

Revisiting the Sinophilia/Sinophobia Dichotomy in the European Enlightenment through Adam Smith's 'Duties of Government'

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Abstract

The Middle Kingdom, as a relatively unknown advanced civilisation, held a unique position in Enlightenment thought, as Europeans tried to understand a widening world and their own place in it. European views of China in the early modern period have been widely studied. While the predominant paradigm has been to analyse a shift from sinophilia to sinophobia, disagreements over the extent, nature and timing of this shift suggest that the rigid juxtaposition may not always be useful. In order to highlight the importance of the particular topic to the constructions of China in eighteenth-century European thought, this paper examines the way primary sources and scholars viewed one particular aspect of China: Its system of government. This paper will consider views of China related to Adam Smith's main duties of government (the art and science of war, the administration of justice and public institutions) and how these duties were to be paid for (the public revenue). Discussions of China's government married interest in the advanced civilisation of China with that characteristic Enlightenment project to define, explain and reflect on the meaning of civilisation and progress. A surprising degree of consensus is found, calling into question the conventional juxtaposition of sinophilia and sinophobia. Moreover, eighteenth-century European observers did not approach China with assumptions of superiority; on the contrary, there was a degree of civilisational relativism in their outlook, and at times China was seen as offering useful lessons. This approach also allows us to consider those questions with which Enlightenment thinkers did not turn towards China for answers, and ask the reasons for such omissions. China was dismissed as a useful model because it was deemed in many ways to be a unique case that could not be worked into the universal models that characterised the European Enlightenment.

Keywords

sinophilia, sinophobia, Enlightenment, China, Other, Adam Smith

Europeans of the Enlightenment — from missionaries and merchants to scholars and popularisers — demonstrated a keen interest in understanding the nature and workings of the Chinese Empire. The motivations for this interest varied and, accordingly, the ways in which knowledge of China was

constructed and used differed greatly. The Middle Kingdom, as a relatively unknown advanced civilisation, held a unique and important place in Enlightenment thought, as Europeans tried to make sense of a widening world and their own place in it.

The views that Europeans held of China in the early modern period have been widely studied (see, for instance, Pinot, 1932; Maverick, 1946; Guy, 1963; Lach, 1965, 1970; Lach and van Kley, 1993; Dawson, 1967; Mackeras, 1989; Mungello, 2005). The predominant paradigm has been to identify and analyse a shift from sinophilia (an excessive admiration of China) to sinophobia (the reprobation of China). This dichotomy is not only a construction of modern historians, but was also recognised at the time. The English translator of a popular eighteenth-century description of China noted (Grosier, 1788:iv):

... the learned seem to differ widely in their ideas respecting [the Chinese]. By some they have been extolled as the wisest and most enlightened of mankind; while others, perhaps equally, if not more remote from the truth, have exhibited them in the most contemptible point of view, and represented them as a despicable people, deceitful, ignorant, and superstitious, and destitute of every principle of human justice.

Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, have been assigned positions at the opposite sides of this spectrum, with the former labelled a sinophobe and the latter a sinophile. The primary sources of information about China have also been deemed representative of one of these two categories, with the Jesuit missionaries seen as sinophiles and various other sources of primary information, such as non-Jesuit missionaries, emissaries, merchants, and travellers, labelled sinophobes.

There is considerable disagreement on the shift from a predominantly sinophile movement in Europe to the rise of sinophobia during the latter part of the Enlightenment. The causes of the shift, its timing and, most crucially, the very conceptualisation of the dichotomy itself, have all been debated. Adolf Reichwien (1925) posits 1760 as the turning point, while John Hobson (2004) dates the shift to 1780, despite noting a number of inconsistencies. Blue (1999) points out the overlap of sinophilia and sinophobia, but notes the balance shifted from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Scholars have proposed various factors that contributed to this transformation in European attitudes towards China, including art history (Reichwien, 1925), societal variances in class and mobility (Waley-Cohen, 1999), the role of increasingly differentiated information (Guy, 1963), as well as economic

causes. This last category has been subject to particular attention. David Jones (2001), for example, describes the importance of European merchant frustration in China; Geoffrey Hudson (1965) emphasises changes in economic efficiency and military power between Europe and China; while Ho-Fung Hung (2003) describes a more general shift in the global economic balance that led to a decline in the estimation of China.

These disagreements suggest that the rigid juxtaposition of sinophilia and sinophobia may not always be useful. Posing such a sharp dichotomy can obfuscate significant instances of consensus in reports and writings on China and neglect elements in contemporary debate that do not fit comfortably in the sinophilia/sinophobia framework. One way of illuminating these elements of consensus and discord is to focus on a particular theme that was of interest to Europeans at the time. Rather than study views of China through the paradigm of admiration or disdain, it is possible to examine the complex relationship between the provision of primary information and the reordering of that information into models that sought to explain the world — a distinctly Enlightened project.

It is useful to examine European perceptions of China *prior* to the age of European imperial domination and to situate these earlier views within the context of European thinkers embracing evidence provided by encounters with the outside world in their efforts to construct better models for their own societies and civilisation. This shows that China was often assessed by Enlightenment thinkers in terms of its utility for developing models of civilisation. P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams' *The Great Map of Mankind* (1982:25) concludes that eighteenth-century Englishmen began their inquiries on Asia 'with comfortable assumptions of superiority.' While this would be a defining feature of later encounters, and while there was a widespread belief in Europe in the superiority of the Christian religion, when it came to the assessment of China's political economy, many European observers looked to the Middle Kingdom with open minds and a high level of civilisational relativism. Robert Markely (2003, 2006) and Ros Ballaster (2005) question the assumption of superiority on the part of early-modern Europeans before the rise of imperial designs on China. These literary historians also favour reviewing early modern views of China against insights gained from more recent scholarship in economic history on the nature, timing and extent of the so-called Great Divergence between China and Europe. If the shift towards the assumption of superiority in European perceptions of China is believed to have taken place in the mid-eighteenth century, it does not correspond to developments in global economic history that show that dominance of Europe relative to China did not occur until after 1800, or that modern

economic growth in Europe did not begin until the early nineteenth century (Pomeranz, 2000; Goldstone, 2002).

Studying the role that empirical evidence of the world had in Enlightenment thought, however, should not detract from the importance of agendas and biases in the construction of perceptions of 'the Other'. Of particular interest is whether these designs and prejudices resulted in epistemological tensions between reality and ideals for thinkers at the time (Rubiés, 1995:2). This is especially relevant to images of China in Europe because less was known about China than other parts of Asia, such as India, where there was easier communication and greater cultural interaction with a wider group of people. Historians have addressed this question in different ways. Christian Marouby's (2007) study of Adam Smith's use of ethnographic sources in developing his theories of economic progress finds his use of anthropology to be highly questionable and selective. Walter Davis (1983:523) argues that for most writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, particularly Frenchmen, 'praise of some distant Utopia remained merely an instrument of social criticism... without running afoul of the censors.' Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1976:11) supports this view by distinguishing the different and often contrasting approaches in Physiocratic writings. When they addressed economic issues, she argues, they would discuss France directly, but when considering political or social issues, they would often talk of universal models or a distant land such as China. Indeed, philosophers often used information gained from the rest of the world to support their preconceived models and theories, rather than actively evaluating the validity of such evidence and its implications for understanding other societies.

The primary sources, however, were not entirely driven by the desire to support their individual agendas; nor did philosophers only discuss China to avoid controversy in their criticisms of their own governments. Europeans interested in China often displayed a sincere desire to understand how aspects of China's political economy could be reconciled with — and even used to improve — their own theories on the fundamental questions of their time. This paper draws on the view of Joan Pau Rubiés (2005:113), who argues that Europeans 'were often genuinely concerned with understanding the East, for practical and intellectual reasons' and the 'intense interaction between direct observation and conceptual development is the key to the emergence of an early-modern discourse on non-Europeans.' China was, of course, at times, used as a mirror or a model for European self-evaluation; and the genuine interest in China's political economy did not always manifest itself in admiration. However, in many instances, it was seen to offer valuable lessons for a remodelling of European political and economic organ-

isation. At other times, China's history, geography and culture were considered such unique elements of its political economy, that they were deemed impossible to be translated into a European setting.

In order to highlight the civilisational relativism in the early modern approach to China, this paper examines the way that primary sources and scholars viewed one particular aspect of China: Its system of government. The argument is structured around Adam Smith's description of the duties of government in the *Wealth of Nations* (1981[1776]), to reflect on contemporary concerns and classifications. Smith's schema is useful as his analysis was driven by political economy, an area where the sinophilia/sinophobia dichotomy is particularly unclear. Further, Smith himself is not typically labelled as either a sinophile or sinophobe. This paper examines views on Smith's three main duties of government: the art and science of war, the administration of justice, and public institutions.¹ The fourth part considers views on how these duties of government were to be paid for, namely, the nature of public revenue. This paper reveals a surprising level of consensus that calls into question the conventional juxtaposition of sinophilia and sinophobia. These discussions of China's government served to unite interest in the advanced civilisation of China with the Enlightenment project to define, explain and reflect on the meaning of civilisation and progress. Eighteenth-century European observers and thinkers did not approach China with assumptions of superiority; on the contrary, at times China was seen as offering useful answers to key Enlightenment questions. This approach also allows us to consider those questions for which Enlightenment thinkers did not turn towards China for answers, and ask the reasons for such omissions. The key insight this analysis offers is that China was dismissed as a useful model because it was deemed in many ways to be a unique case that could not be worked into the universal models that characterised the European Enlightenment.

The Arts (and Science) of War

The first and most important duty of government, according to Smith and other eighteenth century philosophers, was maintaining security by means of a strong military. China's military offers a particularly interesting case because

¹ It was not just Adam Smith who found these categories useful and important. François Quesnay enumerated the constitutive laws of nations based on the natural rights of men: the laws of distributive justice, armies to assure the protection of the nation, and the establishment of public revenue to provide the funds for security, good order, and prosperity (Quesnay, 1946[1767]:265).

it was almost universally seen as the Achilles' heel of the Chinese system. From Jesuit sinophiles to sinophobe scholars, there was a broad consensus that in spite of its immense population, China was unable defend its borders. Although China's geographic features were believed to provide a unique degree of security from outside invasion, the devastating Manchu Conquest was seen by many European observers as a warning against the dangers of a complacent civilisation.

A frequent criticism by both sinophiles and sinophobes was that despite its clear advantages in terms of quantity, the Chinese military lacked quality. In a letter dated 1584, Matteo Ricci, the first Jesuit to reach Beijing, wrote to the Spanish factor at Macao: 'The Chinese, however, are but poor warriors, and the military is one of the four conditions which are considered mean among them... In short, they are only formidable from their numbers' (cited in Lach, 1965:802). While Ricci was perhaps seeking to reassure Europeans that China did not pose a military threat in order to protect his religious mission, his reports and those of later Jesuits provide detailed information supporting this claim.

First was evidence of their formidable numbers. European accounts — such as the sixteenth-century reports by the Augustinians Juan González de Mendoza (1588[1585]:68) and Martín de Rada (*cf.* Boxer, 1953:272) to the popular descriptions by the Jesuits Louis Le Comte (1697[1696]:285) and Jean Baptiste Du Halde (1736[1735]:II:75) from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — ranged in their estimates of China's infantry numbers from 700,000 to nearly six million.² Notwithstanding the variations and discrepancies of these figures, it is obvious that they dwarfed those of the European states. Though numbers fluctuated greatly over countries and between periods of wartime and peace, armies of 20,000 to 120,000 were the norm in European conflicts of the eighteenth century (Eltis, 1998:27).

Although China clearly outnumbered the European military forces, nearly all observers commented on the low quality of its military. Observers from different missionary orders, merchants, emissaries, and military men all agreed that China was not a formidable adversary for the large European states, noting that their horses were small, their culture unfit to shape good soldiers, and their technology inferior. By the mid-eighteenth century, it was widely recognised that the Chinese had mastered the use of artillery long

² The discrepancies with regards to the numbers in these sources are largely in relation to the varying aspects of China's military they are discussing (for instance, a standing army in comparison to the potential size of a conscripted army). These numbers also reflect dramatic changes in China's actual military structure over the early modern period.

before Europe — an observation that had been made much earlier by Mendoza (1588[1585]:99–100) — but most observers agreed that despite this advantage, China had failed to further develop this technology and thus had fallen far behind Europe. In fact, by the seventeenth century, the Chinese had to draw on European information for their more advanced weaponry. Both the Ming and Qing governments used the Jesuits Adam Schall von Bell and Ferdinand Verbiest to help them build European cannons. When Verbiest was attacked in Europe for bringing arms to China, he reportedly responded that, as the Pope's prohibition on providing arms to infidels was designed to prevent them from being used against Christians, this would not be a problem with the Chinese, 'since neither the Chinese, nor Tartars could make war against the Christians' (Du Halde, 1736[1735]:II:83). Again, like Ricci, Verbiest was defending his actions by assuring Europeans that China did not pose a military threat. However, from the numerous critiques it is also evident that these Jesuits were actually convinced of the inferiority of the Chinese military.

Another common critique of China's military capacities focused on the weakness of the Chinese character. Admiral George Anson and his chaplain, Richard Walter (1748:546), criticised the Chinese state for its defectiveness in ensuring the security of its people and described the 'defenceless state of the Chinese Empire' where 'by the cowardice of the inhabitants, it continues exposed not only to the attempts of any potent state, but to the ravages of every petty invader.' Interestingly, this famously sinophobe source is remarkably similar to the Jesuit accounts. Du Halde (1736[1735]:II:75), the noted Jesuit sinophile, concluded that the Chinese troops 'are not comparable to our troops in Europe either for courage or discipline...' He invoked the often-repeated view that the Chinese have an effeminate character, which he argued also infected the 'Tartar disposition' in the aftermath of the Manchu Conquest. Du Halde (1736[1735]:II:75) attributed this alleged character flaw directly to the Chinese high level of learning: 'The esteem that they have for learning preferable to everything else, the dependence that the soldiers have upon men of letters, the education that is given to youth... is not capable of giving men a warlike genius.' Le Comte (1697[1696]:309) had earlier made a similar point, arguing that while China's military 'should awe all Asia' on account of its numbers, its idleness and 'natural effeminacy' rendered it weak. The principles of honour and bravery present in Europe are lacking in the Chinese Empire, he continued, again attributing this to their high level of civilisation: 'The Chinese are always talking to their children of gravity, policy, law, and government; they always set books and letters in their view, but never a sword into their hands' (Le Comte, 1697[1696]:309).

The Jesuits attacked the weakness of the Chinese character by making a Rousseauian argument about the relationship between education and military weakness. Again, this reflects in part the Jesuit agenda of allaying European concerns and securing their position in the Middle Kingdom, but it also represents genuine criticism of the vulnerability of the Chinese Empire by the Jesuit sinophiles.

That the Chinese did not prioritise the military arts was deemed a consequence of the empire's unique geographical situation, as well as an instance of poor governing philosophy. Montesquieu (1777[1748]:308), who like Giovanni Botero, was an early proponent of the role of geography in shaping states, described the purpose of the Chinese state to be 'the peace and tranquillity of the empire.' The primary sources of information on China emphasised the importance of China's natural protections in maintaining the tranquillity of the Empire. Du Halde (1736[1735]:II:76) described how 'Nature has taken care to fortify China in all other places where it might have been liable to be attacked.' Apart from the Great Wall, China was protected, to a degree, by the sea and mountains, which contributed to the protection as well as isolation of the Chinese Empire. This was the argument taken up by Jean François Melon in the eighteenth century (*cf.* Maverick, 1946:34), who believed the peaceful history of the Chinese was an accident of their location.

Although China's geography made its security unique, Europeans proposed that there was still a major lesson to be drawn from its history, a lesson all the more important for being so counter-intuitive: Peace and tranquillity can render governments vulnerable. The goal of public tranquillity was seen not solely as an accident of geography, but also recognised as an ancient prescript of Chinese philosophy. Mendoza (1588[1585]:69) described a Chinese law 'that they cannot make anie wars out of their owne countrie.' By the sixteenth century, the Jesuits Nicolas Trigault and Matteo Ricci (1953[1615]:55) agreed with this assessment in suggesting that while the Chinese could easily conquer their neighbours, 'neither the King, nor his people ever think of waging a war of aggression. They are quite content with what they have and are not ambitious of conquest. In this respect they are much different from the people of Europe, who are frequently discontent with their own governments and covetous of what others enjoy.' The ineffectiveness of the Chinese military was not always seen in a negative light and many seventeenth-century European observers respected China's policy of restricting international relations. The expansion of European interests overseas, concurrent with internal wars, revolutions and diseases, reminded many early-modern observers of the lessons from the decline of the Roman

empire, and concerns about imperial overreach led many to admire China's self-restraint.

A minority of European philosophers maintained this view into the mid-Enlightenment. Abbé (Guillaume Thomas François) Raynal and Denis Diderot (1783[1780]:I:174) agreed that because the Chinese Empire was based on 'reason and reflection,' it had 'no room for that enthusiasm, which constitutes the hero and the warrior.'³ Raynal and Diderot differed from the majority of their contemporaries by not regarding this as a problem. After a description of the weaknesses of China's military, they conclude: 'When a nation has found the art of subduing its conquerors by its manners, it has no occasion to overcome its enemies by force of arms' (1783[1780]:I:174). On this point, they were following several Jesuit sources that drew attention to the sinicisation of the Manchu invaders. This was possible because of the formidable numbers of the ethnically Han Chinese relative to conquerors. François Quesnay (1746[1767]:301), a notable sinophile, also downplayed China's lack of military strength by arguing that war should be rare 'since a good government excludes all senseless pretexts for war, for the sake of commerce and other poorly understood or captious pretensions under which one conceals himself to violate the law of nations to the ruin of the authors of these pretensions and of everyone else.' However, while war might have been rare in Chinese history, it was not unheard of. Challenging Quesnay's theory of good governments and war was the dramatic violence that unfolded in China during the seventeenth century, which made the vulnerabilities of the empire apparent.

The Manchu Conquest that created the Qing Dynasty in 1644 was one of the most formative events in early modern European views of China. The triumph of 'barbarians' over a 'civilised' empire was seen by nearly all European observers as an embarrassing failure and evidence of China's fundamental weakness. The Jesuits offered a more nuanced understanding of the conquest, painting a picture of internal decay rather than mere military inferiority, that to them was a direct expression of weaknesses in the Chinese system of government. While the Jesuits described the minutiae of internal decay that led to this event, philosophers in Europe were more interested in the broader implications of dynastic change. To Rousseau (1753[1750]:135), this revolution provided fodder for his argument about the ill consequences of too much civilisation. In his 1750 essay on the question 'Has the restoration of

³ For a discussion of the relative contributions of Raynal and Diderot to the *Histoire des deux Indes*, see Peter Jimack (2006:9), who argues Raynal wrote this section, and Sankar Muthu (2003:82) believes Diderot did.

the arts and sciences had a purifying effect upon morals?', Rousseau turned to China as a present-day example to support his argument. Of the Chinese, he asked, 'what use were their men of science and literature' against the barbarous Tartars? China's pursuits and aims were deemed useless in the face of the purest test of a nation — whether it can defend itself. Here, China became the Athens to Rousseau's idealised Sparta.

While Rousseau blamed arts and science for military weakness, Adam Smith saw it as the effects of commerce. In *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, he made a general argument about the 'universal experience' of minds being enervated by 'cultivating arts and commerce' (Smith, 1982[1776]:541). This he posed as an explanation for events as diverse as the Scots taking possession of parts of England in 1745, European penetration of India, and the Manchu's defeat of China. These instances he cited as the 'disadvantages of a commercial spirit.' Smith connected the weakness of the Chinese military to its high level of material advancement. In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith (1981[1776]:698) described how a rich state is more likely to be attacked, and 'unless the state takes some new measures for the public defence, the natural habits of the people render them altogether incapable of defending themselves.' The government must either mandate regular military drills for its populace or establish a standing army in order to effectively defend itself. China's failures on this front and the lessons they offered were nearly unanimously recognised.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the French Jesuit Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot had translated Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, adding a great deal to the European understanding of China's military (Waley-Cohen, 1993). However, these developments were not sufficient to overturn the predominant view of China's military weakness, which became even more pronounced in the early nineteenth century. Although interpretations (geographic, cultural and socio-economic) varied, both sinophiles and sinophobes were in agreement about China's military deficiency. For those who travelled to China and had an interest in Europe's continued, peaceful relationship with it, it was useful to show China as unthreatening. To Enlightenment philosophers, it became an example from which to analyse the implications of state priorities and the potential trade-offs between various government agendas. The focus on quality over quantity became pivotal to dismissing the potential of the Chinese Empire and the accomplishments of its government.

Administration of Justice

The second duty of the sovereign, according to Smith (1981[1776]:708), was to protect members of society by establishing 'an exact administration of jus-

tice.’ Interest in this theme can be divided into two areas. The first area centred on protecting the integrity of the justice system and reducing corruption in government. China’s system of government, based on an ancient philosophy, offered a wealth of information on this topic. There was a great deal of agreement between sinophiles and sinophobes on the Chinese model of regulation and the protections provided by the Chinese system of governance. The second area of interest was the relationship between security of property and civil society. Less information was available on Chinese property rights, likely because of the differences in the Chinese system (seen as dominated by agricultural concerns) and because of incommensurabilities in the conceptualisation of property rights. When Enlightenment philosophers did address Chinese property rights it was in the context of having agriculture as the basis of society and the level of debate reflected Europe’s broader engagement with the Chinese model of political economy.

On the topics of corruption and the integrity of the justice system, China was seen in a relatively positive light, even by the most inveterate sinophobes. It was regarded as a model of just regulation, at least in its theoretical form. The extent to which the theoretical constructs of regulation were obeyed in practice was not something primary sources overestimated. Both sinophile Jesuits and sinophobes noted corruption in the Chinese government, but most observers agreed that China had admirable rules in place. The Jesuits described China’s ten principle maxims of good policy as a basis for good governance (Le Comte, 1697[1696]:284–295). China’s meritocratic examination system was widely discussed by Enlightenment authors, as were more specific practices. For instance, it was apparent to observers that Chinese people were accustomed to making use of the legal system to protect their rights. They based this argument on the fourth maxim of Chinese governance, which referred to the meritocratic basis of Chinese society and is extended to the judicial system. This maxim was designed to prevent judges from buying their offices by providing them with a flat salary.

China’s principles of good policy were widely repeated and seen to reflect the balance of the Chinese government. Even the noted sinophobe Montesquieu (1777[1748]:105), who labelled China despotic, argued that in the area of justice, China was more like a republic or monarchy. Montesquieu (1777[1748]:163) also argued ‘particular and perhaps unique circumstances may make it so that the Chinese government is not as corrupt as it should be.’ Amongst these unique circumstances was the size of China’s population, which implied the threat of revolt against a corrupt government. Beyond these unique characteristics, various policies and practices were often praised and thought to be replicable in the European context, thus offering lessons for Enlightenment models.

With respect to the security of property rights, there was comparatively less discussion and information, which reflects fundamental conceptual differences between China and Europe. During the Enlightenment, the connection between government and property was of great significance. From Hugo Grotius to Thomas Hobbes, Samuel Pufendorf to John Locke, the theory of property was extensively discussed, vigorously contested, and gradually refined in early modern Europe. China has long been seen as having had problematic property rights. Following Karl Wittfogel's argument in *Oriental Despotism* (1957), Douglass North (1995) and David Landes (1998) have argued that early modern China was despotic and offered no protection for property rights. More recent scholarship, such as that by Anne Osborne (2004), argues that changes occurring from the mid-seventeenth century (particularly during the Manchu Conquest) and throughout the eighteenth century 'made the determination of rights to property an urgent matter' in China. However, despite this urgency, 'no land law of the sort that we find in Europe ever developed' (Osborne, 2004:120), nor did any argument similar to Locke's articulation of private property and liberty arise. But a point repeatedly made by scholars like Osborne is that although a rights-based discourse did not emerge in China, this does not indicate a complete absence of rights.

Surprisingly, despite European interest in this topic, there is little discussion of Chinese property rights in the eighteenth century European sources. The limited discussion of China's legal system that is presented relates primarily to the checks and balances of government. The discussions about Chinese law in relation to property or commerce in European discourses remains vague, such as Le Comte's (1697[1696]:248) discussion of the power of the Emperor, which merely notes that 'every one be perfect master of his estate, and enjoys his lands free from disturbance and molestation.' One possible reason for this paucity of information is the unique history of the Chinese Empire and particularly its lack of feudal roots. Perhaps the deficit of European debate about Chinese law resulted from the impression that the Middle Kingdom was, once again, too different to be relevant to European theories of property rights. Europe was in the process of moving quickly from a land-based to a money-based economy and the Chinese model could offer little insight to property rights in such a world. Contrary to the nations of early-modern Europe, which encouraged manufacturing and foreign trade, Smith (1981[1776]:679) claimed 'the policy of China favours agriculture more than all other employments.' Furthermore, the lack of a rights-based discourse in China may have meant that there was little for European observers to discuss with regard to Chinese practices. The Jesuits had access to Confucian insights on governmental practice, but there was not the same level or style of

discourse on property rights in the Confucian works as was present in Europe.

Much of the discussion of China's property rights that did take place centred on the desirability of the Chinese agricultural system. One group of scholars, the sinophilic Physiocrats, believed that Chinese property rights with their prioritisation of agriculture could and should be replicated in Europe. In contrast to many other philosophers, notably Montesquieu and Rousseau, the Physiocrats argued that property was the basis of freedom and stemmed from natural law. To this group of philosophers, China represented the epitome of a system where politics, civil government, and religion were all dictated by natural law. Relying extensively on Pierre Poivre, a French missionary and merchant-traveller (*cf.* Maverick, 1946:44), Quesnay's *Despotisme de la Chine* extolled the security of property in the Chinese Empire. In explaining why a Chinese peasant is content with his rice and tea in the evening after toiling in the fields all day, Quesnay (1946[1767]:170) pointed to the fact that the peasant 'has his liberty and property assured; there is no chance of his being despoiled by arbitrary impositions... Men are very hard-working, wherever they are assured the benefits of their labor.' Elsewhere he added, 'The ownership of wealth is quite secure in China' and the right of property 'is extended even to slaves or bonded domestics' (1946[1767]:230). To Quesnay (1946[1767]:204), these observations testified to 'the extent of the right of inheritance and the security of the right of property in this empire.' Quesnay's agenda called for an overhaul of the European way of thinking and a move toward prioritisation of a land-based economy over commerce or manufacturing.

In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith (1981[1776]:663) addressed Physiocratic arguments by contrasting agricultural systems to mercantile or commercial systems. Interestingly, like Quesnay, Smith also relied on Poivre (1769[1768]:161) for his discussion of Chinese property rights, which he directly connected to its agricultural system. According to Poivre (1769[1768]:162), those who buy a field or receive it by inheritance become the 'lord and master' of that land — a clear attack on feudalism. Poivre concluded his book (1769[1768]:170–171) by imploring the kings of Europe to follow the example of China, where '[t]he lands are as free as the people; [there are] no feudal services, and no fines of alienation;...' Smith (1981[1776]:680) followed Poivre in arguing that '[i]n China, the great ambition of every man is to get possession of some little bit of land, either in property or in lease; and leases are there said to be granted upon very moderate terms, and to be sufficiently secured to the lessees.' Smith believed that the precedence of agriculture explained China's stationary status: 'Upon their

present plan they have little opportunity of improving themselves by the example of any other nation; except that of the Japanese' (1981[1776]:681). Thus, Smith is in agreement with the Physiocrats on the description of the Chinese system but not on the implications of the model. The fact that there was debate and discussion reflects the openness of the European approach to evidence from the Chinese system, especially relative to the assumptions of superiority that would come to characterise debate in the nineteenth century.

On the theme of justice, European observers, including the critical commentators such as Montesquieu, largely agreed that China had good maxims of government and effective protections against corruption. The theme of property rights presented a more difficult challenge for European engagement with the Middle Kingdom. The paucity of discussion about Chinese property rights is the likely result of the dramatic differences between Europe and China in terms of the conceptualisation of property rights and the context in which they were understood and enforced. The largely agricultural basis of the Chinese economy was admired by the Physiocrats but dismissed as hindering by Smith. As such, Chinese property rights were not discussed and evaluated in their own right, but rather as part of a larger debate around the viability of alternative models of political economy.

Public Institutions

The third expense and duty of the sovereign, according to Smith (1981[1776]:723), was 'that of erecting and maintaining those public institutions and those public works' that are advantageous to society but do not offer enough profit to induce private agents. Smith divided this duty into two main parts: the first involved facilitating and promoting commerce; and the second was education (which will not be addressed here). Most Enlightenment observers agreed that China had a well-developed public infrastructure, particularly with regard to its canal system. Smith directly referenced China in his discussion of this topic in the *Wealth of Nations* but again deemed it to be a unique case because of its land-based economy from which Europe could not use any lessons.

Drawing on Jesuit sources, Smith noted the importance of public works, such as canals and highways in China. Though he stated that this was the case in several governments of Asia, it was seen to be particularly so in China. Smith drew largely from the primary sources, which highlighted the importance of fulfilling administrative duties in executing public works in China. Le Comte (1697[1696]:307) reported the emphasis on infrastructure maintenance, noting that for governors ensuring the quality of the roads 'concerns

their fortunes and sometimes their life.’ Most sources described the public works provided by the government, particularly the magnificence of the Grand Canal. Smith (1981[1776]:729) cast doubt on the veracity of the information provided by ‘weak and wondering travelers’ and ‘stupid and lying missionaries,’ but nevertheless felt it necessary to offer an explanation for the information they provided about China’s infrastructure.

Smith’s explanation for the importance of public infrastructure in China reflects his assessment of varying paths of development, for he again emphasised the unique nature of China’s political economy. Describing why the Chinese government had the incentive to invest in public works, Smith connected the nature of its agricultural system first to taxation and subsequently to public works. It is natural for Chinese emperors to support agriculture, he argued, as their yearly revenue depends on it. Because the government revenue is collected from the land, the executive has the incentive to maintain the high roads and navigable canals in order to facilitate the marketing of produce. Smith (1981[1776]:730) contrasted this interpretation to Europe where sovereigns might draw the greater part of their revenue from the produce of the land, but the dependency on the land is ‘neither so immediate, nor so evident.’ For this reason, European sovereigns have less interest in investing into roads and canals to facilitate the marketing of produce. This argument again shows how Smith dismissed aspects of the Chinese state by deeming them non-replicable in a European context because these qualities stemmed from China’s unique characteristics. Smith’s argument should, therefore, not be seen simply as an evaluation of the Chinese state. Enlightenment scholars viewed the government’s provision of infrastructure in China as very successful. However, their discourse did not suggest the replication of similar models in Europe, as they were seen as contingent on China’s unique land-based economy.

Public Revenue

Adam Smith (1981[1776]:817) carefully considered where the funds for the main expenses of government should be derived from, which is the subject of his chapter on the ‘sources of the general or public revenue of the society.’ This topic was of the utmost importance, for without sufficient revenues and their proper management, the aforementioned duties of government could not be fulfilled. There was general agreement between Europeans who visited China and Enlightenment thinkers as to the efficiency of the Chinese fiscal system. The high level of revenue the state collected, combined with low rates of taxation for individuals and the consistency and efficiency with which

taxes were collected, earned almost unanimous praise from European writers. Once again, however, China's large population and agricultural base were portrayed as unique and inimitable. Only one group of scholars — the Physiocrats — thought this system was replicable in a European context.

Before the rise of Malthusian concerns, population size was generally correlated to wealth. This was because it demonstrated the ability of the country to feed a large number of people, thereby attesting to its successful agricultural system, but also because it meant that the government could collect revenue from a larger tax base. Specific information on the size of China's population began to reach Europe in the sixteenth century through Mendoza's (1588[1585]:60) history that claimed there were just under 40 million taxpayers in the empire. Soon after, Botero (1608[1591]:297) acknowledged the lack of certainty about China's population before estimating it at around 70 million. Botero (1608[1591]:297) directly compared China to Italy (with its population of nine million), Germany (with the Swiss Confederacy and Dutch Republic totalling 15 million) and England (with its much smaller population of three million), demonstrating the remarkable size of the Chinese Empire. Throughout the seventeenth century, Jesuits and emissaries reported on the number of China's taxpaying men within the range of 55–59 million (Lach and van Kley, 1994:1573). In spite of the disagreements about the specific number of inhabitants of the empire, there was broad acceptance of the fact that China was an extremely populous empire. To infer fiscal wealth from population size was a common leap at the time. Once again, the primary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries report varying figures. Botero (1608[1591]:301) claimed that China's tax revenue equalled 'an hundred and twenty millions of gold, which value, although it may seeme impossible to him that shall make an estimate of the states of Europe with the kingdom of China.' About a century later, Le Comte (1697[1696]:249) provided more information by pointing out the difficulty in calculating the revenue of the empire since it was collected partially in specie and partially in goods.

It was not just the scale of China's tax revenue that was discussed, but also particular policies of taxation, collection and institutions that determined spending. Descriptions from primary sources about spending government revenue contradicted the notion that an absolute despot controlled China. Botero (1608[1591]:301) posed the question: 'Wherefore since this Empire is so huge, and all the profits thereof are in [the emperor's] hands, how can the former assertion of so great a yearly revenue, to men of reason seem any thing admirable at all?' Botero then answered his own question by arguing that the Chinese system should be admired for several reasons. Firstly, taxes are paid

not only in coin, but also in kind (rice, corn, silk, etc.), which can then be redistributed to those in need. Secondly, the emperor distributes ‘three parts’ of his total revenue: ‘people receive againe by those expences as much as they laid out in the beginning of the years’ (Botero, 1608[1591]:301–302). These reports were confirmed by seventeenth- and eighteenth- century accounts (Trigault and Ricci, 1953[1615]:47; Le Comte, 1697[1696]:258; Poivre, 1769[1768]:164–165) which described the Chinese system of public treasuries and rice warehouses that ensure the revenue is spent in the best interest of the empire, and not just the emperor. This accountability was seen as conducive to tax collection. This was supported by the existence of the *Peking Gazette* (*Jingbao*), a daily paper published in the capital that reported on the expenses of the Chinese government and described major public works. China’s taxes were also said to be easy to collect because of the efficient survey of lands and census of families, as well as the efficiency of the officials in charge of tax collection (Le Comte, 1697[1696]:308). Poivre (1769[1768]:164) highlights this point when he writes that the Chinese pay taxes ‘not to avaricious farmers-generals, but to honest magistrates, their proper and natural governors.’

The appeal of the Chinese system stemmed from the dramatically contrasting situation in France and England. After the Glorious Revolution in 1688, the English government’s options for raising money were limited to levying taxes and raising voluntary loans (selling state or crown lands, or offices were no longer feasible solutions). John Brewer (1995:89) claims the average annual tax revenue during the Nine Years’ War (1688–1697) was 3.64 million pounds sterling (double the state’s tax income before the Glorious Revolution). By 1775 the total net tax income was over 12 million pounds sterling per annum, and reached just less than 20 million pounds sterling by the end of the eighteenth century (Brewer, 1995:89). These figures reflect England’s comparatively low revenue. Further, tax collection during the end of the Restoration in England ‘lacked administrative coherence’ (Brewer, 1995:91). By the time of the Glorious Revolution, some reforms began to bring this system into greater order, such as the shift from tax farming to direct collection. French philosophers-cum-administrators showed a great deal of interest in the Chinese tax system for their own reasons. At the time, the French monarchy determined tax rates on a local basis all over the country, creating a fragmented taxation system. The *taille*, a direct tax, was not paid by many nobles and varied greatly across regions. The French state was inefficiently extracting more revenues from its populace as its national debt continued to rise (Hoffman and Norberg, 1994).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans depicted Chinese tax policy as a simple land-tax model that imposed a payment of

between one-tenth and one-thirtieth of the value produced by a piece of land. In 1707, frustrated by the inefficiency and complications of the French taxation system, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban proposed a simplified royal tithe. He advocated a proportional, universal tax of between one-tenth and one-twentieth. He argued that such a system would be less liable to corruption and would incur lower collection costs. He also recommended an annual census for France; to achieve this, he suggested dividing 'all the people into decuries, as the Chinese do' (1710[1707]:159). Although dismissed by French officials at the time, Vauban's taxation policy became very influential with later Physiocrats. Quesnay remarked that Vauban's argument for a principle tax of one-tenth of the agricultural harvest and industrial production was very similar to the practice in China. He described how in China, no plot of land is exempt from the tax, and if a tax is extracted from farmers, the cost of farming is subtracted. However Quesnay did find some fault with Chinese practice. In a section entitled 'Taxes other than on land', he discussed the 'irregular taxes' (Quesnay, 1946[1767]:260) in China, by which he meant customs duties, tolls and the poll tax. He wrote that if these 'allegations have foundation' then 'the state is not sufficiently enlightened as to its true interests; for in an empire, the wealth of which springs from the soil, such impositions are destructive to taxation itself and to the revenues of the nation' (Quesnay, 1946[1767]:260). Although Quesnay saw in these irregular taxes the 'seed of a devastation', he did not believe that they would destroy the empire because they were moderate and fixed. While Quesnay did not think the Chinese system was perfect in practice, reflecting his intellectual engagement with information on China, he argued that it was the closest equivalent to the model that he advocated in actual existence.

Adam Smith (1981[1776]:683) was well informed of the primary sources and largely agreed with their assessment, with the notable difference of stressing the singularity of the Chinese Empire. He explained how the sovereigns of China, as well as those from ancient Egypt and the kingdoms of India, have 'always derived the whole, or by far the most considerable part, of their revenue from some sort of land-tax or land-rent.' He described the one-tenth tax in China and also noted that in some parts of the empire it is only one-thirtieth (Smith, 1981[1776]:838). Smith compared this to tax rates elsewhere, demonstrating the low tax burden on Chinese peasants. However, while Smith believed this system worked well in China, he cautioned that payment in kind rather than in money is more liable to manipulation and fraud. He warned that '[t]he Mandarins and other tax-gatherers will, no doubt, find their advantage in continuing the practice of a payment which is so much more liable to abuse than any payment in money' (Smith,

1981[1776]:839). This again points to the differences between China and Europe, especially in regard to Europe's overwhelmingly money-based economies.

The Chinese organisation of revenue collection and spending was widely appreciated in eighteenth-century Europe. The high level of revenue, the low rate of taxation and the consistency, efficiency and theory of the policy were also generally admired. While most scholars recognised the uniqueness of the Chinese case on account of its large population and agricultural base, some, particularly the Physiocrats, did believe that elements of this system were replicable in Europe. Adam Smith, however, articulated the fundamental differences of the Chinese tax system, based on an agricultural economy that collected a portion of its taxes in kind, in comparison to Europe's increasingly money-based political economies.

Conclusion

Both excessive admiration and criticism of China, the cornerstones of the widely employed sinophobia/sinophilia dichotomy, were present in the Enlightenment context. However, this paper has shown that studying views of China across one particular theme — the purported duties of government — provides a different perspective. It reveals China was often seen as a unique case that at times offered important lessons to European models of civilisation, and at other times, simply could not fit into them.

Moreover, this discussion has emphasised the need to situate such views within their appropriate historical and intellectual contexts, revealing the inapplicability of the Saidian model in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment observers of the Middle Kingdom displayed a genuine interest in how aspects of the China example could be reconciled with — and even improve — their own theories and models on the fundamental questions of their time, such as those on the proper role of government. While in a number of instances China's system of government was seen to hold valuable lessons for an envisioned remodelling of European political organisation, this paper has also identified differing strands of argument that stressed China's uniqueness. In their view, China's history, geography and population were so different that elements of Chinese governance could not be translated into a European setting. In other discourses the Chinese model was excluded from the discussion altogether, despite the availability of potentially useful primary information. Indeed these moments of partial neglect reveal as much about Enlightenment views of China as its explicit discussion does. A striking and

surprising observation is that in a number of areas, there was a remarkable degree of consensus among those conventionally divided into the sinophile and sinophobe groups. Most fundamentally, this study demonstrates that the majority of observers during the Enlightenment approached China without the assumptions of superiority that would be a defining feature of subsequent encounters between Europe and the Middle Kingdom.

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