

The Construction of Zhejiang Under the Colonial Gaze: A Study of *Ferdinand von Richthofen's Tagebücher aus China*

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ABSTRACT

In the sections of *Ferdinand von Richthofen's Tagebücher aus China* pertaining to Zhejiang, the author provides detailed descriptions of the province's geology, landforms, climate, population, economy, and culture. However, these accounts are grounded not merely in the observations of a geographer and traveler, but also implicitly embody the perspective of a foreign colonial agent during the late Qing period. This paper analyzes Richthofen's portrayal of Zhejiang through four spatial categories: natural space, labor space, cultural space, and colonial imaginary space. It seeks to interpret the relationship between geographical space and the author's subjective construction, and to explore how Zhejiang was constructed under a colonialist vision.

Keywords: *Ferdinand von Richthofen, Zhejiang, Construction of geographical space.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) was a German geographer of the nineteenth century. Between 1868 and 1872, he conducted seven geological expeditions to China, visiting thirteen provinces of the Qing Empire. He carried out extensive surveys of China's mountain ranges, geological structures, climate, population, economy, culture, and colonial conditions. In 1907, Richthofen's students, led by Ernst Tiessen, compiled his surviving notes and manuscripts into *Ferdinand von Richthofen's Tagebücher aus China*. The book comprises three parts: Richthofen's personal diaries, his correspondence, and supplementary material added by Tiessen based on remaining manuscripts, together with dozens of landscape and figure sketches drawn by Richthofen himself.

This work filled a significant gap in German and European knowledge of China at the time. Richthofen's concerns extended beyond the perspective of a geographer; he meticulously observed local transportation, commerce, agriculture, and natural products, offering economic assessments. His depictions of China blended objective descriptions of external scenery with his

own subjective impressions, recording both natural and human geographical spaces while implicitly conveying his colonial imaginings of these regions.

His objective records and subjective orientations influenced subsequent foreign investigators. On October 8, 1896, the Japanese Consulate in Hangzhou attached a translated document to one of its reports, introducing a lengthy report Richthofen had submitted to the Shanghai Foreign Chamber of Commerce twenty years earlier following his inspection of Zhejiang. The summary of the section concerning the Qiantang River elaborated on the proposal and rationale for opening Hangzhou as a treaty port (Li Shaojun, 2016: 88). William Barclay Parsons, the renowned American architect who surveyed the Canton–Hankow Railway in the late Qing period, similarly wrote: “Richthofen is the great German geographer, and our knowledge of the geological structure of China is in large measure due to his field work” (Parsons, 2011: 25).

Richthofen depicted expansive geographical spaces and a wealth of geographical imagery in his travel diaries. Current domestic scholarship on *Ferdinand von Richthofen's Tagebücher aus China* has focused primarily on the Silk Road, with only a limited number of regionally specific studies. Most

of these works analyze either Richthofen's formulation of the concept of the "Silk Road" or his travel observations of specific localities.

Since the emergence of the "spatial turn" in the 1970s, the concept has frequently appeared at the forefront of the humanities and social sciences, and textual analysis has increasingly incorporated geographical perspectives. The examination of geographical dimensions and geographical significance has become an important methodological approach in textual studies.

The author and subject matter of *Ferdinand von Richthofen's Tagebücher aus China* exhibit strongly regional characteristics, combining natural and human imagery while depicting a fluid geographical space through a Western lens. As one scholar notes, "The geographical space of literature is composed of two major elements: explicit and implicit. Explicit elements refer to landscapes, characters, and events that are modeled on objective reality, whereas implicit elements are the author's personal emotions and ideological will hidden behind these explicit elements, possessing a subjective character" (Zeng Daxing, 2017: 47). Geographical space, as the core of Richthofen's travel diaries, represents a product of his fusion of actual geographical landscapes with self-imagination. This paper employs the research methods of literary geography and spatial theory to analyze Zhejiang—a key region of Richthofen's investigations—demonstrating his observations of the province's natural space, labor space, cultural space, and the shaping of colonial imaginary space.

2. BACKGROUND AND ITINERARY OF RICHTHOFEN'S EXPEDITIONS

When Richthofen undertook his expeditions to China in the late nineteenth century, the world was undergoing a critical period of political and economic restructuring. The expanding Western industrial civilization, then at the height of its power, collided fiercely with the insular Chinese agrarian civilization, gradually shifting from confrontation toward engagement (Zhang Xiaoping, Gao Shanshan, Chen Mingxing, et al., 2020: 9).

Richthofen stated that the purpose of his journey was "eine geologische Landesaufnahme des Chinesischen Reiches"[to conduct a geographical survey of the Chinese Empire] (Richthofen a, 1907: 1). However, behind this academic objective lay a strong political stance as a

colonialist. Following the First Opium War in 1840, Britain had forcibly opened China's closed doors and obtained substantial benefits through colonial means. The expanding Kingdom of Prussia in Europe was equally eager to secure its share of interests in China. In 1859, the Prussian government established the East Asian Diplomatic Mission, which visited Ceylon, the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan region in China, among other places. One of its missions was to emulate Britain in acquiring a naval anchorage and commercial port similar to Hong Kong. Richthofen was a member of this mission. In August 1868, he departed from California, traveled via Japan, and arrived in Shanghai on September 4, formally commencing his four-year survey of China. By acquiring first-hand geological and geographical data on China, Richthofen not only achieved considerable renown in European geographical circles but also provided the German government with reference material for its military ambitions and expansionist decisions in the Far East (Zhang Xiaoping, Gao Shanshan, Chen Mingxing, et al., 2020: 9).

Richthofen's expeditions in China can be divided into two phases. The first phase, from September 1868 to August 1870, followed an itinerary of Beijing–Tianjin–Shanghai–Zhifu (Shandong)–Ningbo and environs (Zhejiang)–Zhoushan Archipelago–Zhenjiang–Nanjing and environs—the lower Yangtze region–Shandong–southern Manchuria—the Beijing periphery–Jiangxi, Anhui, and Zhejiang–Guangzhou to Beijing. The second phase, from June 1871 to May 1872, covered Zhejiang, Anhui, and Jiangsu–Zhili–Shanxi (Mongolia)–Shaanxi–Sichuan–down the Yangtze River–Shanghai.

During this period, Western enthusiasm for exploring East Asia and colonial ambitions were intensifying daily. Zhejiang, endowed with an exceptionally advantageous coastal geographical location, attracted frequent visits from Westerners. Richthofen surveyed Zhejiang on three occasions: in November 1868, October 1869, and June 1871. At that time, the Taiping Rebellion had only recently concluded, and the devastation had yet to be repaired. During these visits, Richthofen investigated and documented the physical geography, agriculture, commerce, transportation, human customs, and architectural characteristics of the Zhejiang region from the dual perspectives of geographer and colonialist.

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF ZHEJIANG'S GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE UNDER A COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Richthofen's three expeditions to Zhejiang followed different routes. On the first, he departed from Ningbo, traveling westward before turning north at Hangzhou toward Lake Tai. On the second, he started from the border town of Jiekou between Anhui and Zhejiang, proceeding northeast through Hangzhou toward Shanghai. On the third, he departed from Ningbo, traveling westward from the northeast before turning north at Jinhua toward Qianqiuqian on the Anhui-Zhejiang border.

On all three occasions, Richthofen passed through Hangzhou; he visited Ningbo twice and accorded it special attention. Even though influenced by the geographical traditions of Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, Richthofen did not immerse himself exclusively in the mapping and measurement of geological landforms. During his two visits to Ningbo, he expressed astonishment at its commerce and arts while devoting comparatively little attention to its geology and topography. He noted that "die Manufakturen von Ningpo sind recht bedeutend. Man verfertigt Matten, die einen erheblichen Exportartikel bilden, ferner gewebte und gedruckte Teppiche mit bemalten Mustern. Es gibt auch eine Eisengießerei, sie war aber nicht im Gange." [Ningbo's handicraft industry is highly developed; its exquisite printed carpets are important export commodities. There are also iron foundries, though they are not currently in operation.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 36). He further compared Ningbo with Guangzhou, remarking during his first visit that "Ningpo ist nach Canton die reichste und wohlhällbigste chinesische Stadt, die ich gesehen habe." [Ningbo is the wealthiest and most comfortable Chinese city I have seen, apart from Guangzhou.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 36). During his second visit, he similarly admired how Ningbo's "Reinlichkeit, Eleganz und Wohlstand" [cleanliness, prosperity, and affluence] (Richthofen b, 1907: 6) are reminiscent of Guangzhou. Moreover, he considered the influence of Ningbo people on Shanghai to be "merkwürdig" [remarkable], observing that "die Sampan-Mannschaften und die Matrosen sind größtenteils aus Ningpo, ebenso ein großer Teil der Kulis. [...] Aber noch größer ist ihr Anteil am Kleinhandel, besonders am Cheap-Jack-Handel" [the majority of boatmen and sailors are from

Ningbo, as are a large proportion of the coolies... and even more numerous are the petty traders from Ningbo in Shanghai.] (Richthofen b, 1907: 7)—sufficient evidence of his attention to Ningbo's commercial significance.

During his surveys in Zhejiang, Richthofen focused primarily on local agriculture and commerce, followed by physical geography, human customs, and architecture. In most cases, upon arriving at a location, he would observe the local geological conditions and cultivated crops, evaluating their economic value; subsequently, he would examine local commodity types and freight routes. As a geographer, Richthofen also devoted considerable attention to physical geography, providing detailed descriptions of the geographical locations, topography, geology, and plant species of the places he passed through in the Zhejiang region, while also commenting on local human customs and architectural characteristics. Yet these comments and summaries implicitly carried the gaze of a colonialist.

3.1 *Natural Space*

Every work "possesses a geographical foundation and spatial premise" (Zou Jianjun and Zhou Yafen, 2010: 35), and travelogues are no exception. In the Zhejiang-related sections of Richthofen's diary, descriptions of physical geography occupy the largest proportion. As a geographer, Richthofen could hardly neglect the natural scenery, topography, vegetation, and rock formations of each place. He repeatedly mentioned that the Zhejiang region was beautiful and "malerisch" [picturesque] (Richthofen a, 1907: 52).

The vegetation in the Zhejiang region was remarkably diverse. When surveying a narrow canal some forty li outside Ningbo, Richthofen described the banks as follows: "Die Berge sind mit Strauch- und niederer Baumvegetation bedeckt, wiewohl allerdings Laubholzhaine gänzlich fehlen. Kryptomerien, eine Thuja und Fächerpalmen fielen mir besonders auf." [The hills are mostly covered with shrubs and low vegetation; broad-leaved forests are essentially absent. Thus, the occasional pines, arborvitae, and broad-leaved trees particularly attracted my attention.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38). Upon reaching the Yong River estuary, he depicted it as follows. "Die Begräbnisplätze geben sich durch Gruppen hoher Laub- und Nadelholzbäume zu erkennen. Aber die größte Zierde der Landschaft sind die grünen Hügel, die mit Sträuchern, Bambus und Bäumen bekleidet

sind." [graveyards surrounded by tall broad-leaved and coniferous trees... but what is most striking here are the green hills covered with shrubs, bamboo, and other trees] (Richthofen a, 1907: 41). When he arrived at Tailuo Mountain Island, he further described, "mit Sträuchern, Bambus und jungem Nadelholz bewachsenen Hügelgehänge. Fächerpalmen sind häufig." [the steep areas are overgrown with shrubs, bamboo, and coniferous forests, with broad-leaved trees frequently encountered] (Richthofen a, 1907: 44). Upon climbing Mount Tiantai, he devoted substantial narrative space to the region's botanical richness: "Der Tienmushan ist gleich dem Tiantaischan eine außerordentlich geeignete Stätte für den Naturforscher: der Botaniker, der Ornithologe und der Entomologe werden hier reiche Beute finden. [...] Alle Reize der Flora dieses blütenreichen Teils von China finden sich hier vereint." [Mount Tiantai is also an excellent destination for natural scientists; botanists, ornithologists, and entomologists would undoubtedly reap great harvests here... All the charms of the plant kingdom on this magnificent Chinese land are gathered here... The view from the summit is more beautiful than anywhere else] (Richthofen b, 1907: 62).

From these descriptions, Richthofen's fondness for the natural scenery of the Zhejiang region is readily apparent. The diary contains numerous expressions of admiration for natural landscapes. Following his second Zhejiang expedition, he exclaimed: "Die letzte Reise war leicht und angenehm. Das Land, das ich durchstriefte, ist wahrscheinlich das anmutigste von China. Den blütenreichen Teppich, der es im Sommer bedeckt, mußte ich jetzt allerdings durch die Phantasie ersetzen; aber auch ohne ihn war manche Gegend der schönste Park. Auch geologisch und geographische Interessen fanden ihre volle Befriedigung." [My most recent journey was easy and comfortable; the regions I traversed are perhaps the most delightful in China. In summer, flowers bloom everywhere like a dream; even without these beautiful blossoms, the scenery in some places is equally magnificent. My interests in geography and geology were also greatly satisfied.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 340). It is worth noting that in a letter to his parents, he also mentioned that "es gehört übrigens eine gute Natur dazu, um diese Reise zu machen." [the beautiful natural scenery of China is what attracts me to travel here.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 62).

Yet natural scenery was not merely beautiful; it frequently suggested economic potential to him. In the diary, he repeatedly noted that many places in

Zhejiang possessed fertile and flat soil, with gentle slopes and valleys even in mountainous areas. He believed that the residents of Zhejiang had failed to recognize the importance of these geographical resources, leaving them undeveloped: "Von den Hügeln macht man übrigens nur unvollkommenen Gebrauch, da eine regelmäßige Forstkultur ebenso fehlt wie die Benutzung des Weidelandes." [The mountains here have not been fully exploited; no well-developed forestry or animal husbandry has been established.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 44).

3.2 Labor Space

Whether in agriculture or animal husbandry, labor constituted the primary mode of production and survival for the Chinese people at the time. Labor space was the principal arena of human existence and livelihood. Whenever Richthofen arrived in a region, he would attend to local agricultural products and commerce, assessing their economic value.

China at that time remained in a stage of traditional agriculture, characterized primarily by timely and locale-specific adaptation, intensive cultivation, and a focus on maximizing land-use efficiency and per-unit-area yield. Although the agricultural system was highly developed, Richthofen considered such farming methods relatively backward and expressed puzzlement at China's agriculturally dominated economic structure. He once remarked: "Man bewundert die Ökonomie der Chinesen. Aber sie beschränkt sich auf ein sehr vollkommenes System des Ackerbaues, und dessen Vollkommenheit beruht auf Düngung und Bewässerung." [The degree of economic development in China is somewhat surprising, but ultimately it is merely a developed agricultural system, and the so-called development depends entirely on fertilizer and irrigation.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 61). The low utilization rate of arable land also caused him regret:

- "Spürt man dem Grunde nach, weshalb die von den Rebellen verwüsteten Strecken, [...] bis jetzt zum großen Teil brach liegen, so kann er nur darin liegen, daß die Art der Bodenbenutzung nur ein ganz bestimmtes und zwar ein verhältnismäßig sehr kleines Maß der Bodenbearbeitung auf eine gegebene Bevölkerungszahl erlaubt. Hiervon wieder mag der Grund zum Teil in der beschränkten Arbeitskraft des Chinesen liegen, in den unvollkommenen Werkzeugen und in dem System stubtiler und mühsamer Arbeit. Aber vor allem

scheint das Maß der bearbeiteten Bodenfläche in direktem Verhältnis zu der Quantität des Düngers zu stehen, den eine gegebene Anzahl von Menschen produziert. Wird diese durch Krankheit der Krieg vermindert, so vermindert sich die Düngerproduktion und damit die bebaubare Ackerfläche. Stirbt die Hälfte der Bevölkerung, so bleibt die Hälfte des Bodens un bebaut.“ [Most of the fertile land lies fallow for no good reason. This may be because the local people are only permitted to cultivate designated plots and cannot farm freely. It may also be attributed to low labor productivity resulting from backward tools and farming methods. Naturally, the shortage of fertilizer is also an important factor... When the population declines due to war or disease, the crops requiring manual fertilization naturally decrease, and the corresponding amount of cultivated land also diminishes. If the local population is halved, the area of cultivated land is halved as well.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 331-332).

Furthermore, he identified multiple possibilities for land expansion in Zhejiang: “weshalb die Einwohnerzahl eben zur Bebauung des ebenen Landes und der terrassierten Schluchten hinreicht, d. h. in den vollbevölkerten Gegenden, und nur im äußersten Notfall der Anbau der Hügel versucht wird.” [Why is it that in plains or hilly areas—also densely populated regions with very little arable land per capita—the idea of exploiting mountain resources occurs only in the most extreme circumstances?] (Richthofen a, 1907: 332). He believed that hills and mountain slopes in certain areas could be used for cultivation and animal husbandry but were neglected by local residents. From this, he concluded: “daß nämlich das Maß der bebaubaren Ackerflächern in direktem Verhältnis zur Quantität der Düngerproduktion, d. h. zur Bevölkerungszahl steht und nicht überschritten werden kann, ohne einen geringeren Bodenertrag mit sich zu führen.” [The scale of arable land is directly related to the scale of agricultural production, or rather to the number of residents engaged in production; the scale of arable land must not be excessively large, otherwise it will inevitably lead to diminished soil fertility.] (Richthofen b, 1907: 58).

As the largest source of profit in Chinese export trade, the tea plant and the mulberry tree were economic crops to which Richthofen devoted considerable attention. The diary notes that “Die Ausfuhr bezieht sich besonders auf grünen Tee und

Seide. Die Seidenausfuhr ist aber jetzt nicht bedeutend, da die Rebellen die Maulbeerbäume zerstört haben. Der Handel liegt meist in Händen von Chinesen.” [the principal export commodities are tea and silk, but silk production is limited because many mulberry trees were cut down during the rebellion; most of the trade remains in Chinese hands.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 51). He also mentioned that along the roads near West Lake, “Die Ebene ist reich an Kultur, und es wird viel Seidenzucht getrieben. Alle Dämme und erhöhten Stellen sind mit Maulbeerbäumen bewachsen.” [the silk-weaving industry is highly developed; wherever the terrain is slightly elevated, it is planted with mulberry trees.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 60). Tea plants were also common in the Zhejiang region. However, he raised a question: he observed that “als ob die Leute sich um alles andere mehr als um Tee kümmern” [the local people devote considerably more attention to other crops than to tea] (Richthofen a, 1907: 329). How, under such circumstances, could such quantities of tea still be produced? He provided an answer: “The Chinese prefer self-sufficiency and are unwilling to rely on imports; they prefer to provide for all necessities of life themselves.” He unhesitatingly assessed that “if someone could teach them some basic principles of national economy, tea production would increase enormously, and the profits could be used to purchase more grain and maize. They could also cultivate crops of greater economic value...”

Simultaneously, Richthofen paid close attention to commercial activities throughout Zhejiang. His records of Ningbo’s commercial development were particularly meticulous. Having surveyed Ningbo twice, he expressed astonishment at its level of development relative to other parts of China. During his first visit, he described how “Die Straßen sind eng wie in Canton und sehr belebt, so daß man oft durch das Gewirr festgehalten wird, namentlich heute, da der Stadtgottheit zu Ehren eine Prozession aufgeführt wurde.” [the main streets are lined with shops... so bustling that one might imagine some festival is being celebrated] (Richthofen a, 1907: 36). During his second visit, he further described Ningbo: “Indessen ist auch jetzt der Handel in Ningpo nicht unbedeutend, und es blüht eine vielseitige Industrie: berühmt sind Möbel und Schnitzereien, auch Matten, ferner Bijouterien. Beträchtlich ist außerdem der Export von Fischen, zu deren Konservierung die zahlreichen Eishäuser am Fluß dienen.” [Commerce is by no means inferior, especially with its flourishing industries; whether furniture, wood

carving, mats, or jewelry, all are renowned. Moreover, fish exports are considerable.] (Richthofen b, 1907: 6) Commercial activities in other regions, however, disappointed Richthofen. In Dinghai, for instance, he noted that “Die Straßen sind eng, gepflastert, mit niedrigen Häusern; allenthalben herrschen schauerliche Gerüche.” [the streets here are extremely narrow... even the commercial streets appear unimpressive] (Richthofen a, 1907: 46). These areas were regarded by him as comparatively backward.

3.3 Cultural Space

Richthofen was deeply interested in the daily lives, customs, and cultural practices of Zhejiang residents. During his travels, he would rest or lodge in local villages or temples, observing and evaluating the living environment.

Regarding Chinese architecture, Richthofen's comments were predominantly admiring. He praised the appearance of houses in Ningbo: “Die Häuser sind gut gebaut und mit flachen schwarzen Ziegeln gedeckt” [The houses here are built with black bricks, appearing sturdy and handsome] (Richthofen a, 1907: 35), and the imposing grandeur of temples “mit zahlreichen Portalen, Vorder-, Mittel-, und Hintertempel, Priesterwohnungen, Seitentempelchen, Wasserbassins, künstlichen Anlagen aller Art” [with countless pavilions, divided into front halls, central halls, and rear halls, with various buildings of artistic character] (Richthofen, 1907: 38). Having previously visited Japan, he frequently remarked in his travelogue that the scenery he encountered was “erinnert ebenfalls an Japan” [as magnificent as in Japan] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38). What saddened him was the extensive destruction wrought by the Taiping Rebellion; many places had been reduced to ruins. In a village by West Lake, for example, “dass der größere Teil der früher angebaut gewesenen Strecken brach liegt und ein fast undurchdringliches Dickicht bildet. Das Dorf Selbst ist stark mitgenommen: die meisten Häuser sind Ruinen” [it was evident that formerly cultivated areas were now mostly abandoned and overgrown with weeds... most of the houses in the village had become ruins] (Richthofen a, 1907: 331).

In terms of living conditions, Richthofen harbored considerable criticism toward the customs of certain villages, deeming them “unästhetische Seiten” [not particularly aesthetically pleasing] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38). He described one such

scene thus: “ein Zug von Männern, die in Eimern die Dungjauche auf die Felder brachten; dann Eimer und Steingefäße, groß und klein, fast an jedem Haus in den Dörfern, in denen der kostbare Stoff der Gährung überlassen bleibt; endlich die kleinen offenen Häuschen an der Seite der Straße, in denen der Vorübergehende stillschweigend um ein Almosen besonderer Art für den Besitzer des benachbarten Feldes gebeten wird! [...] eine beispiellose Abstumpfung der Geruchsnerve für ein ästhetisches Empfinden.” [A group of men carry buckets of night soil to the fields. In front of every household in the village, large or small wooden or stone buckets are placed, containing what the local people regard as precious fertilizer... Using one's own excrement to pray for a good harvest for the local common people! ... But they completely disregard all sense of the aesthetically pleasing, especially the olfactory.] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38). His commentary carries a strong subjective bias; as a foreigner and colonialist, he could not empathize with Chinese peasants living in a stage of traditional agriculture. He also pointed out a characteristic feature of villages in Zhejiang at the time: “Die chinesischen Dörfer dieser Gegend liegen malerisch im Grünen zerstreut, oft unter hohen Bäumen, aber im Innern sind sie schmutzig und unbehaglich für unsereins.” [Chinese villages appear from the outside to be scattered across a painted landscape of greenery, shaded by tall trees, but inside they are exceedingly dirty] (Richthofen a, 1907: 41). “Die Landschaft sieht friedlich, reinlich und einladend aus. Aber welcher Kontrast, wenn man den Fluß überschritten hat und die glänzenden weißen Häuser in der Nähe betrachtet! Schmutz, nichts als Schmutz, Verfall, Ruinen!” [From a distance, everything appears peaceful and serene. But if one approaches the houses along the shore, one discovers that the so-called beautiful scenery does not exist at all; apart from filth, there is only filth, and everywhere one looks, there is dilapidation] (Richthofen a, 1907: 57).

Temples were numerous in the Zhejiang region. Richthofen visited local temples on multiple occasions, finding the environment of most temples agreeable. He considered the monks friendly, describing them as “Sie legen den Rosenkranz nie aus der Hand und beten sehr viel, Tag und Nacht.” [never setting aside their prayer beads, reciting scriptures and performing Buddhist rituals day and night] (Richthofen b, 1907: 21). Ordinary residents were also mostly amicable; even when encountering particularly aggressive individuals, they would become hospitable upon learning that

Richthofen harbored no ill intentions. Richthofen expressed surprise at the placidity of the common people of Zhejiang. Passing through Ningbo, he marveled that “Man findet in Ningpo das seltene Beispiel einer im allgemeinen harmonierenden Gesellschaft und einer Zufriedenheit der Meisten mit ihrem Schicksal, trotz schlechter Zeiten. Die Gesellschaft bildet ein abgeschlossenes Ganzes und findet in sich selbst hinreichenden Stoff zu fortdauernder Unterhaltung. [...] sie kümmern sich wenig um das, was außerhalb ihres engen Zirkels in China oder in anderen Ländern vorgeht.” [most people are content with their fate, despite living in such arduous times... It is as if this place were isolated from the world, self-sufficient in livelihood... They rarely concern themselves with other places, let alone other countries] (Richthofen a, 1907: 50). Yet from another perspective, the characteristics of ordinary people—non-resistance, endurance, and a narrow, ignorant worldview—were precisely what colonialists welcomed.

3.4 Colonial Imaginary Space

Beyond descriptions of natural space, labor space, and cultural space, the diary also contains a clearly articulated colonial imaginary space. Imaginary space “encompasses the author’s imagination, associations, and fabrications, yet these are not produced from thin air; rather, they possess explicit or implicit connections with objectively existing natural and human geographical spaces” (Zeng Daxing, 2017: 143).

Richthofen journeyed to China not merely as a geographer but also as a colonial agent surveying the actual conditions of the country. As a self-styled “more advanced” European, his observations of China assumed a top-down, condescending perspective. Although he endeavored to employ objective modes of expression in describing China, the national will and political position he bore inevitably led to subjective judgments and even apologetics for colonialism. He explicitly stated in his book: “Allerdings haben die Chinesen nicht die geringste Ahnung, wie folgenschwer der Schritt sein würde. Die Öffnung der ersten Kohlenminen ist, nach meiner Meinung, der erste Schritt zur materiellen und geistigen Umwälzung dieses Reiches von vierhundert Millionen Seelen.” [The Chinese do not truly understand how difficult the pace of China’s opening to foreign contact has been. In my view, the opening of the first treaty ports was merely the first step in the spiritual transformation

of this country of four hundred million people] (Richthofen a, 1907: 28).

Although he regarded most Zhejiang residents as amicable, as a colonialist he inevitably viewed the Chinese from a superior position as relatively backward, making no effort to conceal his discriminatory attitude toward China: “Für das Leben außerhalb Chinas ist dies von ebenso geringem Nutzen wie die ganze Schulweisheit der Chinesen [...] Die Chinesen haben allerdings Grund, auf ein Goldenes Zeitalter zurückzublicken [...] Mit der Einführung des Zopfes scheint sich der Verfall allmählich vorbereitet zu haben.” [But I am well aware that outside China, the Chinese language is utterly useless... Of course, the Chinese still have reason to take pride in their golden age... But since the arrival of those queue-wearers, decline has gradually set in] (Richthofen a, 1907: 64). This constructed an opposition between “uncivilized natives” and “civilized culture” (Jacobs, 2016: 227). He offered pointed commentary in his diary:

- “Aber auch hier fehlt der Reiz, den die Menschenhand schafft: alle Staffage und alles, was die Natur verschönert. ...aber es fehlen jene versteckten Aufgänge, die verschnittenen Hacken, die Torii, welche großen Baumgruppen einen so geheimnisvollen Zauber geben, und es fehlt vor allem eine ansprechende Bevölkerung. In diesen abgeschlossenen Gebirgegegenden sind die Leute gutmütig und harmlos, aber sie erwecken nicht unsere Sympathien. Außer Feld und Haus kennen ihre Gedanken nur noch Geld und Gewicht, und man hört im gewöhnlichen Leben auch nicht eine ansprechende Bemerkung. Bildung fehlt gänzlich: die Leute können weder lesen noch schreiben und wissen nichts über die Grenze ihres Distriktes hinaus. Dazu kommt das stets lästige Ausfragen, die Unreinlichkeit und die oft sehr widerwärtige Aufdringlichkeit.” [There is indeed a lack of human beauty here, a lack of all artificial embellishments that could make nature more beautiful... More importantly, there are no local customs to match the beautiful scenery. The residents enclosed within these mountains, though kind and harmless, are not particularly endearing. Apart from cultivated land, property, their thoughts revolve solely around material gain and money; never have I heard them speak of scenery in their daily lives. So lacking in education are they that they can neither read nor write, knowing nothing of

the outside world. Moreover, their excessive curiosity, lack of hygiene, and lack of restraint are all objectionable] (Richthofen b, 1907: 64-65).

Here, the positions of subject and object are inverted: the local indigenous inhabitants become passive objects of observation and judgment, while Richthofen, as a foreign traveler, assumes the role of an active arbiter over this land. If we refer to Edward Said's definition of the Oriental, these common people of Zhejiang are evidently "regarded as a problem to be solved" (Said, 2007: 264); their lives are scrutinized and negated.

Furthermore, Richthofen repeatedly compared China with Japan. He noted that "Überhaupt erinnert Ningpo mit seiner wegen Naturschönheit berühmten Umgebung an Japan." [the natural beauty of Ningbo also constantly recalls Japan] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38), but immediately added that the streets, architectural styles, temples, and common people of Ningbo "alles dies ist ganz japanisch und nicht chinesisch." [all give the impression that this is not China but Japan] (Richthofen a, 1907: 38). "Allerdings fehlen diesen Landschaften von China die Hauptzierden von Japan, diejenigen, welche der Mensch dort hineingebracht hat: es fehlen die Tempel von jener Anlage, welche sie in Japan so anziehend macht, die Torii, die anmutigen Dörfer von Japan und der poetische Hauch des dortigen Lebens." [However, Chinese scenery still lacks the artificially created scenes found in Japan; Japanese temples are so charming because of their mountain gates, as well as the peaceful villages of Japan and the poetry of life there] (Richthofen b, 1907: 40). Such Sino-Japanese comparisons appear repeatedly throughout the diary. Richthofen describes Japan with a tone of intimacy and gentleness, whereas his descriptions of China become acerbic and questioning. China is consistently portrayed as the backward party, amply demonstrating that Richthofen viewed China through a discriminatory lens.

Richthofen's assessments of geographical locations most explicitly reflect his colonialist inclinations toward Zhejiang. Influenced by the then-prevalent European doctrines of the "civilizing mission" and "tutelage," which held that Western nations at "higher" stages of development bore the responsibility of assisting backward nations, even through the use of force (Chen Ming, 2020: 156), Richthofen, after surveying the Zhoushan Archipelago, indulged in fantasies of its occupation: "Als einfache Besetzung würde Tschusan viel wertvoller sein als Hongkong..... Als Freihafen in

den Händen einer Macht wie Preußen würde Tschusan eine gebietende Stellung einnehmen. Der Hafen kann mit Leichtigkeit befestigt werden, und eine Kriegsflotte würde den Verkehr mit dem nördlichen China und Japan beherrschen. Als Handelsort würde es zu hoher Wichtigkeit gelangen. Ningpo würde eingehen und Schanghai viel einbüßen, da das Eigentum hier viel sicherer sein würde." [If occupied purely for itself, this place would be more valuable than Hong Kong... If some regime—for instance, Prussia—wished to occupy a free port in China, Zhoushan would be an excellent choice. The harbor could easily be blockaded; a single fleet could control the vital sea route between northern China and Japan. As a trading post, the Zhoushan Archipelago also possesses considerable value; if Ningbo and Shanghai were to lose their importance, relocating industries here would be safer] (Richthofen a, 1907: 44-45). "Für die Chinesen sind die Inseln von geringem Wert, und ein Kauf könnte vielleicht für einen nicht zu hohen Preis abgeschlossen werden." [The Chinese have not at all recognized the important value of these islands; at present they could be purchased for a modest price] (Richthofen a, 1907: 45).

Even more strikingly, he imagined that if European colonizers occupied certain areas of the Zhejiang region, the local economy would develop more favorably, regarding colonial rule as a benefaction to the indigenous population. Europeans could "Platz finden; denn nicht nur könnten große, jetzt brachliegende Flächen angebaut werden, sondern der üppige Graswuchs der Hügel würde große Viehherden ernähren und die Düngkraft sowie die direkte Produktion von Nahrungsmitteln vermehren. Man würde Obst, Wein, Oliven usw. bauen, und eine nicht zu schätzende Anzahl von Menschen würde durch industriellen Betrieb in der Ausbeutung der Steinkohlen Beschäftigung und Erwerb finden." [not only better develop existing land but also fully utilize those mountains and grasslands still lying waste to develop animal husbandry, thereby multiplying production. For example, they could cultivate fruit, grapes, olives, and so forth. If industry and mining were further developed, more Chinese would find employment] (Richthofen a, 1907: 333-334).

4. CONCLUSION

Because of its geographical location, Zhejiang became a frequent destination for Westerners in the nineteenth century. In 1842, Ningbo was opened as

a treaty port, and Zhoushan, facing Ningbo, also became an object of Western covetousness. As a geographer, Richthofen selectively focused on Zhejiang's potential for exploitation and its advantages in geographical location, economy, and commerce while surveying the region's natural geographical space. As one scholar observes, "The interpretation of space is directly related to the manner in which that space is used and appropriated" (Song Nianshen, 2022: 5). All descriptions of Zhejiang as natural space, labor space, or cultural space ultimately point toward colonial imaginary space.

Richthofen's construction of Zhejiang's geographical space presents a relatively comprehensive picture of the natural environment, human life, and economic activities of the period. It constitutes valuable historical material that promoted the formation of an external image of the Zhejiang region. Yet it also displayed to the West Zhejiang's potential for colonial development; this colonialist perspective and inclination must not be overlooked.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is a phased achievement of the Zhejiang Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project (23NDJC344YB).

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