

HOW CHINA REVOLUTIONIZED FRANCE:
THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA FROM THE JESUIT FIGURISTS
TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT SINOPHILES
AND THE CONSEQUENCES

By

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Abstract

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From the eighteenth century onward, the Orient, including China, was studied and judged for both its positive and negative differences from the West. In their travelogues, the Jesuit Figurists highly praised Chinese philosophy and government; some even went so far as to suggest that China may have been the preserver of the true Noachide tradition. The Jesuits had various motivations for writing glowing reports on China. Some missionaries were simply trying to justify additional funding from Rome while others sought to understand China's role in the Christian religious tradition. Regardless of the Jesuits' motivations for writing such complimentary reports, the experiences and theories presented in the travelogues of those religious men that questioned the superiority of accepted Catholic Church and European systems of government were extremely provocative and appealed to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment movement, and especially Voltaire.

Ironically, the source material on China that Voltaire used to challenge the Catholic Church was provided by the Jesuit missionaries themselves through their travelogues and journals, personal correspondence, and conversations. The Jesuits self-consciously and enthusiastically delivered their radical theoretical works to the *philosophes*, even selectively

editing them for their secular audiences; these religious outliers were directly responsible for Voltaire's religious and nationalistic ideals. Through direct connection the Jesuit Figurists influenced Voltaire's ideas about the French nation and his belief in universal truth and human progress and fed his critique of eighteenth century French society, religious history, and politics. Voltaire's idealization of Chinese religion, philosophy, and governmental system provided him with a model for an "enlightened" France and an ideal to inspire French nationalism and moral consciousness.

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INTRODUCTION

Voltaire's play *The Orphan of China: A Tragedy* was first acted in Paris on August 20, 1755. It was one of the first stage plays performed in Paris based on a Chinese tale. The tale itself was translated by Jesuit missionaries Prémare and Du Halde who, upon their return to France, shared it with Voltaire. This was just one of the many Chinese works translated by Jesuits that left a lasting impression on Voltaire. The Jesuits' translations as well as their personal travelogues extolled the wisdom and antiquity of China which greatly impressed Voltaire who, as a result of the missionaries' guidance, would become an ardent Sinophile. The Jesuits and French *philosophes*, in their respective works, both portrayed China as an ancient, rationally structured society, and the model of enlightened despotism. Voltaire in the introduction to *The Orphan of China* praises the wisdom, morality, and enlightenment of China when compared to Europe:

The idea of this Tragedy was first conceived some time ago on reading *The Orphan of Tchoa*, a Chinese Tragedy, translated by Father Prémare, which may be found in the Collection published by Father Du Halde. This Chinese piece was composed in the fourteenth century, within the very Dynasty of Gengis-Kan. It is a new proof that the victorious Tartars did not change the manners of the nation vanquished; they protected all the Arts established; they adopted all the Laws. This is a striking instance of the natural superiority of reason and genius over blind and barbarous force: and the Tartars have twice afforded this example. For when they again made a conquest of this great Empire at the beginning of the last century, they submitted a second time to the wisdom of the nation they had subdued: and the two people have formed one nation, governed by the most ancient laws in the world: a striking event, which has been the main scope of my work.

The Chinese Tragedy called *The Orphan*, is taken from a large Collection of Dramatic Pieces of that nation. [The Chinese] cultivated above three thousand years ago that art, found out a little time after by the Grecians, of drawing live portraits of the actions of men, and of establishing those schools of morality, where virtue is inculcated by action and dialogue. Dramatic poetry was for a long time in repute, only in the vast country of China, separated from, and

unknown to the rest of the world, and in the one town of Athens. Rome did not cultivate it till at the end of four hundred years after. If you look for it among the Persians, among the Indians, who pass for people of invention, you will not find it: it never came to them.

The Orphan of Tchoa is a precious monument, which serves better to show is the genius of China than all the relations ever made, or that ever can be made of that vast Empire. It is true, that that piece is quite barbarous, in comparison of the correct Works of our time; but at the same time it is an absolute masterpiece, if we compare it to those of ours written in the fourteenth century. Certainly [our authors] are infinitely below the Chinese Author.¹

Voltaire's introduction to *The Orphan of Tchoa* illustrates three key themes in Enlightenment representations of China: respect for enduring elements of Chinese Confucian ethics, the relationship between "advanced" and "developing" civilizations; and a fascination with China's millennia of recorded history. Europeans were introduced to a China that possessed a superiority of reason that even "barbarous invaders" were forced to acknowledge. Through exposure to works like *The Orphan of Tchoa* Enlightenment France became enamored of Chinese society and philosophy or *chinoiserie*. Representations of China became a perfect venue for Voltaire and other *philosophes* to launch a critique of French society. The *philosophes*, most notably Voltaire, cited China to support their attacks on European institutions and practices and to discredit Old Testament history and infallibility of Catholic teachings. Voltaire celebrated China as the world's oldest, best governed, and most civilized country, exemplary in rendering its subjects secure, with an Emperor responsible to public opinion and checked by institutions to prevent tyranny.

In this study I will follow a three step process to trace the adoption, integration, and synthesization of the Chinese ideal into the French national and moral consciousness

¹ Voltaire, *The Orphan of China*, Dublin: William Smith, Bookseller, (1756), ix-x.

from the early Jesuit missionaries to the Enlightenment philosophes. The Figurist missionaries constitute the first step, with their initial contact and resulting perceptions thinly based in Chinese reality. Voltaire exemplifies the Enlightenment *philosophes*' adoption of the Figurists, representations into their works, resulting in the Sinophilic discourse; this amounts to the second step of the dialectic. The third and final step is the manipulation of those perceptions or ideas by Voltaire and other *philosophes* in the intellectual community to achieve a new self-perception of the French nation in the decades leading up to the Revolution. In the first chapter I will outline Sino-European exchange and the history of religious and philosophical influence. In each subsequent chapters, I will provide parallel sections on the Jesuits and Voltaire respectively to show the formulation and assimilation of their ideas on China. In the Jesuit sections, I will describe the Jesuits' initial contact with Chinese culture and religious philosophy; how their accommodation and idealization of the Chinese religious and governmental systems supported their theories of human history; and how their final assimilation of this information led to controversial religious and political ideas that quietly undermined the Catholic Church. This, in turn, led the monarchy to become increasingly suspicious of the power and influence of the Jesuit order. In the Voltaire sections, I trace the evolution of Voltaire's ideas from his first exposure to Jesuit writings and translations of Chinese Classics to his proto-Sinological works professing his own contentious call for religious and political reform in France using China as a model of enlightened imperial rule. This parallel, thematic approach is intended to clearly illustrate the direct influence of Jesuit missionaries and ideas on *philosophes* like Voltaire.

Much has been written on Voltaire's anti-authoritarian writings on one hand and the Jesuit mission in China on the other. Few historians have examined the connections between the two groups. While previous historians have discussed Voltaire's love of China and noted, in passing, his Jesuit training, none have realized the extent to which his idealized image of China was shaped by a specific cohort of Jesuit missionaries and scholars. Prominent Jesuit historians, including Robert Palmer, Adolf Reichwein, René Füllöp- Muller, and Liam Matthew Brockey, have documented the Jesuit mission in China and the missionaries' intellectual contributions to European society but have largely ignored their influence on the Enlightenment *philosophes*. Rather, these historians suggest that religious men and *philosophes* were fundamentally at odds with each other and that the Jesuits "unwittingly" became intermediaries for information about China that would both undermine the Catholic Church and eventually be used against themselves.² Historian D.E. Mungello rightly points out that the Jesuit missionaries were not unwitting conduits but actively transmitted information and writings to the *philosophes*; these renegade priests were condemned by the Church for their heretical theories.³ I expound on Mungello's argument to show how the Jesuits self-consciously and enthusiastically delivered their radical theoretical works to the *philosophes*, even selectively editing them for their secular audiences; these religious outliers were directly responsible for Voltaire's religious and nationalistic ideals.

² Adolph Reichwein, "China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century". Trans. J.C. Powell, in *The History of Civilization*, ed. C.K. Ogden, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), xii-174.

³ Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, (Honolulu, Hawaii UP, 1989), 13.

In this paper, I show how the Jesuits directly influenced Voltaire's ideas about the French nation and his belief in universal truth and human progress. Most studies on Voltaire focus on the evolution of his ideas by closely analyzing his specific works but do not suggest a source for his ideas or detail the ways in which the Jesuits' writings were so influential for his Sinophilia. It is ironic that the source material on China that Voltaire used to challenge the Catholic Church was provided by the Jesuit missionaries themselves through their travelogues and journals, personal correspondence, and conversations. The Jesuits' encounter with China both shook their own understanding of human origins and history and fed Voltaire's critique of eighteenth century French society, religious history, and politics. Arnold Rowbotham hints at these connections but as a philosopher, is more concerned with Voltaire's ideology than his inspirations.⁴ Jerome Rosenthal and Richard Shoaf both examine how Voltaire's Sinophilia and his subsequent idealization of Chinese religion, philosophy, and governmental system may have provided him with a model for an "enlightened" France but again do not credit the Jesuits for their glowing reports that generated his Sinophilia. So, while much has been written on Voltaire and the Jesuits missionaries independently, the relationship between Jesuit accommodationist literature and the *philosophes'* revolutionary assimilation of this information has been overlooked until now.

Voltaire's Sinophilia, and the resultant works, are an enduring symbol left of that eighteenth century project, the Republic of Letters. The Republic of Letters was an intellectual revolutionary movement comprised of Voltaire and his fellow *philosophe*

⁴ Arnold H. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile." *PMLA*, Vol. 47, No.4 (Dec. 1932), 1053.

compatriots, the “men of letters,” exchanging letters and treatises espousing their desire to reform, or more often abolish, the Catholic Church and French monarchy. The Republic of Letters affirmed that even before the revolutionaries of the 1780s and 1790s, the *philosophes* of the 1770s concerned themselves with establishing the ideals and principles of a new political order. The *philosophes’* situation was, of course, significantly different than that of their revolutionary successors. Rather than attempting to define and legitimize a power they had won, the *philosophes* sought to assert a political power they did not hold through the transformation of an intellectual and cultural authority. As time passed, their project became increasingly influential but since they could not deny the monarchy outright, their assertion of political identity had to operate in the presence of the monarchy rather than in its absence.⁵ So, whereas the revolutionaries ultimately challenged the monarchy directly, the *philosophes* confined their views to the “intimate spaces of Enlightenment society.”⁶ The wide circulation of published and unpublished treatises by Enlightenment *philosophes*, including Ramsay, Père Lafitau, Leibniz, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Voltaire served as a subaltern opposition to the established authorities of the French monarchy as well as the Catholic Church which were viewed by the *philosophes* as oppressive and tyrannical.

Voltaire, in particular, was an active opponent of the Catholic Church and its dogma. Voltaire throughout his life was concerned with expressing the basic natural

⁵ Dena Goodman, “Pigalle's *Voltaire nu*: The Republic of Letters Represents itself to the World. *Representations*, No. 16 (Autumn, 1986), 86-87.

⁶ Goodman, 87.

equality of mankind.⁷ Instead, he promoted belief in a non-dogmatic natural and universal religion which has come to be known as deism. Voltaire's writings made a key contribution to the French Enlightenment, particularly his work on the concept of human progress, his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756). Previously it had been inconceivable to expect that man could come to understand everything about the natural world; this was God's domain. Voltaire believed that through the use of human senses and communication with others, knowledge could be compared and contrasted as a way of analyzing systems of belief and understanding. Voltaire's writings show his suspicion of specific religions or a god who intervenes in human affairs. Instead, he frequently wrote of his faith in humanity itself and its ability to progress with the help of ethical philosophers. Through this accumulation and sharing of knowledge he presumed it was possible for any man to comprehend all the known facts of the natural world. New scientific understanding of the natural world during this period spurred the desire for enlightenment of the social and political world. Voltaire supposed that there was no definition of the perfect human existence and inevitably the human race would continue to progress throughout the course of our existence. He envisioned man as continually progressing toward a perfect utopian society.

French nationalism was one outgrowth of European interest in the world outside of Europe. This knowledge of the world outside of Europe allowed for a process of cultural comparison and the acceptance or rejection of the "other" as superior or inferior. Voltaire, disenchanted with French religious and political censorship, searched for a

⁷Voltaire. *Discours sur l'homme* (1738)

superior system on which to model his “new France”; he found that model in China. During the eighteenth century, French interest in other lands and peoples grew vertiginously, and publishers hastened to satisfy it with travel writings, *The Jesuit Relations*, newspapers, atlases, and Orientalist novels, not to mention the omnivorously cosmopolitan writings of the *philosophes*.⁸ In these writings, the idea of the nation as the fundamental category of society, the ultimate framework for all social and political action, was an idea that had only become thinkable in the early eighteenth century, and now found active, powerful political expression.

Voltaire, for instance, wrote in the *Essai sur les mœurs* that “the spirit of a nation always resides with the small number who put the large number to work, are fed by it, and govern it.”⁹ Voltaire insisted that a society’s privileged minority should be benevolent to the masses they govern and not oppress them for their own benefit. Voltaire had admired the Chinese rulers’ familial concern for their people because, in his opinion, the ignorant masses required a wise leader to guide them not oppress them. Voltaire was still not an advocate of equal rights for *all* citizens because of his disdain for the uneducated masses but his growing insistence on enlightened despots protecting the human rights of the masses was the first move toward that revolutionary ideal and slogan which called for, “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

Voltaire, like other Enlightenment thinkers, believed that nations followed roughly linear development from “savagery” to “civilization” and their quality depended

⁸ Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle de lumières* (Paris, 1995); Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVII^e et au XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1913); Geoffroy Atkinson, *Les relations de voyages du XVIII^e siècle et l'évolution des idées: Contribution à l'étude de la formation de l'esprit du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1927) for proof of this point.

⁹ Voltaire, *Essai Sur les Moeurs*, 90

upon how far they had progressed along this developmental scale. This became the main theme of his *Essai sur les mœurs*. Rousseau's *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* also devoted particular attention to the question of comparative national character.¹⁰ Rousseau, for instance, judged that mores and religion alike depended largely on the form of government. For Voltaire both mores and religion were heavily influenced by the development of civilization. David Bell explains that the factor of *mœurs* (mores or manners), which French writers also frequently invoked, generally depended in its turn on some mixture of politics or evolution, while the phrase "moral causes" (as opposed to physical), which appeared frequently as well, usually amounted to a conflation of the two.¹¹

Self-reflection was the cornerstone of Enlightenment philosophy so it was only natural that the *philosophes* were keen to investigate their own national character. They were not always consistent, to say the least. For example, at different times Voltaire described the French as "the most sociable and polite people on earth" (the preface to a stage play in the 1730s), "a people of heroes . . . a gentle and terrible people" (a war poem from the 1740s), and "monkeys and tigers" (from his bitter exile in the 1760s).¹² This inconsistency was characteristic for Voltaire but his increasingly harsh reflections on the

¹⁰ Rousseau's *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* in *Political Writings* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1962)

¹¹ Bell, David A. "The Unbearable Lightness of Being French: Law, Republicanism and the National Identity at the End of the Old Regime." *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 106, No. 4, (Oct. 2001), 12

¹² Bell, 14. "To be French was to be particularly sociable, particularly refined or polite, and above all particularly *léger*—a term that literally means "light" but that implies a mix of vivaciousness, inconstancy, and perhaps also superficiality." Voltaire, quoted in Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 75; Voltaire, *Le poème sur la bataille de Fontenoy* (Amsterdam, 1748); Voltaire, quoted in Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 50.

character of the French people reflected his rising call for reform. His portrayals of China, on the other hand, though somewhat two-dimensional, showed unflinching admiration in order to illustrate how the French paled by comparison and should look to China for inspiration.

Since Voltaire's many works and treatises rested on the combination of emotional, intellectual, and moral qualities that distinguished both individuals and governments, it is not surprising that he is credited as the original intellectual force behind the movement that produced the French Revolution through the Republic of Letters.¹³ His life's work was largely devoted to this campaign of undermining the authority of the royal court and the Church and, using knowledge provided by the Jesuit Figurists of the China mission, he had "credible" arguments for his heterodox views.

Voltaire's Jesuit professors actively fostered his free-thinking and provided him with the critical and detailed descriptions of China that formed the basis of his sinophilia. In their travelogues, the Jesuit Figurists highly praised Chinese philosophy and government; some even went so far as to suggest that China may have been the preserver of the true "Noachide tradition" or a common origin theory of religion. The Jesuits had various motivations for writing glowing reports on China. Some missionaries were simply trying to justify additional funding from Rome while others sought to understand China's role in the Christian religious tradition.¹⁴ Regardless of the Jesuits' motivations for writing such complimentary reports, their experiences and theories presented in their provocative travelogues that questioned the superiority of accepted Catholic Church and

¹³ Goodman, 87

¹⁴ Paula Findlen, *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man who Knew Everything*, (Routledge, 2004)

European systems of government greatly appealed to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment movement, and especially Voltaire.

Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, argues that the concept of the Orient was essential to Western self conception. European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off from the Orient, "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."¹⁵ So images of two distinct geographical regions supported and reflected each other.¹⁶ Denys Hays argues that the idea of European superiority in comparison to non-European peoples and cultures is precisely what made it hegemonic.¹⁷ Said agrees that, "in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand... the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part."¹⁸ Thus, from the eighteenth century onward, the Orient, including China, was studied and judged for both its positive and negative differences from the West while the relative remoteness of the regions allowed for the subsequent romanticization or villainization of the Other. Said states:

By and large, until the mid-eighteenth century Orientalists were Biblical Scholars, students of Semitic languages, Islamic specialists, or, because the Jesuits had opened up a new study of China, Sinologists....There are two excellent indices of this new, triumphant eclecticism....Quite aside from the scientific discoveries of things Oriental made by learned professionals during this period in Europe, there was a virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period."¹⁹

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

¹⁶ Said, 5.

¹⁷ Said, 6.

¹⁸ Said, 7.

¹⁹ Said, 51.

Said's vision of Orientalism perfectly captures the Jesuits' and Voltaire's images of China. In essence, both the Jesuits and Voltaire were actively looking to reinforce already held beliefs and views. Often because of these preexisting biases, they did not scrutinize the evidence for inconsistencies. According to Said, one of the fundamental processes of Orientalism was validation:

When a learned Orientalist traveled in a country of his specialization, it was always with unshakeable abstract maxims about the 'civilization' he had studied; rarely were Orientalists interested in anything except proving the validity of these musty 'truths' by applying them, without great success, to uncomprehending, hence degenerate, natives. Finally, the very power and scope of Orientalism produced not only a fair amount of exact positive knowledge about the Orient but also a kind of second-order knowledge - lurking in such places as the 'Oriental' tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability- with a life of its own, what V. G. Kiernan aptly called 'Europe's collective day-dream of the Orient.'²⁰

The validation process began with the Jesuit missionaries with the intention of confirming the "musty truths" of the Noachide tradition and the inclusion of China within Christian chronology. The Jesuit missionaries and Voltaire, though temperamentally and ideologically at hopeless odds with each other, had a similar interest in the relationship between Orient and the Catholic Church, "the one to make the Bible more indisputable and the other to make it more unbelievable."²¹ Voltaire and other *philosophes*, unlike the Renaissance writers who invariably viewed the Orient as the enemy, "confronted the Orient's peculiarities with some detachment and with some attempt at dealing directly with Oriental source material, perhaps because such a technique helped a European to

²⁰ Said, 52.

²¹ Said, 76.

know himself better.”²² The practice of self-reflection, a cornerstone of Enlightenment thought, enabled both Figurists and *philosophes* to participate in humble self-positing and look all over the known world for examples of human progress and model of morality.

According to G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, Europeans used the exotic to redefine and reshape their dialectic according to their own values as the world grew wider and more complex.²³ Suzanne Pucci notes that geographical locales are at once cultural and rhetorical where eccentricities can be observed, articulated, and shaped into a controlled discourse about how the world should be perceived and evaluated for value.²⁴ As a result, from “travelers’ tales,” intercultural contacts were made and ethnocentric perspectives were either secured or, occasionally, dismantled.²⁵

Voltaire’s representations of China, drawing heavily on the Jesuit Figurists’ writings, can be seen as an example of the Hegelian notion of thesis, antithesis, and eventually synthesis. This three step process of change and revolutionary thought could not be more clearly illustrated than in the Jesuits’ and Voltaire’s awareness of the distinct identities and distinctive divide between themselves and the Other before their ideas eventually reciprocally synthesized. This exchange is vital to the Hegelian “self-identical determinateness” which is entirely relational and dependent on the notion of estrangement and return to the self.²⁶ The Jesuit missionaries themselves were highly

²² Said, 117.

²³ G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, “Introduction,” in *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1990), ix.

²⁴ Suzanne Pucci, “The Discrete Charms of the Exotic: Fictions of the Harem in Eighteenth-Century France,” in Rousseau and Porter, *Exoticism*, 148.

²⁵ Said, 117.

²⁶ Tim Milnes, “Through the Looking-Glass: Coleridge and Post-Kantian Philosophy” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn, 1999), 319.

aware of the impact their writings had upon the consumer. The strategic supply of favorable information on China by the Jesuits was not unintentional. Many earlier historians forgetting that while the Jesuit missionaries were religious men, their mode of intellectual inquiry and interpretations were not irreconcilably at odds with those of the *philosophes*. Instead, they too were scientifically minded Enlightenment scholars faced with an irresolvable conflict when they were forced to question the supremacy and even the legitimacy of their own religious teachings regarding the origins and development of human society. The Jesuits themselves managed to undermine the Catholic tradition they were sworn to uphold through their promotion of universal tradition based on their studies. Their theories were already deemed heretical before they were cited by Enlightenment *philosophes*. The Jesuits could not have foreseen how the *philosophes* would eventually employ their descriptions and interpretations of China to challenge the authority -- and not just the traditions of -- Catholic Church and French monarchy.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF SINO-EUROPEAN EXCHANGE

The Enlightenment fascination for *chinoiserie*, the fad for all things Chinese, was a continuation of a direct two-thousand-year-old tradition of cultural and economic exchange. This exchange, according to Frederick Paul Cressey, can be divided into four main periods of contact. The first is the Roman Empire's era of the silk trade from the first century B.C.E. to the middle of the sixth century C.E. Second, the Arab Empire in the Seventh Century with the Middle East served as both a barrier and intermediary between China and Europe. Then in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Mongol Empire allowed for sporadic contact. Finally, the sixteenth century Age of Discovery is often considered the birth of "modern" contact with China because it was not until the sixteenth century that the sea route finally became the dominant mode of transportation.²⁷

European trade with China was limited during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, since contact was confined to a few sea ports in the south. The primary exports were silk, porcelain, and tea, supplemented by lacquerware, kites, sedan chairs, and folding umbrellas.²⁸ The limited access to China made wares from China luxury items for Europe's wealthiest class. The Ming to Qing dynastic transition in the first half of the sixteenth century coincided with the arrival of Europeans by sea trade routes and

²⁷ Gunpowder, the compass, and paper are just some lasting examples of this trade. China was revered by Enlightenment intellectuals as an invaluable chapter in the history of world civilization and at four-thousand-year-old one of the oldest and longest lasting empires in history. Paul Frederick Cressey, "Chinese Traits in European Civilization: A Study in Diffusion." *American Sociological Review*. Vol.10, No. 5 (Oct., 1945), 595-604.

²⁸ Cressey, 599-600. Cressey does make a further note about the folding fan, which is a Japanese invention that spread to China, but in this case it shows the influence of Chinese, not Japanese, trade with the west.

missionaries arrived in China via those trade routes. China, during the Qing empire, entered a period of cosmopolitan openness that allowed the Jesuits to enter the empire as learned men dealing with Chinese official on intellectual terms. The resulting relationships were both positive and fruitful.²⁹ Many wide changes were also taking place in Europe at the time of the Qing takeover such as the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the emergence of Enlightenment ideas. As a result of these changes and new ideals, European *philosophes* were also more receptive to new and foreign ideas. As Harry Gelber aptly put it, the Enlightenment “changed the very vocabulary of politics” and the Jesuits missionaries were teaching this vocabulary to the *philosophes*.³⁰

From the earliest trade relations an imbalance of interest became evident. Westerners were always highly interested in China, whereas the Chinese had limited to no interest in the West. Interest in product exchange was also imbalanced. The West had much to gain from trade with China- silk, ceramics, lacquer, weapons, furs, and rhubarb. In return, Europeans would send to China glass, textiles, dyes, precious stones, metal, coral, amber but these commodities lacked the exciting exoticism of the Chinese products.³¹ By the early to mid-eighteenth century the difference in perceptions of the other were striking. European views of China, including missionary travelogues tended to be admiring and even the Pope was presented with Jesuit translations of more than 400

²⁹ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 151.

³⁰ Harry G. Gelber, *The Dragon and the Foreign Devil: China and the World from 1100 B.C. to the Present*, (New York: Walker & Co., 2007), 145.

³¹ Gelber, 36. European demand for rhubarb was so great that many Chinese came to think that it was necessary for European digestion and its withdraw could possibly be used as a diplomatic weapon.

Confucian works.³²

A History of the Jesuit Mission in China

In the mid-sixteenth century the first Jesuit missionaries set out to convert the Chinese. Their plan was not the straightforward approach of mass indoctrination and force often employed by their Franciscan or Dominican counterparts in other missions around the world.³³ Instead, after establishing the first Jesuit mission in China in 1583, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci proposed a threefold conversion plan since, as far as he was concerned, the Chinese could “only be brought around [to Christianity] by the exercise of cunning.”³⁴ First, according to Ricci, the Chinese needed to be convinced that there was another significant civilization on the other side of the world, an idea which had never occurred to many within the isolationist Chinese court. To prove this point, Ricci brought European maps reflecting the many European discoveries and accomplishments. Next, Ricci and the other Jesuits set about showing the substantial learning and technological advancements western scholars could share with the Chinese literati and could potentially profit the already strong empire. After the missionaries had proved their intellectual worth, they embarked on the third phase: to persuade the mandarins and court scholars to embrace Christianity. Ricci hypothesized that the best way to convert the Chinese was to teach the gospels in native languages, borrow concepts from indigenous cultures for illustrative purposes, and earn the respect and sympathy of local

³² Gelber, 124.

³³ Jacques Gernet. *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985), 5.

³⁴ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci 1583-1610*, ed. Nicolas Trigault, (New York, 1953), 20-23.

elites and court officials. This approach has come to be known as *accommodationism*. In order to avoid controversy over their conversion strategies, Rome granted the Jesuits monopolistic access to China and for many years they were the unique source of information of the empire to the West.³⁵

With the advent of Jesuit missionary activity the first glowing reports on Chinese civilization, philosophy, religion, and government reached Europe. These reports from the Jesuit fathers, who were also regarded as Europe's premier scholars, had lasting impact on the great minds of France. In these travelogues the Jesuits portrayed the Chinese people and their governmental and religious systems as similar to, if not superior to, the European system, and China was no longer perceived as a curious heathen land but as an ideal worthy of European admiration.³⁶ Just as Chinese furniture and *objets d'art* became the luxury items in France, so Jesuit travelogues became the intellectual exotica of Europe's Enlightenment leaders.

By the late seventeenth century, the fascination between China and the West was mutual. The Jesuits' unique training in mathematics, astronomy, and other sciences the respect of Chinese scholars and eventually gained them employment in the Imperial Court, providing the Jesuits with intimate access and a singular knowledge of Chinese culture and tradition. The Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722), frequently compared with his French counterpart the *Roi Soleil* of France, actively sought information about western science and civilization. Under his rule, China entered into a period of cosmopolitanism and openness that was uncharacteristic for the notoriously isolationist empire. His thirst

³⁵ Fairbank and Goldman, 151.

³⁶ Cressey, 601

for western knowledge also allowed the Jesuits initial access to the Court of China since many of the earlier and subsequent emperors, Qianlong in particular, refused to support the foreigners' religion. For his part, Kangxi viewed the Jesuits as valuable scholars, both secular and religious, but not as holy men. His love of European technology was evidenced in his command that the Jesuits build him a European style château complete with rococo ornaments and fountains.³⁷

This love of the “other’s” art and architecture was not unidirectional however. French architecture began to take on Oriental elements as well. The eighteenth century ushered in the change from the heavy Baroque style to the more delicate Rococo style. Chinese art provided the novelty that the French desired at this time. Chinese-inspired imported furniture and housewares or *magots de la Chine* were pervasive. In fact, the craze for *chinoiserie* in France was much more popular than the merely elitist interest in China for European technological and scientific accomplishments.³⁸

It was not until the eighteenth century that China reached its highest level of esteem with the intellectual circles in Europe. During this period the rich and powerful Chinese empire spread far into Central Asia and was ruled by highly capable emperors. By 1762, China had an estimated population of over 200,000,000 while French kings had fewer than 25,000,000 subjects.³⁹ Although China was not as innovative or technologically advanced as it had been in past eras or the modernizing developments of eighteenth-century Europe, it demanded respect as a rich accumulation of more than three

³⁷ Arnold H. Rowbotham, “Voltaire, Sinophile.” *PMLA*, 47:4 (Dec. 1932): 1053.

³⁸ Cressey, 601.

³⁹ Cressey calculates the French population as numbering less than 18,000,000 but this is a disputed figure, 599

thousand years of history.⁴⁰

Europe's understanding of China came primarily through two very different sources of knowledge: missionaries and merchants. The merchants' experiences were mostly limited to the sea ports and commercial transactions. At these peripheral points of contact, European merchants interacted with a relatively small number of Chinese merchants and officials who often treated foreigners rudely, since the merchant class was not highly respected in Chinese society. In turn, some early European merchants had displayed violence which further alienated them from Chinese society. As a result, their accounts were often critical and mediated through inaccurate or incomplete translations. By contrast, the Jesuits' education, immersion in the culture, language skills, and association with the Chinese nobility produced more affirmative, accurate and complete observations. So although merchant impressions of China were less favorable than the missionaries', they did not circulate as widely. This was especially true for the French *philosophes*, who had little regular contact with the merchant class and, like the Chinese literati, did not particularly respect the opinions of the merchant class. The *philosophes'* impressions were, therefore, almost exclusively based on Jesuit accounts and interactions with Jesuit missionaries themselves.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Cressey, 600.

⁴¹ Cressey, 599.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION TO CONFUCIAN CHINA

Jesuit Accommodationism and the Confucian Classics

Jesuit accounts were not unbiased or untainted by religious and moral prejudice but the Jesuits genuinely admired Chinese philosophy and ethics and began translating the Chinese classics and Confucius' works as early as 1662.⁴² The Jesuit practice of accommodation and a deeper understanding of Chinese culture were not the only motivating factors for writing positive reports. Critical Jesuit reports of China that existed went unpublished in order to avoid antagonizing their superiors in Rome and in order not to endanger their mission so only the favorable interpretations of the traditional Confucian school of thought reached Europe.⁴³ Chinese poetry, drama and novels as well as works on Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and other schools of philosophy often remained un-translated. This selective translation also influenced the European image of China making China appear like a more unified and harmonious culture.

In the mid-sixteenth century, Ricci recognized Confucianism as the “state religion” promoted by the scholar-official class and began studying and translating Confucian texts to see if there was any element reconcilable with Biblical doctrines. In 1583 Ricci wrote:

We [i.e. the Jesuits] have been living here in China for well-nigh thirty years and have traveled through its most important provinces. Moreover, we have lived in friendly intercourse with the nobles, the supreme magistrates, and the most

⁴² Manfred Barthel, *The Jesuits: History and Legend of the Society of Jesus*. (William Morrow: New York, 1982), 283

⁴³ Cressey, 600.

distinguished men of letters in the kingdom. We speak the native language of the country; have set ourselves to the study of their customs and laws and finally, which is of the highest importance we have devoted ourselves day and night to the perusal of their literature.⁴⁴

Ricci claimed to have discovered that the Classic Confucian texts conveyed belief in a monotheistic God, and the concepts of “God” and “Heaven” were found here and there in the texts.⁴⁵ Through these similarities, Ricci hoped to accommodate Confucianism and Catholicism in order to aid in his conversion attempts. Ultimately, however, the Jesuits had little success converting the Chinese. By 1700, the total conversions numbered around 200,000 which considering the population of China was a dismal failure.⁴⁶ Instead of impressing Chinese scholars with the merits of Christianity, the Jesuits instead came to admire and, in a sense, “convert” to many of the Chinese beliefs and traditions. So the Jesuits, in their attempt to persuade the Chinese of European superiority, learned about and grew to deeply respect Chinese culture, tradition, and religion.⁴⁷

Not surprisingly, Ricci’s accommodationist conversion methods did not earn him approval from Rome or other religious orders, who accused him of accepting heathen practices and writing overly apologetic accounts of their pagan religion. As a result, the Jesuits initially faced great difficulties in disseminating their writings on China, owing to censorship of the Church and the Iberian authorities that sponsored Ricci’s Portuguese mission. Since the Church saw knowledge of alien religions and civilizations as a threat

⁴⁴ Ricci, *China in the sixteenth century: the journals of Matthew Ricci 1583-1610*. chap. 1:1, 3. quoted in Manfred Barthel, *The Jesuits: History and the Legend of the Society of Jesus*. (New York: William Morrow, 1982), 191.

⁴⁵ Ho-Fung Hung, “Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900.” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), 254-280.

⁴⁶ Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007), 4.

⁴⁷ Barthel, 283.

to orthodoxy, most writings on the newly encountered societies were listed in the *Index of prohibition* issued by the Pope in 1558.⁴⁸ Jesuits' writings on China were therefore shielded from the public in Europe. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Jesuits began to shift their allegiance to the French court, which was more tolerant of their cosmopolitan writings. King Louis XIV had launched France into an era of military, political, and cultural dominance within Europe making Paris the cultural capital.⁴⁹ After that, the Jesuits received funding from the French government, traveled on the ships of the French East India Company, and freely published their books in Paris. This turned Paris into a vibrant center of production and dissemination of knowledge on China.⁵⁰

All the while, Jesuit monopoly on access to China provoked jealousy from both Catholic and Protestant rivals. Rome's policy of restricting non-Jesuit sects from entering China came under constant attack. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the pressure became so strong that the restriction began to loosen and by 1632 the Franciscans and Dominicans also entered China.⁵¹ Upon gaining entrance, they immediately set out to distinguish themselves from their Jesuit counterparts. The Franciscans and Dominicans began by preaching to and attempting to convert commoners while denouncing the Jesuits for catering mainly to the Chinese elites.⁵²

However, the most common distinction focused on methods of conversion; the Jesuits' accommodationist policies were severely criticized and replaced by more

⁴⁸ Hung, 271.

⁴⁹ Gelber, 146.

⁵⁰ Hung, 271. The relationship of the Jesuits and the French court was a symbiotic one which granted the Jesuits intellectual freedoms and provided the French government with valuable information on China that would further their trade relationship.

⁵¹ Hung, 256.

⁵² Fairbank and Goldman, 151.

exclusionary approaches to Christianity. In addition, the new orders projected a much more negative picture of Chinese culture and traditional religion. They observed that the Chinese of all walks of life performed rites to the dead, including dead parents, familial ancestors, and Confucius. Confucianist scholar-officials sanctioned these rites, such as burning incense in front of the tablets on which the names of the worshipped were inscribed. The Franciscans and Dominicans regarded these practices as manifestations of idolatry and accused the Jesuits of concealing this fact from the Church.⁵³ So while the Jesuits were criticized for compromising with “idolatry,” the Franciscans and Dominicans continued to preach hellfire and damnation to the Chinese.⁵⁴ A missionary of the Russian Orthodox Church summarized the Jesuit practice of accommodation that provoked the dissension:

The priests of [Franciscan and Dominican] orders have told me that there are still many obstacles [to conversion attempts] from the [Jesuit] priests themselves..., for whatever almost all other orders regard as evil [in Chinese customs] and begin to stop, or argue on the contrary that it is not evil, the Jesuits dispute, and what the others hinder and forbid, they permit; or, on the contrary, what the others allow, they alone protest.⁵⁵

In other words, while other religious orders viewed the Chinese practice of ancestor worship as innately “evil,” the Jesuits incorporated aspects of these rites into Christian modes of worship and justified them theologically. For example, the Jesuits maintained that ancestor worship was an admirable practice that demonstrated a healthy cultural respect for elders that was consonant with Christianity and therefore a “civil rite.”⁵⁶ The

⁵³ Hung, 266.

⁵⁴ Barthel, 194.

⁵⁵ Russian Orthodox Father Smorzhevskii, (no primary source citation available) Barbara Widenor Maggs, “The Jesuits in China’: Views of an Eighteenth-Century Russian Observer,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8:2 (Winter, 1974), 145.

⁵⁶ Fairbank and Goldman, 151.

Jesuits did not view these practices as a hindrance to conversion attempts but merely a harmless cultural idiosyncrasy.

In 1703, a papal legate arrived in China to determine whether or not the “Chinese rites” could actually be sanctioned by the Church, marking the beginning of a lengthy dispute between the legate and the Jesuits. Upon questioning, the Chinese emperor, the only participant who acquitted himself well, explained that the veneration of one’s ancestors was an ancient and edifying practice with no religious significance whatsoever (though this was far from the truth).⁵⁷ This explanation served to pacify the papal legate on the Emperor’s account but the legate would ultimately rule against the Jesuits; in response the Emperor promptly expelled him from the country. The expulsion further angered the Jesuits’ superiors in Rome and incited more criticism from other orders and other antagonists.⁵⁸

This conflict, known as the “rites controversy,” reached a fever pitch through the efforts of French Catholic reformers known as the Jansenists. The Jansenists, in contrast to the Jesuits’ universalistic and humanistic belief that all men on earth had equal opportunities to receive God’s grace, postulated predestination, with the corollary that God’s grace was bestowed more on some men, in this case Europeans, than on others. The Jansenists complained of Jesuit accommodationism to the Pope and the French government, advocating the prohibition of Jesuits’ writings on China. To defend themselves, the Jesuits reasserted that the rites were no more than secular practices showing the youth how to respect their elders and ancestors, but to no avail. Finally, in

⁵⁷ Barthel, 198.

⁵⁸ Hung, 267.

1742 Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758) issued the bull, *Ex quo singulari*, which formally forbade ancestor worship to all Chinese Christians. In retaliation, the Emperor outlawed Christianity in China and expelled all missionaries except, of course, the Jesuits who were encouraged to remain in China and continue their scientific and artistic work in Beijing.⁵⁹ This 1742 ban on Christianity would not be lifted until 1846 at French insistence.⁶⁰

The Jesuit mission in China would last until 1880 but never progressed further than the second phase of Ricci's conversion plan, to dazzle the Chinese with Western science and technology, which had essentially become an end unto itself. The Jesuits were never able to achieve their ultimate goal of converting the Chinese nobility and literati to Christianity. As a result it was only fitting that in later years the China mission was regarded by the Church hierarchy as kind of "Siberian exile for rebellious or recalcitrant Jesuits."⁶¹

In 1687, Jesuit accommodationism and rebellion peaked with the arrival of five French Jesuits in Beijing. Fathers de Fountaney, Bouvet, Le Comte, Gerbillion led by Father Philippe Couplet were a select group of missionaries sent directly to Beijing at the request of Louis XIV. This group, the "*mathématiciens du Roy*," were charged with establishing an academic outpost in Beijing. This group was independent of the rest of the order because they were sent as royal emissaries and therefore did not report directly to the *Mission Étrangères* but to the King. Several other Jesuit fathers would later join

⁵⁹ Barthel, 198.

⁶⁰ Fairbank and Goldman, 222.

⁶¹ Barthel, 198-199.

their ranks but the group was never more than handful. As a result of their unique status and the sheer volume of their printed works they have a special place in French history.⁶²

These Jesuits increased their support for Confucianism and presented it as a rational religion in the publication of numerous controversial Jesuit texts on China including Couplet's *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687), Le Comte's *Nouveaux memoires sur l'etat present de la Chine* (1696) and Du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'Empire de la Chine* (1735). These books favorably presented the doctrines of Confucianism, Chinese history, and portraits of the political-economic institutions of the Empire. China's moral system and the ideal of a mandrinate trained in the Confucian classics, selected by examination, and ruled by an absolute emperor over a peaceful countryside were "lyrically" described.⁶³ Through these texts, the Jesuits posited another controversial theory about China, namely that Chinese civilization antedated that of the West.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, many of the most accommodative Jesuits were beginning to produce works about China's chronological role in religious antiquity. Jesuit missionaries were astounded to find within the libraries of China documents and works that suggested China's history pre-dated the Biblical chronology that had been accepted in Europe as the oldest historical record. These missionaries put forth radical theories to reconcile China's status as a "noble pagan nation" with Christian traditions, to integrate China into the Hermetic theory, the search for universal illumination through

⁶² Brockey, 157-160.

⁶³ Spence, Jonathan, "Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth to the Present." in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, (University of California Press, 1990), 1-2.

philosophy, and to assimilate knowledge of the Chinese language into the search for a universal language and philosophy.⁶⁴ These Jesuit theorists were part of a movement that became known as the Figurists. *Figurisme* or Figurism is defined as “a system of interpretation of Biblical texts based on the possible multiplicity of meanings present within the texts.”⁶⁵ These theories were radical for their deliberate integration of a “pagan” China into the Christian tradition. Especially disturbing to many in the Catholic Church was how the Figurists elevated China to a place of honor in the Christian chronological tradition; some of the fathers had even suggested that the Chinese may in fact be the preservers of a true Christianity. These views were not only extreme but would later be deemed as heretical, resulting in the expulsion of many Figurist priests from the Society.

With such writings, the Figurists pushed the boundaries of Jesuit accommodationism. Fathers Foucquet, Bouvet, Kirsch, Le Comte, Prémare, and Du Halde had the greatest influence on *philosophes* like Voltaire, but Fathers Tournemine, Couplet, Chatolais, and Le Gobien were also well known proponents of Figurist theories. For example, Fathers Prémare and Du Halde provided the inspiration for Voltaire’s play *The Orphan of China*.⁶⁶ These missionaries’ findings could not be dismissed offhand because they were regarded as erudite scholars of both European and Chinese classics even by supercilious critics and colleagues.

⁶⁴ Hermeticism is the mythological tradition relating to Hermes Trismegistus or the works ascribed to him. According to legend Hermes Trismegistus is said to have provided the wisdom of light in the ancient mysteries of Egypt and was said to carry an emerald, upon which was recorded all of philosophy, and the caduceus, the symbol of mystical illumination

⁶⁵ *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Paris, 1924) 2 : 20,

⁶⁶ Voltaire, *The Orphan of China*, Dublin: William Smith, Bookseller, (1756), ix-x.

Inspired by these Figurist texts, one of Louis XIV's tutors wrote a book *On Confucius: the Socrates of China*. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) thought the Chinese meritocracy held many lessons for Europeans and might shed light on a progressive world civilization. Of course, Voltaire would become another admirer asserting that China was infinitely more civilized than Europe and Europeans should look to China as a model of rationalism and stable rule.⁶⁷

Voltaire's Introduction to Jesuit Images of China and Confucian Deism

Voltaire first encountered China through his Jesuit education at Clermont College and Jesuit writings on China. In his schooldays, under Jesuit instruction, Voltaire had been "saturated with moralistic literature on China, and the praises of the natural goodness of the civilization."⁶⁸ Voltaire made a careful study of three chief works of Jesuit missionaries: the *Mémoires* of Father Louis Le Comte, the *Description de le Chine* by Father Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, and the many volume *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* and was uniquely able to separate the favorable Jesuit accounts from their inherently Christian context to point out that the presence of morality in a non-Christian China. He illustrated that morality was relative and nullified arguments for the imposed moral systems of the Catholic Church.⁶⁹ Jesuit universities and colleges often provided the philosophes with their first exposure to China and formal Sinological study. A great

⁶⁷ Gelber, 150.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 95

⁶⁹ Du Halde, J-B. *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique Politique et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise par le Père J-B Du Halde*. (Paris, 1735) (4 volumes), Le Comte, Louis. *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'Etat présent de le Chine par le R.P. Louis Le Comte de la Cie. De Jesus...*(Paris, 1696)., Merigot, J.G. (Ed.) *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des mission étrangères*. (Paris) (26 volumes-volumes XVI- XXVI deal with the China mission.)

many of the French Enlightenment thinkers began their education at Jesuit institutions. At the age of ten Voltaire was under the tutelage of Fathers Olivet, Porée, and Tournemine at the college at Clermont.⁷⁰ Voltaire's unique relationship with his Jesuit mentors is particularly interesting and revealing. Voltaire insisted that he "experienced only good and beautiful things" under his Jesuit mentors and grew to respect immensely their tolerance.⁷¹ The Jesuits, with their accommodationist attitudes and their adaptation to people and times, endeavored to find a compromise between the Church and humanity. Voltaire was sympathetic to the Jesuits' tolerant and accommodationist spirit.⁷² In essence, Voltaire despised the intolerance of the Catholic Church yet could respect and acknowledge the tolerance and relative objectivity of his Jesuit mentors' accommodationist attitudes.

Although Voltaire did not embrace all of the dogmas of the Catholic tradition in school, he enthusiastically adopted the Jesuit admiration for Chinese culture and his works. In the early eighteenth century the young Voltaire was already taking advantage of the apparent contradictions between revealed scientific truths and religious truths of the Bible to attack the Church because numerous contradictions raised doubt of reason and therefore must be rejected. Unlike some enlightenment philosophers who considered themselves atheists, Voltaire considered himself a deist and believed the natural world required a creator. At the same time, he did not embrace the Christian explanation and was a fierce critic of Catholic dogma.

⁷⁰ Füllöp-Muller, 431. For example Descartes, whose doctrine of doubt is often credited with laying the foundation of all knowledge that led to the Enlightenment, had been a model pupil in the Jesuit College at La Flèche.

⁷¹ Füllöp-Muller, 431-32.

⁷² Füllöp-Muller, 432.

Voltaire's rhetoric professor, Father René-Joseph de Tournemine, was particularly interested in Chinese science and medicine and maintained correspondence with Father Bouvet and shared his letters with Voltaire. On a visit to England, Voltaire made the acquaintance of the Figurist Father Foucquet, who would further cement his love of China and its political system. Foucquet was arguably the most outspoken of the small group who strove to prove a common origin for the ancient religion of the Hebrews and the primitive religion of China.⁷³ Foucquet had been a missionary in China from 1699 until 1722 when his heterodox views forced him to leave China and the eventually Society of Jesus. After his return to Europe, he was appointed titular bishop of Eleutheropolis in Rome and brought back with him the largest collection of Chinese books existing in Europe up to the nineteenth century and continued to profess his views to all who would listen.⁷⁴ Although Voltaire despised the intolerance of the Catholic Church, he respected and acknowledged the tolerance and relative objectivity of his Jesuit mentors and maintained friendly lifelong relationships with many of his former teachers.

Perhaps his closest companion was Father Porée. He brought his friend Father Adam with him to his chateau at Ferney, where the priest lived for thirteen years as his host's conversational companion and chess partner. Later Voltaire insisted that he "experienced only good and beautiful things" under his Jesuit mentors and immensely respected their tolerance. In his last testament, Voltaire expressed the wish to die in the Catholic Faith in which he had been born, trusting that God in His mercy would forgive

⁷³ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1051.

⁷⁴ Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists," 475.

him his sins. When he felt that he was nearing the end, he called for his friend Father Gaultier for last rites, declaring, “If you like, we’ll get the little affair over at once.”⁷⁵

The *philosophe* Montesquieu also maintained a significant relationship with the Figurist group, especially Foucquet, although he was less interested in the religious theories of the group than in translating the secular Confucian Chinese law to the man of the Enlightenment.⁷⁶ Montesquieu’s involvement with the Jesuit Sinophiles would certainly have inspired Voltaire to follow suit but not as much Leibniz, who in Voltaire’s opinion was one of the greatest minds of his time.⁷⁷ Voltaire, like Montesquieu, was on several occasions the willing victim of the Foucquet’s loquacity and had been impressed by his statements.⁷⁸ Voltaire was in Paris during at least part of Foucquet’s stay there from 1721 to 1723 and the two became acquainted. In his *Essai sur les Mœurs*, Voltaire says, “Father Foucquet...told me several times that there were very few atheist philosophers in China.”⁷⁹ Voltaire was just one of the many initiates into this new idea of universalism and was following Diderot’s advice, “Élargissez Dieu [Expand God]!”⁸⁰

The Figurist missionaries often had direct and close contact with the burgeoning group of secular Sinophiles like Voltaire while on return visits to Europe and through correspondence from China. The missionaries had more converts to Sinophilia in France than they had Christian converts in China. The growth of French Sinophilia can be viewed as a tree whose branches grew in many different directions but the Jesuit theories

⁷⁵ Füllöp-Muller, 431-32.

⁷⁶ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 484.

⁷⁷ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 485.

⁷⁸ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 480 (*footnote*) also from Voltaire’s *Oevres*, 160.

⁷⁹ “Le Père Foucquet... m’a dit plusieurs fois qu’il y avait à la Chine très peu de philosophes athées.”

⁸⁰ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 481.

were the roots. According to Mungello, “The history of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mission in China is very much like a plant that developed from a common stem of aims into various branches.”⁸¹ The “branch” that led to the early European study of China he calls “proto-Sinology” and these early proto-Sinologists can be distinguished from later Sinologists by their lesser degree of knowledge and philosophical rather than factual focus of their studies on China. Although the Jesuit missionaries’ original aim was to proselytize and convert, their intellectual proclivity led them to disseminate information throughout Europe to garner support for the mission among intellectuals and nobles. This information ignited intense interest in China that eventually led to the formal study of China or “Sinology.” Proto-sinologists, like Voltaire often included their new knowledge of China and their expanding world views in their more general work since the inclusion of China and the exotic demonstrated a breadth of learning that was prized during the Enlightenment period.⁸² The addition of Sinological evidence lent credence to more general philosophical works that were sometimes unrelated, not in an effort to study China, but to make the author appear more learned.

The Jesuit missionaries’ personal correspondence, official reports, personal visits, and published works all reached the European savants and nobles who constituted the proto-sinologists. The Jesuits who wrote these reports had extensive personal and knowledge and experience of China. A step removed from the Jesuit’s personal experiences in China, the savants’ or *philosophes*’ works were reinterpretations based on a superficial knowledge of China. The *philosophes*’ assimilation of the Jesuits’ ideas

⁸¹ Mungello, 13.

tended to focus on those ideas which were of the greatest current importance and interest to Europeans.⁸³ In contrast to later Sinologists and Orientalists who focused primarily on China, these proto-Sinologists used second-hand knowledge of China in service of more general social and scientific theories about human society.

Despite Church censorship of Jesuit publications, there was an increasing number of unpublished Jesuit treatises in circulation defending accommodationist practices and promoting their more radical theories. While the works of Jesuit Figurists were increasingly condemned or went unpublished, the fathers continued to provide the *philosophes* with new research through journals and personal correspondence. Figurists like Father Du Halde, who edited the Jesuit reports, even went so far as to remove material that was unfavorable to the Chinese or the Jesuits. Father Le Comte, in the *Lettres édifiantes*, severely criticized the shortcomings of the court officials and scholars. Likewise, in the same volume, Father Contancin related the story of a Chinese Christian family whose members were persecuted for their faith but these passages were omitted in journal publications.⁸⁴ In fact, the editing was often so extreme that several Jesuit missionaries complained. However, Father Du Halde judged his reading public correctly and was consequently honored by Voltaire who put him on his list of “the great men of

⁸³ Mungello, 15.

⁸⁴ Louis Le Comte, *Memoires*, (Paris : 1696), 1: 213, and [Father] Contancin, *Lettres édifiantes*, (J. Vernareil, 1819), 20: page numbers, passim. A native of France, Father Le Comte was one of five mathematicians sent to China by Louis XIV in 1685. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1671. Due to Portuguese pressures against the French mission presence in China, he returned to France and reported on the status of the mission. He published a work upholding the Jesuit practice of accommodation and the Chinese rites controversy. This work was later condemned as heretical and as a result widely read and praised by Enlightenment *philosophes*. It was his desire to return to China he died before it could become a reality. (Mungello, 340-343).

his time.”⁸⁵ It was the unique relationship between the Figurists fathers and their Enlightenment followers that ultimately brought about their revolutionary influence. In this way the theories of a small group of Jesuit fathers, though deemed heretical and suppressed by the Church, were artfully incorporated into Voltaire’s works.

The Jesuits’ laudatory descriptions sparked the *philosophes* to envision a China that not only rivaled Europe but surpassed it. The “China” of the *philosophes* emerged as a utopia, a governmental and moral ideal with which to compare all the shortcomings and failings of the French monarchy and Roman Catholic Church. The inundation of French intellectual circles’ reports of Chinese glory coincided with the widespread dissatisfaction with the oppression of the French government and the Roman Catholic Church. So it was only natural that French intellectuals welcomed the Jesuit portrayal of the Chinese and examined their ideas and values, hoping to find the key to their success. However, it inspired some hesitancy on the part of the Jesuit missionaries who were now viewed with suspicion by both the Church and by their intellectual peers who dismissed them as minions of the pope.

The Jesuits had introduced Voltaire to a “religion of reason” that matched his Enlightenment principles. The Enlightenment was founded on the principles that all human relationships should be rooted in reason and that rational consideration was paramount. To the delight of most of the Enlightenment philosophers, Confucius had promoted these same ideals two thousand years earlier; as a result Confucius became the patron saint of the Enlightenment. In Confucianism, Voltaire firmly believed he had

⁸⁵ Mungello, 343.

discovered the true faith or the original religion and allied himself with Jesuit missionaries like Le Comte, and philosophers like Leibniz, accepting the theory of Noachide origin for Chinese religion. This is an oddly flawed argument since Voltaire regularly treats Biblical authority with contempt; yet, in order to establish the respectability of Chinese religion, he attempts to identify it with Hebrew monotheism supported by the Catholic Church and its teachings. However, the acceptance of Jesuit writings and the rejection of the Catholic faith were not inherently contradictory for Voltaire since in praising the Chinese religious practices, he recognized that the Jesuits themselves were undermining the infallibility of their Church traditions and the Catholic chronology.

Voltaire and the other Enlightenment *philosophes* admired deism, especially the Confucian brand of deism, because it was free from dogmatic prejudice and priesthood. Voltaire believed that Catholic dogma, liturgical ritual, and priesthood were all man-made rules of piety to distract Catholics from the reality of church corruption. Confucianism, by comparison, appeared to be the pure, non-dogmatic worship of a Supreme Being. Voltaire became an avid disciple of Confucius and kept a picture of the Chinese philosopher facing him while he worked. He had the highest respect for Confucius because he was a wise man, not a prophet, who preferred to teach rather than govern. Of Confucius, Voltaire wrote, “I have read his books with attention...I found that they spoke only of the purest morality...He appeals only to virtue, he preaches no miracles, there is nothing in them of ridiculous allegory.”⁸⁶ Voltaire believed that

⁸⁶ Voltaire. *Lettres Philosophiques*. Letter XI.

Confucius had preserved the purity of the Chinese religion and China flourished when his laws and teachings were most closely followed.

Voltaire's Sinophilia was unwavering and even when the cult of *chinoiserie* began to disappear in France, Voltaire faithfully adhered to his idealized image of Confucian China.⁸⁷ Despite opposition, such as Diderot's observation that the Chinese lacked progress in the arts and sciences, Voltaire asserted that the Chinese achievement in the arts and sciences reached an apex in human happiness where it stopped because it was not necessary to go further.⁸⁸ Voltaire felt the Chinese were not stagnant but that its society was already enlightened and therefore did not require any further advancement.

He wrote:

The question is frequently asked, why the Chinese have not kept up with the scientific advances they displayed in the remote past, why half-tones in music are still unknown to them, why their astronomy is so outmoded. It seems that nature has endowed this human species so different ours, with organs which were made for discovering at one stroke everything that was necessary for them and which are incapable of advancing beyond this.⁸⁹

Voltaire's theory that the Chinese through Confucianism had achieved the ultimate level of civilization reveals his respect for Chinese knowledge and learning and his distaste and disregard for the illiterate and unlearned.⁹⁰ Both the Jesuits and Voltaire selectively overlooked apparent discrepancies in Chinese philosophy and culture to praise an

⁸⁷ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1050.

⁸⁸ *Oeuvres*. XI, 173. This skepticism is not a wholly accurate summation of Diderot's view of China. In his *Encyclopedia*, China is praised as "le pays le plus peuplé & le mieux cultivé qu'il y ait au monde [the most and best cultivated people in the world]." ⁸⁸ The *Encyclopedia* also gives more than six pages to describe Chinese philosophy almost entirely based on missionary writings and limited to traditional Confucianism.

⁸⁹ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*. 266.

⁹⁰ Voltaire's statement seems to echo Rousseau's doctrine that the arts and sciences as agents for human happiness have their distinct limitations.

intellectual utopia; this is most evident in Voltaire's defense of Confucianism and practice of ancestor worship. Voltaire, echoing the Jesuit Figurists, dismisses ancestor worship as the practice of "common people" whose "ignorant and stupid minds demand a coarse spiritual food" and asserts that it is separate from pure Confucian state religion.⁹¹ Here, Voltaire adheres to the Jesuit accommodationist missionaries' dualistic argument making a distinction between an aristocratic religion suitable to cultured minds and a popular religion for the ignorant and the illiterate. Interestingly, Voltaire uses this argument put forth by Jesuit missionaries to find within the Confucian cult "everything necessary for the creation of a religion to oppose the Christian Church."⁹²

For Voltaire, the Confucian state system based on a rational, non-dogmatic religion in concert with the promotion of scientific and intellectual study represented an advanced religious and political ideal. Richard Shoaf argues that Voltaire used science as a symbol of his "optimistic theory of knowledge and his uniformitarianism....to make some extremely optimistic statements about the inevitability of the rapid triumph of valid scientific theories [even] statements that clash with the usual picture of Voltaire as a consummate skeptic and doubter."⁹³ The idea of a universal truth system that has been perverted by established doctrine perfectly worked into Voltaire's criticism of the Catholic Church and his wholehearted and very uncharacteristic Sinophilia. In his essay entitled "Géographie," Voltaire advised his readers to rebuke their "stupid neighbors on the rue Saint-Jacques [when they] reproach you for your unorthodox religious opinions

⁹¹ Voltaire. *Oeuvres*. XI, 58.

⁹² Rowbotham, 1058.

⁹³ Richard Shoaf, "Science, Sect, and Certainty in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*" *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan., 1985), 122.

and proclaim that the whole world supports their beliefs.... Pull out a map of the world and use it as a polemical weapon.... Show them Africa, China, Turkey, Russia, and the rest of Europe; point out ‘You oppose the universe at the rue Saint Jacques.’”⁹⁴

Voltaire also used this uniformitarian principle to condemn a great number of ethical follies, including religious persecution, which he asserted did not exist in Confucian China. Voltaire noted that only a handful of religions-Christianity, Judaism, and Islam ever fought wars over religion. He singled out France among other nations, for this barbarity. The Romans never persecuted anyone for his religious opinions, Voltaire maintained, and neither did the barbarian nations that followed the Roman Empire. Even the Ancient Jews, devoted to their monotheistic religion, allowed some kind of religious toleration. In the eighteenth century the English colonies in America, as well as Russia, Holland, Great Britain, and Turkey, did not persecute. Only in a few parts of Europe, (i.e. France, Spain, and other Catholic countries), had this type of bloodletting become common. By opposing the whole globe to Catholic Europe, Voltaire argued that the religious persecution was a savage anomaly.⁹⁵ The historical reality of this argument was less important to Voltaire than shedding the light of truth on oppression and persecution, especially in his homeland. ⁹⁶

In keeping with Voltaire’s idealized vision of China, he maintained that China’s religious system was free from the sectarian dissension that long plagued European Catholicism. He believed that these sects conceived fanaticism and superstition that

⁹⁴ *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* vol. 19: 256. [Trans. mine]. “Vous opposerez l’univers à la rue Saint-Jacques.”

⁹⁵ Shoaf, 122.

⁹⁶ Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, 125.

perverted the original aim of the faith. He suggested that Christianity should mix philosophy with the Church doctrines to achieve the tolerant and enlightened purity of Confucianism deism.

When at last some Christians adopted the doctrines of Plato and mixed a little philosophy with their religion, they separated from the Jewish cult and gradually won some eminence. But they remained divided into sects; there was never a time when the Christian Church was united. It was born amid the divisions of the Jews.

The terrible dissension which has endured for so many centuries is a striking lesson teaching us mutually to forgive our errors; dissension is the great evil of mankind, and toleration is its only remedy.⁹⁷

In essence, Voltaire believed that dissension and disunity in the Catholic Church impeded universal progress by encouraging sectarian opposition. According to Rosenthal, Voltaire was primarily a moralist concerned with spreading the gospel of Enlightenment and using Europe's new understanding of world geography and beliefs as a useful proselytizing tool.⁹⁸ Voltaire felt that Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular were impeding the world's conversion to the "religion of reason and intelligence." To uphold his observation Voltaire cited the many admirable qualities of ancient pagan civilizations. The religion of Ancient China received high praise for being "wise, simple, and free from all barbarities and superstitions."⁹⁹ According to Voltaire, the Chinese Supreme Deity was prompted exclusively by moral consideration to reward and punish accordingly. Voltaire praised China for being neither pagan nor Christian:

[Europeans] should admire [the Chinese for at least] two articles of merit, which at once condemn the superstition of the pagans, and the morals of the Christians. The religion of their learned men was never dishonored by fables, nor stained with quarrels or civil wars. In the very act of charging the government of that

⁹⁷ Voltaire. *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. Selected and Translated by H.I. Woolf. New York: Knopf, 1924, 29-30.

⁹⁸ Rosenthal, 159.

⁹⁹ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 80, 85, 270.

vast empire with atheism, we have been so inconsistent as to accuse it of idolatry; an imputation that refutes itself. The great misunderstanding that prevails concerning the rites of the Chinese, arose from our judging their customs by our own; for we carry our prejudices, and spirit of contention along with us, even to the extremities of the earth.¹⁰⁰

Unlike Catholic France, Chinese Confucianism appeared to be free from controlling dogma and corruption. The government respected spiritual belief but state religion did not dictate policy that would reinforce oppressive powers. Voltaire regularly points out that the problem with religion is not its spiritual foundation but rather the subsequent perversion of the religion by corrupt spiritual leaders. He cites the difference between Islam and Christianity as an example:

The legislator of Mohammadanism, a powerful and terrible man, established his dogmas through his courage and force of arms. The religion subsequently became indulgent and tolerant. On the other hand, the divine founder of Christianity led a life of humility and peace, preaching the doctrine of non-resistance. But his sweet and saintly religion has become, through our frenzy, the most intolerant and most barbarian of all faiths.¹⁰¹

Ever attentive to the ironic reversal, Voltaire extracts an idealized view of Islam as a foil to Christian intolerance. As Rosenthal eloquently illustrated, Voltaire in all of writing had made it his “habit to use on his palette bright and dark colors only.”¹⁰² Voltaire, like any apologist, justified any belief that suited his argument to useful ends. Voltaire had determined that in producing philosophical discourse and edifying exegetic works, the end justified the means. While Voltaire did admit to blind spots in his works, he asserted that these exceptions applied only to the masses because as Voltaire queried somewhat sarcastically, “is it not a fact that the masses are everywhere foolish, imbecile, and

¹⁰⁰ Spence, 98.

¹⁰¹ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 363.

¹⁰² Rosenthal, 160.

superstitious?”¹⁰³ He even carried this so far as to declare that “masses do not deserve a rational religion.”¹⁰⁴ That is why it not surprising that Voltaire would continue to commend the magistrates and intellectuals of China for recognizing this fault in the masses and providing them with a crude type of religion in the same way they require the coarse food for sustaining their bodies.¹⁰⁵

Voltaire regarded it as a truth that “God endowed us with a principle of universal reason, just as he supplied birds with feather. This principle is so constant that it asserts itself despite all the passions which threaten it, despite the tyrants trying to drown it in blood, despite the imposters endeavoring to destroy it by superstition.”¹⁰⁶ So if the masses could not be taught, the intellectuals would have to guide them. This is a thinly veiled criticism of the oppression of the Catholic Church clergy and French monarchy and magistrates that Voltaire felt were obstructing the path to his “religion of intelligence and reason.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 121.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

CHAPTER 3

ENCOUNTERS WITH CHINESE HISTORY AND THE CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN CHRONOLOGY

The Jesuit Figurists and the Noachide Tradition

According to legends and written records, the beginning of Chinese history could be dated back to 2953 B.C.; on the Christian timeline, this was shortly after the Noadic flood, which was assumed to have occurred in 2957 B.C. Jesuit writers derived three propositions to reconcile these “facts” with Biblical chronology.¹⁰⁸ First, the ancestor of the Chinese was a son or grandson of Noah. Second, given the thousand year continuity of the Chinese language it must be the primitive universal language of the human being, or the *Lingua Adamica*. Third, considering China’s great antiquity, its ancient texts must be the purest manifestation of God’s Will or the pure Logos. Father Louis Le Comte wrote:

[The Chinese had] the knowledge of the true God and practiced the purest maxims of morality, while Europe and almost all the rest of the world live in error and corruption...[The Chinese] people had preserved for over 2,000 years the knowledge of the true God, and had honored Him in a manner which can serve as an example and as instruction even to Christians.¹⁰⁹

In other words, Chinese culture and religious understandings were on par with traditional Judeo-Christian teachings, though ignorant of the New Testament knowledge. Their

¹⁰⁸D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, (Honolulu, Hawaii UP, 1989), 188.

¹⁰⁹Louis Le Comte, *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l’Etat présent de le Chine par le R.P. Louis Le Comte de la Cie. De Jesus...* (Paris, 1696), 2, 141.

work would fall under what historians of anthropology label “monogenic” origin theories of humankind that trace all humans back to Noah and eventually Adam.¹¹⁰

Father Athanasius Kircher was one of the first Figurists to hint at the possibility of a universal language. In his *China illustrata* he remarked that,

Of all the pagan sects known to Europe, I know of no people who fell into fewer errors in the early ages of their antiquity than did the Chinese. From the very beginning of their history it is recorded in their writings that they recognized and worshipped one Supreme Being whom they called the King of Heaven, or designated by some other name indicating his rule over heaven and earth.... Nowhere do we read that the Chinese created monsters of vice out of this Supreme Being or from ministering deities, such as the Romans, the Greeks, and the Egyptians, evolved into gods or patrons of vice.¹¹¹

It is also interesting to note that Kircher’s depictions of the Chinese people in *China illustrata* were not nearly as exotic or as strange as they could have been. Even the illustrations of the physical features of the Chinese are not as foreign as many contemporary images of, say, Moguls or Incas.¹¹² Kircher made every effort to paint the Chinese as lost Europeans, or at the very least, as brothers in the universal or Hermetic tradition. Kircher attained a prominent position in seventeenth century intellectual life as a result of his prolific output of books which dealt with key concerns of that period, including Hermeticism, a belief in universal philosophy, and the search for universal language with the spirit of openness that animated the Hermetic tradition found in the new scientific societies.¹¹³ Kircher proposed that a philosophical language, if uncovered, would not only ease communication and do away with many disputes through its greater

¹¹⁰ Spence, 3. This monogenic view was in opposition to the more popular yet still radical belief of the time polygenic origins of the human race which allowed for the denigration of some races and by the end of the 19th century became the accepted theory and justification for racism.

¹¹¹ Kircher, *China illustrata*, 131 and 132.

¹¹² Paula Findlen, *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man who Knew Everything*, (Routledge, 2004), 367.

¹¹³ Mungello, 185.

precision, but that such a language could find truth in a manner akin to mathematics and geometry.”¹¹⁴ To find the proof for universalism the Jesuits needed to pour over Ancient Chinese texts and in order to do this they had to maintain favor with the Chinese elite by continuing to accommodate their religious beliefs and traditions into Christianity.

The Figurists’ predecessors, like Matteo Ricci, had already set the Jesuit precedence of accommodation that caused the initial rites controversy that had resulted in Jesuits first reprimand from Rome; however, the Figurists continued in the rebellious tradition. Later, at the turn of the eighteenth century with the quickening of the rites controversy in Europe, a small and -- from a European perspective -- obscure group of Jesuit proponents of accommodation led by Father Bouvet displaced Confucianism with the Kangxi emperor as the model of exultation to circumvent further criticism of accommodationism. Bouvet presented Kangxi as a benevolent type of “Sun King” modeled on Louis XIV in order to appease the Jesuits’ benefactor and guarantee the survival of the mission. In the dedication of his *Histoire de l’empereur de la Chine* to Louis XIV, Bouvet wrote:

The Jesuits, whom your majesty sent [to China] some years ago, were astonished to discover at the ends of the earth something that hitherto they had only seen in France: namely a Prince, who, like you, sire, combines a genius that is both sublime and practical with a heart worthy of his empire, who is a master of himself and of his subjects and [who is] equally adored by his people and respected by his neighbors... A Prince, in short, uniting in his person most of the great qualities that heroes have, who could be the most accomplished monarch to reign on this earth for a long time were it not that his reign coincided with that of Your Majesty.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Mungello, 191.

¹¹⁵ Bouvet, *Histoire de l’empereur de la Chine*, (Paris, 1699).

Minimizing Chinese faults was not only intended to reassure the French King that the task of conversion was not insurmountable and still worthwhile but also masked the Figurists' research into the Confucian works in search of proof for their increasingly heterodox theories.

By simultaneously praising the Chinese emperor and the French King the Figurists secured mission funding which assured them more library time to research their controversial theories. Bouvet now shifted the formula of accommodation away from the Confucian Four-Books and toward the Hermetically-fraught numerology of the ancient Chinese Classic, the *I Ching* which elevated China into the premier position in Christian chronology predating the Jewish tradition. However, Ricci's original accommodationist formula had been evolving throughout the seventeenth century and the intellectual leap to Figurism was rather a small one. The immediate political gains which the Jesuits obtained in moving in this direction and which were so helpful in dealing with Jesuit opponents in China were cancelled out by leading accommodation to an intellectual conundrum.¹¹⁶ For example, elevating China in Biblical antiquity conflicted with the tradition claims of high antiquity for the Jews. As a result of this conflict, in 1687 Rome first pronounced Figurism heterodox to Church teachings and the Figurists were prohibited from publishing their works. This censorship ensured that the implications of Figurism were understood and appreciated by few Europeans save a handful of intellectuals who had access to the unpublished works or who had direct contact with Fathers themselves.

¹¹⁶ Mungello, 18.

Figurism, the culmination of Jesuit accommodationism, was an attempt to justify the Christian and Chinese chronologies by entwining them with Noachide tradition. The Enlightenment search for a universal religion of divine nature was substantiated in Noachide tradition. Father Foucquet theorized that:

In the beginning the Ancient Law was pure, the quintessence of God's revelation to Man... But human turpitude brought defilement and, as a scourge for human wickedness, the Flood of biblical tradition.... Shem, son of Noah, saved the ancient Law from destruction but his brother Ham had taken with him into the Ark the spirit of corruption. This further debasement God tried to stop with the punishment of Babel, which brought about the confusion of tongues and dispersal of people."¹¹⁷

In keeping with the European tradition the Figurists brought Shem and his descendents to the Far East, bearing with them the pure Logos where it survived through the agency of Fu Xi was preserved and consequently China was presumed to be the Repository of the Logos.¹¹⁸ The Noachide tradition had long been, to use Edward Said's phrase a "musty truth" that many Jesuits had embraced and wanted to confirm.¹¹⁹ Jesuit travelogues contain numerous shards of Noachide tradition, including references to the land of Gog and Magog, the legend of Prester John, the theory of the Earthly Paradise, and particularly, the story of the destiny of Noah's sons and their descendents. The many accounts generated by explorers and missionaries in the Age of Exploration generated a vast body of information on the mores, governments, and a religious system of foreign lands at the disposal of the European thinker.¹²⁰ This new literature allowed Europeans

¹¹⁷ Foucquet, *Essai d'introduction préliminaire à l'intelligence*. As quoted in Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists," 480.

¹¹⁸ Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists," 476. "In Greek, he is Hermes Trismegistus; In Egypt, Anubis; in Syria, Zoroaster; He is the Thot of Alexandria, the Edris or Adris of the Arabs."

¹¹⁹ Said, 52

¹²⁰ Arnold H. Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists and Eighteenth-Century Religious Thought." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 17, No.4 (Oct., 1956), 471.

to examine Western institutions in the light of this new knowledge and increasingly cosmopolitan attitude. The *philosophes* would then use this information as a point of departure for his idealistic visions of reform.

The accounts of newly discovered countries, most especially a utopian China, became the laboratories of the philosopher, providing them with new perspectives and opinions. Two main ideas emerged as a result of these literary and cultural links between China and the West: first, a better understanding of the variety of cultures and religious beliefs and, second, the idea of questioning man's belief in a specifically "Christian" Supreme Being and in many cases an afterlife. Ecclesiastical liberals wanted to re-examine this evidence to create a better understanding and conception of the Church that was more universal and they began with the re-examination of Genesis and Christian chronology. Comparing and contrasting the religious texts and practices of other nations brought into question accepted Biblical chronology of the Catholic Church.

Eighteenth-century scholars, including the Jesuit Figurists, were enormously interested in the question of chronology.¹²¹ Chinese texts clearly indicated a long continuous history that predated the earliest stories of Genesis. Both the Vulgate and Septuagint creation accounts calculated that the beginning of the world ranged between 4004 and 6000 B.C.E. respectively. The Figurists, consulting Chinese historical accounts

¹²¹ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 121 "Son histoire, incontestable dans les choses générales, la seule qui soit fondée sur des observations célestes, remonte, par la chronologie la plus sûre, jusqu'à une éclipse observée deux mille cent cinquante-cinq ans avant notre ère vulgaire, et vérifiée par les mathématiciens missionnaires qui, envoyés dans les derniers siècles chez cette nation inconnue, l'ont admirée et l'ont instruite. Le P. Gaubil a examiné une suite de trente-six éclipses de soleil, rapportées dans les livres de Confutée; et il n'en a trouvé que deux fausses et deux douteuses. Les douteuses sont celles qui en effet sont arrivées, mais qui n'ont pu être observées du lieu où l'on suppose l'observateur; et cela même prouve qu'alors les astronomes chinois calculaient les éclipses, puisqu'ils se trompèrent dans deux calculs."

in the imperial annals, traced recorded Chinese history back to 4500 B.C.E. with Emperor Fu Xi beginning his reign in 2952 B.C.E. some six hundred years before the accepted date of the Noadic flood. The Figurists' chronological interpretations of the evidence was deemed heretical and their challenge was to reconcile the Biblical narrative of Genesis and a Chosen People with the realization that Chinese history predated much of this Biblical truth.

The Figurists solved the problem by shifting allegiance from the Vulgate to the Septuagint versions of the Scriptures, thus giving them some 1500 years of additional historical tradition between the Creation and the life of Abraham to oppose to the alleged superior longevity of the Chinese tradition. However, there were many who were not satisfied with this solution, even within the Society. Other Jesuits asserted that if history could be traced back far enough that one could arrive at a moment in history when “a particular culture [broke away] from the main culture (which for them was the Judaeo-Christian tradition).”¹²² Father Daniel Huet, bishop of Avranches, in his work expounded on this theory in his 1679 *Demonstratio evangelica*, where he set out to prove that all human culture could be traced back to Moses. This was one of the first apologetic works to directly address the growing numbers of agnostic and deistic thinkers and the growing spirit of universalism in Europe.¹²³

The Figurist suggestion -- that China was somehow the preserver of the true Logos or this Ancient Law -- was very controversial. The Figurists believed that this Ancient Law had been placed in the hands of an earthly Supreme Lawgiver who would

¹²² Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 472.

¹²³ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 472.

represent God and eventually judge mankind. This Lawgiver was often referred to as the “father of science,” “the progenitor of human knowledge,” “and the great moral leader”. In the Hebrew tradition this Lawgiver is Enoch.¹²⁴ It did not take Figurists long to discover a Chinese Lawgiver, in the person of Fu Xi, the traditional founder of Chinese culture within Confucian works. Foucquet and others soon identified Fu Xi with Enoch. The legendary Chinese leader became so closely associated with his Western counterpart that some even went so far as to claim that he never lived in China but was actually the result of the Enoch tradition being translated into the Orient. In this fashion, the Figurists thought they had established a common source for Sino-Western religious and ethical traditions that fit within the Figurists Enlightenment universalistic worldview.¹²⁵ Through the creation of these theories, European Figurists were merely tailoring previously held European ideas and applying them to China. They pointed to a flood mentioned in Chinese tradition as having taken place before the time of Yao as evidence of the universal flood mentioned in Genesis. The Figurists further asserted that the flood had swept away all Chinese lore and pagan religions so when Noah’s son Shem appeared in China he filled this void with the spiritually pure Logos.¹²⁶

In this theory China was not only accepted as a universal equal but elevated over Europe as the preserver of the True Religion. Since the Logos was not only the rational principle that governs and develops the universe but divine word and reason incarnate

¹²⁴ Enoch was Noah’s great-grandfather and it is believed that he was raised directly to heaven by God as a reward for his obedience thus avoiding death at the age of 365. In the Bible his is presented as prophesying about the apocalypse whereby God shall be coming with His saints, Enoch among them, to judge humankind. (Jude 1:14-15). This is why the Jesuits referred to him as the Lawgiver.

¹²⁵ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 476.

¹²⁶ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 478.

which explains why Jesuit scholars not only respected Chinese traditions but looked to them as guardians of religious truth. The Chinese were in this theory in the privileged position of the pure culture. Father Le Comte even claimed that it was China which had the “knowledge of the true God and practiced the purest maxims of morality, while Europe and almost all the rest of the world lived in error and corruption.”¹²⁷

The proof for Noachide tradition rested on the work, *I Ching*, by Fu Xi and as a result, this work was translated, interpreted, and reinterpreted time and again in order to better establish a connection between these two figures Fu Xi and Enoch. Bouvet believed that the *I Ching* was the key to understanding all the sciences since it was written by the preserver of the Logos and therefore the “father of science.”¹²⁸ Foucquet in his *Essai*, makes six comparisons between Fu Xi and Enoch: they were considered historical contemporaries; they were according to the same tradition seventh on the list of patriarchs; they both were regarded as the repository of the Logos and fathers of literature and science; both of them were concerned with the development of the universe; both talked about rewards and punishments in the afterlife; and, finally, both were “‘translated’ to a future life.”¹²⁹ The connections are weak at best and show how determined the Figurist scholars were to incorporate China into their theories and find traces of Christian doctrine and tradition in the Chinese Classics. Father Prémare in his *Vestigia* believes that he found within the Chinese Classic *Zhong Yong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), everything from a common belief in fallen angels, the redemption, the fall of man

¹²⁷ Mungello, 338.

¹²⁸ Bouvet, *Histoire de l'empereur de la Chine*. (Paris, 1699) 14.

¹²⁹ Foucquet's *Essai d'introduction préliminaire à l'intelligence*, as quoted in Rowbotham, “Jesuit Figurists,” 479.

and a returning savior, and even the idea of an immaculate conception.¹³⁰

The attempt to harmonize Judeo-Christian tradition with that of China centered largely around redefining the place of Christian figures in history. One chief success of the Jesuit mission in China was the missionaries' acceptance of Confucianism and their "alliance" with the Confucian scholar-official to reconcile Confucianism with Christianity. Their acceptance was not absolute because they ignored the agnosticism of the contemporary followers and went back to the ancient texts of the Confucian canon. This was tantamount to Christian theologians basing their arguments on the gospels, ignoring the writing of the Old Testament.¹³¹ In this way the missionaries could ignore the inherent "heathenism" and could examine the similarities and common source or Noachide theories. The common origin theory was first espoused by Matteo Ricci who identified the connections between the two religious traditions. It was the Jesuit Figurists, however, who actively pursued the defense of this theory and suffered serious repercussions for their views.

Father Le Comte, one of the most bitterly attacked Jesuit Sinophiles, who not only attempted to reconcile Confucianism and Christianity but also elevated China into a superior position within the Christian tradition, declared that "for five thousand years the

¹³⁰ Prémare, *Vestiges des principaux dogmes chrétiens tirés des anciens livres chinois*...Paris, 1878. (Trans. by H. Bonnetty and P. Perny). In regard to the immaculate conception, Prémare remarks, "Dans les anciens livres chinois rien ne se rencontre plus fréquemment qu'une femme vierge et Mère en même temps, vierge-mère honorée comme aujourd'hui par les Chinois [In the old Chinese books, nothing occurs more frequently a woman and virgin Mother at the same time, the virgin-mother is honored as today by the Chinese] trans. mine. (Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists," 479)

¹³¹ Rowbotham, "The Jesuit Figurists," 473.

Chinese had had a knowledge of the True God.”¹³² Another chief member of this group, Joseph-Henri Prémare incurred the disapproval of the Propaganda on account of his position in the rites controversy but, after being recalled was permitted to stay in the Orient under promises of obedience to his superiors.¹³³ Despite his spending the rest of his life in China, several of Prémare’s works were published in Europe including *Recherches sur les temps antérieurs à ceux dont parle Chou-king* (1696), *De culta celesti Sinarum veterum et modern rum* (1712), and collaborations with fellow Figurist priests to further publicize their theories. The French Orientalist Fourmont describes the aim of Prémare as “...to ensure that all the earth knows that the Christian religion is as old as the world, and that the God-man was certainly known by those who invented hieroglyphics and Chinese comprised the king.”¹³⁴ Prémare’s most influential work, however, was his correspondence with Leibniz and other scholars back in Europe, who, like Voltaire, depended on these accounts to form their understanding of Orient and China.

The Figurists, while small in numbers, were prolific writers and presented their views to both religious and secular European scholars whenever possible. The major Figurist works are Fouquet’s *Essai d’introduction préliminaire à l’intelligence* (the Preface to his *Tabula*), a letter written by Bouvet to the Abbé Bignon in Paris (1704), and Prémare’s *Selecta quaedam Vestigia praecipuorum Christianae Religionis dogmatum ex antiquis Sinarum libris eruta* (originally written in 1712, revised in 1724, and finally a

¹³² Louis Le Comte, *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l’Etat présent de le Chine par le R.P. Louis Le Comte de la Cie. De Jesus...* (Paris, 1696), 75

¹³³ Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 474.

¹³⁴ Etienne Fourmont, *Meditationes et grammatic Sinica*, (Paris,1737) as quoted in Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 474. [Trans. mine] “...de faire en sorte que toute la terre sache que la religion chrétienne est aussi ancienne que le monde, et que le Dieuhomme a été certainement connu par ceux qui ont inventé les hiéroglyphes chinois et composé les king.”

French translation was published in 1878). All of these works explored the same controversial theories. These works attempted to combine Christianity with science and an Enlightenment universalism by finding commonalities in other religions to Christianity to uncover lost Christian truths. Bouvet expressed the views of the Figurists as:

There is no mystery in the Christian religion, no dogma in our Theology, no maxim in the holiness of our morality which is not reflected in these books [the Chinese canon] with surprising clarity, in an infinite number of ways also ingenious and sublime and the ordinary under the same figures and symbols than in the divine scriptures.¹³⁵

For Bouvet there were no inconsistencies between the Christian and the Chinese canon and as a result he determined that both must be divine scriptures inspired by God. Foucquet concluded that the Chinese had received the “True Faith before the Redemption [they later] lost it and their system [became] corrupt and “idolatrous.”¹³⁶ The Figurists found so many similarities in their comparisons of the divine books they came to believe that after the flood, the Ancient Law, by which God had made known to man His wishes and His teachings, had been spread over the world following the dispersal of Noah’s sons. This acknowledged an ecumenical truth while reinforcing the Christian chronology and Biblical tradition.

The more these scholars studied the Chinese tradition, the more they became convinced of the truth of their theories. Bouvet wanted to form an Academia Sinica in

¹³⁵ A letter written by Bouvet to Abbé Bignon in Paris, dated July 25, 1704, as quoted in Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 475. “Il n’y a aucun mystère dans la religion chrétienne, aucun dogme dans notre Théologie aucune maxime dans la sainteté de notre Morale qui ne soit exprimée dans ces livres [the Chinese canon] avec une clarté surprenante, en une infinité de manières également ingénieuse et sublime et pour l’ordinaire sous les même figures et symboles que dans les divines écritures.” [Trans.mine]

¹³⁶ Foucquet, *Essai d’introduction préliminaire à l’intelligence*. As quoted in Rowbotham, “The Jesuit Figurists,” 475.

order to train scholars to further syncretize Oriental and Western thought and uncover the base of religious truth. Ideas and theories about China circulated from one scholar to another in an intellectual round-robin.¹³⁷ There were also direct and sophisticated intellectual exchanges between China and Europe, such as that conducted by the Jesuit Bouvet and the eminent scholar Leibniz through extensive personal correspondence.¹³⁸ These exchanges, as well as others, led to numerous “discoveries” of resemblances between Chinese works and Christian tradition to support the Figurist theories that were characterizing an ardent sinophilia.

In 1700, Bouvet wrote to Leibniz asking him to use his influence with the powerful court of the Jesuits La Chaise and Verjus in Paris in order to have a dozen members of the Society assigned to the task of establishing the Academia Sinica.¹³⁹ The formation of the Academia Sinica was arguably the first, formal study of Sinology and Orientalism in France. The group was small but their influence was great and the Figurists’ innovative interpretations and frank admiration for Chinese philosophy drew the concern of religious orthodoxy. The rites controversy had sparked a backlash against the Jesuit missionaries and the Sorbonne sternly condemned the *Mémoires* of Father Le Comte for his acceptance and appreciation for what in ecclesiastical circles would be viewed as “heathen” ceremonies and beliefs. Le Comte listed his controversial

¹³⁷ Mungello, 17.

¹³⁸ Mungello, 16. “Leibniz’ sustained fascination with China flowed through his vast correspondence which he conducted with some of the most brilliant savants of his time.” (21).

¹³⁹ René Füllöp-Muller, *The Jesuits: A History of the Society of Jesus*, (Capricorn Books Edition, 1963), 90. Originally published as *The Power and Secret of the Jesuits* (1930).

propositions which the Sorbonne deliberated in thirty meetings over two months and 160

academics were asked to express their views. The propositions stated that:

- 1) The people of China preserved for almost two-thousand years [i.e. ca. 2000 B.C. - A.D. 1] a knowledge of the true God, and honored him in a manner which can serve as an example and as instruction even to Christians.
- 2) If Judea, had the advantage of consecrating (a temple to God) richer and more magnificent, sanctified even by means of the presence and by means of the prayers of the Redeemer, is this not a glorious piety to China, of having sacrificed to the Creator in the oldest temple in the universe.
- 3) That the purity of the morality, the holiness of the manners and customs, the faith, the interior and exterior cult of the true God, the prayers, the sacrifices, of the saints, of men inspired by God, of miracles, the spirit of Religion, the purest charity which is perfection and the character of Religion, and, if I dare to say, said the author, the Spirit of God was preserved formerly among the Chinese during more than two-thousand years.
- 4) Be that as it may in the wise distribution of grace that divine Providence has made among the nations of the earth, China had nothing to complain of, since there is no nation that He has more constantly favored.
- 5) Moreover, it is not necessary that his majesty (the Chinese emperor) regard the Christian religion as a foreign religion, since it was the same in its principles and in its fundamental points that the ancient religion, of which the sages and first emperors of China professed, worshipping the same God as the Christians worshipped and recognizing as well as them the Lord of Heaven and of earth.¹⁴⁰

All five propositions were judged to be “false and rash” and in 1700 the majority voted in favor of censure.¹⁴¹ The escalation of debate on the missionary’s methods produced an atmosphere in which serious scholarship was replaced with polemical debates. It was after 1687, the most advanced thinking on Jesuit accommodation, as in the case of Bouvet’s Figurist theories, was no longer able to be fully and publicly presented to European readers and the polemical atmosphere produced an anti-Jesuit criticism, the Sorbonne censure of 1700 and the propaganda effects of the *Missions Étrangères* which

¹⁴⁰Charles Le Gobien, *Histoire de l’edit de l’empereur de la Chine, en faveur de la Religion Chrestienne* (Paris, 1698), 104-105. As quoted in Mungello, 334.

¹⁴¹Mungello, 334.

altered the nature of the works on China being published in Europe by Jesuit proponents of accommodation.¹⁴² Many of the other missionaries' accommodationist works were also condemned by the Catholic Church and the general suspicion that the Jesuits' controversial theories were inimical to the Church eventually contributed to the dissolution of the whole Order in 1762. Ironically though, the Figurists represented a small minority whose ideas were more threatening than they were actually damaging to the Catholic Church.¹⁴³

Voltaire Challenges Christian Chronology with his "Philosophy of History"

Voltaire's history was less concerned with civilization, economics, and trade; instead, it sought to derive from these some ecumenical truths about human nature. Voltaire wanted to write a secular history that did not incorporate the theological superstitions or supernatural sanctions that had supported the Catholic Church's domination of Western civilization for nearly fifteen centuries. Voltaire praised China in his writings for their 'natural diem' and beginning in the 1740s, he pursued his Sinophilia along two parallel tracks, both critical of contemporary interpretations, one in the field of drama, one in history.¹⁴⁴ In drama, he had focused on the recently translated play *The Orphan of Tchao*. Voltaire in his own version of the play, *The Orphan of China*, purposely recast the play as proof of the Chinese moral values over the conquering Mongols, who recognized the superiority of the Chinese and 'submitted,

¹⁴² Mungello, 19.

¹⁴³ Mungello, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Spence, 95.

sword in hand, to the laws of the country they had invaded.’¹⁴⁵ By 1756, Voltaire had also completed his major work of world history, *Essai sur les Mœurs et l’Esprit des Nations*, which he had begun while studying at Clermont College and was first exposed to, and inspired by, Chinese history, culture, and thought. The *Essai* opens with a defiant quote from Father Bouvet that “The Empire of China at that time was vaster than that of Charlemagne.”¹⁴⁶ Then he continues with long chapter on Chinese institutions and laws. As to Confucius he wrote, “His morality is pure, as stern and at the same time as humane as that of Epictetus.”¹⁴⁷ He defended the Chinese against claims that they were atheists by pointing out that their understanding of heaven had merely been misunderstood by “judging their practices in light of ours: we carry the prejudices that spring from our contentious nature to the ends of the world.”¹⁴⁸ Voltaire wrote with his usual wit that instead of Europe sending missionaries to the Far East, “the Chinese should have begged for missionaries to spread the light of Chinese culture in Europe.”¹⁴⁹ Voltaire wrote:

[Europeans], the first observers of the true course of the stars allotted false [religious] influences to them: [in contrast] the founders of the foreign religions, by recognizing the Divinity, did not soil the worship by their superstitions [...]. Our Western people made evident in all these discoveries a great superiority of spirit and courage of the Eastern nations. We learned their languages, we taught some of our arts to them. But nature gave them on us an advantage which balances all ours; it is that they have no need for us, and that we need them.¹⁵⁰

Voltaire often repeated that the Chinese had no need for Europeans but Europeans needed the Chinese.

¹⁴⁵ Spence, 97.

¹⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 31.

¹⁴⁸ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 36.

¹⁴⁹ Füllöp-Müller, 430.

¹⁵⁰ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 100-101.

In his *Essai sur les Mœurs et L'Esprit des Nations*, Voltaire defines his term “philosophy of history” in two senses. The first prong of this dual definition stressed the examination of views expressed in traditional books and narratives of history. The second, and perhaps the most important, is Voltaire’s attempt to reinterpret the moral, esthetic, and religious views, and cultural practices that prevailed in ancient civilizations.¹⁵¹ History had previously been under the control of the Catholic Church and the notion of universal history had a theological emphasis. Voltaire, using China as a model, hoped to establish a secular universal history based on the Figurists’ findings that he would call the “philosophy of history.” The philosophy of history would no longer focus on the religious or political meaning of history but its larger cultural aspects. In this way, the *philosophe* sought what was useful in history to uphold their philosophical arguments. Voltaire’s world history, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, begins with geology, anthropology, and then proceeds to recorded human history focusing on the chronological antiquity of China. This historical account was primarily a subjective and speculative argument attempting to trace a secular genesis of mankind separate and distinct from the Biblical Genesis.¹⁵²

In reality his views were the reinterpretation of the Jesuits depictions’ of the ancient civilizations and systems. According to Figurist writings, the Noachide theory lent China Christian chronological supremacy and should therefore be looked to for spiritual guidance. For Voltaire this elevated Chinese Confucianism with more spiritual

¹⁵¹ Jerome Rosenthal, “Voltaire’s Philosophy of History.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.16, No.2, (Apr., 1955) 151.

¹⁵² Bruce Mazlish, *World Histories*, ed. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, (Palgrave-Macmillan,2005), 22

credence than the Catholic perversions of Christianity. By incorporating Confucianism and Chinese deism into the Christian tradition, Voltaire was simultaneously supporting and undermining his own criticism of the Catholic Church. This was not a logical problem for Voltaire, who felt the efficacy of the arguments were more important than their factual basis.

Yet in spite of his universal world view, Voltaire summarily dismissed non-Western and non-Oriental societies as unworthy of historic consideration because they had no bearing on civilization and, in his opinion, few signs of rationality. While Voltaire defended China, he often displayed a Eurocentric distaste for other cultures and historical records of other regions and races even though this would seem to contradict his belief in an ecumenical religion and the universal progress of man. This is apparent throughout this work but is strikingly so in a passage where he refers to the unique problems of historiography, namely the value of historical sources. He denies all historical value to oral reports or histories from pre-civilization periods. The value of written sources is determined by the extent to which the authors, “priests excepted,” were contemporaneous with the events described by them.¹⁵³ The Jesuit histories kept their spell for Voltaire as well because they were first-hand accounts. He felt that oral histories became too entwined with fables to be considered credible and that written histories suffer from the biased selection of data to resulting in the improper promotion of the author’s agenda. Voltaire insisted that only an author sharing his ethical principles could produce reliable

¹⁵³ Rosenthal, 154. For example, Voltaire wrote: “Could nomadic Tartars and roving Arabs have produced a Thucydides or a Xenophon? Could they know anything about their past?... Would we not laugh at the sight of savage Samoyeds or Eskimoes trying to give us annals of past centuries filled with tales about extraordinary military exploits or with a series of baffling marvels?” *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 233-34. *Lettre à un Journaliste* in *Lettres Choisies*, ed. Garnier, II, 232.

literature because, as long as there were no external temptations to produce fraudulent literature, reason would prevail.¹⁵⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Voltaire found his ideal of objective history in the libraries of China. He writes:

Other nations invented allegorical fables, but the Chinese wrote their history with pens and astrolabe in hands....Each reign of their emperors was recorded by contemporaries.... Other nations took the origin of the universe as the starting point for their histories, but the Chinese started their records from historic times. In contradistinction to the histories of other nations those of the Chinese were not controlled by priests.¹⁵⁵

In his opinion, reason prevailed in these works in a way that was impossible in Europe under the control of the Church and state. Voltaire announced:

[It is a] great historical truth that human reason in the early stages of its career worshipped certain beings in the form of the sun, or of the moon, or of the stars, being believed to possess extraordinary powers; that in its more advanced stages reason, despite all its error, adored a supreme God, lord of the elements, and of the other gods; and that all civilized nations everywhere, beginning with India and ending with Europe, believed in a future life.¹⁵⁶

Voltaire shared this progressive notion of history with other Enlightenment *philosophes*: that through reason, man's progress of civilization would inevitably result in universal religion and morals and the abolition of oppression in all of its forms. He argued that anyone desiring insight should look to the Orient, which is "the cradle of all the arts and has given everything to the West."¹⁵⁷ His desire to provide evidence for the universal progress of man forced the usually Eurocentric Voltaire to paint China as a model for Europe.

For Voltaire to accept that China may have had a golden age went against the 18th

¹⁵⁴ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile.," 1050.

¹⁵⁵ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 84-85.

¹⁵⁶ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 156.

¹⁵⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 245. Voltaire felt that the natives of Africa, America, and Siberia had sunk into an abyss of stupidity, 213.

century Enlightenment belief in the progress of man. In light of this incongruity, Voltaire could not believe in the infinite perfectibility of man and was even forced to question the idea of progress as well.¹⁵⁸ Eventually Voltaire resolved this contradiction by adopting the Jesuit idea that China was somehow a preserver of truth, not moving toward truth. Even though this new framework contradicted the theory of human progress, Voltaire remained resolute in his reverence for Confucian purity. Voltaire was willing to compromise his belief in the universal progress of man to effectively support the idea that Confucianism, the religion of the intellectual class, was the preserver of truth.

Voltaire, ever careful to distance himself from the moral and religious standards of a Christian God, professed his belief in the wisdom of a Supreme Being who remains a passive spectator of creation while sanctioning events that would occur independently of his approval.¹⁵⁹ It was important to Voltaire to demonstrate that the Bible was not a unique product of divine inspiration but one of many religious books that may contain some grains of moral teaching. Yet, in spite of Voltaire's resistance to Church doctrine he often returned to Figurist theories. The concept of teleology was for him of "a materialistic and naturalistic significance."¹⁶⁰ Voltaire ardently defended the historical antiquity of the Chinese to defend their non-dogmatic religion. Illustrating in historical terms the chronological antiquity of China systems over French systems served Voltaire's

¹⁵⁸ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1057.

¹⁵⁹ Voltaire resisted the desire to apply to emphasize the efficacy of his Supreme Deity so as not to make him a copy of the Christian God because Voltaire was so opposed to the official theology of the Christian Church.

¹⁶⁰ Rosenthal, 153 Voltaire declared that the data confronting a historian was "a vast storage room from which one has to select what suits one's purpose." *Lettre à un Journaliste* in *Lettres Choisies*, Ed. Garnier, II, 244.

purpose of undermining European religious tradition. Jerome Rosenthal argues that, “teleology is indeed the key to Voltaire’s system [of history], if a conglomeration consisting of typically rationalistic doctrines, bits of popular wisdom, fragments from Christian theology in disguise, sharply pointed out epigrammatic statements and brilliant insights (most often contradicting one another) can be called a system at all.”¹⁶¹ He regularly only slightly adjusted the Figurists’ theory for his own, substituting spontaneous generation to explain the origin and omnipresence of the human race as opposed to the Jesuit Noachide tradition. On the other hand Voltaire embraced the heretical Jesuit theory of Noachide tradition to validate his theory of an ecumenical religion that had been perverted by Catholic dogma.

He believed that proof of the Noachide tradition had been obscured by the Catholic Church to secure their supremacy only to have their perversion uncovered by their own missionaries. He regularly notes that the Chinese religions avoided perversion and division and, in this respect, the West could learn much from them. For example, Voltaire wrote:

Once again, the religion of the men of letters of China is admirable. No superstitions, no absurd legends, none of those dogmas which insult reason and nature and to which the bronzes give a thousand different meanings, because they don't have any. The simplest cult has seemed to them the best for more than forty centuries. They are what we think Seth, Enoch, and Noah were; they are content to worship a God with all the sages of the world, while in Europe we are divided between Thomas and Bonaventure, between Calvin and Luther, between Jansenius and Molina.¹⁶²

China’s deism, in Voltaire’s opinion, exemplified Chinese freedom from superstition and the oppression of organized dogmatic religion. On the basis of religious

¹⁶¹ Rosenthal, 153.

¹⁶² Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 23.

freedom Voltaire praised and defended China in spite of any contradictory evidence. Voltaire also played with this idea with his assertion of the Noachide source of Chinese religion and was almost certainly influenced by his conversation with Foucquet. By accepting the Noachide tradition of the Figurists, Voltaire could assert that the Chinese were the preservers of truth and had not deluded their people with religious superstitions whereas the Europeans were perverted the truth to maintain their oppressive rule of the people.

The Chinese religious and political systems ideally suited and supported Voltaire's worldview. China provided him with a philosophical ideal and a model for France. Until the twentieth century most ethnologists shared the same ethnocentric and Eurocentric worldview as Voltaire: the tendency to look at the world through western glasses, to hunt everywhere on the globe for potential Europeans, to evaluate foreign beliefs, customs and practices in accordance with whether they could be justified rationally to their own view of the world around them. They would dismiss as ridiculous those beliefs and practices which did not lend justification by the European value judgment. In general Europeans tended to approach other cultures in terms of value and would then judge whether to denounce, moralize or apologize for them. In all this, the Jesuit Figurists as well as Voltaire struggled with this approach to the foreign.¹⁶³ Both Jesuit Figurists who searched for proof of the Noachide tradition and Voltaire in his search for universal reason started from similar assumptions encountered similar problems. Christian theologians were committed to the belief that a moral code valid for

¹⁶³ Rosenthal, 178.

all times was promulgated by an omniscient God, who does not proceed by the way of experimentation, who is infallible in operations, and not subject to errors. Voltaire's Supreme Being, despite his intention to distinguish it from the Catholic God, did not differ greatly; both were guarantors of universal morality that closely followed the essential ethics of the Ten Commandments.¹⁶⁴ At heart a propagandist, Voltaire often cared more for the momentary effect of his arguments than for the internal consistency throughout his system as a whole. As long as a statement carried persuasive weight he was often prone to close his eyes to its sources or to its connections to other statements made by him in other contexts. Moreover, at this turbulent time in French history, Voltaire felt that spreading the Enlightenment gospel was paramount and that any inherent contradictions in that gospel were inconsequential.

¹⁶⁴ Rosenthal, 171.

CHAPTER 4
REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT
AS A MODEL FOR FRANCE

The Jesuits' Representations of Chinese Politics and Society

The Jesuits were anomalous within the Catholic Church. Their role as educators often led them to a level of intellectual inquiry rarely found in other orders and they came to view themselves as both intellectuals and religious men. In Enlightenment Europe, when science seemed to undermine the Church's teachings, the Jesuits had to strike a delicate balance. A prominent scholar on the Jesuits, René Füllöp-Muller, refers to this period of Jesuit history as "The Revolt of the Scholars" because, in their efforts to promote quality Christian education, members of the order's process of inquiry became increasingly led them to question traditional Church teachings.¹⁶⁵ The Jesuits had made concessions to the "thirst of modern humanity for knowledge, allowing it to turn its telescopes to this or that harmless star, and that to doubt many things which were unimportant in relation to the Faith."¹⁶⁶ They could not foresee the progression of the Enlightenment because once Francis Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton had directed philosophical and scientific thought towards new knowledge and discoveries, doubts arose about the infallibility of Catholic dogmas, the creation story, and Biblical chronology.¹⁶⁷ In other words, the scientific knowledge that the Jesuits had undertaken, promoted and defended now seemed at odds with the Church doctrine they were sworn to

¹⁶⁵ Füllöp-Muller, 426.

¹⁶⁶ Füllöp-Muller, 426.

¹⁶⁷ Füllöp-Muller, 427.

uphold and teach. So serious was the challenge to the faith that the Jesuits were placed in the strange circumstance of having the exact sciences they had taught for two hundred years used by the *philosophes* to oppose the Christian faith and the Catholic Church and ultimately, the Jesuit order itself. The Jesuit founder, Ignatius of Loyola, had himself pointed out that religion needed intelligent understanding for its support and scientific knowledge had served as the “handmaid” of religion throughout the medieval period but now that same intelligence that had been valuable to the Church turned against it. The “divine proofs” were no longer supported and substantiated by new scientific discoveries. Thus science was essentially forced to separate from all religious guardianship and claimed the presumption to displace faith.¹⁶⁸

In the last half of the seventeenth century, skepticism had indeed become the trend of the day in intellectual circles. One of the strongest arguments in favor of the “religion of reason” and against the doctrine of revelation, was exemplified by the moral philosophy of China and, in particular, Confucius and it was the Jesuits who brought this knowledge of Chinese philosophy to Europe. Since the Jesuit missionaries were the most progressive of all Catholic clerics with “their receptive and submissive minds,” they immediately recognized what great moral worth that lay in Chinese culture. When Father Couplet returned from China, he widely praised China and quoted the sayings of Confucius and Father da Costa even described Confucius as the ‘wisest teacher’ of moral and political philosophy. The Jesuits published the first translation of Confucius which by popular demand was republished and included in anthologies. By the time Father Du

¹⁶⁸ Füllöp-Muller, 428.

Halde's, *Description de l'empire chinois*, was published it could safely be said that many Europeans knew more about China than they did about many provinces of their own countries.¹⁶⁹

Robert Palmer in his work, "The French Jesuits in the Age of the Enlightenment," looks at the often misunderstood relationship between the French *philosophes* and Jesuits during the Enlightenment. He notes that, all too often, historians have viewed *philosophes* and religious clerics, especially Jesuits, as being at odds with each other because the *philosophes* favored new and enlightened ideas and because of their allegiance to the Catholic Church the Jesuits opposed and stood in the way of progressive ideas. This view essentially arose from the *philosophes* themselves, who generally strove to disassociate themselves with the Catholic Church and other religious dogma. As Palmer notes, "[This notion] perpetuated itself among [historians] because few historians outside of France have examined the Catholic writers of the period. We have easily supposed that these writers were the obscurantists that the *philosophes* preached."¹⁷⁰ He advised that the prudent researcher, in order to be balanced, must consult the Catholic authors of the period to provide balance but also to illustrate that the Enlightenment was not merely a conflict between two camps but "a readjustment of ideas that affected all educated persons, including those who remained faithful to the church."¹⁷¹

Palmer draws evidence for his assertion from the *Journal de Trévoux*. The serial was edited by the Jesuits of the college of Louis-le-Grand, where Voltaire and Diderot

¹⁶⁹ Füllöp-Muller, 429.

¹⁷⁰ Robert R. Palmer, "The French Jesuits in the Age of the Enlightenment: A Statistical Study of the *Journal de Trévoux*." *The American Historical Review*, Vol.45, No.1 (Oct., 1939). 44

¹⁷¹ Palmer, 44. This idea is further discussed in Palmer's *Catholics & Unbelievers in Eighteenth Century France* (Princeton UP, 1939),55.

numbered among the students.¹⁷² The journal was modeled after the only older French periodical *Journal des savants*. Both journals were intended to present new ideas and make them available to a wider audience. This was a way that the learned community could provide critiques of new books and theories much as academic journals do in present times. The Jesuits, who were renowned for their teaching and research as well as their continual correspondence with other Jesuits stationed around the world, were in a perfect position to edit such a journal. The journal editors were also usually careful to announce that except on the matter of theological error, they would treat the works of heretics and unbelievers in an unpartisan spirit.¹⁷³ The *Journal* was published from January, 1701 until April, 1762, just a few months before the Society of Jesus became illegal in France. The long running publication allowed Palmer to trace the comprehensive coverage of development of the Enlightenment movement in Jesuit scholarship and chronicle the increasing numbers of Sinological works.

Yet, for most Church fathers, the idea that Jesuit enthusiasm for China had established a “religion of reason” which elevated heathen Chinese religion over the Christian religion was unwelcome. The assertions of a small group of Jesuits, who subscribed to the doctrine of the Noachide tradition were even more disconcerting since they further challenged the credibility of the European Catholic tradition. The Figurists, who actively searched for evidence to support their more controversial theories of universal language, religion, and human progress would, upon their return to France, become direct conduits of this “religion of reason” to the eager philosophers they later

¹⁷² Palmer, 44

¹⁷³ Palmer, 45.

mentored. These fathers were uniquely positioned outside of the acceptable realms in both religious and Enlightenment circles, however, this exclusion was not new for the Jesuit order who had long been viewed with suspicion in Church, monarchical, and secular circles for their supposed political power.¹⁷⁴ The Enlightenment philosophes would then use those same Figurist theories to build up a revolutionary philosophy inimical to the beliefs of the Church.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, the Jesuits through their teachings supported the idea that religious authority, including the Pope and the Catholic Church, could be questioned.

The Jesuits had become perpetrators of the revolutionary ideal of the sovereignty of the people, which allowed for the questioning of both secular and religious leaders because as the Jesuit missionary Bellarmine put it, “everybody prefers a form of government in which each man has a part, and such a form is also the only one we can propose; for not birth, but the capacities of a man should count.”¹⁷⁶ Such convictions laid the stem from a desire to defend the rights of the Catholic lay population in the face of heretical monarchs. Some Jesuits had even gone so far as to extend this right of the people to disobedience and even “tyrannicide” since only the authority of the Church, “established by God” and of the pope at its head was regarded as immutable and inviolable.¹⁷⁷ Enlightenment philosophers, however, no longer accepted this divine authority either and the Jesuits contributed to the growing social empowerment and

¹⁷⁴ Based on eager personal correspondence with the philosophes, most notably Fr. Kircher with Leibniz, the connection was far from unwitting.

¹⁷⁵ Füllöp-Muller, 431.

¹⁷⁶ Füllöp-Muller, 431. Füllöp-Muller does not cite the original source. Many other Jesuits had either inspired or supported scholar’s beliefs in the “sovereignty of the people.” Jesuits who had elaborated on this belief include Laynez, Mariana, and Suarez.

¹⁷⁷ Füllöp-Muller, 431.

thwarting of authority.

As a result of these assertions, it is not surprising that the French monarchy had a tumultuous relationship with the Jesuit order. King Henry IV once banished the order from France only to recall them in 1603 for their assistance in overturning his excommunication. The exiled Jesuits returned and managed to attain the greatest political influence as confessors of king. The French parliament and the Sorbonne, both concerned by the Jesuits' power and influence with the king launched an anti-Jesuit campaign and forced the Jesuits to take a solemn oath that the Jesuits would never undertake any actions against the King or the peace of the realm. As confessors the Jesuits were enormously powerful and influential mediators between the pope and the king and the order often benefited greatly as a result of this relationship.¹⁷⁸

Naturally the fathers were not always successful in influencing the king's decisions to be in line with the policy of Rome. The Parliament and the Sorbonne twice rose up in opposition to the Society of Jesus but the Jesuits were too powerful at court for those attacks to be successful. While King Louis XIII was still a minor, the Jesuits immediately made use of their power at the regent's courts to bring their struggle with the parliament and university to a satisfactory end. They were victorious and obtained a decree allowing them to teach in public institutions which broke the Sorbonne's monopoly and allowed them to establish the College of Clermont. Throughout Louis'

¹⁷⁸ Füllöp-Muller, 360.

reign the Jesuits frequently employed their trademark accommodationism to simultaneously appease the king and further secure their position in France.¹⁷⁹

King Louis XIV presented the Jesuits with an entirely different problem than previous monarchs. When he pronounced, “l’état, c’est moi” announcing his absolute power and authority the Jesuits knew they would need to conduct themselves discreetly to avoid expulsion once again. Louis’ belief in his divinity led him to deny the authority of the pope in his realm. The Jesuits wisely remained silent and left the “Sun King” happy in his belief that he was the state. Louis’ confessors Fathers Annat and La Chaise with patient fortitude eventually succeeded in influencing small affairs of state giving the Jesuits further hope. As the years passed, the Jesuits softened Louis to such an extent that he no longer objected to the interference of Rome. Often out of necessity the Jesuits were statesmen before they were religious zealots.¹⁸⁰

An example of Jesuit statesmanship was their influence on Louis XIV to fund their China mission. They frequently compared King Louis to his Chinese contemporary Emperor Kangxi and painted a picture of them as heavenly Kings. For example, Father Poivre wrote:

China offers an enchanting picture of what the whole world might become, if the laws of that empire were to become the laws of all nations. Go to Peking! Gaze upon the mightiest of mortals; he is the true and perfect image of Heaven.¹⁸¹

The Jesuits believed that by appeasing Louis by praising him as an absolute ruler they would remain his advisors and forward the causes of their order, including, the continued

¹⁷⁹ Füllöp-Muller, 362-365.

¹⁸⁰ Barthel, 159.

¹⁸¹ Nelson, Eric. *The Jesuits and the Monarchy: Catholic Reform and Political Authority in France (1590-1615)*. (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 234.

funding of the *mission étrangères*. For the Jesuits, making complimentary comparisons between Louis XIV and Kangxi were also beneficial for the Jesuits in France. Although, the Jesuits who lived under the early and glorious days of the Qing dynasty were acutely aware of the governmental superiority of China. Father Du Halde for example remarked, “It is the soul that gives the movement to a large body and which maintains all parties in the most perfect subordination.”¹⁸² Under the Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong the institution of absolute monarchy was at its best, and the foreign scholar-priests had an opportunity to admire its undoubted merits for the intellectual classes. The Jesuits were diplomatic enough to never mention this directly. The Jesuit order had long been viewed with suspicion by both the Church and monarchy for their political power and connections and diplomacy was essential to the orders survival. So maintaining a relationship with Louis, and sending him glowing reports of China, provided the Jesuits with political and financial security.

It is also worth noting that while the Jesuits attempted to appease Louis by comparing him to a heavenly enlightened despot. They also frequently, if subtly, emphasized in their writings that the Chinese emperor had many wise religious and philosophical advisors to guide him. The Chinese governmental boards or courts (*tribunaux*), government of the country and this was consistent with the Jesuits desired role. The Jesuit writers, notably Father Contancin, had praised the tribunals highly.

The Jesuits were highly successful in gaining the trust and support by accommodating his self-image. King Louis XIV was so supportive of the Jesuit mission

¹⁸² Du Halde. Vol. II, 10-25. [Trans. mine] “Il est l’âme qui donne le mouvement à un si grand corps et qui en maintient toutes les parties dans la plus parfaite subordination.”

that he celebrated the first New Year of the eighteenth century with Chinese-style festivities. Later, Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress and a declared supporter of Voltaire and Diderot, was keen to give the Chinese touch to her banquets, feasts and dances *a la chinoise*.¹⁸³ Ironically, the monarchy would ultimately be deposed by a major revolution to which China had contributed through the intellectual battles waged by the *Philosophes* against the monarchy.

Voltaire's Ideal China as a Political and Spiritual Model for Enlightenment France

Voltaire's dying words were, "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies and detesting superstition."¹⁸⁴ Voltaire was one of the Catholic Church's severest critics. He never attacked what he viewed as pure religion, the sincere worship of a Supreme Being, but detested religious hypocrites who hid behind the cloak of religion. Voltaire seized on the works of the Jesuit Figurists- that praised the morality of the non-Christian Chinese society- he found buried in these works the ammunition he needed to criticize the role of the Catholic Church in French society. In particular, Voltaire looked for an example of a perfect government free from Catholic control to replace the corrupt monarchy but distrusted democracies which he believed propagated the idiocy of the masses. He found his ideal in the Qing meritorious political system so vividly described in the Jesuit works. Once he had discovered his idealized China, Voltaire secured a foundation for his own beliefs and served as a fulcrum by which to dismantle the French religious and governmental systems which he saw as corrupt and fatally flawed.

¹⁸³ Nelson, 245.

¹⁸⁴ Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom*, (Bloomsbury, 2005)

By 1734, the cult of Sinophilia was in full swing in France, with noted intellectuals like Voltaire praising the Chinese empire as “the wisest and best governed nation in the universe.”¹⁸⁵ At this same time, Confucian thought in philosophical and intellectual writings were arguably the most popular imports.¹⁸⁶ As a result of these writings and Jesuit schools and universities, Europe was able to acquire an extensive knowledge of the Orient that had previously been inaccessible and by the end of the eighteenth century many European scholars knew as much or more about China than a neighboring European country.

The most important factor to consider when examining the diffusion of Chinese culture and philosophical tradition is the state of French civilization. France had entered a period of social unrest and radical change. Or as one historian so aptly put it, “the cake of custom was cracking open and people were receptive to new ideas.”¹⁸⁷ This was particularly true of noble French thinkers and writers. Deists, like Voltaire, embraced China as a nation free from the interference of established religious dogma yet maintaining a moral and well-governed society with respect to the spiritual. In contrast Voltaire saw France as suffering from religious oppression and corruption:

Once fanaticism has corrupted a mind, the malady is almost incurable....The only remedy for this epidemic malady is the philosophical spirit which, spread gradually, at last tames men's habits and prevents the disease from starting; for, once the disease has made any progress, one must flee and wait for the air to clear itself. Laws and religion are not strong enough against the spiritual pest; religion, far from being healthy food for infected brains, turns to poison in them. These miserable men have forever in their minds the example of Ehud, who assassinated king Eglon; of Judith, who cut off Holofernes' head while she was

¹⁸⁵ Voltaire. *Lettres Philosophiques*. Letter XI. [Trans. mine] “la nation plus sage et la mieux policée de l’univers.”

¹⁸⁶ Rowbotham, “Voltaire, Sinophile.,” 1050-1065.

¹⁸⁷ Cressey, 601.

sleeping with him; of Samuel, who chopped king Agag in pieces. They cannot see that these examples which were respectable in antiquity are abominable in the present; they borrow their frenzies from the very religion that condemns them. Even the law is impotent against these attacks of rage; it is like reading a court decree to a raving maniac. These fellows are certain that the holy spirit with which they are filled is above the law, that their enthusiasm is the only law they must obey.¹⁸⁸

Voltaire felt that the only way to remove the disease of religious corruption from Europe was to demonstrate that countries like China were shown to be moral, yet free from the control of the Catholic Church.

So Voltaire and the Encyclopædists bestowed on Chinese civilization every spiritual attribute that they felt was lacking in their own country. Their enthusiasm was perpetuated by an ideological construct of China enhanced by its remoteness which could not be spoilt by exact knowledge. Voltaire and his enlightened colleagues worshiped China not because it was in reality more enlightened than France but its remoteness allowed them to idealize and romanticize its systems and hold it up as a foil to those aspects they viewed as corrupt and in need of reform. China was not only idealized, but completely reprocessed, reconstructed so as to fit into French intellectual and political controversies.

Voltaire eagerly embraced the Jesuits' innovations in his desire to undermine the Catholic Church and would often criticize missionary activities using the Jesuits' theories of China's antiquity:

We go to China seeking clay as though we had none of our own; cloth, as though we lacked cloth; a small herb to steep in water, as though we didn't have medicinal plants in our own parts. In repayment, we should like to convert the Chinese; that's very praiseworthy zeal, but we should not question their antiquity, nor tell them they are idolaters. Really, would people like it if a capuchin friar,

¹⁸⁸ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 23

having been well received in a château of the Montmorencys, tried to persuade them that they were recent nobility, like the secretaries of the King, and accused them of being idolaters because he had found in the château two or three statues of High Constables, for whom they have profound respect?¹⁸⁹

The idea of converting the Chinese to Christianity, was in Voltaire's opinion, akin to an apprentice instructing the master. Approbation of Chinese religious and philosophical purity inspired Voltaire to study the Chinese system of government. The Figurists' China was as an empire that valued the arts, the wisdom of its philosophers, religious principals and moral systems, and, over the years, comparative peace, all of which naturally appealed greatly to disillusioned French philosophers like Voltaire.¹⁹⁰ China's government was also a source of inspiration to many European critics, and the French in particular, because while the Chinese government maintained its monarchical form, it supposedly did not abuse the liberties of the people. In contrast, according to Enlightenment thought, the French system was marred by censorship and despotic tyranny. Chinese imperial interests, in direct contrast to the French, required that the emperor put the needs of his people first.

The missionaries' accounts of Chinese political rhetoric provided many picturesque examples of imperial care and Voltaire, almost naively, never tired of repeating these examples:

The Son of Heaven with his own imperial hands guides the plough through the first furrow of the springtime; distributing rewards for agricultural merit; assuming personal responsibility for the periodic catastrophes of nature (floods, famine, and the like); testifying a veneration for chastity and old age; watching over the lives even of those accused of crime.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Voltaire. *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 20

¹⁹⁰ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile.," 1053.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1054.

Voltaire insisted that China's government was despotism only in form and that its constitution is "the only one that is based entirely on paternal power."¹⁹² Voltaire concluded that China had an ideal political system, with the emperor caring for his people as he would his own children.

This system was consistent with Voltaire's political ideals and his conception that even an absolute monarch must be guided by wise and incorruptible officials. Voltaire enthusiastically supported the idea of a scholar-official advisor for the king presented in so many of the Figurist works. For the French *philosophes*, a governmental system under the direction of intellectuals was very appealing. Voltaire believed that a governmental system that rewarded intellectual merit would encourage morality, clemency, and guidance for the masses who were not capable to govern themselves.¹⁹³ In this the Jesuits and the philosophes had a common aim, not to replace the monarchy or the enlightened despot, but to ensure that that ruler was surrounded by wise men who would guide the monarch in policy making. If anything, both the Jesuits and Voltaire shared the basic fundamental belief: that the masses should be led by wise leaders because they were not capable of ruling themselves. Voltaire famously noted, "The lower classes should be led, never taught."¹⁹⁴

Comparing the governments of China and France, Voltaire exclaimed, "Should

¹⁹² Voltaire. *Oeuvres (Works)*, XVIII, 158. [Trans. mine] "la seule qui soit toute fondée sur le pouvoir paternel."

¹⁹³ Du Halde. Vol. II, 455-804 (these few hundred pages are devoted to imperial edicts, and official announcements.

¹⁹⁴ Barthel, 161.

we go at the end of the earth to see how much... the blood of men must be spared?"¹⁹⁵

Voltaire took strong exception to Montesquieu's assertion that "It is the stick that governs China" and strove to show that the system was fair and wielded its power with benevolence.¹⁹⁶ Voltaire wrote, "In other countries [like France] the laws are used to punish crimes; in China they do more- they reward virtue."¹⁹⁷ The Chinese system stressed the importance of rewarding virtue and merit and in the way, in Voltaire's opinion, showed its superiority to any system in the Western world.

It was not just the Chinese emperor that attracted French attention, though. The Chinese judicial courts (*tribunaux*) were viewed by both the Figurists and Voltaire as the brothers to the emperor's fatherly role. The tribunals' judges were Confucian scholars; in this respect the Confucian belief system was closely interwoven with government organization. Voltaire saw the Chinese courts as "a cult of justice" and admired how they remained true to their belief system without incurring any religious prejudice or favoritism for those who did not practice Confucianism.¹⁹⁸ Voltaire embraced the Chinese court system because it embodied a system free from religious tyranny where the accused could defend himself before the judge, and if condemned, the punishment would fit the crime. In China, according to the Jesuit Father Contancin in his correspondence with his colleague Étienne Souciet: "You would be surprised, my Father, if you were witness to the scrupulous attention being given in China when it comes to condemning a

¹⁹⁵ *Oeuvres*. XXV, 556. [Trans. mine] "Faut-il aller au bout de la terre... pour voir combien le sang des hommes doit être ménagé?"

¹⁹⁶ *Oeuvres*. XXVII, 28, XXIX, 232. [Trans. mine] "C'est le bâton qui gouverne la Chine"

¹⁹⁷ Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs*, 31

¹⁹⁸ Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile.," 1055.

man to death.”¹⁹⁹

The mercy and compassion of the Chinese systems recounted in the Jesuit accounts led Voltaire to praise the Chinese judicial and political system as superior, surpassing all foreign and prior French systems:

the constitution of their empire is in fact the best in the world; the only one in which the governor of a province is punished when he fails to win the acclamation of the people upon leaving office; the only one that has instituted prizes for virtue, while everywhere else the laws are restricted to punishing crime; the only one that has made its conquerors adopt its laws, while we are still subject to the customs of the Burgundians, the Franks, and the Goths, who subjugated us.²⁰⁰

Clearly Voltaire’s love for Chinese government reflected a utopian ideal – not an existing Chinese reality, but distillation achieved through distance and based upon glowing Jesuit reports. Voltaire’s idealized impression of Chinese rule followed directly from Jesuit writings, such as Du Halde’s celebration of the Qing empire. Voltaire embraced the idea of the emperor-philosopher portrayed in the Jesuit works. His famous essay, “The Century of Louis the Fourteenth,” concludes not with an assessment of the state of French affairs, but with a chapter which had apparently nothing to do with France, a chapter entirely devoted to the Manchu Emperor Kangxi, whose reign in China corresponds almost exactly to that of Louis XIV in France. Here Voltaire, not unlike the Jesuit fathers, avoids direct criticism of the French king but instead attacks the French system indirectly by praising the Chinese system.

Voltaire’s comparisons of the French and Chinese systems, while not necessarily

¹⁹⁹ *Lettres*. XX, 378. [Trans. mine] “Vous seriez surpris, mon Père, si vous étiez témoin de l’attention scrupuleuse qu’on apporte à la Chine quand il s’agit de condamner un homme à la mort .”

²⁰⁰ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 40.

based on reality, certainly contain a degree of truth.²⁰¹ The combination of a monarch with almost unlimited powers and an official class elected on an intellectual and meritorious basis yielded an ideal system relatively free from corruption and religious prejudice, especially in contrast to the French monarchy at the time. In France the monarch theoretically held almost unlimited power but there was no vetting system for the appointment of wise advisors, other than nepotism and political intrigue. Voltaire further argued that the pope and the king should not have divine rights because this was merely a perversion of sectarian religion assigning “truth” to one religious over another in search of power not truth or enlightenment. He specifically challenged the sacrosanctity of the Catholic Church:

Jesus gave the pope neither the borderland of Ancona, nor the duchy of Spoleto; and yet the pope has them by divine right. Jesus did not make a sacrament of marriage or of holy orders; and with us, holy orders and marriage are sacraments. If we wish to study the matter closely: the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion is in all its ceremonies and dogmas the opposite of the religion of Jesus.²⁰²

Voltaire held that no man, neither the king nor the pope, has divine right. To Voltaire, only an enlightened absolutist ruler, closely advised by philosophers, could improve the wealth of his subjects and kingdom. Voltaire essentially believed that enlightened despotism was the key to progress and change and the Chinese imperial system seemed to be the perfect example on which to model France.²⁰³ He remarked on the Chinese system:

This moral obedience to the laws, coupled with the worship of a Supreme Being, are the religion of China, the emperors and scholars. The emperor is, from time

²⁰¹ Said, *Orientalism*, .7

²⁰² Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 35.

²⁰³ Voltaire. *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. Entry on “Democracy.”

immemorial, the first pontiff: he who sacrifices to Tien, the ruler of heaven and earth. It must be the first philosopher, the first preacher of the empire its edicts are almost always instructions and lessons in morality.²⁰⁴

This symbol of enlightened despotism inspired the Enlightenment *philosophes* to call for governmental and religious reform through the Republic of Letters. Voltaire's Sinophilia was as unwavering as his desire for change in France. Voltaire felt he had found in China, a model religion, philosophy, and political system and the key to further human progress in Europe and around the world.

²⁰⁴ Voltaire. *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 35.

CONCLUSION

How shocking it must have been for Voltaire's readers to see that his world history did not begin with Biblical chronology but instead with Chinese time. He went on to praise Chinese antiquity, laws, and Confucian religion. Voltaire's emphasis on the morality of China, a nation still viewed as pagan to the majority of Europeans, was to illustrate that moral truth and goodness was not restricted to Europeans or more specifically the Catholic Church. Ironically, Voltaire's evidence for these arguments was provided by members of the Catholic Church itself. The Jesuit Figurists had not predicted the extent to which the Enlightenment would use Chinese examples to support their own anti-religious programs of state and society. Adolf Reichwein in his study, *China and Europe*, explains that through their missions and studies the Jesuits had "unwittingly become the intermediaries between the Enlightenment of ancient China" and that of the eighteenth century Europe and that they had provided "Voltaire and the Encyclopædists the weapons which one day would be turned against themselves."²⁰⁵ If scientific discoveries were becoming the most serious threat to the Catholic Church, then the scientifically minded Jesuit scholars were now the greatest threat to their own belief system. However, the Figurists were not unwitting providers of information on China. On the contrary, they were enthusiastic suppliers of this information and were not as uncomfortable with its possible ramifications for undermining the papacy or monarchy as historians often assume. The Jesuits themselves were constantly under threat from both

²⁰⁵ Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), xiii.

of these institutions and found sympathizers in their readership of *philosophes*.

Despite their mutual love of Chinese civilization and culture, many *philosophes* remained critical of the Jesuits and their works. When the order came under attack in the mid-eighteenth century and the fathers were about to be expelled from the country, several Enlightenment writers joined the general attack, ridiculing the Jesuit educational system. On August 6, 1762, the final *arrêt* was issued condemning the Society to extinction, but the king's intervention brought eight months' delay and meantime a compromise was suggested by the Court. On April 1, 1763 Jesuit colleges were closed, and by a further *arrêt* of March 9, 1764, the Jesuits were required to renounce their vows under pain of banishment. By November 1764, the king signed an edict dissolving the Society throughout France and the colonies. In 1763, La Chalotais published his *Essay on National Education*, which d'Alembert joyfully greeted as “the first philosophical work against this rabble.” This pamphlet reflected upon and questioned how civilized humanity could have had the “criminal blindness” to offer its youth to a “horde of monks, since as celibates, they could never be in a position to perform any real beneficial educational work.”²⁰⁶ He further challenged the Jesuits' monopoly of male education stating that, “the education of French patriots [had] been left to men who, body and soul, were the minions of a foreign power.”²⁰⁷ La Chatolais suggests that the only antidote for this poisoned system was to reform the institutions, and replacing Latin with French, and exchanging the “scholastic hair-splitting of the Jesuits” with the “clarity of Cartesian

²⁰⁶L. R. C. de La Chatolais, *Essai d'éducation nationale ou plan d'études pour la jeunesse* (Paris, 1763). As quoted in Füllöp-Muller, 434.

²⁰⁷Füllöp-Muller, 434.

intelligence.”²⁰⁸ The first step in sweeping reform of French education and scholarship would result in the expulsion of the Jesuit order from France in 1764.

The Jesuit Figurists’ love of China and willingness to question the historical traditions of the Catholic Church, had resulted in the expulsion of the heretical fathers and provided Voltaire with new information with which to attack both the Church and the complicit French state. Yet the appeal of the Figurists’ image of China to Voltaire is not as surprising or ironic as it might initially seem. Although Voltaire was an outspoken and energetic critic of the Catholic Church with regard to its religious intolerance and what he viewed as the parasitical and hypocritical nature of the clergy, he shared with the Jesuit Sinophiles an image of the world in which the enlightened would lead and rule the ignorant with benign and paternalistic guidance. Thus the Jesuits’ writings perfectly suited Voltaire’s intellectual and political agenda. They at once called into question Catholic teachings regarding the origins and history of human society and offered an idealized portrait of “right” rule: an enlightened emperor, surrounded by secular, intellectual advisors supported by a peasantry in harmony with their filial duty.

Through the Jesuits writings of an exoticized yet civilized China enlightened Europeans drew evidence to redefine values and reshape their philosophical dialectic as their knowledge increased.²⁰⁹ Through the assimilation of China’s values-- whether real or merely projected-- the *philosophes* began to dismantle European ethnocentric perspectives and beliefs in Western supremacy.²¹⁰ To assume that one small group held

²⁰⁸ Füllöp-Muller, 434.

²⁰⁹ Mungello, 343.

²¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 117.

divine rights over all others offended Voltaire's sensibility and view that all men would progress to find true universal belief and understanding. The idea of universal truth, suggested that truth could not be the sole possession of one small group. Voltaire in his *Essai*, which was arguably the first European world history, was intended to incorporate this idea of a universal truth into a secular non-Eurocentric world history. This idea was a recurring theme in Voltaire's work and especially prominent in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. Throughout the study, the of truth is presented as "uniformitarianism" where all humans have an underlying knowledge of truth and differences that occur, or in Voltaire's term "sects" emerge especially in regard to religion, this was a sign of error or movement from the truth. The divisiveness of religion was diametrically opposed to science, mathematics, and physics which were, as a result of their unbiased accuracy, the supposed possessors of truth whereas, "historical truths [were] merely probabilities."²¹¹

So if diversity always signified error and homogeneity was a sign of truth, it would seem that no one sect could be the preserver of truth. However, as Voltaire is quick to add, truth would be recognized by all when it was discovered. In sum, Voltaire never mocked spiritual belief or belief in a God, the essence of Christianity, but did combat superstition and hypocrisy with a burning passion for humanity and justice. So, when presented with the Figurists' glowing picture of China's superiorities and their supposed religious preservation of the Logos, Voltaire felt he had been shown an undisputable truth and upon recognition of this truth, the sects of religious diversity and

²¹¹ Voltaire. *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, 30. As quoted in the "Truth" entry.

domination within France would be eliminated. Voltaire alludes to this truth by extolling China's "perfected moral science, and that is the first of the sciences...One need not be obsessed with the merits of the Chinese to recognize at least that the organization of their empire is in truth the best that the world has ever seen."²¹²

Philosopher Henry Nelson Coleridge famously said that the fragile perception of truth is merely a unification of "insulated fragments of truth and frame a perfect mirror."²¹³ In Voltaire's hands, China became a mirror in which humanity could see its multifarious images, both in its normal and distorted forms. It was Voltaire's conviction that ideas, both good and bad, are the decisive and controlling factor in human life and opinions rule the world.²¹⁴ Voltaire, the consummate seeker of truth, had indeed uncovered the truth that opinions and ideas that constitute the fragments of the mirror, are sometimes less significant than framing the perfect mirror. Voltaire collected shards of truth presented to him by the Jesuit Figurists and selectively arranged them to frame a perfect mirror to envision what France could become.

²¹² Cressey, 601.

²¹³ Milnes, 309.

²¹⁴ Rosenthal, 167.

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APPENDIX

Clotexte: Absolutism in France-Textes sur l'absolutisme en France Lettres de cachet au temps de Louis XV

Contre Voltaire

"Monsieur de B. Je vous écris cette lettre de la main de mon oncle le Duc d'Orléans, Régent, pour vous dire que mon intention est que vous receviez, dans mon château de la Bastille, le Sieur Harrouët, et que vous l'y déteniez jusqu'à nouvel ordre. Je prie Dieu qu'il vous ait, Monsieur de B., dans sa sainte garde.

...écrit à Paris le 17 mai 1717.

Louis."

Contre Diderot

"Monsieur le Marquis du Châtelet, je vous fais cette lettre pour vous dire de recevoir en mon château de Vincennes le Sieur Diderot et de l'y retenir jusqu'à nouvel ordre de ma part. Je prie Dieu qu'il vous ait, Monsieur le Marquis du Châtelet, dans sa sainte garde.

...écrit à Compiègne, le 23 juillet 1749.

Louis."

Letters of cachet at the time of Louis XV

Against Voltaire

"Mr. B. I am writing this letter at the hands of my uncle the Duke of Orleans, Regent, to tell you that my intention is that you receive, in my castle of the Bastille, Sieur Harrouët, and you l 'y hold until further notice. I pray to God that you have, Mr. B., in his holy custody.

... written in Paris on May 17, 1717.

Louis. "

Against Diderot

"Monsieur le Marquis du Chatelet, I am making this letter to tell you receive my castle Sieur de Vincennes Diderot, and thereafter hold until further notice from me. I pray to God that you have, Mr Marquis du Chatelet, in his holy custody.

... writing to Compiègne, July 23, 1749.

Louis. "