

# THE CREATION OF JUSTI'S *VERGLEICHUNGEN* AND CHINA'S ROLE IN IT

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis examines different aspects of the book *Vergleichungen der Europäischen mit den Asiatischen und andern vermeintlich Barbarischen Regierungen*, with special attention to the role that China plays in it and the author's theory. *Vergleichungen* is written by J.H.G. Justi and published in 1762. *Vergleichungen* did not attract much attention when it was published, but I believe that *Vergleichungen* is a very original and interesting book since it is a fundamental critique of Eurocentrism, written at a time when Eurocentrism was on the rise in Europe. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to understand how Justi formed his anti-Eurocentric opinion, how he expressed his point of view in his book, what he wanted to achieve with his book and whether he achieved these goals. The most important findings from this thesis are that Justi became interested in the European power struggle because of his move to Vienna in 1750. Second, that his interest in China was sparked because he met several Jesuit scholars at the Theresianum in Vienna. Third, that Justi seems to want to convince his readers of his opinion in *Vergleichungen* in order to bring about change in Europe. This probably did not succeed because Justi's anti-Eurocentric worldview no longer matched the Eurocentric worldview of the majority in Europe.*

**KEYWORDS:** H.G. Justi, anti-Eurocentrism, Eurocentrism, China, Jesuits, Sino-European history

## INTRODUCTION

*Vergleichungen der Europäischen mit den Asiatischen und andern vermeintlich Barbarischen Regierungen* (Comparisons of the European with the Asiatic

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and Other Supposedly Barbaric Governments) is written by J.H.G. von Justi and published in 1762. Justi was a German political and economic thinker whose ideas were especially influential in Germany and Austria. Many of his books were very important in the economic and political debate of that time, but *Vergleichungen* did not attract much attention. Even nowadays, not much attention is paid to this book, while I am of the opinion that it is a very original and interesting book. *Vergleichungen* is namely a fundamental critique of Eurocentrism, written at a time when Eurocentrism was on the rise in Europe. In *Vergleichungen*, Justi gives extensive examples of institutions of non-European countries, compares them to the ones in Europe, and then concludes that those of non-European countries function better than their counterparts in Europe. Therefore, Justi argues that it would be beneficial for European countries to introduce these in Europe. Of these non-European countries, Justi was especially interested in China as an example for Europe.

Because I am of the opinion that *Vergleichungen* is a work of considerable originality to which more attention should be paid, this thesis will examine the different aspects that were important for the creation of *Vergleichungen*, with special attention to the role that China plays in this work and the author's theory. Chapter 1 is about Justi himself and his motivations and interests. Chapter 2 discusses the contrast between Justi's anti-Eurocentric opinion and the Eurocentric opinion prevailing in Europe at that time. Chapter 3 discusses what Justi wanted to achieve with *Vergleichungen* and what he actually achieved with it.

For this thesis, I focused mainly on the introduction and the first chapter titled *About the Monarchy*. The introduction reflects Justi's anti-Eurocentric opinion. In addition, it discusses why Justi finds the Jesuit reports on China more credible than those of European merchants. Chapter 1 is an extensive comparison between the Chinese monarchy and European monarchies and reflects the structure of Justi's comparisons well.

The text often refers to the book *Pflug und Steuerruder: Zur Verflechtung von Herrschaft und Landwirtschaft* (Plough and rudder: On the interweaving of governance and agriculture), written by Susan Richter. The book was published in 2015 and is one of the few contemporary books that discuss *Vergleichungen*. The fourth chapter of this book is about using the Chinese Emperor as an example. In this chapter Justi and *Vergleichungen* are discussed in detail.

## 1. J.H.G. VON JUSTI

Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi was born in 1717 in Brücken and died in 1771 in Küstrin, both located in Germany (Reinert 2019, ch.5.1 2).<sup>2</sup> He has published more than 60 independent works on a variety of topics such as economy, politics and geology. According to Burgdorf (2006, 53–56), he wrote this many works because his life was overshadowed by debts, and in this way, he hoped to get a job or financial gratifications. For the same reason, Justi published his writings, either unchanged, expanded or newly organized, again and again.

Justi obtained a PhD in cameralism in Wittenberg in 1744. According to Richter (2015, 211–212), he later became quite influential in this field. Cameralism emerged in the 17th century as a German science of administration that concerned the management of the state's finances. According to Adam (2006, 26–33), Justi's growing reputation helped him in establishing contact with Austrian Minister Frederick William von Haugwitz, who effectuated Justi's move to Vienna in 1750. The contact with Haugwitz had a significant influence on Justi since his encounter with Haugwitz turned Justi away from juridical and literary pursuits and towards political and economic questions. Haugwitz brought Justi in direct contact with the European power struggle between contemporary governments. Haugwitz also had a large share in Justi's appointment as a professor at the Magisterium of German Eloquence at the Theresianum in Vienna.<sup>3</sup> Here, Justi made a name for himself in cameralism and tried to apply his theories in practice. Richter (2015, 223–225) argues that at the Theresianum, Justi gained his first knowledge about China because he met Jesuit priest Joseph Franz, who was in close contact with missionaries in Asia and gave Justi access to numerous travel reports and compendia. Richter further argues that Justi was most likely also familiar with Antoine Hoeller (1698–1770), the confessor of Joseph II, through his contact with Father Franz. Hoeller was also in correspondence with Jesuits in China. In addition, Justi's 1754 translation of Claude François Lambert's (1705–1765) essay *Recueil d'observations curieuses* (Collection of curious observations) was an essential inspiration for him to examine China's state and administrative structures as well as its economy and agriculture. Justi gave up

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2 Reinert however states here that there is disagreement about Justi's actual year of birth, but according to him, 1917 is the most likely year of birth.

3 The Theresianum was founded in 1746, when Empress Maria Theresa sold the building in which it was to be located to the Jesuits. The Jesuits had to turn it into an educational institution that had to prepare talented men for civil service.

the Austrian services in 1754, after which he taught for a short period at the University of Göttingen. According to Richter (2015, 223–225), his move to Göttingen made Justi only more interested in China because he met the Lutheran Sinophile theologian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755). Justi communicated intensively with Von Mosheim about the Chinese monarchy. Richter (2015, 223–225) further states that Justi found inspiration in exemplary nature of the Chinese monarchy, but above all in the Chinese government's promotion of agriculture and the Chinese dependence of trade on agriculture in Étienne De Silhouette's *Idée générale du gouvernement et de la morale des Chinois* (1729, General idea of the government and morals of the Chinese). Some parts of *Vergleichungen* almost literally correspond to Silhouette's work. Silhouette's work, in turn, closely follows and sometimes even literally corresponds to the letter of Jesuit François-Xavier d'Entrecolles from 19 October 1720.

Another source of inspiration for *Vergleichungen* was *A Description of China* (1735) by Jean-Baptiste Du Halde. Justi takes many of his examples of Chinese institutions from this book. Du Halde never travelled to China himself but was still able to compile *A Description of China*. The book is based on reports that he collected from Jesuit missionaries and that provide encyclopaedic coverage of all aspects of Chinese civilization and a very detailed geographical description of China.

## 2. JUSTI'S ANTI-EUROCENTRIC OPINION

It becomes clear from Justi's line of reasoning in *Vergleichungen* that he held an anti-Eurocentric opinion. In *Vergleichungen*, Justi discusses the people and institutions of different countries that deal with the administration of the country: the monarchy, the monarch, the administration, the legal system, the civil servants and the family of the monarch. In each chapter of the book, he discusses a state institution, state system or characteristic such as specific government policies, the law or customs of a non-European country. Justi argues that these institutions, systems and characteristics are very important for the functioning of the described non-European country and its society. Justi then compares these institutions, systems and characteristics with their counterparts in European countries, concluding that the institutions, systems and characteristics of non-European countries are better than their European counterparts. Therefore, Justi argues, they should be implemented in Euro-

pean countries. Justi believes that implementing these non-European state institutions, state systems and characteristics in European countries will lead to better functioning governments in European countries. The non-European countries that he uses for his comparisons are Persia, Siam, Peru, and particularly China. In the introduction of *Vergleichungen*, Justi (1762, introduction 3–4) makes his opinion about Europe's alleged superiority clear:

*However common this national pride is to all peoples, we Europeans are much more driven by this high image of ourselves than any other nation on earth. Our preference does not seem doubtful. We boldly look beyond all other peoples of the other parts of the world. In our eyes, they are nothing but unskilful, brute and ignorant barbarians, if we even give them the honour to not immediately classify them as savages. All their ways, customs, and governmental constitutions seem to us absurd, unreasonable, foolish, and ridiculous. Our reason, our knowledge, our understanding, seems to us to be so sublime, that we look down on all the other peoples of the earth as if they were crawling worms, and in truth, we treat them no better. We present ourselves as the lords of the whole Earth, we seize without doubt the lands of all those that inhabit the three other parts of the world; we dictate them the laws of their lands, we see them as our slaves, and if they dare to put up the least of resistance, we exterminate them. The strangest thing is that we do all of this without anyone in Europe realizing that we are committing terrible injustices as a result.*

The title of the book itself, *Vergleichungen der Europäischen mit den Asiatischen und andern vermeintlich Barbarischen Regierungen* translated as "Comparisons of the European with the Asiatic and Other Supposedly Barbaric Governments", also shows that Justi has an anti-Eurocentric opinion. According to Susan Richter (2015, 219–220), the title shows that the book programmatically leans against Aristotle's *Politics*. Based on Aristotle's classification of the Asian peoples as barbarous in the demarcation of the Greek tribes and their nature or their status as slaves of despotic rulers, Justi sought by using a comparative approach in his work to question the alleged barbarity of the Asians to Europe. According to Richter, Justi's choice of the title stems from his perception that the sense of superiority of European state culture and economy was increasingly gaining ground. He aimed to ask about its justification and to examine it in comparison with non-European statehood and economics.

Richter further argues that with the addition of the word *vermeintlich* (supposedly) before *Barbarischen Regierungen* (barbarous governments), the title anticipated the results of Justi's investigations. With this, he provoked his readers with the idea of the opposite: the from his point of view barbaric state of affairs in the European states.

So, *Vergleichungen* shows that Justi believed that although non-European countries were very different from European countries, this did not mean that they were less than European countries. One of the countries that Justi often uses as an example is China, arguing that many aspects of the Chinese state, such as its monarch and its state institutions, work better than their European counterparts. However, according to Brooks (2009, 2), while the image of China was still positive in the 17th and early 18th centuries, it became increasingly negative in the course of the 18th century. During the 18th century, Europeans reconceptualized what it meant for a society to be civilized. The standards for this were primarily based on reason and science. According to Europeans, China was deficient in these areas. This reasoning allowed the Europeans to place China in their Eurocentric worldview. For this reason did Justi's anti-Eurocentric opinion not correspond with the general opinion of that time, especially not with the opinion of the people responsible for the administration of the European countries and their colonies.

### **3. WHAT DID JUSTI WANT TO ACHIEVE WITH *VERGLEICHUNGEN* AND WHAT DID HE ACHIEVE?**

#### **3.1 WHAT DID JUSTI WANT TO ACHIEVE WITH *VERGLEICHUNGEN*?**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Justi's anti-Eurocentric opinion at the time of the publication of *Vergleichungen* no longer corresponded to the general Eurocentric opinion of that time. In *Vergleichungen*, Justi discusses the people and institutions that deal with the administration of a country. He gives many examples of these matters in different countries, in my opinion to show the readers of his book that some institutions, systems, etc. of non-European countries function better than their counterparts in European countries and that they, therefore, should be introduced in Europe. Since he emphasizes the fact that reforms are needed in Europe, and reforms are carried out by people with power, Justi may have hoped that people with power

would read his book, become convinced of his line of reasoning, and then try to change the course of events in Europe.

This interpretation corresponds with Osterhammel's line of reasoning about what Justi wants to achieve with his book. According to Osterhammel (2018, 77), Justi attempted with *Vergleichungen* "to bring the discussions about society and state down from the lofty realm of natural law to the firmer ground of empirical historical analysis." Osterhammel (2018, 78) further states that Justi points out what is praiseworthy about other nations' institutions because his overriding concern was to train his readers in the habit of changing their perspective. He believed that training people in changing their perspective would be beneficial for Europe.

### 3.2 WHAT DID JUSTI ACHIEVE WITH VERGLEICHUNGEN?

*Vergleichungen* was published in 1762 by Rüdigers in Germany, and this is the only edition of the book. The original is written in German and I could not find any translations. Since the book was published in 1762 and no new editions have been published ever since, it seems to me that not much attention has been paid to the book throughout the centuries. Therefore, I think that it has not had much critical effect.

Although *Vergleichungen* itself may not have had much influence, some of Justi's other books had. Many of his most important concepts, such as the *Glückseligkeit* (happiness) of the nation, *Maßigung* (moderation), the importance of agriculture, and the position of the nobility not only occur in *Vergleichungen*, but also in many of his other books. These books often made more of an impact. In *Limits to Despotism: Idealizations of Chinese Governance and Legitimizations of Absolutist Europe*, Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen examines the sources of the perception of China by Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria and Catherine II of Russia, which, according to him, provide the best examples of how the idealization of China influenced the political outlook of Europe. In this article, Jacobsen also examines Justi's influence on these three monarchs. However, Jacobsen's article (2013, 382–384) shows that these three monarchs were mainly influenced by concepts from other books written by Justi. Only the influence on Frederick II seems to partly correspond with *Vergleichungen*.

### 3.3 WHY DID JUSTI'S OTHER BOOKS ATTRACT MORE ATTENTION THAN VERGLEICHUNGEN?

Justi's most influential works were *Staatswirtschaft oder systematische Abhandlung aller Öconomischen und Kameralwissenschaften* (1755, State Economy or Systematic Treatment of All Economic and Cameral Sciences), *Der Grundriss einer guten Regierung* (1759, The Blueprint for a Good Government), and *Natur und Wesen der Staaten* (1760, Nature and Essence of States). In these three books, Justi sometimes also mentions his positive view of China. For example, in *Natur und Wesen der Staaten*, Justi (1760, 118) states that he considers China as a very wisely established monarchy in which even the civil laws and customs are regarded as principles of the state, and where all matters are handled with the greatest care.

I think that *Vergleichungen* has attracted significantly less attention than the other three works because they are essentially different from *Vergleichungen*. The three aforementioned works are primarily about the situation in Europe, and Justi uses China sometimes as an example. *Vergleichungen* focuses on non-European countries and is based on comparisons between China, Persia, Siam, and Peru and European states. These comparisons are the basis for his reasoning. In addition, in *Vergleichungen* Justi uses the examples of China etc. to criticize Europe, while he uses them in the other works more as a suggestion. I am of the opinion that the fact that Justi's reasoning in *Vergleichungen* is based on comparisons with non-European countries and that he uses these to criticize Europe influenced the attention that *Vergleichungen* attracted.

As mentioned earlier, the image of China became increasingly negative in the 18th century, which allowed Europeans to place China in their Eurocentric worldview. The promotion of a Eurocentric worldview comes partly from the government of a country. Even though Justi wanted to influence people to use his ideas for reform with *Vergleichungen*, and therefore probably wanted to reach people with influence in particular, his ideas simply seemed not to correspond with the general opinion of the majority and thus of these influential people.

## CONCLUSION

Concluding, in this thesis I have discussed several aspects that contributed to the creation of *Vergleichungen* and I have discussed the role that China played in it. Justi's move to Vienna in 1750 played an important role in the



eventual creation of Justi's ideas in *Vergleichungen*, as he began to focus more on political and economic issues and to delve into the European power struggle. In addition, Justi became interested in China through his contacts at the Theresianum and later at the University of Göttingen.

*Vergleichungen* shows that Justi had an exceedingly anti-Eurocentric opinion. With *Vergleichungen*, Justi wanted to convince his readers of his right to change the course of events in Europe. Justi's anti-Eurocentric opinion is presumably one of the main reasons why *Vergleichungen* did not have that much influence. During the 18th century, Europeans reconceptualized what it meant for a society to be civilized. Countries such as China were classified as uncivilized, so Europeans could fit them into their Eurocentric worldview. As more and more people began to think that way about China and other non-European countries, Justi's ideas probably simply did not correspond with the general opinion at the time.

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