It's a Long way to Cathay, Where the Emperor Is the "Sun of the Sky"

Mihaela IRIMIA

A generally accepted view in eighteenth-century Europe was that of underdeveloped nations to be identified in the East. On this terrain Voltaire saw civilization as the best thing in the world to be exported to 'Barbary'. *Distance*, in other words, creates *barbarity*. The ancient Greeks, we will remember, saw in the Persians the other pole of their civilizatory model, and portrayed them as inhabitants of the world of history, if at the wrong end. Beyond the pale of civilization, a third category, the Scythians, were deemed people of nature, living outside history, impossible to identify in terms of religious allegiance, and escaping all philosophical taxonomies. Since unclassifiable, theoretically non-extant. Seen from Scythia, the Greek 'Other' looked 'quasi-Greek', while appearing 'quasi-Scythian', when espied from Greece (Hartog: 46) – a question of *perspective*. On the borderline between the *οικουμένη* and savagery, between the world 'in here' and the one 'out there', between the familiar and the *unheimlich*, the *initiatory* space of *hybrid identity* played a crucial role in the collective imaginary.

It will not surprise us to read Voltaire in the original, *and* in an English adaptation – in, that is, 'the' languages of the Enlightenment – on this paradigmatic dichotomy, in the mid-eighteenth century. The Preface to *Les Scythes* (1767) emphasizes 'le contraste des mahométans et des chrétiens, celui des Americains et des Espagols, celui des Chinois et des Tartares', for, '[on] hasarde aujourd'hui le tableau contrasté des anciens Scythes et des anciens Persans, qui peut-être est la peinture de quelques nations modernes'. We, France, can be read between the lines, are neither of these modern national types, for we, France, are the Classics! On Albion's shore, *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755), also performed in Dublin as Murphy's *Orphan of China* (1759), set another significant contrast, the one between the 'exhausted store' of the old nations of Greece and Rome, which 'now can charm no more', and the 'fresh virtues' provided by the 'source of light' found in 'China's eastern realms'. The modern author could only 'boldly [bear] / Confucius' morals to Britannia's ears'. We, England, are neither of those old nations, for we, England are the Moderns!

The two leading languages of the Enlightenment promoted a love-and-hate relationship with the East, a place at once attractive and obnoxious, relatively but passably dangerous, and definitely reachable without exorbitant difficulty. It was not as fine and reliable an ambiance as the West, yet comfortable precisely because it induced a sense of comfortable superiority in the West. And it was also economically tonic and religiously necessary, an ideal place for skilful missioners and ardent missionaries. The East could furnish pragmatic and aesthetic profit, excellent imagological turnover, and no mean investment in things material and spiritual. It lay way away from the luxurious

Philologica Jassyensia, An II, Nr. 2, 2006, p. 199-212

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

West, but it was replete with reserves of luxury, so it was worthwhile covering the long way to its heart. *Maps*, as well as all kinds of *geographies* and *histories* including this so far almost invisible face of the world had been circulated in the last hundred years, spotlighting one or another point of attraction[1].

At the other extreme from Rousseau, Voltaire applauds the conquest of *nature* by *nurture*, and commends the flourishing of 'les arts utiles et même les arts agréables' from Russia to Spain, in a sweeping move westwards. To the traditional '*ex Oriente lux*' is added the modern '*ex Occidente lex*'. Symmetrically, he envisages a historic sweep eastwards, with the Tartars subdued by Russia and Europe in a promising civilized

[1] Adam Olearius, for instance, on embassy from the Duke of Holstein to Muscovy and Persia, had published the account of his exciting experience in 1647. Translated from the German into French, English and Dutch – all languages associated with cultures of exploration and efficiency – *The Travels of Olearius* had shaped the perception of Russia in seventeenth-century Europe. They came as testimony to the latest Western interest in the East, after the fifteenth-century Portuguese thrust and the sixteenth-century Dutch takeover. Olearius brought consistent evidence of French and English presence in lands East of the prosperous West and furnished valuable impressions of Persia's unwillingness to open to Europe. Author of a yet unpublished Persian-Turkish-Arabic dictionary, he had also translated Saadi's *Gulistan*. Most of all though Olearius had committed to paper a comprehensive picture of Russia as a despotic empire in which foreigners were avoided or segregated and the Tsar was considered above all foreign leaders or rulers. This was Alexei Mikhailovich, the last premodern tyrant before Peter the Great. At his total discretion were the lives and property of the people, while travel outside his empire was forbidden under pain of corporal punishment. Immediate neighbours saw in Russia the heir to the Tartars, *savage* and *barbarous*, so unquestionably a *serious menace to the West*.

Besides such fine observations and critical assessments of the situation in 'the East', journeys and voyages to the Middle East or Levant, all across Western Europe, as well as to far away places in Asia and Africa had become customary. The Calabrian Francesco Gemelli Careri had published his *Giro del mondo* as a kind of 'modern' resumption of Marco Polo's extraordinary exploit. English, French, Portuguese, and again Italian (from the French!) versions were circulated in the early and mid-eighteenth century and Lady Montagu declared her admiration for this one of the most *exact travellers* she had ever met. It is a stunning remark, if we consider the loans and pilfering from Jesuit sources identified in the meantime, and which were much of a norm in those days. Careri's work carries the weight of the *typical panorama* of the world in the late seventeenth century. As we read in the Italian original, it was meant as *Lo stato presente di tutti i paesi e POPOLI DEL MONDO*, *naturale, politico e morale, con nuove osservazioni, e correzioni degli antichi e moderni viaggiatori*. The English version of 1739 bears the overall title of a *Modern History* and a subtitle specifying what we would now call an *anthropological* perspective from which 'the present state of all nations' is viewed. The work describes *Their respective Situations, Persons, Habits, Buildings, Manners, Laws and Customs, Religion and Policy, Arts and Sciences, Trades, Manufactures and Husbandry, Plants, Animals and Minerals* and it concludes by calling itself *The most complete and correct System of GEOGRAPHY AND MODERN HISTORY extant in any Language*. It is the *chronotopic synopsis* of reality measurable with human means that had become the standard guide to *otherness* in reference to *the known* at the time.

Later in the century the Bérenger Collection makes popular Prévost's selection of *Voyages imaginaries*. As we are warned from the very beginning, this entertaining bunch of handy volumes for the current highlife consumption had been put together with a view to advertising '*le romanesque*' and '*le merveilleux*'. In the former category fell narratives produced by *non-European nations*. The latter dealt with stories about and from *non-real nations*, say, Amazonia, a location of legendary rather than of historical relevance. The collection was a fairly compendious assortment, as it set side by side such *heterogeneous writings* as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Montesquieu's *Histoire des troglodites* or the Enchanted Island episode in Luis de Camões's *Os Lusíadas*. To unite them all was the sense of *exoticism* transpiring from all those relations of non-Western reality. As has been noticed in the literature, when, in the very late 1700's, interest in the East started waning, 'the East became a subject of interest in children's literature' (Mannsåker, in Rousseau & Porter: 194).

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

future (Wilberger: 15, 279). Going West, it follows, is as relative a thing on the mental map as it had been on the navigational. Columbus had searched for the lands and people of the Khan, while he was getting more and more entangled in the threads of that fascinating oxymoron called the West Indies[2].

At the East-West crossroads is legitimated the idea of Russia as an eighteenth-century invention, an episode in our 'long modernity' which still needs examining. An early seventeenth-century description of *The Russian Empire and Grand Duchy of Muscovy* presents the Tsar as a 'bloodthirsty Asiatic tyrant' governing a people 'more Asiatic and like the Tartars or Scythians' (Margeret: xxix). Russian presence in Central Asia, after the extremity of the continent is reached in 1648 means the quick conquest of Siberia and the ensuing practice of tsars sending expeditions to survey the new empire. Building on inherited images of Russia as the land of cruelty and wilderness, a view shared by Montaigne and Rabelais, Westerners were circumspect about Russia's forays into Asia. Opinions were far from aligned even at the time of Europeanization at home under Peter and Catherine, and Russia's Europeanizing mission in Asia was seen with enough reticence, as confirmed, among others, by Patrick Gordon's *Geography Anatomized, or the Geographical Grammar* (1693) or the better known *Description of the Empire of China* (1736) by du Halde.

In principle, to any cultivated European coming from an overwhelmingly Christian culture, 'the fact that there were few Christians in Asia was the clearest possible mark of European superiority', local religions being 'several degrees less rational than Christianity', which meant that 'Asia failed test after test devised by Europeans' (Marshall:25). Copious accounts of Central Asia, with 'Tartary' still believed part of ancient Scythia abounded deep into the age of Enlightenment. There was a complicating imagological factor, namely the conviction that Scythia was the home of the Goths who had further migrated into Europe, so that a race of Northern Europeans were deemed descendents of Tartars. This was associated with 'the glamorous image of Cingis Khan and Timur Lenk' (Marshall: 74), an attraction exercised by exotic *nomads* upon settled civilized Europeans which had imbibed titanic personalities for Renaissance stages. Indeed, the *vagabond* disposition of the nomad condition was felt as a 'romantic' drive (Vaga, a legendary city in Numidia, was inhabited by *vagabundi* or *vagamundi*, according to Italian Renaissance jargon[3], a definition setting in parallel the literal and the figurative meaning of Numidian, as they collapsed in the adjective *νομαδικός*). Moreover, the particular English sympathy for Tartary had been fed by the folly of a relation between Genghiz Khan and the sons and daughters of Britannia, on the assumption that they had been Deists at the time of the celebrated khan. The Jesuits vehemently rejected this as crazy fabulation.

[2] On the symbolic punning o *cariba* and *caniba*, see Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1982. While the natives naturally speak of the Caribbean population as *cariba*, the Spanish conquistadors decode the message in accordance with their declared aim, that of reaching the Khan's kingdom, where the population can only be called *caniba*. Todorov further analyses the telling semantic glide to *cannibals*, and the ensuing anthropological grid.

[3] Angela Maccarone Amuso's study of the seventeenth-century traveler Careri's life and experience, entitled *Gianfranco Gemelli Careri, l'Ulisse del diciasettesimo secolo* (Roma: Gangemi Editore, 2000) halts at some length to discuss this.

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Two basic stereotypes of Asia in the eyes of eighteenth-century Europeans read back into the first contacts between the two continents, as well as forward into our contemporary conscience of cultural identity. Asia is perceived as, on the one hand, fanatically religious, on the other, very slowly changing, in contrast with Western rationality and dynamism. It could be said that, as an overall narrative of identity, 'Asia' is a Western writing of Asia, very much in the sense in which Orientalism is a metanarrative produced in the Occident (Said: 1978, Venn: 2000). For the sake of didactic differentiation, the 'West is technology', the 'East a passive client' (Cardini: 173). This symbolic divide still operates in our collective (un)conscious. There is 'Russia in Europe' and 'Russia in Asia', with the old capital in Moscow, and the new capital in Sankt Petersburg (Wolff: 23). There is then the historical and historic business of Russia waiting 'to become "known" to the knowing West', an operation that could be called 'putting Russia on the map', and 'becoming civilized [by] choosing Europe' (Wolff: 90, 145, 190).

Mythical portraits of Catherine, recalling the cult of Elizabeth I, or, for that matter, of the 'Son of the Sky' at the time of systematic Russian missions to China, shed more light on *follies of symbolic identity*, as they suggest how blurred, after all, the East-West borderline can be, and how human, too human human behaviour is. Suffice it to mention that, after Peter the Great's Westernizing campaign and Russia really undergoing a sea change, negative perceptions of this deep-going modernization persist in such proportion as to transpire in projections of the collective mind's depths. Europeans are seen as *Tartars* or *Turks*, where Asian populations had been loathed as ruthless Tartars by the civilizing Russians! In anthropological terms, the image evokes earlier fears that could be subsumed to the famous haunting questions, the one voiced by Dionysus the Carthusian, 'Lord, will the Turks invade Rome?', the other by Machiavelli, 'Do you think the Turk will make it to Italy this year?' (Hodgson: 140). Sneered at as heretical and destructive of 'our Orthodoxy', the Latin West came to be considered the Anti-Christ, wearing Western clothing as leading Russians to 'heathen customs' and beard-shaving and tobacco as 'devilish endeavours' by the anti-reformist spirits ill at ease with Peter's opening to the West (Schafly, in Bartlett: 6).

Reactions of the kind have not totally disappeared in South-Eastern Europe, as in today's Russia and the question of where the Eastern border of Europe lies has not stopped arising in the civic-political vocabulary of our New Europe. We are inheritors of the anthropology of the Enlightenment: the world is 'divided into moieties' (Hodgson: 3), with compelling axiological consequences. How topical this sounds now, as we witness clash-of-civilizations conflicts needs hardly be remarked. Narrated in the idiom of the Enlightenment, Russia was gradually to develop its own narrative of power 'superimposed (…) on the Western one (…) as a kind of universally acknowledged commentary or footnote, [e]ntering Western discourse through a side door, (…) as a third voice' (Thompson: 23-24). It was a process at once in the sense of the modern conquest of history, *and* of the resilience that historical changes contain. To recall the Greek-Persian-Scythian taxonomy of our argumentation, it was a process pointing to the fragile nature of the Greek-Persian and of the Persian-Scythian divide, with the middle term migrating symbolically left- and rightwards of an ideal borderline, which in reality is always porous. Hence the Western narrative of Russia as Persia, and Tartary as Scythia, but also of Russia as Scythia. Hence, also, the Russian narrative of Tartary as

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Scythia, of the West as Persia, but also of the West as Tartary, or else, Scythia. In the Central Asian question, power claimed on either of the empires flanking this *symbolic in-betweenness* is eventually a question of '[identity] falling between two stools – Russia and China' (Marshall: 93).

Such projections in the space of the mind do not fare by themselves. Various other ways of looking at Russia in relation to *civilization* and *Western(ized) values* underline the malleability of cultural identity at the time, as nowadays. There is the view of Peter the Great as 'the meritocrat who believed that everyone must work his way up from below' (Hughes, in Klein: 46), the great man who created Russia's modernity as a historicized promised land of law, order, and civility. There is also the view of Peter 'only nullify[ing] Russia's temporary lag, which was the result of the seventeenth-century crisis', and acting as a ruthless tyrant, at the same time as China was, under Russian eyes, an ossified empire (Lukin: 8). For Catherine, Russia was to remain a place always part of Europe, passing understanding Christian judgements on China, which it read as an enlightened monarchy, and rationally organized as a Confucian, so 'proto-Christian moral code', in contrast with the 'rude and ignorant Tartars' (Lukin: 5, 6).

With the growing missionary spirit of Mother Russia setting herself the task of taming the barbarous Tartars, China and Japan become foci of political and economic interest. Culturally and religiously, Russian presence in China, whether physical or spiritual, stays a categorical fact. A recurrent image in Russian poetry is that of Kithay as 'the remote place that can be reached by the growing power of the Russian monarchy', so that, with the Westernization of Russia, China snowballs into the negative example of a 'godless and uninspired, stagnant and immobile, tyrannical and despotic kingdom' (Lukin: 11, 22). The more apocalyptic did the image of the Eastern barbarian invasion into Russia appear, as it was perceived as some reenactment of 'the destruction of the "Second Rome"' (Lukin: 22). While Western-Chinese relations were based on trade and religious ties, Russian-Chinese relations were mainly commercial and political. 'Sino-Russian affairs led to exchanges of official representatives between the two capitals on a scale unmatched in Western-Chinese relations' (Maggs: 5). By the side of many unflattering descriptions of China, Voltaire also detects an inclination in Westerners to regard the Far East with sympathy, while criticizing the 'others' at home, in the West: 'Our European Travellers for the most Part are satyrical upon their neighbouring Countries, and bestow large Praises upon the Persians and Chinese' (Voltaire: 2).

Accumulating images of 'Asia through Russian eyes' take up the space of some of the literature enjoyed in eighteenth-century aristocratic circles. An Asia mediated, Persianized, as it were, for current consumption. Likewise, a 'French Orient' consumed in salons in Russia, more than direct experience by Russian envoys, make of Russia an *intermediary identity* with an extremely important role to play in our European world. As part of this *salon narrative*, a Persianized Russia dwells by the side of a Scythianized Orient. Like the chic set of *Arabian Nights* legitimizing highlife taste, they are more 'gallant' than Galland. In the early century, Leibniz recommended to the Tsar Peter that Russia facilitate exchanges of ideas between the West and the East, and that it 'absorb wisdom from both Western Europe and China' (Maggs: 2, 6). This *neither-nor*, or else, *both-and* nature of the Russian Bear in relation to the Chinese Dragon, *and* to the

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Western Lion – what a non-Western scutcheon of national/political assertion! – conferred upon this other 'Middle Kingdom' a problematic, if rich identity.

Russia's relation with the barbarous East is much more intricate *and* finely filtered through the sieve of her perpetually adjourned desire to go Western, combining facts with fabulations, follies with fakes, and frictions with fictions. There is a fecund Oriental heritage running in her blood: 'Scratch a Russian, and you will find a Tartar' (Vernadsky, in Lensen: 8). As ingredients of Russian absolutism, the Mongol and Byzantine lines are responsible in fairly equal proportion, the one stressing the military, the other the militant drive, the one political, the other religious, the one in the service of tsarist might, the other serving the Church, both in the shadow of Pan-Slavist ambitions. In effect, the haughtiness of Russian rulers has been analysed as both the effect of their 'emancipation from Tatar domination', and the consequence of 'inherit[ing] their empire from Chingis-Khan' (Lensen: 8, 11). In the Mongol unconscious, the Russian Tsar features as *tsagan khan* 'the white khan', which points to the psychological pressure that the conquest of Tartar territories must have exercised. While expanding their rule to the Urals, the Russians discover what use can be made of Cossacks, by capitalizing on their Christian Orthodox faith. By becoming masters over huge expanses of Asian land, the Russians adopt the Byzantine political ideals of a 'New Rome' meant to secure Christian *and* European identity against heathen hordes. *Il deserto dei tartari* seems to be a topos with more longevity in the mental space than in the one traceable on any geographic map.

The literature has pointed to there having occurred 'fewer greater changes (…) in modern history than [China's] cataclysmic confrontation with Western civilization, which (…) sucked [it] into the maelstrom of a world history in which its *t'ien-hsia* was no longer the universe and its centrality, (…) but only a parochial conceit' (Feuerwerker: vii-viii). From the vantage point of the early 2000's, we can now gauge the amplitude of this process unleashed in the eighteenth century. The celebrated *t'ien-hsia* 'all-under-heaven' badge of national identity – as we would proleptically say today – is the *Sinocentrism* turning China into *Chung-kuo* 'the Central Kingdom', and the Emperor into *T'ien-tzu* 'the Son of Heaven'. It is the kind of static image to be typically expected of a culture portraying itself as flourishing in an eternal golden age. Both China's stubborn isolation and Russia's persevering push eastwards encompass a much longer interval, and it appears fair to see the collision of East-West drives of the late seventeenth century as preparing the opinions and views of the Enlightenment, with Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* as a recognized sample.

*
* *

As the 'complete other to the European context (…), Asia was a huge reservoir and field of study for the natural historians of man', requiring of the daring explorer the curiosity and pending bravery to experience 'the wastes of Siberia, the deserts of Arabia, the steppes of Central Asia, the fertile valleys of China and India, and the tropical islands' (Marshall: 93). Travels to China, across the endless stretches of the Russian wilderness, were quite normally the business of people in business or of missionaries, the ones after immediate, the others, after long-term success. Princes occasionally

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

favoured princely escapades, though as a rule aware and wary of difficulties, dangers, and sizeable risks. Bad roads, long distances, primitive behaviour, but, in the first place, the glaring difference in values, protocols, and other forms of cultural identity could be barriers that nobody in their right minds would minimize, let alone discard. Making it all the way to the Chinese capital, a locale enveloped in secrecy and almost completely a *mental configuration* in the 'civilized' West, at the time, was the more fascinating.

A Romanian boyard born, according to documents of the time, not far from Russia and Tartary, in the year 1636 (when Harvard College is founded) advertises himself as Nicolao Spadario Moldavolacone to the emancipated society of the day. Educated at the Patriarchy in Constantinople and having as teachers scholars from Padua, Venice and Rome, he receives thorough instruction in history, theology and philosophy – subjects recalling the onetime *Trivium* – and studies Latin, Greek, Slavonic, Turkish and Neo-Greek – a fairly balanced and doubtless useful bunch of classic and modern keys to the intricate alleys of the world, only to top his erudite stature with natural sciences and mathematics during a study stay in Italy. Thus equipped, it is no wonder that he wins dignity after dignity in a public career culminating with positions entrusted by the Russian Tsar, after successive offices held at Western courts. Alexei Mikhailovich, Peter the Great's father, appoints Milescu translator of the court and the influential Matveyev, Peter's great uncle, takes him under his protection. With a Greek father, the Spathar passes for a Greek Orthodox messenger in tsarist contexts and is soon called upon to put his knowledge and diplomacy to the use of Mother Russia's multiple and subtle missions in Asia.

As Russian embassy to China, the Moldavian Nicolae Milescu, normally regarded as a classic of early modern Romanian culture now, sets out from Moscow on 3 May 1675. From his diary we gather impressions from Tobolsk on 30 May, when he starts heading for Nerchinsk, the hiding place of the Tunguz prince Gantimur, converted to the Christian faith during a recent visit to Russia. Milescu's mission is in great proportion winning the favour of this, under Chinese eyes, terrible traitor, under Russian eyes, confidant to be used for further military and economic interests. An *interpreter* or *ερμηνεύς* by appointed status, the tsarist envoy is entrusted a crucial human instance to treat with official responsibility, before he reaches his final destination, with letters and presents from Russia's to China's Emperor. On 13 January 1676 he touches the Chinese border, and on 15 May 1676, we find him in Peking, having successfully traversed the fearful expanses of Tartary and defied no end of perils.

Milescu's own *amphibious identity* raises intriguing issues. Does he count as Moldavian or Romanian, Moldavian or Russian, Western or East-European, along national/cultural lines? Is he a refined scholar and man of letters, or a representative of administrative-political officialdom? Is he a traveller or an ambassador, a merchant in disguise or a diplomat putting on mercantile airs, just to confuse his counterparts? And is he a servant of the faith or a globe-trotter of sorts having an eye for difference in beliefs, customs and folk lore? He displays a fairly composite status in his public appearances, as in his private hours. Be it as it may, he plays his role with elegance and intelligence and still features in recent studies as the author of 'one of the most spirited of the early Russian travel accounts' (Maggs: 67), leaving behind notes and impressions that remain unknown till the latter half of the nineteenth century, to be translated into

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Romanian (by G. Sion), and Russian in 1889 and 1896, respectively. The publication by Longman, in 1919, of John F. Baddeley's *Russia, Mongolia, China* (of the seventeenth century) places the *Diary of My Journey in China* on a Western orbit which it had long deserved.

What are the reasons of such an assessment? It is very likely that he used as a source the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini's *Novus atlas sinensis*, of 1655. In all appearances, his own text served as a source for the French Jesuit Philippe Avril, whose *Voyages en divers États d'Europe et d'Asie entrepris pour découvrir un nouveau chemin à la Chine* (1692) completed Western notations about exotic Kithay. As Milescu himself acknowledges in his diary that he had previous travellers' writings at hand, he is portrayed by outstanding tsarist officials as a *mediator between Europe and Asia*. The French Ambassador to Russia, M. de Neuville, praises his Latin, Greek and Italian and emphasizes his position on 'our' European side, as he focuses on the Spathar's *mediation between Mongol power and Muscovy*. Yet another French Ambassador, Mr. de Pomponne, sent to the Swedish court, overtly voices his surprise 'de trouver un homme si *voisin de la Tartarie* autant instruit aux langues, et avec une *connaissance aussi générale de toutes choses*' (Picot: 14) (emphasis added).

From the above we get the image of a versatile envoy sent on a decisive mission to the 'Empire of the Sun', namely that of setting up regular diplomatic and trade relations, and locating the best routes for current ties in the future between Russia and China. As he prepares for his mission, the *tsarist go-between* puts together information about Siberia, Mongolia and China, aware of the basic articulations of imperial Russian politics: annexing Ukraine and Belarus (from Poland), defeating Ottoman Turkey, in order to obtain supremacy over the Black Sea area, and advancing to the Baltic, for wide opening to the West. His knowledge of Turkish and Tartar identity must have weighed heavy in the scales of courtly decisions, as must have his being conversant with Turkish and Greek, crucial linguistic vehicles in the enmeshing of the political fabric fringing on Ottoman territory.

Embracing the modern attitude of direct observation *and* in love with the traditional pleasure of perusing fables of exotic identity from written sources or by hearsay, the Spathar does not hesitate to affix to *crude ocular examination* exciting *fabulations* stemming from Biblical or classic texts. Where the ancient Greek authors cannot be brought as evidence, doubt can step in and some willful suspension of belief have its say. Where, on the contrary, authoritative sources can be adduced, his evaluation gains in sprightly verve and persuasive energy. For somebody who is an official Russian messenger, the Mongols are living Gog and Magog, the two nations in the *Book of Revelation* that will war against the Kingdom of God. History and myth overlap on his page, to the effect that the one assumes the exemplary, or downright anagogical charge of the other. It is in such moments that the map of the *mental* metabolizes the map of *actual reality*.

*
* *

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Once in China, the faithful tsarist envoy of Romanian and Greek blood embarks upon an official discourse that could be summed up as 'Russia über Alles'. 'Even if embassies from the Caesar in Rome or from the Turkish Sultan, rightly thought great masters of the world, were to come to the Chinese Emperor (…), not one of these would ever rise to the height and majesty of our Tsar' (Milescu: 1956, 169)[4]. Dutch and Portuguese expeditions preceding his own are also held as minimally important, if at all! But there is a unifying factor and common denominator to safeguard European identity, in the face of Chinese oddity, and that is the Christian faith.

Daily contacts with the askaniama, an imperial functionary appointed to look after him, help Milescu frame a general picture of the place: China is irrefutably fixed in every single Chinese mind as *the centre of the world*, where and only where people see the world with both eyes, whereas everywhere else they can only see with one eye; the Emperor is God on earth, sitting on his throne in his secret city, a *dues absconditus* outside the utterly restricted immediate company of his own noble subalterns, let alone by foreign leaders or their messengers; when he goes out for a walk, the imperial alleys are emptied of all living souls (by contrast, the strong impression left in the early nineteenth century on the Romanian aristocrat Golescu travelling to Vienna rounds off an imagological perspective: the Austrian Emperor shares the promenade space with his subjects and finds it normal to give them back smiling nods, when greeted with duly deep respect); the imperial court is an ossified space in which century-old customs are clung to with stubbornness beyond any stretch of imagination. China lives out of time, and the impression the reader forms perusing these late seventeenth-century pages is not dissimilar to the one emanating from descriptions of the Spanish Conquista, with Aztec immobility violating the sense of time as fast-running and irreversible flow of the European occupiers. Crucially diverging Weltanschauungen result in the terribly cruel colonization of the one space, and in the utmost self-colonization of the other. China remains sealed up in its isolation, surrounded by a great wall of the mind for which the Great Wall is a safe inner lining, yet a mere lining. Once again, the mind is its own space, *and* space 'out there'.

From Milescu's description, and by a translation move rephrasing his observations in modern sociological terms, Eastern power is rooted in the *Gesellschaft* type of community, functioning via immediate and anthropomorphic forms of authority, in contradistinction to the Western model, in which power is delegated and symbolic – the *Gemeinschaft* type. Though neither, Russia is closer to the latter, if geographically pointing in the opposite direction. The Tsar himself is the Emperor of Emperors for his envoy, and for his people, and the amazingly slow pace at which the letters carried by the messenger are handed over to the Chinese Emperor confirms the mythical awe with which imperial protocols unfold at either court. The whole mission is next to doomed to failure because of mandarin intransigence and ceremonial stiffness. The Tsar's letters are not to contain any single trace of possible offence or disrespect and should state in so many words that the Chinese Emperor is 'the Son of the Sky', compared to whom any other leader is an idea of a leader. They are to be entrusted to the hands of high officials, then to specially appointed translators for careful study and rendition in Chinese. A series of negotiations shall then result in agreeing on what language to be used for

[4] All quotes from the Romanian edition of 1956 are in our translation.

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

possible contacts between the two empires, in the future, a prospect encouraged by the Russian envoy, but hardly envisaged by the Chinese side.

The mandarins surrounding the Emperor simply 'do not know any other custom of any other nation' (Milescu: 1956: 193) and their perfect isolation gives them every reason to feel content. After exhausting procrastinations, the much-awaited meeting does take place, but not before the Russian envoy accepts to do the *kowtow* ritual, about which we have the most incredible memories left by Lord Macartney, the first British Ambassador to China in the mid-1790's. Over and over again, Milescu's overtly pragmatic aim of establishing trading ties and periodical visits is counterbalanced by disproportionate ceremonial complications. In the scales of comparative evaluation are placed Chinese arrogance and Russian might, the Chinese sense of endless time and the Russian sense of endless space, Chinese perfidy and Russian imposition. When the 'Son of the Sky' receives the envoy into a sumptuous dining hall lined up in yellow silk, his inquiries about the Tsar are how old and how tall he is, and how long he has reigned on his throne. Not even the lure of fine furs – the one white weapon Russia handled for centuries to keep Tartary and China under control – can move him from his celestial status. Known also as *Hoang-ti* 'the august Godly Emperor', His Imperial Highness will send humiliating gifts to the Tsar, to show his matchless supremacy. A previous embassy to China had brought back to Muscovy a letter that remained cryptic till Milescu's own mission, simply because the language in which it had been written was itself a petrification out of size with dull reality.

European fascination with things Chinese has a history encroaching upon the territory of magic. Khubilai Khan's policy of Sinicization in the 1270's, like Genghiz Khan's slogan 'One sole sun in the sky, one sole sovereign on earth' (Haw: 106) seal up the protocols of grand pomp. To the 'Greek' West, this overlapping of 'Persian' and 'Scythian' rites will not cease to appear fabulous. 'Europe comes to China' (Haw: 118) in reiterated waves, first with the seizure of Malacca by the Portuguese, in the 1510's, then owing to Spaniards trading there in the 1570's, followed by Dutch traders, who expel their Spanish predecessors in 1642 (the year when theatres close down in England, under Puritan pressure). The English come to do trading in China in the late 1630's, just a few years before the Russians penetrate the Amur region, an area enviously desired by the Chinese. Russian settlements on the Northern bank of the Amur fuel the Russian-Chinese conflict. The 1727 treaty delimiting Mongolia from Siberia cannot appease Chinese suspicion of any Western presence, Siberia being felt as a bumper zone now agglutinated to the 'West'. The policy will be, as it had been, to irritate foreigners in whatever way and exhaust their reserves of patience and understanding.

The eighteenth-century peak of *cultural interest* in China vehicled under the heading of *chinoiserie* is only at face value a matter of imports of silk, porcelain, lacquerware, spices, sugar, and tea. Reconnoitering moves by merchants and travellers, attempts to 'civilize' the Chinese into Christendom by establishing a 'conformité des cérémonies chinoises avec l'idolatrie grecque et romaine' (Nöel: 1700), but, first and foremost, the 'European focus on *manners*, *customs*, *arts*, and *crafts*' (Lach: 28) (emphasis added) accounts for this call of the exotic. Macartney makes a point of noticing the difference between the European view of their monarchs as nationals, and the Chinese view, always remarking that Tartars are not Chinese. 'Nothing would be more illusive than judging China by European criteria', concludes Macartney, taken

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

over by Alain Peyrefitte, in a stupendous study of the *immobile empire* rising on a *shock of worlds* not only without, but also within its own physical and mental boundaries (Peyrefitte: 6).

Grasped in its intimate identity, the Chinese model is self-sufficient and absolutely logical: a hermetically closed society abiding by canonical Confucianism with unnegotiable *ban on innovation*, a mental scape conditioned by the landlocked expanses of a hugeness impossible to fathom out, the ensuing xenophobia, the haunting mental image of there lying 'Tartary' beyond the Great Wall, which is the land of duress and impertinence towards the Sun of the Sky, and the numerical superiority of the place deemed flawlessly protected by the celestial hierarchy, *and* kept intangible in an undeciphered/able language, all this transpires from Milescu's observations. It does justice to his informed views and disclaims exclusively Western experiences of the Oriental Other[5]. It also shows how *real* and *imaginary journeys* into *the heart of otherness* are the face of the same coin. For one thing, George Psalmanazar, the 'Formosan' that had shocked the erudite spirits in mid-eighteenth-century London, stands in a different light to us, readers of the early twenty first century of classic modernity's texts testifying to its own and alternative narratives of identity, some facts, some fakes, some follies, all human, too human.

Bibliography

Anderson, M.S., *Britain's Discovery of Russia 1553-1815*, London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1958.

Baron, Samuel H. (ed.), *The Travels of Olearius in Seventeenth-Century Russia,* Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1967.

Bartlett, R.P., A.G. Cross & Karen Rasmussen (eds), *Russia and the World in the Eighteenth Century*, Columbus, Ohio, Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1988.

Brief History of Moscovia and of other less-known Countries lying eastward of Russia as far as Cathay…, London, The Blackmor Press, MCMXXIX.

Cardini, Franco, *Europe and Islam*, trans. Caroline Beamish, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001 (© 1999).

Clubb, O. Edmund, *China and Russia: The 'Great Game'*, New York & London, Columbia University Press, 1971.

Cross, A.G. (ed.), *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century: Contacts and Comparisons*, Newtonville, Mass., Oriental Research Partners, 1979.

Cross, A.G. (ed.), *Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century*, Newtonville, Mass., Oriental Research Partners, 1983.

Diary of an Austrian Secretary of Legation at the Court of Czar Peter the Great, by Johann-Georg Korb, London, Bradbury & Evans, 1863.

Dirlik, Arif, *Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1996.

Dudley, Edward & Maximilian E. Novak (eds), *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, London, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

du Halde, P.J.B., *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*…, Paris, 1736.

Feuerwerker, Albert, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century China: the Ch'ing Empire and Its Glory*, Ann Arbor, Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1976.

[5] The opinion, for instance, that Gemelli Careri was 'le seul voyageur européen, en dehors des missionnaires ou des membres de rares ambassades extraordinaires, qui ait pu aller jusqu'à Pékin et à la Grande Muraille' (*Le Mexique…*: 7) can be radically rejected.

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Grousset, René, *The Rise and Splendour of the Chinese Empire*, trans. Anthony Watson-Gandy & Terence Gordon, London, Geoffrey Bless, 1952.
Harrison, Henrietta, *China*, London, Arnold & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
Hartog, François, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, University of California Pres, 1988.
Haw, Stephen, *China: A Cultural History*, London, B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1990.
Hodgson, Marshall G.S., *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke, III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995 (© 1993).
Hughes, Lindsey, 'For the Health of the Sons of Ivan Mikhailovich: I.M. Golovin and Peter the Great's Mock Court', in Klein, Joachim, Simon Dixon & Maarten Fraanje (eds), *Reflections on Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, Köln & Weimar, Böhla Verlag, 2001.
Iorga, Nicolae, *Oeuvres Inédites de Nicolas Milescu*, Bucarest, Ateliers Graphiques "Cultura Națională", 1929.
Kabbani, Rana, *Europe's Myths of Orient*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1986.
Kaplan, Robert, *La răsărit spre Tarrtaria: Călătorii în Balcani, Orientul Mijlociu şi Caucaz*, trans. Dorin Nistor, Simona Drelciuc, Alina Preda, Iaşi, Polirom, 2002 (© 2000).
Lane, Christopher (ed.), *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.
Lach, Donald F., *China in the Eyes of Europe: The Sixteenth Century*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1968 (© 1965).
Lensen, Alexander (ed.), *Russia's Eastward Expansion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964.
Lukin, Alexander, *The Bear Watches the Dragon : Russia's Perception of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations Since the Eighteenth Century*, Armonk, N.Y., M.E. Sharpe, 2003.
Maggs, Barbara Widenor, *Russia and « le rêve chinois »: China in eighteenth-century Russian Literature*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1984.
Margeret, Jacques, *The Russian Empire and Grand Duchy of Muscovy: A Seventeenth-Century Account*, trans. and ed. Chester S.L. Dunning, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburg Press, 1983 (© 1606).
Marshall, P.J. & Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982.
Le Mexique à la fin du XVII^e siècle, vu par un voyageur italien Gemelli Careri, Le, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1968.
Milescu Spătarul, Nicolae, *Jurnal de călătorie în China*, Ediție îngrijită de Corneliu Bărbulescu, Bucureşti, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură şi Artă, 1956.
Milescu, Nicolae Spătarul, *Manual, sau, Steaua orientului strălucind occidentului (Enkiridion, sive, Stella orientalis occidentali spendens)*, Iaşi, Institutul European, 1997.
Murphy, Arthur, *The Orphan of China, A Tragedy*, Dublin, 1759.
Nicolae Milescu Spătarul şi problemele culturii Moldovei, Кишинев, Щтиинца, 1991.
Nieuhof, Johan, *Legatio Batavica ad Magnum Tartariae Chamum Sungteium. Modernum Sinae Imperatorem*…, 1668.
Nöel, Alexandre, *Conformité des cérémonies chinoises avéc l'idolatrie grecque et romaine, pour servir de confirmation à l'apologie des Dominicains Missionaires de la Chine*, À Cologne, 1700.
Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, Paris, Librairie Hachette et C^ie, 1876.
Panaitescu, P.P., *Nicolae Milescu Spătarul*, Iaşi, Editura Junimea, 1987.
Peyrefitte, Alain, *O império imóvel, ou o choque dos mundos*, trans. Miguel Serras Pereira, Gradiva, Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1995 (© 1989).
Picot, Émile, *Notice biographique et bibliographique sur Nicolas Spatar Milescu, Ambassadeur du tsar Alexis Mihajlovič en Chine*, Paris, Ernest Leroux Éditeur, 1883.

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

Porter, Dennis, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1991.
Psalmanaazaar, George, *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, An Island Subject to the Emperor of Japan…*, London, 1704.
Roma, Costantinopoli, Mosca: Da Roma alla Terza Roma, Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1983.
Rousseau, G.S. & Roy Porter (eds), *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press, 1990.
Said, Edward W., *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.
Salmon, Thomas, *Lo stato presente di tutti I paesi e POPOLI DEL MONDO, naturale, politico, e morale…*, Venezia, Presso Giambattista Albrizzi q. Gir., MDCCXLIII
Salmon, Thomas, *The universal traveller: or, a compleat description of several nations of the world*, London, Richard Baldwin, 1752.
Testament de Pierre le Grand – Plad de Domination Européene, Paris, Passard, 1860.
Thompson, Ewa M., *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Westport, CT & London, Greenwood Press, 2000.
Todorov, Tzvetan, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press & England: London, 1993.
Tönnies, Ferdinand, *Community and Association*, trans. C. Loomis, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955.
Venn, Couze, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*, London – Thousand Oaks – New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2000.
Vergatti, Radu Şerban, *Nicolae Spătarul Milescu – viaţa, cătăloriile, opera*, Bucureşti, Paideia, 1998.
Voltaire, *An Essay upon the Civil Wars of France*, Second Edition, London, 1728.
Wilberger, Carolyn H., *Voltaire's Russia: Window on the East*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1976.
Wolff, Larry, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1994.
Xavier, Alberto, *O imperialismo da Rússia czarista e o da Rússia soviética: seus traços comuns, as diferenças*, Lisboa, Negrovura Lda., 1951.

Le chemin vers Catai est long, où l'empereur est „le soleil sur le ciel"

Une conception généralement acceptée au XVIII-e siècle a été celle d'identifier les pays sous développés dans l'Est de L'Europe. Autrement dit, *la distance* crée l'idée de *barbarie*. L'Est est suffisamment confortable, parce qu'il crée l'impression de supériorité de ceux de l'Ouest. De point de vue économique il était tonique et de point de vue religieux il était nécessaire – une place idéale pour des missionnaires et pour des émissaires. Un boyard roumain, né en 1636 (lorsqu'on créait le Collège Harvard), Le Connétable Milescu, éduqué à Constantinople, où il a eu des professeurs formés à Padove, Venise et Rome, a reçu une éducation distinguée, ce que lui a permis d'atteindre une position hiérarchique distincte, le point culminant étant la position que lui a offert le tsar de la Russie, après avoir d'autres hautes dignités aux Cours de l'Occident. Ayant un père d'origine grecque, Milescu semble être un messager de l'orthodoxie grecque et il a été envoyé par le tsar en missions diplomatiques subtiles en tant qu'émissaire de la Russie en Asie. Sa mission a commencé à 3 mai 1675. L'auteur de cette étude pose beaucoup de questions: Milescu, a-t-il été moldave ou roumain, moldave ou russe, a-t-il appartenu à l'Occident ou a-t-il été est-européen? A-t-il été un érudit et un homme de lettre ou un représentant du régime administratif-politique? A-t-il été un voyageur ou un ambassadeur, un commerçant habile ou un diplomate à l'aire mercantile pour dérouter l'adversaire? A-t-il sert

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)

la croyance religieuse ou a-t-il été un globe-trotter attentif au spécifique des mœurs, des religions, du folklore? Quoiqu'il aurait représenté, il a joué son rôle avec élégance et avec intelligence, laissant des notes et des impressions de voyage. En 1919, le livre de John F. Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China* ('Russie, Mongolie, Chine') a placé *Jurnalul călătoriei mele în China* ('Le journal du mon voyage en Chine'), écrit par Milescu, dans le circuit occidental que cette œuvre le méritait depuis longtemps.

University of Bucharest
Romania

BDD-A793 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:53 UTC)