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# Constructing Chinese History: Kafka's and Dittmar's Orientalist Discourse

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CHINA IS extraordinarily interested in learning from the German people, Paul Rohrbach writes in a 1916 article, because they are a nation characterized by order, science, and the pursuit of foreign languages and knowledge—or so he was told by a Chinese who had studied in Germany. At the same time, Rohrbach continues, the Germans will never attain “das große Ziel, die Umwandlung des alten in das neue China mit deutschem Geist zu beeinflussen” ‘the great goal of influencing through the German spirit the transformation of the old China into the new one’ unless they seriously attempt to judge the country by its own historical essence (11).<sup>1</sup> Although (or precisely because) Rohrbach claims that Germany, having no colonialist interests in China, would like it to be an autonomous and equal partner, his statement is strikingly indicative of that inextricable interrelation between Western political authority and the search for knowledge which is typical of the traditional orientalist discourse about China.

Perhaps too briefly defined, the term *orientalism* here denotes the network of knowledge, power, and writing by which China has for centuries been conceptualized, represented, appreciated, and criticized in Western historiography, fiction, travel literature, and journalism. Its current critical usage derives from Edward Said's seminal study. Relying on Foucault, Said offers this definition, among others:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (3)

Much of what Said says here and elsewhere in his book about the West's construction of the Middle East applies also to the European image of the Far East (Zhang 114).

In China's multifaceted representation by orientalism, as I understand the process, the state tends to disappear as a facticity in its own

right, as a geopolitical reality whose history, culture, social institutions, and customs can be perceived from a “genuinely” Chinese point of view. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the Chinese have such a thing as an indigenous, autonomous self-conception, independent of and untainted by various Western influences, interpretations, and stereotypes, despite the country’s traditional self-mythification as the culturally dominant and self-sufficient Middle Kingdom. Especially since the nineteenth century, Sander Gilman argues, the Chinese have imitated, assimilated, and modified the supposedly superior models of Western science, medicine, and aesthetics to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the network of Western views of the nation and an authentically Chinese civilization and self-understanding.<sup>2</sup> The complex interrelation between Western power and Chinese cultural self-transformation, reaching its culmination during the age of colonialism, might indicate why many turn-of-the-century travelers had trouble finding an “original” civilization in Asia “un-corrupted” by European modernization and hegemony (Günther 149–62). The hermeneutical difficulty of reconstructing an indigenous Chinese self-understanding cannot, of course, justify imposing the political categories and cultural values of the Occident on Asian reality. Nonetheless, China in Western writing, perhaps unavoidably, often seems like a text composed from a markedly Eurocentric perspective, a discursive construct, a tradition of narrative topoi.<sup>3</sup> These are, to be sure, commonly based on the actual experience of travelers, explorers, and missionaries or are adapted from concepts and ideas found in Chinese literature, philosophy, and political writings. To a significant degree, however, orientalist topoi are a complex set of historiographic assumptions, political preconceptions, idealizations, aesthetic norms, moral values, and rhetorical conventions that originated in European philosophical and literary traditions. This provenance does not mean, of course, that orientalist conceptions necessarily miss the reality of the countries they attempt to describe; rather, they are characterized by that peculiar mixture of empirical observation and interpretation, truth and

ideological distortion, factual report and fiction which seems to typify all cross-cultural discourse.<sup>4</sup>

The European Enlightenment generally idealized China as a country founded on superior principles of rational statecraft and ethics (Rose 62–67; Zhang 116–21). But eventually, as Adrian Hsia has shown, the K’ang-shi emperor’s stand against the zealous missionary policies of the Catholic church in his country, the opposition of writers like Herder and Goethe to the chinoiserie of the rococo movement and to the Enlightenment’s adoration of social Confucianism, and Chinese resistance to the aggressive mercantilism of the West combined to alienate Europe from China and to reverse the nation’s positive image (380–83).

In Germany, Herder’s influential *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* ‘Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humankind’ (pt. 3), published in 1787, while granting the Orient an important position in the development of world history, helped initiate the Eurocentric idea that the history of China—“eine balsamirte Mumie” ‘an embalmed mummy,’ in the author’s polemical description (13)—is stagnant, repetitive, timeless (Aurich 41–43, 76–77; Rose 66–67, 81–82). As oversimplifying and culturally arrogant as this interpretation certainly appears, it is not entirely in discord with the Buddhist and Hindu cyclical views of life. As G. B. Sansom points out, “Nothing can be more uncongenial to the European mind than the teaching [of these religions] as to the lack of meaning or purpose in the material universe.” These beliefs necessarily clashed with the doctrine of human perfectibility that ultimately “impelled European states to extend their influence into Asia” and to search “for more wealth and knowledge” abroad (49).

Written after Herder’s treatise, Hegel’s equally canonical, and ideologically more radical, contribution to this topos characterizes the oriental states as a patriarchal, suppressive structure represented by the theocratic despotism of the emperor and resulting in a static history—indeed, in no history at all:

[D]iese Geschichte ist selbst noch überwiegend geschichtslos, denn sie ist nur die Wiederholung des-

selben majestätischen Untergangs. Das Neue, das durch Tapferkeit, Kraft, Edelmüt an die Stelle der vorherigen Pracht tritt, geht denselben Kreis des Verfalls und Untergangs durch. Dieser Untergang ist also kein wahrhafter, denn es wird durch alle diese rastlose Veränderung kein Fortschritt gemacht.

(137)

This history is itself still predominantly ahistorical, because it is merely the repetition of the same majestic decline. The new, which through courage, strength, magnanimity, replaces the splendors of the past, passes through the same cycle of decadence and decline. This decline, then, is not a true one, because through all this restless change no progress is made.

(See also Avineri 223–25; Rose 85; Dawson 15.)

Other typical orientalist topoi are China's large geographical expanse and huge population; the proud cultural and political self-isolation of the Middle Kingdom; its strict legal system, oppressive moral code, and well-organized hierarchical society; the inevitable political and spiritual immaturity of the common people; and the country's ancient culture (Dawson; Zhang). In the German tradition, elaborations of, and variations on, this highly selective list of recurrent concepts—which does not represent orientalist discourse in all its complexity—can be found, in one way or another, in the writings of Herder, Hegel, Schlegel, and many other philosophers and historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Subverting their authors' intention to provide a true representation of Asian historical reality, such views frequently suffer from a one-sidedness, a simplifying and reductive tendency that renders them susceptible to ideological exploitation by later writers. Together, these topoi constitute the discursive context in which I situate two literary constructions of Chinese history: Julius Dittmar's travel book *Im neuen China* 'In New China' and Franz Kafka's fragmentary story "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" 'Constructing the Great Wall of China.'<sup>5</sup>

To explain how Kafka's and Dittmar's particular visions of China developed from their ideological positions within the discursive space of orientalism, I examine Dittmar's travel account as a text that appropriates and manipulates tra-

ditional elements of orientalist discourse and that Kafka's metadiscursive narrative in turn contests and revises. In Dittmar's work, which represents the heterogeneousness of orientalist discourse, various, often contradictory Western responses to China intersect and contest one another without being fully reconciled. For this reason, his book opens up a new hermeneutical perspective on the political and historical dimensions of Kafka's text.

The plurality of orientalist discourse in Dittmar's account is articulated through the voices of the author and his travel companions: Mr. Lewis, from Chicago, and Fräulein Falke, from Stuttgart, who are open-minded newcomers eager to learn more about an unfamiliar and fascinating Asian country; Mrs. Moore, from London, a sincere and well-informed Sinophile who defends traditional Chinese customs, religion, and art; and the Russian spy Herr v. Z., a prejudiced, arrogant proponent of Western hegemony who describes the Chinese as politically self-centered, xenophobic, and lacking in spiritual profundity and imagination. Dittmar himself, the faithful chronicler, listens to them all and observes everything, expressing ever-shifting political and cultural opinions. Thus the five travelers represent the ideological complexity and ambiguity that, as Günther has shown, seems typical of the Western discourse on the Orient around the turn of the century (see also Schuster 56–89).

Published in 1912, Dittmar's book records his travels through China in the late autumn of 1910, "rund ein halbes Jahr, bevor die Revolution ausbrach" 'about half a year before the revolution broke out' (4). The reference is to the nationalist movement that in 1911–12 overthrew the corrupt and decadent Ch'ing, or Manchu, dynasty and sought to establish a democratic republic. Frequently, Dittmar adheres to European clichés, generalizations, and prejudices about China. The Chinese are suffering from political "Schläfrigkeit" 'sleepiness' (16); visiting Mukden, he notes that the Manchus and Chinese alike are dirty, degenerate, and "roh gegeneinander und feindlich gegen den Fremden" 'rude to each other and hostile toward foreigners' (22–23). Dittmar also displays a favorite topos of orientalist discourse that perpetuates a concept often found in classical

Chinese writing: the emperor as the revered symbol of national unity, whose divine descent legitimates his authority and power but at the same time obliges him to rule justly and benevolently. Accordingly, Hegel sees him as the center of the governmental hierarchy, with the well-being of the entire state and people depending on his morality and effective reign (160–61). Giving this theme a new connotation, Dittmar argues that the disastrous economic misplanning, the decadence, and the all-pervasive corruption of the Ch'ing dynasty have drained the diseased body of China to such an extent that only drastic political and social reforms can heal the impoverished country. Indeed, China's present situation is already inscribed with the unmistakable signs of immediate and historically inevitable revolutionary change. Characteristically, Dittmar reads the architecture of the imperial palace, the Forbidden City in Beijing, "in der der Sohn des Himmels in heiliger Abgeschlossenheit lebte" 'where the Son of Heaven resided in sacred seclusion,' as an allegory signifying the anachronistic nature of the present imperial system and the promise of a better future. Describing the alienated emperor as "ein Gefangener in einem goldenen Käfig" 'a prisoner in a golden cage,' Dittmar muses, "Ob nicht die neue Zeit, die in China schon mächtig an die Türe klopft, auch mit diesem glänzenden Elend aufräumen wird?" 'Will not the new era that is already mightily knocking at China's door also do away with this splendid misery?' (44).

Yet the seemingly progressive tone of these statements is deceptive, for Dittmar and his companions interpret their China from the perspective of Europeans thoroughly conditioned by the orientalist topos that asserts the incompatibility of Chinese history with genuine progress. While the British tourist regards the rapidly expanding railroad as a sign that progress does exist in China despite traditional expectations, the Russian spy categorically rejects this argument. As he hastens to point out, the railroad was built not by the Chinese themselves but by Europeans, who forced it on the Asian nation (35). Significantly enough, he does not condemn railroad construction as a colonialist intrusion; for him, foreign intervention is the only way to introduce

change to a people inimical to initiating progress themselves. For the Russian, the traditional stagnation of history is the result of the people's deeply rooted arrogance and hostility toward all whites and their inventions: "Sie halten ihr Reich für die Mitte der Welt und sich selber für eine Art auserwähltes Volk; wir Ausländer aber sind ihnen nur Barbaren, die sie im tiefsten Herzensgrunde verachten" 'They consider their empire the center of the world and themselves a kind of chosen people; for them, we foreigners are but barbarians whom they despise from the very bottom of their hearts' (36).

Certainly not all early-twentieth-century commentators expressed such an unabashed justification of hegemony. In the afterword to his popular collection of Chinese poetry, *Die chinesische Flöte*, a book that Kafka knew (*Briefe* 282), Hans Bethge warns that the import of European science and technology, while advantageous to modernization, would inevitably be harmful to China's ancient culture and arts (110). His anthology, then, is a melancholic monument to a deeply admired foreign civilization threatened with extinction by an aggressive onrush of Western progress that the ideologically critical editor views with profound ambivalence.

Dittmar himself, in the chapter preceding the debate between Mrs. Moore and the Russian spy, clearly recognizes "[d]ie drohende Gefahr der Fremdherrschaft" 'the impending danger of foreign domination' in the politically weakened China (34). Thus we would expect him to disagree with the Russian, who dubiously manipulates the traditional Chinese conception of themselves as the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom and unabashedly endorses technocratic hegemony. At the steadily growing foreign legion quarter in Beijing, however, Dittmar too falls victim to the colonialist discourse of his time, marveling at "diese stattliche Ausstellung europäischer Machtmittel" 'this impressive exhibition of European instruments of power,' which surely influenced the Chinese to abandon some of their nationalistic arrogance and interact with the Europeans as with "Gleichstehenden" 'equals' (45).

That the Europeans in turn were not inclined to treat the Chinese as equals is of course part of the political hypocrisy that characterizes the

presence of the Western powers in Asia, and Dittmar fully subscribes to this ideology. When he visits Tsingtao, the capital of the German-leased territory of Kiaochow, his patriotic heart rejoices at the sight of this “stattliche Ansiedlung eines großen Volkes” ‘impressive settlement of a great people’ (72), and he spends considerable time recapitulating the colonialistic learning process by which Germany gradually came to discover and appreciate the potential significance of this “Oase” ‘oasis’ of the German character on Chinese soil. At the beginning, Tsingtao was intended only as a stronghold of the German fleet. Later, the European nation realized that the town “[hat] nur darauf [ge]warte[t]” ‘was only waiting’ to be developed as an international trading port. But for Dittmar, the true significance of this German colonialist bastion is that it finally came to be “[e]ine anschauliche Darstellung unserer Kultur, eine Ausstellung unserer Tüchtigkeit” ‘a graphic depiction of our culture, an exhibition of our efficiency,’ although, as the author adds without so much as a trace of irony, the Germans did not originally intend this boastful demonstration (78).

Not all commentators were convinced of the advantages and the necessity of Germany’s presence in Kiaochow. As early as 1898, Franz Mehring, arguing from a social democratic perspective, harshly criticized his country’s leasing treaty with China as a shameful act of capitalist greed for profit. Unlike the British, French, and Dutch, the Germans, he points out, began their colonialist politics very late, “im absteigenden Aste der kapitalistischen Entwicklung” ‘on the descending branch of the development of capitalism.’ A burden for the taxpayers at home, colonial politics is a historical anachronism and a moral and political disgrace for the German nation (270–72).

By contrast, some fourteen years later Dittmar justifies the imposition of German—and, implicitly, European—military power, expansionistic trading policy, and cultural norms on China, advancing the dubious argument that these constitute not intentional acts of political aggression but the inevitable revelation of Western superiority over Asia—a superiority inscribed in, and, at the time of Dittmar’s writing, fully disclosed

by, the course of (Western, colonialist) history itself. Seemingly downplaying the brute power of the Germans’ military and technological presence in China, the author concludes his description of Tsingtao by reemphasizing the exemplary supremacy of Germany’s cultural productivity. What arouses the “Neid” ‘envy’ of the other foreign nations and the “staunend[e] Bewunderung” ‘stunned admiration’ of the Chinese is

daß diese Ausstellung unserer Tüchtigkeit uns Siege gewann, die uns weder unsere Kanonen noch unsere Eisenbahnen hatten einbringen können. Seitdem wir das erkannt, ist die Bedeutung der Kolonie festgelegt: sie soll den Völkern Asiens eine Art Anschauungsunterricht geben von dem, was wir auf allen Gebieten menschlichen Fortschritts leisten können; dann mögen sie selber erwägen, ob es sich lohnt, unsere Waren zu kaufen und in der Politik mit uns zusammen zu gehen. (79)

that this display of our efficiency won us victories that neither our cannons nor our railroads were able to bring us. Since we have realized this, the significance of the colony has been established: it is to give to the peoples of Asia a kind of demonstration lesson of what we can achieve in all areas of human progress; then let them consider for themselves whether it is worth their while to buy our goods and cooperate with us in politics.

The message is as self-assured as it is threatening. His admiration for China’s art and his respect for the population’s industriousness and cleverness notwithstanding, Dittmar does not grant the Asian nation the ability to develop historical self-determination. It is certainly true that Dittmar observes signs of change everywhere. He mentions the revolutionary ideas spreading among the modern Chinese soldiers, whom he nonetheless accuses of severely lacking discipline and courage (46), and he speculates about the people waiting for the opportunity to overthrow “dieses verrottete Kaiserhaus” ‘this degenerate dynasty’ as they had so many others before (66). But trapped in the ideological confines of orientalist discourse, Dittmar cannot but think in accordance with its topos asserting China’s ahistorical stagnation. While perhaps latently inscribed in China’s present sociopolitical situation, genuine progress—the translation of the popu-

lation's rebellious dissatisfaction with feudalism and imperial tyranny into political action and the creation of radically new forms of society and government—can only materialize with foreign help. As Dittmar suggests, the country, supposedly incapable of transforming and renewing itself from within its own cultural tradition, must accept the superiority of the European powers as an authoritative model for its imminent revolutionary struggle.

To the extent that China is denied its own history, it is also deprived of its own political voice. Dittmar's rhetoric of colonialist didactics casts the country as a politically immature pupil incapable of making autonomous decisions, except for the resolution to learn the "lesson" of the German cultural pedagogue. Here, too, Dittmar's Eurocentric textualization of China finds a precursor in traditional orientalist discourse. For Herder, the authoritarian and ritualistic structure of China's moral code, its emphasis on strict obedience to paternal power, has kept the people in a state of "kindische Gefangenschaft der menschlichen Vernunft, Kraft und Empfindung" 'infantile imprisonment of human reason, strength, and sentiment,' which "mußte . . . auf das ganze Gebäude des Staats einen schwächenden Einfluß haben" 'was bound to have a weakening influence on the entire edifice of the state' (11).

In accordance with Europe's condescending conceptualization of China, the Russian spy later repeats the standard justification for Western colonialism as an initiator of historical progress in Asia, wondering whether after the collapse of the Manchu dynasty "etwas Neues aus den Trümmern entstehen wird" 'anything new will arise from the rubble' or "ob die weißen Völker die Regierung Chinas übernehmen müssen, wie England die Regierung Indiens auf sich genommen hat" 'whether the white peoples will have to take over the government of China, the way England has taken on itself the task of governing India' (117). Not until this point, literally on the last page of the book, does Dittmar indicate that he can think independently of the European imperialist conceptions of Chinese history. Rather surprisingly, he agrees "aus vollster Überzeugung" 'wholeheartedly' with his British compan-

ion's enthusiastic belief in China's progress, introduced not by foreign forces but through the self-determination of the "fleißig[en] und tüchtig[en]" 'industrious and efficient' Chinese people themselves (117–18). This sudden, somewhat unconvincing change of mind indicates the ideological insecurity of a traveler who is dimly aware that his inherited preconceptions about the Orient's ahistorical history are being severely undermined by the sociopolitical uncertainties and signs of change observable in the China of 1910.

Though understandable in the historical context, Dittmar's enthusiasm for colonialist progress and his residual, but largely unacknowledged, orientalist rhetoric render his account susceptible to critical subversion by Kafka's "Constructing the Great Wall of China," written in 1917, when the political crisis of the Austrian empire, the war in Europe (Rignall 112), and, possibly, reports that reactionary forces were dominant in post-revolutionary China seemed to confirm Kafka's disbelief in the possibility of historical progress. Kafka does not mention Dittmar in his writings. But as Hartmut Binder and Weiyang Meng have shown, numerous intertextual similarities in motifs, diction, and themes suggest that Kafka most likely knew the travel account and used it as a source, together with contemporary anthologies of Chinese poetry and fairy tales (Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar* 218–21; Meng 77–81). Even if we cannot be entirely sure of any direct influence, Dittmar and Kafka are clearly related intertextually within the discursive space of early-twentieth-century writings on the Orient. Like Dittmar, Kafka has recourse to several standard topoi of orientalism, such as China's geographical vastness; the oppressive structure of the sociopolitical system; the Great Wall; the infinite alienation of the common, politically immature people from the imperial institution; and the theocratic aura surrounding the emperor. Yet he and Dittmar take significantly different positions within the rhetorical and ideological space of orientalism. Detracting from the textualizing tendencies that his book shares with traditional Eurocentric conceptions of China, Dittmar speaks with the self-assured voice of the world traveler's direct experience of the Asian countries, emphasizing that his publication is not "eine Art

Abriß der Chinakunde” ‘some kind of abbreviated account of sinology’ but an authentic description of modern China on the eve of the revolution (4). His concentration on empirical observation and on the contemporary, revolutionary China—as opposed to the merely historical, “sinological” state—attests to his intention to avoid orientalist textualization. As we have seen, however, Dittmar’s lack of self-critical insight into the ideological biases and the rhetoricity of his writing subverts his move toward transcending the boundaries of orientalist discourse.

By contrast, Kafka’s “Constructing the Great Wall of China,” the longest and most ambitious of his “Chinese” stories, displays a high degree of ironic, self-reflective awareness of its own status as narrative.<sup>6</sup> A conspicuously unreliable narrator earnestly attempts to present an objective account of the circumstances surrounding the erection of the Great Wall and the (mis)functioning of the imperial institution, but his efforts are constantly thwarted by the many unverifiable legends about the event, the pseudoscientific previous scholarship on the subject, and his own admitted intellectual insufficiencies (Rignall). Referring to his search for an explanation of the Wall’s piecemeal construction, a rationale that would go beyond that offered by the builders, the narrator admits his shortcomings: “Die Grenzen, die meine Denkfähigkeit mir setzt, sind ja eng genug, das Gebiet aber, das hier zu durchlaufen wäre, ist das Endlose” ‘The limitations set for me by my intellectual capabilities are after all narrow enough; what’s more, the field [of investigation] that would have to be covered here is the infinite’ (293). The narrator’s historiographic problems produce an inevitably fragmentary and speculative chronicle that—through its relentlessly self-critical analysis of the act of representing, of furnishing a truthful, accurate, realistic interpretation of Chinese history and the imperial institution (Rignall; see also Beicken 312–15)—draws the reader’s attention to the fictionalizing inherent in European constructions of China, their rhetoric, stereotypical topoi, and ideological distortions. On the one hand, then, Kafka distances himself from orientalist discourse; on the other, he appropriates it, however tenuously and ironically, for a sustained exploration of the intricate

interrelations among illegitimate patriarchal power over willingly submissive subjects, the construction of reality through language, and the apparent impossibility of historical progress. This thoroughly ambiguous dialectics of preserving and critically revising tradition defines Kafka’s position within the corpus of European writings on China and links the story not only to his other orientalist prose—most notably, “An Old Manuscript,” “The Rejection,” and “The Conscription of Troops”—but also to his self-reflective and demythifying meditations on the theme of power and suppression in Western cultural discourses: his travesties of Greek mythology and history—“Prometheus,” “Poseidon,” “The Silence of the Sirens,” “The New Attorney”—and his antimetaphysical hermeneutics of biblical narratives in “The City Coat of Arms” and the aphorisms on paradise (see also Nicolai; Whitlark).

Kafka’s antithetical text should also be seen in the context of the European response to the situation in China after 1911–12. Already in the nineteenth century there were authors—Ludwig Börne, Heinrich Heine, Franz Grillparzer, and others—who read China as an analogy to the equally anachronistic, despotic, and corrupt Prussian and Austro-Hungarian monarchies (Rose 102–17; Meng 17–18). And in Germany, progressive intellectuals referred to the fall of the Manchu dynasty in speculating about the end of their own Wilhelmine empire (Schuster 85). But unfortunately, as C. P. Fitzgerald has shown, the hope for a postrevolutionary China characterized by democracy, industrial progress, reduced poverty, and rising military strength was soon to be shattered by the return of the old in new disguise: “In place of the Emperor there was soon a succession of military adventurers, corrupt and ignorant. . . . In place of the old high officials there appeared a swarm of self-seeking careerists, qualified for office only by flagrantly corrupt election or unabashed nepotism.” After recounting other proofs that the promises of the revolution remained unfulfilled, Fitzgerald summarizes, “This tragic spectacle convinced the foreign observer that the Chinese civilization was at an end, that the long race was run, and since

there could be no return to the past, there was equally no future" (42).

We do not know whether Kafka shared the contemporary disappointment about China's postrevolutionary malaise, but his "Constructing the Great Wall of China," written five years after the end of the Ch'ing dynasty, conspicuously refrains from any direct, mimetic reference to the postrevolutionary realities of the "new China," as celebrated by Dittmar.<sup>7</sup> Kafka was always skeptical about revolutions and the possibility of historical progress: "Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist immerwährend. Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles Frühere für nichtig erklären, im Recht, denn es ist noch nichts geschehen" 'The crucial moment in the development of humankind is continuous. That is why the revolutionary spiritual movements that declare void the entire past are in the right, for nothing has happened yet.' Elsewhere in the same collection he writes, "An Fortschritt glauben heißt nicht glauben, daß ein Fortschritt schon geschehen ist. Das wäre kein Glauben" 'To believe in progress does not mean to believe that any progress has already occurred. That would be no belief' (*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen* 73, 90).<sup>8</sup>

These aphorisms help us understand why Kafka's story avoids any allusion to the "new" China of his own time and instead confines itself to an intertextual play with the traditional Eurocentric discourse on the old, prerevolutionary China. The move away from the contemporary actuality of Chinese politics and history into the aesthetic space of orientalist fiction can be read, I suggest, as a skeptical, revisionary stroke directed against Dittmar's optimistic ideology of a colonialist modernization bringing about a revolutionary demolition of the Ch'ing dynasty's obsolete feudalism and corruption. This critical stance toward Dittmar's advocacy of imperialist domination and his patronizing rhetoric of historical progress would explain why Kafka's text satirically exaggerates and parodies the topos of China's historical stagnation. Kafka's thoroughly fictionalized history of the country chronicles not a living heritage that provides the present era with principles for meaningful political action but an endless succession of authoritative yet pitifully ineffective

emperors, dynasties, and conspiracies, interspersed with battles and rebellions that apparently fail to introduce any political change, any new era in China. Progress is impossible because the people's historiographic ignorance transforms the accounts of long-deceased emperors, ancient battles, and ever-recurrent court intrigues into present facticity, whereas contemporary rulers, revolutions, and wars are displaced to remote times that have lost all continuity with the current political situation. History in Kafka's text is not a tradition representing the collective wisdom of the Chinese civilization but a scene of oppressive dogmas and institutions of sociopolitical power whose significations remain forever incomprehensible to the unenlightened common people and even, to a considerable degree, to the helpless narrator himself (Rignall 120–21). The Great Wall, the emperor, ancient military catastrophes present themselves not as knowable facts but as elusive mysteries constituted by a popular discourse that is limited to vague rumors, ill-informed guesswork, pseudoreligious mystifications, and ideologically confused speculations (see also Nicolai 66–68).

For Schlegel, the Great Wall, overwhelming in its architectural monumentality, is "ein Symbol des chinesischen Staates" 'a symbol of the Chinese state' and of the country's—ultimately unsuccessful—politics of seclusion from foreign cultural influence, especially that of the northern Tartars (*Philosophie* 66–67). The edifice is "das Eine große Factum der chinesischen Geschichte, was den Schlüssel derselben enthält.—Eigentl[ich] giebt es sonst keine chinesische Geschichte, weil eben alles in dem chinesischen Zustande ganz stationär ist" 'the one great fact of Chinese history that contains the key thereto.—Actually, there is no Chinese history otherwise, precisely because everything about the Chinese condition is entirely stationary' (*Fragmente* 371).

In Schlegel's view, the wall is a historical document containing a single, clearly decipherable meaning; in Kafka's narrative the edifice is transformed into the ever-elusive object of various inconclusive and partially contradictory theories, all of which in their own ways confirm Schlegel's notion that the wall symbolizes China's immobile society and history. As the narrator suggests, the

commitment of every single builder to participate in an immense community of self-sacrificing citizens fostered throughout the country a renewed sense of political unity and nationalistic pride (290–91). Another reason for the construction—one advanced by a scholar but both architecturally implausible and ideologically dubious—is that the edifice was planned as the foundation of a new Tower of Babel to unify the collective power of the people (291–92; see also Nicolai 26–31; Whitlark 221–23). Finally, the narrator abandons his futile search for rational explanations, rejecting the common justification of the wall as a protection against invading barbarians from the north; for him, these “[u]nschuldige” ‘innocent’ peoples never constituted a real threat to the Chinese, at least not to the inhabitants of the southeastern provinces. Admitting the obvious purposelessness and inefficacy of the edifice, he traces its origins back to a primordial injunction issued by the country’s supreme leadership, whose authority and absolute power rest, however questionably, on mythological arguments: the designing of the wall was sanctified by the “Abglanz der göttlichen Welten” ‘reflection of divine spheres,’ and these commanders, as well as the decision to build the wall, have presumably existed since time immemorial (292–94; Rignall 117; Nicolai 31–39; Whitlark 223–25).

Even more than the leadership, the imperial reign, by far the “allerundeutlichst[e]” ‘vaguest’ of all political institutions in China, defies accurate conceptualization. Even in Peking, clear knowledge about governmental affairs is “eher scheinbar als wirklich” ‘more apparent than real.’ Scholars of constitutional law and history merely pretend to be informed in these matters; and for the less educated citizens, who are rarely affected by any self-doubts, the imperial institution is but a nebulous idea expressed in a few century-old doctrines that are held to be eternally true without really being understood (294–95; see also Nicolai 40–49). In Kafka’s text, then, the insurmountable alienation between the emperor and his subjects is, to be sure, partially the result of actual socio-political and geographical factors: China’s rigid feudalistic hierarchy and vast size, which renders any news from Peking obsolete by the time it reaches the fringes of the empire. To a greater

extent, however, the estrangement is shown to result from the insufficiencies, ambiguities, and distortive obscurities inherent in popular political conceptualizations and ultimately in language generally. Kafka’s text discloses the semidivine aura legitimizing the absolute authority of the imperial institution as little more than the imaginary creation of the people’s blind veneration, the fictive construct of their politically unenlightened ideology and obedient submission to ancient dogmatic traditions.

Not surprisingly, the narrator emphasizes the almost grotesque contradiction between the grandiose image of the “unsterblich[e]” ‘immortal’ imperial institution and the actual existence of the decadent, tired, and utterly human emperors themselves. Forever subject to the transitoriness of history, the rulers, even entire dynasties, are continuously threatened by court intrigues and coups d’état unknown to the common people (295–96; Nicolai 45–48). Here again, Kafka’s narrative preserves and transforms intertextual traces of traditional orientalist discourse. Hegel’s canonical contribution defines the Chinese empire as a realm of theocratic rulership whose patriarchal principle developed into an organized, secular system of state (143). Arguing from a Christian position, however, Schlegel points out that the term *theocratic* is suitable to describe only “[die] äußer[e] Form, oder herkömmlich[e] Urform” ‘the external form, or the traditional first form,’ of Chinese monarchism because this form of government lacks any “innre wahrhaft göttliche Kraft” ‘inner, truly divine power.’ Referring to the Chinese practice of worshiping the ruler as the “Son of Heaven,” whose will is held to be divine, Schlegel emphasizes that “dieses Zeremoniell von verkehrt angewandten religiösen Redensarten” ‘this ceremony of falsely applied religious phrases’ forms “einen großen Kontrast mit der wirklichen Geschichte” ‘a stark contrast to actual history,’ that is, “der darin enthaltenen langen Reihe von schlechten Regierungen, unglücklichen Regenten und beständigen Revolutionen, die größtenteils den Inhalt derselben bilden” ‘the long series of bad governments, hapless rulers, and perpetual revolutions that for the most part constitute its content’ (*Philosophie* 77).

Schlegel's demythification of the Chinese ruler is confirmed and radicalized in Kafka's parable about the imperial message that never reaches its intended recipient at the country's outskirts (296; see also Nicolai 49–58; Whitlark 225–28). At the same time, the passage probably contains intertextual echoes of Dittmar's scathing critique of the ineffectual emperor's estrangement from the sociopolitical concerns of the people, without, however, preserving Dittmar's acknowledgment of revolutionary ambitions spreading among certain progressive citizens. Implicitly rejecting Dittmar's hope that, with the help of the Western powers, the anachronistic Ch'ing dynasty and the old feudal order will soon be abolished, Kafka's text centers on the irresolvable contradictions between traditional, pseudoreligious ritual—the emperor's formal aura of quasi-divine power, the court's architectural splendor, and the wretched subject's endless, worshipful yearning for a spiritual message—and social reality: the dying, powerless monarch and the insurmountable alienation of ruler and commoner. These incongruities are allegorically expressed in the infinite geographical space between the court and the subject at the farthest reaches of the empire, a distance the helpless messenger is unable to overcome even after thousands of years of travel (296). The final sentence about the message—"Du aber sitzt an Deinem Fenster und erträumst sie Dir, wenn der Abend kommt" 'You, however, sit at your window evoking it in your dreams as evening sets in'—makes clear that here, as everywhere in Kafka's story, the "theocratic" authority of the emperor is constituted, given reality, and sustained by the idolizing, deifying discourse of the common people alone. In this sense, the emperor is similar to other patriarchal figures and institutions in the author's oeuvre: the petty family tyrants, elusive judges, and enigmatic castle bureaucrats. Their hierarchical status and oppressive influence, too, are less factual realities than products of their self-sacrificing victims' language of fear, awe, and mythification.

Ironically, the alienation effected by this fictionalizing construction of political power enables the Chinese citizens to attain a certain feeling of social liberation, to lead a morally pure life that is not subject to any "gegenwärtigen Gesetze"

'present law' and that "nur der Weisung und Warnung gehorcht, die aus alten Zeiten zu uns herüberreicht" 'obeys only the guidance and warnings that reach us from ancient times' (298). But actually, for the Chinese, as Kafka's text suggests, any measure of political freedom, however tenuous, is a mere illusion sustained within the boundaries of the political order of imperial China, within the ideological space of the traditional feudalistic and Confucian dogmas that the democratic revolution of 1911–12 tried to overcome.

Dittmar's travel book and Kafka's self-reflective response show that the West's experience of Asian cultures in the twentieth century, despite a commitment to empirical observation and realistic description, is necessarily implicated in the same ideological network that has characterized the history of European writings on the Orient, a network that combines stereotypical topoi with genuine interest in non-Western civilizations. This discursive influence on our cultural consciousness prevails even in our age of satellite reporting and fax machines, a time when we are increasingly willing to understand foreign nations and cultures from their own, rather than our, perspective. That present and past constructions of China are linked intertextually in Western discourse can be seen, for example, in the concluding paragraph of *Time's* cover story on the brutal suppression of the 1989 democratic student protests in the People's Republic:

In the thousands of years spanned by Chinese history, unspeakable atrocities have occurred. Millions have suffered from the machinations of cloistered emperors, empresses and eunuchs; whole cities have been slaughtered by marauding invaders and warlords. Until Sunday [the day after the crackdown began], that all seemed safely in the past. No one quite expected it to happen again. The shock will ease with the passage of weeks. The tremors will be felt for years. (Birnbau and Chua-Eoan 27)

The pessimistic, disillusioned tone of the passage is understandable, considering that it was written immediately after the regime's tanks and gunfire had crushed the student movement's fight for human rights, democracy, and progress. Yet in suggesting that China's history is cyclical and re-

petitive, the paragraph is nonetheless reminiscent of traditional orientalist discourse; it implies that we Western observers can only comprehend the social, political, and human ramifications of contemporary events like the massacre in Tienanmen Square if we recognize that the ideological assumptions, conceptual categories, and rhetorical figures underlying our views are both limited and made possible and interpretable by earlier occidental perceptions of the Orient. The reevaluation of texts like Kafka's and Dittmar's, then, not only attempts a disinterested reconstruction of past cultural meanings but intersects with our present hermeneutical problems of understanding and assessing China's role and responsibilities in world politics.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>All translations from German sources are mine unless otherwise identified. I did, however, consult the Muir and Muir translation of Kafka's "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer."

<sup>2</sup>Gilman's interesting example of this cross-cultural assimilation is Lam Qua, a nineteenth-century painter of numerous portraits of pathological conditions, who "is the best known of the many indigenous artists who accepted the Western mode of representation. This system, together with Western political power, appeared to the mid-nineteenth-century Chinese as more powerful, and therefore preferable, to their own" (61).

<sup>3</sup>My use of *topos* accords with Curtius's influential definition of the term as a rhetorical commonplace that is preserved with remarkable continuity in cultural traditions. Binder also associates the term with the idea that time stands still in China ("Eins gibt" 40). For general discussions of Kafka's rhetoric and narrative tropes, see the excellent studies by Corngold and Koelb. In Koelb's formulation, Kafka's rhetoric refers "to language understood as readable under more than one interpretive convention, as well as to the activity of 'reading' and 'writing' such language" (9–10). This definition could also be applied to Kafka's appropriation of orientalist discourse: "Kafka's writing—'writing' in the sense of 'composing' discourse intended to be read, whether on paper or not—so frequently derives from the careful consideration of other texts that we may regard language itself as the material (the classical rhetorician's *res*) upon which his invention works" (7).

<sup>4</sup>Hsia offers a convenient collection of German philosophical writings on China. For excellent discussions of the changes in Western constructions of China and the Orient generally, see Franke, especially "The Colonial Invasion of China" 66–91; Hsia's "Nachwort" 369–89; Dawson; Günther; and Zhang. Zhang's article is a stimulating application of Saidian notions

of cultural discourse to the concept of China in Western writing (114). Fine interpretations of the image of China in European, especially German, literature can be found in Aurich; Schuster; Rose; and Fuchs-Sumiyoshi. Like Zhang, Fuchs-Sumiyoshi suggests that Said's notion of orientalism also applies to the Western reception of China (3–18, 159). She offers a detailed critique of Said's approach in the context of German literature (3–18). For a discussion of Hegel in relation to Said, see Gasché. I am indebted as well to Montrose's summation of several concerns of the new historicism: its project of examining the ideological, political, and socially productive dimensions of literary works by reinterpreting these works in their interaction with the various discursive formations and nondiscursive institutions of their time; its emphasis on the "textuality of history" constituted by the mediation of past facts and events through society's texts and historiographic discourse; and its self-reflective awareness of interpretation as a product of critics who are as involved in ideology and history as are the texts they try to understand (6–8). See also Howard's and Pechter's helpful analyses and Kaes's thoughtful exploration of new-historicist arguments for German studies.

<sup>5</sup>For useful philological and factual discussions of Dittmar's book and its likely influence on Kafka, see Binder, *Kafka-Kommentar* 218–21, and Meng 62–64, 77–82. Meng's work, the first comprehensive study of Kafka's appropriation of both Chinese literature and Western writings on the country, is supplemented by an interesting survey of Kafka's reception in China and Taiwan.

<sup>6</sup>Interpretations of Kafka's story that have influenced my own are those by Emrich (187–204); Beicken (312–15); Goodden; Kopper; and, especially, Rignall. My examination of the various historiographic, narrative, and interpretive problems depicted in Kafka's text is similar to Rignall's excellent analysis of "the relationships between history and fiction, words and deeds, writing and truth" in Kafka's text (114). For other pertinent treatments of the concept of history, see Emrich 199–204; Keller 150–58; and Binder, "Eins gibt" 39–40. Nicolai gives a careful close reading of "Constructing the Great Wall of China" in the context of Kafka's other works. He briefly situates the story in a historical background different from mine: the Ts'in period, from 221 to 206 BC, when the historical wall was first begun; the Han period, 202 BC to AD 220; and the Ming dynasty, 1368 to 1644 (Nicolai 20–21). Whitlark's interesting study of Kafka's place in orientalism differs from mine in that Whitlark uses a post-Jungian approach with special emphasis on Kafka's affinity with Taoism (see esp. 11–14, 95–112, and 218–30).

<sup>7</sup>Kafka's continued interest in China's culture is well documented for the years after 1912; as late as November 1923 the author asked his publishing company, Kurt Wolff, to send him two books on the country (*Briefe* 467; Meng 25–47).

<sup>8</sup>Rignall also suggests that Kafka's story should be read in the context of these and other skeptical statements on the failures of progress and traditional historiography. Dating from 1917, these passages were possibly written "in response to the apparent disintegration of European civilization in a year of continuing war and erupting revolution, or in response to the crises in [Kafka's] own physical and emotional life . . ." (112).

Rignall convincingly returns Kafka's text to a historical context that is largely absent from formalist discussions like Goodden's and Kopper's. More extensively, Robertson takes account of the political and historical dimensions of "Constructing the Chinese Wall." He sees the story as "a sustained meditation on the sources of social cohesion, with particular reference to the history of the Jews" (175–76). While his reading is illuminating in the context of the author's interest in Judaism, I would stress that for Kafka "China" is not merely a metaphor, as Robertson implies that it is, but a reference to the actual Asian country, however mediated this designation is by Western discourse and Kafka's poetic language. See, similarly, Hoffmann 47–62, especially 49: "Das chinesische Modell eignet sich offensichtlich zur Darstellung der jüdischen Vergangenheit."

<sup>9</sup>I am grateful to Hartmut Binder for kindly providing me with a copy of Dittmar's book and to Jürgen Born for additional information. I also wish to thank Andrew J. Dunar, Peter Meister, and Daniel Schenker for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

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