery and boredom was a basic step for any traveler seeking to establish his creditability as someone who had indeed visited Asia. While Europeans marveled at the nautical feat, we should not forget that Marco Polo's journey over land was a wonder in itself. Crossing territories may not have required the same technological advances as Portuguese vessels and navigation techniques, but it would still have demanded previously unheard of political and logistical coordination. For the medieval reader, the Mongol system of sending messengers from the Chinese imperial capital out across the entire length of the empire and back again,

23. Anthony Enns, "Introduction: The Media Philosophy of Sybille Krämer," in Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, trans. Anthony Enns (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2015) 15.

all within a measurably short period of time, would certainly have counted as one of the wonders of Asia. The Mongol postal system was curious enough so that John Mandeville borrowed two different versions of how it operated in his fabulous narrative. A fifteenth-century manuscript of Polo's *Livre des merveilles du monde*, now at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, includes an illustration of the mythical king of the Nestorian Christians, Prester John, receiving messengers from Genghis Khan, bearing a request for the hand of his daughter in marriage.²⁴ As Polo tells the story, Genghis was a vassal of the Christian king, so that when the rising Mongol ruler asked for the marriage alliance, Priester John was quite offended that his underling would dare make such a request indirectly, by sending his marriage proposal through messengers, rather than appearing in person as a subordinate. After his proposal is rejected, Genghis Khan then appears with his full army to vanquish Priester John, reinforcing the notion that Marco Polo is far more interested in recounting Mongol power than in discovering lost Christian civilizations in Asia. The French manuscript offers an illustration focused solely on the postal system's operation in which the grandson, Kublai Khan, is shown sending and receiving his messengers.²⁵

Once the reader has discovered the logistical organization of Marc Polo's narrative, the cities he has been describing on his route, one after the other, appear themselves as little more than stages along the postal route, arranged in a series of circuits that ultimately arrive at Kublai Khan's court. According to Polo's description—and there are many sources that corroborate his impressions—Mongol messengers could carry a message or item over 200 miles in a single day.²⁶ Messengers who set out along a highway could find a posting station with fresh horses after twenty-five miles. These hostels were well kept, with spacious lodgings and beds, comfortable

24. Umberto Eco created his own compilation of bibliographic wonders in *The Book of Legendary Lands*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2013), 103.

25. Marco Polo, *Devisement du monde ou Livre des Merveilles Récit de voyage* (1410–1412) (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Manuscripts, Fr. 2810 fol. 1). <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52000858n/f9.planchecontact>.

26. Norbert Ohler, *The Medieval Traveller*, trans. Caroline Hillier (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1989), 101.

enough for a visiting king, Polo claims. As many as 400 horses were stabled there, so the messenger could always find a ready replacement. Polo asserted that this system extended throughout the Mongol empire, leading him to conclude that the ability to send messages and travel along these routes "is surely the highest privilege and the greatest resource ever enjoyed by any man on earth, king or emperor or what you will."²⁷ While Polo makes clear that the Mongol postal system was intended solely for Kublai Khan, he also allows the reader to presume that he was himself able to move through these networks while in the Khan's service. In Marshall McLuhan's terms, the postal system was in effect an extension of Khan's human powers: "The personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."²⁸ Understood in this way, the postal riders introduced an entirely new scale of coverage extending throughout not only China but much of Central Asia.

Polo well understood that the speed and discipline of the horse relay within the Mongol Empire allowed them to rule over widely dispersed territories. "When the need arises for the Great Khan to receive immediate tidings by mounted messenger, as of the rebellion of a subject country or of one of his barons or any matter that may concern him deeply, I assure you that the messengers ride 200 miles in a day, sometimes even 250."²⁹ Polo's account of traveling along the Mongol postal system thus illustrates how the vast empire was administered. The relays allow officials and merchants to move through space without stopping at the older boundaries that differentiated territories before they were overwhelmed by the Mongols. Likewise, travelers could pass through territories unrestrained by internal economic or political arrangements. Postal systems produce space, or, more precisely, geographical knowledge, by connecting places that would otherwise be isolated from one another;

27. Marco Polo, *Travels*, 151.

28. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

29. Marco Polo, *Travels*, 154.

they create the potential for relationships between the inhabitants of the various stopping points. Unlike magic carpet rides, postal routes allow for the possibility of repeated journeys, so that any number of different relationships can be sustained over time. Initially, this new geographical knowledge is organized sequentially because it emerges from travel. Only after the journey's end, and after Polo's narrative has been read repeatedly, does his diachronic geography become classified into a static picture of spatial relations.

Given that space is organized in terms of the journey's linear movement, it is always important to consider the prepositions used to describe the passage. In Polo's account, Europe is just the starting point for his journey. Unlike eighteenth-century explorers, he does not dwell on his departure from his home for long, so that his narrative quickly becomes a trip *toward* the Great Khan's court, rather than a journey *from* Europe. Enlightenment travel literature is often keenly aware of its separation from Europe. In his lecture on universal history, Schiller defines the passage away from Europe as a regression backward to the earlier stages of human civilization. Medieval and early modern accounts of travel to China do not assume this attitude. Instead, regardless of how many varieties of human communities encountered along the way, the goal of any trip to China is to approach the imperial seat. Polo's sense that he was travelling *toward* China rather than away from Europe lasted for centuries. Even when in their haughtiest heights, European descriptions of journeys to China at some point refer to themselves as progressions *toward* the emperor's court. The only question seems to be how far into the trip this orientation takes over. Polo's narration implies that the Mongol postal system sped up the journey, even though he makes clear that he was not immediately privy to its benefits and had to wait until he was formally in the khan's service to actually ride along its routes.

The logistical operations that enable travel and are written into many travelogues serve to enhance their credibility. Hence any narration of an extraordinary journey requires extensive description of the means by which travel was even possible at all. To this day, scholars judge the authenticity of travel reports by the difficulties

they recount in moving from place to place.³⁰ Coupled with the attention to transportation is the awareness that a destination is fundamentally transformed by the mechanisms that allow it to be reached. The Mongol conquest both transformed China and made it approachable. Just how inaccessible China was remained a topic of speculation for centuries. With each new avenue of access, the kingdom became a more plausible object of knowledge. Marco Polo's fascination with the logistics of the postal system reveals an awareness of the interdependence of time and space with each other—a familiar concern for any merchant engaged in long-distance trade and communications. Thus the movement of Mongol messengers constitutes an early point of reflection about media links between Europe and China. The postal network organizes space while tracking temporal sequences. The standard perceptions of the time it takes to move over a distance are dramatically upended by the systematic organization of Mongolian riders. Not only does the postal system reinforce the terrifying image of the Mongolian military; it also aggrandizes the emperor for possessing such an apparatus at his personal command. Asia may seem impossibly large to the ordinary pilgrim, but it becomes a manageable entity within the Mongol communications network. The possibility that information could be distributed at previously unheard of speeds reinforced the important ideological assertion that China was organized into a single coherent political entity, as opposed to being fragmented into many unrelated, singular places. Half a millennium later, the story of the Pony Express in the American West recounted much the same relay system of riders and horses. By discussing the Mongol post, Polo was lending credibility to his narrative, for a fundamental question almost every reader would have raised was: How could he have even made the journey, there and back? In order to convince

30. Thus, Hartmut Walravens can conclude: "Padre Schrecks Reisebriefe geben einen authentischen Eindruck von den Schwierigkeiten Anfang des 17. Jahrhunderts, nach China zu gelangen und im Lande zu leben" (Hartmut Walravens, *China Illustrata: Das europäische Chinaverständnis im Spiegel des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts* [Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1987], 11).

anyone that he had traveled the vast distance to China, Polo had to explain the means by which such a journey was possible. By focusing on the conditions that made travel possible, his attention and the reader's were thus shifted away from providing rich descriptions of particular locations to the logistics of movement. The procedure of travel became an important component in itself. Since all travel-ogues are obliged to explain the manner in which one moves from place to place, they introduce a technological awareness of the conditions that make geographical knowledge possible. With a similar eye on what makes the projection of military power and the accumulation of knowledge over long distances possible, science studies overlaps with traditional naval history by focusing on the construction and sailing techniques of the Portuguese carrack.³¹

Like Marco Polo, the sixteenth-century Jesuits were impressed with internal Chinese communication networks. Integrating the missionary message into the postal networks used by the empire's elite required that they switch away from preaching, the preferred manner of Christian proselytizing, to writing in a manner familiar to mandarins. Once the Jesuit mission's leader, Matteo Ricci, and his colleagues began composing and translating Christian and humanist works into the court language, their China mission wound up having two simultaneous and antithetical media strategies: to communicate across the oceans in a manner that reinforced European support and to address the Chinese elite in familiar terms.³² As great as the distances were that the missionaries had traveled across the Indian Ocean, Ricci quickly recognized that their message would need to reach much farther into the intimate spaces of Chinese society. Within the first years, he concluded that the mediation provided by the printed page within China's administrative channels was far more effective than itinerate sermons in overcoming the barriers placed on the missionary.

31. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 221–23.

32. *China und Europa: Chinaverständnis und Chinamode im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert, Ausstellung vom 16. September bis 11. November 1973 im Schloß Charlottenburg, Berlin* (Berlin: Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten, 1973), 145.

Polo's fixation on logistics carried on into the age of sea voyages. When the Dutch East India Company sent an embassy to the emperor in 1655 to plead its case for opening trade relations, it sent ships from Batavia and then traveled slowly on Chinese barges up the river and canal network from Canton to Beijing. The official publication of the embassy, illustrated by Jan Nieuhof, represents Chinese cities seen from along the water route so picturesquely that they almost appear Dutch. Yet when the members of the embassy finally disembark from the canal boats so that they can approach Beijing by land, Nieuhof makes sure to offer his readers a reminder of the Mongol, in this case Manchu, postal riders. Off in the corner of his Beijing city scape, as the figures closest to the spectator, Nieuhof includes two military riders, coming and going to and from the Forbidden City, presumably with important dispatches. (See figure 1 and, for more detail, figure 2.)

Information relays have a long history in China. Already during the Song dynasty, communication networks had begun to join provincial officials within an imperial network that circulated gazettes, official documents, and military reports. As these missives moved between administrators, they were evaluated and commented upon, so that the magistrates developed relationships across the postal system as well as to the center.³³ Later, Mongol rulers adopted the established administrative regimes, including the promotion of lower Han officials and expansion of existing postal networks. Just how deeply these deliveries were integrated into the life of mandarins we will see in chapter 10 when we analyze the Ming/Qing romances that Goethe read.

Polo's focus on the Mongol post raises larger questions about the importance of information networks within China, particularly among administrators, and then an even broader comparison between Chinese and European networks. To what extent do the similarities between the networks allow or encourage the application of concepts such as the public sphere to describe the complex relations between the imperial court and provincial administrators? While

33. Hilde de Weerdt, Chu Ming-Kin, and Ho Hou-leong, "Chinese Empires in Comparative Perspective: A Digital Approach," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 2.2 (Fall 2016): 58–69.



Figure 1. View of Beijing as Dutch embassy arrives. Source: Joan Nieuhof, *Het Gezantschap der Neêrlandsche Oost-Indische Compagnie aan den Grooten Taratarischen Cham, den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1665).



Figure 2. Detail of Beijing view showing postal horsemen coming and going.

seventeenth-century news of every variety circulated through Europe in handwritten newspapers, in China the much older system of governmental news was distributed via administrative gazettes, called *Dibao*. Originally intended solely for imperial magistrates, during the Ming dynasty they began to be read by a larger audience. These dispatches would draw the attention of any local business or official interested in news from the imperial court. As they read such dispatches, scholars debated their implications and thereby created a network among themselves as well as to the imperial capital.³⁴ Chinese novels incorporated these mail relays into their plots so that court intrigues and marriage proposals would fail or succeed depending on the timely arrival of the messenger.

Modern Europeans have often followed Polo's interest in the Chinese mail systems—always with an implicit reference back to Europe. Enlightenment historians already noted that the Mongols had a postal system well before any existed in Europe: "It seems that the Emperor Cublay established postal delivery in his empire long before it was known in Europe."³⁵ Nineteenth-century commentaries were less worried about the antiquity of the Chinese system than its efficiency. In a review of the third Chinese romance translated into a European language, *The Two Fair Cousins* (*Les deux cousines*), the Tory politician David Wedderburn commented somewhat haughtily: "Postal arrangements in China at the period of our romance appear to have been defective, and considerable confusion arises from letters, generally sent by a special messenger, not being forwarded or duly delivered."³⁶ We know that fiction is never an accurate depiction of a postal system, for letters always arrive just at the moment when the story requires it, especially if they are very late. As any reader of novels knows, delayed letters can hide bad news or unfavorable instructions, thereby allowing new friendships to blossom. While he points to

34. Hung-tai Wang, "Information Media, Social Imagination, and Public Society during the Ming and Qing Dynasties," *Frontiers of History in China* 5.2 (2010): 180.

35. Johann Wilhelm von Archenholtz, ed., "Fragmente aus der Reisegeschichte des Marco Polo, eines berühmten Reisenden des dreyzehnten Jahrhunderts," in *Literatur- und Völkerkunde*, (Dessau und Leipzig, 1783), 3:102.

36. David Wedderburn, "The Two Fair Cousins, A Chinese Romance," *The Fortnightly* 24 (1878): 507.

similarities between Chinese and English narratives, Wedderburn may have been a little over eager to find fault with Chinese civilization. The larger point is that modern Europeans have long followed Marco Polo's fixation on Chinese postal networks. A decade after the Second World War and in the midst of occupied Germany, the sinologist Peter Olbricht reflected on the importance of logistics in a global war: the Mongol information network set an example for modern industrial forces: "Trailing behind their armies, postal routes pulled all of Asia together into one unified net. The organizational measures by the Mongols were extraordinary and, in this regard, should be considered an accomplishment in its own right, even if one must consider that the Mongols used the models and experiences of their conquered lands, especially from Persia and China for their own innovation."³⁷

Contemporary German media theory has also begun to focus on the courier as figure that helps understand the operation of media channels. Without directly addressing Mongol riders, Sybille Krämer states: "The messenger . . . represents a primal scene of media transmission."³⁸ The emissary's vantage point makes it clear that much communication is unidirectional without any opportunity for dialogue. For Krämer, the messenger's trajectory shows that most communication follows a transmission model of sender and receiver, in which the letter carrier has no influence on the content of the message he bears. The messenger does not operate autonomously, but rather serves an external authority—in Polo's example, Kublai Khan. The postal system is not a separate machine unto itself, but rather a privileged instrument of sovereign power.

Delay in Kafka's Media Fable

While outside observers from Polo to Olbricht were struck by how swiftly and securely the information chain operated, functionaries

37. Peter Olbricht, *Das Postwesen in China unter der Mongolenherrschaft im 13. Und 14. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1954), 39.

38. Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, trans. Anthony Enns (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2015), 19.

within a network were more apt to recognize the many small ways in which the delivery sequence never reached beyond the many courtyards of the imperial palace. In his fable "An Imperial Message," Franz Kafka breaks down the stages that a courier had to pass through into a differential calculus of delay before he is able to reach the horse-relay system.³⁹ The German term for "message," *Botschaft*, has a religious connotation indicating much more than mere communication but invoking divine revelation, thereby reinforcing the notion that the emperor is himself almost a deity. True to Claude Shannon's model of communication, the actual content of the emperor's message remains unknown. The parable depicts a courier's movement between communication nodes as part of the transmission circuit: sender, receiver, interference.⁴⁰ The recipient knows his position even though the message has not yet been delivered, because he recognizes the existence of the channel between the emperor and himself, perhaps because other communications have already explained that an important message is on its way.

As Wolf Kittler notes, both the parable and the narrator's knowledge of the message's intended delivery travel faster than the courier.⁴¹ Within literary terms, the parable itself can be understood as a *Botschaft*. "Most of Kafka's stories and novels have to do with messages that move along long paths toward the intended recipient(s) from a hidden position or person, and that originate from some ultimate, obscure, distant authority, whether divine, legal, bureaucratic,

39. An array of brilliant essays and books has been written on Kafka and China, some dealing directly with the importance of media relations across space: Weiyang Meng, *Kafka und China* (Munich: iudicum verlag, 1986); Michael Wood, "Kafka's China and the Parable of Parables," *Philosophy and Literature* 20.2 (1996): 325–37; Rolf J. Goebel, *Constructing China: Kafka's Orientalist Discourse* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997); John Zilcosky, *Kafka's Travels: Exoticism, Colonialism, and the Traffic Writing* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

40. John M. Kopper, "Building Walls and Jumping over Them: Constructions in Franz Kafka's 'Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer,'" *MLN* 98.3 (1983): 351–65.

41. Wolf Kittler, *Der Turmbau zu Babel und das Schweigen der Sirenen, Über das Reden, das Schweigen, die Stimme und die Schrift in vier Texten von Franz Kafka* (Erlangen: Palm und Enke, 1985), 47, 49.

or regal.”⁴² When Friedrich Kittler wrote that “so many of Kafka’s texts deal with the materiality of channels of information,” he singled out the “Imperial Message” as concentrating on “delay.”⁴³ The intended recipient in Kafka’s imperial message professes loyalty while he awaits the message that may never arrive, but this delay allows him to daydream at his window without interruption. Kafka probably read Marco Polo’s step-by-step explanation of the Mongol courier system. If Polo praised Kublai Khan for possessing the most efficient postal system in the world in order to establish the credibility of his claim to have traveled through China, Kafka offered a calculus of delay in the form of a fable that inverts the imperial bureaucracy’s claim to efficiency.⁴⁴ Kafka’s parable reverses the direction and redefines the fictional status of Polo’s supposedly accurate description of Khan’s courier system. The farther the messenger moves away from the emperor, the less likely he will reach the intended recipient. In Kafka’s narrative, in which the emperor functions as the sender, the political logic insists that the emperor cares about his subjects so much that he sends them his last personal message. Within the logic of both Polo’s late medieval and Kafka’s modern communication circuit, the delay of a message becomes just as important to its recipient as its arrival. Once a message has entered into a delivery system, the optimism of the closed system indicates that it has either “arrived” or is “en route.” “Delay” refers to a temporary condition in the present tense indicating ongoing travel, rather than the present perfect “failure” or “loss” of the message. Kafka has the recipient sitting by his window daydreaming while waiting for the message to arrive, his passivity heightened by the window that frames his detached observation of the world in which the emperor’s messenger is riding. The thin spatial barrier created by this one architectural detail reiterates the layered alienation produced by the emperor’s many courtyards, as if daydreaming were a little like dying. Within a system of communi-

42. Barbara E. Galli, “Introduction: Translation Is a Mode of Holiness,” *Cultural Writings of Franz Rosenzweig* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 15.

43. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Me-teer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 338.

44. Weiyan Meng, *Kafka und China*, 80.

cation that presumes delivery, the absence of a letter, or its significant delay, grants the recipient a temporary freedom. In the strict logic of the postal network, delay allows for the play of imagination until the message arrives. So long as the message cannot be tracked, the recipient's thoughts are free to move beyond the parameters of the administrative.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard observes that different orders of space—in his example, the interior and exterior of a bourgeois house—are by no means symmetrical balanced. Even though the volume of interior spaces is much smaller than the vastness outside the house, the perception of space developed by the secluded mind is far more immense than the consciousness of exterior realms. “Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense.”⁴⁵ With a similar juxtaposition of spatial regimes, Kafka matches the fabled territory of China up to the subjective expanse created while dreaming. While Polo values the postal system for its efficiency, Kafka's fable shows that the stricter and more efficient the relations within an information network are, the more important delay becomes, for it offers the patient subaltern time. While Polo insists on the efficiency of travel along Mongol messenger routes to eliminate any suspicion that his trip to the Khan is fabulous, Kafka reintroduces the contented happiness of the fable by concentrating on those moments when the imperial logistics grind to a halt. The disruptions inherent in any logistical relay system (noise, rerouting) can become a mechanism for imagination; the potentials of fantasy substitute for the delivery of information.

Kafka's parable acquires an additional connotation, given the common nineteenth-century trope comparing Austria-Hungary to China. The story's form suggests a parallel between the two empires. The absence of specific historic details lends the story an ontological quality, as if it were a reduction of the many stories known about the emperor, while at the same time it is addressed personally

45. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 184.

to the reader. The double move that maintains the detached center of existence while also extending a personalized address was an important mode of interpellation, one that was necessary to shore up monarchical authority in a democratizing Europe. With the same double move as the Christian deity, emperors stood above the fray of ordinary politics, even as they expressed their personalized concern for the needs of their subjects. Within the eroding crises of modern society, this ability for imperial power to define both center and periphery was increasingly unstable, both in China and Europe. Kafka suggests a parallel between empires, in which the old monarchical comparisons between the Chinese and European rulers has become unstable. Whereas seventeenth-century absolutist rulers reveled in their similarities with the Chinese emperor, Kafka's parable suggests that this ideology is fading fast.

If Polo had compared a Habsburg ruler with the khan, the comparison would have been understood as flattering. In 1273, two years after Marco set off from Venice with his father and uncle, Rudolf I of Habsburg was elected King of the Romans, thereby starting the imperial lineage that lasted until the end of World War One. Franz Josef, Austria's longest reigning monarch, died one year before Kafka wrote "An Imperial Message," and the dynasty came to an end two years later. The Habsburg monarchy was one of the few institutions that spanned the 600 years between Marco Polo and Franz Kafka. The comparison with China was common currency in nineteenth-century complaints about Austria's lack of modernity, its adherence to Catholic tradition, and its archaic ceremonial distinctions. Of course, it must be added that Kafka was writing at a moment when emperors were generally losing their mandate: the last Qing ruler abdicated in 1912, the czar was executed in 1917, and the kaiser would soon leave Berlin for exile in the Netherlands.

The analogy between China and Austria emerged shortly after the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire; it can be traced back to Ludwig Börne's 1818 essay, "Shy Comments. About Austria and Prussia," in which he celebrates Prussia for the speed and dynamism of its reform movement. While Börne deploys a string of metaphors to denounce the Habsburgs, who represent the last pure monarchy in Europe—in other words without any constitutional restraints—it was his one-

line insult—"Austria is the European China, a still standing, outgrown state"—that stuck.⁴⁶ If Enlightenment intellectuals mobilized the image of Asiatic despotism against Louis XIV, Börne revived a less threatening, more ossified version against the Habsburgs to claim they have been fully superseded by more agile states. Once set in motion, the analogy would be repeated throughout the next century. In a 1827 letter, Goethe made a point of defending the intellectual culture "in the Austrian states, which we so like to represent as Europe's China."⁴⁷ Goethe was not so much affirming Börne's comparison as acknowledging that many have adopted it. Karl Marx updated Börne's analogy to the post-revolutionary situation in 1853, when he compared the allowances China made after the first Opium War with Austria's initial response to the revolutionary demands of 1848: "Such language as this, and such concessions we remember to have heard from Austria, the China of Germany, in 1848."⁴⁸ In the prologue to *Ideographic Modernisms*, Christopher Bush argues against the presumption that references to China in Kafka are actually representations of something else.⁴⁹ The absence of a specific historical setting for the "Imperial Message," the possibility that the story could just as well be about the Austro-Hungarian Empire as any other, need not exclude the serious possibility that Kafka was writing within a long lineage of European descriptions of China initiated by Marco Polo. The double possibility that the parable is about China and Europe reflects the inevitable comparisons that all European discourse on China contains. To understand China beyond its distant strangeness is to recognize its similarity. The emphasis on postal delivery only underscores the potential for some fundamental interchange between the two orders.

46. Ludwig Börne, "Schüchterne Bemerkunge. Über Oestreich und Preußen," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Fr. Brodhag'sche Buchhandlung, 1840), part 2, 63.

47. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Letter to Nees von Esenback, September 6, 1827, in *Goethes Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1887–1919), sect. 4, 43:51. Henceforth cited as WA, with section number preceding volume and page.

48. Karl Marx, "Revolution in China and in Europe," *On Colonialism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing, 1960), 17.

49. Bush, *Ideographic Modernisms*.

Despite the initial political use of the comparison to critique Austria's lack of democratic modernization, Kafka does not apply the analogy ideologically so much as write from within its terms. Kafka's parable incorporates the spatial relations from earlier European literary texts that draw parallels between Europe and China. The short version of the parable published in 1919 does not directly refer to China, while the tale's inclusion in the longer story of "The Great Wall of China" places it within a narrative context that explicitly explains Chinese bureaucracy. As Kafka adapts details from Polo's description of Chinese bureaucracy and logistics, the reader wonders whether he is not also describing Austrian imperial operations. By lifting the short parable "An Imperial Message" out from the larger report on the construction of the Great Wall, Kafka also removes all geopolitical references that would allow the reader to situate the story in China or Europe. This ambiguity also alerts the reader to the possibility that European and Asian emperors may operate within similar administrative constraints and possibilities. By allowing us to indulge in the similarities between Chinese and Austrian emperors, the text reinforces the idea that imperial states share certain structural features.⁵⁰ Indeed, the courier's inability to escape the confines of the court is reminiscent of eighteenth-century novels depicting the failings of aristocratic courts. The physical separation between the emperor at the center of his crowded court and the reader-recipient in his provincial abode is typical of both of European Enlightenment and sentimental fiction, as well as sixteenth-century Chinese romances that depict scholar-magistrates who retire from the imperial court but nevertheless receive news regularly. In considering possible antecedents to "An Imperial Message" we should not exclude actual Chinese novels that had been translated into European languages, such as *The Two Fair Cousins* (*Les deux cousines*), known in German as *Die beyde Basen*. But even as they were reading this Chinese novel, its similarities with European novels were already obvious to Goethe and the sinologist Abel Rémusat.

50. Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, "Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains," in *Imperial Formations*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 5.

Already in the eighteenth century, the comparison between China and Austria seemed apt. One prominent example from the Weimar literary scene laid out much the same scenarios as “An Imperial Message.” Christoph Martin Wieland’s 1772 mock oriental tale, *Der goldne Spiegel, oder Die Könige von Schechian* (The golden mirror, or the king of Scheschian), opens with a warning to the Chinese emperor, who issues commands that never quite reach his subjects beyond the capital city. Already in the eighteenth century, Wieland was implicitly positing an affinity between European and Chinese imperialism. Following the example of *A Thousand and One Nights*, *Der goldne Spiegel* offers a well-wrapped package of narrative frames and stories within stories, purporting to provide a history of Scheschian, a fictitious Asian empire. The migration of the novel’s inner narrative is marked by its many retranslations, a common premodern practice. That is, the book purports to derive from a Chinese translation from the original Schechian language (now extinct), which was then translated again from the Chinese into Latin by a Jesuit priest, only for Wieland to provide the last translation into German. The chain of re-renderings of a lost text from an extinct society is so dizzying that all ideas of authenticity fall away. The Chinese translator in fact speculates that the original is really a collection of passages from an ancient chronicle intended to teach princes how to rule. The main story line is told for the shah of Indostan who has difficulty sleeping, so his favorite concubine and the court philosopher begin to narrate the history of this imaginary, fallen empire. In terms of genre, the novel is certainly akin to early modern narratives intended to educate princes. Wieland describes Schechian in terms that make its similarity to the Holy Roman Empire clear, and most commentators agree that the intended, ideal reader was emperor Joseph II of Austria.⁵¹ Rather than criticizing

51. Matt Erlin, *Necessary Luxuries: German Literature and the World of Goods, 1770–1815* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 100–34; W. Daniel Wilson, “Intelлект und Herrschaft. Wielands Goldner Spiegel, Joseph II, und das Ideal eines kritischen Mäzenats im aufgeklärten Absolutismus,” *MLN* 99.3 (1984): 479–502; Walter Benjamin, “Christoph Martin Wieland: Zum zweihundersten Jahrestag seiner Geburt,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), vol. 2.1, 395–406.

the Enlightenment emperor bent upon reform, Wieland sought to teach him. The intended effect failed—Wieland never received an appointment in Vienna. However he was called by the Duchess Anna Amalia to Weimar to serve as the tutor to her young prince, the future Duke Karl August. Far from offering clear principles of statecraft, Wieland gives vent to his skeptical views on absolute monarchy.⁵²

The novel commences with the Chinese translator's opening dedication to the Chinese emperor in which he explains the fundamental problem with absolutist courts—in flattering terms: the emperor issues commands for the well-being of his subjects, but his servants and courtiers delay and distort them so that they never come to pass. Thus, the Chinese translator declares: “Your majesty’s strongest desire is to make your people happy. This is the one goal of your tireless efforts; it is the object of all your councils, the content of your laws and commands, the soul of the praiseworthy enterprises you begin and execute.”⁵³ Then he explains, in terms anticipating Kafka’s parable, how the many layers of administration prevent the emperor’s commands from being fulfilled:

Yet how unhappy would you perhaps become, if you learned how far behind your wishes their execution remains, despite all your efforts! The innumerable crowd of your servants, divided up into the many classes, orders, and types that you need in order to dispense your power, for humanity sets limits to even for the most limitless of monarchs, the need in all matters to rely on instruments for your well-meaning actions, makes you—now please don’t be shocked by an unpleasant yet restorative truth—makes you the most dependent of all inhabitants within your immeasurable kingdom.⁵⁴

Unlike Montesquieu, Wieland does not grant his imaginary Asian despot unlimited power over his subjects. Instead he shows the futility of such a position. Much in the same manner as Marshall McLuhan, the emperor overestimates his powers when he believes that his messengers are extensions of his own authority. All such authority is

52. Benjamin, “Christoph Martin Wieland,” 400.

53. C. M. Wieland, *Sämmtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Göschen, 1856), 7:vii.

54. Wieland, *Werke*, 7:vii–viii.

tempered by courtiers and bureaucrats who siphon off power in small amounts, so that what seems like vast capability is in fact utter dependency—a lesson for absolute bosses and modern media messengers alike.

While Kafka's narrator addresses the reader with the familiar "Du," Wieland's Chinese translator addresses the emperor with the relatively familiar "Sie"—at least by eighteenth-century standards when addressing the Chinese or Holy Roman Emperor. Both accounts juxtapose the appearance of the emperor's caring and overwhelming authority with the inability to have his commands obeyed. Wieland's speaker explains to the emperor the problem that Kafka's subject experiences from the opposite end of the communication such that Wieland's text addresses the emperor who sends the command, whereas Kafka's turns to the subject who expects to receive it. Both describe an asymptotic increase in the impossibility of the emperor's command being fulfilled, the farther the command travels and the longer it takes. Wieland is completely skeptical that an imperial order will be obeyed; Kafka leaves open the possibility of its arrival. While the Kafka passage stresses the labyrinthian architecture of the imperial palace, Wieland's text emphasizes not only the masses of people among whom the emperor's power is distributed, but also the vastness of the bureaucracy and the empire: "the wide circumference of your numberless provinces."⁵⁵

The impression that China was a fabulous place permeated early modern European readers of travel reports. When Jesuit missionaries set out to convert China in earnest, they started sending back reports about the Middle Kingdom. Moving inland from Canton, their intention was to gain access to the imperial court.⁵⁶ As Jesuit letters and reports back home filled in the details in Marco Polo's description of China, they also faced a similarly skeptical yet fascinated readership in Europe. Even within the Church hierarchy, missionary reports from China were viewed with both wonder and circumspection. In 1655, Pope Alexander VII wrote to the Chinese

55. Wieland, *Werke*, 7:viii.

56. Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

dowager empress that her realm had long been considered a “Fabulosum,” which in the German translation became a “Fabel und Märlein.”⁵⁷ The pope drew a direct parallel between Polo’s long journey across Asia and the Jesuit missionaries who now have supplanted his role in China. In both cases, the difficulty in reaching China lent it an imaginary aura. “Your huge kingdom is fabulous, cut off by deserts and almost infinite distances, and false religions and worship have taken over. How could truth travel across so many seas and wandering roads when the stars and heavens are different and the shores are closed even to merchants who seek to trade not in gold and precious stones, but in the pearl of conversion.”⁵⁸ By characterizing China as a land of fables, the pope was not expressing rationalist skepticism so much as referring to a familiar literary genre that was itself regularly deployed by Catholic missionaries. As he noted, the first fantastical feature of any story about China is the very claim that the author visited the place. To suggest that one could actually arrive in China was already to posit a surprising connectedness between societies that undermined the claim that one was uniquely superior to the others. In evaluating the accusation that China itself was a land of fable, we should allow ourselves some dialectical nuance, so that we do not define fables merely as untruths, for this narrow epistemological approach overlooks the truth in fictional narration. Far from being just outlandish distortions, idealized depictions of travel to China can be understood as self-conscious utopias. If China appears in missionary reports as a remarkably ordered and just society, this reflects the expectations and desires of Europeans sent there. To remove the fabulous leaves the prospect that China is just as ordinary and debased as Europe—a plausible enough conclusion, so long as one wants to deny humans any hopeful aspirations. Travels to China were particularly prone to be accused of being fabulous, the more so if they were written

57. Erasmus Francisci, *Neu-polierter Geschicht- Kunst- und Sitten-Spiegel ausländischer Völcker fürnemlich Der Sineser, Japaner, Indostaner, Javaner, Malabaren, Peguaner, Siammer, . . . und theils anderer Nationen mehr* (Nürnberg: Johann Andreae Endters and Wolfgang des Jüngern Erben, 1670), 433.

58. Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata*, trans. Charles Van Tuyl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 93.

long ago. The aversion to fabulous tales became a mainstay of Enlightenment criticism. John Locke so abhorred fables, that he skipped over the theological controversies surrounding the biblical account of Noah's arc: "Not to speak therefore of what is absolutely fabulous, or only supposititious, let us come to the first sailors famed in History; and touching those times lightly, descend to matters of more certainty and better authority."⁵⁹ Locke similarly dismissed John Mandeville's medieval travelogue and Fernão Mendes Pinto's later adventures in East Asia under the Portuguese as fabulous.⁶⁰

It was already a convention for medieval travelogues to insisted that every word written on their pages was absolutely and completely true. Thus, later reports about China had to find additional means to establish their own credibility. The Jesuits managed to surpass, and in the case of Polo, confirm earlier accounts by maintaining a long-distance network of correspondents who provided detailed information over the course of many decades. From 1582 until their suppression after 1774, the Jesuits offered the most detailed descriptions of China, yet even when the authority of their writings was established, they were also harried by the same skeptical challenges that have been brought to bear on Marco Polo's book down to the present. The missionaries understood their affinity with Polo, for they provided information to Europeans that reinforced his account. Martino Martini, the Jesuit who wrote learned histories and geographies of China, was keenly aware of Polo's reputation: "I hold it a duty to free that most noble patrician from the accusation of mendacity and from the other calumnies to which he has been subject: the more so because his accusers who have so lightly condemned in him things they cannot understand are far worthier of reproof."⁶¹ In 1667 the Jesuit compiler Athanasius Kircher retold Polo's journey in his *China Illustrata* with a special emphasis on the missionary purpose of his journey.

59. John Locke, "The History of Navigation," in *The Works of John Locke* (London: Thomas Davison, 1823), 10:361.

60. Locke, "A Catalogue and Character of Most Books of Voyages and Travels," in *The Works of John Locke* (London: Thomas Davison, 1823), 10:538, 547.

61. Quoted in John Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 173.

Kircher wonders why Polo never mentions the Great Wall, but he concludes that Polo's Cathay corresponds directly to the China that contemporary missionaries also describe, thereby reinforcing the sense that the Jesuits were reviving Polo's mission, with a great zeal to convert, no doubt, but also with an interest to study and trade with China.⁶² Ever the well-read humanists who displayed their sources, Jesuits like Kircher published about China in the lineage of Polo.⁶³

Acknowledging the possibility that a reader might question the veracity of reports from China, the eighteenth-century Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde opened his own massive compilation of Jesuit letters from China by remarking on the skepticism with which the wonders Marco Polo described that were met:

What the traveling Venetian published passed for the fruits of his imagination as it searched for excitement. Everything that he recounted about the antiquity of the monarchy, the wisdom of its laws and government, the fertility of the land, the riches of its commerce, the prodigious multitudes of its inhabitants, the gentleness and politeness of its mores, the industry that makes the arts and agriculture flourish, its good taste and ardor of its sciences, all this was taken as a pure fiction that did not even bother to observe the laws of verisimilitude.⁶⁴

This list of China's exceptional qualities appealed to the Jesuits as well. The challenge for Du Halde was to convey much the same image of China while not losing credibility. Marco Polo's descriptions could not be confirmed by other thirteenth-century Europeans; there was no network of correspondents through which follow up questions could be answered or more elaborated information acquired. His travelogue could not be augmented with others. Not until the Jesuit mission's reports could Polo's claims be checked. The Jesuit mission came close to the system of accumulating and con-

62. Kircher, *China Illustrata*, 80–82.

63. Larner, *Marco Polo*, 173–75.

64. Johann Baptista du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la chine et de la tartarie chinoise* (Paris: Henri Scheurleer, 1736), 1:ix.

firming data from across the globe that Bruno Latour described in his actor-network theory.

The memory of Marco Polo's reception, the fact that his account seemed fabulous at first and grew credible only over time itself became part of the work's own history as well as the history of European writing about China generally.⁶⁵ In 1671, as part of his effort to develop Berlin into a center of Chinese scholarship, Andreas Müller edited and published one of the oldest manuscripts in Berlin's royal collection, a Latin translation of Polo's *Travels* composed by the Dominican Franciscus Pipinus between 1315 and 1320.⁶⁶ Goethe later read Müller's reprint in 1813 in the Weimar library, just as he was studying China and Persia assiduously.⁶⁷ Given the repetitive and intensive reading habits of early modern scholars, we can hardly be surprised that 500 years after Marco Polo first set out, China was still organized according to the tropes he introduced.⁶⁸ Goethe, for example, continued to underscore how the Venetian's travelogue seemed like a fable; he also suggested that this helped explained the text's long-standing appeal. "This exceptional man stands at the top of the list. His journey occurred in the second half of the thirteenth century; he managed to reach the farthest points in the East, lead us through the strangest circumstances, about which we are filled with wonder and amazement because they seem fabulous."⁶⁹ So familiar was the image of the merchant returned from the Orient with precious wares tucked away in his sleeves, that

65. Horst von Tscharnier, "China in der deutschen Dichtung des Mittelalters und der Renaissance," *Sinica* 9 (1934): 16.

66. *China und Europa*, 125.

67. Donald Lach, "The Chinese Studies of Andreas Müller," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 60 (1940): 566.

68. Nigel Cameron confirms the persistence of late medieval images: "The Western world remained obstinately faithful to the China of Marco Polo and of that inspired literary robber and romancer Sir John Mandeville" (qtd. in Gerhard Strasser, "The Impact on the European Humanities of Early Reports from Catholic Missionaries from China, Tibet, and Japan between 1600 and 1700," in *From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines*, vol. 2 of *The Making of the Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Mat, and Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 192.

69. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 2:226. Henceforth cited as HA.

Goethe cast himself in this role, in order to encourage the nineteenth-century German reading public, unschooled in Asian cultures, to more quickly accept his late poem collection *West-östlicher Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan*), inspired by the Persian poet Hafez.⁷⁰

Well into our own present, scholars debate how much Marco Polo invented or saw for himself, thereby reinforcing China's long reputation among Europeans as a half-fictional place.⁷¹ The question of credibility was not resolved by celebrating China as an exotic place where familiar ratios were inflated. The scale and sublime excess of Chinese society appealed to baroque courtiers who expected their own monarchs to overwhelm and subdue their subjects with visible signs of power and wealth. Since grandeur was required for all rulers, it seemed appropriate, and reassuring, that the far-away emperor of China ruled in a manner so familiar to the European elite. If travel accounts indulged in hyperbole, this was appreciated as a rhetorical flourish completely in keeping with the narrator's privilege.

Within these broad terms, the seventeenth century is when China became an ideal within utopian discourse, where it hovered between anthropological reporting and theological projection. Its ambiguous representations suggested both a wonderful synthesis of political and social possibilities, while at the same time making clear that it was strikingly different from all other societies, and thus difficult to replicate.⁷² The Jesuits' image of China suggested that it was possible for an earthly ruler to reconcile the historical contradictions that plagued post-Reformation Europe. Early modern literature about China exposes and masks European ideological conflicts between Christian sects, between monarchs and subjects, between competing imperial contenders. China is the focal point that seems to bring all these European forces together into a single resolution,

70. "Damit aber alles was der Reisende zurückbringt den Seinigen schneller behage, übernimmt er die Rolle eines Handelsmanns, der seine Waaren gefällig auslegt und sie auf mancherley Weise angenehm zu machen sucht" (Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan*, ed. Hendrik Birus [Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2010], 1:139).

71. For an overview of the issues, see the first chapter of Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China*.

72. Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1984), 8.

yet the largest empire in East Asia could hardly have been reduced to a mere projection from one side of the globe onto the other. The many critiques that claim to expose the falsity of chinoiserie and orientalism approach the problem only from one side, as if the system that produced and fulfilled European consumers' desires were the only apparatus engaged in the utopian construction of China. To argue that the utopia of China is just a fiction does not explain the ambiguous realities that sustain it to this day. Indeed, so many of the earliest worries that China was only a fable reflect a critical skepticism that masks its own desire to believe in its truth. The fable, as a genre, is repeatedly cited as presenting the radical opposite of theological, empirical, and philosophical truth. Any thoroughgoing critique of the utopian image of China needs to examine its own aggression against that image. What was it about the pleasure provided by fables that made them so threatening? Were fables the source of temptation? Did fables about China, unlike their Enlightenment cousins, lack a moral conclusion? Why were later readers so angry at John Mandeville and other medieval adventurers for spreading invented stories about the East?

How European interests in reading about the Orient shifted in the early modern period can be detected in the alternating reputations of Marco Polo and John Mandeville. As Jesuit descriptions of China and adventurers' accounts of Central Asia circulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Polo's book was increasingly recognized as based on the lived experiences of an intelligent observer, while Mandeville's was increasingly regarded as proof of medieval folly—a collection of tales garnered from English and French libraries. The Jesuits recognized that the geography and imperial politics they saw in China had already been sketched out by Polo. As Mandeville's reputation declined, Polo's narrative garnered confirmation from later travelers. In his capacity as the ducal librarian in Wolfenbuettel, Gotthold Lessing would introduce his bibliographic comments on Polo with the epithet: "Polo, whose work has been confirmed by more recent travelers."⁷³

73. Gotthold Lessing, "Marco Polo, aus einer Handschrift ergänzt, und au seiner andern sehr zu verbessern," in *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur, aus den Schätzen der*

Polo was thus the writer with whom later Europeans began their study of the Orient. His work set the standard by for trustworthiness by being contrasted with Mandeville. Scholars devoted considerable effort to finding the most accurate version of Polo's manuscript—which edition, which translation offered the true account? Reading Polo became a philological adventure in its own right. Later texts were understood as supplements, additions to Polo's information, rather than as contradictions or refutations.⁷⁴ Enlightenment scholars were eager to follow up on the many proper names mentioned in medieval narratives: Did they refer to places, people, specific rulers? In comparing manuscript versions of Polo's travels, Lessing points out many of the problems connected with names, such as the question of how many brothers did Kublai Khan have and over which peoples they ruled. Lessing mentions that the Polo manuscripts he has examined in Berlin and Wolfenbüttel refer to kingdoms that have found no mention in other sources except Joseph de Guignes's recent history of the Mongol peoples. Attentive eighteenth-century readers were thus astounded that almost half a millennium could pass in Europe before important details of Polo's description of China found any secondary confirmation. Wieland could write an ironic novel that featured the political history of an imaginary Asian kingdom, knowing full well that this vague and imprecise reference only bolstered his fable. When it came to evaluating Marco Polo, the Enlightenment pulled in two opposing directions, with Lessing seeking to clarify ambiguities and Wieland seeking to spin them out into longer tales. Polo's route from Venice to Beijing serves as the implicit model for any number of later fables about the Orient. For example, in Friedrich Schiller's *Turandot* the protagonist, Kalef, flees from Ashkedan, a city at the base of the Ural mountains, to China. Kalef's account of how he made his way from the Caspian Sea to Beijing follows Polo's orientation—the same

herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel, ed. Gotthold Lessing (Zweyter Beytrag Braunschweig: Waysenhaus, 1773), 261.

74. In another example of a wandering, imperfect manuscript, Engelbert Kaempfer evaluated Polo in his review of earlier literature about Europeans visiting Japan; see Engelbert Kaempfer, *Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan*, ed. Christian Wilhelm von Dohm (Lemgo: Meyer, 1977), 1:227.

path Goethe will want to pursue when Napoleon's armies crash across the Holy Roman Empire.

As the epitome of the Orient, China represented a neutral third position outside the polarities that were tearing Europe apart after the Reformation; it claimed an unoccupied place of civilization beyond the already familiar divisions. In this sense, China represented an escape from conflict, military and otherwise. The European culture wherein truth was determined by a public confrontation of disputants was unable to incorporate Chinese thought into its own dialectics, though it tried to do so repeatedly. Different sides would claim to be speaking for China but these arguments never had much impact so long as China remained unfamiliar to most participants. Debaters might invoke China as an ideal representation of their particular position, but more often than not the image of China receded back into a position hovering on the horizon but not yet attainable by any party in Europe. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, Hegel and British imperialists reversed the terms of intellectual desire so that instead of remaining the utopia that European philosophy could not quite explain, Chinese thought became the remnant that could be ignored.

For the early modern period, the Jesuits set the standard for accurate reporting about China, because they had traveled there and learned the languages, and because they held a priestly office that established them in the republic of letters as credible eyewitnesses. Moreover, inasmuch as Jesuit reports from China helped remove the impression that Marco Polo had written a fable, they became the new standard for judging the plausibility of fictional writing about China. Just how respected their status was even among northern Protestants can be gleaned from their authenticating function in the first German novel about China, *Aeyquan, oder der Große Mogol* (Aeyquan, or the great Mogul), written by Christian Hagdorn and published by Jacob de Meurs in Amsterdam, purveyor of many illustrated travelogues through Asia. By the time the novel appeared in 1670, German readers were well aware that the Jesuit missionaries had established themselves as the most knowledgeable Europeans about China. Thus Hagdorn invokes their reputation to ground the verisimilitude of his novel. Anticipating his audience's

questions, Hagdorn addresses the problem of his reliability as a reporter of Asian affairs on the first pages. How can an author, in no way a Jesuit, claim to know anything special about China? As be-hooves a baroque novelist, Hagdorn provides a multilayered response. First, he lays out the important genre distinction—namely, that he is offering a novel, not a personal travel memoir. Hagdorn is also aware that this argument is not sufficient given that the contours of the novel, particularly the epistemological status of its internal truth claims, were hardly codified in 1670. Thus, he augments his formalist defense by providing a potentially fictional tale about how he came to write the novel in the first place. This second-order personal account stands somewhere between the fictionality of the novel and the reader's reality. The plausibility of the main narrative remains in question despite the author announcing its fictional status, because the reader expects that the author of a novel about India and China has gone there himself; otherwise how could he describe the vast battle scenes with any accuracy?⁷⁵

In the answer to the question “Did you travel through Asia?” Hagdorn answers, “No, but I met a Jesuit who had.” The preface relates how the author set off on a sea voyage, during which he met a Jesuit, who was just returning from twelve years in both realms. Over the course of their ten-week voyage, the venerable father recounted his experiences and provided the author with additional written works. Unfortunately, the manuscripts were then all lost in a shipwreck in the English Channel, yet the author explains, he remembers most of what he had been told by the Jesuit. Through this elaborate side tale, Hagdorn legitimates the main narrative. Ultimately, the missionary serves as the source of the author's knowledge and the novel's integrity. Logistics, in the form of a failed ocean voyage, again figure in the author's transformation into a valid raconteur. Should this para-narrative seem implausible as well, Hagdorn promises the reader, finally, that most everything to be found

75. Christian Hagdorn, *Aeyquan, oder der Große Mogol. Das ist Chinesische und Indische Stahts-Kriegs- und Liebes-geschichte* (Amsterdam: Jacob von Mörs, 1670), preface: “Unterdessen möchte vielleicht der nicht al zu günstige Leser fragen: Ob ich in China oder Indien gewesen daß ich Darvon die Eigenschaften sonderlich deren Kriege zu beschreiben mich unterfinde?”

in his novel, can also be read in other books about China—intertextuality supplementing as the last line of credibility. Here, too, the Jesuits are invoked, though only indirectly, for they authored most of the important books on the subject.

Even after reports from China had increased dramatically and had begun to circulate in Europe, the wonder readers felt toward China manifested itself in diverse reactions: admiration for its moral order, suspicion that the tale was concocted, a desire to emulate Chinese manners by consuming its wares, a greed to find one's own share of such a wealthy kingdom. These responses could all be mixed in one: fascination for travel reports coupled with doubt that they were entirely true, respect for Confucian principles with the suspicion that dark practices must also involved. The slow historical shift that has so often been diagnosed as a turn from Sino-philosophy to Sinophobia emerges alongside the increasingly suspicious attitude European readers took toward Jesuit's media strategies. Eighteenth-century editors such as Du Halde felt obliged to argue that readers should trust the Jesuit reports sent back from Asia, not because China seemed too wonderful a place to be believed, but because the honesty of their authors of these texts was increasingly challenged. This had not been a problem in the seventeenth century when Jesuit accounts were accepted as authoritative. In the eighteenth century any serious study of China also required a critique of the Jesuit sources. The first point of concern was its utopian character; the second was the amazing, yet suspicious, consistency of the Jesuit publications.

The Uncanny Persistence of Oriental Fables

The eighteenth-century distinction between accurate ethnographic information and imaginary literary creation continues to structure contemporary scholarship. The opposition between fiction and reality plays itself out in political terms, with the presumption that imaginative projections are always ideological distortions. As the debate about Marco Polo's *Travels* became a full-fledged intellectual project in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers were

extremely proud of their ability to unveil the superstition and deception ascribed to tradition, folklore, church, and state. Yet try as one might, it seems impossible to fully dispel the fable of the Orient. Marco Polo's *Travels* continue to hover between fiction and fact. If its claims seemed exaggerated, then the narrative became all the more suitable as literature. For centuries after its publication, well into the Enlightenment, Europeans had no simple method for dispelling the work's influence. To discredit its veracity does not dispel its historical significance. To deny its informational accuracy only reinforces its literary quality. To call Polo's text fiction cannot undo its importance. On the question of depicting China in the Enlightenment, the difference between fable and fact was never easily elucidated.

Srinivas Aravamudan makes clear that imaginative fiction, and fables in particular, continue to define European perception of India, Persia, China, and the Levant even as the novel became the dominant fictional genre during the Enlightenment. Behind these genre distinctions was a rationalist epistemology that preferred scientifically verified information against imaginative narratives. Aravamudan sets the two modes in a dialectical relation: "Two seemingly unconnected genres—scientific dialogue and beast fable—complement each other to form the stereoscopic perspective of Enlightenment Orientalism."⁷⁶ Rather than accepting the simple Enlightenment charges that fables are distortions of reality that readers naively swallow, we might consider how they unveil truths that scientific information cannot represent. Fables are often sharply critical of European society, harboring religious, political, and sexual aspirations that could not be articulated directly.

Such an appreciation of fables has little place in Jürgen Osterhammel's *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia*. Osterhammel insists that the Enlightenment did away with the marvelous fictions about China. He claims that Europe's engagement with Asia was carried out by "roving *philosophes*, itinerant scholars who combined high competence with great intellectual authority."

76. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 129.

Osterhammel reiterates the Enlightenment's own heroic tale of its travelers by praising their valiant self-composure: they reflected on what they had experienced and witnessed, while refraining from "telling tall stories in the manner of many an earlier fabulist."⁷⁷

Osterhammel's epistemological juxtapositions reflect his view of fables as moments of imaginary indulgence, rather than as the bearers of utopian aspirations. As the two modes become more distinct during the eighteenth century, he elevates information and knowledge production over artistic representation, which he faults as a form of distortion or noise. Russell Berman warns: "It is the denigration of the 'marvelous' . . . that represents both the Enlightenment's victory over superstition and its perhaps excessive confidence in its own ability to separate between the marvelous and the accurate."⁷⁸ Rather than setting reason off against the fable, we would be better served to recognize their interdependence. Siegfried Kracauer applied this dialectic directly to the Enlightenment's fascination for oriental tales: "There is profound historical significance in the fact that the *Thousand and One Nights* turned up precisely in the France of the Enlightenment and that eighteenth-century reason recognized the reason of the fairy tales as its equal."⁷⁹ For Kracauer, both modes of thought, critical reason and fables, articulate open suppressed ideals of justice.

In order to support his claim that the Enlightenment produced a steady increase in accurate, rational knowledge about Asia, Osterhammel is required to ignore the many eighteenth-century novels, poems, operas, paintings, and dramas that depict the East. Demand for Chinese porcelain, furniture, and interior design among absolutist princes was already high at the start of the eighteenth century, but most public ballets, operas, festivals, masquerades, and theater performances that included a Chinese diversion appeared in the second

77. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 27.

78. Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1998), 44.

79. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 80.

half of the eighteenth century.⁸⁰ It is relatively easy for Osterhammel to claim that the eighteenth century “unfabled the East,” because he specifically overlooks all the fables written during the period. Ultimately, Osterhammel is less concerned with literary culture and more interested in travel writing as data collection. His book does not consider the nuanced connections between these modes of writing—for example, the manner in which fiction and ethnography reinforce each other. It is one thing for a German historian not to appreciate contemporary theory; much more surprising is one who dismisses Goethe and Romanticism. He dispatches the *West-Eastern Divan* with a muddled quotation from Friedrich Rückert, failing to appreciate how important Persian poetry was to both poets. If one makes a point of ignoring literary culture, then it is relatively easy to claim that one particular literary form no longer matters. The formulation of world literature as a privileged genre was motivated in part by the realization that reading foreign fiction offered access to social relations otherwise hidden to travelers. The nineteenth-century value granted to philological study of Asian novels demonstrates that the earlier interest in fables was also particularly important for Europeans seeking to understand Asian cultures. Osterhammel focuses exclusively on the production and transfer of information as an abstract form of knowledge, thereby ignoring the modes of discourse grounded in more immediate experience and in traditional communication. Romanticism and world literature with their two distinctly different attitudes toward the Orient both rely on the fable in order to find compatibility with Asian societies. As translators discovered, too much information layered as footnotes in the narrative smothers most aesthetic effects, reducing the novel to a clumsy encyclopedia.

Even if we were to juxtapose ethnographic reports with fictional literature, we should not presume that only the travelogues produced knowledge. For the upper classes who did not read scholarly treatises, operas would have been a serious source of information about any number of Asian societies. As Chinese novels and poetry

80. *China und Europa*, 121.

were being translated into European languages, the claim was increasingly heard that fiction more accurately depicted the private life of Asians than the reports of travelers, who were never allowed anywhere near the interior of a house. For all their language skills and political connections, Jesuit priests were also not considered adequate judges of Chinese intimacy and romance. How did the Chinese express and regulate desire? Surely a novel written for a domestic audience was far more likely to reveal such secrets than any European observer. Thus, literature in translation was an important new source for understanding the Orient, although the process of translation did of course allow myriad biases and presumptions to shape the final text. Wieland's novel, like so many others, emerged only after *A Thousand and One Nights* had appeared in French; similarly Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* responded directly to Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's translation of Hafez.

Given these translations, eighteenth-century writers generated a succession of texts that appealed to European sensibilities about Asia. The fable, the genre that Osterhammel seeks to banish, plays a central role in the Enlightenment's conception of the Orient. Lessing's "Nathan the Wise" offers perhaps the most important example of a fable, or parable, receiving a new life within the German Enlightenment. Far from removing fables from the Enlightenment's conception of the Orient, Lessing sets a forgotten fable at the center of his drama and the Enlightenment debates about religious tolerance. For better or worse, regardless of the many critical interpretations it has received, the "three-rings parable" at the heart of Lessing's drama has become the illustrative supplement that defines rationalist arguments in favor of religious tolerance. When Saladin expects a logical disputation, Lessing has Nathan offer the parable instead, suggesting that he well understood that its open-ended undecidability gave the fable an advantage over theoretical discourse and ethnographic realism. In Lessing's presentation, the three-rings parable is clearly marked as an oriental tale. The narrator, Nathan, is a representative of the Orient, a wealthy businessman known also for his practical ethics—the mode of philosophy for which Leibniz had already praised the Chinese. His journeys take him all across the Orient. Nathan enters the

play having just returned in Jerusalem after a long journey, his caravan bearing goods from across the Orient:

He comes from Babylon.
 With twenty well-loaded camels,
 And everything, noble spices,
 Stones and Clothe, that India
 Persia, Syria, even China
 Offer up as Valuables.⁸¹

The image of Marco Polo returning from Asia with riches and stories from a great distant empire once again provides the precedent for Lessing. As already noted, Goethe adopted the same posture, in Islamic guise, for the opening to his *West-Eastern Divan*, a cycle of poems intent on reviving even more myths of the Orient. Even the most philological literary scholars have understood that bibliophilic writers such as Lessing studied the scholarship on Islam before composing a “Nathan the Wise.” Lessing’s attention to detail, down to having Saladin play chess with stone markers rather than anthropomorphic figures, demonstrates the interpenetration of theatrical performance and orientalist scholarship of the late eighteenth century.⁸² Goethe’s extensive notes to the *Divan* were ostensibly an attempt to aid the German reader unfamiliar with Islam, yet as a summary of the author’s research, this addendum to the poems only heightened their learned strangeness. The reinvention of China as a land of fable was compatible with Weimar Classicism’s view of Asia. When Schiller takes up the task of revising Carlo Gozzi’s “Marchen” *Turandot*, he struggles to provide motivations for the princess’s cruelty; in fairy tales actions do not require psychological justifications, yet by Schiller’s understanding of the melodrama, or tragicomedy, they do. Nevertheless, even in providing a hidden reason for the princess to execute her unsuccessful suitors, Schiller does not abandon the sto-

81. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Herbert Georg Göpfert and Karl Eibl (Munich: C. Hanser, 1970), 2:232 (act 1, scene 6).

82. Zahim Mohammed Muslim, “Lessing under Islam: Eine Studie zu Lessings Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam,” PhD diss., Humboldt University, 2010, 110–12.

ry's fantastical qualities. At the top of his list of *Personen* we see "Altoum—fabled emperor of China."⁸³

If travel writers struggled to balance the degree to which their writing seemed fabulous, as they sought to attract audiences to their adventure tale while convincing them of its reality, the situation was quite different for writers around 1800 who were working within genres understood as fictional—Lessing, Wieland, Goethe, Novalis, Hoffmann. Even outside the question of a text's fictionality, any classically trained writer would have maneuvered between the ancient rhetorical distinction between Attic and Asiatic styles of speaking. The challenge for a learned European was to write about Asia in an Attic manner, while preserving the wonder and awe that readers clearly desired. In E. T. A. Hoffmann's romantic story "Der goldne Topf" ("The Golden Pot"), Archivarius Lindhorst offers a fable about salamanders as his own family genealogy. An audience member, sitting in the café where he is holding forth, dismisses the tale as "Orientaler Schwulst" (oriental bombast), an ironic echo of an ancient rhetorical distinction.⁸⁴ Hoffmann's story juxtaposes bourgeois rationalism with Romantic orientalism, deliberately playing Cicero's succinct Attic style against the metaphorical abundance of "Asiatic" writing. Hoffmann was completely aware of how important Cicero was for proper training of Prussian officials. In "The Golden Pot" he goes so far as to include a virtuous bourgeois administrator who reads Cicero in the evenings at home as a lucidly dull counterweight to the hallucinatory revelations the protagonist Anselmus experiences while copying an Asian manuscript written in a strange, non-European script. Cicero is after all our primary

83. The thematic proximity of the two plays shows itself in that Schiller staged the Weimar premiere of *Turandot* on January 30, 1802, two months after he had finished a run of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*. The Orientalist theme continued with Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Taurus* as the next drama to be staged. Marion Müller, *Zwischen Intertextualität und Interpretation: Friedrich Schillers dramaturgische Arbeiten 1796–1805* (Karlsruhe: KIT Publishing, 2004), 105.

84. E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Der goldne Topf," *Fantasie- und Nachtstücke* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), 192–93; Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa, vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1923), 2:783. The term "Schwulst" was used by classicists to describe an excessively ornamental Asian style of writing.

source for the ancient distinction between sober, concise Attic speech and bombastic, flowery Asiatic diction. The absolutist Enlightenment along the Spree certainly favored crisp Attic forms; thus in response to Frederick II's insistence that Christian Garve provide a modern German translation of *De Officia* as a model for all Prussian civil servants, Hoffmann offers as much oriental bombast as he can muster.

Joseph Görres turned the Enlightenment's concern for accurate travel reporting on its head when in 1807 he elevated John Mandeville's crazy medieval fables about travel through Asia into a central influence on Romantic poetry.⁸⁵ Görres fully appreciated that Mandeville cobbled together existing fables into a fully implausible first-person narration, including many about Alexander the Great's exploits on the way to India.⁸⁶ As a philologist, Görres celebrated Mandeville for having brought together the many fables circulated in antiquity into one book, thereby preserving the ancient wonder at the distant paradise for later poets to emulate. "The fables, which were retold many times already in antiquity as Alexander's army marched to India, provide us with the basis for our poetry."⁸⁷ Far from wanting to remove the Orient's fables, Görres strove, like the Grimm brothers and so many other Romantics, to capture and archive the supernatural tales circulating without authority or credibility. Thus he lauded Mandeville's much maligned travelogue as the first truly Romantic work: "The poet collected ancient sagas that were formed in the Orient and Occident and that he strung together into a whole. Thus emerged this strange work, perhaps the first real Romantic composition."⁸⁸

The Romantic revival of fairy tales inevitably created a rift between popular writing on the Orient and German sinology as well. When Richard Wilhelm offered a translated collection of Chinese *Märchen* (fairy tales) in 1913, he inevitably organized the volume

85. Joseph Görres, *Die deutschen Volksbüchern* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1807), 55.

86. Willy Richard Berger, *China-Bild und China-Mode im Europa der Aufklärung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1990), 34.

87. Görres, *Volksbüchern*, 57.

88. Görres, *Volksbüchern*, 59.

according to standards enunciated by the Grimms, drawing a distinction between *Kunst-und Volksmärchen* (literary and folk tales), preferring oral over literary sources, giving precedence to nursery rhymes and children's tales, even while acknowledging that this category had little place in Chinese literature. So broadly did Wilhelm define the Chinese *Märchen* that he affirmed the old notion that Chinese literature was pervaded with the marvelous. "In China, the fairy tale does not constitute a strictly separate genre. From nursery tales to fables up to myths about gods, to sagas and novellas, the borderlines are flexible. For China, the marvelous belongs to the natural course of the world, and thus it is impossible to draw sharp distinctions."⁸⁹

By asserting the demystification of the Orient, Osterhammel touches on only one side of the persistent tension between fiction and veracity in writing about Asia. He posits an Enlightenment narrative of increasingly accurate knowledge, as if the fictional representation of Asia were merely inaccurate and distracting, when in fact nineteenth-century culture, including the German traditions, generated a rich vein of poetic fantasies about Asia, which always drew heavily from academic publications on the Orient.

89. Richard Wilhelm, *Chinesische Volksmärchen, Die Märchen der Weltliteratur, Märchen des Orients*, ed. Friedrich von der Leyen (Jena: Eugen Diederich, 1914), 1.