CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

1.1 Analyzing European Discourse(s) on China

This study focuses on discourses on China as represented in European reference works in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Early modern European discourses on China rarely have been ‘original’ but repeatedly transmitted, transformed, and broken. Discourses emerging from these processes of transmission and transformation had been fed by a variety of sources: by printed accounts of China given by European travellers, traders, diplomats, and missionaries (and their perception throughout Europe), by natural products as well as by artefacts.¹ From the sixteenth century onwards, members of the European aristocracy showed a strong interest in specimens of natural products and artefacts of East Asian or—as they put it—‘Indian’ origin. These non-textual representations of distant lands were eagerly collected throughout Europe. In their cabinets of curiosities, European rulers stored a wealth of information on the wider world.²

In approaching the supposed variety of discourses on China as represented in early modern European sources, this study will analyze the origins of these discourses, their formation, replacement, and temporary renewal/renaissance as well as their persistence and change.

The analysis of the origin, formation (and diversification) of European discourses on China as mirrored in encyclopaedias will help us to learn more about various modes of perceiving China in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe: The general public based its perception mainly on European accounts (travelogues, Jesuit publications, summaries of geographical knowledge). Due to lacking language

¹ Thomas Pekar, Der Japan-Diskurs im westlichen Kulturkontext (1860–1920) (Munich: iudicium, 2003), 48 presented these arguments concerning Western discourses on Japan.
² For a thorough analysis of the state of the field see the introductory remarks in Dominik Collet, Die Welt in der Stube. Begegnungen mit Außereuropa in Kunstkammern der Frühen Neuzeit, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 232 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
proficiency, Chinese language materials were widely neglected until the late eighteenth century. Only the accounts published by the Jesuits relied on Chinese sources.

Encyclopaedic reference works are intended to be consulted, not to be read. Looking up an encyclopaedic work is intended to meet an immediate want for information. As important sources for the historical evolution of discourses in general, encyclopaedias represent a vast field of research for the historian.\textsuperscript{3} The value and significance of this sort of reference works has been repeatedly stated in the field of cultural studies.\textsuperscript{4}

Regarding European encyclopaedias as well as European discourses in general, it may be supposed that China is only one subject among many. As a consequence, information on China is to be found not only under the headword ‘China’ but also under a wealth of other headwords. The analysis of encyclopaedias thus will provide a kind of ‘meta-ordering’ of knowledge disposed in this kind of reference works.

Information on China as arranged in encyclopaedias will be put in the context of its genesis and will be analyzed in the light of the discussions led in the European ‘republic of letters’.

Considering the complexity and scope of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century encyclopaedias and the amount of information on China given by these reference works, an analysis of China-related information can hardly be exhaustive. In studying and analyzing the representation of China in European encyclopaedias, we concentrate on these parts of China usually labelled as China Proper (in French la Chine proprement dite, in German das eigentliche China).\textsuperscript{5} A thorough analysis of the peripheral regions of the Chinese Empire that from time to time were

