

Illustrating China through its Writing: Athanasius Kircher's Spectacle of Words, Images, and Word-images

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Figure 1 (left): Frontispiece to Athanasius Kircher's *China illustrata*, 1667. Digital Library, Villanova University.



Figure 2 (right): Frontispiece to Nicolas Trigault's *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, 1616 (first edition, 1615). Courtesy of Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections.

Even a cursory glance at the frontispieces reproduced in figures 1 and 2 above will show immediately that the two, while separated by only fifty years, diverge in a significant number of ways, the most striking of which is no doubt the highly different role played by words in their respective make-up: prominently centring the frontispiece on the right, they are much less evident in the one on the left – of direct interest here – where they seem to be both somewhat lost among the many visual elements to be presently reviewed below and yet never really absent from the central axis of the image. Unlike the earlier frontispiece, where discipline – discursive, representational or otherwise – would seem to dominate, in the Baroque spectacle of lights and

shadows of the later illustration (just like, as we shall see, in the larger spectacle of knowledge following behind it), words and images engage in a complicated performance of correspondences and echoes, verbalisation and silence, or sameness and difference, by means of which China is staged for the curious minds of seventeenth century Europe. Starting from the frontispiece proper and moving to the book behind it, I will attempt below first to throw some light on the master in charge of this visual-textual show and outline the general manner in which he structures it, then discuss several concrete ways in which he articulates it through words and images, and ultimately focus on the dazzling hybrid of ‘word-images’ in the last chapter of the book – boxed ‘primitive’ and contemporary Chinese characters and the discourses they supposedly articulate.

Let us, then, begin with the frontispiece [Figure 1]. Cherubs, heavenly clouds, two ecstatic saints (Ignatius and Xavier) and the blazing glory of the divine, beautifully matching the design of the Jesuit monogram, float serenely above. Two rays of light point directly to the heads of two strangely-clad men: we are not informed about their names,¹ like in the frontispiece in figure 2, but if we have followed closely seventeenth century publications on China, we may still recognise the one on the right as Matteo Ricci. The identity of the character on the left will become clear only as we flip through the book whose cover is now under scrutiny: he is another Jesuit, Adam Schall von Bell, and his garb, as we will learn later, is that of a high-ranking Chinese official. Helped by an angel, the two men are holding a map of China pictured against the background of its neighbours (India, Tartary and Japan); rivers, several cities (connected to the Christian activity in China),² and the Great Wall feature

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¹ Timothy Billings in ‘Jesuit Fish in Chinese Nets: Athanasius Kircher and the Translation of the Nestorian Tablet,’ *Representations*, no. 87 (Summer 2004), p. 5; ‘Untranslation Theory: The Nestorian Stele and the Jesuit Illustration of China,’ in *Sinographies: Writing China*, eds Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy and Steven G. Yao (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 92. Both sources reproduce a version of the frontispiece under discussion in which the character standing on the right is misidentified as ‘Kircherus.’

² The number of cities represented on the map differs from one edition to another. See Timothy James Billings, ‘Illustrating China: Emblematic Autopsy and the Catachresis of Cathay’ (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1997), p. 253. Billings’ discussion of Kircher’s frontispiece is more extended than the description I attempt here and has a different focus; while I disagree with some of Billings’ points, several of his insights

all on the map. Visually and symbolically, the upper part of the map belongs together with the rays of light and the angel; the lower part, on the other hand, the one that includes the name of the land on which the book will focus, stays firmly within the grasp of the two fathers. Proudly buttressed by the two Jesuits in the same fashion that the pillars in the background support the temples of wisdom framing the whole scene, the map does not unfold fully; instead, it seems to assume a coat of arms aspect,³ with the actual drawings on it functioning emblematically rather than metonymically.⁴



Figure 3: Frontispiece to *China illustrata*, detail (musk deer). Digital Library, Villanova University.

Behind the emblem, something else: we are not quite sure what it is, but it looks like a jungle or maybe a forest, with shrubs, trees and also a small

have been instrumental in further shaping and refining my own perspective. See Billings, pp. 249-259. For a discussion of Kircher's frontispieces, see Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), pp. 23-46.

³ Both Billings and Godwin emphasise the theatricality of the frontispiece and take the map to be a kind of curtain, a screen that both reveals and re-veils "China." Billings, 'Illustrating China,' p. 255 and Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre*, p. 34. While the spectacular character of the cover is undeniable and matches well the book's promise as articulated in its title (see below), I find the coat of arms association just as strong and very much in keeping with Kircher's pretence of absolute epistemological mastery.

⁴ On Kircher and emblems, see Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 379-380.

animal, that we will find again later on the pages of the book (p. 257) [Figure 3].⁵ It is a musk deer, once a “material, catachretic signifier for an Oriental Other,” which was appropriated as a “hieroglyph” for China in the seventeenth century.⁶ Covered by the map, the natural space is further reduced in size by the exquisitely designed quartet of temples filling symmetrically the lateral areas. The temple area extends to the very bottom of the image under discussion; part of it is inscribed with the author’s name and the book’s title, the former being partially shaded and the latter truncated and covered by geometrical and astronomical instruments. To find out more about the author and the title, we will need to turn the page and discover Athanasius Kircher’s (1602-1680) portrait⁷ [Figure 4] and the title page [Figure 5]; a keen eye will perhaps notice that the title in the frontispiece is not, in fact, a truncation of the longer version, but rather an abbreviation that takes the focus away from “monuments” and places it on “illustrated.”⁸ It is, indeed, under the abbreviated title of *China illustrata* that Father Kircher’s text was most often referred to, both in contemporary and later sources.

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this article are made from, and all image references are made to, the widely circulated French translation by F. S. Dalquié, published under the title: *La Chine d’Athanas Kirchere de la Compagnie de Jésus, illustrée de plusieurs monuments tant sacrés que profanes, et de quantité de recherchés de la nature & de l’art* (Amsterdam: Joannes Jansson van Waesberghe, 1670). See also John Ogilby’s English rendition included as an appendix to his translation of Johannes Nieuhof’s *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces...*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed by the author, 1673) as well as the more recent translation by Charles D. van Tuyl, *China illustrata* (Muskogee, Okla.: Indian University Press, Bacone College, 1987).

⁶ Billings, ‘Illustrating China,’ p. 225. For a full discussion on this topic, see Billings, ‘Illustrating China,’ pp. 224-263.

⁷ The position of this portrait varies in the different editions and versions of the book in which it features. For a discussion of the book’s printing history, see Boleslaw Szczesniak, ‘Athanasius Kircher’s China Illustrata,’ *Osiris*, vol. 10 (1952), pp. 388-390; David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), p. 134; Florence Hsia, ‘Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata* (1667): An Apologia Pro Vita Sua,’ in *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 397. For a larger discussion on this portrait, see Angela Mayer-Deutsch, “‘Quasi-Optical Palingenesis’: The Circulation of Portraits and the Image of Kircher,” in Findlen, ed., *The Last Man*, pp. 105-29.

⁸ The opposite seems to be true about the title page. See Billings, ‘Illustrating China,’ pp. xvi-xvii.



Figure 4 (left): Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680). Digital Library, Villanova University.

Figure 5 (right): Title page of the official 1667 edition of *China illustrata*.

It is, however, with the more verbose version of the title – *China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae & artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata*⁹ (*China Illustrated through Monuments Both Sacred and Profane, As Well As Various Spectacles of Nature & Art, and Descriptions of Other Memorable Things*) – that the frontispiece more easily relates. A dialogue between the sacred and the profane can be probably read behind its whole composition, with the top dedicated to the seraphic, luminous and saintly area of Christian truth dominating and guiding the bottom, with its scientific connotations. The transition from one realm to the other is made possible by the Jesuit fathers, true pillars of the church and true pillars of wisdom, whose efforts, as

⁹ When the Latin original is mentioned in this paper, references are made to this 1667 official edition published in Amsterdam by Joannes Jansson van Waesbergh.

missionaries and scholars, are centred here on mapping China. On mapping it or rather, as we have seen above, on both reducing and emblematising it: the natural world in the background – ‘China,’ we are led to think – is made cultural through a map that almost completely supersedes it, while simultaneously claiming the absolute dominion of representation that a powerful emblem such as a coat of arms asserts. Not China, therefore, but rather the Jesuit ‘art’ over ‘natural’ China, will be the focus of this book as well: we will be given access to a realm of words culled from Jesuit ‘monuments’ – from countless textual inscriptions of China that overwrite it in the same way the monumental temples in the frontispiece enclose it – by an author whose name is not highlighted in the book’s very first illustration. In fact, Kircher’s *China illustrata* is sometimes said to be one of the Jesuit polymath’s least original works,¹⁰ including as it does long quotations from readily available books as well as several sections Kircher had already published.

We will need to move beyond the propagandistic frontispiece in order to read the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘nature’ in a different way, give a different meaning to ‘monument’ and, more importantly, find out more than what the frontispiece and the book’s title have already told us about Kircher’s spectacles and memorable things. Before we do, let us also notice that the title’s abbreviation on the cover emphasises the visual dimension of this lavishly printed text. Just like most of Kircher’s productions, *China illustrata* promises to be a memorable visual spectacle; so will it turn out to be, with countless elements – illustrations, tables, fonts, plates, or page layouts – participating. The text is in fact filled with references to figures, tables, and illustrations, words often playing a secondary role as commentary on the images; on the other hand, the impact of the book’s illustrations is clearly demonstrated through their influence on the visual conventions of the soon to come Chinoiserie¹¹ [Figures 6 and 7].

¹⁰ Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 50; J. Michelle Molina, ‘True Lies: Athanasius Kircher’s *China illustrata* and the Life Story of a Mexican Mystic,’ in Findlen, ed., *The Last Man*, p. 366; Mungello, *Curious Land*, p. 137.

¹¹ See Haun Saussy, ‘*China illustrata*: The Universe in a Cup of Tea,’ in *The Great Art of Knowing: The Baroque Encyclopedia of Athanasius Kircher*, ed. Daniel Stolzenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Libraries, 2001), p. 112; Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher’s Theatre*, p. 244.



Figure 6 (left): The Emperor of China. Digital Library, Villanova University.

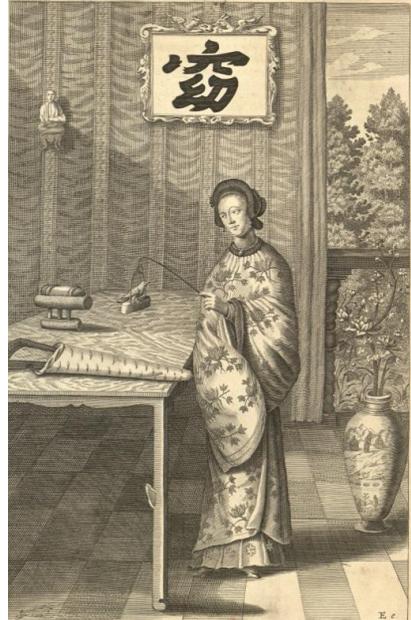


Figure 7 (right): Chinese lady. Digital Library, Villanova University.

But let us not anticipate. Below, I discuss first the book's structure as a spectacular text produced by a mind always in search of the spectacular and the memorable; next, I review several aspects of Kircher's visual-textual spectacle of words and images; finally, I attempt a more extended examination of what I take to be Kircher's 'word-images,' i.e. his disciplined representation of (fanciful) 'ancient' and (recognisable) modern Chinese characters, together with the etymologies he offers for them in the book's last chapter. Such word-images, I submit, fail to fully cohere into the systematic framework where the father's effort at domesticating the Other would have them belong; on the other hand, as I will show, they nevertheless represent the climax of the father's spectacle in *China illustrata*, both through their perceived semiotic uniqueness and as the object of Kircher's supremely effective hermeneutic manoeuvres.

Articulating the Show: *China illustrata* as Kircherian Spectacle

Only the last three chapters out of the six making up *China illustrata* are dedicated directly to aspects of China and Chinese civilisation – the 'miracles of nature and art' one can find there, Chinese architecture and mechanical arts, and Chinese writing. The first three focus instead on a celebrated and much

discussed Sino-Syriac inscription found in Xi'an in 1625 and deemed essential in the Jesuit program of cultural accommodation; on various journeys to and from China attempted since Marco Polo; and on idolatry as it migrated from the West to China via India.

This last point is part of the larger Kircherian strategy of connecting the East with ancient Egypt and Greece as a physical and cultural colony; 'evidence' for these points is marshalled by the Jesuit father in several of his earlier texts from two of which, in fact, chapters 1 and 6 (on the Sino-Syriac inscription and Chinese writing) are excerpted and reproduced anew in *China illustrata*, with some modifications. Kircher's particular program of 'ordering' China (and the exotic in general), including it into acceptable forms of discourse, accommodating its otherness and domesticating its potentially dangerous counter-narratives through ingenious intellectual contraptions is much too extended to be summarised here successfully.¹² Suffice it to say that dazzling his audience with the breadth of his knowledge and his keen associative, analytic and speculative powers was as much part of Kircher's intellectual program as its principles, and this can be seen very much at work in *China illustrata* as well; on the other hand, there is no doubt that the spectacular nature of the text would become even more visible if discussed against the entirety of the father's *oeuvre*.

While this cannot be attempted here, let me point out that Kircher's *China illustrata* became no less of a European master-text on China than its illustrious predecessors,¹³ and this in spite of its highly idiosyncratic structure and at times somewhat incoherent texture. The ordering criteria at work in the previous texts (topical and mission-related, among others) are abandoned in favour of what looks like a twisted trajectory, taking us from one unrelated topic to another and into and out of China, almost at will. Such perceived

¹² Kircher's many hermeneutic tricks drew heavily, *inter alia*, on his real and imaginary linguistic competences, skillful positioning in networks of knowledge resulting in privileged access to enormous amounts of information, knack for combining words and images, and deft use of the powers of print with a view to both recuperating for the world the lost coherence of classical times and also arranging all new multiplicity in recognisable patterns that would fit the great Christian blueprint subjacent to all existence.

¹³ These include works such as Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China ...* (1585), Nicolas Trigault, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (1615), Álvaro Semedo, *Imperio de la China* (1642) or Martino Martini, *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655). All of these works are often quoted by Kircher.

randomness may play at least some part in a relative neglect of *China illustrata* as a whole and a significant concentration of recent scholarly efforts on its first part,¹⁴ in which the Jesuit father attempts to obscure the Nestorian origin of the Xi'an monument, pleading instead for the coming of Roman-Catholicism to China well before the late sixteenth century Jesuit presence. While this chapter's prominence and the high religious stakes behind it are hard to ignore (and also prompt us to read quite differently words such as 'monument,' 'sacred' or 'profane' in the title), it may still be worth pointing out that it is not the book's most extensive section, it is self-sufficient (and does not require that an entire text follow it) and does not occupy, in spite of Kircher's statement to the contrary in the account he gives of his work in its unnumbered 'Preface,'¹⁵ an utmost position in the economy of the text.

In fact, it is the same 'Preface' that may offer us a clue as to how we are supposed to navigate the intricacies of this text. In it, Kircher talks about his ten-year long interest in collecting everything that is "most curious and remarkable" in China and the neighbouring kingdoms regarding "antiquities and superstitions"; the same aggregation impulse is at work in his use of the many Jesuit reports and letters reaching him, from which he extracts the "very rare and very curious things," with a view to both preserving the originals from being forgotten and eaten by worms in a library corner and also being of use to "all scholars and curious people." This interest in the exotica made him write "a beautiful volume" by following the "beautiful method" of organising his work in six sections, thereby giving "further lustre" to his text.

This spectacle of remarkable, rare and curious things, both ancient and modern, both sacred and profane, and which Kircher promises to present in a spectacular fashion is meant for a reader who is supposed to be strongly familiar with much of what the father had written before: the Jesuit, in fact, often enters into a dialogue with his readers and constantly refers them back to other texts from his massive output. Intertextuality further enriches the spectacle by suggesting different connections and reminding one of different contexts for the topics under discussion. *China illustrata* is thus projected as only a part of the Kircherian Baroque theatre of scholarship, the continuous

¹⁴ See Billings, 'Jesuit Fish' and 'Untranslation'. See also Michael Keevak, *The Story of a Stele: China's Nestorian Monument and Its Reception in the West, 1625-1916* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ In the Latin original, Kircher does state that the Xi'an monument is the reason why he undertook writing his work; in the 1670 French translation, the monument becomes merely "the main subject" of the book. Such prominence seems at least partially diluted by the significant role the father attributes in the 'Preface' to the other chapters.

spectacle of knowledge promised and delivered for his contemporaries by the “last man who knew everything.”¹⁶

Not a full tableau, but rather selections; not an account, but rather a quest for specific information in existing accounts; a China to be produced according to Kircher’s particular ‘methods’ and agendas – this is what we are promised in the ‘Preface’ and this is what the book delivers. Its first chapter offers a translation of the inscriptions on the Xi’an monument, and I will have more to say about it in the next section of my paper; here, it is important to point out that Kircher takes this monument as a starting point of his book on China primarily in view of what looks like a private scholarly squabble. This is how Chapter 1, ‘The Cause and Occasion of this Work,’ in Part 1 of *China illustrata* begins in John Ogilby’s 1673 rendition:

It is now about thirty years since I produc’d the Exposition of a certain *Syro-Chinesian* Monument, found in *China* in the Year 1625, which although it gain’d no small Applause among the Readers of a more than ordinary Apprehension, who were taken with the Novelty, yet there were not wanting some incompetent Censurers or Criticks, who ceased not to wound its Reputation by snarling and trifling Objections, stabbing it with critical Steletto’s, albeit they prov’d in the sequel leaden and blunted, *viz.* That there was never any Monument of such a kind in Nature, and that therefore it was a meer Forgery... These and the like Persons...[a]re they that like troublesom Flesh-Flies, flying at any obvious fatness, soil that which is sincere and untainted, and desist not to bespot that which is pure with a defil’d and *Thrasonick* Blast: Amongst which was a certain modern Writer, who blush’d not with all his Might, and indeed with an insolent Scoff to question the truth of this Monument, sometimes asserting it to be introduc’d by a Jesuitical Cheat, and other whiles averring that it was a flat and plain Forgery of the *Jesuits*... I shall conceal the Name of the Person, partly out of a tenderness to *Christian* Charity, and partly because in the Judgment of prudent and knowing Men he seemeth unworthy of any Answer... [I]t is of little concernment what an obscure Bragadocio barketh forth in the utmost Quarter of the World; who, if he had abstain’d from Calumnies and Scoffs, and had prudently propos’d the Matter with some

¹⁶ For a recent discussion of Kircher’s career, see Paula Findlen, ‘Introduction: The Last Man Who Knew Everything... or Did He?: Athanasius Kircher, S.J. (1602–80) and His World,’ in Findlen, ed. *The Last Man*, pp. 1-48; see also Paula Findlen, ‘Scientific Spectacle in Baroque Rome: Athanasius Kircher and the Roman College Museum,’ in *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters*, ed. Mordechai Feingold (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 225-284.

scrupulosity, peradventure might better have sav'd his own
Reputation and the Credit of his Work...¹⁷

The 'Exposition' produced by Kircher appears in his 1636 *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus* and the 'Bragadocio' is Georg Horn, a German Protestant scholar who had cast strong doubts on the authenticity of the Xi'an monument in a text published in 1652.¹⁸ Leaving aside matters pertaining to religion, the regime and metaphors of truth, and the hermeneutics of the Other foregrounded by this passage, we should notice that a text proceeding from such a polemical impulse implies by default all the spectacular pyrotechnics of erudition Kircher's readers expected from him.

The next two chapters (on journeys to and from China, and idolatry, respectively) connect quite well with the first. Thus, the Roman-Catholic origin Kircher needs to demonstrate for the Xi'an monument makes textual travel in time and space an absolute necessity. Going back in time to the Greeks and Egyptians and travelling from China to Europe and back are of course logically required by what Kircher aims to prove, namely the existence of a cultural continuum between Europe and China which supports the Jesuit claim that conversion is, in China, an operation of memory; moreover, they are also, like all voyages of this kind, opportunities for spectacle, the dazzling varieties of which the Jesuit father masters so well.

After all this extensive coming and going has ultimately constructed China as a religious and cultural extension of Europe, Kircher can now indulge in discussing "rare and curious things," as promised. In the next two chapters, Kircher selects, describes and mostly comments on and explains matters of art and nature in China, making connections and comparisons, referring his readers to countless texts produced by himself or others and dizzying everybody with spectacular hermeneutic turns on every page. In these passages, which for a modern reader are also the most attractive, Kircher does better than anywhere in the book what he knows best: he kircherises,¹⁹ producing the spectacles of himself he was so famous for.

Chapter six, dedicated to Chinese writing and also the main point of interest in the present paper, is supposed to take us back full circle: Kircher's etymologies and analytic descriptions are meant to reveal matters bearing on the "antiquity and origin of the Oriental kingdoms of Asia," as he puts it in his 'Preface.' His hermeneutic program of deriving Chinese cultural forms from ancient Western sources is once again at work in a reconstruction venture that

¹⁷ Nieuhof, *An Embassy*, pp. 319-20.

¹⁸ See Keevak, *Story*, pp. 35-36; Billings, 'Jesuit Fish,' p. 18.

¹⁹ Findlen, 'Introduction,' in Findlen, ed. *The Last Man*, p. 43.

goes to the very core of Chinese culture, with a view to obtaining “some advantage for the Christian Republic.” After the flights of fantasy in the previous two chapters, a new drive for discipline rounds off and offers closure, strengthening the image of the zealous worker in the garden of the Christian hermeneutics of the exotic that Kircher had been building for himself for decades. Kircher’s spectacular enterprises are, once again, primarily spectacles of himself. As he himself puts it,

My Business is only to explain those things, which as they are controverted, so likedo wonderfully render the Readers doubtful and perplex’d about the equivocation of the Terms; and also to alledge, in respect to the curious Reader, the more rare Curiosities and Secrets of Things observ’d to be treasur’d up in this Nation and others adjacent, not observ’d hitherto by any former Authors; with the Prodigies both of Nature and Art, each being recorded in their proper place.²⁰

A hermeneutics of the spectacular exotic, to be ordered in memorable fashion, therefore, rather than narratives of the Other. Thus, in spite of the text’s structural differences from earlier master-texts on China, it does keep the promises it announces in its title: *China illustrata* is indeed designed, as the brief overview above has tried to show, as a spectacle of a spectacular mind at work. Some of the more detailed visual-textual aspects will be briefly discussed below.

The Art of Depicting the Other: Words and Images in *China illustrata*

Kircher’s hermeneutic forays, descriptions of the marvellous, and narratives of the Other, together with the way everything looks on the book’s pages – his visual-textual spectacle of words – and the manner in which the illustrations participate in this spectacle cannot be fully reviewed here: with some critics even depicting Kircher as “incapable of thinking other than in images,”²¹ such an attempt would be, no doubt, particularly difficult. In this section of my paper, I will focus only on those aspects I take to contribute the most to making *China illustrata* into a typical kircherian *mise-en-scène*.

Kircher exhibits his visual-textual showmanship in the very first chapter, in which he uses his own special method for interpreting the Sino-Syriac inscription. This method implies, on an immediate visual level, creating a sensation of orderliness and accuracy, and this is achieved in several ways.

²⁰ Nieuhof, *An Embassy*, p. 321.

²¹ Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 165.

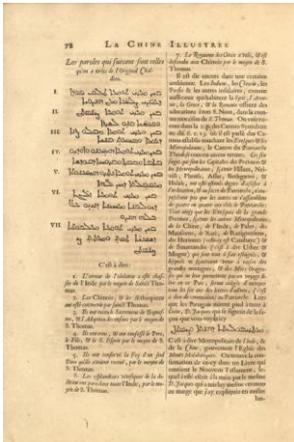
For example, the readers are sequentially offered, as proof of the veracity of the monument and the exactitude of the translation advanced by Kircher on the basis of previous Jesuit work, four different ‘texts’ of the inscription – one in Chinese characters, another in transliteration, a word by word rendition and finally Kircher’s version. By numbering the columns of the Chinese text and cross-referencing them in the other versions, the father permits, hypothetically at least, total transparency.

The hermeneutics at work here has been covered in fascinating detail in recent work by Timothy Billings,²² who has brilliantly commented on the illusions of creating perfect correspondences through translation, the role of the blanks in the Chinese and transliterated text, the different concepts of translation and equivalence at work in the two renditions and the operational value of Haun Saussy’s beautiful “workshop of equivalences” figure,²³ the role of tables and tableaux in the text, etc. I would like to add here only one remark on another feature of the spectacle Kircher builds for the inscription.

Although more excessively ornamented than other pages in Kircher’s books, the one reproduced in figure 8 (p. 55) cannot be considered in any sense uncommon in his texts. The orgy of scripts and characters, often taken from rare and valuable books and always dully followed by translation and interpretation, makes such pages not only scholarly but also visually dazzling. Kircher literally uses script as a powerful weapon in his arsenal of persuasion methods, and when images are embedded in the text (pp. 72, 74) [Figures 9 and 10], one can hardly resist the overwhelming sensation of perfect coherence and correspondence conveyed by what is put in front of one’s eyes.

²² In Billings, ‘Jesuit Fish,’ 2004, especially pp. 6-17, and ‘Untranslation,’ 2008, pp. 95-102.

²³ Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 15-34.



Figures 8 (left), 9 (centre) and 10 (right): Typical pages from *China illustrata*. Digital Library, Villanova University.

This kind of spectacle is never enacted with Chinese text, even if Kircher does pretend to read Chinese; the lack of a press capable of printing Chinese characters is alluded to at one point as a reason for this. While single (and quite large) characters are present on his pages – as for instance in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 –²⁴ the overall effect is much less striking. This technical limitation forces the Jesuit father to include the text of the Xi'an inscription only as a plate [Figure 11] and make all his references to it in translation or through corresponding numbers. Thus, impressive strings of Chinese characters do not bedazzle the readers like other arcane writing, and Kircher's scriptural pyrotechnics fails to acquire a Chinese dimension precisely when, given the polemical impulse motivating the book, it should have been more breath-taking than ever.

²⁴ On printing Chinese characters in Europe, see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Vol. 1, pp. 679-680. Individual characters have been present in European printed texts since the 1570s.

*Insignum vobis et gentium
 Celeberrimi vetus monumenti Sincio Syriaci
 quod in Regno Sinarum prope Urbem Siganu
 mo quo Christianae Religioni fructus et iustitiam
 Anno 1625 detectum fuit.*



*Copia Tabulae propria manu
 cartographo Desjardis
 Matthaei Sina Brundius ex
 Siganfu Romae A. 1664.*

The image shows a large, complex grid of Chinese characters. The characters are arranged in a regular pattern, with some characters appearing in larger or smaller sizes. Below the main grid, there are several columns of smaller text, including Syriac script and numbers. The overall layout is highly structured and organized.

Figure 11: The Xi'an Sino-Syriac Inscription. Digital Library, Villanova University.

Perhaps by way of compensation, spectacle is even more there. One can see it, for instance, in the way the Chinese text in the plate is broken up, disciplined in a grid and carefully numbered; it is also visible in the long tables (p. 19) [Figure 12] dedicated to the correct pronunciation of Chinese words, full of numbers and tone marks; finally, we are offered a new combination of words and numbers (p. 28) [Figure 13], in a way that is legible, yet definitely unusual. The harmony of perfect correspondence between fully disciplined words and numbers replaces dazzling scriptural displays, while also suggesting a certain mechanical ease that reminds researchers of Kircher's earlier experiments in polygraphy.²⁵

²⁵ Saussy, 'The Universe,' p. 108; Billings, 'Jesuit Fish,' p. 6.

La premiere Interpretation
 Par laquelle on apprend à prononcer comme il faut, & selon la vraye & naturelle prononciation, les caracteres Chinois, qui sont au Monument, decouvert depuis peu dans ce Royaume; le tout à la faveur des caracteres Latins.

	7. <i>Chun</i> 8. <i>Kuè</i> 9. <i>Poey</i>	4. <i>Kiao</i> 5. <i>Lieù</i> 6. <i>Fini</i>	11. <i>Ti</i> 2. <i>Cyi</i> 3. <i>Kim</i>
4. Col.	3. Col.	2. Col.	1. Col.
1. <i>uú</i>	1. <i>çú</i>	1. <i>lí</i>	1. <i>yè</i>
2. <i>tè</i>	2. <i>çt</i>	2. <i>ké</i>	2. <i>giú</i>
3. <i>cyè</i>	3. <i>chú</i>	3. <i>ngan</i>	3. <i>cham</i>
4. <i>pè</i>	3. <i>chuní</i>	4. <i>chiní</i>	4. <i>gení</i>
5. <i>chuení</i>	4. <i>küè</i>	5. <i>y</i>	5. <i>chiní</i>
6. <i>xaó</i>	5. <i>miú</i>	6. <i>lí</i>	6. <i>cyè</i>
7. <i>cyè</i>	6. <i>suní</i>	7. <i>tiení</i>	7. <i>syení</i>
8. <i>mó</i>	7. <i>yú</i>	8. <i>tý</i>	8. <i>syení</i>
9. <i>vaní</i>	8. <i>poj</i>	9. <i>kej</i>	9. <i>lí</i>
10. <i>tú</i>	9. <i>çí</i>	10. <i>gè</i>	12. <i>uú</i>
11. <i>kiení</i>	9. <i>chí</i>	12. <i>yüè</i>	11. <i>yuení</i>
12. <i>mú</i>	10. <i>nyj</i>	13. <i>yui</i>	12. <i>siaó</i>
13. <i>huú</i>	11. <i>çt</i>	13. <i>lí</i>	13. <i>gení</i>
14. <i>fè</i>	12. <i>y</i>	14. <i>cheú</i>	14. <i>limí</i>
15. <i>yú</i>	13. <i>çan</i>	15. <i>yè</i>	14. <i>hiú</i>
			C 2
			10. <i>çt</i>

Figure 12: Learning to pronounce Chinese. Digital Library, Villanova University.

La II. Interpretation

Verbale & latine par laquelle on vient à la Veritable connoissance du Monument Syro-Chaldeen.

Le Monument de la très illustre Loy promulguée dans *Chuní kuè* (c'est à dire dans l'Empire des *Chinois*, decouvert dans la grande *Chine* (çavoir la *Judee*.)

o. La Pierre digne d'une eternelle louange, & le prologe de la très illustre Loy promulguée dans la *Chine*, fait par *Kim gym* Prestre de l'Eglise de *Tayn* (c'est à dire de *Judee*.)

1. **L**E principe a esté tousjours le même, veritable, paisible, le premier de tous les autres, & sans origine. Il a esté encore necessairement ce qu'il est, intelligent, spirituel, le plus noble, & le plus parfait de tous; il a réglé les Cieux, & a fait de très belles choses du Neant, les plus parfaits de tous les Saints adorent celui qui n'a point de principe, & lequel estant unique en sa très parfaite substance, a trois persones divines qui participent sa divine essence. Le Seigneur *Holoy* qui est la verité, a reloué de pacifier les quatre parties du monde par sa Croix; il a excité l'esprit d'origine, & a produit au même temps.

2. Il a produit deux causes des changements (les Chinois les appellent *Ym* & *Yan*, c'est à dire la matiere & la forme) il a changé le vuide obscur, & a manifesté & decouvert le Ciel & la Terre. Il a fait le Soleil, & la Lune qui par leur mouvement font la nuit & le jour. Le

Figure 13: Kircherian philology. Digital Library, Villanova University.

Words, images, tables and scripts combine more freely in the next chapters. Kircher often changes the tone from one subsection to another and from one author he quotes to another, deciphering mysterious writing, ingeniously connecting seemingly unrelated topics from different cultures and times, telling all sorts of stories and making all kinds of descriptions, always with an agenda and always with a view to demonstrating the coherence of his general vision. He is alternately the ingenious harmoniser of conflicting accounts or the subtle reducer, by comparison and contrast, of the exotic to the familiar; he sometimes believes older texts more than contemporary works, but in general doubts very little the Jesuit accounts and never his informants, whose words, letters, accounts or other texts he quotes at length. He is interested in anything and everything that draws his attention as being “rare and curious,”²⁶ and even makes numbered lists of such things as they relate to nature or art, the sacred or the profane.

While making their inventory here would be no doubt otiose, I cannot resist mentioning a few, such as: the elephant with a sugar cane growing inside its stomach; the stone that heals poisoning; the infant who indulges in eating snakes and venomous animals; the flying cats of Kashmir, taken by Kircher to be bats; the lucky escape of a Jesuit when attacked simultaneously by a tiger and a crocodile; the charmed Chinese mountain that turns into a labyrinth for anybody who disturbs its vegetation (a Buddhist fable, according to the father); the rose that changes its colour during the day; fish that change into birds and vice-versa; birds with wool instead of feathers (which Kircher dismisses as an illusion); and countless others. All this is interspersed with accounts of plants such as the ginseng root, the tea shrub, or the mango and papaya trees, a description of the Great Wall, as well as many texts written from a strikingly different perspective and on a very different tone. These include long travel narratives, a discussion about the pioneers of the Jesuit mission, various letters to the Pope from important Chinese converts, an imperial edict and a church inscription, bio-bibliographies of significant Jesuits, a learned dissertation on the Chinese religions and one on the illegible characters of the Brahmins.

²⁶ Kircher, ‘Preface’, *La Chine*, n.p.



Figure 14: The Mughal Emperor. Digital Library, Villanova University.

These common and sometimes quite sudden changes of tone are often matched by a corresponding adjustment in the type of illustrations; the script-based scholarly production of China or the East is replaced by the image-accompanied (or even image-inspired) description of the *exotica* and vice-versa. When this happens suddenly, like in the case of a plate [Figure 14] depicting “an Indian prince” and coming unexpectedly after long and learned expositions on “antiquities and superstitions” rather than “rare and curious things,” the effect is particularly powerful. Kircher is very much aware of the role of images in his text and their impact on the viewer: quite often, in fact, he builds his text around images, ordering their elements with Roman numbers [Figures 15 and 16] or building them in systematic fashion [Figures 17 and 18], explaining them with words, verbalising extra details (colour, for instance) and sometimes reproducing them anew in different contexts. Moreover, he also insists on the veracity of the images, which are meant to convey to the European eyes things exactly as they were seen by trustworthy travellers to

Illustrating China Through its Writing

remote lands; the result is a spectacular, orderly and domesticated Baroque exotic to which, *inter alia* and as stated above, we can trace the roots of later Chinoiserie.



Figures 15 (left) and 16 (right): Tartar costume. Digital Library, Villanova University.



Figures 17 (left) and 18 (right): Clothes of the Chinese and a Jesuit father. Digital Library, Villanova University.

In the making of *China illustrata* – or in the making of China through illustrations by means of words and images – one encounters a particular case in which the spectacle of script and the spectacle of image, the show for the minds and the show for the eyes, fully converge. This double spectacle is arguably the book’s most striking, as borders between forms of representation

crumble and a complex word-image ‘primitive’ semiotics is indirectly opposed to modern-day words and images; I will discuss about this in the next section.

The Semiotics of the Other: Kircher on Chinese Word-images

Even if he asked to be sent on missionary work in the Near- rather than the Far-East, Kircher’s interest in China was massive and of early date. He was friends with many of the Jesuit fathers doing work in China, carried an extensive correspondence related to China, and was attracted by the Chinese language and writing both as a field to be included in his larger intellectual explorations and as an outward sign of scholarly mastery. His 1636 *Prodromus Coptus* includes a discussion of the Xi’an monument; while no Chinese characters appear here, they are present in the long dedicatory section [Figure 19] in the first volume of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652) and, in a longer section [Figure 20] later rearranged in *China illustrata*, also in the third volume of the same (*Theatrum hieroglyphicum*, 1654). Kircher also had information about the pronunciation of Chinese, knew a great deal about the Jesuit linguistic strategies applied to Chinese and had certainly perused carefully the various descriptions of the Chinese language in major European texts on China.



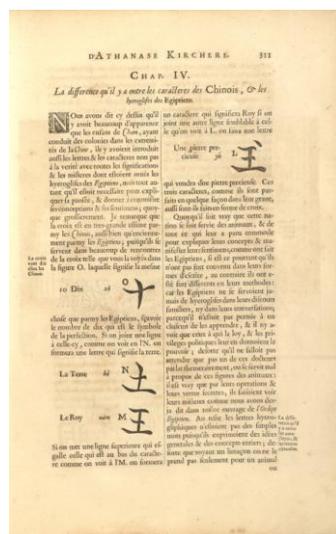
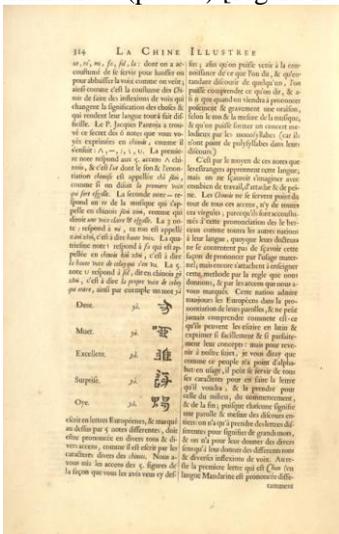
Figure 19 (left): Panegyric included in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* I, 1652.

Figure 20 (right): *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* III, 1654, p. 14.

These are not the model for the last chapter of his book, just as *China illustrata* itself is not modelled on any of the earlier European master-texts on China. Instead, Kircher creates once again spectacle, this time by combining

not only erudition and showmanship, but also ‘nature’ and ‘art’ (in yet a different way from what we have seen so far) and both words and images.

Unlike the original version published in the *Theatrum hieroglyphicum*, the last chapter of *China illustrata* proceeds to argue its main point – that Chinese characters derive from Egyptian hieroglyphs, just like the whole of Chinese civilisation comes in fact from Egypt – in chronological fashion. On sober pages and vintage Kircherian tones, the first and last of the five subsections (p. 314) [Figure 21] offer the historical argument and a description of the present-day situation, sandwiching in-between the visually dazzling (and not less vintage Kircher) sections providing ‘explanations’ about Chinese characters and their relationship to hieroglyphs. The first and last in the group of intermediary subsections (p. 311) [Figure 22], transitioning to and away from the visual smorgasbord of the median subsection, combine words and images or Chinese character in the spectacular fashion we are used to, also famously formulating Kircher’s hierarchy of scripts.²⁷ Finally, at the very core of his section on writing, Kircher explores in detail the make-up of the ‘ancient’ Chinese characters, uniting all threads and running the ultimate Kircherian show (p. 306) [Figure 23].



Figures 21 (left) and 22 (right): Pages from subsections V and IV respectively of the last chapter in *China illustrata*. Digital Library, Villanova University.

²⁷ See Eco, *The Search*, pp. 158-162.



Figure 23: *China illustrata*, final chapter, subsection III. Digital Library, Villanova University.

Kircher's thesis on Chinese characters²⁸ derives from his larger historical projections. Relying on 'Chinese annals' to identify Fuxi as the inventor of the characters 300 years after the Flood, Kircher explains the mythical emperor's connections with Noah's son, Cham, also known as Zoroaster in Persia, and with Hermes Trismegistus. Without further engaging here in one of the century's most spectacular intellectual projects, that of making biblical and Chinese chronologies and figures harmonise,²⁹ Kircher explains the beginning of writing in China as follows:

The first Chinese made their characters from all the things in the world and they used everything, as we can see in their chronicles and the form and figure of their letters; as they formed them as the

²⁸ See Boleslaw Szczesniak, 'The Origin of the Chinese Language according to Athanasius Kircher's Theory,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 72, no. 1 (1952), pp. 21-29; Mungello, *Curious Land*, pp. 143-57; Michele Fatica, 'Athanasius Kircher, Ermete Trismegisto, i geroglifici egizi e i caratteri cinesi,' in *Adorare caelestia, gubernare terrena*, eds Pasquale Arfé, Irene Caiazzo, Antonella Sannino (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 534-542.

²⁹ See Edwin J. Van Kley, 'Europe's "Discovery" of China and the Writing of World History,' *The American Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 2 (1971), pp. 358-385.

Egyptians did, representing sometimes animals, sometimes birds, then reptiles, and fishes; and finally, after all of these, they used herbs, branches of trees, ropes, threads, points, circles and several other things which formed however the same characters in a different manner from that of present day Chinese. These, having become more learned and skilful by experience, have changed everything and given a certain resemblance to this confusion of animals and plants by means of the points they have added and which make this ancient method easier and shorter than it used to be.³⁰

It matters little, I think, that the Dalquié French version translated above is much more prolix and confusing than the Latin original or that Kircher takes these statements (which still need to be demonstrated and ‘illustrated’) as further proof for his colonisation theories. What seems more important is that in the ‘confusion’ of ‘all the things in the world,’ both of nature and culture, from which early Chinese characters appeared, Kircher sees the order of categorisation. The ancient Chinese signs were not independent pictograms of ‘ideographs’ of things and therefore as numerous as things themselves – as many early formulations of the “ideographic myth”³¹ had already made it clear for European readers – but rather sophisticated forms of correspondence leading to a ‘natural’ system of representation. How this was supposed to work is described by Kircher in more detail in the next subsection (II):

We have already said in the preceding discourses that the ancient Chinese used everything that came in front of their eyes in order to be able to manifest their thoughts and make known the concepts of their minds. Therefore, when they wanted to treat of matters related to fire, they used serpents, asps and dragons, which, being placed after one fashion or another, indicated one thing or another. When they wanted to describe what was found in the air, they appealed to the same element and used birds, just as they used fishes for things of the water and flowers, leaves and branches in order to express things of the land and vegetal beings. They indicated stars by points and circles, each of which made known particular stars. As for indifferent things, they used wood, globes or certain threads placed according to the rules they had for this purpose.³²

³⁰ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 303.

³¹ See John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1984), pp. 133-148.

³² Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 304.

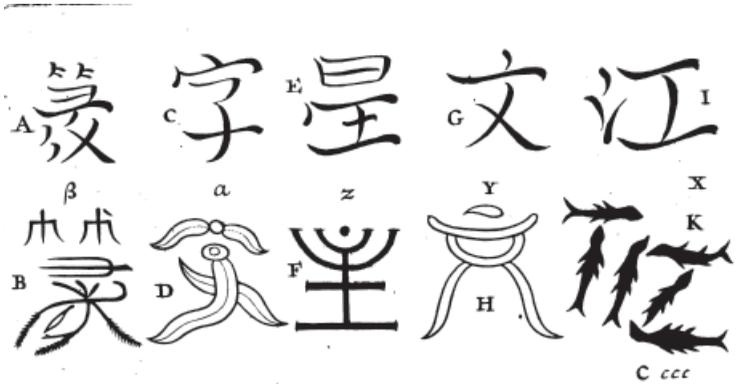


Figure 24: Correspondence tableau between ancient and modern Chinese characters. Digital Library, Villanova University.

While the moderns, continues Kircher, have abandoned this system, one can still recognise it in the make-up of modern characters, as the correspondence tableau (p. 304) [Figure 24] produced by the Jesuit father shows. The ancient and the modern are not contrasted in terms of cultural value – there is no suggestion of any degeneration present in the modern version of the characters – but they are both deemed inferior to the Egyptian hieroglyphs from which they are supposed to be derived. This is what Kircher has to say in subsection IV:

Hieroglyphic letters were not simple words because they expressed general ideas and entire concepts, in sort that upon seeing a snail [mistranslation for scarab] we do not take it only for an animal or the Sun, but for the secret virtues and the operations that not only the material Sun makes in the sensible world, but also the Archetype makes in the intelligible world. And we do not see this in the Chinese characters, as they do not comprise anything else but the signification of words without any mystery or thing worth knowing.³³

Despite their limited symbolic abilities, there are still many ‘agreeable inventions’ related to Chinese writing in its modern form that Kircher finds interesting, and he goes on to discuss them in a typical show of scholarly mastery, which also benefits from some limited visual support (p. 312) [Figure 25].

³³ Kircher, *La Chine*, pp. 311-312.

312 LA CHINE ILLUSTRÉE

ou pour le Soleil, mais pour les vertus secrètes, & les opérations que non-seulement le Soleil matériel fait dans le monde sensible, mais encore ce que l'Archetippe fait dans le monde intelligible. Ce qu'on ne voit pas dans les caractères Chinois, puisqu'ils ne comprennent rien autre chose que la signification des mots & des paroles sans enfermer aucun mystère, ny aucune chose digne d'être secret. Je ne nie pas neantmoins que les Chinois n'aient d'agréables inventions pour se faire entendre dans leurs écritures; mais il faut avouer pourtant que ce n'est rien en comparaison des anciens de la subtilité des hiéroglyphes d'Égypte, comme on peut voir par la disposition des lettres qui suivent, où le caractère C. signifie le meisme qui estre alligé; Il est composé des deux autres, sçavoir de celui du B. & de l'A, dont le 1. signifie le cœur, & le 2. signifie les lèvres qui marquent le D. & l'E. afin de donner à connoître un homme parfait; parce que le D. signifie homme, & l'E. Roy, voulant dire par là, qu'il n'y a rien de si parfait parmi les hommes qu'un Roy. Ils disent encore, que le G. marque un

Homme *g'ho* 人

Roy *mi* 王

Parfait *trinite* F 全

La Porte 門

Le Cœur *sin* 心

Affligé *mond* 痛

le dernier la porte; comme si on dit-
 soit que le *port* du *cœur* est fermé; d'au-
 tant que quand l'homme est dans l'af-
 fliction tous les répts se retirent le
 referent, & se concentrent dans le
 cœur; c'est pourquoy il craint, il ap-
 prehende, & il est alligé. Il ont ac-
 coutumé encore de former une F. com-

poité des caractères qui marquent le
 D. & l'E. afin de donner à connoi-
 tre un homme parfait; parce que le D.
 signifie homme, & l'E. Roy, voulant
 dire par là, qu'il n'y a rien de si par-
 fait parmi les hommes qu'un Roy. Ils
 disent encore, que le G. marque un

Élre amou-
 reux de
 quelqu'un,
 Femme, élre,
 parole

homme amoureux de quelqu'un, pour-
 ven qu'il soit composé de trois cara-
 cteres; sçavoir de l'a. qui signifie
 femme, du h. qui signifie du élre, &
 du e. qui marque la parole, comme
 s'ils voulaient dire par là que tout ain-
 si que l'on attire quelqu'un matériel-
 lement à soy par des cordes & des fi-
 lets & le cœur des hommes spiri-
 tuellement par la parole; de meisme

Le Jour *mi* H 明

les femmes attirent & gagnent les
 hommes. H. signifie la meisme chose
 que

Figure 25: *China illustrata*, final chapter, subsection IV. Digital Library, Villanova University.

In-between words and images, in subsection III, we have the special spectacle of word-images. We already know from the correspondence tableau how the ancient characters are supposed to have looked; we already know from Kircher's descriptions that, limitations in the realm of the symbolic notwithstanding, these early forms of script secured absolute semiotic transparency: the orderly system of the world translated seamlessly on the orderly system of writing, and it is now time for Kircher to put on a visual-cum-hermeneutic show to indicate his own mastery of this translation.



Figure 26: Several types of Kircher's ancient Chinese characters. Digital Library, Villanova University.

The Jesuit father lists sixteen different types of characters, each of which is exposed upon in a short paragraph and also illustrated with (usually) five different signs, for the visual delight of the reader (p. 307) [Figure 26]; the modern characters corresponding to the five signs, much smaller and crammed all in the bottom-left corner, are also offered. Several scholars³⁴ have traced the origin of these word-images to Ming dynasty popular encyclopaedias or perhaps Buddhist texts or calligraphy books and commented on their (mis)appropriation by Kircher. Here, I would like to point out that these beautiful emblems do not appear as separate folio-size plates, but are rather boxed on the printed page, surrounded by printed commentary and disciplined by it through the orderly dissection made possible by the presence of numerals

³⁴ Knud Lundbæk, *The Traditional History of the Chinese Script from a Seventeenth Century Jesuit Manuscript* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988); Saussy, 'The Universe,' pp. 111-112; Bruce Rusk, 'Old Scripts, New Actors: European Encounters with Chinese Writing, 1550-1700,' *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine*, no. 26 (2007), pp. 95-98.

and Latin capitals. We have seen this in the text several times, of course, but the lack of immediate referential familiarity, together with the presence of actual Chinese characters, makes such images quite different from those of clothes or plants, for instance. To put it otherwise, we cannot simply marvel at images, we need Kircher's hermeneutic endeavours in order to comprehend them.

Each of the sixteen types receives a description, sometimes a historical contextualisation and further commentary; at the end, the 'text' they make up is usually translated, on the basis of the 'modern' version. The longer narratives are associated with the oldest types identified by Kircher. For instance, in the case of the first type (p. 305) [Figure 27a], said to have been derived from serpents and dragons, we are told that they were put to early use in the writing of a *Book of Dragons*, dedicated in fact to 'Mathematics and Astrology'; we are then given examples, dully indicated by Latin capitals, and next we are provided with a translation of the "explanation of the moderns" – in this case 'Fuxi's *Book of Dragons*.' Kircher also adds: "You can see here marvellously interlaced serpents, which have various figures in keeping with the diversity of things they signify. These characters are so ancient that we can hardly find anyone able to explain them."³⁵

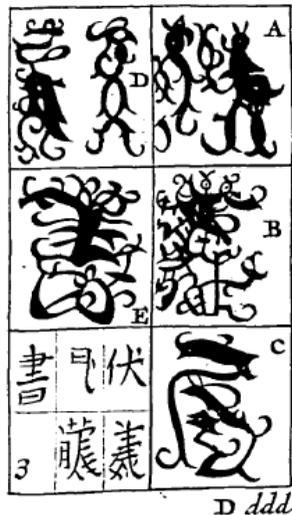


Figure 27a: Characters derived from serpents and dragons. Digital Library, Villanova University.

³⁵ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 305.

But we, as privileged spectators of this double show of words and images, do have Father Kircher as an explainer. Under his gentle guidance we learn, in turn, about scripts derived from agriculture [Figure 27b]; the phoenix bird [Figure 27c]; oysters and worms [Figure 27d]; herb roots [Figure 27e]; short wings of birds [Figure 27f]; turtles [Figure 27g]; birds and peacocks [Figure 27h]; herbs, wings, and branches [Figure 27i]; and stars and planets [Figure 27j]. Some of these are associated with various emperors or books; in the case of others, Kircher also tells us what the correct order of reading should be.

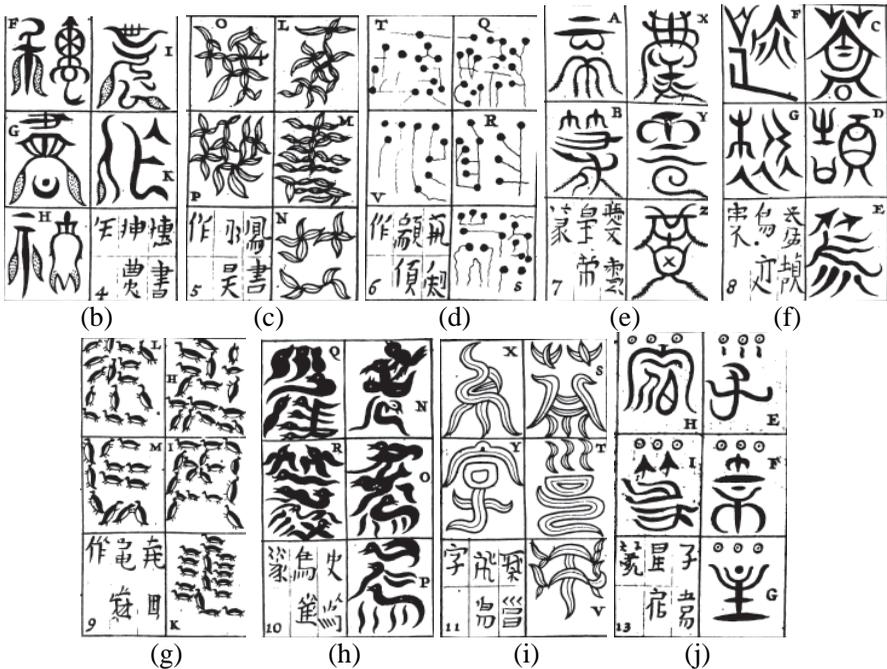


Figure 27b-j: Various forms of ancient Chinese characters, according to Kircher (pp. 306-309). Digital Library, Villanova University.

A quick look will show that I have listed above only ten out of the sixteen types, the reason being that Kircher provides explanations, if he does it at all, of a quite different kind for the remaining six. His type X (Figure 27k), for instance, is not related to natural or cultural objects, and by way of explanation we are only given their ‘signification’: “Co, author of certain tables, has

composed these letters so that he would not forget what he knows.”³⁶ Type XII [Figure 27l] refers to “letters used in ancient edicts”³⁷; type XIII [Figure 27m] provides no narrative about the origin of the characters and offers only a transliteration, not a translation; type XIV [Figure 27n] lists “the letters for quietness, joy, knowledge, discussion, darkness, and clarity”³⁸; type XV [Figure 27o] again offers no account about the origin of the characters but translates the Chinese text as “the assembly of letters of the dark river and scaly fish”³⁹; finally, type XVI [Figure 27p], we are told, could not be read and has not been understood.

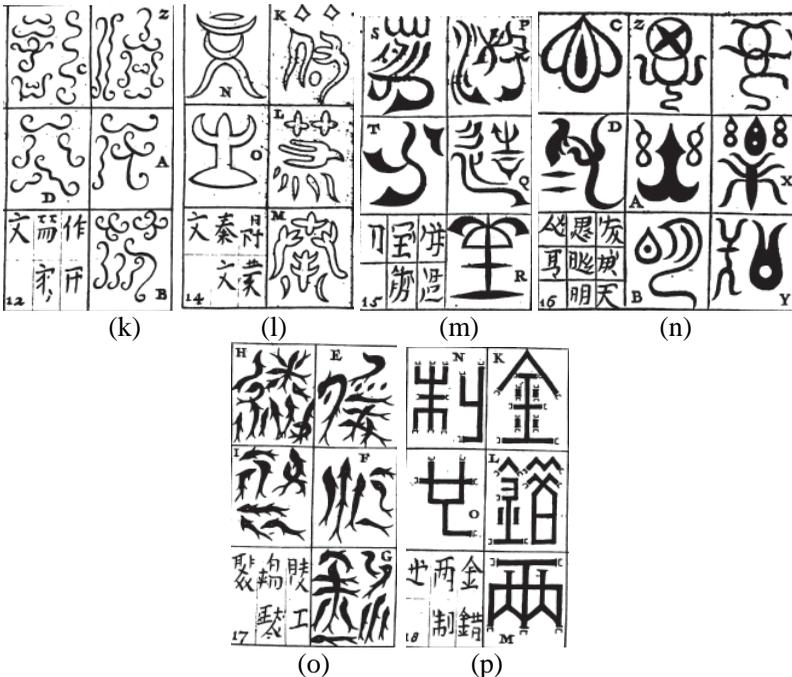


Figure 27k-p: The six ‘strange’ types in Kircher’s categorisation (pp. 308-309). Digital Library, Villanova University.

As post-Borges readers, I am sure that all of the above remind us at least a bit of “a certain Chinese encyclopaedia” that made Foucault laugh and write a

³⁶ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 308.
³⁷ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 308.
³⁸ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 308.
³⁹ Kircher, *La Chine*, p. 309.

beautiful book on the *Order of Things*.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the six ‘strange’ types listed above are visually as much part of the group as the ten ‘transparent’ ones; rejecting the former as logically incompatible with the latter in terms of the way they are ‘explained’ by Kircher does not warrant rejecting their membership in the powerful visual semiotics of the ancient Chinese characters advanced by the Jesuit father. Figuration resists linguistic disfiguration, as Kircher’s type XVI makes abundantly clear. This may perhaps explain why, in contemporary texts such as Ogilby’s, Webb’s⁴¹ or Spizelius’,⁴² the six types that do not fit fully with the others are still accepted as full-fledged members in the system even while they are signalled, at least partially and indirectly, as aberrant.⁴³

Conclusion

What else can be said after Kircher’s Borgesian ‘encyclopaedia’ of ancient Chinese characters? We could, of course, reflect more on what makes ‘word-images’ more than both words and images and their spectacle both alike and very much different from the beautiful strings of strange characters decorating Kircher’s pages and signalling his all-encompassing scholarship. We could, from here, also ponder on matters of categories and otherness, hermeneutics and modernity, or memory, metaphor, opaqueness, transparency and the like. We might also want to notice that, just as Borges’ fictional ‘Chinese encyclopaedia’ ends with an unsettling ‘etc.’,⁴⁴ Kircher’s list may always accommodate other examples, as the presence of a seventeenth type of characters in the earlier *Theatrum Hieroglyphicum*, that of ‘seal letters,’ would seem to demonstrate. Also, we could linger over the spectacular last image (p. 310) [Figure 28] of Subsection III and meditate on the relationship between art

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. xv-xix.

⁴¹ John Webb, *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language* (London: Nath. Brook, 1669), pp. 169-171.

⁴² Theophilus Spizelius, *De re literaria Sinensium commentarius* (Leiden: Pieter Hakkens, 1660), pp. 53-55.

⁴³ This is best seen in Webb’s case: whenever the origin of one type or another is not provided by Kircher, Webb signals the fact graphically, and he also uses paraphrase and commentary to circumvent the difficulties posed by the list.

⁴⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,’ in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 101-105.

and nature as it develops between the human writer and the reading ape.⁴⁵ Finally, we might want to speculate on the enduring sense that we have after going through this fascinating visual-textual tableau, namely that, notwithstanding Kircher's careful instructions regarding the pronunciation of modern Chinese words, his learned dissertation on tones or his long tables of Chinese characters in transliteration in the first chapter, Chinese remains for him, in its modern or 'ancient' form, fundamentally silent, a language for the eyes whose potential is fully achieved only when 'illustrated' through writing.

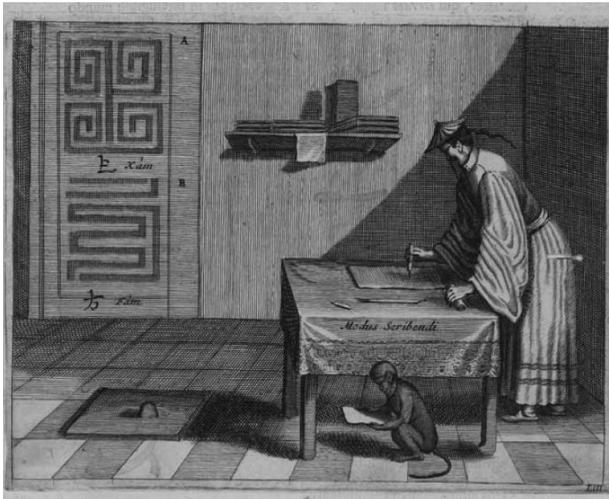


Figure 28: Chinese holding a brush. Digital Library, Villanova University.

Apart from this, I think that we can be quite sure that, upon reviewing his own 'Chinese encyclopaedia,' Kircher did not laugh or feel uneasiness and distress, as Foucault did when confronted with Borges' text. The good father must have looked at it as yet another triumph of his inquisitive mind: the Other was once again domesticated, nature and art had once again combined, in even more spectacular fashion than before, the sacred and the profane had been

⁴⁵ See Thijs Weststeijn, "Signs that Signify by Themselves." Writing with Images in the Seventeenth Century,' in *The Making of the Humanities I*, eds Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p. 141; Dawn Odell, "The Soul of Transactions": Illustrated Travels and Representations of China in the Seventeenth Century' (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2003), pp. 49-51; Mungello, *Curious Land*, p. 151.

revealed through all the Egyptian connections, and a new monument – *China illustrata*, a monument on monuments (the Xi'an inscription, Chinese writing, China itself) and a monument to Jesuit (and Kircherian) achievements – had been erected. And, most importantly, spectacle of the most memorable kind – with words, images, and even word-images dazzling the viewer – had been produced. Words and images have combined since then in many other wonderful European productions of China, and versions of the mystique of word-images have also centred lesser- (the 'figurist' efforts of several early eighteenth century Jesuits) or better-known (the Ernest Fenollosa/Ezra Pound project around *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*) Western spectacles of the Chinese Other; few of these, however, have matched the comprehensiveness and authoritativeness of Kircher's master-text at the time when it was published and none has proved able to appropriate otherness and delight in the exotic in quite the same way. And this, from the distance where we are now, is no small achievement.