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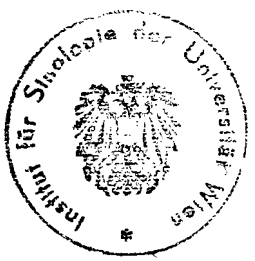
China and Historical Capitalism

Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge

Edited by

Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue



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In honor and memory of
Joseph Needham
1900–1995

Contents

it clearly in retrospect – that humans are ingenious and can develop scientific knowledge and the derived technology.

But is it rational? It was none other than Max Weber, that great protagonist of rationalism, who characterized the businessman's "restless activity" as the leading of an irrational life "where a man exists for his business, and not the other way around." We are used to measuring the gains that the capitalist/"modern" historical system has brought, and to neglecting the fact that the gains have gone to a minority, a large minority perhaps, but still a minority of the world's population. We have been less willing to calculate the costs to the majority – in material terms, in quality of life. And only recently have we begun to measure the costs to the biosphere.

The capitalist world-system has been well established now for some 400 or 500 years. It covers the globe. The history cannot be undone. I have tried to indicate here what were some of the peculiar failings, the conjuncture of circumstances, that made it Western Europe that launched humanity on this irrational adventure. This of course indicates nothing of what might be the substantively rational alternatives possible, given the fact that this historical system now exists and is in turn facing its own "crisis." Just as it was by no means inevitable that the capitalist/"modern" historical system be born anywhere in the sixteenth century, so there is no inevitable outcome to the current "crisis."

The West invented this curious system where "instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system."[99] All other civilizations had sensibly avoided this inversion. Being substantively irrational, this system is ultimately untenable. It remains to be seen however what more fully rational system mankind can invent now, and if it can.

[99] Polanyi 1957: 57.

3 China and Western social thought in the modern period

Gregory Blue

Western interpretations of the nature and significance of Chinese civilization have varied widely over the past eight centuries. At times quite opposing readings have been made of China even within a single period.[1] This diversity of opinions has been documented in a number of detailed surveys on the history of Western ideas about China,[2] and it is not the aim here to elucidate it in detail. In the present chapter, attention will be devoted rather to situating the development of certain key ideas about China in terms of trends in the evolution of Western social thought, especially notions related to what was often termed "the nature" of Chinese society, a concern that underlay and shaped Western discourses about China from the sixteenth till the mid-twentieth century when the bourgeoisies of the leading Western states asserted themselves and then consolidated power in classical fashion both at home and globally. The different phases in the development of ideas about China were linked to broader trends in ideology, political goals, and capitalist economic priorities, though not always in obvious or predictable ways. For present purposes we will not examine the large bodies of literature written by or devoted to authors who over the centuries traveled to China and wrote accounts of it; nor will we consider the corpus of expert works by scholars who devoted themselves primarily to Chinese studies. Instead, we will concentrate on analyses of China by authors and schools of thought that were especially influential in shaping modern Western social thought. Such authors invariably lacked direct or expert knowledge of China, and as a rule drew on sinological writings

[1] The question of periodization is discussed by Lundbaek 1982.

[2] See especially Mackerras 1989, Dawson 1967, and Etiemble 1988–89 for medieval times to the Enlightenment; Barthold 1947 and Lach 1965 for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generally; Appleton 1951 for seventeenth-century England; Pinot 1932, Maverick 1946, and Guy 1963 for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France; Berger 1990 for the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany; for the nineteenth century, Mason 1939 and Kiernan 1972: chapter 5; for the nineteenth and twentieth century, Decournoy 1970, and on the United States in particular, Isaacs 1980. For bibliographies there is the classic Cordier 1904–08 as well as the more recent Lust 1987, valuable for its annotations on books published before 1850.

for ideas and information about China. Their role lay primarily in bringing such ideas and information together with other intellectual materials in new, more or less credible syntheses that reflected the concerns of their times. Their syntheses in turn shaped the thinking of other writers, including sinologists.

The first part of this chapter attempts to delineate four successive phases that characterized the general evolution of ideas about China in the context of changes in Western intellectual culture and capitalism's global prospects. The second part concentrates on interpretations of the relationship between the structure ascribed to Chinese society and the perceived historical stability of that society.

The wonder of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance

By the late Middle Ages, European lore about China was attached to three distinct place names, namely the Serica of the ancients and the Cathay and Manzi of the medieval travelers who took advantage of the *pax mongolica* and traveled east. Prominent among the works that made China known to the literate elite in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe were Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, the fictitious *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville and Vincent de Beauvais' learned encyclopaedia, the *Speculum Mundi*. These works advised European readers that China was the world's wealthiest kingdom and that its emperor, the Great Khan, was the world's most powerful ruler. They provided the information that the Chinese people were highly skilled and prosperous, that they had their own writing system, and that they were in possession of the Christian scriptures. The Chinese were also said to adhere faithfully to the constitution on which their kingdom had originally been founded and to prefer to remain aloof from other peoples. That last piece of intelligence seems to have caused no hesitation to the early modern European princes, navigators, and merchants who avidly sought avenues for entry into the famously profitable Asian trade. By the early sixteenth century, European predominance in the carrying trade in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea had been established, and the subjugation of the Americas was in full swing. Christopher Columbus himself had used the wealth of the Great Khan and that of Japan to lure Ferdinand and Isabella into funding his venture.

Imagery relating to the Chinese realms became a conventional part of Renaissance literary culture during the period of European maritime expansion. In the mid-sixteenth century, for example, Boiardo and Ariosto assigned notable roles in their respective *Orlando*s to fictitious "Chinese" characters like the ambitious king of Sericana, Gradasso, and

his delicate daughter, Angelica. Such imaginative exoticism was accompanied in the same period by a more distinctly intellectual discourse. Already in the fifteenth century the Renaissance spirit had gone beyond the re-affirmation of ancient Graeco-Roman culture, as can be seen from the wide interests of Cosimo de' Medici. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Guillaume Postel was seeking to integrate all philosophies into an orthodox Catholic framework and thereby to outflank the Church's opponents of various persuasions.[3] Such cosmopolitanism was not without gradations in the degree of respect it accorded other peoples, but the Chinese usually seem to have come out quite well in European estimations. This can be illustrated by Jean Bodin who gave a new extension to the older notion that virtue pertains to the East, when he wrote: "The Spanish have remarked that the Chinese, that most Oriental of peoples, are the most ingenious and the most courteous, and that those of Brasil, the most Occidental, are the most barbarous and cruel."[4] Meanwhile, Montaigne drew on information about diverse societies in order to take distance from Western habits and to suggest new, universal criteria of morality. He too wrote favorably of China and took the opportunity to praise the Imperial censorate in particular:

> In China, the civilization and arts of which kingdom, without commerce with and knowledge of ours, surpass our examples in many branches of excellence, and the history of which shows me how much broader and more diverse the world is than either the ancients or we might grasp, the officers delegated by the Prince to inspect the state of his provinces, as they punish those who have abused their responsibilities, so also do they reward most graciously those who have conducted themselves well, beyond the ordinary and beyond what duty requires of them.[5]

Bodin and Montaigne invoked Chinese examples only cursorily, but other writers in the same period went into more detail. One example was the great Portuguese historian of Asia, João de Barros, who wrote glowingly of Chinese social and political institutions, and praised achievements in the arts and sciences such as the invention of printing and artillery. Barros concluded that Chinese civilization was even superior to that of the ancient Greeks and Romans – praise indeed from a Renaissance humanist, as Boxer has noted.[6] Another cache of admiration for the Middle Kingdom is found in the writings of Giovanni Botero, the influential Italian critic of Machiavelli's political doctrines.

[3] Postel 1543 and 1575; see the analyses of Hentsch 1988: 102–07 and Étiemble 1958–61: 1,201. The closeness of Postel's strategy to that adopted by the Jesuits later is clear.
[4] Bodin 1579: 5, 481.
[5] Montaigne 1979: vol. III, 282. See also Lach 1977: 297.
[6] Barros 1563: 2, chapter 7; cited in Boxer 1981: 106–08.

For Botero, China was the model of a prosperous urban culture, its prosperity being based, in his view, on the skill of its artisans, the importance of its internal waterways, and its access to the sea. The political wisdom of the Chinese, he believed, was shown by the fact that unlike certain European states China placed limits on expansion and refrained from pursuing a course of unbridled aggression.[7]

These few examples may serve to illustrate the admiration for China that was widespread in Europe in the sixteenth century. The sources of information available to Western authors about China at this time were very limited,[8] but a consensus of positive opinion seems to have formed on the basis of ideas concerning the economic prosperity of the Empire, its social and political organization, and the ingenuity of its people.

Mixed opinions in the seventeenth century and the early Enlightenment

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, by contrast, interpretations of Chinese civilization were taken up as weapons in some of the great cultural debates of the age in Europe. This entailed a greater variation in evaluations of China, though not always greater objectivity. As evidence of this, one can refer to the opinions of Francis Bacon. Bacon would seem to have known that many of the most important discoveries and inventions that he thought made modern Europe more learned than antiquity had originated in China,[9] but he nevertheless judged his Chinese contemporaries to be a "curious, ignorant, fearful, foolish nation," and to have been made so by the imperial law that excluded foreigners from entering the kingdom without permission – perhaps not a surprising assessment coming from a leading light in a kingdom with mercantile aspirations in Asia.[10]

To be sure, the aspects of Chinese civilization that commanded European respect in the sixteenth century generally continued still to do so in the next century. In particular, enthusiasm about China's social and political philosophy seems to have become even more widespread. The religious discord and wars that had racked Europe for over a

[7] Waley and Waley 1956: 38, 142, 266–69; Botero 1630: 586, 595–96. Lach (1977: 238–42, 245–49) points out that Botero's later work remained favorable to China, though Jesuit influence probably made him more critical.

[8] Mendoza's (1585) two-volume work, commissioned by Philip II of Spain and available in Spanish in 1585, was the first major European publication devoted solely to China. By 1614 there were twenty-eight editions, and translations in seven major European languages.

[9] See, e.g., Bacon 1905, bk 1: 292, 300, aphorisms 109, 110, 129.

[10] Ibid.: 720.

hundred years made many thinkers well disposed toward the non-sectarian civil order they saw in China. Recommending Chinese example in 1624, Michel Baudier wrote:

> Men's care for their persons causes [them] to seek in the Indies, and throughout the Orient, drugs and remedies which purge the body of maladies which afflict it. And this enterprise [also] draws forth from the lore of such oriental regions, lessons which, when exposed to the eyes of the public and imitated, are able to dissipate certain disorders and to heal in the spirits of the age the passions which disturb them.[11]

Not much later François La Mothe le Vayer associated Socrates and Confucius as paragons of natural religion and morality,[12] and brought the theme of the praiseworthy scholar official into the mainstream of skeptical thought in the absolutist era. Yet even such a devout Catholic writer as Athanasius Kircher could speak of the Chinese state as the realization of Plato's Republic.[13] At the behest of Richelieu, La Mothe le Vayer set himself against the Jansenist idea that original sin made it impossible to lead a moral life without the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and he praised the moral doctrines of Buddhism and of contemporary Confucianism. His commitment to rational morality based primarily on human experience and intellectual values rather than on revealed truth and ecclesiastical sanction was something of a challenge to the social and political position of the Church in France.[14] But this was not the only cause in which the image of China was enlisted.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, one of the most important lessons drawn from China was that politics there amounted to nothing more nor less than rational, collective morality. This idea was helpful for those who wished to uphold the mystique of governance and repudiate the Machiavellian separation of politics and morality. Likewise, the example of a civil service whose officials were chosen for distinction in learning, rather than on the basis of hereditary or estate privilege served to legitimate a greater role for the intellectual elite within European state structures. Now the Jesuits were early modern Europe's main purveyors of information about China, and they themselves purported to be such an elite within the Church. Their accounts of China lent ideological support not only to the consolidation of absolutism generally, but also to the political roles they themselves were playing in Bourbon France and the Hapsburg domains. However, such accounts were also to be used somewhat subversively, since Chinese civil order seemed to be based on a "philosophical" moderation free of

[11] Baudier 1624: Préface; Guy 1963: 97–98.

[12] Étiemble 1976: 42. [13] Kircher 1667: 166.

[14] On La Mothe, see Guy 1963: 118–22, and Étiemble 1966: 48–49.

the religious partisanship in politics that had occasioned so much conflict and bloodshed in Europe.

The Jesuits' near monopoly of the China mission led them, on the one hand, to argue that the Chinese literati, while well disposed to Christian thought, were intelligent and therefore required sophisticated – i.e., Jesuit – missionaries. On the other hand, their conviction that the Chinese should be converted led them to characterize the neo-Confucianism dominant among contemporary officials as atheistic, and to denounce various strands of Chinese thought as materialistic.[15] From such Jesuit descriptions other thinkers drew their own conclusions. In the last three decades of the seventeenth century, the prestige of much of Chinese culture remained high in Europe, and the various components of the Jesuit China-image were taken over by many thinkers including the opponents of the Society. However, the Jesuits were increasingly forced to defend themselves on several fronts in the context of the Chinese Rites Controversy: against other factions of the Roman Church in Europe – particularly the Jansenists and the Société des Missions Étrangères, who objected to allegedly lax Jesuit theology as well as to the Society's political power; against competing missionary Orders which supported a stronger campaign of proselytism in China; and, finally, against a group toward which the Jesuits and their enemies in the Church shared hostility, namely, the Libertines, or Free-thinkers, who argued against the political position of the Church in Europe and used the Chinese example to temper belief in certain Christian doctrines.

One such doctrine was the account of the origins of mankind in the Book of Genesis. This was called into question by means of comparisons with the chronologies of non-Biblical peoples.[16] As Edwin Van Kley has said, "perhaps the most serious challenge to the traditional scheme of world history and the factor most instrumental in changing that scheme was the discovery of ancient Chinese history."[17] In 1659, one year after the publication of the Jesuit Martini's *Decas sinicae historiae*, the Dutch

[15] For example, Couplet's introduction to Intorcetta 1687 treated the neo-Confucians as *atheo-politici*, an identification probably related to the seventeenth-century perception of atheism and materialism in the philosophy of Spinoza. Another common association during this period was that of Stoicism and Chinese thought, as in the 1744 quotation from Brücker cited in Needham 1956: 476. The Jesuits, like the other missionary groups, considered Buddhism and Taoism to be idolatrous.

[16] Lach (1977: 414–15) observes that Joseph Scaliger, the father of European historical chronology, was inspired by the study of Asian history and languages. His writings exerted a strong influence on later writers including Hugo Grotius and his associate Gerhard Vossius, Isaac's father.

[17] Van Kley 1971: 362.

historian Isaac Vossius used that work to argue[18] that the Chinese historical annals were superior to the Biblical chronology and that the flood of Noah had not been universal. The views of Vossius and other Libertines were quickly contested by orthodox religious authors keen to re-assert the authority of the Pentateuch and the historical status of the ancient Hebrews. Yet even such figures had to take the Chinese chronology seriously. This was partly because of the antiquity of the events it included (which led John Webb to claim that China had been peopled before Babel[19]), and also because of the Chinese chronology's relative credibility based on datings that were often supported by astronomical observations.[20] Debates on these points concerning the roles of China and the east Mediterranean in world history lasted well into the eighteenth century. In these debates, attempts were made to identify Chinese counterparts with significant Biblical personalities, and three trends developed which would be of importance for later historiography. The first was an increasingly critical, de-sacralizing attitude toward historical sources, whether Biblical or Chinese. The second was a skeptical readiness to treat the fabulous as myth. A third trend, one that came to mark the entire early Enlightenment, was a relativization of Western historical experience and in particular an acceptance of the restricted validity of Judaeo-Christian culture. All three reinforced the broadening of intellectual and cultural horizons typical of the Enlightenment and of the expansion of northern Europe's increasingly global prospects.

In addition to affecting historical conceptions of the world, China inspired secular political theoreticians who were seeking a practical political morality unencumbered by the metaphysical dogmas that had so enflamed the passions of previous generations of Europeans. An example in the late seventeenth century was Gassendi's disciple François Bernier, one-time physician to the Great Moghul and an adviser to Colbert. His negative characterization of the nature of Indian society are well known, not least because of the support Karl Marx later accorded them when developing his idea of an Asiatic mode of production. However, Bernier himself gave vastly different pictures of India and China, for he recommended as a model of virtuous rule the Chinese political order based upon filial piety and mutual respect between ruler and subject. Referring to the durability of Chinese government, he

[18] Vossius was influenced by the ideas of La Peyrère who in 1655 had mentioned the Chinese in passing as one of the peoples whose history could be reconciled with Genesis only by recourse to his thesis of a pre-Adamite race; see Guy 1963: 109–12.

[19] Webb 1667: 60–62. On Webb's sinophilia, see Ch'en Shou-Yi 1935–36.

[20] Comparison of dates with the Chinese chronology was a major factor influencing acceptance of the Septuagint instead of the Vulgate as the standard version of Bible history.

maintained in 1688 that the rationality of the Confucian political tradition had enabled the Chinese to surpass all other peoples in "virtue, wisdom, prudence, good faith, sincerity, charity, gentleness, honesty, civility, gravity, modesty and obedience to the Celestial order."[21] Such praise of Confucian doctrines and practice was similarly shared at about the same time in Britain by Sir William Temple, probably the greatest of the English Sinophiles. He wrote in 1690 that:

> the kingdom of China seems to be framed and policed with the utmost force and reach of human wisdom, reason and contrivance; and in practice to excel the very speculations of other men, and all those imaginary schemes of the European wits, the institutions of Xenophon, the republic of Plato, the Utopias, or Oceanas, of our modern writers.[22]

In a similar vein, Leibniz drew on China's political reputation in formulating his ideas of accommodation and reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics, just as he drew on its reputation for ancient wisdom in publicizing his version of the calculus.[23]

Leibniz's "maximalist" ecumenical program coincided roughly with John Locke's and Pierre Bayle's advocacy of religious tolerance in the 1680s. Of the three, only Bayle argued that atheists should be allowed civil rights, and long-standing Chinese example provided him with powerful evidence for his argument that religious toleration was a viable principle of government. Conversely, when the Edict of Nantes was revoked, the Kangxi emperor's permission for Catholicism to be practiced enabled Bayle to reproach the French Church and state alike for hypocrisy on the grounds that, while urging toleration of Christianity abroad, they proceeded to repress creeds other than their own at home. Bayle's reflection supported the idea, shared by Locke, that intolerance and fanaticism constituted threats to social harmony and therefore ought not to be tolerated, in China or elsewhere.[24] Later, Bayle cited Chinese "atheism" in rejecting the argument for God's existence based on "universal consent" and in maintaining that morality is logically independent of religious belief in a transcendent God.[25]

Such twists to the Jesuits' depictions of China poured oil on the

[21] Bernier 1689.

[22] From "Of Heroic Virtue" in Temple 1720: vol. I, 203; Appleton 1951: 43 notes that the Dutch diplomat Johan Nieuhof was Temple's main source.

[23] On Leibniz' ideas about China, see especially Mungello 1977; Étiemble 1988–89: vol. II, chapters 26–30; and Elster 1975: 239–50, which discusses arguments raised in *SCC*, vol. II concerning a possible transmission of holistic positions in philosophy from China to Europe via Leibniz. Elster argues that Leibniz was as far from neo-Confucianism as he was from European scholasticism.

[24] Bayle 1686a: vol. I, 184; and Berger 1990: 61 on Bayle's depiction of China.

[25] Pinot 1932: 321–28. The relation of Chinese and other extra-European notions to the development of Enlightenment atheism is explored by Kors 1990.

flames of the Chinese Rites Controversy,[26] the vehement polemic in which the Society of Jesus and its ecclesiastical opponents had been engaged since the mid-seventeenth century. The Jesuits' views were linked to their mission strategy; among the most notable of these were the ideas that Confucianism retained elements of an ancient knowledge of the true God, that the Chinese practiced an exemplary morality[27] and that Confucian ceremonies were of a social and political, and not of a religious, nature. The Jesuits lost a major battle in the Rites Controversy in 1700 when the theological faculty of the Sorbonne condemned several of their positions. In the following decades they fought an ideological rear-guard action for the reversal of the condemnations, but the judgments of the Sorbonne were upheld in later papal judgments. Part of the reason why papal authority went against the Society's positions was that by this time the Vatican had become worried about Jesuit gallicanism. Consequently, rituals that were integral to Chinese social life – such as those by which ancestors were remembered and honored – were judged to be pagan and inimical to Christian beliefs and practices. The condemnations were a severe blow to China's reputation in establishment circles in Catholic Europe during the first half of the eighteenth century.

The connection between the attack on Chinese religion and philosophy and that on the Chinese chronology was well summed up by Eusèbe Renaudot, a major protagonist in the Rites Controversy, who had polemicized against both Vossius and the Jesuits. He thought:

> What we are taught by Jesus Christ is too well grounded to want the concurrence of Chinese Philosophy; and if any believe it may perfect the mind and reform the manners, though they know nothing thereof but by paraphrases, as obscure as the Text; they are advised to inquire what may be objected to the Antiquity of this Proud Nation, to their History and Philosophy.[28]

In 1733 Renaudot's work was translated in England, where protests had already been registered against the use the Libertines made of Chinese example. In 1694, William Wotton, commissioned by the Royal Society to combat Sir William Temple's praise of "ancient" learning, judged the teachings of Confucius (and Mohammed) pitifully lower than those of Jesus.[29] Wotton's view of the Chinese as grossly deficient

[26] On the Rites Controversy see Pinot 1932: 71–140; Rule 1986: 70– 149; Rowbotham 1942: 119–75; Cummins (ed. and tr.) 1962: xxxviii–lxiv.

[27] As stated, for example, in Le Comte 1696: vol. II, 141.

[28] Renaudot 1733: 234.

[29] Wotton 1694: 145. On the "Broad Church" appropriation of the new science see M. Jacob 1976. Adas 1989 documents assessments of the scientific records and capacities of non-European peoples by missionaries and other Western travelers. His argument that such assessments were crucial in the formation of general assessments of

in the natural sciences and medicine partly reflected the Newtonian vision of a complementarity between the "new" science and specifically Christian doctrine. Bolingbroke, after an initial enthusiasm for China, later disapproved of the literati as atheists and of the common people as immersed in Buddhist and Daoist superstition.[30] In early eighteenth-century Britain, such views contrasted sharply with the ideas of the anti-clerical radicals, John Toland and Matthew Tindal. In *Christianity as Old as Creation*, Tindal argued that the natural religion of the original Christians had been corrupted by priests and the introduction of superstitious beliefs. With a provocative twist of cosmopolitanism, he held that he was "so far from thinking the maxims of Confucius and Jesus Christ differ, that I think the plain and simple maxims of the former, will help to illustrate the more obscure ones of the latter, accommodated to the then way of speaking."[31] Establishment dismissal of the radicals' views showed the continued importance of Christianity in the post-1688 British social and political order based on a coincidence of middle class and aristocratic interests.

In France, the situation was different: political antagonisms remained sharper, and cultural conflict more intense. Voltaire for once defended the Jesuits and sharply criticized the Church's condemnation of the Order over the Chinese Rites Controversy. He himself was willing to argue that the Chinese had quite simply "perfected Moral science,"[32] and he gave a reasonably accurate summary of the importance of China for the early French Enlightenment when he commented: "In all the discoveries of the East, the potentates of Europe and the men of commerce who have enriched them have been in search only of wealth. The *philosophes* have discovered there a new moral and physical universe."[33] One *philosophe* to whom Voltaire might well have been referring was Louis XIV's distinguished minister, Marshal Vauban. In the early eighteenth century he cited Chinese example in support of two of his new policy measures, namely, the first national census to be taken in modern Europe, and his reform of the chaotic French tax system through the institution of a single general tax reminiscent of the Ming single-whip system.[34] Similarly, Louis XV's reformist Controller-General, Étienne Silhouette, was an avid sinophile who praised the standardized Chinese taxation system. Though he was no doubt idealistic in this, as he was in describing Chinese foreign trade, his depiction of Confucian emphasis

such peoples is well taken, but should not obscure the insight that European attitudes toward non-Christian religions also played a crucial role in this respect from the outset.

[30] Bolingbroke 1841: vol. IV, 266–67.
[31] Tindal 1730: 296.
[32] Voltaire 1877–85: vol. XVI, 85.
[33] Ibid., vol. XII, 367.
[34] Vauban 1698: 124.

on agriculture did lend intellectual weight to his policies.[35] After him, from the late 1750s until the 1770s, China served as a model for François Quesnay and other Physiocrats, who in a prelude to the classical capitalist economic analyses of Smith and Ricardo reestablished production, or more specifically (in line with Confucian thought) agricultural production, as the foundation of their economic theory.[36]

The absolutist position of the Physiocrats constituted a late, perhaps extreme, case of the then common trope of taking Chinese and Egyptian inspiration in framing eighteenth-century ideals of enlightened government. At Versailles Louis XV performed the ritual spring plowing that was dictated by tradition as a duty of the emperor of China.[37] In England the mandarinate was contrasted favorably with Robert Walpole's patronage network.[38] Even the *Encyclopédie* observed that:

> It is certain that all Nations cultivate Science, though some do so more than others; but there is none in which knowledge is more highly esteemed than with the Chinese. Amongst this people one cannot attain the least [State] position unless one is a scholar, at least in comparison to the ordinary people of the nation.... It is not sufficient amongst them to have the reputation of a scholar, it is necessary really to be one in order to achieve dignities and honors.[39]

Among political theorists, Christian Wolff subscribed to the tradition of admiring Chinese statecraft for the importance it accorded to philosophical learning, and held that, despite certain flaws in the Chinese system, no more "illustrious Example" of philosophical government could "anywhere be found."[40] Though Montesquieu firmly parted company with the sinophiles in 1748 when he judged Chinese government to be a form of despotism, China continued to be recommended for its political institutions well into the third quarter of the century. Montesquieu's assessment was contested in France by Voltaire and Quesnay, and in Germany his view was criticized by J. H. G. von Justi who favored a Confucian-style civil service and deemed China a "constitutionally limited monarchy."[41]

Throughout this period the perceived antiquity and continuity of

[35] Silhouette 1729; 1764; on which see Maverick 1946: 27–33.
[36] Hudson 1931: 322; M. Bernal 1987b: 42, 174.
[37] The Chinese ceremony had been recounted in du Halde 1735 (vol. II: 72), and was even praised by Montesquieu in *De l'Esprit des Lois* (bk 10: 228). Louis XV undertook the ritual plowing at the suggestion of Quesnay made through La Pompadour; see Reichwein 1925: 106. Joseph II of Austria followed suit and did a similar harvest plowing in 1769. Budde *et al.* (eds.) 1985 describes the spate of late eighteenth-century books recounting the European imitations and the Chinese prototype.
[38] For example, Budgell 1731; see also T. C. Fan 1949; and Appleton 1951: 125–27.
[39] Diderot and D'Alembert 1751–80: vol. II, 232.
[40] Wolff 1726; cited in Lach 1977: 570–73.
[41] Justi 1762: 52.

Chinese institutions remained important pillars of the country's general reputation.[42] As interest in universal history developed in tandem with increases in Europe's economic and political power internationally, three historiographical trends regarding China emerged. Though all were to some extent Eurocentric, they were so to different degrees and in different ways. The first was frankly dismissive, and can be exemplified in the words of Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy, whose insights into the geographically restricted scope of Biblical history went in the right direction, but who found East Asian history to be "a study of mere curiosity which does not contain much profit, because these peoples have never had much connection with any of those whose history is necessary or useful to us."[43] A second, diffusionist school followed the course set by the seventeenth-century Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher and argued that Chinese culture was derived historically from Mediterranean and especially from Egyptian civilization.[44] A third trend allotted China an important role of its own in world history, but generally restricted this role to the beginnings of political history. The Comte de Boulainvilliers, a prominent spokesman of the French reformists at the turn of the eighteenth century, followed Libertine convention by starting his world history with a chapter on China.[45] Thereafter, the influential world histories of Pretot, Hase, and Shuckford (published respectively in France, Germany, and England) began by treating China, rather than Assyria or Egypt, as the most ancient State on earth.[46] In 1754 Voltaire made the most thorough attempt so far to integrate China into the global historical process. He gave China pride of place in his *Essai sur les moeurs* by devoting to that country his first and penultimate chapters, as well as bringing it into several intermediate ones.[47] Unfortunately, few authors in the new literature dealing with world history followed him in incorporating Chinese developments into their narratives, though the practice of treating China simply at the beginning of history became more and more conventional.

[42] This was so despite the fact that heavy criticism was being leveled at traditional Chinese astronomy, which had been invoked in attacks on the Biblical chronology and on the priority of the ancient Hebrews.

[43] Lenglet-Dufresnoys 1772: bk 9, 81; see also Pinot 1932: 242–44 and Van Kley 1971: 380.

[44] See Baltrusaitis 1960: 226–32; also Needham 1954: 38.

[45] See R. Simon 1940: 312.

[46] Pretot 1753 and Hase 1743. Samuel Shuckford 1728, originally published 1731–37, went through four editions by 1818.

[47] Voltaire 1963; Fueter 1914: 444 – like many other authors – has deemed this the first truly universal history. Étiemble 1958–61: 61–63 and Boxer 1961: 316 stress the importance of Voltaire's use of Chinese chronology as a landmark in establishing the fallibility of the Bible as an historical source.

Meanwhile, the early eighteenth century witnessed contradictory images of China being publicized in the newly emerging genre of the novel. Daniel Defoe, responsible for penning particularly vitriolic attacks on the country's culture, depicted Chinese religion as "ridiculous folly," the mandarins as intolerably proud, and the masses as living in a poverty more abject than that of native Americans.[48] Defoe's dim view of China would become standard wisdom in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth it was out of tune with the mood of the many fictional writers who found it handy to use a Chinese yardstick in order to take critical measure of European manners, a technique which eventually gave birth to the figure of the cosmopolitan Chinese traveler. The prime example of this genre in English is *The Citizen of the World* by Oliver Goldsmith. Goldsmith followed the lead of the Marquis d'Argens' *Lettres Chinoises*, a work that anticipated Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* in using Chinese imagery to express an irreverently libertarian attitude toward Christian sexual conventions.[49] Brunetière (1906) long ago cited d'Argens' work as representing the "definitive annexation" of discourse about China to the domain of Orientalism. Seen from one angle, these works might be taken to illustrate Edward Said's point that the reduction of "the Orient" to the passive function of a set of symbols opened it to manipulation according to the changing interests of Western power.[50]

It would nevertheless be simplistic to infer that the only tendency at work throughout the Enlightenment was a manipulative fixation of images, for communication between China and Europe was also effecting a transmission of knowledge about Chinese civilization into European society. This transmission made possible the assimilation of new cultural elements that were to be involved in the remolding of patterns of thought and material culture there. The most tangible examples of such influence are in the realm of material culture. Honour (1961) and Impey (1977) have surveyed the Chinoiserie vogue that culminated in this period when Chinese porcelains, lacquers, textiles, wallpapers, and tea came into style in Portugal, the Netherlands, France, England, Italy, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. Chinese styles also became fashionable (in adulterated form) about the same time in architecture, furniture, and garden design.[51] Such introductions

[48] Defoe 1868: 547–60; also, on Chinese religion, Defoe 1840–03: 42. For further discussion see Ch'en Shou-Yi 1928: chapter 3, and Appleton 1951: chapter 4.

[49] Étiemble 1964: 63–64; see also Étiemble 1988–89 (vol. II: chapters 5, 6) on Chinese erotic lore as a means of challenging Western sexual conventions; and Berger (1990: 148ff) on d'Argens' overall use of China.

[50] Said 1978.

[51] On gardens, see for example Loehr 1976 and Sirén 1950. A first great admirer of the

played an integral role in the evolution of European tastes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the end of the seventeenth, Chinoiserie and Gothic styles were linked in an assault upon the austere symmetry of aesthetic neo-classicism.

The decline of China's cultural reputation from the mid-eighteenth century

By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, tendencies to discount Chinese culture were becoming increasingly predominant. The attacks on the Chinese philosophical and religious traditions in the Rites Controversy and Montesquieu's judgment in *De l'Esprit des Lois* that China's government was essentially despotic had represented important steps in discrediting China in European eyes. Similarly, by the middle of the century the alliance between the Gothic and Chinese styles in the aesthetic field was breaking down. Chinoiserie became increasingly degraded and intermingled with the Baroque. It lost ground, on the one hand, to the Gothic style and, on the other, to a renewed respect for the neo-classical. Horace Walpole, a prominent observer of contemporary English fashion, boasted that in the 1760s he was working conversions from Chinoiserie to Gothic.[52] At about the same time, the German historian and philosopher of art, Johann Winckelmann, praised ancient Greek artistic tradition for having progressed to the point of attaining the true ideal of beauty, unlike those of "Oriental" peoples which had stagnated. He held Chinese forms of art in low regard, on the grounds that they differed substantially from the Greek "ideal" and that Chinese faces, being disagreeable "deviations" from the "standard," provided inferior models for sculpture.[53]

Anyone who studies the evolution of ideas about China is soon struck by the radical reversal of Western judgments about almost all aspects of Chinese culture which took place from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-

Chinese garden was William Temple, whom we have mentioned above; later on, William Chambers (1757 and 1772) advocated the same cause, as well as that of Chinese architecture generally.

In the area of furniture design Thomas Chippendale was perhaps the most distinguished of many who followed the Chinese mode. See Reichwein 1925: 45ff. on wallpapers.

From the late seventeenth- to the mid-nineteenth-century tea drinking seems to have spread in line with the fall of prices and according to a fairly straightforward "trickle down" tendency from the wealthy to the working classes in Holland, England, Germany, and Russia; on the nineteenth-century promotion of tea by the Russian temperance reformers, see Smith and Christian 1984: 228–47.

[52] Walpole 1903–25: vol. XII, 10–11.

[53] Winckelmann 1850: 32, 38. On the lack of progress of the "Orient," see Winckelmann 1766: 29, 132.

nineteenth century. Of course, as we have already seen, quite a number of writers had negative opinions of China in earlier times, and even in the nineteenth century one finds positive assessments. What we are concerned with then is a change in the balance of opinion.[54] This change accompanied a definite shift in emphasis and approach, in the sense that discussion in the earlier period often focused on positive implications of Chinese culture for the West, whereas emphasis in the late eighteenth century moved increasingly to explaining how aspects of China deviated from an alleged Western model. In the period, roughly speaking, from 1600 to 1750, the invocation of China by European writers often involved a belief that Chinese history and civilization, like those of ancient Egypt, might hold certain lessons that could be appreciated and applied for the enhancement of Western culture. In the period from about 1750 until the years between the two world wars, another consensus was increasingly consolidated based on an assumption among social thinkers that Western civilization (as this was variously construed) dated back to ancient Greece and that this alone could be considered as "universally" valid.

It is appropriate to consider some possible reasons for this shift in approaches as it concerned ideas about China. Perhaps because of the tangible nature of Chinoiserie, one argument often adduced for the decline in China's reputation has been an art-historical one, namely, that tastes and fashions are by their nature bound to change and that the Enlightenment vogue for forms of Chinese culture was thus bound to fall into decline.[55] While there may be some truth to this, it is too vague to be fully satisfactory. Another explanation of the shift is that Western knowledge of China changed qualitatively, moving from myth to knowledge. When one examines the history of specialist writings on China, it is difficult on internal disciplinary grounds to sustain the conventional argument that the primary sources – accounts by missionaries, diplomats, and merchants who visited the country, or by scholars who studied it professionally – were "ideological" until the mid-eighteenth century and then became "scientific" in the nineteenth.[56] That argument is further weakened by the fact that between approximately 1750 and 1880 there were dramatic falls in Western estimations not only of the Chinese, but also of the ancient Egyptians and of Semitic peoples generally. Indeed the reputations of most non-Western peoples declined in Western eyes at this time. This coincidence constitutes *prima facie* evidence for doubting that what was at stake was simply a matter of

[54] Compare Dawson 1967: 132–34.

[55] For example, Appleton 1951: 172–73.

[56] This case is made in Blue 1988: chapter 3.

growing objectivity regarding China. It is thus worthwhile to examine the shift in the balance of Western views in more concrete terms related to social and cultural tendencies within Western culture, and in terms of the shifts in European power worldwide.

Among authors who have written on this subject Louis Dermigny attempted to place the shift of views regarding China within the field of social history, and in particular within the development of capitalism.[57] In his view, enthusiasm for China was a typical characteristic of the world view of the bourgeoisie in several European countries when that class was in the ascendent and its prospects were convergent with those of monarchs who were promoting the centralization of their realms and trade, but at a time when the bourgeoisie had not yet established its own social hegemony. However, once bourgeois hegemony came to be established at the national level, enthusiasm for China became increasingly redundant. The limits that the policies of the centralized dynastic state had placed on the growth of commercial profits were then increasingly resented, and the bourgeoisie consequently discarded its earlier admiration for China and began to replace it with sinophobic ideas.[58] There is much to recommend this interpretation, since it provides a context for the main tendencies in attitudes toward China, while allowing one to understand lags in the decline of sinophilia in different countries, a decline manifest rather earlier in the Netherlands and England, and somewhat later in France and Germany. Dermigny's thesis can be strengthened if one revises it so as to take account of two further phenomena. The first is the growing disenchantment felt by European merchants directly engaged in trade with China. This manifested itself from the middle of the seventeenth century as a growing disdain for certain elements of Chinese society, and especially for Chinese merchants and the Manchu government that placed official constraints on trade. To some extent this disenchantment coincided with the assertion of bourgeois hegemony within Europe, and especially in the Netherlands and England. Merchants engaged in trade with China formed only one segment of the European bourgeoisie, however, and it took some time for their views about China to spread to the bulk of that class. Second, it is clear that the strongest expressions of enthusiasm for China during the period 1650–1770 came not from merchants, but rather from intellectuals. This point can be accommodated to Dermigny's interpretation by

[57] Hudson 1931: 326–28, and Guy 1963: chapter 8 *passim*, have also considered this question briefly.

[58] Dermigny 1964a: vol. I, 32–43.

means of the conventional distinction between the membership of a class and the spokesmen of that class.

At the same time, this second point seems serious enough to merit another hypothesis, perhaps parallel to Dermigny's, regarding the social significance of the rise and fall of the "China vogue." One might argue that sinophilia was characteristic of those early modern intellectuals who supported limitations on the privileges of the hereditary nobility and/or on those of the Church, and who favored revisions to orthodox Christian doctrine. Such ideas then provoked strong reactions within the churches and among the hereditary nobility. In France, opposition to "Chinese" models of state centralization then emerged among the reformist aristocracy and in the *parlemens*, which retained a Jansenist tint down to the fall of the *ancien régime*. In the Protestant Netherlands and England, on the other hand, where revolutionary crises had eventually resulted in social-political pacts in which the middle classes and the aristocracy were joined together, arguments for deflating the hereditary nobility appeared politically outmoded or impertinent from the elite point of view.

In the long run, the great expansion of Western European productive and scientific forces in the Industrial Revolution provided strong reinforcement to ideas of European superiority. The comparative speed of European progress already in the eighteenth century was so remarkable that it led one writer to exclaim quite accurately: "The peoples of the Orient were formerly quite superior to our Western peoples, in all the arts of the mind and of the hand. But how we have made up for lost time!"[59] When the same author jumped from recent real achievements of the West to the conclusion that the "Oriental peoples" had to be considered only "barbarians, or children, despite their antiquity," he used two clichés that were typical of the superiority complex characteristic of European colonialism and imperialism. It was perhaps hardly surprising that China, a country not yet subordinated to colonial domination, became the object of heavy ideological onslaught as India was being brought under Western control politically and militarily.

The shift in late eighteenth-century evaluations of Chinese society and civilization seems to have resulted not so much from any new empirical knowledge about the country, but rather from changes in Western perspectives. The main shift in the balance of opinion came about during the period from the decline of the Jesuit mission and before the advent of the nineteenth-century missions. The new consensus of European opinion hostile to China seems to have been

[59] Diderot and D'Alembert (eds.) 1751–80: vol. VII, 455 ("Japon").

consolidated largely on the basis of the views propounded by social thinkers who were not specialists on China. Such thinkers drew on the negative depictions of the country that were found in the reports of earlier missionaries and merchants,[60] but much of the force of their criticism of Chinese civilization lay in the way they fitted China into their own theories about society and history.

Probably the most important thematic innovation behind the shift toward sinophobia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the new emphasis given to the idea of progress, a notion that was developed in such a manner as to set European nations categorically above others. The notion of the historical stagnation of Chinese society was linked in particular to judgments about the nature of the Chinese language and of Chinese geography. Earlier in the century, Vico had reasoned that China's "monosyllabic" language and "hieroglyphic" writing system implied that the country had never passed beyond the primitive, heroic stage at the infancy of mankind, probably on account of its geographical "isolation."[61] Similarly, David Hume believed that the Chinese had the greatest uniformity of character imaginable, and he accounted for this in terms of their common language and their country's geography. In his view, the natural divisions of Europe, and originally of Greece, had resulted at one level in a variety of political regimes and at another in achievement in the sciences and arts, whereas the lack of geographical divisions in China had led to stagnation in the sciences.[62] Dr Johnson for his part invoked the notion of historical progress to dismiss the Chinese writing system in his elderly years. "They have not an alphabet," he said to Boswell. "They have not been able to form what all other nations have formed.'[63] Though Chinese had been spoken well of in earlier linguistic debates, from the late eighteenth century it fell generally afoul of the new philology, a major thrust of which was to demonstrate the spiritual superiority of progressive Indo-Europeans. One examplar of this tendency early in the nineteenth century was Wilhelm von Humboldt, who assigned Chinese an intermediate rank between the barbarian and the "most perfect" languages (namely, Greek, Latin and German). He argued in 1826 that the Chinese language "stops at a point where it is given for languages to continue their progressive march, and it is already through this that it

[60] Their distaste for China contrasted with the relatively positive assessment of the academic sinologist Abel Rémusat in the early nineteenth century. See, e.g., Rémusat 1825a, 1825b.

[61] Daffino 1957: 10–14.

[62] Hume 1854: 130–31, 225.

[63] Boswell 1887: vol. III, 386. On the evolution of Johnson's ideas about China, T. C. Fan (1945) is the basic reference.

remains, according to my deepest conviction, beneath those languages which have articulate grammatical forms."[64] At about the same time, Shelley too praised the ancient Greeks and maintained that without them modern Europe would be faced with the same "stagnant and miserable state of social institutions as China and Japan."[65]

In addition to the idea of progress, one discerns several other notions developed in the late Enlightenment that were important in bringing about the shift away from admiration for China. For example, many late Enlightenment writers were prone to follow Montesquieu's lead in classifying China as a despotism and consequently in taking a dismissive attitude toward Chinese government and Chinese civilization generally.[66] In addition, Rousseau and Winckelmann can be seen as precursors of Romantic sinophobia in their portrayal of particular aspects of Chinese civilization as "unnatural." Rousseau, for example, cited China as a decisive demonstration of his proposition that civilization corrupts.[67] Furthermore, praise of China wounded Christian pride and continued to provoke an anti-pagan reaction as it had done during the Rites Controversy. "Is not the whole panegyric," asked John Wesley, "a blow at the root of Christianity, insinuating all along that there are no Christians in the world so virtuous as these heathens?"[68] The established notions of despotism, paganism, and the "unnatural" came to be commonly applied to China in the latter half of the eighteenth century, as was the emerging idea of innate racial character that would come into greater prominence in the following century.[69] These notions, in the forms in which they were formulated in the late Enlightenment, were important ideological weapons in the campaign to discredit the China vogue.

One key sinophobe in the late eighteenth century was J. G. Herder[70] whose scornful assessment of the Chinese *Volksgeist* or "racial character" is treated below. Still more intense disdain was expressed by the English essayist Thomas De Quincey, who envisioned a gulf that separated

[64] Humboldt 1906: vol. V, 290–91, 294, 299–300.

[65] From the "Preface" to *Hellas* (1821); Shelley 1970: 447.

[66] On Montesquieu's analyses of China, see Etiemble 1988–89: vol. II, chapter 3, with further bibliography.

[67] In the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* he used the Manchu conquest of China as evidence that the sciences and arts corrupt public morality and patriotism; Rousseau 1971: 42.

[68] Wesley 1909–16: vol. VI, 187.

[69] The genesis of the notion of four or five biologically distinct races can be placed in the late seventeenth century; Olender (ed.) 1981: 39–40. However, it was during the eighteenth century that this idea began to solidly congeal, as geographical determinist explanations of human diversity were called into question.

[70] See Herder 1800: 311 and Hsia (ed.) 1985: 138–39.

Europeans and Chinese: "The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, etc., is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed."[71]

Not long thereafter, the rival philosophers Hegel and Schelling shared and passed on to their followers a similar attitude, which they expressed in typically absolute terms. Schelling gave a representative sample of their view when he wrote:

> China lies in the beginning of history, [but] only to the extent that it has given up all movement. Indeed, the condition of humankind as we think it was before all history is in the Chinese condition fixed, or rather exists in it only in paralyzed form, and thus in fact is no longer captured in its *original* state. Chinese consciousness is no longer the primitive condition itself, but only a dead copy of it, like its mummy.[72]

Ideas like this were essential to making China a symbol of stagnation for Western thinkers across the political spectrum throughout the nineteenth century.[73] China's alleged non-progressiveness can be considered the dominant component in the Western image of the country at least until the downfall of the Qing. This meant, among other things, that Western writers often treated traditional Chinese culture as fundamentally similar to the cultures of the Egyptians and Romans in antiquity and to that of the Jews.

The stress on the alleged historical stagnation of Chinese society brought into discredit the older idea that Westerners might ever have learnt anything from Chinese social practice.[74] Auguste Comte voiced a typically nineteenth-century feeling of superiority when, in opposing himself explicitly to the *philosophes*, he maintained that a scientific approach to history should restrict itself to the nations of Europe, who constituted the avant-garde of the human race.[75] Similarly in 1856, just four generations after the Physiocrats, Tocqueville dismissed as utopian "ecstasies" their admiration for Chinese policies. He wrote:

> it is no exaggeration to say that not one of them [the Physiocrats] fails, in some part of his writings, to voice an enthusiasm for China and all things Chinese. As a matter of fact China was an almost unknown country in those days, and what they wrote about it was absurd to a degree. That unenlightened, barbarian government which lets itself be manipulated by a handful of Europeans was held up as a model to the world.[76]

[71] De Quincey 1885: 138, entry for May, 1818.
[72] Hsia (ed.) 1985: 229–30.
[73] The consensus in Germany was documented many years ago in Rose 1951.
[74] Even at this period these barriers were not completely impermeable, for Chinese example seems to have provided the conscious inspiration for one of the major political innovations of the nineteenth century, the introduction in Britain and the United States of the civil service based on competitive examinations. Evidence of Chinese influence has been presented by Teng Ssu-yü (1943) and Y. Z. Chang (1947).
[75] Comte 1864: vol. V, 7–8.

For Tocqueville to hold against the Physiocrats their ignorance of the fact that China would "let itself be manipulated" by the Western powers in the nineteenth century was hardly fair, though it reflected a broader Western tendency to treat contemporary non-Western weakness as a permanent condition. And whether the general level of knowledge among Western social thinkers about "China" as a historical civilization was higher in the nineteenth century than it had been in the eighteenth, as Tocqueville asserted, is not so easy to say. Certainly more writings were available – but is it right to assume that an equitable synthesis of knowledge had been carried out? What is clear is that the ideas of the nineteenth century were more uniformly chauvinist than those of the early Enlightenment and that they were more directly instrumental in promoting the assertion of Western social and cultural hegemony.

In any case, a range of supremacist attitudes was already in evidence at this time. For example, in England, one can place John Stuart Mill at the intellectualist end of the spectrum. Though conceding that the Chinese people possessed "much talent, and in some respects, even wisdom," he nevertheless cited China as a warning example of what happened when "philanthropists" were allowed to succeed "in making a people all alike." The government corresponding to this social uniformity he likened to those of ancient Egypt, of Russia, and indeed of the Society of Jesus – "a bureaucracy of Mandarins" that inhibited change. Consequently the Chinese had "properly speaking, no history," having for thousands of years remained "stationary," – and "if they are ever to be improved, it must be by foreigners."[77] On the other hand, there were many who supported the more physical approach of Lord Palmerston, who directed British military activities in the Opium Wars. He was of the opinion that backwardness called for an appropriately interventionist pedagogy:

> These half-civilised governments such as those in China Portugal and Spanish America all require a Dressing every eight or Ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an Impression that will last longer than some such Period and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the Stick but actually feel it on their Shoulders before they yield to that only argument which to them brings conviction the argumentum Baculinum.[78]

[76] Tocqueville 1974: 183–84.
[77] J. S. Mill 1872a: 129, 200, 247.
[78] Palmerston, autograph note, 29 Sept. 1850 (F. O. 17/173), cited in Costin 1937: 149–50.

In both cases the conviction was clear that the "progressive" peoples of Europe knew best, by definition.

Post-Enlightenment developments in racialist sinophobia

By the nineteenth century, ideas about differences in the genetically determined capacities of different peoples were taking on widespread theoretical importance in European intellectual culture. Many thinkers shared the conviction that the roots of the generally accepted social, cultural, and moral inferiority of non-European peoples could be found at the natural, biological level, in human racial distinctions which could be attested scientifically. From the middle of the nineteenth century especially, theories of Indo-European or Aryan racial superiority, of racial competition, and of the noxious consequences of racial mixture were used systematically to explain past or present social behavior or to justify Western policies. In accord with conventional wisdom, Asians were ranked as better than Africans, but as very much inferior to whites.[79] The Scottish anatomist Robert Knox put it bluntly: "It is not merely the savage races, properly so called, which seem incapable of civilization; the Oriental races have made no progress since Alexander the Great. The ultimate cause of this, no doubt, is race."[80] Knox argued that the differences in the populations of Britain and China meant that the latter's recent military humiliations in the Opium Wars were only comprehensible if one accepted the racialist case for white superiority. He was pleased to think that the Chinese faced inevitable extinction, probably at the hands of the Russians and Anglo-Saxon Australians.[81] Arthur de Gobineau, writing in 1853, drew on the Orientalist scholarship of his day and shifted the chauvinist clichés he found there to an explicitly racialist mode. For him, the "yellow" race was characterized by "an absolute lack of imagination, a concern only with the satisfaction of natural needs, much tenacity and single-mindedness in pursuit of

[79] For some the image was of a ladder with Europeans on the top rungs; for others, that of a European golden mean with deviations to either side.

[80] Knox 1862: 599. Knox's notoriety stemmed from public disclosure of the fact that he commissioned the grave-robbers and later murderers, William Burke and William Hare, to supply him with fresh bodies for his dissections; he nevertheless went on to become a successful lecturer on the basis of his ideas about race which were coming into vogue. See Gillespie 1970–80: vol. VII, 414–15, and Bernal 1987a.

[81] Knox 1862: 229–30, 282, 449–50. Already before Knox the idea that the Chinese would be made extinct – after the manner of the Amerindians confronted by Yankee expansion – was current in the United States; see Horsman 1981: 156, 226.

ideas that are humdrum or ridiculous ... little or no activity and no spiritual curiosity."[82]

China marked the highest degree of the yellow race's culture, but its original civilization was the result of ancient immigration by a branch of the "Hindu, Kschattrya, Aryan, white race." Chinese government was a patriarchal despotism, and its civilization had stagnated[83] since taking on its current form during the "revolution of Qin Shi Huangdi, which wiped out the last visible trace of the white race."[84] Gobineau saw the "Aryan" race under siege, and he thus pioneered the idea (though not the phrase) of the "Yellow Peril," a theme which in various versions – genetic, demographic, military and cultural – spread widely during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To be sure, such racialism was by no means uniformly accepted. In an earlier generation Blumenbach, Herder, and Alexander von Humboldt had denounced the use of the idea of race as a justification for slavery, though they had advanced racialist explanations of other phenomena. Similarly, the Indianist Friedrich Max Müller, who coined the term "Aryan" for a linguistic family, was sometimes loose and chauvinist in his own usage, though he did repudiate any biological connotation to the term[85] that Gobineau had borrowed from him. John Stuart Mill was more lucid in dismissing anti-Irish racialism. He argued that: "Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effects of social and moral influences on the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences."[86]

In fact, Gobineau too acknowledged that social factors were a major concern lurking behind the rhetoric of innate biological antagonism. Speaking of Chinese immigration to Indonesia, California and Australia, he noted that "The Chinaman, though far from his native land, has become the object of horror and fear in all these countries because people do not know how to answer the industry, application, persistence, and, ultimately, the unparalleled cheapness of his labor. These are the concrete reasons why we know the Chinese is to be feared."[87]

In fact, the industriousness of Chinese workers as well as the business

[82] Gobineau 1983: vol. I, 559–60.

[83] Gobineau 1983: vol. I, 602 held that by their inertness China and India constituted the two great proofs that a race left to itself does not change, except in details.

[84] Gobineau 1983: vol. I, 570–71, 585, 595.

[85] Cited in Huxley and Haddon 1935: 149–51 and Chaudhuri 1974: 313–14. Max Müller (1866) described the Chinese language as "the most primitive stage in which we can imagine human language to have existed" (306), yet observed that "there is no shade of thought that cannot be rendered in Chinese" (120–21).

[86] J. S. Mill 1872b: bk 2, 197.

[87] Gobineau 1970: 242 (*mod. auct.*).

sense of Chinese merchants were often much appreciated by Westerners, where they coincided with the promotion of Western economic and political interests. Similarly, a certain esteem for Confucianism as a pillar of social order was manifest in the West from the time of the Taiping upheaval, and from the 1870s the imperial state was accorded a certain degree of respect by the British both because it provided a check on Russian influence in Turkestan, and because British capital became increasingly involved in the lucrative handling of Qing bond issues (as it did with those of the Ottoman state).[88]

The racialist fear referred to by Gobineau undoubtedly existed. As applied to the Chinese, it was played upon in order to promote or defend the interests of Western labor and business groups under circumstances in which other factors, such as purely economic performance, were not sufficient to do so. In general, "Yellow Peril" propaganda served as a ploy that could be used in particular circumstances both to reinforce social cohesion among "white" populations and to justify various forms of oppression of East Asians. Such forms of oppression included both exclusion of Chinese people from various territories, discrimination against Chinese communities within countries other than China, and imperialist projects against China itself.[89] From the 1870s until the Second World War, the "Yellow Peril" idea was important in the USA, Australia, and Canada[90] in mobilizing public opinion in support of legal barriers to immigration and to the practice of particular professions. Its use for the support of imperialist projects against China reached its apogee with the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion.

One of the main legitimating factors that won adherents to racialism was the fact that it was an ideology largely elaborated by natural scientists in the latter half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. In the 1830s and 1840s Samuel George Morton had begun an important new trend when he immersed himself in the comparative craniometry of various human populations. He managed to devise a "racial" ranking according to brain size (Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, American, Ethiopian,[91] in the then current terminology) which conveniently demonstrated with apparently empirical precision the validity of dominant Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Morton's figures were enthusiastically transformed to literary-historical mode by Gobineau,[92] but Morton's approach and expectations also became part and parcel of the scientific culture of the day. Charles Darwin himself not only saw a serious case for the proposition that various human populations constitute distinct species, but also accepted the idea of the extinction of non-European human races through the struggle for survival.[93] Such ideas reflected the strength of the broader culture of scientific racialism and eventually lent credibility to Social Darwinism.

[88] Cain and Hopkins 1993: chapter 13, examines the relationship between British finance and the Qing in the framework of British imperialism's global structure from the first Opium War to World War I. Kasaba (1993) focuses on the parallels in British imperialism's involvement in China and the Ottoman empire respectively.

[89] The best works on "Yellow Peril" ideology are R. A. Thompson 1978; Decournoy 1970; and Gollwitzer 1962.

[90] On the American immigration see S. C. Miller 1969, Saxton 1971 and Sandnemyer 1973; on Canada, P. Roy 1989.

[91] Gould 1981: 54–72 is a refutation of Morton's figures and argument; page 50 cites him for likening the Chinese "to the monkey race, whose attention is constantly changing from one object to another."

A period piece of scientific thought entitled "Observations on a Chinese Brain" appeared in 1894 in the prestigious journal *Brain*, the organ of the Neurological Society of London. Its findings were reported almost immediately in the pages of *Nature* and then in the *North China Herald*. This article treated the eighth Chinese brain analyzed by modern scientific methods. The author was not shy about suggesting, on the basis of less than a dozen samples, that the brain of a Chinese was closer to that of a chimpanzee than it was to that of a "normal" human.[94] This account was in turn included in the *Descriptive Sociology* series of Herbert Spencer, who also, elsewhere, wrote of China as a declining society and of the Chinese language as "one of the lowest kinds of human speech."[95] Meanwhile, on the basis of the theory of parallel degeneration in racial and individual pathology, Dr John Down had given to the chromosomal disorder known today as Down's syndrome the designation "Mongolian idiocy,"[96] a label which, though soon contested, remains in current usage. In the eugenicist literature of the 1920s and 1930s, the craniological and the pathological sides of these racialist researches were brought together in the volume, *The Mongol in Our Midst*, which drew parallels between non-Western "races" and various types of ape.[97] In this context the reminder of the one-time medical student Guo Moruo, that the Chinese were neither gods nor monkeys, need not be seen as simply a literary flourish.[98]

[92] Gobineau 1983: 246.

[93] See Darwin 1881. Chapter 7 is significantly entitled 'On the races of man,' a reference probably to the work of Knox, whom he cites not unfavorably along with the standard US racialist textbook, Nott and Gliddon 1854.

[94] C. H. Bond 1894: 39; reported in the issues of *Nature* of May 31, 1894 and in the *North China Herald* of July 20.

[95] Tedder (ed.) 1910: 1; Spencer 1937: 286, 336.

[96] See the brief account of Gould 1981: 134–35.

[97] Crookshank 1931. On eugenicism, see for example Gould 1981: 75ff, passim; on its manifestations in the 1920s, confer Barkan, chapters 3–5, and Werskey 1974: 30–37.

[98] Guo 1955: 1; cited by Timothy Brook, p. 135 below.

New vistas in the wake of the First World War

The First World War and the years that followed it, with their imminent sense of crisis and transformation, marked the beginning of a new period of Western attitudes toward China, one in which the consensus about Chinese inferiority and the superiority of the West began to fragment. To be sure, this fragmentation was to come but slowly. The Versailles Treaty itself was a far-reaching example of the victorious Great Powers acting together in blatant disregard for Chinese aspirations. Moreover, various types of fundamentally anti-Chinese thought remained clearly in evidence during the interwar period. Racialist ideas and the various forms of "Yellow Peril" ideology exerted significant social influence and in certain quarters became even more intensely anti-Chinese than previously. At the same time, even among authors who were not strongly committed to biological doctrines of racialism many continued to write in thoroughly dismissive ways of Chinese culture. An eminent example was the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who treated China as an ossified culture in *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*. According to him, "those best acquainted" with "the Chinese mentality ... almost despair of seeing it free itself from its shackles and cease running around in circles. Its habits of thought have become too inveterate, the needs it has created too imperious."[99] On the other hand, Oswald Spengler as a philosophical pessimist might have abandoned belief in the West's innate progressiveness, but he did so without giving a hint of any positive appraisal of China's prospects. He restricted the creative "inner history" of China to the Zhou and Han dynasties, and further maintained that Chinese civilization had been "gradually returning to the biological order" since antiquity.[100]

Nevertheless, certain authors in post-First World War Europe also manifested a new appreciation of China's importance in the world, and a broader realization that neither China's present nor its past could be summarily dismissed. We can distinguish two levels at which re-evaluation took place. The first was that of China's political prospects, and the second that of the significance of its cultural tradition. The predominant role of progressives in initiating a better understanding of China's political prospects has been well portrayed by Jerome Chen when he reflects that:

[99] Lévy-Bruhl 1926: 380–81.

[100] Spengler 1928: vol. II, 49–50, where the author also argued that "a Japanese culture in the genuine sense there has never been," on the stereotyped grounds that the Japanese could only imitate.

in the century of East-West intercourse before 1937 there had been two choruses – a Western chorus denigrating China and a Chinese chorus lauding the West. The few discordant voices in each seem to have come from singers who were following a different score."[101] In the 1920s and 1930s, only the left-wing liberals of the West, who had enough suppleness of mind to see the serious defects in their own civilization and the merits of the Chinese radical movement, and the Marxists (including Russian communists), were prepared to accept the proposition that there was hope and a future for China. Consequently they could both by instinct and by intellectual conviction treat the Chinese masses as their equals.[102]

Significant among such figures was Lenin himself.[103] He shared with Marx not only certain negative assessments about traditional social relations in Asia, but also the conviction of the inevitable growth of progressive, democratic movements throughout the continent. He condemned the imperialist powers for suppressing the Boxer uprising and later for violating Chinese integrity at Versailles, and after the First World War he was particularly hopeful about prospects for social change in China. At a time when some spokesmen of the European and North American right were combining racialist and anti-socialist ideas and warning of an impending "Red-Yellow Peril,"[104] Lenin proposed a joint anti-imperialist alliance between the Soviet Union and progressive forces in China and India. The Sun-Joffe Accord then inaugurated Soviet organizational and military support for the Guomindang and set the stage for the first Nationalist–Communist united front. From that time Soviet-oriented Marxists of various leanings involved themselves in analysis of Chinese history and society, though in the mid- and late 1920s the question of which strategy the Chinese revolution should adopt within a global anti-capitalist program was a major bone of contention dividing the Bolshevik leadership.[105]

In Britain too, a number of influential progressives began to rate China's indigenous human and cultural resources highly. In 1919 H. M. Hyndman recognized that Europe had learnt much from Asia in the past. He even felt that European interference in Asia over the centuries had been "almost wholly harmful." It was his view that "the China of the past is rapidly fading, and the Chinese of the present are

[101] One such discordant voice was that of the Russian novelist and populist Tolstoy, whose pacifistic attraction to Chinese philosophy has been documented admirably by Bodde 1950.

[102] J. Chen 1979: 88.

[103] Behring (1959) is a useful anthology of Lenin's views on China. For analyses of these, see Nikiforov 1970: chapter 2, and D. M. Lowe 1966: chapter 3.

[104] Decournoy 1970: chapters 7–8.

[105] Stalin (1974) and Trotsky (1966) set out the political analyses of the main contenders in the mid-twenties.

taking up the line of their own historic achievements and will play a great, possibly the greatest, part in the future of humanity."[106] The evaluation of R. H. Tawney was similar: "though a nation may borrow its tools from abroad, for the energy to handle them it must look within.... It is in herself alone, in her historical culture, rediscovered and reinterpreted in the light of modern requirements, that China will find the dynamic which she needs."[107]

If it was especially the left that came to appreciate China's political potential in the inter-war years, the growth of interest in Chinese culture and history was more widely diffused. In the literary arena the Confucian Classics were appreciatively reinterpreted by Ezra Pound, whose sympathies were well to the right, while Bertoldt Brecht made regular use of Chinese motifs in his revolutionary theater and poetry.[108] From the 1920s down to recent times, authors of the most diverse political persuasions have enthused over the perceived merits of Daoist philosophy.[109] The crises and transformations of capitalism might thus be said to have broken the nineteenth-century monotonal disparagement and fostered a wider variety of appropriations of what "China" is and means.

In the fields of history and sociology, two theoretical approaches forged in the first forty years of the century have greatly influenced the way later scholars have interpreted Chinese history within the context of world history. In the second decade of the century, Max Weber gave detailed attention to the historical sociology of traditional China as part of his systematic comparative study of the economic ethics of diverse Old World civilizations. Though the contrasts he drew between China and the West were in many cases too stark, some of his analyses continue to command respect still. After his death, Marxist scholars in the Soviet Union and elsewhere concerned themselves during the 1920s and early 1930s with elaborating a materialist framework for world history. This task was intimately linked with the practical need to define revolutionary policies, and it consequently gave rise to heated debates over the analysis of the type of social formation found historically in China and other Asian societies. At one stage the debates focused on whether one should speak of a distinct and special Asiatic mode of production proper to such societies. The universalist model of five successive stages of

[106] Hyndman 1919: vi–vii, 30.
[107] Tawney 1966: 194–95.
[108] For example, in *Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan* (Brecht 1953). Tatlow 1973: 163ff analyses Brecht's relationship to Chinese poetry. Hermann Hesse's interpretations of China are examined by Adrian Hsia (1974).
[109] This is documented nicely by Étiemble 1964: 97–113, to whose examples on the right we can add the relatively early H.S. Chamberlain 1911: 350–51fn.

historical development that became dominant in Soviet Marxist historical writings in the 1930s incorporated a preference toward treating Chinese and Western histories in uniform theoretical terms, though this left the model open to charges of reductionism. The Weberian and the Soviet Marxism approaches both eschewed explanations formulated in terms of biological racialism, as did the historical anthropology of Marcel Granet who developed a Durkheimian analysis of ancient Chinese society.

Political sympathy for China grew greatly as a result of Japanese aggression and occupation during the thirties and the years of the Second World War, and the atrocities that resulted from Nazi racialism marked a crucial step in discrediting biological racialism as a form of scholarly and scientific discourse.[110] After the Communist victory in China in 1949, a certain amount of anti-Chinese literature written along "Yellow Peril" lines again appeared. However, the importance of China in the twentieth-century world had by this time become obvious enough, and the "hearts and minds" of Chinese populations outside of the People's Republic were deemed important enough, to ensure that most serious writers in the West would no longer simply dismiss Chinese culture and social history in blanket fashion. It is perhaps only in the last three decades that Chinese studies have once more begun to have an important theoretical impact on Western social scientific thought as a whole. However, the general period since the First World War can be described as one in which a degree of competition among interpretations of Chinese society has been the order of the day, though many of the older molds for representing China are still in use.

Social structure and historical stability

The preceding discussion has indicated some of the intellectual and cultural contexts in which historical stability came to be imputed to Chinese society as one of the latter's more notable characteristics. From what has been said so far one might justly conclude that from the seventeenth until the early twentieth century Western social thinkers generally emphasized the continuity of Chinese history and took it for granted that Chinese society had remained essentially unchanged for thousands of years. Agreement on this point did not exclude recognition of a certain degree of variability. For example, the fact that successive dynasties had introduced their own specific legal codes was well under-

[110] Barkan (1992) traces the development of refutations of racialism among British and American anthropologists and biologists in the interwar years.

stood. However, China's constancy in respect of its fundamental political constitution and national character was a basic assumption that tended to characterize analyses of Chinese society throughout this period. Indeed, it is striking how this assumption was shared by authors whose world views and ideologies were otherwise radically different. In the pages that follow, we shall examine the ways in which some of the major Western social thinkers developed this idea of China's historical stability, and in doing so we shall focus on how they related it to their analyses of the structure of Chinese society.

The maintenance of social order and stability was one of the major concerns of European thinkers in the seventeenth century, a period when, as we have seen, China's social and political reputation was at a high point. This concern was manifested, for instance, in François Bernier's reflections on "the principal cause of the decline of the states of Asia." His observations on Moghul India, Turkey, and Persia, recorded in the 1660s, gave him occasion to consider "whether it were not more expedient, not only for the subjects, but for the state itself, and for the Sovereign, not to have the Prince such a Proprietor of the Lands of the kingdom, as to take away the *Meum* and *Tuum* amongst private persons; as 'tis with us?"[111]

His view was that the main cause of the impoverished condition of these countries was the suppression of private property and the greed of their rulers. This led directly to the degradation of labor, the absence of a middle class, the decay of cities, and the decline of agriculture and manufactures. As the officials followed the unpaternal example of the ruler, oppression and widespread corruption were the natural result, and political authority could be maintained only through "the cudgel." These factors in turn gave rise to the political instability characteristic of the "despotic" system of government found in these Asian countries.[112] Bernier wrote:

> take away the right of private property in land, and you introduce, as a sure and necessary consequence, tyranny, slavery, injustice, beggary, and barbarism; the ground will cease to be cultivated and become a dreary wilderness; in a word, the road will be opened to the ruin of Kings and the destruction of Nations. It is the hope by which a man is animated, that he shall retain the fruits of his industry, and transmit them to his descendants, that forms the main foundation of everything excellent and beneficial in this sublunary state.[113]

In opposition to the system of government headed by an unrestrained individual despot, which he had experienced as the physician to the Great Moghul Aurangzeb, Bernier in 1688 contrasted the exemplary

[111] Bernier 1671: 68–69.
[112] Bernier 1914: 226–27, 237, 253, 256.
[113] Ibid.: 238.

Chinese form of rule which he knew from the reports of the Jesuit missionaries. As we have seen, China was known at this time for its wealthy cities and its abundant population, as well as for the thriving state of its manufactures and its system of government based on the deliberations of numerous state councils. The reasonably secure condition of property was implicit in the Jesuits' accounts of their own commercial transactions there. To Bernier, the durability of the Chinese mode of government over four thousand years was evidence of the wisdom of the Confucian political tradition. It was this tradition that enabled the Chinese to surpass all other peoples in "virtue, wisdom, prudence, good faith, sincerity, charity, gentleness, honesty, civility, gravity, modesty, and obedience to the Celestial order."[114] In his view Chinese government was based on virtue rather than greed, and this secured the stability and happiness of the social order. This virtue was inculcated especially through the family, by means of respect for the natural principles of "paternal piety," i.e., of love and respect between parents and children, as well as through the cultivation of the goodness and generosity of the ruler, which provided an example to the officials and the entire nation. Bernier's question, "What more could one ask for people who had no other principles than those of nature?"[115] was a significant one in the cultural atmosphere of the 1680s, and the image of China as an exemplary model seems to have appealed to his philosophical libertinism.

Two generations later Montesquieu echoed Bernier's depictions of Asian societies in several ways. In his early *Lettres persanes*, published in 1721, Montesquieu made use of the format of the traditional travel account, of which Bernier's writings were an important example, but created fictional Asian travelers who reflected critically on European manners. The main work in which Montesquieu treated China, however, was his immensely influential *De l'esprit des lois*, published in 1748, a theoretical and historical treatise that set out the characteristics of legitimate government. His political aim in this was to reform the French monarchy. As a leading spokesman for the *parlemens*, Montesquieu was opposed to absolutism, and he argued that a balance of powers was essential to political stability and legitimacy. He classified states into three fundamental types, namely, the monarchical, the republican, and the despotic. The monarchical and the republican types were politically stable, whereas despotic government was politically unstable, as it had been for Bernier. One reason why the former two types of state were stable was that they each incorporated a distinct

[114] Bernier 1689: 37 (*tr. auct.*); Guy 1963: 136.
[115] Bernier 1689: 37 (*tr. auct.*).

balance of power. Under despotism all power rested with the despot, who ruled through fear, and there was no place for a hereditary aristocracy. Since there were no fundamental rights other than those of the ruler and no institutional mechanism for the expression of diverse opinions, the people could assert their interests only through corruption or rebellion. Political instability was thus constitutionally determined by despotic government itself. Montesquieu saw the political stability of monarchies and republics and the instability of despotism as a result of the geographical conditions prevalent in the regions where the different regimes were typical. In his view moderate governments were typical of the medium- and small-sized states found in the variegated and temperate environment of Europe, while the uniform topography and hot climates of Asia, Africa, and America gave rise to large empires lacking a balance of power and political liberties. Such factors accounted for the remarkable endurance of despotic government in various parts of the world.

Montesquieu differed from Bernier and most previous political theorists in classifying China as a despotism along with the rest of Asia. He opposed the image of a virtuous government based on Confucian philosophy with the proposition that in China people acted only out of fear of being "bastinadoed."[116] His geographical determinism made it possible for him to portray an allegedly inherent tendency toward political instability as compatible with the persistence of the same form of constitution, i.e. despotism, over two millennia. At the same time, he also accounted for the historical persistence of despotism by reference to what he saw as a political characteristic of despotic states, namely that the instability engendered by the nature of the government made it expedient for the ruler never to change the customs of his empire. Since customs were the only means by which the harshness of a despotic regime was mitigated, a change in them would lead immediately to a revolution.[117] For Montesquieu, this general characteristic of despotism was most prominently manifest in China, where the primary aim of the laws was to ensure public tranquility. His view that "customs govern China" and that they could "never be changed" there[118] gave a new slant to the image of Chinese historical continuity that had been put forward by the Jesuits[119] and by Libertine thinkers like Bernier.

It was with some difficulty that Montesquieu made China fit this model of despotism. He did so partly by ignoring various aspects of Chinese society, including the institutions of the imperial civil service, which were well attested in contemporary literature, and attitudes

[116] Montesquieu 1949: vol. I, 123. [117] Ibid.: 297.
[118] Ibid.: 294, 298, 303. [119] To whom he was politically opposed.

toward land tenure, which were more sporadically discussed.[120] On the other hand, he also gave new interpretations to a number of well-known characteristics of Chinese society. He explained Chinese industriousness as determined by the precariousness of subsistence there, which in turn inspired "an excessive desire of gain." Indeed, far from being virtuous, the Chinese were "the greatest cheats on earth."[121] The "rites" for which they were famous were to Montesquieu's mind merely exterior habits and had nothing spiritual about them, and his account of the paternalist nature of Confucian ideology tied in with his idea that despotism was not so much a political as a domestic form of government.[122] This position accorded with his aim of reforming the Bourbon monarchy from a pro-aristocratic point of view.

Montesquieu's interpretation of China was soon contested by thinkers who belonged to the "administrative" faction of reformists, for example, Voltaire and François Quesnay, the leader of the Physiocrats, both of whom continued the earlier tradition of Enlightenment sinophilia. Unlike Montesquieu, Voltaire did not believe that the existence of a hereditary aristocracy was important for distinguishing a moderate monarchy from a despotism.[123] Instead he valued the contribution that a civil service afforded to the reasonable conduct of government and argued that "if ever there has been a state in which the life, the honor and the welfare of men has been protected by the law, it is the empire of China. The more great bodies there are which are depositories of the laws, the less is administration arbitrary."[124]

Voltaire depicted imperial China as a model of civilized government. As far as social mores were concerned, he recognized that the Chinese, like all peoples, had their vices, but in his view the uniformity of the laws throughout the empire meant that vice could be checked more efficiently there than in other places.[125] He also contrasted the policy of religious tolerance traditionally adopted by Chinese rulers with the intolerance of Christian rulers, and in particular with the frame of mind that led Louis XIV to revoke the Edict of Nantes in 1685.[126] Voltaire went further than previous historians in integrating China into a comparative historical perspective. For him the comparatively reasonable nature of Chinese government was due to the fact that China, unlike other countries, had never been subject to theocratic rule. Its pure, original institutions had

[120] Le Comte 1698: 248 had noted that in China "every one is the perfect Master of his estate, and enjoys his lands free from disturbance and molestation." In addition, he noted that the Chinese political system made popular remonstration against unjust officials legitimate (260–61).
[121] Montesquieu 1949: vol. I, 297, 304. [122] Ibid.: 301–03.
[123] Voltaire 1877–85: vol. XIII, 179–80. [124] Voltaire 1963: vol. II, 285–86.
[125] Ibid.: vol. 1, 217. [126] Voltaire 1877–85: vol. IX, 76, 178.

thus been preserved and had not undergone the mystical and metaphysical distortions which developed elsewhere.[127] For Voltaire, the essence of China's ancient religion was humane rationality and justice,[128] and its ancient doctrines, transmitted to posterity by Confucius, had since his time remained in practice throughout the empire. China's admirable civilization[129] had thus continued unchanged for four thousand years. He understood the spirit of Chinese government as being virtuous and public spirited because it was based on respect for parents and ancestors. However, this respect, though a virtue, also proved to be a hindrance to progress, for it led the Chinese to rest content with the achievements of the past.[130]

Quesnay too took China as a model for the social and political reforms he favored in France. In his view human society had originally been in accord with nature, but as it developed later in various places disparities had crept in between the natural order and the social order. The task of the Physiocrats as reformers was to restore society to its original natural harmony. In his general philosophy, he depicted the world of Nature as regulated by physical laws, which strictly determined the "natural" moral law. This natural moral law in turn provided the standard with which any humanly enacted "positive" laws ought to be in conformity. A state in which the positive laws accorded with the natural order was in his view obliged to enforce those laws as strictly as possible. Quesnay therefore termed such a state as a "legitimate" despotism, to distinguish it from one that enforced laws which were contrary to the laws of nature. In his opinion, Montesquieu was thus very much mistaken to have confused the two types of despotism.[131] Quesnay believed it was only in China that the properly harmonious and rational social system had been preserved since "primitive" times, and it was precisely because of China's adherence to the "natural" order that its system of government had remained "permanent" and "immutable."[132] China therefore served as "a model" to all states, and its constitution could thus be considered universal.[133] Among the characteristics the Physiocrats cited as demonstrating China's accord with the natural order were the government's encouragement of agriculture as the chief economic activity, the absence of servile status for agricultural laborers, and the freedom to hold personal property.[134]

Quesnay's conflation of the "primitive" and "natural" states of society

[127] Ibid.: 165–67. [128] Ibid.: 176. [129] Ibid.: vol. XV, 76.
[130] Voltaire 1877–85: vol. 9, 173; vol. 12, 433.
[131] Quesnay 1965: 564. [132] Ibid.: 605.
[133] Ibid.: 636; Quesnay 1768: lxv–lxvi.
[134] Quesnay 1965: 580–82, 599, 631.

lived on as a historiographical convention and may be seen in later discussions of why centralized states were to be considered "typical" for the dawn of history. However, sinophile theorists were not the only ones to be disseminating the idea that the Chinese social system was more or less historically fixed and unchanging. This is clear, for example, from the work of Nicholas Boulanger, a royal engineer and notable contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, who analyzed Asian social structures in his *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (1761). Attempting to build up a universal model of social development, he maintained, contrary to the view of Voltaire, that China had originally been a theocratic despotism, and he followed Montesquieu in maintaining that its institutions were based only on custom, which meant that China was bound to fall ever further behind progressive Western nations.[135] Similar ideas are found in the writings of Adam Ferguson, one of the chief social theorists of the Scottish Enlightenment. Ferguson was an early proponent of the notion of successive stages of historical progress and social organization. He saw India and China as exceptions in human history because they had not passed on from one stage to another, but had continued to reproduce their ancient constitutions into contemporary times.[136] During the years of the French Revolution, the notion of stages of historical progress was given general currency by the revolution's main historical theorist, the Marquis de Condorcet. In his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1793–94), Condorcet classified China as pertaining only to the third "epoch" of human history, that in which settled agriculture became the foundation of society, but when the alphabet had not yet been invented. In his view the Chinese were condemned to a "shameful immobility" and "eternal mediocrity."[137] Theories about the structural immobility, or the extreme stability, of Chinese society were by this time becoming bound up with notions about national and racial character. The general notion of racial types can be traced back to Bernier, and Voltaire too had used it to explain why different forms of society existed in different parts of the world. One of the most important writers to develop this line of thought in the late eighteenth century was Johann Gottfried Herder. As a Christian, Herder held that all peoples had derived from a single, common source, but had in the course of time dispersed. He believed their genetic stock had then been fixed in accord with the natural environment that each had come to inhabit. That Chinese culture had stood still in its infancy and had been unable to progress since

[135] Boulanger 1761: 251, 255, 260.
[136] Ferguson 1966: 111. [137] Condorcet 1988: 120.

antiquity[138] was the result of the "Mongol" nature of the Chinese and the physical conditions of their country. These factors were also responsible for their form of government, a "semi-tatarian despotism" based on a "feudal" constitution. The fickleness of their "Mongol" genetic character was expressed in China's lack of hereditary social orders; and their general stagnation was due to the fact that they lacked the spirit of improvement.[139] From the views of the authors treated so far, one might conclude that by the end of the eighteenth century social theorists of both "sinophile" and "sinophobic" persuasions tended to emphasize the continuity of Chinese civilization and to contrast China categorically with the West.

These tendencies continued to be pronounced in the nineteenth century. One of the main vehicles by which the ideas of earlier writers were brought together and then transmitted to others was the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel. In constructing his philosophy of history and his interpretation of China, Hegel drew on the ideas of Montesquieu, Herder, and Condorcet. Although his ideas reflected the spirit of the early nineteenth century, they continued to exert considerable intellectual influence among social thinkers well into the present century. Progressive movement, from unity and simplicity to differentiation and sophistication, was a common theme in Hegel's system of thought. He subordinated China to this theme when he took over the conventional idea that its civilization belonged to the early history of mankind. In his view Chinese civilization marked the lowest level of "world-historical" development. Its failure to reach higher levels was determined by the country's geographical conditions and the racial characteristics of its people.[140] As the embodiment of the principle of unity, China rather than India or Turkey came to serve as the model of a semi-primitive Oriental despotism for Hegel. Under this despotic system the government of the country was dominated by a single all-powerful personality, who ruled with reference only to his own will and to ancient maxims. The government was a "theocratic despotism"; and Chinese society, which was constructed on the principle of the family, had never been able to transcend that principle.[141] It had therefore developed neither a true state (in the European sense) nor a true political life based on the interaction of free individuals.[142] In line with his views of the undifferentiated character of Chinese society, Hegel maintained that all land in China was owned by the ruler and that the entire population was held in a uniform state of serfdom.[143]

[138] Herder 1800: 292, 298.
[139] Ibid.: 293–96, 313.
[140] Hegel 1956: 103.
[141] Ibid.: 112–13, 121–23, 127.
[142] Ibid.: 124, 138.
[143] Ibid.: 130.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were of course heavily influenced by Hegel in their youth, and on issues like the theoretical importance of dialectics they remained in his debt throughout their later careers. In other areas, however, they set themselves the task of forging materialist alternatives to Hegelian philosophy. Historical analysis was one of the areas in which they pushed their research program furthest and made their most far-reaching and original contributions. Yet their mature views in this area continued in certain regards to be marked by earlier doctrines. This was clearly the case with some of their interpretations of the nature and significance of Asian societies in world history. For instance, they generally agreed with Hegel, and with British economists such as J. S. Mills and Richard Jones, in considering socio-economic conditions in Asia to have remained fundamentally the same since the beginnings of social history. They did nevertheless develop innovative ideas on the occasions when they applied their materialist conception to the history of Asia. One of their more stimulating, if always rather cryptically expressed, ideas on this subject was that of the Asiatic mode of production. It should be observed that the part of Asia they studied most carefully in constructing this was not China, but the Indian subcontinent, which they were interested in because of its importance for the British empire, and hence the world economy. It can also be pointed out that in their eyes the key to understanding any society was the analysis of the mode of production dominant in that society, i.e., the characteristic combination of productive forces (including natural resources, skills, technologies and materials) and relations of production and exchange (including relations between producers and their means of production, ownership relations, relations between producers, etc.). For Marx and Engels the notion of modes of production provided the key to assessing a society's level of historical development, since the various modes of production could be seen as representing successive levels of historical progress. As Marx once put it,[144] "In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society."

In the writings of the founders of Marxism there were several features characteristic of the "Oriental" type of society and the Asiatic mode of production.[145] The basic economic units of such societies were self-

[144] Marx 1971: 21.
[145] Krader (1974; 1975) has argued that Marx shifted from the rather Hegelian inspired model of "Oriental society" found in his earlier writings to the more concrete category of an "Asiatic" mode of production. Since there were nevertheless important overlaps between the two notions for Marx and Engels as well as for later Marxists, we need for present purposes simply to mention some of the characteristics Marx and Engels frequently ascribed to Asian societies.

sufficient village communities, whose members occupied themselves in agricultural production and simple domestic industries, and there were few real cities. The communities and society at large had only an elementary and fixed division of labor, and commodity production remained embryonic. Geographic features of the environment, including hydraulic conditions, made a centralized authority necessary to the economic life of the society. The state served as such an authority and constituted a social institution that bound the isolated villages together. Despotic in form, the state supported itself on the surplus extracted from the villages, and it was the sole owner of the land. Because of this, there was no distinction between tax and rent. Marx and Engels saw in the lack of such a distinction an indication of the primitive level of Asian social development. Following Bernier and Hegel, they thus thought that an absence of private property was typical of "Asia"; and like Hegel, but unlike Bernier, they took this alleged lack as characteristic of a rudimentary level of development.[146] Theoretically speaking, historical stagnation and a weakness of socio-economic differentiation were two aspects of the same fundamental Asian reality, and they resulted concretely in poverty and overall backwardness.

The extent to which Marx and Engels understood imperial China as approximating their model of Oriental society or an Asiatic mode of production remains, however, open to question. This is partly due to the unsystematic nature of their definitions of an Asiatic mode and partly to ambiguities about how the various "abstract" modes of production are to be related to the analysis of particular historical societies. It is also due to the fact that Marx wrote about China in different ways at different times. For instance, in his articles analyzing the Anglo-Chinese Opium War, he invoked the vocabulary of essential Asiatic stagnation and referred to "Old China" as the "rotting semi-civilization of the oldest State in the world."[147] He also wrote of small-scale agriculture and domestic manufacture as the pivots of the contemporary Chinese economy,[148] a form of words that fits squarely with the characteristics of the Asiatic mode of production. In general he would thus seem to have assimilated China to the model of the Asiatic mode of production. On the other hand, he elsewhere contrasted contemporary China with India, his prototype for the Asiatic mode of production, when he wrote that in China communal property in land had been the *original* form of

[146] For detailed critical analysis of Marx and Engels's idea on the Asiatic mode of production see Krader 1975: 19–79, Anderson 1974a: 462–72, and Draper 1977: 629–64. For recent Chinese understandings, see below, pp. 144–45.

[147] Ibid.: 4, 45. [148] Torr (ed.) 1951: 64.

ownership.[149] This implied that such property was no longer the form currently predominant in China, though he did not go on to indicate what was.[150]

In any case, it is evident that analyzing Chinese society was not a priority for Marx and Engels. While placing emphasis on the economic structure of Asian societies was a coherent theoretical strategy in principle, they showed little sign of appreciating the complexity of property forms in China or the extent to which private property existed. Nor did they examine the richness of Chinese urban life, the nature of agrarian relations, the extent of landlordism in the countryside, or the extent to which the Chinese economy had historically been developed. These oversights reflected the fact that their primary concern was with the analysis of modern capitalist societies in the West, where they foresaw the imminent possibility of working-class revolutions. The gaps in their analysis of China and the ambiguities in their theoretical treatment of pre-capitalist societies left room for major differences in interpretation among their disciples in later generations. We shall consider some of these differences below when we turn to the early Soviet debates on these subjects. Before doing so, it is necessary first to examine briefly the ideas of Max Weber.

Weber carried out his detailed studies of traditional Chinese society in the second decade of the twentieth century. In these, as in most of his later works, his ultimate aim was to specify the features that define Western civilization in general and modern capitalism in particular and to identify those that were responsible for the emergence, in the West alone, of cultural phenomena he thought of as having universal validity. One of his characteristic techniques for analyzing social structures and forms of culture was to contrast broadly similar phenomena found in different civilizations in order ultimately to highlight what was unique in the West. Unfortunately this consistently led him to represent China and the West as polar opposites and to overlook or underestimate what they had in common. It also frequently led him to interpret Chinese culture as deficient in the capacity for innovative historical development.[151] His idea that China was an archetypical case of a bureaucratic society and his belief that bureaucracy was the major obstacle to creative social change gave theoretical justification to his tendency to depict

[149] Marx 1954–59: vol. III, 333–34.

[150] In this, his view may be seen as paralleling that of G. T. Staunton who considered the question of whether the land in China belonged to the emperor or rested in freehold with individuals, and who gave the opinion that the truth lay somewhere between the two extremes; Staunton (ed. and trans.) 1810: appendix, cited in O. Franke 1903: 5.

[151] Weber developed a great many lines of inquiry into comparative history and what he said in one place was not always consistent with arguments he developed elsewhere.

Chinese history as essentially static since at least the beginning of the imperial era.

Like many nineteenth-century writers, Weber stressed that in China, as in "the Orient" generally, large-scale hydraulic works played a great part in the early development of society.[152] This fact was important for distinguishing China's later development from that of the West, since in China the ruler's power was exercised from the beginning through a centralized staff of officials. Chinese cities were administrative and military centers lacking political autonomy, and the notion of the free citizen thus never developed.[153] Since the state took on both civil and ecclesiastical functions, the distinction between spiritual and secular domains did not develop either, and no creative tension between them emerged.[154] Similarly, at the level of ideology, China lacked the tradition of ethical prophecy grounded in a monotheistic conception of a Deity.[155] The Chinese character therefore never developed the creative inner tension with the world that would be an essential factor in the eventual emergence of modern forms of rationality in the West. During the Zhou dynasty, society was organized according to a particular variant of feudalism. Weber termed this variant "prebendal" feudalism, to indicate a form of organization in which officials were endowed with fiefs, in contrast to later Western feudalism, in which aristocrats held hereditary fiefs in return for military service.[156] The widespread use of money during the Warring States period led him to speak of a "political capitalism" that emerged in coexistence with the prebendal feudal system at that time. However, unification under the Qin and Han dynasties meant the suppression of both feudal and capitalist relations, and the definitive imposition of a social system which Weber called "bureaucratic patrimonialism."[157] In his view the imposition of this system marked the decisive turn toward "traditionalism"[158] and away from the possibility of fundamental historical change.

Unlike many nineteenth-century authors, Weber did not see Chinese social structure as undifferentiated and entirely lacking in tensions. He saw it rather as having generated different types of social structure from those found in the West. However, he consistently portrayed social contradictions in China as inherently static, and he depicted the opposed social forces there as existing in a state of permanent equilibrium. This approach provided a structural explanation for China's historical stagnation. In this regard he identified three such types of

[152] See, for example, Weber 1951: 31, 51.
[153] Weber 1984: 320–21.
[154] Weber 1951: 110–11.
[155] Ibid.: 229–30.
[156] Weber 1978: vol. I, 259.
[157] Ibid.: 1051.
[158] Weber 1951: 112–13.

static opposition. The first was that between the emperor and his personal entourage, on the one hand, and the bureaucracy, on the other. The imperial bureaucracy functioned as a permanent check on the emperor's power, but the emperor was able, by means of the examination system, to restrict the extent to which the literati could form an autonomous status group.[159] At the same time, the rules defining the duration of official appointments and proscribing placement of an official in his native place effectively prevented attempts by officials to build up individual power bases, e.g., along feudal lines. A second fundamental opposition was that between the State and the clans, or lineage associations. While in most of Europe lineage associations had in Weber's view lost their pervasive social significance by the Middle Ages, in China they remained the basic form of economic organization into the twentieth century. As such they served as a constant obstacle to the emergence of modern economic rationality.[160] They also functioned as the basic form of political organization in the countryside and constituted an essential counterbalance to the imperial power represented by officials based in the county seats and provincial capitals. Although the civil service developed administrative rationalism to a high degree, the state and the clans had a symbiotic relationship ideologically just as they did institutionally, and the mentalities of both were basically grounded in magic.[161] Any thoroughgoing technical rationalization of the economy was thus impossible, for the clans opposed economic innovation in itself, and the bureaucracy stood opposed to rationalism of the technical or "instrumental" type that proved crucially important in the emergence of modern European culture. A third static opposition, or at least apparent opposition, was that between the traditionalist social order and the growth of a money economy. Weber did not give a completely clear account of the evolution of the various types of property in China, but he at least appreciated the complexity of this subject.[162] He also realized that over the centuries there had been recurring cycles in which taxation had been extracted at one moment in kind and at another in money. Finally in the eighteenth century, the monetary form won out. The eventual predominance of money taxes corresponded to the long-term growth of a monetarized economy which might, according to Western example, have been expected to undermine the old social order dominated by the literati. However, in Weber's view,

[159] Ibid.: 122.
[160] Weber 1971: 86ff; Weber 1958: 137, 176, 339.
[161] Weber 1951: 30–31, 110–11.
[162] Ibid.: 73–74, 80. Otto Franke (1903) had argued that almost all forms of property known historically in the West, including private property, had also been established in China, where many were still extant.

such a subversion of the social order did not occur in China, or in the "Orient" generally, because of the bureaucratic nature of the state, since the growth of the money economy was effectively subordinated to the prebendal system through which the state allocated income to its officials.[163] Rather than devoting themselves to "rational" forms of enterprise, members of the dominant stratum devoted themselves to acquiring public offices and to using such offices for the acquisition of landed property.[164] Though Weber did accept that all traditional forms of society included obstacles to rationalism and modernism, in his view it was only in the West that there was sufficient cultural dynamism to overcome such obstacles. In contrast to Marxist materialist explanations of historical change, his thought stressed the importance of religious motivations as factors influencing the evolution of different societies. For example, in analyzing the development of early capitalism in Europe, he stressed the importance of God-centered ascetic Puritanism based on a feeling of tremendous tension between God and "the world." He saw in China no similar spiritual or ethical force for moving people to act to rationalize the world as instruments of a greater power, since Confucianism and Daoism were "this-worldly" religions which accepted the world as it was, while Buddhism represented a "flight from the world," without a vision to remake it.[165]

Writers like Marx and Weber who reflected on the structure of Chinese society in the period from the first Opium War till the end of the First World War could hardly fail to be impressed by the way modest-sized nations like Britain and France were able to impose their political will on the great civilizations of Asia and by the fact that China, despite its geographical size and large population, had been repeatedly forced to yield to their demands. There was little doubt among Western theorists, or indeed among Chinese policymakers, that the material reasons for China's comparative weakness lay in its relative technological inferiority, the backward state of its industry relative to Europe, and the comparatively inefficient organization of its economy. An obvious way to explain such disparities between China and the West was to focus on original institutions, relationships, and other cultural elements in each civilization, to depict Chinese society as historically continuous and structurally stable, and to highlight dynamic aspects of Western cultures. This type of explanation nevertheless had the drawback of obscuring the fact that imperial China had in various periods manifested remarkable dynamism in virtually all domains of social life. Weber was well

[163] Weber 1951: 60–62.
[164] Ibid.: 85–86.
[165] See de Bary (ed.) 1975 and Metzger 1977 on creative tensions in Confucian thought.

acquainted with the sinological literature of his day, and he wrote with considerable insight on many aspects of traditional Chinese society including in particular the workings of the bureaucracy. There can also be no doubt that his systematic efforts to integrate Chinese historical sociology into a comparative world-historical perspective proved most stimulating to later generations of social theorists and sinologists. In retrospect, it is nevertheless clear that he underestimated the richness and complexity of traditional Chinese ethical thought, and the degree of dynamism and achievements of traditional Chinese science and technology. His analysis of "the" Chinese city as an essentially administrative and military unit, though it found many advocates among later Western sinologists, failed to recognize the diversity of different types of Chinese cities as they developed over time. It also covered up the fact that the economic functions of cities within Chinese society became more important than their political functions from the Song dynasty onwards.[166] In general, it is difficult to avoid the impression that his underestimation of China's social and cultural resources followed from his propensity to treat China and the West as two fundamentally different types of society.

A different approach, one that sought to identify patterns of development that were common to China and the West, came into play during the 1920s and 1930s in the early Soviet controversies about the nature of traditional Chinese society. Most writers who engaged in these controversies in the 1920s were working with the Comintern and were motivated by the urgent practical need to find a strategy for successfully leading the revolutionary movement in China. As Marxists they sought to understand the role of various social forces in contemporary China by having recourse to a comparative historical analysis of the structure and development of Chinese society. Two of their most important concerns were promoting the anti-imperialist struggle and directing the peasant struggle for the transformation of agrarian relations in the countryside. Chinese and Western communists shared the vision of a common struggle against the capitalist world system which had subordinated colonial and "semi-colonial" societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and had reinforced traditional pre-capitalist conditions within them. They also tended to share the idea that the same revolutionary strategies and tactics developed by Western revolutionary movements, and especially by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, could be taken over and, when suitably tailored to local conditions, used with success in other countries. An important interpretative technique, adapted from

[166] Rowe 1984: 1–11 criticizes Weber's ideas in the light of recent work on Chinese urban history, including G. W. Skinner 1977 and Gilbert Rozman 1973.

Bolshevism, was that of using Marxist historical theory to define the targets, objectives, and tasks of other revolutionary movements. This involved identifying correspondences between the types of social structure found in different countries and the stages of historical development defined in the Marxist classics. From the tradition of European revolutionary thought, liberal as well as socialist, Communist thinkers took over the concept of a feudal order as the target of the agrarian revolution. Feudalism in this sense was interpreted broadly and vaguely as a type of society in which the productive forces were backward, agriculture was the predominant economic activity, and the peasants were subject to heavy exploitation. The notion of "Oriental" societies as typically "bureaucratic" was adopted from Marx and from the broader tradition of comparative historiography. In 1920 the Second Congress of the Communist International characterized Asian societies as examples of a feudal or "patriarchal" social order.[167] Nikolai Bukharin drew on the work of Max Weber to give theoretical and historical support to the notion of a "land-owning bureaucratic" social structure with a "peculiarly constructed state authority" in his influential book on historical materialism published in 1921.[168] The "Theses on the Eastern Question" adopted by the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922 spoke of "feudal bureaucratic" elements in Asian societies.[169] What distinction, if any, there might have been between such a feudal social structure and Marx's notion of an Asiatic mode of production remained unclear. The conceptual problems involved in analyzing the Chinese case were brought to light, however, in 1925–26 through fieldwork done in South China by M. Volin and E. S. Iolk.[170] This made it clear that private property in land was widespread and that the "communal" or clan property, which was central to the Asiatic mode of production, was not even necessarily the predominant type. It also drew attention to the fact that there was no class of great feudal lords of the European sort, but that instead ownership of the land rested either with individual peasant families, or, in the case of large- or medium-sized holdings, with members of the peculiar gentry class. Two problems thus arose. One was how to understand the gentry as a class. The other was how to interpret the course of Chinese history, for the existence of private property implied some degree of social development, and not simple stagnation. Consideration of these problems contributed to political debates in the following years.

During the period 1925–27 social struggles in China intensified, and antagonism between the Nationalist and the Communist parties

[167] Degras (ed.) 1956–59, vol. I: 143.
[168] Bukharin 1921: 174.
[169] Degras (ed.) 1956–59, vol. I: 784–85.
[170] Nikiforov 1970: 134–35.

became increasingly sharper. With the development of different assessments of the current political situation by various groups within the Comintern, there also emerged a variety of positions as to the stage of historical development Chinese society had reached. Those concerned with this question invariably referred back to the stages of social development identified by Marx and Engels; but, as the Marxist classics were by no means decisive on the question of the nature of Chinese society, certain authors placed China at one stage of development while others placed it at another. Such differences of opinion revolved to a large extent around the question of the historical role of the Chinese bourgeoisie in the revolution and the attitude to be adopted toward this class. According to the dominant opinion in the Comintern, the social structure of China was basically feudal, and the bourgeoisie could thus be seen as still having a progressive role to play, especially to the extent that it opposed imperialism. Another line of thought was developed by the economist Yevgeni Varga, who drew on Weber as well as Marx. In his view, China had a specifically "Asiatic" social structure in which the gentry typically formed the ruling class and class conflict of the European type had not yet been fully articulated.[171] The political implication of Varga's analysis was similar to that of the feudal interpretation, since both supported the idea of a positive role for the Chinese bourgeoisie in the progressive national movement. There was a reaction against this political assessment from within the Left group in the Comintern in 1926 and 1927. Historical arguments for the Left opposition were supplied by the Polish Communist Karl Radek, the President of Sun Yatsen University in Moscow. Drawing on the ideas of the historian of early modern Russia, M. N. Pokrovski, Radek emphasized the growth of the money economy in China during the later dynasties. He held that China's social system had originally been feudal, but that it had been dominated by commercial capital in recent centuries.[172] The main target of the revolution was therefore the bourgeoisie. Radek's ideas aroused heated controversy, in the course of which the Comintern secretariat dominated by Bukharin and Stalin reasserted the feudal interpretation of contemporary Chinese society by stressing the comparatively backward condition of Chinese society and the predominance of traditional agriculture in its economy. Also arguing against Radek was the Hungarian communist known as John Pepper who maintained that, far from having passed beyond feudalism, Chinese society was still at the level of the Asiatic mode of production. The notion of Asiatic mode was

[171] Varga 1928.
[172] Radek 1927 unpublished, summarized in Nikiforov 1970: 209–10 and in Barber 1981: 52.

also invoked by Besso Lominadze, the Comintern representative in China after the massacre of the Communists by the Nationalists in May 1927. Lominadze explained the Nationalists' behavior as a result of the fact that Chinese society had been dominated by the Asiatic mode of production, and that therefore the native bourgeoisie had known such an extremely feeble development that it was unfit to take on the historical role of overthrowing the traditional social order.[173] By 1928 political objections were raised amongst Comintern officials not only against Radek's "Leftist" reading of China as a capitalist society, but also against Lominadze's use of the idea of the Asiatic mode of production for interpreting contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, an important controversy regarding the historical development of Chinese society developed during the years from 1928 till 1931. The two contending parties in this controversy were those who considered Chinese social structure as feudal since the earliest emergence of classes and those who thought that the notion of the Asiatic mode of production was suitable for analyzing China during part or all of its history. One of the most prominent spokesmen of the latter group was known as L. I. Mad'iar.[174] Mad'iar's works were chiefly devoted to the analysis of the contemporary Chinese economy, but he held that the specific structure and development of Chinese society was partially determined by the existence of remnants of the Asiatic mode of production which had been dominant in the country's earlier history. He maintained in 1928 that not only capitalist but also feudal notions of property had been introduced from the West, and he sought to confirm that the Asiatic mode of production had constituted the basic form of society until the coming of the European powers to Asia.[175] Representatives of the other group, however, sought the origins of Chinese property in ancient China. A marginal member of this group, Gyorgi Safarov, argued, also in 1928, that feudalism and private property had emerged during the Zhou dynasty. Increasing property differentiation led to the growth of slavery, which eventually became widespread. Contradictions in the social and political system deepened into a crisis that was resolved at the beginning of the imperial era by the introduction of the "feudal-bureaucratic" state.[176] During the Han dynasty this state corresponded to a "feudal slave-owning" social structure. In later centuries the system evolved into "state-feudalism." In 1929, S. M. Dubrovskii attempted to

[173] Nikiforov 1970: 211–15, and Barber 1981: 52–53.
[174] As with many Communists at the time, this was a pseudonym. Nikiforov (1970) gives his real surname as Milgorf. See below, p. 142.
[175] Mad'iar 1928: 12, cited in Nikiforov 1970: 215.
[176] Safarov 1928: 44, cited in Volin 1929: 22.

undermine Radek's views on the nature of Chinese society theoretically by mounting an attack on Pokrovsky's analysis of the historical importance of commercial capitalism. At the same time he also reinterpreted the Asiatic mode of production as a specifically Asian variant of feudalism. Dubrovskii's article initiated a major movement to systematize Marxist historical theory about modes of production and to conceive these modes as distinct stages of historical development. This movement led to attention being focused especially on two phenomena as the defining elements of different modes of production, namely relations between producers and their means of production, and specific mechanisms of exploitation or of the appropriation of the surplus product. This narrowing of focus in turn implied a tendency toward formalization of historical analysis. A notable example of this tendency is found in Volin's introduction to a long essay on slavery in ancient China published by M. G. Andreev in 1929. Volin rejected Safarov's analysis of a mixture of feudalism and slavery under the Han as theoretically incoherent. Interpreting the Marxist classics in the light of the ideas of the famous German classicist Edward Meier, Volin argued that slavery had never been a major component of social production in Asia and that feudalism had dominated the social order there since the first emergence of classes. According to Andreev, Zhou dynasty society had been characterized by the conflict of tribes and clans. He argued that slavery in the Han had been normally limited to a domestic institution and that the basic relations of social production then were feudal.[177] In the following year E. S. Iolk published an influential article, also in the sinological journal *Problemyi Kitaya*, on the "fundamental social structure" of ancient China. In this he drew on a range of ancient Chinese sources and characterized the social and political structure of the early Zhou as feudal on the grounds that the surplus was typically appropriated from the peasant producers (*nongfu*) by large landowners.[178]

Among the supporters of the notion of the Asiatic mode of production, we can also detect differences of interpretation, in particular on the question of the place of this form of society in the development of world history. Mad'iar and his associates seem to have followed Plekhanov in seeing the Asiatic mode as developing out of primitive society and thus as a form of development parallel to slavery in the West. Mad'iar's colleagues M. Kokin and G. Papayan used the notion of the Asiatic mode of production in 1930 in order to throw light on the discussion of the well-field (*jingtian*) system given in the *Zhou li* and *Mencius*, and in

[177] Andreev 1929: 306. [178] Iolk 1930: 112–13.

order to clarify the transition from primitive communalism to the later Chinese forms of class society. T. D. Berin, on the other hand, saw the Asiatic mode as developing out of feudal society.[179] This view was shared by the German communist expert on China, Karl Wittfogel, who wrote in 1931 of a "military feudal" epoch being superseded by the period in which the "hydraulic-bureaucratic" class became dominant.[180] Unlike many of his Communist colleagues, Wittfogel does not seem to have been affected by the intense competition between tendencies within Soviet historical circles. His *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* differed from their works in its emphasis on such things as the natural conditions of the Chinese environment, their influences on particular types of production from the beginning of Chinese history down till the Qing dynasty, and the characteristics of different productive processes. Despite differences among the proponents of the Asiatic mode of production, these authors tended to agree that this form of social organization had several key traits: in particular, agriculture was the basic type of productive activity; it was carried out by peasant communities and was typically made possible by the use of a system of artificial irrigation, which required an over-arching despotic state to maintain it; and the ruling class which ran the state appropriated the surplus labor and surplus products of the peasant communities through a tax-rent collected directly by the state.[181]

Between 1929 and 1931 a series of meetings took place in the Soviet Union in which the defenders of the Asiatic mode of production were confronted by advocates of the position that Asian societies had been feudal since the first appearance of classes and the state. These debates were not purely sinological events for they brought together specialists in the history of various "Oriental" countries. The last of these debates was held in Leningrad in February 1931, organized as a discussion of the recent work by Kokin and Papayan mentioned above. The chairman of the meeting was Mikhail Godes, a well-known proponent of the "constant feudalism" position.[182] Objections to Kokin and Papayan's work were of three types: political, theoretical, and historical. Several of these are relevant to the present discussion. On the theoretical front, Godes and Iolk argued that the tax-rent form of surplus appropriation was not sufficiently unique to distinguish the Asiatic mode from feudalism. They also followed Dubrovskii in criticizing advocates of the

[179] Nikiforov 1970: 226–27.
[180] Wittfogel 1931: 501. Wittfogel made this position clearer still in his article, "The Foundations and Stages of Chinese Economic History," published in 1935.
[181] Mad'iar 1930b: xlviii–lvi.
[182] Nikiforov 1970: 226.

Asiatic mode of production for being distracted by secondary considerations such as geographical conditions and the form of government and for neglecting the essential question of ownership.[183] On these points Kokin and Papayan defended themselves ably enough. Mad'iar had specified that the basic mechanism of surplus extraction under the Asiatic mode was the appropriation of products and labor from the peasantry by the state in the form of a general rent-tax. Kokin and Papayan argued that this appropriation was made possible because of the state's control of water resources.[184] The empirical criticisms of their work were, however, more telling. For example, P. I. Osipov observed that large-scale irrigation works became a major phenomenon only after the Zhou.[185] Similarly damaging was the evidence brought forward by V. M. Stein, drawing on Wittfogel, and by A. S. Polyakov, to the effect that large-scale landed property and a feudal social structure had existed during the Zhou period.[186] However, if the idea of a special "Asiatic" structure in the Zhou was thus placed in difficulty, the idea that "Oriental" societies could be classified as "feudal" throughout their history was firmly criticized by two historians of the ancient Near East, namely S. I. Kovalev and V. V. Struve. While accepting that Asian societies conformed to the broad definition of feudalism since the end of the ancient period, Struve and Kovalev argued that the structures of such societies in antiquity had differed fundamentally from feudalism. They therefore supported the analysis of the ancient period of such societies in terms of the Asiatic mode of production. Struve presented detailed evidence from Pharaonic Egypt in support of this position, and Godes admitted in his concluding address that Struve and Kovalev had raised serious problems for the notion of a uniformly feudal "Orient." Of the speakers who are on record as having addressed the Leningrad conference, half favored the concept of an Asiatic mode of production and half opposed it. However, by October 1931 political concern about the theoretical implications of the various historical controversies then raging became so acute that the Soviet Communist Party leadership decided to establish direct political control over intellectual life.[187] After this, the notion of a distinct Asiatic mode of production was not to be openly upheld again in Soviet historiography until the 1960s.[188]

For several years afterwards the advocates of the view that feudalism

[183] Godes and Iolk's addresses are to be found in Godes (ed.) 1931: 5–34 and 59–74 respectively.
[184] Godes (ed.) 1931: 35–54, 145–53.
[185] Ibid.: 103–11. [186] Ibid.: 82–93. [187] Barber 1981: viii.
[188] While it is widely agreed that the notion of the Asiatic mode of production was suppressed politically, the precise reasons for its suppression have been the subject of much speculation, but still remain obscure. I have tried to bring together and

had characterized Asian societies throughout their history[189] seemed to be victorious. This, for example, was the point of view of A. G. Prigozhin, a well-known writer on Marxist historical theory, and a champion of the feudal positions, who in 1933 summed up the controversy over the Asiatic mode of production.[190] In the same year, the sinologist A. S. Polyakov, following Prigozhin's approach to world history, divided the history of feudalism in China into six periods starting in the twelfth century BC and extending down to the beginning of the twentieth.[191] Historical criticism of the notion of a special Asiatic mode of production corresponded to the desire among many Soviet Marxists for a unified theoretical framework that would explain all history in terms of the same historical stages and would depict struggles between clearly defined classes as the basic motive force behind historical change. However, the theory of "constant feudalism" in Asia was open to the objections that it could neither accommodate the evidence that there had been qualitative social changes in that part of the world over the last three to five thousand years, nor could it indicate the nature of the social contradictions that had induced such changes. Consequently, the notion of "constant" Asian feudalism came under attack, though not in the first instance with reference to China, as it might have done. Instead the challenge came again from V. V. Struve in his work on the ancient Near East. Struve continued to stress the qualitative change which affected the social structure of this region in the centuries just prior to the common era, and in 1933 he began bringing forth documentary evidence in support of his contention that ancient Sumer had been a slave society. On the basis of this and other evidence, he and Kovalev elaborated the idea that Asian societies, like Graeco-Roman civilization, had developed from primitive communalism to slave society and then from slave society to feudalism. Their definition of slavery, like the accepted definition of feudalism, was broad: it included not only chattel slavery, but also a range of statuses in which laborers were unfree; and they defined the nature of a "social formation" according to the type of productive relations found in its most important types of production. In 1934 Kovalev used this model to solve the "problem" of Marx's theory of the Asiatic mode of production. He wrote:

> In this way the problem of the Asiatic mode of production in the writings of Marx and Engels finds a solution. I by no means intend to discuss all the aspects

compare the various types of explanation for the suppression of the Asiatic mode in Blue 1989.

[189] That is, since the dissolution of the primitive communalism of "prehistoric" times.

[190] Prigozhin 1934.

[191] Polyakov cited in Nikiforov 1970: 238.

> of this complex question. But from what has been said above it follows that the "Asiatic mode of production" in Marx and Engels manifests itself in two forms. For the ancient, i.e. "slave-owning", Orient, it is the specific variety of slavery that is the concrete form of the slave-owning formation in countries of irrigated agriculture. For the Orient of the Middle Ages, it is the variety of feudalism in those same countries. Really, the specific feature of the "Asiatic mode of production" appears to be, as is well known, the subsumption of communal relations into a system of pure class forms of exploitation.[192]

This new model of an Asian variant of slave society was not immediately accepted by the majority of Soviet sinologists. However, already in 1935 Osipov wrote a substantial article in which he drew on Struve's approach and on the ideas of Guo Moruo in order to give a new interpretation of the Zhou dynasty as a primitive form of slave society. The interpretative element in his work was, however, ostensible in that he translated as "slave" the Chinese term *nongfu* which Iolk had earlier rendered as "peasant." He also criticized the earlier monograph by Andreev which had argued that slavery in the Han was predominantly domestic in form. This marked the beginning of one of the major divergences between Soviet and Chinese sinologists and their colleagues in North America and Western Europe, for the latter have tended to follow the conclusions of an important study published in 1934 by C. Martin Wilbur, who arrived at conclusions similar to those of Meier and Andreev. In the five years following Osipov's article, a more thorough adaptation of the model of an Asian variant of slave-holding society to China before the third century was carried through by L. I. Duman.[193] Meanwhile, the interpretation of imperial Chinese society as "feudal" and of its state as a "feudal bureaucracy" remained firmly established, and indeed unchallenged, within Soviet sinology.[194] The analysis of the gentry as a class, however, continued to be a matter of some dispute. In dealing with the gentry and with the general problem of the stability of the Chinese feudal order, Soviet sinologists in ensuing decades had recourse once again to components of the Asiatic mode theory such as the importance of irrigation and water control and the bureaucratic nature of the State.[195]

In retrospect, one can discern two distinct approaches within the Marxist historiography of pre-capitalist societies in the early Soviet period. The first focused attention on material conditions of production

[192] Kovalev 1934: 79.

[193] Nikiforov 1970: 256.

[194] See, e.g., the long analysis of P. Grinevich affirming it in 1935.

[195] On the surreptitious "resurrection" of the Asiatic mode of production as a way for explaining the specificities of Asian history in Soviet historiography after Stalin, see Dunn 1982.

and on social relations generally. The second asserted the primary importance of class contradictions within any given social formation. Both approaches gave rise to new questions about the nature of traditional Chinese society and served as stimuli to new thinking in this field. One of their most important innovations was that they placed priority on identifying social and economic forces for change that were imminent to pre-modern non-European societies. In this sense they marked a theoretical break with the assumption that traditional China was historically stagnant. Though the two approaches were not necessarily exclusive, the one that insisted on universal types of class contradiction and hence on an "orthogenetic" pattern of social evolution[196] came to be established as orthodoxy in the 1930s. By the end of 1931, Chinese history was no longer being referred to by Soviet Marxist theoreticians as a source that might be tapped to challenge and enrich the general theory of historical materialism. Instead it was increasingly treated, in accord with the general shift towards orthodoxy, as a field to which "correct" ideas were to be applied and from which "deviationist" ones were to be eradicated. By 1938, it had become official doctrine that there were five universal stages of historical development (primitive communalism, ancient slave society, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism). In this orthodox approach, types of production and ownership were defined broadly in a way that made it legitimate to seek dynamic models of social contradiction in "the Orient" similar to those found in the West. On the other hand, the interpretation of the relationship between social stability and historical change in pre-modern Chinese history remained highly problematic, because of the difficulty in relating the historical stages to the facts and trends in the Chinese historical record. This difficulty may be seen as a direct result of imposing on China analytical categories constructed on the basis of historical data from other societies, and it was one that was largely eschewed by Marxists who followed the approach of seeking primarily to clarify the relations linking material conditions of production and social relations generally.

Reprise

One of the general aims of modern Western social theory has been to explain the specific nature of various human societies in terms of

[196] Franz Boas identified anthropological/sociological "orthogenesis" as the notion that all societies follow a single universal path and must pass through the same stages of development. Identifying this view with such formative nineteenth-century anthropologists as E. B. Tylor and L. H. Morgan (upon whom writers like Marx and Spencer drew), Boas and his followers rejected "orthogenesis" in favor of their notion of "historical evolution." See Lesser 1985: 29–31.

universal principles and categories. In pursuing this goal, social thinkers have taken over ideas and preoccupations current in the societies in which they live. They have also had recourse to writers with specialist experience on other societies,[197] and they have in turn influenced such specialists. The ideas of Marx and of Max Weber, for example, have exerted profound and enduring influence on twentieth-century sinology. One might thus speak of an enduring interaction between social theory and specialist research in Chinese studies. It is however clear that one of the major problems with Western analyses of Chinese society over the last three hundred years has been that principles and categories stemming from the Western tradition of social theory have often distorted that which they were meant to clarify. One of the most important reasons for this has been a tendency to rest content with narrow models of social development and social structure and to avoid accepting various types of evidence from Chinese history and sociology, or indeed from other sources, that might serve as challenges to one's theoretical approach to the study of history and society in general. Part of the narrowness of such models has understandably been due to the fact that they have been primarily based (more or less faithfully) on Western historical experience. Yet such a basis was not sufficient to allow social and historical theory to attain its professed goal of universality. To do so, it would have had to be thoroughly comparative, in the sense that it needed to succeed in systematically taking into account and integrating evidence from the widest possible range of sources. Admittedly this is what Western social theorists including Montesquieu and Hegel claimed to be doing since the Enlightenment, but in fact they failed to take the Chinese historical tradition seriously. From the late eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, any possibility of genuine interaction between social theory and the study of China remained largely suppressed. In this particular sense the nineteenth-century Western approach to China seems to have marked a regression from the more cosmopolitan attitudes of Bernier and Voltaire. Since the Second World War, much has been done to restore that tension between social theory and the study of China and to make it a fruitful one. The chapter that follows will make evident some of the ways in which that tension has been both suppressed and articulated by Chinese and Japanese historians in the twentieth century.

[197] The most prominent types of such writers were missionaries, diplomatic personnel, merchants, and academic sinologists. Discussion of such works and of the relevant secondary literature has been precluded here by the theoretical focus of the present volume, but can be found in Mackerras (1989) and Blue (1988).