Isaac Vossius, Robert Hooke, and the early Royal Society's use of Sinology

I.

China for European scholars from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries exemplified the notion of heterodoxy: for here was a kingdom that was heterodox in the purest sense, literally a place 'of another teaching'. This provoked a crisis of accommodation, resulting eventually in the 1704 decree of Clement XI, forbidding the participation of Chinese Christians in ceremonies honouring Confucius, or involving ancestor-worship. The movement known as 'figurism' had failed; and the Jesuit Mission in China collapsed. The blame here rests squarely on the Papacy, not on the Chinese Emperor, Kangxi, who had officially endorsed the now anathematised Jesuit accommodationist view, and who was extremely annoyed at this new turn of events, describing the papal messenger as 'a sinner against the Catholic teaching and a rebel to China.'

What was heterodox about China? First, China looked like a monarchy, but it was in practice governed not by an aristocracy, but by a scholar-class, appointed on the basis of intellectual merit. Secondly, China apparently boasted the longest uninterrupted cultural and scholarly tradition of any nation in the world – indeed, its long chronology in some versions extended to before the orthodox dating of the Flood or even the Creation. This was to prove important for supporters of non-Vulgate chronologies in the West. Next, there was the connected problem of Chinese religion: what was its relation to natural religion, and did it preserve an original Noachic tradition, equal or superior to its European counterpart? Finally – my concern today – what was the mysterious Chinese language and what part had it played in the preservation of Chinese learning?

Today I present merely one tiny case study in this problem, but one that may suggest some interesting ways for thinking about heterodoxy in the period. I discuss the reactions to Chinese scholarship and language by two early Fellows of the Royal Society, the controversial philologist and natural philosopher Isaac Vossius, and the greatest experimentalist of the age, Robert Hooke. Our conference is titled 'The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy'; I hope you will forgive me for discussing rather some religious consequences of intellectual heterodoxy. For both the fascination and the threat of Chinese learning were powered ultimately by religious considerations.

II.

The scholars of the early Royal Society had pronounced interests in orientalism, and these peaked in the 1680s, the decade with which I shall chiefly be dealing. The publications of the German trader Andreas Cleyer and (posthumously) the Polish Jesuit Michal Boym in these years turned Chinese medicine, particularly the claims of pulse medicine, into a hot scholarly topic. In late 1685 Henri Justel was informing the Society that Père Couplet had sent back 124 volumes from China; and in that year and the next the minor F.R.S. and Africa Company merchant Arthur Bailey presented the Society with letters in 'Chinese' script. Bailey was fascinated by the intricacy of the characters, detecting 18 to 24 pen-strokes in each separate character. In that year too another minor F.R.S., Nathaniel Vincent, finally published a 1674 sermon that in an appendix contained what has recently been recognised as the first snatch of Confucius to appear in English. He also revealed that two of his colleagues were contemplating a complete translation, and by context these F.R.S.s

were almost certainly Robert Hooke and his linguist friend Francis Lodwick. In that year too Hooke lectured on the Chinese abacus, and the following year he turned to the Chinese language. Next year, 1687, the Paris Jesuit partial edition of Confucius, the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, published to the world their controversial interpretation of Chinese religion and its origins. This book made such a splash that James II would ask for it upon his visit to the Bodleian in that year; and Bodley's Librarian Thomas Hyde could produce the library's copy. James' question to Hyde was topical, for only a few weeks prior to the royal visit, Hyde had received in the library the first Chinese visitor to England capable of conversing: the teenage Christian convert Shen Fuzong, some of whose Latin letters to Hyde survive. Shen helped catalogue the Chinese books, and of course the London virtuosi had soon heard all about him; Sir Godfrey Kneller painted him for the king's bedroom.

III.

But the most outrageous sinological publication by an F.R.S. in these years was Isaac Vossius' 1685 essay 'De artibus & scientiis Sinarum', yet another example of his coat-trailing, and it followed in his collection of essays a piece on the stupendous magnitude of Chinese cities, a *topos* of travellers' accounts since the middle ages.

Vossius proposed Chinese learned culture as the greatest and oldest in the world. He discussed the Chinese arts and sciences one by one, and in almost every case, Chinese achievement revealed European failure. The Chinese have unparalleled medical knowledge: their pulse-medicine makes urinoscopy irrelevant; they can diagnose from the tongue alone; they practise arts unknown in the west, such as acupuncture; and they have known about the circulation of the blood for over four thousand years. Their knowledge of medicinal plants and their surgical techniques are unsurpassed. Their chemistry is at least 2,000 years old, perhaps even 4,600 years old. In mechanics, architecture, music, painting, acting, and handicrafts, they excel. The symbol of all of this is their Great Wall, a construction that makes Babylonian, Egyptian, or Roman feats puny in comparison. Nor will Vossius mention their porcelain towers, 1000 feet high, nor their giant bridges – common exaggerations from the literature behind his account. Even things we might interpret as weaknesses are not so, Vossius argues: if the Chinese employ no shading in their paintings, that is because they can distinguish the near and the far by their treatment of line alone. Printing, of course, had been employed by the Chinese 1,500 years before reaching Christian Europe, and their version of it is still superior to ours. The use of magnetism in navigation must have been understood by the ancient Chinese too, as they have been exploring other countries by means of it for 2,800 years; only very recently has Christendom learned the art, passed by the Chinese to the Arabs via Sri Lanka, and thence to Christendom.

Vossius' essay is aggressively heterodox on a first reading. Indeed, he is so unrelenting in his praise that we realise that this essay is best classified as a late example of that uncle of 'heterodoxy', the Renaissance genre of *paradox*. But then on a second reading, perhaps we take a step back. First, Vossius himself had come to sinology in 1659 as part of his developing argument in favour of the Greek Septuagint text of the Old Testament, with its stretched chronology, in opposition to the orthodox, shortened chronology of the Hebrew Vulgate. The antiquity of the Chinese historical tradition was for Vossius in origin a means to and end, therefore – and this use of the Chinese chronology to promote the Septuagint Bible was a move that was

to be commended by Sir William Temple in his 'Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning' of 1690, and therefore attacked by F.R.S. William Wotton in his famous riposte of 1694. Next, Vossius' essay on the Chinese arts and sciences quickly reveals itself as interested in the cause rather than the effects of Chinese scholarship. And this he hammers out again and again: because they have preserved the *perennis literarum usus* and the *perpetuus antiquorum librorum intellectus*. Vossius is therefore really arguing for learned culture, and for a monoglot, supra-regional elite within it. Hence it is not that the Chinese are *naturally* better than us: it is their *perennis literarum usus*, and that alone, that guarantees superiority. We might have better astronomy and mathematics – which the Chinese have eagerly taken on – but again this is not because we are naturally better at these things, but because the Greeks got it from the Chaldeans and Babylonians, and once more it is antiquity that trumps. Vossius the philologist, writing what is really a rather derivative and irritating piece, is in fact implicitly campaigning for the preservation of the *Western* scholarly languages, and the retirement of the vernaculars from learned discourse. On a second reading, therefore, Vossius' heterodoxy becomes orthodoxy, and his sinology pseudo-sinology.

But there is a third reading too. First, eastern scholarship *was* ineluctably opposed to Western orthodox traditions in almost every area Vossius canvassed, and he himself cannot escape this conclusion. Vossius carefully does not discuss Chinese religion, but one implication of his argument should be that China preserves a very old form of natural religion, the Jesuit position that was to prove so self-destructive. The Chinese historical record presented problems for orthodox biblical criticism; their medicine was in collision with western ideas; so too their art; and so forth. Secondly, Vossius also admits that the passage of time has affected China too. The greatness of their ancient statuary, for instance, shows, 'that just as it is with us, so also for the Chinese: with the passage of time, the dignity of arts and knowledge declines' (80). Ancient music the Chinese mourn as a lost art; nor do they make much of modern music. It is credible that this has come about with them, says Vossius, as it has with us, 'through the mutation of speech and language, which with the Chinese, as with us, is flowing and unstable. I have shown elsewhere [he adds] that this happened to the Greeks too' (78). Finally, following the Tartar conquest of 1644, China, as many Westerners noted, had fallen from her millennial chair of cultural superiority. Vossius' essay, therefore, is tinged with a counter-narrative, one of cultural loss. So, finally, the Chinese *perennis literarum usus* cannot fully stabilise their *literæ* themselves; in Vossius' Latin, *literæ* as the object of 'study' and *literæ* as 'language' itself remain problematically uncommensurated.

IV.

Enter Robert Hooke, whose 1686 essay on the Chinese *literæ* may be partially read, I now suggest, as a reaction to his philological colleague's incendiary essay. Vossius wrote in Latin; Hooke lectured and published in English. Vossius made no effort to assess the (rather conventional) sinological scholarship he plundered; Hooke went to the trouble of obtaining Chinese word-lists and printed books; of building an abacus; even, with Lodwick, of taking tea with, and trying to talk to, some visiting Chinese merchants in 1693. Hooke recorded in his journal that they didn't have much luck: but he could at least tell that spoken Chinese was a tonal language.

Vossius's essay, I have argued, was really powered by non-sinological concerns, primarily his conservative advocacy of the *perennis literarum usus* of Greek and Latin. Hooke's motivation, too, was also non-sinological in origin. As he opened

his essay, ‘Whether there ever were any Language Natural, I dispute not: But that there have been, are and may be artificial Languages ’tis not difficult to prove.’ Hooke’s ‘Chinese Characters’ lecture is thus a text that grows out of Hooke’s ongoing work on the construction of an artificial language, in other words his attempts to realise a revision of his patron John Wilkins’ *Essay concerning a Real Character, and an Artificial Language* of 1668 in the 1670s. But ironically, Wilkins had explicitly denied that Chinese script in its origin had been artificially imposed. Hooke, returning to the work of the Dutch polymath Jacobus Golius, rejected by Wilkins, reaffirmed this supposed fact against his master.

Hooke’s own lecture on Chinese language, then, sceptical about the possibility of any ‘clavis’ such as was being touted in the 1680s, and attentive to the complexity of the individual calligraphy of the characters, engages with such discussions among his Royal Society colleagues, even as he situates his analysis within the ongoing speculations about the development of a workable artificial language.

Hooke’s essay focuses on what he perceives as a radical distinction between the effable and the written manifestations of Chinese. Working from Jesuit Chinese publications with interlinear romanised phonetic notation, Hooke is struck by the discontinuity between the complexity of the character and its simple spoken form. This discontinuity prompts Hooke to make a leap of reasoning assisted by his preoccupation with artificial languages: the Golian hypothesis that court Chinese was at one point artificially constructed and imposed. Hooke conjectures that modern spoken Chinese is a later accretion related to the character only by laborious convention, and that the character itself is all that remains of a now mute language that may have been *either* literal *or* artificial in its first institution (Hooke regards all written language as instituted rather than natural). Chinese script therefore reflects a superior approach to language than its current spoken form. In adopting this interpretation Hooke was implicitly rejecting the topical claims of Andreas Müller that there was a simple key to the language. If the original language represented by the surviving script is lost, and if, on the evidence of that surviving script, it is impossible to be sure what the original status of the language was, then Müller’s claims had to be false. Furthermore, Hooke was also rejecting the view put forward by Philippe Couplet in his *proëmialis declaratio* to the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* that, because the Chinese had shunned commerce right from the origin of their nation, they had preserved their language virtually intact since Babel, where it had formed one of the original seventy matrix languages. He was therefore also rejecting Vossius’ stance.

But Hooke went even further, and here we can see his interests in instating a new phonology finding a voice. Having divorced (current) Chinese phonology from (retrospective) Chinese orthography, Hooke then made the bold claim that *all* languages might suffer a divorce over time between their written and spoken forms. In the meeting a week after his lecture Hooke met with stiff opposition to his idea of the instability of the effable forms of languages, with Hooke continuing to assert that Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, even Greek and Latin may all now be pronounced so differently from their ancient forms as to render current practice indistinguishable from a purely ‘Arbitrary’ system. Such a claim was bound to cause dissent from an auditory that included academic philologists, notably Thomas Gale. Nevertheless Hooke’s views here parallel his insistence throughout the geological work which he was undertaking in this period that there may have been many ancient, philosophically advanced cultures of whom we have lost all memory. Hooke therefore hardened

Vossius' intermittently observable counter-narrative of cultural loss into a basic historiographical model. He was not impressed with Vossius' dominant notion that permanence of scholarly dialect equals permanence of scholarly memory: in effect, he exploited the contradiction at the heart of Vossius' work, and turned an essay of an ancient into an essay of a modern. It is no coincidence that Hooke's geological work was itself peppered with sinological anecdotes, and this hints towards a coherence to Hooke's later work that has not hitherto been noticed. It may be noted again that Hooke's Aristotelian view of history as punctuated by periodic floods and earthquakes wiping away contemporary human knowledge is again an implicit attack on Wilkins, who had denied periodic catastrophes.

To conclude, Hooke's practical concern with realising an artificial language dominated the continuation of the 'Chinese Characters' lecture as it had its opening. If, as Hooke maintains, all ancient languages may now be pronounced quite amiss, then this is good grounds for replacing our garbled modern perversions of the ancient tongues with artificially imposed sounds specially designed to erase the 'great many Irregularities and Difficulties of Pronounciation (which are to be found in all Languages now spoken)'. This would convert ancient tongues into *de facto* artificial languages, not philosophical in the Wilkinsian sense, but at least 'exactly Regular and easy' from the point of view of orthoepy. Hooke asserts that even Chinese is a fit language for phonologically refitting in a European context. In this way, Hooke's 'Chinese Characters' lecture combined two different discussions in a complex and intelligent fashion. Faced with a sudden surge in interest in the origin and intelligibility of Chinese, Hooke developed his own sceptical but inventive model, and one that in its interpretation of the general question of the relevance of ancient culture and language sounds a note in the complex *querelle* of the 'Ancients' and the 'Moderns'. Finally, Hooke situated his comments not only within contemporary discussions of oriental scripts but also within the complementary tradition of the search for a workable artificial language. Two decades after his great mentor Wilkins had completed the *Essay*, Hooke was still bending every linguistic discussion he encountered towards the salvaging of at least some aspects of Wilkins' dream, though not quite in the form his mentor had envisaged.

V.

So, two summary observations.

First, heterodoxy and geography are linked, of course: and the problem of China, so cultivated, so vast, so remote, so uninterested in Christianity, is a rich nexus for such discussions.

Secondly, the ancients and moderns dispute has an early index within the Royal Society itself, and is connected to discussions of the proper languages of scholarship, biblical chronology, and possibility of an artificial language. I hope that this is a rich and original line for further enquiry: the Battle of the Books, I maintain, was well underway by the 1680s within English scholarship, and China and its language have early parts to play in that foundational dispute for western intellectual culture.

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