

CHINESE AND THE PRIMITIVE LANGUAGE:
JOHN WEBB'S CONTRIBUTION TO
17TH CENTURY SINOLOGY

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THE IMPACT OF CHINESE THOUGHT ON EUROPE FROM THE LATE 16th century onwards forms one of the most intriguing chapters in the intellectual history of our era. This movement, which begins with the arrival of the first Jesuit missionaries in China and culminates in the work of the Encyclopedists and the Physiocrats, has been thoroughly investigated, at least as far as its development on the continent is concerned. Pierre Martino's pioneer work, *L'Orient dans la Littérature française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècle* (1906), Adolf Reichwein's *China and Europe* (1925) and Virgile Pinot's *La Chine et la Formation de l'Esprit philosophique en France, 1640-1740* (1932), are but three of a series of notable contributions to this subject. Yet, England's role in this intellectual drama has never been adequately described. True, the history of English interest in China during the 18th century is well-documented, especially as regards the cult of Chinoiserie. The 17th century, on the other hand, has not been the subject of such intensive study.¹

England differs in one respect from the continent in the intellectual history of the time in that, while in France and Germany the great age of the sinophiles fell in the 18th century, in England that stage had occurred a hundred years or so previously. While the Encyclopedists were enthusing over the Chinese,

¹ Quite the best general study known to the author and one to which he is greatly indebted, is by Ch'ien Chungshu, "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* (English Edition), New Series, I, 4 (December, 1940), pp. 351-384. This work is henceforth referred to as "China." Earl H. Pritchard, *Anglo-Chinese Relations during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (University of Illinois, 1929), was a pioneer work which has now been largely superseded by William W. Appleton's *A Cycle of Cathay* (New York, 1951). Appleton's book, though quite well documented, is irritating to use for lack of a bibliography.

England remained aloof, Shaftesbury, Defoe and Johnson² were all as ardently sinophobe as Voltaire, Quesnay and Christian Wolff (1679-1754)³ were sinophile. As one writer has well expressed it: "In eighteenth-century English literature . . . China is virtually stripped of all her glories . . . The very freedom from over-subtle thoughts which had won praise for Confucianism in the 17th century was in the 18th century criticized as mere shallowness in metaphysics and theology. Even the antiquity of Chinese civilization which had so attracted 17th century writers was discredited by 18th century ones."⁴

This attitude was to have unfortunate results. Lord Macartney's embassy to Peking in 1793 paved the way for the invasion of China by a host of traders and missionaries whose undoubted proficiency in Chinese — for this age saw the beginnings of real sinology — was equaled only by their contempt for Chinese civilization as a whole. It was largely as a consequence of this attitude on the part of the English, whose commercial penetration of China was the most thorough-going, that the lead in Chinese studies in Europe remained firmly in the hands of the French and the Dutch. It is interesting to speculate as to whether this situation could have been prevented had Elizabeth the First succeeded in her attempts to establish contact with China. If only the "treacherie . . . of the Portugales of Macao or the Spaniards of the Philippinas"⁵ had not prevailed against Thomas Bromefield, John

² For Defoe, see Ch'en Shon-yi, "Daniel Defoe, China's Severest Critic," *Nankai Social and Economic Quarterly*, VIII, 3 (October, 1935), pp. 511-550; Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 55-60. Defoe's work, *The Consolidator* (1705), may be said to mark the beginning of the English reaction against admiration for China. Appleton (*op. cit.*, p. 62) sums up the situation very well when he says: "By 1750 China was no longer generally esteemed among English intellectuals either for its antiquity or its learning."

³ For the very different atmosphere on the continent, see Pierre Martino, *L'Orient dans la Littérature française au XVIIe siècle*; Henri Cordier, *La Chine en France au XVIIIe siècle*; Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe* (New York, 1925); Lewis A. Marverick, *China: A Model for Europe* (San Antonio, 1946); "Chinese Influences upon Quesnay and Turgot," *Claremont Oriental Studies*, No. 4 (June, 1942). On Christian Wolff, see Donald F. Lach, "The Sinophilism of Christian Wolf," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XIV, 4 (October, 1953), pp. 561-574.

⁴ Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," pp. 383-384.

⁵ See Queen Elizabeth's letter of 1583 to the Emperor, in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries*, 12 vols. (Glasgow, 1903), Vol. V, pp. 451-452. Sir Robert Dudley's mission of 1596, which vanished near the West Indies, as mentioned in *ibid.*, XI, pp. 417-421. For English interest in the spice trade and the desire to find what was believed to be a vast market for English wool in China, see Pritchard, *Anglo-Chinese Relations*, pp. 42 ff.

Newbery and Richard Allot, they might have arrived in Peking, delivered Elizabeth's letters to the Shen-tsung emperor (*regnet* 1572-1620) and thus, in establishing "diplomatic relations" — if tribute status will bear the name — between China and England, made sinology a reputable subject in Oxford and Cambridge at an early date. Yet this was not to be. Even down to this day, Chinese studies have remained very much the poor relation in British universities. It is all the more surprising then that as early as the 17th century, there did appear the glimmerings of what — given suitable patronage—might have become the nucleus of a sinological tradition in England. The initiators of this movement, John Webb (1611-1672)⁶ and Thomas Hyde (1636-1673)⁷, saw China only through a glass, darkly: their knowledge of things Chinese was of the scantiest when compared with the vast store of information possessed by the Peking Jesuits. Yet their achievement, such as it was, is not to be decried: for, in an age whose horizons were of the narrowest, they did succeed in casting their eyes beyond the parapets of Europe to descry, faint and shadowy upon the utmost rim of the world, that vision of Cathay which was to dazzle coming generations with its not altogether illusory splendors.

English awareness of China can be traced back to the end of the 16th century, when Parke's translation of Mendoza's *History of China* first made its appearance. Real interest, however, did not appear until after the Restoration — "When the Tired Nation breathed from Civil War" — and the English were once again free to turn their eyes towards the larger world of the continent. Here they found increased attention being paid to China. This was largely due to two causes. First, the establishment of the Jesuit mission in Peking had meant that Europe could now be given exact information on subjects where little but legend had prevailed before. Secondly, the Dutch embassies of 1655 and 1665 had brought home vivid accounts of a great civilization which was based on principles quite different from anything in Western tradition, whether Classical, Christian or Islamic.⁸ In one way, the Dutch embassies had a stronger impact than the Jesuit reports: for

⁶ On John Webb see Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," pp. 369-371; Ch'en Shou-yi, "John Webb: a Forgotten Page in the Early History of Sinology in Europe," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, XIX, 3 (October, 1935), pp. 295-330; Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 27-31. Appleton's study of Webb is superficial. He cheerfully assumes that Webb's *Essay* was dedicated to Charles I (d. 1649), not Charles II!

⁷ See page below.

⁸ See J.J.L. Duyvendak, "Early Chinese Studies in Holland," *Toung Pao*, XXXII (1936), pp. 293 ff.

whereas the Jesuit works were above all accounts aimed at the scholar, the Dutch reports, with their broad interest in everyday life in China, made an immediate appeal to the ordinary public. Jan Nieuhoff's account of the embassy of 1665, illustrated with drawings made on the journey, enjoyed great popularity.⁹ It undoubtedly played a great part in bringing home the magnificence of Chinese civilization to a Europe still dubious of the tales of earlier travelers. This newly awakened curiosity was given added pique by the flood of Chinese goods, porcelains, lacquer, chintz and even "the herbe cha" which now began to pour onto the market. The growing interest in China is adequately attested by the number of books on the subject which came out during this time. In 1662 we find John Evelyn doubting to his friend Van der Douse, whose *Relation of China* he had "to the best of (his) skill translated" whether "this whole piece will be to the purpose" in view of the number of works on China that had recently appeared.¹⁰

It was this atmosphere of quickening intellectual awareness that stimulated John Webb to look closely at the history of China in the hope of finding there the origins of the original language that mankind had spoken before the Deluge. John Webb (or Webbe) had been born in Butleigh, Somerset, in 1611 to a good local family. After being educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, London, from 1625-1628, he took up work as an "executor," or architect, with his relative, the well-known Inigo Jones. After the Restoration, he petitioned the Crown for the office of Surveyor of Works, a lucrative post then held by Sir John Denham (1615-1669), giving as proof of his Royalist sympathies the fact that he had supplied Charles I with plans of the fortifications of the city of London, with instructions as to how they might be carried. He was accordingly granted the reversion of Denham's office, but—fortunately for posterity — on Denham's death in 1669 this passed, not to Webb, but to Sir Christopher Wren. Webb then retired to Butleigh, a most disappointed man, dying there on 24 October 1672.¹¹

⁹ John Nieuhoff, *Het Gesantschap Der Neerlandtsche Oost-Indische Compagnie, an den Grooten Tartarischen Cham* (Amsterdam, 1665). Translated into French as *L'Ambassade de la Compagnie Orientale des Provinces Unies vers l'Empereur de la Chine*. This was the version read by Webb. The English translation by John Ogilvy did not appear until 1669.

¹⁰ Letter of September 13, 1662. *Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn*, Vol. III, pp. 137-138.

¹¹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, John Webb.

It would appear to have been the Restoration that had given Webb the financial security he needed to indulge in the literary pursuits for which he had already shown a marked proclivity. In 1665 he had edited Inigo Jones' work, *The most noble Antiquity called Stoneheng*, and had besides published a book of his own, the *Vindication of Stoneheng Restored* (1665), on the same subject. This interest in antiquity, coupled with a natural desire to gain the Royal favor, led him in 1669—the very year in which he should have inherited the Surveyorship—to publish a work on China which he dedicated to Charles II. The first edition bears the following title-page:¹² *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability that the Language of China is the Primitive Language. By John Webb of Butleigh in the County of Somerset Esq. London. Printed for Nath. Brooke at the Angel in Gresham Colledge, 1669.* Webb's inquiry was historical rather than linguistic. This was of necessity since he did not know a single word of Chinese, even though, as we shall see, his conception of the language was essentially sound. He did however know his Bible, and it was on this, copiously supplemented by commentators and various histories of China, that he based his arguments.

The nature of the "Primitive Language" of mankind was one of the most vexing questions that perplexed an ever-curious century.¹³ According to the never-doubted Biblical testimony, Adam had been endowed with this language by God himself. As Webb puts it: "That the Primitive Language was not a studied or artificial speech nor taught our First Parents by Art and by Degrees as their Generations have been, but concreated is sure. For we read that God no sooner questioned Adam than Adam answered him."¹⁴

¹² The writer has used a microfilm of the Bodleian copy of the first edition. The second edition issued after Webb's death, bears the following title:

The Antiquity of China, or an Historical Essay, Endeavoring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language spoken throughout the whole World before the Confusion of Babel wherein the Customs and Manners of the Chineans are presented and Ancient and Modern Authors consulted with. By John Webb of Butleigh in the County of Somerset Esquire. Printed for Obadiah Blagrove at the Bear in St. Pauls Churchyard, near the Little North Door, 1678.

¹³ Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie* (1652), p. 18, remarks: "Admitting it for true, that those who staid behind with Noah spake the same language which was common to the Fathers before the Flood (be it the Hebrew, or what else soever it was) I see no reason to the contrary but that it might in time be branched into several Languages or dialects . . ."

¹⁴ *Essay*, p. 146.

This language, according to Biblical testimony, had persisted among the race of men until the building of the Tower of Babel, when God, angry at man's presumption, had caused the Confusion of Tongues to fall upon him.¹⁵ Speculation as to the language spoken before the confusion at Babel can be traced back as far as St. Jerome, who had suggested that it might be Hebrew. Later claims had been put forward from time to time in favor of Phoenician, Chaldean, Gothic and Samaritan. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), one of the greatest scholars of the day, had come closest to the truth when he had asserted that the primitive language had long disappeared, though relics of it were to be found in every tongue. But Webb was unconvinced by these arguments. He was certain that the primitive language could be none other than Chinese: it is this theory that he proceeded to develop, with much misplaced ingenuity, in his *Essay*.

Webb's interest in oriental languages can be traced back to his association with Doctor Brian Walton (1600-1661), Bishop of Chester and author of the *Introductio ad Lectionem Linquarum Orientalium* (1654), to whose *Polyglot Bible* (1657) he had contributed a frontispiece.¹⁶ It must have been this that set him off on an extensive course of reading, for the *Essay* reveals an acquaintanceship with literature on China which very few English scholars could have boasted of at that time.

We may digress for a moment to glance at the extent of English writing on China during this period. The first detailed and well-informed work on China in English had been Padre Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's *Historia* (1585), which had been translated into English by R. Parke and published in London in 1588. This work was the principal source of information for most of the English writers on China during the 17th century. Bacon, Raleigh, Sir Thomas Browne, Peter Heylyn and many others all drew heavily upon Mendoza. But what distinguishes Webb from the various other writers who leaned on Mendoza is above all his enthusiasm for China. Earlier English authors had always written quite dispassionately on this subject, whereas Webb displays all the fervor of the zealot. Burton, for example, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), makes frequent references to the Chinese, speaking approvingly of their high regard for philosophers, among other things. So in his ideal commonwealth he would have "these and

¹⁵ Genesis XI, 1—9.

¹⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography*, Walton and Webb.

all other inferior magistrates to be chosen as the *literati* in China . . . and such again not to be eligible or capable of magistracies, honours, offices, except they be sufficiently qualified for learning, manners, and that by strict approbation of deputed examiners."¹⁷ Elsewhere he remarks approvingly of "the industry of the Chinese, most populous countries, not a beggar or an idle person to be seen," and notes that "no man among them [is] noble by birth; out of their philosophers and doctors they choose magistrates: their politic nobles are taken from such as be *moraliter nobiles*, virtuous, noble; *nobilitas ut olim ab officio, non a natura*."¹⁸ But, cram-full of allusions to China as the *Anatomy* undoubtedly is, Burton displays no special enthusiasm for the subject: it was simply one of the many topics his brilliant and eclectic mind had uncovered in the course of his omniverous reading. Webb's bias, on the other hand, is very evident. Furthermore, unlike Burton who relied almost entirely on Trigault's *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas suscepta Societa Jesu* (1615),¹⁹ Webb had ransacked every available work on China. He had read *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1613),²⁰ which includes a couple of chapters on China composed of extracts culled from earlier writers, as well as Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* (1652),²¹ which contains little not in Mendoza or Purchas. Sir Thomas Brown alluded frequently to China in several of his works. *Psuedodoxia Epedemica* (1646) has a lengthy passage on the manufacture of porcelain,²² while *Hydriotaphia: Urne Burial* (1658) mentions the Chinese custom of burning paper images at funerals.²³ Browne's most interesting reference however occurs in his work, *Of Languages and particularly of the Saxon Tongue* (1683).²⁴ This tract, which hints at the possibility that Chinese might be the primitive language, would seem to suggest that its author may possibly have been acquainted with Webb's work, which had appeared fourteen years previously. Other

¹⁷ *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Everyman Edition, 3 vols. (London, 1932), Vol. I, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 140.

¹⁹ A partial translation of this work is to be found in *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625), "A Discourse of the Kingdome of Chine."

²⁰ *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (London: Printed by William Stambury for Henrie Featherstone, 1613).

²¹ *Cosmographie in Four Books, containing the Chorographie and Historie of the Whole World* (London: Printed for Henry Seile, 1652).

²² *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, 6 vols., (London, 1928-1831), Vol. II (Book II, chapter V), pp. 154-155. I am indebted to Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," p. 364, for this and the following references to Sir Thomas Browne.

²³ *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, Vol. IV, p. 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 86.

references to China appear scattered sporadically throughout Raleigh's *Historie of the World* (1614),²⁵ Bacon's *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (1605),²⁶ *Novum Organum* (1620)²⁷ *Sylva Sylvarum* (1620)²⁸ and *New Atlantis* (1627)²⁹ as well as in several minor works by other writers. But English enthusiasm for China did not really manifest itself until the advent of Sir William Temple (1628-1699), whose essays display an admiration of things Chinese besides which Webb's sinophilism pales into insignificance.³⁰ With this, however, we cannot be concerned, since the great bulk of Temple's work appeared after Webb's book had been published.

Enough has been said to show that Webb could have had but scant assistance from English writers in his quest for information on the Chinese. In fact, his principal sources owe nothing to England, for he relied mainly on the works composed by the Jesuit fathers of the Peking mission. Foremost among these was the *Relatione della Grande Monarchia della Cina* (1643) of Alvarez Semedo (Lu Te-chao) which Webb read in the original and not in the English translation of 1655.³¹ He was heavily indebted also to the works of Martini Martinii (Wei K'uang-kuo, 1614-1661) whose *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655), *Sinicae Historiae decas Prima* (1658)

²⁵ See Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," p. 360, who points out that Raleigh's two allusions to China "seem to have been derived from Mendoza."

²⁶ For this and the following references to Bacon, see Ch'ien Chung-shu "China," p. 358. In the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon shows that he had grasped the main principle of the Chinese script: "We understand further that it is the use of China and other Kingdoms of the High Levant to write in Characters Real, which express neither letters nor words in gross but Things or Notions." (*The Works of Francis Bacon*, 14 vol., London, 1857-1876, Vol. III, p. 399).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 237.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 448.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 129 ff.

³⁰ Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," pp. 371-375. Ch'ien notes (p. 373) that "Temple's approach is distinctly new" and goes on to remark (p. 375) that "Temple's summary of Confucianism was the most elaborate in English up to his time." See also Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 42-47.

³¹ *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China, lately written in Italian by Alvarez Semedo, now put into English by a person of Quality* (London, 1655). It is curious however that the misprints of some of the Chinese characters given by Webb come, not from the *Relatione*, but from the French translation by Clovis Coulon, the *Histoire Universelle du Grand Royaume de la Chine* (Paris, 1645). See H. Cordier, "Notes pour servir a l'histoire des études chinoises en Europe jusqu'à l'époque de Fourmont l'ainé," *Nouveaux Mélanges Orientaux* (Publications de L'Ecole Speciale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, 11me série), Vol. XIX (1886), p. 403.

and *De Bello Tartarico in Sinis Historia* (1654)³² were to remain standard works on China until late in the following century.³³

His other main source was, of course, the King James Bible. It may have been from Bishop Walton that he learned to use the various commentaries on this. The commentators — Archbishop Henry Usher of Armagh (1550-1613), Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614), Andrew Willet (1562-1621), Henry Ainsworth (1571-1622) and Joseph Mede (1586-1638) — are all cited in the course of the *Essay*. His use of his Biblical sources was enlightened for the time. Admittedly, he never contradicts scripture: but he is at least prepared to interpret his texts very liberally with the aid of his “credible histories.” His dedicatory epistle puts his case succinctly enough: “History informs us that China was peopled while the Earth was so [*sic*] of one Language, and before the Conspiracy. Scripture teacheth that the Judgement of Confusion of Tongues fell upon those only that were at BABEL: History informs that the CHINOIS being fully settled before, were not there; And moreover that the same LANGUAGE and CHARACTERS which long preceding that Confusion they used, are in use with them at this very DAY, whether the Hebrew or the Greek chronology be consulted.”³⁴

Webb begins his argument by pointing out that though we know little of the earth before the Deluge, we do know from Genesis that it was well-governed by men who, though idolaters, had “trades and occupations” and “enjoyed the use of letters.” Furthermore, he adds, the earth was more populous at that time than it has ever been since. This was an important step in his argument since he had to prove that China was peopled before the Flood or else ruin his case from the start. He follows the chronology of the Septuagint, as exemplified by Isaac Vossius

³² *De Bello tartarico Historia, in qua quo pacto Tartari hac nostra aetate Sincum imperium invaserunt, ac fere totum occuparunt narratur . . . auctore R. P. Martinio* (Antverpiae, 1654).

³³ The *Sinicae historiae decas prima* was the best general history of China until the appearance of Moyriac de Manila's *Histoire générale de la Chine ou annales de cet empire* (Paris, 1777-1785).

³⁴ *Essay*, p. A 3.

(1618-1689)³⁵ in his *Dissertatione de vera aetate mundi* (1659) in placing the date of the Deluge as 1656 years after the Creation and 2294 years before the birth of Christ. Thanks to the long life men enjoyed at this time, he goes on, aided by their known fecundity and the practice of polygamy, we may conclude that in 160 years ("the odd fifty-six years . . . being wholly laid aside") the world's population would have numbered 2,933,384,756,000,000 — a figure to make our Neo-Malthusians shudder!³⁶

We may note that Webb's calculations would have been anathema to Vossius, who was convinced that the world was but scantily populated before the Flood.³⁷ Webb does not seem to have noticed that, in his zeal to establish the fact that every nook and cranny of the earth was populated, he had considerably weakened his next argument, namely that the Ark was built in China, not the caucasus, because there would not have been enough people in the Caucasus at the time to have constructed such a vessel. But then, as we shall see, logic was by no means his strongest point. Nor is he worried unduly by the scriptural statement that the Ark came to rest on Ararat. This, he declares, with a fine disregard for historical geography, is a name that can be applied to whole chains of mountains: and since there is a Chinese tradition that during the Great Flood in the reign of Emperor Yao some people were saved by ascending a mountain in Shantung, then clearly Ararat must have been near, if not in, China. Webb then goes on to equate the legendary Yao, whom the Jesuits called Jaus, with the Janus who was often declared to have been Noah

³⁵ Vossius, who was born in Holland, acquired a reputation as scholar while barely out of his teens. In 1649 he accepted a post at the court of Christina of Sweden, where his unrivalled bibliographical knowledge enabled him to build up a fine Royal Library. In 1670 he came to England, where in 1673 he was presented by Charles II to a vacant prebend in the Royal chapel of Windsor. He was well-known at court, where his religious scepticism, allied to a certain credulity, led Charles II to remark of him that he would believe anything, except the Bible. His *De Antiquae Romae Magnitudine* contains a paean of praise for Chinese civilization. Duyvendak notes that Martini remarked of Vossius that "his native soil seemed to him but a place of exile and that he would soon die, if he could not die among the Chinese."

³⁶ *Essay*, p. 12.

³⁷ *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi* (Hagae Comitatus, 1659), p. XVIII. Pinot, *La Chine et la Formation de l'Esprit Philosophique en France* (1640-1740) (Paris, 1932) henceforward referred to as *La Chine*, p. 204 draws attention to Vossius' argument that the Biblical patriarchs would have to have begun begetting children at the age of twelve to have peopled the earth in the 101 years that was all the traditional chronology would allow to have elapsed between the Flood and the division of the Nations mentioned in Genesis X, 32.

himself. Noah, Webb maintains, very probably went to China before the Flood; for are there not many striking similarities between Noah and Yao? Each was associated with a great flood, each had a worthless son, each was revered for his righteousness and so on.³⁸ From this it was but a step for Webb to prove that the Chinese were not at Babel and hence, escaping the confusion unleashed there, had preserved the primitive language down to that day. Moreover, he adds, it is self-evident that the language they speak must still be in its original, pristine state since only conquests and commerce can corrupt a tongue. Of these, he states confidently, the Chinese know nothing: "They preserve a continued history compiled from their monuments and annual exploits of four thousand five hundred years. Writers they have more ancient than Moses himself. Ever since their happening to be a Nation they have never been corrupted by Intercourse with strangers, nor ever known what wars and contentions meant; but addicted only to quietness, delight and contemplation of Nature have run through the space (*plusquam*) of more than four thousand years, unknown indeed to other Nations, but enjoying to themselves their own felicity at pleasure."³⁹ It is startling to find such cogent expression being given at this early date to that very vision of Cathay which was later to bedazzle the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Here Webb has written a paragraph which would not have looked amiss coming from the pen of a du Halde or a Wolff.

In thus proceeding rough-shod to his conclusions, Webb had trampled over at least two major points of controversy: the first concerning the origin of the Chinese, the second their antiquity. Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), in his *China Illustrata* (1667),⁴⁰ had asserted that China had been peopled by the descendants of Shem. Webb poured scorn on this: ". . . his only argument is that because the Aegyptians, who were descended from Cham, used Hieroglyphicks, therefore the Chinoes [*sic*] did descend from

³⁸ Webb goes to great trouble to prove that Noah could in fact have been Yao: but this was a commonplace of the time which could be traced back as far as Mendoza, who remarks: "Ce royaume est si antique qu'on estime que les premiers qui le peuplaient ce furent les neveux et les petits-fils de Noé." (*Histoire du Grand Royaume de la Chine* [Paris, 1589], p. 40 verso). Webb seems to have missed this remark.

³⁹ *Essay*, p. 48.

⁴⁰ *China Monumentis qua Sacris qua Profanis, Nec non variis Naturae et Artis Spectaculis, Aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis Illustrata* (Amstelodami, 1667).

Cham because they used Hieroglyphickes also."⁴¹ As well say, Webb concludes scornfully, that because the Mexicans used hieroglyphics they too were descended from Shem. Kircher's theory, however, was destined to enjoy a popularity which eluded Webb's. A century later, it reached its full flowering in Joseph de Guignes' celebrated *Memoire dans lequel on prouve, que les Chinois sont une colonie egyptienne* (1759) and the *De Inscriptione quadam Egyptiaca* (1761) of John Turberville Needham. Nor was it finally disposed of even by the efforts of de Pauw in his *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Egyptiennes et les Chinois* (1774). As late as 1834 the scholarly world was taken in for a time by the report of a set of Chinese snuff-bottles found in the vicinity of an Egyptian tomb, and only the perspicacity of Stanislas Julien unmasked the clumsy fraud.⁴²

The antiquity of the Chinese was another object of dispute. If the Chinese histories were to be believed, then the records of their civilization dated back to the era before the Flood. Here we touch on what was later to grow into a dispute second in importance only to the question of the Rites — the controversy over chronology.⁴³ The first Chinese chronology, the *Sinicae historiae decas prima*, had been published by Martini in 1658. In this he stated quite clearly that he believed that China had been inhabited before the Flood. "Hanc enim qua de scribo, extremam Asiam ante diluvium habitatam fuisse procerto habeo."⁴⁴ This was a clear rebuttal to Semedo, whose *Relatione* had accused the Chinese of being grossly mistaken in their computations. Martini's admission was seized upon by the redoubtable Vossius, who in his *Dissertatio* (1659) was quick to adopt the Chinese chronologies in support of his contention that the Flood had not been a universal one, and that the Bible was therefore to be treated merely as local history which did not apply to the whole of the human race. Vossius calculated that the Chinese records dated back as far as 2847 B.C., i.e., to some 553 years before the Flood, by the Vulgate chronology. This was a startling assertion. To make matters worse, Sabatino de Ursis, a Jesuit astronomer in Peking, had

⁴¹ *Essay*, p. 28.

⁴² J.J.L. Duyvendak, *The Chinese Discovery of Africa* (London, 1949), p. 6.

⁴³ See Pinot, *La Chine*, chapter IX. Pinot (op. cit., p. 200) points out that Golius, acting on information given to him by Martini had written a dissertation on the sexagenary cycle of the Chinese which did a great deal to ensure faith in the reliability of their chronology.

⁴⁴ *Sinicae historiae decas prima*, p. 10.

reluctantly reported that he had been forced to conclude from his computation of the positions occupied by certain fixed stars mentioned in the *Shu Ching* (the *Classic of History*) that the Emperor Yao must have been on the throne in the year 2358 B.C., or some 64 years before the Flood.⁴⁵

Here we are witnessing the inception of the controversy which, in less than a century, was to result in the establishment of the reliability of the Chinese histories to the grave detriment of Biblical testimony. Webb seems to have been unaware of the momentous conclusions that could be drawn from the theory he was short-sightedly advocating. He would no doubt have been horrified to find himself classed with the Pre-Adamites, whose leader, La Peyrère,⁴⁶ had scandalized Europe with his speculations only a decade before: yet his contentions were closer to La Peyrère's than to orthodoxy. This is not to say, of course, that Webb was to be classed with the Libertines: he was merely concerned with proving his point about the Primitive Language. Yet it was fortunate for him that he was writing, not on the continent, but in

⁴⁵ Pinot, *La Chine*, p. 209. De Ursis was referring to the passage in the *Yao Tien*, the first chapter of the *Shu Ching*, where the legendary emperor Yao orders Hsi-ho (originally the chariot-driver of the sun but interpreted by later tradition as four persons) to establish the calendar. J. Needham and Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. III, pp. 186-187 and 245-246, have subjected this passage to a thorough scrutiny. They decide that it dates from between the 8th and 5th centuries B. C. though "the observations it contains may well be of the third millenium B. C. (*op. cit.*, p. 186, note b). J. B. Biot, *Etudes sur l'Astronomie Indienne et sur l'Astronomie Chinoise* (Paris, 1862) proved that the four solstitial lunar mansions (*hsiu*) would have occupied the points mentioned in the *Yao Tien* about the year 2400 B. C. Needham, however, while admitting that "there is not much escape from this conclusion," goes on to add: "But the great difficulty of any exact determination of the date was pointed out a century ago by Pratt ["On Chinese Astronomical Epochs," *Philosophical Magazine*, XXIII.1 (1862), 4th Series.] One of the most recent discussions is that of Chatley ["The Riddle of the Yao Tien Calendar," *JRAS* (1938), p. 503], who, while recognizing the strength of the case of Biot and de Saussure adds further uncertainties . . . The question is far from settled and the oracle-bone inscriptions may throw further light on it. In view of all that we know about ancient Chinese history, it seems very unlikely that the data in our text could refer to a time earlier than about 1500 B. C. at the most generous estimate . . . But the possibility remains that the text is indeed the remnant of a very ancient observational tradition, not Chinese at all but Babylonian." (Needham and Ling, *op. cit.*, p. 246).

⁴⁶ For La Peyrère see Pinot, *La Chine*, pp. 192-200. La Peyrère claimed that the story of man's origin with Adam applied only to the Jews and not to the other peoples of the world — an idea already put forward by Giordano Bruno. He based his conclusions partly on the chronologies of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and other ancient peoples.

the laxer atmosphere of Restoration England, for otherwise he might have found his intentions embarrassingly misconstrued.

Of Webb's other foibles, one could say a great deal. His excessive admiration for the Chinese — which he may perhaps have caught in some measure from Vossius — would afford an interesting study in itself. It would be difficult to find any later sinophile who surpassed Webb in this respect. But it is primarily with his remarks on the Chinese language that we must concern ourselves here, since it is for his perspicacity in this matter that he is to be chiefly remembered.

The history of the gradual comprehension by Europeans of the nature of the Chinese language, and more especially, of the Chinese script, has never been adequately related. The first specimens of Chinese characters to reach Europe are to be found in the seals affixed to letters in the Uighur script sent to Philip the Fair by the Mongol rulers of Persia in 1289 and 1305.⁴⁷ It would appear to have been William of Rubrick, who was sent on a mission to the Great Khan Möngu from 1253-1255, who holds the distinction of having been the first European to understand that the Chinese script was not alphabetic. "They do their writing with a brush such as painters paint with, and a single letter of theirs comprehends several letters so as to form a whole word,"⁴⁸ he wrote. Some three hundred years elapsed before this acute observation was to be understood. The great Portuguese historian, João de Barros (1498-1570), got hold of several Chinese books (which Montaigne may have seen in 1581) but could hardly have told one end of them from the other. Martin de Rada (1533-1578) may well have been the first European to have had a working knowledge of spoken and written Chinese. Certainly his lost *Arte y vocabulario de la lengua China* would appear to qualify him for

⁴⁷ See Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, 2nd ed., revised by Henri Cordier, Hakluyt Society (London, 1915), IV vols., I; p. 166; note 1. Reproductions of these letters can be found in Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian*, 3rd edition, revised by Henri Cordier, 2 vols. (London, 1903).

⁴⁸ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, p. 161, note 2. Yule remarks: "Neither Marco Polo, nor, I believe, any other traveller previous to the sixteenth century, had the acumen to discern the great characteristics of the Chinese writing as Rubruquis has done here."

this title.⁴⁹ With the arrival of Ricci, exact information about Chinese became available. By the end of the sixteenth century, Mendoza was sufficiently well-informed to be able to insert a few misshapen characters in his *Historia*. But it was not until the Jesuit mission had really established itself that European scholars became aware of the real nature of Chinese. Golius (1596-1667), Professor of Arabic at Leyden, must have been the first European layman to have possessed a knowledge of Chinese, though he certainly could have made but poor headway with the books in his Chinese library.⁵⁰ The first Englishman to have enjoyed even a smattering of Chinese must have been the much-traveled Peter Mundy, who visited China in 1637. His *Travels* includes a list of some two hundred characters with an approximation to their Cantonese pronunciation beside them. However, he does not seem to have had a very high opinion of the script, for he remarks: "And although there are said to be many thousands of these Characters and soe various, yett a Man May much sooner and easier expresse his Minde with our 24 letters."⁵¹ This bluff verdict was to be typical of the English reaction to the Chinese system of writing for the next couple of centuries. Similarly, Cave Beck (1623-1706) writing twenty years later, speaks contemptuously of Chinese characters "which are such for their fashion that a European with his one eye (which they afford him) would think they shut both theirs (which they so much boast of) when they drew the shapes of those characters."⁵² The only real interest shown in Chi-

⁴⁹ Sec C. Boxer, *South China in the sixteenth century*, Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. CVI (London, 1953), p. 1, XXXVII, who remarks that: "both Barros and Rada preceded Ricci and his Jesuit successors in the systematic acquisition and study of Chinese books." Barros had a Chinese slave to translate for him (Boxer, *op. cit.*, p. 1, XXXVI). Boxer remarks of Rada's *Arte*: "The existence [of this work] has never been fully established; but there seems little reason to doubt that Rada, with his linguistic gifts and tireless energy, at least made a start with such a work even if (as it possible) it never got beyond an imperfect draft." (*op. cit.*, p. 1, XXVI).

⁵⁰ J. J. L. Duyvendak, "Chinese Studies in Holland," p. 57.

⁵¹ *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, IV vols., edited by Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Hakluyt Society (Cambridge, 1907-1925), Vol. III, part I, p. 315. For Mundy's Chinese vocabulary see *ibid.*, pp. 312-313. The Hakluyt Society edition unfortunately omits the list of 200 Chinese characters with their pronunciation and meaning.

⁵² Cave Beck, *The Universal Character* (London, 1657), Preface. Quoted by Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, p. 23. Beck's reference (which Appleton makes no attempt to explain) is to Nicolo Conti's narrative about China, taken down in Latin by Poggio Bracciolini around 1440 or so, in which he says: "Us they [the Chinese] call Franks, and say that whilst other nations are blind, we see with one eye whilst they are the only people who see with both." See Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, Vol. I, p. 175.

nese was displayed by some supporters of the idea of a Universal Language, a theory very much in vogue at that time. Having no understanding of the part played by the purely phonetic element in the Chinese script, these enthusiasts thought of Chinese characters as ideographs, expressing ideas rather than words, a conception which agreed perfectly with their own inclinations. So the speculative Bishop of Chester, John Wilkins (1614-1672), brooded over the possibility of adopting Chinese as his "Real Character," only to reject it at last on the grounds that its tens of thousands of characters rendered it impossibly difficult.⁵³

None of these proponents of Chinese had any knowledge of the language; nor did they attempt to grapple with its intricacies. The first Englishman who really did make an attempt to learn the language, achieving a genuine if limited knowledge of it for his pains, was Webb's younger contemporary Thomas Hyde (1636-1703).⁵⁴ Hyde had been a pupil of Abraham Wheelock (1593-1653), first Sir Thomas Adams Professor of Arabic at Cambridge. He distinguished himself as a Persian scholar and was appointed Keeper of the Bodleian Library in 1659. In 1691 he succeeded Edward Pocock (1604-1691) as Laudian Professor of Arabic, becoming Regius Professor of Hebrew later the same year. Hyde enjoyed the reputation of being the greatest orientalist of his day: "Decessit Hyde, stupor mundi" they said of him at his death. He was for many years Interpreter and Secretary in Oriental Languages to the government. His interest in Chinese appears to have been stimulated by his association with Shen Fu-tung (b. circa 1657), "the little blinking fellow"⁵⁵ who came over with a Couplet in 1683 and later worked with Hyde at the Bodleian. Hyde gives an interesting personal account of Shen in his Latin introduction to his *De Historia Shahiludi*: "Mei in rebus Sinicis Informator fuit D.

⁵³ See Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 22-25; John Wilkins, *An Essay toward a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668), pp. 451-452.

⁵⁴ The writer is preparing an article on Hyde, who is certainly the most neglected figure in the history of English sinology. He is mentioned briefly by Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, p. 35 and Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China," pp. 382-383.

⁵⁵ The phrase occurs in *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary of Oxford, 1632-1695, described by himself*. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1894); Vol. III, p. 236. This contains an account of James II's conversation with Hyde during a royal visit to Oxford in September 1687. "Well, Dr. Hyde, was the Chinese here?" To which he answered, "Yes, if it please your majesty, and I learned many things of him." Then said his majesty, "He was a little blinking fellow, was he not?"

Shin Fo-cung, Nativus Chinensis, Nankinensis, quem ex China secum adduxerunt R.P.D. Couplet & reliqui fratres Jesuitae qui nuperis annis in Europam redierunt & Philosophiam Sinicam Parisiis ediderunt. Fuit quidem juvenis XXX.p.m. annos natus, optimae indolis, valde sedulus et studiosus, natura comis, moribusque benignus, per totem vitam in Sinensium Literatura & Philosophia educatus, in eorum libris versatissimus, & in lingua Sinica promptissimus: & is unicus ac solus ex Indigenis jam in China superestes aliquid Linguae Latinae callens. Antea fuerat alius quidam, sed tunc defunctus. Natus erat a Christianis parentibus, nam Pater antea a Missionariis fuerat conversus.⁵⁶ Thanks to Shen's tuition, Hyde learnt enough Chinese to be able to write a dialogue in Romanized Chinese (using his own system of transcription) and was also able to give detailed descriptions in various works, of Chinese weights and measures, as well as of Chinese chess (*weich'i*) and dice.⁵⁷

Webb must certainly have known of Hyde since the two of them had played a part in the production of Walton's *Polyglot Bible*.⁵⁸ At that time, Hyde knew no Chinese so it would seem very

⁵⁶ *Mandragorias—seu Historia Shahiludi* (Oxford, 1964), Praefatio ad Lectorem. "My instructor in all things pertaining to the Chinese was Master Shen Fo-tung, a native Chinese from Nanking, whom the Reverend Father Couplet and the other Jesuit fathers had brought with them some years previously when they returned to Europe and taught Chinese philosophy to the French. He was a young man of thirty years of age, of great natural talents, very hard-working and studious, affable by nature, kindly in his manners, educated throughout his whole life in Chinese literature and philosophy, deeply learned in their writings and most fluent in the Chinese [Mandarin] tongue. He was the only one remaining of the Chinese who knew anything of the Latin language. There was another, but he died. He was born of Christian parents, for his father had previously been converted by the missionaries."

⁵⁷ This dialogue would appear to be but part of an unfinished work. The manuscript preserved in the British Museum (Hyde, Royal, 16. BXXI) and reproduced in W. Ousley's *Oriental Collections* (London, 1797-1800), Vol. III, pp. 71-74, is marked on the back in Hyde's hand: *Decem Personarum Convivium Dialogus sic dictus*. Only three of the ten persons mentioned actually speak. Hyde's contribution to Edward Bernard's *De Mensuris Et Ponderibus Antiquius* (Oxford, 1688), deals with Chinese weights and measures. His preface to this *De Mensuris et Ponderibus Sinensium* mentions "Cinensis meus (amicus Oxonii fuit)." For Hyde's work on Chinese games see his *De Ludus Orientalibus* (Oxford, 1689 and 1694). Besides these, Hyde left two works on China unfinished. These are the *Curiosa Chinesia et Selanensia* and the *Varia Chinesia sc. eorum idololatria, Opiniones de Deo et de Paradiso, atque Gehenna et de Gradibus et Modis Supplicii; de eorum Literatura et Libris et Charta et de imprimendi Modo atque Antiquitate etc: omnia excerpta ex Ore et Scriptis nativi Chinesis Shin Fo-burgh [sic]*.

⁵⁸ *Dictionary of National Biography*, Hyde, Walton and Webb.

doubtful as to whether he could have been in any way responsible for arousing Webb's interest in sinology. Webb never learnt any Chinese at all: but his total ignorance of the language did not deter him from pronouncing on it. The surprising thing is that on the whole, his judgments are just. He admires the laconic brevity of Chinese, its essential simplicity, and freedom from distracting grammatical superfluities. Nor is he dismayed as so many Europeans have been, by the intricacies of the Chinese script. Even at that time, Chinese had acquired the reputation of being a language of heart-breaking difficulty. As one author remarked sarcastically: "Martinius tells his reader that he was obliged to learn sixty thousand independent characters [*sic!*] before he could read the Chinese authors with ease. That is, without all doubt, an excellent method, to propagate learning. When eight or ten of the best years of a Man's life must be spent in learning to read."⁵⁹

Webb would have none of this; for him, the difficulties of Chinese had been greatly exaggerated: ". . . they are not troubled with variety of Declensions, Conjugations, Numbers, Genders, Moods, Tenses and the like Grammatical niceties, but they are absolutely free of all such perplexing accidents, having no other rules in use than what the light of Nature hath dictated unto them. . . ." ⁶⁰ Even the writing of Chinese, Webb avers, is not so fearsome a task as it has been made out to be. For one thing, the number of characters in actual use is only eight to ten thousand: not much effort is required to learn these. Again, any inconvenience there might be in this system is amply compensated for by the extraordinary advantages which characters bestow in preserving a language from change and, more important, in making it widely intelligible. "But although this way of writing . . . be extremely troublesome to the memory, yet it brings with it a certain famous and incredible advantage to us in regard to the universality of the letter."⁶¹ Because of this, Webb concludes ". . . their characters [are] understood throughout their whole Empire . . . how far and wide soever it now extends, and by those people generally that were in time either colonies of theirs or conquered by them, as the Japonians, Coreans, Laio's, those of Tonchin and Sumatra, with the Kingdom of Cochin-China."⁶²

⁵⁹ William Wotton, *Reflections on Ancient and Modern Learning* (London, 1694), p. 154. Wotton was a tireless opponent of everything Chinese.

⁶⁰ *Essay*, p. 192.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

Webb then goes on to discuss the monosyllabic nature of Chinese, its tonal system, its brevity, which "makes it equivocal but for the same reason compendious" and the principles of its script. Finally, he concludes that Chinese as the language of some 200,000,000 people, spoken throughout an empire larger in extent than the whole of Europe, is clearly a tongue of some importance.

All this makes good sense: and while admitting that Webb has filched every word of his account from the Jesuit authors, one can only applaud the acumen which led him to isolate precisely those factors of Chinese which distinguish it as a language. Later writers, right down to the beginning of this century, were blind to that essential simplicity of Chinese which Webb had so clearly discerned. Obviously, Webb's account of the language contains its share of the nonsense which all too often makes itself manifest in the rest of the *Essay*. His solemn speculations as to whether Chinese is not the most ancient form of Hebrew⁶³ or whether all children prattle in Chinese before they learn to talk,⁶⁴ bring us up sharply at times against the realization that Webb lacked even the rudiments of linguistic knowledge. But in this he was very much of his age. Ultimately one can only wonder at the paradox we are confronted with: that for close on a century and a half quite the best account of the Chinese language available in English was to be found in a forgotten work whose central thesis was too preposterous even for the time it was written.⁶⁵

Furthermore, Webb's account of the social and political history of China is also surprisingly sound for its time, though admittedly entirely derivative. But here again the main contentions

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Sir Matthew Hale, *The primitive Origination of Mankind considered and examined according to the light of Nature* (London, 1677), dismisses Webb's work as mere conjecture. See Ch'ien, "China," p. 371; Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 31-32. Robert Hook's *Some Observations and Conjectures concerning the Chinese Characters, in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (March-April 1686), pp. 63-78, is far inferior to Webb's work in insight, though he was on firmer ground than Webb was when he declared that he believed "the present Chinese language to have no affinity with the Character, the true primitive, or first Language, or pronunciation of it, having been lost." This looks like a brilliant conjecture on Hook's part. The idea that though the characters had remained more or less the same, their pronunciation had altered, did not occur to European scholars until the nineteenth century. Hook is here taking the first step on the path that leads to Karlgren's reconstructions of Ancient and Archaic Chinese.

of the work were unpalatable enough to turn readers away from a history otherwise remarkable for its sense of balance and its accuracy. Yet Webb's work, neglected as it was, was not entirely forgotten. Some seventy years after the first publication of the *Essay*, we find Samuel Shuckford (1694-1754), in his *Sacred and Profane History of the World* (1731-1737) repeating Webb's speculations: "There is indeed another language in the world, which seems to have some marks of its being the original language of mankind, namely the Chinese . . . Noah, as has been observed, very probably settled in these parts; and if the great father and restorer of mankind came out of the ark and settled here, it is very probable that he left here the one universal language of the world."⁶⁶

Much more important, however, was Webb's influence on Leibnitz, who noted in his correspondence that John Webb believed that Chinese was the Primitive Language.⁶⁷ It may well have been Webb's thesis in fact, that initially stimulated Leibnitz into displaying the interest in Chinese as the Primitive Language that he displayed all his life. If this is so, Webb's labors were not in vain: to have influenced Leibnitz is in itself sufficient commendation to assure him a permanent if minor place in the history of European sinology.

⁶⁶ Samuel Shuckford, *Sacred and Profane History of the World*, 4th ed. (London, 1808), Vol. I, p. 106; Appleton, *A Cycle of Cathay*, pp. 33-34.

⁶⁷ *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque royale de Hanovre*, edited by Louis Couturat (Paris, 1903), Vol. I, p. 53; Pinot, *La Chine*, p. 333. For Leibnitz's sinophilism see Donald F. Lach, "Leibnitz and China," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, VI, 4 (October, 1945), pp. 436-455.