

ROMANIAN SINOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND SOLIPSISM

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Abstract. The article explores two of the earliest Romanian works related to the Sinophone world in early twentieth century, whose authors are Nicolae Iorga (1894) and Ion Vasilescu-Nottara (1926). The two works in question hold a significant place in early Romanian Sinology due to the fact that these are part of a historiography that is both methodical and unmethodical. Therefore, the article seeks to introduce several notions affiliated with the research of Romanian Sinology by systematically comparing the two contrasting examples. Furthermore, this article seeks to bring to attention the need of establishing new engagements of Romanian Sinology with the Sinophone world, invoking the concept of “New Sinology” as described by Geremie R. Barmé, one of Australia’s leading academics and sinologists. As a result, the article stimulates a narrative that encourages the rediscovering and establishing of new historical truths which have been ignored, hidden or vilified in the past due to material, political and intellectual conditions generated by communism.

Romanian Sinology has a distinct personality which needs to be labelled accordingly, beyond the existence and practice of communism in the past, and in accordance to the subscription of the twenty-first century, requiring thus ethical allocations that need to be associated with the engagement of Sinitic dynamism and the Sinophone world.

Keywords: *History; Intersubjectivity; Romanian Sinology; Sinophone world; Solipsism*

Introductory Remarks: Theoretical Delimitations and Conceptual Considerations

Researching, studying or, more simply, contemplating about Sinology – with all its adjacent substructures – is a challenging endeavour. By definition, Sinology is preoccupied with the study of Chinese history, language, literature, culture and society¹. However, these are merely limiting how Sinology should

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¹ See Cambridge English Dictionary, [f.a.], <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sinology>, accessed 18 August 2020.

be comprehended in today's heavily inter-disciplinary academia. Deriving from *Sīnae* (Latin), a welter of prefixes and words have been coined throughout time and space. Therefore, within lexicons and historiographies, more broadly, *China* represents a distinct *historia* that is still being assessed. For instance, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese voyageur, used the term *China* in 1516, in a manner that is regarded today as modern, although it remains well-known that this is a derivate of the Middle Persian *Chīnī*². Duarte Barbosa's usage was ultimately transferred into English by Richard Eden in 1555³. A few centuries later, Samuel Wells Williams observed, more precisely in 1848, that "the interchange of the initial in *China*, *Thina* or *Tina*, and *Sina* ought to give no trouble in identifying the land [inhabited by Chinese], for such changes in pronunciation are still common in it..."⁴.

Bearing these incentives in mind, it is important to understand that *Sīnae* and *China* are two terms that are identical in absolute paradigms, despite the fact that their evolution, interpretation and definition have been the product of ample debates for centuries – very similar to Sinitic styles, too. As a result, firstly, we ought to begin by stating that this article is not related to lexicons, but rather to the concept of correlation and inter-disciplinary developments. In this succession of thoughts, what Geremie R. Barmé asserted upon launching *The China Heritage Project* at The Australian National University is very crucial towards defining conceptual approaches. A leading Australian academic and sinologist, Geremie R. Barmé discusses certain means of a collaborative upgrading of the comprehension of Sinology as well as an adaptation of Sinology to *the New*. In other words, Geremie R. Barmé seeks to "affirm the distinctiveness of Sinology as a mode of intellectual inquiry"⁵ and to "emphasize strong scholastic underpinnings in both classical and modern Chinese language and studies, at the same time as encouraging an ecumenical attitude in relation to the rich variety of approaches and disciplines, whether they be mainly empirical or more theoretically inflected"⁶. Departing from Geremie R. Barmé's assertions, we intend to explore the process of engaging with the Sinophone world in a Romanian context suitable for the deeds of the twenty-first century. we must affirm that Geremie R. Barmé's standpoints are very important for the explicit "robust engagement with contemporary China and indeed with the Sinophone world in all of its complexity, be it local, regional or global"⁷. Surprisingly enough, what Geremie R. Barmé delivers for the academia is, even after more than a decade, transposed well beyond Australia, becoming thus a very essential moment for the conceptual *modus vivendi* of Sinophile academics around the world.

² See Duarte Barbosa, *Livro em que dá relação do que viu e ouviu no Oriente*, Lisbon: Agência Geral das Colónias, 1946, pp. 217-219.

³ See Henry Allen Myers (ed.), *Western Views of China and the Far East: Ancient to early modern times*, vol. 1, Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982, p. 34.

⁴ Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 2, London: Kegan Paul, 2005, p. 408.

⁵ Geremie R. Barmé, "Towards a New Sinology", in *Chinese Studies Association of Australia Newsletter*, no. 31, 2005, p. 5, [http://www.csaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/CSAA_Newsletter_31.pdf], accessed 20 August 2020.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Secondly, it is equally important to mention that, in my recent academic exposures, I have observed a certain conditionality of the Romanian scholarship which derives from within methodical historiography. In time, this conditionality extricated those articulated methods in favour of an unmethodical approach to historiography and, more broadly, to the study of the Sinophone world in Romania. Comprehensively, the same conditionality binned the core understanding of Sinology to geopolitics until trans-disciplinary approaches towards China have taken shape due to communism. And despite the fact that these approaches have become diversified throughout the *golden age* of Romanian-Chinese relations (1949-1989), all have now become hindered due to the disappearance of ideological affinities. Hence, esotericism teaches Sinophile academics not just in Romania, but across Central and Eastern Europe, in general, that relations and cooperation with China regarding the study of the Sinophone world *per se* in the aftermath of the fall of the Iron Curtain are simply a matter of habitual activity; nothing more, nothing new, nothing extricating. As a result, the need to rethink the way Sinophile academics relate to China and the Sinophone world is vital than ever before, including (but not limited to) the way our institutions relate to Sinology from both the perspective of inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches, the way our academic institutions react to obscure political practices that are circulating in an environment that shall always be free, the association of academics with non-governmental organisations whose transparency is uncertain and, beyond doubt, the list may go on. Additionally, the current global health crisis and the recurrent stagnation in understanding the Sinophone world in all of its complexity across Central and Eastern Europe, as well as China's subsequent *modus operandi* in domestic and international politics trigger a "new tide in European approaches to dealing with China..."⁸ which requires evident consideration and pertinent action in conceiving intersubjective European approaches in both epistemology and ontology.

Lastly, the main focus of this article is to contrive how should the Chinese world as well as Sinology be researched and studied in Romania, and what are those ethical allocations that need to be associated with these engagements. Subsequently, the transfer of tutelage in the processes of studying China in Romania – from the absolutisation of communism in Romanian-Chinese relations to the new developments imposed by the twenty-first century – needs to resonate with "... the age of revivals and rediscoveries of the past in mainland China (from the dynastic past, to the more recent Republican era), and the pursuit of historical and cultural particularism in Taiwan, have meant that those who are unlettered in the basic histories, languages and ideas of the last few centuries will be only ever semi-literate in the culture, thought and even language of China today"⁹. In Romania's case or – for that matter – in the case of Romanian Sinology, the crossroads are ought to be defined as an immersion in eclecticism which seeks to submerge historiography, once again, to the concept of methods for enabling a vigorous combination of the empirical and the hypothetical. This has

⁸ Ivana Karásková, "Eastern Promises 2.0: Goodbye Beijing, Here Comes Taipei", in *The China Story*, 23 September 2020, [https://www.thechinastory.org/eastern-promises-2-0-goodbye-beijing-here-comes-taipei/], accessed 28 September 2020.

⁹ Geremie R. Barmé, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

great potential to contribute to the emergence of a generational scholarship (for example, in fields such as history or political science) that is not preoccupied anymore with the satisfaction of institutional engagements of inter-state relations and of the communist tradition, but rather with ethical behaviour and assertive repudiation of unethical claims.

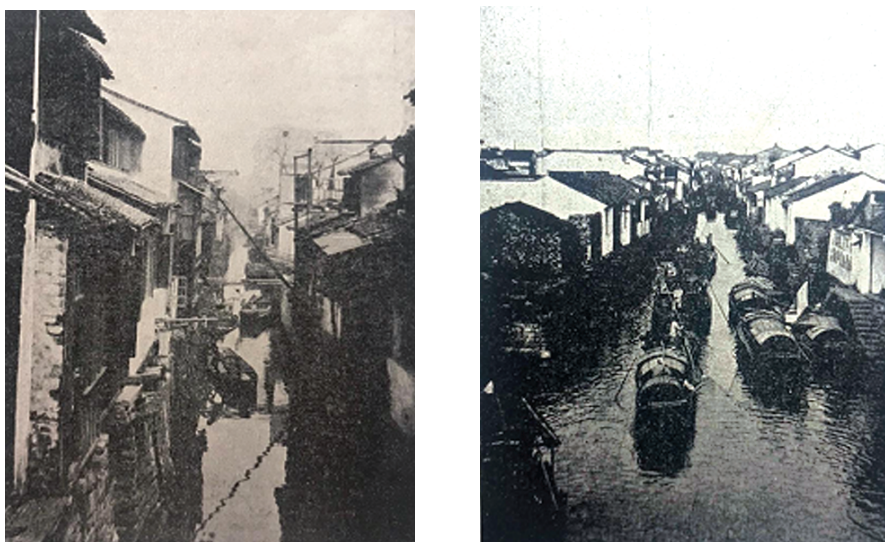
*Synopses of Romanian Sinology:
Methodical and Unmethodical Historiographies*

The most researched as well as perhaps the most researchable patterns in the history of Romanian-Chinese relations begin with the twentieth century, right after Guangxu of the Qing dynasty sent a dispatch to Mihail Kogălniceanu on 13 January 1881 which paved the way for the first mutual recognition of the two countries¹⁰. This moment remains the most accurate historical truth that generated a wave of diplomatic action and intellectual awareness. For instance, Victor Cădere suggested as early as 1920 that Romania ought to establish Legations in Tokyo, Beijing as well as Consulates in Shanghai and Harbin¹¹. In the meantime, a series of works have been published in Romanian about East Asia and the countries in its proximity, covering thus a generous range of topics. Indeed, some of these works are fundamentally based on studies already concluded across Europe – roughly beginning with the 1860's to early 1900's –, though what remains critical to observe is the enthusiasm towards *Huaxia* displayed in an unprecedented manner among nations that are at a considerable distance apart from one another. Therefore, this section is dedicated to two *synopses* which are valuable for the study of the Sinophone world in Romania(n) and which have been chiefly ignored by the communist tradition in terms of value for historiography. In brief, the two synopses refer to (1) Nicolae Iorga's 1904 work entitled *Războiul din Extremul Orient. China, Japonia, Rusia asiatică: Schițe* (in translation *The war in the Far East. China, Japan, Asian Russia: Sketches*) and (2) Ion Vasilescu-Nottara's 1926 book *Străbătând China dela Shanghai la Peking* (in translation *Crossing China from Shanghai to Beijing*).

As a general rule, the main purpose of both authors has been the introduction of fundamental notions regarding Chinese culture and civilization. In fact, Nicolae Iorga and Ion Vasilescu-Nottara are not the only ones that have had such preoccupations at the beginning of the last century. In this regard, it is indicative to point out two other works that complete, in my point of view, the beginnings of Romanian Sinology: *Neculai Mănescu Spătarul: Călător în China* (in translation *Neculai Mănescu Spătarul: Traveller in China*) by Tiberiu Moțoiu (Oradea: Editura Revistei Familia, 1936, p. 248) and *China și poporul chinez – dela origină până azi* (in translation *China and the Chinese people – from the origin to present day*) by Mihail Negru (Bucharest: Editura Universul, 1937, p. 344).

¹⁰ For further reference, see Radu Sava, *Reflecții asupra relațiilor româno-chineze la 70 de ani de raporturi diplomatice: Convorbiri cu Excelența Sa ambasadorul Romulus Ioan Budura*, Sibiu: Lucian Blaga University Press, 2020, pp. 13-15.

¹¹ See Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Problem 75/1891-1931. Honorary consuls, vol. 13, f. 211-215, published in Romulus Ioan Budura (coord.), *Relațiile româno-chineze, 1880-1974: Documente*, Bucharest: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Archives, 2005, pp. 155-156.

Figure 1. *Hangcheau*

Source: Ion Vasilescu-Nottara, *Străbătând China dela Shanghai la Peking*, Bucharest: Ancora S. Benvenisti & Co., 1926, pp. 104-106.

As a result, despite the fact that the main focus throughout this article are the works of Nicolae Iorga and Ion Vasilescu-Nottara, it is equally important to develop a few discernments in relation to the general status of Romanian Sinology at the time in question. Hence, Mihail Negru accomplishes perhaps what is the most robust assertion of China at the time in the sense that his work features fine elements, for the first time, of culture and civilization. For example, Mihail Negru presents aspects related to the metaphysics of the Taoist system, of Chinese philosophy, literature, medicine, society, of the judicial system and even aspects related to the Chinese media of the time.

Alternatively, Tiberiu Moțoiu presents accounts of Miclescu Spătarul, beginning with his early life to his seventeenth century diplomatic career in the Far East on behalf of the Russian Tsardom. However, what ought to be mentioned in the latter regard is the fact that today this historical fact is being reconsidered as Miclescu Spătarul was present in Beijing as an Ambassador of the Tsardom of Russia, serving thus the cause of the Russian Tsar in the Orient. In fact, we have pointed out recently, after several interviews with Dr. Anna Eva Budura – historian and renowned Romanian Sinologist – that Miclescu Spătarul wrote about China based on fragments and ideas of other authors¹². Also, it is noteworthy to mention that Miclescu's works have not been translated into Romanian until 1956¹³.

¹² See Radu Sava, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

Figure 2. The Great Wall of China (1926)



Source: Ion Vasilescu-Nottara, *Străbătând China dela Shanghai la Peking*, Bucharest: Ancora S. Benvenisti & Co., 1926, p. 113.

Subsequently, Nicolae Iorga often draws analogies between the Chinese civilisation and other ancient civilisations by evoking examples from the daily life of China, which becomes a perpetuated model within Romanian Sinology in early twentieth century. Therefore, Nicolae Iorga proposes a detached, objective and, at the same time, methodical reading due to the fact that Iorga issues insights based on verified and verifiable knowledge. Consolidated examples are offered by surveying historical events of great importance, including several details about *Genghis-Han* and the events of 1276¹⁴, the Ming and Qing dynasties¹⁵ or the Treaty of Nanking (1842) which brought the First Opium War to an end¹⁶.

Congruently, Ion Vasilescu-Nottara (also known as I. Ștefănescu-Nottara¹⁷) inserts a narrative that becomes identical to a traveller's journal – a voyageur that writes along his travels from Shanghai to Beijing. In other words, Vasilescu-Nottara sketches an unmethodical account of China in early twentieth century to the extent that he becomes directly involved in the narrative and creates a sort of compilation of personal impressions and opinions. Rather drawn to the ideals of broad acumens, Vasilescu-Nottara's conclusions overall, as historian and writer Codruț Constantinescu affirms, are "lacking vigour or literary talent"¹⁸.

¹⁴ See Nicolae Iorga, *Războiul din Extremul Orient. China, Japonia, Rusia asiatică: Schițe*, Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socecu & Comp., 1904, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ See Codruț Constantinescu, "Străbătând China interbelică", in *Revista* 22, 17 February 2020, [<https://revista22.ro/cultura/strabatand-china-interbelica>], accessed 18 September 2020.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Figure 3. Temple in Sucheau (1926)



Source: Ion Vasilescu-Nottara, *Străbătând China dela Shanghai la Peking*, Bucharest: Ancora S. Benvenisti & Co., 1926, p. 44.

Having assessed in generic terms the two samples that serve as a *fundamentum* to this article, the table below aims to prove, in an enclosed form, the prescribed recognition of “an academic and human relationship with a vital and voluble Sinophone world [...] part of the intellectual, academic, cultural and personal conversations in which many of us are engaged [...] regardless of our background, individuals who are energetically and often boisterously interconnected with one of the great, complex and lively geo-cultural spheres of the world”¹⁹.

	Sample 1 Nicolae Iorga — <i>Războiul din Extremul Orient. China, Japonia, Rusia asiatică</i> (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socecu & Comp., 1904)	Sample 2 Ion Vasilescu-Nottara — <i>Străbătând China dela Shanghai la Peking</i> (Bucharest: Ancora S. Benvenisti & Co., 1926)
Method of research	Correlation. Nicolae Iorga determines relational information based on previous knowledge and/or data (excerpted <i>inter alia</i> from Laurence Oliphant (1860), J. J. M. de Groot (1903) or Lankenau and Oelsnitz (1877)).	Naturalistic observation. Ion Vasilescu-Nottara engages an approach suitable for real-life settings, records behaviour, customs, traditions etc. over a certain period of time in a given, concrete context.
Framing of the narrative	Third person. Detached, methodical.	First person. Directly involved, unmethodical.
Common points	Both authors seek to transmit a particular sense of enthusiasm for studying China and the Sinophone world, while acknowledging the limitations and, for that matter, the limits of their works as being insufficient for the volume of knowledge that ought to be comprised in regards to the Sinophone world.	
Differences	Nicolae Iorga's book is historically more accurate, depicting thus events vigorously while conveying analogous remarks regarding civilisations. Nonetheless, Iorga's book is more hypothetical or “theoretically inflected” as Geremie R. Barmé asserts.	Ion Vasilescu-Nottara's book is less historically accurate and beholds simply a generic outlook upon details of Chinese life in early twentieth century. Vasilescu-Nottara's book remains more drawn to empiricism.
Observations	Nicolae Iorga manages to transmit certain Western patterns of commonality as well as communality. As a result, Iorga's approach to studying the Sinophone world is connected to notions of intersubjectivity.	Ion Vasilescu-Nottara determines a Romanian Sinophile sequence that is more closely related to solipsism.
Technical considerations	Nicolae Iorga's book is not solely dedicated to China, exhibiting other (two) distinct chapters dedicated to Japan (“Japonia”) and the Asian part of Russia (“Rusia asiatică”). The author did not include any photographs in none of the 48 pages allotted to China.	Ion Vasilescu-Nottara's book is entirely dedicated to China, comprising thus 119 pages and 70 photographs dispersed throughout the text.

¹⁹ Geremie R. Barmé, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Conclusion: An Eclectic Manifesto?

Focusing, once again, on Geremie R. Barmé's assertions, ahead of everything else, is crucial in determining the closing nature of this article. As previously stated, Geremie R. Barmé launches a consistent academic resource for the study and research of the Sinophone world that could become very applicable to the case of Romanian Sinology as well. Perhaps not regarded (yet?) as within Geremie R. Barmé's *New* paradigm, Romanian Sinology surely has the potential to aggregate innovation and holistic approaches, beyond the latent absolutization of communism. In Geremie R. Barmé's age of rediscoveries, Sinology, from an intellectual perspective, has gained connotations that are unparalleled in human history, especially in terms of resourcefulness and creativity. However, for the concept of *New Sinology* to apprehend valuable innovation in Romania, there is an acute need of intersubjectivity. How can Sinophile Romanian academics become able to engage with the Sinophone world on an intersubjective level? Firstly, by understanding relational and contextual esotericism regarding the Sinophone world in all its complexity without considering entirely those adjacent systems of the Sinophone world. This, above all, could only be accomplished by scholars that handle the skills required by the language and cultural knowledge.

Secondly, through rediscovering and establishing new historical truths which been ignored, hidden or vilified in the past due to material, political and intellectual conditions generated by communism. Romanian Sinology has a distinct personality which needs to be labelled accordingly, beyond the existence and practice of communism in its past.

Figure 4. Map of China in Mihail Negru's 1937
China și poporul chinez ¾ dela origină până azi



Source: Mihail Negru, *China și poporul chinez – dela origină până azi*, Bucharest: Editura Universul, 1937, pp. 16-17.

Tradition has wrongly been labelled by and limited to communism when, in fact, Romania's connection with the Sinophone world dates way before 1949. Here, it is important to mention that this is not about neglecting or erasing communism from the past, but rather to set it apart, to de-absolutize communism for the sake of a multidimensional Sinology in Romania. This will contribute to the emergence of (new) bridges with the most distant past for the demise of solipsism because communism, simply put, is not the only thing that propelled certain action, but rather the unaltered vision of accumulating, preserving and sharing knowledge.

Thirdly, Romanian Sinology, in accordance to the subscription of the twenty-first century, requires ethical allocations that need to be associated with the engagement of Sinitic dynamism *and* the Sinophone world. It is not merely about the allocation of ethical resources, transparency and setting out priorities openly, but rather about the way Sinophile academics react to unethical behaviour such as plagiarism, censorship, and aggressive diffusion of scope and meaning. It is, once again, evident that the need for a generational scholarship is required, since the satisfaction of inter-state institutional engagements as well as the communist tradition are too obtrusive. Therefore, ethical allocation should be conceived here, at home, in our academic institution and academic networks in order to be able to repudiate unethical claims.

Finally, bearing in mind the three above-mentioned points, it is what precisely the immersion in eclecticism signifies; the enablement of resources, creativity and attention from different periods of time for the sake of glazing the submergence of historiography to the concept of methods and to a clear-cut differentiation among the empirical and the hypothetical. Eclecticism stands for the preservation of the enablement and with the ideals that intersubjectivity seeks to achieve. Beyond doubt, my approach is rather simplistic as this article remains an attempt to frame bits of previous engagements in historiography with the purpose of correlating Sinophile historical accounts with one another. It is a process that requires the involvement of sustained work, genuine motivation and uniformity within Romania's academia.

Above all this, it remains critically decisive to adapt to the (new) requirements of inter-disciplinarily by revaluating approaches with the Sinophone world. Today, Romania's Sinology is on a path towards submergence with intersubjectivity, yet a few decades ago it was in total solipsism. Czechia, France, Germany, The Netherlands or Slovakia are all intersubjective in their approach to the Sinophone world, while Bulgaria, Portugal, Ukraine or the United Kingdom have remained on the other side of the spectrum. Thus, we ought to ask ourselves (hopefully not on a rhetoric wavelength) how and when will *New Sinology* become uniform throughout academia? How can we improve the *modus operandi* of intersubjectivity in order to serve the interests of ethical knowledge surrounding Sinology? Would there be any obstacles imposed by state actors? How should we react to these obstacles, if so imposed?

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