

GOETHE READS THE JESUITS

The proposition that China and Europe stand parallel to each other has a long history. In 1694, Leibniz opened his *Novissima Sinica* (The newest from China) by suggesting that fate had purposively set European and Chinese civilizations at opposite ends of the same continent. When Leibniz advocated for the intensification of this alignment through further intellectual exchange, he was clearly following the lead already put forward by Jesuit missionaries.¹ Later, when the first European translators of Chinese literature perceived clear similarities in narrative conventions, they left out any reference to a divine order. In the twentieth century, the idea reemerged when Karl Jaspers proposed the term *Achsenzeit* (Axial Age) to describe the simultaneous development of philosophical

1. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Preface to Leibniz' Novissima Sinica*, trans. Donald Lach (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1957).

thought in ancient China and Greece.² In the early 1980s, Joseph Fletcher elaborated on Jasper's suggestion that these parallels would make historical sense only if they could be connected through underlying horizontal influences.³ More recently, comparative literary scholars have argued that Chinese and European novels share certain formal features because they participate in the same global economy.⁴ Goethe's inclination to perceive correspondences between Chinese and European civilizations provide a variation of this established theme.

While his predilection for finding resemblances between disparate texts and cultures proliferated in many directions, the Orient was an inevitable focus. Goethe's propensity for analogies became obvious through his biological writings; however this disposition also guided his interpretation of foreign literature. Unlike Jaspers or Fletcher, Goethe's literary pairings were not concerned with organizing knowledge so much as finding creative inspiration. Rather than positing and applying an overarching concept of humanity, his readings offered a method for detecting repetition in poetic expression. His humanism was imbedded within his interpretive technique. His attentiveness to literary likeness depended upon the ability to place oneself in the position of others. Goethe's intuitions about resemblances between Chinese and European literature were motivated initially by a sentimental attitude that sought affinities between kindred souls—a modus that can be traced back beyond Pietism to late medieval devotional reading practices but that by the late eighteenth century had already manifested itself as a secular moral psychology.

The Jesuits had famously asserted the existence of a shared metaphysical foundation between Christianity and Confucianism, yet a minor countertradition stretching back to the earliest reports from China also suggested the opposite: the possible absence of any the-

2. Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1955).

3. Joseph Fletcher, "Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 9.1 (1985): 37–57.

4. Ning Ma, *The Age of Silver: The Rise of the Novel East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

istic belief among the ruling elite. This continuous, radical potential shows itself in an analogy that Goethe puts before Schiller, in which he compares a Chinese debate between a Jesuit missionary and a Buddhist monk with contemporary Weimar disputes between Kantians and Idealists. Goethe joins two divergent philosophical cultures in a parallel constellation. Both debates revolve around the question of atheism, broadly defined. In drawing these comparisons, Goethe and Schiller themselves remain the discreet third pair, commenting on the other two. These three duos stretch across two hundred years and great distances to form an intellectual continuity based on the eternal repetition of the same fundamental questions. Goethe's correspondence with Schiller shows that academic institutions and their publications (treatises, letters, encyclopedias, poems, plays) are central to preserving and recognizing these repetitions. Similar philosophical debates may spring up over time and space, but unless they are consolidated in institutional nodes, they vanish into nothingness. The similarities between the Nanjing and Weimar debates are conveyed through discourse, often obscure and archived yet readily revitalized by a curious reader. Distant, old epiphanies are stored in libraries waiting to be recalled again in a new setting capable of familiarizing the old.

Like any eighteenth-century German studying China, it was perfectly natural that Goethe followed up his reading of Marco Polo by turning to the Jesuit mission and Matteo Ricci. Jesuit treatises were the obvious, and often the only, source for further information about China. The succession of these three pairs (Jesuit-Buddhist, Kantian-Idealist, Goethe-Schiller) demonstrates the long continuum in the European reception of China, as well as its sporadic, on-off movement: China did not rise and fall in the esteem of European intellectuals, so much as come and go in an elaborate "fort-da" play of similarities and differences. The link between Weimar and Nanjing shows that connections were not drawn only between political or economic capitals. Intellectual logistics were far more flexible. To engage China, one did not have to study in Paris or Rome. Writers in small German towns could feel fully engaged with Chinese events. Leibniz once joked with a Prussian princess that his office in Hannover could become the central exchange for

news from China. In the early modern period, the links between Germany and China were understood in textual terms, as more dependent upon mediation rather than personal observation. Running between the three duos are Jesuit reports and baroque compilations. As we shall see in this chapter, the arguments about atheism in Nanjing share much with those in Weimar, even as they reverse and refute each other.

Goethe's heterodox interpretation of the Jesuit position in China starts with an epiphany. On January 3, 1798, Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote to Friedrich Schiller that he had just come across a curious story in an old tome describing a debate held in China during a banquet in 1599 involving a Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, and an unnamed Buddhist scholar, who today is identified as the renowned abbot Xuelang Hong'en (1545–1607); the Jesuit texts refer to him as Sanhoi.⁵ Goethe wrote, "This discovery amused me unbelievably and gave me a good idea of how sharp witted the Chinese are."⁶ Typical for how humanists combined friendship, letter writing, and intellectual labor, Goethe promised to send Schiller a handwritten copy of the passage. Three days later Goethe followed through with his promise and went on to speculate about how the Buddhist might have even more wittily turned the tables on the Jesuit. Rather than agreeing with the Jesuit arguments about the creation of the earth, Goethe takes the heterodox step of siding with the Buddhist—not a complete surprise, as he had resumed working on *Faust* the previous summer. In telling Schiller about the Chinese dinner conversation, Goethe assigns eighteenth-century philosophical positions to each participant: the Buddhist he characterizes as a creative Idealist ("ein schaffender Idealist") whereas the Jesuit is given the position of a Reinholdianer, a loyal interpreter of Imman-

5. For modern scholarly treatments of this dinner debate, see Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 194–98, and Iso Kern, "Matteo Riccis Verhältnis zum Buddhismus," *Monumenta Serica* 36 (1984–1985): 88–94.

6. Sigfried Seidel, ed., *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe* (Leipzig: Insel, 1984), 2:8 (hereafter cited as *Briefwechsel*): "Dieser Fund hat mich unglaublich amüsiert und mir eine gute Idee von dem Scharfsinn der Chineser gegeben."

uel Kant.⁷ The two writers had been sharing the latest work by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, as well as an anonymously written Chinese novel. For Goethe these disparate topics suddenly converged in an insight. Ever the sympathetic friend, Schiller was quick to align himself with Goethe's interest: "The father's metaphysical conversation entertained me very much." China was already an established topic between the two writers. After a few of his own sharp-witted remarks, Schiller asks, "Where did you find this morsel?"⁸ and this is where the story gets complicated. Where did Goethe first read this story? Not in any source one would expect.

Goethe discovered the debate while searching for poetic plunder in a 1670 collection of stories about East Asia compiled by Erasmus Francisci. The tome had a wonderfully long-winded title, which listed off the Asian peoples with whom Europeans had come into contact. Rendered into English here, the title resounds as the "Newly-Polished Mirror of the History, Art and Morals of Foreign Peoples, Especially the Chinese, Japanese, Indostanese, Javanese, Malabarese, Peguese, Siamese, and Some Other Nations in Addition."⁹ Subdivided into six volumes, this opus had been printed in Nuremberg, a center of the seventeenth-century publishing industry. Records show that Goethe had checked out the volume from the Weimar royal library for almost a year, between December 6, 1797, to November 10, 1798. Francisci was one of Germany's first professional writers, which is to say that he lived off the income his publications produced—a hard life in the seventeenth century. A cripple confined to his study after having broken both his legs in a horse-riding accident, he was unable to travel anywhere in the world he described. To make matters worse, as a scribe and compiler, he was

7. Iso Kern translates the debate into Western metaphysics by distinguishing between Buddhist phenomenology and Jesuit realism ("Riccis Verhältnis zum Buddhismus," 88–94).

8. *Briefwechsel*, 2:17.

9. Erasmus Francisci, *Neu-polirter 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). The Nanjing Disputation appears in book 1, 41–60.

also obliged to give up his family's noble title. During his long convalescence in Nuremberg, he wrote a succession of enormous compilations synthesizing travel reports from all hemispheres for the bookdealer Johannes Endter.¹⁰ Goethe explains that he is reading Francisci's compilation precisely because it brings together so many unusual anecdotes. He was, after all, well-versed in prowling through old collections for new inspiration. The legend of the magician and trickster Faust had come down to him through a series of compilations. Francisci had himself been involved in editing Endter's influential collection. Its descriptive title sounds just as dramatic when rendered into English. "The Troubling Life and Horrible End of the Very Notorious Black Artist Dr. Johannis Fausti" was a collection that went through six editions with an appendix written on the magical practices of Lapplanders.¹¹ From his years of research into the Faust legend, Goethe would have well understood how popular stories in the seventeenth century would find publishers who would reissue the same material, with new editorial additions.¹² The publishing history of the many Faust editions provides a genealogical model of how curious tales grew more complex, acquiring additional characters, descriptions, locations, adventures, and connotations as they circulated within the early modern publishing industry, so that eventually later versions put forward meanings completely at odds with the original text. Baroque literature was a complex circulatory system of stories rewritten and republished, compiled, expanded, and annotated by new authors copying old ones. These tomes full of stories, shocking anecdotes, and

10. See Georg Andreas Will, *Nürnbergisches Gelehrten-Lexikon oder Beschreibung aller Nürnbergischen Gelehrten beyderley Geschlechtes* (Nürnberg: Lorenz Schüpfel, 1755), part 1, A–G; Gerhard Dünnhaupt, "Erasmus Francisci, ein Nürnberger Polyhistor des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts. Biographie und Bibliographie," *Philobiblon* 19.4 (1975): 272–303.

11. *Das ärgerliche Leben und schreckliche Ende des viel berühmten Ertz-Schwartzkünstlers D. Johannis Fausti . . . und einem Anhang von den Lapponischen Wahrsager-Paucken wieauch sonst etlichen zauberischen Geschichten* (Nürnberg: Endters, 1717).

12. Jochen Schmidt, *Goethes Faust Erster und Zweiter Teil Grundlagen-Werk-Wirkung* (Munich: Beck, 1999), 28.

foreign histories were mined for inspiration long after their publication. By way of excusing his perusal in such dusty tomes, Goethe tells Schiller that while Francisci's writing displays awful taste, it offers up many useful stories. By following Goethe's route through such a compilation, we can better understand the broader reception of Chinese culture from the later sixteenth to the early nineteenth century.¹³ Along the way, we might ask how far reaching was Goethe's analogy between Weimar and Nanjing? Was it confined to this one theological disputation, or did it reveal an underlying affinity between literati in both places? Were Weimar's poets flattering themselves with their imagined affinities with China?

Nineteenth-century colonial ideology, beginning with the memoirs written after the British attempt in 1793 to open trade with China, known as the Macartney embassy, sought to dismiss baroque knowledge of Asia by arguing that its categories were defined foremost by theological concerns. While making these arguments, the later expansionists also disparaged the earlier era's sympathetic bonds with China. In order to understand the long history of European attitudes toward China, we need to trace out how knowledge of the Orient was transmitted across through Europe and down through generations of readers. This requires us to wander into the labyrinth of baroque literature that transcribed, compiled, and revised the initial Jesuit accounts of China. If we constantly refer back just to the primary missionary reports, we will never understand how readers who were removed from and often critical of the Jesuits would have understood their descriptions of China. Goethe, for example, reads Matteo Ricci's report of his debate with the Buddhist directly against author's intention. Other eighteenth-century

13. Among German sinologists, opinions vary on Goethe's reading of Francisci. Günther Debon considers it to be without consequence (*folgenlos*), while Wolfgang Bauer sees it as a turning point in Goethe's views on China. Günther Debon, "Goethes Berührungen mit China," *Goethe Jahrbuch* (2000): 47. Wolfgang Bauer, "Goethe und China: Verständnis und Missverständnis," in *Goethe und die Tradition*, ed. Hans Reiss (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1972), 177–78. It seems noteworthy that in his book on Goethe and China, Debon does not once mention his Kommiliton and Munich sinology colleague Wolfgang Bauer's essay on the same topic.

readers did much the same. What the devout missionaries meant to convey by recounting Ricci's dialogues was not at all what Goethe, and presumably others, took from the tale. Even as he reads counter to the Jesuit aims, Goethe posits an affinity between Chinese and German thought without claiming a hierarchical superiority.

The first notable point of Goethe's comparison is that he sets all four positions on an equal footing, an unusual move given that both Jesuits and Buddhists would have had little credibility in German philosophical circles.¹⁴ He aligns his own interest with the Buddhist position in part because the disputation provides an intellectual arena in which such choices are possible. A disputation provides a broadly applicable framework for ideas and arguments to be compared and transferred between debaters. Goethe seems to have had an inclination to identify with the unchristian position all his life. As he recounts in book 15 of *Poetry and Truth*, as a young man he would read aloud from Pietist missionary reports to Susanne von Klettenberg, a pious friend of his mother's. Klettenberg was the most important source for the mystical Pietist language that entered into his early sentimental writing and the model for the "schöne Seele" in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.¹⁵ In reading the pietist missionary *Hallesche Berichte*, whenever the narrative came to a scene in which a missionary would try to convert the indigenous population, Goethe inevitably sided with the locals against the preacher.¹⁶ In reading the Jesuit report, Goethe is still operating within the logic of the scholastic disputation that presumes an intellectual parity between the two cultures, when his allegiance again crosses over to the foreign and heretical position,

14. On the exclusion of Asian thought from the Western philosophical canon, see Peter Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1750–1830* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

15. Burkhard Dohm, "Radikalpietistin und 'schöne Seele': Susanna Katharina von Klettenberg," in *Goethe und der Pietismus*, ed. Hans-Georg Kemper and Hans Schneider (Tübingen: Franckesche Stiftung and Niemeyer Verlag, 2001), 111–34.

16. *Goethes Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1887–1919), 1.28:301; hereafter cited as WA.

one that he domesticates by comparing it to early Weimar Idealism. Martin Mulsow describes a similar transfer of heretical beliefs from Islam into the radical Enlightenment, through a complex series of untraceable transmissions: "On the one hand there was perhaps a subliminal continuity of heretical ideas in astrological, alchemical, or medical treatises, but on the other hand we need to take a simple fact into consideration: orthodoxy of one particular religion is automatically a heresy in the eyes of another. This means that those who argue especially for the truth of the doctrines of their own religion may in fact have a subversive effect on another religion."¹⁷ For Goethe these transfers appeared directly on the pages of Francisci's compilation. In researching for *Faust*, Goethe was clearly fascinated with the long tradition of heretical texts, but in the Nanjing Disputation he followed the more automatic heresy of adopting a foreign religion's belief. Completely absent from Goethe's affinity with China is the modernist presumption (typified by Hegel's history of philosophy) that Europe had superseded East Asian civilization.¹⁸ Goethe's letter to Schiller succinctly encapsulates the long transformation whereby sympathy for China was understood first in theological terms as a shared participation in the divine truths revealed at the world's creation but then reversed itself into a secular history of parallel cultures. Underlying both belief systems was the technological presumption that shared experiences could be transmitted across a single global space. Both Ricci and Goethe were acutely aware of how written texts communicated over great distances, thereby conditioning the recognition of identities and differences between Europe and China. The likelihood that these insights are predicated upon a misrecognition of similitude is always present, not only because the viewing subject is apt to find confirmation of his own condition whenever looking off

17. Martin Mulsow, "Socinianism, Islam and the Radical Uses of Arabic Scholarship," *Al-Qantara* 31 (2010): 549–86.

18. The two most important passages appear in G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 142–74, and *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 138–47.

into the distance, but also because the long relays involved in conveying the message are also likely to rearticulate the foreign so that it appeals to the end consumer.

Ricci's Arguments

The dialogue entitled “Father Ricci Debates with a Minister of the Idols” was first published for Europeans in Matteo Ricci’s posthumous account of the Jesuit mission to preach Christianity in China, entitled *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas* (The Christian mission in China), published 1615 in Augsburg.¹⁹ The book was based on an Italian manuscript found in Matteo Ricci’s desk after his death. It was then augmented and edited into a 645-page Latin volume by the Belgian priest Nicholas Trigault. *De Christiana Expeditione* was the most influential work on China in the seventeenth century. David Mungello claims the book reached more readers than any other contemporary work on China.²⁰ The original Latin text was translated within a decade into French, German, Spanish, Italian, and English. The German title appeared in 1617 as *Historia von der Einführung der christlichen Religion in das große Königreich China durch die Societet Jesu* (History of the introduction of the Christian religion in the great kingdom of China by the Society of Jesus).²¹ Ricci also provided a Chinese account of the debate in chapter 7 of *The True Meaning of the Lord in Heaven*, a work intended to offer a synthetic account of Christianity and Confucianism.²²

Matteo Ricci’s support for Confucian thought was coupled with a very clear antipathy against Buddhism, which most missionaries

19. Nicholas Trigault, *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Iesu ex. P. Matthaei Riccii* (Augsburg: Christoph Mangius, 1615).

20. David Mungello, “Die Quellen für das Chinabild Leibnizens,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 14.2 (1982): 234.

21. Nicholas Trigault, *Historia von der Einführung der christlichen Religion in das große Königreich China durch die Societet Jesu* (Augsburg: Antony Hierat, 1617).

22. Matteo Ricci, SJ, *The True Meaning of the Lord in Heaven*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chon, SJ (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 347.

in East Asia perceived as idolatrous.²³ The first European reports stressed Ricci's decisive rejection of Buddhism as both pagan and pantheist. Ricci wrote: "Their great error, fatal to the idea of divinity, namely that God and all things material are one and the same substance, taken from the doctrine of the idol worshippers, has gradually crept into the schools of the literary class, who imagine that God is the soul of the material universe; the one mind, as it were, of a great body. After the debate at the banquet, some of the disciples of the host became frequent callers on Father Ricci and soon put aside their pantheistic ideas."²⁴ While the original debate may have been intended to impress Nanjing literary circles, the official Jesuit circulation of the dialogue in print was clearly intended to rouse European audiences. In each version, whether in Nanjing or in Europe, the Buddhist serves as the third man who is purposefully excluded from the sender-receiver communication. Whether as a rhetorical strategy or as a condition in the operation of any successful media channel, the Nanjing Disputation illustrates Michel Serres's claim that "to hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him."²⁵ This principle is of course central to German Idealism's discovery of dialectical reasoning; Fichte already stated, "Any pair of things to be distinguished must be related to a third thing."²⁶ If Ricci is engaging in a disputation with Buddhism, he is also specifically refraining from holding one with the Confucian literati. In a syncretic society with many religions, to distinguish

23. Haun Saussy has shown that Ricci's arguments against Buddhists coincided with a wider debate around the imperial court about mandarins who were perceived to have abandoned Confucian teachings; see his "In the Workshop of Equivalences: Translation, Institutions, and Media in the Jesuit Re-formation of China," in *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24–29.

24. Matteo Ricci, SJ, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci (1583–1610)*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 342.

25. Michel Serres, "Platonic Dialogue," in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué Harari and David Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992), 67, quoted in Bernhard Siegert, "Cacophony or Communication? Cultural Techniques in German Media Studies," trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, *Grey Room* 29 (Winter 2008): 33.

26. J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 243.

between different teachings by criticizing only one of them is tantamount to seeking an accommodation with another. While many readers may have pondered the logical content of the disputation, the most important aspect of Ricci's argument with Buddhism, the pagan error that must be excluded, was his two-sided appeals to Confucians within China and Catholics in Europe. As Ricci sought to draw a connection between Christianity and Confucianism, he felt obliged to block out the "noise" of Chinese idolatry, a cacophony that he labeled "Buddhism," but that included disparate practices.

Jesuit accommodation with Confucianism established a model for European identification with elite Chinese culture. To the extent that it was not just a strategy for delivering the Christian message to the upper class, accommodation makes the case that Christianity and Confucianism have parallels both in terms of their teaching and history. If modern scholars such as Karl Jaspers can marvel at parallels between Europe and China, it is because the Jesuits first put forward this position. At the same time, accommodation fosters identifications that often leave other Europeans wondering whether the missionaries have given up their own culture and "gone over." The suspicion asks whether the missionaries have themselves been converted. This doubt about missionaries as having been seduced by the people they were supposed convert persists throughout the Jesuit mission in China. The same accusation is made against Protestant missionaries in India, such as Ziegenbalg, who see similarities between Christianity and Brahmin teachings. It is the charge that Goethe toys with when he hints that he may have become a Mohammedan as he announces the publication of *West-östliche Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan*). Accommodation with Confucianism is decidedly not refutation; it did not attempt to measure a higher truth on the basis of intellectual combat. Ricci was trained in disputations as were all his colleagues, and there was almost no way to remain in good standing within the mission and not refute idolatry. Instead, Ricci's major maneuver was to shield Confucianism from the post-Reformation desire to combat heresy. Ricci hoped to direct the urge for forensic confrontation at Buddhism instead.

The banquet figures prominently in the early history of the Jesuit mission because it shows clearly how Ricci aligned himself with a

magisterial elite by insisting on an interpretation of Confucianism that focused primarily on the early writings and that rejected later neo-Confucian syncretic appropriations of Buddhist teachings. Many historians have noted the Jesuit affinity for the polite scholarly conventions of the Confucian literati. Just as important is the story's rhetorical context. In most seventeenth-century texts, Ricci is presented within the conventions of early modern rhetoric as a subtle and understated master, capable of following long complex discussions with theological shadings while engaging in quick, witty one-upmanship, all in the company of the most educated men in Nanjing. Jesuits were trained in the conventions of classical rhetoric. Ricci makes a deliberate point of showing his skills in recollection by summarizing all the arguments that had been made during the dinner debate before offering his own concluding statement, a move anyone trained in classical rhetoric would have admired: "He began by making a detailed summary, from memory, of all that had been said on the question, after which he said: 'There is no room for doubt that the God of heaven and earth must be considered as infinitely good.'"²⁷

As with many debates, the stakes were more complex than the arguments presented by the two speakers, and there were inevitably third and fourth parties looking on and who were implicitly addressed during the disputation. These onlookers included Catholic readers in Europe, who were supposed to acknowledge his confrontation with idolatry. Additionally, Ricci was also offering his Confucian audience a model of Christian metaphysics without directly engaging in an interpretation of canonical Chinese texts. To the extent that the first Jesuits in China suspected that the literati were not concerned with the afterlife or God as creator, Ricci may have been elaborating this principle for his Confucian listeners while arguing with a Buddhist with the hope that they too would be persuaded. The continued reception of the debate in Nanjing can be followed through its extended circulation throughout the early modern period, as it is retold by a succession of compilers and readers. The process allows the story to be recomposed repeatedly for the purposes of providing old material for new readers, while reconfirming

27. Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 341.

established knowledge claims about China. The audiences and theological implications multiplied as the story of the Nanjing Disputation circulated in Europe, so that later radical philosophers and free-thinking poets would draw conclusions wholly at odds with Jesuit intentions—namely, that the Chinese were perfectly civilized and moral even without believing in a theistic creator and judge.

At the start of the debate, Ricci asks his opponent what he thinks of the creator of heaven and earth. His goal is to establish a first principle from which other conclusions could be drawn. Ricci feels that if he can demonstrate agreement that the world had been created by a single deity, then the rest of the debate will follow as he wishes. Anticipating the sequence of arguments that would flow from this claim, the Buddhist does not accept this appeal to first principles as decisive: “He did not deny the existence of a moderator of heaven and earth, but at the same time he did not believe him to be a god or endowed with any particular majesty.”²⁸ In other words, the creator was no different than anyone else seated around the table. To show how common creation was, the Jesuit text states: “He then admitted that he could create heaven and earth.” The original German translation of this passage includes the marginal gloss “Ungeschickte Sophisterey des Götzen Pfaffen” (the clumsy sophistry of the idolatrous priest), which implicitly draws the connection to Socratic dialogues. For all the warnings not to side with the Buddhist, Goethe is clearly drawn to his argument. Already in his youthful *Sturm-und-Drang* writings, he had extolled Promethean versions of the proposition that humans share in the ability to create the world, that the poet is a second creator. Ricci’s response is to ask his opponent if he can grasp hold of a glowing stove like the one they had in front of them at the banquet—the point being that material things have their own reality apart from human representations. Consciousness alone cannot eliminate or ignore the heat of a glowing pot. Ricci claims that his commonsense refutation of Buddhist inwardness thoroughly flabbergasts Sanhoi. After some uproar—the Jesuit text refers to moments of vehement discussion without making clear exactly what was being said—Sanhoi offers

28. Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 340.

an explanation of what he means by creating a universe. If an astronomer or a mathematician studies the heavens, he creates an image of the moon and the stars in his mind which he then can recall from memory." Ricci's text then has the monk state: "In other words, you have created a new sun, a new moon, and in the same way anything else can be created."²⁹ Goethe who so often described his own poetic creation as a process of drawing images from his storehouse of memory—a metaphor common to Roman rhetoric—would readily have identified with the Buddhist line of reasoning. Already in *Werther*, Goethe had coupled the proposition that reality is just a dream state with the conviction that an imaginative person could constitute an entire reality within his or her own mind. "Ich kehre in mich selbst zurück, und finde eine Welt!"³⁰ ("I look within myself and find a world") suggests a similar turning away from natural sensations to create a second version of that reality within consciousness. For Goethe this was the Idealist moment in the debate: that the human understanding of nature emerges only from subjective consciousness. Ricci responds by drawing a distinction between the reality of things and their representation in our minds—a move Goethe associates with Kantian epistemology.

On a general basis, Ricci's references to astronomy offer a shared intercultural form of knowledge, important to all earthbound observers. In the context of world literature and cultural comparison, astronomical observation provides a potential position of agreement. In an epistemological vein, Ricci insists that it must be obvious to everyone that there is not only a difference between a thing and its image, but also that it would be impossible to form an image of something that one had not seen—in other words that our mental representations are dependent on our perception of real natural things. Here again Ricci draws a distinction familiar to Kantian followers such as Reinhold. According to the Jesuit version, the debate descends into a chaotic string of arguments in which Sanhoi begins to quote mystical passages and Ricci responds by saying

29. Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 340.

30. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 6:13; hereafter cited as HA.

that the debate can be carried out only through appeals to natural reason and not by each side quoting their own sacred writings. Ricci's account of the debate concludes with a summary statement about the wider flaws of the Buddhist arguments, which he sees as creeping into Confucian thinking as well—namely, the claim that “God and all things material are one and the same substance” so that even members of the literary class “imagine that God is the soul of the material universe, the one mind, as it were, of a great body.”³¹ This concluding statement tries to draw theological implications that reach far beyond the specific claims of the debate in order to make a broad criticism of pantheism. While Goethe does not refer to Ricci's summary statement in his letters, literary historians have assumed that he would have identified strongly with just the kind of pantheism Ricci denounced. Goethe's lifetime fascination with Spinoza is well documented, and the common scholarly assumption is that he would have found nothing wrong with the principle Ricci rejects.

Francisci's Retelling

The Reformation could be defined as a massive disputation, dividing North and South. Writing after the Thirty Years' War, Erasmus Francisci could not resist presenting the Nanjing Disputation in terms familiar to European readers, as a rhetorical duel or match. Readers would have known that Jesuit schools were famous for including public debates in the curriculum. The pedagogical presumption was that students were motivated to study and prepare their arguments out of an innate competitive desire to win in a forum of their peers and teachers. Even Protestants could acknowledge that Jesuits were highly skilled orators; indeed, Francisci's narrative frames the theological debate as a duel that allowed all Christians to cheer on the missionary. Buddhists are depicted as deceptive with a comical character, while the Jesuits are shown even to Protestants as honorable virtuosos defending the faith. The framework of a sociable conflict also allowed readers to recognize a moment of identity between Eu-

31. Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 342.

ropean aristocrats and Chinese mandarins, for any respectable duel requires both participants to share the same rank. Yet in the end, the cultural differences were most important, for they made Ricci's triumph all the greater for having been managed under foreign rules.³²

The theological details of the argument would have been familiar to European scholars, whether Protestant or Catholic. Thus Ricci's critique of Buddhism would have allowed a common agreement between European denominations. His logical demonstration of the existence of a God, in heaven apart from the universe he created, was also intended for Ricci's allies among the Confucian scholars, for his entire accommodationist synthesis between Christianity and Confucianism rested on his assertion that early Confucian writings also referred to a theistic god. By demonstrating logically that a divine Creator exists, Ricci was not only refuting Buddhism, but also advocating for his own rather speculative interpretation of Confucianism.

The original Jesuit text deliberately selects which heresy it addresses. Ricci specifically refrains from entering into a discussion of Buddhists writings. This reliance on logic rather than scripture in order to debate Jews and pagans can be traced back to St. Anselm's twelfth-century claim that reason alone could demonstrate God's existence. Joachim Kurtz points out that the Jesuit texts on China often stressed the superiority of European sciences in the paratext.³³ The Protestant Francisci follows a similar approach for recounting Ricci's conversation, for he frames the narration with a long paragraph explaining that Europeans have a better grasp of logical argumentation, in particular how to draw conclusions in a syllogism, than the Chinese. Natural reason is presented as a neutral, nonculturally

32. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles Singleton (New York: AnchorBooks, 1959), 135: As Wayne Rebhorn states, "All the courtier's behavior . . . is designed to make people marvel at him." See his "Baldesar Castiglione, Thomas Wilson and the Courtly Body of Renaissance Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 11.3 (1993): 249.

33. Joachim Kurtz, "Framing European Technology in Seventeenth-Century China: Rhetorical Strategies in Jesuit Paratexts," in *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History*, ed. Dagmar Schäfer (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 209.

specific mode of thinking, set in contrast to the interpretation of a region's myth and scripture, while at the same time, Francisci claims that the Jesuits have a superior skill—that is, that logical argumentation is a European trait. “The Jesuits excelled in sacred oratory: ‘wisdom speaking copiously,’ as Cicero defined oratory, putting eloquence and reason to serve the mysteries of the Christian faith.”³⁴ Francisci gives the story a title, “Die ungeschickte Schluß-Künstler” (The clumsy deducers), and, in an appeal to European aristocratic readership, draws direct parallels between rhetorical debate, logical reasoning, and fencing. If Francisci crosses cultural boundaries to admire how clever the Jesuits are, Goethe does the same by admiring the Chinese, for he draws the exact opposite conclusion of Francisci by deducing that it is the Chinese who are cleverer than the missionaries. Jesuit reports were replete with examples of Chinese cleverness, yet both Jesuits and mandarins were known for their canniness, so that the one reputation burnished the other. In the overlapping claims to cleverness, Goethe suggests that the Buddhist monk was perhaps the most shrewd of all, for he put forward arguments that Ricci blindly believed he had refuted and therefore included in his report back to Europe, but that in the end were the more persuasive, at least to Goethe sitting in Weimar as he pondered Spinoza and the earliest formulations of German Idealism.

Francisci revises the Jesuit text so that the reader seems to be examining the narrative's unfolding with detachment. He conveys the sense that European reader is watching a distant spectacle, like a modern Olympic competition. For early modern German readers, it was necessary to provide a context and guidelines for understanding these Chinese encounters, and inevitably these foreign events were translated into familiar scenarios, sports among them, for a fencing match was one scenario that could be readily understood even if the motives for the fight and the combatant's utterances were unintelligible. Duels could bring in an audience that was entertained and excited by the contest, without requiring them to understand the theological expectations of the combatants. Fencing was but one

34. Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, 12.

useful trope that helped structure a European readership. Not only was it presumed that armed personal conflict was universal, but the fencing metaphor was easily connected to other familiar tropes in rhetoric and politics.³⁵ By placing the reader out of bounds, the fencing metaphor allowed for an easy appropriation of the encounter without requiring knowledge of strange languages and religions. Fencing reduced foreign encounter to a simple visual denominator.

Whereas the Jesuit narrative differentiates between different forms of Chinese thought, Francisci makes perfectly clear that the primary motive for Europeans to study foreign cultures is so that they may know themselves better. The Other is quite explicitly the mirror against which Europe defines itself, according to Francisci: "To know ourselves in God remains the highest form of knowledge that man can achieve. . . . However, to reach the highest form of self-knowledge we are urged to study other people as much as ourselves, as they are civilized in manner, customs, and practices. Herein we can learn what we lack."³⁶ Further translating the Jesuit text into a courtly context, Francisci presents Ricci's conversations as a demonstration of superior skill. The Jesuit need to disprove heresy and reveal divine truth recedes in Francisci's telling. Trigault's original narration stresses Ricci's role in giving sermons on God's law. He emphasizes Ricci's campaign against the worship of false idols, which the story will demonstrate is practiced by Buddhists, not Confucian mandarins. Trigault's interest is to further the Jesuit policy of *approchement* with the Confucian elite by writing for an ecclesiastical audience in Rome, whereas Francisci emphasizes Ricci's skill in verbal combat. As much as Francisci admires Ricci's dexterity, his account stresses that he doubts, or says he cannot understand, the Jesuit claim that pictures of Confucius were treated

35. Dena Goodman draws a direct parallel between the forensic pedagogy of Jesuit schools and fencing in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). 94.

36. Erasmus Francisci, *Neu-polirter Geschicht- Kunst- und Sitten-Spiegel ausländischer Völcker fürnemlich Der Sineser, Japaner, Indostaner, Javaner, Malabaren, Peguaner, Siammer, . . . und theils anderer Nationen mehr: welcher, in sechs Büchern, sechserley Gestalten weiset . . .* (Nürnberg: Endter, 1670), n.p.

with respect as being of a human and not a god.³⁷ In other words, on the crucial question of idolatry, Francisci sides against the missionaries. For Goethe writing to Schiller, Ricci's preference for logic over scripture does not appear as a universal form of humanity; rather it is quickly reduced to a particular philosophical school. Indeed, the Buddhist challenges Ricci's reliance on abstract categories by arguing that they constituted a secondary mode of creation. To postulate abstract terms for the sun, moon, and heavens amounted to their recreation.

Goethe's Reversal

By the time Goethe read about Matteo Ricci, European interest in China had taken on a very different tone than when the missionaries were sending back reports about the court in Beijing. The Jesuits had been suppressed by papal decree in 1773, the China mission had been closed, and new ethnographic travelogues about more contemporary journeys to Peking, such as the failed British Macartney embassy, were filling the book market. Before Goethe sent his friend a copy of Francisci's report on the disputation, Schiller had already sent Goethe the first translated Chinese novel, originally published 1761 in London as *The Pleasing History* and then given a German makeover, entitled *Die angenehme Geschichte*, by Christian Gottlieb von Murr in 1766. Murr had sent Schiller a copy in 1794, which Schiller presumably passed along to Goethe.³⁸ Thus, in the 1790s, Goethe and Schiller were pursuing any number of Chinese sources, driven by a clear sense of having rediscovered a culture that had been ossified into rococo stereotypes. For them, China was a discovery made in the library rather than on a porcelain vase. Rejecting Francisci's inclination to perceive the dinner debate as an encoun-

37. Francisci, *Neu-polirter . . . Spiegel*, 1012.

38. Schiller mentions Goethe reading a Chinese novel in a letter dated January 24, 1796; *Briefwechsel*, 1:148. Goethe's diary entry from January 12, 1796, likewise mentions the Chinese novel—at this point only one had been translated. Commentators identify it as Murr's translation of the English *The Pleasing Story*; *Briefwechsel*, 3: 101–2.

ter between East and West, Christianity and paganism, Goethe sees the disputation as a contest between two types of thought that have their direct parallel in Weimar as well. He characterizes his interpretation of the debate in terms of two sets of antithetical couplings, one in China, the other in Germany, thereby suggesting a set of constellations that reoccur in different times and locations.

Given how assiduously German literary historiography distinguishes between what it has called baroque literature and the classical period of autonomy aesthetics, we should pause to consider what it means for the two luminaries to read through a seventeenth-century scribe such as Francisci in search of good material. In German literary history, Goethe and Schiller are the authors who define literature as a self-created reality, flowing from the internal genius of the author as a second creator. What does it mean that they have been caught poaching from an earlier, encyclopedic compilation about exotic places? Do we have to reconsider our awe for aesthetic autonomy? Schiller refers to Francisci's style as "gothic," a term Herder used decades earlier to describe ornate courtly style, what we call "baroque" or "rococo." Both Goethe and Schiller reassure themselves and each other that even as they read Francisci, they are detached from his convoluted style.

Goethe's rummaging through old collections looking for exotic stories is itself a seventeenth-century practice.³⁹ The late poetic works that led up to his notion of world literature emerged from reading around in oriental literature and scholarship looking for inspiration. The legend of his renewed poetic voice upon reading Hammer-Purgstall's translations of Hafez fits this pattern of searching through writing about non-European cultures for new material. This readerly gleaning of poetic material is by no means confined to the late Goethe, for *Faust* is also a product of long dives through seventeenth-century literature. In the end the discursive practices that Friedrich Kittler claims ended with Goethe's *Faust*, the constant borrowing and refurbishing of someone else's

39. See the introduction to Robert Folger, *Writing as Poaching: Interpellation and Self-Fashioning in Colonial relaciones de méritos y servicios* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3–12.

old stories, were indeed still at play in Weimar classicism. If we see Goethe as a complex writing-machine, then reading books intensively, in order to put them to use, drives its operation.⁴⁰ As Peter Bürger claims, “The organic artwork tries to make the facts of its having been produced invisible.”⁴¹ For his part, Walter Benjamin suspected that Goethe had burned the notebooks he kept while writing *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) because he did not want his trade secrets revealed. The one difference between baroque practices and Goethe, of course, is that with his appropriation of the Faust legend or Hafez’s *ghasels*, he composed poetry in his own distinctive voice—a point Hegel makes in his commentary on the *Divan* and one that Heine ignores deliberately when he tells Goethe of his own plans to write a Faust, as if the story were not uniquely bound to Goethe, but was available to anyone reading through old tomes. Heine, like Edgar Allan Poe pondering over some “quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,” reveals that one of his poetic strategies was to recast old compilations within a modern idiom, as opposed to commenting upon them with learned discourse:

Yes, what I said is nothing new, and can be found in old, respectable folio and quarto editions of the compilers and antiquarians, in these catacombs of learnedness, where sometimes with a dreadful symmetry that is more horrifying still than the wildest arbitrariness, we find the heterogeneous bones of ideas are piled up—I admit as well, that modern scholars have also examined these topics; however they have entombed them in the wooden mummy caskets of their confusing and abstract scholarly language, which the general public cannot decode because they seem like Egyptian hieroglyphs. I have conjured up these thoughts from out of such crypts and ossuaries in order to bring them back to life through the magic power of commonly understood words, through the black art of a healthy, clear, popular style!⁴²

40. Gilles Deleuze, “Letter to a Harsh Critic,” *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 7–8. Deleuze’s notion of intensive reading differs substantially from Rolf Engelsing’s *Lesegesichte*; indeed, it aligns more with his “extensive” reading.

41. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 97.

42. Heinrich Heine, “Die Götter im Exil,” in *Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, ed. Manfred Windfuhr (Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe, 1987), 9:125.

Goethe shares this black art of borrowing from forgotten collections with Friedrich Schiller, who in his correspondence about Ricci's disputation referred to the practice as searching for poetic spoils, "poetische Ausbeute."⁴³ The language of acquisition that Goethe, Schiller, and Heine use to describe the search for poetic inspiration—the borrowing of another text's images for one's own writing—becomes explicit in Goethe's "Harzreise im Winter" (Winter journey into the Harz mountains), where a soaring bird embodies the poet's constant search for new symbols to draw into his compositions.

Just as a raptor
with soft wings resting
upon heavy morning clouds
scans for prey,
may my song soar

Dem Geier gleich,
Der auf schweren Morgenwolken
Mit sanftem Fittich ruhend
Nach Beute schaut,
Schwebe mein Lied.⁴⁴

As David Wellbery shows in his comprehensive reading of this poem, the hunting theme depicts the mediation between the poet and his long sought-for song. As far as finding the sources for poetic inspiration, "Harzreise" makes clear that the predatory poet's prey lies well off the path of established culture.⁴⁵ The poet must travel far afield away from the courts and the "comfortable crowd" to find plunder. The poetic object that breaks with convention and establishes a new vision possesses at first a degree of hiddenness and obscurity. It lies "abseits" and off to the side in the bushes as within

43. *Briefwechsel*, 2:11.

44. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Harzreise im Winter," in *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. Karl Eibl (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987), 1: 322; hereafter referred to as FA.

45. David Wellbery, *The Specular Moment: Goethe's Early Lyric and the Beginnings of Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 356–66.

the terms of “Harzreise’s” hunting metaphor.⁴⁶ Hermeneutic excursions into unfamiliar texts would over time substitute for actual travel, though from the earliest Goethe was just as inclined to work through an esoteric book as to wander into the mountains in search of a poetic symbol. Reading foreign texts and traveling abroad were mutually reinforcing and eventually interchangeable avenues to an epiphany. By the time he turned to Asian literature, Goethe was too old to go there. His trips remained virtual all the better to actualize his writing.⁴⁷

Goethe’s relationship to Persian and Chinese literature entails borrowing stories for the sake of his own writing—a relation of influence that he acknowledges for Shakespeare and the Bible as well: “Does not everything accomplished by our predecessors and contemporaries belong by rights to the poet? Why should he refrain from picking flowers from where he finds them? A great work requires the appropriation of foreign treasures. With Mephistopheles did I not take from Job and Shakespeare?”⁴⁸ If Goethe and Schiller referred to themselves ironically as marauders and magicians, we can understand these allusions on several levels: first, as a witty contradiction to the polite public discourse about artists, second as an identification with their own critical representation of the construction of meaning in *Faust* or *Iphigenie* as trickery or exploitation, and thirdly as an acknowledgment of the fundamental intertextuality of all writing as derived from earlier reading. With these considerations, classical aesthetics emerges as the appropriation of ancient texts—that is, as a process of rewriting already established stories. As Eckermann puts it, “Everything is different with already *given* material and easier. Facts and characters are then already provided and the poet has only to enliven the whole. . . . Yes, I would advise to use objects that have already been worked upon. How often has Iphige-

46. Goethe, FA, 1:32.

47. Within this poetic framework reading is virtual, writing actual. For more on this Deleuzian distinction, see Matt Bluemink, “On Virtuality: Deleuze, Bergson, Simondon,” *Epoché* (December 2020), <https://epochemagazine.org/on-virtuality-deleuze-bergson-simondon-824e3742368e>.

48. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, “Gespräch 17 Dezember 1824 mit von Müller and Eckermann,” WA, 5:120.

nia been done and yet they are all different, for everyone sees and positions the situation differently, according to his own manner.”⁴⁹ In the 1798 letter in which he describes Matteo Ricci’s dinner debate, Goethe refers to “we poets” as magicians (*Taschenspieler*), who do not want anyone to see how their art is practiced.⁵⁰ If modern avant-garde works make a point of displaying the techniques used in their production, Weimar classicism preferred to hold them as a guild secret. Goethe’s identification in this passage with the most notorious early modern magicians is but a turn of the hand away from the tricks Mephistopheles pulls off in the Auerbachs Keller scene, his *Taschenspieler*sachen.⁵¹ As an example of literary magic, Goethe cites, in his letter to Schiller, the Germans’ enthusiastic reception of “Hermann und Dorothea,” an epic poem whose original source was discovered only later in the nineteenth century. Rather than having been about the recent arrival of the French Revolution’s refugees, Goethe’s tale about a man who falls instantly in love with a woman fleeing her home derives from a 1732 account of Protestants driven from the Salzburg archbishopric.⁵² Schiller shared Goethe’s habit of roving through old chronicles and compilations for inspiration. His ballad “Der Kampf mit dem Drachen” (Battle with the dragon) was also based on a tale found in the Francisci collection. After Goethe praised the Jesuit compiler Athanasius Kircher, Schiller was able to compose “Der Taucher” (The diver), based on a tale in several baroque compilations.⁵³ A key difference between scholars and poets lies merely in the manner in which they peruse libraries. Classical authors looked for material they could

49. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Christoph Michel and Hans Grütters (Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2011), 51–52 (September 18, 1823) (emphasis in original).

50. “Wen nuns als Dichtern, wie den Taschenspielern, daran gelegen sein mußte, daß niemand die Art, wie ein Kunststückchen hervorgebracht wird, einsehen dürfte, so hätten wir freilich gewonnen Spiel” (*Briefwechsel*, 2:9).

51. Goethe, *Faust I*, HA 3: 73, line 2267.

52. *Das Liebthätige Gera gegen die Salzburgerischen Emigranten* (Franckfurt, 1732).

53. John Edwards Fletcher, *A Study of the Life and Works of Athanasius Kircher, “Germanus incredibilis”* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 384.

transform into their own writing; scholars sought to understand in order to produce knowledge.

Friedrich Kittler argues that modern German literature was born as a subjective cry of despair sent out from a scribe caught within the baroque discourse of cutting and pasting earlier texts. The celebration of Goethe as the founding genius of German *Poesie* concentrates on this personal voice but by doing so overlooks Faust's intellectual labor as a translator, for it is in the intertextual transfer of a text from one language to the other that we can most readily recognize baroque literary practices. The two types of utterances—the poet's cry and his dictionary searches for the right word—are interdependent. Without the endless repetition of old stories in new bindings, Goethe's—or Faust's—personal shout of frustration and defiance would have never been made. The translation scene in *Faust*, far from showing the end of the baroque, hints at the poet's persistent return to familiar texts and forgotten tomes in search of his own voice. The interdependence between repetitive learning and personal revolt does not lead only to a synthesis of higher poetry and insight, but rather it starts the same process anew at a different register, so that after rereading old books so that you can find your own epiphany, and then start another such cycle of rereading old books to find your another version of that inner voice. As the legend of *West-Eastern Divan* suggests, the best Goethe can hope for is that the books change and the voice remains the same.