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CONSTRUCTED REALITIES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION?
CONSIDERATIONS ON THE MARGIN OF JUDAISM'S RECEPTION
IN PRESENT-DAY CHINA

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Abstract: The aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, it intends to highlight the value of constructivist insights for religious studies by showing that various forms of approach to issues related to religion are mere constructs. In contrast to this viewpoint, the discipline of religious studies had traditionally sought a higher degree of objectivity in the scientific reflection of religious topics, but that has been a fraught path. Secondly, the example it refers to is worthy in itself. The reception of Judaism in contemporary China is not only an under-investigated topic endowed with a great potential to reveal to what extent the Chinese ordinary man as well as the academic succeed to understand Western thought and to differentiate among the varied cultural traditions generally subsumed by them under the notion Western, but it also shows that the constructivist approaches preserve their validity in non-European contexts as well. Judaism's reception in contemporary China will be pursued on four different levels: popular literature, fake books, articles in the Christian Chinese media and academic productions. The four categories of texts represent four different degrees of comprehension of the object of study, primarily offering information about the worldviews of the authors of the texts. The process of reception of thought is regarded as a form of encounter where the active part is striving to get out of its own mindset and move towards the other.

Key Words: religious studies, constructivism, objectivity, Wertfreiheit, Judaism, anti-Semitism, China, Chinese media, Chinese literature, reception.

As any descriptive and empirical science, religious studies are characterized by their striving for a realistic representation of their research object, which has to be proved by unbiased, objective work. “Objectivity of historical research”, “objective study“ or “complete objectivity“ (Schimmel 1960, 236ff.) are concepts recorded in the Marburg “basic minimum presuppositions” for religious studies, issued at the Congress of the IAHR in 1960, and acknowledged as an international “Magna Carta” for this discipline.

Today, however, the postulate of objectivity, grounded on the concept of universal reason, is considered to be obsolete (Stolz 2001, 36). It is presently acknowledged that researchers address their objects of study with their own pre-scientific understanding of reality, based on personal and social pre-determinations. Here constructivist approaches intervene, defining every form of knowledge as a constructed reality (Fosnot 2005; Gergen 2015; Rockmore 2008; von Glasersfeld 1995). Even the impartiality or the unbiased character of scientific work has been strongly questioned, at least since the positivist dispute of the ‘60s. The representatives of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Habermas) generally consider that there are divergent interests behind all sorts of research (Antes 2007b, 209), and thus, they express suspicion regarding every science that emphasises its unbiased character, raising the issue of concealment of their real research interests.

To what extent can religious studies assume objective, unbiased representations of the investigated issues? Our hypothesis is that religious studies reach the desired truthfulness of reality to a higher degree compared to other forms of religious research and representation. When we refer to religious studies, we refer to studies such as those performed by Donald Wiebe, Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, or Moshe Idel (Wiebe 2005, 98-124; Swidler and Mojzes 2000; Idel 2007, 5-20). We depart from the specificities of religious studies when we examine the documents that we use in our research. Using the example of Judaism in present-day China – a topic that has hardly been taken into account by religious studies so far – it becomes unmistakably evident how the contexts in which the observers act influence their observations. This claim is even more provable if we take into account the popularization literature produced for the general public. Thus, on one hand, this literature is produced for mass consumption – and therefore it influences and even shapes the perception of the general public. On the other hand, the general public lacks the specific scientific lenses through which to filter the information provided in these popularization books – and therefore are prone to believe whatever the authors claim in it.

The scientific quality that the approach of religious studies may bring about becomes visible as well. In the German-speaking world, this methodological debate has led to the establishment of the difference between Christian theology and the history of religions, later

Religionswissenschaft (Antes 2008, 55). This preoccupation to delineate theology and religious studies still reverberates strongly today, as the recent disputes on the Yggdrassill discussion list prove, only during Aug.-Sept. 2011 there were more than 200 e-mails dealing with the issue (see the pages of *Religionswissenschaft* 2011). The research object that we have chosen, namely the encounter between China and Judaism, takes the debate on the role of religious studies out of the European Christian framework and tests the validity of these remarks when facing another socio-cultural context.

We will first tackle some information about the contemporary Jewish presence in China. According to the *Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Diaspora* issued in 2009, somewhere between 6000-7000 Jews live in mainland China. They arrived there after the Cultural Revolution, and approximately 4,000 live in Shanghai, 2,500 in Beijing and smaller groups in other places (Ehrlich 2009, 1155ff). Additionally, there are 3,000 Jews who live in Hong Kong, representing a much more visible and stronger community (Green and Diestal 2009, 1186ff).

Compared to the total population, which goes beyond a billion, the 10,000 resident Jews or so are an infinitesimally small group, whose number may be justly neglected in the population statistics. They have the status of foreigners and their contact with the Chinese is restricted to daily activities. Religious communities on the mainland are careful not to allow Chinese people to participate in their services, fearing of being accused of unauthorized missionary activity (Schrieb 2009).

Thus, the distinct perception of Judaism in China by means of these communities remains insignificant. Instead, China learns about Judaism from the countless and very diverse Chinese publications on the subject, which we will briefly describe and bring together into four groups. We have to state from the beginning that, with the exception of the latest group, the previous three are representative for popularization literature on Judaism, and not of religious studies literature.

The most widespread form of popularization literature on Judaism is represented by the countless number of books that express the so-called 'positive' Chinese prejudices. Titles such as *The Enigma of Jews: The Wisdom of Success of a Miraculous Nation* (He, 2006), *The Golden Rule: The Great Wisdom to Fulfill Jewish Success in the World* (Jin, 2006) or *Talmud: Jewish Bible on Business and Living* (Ge, 2004) belong to this group. The important bookstores in large cities offer hundreds of such works. Ehrlich offers a comprehensive bibliographical list of Chinese publications on Judaism up to the year 2010, many of them belonging to this group (Ehrlich 2010, 247-275). The topics of these books depict the Jews as being rich, successful, controlling the world's economy and finances. Such books could be divided into two categories: simply popular literature and fake books, which we will analyse separately below.

1. Some of the above-mentioned books can be regarded as nothing more than the reproduction of the economic prejudices regarding the Jews that have originated in Europe. Such books can be also regarded as an attempt to explain the Jews through an improper usage of Jewish sources, or through the reproduction of further stereotypes about them. However, unlike what has happened in the West, this information does not trigger hatred, but admiration and respect. The Chinese, who have accomplished a long tradition of learning, react to such insights eager to acquire the methods and the useful knowledge of the Jews (Ross, 2016a 24ff).

Such books stand for a constructed form of knowledge, which substantially tackle the facts relevant to the cognitor himself and projects them onto the object. “As the Chinese economy surges under economic reforms, Jews represent money, power, and success, goals to which most Chinese aspire” (Ross 2016b, 1). The desire of the Chinese to enjoy success all by themselves, the Confucian attitudes of respect and admiration for those who have ‘made it’ in life, the appreciation of learning for itself and as a means of social progress, have led them to retain only some superficial remarks about the Jews. Of course, this is a distorted picture of Judaism. Such an account on Judaism is rather focused on the one who receives and who achieves the representation than on the supposed object of knowledge. For it is not only a picture of a certain religion and culture, a picture in which those who belong to it cannot recognize themselves, but rather a way of access for the Chinese to a longed-for healing world. We would call it a form of encounter between China and Judaism, in which the person who makes for the encounter has not noticeably made headway towards the other.

This form of popular literature has its roots in a clear identifiable attempt to accustom the Asian readers to Jewish thought. Marvin Tokayer, the rabbi of the Jewish community in Japan in the 1960s and 1970s, took the initiative to publish a few easy-to-read introductory books on Judaism, aimed for the Japanese readers (Zhang 2013, 251f). Thus, the stone was sent rolling: his books were translated into the Korean and Chinese languages, paraphrased and ‘enriched’, and, in the end, they lost the name of the original author and very much of the original content (Zhang 2013, 252). Following this trend, new “Jewish” texts started to be translated for the general Chinese and Asian public. For example, a book called *Secrets of a Jewish Mother: real advice, real stories, real love* (Kamen, Wexler and Zarin 2010), superficially rooted in Jewish secular culture, was translated into Chinese under the same title, with slight changes (Zarin et al. 2010). Such a work is presented and received in China as mere Judaism and Jewish thought, while it hardly points to anything else but the commonly accepted values of Western societies. Here is, for instance, the conclusion of the chapter entitled “Money”: “Money is complicated. People have written tomes on the psychology of money – some earn for money to replace the love they need; others use money to control and demoralize

people in order to satisfy their own insecurities. We, Jewish mothers, believe that the secret is to treat money seriously enough to make sure you can provide what you need in this world, but not so seriously that greed corrupts your values. Money should never stand in the way of love, friendship and trust” (in Kamen et al. 2010, 225).

Later on, books about Judaism and Jewish thought compiled entirely by Chinese authors appeared. These works mingle secular Jewish sources, outdated literature about the Jews and (intended or unintended) fabrications of the Chinese author. The transition from the still-pertinent popular literature to the subsequent fake books was thus made smooth.

2. The immense demand of such books has led to the flourishing of a new literary genre known as “the fake ‘Jewish Wisdom’ books, that have started to flood the Chinese books market since the beginning of the 21st century” (Zhang 2013, 252). The authors of such books “felt free to distort and to fake the [Jewish] wisdom with whatever materials they got, sometimes completely irrelevant to Jewish tradition” (Zhang 2013, 252). For example, in writings such as “Listening to the others in order to enrich oneself”; “Seven tricks of ‘how to listen to others’” the previously mentioned strategies present in the titles themselves were demonstrated, and “it is stressed time and again that one should follow those tricks in order to gain the trust of the speaker and to squeeze more information out of him” (Zhang 2013, 254). Ping Zhang believes that “the rise of the distorted Jewish wisdom coincided with the collapse of social morality in China as a companion of the fast economic development” (Zhang 2013, 256).

In this case, we cannot speak about a ‘reception’ of Judaism any longer. Here, we can hardly speak of the process of the encounter between Chinese and Jewish thought. If we still do it, we owe it to Ping Zhang, who opines that: “One thing, however, did survive through all these procedures of piracy, plagiarism, faking and distortion, and that is the term ‘Jewish Wisdom’” (Zhang 2013, 252). That is, Judaism stands for a label put on the wrong jar. The label still reminds one of the original (which, by the way, is a religion centered on remembering) and enlivens the hope that the way to the original will be found one day. It is intended as a construct by the authors and the publishers, but received as ‘reality’ by uninformed readers. This shows again the value of the constructivist insights and points to the importance of the raising of a critical consciousness, both for experts and the masses.

Such representations penetrate the society and influence the consciousness of ordinary people. This is also revealed in the dialogue below, which speaks for itself:

“Who are your people? Where your people come from?” he asks. [...] ‘I am Jewish,’ I respond. [...]

He abruptly removes his hands from the wheel and turns completely around to look at me.

‘So lucky,’ he sings. ‘I never before have the Holy People in my taxi. Never before. So lucky, lucky.’ [...]

‘So smart. So clever,’ he says. ‘The Holy People in my taxi. Make so much big money. Read so many books. Study so much. Lucky.’ [...]

We are approaching my stop. ‘Lido (here),’ I shout as he excitedly chatters in Cantonese into the headset connected to one of the five phones he has attached with rubber bands to his dashboard. [...] I assume he is busy spreading the news of his good fortune.

Again, ‘Lido! Stop here,’ I shout to get his attention. He abruptly stops. With my open wallet in hand, I look at the meter. He places his hand over the numbers and turns around and smiles.

‘No charge for you. So lucky, lucky for me. Holy People in my taxi.’” (Lyons 2011, 24).

3. There are also attempts to undermine the positive Chinese image on the Jews. The Christian (Catholic and Protestant) media in China, that writes for the members of particular religious communities, is sometimes quite radical in this respect. Sometimes it goes so far as to demonize Jewish people (Fgsm 2006).

These publications intend to clarify for Chinese Christians how things really stand with the Jews. Chinese Christians are not always up-to-date with the developments that their churches are going through in other parts of the world. Bearing in mind the positive Jewish image of Chinese society, one can say that demythologization is aimed at here. These publications still import and translate ideas from Western texts of late 19th and early 20th century. A picture of the Jews and of Jewish thinking comes forth here which we, as external observers, cannot take seriously. If one decomposes it into its constituents, there is scarcely anything left. Our informational gain, in this case as well, regards the author of this article: we learn what ideas about the Jews circulate in Chinese Christian media. Therefore, what the author actually depicts is the encounter between China and the West, and, only to a lesser extent, the encounter between China and the Jews.

The compiler mingles ideas that stem from European sources with his own reflections on the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs, on the international political situation, in which fatherland China and America appear, and with the description of the position of present Jewish personalities, who are regarded as representatives for a whole nation. The mentioning of the “national interests of China” can be regarded as a personal concern of the author as well as a necessity in a state in which Catholics and Protestants have to prove repeatedly that they are faithful citizens of the fatherland, not instruments of a Western power (Daiber 2008, 103ff).

From an epistemological point of view, we tackle a construction which results from certain epistemic interests and a selective use of literature. In such a case, however, we may respond more alert to it,

because these statements are much more clearly anti-Jewish, and European anti-Judaism had a terrible impact on our history. We can see a danger, and perhaps some of us feel like shouting aloud: not just every construction may be permitted! This places us, as readers, at the core of epistemological considerations. We have our own experiences and we project them onto our research object, and so, our interpretation of these realities is a construction in itself.

Of course, we believe that anti-Judaism, antisemitism, as well as all other ideologies that might endanger certain groups of people must be fought against everywhere and by all means. But it must also be emphasized that the anti-Jewish rhetoric of such texts has not the same effect on Chinese people, as it does on us. It is highly unlikely that it could ever lead to comparable consequences; and, in any case, it cannot be asserted that there has ever been, or there is, any form of Chinese antisemitism. A Jewish sinologist commented on the same text as follows: "I would not use the word antisemitism in connection with China. The Chinese were NEVER anti-Semites and they treated the Jews as they treated any other nationality. Negative Chinese attitude towards the Jews derives from the poor translation of Western historical material, sometimes the Chinese do not distinguish between fiction and non fiction and both materials are treated equally (e.g. Herman Wouk fiction books are translated and widely quoted in research papers). I am not sure that the Chinese understand the depth and the real meaning or connotation of antisemitism or Holocaust for that matter. For them they are just words." (Weisz, personal e-mail from 3.09.2011).

These things disclose something else: we bring ourselves and our Western perception in, when we want to impartially approach a different text or context. This example shows that we also need to observe the encounter between us and the investigated facts. This is one of the main challenges for religious studies. Avoidance of misinterpretations can be achieved through a very good acquaintance with the object of study as well as with its historical, cultural and social context.

4. Chinese universities and academies also have a few institutes for Jewish studies. In Jinan there is the Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies at Shandong University (<http://cjs.sdu.edu.cn/en/>, accessed July 26, 2016), in Shanghai the Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai, a part of the Academy for social sciences (www.cjss.org.cn, accessed July 26, 2016) and in Nanjing the Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies, (<http://www.nju.edu.cn/EN/8c/3b/c7549a166971/page.htm>, accessed July 26, 2016), all set up in the course of the newly practised policy of China after the Cultural Revolution. Their aim is to reach an accurate reception of Judaism, to highlight its value for the Chinese thought (Fu 2003, 109ff; Fu 2007, 197ff) and to investigate the history of the Jewish communities in China (Pan 2007b, 84ff; Wang 2007, 100ff; Pan et al. 2007, 1, 6ff; Xu 2007, 147ff).

Judaism researchers read and interpret central concepts of Judaism such as *Messiah*, *Law*, *Covenant*, *Human Nature*, *Revelation*, *Prophets* as they understand them from the reading of secondary sources, sometimes of fragments of the *Talmud* or from later Jewish thinking, and often by comparing them to similar topics from the Chinese traditions (Fu 2001, 175ff.; Huang 2010, 41ff). The study of the *Torah* itself is not authorized and thus it is omitted. Further, they seek a similar approach to the principles of Jewish ethics, especially to Jewish economic ethics, or to the more recent events of Jewish history: reform and modernization without identity loss, their existence as a diaspora, Western anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, Zionism, the state of Israel. Most of these topics are of direct relevance to the Chinese who hope to learn how to overcome the current cultural and identity crisis from the experience of reform and modernization (Fu 2007, 197ff.). They also want to learn how they can help the Chinese diaspora communities to preserve their identity inspiring themselves from the long- lasting existence of the Jewish diaspora (Zhang Longxi 2007, 1, 4ff); Jewish economic ethics is of interest to them in order to learn what might impel their own economic development (Ehrlich 2010, 20ff).

The contributions on the Jewish history in China highlight the humanity and tolerance of China over the centuries. One may ascertain the West-China dichotomy in this respect, particularly when the authors value the lack of Chinese anti-Semitism (Pan 2000, 444). Furthermore, the common features of the two peoples are highlighted: a phenomenology of these two cultures leads to the conclusion that they are similar in certain respects (Zhou 2007, 229ff), and that moreover, from a Chinese perspective, a similar destiny unites these two peoples (Ho 1997, 199ff; Zhang and Gotel 2008, 82ff; Zhang Zhongli 2007, 1f.). In respect of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the State of Israel in 1992, there has been proclaimed the unimpeded friendship of the two peoples (Pan 2007a, 4f). Chinese researchers point out "the relevance of their subject for the overall social discourse in China: the Jews in general are regarded as an example of how to preserve one's own traditions in a modern world, dealing with the memory of the Holocaust is to serve as a model for one's own memorial work on the Nanjing massacre, the importance of cooperation and cultural exchange between China and Israel is emphasized, and one speaks openly about the advantages that Jewish tourism and Jewish investors would bring to China" (Goikhman 2007, 175). Due to the difficult style (a combination between classical Chinese style and modern Chinese form, with very long sentences, many secondary clauses and bracketed contents), scientific articles are accessible only to specialists in China.

Goikhman points out that sometimes there are differences between the Chinese-language and the English-language versions of the same articles: for example, there is an unhampered support for Zionism in the

articles in English, whereas in Chinese there appear negative feelings against British and American imperialism, the Jews being included (Goikhman 2007, 161f.). Goikhman discovered even a latent anti-Semitism in Chinese research, where the Jews are described as “Jewish villains” “obsessed with money”, or where a connection between Jews and prostitution is made (Goikhman 2007, 163).

Misperceptions of the Jewish thought occur on the academic level, too. Even worse than that, he offers an example of an academic working in the field of Jewish thought, which “has practically no knowledge whatsoever of the Talmud which he talked about from the beginning to the end. The list of the so-called ‘Talmudic books’ that he gave in his footnotes contains mostly faked Jewish wisdom books. His whole theory was based on several stories that he took from these books and my article, without any text analysis of the Jewish classics” (Zhang, 2013, 255).

According to Tiberiu Weisz, the absence of the study of the *Torah* is the reason why their representations misuse the original concepts (Weisz, personal e-mail from 3.09.2011). However, Ping Zhang believes that the sole use of “the *Aggadah* (exegetical texts) of the tradition, without specifically discussing much of the *Halachah* (religious law)”, is the cause of the misperception (Zhang 2013, 253). Other misunderstandings are due to the fact that Jewish concepts are “discussed with Greek philosophical tradition, as if it were part of that tradition or equal to a part. This kind of misperception [the confusion between Jewish and Greek tradition] is not rare among Chinese academics” (Zhang, 2013, 256).

The last idea exposed here shows how difficult it is, even for a researcher, to grasp all the fine differences when dealing with foreign cultures or traditions. For the Chinese, Jewish thought is as Western as Greek thought. Ping Zhang calls this “a failure to grasp the betweenness” (Zhang 2013, 256). This approach points to the fact that strongly misinterpreted constructs can be avoided by a very solid knowledge of the context of facts or ideas and by careful attention paid to detail.

From the viewpoint of scientific criticism, we come across the contextual boundaries of the scientific discourse. Both the internal - the personal background of the scientists - as well as the external context - the political, social and scientific developments - influence the representations (Goikhman 2007, 172). It is justified, in the case of these writings, to highlight that China has taken a few steps forward towards the encounter with Judaism. However, there is still a long way to go. Thus, even in the case of scientific discourse, we should agree to the constructivists’ concern with the fact that constructs are conditioned by many factors, which are by no means plainly objective and unbiased.

Coming back to the level of theoretical remarks, the authors wonder whether it is reasonable to assert that the Europeans familiar with the biblical tradition and, to a far higher extent, even with Judaism, can easily deconspire all four types of Chinese discourses about Judaism as

constructs. We know both about the common roots of Judaism and Christianity (the Tanach or the Old Testament) and about our different religious and cultural roots (Mishna and Talmud versus the New Testament and the Greek frame of conceptualization). We also know about the different ways of perceiving our common source and about the different developments recorded by the two religions after separation. But are we not exposed to the same type of reductionist interpretations when we deal with religions and cultures from other parts of the world? How can we assure a proper understanding of Bali Hinduism, Indonesian Islam or Sri Lankan Buddhism? Is our representation of Bali Hinduism not also a construct, the same way as the Chinese image of Judaism is?

The fundamental question that arises is to what extent contributions in the field of religious studies can claim higher scientific quality. Constructivist criticism has taught us one thing: it is no longer possible to strive for 'total' objectivity. We are nevertheless convinced that the researcher of religious studies can succeed in achieving a higher degree of objectivity. It is clear that every research result is an interpretational construct. But nowadays, the scholars of comparative religious studies have two advantages on their side. Firstly, they are very familiar with their object of study, because no solid research on old religious texts is done without properly knowing the language and the culture and without studying the texts in original. Equally relevant is the fact that no solid research on contemporary religions is done in absence of the direct contact with the focus group and without consulting the various scientific approaches of it, coming from the adjacent disciplines of study. Secondly, the information they possess about the systems of religion under its various forms of manifestation in the most divergent cultural contexts helps them to classify issues related to religion and to offer representations where the subjects concerned can recognize themselves most easily.

Religious studies have "a simulating function in the sense of an intimation of foreign religions and cultures, and at the same time it is both ideological-critical and clarifying because it also reveals the patterns of one's own thinking" (Antes 2007a, 228). When it comes to issues of religious studies where a current situation is examined the contact with the participants can and should serve as control means. As far as impartiality or an unbiased attitude is concerned, it is also true that researchers in religious studies choose their themes following specific interests that have some connections to their personal background, and so they can unintentionally incorporate their personal preferences into the theme. Though impartiality and a posited unbiased attitude in religious sciences is a very high goal, religious studies have at least learned to abstain from premature generalizations or conclusions and to keep away from the biased evaluations of the others. From our current research, it has become evident that the more distant from rigorous scientific

research a paper/book finds itself (such as the plentiful examples from the popularization literature show), the less objective or neutral that paper/book is.

To conclude, religious studies as instruments for analysing and rendering complex religious and cultural contexts are not perfect. Scholars should be aware of their limitations. However, when paying attention to all the contextual details and when assimilating the results of the research into related disciplines, religious studies have some instruments at hand that cannot be claimed by other sciences or descriptive approaches. These instruments enable them to provide representations as impartially as possible.

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