



# German Dreams of Empire in the Far East: The German Expeditions to the East and Ferdinand von Richthofen's Encounters with Asia, 1850–1880

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## I INTRODUCTION—RICHTHOFEN AND IMPERIAL CURIOSITIES

Ferdinand von Richthofen is maybe the most prominent European traveller of East Asia in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The German geologist first encountered Japan and China, as well as Siam, Java, and other parts of Asia as a scientific expert on the Prussian expedition to the Far East that was to conclude trade treaties in 1860/1861. He

<sup>1</sup> Chin (2013, 194–219), Wu (2014, 339–363; 2015, 33–65), Mertens (2019, 1–9), and Jacobs (2020).

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left China with a huge repertoire of travel writings and notes after extensive travels throughout Asia and a longer interlude as mining prospector in the American West in late 1872.<sup>2</sup> Richthofen is best known for his invention of the term “Silk Road.” His seminal pieces on the Ancient Silk Roads and his vision for a modern industrial railway “Silk Road” have made him famous both in his time and in the more recent decades.<sup>3</sup> He is also recognised as one of the first Europeans who travelled almost all of China after its opening to foreigners in 1860. As a geologist by profession and an ethnographer by interest, Richthofen presented a reflective combination of human curiosity and European scientific observation that guided him towards the creation of industrial, social, and cultural knowledge of Asian spaces.<sup>4</sup> As a curiosity himself, he combined a distinct social status of a Prussian *Bildungsbürger* with a claim to act as the herald of Prussian-German civilisation at the perceived Asian frontier.<sup>5</sup> His “excitement of discovery” paired with the dissemination of knowledge contributed to a more diverse social imagination of different parts of Asia in the context of German dreams of Empire and aspirations to world and imperial power status during the formational years of the German nation-state in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it is problematic to apply to the Silesian geologist the sweeping category of an exclusive Eurocentric imperialist from whose tale “colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured.”<sup>7</sup> This would be a gross over-exaggeration and misinterpretation of many European explorers and travellers in Asia until the 1890s and a misunderstanding of direct observations and curiosities in contrast to the public framing of

<sup>2</sup> Mertens (2019, 2–4), Waugh (2007, 1–10), Hansen (2012, 7), and Chin (2013, 194–196). The most important studies on Richthofen are: Osterhammel (1987, 150–195), Wardenga (1990, 141–155), Hsieh (2007, 353–368), Marchand (2009, 153–155), Wu (2014, 339–355; 2015, 33–65), and “Richthofen” (2015, 597–615).

<sup>3</sup> Richthofen (1874a, 1874b, 1877a, 96–103; 1877b, 495–498, 716–717; 1882, 693–694). See the seminal piece by Osterhammel (1987), further Hansen (2012, 7), Mertens (2019, 1–2), Chin (2013, 195–197), Wu (2014, 340–342; 2015), and Mueller (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 167, 170; 2013, 1038–1039).

<sup>5</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 204). All translations from the German sources are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> Osterhammel (2008, 1–3; 2013, 50) and Naranch (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Said (1978, 117). See also Stoecker (1958, 69–84). Different with good arguments Marchand (2009, 155), Osterhammel (1987, 183–184; 2013, 409–412; 2018, 489, 491–495), and Pratt (2008, 1–4).

Asian images as part of domestic social imaginaries.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, in the nineteenth century, geography was utilised as an imperial science to influence both strategic decisions of expansion and a “common understanding that makes possible [...] a widely shared sense of legitimacy” for imperial aspirations.<sup>9</sup> However, even while parading his imperial mind-set and his claim to a European concept of knowledge through scientific observation, Richthofen showed considerable reflective curiosity and critical awareness of the local and spatial contexts in which he moved. Although research has stressed in different intensity the exclusive Eurocentrism of perspectives on Asia since the early 1800s, many nuances in the perceptions, representations, and constructions of Asia are outside the strict post-colonial framework that assumes rather than evidences simplistic condescending “Orientalism” or Gramscian hegemony.<sup>10</sup>

This essay shows instead that by applying different categories of analysis like curiosity, knowledge, identity creation, and the target of German social imaginaries, the German dreams of an Empire in East Asia should be understood in their nuanced differences.<sup>11</sup> Like his predecessors Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, Richthofen to some extent followed a relatively open tradition of scientific curiosity and observation based on the object and not only on hierarchical or racial assumptions underlying the observing subject.<sup>12</sup> Although his observations breathe the air of its author’s self-perceptions as protagonist of educational and scientific Prussian *Kultur*, Richthofen is best understood as a complex character that embodied Humboldt’s view of travels, discoveries, and encounters. “Everything that stimulates movement [... like] errors, unfounded assumptions, instinctive divinations, conclusions based on facts, leads to the expansion of the horizon of ideas and new ways to enforce the power of intelligent knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> By analysing Richthofen’s travel writings and diaries, published reports, and scientific work based

<sup>8</sup> Osterhammel (2008, 2–3, 10) and Taylor (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Osterhammel (2013, 1038) and Taylor (2004, 23).

<sup>10</sup> Morton (2007, 2012, 45–64) and Potter (2014, 68).

<sup>11</sup> For a good overview, see Conrad (2013) and Naranch (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Humboldt (1809, 125) and Ritter (1834, 726–729). See also Osterhammel (1987, 162–167; 2013, 378), Wardenga (1990, 142–145), Wu (2014, 339–363, 341–344), and Mertens (2019, 5–8).

<sup>13</sup> Humboldt (1852, 34).

on his travel observations, the essay places his travels, perceptions, and reflections on Asia in the broader context of a global view of Germany and imperial curiosities in Asia in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>14</sup> Richthofen's curiosity about what he encountered in Asia and his creation of new knowledge in cultural terms strongly influenced the shaping of European and specific Prussian-German identities through the framing of social imaginaries about differentiated spaces of Asia.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 THE DUAL CURIOSITY OF FERDINAND VON RICHTHOFEN

Richthofen was as much a curiosity as a curious traveller. As the latter, he criticised the typical “globetrotters” of the nineteenth century who would “entertain at each place [...] the same stereotypical programme and expect a standardised experience” and consequently produced repetitive and superficial descriptions of the treaty ports and major cities in China and Japan.<sup>16</sup> “It seems to me that many people travel in China, but very few see anything.”<sup>17</sup> Richthofen's ethos was different. He stressed in his “Travel Guide for Field Researchers” the imperative importance of curiosity in social contacts for receiving vital information and understanding the local population: “Conversation must be held in abundance with the indigenous people.”<sup>18</sup> Curiosity in the situations and constellations of humans was important in guiding the scientific “observation and research [that] were the highest and most difficult capacities to perform [...]; bold spirit of inquiry and decency in [human] encounter are the noblest character traits of an explorer.”<sup>19</sup> This was by no means an impartial curiosity into acquiring knowledge of space but combined

<sup>14</sup> Naranch (2010, 367–368, 379–380).

<sup>15</sup> The following elaborations will focus on Richthofen's ethos and mode of observation as well as some of his social observations, because the creation of the “Silk Roads” and his quest for industrial knowledge have been the subject of substantial research already. See e.g. Osterhammel (1987) and Wu (2014, 339–363; 2015, 33–65). The author is preparing a comprehensive study of the German expeditions to East Asia and the legacies for German imperialism before Empire in Asia, 1850–1885.

<sup>16</sup> Richthofen (1877b, 717).

<sup>17</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 116).

<sup>18</sup> Richthofen (1886, 32).

<sup>19</sup> Richthofen (1886, 44).

a curious spirit of exploration with a European understanding of scientific inquiry to order and rationalise space with modern methods.<sup>20</sup> It would be presumptuous to call this type of ordering an imperial act of conquest *per se*. However, Richthofen's curiosity contributed in its presentation and outcome of knowledge production to a larger imperial project of exploring space for the sake of utilising it for European and German goals.<sup>21</sup>

Richthofen himself was also a curiosity as a person. This might not be important for post-colonial scholars who assume that Eurocentrism exerted itself in the attitude of racial or civilisational superiority over other civilisations. Richthofen certainly cherished his origins in Prussian Silesia and showed an ostentatious feeling of cultural difference when he travelled. He presented himself as a distanced traveller on horseback with European attire and servants,<sup>22</sup> praised his cooking skills in producing German dishes far away from home, reflected upon his acquired taste for Liebig's "Fleischextrakt" (instant broth), carried around China his table silver, white tablecloth, and bed linen, and decorated every place possible with the Prussian and later German flags.<sup>23</sup> Richthofen as a curiosity calls for a reflection on the different roles and self-identifications that he performed in displaying this staged "imperial" curiosity within the context of an Asia in transition.<sup>24</sup> The tensions between Richthofen as the observing subject exposing an exploring curiosity about Asian social and cultural dimensions and his normative judgement on the observed objects and perceived facts produced an ambivalence that found its repercussions in the political hierarchies of Asian countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Both categories of curiosity lead to the question which kind of social knowledge Richthofen generated. The Prussian Ministry of Trade initially

<sup>20</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 155) and Wardenga (1990, 145–146). The twofold reality of curiosity to observe with different purposes is also addressed in Matteo Salonia's piece and reflects on the broader problem of narrowing down global history to networks and convergences only.

<sup>21</sup> Osterhammel (2013, 24–25, 1038–1040) and Wu (2014, 344).

<sup>22</sup> Richthofen (1907, 201) and Richthofen (1898, 127). Interestingly, Japanese noblemen would rather walk in front of their horse than sit on horseback. *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 935, 1 June 1861, 374. See also Osterhammel (1987, 172, 178).

<sup>23</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 202–205; II, 30–32).

<sup>24</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 174, 177–179).

tasked him as a scientific legation secretary (*Legationssekretär*) on the Prussian East Asia expedition to look out for possible opportunities for mining in 1860.<sup>25</sup> From 1868 to 1872, the California Bank of Development and the International Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai extended these professional demands that Richthofen should uncover ore and coal holdings and mining possibilities in China.<sup>26</sup> Yet in doing so, Richthofen also inquired into ethnographic observations and political suggestions for a Prussian Empire in the Far East. His industrial knowledge and his reports based on his geological expertise clearly indicated the primacy of development investment in the 1860s and 1870s for the European Empires in Asia.<sup>27</sup> Richthofen also proposed through his open curiosity in the “indigenous people” a differentiated social and cultural interpretation of Asia—China, Japan, Korea, and Siam—that reflected both hierarchical imperial thought and genuine interest in understanding and conveying “his” Asia as a system of intercultural relations beyond stereotypical observations. In his writings published before the heyday of German imperialism after 1885, Richthofen presented to the German public a much more nuanced image of Asia than almost all other contemporary accounts.<sup>28</sup> These writings explore and expose a nuanced construction of Asia without assuming a simplistic matrix of purely oppressing, exploitative, and dominating narratives.

### 3 “EVERYTHING IS NEW, STRANGE, INTERESTING.” GERMAN IMAGINARIES OF ASIA, 1850–1870<sup>29</sup>

In 1834, the German geographer Carl Ritter characterised the interior of China as “a world of its own” and a “Terra incognita” removed from direct observations. Ritter claimed that many parts of China had not seen a European traveller since the accounts of Marco Polo that would be able

<sup>25</sup> Prussian Trade Minister August von der Heydt to Ferdinand von Richthofen, Berlin 20 January 1860, *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA, Rep. 120, Ministerium für Handel und Gewerbe*, C XIII 18, No. 9, Vol. 3, fols. 36–39; Richthofen (1907, I, 10–12); Hsieh (2007, 362); Osterhammel (1987, 168–169).

<sup>26</sup> Richthofen (1877b, VII–XIII; 1907, I, 26–28).

<sup>27</sup> Richthofen (1874a, 115–120; 1874b, 146; 1903, passim; 1912a, 693–704).

<sup>28</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 155, 167; 2013, 22; 2018, 495–502), Marchand (2009, 153–155), and Wardenga (1990, 145, 148).

<sup>29</sup> Kreyher (1863, 75).

to give an adequate eyewitness account.<sup>30</sup> Yet, this observation was one-sided. Jürgen Osterhammel among others has pointed to the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century, Europe possessed much more factual knowledge about Asia and China than about other parts of the world.<sup>31</sup> Yet this knowledge was abstract and lacked a forceful imagination of travelled experiences, a body of travel literature on “new” areas of the Asian continent that would bring an experienced space “with new methods of observations” to the German reader.<sup>32</sup> What was missing were specific imaginations of Asia produced by travellers who physically explored and observed the space that could be mapped on geological and geographical representations. This lack of imaginative landscapes and their people was still apparent for many parts of Asia when Richthofen embarked on his first journey to the Far East in 1860. Despite the forced opening of Asia through British, French, and American expeditions since 1839, knowledge and interest in Asia remained superficial and largely focused on religious and commercial interest in selected ports.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the early accounts of the treaty ports in China and Japan set the tone and imagery of Asia for decades to come.<sup>34</sup> Richthofen himself repeated the stereotypes of “dust and dirt” and “corrupt mandarins” in his early diary entries in 1868.<sup>35</sup>

It would however be misleading to assume that colonial stereotypes inevitably provided access to a “royal road to colonial fantasy,” as Homi Bhabha has put it.<sup>36</sup> Colonial fantasies or imaginaries were not simplistic blueprints for Eurocentric dominance or expansion, but were in themselves highly differentiated, ambivalent, and dynamic.<sup>37</sup> Richthofen as a transnational and trans-imperial actor in Asia contributed to this dynamics

<sup>30</sup> Ritter (1834, 726–727, 513–514).

<sup>31</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 157) and Zantop (1997, 2–15).

<sup>32</sup> Foucault (1971, 21) and Richthofen (1877b, XXVII). See also Brandt (1897, 19).

<sup>33</sup> Richthofen (1877b, 717; 1912b, 48). See also Morse (1910, I, 563) and Osterhammel (1987, 168–169).

<sup>34</sup> Gützlaff (1834, V, IX, 252) and Smith (1847, 164, 170–171).

<sup>35</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 18, 20–21). Peking seemed for him “to swim in dirt. [...] The nerves of smell and vision are constantly affected very unaesthetically. These people do not know any decency.”

<sup>36</sup> Bhabha (1983, 25).

<sup>37</sup> Zantop (1997, 4–5).

with an equally differentiated and at times contradictory construction of Asian spaces. However, the one clear guidance for exploring Asia was a diffuse fantasy of German cultural influence on the historical progress of the world through German agency in Asia. Richthofen's mind-set in approaching East Asia reflected a guided curiosity of the German public that was stimulated by the political imagination and aspiration of a strong nation-state with a civilisational mission in world politics since 1848.<sup>38</sup>

The overlapping liberal ideas of nation-state building and imperial outreach to match the British and French claims for global dominance generated imaginations about Asia that channelled middle-class curiosity in cultural, commercial, and industrial trajectories. As early as 1848, the discussions about a German fleet invoked the idea of the expansion of Germany "in Chinese waters" as a sign of virility of the new nation-state to be.<sup>39</sup> These ambitions, further fuelled by the hopes of the German constitutional assembly in Frankfurt/Main during the 1848/49 revolution, created a diffuse social imaginary of Asia that in turn fuelled both the commercial and cultural ambitions of German idealism and the discussions over the outward-looking lead of Germany in terms of politics and trade.<sup>40</sup> Although much more modest than the ambitious fleet projects during the German Revolution, Austria and Prussia started expeditions to the Far East between 1857 and 1861 that triggered these guided curiosities in the German public. Those expeditions mirrored the increasingly competitive political dualism in Germany over the future lead of Germany towards becoming an imperial player and world power.<sup>41</sup> This particular German social imaginary profoundly framed Richthofen's observations, his curiosity and identity as an exploring scientist, and his formation of knowledge about Asia.

The German middle-class public took great interest in the Far East since the 1850s as a potential for commercial activities and a reflection of German moral duties in representing a specific type of European civilisation: *Kultur*. During the 1848/49 revolutions, German overseas movements that took off as part of emigration waves in the 1840s

<sup>38</sup> Naranch (2010, 366–370) and Müller (1998, 364–365).

<sup>39</sup> List (1850, 210); Adalbert von Preußen (1848, 4, 20); *Deutsche Zeitung*, no. 182, 1 July 1848, Beilage, 1; Wigard (1848, I, 309).

<sup>40</sup> Wigard (1848, I, 308–309), Taylor (2004, 23–24), and Naranch (2010, 366–380).

<sup>41</sup> Martin (1995, 3–16) and Naranch (2010, 369–370).

attracted great attention, as emigration and settlement met the needs of commercial expansion of the shipping companies from the Hanseatic cities and Prussia.<sup>42</sup> In 1862, the commercial volume of commissioned German shipping in Asian coastal waters was second only to the British trade and continued to grow until 1897.<sup>43</sup> In the 1860s, the older literary images of the Far East from the enlightenment and earlier periods met with guided interests in the “commercial importance of the coastal countries in the Pacific Ocean that seemed impossible a decade ago.”<sup>44</sup> The Treaty of Tianjin (1858) and the Convention of Peking (1860) legalised travels to the interior of China and opened the gates for merchants and trade agents, consular officials, adventurers, and natural expeditions to explore regions in East Asia that had not seen a foreigner since Marco Polo.<sup>45</sup> Richthofen was among the first to utilise this opportunity fully when he came to China in 1868. The observation on travelled space in Asia and its production of knowledge raised curiosity in Germany as to the German merchant activities and potential future political aims.

The German states had a vital interest in participating in the new trade treaties with Japan and China to secure their expanding trading position in Asia.<sup>46</sup> While the Austrian expedition of the “Novara” in 1857/58 failed to deliver any commercial or political results, it triggered in its ambition to establish Germany as a naval power both the imaginations of the

<sup>42</sup> Bericht (1849, 3) and Müller (1998, 357–362).

<sup>43</sup> *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 794, 18 September 1858, 178; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 493, 23 March 1861, 98; *Die Zeit (Frankfurt/Main)*, *Beilage*, no. 218, 15 December 1861, 2670; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 541, 22 February 1862, 60–61; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 891, *Beilage*, 7 November 1868, 421–423; Brandt (1894, 109–110); Reichsamt of the Interior to Senate Hamburg, Berlin 26 October 1897, *Staatsarchiv Hamburg (StA HH)*, 132-1/I/2132, no. 5 and appendix 5a. Chinese merchants preferred to hire German shipping companies because they were cheaper and treated the Chinese with respect. See Werner (1873, 120).

<sup>44</sup> *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 828, 14 May 1858, 315; Sturz (1859, 6); *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 541, 22 February 1862, 61; Berg (1863, VIII).

<sup>45</sup> Morse (1910, I, 563), Sturz (1859, 1–3, 6), Richthofen (1877b, 706–726), Embacher (1882, 359–364), and Roberts (1932, 65–70). For the almost child-like innocent curiosity of the German public about Asia, see Brandt (1894, 1): “If we consider countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Siam, then the scarce knowledge about foreign places gives way to a truly childlike and touching ignorance.”

<sup>46</sup> Martin (1990, 32–33; 1995, 6–8).

German public and the political action of its German rival Prussia.<sup>47</sup> The German states feared that other nations could withdraw consular support for German merchant vessels in Asia after the end of the Second Opium War, and that the German Customs Union would miss new chances of world trade in an opening East Asian market after 1858.<sup>48</sup> To promote its action upon the mercantile concerns and to make “moral gains” in Germany, the Prussian government of the liberal “New Era” decided in late 1859 to establish its own direct relations with China, Japan, and Siam in order to secure the legal means of direct trade for the members of the German Customs Union.<sup>49</sup> The naval expeditions were seen as part of a “competition of movement and progress” that would decide which power would best represent German trade interests abroad.<sup>50</sup> Richthofen as an imperial agent aspired to influence the future German policies in East Asia through his first-hand observations, his travelled experience, and his allegedly scientific observation of Asian spaces. His ethnographical studies, though curious and open to new discoveries, remained an element of an imperial framework that tried to make sense of industrial modernisation as part of a larger paradigm of moral and social progress towards human imperfectability and Prussia’s role in promoting this.

#### 4 RICHTHOFEN’S IDENTITY AS AN EXPLORER

Richthofen in his early years held a critical view on formal settlement colonialism and did not favour incursions into the sovereignty of other states. This was very much in line with the Prussian approach to conclude “equal” treaties with China, Japan, and Siam. However, his imperial thinking showed considerable elements of exercising will and capacity

<sup>47</sup> *Neue Münchener Zeitung, Abendblatt*, no. 95, 21 April 1857, 378; *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung*, no. 727, 6 June 1857, 453–454; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 412, 3 September 1859, 309; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 493, 23 March 1861, 99; Harkort (1861, 10).

<sup>48</sup> Sturz (1859, 2–3, 6) and Wichura (1868, 96).

<sup>49</sup> Berg (1863, VII–IX); Eulenburg (1900, XVI–XVII); *North China Herald*, no. 544, 29 December 1860, 207; *Wochenschrift des Nationalvereins*, no. 79, 1 November 1861, 650; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 540, 15 February 1862, 55. See Haupts (1978, 60–65) and Martin (1990, 35).

<sup>50</sup> *Allgemeine Zeitung (Augsburg), Beilage*, no. 23, 23 January 1862, 373–374.

to shape the affairs of Asian countries by observing, mapping, and re-defining them.<sup>51</sup> He considered sustainable progress under the myth of industrial modernisation and development as the normative yardstick of the modern world.<sup>52</sup> As a professional traveller with geological missions, he perceived travelling not only as a form of movement between places and across space, but also as a method of generating scientific knowledge and gaining hermeneutic insight.<sup>53</sup> His reflection on curiosity as the guided operation that fuelled his observations of nature indicated that Richthofen explored almost everything that would be worth noting in human and physical geography.

Richthofen consciously placed himself between the specialised textual Sinology as an academic subject and the romanticising yet increasing banal literature on Chinese culture.<sup>54</sup> He assumed that the framework of physical geology and geography as a natural science would produce more objective facts than guided yet presumptuous ethnographic observations. Ethnography as an auxiliary science helped to establish geological facts by producing social knowledge.<sup>55</sup> He assumed that it was possible to observe without prejudice and to rationally conclude and produce objective knowledge from this disinterested observation.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Richthofen idealised himself within the context of European approaches to science and its superiority over other forms of knowledge generation.<sup>57</sup> What made him different was that he insisted on the direct observation and the necessity of curious interaction between the observer and the observed—the natural space of geological formations and the human space of interaction.<sup>58</sup> In this form, his whole habitus of a scientific empiricist reflected his idealisation as an occidental rationalist who could distinguish out of his own ethos between good and bad information.<sup>59</sup> This claim of

<sup>51</sup> Cain and Hopkins (1993, 42–43), Martin (1995, 9), and Conrad (2013, 546, 550–553).

<sup>52</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 183–184).

<sup>53</sup> Richthofen (1877b, XXVII; 1907, I, 28).

<sup>54</sup> Richthofen (1877b, VIII, XXVIII, 717) and Osterhammel (1987, 170–171).

<sup>55</sup> Richthofen (1886, 23–25; 1877b, VII).

<sup>56</sup> Richthofen (1883, 45–47, 56–7).

<sup>57</sup> Osterhammel (2013, 19–20, 779–780).

<sup>58</sup> Richthofen (1877b, VII).

<sup>59</sup> Richthofen (1886, 40–41, 44).

superiority of scientific observation and objective knowledge creation runs through his travel writings. In applying a general principle of scientific geology to his human objects, Richthofen the travelling natural empiricist displayed the superiority of Europe and Prussia-Germany in particular in terms of science, morals, and even politics.<sup>60</sup>

Richthofen identified himself not only as an observing scientist but also as a political actor. Certainly, his self-identifications indicated the layers of constructions of Asia that relate to a reflected account of observations about Asia. Besides being a natural scientist and a geologist, Richthofen perceived his mission and work in Asia to some extent as a career project.<sup>61</sup>

If I came back now, I would have nothing for the present and maybe in some distant future the remote option for an ill-paid professorial chair. The continuation of my current research travels and the acquisition of profound knowledge of these [Asian] lands is in itself a capital, and solid publications will expand my options. Even if my current observations and travels are mostly scientific, they have practical implications, especially for Prussia.<sup>62</sup>

The social knowledge in addition to geological and geographical information formed the core of Richthofen's identity as *the* German expert on Asia between 1875 and 1900.<sup>63</sup> Richthofen mixed knowledge and curiosity with political ambitions to serve himself and the Prussian and future German government. While being an authority on coal in China, he also engaged with the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck on the expansionist plans of Prussia, the North German Confederacy and the future small German nation-state for limited colonial activities in Asia beyond trade.<sup>64</sup> In the broader German discussions on colonial policies, Richthofen positioned himself as "half lost geologist" and knowledgeable man on the spot to influence German choices for a potential colony in

<sup>60</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 154–155).

<sup>61</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 141, 282) and Osterhammel (1987, 171–172). See also Paulmann (2013, 677–681).

<sup>62</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 141).

<sup>63</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 151).

<sup>64</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 141, 282), Stoecker (1958, 272–274) and Yü (1981, 157).

the Far East.<sup>65</sup> “I might have triggered questions of large importance for Prussia that I might follow up later.”<sup>66</sup>

As an imperial actor for Prussia-Germany and for the other European Empires in Asia, Richthofen used his travels to develop a curiosity that would both encompass investment opportunities for the imperial powers and social knowledge that triggered him personally. He conceptualised Asia not only in geological and geographical terms, or in terms of political or career gains, but also through a rather open concept of understanding human constellations and their potential. His letter to his parents in late 1869 indicated his excitement with the encounters while “profoundly researching Liautung, the border between China and Korea, Mukden and Manchuria, Mongolia and finally Peking.”<sup>67</sup> “From my last voyage, I could tell stories without end.”<sup>68</sup> It is a pity that he did not tell more stories but these outbursts of more spontaneous curiosity besides his professional reports indicated his curiosity on human stories emanating from his observations in his further encounters.

Richthofen as an academic explorer stood “not without fright at the gates of an immense Empire.”<sup>69</sup> In his writings, he reassured himself of his scientific ethos and his civilisational mission through staging his self-discipline. As part of his moral representation of superiority to the domestic German audience, Richthofen highlighted the moral discipline of the self through his own cooking, his scientific work, and journal writing at night when his servant slept, and ordering his mineral findings and ethnographic observations. His discussion on food in particular is not only an eccentric curiosity, but also takes place within a broader discourse of European civilisation. His most important provision and the culinary driving force for German expansionism was the indispensable Liebig’s “Fleischextrakt, [...] a huge benefit for travelling mankind.”<sup>70</sup> In parading different recipes for soup and meat, he repeated a common place in European travel writing that discussed the alleged absence of

<sup>65</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 28, 141, 282–283, quote 283).

<sup>66</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 141).

<sup>67</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 280–281).

<sup>68</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 282–283).

<sup>69</sup> Richthofen (1877b, xxix).

<sup>70</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 204).

these two “strengthening” dishes as civilisational weakness in Asia.<sup>71</sup> By doing so, Richthofen combined this civilisational claim with his personal narrative of asceticism and discipline.

The function of this self-assertion was part of his interpretation of moral leadership. He claimed that the Chinese had not perfected anything and lived mostly in an ignorant state of limited interest and curiosity towards foreign knowledge. “Only in one thing the Chinese serve the world as a dubious example: that is their sexual reproduction. In this they are virtuosos.”<sup>72</sup> In this inscription of lax morals and sensual lack of discipline, his staged asceticism would also serve as a legitimacy to rule. Only the man, who controls himself and shows imperial virility and self-discipline, would be entitled to rule.<sup>73</sup>

Richthofen’s political and national identity gained shape through his pronounced parading of Prussian symbols. The Prussian expedition in 1860 and 1861 was proud to symbolise the moral duty that Prussia exercised on behalf of the German states through its flag.<sup>74</sup> Richthofen travelled around China by boat hoisting the Prussian flag and used it alternatively as tablecloth and room decoration in every inn he stayed.<sup>75</sup> His staging of restlessness and constant industriousness further represented the sacrificing self in control against the moral temptations of rest and decay that dominated the contemporary perception of China. He criticised exactly this kind of observed decay and lack of discipline in the localised missionaries that he met. For him, rigorous self-discipline and asceticism were key to staging European superior virility and Western discipline over Eastern Barbary.<sup>76</sup> After 1890, the narrative of European moral and physical strength versus Asian weaknesses was part of the wider “Yellow Peril” discourse on imperialist anthropology. In his early writings, the concept of a disciplined European pointed towards the superior rational and reasoning of his scientific observations on Asia through a pointed staging of moral discipline.<sup>77</sup> His character should

<sup>71</sup> Richthofen (1907, 202–203).

<sup>72</sup> Richthofen (1907, 264). See already Kreyher (1863, 131–132).

<sup>73</sup> Richthofen (1907, 263–264) and Osterhammel (1987, 175).

<sup>74</sup> Richthofen (1912a, 43–44), Brandt (1901, 103) and Rose (1895, 38).

<sup>75</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 77, 202; II, 30–32).

<sup>76</sup> Richthofen (1907, I).

<sup>77</sup> Gollwitzer (1962, 201–202) and Schulte-Althoff (1971, 212–214).

seem impeccable to make his claims and observations on Asia and China more convincing.<sup>78</sup>

The self-declared herald of Prussian *Kultur* at the “half-barbarian” frontier<sup>79</sup> also found respect for the elementary strength at the frontier, presented in the theme of respect for the martial “races.” Richthofen identified between the different provinces’ military discipline and strength, mostly in Hunan province and in Mongolia. He likened this virility and violence to the nomadic origins and more than once referred to them in comparison to the North American Plains Indian nations.<sup>80</sup> This conclusion led him to apply an enlightenment idea of the noble savage that had not had too much contact with the Europeans “who treat the Chinese badly.”<sup>81</sup> Most of the provinces that had not been influenced so far by the Treaty ports did not match the European cliché of a general xenophobia of the Chinese. In exploring the socio-psychological reasons for some Chinese violent reactions to foreigners, Richthofen pinpointed the reasons to the impact of steam ship companies responsible for the decline of the traditional trade and shipping system along the Yangtze River.<sup>82</sup>

However, his performance as a traveller made use of a hybrid Prussian and Chinese magic of power from a horseback. Looking back to his experiences in China in 1897, he suggested travellers to stay calm in case people would stir unrest.

Seldom will an excess begin if you ride on a horse [... If you are attacked by someone throwing a pea], then immediate action is in order. Yet, never should the traveller be involved in this action personally, because he would give up his status and position; and one needs to be completely sure of the identity of the culprit. In those case I ordered [my translator] Splingart [sic!] to punish the man. [...] Speed and energy create fear and stir

<sup>78</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 142–144, 177, 283) and Richthofen (1898, 41).

<sup>79</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 204).

<sup>80</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 167; II, 120–121, 204).

<sup>81</sup> *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 541, 22 February 1862, 60–61.

<sup>82</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 120).

the emotion of justice between the Chinese that would take sides for the injured and insulted foreigner.<sup>83</sup>

This magic of power developed through exercising impartial justice from the elevated position of a horse, and as the execution is not carried out by himself, it remains a symbolic superiority without any real power. The Chinese did not necessarily perceive this magic of power as symbolic representation of European imperial gesture.<sup>84</sup> On the contrary, Richthofen in his representation of power mimicked the authority of a Chinese Mandarin to command, judge, and punish from horseback on the spot through his servants. The magic of power only succeeded because it relied on the local structures of power dynamics and imitated the way in which local higher classes exercised their own authority within the Qing imperial system.<sup>85</sup> Richthofen was not aware of this cross-cultural aspect. Yet, the Prussian exercise of power to survive and the Mandarin practice of punishment indicate the overlap of exercising hierarchy across the East. Although Richthofen insisted on shaping his identity within a Prussian and European framework of *Kultur* and civilisation against any attempt towards acculturation, he performed Chinese power symbolically and thus constructed an Asia that moves beyond clear lines of foreign imperial hegemony and superiority.<sup>86</sup>

## 5 CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE—MAPPING ASIA THROUGH INTERCULTURAL OBSERVATIONS

Research has taken great interest in Richthofen's contribution to gathering industrial knowledge about China, and many of his most prominent writings focus on the primacy of industrial modernity. Yet, his wider

<sup>83</sup> Richthofen (1898, 127). See also Richthofen (1903, 75–76; 1907, I, 395). For the importance of his loyal Belgian translator and servant, see Spingaerd Megowan (2008, 60–73) and Richthofen (1907, I, 17–21).

<sup>84</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 179). On symbolic use of power Cohn (1983, 165–209).

<sup>85</sup> Osterhammel (1987, 179–180).

<sup>86</sup> An important element of this exercise of power is the staging of calmness in times of distress. The attributes of imperial governance as a sign of superior symbolic power are constructed around Eulenburg and the success of the peaceful Prussian expedition in concluding the equal trade treaties in 1860 and 1861. The essay by Ruairidh Brown in this volume equally stresses the importance of differentiating the overall moralised Eurocentric narrative from the more nuanced travel observations in detail.

anthropological observations created a diversified Asian space of social knowledge that followed his curiosity in human geographies and his moral understanding of Asian cultural spaces. His personal curiosity towards encountering local people showed a reflected mechanism of integrating his knowledge about Asia into a Eurocentric system of morals and identifications, yet also pointed to creating analogies and similarities of different Asian people to the German and European spheres. In this sense, Richthofen's creation of knowledge is exercising a sorting power of evaluating cultures through a Eurocentric normative concept, but that did not mean an inscription of conquest, subjugation, or dominance in the classical imperial sense. Through highlighting relational similarities and peculiarities rather than stark differences, Richthofen created a cultural order of Asia that presented a hierarchy of people and cultures related to his own understanding of their collective intellectual and moral self-consciousness. His specific German idealism thus became the normative yardstick for constructing Asian spaces and hierarchies.<sup>87</sup>

### *Spaces and Identities: Japan*

Richthofen developed a high esteem for Japan between his first encounter in 1860 and his subsequent visits until 1871. Many of his observations try to make sense of a Japan in transition from Tokugawa to early Meiji society. One important factor for the Japan craze among the members of the Eulenburg expedition, Richthofen among them, was the long stay in Japan while waiting for the conclusion of the trade treaty that facilitated many more observations.<sup>88</sup> Further, knowledge in Germany was much scarcer about Japan than about other Asian countries.<sup>89</sup> Although

<sup>87</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 323).

<sup>88</sup> Eulenburg (1900, 129) and Wichura (1868, 167). See also *Illustrierte Zeitung Leipzig*, no. 916, 19 January 1861, 35–38; no. 917, 26 January 1861, 53–54; no. 918, 2 February 1861, 67–69; no. 920, 16 February 1861, 111–113; no. 935, 1 June 1861, 374; no. 937, 15 June 1861, 418; *Nationalzeitung Berlin (Morgenausgabe)*, nos. 177, 179, 183, 191, 213, 217, 219: 17 April, 18 April, 20 April, 26 April, 9 May, 12 May, 14 May 1861.

<sup>89</sup> “Never has Japan seen an expedition like the Prussian that was so well equipped in its scientific means of observation.” *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 493, 23 March 1861; *North China Herald*, no. 544, 29 December 1860, 207. See Dobson (2009a, 123–130; 2009b, 34–36) and Jacob (2016, 69–71).

Japan was constructed as a “new Asia Prussia” by Eulenburg and others,<sup>90</sup> Richthofen set the tone for an image of Japan as a virile “Prussia of the East,” an upward striving modernising power with moral and intellectual characters aspiring to become European or exceed those standards.<sup>91</sup> His admiration for the “perfection” of crafts and its “pure and noble” taste in details far exceeded European yardsticks and indicated for Richthofen an advanced intellectual maturity. “The industriousness of the people is astonishing. [...] One cannot comprehend how it is possible that a people that is completely closed off and has no connection to the outside world, can produce all of this and developed in diverse directions to such a civilizational height as it has.”<sup>92</sup>

His curiosity to understand cultural Japan in 1860 also led Richthofen to evaluate other foreign prejudices and to form his own opinions. Parts of the German public criticised the American and British policies because they seemed to be destroying the very essence of civilisation by their “disgusting exercise.”<sup>93</sup> Prussia on the contrary would do its utmost to “ensure that Japanese would have the highest esteem for European power and civilisation.”<sup>94</sup> This general tone of Prussian *Kultur* and appreciation for Japan continued in Richthofen’s later travel reports when encountering fellow foreigners. Upon a visit at the Bellecourts in October 1860, the young Parisian wife of the British attaché in Yokohama (Madame Hodgson) complained incessantly about the “dirty and abominable” character of “the” Japanese. Dismissing the bored woman, Richthofen lamented that “if one listens to such narrow-minded judgements, one understands how wrong and absurd opinions about foreign people and places can gain solid ground.”<sup>95</sup> The problem with most mid-nineteenth century constructions of Asia were in his opinion that they emerged from these narrow-minded attitudes of the European and American merchant communities. “They do not even get to know the people, they judge

<sup>90</sup> “Everything looks as if we were in Germany, just more cute and neat. I am totally in love with the country” (Eulenburg 1900, 129).

<sup>91</sup> Japan showed “signs of vital power, intellectual freshness and the ability to higher education” which in turn suggested a likeness between Prussia-Germany and Japan. Sturz (1859, 7); See Richthofen (1912a, 1912b, 37) and Berg (1865, II, 36).

<sup>92</sup> Richthofen (1912a, 1912b 37). Richthofen called it “geistige Bildung.”

<sup>93</sup> *Illustrierte Zeitung Leipzig*, no. 937, 15 June 1861, 418.

<sup>94</sup> *Illustrierte Zeitung Leipzig*, no. 937, 15 June 1861, 418.

<sup>95</sup> Richthofen (1912b, 57).

only on the value of money, but without understanding the inner values of society.”<sup>96</sup> Richthofen as a university-educated member of the German *Bildungsbürgertum* questioned the capacity and indeed the moral quality of his fellow Europeans in Asia to observe and judge upon the character of the Japanese. While he stressed his exclusive Eurocentric view of the superiority of moral qualities in observation and sciences, he warned that the Asia created by European merchant adventurers did not reflect well on European civilisations. On the contrary, while “we might possess more moral and intellectual education than the Japanese, [...] these European elites do not come to Japan. [...] It is the servile excess of a greedy merchant world [...] that clings to Japan like parasites.”<sup>97</sup>

Richthofen distinguished between the people at large and the administrative elites. While he considered Japanese to be generally curious and without prejudice, the *yakunins* as administrative warrior overseers of the foreigners in Japan appeared to him stubborn, strict, and full of xenophobic prejudice. For Richthofen in the light of the merchant community in Japan, the xenophobia of these Japanese elites against the foreigners was understandable. Yet he went even further to argue that state administration was the same everywhere: “Who in our countries likes a tax collector?”<sup>98</sup> As a country, Richthofen saw the modernising potential in Japan to improve according to his Eurocentric idea of advancement of progress. Japan was giving him “much hope to align with the Germanic people” because the Japanese, though perfectionists in some cultural traits, “have acknowledged the moral superiority of the educated Europeans and burn with curiosity to learn from them and to move to Europe for education.”<sup>99</sup> In essence, Richthofen’s Japan in line with other contemporary judgements placed the similarity of Prussia and Japan as the interpretative framework for curious observations on Asia.<sup>100</sup> The distinction between greedy merchant interests and higher moral values in the classification of Asian civilisations likened the European controversies about the peculiarities of the Germans versus the French and British commercial interests in imperialism.

<sup>96</sup> Richthofen (1912b, 57–58).

<sup>97</sup> Richthofen (1912b, 58).

<sup>98</sup> Richthofen (1912b, 58).

<sup>99</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 264).

<sup>100</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 282).

*Spaces and Identity: Korea*

The relational construction of Asian spaces through comparative observation becomes much more pronounced in Richthofen's reflections on Korea and China. One of the most interesting parts of the travel diary surfaces when Richthofen reached the Chinese border with Korea in 1869. He described his encounter with the Korean merchants in late 1869 as "his dearest memory."<sup>101</sup> The "Great Gate of Korea" east of Fongwhangtschin (to the Northeast of today's Dandong) was the only gateway for trade between China and Korea with markets on the Chinese side of the border only held in April, June, and October each year.<sup>102</sup> Richthofen observed with considerable surprise the physiognomy and appearance of Korean merchants, describing them as "more handsome, larger, and stronger than any Chinese or Japanese."<sup>103</sup> Further, Richthofen elaborated in his civilisational observations on the cleanliness and "whiteness" of Korean merchants in clothing, houses, and with a skin even "purer" than the Europeans were. "I believe that they are the cleanliest people on earth."<sup>104</sup> In his observations, the likening of cleanliness to civilisation in a Eurocentric sense also touched upon his concept of sensual encounter as Koreans lacked "the most problematic affection of the smell, a very unpleasant attribute of the Chinese even of the better classes."<sup>105</sup>

In describing Koreans as interested and civilised observers towards foreigners, Richthofen contrasted in a relational approach Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans in rather sweeping interpretations. He likened Chinese curiosity in Europeans to the European imperial powers' curiosity in Africa.

The Chinese want to see the Europeans with the same curiosity that attracts us to visit a [circus] menagerie or an exhibition of Zulu Kaffirs. They want to have seen us, talked to us, and observed us while we eat; the act of feeding is for them the main attraction. Not the Koreans: they naturally left the room during our meals and returned when we had finished. In our

<sup>101</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 284).

<sup>102</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 129–131), Ratzel (1876, 145) and Meyer's *Konversationslexikon* (1885, X, 87). See also Chan (2018, 137–145).

<sup>103</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 231).

<sup>104</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 232).

<sup>105</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 232).

conversation, they showed curious interest in us and were keen to reflect on our thoughts and to learn from us. [...] Despite their isolation, the Koreans showed more knowledge of foreign countries than the Chinese from interior cities.<sup>106</sup>

The opposition between Korean knowledgeable curiosity and Chinese imperial gaze becomes apparent and points towards Richthofen's creation of morally distinct spaces in Asia. Further, he does not only criticise the Chinese practice of treating the Korean merchants and others with disrespect. Implicitly Richthofen condemned imperial superiority and lack of genuine curiosity and thirst for knowledge equally in the Chinese attitude towards foreigners and in his fellow Europeans in their arrogant approach to Africa alike.

The Koreans appeared to him as people of decency as they left the room during his dinner; they developed a keen interest in the world, asked about Prussia, and reflected upon philosophical questions that he judged as a higher "value that indicates an inner feeling, a sympathetic element that stirs our compassion."<sup>107</sup> For Richthofen, Japanese and Koreans showed self-conscious reflection and courage facing the West, even a national pride that he missed between the Chinese. The problem that becomes apparent is the undoubtedly normative appreciation of assumed intellectual and moral proximity of what Richthofen identifies as Korean and Japanese behaviour to his understanding of German *Kultur*. The moral values and their actualisation in political consciousness sets the tone for cruder hierarchies of civilisation between Europe and Asia in the following decades, but also questions Chinese claims to cultural superiority towards Koreans and Japanese through the lenses of German concepts of moral and virtue in judging Asian people.

These rather sweeping observations based on single encounters point towards a referential identification of the similar in the other. Just as Werner Sombart observed some decades later in distinguishing an English merchant from a German *Kultur* spirit, Richthofen criticised the materialism of his Chinese encounters and the merchant mentality of petty shop owners as opposed to a higher spiritual aspiration of Koreans and Japanese.<sup>108</sup> He even likened Japan and Korea to the "Germanic" people

<sup>106</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 233).

<sup>107</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 259–260, 233).

<sup>108</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 234, 260).

of Asia that made up in virility for a lack of Chinese—and one might add English—shopkeeper spirit.<sup>109</sup> In observing Asia at the pivot of three different civilisations, Richthofen’s interpretation of European differences mapped upon his perceptions and constructions of Asia.

### *Spaces and Identity: China*

The reports on China from the Eulenburg expedition had created a socio-cultural space that repeated sweeping stereotypes of stasis and moral deficits of “this peculiar people.” Starting with the description of their quarters at the “Hotel to the Dancing Cockroach” in Shanghai, the participants created a country still struck by the Taiping Rebellion and confined to “dirt” and moral decay.<sup>110</sup> This rather negative tone of a static China in comparison with a dynamic Japan set the tone for the expectations with which Richthofen re-encountered Asia in the form of the Chinese Empire in 1868.

Richthofen was impressed by the commercial vibrancy and resilience in China, yet not in a morally uplifting sense. Richthofen condemned outright the lack of curiosity beyond the expected results of knowledge and learning: “They touch upon everything, but we never heard one single question that would run deeper than the mere material surface.”<sup>111</sup> The essence and nature of an open curiosity seemed to be lacking. This confirmed Richthofen’s judgement that China needed triggers from the outside to overcome a purely materialistic and thus culturally static understanding of the world. “The materialism of the Chinese is beyond description. Buying and selling are their highest aim in life.”<sup>112</sup>

He emphasised the rapid decline of European and American trade houses and the take-over of Chinese businesses in the Treaty Ports, to the extent that if Chinese merchants were ever to expand to Europe, the Europeans could pack up their business.<sup>113</sup> “The Chinese are very competent in business and at least equal to the Europeans, but have

<sup>109</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 260, 263–264).

<sup>110</sup> Eulenburg (1900, 181, 197, 228), Kreyher (1863, 193, 252–253), and Rose (1895, 70, 79) (Quote).

<sup>111</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 259).

<sup>112</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 260).

<sup>113</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 80–81).

the great advantage of demanding fewer resources.”<sup>114</sup> The commercial competence however differed according to provinces. He likened, e.g. people in Kiangsi to the British as a “shop keeper people.”<sup>115</sup> In constructing within Asia equivalent comparisons to European popular images of national characters, Richthofen exposed his equally conceited opinion of Germany as a philosophical country against a morally inferior shopkeeper mentality of British imperialism. Not unlike other contemporaries, Richthofen identified the Chinese as the British of the East against Japan and Korea as their more Prussian stern, “self-conscious and courageous” counterparts.<sup>116</sup> His increasing knowledge of the provincial diversity of China however raised doubts in him over these sweeping observations. With more insight into other provinces, he conceded that the merchants from Kiangsi differed considerably from the “intelligent and moral, yet too honest shopkeepers from Shensi.”<sup>117</sup> In this continuous curiosity through observing human relations lay a certain self-corrective of Richthofen, very much in line with his claim to disinterested scientific observation.

Richthofen’s process of learning through observation stemmed from his curiosity in his human environment. In applying his own yardstick of living a “spirit of inquiry and decency in encounter,” he changed his initial attitude towards the role and status of mandarins as the source of Chinese stasis and decay. While in 1868, he reiterated the European stereotype that the Confucian mandarins were the source of Chinese cultural decay, in 1870 he realised that this was not the case. The local mandarins as “fathers of the administrative districts” were less of an authority than representatives that had to follow the opinions of the districts. “If the Mandarin does not act according to the will and needs of the people, he risks to be promoted to the afterlife.”<sup>118</sup> This learning through curiosity and observation also placed his judgements on the reasons for stasis and decay into a new light.

Richthofen applied an unscientific dual yardstick towards observing China. The main parameters of this normative standard appeared to

<sup>114</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 81).

<sup>115</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 99).

<sup>116</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 233).

<sup>117</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 540).

<sup>118</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 407).

be moral progress and industrial modernisation in conjunction with the German idea of intellectual and philosophical *Kultur*. Richthofen's curiosity was thus channelled towards evaluating his observations through the assumed moral quality of Prussian Protestantism and industry. Just as he exposed a sincere dislike of European missionaries in China due to their ineffective work, he also addressed a "very low opinion of the morals of the Chinese; [...] they lack all the invigorating, warming and healing qualities of the doctrines of Christendom."<sup>119</sup> Confucianism as a moral framework would not allow for any development of progress or morals in China. "The Chinese converts see in Christianity a lucrative business."<sup>120</sup> Thus, he assessed conversions by voluntary association that were made only to gain monetary advantage, again highlighting the assumed commercial mind of Chinese that was incapable of reaching the higher echelons of German inner *Kultur*. He argued that any progress in material development must be accompanied by a progress in morals, and in principle, he saw the potential in China to do so. "If the Chinese changed to modern education and intellectual strength according to their true intelligence, they would with their sheer mass of intelligent labour crush the whole world."<sup>121</sup> Although he recognised the potential, he insisted that this potential must be triggered from European interference and support, as China would be incapable of abandoning the traditions of Confucianism that morally crippled the people and confined the country from the top down to stasis.<sup>122</sup> This imperialism of development guided his curiosity in observing and constructing China and channelled his social knowledge and construction of China as a moral and social space.

The underlying normative narrative extended to the observation of places in China. In those, Richthofen displayed an open curiosity that leads him to evaluate and reconsider his assumptions. Ningbo is a particularly striking example because open curiosity about the unexpected appearance of the town aligned with an instrumentalised reflection of the usage of knowledge for a German audience. Upon arrival from Yokohama in China in late 1868, Richthofen's first port of call was Ningbo that immediately struck him as "different" from his former experiences

<sup>119</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 142).

<sup>120</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 143).

<sup>121</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 144).

<sup>122</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 143–147).

and perceptions of China. “The cleanliness of the streets, the precision in the style of the houses, the plentifulness of temples with groves, the pretty burial sites on the hills, the kind gentleness of its people, the diligence in agriculture – all this is totally Japanese and not Chinese.”<sup>123</sup> Richthofen took Japan as the yardstick for progressive and Prussian transformation in Asia and praised Ningbo as a place outside of his imaginary of China. In doing so, Richthofen in his curiosity about the places of exploration added complex layers to the images on Asia and China, in particular, thus responding to the stereotypical descriptions of China in engaging with European discourses on space and place in highlighting the possibilities of progress through science, industriousness, and cleanliness.

Utilising his lenses of modernity, Richthofen further praised Ningbo as a centre of trade and entrepreneurship. In fact, he identified resilience and search for opportunities to forge businesses as a key character trait of the Ningbonese.<sup>124</sup> By Ningbo, Richthofen meant not only a confined legal space, the place of the city itself. Highlighting the influx of vast capital into the local network of merchants from the connected towns in Ningbo’s hinterland, Richthofen further constructed Ningbo as a space of connected places, so that the perception of Ningbo included human webs of influential families from its surrounding smaller towns, notably Cixi to the Northwest of Ningbo.<sup>125</sup> The Treaty Port system and the forceful opening of the Qing Empire to foreign powers had a mixed effect on Ningbo. While it had led to a decline of traditional trade connections, it also set free new creative potential among the Ningbonese.<sup>126</sup> “The influence that the Ningpo [sic!] people have gained in Shanghai is very peculiar and noteworthy.”<sup>127</sup> He claimed that Ningbonese had taken over the Sampan business and controlled the Coolie business in Shanghai. The small and “Cheap Jack” trade as well as large parts of the commodity trade seemingly fell into the hands of Ningbo merchants, too. Thus, Richthofen concluded enthusiastically “the Shanghai people cannot compete with the

<sup>123</sup> Richthofen (1907, I, 38–39). See also Wichura (1868, 168): “My thought are still in Japan, and I think that this will remain the highlight of our travel experiences.”

<sup>124</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 6).

<sup>125</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 7).

<sup>126</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 6–7; 1912b, 157).

<sup>127</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 6).

[Ningbo people] in almost any business or direction.”<sup>128</sup> “In a country, in which everything seems to be amalgamated and undifferentiated, this localized pre-eminence of talents and directions of the entrepreneurial spirit is a most notable fact.”<sup>129</sup>

While occupying key businesses in a trans-local fashion within the Qing Empire, the Ningbo overseas trade and commercial businesses also returned. They did so partly using the smaller “imperial” powers in their attempts to secure a share in the vast domestic and East Asian sea trade, e.g. Prussia and the German Hanseatic shipping companies, and partly through exercising their own might. Richthofen observed this increasing dominance of Chinese trading houses overseas, some of them based in Ningbo, in Yokohama in 1870.<sup>130</sup> The European trading houses in China and Japan were struggling to survive financially and to get a sustained foothold into the imperial Treaty Port system of trade. One of the main reasons for Richthofen’s extended China travels was in fact the urgent request of the International Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai to explore investment options in coal mining and infrastructure that would make up for the failing trading balance in the treaty ports.<sup>131</sup>

His engagement with Ningbo also points to another discussion in Germany that Richthofen tried to influence. The German public opted strongly against acquiring formal colonies but hoped for coaling stations and favourable harbours to establish navy stations along the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>132</sup> Ningbo and the Chusan (Zhoushan) islands

<sup>128</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 7).

<sup>129</sup> Richthofen (1907, II, 7).

<sup>130</sup> Richthofen (1912b, 157).

<sup>131</sup> Richthofen (1903, passim); *North China Herald*, 14 November 1868, 557; *North China Herald*, 30 November 1869, 628–629; *North China Herald* 4 January 1870, n.p.

<sup>132</sup> “Colonies in the old sense are partly unpractical, partly dangerous, and we would rightly be ridiculed as the Don Quixote’s of world history if we wanted to burden ourselves with such Pandora’s boxes at a time when more enlightened nations consider abandoning them. [...] With colonies stay away from us!” *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 816, 1 June 1867, 186. *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 781, 29 September 1866, 332; *Berlinische Nachrichten*, no. 117, 21 May 1867; *Wochenblatt des Nationalvereins*, no. 108, 13 June 1867, 846; *Bremer Handelsblatt*, no. 998, 26 November 1870; Friedel (1867, 6–7, 68); *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, no. 32, 7 August 1867, 1278–1280; StBRT (1867, 271–272); Wuellerstorf-Urbair (1880, 190). See Wirth (1898, 123–126), Stoecker (1958, 69–71), Yü (1981, 157–158) and Richter (2017). The leasehold or purchase of Formosa, Chusan, the Nicobar Islands, and even Saigon were under question.

appeared to him the best home for a geopolitical and mercantile base for Prussia. While not in favour of formal colonies, he suggested to the Prussian and later German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck that Ningbo and the Chusan (Zhoushan) islands were the ideal place to invest, trade, and collaborate as Germany was slowly turning its dream of an Empire in the East into an aspiring reality.<sup>133</sup>

## 6 CONCLUSION

Richthofen's travel writings created a forceful image of human landscapes in Asia that left lasting impressions on the evaluation of German involvement in China, Japan, Korea, and other places. Richthofen promoted a strong imperialism of development and this shines through in his writings on China. Further, his writings exhibit strong normative yardsticks that underlie his celebration of objective scientific observation, especially the moral and cultural dimensions of his civilisational interpretations of Asia. Yet, this normative yardstick did not hinder Richthofen from developing and exercising an interested curiosity in observing and constructing Asia beyond crude stereotypes or simplistic imperial gazes. The difficulties arise from the ways in which Richthofen stages his curiosity paired with his scientific ethos of rational and impartial observation. This rather naïve assumption finds its limits in the application of moral standards for observation that are also part of his identity creation. As a herald of Prussian-German *Kultur* and civilisation more broadly at the frontier of industrial development and moral progress, plenty of observations move towards an attempt to order Asian spaces in terms of a moral hierarchy related to a developed critical self-consciousness. Richthofen's curiosity also allows for a severe criticism of superficial European observers and creators of fake knowledge about Asia that rules out any meaningful interaction. This perspective triggers many fascinating observations on Asia as it groups the status and potential of Asian countries and their populations in relation to industrial and moral development. Yet in doing so, Richthofen also opens the field for later attempts to create imperial hierarchies in Asia by substituting *Kultur* for race in the decades until 1914 and beyond.

<sup>133</sup> See Yü (1981, 155–164) and Stoecker (1958, 62–84).

However, Richthofen did not create the will and might for colonialism through his travel writings. Instead, his observations point to the potentials of German and more widely European interests in Asia and possible opportunities and encouragement of agency—financial, commercial, and political—to pursue a different agenda. That is not an exercise of might, but an evaluation of the possibilities of agency to do so. Jürgen Osterhammel has elaborated Richthofen's understanding of an imperialism of development that lifted different countries of Asia into their specific places in the stages of civilisational and ultimately industrial progress to modernity. This article has shown that this project of imperialism of development relied on a moral concept of self-conscious reflection that Richthofen placed at the heart of the modern progressive individualistic society. In judging Asia through these specific lenses, the appreciation of the numerous observations that add up to Richthofen's construction of Asia is included in an inward-looking moral map of the progressive world that finds its outer repercussions in industrial and eventually political development. Change becomes possible through a Eurocentric appreciation of the enlightened individual, not through the adoption of industrial and technological means alone.

This normative Eurocentric concept does not inscribe an exclusive ethnocentric perspective that degraded people and their spaces in Asia to merely passive receivers of developmental infusions. Richthofen does not start by an inflexible perception of a retrograde Asia, although he sees China in particular as an Empire in trouble lacking self-conscious agency individually and collectively. He is able to correct his value judgements while he travels, and amends his initial perceptions through his thorough scientific observation or through anthropological ways of listening. In changing and challenging some of his images through staged reflections, he diversifies and to some point “destabilises” a coherent image of Asia that was absorbed by the audiences at home.

Further, Richthofen displayed with his observations the ambivalence of European perspectives on Asia in a field of tensions between aspirations for moral and material progress and open awe, sometimes even anxiety, as to the potential of Asia in their main observed entities China, Japan, and Korea. Once his observations had led to a successful stimulation of development through imperial means in Asia, Europe would not be able to keep up with them. In essence, Richthofen's observations indicate a deep fear of the effects of imperialism of development, a Eurocentric infusion

of moral and material progress through incursion based on limited and borrowed time.

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