

Audience for a Giraffe: European Expansionism and the Quest for the Exotic

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There were, broadly speaking, two great waves of European expansionism—one in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century and the other in the nineteenth century. In the first wave the world was “discovered” and then explored; in the second wave, it was decisively invaded and occupied. People in other parts of the world have certainly engaged in similar expansionist enterprises—Huns and Mongols, Muslims or Indic groups in Southeast Asia, among others—but for some reason the results were never the same.¹ What we ended up with, and what we still have, is an economic, political, and cultural world system with a center in Europe and in the successors to its North American colonies.

The question is only how these two waves should be explained. The most common explanations are economic. Thus the first wave of expansion is seen to correspond to the commercial revolution that was taking place in Europe at this time.² It was the revival of trade, the argument goes, that brought European economies to life, that boosted

¹ For an overview, see for example Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 153–247, 316–351.

² This starting point unites accounts as different as those of Eric L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 70–84, and Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 114–165.

the power of cities and the middle class—and it was the insatiable demand of the middle class for foreign goods that made the Europeans look for trade routes across the ocean. Similarly, the second wave is seen to correspond to the Industrial Revolution. Here it was the invention of the factory system and Europe's vastly expanded productive power that created an unprecedented demand both for raw material and for export markets. Reacting to these economic imperatives, the Europeans sallied forth.

It would be foolish to reject these explanations, but it is at the same time necessary to complement them. If we accept that a European desire for exotic goods provided a rationale for the search for trade routes, we still need to explain where this desire came from. And if we accept that industrialization led to a need for foreign markets, we still need to explain why this need took the form of imperial occupation. The problem in both cases is an excess of uncertainty and risk. The Europeans never knew what they could expect from their foreign ventures—whether they would lead to profits or losses—and under such circumstances expansionism is necessarily less than fully rational. Under conditions of severe uncertainty and risk, economic reasons cannot be all that imperative.

Compare the case of China. Until the middle of the fifteenth century the Chinese had travelled far and wide—Java, the Indian Ocean, even Arabia and East Africa.³ In fact, if they only had arrived a few decades earlier, Portuguese ships traveling eastward could easily have bumped into Chinese ships, traveling westward, somewhere along Africa's eastern coast.⁴ But then the Chinese explorations suddenly stopped. No more official missions were dispatched, foreign commercial contacts were reduced to a minimum, and eventually all overseas travel and trade were banned. Despite the benefits of trade and the temptation of foreign possessions, the Chinese state decided that the costs outweighed the benefits. Looked at from a Chinese perspective it is clear that there was nothing imperative about what the Europeans did. On the contrary, the European expansion becomes a puzzle in need of an explanation.

As the Chinese example illustrates, economic explanations of

³ J. J. L. Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa* (London: Probsthain, 1949); Louise Levanthes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405–33* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), pp. 1–36.

⁴ Joseph R. Levenson, ed., *European Expansion and the Counter-Example of Asia, 1300–1600* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

European expansionism need to be complemented with an account of how the Europeans regarded the world across the oceans. It was a cultural predisposition in favor of the extra-European and the exotic, and not some impersonal imperatives, that prompted the far-flung ventures of the Renaissance.⁵ There would never have been money to be made in commodities such as spices, pearls, silk, teak, and tea but for this predisposition. Similarly, it was a particular definition of the extra-European world that convinced the Europeans of the nineteenth century that an imperial occupation was worthwhile. This too was a cultural predisposition, implying a certain view of the non-European world. Before an economic rationale can be formulated, in other words, and before a reason can be taken as imperative, we need some sense of what there is to be found out there; we need an account of the European definition of the exotic. The aim of this article is to provide such an account.

Consider a comparative case study involving no fewer than three giraffes. With their enormous necks, freckly skin, and gentle, people-friendly demeanor, giraffes are curious animals by any account. As natives of eastern and southern Africa, and notoriously difficult to transport, they are also—outside of Africa—the very epitome of the exotic.⁶ Given these unusual attributes, giraffes can be used as a means of understanding how people in a certain society relate to the world that lies beyond it. A giraffe that suddenly appears in a place where none has been seen before is like an emissary from the unknown; it is an empty signifier that forces people to reveal their cultural predispositions.

The first giraffe was presented to Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence in 1486, and the second giraffe appeared before Charles X, king of France, in 1827. As we would expect, in both cases the animals caused a great sensation, and people discussed them in quite different, and revealingly specific, terms. Please note the years. The first giraffe appeared right before the Europeans—Florentine explorers prominently among them

⁵ The original source for this argument is Werner Sombart, *Capitalism and Luxury* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967). See also Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, pp. 114–165. Compare Stefan Halikowski Smith, “The Mystification of Spices in the Western Tradition,” *European Review of History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 119–136.

⁶ The history of the giraffe as a symbol of the exotic is treated in a number of works. See, for example, Charles D. Cuttler, “Exotics in Post-Medieval Art: Giraffes and Centaurs,” *Artibus et historiae* 23; Berthold Laufer, *The Giraffe in History and Art* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1928); C. A. Spinage, *The Book of the Giraffe* (London: Collins, 1968); or the recent best-seller Michael Allin, *Zarafa: A Giraffe's True Story from Deep Africa to the Heart of Paris* (London: Review, 1999).

—went off to discover what was to become “America.” And the second giraffe appeared only three years before France’s first imperialist venture began—the bloody war in, and subsequent occupation of, Algeria. By studying how the Europeans reacted to these two animals, we should be able to better understand how they regarded the extra-European world right at the cusp of the two waves of expansion.

To put these reactions into perspective, there is a third giraffe—an animal brought to Beijing in 1414 from the city of Melinda in East Africa and presented to the emperor with much celebration and fanfare. Again the year matters. Only two decades later came the first of a series of decrees that outlawed overseas travel and trade by Chinese subjects. Again we would hope that the giraffe could tell us why.

A GIRAFFE IN FLORENCE

To collect exotic animals of various kinds was a common hobby among Renaissance princes, not least in Italy.⁷ The dukes of Milan kept English dogs, leopards, and hunting birds; the pope had elephants, rhinoceroses, and Hungarian bears; the duke of Calabria had a great number of leopards, camels, ostriches, deer, and swans; the Malatesta of Rimini kept elephants; and there were lions and eagles in Venice, Ferrara, and Naples.⁸ In addition they all owned racehorses, often of the finest Arabic breeds.⁹ Giraffes were an obvious addition to these collections, and there would have been many more of them if they had not been so notoriously difficult to get hold of. The first giraffe brought to Europe was a present to Fredrick II of the Two Sicilies, given in 1261 by the sultan of Egypt in exchange for a white bear.¹⁰ In the fifteenth century, the duke of Calabria was another proud giraffe owner, and so was Duke Hercules I in Ferrara and the Ferrante, rulers of Naples.¹¹

In the Middle Ages animals had played a role above all for the moral lessons they could teach; they were signs sent by God that had

⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 2:290; Gustave Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries de l’antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Octave Doin, 1912), pp. 197–209.

⁸ For an exhaustive list, see L. C. Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros in Captivity: A List of 2439 Rhinoceroses Kept from Roman Times to 1994* (The Hague: SPB, 1998).

⁹ Arabic horses, *barberi*, were highly prized, and Italian princes maintained extensive contacts with horse breeders in the Arabic world. Michael Mallett, “Horse-Racing and Politics in Lorenzo’s Florence,” in *Lorenzo the Magnificent: Culture and Politics*, ed. Michael Mallett and Nicholas Mann (London: Warburg, 1996), pp. 254, 257–258.

¹⁰ Spinage, *Book of the Giraffe*, pp. 70–71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

to be interpreted before they could be understood.¹² As such they always had more to tell about the Europeans themselves than about the foreign, faraway places they had come from. Because everyone knew that fantastic animals existed—compare the bestiaries produced by medieval monks or the monsters in the margins of medieval maps—people were not necessarily all that surprised when they actually saw one. Moreover, curiosity regarding the exotic was, officially at least, taken to be a great sin. As St. Augustine had explained, the overly curious were prying into the forbidden secrets of God’s creation, and they did so only at their own peril.¹³

By the Renaissance, people looked at exotic animals with new eyes. In general there was a great desire for new visual experiences; people took an enormous joy in looking at the unexpected, the monsters, prodigies, and the freaks.¹⁴ Even though people refuse to give a farthing to “a lame beggar,” as William Shakespeare put it, “they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian” or a “painted fish.”¹⁵ The emphasis was on the marvelous. When suddenly seeing something that surpassed the expected in beauty, diversity, or abundance, the mind was overwhelmed. People were first astonished, then delighted, and finally excited. Clearly there was something highly addictive in this mixture of emotions. It piqued people’s curiosity, and once they had seen a little, they wanted to see more. Obviously, in terms of height and sheer impact, there was no more marvelous, or more curious, animal than a giraffe.

At the time, meaning was more than anything made through analogies.¹⁶ Analogies revealed similarities between things, or hidden essences of some kind. There was a hidden affinity, for example, between stars and diamonds because both were shiny objects embedded

¹² Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), pp. 68–88. Compare Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹³ Compare Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (397–398; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), chap. 10, p. 242.

¹⁴ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, pp. 146–159. See also Steven Mullaney, “Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance,” *Representations* 3 (1983).

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1611), 2:ii, 27ff, available at http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/The_Tempest/4.html. Compare the discussion in Mullaney, “Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs,” pp. 43–44; Katie Whitaker, “The Culture of Curiosity,” in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 75–90.

¹⁶ William B. Ashworth, “Emblematic Natural History of the Renaissance,” in Jardine, *Cultures of Natural History*, pp. 17–37. Compare Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 17–25.

in dark matter, and walnuts made you intelligent since they resembled the shape of a brain. This is why Renaissance rulers collected wild animals. They were rare and strange looking and as such perfect sources of marvel, and through the analogies they invoked, they served to enhance the ruler's claim on power. A prince who owned ferocious and awe-inspiring animals would himself come to be regarded as ferocious and awe-inspiring.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the lions' den was usually located near, or in, the government palace, and this was also why the princes included rhinoceroses, elephants, camels, and ostriches in their triumphal processions whenever they had won a war or concluded a particularly advantageous peace.

The vast majority of foreign animals kept in Italy had come from Muslim rulers—initially from the sultan of Egypt and, after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, from the sultan of Istanbul.¹⁸ This Muslim connection gave the animals in question an added aura of mystique. The European image of Turkey was complex.¹⁹ On the one hand, the Turks were regarded as brutal, misogynistic, and unspeakably cruel, and everyone agreed that they embraced a demonic religion. In addition, in the 1480s at least, the Turks posed a real military threat to central Europe and to the Italian peninsula. On the other hand, there was a strong fascination with things “Oriental.” The Oriental signified opulent splendor, absolute power, and sexual license. In order to learn more about this exciting world, Italian princes dispatched their best painters to Istanbul—the Venetian Gentile Bellini led the most famous such mission in 1479.²⁰ In the pictures they brought home the surprised Italians saw men with strange headgear and big baggy trousers, and beautiful women sequestered in harems.

The enormous zoological gardens maintained by Muslim rulers—known as a *serraglio*, from the Turkish *saray*, meaning “palace” or “court”—were integral parts of this world, and before long every Italian ruler wanted one. Naturally Florence had its own collection of

¹⁷ Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (1973; Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984), see especially pp. 42–62. Compare Foucault, *Order of Things*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries*, pp. 197–198.

¹⁹ Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 4–6; Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Compare Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), especially pp. 31–110.

²⁰ The princes of Naples and Rimini also dispatched painters. The account of Bellini's mission is to be found in Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (1550; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 2:66–68. Compare Cuttler, *Exotics in Post-Medieval Art*.

animals; in fact, its zoo was the most impressive in all of Italy.²¹ There were no fewer than twenty-five lions living in the Palazzo Vecchio itself, and the Florentine leopards, used for hunting, were rightly famous across Europe. In addition there were tigers, bears, bulls, wild boars, Arabic horses, and greyhounds.²² The Medici family had its own private collection of animals at their villa in Fano—in fact, commonly referred to as a *serraglio*. Since Florence, officially at least, was a republic, the municipal menagerie served to give glory to the city, while the Medici menagerie emphasized the family's status as *primi inter pares*.

The position of the Medici family relied heavily on their ability to provide games, jousts, processions, and tournaments for the entertainment of their fellow Florentines.²³ In this respect they behaved just like the aristocratic families of Rome—the *mecenas*—whose positions of authority depended on their ability to provide bread and circuses for the *plebes*.²⁴ In fact, some of the Medicean entertainments had direct Roman precedents. A favorite Roman pastime had been to stage combats between incongruous animals—bears were pitted against leopards, or tigers against parakeets with clipped wings—and when Pope Pius II visited Florence in 1459, the city decided to revive this tradition.²⁵ The streets leading up to the Piazza della Signoria were blocked off for the occasion, and first lions were let loose in the improvised arena, then wolves, wild boars and horses, bulls, and Corsican dogs. A giraffe was also present, but only in the form of an immense mannequin. Inside the animal, twenty young men were hidden whose job it was to try to agitate the lions and make them go on the attack. Despite their best efforts, the spectacle ended in failure. The lions were not hungry, and the crowds jeered.

The giraffe situation improved dramatically in 1486 when a real example of the species was presented to Lorenzo il Magnifico by Al-Ashraf Kait-Bey, the Mamluk sultan of Egypt. The Florentines were on good terms with all Muslim rulers, but above all with the Turks

²¹ Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries*, p. 198.

²² Laufer, *Giraffe in History and Art*, pp. 79–80.

²³ Mallett, "Horse-Racing and Politics," p. 253.

²⁴ Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: The Historical Sociology of a Political Pluralism* (1976; London: Allen Lane, 1990).

²⁵ He was accompanied by Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan. Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries*, p. 198. The original sources are Lodovico Antonio Muratori, *Storia cronologica della città di Firenze* (Napoli: Stamperia Simoniana, 1755) t. II, pp. 718–752; *Ricordi di Firenze dell'anno 1459*, ed. Guglielmo Volpi. G. Volpi (Città di Castello: Tipi della Casa editrice S. Lapi, 1907).

because they were at war with the Venetians—Florence's main Italian rival—and because the Turks favored the Florentines as trading partners in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁶ Yet this particular giraffe came from Egypt, and this for a particular reason. Since 1467, the Mamluks had been in open revolt against the Turks who occupied their country. The giraffe was an attempt to establish good diplomatic relations with the Florentines in order to make them intervene on their behalf in the inter-Muslim conflict. As far as the Mamluks were concerned, the giraffe played much the same role in their foreign policy as pandas did in the foreign policy of China in the 1970s.

The animal itself, when it arrived, caused a great sensation. It was eulogized by poets such as Angelo Poliziano and Antonio Costanzo, and immortalized in many paintings, not least in the “adoration of the magi”—pictures of the three kings giving presents to baby Jesus, a motif which gave free range to the painters' Oriental fantasies.²⁷ Much of the time, however, the giraffe simply wandered about in the streets, enjoying the adulation of the crowds. As Antonio Costanzo described the scene, “I have also seen it raise its head to those onlookers offering to it from their windows, because its head reaches as high as eleven feet, thus seeing it from afar the people think that they are looking at a tower rather than an animal. Ours appears to like the crowd, it is always peaceable and without fear, it even seems to watch with pleasure the people who come to look at it.”²⁸

Although Florence itself was landlocked, a successful war against Pisa in 1421 had given the city access to a good port at Livorno, and soon Florence produced a series of remarkable explorers. Together with their Genovese colleague Cristoforo Colombo, the likes of Giovanni da Verrazzano took up service with foreign rulers, and before long they were off exploring foreign lands and winning fortune and fame for themselves. Amerigo Vespucci—who in 1507 was to give his name to no fewer than two recently discovered continents—was the most famous of these sea captains.²⁹ Although there are no records of his

²⁶ Goffman, *Ottoman Empire*, pp. 176–177.

²⁷ Compare the *Adoration of the Magi* now in the Pitti Palace, and by Andrea del Sarto in his *Adoration of the Magi* in Santissima Annunciata in Florence. A giraffe is also painted in one of the frescoes of the Poggio Cajano in 1521. Laufer, *Giraffe in History and Art*, pp. 81–82.

²⁸ Quoted in Spinage, *Book of the Giraffe*, p. 73.

²⁹ This was the year of the publication of Waldseemüller's famous map with the name “America” for the new continent. Discussed in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), pp. 252–253.

exact whereabouts in the year 1486, it is easy to imagine him cheering on as Lorenzo's giraffe made its triumphal entry into the city. At any rate, only a few years later, in 1497, he equipped a ship and set sail for what was to become the Americas.

A GIRAFFE IN PARIS

In 1827, after an interval of some 350 years, another giraffe appeared in Europe, this time in Paris.³⁰ This giraffe was also a gift from the ruler of Egypt, and it too was a pawn in a diplomatic game. As always, the giraffe produced a lot of excitement wherever it went. Reacting to the tall and composite creature, the French too came to reveal just how they thought about the extra-European world, and this at a time when the country was about to embark on its first imperialist venture. Only three years later, fighting a cruel and genocidal war, France invaded and occupied Algeria. The question is what, if anything, the animal can tell us about these subsequent events.

It was the entrepreneurial talents of the French consul general in Cairo—an Italian by the name of Bernardino Drovetti—that brought the giraffe to Paris.³¹ Drovetti was a confidante of Muhammad Ali, the Mamluk pasha, but above all he was a tomb raider and an antiques dealer who helped assemble the collections of Egyptological artifacts that still are on display in museums across Europe. In addition, Drovetti dealt in animals—Arabian stallions, Nubian sheep, shells and fossils from the Libyan desert—and the giraffe was a part of this latter trade.³² When a new French king, Charles X, ascended to the throne in September 1824, Drovetti spotted an opportunity to ingratiate himself with both rulers. In the 1820s, Muhammad Ali had been engaged in an aggressive maritime expansion, attacking Cyprus and threatening Greece.³³ The exotic animal, it was hoped, would serve to entertain the French public and reassure its leaders about the pasha's amicable intentions.

³⁰ The best academic sources are Gabriel Dardauid, "L'extraordinaire aventure de la girafe du pacha d'Égypte," *Revue des conférences françaises en Orient* 14 (1951): 1–72; Gabriel Dardauid, *Une girafe pour le roi* (Paris: Dumerchez-Naoum, 1985); and Olivier Lageux, "Geoffroy's Giraffe: The Hagiography of a Charismatic Mammal," *Journal of the History of Biology* 36 (2003): 225–247. For a popular account see Allin, *Zarafa*.

³¹ Allin, *Zarafa*, pp. 50–57.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³³ For a historical overview, see André Jardin and André-Jean Tudesq, *Restoration & Reaction, 1815–1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 152–154.

Given the unusual nature of the gift, the authorities turned to the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle for advice, and the museum in turn turned to Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.³⁴ As supervisor of the *ménagerie royale*, professor of zoology for mammals and birds, and a leading theoretical biologist, Geoffroy was eminently well qualified to help out.³⁵ In addition, he had his own direct experiences of the Near East. As a young man in 1798 he had been a scientific advisor to Napoleon's ill-fated Egyptian expedition. Geoffroy enthusiastically agreed to oversee the transportation of the animal, and in May 1827 he went to Marseille to meet it. What he discovered was a young female giraffe, three and a half meters tall, "healthy, gay, vigorous and absolutely silent."³⁶

The question was only how to transport an animal of such dimensions. Geoffroy decided that the best thing was to make it walk the 880 kilometers to the capital. To protect it against inclement weather, the giraffe was given an oilskin blanket decorated with golden fleurs-de-lys, the emblem of the kings of France. As soon was clear, however, the question of security had to be reformulated—the problem was not, as had been imagined, how to control a wild African animal, but rather how to control the crowds that everywhere turned up to gawk at it. En route to Paris the giraffe generated an enormous attention, and when it reached Lyons some thirty thousand people turned out to see her in the Place Bellecour, the city's main square. As Geoffroy was happy to report, the giraffe was coping very well with the attention. It was daily gaining weight and its muscles were getting stronger; it no longer refused to drink in front of strangers, and she was "as debonair as she [was] intelligent."³⁷

Eventually the convoy reached Paris, where she had her audience with Charles X. Geoffroy introduced the animal with the help of a short scientific text he had written, and the royal couple and the whole court were duly impressed. As the newspapers reported the event, "His Majesty wished to see this singular quadruped walk and even run; the entire court was present and her gaits, especially running, appeared completely extraordinary. For more than half an hour, the King interrogated the learned academician. His Majesty appeared

³⁴ See Lageux, "Geoffroy's Giraffe"; Allin, *Zarafa*, pp. 126–141.

³⁵ Lageux, "Geoffroy's Giraffe," p. 229.

³⁶ This according to the "Observations on the Giraffe," compiled by M. Salze of the Academy of Marseille, quoted in Allin, *Zarafa*, p. 117.

³⁷ Quoted in Allin, *Zarafa*, p. 169.

very satisfied with [Geoffroy's] responses and deigned to show all his satisfaction to him."³⁸

After the audience, the giraffe was put on public display in the Jardin du Roi, the royal garden temporarily renamed Jardin des Plantes after the revolution. In the summer of 1827 some one hundred thousand people came to look at her, and for a few months the capital was in the grip of an intense giraffe-driven craze.³⁹ The animal became the subject of songs and instrumental music, poems, music-hall sketches, and political satires; children bought gingerbread biscuits in giraffe shapes and their mothers wore their hair *à la girafe*. The distinctive spots and long-necked shape appeared on textiles and wallpaper, on crockery and knickknacks, soap and furniture.

Making sense of these reactions, it is clear that the giraffe appeared just at the intersection of several interpretative possibilities. Most ordinary Frenchmen reacted much the way ordinary people always have—with wide-open eyes and slack jaws. What was unprecedented, however, was the degree to which this spontaneous curiosity was commercially driven. In the course of the eighteenth century, a mass market was for the first time created in consumer goods, clothes, and knickknacks, and, to fuel demand, this market constantly required new fads and fashions.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1827 the giraffe played this part. It was turned into a product that people did not see as much as consume. Like contemporary celebrities, you came closer to it, and experienced it more fully, by means of the merchandise associated with it. Yet, as with all commercial fads, the public's interest in the giraffe was fickle, and before long they turned to other attractions.⁴¹ Three years after her arrival in Paris, Honoré de Balzac noted, the giraffe was visited only by “retarded provincials, bored nannies and simple and naïve fellows.”⁴²

³⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 171–173.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174–177. A number of other crazes for natural objects, including the Victorian “fern craze,” are discussed in David E. Allen, “Tastes and Crazes,” in Jardine, *Cultures of Natural History*, pp. 394–407.

⁴⁰ For an introduction, see the contributions to Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982).

⁴¹ Such as the whale that washed up on a beach at Ostende or the six American Indians who appeared in Paris the same summer. Allin, *Zarafa*, p. 180. On the idea of exoticism in France, see Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 264–308; Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 113–123.

⁴² Lageux, “Geoffroy's Giraffe,” p. 242.

At the same time the giraffe was of course a present for a king—as was obvious from the fleurs-de-lys that decorated its back. In this capacity it harked back to the days—discussed above—when rulers collected exotic animals for the sake of their analogical connections. In fact, soon after Charles X became king, the French foreign ministry informed its embassies around the world of the new monarch's desire to expand the *ménagerie royale*.⁴³ Yet the giraffe was of course nothing like the ferocious leopards of Renaissance Florence, but instead a gentle and sophisticated creature who knew perfectly well how to carry herself in the salons of the aristocracy. Indeed, she was widely compared to a foreign queen on a state visit. Yet in this capacity too she was useful. As a member of “high society” she reminded people of the genteel culture of the *ancien régime*—a connection the new and insecure king was keen to draw. The political satirists of the time drew the same connection, but inverted the evaluation. There is a venerable French tradition of portraying rulers in the guise of various animals, and the arrival of the giraffe allowed critics of the regime to return to these well-worn themes. “Nothing has changed in France,” as they concluded, “there is only one more beast.”⁴⁴

In addition, the giraffe was given what perhaps could be referred to as an Orientalist interpretation. The animal came from a foreign ruler after all—from the Mamluk pasha of Egypt. Yet in the 1820s Egypt was a country the French knew quite well. It had been occupied by Napoleon after all, and some of his officers had stayed behind and established themselves as advisers to the pasha. Indeed, the Egyptian fleet that led the attack on Cyprus was to a large extent French trained.⁴⁵ In addition, the troop of 154 scholars that Napoleon brought with him—of which Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire was one—had thoroughly documented the country's many wonders.⁴⁶ And in 1824, when the French philologist Jean-François Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta stone, it seemed as though this ancient civilization finally would reveal its deepest secrets. This scientific interest had a popular counterpart in a widespread fascination with all things Oriental. In

⁴³ Allin, *Zarafa*, pp. 66–67.

⁴⁴ Lageux, “Geoffroy's Giraffe,” p. 242. Compare the satirical *Description de la ménagerie royale vivants*, anonymous, 1789, available at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/329/>. On the unpopularity of the conservative Bourbon régime see Jardin and Tudesq, *Restoration & Reaction*, pp. 97–101.

⁴⁵ Jardin and Tudesq, *Restoration & Reaction*, p. 152.

⁴⁶ On their return to France they published the twenty-three-volume *Description d'Égypte*, the last tome of which appeared in 1828. For a discussion, see for example the contributions to Irene A. Bierman, ed., *Napoleon in Egypt* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2003).

the first decades of the nineteenth century, novelists, playwrights, and painters competed with each other in representing the mysterious, sensuous East in their work.⁴⁷ It was by this cultural environment—full of desire and imperial ambition—that the giraffe was received. She was a perfect example of the exotic: she was different, yet attractively, not repulsively, so, and she was also thoroughly unimportant—a novelty item, a passing fad, a big toy.

More than anything, however, it was a scientific interpretation that the giraffe received. The first reaction of the court when hearing news of the gift was to turn to the natural history museum for scientific advice, and Geoffroy, the famous zoologist, was identified as the animal's interlocutor. In all major towns they passed, Geoffroy introduced the giraffe with a lecture at the local scientific academy, and when it reached Paris its audience with the king was prefaced a scientific tract. Given the prestige and self-confidence of French biology at the time, this was not surprising.⁴⁸ Men such as Georges-Louis Buffon, Jean Baptiste Lamarck, and Georges Cuvier had done their utmost to catalogue and organize the natural world in accordance with rational principles. Geoffroy was one of these self-confident scientists.⁴⁹ In fact, curious animals were his specialty. Yet what interested him were the laws underlying the immense diversity of natural forms. As he firmly believed, all living beings were formed according to a single pattern. For the scientist there is nothing unique because every phenomenon can be explained by some other phenomenon.⁵⁰

This definition of science meant that also the scientists before long were bound to get bored with the animal. By the early nineteenth century, the miraculous and the curious were no longer considered as proper objects of scientific investigations.⁵¹ The giraffe was not baffling in itself, but instead merely an empirical instantiation of a general scientific law. The giraffe occupied a ready-made slot in the great taxonomy that French scientists had designed for it. They were happy to insert the animal into this slot, but once this was done they quickly moved on. When the giraffe finally died, after eighteen years in the Jardin du Roi, it was, in the words of the painter Eugène Delacroix—

⁴⁷ Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, pp. 282–308; Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 73–92.

⁴⁸ For an overview see Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1982), pp. 362–371.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 368–371; Jardin and Tudesq, *Restoration & Reaction*, p. 75.

⁵⁰ On the connection between biological science and Orientalism, see Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 141–146.

⁵¹ A point extensively discussed in Daston and Park, *Wonders*, pp. 329–368.

himself still an aficionado of the exotic—"a death as obscure as her entry into the world had been brilliant."⁵²

Three years after the giraffe's arrival in Paris the French invasion of Algeria began.⁵³ They occupied a country that was Oriental in the same sense as the giraffe. It was foreign, yet known; it was attractively, not repulsively, different. It was a place the French already had occupied in their minds, and as soon as Algeria became available to them the French immigrants came pouring in. Disregarding traditional deeds and titles, the settlers expropriated land and began building cities, and the military guerilla movement that the Arabs organized was brutally put down. This was when the *razzia*—the indiscriminate burning of crops and reprisals against innocent bystanders—became an integral part of French colonial warfare.⁵⁴ Even Alexis de Tocqueville, the celebrated author of *Democracy in America*, contemplated migrating to Algeria for a while, and as a leading parliamentarian in the 1840s he was vigorously defending the French tactics. "[I]n order for us to colonise to any extent, we must necessarily use not only violent measures, but visibly iniquitous ones. . . . The quarrel is no longer between governments, but between races."⁵⁵ In 1827, when the giraffe was passing through Paris, he had been an apprentice magistrate at the court of law in Versailles and as such well positioned to take part in the general excitement.⁵⁶

Illusions of royal splendor, Orientalist longing, and scientific hubris are not in themselves enough to produce overseas aggression. Indeed the original Enlightenment position—often associated with Denis Diderot—had been radically egalitarian, promising respect for other societies and traditions.⁵⁷ Yet this cosmopolitan outlook never came to power. Instead the wars of the Revolution melded enlightenment with French chauvinism in a combination which Napoleon made

⁵² Lageux, "Geoffroy's Giraffe," p. 242.

⁵³ Jardin and Tudesq, *Restoration & Reaction*, pp. 158–166.

⁵⁴ For a short introduction to the methods of warfare of Thomas-Robert Bugeaud in Algeria, see Douglas Porch, "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 378–382.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Jennifer Pitts, "Introduction," in *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, by Alexis de Tocqueville, ed. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. xxiii.

⁵⁶ Compare de Tocqueville's impressions of North Africa, which he visited in 1841: "Never in my life have I seen anything more bizarre than the first sight of Algiers. It is a tale out of the Thousand and One Nights. . . . It's an enchanted country farmed by savages." Quoted in *ibid.*, p. xx.

⁵⁷ Compare his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1796).

famous across Europe. By 1830 a weak French monarchy sought to unite the country by diverting public attention to adventures overseas. Even liberals like de Tocqueville were convinced regarding the necessity of expansionism.⁵⁸ Once they had committed themselves, the honor of the French nation made any retreat impossible. These are political arguments, and the decision to invade Algeria was a political decision, yet it made sense only in an environment which combined royal pretensions, Orientalist fantasies, and scientific pretensions, all exemplified by the giraffe.

A GIRAFFE IN BEIJING

The Chinese are interesting for our purposes both for what they could do and for what they did not do. Their overseas explorations preceded those of the Europeans, their convoys were far larger, and, before the middle of the fifteenth century, they ventured farther afield. Then the expeditions suddenly stopped. In a series of increasingly draconian decrees, overseas travel was restricted and eventually outlawed completely.⁵⁹ The question is why. Again we have a giraffe to help our analysis along. A giraffe arrived in Beijing in 1414, not long before the first of the antiexpansionist decrees was promulgated.⁶⁰

Just like their European counterparts, Chinese rulers were always fond of their animal collections. A zoological garden has existed in Beijing at least since 1000 B.C.E., and when the capital moved with the rise and fall of various dynasties, the animals would move with it.⁶¹ There were African animals such as zebras and gazelles and Asian animals such as elephants, tigers, and camels. The taste for the exotic seems to have been particularly strong in the Chinese Middle Ages. During the Tang dynasty, for example—618 to 907 C.E.—China was an international meeting place where Arabs and Persians came to

⁵⁸ Compare Cheryl B. Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria," *Political Theory* 31, no. 2 (2003): 241–245.

⁵⁹ Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa*, pp. 86–89. See also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (1990; New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), pp. 119–120. I discuss Chinese overseas explorations in the context of the institutional limits of entrepreneurship. See Erik Ringmar, *The Mechanics of Modernity in Europe and East Asia: The Institutional Origins of Social Change and Stagnation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 155–158.

⁶⁰ Compare the white elephant from Annam given as a present to the Japanese shogun Yoshimune in 1728. Discussed in Marius B. Jansen, *China in the Tokugawa World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 37–39.

⁶¹ Loisel, *Histoire des ménageries*.

trade and study, and where acrobats, jugglers, and conjurers from Syria and Bactria would put on shows.⁶²

As far as the Confucian literati were concerned, there was never any doubt regarding the nature of the relations obtaining between China and the rest of the world.⁶³ China was the “Middle Kingdom,” the most sophisticated civilization on earth—embodied in Confucian morality and the written Chinese language—and by comparison, all surrounding states were vastly inferior. At best they were satellites circling around the brightly shining Chinese sun. The imperial bureaucrats related to them as tributary states that once a year were allowed to bring gifts to the Celestial Court. The Chinese emperor would magnanimously reciprocate and give even more lavish gifts in return. In this way, the tributary states were given an opportunity to show their submission, and the Chinese had an opportunity to impress them with their generosity and the splendor of their civilization.⁶⁴

The tributary system was at its most extensive in the early fifteenth century when the intrepid Zheng He—a Muslim, an admiral, and a eunuch in service to the emperor—visited Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and India as well as Persia and Arabia.⁶⁵ The expeditions were huge—one of the convoys comprised no fewer than sixty-two vessels, carrying some thirty-seven thousand soldiers. Although the receiving and handing out of gifts took up much of their time, a great deal of ordinary trade also took place on these occasions. For one thing, as a leading eunuch and employee of the court, Zheng was in charge of supplying the several thousand imperial consorts with assorted luxury items.⁶⁶

It was as a tributary gift that a giraffe arrived from Bengal in 1414.⁶⁷ A ship detailed from Zheng He’s main expedition had visited Bengal a few years earlier when a new king, Saifud-din, ascended to the throne. Among many other guests at the coronation were embassies from various Muslim rulers, and naturally they all brought presents with them. One of these was a giraffe presented by the ambassadors of the African

⁶² Colin A. Ronan and Joseph Needham, *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1:44. Compare Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, pp. 316–351.

⁶³ John K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, *Ch’ing Administration: Three Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; repr., Levenson, 1967), p. 106.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

⁶⁵ See Snow, *Star Raft*, pp. 1–36; Levanthes, *When China Ruled the Seas*, as well as the less than scholarly Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* (New York: Bantam, 2002).

⁶⁶ On the organization of the imperial course, see S. E. Finer, *The History of Government: II, The Intermediate Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 787.

⁶⁷ The following paragraphs paraphrase Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*.

state of Melinda—Malindi in today’s Kenya—and this was the animal the Bengalis proceeded to pass on to the Chinese. Worried that the animal would not survive the long journey, Zheng He’s men took the opportunity to order another giraffe, this time directly from the Melindians themselves.⁶⁸

The animal, when it arrived, was treated as a sign of the benevolence of heaven, and as such it had to be interpreted by scholars before its meaning could become clear. Fortunately Chinese literati were highly skilled at interpreting signs. From the earliest times, scholars had spent much of their time reading the cracks in tortoise shells or the patterns formed by yarrow stems, and a set of imperial astronomers was constantly at hand watching the night sky for omens.⁶⁹ Unusual sightings were immediately identified as portents and vested with huge political significance. Whatever happened was quickly interpreted in terms of the established canon. Hence Chinese scholars were never all that surprised.

The giraffe, when it appeared, was treated as such a sign. Checking with their encyclopedias, the scholars determined that it must be a unicorn, a mythological creature that traditionally was said to have a “horn in its head made out of flesh,” “the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, and the hooves of a horse,” and to be of such a gentle disposition that “it only ate grass and never hurt a living being.”⁷⁰ As they saw it, this description fitted well enough with the beast standing before them—giraffes, after all, do have horns, a curiously composite body, and a gentle nature. When the Chinese literati, in addition, learnt that the animal in the Somali language was known as *girin*, that settled the matter.⁷¹ To Chinese ears, *girin* sounded very much like *qilin*, the Chinese name of the unicorn.

In the official Chinese bestiary the *qilin* was together with the dragon, the phoenix, and the tortoise an animal of good omen, and it was known as “the foremost of the 360 creatures living on land.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 32. It was when these ambassadors were to be accompanied home that Zheng He undertook a fifth voyage (1417–1419) which took him all the way to Africa.

⁶⁹ Wolfram Eberhard, “The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China,” in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 33–70. Compare Ronan and Needham, *Shorter Science & Civilization*, pp. 67–221.

⁷⁰ Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, p. 32.

⁷¹ The contemporary Somali seems to be *geri*, see *Somali Dictionary*, available at <http://ww2.saturn.stpaul.k12.mn.us/somali/dictionary/englishwords/gi-gowords.html>.

⁷² Jorge Louis Borges, “The Unicorn of China,” in his *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 148–149. Borges quotes among others, Margoulis,

The appearance of a *qilin* was thus regarded as a happy portent, a sign of heaven's favor, and proof of the virtue of the reigning emperor. As the courtiers quickly realized, to present such an animal to the Son of Heaven would be a supreme form of flattery. This was particularly the case since several other signs of celestial favors recently had appeared: comets in the sky, vegetarian tigers, and extraordinarily large ears on grain.⁷³ As one of the courtiers helpfully explained, "[t]his shows that Your Majesty's virtue equals that of Heaven; its merciful blessings have spread far and wide so that its harmonious vapours have emanated a *qilin*, as an endless bliss to the state for a myriad, myriad years."⁷⁴

When the second giraffe—the one dispatched directly from Melinda—arrived in 1421, the emperor went out to greet it in great state, accompanied by a "celestial horse"—a zebra—and a "celestial stag"—probably an algazel. The officials prostrated themselves before the emperor and the animals and offered their congratulations. Members of the imperial academy and the painters of the court did not miss the opportunity to immortalize the occasion. The emperor is reported to have said, "This event is due to the abundant virtue of the late Emperor, my father, and also to the assistance rendered me by my Ministers. That is why distant people arrive in uninterrupted succession. From now on it behoves Us even more than in the past to cling to virtue and it behoves you to remonstrate with Us about Our shortcomings."⁷⁵

Despite the excitement caused by the giraffe and the obvious benefits the Chinese derived from international trade, it was only a decade later, in 1433, that an imperial decree limited foreign trade and travel. New decrees in 1449 and 1452 restricted foreign commerce even further, and each new law had increasingly severe penalties attached to it. The ban was eventually extended to coastal shipping so that in the end "there was not an inch of planking on the seas."⁷⁶

In the end the inward-looking anticommmercialism of the Confucian literati defeated the entrepreneurial curiosity of the eunuchs of

Anthologie raisonnée de la littérature chinoise (1948), a book that, perhaps not surprisingly, does not seem to exist.

⁷³ Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization* (1972; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 218. See also Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-chien Wang, "Economic Developments, 1644–1800," *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 9, pt. 1, *The Ch'ing Empire to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 565.

the court.⁷⁷ But this was a political battle rather than a battle between ideas. Whenever the eunuchs were in power, trade restrictions were relaxed, and whenever the literati were in power, trade restrictions were tightened. Restricting international trade was a way for the Confucians to impose their outlook on the state, but it was also a way to enhance their power at the expense of their despised opponents. As the Confucian vice president of the board of the War Office summarized the new consensus later in the fifteenth century, “The expeditions of the San-pao [Zheng He] to the Western Ocean wasted tens of myriads of money and grain, and moreover the people who met their deaths on these expeditions may be counted by the myriads. Although he returned with wonderful precious things, what benefit was it to the state? This was merely an action of bad government of which ministers should severely disapprove.”⁷⁸

Zheng He’s expeditions were the last large-scale overseas ventures in which the Chinese were to engage. The world was never discovered and explored by the Chinese. Instead, a hundred years later, the first Europeans arrived in China.

WHAT THE GIRAFFES SAID

There were, we said, two main waves of European expansionism: one taking place in the Renaissance, the other in the nineteenth century. Both waves have traditionally been explained in economic terms, yet economic factors can serve as reasons for an expansion only to the extent that people can overcome the uncertainties and risks it entails. As a comparison with China shows, risks and uncertainties can be assessed in radically different ways. Hence there can be nothing inevitable about expansionism. The Europeans embarked on their ventures not because an economic imperative compelled them to do so, but because they interpreted the extra-European world in a particular fashion. These interpretations are what interested us in this article.

Hence the giraffes. For a next-to-silent animal, these three giraffes had a lot to tell us. Before the latter half of the nineteenth century

⁷⁷ There were other reasons for the ban, such as the completion of the Grand Canal to Beijing in 1411 and the threat from Mongols in the northwest of the country. See Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 220.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Duyvendak, *China’s Discovery of Africa*, p. 88.

giraffes were rare everywhere outside of Africa, and the few that appeared elsewhere were like emissaries from a different world. The question was always how to make sense of the animal, what it was and what it meant. In the process people inevitably came to reveal how they regarded the exotic. Like a sleeping person who interprets any external stimulus in terms of the dream she is dreaming, the Europeans and the Chinese interpreted the giraffes in terms of the preconceptions of their respective societies.

Having said this, it seems the reactions of ordinary people almost always were the same. They were first bemused by the appearance of the giraffe and then amused; first delighted and then excited. This was how people reacted when the giraffe first came to Europe, and it was how women, children, and the uneducated reacted in China.⁷⁹ Everywhere ordinary people expressed a strong desire to look, and this was a desire they were prepared to go to quite considerable lengths to satisfy. People were curious before they saw the animal, while they saw it, and after they had seen it; and when they had seen it once, they wanted to see it again. This was also how just about everyone seems to have reacted in Florence. In the Renaissance the exotic was celebrated, by high and low, in its very exoticness, and the excitement it caused constituted at the time the very definition of entertainment.⁸⁰

This was definitely not how educated people saw it in Paris and Beijing. Neither Confucian scholars nor members of the French academy were supposed to get excited, and particularly not by the curious and the bizarre. Scholarly investigations required detachment, not spontaneous reactions to marvelous objects. Fortunately, in both cases there were well-established interpretative schemes that helped the scholars maintain their equanimity.⁸¹ With the help of these canons, the animal was first identified and then filed away under the appropriate label. To the Chinese literati the giraffe was a *k'i-lin*, and to the French scientists it was a *Giraffa camelopardis*. In the end the animal was not alien at all but instead perfectly well known, and its appear-

⁷⁹ On the educated man's preference for black and white ink paintings over colored prints, see Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 41–55.

⁸⁰ Compare Whitaker, "Culture of Curiosity," pp. 75–90.

⁸¹ On the Confucian "Doctrine of the Mean," see Wing-tsit Chan, ed., *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 97–101. On the detachment of European gentleman scholars see Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 74–86.

ance affirmed rather than undermined the grasp on reality of the two respective groups.

Compare the hermeneutic tools employed. The Chinese made sense of things with the help of allegories. In an allegory one object stands for another object; it is a sign that requires interpretation. Given this outlook, the giraffe was interesting only for the lessons it conveyed; it was like a messenger who has no value apart from the message she carries. The French, on the contrary, made meaning with the help of laws. Their challenge was classification. Once the classification was completed, however, the giraffe lost its unique status. It was only an empirical observation after all, a data point, and as such a mere instantiation of the scientific law. By contrast, the basic epistemological principle of the Renaissance was analogy.⁸² Analogies reveal underlying affinities of structures, functions, or essences, and as such they point to long chains of objects that all somehow relate to each other. Looking at the giraffe, the Florentines could begin to imagine what these chains would look like. The analogies the giraffe invoked operated as tools of discovery, and making these discoveries was the source of their delight.

Or compare what we perhaps could refer to as the geography of meaning. For the Chinese the giraffe pointed to the center of their conceptual universe. It derived its meaning from the canonical system institutionalized in the Chinese state and embodied in the emperor and the court rituals. By contrast, the claims of French scientists were universal and homogeneous and applied in the same manner everywhere. Everything was included in the grids of a scientific system that had no epistemological center but that required French, or at least European, scientists for its proper formulation. By contrast, the analogical connections of the Florentines started with the animal, went on to the rulers of their city, and continued onward to Egypt and beyond. For them the giraffe was a mere starting point for a journey of the imagination.

The political role of the animal is equally obvious. All three giraffes were pawns in diplomatic games of gift giving, and they all reflected the power of Muslim rulers as intermediaries between East and West, Africa and the rest of the world.⁸³ Everywhere they appeared they

⁸² Compare the discussion of “sympathetic magic” in James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890; London: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 26–37.

⁸³ Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, pp. 212–247.

boosted the legitimacy of the rulers who received them. In Florence political power was derived from the citizens for whom the rulers were supposed to provide public entertainments and feasts. The power of the giraffe came from the stories it told of distant places and unknown lands—the feudal *serraglio* of the Muslim sultans and the vast, unknown expanses of Africa itself.⁸⁴ In China, by contrast, the power of the ruler did not depend on a public mandate at all but instead on a mandate from heaven. The stories the giraffe told concerned the emperor; it was a sign that confirmed the legitimacy of his reign.

In France, Charles X invoked the Renaissance legacy of princely zoology, but the strategy backfired because the tradition, by the early nineteenth century, was easily lampooned. The new scientific tradition of zoology was a more reliable source of legitimacy. Just as the deciphering of the Rosetta stone had opened up Egypt's past to scientific investigation, the subjection of the animal kingdom to laws meant it could be studied not impressionistically but scientifically. In both cases, science demonstrated, to the satisfaction of the Europeans, their own intellectual superiority over the rest of the world.⁸⁵ The Europeans knew more about Egypt and Africa than the Egyptians and the Africans themselves. In their minds the giraffe only reinforced this hierarchy. It was a curious toy, the vicarious pastime of an Oriental prince, the kind of strange creature that provided entertainment to the members of the lower classes, or to members of lesser races.⁸⁶

In terms of cultural predispositions there are thus three basic models: a Renaissance model of outward-looking curiosity, a Confucian model of inward-looking self-sufficiency, and an Enlightenment model of outward-looking self-sufficiency. Not surprisingly, these models had implications for action. The Florentines went out into the world full of curiosity and a will to discover; their economic aim was to satisfy a booming European market in exotic goods. The Chinese self-confidently closed themselves off from the world, as emperor Qianlong put it in 1793, because “we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufacture.”⁸⁷ In the

⁸⁴ Compare Mullaney, “Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs,” pp. 45–48. Not everyone was ignorant of Africa; compare the widely travelled Giovanni Leone Granatino known as “Leo the African,” and his *Description of Africa* (Florence, 1526), discussed in John Howland Rowe, “The Renaissance Foundations of Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 1–20. Available at <http://www.aaanet.org/gad/history/011rowe.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 34–37.

⁸⁶ On the racism of nineteenth-century France see Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, pp. 90–170.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Spence, *Search for Modern China*, pp. 122–123.

case of the French, their intellectual occupation of the Muslim world preceded their military occupation. Like the Chinese they lived in a conceptual universe without a significant outside—beyond science, after all, there can be only superstition. Yet science has universal pretensions and it needs concrete cases on which it can be tested. Likewise France could find conclusive proof of its superiority only by comparing itself with inferior societies.⁸⁸

But it would be a mistake to say that these interpretative schemes made the respective societies do what they did. Predispositions are nothing more than predispositions, and there are often, as we have seen, quite contradictory interpretations present in each society. This was most obviously the case in China and in France. The Chinese eunuchs were clearly ready to go on exploring the world on behalf of the emperor's court, and an earlier generation of Enlightenment thinkers—the generation of Diderot—regarded the extra-European world with considerable respect. The reason these interpretations did not win out in the end was not that they were less plausible, but rather that they never were backed up by sufficient power. The imperial state was too strong and the Confucian literati who ran it were too powerful. The French state, on the contrary, was too weak and too full of self-doubt. It was hoped that a foreign war would help the nation unite. The result was the beginning of the overseas empire.

⁸⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 92–110.