observes, "the Ottomans lost their image as formidable and eventually ceased to provoke curiosity in the European public."[98] The ongoing expansion of Europe's horizons also contributed to this shift, as other peoples and cultures began to exert a more powerful pull on Europe's collective imagination. Robert Irwin writes that "the short-lived craze for Arabic was succeeded by an equally transient fashion for Chinese studies and Chinoiserie... A literary cult of the Chinese sage developed, English landowners had their gardens landscaped in the Chinese manner, French *philosophes* brooded on the supposed merits of Chinese imperial despotism, and the German philosopher Leibniz studied the *I Ching*."[99] We will now turn to examine the Enlightenment's encounter with Confucian Chinese civilization and the uses to which it was put in the political and philosophic debates of the age.

2

The Wisdom of the East: Enlightenment Perspectives on China

Unlike the Islamic Near East, which had been known to the West for centuries, China constituted a "new world" for early modern Europe, which had been only dimly aware of its existence before the sixteenth-century voyages of exploration. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China came to be admired by many Westerners in a way that the Islamic world never was. Respected for its great antiquity, the stability of its institutions and customs, and the urbane wisdom and tolerance of its ruling elite, China was embraced as a model of "enlightened despotism," which some *philosophes* saw as the solution to the chronic instability and conflict of their own societies, and the Chinese mandarin became one of the favored stock characters for Enlightenment authors seeking to criticize the European status quo. For Enlightenment Sinophiles, China represented a rationalist utopia, a place where meticulous organization and the refinement of manners ensured a harmonious and prosperous society.

Much like Western representations of the Islamic Orient, Enlightenment discourse on China had far more to do with France itself than with the Middle Kingdom. Michael Keevak has written that "the vogue for Chinese things was based on a distinct *lack* of knowledge about the empire... This was a *rêve chinoise*, not a modern ethnography, and Western ideas about China remained thoroughly Eurocentric fantasies filtered through long-standing prejudices and stereotypes about the fabled Middle Kingdom."[1] China was not exactly a blank screen on which European observers could project whatever they wanted—the ethnographic information provided by the Jesuits and other observers was too extensive and too specific for that—but it did serve as a sort of Rorschach test in which those Europeans who contemplated it (Jesuits, Deists, philosophers, and

political economists) could see what they wanted to see. Whatever the specific image of China a particular Western observer came away with, the very fact of China's existence, and the great antiquity and refinement of its civilization, posed a challenge to Europe's sense of its identity and place in the world. Imperial China would prove both seductive and disconcerting to early modern European observers, forcing them to balance the merits of competing forms of civilized society as they theorized new concepts of natural law, the diversity of customs, and the course of human progress.

The Chinese Model

French Enlightenment Sinophiles, of whom Voltaire was the most prominent example, praised the Middle Kingdom as a model of an enlightened and well-ordered society, which they contrasted with the tumultuous, irrational state of France from medieval feudalism to the sixteenth-century wars of religion. In the *Essai sur les moeurs,* Voltaire praised imperial China as a model for a rationally administered and highly cultivated society, writing that "in general, the spirit of order and moderation, the taste for science, the cultivation of all the arts useful for life, a prodigious number of inventions that make these arts easier, composed the wisdom of the Chinese."[2] He further remarked that "the human spirit can certainly not imagine a better government than that where everything is decided by great tribunals, subordinated one to the other, whose members are only selected after several severe examinations...If there was ever a state in which life, honor, and property were protected by the laws, it is the empire of China."[3]

Given the consistent hostility of Voltaire and other Enlightenment authors toward the Jesuit order, it is richly ironic that the Enlightenment's celebration of China as an enlightened despotism governed according to natural law by a wise elite of mandarin scholar-administrators was borrowed lock, stock, and barrel from the Jesuit relations of the late seventeenth century. The Jesuit mission to Asia began with the travels of St. Francis Xavier in the sixteenth century and the subsequent establishment of a Jesuit mission at Peking under the direction of Matteo Ricci, who set the tone for subsequent efforts at winning over the mandarin elite by learning the Chinese language and adopting Chinese dress and customs. The Jesuit foothold in China was threatened on several occasions in the early seventeenth century, first by a wave of persecutions aimed at preventing religious proselytization, and subsequently by the invasions from the

north that led to the overthrow of the Ming dynasty and its replacement by the Qing in 1644. Thereafter, however, the Jesuits enjoyed a long period of protection and favor at the imperial court under the protection of the Kangxi emperor, who valued their knowledge of science and technology.[4]

One of the first Jesuit histories of China, written by the Portuguese missionary Alvarez Semedo, established the image of China as a well-ordered society governed by a learned elite of mandarin scholar-bureaucrats. Semedo praised the wisdom and virtue of Hun Vu, the fourteenth-century founder of the Ming dynasty, who humbled the great warlords, excluded members of his own family from holding office, and entrusted the government to the mandarins. Semedo wrote that this wise ruler "placed the whole government in the Literati, who are created such by way of concurrence...without any dependence at all on the Magistrates, or the King himself, but only by the merit of their learning, good parts, and virtues. He did not annul those ancient laws which concerned good government." Semedo described the virtue of the emperors, who sought to lead by moral example, and reflected, "Who seeth not how much reason we have to envy these heathens, who, although they are exceeded by us in the knowledge of things belonging to faith, do yet oftentimes surpass us in the practice of moral virtues?"[5]

Most Enlightenment-era French readers encountered the Jesuit construction of China through Jean-Baptiste du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise,* published in 1735 in four massive tomes.[6] Though du Halde himself never visited China, he drew extensively from the travel narratives and treatises of his fellow Jesuits and corresponded with many of the long-serving missionaries at the court of Peking, and his highly positive account served to crystallize a number of themes that would be echoed repeatedly by Enlightenment Sinophiles. Du Halde stressed the rationality and benevolence of imperial governance, writing that wise paternalism and filial piety were the bonds that united the emperor to his subjects as members of an extended and interdependent family. He praised the bureaucratic system of administration through a corps of mandarins who were selected by rigorous examinations, repeatedly observed by imperial representatives, and who could be removed for bad conduct. He condemned Chinese popular religion, particularly Taoism and Buddhism, as superstition and idolatry, but greatly admired the ethical doctrines of Confucius, insisting that these in no way contradicted the teachings of Christ. In du Halde's

presentation, popular "superstitions" represented corruptions of the pure natural wisdom of ancient Confucianism, so that the Jesuits, by preaching the Gospels, were in a sense helping the Chinese to recover their true selves. As we shall see, however, the secular and skeptical authors of the eighteenth century would use the evidence that the Jesuit scholar compiled to plead a very different case.

The favorable portrait of China produced by the Jesuit relations and treatises of the seventeenth century and synthesized in du Halde's magnum opus appealed to eighteenth-century French observers for a variety of reasons. Certainly the idea of a government administered through the agency of men of letters was tremendously attractive to French writers and intellectuals who, despite the respect with which they were usually (though not always) treated by the court and by their noble patrons, had few opportunities to shape or enact policy directly. The sixteenth-century wars of religion and the civil war of the Fronde in the seventeenth century were not long distant, and events such as the expulsion of the Huguenots in 1685 and the destruction of the Jansenist convent of Port-Royal in 1709 remained within living memory. As a model of enlightened and tolerant rule, the Kangxi emperor of China compared favorably to Louis XIV on a number of counts.[7] In the early eighteenth century, therefore, critics of religious intolerance and advocates of a rationally ordered society under enlightened absolutism looked to the East for inspiration. One of the most prominent of these Enlightenment Sinophiles was the marquis d'Argens, whose *Lettres chinoises* used imperial China as a mirror with which to reflect the faults of contemporary French society.

Jean-Baptiste du Boyer, marquis d'Argens, was a novelist, pamphleteer, and courtier who produced a great number of works modeled on Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, notably the *Lettres juives*, *Lettres cabalistiques*, and the *Lettres chinoises*, with which we will concern ourselves here. Written from 1738 to 1742 and published in serial form, the *Lettres chinoises* are structured as the correspondence between a half dozen Chinese mandarins scattered across the globe. The most prolific contributors are Sioeu-Tcheou, in Paris, and his friend Yn-Che-Chan, who remained behind in Peking, but d'Argens created additional travelers as needed in order to include reports from Persia, Japan, Siam, Russia, Germany, and Scandinavia. Rather than a simple duality between East and West, d'Argens thus offered a broad panorama for his readers to reflect philosophically upon the variety of customs and conventions of mankind. Like the *Lettres persanes*, the *Lettres chinoises* compared the manners, morals, and gender relations of the East to those of the West. Sioeu-Tcheou described the people of Paris as obsessed with novelties, commenting that "the empire of fashion is as powerful over the French spirit as that of jealousy among the Turks and Tartars," and criticized the overuse of powder and makeup by French women, which "made their faces resemble the skin of a tiger."[8] The traveling mandarin further lamented that the French, unlike the Chinese, showed no respect toward their elders, and faulted French court society for its tacit approval of adulterous liaisons as "gallantry."[9]

Like the Jesuits who preceded him, d'Argens held up the Chinese imperial system as a model of wise and benevolent governance. Sioeu-Tcheou praised the examination system for the selection of mandarins, noting that by contrast, "In France...all judicial positions are sold, and held by families as patrimonial goods. One purchases here the right to judge men like a merchant in China purchases a bundle of merchandise."[10] D'Argens's correspondents also criticized the social pretensions of the clergy and nobility, stressing that the wiser Chinese instead honored peasants and merchants as useful, productive members of society.[11] Criticizing the recent French kings Henri III and Louis XIII for being led astray by corrupt courtiers, d'Argens's narrator Sioeu-Tcheou laments that truly great kings, such as Augustus, Henri IV, or Frederick the Great, are rare, and finds it extraordinary that so few rulers recognize that their true interest lies in being useful to their subjects and thereby ensuring the enduring admiration of subsequent generations.[12]

D'Argens's celebration of Frederick the Great, his patron at the time, as one of the rare great kings of history was evidently self-interested, while his selection of Augustus reflects the predominant classicism of Enlightenment culture. His praise of Henri IV, however, reflects one of the underlying motifs of Enlightenment Sinophilia—the contrast between the religious fanaticism that had torn European society apart in the two centuries since the Reformation and the ecumenical tolerance that appeared to reign at the Chinese imperial court. Here as well, as we shall now see, the intrepid Jesuit missionary-scholars served as the unwitting sources of Enlightenment anticlericalism.

Confucius between Jesuits and Philosophes

In their efforts to win Chinese converts, the Jesuits were careful not to offend Chinese sensibilities by attacking rituals and customs at the heart of Chinese social life, such as the rites performed to honor the emperor and the spirits of deceased ancestors. Indeed, as

Liam Brockey has observed, the position of the missionaries, a small group of Westerners far from home and living on the margins of a vast and powerful empire, was always precarious, and depended on the indulgence of the imperial authorities. Therefore, while their counterparts in the Americas were free to attack "pagan superstitions and idolatry," using coercion if necessary, the Jesuit mission to China had to proceed more carefully. Consequently, they argued that the "Chinese rites" were purely secular rituals in which Chinese Christian converts could participate without dishonoring their new faith. They also took care not to condemn traditional Confucian values and beliefs, nor to suggest that venerable ancestors who had not heard the word of the Gospels were condemned to eternal damnation. Instead, Ricci argued in his memoirs, "One can confidently hope that in the mercy of God, many of the ancient Chinese found salvation in the natural law."[13]

Just as they sought to make Christianity appear less alien and threatening to the Chinese mandarins, the Jesuits also sought to make China appear less foreign and heretical to European audiences. In 1687, members of the Jesuit order published an anthology of Confucian texts and maxims, translated into Latin as *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, representing the Chinese philosopher as a virtuous sage whose teachings reflected the truth of an original "natural religion" and were in no way contradictory to Christianity. Basil Guy writes that the Jesuits created "an image of the Middle Kingdom less in accordance with reality than with the needs of the moment... In the kingdom of the Son of Heaven, there dwelt a virtuous people, civilized from time immemorial, whose moral attitude was perfection itself." Observing that the Enlightenment *philosophes* adopted this characterization and used it for their own ends, Guy further remarks: "It is thus amusing to note that in European minds at least Confucius still owes his renown as a sublime sage to the chicanery which accompanied this crisis in western intellectual history."[14] The Jesuit celebration of the wisdom of Confucius bordered on heresy, and critics of the order would argue that it crossed the line entirely. Colin Mackerras writes that "the translator was in fact imputing to the Chinese a knowledge of truth irrespective of Christian revelation. Indeed the introduction to the translation asserts specifically that the ancient Chinese must have had knowledge of the true God and worshipped him."[15]

As they sought to approximate China to Europe, the seventeenth-century Jesuits also benefited from a fortunate accident. In 1625, workmen in the western Chinese city of Xi'an accidentally discovered

a stone stele with inscriptions in both Chinese and Syriac, bearing a cross and preaching a new doctrine called *jingjiao*, or "luminous teaching." A Chinese convert and scholar named Li Zhijao read the inscription and published it with commentary, suggesting that *jingjiao* might be "the same holy religion of the West that has been preached by Matteo Ricci," and the stele was indeed subsequently proven to be the work of Nestorian Christians who had traveled to China from the Near East in the eighth century. Though of only minor interest in China itself, the stele was celebrated by Jesuits as proof that the gospel of Christ had indeed been preached to the far ends of the earth, and that the Chinese, having already been exposed to the true religion in the past, would be uniquely receptive to their missionary outreach in the present. Although in fact, as Michael Keevak notes, "the 'luminous religion' was little more than a marginal creed in an ancient dynasty that had tolerated a wide variety of foreign philosophies," it soon became central to seventeenth-century Jesuit accounts of Chinese civilization, and was seized upon by the seventeenth-century Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher as proof of his theory of the Egyptian origins of Chinese civilization.[16]

The Jesuits' enthusiastic and optimistic representations of Chinese civilization and Confucian philosophy were not universally accepted, and many of the sharpest criticisms of their views came from rival Catholic orders, particularly the Dominicans and members of the French Société des Missions Etrangères. These groups, envious of the Jesuits' successes and suspicious of their close ties to the mandarin elite, lobbied the Vatican against Jesuit indulgence, accusing the rival order of diluting the truth of Christianity and seasoning it with pagan elements in order to make it more appealing to idolatrous palates. These polemics, which escalated in intensity over the latter decades of the seventeenth century, exploded into the "Chinese rites" controversy of the turn of the century. Ironically, a Chinese imperial edict of 1692 that explicitly tolerated Christian missionary activity worsened the dispute by encouraging rival religious orders, which were less accommodating to Chinese tradition than were the Jesuits, to enter the empire, where they soon condemned its customary rituals. After a decade of debate and consideration, in which the Propaganda Fide and the Roman Inquisition weighed in on the side of the doctrinaires, Pope Clement XI condemned the Jesuit interpretation of the Chinese rites in 1704. Relations between the Catholic establishment and the Chinese imperial court deteriorated rapidly thereafter. Maillard de Tournon, a papal legate appointed to announce the Vatican's decision in China, was expelled by the Kangxi emperor two

years later, and a Chinese imperial edict subsequently required all Catholic missionaries to accept the emperor's secular interpretation of the Confucian rites—and thereby deny that of the pope—in order to continue to preach in China. Caught between these irreconcilable positions, the Jesuit mission to China withered in the following years, until the subsequent emperor expelled most foreign missionaries from China in 1724.[17]

European critics of Counter-Reformation orthodoxy were quick to seize upon the contrast between the tolerant Chinese emperor Kangxi, who allowed Christian clergy to proselytize in his empire even though he did not share their faith, and the inflexible Vatican, which condemned all beliefs and customs different from its own. Pierre Bayle wrote, "I do not know why the Christians make so few reflections on the spirit of tolerance that reigns among these pagan kings whom we loudly condemn as ferocious barbarians. Here is a Chinese emperor, entirely persuaded that the religion of the Jesuits is false and totally opposed to that which he and all of his subjects profess, who nonetheless suffers these missionaries and treats them quite humanely."[18] The German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz suggested that China should "send missionaries to us to teach us the purpose and use of natural theology, in the same way as we send missionaries to them to instruct them in revealed theology."[19]

Voltaire condemned "the miserable disputes that we have seen in Europe over the Chinese rites," and wrote that the Vatican's attempt to decide the issue "could not have been more absurd had the republic of San Marino set itself up as mediator between the Grand Turk and the Persian Empire."[20] He further argued that the conflicts between the Jesuits and their Dominican and Franciscan critics weakened the cause of Christianity in China, and wrote that "the Chinese were astonished to see sages who were in disagreement over what they should teach, who reciprocally persecuted and anathematized one another, who instigated criminal prosecutions in Rome, and who deferred to congregations of cardinals to decide whether the emperor of China knew his own language as well as the missionaries sent from Italy or France."[21] Voltaire contrasted the dogmatic squabbling of the Catholic religious orders to what he represented as the pure, natural religiosity of Confucian China, writing, "Never was the religion of the emperors and courts dishonored by imposture, never disturbed by quarrels between the empire and the priesthood... Their Kung Fu-tze, whom we call Confucius, imagined neither new opinions nor new rites; he was neither medium nor prophet; he was a wise magistrate who taught the ancient laws... He recommended only virtue, he preached no mysteries."[22]

Much as Voltaire would do across his many works, the marquis d'Argens contrasted the urbane tolerance and world-weary wisdom of his Chinese observers to the religious bigotry and superstition of European society in the *Lettres chinoises*. Sioeu-Tcheou condemned the religious wars that had devastated Germany in the previous century, calling them "as ridiculous as sacrilegious," and lamented that, despite "the extravagances, cruelties, and barbarities that fanaticism has inspired... men have not become wiser or more sensible." Contrasting the madness of holy war with the tranquility of China, where "we mortally hate persecutions... and abhor wars of religion," the mandarin asserted that "missionaries would never have been tolerated there, if it had been known that the opinions which they taught could one day be harmful to the state."[23] In the later sections of the work, d'Argens became increasingly strident and explicit in his attacks on the Jesuit order, discussing in detail both the "Chinese rites" controversy and the Nestorian monument of Xi'an, which he repeatedly denounced as a forgery. D'Argens used these sections to paint the Jesuits as duplicitous and deceitful, enforcing religious orthodoxy at home while blending Christian and Chinese elements in the Peking mission. Yn-Che-Chan wrote that these missionaries had initially sought "to make us Christians, but after they had spent a few years among us, they seemed to forget the purpose of their voyage, and they themselves became Chinese," and noted that their "mixture of Christian and Chinese ceremonies" had been condemned by the Vatican.[24] By attacking the Jesuits, virtually the only source of reliable information on Chinese civilization in early modern Europe, d'Argens sought to detach the Jesuit image of a rational, tolerant, well-ordered Chinese society from its theological moorings, the better to use it as a mirror with which to reveal the faults of Christian European society.

In addition to condemning religious conflict within Christendom, d'Argens, speaking through his Chinese observers, offered a passionate defense of the Jews and a stinging critique of anti-Semitism, both medieval and modern. Sioeu-Tcheou declared: "I tremble with horror when I think of the barbarities that men who are considered cultured and civilized commit against unfortunates who are all the more to be pitied because they are only miserable because they follow the dictates of their conscience," and exclaimed, "what barbarity... to kill a man who is guilty of no crime but refusing to lie!" He further concluded: "There is no people who has been so barbaric as the

Europeans, who dare to speak of the ferocity of other nations, who, compared to them, have the most gentle and generous manners," and went on to note that the Turkish sultan Mehmet II, condemned as a despot by Westerners, had granted asylum to the Jews expelled from Portugal.[25] In subsequent letters, he cited and refuted charges of ritual murder and of the profanation of the host, noting the lack of credible evidence, the fabrication of similar false charges against the Templars, and the fact that the Jews, not believing in transubstantiation, would have no reason to destroy "a piece of bread."[26] The wise governance of the mandarins, d'Argens suggested, would never tolerate such barbaric acts.

Eternal China

Of all of the revelations made by the Jesuits regarding imperial China, the one most disconcerting to European intellectual circles was that of the unparalleled antiquity of Chinese civilization. The Italian Jesuit Martino Martini set off a bombshell in European intellectual circles when he revealed that unbroken Chinese chronologies stretched back nearly five thousand years, and that the putative founder of Chinese civilization, the first emperor Fo-Hi, lived around 2950 BC, or about six hundred years prior to the date commonly given for the Biblical Deluge. Virgile Pinot observes that "for the men of the seventeenth century... the antiquity of a nation... was a title of glory still greater perhaps than its sophistication. If for the individual it was a sign of nobility to have ancestors who had participated in the Crusades, for a nation, nobility was to have as founders people who went back to the Deluge." [27] Furthermore, given the monogenist and diffusionist assumptions of the age, it was assumed that whichever civilization could be proven to be the eldest had surely given rise to all the others. This was far from a purely academic question. If this root civilization was not that of the Biblical patriarchs, what was to become of sacred chronology and the story of human origins and the dispersion of peoples narrated in the book of Genesis?

Efforts to reconcile Chinese chronologies with the accepted timelines of (sacred) universal history led to some elaborate, and ultimately unconvincing, intellectual gymnastics. The seventeenth-century Jesuit Athanasius Kircher argued in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* and *China Illustrata* that China had been colonized centuries after the Deluge by the ancient Egyptians under the conquering pharoah Sesostris (who was in fact a composite of several different historical pharaohs invented by Herodotus[28]). This implausible theory, which required

the dismissal of the ancient Chinese annals, was also endorsed by Pierre-Daniel Huet and was revived during the high Enlightenment by the antiquarian Joseph de Guignes.[29] With equal improbability, observing that the Chinese annals spoke of a great flood around 2337 BC, the classicist Etienne Fourmont argued in 1747 that the first emperors of China were in fact the antediluvian patriarchs of Genesis, and that Fo-Hi, the legendary founder of Chinese civilization, was Noah himself, a conclusion that his English contemporary Samuel Shuckford had already reached in 1728.[30] Fourmont argued that "the times of Noah fall with precision in accordance with the times of Fo-Hi, and with regard to the regions of the Ark and of Babel, it can be remarked that the Caucasus is not so far from China, and according to the Annals themselves, Fohi arrived from Xensi [that is, from the west]."[31] Fourmont further argued that, if the Chinese were not descended from Noah, "what are we to think of such a race of men unknown to the rest of the universe?"[32]

Other European scholars resolved the challenge of Chinese antiquity by moving back the date of the Biblical Deluge. Paul-Yves Pezron, a Benedictine monk and antiquarian scholar at the abbey of Saint-Maur, noted in his 1687 treatise *L'Antiquité des Temps rétablie et défendue,* that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, placed the date of creation around 5500 BC, rather than 4000 BC, the date suggested by the Latin Vulgate. Pezron further argued that this chronology "accords perfectly well with the antiquities of the oriental nations, such as the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, and the Chinese." Pezron acknowledged that the civilizations of the East, particularly China, were older than those of Greece or Rome, and wrote that "the Orient began to be settled three or four centuries after the Deluge, and there were already kingdoms in this part of the world, perhaps even before Greece and Italy were inhabited. Asia was the cradle of humanity."[33] Similarly, Nicolas Fréret, the most prominent of the early eighteenth-century French érudits, also favored the longer chronology of the Septuagint over the shorter timetable of the Latin Vulgate version, and observed that the Vatican had never made the Vulgate chronology an article of faith, whereas the Greek Orthodox Church had consistently followed the Septuagint. He argued that "the advantages of the extended calculation to reconcile all the authentic histories of the nations with the chronology of Moses, should lead us to favor the chronology of the Septuagint. There are many of these authentic histories that cannot be rejected without destroying all the rules of criticism and opening the door to an absolute historical Pyrrhonism."[34]

The introduction of the Septuagint chronology to resolve the contradictions between sacred and profane histories resolved the immediate issue at hand, but set a potentially dangerous precedent for Biblical orthodoxy. Martini, Pezron, and the other *dévots,* even as they sought to defend the literal truth of the book of Genesis, removed the Bible from its pedestal and effectively placed it on the same level as the annals of China, the dynastic tables of Egypt, and the astronomical charts of Babylon. Anthony Grafton notes that the discipline of chronology "is based on a philological method which applies equally to Hebrews and to Greeks, to the Bible and to the ancient historians."[35] One orthodox critic, the abbé de Vallemont, recognized the danger and asked: "What will the unbelievers and libertines say about us if, on the authority of memoirs from China, we will change our beliefs and abandon a Bible consecrated by the Church for its antiquity and by the decrees of the Council of Trent?"[36]

If devout scholars were troubled by new revelations regarding the great antiquity of Chinese civilization, their skeptical contemporaries seized upon them as additional weapons in their struggles against religious orthodoxy. Voltaire wrote in the *Essai sur les moeurs* that "it is incontestable that the oldest annals of the world are those of China. These annals flow without interruption. Almost all detailed, entirely wise, without any magical elements, always supported by astronomical observations over four thousand one hundred fifty two years, they extend several centuries beyond, without precise dates, to be sure, but with that plausibility that approaches certitude."[37] Citing the Jesuit astronomer Antoine Gaubil to observe that the Chinese had accurately recorded a solar eclipse in the year 2155 BC, and further noting that China's historical records went back even farther, to the first king Fo-Hi who reigned more than 25 centuries before Christ, Voltaire wrote in the *Essai sur les moeurs* that "their vast and populous empire was already governed as a family in which the monarch was the father, and in which forty legislative tribunals were considered as older brothers, while we were a small band of nomads in the forest of the Ardennes," and wrote in a 1760 letter to the Orientalist Michel-Ange André Leroux-Deshauterayes that China was a well-governed, civilized society at a time when the ancient Gauls were "illiterate barbarians who slaughtered little girls and boys to the honor of Teutates, as we slaughtered them in 1572 in honor of St. Bartholomew."[38]

As these comments suggest, the longevity, continuity, and apparent harmony of Chinese civilization recommended it to French observers distressed by the conflict and upheaval of their own place and time. The marquis d'Argens contrasted the ephemeral rise and fall of the nations of the West with the eternal glory of China, which he attributed to its good governance and to the spirit of tolerance that prevailed in the Middle Kingdom. Reflecting upon the ruins of the Roman forum, I-Tuly, a new correspondent introduced in the fifth volume to discuss the denouement of the "Chinese rites" controversy at the Vatican, likened the causes of the decline and fall of civilizations to the diseases and accidents that shorten the lives of individual human beings:

> [Societies] have a fixed duration which they cannot exceed; one may say that they are born, grow, live, and finally die, just as living creatures do...Of all the peoples of the universe whose histories I have read, I know of none whose situation has been more durable than our own. How many centuries has it endured, without experiencing any of these deadly revolutions?...To what may we attribute this...but to the goodness of our government? I hope that it will long preserve the state of health which it now enjoys.[39]

Like d'Argens's mandarin, Voltaire praised the great antiquity and endurance of China as proof of the wisdom of its fundamental laws, and stressed that the superiority of the Chinese imperial system was proven by the fact that the foreign Mongol and Manchu conquerors had seen fit to adopt it, calling it "a great example of the natural superiority of reason and genius over blind and barbaric force."[40] This process of acculturation of the victors by the vanquished formed the theme of one of Voltaire's dramas in verse, *L'Orphelin de la Chine,* based loosely on a Chinese tale included in du Halde's compendium, in which the devotion of the mandarin Zamti to the dethroned imperial family, which leads him to offer the sacrifice of his own son in the place of the last surviving royal heir, overcomes the wrath of the conqueror Genghis Khan, and moves the latter to offer clemency.[41]

As both Basil Guy and J. H. Brumfitt have noted, Voltaire made use of China as a discursive tool with which to present arguments that were primarily about Europe. Guy writes, "The Chinese ideal became for him simply one more weapon with which to tilt at 'l'infâme'...useful to him only insofar as he could criticize with it contemporary abuse."[42] J. H. Brumfitt concurs, observing that Voltaire projected his own concerns onto Asia, and thereby "discovers the *philosophe* beneath the robes of the Chinese mandarin or the Indian

Brahman."[43] The same would be the case for the Physiocrats in subsequent years, whose celebration of China as a model of bureaucratic and economic rationalization we will now consider.

China and the Physiocrats

In the 1760s, imperial China found a new set of French admirers among the Physiocrats, a group of free market economic reformers who hoped to revitalize the declining and deeply indebted French monarchy by removing restrictions on the trade in grain and other staple commodities. Similar in many ways to their British counterparts Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, the French Physiocrats remained more traditional in their relative disdain for manufactures and their insistence that agriculture was the source of all wealth. The Physiocrats saw the privileges of the landed nobility, the restrictions placed by urban guilds on the production of goods, and the strict regulation of prices for bread by royal and municipal authorities as so many fetters that prevented the French economy from functioning at an optimal level. Most of them, perceiving the nobility, clergy, and merchant and artisan guilds alike as atavistic forces hindering progress, looked to a revitalized, enlightened absolutism as the best hope for France's economic resurgence.[44] For this reason, a number of Physiocratic reformers held up an idealized vision of China as a model for the French monarchy to emulate.

The most enthusiastic endorsement of China as a model for the West was François Quesnay's *Le despotisme de la Chine*, published in several installments in the Physiocratic journal *Ephémerides du Citoyen* from March to June 1767. Quesnay wrote to defend China against charges of despotism by arguing that the term had been misunderstood. "If one believes the English authors of the universal history," he wrote, "there is no power on earth more despotic than the emperor of China. If by despotism they understand the absolute power to enforce obedience to the laws and fundamental maxims of government, it is true that there is no other human power in China capable of weakening that of the emperor." However, he argued, these historians are unaware "that the constitution of the Chinese government is founded on natural law in such an unshakable manner that it prevents the sovereign from doing evil, and ensures him in his legitimate administration the supreme power to do good, such that this authority is a beatitude for the prince, and a pleasant dominion for his subjects." Quesnay argued that China's stability and prosperity derived from its recognition of natural law, which he defined as "the very physical laws of the perpetual reproduction of the goods necessary to the subsistence, preservation, and comfort of men." In this formulation, the primary purpose of government was to maximize the total economic utility of society, "to cultivate the land with the greatest possible success, and to defend society against thieves and scoundrels."[45]

Quesnay praised the Chinese system of governance by an enlightened elite of mandarins, educated in the principles of government and selected through a system of competitive examinations. He wrote, "The first law should be that which ordered the study of the science of making laws; the first political establishment should be the creation of schools for the teaching of this science. Except for China, all kingdoms have ignored the necessity of this establishment which is the foundation of government." He further declared that "men cannot perceive natural law but by the light of reason which distinguishes them from beasts. The primary object of the administration of a prosperous and durable government should thus be, as in the empire of China, the profound study and continuous and general instruction of natural laws, which constitute the social order."[46] As Basil Guy has observed, Quesnay considers that "the art of government is... the creation and maintenance of a condition in which the laws of nature can best be supported by an absolute monarchy... To this end, the monarch needed wise and good counselors, mandarins, or, as the author would prefer, Physiocrats. With their aid, he should be able to rule as the most benevolent of enlightened despots."[47] Imperial China thus furnished a model for the renewal of the increasingly sclerotic French monarchy.

Quesnay further wrote that "ignorance is the primary cause of the most harmful errors of government, of the ruin of nations and the decadence of empires, from which China has always been so securely protected through the ministry of its mandarins, who form the first order of the nation, who take care to lead the people through the light of reason, and to submit the government to the natural and immutable laws which constitute the essential order of societies." Quesnay then asked: "Are not the endurance, the extent, and the permanent prosperity ensured in the empire of China through the observance of natural laws? Does not this so populous nation with good reason regard those other peoples governed by human will and constrained to obedience by the force of arms as barbarous nations?" In keeping with Physiocratic concerns, Quesnay praised the importance granted to agriculture in China, and wrote, "there are some kingdoms in Europe where one has not yet sensed the importance of agriculture,

nor the riches necessary for agricultural enterprises, which can only be pursued by inhabitants noteworthy for their capacities and their wealth, and their rank has been fixed below the common people of the towns."[48]

Quesnay's view of Confucian doctrines was heavily influenced by du Halde, from whom he drew most of his information on Chinese culture. Quesnay thus presented Confucius as a wise and benevolent sage, writing, "All the doctrine of this philosopher tended to reestablish human nature in its ancient splendor and primitive beauty, as granted by heaven, but which has been disfigured by the shadows of ignorance and the contagion of vice."[49] Like the Jesuits, Quesnay represented the Confucian belief system as a rationalized religion, which recognized the existence of a supreme being, and saw Taoism and Buddhism as subsequent corruptions of this original truth. "It is remarkable," Quesnay wrote, "that for more than two thousand years, the Chinese nation has known, respected, and honored a supreme being, the sovereign master of the universe, under the name Chang-ti, without any vestiges of idolatry to be seen. It was not until several centuries after Confucius that the statue of Fo was brought from the Indies, and that a quantity of errors began to infect the empire. But the mandarins, unshakably attached to the doctrine of their ancestors, were never affected by this contagion."[50]

Another Enlightenment Sinophile was the colonial administrator Pierre Poivre, who had traveled extensively in South and East Asia in the 1740s and 1750s as an employee of the Compagnie des Indes, a career that culminated in a stint as intendant of the Isle de France from 1767 to 1773. Doing honor to his name, Poivre dedicated much of his career to the ultimately successful transplantation of cloves, nutmeg, and other spice plants from the East Indies to the Isle de France. Described by the biographical reference in his personnel file as "a good man and a practical philosopher" whose "wise and active administration, after the disasters of the war, returned these fine colonies to a new prosperity," Poivre was, like Quesnay, an adherent of the Physiocratic school, and shared with him the belief that agriculture was the key to all wealth.[51] He often quarreled with the military administrators of the Isle de France, whom he accused of neglecting long-term economic interests in favor of military priorities, engaging in illegal smuggling for personal gain, and exercising arbitrary, despotic authority over the local administration. During the period between his initial return from South Asia to France in 1757 and his designation as intendant a decade later, Poivre wrote a series of short

memoirs on his travels, which were subsequently published in 1768 as *Voyages d'un philosophe*.

Poivre's *Voyages* are not a straightforward travel narrative, but rather a didactic parable regarding politics, economics, and the conditions that create the prosperity and poverty of nations. He dismissed Africa as "uncultivated lands, inhabited by unfortunate Negroes," and criticized the government of Siam as a despotic tyranny that sapped the vitality and resources of a potentially productive land, writing, "In this earthly paradise, amidst so many riches, who would believe that the Siamese are perhaps the most miserable of peoples?"[52] The culmination of Poivre's philosophical travels, however, is his enthusiastic description of China. Arriving in Canton, he was amazed by the great size and population of the city, and wondered how the Chinese were able to feed so many people. In his subsequent travels to the countryside, he noted approvingly that the Chinese practiced an extremely intensive form of agriculture, leaving no fields uncultivated, and renewing lands through the use of multiple fertilizers. He wrote that the Chinese system was "followed from one end of the empire to the other since the origin of the monarchy, confirmed by the experience of more than forty centuries, in the nation of the world most attentive to its interests." "The Chinese nation," Poivre continued, "is capable of the greatest works; I have seen no more industrious people in the world. Every day of the year is a workday, except for the first, designated for the exchange of visits, and the last, consecrated to the ceremony of duties rendered to the ancestors. A lazy man would surely be scorned; he would be regarded as a paralytic member burdening the body of which he formed part."[53] In an imaginative reversal of the ethnographic gaze, Poivre remarked that "a Chinese farmer could not keep himself from laughing" if he were to witness the lamentable state of agriculture in eighteenth-century France, "part of our fields left uncultivated, another part dedicated to useless crops, the rest poorly labored... the extreme misery and the barbarity of those who cultivate it."[54]

Elsewhere in his *Voyages*, Poivre used a utopian parable to make the case for the importance of agriculture to the prosperity and happiness of humankind, describing the colonization and transformation of a Southeast Asian country by a wise Chinese mandarin named Kiang-tse. Poivre wrote that Kiang-tse, unlike his French seigneurial counterparts, "distributed his lands to his farmers as pure gifts, without reserving the rights known under the names of *service, lods, and ventes*, rights which... are the most terrible scourge of agriculture, and the idea of which has never touched the common sense of wise

peoples." Kiang-tse also led by "providing an example of simplicity, of labor, of frugality, of good faith, and of humanity. He thereby formed no laws; he did far more: he established customs." Poivre then declared: "May I be allowed to state here in passing: what a difference between such men, and those famous conquerors who have stunned, desolated the earth, and who, abusing the right of conquest, have established laws which, even after the human race was freed of them, have perpetuated human misery over the course of centuries!"[55] Poivre concluded his text with the assertion that it was agriculture and the laws, customs, and property rights governing it that determined the prosperity and happiness of peoples, and encouraged the rulers of Europe to emulate the emperor of China, whom he described as the greatest and richest of all the sovereigns of the world.

Poivre credited China's enduring prosperity to the virtue of its founders and their perpetuation of the natural laws of mankind, which had been lost to other peoples. He wrote that "the Empire was founded by farmers in those happy times in which the memory of the laws of the Creator had not yet been lost." Declaring that in China "the cultivation of the land was the most noble occupation, the one most worthy of men and the occupation of all," Poivre argued that "since Fo-Hi, who was the first leader of the nation . . . all the emperors without exception, down to this day, have taken pride in being the first farmers of their empire. One of the most memorable passages in Poivre's description of imperial China is his account of the annual plowing ceremony with which the emperor opened the new agricultural season. Poivre described how the emperor, accompanied by the royal court, would pray to heaven (T'ien) for divine blessing upon his people, perform sacrifices and time-honored rites, and would then "seize the handle of the plow, and open several furrows across the full width of the field." While Poivre had not been present in the imperial capital of Peking to witness the emperor perform the ceremony in person, he had seen the emperor's viceroy perform the same acts in Canton. He wrote, "I cannot recall having ever witnessed any ceremony invented by man with such pleasure and satisfaction as I felt in considering this one."[56] Poivre's description of the annual plowing ceremony, also described by du Halde, Quesnay, and several other Western writers on China, was perhaps the part of his text that most inspired the imagination of his readers, and in 1768 the French dauphin imitated the emperor of China by plowing a small plot of land to set a good example for his subjects.[57]

However, Grimm and Diderot's *Correspondance littéraire* remained skeptical regarding the significance of this ceremony. In their review of Poivre's *Voyages d'un philosophe*, they argued that it held no deeper importance than did many of the ritualistic observances of the Christian monarchies of Europe:

> This ceremony is held in the first days of our month of March; each viceroy observes it in his province. M. Poivre saw it in Canton, and one may imagine all that a European philosopher might find noble, emotional, and touching in this spectacle! It remains to be determined whether the emperor attaches to it any of the noble and touching ideas of the European philosopher. Let us be sent a Chinese Poivre, may he arrive at Versailles on the morning of Holy Thursday, and there he will see one of the most powerful kings of Europe washing the feet of twelve paupers. Soon thereafter he will see this monarch, accompanied by all the royal household, serving these twelve paupers at his table. What great and touching ideas will this ceremony inspire in our Chinese philosopher, when he learns that this ceremony is repeated every year to honor the Confucius of Europe who washed the feet of his disciples! He will find it one of the most beautiful human institutions in the world. What greater wisdom, in fact, than to remind once a year the rulers of the earth of the primitive equality and the bonds of brotherhood that unite all men? If this Chinese philosopher returns home, as our travelers do, he will give so touching a description of this ceremony that no one will read it without tenderness. What would be the astonishment of our foreign philosopher if he is told that this ceremony is but a vain formality consecrated by habit, that the prince who observes it has never made a single reflection on the good of humanity at the conclusion of this touching ceremony, and that the philosopher who would dare to address such sentiments to him during the ceremony would soon be imprisoned in the Bastille, where the warden would not wash his feet, and that for centuries all the princes of the Roman faith have practiced this ceremony every year without doing any good for anyone, except for the money and food that is given to twelve paupers?[58]

As it turned out, the Physiocratic writings of the 1760s were a last hurrah of sorts for the Sinophilia of the Enlightenment. The intellectual climate within France was shifting, as both the legacy of Montesquieu and the growing influence of Rousseau led an

increasing number of French observers to reject despotism, whether enlightened or not, as a political model, whereas a constellation of factors, including wounded national pride resulting from defeat in the Seven Years' War, the intensification of French colonial activity in the Caribbean, and an increasing sense of European superiority over the non-Western world (which will be discussed at greater length in the following chapters), began to darken China's reputation in French eyes. Colin Mackerras notes, "For a variety of domestic reasons, which had little to do with China, opinion both in France and England moved strongly against China in the second half of the eighteenth century...On the whole, the newly industrializing and supremely confident West now observed a declining China with eyes totally different from those with which their predecessors of not long before had viewed an empire that appeared to be at the height of its glory."[59] We will now consider the reasons for this shift in French Enlightenment perceptions of the Middle Kingdom.

Downgrading China

Even in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment Sinophilia was at its apex, there was no shortage of discordant voices who questioned the idealized portrait presented by the Jesuits and their secular imitators. Not surprisingly, the baron de Montesquieu, the early Enlightenment's most prominent critic of royal absolutism, was skeptical of the praises then being lavished upon China by Jesuits and philosophes alike. "Our missionaries speak of the vast empire of China as an admirable government," he wrote, but then asked: "Could it not be that the missionaries were deceived by an appearance of order, that they were struck by that continuous exercise of the will of one alone by which they themselves are governed?" For his part, Montesquieu noted dismissively, "I do not know how one can speak of honor among peoples who can be made to do nothing without beatings," and observed, "Our men of commerce, far from giving us an idea of the same kind of virtue of which our missionaries speak, can rather be consulted about the banditry of the mandarins." He concluded that, much like the Islamic empires of the Near East and South Asia, "China is a despotic state whose principle is fear."[60]

While Voltaire was a great admirer of imperial China, his praise was not unqualified, but rather rested on a distinction between an elite Confucian society which he greatly admired and a superstitious popular culture that he often ridiculed. "When we speak of

the wisdom that has presided for four thousand years over the constitution of China," he wrote, "we do not presume to speak of the common people: it is in all countries uniquely occupied with manual labor." [61] While Voltaire's admiration of the Chinese sage was such that a portrait of Confucius decorated the walls of Voltaire's residence at Ferney,[62] he dismissed both Taoism and Buddhism as superstitions of the ignorant masses, blasting the latter as "the most ridiculous cult, and consequently that most suited to the ignorant," and described it as having "infected East Asia" from its origins in India. He mocked the belief that the Dalai Lama was a living god as "the triumph of human superstition," and noted with ridicule that the holy man's devotees conserved pieces of his excrement as sacred relics.[63] Voltaire's class biases contributed to his disdain for popular religion, as he wrote that "these sects are tolerated in China for the use of the vulgar, like simple victuals prepared to nourish them, while the magistrates and literati, separated from the people, feed upon a more pure diet."[64] Voltaire also condemned the widespread practice of infanticide among the poor, which he rationalized as the consequence of overpopulation. He suggested that, had the Mongol emperors been truly wise, they could have settled the surplus population on the uninhabited deserts of Tartary, though he recognized that European nations had only recently created foundling hospitals and other means of social assistance, and concluded, "it takes many centuries for human society to perfect itself."[65]

Quesnay's admiration for China was such that he was willing to excuse or downplay those aspects of Chinese society that his contemporaries found most distasteful. After noting Montesquieu's critical assessment of the brutal penal procedures in China, Quesnay responded: "Beatings with a staff are in China a punishment reserved for the guilty, as the whip, the galley, etc., are punishments in other kingdoms. Is there any government without penal laws?"[66] Similarly, Quesnay recognized the practice of infanticide, writing that "the excess of population in China forces the indigent sometimes to commit acts of inhumanity which cause horror," but he argued that "one should not impute this calamity to the very constitution of a good government," and noted that "everywhere there are men in indigence."[67]

The great irony in the Enlightenment's romance with China is the fact that, during the period of greatest philosophical interest in the Middle Kingdom, commercial and cultural interaction between China and the West was minimal. The expulsion of most of the foreign missionaries from China in 1724 and the restrictions placed on

Western merchants, who were confined to a few coastal ports such as Canton, limited opportunities for interaction, and ensured that the information on China that the French philosophes debated was increasingly out of date. One rare exception—the visit of Captain George Anson in the course of his voyage around the world in the 1740s—offered a much more negative assessment, though French admirers of China found it easy to discount as biased and ignorant the opinions of an English naval officer. Four decades later, however, the French explorer Jean-François de La Pérouse came away with a similarly negative impression of the Chinese from a brief stopover in Portuguese Macao in January 1787. La Pérouse wrote that "this people, whose laws are so praised in Europe, is perhaps the most unhappy, the most vexed, and the most arbitrarily governed that exists on earth," and added, lamenting the treatment of European merchants on the Chinese coast, that "not a cup of tea is drunk in Europe which has not cost a humiliation to he who purchased it in Canton."[68] By that point, La Pérouse was not alone in forming a negative view of the Chinese. Chrétien-Joseph de Guignes, son of the Orientalist Joseph de Guignes, served as a French representative in China in the final years of the eighteenth century, and echoed this same paradigm of an ancient, but static and superstitious China. He condemned Chinese society as despotic and corrupt, writing, "I traveled this vast empire from end to end, and everywhere I saw the strong oppress the weak, and every man having a share of authority made use of it to vex, bother, and crush the common people."[69] Guignes was dismissive of claims of China's astronomical knowledge, noting that the sage Mencius himself stated that the Chinese of ancient times were barbarians. Guignes concluded that it was only around the time of Confucius that the Chinese were able to record eclipses with precision, and remarked: "One may affirm that the Chinese have only made use of astronomy in relation to astrology; that is to say, to predict fortunate or unhappy events, in order to guide them in their actions, which they still do at present. They are still more astrologers than astronomers."[70]

The Enlightenment's reassessment of Chinese civilization began even as the Physiocrats continued to sing its praises during the last years of the reign of Louis XV. Grimm and Diderot's *Correspondance littéraire* observed in 1766 that contemporary Europeans in fact knew very little that was certain regarding China. They noted that first the Jesuits, and later the philosophers, were able to look to China and find in it what they wished to see, producing "marvelous relations of a very distant land which could neither confirm their veracity, nor dispute their lies." The result of such varied praise was that China became "the asylum of virtue, wisdom, and happiness; its government, the best possible and the oldest; its morals, the purest and most beautiful that were known; its laws and administration, its arts and industry, so many models for the rest of the peoples of the world."[71] The reviewer noted, nonetheless, that the wise reader would not be "seduced" by such mirages, but would reserve judgment, as "he would want to spend twenty years in China and see these things for himself prior to taking a definite position." Even as it acknowledged the wisdom and benevolence of Confucian ethics, the *Correspondance littéraire* expressed skepticism that China was truly governed by these maxims, remarking: "Read the edicts of all of the emperors and kings of the world, and you will find that they are all fathers of their peoples, only preoccupied with the happiness of their children. Nevertheless, injustice and misfortune cover the entire earth."[72]

The end of the Enlightenment's romance with China, I would argue, resulted primarily from two factors: the adoption of a progressive, evolutionary vision of world history that contrasted Western dynamism to Oriental decadence, and the rejection of enlightened despotism in favor of classical republicanism as a model for political reform. As French observers became more self-confident in Europe's ability to overcome the legacy of its past, they contrasted the rapid technological change and economic expansion of early modern Europe with the supposed stagnation of China during the same period. In its review of Mairan's published correspondence with the missionary-scholar Parennin, the *Histoire de l'Académie des Sciences* celebrated the superior dynamism of Europe in relation to China:

> All of these considerations...lead M. de Mairan to state, with reason, that the genius of the Chinese, though very admirable, is greatly inferior to that of the Europeans, and that they know little how to invent or perfect anything, and this judgment of the Chinese is furthermore confirmed by P. Parrenin. The genius of invention, which leads to such rapid progress in our knowledge, is given to few nations. Most of them know only how to imitate; this is a talent which nature gives even to the simplest of men. But this strength of spirit through which, by launching oneself above the sphere of ordinary ideas, one rises to new and unknown ideas, is almost the unique heritage of Europeans.[73]

Even as it painted a generally laudatory portrait of Chinese civilization, the *Histoire des deux Indes* of Raynal and Diderot drew the same

contrast between Western dynamism and the supposed rigidity and stasis of the Orient. It noted that while China had preceded the peoples of Europe in reaching a civilized state, it had made little progress in recent years, and concluded that the Chinese lacked the "spirit of innovation." The *Histoire* also observed that the Chinese were deficient in the arts of war, as demonstrated by the repeated conquest of China by barbarian invaders from the north and west.[74]

As China was most admired by the advocates of enlightened despotism, it is not surprising that the Enlightenment's most outspoken critics of despotism were the most critical of the Chinese model as well. Rousseau sharply criticized China in his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts,* writing, "In Asia there is an immense country where honors for learning lead to the highest offices of the State. If the sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for their country, if they aroused courage, the peoples of China would be wise, free, and invincible." The fact that this was not the case, in Rousseau's view, indicated the emptiness and moral bankruptcy of China's renowned cultural refinement. "There is no vice that does not dominate them," he wrote, "no crime with which they are not familiar."[75] Rousseau also cited the conquest of Ming dynasty China by the Manchus, asking: "If neither the enlightenment of government officials, nor the supposed wisdom of laws, nor the multitude of inhabitants of that vast empire were able to save it from the yoke of the ignorant and coarse Tartar, what purpose did all its learned men serve? What benefit has resulted from the honors bestowed on them?"[76] The baron d'Holbach condemned and dismissed China and Confucianism for reasons similar to those of Rousseau, dismissing Confucian wisdom as "common and trivial maxims that can in no way be compared with those of the Greeks and Romans," and declaring that the sage's teachings, "so praised by some moderns, are favorable to despotism; that is to say, to the most unjust of governments, to paternal tyranny, which they confuse with reasonable authority, to polygamy and to the tyranny exercised over women; finally, they have no object but to produce slaves." D'Holbach concluded "that this sage of the Orient or those who have adopted his maxims have not had the slightest notion of true morality or of natural law."[77]

Perhaps the most negative depiction of China produced by the later Enlightenment came from Cornelius de Pauw, a Dutch polemicist who formed part of Frederick the Great's intellectual entourage at Potsdam. De Pauw's denunciation of China is inseparable from his critique of despotism, as he wrote that "the principal mainsprings of the government [of China] are the whip and the rod; there are no Chinese, there are no Tartars who can escape it."[78] De Pauw rejected the notion that Confucianism had led to the perfection of morals, and offered lurid descriptions of such horrors as infanticide, castration, polygamy, and slavery in China, writing, "The Chinese can, just as the Negroes, sell their children, and their legislators have never had the slightest idea of the limits of parental authority," whereas Europeans "have destroyed slavery in their lands and have discovered the true limits of parental power, which is the masterpiece of legislation." He returned repeatedly to the theme of infanticide, and wrote that "I have not found examples of such atrocity, even among the cannibals of America."[79] Echoing Montesquieu's description of despotism, he declared that "the servile fear which directs the actions of the Chinese is a consequence of their institutions. In effect, who would not fear, if innocence itself is not secure?" After enumerating the shameful customs of the Chinese, de Pauw declared: "Such has been the incorrigible madness of a people whom the Jesuits have tried to represent to the eyes of Europe as a society of philosophers, but it is apparent that the Jesuits have never known of what true philosophy consists."[80]

Diderot was dismissive of the cultural achievements of China in the *Encyclopédie,* writing that "it is worth noting that the sciences and the fine arts have made no progress in China, and that this nation has had neither grand buildings, nor beautiful statues, nor poetry, nor music, nor painting."[81] In a letter to Sophie Volland in 1760, Diderot criticized Chinese codes of etiquette for "destroying frankness and making hypocrites of an entire nation."[82] Similarly, the abbé Mably questioned Quesnay's idealization of China in his *Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes,* writing that "the government of China, lazy by its nature and little industrious, has not had the wisdom to profit from the fecundity of its lands and the multitude of its citizens to banish poverty and misery."[83] Like Diderot and de Pauw, Mably criticized the Chinese for unquestioning devotion to "the puerile minutiae of their ceremonies, rites, and routines," which prevented them from making progress. Mably concluded, "Two thousand years ago the Chinese had the same amount of knowledge that they have today."[84]

By the 1770s, French commentators on China increasingly concurred that the despotism of the Chinese empire, far from serving as a force for progress and rationalization, as Quesnay and Poivre maintained, had instead frozen it in time and caused its growing decadence. The progress of the arts and sciences, the proponents of this view maintained, could only be sustained by free peoples, an

argument that we will examine in greater detail in the final chapter. Revisiting the question of Chinese origins in August 1773 the *Correspondance littéraire* offered a negative assessment of Chinese civilization as both static and despotic:

> What seems to me to be clearly demonstrated regarding the Chinese is that they are one of the oldest peoples of the world, but that they are still at the first stages of the arts and sciences, because they live under the yoke of the most terrible form of despotism, that which governs the customs, manners, and beliefs of private citizens as well as the public administration. It seems to me also demonstrated that the isolation of this people from its neighbors has preserved its industriousness and its ignorance, its laws and its chains. This people, it seems to me, has all the characteristics of the great number of old men: cold and hard prudence, weakness, mistrust, and stubbornness.[85]

Even Voltaire, among the French Enlightenment's most enthusiastic advocates for the greatness of imperial China, drew a similar contrast between Western dynamism and Eastern decadence. Karen O'Brien remarks that for Voltaire, "China is a particularly curious case, representing both a utopia and—since it is a society which has advanced as far as it can go—a haunting image of cultural atrophy."[86] In the dedication to his drama *L'Orphelin de la Chine,* dedicated to the duc de Richelieu, Voltaire wrote, "The Chinese, like the other Asiatics, have remained at the first elements of poetry, eloquence, physics, astronomy, and painting, known to them long before they were known to us. They were destined to begin everything before other peoples, only to make no further progress. They have resembled the ancient Egyptians, who having taught the Greeks, were in the end incapable of being their disciples."[87] Despite his great admiration for the longevity, harmony, and stability of the Middle Kingdom, Voltaire concluded in the *Essai sur les moeurs*, "Finally, with regard to any civilized people of Asia of which we speak, we may say of it, 'It preceded us, and we have surpassed it.'"[88]

Conclusions

In a 1773 review of a "Lettre sur les caractères chinois" by an unnamed Jesuit, the *Correspondance littéraire* remarked that the work's author "bitterly laments the malicious usage that has been made in this century of the memoirs that missionaries have provided, with the best of

intentions, regarding the history of the Indies and especially that of China. One must admit that in general the discovery of this country has not been terribly useful to the Church. The resources that philosophy has drawn from it have damned more souls in Europe than the Jesuits have saved in the two Indies."[89] As the reviewer noted, the eighteenth-century encounter with Chinese civilization allowed French observers to draw contrasts between the faults of contemporary Europe and the allegedly superior organization of the Chinese empire. In contrast to a Europe still struggling with religious conflict and a social order in which medieval and modern elements were uneasily blended, China served as a model for a meritocratic, bureaucratic state governed according to reason and natural law. It also served as an example for secular philosophers to argue against religious authorities that the Chinese had perfected virtue and morality without knowledge of the gospel of Christ.

There was never a single French Enlightenment view of China over the course of the eighteenth century, but rather competing discourses, based primarily on what the speaker wanted to see in China, and the point that he wished to make regarding the lessons that contemporary Europe could draw from the Chinese example. Keevak writes that French and other European observers of China were blinded by "the Great Wall of Europe, a kind of mental limit that prevented not only armchair travelers but even real ones from being able in any true sense to compare cultures," which led them to perceive in China those features that they expected to find there.[90] As J. J. Clarke has argued, this admiration does not fit into Edward Said's paradigm of Orientalism as colonialist knowledge, for "it is implausible to suggest that the interest of the Enlightenment philosophes in Confucianism was motivated, even unconsciously, by the desire to dominate China in anything but the most attenuated meaning of that term."[91] Instead, the European admirers of China, from the Jesuit missionary-scholars of the seventeenth century to the Physiocrats in the late eighteenth, presented an idealized representation of China as a model for Europe to follow. This model was closely linked to a worldview that posited enlightened despotism as an ideal form of government, believed that the cultivation of manners and cultural refinement were essential to the civilizing process, was attracted to the notion of a rationally ordered society administered by humanistic philosophers, and valued stability and social peace over the potentially disruptive forces of dynamic change.

Once the value system within France had shifted toward a democratic civic culture, a dynamic and expansive society, and a belief

in historical progress in which the leading powers of the West were the principal protagonists, China was no longer valued as a model of good order, but increasingly derided as a static, decadent power frozen in time, a majestic and imposing relic, to be sure, but a relic nonetheless. Keevak observes that by the end of the eighteenth century, "Confucian codes of politeness and morality were increasingly being turned into symbols of oriental duplicity and treacherousness, and the unparalleled antiquity that had once fascinated and challenged the Western world was now a sign of China's backwardness, stagnation, and decay."[92] Similarly, Clarke notes that after the Enlightenment, "China indeed faded almost completely from serious Western philosophical interest and throughout the nineteenth century became instead largely an object of contempt and racist condescension in the West."[93] The flawed but seductive *rêve chinoise* had evaporated, to be replaced by a smug and facile contrast between the dynamic West and the decadent East.

3
The New World and the Noble Savage

As eighteenth-century Europeans looked to the Orient to debate the relative merits of Eastern and Western civilizations, they also looked across the Atlantic to consider the benefits and drawbacks of civilization itself, as weighed against the charms of a simpler, more primitive existence in harmony with an idealized Nature. The figure of the "noble savage" was increasingly invoked in these debates as a sort of discursive experiment, an effort to discover what Man would be in the absence of societal and cultural constraints. Cultural critics from Montaigne to Lahontan to Rousseau invoked the example of indigenous American peoples to condemn tyranny, religious persecution, social inequality, and artificial, alienating culture in Europe itself. While the Chinese mandarin had been the symbol most convenient for the advocates of enlightened despotism, the noble savage came to represent egalitarianism and a sort of romantic anarchy.

Native Americans would be invoked in a variety of philosophical debates throughout the course of the eighteenth century in France, and the figure of the "noble savage," though certainly the most popular and enduring such representation, was not the only lens through which they would be perceived and depicted. If secular cultural critics found an idealized "child of nature" well suited to their purposes, their clerical counterparts, particularly the Jesuit missionaries whose experiences with Native Americans were frequently more direct and sustained, sought to balance an image of an essentially good (if sometimes childlike) savage with the need to spread the Gospel and to affirm the essential unity of mankind. As the century progressed, a more negative vision of Native American peoples came to predominate, for reasons that we will consider below. Across these widely divergent representations, the Amerindian remained endlessly fascinating, a stock figure of philosophical discourse and a mirror through which Europeans could perceive and critique their own societies.

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77. Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale* (Amsterd am: Marc Michel Rey, 1778), 1.
78. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*. 61, 66.
79. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, 75, 114, 175.
80. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, 32, 37.
81. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, iv–v.
82. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, v.
83. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, 31–32.
84. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale*, 181, 195.
85. Laurens, *Les origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Egypte*, 63.
86. Laurens, *Les origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Egypte*, 64.
87. On these events, see Dale, especially 247–280.
88. Laurens, *Les origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Egypte*, 174–175. For French policy debates regarding the Ottoman Empire and the "eastern question," see also Kaiser, "The Evil Empire."
89. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 3:49, 3:172, 3:86.
90. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 1:4, 1:234.
91. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 1:167–168.
92. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 1:31–32, 1:xxix.
93. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 2:13, 1:189.
94. *Correspondance littéraire*, November 1784, 225–226.
95. Tott, *Baron de Tott*, 4:35–36.
96. Volney, *Voyage*, 2:434, 2 :432.
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98. Çirakman, "Despotism," 49.
99. Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 128–129.

2 The Wisdom of the East: Enlightenment Perspectives on China

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2. Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756; repr., Paris: Garnier Frères, 1963), 2:398–399.
3. Voltaire, *Essai*, 2:785–786.
4. For an excellent recent survey of the Jesuit mission to China, see Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
5. Alvarez Semedo, *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (London, 1655), 108–109.
6. Jean-Baptiste du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (Paris : P. G. Le Mercier, 1735).

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9. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 1:26, 1:163.
10. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 2:130.
11. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 3:242.
12. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 5:2–3.
13. Cited in Basil Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (Geneva: Publications de l'Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1963), 40.
14. Guy, *French Image*, 49–50.
15. Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30.
16. Keevak, *Story of a Stele*, 29.
17. For the Chinese rites controversy and the end of the Jesuit mission to China, see Brockey, *Journey to the East*, especially pages 184–203.
18. Cited in Guy, *French Image*, 124–125.
19. Cited in Mackerras, *Western Images*, 33.
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21. Voltaire, *Essai*, 2:791.
22. Voltaire, *Essai*, 1:69.
23. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 4 :49–51; 1:59.
24. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 5:264, 5:288.
25. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 4:276, 4:311; 4:318–320.
26. D'Argens, *Lettres*, 5:23, 5:26.
27. Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France, 1640–1740* (1932; repr. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971), 190–191.
28. Brian Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 18.
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