

## Attempts to persuade or convert the West?

### Trajectories of literati, scholars, priests, and prophets coming from the East(s)

The international symposium “Attempts to persuade or convert the West? Trajectories of literati, scholars, priests, and prophets coming from the East(s)” invites scholars to reflect upon the trajectories of non-Western historical actors who came to Europe or the United States in order to present traditions, religions, practices, or cultures originating from their homeland. By bringing together specialists of different geographic areas working on the last three centuries, the objectives of these two days of presentations and dialogues will be to create a platform of discussion, where scholars can exchange with colleagues beyond the boundaries of areal studies. By emphasizing the discourses held in European languages, and the doctrines put into practice in the West, the idea is to bring the attention of the many on a corpus of documents directly accessible to all. It will also open a door toward a global and connected history of tradition that the people of Europe and America long ignored, fantasized, denigrated or dominated.

Since the end of the 19th century, the progressive political domination of the West over the rest of the world has gone hand in hand with a diffusion of its beliefs, dogmas, knowledge systems and categories of intellection. Supposedly endowed with a “civilizing mission,” a part of Europe went on to propagate not only its *Gospel* but also practices, methodologies, and concepts that contributed to the mutations, transformations, reformations, and revolutions within the tradition it interacted with. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, as well as many other intellectual and religious nameless traditions were encouraged or impeded to reinvent themselves or to reformulate their narrative. Yet, this growing referential asymmetry in knowledge and belief production didn’t merely involve a one-way transcultural exchange. In turn, so-called “eastern” or “oriental” traditions also tried to export themselves and treaded on European and American grounds. Under the new clothes of “religion,” “philosophy,” “wisdom,” or “spirituality,” they attempted to fill a gap supposedly created by the very process of modernity. Notably, after the First World War, these traditions claimed that they could be the saviors of a declining and sick civilization.

The chronological frame of the presentations will therefore be open up to today. This will enable us to cover these non-Western discourses throughout the evolutions of political frameworks and epistemological structures of domination that characterized the colonization period, the cold war, and the last decades. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and specialists of literature will be invited to cross their research agendas in order to offer a kaleidoscope of perspectives regarding these missionary or apologetics endeavors directed toward the West. It will be the first time that such a topic be considered from a global and transversal angle.

The presentation in this symposium will notably try to articulate the two following themes:

1. **The genealogy of discourses that claimed to reveal the (or a) truth of the East.**  
One will be particularly careful about the issue of how the diffusion of these doctrines to Western populations was dependent on the constitution of networks of individuals and institutions, as well of intellectual filiations. One will question the trajectories of those apologetic and proselytist figures that often had to construct a discourse according to their foreign interlocutors but also within the context of the social and

ideological structures of their homeland. Through an analysis of the political sociology of these figures, one will also question the extent to which they were integrated within the traditions they expounded on. Indeed, since they had the technical and linguistic capacities to go to the West and preach there, they may not have been the most orthodox representatives of those traditions.

2. **The method used to persuade and convince the Westerners that they may have to learn things from exotic countries, and the value of the message they purported.** One will question not merely the media used to communicate – journal, literature, conference, venues, etc. – but also the notions used to describe and explain the doctrinal systems and social practices completely foreign to Western traditions. With what terms did these literati, scholars, priests, and prophets spearhead their attack on Western hegemony, and attempted to pluralize Western thought? Did they speak of “religion,” “philosophy,” “wisdom,” “spirituality,” “culture,” or even “civilization”? What about native terminologies such as *Karma*, *Dao*, or *Ubuntu*? As such, aside from the men and women that upheld these discourses, the very words they used will be looked into.

In this logic, a peculiar attention will be given to **the construction of identity issues and to the concrete objectives** of these actors who had often been downsized and reduced to their pretended “foreign”, “oriental”, “colonial”, “savage”, “barbaric”, “half-civilized”, “third-world”, “southern”, “developing countries” origins. As such, the objective of this symposium will be to foster new interrogations regarding the circulation of these individuals in the West, and consider what meant, and still mean, the proselytist and apologetic missions of these men and women across frontiers.

**Languages:** French / English

**Scientific coordinator:** Dr Joseph Ciaudo (Hastec Postdoctoral fellow)

**Academic Institutions:** UMR GSRL / Labex HaStec / IFRAE / CEIB

**Important dates:**

Please submit a presentation title, short abstract (400 words maximum), as well as a short biography (100 words) to [convertir.occident@gmail.com](mailto:convertir.occident@gmail.com) on or before Tuesday, 15 February 2020.

Notification of accepted submissions will be given from the 10 March 2020 onwards.

The symposium will be held in Paris on June 11 and 12 in Paris.

**Publication:**

The publication of the presented papers is envisioned.