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The First Global Turn: Chinese Contributions to Enlightenment World History

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THE FIRST GLOBAL TURN

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment historiography underwent what might be called the first global turn. European historians devised a new program for world history, drawing diverse local histories together to treat the world as an interconnected whole. Enlightenment world history took many forms, as Jennifer Pitts has shown. Conjectural history, developed in Scotland, formulated universal models of historical development through stages of civilization. Commercial histories, pioneered in France, uncovered the economic links that drew different parts of the world together. Both were attempts to write histories with very broad coverage in time and space. Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published beginning in 1776, took for its subject the entirety of Europe and much of West Asia over a period of more than a millennium. Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, first published in 1756, was yet more expansive, starting with the beginning of recorded civilization and extending almost to his own day. Both developed approaches that were world-historical in the sense that they were supposed to be applicable always and everywhere. And both realized, too, that in order to be so, they would have to engage with the scholarly traditions of the world beyond Europe.¹

¹ Jennifer Pitts, "The Global in Enlightenment Historical Thought," in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori (Chichester, UK and Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 184–196.

Enlightenment world history developed in response to the collapse of an older model of universal history that was no longer workable. This involved two shifts that were in fact conceptually linked: the questioning of the Bible's historicity and the discovery of independent historical traditions that the Bible did not include. Orientalism in the early modern era was a fundamentally religious field of study. But recent historians such as Urs App and Alexander Bevilacqua have shown that the relationship between Christian ecumenicism and widening historical horizons was decidedly ambiguous: religious reasons were typically what led scholars to engage with non-Western historical sources, but those same sources sometimes challenged the very religious visions that had made them available.² Catholicism, all-embracing by definition, had provided a framework for understanding the human past that was based on the story of Christianity. This remained crucial even for those Enlightenment historians who wished to reject it; thus, Voltaire envisioned his work as a response to Bossuet's providentialist *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* of 1681, while Gibbon's final subject was the triumph of the Catholic Church. But at the same time, the translation of historical texts from languages such as Sanskrit, Turkish, and Persian had also shown such historians that the human record extended to times and places about which the Bible said nothing at all. Enlightenment writers were therefore compelled to deal with historical traditions that seemed like they might be tied with their own origins, but that their predecessors had in some cases not even known existed.

Among the many foreign historiographies that challenged older historical frameworks, none was more compelling than that of China. When early Jesuit missionaries had begun studying Chinese language and culture in the late sixteenth century, they discovered a historical tradition that seemed in many ways comparable to their own—voluminous, ancient, and confirmed by astronomical record—yet probably non-Christian, and definitely non-European. Over the next two hundred years, the missionaries produced dozens of translations of Chinese historical works, which reconciled them with the Bible in diverse and creative ways.³ But, back in Europe, their ideological opponents, including deists, freethinkers, and eventually atheists, turned the Jesuit translation project on its head, using the

² Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism: Encounters with Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

³ Nicholas Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts: Chinese and European Stories about Emperor Ku and his Concubines* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

ancient record of China instead to argue against a historical reading of the Old Testament.⁴ By the 1680s, Isaac Vossius had made Chinese history into a bludgeon for smashing Christian idols, Biblical chronology chief among them. Likewise, Voltaire put China at the start of his world history precisely as part of his response to Bossuet's *Biblicism*: "it is incontestable that the most ancient annals of the world are those of China."⁵ The deployment of Chinese history in such polemics has often appeared as its dominant use in the high Enlightenment. As Edwin Van Kley put it in an article on "Europe's 'Discovery' of China and the Writing of World History" published in the *American Historical Review* in 1971: "those writers who most effectively integrated ancient Chinese history with ancient Western history [. . .] often lost interest in Chinese history once they had resolved the problem of ancient chronology."⁶ This conclusion is very well known to historians of the Enlightenment, and it has been for a long time.

What is less well-known is that from the 1750s on, while some historians were using Chinese historiography to destroy an older approach to world history, others were using it to construct a new one. Since Van Kley's day, the once-burgeoning sub-field of the history of early modern Sino-Western relations has been largely pushed into its own historiographical corner, as Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen has recently shown; indeed, the authoritative study of Chinese history in the Enlightenment remains a book written by Virgile Pinot in 1932.⁷ Historians have had difficulty getting past the analytical binary of images versus influences; that is, investigating either how the Enlightenment perceived China, or how China affected the Enlightenment. In recent years, a revived interest in world history—just one part of the global turn within the historical profession—has led some to begin to address this problem. In particular, historians of China have shown how Chinese histories reached Europe, while historians of Europe have revealed how Enlightenment scholars learned about

⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 640–652.

⁵ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968–), Volume 59, 269; see also, for example, Jean-Robert Armogathe, "Voltaire et la Chine: Une mise au point," *La mission française de Pékin aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1974), 32–33.

⁶ Edwin J. Van Kley, "Europe's 'Discovery' of China and the Writing of World History," *The American Historical Review* 76, no. 2 (1971): 385.

⁷ Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen, "Chinese Influences or Images? Fluctuating Histories of How Enlightenment Europe Read China," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 3 (2013): 623–628; Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France, 1640–1740* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1932; Reprint: Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971).

Chinese histories.⁸ My aim here is to bring these two largely independent efforts together by showing that the engagement with Chinese historical sources posed and answered distinctive Enlightenment questions.

I argue that certain Enlightenment approaches to world history took shape through a productive engagement with Chinese historical texts, and I demonstrate this by retracing the efforts of two French writers to put Chinese history to use in the age of the *philosophes*. Joseph de Guignes and Michel-Ange le Roux Deshauterayes, both professors at the Collège royal, were among the first Western European scholars to learn to read Chinese without leaving Europe. They capitalized on their unique ability by making comprehensive, primary-source Chinese histories available in translation and deploying them in their own original research. By the 1750s, they were drawing from Chinese texts not only to recount the history of China, but also to articulate a vision of a connected human past and to solve specific problems that this vision presented. Deshauterayes used the sixteenth-century historian Nan Xuan to argue that the mariner's compass was invented in ancient China and diffused westward to Europe. This project foreshadowed the twentieth century historian Joseph Needham's influential approach to the history of science in China, and what I call the "China, too!" paradigm in world history more generally. De Guignes read Ma Duanlin's fourteenth-century encyclopedia to identify the Xiongnu who invaded the Han with the Huns who threatened Rome.⁹ His *Histoire générale des Huns*, like many efforts in world history today, focused on contact and exchange across the historical and geographical expanses of Eurasia.¹⁰ Both scholars suggested not only that China and Europe were historically connected, but also that the history of each could shed light on the history of the other.

⁸ On the former, see Isabelle Landry-Deron, *La Preuve par la Chine: La "Description" de J.-B. Du Halde, Jésuite, 1735* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2002); Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts*; and Wu Huiyi, *Traduire la Chine au XVIIIe siècle. Les jésuites traducteurs de textes chinois et le renouvellement des connaissances européennes sur la Chine (1687–ca. 1740)*; on the latter, see Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 640–652; Anthony Pagden, "The Immobility of China: Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Enlightenment," in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 50–64; J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume 4, Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁹ Xiongnu 匈奴.

¹⁰ Joseph de Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartare Occidentaux, &c., avant et depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent* (Paris: Desaint & Saillant) (1756–1758), Volumes 1–4.

Historians of the Enlightenment, including Jonathan Israel, Anthony Pagden, and J.G.A. Pocock, have recently drawn attention to the fact that European scholars learned *about* China; I aim to show that they also learned *from* China. The point is that Parisian savants read Chinese histories by identifiable Chinese authors and cited them as such to advance their own claims about the European past. This is not to say that those claims were in any meaningful sense correct. In point of fact, their positions on the origins of the compass and the identity of the Huns are still debated today, although their use of Chinese evidence was often inaccurate, usually misinformed, and sometimes even dishonest. Yet, correct knowledge and powerful knowledge were by no means the same thing. In warping Chinese history to make better use of it, Deshauterayes and de Guignes revealed the distinctive ambitions of their own time, and made it available to other historians, including both Gibbon and Voltaire. What took place during the Enlightenment was not just the “discovery” of Chinese history, but also the marshalling of it.

This is just one story of the first global turn. It shows that European writers drew from non-European texts to articulate an approach to world history and also to make claims about histories that they already saw as part of their own. In this particular case, those writers were French, the texts they drew from were Chinese, and the world-historical claims involved the origins of medieval science and the fall of the Roman Empire. One could surely tell similar stories about Arabic, Indian, or Mesoamerican contributions to the first global turn, and indeed, others have begun to do so.¹¹ I do not myself intend to make a “China, too!” argument. The point is not that China, too, had histories, or that China, too, had an Enlightenment, though both may be true. The point is rather that French writers working in Paris deployed original Chinese evidence in the context of broader Enlightenment debates. They used their knowledge of Chinese to address issues of world history to which Chinese texts were not necessarily, or even obviously, relevant. In this way, non-European culture permeated the ideas of the Enlightenment at a deeper level than often imagined.

By showing how European thinkers used Chinese texts, I aim finally to suggest an approach to the global Enlightenment that both global

¹¹ For example, Bevilacqua; Marie Fourcade and Ines G. Zupanov, eds., *L'Inde des Lumières: Discours, histoire, savoirs (XVIIe-XIXe siècles)* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

historians and Enlightenment historians will find acceptable. According to Sebastian Conrad's thought-provoking 2012 article on "Enlightenment in Global History," most scholarship on the global Enlightenment "moves beyond the obsession with the Enlightenment's European origins" to include times and places that traditional historians of the Enlightenment would never be willing to include; this is thought to be necessary because "an axiomatic definition forecloses every possibility of global perspectives." I propose that whatever the merits of such an approach, one need not move beyond the Enlightenment's origins to show that it was global: the Enlightenment was already global in its origins. Even at ground zero, mid-eighteenth century Paris, Enlightenment thinkers engaged with original non-European texts in serious and productive ways, leading to some of the very ideas that historians of eighteenth-century Europe have always seen as distinctive to the Enlightenment narrowly defined. If it is true that "the Enlightenment has long held a pivotal place in narratives of world history," it is also true that narratives of world history were themselves a signature contribution of Enlightenment efforts.¹² Some of them—indeed, two in particular that have found renewed purchase in discussions of world history today—were formulated through the deployment of Chinese histories.

CHINESE HISTORIES IN THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

"Dare we speak about the Chinese without referring to their own annals?" asked Voltaire in the *Philosophie de l'histoire*; "they are confirmed by the unanimous testimony of our voyagers of different sects, Jacobins, Jesuits, Lutherans, Calvinists, all interested in contradicting each other."¹³ Although Enlightenment opinions on China were split, virtually everyone agreed on the importance of its historical record. European scholars in fact knew quite a lot about it, thanks almost entirely to the Catholic missionaries, mostly Jesuits, who had been resident in China already for nearly two hundred years. During that time, they had sent back hundreds of original Chinese historical works, along with many thousands of pages of original translations and analyses. Historians including Wu Huiyi and Nicholas Standaert have recently begun to document the early modern explosion of Chinese

¹² Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 999, 1115.

¹³ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 59, 152.

texts in Western-language translation and to trace them back through the missionaries to their Chinese originals. It remains, however, comparatively unknown what Enlightenment writers did with those Chinese texts back in Europe, though it is clear that it often had little to do with the missionaries' original intentions.¹⁴ What is particularly surprising is that the primary sources and secondary research made available by the missionaries were in some cases deployed even in domains that on their surface had nothing to do with China at all.

The missionaries insisted that “there is no better way to learn about China than from China itself”—but could China teach Europe about topics besides itself as well?¹⁵ This was in a sense a different question from the one that Voltaire asked. On the subject of China, Chinese histories were simply the only sources available, and, since ancient European writers had said almost nothing about it, they could not usually be contradicted. Even if events had not occurred as a given Chinese work said they had, that work could still at least be used to talk about what was going on in China during the period when it was written. European writers widely believed that myths and legends might conceal historical truth. Yet they also by and large accepted that Chinese histories were indeed historical.¹⁶ The Jesuit missionaries had used Chinese sources to say much about the history of China, as well as other places in Asia about which Europeans in most cases knew even less. But they rarely ventured too far beyond that, and when they did—as for example when the Figurist missionaries argued that ancient Chinese texts contained premonitions, or “figures,” of Christian Revelation—it often got them into trouble. So, during the mid to late eighteenth century, that task fell instead to two French savants, both based in Paris, whose social position, professional duties, and intellectual background forced them to take a less expert, and thus also broader, approach to Chinese history.

Joseph de Guignes, born in 1721, and Michel-Ange le Roux Deshauterayes, born in 1724, were for most of their lives the only two scholars in Western Europe who claimed a working knowledge of written Chinese. They had learned to read the language together as

¹⁴ Jeffrey D. Burson, “Unlikely Tales of Fo and Ignatius: Rethinking the Radical Enlightenment through French Appropriation of Chinese Buddhism,” *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015): 391–420.

¹⁵ Quoted in Wu, 15.

¹⁶ John W. Witek, “Chinese Chronology: A Source of Sino-European Widening Horizons in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Actes du IIIe Colloque International de Sinologie: Appréciation par l'Europe de la tradition chinoise à partir du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, Cathasia, 1983), 236.

teenagers at the Bibliothèque royale, under the tutelage of Deshauterayes' uncle, the orientalist Étienne Fourmont, and his colleague, the classicist Nicolas Fréret. These two had enjoyed the rare opportunity to study it with an actual Chinese person, Arcadio Huang, who worked with them at the Bibliothèque royale from 1711 until his death in 1716. This was not enough time to bring Fourmont or Fréret up to true Chinese literacy, but it was long enough to establish what one missionary later called a "Chinese institution" in Enlightenment Paris, which came to an end only with the deaths of de Guignes and Deshauterayes in 1800 and 1795.¹⁷ The first professional academic Sinologists who came soon thereafter much doubted their linguistic abilities, and virtually all later historians have followed suit.¹⁸ Yet there were few if any in France who were better, and, as this was also the opinion of their contemporaries, that lent considerable authority to their works.

For nearly half a century, de Guignes and Deshauterayes delivered papers, wrote treatises, and engaged in disputes, all while claiming to exploit their knowledge of Chinese texts. Their careers progressed largely in tandem, always in the direct pay of the French state, and, almost inevitably, they became academic rivals. In the 1740s, each was made an interpreter at the Bibliothèque royale, and in the 1750s, each was appointed to a remunerated teaching position with a chair at the Collège royal.¹⁹ A dispute broke out in public at around this time, when de Guignes revived the idea that the first Chinese were a settler colony of ancient Egyptians, and Deshauterayes contested it. De Guignes eventually lost the argument, but not before effectively marginalizing Deshauterayes—who cannot really be said to have won it, either.²⁰ De Guignes was elected to the prestigious Académie des Inscriptions, and though Deshauterayes continued to teach, his writing remained mostly unpublished. Still, both remained fixtures of French academic life.²¹

The two Sinologue scholars were by no means professional Sinologists. For the most part, their contemporaries referred to

¹⁷ Joseph-Marie Amiot to Bertin, 10 October 1789, Institut de France (IF), MS 1517, 65–86; Cécile Leung, *Etienne Fourmont, 1683–1745: Oriental and Chinese Languages in Eighteenth-Century France* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, "Lettre au Rédacteur, sur l'état et les progrès de la littérature chinoise en Europe," *Journal Asiatique* I (1822) (Paris: Dondey-Dupré Père et Fils), 281; App, 191–196.

¹⁹ Archives de la Collège de France, MS 15 CDF 142, MS 15 CDF 187.

²⁰ Janine Hartman, "Ideograms and Hieroglyphs: The Egypto-Chinese Origins Controversy in the Enlightenment," *Dalhousie French Studies* 43 (1998): 101–118.

²¹ App, *Birth of Orientalism*, 236.

them simply as *savants*.²² Some later historians have used the term ‘proto-Sinologists,’ but the term “proto-orientalists” is probably more suitable, since, though each held a chair in an eastern language at the Collège royal, neither was in Chinese: de Guignes’s was in Syriac, and Deshauterayes’s was in Arabic. This suggests already the point made by many recent historians that early modern orientalism and Biblical studies went hand in hand. Together, the two scholars offered full coverage of the three Abrahamic faiths, with classes on the Psalms of David, the New Testament, and the Qur’an.²³ They were not philosophes; in fact, they argued against the philosophes’ attempts to co-opt China to turn Biblical history on its head.²⁴ But they were active participants in the Enlightenment, and they sought to contribute by introducing Chinese knowledge into it.

It is certain that the French savants could have made no progress toward this end without the Jesuit missionaries. Their “Chinese institution” owed its existence to the earlier French mission in Beijing, and throughout their careers they maintained an active correspondence with the missionaries still living there.²⁵ Almost all of the Chinese books that they read in the collection of the Bibliothèque royale had been sent or brought there by Jesuits.²⁶ Perhaps more important, so too had many manuscript translations of Chinese works into Western languages, which allowed them to work from French or Latin and then check back in Chinese originals for confirmation. With all this in mind, it is not surprising that many of their ideas, including both the Chinese priority of the invention of the compass and the identification of the Huns with the Xiongnu, had already been suggested by some missionary at one point or another. Time and again, they copied citations, stole research notes, and plagiarized paragraphs wholesale from the missionaries, who were by any modern measure better scholars of China.²⁷ But to disregard the savants on this account would be to misunderstand what they were trying to do. In general, they served less as China specialists, and more as intellectual “go-betweens” between the missionaries in China and Enlightenment scholars in Europe.²⁸

²² For example, Henri Bertin to Aloys Ko and Étienne Yang, 31 December 1766, IF, MS 1521, 4–25.

²³ Archives de la Collège de France, MS 15 CDF 142, MS 15 CDF 187.

²⁴ Pocock, *Volume 4: Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, 111.

²⁵ Antoine Gaubil, ed. Renée Simon, *Correspondance de Pékin 1722–1759* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970).

²⁶ Leung, 132–138.

²⁷ App, 196–197, 235–237.

²⁸ Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj, and James Delbourgo, eds., *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2009).

In this capacity, they were the people responsible for bringing several of the most important missionary works to press, while changing them in the process. The 1770s stands out as a time of major progress in the European study of Chinese history, with the publication of two fairly comprehensive French translations of Chinese historical works. The first was the *Chou-king*, edited by de Guignes and translated loosely from the *Shujing*, or *Classic of Documents*, a compilation canonized during the second century BCE, with some texts dating back hundreds of years earlier. The second was the *Histoire générale de la Chine*, edited by Deshauterayes and based indirectly on the *Outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*, a macroscopic history of China edited in the twelfth century.²⁹ For almost a hundred years, these were the most extensive original Chinese histories available in any European language.³⁰ Each had been translated by a French Jesuit missionary in the early eighteenth century, and each was then edited decades later by one of the savants for publication in Paris.

It is worth pausing for a moment to note just how difficult this task must have been. In late imperial China, new historical works were often presented as expansions, revisions, or commentaries on earlier ones. An individual publication was like a photograph taken of an evolving corpus at a specific point in time.³¹ Consider, for example, the *Comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*, composed in the eleventh century under the supervision of the famous historian Sima Guang. In the twelfth century, the philosopher Zhu Xi oversaw an abbreviation and commentary, which was published as the *Outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*. Then, in the sixteenth century, the historian Nan Xuan composed a supplement to Zhu Xi's abbreviation and commentary, which he called the *Prologue to the outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*. To make things still more confusing, later editions often combined the earlier texts in different ways, such as the *Imperially commissioned*

²⁹ *Classic of Documents*, *Shujing* 書經; Antoine Gaubil, trans., *Le Chou-king: Un des livres sacrés des Chinois, qui renferme les fondements de leur ancienne histoire, les principes de leur gouvernement & de leur morale*, ed. Joseph de Guignes (Paris: N. M. Tilliard, 1770); *Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government*, *Zizhi tongjian gangmu* 資治通鑑綱目; Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla, trans., *Histoire générale de la Chine, ou annales de cet Empire, traduites du Tong-kien-kang-mou*, ed. Michel-Ange le Roux Deshauterayes (Paris: Pierres and Clousier, 1777–1785). I ask the reader's understanding for leaving French titles in French while translating Chinese titles into English; the former is intended to avoid ambiguity, while the latter is to give a better idea of the meanings of the titles for those who do not read Chinese.

³⁰ Witek, 248.

³¹ Wu, 345–346.

complete book of the outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government, sponsored by the Kangxi emperor in the early eighteenth century. All of these publications had a title that included Sima Guang's original "Comprehensive mirror for the aid of government," and many discreet passages, which themselves had often been taken from still earlier texts, could be found in any one of them. A few Jesuit historians seem to have achieved a firm command of this literature, but they often simplified things for their European audiences.³²

In fact, neither of the two 1770s French editions of Chinese histories was in any sense a straightforward translation. Neither one was the work of a single author, nor a single translator, nor even a single editor, and both drew from multiple Chinese publications. The *Histoire générale de la Chine, ou annales de cet empire, traduites du Tong-kien-kang-mou* was supposedly a translation of Zhu Xi's *Zizhi tongjian gangmu*, or *Outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*, which was, again, based on Sima Guang's earlier text. But the French manuscript, composed in Beijing by the missionary Joseph-Anne-Marie de Moyriac de Mailla, included events that supposedly took place thousands of years before Zhu Xi's story began, and others that took place long after Zhu Xi's death. In fact, de Mailla's manuscript was not a translation from any Chinese work, but rather from a Manchu edition of it that had been produced under the Kangxi emperor in the late seventeenth century.³³ The French manuscript was altered and annotated by Deshauterayes, who in turn handed over the proofs to the publisher, the abbé Jean-Baptiste Grosier, for further changes.³⁴ The French translation of the *Chou-king* had a similarly convoluted backstory: the missionary Antoine Gaubil's original manuscript, which was also composed in Beijing in part from a Manchu edition, had been lost, so de Guignes was obliged to work from a decades-old copy.³⁵ In sum, the *Tong-kien-kang-mou* was not the *Tongjian gangmu*, and the

³² *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* 資治通鑑; *Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* 資治通鑑綱目; *Prologue to the Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* 資治通鑑綱目前編; *Prologue to the Outline and Details of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* 御批資治通鑑綱目全書; For an introduction, see Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts*, 15–87.

³³ Nicolas Standaert, "Jesuit Accounts of Chinese History and Chronology and their Chinese Sources," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 35 (2013): 66–70.

³⁴ Bibliothèque nationale de France [BnF], Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises [NAF] MS 2492, 1–143.

³⁵ De Guignes, "Preface," *Chou-king*, i–ii.

Chou-king was not the *Shujing*. These French publications were separated by many steps from anything like a Chinese original.

Yet it is telling that the titles of both of these French works did include transliterations of their Chinese ones. In response to demands like Voltaire's, they were advertised as faithful translations of Chinese historical texts. The minister Henri-Léonard Bertin, who had a hand in both publications and would soon become the major patron of the French missionaries in Beijing, made the imperative very clear. As he wrote to one of the missionaries, translations, extracts, or anything based on a "Chinese original" were more successful and "infinitely more useful" than their own compositions: "it is the Chinese themselves whom one wants to see."³⁶ But where the missionaries who were active during this period, including Pierre-Marital Cibot and Joseph-Marie Amiot, largely ignored his demands, the Parisian savants responded accordingly. In the first pages of the preface to the *Chou-king*, de Guignes explained that he had decided to revise Gaubil's translation, which had included explanations and expansions interwoven with the main text, in order to more closely follow the Chinese style and to produce a version that was "much more in conformity with the original."³⁷ In the preface to the *Histoire générale de la Chine*, Deshauterayes claimed that his aim was simply to "represent the original Chinese."³⁸ Of course, there was always a good reason for both savants to insist on the importance of Chinese originals, which was that they were the only two scholars in France who claimed to be able to read them.

The great physical and conceptual distances between France and China thus presented the savants with advantages as well as difficulties. Since they could never challenge the missionaries on their own turf—the exact translation and philological explication of Chinese texts—they had to be more creative in how they used them. In their own research projects, subtleties such as the social contexts and authorial intentions that had produced Chinese texts were bluntly beside the point. Their own social and intellectual world of Enlightenment Paris encouraged them to ask questions of those texts that Jesuit interpreters usually did not answer, and allowed them to put a variety of different sources together into conversation in a way that the Jesuits rarely could. The result was that neither their reliance on the missionaries nor their

³⁶ Henri-Léonard Bertin to François Bourgeois, 30 November 1777, IF, MS 1522, 144–149.

³⁷ Joseph de Guignes, "Preface," *Chou-king*, ii,

³⁸ Deshauterayes, "Observations," in *Histoire générale de la Chine, ou annales de cet empire, traduites du Tong-kien-kang-mou* [. . .] (Paris: Pierres and Clousier) (1777), Volume 1, lxvi.

inferior knowledge of the Chinese language made their own scholarship any less influential; quite the contrary, it freed them to spend less time assessing Chinese knowledge and to concentrate instead on putting it to use.

THE ORIGINS OF THE COMPASS AND THE “CHINA, TOO!” SLOGAN

A major trope in the field of world history today is what we might call the “China, too!” slogan. Historians invoke it to combat Eurocentrism when, confronted with some historical phenomenon typically thought of as distinctive to Europe, they say: “That happened in China, too!” The core of the idea is that until the eighteenth or early nineteenth century—roughly the time of de Guignes and Deshauterayes—China and Europe were essentially comparable. This can be argued for anything from ancient urbanization and philosophical debate, through medieval market economies and urbanization, to early modern exploration and state formation. But the most influential example has probably been Joseph Needham’s *Science and Civilisation in China*, begun in 1954 and still ongoing today, which demonstrated that China, too, had sophisticated traditions of science and technology. Needham believed that “the greatest Chinese contribution to physics” was the discovery and application of magnetism, and he argued that the mariner’s compass, which became so important in medieval Europe, had likely been introduced there by transmission from China.³⁹ This, in fact, was exactly the view maintained by Deshauterayes. Though some of his evidence was wrong, his broader conclusion may have been right. More importantly, in arriving at it, he drew from authentic Chinese writings to contribute to French discussions of an issue of world historical significance.

Deshauterayes has been largely neglected by historians for the simple reason that little of his work was ever published. Early in his career, during the late 1750s, he did put out a brief but influential essay on Chinese mythology, as well as a pamphlet on the non-Egyptian origins of the ancient Chinese, targeted against his classmate and rival, de Guignes.⁴⁰

³⁹ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume IV: Physics and Physical Technology, Part I: Physics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 229, 330–335.

⁴⁰ Deshauterayes, “Extraits des historiens chinois,” in *De l’origine des lois, des arts, et des sciences, et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples*, ed. Antoine-Yves Goguet, Volume III (1758) (Reprint: Paris: Haussman and d’Hautel, 1809); Deshauterayes, *Doutes sur la dissertation de M. de Guignes qui a pour titre: Mémoire dans lequel on prouve, que le Chinois sont une Colonie Egyptienne. Proposés a Messieurs de l’Académie royale des Belles-Lettres* (Paris: Prault and Duchesne, 1759).

In the process, he caught the attention of Voltaire, by then an international celebrity, who wrote him a flattering letter: “the languages that you possess and that you teach are necessary to know antiquity, and this knowledge of antiquity shows us how much we have been fooled on everything.”⁴¹ In the early nineteenth century, some of Deshauterayes’s writings on the religion that would come to be called Buddhism were published posthumously and seem to have been influential for Arthur Schopenhauer.⁴² But even so, I am aware of no modern scholarly study that is primarily about him. Deshauterayes is thus less interesting for the reception of his efforts in later times than for what they reveal about his own.

For his contemporaries, his most influential work was undoubtedly the edition of the *Histoire générale de la Chine*, a chronological account spanning some three thousand years in time. Until the end of the nineteenth century, this remained among Europe’s most cited sources on the political history of China. It was also a massive and immediate success, with famous subscribers including Jean Sylvain-Bailly, Henri Bertin, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, Pierre-Samuel du Pont de Nemours, the Baron d’Holbach, Malesherbes, the Marquis de Mirabeau, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, and the Comte de Vergennes, to name just a few.⁴³ Through its thirteen volumes, which came out between 1777 and 1785, Deshauterayes created also an outlet for the publication, in the form of editorial comment and footnotes, of much of the independent research that he had conducted over the previous three decades.

One of those earlier efforts was a short essay entitled “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole” [Dissertation on the origin of the compass] about 23 pages folio, completed and delivered as a lecture in 1754, and now held in the archives of the Institut de France.⁴⁴ Although it was never published in its entirety, the manuscript was apparently shown to other scholars, and bits and pieces made it into a few other

⁴¹ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, Correspondence and Related Documents*, ed. Thomas Besterman (Geneva, Banbury, Oxford: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1968–1977), D9483, D10246.

⁴² Urs App, *Arthur Schopenhauer and China: A Sino-Platonic Love Affair* (Philadelphia: Sino-Platonic Papers 200, 2010), 20–22.

⁴³ Deshauterayes, *Histoire générale de la Chine*, Volume 1 (1777), v–xvii; see also Marie-Françoise Milsky, “Les Souscripteurs de ‘l’Histoire générale de la Chine’ du P. de Mailla: Aperçus du milieu sinophile français,” in *Actes du IIe Colloque International de Sinologie, Les rapports entre la Chine et l’Europe au temps des lumières* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, Cathasia, 1980), 101–123.

⁴⁴ Deshauterayes, “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole,” IF, MS 5409, 1–23.

eighteenth century publications as well.⁴⁵ Deshauterayes stated his main idea quite clearly at the beginning of the piece: “I establish by evidence that the compass owes its origin to the Chinese, who gave knowledge of it to the other peoples.”⁴⁶ To tell this history of cross-cultural connections, the French savant read obscure Chinese sources and put them into conversation with well-known Classical and European ones. He asked a question that was not specifically about China and used Chinese sources to answer it, presenting the findings in a world-historical context.

It was already apparent to the first European observers in China that the compass had been known there for some time. The Chinese compass was mentioned by Juan González de Mendoza in 1586, and it was known to non-specialists such as William Gilbert by the end of the century.⁴⁷ The first major missionary work on Chinese history, Martino Martini’s *Sinicae historiae decas prima* of 1658, provided significant discussion of the compass in China based on a solid textual foundation. Martini recounted a story about a diplomatic mission from the land of Jiaozhi, in what was then called Cochin China and now Vietnam, which had allegedly arrived at the court of the Zhou Dynasty in the eleventh century BCE.⁴⁸ Probably, Martini had read about it in the Song historian Jin Lüxiang’s *Prologue to the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government* (not to be confused with Nan Xuan’s text, which is sometimes given under the exact same title).⁴⁹ According to Martini, the Duke of Zhou gave the legate from Jiaozhi a gift: a “machine made with the greatest artifice, which by its own power showed the south . . . and it was called by the syllables *chinan* [*zhinan*], which is what the Chinese now call the compass.”⁵⁰ Martini concluded that the compass had been invented in China in deep antiquity and then diffused throughout the Indian Ocean, explaining why it was already in use there when European explorers first arrived.⁵¹

In the early eighteenth century, there had been some debate about this story. The greatest challenge came from an ex-Jesuit scholar,

⁴⁵ Deshauterayes, *Doutes*, 87–89; De Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine* (1777), Volume 1, 317–318; *Dictionnaire de la conversation et de la lecture* (Paris: Garnier frères) (1845), Volume 58, 440.

⁴⁶ Deshauterayes, “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole,” 1.

⁴⁷ Albert Schück, *Der Kompass* (Hamburg: A. Schück, 1915), Volume 2, 4–5.

⁴⁸ Jiaozhi 交趾.

⁴⁹ Jin Lüxiang 金履祥, *Zizhi tongjian qianbian* 資治通鑑前編 (*Prologue to the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government*); Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts*, 98.

⁵⁰ *zhinan* 指南.

⁵¹ Martino Martini, *Sinicae historiae decas prima* [. . .] (Munich: 1658), 91.

Eusèbe Renaudot, who in 1718 published a translation of an Arabic account of an expedition to East Asia.⁵² In this work, Renaudot was somewhat critical of China across the board; this, he believed, was necessary in order to defend his Arabic author's "little esteem for Chinese Philosophy, about which so many marvels have been said for around a hundred years."⁵³ He cited Martini's story about the embassy from Jiaozhi and, without challenging the missionary's representation of the Chinese sources, argued that the Duke of Zhou's "machine" was not in fact a compass. And even if the ancient Chinese had invented the compass, he claimed, it was not they who had spread it throughout the Indian Ocean.⁵⁴

In the early 1750s, Deshauterayes wrote his essay with the evident intention of settling the question in favor of Martini. He defended China against the general criticism that had emerged in the context of the compass story—"I am sorry that so learned a man as Father Renaudot should have lashed out against the Chinese with so much fury," he wrote—and cited some more recent evidence taken directly from the works of several more recent missionaries, both published and unpublished.⁵⁵ He began with a short extract copied out from Louis le Comte's 1696 *Nouveaux memoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* describing the design of the Chinese compass in modern times, with its division into twenty-four sections.⁵⁶ Next, he gave an extract from Gaubil's three-volume history of Chinese astronomy, which had been published recently in the 1730s, describing a technique from an unnamed Chinese herbal according to which a needle could be rubbed against a lodestone to give it the property of pointing south.⁵⁷ This was followed finally by a discussion citing Martini on the Duke of Zhou's south-pointing machine.⁵⁸ Deshauterayes was thus able to learn a great deal about the compass from the Jesuits already, without requiring any independent exploration of Chinese sources at all.

⁵² On Renaudot, see Bevilacqua, 136–166.

⁵³ Eusèbe Renaudot, *Anciennes relations des Indes et de la Chine de deux voyageurs mahométans, qui y allèrent dans le neuvième siècle* (Paris: Coignard, 1718), xviii.

⁵⁴ Renaudot, 290–291.

⁵⁵ Deshauterayes, "Dissertation sur l'origine de la Boussole," 12.

⁵⁶ Louis le Comte, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale) (1696), Volume 1, 476.

⁵⁷ Antoine Gaubil, *Observations mathématiques, astronomiques, géographiques, chronologiques, et physiques, tirées des anciens livres Chinois* (Paris: Souciet, 1732), Volume 2, 94–95; as noted in the margins of Deshauterayes's text, this was in fact the *Bencao yanyi* 本草衍義, composed in the early twelfth century (Needham, 251).

⁵⁸ Deshauterayes, "Dissertation sur l'origine de la Boussole," 10–13.

Yet the longest citation in the “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole” was given in quotation marks to indicate that it had come directly from a Chinese original. It described a battle that supposedly took place in the twenty-seventh century BCE between the sage king Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, also called Xuanyuan, and one of his legendary opponents, the tribal chieftain and wizard Chiyou.⁵⁹ This event was supposed to show that Chinese knowledge of the compass was even more ancient than the embassy from Jiaozhi—“if one believes Chinese history.”⁶⁰ In the key scene, according to Deshautes-ayes: “*Tchiyeou* [Chiyou], continues our historian, had the ability to create thick fog, which threw both officers and soldiers into trouble and confusion. *Yan-yuan* [Xuanyuan], to remedy this inconvenience, made a compass in order to indicate the four parts of the world.” Deshautes-ayes cited his source here as Liu Shu, an eleventh-century historian who had worked with Sima Guang; but in fact, the book he was working from was Nan Xuan’s sixteenth-century *Prologue to the outline and details of the comprehensive mirror for the aid of government*. This is proved by his citation of a particular commentary that can be found in the latter, but not in the former. But citing Liu Shu was not exactly wrong, since Nan Xuan had himself cited Liu Shu, and the main text of the story was essentially the same in both.⁶¹

It is impossible to say for sure whether Deshautes-ayes learned about the battle between the Yellow Emperor and Chiyou by reading a Chinese original, though he almost certainly consulted one at some point. That task was made much easier by his possession of a French translation of Nan Xuan’s text. It had been composed by another Jesuit, Dominique Parrenin, sent to Paris in 1730, and published in part by yet another Jesuit, Jean-Baptiste du Halde, in his *Description de la Chine* of 1735.⁶² Deshautes-ayes might well have read Parrenin’s translation, but if so, evidence suggests that he then used it to guide him through the Chinese. According to Deshautes-ayes, the battlefield on which the Yellow Emperor defeated Chiyou became known as the “land of the broken rein,” a name that he also gave in a French transliteration of the

⁵⁹ Huangdi 黃帝; Chiyou 蚩尤.

⁶⁰ Deshautes-ayes, “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole,” 13–14.

⁶¹ It is likely that the copy Deshautes-ayes had in front of him was the one now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Chinois 393, which bears the stamp of the pre-Revolutionary Bibliothèque royale: Nan Xuan 南軒, *Zizhi tongjian gangmu qianbian* 資治通鑑綱目前編 (*Prologue to the Outline and Detail of the Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government*) (1596) (Chen Renxi 陳仁錫, 1630).

⁶² Dominique Parrenin, “Version littérale du commencement de l’histoire chinoise depuis Fou-hy jusques à Yao,” BnF, MS Français 17240: 91–144, 271–556; see also Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts*, 117–122.

original Chinese. Parrenin's manuscript, however, had not included any Chinese name for the place, which it translated rather as "the plain of broken reins." It would have been difficult for Deshauterayes to work backward from this French phrase, which he did not adopt, to the original Chinese.⁶³ Furthermore, where Deshauterayes's recitation of the story of the embassy from Jiaozhi followed Martini's almost word for word, his version of the story of the Yellow Emperor was generally quite different from Parrenin's.

However he came upon the material, Deshauterayes certainly manipulated it to prove his point. In both Nan Xuan's Chinese text and Parrenin's translation, what the Yellow Emperor invented was literally called "a south-pointing chariot"; but in Deshauterayes's version, it was simply translated as "a compass."⁶⁴ To justify this interpretive leap, Deshauterayes referred to the commentary of a certain historian Chen Yin which was included in Nan Xuan's text, but which Deshauterayes only paraphrased.⁶⁵ Now, in the Chinese original, Chen Yin gave two possible interpretations of the South-pointing chariot. On the one hand, some considered it to be a mechanical device: "while the chariot rotates, the hand always points to the South." On the other hand, "some say that on board the chariot was used a divining board needle;" that is, a compass. Chen Yin explicitly did not take sides: "both work." That there was a question as to whether or not the south-pointing chariot was related to the divining board needle was in fact the main point of his commentary.⁶⁶ Deshauterayes deliberately eliminated this ambiguity. Parrenin, by contrast, in his discussion of that same commentary, had emphasized it: "it is to be feared that this explanation was after the fact—thus the history says some people say&c."⁶⁷ Deshauterayes was plainly less faithful to the Chinese original than his missionary predecessor had been.

This makes sense, however, considering that the real point of the "Dissertation sur l'origine de la Boussole" was not to establish the facts of the battle between the Yellow Emperor and Chiyou, but to make a broader point about world history. Chinese sources had to be simplified in order to put them into conversation with more familiar ones. Recall

⁶³ "Tsiûe pi tchi ye [jue pei zhi ye 絕轡之野], c'est à dire, la campagne du frein rompu," Deshauterayes, "Dissertation sur l'origine de la Boussole," 13; compare with "*la plaine des rênes rompues*," Parrenin, 99–100.

⁶⁴ South-pointing chariot, *zhi nan che* 指南車; Deshauterayes, "Dissertation sur l'origine de la Boussole," 13.

⁶⁵ Chen Yin 陳殷; I have not been able to identify this author.

⁶⁶ Nan Xuan, *juan* 1, "Huangdi you xiong shi" 黃帝有熊氏.

⁶⁷ Parrenin, 100.

that the essay was divided into three sections. The first section aimed to establish that the compass was not known in Europe before the high middle ages. The third section showed that the compass had not been known to the ancient Romans or Phoenicians. The section on the Chinese origins of the compass, though clearly the main focus, came in between the other two.⁶⁸ Deshauterayes treated Chinese and Western-language histories separately in their own sections, but linked them together with a single purpose to tell the history not of the compass in China, but of the compass in general. And his main conclusion was that more than just having invented it, the Chinese “gave the knowledge of it to the other peoples.”⁶⁹ Like Needham two centuries later, Deshauterayes suggested that the Chinese not only had their own scientific tradition, but also that they were responsible for discoveries that Europeans would later claim for themselves.

An abbreviated extract of Deshauterayes’s essay that made it into the *Histoire générale de la Chine* some twenty years later reveals even more clearly both his manipulation of the Chinese source material and his overarching argument about diffusion. In the manuscript that had formed the basis for the *Histoire générale de la Chine*, de Mailla had not mentioned the south-pointing chariot until it appeared in connection with the Duke of Zhou in volume three, but Deshauterayes, in his position as “editor,” took the opportunity to insert a long footnote about it to the story of the battle between the Yellow Emperor and Chiyou in volume one. Referring to Chen Yin’s note in Nan Xuan’s text, he stated that “none of the interpreters doubt that one must understand the compass for the expression *Tchi-nan-tche* [*zhi nan che*], word for word, *chariot that indicates the south*.” This was demonstrably false, but there were very few people around who could have contested it, and Parrenin’s manuscript stating the contrary had not yet been published. Deshauterayes concluded: “there is every appearance that we owe to them this important discovery, the knowledge of which Marco Polo, upon the return from his voyages, gave to Europe, as well as that of the printing press.”⁷⁰ Based on an ambiguous footnote to a single passage in a medieval Chinese history, Deshauterayes claimed that two of great inventions singled out by Francis Bacon had come to Europe from China.

⁶⁸ Deshauterayes, “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole,” “Première Partie,” 1–9; “Seconde Partie,” 10–15; “Troisième Partie,” 17–23.

⁶⁹ Deshauterayes, “Dissertation sur l’origine de la Boussole,” 1.

⁷⁰ De Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine* 1 (1777): 317–318.

Unsurprisingly, the argument was not entirely convincing. For nearly a century, the question of the Chinese discovery of the compass remained contentious. Many intermediary opinions were proposed. Voltaire, for example, expressed what was probably the most common opinion at the time: the Chinese had invented the compass, but they had not used it extensively for navigation, and Europeans had discovered it later independently.⁷¹ The article on the compass in the *Encyclopédie*, published in 1752, took a more critical opinion: “we do not give the honor to the Chinese.”⁷² Many French writers, however, did accept the Chinese evidence, which they encountered mostly through the works of the missionaries.⁷³ At the turn of the nineteenth century, John Barrow, who accompanied the British diplomatic mission under George Macartney, considered the Chinese invention of the compass as certain, and its westward transmission as “extremely probable.”⁷⁴ By contrast, others by that time flatly denied all parts of the Chinese story.⁷⁵ But after Deshauterayes, no new Chinese evidence was introduced into the discussion until 1834, as we will later see.⁷⁶

HUNS, XIONGNU, AND THE “DISCOVERY OF EURASIA”

World history as it is practiced today is often about intercultural connections. To cite just one of many possible examples, Patrick Manning, a historiographer of world history, defined the field as the “story of connections within the human community.”⁷⁷ In fact, this interest is one of the only features that draws the diverse approaches called global, world, and transnational history together.⁷⁸ For the

⁷¹ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes; Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), Chapter 1.

⁷² Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project), “Boussole.”

⁷³ For example, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, *Histoire de l'astronomie ancienne* (Paris: frères Debure, 1775), 122–123.

⁷⁴ John Barrow, *Travels in China . . .* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1804), 39–40.

⁷⁵ Flaminius Venanson, *De l'invention de la boussole nautique* (Naples: Trani, 1808).

⁷⁶ Julius von Klaproth, *Lettre à M. le Baron A. de Humboldt sur l'invention de la boussole* (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1834); Schück, 4–10.

⁷⁷ Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

⁷⁸ Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 30–50; see also the website of the World History Association <<https://www.thewha.org/about/what-is-world-history/>>.

history of the premodern world in particular, it has often produced attention to the Eurasian ecumene, which was always to some degree connected, and about which the extant written record is the longest and most extensive.⁷⁹ Located between the settled societies that developed along Eurasia's extremities, Central Asia has emerged as a crucial link and a site of dynamic encounter and exchange.⁸⁰ From the 1750s on, it was Joseph de Guignes who heralded what J.G.A. Pocock has called "the discovery of Eurasia," and it was the history of China that showed him the way, again resulting in a claim of world historical significance then and now.

Across his historical endeavors, de Guignes was interested in patterns of cultural diffusion and the dynamic interactions between societies.⁸¹ In his studies of China, he never lost sight of a broader framework of pan-Eurasian, even global exchange. In one essay, on the "Literature of the Chinese in general," he argued that Greek, Roman, Persian and Arabic knowledge could all be found in Chinese books, "and everywhere traces of communication with all these nations in the sciences and the arts, because the Chinese have never ceased to be in relation with the civilized peoples of the West."⁸² In another, which provoked significant controversy, he claimed to show that Chinese monks had discovered and colonized North America by the fifth century C.E.⁸³ Each of these projects put Chinese historical works in conversation with other historical sources in an effort to make sense of them all together.

Unlike Deshauterayes, de Guignes also published a major independent work of his own: the *Histoire des Huns, des Mongols, et des autres Tartares occidentaux*, which was read and admired throughout the Enlightenment and remains his most treated text today. Published in four volumes between 1756 and 1758, it was a comprehensive account, from the Biblical creation to the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Drawing from sources in ancient and modern Western

⁷⁹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–762.

⁸⁰ For example, Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸¹ Pocock, *Volume 4: Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, 118, 132.

⁸² Joseph de Guignes, "Idée de la Littérature Chinoise en général, et particulièrement des historiens et de l'étude de l'histoire à la Chine," *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 36 (1774): 190–238.

⁸³ Alexander Statman, "Fusang: The Enlightenment Story of the Chinese Discovery of America," *Isis* 107, no. 1 (2016): 1–25.

languages and Chinese as well as Persian and Arabic, de Guignes brought the various peoples of Central Asia, who remained at the time very little known in Europe, into a single story of monumental importance for all the peoples they had come into contact with. Summing it up at the end of the final volume, he opined: “such are the great revolutions that this crowd of Barbarians, known successively under the names of Huns, Turks, Mongols, and Tartars, have occasioned in the world.”⁸⁴

De Guignes was explicit about the world-historical ambitions of the project: in the preface, he declared, “it is a part of universal History . . . ”⁸⁵ Historians have recently demonstrated the importance of the *Histoire générale des Huns* in developing various conceptual tools that other Enlightenment thinkers would adopt. Pocock has argued that it “plays a part in making the *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* a history of the world, or at least the Old World,” by providing an account of barbarism as a dynamic, creative force and laying out Central Asia as a site of encounter and exchange.⁸⁶ Others have seen its contribution as linking the history of material cultural to the stages of cultural development, or as proposing innovative approaches to world religions.⁸⁷ In sum, there is no question that de Guignes contributed to the development of Enlightenment approaches to world history. What has not been shown, though, is how his encounter with Chinese historiography made this possible. In sum, de Guignes used Chinese sources to shed new light on what was then seen a central event in the secular history of the world: the fall of the Roman Empire.

The one thing that is always mentioned about the *Histoire générale des Huns* is its identification of the steppe people who threatened the Han Dynasty, known in Chinese history as the Xiongnu, with those who invaded the Roman Empire, called by Roman historians the Huns.⁸⁸ But in the lengthy series of books, de Guignes only briefly argued for this; mostly, he just assumed it. The identification was defended based entirely on the similarity between the two names. According to de Guignes, the Chinese word *Xiongnu*, or “*Hioung-nou*” in his transliteration, literally meant “unfortunate slaves” and was probably a calque

⁸⁴ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 4 (1758): 337.

⁸⁵ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 1, no. 1 (1756): 4.

⁸⁶ Pocock, *Volume 4, Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, 111.

⁸⁷ Nathaniel Wolloch, “Joseph de Guignes and Enlightenment Notions of Material Progress,” *Intellectual History Review* 21 (2011): 435–448; App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 188–254.

⁸⁸ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 205.

from “a Tartar word that the Chinese would have expressed by two characters that make the same sound.” The Chinese *Xiongnu* was thus not related to the meaning of the characters *xiong* and *nu* but was rather, like the world *Huns*, a corruption of the name that the people had called themselves.⁸⁹ After setting this out quickly in the second volume, he never made the argument again, but still went on to build a whole story upon it.

It is quite certain that this identification between the Huns and the *Xiongnu* was not original to de Guignes; in fact, the basic idea seems to have been taken for granted by most of the Jesuit missionaries who had written on Chinese history. Historians have long thought that de Guignes got it from a manuscript written by the French missionary Claude de Visdelou around 1719.⁹⁰ He might have encountered it too in the manuscript by de Mailla that was later edited by Deshauterayes.⁹¹ Interestingly, though, de Guignes himself was concerned about a potential priority dispute with yet a third missionary, Antoine Gaubil. He claimed that he had the idea it already in 1751, a few years before a very brief comment by Gaubil to the same effect was published. This, however, is pretty unconvincing, since at that time de Guignes made the connection only in the sense that he used “Hun” as a generic term for all the peoples of Central Asia.⁹² In any case, he did not spill much ink in defending himself, and indeed it seems he did not have to, because the idea quickly became associated primarily with him.

This was because de Guignes was able to use the insight productively in a way that the missionaries had not by bringing Chinese sources to bear on a story that was already very familiar to European readers. The missionaries had recounted the history of the *Xiongnu* from the perspective of China and mentioned their connection to the Huns mostly in passing. De Guignes’s ambition was less to explicate the Chinese sources than to draw from them. But putting Classical and Chinese sources together was no easy task. The recorded events were separated by vast chasms of space and time. Western writers in late antiquity had typically encountered steppe peoples only when they appeared on the periphery of the Roman Empire; Likewise, Chinese records had mostly described what happened in China, with occasional discussions of Central Asia only when events there became relevant to

⁸⁹ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 1, no. 2 (1756), 13.

⁹⁰ Claude de Visdelou, “Histoire abrégée de la Tartarie,” in *Bibliothèque Orientale . . .*, ed. Barthélemy d’Herbelot (La Hague: Neaulme & van Daalen, 1779), Volume 4, 46–296.

⁹¹ De Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine* 2 (1777): 372.

⁹² De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 4 (1758): 345–359.

the dynastic histories. The Han and Roman encounters with the Xiongnu and the Huns took place thousands of miles and hundreds of years apart, and there was no obvious way to know what had happened in between.⁹³

The most methodologically original part of de Guignes's work was his attempt to figure that out, which took place in the chapter in volume one, part two on the "Western Huns," who supposedly entered history as a branch of Xiongnu on the outskirts of China and left it upon the death of Attila when they merged with the Hungarians. According to de Guignes, their story began when another group, the "Northern Huns," were defeated by the Han armies around 90 C.E., after which a subgroup fled west. Over the following two centuries, the activities of these now-Western Huns were basically unknown. They suddenly reappeared in Roman historiography during the reign of the Emperor Valens in the 370s C.E., when they burst forth across the Don river and attacked the Ostrogoths, the Alans, and the other tribes living along the Roman frontier. In response, the Visigoths requested permission from Rome to cross the Danube and were allowed into Thrace: "an irredeemable mistake that opened to the Goths the road to Greece, to the Gauls, and finally to Spain, where they established a considerable kingdom. Such were the results of the eruption of the Huns." In this way, the movement of the Huns across Central Asia directly precipitated the events that would lead to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West.⁹⁴

Unlike most of the other chapters of the *Histoire générale des Huns*, this one cited late Antique historians such as Jordanes and Procopius right next to Chinese books including the *Tongjian gangmu* and the *Wenxian tongkao*, often on the same page and sometimes even in the same paragraph. The purposes to which Classical and Chinese sources were put were a little different: while the Greek and Latin sources were used to recount particular events, the Chinese sources provided background and context. De Guignes typically drew from Chinese works to explain why the Huns did what they did, or to show what the Huns might have been doing during the periods where what they did was unknown. For example, according to de Guignes, after Attila and his brother Bleda took command of the Huns in 434 C.E., their first priority was to subjugate the other "Scythic nations."

⁹³ Pocock offers another interpretation of de Guignes's resolution to this problem by focusing on his view of nomads as unchanging (*Volume 6, Barbarism: Triumph in the West*, 261–263).

⁹⁴ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* I, no. 2 (1756): 277–324, 291–292.

To this end, they concluded a truce with the Roman Empire and sent ambassadors to China with the same intention: “at least it appears from Chinese history that the peoples of Asian Sarmatia, a dependent country of the Huns, sent ambassadors to China during this time.” These ambassadors succeeded in reducing the threat on their eastern front, which facilitated the consolidation of their power in West Asia as described by Roman historians.⁹⁵

It is hard to determine how exactly de Guignes accessed his Chinese sources, since, although he mentioned book titles and authors in the margins throughout his text, he rarely gave any identifying details such as page or chapter citations. A lengthy annotated bibliography at the end of the final volume listed many Chinese works of all kinds, ranging from Han narrative classics like the *Records of the Grand Historian*, composed between the first and second centuries B.C.E., to an unnamed “new edition of the Chinese annals in the form of tables, printed in these recent times.”⁹⁶ Like Deshauterayes, he did not distinguish between them in terms of authority or reliability. And, also like Deshauterayes, even when he cited them, he probably drew much of his evidence rather from missionary translations of those works. For example, on the story of the Hun ambassadors to China, de Guignes cited Zhu Xi’s edition of Sima Guang’s text, but all the information that he included would have also been available in de Mailla’s French translation later published by Deshauterayes, which had arrived in Paris already in 1737.⁹⁷ De Guignes also made use of the missionaries’ original analyses, such as a lengthy work by Claude de Visdelou eventually published as the “Histoire abrégée de la Tartarie.” De Guignes copied out long sections from this manuscript in the course of his research, and there is no question that he relied on it extensively.⁹⁸

But as his later contemporaries themselves pointed out, this should not necessarily be seen as a fault, because de Guignes’s reliance on the missionaries was just what allowed him to develop his most interesting claims. Their extensive translations and analyses made it possible for him to spend less time struggling with Chinese sources and more time using them productively. This was explicitly noted by one early nineteenth century commentator, who drew attention to the extreme similarity between de Guignes’s and de Visdelou’s conclusions: “this is

⁹⁵ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 1, no. 2 (1756): 298.

⁹⁶ *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Shiji* 史記; This was probably the *Yuding lidai jishi nianbiao* 御定歷代紀事年表, printed in 1715 (BnF MS 644–653).

⁹⁷ De Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine* 5 (1778): 41–42; Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Chinese Texts*, 133.

⁹⁸ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 204–205.

not here an accusation of plagiarism directed against the savant academician; he certainly went through the originals: but the object of our observation is to show how he arrived at understanding them, and to draw much more extensive extracts from them.”⁹⁹ This was not only a correct identification of de Guignes’s and Deshauterayes’s academic ambition; it was also a pretty accurate description of how they actually used their Chinese sources.

For De Guignes did indeed consult some original Chinese sources, and even his limited ability to do so was invaluable. The one he used most was the *Wenxian tongkao*, or *Comprehensive Examination of Literature*, compiled by Ma Duanlin in the early fourteenth century, which he called a “great collection on different subjects concerning political and literary history of China.”¹⁰⁰ The brevity and clarity of this work made it ideal for answering specific historical questions. Take, for example, the hazy period spanning nearly two centuries between the defeat of the Xiongnu in Western China and the appearance of the Huns in Eastern Europe, which provided ample space for interpretation. According to de Guignes, after suffering a series of military setbacks in Central Asia, the Huns pushed north of the Caspian into the land known to the Chinese as Yancai, where they killed the king of the Alans: “We do not know the time of this event, I place it here; but whatever time one wishes to fix it, it no less resulted that the Huns were established in the vicinity of the Romans.”¹⁰¹ If the Huns were really the Xiongnu, the Chinese record explained how they got from the borders of the China to the frontier of Rome.

In fact, de Guignes was right that the histories of China and Rome, on this one point at least, were connected. His marginal citation for this story referred to the *Comprehensive Examination of Literature*, which in fact recounted it just as de Guignes told it. According to Ma Duanlin, Yancai “borders *Daqin* to the West.”¹⁰² *Daqin* was indeed the term used in classical Chinese historiography to refer to Rome.¹⁰³ This, then, was surely the passage that de Guignes was referring to when he wrote of

⁹⁹ *Biographie universelle* (Paris: Michaud) (1827), Volume 49, 268.

¹⁰⁰ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 224; de Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 4 (1758): 375. Here, too, we can identify the copy that de Guignes likely consulted: BnF MS Chinois 782, Ma Duanlin 馬端臨, *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 (Beijing: 1524).

¹⁰¹ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns* 1, no. 2 (1756): 289. This story became crucial in later discussions of the Huns and Xiongnu question for other reasons entirely. Christopher P. Atwood, “Huns and Xiōngnú: New Thoughts on an Old Problem,” in *Dubitando: Studies in History and Culture in Honor of Donald Ostrowski*, ed. Brian J. Boeck, Russell E. Martin, and Daniel Rowland (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2012), 32–33.

¹⁰² Ma Duanlin, *juan* 338.

¹⁰³ *Daqin* 大秦.

Yancai: “on the western side, it bordered the *Ta-tsin* which is, without a doubt, the Roman Empire.”¹⁰⁴ Here, then, was an answer to the question of why the Huns had invaded the Roman Empire: it was because their ancestors two hundred years earlier had been defeated by the Han armies, leading them or their descendants ultimately to the borders of Rome, as recounted by later Chinese historians. The claim connected two ancient bodies of historiography to give a truly cross-cultural, integrated account of one of them most fundamental events in world history.

Other Enlightenment authors for the most part acknowledged what de Guignes had achieved, not in terms of recounting the history of China, but in bringing it to bear on the history of Europe. Among contemporary historians, Gibbon was his particularly avid reader, accepting the identification of the Huns with the Xiongnu and admiring the methodological innovation that had proved it: “M. de Guignes has skilfully traced the footsteps of the Huns through the vast deserts of Tartary,” he wrote.¹⁰⁵ For Gibbon, too, the movements of barbarians into Europe were essentially caused by events in China: the history of Eurasia was connected in just the way that de Guignes had proposed.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, Voltaire, who had praised Deshauterayes, was a harsh critic of de Guignes. But even he still admired his methodological innovation: the Huns “do not merit to be known, because they have rendered no service to the human species . . . but in the end, one is aided in this research by some Chinese archives.”¹⁰⁷ Whatever one thought of de Guignes’s conclusions, his productive use of Chinese historiography could not be denied.

CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE FIRST GLOBAL TURN

It was the world-historical perspective of the Parisian savants, not their expertise on China, that led them to their findings that historians still find most interesting. De Guignes and Deshauterayes were less capable as Sinologists than the missionaries who preceded them or the academics who came after them, and they were soon forgotten as historians of China. But their contributions to the first global turn,

¹⁰⁴ De Guignes, 1, no. 2 (1756): lxxviii.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume 6, Barbarism: Triumph in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 261.

¹⁰⁶ Pocock, “Barbarians and the Redefinition of Europe,” in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni, 38–40.

¹⁰⁷ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume 39, “Celts.”

developed through their engagement with Chinese histories, has had a more interesting afterlife. Their interest in history beyond China led them to see a broader importance for some of the specific observations that the missionaries had already made, and that professional Sinologists would later develop in much greater detail. It also led them to formulate an approach to world history that shares something in common with our own. Even without having read their works, historians have come to revisit their findings.

Opportunities for Enlightenment orientalists to participate in the first global turn were largely closed off by the emergence of new scholarly disciplines and academic institutions during the Napoleonic era. In 1814, Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat assumed Europe's first chair in Chinese and Manchu at the Collège royal, and in 1816, Julius von Klaproth was granted a regular stipend from the Prussian state to study Asian languages. These two figures and their contemporaries have been widely considered as the first professional academic Sinologists, ensconced within the new framework of orientalism proper.¹⁰⁸ They began their work by revisiting much of the terrain that de Guignes and Deshauterayes had laid out: Klaproth wrote a short book on the Chinese invention of the compass, and Abel-Rémusat wrote one on Central Asia.¹⁰⁹ Neither made much of their predecessor's work. The progress of knowledge required that everyone expertly plough their own small domain, and professionalization left little room for a global approach. Orientalism diverged from history and philosophy when it became a pursuit unto itself.¹¹⁰

For the heirs of Voltaire and Gibbon, too, Chinese histories soon lost their capacity to answer world-historical questions. We come here to another trope of world history today: the so-called "great divergence" between China and what was just then starting to be called the West.¹¹¹ European observers in the mid-eighteenth century said little about this, because it had arguably not yet occurred.¹¹² By the early nineteenth century, many believed that it had. But drawing a sharp distinction

¹⁰⁸ On Abel-Rémusat, see Anne Cheng, "Philosophy and the French Invention of Sinology: Mapping Academic Disciplines in Nineteenth Century Europe," *China Report* 50, no. 1 (2014): 11–30; on Klaproth, see Helmut Walravens, "Julius Klaproth: His Life and Works with Special Emphasis on Japan," *Japonica Humboldtiana* 10 (2006): 180–182.

¹⁰⁹ Klaproth, *Lettre à M. le Baron A. de Humboldt sur l'invention de la boussole*; Abel-Rémusat, *Recherches sur les langues Tartares* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1820).

¹¹⁰ Cheng, 11–30.

¹¹¹ Georgios Varouxakis, "The Godfather of 'Occidentality': Auguste Comte and the Idea of 'The West,'" *Modern Intellectual History* (2017): 1–31.

¹¹² Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

between the observation of the event and the event itself may be deceptive. Certainly, there were many reasons for the Enlightenment's puzzling reversal from Sinophilia to Sinophobia: shifting geopolitics, the suppression of the Jesuits, the personal preferences of the Qianlong emperor, and the foibles of the Macartney embassy all played a role.¹¹³ But the great divergence was also an intellectual invention, and as such it dates to about the same time that these events were occurring. Enlightenment philosophes eventually decided that world history was the story of progress. This view excluded the rest of the world from world history. But the paradox is that engagement with non-Western history was part of what had made it possible in the first place.

Only since the twentieth century, when historians challenged the Eurocentrism built into the historical discipline, have some of the observations of the Parisian savants been in a sense vindicated. Deshauterayes was right that the compass was invented in China, although his evidence did not really prove it. An eleventh-century Chinese text unambiguously described a needle magnetized with a lodestone, and there is evidence for its use in navigation from still earlier.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Deshauterayes was wrong about the "south-pointing chariot," which historians now believe was a mechanical device that used gears to maintain its orientation.¹¹⁵ The identification of the Huns with the Xiongnu is harder to evaluate, in part because it always rested largely on definitions. It was generally considered disproven until, in 1948, a Sogdian letter was discovered and dated to 313 C.E., referring to a people known to the Chinese as Xiongnu by a name that can be independently linked to the ethnonym "Hun." Some historians and linguists believe that these were indeed the same people described by Roman writers.¹¹⁶ In both these examples, Deshauterayes's and de Guignes's conclusions are now considered to some degree correct. But their work was not genealogically connected to our own; for most of a century, scholars doubted it, before coming to similar conclusions based on different evidence.

The first global turn was not the seed from which ours grew—at least, not directly. Voltaire and Gibbon may have joined de Guignes, Deshauterayes, and other semi-forgotten scholars in thinking about

¹¹³ For an introduction to the arguments see Michel Cartier, "Introduction," in *La Chine entre amour et haine: actes du VIIIe Colloque de sinologie de Chantilly*, ed. Michel Cartier (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), 7–13.

¹¹⁴ Shen Kuo 沈括, *Mengxi bitan 夢溪筆談 (Dream Pool Essays)*, Needham, 249–250.

¹¹⁵ Needham, 229–230.

¹¹⁶ Atwood; Etienne de la Vaissière, "Huns et Xiongnu," *Central Asiatic Journal* 49, no. 1 (2005): 3–26.

world history, but their project was cut off. By the mid nineteenth century, European and American universities had institutionalized the empirical, nation-based approach that has continued more or less until today. To be sure, there were still world histories, but they were not at the heart of the discipline.¹¹⁷ There was no teleological development connecting the world history of the eighteenth century through the world history explored in this journal since its founding in 1990; quite the contrary, other approaches intervened in between.

But this does not mean that earlier insights into world history were lost forever, nor that they cannot be learned from now. To conclude with just one suggestion: Enlightenment historians drew no distinction between comparison and connection. The discovery of an apparently separate Chinese historical tradition—an event that surely constitutes a world-historical connection in itself—created the conditions of possibility for doing comparative historical work. It was the comparison of European and Chinese records that led Enlightenment scholars to see their histories as also connected. And although their scholarship did not lead step by step to the world history of today, the world-historical perspective of the first global turn did produce both discoveries and methodologies that have recently seen a renewed interest: our own global turn.

¹¹⁷ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).