

THE *KITAJSKAJA GRAMMATIKA* (1835) AND BIČURIN'S IDEAS ON THE "MECHANISM" OF CHINESE BETWEEN EUROPEAN AND CHINESE GRAMMATICAL TRADITIONS*

Anna Di Toro

Università per Stranieri di Siena, Siena, Italy

Abstract

The main contribution of Bičurin in the field of Chinese language, the *Kitajskaja grammatika* (1835), is still quite understudied, even though it represents the first grammar of Chinese written in Russian. Through a rapid overview of some of the early grammars of Chinese written by European authors and the analysis of some sections of the book, in which the Russian sinologist expounds the mechanism of Chinese, the paper dwells on the original ideas on this language developed by the Russian sinologist, inspired both by European and Chinese grammatical traditions. A particular attention is devoted to Bičurin's concept of "mental modification", related to the linguistic ideas discussed in Europe in the early 19th century.

Keywords

European grammars of Chinese, Russian sinology, Chinese grammatical studies, theory of "mental modification"

Résumé

La contribution principale de Bičurin dans le domaine de la langue chinoise, la *Kitajskaja grammatika* (1835), est encore peu étudiée, bien qu'elle représente la première grammaire du chinois écrite en russe. Après avoir fait un rapide tour d'horizon des premières grammaires dues à des auteurs européens, puis une analyse des parties du livre dans lesquelles Bičurin expose le fonctionnement de la langue chinoise, ce travail se concentrera sur les idées originales développées par le sinologue russe et inspirées à la fois par les traditions grammaticales européenne et chinoise. Dans ce cadre-là, une attention particulière sera dédiée au concept de Bičurin de "modification mentale" en relation avec les idées linguistiques débattues en Europe au début du XIX^e siècle.

Mots clés

Grammaires européennes du chinois, sinologie russe, études grammaticales chinoises, théorie de la "modification mentale"

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‘Savez-vous pourquoi M. Pauthier se trompe, en traduisant du chinois? C’est qu’il a une fausse idée du mécanisme de cette langue...’

(N. Ja. Bičurin, letter to Stanislas Julien, 13th February 1841)

Nikita Ja. Bičurin (name in religion: Iakinf, 1777-1853), considered the main Russian sinologist of the past, was a very peculiar figure in 19th century Russia¹. Bičurin’s life and activity have been studied in numerous works, but, although some studies have been devoted to his grammar book, many aspects of this work still require further research².

1 ORIGINS OF THE *KITAJSKAJA GRAMMATIKA*

Between 1830 and 1832, Bičurin took part in a scientific expedition to Kjachta; among his tasks in the mission were the compilation of a Chinese grammar and teaching Chinese to the students of the Kjachta School of Chinese³.

The *Kitajskaja grammatika* was first published in Kjachta in 1831 in a brief lithographic edition (consisting of 32 pages), while the first complete edition (263 pages) was published by Gemil’jan in Saint Petersburg in 1835, ‘according to the Highest command [of the tsar]’⁴. The imperial patronage of the book reflects the interest towards the Oriental languages shown by Sergej S. Uvarov (1786-1855), Minister of National Education from 1833 to 1849, who was very active in promoting institutions for the study of Eastern cultures in Russia⁵.

The first aim of the book was practical, since it was meant to be a text-book for the pupils of the School of Chinese language that was founded in order to train Russian translators who could facilitate commercial negotiations with the Chinese. The towns of Kjachta (in Russia) and Mǎimàichéng 買賣城 (in China at the time, today’s Altanbulag, in the Republic of Mongolia), situated on the boundary

1 N. Ja. Bičurin studied in Kazan’ seminary and had a very rapid ecclesiastical career. He was head of the Ninth Spiritual Mission in Beijing (1808-21), where he studied Manchu, Mongolian and Chinese and undertook a vast work of research on the history and geography of China and Central Asia. When back to Saint Petersburg, he fell into disgrace, being accused of neglecting his spiritual duties during his sojourn in Beijing and of plundering the funds of the Mission. He was imprisoned in Valaam Monastery for three years and after his release he was appointed to the position of translator in the Asiatic Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, in Saint Petersburg, where he devoted himself almost entirely to research. In the private notes of his contemporaries it is possible to find vivid accounts on this eccentric monk, who was a habitué of the intellectual salons of the Russian capital (See [Aleksseev 1937](#)).

2 For a complete overview on the literature on Bičurin, see [Epišin et al. 2009](#). For previous studies on *Kitajskaja grammatika*, see [Semenas 1977](#), [Liū 2009](#) and [2010](#) and [Di Toro 2007](#) and [2008](#).

3 [Skačkov 1977](#), p. 96; on the Kjachta School of Chinese, see [Kim and Šastitko 1990](#), p. 186 ff.

4 See the title page. The book had several editions and was used as a textbook of Chinese in Russia throughout the 19th century; the last edition was published in Beijing, by the Russian Spiritual Mission, in 1908; the present article is an analysis of 1835 edition.

5 See [Kim and Šastitko 1990](#), p. 154-155 and [Archaimbault 2017](#), p. 30.

between the two countries, were designated starting in 1727 as special centres for border trade between Russia and China. During the 18th century the Chinese population of Kjachta developed a peculiar spoken form (known as “Russian-Chinese dialect”, or “Chinese Pidgin Russian”), used in their contacts with Russians⁶. In the opinion of Russian merchants, this unofficial language, although useful in daily communication, created numerous misunderstandings that hindered commercial exchanges (Skačkov 1977, p. 109-110).

Bičurin made some remarks on this so-called dialect in the Preface of *Kitajskaja grammatika*:

In Kjachta [...], where the Chinese language is necessary for commercial dealings with the Chinese [...], none of the Russians has engaged in a regular study of that [language...]. The cause consists in the fact that the Chinese, employing in their relations with Russians a mangled Russian parlance (*izkoverkannoe Russkoe narečje*), are in no condition to explain in that [parlance] even the first bases of their own language. (Bičurin 1835, p. XVIII)

The course of study in the Kjachta School of Chinese was organized over four years, during which the students learnt the basic rules of Chinese grammar by a comparative study of the rules of Russian and Chinese, made written translations and practised spoken and writing skills, with particular attention to different stylistic levels. This programme represented the first example of an original methodology of didactics of Chinese in Russia (Skačkov 1977, p. 111) and the *Kitajskaja grammatika*, written as a text-book for the school of Kjachta, was the first systematic analysis of the Chinese language to be written in Russian⁷.

2 BIČURIN AND PREVIOUS EUROPEAN GRAMMARS OF CHINESE

Although written as a tool to be used in training commercial translators, the *Kitajskaja grammatika* is much more than a practical text-book: it is rich in reflections on the mechanism of the Chinese language and expresses several

6 This phenomenon attracted the interest of Russian scholars starting in the 18th century (see Shapiro 2012) and has been studied by A. Šprincin (1968) and, more recently, by R. Shapiro (2012). Bičurin is probably the author of an article entitled “A letter from Kjachta”, containing a description of this Russian pidgin, which was published in the *Moskovskij Telegraf* in 1831 (N. 5). The “letter”, unsigned, has been attributed to Bičurin by P. Skačkov (1977, p. 109; quoted in Shapiro 2012, p. 4).

7 On previous experiences of didactics of Chinese to Russians, see Di Toro 2008. The methodology implemented in the Russian Spiritual Mission of Beijing by Illarion Rossochin (1717-1761) and his successors relied considerably on Chinese didactical tradition (Skačkov 1977, p. 96).

original ideas. Unfortunately, the fact that the grammar was written in Russian hindered its diffusion and its potential influence on sinological studies in Europe⁸.

In the opening page of the Grammar, we read:

The Chinese Grammar that I am publishing in Russian should embrace the language and the script of the Chinese, two objects, the exposition of which has drawn the attention of the educated people of Europe already for a long time. [...] By the comparison of Chinese with all the other languages, it is revealed that it does not contain anything that could demonstrate any affinity with them. (Bičurin 1835, p. III)

Father Iakinf, from the very beginning of his book, takes a precise stand on two questions: the uniqueness of Chinese and the necessity of a distinction between the spoken and the written language in the compilation of a Chinese grammar.

A conspicuous section of the Preface (p. viii-xviii) is devoted to the exposition of the previous Chinese grammar studies by European scholars⁹.

The first grammar towards which the Russian monk devotes his attention is *Arte de la lengua mandarina*, by the Dominican Francisco Varo (1627-1687), written in 1682 and published in Canton in 1703¹⁰. Until recently, this book was considered the first extant grammar of Chinese ever to be written and published in a European language¹¹. About Varo's *Arte*, Bičurin observes that it is organised according to Latin parts of speech, by which 'the author tried to explain how in Chinese, by the

8 The book was awarded the Demidov Prize in the "Philology" section in 1839 (Liǔ 2010, p. 138). While other works of Bičurin were translated into other European languages (for example, *Opisanie Tibeta v nyněšnem ego sostojanii* [A description of Tibet, in its present state, 1828, French version edited by J. von Klaproth in 1831 with the title *Description du Tibet, traduite partiellement du chinois en russe par le P. Hyacinthe Bitchourin...*, Paris, Imprimerie royale]), this never happened with the Grammar. C. Harbsmeier noticed this failure (Harbsmeier 1998, p. 8-26). Although representing, in Harbsmeier's opinion, one of the best early books on Chinese, *Kitajskaja grammatika* was not included in the list of remarkable Western books on Chinese language compiled by Keiichi Uchida (2017, p. 27 ff.), possibly because it did not have much influence outside Russia. At the moment, an Italian PhD candidate from Rome University 'Sapienza', A. Leopardi, is translating Bičurin's grammar into Italian.

9 This section of the Preface has already been analysed, especially by Liǔ Ruóméi (2010) and me (Di Toro 2007). In the present article I add some new information and correct a few shortcomings contained in my previous paper.

10 For a modern English translation, see Varo 2000.

11 As far as Mandarin is concerned, G. Bertuccioli (1994 and 2003) demonstrated that *Grammatica sinica* by Martino Martini (1614-1661) is the first grammar written by a European author we know of; more recently, L. M. Paternicò has proved that Martini's grammar, which had circulated in manuscript form in Europe, was also printed and attached to some of the copies of Mèlchisedec Thévénot's *Relations des divers voyages curieux* (1696; Paternicò 2011 and 2013). The very first still extant grammars of Chinese, however, were descriptions of local varieties, fulfilled by Dominican missionaries in the Philippines, as the *Arte de la lengua Chiō chiu*, handwritten in 1620 by Melchior de Mançano (Chappell and Peyraube 2014 and Klötter 2017).

invariability of the words, it is possible to express the inflections characteristic of the European languages' and it is exactly this approach that prevented Varo from disclosing the 'original characteristics' of Chinese (Bičurin 1835, p. x).

The conviction of the necessity to describe Chinese starting from its own peculiarities is a crucial point in Bičurin's book, and the presentation of previous grammars has a precise function in this question. Although, since Matteo Ricci's time, Chinese had been described as absolutely different from all other known languages ('Subito mi detti alla lingua cina et prometto a V. R. che è altra cosa che né la greca, né la todesca...')¹², for a long time European grammatical works on Chinese relied upon the Greek-Latin tradition. The universal validity of this model was questioned only at the beginning of the 18th century, when gradually the idea that rules valid for Latin were hardly applicable to all other languages, spread among some scholars, together with the refutation of one of the central ideas in the Port Royal grammar tradition, i.e., that different languages may be reduced to a unique grammatical model¹³.

In commenting on Varo's grammar, Sandra Breitenbach has underlined that, although the Latin model caused several hindrances in the correct interpretation of features peculiar to Chinese, it represented the only model of language description familiar to European scholars at the time (Breitenbach 2000, p. xxxviii). Moreover, the first grammars of Chinese were intended as tools for newly arrived missionaries, who had an urgent need to learn the language. Having recourse to a method and a terminology already familiar would help them to save time and energy (see Klöter 2017).

While Bičurin does not devote much space to *Museum Sinicum* (Petersburg, 1730) by Teophilus Bayer (1694-1738), it is worth presenting briefly the passage about *Linguae Sinarum Mandarinicae Hieroglyphicae Grammatica Duplex* (Paris, 1742), by Étienne Fourmont (1683-1745)¹⁴. As Father Iakinf emphasises in his comments, the Latin title is preceded by a Chinese one: *Zhōngguó guānhuà* 中國官話, meaning 'spoken Chinese language of the higher status'; from the title, we are

12 Matteo Ricci, Letter to Martino de Fornari, Macao, February 13th, 1583 (Ricci 2008, p. 45).

13 See Leung 2002, p. 209-210. C. Leung quotes François C. Buffier S.J. (1661-1737), a representative figure of this tendency: 'It is essentially to the grammar to adjust itself to the languages for which it is written, and of which it is the result of analysis. Languages are not made for grammar, but grammar for languages [...]. Consequently, each language should have a particular grammar to make it apt to be learned. There are many bad grammars because one has applied what belongs to a particular language to another totally different language.' (F. C. Buffier, *Grammaire Française sur un plan nouveau*, Paris, Witte, 1714, p. 7-10, in Leung 2002, p. 210). It may be worth to note that Buffier is contemporary of J. de Prémare S. J., who was the first to theorize the necessity to adopt Chinese categories to analyse Chinese.

14 The *Museum Sinicum*, in *quo Sinicae Linguae et Litteraturae Ratio Explicatur* is, as suggested by the title, a treatise on various aspects of Chinese language, comprising a section on the grammatical system of a local variety of Chinese; on T. S. Bayer, see Lundbaek 1986.

told that Fourmont treated only the spoken, and not the written, variety¹⁵. The French scholar, by following the traditional exposition of European grammars and producing tables of noun declensions and verb conjugations, limited the exposition of the peculiarities of Chinese and even proposed incorrect examples (Bičurin 1835, p. XI-XII).

Fourmont was accused of plagiarism by Abel-Rémusat, who wrote that the *Grammatica Duplex* was nothing more than a Latin translation of Varo's work, to which the author had added Chinese characters, absent in the original (Abel-Rémusat 1822, Préface). As a matter of fact, Fourmont was very much indebted to Varo. However, as underlined by Cécile Leung, the main concern of the French scholar was to insert the characters in the grammar, not an easy task at the time for a sinologist residing in Europe (Leung 2002, p. 232-233). Bičurin does not seem to support Rémusat's accusation of plagiarism, and simply observes that the author had studied Chinese in France relying on Varo and he had not been able to have his grammar revised by scholars with a sound knowledge of this language (Bičurin 1835, p. XII).

The Russian monk then devotes a paragraph to the *Notitia linguae Sinicae* (in Latin, with Chinese characters), by Joseph de Prémare, S.J. (1666-1736), completed in 1728 and published in Malacca only in 1831:

Father Prémare [...] who had devoted himself for a long time to Chinese, in China, comprehended thoroughly the characteristics of this language, and displayed them in his Grammar with utmost precision, without attaching himself to the grammatical order of the European languages, since they do not have any resemblance to Chinese. [...] The author uses] many fine examples, the majority of which are expressions belonging to the dictionary, and not derived from the essential rules of the language. [...] It is a pity only that in *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*, a creation unique in its genre for the purity of style, we can find a deficiency, common to all the above-mentioned grammars, in the rules on which is based the organization of the words characteristic of Chinese, in spoken and written language. It is probably for this reason that Father Prémare himself did not designate his work a Grammar. (Bičurin 1835, p. XII-XIII)

In Bičurin's opinion, the *Notitia Linguae Sinicae* was the best book on Chinese written by a European. Even more important is the fact that Bičurin and Prémare shared the idea of the necessity to analyse Chinese using its own categories, as effectively expressed by Prémare with the maxim 'Absit ut ad nostras linguas sinicam revocare velim' ('Far be it from me to reduce the Chinese [language] to our tongues', Prémare 1831, p. 153).

15 By the insertion of Chinese characters from the very title of the book, Fourmont stressed the fact that his book was the first grammar of Chinese published in Europe that displayed the characters.

As pointed out by Knud Lundbaek (1912-95), Prémare's book is 'a comprehensive textbook of the Chinese language and of Chinese literature' (Lundbaek 1991, p. 64), aimed at the missionaries newly arrived in China. The author is concerned with didactical issues: to offer an example, he gives many suggestions to the students about the order of reading Chinese books, the way to take notes from them and to translate and memorize the passages with the help of a Chinese instructor. He even warns the learner not to neglect the correct pronunciation of Chinese sounds, marking the aspirates and the tones, recalling his own experience when, as a beginner, he had disregarded these tracts and had to devote later on much time and effort to learn them anew (Prémare 1831, p. 4-5)¹⁶.

In Father Iakinf's lines on Prémare, I find particularly interesting the remark about the "non-grammatical" nature of the examples given in the *Notitia*. The presence, in the European grammars, of phrases and expressions that would sound artificial in Chinese, is constantly pointed out by Bičurin. Prémare is concerned with the problem of offering reliable examples of the spoken tongue and decides to draw examples from plays and novels in *báihuà* 白話, written in Yuan and Ming periods (13th-17th centuries)¹⁷.

The Russian monk is not very generous towards the grammars written within the British missionary milieu. While he just mentions the book (which he had not been able to obtain) by Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), in discussing *Tōngyòng Hànyán zhī fǎ* 通用漢言之法, *A Grammar of the Chinese Language* (1815), by Robert Morrison (1782-1834), he essentially stresses the shortcomings of the book, which derived, in Bičurin's opinion, from the choice the author made to adapt the grammar to the needs of his fellow countrymen. Thus, the book is abundant of examples offered in an awkward Chinese and is not a sufficient tool to reach even a shallow knowledge of the spoken language (Bičurin 1835, p. xiii-xiv). The verdict of the Russian sinologist is of course too severe: although Morrison entitled a paragraph of his book *Of Cases*, presenting the Chinese forms that expressed, in his opinion, noun declensions and verb conjugations (Morrison 1815, respectively, p. 62 ff. and p. 113 ff.), he nonetheless introduced some traditional Chinese

16 As it is well known, Ricci had the same experience (see Casacchia and Gianninoto 2012, p. 290 ff.).

17 Prémare entitled the first part of his grammar 'On Popular Chinese and Familiar Style' and the second one 'On the style of Noble Literary Works' (thus translated in Lundbaek 1991). The method of drawing examples from literature in *baihua* was also shared by other authors, such as Varo. S. Breitenbach remarks that 'anybody who needed reliable sources for learning correct Mandarin usage was expected to refer to the great Mandarin novels' (2000, p. xliii). Nonetheless, Varo's grammar presented quite a few examples in "artificial" Chinese.

grammatical categories (as the ones of *shēngzì* 生字, “living words”, and *sǐzì* 死字, “dead words”), trying to integrate them with the Western tradition (Morrison 1815, p. 133)¹⁸.

About *Éléments de la Grammaire Chinoise* (Paris 1822), by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788-1832), Bičurin writes the following remarks:

Abel-Rémusat [...] did not have the opportunity to stay in China, and studied the Chinese language in Paris, as an autodidact; but justice compels me to say that the resources [he had], his talents and effort gave him a fair knowledge [of this tongue]. The arrangement of his Grammar is not complicated and, we should say, correct. [...] The Grammar is divided into two parts: in the first, there are expounded the rules, by which the Chinese express in the written language, without changes in word [endings], the grammatical variations characteristic of European languages; the second part contains the same rules for the vernacular language. (Bičurin 1835, p. xv-xvi)

Father Iakinf then points out some errors in the terminology used by Rémusat to indicate the written and the spoken form of the language, but these ‘erroneous designations do not in the least injure the intrinsic value of the book.’ (*Ibidem*)

Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat was one of the main figures of the new tide of China experts that emerged in Europe in the first decades of the 19th century. This group was characterized by a sharp polemical vein: scholars such as Antonio Montucci (1762-1829), Julius von Klaproth (1783-1835) and Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat himself, just to mention the most pugnacious ones, were constantly involved in debates on Chinese language and literature¹⁹. These debates, although sometimes exceedingly violent, represented a moment of great progress in sinology: a strict philological and historical approach was expected now not only from the missionaries, but also from those scholars who lived in Europe and were not able to travel to China. Rémusat’s *Éléments* reflect this attitude commencing from the Preface, devoted in part to an exploration of the state of the art of Chinese grammatical studies by European scholars (Abel-Rémusat 1822, Préface, p. vij-xvii)²⁰. As noticed by Zhitang Drocourt (2013, p. 5 ff.), with his grammar, Abel-Rémusat wanted to question some deep-rooted opinions concerning Chinese, such as the one regarding the ideographic nature of the script or the idea of Chinese as a monosyllabic language²¹. On this issue in particular, the French philologist proposes in his grammar an original visual solution to help the European student to have a perception of the polysyllabic compounds, that is, to join the characters with

18 On Morrison’s grammar, see Uchida 2017 and Huáng 2008.

19 On Montucci and von Klaproth, see respectively Di Toro 2018 and Walravens and Behr 2017.

20 If we compare Rémusat’s Preface with that of Bičurin, we can notice that the latter shares most of the opinions on previous grammars expressed by the French sinologist.

21 On the long lasting Western ‘fantasies’ about Chinese (as the idea of its monosyllabic nature), some of which date back from the 16th century missionaries, see De Francis 1984.

a curved line (*Ivi*, p.13-14). Rémusat himself acknowledges that Prémare's grammar was a model for his *Éléments*, especially for the division in two parts on the spoken and the written forms of Chinese ([Abel-Rémusat 1822](#), Préface, p. xvijj).

The last grammar on which Bičurin comments is *Hànzi wénfǎ* 漢字文法, or *Arte China Constante de Alphabeto e Grammatica comprehendendo Modelos das diferentes composiçoens*, by the Lazarist priest Joaquim Afonso Gonçalves (1780-1844), published in Macao in 1829. Gonçalves' grammar is innovative in its structure and didactical concerns; it offers a clear distinction between the spoken and the written language and introduces the syntactic rules of Chinese and the use of particles through a generous number of examples which Bičurin finds 'absolutely pure and correct' ([Bičurin 1835](#), p. xvi-xvii)²².

In general, Father Iakinf declares that only the grammars written by Prémare, Rémusat and Gonçalves deserved his attention ([Bičurin 1835](#), p. xvii).

The above-listed grammars present several common features:

1) A large amount of space is taken up with the Chinese phonological system and the methods of transcription of Chinese developed by Europeans.

2) Sections dedicated to aspects of Chinese culture are introduced, ranging from etiquette and social behaviour to the texts of the literary tradition and the origins of the Chinese script.

3) Some of the authors introduce the traditional Chinese grammatical categories of *shízi* 實字, *xūzi* 虛字, *huózi* 活字 and *sǐzi* 死字. Although these authors perceive the importance of these categories, only in de Prémare and Rémusat are they analysed in some detail so as to influence the structure of the book.

4) There is a large use of examples. In general, the authors tend to prefer the example of a given Chinese grammatical form to theoretical explanations. The models chosen by the authors for the examples, however, vary deeply among each other, ranging from written Chinese sources to "artificial" sentences created in order to show the Chinese equivalent of European forms²³.

As far as *Kitajskaja grammatika* is concerned, we may notice that Bičurin's book presents all the features listed above; moreover, by observing the Index, we may notice that the book is clearly divided into four parts:

22 On the *Arte China*, see [Levi 2006](#). Liǔ Ruóméi devoted an article to a thorough comparison between the grammar books by Gonçalves and Bičurin ([Liǔ 2009](#)).

23 For a synthesis of the structure of each grammar book, see [Di Toro 2007](#). On "artificial" examples in Fourmont, see [Leung 2002](#), p. 215-216; on Morrison's examples, see [Bičurin 1835](#), p. XIV.

a) a lengthy Preface, containing numerous general comments on the Chinese language, on the origin of Chinese script, a hint regarding the distinction between written and spoken language and the analysis of the Chinese grammars by European authors;

b) Part One. On the general basic notions of Chinese language, script and phonology;

c) Part Two. On the exposition of syntax and grammar rules;

d) a conspicuous number of Tables on various subjects (Chinese characters and styles of script, radicals, foreign transcriptions of Chinese sounds, numerals, names of the goods traded in Kjachta, etc.).

While we can see numerous similarities among these grammar books, we can also find different positions in the attitude of their authors towards the European grammatical tradition, used as a means of approaching Chinese. Greek-Latin grammatical categories, in fact, are present in most of the books. However, this model is adopted in different ways, from a “hard” position, of those scholars compiling tables of declension of nouns and pronouns and tables of verbal conjugations for different tenses and moods (such as Varo, Bayer, Fourmont and partially Marshman and Morrison), to a more “soft” approach, recognisable in the authors who adopt only the traditional Latin distinction of parts of speech, and essentially in order to introduce the reader to the analysis of Chinese parts of speech (such as Prémare, Abel-Rémusat, Gonçalves and Bičurin). These last authors tend to display a much more open attitude towards autochthonous Chinese tradition of linguistic analysis.

3 BIČURIN’S GRAMMAR: AN EXAMPLE OF INTEGRATION OF EUROPEAN AND CHINESE GRAMMATICAL TRADITIONS

The issue whether China has or has not an autochthonous grammatical tradition has long been discussed. Most of the scholars agree on the fact that the systematic study of this subject begun only with *Mǎshì wéntōng* 馬氏文通 [Master Ma’s Overview on Language] (1898), by Mǎ Jiànzhōng 馬建忠 (1845-1900) (Norman 1988, p. 152). Chinese reflection about grammar prior to *Mǎ shì wéntōng* is considered in different ways by the researchers. While Alain Peyraube dismisses it as ‘some scattered unsystematic analysis’, fundamentally limited to the repertoires of particles (Peyraube 2001, p. 341-356) and Wáng Lì 王力 (1900-86) considers the attention devoted towards grammatical phenomena by Chinese philologists since the Han period only as ‘the first sprouts of grammar’, devoid of a general notion of the mechanism of the language (Wáng 1981, p. 173-174), other scholars tend to consider the ‘studies of particles’ (*xūcí de yánjiū* 虛詞的研究), developed since the 12th century, as a genre that, though unsystematic, belongs to the field of grammar

studies (Gōng 1997, p. 6-7). Still another position is represented by Chén Guóhuá 陳國華, who has given to one of these repertoires, the *Biànzì jué* 辨字訣 [A Refined Method for a Categorization of the Words, 1694], by Wáng Míngchāng 王鳴昌, the status of an autochthonous complete grammar treatise (Chén 2015)²⁴.

All the different positions on the birth of Chinese grammar, however, agree on the fact, that it happened late. Cristoph Harbsmeier thus answers the question about the reason why this tradition was so slow to develop:

One reason why the Chinese did not develop systematic grammar is that in an analytic language like Chinese the lexicon of words plus the lexicon of grammatical particles taken together go a long way towards accounting for what it takes to understand the texts [...]. In Greek, there is an obvious and pervasive need for an analysis of the cases [...] and for the endings of tenses and their aspects [...], for agreement and many other things. All these can only be accounted for in a grammar. They cannot very well be treated in a dictionary. In general, a great deal of the grammar of Classical Chinese can be formulated as an extended dictionary entry under the various grammatical particles of that language. Grammars could therefore take the form of dictionaries of grammatical particles, which is exactly what happened. (Harbsmeier 1998, p. 87)²⁵

In China, the first texts that could be considered as grammar tools are the repertoires of particles²⁶. The first of them, the *Wénzé* 文則 [Rules for Written (composition)], 1170], by Chén Kuí 陳騏, was a stylistic handbook; in the *Wénzé*, the author states that “wén wú zhùcí bù shùn” 文無助詞不順 (‘without auxiliary words, the written language has no smoothness’; quoted in Casacchia and Gianninoto 2012, p. 216). The pursuit of the harmonious flow of the language, given by the shifting of fullness and emptiness (an important issue in Chinese aesthetics and in poetry) developed into the creation of the categories of *xūzì* 虛字 (“empty characters”) and *shízi* 實字 (“full characters”) and the reflection on the dynamics of their alternation within the sentence or the verse. The first text to mention the antinomial and mutually dependent couple was the poet Zhāng Yán 張炎 (1248-1314), in his *Cíyuán* 詞源 [Source of the Verses] (*Ibidem* and Peverelli 2015, p. 15). Some early European sinologists were not indifferent to the aesthetic principles governing Chinese; in Joseph de Prémare we can read:

24 The *Bianzizue* was appended to *Zhùyǔcí bǔyì* 助語辭補義, by Wèi Wéixīn 魏維新 and Chén Léi 陳雷.

25 It is perhaps worth mentioning the fact that one of the best handbooks of Modern Chinese, *Xiàndài Hànyǔ bābǎi cí* 現代漢語八百詞 [800 Hundred Words of Modern Chinese], by Lǚ Shūxiāng 呂叔湘 (1st edition, 1980), is in fact a repertoire of words with grammatical function.

26 On the development of these repertoires in Qing time, see the contribution of Gianninoto in this volume.

[In Chinese] there are added adverbs, prepositions, particles and other elements of that kind, which concern perspicuity and embellishment of speech more than its essence. (Prémare 1831, p. 39)²⁷

Prémare, however, was also well aware of the fundamental grammatical function of the particles. Knud Lundbaek underlines that, in Part One of the *Notitia* ('On Popular Chinese and Familiar Style', see Lundbaek, 1991, p. 80), the chapter presenting the 'reassuring heads' of Latin parts of speech occupies 8 pages, while the chapter dealing with the presentation of the particles occupies more than 100 pages (Lundbaek 1991, p. 75).

The European missionaries pointed out the central function of the particles in Chinese from the very beginning. In 1583, Matteo Ricci wrote: '[...] la lettera non tiene né articoli, né casi, né numeri, né tempi, né modi, ma a tutto danno rimedio con certi adverbij che si dichiarano molto bene.'²⁸ As far as the grammars are concerned, Varo had already stressed the function of the particles in Chinese, but, as we have seen, he was not able yet to think of Chinese through a new lens. The stimulating question is: when and why were the European sinologists ready to accept new categories in analysing Chinese? And when did they commence to integrate the Chinese grammatical studies with their own tradition?

As mentioned above, in my opinion, a turning point in the attitude towards Chinese tradition is represented by Prémare, with Bičurin following and further developing his ideas. Most remarkable in both these authors is the fact that they adapted the structure of their books to the new concepts they drew from Chinese linguistic tradition. Both sinologists had a clear awareness of embarking on something new; thus, Prémare writes:

I know, of course, that people who compose grammars usually divide the particles into a number of kinds or classes such as copulatives, disjunctives, augmentatives, diminutives, etc., but to follow them here would not be worthwhile. Far be it from me to apply the rules of our languages to the Chinese language. On the contrary, I want the missionaries to release their ideas, to abstract them from their native languages and to dress these naked ideas in a Chinese costume.

Goodbye, therefore, to Despauterus and Alvarus, our Latin grammars! Now I shall explain the Chinese particles, one by one, in eighteen articles. (Prémare 1831, p. 153; transl. in Lundbaek 1991, p. 81)

And Father Iakinf seems to respond perfectly to his words in explaining the structure of his book, with these remarks that follow the exposition on European grammars:

27 I express my gratitude to Luigi Spagnolo for checking the translation of this passage; a complete English translation of Prémare's grammar was made by J. G. Bridgman in 1847, but it is not considered fully reliable (Harbsmeier 1998, p. 16).

28 '[...] the letter has no articles, nor cases, nor numbers, nor gender, nor tenses, nor modes, but certain adverbs, which are easily understood, remedy to all this.' (Matteo Ricci, Letter to Martino de Fornari, Macao, February 13th, 1583, Ricci 2008, p. 46).

In the Chinese grammars that have been published until now in the various European languages is contained, separately, almost everything we need for a fundamental knowledge of Chinese language and script; in composing this grammar book, all I had to do was to complete the deficiency of rules, giving to the grammar the order that is required by the absolute remoteness (*soveršennoe ustranenie*) of the Chinese language, with all its peculiarities, from all the other languages. So, I have divided it into two sections: in the first I have introduced the fundamental concepts concerning Chinese language and script [...], in the second section I have placed the rules that govern the words' combination, both for the vernacular spoken language and for the written language. (Bičurin 1835, p. xx)²⁹

As we have seen above (Par. 2.1., note 20), Joseph de Prémare could be associated with the tendency that, in the first decades of the 18th century, was questioning the authority of the Latin grammatical model as a universal one. Interestingly enough, the author of the first grammar of Russian, Michail V. Lomonosov (1711-1765) followed the same trend.

In her analysis of Bičurin's work, Liǔ Ruòméi (2010) has already noticed some connections between the *Rossijskaja grammatika* (1757) by Lomonosov and the *Kitajskaja grammatika*, arguing that the latter is an organic combination of Russian and Chinese grammatical systems³⁰. In my opinion, a link between Bičurin and Lomonosov can be found also in the idea that stands behind the compilation of a grammar book: 'Beaucoup commettent l'erreur, en composant de grammaires, de les ramener de force aux autres langues' (Lomonosov, quoted in Comtet 2001, p. 1141). Lomonosov was the first scholar to make a complete description of the Russian language and to propose a norm for its usage, without recurring to foreign models³¹. Coherently with this view, Bičurin explains how he drew the rules and general concepts on Chinese grammar from practical experience and from Chinese dictionaries and textbooks, such as the *Kāngxī zìdiǎn* 康熙字典 [Dictionary of Kangxi Era] and *Dúshū zuòwén pǔ* 讀書作文譜 [Manual for Reading Books and Writing Compositions], by the Qing scholar Táng Biāo 唐彪 (Bičurin 1835, p. XX)³².

29 I am grateful to Ksenija Koža for her valuable suggestions on the rendering of this passage.

30 Liǔ Ruòméi has proposed, for example, that Father Iakinf, in analysing the nature of the Chinese word, bases himself on Lomonosov's definition of *slovo* and that his ideas on Chinese phonetics are drawn from the phonological studies of the Qing period (2010, p. 142).

31 Lomonosov draws his grammatical terminology from the authoritative grammar of Slavonic compiled in 1619 by Meletij Smotrickij (1571-1633), inspired by the Greek-Byzantine tradition (Comtet 2001, p. 1141). On Lomonosov's grammar and its adherence to the scheme of the two levels of 'general grammar' as a science and 'particular grammars', see Archaimbault 2017, p. 29.

32 As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, Bičurin's position follows a more general evolution of linguistic studies in Russia, during the first decades of the 19th century, when Sergej Uvarov himself fostered the analytic and comparative approach towards the languages with his memorial «Projet d'une Académie Asiatique» (1810, publ. in *Études de philologie et de critique*, Sankt Petersburg, 1843, quoted in Archaimbault 2017, p. 30 ff.)

Chinese is defined by Bičurin as the remotest from all the known languages and a language that should be described starting from its own grammatical ideas. But in what kind of mechanism does the ‘remoteness’ of Chinese manifest itself? And how this remote mechanism can be explained to European learners?

Part 2 (‘Containing the Grammar Rules of Chinese Language’) of *Kitajskaja grammatika* is devoted to the explanation of this mechanism; it is organized as follows:

Chapter 1. ‘On the Modification of Words in Chinese Language and on Parts of Speech’

Chapters 2-9. ‘On Nouns, On Adjectives. On Chinese Classifiers, On Pronouns, On Verbs, On Adverbs, On Prepositions, On Conjunctions, On Interjections’

Chapter 10. ‘On the Chinese Division of Parts of Speech’

Chapter 11. ‘On the Arrangement of Letters endowed with Substance (*sušestvennye bukvy*) [full words]’

Chapter 12. ‘On the Arrangement of Empty Letters (*pustye bukvy*) [empty words]’

As had been experimented before by Prémare, Bičurin introduces both Western and Chinese categories in order to explain the grammar of Chinese, moving between European and Chinese concepts. Prémare divides his book into two clearly distinguished parts (one devoted to the spoken language and the other to the written one), giving the learner a sound idea of the diglossia existing in China, where the language of the high written tradition (*wényán* 文言, “literary Chinese”) and the spoken languages (either formal, *guānhuà* 官話, “Mandarin”, or regional vernaculars) were perceived as two different languages³³. On this issue, Bičurin does not follow Prémare’s path and introduces a comparative system in teaching the literary and the vernacular language, offering parallel examples from the two varieties (see for example Chapters 2-9 of Part 2). He explains his choice as follows:

I have arranged the rules of the two languages, written and spoken, placing them one after the other in the same place, in order to make more strikingly prominent, through the contrast, in what consists the difference between these languages. This method really helps also to put the concept [of their difference] into practice. (Bičurin 1835, p. XXI)

It is rather surprising to read, as an introduction to the section devoted to grammar, a chapter entitled ‘On the Modification of Words in Chinese’. As we have seen, the fact that Chinese did not have word inflection had been well-known since Matteo Ricci’s time. Moreover, already in Chapter 1 of his grammar, Father

33 On the Diglossia existing in pre-modern China, see Li 2017.

Iakinf had stated: 'the Chinese language has neither derivation of words from a root, nor modification of words' endings.' (Bičurin 1835, p. 1). This is how Bičurin explains the "modification" of Chinese words:

Instead of a word modification [made] in the endings according to the declinations, the conjugations, the genders and the numbers, the Chinese language possesses [as its underlying principle] a mental modification (*izmenenie umstvennoe*) which cannot be matched by the rules proper to the gramma[tical systems] of all other languages; and it is only by that mental modification [that] the qualities, the action, the state, the reciprocal relation of objects and the connection of opinions can in that [language] be shaded. The mental modification of the Chinese words consists in a modification of their very meaning, so that it corresponds to the changes in the endings which in the other languages are introduced for the denotation of qualities, of action, of state, of the reciprocal relation of objects and of the connection between opinions. This mental modification is twofold: the Derivative [Modification] of Words (*slovoproizvodnoe*), which determines the classes of words, and the Grammatical (*grammatičeskoe*) [Modification], which shows the mental modification [that in all other languages reveals itself] in the endings, according to the composition of the words in that language, into which the translation from Chinese is being made. (Bičurin 1835, p. 57)

This theory of "mental modification" is absolutely original and shows a deep reflection on the mechanism of Chinese³⁴. In my opinion, it is possible to relate it to the early 19th century debate on the nature of Chinese. One of the crucial moments of this discussion was between 1821 and 1831, with the exchange of public letters between Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). As Rousseau and Thouard have proved in their study (1999), Chinese represented a difficult challenge to Wilhelm von Humboldt's systematisation of the languages of the world, and the German scholar was compelled to attribute a form of perfection to Chinese, due to its antiquity and authority in Eastern Asia. But this perfection is radically different from the perfection of inflectional languages. In declaring the exceptionality of Chinese, von Humboldt admits that this language has its own perfection, but in the end he denies that Chinese can ever attain the superior perfection of inflectional languages, which in his opinion are the only languages able to express the real, philosophical level of life.

Les langues classiques assimilent leurs mots aux objets réels, les douent de qualités de ces derniers, font entrer dans l'expression des idées, toutes les relations qui naissent de ces rapports des mots dans la phrase, et ajoutent à l'idée par ce moyen des modifications qui ne sont pas toujours absolument requises par le fond essentiel de la pensée qui doit être énoncée. La langue chinoise n'entre pas dans cette méthode de faire des mots des êtres dont la nature particulière

34 The expression is translated by C. Harbsmeier as "mental inflection" (1998, p. 18).

réagit sur ces idées ; elle s'en tient purement et nettement au fond essentiel de la pensée, et prend, pour la revêtir de paroles, aussi peu que possible de la nature particulière du langage. (Humboldt 1827, p. 60)

In Humboldt's opinion, Chinese keeps itself purely and clearly on the essential base of thought. Moreover, it completely 'relies on word order, and on the imprint of grammatical form within the mind' (Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Kawi-Schrift*, p. 715, quoted in Kwan 2001, p. 187). Father Iakinf was possibly developing these ideas in his own way and, while affirming the absolute "remoteness" of Chinese from all the other languages, he formulated the theory of "mental modifications", by which he explained the deep mechanism of Chinese grammar.

But a new problem arises: how can one recognise the "mental modifications" theorized by Bičurin? And what are the rules to follow in order to grasp the mechanism of Chinese?

As we have seen, the section dedicated to Chinese grammar is composed of two parts: in the first part Father Iakinf analyses the parts of speech using Latin categories; in the second part, he adopts the Chinese categories of *shízi* and *xūzi* to expound the rules that determine the word order in Chinese. The structure is quite similar to the one that we can observe in the *Notitia Linguae Sinicae*, but while Prémare lists and analyses particles and characters with peculiar grammatical uses, devoting just a few general lines to the syntax of Chinese, Bičurin dedicates two specific chapters to Chinese word order (Chaps. 11 and 12, respectively on the arrangement of Full words and of Empty words).

In introducing the Chinese distinction of the parts of speech (Chap. 10), Bičurin writes:

Besides expounding the parts of speech according to the order that is usual in European grammars [...], I deem it necessary to expound the distinction of the parts of speech based on the rules of the Chinese philologists, in order to explain the rules [governing] the composition of the words according to this[distinction]. This method, although slightly strange for its novelty, shows the characteristics of Chinese language [...]. (Bičurin 1835, p. 103)

The full words (*shízi*), rendered by Bičurin as *sušestvennye bukvy* (literally, "letters endowed with substance"), are the 'letters that, in the speech, indicate an object or a quality, an activity or a condition of an object.' (*Ivi*, p. 104)

As for empty words (*xūzi*, *pustye bukvy*, "empty letters"), they:

[...] indicate the quality of an action, the reciprocal relation of objects, the connection between opinions and the expression of emotions, or they just give expressivity and a clear turn to the thought, without possessing in themselves any meaning in the speech' (*Ibidem*).

Bičurin adds that ‘the character *xū* 虛 does not mean “empty”, as “emptied”, but rather “empty” in the sense of “simple”, without a material substance, like for example the spirit’ (*Ibidem*).

Bičurin then divides the “empty letters” into seven groups, corresponding to the seven categories listed in the *Dúshū zuòwén pǔ*. These categories reproduce the ones defined by Wáng Míngchāng in his *Biànzì jué*³⁵.

If in introducing the traditional Chinese categories of empty words, the *Kitajskaja grammatika* already represents a step forward in the integration of European and Chinese grammatical ideas (other authors had introduced lists of particles, but not as systematically as Bičurin), the section entitled ‘On the Arrangement of Empty Letters’ is an absolute novelty in presenting the mechanism of Chinese by its linguistic tradition. As a prefatory remark to this section, Bičurin writes:

The disposition of the empty letters is the sequence by which they are arranged in the discourse, in order to [...] attain fluidity and harmony of sound. An incorrect use of the empty words [...] produces obscurity of thought or a want of smoothness which is unpleasant to the ear. (Bičurin 1835, p. 125)

These lines remind us of the aesthetic ideal of the harmonious flow of the language that was at the basis of the Chinese repertoires of particles and normative text-books for written composition: the 7th *juan* of *Dúshū zuòwén pǔ*, one of the sources mentioned by Bičurin, is actually an exposition of these rules of harmony³⁶.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The *Kitajskaja grammatika* was without doubt a practical text-book of Chinese, written to train interpreters and translators, but I believe that the grammatical reflections contained in the book are much more than a contrastive analysis between European and Chinese grammatical systems for didactical purposes. Bičurin was trying to build a theoretical scheme able to explain the hidden mechanism of Chinese language. In order to give Chinese the same status as that of inflectional languages, a status that was questioned by some of his contemporaries,

35 The categories are: *qǐyǔcí* 起語辭 (“initial words”); *jiēyǔcí* 接語辭 (“continuative words”); *zhuǎnyǔcí* 轉語辭 (“adversative words”); *chènǔyǔcí* 襯語辭 (“inserted words”); *shùyǔcí* 束語辭 (“linking words”); *tànyǔcí* 嘆語辭 (“exclamation words”); *xiēyǔcí* 歇語辭 (“pause words”). The English translation of each group is drawn from Peverelli 2015, p. 15.

36 Liǔ Ruòméi has disputed the fact that Bičurin did actually use *Dúshū zuòwén pǔ* as one of his sources, finding in the *Kitajskaja grammatika* no direct quotation of Táng Biāo (Liǔ 2010, p. 8). The list of particles inserted by Father Iakinf can be actually found in numerous Chinese text-books and repertoires of the time, drawn as it is from ancient sources. I do nonetheless think that a certain influence of *Dúshū zuòwén pǔ* (especially *juan* 7, the section devoted to the rules governing written composition) on Bičurin’s grammar cannot be denied.

Bičurin formulated the theory of “mental modifications”. According to this theory, Chinese has, in fact, inflections, but these inflections are only in the mind of the speakers, and do not have any physical manifestation³⁷. Unfortunately, Bičurin did not develop further his ideas; in Ksenija Koža words,

[Bičurin’s] theoretical premises have an intuitive character, but at the same time they witness the constant aspiration to go beyond the frames that formed the theoretical stereotypes of the time and to present Chinese as a unique, completely peculiar language, not devoid of the capacity to express the grammar categories and the “qualities of the different parts of speech”, in complete conformity with the needs of its speakers. (Koža 2018, p. 182)

While the Russian sinologist underlines the uniqueness of Chinese (‘Chinese language differs completely from all the languages we know...’), he also indicates a way by which Europeans can have access to it:

Such strange characteristics of the language and the script render the study of Chinese very difficult for the foreigner, but its difficulty is rapidly and easily levelled by a careful observation of its structure (Bičurin 1840).

So, it is possible to learn Chinese, after all, ‘rapidly and easily’. In order to level its difficulty, the student should attain a through comprehension of its mechanism. This is made possible only by studying the Chinese grammatical tradition and by emancipating from the limits imposed by a Western-based conception of the structure of the language.

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37 The Russian sinologist actually treated his ideas on Chinese as a theory, repeating his own formulas in many of his writings, as *Kitaj. Ego žiteli, obyčai, prosvešenie*, published in 1840 (Koža 2018). See also the polemic article «Missioner Gjutclaf» (Bičurin 1851), in which he contested the description of Chinese given by the German missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803-1851; I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention on this essay). K. Koža underlines the modernity of Bičurin’s theory, which somehow anticipated, in her opinion, the ideas of transformational grammar (Koža 2018). Bičurin’s daring ideas on the mechanism of Chinese are quite impressive, since he was not always very keen on non-traditional concepts, as we can read in the analysis made by the same scholar of Iakinf’s notes on Giuseppe Calleri’s System of phonetics of the Chinese script (Koža 2015).

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