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From Egypt to China: Fantasizing the survival of hieroglyphic writing in the age of Enlightenment

JEAN WINAND
University of Liege

The Renaissance period, synonymous with the rediscovery of classical, Greek and Latin authors, was also marked by an extraordinary openness to new horizons. While American civilizations, primarily the Mayans and Incas, were not given much consideration by Europeans, Ancient Egyptian and Chinese civilizations were widely discussed¹. However, while knowledge of Egypt was mainly based on testimonies from classical authors and monuments in Europe², knowledge of China was constantly fed by direct informants, led by the Members of the Society of Jesus, who became very active in the second half of the 16th century³.

The discovery of ancient and refined cultures acutely raised the question of Europe's place in the world and, as a ripple effect, that of the primacy of the Bible as the single source of interpretation⁴. Regarding Ancient Egypt,

1. Regarding Egyptomania and the interest in Chinoiserie, see David Porter, "Writing China: Legitimacy and Representation 1606-1773", *Comparative Literature Studies*, 33-1, 1996, p. 98-122.

2. See Jean Winand, "When Classical authors encountered Egyptian Epigraphy", in Vanessa Davies & Dimitri Laboury (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Egyptian Epigraphy and Palaeography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 163-175.

3. Regarding the pioneering work of Matteo Ricci and his successors, see David Mungello, *Curious land: Jesuit accommodation and the origins of Sinology*, Stuttgart, F. Steiner, 1985; Jean-Pierre Duteil, *Le Mandat du ciel. Le rôle des jésuites en Chine*, Paris, Éditions Arguments, 1994 ; Yu Liu, "The Intrigue of Paradigmatic Similarity: Leibniz and China", *Comparative Civilizations Review*, 77, 2017, p. 34-35.

4. See Thijs Weststeijn, "Memory and self-presentation: Egyptian antiquities seen through the eyes of antiquarians", in Miguel John Versluys, Kristine Bülow Clausen, Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi (eds.), *The Iseum Campense from the Roman Empire to the Modern Age. Temple – Monument – Lieu de mémoire and aristocrats in 17th century*, Rome, Edizioni Quasar, 2018, p. 306.

Father Athanasius Kircher attempted to incorporate Pharaonic civilization into Christian history⁵. With much ingenuity, he managed – or so he thought – to demonstrate that Ancient Egypt had preserved significant traces of the Adamic revelation, and that these teachings, passed down by Hermes Trismegistus, were noted down by priests using a specially designed writing system – hieroglyphs – to keep ignorant crowds at bay. These teachings were then passed down to Greek philosophers, including Plato and Pythagoras, who supposedly visited Egyptian temples to perfect their intellectual training⁶. For systemic reasons, Kircher applied the idea that a primitive theology, or *prisca theologia*, had existed among all peoples on earth – sometimes without them knowing – after the episode of the Tower of Babel, and the confusion of tongues. This included China, where he hoped to be sent. In *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-1655), and later in *China illustrata* (1667), he tried to find a link with Egypt based on the supposed existence of common customs and beliefs, as well as similarities he thought he perceived between the two writing systems.

This is how Chinese writing became a topic of discussion for over a century, mainly in France, England, and Germany. In this paper, we will examine three key research areas which influence one another: the search for a universal writing system (or even language), the world history of writing, and the relationship between hieroglyphs and Chinese writing.

THE SEARCH FOR A UNIVERSAL WRITING SYSTEM

In the late 17th century, Chinese writing appeared to have all the necessary characteristics to establish a universal writing system, also known as pasigraphy. Following the first reports from the missionaries, the high stability of Chinese writing – as evidenced by its antiquity – captured people’s attention, but above all, it transcended the linguistic boundaries of Chinese speakers since it could be understood by people from across Asia who spoke different languages – a point consistently reaffirmed during the 18th century⁷. Some people estimated that Chinese

5. Regarding the political instrumentalization of Egypt during the Renaissance period, see Nicholas Popper, “An Ocean of Lies: The Problem of Historical Evidence in the Sixteenth Century”, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 74, 2011, p. 375-400.

6. See Jean Winand, “La réception de l’Antiquité classique”, in Gaëlle Chantraine et Jean Winand (eds.), *Les Hiéroglyphes en Europe avant Champollion. Depuis l’Antiquité classique jusqu’à l’Expédition d’Égypte*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2022, p. 37-57.

7. See Viviane Alleton, “L’oubli de la langue et l’‘invention’ de l’écriture chinoise en Europe”, *Études Chinoises, Association française d’études chinoises*, 13, 1994, p. 272-273. See also David Porter, “Writing China”, *art. cit.*, p. 105.

writing came close to what Wilkins called *real characters*, in other words, a graphic system organised according to the principles of taxonomy as developed by Aristotle. From this perspective, it appeared to be a more developed version of hieroglyphs. The link between Egyptian hieroglyphs and universal writing had already been clearly stated by Francis Bacon as early as 1605⁸.

On this basis, elaborating upon Kircher's writings, John Wilkins included Chinese characters in his proposal to create a universal writing system that transcended all phonetic realisations, and which could facilitate communication between people through a logical progression of symbols⁹. A universal writing system had to be ancient, simple, modest, concise and have strength and vitality¹⁰. The supposed one-to-one correspondence between symbols and meaning outside of all speech acts appeared to bring Chinese writing closer to this ideal¹¹. In contrast, Wilkins did not have a high opinion of hieroglyphs, which he briefly described as an invention that should be placed in the same category as the Maya script¹².

Gottfried Leibniz, a scholar dedicated to universal language projects, also took a close interest in Chinese language¹³, encouraged in this, among others, by Father Bouvet, with whom he corresponded regularly between 1697 and 1707. In particular, the latter had studied very old texts written by the legendary Fu Hsi, whom he likened to Hermes Trismegistus, Enoch and Zoroaster. Upon learning that Leibniz studied differential calculus, he told him about remarkable similarities with the

8. See Cordula Neis, "European conceptions of 'exotic' writing systems in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries", *Language & History*, 61/1-2, 2018, p. 48.

9. John Wilkins, *Essay towards a real character, and a philosophical language*, London, Royal Society, 1668; see Cordula Neis, "European conceptions of 'exotic' writing systems", art. cit., p. 48-49.

10. See Rachel Ramsey, "China and the Ideal of Order in John Webb's *An Historical Essay...*", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62, 2001, p. 483-503. After Wilkins, the Royal Society banished all forms of rhetoric as a corrupt form which prevented people from attaining the naked truth.

11. John Wilkins, *Essay towards a real character*, op. cit., p. 13.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

13. Leibniz's library contained almost everything there was to know about China (see David Porter, "Writing China", art. cit., especially p. 106). Many viewed him as the only major philosopher at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries to argue that China's spiritual doctrine was compatible with that of the Bible (Roger Ariew, "G.W. Leibniz, Life and Works", in Nicholas Jolley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 18-42).

composition of hexagrams he encountered in the most ancient texts of Chinese literature¹⁴.

Like Kircher, Father Joseph Prémare ardently defended the belief that Chinese writing was absolute writing, which he conveyed in his *Notitia linguae sinicae*, published in 1720. However, while he strongly believed in some mythical way in the proto-Christian origin of Chinese symbols, he believed that it would be impossible to uncover the secret of the oldest Chinese characters without drawing on Christian faith¹⁵. He reiterated and developed Kircher's ideas on the predominance of *prisca theologia* in his attempt to explain the history of the world. His works thus reflected a theory of hieroglyphic writing widely in vogue at the time, the profound meaning of which was intended to remain hidden from ordinary people¹⁶.

EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS, CHINESE CHARACTERS, AND THE WORLD HISTORY OF WRITING

In the 18th century, Egyptian and Chinese scriptures were set back in a general history of writing¹⁷. As early as 1719, Nicolas Fréret expressed a theory that widely prevailed throughout the 18th century, which could be described as teleological insofar as the alphabet was infallibly its

14. See David Porter, "Writing China", *art. cit.*, p. 107; David Mungello, *Curious Land, op. cit.*, p. 67-68. Leibnitz' ideas on China are discussed for the last time in the *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois*, published in year of his death, in 1716 (see section IV, § LXVIII. In his study of the Chinese script, Leibniz is also much indebted to Webb's influential work).

15. Prémare's manuscript, addressed to Étienne Fourmont, remained relatively unknown until Rémusat used it in his own works from 1815 onwards. See Viviane Alleton, "L'oubli de la langue", *art. cit.*, p. 262 ; Cristiano Mahaut de Barros Barreto, "Calvis Sinica: a short history of the long battle for the Chinese writing system in the West between the XVI^e and XIX^e centuries", *Alfa*, 61, 2017, p. 208-210.

16. This theory dates back to the Classical era and partly reflects the status of hieroglyphs as practised during the Greco-Roman period (Jean Winand, "When Classical authors encountered Egyptian Epigraphy", *art. cit.*).

17. In 1669, two years after Kircher published his work *China illustrata*, John Webb published *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language*, London, N. Brook, 1669; according to him, China preserved the Adamic, pre-Babelic tradition (Cristiano Mahaut de Barros Barreto, "Calvis Sinica", *art. cit.*, p. 206; Rachel Ramsey, "China and the Ideal of Order" *art. cit.*, p. 487 and following). Webb instrumentalised a certain idea of China as a model of stability, as opposed to the chaos that prevailed in England at the time. Finding a source language was therefore also a way to renew a state of economic prosperity, whereby China appeared to set an example (Rachel Ramsey, "China and the Ideal of Order", *art. cit.*, p. 488).

ultimate achievement¹⁸. In his view, while the Egyptians were above all attached to the first two genres of representative writing, *i.e.*, paintings and symbols, the Chinese always used arbitrary signs, having only a conventional relationship with the signified. The two systems, however, did not provide the example of a purely verbal writing system¹⁹. Fréret quite correctly detected the composite and analytical structure of Chinese writing, combining simple characters to create complex forms, which he considered to be a purely philosophical way of doing things²⁰.

Referring to the absence of all figurativeness in the origins of Chinese characters²¹, Fréret, who criticised Father Kircher, actually disregarded the ideographic foundations of Chinese writing. In fact, just as hieratic and demotic writings in Egypt gradually moved away from hieroglyphs, the stylisation of Chinese characters makes it impossible in many cases to recognise the original motifs. In the final part of his treatise, he explains how Chinese writing ultimately failed as it distanced itself from the principles of ancient philosophy due to the inflation of graphic combinations under the influence of a metaphorical and poetic usage²².

Cibot shared Fréret's feelings on the decadence of Chinese writing in his letter to the Royal Society regarding the Turin bust, in which he expressed his views on the origins and evolution of Chinese writing. His aim was to educate people by explaining in details a system that was still widely unknown in Europe²³. According to him, there was an urgent need to express realities and ideas that could not be directly conveyed by

18. Nicolas Fréret, "Réflexions sur les principes généraux de l'art d'écrire, et en particulier sur les fondements de l'écriture chinoise", *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, avec Les Mémoires de Littérature tirez des Registres de cette Académie. Partie Mémoires*, Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1710-1843, [1729], p. 609-612.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 618-619.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 622 goes on to discuss the 214 keys or radicals, which provide the fundamental principles for the organisation of words in Chinese dictionaries.

21. Fréret founded his analysis on *Yi Jing* (spelled *Ié-King* by Fréret), usually translated as *Book of Changes*, a treatise on methods of divination, which was even used by Father Bouvet to show Leibniz correspondences with the binary number system. Yet it is clear enough that the combinations of hexagrams which made up the main body of the treatise in no way correspond to a writing system. See Léon Vandermeersch, "L'idéographie chinoise, instrument de maillage du sens sur le réel", in Nathalie Beaux, Bernard Pottier, Nicolas Grimal (eds.), *Image et conception du monde dans les écritures figuratives*, Paris, AIBL, Soleb, 2009, p. 12-43.

22. Nicolas Fréret, "Réflexions sur les principes généraux de l'art d'écrire", *op. cit.*, p. 629.

23. Pierre-Marie Cibot, *Lettre de Pékin sur le génie de la langue chinoise et la nature de leur écriture symbolique comparée avec celle des anciens Egyptiens... par un père de la Cie de Jésus...*, Bruxelles, J. L. de Boubers, 1773, p. 282.

images²⁴. It is likely that the Chinese and the Egyptians used the same method in the earliest phase of their writing²⁵. In contrast, the Chinese attempted to simplify their writing system by reducing the number of strokes. Unfortunately, this task was carried out in various parts of the country, without consultation. This caused great confusion, often making it impossible to trace back the origins of a character²⁶.

Ideas on the formation of language and writing adopted a more theoretically oriented standpoint, as developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, published posthumously in 1781. Adhering to the widely held view that the initial practice had been to directly paint objects, like the Mexicans did, or allegorical figures as the Egyptians did, he discusses the Chinese method, which consists of representing words and propositions by conventional characters, before discussing the third and final state, that of alphabetic writing. In his view, a parallel can be drawn between the different types of writing systems and the social groups that use them: "The depicting of objects is appropriate to savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to barbaric people, and the alphabet to civilised people²⁷".

CHINESE WRITING AS THE LATEST EXPRESSION OF HIEROGLYPHIC WRITING

One would think that Fréret's views on Egyptian hieroglyphs would definitively banish the idea of the connection between Egyptian and Chinese writing as devised by Kircher in *China illustrata*, published in 1667. In fact, the opposite is true! In 1759, following the simultaneous publication of works by Abbot Barthélemy and Joseph de Guignes, Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan published three letters from his correspondence with Father Parrenin dating back more than twenty years, before the latter's death in 1741²⁸.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

25. In his response to De Pauw's work, Cibot raised the question of the possible connection between the two cultures; see *infra*.

26. Pierre-Marie Cibot, *Lettre de Pékin sur le génie de la langue chinoise*, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

27. While Rousseau was wrong about the origins of alphabetic writing, the idea that it was created out of a practical need to communicate with communities of craftsmen and merchants corresponds fairly well to modern research findings. See Orly Goldwasser, "The miners who invented the alphabet", *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections*, 4, 2021, p. 1-14.

28. Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, *Lettres de M. de Mairan, au R. P. Parrenin, missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus à Pékin; contenant diverses questions sur la Chine*,

In his second letter, Dortous de Mairan asked Father Parrenin if it had ever occurred to him that Chinese traditions seemed to be derived from Egypt²⁹. This passage outlines the strokes that would become *topoi* in debates on the relationship between Ancient Egypt and China: a similar writing system, a kinship in mores and customs, certain beliefs, such as metempsychosis³⁰, the same way of dividing society up into castes, and a reluctance to innovate, synonymous with destabilisation. Finally, Dortous de Mairan suggested the possibility of communication between the two peoples, recalling the adventures of Sesostris, who allegedly went to the Ganges and beyond, even reaching China³¹. Questioning the ways in which one group of people had influenced the other, he takes in another letter the side of Ancient Egypt on the grounds that it is closer to the cradle of humanity³².

The relative prudence shown by Dortous de Mairan contrasted to Joseph de Guignes' approach. In his *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*, published in 1759 and to which the author attached Barthélemy's *Précis* on Phoenician letters, Guignes intended to prove that "Chinese characters are only types of Monograms formed from three Phoenician Letters; and that the resulting text produces Phoenician and Egyptian sounds when read aloud³³". He begins by recalling that he was not the first person to hold this opinion, that French scholars such as Huet and Dortous de Mairan, and English scholars had already examined the relationship between Egypt and China³⁴. Guignes, who had initially shared Father Parrenin's opinion, goes on to explain with much ingenuity how he radically changed his mind during the fortuitous consultation of Abbot Barthélemy's *Memoir* on Phoenician letters:

Pour me délasser je m'avisai de jeter les yeux sur un Dictionnaire Chinois, qui contient la forme des caractères antiques : je fus frappé tout-à-coup d'apercevoir

Paris, Desaint & Saillant, 1759, p. iv-v.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 51. For more information about the legendary figure of Sesostris, see Malaise Michel, "Sésostriis, Pharaon de légende et d'histoire", *Chronique d'Égypte*, 41, 1966, p. 244-272.

32. Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, *Lettres de M. de Mairan, op. cit.*, p. 78.

33. Joseph de Guignes, *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne... Avec un précis du mémoire de M. l'abbé Barthélemy sur les lettres phéniciennes... Par M. de Guignes...*, Paris, chez Desaint & Saillant, 1759, p. 5-6.

34. The author (*ibid.*, p. 14-18) then has the intellectual honesty to cite long extracts of Father Parrenin's response to Dortous de Mairan in which he challenged his reasoning and conclusions.

une figure qui ressembloit à une Lettre Phénicienne ; je m'attachai uniquement à ce rapport, je le suivis, & je fus étonné de la foule de preuves qui se présentèrent à moi. Telle est l'origine de ce Mémoire, que deux circonstances réunies par le hasard ont fait naître.

Je fus alors convaincu que les caractères, les loix & la forme du Gouvernement, le Souverain, les Ministres mêmes qui gouvernoient sous lui, & l'Empire entier étoient Égyptiens ; & que toute l'ancienne Histoire de la Chine n'étoit autre chose que l'Histoire d'Égypte qu'on a mise à la tête de celle de la Chine, comme si des François établis en Amérique y fondoient actuellement un Royaume dont le premier Souverain seroit regardé comme le successeur du Monarque qui règne en France.

Guignes then returns to the topic of Chinese writing. Beginning by recalling the alphabetic principle shared by most civilised nations, he explains that Chinese characters are representative of an idea, that they are formally reduced to three types of strokes³⁵, and that the core writing system is made up of 214 keys or radicals. In contrast, he thought that the Chinese language was simple, even simplistic, since it was made up of monosyllables which only distinguish the tones, leaving aside conjugation and declension³⁶.

What is interesting about the *Mémoire* is that it drew for the first time the attention to archaic signs. While it was generally thought, following Fréret and Dortous de Mairan, that Chinese characters shared only a conventional relationship, Guignes placed in its proper setting, rather correctly, the ideographic origins of Chinese writing, even if he did not understand how they had evolved to the modern times. The presence of figurative characters thus enabled him to draw a link between Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters. However, before validating this hypothesis, it was necessary to ensure that the convergent characteristics between the two systems were not the result of chance. This is where the Phoenician alphabet comes in, recently elucidated by Barthélemy. The letters *yod* and *aleph* served as keys to unlocking the mysteries of Chinese writing. Noting that the shape of the Phoenician *yod* corresponded to that of a Chinese sign for hand, he realized that the Phoenician word

35. These are the straight line, the curved line and the point. In reality, there are eight graphemes: the point stroke, the horizontal stroke, the vertical stroke, the down left slant, the down right slant, the upward slant, the angled stroke, and the hooked stroke: see Léon Vandermeersch, "L'idéographie chinoise", *art. cit.*, p. 22, table v.

36. Joseph de Guignes, *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 57-58.

yod also means hand. This match, which could have been fortuitous, as it is actually, seemed to him to be confirmed by the study of the letter *aleph*, whose shape is identical in Phoenician and Chinese, and expresses pre-eminence in both languages³⁷.

From then on, Guignes sought to find correspondences with the etymology of Phoenician signs in the Chinese lexicon. He saw some correspondences between the Chinese sign for house and the Hebrew *beth*, door and *daleth*, eye and *ayin*, teeth and *shin*, and so on. Guignes never realized that when it comes to drawing elementary objects or body parts, it is not at all surprising that different cultures ended up with similar results. Nevertheless, as a precaution, he decided to analyse the Chinese characters which contained several of these first letters, in order to find Phoenician or Egyptian words, *i.e.* Coptic. Examining the Chinese character for father, Guignes observed that it was made up of a *yod* and a *daleth*. He then read without hesitation *Jod*, which he miraculously found to have the same meaning in Coptic (actually, *eiwt*, with a voiceless consonant). He used the same method to find new correspondences, this time extending his investigation to words made up of three roots, with just as much success³⁸. This is how the character meaning the prince was, according to Guignes, made up of an F and two Is, *i.e.*, Phii, which could only point to several names of Egyptian kings ending in *-phis*, such as Amenophis and Apophis³⁹.

In conclusion, Guignes declared with much excitement that he had established that “Egypt & Phoenicia [are] linked to China by the most significant ties; letters, languages, and the records of the oldest Nations are connected to one another, helping to create the effect of a general harmony⁴⁰”. In his *Memoir*, he refrained from examining in detail the material conditions that made it possible to draw connections between Egypt and China, instead choosing to simply refer to generalities taken from classical authors. Recalling Clement of Alexandria’s theory on the tripartite division of Egyptian writing in epistolic, hieroglyphic and symbolic forms⁴¹, he noticed the same division in Chinese writing⁴².

37. *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 66. In fact, the name Amenophis is a Greek form of Amenhotep, *i.e.*, *jmn-htp* “Amun-is-satisfied”.

40. Joseph de Guignes, *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

41. Or rather by Porphyry as Deshauterayes rightly notes.

42. For a more precise insight into symbolic writing, Guignes (*Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 72) gives a few examples

He concluded his paper by tentatively establishing the etymology of the first Chinese emperors. In his view, given that the words of the spoken language have no relation to the written language, it is possible to analyse them according to his own devised alphabet. Consequently, he established that Yu corresponded to Men, whereby Menes from the classic tradition was easily recognisable⁴³. This would mean that the Chinese had made the Ancient Egyptians annals their own! Guignes thus claimed that the Egyptians arrived in China precisely in 1122 BCE. In conclusion, he posits the identity of the Egyptian and Chinese languages; by studying the latter it is possible to understand the former⁴⁴.

That same year, Michel-Ange-André Leroux Deshauterayes, who wrote the comments associated with the plates about writing in the *Encyclopédie*, expressed a series of twenty-three objections⁴⁵. The first focuses on the chronological succession proposed by Guignes⁴⁶. The author observes the differences in usage between hieroglyphics, reserved for monumental expressions and which ultimately became exclusively used by *hierogrammateis*, and the alphabetic script (or rather a cursive form of writing, as one would now say), the invention of which was probably motivated by specific needs, such as handling daily affairs. His objections highlight the bold, sometimes confusing character of Guignes' work, the logical dead ends, errors in interpreting Chinese facts, and the practical disadvantages of his arguments⁴⁷. Having said this, Deshauterayes failed to give a clear definition of the very concept of hieroglyphs, which he

taken from Chinese which he compares to Egyptian hieroglyphs such as those described by Horapollo.

43. It was easy for Deshauterayes (see Michel-Ange André Le Roux Deshauterayes, *Doutes sur la dissertation de M. de Guignes qui a pour titre : "Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne"*..., Paris, Desaint, 1759, p. 66) to show the unlikelihood of this process and highlight that the names Menes and Achetoes, etc. are Hellenistic forms far removed from the original names. See also Voltaire's mockery of this (see *infra*).

44. This is also indicated – with a touch of irony, perhaps – in a comparative analysis published in 1722 in the *Journal des Scavans*.

45. Michel-Ange André Le Roux Deshauterayes, *Doutes sur la dissertation de M. de Guignes, op. cit.*, p. 11 : "J'avouerai avec franchise qu'aucune des preuves alléguées par M. D. n'a opérée sur moi la moindre sensation à la première lecture que je fis de sa Dissertation ; plus je les ai examinées ensuite, moins j'y ai trouvé de solidité".

46. *Ibid.*, p. 13 : "Je ne reconnois point en cela la marche de l'esprit humain".

47. The author ends his paper by discussing philosophical considerations: "Mais qui ne sçait où nous mène souvent la recherche de la vérité ? L'ardeur avec laquelle on s'y livre, trompe sur les plus foibles apparences. On prend l'ombre pour la réalité." (*ibid.*, p. 89). The origin of the expression "the shadow of a dream" can be found in Pindar's work (*Pythian*, VIII, 94-95: σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἀνθρώπου).

interpreted as figurative representations of God, perhaps following in this an ancient tradition⁴⁸. He returns, without referencing it expressly, to Guignes' hypothesis in the article of the *Encyclopédie* published in 1763, commenting on the plates dedicated to such writings. Regarding plate xxv (Chinese radicals), he thus resumes his hypothesis on the connections between the Chinese writing and some writings from the ancient Near East⁴⁹:

Dans l'origine, les caracteres chinois étoient, comme ceux des Egyptiens, autant d'images qui représentoient les objets mêmes qu'on vouloit exprimer ; & c'est ce qui a porté plusieurs savans hommes à soupçonner que les Chinois tiroient leur origine des Egyptiens, ou que ces derniers venoient des premiers, & que leur écriture ne devoit point être différente. [...] On a prétendu plus encore il y a quelques années, on a voulu insinuer qu'une partie des caracteres chinois étoit formée de l'assemblage de deux ou trois lettres radicales empruntées de l'alphabet des Egyptiens ou de celui des Phéniciens ; & que ces lettres déchiffrées & liées suivant leur valeur, soit égyptienne, soit phénicienne, signifioient précisément ce que ces mêmes caracteres étoient destinés à exprimer chez les Chinois. [...] Ce système sembloit promettre de grands changemens dans l'histoire, & ouvrir une nouvelle carrière aux chronologistes ; mais malheureusement il est demeuré système, & j'ose desespérer que jamais on ne pourra alleguer la moindre autorité qui puisse le rendre plausible.

Still in 1759, Friedrich Grimm humorously ridiculed the proposals put forward by Guignes, as well as the works of Barthélemy and Deshauterayes' *Doutes*, which he claimed to never have read, in a letter to Diderot⁵⁰. Things could have therefore stopped there. However, the Chinese connection was revived by the affair of the Turin bust. In 1761,

48. Michel-Ange André Le Roux Deshauterayes, *Doutes sur la dissertation de M. de Guignes, op. cit.*, p. 29-31.

49. In an article about hieroglyphs published in the *Encyclopédie* in 1765, after Guignes' *Mémoire*, the Chevalier de Jaucourt only makes reference to China via the general classification of writing, but makes no reference to a connection, or resemblance between the two systems. Article HIÉROGLYPHE, s. m. (*Arts antiq.*), written by Jaucourt, in Diderot and d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, Paris, Briasson / David / Le Breton / Durand, 1751-1772, 17 vol. of text and 11 vol. of plates ; vol. VIII (1765), p. 205.

50. Friedrich Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1790*, Paris, Furne, 1829-1831, p. 342-346 ; see Jean Winand, "Les hiéroglyphes égyptiens après Kircher : la naissance de la philologie orientale au XVIII^e siècle", in Corinne Bonnet, Jean-François Courouau, Éric Dieu (eds.), *Lux Philologiae, l'essor de la philologie orientale au XVIII^e siècle*, Genève, Droz, 2021, p. 318.

John Tuberville Needham published a letter in Rome originally intended for the Paris and London Academies about an Egyptian inscription found on a statue of a god then in Turin, which he believed represented the goddess Isis⁵¹. According to a plate provided by the author, it was a black marble bust incised with thirty-one curious signs arranged over seven lines, which he claimed explicitly resembled Chinese characters. The bottom of the plate displays a list of correspondences between these signs and Chinese characters such as those indexed in a reference dictionary at the Vatican library⁵².

Needham's memoir caused a stir in the Republic of Letters as soon as it was published. The first reaction appeared to be that of Barthélemy in a letter addressed to the Count of Saluces, probably in 1763⁵³. Barthélemy's first intention was to re-establish Joseph de Guignes' theory that Chinese writing descended from Egyptian hieroglyphs. He thus set out to demonstrate the futility of Needham's theses. Having firstly observed that the latter had no knowledge of Chinese, he highlighted errors in his chosen method. The key to making a compelling case would be to focus on the oldest Chinese characters in order to establish a solid foundation for comparison. However, as Barthélemy noted, all the evidence was muddled up. In conclusion, Barthélemy, who was convinced of Guignes' discovery, lamented the time Needham had wasted in an undertaking that he believed would be better carried out by someone else. In his role as a palaeographer, he suggested gathering all hieroglyphs displayed on monuments to ensure that the signs inscribed on the bust were indeed present in the oldest Chinese dictionaries.

In light of doubts expressed, Needham published a pamphlet in 1773 featuring several texts to help people understand his point of view. The general title of the publication was *Lettre de Pékin sur le génie de la langue chinoise et la nature de leur écriture symbolique comparée avec celle des anciens Égyptiens*. It was presented as the work of a Jesuit priest stationed in Beijing. Father Cibot was credited as its author. After reminding readers about the discovery of the Turin bust in 1761, a certificate was produced, signed

51. John Tuberville Needham, *De inscriptione quadam Aegyptiaca Taurini inventa et characteribus Aegyptiis olim et Sinis communibus exarata idolo cuidam antiquae in regia universitate servato ad utrasque Academias Londinensem et Parisiensem [...] data epistola*, Rome, Pagliarni Frères, 1761.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

53. The Count of Saluces wrote to Barthélemy on December 15th, 1762, to obtain his opinion on Needham's work: Jean-Jacques Barthélemy, *Œuvres diverses de J. J. Barthélemy*, new revised edition of *Essai sur la vie de J. J. Barthelemy*, par Nivernois, Paris, Gueffier jeune, 1823, p. 315, n. 1.

by ten prominent figures attesting to the correspondence of the characters engraved on the bust with signs included in the Chinese dictionary. Needham then reproduced two extracts from the *Journal des Sçavans* dating back to 1771 and 1772 respectively, whereby new arguments proposed by Guignes were included that supported his theory. The text of 1771 essentially covers points relating to the historiography of China, while the second text intended to develop ways of reading and understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs. As the *Journal* summarises, Guignes' intention was "to compare the language and hieroglyphs of Egyptian and Chinese with the Writing and Languages of the Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, etc"⁵⁴. His main idea was to compare the 214 Chinese radicals with simple hieroglyphic characters found on monuments. By acknowledging that the Egyptian groups that were discovered are "composed of the same ideas and elements, it must be concluded that Chinese characters shared the same writing and words and that Chinese characters can help us understand Egyptian hieroglyphs"⁵⁵. To avoid all speculation, the author of the *Journal* article highlights that Guignes draws on Horapollo's treatise to definitively ground his theory. Going one step further, Guignes believed that he had found a way to read hieroglyphs by interpreting signs as simple alphabetical or syllabic letters, which caused much surprise to the author of the article⁵⁶. The treatise ends with an attempt to reconcile the origins of writing as conceived by Guignes with the teachings from classical authors, particularly opinions made by Clement of Alexandria and Porphyry regarding the categories of signs. The last paragraph of the article highlights the significance of Guignes' proposal in explaining world history from a Christian perspective:

Les réflexions que l'on vient de faire sur son Ecriture, réflexions qui tombent également sur sa Législation, & sur ses Livres Sacrés, nous représentent les traces presque effacées de la communication des Chinois qui ont été les Peres du genre humain, rapprochent ces Chinois du trône dont Moyse nous a conservé l'histoire, & font voir qu'ils ne sont qu'un rameau de la branche qui s'étendit en Égypte & qui alla ensuite policer les Sauvages qui habitoient dans la Chine⁵⁷.

54. Pierre-Marie Cibot, *Lettre de Pékin sur le génie de la langue chinoise*, op. cit., p. xxix.

55. *Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

56. *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.

57. *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

Then came Father Cibot's *Lettre* dated October 20th, 1764⁵⁸. He first observes that if there had ever been any real resemblance between Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphs, time had erased all traces. This is followed by a long discussion about Chinese writing in which Cibot recalls features that were common in knowledge of China at the time, such as the fact that Chinese characters are expressed by figures and symbols without links to any sounds, so as to be understood in all languages⁵⁹. By examining the oldest characters, Cibot adds, it is impossible not to notice that the figures and images were used to form characters in a style reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Here he departs from his predecessors who believed that a purely conventional relationship existed between Chinese characters and their meanings. He also had a vague idea of the process by which the original signs were stylised and standardised using six strokes to facilitate the writing system, but which, according to him, had disastrous consequences on its integrity due to the chaotic nature of these transformations⁶⁰. This meant that it was no longer possible to find the original meaning of the sign. Referring to the Turin bust, Cibot did not see any possible links with Chinese writing and added that it would be futile to look for any further possible meaning⁶¹. However, far from condemning Needham's hypothesis outright, he leads readers down another path, by identifying the hieroglyphs analysed by Horapollo and comparing them with ancient Chinese characters⁶². In between several digressions, he highlights the existence of a sign which takes the form of a delta, which could create the impression that the

58. The letter is featured in Pierre-Marie Cibot, « Lettre sur les caracteres chinois », in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, &c. des Chinois. Par les missionnaires de Pékin*, Paris, Nyon, t. I, 1776, p. 275-307.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 13-14. On the number of graphemes used in the Chinese writing, see *supra*, n. 35.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 18-19 : « Ou je suis bien trompé, ou qui les comparera avec les symboles de l'Isis, y trouvera autant de différence qu'entre une page d'Arabe & une de Tartare ».

62. He also proposes to compare the oldest hieroglyphs with the most ancient Chinese characters. The section about Egypt draws on Athanasius Kircher's *Obeliscus Pamphilius, hoc est interpretatio nova et huc usque intentata...*, Rome, Grignani, 1650 (OA III, p. 350, and echoed by William Warburton in *Divine Legation of Moses demonstrated in nine books, The fourth edition...* By William, lord bishop of Gloucester, London, Millar & Tonson, 1765, pl. VIII, and p. 145) whereby hieroglyphs appeared to be stylised, much in the same way as Chinese characters. ~~This monument, which would have been found in Florence, could not be located.~~

Chinese were aware of the “Blessed Trinity⁶³”. The collection ends with a series of plates mostly provided by Cibot.

In his *pro domo* plea, Needham does not mention the objections raised by Edward Wortley Montagu in two letters addressed to the President of the Royal Society in 1762 and published in 1763⁶⁴. In his introduction, Montagu recounts the difficulties he encounters in finding the famous bust and above all his disappointment with the weaknesses and errors in Needham’s copy. Montagu essentially focuses on three areas: the materiality of the bust, its style, and the famous characters engraved on it. According to the experienced sculptors consulted, the material – a local black granite – as well as the engraving technique testify to recent work. Montagu also called on the expertise of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who was already famous for his works on Egyptian art. According to the latter, the bust does not belong to any of the three categories he had drawn up to classify Ancient Egyptian works. He concludes his assessment with this simple statement: “*For my part, I esteem it a modern Imposture*⁶⁵”, pertaining to the examination of the characters undertaken by Giuseppe Simonia Assemani, the Prefect of the Vatican Library, who believed that it was much more likely that the signs on the bust, which closely resembled astrological signs, were recently engraved. After finding no correlation whatsoever with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Assemani acknowledged that there may be several formal links with Chinese signs, but that it is difficult to be sure of the equivalence of their meanings.

As we can see, while the idea of a link between Egypt and China was not unanimously supported, there were still nevertheless fervent supporters, for a diverse array of reasons. The opinion of the Jesuit missionaries in China was ambiguous in this respect. The fathers were torn between two irreconcilable positions: on the one hand, they realised that the arguments proposed by Guignes and Needham received little support and, on the other hand, that refuting them outright could have negative consequences from a religious standpoint by calling into question China’s place in a world history shaped by the Bible.

In 1773 – the same year that Needham published his paper – a voluminous work on relations between Egypt and China was published

63. Pierre-Marie Cibot, *Lettre de Pékin sur le génie de la langue chinoise*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

64. Edward Wortley Montagu, *Observations upon a supposed antique bust at Turin*, by Edward Wortley Montagu, London, T. Becket, 1763. See Thijs Weststeijn, “Memory and self-presentation”, *art. cit.*, p. 308-309.

65. Edward Wortley Montagu, *Observations upon a supposed antique bust at Turin*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

in Berlin by Cornelius De Pauw, who generally held a low opinion of the Chinese, particularly their scholars⁶⁶, and those who served as their mediators in Europe, i.e., the Jesuit missionaries⁶⁷. In the preface, De Pauw condemned any idea of communication between China and Egypt⁶⁸. It is in fact absurd, he wrote, to imagine that the Egyptians, who already had the alphabet, would have imported a writing system as complicated as hieroglyphs into China⁶⁹. Well aware of the literature of the era and recent debates, he criticised the supposed role of Phoenician letters as mediators between Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters, while lambasting ideas about the Turin bust and Needham's ill-considered comments⁷⁰.

Following a tradition that dates to Antiquity, De Pauw believed that hieroglyphs originated in Ethiopia, and were later passed onto the Egyptians⁷¹. The main aim of the book was to definitively debunk, in as many areas as possible (architecture, food, beliefs, religion, languages, and writing systems) the theory that Chinese culture originated in Egypt. From a methodological perspective, it is worth highlighting interesting passages where De Pauw discussed how information is collected and evaluated, incidentally establishing a hierarchy based on how each writer has access to the sources⁷².

The book, which almost exclusively criticises the Chinese (and incidentally the Jesuits), left Voltaire, who extensively annotated his copy⁷³, highly perplexed. He did not mind the fact that the Society of Jesus was being undermined but the damage that de Pauw was doing to Chinese culture,

66. He described the Chinese language as a “language of confusion”, unfit for discussing metaphysical topics (Cornélius De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Égyptiens et les Chinois, par Mr. de P****, Berlin, G. J. Decker, 1773, t. II, p. 179), an opinion already expressed by Fréret.

67. For example, concerning the search for links, he criticised Father Parrenin's opinion, stating that “such an opinion can only be attributed to the predilection that the writers of his order have shown for the Chinese; which has made us constantly sceptical when reading their accounts” (*ibid.*, t. II, p. 14).

68. “Dès qu'on eût adopté si aveuglément en Europe le ridicule système sur l'origine des Chinois qu'on faisoit venir de l'Égypte, on crut voir dans les statues Egyptiennes une physionomie Chinoise ; & par une illusion dont il n'y a point d'exemple, on crut reconnoître encore les visages de la Chine dans les momies [...]” (*ibid.*, t. I, p. 238).

69. *Ibid.*, t. I, p. xvi-xvii.

70. *Ibid.*, t. I, p. 25.

71. *Ibid.*, t. I, p. 208.

72. *Ibid.*, t. II, p. 45-46. See also his criticism of Barthélemy's fairly unconvincing explanation of the Nile mosaic of Palestrina (*ibid.*, t. II, p. 12).

73. See Christiane Mervaud, “Le sinophile et le sinophobe. Voltaire lecteur de Cornelius de Pauw”, *Revue Voltaire*, 7, 2007, p. 183-203.

or rather to Voltaire's idea of it, was bound to provoke a reaction. Voltaire was too shrewd to reject de Pauw's argument outright; he was well aware of the absurdity of the stance of some European scholars, especially the French. He was the first to mock the etymological contortions of Guignes, who managed to reconcile Egyptian and Chinese words, whatever their differences, by substituting and swapping all of the problematic letters. Indeed, people were not much more advanced on this point than the etymologists of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance⁷⁴.

The longest reaction came from Father Cibot, a fine connoisseur of Chinese literature⁷⁵. He wanted to refute De Pauw's arguments on a case-by-case basis by highlighting his ignorance of China and the Chinese language⁷⁶, which he could not know about first-hand despite all the insight he could demonstrate, and also his prejudice against religion in general and the Jesuits in particular. In his demonstration, Cibot put Egypt, which he did not know about, to one side, preferring to take what was happening in Europe as his points of comparison.

Another shorter but more targeted criticism, this time from Father Joseph-Marie Amiot, was published later on in the same review in 1780⁷⁷. Amiot instantly labelled De Paw's *Recherches* as the product of someone who was only looking to promote himself⁷⁸. He fiercely criticised the latter's lack of expertise in the subject, his ignorance of Chinese, which prevented him from accessing the original sources, and also for attacking the Society of Jesus in the spirit of an anti-religious system⁷⁹, a criticism already made by Cibot. Amiot did not respond to all the points made by

74. See also Sydney Aufrère, "Jean Potocki au pays d'Étymologie", in François Rosset et Dominique Triaire (eds.) *Jean Potocki ou le dédale des Lumières*, Montpellier, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2010.

75. [Cibot, P.M.], "Remarques sur un Ecrit de M. P**", intitulé : *Recherches sur les Égyptiens & les Chinois*, in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois*, Par les missionnaires de Pékin, Paris, Nyon, t. II, 1777, p. 365-574.

76. In particular, Cibot ("Remarques sur un Ecrit de M. P**", *op. cit.*, p. 414-415) identified a significant number of errors in how the Chinese words were copied down and how titles and authors were cited, which in his view was enough to disqualify De Pauw's theory. When read carefully, Cibot's comments repeatedly denounced (albeit without using the term itself) De Pauw's latent racism regarding anything that was not European.

77. Joseph-Marie Amiot, "Observations sur le Livre de M. P**", intitulé : *Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiens & les Chinois*, in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, &c. des Chinois*, Paris, chez Nyon, t. VI, 1780, p. 275-346.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

79. « S'il eût vu à l'œil nu, & examiné en véritable Philosophe, ce que ces Missionnaires, qu'il méprise si fort, & qu'il décrie avec tant d'assurance & si peu de raison, ont écrit en différens tems fur la Chine, il se fût mieux instruit qu'il ne paroît l'être » (*ibid.*, p. 277).

De Pauw. He only chose a few of them, which he painstakingly deconstructed by producing documents and Chinese examples to substantiate each of his arguments. Limiting himself to his area of expertise, Amiot avoided discussing Egypt, instead adopting the methodological prudence already shown by Cibot.

China's involvement in receiving Egyptian writings must be understood within the wider framework of the integration of the history of ancient civilisations into world history as constructed by the Bible. This question had already been raised for Egypt. The inclusive concept of *prisca theologia* made it possible to find a common foundation among the scattered branches of post-Babelic civilisation. According to classical tradition, the greatest Greek philosophers – particularly Plato – completed their intellectual training in Egypt with the most eminent figures of the priestly caste. The compatibility of philosophical, Platonic and Aristotelian systems with Christian doctrine laid the foundations to welcome Ancient Egypt into the bosom of the church. This was the work Athanasius Kircher had sought to accomplish by suggesting that the Adamic revelation was hidden in the hieroglyphic inscriptions preserved on obelisks. Kircher's entire work thus set out to reveal the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, symbolically transcribed into hieroglyphic signs. The discovery of China, its ancient civilisation, and its unique writing system raised the same question: could the history of a very ancient and apparently refined civilisation be reconciled with Biblical teachings and chronology? Egypt served as a bridge between the two. By deriving Chinese writing – and, beyond that, its culture and political system – from Egyptian practices, the civilization of the Middle Kingdom was brought back into the Western fold.

China also took over from Egypt in debates on universal writing. Unlike in the Baroque Era, when hieroglyphic writing could still pass as a universal medium detached from all linguistic realisations, during the Age of Enlightenment, Chinese characters were viewed by philosophers as the finest exponents of pasigraphy. The fact (widely disseminated in Europe) that this writing system was intelligible to non-Chinese speakers – even if understanding was sometimes minimal – significantly contributed to this idea. In addition, the number of signs used suggested the possibility of representing reality under a figurative form.

The Chinese theory hardly survived the turn of the century. While Jean-François Champollion was once interested in this from a typological

perspective, he conclusively brushed away the idea⁸⁰. The belief that Chinese writing descended from Egyptian hieroglyphics nevertheless remained a topic of discussion until the mid-19th century and even beyond, in light of Shichisaburō Itazu's treatise *On the Single Origin of Egyptian and Chinese Scripts*⁸¹, published in 1933.

At the turn of the 18th century, the primacy of written forms gave way to a more linguistic conception, which highlighted the prominence of the spoken word. The status of Chinese writing was irrevocably impacted in the West, all the more so since the Chinese language was perceived as too simplistic and incapable of expressing complex thought⁸².

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80. Jean-François Champollion, *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens Égyptiens, ou Recherches sur les éléments premiers de cette écriture sacrée, sur leurs diverses combinaisons, et sur les rapports de ce système avec les autres méthodes graphiques égyptiennes [Texte imprimé]. Par Champollion le jeune...*, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1824, p. 344.

81. Shichisaburō Itazu, 埃漢文字同源考, 一名, 東洋口セツタ石 (= *De unitate originis litterarum Sinicarum et Aegyptiacarum*), Tokyo, Shōwa, 8, 1933. Cité par “Memory and self-presentation”, art. cit., p. 311-312.

82. Cristiano Mahaut de Barros Barreto, “Calvis Sinica”, art. cit., p. 210.

