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Voltaire, Linguet, and China

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Voltaire's interest in sinology has been described¹, the sources for several entries in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* have been established², and Basil Guy has set out in admirable detail the genesis, growth, and significance of his sinophilism. Since the latter indicates that Voltaire's ideas on China did not change importantly after the publication of his *Essai sur les mœurs* (p.276), and because he does not pursue at length the question of China in the satirist's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, it would seem useful to show that Voltaire was influenced in the composition of his article on China for this second work by Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet's *Théorie des loix civiles* (1767). It would also be opportune to examine concomitantly the nature of his adaptation of Linguet's treatise, wherein he found confirmation of his own already established conviction that China was populated by wise men and knowing philosophers pursuing their ancient ways peacefully and in enlightened fashion.

It is known that Linguet and Voltaire were acquainted with each other's work, because the former wrote Voltaire on 19 February 1767 that he was sending him a copy of his *Théorie des loix civiles*³. While the book did not reach Geneva immediately, because it was still being held by customs in Lyons as late as

¹ Arnold H. Rowbotham, 'Voltaire, sinophile', *PMLA* (1932), xlvii.1050-1065, and Basil Guy, *The French image of China before and after Voltaire* (Studies in Voltaire, xxi: 1963), pp.214-284.

² Ira Wade and Norman L. Torrey, 'Voltaire and Polier de Bottens',

RR (1940), xxxi.147-155; Mina Waterman, 'Voltaire and Firmin Abauzit', *RR* (1942), xxxiii.238-249; G. Mortimer Crist, 'Voltaire, Barcochebas and the early French deists', *FR* (1933), vi.483-489.

³ Best.D13973.

6 April 1767⁴, it was apparently in Voltaire's hands by 13 February 1768, when the Bern gazette objected to certain comments Voltaire had already made about it⁵. Yet there is no doubt that the author of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* had read Linguet's *Théorie des loix civiles* by 23 December 1768, because he wrote to Alembert under this date and complained of its lengthiness while observing that Linguet 'a de l'esprit pourtant, et a quelque fois la serre assez forte'⁶.

It will be recalled that Voltaire published his *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* between 1764 and 1769, that this work was complemented by his *Les Questions sur l'encyclopédie* appearing in 1772-1774, and that the so-called *Dictionnaire philosophique* is in reality a compilation arranged by Voltaire's editors after his death⁷. Since the second title is a revision and was issued in Voltaire's lifetime, the comparison here will be made between the *Questions* and Linguet's treatise. In this way the full impact of the latter's book upon Voltaire's essay will be more fully measured. Also, the dates of publication for *La Théorie des loix civiles* and *Les Questions sur l'encyclopédie* render more plausible a comparison between Linguet's text and that of the second rather than of the first or third version of Voltaire's composition: Voltaire had read Linguet by 1768, and the *Questions* started to appear in 1772⁸.

Voltaire's article on China begins with a sentence alluding to the exploitation of this country by occidentals in search of certain natural resources found there. He remarks that this senseless venture is undertaken by Europeans despite their already

⁴ Best.D14084.

⁵ Best.13831.

⁶ Best.14417.

⁷ William C. Archie, 'Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique: Les Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*', *Symposium* (1951), v.317-325.

⁸ the references hereafter are to the following editions of the two works:

Théorie des loix civiles, ou principes fondamentaux de la société (Londres 1767), 2 vols., which does not bear Linguet's name, and Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ed. Julien Benda (Paris), which prints the 'suppléments parus dans *Les Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*'.

possessing these materials or their equivalents in abundance. He concludes this observation with the ironic comment that all the plunderers do in return for the Chinese is to try to convert them: 'Nous allons chercher à la Chine de la terre, comme si nous n'en avons point; des étoffes, comme si nous manquions d'étoffes; une petite herbe pour infuser dans l'eau, comme si nous n'avions point de simples dans nos climats. En récompense, nous voulons convertir les Chinois: c'est un zèle très louable: mais il ne faut pas leur contester leur antiquité et leur dire qu'ils sont des idolâtres' (i.148).

Linguet had written in parallel fashion: 'Je ne rougirai jamais de le dire: cette Asie dont nous apprécions les moeurs avec tant d'ignorance, et que nous parcourons avec tant d'avidité, peut nous fournir des trésors tout autrement précieux que ceux que nous y cherchons. Ce sont des soies, des diamans, de l'or que nous nous applaudissons d'y ramasser. Combien plus sage seroit le voyageur bienfaisant, qui nous en rapporteroit une théorie suivie des vérités utiles qui y sont mises en pratique de tems immemorial' (i.114-115).

There are at least four points of similarity between these two passages: a contrast is established between greedy Europeans and despoiled orientals; westerners are portrayed as concerned exclusively with the material wealth of the east; each author reflects or expresses his shame or indignation at the crass attitude and behaviour of his compatriots; the aggressive intruders are unaware of the intangible values inherent in the ancient but vital traditions still dear to their hosts. There are differences, of course, because Linguet is interested in extending his knowledge of oriental philosophy of government, while Voltaire is intent upon using this opportunity to attack the church. Linguet's silks, diamonds, and gold are turned to clay, textiles, and tea. Linguet is speaking of Asia; Voltaire refers only to China. But the basic themes in the two passages are identical, and the attitude reflected by each author is the same.

Voltaire devotes his next four paragraphs to an account of

professor Wolf's unjust dismissal from his chair at Halle, but he returns to a direct discussion of China in his sixth, seventh, and eighth paragraphs, where he derides European historians quibbling over Chinese dynasties and chronology. He insists once again on the 'prodigieuse antiquité' of this country, and, in his ninth paragraph, he contrasts her almost ageless customs with the relatively short traditions of France: 'Laissons donc, nous qui sommes d'hier, nous descendants des Celtes, qui venons de défricher les forêts de nos contrées sauvages, laissons les Chinois et les Indiens jouir en paix de leur beau climat et de leur antiquité' (i.151).

Linguet refers in similar fashion to the barbarian heritage of Europeans which induces them to persist in what he calls 'ces idées gothiques' (ii.207); he points to the Asiatic mode of government 'sous lequel tant de peuples vivent heureux' (ii.207); he uses the phrase, 'beaux climats', as a synonym for Asia (ii.216). He defends this continent with the argument that 'la longue durée de la forme des gouvernemens de l'Asie est seule une réponse invincible aux imputations déshonorantes dont on ose la noircir' (ii.216). Each author, therefore, expresses the same pro-Asia opinions, even if he must decry his own heritage by taking this position. Thus, while both writers point to the validating longevity of oriental tradition and the recent 'barbaric' origins of their own culture, they exhort Europeans to honour Asiatics at least to the extent of permitting them to enjoy in peace what Linguet terms their 'beaux climats' and which Voltaire designates as 'beau climat'. Also, it will be observed that Linguet refers to Asia in voicing these views, and Voltaire speaks suddenly of both Indians and Chinese although he has suggested titularly that only the latter's country is under discussion.

Until this point in his article, Voltaire has considered only the general topics of Sino-European relationships and the venerable antiquity of China. In the middle of his ninth paragraph, he turns to the question of government: 'Il ne faut pas être fanatique du mérite Chinois: la constitution de leur empire

est à la vérité la meilleure qui soit au monde, la seule qui soit toute fondée sur le pouvoir paternel' (i.151). The father holding total sway over his family and the virtues of this situation being the source of China's strength and unity are favourite themes of Linguet. He writes, 'La puissance paternelle n'a souffert presque aucune altération en Asie. La dépendance filiale y subsiste encore dans toute son étendue. Les pères . . . y jouissent de tous les droits attachés à la paternité' (ii.206). Shortly after he offers this description of the absolute and complete power of the oriental father, Linguet equates the family with the empire and implies that the government is but an extension and a repetition of the *pater familias* concept: 'Le pouvoir paternel en est une des principales branches, et elle s'y soutient avec autant de vigueur que sa tige. Dans ces climats fortunés où tout l'Empire n'est considéré que comme une grande famille, chaque famille est censée y former un petit Empire' (ii.221-222).

Voltaire finds added reason to admire China in the fact that it is the only country 'dans laquelle un gouverneur de province soit puni, quand, en sortant de charge, il n'a pas eu les acclamations du peuple' (i.151). Linguet points out that the Chinese punish incompetent or disloyal 'magistrats' in the name of justice, a measure that dismays Europeans unable to understand that 'les incidens qui nous paroissent d'ici des révolutions sanglantes dans le ministère, ne sont que des sacrifices qu'on lui fait. . . . Nous nommons rigueur tyrannique ce qui n'est que l'effet d'une sage et prudente fermeté' (i.214-215). Linguet does not specify that the people judge the competency and honesty of their government officials, but he makes it clear that they are answerable for their acts and that they are punished in the name of justice rather than through revolution. If all details are not parallel in both texts in this instance, however, it is no less true that the two sinologists are discussing the same aspect of their subject.

After pointing to the insistence by the Chinese upon virtue in government, Voltaire recalls a feature of their history which he considers added evidence of the political strength of their

country: its constitution is 'la seule qui ait fait adopter ses lois à ses vainqueurs, tandis que nous sommes encore sujets aux coutumes des Burgundiens, des Francs et des Goths, qui nous ont domptés' (i.152). The retention of their own customs by the Franks is also indicated by Linguet, who asks, 'Quand nos ancêtres sortirent de leurs forets sauvages pour démembrer ce colosse expirant de l'Empire Romain, en consacrerent-ils les coutumes dans les pays qu'ils usurperent? Ils en prirent la religion: mais ils se garderent bien d'en conserver la politique' (ii.217). And his question is posed in reference to the same situation, wherein, after conquest, only two results are possible: 'Ou les vainqueurs sont régis par les loix des vaincus, ou les vaincus le sont par celles des vainqueurs' (ii.218). Like Voltaire, he notes that the superiority of eastern government has been the force effecting the political triumph of the invaded country, since it is the oldest and best form of government that survives no matter which of the warring parties conquers: 'il faut remarquer soigneusement que ce sont les plus anciennes qui ont prévalu de part ou d'autre, et les meilleurs qui ont eu la préférence' (ii.218). In his preface, moreover, Linguet alludes to the tribal origins of the French and their laws, a fact which he adduces to demonstrate the presumptuousness of the west in belittling the orient: 'C'est pourtant à l'occasion de ces Loix que nous osons leur insulter, nous, malheureux descendans des Cauques, des Sicambres, des Usipetes et des Bructeres. Nous sommes encore tout couverts des haillons avec lesquels nos ancêtres cachoient à peine leur nudité dans leurs forêts sauvages: nos Loix nationales ne sont autre chose que la boue grossiere dont ils s'étoient souillés dans leurs marais' (i.119-120).

It will be observed that Voltaire and Linguet see a sign of superiority in the ability of China to assimilate her invaders, and they refer specifically to 'coutumes' as well as to governments in their arguments besides naming the tribal groups they consider pertinent to their assertions. Yet there is a subtle difference in the two writers' points of view: Voltaire speaks as if he were a citizen of Rome when he remarks that the Burgundians,

Franks, and Goths conquered 'nous'; Linguet identifies himself as an eighteenth-century Frenchman in his reference to 'nos ancêtres' emerging from the swamps and forests of the north to drive the Romans from Gaul. This difference may be explained by Voltaire's intent and manner being more satiric than expository, of course, but the similarity between the passage by Voltaire and Linguet's comments is no less striking by reason of their parallel ideas and allusions.

Finally, Voltaire reverts to the theme of the antiquity of the Chinese nation and asserts that her long history certifies the authenticity of her institutions and customs: 'Nous avons assez remarqué ailleurs combien il est téméraire et maladroit de disputer à une nation telle que la chinoise ses titres authentiques' (i.362). As has been indicated, this view is one which Linguet expresses often in his zeal to establish the pertinency of his using China as an ideal example of an enduring government: 'il n'y a point de pays où les coutumes soient moins variables, où les loix, une fois établies, prennent une solidité plus constante. Elles s'y affermissent par le tems, au lieu d'y dépérir comme par-tout ailleurs' (ii.213-214). Like Voltaire, he laments the European tendency to misunderstand and to belittle a non-European tradition: 'J'avoue que je démêle avec plaisir dans ces Empires dont nous nous faisons une idée si fausse, un tableau très-peu altéré des premieres institutions humaines. J'aime à m'y retrouver auprès du berceau de la société' (ii.219).

An inquiry into the similarity between Voltaire's entry for China in his *Questions sur l'encyclopédie* and Linguet's *Théorie des loix civiles* reveals that both writers were sinophiles. They based their favourable opinions of this country upon the antiquity and validity of her customs and institutions. They regretted that Europeans refused to acknowledge the venerability and authenticity of public government and private life based upon paternal discipline and familial virtue. Voltaire saw fit to speak of other things, of course, as did Linguet, who was interested in oriental views on matrimony, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance

as well as morals, traditions, and government. But, in the latter areas, their information and sentiments were remarkably similar. It is true that the topics whereon they held parallel opinions may seem almost commonplace today, when the world is small, but China and Asia then were relatively new subjects for discussion in books designed for popular consumption. It might be argued that any educated gentleman of the eighteenth century would have shared the knowledge and notions found in Voltaire and Linguet, that they might very well have expressed them independently of each other, therefore especially Voltaire, whose interest in 'Chinoiserie' in general and in the writings of Jesuit missionaries to China in particular is well known. Yet the fact remains that Linguet's treatise was in Voltaire's hands at the time he was writing his *Questions*. Also, as soon as Voltaire's work appeared, the similarity between his remarks on China and those already made by Linguet was observed immediately by at least one critic of the contemporary literary scene, who wrote in reference to Linguet's *Théorie des loix civiles*, 'M. de Voltaire l'a copié presque mot pour mot dans ses *Questions Encyclopédiques* relativement à ce que M^e. Linguet a dit concernant les administrations orientales'. The phrase, 'presque mot pour mot', is an exaggeration, of course, but it does reveal that the editor of the *Mémoires secrets* was so struck by the resemblance between the passages on China in the two works that he was led into an overstatement. And it is to be admitted that he was correct at least to the extent of inducing future editors of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* to include Linguet's *Théorie des loix civiles* among the sources Voltaire used or consulted in writing this work.

⁹ *Mémoires secrets*, xxxiv.81.