

THE VINDICATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL OPTIMISM
IN A PSEUDO-CONFUCIAN IMITATION
OF VOLTAIRE'S "CANDIDE"

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The aim of this essay is to analyze a short fiction entitled *L'Aventurier chinois*, written by an anonymous writer, published in 1773, not known as yet among the sinologists and literary scholars, in relation to Voltaire's *Candide*, as well as to then European and ancient Confucian philosophy. In the realm of Chinese studies, *L'Aventurier chinois* belongs to the category of *chinoiserie* and in its time it was a part of the French literary and philosophical "mirage" of China.

In the year 1773 there appeared in Paris a work of short fiction bearing the title *L'Aventurier chinois*, presumably published at Peking, but available at a Parisian bookstore. According to the titlepage, it was printed in Peking and sold for "Merigot le jeune Librairie." Not treated in previous East-West scholarship, this work reveals that before the end of the eighteenth century the influence of China on Western literature had extended into popular literature beyond the confines of theology, drama, and the essay. The work has additional importance as a reply to Voltaire's *Candide*, partly imitation and partly refutation, that has so far not been mentioned in studies or bibliographies concerning Voltaire. Finally, the work is in itself a lively and entertaining narrative, providing an original perspective on one of the major philosophical notions of the Enlightenment, the doctrine of optimism. In modern times, moreover, it may also be considered as a defense of feminism, parallel to Voltaire's *Femmes, soyez soumises à vos maris*.

Voltaire did not use China as a setting for *Candide* or for any of his tales or short prose satires even though he treated the Chinese nation and its people extensively in his other works, poetical, historical and dramatic. The single possible exception is his retelling the story of the unfaithful widow of Chong Tse in his tale *Zadig*, but in doing so he completely removed the Chinese element by transferring the setting and characters of the narrative to Persia.

The author of *L'Aventurier chinois*, although also responding to the Chinese mania of the times, knew considerably less than Voltaire about the real China.

The names of his characters, for example, Myredorb and Doliverte, have no resemblance whatsoever to those current in Canton, where they presumably reside; Doliverte is described as a fetching blonde; and reference is made to a Chinese ambassador to Paris, a non-existent functionary in the eighteenth century. *L'Aventurier chinois* belongs to a class of works which are not designed to reveal China as it is, but by using China as a background to illustrate Western conditions, circumstances, or attitudes and to promote various domestic or private concerns. Although not a document of historical authenticity such as the European translations of Confucius, the compilations of Du Halde, or the narrative of *Le Compte*, *L'Aventurier* illustrates the pervasive influence of China in Western imagination, in this sense parallel to the erecting of pagodas in eighteenth-century Munich and London. Although its narrative structure and its ideological purpose of defending optimism are mutually supportive, the two strands are not essential to each other in the same way that the adventures of *Candide* depend upon the philosophy of Pangloss. *L'Aventurier* therefore, may be considered from three separate perspectives, as an illustration of the appeal of China in Western popular culture, as an example of the influence of *Candide*, and as an independent defense of philosophical optimism. In the realm of Chinese studies, however, it belongs to the category of *chinoiserie* rather than to that of serious cross-culturalism.

According to its preface, the narrative derives from the manuscript of a Chinese philosopher and teller of allegories, Xien-Chang-Yen, which is stolen and delivered to a European supercargo, who translates it. At his next designation, Alexandria, the supercargo purchases a mummy, which he wraps in the pages of the manuscript. He sends the package by freight to Paris, where it is seized by the customs. When he arrives personally in Paris somewhat later, he is placed under temporary arrest. His mummy is eventually restored, but not his manuscript, which makes the tour of the world. It finally returns to China in a vessel of the French East India Company, where it has been used as wrapping for an indecent miniature painting. When the supercargo happens to be once again in China, he sees the manuscript pages, claims them, and has them printed in Europe.

L'Aventurier chinois has escaped previous notice as a descendent of *Candide* probably because of its title, which suggests picaresque or erotic situations and has no clue to draw the attention of Voltairean researchers. Apart from *L'Aventurier chinois*, bibliographers have located over a dozen posterity of *Candide*, the exact number depending on which literary genres are accepted for inclusion – continuations, imitations, comedies, operas, vaudevilles, or poems.¹

¹ Works related to *Candide* are treated by Christopher Thacker: "Sons of *Candide*". In: *Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 58, 1967, pp. 1515–1531; J. Rustin: "Les 'Suites' de *Candide* aux XVIIIe siècle." *svec* 90, 1972, pp. 1395–1416 and J. Verduyssen: "Les Enfants de *Candide*." In: Jean Macary (ed.): *Essays on the Age of Enlightenment in Honor of Ira O. Wade*. Geneva 1977, pp. 369–376. Basil Guy in his *The French Images of China before and after Voltaire*, Geneva, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1963, lists *L'Aventurier* in his bibliography on p. 445, but does not mention it in his text or associate it in any way with Voltaire.

These works are presumed to be influenced by *Candide* when they incorporate allusions to the personages in that narrative, recapitulate the misfortunes of the protagonists, and introduce motifs such as that of smallpox and the recruiting of soldiers. "At times they effectively suggest *Candide* in its general narrative line and in particular events; at times they refer to it disparagingly without revealing sufficient grounds for affirming actual imitation."² Most of these followers of Voltaire portray an optimistic philosophy as does *L'Aventurier chinois*.

Many narrative and philosophical connections between *Candide* and *L'Aventurier chinois* may be noted, but the direct line is established in two passages in the latter work. In one of them a character "qui venoit de finir le fameux *Candide*, dernièrement traduit en langue savante" (in this context the Mandarin language) quotes the line "*Tout est au mieux*." In another passage, one of the protagonists learning of the harrowing experience of a mandarin remarks that "tout étoit *au pis dans le plus bizarre des mondes possible*." The Confucian patina is applied early in the narrative when one of the female characters compares her religious views with those of the Chinese sage and at the end when the hero quotes Confucius to confound the doctrines of both Pangloss and the latter's detractors. Confucius is introduced not because he figures prominently in *Candide*, for he does not, but because Voltaire praises him extensively in his other works, where he is treated as a symbol of rational morality, deism, and antique wisdom. In a quatrain in the *Almanac des Muses*, 1771, two years prior to the publication of *L'Aventurier*, Voltaire affirms

He speaks only as a sage, never as a prophet,
But he is believed even in his own country.³

The opening chapter of *L'Aventurier* on hazard or chance seems to be a commentary on the portrayal of philosophical necessity in *Candide* although the first sentence of the work, which functions as a quasi-epigraph, restricts coverage to women alone. Apparently directed toward Voltaire, this sentence affirms, "Non, Monsieur, les femmes ne sont pas toutes aussi légères, aussi inconséquents que vous venez de les peindre." The narrative itself begins immediately after this introductory sentence. The protagonist, loosely modeled on *Candide*, is a young soldier, who is known in the narrative only by his military title, Soupdar, which, according to a footnote, is a term from the Near East. In a cafe in Canton, he encounters an adventurer, Schouwia-Kan, who is posing as a mandarin of the first rank. Soupdar invites Schouwia to his home in order that the latter may meet his mother, Myredorb, and his sister, Doliverte, who, as I have already noted, is described as an attractive blonde. The mother and daughter conspire to arrange a match, and Schouwia is only too willing to cooperate.

² J. Rustin: op. cit., p. 1398.

³ See "Voltaire and the Mirage of China". In: A.O. Aldridge: *The Reemergence of World Literature*. Newark, Del., University of Delaware Press 1986, pp. 141-166.

When Doliverte is conveniently left alone in the company of Schouwia, she expresses a philosophy of hedonism and self-interest. “Toujours notre intérêt est le principe primordial de toutes nos actions: si nous sommes le plus souvent malheureux, c’est que nous avons fait des fautes contre nos vrais intérêts & notre bonheur ne commence qu’au point ou nous découvrons avec plus de sagesse, ce qui y est le plus conforme.” A footnote, presumably from the pen of an objective editor, gives her words wider application. “Un Déiste, un Athée, un esprit-fort, est une autre Doliverte qui arrange des mots, nie une Puissance supreme, succombe, l’invoque dans sa détresse, & l’adore par une impression irrésistible.” As the narrative continues, Doliverte maintains that chance had nothing to do with the original meeting between Schouwia and her brother which led to the conversation then taking place. To the contrary, efficient causes were responsible for Schouwei’s having complained about women and of his desire to have them less frivolous. At this point Schouwia interrupts to ask Doliverte how she can associate her ideas with religion, for “Confucius n’enseigne assurément pas cette morale.” Her answer, which has nothing to do with Confucius, seems to be a rejection of free will and a reaffirmation of Pangloss’s insistence that things cannot be any otherwise than they are. “J’ai compris que ce que je suis; je le tiens d’un autre, je n’ai rien appris de moi-même; & si la nature, une bonne constitution, des causes secondes sans nombre, m’ont laissés quelques charmes, il est evident que je ne les ai pas de moi. Si l’étude m’a donné quelque espèce de raisonnement, je l’ai aussi pris dans les Auteurs ou chez tel autre personne. Du reste, Monseigneur, je n’ai de la religion que l’extérieur; et je puis, je crois, sans déroger au titre d’honnête, dire comme un Païen, ‘Je sers ni Baal ni le Dieu d’Israel.’” A footnote points out that the latter sentiment is practically the same as that expressed by Racine in *Athalie*. Adopting a tone of extreme disapproval, the presumed editor castigates Doliverte as “une inconséquente petite-maîtresse, qui enveloppe, sous des grands mots, les faiblesses de son cœur.” Although the passage cannot be considered as a direct reflection from Voltaire, it certainly reveals his frequently-expressed opinion that no such thing as a religion of Confucius exists – that he merely taught traditional beliefs while recommending virtue and avoiding mystery.

After this philosophical interlude, the narrative gives some biographical details about Doliverte, who has much in common with Voltaire’s Cunegonde. At the age of nineteen, she has already had several sexual encounters, but pretends to virginity in order with her mother’s complicity to entrap Schouwia in a marriage. The sham mandarin and Doliverte are two of a kind, however, for Schouwia in addition to parading his alleged noble lineage boasts of wealth and influence, which are also illusory. Doliverte is consequently delivered to him without a marriage ceremony, and he lives with the bride’s family at the family’s expense. His pretext for the emptiness of his own purse is that he is waiting for funds to be forwarded from his own family and that he prefers to travel incognito rather than in the state to which his position entitles him. In an aside on the poor remuneration accorded to the literary profession, the narrator remarks that “A Kanton, comme dans notre Europe, l’esprit s’estime au poids de l’or; un thé-

sauriseur, ou un Fermier-Général en a beaucoup plus qu'un Baile [sic] qui vit aux dépens de son Librairie; ou qu'un Jean-Jacques persécuté parcequ'il a dit de fort bonnes choses, & fait des sophisms en bon français." Unlike most of the other replies to *Candide*, this one does not place Rousseau in opposition to Voltaire, but considers them as on an even plane.

From this point on, the structure of *L'Aventurier* resembles that of *Candide* as the narrative embraces the travel theme. The two main characters, however, are not matched like Pangloss and Candide as teacher and student, but in the persons of Schouwia and Soupdar as a sharper and his dupe. In the end Schouwia is regenerated, honesty carries the day over deceit, and virtue triumphs. Soupdar is not completely innocent like Candide, however, nor is he completely exempt from faults, the chief of which is vanity. He is incessantly proud of his lower limbs and his fine clothes, especially shoes. A somewhat lubricious passage, clearly in the vein of Voltaire, describes his masculine endowments. "Il fut, dit-on, le premier à imaginer les grands flots que sont actuellement sur le devant des caleçons de nos petits Adonis de Kanton. Ces flots étoient dispendieux quand l'étoffe étoit riche; mais ils laissoient chez les femmes une agréable *supposition* à faire, & cette supposition-là avoit un grand mérite." Needless to say, the notion of a Chinese codpiece is ludicrous.

As the narrative proceeds, Myredorb receives a letter from a son-in-law in Peking desperately pleading for financial assistance. She turns to the sham mandarin Schouwia, who instantly gives her a letter of credit, which later proves to be worthless, but at the moment produces an emotional response. "*Tous est au mieux* disoit l'éloquent Myredorb, qui venoit de finir le fameux Candide, dernièrement traduit en langue savante." This transaction seems to indicate Myredorb's dominance over the household. The narrator immediately affirms that the daughter Doliverte holds the mandarin in her net and that there is no indication that he would ever free himself from her "*talens singuliers* pour fixer un cavalier."

In a quasi-digression, the narrator introduces an "Auteur celebre" who had written successfully on the feminine heart. This author had maintained that among all created beings women occupy a distinguished place by virtue of their manner of being and their way of governing men, even those for whom they have shown contempt. This author of excellent things was hanged at Peking, however, because the emperor Yao, who frequently became embroiled with his empress, proved that his work perpetuated in the feminine sex the empire which women had over him. This may possibly be a reference to Voltaire's *Femmes, soyez soumises à vos maris* since immediately following the passage concerning women manipulating their husbands, a dominant theme of Voltaire's bagatelle, the narrator observes that Myredorb had frequently maintained that the Abbé Bazin (Voltaire's pseudonym in *La Princesse de Babylone*, a companion piece to *Candide*) was at fault for going to great lengths to prove that the princesses he wrote about were chaste. It is somewhat ironical that the author of a work obviously indebted to *Candide* should also cite *La Princesse de Babylone*, in which Voltaire castigates those authors who have imitated or plagiarized *Can-*

dide and his other tales.⁴ Myredorb, who is not particularly chaste, but who has great talents in handling her husband, uses her sexual powers to obtain money from him to gratify the sham mandarin's taste for luxury goods.

The latter finally decides to go to Peking, ostensibly to obtain money to satisfy his creditors. He takes Soupdar on the voyage, promising to place him in charge of a company of palace guards and to obtain for him the title of Mandarin Lettre, despite the circumstance that even a minimum acquaintance with letters had never graced his own mind. Even though Soupdar and the mandarin have insufficient funds at their disposal, they are able to travel by teaming up with a band of smugglers. The latter offer to share the boat on which they are to make their way up the river in exchange for free use of Schouwia's title of mandarin first grade as protection against official inspections. They set off with a retinue of a broken-down palanquin, a horse, and three carriers. When they are stopped at one city, Schouwia with his usual boldness declares that his class of mandarin is higher than that of the local official, and they are allowed to proceed. When they arrive at Peking, Schouwia persuades Soupdar to lend him his swords and rings so that he may appear in a suitable state before his father. He leaves the boat at the outskirts of Peking and directs Soupdar to continue on to the city, giving him the name of an inn for their future rendezvous. Here Soupdar orders an expensive costume and shoes, promising to pay for them on the next day. At the common dining table while reciting his adventures and anticipations, he encounters two sympathetic Europeans, but learns that Schouwia has been exposed as an impostor and forced to leave the city. The sham mandarin's real name is Xienxi, and he is the offspring of a Chancellor who had accompanied the emperor to Paris and a French woman of easy virtue whom the Chancellor had encountered in the Botanical Gardens. As a young man in Paris, Schouwia had acquired from his father the art of Chinese hairdressing and made a fortune from the profession. But spoiled by luxury and high society, he returned to China, where he sought to maintain his elevated life style by passing himself off as a nobleman from various parts of the world. The concept of a Chinese official in Paris excelling in the oriental art of hairdressing is certainly a novel misrepresentation.

The narrator weaves another reference to *Candide* into moralizing comments on the problem of evil. "Je ne sais quel Philosophe a prétendu donner une égalité parfaite aux biens & maux. Je ne sais non plus comment il s'en seroit tiré, s'il avoit dû prouver cette assertion. Un autre dit de fort bonnes choses sur la vivacité avec laquelle des peines se succèdent. Jamais dit ce judicieux Auteur, un malheur ne vient seul." I do not know of any French author who argued for an absolute balance between good and evil although Benjamin Franklin did so in an early work, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725). There is almost no possibility, however, that the author of *L'Aventurier* could have been aware of Franklin's work, but it is quite possible, even likely,

⁴ René Groos (ed.): *Romans et contes*. Pléiade edition. Paris, Gallimard 1954, p. 431.

that he knew another English treatment of optimism, Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*, with which Voltaire was familiar. Although Pope does not assert an absolute equality of pleasure and pain throughout the universe, he maintains an absolute equality of pleasure and pain in each individual.

ORDER is Heaven's first law; and this confest
Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,
More rich, more wise; but who infers from hence
That such are happier, shocks all common sense
Heaven to Mankind impartial we confess,
If all are equal in their Happiness. IV, 49–54

While conceding that equality of pleasure and pain does not exist in external elements that can be measured, Pope affirms that intangible elements work to produce a psychological equality. A man who is outwardly happy may be internally miserable and one who is outwardly miserable may be blessed with interior happiness.

Fortune her gifts may variously dispose,
And these be happy called, unhappy those;
But Heaven's just balance equal will appear,
While those are placed in Hope, and these in Fear.
Nor present good or ill, the joy or curse,
But views of better, or of worse. IV, 67–172

These lines follow a long tradition originating with Plato which considers pleasure as the negation of pain. Montaigne summarized the doctrine by remarking "Our well-being is nothing but the not being ill" (*Essais*, 2:12). The English philosopher John Locke had also affirmed that "in reference to the passions, the removal or lessening of a pain is considered, and operates, as a pleasure: and the loss or diminishing of a pleasure, as a pain" (*Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II, xx, 16). Voltaire's contemporary, Pierre Maupertuis, who was also Voltaire's personal foe, had a much different view from Pope's, but one essentially the same as Voltaire's. He affirmed in his *Essai de philosophie morale* that the pleasures of body and those of spirit may balance each other, but they are not equal, that in ordinary life the sum of the evil surpasses the sum of the good. (*Œuvres*, 1: 214) (Lyon 1756). The "judicious author" quoted in *L'Aventurier* who remarked on "la vivacité avec laquelle les peines ses succèdent" is certainly Voltaire, who in *Candide* established the convention of recapitulating the harrowing misfortunes of his characters. Candide, for example, challenges his mentor Pangloss "quand vous avez été pendu, disséqué, roué de corps, et que vous avez ramé aux galères, avez-vous toujours pensé que tout allait le mieux du monde? (Chap 28).

When Soupdar learns the truth about his erstwhile patron Schouwia, he recounts his own mishaps and exclaims bitterly "que tout étoit *au pis dans le plus*

bizarre des mondes possible.” Hearing another inhabitant of the inn refer to him in opprobrious terms, Soupdar demands to know why he is being insulted after the great misfortunes he has suffered. The other replies that he finds it extraordinary that a person without status would dare to ask for an explanation and that he would provide one only at sword’s point. They accordingly fight a duel in which Soupdar is victorious. In this fictional Peking, duels customary take place in a kind of arsenal where the combatants receive their weapons and sign their names. They are required to keep up the contest until one of them is dead. The one deemed the aggressor must serve three years of public service if he is the winner, but if he loses, his estate must pay five thousand ounces of gold, of which four thousand go to the state and one thousand to the winner. As the victor, Soupdar immediately collects his thousand ounces. In the conflict he receives a minor wound, which is dressed by the two sympathetic Europeans who, motivated by their virtue and benevolence, have accompanied him to the dueling place.

At this point narrative emphasis shifts from Schouwia to Soupdar and from the shady dealing of the sham mandarin to the benevolence and virtuous behavior of the two Europeans. The latter are described in glowing terms. Under the influence of these benevolent souls, Soupdar develops an anti-Voltairean philosophy. He learns from the mixture of misfortune, loss and success he has experienced that man is sometimes attached to his faults, but also that when these faults have led him to the edge of an abyss, he may sometimes by his self-will leave the path that has led him to the precipice and return to the highway of good fortune. The Europeans offer to take him under their protection for two years, to travel with him, and to establish him in a social and economic position that will eventually allow him to return with honor to his family. Soupdar gladly accepts the offer.

After sailing for three weeks, he and his companions run into a storm during which one of the Europeans is washed overboard and perishes. The other, named Francville, is overwhelmed with grief. He learns that reason and philosophy cannot efface in a moment the memory of a friendship conserved over twenty years of acquaintance and mutual conformity of character.

Continuing their voyage, Soupdar and Francville lay anchor at Ceylon where they are able to compare the customs of the Ceylonese with those of the Chinese, giving Francville the occasion to air his view on tolerance. “Ne blâmez point les usages des peuples chez lesquels vous aborderez, car vous n’en avez le droit, & tous les peuples de la terre vous verront avec joie, vous recevront avec considération, & se feront un plaisir de vous être utile.” After Ceylon, Francville goes back to his homeland, leaving Soupdar free to return to Canton. Francville gives Soupdar an order on all his property there, to be returned only in the event that he should revisit the city at a later date.

Just as Soupdar is on the point of sailing for home, he receives a communication from the King of Ceylon, requiring his immediate presence. He has been recommended to the king’s good graces by one of the latter’s sisters, and the king in recognition offers to grant him any favor which it is in his power to be-

stow. At that moment one of the soldiers in attendance presents Soupdar a letter, which the king orders him to read. It is from the sham mandarin Schouwia, who is also in Ceylon expecting to be impaled alive on that very day for the crime of passing himself off as a mandarin and by that means seducing another of the king's sisters. When Soupdar asks the king to grant Schouwia his life, the king does so on the condition that Schouwia serve seven years in the royal troops. Soupdar then returns to Canton, rich and virtuous.

In his conclusion the author unites virtue with happiness.

“Un événement triste peut conduire à des événements heureux: le Soupdar le disoit, Confutzé a mis ce proverbe en morale; je l'ai mis en histoire. J'avois mes raisons; le lecteur qui ma'aura lu, aura les siennes; car tout est dans l'ordre.”

The real Confucius, of course, has no such proverb in his ethical writings although he nowhere denies the notion that distressing events may lead to pleasant ones. For the author, the figure of Confucius, who appears also in the first chapter, is primarily a means of lending verisimilitude to the Chinese background. The introducing of Confucius at the beginning of the narrative and reintroducing him at the end may also be considered as a device to bring together the opening and close of the story in order to create the impression of unity and compactness, a technique that scholars have previously noted in *Candide*. It could also be interpreted as an admission that since no Western philosophy has found the answer to the human condition, there might be some reason to seek it in the older civilization of the East.

L'Aventurier chinois is not a work which attempts to gain notoriety by associating itself with the author of *Candide*; rather it is one which attempts to refute the pessimistic philosophy of Voltaire's narrative by bringing it into contact with the humanistic tradition of China as symbolized by Confucius.

Although not a battle of wits between Leibniz and Confucius, *L'Aventurier* recognizes Confucius as a universal sage whose authority in matters of virtue is paramount.