

Saint Confucius, the Chinese Adam, and a Broken Mirror: Writing World History in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Early European attempts at writing a comprehensive history of the world struggled in particular with China, whose greater antiquity was difficult to accommodate with the biblical chronology of Creation and the Flood; the Chinese might also have traveled to the Americas before the Europeans. The fulcrum of this debate was the Dutch Republic, where innovative schools of historiography and biblical criticism went hand in hand with interest in East Asian material culture, antiquities, and books. Around 1650, Jacob Golius, Georg Hornius, and Isaac Vossius quarreled about China in relation to Egypt, Israel, and the Americas. The debate flared up again fifty years later when Nicolaes Witsen and Gijsbert Cuper confronted the Republic of Letters with a rare bronze mirror from Han Dynasty China. Dutch attempts to engage with Chinese written and material sources, and even with a handful of early Chinese visitors to Europe, arguably made this exchange an early example of global history.

Who knows, as many say, about the things that flourished in an earlier age among the ingenious Chinese, who calculate the rule of their kings in so many thousands of years that Adam would not even come close, were one to count backwards in time.

—Willem Beurs¹

1. “Wie weet, zeggen vele, wat er by de vernuftige Chinesen te voren gebloeit heeft, die ook haare Koningen zoo veele duizenden van jaren optellen, dat'er Adam niet eens omtrent en zou komen, als men naa agteren reekenen zal” (Beurs, *De groote wereld*, “Voorreden”).

In the 1660s the Dutch city of Leiden witnessed professor of history Georg Hornius running naked through the streets, shouting, “Have you seen the paradisiacal man? I am Adam!”² What seems to have gone to his head were his attempts to write a comprehensive global history. He had long speculated on the origins of Native Americans and discussed the age of the world with a notoriously quarrelsome colleague, Isaac Vossius. Their main bone of contention was China, as its literary sources documented an unbroken cultural tradition stretching back to before Jewish antiquity, posing a challenge to the biblical dates of the Universal Flood and even Creation itself. Perhaps the Flood had not extended to East Asia, and God had spoken to Adam in Chinese. Or had there been men before Adam, which might explain the antiquity of Chinese as well as Egyptian civilizations? Had East Asians discovered and peopled the Americas long before Columbus?

Hornius’s conundrums illustrate how early European theories about the global spread of civilizations and the age and shape of the world struggled in particular with Chinese history. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, in the context of Protestant millenarian ideas, the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644 and the taking of the imperial throne by the non-Chinese Manchus appeared as a cataclysmic event: that very same millennial tradition, stretching back to Adam or earlier, had finally come to an end, confirming eschatological expectations. A hotbed for these discussions was the Low Countries, which were a European staple market for non-Western goods and material culture while also fostering innovative schools of historiography, antiquarianism, and biblical criticism. This essay will draw out how the Dutch, in their engagement with China in particular, attempted to write what might be called global history *avant la lettre*: an integrated history of the world that was partly based on non-Western expertise. This Dutch perspective originated, obviously, in Chinese sources about Chinese history, and it is their (largely implicit) presence that is in the background throughout; there was also an important, albeit more occasional, role for ancient Chinese artifacts and even for Chinese individuals.

Incidentally—by one of the ironies of history that sometimes mark early European-Asian encounters—the Chinese were occupied with chronological calculations, as were the Dutch. One of the main reasons why Europeans were allowed entrance into China at all, and eventually came into close contact with the emperor, was their ability to establish a more accurate calendar to determine the events of China’s past and—based on astrology—its future. As we shall see, sometimes Chinese and European attempts to

2. “An tu unquam vidisti hominem paradisticum? Ego sum Adam” (Jöcher, *Gelehrten-Lexicon*, vol. 2, col. 1709). Hornius’s madness, first documented in 1668, may also have been related to his experiments with alchemy.

make sense of the world's history directly interlinked: a Dutch discussion about a Chinese artifact inspired at least one scholar to travel to Beijing to work on the Chinese imperial calendar.

It seems that since the *spatial* layout of an interconnected world was being charted in increasing detail, the *temporal* dimension also had to be calibrated, in Europe as well as in Asia. Thus, around the time that the first detailed maps of the world were published in the Netherlands and China, histories of the world also were being initiated, though somewhat more gradually. In 1602, missionary Matteo Ricci, on the basis of the work of an Antwerp cartographer, had been the first to present the Chinese with a map that showed their country's position on a globe that also included the Americas. In turn, a set of Chinese-made maps, brought to Amsterdam by another Jesuit in 1654, allowed publisher Joan Blaeu to produce his comprehensive atlas of the world in eleven volumes, one of which was entirely devoted to China. (Then, in 1674, a missionary from the Low Countries, Ferdinand Verbiest, used Blaeu's work to present the Chinese emperor with a more detailed world map). This exchange of geographical knowledge is fairly well known. Contemporary projects with a temporal remit, however, have received less attention. Papelitzky has recently called attention to how in China in the first half of the seventeenth century, an unprecedented number of historical texts on foreigners appeared. During the early Ming Dynasty, the Middle Kingdom had closed itself off from the outside world. But the lifting of the ban on international trade in 1567 sparked in the following decades seven texts about the history of the whole known world; Mao Ruizheng's 茅瑞徵 *Huangming xiangxulu* 皇明象胥錄 (Records of the imperial interpreter) from 1629 also described the Dutch, who had attempted to trade on the southern Chinese coast since 1601.³ This article focuses on the counterparts of these authors in the Netherlands: six Dutchmen who tried to make sense of global history. Although they were essentially armchair scholars, they took care to engage with the Chinese sources and even to meet with Chinese visitors. The first discussion took place around 1650; perhaps due to the fact that nobody could actually read Chinese books, on whose authority the Europeans purportedly had to rethink their historical primacy, the debate petered out. Half a century later, it was the arrival of an ancient bronze mirror in Amsterdam that caused it to flare up again: the oldest Chinese object Europeans had ever laid their hands on could provide tactile proof of a more irrefutable kind.

SCALIGER, MARTINI, GOLIUS, AND FICHINPAI

One of the first Chinese books to arrive in the Netherlands was a work of historical morality tales (including *Ershisi Xiao* 二十四孝 [Tales of the twenty-four filial exemplars], a classic of the Yuan Dynasty). Since in 1603 it was identified as "a printed history

3. Papelitzky, *Writing World History*.

from the great Kingdom of China,” it may have been related to the arrival in Middelburg in 1600 of a literate Chinese man, who toured the Netherlands and explained the nature of the Chinese script to his hosts.⁴ Two respected Leiden professors of history and Oriental languages, Joseph Scaliger and Jacob Golius, clearly gravitated toward this subject and collected Chinese books even though they were unable to read them. When in 1605 Scaliger and another friend inspected some volumes, their frustration was palpable: “There is no doubt that, if someone among us could read and understand these, it would be most useful . . . because it is probable that these writings contain many faculties that as yet we do not know of. Now, however, I think these books can be of no use to us, except being placed in a collection of curiosities.”⁵ Scaliger’s interest was raised particularly because he had come across the observation, in Juan González de Mendoza’s *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China* (1585), that Chinese civilization was older than the Great Flood, which complicated his attempt to calibrate the histories of Egypt, Asia, and the Americas with biblical chronology. Since according to the Hebrew Bible, the world had been created in 4004 BC, there seemed to have been pharaohs before the world: Scaliger solved this problem by supposing that there had been “proleptic time” before biblical time.⁶ It was on the basis of his ideas that—without acknowledging Scaliger—the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher developed his influential idea that antediluvian migrants from Egypt had laid the basis of Chinese civilization. This became the standard view for the handful of Europeans who managed to penetrate into the Chinese mainland, since Kircher, based in Rome, taught aspiring missionaries the basics of the country’s history.

One of these indirect students of Scaliger was Father Martino Martini, who, after arriving in China in 1643, delved deeply into Chinese historical sources. In 1654 he traveled back to the Netherlands to publish a volume on Chinese history “from the origin to the human race until the birth of Christ” (*Sinicae historiae decas prima: Res a gentis origine ad Christum natum in extrema Asia*, 1659) as well as the volume of Chinese maps (*Atlas sinensis*, 1655) that would be one volume of Blaeu’s great atlas. During the years he stayed in the Netherlands, Martini visited Amsterdam and Leiden accompanied by his Chinese assistant called Fichinpai. He met at least twice with Jacob Golius, whom he gave more Chinese books for his collection; Fichinpai was also able to demonstrate Chinese calligraphy and explain peculiarities of the language.⁷

Golius needed this as he was trying to grasp how time was computed in the country he knew as “Cathay.” While studying Persian literature and astronomy, he had found

4. Bodleian Library, Sinica 41; Weststeijn, “Just Like Zhou,” 109.

5. Clusius, *Exoticorum*, 376; Weststeijn, “Just Like Zhou,” 331.

6. Grafton, *Scaliger*, II, 405–7.

7. Weststeijn, “Just Like Zhou,” 112–14.

in a 1272 work by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī, *Zij-i Īlkhānī* (The Ilkhan stars), information on the Chinese calendar, with the Chinese words transcribed into Persian.⁸ He had first invited a young Moroccan-born convert named Johannes Maurus to his house to teach him Persian (it is tempting to speculate on a meeting between Maurus and Fichinpai).⁹ Now, Martini and Fichinpai could explain how the Chinese used to divide time, according to the day, the year, and the zodiac: Golius read aloud the Persian words, and his guests recognized the Chinese pronunciation and added the corresponding characters, transcription, and meaning. Martini proved extremely familiar with the Chinese calendar. For several years already, the Jesuits had directed the Imperial Astronomic Bureau in Beijing. They had been called to the Forbidden City by the emperor himself to correct the calendar calculations that were essential to Chinese astronomy. What had been most shocking to Martini was that the Chinese, in contrast to the Europeans, had preserved eclipse observations from centuries back. Eventually, scouring the Chinese annals for astronomical reference moments in comparison to European and Middle Eastern chronologies would become (in the words of Golvers) “the core of the Jesuit activities and one of the main *raison d’être* of the Jesuit presence” in the Middle Kingdom.¹⁰

Golius included the results of this exchange in his text “De regno catayo additamentum,” which was added to Martini’s volume of Chinese maps. This was the first European publication with a sizable number of Chinese characters. But Martini’s own *Sinicae historiae decas prima* presented an even more important body of new knowledge: it was based on a panoply of Chinese historiographical writings, including the monumental *Shiji* 史記 (Historical records) by Sima Qian 司馬遷 and Sima Guang’s 司馬光 *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive mirror to aid in government).¹¹ Martini, applying the Chinese sixty-year cycle, traced the first year of the first emperor to 2697 BC, that is, to 600 years before the Flood. He was at a loss, however, to explain how the Chinese could have remembered so much of what happened before the Flood if most of mankind had drowned.¹² What gave him some leeway was that the (Latin) Vulgate and the (Greek) Septuagint versions of the Bible had different dates for the Creation and the Flood: 4004 BC and 2348 BC in the Latin text, 5622 BC and 3366 BC in the Greek. Standaert summarizes Martini’s position as follows:

8. Paternicò, “Jacob Golius”; Van Dalen et al., “Chinese-Uighur Calendar.”

9. Weststeijn, “Just Like Zhou,” 113–14.

10. Golvers, *Libraries*, 386–87.

11. Standaert, “Jesuit Accounts,” 35–36.

12. Martini, *Sinicae historiae*, 10.

Martini . . . was obliged to indicate a date for the authentic origins of Chinese history that seemed to be in contradiction with the Vulgate. He leaves it to chronologists to solve the question, however, since they have at their disposal the Septuagint and other texts. He had such admiration for Chinese history and for Chinese chronologists that he affirmed the certainty of this chronology without considering the consequences this might have for criticism of the chronology of the Scriptures. . . . [A]fter Martini the Jesuits, who were nonetheless fervent defenders of the antiquity of China, were never again as daring, at least not in their publications.¹³

It was outside the Jesuit context that the consequences of Martini's numbers were recognized and developed further: namely, in the Dutch Republic, in the wake of Scaliger's and Golius's findings. There was one man in particular, a student of Golius, who was prepared not only to provoke clerical authority but also to undermine Europe's vision of its own preeminent antiquity: Isaac Vossius.

MOSES OR CHINA: HORNIUS VERSUS VOSSIUS

Vossius was (in Van Kley's words) "the first European scholar to have accepted enthusiastically ancient Chinese history," which made him one of the internationally most controversial Dutch scholars of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ The seeds of this development were planted when he was librarian at the court of Christina of Sweden, where he first encountered new, radical ideas about history. It is possible that in 1654, while in Antwerp in the queen's service, Vossius met Martini and Fichinpai, who drew substantial scholarly attention during their visit to Europe.¹⁵ The queen, with her evident Orientalist interests, may have actively sought to speak to the Chinese visitor; in any event, in 1685 she made sure to meet twice with another Chinese-born convert then present in Rome.¹⁶ Christina also appears to have financed the publication of Isaac la Peyrère's *Prae Adamitae*, an alternative account of biblical history.¹⁷ Printed in Amsterdam in 1655, La Peyrère's book argued, on the basis of Scaliger's calculations, that "pre-Adamites" had peopled the earth before Adam, which explained how only a few generations after Adam, the world was already extensively inhabited. One of La Peyrère's propositions was that China was at least 10,000 years old. Genesis actually

13. Standaert, "Jesuit Accounts," 33.

14. Van Kley, "Europe's 'Discovery,'" 370.

15. Weststeijn, "Just Like Zhou," 117–19.

16. Foss, "European Sojourn," 133.

17. Pintard, *Libertinage érudit*, 399.

told two stories: that of the whole human race (including the Egyptians and Chinese), and the shorter one of the Jews; the Great Flood had been only a local event.

This was close to heresy: La Peyrère found himself under house arrest and was forced to convert to Catholicism. Yet the issues he had addressed only became more urgent with the approach of the year 1656. According to some Protestant chronologers, the Flood had happened 1,656 years after Adam's birth, which meant that in 1656 AD, Noah's covenant would be renewed; true knowledge of God, which had been lost after the Tower of Babel, would be revealed once more. Some even expected the conversion of the Jews and the Last Judgment: "a flood of fire is coming upon all the world," a minister warned in 1652; English millenarians called upon the Jews of Amsterdam to resettle in Britain.¹⁸ Such sentiments explain the urgency of establishing the exact dating of the Flood and any antediluvian and even pre-Adamite events.

What contributed to the sense of imminent global cataclysm was that the Chinese seemed the first domino to fall. Not only had Martini confronted Europeans with China's problematic antiquity: in Beijing in 1644 he had also been an eyewitness to the collapse of the Ming Dynasty and the emperor's suicide. Incidental Tartar breaches of the Great Wall had already been reported in Dutch news since the early seventeenth century.¹⁹ What was at stake was that a civilizational line going back to before the Flood, and perhaps before the birth of Adam, was being severed: "the great Emperor of China who has lived and ruled with his ancestors triumphantly since before the World's Creation, according to his calculation, without ever being vanquished or brought down; whose strong and stable rule no king ever dared looking upon to attack—this richest, brave and most intelligent, this most populous and most caring Prince of the World and Heathendom . . . look now what has happened to this great King, by the finger of the Lord God!"²⁰ Thus wrote Jacob de Hennin, a bailiff in The Hague. Not everyone was pessimistic, however: Spinoza, for one, who thought that the Chinese had "preserved themselves so many thousand years, that their antiquity exceeds all other nations," was sure that "they have heretofore recovered their lost empire, and without doubt will do so again, when the courage of the Tartars, hath lain a while longer buried in wealth, luxury and sloth."²¹ (In reality, the Ming never managed to reassert their power over the "Tartar" Manchu invaders).

18. Sterry, *Englands Deliverance*, 43–44; Hill, "Till the Conversion," 15; also Van der Wall, "Mystieke chiliast."

19. Van Kley, "Qing Dynasty China," 219.

20. De Hennin, *Zinrijke gedachten*, 101–2.

21. Spinoza, *Treatise Partly Theological*, 81.

Vossius joined the fray with his first work on the history of man and the world, *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi, qua ostenditur natale mundi tempus annis minimum 1440 vulgarem aeram anticipare* (1659). Although he referred to La Peyrère's theories, he did not deem them very plausible, and his text was first of all a reaction to Martini and the topic of Chinese history. Inspired by his assertion that China boasted 4,500 years of monuments and books as well as philosophers older than Moses, he questioned the authority of the Vulgate and concluded that the text must be corrupted.²² The radicalism of this idea, and the implication that the Bible was only of local historical value, is hard to overstate. It greatly contributed to Vossius's reputation as libertine. Charles II of England reportedly said, on hearing him speak about China, that the Dutch scholar "believed everything except what was in the Bible"; eventually this led to his reputation as an atheist or, by that day's criteria, one who "denies Sacred Scripture."²³

The first reaction to Vossius's book came from the aforementioned Leiden professor, Georg Hornius, in relation to his attempts at writing a history of the world. Although he was attracted to Vossius's theory, he backed away from its consequences. In a rivalling *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi, qua sententia illorum refellitur qui statuunt natale mundi tempus annis minimum 1440. vulgarem aeram anticipare* (1659), he pointed out that "if the Hebrew text does not have to be preferred to the Greek writings, it results that until now no church in the West has admitted a true version of the holy scriptures."²⁴ The discussion moved from the date of Creation to the question of whether Confucius was the oldest philosopher and the philological origins of the different names for China.²⁵ Hornius laughed at Vossius's preference for Chinese authorities above the church fathers: "What do we think of the Seres, commonly called Chinese, whose precise chronology antedates the Flood by seven or eight centuries? . . . We think that their chronology is false, even though they speak about the eternity of the world and about Panzonis and Panzona, Tanomus, Teiencomus, Tuhucumus, Lotzizanus, Azalamus, Atzionis, Usaonis, Huntzujus, Hautzibona, Ochen-tejus, Etzomlonis."²⁶ Such a fulsome list had to illustrate the spurious foundations of Vossius's timeline; Hornius discarded the historiography of the Chinese because "their antiquity is contaminated by monstrous fables."²⁷

In *Castigationes ad scriptum Georgii Hornii de aetate mundi* (1659), Vossius "castigated" his opponent, questioning his philological skills and asserting that "in whatever

22. Vossius, *De vera aetate*, 49; cf. Weststeijn, "Spinoza sinicus."

23. Nicéron, *Mémoires*, 13:133; Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 207 n. 13.

24. Hornius, *Dissertatio*, 3.

25. *Ibid.*, 53, 58.

26. *Ibid.*, 34.

27. *Ibid.*, 50.

language the Bible is written, its sanctity derives not from individual marks, letters, or words, but from the sense that is transferred through them.”²⁸ The discussion reached its boiling point in relation to Chinese history against a theological foil. Vossius noted that Hornius’s account compared the “devilish” Chinese to his own chronology as if it were inspired by the Holy Spirit: “about the Chinese you would speak best, if you would keep silent altogether.”²⁹ Predictably, Hornius retaliated with a *Defensio dissertationis de vera aetate mundi* (1659) that emphasized the importance of the Hebrew Bible, this time referring to the Synod of Dordt, quoting it in Dutch for the greater authority it held in this case: Hebrew is “den Origineelen text, de oorspronckelijke Talen.”³⁰ The argument escalated into more ad hominem attacks, especially on the subject of East Asia: Hornius had “jokes follow upon jokes,” stated Vossius, who had the last word in *Auctarium castigationum ad scriptum de aetate mundi* (1659).³¹

While Vossius (as a Dutch pocket-size counterpart to Kircher, whom he had befriended in Rome) had wide-ranging humanistic and scientific interests and let the topic rest for a few decades, Hornius kept struggling with it in his attempt to write what was, to all appearances, the first European comprehensive history of the world. In 1666 his *Arca Noae sive historia imperiorum et regnorum a condito orbe ad nostra tempora* appeared. Although by then it had become clear that not even the fall of the Celestial Empire had spelled the apocalypse, the frontispiece of *Arca Noae* maintained an unabashed reference to the End of the World (fig. 1). It represented the Four Beasts from the book of Daniel (7:23): a winged lion, a bear, a leopard, and a bird with a scepter and “iron teeth” that “shall devour the whole earth . . . and break it in pieces.” These beasts were traditional symbols for the succession of classical empires: Assyria, Persia, Macedon, and Rome.

The frontispiece thus illustrated that in his textbook-like overview, Hornius depended heavily on the Bible and classical sources, maintaining that all peoples were offspring of Noah’s sons. A single human race would have peopled the world in the last few millennia: the Egyptians were forefathers of the Chinese, who, in turn, were the ancestors of the Native Americans. Hornius had already floated the idea that the Chinese had discovered the Americas long before European exploration, in *De originibus Americanis* of 1652; that same year Kircher repeated it in his influential *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (eventually, Kircher’s “Sino-Egyptian hypothesis” took deep root and is still believed in some quarters).³²

28. Vossius, *Castigationes*, introduction (unpaginated).

29. *Ibid.*, 40, 30.

30. Hornius, *Defensio*, 3.

31. Vossius, *Castigationes*, 28.

32. Hornius, *Arca Noae*, 447; Weststeijn, “Chinese Isis.”



Figure 1. Frontispiece to Georg Hornius, *Arca Noe* (Leiden, 1666). Utrecht University.

Arca Noae devoted several chapters to China, stating that its history started 1,940 years after the Creation, which would be about 300 years after the Flood; Chinese historical annals that said otherwise were “ridiculous.”³³ Hornius was on the whole far less enthusiastic than Vossius about the achievements of the Chinese, stating, for example, that they were “in architecture, painting and sculpture very inferior to us.”³⁴ This sentiment echoed what might be called the official stance, maintained even by travelers to China, such as Johan Nieuhof, who made a detailed, illustrated report of the Dutch trade embassy to Beijing in 1655. Hornius was responsible for translating this volume into Latin (1668), thus offering the international Republic of Letters its first eyewitness account, in word and image, of the Celestial Empire.³⁵

Arca Noae borrowed from similar travelogues (often implicitly: Jan Huygen van Linschoten on Asia, José de Acosta on the Americas) and concluded with a lengthy description of North and South America. The book was innovative in this respect: contrary to the frontispiece’s message, it did not actually explore global history as the succession of the classical empires but rather in terms of individual European and non-European states, with chapters devoted to places such as Armenia, Congo, Ceylon, and Japan. Grafton therefore emphasizes that *Arca Noae* was “as radical as its appearance was modest”: “Hornius tacitly abandoned many positions that even Scaliger would have defended strongly. He made no effort to show that Providence had directed the peoples in their movements, or that the devil had provided the Indians with false accounts of their past and a parodic liturgy . . . he did not insist on the superior civilization of the West.”³⁶

This hint of cultural relativism might be confirmed by referencing Hornius’s history of philosophy (*Historia philosophica*) of 1655, which was no less original than his other writings. It devoted considerable attention to the Middle Kingdom. In contrast to his later stance, here he was extremely positive about Chinese ethics and political theory, concluding that, as the emperor obeyed philosophers who listened to the people, “they have thought so splendidly about the Republic, that if Plato were to come back from the underworld, he would not wish for any other [political and ethical doctrine] than that of the Chinese.”³⁷ The statement elaborated on a European commonplace: the emperor’s pristine “Platonic” politics would have ensured that a single family had ruled over China since the Flood or even earlier.³⁸ More innovative was Hornius’s placement of

33. Hornius, *Arca Noae*, 425–26.

34. *Ibid.*, 446.

35. Nieuhof, *Legatio Batavica*; cf. Rietbergen, “Before the Bible.”

36. Grafton, *New Worlds*, 234–37.

37. Hornius, *Historiae philosophicae*, 309.

38. See, e.g., De Hennin, *Zinrijke gedachten*, 100–101.

China in the chronology of the global history of philosophy: just after the Renaissance—probably because it was during this period that China’s civilization had first become known in Europe.

In agreement with Hornius’s views about admirable Chinese Platonism, Vossius published a more elaborate paean in 1685: “On the Arts and Sciences of the Chinese” (in *Variorum observationum liber*). This presented China as a utopia in which all the arts and sciences, with the exception of mathematics and astronomy, were more developed than those of Europe. Its defense of Chinese knowledge of acupuncture and the circulation of blood and its preference for Chinese linear painting above European chiaroscuro were extraordinary in light of the negative stereotype of these issues in the travelogues. Yet it is historiography that explains Vossius’s unique position. In the context of the budding debate on the respective merits of ancients versus moderns, Vossius—whose core business was philology—sided with antiquity. It was only logical that he preferred China, whose antiquity not only went farther back than the Greeks but had also continued uninterrupted for at least 4,500 years. That China’s knowledge of mathematics and astronomy was inferior—and the emperor needed the Jesuits precisely for these topics—was because in Europe, these were the only disciplines that had always been firmly rooted in a Chaldean (i.e., Mesopotamian) groundwork.³⁹

It may have been partly in reaction to Vossius’s ideas on Chinese history that the Flemish missionary Philippe Couplet, a close friend of prominent Dutchmen such as Blaeu and the playwright Joost van den Vondel (author of a dramatization of the suicide of the last Ming emperor, incidentally the first European tragedy set entirely against a Chinese background), decided to settle the issue from the Jesuit perspective. His *Tabula chronologica monarchiae Sinicae* (1686) was a 109-page chronology based on an extensive array of Chinese historiographical texts, listing all Chinese emperors from the mythical King Huangdi to the Kangxi Emperor’s campaign to pacify the western Mongols in 1683.⁴⁰ Although Couplet resorted to speculations such as a stranding of Noah’s Ark in Central Asia, his text defended the orthodox view of sacred history and highlighted similarities between Chinese chronology and calculations based on the Septuagint. To quote Standaert:

Like Martini’s, Couplet’s chronology does not accord with the Vulgate. But unlike Martini, who presents an uninterrupted flow of historical events, Couplet includes an interruption to preserve the possibility of a universal Flood. In his eyes, the

39. Weststeijn, “Vossius’s Chinese Utopia.”

40. On Couplet’s sources, see Standaert, “Jesuit Accounts,” 44–47.

Chinese have great difficulty in interpreting the earliest times of their history precisely because they lack the Flood, but that everything becomes clear when one uses the light of the Bible. Thus, the Bible is an aid to solving the obscure periods of ancient Chinese history. This became the Jesuit position after 1686. They were not afraid to accept, with some precautions, ancient Chinese history. The only concession to be made was to accept the version of the Septuagint instead of the Vulgate for the calculation of the years.⁴¹

To finish and print this book, Couplet traveled from China to the Netherlands on a ship of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), taking a cartload of relevant Chinese books. In Amsterdam, he must have discussed the issue with Nicolaes Witsen, a former mayor of the city and a “good friend.”⁴² He showed Witsen an ancient Latin Bible found in East Asia, to underscore the Christian roots there, and gave him a copy of the oldest extant comprehensive atlas of China (the sixteenth-century *Guang yutu* 廣輿圖 [Enlarged terrestrial atlas] by Luo Hongxian 羅洪先, now in the Museum Meermanno, The Hague). Witsen also had occasion to meet Couplet’s Chinese assistant, Michael Shen Fuzong 沈福宗, who helped him to prepare the publication of a sizable map of “Tartary,” or northeast Asia.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, Couplet and Shen (like Martini and Fichinpai in the 1650s) attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention. When they traveled on to Britain in 1687, it is certainly plausible that Vossius also became involved. By then he had accepted the position of a canon at Windsor, where he may have been able to admire the eye-catching portrait of Shen that Charles II had made and hung in Windsor Castle. Around this time, Vossius acquired for his own library a twelve-volume historical chronicle of Ming China (*Mingji bian nian* 明紀編年 [Ming chronicles]) that had belonged to a Chinese Christian named Lu Xiyan 陸希言, who was in Macao in 1680, probably in the Jesuit College; if this was not a direct gift from Couplet and Shen, then in any case missionaries must have played a role in shipping it to Europe.⁴⁴

But Couplet and Shen may also have shunned Vossius, in light of the radical consequences he connected to China’s antiquity. Couplet actually provided Sinological knowledge to a French abbot, Eusèbe Renaudot, who would develop into the most vehement critic of Vossius’s Sinophilia. In 1685 Renaudot produced a comparison between an Arabic text by two ninth-century travelers to China (named Sulayman and

41. *Ibid.*, 33.

42. Witsen to Cuper, April 9, 1713, in F. Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen*, 2:364.

43. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, 966.

44. Leiden University Library, Sinology, Schlegel 50; Weststeijn, “Just Like Zhou,” 325.

Abū Zaid) and a Chinese historiographical text about the same period, probably Zhu Xi's 朱熹 *Tongjian gangmu* 通鑒綱目 (Outlines and details of the comprehensive mirror) of 1172. This (to quote Zwierlein) represented one of the first moments in Western historiography "of coupling Middle-Eastern and Far-Eastern medieval history."⁴⁵ Renaudot's treatise *Science des Chinois*, which accompanied his edition of the Arabic text, was (at least in part) a pretext for an all-out attack on Vossius, placing his writings firmly among those of "libertines, spoiled by a false metaphysics" and accusing him of finding "proofs in the ancient authors to substantiate everything that he read or heard about the Chinese" in order to concoct ideas that would "lead to nothing less than a total subversion of all religion."⁴⁶ The abbot was clearly not prepared to tamper with biblical chronology.

Vossius's position on China, which was so extraordinary in the Republic of Letters, might be explained by two factors. For one, his willingness to upend traditional Eurocentric views was embedded in the climate of philosophical and religious skepticism fostered by Dutch Cartesianism from the 1650s onward. Here the efforts of Spinoza and his adepts to arrive at a nonsectarian, nonconfessional method of interpreting scripture played a central role. Spinoza appeared to take nascent biblical hermeneutics to its radical conclusion with an "almost obsessive new application of the principle of anachronism to biblical interpretation."⁴⁷ His *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) explicitly argued "that the Pentateuch, and the Books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings were not written by themselves;" this had serious implications.⁴⁸ The discussions of the beginnings of history, which may eventually have caused Hornius's mental breakdown in Leiden, were at the heart of Protestant controversies concerning the importance of natural versus divine law. Nor, for that matter, were Catholics amused: in 1686 some of Vossius's works, including *De vera aetate mundi*, were even placed on the Index of Prohibited Books. As Pinot concludes from studying a broad corpus of early eighteenth-century texts on China, the debate about Chinese history was, up to 1740, an influential factor in radical ideas; questioning the date and universality of the Great Flood was more common than doubt about Chinese chronology.⁴⁹ This questioning was, moreover, clearly not limited to academia: Willem Beurs's 1692 treatise on oil painting, *De groote wereld in het klein geschilderd* (The big world painted small), which was intended for practicing artists, also expressed the relative value of the Western

45. Zwierlein, "Orient contra China," 32.

46. Renaudot, *Anciennes relations des Indes et de la Chine*, 28–29.

47. Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 181.

48. Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 161.

49. Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique*, 278–79, 471.

history of art in regard to the history of China that was, by virtue of its greater antiquity, fundamentally uprooting the Eurocentric worldview.⁵⁰

The involvement of an artist illustrates the second circumstantial factor that illuminates Vossius's unique position: in the Dutch Republic, China was not only discussed in a more radical fashion than elsewhere in Europe, but it was also physically present in a ubiquitous and fairly inconvertible manner. The Chinese material culture that Vossius so admired, in particular porcelain, was imported in tens of millions of pieces and it (or local Delftware imitations of it) was available to households of all social classes, contrary to elsewhere in Europe, where it was an aristocratic prerogative.⁵¹ Its blue-and-white images of elegant people frolicking in unperturbed gardens seemed to confirm the timeless tranquility of a Platonic republic. Among such plenitude of material objects, it was the arrival of a singularly ancient one in Amsterdam around 1700 that caused the debate on comparative chronology to flare up again.

WITSEN, CUPER, BONJOUR: A TEST CASE SET IN STEEL

As the Vossius-Hornius controversy illustrates, textual sources were of a very inconclusive nature; they could be distorted by scribal transmission, and Hornius even found it hard to believe that there was any truth at all “in that multitude of characters” of the Chinese script.⁵² What could have a much more robust scientific status therefore was antiquarianism: material objects offered hands-on contact with the past. The earliest Chinese antiquity known in Europe was the famous Nestorian Stele, which dates from 751 AD and documents the early Christian presence in Asia. It was illustrated and translated in Kircher's *China illustrata* (1667) but had by then been known for several decades: Hornius discussed it in relation to his ideas on the Chinese origin of the Native Americans.⁵³ It also drew the attention of the aforementioned Nicolaes Witsen, whose collection of non-Western artworks was probably the richest in Northern Europe. On show were sizable Indian and Ceylonese votive sculptures, hundreds of Chinese and Japanese paintings, and jewelry, maps, books and ceramics. Many of them he discussed in letters with a good friend, the antiquarian Gijsbert Cuper. In 1705, they laid their hands on an object that was much older than the Nestorian Stele: a bronze mirror from the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) with an elaborate description on its reverse. Probably manufactured in Linzi 臨淄 in eastern China, it was seemingly carried westward by a warrior in the Han-Xiongnu wars (first century BC–first century AD), and then traveled along the

50. Beurs, *De groote wereld*, “Voorreden.”

51. Weststeijn, “Vossius' Chinese Utopia,” 213–22.

52. Hornius, *Dissertatio*, 54.

53. Hornius, *De originibus americanis*, 276–77.

northern branch of the Silk Road to a latitude of 60° in Siberia. Here it was deposited as an apotropaic grave gift of the Sarmatians or another nomadic tribe. When 1,500 years later, local treasure hunters opened the grave, Witsen's contacts in Peter the Great's Russia ensured that the object was sent to Amsterdam.⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, Witsen and Cuper discussed the mirror in relation to Chinese chronology, in particular Couplet's authoritative account.⁵⁵ This mirror made of "steel" (actually of white bronze), "one of the greatest antiquities that we have here from those lands," seemed to offer factual hands-on proof of the Middle Kingdom's antiquity.⁵⁶ They repeated to their correspondents that they had touched and seen the object with their own hands and eyes. Although it had shattered into pieces when Cuper came to inspect it once again, fortunately Witsen had already ordered an engraving of the mirror's reverse to be put into print, and over the next few years, the two friends frantically sent copies to their learned contacts—from philologists in Paris and Copenhagen to missionaries in Beijing and India—asking for help in translating the circular inscription in the ancient Chinese seal script (figs. 2, 3).

After failing to procure a translation in Europe, Witsen and Cuper recognized the importance of a comparative approach with China's own sophisticated tradition of antiquarianism. Witsen ordered relevant books in Chinese: "God willing in the years to come I shall receive more explanations from the Indies of this Chinese wisdom."⁵⁷ Cuper later confirmed that from China had indeed arrived "a book with many images of these mirrors, including that very same one that has been found in Siberia. . . . I cannot admire enough the rarity and diversity of the characters that one sees there."⁵⁸ This was probably the comprehensive, authoritative *Chongxiu Xuanhe Bogutu* 重修宣和博古圖 (Antiquities illustrated of Xuanhe Hall, revised), a catalog of the Huizong Emperor's 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126) collection of antiquities, which had images of round mirrors with inscriptions very similar to Witsen's.⁵⁹ In addition, Witsen sent his engraving to the sizable Chinese community in Batavia (now Jakarta) by way of his VOC contacts. "I have

54. Van Noord and Weststeijn, "Global Trajectory."

55. Cuper's undated description of Witsen's collection, 72C31, fol. 144r, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague (hereafter cited as KB).

56. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, 750; "een van de grootste oudtheden, die men uit die landen alhier heeft" (Cuper to Witsen, November 3, 1705, Be 36, fol. 90r, UBA, University of Amsterdam [hereafter cited as UBA]).

57. Witsen to Cuper, October 20, 1705, in Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen*, 2:307.

58. "un livre out il y avoit beaucoup des copies de ces miroirs, et meme celuy la, qui a ete trouve en Siberie; . . . je ne pouvois pas assez admirer cette rareté, et la diversitez des caractères, qui s'y rencontroient" (Cuper, undated description of Witsen's collection, 72C31, fol. 144r, KB).

59. Van Noord and Weststeijn, "Global Trajectory," 333.



Figure 2. The Witsen Mirror, in Nicolaes Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye* (Amsterdam, 1705), 750. Utrecht University.

sent [the image of] the mirror to Batavia where there are more than ten thousand Chinese. No one understands it, but the governor-general had it brought to China to show to learned Chinese and ask them for an explanation. So it happened: the dish is made more than 1800 years ago and it is surely [inscribed] in ancient Chinese, now mostly unknown.⁶⁰ With the help of the “learned Chinese” Witsen arrived at a translation that was far from correct, but certainly “the most doable” and not deliberately deceptive.⁶¹ But it was clearly inflected by the earlier Dutch debate on China’s antiquity: “it is remarkable that these letters are more than a thousand years old and the common man cannot read them. . . . This is a device or *symbolium* from one of the ancient Chinese emperors, around the time of the so learned and pious Confucius of whom was

60. Witsen to Cuper, November 20, 1705, in Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen*, 2:308–9.

61. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, 750.



Figure 3. Map of the Witsen Mirror's global trajectory: (1) Linzi, where mirrors were produced during the Han Dynasty; (2) Verkhoturyskaya, burial site where the mirror was found; (3) Amsterdam, Nicolaas Witsen; (4) Batavia, Johan van Hoorn; (5) Canton, anonymous learned Chinese; (6) Deventer, Gijsbert Cuper; (7) Rome/Montefiascone, Arcadio Hoang; (8) Cape of Good Hope, Guillaume Bonjour; (9) Hanover, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; (10) Beijing, Joachim Bouvet; (11) Pondicherry, Claude de Visdelou; (12) Paris, L'Abbé Bignon; (13) Copenhagen, Otto Sperling; (14) Berlin, Mathurin de la Croze.

said, with more reason than was said once about Plato and Seneca, 'O Saint Confucius!'"⁶² With this exclamation, Witsen connected to the theory (developed by Scaliger, Hornius, and Kircher) that the Chinese descended from Middle Eastern migrants: their "oldest" philosopher, Confucius, would, like the Hebrew prophets, have been one of the "virtuous pagans" who had taught proto-Christian teaching before Christ's actual coming.⁶³ This idea seeped through in the translation of the Witsen Mirror's inscription as a monotheistic paean, beginning: "God is pure, immaculate and wholly untarnished./ God is as beautiful as pure and clear water."⁶⁴ (The translator mistook one of the first characters for *tian* 天 'heaven' and interpreted this as a reference to the divinity).

62. Witsen to Cuper, October 20, 1705, in Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen*, 2:307.

63. Mungello, *Curious Land*, 57.

64. Witsen, *Noord en Oost Tartarye*, 750.

Determining the age of the mirror, however, was only the starting point of a protracted quest for touchable proof for China's antiquity relative to Egypt and Israel. In 1704, Cuper wrote twelve letters about the mirror to a young Augustinian friar in Rome, Guillaume Bonjour, along with references to practical matters, such as auctions of antiquities in Amsterdam, and theoretical ones regarding chronology: "I myself have held it in my hands in Amsterdam . . . and seen with my own eyes . . . a plate inscribed with ancient Chinese letters. . . . When you or others desire the plate itself, I will put serious work into acquiring its image and description."⁶⁵ Cuper expressed the "hope that the Roman Oedipuses will clarify these mysteries for us,"⁶⁶ clearly inspired by Bonjour's reputation as a scholar of oriental languages, albeit those of the Middle East. At a young age, he had made his name with a study of Coptic, which was deemed essential for understanding the origins of civilization as it was recognized (correctly) as the last language in which the Egyptian hieroglyphs were written. Linguistic pedigrees were for Bonjour a means of defending the biblical chronology against the doubts of someone like Vossius, and this is where Chinese drew his interest.

When the image of the mirror arrived in Rome, in 1706 he discussed it with a missionary who had returned from Guangzhou and Fujian, Bishop Artus de Lionne, who had "two Chinese" traveling in his company, including the well-known Arcade Hoang (or Huang Jialüe 黄嘉略). They pointed out that translating the inscription as a paean to God was very questionable, "for the Chinese have no word to designate God simply and uncontrovertibly": to refer to the Christian god they used the composite *Shangdi* 上帝, the Supreme Emperor.⁶⁷

The care with which Chinese expertise was sought out is noteworthy. For Bonjour, however, who devoted his life's work to chronology, this was not enough, and the question of how to reconcile a Chinese antiquity with biblical history seems to have inspired a fateful change in his ambitions. That same year he left Rome to join the Chinese mission. In the words of his only biographer, this was a "perplexing" decision. Not long before, Bonjour's scholarly acclaim had resulted in his honorific membership of the Papal Commission for the Reform of the Calendar. His star was rising and "nothing in . . . Bonjour's studies until 1707 could have predicted his decision to become a missionary-scientist;" moreover, "nothing indicates that religion was particularly involved."⁶⁸ In fact, whereas Bonjour's earlier work had focused on the Middle East, his only demonstration of interest in East Asia was his confrontation with the Witsen Mirror. On his way to an

65. Cuper to Bonjour, June 15, 1704, in Hoogewerff, *Bescheiden*, 66.

66. Cuper to Bonjour, 26 December 1705, in Hoogewerff, *Bescheiden*, 69.

67. Bonjour to Cuper, February 15, 1706, in Cuper, *Lettres*, 21–22.

68. Baldini, "Guillaume Bonjour," 241.

English ship bound for China, he continued to correspond about this object and even arranged meetings with Cuper in Deventer and Witsen in Amsterdam. This was one of those moments when Catholic missionaries and VOC officials set aside religious differences when sharing knowledge.⁶⁹ Witsen realized “that he is very versed in oriental languages and Chinese matters. . . . The missionaries of the Holy See are in our lands blackened in coal; nevertheless, out of love for such a remarkable man, earned solely by learning . . . I gave him letters of recommendation for the governors of Batavia and the Cape of Good Hope.”⁷⁰ Bonjour did not fail to write back when he arrived at the cape. His shift from the Middle East to East Asia was clearly sparked by his confrontation with tactile proof of the Chinese antiquity that threatened to upset the orthodox chronology he was taking such pains to defend. In 1708, Cuper lamented to the friars in Rome that his friend had left for China, still amazed at “how such a unique and sophisticated knowledge of oriental languages . . . could fall unto a single man, and a young one at that. . . . [H]e taught with many examples that Sacred History agrees with the profane one.”⁷¹ He was certain that Bonjour would find out how Chinese antiquities would be “a marvelous confirmation of the Hebrew *ratio temporum*.”⁷²

It was one of the ironies of history that Bonjour’s credits in Catholic chronology determined his career in Beijing, which he began by sending the Kangxi Emperor his reform of the Roman calendar; he was promptly asked for a Chinese translation.⁷³ This was the legacy of the well-known “calendar case” surrounding the Jesuit astronomer Johann Adam Schall von Bell. The missionaries had maintained their position as court astronomers after the fall of the Ming. Schall had even used the transition to phase out the calendar system that had been used for millennia, so that European astronomy might determine the orthodox calendar of the Qing. The new Manchu ruling class, of ethnically foreign origin, needed precise calculations of astronomical data from the past, present, and future that would be seen as the strongest heavenly confirmation of imperial rule: celestial as well as sublunar bodies had to align with commands of the “Son of Heaven.” At a young age, Kangxi had therefore been particularly impressed when, in 1664, Schall, accused by a rival Muslim astronomer, was arrested and sentenced to death; this was even reported in various Dutch newspapers.⁷⁴ But when Schall and his confreres correctly predicted an eclipse that was about to take place, they were

69. Hertroijs, “Hoe kennis uit China.”

70. Witsen to Cuper, undated (1708), in Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen*, 2:318–19.

71. Cuper to Adeodatus Nuzzi, February 18, 1708, in Hoogewerff, *Bescheiden*, 94.

72. Cuper to Nuzzi, August 25, 1709, in Hoogewerff, *Bescheiden*, 96.

73. Baldini, “Guillaume Bonjour,” 266.

74. Chu, “Scientific Dispute”; Dijkstra, “Chinese Imprint,” 285.

set free. Kangxi decided to tolerate the spread of Christian doctrines. In this context, by 1708 Bonjour's revised calendar would be relevant; among the missionaries around Kangxi, he came to hold a special position indeed as the only non-Jesuit to become deeply involved in scientific research (albeit, eventually, cartography rather than chronology). Unfortunately, he would die before being able to realize his ambitions. At home, however, Cuper remained adamant that, were his friend ever to have returned, he would have solved the question as to the oldest authority: Moses or China?⁷⁵

Cuper decided to approach Chinese antiquity via an exploration of language and script. If Scaliger, Hornius, and Kircher had been right, the Egyptian hieroglyphs lay at the basis of the Chinese characters (from which, in turn, Amerindian pictographic scripts had evolved). Cuper and Witsen discussed their mirror in this context with Sinophile philosopher and linguist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and with the royal librarian in Paris, Jean-Paul Bignon.⁷⁶ The origin of the latter's expertise became clear when Cuper inquired about "*votre Chinois*" who was working on a Chinese grammar: the aforementioned Arcade Hoang had apparently exchanged Rome for Paris, where he was elected to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.⁷⁷ This enabled Bignon to order thousands of books from China. In contrast to Leibniz, however, he did not support China's greater antiquity. When Cuper suggested that the Chinese script predated hieroglyphs, and Chinese was the primeval language in which God had spoken to Adam, Bignon was doubtful:⁷⁸ he was sure Aramaic was older than Chinese, even though he was aware that the Chinese dynasties went back "more than forty thousand years" (*sic*). He criticized a civilization that "during all those years has made so few discoveries in the arts and sciences: . . . There has never been a people more attached to their habits than the Chinese, and in the history of this mighty realm one sees nothing that has been innovated, neither in the script nor the language."⁷⁹ Finally, at the end of 1708, Cuper sent his last remaining engraving of the Witsen Mirror to the Berlin librarian Mathurin de la Croze. Depending on VOC connections for Chinese books, the latter had amassed the largest European collection of Sinica. Although he was very negative about Kircher ("the greatest impostor and most barefaced liar the Republic of Letters has ever produced"), he was likewise certain about the Egyptian origin of Chinese

75. "si le pere Bonjour nous estoit rendu, je m' imagine, qu'il ne seroit pas d'un de ces sentiments, et qu'il pourroit decider cette contestation" (Cuper to Bignon, June 10, 1714, 72H7, KB).

76. Cuper to Leibniz, September 10, 1704, in Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 23:704.

77. Cuper to Bignon, March 4, 1713, in Cuper, *Lettres*, 298.

78. Cuper to Bignon, February 23, 1714, in Cuper, *Lettres*, 326.

79. "plus de quarante mille ans . . . d'avoir pendant tant d'années fait si peu de découvertes dans les Arts, et dans les sciences. . . . Jamais peuple n'a esté plus attaché à ses usages que celui de la Chine: et dans l'histoire de ce puissant royaume, on ne voit pas qu'il ait esté rien innové, ni dans les caractères, ni dans la langue" (Bignon to Cuper, July 12, 1714, 72H7, fol. 408, KB).

civilization, pointing out, for instance, that Chinese dragons were actually crocodiles:⁸⁰ “[The mirror’s] inscription cannot be as ancient as the Chinese of Batavia say. That nation [i.e., China] has always greatly exaggerated its antiquities.”⁸¹

In 1709, Witsen himself also arranged a meeting with a Chinese visitor, the medical doctor Zhou Meiye, who had joined a VOC governor upon his return to the Netherlands. In fluent Dutch, he could inform his hosts about the “chronology of the emperors of China.”⁸² Witsen mentioned the Nestorian Stele but did not bring up his mirror, which had shattered into pieces four years earlier. By now, he was chiefly occupied with how Chinese medicine could assist his ailing health.⁸³

THE CHINESE ANNALS, THE SHAPE OF THE EARTH, AND HOMO DILUVII TESTIS

In his *Dissertatio de vera aetate mundi*, Vossius had already concluded that, because Chinese historical sources did not mention the Flood, the event did not extend to East Asia; this confirmed his belief that the seas did not hold enough water to flood the entire globe—one of the statements that would land his books on the Index of Prohibited Books.⁸⁴ It is therefore not surprising that the discussion between Witsen and Cuper—although they had serious doubts regarding Vossius’s Sinophile stance⁸⁵—took a turn to geology as well as to a newly identified category of source materials to complement texts and artworks for research into deep time, namely, fossils. The immediate occasion was a request for information from a Swiss member of the Republic of Letters, Louis Bourguet. Like his Dutch counterparts, Bourguet mixed scholarly and commercial interests: his claim to fame rested on some of the first publications on the Etruscan alphabet, but his core business was trading in silk (he sent Leibniz a batch of silkworms). In the 1710s he engaged with Cuper and Witsen in the pressing issue of the age of the Earth and the nature of the Flood for which he wanted to study the Chinese historical annals in their original language.

80. “le plus grand imposteur & le plus hardi menteur que la Republique des Lettres ait jamais produit” (De la Croze to Cuper, January 16, 1713, 72H19, fol. 24v, KB; and see September 27, 1709, 72H18, fol. 34v, KB).

81. “Cette inscription n’est peut être pas si ancienne que le disent les Chinois de Batavia. Cette nation a de tout tem[p]s été fort portée à exagerer ses antiquitez” (De la Croze to Cuper, 72H19, I, fol. 18r, undated attachment, ca. 1710–13, KB).

82. “tijt rekening der keyzers van China” (April 27, 1710, Leiden, KITLV mss J. Van Hoorn, no. 269).

83. Cuper to Witsen, December 16, 1710, Be51, UBA.

84. Vossius, *Dissertatio*, 44, 47.

85. Witsen to Cuper, February 25, 1714, Gebhard, *Leven van Witsen*, no. 56; Cuper to Witsen, July 3, 1711, Be55, fol. 169r, UBA.

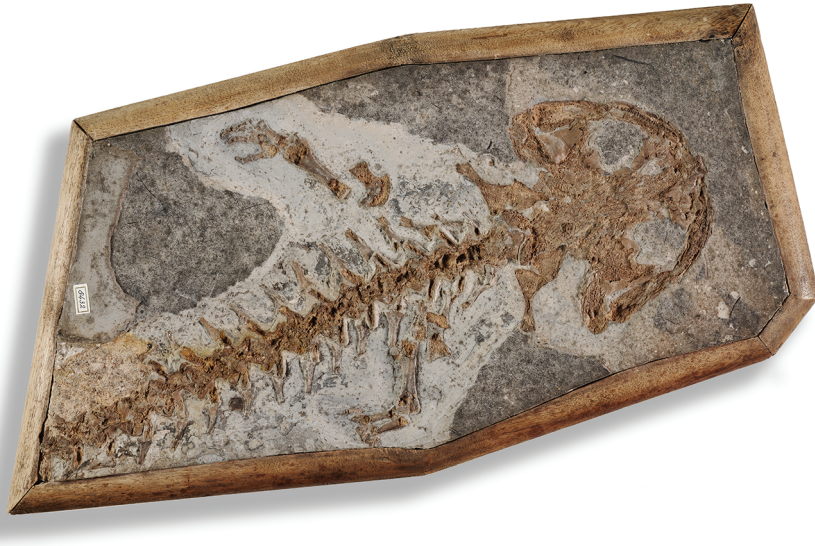


Figure 4. “Homo Diluvii Testis,” Teylers Museum, Haarlem

The latest theory (as confirmed in Cuper and Witsen’s correspondence) was that Vossius had been right: the Great Flood could not have been caused by rain, but by the dissolution of all earthly matter into a thick slurry that caught up all living things. The idea was first floated in John Woodward’s *An Essay toward a Natural History of the Earth* (1695) and developed further in *Herbarium diluvianum* (1709) by Johann Scheuchzer, a graduate in medicine at Utrecht University.⁸⁶ Scheuchzer identified fossils as plants and animals that had solidified in Woodward’s universal slurry. Most momentous was his find, in a German quarry, of a sizable fossil skeleton that he recognized as “*homo diluvii testis*,” a human witness to the Flood and thus a confirmation of the biblical account (the object, actually a fossil of a large reptile, is now in the Teylers Museum, Haarlem; see fig. 4). Bourguet was initially attracted to Woodward’s and Scheuchzer’s views but, according to Cuper, when he “began to doubt whether the globe, at the moment of the Great Flood, had indeed turned with everything inside into a single mixture of substances,” he gravitated toward Chinese historical accounts.⁸⁷ Apparently he began learning Chinese, convinced that he would need only the rudiments of the language to understand the first phase of history. He approached Cuper

86. Cuper to Witsen, April 1, 1713, Be71, UBA.

87. “Het schijnt mij toe, dat [hij] begint te twijfelen, of de aerdtkloot wel soude zijn gebraght ten tyden van de Sundtvløet met alle haer herde ingewanden tot een pap, ende eene gemeene vermenginge van stoffen” (Cuper to Witsen, June 16, 1713, Be73, fol. 287, UBA).

who, through Witsen, had access to Asian source materials: “It would not matter much if you cannot find all of the Chinese *Annals* for me, if only I have the beginnings that treat of their first Emperors: that will be sufficient since I only want to work on that part.”⁸⁸ Cuper duly wrote to Witsen, confirming that “Bourguet surely understands Chinese, and does not want the Latin translation of Confucius [i.e., *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* that had been published by the Jesuits in 1687], but original Chinese texts.”⁸⁹ His friend ordered the desired books in Batavia, which arrived after three years. They failed to satisfy Bourguet’s expectations, however, and he eventually began to question the presumed age and isolation of the Middle Kingdom’s traditions and antiquities. He ended up casting doubt on Chinese chronology (*Lettre à M. Hottinger sur l’histoire de la Chine*, 1734); more interesting was his take on the idea, first put forward by Hornius, of the origin of the Native Americans, which presupposed the existence of a land bridge across the Bering Strait (*Lettre sur la jonction de l’Amérique avec l’Asie*, 1735).

Bourguet’s engagement with the Dutch scholars points clearly to what would eventually be the end of comparative Sino-European chronology in writing the history of the world. The collapse of the biblical timeline was ultimately not due to Chinese antiquity; by the mid-eighteenth century, chronology, as a discipline, would even be made redundant. This was the result of the far more shocking claims of geology and paleontology: when from the 1740s onward, the Comte de Buffon began to publish his studies of fossils, he took the history of the Earth back at least 70,000 years. China’s 500 years of greater antiquity had obviously lost their radical appeal; believing the Chinese rather than Moses was now a relatively harmless error of judgment.

CONCLUSION

As the attempts of six Dutch scholars—Scaliger, Golius, Vossius, Hornius, Witsen, and Cuper—to reconcile European history with the histories of the Middle East, the Americas, and in particular China were partly based on Chinese texts (and one Persian one) and on engagement with Chinese individuals, one might argue that they be conceived of as global history. In a basic sense, they struggled to calibrate the world’s different chronologies and, in so doing, to integrate non-European perspectives. This inspired Hornius to “provincialize” European countries among a sizable number of similar states worldwide, and Vossius to even see the Celestial Empire as superior on the basis of

88. “Ce ne feroit pas un affaire quand on ne troueroit pas tous les Annales de la Chine, pourvu que j’aye les commencemens, qui traitent de leurs premiers Empereurs; cela suffiroit; ce n’est que sur cette partie que je voudrais travailler” (Cuper to Witsen, June 16, 1713, Be73, fol. 288, UBA).

89. “Bourguet . . . verstaet sekerlijk het Chinees, en begeert niet de Latijnse oversettingh van Confucius, maer het origineel of Chinees” (Cuper to Witsen, April 28, 1713, Be72, fol. 284r, UBA).

its greater antiquity. The arrival of the Witsen Mirror led to the question, “Moses or China?” in connection to larger humanistic and scientific questions: the age and shape of the world, the migration of languages, and the origin of fossils.

With regard to Vossius in particular, his interest in China has recently been interpreted as merely a rhetorical ploy to support his self-image as an intellectual radical in Spinoza’s wake: “a subversive strategy within western intellectual debate . . . as part of Vossius’s campaign to sap confidence in biblical chronology.”⁹⁰ Yet such a conclusion does not acknowledge the palpable challenge that China presented even to Dutch scholars who never traveled, from the arrival of the first Chinese historical text in 1602, through the eyewitness reports of foreign visitors, and most obviously the material culture—so admired by Vossius—that was omnipresent in Dutch households. A collection such as Witsen’s showcased hundreds of Chinese paintings and other artifacts; evidence set in “steel” as provided by his Han Dynasty mirror demonstrates to what extent scientific findings at the time depended on humanistic expertise. There were no means of establishing the age of fossils, stones, or bones (like the skeletons of mammoths, which Witsen claimed, the first to do so, were animals who had perished in the Flood), but antiquities could be subjected to the philological rigor of the Republic of Letters and dated on the basis of their inscriptions and artistic styles and techniques.

Seeing the attempts to rewrite Eurocentric accounts of history as merely libertine rhetoric also ignores the care that Dutch scholars took to procure authentic Chinese documents and to meet with foreigners in the flesh—Fichinpai, Shen Fuzong, Arcade Hoang, and Zhou Meiye, who traveled to Europe—as well as the fact that the Republic of Letters had by 1700 stretched to include learned Chinese in Batavia and southern China. The arrival of a Chinese antiquity even seems to have inspired Guillaume Bonjour to seek conclusive evidence in Beijing. In light of the Chinese emperors’ concurrent interest in time-keeping on the basis of European expertise, it is possible to compare the Amsterdam mayor, looking into his extraordinary Chinese mirror and pondering questions of global history and cultural priority, with Kangxi’s grandson, the Qianlong Emperor (ruled 1735–96), who owned a small but valuable circular mirror made of European glass. In his memoirs, he documented a rare moment of tranquil introspection, when he spent an evening “sitting on my fine bed and gazing at the mirror, [where] all the multitudinous influences of karma are stilled.”⁹¹ Juxtaposing these two mirrors may illustrate the heightened sense of parallax, and of different timelines converging, that individuals far apart could experience in a globalizing world.

90. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 640.

91. Qianlong 乾隆, *Shiwen quanji* 詩文全集, 1:14, quoted in Screech, *Lens within the Heart*, 159.

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