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A window to China. Tracing the dynamics of Russian Orientalism in the early work of Nikita Bichurin (1827-1833)

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A window to China

Tracing the dynamics of Russian Orientalism in the early work of Nikita

Bichurin (1827-1833)



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Pictured on the front page is a lino print I made after a portrait of Nikita Bichurin (1777-1853) by an anonymous artist.

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Introduction

In the late 1820s, a strange-looking Russian monk with a long beard and an Asian conical hat attracted the attention of Saint Petersburg's intellectual elite. Nikita Yakovlevich Bichurin (1777-1853), monk and sinologist, arrived in the Russian capital in 1822. He had not been in Russia since 1807, when he emigrated to China to become Head of the ninth Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing. After his return, Bichurin became a popular guest in the literary salons of Saint Petersburg. He shared his stories of faraway China with curious attendees, befriended the poet Alexander Pushkin and connected with publishers and editors, whose popular journals would feature Bichurin's articles about China in the three decades to come.

What did this monk, who apparently wore his hat and beard in a style matching to his specialism, have to tell the public? It seems curious that while the Russian capital was designed just a century earlier to be the country's 'window to Europe', its inhabitants were interested in hearing about a country so far East.¹ This thesis engages with the historiographical debate that explains why curiosity about China in this period is actually not that hard to explain. That debate is rooted in Edward Said's famous *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*, which was first published in 1978 and still provides fuel for critical discussions of representation and the relationship between power and knowledge.² *Orientalism* likewise fueled the debate about Russian conceptions of the Orient, yet its framework has been adjusted to provide, according to those scholars who twitched it, a better fit.

Bichurin is a rather well-known figure in the historiography of the late Russian Empire. Bichurin, or 'Father Hyacinth' in his ecclesiastical capacity, is considered the founder of Russian Sinology. He set a standard for the academic study of China by publishing dozens of works about the country's history, economy, its political system and the practicalities of daily life.³ He translated important Chinese works, and composed the first Russian grammar of the Chinese language. He became a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1828, was awarded scientific prizes, and, importantly, proved eager to spread his knowledge beyond the

¹ The description 'window to Europe' or 'window on Europe' is commonly used to describe the way czar Peter the Great designed the city in 1703. Its construction was West-European in architectural style, and also focused on the West psychologically: it should function as a port through which ideas could flow through to the rest of Russia. See for example Alexander Shevyrev, 'The Axis Petersburg-Moscow: Outward and Inward Russian Capitals', *Journal of Urban History* 30:1 (2003) 17-84; Louise McReynolds, 'Review essay: St. Petersburg: The National Destiny in the Cityscape', *Journal of Urban History* 33:5 (2007) 857-863.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1978).

³ See David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 'The Genesis of Russian Sinology', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:2 (2000) 355-364 (Review).

walls of academia. Working on his publications from a cell in the Alexander Nevski Monastery during daytime, he left the Church grounds to spend his evenings in the company of the influential writers, publishers and journalists of the period. As Alexander Nikitenko, a historian who frequented the same salons as Bichurin did in Saint Petersburg, remarked in his diary, Bichurin seemed to have ‘some kind of passion for China and for everything Chinese, and somehow even found a way to match his own face and beard to the Chinese style.’⁴

This thesis takes Bichurin’s ‘passion for everything Chinese’, acknowledged by his contemporaries and scholars alike, as a point of departure to explore the dynamics of Russian Orientalism, a debated concept in historiography. Edward Said formulated his critique of the Western conception of the Orient in 1978, arguing that negative stereotypes were both the result of, and serviceable to, the European strive for imperial domination. Now it took some two decades before this framework was transferred to the Russian context, but in 2000, the discussion really took off. In that year, the journal *Kritika: explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* featured three now-famous articles by Nathaniel Knight, Adeeb Khalid and Maria Todorova. The first two historians strongly disagreed about the applicability of Saidian Orientalism to Russian history. Todorova, senior to Knight and Khalid both in age and career, explained their polemic to be rooted in two opposing approaches of Russian history: that of particularism versus universalism. Knight believed that Russia escaped the binary opposition between East and West, and instead represented the middle part of an ‘awkward triptych’. Khalid considered that argument to be a rhetorical trick dating back to the 19th century, and argued that the crucial relationship between knowledge and power described by Said functioned quite well within Russia’s imperial system.

Since 2000, prominent scholars of Russian history, such as Vera Tolz, Alexander Etkind, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Susanna Lim have contributed to the debate about Russian Orientalism. Their deliberations combine some aspects of Said’s framework with specific historical circumstances which influenced conceptions of the Orient in Russia. They agree about one thing: more research needs to be done to historicize Russian Orientalism. Concretely: which Russians were looking at which Orient, when and how? Already in his contribution in *Kritika* in 2000, Nathaniel Knight assured his reader that ‘Orientalist discourse could and did change [...] and these shifts need to be traced with care.’⁵ Seventeen years later however, historian specialized in Russian-Chinese relations Mark Gamsa expressed his

⁴ A. V. Nikitenko, *Dnevnik v trekh tomakh. Tom 2 1858-1865* (Moscow 1995) 525.

⁵ Nathaniel Knight, ‘On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000) 701-715, 710.

disappointment with much of the work that had been done. He even blamed scholars for having ‘exploited the popularity’ of the concept of Orientalism by bundling together Russian conceptions of the Caucasus, Central, East, and South Asia into a coherent, but false construction.⁶

This study tries to escape the attraction of coherence and poses the question how Bichurin’s work on China in the period between 1827 and 1833 fits with the historiography of Russian Orientalism. After Said’s *Orientalism* appeared in 1978, it took a while before scholars were ready to consider Russia as a representative of the West. Likewise, China has not been the first country associated with the Orient. China was never colonized by a Western Empire, and was thought to fall outside of the imperialist framework stressed by Said. This has changed over the past fifteen years, and a number of studies have delivered insights in how China figured in the Russian conception of the Orient.

The first chapter will trace the debate on Russian Orientalism, running from Said’s *Orientalism* to recent contributions tapered to Russian conceptions of China. The guiding question is how scholars try to establish a balance between the universal value of Saidian Orientalism as a framework, and specific Russian circumstances. Studies of the Russian conceptions of China, we shall see, are indebted to outcomes of the broader debate and have in turn contributed to it. The general narrative is that Russian conceptions of China, unlike those in Western Europe, quickly fragmentized in the beginning of the 19th century, and were instrumentalized as Russians started questioning their relationship to Europe. This outcome will be put to the test in the third chapter, by measuring this development to the early work of Bichurin.

Before tracing these dynamics in Bichurin’s sources however, the second chapter dives deeper in his character and the background of his knowledge. How did this respected sinologist build his career, what drove his passion for China? Drawing on Soviet scholarship and more recent accounts, these questions will be answered. Having gained insight into Bichurin’s motivation and navigation through society, the third and last chapter will present a critical reading of a small number of his sources. Three articles from Bichurin’s early Saint Petersburg years will be analyzed. In the recent debate about Russian Orientalism, historians have interpreted Bichurin mostly in reference to his works from the 1840s. However, his

⁶ Mark Gamsa, ‘Refractions of China in Russia, and of Russia in China: Ideas and Things’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 60 (2017) 549-584, 577.

publications from the late 1820s and early 1830s remain out of scope.⁷ That is striking, because chronologically, Bichurin's early work coincides with the period in which conceptions of China fragmentized according to historiography. Bichurin's versatility and vast knowledge present the opportunity to look for the concrete dynamics of this development, to study if and how it manifested itself in Bichurin's publications.

⁷ In general, Bichurin's articles receive much less attention than the monographs he published in his later career. See for example: Susanna Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination, 1685-1922: To the ends of the Orient* (Taylor & Francis Group 2013), 64-67. This and other works will be discussed in more detail in the first chapter.

Between universalism and particularism: debating Russian Orientalism

This chapter presents a historiographical study of the debate on Russian Orientalism. During the almost 45 years since Edward Said's *Orientalism* was first published, both Russia and China have slowly become part of that debate. For a long time after 1978, Russia and China were considered to fall outside of the Saidian framework, the first an atypical colonial power, the second never directly colonized by the West. The discussion however broadened, and I will trace below how scholars have come to engage with the framework of Orientalism while still acknowledging that Russia and China are in some aspects anomalies. I will close this chapter by clarifying which narrative of the Russian conception of China comes forward from historiography. That outcome will then be put to the test in the third chapter.

Saidian *Orientalism*

In 1978, *Orientalism* was first published in the United States by a commercial publishing house, Pantheon Books. The author, Edward Said, was born in 1935 in Jerusalem. His father was a Palestinian who had joined the US army during the First World War. After the war, the veteran and his family acquired American citizenship. Said grew up in Lebanon and Egypt under British colonial rule. He attended English-language schools together with British children and Egyptian classmates who would later become the diplomats and politicians leading the country after decolonization. In 1951, Said moved to the United States to study. He rapidly progressed in his academic career at Princeton and Harvard. Based in Columbia University as professor of comparative literature, he worked as visiting professor at prestigious American universities, and as a guest lecturer around the world.

This short biography introduces the main theme of Said's career: the relationship between West and East. In Said's observation, the way the West looked at the East was heavily distorted. The feeling of being a permanent outsider, first in the Arabic, later in the Western world, drove his critical reflection. Said formulated in his memoirs that his entire life, he felt

‘always out of place.’⁸ In his youth in Egypt, he was part of the Christian-Arabic minority. His distinctly Western first name Edward, after the British prince, raised many of the eyebrows surrounding him.

In the United States however, the identity projected on Said got paradoxically reversed. Here, he was permanently viewed as a Palestinian, as someone from the East, attributed with prejudiced caricatures. Yet in a way, Said embraced the identity he was attributed. Anna Bernard, professor of Comparative Literature at King’s College specialized in anti-colonial literature, in her 2013 monograph *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* stresses that Said in his work kept self-identifying as a ‘Palestinian’ and an ‘Arab’. According to Bernard, Said did so for pragmatic reasons. His intention was to deliver a message about a part of the world that, in his own words, was ‘not very well known and certainly not well appreciated.’⁹ By presenting himself as native to the unknown, Said was ‘taking advantage of his position’¹⁰ That strategy has been successful. From the earliest reviews of his works to the most recent introductions to new editions of his work: critics see Said’s non-American background as crucial to the worth and originality of his work.¹¹ While strategically making use of a caricaturistic identity to deliver his message, Said’s work actually attacked those very caricatures’ existence.

In *Orientalism*, Said formulated a critique of Western perceptions of the East. In the first place, it was aimed at the Western academic tradition of studying Eastern countries as backward, mysterious and inferior. However, Said was also very clear about the connection between academia and politics, between knowledge and power. Orientalism, according to Said, provided a discourse that enabled Western imperial domination over the East. By portraying and homogenizing the Orient as weak, feminine, backward, and mysterious, European rulers and intellectuals legitimated a right to rule, intervene and expand. The twisted stereotypes and caricatures applied to the East were ingrained in the system of colonialism with its excessive violence and abuse. Said defines orientalism as a ‘political doctrine’ that perceived the East as the ‘Other’, as something fundamentally different. That difference was interpreted and defined

⁸ Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*, Liverpool University Press (2013), 42-43.

⁹ Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (London 1992) xxxv. Cited in Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging*, 44.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ See for example the prologue to the Dutch translation of Said’s *Orientalism*: Sinan Çankaya, ‘Voorwoord’, in Edward Said, *Orientalisme* (Athenaeum-Polak en Van Genneep) 2022. Çankaya, a Dutch anthropologist, described Said’s struggle with his own identity by making a language play out of his name. He refers to Said as ‘Edward-and-Said’, to convey the incongruence of his Western and Eastern roots.

as a weakness compared to the West.¹² Knowledge, for Said, does not remain in the realm of the ideological. It becomes political, and accumulates performative power.

Pandora's box

When *Orientalism* appeared in 1978, it immediately resonated loudly within the academic and societal debate. In the words of one critic, *Orientalism* '[...] opened the Pandora box of the intellectual configurations of the empire, bringing the question of cultural and political representation to the heart of intellectual and political debates.'¹³ Having opened that box of imperial knowledge-power relations, Said is considered one of the founding fathers of postcolonial studies. Until the 1970s, the term postcolonial was not used as an ideological concept, but as a rather objective term referring to the historical period after official decolonization of a country. With the rise of postcolonial studies, objectivity was replaced with a more critical approach. From the late 1970s, postcolonialism developed as the study of uneven divisions of power, unequal representation and eurocentric thinking.¹⁴ Edward Said, together with others such as Homi K. Bhabha and Benedict Anderson, belong to the generation that invented the field.¹⁵

In his understanding of the relation between power and knowledge, Said himself declared his indebtedness to Michel Foucault. This is a connection widely elaborated upon by critics, and the discussion is quite complex at a philosophical and theoretical level. Here, it suffices to explain that Said understands Orientalism as discourse, largely as the term was conceptualized by Foucault: an underlying structure or 'master-code' that influences the production of knowledge.¹⁶ The structuring codes can change over time, yet those changes are in no way progressing along a linear or predictable line. A knowledge system or *episteme*, as Foucault explains in his 1966 work *The Order of Things*, can radically and suddenly be

¹² Said, *Orientalism*, 204.

¹³ Atef Alshaer, 'Review: The Cambridge Introduction to Edward Said by Conor McCarthy; Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation by Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom (eds.)', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5 (2012) 247–254, 251.

¹⁴ Neil Lazarus, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge 2004) 3-5.

¹⁵ Idem, 1, 10. Bhabha wrote about the meaning of postcolonial critique in his famous essay 'The postcolonial and the postmodern: The question of agency', published in H. K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (Taylor & Francis Group 2004, first published 1994). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983) elaborates on the nation as a social construct that depends on defining the 'we' in opposition to the 'other' This work has become another important reference point for postcolonial studies.

¹⁶ Carl Olsen summarizes that Foucault's notion of discourse is that of 'a knowledge that empowers its creator over the other through the subterfuge of ordering reality.', Carl Olsen, 'Review: Daniel Martin Varisco: Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007)', *The Review of Politics* 71:1 (2009), 146-149, 147.

overturned and replaced by another. Yet while it is in place, the system shapes knowledge that is produced by human science. As Conor McCarthy summarizes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Edward Said*:

One of the most radical implications of Foucault's work, therefore, is the suggestion that man's accumulating knowledge of himself does not result in affirmation of the self-analysing rational and transcendently free subject beloved of traditional post-Renaissance European humanism. The figure of 'Man' is not the creator of economic, linguistic, or biological knowledge; rather it is created by those discourses.¹⁷

Though Foucault does not write about colonialism and imperial power, Edward Said has applied his conceptualization of knowledge and power to the relationship between East and West. In Said's interpretation, underlying ideas of Western superiority over the East have resulted in a body of scholarship that is full of racism and stereotypes. The texts produced by this scholarship are manifestations of the imperialist system, and in turn reinforce the system.¹⁸ What Said importantly takes from Foucault is the idea that knowledge, in the form of scholarship and written text, not merely describes the world but also prescribes and shapes it.¹⁹ For Said, the object of Orientalist discourse is an invention of the West, and 'the Orient' does not exist in reality. This invention however resulted in very real social and material constructs, such as the continued inequalities between nations in the postcolonial world.²⁰

One last passage from the pages of *Orientalism* itself helps to clarify the connection between knowledge and power. In Said's words, '[...] knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.'²¹ And so the way the West understands the Orient both results from and feeds into imperialist discourse. Having clarified Said's understanding of Orientalism and the relation

¹⁷ Conor McCarthy, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edward Said* (Cambridge 2010), 49.

¹⁸ Ho-Fung Hung, 'Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900', *Sociological Theory* 21:3 (2003) 254-280, 255. Hung writes that 'Oriental studies was based on an imperialist epistemology that constantly presumed the differences between Western and non-Western civilizations to be ontological and suggested the moral and intellectual superiority of the former.'

¹⁹ Neil Lazarus, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge 2004) 1, 11.

²⁰ I will not elaborate on examples here. For Said, the Question of Palestine is a central point of reference.

²¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 36. Also quoted in Nathaniel Knight, 'Grigorev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?', *Slavic Review* 59:1 (2000) 74-100, 75.

between knowledge and power, the question rises: how has this framework been applied to study Russian Imperial history?

Russian Orientalism: an anomaly?

In *Orientalism*, Said focuses on the Western conceptions of the Islamic world from the beginning of the 19th century. He barely mentions Russia, and when he does, Said seems convinced Russia's imperial experience did not follow the Western pattern: 'Russia, however, acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other continents, Russia moved to swallow whatever land or peoples stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving farther and farther east and south.'²² Said ascribes a different form of imperialism to Russia, but barely elaborates on what that means for the applicability of Orientalism. The differentness or uniqueness of the Russian imperial experience would however become one of the main points of discussion when the debate about Russian Orientalism set off, a little more than two decades after *Orientalism* was first published.²³

The starting point of that debate was an article in the January 2000 issue of *The Slavic Review*, written by historian Nathaniel Knight. The same year, a reaction to Knight's argument, a response of Knight himself to that critique, and a third article commenting on their discussion were published in the fall number of *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. By now, *Kritika* is one of the leading journals in the field of Russian Studies. In 2000, it had just recently been founded, and the Orientalism-debate that ensued on its pages made clear what this medium could contribute to academia. Still today, no new contribution to the debate on Russian Orientalism fails to mention the crucial 'Kritika debate' as its foundation.²⁴

The *Kritika* debate

²² Said, *Orientalism*, 10.

²³ See for an extensive critique of the 'adjacence myth': David Chioni Moore, 'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique' in Violeta Kelertas ed., *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Bril 2006) 11-43, 23-24.

²⁴ Orientalism has continued to be a subject of debate in *Kritika*. Many more contributions have appeared in the journal over the years. There are even special Orientalism-themed editions in which such publications are collected and contextualized by the editing board of the journal, for example the 2006 volume titled *Orientalism And Empire In Russia: Kritika Historical Studies 3*, edited by David-Fox, Michael, Peter Holquist and Alexander Martin. This attests to the importance of the theme to the journal and the field.

The *Kritika* debate is fascinating historiography to read, interesting and lively. The participants, Nathaniel Knight, Adeeb Khalid, and Maria Todorova, don't over-complicate conceptual theory or dwell on abstractions. The reference point of the debate that ensued between the three authors in *Kritika* was an article published some months earlier in *The Slavic Review* by Nathaniel Knight, titled 'Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?'. In it, Knight questions the 'general theoretical framework of Said's model and its specific applicability in the Russian context.'²⁵ Considering the theoretical framework, Knight argues that Said's connection between knowledge and power fails to reveal the concrete mechanisms of their interaction. He summarizes Said's argument as follows:

[W]hile the Orient may be an illusion, the power generated by orientalist knowledge is real and inescapable. [...] oriental "otherness" is never merely an assertion of difference. Rather is it the mark of subordination, through which the universally inferior "other" embodies the full panoply of traits unworthy of civilized man. Thus orientalism is both a product of and a precondition for European imperialism.²⁶

Knight is curious as to how individuals in concrete historical moments embody the nexus of knowledge and power. His skepticism is laid out in a crucial passage: 'Is discourse destiny, an inescapable web of assumption so deeply ingrained as to appear invisible to the subject? Or can the individual transcend the hegemonic grip of discursive practices to offer meaningful alternatives to (or simply to act outside of) the dominant paradigm of empire?'²⁷ Considering the specific applicability of Orientalism to Russia, Knight's wonders how 'the esoteric pursuits of orientalism further the interests and agendas of the imperial state.'²⁸ In other words: how did the specialized knowledge Russian scholars accumulated about the Orient contribute to imperial rule?

Knight sets out to answer these questions by means of an individual case study. Knight presents the Russian Orientalist Vasilii Vasil'evich Grigoryev (1816-1881), an academic specialized in the history and languages of Central Asia. After Grigoryev's hopes of a successful academic career were shattered, he entered governmental service, and in 1851 decided to leave St. Petersburg for Orenburg, a much smaller city on the border between

²⁵ Nathaniel Knight, 'Grigorev in Orenburg, 1851-1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?', *Slavic Review* 59:1 (2000) 74-100, 77.

²⁶ Idem, 76.

²⁷ Idem, 78.

²⁸ Ibidem.

European and Asian Russia. Grigorev was a patriot, 'devoted to the idea that science should exist, not merely as an end in itself, but for the greater good of the nation.' Becoming an administrator in the border region, he hoped that his specialized knowledge could contribute to the consolidation of Russian rule on the Central Asian steppes, which was still threatened by independent khanates whose allegiance to Russia was uncertain or absent at all.

In theory, the case of a Russian scholar of the Orient joining the administration to consolidate Russian rule fits the Orientalist scheme of Said. In practice, Knight explains, the connection between knowledge and power malfunctioned:

Without a receptive and accommodating environment of power, Grigor'ev's knowledge was little more than an irritant to those whom it was to have benefited. [...] Grigor'ev came to Orenburg as an oracle of scientific truth about the Asiatic "other," only to find himself valued as the consummate penpusher, mechanistically executing a vision over which he had no control. For him, the nexus of power and knowledge was a one-way street.²⁹

Even if the content of Grigoryev's knowledge was Orientalist in the Saidian sense, it did not affect power along the lines Said sketched out. Based on Grigoryev's policy memoranda and personal correspondence, Knight concludes that there was barely any room for his specialized knowledge of Central Asian languages and history. His academic merit served more as a decorative element to the local governor's administration than as a source of knowledge giving direction to policy. He was used as a secretary more than as an advisor.

When it comes to the content of Grigoryev's knowledge, Knight also perceives nuance absent in the Orientalist mindset described by Said. Grigoryev was convinced that knowledge of the Orient provided Russia with a role of patronage over the East, thus formulating an idea of superiority and of a civilizing mission, though not one necessarily including military conquest.³⁰ On the other hand, he was an ardent proponent of Kazakh education to strengthen native culture and language while simultaneously offering exposure to Russian society. This strive for education, according to Knight, attests to Grigoryev's conviction that the oriental 'other' was capable of learning, that the characteristic and unbridgeable Saidian 'gap' between West and Orient could actually be overcome.³¹

²⁹ Idem, 88-89.

³⁰ Idem, 81.

³¹ Idem, 95, 97.

Knight's article about Grigoryev in Orenburg concludes that Orientalism is not a very fruitful framework to study the dynamics of power and knowledge in the Russian Empire. Said's reductive and essentialized understanding of the East does not fit the Russian mold. Knight writes that '[...] in Russia the oriental "other" was not necessarily an unknown creature set apart by thousands of miles and vast oceans. In Russia, the "other" was all around.'³² Knight adjusts the bipolar scheme of East versus west to the Russian model of an 'awkward triptych: the west, Russia, the east.'³³ Rather than considering Russian Orientalism as discourse, Knight proposes to study it as a discipline in which different discourses became apparent and sometimes clashed.

The *Kritika* debate that ensued in response to Knight's article opened with a reaction by Adeeb Khalid. In this contribution, 'Russian history and the debate over Orientalism', Khalid introduces the reader to a Russian individual who clearly did present a successful interaction between Orientalist scholarship and imperial power. Nikolai Petrovich Ostroumov (1846-1930) offered his academic knowledge of Turkic languages and Islam religion, history and culture to the administration of the recently created province of Turkestan. In his administrative capacity, Ostroumov for example censored publications in Turkic languages and published pro-Russian articles in the local newspapers.³⁴

Khalid expresses his surprise that scholars of Russian history have barely engaged with Said's Orientalism, which he considers a useful framework that allows the Russian imperial experience to be studied in a comparative perspective. Khalid warns against what he calls the 'self-imposed limitations of Russian historiography'. Such a limitation, the reader understands, Khalid perceives in the work of Nathaniel Knight. Khalid's diagnosis is that these scholars suffer from an unease with 'approaches that dilute Russia's historical specificity.'³⁵ Nathaniel Knight derives from the example of his Orientalist, Grigoryev, the explicit encouragement to dispose of the prism of Orientalism altogether. Khalid strongly disagrees that a single example should result in the disposal of Said's framework.

Khalid wants to debunk the unicity of Russian Oriental knowledge. Khalid makes an interesting analysis. He explains that the idea that Russia was inherently different from Europe was first formulated by Russians who were influenced by German romanticism. They should

³² Idem, 97.

³³ Idem, 77.

³⁴ Adeeb Khalid, 'Russian History and the Debate over Orientalism', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000) 691-699, 691.

³⁵ Idem, 692.

not be taken over as true, but as ‘variations on a pan-European theme’.³⁶ Khalid here refers to the major Russian intellectual discussion of the 19th century between westernizers and slavophiles, who disagreed about Russia’s relation to Europe. According to Khalid, the assertion of Russia’s greater affinity with Asia is a ‘corollary’ of that first, unanswered question to what extent Russia is part of Europe: ‘[...] all Russian discourse about Asia has rather little to do with Asia, and everything to do with Russia’s awkward, often unrequited relationship with Europe.’³⁷ In practice, the affinity with Asia functioned as a ‘justification for conquest’, and, according to Khalid, was a constructed pillar to support the thesis that Russia followed a distinct route through history. Khalid aims to unmask unicity as a rhetorical trick and argues that in fact, Russian discourse since the early 19th century was characterized by a conception of the Orient, or ‘*Vostok*’ in Russian, equal to that in Europe: formed by the Saidian stereotypes of ‘despotism, fanaticism, deceit, violence, and eroticism’.³⁸

In his response to Khalid’s criticism, Knight in the same issue of *Kritika* accuses Khalid of presenting the false dichotomy that ‘Russia must either be fully European or not European at all.’³⁹ Even if Russia’s affinity with Asia served rhetorical purposes, it still influenced how Russian related to the Oriental ‘Other’. Knight stands squarely behind his metaphor of the West, Russia, and the East as an ‘awkward triptych’. The aim of his original article in *The Slavic Review*, Knight stresses, was to point out that Said’s essentializing of the West and its view of the Orient is problematic. It leaves no room for individual agency and derivations of discourse, and Knight considers seeking such examples as part of the historical profession. He puts Khalid’s counter-example of Ostroumov, the Russian academic who successfully put his expertise to the service of the Russian administration in Turkestan, aside as irrelevant, explaining that he never argued that his own Grigoryev was exemplary of all Russian Orientalists, or that scholarly knowledge never contributed to imperial power in Russia. Rather, he stresses that exceptions as Grigoryev matter because they show that it is not inevitable that knowledge and power ‘go hand in hand.’⁴⁰ The more of such instances can be found by scholars, the more likely the paradigm will be criticized, nuanced and rethought.

Knight calls his own approach the study of ‘Orientalism as practice’, revolving around the interplay between knowledge and power not in theory, but on the ground. Grigoryev

³⁶ Idem, 697.

³⁷ Idem, 697.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Nathaniel Knight, ‘On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000) 701-715, 706.

⁴⁰ Idem, 702.

presented an example of ‘an active agent whose behavior, while shaped by a range of constraints and dispositions, was not predetermined by a set Orientalist “script.”’⁴¹ If Knight’s first largest problem with Orientalism is its dichotomous character that leaves no room for individual agency, his second frustration is that Orientalism, in his opinion, denies any sincerity in the production of knowledge and scholarship:

The very possibility of understanding other cultures, of engaging deeply and sympathetically with the values and traditions of “others,” is dismissed as either a naive delusion or a devious deception. All Western knowledge and behavior toward the Oriental “other,” regardless of how neutral it appears on the surface, must inevitably proceed in Said’s framework from a pathological will to dominate.⁴²

Knight is convinced genuine knowledge is not a deception. In response to Khalid, he dilutes his weariness of transferring the framework of Orientalism to Russia altogether, but persists that scholars should apply it with caution, remaining careful to disentangle different kinds of knowledge and the contexts in which conceptions of the Orient take shape. Zooming out, we recognize in Knight’s recommendations for further research an often-heard criticism of Said’s Orientalism. It has been clearly summarized by American anthropologist and historian Daniel Martin Varisco: ‘What is missing from Orientalism is any systematic sense of what that real Orient was and how individuals reacted to the imposing forces that sought to label it and theoretically control it.’⁴³ With Grigoryev, Knight presented a case study of an individual who escaped dominant discourse, and he calls out for more examples.

If the individual examples, refutations and counterarguments in Knight’s and Khalid’s articles may leave the reader a bit dazzled, Maria Todorova’s contribution in *Kritika* helps to discern the read line in their discussion. Todorova was a well-respected scholar already in 2000, author of the acclaimed monograph *Imagining the Balkans*. In this monograph, published in 1997, Todorova works with and adjusts Said’s Orientalism to build her own thesis of ‘Balkanism’.⁴⁴ Her specialism is more in Eastern Europe and Ottoman history than in Russian studies, but her knowledge of the debates on Orientalism and nationalism, and her experience in applying Said’s framework outside of its most evident context, allow her to reflect on the

⁴¹ Idem, 704.

⁴² Idem, 714.

⁴³ Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (University of Washington Press 2007) 291.

⁴⁴ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press 1997).

polemics between Knight and Khalid. Her article in *Kritika*, titled ‘Does Orientalism have a Russian soul?’, sheds light on the debate between Knight and Khalid rather than taking a third stance in it.⁴⁵

Todorova explains the polemic between the two historians as the result of their different hermeneutic approaches. Knight adheres to the approach of particularism, focusing on specific Russian circumstances that differ from the Western experience. Khalid, contrastingly, adheres to universalism by arguing that the Russian imperial experience should be studied in the same framework as other imperial states. According to Todorova, both approaches have their advantages and drawbacks. She writes: ‘The universal idiom does, indeed, open the field. It serves as a necessary and welcome stimulant, and is the only medium for genuine comparative research.’⁴⁶ However, universalism comes at the price of cultural hegemony: it is inevitable that a framework is influenced by the context in which it is produced. In the case of Orientalism, that is the context of British and French colonialism in the Arabic world. Todorova writes that like universalism, the uniqueness approach has its wins and perils: ‘Its rewards are the embedding of a greater cognitive value in the object of study, but this intellectual autarchy comes at the price of isolation and parochialism.’⁴⁷ Following her elaboration on these two hermeneutic approaches, Todorova concludes that transferring the framework of Saidian Orientalism to Russian history remains a useful practice. She writes that Said himself made explicit that his protest against the reductive essentialism of Orientalism primarily resulted from the encounter between Britain and France and countries of the Arabic world.⁴⁸ It would only be logical that the transfer of his framework to a different context would call for adjustments. Todorova concludes Orientalism already has fostered a fruitful debate for over two decades, and is positive it can also deliver insights in the dynamics of Russian Imperial history.

The debate after 2000

It seems that Todorova has been right. Since 2000, the debate on Russian Orientalism has been fruitful. The framework stimulated discussion, and scholars have not felt restrained to engage

⁴⁵ Both Khalid and Knight refer in their articles to Todorova’s work on the Balkans, in which she actively engaged with Said’s framework, with respect.

⁴⁶ Maria Todorova, ‘Does Russian Orientalism Have a Russian Soul? A Contribution to the Debate between Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:4 (2000) 717-727, 719.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Idem, 721.

with it while still remaining attentive to specific Russian circumstances. Before elaborating on the outcomes of the debate however, it is interesting to make some remarks about chronology. Between Said's *Orientalism* and the *Kritika* debate lies a gap of 22 years. Why did it take such a long time for postcolonial critique to arrive in the field of Russian Studies? Attesting to the reflective quality of the debate, recent contributors have addressed that question, and we can draw on their deliberations to introduce the continued debate after 2000.

David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, professor of Russian History whose contribution to the debate will be discussed below, in an article from 2014 clarified why Russian Studies were late to get involved with Said's Orientalism. He explains that firstly, many scholars in the West continue to consider Russia itself als Oriental, rather than as part of the Western world. And secondly, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Russian scholars and their colleagues in the West seemed to share Said's idea that the Russian imperial experience was 'different'. In the West, associations of overseas colonies disqualified the Soviet Union as an empire. Within the Soviet Union itself, to acknowledge the Soviet experience as imperial or colonial would be a direct attack on communist ideology. And so, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye concludes, 'Postcolonialism simply had no place in Russian and Soviet studies.'⁴⁹

It was only with what has been called the 'imperial turn' in the field of Russian Studies that things started to shift. This turn is perceived to have set in after the fall of the Soviet Union, and is often associated with Andreas Kappeler's 1992 monograph *Russland als Vielvölkerreich*.⁵⁰ Shifting focus, away from the rise and fall of Russian rulers, in the direction of the state's border regions, to mechanisms of cohesion, oppression, coercion and cooperation, Russia's experience with different nationalities and expansion came to be studied as a form of imperial rule.⁵¹ These new debates fostered understanding that concepts of East and West are variable and imagined, and thus readied the ground for the critical application of Said's paradigm to Russian conceptions of the Orient.⁵²

The *Kritika*-debate has no winners or losers. Rather, the participating authors made fertile soil for the continued discussion about the applicability of Said's Orientalism to Russia.

⁴⁹ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 'The Curious Fate of Edward Said in Russia', *Études de lettres* 2:3 (2014) 81-94, 83-84.

⁵⁰ M. David-Fox, P. Holquist and A. M. Martin, 'The Imperial Turn', *Kritika* 7:4 (2006), 705-712.

⁵¹ Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization* (Cambridge 2011); Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* (Munich: Beck, 1992).

⁵² See A. I. Miller and Gust Olson, 'Between Local and Inter-Imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5:1 (2004) 7-26, 8.

I will present three short examples of prominent contributions that each balance between universality and particularism. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Vera Tolz and Alexander Etkind all accept Said's thesis that knowledge is a crucial part of imperial domination, yet they try to differentiate between different kinds of knowledge, and Knight's 'awkward triptych' proves a lasting influence in their work.

First, the work of David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye shows that Russia's 'special affinity to Asia' goes beyond objective geographical facts. It has been studied as an idea that influenced the self-consciousness of Russian intellectuals and their conceptions of the Orient. In his 2009 monograph *Russian Orientalism*, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye writes that during the rule of Catherine the Great in the 18th century, Russian intellectual and political elites self-identified with Western Europe and were greatly influenced by the French Enlightenment. In this period, the East was seen as fundamentally different from Russia, as exotic and strange, in full accordance with Western Enlightenment idealization of the Orient. Only when Russia's relationship with Europe was increasingly questioned from the early 18th century, it seemed that 'attitudes toward Asia likewise became more ambivalent.'⁵³ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye invokes the famous image of Russia as the 'two-faced Janus' simultaneously looking to Asia and Europe. Struggling to understand their relation with Europe, Russian intellectuals looked East:

And when gazing East, Romantic Russia also saw some reflections of itself. Whether consciously or not, this recognition that the boundaries between Orient and Occident were much less distinct than for Germans, French, or English made Pushkin and his contemporaries more empathetic with the East. In Said's terms, there was much less difference between self and other.⁵⁴

This presents a combination of Knight's particularism and Khalid's criticism. Russian affinity with Asia is not of interest as a fact of geography or historical context, but as a state of mind that developed in reaction to an unrequited relationship with Europe. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye concludes that this ambivalent relationship with Europe, together with Russia's bicontinental geography and complicated encounters with Asia have resulted in a conception of Asia that does not fit Said's Orientalism, for 'Said's Orientalist schema assumes unanimity, a shared view both of Asia and about how to confront it that simply never existed.'⁵⁵

⁵³ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 59.

⁵⁴ Idem, 91.

⁵⁵ Idem, 11.

The complexity of Russian interpretations of Asia means that Orientalism for Russian scholars holds less of a pejorative meaning than it does in the Saidian interpretation. Once more, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye gives a clear explanation: ‘While I recognize the importance of Said’s ideas, I do not share his distaste for the terms “Oriental,” “orientology” and “Orientalist.” therefore use them in the neutral, pre-Saidian sense, much as Russians understand Vostok, vostokovedenie, and vostokoved (orientologist).’⁵⁶ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye thus uses the concept of Russian Orientalism in a broader sense, with a less pejorative connotation. Though Russian knowledge about the Orient, according to this author, can encompass the Saidian notion of negative stereotypes and reductiveness in some cases, it is often characterized by a certain affinity absent in Western countries.

Like Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Russian historian Vera Tolz has acknowledged the greater complexity of Russian conceptions of the Orient compared to Western Europe. Tolz got involved in the debate in 2005, when she published an article in *The Historical Journal* about Orientalism in late Imperial Russia. This contribution departs from two problems Tolz perceives in the work of Knight and Khalid. Firstly, these authors in their articles in *Kritika* fail to differentiate between different kinds of specialists. For example, among the Russian scholars of the Orient (Orientologists), we should distinguish between those with a theological or missionary and those with an academic background. Tolz points out that Knight’s case study, Grigoryev, was a product of a secular university, while Khalid’s Ostroumov was trained at a theological academy with focus on anti-Islam polemics. In the *Kritika*-debate, the two authors are inattentive to these different backgrounds. Tolz also points out that some government and military officials contributed to ethnographical and archeological research in the East, yet their political background should be taken into account when comparing their work to that of ‘formal’ academics for whom the study of the East was their main occupation.⁵⁷ Tolz’s second problem with the *Kritika*-debate is that it only acknowledges the relationship between Oriental Studies and imperial rule. For the Russian context, she argues that Oriental Studies in the late Imperial period were more connected to the political aim of building a nation-state. Instead of ruling over the population, Orientologists were concerned with nation-building, as Tolz defines it: ‘fostering a sense of community and unity’ among its objects.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Idem, 10-11.

⁵⁷ Vera Tolz, ‘Orientalism, Nationalism, and Ethnic Diversity in Late Imperial Russia’, *The Historical Journal* 48:1 (2005) 127-150, 131.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

Tolz immediately puts her own advice into practice by presenting her research on the role of late imperial Orientalists who, to the dissatisfaction of the government, argued for the preservation and promotion of ethnic minorities in the Eastern parts of Russia. This narrative would be worked out in her 2011 monograph *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods*. In this work, Tolz presents an in-depth study that answers the call for concrete historicizing of the Orientalists and the object of their gaze. Chronologically, her study is delineated to the decades around 1900. Her Orientalists are the professional scholars who studied what Tolz calls 'Russia's own Orient': the parts of the Russian empire near the eastern and southern border, primarily the Caucasus and East Siberia. She argues that these scholars countered traditions of studying the Orient as a strange place inhabited by 'exotic beings.' On the contrary, they directly countered the existence of essential differences between peoples of the East and West and their 'immutable racial peculiarities.'⁵⁹ This late Imperial and early Soviet Orientology clearly did not fit the mold of Said's Orientalism. Moreover, Tolz points out that Said's critique of European scholarship is actually indebted to her objects of study, who decades before him realized that knowledge was power (using the expression '*znanie - sila*'), and considered the knowledge about the East accumulated in the West accomplice to Western colonial cruelty.⁶⁰

A third scholar who has reflectively interacted with Said's framework in his contribution to the debate on Russian Orientalism is Alexander Etkind. Like Vera Tolz, Etkind is a native Russian citizen who has been based in Western Europe for many decades. His acclaimed 2011 monograph *Internal colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* argues that Russian terrestrial imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries was by no means less 'adventurous, consequential, and repressive' than the overseas variant practiced by France, Britain, and other Western states.⁶¹ Thus countering Said's suggestion that Russia's colonial experience differed fundamentally from that of Western Europe, the result is the broader applicability of Said's framework. Etkind, like Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Tolz, is convinced of the relationship between knowledge and power. However, his specialism in Russian expansion, and in the state's century-long attempts of colonizing the lands it

⁵⁹ Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford 2011) 12.

⁶⁰ Idem, 70.

⁶¹ Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization* (Cambridge 2011), 5. Etkind gives many reasons why imperialism over land was at least as challenging. For example, unlike the seas, some lands were inhabited and the conquerors set out to deal with these 'strange' people, but also travel over land was more expensive and time-consuming than travel by ship over sea.

conquered, brings him to criticize the bipolarity of Said's framework. Combining his own insights with number of studies that nuanced Said's framework in the context of the British Empire, Etkind comes to the conclusion that early versions of postcolonial critique, such as Said's, 'did not do justice to the enormous "grey" zones that lay between the imperial capitals and the colonial frontiers. It was these hybridized zones, sometimes grey and sometimes blooming, which were actually "empires".'⁶² These 'grey zones' do not have to be defined geographically; they can also exist as a type of knowledge. In the case of Russia, Etkind exemplifies this in reference to some studies of Russian 19th century literature, interwoven with his own deliberations. According to Etkind, Russian writers and poets in the early 19th century on a large scale self-identified with the Oriental 'other' in order to construct a cultural identity different from the West. Etkind calls this reversed Orientalism, or self-orientalization. This form of Orientalism, incongruent to Said's scheme, is a concrete example of the 'affinity' with the East as formulated by Nathaniel Knight. And in this case, it is not found in the realm of scholarly Orientalism but in that of literature. And the knowledge of literature, according to Etkind, did not support imperial power: 'the empire did not like its poets, and most of them did not like the empire.'⁶³

Since the debate kicked off in 2000, Russian conceptions of the Orient have been thoroughly historicized. The contributions of Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Tolz and Etkind show along which lines this has been done. Both spatial and temporal variations have been taken into account to adjust the Saidian framework to the Russian context. Russian affinity with Asia has been studied not as an absolute fact, but as a reaction, formulated while Russians tried to define their relationship to Western Europe. Different kinds of specialists have been distinguished from each other, and their backgrounds have been studied to understand the kind of knowledge they produced. However, this debate on Russian Orientalism has mostly concerned itself with the Russian conception of Central Asia, Siberia, and the Caucasus. So what is the place of China, and of the Russian tradition of Sinology, in this debate?

The Chinese Orient: another anomaly?

Russia for a long time was considered an atypical colonizing power, and its corresponding conceptions of the Orient are still considered to be partly atypical. A comparable conviction of exceptionality is present in the study of China as the object of the oriental gaze. Political

⁶² Alexander Etkind, 'Orientalism Reversed: Russian Literature in the Times of Empires', *Modern Intellectual History* 4:3 (2007) 617–628, 621.

⁶³ Idem, 622.

economist and sociologist Ho-Fung Hung in 2003 published an article in *Sociological Theory* that provides a good starting point to understanding this idea.

Hung departs from one of the often-heard criticisms of Said's *Orientalism*, namely that it oversimplifies Western Orientalist scholarship. Taking the example of how Europe studied China between 1600 and 1900, Hung wants to shed light on some 'twists and turns of the Western representations of the East over the long run.'⁶⁴ He names a number of conditions that set China apart from the Islamic world: until the 19th century, China was never at war with Europe, it was never a European colony, and prospered economically. These conditions, according to Hung, made for a 'larger space for Europeans' fantasy and idealization.'⁶⁵ Looking at the concrete views of China in the period of 1600-1900, Hung perceives a 'cyclical movement' between admiration and contempt. Examples of such opposing groups are the Jesuits and the Jansenists in the 17th century, Sinophiles and Sinophobes in the 18th century, and romanticists and evolutionists in the 19th century. The Jesuits, Sinophiles and romanticists idealized and universalized China, while the Jansenists, Sinophobes and evolutionists considered it inferior and inherently different to Europe.⁶⁶ Hung explains the existence of such intellectual rivalry as a natural outcome of the 'universal logic of intellectual fields', a theory laid out by the American sociologist Randall Collins: rivaling intellectual networks compete for space, and the rise of one school of thought is a direct challenge for an opposing school to develop.⁶⁷ The outcome of such rivalry however, according to Hung, not only depends on the discussion that takes place within the intellectual field, but also on political and economic transformations that influence popular opinion and the relation between regimes and social elites.⁶⁸

Hung's article is rich in content, but I will only elaborate on one point as a relevant take-away. Hung adjusts Said's framework of Orientalism, by arguing that in the case of China, European conceptions were reductionist rather than negative. According to Hung, in the case of China, Orientalist knowledge should not be understood merely as a set of negative stereotypes of inferiority and simplicity. From the early seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, there were rivaling intellectual traditions in thinking about China, and

⁶⁴ Ho-Fung Hung, 'Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900', *Sociological Theory* 21:3 (2003) 254-280, 254.

⁶⁵ Idem, 255.

⁶⁶ I will not elaborate further on the specificities of these different groups.

⁶⁷ R. Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Harvard University Press 1998).

⁶⁸ Hung, 'Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories', 274-275.

usually one of those sides held a very positive view of China. That does not mean, however, that this Orientalism was less problematic than the Saidian variant. According to Hung: '[T]he most fundamental fallacy of Orientalism did not lie in the presumptions about the ontological differences between East and West and the former's inferiority. [...] In fact, Orientalist knowledge was most problematic in its reductionism.'⁶⁹ This reductionism could take two directions: either it spiraled into adoration or contempt, while both these forms ignored the complexity, dynamism and historicity of Chinese society.

What remains unclear in Hung's article is to what extent his conclusion, namely that Orientalism was reductionist rather than just negatively stereotyping, is specific to China. Though he introduces his argument with the statement that 'The special situation of China created a larger space for Europeans' fantasy and idealization', this claim is not thoroughly referenced.⁷⁰ The conditions that Hung presents, of China not having been at war with Europe until the 19th century, its having a prosperous economy while never having been colonized by the West, are interesting but hardly convincing of unicity. Besides, after presenting his conclusion that the Western view of China ignored spatial and temporal variations, Hung adds that 'The same applied to the Western conceptions of other non-Western civilizations', without further elaboration.⁷¹

Hung draws upon his knowledge of Chinese society to adjust the general mechanism of Orientalism from negative stereotypization to reductionism. The 'special situation of China' makes the core of this process, reductionism, more clear, and its effects larger than it has been for other parts of the Orient, who were colonized by Western powers, waged war with them, and had less prosperous economies. China thus remains an anomalous object of the Oriental gaze. Combined with the late arrival of the debate about the applicability of the Orientalism-framework to Russia, it is maybe not surprising that not many scholars have undertaken the exercise to combine the two anomalies together.

Though the historiography of the Russian study of China counts many contributions, only over the last fifteen years, more works have considered the Russian views of China as a form of Orientalism.⁷² David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye did so in his aforementioned monograph *Russian Orientalism*, concluding that the Russian conception of China from the

⁶⁹ Idem, 276.

⁷⁰ Idem, 255. The only reference attached to the three conditions of the absence of war, colonial history and prosperous economy is to a monograph from 1998 about the position of Asia in the global economy.

⁷¹ Idem, 275.

⁷² In the next chapter, I will discuss earlier accounts of the Russian study of China, such as the Soviet scholarship on Russian Sinology.

19th century escaped the influence of Enlightenment universalism and became more fragmented. In 2013, another monograph appeared and treated that shifting perception of China in much more detail. *China and Japan in the Russian imagination, 1685-1922: To the ends of the Orient*, written by American specialist of Russian late imperial history Susanna Soojung Lim was well-received, yet remains somewhat less known than Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's work. Lim agrees with Schimmelpenninck van der Oye that to understand Russian conceptions of China, one needs to look past Said's Orientalism framework, which is unfit to understand the 'almost dizzying array of impressions, images, and ideologies' that developed since the late 18th century.⁷³ Lim treats Japan and China separately, but her conclusion applies to both nations:

China and Japan came to play an uncommon role in Russian Orientalism. Quintessential symbols of the exotic Orient, yet never ultimately colonized by Russia or the West, these two Asian states were linked to not only the greatest and most extravagant of Russian imperial fantasies, but also conversely to a deep sense of insecurity and anxiety regarding Russia's place in the world.⁷⁴

Here we recognize Knight's formulation from 2000, since then elaborated on by his colleagues: thinking about Asia was fueled by the debate about Russia's relationship to Europe and place in the world. And though the role of China (I will not elaborate on Japan) according to Lim was quintessential, she remarks that it has been understudied in scholarship that developed since Said's *Orientalism*.⁷⁵ Though she acknowledges that Said's Orientalism raises useful questions about power and representation that are still relevant to understand how Russia looked at China, she also claims an anomalous position for both countries. Russia and China are 'grey spaces', with Russia being considered 'not quite West', and China as 'not quite East', as it was never colonized by Russia or West-European countries.⁷⁶

Yet we should not dispose of the imperialist framework altogether in the study of Russian conceptions of China. As Susanna Lim notes in the fragment quoted above, China

⁷³ S. S. Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination, 1685-1922: To the ends of the Orient* (Taylor & Francis Group 2013), 4.

⁷⁴ Idem, 5.

⁷⁵ Idem, 11. Lim does express her indebtedness to a number of publications about Russia and China. She mentions Barbara Maggs' *Russia and "le rêve chinois": China in Eighteenth-century Russian Literature* (Oxford 1984) and Alexander Lukin's *The Bear watches the Dragon: Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations since the Eighteenth Century* (New York 2003). Both these works will be discussed below.

⁷⁶ Idem, 13-14.

became linked to the ‘greatest and most extravagant of Russian imperial fantasies.’⁷⁷ That was especially true for the last decades of the 19th century, but it was definitely preceded by expressions in earlier politics and literature. Catherine the Great considered going to war with China when she was confronted with some very practical border issues with the neighboring state in the earlier years of her reign.⁷⁸ Alexander Pushkin in 1831 also partook in, as Susanna Lim calls it, the ‘exercise of imaginative geography’. In his poem ‘To the slanderers of Russia’, the poet states that Russia’s legitimate authority expands to ‘the walls of immovable China.’⁷⁹ So what, exactly, was going on in this period? How exactly did Russia’s ‘deep sense of insecurity and anxiety’ influence conceptions of China, and what were the outcomes? In the last part of this historiographical study, I will elaborate on this development.

Russian conceptions of China around the turn of the century

Starting with the rule of czar Peter the Great (1682-1725), Russia in the 19th century embarked on a path of Westernization. Not only rulers and politicians were looking to the West for inspiration, intellectual and cultural elites did the same. In this spirit, Russian conceptions of China were strongly influenced by ideas from Western Europe. French Enlightenment thinkers were on the forefront of Russians’ minds. To French intellectuals as Voltaire, China was an example of enlightened absolutism, of perfectly functioning meritocracy. Chinese philosophy was considered a highlight of morality and sageness. These French Enlightenment-thinkers were deeply influenced by the writings of the Jesuits. These Catholic missionaries were present in China since the 17th century and wrote about Chinese Confucianism as a kind of proto-Christianity. In the latter half of the 18th century, thinkers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu started questioning the idealization of China and countered it with ideas of despotism and stagnation, which they saw manifested in Chinese society in the form of a slave-like mentality of objects towards rulers and high corruption rates within governmental circles.

For all of these Enlightenment intellectuals, conceptions of China were instrumental to their deliberations on the political system in Europe itself. Though some of them presented China as an example of state-making not to be followed, it was the more popular positive view as held by Voltaire that lingered in the Russian imagination. This has been thoroughly

⁷⁷ Again, Lim writes that this is true for both Japan and China, so I am leaving half of her narrative out of scope here.

⁷⁸ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 52.

⁷⁹ A. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh* (Moscow: Akademiia nauk 1956–8) 3, 222–223. Quoted in Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination*, 10.

researched by Barbara Maggs, who based on a large body of Russian literature from 18th century, ranging from original poetry to works translated from French and German, concludes that while some negative remarks about Chinese state-making were found in the period, the overall picture is that of ‘China as the unique happy land where wisdom and virtue prevail.’⁸⁰ While Maggs laid out this development in her doctoral thesis, it became the main subject of her 1984 monograph *Russia and 'le rêve chinois': China in eighteenth-century Russian Literature*.⁸¹ The expression of ‘le rêve chinois’ or ‘the Chinese dream’ has since recurred in historiography to describe the dreamy idealization of China in the eighteenth century.

Fondness of China manifested itself in Russia in the cult of *kitaischchina*: a direct translation of the French *chinoiserie*, a fancy for everything Chinese that transgressed the intellectual boundaries into the material: Chinese porcelain, art objects, landscape design and architecture became ragingly popular. One of the most enthusiastic fans of *kitaischchina* in Russia was empress Catherine the Great, who built several Chinese-style palaces in and around Saint Petersburg, and even installed an entire ‘Chinese village’ on the imperial grounds of Tsarskoe Selo.⁸²

Several historians have noted that this infatuation with China in Russia was an emulation of a Western European trend, and did not incorporate Russia’s own relationship with the country. That relationship offered less room for idealization for the simple reason that China shared a border with Russia, and obviously not with states such as France or Britain.⁸³ Catherine the Great in her private correspondence sometimes expressed a lot less idealized views about China, a result of how she had to deal with the country in a very practical sense. As briefly touched upon above, China was Russia’s most Eastern neighbor, and border conflict and trade relations did not always match the dreamy imagination of a wise and sage country. However, the general Russian conception of China did not offer room to such ambiguity, as identification with Europe was more important than an authentic Russian experience. Historian Alexander Lukin explains that Russians took their own recent arrival to Europe ‘even more seriously than their French mentors’.⁸⁴ As early as 1976, American professor of Chinese Studies Eric Widmer wrote about the Russian intellectuals:

⁸⁰ Barbara Maggs, *China in the literature of eighteenth-century Russia* (University of Illinois 1973) 216.

⁸¹ Barbara Maggs, *Russia and 'le rêve chinois': China in eighteenth-century Russian Literature* (Oxford 1984).

⁸² See for a detailed description of all the Chinese features of these Catherinian projects: Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Orientalism*, 54-56.

⁸³ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 59.

⁸⁴ Idem, 7.

[T]heir national energies were so wholly absorbed in the process of "Westernization" that Russians were unable to focus attention on their own experience in China. Systematic exploration of even less Westernized societies outside of the Russian empire seemed irrelevant, or at least of little intrinsic importance.⁸⁵

And thus, barely incorporating neighborly and practical contacts with China out of scope, Russian conceptions of the Eastern neighbor were predominantly idealized in the trend of French Enlightenment.

While the idealization of China as a remote and different place remained dominant throughout the 18th century, the following century is of great interest because existing ideas started to shift. According to Susanna Lim, that shift chronologically just preceded Nikita Bichurin's early activity in Saint Petersburg. She writes that by the time Bichurin entertained the public in the salons, 'le rêve chinois of the French Enlightenment had given way to quite different conceptions of the Orient.'⁸⁶ So what happened to *le rêve chinois*, and if it really disappeared, what replaced it?

Like during the preceding decades, Russian conceptions of China in the early 19th century were greatly influenced by ideas from Western Europe. This time, it was German romanticism that inspired Russian intellectuals. Thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder and Georg Wilhelm Hegel came to consider China as a country that was outside of history, as a stagnant and despotic nation. And while such ideas were taken over by Russian Westernizers as Pyotr Chadaev, Aleksandr Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky, it soon became clear that Russia's intellectual debate was no longer likely to fully align itself along the Western European trend. Rather, the offset of the debate about Russia's relationship with Europe between Westernizers and Slavophiles brought with it a fragmentation of the conceptions of China. While the Westernizers saw China as the antithesis of what Russia should become, Slavophiles adhered more to an idealized view of an accomplished, yet totally different country. Rather than an example to follow, China proved to them a case in point that non-Western societies could be successful, to be interpreted as an incentive for Russia to follow a separate path of development from other countries.⁸⁷ As Aleksandr Lukin concludes: 'The

⁸⁵ Eric Widmer, *The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Peking during the eighteenth century* (Harvard 1976) 167.

⁸⁶ Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination*, 61.

⁸⁷ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 29. Lukin names two influential Slavophiles who expressed these interpretations, namely Aleksei Khomiakov and Nikolay Danilevsky.

image of China began to play a symbolic role in the controversy between the supporters and opponents of pro-Western orientation.⁸⁸

The fragmentation of the Russian conception of China is exemplified in the changing connotation of the word *kitaischchina*. As mentioned above, in the Catherinian context, the term was applied to the great number of buildings and objects fashioned in Chinese style. Halfway the nineteenth century however, the connotation had come much nearer to the original meaning of the suffix *-schchina*, which is added to Russian words to express a sense of negativity. *Kitaischchina*, then, came to embody a vision of stagnation and autocracy.⁸⁹ Susanna Lim describes how these ideas became more influential, just as Bichurin entered his most active period in Saint Petersburg:

Russian Sinology, in the person of the monk, had reached a peak at the very time when the Romantic ethos had effected a decisive shift in the perception of China. For Father Yakinf's [as Bichurin was also referred to in his clerical capacity] generation, this shift was moreover given historical confirmation when, in the 1830s, the decline of the Qing empire became all too apparent as it began to suffer humiliating defeats at the hands of the Western powers.⁹⁰

Interestingly, Lim in the fragment above refers to the influence of Romanticism, but also to the contemporary decline of the Qing dynasty, which had been ruling China for almost 200 years. These developments fueled a negative conception of China, along the lines described by Said in his *Orientalism*. As we have seen however, this interpretation was rather new, and it was definitely not the only way China was read. Alternatives ranged from the older conviction that China was a place of wisdom, at the root of human knowledge and language, to the Slavophile interpretation that if China had found a path to success, radically different from the routes followed by Western countries, there should also exist such an individual path for Russia.

These accounts of Russian conceptions of China attest to a certain oscillation between universalism and particularism that we recognize from the broader debate on Russian Orientalism. Combining the knowledge produced by literary figures and scholars, the research of Lim, Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Lukin and Maggs reconstructs how Russia for a long time followed a West-European trend, before breaking away from it as Russian intellectuals

⁸⁸ Idem, 14.

⁸⁹ Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination*, 5, 64.

⁹⁰ Idem, 67.

instrumentalized the role of China in their own debate about Russia's future. Before tracing this development in the work of Bichurin, the next chapter will explain why this individual presents a good case study to see these dynamics reflected in.

A passion for China: characterizations of Nikita Bichurin

The same year Bichurin published his first original article, he would turn fifty years old. That debut article from 1827, and two more articles from 1828 and 1833, will be analyzed in the following chapter. First however, the current chapter aims to make a nuanced characterization of the monk and sinologist. In order to interpret Bichurin's work from his early Saint Petersburg years, it is necessary to understand that these sources were not produced by a young traveler or researcher, but by a senior scholar. The years in which he started publishing were the tip of the iceberg: Bichurin was drawing on three decades of study and experience. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Vera Tolz among others expressed the need to 'differentiate between various groups of experts'.⁹¹ We need to historicize not only the Russian 'Orient', but also the Russian 'Orientalist', because background and ideological motivation matter. Knowledge functions differently for scholars, governmental officials, poets, theologians and missionaries. Tolz's advice is taken as a guideline in the current chapter, which answers the question what kind of expert Bichurin was, and how he built up his knowledge about China.

Following Tolz's recommendation however, we immediately run into problems. Bichurin was many things. When he arrived in the imperial capital, he was no longer supervising an Orthodox institution as he had been in Beijing, but he was still a monk. He also entered governmental service, assisting the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a translator and interpreter. He was a productive and knowledgeable academic, and lastly, he became one of the Saint Petersburg intellectuals who visited literary salons and published in the popular thick journals of the period. Bichurin's special knowledge of East-Asia, and China specifically, made him an appreciated figure in all these different tiers of society.

How to understand the different roles Bichurin seems to have juggled? Was that a conscious choice, did he want to be all these things, or was there an external factor forcing him to switch and combine capacities? To discern the driving force behind Bichurin's knowledge of China, this chapter combines insights of the prominent Soviet historian and *vostokoved* Piotr Yemelianovich Skachkov (1892-1964) with more recent accounts of scholars from Russia,

⁹¹ Vera Tolz, 'Orientalism, Nationalism, and Ethnic Diversity in Late Imperial Russia', *The Historical Journal* 48:1 (2005) 127-150, 130.

America and Western Europe. I will try to add up their sometimes seemingly incongruent insights to shed light on Bichurin's passion for China.

Introducing Nikita Bichurin

Nikita Iakovlevich Bichurin (1777-1853) grew up as the son of a Chuvash Orthodox cleric in a village near Kazan. He entered the Kazan Seminary, an educational institute of the Russian Orthodox Church. His study in Kazan initiated Bichurin's professional life as a cleric, yet it also laid the foundation of his life-long dedication to the study of China and East-Asia. Analogous to Saint Petersburg's function as a 'window to Europe', the position of Kazan within the Russian Empire was that of a 'window to Asia': its geographic location just West of the Ural mountains, together with the presence of Turkic minorities and the administrative responsibilities over Siberia made the city one of the earliest centers for the study of Asia in Russia.⁹² Starting his study of Mandarin Chinese at the Kazan Seminary, after his graduation in 1799 Bichurin stayed at the school for some years as a teacher before becoming archimandrite and head of a smaller Seminary school in Irkutsk, some four thousand kilometers east of Kazan.

Through contacts with Russian diplomats in this eastern part of the Empire, Bichurin got appointed as head of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing in 1807. This organization existed since the beginning of the 18th century as a service to a small group of Russian soldiers who had been incorporated into the Chinese army after the Siege of Albazin in 1686. The Albazin fortress was a strategic stronghold in the basin of the Amur river. The battle of in 1686, in which the Qing army managed to take the fortress from the Russian imperial army, was part of a series of border conflicts between the two empires during the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century. The Russian soldiers who surrendered after the siege got stationed in Beijing and became known as the *albazintsy*. In the absence of official diplomatic relations the Russian government took this opportunity to have a permanent Russian representative in China, which provided support to the small group of Russians in the Chinese capital, but had no function of active missionary work and was used to develop trade relations and unofficial diplomacy.⁹³

⁹² David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (Yale 2010), 94-95. See also for a full monograph about the city of Kazan in the politics of the late Russian Empire: Robert Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Cornell University Press 2009).

⁹³ Alexander Kim, 'The Life and Works of N. Ia. Bichurin, a Pioneer of Russian Sinology', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung* 66:2 (2013), 163–178, 165.

Bichurin was head of this Orthodox Mission until 1816, but stayed in China six years longer. When he returned to Saint Petersburg in 1822, a hostile welcome awaited. Complaints from Bichurin's superiors about his supposed misbehavior in China, namely not attending Church, selling Church property, and improper behavior of drinking and seeing women yielded him a life-long banishment to the Solovetsky Monastery, in the far North of Russia. However, after three years Bichurin was pardoned and he returned to the imperial capital in 1826. In the following decades, Bichurin published many translations of Chinese literature, as well as his own works on the history and society of China and its neighboring Central-Asian countries. He composed the first Russian-Chinese dictionary and the first Russian grammar of Mandarin, and also contributed many articles and reviews of his colleagues' works in the periodical press of the period. He worked for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government's Asian Department, and was a key figure in the establishment of the first Russian-language school in Kyakhta, a Russian trade capital on the Mongolian border where many Chinese tradesmen resided.

The literature on Nikita Iakovlevich Bichurin is quite diverse. In the 1960s and 1970s, his name rarely came up in West-European and American scholarship. In the Soviet Union however, several historians working on Sino-Russian relations and Russian Sinology researched the life and work of Bichurin. The results of their work was largely paced by the retrieval of new archival material consisting of Bichurin's personal correspondence and of his unpublished articles and travel notes. Though many of such contributions are by now outdated as they each built a bit further on existing material, one work published by Piotr Yemeljanovich Skachkov (1892-1964) remains an often referenced standard work in more recent historiography.⁹⁴ This monograph, *Ocherki istorii russkogo kitaevedenii*, was published posthumously as the result of Skachkov's forty years of bibliographical research about the development of Russian China studies from the beginning of the 17th century to 1917.⁹⁵ This work includes a detailed study of the professional life of Nikita Bichurin.

Skachkov's monograph is clearly a product of Soviet scholarship. It is focused on the

⁹⁴ Alexander Lukin refers to Skachkov's monograph as a 'very important source for information and thoughts on the perceptions of China of various individual Russian China scholars, and cultural, political and social figures in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.' Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon : Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations Since the Eighteenth Century* (New York 2003), xii. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye likewise refers to Skachkov as a useful source for biographical information about Bichurin: Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 'The Genesis of Russian Sinology', 364.

⁹⁵ P. E. Skachkov, *Ocherki istorii russkogo kitaevedenii* (Moscow 1977). Skachkov in 1932 published an extensive bibliography titled *Bibliografiia Kitaja: sistematicheskij ukazatel' knig i zhurnal'nykh statej o Kitae na russkom iazyke: 1730-1930*, and an updated version of that work in 1960.

importance of Russian Sinology and collects historical archival material to come to a certain level of appreciation of individual contributions such as Bichurin's.⁹⁶ This approach is helpful to understand the content and development of Bichurin's scholarship, and very different from the approaches in more recent scholarship, which start out from Bichurin's disputed reputation as a monk, his personal relations with colleagues and friends, and his vivid personality. Some examples of how these aspects are stressed in more recent scholarship will be given first. The subsequent discussion of Skachkov will re-emphasize some aspects that have been left out in later accounts.

Recent narratives of an 'exotic' monk

Alexander Kim, a historian and very productive scholar publishing about the history of Central and East-Asian countries, in a research paper about Bichurin has problematized the monk's reputation by contrasting Bichurin's supposed academic authority to his disputed and improper behavior as a monk: 'For many historians Bichurin was a great scholar of the Russian Empire in the 19th century, while his opponents believe that he was just a bad priest with several vices which cast a shadow on his achievements.'⁹⁷ The 'vices' Kim refers to, namely Bichurin's supposed debauchery, clerical disobedience and breaking of celibacy during his stay in Peking, were also the reason Bichurin was banned to the Solovetsky Monastery when he returned to Russia in 1822. Several authors have speculated as to why Bichurin would have become a monk in the first place if he felt so little attracted to living a clerical life. Kim summarizes three versions as most popular among scholars. The first explains that Bichurin became a monk out of revolt against his father, who wanted him to become a village priest. The second reading is that Bichurin followed the advice of his teachers at the Kazan Seminary: becoming a monk would be his best option of securing a good position in society, building a career within the Church. Kim himself finds version three most likely: Bichurin and his friend were in love with the same girl, the girl chose to marry the friend, and Bichurin retreated to take the monastic vow.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ And it results in the somewhat patriotic conclusion: 'Imia N. Ia. Bichurin, odnogo iz pervykh russkikh sinologov, sostavliaet slavu i gordost' otechestvennoj nauki.' See page 123. Together with some statements about the prevalence of Russian Sinology over West European Sinology, these remarks attest to a lack of integration of West-European and Russian scholarship, something that has developed much more over the past three decades.

⁹⁷ Alexander Kim, 'The Life and Works of N. Ia. Bichurin, a Pioneer of Russian Sinology', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung* 66:2 (2013) 163-178, 163.

⁹⁸ Idem, 164.

For whatever reason Bichurin may have chosen clerical life, Kim is not the only historian to stress that ‘Bichurin did not like the life of a monk’.⁹⁹ Already in 1958, Russian literary historian Leonid Petrovich Grossman used the term ‘monakh-ateist’ to describe Bichurin.¹⁰⁰ David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye wrote about Bichurin that ‘[t]o be sure, he was hardly a faithful member of the church. Often described as “a freethinker in cassock,” he had remained a monk against his will by order of the tsar, and his perspective was distinctly secular.’¹⁰¹ This ‘order of the tsar’ came in 1831, when Bichurin petitioned the Holy Synod to be released from monastic life. Though the Ministry of Foreign affairs supported Bichurin’s cause, Nicholas I intervened, allegedly because he feared Bichurin would get closer to a number of Decembrists who he had met during his travels through the Eastern outposts of the Russian Empire.

A second approach that returns in recent academic studies of Bichurin is the monk’s friendship with the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, and more in general his popularity in Saint Petersburg’s lively literary salons of the 1830s and 1840s. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye in his *Russian Orientalism* remarks that ‘the monk likely stirred the bard’s imagination.’¹⁰² Mark Gamsa, a historian specialized in Russian-Chinese relations, wrote that Bichurin ‘informed the poet about China’.¹⁰³ Bichurin and Pushkin met in St. Petersburg’s literary circles in the late 1820s. They read each other’s works, and Bichurin’s articles were published in the journal edited by Pushkin, *Literaturnaya gazeta*. During Bichurin’s travels to China in the 1830s, they maintained a lively correspondence.¹⁰⁴ The narrative of friendship between Pushkin and Bichurin presents Bichurin as a source of inspiration to Pushkin, a relation in which the poet was hungry for the information about China and the East that Bichurin was able to feed him. The interaction between Bichurin and Pushkin is a concrete example of a phenomenon described in the previous chapter. Russian cultural society in the 1830s became increasingly curious about China, for representations to be incorporated in the continuously

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Leonid Petrovich Grossman, *Pushkin: Biografiya* (1958), 78.

¹⁰¹ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 151. Schimmelpenninck also uses the words ‘exotic monk’, quoted in this chapter’s title, on page 139, and writes that Bichurin was ‘a good example of the troubled relationship between Orientology and the church in Imperial Russia.’

¹⁰² Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 146.

¹⁰³ Mark Gamsa, ‘Refractions of China in Russia, and of Russia in China: Ideas and Things’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 60 (2017) 549-584, 557.

¹⁰⁴ See also Li Xingyao, ‘Kitaist Iakin (N. Ia. Bichurin) i A. S. Pushkin’, *Puskinskije Chteniia: Sbornik Nauchnykh statej po itogam Mezhdunarodnyj nauchno-prakticheskoi konferencii “XXIX Pushkinskie chteniia” (Mosva, 17 oktjabrja 2019 g.)* (Moscow 2020) 187-192.

developing image of the East, which was in turn directly linked to the issue of Russia's own identity and relationship to Western Europe.¹⁰⁵

A third and final example of aspects of Bichurin's attitude stressed in more recent publications is Bichurin's polemic style of conversation, and his striking attire, which attracted the attention of Saint Petersburg society. Several authors draw their reader's attention to testimonies of Bichurin's contemporaries, who were surprised to see that during his stay in China, Bichurin not only studied the country, but also made the Chinese style of dress and behavior his own. An often quoted source is the diary of Saint Petersburg University historian Alexander Nikitenko. Nikitenko wrote in his diary what he was told by someone who met Bichurin in St. Petersburg: 'In general, he held some kind of passion towards China and everything Chinese and somehow he found a way to match his own face and his beard to the Chinese style.'¹⁰⁶ Alexander Lukin in a monograph presenting a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Russian perceptions of China since the 18th century writes about Bichurin's striking appearance: 'After his return to Russia, Bichurin, for a time, became a focus of attention of St. Petersburg society. Many habitués of the city's salons and parties remembered later how they were impressed by a strange-looking monk with a long gray beard who appeared wearing a cassock but who did not behave like a monk.'¹⁰⁷ Like Bichurin's troubled relationship with the Church and his friendship with Pushkin, descriptions of Bichurin's appearance and impressive story-telling appeal to the imagination, presenting the Sinologist as a very colorful figure rather than a gray contour in history.

These three lines discerned in recent scholarship are more than amusing. They aid the interpretation of Bichurin's combined roles as a scholar, monk, academic and salon guest in his early Saint Petersburg years. Accounts of his troubled relationship with the Church show how he used monastic life to build a career around the study of China, allowing him to reside in China for many years, and to work on his publications from a cell in the Alexander Nevski Monastery once he settled in Saint Petersburg. He was not driven by missionary zeal, and when his attitude got him into a conflict with Church authorities, the government intervened to get him out of trouble, making use of his practical knowledge about China in return.¹⁰⁸ In the

¹⁰⁵ Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism*, 92; Gamsa, 'Refractions of China in Russia', 549.

¹⁰⁶ Nikitenko, A. V., *Dnevnik v trekh tomakh. Tom 2 1858-1865* (Moscow 1995) 525 (my translation). Also quoted in Xingyao Li, 'Kitaist Iakinf (N. Ia. Bichurin) i A. S. Pushkin', 192.

¹⁰⁷ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ The interest of the government in Bichurin's service fits the very practical encounter between China and Russia as neighboring states, described in the previous chapter. For these practical matters, ranging from border conflicts to trade connections, knowledge of Chinese languages, economy and society were a crucial asset for the Russian government.

meanwhile, Bichurin on his own initiative went out into the world wearing Chinese-style attire, attracting the attention of intellectuals who were curious for input to further fuel their discussions about Russia's position in what Nathaniel Knight has called an 'awkward triptych' consisting of the East, Russia, and the West.

These characterizations were made in the past two decades by scholars who have actively engaged with the debate on Russian Orientalism. Their accounts give insight in the way different tiers of society were pulling on Bichurin. They provide less information about the extent of Bichurin's knowledge and the build-up of his career, which is exactly what we can find in the aforementioned study by the Soviet historian Pyotr Yemilianovich Skachkov.

A Soviet account of Bichurin

The chapter on Bichurin in Skachkov's 1977 *Ocherki istorii russkogo kitaevedenii* is focused on the development of Bichurin's work over four different periods. The first is his stay in Peking during the Ninth Russian Orthodox Mission and some years after that (1808-1822). The second is his activity in St. Petersburg (1822-1840). The third is Bichurin's role as one of the founders of the first Chinese language school in Kyakhta (1835-1838), and the fourth consists of his last years back in St. Petersburg (1840-1853). Skachkov describes all of Bichurin's activities quite in depth, providing much more detail than the authors mentioned above.

Though Skachkov's overview of Bichurin's publications yields some quite dry paragraphs, they contain an important characterization. Not made explicit by Skachkov, it comes forward in comparison to the narratives of Bichurin in later contributions to historiography. From Skachkov's listings of Bichurin's works produced in different periods, we can derive two important developments Bichurin went through in his professional career. The first concerns the style and content of his work. From composing works consisting of direct translations from Chinese and Mongolian in the 1820s, Bichurin developed to providing his works with more commentaries and annotations in the 1830s, and in the 1840s he was publishing works based on research he conducted himself.

The second development concerns the geographical focus of Bichurin's work. In his early work of the 1820s, Bichurin published articles and monographs mostly about the countries in East-Asia and Central-Asia that were bordering China, while in the 1840s he focused on China proper. The first period resulted in works as *Opisanie Tibeta* and *Zapiski o Mongolii*, both published in 1828. Fitting to the first period of the transition mentioned above, these works were largely translated from Chinese, although *Zapiski o Mongolii* also included

Bichurin's own travel notes and statistical information he gathered about Mongolia. In 1829 another monograph followed, *Opisanie Chzhungarii i Vostochnogo Turkestana v drevnem i nyneshnem sostoyanii*, also mostly translated from Chinese, and in 1833 another history of Ancient Tibet. The 1830s again were a period of transition, in which Bichurin published more articles about China proper in the Russian periodical press. Bichurin's articles about Chinese history and society appeared in the popular *Moskovski Vestnik*, edited by M. P. Pogodin, and in N. A. Polevoi's *Moskovski Telegraf*. Both Pogodin and Polevoi were influential individuals in Russian journalism of the first half of the nineteenth century, and were personally acquainted with Bichurin, whom they esteemed highly for his vast knowledge and continuous contribution of articles.¹⁰⁹ Finally during the 1840s, Bichurin dedicated himself to writing longer articles and monographs about China.

Importantly, Skachkov understands these two developments not as unconscious processes or gradual personal growth, but as deliberate steps taken by a dedicated scholar who planned out the path he wanted to follow. Both the first process, the move from translations and commentaries to the publication of his own investigations and composed works, and the second, the exploration of neighboring countries prior to zooming in on China, were part of Bichurin's plan to develop his scholarship. Thus, Skachkov's narrative stresses that Bichurin's success was his own merit.

Skachkov's narrative of Bichurin is that of a serious scholar who successfully planned out his career, and made a large contribution to Russian Sinology. This contribution was even more valuable, according to Skachkov, because Bichurin was convinced that Russian scholarship should not develop by tagging along with West European scholarship, but mostly follow its own path. To underline this position, he refused to publish in any language other than Russian. Some reviewers criticized Bichurin for that choice, which complicated interaction with international Sinologists.¹¹⁰ It did however not hinder his authority in Russia. Besides mentioning Bichurin's popularity in literary salons and academic classrooms, Skachkov elaborates on the two Demidov prizes Bichurin won.¹¹¹ The Demidov prize, the most important scientific award in the Russian Empire, was granted every year by the Russian Academy of Sciences to a number of its members. Bichurin received his first Demidov in 1835 for his

¹⁰⁹ Skachkov, *Ocherki istorii russkogo kitaevedenii*, 107. In these periodicals, Bichurin entered discussion with other Sinologists, such as Julius Klaproth (1783-1835), a prominent German scholar of East-Asia. Articles from both *Moskovski Vestnik* and *Moskovski Telegraf* will be analyzed in the next chapter.

¹¹⁰ Idem, 106.

¹¹¹ Idem, 102.

history of the Kalmyks from the 15th century to the present. In 1838, Bichurin received his second prize for the revised edition of his Chinese Grammar.¹¹²

Comparing Pyotr Skachkov's narrative of Bichurin's contribution to Russian Sinology to the more recent accounts, the first lacks tension between individual and society. New themes and debates came up in the 1980s and 1990s and made historians look at Bichurin with more critical notions of what it could mean to be a source of information on China as an Eastern 'other' in imperial Russia. However, we would lose something by simply siding Skachkov's study as outdated. The way Bichurin consciously built up his career and publications, first translating and writing about countries surrounding China, later publishing original works about China proper, is important. This gradual and passionate process of building knowledge got overshadowed in publications of the last two decades by narratives of a flamboyant character. Though still acknowledging Bichurin as the 'founder of Russian Sinology', that title sometimes lacks context and shines a uniforming light on the many decades of Bichurin's career.

The debate about Russian Orientalism is concerned with the question to what extent the knowledge accumulated by Russian scholars of the East served an imperialist and orientalist attitude of Russia ruling over the East.¹¹³ In his response to Adeeb Khalid, Nathaniel Knight in 2000 formulated one of his main problems with Said's framework: it does not take into account the possibility of an intrinsic strive for knowledge, as all knowledge directly serves power relations between ruler and ruled. Knight stresses that, though scholars are of course influenced by politics and society, not all Orientalists were driven by the 'pathological will to dominate.'¹¹⁴ Though I have barely touched upon the content of Bichurin's work, the analysis above does call for the consideration that Bichurin's passion for China was driven by some intrinsic hunger for knowledge. In the combination of old and new academic literature, we have seen how Bichurin followed his own course through monasticism, academia, politics and intellectual society to facilitate his study of China, remaining eager to share his knowledge with others. Skachkov's account helps us gauge the extent of Bichurin's knowledge, whereas more recent

¹¹² Skachkov considers this work a milestone in Bichurin's original contributions to scholarship, as it included not only translations, but also extensive commentaries on the material and interaction with other Russian scholars.

¹¹³ Issiyeva, Adalyat, *Representing Russia's Orient: From Ethnography to Art Song* (Oxford 2021), 8. See also Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford 2011) 20.

¹¹⁴ Knight, 'On Russian Orientalism: A Response to Adeeb Khalid', 714.

accounts, influenced by the imperial turn in Russian Studies and the debate on Russian Orientalism, allow us to understand how Bichurin interacted with society.

Bringing China to the Russian capital (1827-1833)

Said's *Orientalism* described how Orientalist knowledge, based on reductionist and negative stereotypes of the Oriental Other, both resulted from and was accomplice to imperialism. In the first chapter, I traced how since the *Kritika* debate in 2000, scholars of Russian Studies have adjusted the concept of Orientalism to the case of Russia, stripping the Saidian understanding from some of its monolithic aspects in order to do justice to the 'awkward triptych' between the East, Russia and the West that plays a role in Russia's geographical and psychological context. The literature on Russian conceptions of China is embedded in this larger literature on Russian Orientalism, and has followed some of its advice: David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Susanna Lim and others have historicized how China was part of Russia's Oriental gaze, distinguishing between different groups of specialists and pointing out chronological developments. The previous chapter has done the same for Bichurin. Bichurin's many functions as a monk, scholar, governmental interpreter and intellectual friend to Pushkin seem dazzling. The combined characterizations found in historiography however show that throughout his career, Bichurin was guided by an intrinsic passion for learning about China and sharing his knowledge. Of course, the capacity-juggling sinologist remained a product of his time, influenced by the historical context.

Bichurin's versatility and involvement with different tiers of society interested in China make the analysis of his early publications a valuable addition to the debate on Russian Orientalism. Historiography has traced how Russian views of China in the beginning of the 19th century started to diverge from West-European conceptions, just as in the West the Saidian caricatures about the Orient became dominant. How do Bichurin's representations of China fit this development? Is the Russian sinologist adhering to existing conceptions, is he trying to 'revise' something or counter new ideas? If the growing tension with Western Europe, considered to be the driving force behind changing conceptions of China, is also present in Bichurin's work, how does it manifest itself?

Looking for answers to these questions, a small selection of Bichurin's early work will be analyzed: three articles from 1827, 1828, and 1833. They were written during Bichurin's first years in Saint Petersburg. Even though Bichurin was already working as an interpreter for

the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in this period his administrative service was secondary to his own research, which determined his daily routine.¹¹⁵ After his arrival in Saint Petersburg, Bichurin operated from his room in the Aleksandr Nevski Monastery, quite aptly using his clerical position as a base to autonomously develop his specialism, and subsequently to spread his knowledge. He started writing articles catered to the Russian intellectual public and he became something of a sensation in the Saint Petersburg's social salons. These developments undoubtedly went hand in hand, as Bichurin got acquainted with the capital's editors, journalists and writers in the literary salons he visited. Bichurin's publications would appear primarily in *Moskovski Vestnik*, *Moskovski Telegraf*, *Severnyj Arkhiv* and *Syn Otechestva* (the last two merged in 1829). All these titles had been recently founded and were examples of the so-called 'thick journals' that flourished at the time. Louise McReynolds, professor of Russian history specialized in mass-communication in Imperial Russia, wrote about these sources: 'Published by and for the native intellectual elite, Russia's all-important intelligentsia, these journals served as the dominant medium for political discourse well into the nineteenth century.'¹¹⁶

As discussed in the first chapter, historians have described how Russian conceptions of China in the period of Bichurin's early activity was fragmentized and instrumentalized in the debate about Russia's relationship to Europe. In other words, they have traced how conceptions of China became part of political discourse, of the discussion about Russia's future. As McReynolds' description above tells us, Russian periodicals were the primary medium for such discussions to take place. And thus this chapter will set out to look for the dynamics described in historiography in the work of the most prominent China specialist of the period.

A final note should be made about the way Bichurin's articles fit in his career. As discussed previously, Bichurin's publications were chronologically organized by a number of very self-conscious choices. Before publishing monographs with his own insights about China in the later 1830s and 1840s, he wrote a number of works about the states surrounding China, such as Mongolia and Turkestan, and produced translations of original Chinese works he found important. Bichurin saw the build-up of his career as a kind of circumferential movement, in which he first showed his understanding of what happened around China before he proved his expertise on China proper. Though this approach is clearly visible in the larger works Bichurin

¹¹⁵ Leonid Petrovich Grossman, *Pushkin* (1958), 78.

¹¹⁶ Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton University Press 1991) 20.

published, it did not regulate the early articles he wrote. Unlike in his monographs, in his articles the sinologist did not refrain from speaking about China. So what did he have to say?

Frequently asked questions about China

In 1827, Bichurin's first original article appeared, divided over three subsequent issues of the journal *Severny Arkhiv*.¹¹⁷ The article is a lengthy response to a travel report written by the then-famous Russian explorer Adam Johann von Krusenstern (1770-1846).¹¹⁸ Its full title, 'Otvety na voprosy, kotorye g. Virst predlozhil g. Kruzenshterna otnositelno Kitaja', or 'Answers to the questions posed by mr. Virst to mr. Krusenstern concerning China', discloses the somewhat complicated structure of the article. Bichurin counters a number of allegations about China which were made by Krusenstern in his travel reports. Krusenstern drew these allegations up in the form of answers to questions he allegedly received from a mr. Virst, most likely F. G. Virst, a State Counselor who headed the Commission of commercial lawmaking.¹¹⁹ Who was this Krusenstern, and what did he have to say about China?

As an admiral and explorer in Russian Imperial service, Krusenstern visited China on different expeditions, first in 1798 and again in 1806. The last journey was part of the first Russian circumnavigation of the world, organized by the Russian state under czar Alexander I (r. 1801-1825) to develop trade relations and explore the possibilities of establishing Russian colonies. Krusenstern wrote a detailed three-part report of his journey, which in the 1810s and 1820s were published in three parts in different West European countries and in Russia, both in the original German, and in Russian translation.¹²⁰ In the second part of his report, drawn up in 1806 while the expedition resided in China, Krusenstern discusses a total of 24 questions posed to him by his 'Freund, der Herr Etatsrath von Würst'.¹²¹ Krusenstern presents each question integrally to the reader, followed by an alinea containing his answer. The general

¹¹⁷ Before this time, Bichurin had only published an article with translations from Chinese correspondence related to the English embassy in Peking. The first part of these articles were published in 1825 in *Severny Arkhiv*. The second part appeared in the same journal in two issues in 1828.

¹¹⁸ N. Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy, kotorye g. Virst predlozhil g. Kruzenshterna otnositel'no Kitaja', *Severny Arkhiv* 1827 (29: 19) 220-238; (29:20), 307-328; (29:21) 45-67.

¹¹⁹ 'Virst (F. G.)', *Slovar' russkikh svetskikh pisatelej, sootchestvennikov i chuzhestrancev, pisavshikh v Rossii, Tom 1* (Moscow 1848), 83. Virst is the Russified version of the German Würst. German Russians were very well represented in the ranks of Russian officials in this period.

¹²⁰ In Saint Petersburg, both the original German and the Russian translations of Krusenstern's three-part report were published in the 1810s. For referencing and quotes in my discussion, I have stuck to Krusenstern's original version in German. As mentioned, Bichurin in his article includes all of Krusenstern's questions and answers integrally. It would seem like a missed opportunity not to check those quoted parts with the German original.

¹²¹ A. J. von Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt, in den Jahren 1803, 1804, 1805 und 1806: auf Befehl seiner Kaiserlichen Majestät Alexander des Ersten auf den Schiffen Nadesbda und Newa unter dem des Capitains von der Kaiserlichen Marine. Zweiter Theil* (Saint Petersburg 1812) 369-382.

subject is the organization of Chinese society, ranging from financial subjects as mortgages and loans, to the existence of slavery and serfdom, the working of the mail system, and the organization of labour in factories or guilds.

Nikita Bichurin must have read Krusenstern's reports soon after his return to Russia. And clearly, the sinologist had some issues with what he read. The form of Bichurin's article is interesting: it presents the Russian translation of the questions and answers written out by Krusenstern, followed by Bichurin's comments. In some cases, Bichurin has little to add, but more often, he presents the reader with additional information or directly refutes Krusenstern answers. The amount of detail provided by Bichurin is impressive, and bulks up the read. Whereas the German original totals 13 pages, Bichurin's response, divided over three consecutive issues of the biweekly *Severnyj Arkhiv*, amounts to a total of 61 pages.

The organization of Chinese society

Bichurin uses no impolite formulations, but his comments make clear that he thinks Krusenstern understands very little about Chinese society. I will give three short examples concerning questions about the existence of slavery, the use of promissory notes in financial transactions, and the organization of craftsmen in guilds. Where Krusenstern states that in China, only one form of slavery exists, namely the form of parents selling their children for the period until they come of age, Bichurin adds that there are two more forms of slavery: adults can also sell themselves, and the government can sell war captives and criminals into slavery. When Krusenstern ascertains his reader that the Chinese do not use promissory notes to arrange the future payment of their debt,¹²² Bichurin's commentary is the clear refutation that '[i]n China three sorts of promissory notes are used,'¹²³ and he adds that they function quite well. Finally, concerning the existence of guilds in Chinese cities, Krusenstern writes that all Chinese craftsmen are organized in 'Gesellschaften' which are headed by elders, and in some cities they even have their own neighborhoods.¹²⁴ Bichurin denies this. He explains that though ancient China knew more ranks in society, the current state only knows two: one for princes, civil servants and academics, and one for salesmen, craftsmen, landowners and many other professions. However, there are no political or legal differences within this rather various

¹²² Krusenstern writes: 'Ueberhaupt ereignet es sich sehr selten dass ein Chinese dem andern Geld leihen sollte. In einem Lande, wo Reichthum seinen Besitzer leicht unglücklich machen kann, ist man nicht geneigt, den Zustand seines Vermögens bekannt werden zu lassen.' *Reise um die Welt*, 371.

¹²³ Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy [part 1]', 230.

¹²⁴ Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt*, 372.

second group. Because of this equality, there are no organized guilds. However, private agreements are made within groups of craftsmen in order to coordinate and work together. Those agreements 'which have been affirmed by long-term use and mutual respect, for the Chinese take the place of our statutes, and the Government always prosecutes those who violate them.'¹²⁵ Bichurin's conclusion: 'From this it becomes clear that the Chinese in their business are guided by habits, as we are by laws. Sometimes these habits, taken separately, seem quite strange: but when we look at them in combination with others, or in their relation with specific circumstances, then one cannot deny that they really should be as they are, and instead of strangeness we find in them a smart adaptation to circumstances.'¹²⁶

This conclusion indeed returns in many of Bichurin answers: just because things are organized differently, doesn't mean they don't function well. He provides examples of the mail system, which is much more extensive and elaborate than Krusenstern suggests.¹²⁷ Yet not all the subjects concern the practical organization of Chinese daily life. Bichurin also corrects Krusenstern's analysis of Chinese moral standards. One question inquires whether it is true that the Chinese are encouraged to get married by allowing the murder of children. Krusenstern confirms the rumor, making use of an example: 'Der seiner Moralität wegen so sehr berühmte Chinese, sieht den Kindermord eben so wenig für ein Laster an, als der Canibalismus bey den, von manchen so hoch gepriesenen Naturmenschen auf den Inseln des grossen Ozeans für abscheulich gehalten wird.'¹²⁸

Bichurin is very fiery in his response to this question: he writes that allegations of child murder being a regular and unpunished practice in China could only be made by fools, who blindly draw conclusions from false information. Indeed, in China few people remain unmarried, but the cause is not found in the legal murder of children, 'a crime entirely against human nature.'¹²⁹ Bichurin mentions that there have been cases of unmarried women who tried to hide something that would bring them disgrace, yet the rare instances in which such women choose to commit a sin are guided by shame, and any attempt to kill an unborn child or newborn is heavily punished by the state. Another phenomenon that has clearly been misinterpreted by Krusenstern is the tradition by which rich and religious people send ox carts to collect deceased children throughout Chinese cities and bring them to a public cemetery. According to Chinese

¹²⁵ Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy [part 1]', 233.

¹²⁶ Idem, 233-234.

¹²⁷ Idem, 236-238.

¹²⁸ Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt*, 380.

¹²⁹ Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy [part 3]', 55-56.

philosophy, Bichurin explains, children who die at a young age do not have a fully grown soul yet, and should thus not have a ritual burial. In some parts of China, rivers serve as public cemeteries. Krusenstern has obviously misunderstood this practice as he writes that in a certain city, he frequently saw the bodies of dead children drifting by in the river, assuming murder to be the cause of death.¹³⁰ 'It is against nature and humanity, which here takes the first place amongst all virtues and is the basis of legislation.'¹³¹

The alleged habit of murdering newborns may seem like a random and cruel subject, but it actually presents a concrete example of early 19th-century interpretation of Chinese society through a prism of Saidian Orientalism. The murder of children, the culmination of immorality and backwardness, is considered a solution the Chinese would opt for to counter a phenomenon that will be elaborated on below: the enormous growth of the Chinese population, which would soon prove to be an insurmountable challenge to the state. As we see, Bichurin tries to overcome this interpretation of how Chinese society deals with problems by providing insight in traditions and history, not only correcting the supposed lack of morality among subjects, but also the idea that the state would refrain from punishing their crimes.

More than twenty questions about China, about a wide-range of subjects, result in a myriad of information. How to come to a coherent interpretation of what exactly Bichurin tried to do in this article? And what does that tell us about the dynamics of Russian Orientalism? Context-analysis can clarify the structure of this source. I present two angles, with more examples from Bichurin's article: first, the background of the Russian explorer Krusenstern, and second, the interpretation of the contemporary decline of the Chinese Qing Dynasty.

Countering the imperial explorer

First, 'Otvety na voprosy', Bichurin's first original article, is rather unique in form. A Russian sinologist commenting on the findings of a well-known German-Russian explorer who, by order of czar Alexander I, was the first Russian to circumnavigate the globe in search of trade relations and colonies: a scheme that should ring many bells for anyone studying Russian Orientalism. Adam Johann von Krusenstern (1770-1846) was born in an aristocratic Baltic-German family. As a member of the westernized intelligentsia, he was the first Russian to circumnavigate the globe by order of czar Alexander I, becoming a key asset in the Russian Imperial aim in the first decade of the 19th century. The parts of his report about China present

¹³⁰ Krusenstern writes about the bodies he sees in the river: 'Bey [the city] Whampoa sah man häufig todtte Kinder den Fluß herunter treiben.' Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt*, 380.

¹³¹ Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy [part 3]', 59.

something more than his personal deliberations or experiences. It is drawn up as a number of answers to questions posed by an Imperial administrator. What we see here is a sort of 'frequently asked questions' format of two centuries ago, targeted at the Russian intellectual reader. We cannot blindly assume that these exact questions were roaming the mind of any Russian intellectual at the time. Studying these early 19th century formulations of curiosity about China however, their authoritative and formative power should also be kept in mind. These were questions formulated by an Imperial administrator, and they were considered worth answering and publishing by a famous explorer, an honorary member of the Russian Academy of Sciences who was respected widely throughout Western Europe.

By integrally publishing the questions posed, Krusenstern's report is in fact suggestive about what the right line of questioning is to approach China. The subject of those questions indeed seem to correspond to what we read in the historiography about Russian Orientalism: the Russian aim to catch up with the West became projected in the conception of China. As the 19th century progressed and the debate about Russia's alleged European path lighted up, with it the interpretations of China likewise fragmented. And indeed, the questions in Krusenstern's report address the very issues that were at the center of the debate about Russian reform and modernization: the organization of the post system, the existence of serfdom, the organization of production, combined with a mix of commerce-related interests and rumors about a faraway country with different morals and customs. Krusenstern's answers seem to comply with the trend described in historiography, and embodied by the changed meaning of *kitaischina* in the 19th century: idealization of China as a sage but faraway country made place for associations of immorality and stagnation. Krusenstern expresses these associations by portraying the Chinese as immoral, comparing them to cannibalists who live on islands in the Pacific Ocean. Overall, drawing comparisons with Western Europe, Krusenstern describes China as a less developed society, with a limited organizational structure, for example in the number of laws and the possibilities of communication, trade and finance.

Though Bichurin seems to have no real problem with the line of questioning, as he includes every question and the given answer in his own article, he seems to have greatly stumbled over the answers provided by Krusenstern. Still, Bichurin's style shows he was careful not to come across as imbalanced or haughty to his public. As we saw in the previous chapter, Bichurin was no young inexperienced journalist, and he was careful to navigate the realms of academia, politics and journalism so that he could pursue his study of China. In his debut article, he does not outrightly attack Krusenstern for being wrong, in fact he even barely mentions the name of the Russian imperial hero. Bichurin's comments are drafted up as

additional information about China, more than as a polemic discussion, though he becomes a bit more aggressive in the third and last part of his article.

At the informational level however, Bichurin is determined to change the public's mind. His strategy in overturning Krusenstern's allegations is to share his specialism in China, proved by his command of the language and the many years of living experience, and to deliver his knowledge in an apprehensive way. His article displays a very detailed understanding of Chinese society, of the practicalities of daily life. Bichurin knows how someone in the south of China would go about to get a letter to someone in the north and he can explain where people would go to borrow money. His knowledge is not reserved to how people make use of the structures in society, it expands to the system itself. Bichurin explains how the organization of Chinese society has resulted from philosophy and historical context, and tries to show his reader that deviation from Western standards does not equal inferiority. He also counters the conception of immorality and lack of personal development, by presenting some insights from Chinese philosophy and value systems. I will present one more example to illustrate the difference between Bichurin's and Krusenstern's approaches.

'Do they eat meat?'

Where Krusenstern presents the Chinese as very different, and less civilized than Europeans, Bichurin tries to show that the Chinese on the contrary are very humane, social, and not so different from 'us'. One of the last questions in Krusenstern's report concerns a very down to earth matter: what do the Chinese actually eat? Do they eat anything other than rice, can they afford to buy meat? Krusenstern's short answer confirms that rice and fish constitute the main diet, and that very little meat is consumed, except for the southern provinces, where quite a lot of pork is consumed.¹³² Bichurin's addition to Krusenstern's analysis is quite long and detailed, presenting many nuances of what exactly is consumed in which parts of China. Yet his first sentence makes an interesting comparison between the daily Chinese diet, and that of Russians at home: 'Saracen grain [as rice was called at the time in Russia], greens and vegetables constitute the main diet of the Chinese, like for us rye bread and shchi [cabbage soup].'¹³³ Though it may seem subtle, this simple comparison shows how Bichurin offered his Russian readers a mechanism to understand Chinese society. Krusenstern's answer seems an objective description of the Chinese diet, yet the question in itself is deeply 'othering': it lays

¹³² Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt*, 382. Krusenstern clearly considers pork to be inferior to other kinds of meat, like beef, which he explicitly mentions the Chinese almost never eat.

¹³³ Bichurin, 'Otvety na voprosy [part 3]', 65.

over the Chinese a stereotype of simplicity based on food consumption. Bichurin skilfully undermines this effect by transferring the Chinese example to the Russian context. Most Chinese people eat rice, just like most Russians consume rye and cabbage. This example is illustrative of Bichurin's aim in his first original article. The sinologist corrects information he considers too reductionist, provides additional elaborations, and importantly, he does not deny that things are different in China. However, he explains differences as the result of long historical processes, and places them in the Russian context, in order to promote understanding rather than estrangement among his public.

Contrasting interpretations of Qing decline

The seemingly trivial subject of a daily diet in this context shows Bichurin's attempt to debunk a reductionist and 'othering' conception of China. The curiosity about food returns in more questions answered by Krusenstern and Bichurin. These questions concern the supposed scarcity of food, overpopulation, dire living circumstances and overall poverty.¹³⁴ This brings me to the second angle from which we gain insight in the meaning of Bichurin's article. The poverty-related questions included in Krusenstern's report are interesting because they show how news about the decline of the Qing Dynasty entered Russian society. As discussed in the first chapter, that decline functioned as a confirmation of the Romanticist associations of stagnancy and despotism. Susanna Lim spoke of 'historical confirmation' of these ideas in the 1830s, as China's defeat in conflicts with the West made the decline of the Qing Dynasty undeniable.¹³⁵ Though international disputes and especially the First Opium War, which will be discussed below, uncovered the economic and political problems China dealt with, internal circumstances had been deteriorating for some decades.¹³⁶ Already in the second half of the 18th century, Qing rule became less effective, it became fraught with corruption and incentives to reform and control disappeared.¹³⁷

As political institutions declined, the Chinese population continued to grow, a trend that began early in the 18th century. Political stability since the beginning of Qing rule in 1644, few international and internal disputes, and improved infrastructure allowed the population to grow

¹³⁴ For example, question 21 on page 379 asks if it is true that a common working men and artisan can barely feed their families,

¹³⁵ See footnote 6.

¹³⁶ R.K.I. Quedstedt, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History* (Routledge 2005, first published 1984), 63.

¹³⁷ Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Harvard University Press 2005), 549. Perdue's argument is that this demise of state bureaucracy was connected to the end of frontier expansion, as with the end of expansion also the 'competitive state-building process' ended.

from around 100 million in 1700, to some 400 million in 1850.¹³⁸ In the same period, Chinese agriculture saw little innovative development. This is what Mark Elvin, professor emeritus of Chinese history, has explained with the concept of the ‘high-level equilibrium trap’: the pre-industrial economy was so effective to suit demand that there was little incentive to experiment and improve. When supply and demand rapidly grew out of sync as a result of the population explosion, this led to large deficits.¹³⁹

Now we see the developments described above reflected in Bichurin’s article from 1827, and in the original work by Krusenstern, who bases his answers on his experience in China in 1806. As mentioned, Krusenstern includes in his China-FAQ several statements about the dire situation of the population that ask for confirmation or denial. Krusenstern confirms that many people struggle to earn money, resort to feeding themselves with dead cats and dogs, and have to live on boats on the water because there is not enough space on land. He also confirms that the ‘extraordinary amount of people’ has caused this poverty.¹⁴⁰ Krusenstern himself is not sure which statistics about the current population size to believe, as different numbers circulate. Krusenstern writes that ‘Die Extreme gehen von 70 bis auf 333 Millionen.’¹⁴¹

Bichurin, taking his turn, confirms that ‘China has more inhabitants than all of Europe combined, and besides, the population is growing every year.’¹⁴² The fact that Bichurin mentions the growth of the population may seem self-evident, yet it is strikingly absent in Krusenstern’s answer. Even when the famous explorer discusses the contradicting statistics on China’s population size, he seems unaware that some of its discrepancies may be explained by the process of growth, as the sources he mentions are from different decades.¹⁴³ Krusenstern’s description yields a static picture of an over-crowded and poor country. Bichurin makes an effort to analyze the dynamics between supply and demand, his analysis nearing the thematic of Mark Elvin’s theory of the high-level equilibrium trap. Bichurin in the first place describes the outcome: ‘[O]ne can accurately say that the number of hands in need of work far exceeds the amount of work to be done; that the large population far exceeds the amount of soil

¹³⁸ Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (London 1973), 310.

¹³⁹ Idem, esp. 285-316.

¹⁴⁰ Krusenstern, *Reise um die Welt*, 379-380.

¹⁴¹ Idem, 382.

¹⁴² Bichurin, ‘Otvety na voprosy [part 3]’, 63.

¹⁴³ Krusenstern mentions statistics from three sources: the French explorer Pierre Sonnerat, who traveled to China between 1774 to 1781, from the British diplomat George Macartney who based himself on a population count of 1792, and of the French Jesuit Jean Joseph Amiot who was active as a missionary in China from 1750 to 1793.

necessary to feed the inhabitants.¹⁴⁴ The Chinese, in Bichurin's description, do what they can to use every single piece of land, and their diligence and hard work deserves the respect of the reader. Bichurin writes that 'if the type of Chinese agriculture had not been profitable and there would not be a double [twice a year] sowing of rice in the South', then the problems would have been much larger and the country would have been unable to feed half its population.¹⁴⁵

In fact, Bichurin here describes what Elvin, 150 years later, pointed out to be the problem: the relative efficiency of the agricultural system. Bichurin does not problematize this efficiency like Elvin does, but his analysis does explain the poverty in China as a result of a systemic problem of supply and demand, and not as an inherent feature of society. And with this argument, Bichurin says that we should not judge the Chinese for some of the less pretty results of this situation. 'I have seen myself how a poor man with happiness and care carried away a dead cat or dog that he accidentally found on the street.' And though Bichurin describes this phenomenon, of eating animals who have not been slaughtered for consumption but died of an unknown cause, 'disgusting', he concludes: '[A]ctions, urged by necessity or difficulty, should not be considered a general habit or a moral rule.'¹⁴⁶ Bichurin's interpretation of Qing decline, and its effect on the population, is much more nuanced and dynamic compared to Krusenstern's.

A day in the life of the Chinese emperor

Bichurin's first article shows his attempt to offer counterweight to associations of stagnation and despotism, which were quickly gaining influence on the development of the Russian conception of China in the period. 'Otvery na voprosy' attests to Bichurin's careful navigation, by not entering a direct polemic with Krusenstern, and by guiding his reader with historical and philosophical context. However, Bichurin's second original article, published in 1828 in another popular periodical, *Moskovski Vestnik*, attests to even more skill on the side of Bichurin in getting his message across. Unlike the strict format of question, answer, comment, this article is a short story, titled 'The daily routine of the Chinese emperor'.¹⁴⁷ The piece reads like a play almost, with strong visual associations and subtle humor throughout. I want to shortly elaborate on this article, which I have not found any reference to in historiography. That is surprising,

¹⁴⁴ Bichurin, 'Otvery na voprosy [part 3]', 51.

¹⁴⁵ Idem, 52.

¹⁴⁶ Idem, 54. Bichurin uses the word 'otrvtitelny', 'disgusting', when he returns to the phenomenon of eating dead (but not slaughtered) animals in his comment on the question about the daily Chinese diet on page 65-67.

¹⁴⁷ N. Bichurin, 'Ezhednevnye uprazhneniya Kitajskogo gosudarya', *Moskovski Vestnik* 7 (1828) 101-107.

firstly because its title already promises to tell us something about the Chinese Emperor, who personified the association of despotism that was gaining momentum in the Russian conception of China. Secondly, this article clearly shows that Bichurin was more than a scholar and a monk: he was a story-teller, and a popular one in the societal circles of the Imperial capital. Though we know something about the impression Bichurin made on the intellectual elite through diaries and personal correspondence and those are valuable sources, his story about the daily routine of the Chinese Emperor presents us with written proof of the sinologist's talent to deliver his specialized knowledge with a certain amount of wit.¹⁴⁸ If the Chinese Emperor was considered the epitome of despotic rule, Bichurin's perspective actually almost makes us feel sorry for him. Like a fly on the wall, the reader is brought along in a typical day of the Emperor's life, which I will summarize.

The Emperor is woken up by his servants, drinks a quick cup of tea and enters his office at half past four in the morning. He works through mountains of paperworks and consults with his advisers and officials. At dawn, he goes into the throne hall, takes his seat, and meets with more administrators and petitioners. At seven in the morning, this ends, and the Emperor gets to eat breakfast. He has to eat alone, and his diet follows the rules of the seasons, so no produce from greenhouses or warmer areas. After he has eaten, the Emperor has some free time before he has to go into his office again to continue working, assisted by his well-organized administrators. In the evening, the Emperor spends some time with his family. He goes to bed at sunset, but barely gets any sleep in spring and summer:

Every time he wakes up, he asks the eunuch at guard from which direction the wind is blowing, and whether the sky is clouded. How he worries about the rain! For drought in such a populous state is both dangerous and burdensome for the government. In this way he spends every day, except for his rest days, which are very few.¹⁴⁹

Under this strict and rather lonely routine, the Emperor is forbidden to leave the palace by law. As he represents the heavenly mandate, he has to remain in the center of his Empire, from where his power spreads and radiates through the entire country. The closing sentence of

¹⁴⁸ See for example the description by editor and journalist Mikhail Pogodin, cited in Petr Denisov, *Zhizn' monakha Iakinf Bichurina* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1997), 102–3: “‘Here went jolly Pushkin and Father Yakin, with his narrow Chinese eyes. The stout and stern German traveler – Baron Schilling [...], Glinka [...], Lermontov [...], Krylov, Zhukovsky, and Viazemsky were always there too.’” Lim writes: ‘The monk often indulged the curiosity of his audience regarding the exotic East by entertaining them with titillating tales of China.’, 66.

¹⁴⁹ Bichurin, ‘Ezhednevnye uprazhneniya Kitajskogo gosudarya’, 105.

Bichurin's article concludes: 'Thus the Emperor, to whom Europe ascribes unlimited power, is in his free action bound by laws.'¹⁵⁰

Bichurin's story in *Moskovski Vestnik* is an amusing and light read, yet it counters the supposed despotism of China by contextualizing the power of the country's head of state. First of all, Bichurin repeatedly mentions how the Emperor consults with his advisers and administrators, and how this group is quite well-organized and, like the Emperor himself, bound to a schedule dictated by the responsibility to rule. The importance of cooperation and deliberation in the Emperor's daily routine counters the stereotypical image of the despotic ruler who does as he likes. Secondly, the Emperor is portrayed as a ruler who not only works together with advisors, but who is also very involved with his population. This becomes clear in Bichurin's description of how the Emperor cannot fall asleep at night because he is so anxious for the rain to arrive. The ruler is concerned for his people, and aware that continuous drought will bring them into trouble. Of course, this thought process is also about his own position, as drought and famine lead to unrest and protests that the state had to deal with.¹⁵¹ Again, like in his first article 'Otvety na voprosy', Bichurin displays his awareness of internal problems the Chinese state is experiencing related to the increased pressure on agricultural production because of population growth. Incorporating his knowledge of these dynamics in his story about the Emperor, Bichurin tries to show that these matters keep the Chinese ruler awake at night. This monarch does not have a 'let them eat bread'-mentality; he knows what is going on in the country and worries about it. His sleepless nights also proves Bichurin's third point, which ties the whole story together: the Emperor does not have a 'fun' life. He gets little time off, only sees his family a few hours a day, and is rarely allowed to leave the palace. His power may be large, it is directed by laws that benefit the rule of the country, and not the Emperor's own interest.

A mirror for... no one?

Looking at Bichurin's first article and his short story about the Chinese Emperor together, we also perceive a quite strikingly absent second level of interpretation. This is extra clear in the short story, as its genre would be extremely fit to indirectly criticize the Russian government, to recommend or warn against following a Chinese example. Bichurin must have been aware

¹⁵⁰ Idem, 107.

¹⁵¹ Hunger led to unrest and protest, and this mechanism became increasingly problematic for the Qing government. See Kuan-Hui Elaine Lin et al., 'Historical droughts in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) of China', *Climate of the Past* 16 (2020) 911-931, 921-924. For example in 1795, the state saw its subjects rebel in nine different provinces. Quested, *Sino-Russian Relations*, 63.

that the title of his article, literally ‘The daily tasks of the Chinese ruler’, invoked associations with the *speculum principum* or ‘mirrors for princes’ literature, popular during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Works in this genre drew up images of leaders as an example to be followed or avoided. Offering an opportunity of indirect critique, it remains one of the most well-known types of political discourse in literature, and Russia’s intellectual elite was undoubtedly familiar with it.¹⁵² In fact, discussions of foreign politics were still a common mechanism of critique in thick journals of the period, not only in czarist Russia but also in Western Europe.

However, though Bichurin attracts the reader’s attention with a familiar format, he seems little interested in constructing a mirror. He stays quite far from idealizing the situation of the Chinese Emperor. Though he explains why the laws which bound him to the palace, for example, make sense according to Chinese philosophy, they would make little sense in any non-Chinese context. This lack of a deeper interpretation or relevance to Russian politics is less clear in Bichurin’s ‘Otvety na voprosy’, but it still comes forward. Especially concerning subjects we know were part of the debate on Russian modernization at the time, Bichurin does not make the smallest reference to the Russian internal situation. The primary example is the institution of serfdom, which in Russia would not be abolished for some decades to come, but was already heavily criticized by large parts of the intelligentsia when Bichurin was writing his articles.¹⁵³ When he discusses the situation of slavery in China in ‘Otvety na voprosy’, Bichurin corrects Krusenstern and explains that the explorer fails to mention two more forms of slavery that exist in China. Yet in no way he takes the chance to reflect on the situation in Russia. Bichurin seems primarily interested in drafting up a representative picture of China and the Chinese, and wants to make his reader understand their customs instead of judging them.

Louise McReynolds’ definition of the periodical journal in Russia, cited earlier in this chapter, mentioned that these journals served as the dominant medium for political discourse. In the case of Bichurin, we can ascribe to his articles’ role in political discourse as they tried to counter the influence of imperial narratives of a stagnant and despotic Oriental China. On the other hand, it could be said that Bichurin tries to prevent China becoming incorporated in Russian political discourse. Alexander Lukin described that as the debate between slavophiles and westernizers developed, the image of China became an asset in respective support for and

¹⁵² Cary J. Nederman, ‘The Mirror Crack’d: The Speculum Principum as Political and Social Criticism in the Late Middle Ages’, *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 3:3 (1998) 18-38.

¹⁵³ See for example how the subject of serfdom became part of the early slavophile-westernizer debate: J. M. K. Vyvyan, ‘Russia in Europe and Asia’, in: J. P. T. Bury ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume 10: The Zenith of European Power, 1830-70* (Cambridge University Press 1960) 357-388, 368, 371.

resistance against orientation towards the West.¹⁵⁴ Symbolism, however, remains strikingly absent in Bichurin's two articles discussed above.

An encounter between Russian and British Orientalism

The last article of Bichurin's hand I will analyze appeared in 1833. It attests to the sinologist's perseverance to correct the writings of Russian imperial explorers about China, and provides insight into how such imperial impressions entered Russian society. In this case, Bichurin's article is a review of a book by Peter Dobell (1772-1852), an originally Irish adventurer and tradesman who had settled in Canton, in the south of China. There, he met Adam Johann von Krusenstern, whom we are already familiar with. Through Krusenstern, Dobell came into contact with the Russian Imperial government. He moved to Saint Petersburg, received Russian citizenship and in 1818 entered Russian Imperial service, becoming the first official Russian envoy to the Philippines.¹⁵⁵ Under the Russian name Pyotr Vasilevich Dobel, he wrote several articles about his travels for Russian periodicals, and in 1833 his book *Puteshestviya i novejschie nablyudeniya v Kitae, Manile i Indo-Kitaiskom arkhipelage* was published in Saint Petersburg.¹⁵⁶

In his review of this work, Bichurin expresses his admiration for those parts of Dobel's work that describe daily life in Canton, for a long time the only Chinese city where traders from Europe were welcome. However, whenever Dobel speaks about China in general, or draws on secondary sources instead of his own experience, his accounts fail to correspond to reality. Bichurin writes that we can't really blame Dobel for his inaccuracy: 'In order to separate truth from fairytales, in the collecting of information about any country, one already needs to possess enough knowledge of that country. Mr. Dobel did what he could.'¹⁵⁷ Bichurin formulates the faults he also found in Krusenstern's work: misinterpretation as a result of lacking knowledge of the background and context, overgeneralization and dependency on translators and interpreters. Bichurin writes that his criticism is not meant to discourage the public's curiosity about China, but to correct and clarify some impressions they may get from Dobel's work.

¹⁵⁴ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 14.

¹⁵⁵ *Russkij biograficheskij slovar': Dabelov - Dyad'kovskij / Izd. pod nablyudeniem predsedatelya Imperatorskogo Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva* A. A. Polochova - Tom 6 (Saint Petersburg 1905) 468-469.

¹⁵⁶ P. Dobel, *Puteshestviya i novejschie nablyudeniya v Kitae, Manile i Indo-Kitaiskom arkhipelage* (Saint Petersburg 1833) was translated from the English original *Travels in Kamtschatka and Siberia, with a Narrative of Residence in China* (London 1830).

¹⁵⁷ N. Bichurin, 'Zamechaniya o Kitae i Kitaicakh', *Moskovski Telegraf* 5 (1833) 83-97, 84.

Compared to Bichurin's response to Krusenstern from 1827, the tone of this 1833 article is more polemic. Bichurin describes one of the sources that Dobel drew from as 'absolute bragging', and remarks that '[In] general it can be noted that the travelers who have the most to say about China are the ones who know the least about it.'¹⁵⁸ Such explicit remarks give this article a more frustrated undertone. Like in 1827, Bichurin finds himself countering the allegations by an explorer in service of the Russian Empire, who is presenting the Russian public with a continued stream of reductionist and negative stereotypes about China. These heightened dynamics in Bichurin's text contribute to a clearer interpretation of the tensions in Russian Orientalism. This review presents a clash between the dedicated sinologist, and the impressions of a British traveler. It is a concrete example of how West-European Imperial experience directly influenced Russian views. To analyze this process, I will trace how the trade relations in China influenced a negative British conception of the Chinese. Examples of this development are found in Dobel's work, and Bichurin in turn tries to counter its outcomes.

The British in China

Peter C. Perdue, professor of Chinese history at Yale University, in an article from 2010 pointed out some of the peculiarities of the British trade position in China. The British, describes Perdue, had in 1763 defeated their opponent France in the Seven Years' War, and with their newly established trade bases in India and Canton, they dominated the Western trade with South and East Asia. Though Perdue does not use the term Orientalism, he does note that 'British dominance over other Europeans arose along with increasing skepticism over the superiority of Chinese civilization.'¹⁵⁹ He gives three underlying reasons. First, the clash between the Protestant British and the Chinese religions was intensified by British hostility towards the positive accounts of the Chinese produced by the Jesuits. As mentioned in the first chapter, these sources had been influential in the European Enlightenment. The British traders however considered these sources as strategic idealization, part of the Jesuit Catholic mission. Perdue writes that admiration was replaced with the idea of 'stagnant despotism'.¹⁶⁰ Second, the British in Canton only came into contact with the local merchants, communicating with them through a so-called pidgin language: a mixture of, in this case, English and several Chinese languages. This pidgin language had developed as a trade language, and though it

¹⁵⁸ Idem, 94.

¹⁵⁹ P. C. Perdue, 'Boundaries and Trade in the Early Modern World: Negotiations at Nerchinsk and Beijing', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43:3 (2010) 341–356, 354.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

served its practical goal, it was not fit for, as Perdue writes, ‘the expression of high cultural ideals.’ Thirdly, the British grew frustrated with their trade position in Canton because of a growing trade imbalance: the British struggled to find a commodity to exchange for the large amounts of Chinese tea and silk the British were hungry for.¹⁶¹ To the great disappointment of the British, the Chinese simply seemed to be uninterested in anything the British had to offer other than silver, and Perdue explains that the traders in Canton ‘blamed their frustrations on the duplicity of Chinese merchants and obstruction by Qing officials.’¹⁶² These three developments influenced the strength of connotations of despotism, stagnancy and backwardness among the British in China.

Now these three points, the influence of religion, language and frustration in the British trade encounter with the Chinese, are all made and stressed by Bichurin in his 1833 review. Dobel presents the resentment towards Chinese religion from the protestant perspective in his book by characterizing the Chinese government by religious intolerance. Its policies, according to Dobel, ‘can boldly be put in line with that of Japan and some Mohomedan states,’ and prove the despotism of the Chinese state.¹⁶³ Bichurin explains that foreigners, including the British, are actually free to openly practice any religion, and the intolerance only concerns the spreading of the faith to Chinese subjects.

Bichurin also presents a formulation of Perdue’s argument about the limitations of the pidgin-language the British and Chinese communicated through. Bichurin writes that he makes out from Dobel’s book that the author in Canton mostly encountered ‘that corrupted English, in which the Chinese make themselves clear to the English in Canton.’¹⁶⁴ He furthermore writes that the Chinese in Canton, who interact with the Europeans, behave totally differently than the people elsewhere in China. The Chinese who can communicate with the traders in Canton, Bichurin writes: ‘are ignorant people who [...] lacked enough knowledge in foreign languages in order to explain many things, especially the abstract.’¹⁶⁵ Bichurin’s remarks coincide with Perdue’s formulation about the effect of the Pidgin language spoken in Canton.

¹⁶¹ For an elaboration about this trade imbalance, see T. Chung, ‘The Britain-China-India Trade Triangle (1771-1840)’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 34 (1973) 77–91. This article elaborates on the trade imbalance, and explains how opium from India came to play a part in the frustrated British attempt to resolve it, which in turn resulted in the First Opium War of 1840-1842.

¹⁶² Perdue, ‘Boundaries and Trade in the Early Modern World’, 354.

¹⁶³ N. Bichurin, ‘Zamechaniya o Kitae i Kitaicakh’, *Moskovski Telegraf* 5 (1833) 83-97, 88.

¹⁶⁴ Idem, 97. He furthermore notes that his English is comparable to the Russian used by the Chinese in Kyakhta, a point to be discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁶⁵ Idem, 84.

Thirdly, Bichurin also explains how Dobel remains trapped within the perspective of the English traders in Canton. That is problematic, because Dobel portrays the problems between the Chinese and foreign traders in Canton as caused by the Chinese government, and as representative for the failure of the state in general. Bichurin confirms that the Chinese behave rudely towards the English and look down on them, but he says the British are to blame for that. If they would have stuck to the trade rules in Canton, which are equal for all European countries, they would not have encountered trouble. However, Bichurin describes how the British smuggle opium into China, sell it for silver, and use that to trade for Chinese goods.¹⁶⁶ ‘Which State would watch with indifference, when foreigners, in spite of prohibition and all kinds of precautions, will deliver poison to its subjects, and in exchange exhaust the governmental funds, that consists of the metal that is used for the coins!’¹⁶⁷ Bichurin describes how the British in Canton negotiated with a self-assured ‘high tone’, fulfilled with their successes in Europe and Asia as described by Perdue. However, the Chinese have no respect or understanding for this haughtiness, because in their two-rank system (as also described in Bichurin’s first article discussed above), craftsmen, tradesmen and farmers are all equal, and the Chinese see no reason to place foreign tradesmen on a higher rank than their own. In other words: Dobel’s account of how the British are mistreated in Canton is first of all not representative of the Chinese state in general. Secondly, it presents a perspective of frustration much the fault of the British themselves.

Protesting the adoption of a British narrative

Bichurin’s reviews of Dobel’s work reveals some tensions within the development of Russian Orientalism in the period. Peter Dobell, a British citizen, was influenced by the British Imperial experience in China during the beginning of the 18th century. Though the British presence in Canton was not a colonial project itself, it was, as Perdue explains, orchestrated by the British East India Company, intertwined with the colonial project in the Indian subcontinent, and incorporated in the British imperial mindset. And indeed, Dobel formulates a conception of the Chinese along the lines of Said’s Orientalism, reigned by associations of despotism, stagnancy and weakness. The special value of this source is that it shows how the Russian Imperial strive literally adopted a British perspective. Dobel came into contact with Krusenstern in Canton, entered Russian imperial service, acquired Russian citizenship, and published his articles and

¹⁶⁶ Bichurin mentions an amount of opium worth 50 million rubles. ‘Zamechaniya o Kitae i Kitaicakh’, 94.

¹⁶⁷ Idem, 95.

monographs in Russia under the name Pyotr Vasilevich Dobel. Bichurin at the time analyzed this process, and did so with remarkable insight and interpretative skill. I have tried to clarify this by pointing out the similarities in Bichurin's arguments and those presented by Peter C. Perdue, almost two centuries later.

This chapter analyzed three of Bichurin's early articles. Each of these publications attest to the sinologist's vast knowledge about China, to his understanding of its traditions and history. In them, we clearly recognize the development of Russian conceptions of China as described in historiography. Bichurin is trying to offer counterweight to a force that is pulling conceptions of China in the direction of a distinctly negative stereotype. We are presented with the concrete faces who represent this force: the Russian-German explorer Adam Johann von Krusenstern, and the British traveler Peter Dobel, both part of the Russian imperial effort to expand and navigate the world at the same pace as Western powers. These sources present how such dynamics were conceived by the most knowledgeable Russian specialist of China at the time. The following chapter summarizes what we have gained by tracing these developments in Bichurin's early work. I will also point out some incongruencies between historiography's dynamics of Russian Orientalism and these primary sources, which may in turn fuel the future debate.

Conclusion

This study engaged with the historiography of Russian Orientalism in two steps. First, the existing debate was analyzed with focus on Russian conceptions of China. Second, this framework was critically assessed and traced in the early work of Nikita Bichurin, the founder of Russian Sinology. When Nathaniel Knight and Adeeb Khalid in 2000 kicked off the debate about the applicability of Edward Said's Orientalism to Russian history, they each presented a case study of an individual Orientologist to support their respective arguments that Russia escaped or, contrarily, fitted the general pattern of Orientalism. Though I have also presented the reader with an individual Orientologist, the aim has not been to argue for or against the usefulness of Saidian Orientalism as a prism to study Russian imperial history. Instead, the in-depth analysis of Bichurin's publications from a concise period was used to critically measure the current state of the debate, and to look for the concrete dynamics it ascribes to history.

Since 2000, the debate on Russian Orientalism has developed, as was traced in the first chapter. The discussion is no longer polarized along the lines of universalism and particularism, which Maria Todorova pointed out to be the main difference between the approaches of Knight and Khalid. When Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978, the idea that the Russian imperial experience was 'different' was still firmly rooted in both Soviet and Western scholarship. Since that time however, works as Andreas Kappeler's *Russland als Vielvölkerreich* and, more recently, Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization*, have made it dawn upon the field that Russian history needs to be studied in an imperialist framework, and does not fall outside of the scheme because czarist expansion, for example, went over land rather than over sea.¹⁶⁸ This has also been true for Orientalism, which explains how knowledge both resulted from and fed into the imperial system of conquest and domination. Scholars like Vera Tolz and Schimmelpenninck van der Oye have acknowledged the Russian imperial experience, but remained attentive to the specificities of the Russian situation.

Most research in the first decade since 2000 focused on Central Asia, or 'Russia's own Orient': the vast landmass east of the Ural mountains that was conquered by the Russian Empire from the 16th century onwards. It took some years before scholars, just having moved past the idea that Russia was an imperial anomaly, were ready to broaden scope to China, never directly colonized by Russia or Western Europe, as an object of the Orientalist gaze. However,

¹⁶⁸ This is the so-called 'myth of adjacence' that was already formulated by Said in 1978 and criticized in postcolonial studies.

because the two ‘anomalies’ of Russia and China were combined relatively late into the framework of Russian Orientalism, the discussion could more easily build on the nuance and adjustments the debate had already yielded since 2000. Attentive to chronological development, and distinguishing between different kinds of knowledge, scholars reconstructed the place of China in the Russian Oriental gaze. Important contributions include the studies of Susanna Lim, David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Alexander Lukin.

Like the work done on Central Asia, the historiography of Russian conceptions of China shows an attempt to balance a universal framework with specific Russian developments. Russian conceptions of China until the early 19th century followed a European lead, but then fragmented as Russians increasingly questioned their own relationship with Europe. While Enlightenment-associations of a country of age-old history and society, ruled by a potent but just ruler did not lose their shine to everyone, they lost momentum to ideas of stagnation and despotism. As Susanna Lim wrote, these negative interpretations were given ‘historical confirmation’ in the 1830s, as the internal problems the Qing government dealt with in China were exposed in international conflicts, leading up to the First Opium War in 1839. By the end of the 19th century, China figured in the wildest imperial fantasies of Russian expansion to the East.¹⁶⁹

This development, indeed, is apparent in the early work of Nikita Bichurin. However, his case study yields more than a confirmation of historiography. This study has provided insight into the dynamics of changing conceptions of China, by making detailed analyses of three articles from 1827, 1828 and 1833, and providing them with additional historical context. One of the most striking outcomes of the analysis is Bichurin’s own perceptiveness to long-term developments in Chinese society. His analytic insight and dedication to detail fit the characterization made in the second chapter of this thesis. By combining older and more recent scholarship, Bichurin can be understood as an extremely dedicated, knowledgeable specialist who consciously constructed his career around a passion for China. Missionary zeal was never his motivation, but if he lacked affiliation with the Church, he made up for it by mixing in with Russia’s intellectual elite, an audience that proved very interested in the knowledge about China Bichurin was enthusiastic to share.

The background of Bichurin’s extensive knowledge provided in the second chapter is crucial to the critical reading of his early Saint Petersburg publications, and to interpreting the meaning of China in Russian Orientalism. When Nikita Bichurin arrived in the Russian

¹⁶⁹ Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian imagination*, 5.

imperial capital two hundred years ago, he had already lived a whole life in China. He studied the region and its languages for many years, and when the monk and Sinologist finally crossed Russia's far Eastern border in 1807 to start serving as head of the ninth Russian Orthodox Mission in Beijing, he fully immersed himself in Chinese society. More often than any of the eight archimandrites who headed the Mission before him, Bichurin chose to leave the Church compounds in the Chinese capital to explore, observe, and experience daily life. He traveled the country and the region of South-East Asia. He prepared dozens of translations, studies and reports, the building blocks for his publications once he returned to Russia.

The three articles analyzed in this study show that Bichurin, in these early contributions in the periodical press, threw overboard the strategy of keeping China for later, as he did in his monographs. He was determined to counter the allegations made by Adam Johann von Krusenstern and Pyotr Vasilevich Döbel. These imperial explorers, with their descriptions of a lawless and disorganized state, clearly represent one side of the development described in historiography: conceptualizing China as despotic and stagnant. Their input can easily be interpreted in Alexander Lukin's statement that 'the image of China began to play a symbolic role in the controversy between the supporters and opponents of pro-Western orientation.'¹⁷⁰ What remains strikingly absent however in Bichurin's response, is an equally forceful attempt to instrumentalize the conception of China into the opposing direction. In these sources, China never comes forward as an example to be followed for Russia. Chinese society is explained to make sense in its own context, yet Bichurin seems very hesitant to take his special knowledge out of the context of China and into that of the Russian Empire. As came forward in the analysis of his short story about the daily routine of the Chinese Emperor, the sinologist stays far from allusional referencing and bringing China into Russian political discourse. Attracting the reader's attention with a format that reminds of the *speculum principum*, Bichurin seems only interested in correcting interpretations of despotism, not in telling the public what they can learn from this example, and how to apply that to Russia.

The scope of this thesis has not been broad enough to present a convincing explanation for Bichurin's puzzling dedication to informing, while refraining from politicization. The characterizations of Bichurin made in the second chapter reiterated a critique of Saidian Orientalism formulated by Nathaniel Knight in 2000. Knight argued that we should remain open to the intrinsic value of knowledge, the desire to collect information without the aim of

¹⁷⁰ Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 14.

making it serviceable to a system of power relations. We can recognize a certain intrinsic passion and strive for knowledge in the early work of Bichurin.

Yet we should also keep in mind that at the time Bichurin's articles were published in the periodicals, the great discussion between the slavophiles and westernizers about Russia's relationship to Europe had only just set off. When Bichurin arrived in Saint Petersburg two hundred years ago, Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky, Russia's future advocates of westernization, were still teenagers, and the first of Pyotr Chaadaev's *Lettres Philosophiques*, generally regarded as the starting point of the whole debate, was yet to be published.¹⁷¹ We know that this debate heated up while Bichurin continued publishing about China, and worked together with the government more closely than before when he joined a Russian Imperial expedition to Central Asia in the 1830s. With a career spanning to the early 1850s, some of Bichurin's qualities and activities deserve to be studied in the light of the rise of Russian nationalism, which according to Vera Tolz deeply influenced Russian Orientalist knowledge from the second half of the 19th century.¹⁷²

Bichurin's early work allows us to see the concrete dynamics of Russian Orientalism at work. Importantly, it also attests to Bichurin's own interpretative skill and awareness of the way China got incorporated into Russian political discourse. Since 2000, contributors to the debate on Russian Orientalism have continued to argue that knowledge is not static, that it can change over time and even contradict itself depending on the framework we measure it by. As the debate over Russia's place in Europe lighted up in the 1830s and 1840s, Bichurin's representations of China, and his analysis of how others represented the country, may have moved in a different direction. Without doubt, the sinologist continued to build a window to China. We should also question if he became any more interested in turning his window into a mirror for Russia to reflect on itself.

¹⁷¹ S. Horujy, 'Slavophiles, Westernizers, and the birth of Russian philosophical humanism' in G. Hamburg and R. Poole eds., *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (Cambridge 2010) 27-51, 27-31.

¹⁷² As discussed in the first chapter on page 20, Tolz in *Russia's own Orient* argues that in the zeal of nationalism, Orientologists were not concerned with ruling over an Oriental 'Other', but by nation-building and creating a sense of community and unity among all Russian objects.

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