

The Enlightenment European Perception of China:

Sinophilia, Sinophobia, and Modernity

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Haverford College, 2009

Abstract

This thesis examines the drastic shift in Western Europe's attitude towards China during the 18th century. In 1700, Europeans on the whole had a positive view of China. They appreciated what they perceived to be China's strengths, and identified those fortes as having the utmost importance to societies in general. Foremost among these was what Western Europeans saw as China's adherence to the "natural law" or "natural order". This adherence made China great; its most obvious manifestation was China's government's long duration. At the same time, while Westerners perceived problems with China, they placed little weight on China's alleged flaws. The sciences, for example, were a field where Europeans going into the 18th century felt that the Chinese lagged behind. However, such concerns were either dismissed as minor in the face of all of China's achievements or else cast as flukes that would soon be remedied. In the early eighteenth century, many Westerners saw China as a model to which European polities ought to aspire.

By 1800, European attitudes had undergone a near-complete reversal. China was generally portrayed as a backward, stagnant nation. The Chinese government, whose longevity and stability Europeans had lauded only a century earlier, was corrupt. Contemporary opinion stated that the only reasons that the imperial government of China had been able to maintain its hold on power for so long were its liberal use of force and the complacency and poverty of the populace. Such was the European perception by the late eighteenth century of aspects of China that had been held in high esteem in the early Enlightenment. Those areas in which early-eighteenth century Europeans had faulted China faced far worse treatment. Westerners especially criticized what they perceived as the stagnation of the Chinese in the fields of scientific endeavor and technological development. Thus by the close of the eighteenth century, China was placed within a fully articulated Eurocentric worldview.

This paper attempts to elucidate this reversal of views by closely examining selected travel texts on China and certain works informed by them. The examination has two goals; namely, to probe the motive behind this shift and the means by which it was enacted. The former of these two things, the "why" of the matter, has as much to do with Europe's self-definition during the Enlightenment as it does to do with Europe's definition of China. During the eighteenth century, Europeans reconceptualized what it meant for a society to be civilized. The new rubric against which civilization was measured had standards that were primarily based on abstract understandings of science and reason. According to these new standards, China was deficient while Europe was proficient. Proponents of this new worldview succeeded in integrating China into it, despite decades of Europe admiring China, by a three-step rhetorical process. In this process, Chinese superiority was deconstructed, European superiority constructed in its place, and then an intellectual framework that explained the relative statuses of the nations as a function of science and reason implemented.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the Haverford College History Department. If the thesis is the capstone of my academic career, the History Department has provided me the tools with which to cut it. I would also like to specifically thank Professor Paul Smith, without whom my interest in China would not exist as it does, and Professor Lisa-Jane Graham, both of whom have subjected themselves to reading and editing my work, thesis and otherwise, without complaint. Thanks also to Professor Ignacio Gallup-Diaz as well, for instilling in me a love of travel literature. Finally, I would like to thank Jen Shuch, who for some reason actually agreed to listen to me read my thesis while it was still in progress.

Table of Contents

Introduction 5

Section 1: Pre-Enlightenment Presentations of China 14

The Travels of Marco Polo 16

Early Jesuit Travel Literature 20

Section 2: The Early Enlightenment Transition: *The General History* 27

Du Halde and the Image of China in the Sciences 30

Sinophilia, Sinophobia, and Eurocentrism 28

Section 3: The Middle and Late Enlightenment: Refuting Du Halde 39

An Irregular Dissertation 40

The Question of Chinese Stability 41

The Sinophobic Answer 49

Section 4: Establishing and Explaining European Superiority 54

Montesquieu and the Construction of a Superior West 56

Turgot: Justifying European Superiority 61

Conclusion 70

Bibliography 73

Introduction

“Of all the kingdoms of the Earth China is the most celebrated for politeness and civility, for grandeur and magnificence, for arts and inventions... That vast empire is so fertile and wonderful in all respects that it will always furnish fresh materials for discoveries”¹

“A Chinese closes his eyes forever before he can read... In whatsoever degree of fame the Chinese stand for real arts and sciences, their (deservedness) is but very slender. If they know something of many things, (it is) all a very superficial tincture. Most arts and sciences have been known among them from times immemorial, but all of continued just what they were at first; of some they know not a single jot”²

China is grand, the Chinese are blind. China is magnificent, China is undeserving. China is a land of fertile, continuing discovery, China’s knowledge amounts to nothing more than a superficial tincture. The images of China that these quotations portray are starkly different. It hardly seems possible that the two authors could have been writing about the same place, but they were. Furthermore, both authors were well-respected by their contemporaries. Neither was a marginal character, and neither expounded aberrant opinions. How, one might ask, is it possible to reconcile all

¹ Louis Le Comte, *Memoirs and observations topographical, physical, mathematical, mechanical, natural, civil, and ecclesiastical* (London: Printed for Benjamin Tooke, 1698), 3-4, http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgthumbs.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=11225404&FILE=../session/1240378611_15095&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&SEARCHCONFIG=var_spell.cfg&DISPLAY=AUTHOR (accessed 04/22/2009).

² Johann Georg Zimmermann, *An essay on national pride* (London: Printed for J. Wilkie, 1771), 128, http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?contentSet=ECCOArticles&sort=Author&tabID=T001&searchId=RI&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&prodId=ECCO¤tPosition=3&userGroupName=have19984&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&sgHitCountType=None&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28A0%2CNone%2C23%29Johann+Georg+Zimmermann%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28BA%2CNone%2C60%29LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&&docId=CW3320074150&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=CW3320074150&relevancePageBatch=CW120074149&showLOI=Yes&contentSet=&callistoContentSet=ECLL&docPage=article&hilite=y (accessed 04/22/2009)

of these facts? The answer is “time”. Neither portrayal was abnormal, but the better part of a century separates them; the opposing images of China in these lines are the result of the passage of nearly one hundred years. Any one hundred year period can affect large-scale changes in public attitudes, but the years separating the two quotes above were especially tumultuous. The former is from 1689, while the latter is from 1771; the time between the two encompasses the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment, which for the purposes of this paper is synonymous chronologically with the eighteenth century, was a period of massive, systemic change throughout Western Europe and “Western” societies in general. It was a time of material and scientific progress, philosophical and intellectual upheaval, and overall revolution, figurative and literal. Scholars have produced a vast body of work on the Enlightenment, much too large to even begin to summarize; for my purposes it suffices to quote John Hobson. He states that “above all, the Enlightenment was a defining moment in the reinvention of European identity. In effect it was based on the question who are we and what is our place in the world? Answering this question led on to the systematization, classification and, indeed, invention, of the world.”³ Western European societies emerged from the eighteenth century with substantially, and in some cases dramatically, different values and perceptions than those with which they had begun it. Among the many things altered, as Hobson suggests, was how Europeans conceived of the world, of the hierarchy of nations and societies, the progress and measure of civilization, and the places, both their own and those of others, within it. What I wish to study here, the glaring divergence of Europe’s perception of China before and after the Enlightenment,

³ John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222.

depicted in the opening quotations, in many ways was caused by, and to a large extent reflects, the concurrent shift in Europe's perception of itself and the world at large.

The changing role of science was one of the key elements in this shift, and the key element with regards to Europe's relationship with China. The eighteenth century, like the seventeenth century before it, saw colossal advances in sciences like mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. These advances had equally enormous practical applications, allowing for the construction of superior firearms and cannon, for example.⁴ The Enlightenment was also a period of great technological invention and innovation, no doubt partially sparked by the advances in the abstract sciences. Many staples of the Industrial Revolution date to the eighteenth century, including the steam engine and the power loom.

This progress in the sciences, and the material benefits that accompanied it, evoked the new ways in which eighteenth century Europeans were thinking *within* scientific fields. Just as important however, were the manners in which contemporary Europeans were thinking *about* science and technology. Science became crucial to Western Europeans' understanding of the world during this period.⁵ Science increasingly provided the intellectual framework, and technology the physical means, for Western Europeans to better understand reality. Innovations to the telescope, for instance, opened up the investigation of physical fields that had previously been too distant to see, while developments in physics and astronomy provided a means for Europeans to process this

⁴ Ken Adler, *Engineering the Revolution: Arms and Enlightenment in France, 1763-1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See this book for an extensive discussion of technical progress in engineering during the Enlightenment.

⁵ E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789-1848* (London: Shenvall Press, 1962), 27-52, 277-296.

data.⁶

Even more important though was the indirect impact of advances in science and technology. During the Enlightenment, Europeans began to conceive of scientific development as the predominant measure of civilization. How deeply a society understood the sciences and how successfully that society translated scientific development into technological innovation became crucial markers of the “progress” of civilization, another concept that took on a larger role in the Western European worldview at this point. The philosophy of technological determinism, the belief that technology, technological advances, and the science behind them are crucial governing forces in society, dates back to the intellectual discourse of the Enlightenment.⁷ The impact of this philosophy is difficult to overstate. For instance, Andre Gunder Frank, in his book *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, compellingly criticizes many modern scholars for exaggerating the date when European scientific superiority emerged. He holds that the belief that the period of Europe technological dominance over the rest of the world dates back to the 1500s is wholly incorrect.⁸ This exaggerated backdating is a consequence of the lingering effects of Eurocentrism combined with technological determinism.

The development of philosophies of scientific determinism may be conceptualized as the logical outgrowth of earlier ideas of “reason” being the driving force behind human advancement. Any number of famous thinkers, beginning in earnest in the seventeenth century and continuing through the eighteenth century, have

⁶ Chester Moore Hall is credited with inventing the achromatic lens in 1733.

⁷ Merritt Roe Smith, “Technological Determinism in American Culture,” in *Does Technology Drive History?: The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), 2.

characterized reason as the engine of civilization. That the seventeenth century is often distinguished by historians as “the Age of Reason” speaks to the importance of reason in European thought at the time. Moving into the Enlightenment, many prominent thinkers believed that scientific progress in a society was a function of the degree to which reason governed that society. For Diderot, Voltaire, and many other eighteenth century philosophers science and technology were the driving forces behind civilization, a measurable means by which reason made its presence in a given nation felt; for many of these same writers, science and technology had actual and powerful agency as historical and social actors.⁹

In short, scientific advances and, to a lesser extent, technological ones, and the manner in which they led Enlightenment Europeans to conceptualize of a “progress of civilization” determined by science, had tremendous ramifications for Europeans’ views of the world.¹⁰ China was no exception to this occurrence, as the opening quotes suggest. If anything, China actually presents what I believe is the most intriguing case of Europe’s reordering of its perception of “Others”, which this paper endeavors to illustrate.

Prior to the 18th century, Europeans viewed China in generally positive terms, unlike essentially every other foreign land that they had then encountered. Given this fact, it is unsurprising that placing China into a new, “scientific”, Eurocentric worldview required a considerable amount of effort and took several decades. Though Europeans had long viewed themselves as more scientifically advanced than the Chinese, through the older measures of civilization they had nonetheless viewed China favorably.

⁸ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 185-195.

⁹ Smith, 2. See also Dorinda Outram, *Panorama of the Enlightenment* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 238-274.

Jonathan Spence states that the presentation of China in Marco Polo's *Travels* and in Jesuit missionary literature, two of the most formative forces for pre-Enlightenment European attitudes towards the East, discussed in section one, portrayed China well with few exceptions.¹¹ Further, those exceptions were generally perceived as "vices", such as the high degree of male prostitution, rather than systemic failures.¹²

The grand image of China produced by this older rubric, dominant going into the Enlightenment, had to be deconstructed in order to integrate China into a new social framework oriented around science and reason. From that perspective, Western Europe's superiority was articulated and reinforced by grounding civilization in scientific development. Finally, after establishing the "what", that is, Chinese weakness and Western strength, Europeans produced an overarching framework that explained why this was so, one that accounted for the reasons behind different society's strengths and weaknesses and mapped onto contemporary beliefs about science and society.

I will argue two things in this thesis. The first is that a large part of the dramatic reversal of Enlightenment European attitudes towards China was due to Europe's new understanding of the role of science in society. Science provided both the justification for European superiority over China and part of the means by which they established it. The second thing that I want to propose is that the reversal of perceptions itself can be conceptualized as having taken place in the three part process outlined above. Against the backdrop of new ideas about science, reason, and progress, the Enlightenment saw the deconstruction of Chinese superiority, the establishment of European superiority, and the

¹⁰ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 77.

¹¹ Frank, 1-40.

¹² Frank, 35.

assembly of an intellectual framework justifying this new perception of the world. What follows is an attempt to trace this process chronologically by examining various eighteenth century representations of China in travel texts and the responses predicated upon them.

Travel texts were terribly important in 18th century Europe. They were a category of literature encompassing a broad array of works, from simple narratives about foreign travels to encyclopedic guides to far-off lands to philosophical treatises predicated on alien lifestyles made known by the former two sorts. Contemporary people hungered for information about the world around them, and as so often happens every question answered raised several more. The explosive growth of the natural sciences outlined above was one outgrowth of this phenomenon. Moreover, so was the expansion of “scientism”, the attempt to apply natural scientific principles to political and social problems, which Keith Baker notes reached its high point in the French Revolution.¹³ Still, while contemporary Europeans’ desire for understanding was often characterized by scientism, their interests were by no means solely what we would consider scientific. Hence the emergence of travel literature: enterprising individuals capitalized on a convergence of trends, which produced that particularly Enlightenment European interest about the world, by disseminating information about it.

However, what makes travel discourse a fruitful area of study is that it records not only Europeans’ observations of the world, but also their attempts to understand it. By examining the widely read travel narratives, guides, ethnographies, and the literature informed by them, one can trace both the development of European perceptions towards

¹³ Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 157.

other societies *and* the reasons underlying the course of that development. Thus the reason that I have chosen to use travel discourse in an effort to illustrate the 18th century's shifts in Europe's attitude towards China.

As one last note, it bears stating that the interests that eventually led me to this project were first piqued by the “global histories” within the multi-volume works of Donald Lach and Joseph Needham. Their specifics aside, these works generally asserted that China played an integral role in the development of Europe, and that that role, prior to the 18th century at least, was one where China was the “active”, dominant player on the world stage. That Chinese actions during this time affected Europe greatly is all the more impressive since those effects were often afterthoughts and accidental by-products. This state of things presents a puzzle, known in some circles as the “Needham question”: why did Western Europe overtake China in scientific and technological development during the 18th century, and thus industrialize before China?

Using this question as a starting point, numerous authors have expounded upon global history, examining the interconnectedness of China, Europe, and the rest of the world. Some of them, like Mark Elvin, in attempting to elucidate the complex interchange of goods, technologies, and ideas that formed the global economy over the centuries, have directly and specifically responded to the Needham question. In his case, Elvin answered by postulating the existence of a “high-level equilibrium trap” in China, where various forces converged to keep China stable and functional, but stagnant.¹⁴ Other scholars have answered in different manners and focused on different aspects of the development of the relationship between China and Western Europe. Of that group, I

¹⁴ Mark Elvin, *Another History: Essays on China from a European Perspective* (Canberra: Wild Peony Pty Ltd, 1996), 20-64.

am especially indebted to Andre Gunder Frank, S.A.M. Adshead, and Jonathan Spence. Although the former two take more of a materialistic-economic approach, Frank particularly so, while I am attempting more of an intellectual history of ideas, without their great contributions to the field this paper would not exist.

On that topic, the fact that my paper works from an intellectual perspective is an important distinction. Many scholars, Elvin and Frank come to mind, have written about how material and technological developments in the eighteenth century, and even more in the nineteenth century, radically changed the political and economic balance of power in Europe's favor. Frank even goes so far as to suggest that these "material developments" had more to do with decline in Asia than they did with progress in the West.¹⁵ Here however, the actual state of eighteenth century European science, and especially of its material outgrowths, as well as its Chinese counterparts, are only important insofar as they affected what Europeans *thought* about science and technology. Likewise, what contemporary Europeans thought about science only matters as far as it affected how they thought about China. What I trace herein are shifting perceptions, the development of cultural attitudes, not that of material goods.

Pre-Enlightenment Presentations of China

Prior to the Enlightenment, Western European contact with Imperial China was relatively limited. This is not to say that such contact was nonexistent by any means. Numerous authors have demonstrated the existence of a global trade network stretching back thousands of years, of which both China and Western Europe have long been parts. That said, these same authors state that for most of the Common Era Western Europe played a small, peripheral role in the global system of commercial and intellectual intercourse, while China was at its center. Frank, citing Needham, argues convincingly that the flow of information, goods, and technology was primarily from China outward, first to the nations directly bordering it, then either back to China after being innovated upon or else farther outward, only in due course reaching Europe.¹⁶ In light of this tenuous connection, China did not figure prominently in European intellectual discourse or the European public consciousness for most of this period. The Middle Kingdom only gradually made the transition from being a semi-mythic land on the edges of Europe's worldview to a fully realized part of it. This process spanned several centuries, and laid the groundwork for the explosive battle over China's place in the European conception of reality. What follows is a brief overview of this earlier transition.¹⁷

During the Middle Ages, the state of affairs between China and Western Europe can be generally explained by the fact that the West had little that China wanted, in any

¹⁵ Frank, 274-297.

¹⁶ Frank, 187.

¹⁷ For a more in depth look at this earlier period, see S.A.M. Adsheed, *China in World History* (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1988).

sense. Further, spanning the physical distance between the two regions directly would have required a Herculean effort, and European countries lacked the means and China the motivation to accomplish this feat. Though Europeans did consume Chinese goods during this period, and although Westerners did incorporate Chinese technologies into their daily lives, contact between China and Western Europe was mostly indirect before the 16th century, and effectively exclusively so prior to the *Pax Mongolica*, beginning in the 13th century. Adshead observes that even during the period when Tamerlane's rule guaranteed relatively free access to China for Westerners, the great distance between China and Europe and Europe's general disarray made direct contact, mercantile or otherwise, extremely difficult.¹⁸ The more developed trading societies of the Middle East and Central Asia remained Europeans' primary procurers of Chinese goods, while Europeans themselves remained largely ignorant of the foreign lands whose riches they coveted.¹⁹

Thus though by the late Middle Ages Westerners recognized "the East" as a source of great wealth and much-desired goods, China per se was barely present in Western thought. The relative lack of European literature or popular discourse about China created prior to the 16th century evidences this claim. Only the rare trader or missionary had direct contact, and rarer still were the individual Europeans who felt moved to write about their experiences in China. However, the works of those contemporaries who did publish travel literature about China had oversized impacts upon the popular conception of "the East". It is crucial to understand the basic aspects of the images of China conveyed in these medieval travel texts, since their portrayals of China

¹⁸ Adshead, 195-197.

¹⁹ Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe: The Century of Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago

contributed much to the beginning of European sinophilia.²⁰

The Travels of Marco Polo

The most famous and influential of the medieval Chinese travel texts was Marco Polo's. While there were other medieval travel texts detailing or purporting to detail adventures across Asia, very few of their authors claim to have visited China and none were as widely read as Polo's work, which according to Lach was one of the most popular tracts of the late 13th and early 14th centuries.²¹ *The Travels of Marco Polo* is therefore extremely useful in characterizing the general state of medieval Europe's attitude towards China.

Any overview of the Polo text has to address the work's veracity. Spence aptly says of the book that it is "evasive and problematic... a combination of verifiable fact... exaggeration... and a certain amount of outright fabrication... (though) what matters to us... (is that) the force of the narrative description was strong enough to imprint itself in Western minds down to our own time."²² Most modern historians agree that there is at least some truth to Polo's accounts of his travels, and whether or not he actually traveled there himself, much of what he presents was fairly accurate.²³ Enormous portions of the text are indisputably false, as will be addressed shortly, but the general consensus is that it was highly likely that Polo did in fact travel through large parts of China, recording his observations as he went. When discussing China, Polo spends much of his text on

Press, 1965), Vol. 1, Book 1, 20-30.

²⁰ Outram, 156.

²¹ Lach, Volume 1, Book 1, 35.

²² Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1998), 1.

²³ Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996). The author provides a thorough discussion of the truthfulness of Polo's work. While she ultimately discloses that she is of the opinion that Polo never ventured east of the Black Sea, she presents the case that he could have in a balanced manner. More importantly, she demonstrates beyond any doubt that much of what Polo

enumerations: how many people lived in a certain city, how many ships sailed on a given river, how much trade of what items occurred, and so forth. Marco Polo had a merchants' background, which may explain his focus on statistics that trader might find useful. These numbers, although only estimates, are accurate enough to cause modern analysts of the Polo text to confer on it at least some measure of veracity.

The fact that the scale on which Polo characterized China was generally accurate also meant that this scale was, relative to what contemporary Europeans were used to, extremely large. The hugeness of Chinese cities, the vast amounts of commercial traffic and wealth, and the high levels of technological development and bureaucratic sophistication that Polo records are the crux of the text. Hence its other name in Italian, *Il Milione*, "The Million", referring to Polo's tendency to use millions as his basic scale for description. In his observations of China, the main facts that Polo tries to convey are superlatives: Imperial China is physically large, extremely wealthy, highly developed and, moreover, it is larger, wealthier, and more developed than any European country.

On the other hand, enumeration and the description of various events that actually occurred only constitute a part, perhaps even the smaller part, of the Polo text. Many chapters of the text either contain or are wholly dedicated to completely fabricated people, places, creatures, and events. Polo claims to have seen the Gates of Alexander²⁴ as well as headless people whose faces are located on their abdomens²⁵, met peoples "adept beyond all others in the art of magic"²⁶, and seen evidence that Genghis Khan asked for the hand of the daughter of the mythical Prester John in marriage, only to

recounted was more or less true, whether he witnessed it or not aside.

²⁴ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*, ed. trans. Manuel Komroff (New York: Garden City Publishing Co. Inc., 1941), 27.

²⁵ Polo, Komroff, 67.

vanquish him after being turned down.²⁷ Polo's *Travels*, in the vein of the romance literature of the time, integrated a number of mythological elements seamlessly into its accounts of China.²⁸

To the modern reader, these fantastic fabrications juxtapose sharply against the enumerative, observational tone of the rest of the text. Ironically, for contemporary readers the parts of Polo's text that appeared too outlandish to believe were his cut-and-dried enumerations, rather than the myths that the modern reader discerns. While his contemporaries were by no means wholly credulous of Polo's accounts, they generally had less trouble accepting the idea of strange creatures and lost Christian kingdoms, which were already part of their worldview, than they did the idea that a place as populous, wealthy, and large as China existed.²⁹ For instance, the alternate name for *The Travels of Marco Polo, Il Milione*, fed into the book's common nickname, "the million lies", a measure of European credulity of Polo's claims about the size, wealth, and development of Imperial China.

The Travels of Marco Polo and its contemporary reception speak volumes about the medieval European conception of China. Although they were the recipients of Chinese goods and inventions, Westerners in the 13th and 14th centuries knew next to nothing about it, save that it existed in some fashion or another. China was a fantastic land, still on the edges of the European worldview; despite the popularity of the Polo text,

²⁶ Polo, Komroff, 64.

²⁷ Marco Polo, *Marco Polo: The Travels*, ed. trans. Robert Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), 93-96.

²⁸ Henry Yule, *The Travels of Marco Polo: The Complete Yule-Cordier Edition*, (Plain Label Books), 384, http://books.google.com/books?id=YtnglhJEI7wC&dq=Henry+Yule:+The+travels+of+Marco+Polo&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=Rr4MiThaGr&sig=-xIoczNKg2W5YxYtOMky_cyE3xQ&hl=en&ei=kLPuSdedKcOclQeV2swl&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1 (accessed 04/22/2009).

²⁹ Lach, Vol. 1 Book 1, 36.

Europeans' different reactions to its fictitious and its real elements evince China's lack of integration with contemporary Europe's conception of reality.³⁰

Nevertheless, Polo's *Travels* had an important impact upon Europe's perception of China, even if it was not immediate. With the exploration of East Asia in the 16th century, first by the Portuguese and later by other nations, Europeans began to establish trading posts in and around China. These uninterrupted commercial links inextricably cemented China as a wholly real entity within the European mindset, bringing it out of the realm of partial myth.³¹ This first direct anchoring of China to Europe confirmed much of what Polo had recorded about the size, wealth, and development of China. Beyond this however, these early European traders contributed little in the way of discourse about China. Presumably, they were more concerned with capitalizing on the new trade routes that they had opened up than with anything else; it could have conceivably even been in their interests not to spread further information about China, in order to hinder their rivals.

Whatever their motives, the traders confirmed China's reality to European society while contributing little to its definition. As a consequence, the data, true and false, presented by Polo and his successors stepped in to fill the gap, leaving, as Lach puts it, "a veneer of legend and fable" over European interactions with China.³² *The Travels of Marco Polo*, in addition to describing China's great wealth, portrayed this wealth as a product of the proper construction of Chinese society and the justness and efficiency of

³⁰ J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.

³¹ Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 22-23.

³² Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe: The Century of Discovery* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1965) Vol. 1, Book 2, 730.

the Chinese form of government.³³ Although the text did not provide an enormous body of data to back up its assertions, its claims nonetheless stuck, and were echoed and expanded through the 16th and 17th centuries, such that the basic notion of “China as a model for Europe” was dominant by the beginning of the Enlightenment.³⁴

Early Jesuit Travel Literature

The Jesuits were crucial figures in this expansion of the view of China that the Polo text seeded. This is not to say, however, that their order alone was responsible for shaping the contemporary image of China in Europe; Colin Mackerras has identified at least three important tracts on China published by non-Jesuits in the early sixteenth century, and it is only by comparison to the Jesuits’ oversized impact that these earlier works pale.³⁵ From the end of the sixteenth century through most of the seventeenth, the Jesuit missionaries’ missives, books, and maps widened the frame and colored the glass of the window through which Westerners viewed China. Although their influence on the Western European perception of Chinese society waned during the Enlightenment, the Jesuit order was in large part responsible for the state of Western attitudes towards the Middle Kingdom going into the 18th century.

The first Jesuit mission to China was led by Father Matteo Ricci, a man of myriad exploits, many of which Spence chronicles in his eponymous book, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*.³⁶ This mission began in 1582, although St. Francis Xavier had attempted a journey to China several decades before, dying before he reached the mainland. Naturally, the Jesuits’ main goal in China was the conversion of people to

³³ Lach, Vol. 1, Book 1, 36.

³⁴ Clarke, 39.

³⁵ Mackerras, 22.

³⁶ Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984).

Catholicism. Their success in reaching this end was mixed, but in their attempts to garner souls to salvation they succeeded enormously in placing China in a more vivid place in the Western mindset. Although they may have failed in the wholesale conversion of China to Christianity, as Otto Berkelbach van der Sprenkel describes it, they were incredibly successful in interpreting China to the West.³⁷ The Jesuits, whether they intended to or not, tipped the dominoes set up by Polo and other predecessors, setting of the wave of sinophilia that caught up much of European society and intellectual life during the seventeenth century.

The extent to which the Jesuits' correspondences aided and influenced the construction of the contemporary image of China as a superior civilization should not be underestimated. Gottfried Leibniz, for instance, was one of the leading lights of European intellectual discourse in the 17th century. He was highly regarded in his own time, and many of his inventions, such as the binary system, have proven to be momentous. He was also a self-avowed sinophile, and is known to have based his views of Chinese society almost exclusively on missionary correspondence, like nearly all of Europe's seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers.³⁸ His writings on everything from philosophy to politics were, like those of many other influential thinkers of the time, heavily informed by data provided by the Jesuits. Hence his propounding of Confucianism as a rational religion, not only compatible with Christianity but from which Christianity could learn much, in particular how to shed its sectarian quarrels.³⁹

³⁷ Otto Berkelbach van der Sprenkel, "Western Sources," in *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History*, ed. Donald D Leslie, Colin Mackerras, and Wang Gungwu (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), 156.

³⁸ D.E Mungello, "Confucianism in the Enlightenment: Antagonism and Collaboration Between the Jesuits and the Philosophes," in *China and Europe: Images and Influences in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Thomas H.C. Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991), 99-100.

³⁹ Anthony Pagden, "The Immobility of China: Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Enlightenment," in

Likewise, Leibniz was also one of the earliest major figures to explicitly state that China had a better grasp on the proper structuring of government and society than did Europe. His case reflects the general trend during this period toward conceptualizing China as a model to which Europeans should in many ways aspire, the immediate root of this trend being the Jesuits' sinophilic portrayals of China.

Ricci and his Jesuits' appreciation of China is evident in even their basic approach to the missionary endeavor. Ricci, writing to search for more missionaries to serve the cause, appealed for "men of talent, since (they were) dealing (there) with a people both intelligent and learned."⁴⁰ While on the surface this missive was simply a request for more personnel and could potentially be read as having stemmed from internecine struggles between the Catholic orders, its description of the Chinese as an intellectually proficient people different from others that Westerners had encountered reflects what would fast become the prevailing European sentiment about China. The Jesuits depicted China and the Chinese as special. Though "Other", Europeans largely saw Chinese society and culture as positive and beneficent during the seventeenth century, unlike that of sub-Saharan Africa and further places that Europeans were integrating into their worldview at the time.⁴¹

It should be noted that part of this presentation may have been due to personal bias on the part of the missionaries. As has been stated, most members of the Jesuit order, at least such as were stationed in contemporary China, were astute men, but beyond reporting actual disparities that they observed between Imperial China and

Anthropology of the Enlightenment, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 57-58.

⁴⁰ George H Dunne, *Generation of Giants* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 28.

⁴¹ Birgit Tautz, *Reading and Seeing Ethnic Difference in the Enlightenment: From China to Africa* (New

Europe, the Jesuits had a personal stake in presenting China positively. Their entire approach to proselytizing was predicated on the intelligence and development of the Chinese, so it was in the vested interest of the order to present the Chinese as such.⁴²

The Jesuit order had concluded, understandably, that their efforts would be substantially less laborious if they ingratiated themselves with the Emperor. To this end, at Ricci's direction, they sought to integrate themselves into the literati class of the Ming court. The missionaries succeeded in this task by approaching it earnestly. They claimed authority as literati by proving the extent of their learning, European learning, to their Chinese counterparts.⁴³ By taking this approach, the Jesuits' tied their own authority, as well as their legitimacy and the potential for success of their endeavor, to the fortunes and favors of the Chinese government and Chinese high society. Spence remarks that the Jesuits even hastened their production of literature about China precisely to increase the prestige of their order.⁴⁴ The rise and fall of the Jesuit order follows the rise and fall of Europe's opinion of China almost exactly; it is no coincidence that the order was disbanded in 1773, when European attitudes towards China were well on their way towards contempt and scorn. It is therefore unsurprising that the missionaries' reports back to Europe portrayed the Chinese government and Chinese society in positive lights, the fact that these accounts were in many ways accurate notwithstanding.⁴⁵

Their underlying motivations aside, the 17th century Jesuits transmitted to Europe painted China as a great civilization that was at least equal to, and possibly greater than, those of Western Europe. This image was widely accepted up until the Enlightenment,

York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3-5.

⁴² Clarke, 40.

⁴³ Mackerras, 28-30.

⁴⁴ Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent*, 41.

when it gradually but inexorably lost its pride of place. Attempting to understand the process by which Europeans upended this previously held perception during the 18th century is the core of this paper, and to that end it is necessary to understand the basic arguments the sinophilic view that the Jesuits established.

The viewpoint itself was fairly straightforward. The Jesuits marveled at the same things that Polo had centuries before: China's great material wealth, its large population, the continuity and stability of its government and social structures, and its high level of technological development, to name the major points. They communicated their impression of these things to Europe, where like-minded voices concurred with and expounded upon their assessment that in the first three of these things China surpassed Europe.⁴⁶ The sinophiles argued that the longevity of Imperial China's social structures demonstrated that the Chinese had ordered their society properly. They held that this correct structuring of government and culture, which had taken place thousands of years earlier, caused the Chinese population to grow at a fantastic rate and enabled the production of wealth and the development of technology on a scale not seen in Europe until recently, if even then.

Scientific development however, represented a sticking point in this theory, as Europeans were more advanced in the large majority of the sciences by the 17th century than were the Chinese.⁴⁷ Indeed, the Jesuits ingratiated themselves with the Emperor and the literati in large part by introducing them to new sciences and technologies. The voices that conceived of China as a superior place accounted for this by dismissing the contemporary differences between Chinese and European development as relatively

⁴⁵ Clarke, 40.

⁴⁶ Adas, 88.

small in the sciences and almost nonexistent in technology, and maintaining that since China had invented or discovered much of what Europeans now knew hundreds of years beforehand its current stagnation or backsliding was negligible. From a sinophilic viewpoint, the fact that the Chinese had created and utilized things like gunpowder, printing, and the magnetic compass long before they were present in Europe far outweighed the contemporary gap between the two regions. These three inventions in particular are emblematic of this line of reasoning. Gunpowder, printing, and the compass were the three things which Francis Bacon credited as founding the modern order in Europe, and all three of them had been in common use in China since the Song Dynasty, 960CE-1279CE.⁴⁸ The Chinese' ancient inventiveness further established the sinophilic argument for China's superiority, mitigating any current gap in scientific achievement.

By 1700 the vision of China as place that was in general superior to Western European nations was firmly entrenched, a product of the cumulative efforts of Polo, the Jesuits, and numerous other contributors. The image of China as a model to be emulated rested on generally held perceptions about both the state of things in China and the reasons behind that state. China's population and wealth, and the stability and continuity of its institutions, were perceived, correctly, as clearly exceeding those of the West; by measuring the "progress" or "superiority" of civilizations by those vectors, sinophiles established China as superior to Western Europe. The logical conclusion of this line of reasoning dictated that if Western Europeans were to become more advanced themselves, they needed emulate the Chinese model, at the root of which was government by an

⁴⁷ Adas, 75-99.

⁴⁸ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Society in Ming China (1368-1644)* (Washington, DC: The Society for

“enlightened despot” and an “enlightened” bureaucracy. However, despite the powerful place that this school of thought occupied going into the Enlightenment, by 1800 it was fully replaced by another type of worldview, with which it was wholly incompatible: Eurocentrism. The literature that follows illustrates the resolution of the cognitive dissonance between these two doctrines over the course of the 18th century in the favor of the latter.

The Early Enlightenment Transition: *The General History of China*

Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's work, *The General History of China*, is a prime example of sinophilic, early 18th century travel literature. This text is extremely useful in understanding the forces behind Europe's attitudinal shift against China during the Enlightenment. It was widely read, arguably the most thorough description of China published by that time in Europe, and was among the most favorable to China ever released.⁴⁹ Although the main purpose of the text was to provide a general history of China, as its title suggests, this was not an attempt at an unbiased report; Du Halde was a Jesuit priest and his data sources were Jesuit missionaries. As such, much of *The General History of China* is dedicated to constructing an image of China congruent with the one favored by Jesuits and other sinophiles. The ancient roots of China's sociopolitical structures are verified and lauded, as is the continuing beneficence and efficiency of the Chinese government. Likewise, the prosperity and just behaviors of the general populace are noted and attributed to the goodness of their governance.

The General History of China explicates essentially all of the basic arguments behind China-as-a-model-for-Europe, and does so in a grand fashion. However, as far as the intellectual conflict between sinophilia and sinophobia, the text was somewhat similar to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. It embodied the high water mark for the perception of China as an admirable, emulable place while in retrospect it is clear that by the time of its publication that view had given substantial ground to the Eurocentrist perspective.

⁴⁹ Mackerras, 35-37. For more reading, Mackerras provides a short but pithy set of excerpts from Du Halde

The somewhat disjointed place that *The General History of China* occupies in terms of the chronology of the transition from sinophilia to sinophobia is important, but easily explained. Du Halde published the first edition of *The General History of China* in French, as *Description de la Chine*, in 1736, well into the thick of the Enlightenment, when the public debate over China's character and its relationship to Europe was already in full swing, with the sinophobes steadily gaining ground. The text reflects the less abashed appreciation and even the glamorization of China of an earlier period because Du Halde, in addition to being a Jesuit working from Jesuit sources, wrote from materials that other members of the Jesuit order had collected from significantly earlier. He never went to China himself, and thus his work is less a matter of personal experience and opinion than it is a distillation of the experiences and opinions of the Jesuit order as a whole.⁵⁰ The Jesuits were in turn the vanguard of contemporary sinophilic attitudes, another reason to consider *The General History of China* invaluable in understanding Europe's 18th century attitudinal shift towards "the East". Hence the text, although published in the middle of the Enlightenment, embodies attitudes of sinophilia characteristic of the early Enlightenment.

The body of the text can be fairly described as having four different sections: Chinese history, geography, culture and society, and a brief description of some of the dependent regions of the empire. *The General History of China* is a tremendously lengthy work, and gives as thorough a treatment to most of the subjects as can reasonably be expected. In its own words, it attempts to cover the large field of China's "character,

which further illustrate the general attitude of the text.

⁵⁰ Mackerras, 35-37.

manners, customs, government, progress in the sciences” and other similar things.⁵¹

In keeping with their construction of a positive image of China, the society and government of the Chinese are presented in a very flattering manner, according to what was the typical sinophilic formulation. The long histories of most of China’s ancient sociopolitical institutions are vouched for, their benevolence and potency attested to, and their longevity held up as incontrovertible evidence of their goodness. The text pays particular attention to what it describes as the Confucian roots of the government and many social traditions. The Jesuits deemed Confucianism to be compatible with Christianity, like Leibniz, hence their support for it⁵², while sinophiles who were less inculcated in Christian dogma, like Voltaire and Quesnay, went on to portray Confucianism as a sort of deist, non- or anti-Catholic guide to morality⁵³, but both sides argued that the philosophy and its stabilizing effects on society further affirmed China’s greatness. To this extent *The General History of China* is simply a presentation of pro-China information and an articulate recitation of the sinophilic arguments that followed from it.

⁵¹ Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *The General History of China* (London: Printed by and for John Watts, 1736), Vol. 1, 11,

[http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&directDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale\(en%2C%2C\)%3AFQE%3D\(A0%2CNone%2C8\)Du+Halde%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D\(BA%2CNone%2C60\)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R2¤tPosition=1&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=Yes&bookId=0144200201&collectionId=T114211&relevancePageBatch=CW100358703](http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&directDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(A0%2CNone%2C8)Du+Halde%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D(BA%2CNone%2C60)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R2¤tPosition=1&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=Yes&bookId=0144200201&collectionId=T114211&relevancePageBatch=CW100358703) (accessed 04/22/2009).

⁵² Louis Le Comte, *A Compleat History of the Empire of China* (London: Printed for James Hodges, 1739), 128,

[http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&directDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale\(en%2C%2C\)%3AFQE%3D\(A0%2CNone%2C14\)Louis+Le+Comte%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D\(BA%2CNone%2C60\)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R1¤tPosition=11&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=Yes&bookId=0330800200&collectionId=T072767&relevancePageBatch=CW101539551](http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&directDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(A0%2CNone%2C14)Louis+Le+Comte%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D(BA%2CNone%2C60)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R1¤tPosition=11&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=Yes&bookId=0330800200&collectionId=T072767&relevancePageBatch=CW101539551) (accessed

Du Halde and the Image China in the Sciences

Where the work deviates from being a boilerplate sinophilic characterization of China, and where it begins to reflect contemporary Eurocentric points and foreshadow their later development, is in its description of the condition of the sciences in China. The first section that directly addresses the state of Chinese science and intellectual life starts as follows:

When we cast our eyes on the great number of libraries in China magnificently built, finely adorned, and enriched with a prodigious collection of books; when we consider the vast number of their doctors and colleges established in all of the cities of the Empire, their observatories, and the constant application to watch the course of the stars, and when we farther reflect that by study alone the highest dignities (in China) are attained, and that men are generally preferred in proportion to their abilities; that according to the laws of the Empire the learned only have, for above four thousand years, been governors of the cities and provinces, and have enjoyed all of the offices of the court, one would be tempted to believe that of all the nations in the world China must be the most knowing and most learned⁵⁴

Having set up this straw man, Du Halde does not fail to quickly knock it down. “A small acquaintance” with the Chinese, he says, will quickly disillusion anyone with high expectations for Chinese mental acuity.⁵⁵ Likewise, “the Chinese have a great deal of wit, yet it is not an inventive, searching, penetrating wit, nor have they brought to perfection any of the speculative sciences, which require subtlety and penetration.”⁵⁶ In

04/22/2009).

⁵³ Clarke, 44-45.

⁵⁴ Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *The General History of China* (London: Printed by and for John Watts, 1736), Vol. 3, 75,

[http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&d oDirectDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale\(en%2C%2C\)%3AFQE%3D\(A0%2CNone%2C8\)Du+Hal de%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D\(BA%2CNone%2C60\)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+ 0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R2& currentPosition=1&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=&bookId=01 44200203&collectionId=T114211&relevancePageBatch=CW100359694](http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&d oDirectDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(A0%2CNone%2C8)Du+Hal de%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D(BA%2CNone%2C60)0LRH+Or+0LRL+Or+0LRI+Or+0LRK+Or+0LRF+Or+ 0LRJ+Or+0LRN+Or+0LRM%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R2& currentPosition=1&userGroupName=have19984&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=&bookId=01 44200203&collectionId=T114211&relevancePageBatch=CW100359694) (accessed 04/22/2009).

⁵⁵ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 75.

⁵⁶ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 76.

short, Du Halde begins his description of Chinese scientific development by stating that the quantity of the intellectual feats of the Chinese belies their quality.

Then again, in *The General History of China* this idea is by no means the crux of the text. Du Halde goes into a fair amount of depth about the inferior state of the sciences in China, but he maintains the older, sinophilic view of China and of the measure of civilizations. This view had grown out of 16th and 17th century ideas about the nature of progress, hence its connection with sinophilia. In this worldview, the most important measure of a society and of a nation is how “well-structured” it is, according to whatever philosophy one ascribed to, with more evident measures of progress stemming from its structure. China, with its enlightened despot Emperor, a highly educated bureaucracy, and a society based around Confucian ideals, was clearly properly structured, as evidenced by the longevity and stability of its institutions and the great wealth and size of its populace. Within this general framework science was not all-important; a relative lack of scientific development did not change the fact that the Chinese model, in general, was superior. However, the apparent condition of Chinese scientific progress later became the crucial justification for Western European superiority, given Enlightenment Europe’s changing notions of the relationship between science and civilization. Hence the reason that Du Halde’s statements about the Chinese sciences are interesting.

Du Halde, ironically while attempting to temper his statements about Chinese scientific achievement, plays further into what later authors would reinterpret as evidence for Chinese inferiority. He states that though he does not mean to cast the Chinese as stupid, “since it is plain that they succeed in other things which require as great a genius

and as deep a penetration as the speculative sciences”, he believes that “there are two principle obstacles which hinder their progress in these kind of sciences.”⁵⁷ These are that “there is nothing within or without the Empire to stir up their emulation”, and that “those who are able to distinguish themselves therein have no reward to expect for their labor.”⁵⁸ Notwithstanding their dubious veracity and the fact that they constitute only a short paragraph within a large work, these exculpations would crop up increasingly through the Enlightenment and beyond. Indeed, a few decades later these ideas came to constitute the core of Turgot’s theory about the historical progress of civilizations. This theory, explained in Section 4, and others like it were some of the final nails in the coffin of European sinophilia.

Du Halde goes on to describe the states of various sciences in China in detail. In one of the ironies of history, these portrayals, though embedded within a sinophilic framework, foreshadowed the means by which China would be integrated into a Eurocentric worldview. Given the popularity of *The General History of China*, the particular characterizations in Du Halde’s descriptions of Chinese scientific development may have actually fed the sinophobic re-conceptualization of China.⁵⁹

For instance, in the areas of logic and rhetoric, “so greatly refined in Europe”, Du Halde describes the Chinese as being “void of all precepts... (that) bring argumentation to perfection.”⁶⁰ This in itself is not terribly remarkable. Contemporary Europeans were not generally inclined to positively assess the intellectual lives of foreign societies, as numerous earlier travel accounts from the New World, Africa, and Southeast Asia

⁵⁷ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 76.

⁵⁸ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 76.

⁵⁹ Montesquieu, for instance, used Du Halde as one of his primary sources in his masterwork, *The Spirit of the Laws*

demonstrate.⁶¹ However, as has been remarked, China was different from the other societies with which Europe had come into contact in the centuries prior to the Enlightenment. China presented Westerners with evidence of intellectual sophistication that was, at least to a certain degree, undeniable. Therefore, in *The General History of China* the Chinese are not shown to be completely lacking in logic; they are not, in the parlance of the time, “irrational”. Despite being devoid of an advanced understanding, they still “follow... the natural light of reason”, which allows them to come to a level of knowledge that, though not perfect, is sufficient to achieve the relatively high level of development that they enjoyed.⁶² By damning the Chinese with faint praise, Du Halde, probably unwittingly, builds on the themes of Chinese “underachievement” and high-functioning stagnation, which later sinophobes and Eurocentrists latched onto.

Music, which Du Halde places under the same scientific heading, provides another study in the developing European sense of Chinese underperformance. The criticism of Chinese music is perhaps the harshest treatment that any subject receives in *The General History of China*. According to Du Halde, although the Chinese had an ancient musical tradition, it was much degraded. He states that Chinese music during the eighteenth century is in such a woeful state that it hardly deserves the name.⁶³ He perceived that Chinese musical compositions, while not necessarily unpleasant, were not developed beyond a very basic level. The Chinese only enjoyed the simplest of European music, unable to understand “the most curious part of music, ...the contrast of different

⁶⁰ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 76.

⁶¹ For further reading on contemporary European portrayals of other foreign societies in travel literature, I recommend the travel diaries of William Dampier, or the recent book on the same subject, *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind*, by Diane and Michael Preston.

⁶² Du Halde, Vol. 3, 77.

⁶³ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 77.

voices, of grave and acute sounds.”⁶⁴

When the Kangxi Emperor was finally introduced to European music, and especially to European musical notation, he declared European music incomparable and the man who demonstrated it to him brilliant; he ordered a musical academy opened and run by him. The man in question, Father Pereira, is said to have not only established European music in China, but more importantly to have reexamined ancient Chinese musical texts and discovered mistakes that were being made in the construction of Chinese musical instruments. The text attributes the correction of these errors to him, a European.⁶⁵

In other areas of science Du Halde portrays the Chinese as reasonably intelligent but nonetheless ignorant of higher knowledge. Similar to his descriptions of the development of Chinese rhetoric and logic, the Chinese, though “pretty well versed in arithmetic... have nothing like (European) figures whereby they may perform the operation(s).”⁶⁶ They rely instead on the abacus, which allows them to perform calculations with great speed, substantially faster than their European counterparts, but at the expense of abstract ability, akin to the argument over modern calculator use. Chinese abilities in geometry follow in the same vein, according to Du Halde.

As for (Chinese skill in) geometry it is superficial enough, for they have but little knowledge either in the theory or practice; if they undertake to solve any problem, it is rather by induction than by any stated rules⁶⁷

He also credits the Jesuit missionaries with the introduction of advanced optics, clock making, and other precise arts to Imperial China, all of which were well-received by the

⁶⁴ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 80.

⁶⁵ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 81.

⁶⁶ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 82.

⁶⁷ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 84

Emperor and the members of his court.

In a general statement about the status of Chinese science, Du Halde notes that the Chinese “naturally proud, (had) looked upon themselves as the most (scientifically) learned in the world, and enjoyed this reputation without disturbance... (until) they were undeceived by the ingenuity of the missionaries who appeared at Court.”⁶⁸ *The General History of China* is a sinophilic text that outside of the sections on the sciences generally maintains an extremely positive view of China; China is typically presented as being equal to or superior to Europe, depending on the subject matter. In this context, a statement that alludes to Chinese hubris and European superiority, or at the very least equality, might seem out of place. It is not misplaced however, as long as one remembers that Du Halde and the Jesuits, though sinophiles, were also educated men and are generally regarded as having been fairly honest observers. Du Halde reports what his fellows perceive about the sciences in China, and while it is unflattering to the Chinese, when placed within the greater context of the work it does not detract from their overall appreciation of China. Despite the fact that on its own the section about the sciences is anything but positive towards the Chinese, the larger portrayal of China in *The General History* is extremely positive. China is wealthy, China is populous, the Chinese people are well-mannered, the Chinese government is fair, just, and powerful, and all of these things evidence China’s proper structuring according to “the natural law”.

Sinophilia, Sinophobia, and Eurocentrism

This last sentiment more or less sums up the trend in early Enlightenment portrayals of China. The primary characteristics of the seventeenth century Western European attitude towards China were wonder and appreciation, and even astonishment,

not coincidentally the same traits that Adshead says characterize Marco Polo's book.⁶⁹ For Europeans in the 1600s and early 1700s, China was enormous, in geographic area, in population, in riches, but most of all in culture and social achievement. It was not the first time that Westerners faced the "Other", but it was the first time that they faced one that did not fit readily into some ready schema or worldview of theirs. For example, biblically Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas had never received the Word of Christ, which explained what contemporary Europeans saw as their lack of civilization; likewise, they fit into the biblical lineage via Ham. Jews and Muslims were Abrahamic, and the Indians were supposed to have received the gospel from the apostle Thomas.

The Chinese, however, did not fit into this or any other preexisting European understanding of the world. They had what appeared to be a high level of civilization, but they were not part of the biblical narrative, which had a long tradition in Europe, albeit a weakening one by the 17th century, of explaining directly or indirectly the nature of the entire world. 16th and 17th century European scholars struggled to link the Chinese to the Noahide genealogy, to the linguistic heritage of the tower of Babylon, and to other Biblical markers.⁷⁰ Europeans at that point faced the difficulty of placing China into a Bibliocentric, Eurocentric worldview. The conflict evident in upholding even a relatively strictly Bibliocentric worldview in the face of China's existence, much less a Eurocentric one in the face of China's wealth, size, and development, led Europeans to experience cognitive dissonance over China from the moment that it ceased to be just a legend in the European mindset.

Du Halde's *General History of China* embodies what many of the sinophiles

⁶⁸ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 84.

⁶⁹ Adshead, 244.

essentially proposed: a worldview that was still often Bibliocentric but not Eurocentric. For those who wanted to maintain the Biblical link, theories abounded, linking Chinese to ancient Egyptian by alleged similarities between hieroglyphics and kanji, or perhaps by asserting that the Chinese people descended from a lost tribe of Israel. Biblical or not, within these systems China held a place that was on the whole at least the equal of Europe's. The material reasons already given, stability, enlightened government, wealth, and so forth, were thought to be irrefutable proof that China was at least the equal of Europe and in many ways the better, especially if one held, as the Jesuits did, that Confucianism was another divine ordination similar to, if perhaps inferior to, Christianity, a belief that countered idea of Europe being the exclusive recipient of God's will.⁷¹

However, despite the early popularity of the sinophilic resolution to the problem of integrating China into the European mindset, the view forwarded by Du Halde and those like him did not win out. The Enlightenment saw the integration of China into a worldview that contrasted sharply with Du Halde's. This view was first and foremost Eurocentric, and though it still paid attention to the Bible and the role of God, sacred sources were no longer the most important component of it, and were largely used in secondary support for European claims to superiority, *a la* a divine mandate to rule.

Given the contrast between the two, it should come as no surprise that this Eurocentric view had to completely upend the older sinophilic view rather than simply supplanting it. What we have seen so far, from the historical background and *The*

⁷⁰ Jeremy Black, *Europe and the World: 1650-1830* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 49.

⁷¹ Qian Zhongshu, "China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century" in *The Vision of China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Adrian Hsia (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 126. The portrayal of Confucius in Western Europe is a subject for a

General History of China, has largely been the establishment of Chinese superiority based on 16th and 17th century notions of progress and the measure of civilization. China was prosperous because China's sociopolitical structures were based on proper principles of government; stability, wealth, and population demonstrated China's superiority. For some, those principles were even part of a divine mandate; the Chinese prospered because they adhered to God's plan. In order for the Eurocentric view to take hold, the perception of China as superior to Europe had to be deconstructed; this was accomplished by several different methods that will be illustrated in the next section. After this, sinophobic voices also had to establish European superiority, and then develop a theoretical framework that explained both Europe's superiority over China and China's place in the world, inferior to Europe but still undeniably superior by any contemporary measure of progress to other non-European lands. It is in these last two tasks, and especially in the lattermost one, that the state of sciences in China, which Du Halde characterized negatively but dismissed as unimportant in the larger scheme of things, was crucially important.

paper of its own, but suffice to say that an elevated conception of the Scholar was, like most things initially propounded by the Jesuits, not limited to their order alone.

The Middle and Late Enlightenment: Refuting Du Halde

The travel literature of the mid- to late Enlightenment reflected the integration of China into the Western Eurocentric worldview. While the views of China transmitted by European travel writers were certainly never homogenous, the incidence and acidity of sinophobic images increased sharply and more or less continuously from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards.⁷² The next steps in this progression manifested themselves in two broad ways during this period, as was mentioned: the deconstruction of the image of Chinese superiority and the establishment of European superiority.

The works to this end executed their arguments in support of a Eurocentric understanding of history in two main ways. First, they presented a different picture of China, one that disputed the facts that had earlier supported the idea that the Chinese were more advanced than were Europeans. Secondly, and more importantly, they challenged many of the basic premises on which sinophilic voices had judged China to be superior to Europe, discarding or reinterpreting them as necessary. This latter step reflected Europe's new understanding of science, what it meant to be "civilized", and how "progress" or "advancement" was supposed to be measured. From the middle of the Enlightenment onward, the interaction between travel literature and its audience gradually shaped the European perception of China to a Eurocentric end. By the end of the century, that end had effectively been reached.

⁷² Zhongshu, 117-215; Pagden, 50-65. The latter citation, although I disagree with its broader assertions about the relationship between China and Western Europe, does illustrate the progression of European attitudes towards China over the course of the 18th century

An Irregular Dissertation

There were, of course, many works published that reflect the process outlined above. One of the best examples that I have found is entitled *An irregular dissertation, occasioned by the reading of Father Du Halde's description of China*. Needless to say, it does not disguise what it is: a response to Du Halde's compilation and analysis of Jesuit travel accounts. This text was written by an anonymous British author and published shortly after Father Du Halde's account was translated into English.

An irregular dissertation is a prime example of the sort of highly charged literature that characterized Europe's mid-Enlightenment discourse about China.⁷³ It was extremely partisan, in this case on the side of Eurocentrism, but maintained a focus on actually informing the public about China, albeit in a manner that coupled information with withering analysis. This latter characteristic is important as it reflects the unsettledness of the issue engaged, that issue being, of course, the nature of Chinese civilization and hence the relationship between China and Europe. This contrasts starkly with texts from the nineteenth century, for example. These works often equaled or surpassed *An irregular dissertation* in terms of negative portrayals of China, but did so almost exclusively in a fanciful manner, detached from reality, as their public already recognized China's inferiority, and did not need to be convinced of it before finding humor in it.⁷⁴

This particular travel text, on the other hand, was clearly concerned with the act of providing its audience with more or less legitimate information about China, albeit

⁷³ Gunther Lottes, "Confucianism in the Enlightenment: Antagonism and Collaboration between the Jesuits and the Philosophes" in *China and Europe*, ed. Thomas H.C. Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991), 65-99. See this for several more illustrative examples of the heated contemporary debate about China.

carefully selected and then presented without even the pretension of an unbiased viewpoint. However, given the furor about the importance of “reason” and the “enlightened individual” then ongoing, the reading public of Europe could not be expected to simply swallow an opinion without at least the pretense of data or a legitimate rationale; hence the text’s provision of data as well as judgment.⁷⁵ Thus *An irregular dissertation, occasioned by the reading of Father Du Halde’s description of China* illustrates the arguments being made in this period by the avowedly sinophobic in both the information that its author elected to present and in the analysis of that data.

Following a brief introduction, the tract itself dives straight into its description of China. Part and parcel of this description are the author’s comments about China, which are what truly makes this text notable. The commentary very directly outlines many of the Eurocentric, and in this case particularly Anglo-centric, rebuttals of sinophilic arguments. Moreover, it does so from the point of view of a member of the general public. Though the author was clearly well educated and in possession of means enough to publish this pamphlet, and may even have had some personal knowledge of China, he was neither a philosophe nor a missionary steeped in Chinese lore. His observations, in addition to tracing the course of the ongoing debate about China, also demonstrate that the phenomenon of China really did have an impact upon the broader European consciousness, and was not just limited to academic debates or abstract treatises.

The Question of Chinese Stability

To begin, the author, like most sinophobes, attacks what Europeans of the opposite school considered the most prominent indicator of the superiority of Chinese

⁷⁴ Zhongshu, 199.

⁷⁵ Lottes, 66.

civilization: its longevity and stability. He states that he “often heard it made a matter of wonder, that this wide empire should have subsisted so very long without any considerable alteration of maxims, customs, religion, language or habit.”⁷⁶ Further, he says that many Europeans and presumably all Chinese ascribe this endurance “to something very wise in the form of their government, which has continued sacred and untouched, notwithstanding of many state revolutions.”⁷⁷

The narrator, however, does not agree with this assessment. He acknowledges, as he explains later on in the text, the durability of what he identifies as the basic structure of Chinese governance, political and social, but “doubts if some of the facts have not been too lightly taken for granted”⁷⁸ regarding this stability. The better part of the text is structured around answering the question of what might have caused the apparent permanence of China’s culture and society, with the implicit stipulation that it was not due to benevolent law and proper structuring.

In providing his answer to this question, the author first addresses the possibility that China’s somewhat singular geographical location might be at the heart of the matter. Theories of geographical predestination had been forwarded before, primarily by sinophiles as contributing factors in China’s development of an ideal society.⁷⁹ That said, this author was distinctly not a sinophile. He describes the physical geography of

⁷⁶ *An Irregular Dissertation, Occasioned by the Reading of Father Du Halde’s Description of China* (London: printed for J. Roberts, 1740), 3, http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=ECCOArticles&inPS=true&sort=Author&searchType=&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R4¤tPosition=1&userGroupName=have19984&showLOI=&docId=CW3300988884&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=CW100988884&relevancePageBatch=CW100988884&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&callistoContentSet=ECLL&docPage=article&hilite=y (accessed 04/22/2009).

⁷⁷ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 3.

⁷⁸ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 3.

⁷⁹ Du Halde, for instance, remarks throughout his work about the “goodness” of the land in China and its effects not only on agriculture but on Chinese society.

China relatively accurately, focusing chiefly on its relative isolation. China, he says, is “washed by the sea on the south and east, guarded on the west by mountains almost inaccessible, and on the north by cold and inhospitable deserts... (it) is a sort of world by itself.”⁸⁰ However, rather than identifying its isolation as having allowed for relative peace, and so for stability and the refinement of science and society, as the Jesuits and their intellectual kin did, this author focuses on the various wars that Imperial China did fight.

In China’s rather violent dealings with what the narrator refers to as the “Tartars”, meaning all the various peoples of Central Asia, he sees the evidence of China’s weakness. The Great Wall, whose construction and maintenance most European travel writers justly regarded an impressive feat⁸¹, was a sign of the enervation wrought by Chinese society on those within it. While he acknowledged that the wall was in and of itself a remarkable work of engineering, the fact that the Chinese felt compelled to build it “only (served) to show how early the Tartars were formidable, and consequently, how long ago China was impotent.”⁸² The geographical isolation of the Chinese by implication really serves as a cover for their weakness, rather than an explanation for their strength. The author seems to invite the reader to imagine what presumably ill events would have happened had the Chinese faced foes more numerous than the Tartars, given that they felt it necessary, against a small foe, to construct the Great Wall.

He uses the touchstone of the Great Wall, an understandably recognizable icon of China in the European mind, to segue back into his main argument about the stability of

⁸⁰ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 3.

⁸¹ One of the earliest criticisms leveled at Marco Polo’s travels claimed that Polo could not have possibly traveled to China and failed to remark upon the Great Wall.

⁸² *An Irregular Dissertation*, 3.

China. First, he notes that at multiple points in their history, the native Chinese have found themselves conquered by the “Tartars”. Given the prodigious difference in population size between the two groups, even if “all the Tartars of Mongol, Kalkas, Eluth, Coconor, Sifan, Tciticar, and Mantcheou at once (overran) China, it is evident that in a century that drop of water would be lost in the great ocean, and the Tartars would turn Chinese, instead of the Chinese Tartarizing.”⁸³ Many authors, particularly earlier Jesuits and as well as sinophiles like Voltaire and Leibniz, remarked upon this phenomenon as well, but in a positive light. It fit neatly into their case for government by an enlightened, intellectual bureaucracy, as one of the biggest reasons for the sinification of the various invading groups was that the bureaucracy was a necessary for the governing of China, and in order to run a thoroughly Chinese bureaucracy, any conqueror had to eventually become Chinese. To paraphrase Voltaire, it was impossible to govern China, despite having achieved a military conquest, without being Chinese, which demonstrated China’s superiority to ancient Rome, which Europeans considered as their own ancestor.⁸⁴

The author of *An irregular discourse*, while he faithfully reports the same occurrence, does not conclude that it reflects favorably upon the Chinese people, their society, or their system of government. He does not focus on the inevitable assimilation of foreign conquerors into Chinese society. Although he allows for this assimilation, he does not ascribe any beneficial effect to it, in keeping with sinophilic reasoning about the durability of the Chinese model evidencing its superiority. Instead, he notes that whether

⁸³ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 4. The Tartars of Mongol refer to the Mongolians. The Kalkas dwelt in the Altai Mountains and the Gobi Desert, the Eluth, or “Eleuth”, on the Ili River, and Mantcheou appears to refer to the Manchu; the others refer to unknown groups.

⁸⁴ Lottes, 74.

or not they assimilate their conquerors into their society, the Chinese remain a conquered people, and “thus it will ever be; an enervated and enslaved multitude will always acknowledge the superiority of a few.”⁸⁵ This statement is in effect a condemnation of what the author perceives as the sociopolitical structure of Chinese society. Having already said that foreign invasions did not actually inflict any noteworthy change on China, the constructs that predate those invasions must be responsible for the “enslavement” of the Chinese people. This idea becomes explicit later on in the text, and fits into larger arguments about malevolent “Oriental Despotism” that were being formulated around the same time.

The author returns to his overarching argument about the source and nature of the longevity of the Chinese government by moving onto the subject of the Chinese language. In doing so, he also takes the opportunity to rebut sinophilic contentions about Chinese perhaps being the language of Adam and Eve before the fall. He structures his argument by drawing parallels between regional dialects in China, united by Mandarin Chinese, romance languages rooted in Latin, Germanic dialects in “Teutonic”, and the like. The narrator observes that the Chinese possess “very various dialects, so various that in some provinces the language of the others is not understood.”⁸⁶ The language of the mandarins keeps them together, “but that is no more the language of China than Latin is ours.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, if the dialects of Chinese were not as different as Spanish is from French, it was only by fluke of geography, as there were no overwhelmingly large migrations of populations speaking foreign tongues into China.⁸⁸ Dumb luck, not

⁸⁵ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 4.

⁸⁶ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 6.

⁸⁷ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 6.

⁸⁸ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 6.

enlightened government or predetermined ordination, caused the Chinese people to maintain dialects that were similar enough to, although not the same as, the language of their government that Westerners simply misperceived China as being unified by one language.

In short, the author dismisses the linguistic union that the sinophiles held up as evidence of China's cultural superiority as mostly matter of Western misperception, and where it was not, the result of the luck of their geographic location as discussed before. Note though, that in addition to attempting to debunk the Western European perception of a monolithic Chinese language, and the awe that went with it, he again introduces notions of control by the many over the few. The writer, while he is dismissive of the idea of a single Chinese language, acknowledges the crucial importance of the language that Europeans had ascribed to all of China, that of the mandarins. He compares it to the administrative use of Latin under Rome and Greek under the Byzantine Empire.⁸⁹

For this author, the language that sinophiles perceive as uniting China is really just the language of the mandarin class, although he caveats this by noting that Nanking and "some few other places" speak that particular dialect of Chinese as well.⁹⁰ This is unsurprising however, as these places also produce a preponderance of bureaucrats. Thus the apparent union of China under one common language, held by sinophiles as further evidence of Chinese superiority, is, according to *An irregular dissertation*, no union at all. It is merely another manifestation of domination of the few over the many, and does not account for the ability of the Chinese to maintain a stable society for such a great length of time.

⁸⁹ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 8.

⁹⁰ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 5.

In the same vein, the author rejects the vaunted status of “enlightened” bureaucracy that the mandarins had achieved amongst the ranks of large swathes of interested European intellectuals who perceived the potential for personal gain in the implementation of such a system in their own nations. To recap, these sinophiles held that the high level of development and good governance that they perceived in Chinese society was due to the structure of the government. The government, in turn, was good because coveted positions of power were handed out solely on the basis of demonstrated intellectual achievement, via a series of rigorous examinations. The writer, having already established his general opinion of the quality of government under the Chinese model, responds to these claims by both challenging and co-opting their universality.

Appointment to the bureaucracy in China, according to the narrator, was not totally based on skill in the sciences. Moreover, to the extent that it was based on demonstrable intellect and education, it was not more so than found in any other country. When the Chinese system worked well, capable men who had shown their worth were not barred from high office. “Places in the state or the law” were not, as many sinophilic voices were wont to believe, “circumscribed to the scholars. (Chinese) history affords (many) examples of the contrary; an associate in the Empire taken from the plough, (or) a mason chosen prime-minister of a venture.”⁹¹ The Chinese system was subject to the same un-meritocratic influences as every European system. “It must be considered”, writer notes, that

they (the Chinese) have several orders all superior to the mandarin, which our Europeans translate by the names of Regulos, Dukes, Counts, and the like... The polite illiterate of all sorts are the seminary out of which such dignitaries are taken, (who) scorn to debase themselves to the

⁹¹ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 10.

mandarins... This shows the error of those that think that there is no road open to Chinese advancement, but that of Science. It is indeed the high road, and conducts the weary travelers to be inferior judges, and secretaries of offices, and undertellers; but there is an earlier and nearer way, which, like the Royal Road to Fulham, shuns the stones and the mire, and leads to other preferments, to be grandees, tellers, commissioners, directors, and the like, the less learned, I fancy, the better, provided they know “yes” from “no”. *Just as at our place.*⁹²

This author presents the Chinese bureaucracy as no more enlightened than any European government, dismissing the perception that learning was the sole determining factor in gaining official appointment and patronage. Further, as far as the system did spur its subjects to intellectual development and scientific attainment, it did so no more than similar ones elsewhere, and in fact less so than in some parts of Europe, namely England.

Learning, or a pretension to learning, has been time out of mind in China, reckoned necessary to all employments requiring (it), or that are thought to require learning, or a pretension to it. Thus it is there, and thus it is here, and everywhere. Even in Turkey, the *Cady*, or judge of a town, is a man bred to the law: with us (English) an under sheriff is an attorney; a bailiff can read and write; and an exciseman stick in a pen at his ear.

So, in the process of guiding his readers towards the “true” source of Chinese sociopolitical stability, the author has thus far discarded climate, ingrained racial fortitude, language, quality education, and enlightened bureaucracy as potential wellsprings. Not coincidentally, all four of those things had been claimed by sympathetic European observers as bases for, and evidence of, the superiority of Chinese civilization. The stability of China’s sociopolitical institutions, whose source the text is ostensibly aimed at finding, was held by sinophiles to be caused by, and therefore proof of, the

⁹² *An Irregular Dissertation*, 12. Note: The Italics are in French in the original text.

superior, enlightened nature of China's government and society. This same superior structuring was supposed to be behind China's apparent linguistic union and emphasis on education and learning. Yet the author of *An irregular dissertation* depicts these latter two things as nonexistent in China, or not unique to China, or even present in a better fashion in Europe. This new, unfriendly portrayal of certain characteristics that had been key to earlier, more positive images of China deconstructs the image of a superior China step by step, and replaces it with one of a stagnation and weakness.

The Sinophobic Answer

The author eventually comes to the crux of his text, answering the question he poses at its beginning of what, exactly, is the source of the apparent stability and longevity of China's sociopolitical structures. The opening of the text, as discussed, effectively served to rule out the sinophilic answer, that the stability of the Middle Kingdom was a function of the superiority of Chinese society. Before he actually provides his answer however, the author addresses the veracity of the sinophilic claims about China's sociopolitical history.

The text states that when considering the alleged continuity of the "laws of China... (and the Chinese) maxims of government", even if one stipulates for a moment the stability of the structures of government and society, the figures heading that society often changed.

(The Chinese) reckon twenty-two dynasties or different families that have possessed the throne (during their history): passive obedience may be the professed principle of the body of the people in that country, but surely two and twenty revolution could not be brought about without two and twenty actual insurrections and civil wars. The Chinese scepter came thrice into the hands of tartar invaders. Ten times did Prime Ministers... set aside the regnant family to make place for themselves. Thrice the supreme command was attained by captains of thieves, once by a seditious

cobbler: and though all these revolutions had natural causes in the tyranny or imbecility of the prince dethroned... it happened by seldom, only twice, that imperial monsters were expelled by a deliberate act of national justice⁹³

The text portrays the Chinese version of their own history, the large part of the basis for European sinophiles' claims of Chinese superiority, as being improbable, if not logically inconsistent. The sinophiles perceived China as having maintained certain enlightened principles, upon which they built their government and their society, throughout their history. *An Irregular Dissertation* implies that the number of changes between dynasties makes it unlikely that China's sociopolitical structures preserved, through every different reign, the benevolent guiding principle imagined by pro-China voices. Were this the case, there would have been fewer changes between dynasties, given the general benevolence of the government, more acts of "national justice" following revolutions, since any revolution would have had its roots in an Emperor tyrannical or imbecilic enough to violate the government's benevolent principles, or both. This is likewise true with the image of a minister seizing power in a palace coup.

The author, in examining China's dynastic history, rules out the possibility of the existence of the sort of enlightened, unifying principle attested to by the sinophiles. This strikes directly at the heart of claims to China's superiority as a civilization, as on the whole these claims were predicated upon the presence of some form of enlightened force guiding the structuring of Chinese society. Tellingly however, *An Irregular Dissertation* does not rule out the possibility that the core of China's "laws and maxims" remain largely unchanged since the dawn of Chinese society. It only argues that the core of these maxims could not be benevolent, a line of reasoning that quickly gained traction;

⁹³ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 18.

for instance, Spence observes that Montesquieu made an almost identical assertion.⁹⁴

There is then one governing principle that the text identifies. This principle, maintained through the China's history is, according to *An Irregular Dissertation*, despotism. Despotic rule by one person, a prince whose will is the rule of the Chinese people, is the defining maxim of the Chinese government and Chinese society.⁹⁵ Nor is this the sort of enlightened despotism admired by the sinophilic philosophers; the author of this text ruled that out in his analysis of China's dynasties, as we have seen, while later authors, like Montesquieu, seized on this point as well.

Thus the author finally gets the answer to his question. The source of China's stability is not an enlightened understanding of reality; the Chinese clearly do not possess such an understanding. The source of China's stability, in the sinophobic interpretation of the facts, is despotism. Not only do the longevity and continuity of China's social and political institutions not reflect positively on China, they actually reflect severely negatively. The author portrays the sinophilic perception of China as absurd. The sinophilic awe of China is ridiculous, their "wonder seems to be reduced to this, that from the very beginning the Chinese have been slaves. It seems that they were so as far back as we have their history... with (their) hallowed maxims, I think the wonder would have been much great, if ever they had become free. None of their revolutions could procure them the blessing of liberty, because no man fought for it, or thought of it."⁹⁶

An Irregular Dissertation illustrates the shifting of European sentiments towards China during the Enlightenment quite well. More importantly, it demonstrates the methods used in the reconceptualization of Europe and China's respective places in the

⁹⁴ Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent*, 94.

⁹⁵ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 20.

world. Older images supporting China's superiority were deconstructed, either by dismissing them as false, as with China's linguistic union, or as irrelevant, as with China's emphasis on learning as the primary means to government rank and social achievement, or most damagingly of all by inverting them, taking things that had previously been perceived as supporting Chinese superiority, like their social and political stability, and redefining them to support Chinese inferiority.

While deconstructing Chinese superiority, the text also begins to assemble an image of a superior Europe. Throughout *An Irregular Dissertation*, Western Europe is portrayed as being at least the equal, and sometimes the better, of China, a complete reversal of earlier images. Instead of Europe being fractious and warlike where China was stable and peaceful, Europeans are free and bold while the Chinese is enslaved and cowardly. The author, an Englishman, even states that France and Spain were better governed than China.⁹⁷ This notwithstanding *An Irregular Dissertation* spends substantially more time deconstructing the image of a superior China than it does constructing a superior one of Europe. This reflected the general trend of the mid-Enlightenment; Eurocentrists had more immediate success removing China from its pedestal than they did placing Europe upon one. However as the years wore on sinophobic attitudes continued to gain ground. As the next section demonstrates, the general switch in Europe to measuring the advancement of civilizations by their scientific progress effectively established European superiority, while philosophical frameworks that explained and justified both science as the measure of civilization and Europe's superiority in the sciences cemented Europe's superiority and China's inferiority into a

⁹⁶ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 33.

⁹⁷ *An Irregular Dissertation*, 22.

coherent worldview.

The Late Enlightenment: Establishing and Explaining European Superiority

By the mid-late to late eighteenth century the proliferation of Chinese travel literature had shifted the pendulum of European public thought from sinophilia to sinophobia. The previous section outlined the basic means by which this was occurring. Though debate over the nature of China, the Chinese people, Chinese society, and their relationship to Europe was not yet settled one way or the other, the negative views of East Asia were winning out.

For instance, Voltaire, generally regarded as one of the preeminent thinkers of the Enlightenment, and certainly one of the most influential, was an archetypal sinophile of the eighteenth century. As has been noted, he was fond of utilizing the idea of China having developed well free from any Christian influence in his perennial attacks on Christian, and particularly Catholic, fanaticism. He also admired what he perceived to be the structure of the Chinese government and Chinese society. “The human mind”, he said, “cannot imagine a better government than (China’s,) where all is decided by great tribunals subordinate to each other and staffed by men who have proven themselves qualified for their task by having taken several different examinations.”⁹⁸

Like the Jesuits, it is unlikely that Voltaire and the intellectuals who shared this attitude were altruistic in their assessment of the Chinese Empire. They advocated for the adoption of “the Chinese model” of rule, which they supposed consisted of a perfectly meritocratic government by the intellectual elite. Of course, if European nations were to

⁹⁸ Lottes, 72.

adopt such a model, Voltaire and his compatriots would naturally make up the intellectual elite running the new government, hence the element of self-interest.⁹⁹ It would be a mistake, however, to image that the sinophiles' were based solely upon naked self-promotion. They had a legitimate basis for these views on the grounds that such a regime would be the best way to further advance the causes of reason and civilization.

The difficulty that the sinophilic voices faced as the Enlightenment progressed was not in defending their premise, that the best form of government and society is that which most advances whatever one defines as civilization, but in their conclusion, that China possessed such a structure. Their opponents made increasingly strong arguments that “the institutional and educational system which they recommended as an instrument of modernization had on the whole worked in the very opposite way in China.”¹⁰⁰ The success of these arguments derived from the shift to defining modernity with science as its key criterion.

For instance, European onlookers, whatever their overall attitude towards China, had long recognized the stability of the Chinese system. The sinophilic side, dominant prior to the Enlightenment and represented during it by Voltaire, Quesnay, and others, saw the stability that this structure provided as a powerful civilizing force. For them, China had “learned all essentially useful things on which (contemporary Europeans) prided (themselves)... four thousand years (earlier)”¹⁰¹. China’s achievement, proof positive of the greatness of Chinese society and culture, was preserving this level of development over the span of the centuries.¹⁰² To them, the more that Europe adopted

⁹⁹ Lottes, 72-73.

¹⁰⁰ Lottes, 74.

¹⁰¹ Lottes, 74.

¹⁰² Lottes, 74.

what they conceived of as the Chinese model, the better; Voltaire went so far as to lament what he saw as ancient Rome's failure, relative to the ancient Chinese, to defend itself against barbarian invasion, causing an enormous loss to Europe.¹⁰³

The sinophobic side, meanwhile, was slowly but steadily eclipsing the sinophiles, led first by the occasional early Enlightenment writer like Defoe, and then by a growing chorus: Turgot, Condorcet, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith, to name a few. All of these men contributed to the solidification of a Eurocentric worldview that classified China as inferior to the nations of Western Europe, but they did so in many different ways. Despite their varied means however, these newly powerful voices shared two things in common. They took their basic information from travel accounts, as very few of them ever actually visited China. Likewise, they formulated their arguments by inverting earlier perceptions of China and the relations between China and Europe: stability became bad, upheaval good, the mandarin corrupt, the Chinese Emperor only despotic and not enlightened, and so forth, just as the author of *An Irregular Dissertation* did with his characterization of stability as slavery.

Montesquieu and the Construction of a Superior West

Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, for example, expended a large part of his energies responding to the particular claim that China represented a society governed by enlightened despotism. In this vein, he developed the ideas presented in the last section. Quesnay and the physiocrats were among the most notable proponents of this China as the model of an enlightened society. As their thinking went, the Chinese people had long ago recognized that the accumulation of wealth on a national level, and thus the securing of prosperity, was the ultimate goal of society. Likewise, they saw that

¹⁰³ Lottes, 74.

the foremost method to generate wealth was by agriculture; as Du Halde notes, the contemporary Chinese placed “agriculture... in great esteem; and the husbandman, whose profession is looked upon as the most necessary one in a state, are of considerable rank; for they are preferred to merchants and mechanics, besides having large privileges.”¹⁰⁴ Quesnay perceived the Chinese as having structured their government and their social mores around these two principles, which he saw reflected in everything from their bureaucracy to their religious beliefs. This perception of China influenced him greatly in developing his theories. For these reasons, Quesnay and his followers held up China as the end product of benevolent enlightened despotism, a model for Europe.

Montesquieu condemned this line of reasoning, and thus the image of a superior China, wholeheartedly. Although his attacks on China were strategically dispersed rather than concerted, as Spence notes, Montesquieu’s view of China was clearly harsh.¹⁰⁵ Besides challenging Quesnay’s basic premise, that the production of an agricultural surplus to further national wealth should be the goal of a civilized society, he assaulted the idea of Chinese despotism as benevolent. In contrast to this view, he offered an alternative, and pejorative, set of reasons for the development of despotism in China. Where *An Irregular Dissertation* asserted that the Chinese government was despotic, Montesquieu offered a rational explanation as to why it was so.

To begin, Montesquieu did not believe in the concept of “enlightened” despotism; his theory of governments dictated that the honorable despot did not exist and that despotism on the part of the governor naturally led to a disregard for the well being of the

¹⁰⁴ Lewis A. Maverick, *China: A Model for Europe* (San Antonio: Paul Anderson Company, 1946), 23. See also Francois Quesnay, *On Chinese Despotism* (Paris: 1767), trans. Lewis A. Maverick in *China: A Model for Europe* (San Antonio: Paul Anderson Company, 1946), 272.

¹⁰⁵ Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent*, 92.

governed. “The nature of despotic government”, Montesquieu says, “is that one alone governs according to his wills and caprices... Just as there must be *virtue* in a republic and *honor* in a monarchy, there must be FEAR in a despotic government. Virtue is not at all necessary to it and honor would be dangerous... *fear* must beat down everyone’s courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition.”¹⁰⁶ A constant state of enforced fear is the primary characteristic of Montesquieu’s despotism, which for that reason cannot be enlightened. For the sinophiles on the other hand, many of whom were also politically and personally aligned against Montesquieu, China was proof, for the reasons articulated by Quesnay, that not only did enlightened despots exist, but government by a well-educated despot and his equally enlightened servants constituted the best form of government.

Montesquieu responded to this line of reasoning by arguing that China’s government was rooted in the predatory practices that he saw as one of the defining characteristics of despotism. To him, China’s despotism was a predatory despotism, like every other, not Quesnay’s enlightened despotism, which “compell(ed) exact observance of the laws and fundamental maxims of government... based upon natural law in such an irrefragable and so emphatic a manner that it deter(ed) the sovereign from doing evil and assure(d) him in his legitimate administration.”¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Montesquieu was well aware that many people disagreed with his assessment, to the point that he addresses the concern that persons might find China “an objection that may be made about all (he) has said” of government in the opening sentence of his primary discussion of the Middle

¹⁰⁶ Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Quesnay, “On Chinese Despotism”, 225.

Kingdom.¹⁰⁸

The key to understanding the structure of Chinese government and society, according to Montesquieu, lies in the climate of China. Rather than going into an explication of his theories about the deterministic effects of climate and geography on the make up of governments, *The Spirit of Laws* notes that the Chinese people, due in large part to the climate in which they dwell, reproduce at a high rate, resulting in a large and rapidly increasing population. So quickly do they reproduce that even “the cruelest tyranny cannot check the progress of propagation” there.¹⁰⁹ From there, Montesquieu notes that the primary food stock of China is rice, again thanks to the climate. Rice is subject to the vicissitudes of the weather more than most staple crops, according to the text.¹¹⁰ This fact about rice, together with China’s large, constantly increasing population makes Chinese society more sensitive than most to crop failures and famine, which triggered a rise in banditry and a breakdown of the social order.¹¹¹ Therefore, the government of China must constantly \ guard against crop failures, droughts, floods, and so forth; the Emperor of China “(does) not feel, as our princes do, that if he governs badly he will be less happy in the next life, less powerful and less rich in this one; he (knows) that if his government is not good, he will be stripped both of empire and life”, rather than simply losing power and opulence.¹¹²

Given this logical progression, Montesquieu argues that the despotism of China’s government bears the same ill nature as all other despotism. Any appearance of freedom

¹⁰⁸ Montesquieu, 126. Quesnay was, not coincidentally, one of Montesquieu’s main detractors, to the point that he dedicated a whole section his own *On Chinese Despotism* to rebutting certain of Montesquieu’s arguments.

¹⁰⁹ Montesquieu, 128.

¹¹⁰ Montesquieu, 128, 436.

¹¹¹ Montesquieu, 128.

¹¹² Montesquieu, 128.

from the fear characteristic of despotic government, such as the ability of the average Chinese peasant to subsist on his own produce, is false. The fact that the government does not strip as much wealth from its people as other despotic authority structures is not due to the enlightened education of the Emperor or the efficient bureaucracy of the mandarin, as Quesnay, Voltaire, and sinophiles in general argued. That every subject of the Chinese Emperor “at every moment... be able to work without fear of being frustrated for his pains” only reflects the government’s instinct for self-preservation.¹¹³ The government must ensure that every man is able to feed himself, or it will be overthrown. The Emperor guarantees the subsistence of his subjects, but must control their lives in order to do so, albeit towards a beneficial end. “This is what has produced the rules that are so much discussed”, he states in his refutation of the ostensibly virtuous basis for the structure of Chinese society: the Chinese people are well-treated slaves, but slaves nonetheless.”¹¹⁴ In an image that foreshadows the modern perception of Mao’s policy of the “iron rice bowl”, Montesquieu states that though the Chinese peasantry might have their subsistence guaranteed, this guarantee was proof of a despotic lack of freedom, not of an enlightened government.

Furthermore, the governing classes had no desire to advance their civilization; in the parlance of the time, they were not committed to “progress”. According to Montesquieu, the philosophical basis of Chinese civilization was nothing more than self-preservation. This was a far cry from Enlightenment ideas about reason being the basis for civilization and its constant advancement. Montesquieu’s rationale accounted for both the early scientific advances of the Chinese and their current stagnation. A

¹¹³ Montesquieu, 128.

¹¹⁴ Montesquieu, 128.

government and a society that were formed as Montesquieu suggested had no innate desire for scientific progress beyond that required for the well-being of those at the top. Western Europeans, by contrast, were starkly different. The faults that he found with them notwithstanding, Western European nations were anything but stagnant, as their recent and continuing scientific progress demonstrated, and so for Montesquieu were better off than China.

Turgot: Justifying European Superiority

Much like the author of *An Irregular Dissertation*, Montesquieu argued by taking his opponents' theses, in this case that the philosophical basis of China's government both accounted for and demonstrated the enlightened, paradigmatic nature of Chinese governance and society, and subverting them. He contended that the basis of China's government demonstrated the social iniquity and inferiority of the Chinese. Montesquieu illustrates how philosopher cemented European superiority. While he did this extremely effectively, as the fact that Quesnay and Voltaire, prominent sinophiles and respected figures in their own rights, both felt compelled to respond publicly to him demonstrates, Montesquieu was far from alone. Turgot, for instance, used a similar methodology when he relegated China to the status of a second-class society. Turgot, however, rather than focusing on the fact itself, that Europe was superior to China, instead sought to explain why this was so. What he created in this process is an example of the sort of intellectual framework Europeans used by the end of the Enlightenment to justify their new worldview. Tellingly, Turgot in his publications focused on science as the marker of "civilization". One can see in his works the convergence of intellectual ideas about science and European dynamism, like Montesquieu's, with the broader trends of

contemporary Europe described earlier.

Turgot was one of the most prominent proponents of a teleological conceptualization of history. He drew on the general emphasis during the Enlightenment on reason as a measure of civilization, and scientific development, in turn, as a measure of reason.¹¹⁵ In it, “Providence” was the guiding force behind history. This force regulated the interplay between “passion” and “reason”.¹¹⁶ Metaphorically speaking, passions were the smelting pot for societies, providing the raw material for the development of civilization and purging it of its initial impurities. By the same token, reason and rationality were the hammer and anvil, working the material into necessary structures. Without reason, nothing could be formed, but without passion, what was made would be riddled with impurities. Through passion and reason, Providence moved the world inexorably towards dominance by the West, or at least by Western European ideas of government, scientific development, and “modernity”. By the end of the Enlightenment, this understanding of history became the primary characteristic of the Western European worldview. It was “the basis of an occidentalism which left the rest of the world with the option of overcoming the past through modernization or perishing in the inevitable confrontation with occidental reason.”¹¹⁷ This conceptualization of the world was influential and arguably continues to underpin discussions of “developing nations” and “building democracy” in the world. This reformulation of history had immediate consequences on Europe’s relationship with China.

¹¹⁵ Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 33-70. See this for a succinct overview of 18th century philosophical conceptualizations of the nature of Nature.

¹¹⁶ Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, *A Philosophical Review of the Advances of the Human Mind*, trans. ed. Ronald L. Meek in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology, and Economics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973) and Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, *On Universal History*, trans. ed. Ronald L. Meek in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology, and Economics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹¹⁷ Lottes, 81.

The first and most readily evident effect of Turgot's viewpoint was to completely establish Western European preeminence. It asserted that Western Europe was increasingly powerful because it was destined to be so, whether by the Christian God, the deist "clockmaker", or an innate spirit of racial superiority, depending on one's views. The important part however, was that, after establishing Providence's divine designation, Turgot set out to explain just how it had designated Western European nations as superior to other societies. In doing this, he created a framework for understanding the varied statuses of every society in existence. This resolved one of the most difficult issues in the European-Chinese superiority debate, that of how to explain China's advanced status relative to every nation outside of Europe, even granting Europe's superiority over China.

Turgot's model was predicated on the idea that reason, when understood and applied properly, produced rational behavior on a societal level. Further, reflecting Europe's new understanding of the role of reason, rational behavior on a wide scale led to the advancement of society. To return to the earlier metaphor, reason hammered human social "material" into useful tools, such as just governments and scientific development. Hence the level of scientific development a society had achieved was a potent measure of how advanced that society was. Thus science, by the late Enlightenment, replaced earlier, more philosophical, abstract things as the measure of civilization.¹¹⁸ To this formulation Turgot added the idea that "the evolution of reason (was) guided by Providence."¹¹⁹ Reason alone was not enough to produce the scientific achievements that marked the progress of a civilization; according to Turgot, reason had to be guided by an

¹¹⁸ Lottess, 81-83.

¹¹⁹ Lottess, 82.

outside power.¹²⁰ From this line of thought, Turgot concluded that this outside power, which he termed “Providence” or “Nature”, “had singled out Europe to lead the way on the road to progress.”¹²¹

The corollary to this idea was that Providence acted by encouraging the development of reason and rational behavior *in the proper time and place*. Providence encouraged human “passion”, the opposite of reason according to Turgot, to induce behavior that, while irrational, was nonetheless beneficial, in order to pave the way for the dominance of reason and the development of science. In this view, although the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire to the barbarians was irrational, as property was destroyed, lives taken, and great classical treatises lost forever, it was still a positive event, as part of Providence’s divine plan.¹²² After all, Turgot says, the downfall of Rome was necessary for the rise of Christianity and the creation of modern Western society. This statement contrasts sharply with Voltaire’s earlier lament of the downfall of Rome, with all of its implications about China. To return to the theme of language taken up in *An Irregular Dissertation*, if a language stabilizes too early, it becomes forever marked by that “first imperfect stage.” Since “languages are the measure of men’s ideas”, an ancient language, unified long ago by reason and unaffected by passionate development, would permanently stunt the advancement of a society.¹²³

Rationality was king in Turgot’s worldview, but irrational, impassioned behavior could be rationally understood as a necessary precursor to reasonable governance.

Rational society could only exist after certain things had been accomplished by human

¹²⁰ Turgot, *A Philosophical Review*, 41-43.

¹²¹ Lottess, 82.

¹²² Lottess, 81.

¹²³ Turgot, *A Philosophical Review*, 48.

passions:

the passions have led to the multiplication of ideas, the extension of knowledge, and the perfection of the mind, in the absence of that reason whose day had not yet come and which would have been less powerful if its reign had arrived earlier.

Reason, which is justice itself, would not have taken away from anyone what belonged to him, would have banished wars and usurpations forever, and would have left men divided up into a host of nations separated from one another and speaking different languages. As a result the human race, limited in its ideas, incapable of that progress in all kinds of understanding, and in the sciences, arts, and government, which takes its rise from the collective genius of different regions, would have remained forever in a state of mediocrity.¹²⁴

This worldview explained not only the dominance of Europe, which came to conceive of itself as having entered the “Age of Reason” and “Enlightenment”, but also the differences in development between other non-European societies. Those societies that took hold of reason too strongly, too early, could not progress, as reason prevented or mitigated the kinds of upheaval necessary for progress. War and chaos, though unpleasant, were necessary components in the progress of civilization. Although the establishment of peaceful stability that would accompany the elimination of confrontation and struggle might seem desirable, any society that accomplished this feat too early faced dire consequences in this conception of the nature of humanity. Tellingly, Turgot singles out China as emblematic of this outcome:

Reason and justice, if they had been more attended to, would have immobilized everything, as has virtually happened in China. But what is never perfect ought never to be entirely immobilized¹²⁵

The explanation for the ready application of this view to China, outside of the significant

¹²⁴ Turgot, *On Universal History*, 70.

place that China occupied in European thought, was that the groundwork for this perception had already been laid. The Du Halde text's presentation of China in the sciences illustrates this foundation extremely well. Du Halde, and others like him, held China up as a model state to whose rationality Europeans ought to aspire. These sinophiles acknowledged China's relative lack of achievement in the sciences, but excused it because, as Du Halde put it, the Chinese clearly "follow... the natural light of reason", despite their scientific underdevelopment.¹²⁶

Turgot's conceptualization of reality turned this exculpation into a condemnation. For him, China's adherence to reason and rationality failed to excuse its lack of scientific development, it caused it. An over-abundance of reason before its due time made the Chinese "like those trees whose trunk has been lopped and whose branches grow close to the ground; they never escape mediocrity."¹²⁷

The worldview that Turgot articulated marked a reformulation of Europe's conception of itself, of the non-European world in general, and of China in particular. This reformation, after all, was in large part a response to increased European contact with China. It managed in one rhetorical swoop to nullify both the strongest argument made by the sinophiles against European superiority and render inapplicable their best case in support of the Chinese model.

Although articulated by specific individuals, here by Turgot but by others, notably the later "Scottish school", as well, this reformed reflected greater changes in Europe.¹²⁸ Europeans had long understood progress to be a quantifiable, concrete thing. The society

¹²⁵ Turgot, *On Universal History*, 70.

¹²⁶ Du Halde, Vol. 3, 77.

¹²⁷ Turgot, *On Universal History*, 111.

¹²⁸ For more information on the Scottish Historical School and the development of society as an

that had “progressed” the most, typically in terms of intellectual achievement, was the most civilized and therefore superior to all others. However, what precisely constituted “progress” or “intellectual achievement” was debatable. As has been noted, through the early Enlightenment many sinophiles relied upon the duration and the seemingly, to them, unbroken stability of China’s government and the prosperity of its society as proof of China’s superior intellectual achievement. “The duration, the extent, and the permanent prosperity of the Chinese empire” demonstrated beyond any doubt for Quesnay that the Chinese empire had progressed farther and better than any European state.¹²⁹ The fact that the Chinese for thousands of years had maintained a single form of government and a level of wealth and scientific development that Europeans had only recently acquired was all the proof that was necessary to evince China’s superiority over Europe.

Nonetheless, progress was measured quite differently by the later Enlightenment, when Europeans primarily saw the world like Turgot. What mattered was not how long ago a state had established its government or cultivated a relatively advanced level of intellectual and scientific development. To paraphrase Montesquieu, the freedom to progress was more important than the assurance of stability, and progress was intimately related to reason. Turgot took this logical one step further. His theoretical framework supposed that a superior society was one that had been guided by Providence into a true “age of reason”. Such a society demonstrated its preeminence by its current pace and level of scientific development; the present superseded the past. Progress in Turgot’s conception of the world was dynamic rather than static, all of which tied in with

unintentional by-product of human conflict, see Ronald Meek, *Economics and Ideology and Other Essays: Studies in the Development of Economic Thought* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1967)

Europeans' new understanding of the role of the sciences.

Thus Turgot agreed with Montesquieu and earlier European partisans. They believed that Western Europe was more civilized than China, more scientifically developed, and generally superior to it. Had he ended his argument there however, Europeans still would have lacked a means of conceptualizing Imperial China within a worldview congruent with their new understandings of science. The tendentious arguments about the nature of China among Western Europeans before the establishment of a scientifically based, progressive model of civilization reflected the difficulty of integrating China into a Eurocentric framework. Hence the relative ease of deconstructing Chinese superiority compared to the task of constructing European superiority. Logically, or better said *reasonably*, it seemed that while contemporary Western Europe might have been able to claim to be more civilized than the Middle Kingdom, by virtue of their moderately greater scientific development, it was difficult to assert the existence of an exceptionalist mandate in the face of several previous centuries of Chinese superiority in that respect.

The theories articulated by Turgot and those like him went beyond the basic assertion of European superiority and resolved the challenge that China, with its long history of scientific development, posed to Eurocentric worldviews. China's longstanding sociopolitical structure and early development of the sciences did not evince the superiority of their civilization. Nor did the histories and current states of China and Europe demonstrate some kind of baseline equality between the two; there was not a race between the two in which Europe had recently pulled ahead but China, given its long record of dominance, might again take the lead. The stability of the Chinese social model

¹²⁹ Lottes, 75.

and China's early scientific development were actually damning evidence of China's preordained inferiority, while contemporary Europe's higher level of scientific development, and the fact that that development was the product of mostly relatively recent advances, conclusively demonstrated European superiority.

Conclusion

What I set out to illustrate in this paper was the change in Western European attitudes towards Imperial China over the course of the eighteenth century. I believe that one of the primary drivers behind this shift was Europe's new understanding of the role that science and reason played in shaping societies, which developed over approximately the same time frame. In tandem with this new conception of the nature of science and progress, Europeans took apart both the image of a superior, enlightened China and the beliefs that had under-girded it, over the staunch objections of defenders of the old order. They replaced the former first, with an assertion of European dynamism and vitality, and the latter second, with a new intellectual framework that applied theoretical philosophies about the relationship between reason, science, and progress to the realities of European interactions with other nations on the world stage.

China was at the center of much of the sociopolitical and philosophical discourse that articulated and influenced Europe's shift in worldviews. This is because of the important place in European thought that the polity had occupied for nearly two centuries prior to the Enlightenment. Europeans could not dramatically modify their understanding of reality without an equally dramatic change occurring in their understanding of the nation on which many their earlier perceptions had centered. I have suggested a three-step process of deconstruction, construction, and integration that I think characterizes the stages of and elucidates the means behind this change in European attitudes towards China.

In writing this paper, I hoped to contribute something small to our collective

understanding of Western Europe's relationship with China. The logic behind my argument has been largely inductive, using a few cases to illustrate some specific characteristics of a larger trend, and so comes with all of the qualifications that accompany inductive reasoning. For instance, I do not mean to leave the impression that any one of the texts examined here represents precisely the attitudes of every contemporary European, or that by the end of the Enlightenment images of China conjured jingoism in the hearts of all Westerners. Nor do I intend to state that the European perception of China was changed solely due to Europeans' new perception of reality. I do, however, feel that the works that I have chosen to examine are representative of the general perceptions of their respective times, and that taken together they illustrate a progressive shift in the common Western European perception of China over the course of the Enlightenment.

I also think that the conclusions that this thesis suggests, namely that the shift in 18th century Europe's attitude towards China was deeply connected to Europe's coincident development of new attitudes towards science and that this shift can be understood as having occurred in the three phases outlined, pose further questions. The fact that China went from being considered a paradigm for development in many respects to a backward, despotic empire in a matter of decades suggests to me, as it has to many others, that the frequently pondered question of why China did not develop earlier into a modern country may be mistakenly assuming something about the natures of development and modernity.

The European debate about the nature of China during the Enlightenment suggests that the broad assumption that China never developed to modernity, though it

might not be totally false, is not wholly true either. Any debate about modernity or the development of a society is predicated on how one defines “development” and “modernity”. The Enlightenment European discourse about China evinces this. The main force behind the 18th century inversion of Europe’s conception of China was not a change in actual, physical conditions; China did not suddenly dissolve its government, nor did Europe see the widespread adoption of Chinese sociopolitical practices. What changed were the terms of the debate, the rubric by which Europeans measured development and modernity, more than the conditions themselves. Modernity in this sense is a constructed object, not one that stands outside the scope of historical context, a fact that anyone attempting to answer Needham’s famous question should remember.

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