

An Enlightened Country: The East viewed by Voltaire in The Princess of Babylon

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Abstract. The eighteenth century marked the advent of a true Chinese exoticism, its growing interest in the search for universal values characterized the spirit and approach of the Enlightenment that swept France. Philosophers began to find foreign models to remedy this ailing country and in Voltaire's eyes, China could be an ideal example. This study analyzes the image of China from the pen of Voltaire, mainly in *The Princess of Babylon* and also in his other works as a complement. It highlights Voltaire's great interest in Chinese politics, culture and civilization. The return to the legendary and authentic China that Voltaire describes includes a new conception of history, a morality without religious imperatives, a harmonious vision of the state that he calls enlightened despotism.

Keywords: the image of China, Voltaire, the Enlightenment, *The Princess of Babylon*, enlightened despotism

1. Introduction

Today, as China and France celebrate the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic relations, developed China intrigues and fascinates the world more than ever. The passion of the French for the "East Kingdom", which is illustrated in many fields, has indeed crossed the centuries, especially in literature and philosophy in the eighteenth century.

During the Enlightenment, France encountered several problems that did not fail to agitate the critical thinking of philosophers. All of them are looking for a model that could contribute to the reconstruction of the Western world, which had then demonstrated several shortcomings.

France is indeed experiencing religious and political upheavals. On the one hand, the religious intolerance that was revived following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 caused philosophical writers to react very early on. France had already suffered from great religious quarrels since the sixteenth century, the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572 is a striking example of this dark period. On the other hand, Enlightenment thought came up against the absolutism of the state framework. The Enlightenment movement is characterized by its commitment against religious, moral, and political oppression, and tends towards a desire for progress by combating the superstition, obscurantism, arbitrariness, and irrationality that dominated previous centuries. François Fénelon, a French writer and man of the Church, fiercely criticized this type of power then in the hands of Louis XIV: "Absolute power makes as many slaves as it has subjects". Feudal autocracy in France in the eighteenth century reached its peak and then began to decline. Social reform became a central subject, French thinkers wanted to build a more rational, more tolerant and more liberal society.

Just as philosophers strove to find a model that could satisfy a France that had broken down of its institutions, among the ephemeral models that reached them, that of China, transmitted from the other side of the world by Jesuit missionaries, awakened their minds and their interest. This distant empire is portrayed as a land of religious tolerance ruled by a kind and lenient emperor towards his subjects. "The best remedy for all the ills from which the kingdom suffered would be to inoculate it with something of the Chinese spirit", this is what Henri Léonard Jean Baptiste Bertin, Minister of Finance under Louis XV, conceived of this distant land that is China, rediscovered thanks to the writings disseminated by missionaries as early as the seventeenth century.

2. Contacts between China and France at the Time

We can identify two key periods that allow us to grasp the influence of China in France during this period. The first occurred during the departure of the "King's Mathematicians" in 1685, a period when the constitution of the French monarchy was criticized

following the intransigence of the Sun King, and religious intolerance following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes during the same year. To this end, Louis XIV asked for tolerance from the Emperor of China, even though he did not even show it to his own subjects. The second occurred after 1750, when philosophers sought to build a better political and moral foundation for their country [7].

As for literature, the first contact between French writers and Chinese culture began with the spread of the Christian religion in China during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: at the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), missionaries built a bridge between the Western and Eastern worlds by bringing Christian culture and bringing back Confucian culture. It is in this context that French writers have come into contact with Chinese culture. This new culture surprised French writers by offering them new ways of understanding the world. As far as works on the relations between French writers and China are concerned, there are two keys: *The Edifying and Curious Letters* (1702-1776) and *The Description of China and Chinese Tartary* (1735), which are considered to be the apogee of the Jesuits' literary reflection on China.

The eighteenth century was a new era of growth for Sino-French culture. There is a kind of "madness for things from China – including philosophy – that swept through Europe and especially France in the eighteenth century". It was a time in which French writers discovered China as a whole. China is no longer a perplexing image, but has a multiple existence [1].

3. Voltaire and China

As the French writers, by their wisdom, experience and thought, vividly described the joy and sadness of their contact with Chinese culture. The interpretation of China appeared in the works of the great French writers and philosophers, such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, etc. Among them, we distinguish two categories, one, represented by Voltaire, displays his appreciation for this country of the East; the other, represented by Montesquieu, reserves his criticism of China. These are then the sinophiles and the sinophobes.

3.1. Voltaire: His First Contact with China and the Formation of His Ideas

Voltaire hardly travelled, except in Holland, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. He has never been to China. The sources of his information are known. They are the only ones that were available at the time. They come to him from the Jesuit fathers and their missionaries in China. He therefore prefers to focus his fantasies on an exemplary distant culture and on an unparalleled mode of government.

When Voltaire entered the College Louis le Grand in Paris in 1704 at the age of 10, China gradually became part of scholarly dialogue. No informed man of the eighteenth century could be ignorant of the "Celestial Empire" and Voltaire was no exception. The teaching he received was influenced by the Jesuits' struggle in China and consequently played on his interest in this distant land. Voltaire discovered the "Middle Kingdom", and met his first Chinese through the teaching and histories of the Jesuits. In 1736, the pirated edition of Father Du Halde's *Description of China* was published in The Hague. It is this edition that Voltaire obtains. His interest in China, which developed around 1740, appeared at a time when his gaze momentarily lost interest in the English model. He gradually formed his political and religious conceptions, and actively sought to introduce the great scholarly circles.

As the pivot of the Enlightenment movement, his polemical pen questioned and even attacked the dogmas of the Christian religion, superstition, fanaticism and absolute monarchy. This philosopher was above all a fervent defender of tolerance and therefore condemned the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In the political field, Voltaire wanted his country to have a temperate or strong monarchy that respected civil liberties, excluded arbitrariness and listened to the advice of enlightened men, and a new name appeared, that of "enlightened despotism".

3.2. His Works Concerning China

Voltaire did not particularly write any works on China, but his views on China are scattered throughout his works: plays, novels, correspondence, etc. China is never far away in Voltaire's reflections as it is present in the majority of his books, occupying an important space in one of the masterpieces of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* published in 1756, of which three chapters are devoted to China: *About the China, the religion of China, China in the 17th and early 18th centuries*. This book opens with a long apology for China, which he presents as the matrix of civilization. In addition, there is the last chapter of the *Century of Louis XIV - Dispute over Chinese ceremonies* (1751), the theater *The orphan of China* (1755) whose idea came from the Chinese tragedy *The Zhao family's orphan* translated by Fr. de Prémare, articles such as *China in the Questions about the encyclopedia* (1770) and *China in Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), the complete work which remained until the nineteenth century the most serious sum of sinological knowledge *Description geographical, historical, chronological, political and physical of the empire of China and Chinese Tartary* (1735), the correspondence *Chinese, Indian and Tartar letters to Monsieur Paw by a Benedictine* (1776), and also the philosophical tale *The Princess of Babylon* (1768).

The philosopher read a great deal about this empire, including Father Louis Lecomte's controversial work, *A Jesuit in Beijing*, and Father Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's compilation, *the Description of China*. He also did not hesitate to read works hostile to the

Jesuits in China, such as the *Tratados historicos, politicos, ethicos, y religiosos de la monarchia de China* by the Dominican Domingo Fernandez Navarette, published in 1676. Voltaire admired this distant civilization and saw it as a political and spiritual model for France. This empire thus became Voltaire's philosophical weapon to promote his ideas [4].

4. Voltaire's Global View of China

China appears in many of Voltaire's works. Here the author selects three of the most important works, in which Voltaire frequently evaluates and describes the image of China, from which we can first grasp his global view of China.

4.1. In *Philosophical Letters*

Already in 1734, he exalted the Chinese model in his *Philosophical Letters* with a naivety and credulity surprising on his part:

I learn that for a hundred years the Chinese have been in this custom. It is a great prejudice to set the example of a nation which is considered to be the wisest and best policed in the universe. It is true that the Chinese do it in a different way; they make no incision; they make the smallpox catch through the nose like powdered tobacco.

Voltaire's recourse to legitimate China entailed a new conception of history, a morality without religious imperatives, a harmonious vision of the state, and the principles of a healthy economy. It is at the heart of his vision of human becoming. He heaps praise on China and its people: "wonderfully civilized," "a paternal government," "pious and tolerant magistrates," "an admirable body of laws, and philosophers of sublime wisdom". This good system rests in China on an admirable constitution, if not the best ever created:

The constitution of their empire is indeed the best in the world; the only one that is entirely based on paternal power; the only one in which a provincial governor is punished, when on leaving office he has not received the acclamations of the people; the only one that has instituted prizes for virtue, while everywhere else the laws limit themselves to punishing crime; the only one that has caused its conquerors to adopt its laws, while we are still subject to the customs of the Burgundians, the Franks, and the Goths, who have subdued us.

4.2. In the Century of Louis XIV

In this work, Voltaire argues that although China is relatively backward in science and technology, its police and morals are advanced in the world. At the same time, he also emphasizes the superiority of morality and police over science:

Progress in the sciences is the work of time and of the boldness of the mind. But morality and police, in the sense of politics, being easier to understand than the sciences, and having been perfected at home when the other arts were not yet perfected, it has happened that the Chinese, who have remained for more than two thousand years at all the terms to which they had arrived, have remained mediocre in the sciences, and the first people of the earth in morality and in the police as the oldest.

4.3. In *Essay on Manners*

In his *Essay on Manners*, Voltaire expresses the same opinion: "In the eighteenth century, their science is far behind, and they are as bad physicists as we were two hundred years ago, and as the Greeks and Romans were, but they have perfected morality, which is the first of the sciences". Europe's advance is therefore recent, and it is very partial. Voltaire likes to remind us that:

Their vast and populous empire was already governed like a family of which the monarch was the father... when we were wandering in small numbers in the forest of the Ardennes. Their religion was simple, wise, august, free from all superstition and barbarism, when we did not even have Teutates, to whom the Druids sacrificed the children of our ancestors in great wicker mannas.

In this work, he is particularly interested in three aspects of China admired in the works of the Jesuits: its political system and its constitution, Chinese philosophy and especially Confucianism, and finally the talents of the Chinese in the field of the arts. In Voltaire's eyes, the Chinese government was ideal. He points out that the aristocratic order does not exist in China, that civil servants are chosen each year in national competitions, and that all social classes enjoy the opportunity to participate in the governance of the country [9].

Voltaire then appreciated the philosophy of Confucianism, and deep down, it was because it was not a Christian nation. For him, Confucianism constitutes "a kind of rationalist religion". Thus, in the introduction to his *Essay on Manners*, Voltaire states:

Never was the religion of emperors and tribunals disgraced by impostures, never disturbed by the quarrels of the priesthood and the empire, never laden with absurd innovations, which fight each other with arguments as absurd as themselves, and whose madness, led by factious people, has at last put the dagger in the hands of fanatics. It is in this above all that the Chinese prevail over all the nations of the universe.

Finally, sensitive to luxury and aesthetic values and open to fashion, Voltaire noted the talents of the Chinese in the field of art. As the Jesuits did in their letters, he took the abilities of this people to produce porcelain and organize gardens as tangible signs of "Chinese superiority" [6].

5. The Image of China in the Princess of Babylon

The Princess of Babylon, a lesser-known story that has the mixed characteristics of a marvellous tale and a philosophical tale, confirms, like so many of his other tales, Voltaire's interest in the Orient.

5.1. Introduction of the Princess of Babylon

The Princess of Babylon is a philosophical tale written by Voltaire in 1768. The tale features two lovers: Amazan, the shepherd, and Formosante, the princess of Babylon. As in *Candide*, the separated lovers are looking for each other in Asia and Europe. The story begins at the fabulous court of ancient Babylon; the Belus monarch wishes to find a husband worthy of his daughter, the beautiful Formosante. According to an oracle, the lucky one must meet certain requirements. A young stranger Amazan passes all the trials, but he quickly leaves the court after receiving the news of his father's death. Belus consults the oracle a second time to learn that Formosante must travel the world in order to find his love. The princess begins her quest in the company of the phoenix left behind by Amazan. They first arrive in the land of the Gangarids, the kingdom of Amazan where equality, self-sufficiency and natural religion reign. Having not found Amazan, they continued on the road through a large number of real countries: China, Scythia (the Germanic and Slavic countries), the Cimmerian Empire (Russia), Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden), the land of the Sarmatians, Germania, Batavia (the Netherlands), Albion, Dalmatia, Italy, France and Betica (Spain). This journey in finally has a happy ending.

Throughout this quest for love, using the figure of comparison extensively, Voltaire made many observations on the political, religious, social and cultural aspects of these countries. By praising certain places and criticizing others, he seeks solutions to France's problems and, more broadly, to the functioning of society. China, which was the first real destination for this journey around the world, became a model country, as was the case in several of Voltaire's philosophical writings, thanks to qualities such as wisdom, justice and politeness that its emperor testified, as well as the religious tolerance and sense of morality that characterized the entire society. From this point of view, this tale is fully in line with the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

5.2. China's Image from Different Aspects

The part devoted to China in this account, in fact, is not long, but it is very rich in ideas that will be developed later in the book. Therefore, it can be used as a typical object for research and analysis. The author studies the work in many aspects, such as the description of the environment, the image of the characters, the speech, etc., and mainly analyzes the image of China in this tale from five aspects: the capital, the emperor, justice, religion and culture.

5.2.1. The Chinese Capital: Symbol of the Admirable Country

Cambalu (Peking), the capital of the empire of China, is the first and also the only Chinese city introduced in this tale. For Voltaire, the capital is a place that is highly revealing of the relationships that govern a country. In most of the countries visited, the narrator does not specify the names of the cities visited, but the presence of royal figures and his remarks on the political, economic, religious and social aspects of these countries lead us to presume that they are the capitals. As for the other countries, including China, the cities visited are well indicated.

With the arrival of Formosante, the beginning of the episode in China also announces his first impression of that country: "It was a city larger than Babylon, and of a very different kind of magnificence. These new objects, these new customs, would have amused Formosante, if she could have been occupied with anything other than Amazan". In two sentences, using qualifying words and comparison, the narrator evokes a sense of admiration for China. If the point of reference here is Babylon, an incomparable place, the words "different", "new", "magnificence", "amused" serve to suggest a reality that is as striking for the character as for the reader. As in any journey, the desire to discover "new objects" and "new customs" is what should motivate every traveller and what becomes the object of representation. Voltaire, with his understanding of China, invents here a ritual, rich, welcoming and civilized country. His appreciation for China was felt from the very beginning.

The capital can be the mirror and a concentrate of what can be said about a country. For Rousseau, the countryside embodies the state of nature to which he aspires; the big city, and especially Paris, is the symbol of corruption, superfluous luxury, depravity and lies. Voltaire, on the other hand, considered the capital as the place of progress, that of the political and cultural institutions that should contribute to it. When it comes to the choice of capital in the China episode, there is probably another more specific reason, as there is a big gap between the Chinese capital and the provinces (especially those in the south). While Beijing is home to royal power and civilized and polite mandarins, southern China, like Canton Province, is a place open to international trade. Chinese traders in this region are often portrayed negatively in travellers' accounts [5]. For the sake of his argument, Voltaire dismisses this type of image in order to present China as an exemplary country in several areas.

5.2.2. *The Emperor: Political Symbol of Enlightened Despotism*

From the image of the capital, the narrator immediately moves on to the image of the emperor of China:

As soon as the emperor of China heard that the princess of Babylon was at a gate of the city, he sent her four thousand mandarins in ceremonial robes, all of whom prostrated themselves before her, and each presented her with a compliment written in letters of gold on a sheet of purple silk.

The emperor was the first Chinese person with whom the traveller came into contact. In other countries visited, Voltaire painted a more or less abstract and collective image of their inhabitants, captured in their political organization and not as individuals. This range of conditions allows us to paint a broad picture of social mores in various countries. In the Chinese episode, however, the figure of the emperor symbolizes not only the hospitality and politeness that should characterize any royal personage, here we see a sharp criticism of absolute monarchs in Europe. It addresses several issues relating to the organization, functioning, governance and political mores of China. And then, the narrator sums up the emperor's main traits as follows: "He was the most just, the most polite and the wisest monarch on earth". The superlative that is part of Voltaire's argumentative style highlights his thought through exaggeration and amplification. All the elements of this portrait, such as the qualities of "justice", "politeness" and "wisdom", set up this monarch as a true model that real kings must imitate.

In addition, the words "as soon as" and "dispatched" emphasize his hospitality and politeness to the stranger, a virtue confirmed by the words "polite" and "politeness" that recur several times in this episode. Formosante addressed the Emperor: "But, sir," she continued, "how, why could he leave so abruptly a Court so polite as yours, in which it seems to me that one would like to spend one's life?". The article on royal politeness in his *Philosophical Dictionary* confirms that this was an important question for Voltaire. The emperor's politeness is a sign of his open mind, of his willingness to embrace the diversity of peoples and customs [3]. It should be noted that this image is not invented. Erkang Feng's work tells the story of a visit by a Portuguese diplomat to China that testifies to this hospitality of Emperor Yong Zheng, the original figure of the emperor of China in this tale.

This meeting of the stranger with the emperor then relates the relations that the latter maintained with his subjects. The mandarins' solidarity with the king shows that Voltaire, like other philosophers of the Enlightenment, wanted to see the country as a family and the king as the father. China, in his eyes, achieves this model perfectly. In his *Essay on Morals*, the philosopher has already drawn this parallel:

The respect of children for their fathers is the foundation of the Chinese government. Paternal authority is never weakened. The learned mandarins are regarded as the fathers of cities and provinces, and the king as the father of the empire. This idea, rooted in the hearts, forms a family of this immense State.

Once again, the structure of China and the place of the emperor described by Voltaire in his tale are not invented. In the Chinese language, the term for the country is "guo-jia" which means: country-family. The emperor is called "tian-zi", which means "son of heaven", and the citizen "zi-min", which means "citizen and son". Emperor Kang Xi, for example, demonstrated his respect for his subjects and conformed to the idea of generous love demanded by Confucianism, by abolishing land taxes many times over and lowering penalties [8].

The scene of the emperor's reception of Formosante is also an opportunity for Voltaire to give as an example the structure of the government of China, with its six tribunals formed by the mandarins of the robe who obtained their position after passing a national examination. This is far from the French reality. Hereditary nobility does not exist in China, only the merit of someone is recognized. The governance of the state ensured by the learned mandarins guarantees a just government and wise political decisions. In the eyes of Voltaire and most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, China was an example of the state based on reason, as shown by Hubert Baysson in his work *The Idea of the Stranger among the Philosophers of the Enlightenment*: "For the Enlightenment, China embodies a society organized according to the perfect canons of rationality, and moreover under the direction of scholars and philosophers".

Then, by telling the reader of his tale that it "was the emperor of China who first ploughed a small field with his imperial hands, to make agriculture respectable to his people", Voltaire insists in his fiction on the importance that each dynasty attached to agriculture. In his *Essay on Manners*, Voltaire examined, in praise of China's policy in this field, as well as its concern for economic development in general: the construction of roads, canals, factories, etc. The example of China is therefore very interesting for France [2]. The philosopher believes that progress comes through economic advancement, encouraged by a wise king. But at the same time, this ploughing king represents a perfect alliance between man and nature that the ideal economy does not destroy: the "imperial hands" of the "son of heaven" are close to the "field", to the "earth".

It can be concluded that, in Voltaire's eyes, the image of the wise, polite, hard-working, tolerant, and hospitable emperor is a kind of "enlightened despotism" or "enlightened absolutism" proposed by this philosopher, and also the ideal image of the government and political system in China.

5.2.3. *Justice: The Best Legal System Linked to Morality*

After sketching the image of the emperor working in the field, Voltaire immediately moves on to comment on his decisive influence on the country's judicial system, using superlatives and comparisons as usual: "The emperor of China is the first to establish prizes for virtue. The laws, everywhere else, were shamefully limited to punishing crimes". This way of doing things in China is based on the same vision of the family that is the basis of politics. The emperor acted as a good father to his children, hence the perfection

of the system, which is further confirmed in the *Essay on Manners* and the *Philosophical Dictionary*: “What the Chinese have best known, the most cultivated, the most perfected, is morality and laws”. In Voltaire’s eyes, a natural link between morality and law is a quality unique to China: “In other countries the laws punish crime: in China they do more, they reward virtue. The mandarin is obliged to warn the emperor of this; and the emperor sends a mark of honor to him who has so well deserved it”.

5.2.4. Religion: A Satire of Catholicism and Religious Tolerance in China

Thus, in a natural way, the question of religion completes, under the pen of the storyteller, that of justice treated in relation to morality. The episode of the meeting is for him an opportunity to recall the expulsion of the Jesuits by Emperor Yong Zheng:

This Emperor had just driven from his dominions a troop of foreign Bonzes who had come from the depths of the West, in the foolish hope of forcing all China to think as they did, and who, under the pretext of proclaiming truths, had already acquired riches and honors. He had told them, as he drove them away, these own words, recorded in the annals of the Empire.

He further mentions what the emperor said to the Jesuits, which are derived from the historical sources of the missionaries in China at that time:

“You could do as much harm here as you have done elsewhere: you have come to preach dogmas of intolerance to the most tolerant nation on earth. I send you away so that I may never be forced to punish you. You will be conducted honorably to my frontiers; you will be provided with everything to return to the limits of the hemisphere from which you started. Go in peace if you can be at peace; and don't come back.”

The episode still emphasizes the politeness and wisdom that should characterize any king, but its central theme is the abuses and hypocrisy of the Roman Church. The Jesuits serve Voltaire in his tales as material for the criticism of the earthly dimension of the Catholic religion, the criticism aimed at “its dogmas, its hierarchy, its discipline and its practices”. A whole lexical field is put at the service of the virulent condemnation of “a troop of foreign monks”: “honorably”, “forced”, “foolish”, “under pretext”, “had already acquired wealth and honours”.

By giving the floor to the Chinese emperor who explains his gesture, the storyteller raises through fiction yet another theme that is dear to him, namely the question of Europe’s intolerance, that of its religious ethnocentrism. The Jesuits’ fault consisted in “preaching dogmas of intolerance to the most tolerant nation on earth.” The emperor is here giving a lesson in tolerance to Europe. His “I send you away so that I will never be forced to punish you” is a counterpart to this other use of the word “force”: “to force all of China to think like them”. The passive form underlines the fact that the decision to expel the Jesuits was frustrating for the emperor, but in China, prevention was necessary so as not to punish. Everything confirms, once again, that this literary image of the tolerant emperor corresponds to historical reality: the Chinese emperor did not impose a specific religious belief on his people. Although Confucianism was widely adopted by scholars and philosophers at the time, the people had the right to adhere to other beliefs.

Several of Voltaire’s works forge this image of a tolerant China. For example, in the chapter “About the China” of his *Essay on Manners*, the philosopher praises the open attitude that characterizes it: “These sects are tolerated in China for the use of the vulgar, as coarse food made to feed them”. Moreover, according to Voltaire, the Confucianism of the Chinese literati is itself a very accommodating religion. Voltaire sums up the “deist” principle of Confucianism in his *Philosophical Dictionary* as follows: “What has been the religion of all honest people in China for so many centuries? It is this: Worship heaven, and be just. No emperor has had any other.”

As China is not a Christian nation, it has always ignored religious quarrels, conflicts between church and state, sectarian hatreds, and the crimes of fanaticism. On the other hand, she is deist and tolerant of religion. For Voltaire, it is in this above all that the Chinese prevail over all the nations of the universe. This ideal China, perceived through this tale, is the perfect antithesis of Christian France of the eighteenth century.

5.2.5. Culture: A Country Rich in Culture and Wisdom of Its People

In *The Princess of Babylon*, cultural and literary life does not occupy as much space as the other areas dealt with above. But we must not neglect Voltaire’s praise of this aspect of China, and especially of the high regard in which culture was held there. Questioned by Formosante about the fate of his beloved, the emperor of China praised Amazan who said a lot about the qualities that the cultured monarch appreciated in a human being: “None of my favorites has more wit than he, no mandarin of the robe has more extensive knowledge”. He therefore compares Amazan to his civilian mandarins, the intelligentsia that is recruited. This shows the importance that Voltaire also attaches to culture which, more than any other field, must be based on merit and talent. Historiographers and court poets, the mandarins of the robe were responsible for compiling the “annals of the empire”, which were historical writings written on each Chinese dynasty, four thousand mandarins presented Formosante with “each a compliment”. Voltaire’s hyperbole highlights the extent of the intellectual potential and cultural richness that the court fostered. It is also the embodiment of China’s great and deep culture and the wisdom of the Chinese nation, which has a fairly long history.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of these criteria of appreciation and by selecting his information, Voltaire managed to maintain in his works, in good faith, the mythical image of the exemplary, positive, rational, deistic, pragmatic country, whose religion was reduced to a morality of the public good. The polemical use of the Chinese model, which is accentuated by the exasperation of the fight against the infamous, could lead one to believe that it is a simple pretext or a kind of foil in a simplistic vision of the clash of cultures. His admiration for China is not reducible to a pure tactic. It is based on a solid conviction, nourished by an abundance of information. In the depths of this ideal China between fiction and reality, there is an aspiration to rebuild one's country or even the Western world, like the other pioneers of the Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Voltaire's model is not flawless, and it is more questioned. Whether it is indeed an authentic intellectual delight in which his political, economic and social dreams are condensed by a phantasmatic process that resembles a utopian projection, the only proof of this is the isolation to which this attitude condemns him among his philosophical friends. For example, Montesquieu, as we mentioned earlier, thinks that China's system is based solely on the stick.

An old country, China is also the pet of an old philosopher. The allusions to the chimeras of the philosophers, to the taste for the marvellous, all this is part of an imaginary that the narrow rationalist harshly condemns rather than trying to understand and explain it. It is up to us to do better, based on a different perception of the Age of Enlightenment, its innumerable contradictions, and the profound complexity of Voltaire's thought.

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