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Exploring China in Alexander von Humboldt: The Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS), Changsha

ABSTRACT

Humboldtian science aims at an empirically supported transdisciplinary and at the same time transareal development of a world consciousness. In the development of this world consciousness, not only Europe and the Americas, but also Central Asia and especially China play an important role. The Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS) in Changsha, is attempting to address the fact that China has been largely left out of international Humboldt studies and that Alexander von Humboldt was intensively engaged with Central Asia and China for decades. Therefore, the Humboldt Center in Changsha sets itself the goal of expanding Humboldt Studies to include this important aspect, to stimulate and coordinate special research work, and to build scientific and cultural bridges between Germany and China, Europe and Asia.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Humboldt'sche Wissenschaft zielt auf eine empirisch gestützte transdisziplinäre und zugleich transareale Entfaltung eines Weltbewusstseins. Bei der Entwicklung dieses Weltbewusstseins spielen nicht allein Europa und die Amerikas, sondern auch Zentralasien und insbesondere China eine wichtige Rolle. Das Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS) in Changsha versucht, der bisher weitgehenden Ausblendung Chinas aus

den internationalen Humboldt-Studien und der Tatsache Rechnung zu tragen, dass Alexander von Humboldt sich jahrzehntelang intensiv mit Zentralasien und China beschäftigte. Daher setzt sich das Humboldt-Zentrum in Changsha zum Ziel, die Humboldt-Studien um diesen wichtigen Aspekt zu erweitern, spezielle Forschungsarbeiten anzuregen und zu koordinieren sowie wissenschaftliche und kulturelle Brücken zwischen Deutschland und China, Europa und Asien zu bauen.

RESUMEN

La Ciencia Humboldtiana intenta desarrollar, mediante una estrategia a la vez transdisciplinaria y transareal siempre empíricamente fundada, una conciencia mundial. Dentro de la concepción de esta conciencia mundial, Asia Central y específicamente China ocupan un lugar importante dentro de las concepciones humboldtianas. A pesar del hecho de que Alejandro de Humboldt estudiará, durante largos años, tanto a la Asia Central y a China, los estudios humboldtianos ofrecen una especie de blind spot en esta área. El Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS) en Changsha quiere remediar esta situación, fomentar y coordinar estudios especializados sobre China y el mundo de Asia Central en la obra humboldtiana y crear asimismo un puente científico y cultural entre Alemania y China, entre Europa y Asia Central.



In the heart of Alexander von Humboldt's world consciousness was the aim to live together, on a global scale, in peace and in difference.¹ Humboldtian Science, in its transdisciplinary and transareal construction, is based on a conviviality in the sense of *convivencia*, in a world-wide relationship of different nations, different cultures, of entangled histories and a common destiny of mankind. Therefore, Alexander von Humboldt is not only focusing our *Planet*, as the theories of the Anthropocene era usually do², or the *Globe*, in a global understanding of inter-related phenomena, but the *Earth* ("Erde") as the *habitat* of mankind as genuine part of his concept of nature-culture, and the *World* ("Welt") as a world-wide vectorized space including all activities of mankind and as the living framework of what the Prussian researcher and traveller called world consciousness, *Weltbewusstsein*.³

Analyzing his own period of accelerated globalization and extensively the beginnings of the colonial expansion of Europe, i.e. of Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15th Century and during the 16th Century, Alexander von Humboldt developed a historical perception of structural patterns that are still underlying the latest period of accelerated globalization, coming to an end around 2015. Humboldtian Science has not only been looking forward and creating the ground for the development of ecologic thinking and the comprehension of what is called Earth System today but has been clear in condemning all kinds of colonial structures and colonialism from a historical perspective rooted in the first six decades of the 19th Century. Alexander von Humboldt was, and there is no doubt about it, a man of his time; but his historical figure is outreaching far beyond his own time.

During over seventy years of restless publishing, Alexander von Humboldt created forms and norms of world-wide understanding and relationship, outlining in *Kosmos* his own *Weltbetrachtung* – the subtitle of his major work – in order to develop a global picture of "all things created." In this picture, in this *Naturgemälde*, of course, Central Asia and China could not and should not be missed. In fact, for decades, Alexander von Humboldt has worked on this important part for his world consciousness: Central Asia and China are far from being marginal fragments of Humboldt's world-wide puzzle of *Kosmos*.

Alexander von Humboldt is, of course, a multi-dimensional figure who requires new ways of understanding his pre-ecological and transcultural thoughts. The pandemic outbreak started in 2020 evidenced the end of the fourth phase of accelerated globalization, a time that the UN Secretary General had to warn that the world could once again break up into two antagonistic blocks. Bridge-building in the fields of science and culture is thus of particular significance. The Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS) in Changsha, China, is one of those bridges to establish a close and academically sustainable link between China and Germany, between Asia and Europe. Given his enthusiasm for China, which can be traced in many writings and manuscripts, and his cosmopolitanism towards other cultures, Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian cultural and natural scientist, the first theorist of globalization, is an ideal basis for this collaboration and bridge-building.

1 This paper is supported by the research project "Alexander von Humboldt's Travel Writing from Chinese Perspectives" (no. 19YBA228).

2 Cf. Chakrabarty, Dipesh: *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2021.

3 Cf. Ette, Ottmar: *Weltbewusstsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne*. 2nd edition. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2019.

In Humboldtian Studies, the view prevailed that the most important connection existed between Humboldt and China was the desire of the then 60-year-old explorer to reach the Chinese border once in his life. No doubt, Alexander von Humboldt's cosmos would be incomplete without China. Likewise, Humboldtian Studies is substantial for China since the development in globalization has set up Alexander von Humboldt as an icon that stands for respectful cultural exchanges, and more importantly for another and unexplored possibility of western modernity.

Humboldt and the Center

Alexander von Humboldt read extensively about China and acquired an in-depth knowledge of Chinese civilization. His interest in the development of a broad-based sinology in France as well as in German-speaking countries was strong. For instance, a beneficiary of this development, Humboldt was familiar with the Chinese books that were part of formal and general education in ancient China and greatly appreciated the well-developed geographical knowledge articulated in the chapter “禹贡” (Yu Gong) in an ancient book called 尚书 (Shang Shu, *The Book of Documents*). He considered the development of ancient Chinese geography to be more advanced than that of the ancient Greece and Rome in the same period. He was also familiar with the astronomical achievements in ancient China. Humboldt was very thorough in collecting information about China, as he was also familiar with the knowledge of regional development in China. Thus, he learned the traditional Chinese drilling methods in detail and was interested in the works of pilgrim monks traveling through China and on the Silk Road.

It is undoubtedly this great interest in China, evidenced over decades, that led him to the bold decision to break through the restrictions of the Tsarist government on his 1829 Russian-Siberian Exploration Trip and arrived at the Chinese frontier. There he met with a Qing Dynasty official named 清福 (Qing Fu). Although time and other reasons prevented him from penetrating further into this vast and diverse country, this unfinished experience was echoed in the founding of the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies. In other words, after a very long period of unawareness, Alexander von Humboldt has arrived in China!

This center, whose inspiration and intellectual “founder” was Alexander von Humboldt, aims at invigorating and inheriting the unique value of Humboldt's encounter with Qing Fu and, beyond that, to build a bridge of scientific and cultural knowledge between China and Germany. It will attempt to uncover the vast field of research for the study of Alexander von Humboldt and to facilitate an exchange between Chinese and German scholars and students in the spirit of Humboldt. In so doing, the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies can rely on the support of the academy project “Travelling Humboldt – Science on the Move”, which has been established at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities since 2015, and is scheduled to run until 2033, i.e. for at least a decade. Apart from this academy project, but deeply interrelated with it, another project dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt with the support from Humboldt House in Havana, Cuba (*Proyecto Humboldt Digital*) enables trans-areal contacts, i.e. contacts that go far beyond the boundaries of binational interrelationship. Alexander von Humboldt is a world-wide figure, and the Humboldtian Science deserves an interrelated and global analysis of our world today. TransArea Studies are perfectly designed to reach this goal.

An Alternative Pattern of Modernity

Humboldt's advance on his Russian-Siberian Exploration to the Chinese border took place about eleven years before the First Opium War between China and Great Britain, the war that set the pattern for China's encounter with the West for the next 100 years: the colonialist model of conquest by military force. There is no doubt that Humboldt would have condemned these brutal ways of colonial expansion. One of the manifestations of this pattern, which continues till today, is that China was drawn into an earnest pursuit of modernization defined by the West. Humboldt's sharp criticism of European colonialism and its consequences, as well as of any form of slavery, stands for the buried tradition of another modernity, which relies on the forces of peaceful coexistence and conviviality in difference. Thus, his short visit to the Chinese border, emotionally and epistemologically important for him, and his scientific passion for China represents a different pattern, a different model that can still serve us as a guideline for the 21st Century.

Indeed, Alexander von Humboldt represents a unique presence who has shaping influence to modernity at the end of the 19th Century. It is impossible to have the big picture of modernity without a thorough understanding of Humboldt and his writings. Yet this pattern or model of modernity that he represents is largely overlooked and forgotten by the modern western world. Uncovering this buried tradition would undoubtedly enrich the understanding of our world today.

Alexander von Humboldt's multi-logical thinking stands for the possibility of a peaceful interaction between different cultures, between heterogeneous civilizations with different underlying logic. An essential difference between this alternative model and the colonialist one is that the former is not characterized by violence. Humboldtian Science, characterized by mutual respect and consideration of other cultures and views, is an ethically anchored fundamental conviction, from which we can still learn a great deal today. It is far beyond simple stereotypical political antagonisms and horror stories. This forgotten and sometimes intentionally overlooked possibility is one that Chinese culture is more willing to identify with and practise. As the old Chinese saying goes, holding history up as the mirror, the rise and fall of the world is reflected. The study of this historical figure and his writing from the Chinese standpoint and perspective enable a re-examination of the diversity and variety of the modern tradition, both for Europe and for China, which is the prerequisite for conviviality in its true sense of living together in peace and difference.

Fostering Tricontinental Relations

Alexander von Humboldt and China is a vast field of research that remains largely unexplored. However, while emphasizing that Humboldtian Studies is a new and unexplored research field in China, it should not be forgotten that this neglect exists not only in China but in the entire international research world. The Chinese voice and the Chinese dimension have been a glaring omission in world-wide Humboldtian studies. With the founding of the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies, Chinese scholars are trying to fill in this gap, with the encouragement and support from various Humboldt projects world-wide.

The Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities is trying to establish a cooperation with its Chinese partner academy. At the tri-continental conference on Alexander von Humboldt organized by Casa Humboldt, Ren Haiyan was the only Chinese to participate and set

an example for the willingness to strengthen China's ties not only to the scientific landscape in Germany but also in Latin America. In this context of TransArea Studies, Chinese colleagues are combing through Humboldt's Chinese connections, focusing on Sinology in Europe, Humboldt's knowledge of China, and Humboldt's reception and dissemination in China. They discovered that as early as 1832, *The Chinese Repository*, a China based English periodical run by Protestant missionaries referred twice to Alexander von Humboldt and his discoveries in the trip to Central Asia in a review. This probably is the earliest record of Humboldt in China.⁴ Last year, a Chinese doctoral student started to work on a project that will shed light for the first time on Alexander von Humboldt's wide-ranging relations with China in a monograph form. A second doctoral student focusing on Humboldtian Studies will start her research this autumn. These are truly promising perspectives!

Qian Zhongshu, who is generally considered one of the representatives of the best humanistic scholarship since the 20th Century in China, proposes that "from the east sea to the west sea, the minds and principles are similar; in the discourses of the south and the north, the way and the approaches do not go separate."⁵ The universalist ideal in Qian's remark, embraced as the guideline by many Chinese scholars in comparative literature studies, highlights the significance and value of a comparative study between Humboldt's Europe and China, albeit the vastly different historical and cultural backgrounds. In this regards, there are two research projects on Alexander von Humboldt from the Chinese perspective that are endorsed at the provincial level: one aims at examining and making a comparative study on Alexander von Humboldt's view of nature with that of Taoism; the other intends to conduct a comparative study on Alexander von Humboldt and his contemporary traveller Xu Song (徐松) from China with the help of multi-model database. Taoist classic *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching* or *Laozi*) says that man follows the ways of di (the earth), di follows the ways of tian (the heaven), tian follows the ways of Tao, and Tao follows the ways of zi-ran (nature). This Taoist thought may find its resonance in the ecological Humboldt. The comparative studies on traveling writing, while reconsidering Humboldt in Chinese dimension reposition and "rediscover" a number of Chinese travel writing, a line of writing tradition somewhat deviated from the dominant in traditional China.

In the light of TransArea Studies, "inviting" Alexander von Humboldt and Humboldt Studies to China is only half of the story. We hope to honor the cosmopolitan spirit of Humboldt's world consciousness and his deep concern for the real world by transforming the center into a hub of intellectual communication and global exchange to create a transareal platform for multilateral cooperation. For example, a special issue on Latin American literature and culture was published in English in *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, which attracted much attention both in China and outside China. New horizons of research will be created in the spirit of Alexander von Humboldt.

This is not easy against the background of the history of science. The existing disciplinary system in China largely derives from the West, especially the Anglo-phonetic world. Indeed, since the Opium War in the late 19th Century, China considered itself to be a humble admirer and follower of what is generally termed "the Western power," from whom there is much to emulate and learn. Even today, the influence of Anglophone literature, especially British and U.S. lit-

4 We owe this discovery to Dr. Yi Jia who is currently working on a comparative study on Alexander von Humboldt and a Chinese traveller from the same period, Xu Song.

5 Qian, Zhongshu, *Tan Yi Lu*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2007, p. 1.

erature, is still prevalent in the field of foreign literary studies and beyond in China. English was for a long time the only foreign language designated as the “major” whereas other languages were classified as “minor”. Fortunately, Humboldt is an icon that is enabled to garner and gather scholars in languages that were once labeled “minor”.

In addition to the monopoly of Anglophone literature, the nonchalance towards Chinese reality is another crisis, questioning the validity of the research. The rise of foreign literature studies as a discipline in China was to meet the needs of revolution. As Chen Zhongyi points out, in many senses, together with Chinese literature studies, they are the two sides of the same coin.⁶ However, with foreign literature studies drifting apart from the reality of Chinese life as well as from the general public, the visions are confined, the conclusions are irrelevant. To counteract these crises, Chinese academia set up as its primary goal to build up three systems, that is, a disciplinary system, an academic system, and a discursive system with Chinese characteristics. The funding of the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies reflects and corresponds to such substantial changes.

In recent pandemic years, the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies earnestly seeks to be a hub of connection, relating scholars to scholars, scientific fields to scientific fields, the academia to the public, which is also known as relating everything to everything. It has succeeded in organizing a series of events and conferences to promote world consciousness and global cooperation. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Germany, the Humboldt Center co-hosted with the German department at Hunan Normal University, the German Cultural Festival. This Festival, which lasted for more than two months, gathered the attention of a large number of faculties as well as students. It sparked an intense interest in German and European cultures. Last April, the Center hosted an international conference on Latin American studies. What is particularly gratifying about the conference is that participants from the Americas, Europe and China have embraced the simultaneous existence not only of different languages, but of different logic of research and writing. Humboldt’s active participation in public education created far-reaching influences. For instance, he helped to promote the interest of women in scientific research. In due course, our center hopes that we can organize activities and events for the general public.

In the future, even under difficult global political conditions, the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies will continue to be obliged to commit to the task of creating a truly global community of research and learning in order to intensively engage people with diverse backgrounds from different parts of the world, to create occasions for researchers to tell their respective stories, to transcend stereotypes, and thus to build up convivial life. A convivial life based upon a new understanding of the interrelations between Planet and Globe, between Earth and World, establishing new entanglements of Nature and Culture.

6 Cf. Chen, Zhongyi, “An Overview of Foreign Literature Studies in China in the Past 100 Years.” *New Perspectives on World Literature*, 2019 (5), p. 5–12.

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