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European perceptions of religion and society in 18th century China & Bengal, and their subverted gaze in local art and encounter

This essay presents two late 18th century European travelers' encounters with and perceptions of religion in Chinese and Indian societies. While C.L.J De Guignes made an extensive tour of Chinese pagodas, Balthazar Solvyns was depicting Bengali people in 1794. Both traveler's works reveal a lineage of ideas involving exoticism and early-modern orientalism. While creating images of religion based on superstition and alterity, they did not take into account how the gaze was reversed unto them. While Solvyns created images of 'the Hindoos', Bengali artists were depicting the European colonial presence in scroll paintings and temple sculptures. These depictions may be considered as mimetic practices subverting the relational gaze, incorporating the European presence in order to overcome it. Contrasting early ethnographical European descriptions of Asian religions with their original contexts, a subverted gaze shines back upon the self-image of early modern European scholars seeking to make exotic Asian religions 'known'.

Keywords: De Guignes; Solvyns; Bengal; China; Orientalism

Introduction: counterpoint visualisations of exoticism in China and Bengal

This essay investigates and compares two European travelers' descriptions of what they perceived as religions, in their encounters within Chinese and Indian societies between 1794 and 1808: Chrétien Louis Joseph de Guignes travelling as an interpreter for the diplomatic Titsingh expedition to the Chinese court, and Balthazar Solvyns who travelled to Calcutta in 1790, as a painter for the British and designed 250 etchings depicting the customs of 'the Hindoos'. From their encounters with Asian cultures and religions, these travelers created a body of proto-ethnographical literature in which they displayed exotic elements in books and travel accounts for a European readership. These proto-ethnographers aimed 'to study the manners and character of native people', so as to turn them into objects of knowledge with an 'accuracy which is necessary to make them perfectly known' (Solvyns 1808, tôme 1, 20). Their works were written in 1794 and published between 1797 and 1808, on a turning point between the 'invention of exoticism' and its subsequent transformation into a more institutionalized Orientalism.

Benjamin Schmidt (2015, 3-5) reveals how, during this period, a secular and geographically inquisitive Europe accumulated exotica, gaining its identity through a new conception of the exotic world. This identity created itself in line with an ideology preceding modern colonialism, but justifying its subsequent development, in what he labels as a 'post-Columbian, pre-Saïdian moment of geography' (Schmidt 2015, 16). This productive moment of shaping European identity by invoking the exotic would bloom into the orientalism of which we already find some characteristics in 18th century European travel literature. This orientalism is described by Edward Saïd as a 'distribution of geopolitcal awarness into aesthetic (…) texts which create, maintain and express an 'intention to understand, control, manipulate and even incorporate what is a

manifestly different world' (Saïd 2003, 12).

It is therefore no surprise that both Solvyns and De Guignes would express their intention to depict the Chinese and Indian people as 'objects of knowledge', coupled to the necessity of establishing difference, either by the denial of coevalness or temporal coexistence by emphasizing their unchanged antiquity (Fabian 1983), or by emphasizing moral differences in judging their religious practices as immoral. Yet, what Enlightenment knowledge did not take into account, and may be considered vital for the subversion of these European authors' objectifying gaze and moral indictments, is how the local gaze was staring back and developed its own perceptions in art and encounter during the same period.

The concept of gaze is used here as an interpretive category for visual observation and depiction, which conceptually originated in film theory and feminist studies, where it fostered a critical awareness on culturally constructed ways of looking (Urry 1990, Kaplan 1997, Mulvey 1975). It is also applied in visual anthropology for considering how different observational positionalities allow for the interpretation of knowledge constructs (Stadhams 2007, 126). In the same way, it may serve as a category for interpreting the knowledge constructs and positionality of early-modern European authors towards the Chinese & Indian subjects they observed and depicted, who were in turn observing them. We may also refer here to what anthropologist Sal Restivo notes as the double bias situation in the anthropologists' encounter, in which 'anthropological inquiry has to manage the bias of the observer's cultural perspective; and the bias associated with the role he/she is given within the group under study' (Restivo 1994, 125). He points out that the earlier, 'classical' anthropological method entailed a positivistic approach which 'assumes the possibility of objectifying others, and the ability to control and repeat observational procedures' (Restivo 1994, 125). As

‘proto-ethnographers’ (see also Hodgen 1971), both Solvyns and De Guignes predated this ‘classical’ approach by not taking the double bias of Bengali or Chinese people into account. Simultaneously, the Bengali or Chinese observational bias towards Europeans carried a subversive potential towards notions of modernity legitimising colonialism through its social commentary and the rival interpretations of authority or superiority these invoked.

Just as a specific European lineage of ideas was at work in the accounts of travellers and missionaries, Chinese and Bengali perceptions and ideas also carried their own trajectory during the same period. We may take a specific comparative approach to these perspectives in the manner Edward Saïd labelled as ‘looking at the different experiences contrapuntally’, resulting in a set of ‘intertwined and overlapping histories’ (1994, 19). Such a comparative or contrapuntal perspective allows us to think through and interpret ‘together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships’ (Saïd 1994, 36). This yields a history which may be narrated against the discourse of Europe (Saïd 1994, 59) attributing its dominance through colonial or imperial power in both industrial and moral terms, which caused non-Europeans and colonial ‘subjects’ to be viewed as inferior, in turn legitimizing the European claim to dominance (Saïd 1994, 127).

A counterpoint view to De Guignes and Solvyns’ approach may be provided by the perceptions Bengali folk artists had of the European presence in Bengal in the same period, and the religious media of temple sculptures and scroll paintings they used to address this presence, where folk art involved the subversion of both European and European-influenced images, the lineage of which may be traced up to the present. For a Chinese counterpoint, the European presence had a different significance: although

the same European discourse was present, colonial domination did not take place there as in Bengal, and Europeans were instead considered as subordinate tributaries in an official Chinese perspective, or provoked curiosity or ridicule in the gaze of local people.

Therefore, one may argue that mutual 'visual anthropologies' occurred in 1794, involving not only the gaze of the European observers on religion and society, striving to make the subjects of their gaze 'perfectly known', but also the creative visualization of these so-called subjects gazing back whom were paradoxically denied precisely this creativity or agency on the grounds of their religion itself. One sees this embodied in the terracotta temples of rural Bengal, which depict a European presence and influence placed within the context of a local social and religious life-world. These depictions may be considered as a mimetic practice subverting the gaze, constructed by a different authority than the colonial views presented by European travellers, perhaps even incorporating the European presence in order to overcome it. This fits within the wider scope of this volume on 'Subtle Subversions', or the resistance to colonialism through religion, as this essay shows how notions of European dominance embedded in the observation of religious practices could be subverted by counterpoint perceptions from within those domains which European observers recognised as religious and unchanging, forming a site of social commentary which carries its legacy into the post-colonial world.

Shared tropes on religion: from 17th century Jesuit to 18th century travellers' views

Les lettres édifiantes: religion and modernity

We may trace the European perception and reporting on Asian religions from a

lineage of ideas which, for China as well as India, was founded on the same stereotypes or premises which accompanied self-proclaimed notions of Western modernity. This lineage in modes of thought and perception crossed over from Jesuit missionaries with a religious agenda centered on conversion or decrying of false gods and idolatry, onto Enlightenment travellers who, although they opposed earlier missionary accounts on a rhetorical level, nevertheless incorporated the same tropes. Joan-Pau Rubiés has shown how the works of early modern missionaries as well as 'proto-ethnographers' took place within a consolidated colonial project, in ethnographic practices to which religious concerns remained a key driver (2007, 273). From the viewpoint of the Catholic church, the exotic ethnography which consequently developed served a teleological narrative aimed at conversion and redemption, for which concepts of superstition and idolatry were essential markers (Rubiés 2007, 274-277). As a general tendency within Enlightenment culture, to which travellers such as De Guignes or Solvyns claimed to belong, Peter Gay noticed a tension between Enlightenment philosophers and Jesuits: while the philosophers were often formed by Jesuits, they often considered themselves as secular, modern and unindebted to any Christian background (Gay 1973, 24). He states that, even though Enlightenment philosophers boasted to make things new and abolish dogma, 'far from wholly discarding their Christian inheritance, they repressed, and retained, more than they knew.' (Gay 1973, 59). Mungello also notes that although their agenda differed substantially from the Jesuit outlook, Enlightement travellers continued to accept and disseminate the same images as 'they changed remarkably little in the Jesuit accounts which they used for their own cultural agenda' (Mungello 1991, 120). This was the case for European reactions to Hindu religion and late Mughal society in India as well, where the perceptions of missionaries were also similar to those of Enlightenment culture (Lorenzen 2003). The recurrent tropes on religion featured

throughout De Guignes' and Solvyns' works, and the striking similarities in their views on China and India, will make this clear.

The collection of Jesuit 'Lettres édifiants et curieuses', originally published between 1702 and 1776 in 34 volumes, contains excerpts from letters Jesuit missionaries sent from China. These letters denounced the supposed luxury of Taoist and Buddhist monks, magical practices and belief in demons as practices of superstition and idolatry. The letters also directly influenced European philosophers and thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Leibniz on topics of both Asian religions and societies. By consequence, they would also influence and unwittingly collaborate with 18th century Enlightenment travellers (Vissière and Vissière 1979, 13-14; Mungello 1991, 99-103). In these Jesuit writings, anything which is identified as foreign religious practices or creeds is denounced as 'false', in contrast to the supposed 'true' religion of Christianity. Chinese religions were considered as counterfeit practices to a Catholic truth, as when Jesuit priest P. Premare wrote from Canton in 1669 how 'the clerics are great in number here. There is no place where the demon has better counterfeited the saintly manners in which the Lord is lauded in the true church.' (Vissière and Vissière 1979, 63) Premare denounced Buddhist and Taoist monks as 'priests of Satan', who worshipped idols and took up the role of priests among the people of 'for whom the whole religions consists but of bizarre superstitions, which each forms according to their own fantasy' (impressions of P. Premare in Canton, letter of 17 february 1699, in Vissière and Vissière 1979, 63). Likewise, in a 1735 letter to the French *Académie Royale des Sciences*, P. Parennin wrote that 'the Chinese of those distant times were more or less of the same character and same spirit than those living today, superstitious people, indolents, enemies of all application', to which he adds a curious reflection on modernity by stating 'I would add that they fear new phenomena for as much as you

wish them in Europe' (Vissière and Vissière 1979, 375). Likewise, the 17th century Jesuit missionary Adriano de las Cortes portrayed the Chinese as essentially unchanging, as he claims how they 'have never modified their clothing, nor the layout of their buildings, nor the general way of their objects and customs' (de las Cortes, 2001, 365). Throughout these letters and testimonies, we see a recurring argument was made by the Jesuits in regards to scientific invention, which they deemed to be impossible in China due to the supersititious religious practices in which the Chinese supposedly engaged.

Just as the religious truth claim did for these Jesuits, the teleology of a singular modernity would be at work in the accounts of late 18th century Enlightenment travellers such as De Guignes and Solvyns. This logic of developing modernity is described by Johannes Fabian as 'a succession of attempts to secularize Judeo-Christian Time by generalizing and universalizing it' (1983, 2). In such a time scheme, both China and India were placed somewhere in remote antiquity, as if to emphasize its difference with colonialist Europe. Consequently, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite rightly states that 'It is perhaps not a coincidence that in the late 16th century we see religion playing the same role that science does in the 18th, as the index of the stage of development of non-Western civilizations and societies'. (2011, 640).

Not only did idolatry prove a marker for difference between European and Asian people in a secularized religious history, but the religious arguments on idolatry and superstition were put forward as an impeding force for any possibility of development or progress in Chinese or Bengali arts, sciences or society in comparison to the European world of colonial modernity. Such views are found throughout the works of early-modern authors such as Solvyns on India, or De Guignes on China.

This lineage of ideas fitts within the debate concerning the construction of 'Asian religions' by European observers. Scholars such as Sugirtharajah and Balagangadhara claim that 'Hinduism' has been invented as a 'religion' through 'Western' categorizations (Sugirtharajah, 2004; Balagangadhara, 1994). More recently, Pennington attributes this to the way European missionaries processed their concrete experiences of contact and observation out of the 'confounding multitude of practices and doctrines' that confronted them (2005, 60). As Balagangadhara puts it, this led to the creation of 'Hinduism' as an 'experiential entity', which lent coherence to this European cultural experience (2012, 53). He claims that European observers and missionaries were 'compelled' to do so, as the presence of religion formed an important factor in constituting the identity of a culture for 'the West' (81). As Semitic religions in particular contain a truth claim depicting alternative practices as false, the 'religions' they claimed to see were turned into arguments for immoralism, corruption and degeneration in other domains of the societies they encountered (238-245). Pennington disagrees with what he sees as the 'radical difference' following from Balagangadhara's theory, and instead points to the creation of 'Hinduism' through the prism of Christian categories as the result of a collaborative undertaking between European colonial interests and Indian elites (2005, 171), as the gathering of religious forms and texts crystalized into a coherent whole designated as a religion (5-7). He also adds that the outcome of this complicity between British and elite Hindu classes also led to the 'systematic erasure of the folk culture of Bengal' in 19th century religious traditions (5). In the construction of their gaze, we may comparatively examine how Solvyns and De Guignes reported on the 'multitude of practices' they encountered. This comparison may also reveal if the same approach was followed towards 'Chinese religions' as well as for 'Hinduism'.

De Guignes' perceptions on China

Chrétien Louis Joseph de Guignes, son of Joseph de Guignes, a proto-Sinologist and member of the Royal Society and Collège de France in Paris, served in China as a second translator for the 1794 Dutch Titsingh embassy to the Chinese court in Beijing (Van Kley 1971, 12). He noted down his observations on Chinese culture, society and religion in his 1808 book *Voyages à Peking, Manille, et l'ile de France faits dans l'intervale des années 1784 a 1801* from which we may note how certain tropes put forward by Jesuit writers still influenced and permeated his writings, even as he claimed to hold a more Enlightened perspective. He explicity positioned his discourse against that of previous missionaries and travelers, stating that 'I do not share the opinion of the missionaries, who want to persuade me that traveling into China can not be undertaken but for the motive of religion, and not out of curiosity' (De Guignes 1808, vol. 3, 359). Instead of a religious missionary agenda, he proposed a curiosity-driven early-modern ethnography, for which he had 'meticulously observed' with his own eyes, in order to depict the Chinese 'just as he found them' (De Guignes 1808, Vol. 1, vi). In consequence, his encounters with Chinese religion resulted into a largely descriptive approach, in which stated that 'the architecture of this nation follows the nation's character, everything is at the outside surface and nothing in the interior' (De Guignes 1808, vol. 3, 43). Yet it seems De Guignes' motive of curiosity contained more of the 'motive of religion' than he was aware of.

On his journey through China, he visited Buddhist and Taoist convents and pagodas, which he described in great detail. Serving as an interpreter, he would have had the opportunity to meet and interact with Buddhists and Taoists in order to find out more about their practices, but instead De Guignes warned his readers that it is prudent for the enlightened traveller not to believe the Chinese on their word, as they would have merely been cheating their interlocutor:

> I have myself consulted the Chinese; but having found them in contradiction, judge it not prudent to believe them on their word; for no people in the world are so disposed to exaggerate all concerning their nation. They have no scrupules in cheating a stranger, as much as their vanity finds itself recompensed by the important that they believe to give to themselves' (De Guignes 1808, vol. 3, 56)

Instead he considered his own observations and visual descriptions as more accurate than any account Chinese informants could give. However, these observations merely seem to repeat the stereotypes and tropes put forward by earlier Jesuit writers in condemning Buddhism and Taoism as idolatry and devil worship. De Guignes explicitly alludes to such idolatry and devil worship when he mentions that

> The city of Sin-tching-hien has nothing remarkable except for the pagoda in which we lodged. The idol is called Chin-nong; she is dressed like the ancient kings, and surrounded on two sides by warriors and genies which make offerings; behind it we see a factice grotto filled with devils and diverse other characters (1808, vol. 2, 7)

This level of detailed visual observation only left space for what De Guignes claimed to see as religious practices equated with devil worship, and left no possibilities for an emic interpretation by local people, who he decried as fraudulent cheats. Yet this doesn't mean that there was no room for Chinese offical agency, or even for the subversion of his gaze, as the itinerary of the embassy was tightly conducted through government officials or mandarins, who controlled which religious sites were to be visited. For instance, De Guignes mentioned his desire to visit a monastery where the mandarins refused to take him, as 'there is nothing to be seen', upon which he notes that

the Embassy's leader, Isaac Titsingh, 'seeing that the mandarins were not disposed to take us elsewhere, determined to return to our boats' (1808, Vol II, 58). Resultingly, it might be no surprise that the European Embassy was mostly led to state-sponsored Buddhist temples, rather than to Taoist places or local folk rituals.

Yet, De Guignes' description of Chinese religious practices is at its most poignant when he describes Taoism. There he shows his fascination for sacrifices and exotic religious practices, which again echoes the indictments and tropes of earlier Jesuit missionaries and European travelers. For instance, late 16th century Italian traveller Francesco Carletti also mentioned how some Chinese offered 'sacrifices' to their 'idols', which he considered as 'simulacra of God', on the 'altar' in their 'churches' (Carletti, 1999, 216-217). In his writing on such sacrifices, De Guignes also referred explicitly and comparatively to India, reporting how

> The Tao-tse sacrifice to demons, a pig, a fish and a chicken, they undertake the profession of diviner; chase the evil spirits, and attempt to heal the sick (…) they run through the streets, as in India, hitting themselves to expulge the sins of men, and undertake quests; as such, there are no means which they do not employ to cheat the too credulous Chinese (1808, vol. 2, 368)

Using his linguistic knowledge in an attempt to translate the main maxims of the Taoist *Dao De Jing*, he encountered an ontological incongruity which led him to judge it as too difficult to understand, and ultimately to indict it as a work of superstition, just as he did with so-called fraudulent religious practices. He found the 'Taoist doctrine' laid out in the *Dao De Jing*, which he translated and summarised as 'the book of the power of the Tao, presenting some thoughts and maxims in very concise style and very difficult to understand' (329). His summary mentions the tao as fixed and unchanging:

> Which produces all, its rule being itself; the one who unites himself with it must be without passions, reject dignities, not occupy himself with anything but the void, observe silence, living as if he did not live, and be touched by compassion for others (329-330)

He mentions the followers of this book as 'sectarians', who prove that 'superstition is always on the rise' (331). His textual consideration of the Tao and observation of Taoist practices lead him to a general conclusion that stresses superstition, which he explicitly puts forward as the presumed cause preventing society from deploying itself, connecting his observations on religion with a sociological indictment of Chinese people not having an aptitude for science, and instead keeping to the character of their forefathers (161). Therefore, as a conclusion on both society and religion, he states that

> Having separate cults and notwithstanding mixing different ceremonies belonging to other beliefs, it is not astonishing that, in such a great confusion, the general spirit of the nation is turned towards superstition, and has not adopted all which could seem useful (352-353)

Where De Guignes' depictions mostly relied on translation and observation, de las Cortes also attempted to understand several of the 'doctrines' or 'beliefs' associated with the religious practices he observed in the 17th century. This led him to notice multiple 'erroneous' analogies with Catholic religion, both on the levels of perceived doctrine and practice. Concerning the 'doctrine' of Taoism, de las Cortes noted similarities regarding rhe principle of creation of the world, its clear doctrine that at all times was true, without beginning or end, and as a supreme power which creates all things (de las Cortes, 470-472). He also noted similarities to Buddhist monks' practices in using a *mala* or rosary of 108 beads. When he asked a buddhist monk about the prayers recited on the rosary's main

bead, which he linked to the Jesuit representation of the 'Pater Noster', the monk replied 'nothing' or else 'invoking the divinity Amitabha Buddha', which de las Cortes considered as a similar invocation to 'the very saintly name of Jesus or Mary' (de las Cortes, 116-117). Yet, in the same way as 'idol worship', these practices were ultimately indicted as faulty or wrong, as he states how the Buddhist monk would 'confuse everything with a thousand errors, accepting the idea of transmigration of souls in other bodies, and those that are reborn after several years and in other worlds (…) as well as other extravagancies' (de las Cortes, 118). De las Cortes attempted to convince the monk that 'the mandarin divinities were but only wooden statues' and 'to believe but only in a single living God, creator of heaven and earth, by who they had been created, and not in dead mandarins' to which the monk 'showed on his face that he was confused and embarrassed but not convinced' (121). In the truth claim of such European observers, the only alternative to their own religious doctrines was to be wrong and confused. This purported state of 'great confusion' and 'general spirit of superstition' in religion also found its way into De Guignes' description of Chinese society in general. His observations would remarkably resemble other European descriptions, such as those Solvyns made on Indian society during the same period. De Guignes' observations of Chinese society run as follows:

> I have seen Chinese sitting a whole day considering us; and, when they left out of hunger, they were soon replaced by others. There is nothing more singular than seeing these people bent-down on their heels, their knees folded and body hunched forward, smoking, talking among themselves and so long time keeping such a strange posture, that it makes them resemble monkeys (154) (…) the Chinese are active and labourious; they do not have a great spirit for science, but have some aptitude for art and commerce; they

> are supple and pliant; however disdaining other nations, to which they deem themselves superior, keeping to that the character of their forefathers (163).

These same tropes occurred in other European travellers' works on Asia, describing men able to spend time leisurely or idly, the strange posture of the locals, the comparison with monkeys, their inaptitude for science or invention, and the retaining of their old or ancient character. This brings to mind the earlier comment made by P. Parennin, which contrasted a similar image with European society as very inventive and constantly wishing new phenomena. De Guignes also denied all possiblities for modernity to the Chinese, whom he portrayed as stuck in the superstition of distant times, clouding their spirit. Where previously the 'mystery of the cross was unknown to them' in Jesuit letters, now invention and enlightenment were denied to them due to superstition.

On the Chinese side of the encounter, the superiority or notion of progress embedded in the concept of European modernity was subverted by the sense of Chinese culture having a civilising impact on the European embassy: an official letter of invitation was presented by the viceroy to the Titsingh embassy, which had the Qianlong Emperor acknowledging the transformative sense of civilisation the mandarins believed the Chinese court to have. The letter stated how greatly the Chinese Emperor appreciated 'your desire to be civilised by Chinese culture, so that you have come from afar the Great Emperor has seen your dutiful submission' (Duyvendak 1938, 87). This accords to an 'official' worldview in which 'outer barbarians' were to travel to the imperal court 'to be transformed' (*laihua*) by its influence (Mungello 2013, 4). This concept of transformation by proximity refers to a cultural practice dating back to early Han Chinese times, where Imperial Chinese culture and refinement were contrasted with the uncultured people located at a distance from the Imperial center (Joniak-Luthi,

2015, 25). According to Joniak-Luthi, this center would possess a transforming power towards those coming from beyond, firmly embedding them into a superior cultural and political sphere of influence (27).

James L. Hevia has studied this phenomenon related to the McCartney Embassy to the Chinese Emperor in 1793, which took place one year before the Titsingh Embassy. Hevia considers *laihua* as a key notion defining power relations in the Qing Chinese conception of the ambassadorial encounter, according to which outsiders were embedded in ritual processes where they were legitimated or transformed through rites of passage altering their status (Hevia, 1995, 21). It is important here to point out how the very trajectory of the Titsingh embassy itself, both to and from the Imperial court in Beijing, was conducted as a tightly controlled ritual with visits to key religious sites, accompanied by mandarins demanding formal respect (De Guignes 1808, vol. 2, 253-262). Osterhammel also mentions how the Titsingh Embassy had to abide by the strict conditions set by their Chinese hosts: unceremoniously assigned to abismal living conditions and fed poorly, the conditions of the Embassy improved markedly after having received the Qing emperor's blessing (2018, 146-147). Having gone through the rite of passage of *laihua*, and having come into closer proximity to the Chinese court, had improved the status of the European travelers. However, the conditions throughout the return journey to Canton remained under strict mandarin control (De Guignes 1808, vol. 2, 314).

For the McCartney embassy too, audiences were held at sites of historical import, which might evoke the genealogy of Manchu overlordship or made the distribution of lordly and cilizing power clearly felt (Hevia, 1995, 32). A prime example is the McCartney Embassy's visit to a Buddhist monastery incorporating a cult in which the early Qing emperors are depicted as the bodhisattva Manjusri (Hevia, 1995, 39).

Likewise, De Guignes' colleague Van Braam, second in command of the Titsingh Embassy, notes how current Emperor Qianlong was already included 'in the number of Saints, although still living' and due to being 'in the habit of being served and honoured like a god, it is very natural that he should let himself be inserted in the list of the beatified before his death' (Van Braam 1798, vol. II, 223). As to Chinese encounters on a non-official level, De Guignes repeatedly mentions how local people regarded the European travelers with curiosity (1808, vol. 2, 276) or how children pursued them while shouting (1808, vol. 2, 339).

The Chinese concept of *laihua* and its power relations clearly subverted the European orientalists' claim to modernity, by countering it with the civilizing notion of proximity and influence embodied in rites and trajectories which European ambassadors were obliged to follow. This reverse gaze of Chinese officials, and by the occupants of state-sponsored temples, was not situated within a context which could be recognised as 'religious', but rather in the political and cultural fields of relations defined by concepts of foreignness, inherent superiority claims and civilising proximity. Chinese views and practices thus formed an antithesis to colonial orientalism, which was present in scholarly works such as that of Solvyns in Bengal, where different configurations of power played a role.

Solvyns description of 'the Hindoos' in Bengal

Drawing on a similar lineage of tropes as De Guignes, Balthazar Solvyns' descriptions of the religion of 'the Hindoos' also formed a descriptive work based on 'exact' visual observation. Sita Reddy depicts this as a 'para-ethnography', predating later surveys by British authorities, which took place on a larger scale, scope and ambition (Reddy 2012, 72).

In Solvyn's work, the study and depiction of 'Hindoos' as objects of knowledge for men of science and letters is explicitly coupled to colonialism as the extension of power relations across the whole known world, or in Solvyns' own words:

> Since the revival of Science and of letters in Europe has awakened in its inhabitants the noble ambition of enlarging the boundaries of human knowledge, and extend their relations and their power over the whole surface of the earth, the country of the Hindoos has been one of the chief objects of their research' (1808, 20).

Solvyns claimed to differ from previous travellers or scholars in accurately appraising and depicting the Hindus as objects of knowledge, just as De Guignes had claimed to differ from the Jesuit missionaries. Accordingly, Solvyns stated:

> Its inhabitants have not yet been observed nor represented with that accuracy which is necessary to make them perfectly known [and to do this it is] necessary to reside among this people a sufficient time to have opportunities of observing them in all their habits of life (1808, 21).

However, he then continues the same claim found in previous travelers' works that the society and habits of Indians have remained primitive due to their ancient religion: 'It is without doubt that their primitive mores of the Indians have been conserved among them due to their immutable attachment to their ancient religion' (i). Solvyns simultaneously pointed out how colonial modernity was transforming life in India, when stating that

> the closer connections of Europeans with this country have made some impressions upon the primitive character of the hindoo nation (…) new

> manners and new forms of worship have been introduced, where formerly the name of Brahma only was revered (19).

European colonial modernity was contrasted with tenacious antiquity among the Hindu people, as Solvyns mentioned how the 'antique virtues of the hindoos' kept their ancient character. Throughout his descriptions, one finds India presented as a 'museum of mankind', which Saïd states fulfills the role for the European Orientalist 'to rescue, to collect its artifacts, and to give his judgment to it' (2003, 79). Solvyns' self-portrait portrays this objectifying power relation, as it shows him as being attended by his servants.

Nitin Sinha criticises Solvyns' colonialist views of India, claiming that the textual depictions accompanying his visual representations contributed to the rhetorics of the local people's colonial domination (2012, 21-22). The contrast against which the European Self positioned an Other was that of furthest antiquity, as a level of progress

or development where the development of arts and sciences in India and China supposedly stopped. Stating this, Solvyns explicitly compared China and India: ‘With them, as in China, the arts and sciences have never risen beyond a certain degree of perfection. It is evident that they stopped where there was no immediate use in going further’ (1808, 27). Solvyns explicitly contrasts this with Europe, just as P. Premare did for China in the ‘lettres édifiantes’, stating:

> the natives of Europe have a love of novelty and an ardent desire of perfection, which makes them despise the past, and esteem the present only as worthy of their attention. In Asia, on the contrary, and especially in India, on both sides of the Ganges, ancient customs and manners are most scrupulously adhered to. There, the object of emulation is not to invent new things, but to preserve in all their original purity the practices and documents of the remotest antiquity (27).

This especially concerns the domain of religion, as Solvyns equated the morals of social life with religion, depicting India as ancient and unchanging.

As to his descriptions of the posture and activities of the Hindus, he repeated the same tropes we have seen in De Guignes, as he depicted the Hindus in a ‘natural state of indolence’, in which people smoke and take up weird postures. The comment accompanying his depiction of a ‘HIndu’ smoking his hookah as the frontispiece of his third volume states that

> The state of repose is for the peace-loving Hindu the most happy of his life, after having done his chores, he can return to his natural indolence and tranquily smoke the houka, and rests hours without moving from his place,

or changing position, which would be embarassing for us Europeans (Solvyns 1808, 26).

Some of his immediate Flemish predecessors already held similar ideas as the tropes noticed earlier for China, which shows that these were not only limited to printed books in early modern Europe but formed a circulating knowledge. For instance, Ostend Company traveller Jacques-André Cobbe presented the same views on Indian society and the impossiblity of invention in a 1723 letter to the Marquis de Prié, in which he described the Bengali people as follows:

> The men here are like monkeys, never upright, but when they walk, always sitting on their heels in almost all their work: their toes serve as their hands; they have difficulties to conceive the work which we order them, even

> though they are craftsmen, they are not capable of invention (Cobbé 1723, folio 7).

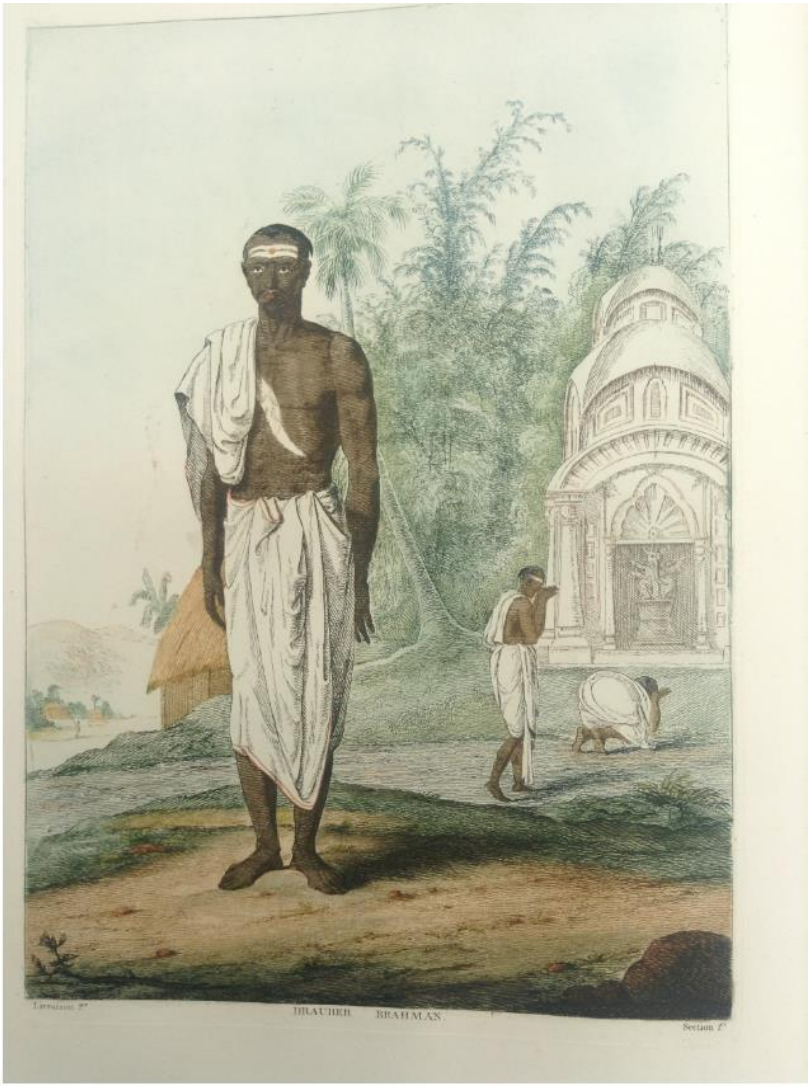
On the ‘religious doctrines’ of ‘the Hindoos’, Solvyns considers a peculiar link between its origins and that of early Christianity, referring to a purported link between the dogmas of Moses in Christianity and the antiquity of Asian religions, with the addition of ‘oriental fancy’:

> These dogmas being already as it were contained or implied in the religious code or in the patriarchal history of Moses, beyond which no history reaches, where from hence spread with more or less embellishment of oriental fancy over the nations not only of India, but of all Asia’ (Solvyns 1808, 23).

In true Orientalist fashion, he then equates Indian religions with religions across all Asia, including China. Some factors which he holds them to have ‘in common with all the worships of the east’ include ‘cruel expiations, their painful penances, the horrid death of their widows, and other supersititious practices of the same sort’ (24). He continues by stating that ‘the religion of the Hindoos dates probably from a period when the inhabitants of Asia, but little advanced in civilization, mingled with their worship these barbarous and sanguinary customs’ (24).

As to his specific encounters with religious practices, he mentions encountering Brahmins from Maharashtra, which he depicted as ‘In a state nearly uncivilized, there can be few enlightened men among them’, in their practices ‘they adore the god Ram, and prostrate themselves in his temples’. As to their doctrine, similar to De Guignes’ judgment on Taoism in China, he states he ‘could never obtain a satisfactory account of their origin, their religion or its mysteries’ yet he somehow claims to know that ‘they

have preserved more of the purity of their primitive religion' (Solvyns, 1808, tôme 1, Pl. IV). He particularly mentions this in accompaniment to an image depicting a 'drauber Brahman', in the background of which similar figures prostrate themselves in front of a nondescript statue placed in a Bengali temple.



Solvyns also considered what he noticed as 'religious art' in describing the Bengali 'pattooa' community, whom he describes as 'sculptors, they carve and color the images of their Gods', while also criticising their lack of artistic talent and impossibility to invent new forms or art:

> The puttooas have no great talents, nor would such in fact be of much use to them as they are obliged to give their idols exactly the same form they had in the most remote times (…) they have some good copiers, that is the utmost extent of their art; if some original painters are to be met with in Hindoostan, they are Mahometans, Persians, Greeks and other foreigners (Solvyns 1808, tôme 1, pl. V).

As for their sculptures, he claimed that their stagnation in the arts was also directly linked to their worship and religion, stating that 'their sculpture is necessarily inferior, consecrated entirely to their worship (…) almost all the statues of their divinities are hideous figures, shapeless and deformed' (Solvyns 1808, 26). Here too, he seems to echo the same views as De Guignes or Jesuit Missionaries expressed on Chinese idols and demons.

Counterpoint images of the European presence in Bengali socio-religious art

Having considered the European colonial or orientalist gaze and its tropes as expressed in the works of both Solvyns and De Guignes, in which religion is used as a marker for stagnation and superstition, one may investigate the counterpoint images which trace the subversion of the European colonial presence. One element of this subversion may precisely be found in the area of sculpture and painting which Solvyns relegated to stagnant antiquity. Indeed, the history of terracotta temple architecture and painted scrolls in Bengal shows otherwise. Kumkum Chatterjee considers Bengali temples, and in particular those of 16th-18th century Vishnupur, as products of a cultural efflorescence in North India (Chatterjee 2009). Not only was Solvyns unable to notice that these artforms were developing during the 18th century, but he also failed to

see that these religious edifices were related to ongoing colonialism in the social world, commenting on and depicting the European colonial presence in Bengal. Nevertheless, the architectural form of the terracotta temples resemble those that form a background element in his etchings.

Thus, we may find depictions of Europeans on terracotta temple friezes throughout Bengal. These sculptures formed a reply to the European presence in Bengal, integrating it to a certain extent within scenes of daily life and mythological depictions. Satyasikha Chakraborty considers these temples as ‘products of the native gaze’, in which contemporary rural life is featured amidst the divine, and stresses that ‘in the 17th, 18th and 19th century, the presence of Europeans had become an integral part of the *visualscape* of rural Bengal’ (2012, 40-41). She convincingly argues that the visualisation of European Firingee on the Terracotta temples served as a ‘rural gaze’,

reciprocating the ‘colonial gaze’ and challenging normative assumptions on colonizing viewed subjects versus colonized viewed objects (Chakraborty, 2012, 47). This would prove a counterpoint visualisation during the same period European objectifying Orientalist ethnographies and descriptions, such as those of De Guignes and Solvyns, were established.

Terracotta temple building in rural Bengal was the result of an intense concentration of economic and artistic resources, as well as a public means of expressing power through patronage. In his ‘historical background’ to the *Brick Temples of Bengal*, George Michell notes that the development of these temples in Bengal was closely associated with contemporary movements in religion, literature and the arts as well as with broader political, social and economic developments (1983, 3). As the majority of Bengalis were illiterate during this period, the terracotta artists of the Sutradhara-community who built the temples had little opportunity to acquaint themselves with Sanskrit Puranas, epics, or other mythological source-books. Instead, these artists’ knowledge of epics and myths was mainly derived from the works of local Bengali poets, particularly in the form of popular dramas and songs. Such poets translated and retold the stories to villagers, also intrucing new episodes and own interpretations without hesitation. This brought the atmosphere of contemporary society into their stories and poetry, profoundly influencing the artists who decorated the temples of the period. (Zulekha Haque in ed. Michell 1983, 171). These terracotta temple sculptures were related to other arts flourishing simultaneously in the same region, and to the narratives of similar social groups –especially the pattua scroll painters (Michell 1983, 177). As these artforms reflected themes from contemporary society, it is no wonder that the European colonial presence was also depicted there.

One design portrays the powerful and threatening presence of Portuguese soldiers and pirates, who abducted native people from local villages in their slave trade, and whose presence was later displaced by British merchants, administrators, and other classes of foreigners (Chakraborty 2012, 41-42). Das Gupta notes that, even after the eviction of Portuguese from Bengal by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in 1632, individual Portuguese soldiers remained employed as mercenaries in Bengal, and would therefore be depicted among the temple figures (1971, 21). These would usually be pictured on friezes as wearing a distinct suit of armour, and equiped artillery gear.

Another design incorporated European clothing styles, European doctors and violinists within scenes of folk religion, which are explicitly described as ‘secular scenes’. Rachel McDermott describes the 18th century design of such scenes as follows:

> Secular life makes its way onto these friezes: bearded priests and servants attend to Durga, violinists serenade her, and the devotees are even dressed in European clothing. On other slabs, Ganesha can be seen feeding from a

> bottle, zamindars are strutting about in Western dress, and European boats sail into Bengali ports (2011, 92).

Satyasikha Chakraborty interprets such depictions as occasions for the *zamindar*, or local land-owner ordering the construction of temples, to 'display their European taste and the power and prestige that was gradually becoming associated with it' (2012, 45). George Michell also offers the same explanation, connecting it with 'the worldly ambitions and acquisition of new wealth and status by the temple patrons' (1983, 11). However, the historical meaning and contemporary significance of these temples seem to go beyond displays of European taste, itself a possible effect of colonial modernity, and may also point towards a subversion of the European presence. Just as Michael Taussig has pointed to the approach of mimesis as 'the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed' (1993, 13), we may interpret the incorporation of European figures into the temple sculptures as an attempt to incorporate their presence in order to overcome it. One might therefore question whether the sculptures only indicated the emulation of and compliance with European 'others', or strategically incorporated them in order to overcome them.

Moreover, one wonders how this would have been experienced by the local inhabitants whose lifeworlds were shaped and depicted, for although the temples were constructed under patronage of economically prestigious powerholders in an agricultural society, their social use-context was aimed at wider community rituals and festivals (Michell 1983, 7-8). How these Europeans might have figured in performances and stories acted out in local communities becomes clear in Byapti Sur's article on the Bengali perceptions of the 17th century Dutch East India Company. She shows how oral performances of local religious poetry, or *mangalkavya*, presented the image of 'hat-wearing' Europeans as the 'stereotypical image of the powerful merchant-warrior

type' through the predatory presence of Portuguese soldiers as dreaded *firangi* pirates (2017, 67-68). Sur notes how Europeans were considered as a fearful and warlike presence, as an image leading back to Portuguese pirates and slavers' horrendous activities in the Ganges delta during earlier times (71). According to a mimetical interpretation, the depiction of Portuguese soldiers could also offer some release from the traumatic and vivid histories of Portuguese involved in local slave trade. As to its further subversive potential, it may not be a random choice that Europeans were protrayed amidst temple friezes dedicated to Durga, for as Rachel McDermott notes, the depiction of devis like Kali and Durga were used in and as an expression of anti-colonial and communal political rhetoric (2011, 183-184).

From the related folk artform of scroll painting, or *patuas*, Bengali visual arts also provided a way to satirize and criticize ongoing colonial influences and developments in a changing society from the late 18th to the 19th century. An example of this is the artform of Kalighat painting. W.G. Archer has argued that the specific form of Kalighat painting reflected a Western stylistical influence upon *patua* painters (Archer 1953). In contrast, Lauren Slaughter and Jyotendra Jain claim it as more of an indigenous style, due to the Kalighat painters' social segregation from British or even elite Indian society (Jain 1999, Slaughter 2012). Slaughter questions the validity of Archer's scholarship, as she contrasts the genre of 'Company paintings', which were created by Indian artists of a higher socio-economic background, with those of the lower status Kalighat patuas who never received European artistic training (Slaughter, 250-251). Mildred Archer follows a Eurocentric narrative, stating that Company Paintings were commissioned by and produced for members of the British East India Company, following the rise of European trading and colonial communities in Bengal after the supposed 'collapse of the Mughal Empire' (Archer, 1948, vii). In contrast,

Jyotendra Jain points out how the genre of Kalighat paintings, apart from the community of patua-painters, also involved potters, carpenters and stoneworkers, which links the Kalighat painting practice with earlier traditions of craftsmanship, carpentry and sutradhara sketches (Jain, 1999). Therefore, one can argue for a continuity from depictions of and commentary on the European presence on terracotta temples towards the craftsmanship of patua scrolls and Kalighat paintings.

One social phenomenon that became criticized in these patuas was the so-called 'Babu culture', making fun of and criticizing the social class of new bourgeoisie which developed in colonial Bengal. Krishna Dutta addresses the subversive potential of Patua and Kalighat paintings directly in their themes of social criticism linked to images developed from the 'Hindu pantheon' and rural stories (2003, 37). An example of how 19th century Kalighat painters engaged in such criticism was by empowering women through depicting their suitors as charlatans and lap dogs (38). Earlier forms of folk painting could be equally subversive, as Mir Muhammad and Mir Ahammad Ali note that an element of folk performance accompanied the patua paintings, which also held a directly subversive potential as a tool of resistance in confronting British colonial authority, for instance in the *Medinipur Pata* addressing the Chuar Rebellion against the British East India Company's taxation (2015, 252).

We may therefore conclude that the colonizing influence of Europeans in Bengal was both depicted directly, as on the temple sculptures, and indirectly in the patuas' critique on changing tendencies in society. Far from an unchangeable form of antiquity, rooted in a purely religious background, these artworks held a constantly evolving potential for incorprating and subverting elements of social life. Moreover, rural art forms such as patua-paiting are still produced today, and maintain this function of chronicling social life in a globalised world. Its potential to adapt to changing times

becomes apparent from Soma Mitra's 2008 interview with Fateja Chitrakar, where Mitra claims this artform is carried forward on 'modern issues', stating her involvement in government-sponsored art workshops in which she was asked to portray the 9/11 attacks in order to create awareness against terrorism (Mitra, 2008). The critical potential of these artworks still holds, yet we may wonder about their subversive potential today, and whether they might resist or adapt to a global art market in postcolonial times.

Conclusion: Early-modern Orientalism in China and Bengal, and its subversions

This essay has shown how European perceptions of Chinese and Bengali societies referred to religious categories as arguments in an orientalist and exoticist discourse which considered Asian social and cultural life as stagnant and unable to keep up with European colonial modernity. For instance, Solvyns' work on India shows an early 'visual anthropological' attempt to produce an oeuvre which aimed at understanding as a form of domination. As Saïd stated in Orientalism, the Oriental was portrayed as living in a world of his own, given intelligibility by the Orientalists manipulations as an object of knowledge (2003, 40). This ultimately leads him to conclude that 'from traveler's tales, and not only from great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured' (117).

Yet it is precisely from those religious contexts which were perceived by De Guignes and Solvyns' 'constructed gaze' as religious, and which were indicted of stagnant superstition and idolatry, that counterpoint images could be found which subverted the European presence. Both Chinese and Bengali religious sites and practices proved to be possible grounds for subversion, providing a social commentary on the European presence and implicitly challenging the European claim to dominance.

For China in the work of De Guignes, subversion or resistance to making it 'perfectly known' relied on three factors: a differing context of power which, opposite to the colonial context of Bengal, implied that Mandarin officials decided which itinerary his voyage would follow and which religious sites could be visited; the civilising notions of the Qing Imperial authorities were conceptually opposed to the views De Guignes ascribed to Chinese society; and the ontological resistance of what he claimed to see as religion itself. In the case of Taoism, his attempts at going beyond descriptivism resulted in perplexity. Beyond perplexity, De Guignes and Solvyns' biases concerning falsity and superstition are to be situated in the religious domain, and are shown to have occurred in the same way in China as well as Bengal.

In terms of Bengali counterpoint visualisations of the European colonial presence, both terracotta temples and painted scrolls formed a social commentary within a local religious context. The living and evolving character of such views, and of these artforms itself, within the local religious lifeworld of Bengal remained unnoticed in the work of Orientalists such as Solvyns, precisely due to the involved biases denying all possibilities of invention. Instead of the orientalist endeavour, the Bengali scrolls and temples did not have the explicit mission to create 'objects of knowledge' to be made known, but were commenting on and integrating the foreign colonial presence in local life and perception.

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Figures

Figure 1 - Self-portrait of Balthazar Solvyns. Frontispiece of Volume IV.

From: Solvyns, F. Balthazar. *Les Hindous Ou Description De Leurs Moeurs, Coutumes Et Cérémonies. Tôme IV.* Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1812. (Ghent University Library)

Figure 2 – Hindoo leisurely smoking a hookah. Frontispiece of Volume III.

From: Solvyns, F. Balthazar. *Les Hindous Ou Description De Leurs Moeurs, Coutumes Et Cérémonies.* Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1811. (Ghent University Library)

Figure 3 – Drauber Brahman. From: Solvyns, Volume I. tôme 1 pl. IV. Livraison 1re.

From: Solvyns, F. Balthazar. *Les Hindous Ou Description De Leurs Moeurs, Coutumes Et Cérémonies.* Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1808. (Ghent University Library)

Figure 4 – Terracotta Temple at Surul. Photograph: Wim De Winter, fieldwork Bengal 2015.

Figure 5 – European Soldier (cannoneer?) depicted on Surul Terracotta Temple (detail). Photograph: Wim De Winter, fieldwork Bengal 2015.