Commentary on de Pee

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Christian de Pee’s article “The Cycles of Cathay” is an interesting account of the development of Sinology in Europe and the United States and a captivating exercise in the development of scholarship and the connections between the evolution of academia and the intellectual and sociopolitical happenstances. He traces the development of Sinology from an early philological origin to the “behaviorist revolution” and the development of social sciences to the post-structuralist “revolution” in the study of cultural history. This development strikes a reader coming from a neighboring field of non-European history as eerily similar yet significantly distinct and raises multiple questions, which I will try to explore in this commentary.

The chronology that de Pee outlines is revealing to the connections between colonial policies and priorities, on one hand, and the development of different fields of study, on the other. He draws clear connections that drive the reader smoothly to his conclusions. However, this chronology leaves much to be desired and raises more questions than it answers. De Pee begins with the development of philological studies in the eighteenth-century European academia with the work of specific philologists, many of whom were trained in China under the supervision of Chinese literati. However, this raises a question about earlier traditions of learning Chinese that developed alongside the missionary activities in the seventeenth century on. How did this tradition influence Chinese learning in the nineteenth century? Were there any continuities between the colonial activities from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, or can we notice significant breaks in these traditions?

It is very hard to trace how a particular language entered the intellectual sphere in a specific community. However, it is possible to determine the spread of particular language-learning traditions and how these traditions influence the languages and the perception of the discursive fields of study or scholarship regulated by this knowledge. In the case of Arabic, for instance, it is clear that different modes of Arabic learning existed in different parts of Europe since the ninth century, allowing for communications and diplomatic and commercial relations to exist. New patterns of Arabic learning appear in the twelfth century with the beginning of translations from Arabic to Latin. In the latter case, the interest in Arabic was largely “instrumental” and did not dictate a field of study.
or a discursive space of communication as much as it defined a medium of transmission of “classical” knowledge.

In the early sixteenth century, the first Arabic books were printed in Europe. The close ties between King Francis I and the Ottoman court allowed for more books to be printed and for Arabic print to exist more frequently in Europe. It was about a century later when the first chair of Arabic was established in Cambridge under the name “Sir Thomas Adams’s professor of Arabic,” which was established in 1643. The appearance of Arabic press and the establishment of a professorship of Arabic signaled the beginning of a new paradigm, where this practice of language-learning that is now organized in the confines of university education defined a field of study and solidified an “order of things.” This organized form of language-learning signaled also the naturalization of Arabic studies as part of the larger orientalist discourse in its academic sense.

The continuity in the case of Arabic is striking. In the interest of space, we can confine ourselves to a rapid look at the Thomas Adams chair in Cambridge to monitor some of the priorities motivating Islamic and Arabic studies and to see the continuity in this scholarship. The second person to occupy the chair (and the first under the chair’s full name, “Sir Thomas Adams’s Professor of Arabic”) was the famous Edmund Castell (1606–1685), whose works reflect the spirit of the time in regulating the linguistic fields and arranging the different fields of knowledge accordingly. In addition to helping Brian Walton produce the first polyglot Bible, he composed the famous *Lexicon Heptaglottum Hebraicum, Chaldaicum, Syriacum, Samaritanum, Aethiopicum, Arabicum, et Persicum* in 1669. The compendium shows not only an interest in philological comparison but also a definition of geographic fields of study and of racial identities that regulated the strategies of knowledge. With Hebrew, Chaldiac, Syriac, Samaritan, Ethiopian, Arabic and Persian, Castell defined the discursive space of “Semitism” as a line of inquiry that operated in Orientalist studies for a long period. In this order of things, who spoke the languages, whether the languages were in use or not and the geographic spaces of their practice did not matter as much as the discursive space of knowledge that was defined and reiterated in this compendium.

De Pee hints at the spaces of linguistic knowledge without delving much into them. He explains that many of the early scholars of Chinese worked or studied many other languages or fields: Julien (Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Sanskrit), Franke (Sanskrit), Maspero (Egyptology), and Demiéville (Sanskrit) among others (64). Were the methods of training and the selection (or self-selection) of scholars consistent with a particular view of China and Sinology within or without the larger Orientalist context? How did these scholars learn Chinese and how did they think of the earlier missionaries who learned and worked in China for a century before them?
Leonard Chappelow (1683–1768) and William Wright (1830–1889), who occupied Thomas Adams’s chair of Arabic as well, contributed to regulating the knowledge of Arabic by organizing Arabic grammar for the Western reader. Chappelow published his “Arabic Grammar,” while William Wright translated Carl Paul Caspari’s (1814–1892) “Arabic Grammar” into English. Caspari’s “Grammar” remained extremely important in Arabic teaching for a long time and contributed to creating the European understanding of Arabic to this day. In his book, Caspari regulated Arabic tenses and verbal forms in a manner that is consistent with Latin European languages constructing essentially what amounts to a new Arabic grammar that remains “unknown” and “unnatural” to native Arabic speakers but the only way to teach Arabic to Europeans. The difference is significant as it creates a new and parallel discourse of knowledge that takes for granted the presumed inferiority of the languages of the “natives” and tries to regulate this language for the sake of the European gaze.

More importantly, Caspari and his contemporaries produced a new linguistic order that controls the dialectics and recreates the classical linguistic structure. With “classical Arabic” being essentially a textual phenomenon in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Middle East, and with the spread and evolution of different regional colloquial and dialectics, European Orientalists organized and regulated the linguistic field to “recreate” classical Arabic in a manner that is consistent with the textual practice and adaptive to modern society. However, this process led to the marginalization of the local and regional dialects, producing a double linguistic space, where a written language expresses the higher thought and a spoken one reproduces the thought in different registers of oral communication.

A similar phenomenon in Colonial India is analyzed by Michael Dodson, where he describes how British colonial powers aimed not only at producing translations from English to Sanskrit or from Sanskrit to English but at regulating the Indian linguistic landscape by promoting the intellectual priority of Sanskrit and motivating translations of different texts from different languages in the Indian peninsula to Sanskrit (Michael S. Dodson, “Translating Science, Translating Empire: The Power of Language in Colonial North India,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 47[4] [2005]: 809–35). Here, the colonial powers attempted to regulate the linguistic space while creating new realities and new priorities of knowledge. This view motivates a question about the Chinese case discussed in de Pee’s article as to how language learning regulated the linguistic space itself and whether the European learning motivated a specific ordering of the linguistic space along particular racial, ethnic and intellectual lines.

The influence of Chinese literati on European scholars and how many Sinologists were trained in China marks an essential difference between
Sinology on one hand and Islamic Studies among other Orientalist disciplines, on the other. The intellectual rapport between the European academe and the Chinese milieu reflect in many ways a unique arrangement that may have been influenced by the Chinese local “modernization” priorities, the unique colonial and post-colonial history in China and the Japanese colonialism in East Asia. In the case of Arabic learning, native institutions, scholars or literati remained largely marginalized by the European academe and they always occupied a low position in the hierarchy of academic learning of Arabic. The ordering of language and linguistic learning played an important role in marginalizing local linguistic knowledge, as it remained essentially unintelligible to the European student. The local language teacher, let alone the historian, needed to change the outlook of their teaching and to reorder their scholarship to fit within a European Orientalist paradigm.

Chronology is essentially an endeavor of ordering and a trial to discipline specific epistemic content to a preconceived, seen-natural or logical, template where such pieces of epistemic content acquire their place within the chronology by virtue of a specific character among many that they have; namely their time of occurrence. Much like any other attempts at ordering, chronology or chronological analysis attempts to reveal more by arranging and to show new insights in the subject of study by putting things together in a particular order. Implicit in this view are the claims of the novelty of this order, of its epistemic value and of its ontological relevance. Christian de Pee’s “Cycles of Cathay” attempts to organize Sinology and Chinese learning in Europe and the United States. In this organization, he argues, albeit implicitly, for a reason and an epistemic value for this organization, which can be the uncovering of twists and turns or the cyclical nature that we see in the title. In and of itself, this attempt is increasingly important and valuable for the field of Sinology as for other neighboring fields.

However, extending the epistemic value of this order requires more substantial arguments about its ontological relevance. This is to say that the organizing character has to go beyond the dates and even the concurrent events and tides of colonialism in order to show how this principle of organization is capable of revealing more and of providing greater insight beyond its own organizing principle. De Pee attempts to achieve this goal by dissecting the implications of some entries in his “ordering” such as the behaviorist and structuralist views and how they influenced the interest and the subject of the study. In this regard, he leaves more to be desired. The present reader, coming from a different background and intrigued by the ordering of knowledge in my own fields of Islamic studies and of the history of science, was left with many questions that aim at dissecting the orders of knowing that are de Pee’s subject of organization. Although the
organizing principle of the article and its major lines of argument drive us
to see clear developments and specific sophisticated connections between
the analyzed systems of knowledge (different schools of Sinology) and the
surrounding intellectual and sociopolitical gestalt, the article takes these
specific systems or schools for granted, placing many of them one after
the other relying on the self-evidence of the argument.

We are left with a desire to break through these systems of knowledge
and see how they specifically relied on the surrounding gestalt to con-
struct an order of things that governed their hermeneutic and heuristic
strategies, their ontological awareness and epistemic sensitivities. De Pee’s
use of the term “Orientalism” is an example of this issue: although the
development of orientalism and orientalist thought appear to be central
to the article, the term and the discursive practice are taken for granted
as the article shifts between an instrumental usage where “orientalist”
is simply a job or a university position and a Said-ian understanding
where the term recalls long narratives and discussions. While I believe
that both usages, and even shifting between them, is perfectly legitimate,
“Orientalism” as an order of knowledge (instrumental usage) and as a
principle of ordering (Said-ian understanding) needed to be dissected in a
manner that allows us to see the specificity of Sinology in the collectivity
of Oriental studies and the influence of this paradigm on knowledge, the
knower and the object of knowledge.

Similarly, taking these systems of knowledge for granted precludes the
author from seeing how such systems are capable of changing the object
of knowing itself. In fact, a system of knowledge, by virtue of its being
a discursive tool of organization, intends first and foremost to organize
the field of knowledge and its objects in a manner that renders them ac-
cessible to its strategies and intelligible to its actors and audience alike.
Here, the statements produced by any such system are interesting in and
of themselves but veil an attempt to organize the field of knowledge to
allow for the production of these statements. Throughout de Pee’s article,
the object of Sinology(ies) remain essentially absent from the analysis as
we are not told of how these developments in Sinology influenced the
perception of sources, how sources were chosen and what constituted a
source to be chosen from and how they were dealt with in terms of lin-
guistic, intellectual and even physical practices such as copying, export-
ing or note-taking among other techniques. Such practices influence the
objects of knowing not only for any specific school of Sinology but for
subsequent discussions as well.

Moreover, systems of knowledge produce and are produced by specific
learning techniques, which involve periods and sites of study, mentors and
mentoring traditions, stages of learning, sourcebooks, etc. These techniques
of learning are also essential parts of the organization of knowledge and
of the legitimization of specific methods, inquiries and/or tools. In the discussion of Orientalism, such tools afford us a window into how the European and American Academe negotiated its relations with the local elites and with their own students and scholars. In their being epistemic structures, these systems of knowledge (or Sinologies) are by definition systems that intend and aim at communicating an ordered form of knowledge. In this regard, the strategies of communication and the tools of education and learning are crucial to understanding the development and the mutations of these systems of knowledge.

Christian de Pee offers us a chance to look at the development of Sinology across time in a manner that connects the field with different schools of thought and with changing circumstances. This analysis, as any deep and provocative engagement, motivates many questions and points out the necessity of dissecting the history of scholarship in different fields of “Oriental Studies.”