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The Idea of China in British Literature, 1757 to 1785

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

PhD

University of Edinburgh
Department of English Literature
October 2013

I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualifcation. The publication of my article “‘Mi Li’ Revisited: Horace Walpole and the Idea of China” (Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies 32.2 (2009): 215-34) was approved by Colin Nicholson. A copy of the article is bound into this thesis.

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Paul Nash       Date

23 October 2013
Abstract

This thesis examines the idea of China in British literature during a clearly defined period. Between 1757 and 1785, when Britain still had little direct contact and cultural exchange with the Chinese, China evoked various attitudes, images and beliefs in the British imagination. At times uncertain and evasive, popular understandings of China were sufficiently malleable for writers of the period to knead into domestic political satire and social discourse, giving fresh expression to popular criticisms, philosophical aspirations, and religious tensions. The period presents several prominent English, Irish, and Scottish writers who use the idea of China precisely in this manner in writings as generically diverse as drama, translation, travel writing, pseudo-Oriental letters, novels, and fairy tales. Some invoke China’s supposed defects to accentuate Britain’s material, scientific, and moral progress, or to feed contemporary debate about decadence in British society and government. Others exploit the notion of a more civilized and virtuous China to satirize what they regard as a supercilious cultural milieu attendant on their own emerging polite and commercial society, or to interrogate their nation’s moral criteria of the highest good, public-spiritedness, or evolving global enterprise. All give the idea of China new currency in the dialectical interplay between literary appeals to antiquity and the pursuit of modernity, enlisting it in philosophical and theological debates of Enlightenment. This thesis will argue that its subject writers, including Arthur Murphy, Thomas Percy, Oliver Goldsmith, John Bell, and Horace Walpole, use the idea of China to help define a British identity as culturally and politically distinct from Europe, especially France, and to contemplate Britain’s place within global history and a broadening world view at mid-century.
Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. 2
Contents .................................................................................................................................................. 3
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... 4
INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................... 6
CHAPTER 1:  
China in the European Imagination to 1757 .................................................................................... 42
CHAPTER 2:  
Arthur Murphy’s *The Orphan of China* ......................................................................................... 84
CHAPTER 3:  
*The Pleasing History*: Thomas Percy’s Editorial Treatment of the First Chinese Novel in English .................................................. 115
CHAPTER 4:  
*Citizen of the World*: Oliver Goldsmith’s Chinese Narrator ...................................................... 163
CHAPTER 5:  
A Scotsman on the Road to Cathay: John Bell’s China ............................................................. 203
CHAPTER 6:  
The *Bonze*: A King’s Friend in the Vale of Hoangti ................................................................... 248
CHAPTER 7:  
Mi Li Revisited: Horace Walpole and the Idea of China ............................................................. 306
CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................................... 342
Works Cited and Consulted

Primary Texts .................................................................................................................................... 356
Secondary Works ................................................................................................................................. 370
APPENDIX:

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“CONFUCIUS: The celebrated Chinese Philosopher.” Frontispiece to The General History of China. London: John Watts, 1736. This was the first English translation of the Jesuit scholar Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s Description [...] de la Chine (Paris, 1735), the most widely consulted book on China in Britain in the early to mid-eighteenth century. Du Halde’s artist probably based this illustration on a similar one in Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (Paris, 1687).
Introduction

“He was led through a venerable wood of beeches, to a menagerie commanding a more glorious prospect than any in his father’s dominions, and full of Chinese pheasants.” – Horace Walpole, “Mi Li. A Chinese Fairy Tale”

Mi Li, China’s impetuous prince, sailed to Ireland from Canton on a returning British man-of-war in search of the bride foretold by his godmother. He never expected to end up in England, a strange and wonderful country, but one misadventure after another leads him onto the grounds of Lord Henry Seymour Conway’s estate at Park Place, near Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire. An English gardener conducts him to “a place where there was a bridge over no water, a tomb where nobody ever was buried nor ever would be buried, ruins that were more than they had ever been, a subterraneous passage in which there were dogs with eyes of rubies and emeralds, and a more beautiful menagerie of Chinese pheasants than any in his father’s extensive gardens.” In this fantastical setting, where Chinese gardens blend incongruously with the mock ruins of classical Greek and Roman pavilions and monuments, he discovers his destined bride, the orphaned daughter of a former American colonial governor who “had lost the dominions which never had been his dominions.”

Mi Li is a fairy tale. Horace Walpole wrote it in the early 1780s to amuse himself and entertain a young girl of his acquaintance. More than two decades had
elapsed since he first published his immensely successful political pamphlet “A Letter from Xo Ho” (1757), a satire occasioned by Admiral Byng’s callous execution for failing to “do his utmost” to prevent the French from capturing Minorca in 1756 at the start of the Seven Years’ War. The pamphlet represents English events of the day through the critical eyes of a rational and humane Confucian philosopher from Peking (present-day Beijing) residing in London. Mi Li also puts an imagined Chinese visitor to satirical use, but its satire is conveyed through the irrational romantic pursuit of a young Chinese prince in a fairy tale informed by the extravagances of chinoiserie, the vogue for Chinese asymmetrical interior decoration, architecture, and landscape gardening which had spread to Britain from France and reached fever pitch by mid-century. As Jonathan Spence notes, the tale takes “the extravagances of Chinoiserie to their outermost limits, only to let them dissolve in their own absurdity” (Chan’s Great Continent 79).

Mi Li is more than simply a parody, however. Spence overlooks an important feature cleverly hidden within the story and signalled by the title of the collection in which it appears (“Hieroglyphic Tales”). The key to unlocking the tale’s satirical method and purpose is easily missed if one reads it without taking into account its historical context. Indeed, the key has been passed over by critics who have all presumed that Walpole wrote the tale, like the others in the collection, before the American Revolutionary War (1775-83). Only by examining Mi Li as an expression of Walpole’s post-war attitude toward Britain’s global expansionary enterprise can one see it for what it truly is: a subversive “hieroglyphic” satire on the amoral pursuit
of profit overseas, which Walpole feared was coming to destabilize England’s traditional values and landed interests at home. Walpole could just as well have put a Persian or an Indian character to similar effect. He chose instead to model his protagonist after a superstitious Chinese youth, juxtaposing his impetuousness against a more phlegmatic, rational Confucianism made popular by Jesuit accounts.

This study examines the “idea” of China in British literature during a clearly defined period. It begins with Arthur Murphy’s play The Orphan of China, first staged in London in 1757, following the onset of the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), after which Britain consolidated her overseas territorial dominions and expanded her global trade with greater rapidity and compass than ever before. Robert Clive’s decisive defeat over the French at Plassey in 1757 brought all of northeast India under the East India Company’s control, stimulating renewed commercial interest in China by promising access to China’s northern interior through Tibet, where it hoped to find a vast export market for Britain’s growing heavy woollen industry. The Chinese imperial court in 1757 reinforced restrictions on British traders in China, and in less than three years George III would come to the throne in Britain as the Elector of Hanover. The study concludes with Walpole’s Mi Li in 1785, shortly after the American Revolutionary War (1775-83), which marked an end to Britain’s American empire and the beginnings of a new trajectory of global expansion eastward.

The period of study is one that witnessed momentous changes to Britain’s global mercantile-colonial enterprise, stimulating energetic discussion and debate on Britain’s place in the world and its identity as culturally and politically distinct from
Europe, especially France. China generated considerable interest in Britain, and yet little direct cultural contact during the period made possible in the British imagination a greater flexibility and multiplicity of attitudes, images, and beliefs about China. Academic Sinology had not yet emerged in Britain, and Britain had not yet experienced Lord Macartney’s failed embassy to the Qianlong emperor (1792-94), nor the Anglo-Chinese War now commonly referred to as the First Opium War (1839-42), which would fundamentally alter British understandings of, and attitudes toward China. At times uncertain and evasive, popular understandings of China remained sufficiently malleable for writers of the period to employ in domestic political satire and social discourse, giving fresh expression to popular criticisms, philosophical aspirations, and religious tensions. Some invoke China’s supposed defects to accentuate Britain’s material, scientific, and moral progress, or to feed contemporary debate about decadence in British society and government. Others exploit the notion of a more civilized and virtuous China to satirize what they regard as a supercilious cultural milieu attendant on their own emerging polite and commercial society, or to interrogate their nation’s moral criteria of the highest good, public-spiritedness, or evolving global enterprise. All give the idea of China new currency in the dialectical interplay between literary appeals to antiquity and the pursuit of modernity, enlisting it in philosophical and theological debates of Enlightenment, particularly those concerning Britain’s place in the world and its identity as culturally and politically distinct from Europe.

Europeans have been writing about China’s culture, history, and geography
since late antiquity. By the mid-eighteenth century, poets, historians, romance writers, and travellers alike had, for many centuries, painted various pictures of China, dabbing their brushes as freely in fact as in legend and fiction. Some, either unacquainted with China through direct experience or lacking sufficiently detailed and correct authorities, gave untrustworthy accounts. Others deliberately fabricated. Still others, commanding excellent means of knowledge, either through personal experience or access to original authorities, wrote with exceptional intellectual ability, literary skill, and sympathetic insight. Most, however, tended to show a remote and evasive country coloured to some extent by the preoccupations of their own time and place.

From classical antiquity to the period under study, European images of China generally oscillated between two antithetical viewpoints. As early as Hippocrates, who claimed that Asia’s temperate climate made its people submissive and docile, one pictured China as despotic and culturally backward. Marco Polo gave the impetus to a competing image by extolling China as a well-developed, orderly, and self-reliant civilization, a happy conjunction of benign climate and political institutions capable of avoiding the sins that had destroyed other empires. When French Jesuits made their first real inroads into China’s interior, starting with Matteo Ricci in the late sixteenth century, they encountered a culture already above two thousand years old which seemed to have evolved in almost complete isolation from Western influences. Its presumed monotheistic religion appeared analogous to Christianity, prompting Europeans to attempt to subsume China under a Judaeo-
Christian meta-narrative of world history, framing it within the tensions of redemptive and degenerative historiography.

By the late seventeenth century, European intellectual tides had changed and China was swept into the unfolding dialogue of Enlightenment. Whether perceived as progressive or backward, China’s philosophical traditions appeared to share little with Western religious and political thought. They engaged European thinkers, such as the French *philosophes*, who sought to place China’s state-system of ethical teachings, founded by Confucius and developed by Mencius, in relation to general theories of human society, interrogating its ostensibly rational, non-religious, and mythless roots. Confucian China appeared to owe its social, economic, and political achievements to the countenance of natural law and the active promotion of the common good, which to some seemed a welcome model of rectitude and prosperity for European systems struggling to overcome their own limitations.

In Britain interest sharpened in China’s political system, a meritocracy of scholar-officials in which hereditary distinctions carried little or no weight under an enlightened monarchy solicitous about its subjects’ welfare. Based on a traditionalist value system of ethical duty, service, moderation, and self-discipline, Confucianism came to be exploited as a metaphor for certain British political values. China, which had regarded itself as the “Middle Kingdom” since the late Zhou dynasty (1027-221 BC), when the Zhou clan formulated a “mandate of heaven” doctrine to counter Shang claims to a divine right to rule, represented to the British mind a benevolent despotism to which an enlightened constitutional monarchy ought to aspire. China’s
earlier conquests by “barbarous” Tartars concurrently rang a cautionary note against French absolutism.

By the early eighteenth century, European fantasies of China found material expression in chinoiserie, the whimsical, irregular decorative style inspired by imported Chinese porcelain, fabrics, wallpaper, and lacquered furniture, together with Chinese aesthetic sensibilities in architecture and landscape gardening. Refreshingly antithetical to neoclassical restraint, chinoiserie reached its height during the first half of the century, but not before converging with analogous movements in Britain, such as the Gothic Revival, which helped to point the way towards Romanticism. Chinoiserie’s grosser excesses, however, drew mounting criticism from those who identified it with French decadence, or those who saw it as the aesthetic embodiment of all the dangers, ambiguities, and contradictions associated with a desire to define and critique modernity. Jesuit accounts of China, which had always received mixed reviews in Britain, especially from Protestants, began to elicit growing scepticism and antipathy as political rivalries and religious tensions with France intensified during the Seven Years’ War.

It is a telling observation that many popular British ideas of China in the eighteenth century lingered at an imaginative altitude as fabulous as the most credulous legends and historical romances to enthrall medieval Europeans. As a literary project, this study does not endeavour to trace the evolution of British Sinology, which would not become a professional academic discipline until the nineteenth century. It neither measures the validity of historical, cultural, or
anthropological representations of China, nor attempts to assess China’s contribution to the Western intellectual heritage. It is concerned instead with the ways in which miscellaneous attitudes, beliefs, and images about China prevailing in Britain between 1757 and 1785, some of which are deliberate fictions, are put to use by a cross-section of English, Irish, and Scottish authors to express domestic social and political anxieties, or to engage the philosophical and theological debates of the day.

When Spence published his elegant and insightful study *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (1998), a collection of essays first presented in 1996 as the Clyde DeVane lectures at Yale University, he hoped to inspire future graduate students to an exciting but critically neglected subject. Spence, a noted China historian and colleague of Harold Bloom, to whom his book is dedicated, gives a free-ranging survey of China in Western literature from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. Using the figurative motif of “sightings,” a term used in navigation, exploration, and warfare to denote that fleeting moment in which one catches sight of something, often for the first time, he maps out “the multiplicity of intellectual and emotional attitudes that Westerners have brought to their attempts to deal with the phenomenon of China” (xi). Beginning with Marco Polo’s fabled depiction of Kublai Khan in the 1270s, he forges ahead to accounts given by Jesuits and Enlightenment synthesizers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, and then on to Marx, Kafka, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Ezra Pound, Eugene O’Neill, and Pearl Buck. Each of the 48 narrative samples he chooses illustrates how fleeting, intermittent, and partial Western encounters with China have been over the centuries. Whether
pictured as enlightened and progressive, or as cruel and despotist, China remained in some measure a product of the Western mind: either an unconscious projection (in the Freudian sense) or a deliberate fiction. Both, he says, reveal more about Western sensibilities than they do about China or its relationship with other civilizations. Evasive and problematic, China sightings have, he argues, something profounder to say about things like the medieval world view, the overseas conquests of Catholic nations, the “realist” voyages of emerging Protestant states, the philosophies of the Enlightenment, the development of the Romantic Movement, or the progress of feminist sensibilities. He builds no theoretical framework beyond what is necessary to demonstrate that Western observers do “not necessarily understand [China], or seek to do so” (xviii). His conclusion is simply that Western sightings of China are, apart from certain commonalities, as various as they are numerous, and “the impact of China need have little or anything to do with the literalness or precision of an actual experience” (xii).

This study represents in some respects an extension of Spence’s project. Spence is one of the more engaging scholars of the past few decades to revisit the ways in which China has, from age to age, presented an alluring impression of difference, and how that impression lends itself to discourse and debate in a Western context. Since *The Chan’s Great Continent* appeared, Western interest in China has surged as the world’s most populous nation, a civilization with nearly four millennia of continuous history, re-emerges from decades of self-imposed isolation brought about by devastating political and economic upheavals experienced during the first
three quarters of the twentieth century. The prospect of China regaining its former prestige has occasioned in the West complex and ambivalent responses echoing those called forth centuries ago by Britain’s earliest encounters with imperial China. It seems a particularly fascinating moment to delve deeper into this subject by looking back in time on another eventful and complex period, one replete with writings that illustrate a recurrent Western inclination to refract visions of itself through ideas of China. This does not necessarily imply studying a closed historical period, for to isolate and interrogate the qualities which made China appealing to the Western imagination then, one may gain insight into the psychological and intellectual dynamics by which they interact with Western social and political concerns today.

It is tempting to approach a subject like this one, as Spence does, with broad historical sweep, treating representations of China in English literature from, say, the seventeenth to the twentieth century. A major obstacle, however, quickly becomes apparent. To traverse British and American cultural sensibilities and intellectual preoccupations with any scholarly rigour over four hundred years is very difficult. A recurring criticism of Spence’s book, in fact, is that it is too diffuse in the treatment of its subject and lacks a proper interpretive framework in consequence of the broad period it covers.1 This criticism is perhaps unfair, as some critics themselves admit, for Spence’s intention is to revive interest in the subject without reducing it to

1 Soren Clausen writes that the book is perhaps too “vast in its scope, and the interpretive framework is quite open, with few attempts at categorization” (523), while John A. G. Roberts criticizes the weaknesses of Spence’s “narrow” approach to treating such a long and complex period (n. pag.).
theoretical generalities. “It is my implicit belief that bold generalizations are usually wide of the mark,” he writes, “and that the individual experience rarely matches the allegedly universal trend” (xviii). He pays more attention to historical context and authorial biography than Bloom perhaps would have, but in panning his lens across seven centuries he necessarily blurs details of historical and literary circumstance which could have better informed and enriched his treatment. This project aims to sharpen some of that detail by focusing on a narrower period: the quarter century between 1757 and 1785, a seminal phase in Anglo-Chinese relations, which is both manageable and offers a rich and diverse group of texts for study. Rather than approach these texts as windows on British understandings of China, this study examines the ways in which they present and use ideas of China in an attempt to better understand the texts themselves within their British context.

It might seem useful to draw on Edward Said’s theories of Orientalism to critique representations of China during this period, but attempts to apply these theories to writings before the nineteenth century often fail or yield very little. Robert Markley and others have discovered that postcolonial criticism is inadequate to “the vast literature on China available to early modern readers,” at least in so far as it “emphasize[s] the silencing of the victims of European imperialism” who “serve merely as stage props for one-sided portrayals of European colonization and conquest” (104-5). Daniel Defoe, whose Robinson Crusoe travels through China in *Farther Adventures* (1719), can lay claim to a place in postcolonial studies, as can (less decidedly) Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, and Sterne. The works considered
here, however, envision China from a perspective that either renders problematic or anticipates those critiques postcolonial studies usually bring to bear on a nineteenth-century milieu. Oliver Goldsmith’s fictional Chinese philosopher Lien Chi Altangi, for example, is a strident Saidian critic two centuries before Said. In fact, the period’s literature seldom represents the Chinese Other in a manner that suggests a relationship of domination or authority.

British authors frequently use the idea of China to help give expression to domestic concerns, self-consciously calling into question the epistemological and ontological categories informing those attitudes that Said considers, to one degree or another, unconscious. It soon becomes apparent that the discursive conditions of the nineteenth century cannot simply be projected back onto a period whose “transcultural processes,” as Robert Batchelor observes, are too complex to be reduced “to binary discursive oppositions rooted in inherited ideas about national cultures, imperial economies, and civilizational contrasts.” Instead, they open up “new possibilities for translation and new ways of imagining the social.” Batchelor’s project consequently examines how the British nation is “imagined through China,” concentrating on “attempts by self-styled British patriots of the 1730s to reformulate feelings about beauty and merit by appealing to a Chinese notion of aesthetics as embodied in the garden” (79-80). This approach begs an intriguing question. Did Britons after the 1730s and 40s continue to use ideas about China in similar fashion to imagine their nation? If so, how did these ideas change, if at all, through the Seven Years’ War and after the American Revolutionary War, when Britain began to expand more decisively in India, giving rise to those imperial attitudes with which
Said is concerned?

Markley treats the subject differently and with broader geographical scope in *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730* (2006). Drawing on some two hundred texts from a broad range of authors, including Jesuit missionaries, Dutch merchants, and luminaries such as Milton, Dryden, Swift, and Defoe, he examines English attitudes to the Far East and Eastern influences on English thinking during the “long” seventeenth century. While acknowledging that China was “a fantasy space for mercantile capitalism” (4), he argues that contemporary English writers saw England as being dominated or marginalized by the economic power of the Eastern world. Utilizing a hybrid historical method which he terms “eco-cultural materialism,” he examines how English attitudes to Eastern wealth and power helped to reconceptualize national and personal identity from the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. Like other historians, such as Jack Goldstone, Andre Gunder Frank, and Kenneth Pomeranz, he rejects Anglo-centric postcolonial assumptions that England confidently regarded the “natural world as though it were primarily a storehouse of resources for labor to exploit” (8-10). English writers during the seventeenth century, he notes, saw China and Japan as exemplary rather than inferior nations, which put them in mind of their own shortcomings. This would not change, he contends, until Defoe portrayed China as vulgar and backward in 1719 in a work anticipating the aggressive imperial acquisitiveness of the nineteenth century. Like Spence’s work, Markley’s study has been faulted for lacking theoretical unity, as well as for placing too strong an emphasis on “English” representations of China while ignoring the subtle differences manifest in Irish and Scottish representations.
Before Spence, William Appleton published *A Cycle of Cathay* (1951), a study of the Chinese vogue in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Borrowing his title from a line of Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall” (“Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay,” 1.184), Appleton sees Western interest in China ebbing and flowing in historical cycles. His study concentrates on the modern cycle, beginning with the East India Company’s founding in 1600, then moves forward through the course of chinoiserie’s popularity to the first British embassy to China led by Lord Macartney (1792-94). European modernity, he argues, created a mythical conception of China that was “largely a synthetic product” because the China that Stuart and Augustan Englishmen visualized was seen refracted through Jesuit eyes; it was associated with the artistry of Chippendale, the wit of Goldsmith, and the deistic worship of Confucius. Few were the British voyagers who brought back firsthand accounts, and fewer still were the genuine Sinologists. As the disparities between the myth and the actuality became apparent, the reaction set in. Enthusiasm dwindled to bewilderment and irritation and, ultimately, to downright hostility. (v)

Appleton argues a case for adopting a thematic approach, for “so scattered were these manifestations [of China’s influence on English life and letters] that it is virtually impossible to treat them chronologically.” Chinese scholars in British and American universities, he contends, have erred by treating them chronologically such that “their collections of scattered references to China sometimes seem more like kaleidoscopic patterns than clear and orderly mosaics” (vi).

*A Cycle of Cathay* concentrates on England’s interest in China because “Continental aspects of Sinology have already received much attention” (vi). It traces the influence that Chinese thought, particularly Confucianism, had on the deist movement in England and how it differed from the political and religious sway it
held in France. Appleton’s intention is to explore for the first time the structure of a single cycle, whereas Spence attempts to sketch out a meta-structure over the course of what Appleton would have considered multiple cycles. Spence mentions Appleton only in a passing footnote, but he is clearly indebted to his methodology. Although Spence does not fully assert the autonomy of China sightings from historical circumstance, he adopts Appleton’s thematic approach, no doubt influenced also by Bloom’s formalism in *The Western Canon*.

Shortly after Appleton’s study appeared, Harold Isaacs published *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (1958), which examines 150 years of Sino-American encounters. Other scholars since then have written on the subject from American perspectives, including Jonathan Goldstein (1991) and T. Christopher Jesspersen (1999). Raymond Dawson, an eminent British Sinologist, revisited the European encounter with China in *The Chinese Chameleon* (1967). Dawson begins with Marco Polo and travels down through seven centuries to show “the difficulty of achieving objective judgement on a remote country with an alien civilization” (3), whose changeability in Western eyes he feels is better characterized by a chameleon than a dragon. Writing for a popular audience, Dawson attempts to show that European conceptions of China are distorted by the subjectivity of European psychological demands. Even the historian, he argues, can never achieve true objectivity because he “is primarily studying not historical facts (whatever that may mean), but opinions about the past.” The historian necessarily works from extant evidence, typically selected and arranged by others in the past, which he filters through the preoccupations of the present, leaving little hope of “ever attaining
ultimate historical truth” (76). Dawson’s thesis may be self-evident but it succeeds in accentuating an important point lost on those who would overstate China’s influence on the “making of British modernity.” It also calls attention to a theoretical quandary, for implicitly it both rejects and recommends a New Historicist approach.

In 1987 Timothy Hugh Barrett delivered a conference paper at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies on British Sinology and scholarly contacts with China from the seventeenth century onward. It became the basis for a 125-page monograph published in 1989 as *Singular Listlessness: A Short History of Chinese Books and British Scholars*. The title is borrowed from a remark made by John Francis Davis, a prominent nineteenth-century Sinologist and the second British governor of Hong Kong, to indicate the relative academic indifference to China in Britain compared to the interest shown by European and American scholars. In the same year, Colin Macherras published *Western Images of China*. Written for a general audience and based on lectures he delivered in 1986 at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, it chronicles seven hundred years of China “images” in the West, from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, drawing examples from literature, journalism and the arts. Macherras’s method, guided by Said and Foucault, aims to “decolonize” the “power/knowledge” relationship that he argues has always informed Western representations of China. John K. Fairbank, Harvard University’s first full-time specialist in Chinese history and a seminal figure in American Sinology, describes the book as Macherras’s “personal voyage of discovery,” containing “profuse expressions of personal judgment offered ex cathedra.” He writes that it gives one a thousand impressions derived from others but nothing deduced by
Spence uses the term sightings to replace Macharras’s images, implying the elusiveness of links between images and influence in popular Western understandings of China. A similar book appeared in 1991 titled China and Europe, Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries, a collection of essays originally presented in an international symposium at Hong Kong University and edited by a Chinese scholar, Thomas H. C. Lee. Reading these essays, one gets the impression, as with Spence and Mackerras, that the Western literary engagement with China through this period was little more than an encounter with a series of shifting images from which readers formed opinions or drew comparisons.

Another such collection appeared in 1998, edited by Adrian Hsia, titled The Vision of China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Hsia brings together thirteen essays written entirely in English by four Chinese scholars, mostly in the 1930s and 40s. These, no doubt, are the essays to which Appleton derisively alludes as kaleidoscopic surveys. The volume contains two lengthy essays by Qian Zhongshu, a Chinese scholar who studied at Oxford in the late 1930s and is now best known for his satirical novel Fortress Besieged, a modern Chinese classic. While concerned generally with Western perceptions (“the vision”) of China, the essays highlight the linguistic, aesthetic, and theological uses to which Chinese exoticism was put in the “making of modernity.”

In 2005 Ros Ballaster published Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785, revisiting the role of Eastern tales in “constructing” the Orient
(Persia, Turkey, China, and India) in the English imagination. In particular, she examines how the East became a source rather than merely a subject of narrative. Before this, the last general study of its kind was Martha Pike Conant’s *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1908). “Historians of English fiction,” Conant writes, “have insufficiently recognized the fact that the oriental tale was one of the forms of literature that gave to the reading public in Augustan England the element of plot which, to a certain extent, supplemented that of character” (242). Conant explores multiple genres: the novel, allegory, tale, dream vision, drama, and “pseudo-Oriental letter” (a term she coined to describe the letters of pretended Eastern characters written by Western authors). She groups her texts into four categories: imaginative, moralistic, philosophic, and satiric.

Ballaster divides geographically, but like Conant she concentrates on the fictional Orient, examining the narrative tropes that came to dominate its representation as a form of self-divesting sympathetic engagement with otherness rather than an expression imperial power. While many studies since Foucault and Said have obsessively critiqued the “power” relations believed to inhere in knowledge of Orientals, detracting from their “authenticity” as they exert ideological authority over them, Ballaster shows that representations of the East serve other purposes. From both formalist and feminist perspectives, she “looks at what Western readers [...] read into oriental tales” and how they responded to narratives sharing a protean quality in the way in which they “move” or “transmigrate” across countries, cultures, and epochs. The passage of narratives from East to West, and from past to present, she argues, was not simply “the best way of ‘knowing’ the Orient” but also
“the Orient’s undoing,” for it was “a proleptic sign of a long transfer of power from one half of the globe to the other” (5-6).

More recently, David Porter has drawn renewed attention to China’s material influence on “the making of modernity” in *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (2010). Porter examines the processes by which English culture assimilated Chinese aesthetic sensibilities by means of material exchange, suggesting alternative interpretive approaches to ideas of luxury, consumption, gender, taste, and aesthetic nationalism. “The pervasive cultural motifs reflected in morally fraught debates over standards of taste, changing patterns of consumption, and the social effects of luxury,” he argues, “coalesce in the period’s pronounced and deeply ambivalent fascination with that style in the decorative arts known as chinoiserie” (17). “It is well known that eighteenth-century consumers admired, collected, displayed, satirized, and roundly condemned Chinese wares,” Porter writes, and his “purpose here is to ask how these seemingly trivial goods in turn acted upon the culture in which they were consumed.” Porter’s hypothesis is that “the thorough-going domestication of the alien Chinese aesthetic involved not merely a superficial shift in British taste or a passing fad, but rather a profound transformation of underlying constructs of gender, nation, and desire” (5).

*The Chinese Taste* follows Porter’s earlier study of China’s intellectual influence on Europe in *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (2002). From the first successful Jesuit missions in the sixteenth century to Britain’s failed trade embassy in 1816, Porter attempts to show how Europe was “transformed
through its contact with the world beyond its borders, not only through the direct channel of assimilated influences but also in the less obvious sense that an active engagement with the cipher of the foreign itself constitutes an act of cultural formation.” Less concerned with cataloguing images than previous scholars, he traces the origins and development of hermeneutic strategies that inform recurrent patterns in European imaginings of China through four spheres of encounter: linguistic, theological, aesthetic, and economic. He examines the “visible gestures of imitation and appropriation” that afford insight into the interpretive processes “by which those responding to the unfamiliar and often enigmatic artifacts of Chinese culture coaxed them into familiar forms of meaning, thereby engaging them in the emergent discourses of European modernity.” He selects this particular period because it falls after the fabulous medieval tradition of romance travel writing but before China’s colonial encounter with the West beginning with the First Opium War. During this period, he argues, the West’s interest in a provocative and perplexing Chinese culture swelled but its attempts to influence China “typically ended in frustration and failure” (2-3).

In 2011 Chi-ming Yang published *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth Century England, 1660-1760*. “To early modern Europe,” Yang writes, “China emerged as an exemplary and controversial model of empire, by turns enlightened and despotic” (1). Chinese society gave the impression of good governance and refined manners, arts, and sciences, even as its people appeared vain, superstitious, and deceitful. China carried an ambivalence that “test[ed] the changing boundaries between virtue and vice,” which Yang contends, somewhat simplistically,
was being reconceptualised for a new era of overseas commerce and the “fundamental contradictions of British consumer society.” China, denoting both an empire and imported porcelain, became during this “era of moral uncertainty” a “moral example in commodified form” (9). It was conveyed for “Western consumption” by spectacle “performed” in literature, theatre, and material culture (3). Such spectacle, Yang argues, had “radical consequences for English traditions of honor, patriotism, piety, sentimentality, and temperance” (1).

Yang takes her cue from Robert Batchelor’s “Concealing the Bounds: Imagining the British Nation through China,” which argues that “the encounter between Europe and China in the seventeenth century had a profound impact on how national communities such as ‘Britain’ were imagined in the eighteenth century” (79-80). She extrapolates from recent scholarship in global economic history, post-colonial criticism, and the present-day trajectory of China’s reintegration with the world assumptions about China’s influence on Britain that tend toward the kind of sweeping generalizations that Spence eschews as untenable. One wonders if China did in fact have such a profoundly transformative influence on Britain during the period, bringing about radical changes to nearly all spheres of British life, which until Yang and other recent studies have gone unnoticed or underappreciated. Or, does the period’s literature simply present and use ideas of China (among other entities) to reflect transformations already taking place in Britain, independent of any causal relationship?

Many British writers at mid-century refer to China in discourse and debate on
political economy, religion, philosophy, and national identity, but they do so most often, it seems, to lend fresh colour to concepts already familiar to Europe in one form or another. China’s relative obscurity and ambiguity as an idea during the period appears to open up new imaginary spaces for the reassertion of old ideas, many familiar since Greek and Roman antiquity, which were becoming petrified under the weight of common usage or made to seem pedantic and irrelevant. As Batchelor suggests, Britons’ “turn to China could be read as a trope of distance, implying an ironic relationship to humanistic universalism as remote and absent from the British polity.” In other words, China serves “as an allegory of the spatial distance that provides critical perspective, paralleling the temporal distance of references to Greek, Roman and Persian antiquity” (82). Any attempt to gauge China’s influence on Britain’s traditions and values must of course acknowledge that very few Britons seriously put forward China’s laws, institutions, or customs for emulation in any systematic fashion. Nor would it, as Batchelor observes, “make any sense to contend that ‘Chinese culture’ as an entity encountered ‘British culture’ as an entity and produced some kind of Anglo-Chinese transcultural fusion” (83).

The contemplation of China obviously left its mark on the day’s cultural productions. Confucianism and the Chinese aesthetic in landscape gardening and architecture offered a fresh iconography for existing questions of political merit, the nature and function of monarchy, national identity, patriotism, class division, and global commercial expansion. Batchelor notes that in the 1720s and 30s, “among members of the opposition press, references to China were a popular means of justifying their productions and opposing the corrupt patronage of Walpole,” for a
legitimizing “Chinese-style merit provided an attractive model and conveniently exotic allegorical space” (83-84). Material imports from China nourished Britain’s growing “commodity culture,” as Yang indicates, feeding fantasies of a nascent British Empire and creeping into contemporary discussion on virtue. Some economic historians now submit that China dominated the early modern global economy, but it is important to keep in mind that Britons saw themselves differently. They considered their nation an emergent trading power lifted up from virtual obscurity only two centuries earlier by technological, institutional, and financial innovations which allowed them to strike out to distant markets in America and the East. They regarded China’s complacent insularity as a stumbling-block to a new global equilibrium of exchange. Britain’s China trade, while growing rapidly in volume, promising fresh markets for British manufactured goods, was by no means the predominant force of the British economy. Trade with Europe and the American colonies still far surpassed all trade with the East.

“China” in the period’s literature is, as Yang acknowledges, best described as an idea. Its ideological import, however, is not entirely new; in large part it runs parallel to, or converges with European thought. It often gives only a new face to old ideas the West had formulated independently or that had arrived in Europe long before. The history of Western thought, from the pre-Socratics forward, had already established the conceptual elements some mistakenly think were imported from China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. China in fact had a slighter transformative influence on Britain’s moral and political economies than some would suggest. Even Voltaire, who invokes China’s achievements with greater enthusiasm
than many of his contemporaries, does so to validate or exemplify his own world view. His “China” is fabricated partly to conform to his own theories, which are woven together from the strands of a rich Western philosophical tradition. *L’Orphelin de la China* (1755), for example, alters the temporal setting of a Chinese play translated by the Jesuits, relocating it to the period of the Mongols’ conquest of China to better illustrate his confidence in the civilizing process over Rousseau’s belief in the normative good of the uncorrupted morals supposedly residing in “Natural Man.” Arthur Murphy also rewrote the play, using it to express English patriotism and to amplify the supposed merits of a benevolent and enlightened constitutional monarchy.

China appears to have had a more tangible ideological influence on Britain in the nineteenth century, when the Chinese imperial examination system inspired reforms to the civil service in British India and later in the United Kingdom, which included the introduction of competitive testing to select civil servants. The concept of a meritocracy, however, was nothing new to the Western world of ideas. European philosophers had contemplated and debated ways to encourage the spirit of public service and to promote moral and intellectual merit at least since Plato, who advocates a state-sponsored educational meritocracy. When Ricci in the sixteenth

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2 For a history of China’s civil service examinations, see Frank, *Chinese Examination System*. Thomas Taylor Meadows, interpreter to the British consulate at Canton, successfully argued a case for reforming the British civil service in *Desultory Notes on the Government and People of China* (1847), in which he states that “the long duration of the Chinese empire is solely and altogether owing to [the principle] that good government consists in the advancement of men of talent and merit only, to the rank and power conferred by official posts” (124). The British adopted a meritocratic civil service system following the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1853.
century sent back accounts of China’s meritocracy, which attracted the admiration of French philosophers in the seventeenth century and stirred debate in eighteenth-century Britain, he only reinvigorated a familiar ideal. In the eighteenth century some Britons wondered if China’s Confucian bureaucracy exemplified a regime of Platonic philosopher kings, while others considered it flawed because it calls for slavish adherence to inflexible rules. That British writers around mid-century are able to invoke and manipulate ideas of China to express or interrogate British concerns is what forms the premise of this thesis.

Material imports and an active engagement with the “cipher” of Chinese foreignness no doubt helped in some measure to shape the ways in which British society understood itself. There is more at play in the encounter, however, than simply the dynamics of a Freudian or Kleinian ego-object psychology, an introjective and projective orientating process of coming to know the self through knowledge of otherness. As the century progressed, the global exchange of ideas would contribute to the breakdown of barriers between cultures, religions, genders, and geographies. During this highly self-conscious and self-reflexive period, however, when the currents of Enlightenment ran high, Britons already possessed a strong sense of how their cultural and national identities were changing, independent of any exchange of ideas or contact with China. China represented one of several entities about which various ideas from the crucible of contemporary Enlightenment concerns and debates coalesced, rather than one from which new ideas originated. It thus found a more conscious place in British literature between 1757 and 1785 than many studies, especially those informed by postcolonial theory, acknowledge. In the texts that
make up this study, the idea of China functions as a vehicle for the expression and interchange of ideas familiar to the Enlightenment project, deliberately transformed by their authors into metaphors for their own social, political, and theological concerns.

There appears to be ample room for a project of this nature. Previous studies have many virtues but leave many gaps worth exploring, particularly during this important transitional period in the nation’s history. What historians once generally referred to as Britain’s “first” empire, an overseas mercantile-colonial enterprise ostensibly built on free trade and liberty, found its limits during the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolutionary War. An emergent British nationalism struggled to reconcile itself with the role of monarchy and its own provinciality and social divisions; to its Celtic peripheries and sense of place within a wider world brought into view by the scale of its overseas possessions; and to its changing attitudes towards empire. Advances in technology and the rise of commercialism laid the ground for the first industrial revolution, while the Augustan age of Pope, Dryden, Swift, and Addison ran its course and sought new direction in realist and romantic sensibilities.

This study is not, therefore, simply a narrative of British representations of China. It does not approach China as a passive image flashing across the page or a conception of otherness in which power acting through knowledge is used to subordinate the foreign in the sense that Said or Foucault would argue. Nor does it take China to represent a source of new intellectual models for Britain, or a neglected
catalyst in the making of British modernity, for China’s philosophical heritage had a smaller impact on British thought during this period than it did in helping to develop the ideas of continental writers like Leibniz and the French deists. Confucian precepts were incorporated into works of moral education and satire, and while coincidences of intellectual and material achievement could be (and often were) drawn out, they served largely to reinvigorate homespun ideas or ideas that had long since arrived on British shores from Egypt, Greece, Rome, and northern Europe. China represents a colourful imaginative space in which competing Western philosophies, theologies, and aesthetic values jostle for position or search for support and validation. Confucianism, with its emphasis on harmonizing individual happiness with the state and its insistence on a meritocratic civil service, practiced since the Qin and Han dynasties (221-207 BC), provides a useful ally in revisiting questions that had preoccupied Western thought and discourse since antiquity.

The thesis of this study is that the idea of China helps to give expression to the political, philosophical, and cultural characteristics that Britons at mid-century felt set them apart from continental Europe, especially France, within well-established debates concerning Britain’s changing relationship to Europe and the nature of its national Union after 1707. The period presents a contemporaneous set of English, Irish, and Scottish authors who each enlists ideas of China to probe the basis of an evolving and oftentimes uneasy nationalism, or to endorse or render problematic its distinguishing qualities. Drawing loosely on various critical methodologies, this study attempts to pay close attention to each work’s historical, intellectual, and biographical context as it examines how the idea of China functions to help express
domestic social, political, and religious concerns. It aims to elucidate aspects of these texts linked with the idea of China which have been neglected by previous studies that move thinly across several hundred years in surveying representations of China in English literature and what these reveal about understandings or encounters across cultures.

This study covers only a quarter century when Britain still had very little contact and direct cultural exchange with China, and when new information was slow to travel across the seas. It seems desirable, therefore, to begin with a chapter surveying earlier European writings concerned with China’s geographical, historical, and social composition, as well as those writings that seek to interpret China’s cultural and intellectual traditions. These are important to take into consideration because they provide a useful and perhaps necessary background and setting. They shape and colour British ideas about China at mid-century, for many were being rediscovered, consulted, translated, and recycled throughout the period.

The second chapter will examine Arthur Murphy’s play *The Orphan of China*, an adaptation of the first genuine Chinese drama to appear in a European language. Jean-Baptiste du Halde published a French translation by the Jesuit Joseph Henri Prémare in 1735, and Voltaire reworked it for the French stage in 1755. Murphy wrote his own adaptation in 1756, retaining the original and, to his mind, more Shakespearean theme of revenge, discarding Voltaire’s introduction of a romance and happy ending. Murphy’s tragedy carries its London audience away from “Th’exhausted store” of French neoclassical drama to “China’s eastern realms: and
boldly bears/ Confucius’ morals to Britannia’s ears.” Its subject, the zealous loyalty of an old mandarin willing to sacrifice his only child to preserve the monarch’s orphaned heir, is moulded by an English sensibility into a warning against French absolutism. Staged at the outset of hostilities in the Seven Years’ War, the play panders to British patriotism. Murphy extols his “English” adaptation over Voltaire’s, invoking Confucian urbanity, deference, and moral probity to endorse an enlightened constitutional monarchy exemplifying unity and a paternalistic concern for the common good.

The third chapter will explore Thomas Percy’s editorial treatment of the first Chinese novel in English translation. Percy, a newly ordained curate in the Church of England and a scholar engaged in the emergent historical and textual study of earlier English literature, published Hau Kiou Choaan, or The Pleasing History in 1761, believing “it would be no unacceptable present to the curious” to give an authentic “specimen” of Chinese literature. The novel was translated by the late James Wilkinson while serving the East India Company at Canton. Percy, who had no prior interest in China, saw an opportunity to capitalize on its commercial and intellectual appeal. His editorial treatment, including footnotes, a preface, and supplementary material, attempts first to illuminate the narrative’s cultural obscurities. Secondly, it tries to establish a theologically protective frame through which a British reader might “safely” encounter Chinese moral thought free from Jesuitical interpretation.

The next chapter will explore Oliver Goldsmith’s Chinese Letters. From
January 1760 to August 1761, Oliver Goldsmith contributed a series of 119 epistolary essays to John Newbery’s newly inaugurated *Public Ledger*, which in 1762 he reissued together in two volumes as *The Citizen of the World*. The letters purport to be the correspondence of Lien Chi Altangi, a Chinese mandarin visiting London for the first time, whose reports home to China playfully subject the follies and foibles of British society and culture to the critical evaluation of a Confucian moral and philosophical outlook honed by worldly travel. As a vehicle for satire, the pseudo-Chinese letter genre, already well established on the Continent, was functional and inviting, for, as Goldsmith noted, “that satire which in the mouth of an Asiatic is poignant, would lose all force coming from an European.” While some Britons saw China merely as the distant site of savage wars, cruelty, and licentiousness, others were intrigued by its philosophical urbanity, moral order, and meritocracy of scholar-officials. Goldsmith uses the idea of an enlightened China to satirize haughty London-centric attitudes to the wider world, especially those based on immoderate rationalist pretensions. The difficulties he experienced in creating a believable Chinese persona, however, occasion a running commentary on the psychology of cross-cultural understanding and self-awareness.

The next chapter turns to an actual travel narrative written by the Scotsman John Bell in *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Pekin* (1763). Bell, a medical doctor educated at Glasgow, went overland from St. Petersburg to Peking in 1719-22 as a physician in the suite of a Russian embassy from Peter the Great to the Chinese emperor K’ang Hsi. Bell’s earthy, well-tempered account of the Silk Road appeared at a time when Britain had come to fix its attention on sensational sea voyages of
discovery. It carries the reader across ancient caravan trails to a country known as Cathay before Jesuit missionaries discovered in the sixteenth century that Cathay and China were one and the same place. While British merchant adventurers, whom the Chinese considered uncivilized, remained confined to a cramped trading compound at Canton, Bell gains access to the gated splendours of the imperial palace at Peking, which for over a century had been refracted mainly through Jesuit reports. In Peking he witnesses the honours lavished upon a Russian ambassador, a reception that still evaded the British after six decades of desultory efforts to open up trade and establish diplomatic relations, and one that Lord Macartney could only hope for during his embassy to Peking (1792-94).

Bell’s account is as much a temporal journey back in time as it is a geographical movement eastward, resurrecting an erstwhile dream of discovering in China a golden age of prosperity and abundance, a source of inexhaustible wealth and mutually beneficial trade. It is also a journey across European religious divides in so far as its treatment of the Eastern spiritual landscape touches upon heated theological debate in Europe concerning China’s place in biblical historiography and the controversial proselytising methods that were widening the gulf between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Bell’s account participates in a gradual remapping of British ideas about China. By establishing a certain way of seeing China, predicated on empirical observation and the vantage point of a Roman Catholic Scotsman travelling through neighbouring Russia, Siberia, and Mongolia, Bell reasserts something of the Jesuitical view of China that had been discounted by the
satirical Protestant wit of writers like Defoe or by flights of fancy inspired by a
growing body of pseudo-Oriental tales. The result is a vibrant account illustrating
Britain’s smallness compared to the Russian and Chinese empires. It reads in some
respects like a reproach to Britain’s inability to improve commercial and cultural
exchange with China rather than a criticism of China’s unwillingness to settle a
mutually beneficial trade accommodation with Britain.

The sixth chapter moves on to an imaginative work which is undoubtedly the
most peculiar of the period to use the idea of China as a vehicle for British political,
thological, and philosophical thought. The Bonze, a pseudo-Chinese translation
published 1769, has two British merchants in China debating the doctrine of the
transmigration of souls. They seek spiritual enlightenment from a hermit named
Confuciango. Claiming to be writing for a young readership, its anonymous author
relates Confuciango’s life story, allusively endorsing a strong, benevolent monarchy
under George III. Drawing heavily on the Bible and Milton’s Paradise Lost, the
frame tale equates Chinese belief in the emperor’s mandate from heaven with the
Judaeo-Christian conception of God as a paternal deity. The equation opens up fresh
possibilities for indulging a familiar but threadbare theme. The fall of the Ming
dynasty parallels the great moral lapses of Adam and Eve. The novel’s factious rebel
Ligh, like Lucifer, embodies the pride and envy imperilling a divine hierarchy that
ought to inform worldly politics. Destructive Tartar incursions into China
correspond to Jacobite uprisings in Britain, while Peking bears witness to the luxury,
effeminacy, and sectarianism thought to perennially corrupt civilization.
Confuciango tells how he came to reject Roman Catholicism and attain the eminence of a Protestant hermit. The transmigrations endured by his princely friend’s soul form the basis of a series of moral allegories illustrating principles of good government.

British writers of the period also looked to ideas about China to express their changing sense of individual and collective identity attendant on their nation’s global expansion. Linda Colley argues that Britons in the first half of the century seldom contemplated the world with any unified sense of manifest destiny or expectation of imperial dominance. Before 1750, the nation was relatively weak in comparison to the Ottoman, Mughal, and Chinese empires, whose rulers regarded Europeans with disdain or indifference. After the Seven Years’ War, however, Britons became increasingly conscious of their global enterprise and the weakening of the Ottoman and Mughal empires. Britain’s geographic and demographic characteristics, once a source of insecurity, began to foster a countervailing strength and internal cohesion as well as a more brawny sense of national identity. During the period under study, Britain emerged as the world’s dominant imperial power, surpassing the earlier mercantile achievements of Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands. She consolidated her overseas territorial dominions and expanded her global trade with greater rapidity and compass than ever before. Captain Cook’s voyages to the Pacific (1768-75) brought more of the world within range of the British imagination and staked an imperial claim for what would become Australia and New Zealand.

These successes stimulated a feeling of Augustan mastery over the globe and
confidence in the Enlightenment ideals thought to have made them possible. Many Britons believed their nation would usher in a new era of global socioeconomic progress. Accumulated grievances in the American colonies over trade, taxation, and representation came to a head in 1773, however, when Britain sought to impose new taxes to defray the costs of war. The American Revolutionary War brought Britain’s “first” empire to a close and shifted the trajectory of its global enterprise towards the commercial potential of India and the Far East. British corruption and atrocities in India, however, soon excited anxieties about an enterprise which many at home still believed was based on free trade and liberty. An uneasy adjustment began to take place in the nation’s psyche to which China seemed relevant and symbolically apt.

Even though China’s longstanding imperial structure was succumbing to internal pressures and entering into decline, the Middle Kingdom still gave the impression of unity and homogeneity to the Western world. Robert Clive’s decisive defeat over the French at Plassey in 1757 brought all of northeast India under the East India Company’s control, promising access to China’s northern interior through Tibet, where it hoped to find a vast export market for Britain’s growing heavy woollen industry. The Company’s China trade was already generating substantial revenues for the exchequer. The Chinese imperial court, however, stirred by British trading incursions and expansionary ambitions, that year restricted all future commerce with European nations (except Russia) to Canton. China remained largely inaccessible to the British. It represented to the British imagination a foreign recalcitrance running against the grain of its own sense of ascendancy. Its policy of
disdainful exclusiveness aroused both indignation and curiosity, finding spirited expression in public discussion of Britain’s character and place in the world.

As the loss of the American colonies and the Indian crisis of the early 1780s shook Britain’s imperial confidence, the idea of China found employment in critiquing a mercantile-colonial enterprise whose failures were coming to be regarded as a threat to genteel values and traditional landed interests. Within this context, the final chapter will consider Horace Walpole’s fanciful fairy tale “Mi Li.” The tale satirizes the supposedly enlightened conviction that Britain’s new empire of science and commerce would prove different from Rome’s empire of the sword. Drawing inspiration from things Celtic and Gothic, and informed by the Chinese gardening aesthetic, it follows the journey of a passionate young Chinese prince who is led to Britain on a returning man-of-war by an Irish rogue employed in the Company’s service. Once in England, he takes “possession” of the daughter of a former American colonial governor. This chapter begins by demonstrating that the tale was written after the American colonies were lost. On this basis, it deciphers its “hieroglyphic” satire as an assault on amoral profiteering in the colonies, which Walpole thought was destabilizing traditional values and landed interests in England, thereby calling into question expectations about the changing nature of overseas imperial dominion.

The chapters that make up this study aim to demonstrate that between 1757 and 1785, when Britain still had little contact and direct cultural exchange with China, China remained an idea sufficiently malleable to knead into domestic satire and
political discourse, giving fresh expression to social criticisms, philosophical aspirations, and religious tensions. They attempt to trace the ways in which ideas about China gained currency in the dialectical interplay between literary appeals to antiquity and the pursuit of modernity. Each of the primary English, Irish, and Scottish authors examined figures China into writings as generically varied as drama, translation, travel writing, pseudo-Oriental letters, novels, and fairy tales. Each uses the idea of China to express or define a British identity as culturally and politically distinct from Europe, especially France, and to contemplate its place within a broadening world view.
Chapter 1

China in the European Imagination to 1757

British interest in China, a country for centuries shrouded in legend and myth, quickened during the eighteenth century, stimulated by the vogue for Chinese-styled decorative arts and growing trade ambitions in the Far East. Having still very little contact with China, however, Britons had to rely largely on continental literature for information. The idea of China was not new to Europeans. It had entered the European world view long before the great voyages of discovery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since the Middle Ages, European travellers had intermittently returned from China with accounts so vibrant that they spread throughout Europe and endured despite their sometimes questionable veracity. Centuries of fitful Sino-European contacts produced scores of books, written in Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, German, and English, which describe and interpret China’s geography, social structure, history, and cultural traditions.

Before turning to the idea of China in British literature between 1757 and 1785, it is desirable to survey earlier European and British writings on China because these provide a background and setting. They shaped and coloured assumptions about China in the period under study. Many were being rediscovered, translated into English, consulted, and recycled in Britain throughout the period. Britons
writing on China at mid-century, for example, routinely consulted the two monumental compendia prepared a generation earlier by the Jesuits Le Comte and Du Halde. These drew considerably on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century first-hand accounts, presenting a Jesuitical vision of China with which Britons would have to negotiate if they wanted to enlist Confucian precepts of social and political order to defend their own values or endorse a constitutional monarchy. This chapter therefore sketches China’s presence in European literature from the Middle Ages to the mid-eighteenth century, demonstrating how Western ideas of China were shaped to some extent by European preoccupations. In doing so, it identifies some of the thematic strands from which ideas of China in eighteenth-century Britain were knit together.

**Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages**

To medieval Europeans, China lay over the eastern horizon at the extremity of unfamiliar regions known collectively as the Orient. By the thirteenth century, when Chaucer’s Monk mentions the “many regnes grete/ In the Orient, with many a fair cite” (CT 3503-4), Europeans possessed only a loose and undifferentiated understanding of geography beyond the Near East. To them, the Orient was southwestern Asia, Asia at large, North Africa, or more generally anywhere east of southern Europe and the Mediterranean. Supposedly a primordial expanse at world’s end, inhabited by strange races and outlandish beasts, it was often identified with localities in biblical and apocalyptic literature, such as the terrestrial paradise of Eden or the land beyond the tower of Babel ruled by Gog and Magog under the dominion
of Satan. Actual knowledge, however, remained limited primarily to scant information handed down from late antiquity, before land communications between the Far East and Western Europe were severed by the expansion of Islam.

Herodotus in the fifth century BC brought back from southern Russia tales of the Hyperboreans, a mythical people possibly related to the “Seres” (Schoff 224-39). As eighteenth-century historiographers assiduously traced out, Serica (“the land of the Seres”) is one of the earliest names by which China was known in Greek and Roman antiquity.\(^3\) A passage ascribed to the Greek historian Ctesias in the fifth century BC mentions their great stature and longevity (Yule 1: xxxix). Strabo later makes similar claims in the first century AD (7: 61-63), and Pomponius Mela notes the integrity of these “silk people” (36). Serica may have derived from the Chinese word for silk (絲 or 丝 sī). Chinese silk came to the Roman Empire in great quantities, at first across a network of caravan trails over Central Asia linking China with Mesopotamia, known today as the Silk Road.\(^4\) It was conveyed by Parthian, Greek, Syrian, and Arab merchants. Although the Romans sought to open up direct land and sea routes, the Parthians succeeded in protecting their intermediary position well into the period of the Byzantine Empire. The Romans in consequence had to rely on vague second-hand information about China. Virgil, for example, unfamiliar with the silkworm, supposes that silk grows on trees (Georgics 144-45). Pliny the

\(^3\) See Turner, for instance, who describes Serica as “now Cattai or Northern China” (38).

\(^4\) The Romans under Tiberius Caesar Augustus estimated that they purchased an astonishing 550,000 sesterces of silk annually (Harrison 166).
Elder describes Serica as a savage nation at the edge of the world, beyond Scythia, over a mountain range called Tabis. “The Seres,” he writes, “though mild in character, yet resemble wild animals, in that they also shun the company of the remainder of mankind, and wait for trade to come to them” (Natural History 2: 378-79). China’s self-imposed isolation would become a recurrent theme in European literature, intriguing historiographers and moral philosophers alike, who speculated that the Chinese may have, in consequence, retained ancient wisdom lost to the Western world. To British merchants in the eighteenth century, however, China’s insularity seemed a by-product of stagnation, heightening the sense of their own technological and maritime achievements.

After a time, the Romans came to regard imported silk as symptomatic of the ills debasing their empire. Silk was a luxury in the Augustan Rome, worn by women as well as men thought effeminate. In Herodian, for example, Antoninus is pictured unmanfully dressed in pure silk: “only seric [Chinese] silk was good enough for him” (40-41n). The drain of bullion caused by silk imports, together with the fabric’s immodest filminess, provoked the Senate during the reign of Tiberius to make failed attempts to ban silk clothing. Eighteenth-century Britons would experience similar misgivings about imported Chinese luxury goods, which depleted bullion reserves and appeared to encourage an effeminacy that corroded the national fabric and weakened Britain in the eyes of foreigners. Such goods became the subject of
parliamentary debates, and many writers assailed their pernicious influence, including Daniel Defoe in *An Humble Proposal to the People of England*.5

By late antiquity China had come to be known in Europe by other names, such as *Thin*, *Sin*, *Sina*, and *Sinae*. These may have derived from the Ch’in (or Ts’in) dynasty which united China in the third century BC. They were the names by which China was known in India, Persia, and other Asiatic nations trading into south China via the sea route from India. They likely passed through India and Asia Minor, and from there into Greece and Rome, although *China* would not appear in English until the sixteenth century, when Richard Eden used it in his translation of *The Decades of the Newe Worlde*: “the greate kynge of China” who is “thought to bee the greatest prince in the worlde” (“China” *OED*). The last author of antiquity to describe China in any detail was Theophylactos of Simocatta, a Byzantine historian of the seventh century, who gives a second-hand description of a country named *Taugast* which is divided by a great river (presumably the Yangtze) and ruled by a temperate and wise king known as the son of God (Yule 1: 1). Historians believe that this was China, although Theophylactos probably did not know it (Franke 2-3).

Despite Europe’s sizable imports of textiles, gems, pearls, and spices from the Far East, commerce remained indirect throughout antiquity. Near the period’s close, Europe’s Eastern trade divided into two spheres. One, as Leonardo Olschki notes, was increasingly “dominated by a Mohammedan monopoly of commerce, extending

5 For a discussion of Defoe’s criticism of China’s influence on Britain, see Starr, “Defoe and China.”
from Alexandria in Egypt to the China Sea, from the banks of the Volga to the northern boundaries of India; the other, Mediterranean and Christian, increasingly activated by the competition in arms and commerce that existed between the Italian maritime republics” (42). Continued trade with China into the early Middle Ages, more fractured than before, did not bring about cultural exchange. Western Europe became increasingly indifferent to the lands beyond its reach and the edge of Asia won back to Christianity during the Crusades.

By the thirteenth century, China became known in Europe as Cathay. The name was introduced by Persian and Arab merchants who carried out a lively trade with the Mongol Empire in northern China, or else by Franciscan friars who undertook embassies to Karakorum, the Mongols’ ancient capital, in 1246 (John of Plano Carpini) and 1254 (William of Rubruck). The name Cathay derives from Khitan (契丹 Qidān), the Chinese name for a non-Chinese ethnic league of semi-nomadic Manchu tribes inhabiting northeastern Mongolia (Franke and Twitchett 21). In the tenth century the Khitan took northern China and laid claim to the Chinese throne after the T’ang dynasty (唐朝 618-907) was deposed. Assuming the Chinese dynastic name Liao in 937, they consolidated and ruled over large tracts of northern China for nearly two centuries and made peace with the southern Chinese Sung, who agreed to pay them annual tribute. Although the Khitan tried to preserve their language (related to Mongolian) and traditional social order, they gradually assimilated to Chinese culture.
In 1125 a more hearty and militant semi-nomadic tribe from Manchuria, the Jurchen, overthrew the Liao Khitans. A portion of the Khitan nobility moved westward and settled in Turkestan, where some converted to Nestorian Christianity. Their victory over the Seljuk Turks gave rise to a curious legend that would preoccupy the European imagination for centuries. It concerned a potential ally against the Turks named Prester John, a Christian sovereign who ruled the Three Indies (India, Central Asia, and Ethiopia) and supposedly descended from one of the three Magi described in the Bible (Matt. 2.1). Some believed his elusive kingdom, filled with mythical creatures and endowed with idyllic tranquillity, centred in Ethiopia and extended over vast fertile areas containing the burial place of St. Thomas, the ruins of Babylon, the Tower of Babel, and the Fountain of Youth. In 1605 Fernão Guerreiro, a Portuguese Jesuit, conjectured that Prester John was actually the emperor of China (127). Shakespeare refers to Prester John in *Much Ado about Nothing* (2.1.266-71); Milton, drawing on Samuel Purchas for geographical knowledge, associates his kingdom with the earthly paradise in Book XI of *Paradise Lost* (381-420). The myth encouraged European exploration in Central Asia, the Far East, and Africa (Brooks). Although sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers dispelled the notion that Prester John’s kingdom existed in Ethiopia, speculation that it was actually in China continued well into the eighteenth century.6

6 The *Annual Register* for 1780 suggests that Prester John was not the emperor of China but Tibet’s Dalai Lama, and that through metempsychosis he still lived (61-63).
The legend had a more lasting influence on Western literature. It was said that Prester John could see all his dominions through a magical mirror. Tales of this mirror helped to revive a typical optical conceit used by Augustinian, biblical, and Platonic writers, inspiring the medieval genre of *speculum* literature in the scholastic period, which surveys or “mirrors” whatever was thought important in history, alchemy, and morals.7 The genre remained popular from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, quickening demand for encyclopaedic knowledge contained in a single work and shaping the way Europeans learned and thought about China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It informs Jesuitical histories of China, for example, and its influence is seen reflected in the popularity of eighteenth-century translations of *Æsop’s* fable of the eagle and the tortoise (*Æsop Naturaliz’d* 77). Defoe satirizes it in *The Consolidator* (1704), a tale in which the narrator surveys China’s fabled towers and spires from the moon through a magical looking-glass, while Goldsmith’s *Chinese Letters* use “looking-glass of Lao” as a satirical metaphor (Letter XLVI). Today’s scholarly surveys owe much to the speculum tradition, including Spence’s panoramic study of China sightings. Prester John’s mirror encouraged a highly visual approach to understanding China as an exotic “other” place to be studied through the looking-glass, emphasizing its distance and vastness, which tends to blur its geographical, cultural, and religious distinctions from other Eastern countries.

7 For a treatment of this subject, see Franklin-Brown.
The western Khitan, who probably gave rise to the legend of Prester John, also gave the West a new name for China. As C. P. Fitzgerald explains, the Khitan “became known to the peoples of Western Asia and Eastern Europe as the Keraites, Kara-kitan, Kitay, and lastly, Cathayans, from which name that of Cathay for China, is derived” (390-91). The name Cathay was used in Persian and Turkish to designate China, and it has survived to the present day in various cognates in the Russian and Mongol languages. Since the Arabs who traded at Canton never used the name, European geographers before the seventeenth century, who relied on their knowledge, were confused by the existence of two countries: China and Cathay. Europe did not realize that they were one and the same place until the Spanish Augustinian missionary Martin de Rada reported it in 1575. Confirmation came in 1607, when the Jesuit Bento Goes reached Cathay by the overland route and informed Matteo Ricci, who had travelled to Peking by way of the sea route to Macao and Canton. Nevertheless the names Cathay and China were used more or less interchangeably on down through the eighteenth century, although closer to the nineteenth century Cathay is found increasingly only in poetic contexts. Thomas Warton, for example, notes the distinction in 1774: “the country constantly called in the dark ages Cathay […] proves to be the northern part of China” (1: 101 note c).

After overthrowing the Liao Khitan, the Jurchen established the Chin (金朝 Jin or “Golden”) dynasty (1115-1234). They came into conflict with the ethnic Chinese Sung, who ruled over cultivated regions south of the Great Wall, capturing their capital at Kaifeng, below the Yellow River, in 1127. They eventually gained
control of all northern China and pushed as far south as the Yangtze Valley, forcing the Sung capital to relocate to Hangchow. In 1147, however, they were driven south by rival nomads from the north: the Mongols. By 1206 an enterprising military leader named Temujin had drawn together a confederacy of Mongol-Turkic tribes and established the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). The tribes elected Temujin as their universal ruler or “Grand Khan,” and he took a dynastic title that would live on in infamy: Genghis Khan. Genghis began his first full assault on China in 1210, utilizing terror, extreme brutality, and wholesale massacre. Within five years he forced the Jurchen Chin to abandon their capital at Khanbaliq (modern Peking) and withdraw to their southern capital at Kaifeng.

Genghis fell ill and died in 1227, before conquering all of China, and his expansive empire was divided up amongst his four sons. By 1234 his successor, Ogodei, brought all northern China under Mongol sway. Ogodei continued his father’s policy of cruelty and conquered Persia, Moscow, Kiev, Poland, and Bohemia. The Mongols, known to the Russians as the Golden Horde, carved out an empire extending at its zenith from the Adriatic Sea to China’s Pacific coast. As their generals were preparing to invade the Holy Roman Empire, having reached as far as Vienna after laying waste to Hungary, news of Ogodei’s death turned them back to their capital to elect a new Grand Khan, likely sparing Western Europe a similar fate.

It was during this period that the name Tartar, borne by one particularly vicious Mongol tribe, first gained currency in Europe. By association with the Latin
word *Tartarus*, the hell of classical mythology, it came to refer to all nomad tribes roving the Mongolian steppes and harassing China and Russia. To European Christians of the thirteenth century, the Tartars, descending suddenly upon Russia and speaking what sounded like an inhuman language, were believed to be the scourge of God sweeping across a sinful earth. Stories of the proverbial Tartars endured for centuries, finding symbolic use in France and Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to illustrate the conflict between barbarity and civilization. The theme was popularized in London by a tragicomedy, written by Elkanah Settle and staged at Dorset Garden in May 1675, titled *The Conquest of China, by the Tartars*. John Dryden, writing to his sons in 1697, expresses his unfulfilled aspiration to rework an earlier adaptation by Sir Robert Howard (18 [1893]: 133-34).

In 1730 a French book was translated into English which presents a countervailing view: that the Tartars had distinguished themselves in learning as well as arms. Its English translator goes so far as to suggest that Europeans are descended from Tartars who arrived in northern Europe before the ancient Greeks and Romans: “Our contempt for the *Tartars* would still lessen perhaps, did we consider how nearly we stand related to them: that our Ancestors came originally from the North of Asia, and that our Customs, Laws, and way of Living were formerly the same with theirs: In Short, that we are no other than a Colony of *Tartars*” (Ebülgâzî Bahadir Han,

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8 See, for example, the English Benedictine monk and chronicler Matthew Paris (1 [1852]: 312).
General History 1: iii). The book had little influence, though. In 1748 Montesquieu expresses the more common and enduring belief that the Tartars “destroyed Asia from India even to the Mediterranean, and all the country which forms the east of Persia they have rendered a desert” (Spirit of the Laws 1: 338). Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and the primary authors examined in this study all invoke the Tartars to help illustrate or scrutinize the dichotomy between barbarity and civilization.

In 1245 Pope Innocent IV, alarmed by the Tartar threat to Western Europe, dispatched an envoy to their Grand Khan with a letter warning him to cease his attacks on Christian nations. The envoy was also instructed to establish contact with Prester John, a potential ally against the Muslims (De Rachewiltz 84-88). Chosen for this mission was the Italian Franciscan friar John of Plano Carpini, who reached the Mongolian capital after a difficult 3,000-mile journey, just as Guyuk was proclaimed Grand Khan following Ogodei’s death in 1241. He returned to Europe with a letter from Guyuk in Persian declaring that his extensive conquests testified to a mandate from heaven to which the Pope must submit. Plano Carpini’s account, surviving in several manuscripts, is considered the earliest first-hand account of contact between Western Christendom and the Far East (Christopher Dawson vii). It was known at first only through an abstract in Vincent of Beauvais’s Speculum Historiale, a popular encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages printed in 1473. Much later, however, Richard Hakluyt (1598) and Pierre Bergeron (1634) published portions in England, including Plano Carpini’s incidental report of the “men of Kytay” who, unlike Tartars, are “a very courteous and gentle people.” Reputedly, these unbaptized
“Pagans” possess “the Scriptures of the olde and newe Testament,” have churches and saints, and “adore and reverence CHRIST IESVS our Lorde.” Plano Carpini presumably misinterpreted China’s Confucian and Taoist traditions but nevertheless inspired a favourable view of China, describing its richness and the skill of its artificers (*Principal Navigations* 1: 53).

Seeing the Mongols as potential allies against the Islamic world, Louis IX of France sent two envoys to negotiate an alliance: the French Dominican friar Andrew of Longjumeau (1249), and the Flemish Franciscan monk William of Rubruck (1253-54). Rubruck wrote an account identifying Cathay with the country anciently occupied by the Seres (155). He describes China’s silk industry and paper money (201), as well as the skill of Chinese craftsmen and physicians (155). In one passage he mentions a man named Basil, the son of an Englishman born in Hungary, residing in Karakoram, possibly the first Englishman ever to have lived in Mongolia (211). Upon his return to Europe, Rubruck met Roger Bacon during a sojourn at Paris in 1257-67. Bacon incorporated much of his account into his *Opus Majus*. Another papal envoy was sent to the Mongols: the Italian Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone, who reached Canton by the sea route in 1323 and then travelled to Peking. His narrative, published after his return to Italy in 1330, became an important source for John Mandeville, but like Rubruck’s it received little attention in England until a translation appeared in Hakluyt’s collection in 1598.

It would be left to the son of a wealthy Venetian merchant, Marco Polo, to popularize Cathay in Europe, setting a pattern for writing about China in the West
that has endured even to the present day. In 1260 Marco’s father, Niccolò, and his uncle, Maffeo, went out to trade in Constantinople. A succession of commercial opportunities drew them eastward into Mongol territory. When their return home was cut off by war between two rival Mongol leaders, they joined a diplomatic mission to the Grand Khan, Kublai, Genghis’s grandson. Kublai later proclaimed his own dynasty in 1271, Ta Yuan (大元 “Great Origin”), and by 1279 he had conquered the Sung, thereby extending his empire into southern China. The Polos probably stayed at Kublai’s summer residence at Shangdu, which Samuel Taylor Coleridge memorialized as Xanadu in “Kubla Khan” (written in 1797 [or 1798] but not published until 1816). After a few months, the Polos embarked on their return journey with letters from Kublai to Pope Clement IV requesting one hundred learned men to teach the Mongols Christianity. They arrived at Venice in 1269 but were delayed in their mission by the Pope’s untimely death. When a new pope was elected in 1271 (a friend, as it happened, who assumed the regnal name Gregory X), they set out again for Mongolia, this time with young Marco, then 17 or 18 years old. Only two friars were available to return with them to Kublai, but they, fearing for their safety, soon abandoned the journey. From Acre, the Polos passed through what is now Turkey and Iran, reaching Hormuz on the Persian Gulf before crossing the Asian continent on the Silk Road.

Marco spent 16 or 17 years in Kublai’s dominions in northern and possibly also southern China. He became a favourite of the Mongol leader by virtue of his intelligence and the excellent reports he brought back from visits to remote corners of
the empire. Kublai had Marco tutored in the four principal languages of the Mongol government and appointed him to several positions in the Mongol administration, most notably an official of the city of Yangchow between 1282 and 1287. Perceiving the Khan’s advanced age and an impending regime change, the Polos departed from China around 1290. Travelling mainly by sea, they reached Venice in 1295, making a dramatic homecoming with a fortune in jewels sewn into the lining of their clothing.

Little more is known about Marco until 1298. While serving as captain of a Venetian galley during war with Genoa, he was captured in the Mediterranean and sent to a Genoese prison. There he met another prisoner from Pisa, a romance writer named Rustichello, who transcribed an account of his Eastern travels, probably in the popular Franco-Italian language, under the title *Divisament dou Monde* (“Description of the World”). Rustichello incorporated conventional romantic adornments and modelled central events after European literary paradigms, such as Marco’s arrival at Peking after Tristan’s arrival at King Arthur’s court at Camelot (Raymond Dawson 12). The book was an instant success and came to be known by the nickname Marco gained from his China fortune: *Il milione* (“The Million”). Giuseppe Marco Antonio Baretti notes in 1757 that the book “multiplied with great rapidity, though written in that uncouth dialect and manner, and quickly spread into all parts of Italy, and even of France and Germany” (vi-vii). Although circulating in England in various European languages before the Elizabethan period, it did not become available in English until John Frampton, a merchant engaged in the Seville-to-Bristol trade who
had been caught up in the Spanish inquisition, translated a Spanish edition into English in 1579 and published it in London to stimulate English efforts to find a sea route to China to rival Spain (Beecher 103-122).

Marco’s narrative probably drew as much from first-hand experience as it did from stories told by his father and uncle and other travellers. Animated by colourful emperors and courtesans, intrigue, sorcery, and war, it describes Cathay as culturally and technologically advanced, amenable to Christianity, and above all else fabulously rich in gems, silks, and spices. Adam Smith believed it captured something of China’s timeless essence: Polo, he writes, “who visited [China] more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry and populousness almost in the same terms in which they are described by travelers in the present times” (1: 87). Other writers were sceptical, however. Edward Gibbon, for example, refers to “the exaggerations of Marco-Polo” (History 4 [1783]: 369n39). Many point out that Polo neglects to mention China’s most striking features, noted by Odoric and others, including the Great Wall, tea, footbinding, printing, and writing. These omissions cast doubt on Polo’s veracity and led some to wonder if he had been in China at all. Modern scholarship has tried to reconcile these discrepancies and found some measure of truth.

Whether fact or fiction, however, Polo’s mixture of legend, geographical outline, and historical description captured the imagination of generations of Europeans after him and provided inspiration to many of the great voyages of discovery. A brother of Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), who organized
Portuguese voyages in the fifteenth century, for instance, owned a copy of Polo’s book, and Christopher Columbus is said to have carried his own annotated copy when he went in search of a western sea route to Cathay in 1492. Polo created an idea of China that emphasizes its material rather than cultural riches, exploitable by European nations in their competition with one another. The idea continued into eighteenth-century Britain. In 1769, for example, the Scottish geographer Alexander Dalrymple, who sought to lead an expedition to the South Pacific sponsored by the Royal Society in conjunction with the Admiralty (granted instead to Captain James Cook), invoked Polo’s achievements in *A Plan for Extending the Commerce of this Kingdom, and of the East-India-Company* (92). In 1771 John Brown, more concerned with religion than commerce, extolled the Polos for converting many Chinese to Christianity (*General History* 1: 297).

After Kublai died in 1294, internal dissension and a degenerate ruling class left the Mongols incapable of governing China. Worsening agrarian crises, famine, and oppression of the peasantry gave rise to widespread revolt. Having lost much of their former military prowess, the Mongols saw their empire collapse during the second half of the fourteenth century and they were forced to retreat into the northern desert. Tamerlane, the Mongol ruler of Samarkand (1369-1405), shattered and annexed what remained of the Mongol kingdoms in Central Asia and Persia, establishing a Muslim kingdom that lasted for generations. Europe’s eastern trade routes were disrupted and contact with China was all but lost until the mid-sixteenth century. Stories of Polo’s Cathay and its fabulous wealth, however, lived on, often
conflated with accounts of Asia Minor, Palestine, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Armenia, and India. Some writers compiled fresh descriptions, confusing or embellishing second-hand information from non-European travellers, while others simply fabricated marvellous accounts befitting Prester John and his terrestrial paradise.

The most celebrated fabrication to appear in England during the fourteenth century was purportedly written by Sir John Mandeville. Probably composed in French in 1357, it was translated into English in 1375 as *The Voiage and Trauaile of Syr Iohn Maundeville Knight*. The narrator claims to be a knight of St. Albans laid up at Liège by arthritic gout. He has decided to write about his worldly travels to Turkey, Tartary, Persia, Egypt, India, and China between 1322 and 1356. The book, now generally regarded as a compilation of accounts from other travellers, such as Rubruck and Plano Carpini, is interspersed with details gleaned from encyclopaedias. It was put together and embellished either by Mandeville himself or some other, unknown hand. Like Polo’s, it paints a fabulous picture of China which established “Mandeville’s” reputation as the greatest traveller of the Middle Ages. M.C. Seymour remarks: “there can scarcely have been anyone in the realm who had not heard of the wonderful adventures of the English knight, and most who had the means and opportunity would have read or heard his story” (175). While advances in knowledge during the ensuing age of exploration diminished Mandeville’s authority, they did little to weaken his popularity. His book’s popular appeal remained so strong into the eighteenth century that it was frequently ridiculed as an example of vulgar counter-Enlightenment tendencies. The Scottish historian William Robertson,
for example, writes in the 1770s: “the narrations of those early travellers abound with many wild incoherent tales, concerning giants, enchanter, and monsters: but they were not, from that circumstance, less acceptable to an ignorant age, which delighted in what was marvellous” (2: 34-35). In 1787 Horace Walpole remarks in a letter to Lady Craven: “incredulity went so far, that at last it was doubted whether China so much as existed; and our countryman Sir John Mandeville got an ill name, because, though he gave an account of it, he had not brought back its right name” (Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence [hereafter Correspondence] 42: 183).

The Age of Exploration

By the sixteenth century, Portugal and Spain dominated East Asian waters. Under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portuguese captains explored the African coastline for a sea route to China, but it was not until 1487 that Bartholomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, establishing an eastern sea route from the Atlantic to Asia. Spain set out for a western route to China, sponsoring Columbus’s voyage in 1492, which inadvertently landed in the New World. Reports of the discovery prompted Spain to solicit papal support for its claims to the Americas against Portuguese rivalry. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued a series of Bulls dividing the spheres of exploration and conquest between the two countries. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) fixed an imaginary boundary down the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, bisecting South America, giving Portugal exclusive rights to everything east, while everything to the west belonged to Spain. In the Pacific,
demarcation line ran immediately west of the Philippines. This allowed the Portuguese to control trade routes eastward to Asia and Africa, while Spain controlled westward routes to the Americas and onward to the Pacific and the Philippines. Richard Hakluyt argues in *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584) that the Pope had no lawful authority to set such boundaries, voicing a common English view that would remain coloured by Protestant-Catholic imperial rivalries for centuries (MacMillan 67-78).

In 1498 the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, accompanied by Dias, made an expedition round the Cape of Good Hope and on to India. Rafael Perestrello followed it in 1516 and continued on to China, where he turned a healthy profit demonstrating the value of trading with China during the Ming dynasty (大明 1368-1644). Three years later, the Portuguese governor of Goa sent Tomé Pires, a Portuguese apothecary, to the Ming court. Pires, the first non-papal European envoy to China after the Middle Ages, sailed to Canton and then, in 1520, travelled to Peking to await the Chinese emperor Ming Cheng Te who was away on an extended inspection of the provinces. The emperor returned ill and died shortly thereafter, prompting the Chinese to expel all foreigners (mostly merchants from Central Asia). Pires, however, remained in China and was imprisoned in consequence. He died in Canton in 1523, but not before writing *Suma Oriental*, the earliest and most complete first-hand description of China by a European after Marco Polo.

Soon after, the Chinese banned commerce with the Portuguese, who turned to the smuggling trade, together with Japanese pirates, along China’s southern coast.
Barred from Canton, many took up temporary residence at Macao, a narrow peninsula on the Pearl River estuary, which became a permanent trading base and the oldest European establishment in China. Although Portugal had an advantage by controlling Macao, its dominance of Asian sea lanes and share of trade with China and Japan declined under intense competition from Spain. Columbus’s discovery of America convinced the Spaniards they could reach the East by sailing westward. In 1519 Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer in the service of the Spanish king Charles V, embarked with five vessels from Spain to the East Indies via the western route. He arrived at South America, rounded the continent through the strait that now bears his name, and emerged on the other side to become the first European to navigate the Pacific. Magellan was killed by natives in the Philippines in 1521, but one of his ships sailed back to Spain by way of the Indian Ocean in 1522, thereby completing the first circumnavigation of the globe.

**China and the Jesuits**

By the early sixteenth century, China’s importance was firmly established in the European mind. When the Society of Jesus formed in 1534, Jesuit missionaries quickly set out to convert the Eastern world. At the instigation of Ignatius of Loyola and Pope John III, Francisco Xavier embarked from Lisbon in 1540 and travelled ten years on a missionary course from Mozambique to India, Malacca and Japan. From there he fixed his sights on China, the mightiest empire of the East. Although he never gained access to China’s mainland, dying in 1552 on the small island of
Shangchuan (“St John’s Island”) just off China’s coast, his dream of converting China inspired subsequent missionaries (Rowbotham 37-51). After him, Alessandro Valignano, an Italian Jesuit appointed visitor-general to the Indies in 1573, proposed a new approach commensurate with the methods advocated by Ignatius. He believed the Jesuits could succeed in China by learning Chinese and accommodating or adapting to Chinese culture. While laid over at Macao on his way to Japan in 1578, he contrived a strategy to propagate Christianity in China from the top down by reaching out first to China’s Confucian scholar-gentry.

The first Jesuit to make significant progress was Matteo Ricci, who gained access to the Chinese mainland and lived there for nearly 30 years. Ricci began in Canton and worked his way north to Peking by 1598. A man of inexhaustible patience and curiosity for things Chinese, he adopted the attire of the Chinese literati, became conversant in the Chinese Classics, wrote in Chinese, and displayed an openness to Chinese values and customs. His knowledge of Western astronomy, mathematics, geography, and other scientific achievements won the friendship of the more open-minded Chinese scholars and officials. He spent the last ten years of his life at Peking, translating Confucian texts into Latin for the first time. E.R. Hughes notes that Ricci “marks the beginning of the modern period when cultural influences as well as trade began to find their way” from China to the West (3).

Ricci’s portrait of China found a favourable reception in Europe. The Confucian discourses on human nature not only appeared compatible with Christian beliefs but also coincided with interest in natural religion. Ricci described China as a
benevolent despotism administered by learned men, which, as Raymond Dawson notes, appealed to European political and philosophical sentiment (“Western Conceptions” 9-10). His demonstrated mastery of mathematics and astronomy secured for him and his successors, such as Adam Schall von Bell, appointments to high imperial offices, most notably head of the Imperial Bureau of Astronomy, a post customarily held by Muslims since the days of the Mongol rulers. Nevertheless the Jesuits were to have a troubled history in China, glimpses of which can be seen in the texts that make up this study, including John Bell’s account of his sojourn in Peking. The Jesuits aroused curiosity in China but also, at times, fear and hostility, leading to their persecution. In Europe, their policy of cultural accommodation, especially their contention that Confucian ancestor worship was devoid of theological content, aroused fervent anti-Jesuit criticism and eventually threw the Roman Catholic Church into the Rites Controversy of the seventeenth century. Their privileged position at Peking, however, afforded them unique insight into Chinese culture, and their reports home stirred considerable interest, bringing Europe to a deeper understanding of the Celestial Empire.

**England’s Growing Interest in China**

While the Jesuits looked to China for religious converts, English merchant adventurers saw in China a vast market for woollen goods that could be traded for rich cargoes of silks and spices. The English tried to establish a sea route to Cathay as early as 1497, when John Cabot, an Italian mariner, sailed under English flag with
letters patent from Henry VII to find the Northwest Passage. They thought the Northwest Passage, if found, would allow direct trade with Cathay, and the adjacent cold lands would offer additional markets for their woollens. Cabot landed instead in North America, probably at Cape Breton, which he thought situated to the north of Cathay. In 1553 a trading enterprise, later known as the Muscovy Company, formed with Cabot’s son Sebastian as governor. It sent Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor in charge of an “expedition for the discoverie of Cathay,” but it reached Moscow instead by way of the White Sea. Between 1557 and 1560 another English voyager, Anthony Jenkinson, followed this route to the Caspian and Bukhara, thus reaching the ancient east-west trade routes by a new way. Soon, attempts to find the Northwest Passage were displaced by efforts to divert trade across the ancient Silk Road from traditional outlets on the Black Sea to new northern outlets on the White Sea. In 1574 William Bourne published A Regiment of the Sea, which proposes five possible routes to China: the Portuguese route round the Cape of Good Hope; the Magellan Straits route; the northwest route; the northeast and north of Russia route; and the northern route (presumably over the Pole). Drake circumnavigated the globe in 1577-80, and for more than a century afterwards other explorers, such as Gilbert and Frobisher, Davis, and Hudson, took up the quest for the Northwest Passage. After the Spanish Armada was defeated and the war with Spain ended, however, existing sea routes opened to the English and became more attractive in the face of mounting competition from Holland.

England’s fledgling commercial ambitions in the Far East during the late sixteenth century renewed interest in earlier Portuguese and Spanish accounts. One
became the first book on China published in English. It appeared in London in 1577 under the title *Certayne Reports of the Prouince China, Learned through the Portugalles there Imprisoned, and by Relation of Galeoto Pereira* (repr. in Boxer 3-43). Richard Eden translated it from the Italian edition printed at Venice in 1565, and Richard Willes arranged, augmented, and finished the English edition. It was reprinted in 1625 by Samuel Purchas, an English compiler of travel and discovery writings who inherited the manuscripts of Richard Hakluyt, in Part III of his well-received *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes.* Pereira had been taken captive by the Chinese in 1549 while engaged in the smuggling trade along the southern coast of Fukien and exiled to Guangxi. His account details China’s system of justice and harsh punishments, but it also gives a rather complimentary account of Chinese customs and manners. In 1625 Purchas reprinted another translation that captivated English readers: a small book originally printed at Evora (1569-70) by the Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz titled *Tractado em que se cõtam muito por estẽsó as cousas da China.* Da Cruz drew on Pereira’s narrative and his own observations in and around Canton during a visit in 1556 that probably lasted only a few months. His book is considered the first in Europe devoted entirely to China after Polo’s (Boxer lxiii). It laments China’s insularity, noting that all Chinese are prohibited from travelling abroad on pain of death, but generally lauds its refined culture and social order.

In 1577 Barnardine of Escalante published in Spanish a small compilation of Portuguese accounts. John Frampton printed a translation in London two years later to increase England’s knowledge of that “Famous Countrey China” and to fire the
English spirit of exploration and discovery (2). Like Da Cruz, Escalante presents China as unified and prosperous, subject to one king who appoints governors on merit of learning and preserves his dignity by seldom leaving his palace at Peking. The country is vast, climatically diverse, and well cultivated, abounding with rich deposits of base and precious metals. The Chinese are industrious, having many fine artisans and craftsmen and no beggars, for even the debilitated are found suitable work. A contemporaneous English readership would have been intrigued by the description of China’s communications system. An incalculable number of ships and boats navigate a complex network of rivers, canals, and sea coasts, moving goods quickly and efficiently from one place to another. Escalante notes that China has determined that foreign trade is disadvantageous to a country so rich in resources, and foreign traders are closely restricted. He writes: “in this point […] they had more wisdome then the Grekes, Carthaginenses, and Romaines, the which for to conquer other straunge Countreys farre off, went so farre from their owne, that they came to lose their owne Countreys at home” (46, 25). Opinions like this one eventually drew China into the debate on stagnation and progress in the eighteenth-century European historiography of man and empire. Johann Gottfried von Herder expresses the countervailing viewpoint in 1787: “the [Chinese] empire,” he writes, “is an embalmed mummy, wrapped in silk and painted with hieroglyphics: its internal circulation is like that of an animal’s in winter’s sleep” (296).

Escalante’s account is significant because it was given much wider currency in Europe by the Spanish padre Juan González de Mendoza. Mendoza never visited China, but when Philip II decided for religious and commercial reasons to dispatch
an embassy to the Chinese emperor Wan-li in 1580, he appointed Mendoza envoy. The embassy aborted in 1582 after reaching Mexico, where Mendoza had earlier served as a soldier. He remained there for a time, preaching and copying the papers of the Augustinian friar Martín de Rada, who had attempted in 1575 to establish a mission at Fukien. After discussing China with Martín’s companion, Jerónimo Marín, Mendoza returned to Spain and then Rome, where in 1585 he published his *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran Reyno de la China*. Largely rehashing Gaspar da Cruz, Barnardine of Escalanta, and Martín de Rada, *Historia* became immensely popular, appearing in thirty editions by the end of the century and remaining in print to 1656. Robert Parke translated it from Spanish into English in 1588 as *The Historie of the Great and Mightie Kingdome of China*. Boxer notes that “Francis Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh derived their notions of China and the Chinese primarily, if not exclusively, from this work” (xvii). G.F. Hudson sums up its importance: “its publication may be taken to mark the date from which an adequate knowledge of China and its institutions was available for the learned world of Europe” (qtd. in Boxer xvii).

**The Seventeenth Century**

Such accounts excited British merchants’ interest in China’s wealth (Morse 1: 6-8; Pritchard, *Anglo-Chinese Relations* 45). Elizabeth I dispatched John Newbery to the Chinese emperor in 1583 with a letter urging the mutual benefits of direct commerce, but the mission was aborted (Hakluyt 5: 451-52). A second English
attempt to establish trade relations was organized by Sir Robert Dudley. In 1596 he dispatched three ships to China under the command of Benjamin Wood, but they disappeared somewhere in the West Indian Ocean (Purchas 7: 218-19 and 2: 288-97; Hakluyt 11: 2). The British East India Company was formed by charter from Elizabeth I in 1600 and received a monopoly on the British trade in Asia, Africa, and America. A private company guided largely by commerce, it concentrated initially on modest trading in the Indonesian archipelago for aromatic spices. It later opened trade with Japan as a staging ground for an eventual entry into China. Although it had twelve Oriental “factories” (storehouse domiciles) by 1617, all were outside of China.

Henry Bornford is thought to have been the first Englishman to trade directly with China, which he accomplished in 1636 through Macao. His enterprise sanctioned by Charles I and Endymion Porter, was conducted by Captain John Weddell. Weddell asked Chinese officials at Canton for leave to trade after the Portuguese at Macao hindered his efforts. Receiving no reply, he began trading anyway, violating Chinese law and prompting an attack by Chinese fireboats. Enraged, he sailed his fleet up the Pearl River and briefly seized a small fort, burned several junks and raided some villages. Chinese authorities conceded to limited trading privileges contingent on his immediate departure. Weddell disposed of his cargo in Canton and loaded his ships with sugar and ginger. Although he perished on the return voyage, Peter Mundy, who sailed with him, recorded the events in a travel journal. Unlike many Europeans before him, Mundy gives an unsympathetic view of China imbued with contempt for the foreign. By 1675 the English had opened trade
at Amoy, where they established a factory in 1676, giving the Company its first real foothold on Chinese soil (Fu 1: 48-49). When the Portuguese monopoly at Canton ended in 1685, the Company secured the use of another factory, although it would not establish its own at Canton with a permanent staff until 1715, after its ships began sailing to China at regular intervals.

Mounting interest in China is reflected in British literature throughout the seventeenth century. Shakespeare uses “Cataian” (a person from Cathay) as a derisive term for a swindler or lying sharper on two occasions (Wiv. 2.1.136; TN 2.3.72). Samuel Purchas published the first part of Purchas his Pilgrimage in 1613, the first book to contain material about China written in English. Incidental references to China turn up in many places. Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) lauds China’s system for selecting civil servants based on examined merit (1: 92-93). China finds imaginative use in Francis Godwin’s fantastic tale The Man in the Moone (1628), whose hero returns to earth after two years on the moon only to find himself near the “mighty city of Pequin,” where local villagers, suspecting he is a spy or magician, take him to the imperial court for questioning.

In 1652 John Milton includes China in the geographical prospect that the archangel Michael lays before Adam: “from the destind walls/ Of Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can […] To Paquin of Sinaean kings” (PL 11.385-90). Allan Gilbert notes that Cathay and China (the Latinate “Sinae”), and Cambalu and Peking (“Paquian”), are paired in this passage to indicate the different names by which China was known, depending on whether approached overland or by sea, for doubts still lingered about
whether Cathay and China were one and the same. He also submits that Milton “may have known that China was Cathay and yet, to complete his roll of ‘cities of old and modern Fame,’ deliberately used the two names to aid in different ways in producing the total effect, for ‘Cambalu, seat of Cathaian Can,’ suggests military power, and ‘Paquin of Sinaean Kings,’ more peaceful splendor” (199-200). Milton later published more on China in *A Brief History of Moscovia* (1682). Before that, another book appeared in London, translated from Italian, titled *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (1655). Nine years later, John Evelyn, who was appointed to the council of the Royal Society in 1662 and later served on a council for colonial affairs (1671-74), attested to the prevailing interest in Chinese curios. According to a diary entry dated 22 June 1664, he had encountered a Jesuit who had shown him a collection of rarities from Japan and China, which included richly embroidered cloth, rubies, fans printed with Chinese characters, rice paper, landscape prints, and a Chinese-Spanish dictionary (460-61).

Europeans around this time began to take a greater interest in trying to place China’s antiquity within sacred history. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, history began with God’s creation of the world and Adam, as described in the Old Testament. Civilization took root after a universal flood when Noah and his sons planted the seeds of a new population, which dispersed from the Plain of Shinar following the failure of the tower at Babel (Gen. 11: 1-9). If nations shared a common ancestry, then each must have originated with one of Noah’s sons. Martinio Martini, a Jesuit missionary who published Europe’s first systematic history of China in 1658, traces China’s origins to Fu Hsi (Fu Xi), thought to be the earliest Chinese
king. He attempts to reconcile the biblical Deluge to a flood recorded by Chinese historians, which occurred around 3,000 BC and left large areas submerged during the reign of Yao. Speculation quickly arose that the Chinese may have descended directly from Noah or one of his three sons, and that China, being isolated from the rest of the world, might have retained something of the moral, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of antediluvian man, perhaps even uncorrupted. George Horn, a Leiden theologian and historian, suggested in 1666 that Fu Hsi may have been Adam himself, for it was said that “Fu Hsi had no mother but the earth, similar to the description in Genesis of Adam’s creation from the earth’s dust.” Horn identifies China’s succeeding sage emperors with Old Testament patriarchs, hypothesizing that Yao may have been Noah (4-5, 13). The Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, a prominent seventeenth-century Egyptologist, argues in China Illustrate (1667) that Fu Hsi was descended from Noah and the Chinese a branch of the Egyptians possessing a religion approaching the divine dispensation later revealed to Christians. China’s hieroglyphic-like writing suggests to Kircher that the Chinese, like the ancient Egyptians, understood the universe better than the Greeks because each hieroglyph appears to represent a deep philosophical truth.

Such notions quickly spread to England. In 1669 John Webb of Butleigh, an artist and scenic designer by trade, pupil and companion of Inigo Jones and John Denham, wrote The Antiquity of China, or An Historical Essay. Webb rejects Kircher’s argument and, like Horn, identifies Yao with Noah or one of his sons. Since the ark landed in the East, he submits, “China was after the Flood first planted either by Noah himself, or some of the sons of Sem, before they removed to
He then makes a bolder claim: that they all lived in China before the Flood, where they built the ark; and since they had not participated in constructing the tower at Babel, they could not have suffered the Confusion of Tongues. “It may with much probability be asserted,” Webb concludes, “That the Language of the Empire of CHINA, is, the PRIMITIVE Tongue, which was common to the whole World before the Flood.” He argues on this basis that China’s social and political order may contain vestiges of an Edenic rectitude which had allowed the Chinese to survive the Flood and carried over into the antediluvian era, thereby offering an exemplar to be put before the English monarchy. Rachel Ramsey suggests that Webb’s treaty emerged from his personal and “political disappointment in the monarchy’s failure to deliver economic and political stability.” It holds up China as “an uncorrupted Noachian alternative to the corrupt and fractured world of seventeenth-century Europe,” an example for England in the aftermath of the civil wars and turmoil of the early Restoration, when English “radicals and Royalists alike politicized, scapegoated, and blamed the instability of language for both religious and political conflicts.” Ramsey points out that in literature of the period, “as Sharon Achinstein and Nigel Smith argue, the confusion of tongues at Babel served as the dominant ideological metaphor for linguistic and socioeconomic confusion, and the English Revolution itself was figured as Babel” (487).

China’s language and antiquity fascinated Britons well into the eighteenth century. Jonathan Swift was intrigued by the language’s apparent immutability, noting in 1712 that it is “above two thousand years old, neither have the frequent conquests of the Tartars been able to alter it” (9: 145). The English historian Samuel
Shuckford in 1728 contends that Chinese descriptions of Fu Hsi more closely resembled Noah than Adam (1: 29, 100-105; 2: 60-61). The English classical scholar and bibliophile Jacob Bryant revisits the question in 1774 (4: 256-57). Even as late as the nineteenth century, the Englishman Frederick Edwyn Forbes, while travelling in China (1842-47), wonders “whether Noah might not have settled in China with a fourth post-diluvian born son” (1).

China’s reportedly rational government, a meritocracy of scholar-officials overseen by a philosopher king, attracted considerable attention in the late seventeenth century. Simple and superior virtues seemed to flourish in the Middle Kingdom, producing idyllic social harmony. The major works of Confucian doctrine appeared in English for the first time and found an approving audience. In Of Heroick Virtue (1690), for example, Sir William Temple praises the enlightened Confucian precept “that every man ought to study and endeavour the improving and perfecting of his own natural reason to the greatest height he is capable” (Works 3: 333).

The Early Eighteenth Century

In the early eighteenth century Britain’s trade with China was still relatively small and economically unimportant. British travellers to the Far East were few, and no English students or scholars worked within China. Geographical distance made it difficult to obtain timely news or reliable information. For the most part, the British government left Chinese affairs to the East India Company, which jealously guarded
its knowledge. British traders showed only slight curiosity in Chinese culture beyond what was commercially useful, and their Chinese counterparts displayed even less interest in Britain and its culture. The Chinese confined British traders to a narrow strip of land along the Pearl River at Canton, outside the city walls, where they kept their factory. They refused to recognize the British as equals and prohibited them from learning the Chinese language or having direct contact with Chinese officials. Britons therefore had to rely largely on secondary sources for information, particularly the books written by the Jesuits.

One such book enthralled Britons. Père le Comte’s *Nouveaux Mémoire sur l’État Présent de la Chine*, published at Paris in 1696, was translated into English and printed in London the following year by Benjamin Tooke and Samuel Buckley as *Memoirs and Observations made in a Late Journey through the Empire of China*. Its introduction proclaims that “of all the Kingdoms of the Earth China is the most celebrated for Politeness and Civility, for Grandeur and Magnificence, for Arts and inventions; which the Romish Priests are so sensible of, that they pass there under the Character of Physicians, Painters, Merchants, Astrologers, Merchancian, etc.” (iii). British historical and economic philosophers, such as David Hume, drew on Le Comte for examples of China’s exemplary merits (*Essays Moral* 2: 321). The popularity of Le Comte’s book and the interest it aroused in the Far East no doubt

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9 An event illustrating this mutual indifference occurred in November 1700. A British warship was driven ashore at Fukien by a storm, but the Chinese sought only to assist the British “Red-haired Barbarians” leave as quickly as possible (Fu, *Documentary Chronicle* 111). Alexander Hamilton, a merchant on board, returned to England and published a book describing the event but little else of Chinese culture.
aided one of most notorious impostures in Britain during the early eighteenth century. In 1704 George Psalmanazar, a vagabond Frenchman pretending to be a native of Formosa (present-day Taiwan) who had been brought to Europe by Jesuits, where he converted to the Church of England, published in London An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island subject to the Emperor of Japan. The book, which purports to be a detailed description of Formosan culture and geography, was a complete fabrication but it helped Psalmanazar to obtain an appointment at Oxford College to translate religious literature into Formosan.

Some Britons, however, distrusted continental enthusiasm for China, seeing China and Asia generally as the great counter-example of progress: stagnation. Daniel Defoe, among others who read Le Comte, gives acerbic comments on China that are as much expressions of Protestant values as they are correctives to Jesuitical views. In The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719), Crusoe travels to China and remarks: “But when I come to compare the miserable people of these countries with ours, their fabrics, their manner of living, their government, their religion, their wealth, and their glory, as some call it, I must confess I do not so much as think it is worth naming, or worth my while to write of, or any that shall come after me to read.” Standing on a Calvinist conviction of universal reprobation and damnation, confident in Europe’s superiority in the arts and sciences, architecture, navigation, and warfare, he says that Europeans exaggerate China’s grandeur simply because they “do not expect to find any such things so far off.” Crusoe finds the Chinese a “contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant, sordid slaves, subjected to a
government qualified only to rule such a people.” He embodies his opinion in a Chinese “country gentleman,” a “greasy Don” who, on the road to Nanking, rides past Crusoe on a half-starved horse in a state of “perfect Don Quixotism, being a mixture of pomp and poverty.” Later Crusoe comes to the Great Wall trailing “over hills and mountains in a needless track, where the rocks are impassable, and the precipices such as no enemy could possibly enter, or indeed climb up, or where, if they did, no wall could hinder them.” When a Chinese guide asks his impression, he “told him it was a most excellent thing to keep off the Tartars, which he happened not to understand as I meant it, and so took it for a compliment” (1: 256-73).

Defoe parodies admiration for China in his earlier work *The Consolidator* (1705). This satirical political allegory follows its narrator’s imaginary journey to the far reaches of the Chinese Empire at Tonkin, a mountainous region in present-day northern Vietnam. There he discovers the Consolidator, a mechanical chariot with flapping wings capable of flying to the moon. Only one person ever has died in a Consolidator: a Chinese king travelling in one whose wings fell off in mid-flight. Commentators generally interpret the Consolidator as the “engine that flies the aerial ship of state” and “improper flight [as] the metaphoric equivalent to political, religious, and speculative madness.” Defoe no doubt selected Tonkin, “a principality removed enough from the more beaten paths of Jesuit-explored ‘Pekin’ China,” because its tidal features, studied by Edmund Halley and Isaac Newton, became the subject of several Royal Society *Transactions* (especially vol. 16), which Defoe
parodies in Tonkin’s ridiculously advanced Great Library (Seidel, Novak, and Kennedy xxii-xxvii).

Defoe’s narrator declares that “all men know the Chinese are an ancient, wise, polite, and most ingenious people” who invented gunpowder, printing, and the magnetic compass (4). He speaks tongue-in-cheek, however, for the Chinese origin of these inventions remained in doubt.10 He goes on to extol the Chinese to absurdity, claiming they can read one another’s thoughts and that their royal historiographer prints on “leaves of vitrified diamond.” He would like to visit China one day and return “in time to bring our nation, so famed for improving other people’s discoveries, to be as wise as any of those heathen nations,” though he wishes that he “had the same prospect of making them half so honest.” Parodying Europeans writing about China without ever having set foot in the country, he admits that he has only seen “all the lofty towers of the immense cities of China” through extraordinary looking-glasses from the moon: in other words, through popular medieval encyclopaedias. Turning to the question of China’s antiquity, he claims that the Chinese issued from a distinct antediluvian race, surviving the Flood in “a fleet of ships of a hundred thousand sail” anchored to the earth with “six hundred fathom of chain.” Then, “when the waters abated, the people had nothing to do but open the doors made in the ship-sides, and come out, repair their houses, open the great China pots their goods were in, and so put themselves in statu quo” (10, 65, 7-

10 See, for example, the entry for “Magnet” in Chambers’s Cyclopaedia (3 [1781]: n. pag.).
8). The Chinese thus retained their original genius—Defoe characterizes this as a craftiness more than an Edenic rectitude—which was bestowed upon them two thousand years earlier, not by God or Noah, by a man in the moon, Mira-cho-cho-lasmo, who came down on a voyage of discovery.

In 1735 the Yung-cheng emperor, Shih-tsung, died. He was succeeded to the Dragon Throne by his fourth son, who ruled until his death in 1796 as Ch’ien-lung, the fourth Manchu emperor of the Ch’ing (大清 “Clear”) dynasty (1644-1917). Jesuit representation at Peking, renewed under the previous Ming dynasty and strengthened during the first part of the Ch’ing, was well established by 1735. The Jesuits had charge of the mathematical and astronomical computations regulating the official calendar, an eminent position in the Chinese imperial court. It was in 1735 that a second compendium on China appeared at Paris, published in four folio volumes, that would have the greatest influence on British ideas about China during the period under study: Description Géographique, Historique, Critique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l’Empire de la China et de Tartarie Chinoise. The editor, Jean-Baptiste du Halde, was a Jesuit scholar at Paris who had never been to China. He compiled his material largely from the memoirs and letters of Jesuits who had. An encyclopaedic reference work, it was considered authoritative and consulted by nearly everyone wanting to learn about China. Samuel Johnson recommended reading it “as one reads such a book; that is to say, consult it” (Boswell 1: 302). Horace Walpole received a copy from Lord Hervey while studying
at Cambridge and from it seems to have formed his basic notions about China (Correspondence 40: 18).

Du Halde’s compendium conveys a favourable image of China, linking its antiquity to its supposed state of heightened morality, learning, industry, and politeness. Edward Cave, the proprietor of the Gentleman’s Magazine, noted its success and quickly commissioned an English translation in 1736, which he published in weekly instalments. Samuel Johnson evidently encouraged the project by writing favourable reviews. One reader responded:

What a rich and lovely Country does [China] represent to us? How populous and full of glorious Cities? What a number of surprising and magnificent Works? What Industry and Genius in the People for mechanic Arts? But above all, what admirable Maxims in Government and Morality; wherein the Chinese wisely place the Top of all Sciences? I am persuaded, no Nation ever had more sublime Notions of Moral Virtue, or produced such a number of illustrious Instances in the several Branches of it, as the Chinese; who take more than ordinary Care to record them for the Instruction of the Publick. (6 [Aug 1736]: 150)

Cave’s fastidious translation, however, was not the first. Earlier that year, John Watts rushed to press an abridged translation by Richard Brookes titled The General History of China. Both the French and English editions included a Chinese play, The Orphan of the House of Chao, translated by the Jesuit Joseph Henri Prémare, which inspired adaptations by William Hatchett, Voltaire, and Arthur Murphy.

China was soon enlisted into the Old Whig and Tory opposition to Robert Walpole. Lord Bolingbroke in 1739 alludes to China’s gentle patriarchalism and “nobility of merit” in an attempt to invigorate British nationalism in The Idea of a Patriot King. “Nobility in China mounts upwards,” he writes:
and he, who has it conferred upon him, enobles his *Ancestors*, not his *Posterity*: A wise institution! and especially among a People in whose Minds a great veneration for their Fore-fathers has been always carefully maintain’d. But in China, as well as in most other countries, Royalty has *descended*, and Kingdoms have been reckoned the Patrimonies of particular Families. (6)

Although China’s nobility of merit “has descended,” Bolingbroke regards China as an exemplar because, as Robert Batchelor notes, it “seemed to have the ability to repair ‘broken traditions’ and in particular revitalize the counselling function of the nobility so that proper mirroring for princes could occur” (82).

During this period, the Rococo decorative style sweeping across continental Europe gradually took on an exotic Chinese character. Rococo-chinoiserie quickly spread to England, which had already acquired a taste for imported Chinese luxury goods such as textiles, lacquered furniture, fancifully patterned wallpapers, stylized paintings, and blue-and-white porcelain. English chinoiserie coincided with a romantic protest against Augustan geometrical rigidity and converged with the Gothic Revival of the 1740s. Its influence could be seen increasingly all over England in architecture such as the Chinese pavilions erected at Lord Lichfield’s estate in Staffordshire or at Ranelagh in 1740. William and John Halfpenny published their *New Designs for Chinese Temples, Triumphal Arches, Garden Seats, Palings, etc.* in four parts from 1750 to 1752. Edwards and Darly printed *A New Book of Chinese Designs* in 1754. Arbiters of taste, such as Sir William Chambers and Horace Walpole, promoted the Chinese gardening aesthetic known as Sharawaggi, a term coined by Sir William Temple in his 1696 essay *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus* to describe the Chinese style of “studied irregularity” (132).
The craze for Chinese landscape gardening had reached fever pitch in Britain by 1757. When Chambers, who had learned something of China earlier in life as a supercargo at Canton, published *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, Samuel Johnson felt it necessary to lend some sobering introductory remarks. “It is difficult,” Johnson declares, “to avoid praising too little or too much,” for “the boundless panegyrics which have been lavished upon the Chinese learning, policy, and arts, shew with what power novelty attracts regards, and how naturally esteem swells into admiration.” He continues:

I am far from desiring to be numbered among the exaggerators of Chinese excellence. I consider them as great, or wise, only in comparison with the nations that surround them; and have no intention to place them in competition either with the antients, or with the moderns of this part of the world; yet they must be allowed to claim our notice as a distinct and very singular race of men: as the inhabitants of the region divided by its situation from all civilized countries; who have formed their own manners, and invented their own arts, without the assistance of example. (Preface, n. pag.)

By mid-century British writers often quoted Confucian maxims and discussed China. Most numbers of the *Gentleman’s Magazine, British Magazine* and *Monthly Review* at the time contain observations on China and its culture. Sir William Jones, Johnson’s friend, published several volumes of scholarly investigations. Horace Walpole enlists the idea of China in his satirical pamphlet *Xo Ho* (1757). China was treated on the stage by Arthur Murphy in *The Orphan of China* (1759). Between January 1760 and August 1761, Oliver Goldsmith contributed a series of epistolary essays to the newly inaugurated *Public Ledger*, which purports to be the correspondence of a virtuous, philosophically minded mandarin from China visiting London for the first time. Thomas Percy published the first Chinese novel in
English, *Hau Kiou Chooan, or The Pleasing History* (1761), in addition to other material in *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese* (1762). In 1763 John Bell published an account of his travels to China in the suite of an embassy from Peter the Great. *The Bonze, or Chinese Anchorite* appeared in 1769, and in 1785 Walpole revisits the idea of China in “Mi Li. A Chinese Fairy Tale.” The following chapters examine the ways in which the latter authors use the idea of China to help define a British identity as culturally and politically distinct from Europe, especially France, and to contemplate Britain’s place within global history and a broadening world view at mid-century.
Chapter 2

Arthur Murphy’s *The Orphan of China*

In November 1756 Arthur Murphy, an Irish-born actor-playwright who began his career as a merchant’s clerk in London and later became a barrister of the Middle Temple, completed writing *The Orphan of China*, a tragedy concerning the zealous loyalty of a Chinese mandarin who sacrifices his only child to preserve the life of the deposed monarch’s orphaned heir. Murphy based his play on the first authentic Chinese drama to appear in a European language. It had been translated into French by the Jesuit Joseph Henri Prémare, under the title *Tchao-Chi-Cou-Eulh: Ou L’Orphelin de la Maison de Tchao, Tragédie Chinoise*, and published in Du Halde’s *Description de la Chine* (1735). Murphy, who studied the classics at St. Omer, an English Jesuit college in France, was drawn to the play by its resemblance to Greek and Roman tragedy as noted by Bishop Hurd in “Discourse on Poetical Imitation” (1751). “My first propensity to this story,” Murphy writes, “was occasioned by the remarks of an admirable critic of our own, upon the Orphan of the House of Chau, preserved to us by the industrious and sensible P. DU HALDE, which, as our learned commentator observes, amidst great wildness and irregularity, has still some traces of resemblance to the beautiful models of antiquity” (89-90).

Murphy believed he had found opportune material for the London stage. Not only would it capitalize on the vogue for things Chinese but also, in a fresh setting,
endorse the embattled Greco-Roman dramatic principles he esteemed, for, as Hurd notes, the play adheres to the two cardinal Aristotelian rules. First, it observes the three unities of time, place, and dramatic action. Secondly, the action progresses rapidly from a starting point in media res, and its episodes, simple and free of artifice and ornamentation, move forward in harmony to achieve the plot’s resolution. For these reasons, Hurd considers Chinese dramatists less primitive or spontaneous in their craft than generally supposed by contemporaries such as William Collins, who alleges that a “Wildness of Thought” typifies the “Asiatick” mind and its artistic production (Preface, n. pag.). Hurd says the play shows common sense and is therefore in “identity of composition with that of Greece.” Although imperfectly executed, it demonstrates “that the poet was not unacquainted with the most essential dramatic method.” This is corroborated, he believes, by numerous “marks of coincidence,” including shared dramatic features, proverbs, and moral sentiments, as well as by poetic songs resembling the Greek chorus (2: 180-85).

Hurd would jettison these remarks from later editions of his Discourse, however. He did so probably, as Thomas Percy conjectured when he reprinted them in his Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese (1762), because he “found on a cool revisal that he had expressed himself rather too warmly in favour of the Chinese attempts, and had fancied design, and resemblances of the Grecian drama, in a much higher degree than they were found to possess” (1: 217). Murphy agreed with Hurd’s initial opinion, though, and set about to write an adaptation of the play. He was not the first. English, French, and Italian versions were already in print. More
importantly, Voltaire had recently seen his own reworking enacted at Paris as a moral comedy catering to the Chinese vogue in France.

This chapter explores the way in which Murphy reinstates the play as a tragedy, deliberately accentuating its Greco-Roman and Shakespearean qualities to gratify an British sensibility wearied by the imitation of French theatrical models and roused to patriotism by the outset of hostilities in the Seven Years’ War. He distinguishes his play from Voltaire’s by drawing out its Lockean undercurrents, laying a distinctly British claim to *The Orphan* to stage a cultural and ideological competition with France. His prefatory letter to the print edition extols his adaptation above Voltaire’s, underscoring China’s age-old Confucian ideal of civic virtue to warn against French absolutism and to endorse the merits of a British constitutional monarchy aspiring to unity and a paternalistic concern for the common good.

Murphy submitted a draft of *The Orphan* to David Garrick, the celebrated actor and manager of Drury Lane. Garrick initially rejected it, partly because he had already engaged John Hawkesworth to adapt Voltaire’s rendition. His rejection set in motion a lengthy period of quarrelling and “petty disputes” between the two men (Murphy, *Works* 1: ix), which became a “paper war” waged in the press (Murphy, *Life of Garrick* 1: 331). Eventually Henry Fox (Murphy’s patron), Horace Walpole, and William Whitehead prevailed upon Garrick to produce the play (Dunbar 51-77). It was performed at Drury Lane on 21 April 1759 and by most accounts was well received. Garrick played the patriotic mandarin Zamti. Mary Ann Yates took the part of his wife, Mandane, a role that would confirm her reputation as “one of the
greatest actresses of the English stage, statuesque and capable of expressing the deepest pathos by her elocution and gestures” (Knapp 47).

The Orphan of China takes place in Peking during the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion of China. Responsive to demands for fresh and remote settings to supplant the ancient Mediterranean, worn smooth by repetition and saddled with the accumulated weight of tradition, the play opens with a prologue, spoken by Whitehead, proclaiming: “ENOUGH of Greece and Rome. Th’exhausted store/ Of either nation now can charm no more:/ […] On eagle wings the poet of to-night/ Soars for fresh virtues to the source of light,/ To China’s eastern realms: and boldly bears/ Confucius’ morals to Britannia’s ears.” The action begins twenty years after the Tartars, under Timurkan (Genghis Khan), rode roughshod over China’s tranquil civilization. Mandane, the wife of a loyal mandarin, is lamenting the usurpation of China’s crown, while her husband, Zamti, declares that “China is no more;—/ The eastern world is lost—this mighty empire/ Falls with the universe beneath the stroke/ Of savage force.” Bemoaning China’s lost Confucian order, he says:

—In vain Confucius
Unlock’d his radiant stores of moral truth;
In vain bright science, and each tender muse,
Beam’d ev’ry elegance on polish’d life—
Barbarian pow’r prevails. (6)

The Tartars, two decades earlier, had killed all members of the Chinese royal family save for one infant, Zaphimri. Morat, Zamti’s Confucian mentor, preserved the prince, and Zamti substituted him for his own son, Etan. Morat took Etan to Korea to be brought up in safety under the assumed name Hamet, which Murphy probably
chose for its tragic association with Hamlet. Zamti remains in Peking and rears “China’s Orphan” as his own son, concealing his royal lineage for twenty years, hinting at an impending anagnorisis. The Tartar tyrant, however, returns from a raiding expedition in Korea with a curious captive (Hamet) rumoured to be China’s lost prince. As the scene closes, Zamti reveals he has secretly organized a revolt against the Tartars. He instructs China’s Orphan to wait with a band of patriots at a nearby temple for the chosen hour (midnight), when they shall issue forth to perform “the work of vengeance” (13).

In the second act Hamet is led on stage in chains. As in Hamlet, the chains symbolize an oppressive, barbarous world. Hamet claims to be the royal orphan in order to protect the true prince and commends his Confucian mentor Morat: “With him and contemplation have I walk’d/ The paths of wisdom; what the great Confucius/ Of moral beauty taught, […] to be Brave and Good” (27). As the Tartars prepare to execute Hamet, Zamti faces a moral dilemma: whether to forfeit his own son or save him by betraying the true prince. He remains loyal to the deposed Chinese monarch, opting to sacrifice his own son. The choice is more problematic for his wife, Mandane, who is torn between maternal affection (“nature’s voice”) and patriotic duty. Zamti tries in vain to persuade her to “our country’s love,” against which “all other tender fondness must yield,” but Mandane decries him as an “inhuman father.” Mandane’s emotional struggle takes centre stage, emphasizing the

11 “Hamet” appears neither in the original nor other adaptations. He bears little resemblance to Hamlet, however, apart from his patriotic zeal and banishment to a foreign country.
conflict between public and private good. Zamti censures Mandane’s outburst as the “wild fury of a mother’s love,” imploring her to uphold the “righteous cause/ Of all our sacred kings” (31).

The third act, set before a temple and surrounded by tombstones, has a distinctly Shakespearean atmosphere. Zamti emerges from the tomb of China’s last king and gathers round him his patriot band. Zaphimri, still unacquainted with his royal lineage, issues forth and Zamti discloses his true identity, after which Zaphimri adds his voice to the rallying cry of “Revenge!” (43). The Tartars enter with Hamet, who has been brought to the tomb for execution. Mandane follows, proclaiming Hamet is her son. The Tartar king is thoroughly confused and orders Zamti tortured to find out the truth. Octar suggests to the Tartar king in the fourth act that he make love to Mandane and, “when virtue melts/ In the soft tumult of her gay desires,/ Win from her ev’ry truth.” Timurkan, however, cannot bring himself to “stoop with love-sick adulation” before a woman, for he is a warrior made only “to drive [his] chariot-wheels, smoaking with gore” (63).

The final act opens with Zamti being tortured offstage while a Tartar troop goes off to suppress the Chinese rebels approaching the palace. Zaphimri appears, armed with a sabre, and the action reaches its climax in the print edition when the two fight a duel and Timurkan is killed. In the staged version Timurkan is slain unarmed, for Henry Fox objected to the point of honour in allowing the tyrant to procure a sabre (Dunbar 67). The rebels prevail but Zamti has been badly broken on the rack. Mandane despairs and commits suicide. Before dying, Zamti points the play’s
central theme, the conflict between private and patriotic duty in the pursuit of freedom from tyranny:

The moral duties of the private man,
Are grafted in thy soul—oh! still remember
The mean immutable of happiness,
Or in the vale of life, or on a throne,
Is virtue—each bad action of a king
Extends beyond his life, and acts again
Its tyranny o’er ages yet unborn.
To error mild, severe to guilt, to protect
The helpless innocent; and learn to feel
The best delight of serving human kind.
Be these, my prince, thy arts; be these thy cares,
And live the father of a willing people. (86-87)

Zamti expires and Zaphimri pronounces the eulogy of “that firm patriot” and “the Orphan’s guardian to the last” (88).

Enacted against the backdrop of a “magnificent set of Chinese scenes,” the play achieved immediate success, running nine times in the first season before mid-May, 1759 (Account of the New Tragedy of the Orphan 14). One critic wrote: “every one has, by this time, seen or read [the play], and most have applauded it” (Monthly Review 20: 575 [June 1759], art. 24). The production was revived almost yearly at Drury Lane from 1759 to 1766, and on several occasions in 1766, no doubt for its patriotic appeal in times of political crises. Garrick played the role of the morally staunch and loyal Zamti until 1760, after which Charles Holland took over. In 1761 the theatres of Smock Alley and Crow Street vied to be the first to stage the play in Dublin. A variant was performed at Covent Garden for the first time on 6 November 1777, with Ann Spranger Barry playing Mandane, and it ran a total of three times. By then the play had appeared also in several English provincial theatres. In the
colonies, amid growing anti-British sentiment, it was performed in the permanent theatres established by David Douglass with the royal government’s support at John Street (New York) and Southwark (Philadelphia) to offer the “elite fashionable entertainments which resembled those they might have seen at ‘home’ in England” (Nathans 18). After the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, Douglass returned to Jamaica, where *The Orphan* appeared for the first time at Montego Bay, together with the comic opera *The Poor Soldier* which concluded with “a Display of Scenery representing the naval Action and Defeat of the French Fleet, on the Glorious 12th of April, 1782, with the burning and blowing up of the Caesar, etc.” (Wright 214). While Douglass was the first to stage plays in America concerning primitive native societies, the success of his presentation of *The Orphan* had less to do with Chinese exoticism than with the strong sentiments of royalist patriotism it roused in the guise of Confucian morality.

According to Murphy, *The Orphan* had “very far outgone [his] most sanguine hopes.” His “first attempt towards ‘the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all poems,’ as Milton calls a Tragedy” (iii-iv), was profitable indeed. Murphy is reputed to have made “large sums” from the first performances, which he used to remit the debts of his deceased brother James (Reynolds 2: 319). Paul Vaillant paid Murphy another hundred guineas for the copyright and published the play in 1759. Murphy sought to dedicate the text to Henry Fox, but after Fox declined, he inscribed it

12 Dave Williams has attempted a Saidian critique of the American productions between 1767 and the mid-1920s (21-44).
instead to the Earl of Bute, Groom of the Stole to the Prince of Wales and future George III. Bute offered Murphy £100 for the honour, probably, as Dunbar suggests, because “he saw in Zamti and the Orphan of China a parallel to himself, the faithful protector of the true prince, and the Prince of Wales” (71).

**The Chinese Original and its European Adaptations**

To better appreciate Murphy's reworking, it is helpful to consider the Chinese original and previous European adaptations. The original was a thirteenth-century drama of the Yuan period known as *The Wrongs Avenged by the Orphan of Tchao* (趙氏孤兒大報仇). It has been attributed to a minor Chinese playwright named Chi Chun-hsiang (紀君祥), about whom very little is known apart from the fact he authored six other plays no longer extant. His name appears in the only contemporary record of Yuan drama, *Lu Kuei Pu* (“The Book of Ghosts”), compiled around 1330 by Chung Szu-ch’eng (Liu, “Original Orphan” 193). *The Orphan of Tchao* is an historical tragedy concerning the house of Tchao, an eminent ministerial family in the state of Tsin in Northern China. Set in the declining years of the Chou dynasty (early sixth century BC), its theme is also revenge.

The original play begins with the Minister of War bringing trumped-up charges of treason against his political rival, the Minister of the People, a virtuous mandarin named Tchao-so. Nearly all Tchao-so’s family is killed and he takes his own life, but shortly afterwards his wife gives birth to a son. The Minister of War, fearing the Orphan will grow into a formidable enemy, designs to murder the infant, but Tchao-
The Chinese original exhibits a darker fatalism and sense of Spartan virtue than either Voltaire’s or Murphy’s adaptations. Du Halde’s advertisement to Prémare’s translation says that such plays were performed “always [as] an Entertainment at the great Feasts given by the Chinese Mandarins and other great Persons.” They were intended to “inspire them with the Love of Virtue, and a Detestation of Vice.” Du Halde calls it a tragedy only because the Chinese “make no distinction between Tragedies and Comedies.” He describes it as “very rude and unpolish’d,” cautioning those readers accustomed to the Aristotelian design that “the three Unities of Time, Place and Action are not to be expected, nor yet the other Rules observed by us to give regularity to Works of this sort.” “The Rules of our Drama,” he continues, “are unknown to the Chinese, who have always lived as it were in a World by themselves” (General History of China 3: 195). Du Halde’s remark suggests that Murphy’s adherence to the Aristotelian unities is a departure from Chinese drama. Murphy,
however, believed he was improving upon the Chinese original, strengthening its embryonic Greco-Roman design to lend the clarity, depth, and universal appeal to which he believed the Chinese author aspired.

The *Orphan of Tchao* incorporates songs which, Du Halde explains, “express some great Emotion of the Soul, such as Joy, Grief, Anger, or Despair.” Liu Wu-chi notes that these heighten the play’s dramatic tempo and lyricism. “The Chinese drama,” Liu writes,

like the Greek, is essentially poetic, and a Chinese play translated without its songs is just as incomplete as a Greek play without its choruses. The beauty of a Yuan drama lies in its poetry, without which it is not a drama. (“Original Orphan” 195-96)

Murphy omitted these songs, however, as did Voltaire and also Thomas Percy when he included his own English translation of Prémare’s translation in *Miscellaneous Pieces*. Murphy’s omission is explained perhaps by Du Halde’s observation that the original songs “are difficult to be understood, because they are full of Allusions to things unknown to us, and Figures of Speech very difficult for us to observe” (3: 196). He may have excluded the songs also because he felt that they, like the Greek chorus, unduly impede the dramatic action. “There is a Nation in the World which has found out a way” to introduce characters “very effectually without interrupting the Action,” Murphy writes elsewhere:

and that is, the *Chinese*; these People always make the Characters of the Drama come upon the Stage before the Play begins, and tell who they are, […] Thus, Sir, do these wise People let you into the Characters of the Drama; which is to be sure a much wiser way, than by a Chorus, who interrupt the Actors to cram in their stupid Remarks. (qtd. in Sherbo 176)
Oddly, Murphy abandons this convention also. Percy abandons it too—though Prémare keeps it—which is perplexing because he claims “to retain the peculiarities of the Chinese original, with a care and exactness, which the former translations did not always think it necessary to observe” (*Miscellaneous Pieces* 1: 103).

Murphy’s play includes numerous incidental references to Chinese culture, such as footbinding, writing, and ancestor worship, which are absent from the original. They give the impression of being mere window dressing, for the plot diverges substantially from the original. Murphy retains the central theme of a child saved from a tyrant’s murderous rage, raised up in ignorance of his true identity to avenge his father’s death and reassert his royal heritage. Timurkan’s design to destroy all twenty-year old males resembles the Minister of War’s order to put to death all infants younger than six months. Murphy’s adaptation comes nearer to the great revenge tragedies of Western literature, portraying a character grievously wronged by a bloody crime against his family, which he avenges, although his accomplices die at the moment of success. It clearly strives to incorporate elements of the genre that captivated Elizabethan audiences, such as an atmosphere steeped in turmoil, confinement, and torture, but unlike *Hamlet* or even the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, or Seneca, it fails to deepen the protagonist’s revenge psychology. Hamet’s desire for revenge is a straightforward matter of duty within an accepted Confucian moral order. Moral ambiguity is experienced only by Mandane and is resolved in favour of loyalty to the monarch, “the father of a willing people.”
Other dramatists before Murphy had attempted to adapt Prémare’s translation to express contemporary domestic themes. William Hatchett published *The Chinese Orphan: An Historical Tragedy Alter’d from a Specimen of the Chinese Tragedy, in Du Halde’s History of China* in 1741, the same year in which the Marquis d’Argens’s critique of Prémare’s translation appeared in English in *Chinese Letters*. Hatchett praised the play’s novelty, writing: “*China* has furnish’d us long with the Produce of her Earth; with her Manufactures; and I am willing to flatter myself, the Importation of her Poetry will serve to regale in its turn.” He felt it necessary, however, to alter the original because it “is very rude and imperfect; tho’ I imagine there are certain Strokes of Nature in it, scarce to be equall’d by the most celebrated of the *European Drama*” (vi). His play was never produced, likely because it was deemed “totally unfit for representation” (Genest, 4: 550). Dedicated to the Duke of Argyle, it was, as T.C. Fan observes, “essentially an Opposition pamphlet” directed against Robert Walpole’s government (“Chinese Fables” 148). Hatchett’s thinly veiled prefatory states as much:

As the *Chinese* are a wise discerning People, and much fam’d for their Art in Government, it is not to be wonder’d at, that the Fable is political: Indeed, it exhibits an amazing Series of Male-administration, which the *Chinese* Author has wrought up to the highest Pitch of Abhorrence, as if he had been acquainted with the Inflexibility of your Grace’s Character in that respect. It’s certain, he has exaggerated Nature, and introduced rather a Monster than a Man; but perhaps it is a Maxim with the *Chinese* Poets to represent Prime Ministers as so many Devils, to deter honest People from being deluded by them. (vi-vii)

Hatchett’s play is interspersed with lengthy and awkward political denunciations that eclipse its tragedy. Characters are altered and new ones introduced to facilitate political satire. The Orphan (Camhy) is a child who takes no part in avenging his
family, while the Tartar usurper’s demise is tied to political ineptitude. Hatchett retains only enough detail from the original to dress up an Augustan satire.

Another adaptation was written 11 years later in Vienna by the Italian Pietro Metastasio, a celebrated librettist who, like Murphy, admired classical Greek and Roman drama. Solicited by the Habsburg empress Maria Theresa to produce an occasional performance in the Garden Theatre at Schönbrunn Palace, Metastasio turned to China for inspiration. He found it in Du Halde’s still-popular compendium, and in 1752 he wrote *L’Eroe Cinese* (“The Chinese Hero”), a three-act lyric tragedy. An operatic work designed to be acted by the empress’s daughters, Metastasio’s piece called for elaborate Chinese robes and ornaments to disguise five actresses as men. It was set against an elaborate stage intended to elicit the grandeur of the Chinese Empire at its peak and, by extension, as Adrienne Ward notes, “Habsburg dynastic mythologies, especially those related to geographical expanse, cultural brilliance, and historical longevity.” Ward observes that Metastasio was attracted to the idea of China because he thought it would appeal to the enlightened ethos of Europe’s newly ascended absolutist monarchs. After the last three wars of succession in Europe (Spanish 1700-13; Polish 1733-38; Austrian 1740-48), these monarchs sought fresh models of subjecthood, in which social stability was undergirded by merit and the distribution of wealth free from the past abuses of feudal authority (98-116).

It is difficult to know to what extent *L’Eroe Cinese* influenced Murphy, if at all. Murphy too was drawn by China’s enlightened appeal, and he was familiar with
Metastasio’s work, for in 1759 he composed a three-act poetic tragicomedy, *The Desert Island*, based on Metastasio’s *L’Isola Diabitata* (1752), and in 1768 he reworked Metastasio’s *Zenobia* (1740) as his own *Rhadamistus and Zenobia* (later *Zenobia*). At any rate, it appears that Metastasio based his opera on a short passage in Du Halde’s Chinese dynastic chronicle rather than Prémare’s translation. Nothing approaching the original *Orphan of Tchao* would appear on the European stage until Voltaire wrote his renowned adaptation in 1753, *L’Orphelin de la Chine*, a moral comedy staged at the Théâtre Français in Paris on 20 August 1755 and later at the royal palace at Fontainebleau.

Although Murphy claimed that Prémare’s translation was his primary source, he evidently relied heavily on *L’Orphelin* as a model and counterpoint. Voltaire completely refashioned the original to accord with his enlightenment doctrines, emphasizing the conflict between Chinese deism and Tartar barbarism. His most substantial alteration was to introduce a love theme, absent from the original, between Genghis Khan and the Chinese heroine. Genghis had come to China earlier as a fugitive and fallen secretly in love with Idamé; he pursues his romantic attachment when he returns years later as the conquering Tartar king. Idamé consequently finds herself torn between not two but four strains of love: a mother’s love for her son, a wife’s love for her husband, a past love for Genghis, and a citizen’s love for her country. Her obsessive maternal instinct is tempered by marital fidelity and patriotic duty. Genghis, the regal conqueror, is himself conquered by the feminine virtues exhibited by Idamé, a woman who remains faithful to her husband, son, and country, and also by the civilizing wisdom imparted by Zamti, the pious
Confucian mandarin-scholar who is willing to sacrifice his own son for his country. A raging tyrant gradually learns to appreciate the merits of an ancient civilization and the value of faithfulness, piety, honour, and justice. This play, Voltaire writes in his dedication, “is a new proof that the victorious Tartars did not change the manners of the nation vanquished; they protected all the Arts established in China; they adopted all its Laws.” It is therefore “a striking instance of the natural superiority of reason and genius over blind and barbarous force” (x). In the end Voltaire’s Orphan, like Metastasio’s, never avenges the wrongs done to his family. Genghis spares his life, and to give the play a happy ending, Genghis promises to adopt him as his own son.

Voltaire’s play achieved remarkable success. Appearing at the height of the French vogue for chinoiserie, first popularized by Louis Le Vau’s Trianon de Porcelaine (1670-71), built for Louis XIV at Versailles, its success owed a great deal to its stage production. Audiences were enthralled by its innovative Chinese scenic designs, considering them “authentic” because they were fashionably exotic. Voltaire strived for verisimilitude: he had twelve men work for more than two weeks, day and night, to construct and paint a Chinese setting (Carlson 100). The actors were dressed in sumptuous Chinese costumes. Lekain (Henri Louis Cain), who played Genghis, wore an embroidered robe rather than a pannier skirt, and Mlle Clairon (Clair Josèphe Hippolyte Leris), as the heroine Idamé, wore a simple sleeveless dress without hip-pads. Although L’Orphelin was not performed in London during the eighteenth century, the script was translated into English by Thomas Francklin and published in London in December 1755 (dated 1756). Dedicated to Garrick, it was critically acclaimed and went through three editions in
London and one in Dublin in 1756 (Bruce 70). Francklin declared that “a play built on the same fable could not fail of being well received on our stage” (v). He suggested that Zamti’s role would best suit Garrick and that Idamé’s might be played by Susannah Maria Cibber or Hannah Pritchard. Soon afterwards, Garrick engaged John Hawkesworth to rewrite L’Orphelin for the London stage.

Murphy’s Adaptation and its French Counterpoint

Around the time Hawkesworth was preparing his adaptation, Murphy decided to rework the play himself. While using Prémare’s translation as a starting point, he found himself unable to ignore Voltaire’s interpretation and borrowed liberally from it elements of language, action, and characterization. He preserved the historical background of the Tartar invasion, the name of the Confucian patriot Zamti, and, as he admitted, numerous “sentiments,” especially from the first act (Orphan of China 94). He parted company with Voltaire, however, in general method and purpose. While Voltaire sought to create Chinese spectacle, Murphy considered the play’s Oriental trappings “trivial” (Dunbar 68). This “apparently somewhat disturbed” Garrick, who wanted Chinese spectacle. No doubt Murphy was mindful of London’s politically charged theatrical environment and Garrick’s earlier disastrous staging of Jean-Georges Noverre’s The Chinese Festival in 1755, whose high-flown French chinoiserie had aroused public indignation and caused a riot (Appleton 76-81; Lynham 20-21). Hsin-yun Ou suggests that Garrick’s misfortune occurred because the “Francophobia displayed by the audience in 1755 was an expression of patriotic
possessiveness.” Murphy, however, “had found a way of giving a peculiarly English flavour to the taste for Chinoiserie, a flavour that lacked the ingredient of French neoclassicism” (Ou, “David Garrick’s Reaction” 25). Critics at the time agreed. As one wrote, *The Orphan of China* is “a new English play, formed upon the Frenchman’s model, with considerable improvements of the plan” (*Monthly Review* 20 [June, 1759] 575-76). Some at least felt that Murphy had successfully appropriated the idea of China to compose something new and English.

Murphy argued his own case for originality and independence from *L’Orphelin* in a letter “To M. De Voltaire.” Appended to the 1759 edition, the letter represents Voltaire as a French patriot sneering at the English as “barbarous” apes to continental refinement, “islanders” who “fall behind other nations in point of taste and elegance of compositions,” a people “deprived of the true spirit of Tragedy.” Murphy presents *The Orphan* as an object of national artistic rivalry, holding it out as an example of English dramatic excellence. Voltaire’s paramount mistake, he contends, is to “fill up the long career of a tragedy with [an] episodic love.” Murphy earlier faulted such plays as Thomas Southerne’s *Isabella, or The Fatal Marriage* for the same reason (Emery 41). In his letter to Voltaire, Murphy, pointing out the inconsistency in Voltaire’s Tartar king, who is simultaneously an heroic lover and a base, murderous tyrant, asks: “How would that noble performance, that *chef d’œuvre* of [Voltaire’s] country, the Athalie of Racine, have been defaced by the gallantry of an intrigue, if a tyrant had been introduced to make love to the wife of the high-priest?” (91). Where Voltaire incorporates a view of human nature as basically good and corrigeble, Murphy reinstates something of the darker fatalistic intensity that weighs on the
Chinese original, showing a gentler and more civilized China beset by unrelenting Tartar militarism. Murphy’s intention, however, was not to be more faithful to the Chinese original but to transform it into a tragedy of character rather than external opposition, in the spirit of what Voltaire derides as “the monstrous Drama of Shakespeare” (xi-xii).

Voltaire fired back with his own letter addressed “to the author of the Orphan of China,” signed at Geneva and published in English in 1759. It has as little to do with the Chinese original as does Murphy’s. In a composed voice striking a patronizingly mature and worldly chord, he reproaches Murphy for exaggerating his enmity towards the English, reminding the reader that he, an exile with no hope or desire of returning to France, is far less patriotic than Murphy makes him out to be. He affects surprise that Murphy “should treat [him] as the declared Adversary of English Literature, when it is well known that [he] first introduced a Taste for English Authors in France” (2). His reproach brings to mind the prologue to the English translation of Mahomet the Imposter in which Voltaire’s blossoming literary talents and libertarian critique of Roman Catholicism are attributed to his experience of England’s moderate religious attitudes and political liberties:

BRITONS, those numbers to yourselves you owe;  
VOLTAIRE hath strength to shoot in SHAKESPEARE’S bow;  
Fame led him at his Hippocrene to drink,  
And taught to write with nature as to think;  
With ENGLISH freedom, ENGLISH wit he knew,  
And from th’ineexhausted stream profusely drew.  
Cherish the noble Bard yourselves have made,  
Nor let the frauds of FRANCE steal all our trade. (iv)
Voltaire confesses to adding a love theme to *L’Orphelin* to pander for “the vicious Taste of my Age and Nation,” but he coyly reminds Murphy that Shakespeare had done the same. He says Murphy’s “affected” comparison to Shakespeare is intended to puff up his composition, and that Murphy would have done better simply to have translated *L’Orphelin* into English (“Letter to the Author of the Orphan” 26, 33).

At the heart of Murphy’s criticism of *L’Orphelin* is Voltaire’s abandonment of Aristotelian principles. In reviewing Murphy’s play in the *Critical Review* (May 1759), Oliver Goldsmith agreed that Voltaire had stumbled when he “resolved to indulge [the] extravagance” of chinoiserie and “accordingly embroidered a Chinese plot with all the colouring of French poetry.” Goldsmith attributes this extravagance to the degradation of taste on the Continent brought about by a “luxury” which “expects from novelty those satisfactions it has ceased to find in nature.” “From the prevalence of a taste like this,” he writes,

or rather from this perversion of taste, the refined European has, of late, had recourse even to China, in order to diversify the amusements of the day. We have seen gardens laid out in the eastern manner; houses ornamented in front by zig-zag lines; and rooms stuck round with Chinese vases and Indian pagods. If such whimsies prevail among those who conduct the pleasures of the times, and consequently lead the fashion, is it to be wondered, if even poetry itself should conform, and the public be presented with a piece, formed upon Chinese manners?—manners which, though the poet should happen to mistake, he has the consolation left, that few readers are able to detect the imposture.

Some present-day critics, influenced by Saidian critical theory, mistakenly interpret Goldsmith’s remarks as a sweeping expression of Eurocentric unease with China’s influence on European culture. Julia Lee, for example, writes that those who “complained about [chinoiserie’s] theatrical existence in the Western imagination
[104]

[...] worried that because chinoiserie (like China itself) was so utterly foreign and wholly different from the West it was not subject the usual workings of signification and meaning making that could be applied to other areas of aesthetics and culture” (120). This is somewhat misleading, however, for the object of Goldsmith’s criticism is simply the extravagance of Voltaire’s interpretation of China, which renders it a misinterpretation (“mistake”). It is a threat to taste because it is entirely self-indulgent and self-serving, perhaps unrepresentative of China but certainly distasteful in it excess. Misinterpretation is a theme that runs explicitly through The Citizen of the World—Lien Chi Altangi repeatedly stresses that European chinoiserie is untrue to Chinese aesthetics because it is ridiculously exaggerated—which ought to be read in conjunction with this review. Murphy succeeds, according to Goldsmith, by resisting the impulse to reduce China, as well as artistic production, to “such whimsies.” He avoids the pitfalls of misinterpreting a culture he has not directly encountered by adapting the play to European standards: “In proportion as [Murphy’s] plot has become more European, it has become more perfect. [...] Mr. Murphy has given us a play [that is], if not truly Chinese, at least entirely poetical” (Works 1: 170-72).

Murphy observes Aristotle’s unities, but only up to a point. Earlier, in The Covent-Garden (1752), he remarks on the potential advantages of loosening these restraints: “what a Figure wou’d a Modern Tragedy make with [Aristotle’s] three Unities!—if Shakespear had observed them—he wou’d have flown like a Paper-Kite, not soar’d like an Eagle” (qtd. in Sherbo 175-76). He terms his departure from the “studied irregularity” of chinoiserie a “studied regularity” that builds to a
spontaneous Shakespearean overflow of genius. Murphy writes: “If the great scenes of Shakespear [...] cannot strike the imagination of M. De Voltaire, how can I expect that the studied regularity of my little shrubbery should afford him any kind of pleasure” (95). To extend this gardening metaphor, Murphy claims a formalism resembling a trim and orderly European labyrinth garden. Voltaire caught the implied metaphor and countered sarcastically: “your Plan represents a Labyrinth, wherein those that enter must wander at random, seek for the guiding Clue of Reason in vain, and, at last, loose themselves in inextricable Absurdity” (31).

Murphy attempts greater uniformity of dramatic action by developing “everything that seemed to [him] to result with order and propriety from it” with “probability and perspicuity.” While he achieves tighter dramatic tension by substituting the pursuit of justice for Voltaire’s sentimental morality as the action’s motivating principle, some episodes are obviously contrived to fit his plot’s circumstantial requirements, such as Hamet’s fortuitous capture and return from Korea at the very moment Zamti initiates his rebellion. Voltaire claims that Murphy’s plot “runs counter to common Sense and Probability” (25). He of course overlooks the improbable and complicated intrigues animating Oriental tales popular in Europe at the period, such as the Arabian Nights Entertainment. “Probability and perspicuity” are his touchstones rather than any actual or perceived Chinese literary practice, and he goes on to chide Murphy for unreasonably hiding the tyrant’s death behind scenes: “Here I must own I do not see any Reason why the Combat should not be decided on the Stage” (20). Murphy may have felt that Voltaire was correct, for although his later and most popular tragedy The Grecian Daughter (1772) places all
physical struggle behind the scenes, the central moment when Euphrasia stabs Dionysius occurs onstage.

In 1756 Murphy remarks in *Gray’s Inn Journal* that “Aristotle was certainly mistaken when he called the fable the life and soul of tragedy; the art of constructing the dramatic story should always be subservient to the *exhibition of character*” (Sherbo 180). He faults Voltaire for stifling his characters’ tragic passions and not developing the Orphan’s character, leaving him an infant throughout the play. While this facilitates temporal unity, it diminishes the Orphan’s role as a moral agent because an audience is unlikely “to take any considerable interest in the destiny of a babe, who, when [Voltaire’s] Zamti has saved him, cannot produce any change, any revolution in the affairs of China” (93). Murphy’s characters may lack psychological complexity but they are more trenchant moral agents. His heroes are unambiguously good and his villains unequivocally evil, more like the characters of the Chinese original than those of Shakespeare. The vicious are punished and the virtuous rewarded, although Murphy clearly demands more from his characters than simplistic didacticism. He strives for a Shakespearean expression of deep emotion in what John Pike Emery calls “the necessity of a ‘struggle between virtue and vice’ in the feelings and thoughts of a character.” Emery contends that Murphy’s “emphasis on Shakespeare’s pre-eminence through characterization rather than plot greatly influenced other eighteenth century critics and hastened the ‘defeat of the neoclassic forces’” (21-23). If Emery overstates Murphy’s influence, it is only because *The Orphan* falls short, as Dunbar observes, in achieving “the appeal found in
Shakespeare and even in Otway and Rowe, but absent in eighteenth century tragedy—the appeal of the common humanity of the characters” (Dunbar 75).

Language is the final point of contention between Murphy and Voltaire, but not on the basis of any real or supposed Chinese style of expression, for both authors believed the Chinese style too obscure for their purposes to imitate. Murphy claims his characters speak naturally. Although he admired classical drama, he strove to jettison “the Rubbish of dead Languages, Languages which we can no longer pronounce, Languages which afford us no Insight into human Nature, and which should be confined to the Cloysters of pedantic Obscurity” (3). Voltaire scoffs at Murphy’s dialogue as a “Jumble of Metaphors” and “poor frothy Play-house Cant.” Singling out Mirvan’s language for example, Voltaire writes: “That you should be acquainted with the Language of such Ladies of Condition is not at all surprising, as you were (if I am not misinformed) an hired Actor both at Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden” (Letter to the Author of the Orphan 12, 25, 11). Voltaire’s stab at Murphy’s moral linguistics was likely prompted by familiarity with Murphy’s essays on dramatic theory. In a review of John Home’s Douglas in the Literary Magazine (1757), Murphy writes “that the theatre, if it does not promote virtue, at least retards the progress of vice” (qtd. in Sherbo 123).

Garrick’s initial reservations about The Orphan evidently share much in common with Voltaire’s criticisms. He sought to mitigate the play’s shortcomings with stage business and Chinese spectacle. Murphy considered such external aids incidental to serious dramatic production. It “is not the theatrical apparatus,” Murphy
states elsewhere, “the bowl, the dagger, the dungeon, or the clank of chains, that can affect an audience, but a faithful portrait of the mind” (Emery 23). Ironically, it was stage business and spectacle that London audiences demanded and the play’s saving grace. Goldsmith writes that although “few of the situations were capable of […] exciting a single tear, the first night the whole house seemed pleased, highly and justly pleased” with “the glowing imagery, the well-conducted scenery.” In response to Voltaire’s unrelenting criticisms, Murphy finally appeals to the high praise his play’s theatrical apparatus received, claiming it far surpassed that of the Paris production: “if you had been present at the representation, you would have seen a theatrical splendour conducted with a bienséance unknown to the scène Françoise” (96). Voltaire provocatively retorted: “Our Pieces at the French Theatre stand or fall by their own Merit” (Letter to the Author of the Orphan 36).

Murphy of course believed that his adaptation could stand on its own merits better than Voltaire’s. He stresses this in the epilogue spoken by Mrs. Yates. With “so many heroes,—and not one in love,” she asks, “How cou’d this bard successful hope to prove?” (n. pag.). It is a rhetorical question, and Yates goes on to reassure the audience that British women possess greater freedom and beauty than Chinese women, who have “broad foreheads, and pigs eyes at best.” “Ladies, excuse my dress,” she says in mock apology, “‘tis true Chinese.” Some present-day scholars take this claim of Chinese “authenticity” as an example of the British theatre “appropriating China’s ‘tastes and fashions’ for British consumption” (Yang 174). It is important to recognize, however, that Yates’s comparison between British and
Chinese women is a veiled comparison between British and French tastes and fashions. When she says that her costume is “true Chinese,” she is alluding to what she asserts is the play’s true “tragic strain,” which Murphy believed he had retained, unlike Voltaire, from the original Chinese drama and improved upon. The Orphan, in other words, like the elegance of Yates’s Chinese costume, which the London audience considered more authentically Chinese and tasteful than that worn by Mlle Clairon’s as Idamé in the Paris production, conveys a “true” tragedy, one properly informed by Aristotelian and Shakespearean dramatic principles. To underscore this point, Yates describes the Chinese mode of writing in what appears to be a sideswipe at Voltaire’s style: “Then how d’ye think they [the Chinese/French] write?—You’ll ne’er divine—/ From top to bottom down in one straight line,” whereas the English write properly “from one corner to another.”

The Orphan’s Patriotic Appeal

Murphy’s dispute with Voltaire illustrates how politically charged ideas about China could become at a time when the currents of British national pride ran high. The play is so strongly infused with the spirit of patriotism that an English audience would have found it difficult to avoid drawing a parallel between theirs and China’s nostalgic aspirations for political liberty and collective national identity. Whitehead’s prologue resonates with patriotism and a repudiation of French absolutism, asserting that the only right monarchs can claim is, as Bolingbroke writes, “a divine right to govern well and conformably to the constitution at the head
of which they are placed” (*Idea of a Patriot King* 87). In 1759 Britons were basking in their victories over the French in India, South America, and North America. They were coming to regard themselves as uniquely British; that year was, as Frank McLynn writes, perhaps “the first time a genuine British Empire could be discerned” (20-21, 38). Murphy’s play caters to patriotism and national pride, and it found approval in places such as William Woty’s *Shrubs of Parnassus*: “Murphy! proceed and teach the subject age/ To catch the patriot flame from thine and Freedom’s page” (56-57).

Murphy’s own patriotic exuberance rings clear in his letter to Voltaire, which starts off on a nationalistic note intended to put the reader in mind of England’s ongoing hostilities with France:

Sir, A LETTER to you from an English author will carry with it the appearance of corresponding with the enemy; not only as the two nations are at present involved in a difficult and important war, but also because in many of your late writings you seem determined to live in a state of hostility with the British Nation. (88)

Murphy couches his artistic rivalry with Voltaire in language styled to arouse Anglo-French political and colonial antagonisms. In this sense, *The Orphan* might be looked upon as an imaginative geography for which two competing interpretations vie for control. The cultural politics of competing nationalisms play out in Murphy’s plot and his characters’ patriotic heroism, which are shaped to convey a warning against absolutism and the divine right of kings. They are summed up in Zamti’s final words entreating the Orphan as king to “live the father of a willing people.” This Confucian precept echoes Bolingbroke’s “patriarchal family, where the head and all the members are united by one common interest, and animated by one
common spirit” (148). Whitehead’s Prologue endorses a British constitutional
monarchy built on “freedom’s choice,” “Justice,” and “Mercy.” He says:

From nobler motives our allegiance springs,
For Britain knows no Right Divine in Kings;
From freedom’s choice that boasted right arose,
And thro’ each line from freedom’s choice it flows.
Justice, with Mercy join’d, the throne maintains;
And in his People’s Hearts our Monarch reigns. (25–31)

Writing earlier in Gray’s Inn Journal, Murphy claims that the English public had
“exploded all notions of the right divine of Kings [and had come to consider]
crowned heads as no more than common men” (Works 6: 203). To convey this in a
Chinese drama was tricky, for Europeans were well aware of Chinese belief in their
emperor’s mandate from heaven. Murphy meets the challenge head on by having his
characters act out the conflict. When Zamti reminds Mandane that she is sworn to
preserve the monarchy, she responds by questioning the divinity of Chinese kings:

Our kings!—our kings!
What are the scepter’d rulers of the world?—
Form’d of one common clay, are they not all
Doom’d with each subject, with the meanest slave,
To drink the cup of human woe?—alike
All levell’d by affliction?—Sacred kings!
’Tis human policy sets up their claim. (2: 32-2)

It seems doubtful from Du Halde’s History that a woman of the Yuan dynasty would
have made such an inflammatory claim, but the sentiment sat well with contemporary
British attitudes. Hsin-yun Ou argues “that Mandane, who opposes her husband’s
absolutist patriotism and patriarchal authority, is the author’s spokesperson against
Chinese and French anti-egalitarianism” (“Gender, Consumption, and Ideological
Ambiguity” 383) and “embodies a resolute force against patriarchal domination” (“Arthur Murphy’s Views of Confucianism and Gender” 111).

Mandane’s feminist vigour is moderated by the pathos of a mother’s distress at being separated from her child, which is emphasized in the motto Murphy chose for the play. It is taken, not from Confucius, but from Virgil:

Interea pavidam volitans pennata per urbem
nunta Fama ruit matrisque adlabit auris
Euryali. at subitus miserae calor ossa reliquit,
excussi manibus radii reuolutaque pensa.
euolat infelix et femineo ululate
scissa comam muros amens atque agmina cursu
prima petit, non illa uirum, non illa pericli
telorumque memor, caelum dehinc questibus implet

[Meanwhile, winged Fame, flitting through the fearful town speeds with the news and steals to the ears of Euryalus’ mother. Then at once warmth left her hapless frame: the shuttle is dashed from her hands, and the thread unwound. Forth flies the unhappy lady and, with a woman’s shrieks and torn tresses, in her madness makes for the wall and the foremost ranks—she is heedless of men, heedless of peril and of darts; then she fills the sky with her plaints.] (Aeneid 2: 146-49)

The grief that overwhelms Euryalus’s mother when she learns her son has perished while seeking to glorify his people, like Mandane’s anguish, calls into question the bonds of family and state, the merits of personal sacrifice for a common good, and a woman’s position in a patriarchal society.

The mother’s unceremonious suicide in the original Chinese play is perhaps a more poignant evocation of female resignation. Mandane rouses our sympathy differently by emulating the qualities Murphy admired in Lady Randolph, the heroine of John Home’s Douglas: her “strong maternal love, her conjugal affection, and her spirited virtue.” Musing over Home’s characterization, Murphy asks: “Would it not
have been better not to have lady Randolph guilty of suicide, as she might have expired with grief over her dead son, and then the close would have been more pathetic” (qtd. in Sherbo 132). Mandane commits suicide, but her death is tied to maternal affection rather than to the zealous patriotism displayed by her husband. It is tragic because it brings Zamti to grief, in the same way that Zenobia’s death is tragic because it grieves Rhadamistus in Murphy’s Zenobia. The prologue refers to Zamti as a “dubious character” and a “patriot zealous in a monarch’s cause” (13-44), while the epilogue calls into question the appropriateness of such “patriot passions” as the subject of an heroic theme, dismissing them as “eastern virtues” (13). Zamti is considered flawed because his patriotic fervour is “undistinguish’d loyalty” (21). He is redeemed, however, by eventually coming around to a more temperate Confucian view that a good emperor must win consent to govern by exercising benevolent authority over the state like a good father over a large family.

The play also expresses the Confucian ideal of individuals fulfilling their proper role in society, which, as Du Halde describes it, is that “Attachment to one’s Sovereign, Obedience to Parents, Reverence to Masters, Union between Husband and Wife, Friendship between Brethren, Fidelity of Friends, Deference amongst Relations, and good Intelligence amongst Citizens” (3: 321). Private considerations are subordinated to the public good, the failure of which, Murphy writes elsewhere, has plagued Western civilization since Livy recorded instances in Roman times (qtd. in Sherbo 14). Murphy’s adaptation of the play is therefore not an attempt simply to represent an authentic or spectacular Chinese drama or to accurately depict life in China. It aims to draw out a particular idea of China, popularized by the Jesuits, and
align it with a Western ideal to invigorate support for a strong, benevolent, and enlightened monarchy at home, one at odds with French absolutism and roughly corresponding to a British notion of a constitutional monarchy. Lord Bute was quick to recognize the political capital he could draw from *The Orphan* by identifying Zamti with his own role as protector of the future George III (Price 159; Emery 48-49; Dunbar 71-73). Thereafter he began to support Murphy in his literary career because he saw his value as a political propagandist who could produce material favourable to his own views. Murphy quickly found himself recruited into Bute’s effort to organize a government press using secret service funds, and before long he became editor of the weekly *Auditor*, a paper intended to promote government policy on major issues of public concern.
Chapter 3

The Pleasing History: Thomas Percy’s Editorial Treatment of the First Chinese Novel in English

“There has lately appeared in four little volumes a Chinese tale,” wrote Horace Walpole to Sir David Dalrymple in 1761, “called Hau Kiou Choaan—not very entertaining from the incidents, but I think extremely so from the novelty of the manner, and the genuine representation of their customs” (Correspondence 15: 75-6). Published as The Pleasing History and dedicated to the Countess of Sussex, it had been translated from Chinese apparently in 1719 by the late James Wilkinson, an Englishman who had served the East India Company at Canton. Wilkinson’s nephew, Captain James Wilkinson of Bugbrooke, Northamptonshire, discovered the manuscript handwritten on four packets of old Chinese paper amongst his uncle’s personal effects after his death. In 1758 he sent the manuscript to Thomas Percy, a newly ordained curate in the Church of England who was active in various literary pursuits, most notably editing a collection of old ballads that would appear as Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765). Percy, who had changed his name from “Pearcy” so as to claim descent from the Earl of Northumberland, had no especial interest in China. He had never visited the Far East and only once, nearly two decades later, did he ever meet an actual Chinese: a young Cantonese man in the
streets of London in 1775, with whom he talked about Chinese painting (qtd. in Kenneth Ch’en 211). The manuscript nevertheless piqued his interest. Always with an eye to the literary marketplace, he saw an opportunity to be the first to publish a full-length Chinese novel in Britain. Shorter Chinese fictions had appeared in Europe already, most translated by the Jesuits, but *Hau Kiou Choaan* seemed a better-rounded specimen. Moreover, it happily echoed the themes of domestic courtship and embattled virginity made popular by works such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.

Percy drew up a proposal, which his friend James Grainger brought to Ralph Griffiths, publisher and founder of the *Monthly Review*. Griffiths was dissatisfied with Percy’s planned treatment of the novel’s virtuous Chinese protagonist, for, as Grainger reported, “he wants a pleasing romance, and you talk of a faithful copy” (qtd. in Powell 446). Griffiths, like Garrick, wished to capitalize on the vogue for Eastern romances, blending the pleasure of a good story in an exotic setting with the moral didacticism of Persian tales. Percy thought differently. He believed “it would be no unacceptable present to the curious” to give a “specimen” of Chinese literature, unaltered, to show “how a Chinese Author would conduct himself through the windings of a long narration” (*Pleasing History* 1: xi).

As an English pastor and a scholar engaged in the emergent historical and textual study of earlier literature, Percy envisioned his editorial role as twofold. First, he would illuminate the narrative’s Chinese cultural obscurities using the apparatus of footnotes, a preface, and supplementary material. Secondly, and more subtly, he
would use this apparatus as a theologically protective frame through which the British reader could safely encounter Chinese moral thought independent of Jesuitical interpretation and its tendency to regard Confucianism as capable of being accommodated to Christianity. This chapter examines the way in which the novel and Percy’s editorial treatment of it present an idea of China as a country fundamentally concerned with the struggle of virtue and liberty beset by greed, political corruption, and civic apathy. The novel portrays Confucianism as an agent of liberty and the active protection of the laws, upon which Britons may profitably reflect, and its Lockean undercurrents encourage one to draw a parallel with post-1688 England. The hero and heroine are conscientious censors of public morality and proponents of the rational regulation of civil society, embodying an ideal eulogized in Western literature from the Greeks onward. Percy, however, uses his editorial treatment to call attention to the limitations of reason exercised without the guidance of direct personal engagement with Christian scripture. Although Confucian moral imperatives can contribute to preserving the God-given rights of life, liberty, and property, he attempts to use the novel to illustrate that reason alone is only a partial basis for morality and the proper functioning of civil society.

Shortly after Griffiths’s rejection, Robert Dodsley, bookseller and author of *The Oeconomy of Human Life* (1750), a collection of ethics purportedly derived from Tibet by way of China, saw Percy’s proposal, together with edited samples of the translation, and agreed to publish *The Pleasing History*. Although Percy was completely unfamiliar with the Chinese language and culture, he threw himself into
his newly won commission with relish. He consulted all the books on China at his disposal, chiefly those supplied by Dodsley and the Earl of Sussex’s library (Davis 70). His notes reveal that he relied heavily on the two encyclopaedic histories compiled by Le Comte and Du Halde.

The *Critical Review* (Nov. 1761) describes *The Pleasing History* as “the most unpleasing performance which we have perused for some months past” (373). A thousand copies of the first edition went unsold. Although disappointing commercially, the novel did arouse curiosity. Before long it was reprinted in French and German (1766) and Dutch (1767). Dodsley re-issued his unsold copies as a second edition in 1774, but Percy was left embarrassed by the “very numerous” errors in the printing, as well as by suggestions that his dedication to “the House of Sussex” was “a little too pompous” (*Percy Letters* 106, 114). Nevertheless *The Pleasing History* advanced Percy’s literary career in a roundabout way. In the early months of 1758 publishing arrangements took him to London, where he met Oliver Goldsmith, with whom he formed a life-long friendship, and was drawn into Samuel Johnson’s literary circle.

Like many works purporting to be authentically Chinese, *The Pleasing History* immediately fell under suspicion as a pseudo-Oriental translation. Percy entertained his own doubts. Shortly after the first edition appeared, he made inquiries through the East India Company to determine whether the novel even existed in China. The letter he received in response from James Garland in 1763, which he printed in the second edition, indicates that the Chinese at Canton were indeed familiar with the
story and believed it to be a true account of events four or five hundred years earlier. Still, another niggling question remained: how faithful was the translation to the Chinese original? The manuscript’s first three volumes came to Percy in English; the fourth was in Portuguese, which Percy laboured to translate himself. The fact that the last volume was in Portuguese raised the possibility that Wilkinson may not have worked from the Chinese original. Percy tries to dispel any doubts in his preface to the second edition. He names Wilkinson as the translator (something he had not done previously) and suggests that the manuscript was made as an exercise in learning the Chinese language, for the interlinear translations appear written initially in pencil and afterwards corrected in black ink, as though “drawn up under the direction of a Chinese master or tutor” (1: ix-x). Shou-yí Ch’en submits, quite plausibly, that Wilkinson may have studied Chinese at Macao and the final book was rendered into Portuguese by a Portuguese tutor or fellow student (Shou-yí Ch’en 216).

At any rate, Percy presented the novel as a major work of Chinese literature, comparable to The Four Books (四書), first translated into Latin by the Jesuits, containing the foundations of Confucian philosophy. We now know, however, that its provenance is less illustrious. It is an imperfect translation of a popular seventeenth-century romance known as Hao Qiu Zhiuan (好逑傳) or Xia Yi Feng Yue Zhuan (俠義風月傳 “The Breeze in the Moonlight”), originally published in the early Q’ing period under the pseudonym Mingjiao Zhongren (名敎中人著 “Man of the Teaching of Names”). Kai-chang Cheung situates the work within a Chinese
genre of fiction known as the “scholar-beauty romance.” “In works of this genre,” he writes, “the male protagonist is a representative of the dominant scholar-official class, has all the masculine virtues, especially courage and physical strength, while the female protagonist, a sheltered daughter of the nobility, possesses the feminine virtues, especially charm and forbearance.” Together they:

reveal the most important virtue of all, complete subservience to Confucian morality, especially physical and intellectual chastity. As models of rectitude for the younger generation of their period, they exalt purity over sensuality, fidelity over passion, and arranged marriages over free choice. Despite the obstacles both natural and artificial placed in their way, the scholar and the beauty proceed toward an approved union while remaining true to their rigorous moral code. (31)

The female protagonist in *The Pleasing History*, however, rejects the marriage arranged by her unscrupulous uncle who is intent only on stealing her paternal inheritance. She fights with all her wits to exercise free choice in proceeding with a union compatible with the Confucian moral code, to which she adheres, but which is clearly at odds with the corrupt behaviour of many of the male officials.

George Staunton, who learned Chinese in his youth while accompanying his father on the Macartney embassy to Peking, points out that the *Hao Qiu Zhuan* was “not written in *ouen-tchang*, or style of professional writing, but in that of polite conversation, in the upper classes of society” (Miscellaneous Notices 103). Percy could not have known this. Charmed by the manuscript’s novelty, he supposed it was a Chinese classic because Wilkinson apparently selected it above other possible specimens; moreover, circumspect Chinese literati allowed him to translate it, which Percy felt sure they never would have done had the work been of lesser importance. Percy’s footnotes and scholarly annotations lend an air of dignity to the novel, as
The paraphernalia of prefatory remarks and supplementary material consisting of a collection of Chinese proverbs, the argument of a Chinese play, and fragments of Chinese poetry.

**The Novel’s Plot**

*The Pleasing History* tells the story of Tieh-chung-u, the son of a Chinese magistrate. Like Confucius, he is a student with lofty ideals who wins renown by tenaciously pursuing justice and aiding the distressed. The story appealed to Percy, himself once a prized student and the son of a bankrupted wholesale grocer who had become chief magistrate. He also had a taste for adventure stories. As a boy he voraciously read tales of chivalry, fairies, pirates, and highwaymen; his library included such titles as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Pamela*, and *Don Quixote* (Bertram Davis 5). Tieh-chung-u’s adventures begin one day after he reads a book on filial obedience and decides to return home from school to visit his parents, an obligation in which he has been remiss. Along the way, while passing through a small village, he learns that a girl engaged to an impoverished student has been carried off and made concubine to a corrupt mandarin named Tah Quay. He rescues the girl and brings the mandarin to justice for having “made tyrannical use of his power” (1: 59).

This initial episode establishes the novel’s central themes: the tension between the aristocratic and the democratic, the conflict between self-interest and public good, and the struggle between wealth or power and the rule of law. The protagonist is a
young philosopher-scholar training to become a public servant, embodying the qualities of a dutiful, upright citizen equipped by his Confucian education with humanist virtues in good measure: modesty, manliness, and beneficence. He is practical, generous, and rational, constantly asserting man’s importance as a cultivated being in control of his moral universe. He is confident of his worth, courteous to others, and decent in social conduct. As a moralist in action he is a model public servant in the making. He possesses the qualities which Percy’s notes implicitly claim for British Protestant Christianity, apart from the occasional lapses of tolerance and self-control.

Tieh-chung-u’s fame quickly spreads. Overwhelmed by celebrity, he determines to withdraw from “civilization” (China) and visit the world’s “four corners.” He reaches only as far as Confucius’s birthplace in Shantung province, however, where there lives a girl of unusual beauty and intellect named Shuey-ping-sin. Her father, a widower and former secretary of state, has been unjustly banished to Tartary. Her wicked uncle Shuey-guwin is scheming to marry her off to Kwo-khétzu, the repugnant son of the newly appointed secretary of state, thereby leaving him in sole possession of his brother’s estate. The uncle is the epitome of Eastern intrigue and treachery, embodying the vices of the rich and well-born, abusing male prerogatives and power. Shuey-ping-sin discerns his treachery, prompting him to attempt a series of deceptions intended to ensnare her in a binding legal marriage, but she successfully outwits him at every turn. Frustrated and impatient, her unwanted suitor orders her abduction, and his servants carry her away locked in a sedan chair.
They twist and turn through the city’s labyrinth alleys that reflect the novel’s elaborate plot structure: a capricious and asymmetrical chinoiserie pattern. In an improbable (if not providential) turn, they run into Tieh-chung-u. Perceiving another grave injustice, he rescues the maiden and is smitten by her beauty and cleverness. Kwo-khé-tzu has the Confucian youth poisoned but Shuey-ping-sin brings him home and nurses him back to health. Her uncle and the local magistrate send spies to the house at night, but they obtain no incriminating evidence. Astonished that two young people left alone together could behave “so circumspect and blameless,” the magistrate resolves to marry them. They, however, rebuff marriage in order to conceal their budding affection for each other, for to admit it would be to admit that their relationship has not been as emotionless as they have led others and themselves to believe. Thus ignoring the dictates of nature, the young lovers give rise to a familiar tension: the conflict between self and society. Unlike its evocation in British novels such as Richardson’s *Clarissa*, where it is treated with greater psychological depth, it serves here to illustrate the rewards of curbing one’s individualistic tendencies in a world of ambivalent or corrupt values to share in the harmony of a Confucian social order.

After Tieh-chung-u sets off for home, the Grand Visitor arrives in Shuey-ping-sin’s village. He is a superior but corrupt mandarin periodically sent out by the imperial court to inspect the provinces and investigate complaints against local governors. When he is persuaded to order Shuey-ping-sin to marry her despised suitor, she threatens suicide and dispatches a personal petition to the emperor, a
benevolent monarch and the final arbiter of justice. As chance would have it, Tieh-chung-u, now at home in Peking, comes upon the maiden’s servant on his way to the imperial court. He returns to Shantung to save Shuey-ping-sin once more but her unwanted suitor charges him with sedition. He therefore goes back to Peking to seek help from Hû-biau, the former general of the maiden’s exiled father, who is awaiting execution. Tieh-chung-u persuades the emperor to grant Hû-biau the opportunity to redeem himself in combat against the Tartars.

In a last effort to separate the two, the father of Shuey-ping-sin’s suitor enlists the support of a powerful Court eunuch (the “Eunuch of Danger”) who has the ear of the emperor as well as an ugly sister who can be married off to the Confucian youth. The Eunuch of Danger invites Tieh-chung-u to his palace and tries to ensnare him into marrying his sister, but Tieh-chung-u is saved by the sudden announcement that general Hû-biau has returned victorious from the Tartarian frontiers. Shuey-ping-sin’s suitor lodges a complaint with the Tribunal of Rites against Tieh-chung-u and Shuey-ping-sin for an allegedly illicit relationship. The investigating magistrate turns out to be no other than Wey-phey, the once hapless student Tieh-chung-u assisted in the novel’s opening episode. Wey-phey investigates fairly, finding their conduct saintly and uncovering a litany of corruption in high places. When the Eunuch casts doubt on his judgement, the emperor himself intervenes and determines their innocence. Poetic justice is visited upon the bad characters. Hû-biau and Shuey-keuyé are restored to their former positions, and Shuey-ping-sin and Tieh-chung-u are properly wedded and their virtues extolled throughout the empire.
What emerges from this lengthy digest of the novel’s elaborate plot, spanning four volumes, is an underlying theme Percy believed still ought to concern a British readership: the struggle of the spirit of virtue and liberty beset by moral corruption and political intrigue. If post-1688 England had become the land of the free, a model of liberty and the active protection of the laws for Europe to follow, it had found perhaps a ready ally in Confucian China. The Chinese seemed capable of true public spirit and possessed the moral fibre by which political liberty is sustained in the face of greed and civic apathy. The novel’s hero and heroine are conscientious censors of public morality and proponents of the rational regulation of political life, acting out an ideal eulogized in Western literature from the Greeks onward. They represent the happy union of a contemplative, philosophical outlook with a Baconian philosophy of action guided by serious moral purpose. “Virtue is the Conformity to a Rule of Life,” writes the English moral philosopher John Gay, “directing the Actions of all rational Creatures with respect to each other’s Happiness” (xvii). To endure, civil liberty requires individuals in government to act in their respective stations for the public good. Without the personal involvement of such individuals, Adam Ferguson writes, government could easily become a passive menace to the liberties enshrined in the rule of law if some individuals act towards their fellow citizens in ways contrary to justice and the equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to the different orders of his subjects (210). *The Pleasing History* dramatizes this personal involvement in Confucian terms, following its course as it leads to superior orderliness in the triumph of sexual equality under the law, meritocratic social mobility, and diminished oppressive tendencies.
The Novel and Jesuit Representations of China

“At a time when this nation swarms with fictitious narratives of the most licentious and immoral turn,” Percy writes in his dedication, “it may have some good effect to show what strict regard to virtue and decorum is paid by writers amongst the Chinese, notwithstanding the deplorable ignorance they labour under of those sublime and noble truths, which we enjoy to so little purpose” (n. pag.) If the Chinese can pay “strict regard to virtue and decorum” without the light of revelation imparted by Christian scripture, then what, Percy asks implicitly, has become of Britain’s spiritual vision? *The Pleasing History* tacitly revisits a sticky theological question posed by Europeans as they came to learn more about the distant peoples living beyond the limits of Christendom: Could they be as virtuous as Christians?

The novel represents society in China as deeply rooted in rational ethical teachings. For Locke, Christianity rightly understood is rational in so far as reason lights the way to knowledge of a supreme being and mankind’s moral duties (14). Percy’s editorial treatment, however, is careful not to fully endorse Confucian rationalism, which the Jesuits regarded as a tolerable surrogate to scriptural revelation in regulating social and political conduct. His notes attempt to illustrate that reason alone is only a partial basis for true morality, an aide to understanding the Christian scriptures but not a substitute for them. The scriptures contain all that is necessary to salvation. They are the sole article of faith, which can be grasped by the individual without the interpretive intervention the Roman Catholic church claims is necessary.
While acknowledging the Jesuits’ sizable contribution to Sinology, Percy’s notes make it clear that their admiration for Chinese culture is under-scrutinized in Britain, even though a chorus of voices from other missionary orders (chiefly the Franciscans and Dominicans) had, for nearly a century, accused the Jesuits of deliberately misrepresenting the Chinese in order to buttress their own standing at Paris and Rome. James Watt rightly situates Percy’s “often hostile treatment of Chinese customs and manners” within the context of “a larger process by which the authority of missionary writing was gradually superseded by more sceptical accounts of China and its peoples, accounts which appealed to a different—and often much more superficial—kind of first-hand knowledge.” Watt suggests that “the depth of Percy’s engagement with previous—especially Jesuit—accounts of China and its people nonetheless encourages one to suspect that there was much more at stake in the editorial practice of these works than scholarly obsession alone” (99, 102). Percy may have published the novel intending to show China through Chinese eyes, but his interpretive framework, like Murphy’s, transforms it into an imaginative space in which two European philosophies, both religious and political, compete with one another.

Percy’s engagement with the Jesuits, however, is not cut from the same cloth as the sinophile philosopbes, for the philosopbes sought to divorce morality from Christianity. Percy’s editorial interventions are predominantly Christian in spirit, even though they are seldom dogmatic in emphasis. At times they subtly draw attention to the ironies inherent in Roman Catholicism and the Jesuits’ portrayal of
China. If they lack theological unity, it is likely because they were written in haste to publish, reflecting a temper pervading the English church at the time in the worldly competition for place and advancement. Percy’s interventions in this respect reveal a second purpose. Although often correctives of the moral imperatives he deems flawed from a British Protestant’s perspective, they also aim to carve out a place for *The Pleasing History* within the monumental work already completed by Jesuit scholars in translating China for the West.

Percy credits the Jesuits with accurately describing China outwardly, but he believes China’s inner character can only be appreciated through works written by the Chinese themselves. He likens European accounts of China to “the man who is sitting for his portrait, stiffened into a studied composure, with every feature and limb under constraint.” *The Pleasing History* can lay claim to a place alongside Le Comte and Du Halde, Percy contends, because it brings the Chinese to life in their own words, unreserved in their own sphere, “with every passion in play, and every part of [them] in motion” (1: xvi). For Murphy, *The Orphan* is China’s Shakespeare; for Percy, *The Pleasing History* its Fielding. “A foreigner will form a truer notion of the genius and spirit of the English,” he analogizes, “from one page of Fielding, and one or two writers now alive, than from whole volumes of *Present States of England*, or *French Letters concerning the English Nation*” (1: xvii).

Percy’s editorial method therefore seeks to preserve the novel’s distinctive Chinese style, concealing none of its faults. “The laws of the Editor,” he writes, “hath prescribed to himself of suppressing nothing however ridiculous” (1: 116n). If
this is a sideswipe at the Jesuits’ accommodation of Chinese culture, it is ironic that he alters some passages he feels would offend a British sensibility. When Tien-chung-u rebukes Shuey-ping-sin’s servant, for instance, he notes: “The Editor was obliged to soften this whole passage and some few of the preceding: the Original contains an appearance of indelicacy and indecorum, that would not have been borne by an English Reader” (2: 158n). He claims to have removed only unmeaning repetitions but on the whole tried—we have no way of knowing how successfully as the original manuscript is lost—to be “particularly exact in retaining the imagery, the allusions, the reflections, the proverbial sayings, and any uncommon sentiment or mode of expression, and as much of the Chinese idiom in general as was not utterly inconsistent with the purity of our own: and when he could not retain this in the text; he hath frequently been careful to preserve it in the margin.” Beyond such minor alterations, he claims to have added only enough to expatiate “the manners and customs of the Chinese, their peculiar ways of thinking, and expressions that are too remote from English as to render them unintelligible” (1: xxi).

In practice, however, Percy’s editorial treatment is marked by contradiction and inconsistency. Although aiming to reveal the Chinese in all their complexity, he frequently attempts to simplify them for the benefit of the reader’s comprehension. His fifteen-page index, for example, subdivides “CHINESE” into two categories: “The dark side of their character” and “The bright side of their character.” He inserts numerous footnotes, wholly incidental to the text, protectively between the reader and the narrative to qualify and control Chinese precepts detrimental to the
pedagogy of the Church of England. His list of books for further reading, on the other hand, shows few signs of discrimination; the twenty-five books on China it contains includes the major Jesuitical works. In 1762 Percy published a selection of his background research in a small volume titled *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese*. His selection of material for this volume clearly reflects the underlying editorial disposition of his notes to the novel. It includes essays critical of the Jesuits, such as the Lutheran ecclesiastical historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim’s “Authentic Memoirs of the Christian Church in China.” Originally published in 1748 in the German edition of Du Halde’s *History of China*, this essay alleges that Du Halde “has not related all that he might and would have related, had he been an impartial historian.” It claims that the Jesuits were aware that China was evangelized long before they arrived, and that their proselytizing method improperly “connects and intermixes the doctrine of Jesus with the morals of Confucius” (*Miscellaneous Pieces* 2: 6, 11).

The collection also includes William Chambers’s “Of the Art of Laying out Gardens among the Chinese,” as well as Murphy’s favourite, Hurd’s essay “On Chinese Drama.” Percy contributed a preface and an English translation (made from Prémare’s French) of “The Little Orphan of the House of Chao.” He also added his own “Dissertation on the Language and Characters of the Chinese,” which he wrote apparently to satisfy Griffiths’s earlier request for a discourse on Chinese writing to preface *The Pleasing History*. Percy’s dissertation expounds on the conjecture submitted by Turberville Needham (1713-81), the English naturalist and a Roman
Catholic priest—Voltaire falsely accused him of being an Irish Jesuit—that Chinese characters derive from Egyptian hieroglyphics. Although Needham’s conjecture was discredited shortly before Miscellaneous Pieces went to press (Qian Zhongshu, “China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century” in Hsia 157-58), Percy claimed he had insufficient time to remove his dissertation from the collection (Davis 94).

Percy’s preface to The Pleasing History attempts to establish a critical distance from the novel by critiquing its literary qualities. The novel is poorly contrived and artificial, he writes, its imagery neither exact nor lively, and its narrative encumbered by dry and tedious detail extraneous to the plot. The “littleness and poverty of genius” which typifies Chinese literature, he says, is traceable to “that servile submission, and dread of novelty, which inslaves the minds of the Chinese, and while it promotes the peace and quiet of their empire, dulls their spirit and cramps their imagination” (1: xii-xiii). He nevertheless recommends the novel to William Shenstone because it affords insight into the Chinese mind and through it “knowledge of our common nature” (Percy Letters 110).\(^\text{13}\) Shenstone believed that this deeper insight is what Collins fails to show in Persian Eclogues (Percy Letters 52). Percy says that human psychology is displayed with greater clarity by a Chinese writer because Persians are more inclined to be carried off in wild flights of fancy. Although The Pleasing History’s structure resembles chinoiserie, it is “more regular

\(^{13}\) Sir William Jones later writes that Oriental tales ought to be studied in England because they afford “a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind” (Works 5: 547-48).
and artful than is generally seen in the compositions of the East; hath less of the marvellous and more of the probable.” However imperfectly, “it contains an unity of design or fable, and the incidents all tend to one end, in a regular natural manner, with little interruption or incoherence” (1: xiv). Paradoxically, Shenstone light-heartedly asks Percy, “Are you never prejudic’d by the Air of Learning, the obscurity, the rarity, and, perhaps the Difficulty, of your work, to imagine something in it more extraordinary, than the Publick will perhaps discover?” (Percy Letters 51).

While Percy looks to the novel as a window on human psychology, which in Britain was still conceptualized as a philosophy of the mind, Shenstone presumes that Percy is concerned principally with discovering in China new exemplars of literary style and form, playfully likening him to the Jesuit who labours to translate a poem in the length of time it would take to compose one ten times better (Percy Letters 51). Percy’s notes, however, are grounded in the belief that human psychology is essentially the same through place and time, and that Chinese “peculiarities” simply reflect its response to different environmental and educational circumstances. It is an approach to cross-cultural understanding that allows writers of the period (especially those treated in this study) to use the idea of China to comment, directly or indirectly, on their own society. If the Chinese possess mental characteristics in common with the human family, then their “peculiarities” can be studied, in the spirit of the

14 Horace Walpole, pretending that his gothic novel was an actual historical manuscript, remarks tongue-in-cheek: “It is natural for a translator to be prejudiced in favour of his adopted work. More impartial readers may not be so much struck with the beauties of this piece as I was. Yet I am not blind to my author’s defects” (Castle of Otronto 5).
experimental psychology being evolved by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, to gain insight into the workings of the human mind in an alternative world or divergent society with certain parallels to Britain. In the novel’s depiction of injustice and the desire for enlightenment and liberty, a British readership, accustomed to allusive social commentary and satire since the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, would have found it difficult not to see aspects of its own from an unfamiliar angle. In this sense, the novel shares certain similarities with “as others see us” works of satire and social commentary such as Goldsmith’s *Chinese Letters*.

**Confucianism and the Novel’s Readership**

*The Pleasing History* sought also to participate in the intellectual and commercial success enjoyed by travel literature. Physical travel and eyewitness accounts, made possible by a geographical revolution in exploration and discovery, afforded a wealth of factual data to challenge or supplement existing ideas in Britain about the human family. Percy felt himself underwriting a form of travel somewhere between the imaginative and the actual, inviting the reader to take a journey into the Chinese mind that promises to show its people and culture through their own eyes, free from the extraneous preconceptions of a mediating observer. Goldsmith’s Altangi advocates a similar subjective approach (Letter VII): “Let European travellers cross seas and deserts merely to measure the height of a mountain, to describe the cataract of a river, or tell the commodities which every country may produce; merchants or geographers, perhaps, may find profit by such discoveries, but what
advantage can accrue to a philosopher from such accounts, who is desirous of understanding the human heart, who seeks to know the men of every country, who desires to discover those differences which result from climate, religion, education, prejudice, and partiality” (Works [ed. Friedman] 2: 40).

_The Pleasing History_ itself discounts sight-seeing travel as an approach to enlightenment. When Tíeh-chung-u sets out to see the world’s four corners—Percy interprets these as Europe, Asia, Africa, and America—embarking on an educational journey similar to the Grand Tour, he reaches only as far as Shantung province in the ancient southern state of Lu, the cradle of Confucianism and China’s holy land, and his journey becomes instead a kind of inadvertent pilgrimage. There, Shuey-ping-sin advises him against going abroad. “You may travel through the world in pursuit of knowledge,” she says, “but if you would be truly wise, you had best remain at home.” Percy adds: “as the only Knowledge in request in China is that of Morality, and of the Government, History, Rites and Literature of their own Empire, so this can neither be promoted by Travel, and is only to be attained by severe application to their own private studies. Hence the character of a hard student is greatly respected among them” (2: 90-91n). Like Altangi, Tíeh-chung-u acknowledges the rewarding cultural parallax which travel can induce, but he eventually comes to realize that physical travel is not the most direct path to wisdom. He heeds Shuey-ping-sin’s advice and applies himself to intellectual travel or book study, a Confucian approach to moral wisdom aligned less with Roman Catholicism and its emphasis on an
experiential tradition than it is with a British Protestant’s confidence in the value of individual judgement and the primacy of scripture.

Tieh-chung-u’s book learning and good judgement serve him better than any stretch of worldly travel. They become the source of personal enlightenment as well as a means to establishing a public identity which allows him to participate in the political life of his nation. In China social status is represented as being conferred neither by wealth or political patronage, nor by blood, pedigree, or birth. China’s meritocracy, an egalitarian relationship between individuals and the political institutions by which they are governed, would doubtless resonate with Britain’s contemporary middling class, which, as Plumb notes, demanded more political involvement as its “literacy increased by leaps and bounds” (10-11). Tieh-chung-u rises up from relative obscurity through the social strata by virtue of good education, sagacity and a commitment to justice. He does not buy his way to political power: his political currency is personal integrity and sound moral sense. When he travels, he travels locally, often amongst the common people with whom he never loses touch, using his education to protest their grievances and protect their rights.

At the start of the fourth volume we find that Tieh-chung-u has “grown a very personable man,” which Percy understands to mean “fat and jolly.” Percy quotes Le Comte to put a visual image to Tieh-chung-u, who is never physically described. He says that the Chinese idea of masculine beauty “require[s] a man to be large, corpulent and burly: to have a large forehead, little flat eyes, a short nose, ears rather of the largest, a little mouth, a long beard and black hairs.” A man is considered
handsome “when he fills his easy chair, and by his gravity and bulk, makes a large and pompous figure” (4: 22n). Percy’s note suggests that Tieh-chung-u may have been corrupted by the luxuries attendant on his success, calling to mind Defoe’s satirical portrait of a “Chinese Don Quixote” whom Crusoe encounters outside Peking sitting under a tree:

lolling back in a great elbow-chair, being a heavy, corpulent man, and his meat being brought him by two women slaves. He had two more, whose office, I think, few gentlemen in Europe would accept of their service in, viz., one fed the squire with a spoon, and the other held the dish with one hand, and scraped off what he let fall upon his worship’s beard and taffeta vest; while the great fat brute thought it below him to employ his own hands in any of those familiar offices which kings and monarchs would rather do than be troubled with the clumsy fingers of their servants. (Farther Adventures [Stockdale ed.] 2: 262)

Tieh-chung-u, however, retains a consistent manly vigour throughout the novel. He may have become personable but he is never portrayed as given over to dissolute indulgence in sensual pleasure like Defoe’s gross Chinese “gentleman,” who is imagined in the light of a Presbyterian’s Calvinistic beliefs. In the final episode Tieh-chung-u puts on armour, takes up a giant brazen mace and kicks down the door to Tah Quay’s palace, chivalrously rescuing the imprisoned maiden and her parents within (1: 59). At times even Sheuy-ping-sin complains that he “hath very little of the gravity of a student” and “is rough and headstrong, and seems more like one of the sword” (2: 130). He is regularly given over to fits of righteous anger and moral pride, and always quick to deal out a stiff beating to anyone deserving one. Percy laments this lack of gallantry, which he says is a roughness found typically in the “most savage and unpolished nations of the world” (2: 129n). He situates the young scholar’s character somewhere between the Noble Savage and the Noble Sage, the
two types Walpole would later intermingle for satirical effect in his Chinese fairy tale Mi Li. Ultimately, however, Tieh-chung-u proves to be just that—a type. He is described only in generalizations about his psychological and moral qualities, displaying little variability, complexity, or self-awareness, like a character in didactic and moral literature such as romances, histories, and novels of manners. We never truly enter his skin as we do in Richardson and Defoe. He is for the most part an expression of the moral imperatives of Confucianism. Although he lacks the psychological complexity that might better connect him with the common humanity Percy tries to elicit from the novel, he is redeemed somewhat in Percy’s estimation by his “virtue and decorum,” perhaps in the same way that Murphy believes his characters are in comparison to Voltaire’s.

The Novel’s Heroine and the Condition of Women in China

*The Pleasing History* imparts an equally typed and ambivalent portrait of its heroine Shuey-ping-sin. Her physical appearance is only vaguely suggested by her general traits of character. She is beautiful, but the reader is left to guess at the features of that beauty. Does she have blackened teeth or small feet, those qualities the Chinese were thought to admire in women, as Du Halde, Bell, and Goldsmith note? Does she have little eyes and big ears? “The Chinese Ladies,” writes Nicolas Andry de Bois-Regard, “are […] fond of little Eyes; but to make amends, they like to have the Ears very large, broad, and hanging down” (75). The reader is never told. “Ugly” women, such as her niece or the Eunuch of Danger’s sister, are juxtaposed to
her throughout the novel, but what makes them ugly also remains obscure, apart from their vices.

While the novel links physical beauty with virtue, its representation of the Chinese concept of female virtue does not entirely correspond with the impression conveyed by Du Halde. According to Du Halde, Chinese women cultivate an attitude of humility and submissiveness toward men, or have it imposed upon them as the oppressed subjects of paternal authoritarianism. Confucian philosophy, as outlined by the Jesuits, strongly emphasizes the proper fulfilment of one’s social role. Moral excellence and political stability are attainable only after relations between the sexes have been properly ordered, which in the neo-Confucian system necessitates a separation of male and female social roles into public and private spheres. The man’s proper role is public, conducted in the “outer court.” The woman’s is conducted in the “inner court,” tending to the private affairs of the household. Neo-Confucian education, in so far as it concerned women, narrowed over time, and eventually females were simply trained to meet the demands of motherhood and domestic management. Patriarchal authority gained in importance, repressing the female’s independence by social practices such as forced seclusion, arranged marriages, and footbinding.

The striking image of the latter was propagated in Europe largely by the Jesuits—Marco Polo never mentions footbinding, although Mandeville and others do—and the crippling practice came to symbolize in Britain China’s patriarchal oppressiveness. According to Du Halde, “Among the Charms of the Sex the
smallness of their Feet is not the least; when a Female Infant comes into the World, the Nurses are very careful to bind their Feet very close for fear they should grow too large.” Chinese ladies, he says, are subject all their Lives to this Constraint, which they are accustomed to in their Infancy, and their Gait is slow, unsteady, and disagreeable to Foreigners: Yet such is the Force of Custom, that they not only undergo this Inconvenience readily, but they increase it, and endeavour to make their Feet as little as possible, thinking it an extraordinary Charm, and always affecting to shew them as they walk.

Du Halde attributes the practice to the jealousy of Chinese men, who, to oblige their Wives to keep at home, are said to have brought little Feet into Fashion. The far greater Number think it to be a politick Design, in order to keep the Women in a constant Dependance: It is very certain that they seldom stir out of their Apartment, which is in the most inward Part of the House, having no Communication with any but the Woman-Servants. (2: 139)

Patricia Ebrey criticizes Du Halde and the Jesuits for not satisfactorily emphasizing that footbinding was a barbarically crippling mark of male oppression (12). Indeed, the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Morvan de Bellegarde goes so far as to suggest that Chinese women kept themselves secluded by their own vanity, and “there is not any thing which can more fully convince us of the Whims there are in Fashions, than the Fancy of the Chinese Ladies for little Feet, in which the principal Part of their Beauty consists” (45). China’s neo-Confucian patriarchy considered women equally unwilling to grow intellectually and unable to regulate their sexual desires. For these reasons, they were socially bound: disqualified for a liberal education, debarred from participating in moral discourse, and prevented from taking on any role in government affairs. Within the Confucian system of self-cultivation, women discharge their moral duties simply by becoming model wives and mothers. At a time when women’s rights and liberties were in gradual ascendance in Britain, the
Jesuits’ description of the condition of Chinese women ran against the grain, appearing grossly backward and emblematic of the “Defects of the Female Sex in that Country” (*Ladies Library* 2: 177). Mary Ann Yates echoes this in her epilogue to *The Orphan*: “A little more at home than English wives:/ Lest the poor things shou’d roam, and prove untrue,/ They all are crippled in the tiney shoe” (n. pag.).

*The Pleasing History*, however, places its heroine in a different light, representing her as a victim of patriarchal injustice. The novel begins by picturing Shuey-ping-sin in the role expected of her. She appears alone in her cloistered garden on the day her uncle brings Kwo-khé-tzu to steal a glimpse of his promised bride. She exhibits the proper Confucian qualities associated with a woman’s social station: she is a chaste young lady who has little say in choosing a spouse, and whose traditional sphere is domestic rather than public. Whenever she ventures outside her home, she is invariably carried in a closed sedan chair by male servants, confirming that a woman in China is expected to live according to the dictates of a deeply patriarchal tradition. Her status may improve somewhat after marriage but not her autonomy; beforehand she remains in her father’s charge or that of a paternal surrogate, and afterwards she comes under the authority of her husband, who may take more than one wife or concubine. Shuey-ping-sin confirms also that a young lady may engage in self-study but is barred from formal education, as schools in China were institutions designed exclusively to prepare men to sit for the

15 James Nelson quotes Locke on the subject to suggest the harmfulness of such constriction (104).
examinations that would admit them into the imperial bureaucracy. We also see that women belonging to the lower social classes fare worse. They receive little education and enjoy even fewer rights. If suspected of a crime, for example, they may, unlike women of refinement, be subjected to torture under Chinese law, as witnessed by the magistrate who orders the fingers of Lee-thay-cong’s wayward concubine placed in stocks to extract a confession. Percy’s own attitude to the social strictures intended to keep women “virtuous” in China is ambivalent. He evidently presumes Shuey-ping-sin has dwarfed feet, as he quotes Du Halde and Le Comte on the subject in a note intended to add visual detail to an episode in which she “hastens” to her door in short shuffling footsteps (1: 190n). He regards the practice as part and parcel of what he later calls the “patriarchal simplicity which so still remarkably prevails in the domestic and political conduct of the Chinese,” and compares these to “some of the wild nations of North America” such as “noble savages” like the Iroquois (2: 260-61n).

There is nothing ambiguous, however, in the novel’s treatment of women. As the plot progresses, Shuey-ping-sin’s extraordinary resourcefulness and erudition soon challenge the patriarchal attitudes of her male persecutors and, more generally, the trivialization of women in China as decorative charms. While she pursues the ennobling Confucian task of defending a father wrongly exiled, she also uses her intellect as a means of self-empowerment, asserting her right to public expression, an inheritance, and a free choice in marriage. Susan Mann demonstrates that this theme is prevalent in many Chinese novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (19-
Shuey-ping-sin’s intellect allows her to assert a degree of rational control over her life. A memorable incident illustrates this. When her suitor’s henchmen steal her away locked in a sedan chair, they later find inside only a box of pebbles wrapped in a scarlet cloth. Although shrewd enough to escape her pursuers’ repeated snares, Shuey-ping-sin neither compromises her moral standards nor cedes her feminine gentleness. Her Chinese name in fact reflects the coalescence of a deferential nature and firm moral and intellectual strength. Literally translated, it means “water with heart as pure as ice.” Ice (冰 ping) represents a crystalline mental sharpness at the virtuous heart (心 xin) of the water (水 shuey) that symbolizes her femininity.

Shuey-ping-sin proves to be as learned as she is clever, adroitly engaging men in moral philosophy and poetic discourse. When her uncle shows her ancient verses intended to cast a pallid light on Tieh-chung-u’s character, she knows enough about the subtle complexities of Chinese poetics to recognize them as forgeries. Percy cautions the reader, however, not to assume from her exceptional literacy that the Chinese value learned women. Quoting a Chinese moralist, he writes: “You cannot commend a woman more, than to say she is not learned” (2: 227n), echoing Mary Wortley Montagu who advised her daughter that a lady must “conceal whatever learning she attains, with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness” (380). In Britain, contemporary sentiments abounded on the inferiority of the female sex: that the bold, independent, and enterprising spirit, so much admired in boys, should be suppressed when it happens to discover itself in the other sex. Girls were often taught to give up their opinions and conceal their learning and
reason. Elizabeth Montagu would have found an ally in our Chinese heroine, whose uncle complains “hath a tongue, and knows how to use it [and] a mouth, whose words are keener than the edge of a pen-knife or razor.” “I had scarce uttered one word,” he grumbles, “when she immediately answered with arguments fetched from ancient and modern authors, and backed with a multitude of reasons; insomuch that I could not open my mouth” (2: 61). The novel holds out rationality as a great instrument of humanity and liberation, a force over which even Kwo-Khé-tzu’s wanton ambition cannot ride roughshod. The strength of Shuey-ping-sin’s appeal to reason curbs his passion such that he “stamped and raved like a madman” (2: 62). In 1749 Elizabeth Montagu, in a letter to Mrs. Donnellan, lamented that “wit in women is apt to have bad consequences, like a sword without a scabbard, it wounds the wearer and provokes assailants. I am sorry to say the generality of women who have excelled in wit have failed in chastity” (2: 166). Shuey-ping-sin, however, is esteemed by Tieh-chung-u and others for her ability to use her wit to parry attacks on her virtue. Ironically, though, she is not quite Percy’s romantic ideal, the type he portrays in his 1755 elegy on Flavia, or the well-tempered, submissive type he sought in a wife: a woman, he wrote, who would be

possess’d with a sweetness of Temper able to soften the bitter Cares of Life, with a Mind properly cultivated to render her not undelighted with the Conversation of a Book-worm: & with such a moderate Knowledge of the World & Share of good breeding, as to do the Honours of my little Table with a become. Ease & dignity, & when my Noble Patron or any of his Friends honour my humble Roof with their Presence, they may meet with no aukard [sic] or unpolite Reception […] (qtd. in Davis 42)

Percy occasionally frowns upon Shuey-ping-sin’s behaviour, not because it falls short of polite womanly conduct, at odds with the soft and nurturing character hailed by
Rousseau as the incarnation of feeling and submissiveness, but because it fails to adhere to the dictates of Christianity. When she proclaims, for instance, that “the injury then offered me was too great ever to be forgotten, though my enemies were to be sacrificed and their flesh offered to me to appease my resentment,” Percy is at pains to remind the reader how Jesus taught his followers to love one’s enemies, quoting at length passages from Luke and Matthew (2: 51-52n).

Percy’s estimation of Shuey-ping-sin’s moral character darkens considerably when she threatens suicide before the Grand Visitor. Whereas Murphy would have considered this Shakespearean, Percy adds a note pronouncing the Chinese “the most cowardly people in the world” because they are “much addicted to Suicide, and none more than the females and most pusillanimous among them” (2: 256n). He stops short of labelling suicide a sin, as a Roman Catholic would have, but he fails to acknowledge that Shuey-ping-sin is invoking her feminine vulnerability to amplify her plea for justice. She sums up her predicament by saying: “My mother being dead and my father at a distance, I remain alone in my house a poor helpless maiden, observing the laws of virtue and modesty, as it becomes all young ladies to do. While I thus past my time in innocence, suspecting no harm, I have been treacherously persecuted by a young man, named Kwo-khé-tzu, who hath contrived a hundred ways to ensnare me; all which I have still endeavoured to avoid.” She reminds the Grand Visitor that his first action upon arriving “was to do violence to my inclinations by commanding me to marry this young man, contrary to all reason and law” (2: 257-58). It is a pointed comment that would have pricked an English
readership. If, as post-1688 ideology insisted, monarchs were no longer rulers by divine right but by contract, on what grounds could fathers and male suitors legitimately claim their ascendancy over women?

Relations between the sexes provide the catalyst to much of the novel’s action. Shuey-ping-sin’s plight is brought about by her position as a chaste and intelligent female in a corrupt, male-dominated society; Tieh-chung-u’s adventures are all set in motion by his desire to assist females in distress. The two are drawn together by chance or destiny, but they rebuff a speedy marriage and conclusion to their troubles, instead holding fast to an idyllic sense of social decorum which only conjures up further tribulations. Their plight calls to mind the stock plot involving a moral trial in which the hero and heroine must prove themselves worthy of each other. In this case, they must do so, not as in romantic narratives by transcendental passion, but by more rational tests of probity, stoic selflessness, and social merit as guardians of public virtue. Curiously, Percy attributes their forced romantic aloofness to superstition: “Among a people so superstitious as the Chinese, it may well be judged a sufficient reason for not prosecuting such an acquaintance, that it has so ominous a beginning” (2: 121n). If this remark seems out of place, it is perhaps because Percy saw an opportunity to insert here, however awkwardly, a sideswipe at the Jesuits’ claim that Chinese religiosity is less superstitious than it appears on surface. At any rate, Percy concedes that an easy marriage would have had “consequences […] fatal to them both” (2: 131n), although he laments the chasm separating British and Chinese romantic sensibilities, suggesting that “the Hero of the piece cannot but
suffer in the opinion of a very fair Reader, for his seeming Indelicacy and want of Gallantry.” He continues: “after all it is impossible there should be any such thing as Gallantry among a people, who admit of no intercourse between the two Sexes” (2: 127-28n). Later he notes that “the Chinese have some notion of an original state of innocence,” which existed long ago when “the two sexes cloathed alike, and conversed together without restraint” (2: 287n). While Jesuit sinophiles continued to scour the Chinese cultural landscape for traces of Edenic innocence, Percy thinks the Chinese have fallen away from any such “original” state. To his mind their cultural sophistication has merely exaggerated decorum between the sexes to a higher pitch of absurdity than in France. Shuey-ping-sin clearly represents a revolution in female manners in China, but Percy’s notes offer a peculiar interpretation. She represents to his mind a woman kept in ignorance of her full potential under the specious name of innocence, which prevents her from taking part in a socio-sexual reorganization that would promote the acceptance of mental and spiritual equality.

**The Gulf between Chinese and British Culture**

Percy’s notes often call attention to the novel’s stilted urbanity, tacitly comparing the Chinese literary sensibility with a deepening sincerity of style and romantic sentiment in English novels of the period. One note, for example, highlights an episode in which Kwo-khé-tzu, after being duped into marrying Shuey-

16 For a book-length treatment of this theme, see Guilhamet’s *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature.*
guwin’s ugly daughter, retires to a darkened bedroom and, “stretching out his hands to find his way to the bed, said, ‘Ah! She is asleep: I will pull off my cloaths and go to sleep too’.” Percy says that this passage “probably did not so much proceed from simplicity in the Author, as from an affectation of modesty,” and that it shows that the “Chinese are a very affected people, and all affectation leads to absurdity” (1: 116n). While some readers may have considered such modesty an endearing contrast to popular depictions of gross Persian sensuality, Percy censures it because it runs against the grain of Christian simplicity and honesty. “Chinese morals,” he cautions, “notwithstanding their boasted purity, evidentally fall short of the Christian, since they know not how to inspire that open and ingenuous simplicity, void of all guile, which more elevated principles of morality propose to our esteem and imitation” (1: 129n). Paradoxically, Percy later lauds Chinese shrewdness. The Chinese, he writes, “are the most subtle crafty people in the world,” possessing “an acuteness and cunning that is truly wonderful, whether it be exerted in promoting their own interest in general, or in extricating themselves on sudden emergences” (1: 228n).

Whereas the Jesuits sought out (and sometimes overstated) points of intersection between Chinese and Christian moral codes, Percy makes small but numerous alterations throughout the novel to passages he fears may encourage false parallels. When Tieh-chung-u declares an oath before “heaven, genii or spirits,” for instance, Percy notes that the original manuscript actually reads “angels” (2: 143n). He discloses his substitution to stress the disparity between Chinese and Judaeo-Christian concepts of the supernatural, applying the same editorial convention,
acceptable at the time, which he used in preparing his early English ballads for publication. He wants the reader to know that although some “Chinese expressions exactly correspond to those in Scripture” (2: 65-66n), Chinese thought is not the same as Christian thought. “How different,” he asks, “do the Chinese reason from us?” (2: 144n). The answer, he claims, emerges with better clarity in the novel’s descriptions of temporal government and the administration of justice in China. The Chinese reduce moral virtue to order, regularity, and propriety in personal conduct and manners, and these qualities, as they inform state governance, derive not from divine revelation but by analogy to a harmonious temporal family. Tieh-chung-u’s desire to see justice carried out is, Percy notes, therefore “natural in a nation, whose fundamental principle it is, that the state is a large family, and that the rulers ought to have for the subjects, the same regard that parents have for their children.” The Chinese thus “require no refined skill in politics to judge of the merit and talents of their princes,” only the ability to judge their rulers by the standards of “a good mother or father” (1: 205n). Whereas Du Halde and the Jesuits believed that the Chinese ascribed their rulers’ “characteristicks of superiority” to a “Heaven [Tien]” according with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Percy contends that the Chinese understood them in a purely secular light. As a result, he says, Chinese behaviour is more susceptible to absurdity than Christian behaviour, a claim infusing a sense of irony into the erstwhile Tory ideal of the moral economy.

Percy illustrates this absurdity by referring to the Chinese way of cultivating humility, a practice central to the proper functioning of Confucian society. “The
Chinese always affect to speak meanly of themselves and whatever belongs to them,” he writes, and “even to mean and inferior people they give an honourable name: thus a servant, if he be a grave person, is called the great master of the house: a bargeman, the chief master of the vessel [...]” The Chinese go astray, however, by carrying this manner of speaking to “ridiculous excess,” even though “in many respects [it] resembles that of the ancient Hebrews, which we so justly admire for its venerable and majestic simplicity.” “If this peculiarity of address is not found adhered to throughout this history,” he writes, “it is because the Translator hath substituted the European phrase instead of the Chinese: a liberty which he hath taken in other instances” (2: 150-52n). Such editorial mediations paradoxically muddy the waters, for they conflate rather than distinguish Christian and Confucian moral codes.

Percy locates the widest gulf between Confucian and Christian thought in ideas concerning an afterlife. He addresses this subject at length in relation to the episode in which Shuey-ping-sin, who is preparing to commit suicide, expresses optimism the emperor will review her petition impartially and ultimately bring justice to “her memory” (2: 267). Again drawing on Du Halde, he writes that the Chinese emperor has authority to confer posthumous honours and that the Chinese consider one’s memory, held by those still living, to be an assurance of “life” after death. Like the Jesuits, he notes that “Confucius himself hath scarce dropt a hint on this subject” (2: 168-69n). His subsequent notes, however, cast in doubt the Jesuits’ contention that Chinese ancestor worship is essentially a non-religious practice. The Jesuits had taken this position partly to defend their highly controversial policy of cultural
accommodation in China, the immense success of which buttressed their continued existence as a missionary order. Percy undermines their argument in frequent editorial allusions to China’s other, competing notions of an afterlife, laying emphasis on the conspicuously superstitious beliefs of “the Bonzes or followers of FO.” Fo, he says, travelled to India some 500 years before Pythagoras and brought back a medley of ideas from the Brahmins (2: 268n). His disciples, the Bonzes, now “teach that there is a paradise or delightful abode in the west, where FO waits to receive [the most distinguished of] his votaries, and to make them partakers of his bliss,” but,

on the other hand, that there is a hell beneath the earth, the abode of Yen or evil spirits, and under the dominion of a Yen-yang, or king of demons; and that they there are Lo-ban or spirits of destiny, whose business it is to convey the souls of men into their bodies at the moment of their birth, and to drag them away at the moment of death to the subterraneous dominions, where [if they have deserved it] they are cruelly tormented by [the] other spirits. They believe hell to contain nine several compartments, and that after the soul hath passed through them all, it transmigrates into a new body: if it hath behaved well in its former state, into that of a man, a prince, &c. (2: 267-68n)

If this Dantean underworld strikes a Christian chord at all, it is clearly more “Romish” than Protestant. Tellingly, Percy’s notes, recurrently finding fault with Buddhism, which the Chinese literati considered “extravagance and nonsense” (qtd. in Gernet 39), sound more like a constant sniping at the wilder shores of Roman Catholicism. In one note, for example, he writes that “the corrupt doctrines of the Bonzes” allow one to purchase impunity or atone for bad behaviour “by Fastings, Penances, Pilgrimages, Alms to themselves and Contributions to their Pagodas; in short by being any thing else rather than Good and Virtuous” (2: 168-69n).
Turning to the question of whether the Chinese believe in God, Percy writes: “the Jesuits allege” that the Chinese use the terms “The Heaven and The Earth” as “phrases to signify the Deity, the Sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth.” He is sceptical, noting that “the Chinese have no particular term in all their language that expressly denotes the Supreme Being, or answers to our word GOD,” although he acknowledges evidence suggesting that the Chinese believe in “a Divine Providence” (4: 42n). The Chinese in fact did have a name roughly equating to God (上帝 shangdi or “sovereign on high”), which had been used by the Han for nearly a millennium to signify a patriarchal ruler deity, but its usage carried many connotations, each closely linked to its context within China’s Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian traditions. In the sixteenth century Ricci adopted the word to denote the God of Christianity, and by the eighteenth century it was widely accepted by China’s Christian converts and many Western Sinologists, but for most Chinese it never fully shed its Buddhist associations.17 When John Bell visited Peking in the early 1720s, he entered a temple with a “monstrous image” of Fo sporting two “great googling eyes” (158) and found himself having to abandon his expectation that this supreme deity might correspond to the Judaeo-Christian God. He consequently turned his gaze toward China’s more rational theists in search of analogous belief.

Percy looks in a different direction, to the metaphysical Taoists who espouse a “future glory” existing in another life or attained in the here and now through

17 For a detailed discussion of this subject, see Kim’s Strange Names of God (119-266).
spiritual exercises and meditations. He only briefly alludes to the Taoist doctrine of metempsychosis because his sources “are all of them very confused and obscure on this article” (2: 269n). He instead quotes at length a motley assortment of Chinese sayings concerning Taoist notions of an invisible soul and a heaven under the earth. Combing through these for hints of absurdity, he finds some readily enough: the Taoists believe the departed cry out at the desecration of their bones, vengeful ghosts stalk the living, and the souls of criminals pass into nearby bodies at the moment of execution. Percy again asserts that “no people are more superstitious than the Chinese in the article of apparitions, specters, &c.” (2: 271n).

Percy is well aware that his notes on Chinese religion paint a muddled picture. He excuses himself to a degree by citing the obscurity of Chinese thought, which he says is evident in the novel’s poetic embellishments. He points out that “the Chinese are very fond of Poetry, and in their Romances, Novels, &c. often insert four or five Verses to enliven the narration.” For example, the reader encounters the following verses on the delicate merits of transient virtue under threat when Shuey-ping-sin brings Tieh-chung-ü home to nurse him back to health:

The lucid dew falleth to the ground but is not lost;  
It springeth up in tender grass and golden flowers;  
From clear and spotless actions, thus ariseth fame and happiness.  
Where shall now be found so virtuous a pair?  
Only thoughts of gratitude that night employed them. (2: 36-37)

Percy says that “in the Translator’s M.S. the three first of the above verses were so obscurely written, with such interlineations, corrections, &c. that the Editor was obliged to guess at the meaning, or rather to substitute something equivalent” (2: 37n). Oddly, he attributes this poetic abstruseness to China’s constrained political
system rather than to the abilities of the translator: “The nearer any people are to a state of wild nature,” he writes, “while their customs and notions are few and simple, it is easy to conceive that their Poetry will be easy and intelligible to other nations.” But “no people live under more political restraints than the Chinese, or have father departed from a state of nature” (4: 233-34n). This seems paradoxical since many other notes compare China’s patriarchal simplicity to the more “primitive” cultures in North America.

Chinese proverbs prove equally murky. When Shuey-ping-sin’s uncle entreats her to marry Tieh-chung-u, he broaches the subject by quoting a Chinese proverb: “Whoever hath sore eyes will see clearly in ten days if he let them alone to cure themselves.” Rather than hazard a guess at the proverb’s hidden moral, Percy simply quotes an incidental remark from Du Halde: “no People are more subject to blindness than the Chinese, which is by some attributed to their feeding on rice” (2: 111n). This bit of trivia no doubt caught Percy’s attention because he suffered from persistent eye problems himself, but it sheds no light on the proverb, which is a pity because Percy states elsewhere: “no truer judgment can be formed of the temper and genius of any nation, than from their common Proverbs” (3: 183n). The trouble with Chinese proverbs, he notes, is that they are either impenetrable or at least “require a circumlocution to render them intelligible” in English because Chinese is “the most concise language in the world, in which two words often contain an intire sentence, and when translated, require a multiplicity to unfold their meaning” (3: 184n).
The Triumph of Justice and Virtue

Linguistic difficulties cannot obscure the novel’s central theme, which echoes contemporary literary concerns in Britain. *The Pleasing History* conveys an idea of China as a nation in which the application of justice has fallen away from its ancient ideals, casting the failure of liberty as a social and political pathology. Shuey-ping-sin laments that “there are only two words in our days by which both the people and Mandarines regulate their conduct, and those are RICHES and POWER” (2: 85). In a moment of Christian-like charity, she advises Tieh-chung-u to relinquish his desire to punish Che-bien, saying he was compelled only by fear of losing his office and ought to be pitied. Throughout the novel, the two young protagonists remain spirited censors of political morality, championing public-mindedness and political liberty. Tieh-chung-u’s freedom of speech is guaranteed by his appeals to reason and justice. He poses no danger to public order and threatens only the malignancy corrupting government and those who set up private interests above public virtue. He is an outspoken agitator working to close the gap between the theory and the practice of proper government. “If we examine the *Chinese Government in Theory*,” writes Percy, “nothing seems better calculated for the good and happiness of the people; if in Practice, we shall no where find them more pillaged by the great” (2: 166n). Percy was neither the first to commend China’s aspiration to a meritocracy, nor the first to criticize its practicability. In his *Letter to Cleomenes* (1731) Eustace Budgell lauded China’s system because it leaves fewer opportunities for corrupt officials to secure
power (95-96). A countervailing argument appeared in *An Irregular Dissertation, Occasioned by the Reading of Father Du Halde’s Description of China* (1740), an anti-Walpole pamphlet criticizing China’s civil service examinations for testing a candidate’s ability to read and write but not his moral character. Percy doubts the soundness of China’s meritocracy because those who advance by merit often come “from the lowest ranks, so that they come poor to their governments; they lie under strong temptations to be rapacious and greedy.” He does favour the institutions in China established to check such temptations. China’s laws, for example, afford all citizens easy access to public tribunals, and the imperial court regularly sends visitors into the provinces to inspect the application of justice, to receive complaints against local governors, and to hear appeals. If an appeal goes unsatisfied, one may seek an audience with the emperor directly. When Shuey-ping-sin dispatches her petition to Peking, she instructs her servant to make such a request by sounding a drum outside the imperial palace. Percy tells us that this drum was installed by China’s ancient emperors as the commoner’s last recourse to justice. He gives a lengthy account of its demise, saying “it is a pity so excellent an institution is no longer kept up,” perhaps implying a corresponding attitude of neglect or indifference in Britain to the lower classes of society (2: 259-60n).

Percy notes another Chinese curb on the arbitrary abuse of power. It is the *Imperial Gazette*, a large pamphlet published daily in Peking detailing all public

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18 For a general discussion of Budgell’s idea of China, see Leites (148-50).
transactions and imperial responses to memorials received by the emperor. It is from the *Gazette* that Tieh-chung-u learns of his father’s illness and departure from court. It serves as both a guide “for the Mandarines in discharge of their offices” and “a severe check upon their conduct” because

> it not only contains the names, places of abode, &c. of all new Mandarines, and of those to whose places they succeed; but also of all that are deprived of their employments and the reasons for their dismissal; *viz.* this for being too severe or indulgent in his punishments; that for embezzeling the Emperor’s tribute; another for oppression; a fourth for want of talents to govern well. (3: 15n)

The *Gazette* is prepared with a solemnity such that its editors would be severely punished for introducing the smallest inaccuracy. Anyone daring to insert a deliberate falsehood could face execution. British newspapers likewise boasted their role as guardians of independence and liberty in a nation where freedom of speech was considered the cornerstone of all others, the palladium of civil, political, and religious rights. In England, however, both Lords and Commons made efforts to suppress reports of parliamentary proceedings. Publications such as the *Political State of Great Britain*, the *London Magazine*, the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and the *Historical Register* reported important debates, but these were treated by both houses as a breach of privilege. Johnson and other editors, fearful of being brought up to the bar, had to put together such reports surreptitiously and cloak the identity of the speakers under fictitious names. If not entirely accurate, *The Pleasing History* presents an idea of China in which freedom of the press is not merely tolerated but a matter of official concern. Social criticism in China, it seems, would not have to be cloaked in the musings of, say, a visiting British philosopher in the manner Walpole
uses a visiting Confucian philosopher in London to voice his condemnation of Admiral Byng’s execution by placing it in the mouth of Xo Ho.

In addition to the Imperial Gazette, Percy mentions China’s “Tribunal of Censors, whose business it is (not unlike that among the Romans) to watch over the public manners, sparing neither Emperor nor Mandarines.” Chinese officials display zeal and efficiency “in the discharge of this office, [and] they often shew surprising courage and perseverance: some of them have persisted for two years together in accusing a Viceroy supported by all the grandees; and without being discouraged by delays or opposition, have at length compelled the court to degrade him, to avoid incurring the public odium” (4: 10-11n). Percy regrets that these august institutions are responsible only to temporal law and politics, “backed by no sanctions of future rewards and punishments, though they may influence the exterior, they will not affect the heart, and therefore will rather create an appearance of virtue, than the reality.”

Citing evidence from Lord Anson’s Voyage and the Modern Universal History, he concludes that Chinese law is deficient in so far as it holds “no check from conscience,” at least not one that conforms to the dictates of the Christian God, and therefore is “not supported by higher sanctions, than what affect temporal hopes and fears” (2: 167n).

Nevertheless a contemporary British readership may have found that China’s more centralized civil service compared favourably with Britain’s system of still largely autonomous and heterogeneous local self-governing institutions carried over from Tudor and Anglo-Saxon times, even though these were essentially democratic
in form. In England officials such as justices of the peace had acquired, except in times of civil disturbance, virtual independence as the local oligarchies of the shires, boroughs and parishes. They had become local despots, even if they were benevolent despots and, as Basil Williams writes, “in the main public-spirited men animated by a hoarse common sense, a pride in their duties, and a paternal interest in the poorer neighbours who looked to them for guidance and correction.” Although the idiosyncrasies of the single judge or a grave aberration of justice could be taken up at quarter sessions or brought before the judges of assize, “this was a serious business not likely to be undertaken by the simple, uneducated folk of little means chiefly subject to their jurisdiction.” In practice, there was little to check the actions of the abusing despot “intent only on curry[ing] favour with the rich and powerful and oppressing the humbler folk who were unable to bribe him” (43-65).

The Pleasing History represents “effeminate” dissipation as the corrupting dynamic responsible for China’s political and social ills. It is juxtaposed throughout the novel with China’s ancient ideals concerning justice, which are characterized by the masculine qualities embodied in Shuey-ping-sin’s father, a capable and courageous military leader exiled for no other reason than engaging the Tartars in battle without first paying customary visits of politeness to dissolute mandarins at court. His own position at court has been usurped by Kwo-khé-tzu’s father, a depraved and effeminate mandarin who unjustly blames China’s military failures on Shuey-keu-yé and his chosen general Hû-biau. Percy inserts a lengthy note to indicate “at how low an ebb is [China’s] military prowess” by recounting Lord
Anson’s skirmish near Canton, in which the Chinese attempted to stave off attack by exaggerating their forces (3: 133n). When Tieh-chung-u returns to Peking, he finds General Hû-biau condemned to death and awaiting execution, an astonishing turn of events considering the dearth of brave men to check the barbarians’ impending advance on the capital. Hû-biau, rather than attempting to vindicate his actions, has resigned himself to death because “the present times are vile and corrupted” (3: 136). Tieh-chung-u ventures before the tribunal that passed sentence on him and appeals for his release. Percy declares that his actions show a “firmness and integrity in opposing oppressive measures, that would do honour to the patriots of Greece and Rome” (3: 141n). The emperor grants Hû-biau an opportunity to redeem himself in combat with the Tartars. Walpole must have wondered how Byng’s case would have turned out in China had the admiral been Chinese and there brought up on a charge of disengaging the enemy rather than flying too eagerly into battle like Hû-biau.

While Hû-biau is away fighting, Kwo-khê-tzu remains at home engineering yet another scheme to prevent Shuey-ping-sin’s marriage to Tieh-chung-u. To this end, he enlists support from the grossest embodiment of China’s profligate effeminacy, the Eunuch of Danger, who lures Tieh-chung-u to his palace under false pretences and attempts to ensnare him into marrying his sister. Tieh-chung-u invokes an ancient Chinese law in his defence, but the Eunuch claims that he can persuade the emperor to overrule any law at his pleasure, thereby juxtaposing his emasculate personal ambition against the empire’s legal principles. The episode tacitly raises a question of longstanding importance to Britons concerning the theoretical power of a
king (4: 69). Tieh-chung-u has to summon up all his masculine strength to extricate himself, saying: “you are all of you deceived in thinking to conquer me: my name is Tieh, that is Iron; my body, my heart are all of iron, hard and inflexible, it is impossible to move me” (4: 82-83).

Tieh-chung-u is saved when two small eunuchs enter to announce that Hû-biau, another embodiment of masculine virtue, has returned victorious from the Tartar frontier. The Eunuch, however, works feverishly behind the scenes to renew suspicions of an illicit love affair and illegal marriage between Tieh-chung-u and Shuey-ping-sin. He lodges a complaint with the Tribunal of Rites and, to ensure a guilty verdict, sends a bribe of a hundred gold pieces to the magistrate appointed to investigate. This magistrate, however, turns out to be no Judas Iscariot but rather Wey-phey, the young student whom Tieh-chung-u had first helped.

Wey-phey conducts his investigation fairly and finds Tieh-chung-u’s conduct saintly. The Eunuch succeeds in casting doubt on his judgement, but the emperor intervenes and determines the protagonists genuinely virtuous. Justice prevails and they are delivered from tyranny and persecution. The emperor encourages their marriage and promotes Tieh-chung-u to higher office. Their fathers are advanced in rank for having properly educated their children. Wey-phey is elevated for discharging his duties fairly and resisting a large bribe. Kwo-sho-su is removed from office and sentenced to fifty strokes. Percy pointedly remarks here: “In China the greatest ministers are not beyond the reach of punishment” (4: 157n). The emperor sums up: “Those that do well shall be rewarded: those that do evil shall be punished.
Let this sentence be published throughout the empire” (4: 159). The couple lives happily together many years in great harmony and virtue, serving the emperor with all sincerity. Percy claims that he “hath been careful to exhibit the exact form in which the Chinese Author concludes his book” (4: 168n). The last line reads: “Both Tien-chung-u and Shuey-ping-sin afford a striking example of virtue and integrity. May their fame be spread abroad for ever!” (4: 167-68). “From these words,” Percy writes, “one might be tempted to suppose that the foregoing history is founded on real fact” (4: 168n).

Percy, who recommended the novel in part as an exemplar of “virtue and decorum” in response to British “fictitious narratives of the most licentious and immoral turn,” might just as well have altered the title to “The Pleasing History, or Virtue Rewarded.” Shuey-ping-sin, however, is no Pamela Andrews, either in moral character or psychological complexity, and at least one critic described the novel as a “most unpleasing performance.” Indeed, sensibilities in Britain were becoming tempered by the more sombre scenes painted by sentimental novelists, in which the embattled individual could no longer count on a happy ending, or reason and beneficence lead to triumph in a wicked world. Walpole, like Percy, regarded the novel as artistically flawed but nevertheless a source of genuine information about the Chinese. Some readers were no doubt pleased with the story, delighting in the novelty of its curious narrative design, similar to an elaborate chinoiserie pattern, or relishing in its presentation of moral conduct. Others probably gave more serious consideration to its expression of Chinese political philosophy, finding the Confucian
relationship between individuals and the institutions by which they are governed still worthy of discussion or debate. The novel portrays China as a nation in which the title to rule is wholly dependent on character, ability, and education. The way of Confucius is the way of action animated by the ideal of justice. Confucian schooling is designed to develop character and intelligence to the utmost, equipping students to become true political participants, not simply instruments of those who rule but moral activists who play a dynamic role in revolutionizing any government in which they might take part, making it serve the needs of the people. The Confucian student struggles to bring the application of justice back to its ancient ideals, championing liberty against social and political corruptions. Percy’s notes implicitly represent this as a critique of French political absolutism or “Romish” religious authoritarianism.

The uncertain effect of his editorial interventions, however, so often tempering uncritical admiration for Confucian principles, leaves contemporary readers’ actual responses open to conjecture. Confucianism attaches considerable importance to rational good conduct, but Percy’s notes suggest it lacks the ultimate moral imperative of a proper understanding of, and belief in the one true God. Whereas Murphy sought to recover and celebrate a native British genius by way of reworking a Chinese play, Percy’s notes seek to carve out a distinctively British idea of China, a corrective in some measure intended to loosen the Jesuits’ interpretive authority.
Chapter 4

Citizen of the World: Goldsmith’s Chinese Narrator

From January 1760 to August 1761, Oliver Goldsmith contributed a series of epistolary essays to John Newbery’s newly inaugurated Public Ledger. The Chinese Letters, as they came to be known, purport to be the correspondence of Lien Chi Altangi, a Chinese mandarin visiting London for the first time, who reports home to China, sometimes to his son Hingpo but more often to his friend Fum Hoam, first President of the Ceremonial Academy of Peking. His letters playfully subject the follies and foibles of the British to the critical evaluation of an ostensibly Confucian moral and philosophical outlook honed by worldly travel. Goldsmith found the pseudo-Oriental letter an especially attractive vehicle for satire, for, as he notes in an earlier essay on Montesquieu, “that satire which in the mouth of an Asiatic is poignant, would lose all force coming from an European” (Monthly Review, Aug. 1757).

This chapter examines how Goldsmith came to choose a Chinese philosopher-traveller for his voice, constructing a persona around a particular idea of China that enabled him to interrogate the collective conscience of a British readership whose world view at mid-century was broadening but whose self-understanding, particularly in the metropolis, seemed to be narrowing in consequence of national insularity and
pride. Altangi arrives in London representing a loftier moral order and an enlightened culture grounded in reason. Gradually he is tempered by feeling and transformed into the embodiment of a moderate Johnsonian conception of cosmopolitan man who reveals a common humanity beneath the accidental differences of cultures and ethnicities.

Like Murphy and Percy, Goldsmith believed that among the Asiatic countries only the “polite Chinese” had escaped a breakdown into despotism and a relapse “into more than pristine barbarity.” A visiting Chinese philosopher seemed a fitting vehicle for an extended satire on the follies and foibles of British manners. Public incredulity toward Altangi forced Goldsmith to reconsider the pretence. He soon began to shift attention away from Altangi’s Chineseness by focusing his satire on the ways in which Londoners perceive (or misperceive) foreign cultures and the psychological dynamics that shape transcultural understanding. Altangi is transfigured from a simple rationalist into the embodiment of a more complex outlook that militates against false impressions of China induced by chinoiserie, thereby affirming the fundamental oneness of the human race. For Goldsmith, the activity of discovering the East—or any foreign culture—necessarily begins with philosophically disciplined introspection, which involves a systematic stripping away of self-illusion. Deconstructing misperceptions of the Other becomes central to the process and to the Chinese Letters as they progress. Two centuries before Said, one finds in Goldsmith’s Chinese Letters a Saidian critique of Eurocentric visions of the Far East that ignore actual Orientals and undercut their ability to represent
themselves. Altangi’s humane cosmopolitanism is the product of Confucian rationality tempered by British feeling, leading to transcultural empathy and understanding, which is the life-lesson that Goldsmith drew from his own continental travels.

In all, Goldsmith published 119 Chinese Letters. Although the popularity of chinoiserie had already entered into decline in Britain by 1761, the letters met with considerable popularity and did much to establish the reputations of both the Public Ledger and Goldsmith as a writer. Many letters were reprinted in other periodicals, including the Royal Magazine, the Court Miscellany, the British Magazine, and the Gentleman’s Magazine (which also published at least one parody). After the series ran its course, Goldsmith collected the letters together, added four new ones, and in 1762 reissued them in two volumes under a title reflecting the theme of humane cosmopolitanism that had emerged as they progressed: The Citizen of the World.

As a vehicle for social and political satire, the pseudo-Oriental letter genre, less subtle perhaps than classical Western epistolary traditions but fresher, was already well established on the European continent. It had received its impetus in 1684 when the Italian Giovanni Paolo Marana initiated a series purporting to be written by L’Espion Turc at Paris, which soon appeared in English as The Turkish Spy. That Goldsmith was familiar with Marana’s work is evident from a letter he wrote home to his uncle while still studying medicine at Edinburgh, in which he says he feels “here as recluse as the Turkish Spy at Paris” (Works 1: 5). Marana’s success inspired a wave of imitators, including Charles-Loïus de Secondat, Baron de
Montesquieu, who amused his Parisian readers by showing France through the eyes of a Persian visitor in *Lettres Persanes* (1721). Later, Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d’Argens, adapted the genre to the character of a Chinese visitor in *Lettres Chinoises* (1739-40), taking full advantage of the intellectual and aesthetic vogue in Paris for things Chinese. Hamilton Jewett Smith demonstrates in his book-length study of the subject that Goldsmith’s letters are heavily indebted to these works, both as stylistic models and sources of satirical material.

Goldsmith was not the first in Britain to try his hand at the genre. George Lyttleton uses it in *Letters from a Persian in England, to his Friend at Ispahan* (1735). Walpole employs the Chinese variant in 1757 to deliver a caustic political satire occasioned by the execution of Admiral Byng. It was, in fact, from Walpole’s pamphlet that Goldsmith evidently borrowed the name of his Chinese philosopher Lien Chi Altangi, although it was probably his acquaintance with Percy and *The Pleasing History*, as Alda Milner-Barry suggests, that “decided the nationality of the hero of the *Citizen of the World*” (60). A Chinese persona, however, was not Goldsmith’s first choice. According to James Prior, he had thought “to make his hero a native of Morocco or Fez; but, reflecting on the rude nature of the people of Barbary, this idea was dropped” (1: 360). After a time, it became apparent that a Confucian observer would open up more possibilities for irony and humour in questioning the shared assumptions upon which European civilization rested. China, although regarded by some (such as Daniel Defoe) as little more than a distant site of savage wars, harsh justice, cruelty, or licentiousness, was still an object of
enlightened curiosity. Confucianism appealed not only to British political polemicists but also to a fundamental romantic yearning for a temperate society grounded in reason and wisdom. China’s supposedly rational government, a meritocracy of scholar-officials, represented a welcome alternative Europe’s hereditary aristocracy. Its ancient tradition of benevolent absolutism was thought to foster a stable, prosperous, and egalitarian state, attracting the admiration of European thinkers increasingly discontented with the conditions of their own society. As Walter Davis argues, this ideal, unlike humanistic dreams of a “brave new world” inspired by French and English utopian literature for more than two centuries, “was neither projected into the future nor located in a fantasy land.” It seemed a viable practice that could be adopted in Britain. Moreover, China appeared, despite Percy’s objections, to exemplify a culture in which ethics and public morality could stand on rational legs alone, without the crutches of revealed religion, a notion that engaged deists, who looked to China as a model for solving European religious strife and intolerance. “To the philosophes,” Davis writes, “the Chinese people—with their tolerant, humanitarian spirit and well-ordered government—were living proof that no society need predicate its ethical and legal systems upon religious sanctions” (531-34). As the French jurist Jean Barbeyrac noted in 1729 in his reflections on the art of moral government, “there is more to be learn’d from this small Book of Confucius, than from the vast and numerous Volumes of some of the Fathers of the Church” (44).
Like Murphy and Percy, Goldsmith had no first-hand knowledge of China. He had travelled widely in Europe but never farther east, despite at least two attempts to do so. In 1761 he applied to the government to underwrite an expedition to Siberian Tartary, where he thought he could discover useful inventions unknown to the West. One of his Chinese Letters (CVIII) in fact appears to have been written to bolster this application, which was disappointed in the end and even scoffed at by Samuel Johnson (Irving 149-51). He later sought an appointment as physician and surgeon to a factory on the Coromandel Coast in India, where he hoped to make his fortune in the private trade, but this endeavour also failed. Goldsmith was familiar, however, with the Jesuits’ writings on China. By the late 1750s, he had read the histories compiled by Le Comte and Du Halde, from which he occasionally drew material to embellish his own writings and conversation. His “Study of Belles Letters,” for example, quotes Du Halde on Chinese festivals (Works [ed. Gibbs] 1: 343); and, according to Boswell, he once recounted to Johnson and the Thrales a story borrowed from Du Halde about the instinctive hostility of Chinese dogs to butchers (Life of Johnson 2: 232).19

It was not until 1759 that Goldsmith wrote anything substantial on China. His review of The Orphan of China praises Murphy’s treatment for deviating from the “calm insipidity of his Eastern original.” Evidently Goldsmith derived from Du Halde the notion that the Chinese temperament is passionless, a trait he exploits in

19 Goldsmith retells the story in An History of the Earth and Animated Nature (2: 395). See also Du Halde’s version of the story in General History of China (1: 314).
Du Halde cautions that “when you have to do with a Chinese you must take care of being too hasty or warm; the Genius of the Country requires that we should master our Passions, and act with a great deal of Calmness; the Chinese would not hear patiently in a Month what a Frenchman can speak in an Hour; one must suffer, without taking fire, this Phlegm that seems more natural to them than any other Nation; it is not because they want Fire of Vivacity, but they learn betimes to become Masters of themselves, and value themselves in being more polite and more civiliz’d than other Nations” (1: 128-29). Altangi arrives in London duly instilled with Confucian composure and throughout his sojourn labours to preserve it in times of trouble against the false impressions he receives from, and to which he is subjected by the English. His ability to meet trouble with a level head strikes a deliberate contrast to the frivolity and “extravagances” of British chinoiserie. When he fails to keep up a strictly rational attitude, it is to stress his humanity and to add poignancy to the satire, to suggest the impossibility of self-knowledge, or to question (like Percy) whether reason alone is adequate to guide behaviour, whether personal or social.

As brief impromptu essays concerning the social and political problems of the day, the Chinese Letters follow no obvious intellectual order or topical arrangement. They are perhaps similar in this respect to chinoiserie, although it is doubtful that Goldsmith consciously sought to imitate chinoiserie formally. Like chinoiserie, the letters are knit together by multiple underlying thematic strands, which are philosophical, political, and moral in nature. They are also framed by a sensational
tale unfolding in the background, intruding periodically on Altangi’s day-to-day encounters in the dreary streets of London to add the colour of heroic exploits, danger, and exotic landscapes. This frame tale, clearly inspired by *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*, first published in French in 1704, conveys a sense of the larger world looming beyond Europe’s eastern horizon. Through it we learn about Altangi’s misfortunes after he quits China, a crime for which his wife and daughter are imprisoned. We follow the harrowing journey of his son Hingpo who, drawn by filial piety, ventures forth from Peking to search for his departed father, only to wind up a slave among barbarians. Hingpo makes a daring escape with the beautiful Christian Zelis, who turns out to be the Man in Black’s niece, and they are married.20

An awkward consequence of the frame tale’s foray into the exotic is that it adds Persian colouring to Altangi’s Chineseness by association with *The Arabian Nights*. It also smacks of fiction, detracting from the impression of authenticity to which the letters initially aspired. Goldsmith attempts to mitigate these effects by assuming the role of an impartial editor whose footnotes endorse Altangi’s Chineseness. In certain instances, however, his editorial interventions themselves get carried away and turn satirical. Before Altangi’s lengthy philosophical flourish in Letter VII, for example, appears the following note: “The Editor thinks proper to acquaint the reader, that the greatest part of the following letter, seems to him to be little more than a rhapsody of sentences borrowed from Confucius, the Chinese philosopher.” This remark may

20 The frame tale appears in Letters VI, XXII, XXXV, XXXVI, XXXVII, XLVII, LIX, LX, LXI, XCIV, and CXXIII.
validate the Chinese origins of Altangi’s maxims, but it is clearly tongue-in-cheek. It echoes William Wotton who, in his criticism of Sir William Temple’s laudatory remarks on China, claimed that if the Jesuits had presented Confucius’s maxims as their own, they would have been called “an incoherent Rhapsody of moral Sayings, which good Sense and tolerable Experience might have furnished any Man with” (145). Wayne Booth argues that “it is in the nature of this genre that it will not permit a developed drama any more than it will permit a really serious development of philosophy” (894). Goldsmith’s playfulness serves a serious purpose, though. It parodies the English vogue for glibly rhyming off Chinese maxims, and it ridicules the sectarian debates cutting across European theological and political divides over the interpretation of Chinese enlightenment. It also spoofs the elaborate editorial paraphernalia often brought to bear on Oriental translations by English editors, such as Percy, wishing to heighten the importance of their work or, as Said would argue, to establish an intellectual or cultural authority over the Orient (3). In this sense, it might be regarded as what Joseph Lennon describes as “Irish Orientalism,” which “developed both imperial and anticolonial strains, mirroring the Irish population in their participation in and resistance to the British Empire” (123). Like Percy, who uses the idea of China to express English concerns, Goldsmith uses it in part to express Irish concerns.

Apart from the frame tale, a sprinkling of Confucian sayings, and cursory references to things Chinese, the letters convey very little to suggest they could not have been written by a shrewd observer of any nationality or cultural background.
Altangi is, after all, a citizen of the world, a representative of humanity transcending all cultural veneers, exalting the interest of mankind above the interest of country or ethnicity. He is a philosophical traveller whose mission is to cultivate, enlighten, and ennable the human race. It would seem paradoxical in this context to witness Altangi asserting his Chineseness if he were not doing so to ridicule Londoners’ misconceptions. One wonders, though, why Goldsmith made his London observer Chinese rather than an Irishman like himself. He too felt himself “belong[ing] to no particular class” and “resembl[ing] one of those solitary animals, that has been forced from its forest to gratify human curiosity” in the metropolis. He settles on the persona of a traveller from a country farther removed and less familiar possibly because he thought an English readership would be less likely to object to heightened civility and wisdom in a Chinese philosopher.

Goldsmith had experimented with the dynamics of the gentleman-observer—evidently less successfully—in an earlier essay written for the *Weekly Magazine* in November 1759, shortly before his first Chinese letter appeared in December of that year. “A Description of the Manners and Customs of the Native Irish” claims to be a letter written by an English gentleman touring rustic Ireland, “our conquered kingdom” (*Works* [ed. Friedman] 1: 24-30). “While our travellers are busied in studying the manners, the soil, and produce of distant countries,” it begins, “there are several which are at our very doors possessed of peculiarities hitherto unknown, and yet quite neglected.” The Englishman recommends humane travel for educational value while satirizing England’s incipient imperialist attitudes. He also adds a
humorous twist to the British idea of China by drawing a comparison between the Irish and the Chinese Tartars “from whom they pretend to be originally descended,” alluding to an origin myth created in the ninth century by Irish monks who conjectured that Ireland was settled by the Chinese in remote antiquity (Carey 73-79).

Goldsmith may have contemplated using a Chinese persona as early as 1758. Writing in that year to his cousin Robert Bryanton, he poses the existential question that concludes his preface to The Citizen of the World: “What am I?” He furnished Bryanton with a facetious answer by imagining what would happen “if ever [his] works find their way to Tartary or China.” His writings would, he says, surely occasion a lecture upon himself in which he would be acclaimed, on the merits of his Essay on the Present State of Taste and Literature in Europe, “the sun of [literature] and the Confucius of Europe” (Collected Letters 39-40). The lecture would be delivered by a “Chinese Owanowitzer” to a “Tartarian Chianobacchus,” he proclaims, using “Chinese names to show my own erudition, as I shall soon make our Chinese talk like an Englishman to show his.” Altangi is made to talk like an Englishman; he is a “philosophic vagabond” like the Englishman in Cracow that Goldsmith invented for an earlier essay in the Bee, whose aspiration is to bring people together in a common ideology (Works [ed. Friedman] 1: 370).

21 “Chianobacchus” seems to be a combination of “China” and “Bacchus” (the Roman god of wine and revelry); together with “Tartarian” it may suggest a Tartar who revels in the conquest of China. “Owanowitzer” is perhaps formed from “own” and the German masculine noun Witz (“joke”), suggesting a “Chinese” who represents his own (or a private) joke.
Perhaps the first indication that Goldsmith might put a fictitious Chinese philosopher to similar use appears in his essay “On the Instability of Worldly Grandeur” (1759). Borrowing an anecdote from Voltaire, it portrays a learned mandarin who “had long studied the works of Confucius” and “took it into his head to travel into Europe, and observe the customs of a people who he thought not very much inferior, even to his own country-men.” In Amsterdam he visits a bookseller to enquire about the works of “Xixofou” (Confucius), with whom the bookseller is unfamiliar. “Alas,” cries the Chinese traveller, “to what purpose, then, has he fasted to death, to gain a renown which has never travelled beyond the precincts of China” (Works 1: 471-72). The Jesuit Gabriel de Magalhães, who spent 29 years in Peking until his death in 1677, comments (more seriously) on a similar lack of intercultural exchange and awareness:

I have many times observ’d, that when I have been discoursing with the Learned [in China] concerning the Christian Religion, and the Sciences of Europe, they ask’d me whether we had their Books? To which when I answer’d No, they reply’d altogether surpris’d, wavering and scandaliz’d, If in Europe you have not our Books and our Writings, what Learning or what Sciences can you have? (63-64)

Altangi’s point is that philosophy which fails to travel holds as little value as travel uninformed by philosophy. Goldsmith’s satire transfers the European idea concerning China’s insularity and pride to Londoners. In the end, Altangi decides to leave London and continue a philosophic vagabond. While it is true that there is a certain irony in his never fully uniting with those he seeks to unite, his departure is cast as a departure from one place to continue his search for truth and rectitude in others, striving to bring about the oneness of the whole human family.
A New Chinese Citizen of the World

The Chinese “literati novel” genre to which *The Pleasing History* belongs portrays upright characters devoted to moral cultivation through classical study and ethical perseverance. While a strain of satire developed in eighteenth-century China that poked fun at Confucian ethics pursued too rigorously, Goldsmith was probably unaware of it, even though he, too, often engages in it. Altangi expresses Confucianisms as freely as the Chinese author of *The Pleasing History*, but Goldsmith frequently lampoons them. The *Chinese Letters* are, for the most part, firmly grounded in the classical Western tradition. Their substance echoes the staple themes of Horatian satire: complaints about crooked city life, laments on the brevity of existence, the menace of bores and bluestockings. They are less elaborate, however, than the classical Horatian or Ovidian epistle. Like pages torn from a hurriedly prepared diary, they convey a sense of immediacy analogous to experience scrawled out as it happens, before it can be filtered, reshaped, and rearranged. Goldsmith’s familiar tone draws a willing reader into the illusion of being an interloper on an intimate correspondence between close friends or relations. We are invited to identify with the writer or recipient in a manner which, as Booth observes, appeals to our self-esteem and exempts us from the charge of Goldsmith’s satire (s90). Readers are made to feel they are participating in a movement towards a more sophisticated, liberal, and tolerant critique of their own culture through an idea of China that functions as a cultural distancing devise even as it represents a unifying principle.
The personal letter format also serves a qualifying purpose. It allows Goldsmith greater ease in revealing those instances, otherwise kept private, when Altangi fails to live up to his own polite and rational standards. From time to time he experiences lapses in judgement that render him equally susceptible to the criticisms he levels at the English, making it unclear whether or not he represents an intellectually and morally superior vantage point. In these moments he appears no different from the people he observes, except in race, social standing, and education, but even these are misconstrued by the English as often as he misconstrues them in the English. His fallibility reminds us of our own unreliability as subjects and the need for a complex, questioning understanding of the world. Altangi defies simplistic categorization in this respect. He challenges the binary contrasts that give rise and shape to conventional stereotypes of the Oriental, complicating and multiplying possibilities of character and perspective. This complexity differentiates him from the simpler antagonist of Percy’s novel, underscoring an evolution in eighteenth-century British satirical writing towards greater psychological complexity, which Samuel Johnson intimates in his preface to A Voyage to Abyssinia: “The Reader will here find no […] Chinese perfectly Polite, and compleatly skill’d in all Sciences: he will discover, what will always be discover’d by a diligent and impartial Enquirer, that wherever Human Nature is to be found, there is a mixture of Vice and Virtue, a contest of Passion and Reason, and that the Creator doth not appear partial in his Distributions, but has balanced in most Countries their particular Inconveniences by particular favours” (viii). If Altangi is free from defect or blemish, it is only because he is less than perfect. He displays philosophical modesty
in a healthy appreciation of his own follies and ignorance, illustrating that Goldsmith’s claim for the omnicompetence of criticism is in no way a claim for the omnipotence of reason.

Altangi’s character partly reflects certain Stoic ideals that Bonamy Dobrée argues had tinctured British religious and political thought since Tudor times (25) and that David Hume describes in his essay “The Stoic” (Essays and Treatises 90-94). Like the Athenian founders of Stoicism, he adheres to a radical cosmopolitanism teaching that all men are brothers, members of the great city bound together by the spark which is part of divine Reason. Diogenes of Thebes, the Cynic philosopher, is thought to be the first to give expression to cosmopolitanism by identifying himself as a kosmopolitês or “citizen of the cosmos/world” (6: 63), influencing later disciples, such as the Stoic Zeno of Citium, to develop the type of positive conception of cosmopolitanism with which we are familiar today. Britons had come to identify civic humanism, based on extirpating the passions to lead a virtuous life marked by a stoic, rational, and introspective philosophy, with Roman republicans such as those portrayed in Nathaniel Lee’s Lucius Junius Brutus (1681) and Joseph Addison’s Cato (1713). Rather than draw capital from threadbare ancients by recalling the glories of Sparta or early Rome, however, Goldsmith transforms himself into a more fashionable Chinese sage to interrogate the collective conscience. Confucianism and Stoicism, after all, are not unconnected. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci had already drawn a parallel between the two, systematically using Stoic writings, which he considered essentially compatible with Christianity, as a bridge to facilitate a proselytizing dialogue between the Jesuits and China’s
Confucian literati (Standaert 49-52). Although Altangi’s moral thought is generally Stoic in temper, his stoicism differs fundamentally from the Hellenistic tradition because his character evolves away from being perfectly rational or perfectly dispassionate and self-contained.

Tension between the passions and a Stoical variety of neo-Confucian rationality finds thematic expression in both *The Orphan of China* and *The Pleasing History*, as it does in *The Bonze* and Walpole’s Chinese fairy tale. Unlike Zamti and Tieh-chung-u, however, Altangi professes a more tempered Johnsonian conception of rational, cosmopolitan man. Like Asem in Goldsmith’s earlier “The Proceedings of Providence Vindicated: An Eastern Tale” (1759), he is a rational agent pursuing virtue as its own reward but capable of moral affections, reflecting Goldsmith’s sentimentalist construction of cosmopolitan virtue, which, like Johnson’s, “incorporated Stoical patterns of thought, and even Stoic principles, into advice based ultimately on worldly experience, shrewd common sense, and Christian faith” (McIntosh 333). Altangi demonstrates throughout his letters that reason is not the only criterion of universal citizenship. However much he tries to cling to a rational outlook during his sojourn in London, he is successively tempered by feeling and sentiment, and his search for happiness on the highways of knowledge is regularly frustrated by the vicissitudes of fortune. Hingpo and Fum Hoam repeatedly undercut his cerebral approach, and his daily experiences in the metropolis subvert the absolute moral authority of his philosophical maxims. Altangi may have departed China a rigid Confucian man of reason, but he is taught by his London experience to understand feeling, which is elevated to a position alongside reason as a requisite of
true civility, just as scriptural revelation is for Percy. Being neither primitive nor fully formed, he is neither a Noble Savage nor a Noble Sage. In this sense, Goldsmith reimagines British and Chinese civilizations as complimentary rather than as alternatives to one another, deliberately complicating the idea of China in a way that draws China closer in human terms, imaginatively bridging a gulf as yet little crossed by actual contact.

**Altangi Compared to Actual Chinese Travellers in Europe**

Goldsmith was writing during a period in which few Chinese actually visited Europe. Zheng Manuo Weixin came to Rome in 1649, brought by the Jesuit Martin Martini from Macao to study philosophy and theology at the Collegium Romanum. He later became the Jesuits’ first Chinese priest (Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China* 449). In 1681 Sen Fu-tsung accompanied Fr. Philippe Couplet on his return voyage from China and visited several European cities. He wound up in the Bodleian, where he helped Thomas Hyde to enlarge the library’s Chinese collection (Foss 121-40). Walpole parodies their collaboration in Mi Li by portraying a young Chinese prince struggling to get to Oxford, where he hopes to consult the “sage Banks” who is busied in the Bodleian devising mad-cap schemes to expand Britain’s global empire.

Other Chinese Christian converts arrived at Paris and Rome during the eighteenth century to study Latin and French as well as Western arts and sciences under Jesuit tutelage. In 1723 four Chinese students returned with Fr. Matteo Ripa to
Naples where they established a small evangelical training school, from which Lord Macartney would later secure two translators for his embassy to Peking (Ripa 147-56). (Altangi states in Letter XVI that he too studied under Jesuit missionaries at Peking, calling attention to those qualities of character his experiences in London progressively subvert.) Even so, Chinese visitors were a rare sight in Europe. Those who did make the voyage recorded few, if any, impressions. The only substantial Chinese travel account concerning Europe before the nineteenth century was given by a Manchu envoy sent in 1723 to the Tangut Tartars inhabiting the region north of the Caspian Sea, but this is little more than a perfunctory sketch of the Russian cities he toured much earlier in 1712-15 (Mirsky 264).

It is not until the nineteenth century that one sees any indication of what a visiting Chinese would have thought about Europe or felt worth recording. Hsieh Ch’ing-kao, who spent fourteen years on a foreign trading vessel calling at the principal ports of Europe in the late eighteenth century, was persuaded by a friend, long after returning to China and succumbing to blindness, to relate as much as he still remembered. The result is a concise, matter-of-fact description of Europe’s geography, manufactures, commerce, and dress, as well as its military, engineering, and architectural capabilities (Mirsky 269-70). Ironically, his is the very sort of travel account Goldsmith derides nearly a century earlier when, reviewing Van Egmont and Heyman’s Travels, he laments that travellers to Asia describe “the same cities, towns, ruins, and rivers” without giving any consideration to the human topography of the mind (Works 1: 184). Altangi articulates Goldsmith’s travel
philosophy: “Let European travellers cross seas and deserts merely to measure the height of a mountain,” he says, “to describe the cataract of a river, or tell the commodities which every country may produce; merchants or geographers, perhaps, may find profit by such discoveries, but what advantage can accrue to a philosopher from such accounts, who is desirous of understanding the human heart?” Europeans, he continues, “may perhaps outdo us in the arts of building ships, casting cannons, or measuring mountains; but are they superior in the greatest of all arts, the art of governing kingdoms and ourselves?” (Letter VII). Altangi’s Confucianism is as much a call to moral action as it is the basis for detached observation. It prompts him, like the protagonist of Percy’s novel, to scour the human landscape for injustice and needless suffering, and to oppose it even at the expense of his own happiness and immediate reputation (Letter XLII).

Altangi exemplifies a loftier moral order achieved through an enlightening process conceptualized, at least initially, as the struggle of reason to lift society through stages of development, from barbarism to progressively higher strata, but one always threatened by its own excesses. He is one of the “polite Chinese” Goldsmith thought had escaped a relapse “into more than pristine barbarity” (Works 3: 79). When Goldsmith’s Chinese Letters appeared, however, Britons were equally interested in “primitive” peoples and cultures that lived in supposedly uncorrupted states, both eastward and westward across the Atlantic. Some thought these “natural” cultures might contain an antidote to their own “polite” excesses. Altangi shares some of the Noble Savage’s endearing qualities, especially his naïveté and
capacity for surprise when confronted with the oddity of British norms, but he clearly wears the mantle of urbanity, although he has not been corrupted by it, as has the “greasy Don” whom Crusoe encounters on the road to Nanking.

Altangi disturbs popular assumptions about foreign primitivism through a habit of humane observation. He discovers in London evidence of an incipient collapse of polite and cultured society. His letters try to expose it to a British readership as it witnesses the bounds of its empire expanding but whose self-understanding seemed to be narrowing. Insularity and pride seem impediments to feeling, set up by excessive reasoning, which blinds Londoners to the common humanity beneath the accidental differences of civilizations. In his earlier essay “On National Prejudices” Goldsmith writes: “I should prefer the title of the antient philosopher, víz, a citizen of the world, to that of an Englishman, a Frenchman, an European, or to any other appellation whatever” (*British Magazine* [August 1760] 461). Altangi travels the same path of humane cosmopolitanism: “Confucius observes, that it is the duty of the learned to unite society more closely, and to persuade men to become citizens of the world” (Letter XX). His corporate ideal, based on good sense and humane judgement, represents the life lesson Goldsmith learned during his continental travels and is not meant to be construed as uniquely Chinese. Altangi places himself in a long line of prophets and philosophers stretching back to classical antiquity, which tacitly includes such moderns as Bacon, Addison, and Montesquieu. “From Zerdusht down to him of Tyanea,” he writes, “I honour all those great names who endeavoured
to unite the world by their travels; such men grew wiser as well as better, the farther they departed from home” (Letter VII).

To illustrate that true politeness is the same over the world, beneath different cultural veneers, Altangi compares two letters composed by two ladies, one Chinese and the other English. Gentility is shown to originate in the heart, wherein lies our shared humanity, rather than in the mind, which can be given over to pride and partiality (Letter XXXVII). In another example, Altangi reads an advertisement listing those who gave money to care for French prisoners of war, noticing that “the names [are] almost entirely English; scarcely one foreigner appears among the number.” It dawns on him that the English can show as much concern with alleviating human suffering as any people, even though they, like the representative Man in Black, often put up a stony façade. He is moved by one name in particular, whose contribution is accompanied by the following words: “The mite of an Englishman, a citizen of the world, to Frenchmen, prisoners of war, and naked.” Altangi declares him “an honour to human nature; he makes no private distinctions of party; all that are stamped with the divine image of their Creator are friends to him; he is a native of the world—and the emperor of China may be proud that he has such a countryman” (Letter XXIII). The words “mite” and “stamped with the divine image of their Creator,” together with the self-effacing disposition of the Man in Black, carry Christian overtones, and yet the English behaviour leading Altangi to a “more favourable opinion of mankind” is not occasioned by anything identified as distinctly Christian any more than it is identified as wholly rational. Almost imperceptibly as they progress the letters
dislodge the idea of China from the European preoccupations with Christianity and reason that had long given it shape and context.

**Goldsmith’s Chinese Disguise**

Goldsmith initially felt it important to create a believable Chinese disguise. In 1757 he criticized a series of pseudo-Oriental letters on Irish politics, *Letters from an Armenian in Ireland*, for failing to establish their narrator’s veracity. “The writer who would inform, or improve, his countrymen, under the assumed character of an Eastern Traveller,” Goldsmith writes:

should be careful to let nothing escape him which might betray the imposture. If his aim is satirical, his remarks should be collected from more striking follies abounding in the country he describes, and from those prevailing absurdities which commonly usurp the softer name of fashions. His accounts should be of such a nature, as we may fancy his Asiatic friend would wish to know,—such as we ourselves would expect from a Correspondent in Asia. (*Monthly Review* [August 1757] 150-51)

Goldsmith’s *Chinese Letters* consequently focus on the English follies a Chinese visitor would find striking, adding ample Chinese colouring (mostly plucked from Du Halde and Le Comte) to accentuate the cultural distance of Altangi’s perspective. Some readers evidently gave themselves over to the illusion, but many did not. The *Monthly Review* remarked: “Although this Chinese Philosopher has nothing Asiatic about him, and is as errant an European as the Philosopher of Malmesbury; yet he has some excellent remarks upon men, manners, and things” (*Monthly Catalogue* [June 1762] 26: 477). Smith writes that Goldsmith’s pretence from the start “was transparent, and the *Public Ledger* soon began receiving letters which aimed to
expose the deception,” after which Goldsmith tried “to cover up the transparency […] by exposing the English ignorance.” He submits that Goldsmith relinquished his charade after the first three months. “When Goldsmith realized that the public refused to believe that a Chinese had written the letters,” Smith writes, “he began to drop the pretense” (Smith 23-25). Indeed, less and less incidental Chinese detail appears in subsequent letters and a heavier emphasis falls on the foibles of English manners and customs. In particular, the letters begin to scrutinize more deeply the ways in which Londoners perceive foreign cultures. Attention shifts to London’s ostensible ignorance of the wider world and to the psychological dynamics that shape transcultural understanding.

For Goldsmith, “discovering” the East necessarily begins with philosophically disciplined introspection, a process of stripping away those self-illusions and preoccupations that Shaftesbury, in his private meditations, terms the “wrong self, a nothing, a lie” (136). Stephen Cox notes the increased attention paid by eighteenth-century philosophers to the difficulty of defining either the nature or significance of the self without considering all the complexities of its relationship to the outside world (13-34). Altangi’s letters too are concerned with this difficulty, especially as it leads the collective self to overdraw ethnic and cultural distinctions in defining and elevating its significance. They recommend that a proper understanding of other cultures is best approached through self-examination. Several characters are tailor-made to convey this message, including the Bookseller who satirically advises Altangi how to write “a volume of Chinese letters” which will avoid critical censure
by conforming to English preoccupations and misconceptions. “Should you,” says the Bookseller, “with the most local exactness, stick to the manners and customs of the country from whence you come; should you confine yourself to the narrow limits of eastern knowledge, and be perfectly simple, and perfectly natural, [the English critic] has then the strongest reason to exclaim. He may with a sneer send you back to China for readers.” Altangi counters that while he is “not possessed of much learning, at least [he] would not suppress what little [he] had.” “Here, then,” cries the Bookseller, “we should have you entirely in our power; unnatural, uneastern, quite out of character, erroneously sensible, would be the whole cry; sir, we should then hunt you down like a rat.” Altangi refuses to conform to such misconceptions, subverting the Orientalism that Edward Said argues came to predominate Britain in the nineteenth century as “knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing” (41).

Altangi argues that the Chinese and British are fundamentally the same beneath their superficial cultural differences, and that this sameness can be appreciated only by examining the Chinese on their own cultural terms, in contrast to those like Johann Gottfried Herder who argue an irreconcilable difference: “as the magnet has not the same variation in China as in Europe,” writes Herder, “so this race of men, in this region, could never become greeks or romans. Chinese they were, and will remain […]” (293). Like Shaftesbury, Altangi regards misconceptions informed by self-illusion and domestic preoccupations as a sort of lie forged in pride
For this reason, he is unwilling to lend his name to a new history of China that the Bookseller has put to press. “What, sir, replied I, put my name to a work which I have not written,” he says, “Never, while I retain a proper respect for the public and myself” (Letter LI). Issuing as it does from a fictitious Chinese, this tongue-in-cheek statement also implies contempt for London’s reading public whose pride and prejudice has made it credulous. It is especially ironic in light of an anecdote on “Goldsmith’s Pride” that appeared some two decades later in the *European Magazine* (Jan. 1784). When a fellow Irishman asked Goldsmith if he could borrow the proceeds of a recently published book, Goldsmith refused, telling him “he should write himself.” He then offered to share the proceeds of a new book if the man were to “draw up a description of China, interspersed with political reflections, a work which a bookseller had applied to Goldsmith for a price he despised, but had not rejected.” Goldsmith did not read the manuscript his Irish compatriot produced before sending it off to press under his own name, unaware that the man had “made the Emperor of China a Mohometan, and […] supposed India to be between China and Japan.” Embarrassed, Goldsmith had to cancel two sheets at his own expense (*Critical Heritage* 198).

Altangi mocks English credulity in his declamations on false travellers’ tales. “When I survey the absurdities and falsehoods with which the books of the Europeans are filled,” he says, “I thank heaven for having been born in China, and that I have sagacity enough to detect imposture” (Letter XVI). Europeans may deride Chinese history as fabulous but “how should they blush to see their own books, many
of which are written by the doctors of their religion filled with the most monstrous
fables, and attested with the utmost solemnity.” No doubt he has Sir Thomas
Mandeville in mind when he mentions European tales of a one-eyed race in Ethiopia,
swift one-legged hunters in India, men with serpent heads inhabiting the Ethiopian
borderlands, and dog-headed people in Egypt. “The writers of books in Europe,” he
says, “seem to think themselves authorized to say what they please.”

Altangi laments that Londoners have made social status the main criterion of
literary scrutiny (Letter LVII). William Black suggests that his voice here “is not a
Chinese, but a Fleet-Street author by profession, who resents the competition of
noble amateurs whose works—otherwise bitter pills enough—are gilded by their
titles” (51). Ironically, Goldsmith’s satirical method plays on an analogous dynamic,
for the appeal of nobility is similar psychologically to the appeal of the exotic. In
Altangi’s own words: “There is something of oddity in the very idea of greatness; for
we are seldom astonished at a thing very much resembling ourselves” (Letter LVII).
Social privilege, like the exotic, creates distance which heightens the impression of
an elevated mind or character. The Tartars’ Lamas, Altangi reminds us, cultivate
such distance to conceal their priestly minuteness from public scrutiny (Letter
LXXIV). The letters exploit this distance to amplify their exotic appeal even as they
attempt to bridge it by revealing Altangi’s human qualities.

Altangi proposes another way of assessing an author’s work. “I have frequently
admired the manner of criticising in China,” he says, “where the learned are
assembled in a body to judge of every new publication; to examine the merits of the
work without knowing the circumstances of the author; and then to usher it into the
world with proper marks of respect or reprobation.” This statement registers
Britain’s growing interest in China’s meritocracy, putting it forward as a corrective to
literary criticism in a country in which “if any choose to be critics it is but saying they
are critics.” Altangi’s subsequent remarks carry broader implications as they link the
state of literary criticism in London to a faltering democratic system: “As almost
every member of society has by this means a vote in literary transactions, it is no way
surprising to find the rich leading the way here, as in other common concerns of life,
to see them either bribing the numerous herd of voters by their interest, or
browbeating them by their authority” (Letter LVII).

Altangi says British ideas about China generally suffer because those Britons
who have actually visited China are not philosophers but merchants and missionaries
whose accounts “are such as might reasonably be expected from men of very narrow
or very prejudiced education, the dictates of superstition or the result of ignorance”
(Letter CVIII). He goes into raptures describing the utility of a British expedition to
the Far East, which would seek to discover “the power of the Asiatics in producing
winds, or bringing down rain, [which] Europeans are apt to treat as fabulous, because
they have no instances of the like nature among themselves.” Despite Europe’s
proud mastery of gunpowder and the mariner’s compass, these inventions, he claims,
originated in China. In a letter clearly written to promote Goldsmith’s own scheme
to visit Siberian Tartary, a journey he hoped would be underwritten by the Royal
Society, Altangi adds: “I never consider this subject without being surprised that
none of those societies so laudably established in England for the promotion of arts
and learning, have ever thought of sending one of their members into the most
eastern parts of Asia, to make what discoveries he was able.” He concludes that it
ought to be a matter of national concern for Britain to send a philosophically minded
traveller to China (Letter CVIII).

**The Perception of Ethnic and Cultural Difference**

When Altangi arrives in London, the English regard him as a curio. “I am sent
for not,” he says, “to satisfy curiosity; not to be entertained so much as wondered at;
the same earnestness which excites them to see a Chinese, would have made them
equally proud of a visit from the rhinoceros.” “From the highest to the lowest,” he
despairs, “this people seem fond of sights and monsters,” especially wax-men,
Indians, and mummies. He writes about an Englishman who dresses up as a wax-
work and charges people to view him from “behind a glass door.” The man sustains
the deception, as do Tartar Lamas, by “keeping the spectators at a proper distance,
and having his head adorned with a copper crown […] till an involuntary fit of
sneezing brought him to life” (Letter XLV). Altangi considers such exhibitions a
perversion of the enlightened spirit on which the nation prides itself. Science and
exploration have not become prelude to moral and political improvement. Instead,
they have been made handmaid to a cultural arrogance learned from the French,
whose “civility to foreigners is not half so great as their admiration of themselves”
(Letter LXXVII). Altangi’s satirical observations in London are intended to provoke that “fit of sneezing” that will bring Londoners to life.

Altangi returns frequently to the theme of ethnic and cultural difference. Although born to a nation that regards itself as the “Middle Kingdom,” the centre of the civilized world, he has come to realize through his travels that cultural insularity and ethnocentricity are self-imposed limitations to human potential. After leaving Peking, he “fancied every deviation from the customs and manners of China was a departing from nature,” but he soon recognized his folly (Letter III). In seeking to show others how to do the same, he registers what Charles Knight terms the “complex nationalism” that emerged in the eighteenth century “when satire shifts perspectives to insist on the priority of universal human nature over the eccentricities of national character and interest” (489).

Altangi’s London sojourn unfolds in a comedy of presumption and misunderstanding as he too struggles to connect across cultures. A high point occurs when he is asked to visit an English lady (Letter XIV). The unexpected invitation at first excites his vanity, for he presumes she is some woman “in all the bloom of youth and beauty,” who, having seen him at a distance somewhere in the street, has fallen spellbound to his good looks. Altangi arrives at her apartment, however, only to find “a little shrivelled figure indolently reclined on a sofa.” She mistakes him for an Englishman because he is dressed after the European fashion. She is surprised to learn he is Chinese. “What an unusual share of somethingness in his whole
appearance,” she says as she scrutinizes him as though he were an artefact in a gallery:

Lord how I am charmed with the outlandish cut of his face; how bewitching the exotic breath of his forehead. I would give the world to see him in his own country dress. Pray turn about, Sir, and let me see you behind. There! there’s a travelled air for you. You that attend there, bring up a plate of beef cut into small pieces; I have a violent passion to see him eat. Pray, Sir, have you got your chop-sticks about you? it will be so pretty to see the meat carried to the mouth with a jerk. Pray speak a little Chinese: I have learned some of the language myself.

In this, one of the few depictions of Altangi through English eyes, the Lady’s opinion is completely altered by the revelation that he is not English. She searches for difference and draws out stereotypes, but always in a ridiculous manner which causes the stereotypes to turn satirically upon themselves, exposing their own absurdity. All the while Altangi is barred from participating in her preposterous monologue. Her notions are conspicuously at odds with his actual character, but she is made oblivious to this by her chinoiserie-induced misconceptions.

It is through the lenses of British chinoiserie that Altangi is transformed into a simple exoticism, and it is against chinoiserie that he most vigorously militates. The English look upon Altangi as though he were a trinket brought back from the East, something admired for its pleasing novelty but otherwise useless. The Lady asks him: “Lord, have you nothing pretty from China about you; something that one does not know what to do with: I have got twenty things from China that are of no use in the world.” He believes that her Chinese trinkets are unworthy of aesthetic consideration, for “nothing is truly elegant but what unites use with beauty.” The Lady protests, saying: “I shall begin to suspect thee of being an actual barbarian.”
Her idea of refined taste divorces beauty from utility. When she draws his attention to her pagodas, he is scandalized that Fo has spread his “gross superstitions” as far as England and says: “Pagods of all kinds are my aversion.” The pagodas to her mind have no religious import; they simply add worldliness to her expression of aesthetic taste. Her indifference to philosophical concerns is symbolized by the next object on the shelf: a headless mandarin. She shows him a “Chinese temple” in her garden and asks: “Is there anything in China more beautiful?” Altangi, however, sees nothing that “may not as well be called an Egyptian pyramid as a Chinese temple.” “What! Sir, is not that a Chinese temple?” she asks, “you must surely be mistaken. Mr. Freeze, who designed it, calls it one, and nobody disputes his pretensions to taste.” Hers is an aesthetic standard based on novelty rather than comprehension. It is Eurocentric in that the Egyptian pyramids, for all their technical mastery, were still regarded by the British as having been built by despotism, vanity, servitude, and superstition (Rollin 1: 12-15).

Despite their civility, or perhaps because of it, the English appear incapable of relinquishing the impulse to turn the experience of otherness into self-congratulatory myth. Altangi despairs of her overbearing misconceptions and resigns himself to silence as he is ushered through more rooms packed with “sprawling draggons, squatting pagods, and clumsy mandarins,” none of which is truly Chinese. The Lady sinks progressively deeper into her fantasies, oblivious to Altangi’s physical presence as well as to his protests, which take the form of a soliloquy on China’s orderly government, social virtues, laws, and ancient wisdom.
Altangi becomes aware that it is not his difference which is causing English curiosity or indifference. It is his sameness: the realization that he, a Chinese, is “formed more like a man than a monster.” If the English do not ignore him, they “wonder to find [a Chinese] born five thousand miles from England, [who is] endued with common sense” (Letter XXXIII). Like the French, the English believe common sense indigenous to their country alone and marvel to find it anywhere else: “Strange, say they, that a man who has received his education at such a distance from London, should have common sense [...] impossible!” Goldsmith then adds, tongue-in-cheek: “He must be some Englishman in disguise.”

Perception is a central concern of Altangi’s letters. Time and again appearances are shown to be misleading, as illustrated by the Pensive Stranger who, although Altangi finds him sitting miserable upon a park bench in a thread-bare coat, actually resides in a “magnificent palace” attended in “sumptuous elegance” (Letter LII). The subsequent letter carries a darker warning about false impressions. In times and places of incipient barbarity—Altangi counts modern London among them—they facilitate a relapse into superstition and idolatry. “The veneration we have for many things,” Altangi says:

entirely proceeds from their being carefully concealed. Were the idolatrous Tartar permitted to lift the veil which keeps his idol from view, it might be a certain method to cure his future superstition: with what a noble spirit of freedom, therefore, must that writer be possessed, who bravely paints things as they are, who lifts the veil of modesty, who displays the most hidden recesses of the temple, and shows the erring people that the object of their vows is either, perhaps, a mouse, or a monkey. (Letter LIII)
This passage sums up Goldsmith’s satirical method. Altangi’s letters are intended to “paint things as they are,” to “lift the veil” of English cultural idolatry and arrogance. Altangi dreams of a physical instrument that could do better: the fabled looking-glass of Lao, which reflects the mind as well as the body. Chusi gave it to each of his three hundred concubines in order to discern their true minds and hearts. A good woman would reflect “neither gaming nor ill-nature; neither pride, debauchery, nor a love of gadding.” The English “would find more real pleasure in this utensil in private, than in any other bauble imported from China” (Letter XLV).

Altangi’s letters substitute for Chusi’s looking-glass. “Instead of characterising a people in general terms,” he explains, a philosophical traveller such as he is able to “lead us into a detail of those minute circumstances which first influenced their opinion: the genius of a country should be investigated with a kind of experimental inquiry; by this means we should have more precise and just notions of foreign nations, and detect travellers themselves when they happened to form wrong conclusions” (Letter XXX). His emphasis on minutiae seems curiously at odds with his philosophy’s universalizing tendency, but he justifies it by arguing that the broad, universal system is best discerned through the narrow sphere around us. A philosophical traveller assimilates and compares experience across cultures after stripping away its exterior gloss to understand its essence. Goldsmith illustrates the dangers of a more brash, head-long approach with his allegory of Happy Valley, in which an attempt to penetrate the secrets of a distant land, undertaken too quickly and carelessly, proves futile and disastrous (Letter XXXVII).
When Altangi arrives in London, the city’s unfamiliarity dazzles his imagination “with wonder and surprise.” He is carried away at first by naïve exuberance for the English, “a people of humanity” (Letter VIII). A prostitute, however, swindles him out of his watch and he soon recalls just how deceptive appearances can be, even to a seasoned philosophic vagabond like himself. He then calls upon “the reasoning principal” to wear away the “gloss of novelty” (Letter III). This process runs through several letters as he enters into a gradually more reflective study of the English character. The “wrong conclusions” he forms are corrected by rational “experimental enquiry” as much as by a change in outlook progressively tempered by feeling.

Altangi looks “to see reasons for several deviations which [the English] make from [the Chinese],” measuring English pretensions against human nature in its local and temporal context (Letter VIII). He overcomes his initial disappointment with English women, exclaiming in a letter to Fum Hoam: “yet still they have souls, my friend” (Letter VIII). He discerns beneath English “national peculiarities” something both individually and universally human, which he claims is the foundation of true politeness. Manners may be “different in every country” but “true politeness is everywhere the same.” “How would an Englishman, skilled in all the decorums of Western good-breeding, appear at an Eastern entertainment?” he asks. “Would he not be reckoned more fantastically savage than even his unbred footman?” (Letter XXXIX). By the same token, a nation’s true character, he later points out, can be oppressed by local circumstance. “In Asia,” he says, “I find [the Dutch] the great
lords of all the Indian seas; in Europe, the timid inhabitants of a paltry state. No longer the sons of freedom, but of avarice; no longer assertors of their rights by courage, but by negotiations; fawning on those who insult them, and crouching under the rod of every neighboring power” (Letter LVI). One wonders if this might be an Irishman’s veiled criticism of the English.

Altangi’s later letters pay considerable attention to English ideas about China. The English, he says, “are generally found to supply by conjecture the want of record, and then by perseverance are wrought up into a confidence of the truth of opinions, which even to themselves at first appeared founded only in imagination.” They know as little about China’s actual manners, arts, commerce, laws, and morals as they do about their imported Chinese knick-knacks. He singles out English savants for particular censure, for they carelessly engage in “long, learned, laborious disputes about what China was two thousand years ago.” Some argue that China originated as an Egyptian colony, dwelling on similarities between Egyptian and Chinese scripts or Egyptian pyramids and Chinese porcelain towers. Others claim that China was settled by Noah or one of his sons after the biblical Flood and identify Fo as Noah himself. Still others contend that the Chinese are descended from Magog, Meshec, and Tubal. These, Altangi says, demonstrate the “infantine folly” into which idleness has led British philosophy, for “China and European happiness are but little connected even at this day; but European happiness and China two thousand years ago have certainly no connection at all” (Letter LXXXIX).
Whenever Altangi asserts his Chineseness to counter such misconceptions, he is overridden, silenced, or ignored by the English, “those islanders” who “pretend to instruct [him] in the ceremonies of China!” Attending a dinner party hosted by an overbearing learned gentleman, he finds that “the moment [he] ventured to speak, [he] was at once contradicted with a snap.” He tries to turn the conversation on China, confident he can speak with unrivalled authority, but even then he is dismissed. “Heavens, thought I, this man pretends to know China, even better than myself! I looked round to see who was on my side, but every eye was fixed in admiration on the great man; I therefore at last thought proper to sit silent, and act the pretty gentleman during the ensuing conversation.” When Altangi visits a second English lady, he discovers that she “had collected all her knowledge of Eastern manners from fictions every day propagated here, under the titles of Eastern tales, and Oriental Histories.” She is astonished that he has no opium and a tobacco-box. During dinner she assigns him to a cushion on the floor and asks whether he would like a plate of bear’s claws or a slice of bird’s nests. Unfamiliar with these supposed Eastern delicacies, Altangi asks for a slice of British beef instead, thoroughly confusing the party: “A Chinese eat beef!” his host exclaims, “that could never be; […] the Chinese never eat beef” (Letter XXXIII). Arthur Friedman points out that this letter, in ridiculing false ideas about China, “presents a curious mixture of genuine misconceptions and genuine customs about which Goldsmith could hardly have been ignorant, since they appear in his sources” (Works 2: 143n).
Altangi’s host is equally astonished that he makes no use of chop-sticks. A “grave gentleman” at the table, whom Altangi presumes is an author, discourses upon the use of chop-sticks in China, “enter[ing] into a long argument with himself about their first introduction, without once appealing to me, who might be supposed best capable of silencing the inquiry.” The Englishman speaks in confident tones, making soaring claims to knowledge, and again Altangi is forced silent. “As the gentleman therefore took my silence for a mark of his own superior sagacity,” Altangi writes, “he was resolved to pursue the triumph:

he talked of our cities, mountains, and animals, as familiarly as if he had been born in Quamsi, but as erroneously as if a native of the moon. He attempted to prove that I had nothing of the true Chinese cut in my visage; shewed that my cheekbones should have been higher, and my forehead broader. In short, he almost reasoned me out of my country, and effectually persuaded the rest of the company to be of his opinion.

The Learned Gentleman chides Altangi for lacking true Eastern rhetorical eloquence, speaking “mere chit-chat and common sense.” A true Oriental, he proclaims, would speak with “sublimity” and relate tales of “Aboulfouris, the grand voyager, of genii, magicians, rocks, bags of bullets, giants, and enchanters, where all is great, obscure, magnificent, and unintelligible.” He says he has “written many a sheet of Eastern tale” himself and recites an example replete with overblown similes and mixed metaphors, in which even the most mundane occurrences are likened to falling stars, splitting mountains, foggy summits, morning dews, and willows weeping over a glassy stream. “There,” he concludes, “there is the true Eastern taste for you; every advance made towards sense is only a deviation from sound. […] Eastern tales should always be sonorous, lofty, musical, and unmeaning.”
The Learned Gentleman embodies the Orientalism that Edward Said criticizes for representing Eurocentric visions of the Far East while ignoring actual Orientals and undercutting their ability to represent themselves. Altangi subversively asks if he has ever visited the East or studied Chinese or Arabic. He then tells the party that “what is palmed upon you daily for an imitation of Eastern writing no ways resembles their manner, either in sentiment or diction,” for Eastern writing in general uses few similes and nearly no metaphors. In China “the very reverse of what you allude to takes place: a cool phlegmatic method of writing prevails.” The Chinese aim to instruct more than to please, and they speak directly. Moreover, they are well versed in the sciences, including some unknown to Europe, and many have easily mastered European languages under Jesuit tutelage.

Altangi’s travels have taught him that “the unaffected of every country nearly resemble each other, and a page of our Confucius and of your Tillotson have scarcely any material difference.” Those English who pretend to know China are those who wear the “the badges of ignorance, or of stupidity,” for to know China the English must, he says, echoing the Delphic aphorism, know themselves. As he draws his speech to a close, however, he looks around to see his audience inattentive. “One lady was whispering her that sat next,” he says, “another was studying the merits of a fan, a third began to yawn, and the author himself fell fast asleep.” Altangi’s departure goes unnoticed, and he is not invited to visit again because he “aimed at appearing rather a reasonable creature, than an outlandish idiot” (Letter XXXIII).
Goldsmith never received the opportunity he had hoped for to travel to the Far East. Unable to draw from first-hand experience of the Chinese, he offers instead a philosophically grounded corrective to the insular Anglo-centric attitudes preventing Londoners from appreciating other cultures and peoples on their own terms, within the context of universal citizenship, whether Chinese or (implicitly) those closer to home like the Irish. One wonders if Goldsmith’s Chinese Letters would have been any different had he actually visited China. The incidental details would have changed, perhaps, but surely not the underlying method and purpose. After all, The Citizen of the World, like Murphy’s play, is more about Britain than it is about China. Goldsmith uses the idea of China, embodied in an imaginary Confucian whose philosophy is as much Greco-Roman as it is Chinese, to convey his own world view, formed within a decidedly Western tradition and honed during his travels on the European continent, in satirizing the follies and foibles of British culture.

A year after Goldsmith published The Citizen of the World, a new account of China went to press in Glasgow which presents the narrative reflections of a Scotsman who actually did make a journey to Peking. While keeping company with merchants and missionaries, John Bell, trained in the medical sciences like Goldsmith and intrigued by the historical processes that shape societies and cultures, became no less a philosophically minded traveller, although of a very different order. Bell endeavoured to bring back such useful discoveries as Goldsmith proposed, and his narrative assumes an equally humanistic attitude to the peoples he encounters. Paradoxically, however, his account leads to a somewhat different, backward-looking
conception of China. While Bell shares Goldsmith’s inclination to place Britain and its global significance in relation to a much larger world looming beyond the eastern horizon, his narrative resituates the idea of China within the context of those European theological and political preoccupations that had informed it since Marco Polo and from which Goldsmith tries to extricate it.
Chapter 5

A Scotsman on the Road to Cathay: John Bell’s China

In 1763 John Bell, a Scottish physician and traveller, published an account of his overland journey to China, made some forty years earlier (1719-22) in the suite of a Russian embassy sent by Peter the Great to the Chinese Emperor K’ang-hsi. Bell had travelled from St. Petersburg to Peking across the northern reaches of Europe and Asia, traversing an expansive landmass “bounded by three of the most potent empires in the word; on the north by Russia, by China on the east, and by the country of the Great Mogul to the south” (51). His journey carried him through a geopolitical landscape already made familiar to British readers by the mid-eighteenth century. Writers like Milton, drawing on Purchas, had surveyed a similar prospect in A Brief History of Moscovia (1682) in recounting a failed Russian embassy to China a hundred years earlier (29-36).

Bell followed the same route taken by Evert Ysbrants Ides, who went to Peking in 1692-95 on behalf of Peter the Great to formalize trade and diplomatic relations with the Manchu court after a series of border skirmishes in the 1680s. Ides’s secretary, Adam Brant, provided the first account of the embassy, which was published in German in 1698 and later in Dutch, English, and French. Ides’s own report appeared in Dutch in 1704. An English translation followed in London under
the title *Three Years Travels from Moscow Over-Land to China* (1706). Containing a wealth of extraordinary information, including the first description of the remains of the Siberian Mammoth, it was considered the most detailed report of Inner Asia up to that time. Defoe may have used it as a source in writing *Farther Adventures*, for there are numerous “geographical coincidences as well as similarities in descriptions of the cities, the tribes, and a pagan idol encountered on their respective journeys” (“Possible Source for Daniel Defoe’s *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*” 231). As Robert Markley observes, Ides’s account was “unusual for its time in that it sets Chinese civilization in an anthropological context of the various peoples and cultures that he and his train encountered in riding, sledding, and rafting across Siberia, through Tartary, to China” (129).

By the early eighteenth century, British mariners had mastered the sea route to China’s southern coast. It seemed that the days of harrowing overland treks to Peking across the arduous Silk Road had passed, and that the spirit of a new age had settled. Britain fixed its attention on sea voyages of discovery and trade, and by mid-century was celebrating a maritime reach that spanned the globe. An overland journey, however, still made for compelling narrative. After some friendly prodding, Bell drew up an account of his experience, which takes the reader back in the footsteps of medieval merchant travellers like Marco Polo to revisit an ancient system of caravan trails running through Russia’s newly acquired colonies of Siberia and Mongolia, brimming with natural resources and inhabited by strange hunting, fishing, and pastoral tribes. From there he moves beyond the edges of the more
familiar world to a region for centuries clouded in myth and still haunted by the memory of the Mongol hordes that once threatened to overrun Europe. After travelling for nearly a year, he approaches from the north the country known as Cathay before Jesuit missionaries discovered in the sixteenth century that it and China were one and the same.

Bell’s narrative is as much a temporal journey back in time as it is a geographical movement eastward, resurrecting an erstwhile dream of finding in China a golden land of prosperity and abundance, a source of inexhaustible wealth and mutually beneficial trade, which had inspired earlier generations of European merchant adventurers but continued to elude the East India Company. It is also a journey across European religious divides, exploring an Eastern spiritual landscape which for centuries had roused missionaries and stirred heated theological debate in Europe, especially concerning China’s place in world history and the controversial proselytising approaches that had widened the gulf between (and amongst) Protestants and Roman Catholics. This chapter explores how Bell’s account of an actual overland journey to Peking recreates the British idea of China. It examines the way in which the narrative approaches China from the empirical vantage point of a Catholic Scotsman travelling on foot through neighbouring civilizations in Russia, Siberia, and Mongolia, helping to reassert the Jesuitical view of China gradually being transformed by the satirical wit of Protestant writers like Defoe or by British flights of fancy inspired by a growing body of pseudo-Oriental tales. The effect is a vivid, earthy picture of the Middle Kingdom’s grandeur and apparent immutability,
which might be read as a reproach to Britain’s smallness, its inability to improve commercial and cultural exchange with China, and its seemingly quixotic aspirations for global expansion and empire.

Defoe rewrote Milton’s journey to China through Siberia and Mongolia as an excursion into a threatening pagan world of turmoil and hardship, unapologetically refracted through a Protestant’s scepticism of “primitive” cultures, exalting Britain’s achievements above those of the Eastern world. Bell, however, who actually was on the road to Peking at the time Defoe was writing *Farther Adventures*, produces a narrative implicitly calling attention to Britain's failures in China and its own shortcomings at home in Europe. At the time, British traders, self-confident in their successes in Moghul India, the Ottoman Empire, and Persia, found themselves regarded as “barbarians” by Chinese officialdom. Still confined to their factory at Canton, they complained of the corruption, stubbornness, and inflexibility of an inward-looking Chinese bureaucracy. China, the richest and largest empire on earth, could dictate the terms of trade and oblige the British to accommodate to its code of conduct. When Alexander Hamilton went out to Canton in 1703, his efforts to trade freely were quickly frustrated and he had to sell his cargo for less than market value. He blamed his disappointment on the Jesuits, adding his voice to the Protestant chorus of complaints about their pernicious influence in China. “The Christian Missionaries,” he writes, “have converted many by the Indulgence of several Emperors, particularly of the Chunghee, and those Apostles indulge their Proselytes in many Things opposite to the System and Canons of the Western Christianity, as
Polygamy, Concubinage, and the Invocation and Adoration of Pagan Saints, as well as Christian, in their Apotheosis, which has caused no small Disturbance at Rome” (2: 270).

Bell, on the other hand, accompanies a Russian embassy as it enters the gated splendours of the imperial palace at Peking, which for more than a century was seen only through Jesuit accounts. There he is received hospitably by the Jesuits and witnesses the honours lavished upon a fully credentialed Russian ambassador, a reception unknown to the British even after six decades of desultory efforts to open up trade and establish diplomatic relations, and one that would still elude the British more than half a century later when Macartney arrived in 1793.

**John Bell and his Travels**

Bell was born in 1691 at Antermony, Stirlingshire, and educated at Glasgow University. While never possessing Goldsmith’s literary ambitions, he did succeed in using his education as a means of travelling to the East. After qualifying in medicine and surgery in 1713, he went out to Russia, like many other qualified Scotsmen of his generation, to seek work and satisfy “a strong desire of seeing foreign parts” (31). In St. Petersburg he met Dr. Areskine, a fellow Scotsman who had obtained his medical qualifications in Edinburgh and become chief physician and privy-councillor to the Russian Czar, Peter the First. Areskine recommended Bell to the Imperial Envoyé, Artemy Petrovich Valensky, who was then looking for a gentleman with “some knowledge in physic and surgery” to accompany an embassy
he was preparing to lead to Ispahan in Persia (31). Bell, who “had, from [his] early youth, a strong inclination to visit the eastern parts of the world” (189), was agreeable and the Imperial College of Foreign Affairs appointed him physician. The ambassador’s suite set out for Persia in the spring of 1715. It arrived at Ispahan the next spring, receiving a majestic welcome at the shah’s court.

Bell returned to St. Petersburg in the winter of 1718 as the Czar was preparing to dispatch another embassy to the Chinese emperor K’ang-hsi. Valensky introduced Bell to Count Leoff Vassilovich Ismayloff, a captain of the Russian Guards whom Peter designated envoy extraordinary to the Manchu court, and once again Bell was commissioned as physician. The delegation’s objective was to improve the lucrative Sino-Russian trade by securing permission for yearly caravans to enter China and a permanent consular representative to reside at Peking. It was also to secure a tract of land in Peking for an Orthodox church (Clubb 30-44).

The embassy embarked on 14 July 1719, travelling through Moscow, Siberia, and Mongolia, and from there on to Peking. It would not return until 17 May 1722, thirty-four months after its departure. All things considered, it came to a satisfactory conclusion. The Chinese granted the Russians a hundred official seals, each permitting one caravan entry. They also approved a site on which a church could be erected at the Czar’s expense. Lorents Lange, secretary to the ambassador, was sanctioned to remain in Peking as a resident diplomatic agent, although he was never allowed to present his credentials and his subsequent efforts to improve trade were disappointed. After returning to St. Petersburg, Bell attended the Czar on his
expedition to Derbent and the Caspian Gates. He was brought back to Scotland shortly afterwards by his father’s death and succeeded to his family’s estate. He returned to Russia in 1734, however, to serve as secretary to the British minister at the Russian court, Claudius Rondeau. In 1737 the Russian chancellor, Count Osterman, chose Bell to act as courier between Rondeau and Sir Edward Fawkner, the British minister at Constantinople, in a mission to treat of peace in the long hostilities with Turkey. A year later, Bell settled for a time to a mercantile career in Constantinople. He married a Russian named Marie Peters in 1746. Then, at the age of 55, he retired to Antermony, where he spent the remainder of his life.

The *Quarterly Review* (July 1817) tells how, “for many years after Mr. Bell returned from his travels, he used to amuse his friends with accounts of what he had seen, refreshing his recollection from a simple diary of occurrences and observations.” One friend, the Earl of Granville, persuaded him “to throw them together into the form of a narrative” (“On M’Leod’s Voyage in the Alceste” 464-65). Although not the first Scotsman to visit China, Bell became the first Scotsman to publish an account of his journey. More than forty years had elapsed since his return from Peking, but he drew up a narrative based on his travel diary (31). The diary has since been lost, but most contemporaries believed that Bell’s account is honest and scrupulous (Clubb 22-24).22 It went to press in 1763 under the title *Travels from St. Petersburgh in Russia to Various Parts in Asia*, appearing in two

22 Pentii Aalto gives a detailed assessment of the accuracy of some of Bell’s observations from his journeys in Siberia and Mongolia (141-64).
quarto volumes sold by subscription in Glasgow. The *Gentleman's Magazine* and
the *Annual Register* for 1763 printed long extracts. Two additional editions quickly
followed in 1764 at Dublin and London. A French translation appeared at Paris in
1766 and a Russian translation in 1776. A new English edition came out in
Edinburgh in 1788, which was reprinted in 1811.

**Bell’s Narrative Approach to China**

Bell’s narrative is first and foremost a travelogue, carrying the reader on a
journey of geographic rediscovery along Eastern trade routes made popular in the
tradition of medieval travel romance. Bell follows in Polo’s footsteps on a
marvellous but earthy expedition across the great wastelands of Central Asia,
penetrating to the centre of a sheltered civilization which Britain had long sought to
understand through direct contact. “Mr. Locke,” speaking in Hurd’s *Dialogues on
the Uses of Foreign Travel* (1763), says that one must come to know human nature
from a “wider and more extensive view of mankind.” That is, one must “read
*Europe* in the mirror of his own country, which but too eagerly reflects and flatters
every state that dances before its surface; and, for the rest, take up with the best
information he can get from the books and narratives of the best voyagers” (158-59).
Goldsmith, who had to rely on books about China rather than first-hand experience,
attempts to show his own country reflected in the mirror of universal humanity. Bell,
who had travelled to Peking and could thus claim legitimacy of another order, opens
up a brilliant vista which tacitly shows Britain in relation to a larger world. He
shows Russia, Siberia, Mongolia, and the vast Chinese interior in stark contrast to the
dreary picture conveyed by monthly trading notices from Canton, where the British
were embroiled in narrow commercial squabbling, or the acerbic wit imparted by
Defoe’s imaginary traveller Crusoe. The result is a picture of Peking that shares a
closer affinity with the Jesuit histories.

The Quarterly Review (1817) praises Bell’s narrative as “the best model
perhaps for travel-writing in the English language.” The Earl of Granville had first
sent Bell’s manuscript to William Robertson with a request to revise it for
publication. The Scottish historian was otherwise engaged at the time and suggested
they consult Mr. Barrow, a professor in the University of Aberdeen, on matters of
style. Barrow told Bell: “Take Gulliver’s Travels for your model, and you cannot go
wrong” (464-65). Gulliver’s Travels enjoyed an immediate success when first
published in 1726 and was reputed to be almost universally read in Britain by mid-
century. Although an imaginary voyage which most readers recognized as satire, its
engaging “Plain Style” appealed to Bell, who adopted Swift’s simplicity of
observation and level-headed, earthy outlook. The style jibed with the sensibility of a
“new” age. Ancient geographies and fantastic tales of travel to the East had already
given way to the visionary empiricism of Richard Eden, Richard Hakluyt, and
Samuel Purchas. “Gulliver’s prose style,” as Ricardo Quintana observes, “is the kind
which had the approval of the Royal Society; it is seemingly matter-of-fact, free of
literary colouring, recording observed details with the fullness and precision of some
scientific instrument” (159-60).
While Bell’s narrative is guided sequentially by the contingencies of travel, it is clearly shaped by the methods of natural science and a physician’s habit of mind. There is little unfiltered and unadulterated feeling, and no spontaneous overflow of emotion that would characterize sentimental travellers later in the century. His account advances in chronological order, recorded as dated entries, with little retrospective grading or selection. Organized as he made them during his journey, his observations appear immediate and hence accurate. He records the routes taken, the towns visited, and the peoples encountered along the way. He takes thermometer readings and investigates agronomy, generally making observations that Defoe or Goldsmith would have considered trifling. While Bell and Goldsmith adhere to very different travel philosophies, they are not at odds in so far as both are concerned with advancing knowledge, exercising reason, testing authorities, and trying conjectures.

In receiving and recording his impressions, Bell brusquely separates fact from fancy, taking care to distinguish hearsay from that which he witnesses at first-hand. Impostures such as George Psalmanazar’s *Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa* (1704), together with a growing body of spurious travel books written by those who had never set foot outside the city limits of London, made eighteenth-century readers distrust narratives of travel to faraway places like China. Many genuine accounts fell under suspicion, especially those written years after their authors were safely home, when descriptions could be, as Johnson often warns, easily confused or embellished. Bell stresses in his prefatory that he has, “through the whole, given the observations, which then appeared to [him] worth remarking,
without attempting to embellish them, by taking any of the liberties of exaggeration, or invention, frequently imputed to travellers” (31). He contends that “it is the business of a traveller to describe places and things without prejudice or partiality; and exhibit them fairly, as they really appear” (49). His narrative is reserved, never reduced to literary frills, and, as Stevenson observes in his introduction to the 1965 reprint, registers “remarkably few judgements” (25). Bell offers what the Critical Review (1770) says a travel book ought to offer: a “happy mixture” of “the utile and the dulce.” In other words, it:

- amuses and captivates our fancy, without the fiction of romance;
- it gives us a large proportion of moral and political information, without the tediousness and perplexity of system. It promotes and facilitates the intercourse of countries remote from each other; it dispels from our minds unreasonable and gloomy antipathies against those manners, customs, forms of government, and religion, to which we have not been bred: it makes man mild, and sociable to man; it makes us consider ourselves and all mankind as brethren, the workmanship of one Supreme benign Creator. (“Baretti’s Journey from London to Genoa” 196)

Bell’s journey of course is sufficiently extraordinary not to need fictional embellishment. Personal details intrude occasionally but they never distract from his balanced and orderly descriptions, which rarely seem contrived.

Bell endeavours to be a Johnsonian traveller “who brings home something by which his country may be benefited” (“Narratives of Travellers Considered” 253). If by expressing scant critical opinion of the Chinese in his narrative he seems to forget that “the great object of remark is human life,” he makes amends by including lengthy “general remarks” on the Chinese, derived largely from Du Halde, in an appendix (175-89), together with a translation of the Peking journal of his fellow traveller Lorents Lange, who stayed on in Peking after his departure. Lange’s
jaundiced report, which became “one of the main sources informing Montesquieu’s negative opinion of China” (Lukin 42), provides a counterpoint to Bell’s even-tempered descriptive account, heightening the impression of its objectivity.

Like many eighteenth century travel writers, Bell spends considerable time describing life on the road that leads to his destination. His narrative’s measured tone belongs to a temperate, well-seasoned traveller. Stevenson suggests that Bell’s Scottish background provided him “with a spectrum of experience of men and manners ranging from the highly civilized to near savagery,” which “perhaps better equipped [him] to encounter without bias the hovels and palaces, the princes and peasants, of his various journeys than would have been an observer from the more sheltered and ordered England of his time” (26-27). During a period in which economic and technological gains made travel possible and comfortable for increased numbers, Bell takes the reader on a journey of extreme physical hardship. The punishing conditions he met with in Siberia and Mongolia accentuate his unflagging forbearance and curiosity. The embassy’s train—its horses and sledges saddled with supplies and presents for the Chinese emperor—labours along interminable stretches of rough terrain, through dense and foreboding forests, and across the vast icy plains and snowy mountains of Siberia for nearly a year. Constantly in danger of being robbed by gangs of marauding highwaymen and threatened by wild beasts, it is beleaguered in turn by piercing cold, violent storms, and oppressive heat. And yet, all along, Bell keeps up assiduous enquiries into local cultures, interacting liberally and sensitively with the peoples he encounters.
The narrative is held together by the spatial and temporal threads of travel. Meticulously marked routes, distances, and times lend it both coherence and veracity, testifying to the period’s growing culture of quantification. Bell translates distances into English miles and records both the ways and the means of getting from one place to the next. Peculiar natural phenomena, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, never get the better of his imagination or judgement. The narrative seems to substitute honest description for the fabulous stories of previous travellers, cautiously guiding the reader away from the seductive allure of outward appearances. Upon hearing legends of a stag with “only one horn, stuck in the middle of its forehead,” for example, Bell quickly deflates the beast’s potentially mythological proportions. He “inquired carefully about the shape and size of this unicorn” and found that rather than resembling the proverbial beast mentioned by Ctesias, Aristotle, and Strabo, which supposedly had a body the size of a horse, “it exactly resembled a stag” (55). He endeavours to be what Voltaire called a “Merchant of a noble Kind,” one “busied chiefly in giving faithful Accounts of all the useful Things” (An Essay Upon the Civil Wars of France [3]), registering anything commercially promising, such as deposits of iron, copper, silver and gold, or asbestos and loadstones. He notes local discoveries, such as a technique for extracting honey from beehives without destroying them, or another for drawing fresh water from a salt-water river (37). Ultimately, however, Bell’s observations are mostly too vague to hold any real practical value, but his scientific attitude at least keeps him from falling into the fantastic exaggerations of previous travellers.
When directing his glance to the human geography of Siberia and Mongolia, Bell frames his observations in the social-scientific terms of such emergent disciplines as political economy, demography, and psychology. He sympathetically describes primitive nomadic tribes which “differ in language, dress, and manner, from any nation I ever saw” (40), insisting upon their humanity and occasionally extolling them as exemplars of natural virtue. The Kalmucks, for example, “are not such savage people as they are generally represented; for I am informed a person may travel among them with greater safety, both to his person and effects, than in many other countries” (52). Surprisingly, those Tartars living within Tobolsky, a fortified trading town inhabited chiefly by Russians and Swedish prisoners of war, “are very courteous to strangers, and esteemed honest” (46). Bell dwells on their natural grace, charming manners, and idyllic life, giving the impression that they are virtuous children of Nature, Noble Savages innocent of European corruption, not unlike the manner in which Captain Cook would describe the natives of Tahiti during his sojourn there in 1769. While conceding that the Tartars are given to intemperance and sensuality, Bell resists sitting in judgement. He attempts to understand them in light of their circumstances, concluding that he should “like [the Mongolians] very well for neighbours” because they are simple and honest (100).

Bell’s observations through Siberia and Mongolia are important because they establish a vantage point from which an alternative civilization in China may be viewed. He pictures the evolution of man and society in the geographical terms of his journey rather than abstract it in the vocabulary of progressive historiography.
The wilds of Siberia and Mongolia represent an antecedent stage in the development of civilization, contrasting and complimenting two highly cultured (though very different) nations existing at opposite extremities of the Eurasian landmass. They are integral to Bell’s vision of China because their primitiveness separates and contextualizes the achievements of two civilizations which were thought to have developed autonomously. Not long before Bell’s journey, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, in an effort to persuade Peter the Great to open up a land route to China, wrote: “I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and in Tshina [China] (as they call it), which adorns the Orient as Europe does the opposite edge of the earth.” Leibniz goes on to say that “perhaps Supreme Providence has ordained such an arrangement, so that as the most cultivated and distant peoples stretch out their arms to each other, those in between may gradually be brought to a better way of life” (qtd. in Lach, The Preface to Leibniz’ Novissima Sinica 3-4). Bell shares this view of Russia and China as two benevolent nations exerting a civilizing influence—a marked contrast to Britain’s exploitative colonial enterprise—that promises to lift Tartary to a higher stage of social and political development:

Kamhi, the present Emperor of China, was the first who subdued these hardy Tartars; which he effected more by kind usage and humanity than by his sword; for these people are great lovers of liberty. The same gentle treatment hath been observed by the Russians, towards those of them who are their subjects. And they themselves confess, that, under the protection of these two mighty Emperors, they enjoy more liberty, and live more at ease, than they formerly did under their own princes. (88-9)
Bell advocates benevolence over conquest as a civilizing force, illustrating its effectiveness in his portrait of the Tartars and Mongols. They are no longer blood-thirsty hordes committing frightful atrocities in their lust for universal conquest, but peoples who, squeezed between two great benevolent cultures, have tempered their ways while preserving something of a natural simplicity lost to Europeans during the course of material progress. Although ignorant of the benefits of a more settled way of life, they have retained traditions which cast a pallid light on contemporary Britain. Their simple barter system, for example, compares favourably to the worrisome sophistication and dangerous excesses of London’s commercial and financial markets, which had brought ruin to many during the South Sea Bubble in 1720 (89).

Bell’s observations throughout the narrative resonate with a cautionary note against European luxury and excess. They often endorse the Augustan ideal of a virtuous rustic existence insulated from the sordidness and overcrowding of metropolitan life. While never indulging in explicit didacticism, Bell gives descriptions which carry subtle but distinct Georgic overtones. “In surveying these fertile plains and pleasant woods,” he writes, “I have often entertained myself with painting, in my own imagination, the neat villages, country seats, and farm-houses, which, in process of time, may be erected on the banks of the rivers, and brows of the hills.” Voicing the commonplace fear that Europe’s land and natural resources would fail to support a rapidly expanding population, he continues: “There is here waste land enough to maintain, with easy labour, several European nations, who are,
at present, confined to barren and ungrateful soils” (100). He finds in Siberia a wilderness comparable to those in North America: “From what I have read of North America, I am of opinion, that this country resembles none so much as some of our colonies in that quarter of the world; particularly the inland parts of Pennsylvania and Mary-land” (101). Siberia through Bell’s eyes becomes another America, rediscovered through an enlightened encounter which promises to remap British ideas of the East, perhaps in the same way that the Age of Exploration had remapped medieval geographical and ethnological allegories, which for centuries had formed the mnemonics of a Eurocentric world view. The narrative anticipates the kind of Romantic Orientalism that would later give prominence to the ambivalence of cultural difference and challenge Western notions of cultural hegemony.

Bell finishes his description of the Tartars by shading in their “darker side,” to which he grants fewer concessions. The Tongusy may have their virtues but are “altogether unacquainted with any kind of literature, and worship the sun and moon.” These flaws pervert their moral character as surely as their grotesque tattoos distort their faces (65). The Yakuty, “though otherwise humane and tractable,” sell their children into slavery and abandon their sick to die alone (73). The Buraty may be “courteous in their behaviour,” but Bell “should like them much better if they were a little more cleanly.” Religion is their main flaw. It is “downright Paganism of the grossest kind” (76). Bell embodies it in the description of an esteemed Buratsky shaman who, dancing around the fire pit in a smoky tent, “wrought himself up to
such a degree of fury that he foamed at the mouth, and his eyes looked red and staring” (79).

The shaman represents a counterpoint to both Christianity and empiricism. His place in the narrative reveals a curious and perhaps telling alteration in chronology. Bell witnessed his performance on 10 April but his account of it appears before his entry of 6 April, on which day the embassy’s suite “went to a monastery, about five miles to the westward of this place, where [they] dined with the archbishop of Tobolsky” (80). This reversal of events has the effect of delivering the reader from a menacing world of pagan self-indulgence, unreason, and superstition into a gentler order exemplified by a monastery, the quintessential symbol of sobriety and the communal rule of order in Christian religious life. Many Europeans of the period thought the history of the human mind was the history of its rise from the tempestuous waves of ancient myth to the clayey shores of Christian superstition, and onwards to its triumphant arrival on firmer ground made possible by reason, individualism, and scientific enlightenment. “We contemplate the gradual progress of society,” Gibbon writes, “from the lowest ebb of primitive barbarism, to the full tide of modern civilization” (Miscellaneous 3: 469). The embassy’s arrival in China appears to intimate an arrival at that point of high tide, and yet Bell endorses Christianity’s achievements, reimagining human progress as a more circuitous geo-cultural process, closer in some respects to Hume’s philosophy. “The arts and sciences, indeed,” Hume says,

have flourished in one period, and have decayed in another: But we may observe, that at the time when they rose to greatest perfection among one
people, they were perhaps totally unknown to all the neighboring nations; and tho’ they universally decayed in one age, yet in a succeeding generation they again revived, and diffused themselves over the world. (“Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” Essays and Treatises 208)

Bell represents Russia and China as two such “revived” and enlightened nations from which the arts and sciences gradually spread to neighbouring countries. Hume’s four-phase societal progression begins from a “savage state” of subsistence and advances to an agricultural economy; the arts then develop and lead in time to refinement and general well-being. The Mongols, in Hume’s scheme, would be antecedent in their customs and lifestyle, but Bell envisions them as possessing a certain cultural innocence in which Europe might find an antidote to its own supposed moral decay and an impetus to further advancement.

China’s separation from Mongolia is marked geographically by the “Hungry [Gobi] Desert” (110), a scorched wasteland punctuated sporadically by abandoned settlements which have been ruined by earthquakes. Upon leaving Selinginsky, the embassy sends forward a letter to the Chinese prime minister announcing its approach, “for no strangers are allowed to travel through his territories to China, without his permission” (90). The travellers soon receive word that the women among them are not allowed to pass beyond the desert, for “there never had been an European woman in China” (105). The Chinese feared that European women would undermine their patriarchal system, and Stevenson reminds us that “the European merchants trading at Canton were likewise prohibited from bringing their wives and families into that city” (105n).
The first landmark they come to after crossing the Gobi is the fabled Great Wall, for centuries identified with Cathay, as the Parthenon was with Greece or the Coliseum and the Pont du Gard with Rome. Polo never mentions the Wall but Bell’s group trumpets its appearance on the horizon in terms ironically associated with a long sea voyage of discovery: “one of our people cried out Land, as if we had been all this while at sea” (116). All along, the narrative has been building up to this moment. A harrowing passage through the naked wilds of Siberia and Mongolia has set the stage for an exultant arrival in a “rich and inhabited country” (116), a utopian land of plenty “separated from all the rest of the world; situated in a fine and healthy climate, surrounded by the ocean to the east and south; by a chain of high rocks and barren mountains on the north and west, along which runs the famous wall as an additional defence” (180). China appears situated like Happy Valley in Johnson’s philosophic romance Rasselas (1759). Defoe mocks the Great Wall as an ineffectual barrier, a “mighty nothing” built to keep out Tartars who, when Crusoe “came to see them distinctly” beyond the Wall, caused him to wonder “that the Chinese empire could be conquered by such contemptible fellows; for they are a mere horde or crowd of wild fellows, keeping no order, and understanding no discipline, or manner of fight” (Farther Adventures [Stockdale ed.] 2: 273). Voltaire writes that “European Travellers for the most Part are satirical upon their neighbouring Countries, and bestow large praises upon the Persians and Chinese, it being too natural to revile those who stand in Competition with us, and to extole those who being far remote from us, are out of the reach of Envy” (Essay Upon the Civil Wars of France [3]). Perhaps China was not, however, beyond the reach of Defoe’s envy. At any rate,
Bell acknowledges that “a country, so fortified by nature, had little need of such a strong wall for its defence” (123), and yet he gazes in awe upon this testament to the potential of human technological achievement. It is “most magnificent,” he says, and “no nation in the world was able for such an undertaking, except [...] the ingenious, sober, and parsimonious Chinese” (116). Bell neglects to mention, of course, that Chinese by the thousands, overworked and underfed, had perished in its construction. This information, if given at this point in the narrative, would have complicated the image, perhaps in the same way in which opinions of the Egyptian pyramids were diminished by the idea that they were built by despotism and servitude, although Bell simply may not have been aware of it. “This surprising piece of work,” he states, “if not the greatest, may justly be reckoned among the wonders of the world” (176).

As the retinue descends to the Wall by a narrow path between precipitous mountains, a prospect opens up that bears a striking resemblance to landscape scenes painted on the imported blue and white Chinese porcelain so highly prized in Britain:

In the cliffs of the rocks you see little scattered cottages, with spots of cultivated ground, much resembling those romantick figures of landskips which are painted on the China-ware and other manufactures of this country. These are accounted fanciful by most Europeans, but are really natural.

“Everything,” Bells writes, “now appeared to be as if we had arrived in another world.” It is not a Utopia in the Greek sense of the word, a land of goodness which is a “no place.” It is an actual place as well as an alternative place, and to emphasize its difference, Bell registers a tangible change in climate: “We felt, especially, a sensible alteration in the weather; for, instead of the cold bleak wind in the desert, we had here a warm pleasant air.” The first Chinese residence they come upon is a Buddhist
monastery, the Chinese counterpart to the Christian monastery they left behind before crossing the desert. The monks give them green tea—another item Polo never mentions—and lodge them that night “in clean rooms” unlike the filthy tents and huts in Siberia and Mongolia. The monks are “not at all superstitious,” though their idols are “too absurd” to be mentioned (117-23).

Beyond the Great Wall

Bell enters the Wall through a “great gate, which is shut every night, and always guarded by a thousand men, under the command of two officers of distinction, one a Chinese, the other a Mantzur Tartar.” One wonders how this arrangement, a reminder of China’s uneasy alliance with its northern neighbours, may have been interpreted by a Scottish readership struggling with the ambiguities of national identity after the Union of 1707. The Chinese practice of balancing political power by including Tartars in military and political affairs of state seems to cry out for comparison with the uncomfortable absorption of Scotland into Britain, and to underscore the lingering question of Scotland’s role in the new nation. Bell draws no comparison, however, and the narrative stays grounded in China.

The embassy travels to Peking through “a fine champaign country” like that described by Polo. The land is pleasant and well cultivated, producing fine wheat, grain, and fruit. Bell remarks: “I had heard a great deal of the order and oeconomy of these people; but found my information far short of what I daily saw in all their works and actions” (120). Bell’s entry into Peking evokes Polo’s arrival at Kublai
Khan’s winter palace at Cambaluc (Peking). With great pomp and ceremony, and dressed in its best apparel, the embassy train enters the city gate, “which opened into a spacious street, perfectly straight, as far as the eye-sight could reach:”

A guard of five hundred Chinese horsemen was appointed to clear the way; notwithstanding which, we found it very difficult to get through the crowd. One would have imagined all the people in Pekin were assembled to see us; though I was informed that only a small part of the inhabitants of the city were present. I observed also great crowds of women unveiled; but they kept in the windows, doors, and in corners of the street. The soldiers did not behave with roughness to the people, as in some other places of the east; but treated them with great mildness and humanity.

After being congratulated on a successful journey, they are conveyed to the Russia House, a lodging appointed to accommodate Russian caravans. Here they are supplied with fresh provisions and lavished with “marks of respect.” After the first night, they are allowed to go about the city as they please (126-28).

The reception and freedom granted to the Russian embassy strikes a blunt contrast to the British experience in China. At the time that Bell ushered his account through the press, British merchants in Canton were treated with the same contempt as Chinese merchants, who traditionally ranked near the bottom of the social scale (Pritchard, Crucial Years 108). They were kept outside the city’s walls by an edict of the Ch’ing court which sought to limit foreign seaborne commerce and bar foreign influence, residing in their factory built on a narrow strip of land along the Pearl River. “Canton is a very secure and commodious harbour, and the only port at present to which the European merchants resort,” writes Thomas Salmon in 1757, but the Chinese “will not suffer a Christian to come within the wall of the town; they are admitted no farther than the suburbs” (100). Britain’s efforts to establish diplomatic
relations were continually rebuffed and its foothold at the periphery of the empire remained precarious at best.

Although trading in China as early as 1644, the East India Company was not able to set up a post at Canton where its factors could trade, mainly in silver bullion, for Chinese tea, silks, and other local products until 1711. The Company monopolized trade, granting charters to private ships to sail from India to Canton under licence. All trade at Canton had to be conducted through the Hong merchants, the only Chinese officially sanctioned to deal with foreigners, thirteen of whom formed a guild in 1720 known as the Co-hong, a private self-regulated organization, which collected customs duties and other sundry fees on behalf of the government. The Co-hong served as a buffer between the British and a government that showed little interest in the affairs of the “red-haired barbarians.” Communication with officials in Peking was permitted only through the Hong merchants, reflecting the xenophobic tributary mentality that had solidified in the late Ming and early Ch’ing periods. China still regarded itself, justifiably or not, as largely self-sufficient, and it granted trade with foreigners chiefly as a mark of favour (Fu 228-29).

Bell accomplishes what British merchants in Canton had not: he throws open the gates of modern Peking to British eyes. Walking the city’s “spacious” and “straight” streets, he describes China’s grandeur in terms nostalgically reminiscent of earlier European travellers. Of Khanbaliq (modern Peking) Polo writes: “The streets are so broad and straight” that “you can see along the whole length of the road to the gate opposite” ([Latham ed.] 128-29). Pereira describes Peking as “so great, that to
go from one side to the other, besides the suburbs, the which are greater than the city itself, it requireth one whole day a-horseback, going hackney pace” (Boxer 30). Bell likewise gauges the city’s compass by riding on horseback around its walls, which he “performed, at an easy trot, in the space of four hours” (155). Although densely populated, the city is pacific and orderly. “Noisy brawls,” he observes, “are very seldom, hardly ever, known at Pekin.” Brothels are permitted but consigned to a designated quarter where they can be properly regulated (183). Like Polo and others before him, Bell notes that “there are, indeed, few beggars to be seen in the city.” He qualifies this, however, by reckoning their number few only in proportion to the population: “notwithstanding the labour and industry of the inhabitants, they are so numerous, that it is hardly possible to prevent many from being reduced to the utmost necessity.” Adam Smith would echo Bell’s comment, saying that China’s beggars actually number high in absolute terms and “the poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe” (1: 88). Bell shows the face of China’s extreme poverty in the image of an “old beggar picking vermin from his tattered cloaths, and putting them into his mouth; a practice, which, it seems, is very common among this class of people.” He also relates the story of a Chinese youth who sells himself into slavery to alleviate his parents’ suffering (155-56), an extraordinary act of filial piety worthy of Percy’s protagonists. He counterbalances this story with an account of the “shocking and unnatural practice” of “exposing so many new-born infants in the streets [...] by the poor, who have more wives than they can maintain” (183). Many such infants, he says, are saved by public hospitals and European missionaries.
European travellers, from Polo onward, had celebrated China’s wealth and prosperity so highly that they prompted a cynical backlash. Bell also praises China’s richness, picturing Chinese merchants who are “emmensely rich by [the] inland and foreign trade” (181), but unlike detractors, such as Defoe, he emphasizes the politeness of Chinese commerce. The capital’s streets are lined with small shops conspicuously unlike the noisy and bustling markets of Persia and India. “In most of the shops,” Bell writes, “I found both men, and women, unveiled. They were extremely complaisant, and gave me a dish of tea in every shop.” These inviting glimpses of Peking “unveiled” contrast with the darker and oftentimes threatening ancient Islamic bazaars appearing in Oriental tales of the period. Bell shows us, not untrusting and untrustworthy Oriental merchants, but Chinese who “expose their gold and silver, and other goods of value, with as much freedom and security, as the merchants do in London or Amsterdam” (152). The observation perhaps lends support to contemporary doubts that Europe had borrowed the concept of its modern banking system from the Chinese. “Whether we had the hint of Banks from the Chinese or not,” writes Patrick Murray in 1758, “it is impossible to doubt that the industry and avarice of later ages, would have found out so obvious a method of securing money against Thieves, and other accidents, of extending its use, and of facilitating payments, tho’ Marco Paolo, who is said to have brought the secret into Europe, had never gone to Cathay” (17). From the Middle Ages onward, especially through the Elizabethan period and since the Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753, a strain of radical stereotyping in English literature identified the Chinese, like the
Jews, as merchants or traders, oftentimes shrewd, grasping, and excessively materialistic. Bell’s characterization seems to challenge this stereotype.

The Chinese People and their Society

Bell generally presents the Chinese as a “civilized and hospitable people.” They are “complaisant to strangers, and to one another; very regular in their manners and behaviour, and respectful to their superiors;” but “above all, their regard for their parents, and decent treatment of their women of all ranks, ought to be imitated, and deserve great praise” (182). Chinese women exhibit “many good qualities besides their beauty,” which, unlike Tartar and Mongolian women, include being “very cleanly, and modest in their dress” (182). Like Percy, Bell takes an uncritical attitude to footbinding, simply recounting one Chinese legend of its origin as a fashionable status symbol introduced long ago by a princess who was “a lady of extraordinary beauty and virtue, and has obtained the reputation of a saint; but, it is reported, her feet resembled those of birds; on which account she kept them always carefully wrapped up, and concealed even from the Emperor her husband” (184).

Bell acknowledges that swindlers exist in China (184) but says nothing to corroborate European reports of corrupt, profit-minded mandarins. The Chinese, writes Nicolas François Dupré de Saint-Maur in 1755, “are very cunning, conceited, industrious, almost all Pagans and Grand Cheats” (226n). The Aberdeen Magazine (1761) describes them as having a “thevish inclination in trade” (“Description of the Manners, Religion, Customs &c of the Inhabitants of Whida” 419). Even Le Comte
warns “how far their Tricks and Craftiness proceed when they are to insinuate into Mens affections, manage a fair Opportunity, or improve the Overatures that are offered: The desire of getting torments them continually, and makes them discover a thousand ways of gaining” such that “a Stranger will always be cheated, if he be alone” (237). Bell, in contrast, writes that the Chinese are “very honest, and observe the strictest honour and justice in their dealings” (184). The only roguery he hints at, in an aside, is on the part British tea traders: “the high rates, at which tea is sold in Europe, are a little surprising considering the prices in China” and “allowing the freight and duties to be high, yet the profits seem somewhat extravagant” (182).

During preparations for the ceremonial of the ambassador’s introduction to the Chinese Emperor, several matters of protocol are not easily settled. Amid intense diplomatic gamesmanship, the Russians win important concessions from the Chinese which attest to the Dragon Throne’s desire to improve relations with their closest imperial neighbour. When the ambassador is granted a public audience with the emperor, however, he and his retinue are asked to perform the kowtow, the highest form of obeisance in China intended to publicly acknowledge the emperor’s divine nature, which consists of three kneelings and nine prostrations while knocking the forehead on the ground. “Great pains were taken to avoid this piece of homage,” Bell writes, “but without success” (134). Earlier Russian emissaries and other Europeans had failed to avoid it. Robert Markley notes the unsuccessful Dutch attempts to establish an ideological basis for negotiating with the Chinese, grounded in mutual respect and couched in theocentric arguments concerning God’s will (122-23). Bell
sidesteps discussion of this contentious diplomatic quandary altogether, writing only
that it would have “seemed somewhat strange to a Briton, to see some thousands of
people upon their knees, and bowing their heads to the ground, in most humble
posture, to a mortal like themselves” (161). “Strange” seems a tactful
understatement, for even British merchants at mid-century indignantly refused to
perform the ritual. The prospect of a British ambassador having to formally
acknowledge his nation’s political subjection to China with a kowtow would prove
especially challenging for Macartney, who fortunately received a special exemption
from the next emperor, Chi’en Lung.23

Bell’s account of the imperial court and the “good old Emperor” is at once
laudatory and deflating (168). Although the emperor and his officers are clad in
imposing long tunics of yellow silk interwoven with figures of monstrous golden
dragons, the imperial court is “order and decency, rather than grandeur and
magnificence.” The throne is “simple” and the ministers of state are “dressed very
plain, having nothing like ornaments about them; a few only had large rubies,
sapphires, and emeralds,” which Bell deems of no real value (135). There is little
approximating the fabulous treasure and ostentatious displays of power that colour
legendary accounts. Of the emperor, Bell writes: “I cannot omit taking notice of the
good nature and affability of this ancient monarch,” and “though he was near the
seventieth year of his age, and sixtieth of his reign, he still retained a sound

23 For a discussion of this subject from the perspective of a later British civil servant in China, see
Eames (122-24).
judgement, and senses intire; and, to me, seemed more sprightly than many of the Princes his sons” (155). The allusion to K’ang-hsi’s longevity, greatly revered in China, serves to accentuate his paternal qualities. Following the kowtow ceremonial, he and the ambassador, like father and son, talk “very familiarly on various subjects.” K’ang-hsi is free from the haughtiness stereotypically attributed to Oriental despots. He is a benevolent ruler solicitous about the well-being of his citizens and foreign guests. He enquires after the Czar in a fatherly manner, calling to mind the relationship between Polo and Kublai Khan. Bell writes:

Among other things, he told him, that, he was informed his Czarish Majesty exposed his person to many dangers, particularly by water; at which he was much surprised; but desired he would take the advice of an old man; and not hazard his life, by committing himself to the rage of the merciless waves and winds, where no valour could avail. We were near enough to hear this piece of friendly and wholesome advice. (134)

Bell’s description is very unlike Matteo Ripa’s vivid portrayal of K’ang-hsi as “childishly vain” (64), intolerant, and prone to display “the fury of a tiger” (83). Whenever K’ang-hsi criticizes his foreign guests, it is only out of paternal concern for their comfort and welfare: “His Majesty also found many faults with our dress, as improper for a cold climate; and, I must confess, I thought him in the right” (135). Bell’s portrayal of K’ang-hsi more closely resembles that given by the Jesuit Joachim Bouvet in his biography of the emperor in 1699. The Chinese, Bouvet writes, are “charmed with his Love and Justice, […] and with his vertuous Inclinations; which as they are always guided by the Dictates of Reason, so, they render him an Absolute Master of his Passions” (2). When the Russians depart from Peking, K’ang-hsi sees to it that each receives a present “corresponding to their different stations and
characters; and, so minutely and exactly was this matter managed, that even the meanest of our servants was not neglected” (166). He asks the ambassador to convey to the Czar a personal letter, which Bell remarks must be considered “a singular mark of favour” as Chinese “Emperors were not in use to write letters of compliment to any prince” (174). Macartney would receive few such favours from K’ang-hsi’s successor Chi’en-lung. Chi’en-lung sent Macartney home to George III in 1793 with a haughtily letter reprimanding Britain’s insolent request to establish direct diplomatic and trade relations with China (Backhouse and Bland 322-31).

Bell portrays K’ang-hsi as a great patron of the liberal arts and natural sciences. The Chinese once looked to the heavens to divine auspicious times and places, but now they (unlike the Mongols) do so with greater scientific interest in a systematic, theoretical, and rational manner. The Chinese are “indebted to the present Emperor for what progress they have made in astronomy.” Bell stresses K’ang-hsi’s impartiality in matters of science by noting that he has “chiefly promoted this study by countenancing the Jesuits and other missionaries; for I have been informed, that, before their arrival in this country, the inhabitants could scarcely calculate an eclipse.” Science is held in such high esteem that it cuts across not only national, religious, and ethnic divides but also across local class divisions. The College of Astronomy was “erected by the present Emperor, who spares no cost to bring it to perfection; and the meanest of his subjects, who discover a genius for science, or any useful art, are sure to meet with due encouragement” (172). This institution presents a contrast to the cultural politics of the Royal Society, which was dominated by men
of privilege and, as David Miller argues, Whig elements in the early and mid-eighteenth century ("Hardwicke Circle" 73). The musical arts are equally progressive and inclusive. On one occasion the Chinese bring out an old Tartar to sing a war song not unlike the ancient Scottish ballads becoming popular in England. The emperor tells the ambassador "that he knew well their musick would not please an European ear; but that every nation liked their own best" (163).

Bell also gives lengthy, detailed accounts of entertainments performed by dancers, jugglers, acrobats, tumblers, wrestlers, and fencers. He is "fully persuaded, that, in tricks and feats of dexterity, few nations can equal, and none excel, the Chinese" (146). These elaborate entertainments prompt him to remark: "One would scarce have imagined, that luxury had made such progress among the sober and industrious Chinese" (144). He is conscious, however, that showmanship is part and parcel of the language of power in diplomatic relations, and for this reason he refrains from characterizing them as mere luxuries. He notes that effeminacy has not debased the imperial court. The emperor guards against it by taking hunting trips in Tartary two or three months a year, bringing only basic necessities, "chiefly with a view to harden the officers of his army, and prevent their falling into idleness and effeminacy among the Chinese; and, at the same time, to set a good example of the austerities he recommended, by living on the same hard fare he prescribed to others" (169). Bell’s China seems to possess great military vigour, stronger in the north than at Canton, corroborating what Horace Walpole suggests in a letter to Lord Strafford in 1757, which ridicules Lord Anson for boasting, based on an isolated skirmish on
the Pearl River, to have “made one man of war box the ears of the whole empire of China!” (*Correspondence* 35: 284). Bell states sombrely: “I know but one nation who could attempt the conquest of China, with any probability of success, and that is Russia; but the territories of that empire are so extensive, in this quarter of the world, as to exceed even the bounds of ambition itself” (181). This statement, like the spatial passage of Bell’s long journey, shows China in broader context, expanding the reader’s focal range from the small strip of land along the Pearl River, to which British traders were confined, to a sweeping empire whose might rivals that of Russia. It dwarfs Britain in the panorama it opens to contemplation.

“Although the government of China is absolute,” Bell writes, “it requires no small sagacity and skill to rule an empire of such extensive dominion, and containing so numerous subjects.” The Chinese emperor attends to affairs of state with great care and shows a keen interest in politics, both domestic and international. He converses with the Russian ambassador on peace and war “in the style of a philosopher” (138). Bell praises the “great oeconomy and moderation” of the man “whose reign is called the reign of great peace and rest” (179-80). His portrait of the Chinese emperor suggests that a sovereign can govern well as more than merely the nominal head of government within a constitutional framework, and thus be free from the factionalism that frequently disrupted Britain’s parliament during the period. The Chinese prime minister, moreover, who is responsible to the emperor, has “the character of a very able minister,” Bell writes in another suggestive passage which invites comparison of China’s political system with Britain’s (141). Bell notes
eunuchs at the Chinese court, but he mentions no intrigue, as in *The Pleasing History*, nor anything like Ricci’s account of their baleful influence and threat to political order during the declining years of the former Ming dynasty. He says they appear “much respected” and their master is kind and gracious (186).

Oddly, Bell’s narrative conveys very little about the intricate courtly and bureaucratic hierarchy of China’s imperial administration. His contemplation of Chinese politics altogether overlooks its Confucian underpinnings. The Chinese state, as he sees it, owes its strength and unity chiefly to the power and virtues of K’ang-hsi, just as Polo’s Cathay owed theirs to Kublai Khan. The reader is left blinded to the fact that these were not unconnected with the efficient administration of a sizable and complex system of government by nine levels of scholar-officials trained in the Confucian classics. The closest Bell comes to touching upon the subject occurs during a visit to the ambassador by a “young gentleman, a descendent of the famous Chinese philosopher Confucius; whose memory and works are greatly respected in China.” Bell remarks:

> From what I could learn of this eminent philosopher, he appears to have been a person of extraordinary parts, extensive knowledge, and exemplary virtue. On account of such rare qualities, his family is still honoured and esteemed even by the Emperor himself. (174)

Bell’s silence on (or perhaps his unfamiliarity with) Confucianism, which had been reformed into a state religion with a special weight attached to its moral and social teachings, is all the more puzzling considering his extensive interaction with the Jesuits. The Jesuits, after all, had translated the primary texts of Confucianism for
the West, and they were better acquainted with China’s system of government than any other European group.

Bell and the Jesuits at Peking

It is possible that the Jesuits simply avoided discussing Confucianism with Bell, for his arrival occurs at a critical juncture. Their interpretation of Confucianism was, at that very moment, threatening to put an end to Papal support for their mission in China, as well as to their future as a Roman Catholic religious order. They had taken a tolerant view of Chinese ancestor worship and other rituals honouring Confucius and the emperor, contending that these were essentially atheistic civil practices. This view, strongly protested by competing missionary orders, had thrown Rome into the Rites Controversy. The Pope in consequence dispatched two investigative legates to Peking. The first had returned to Rome in 1715. The second, led by Signior Mezzobarba, cardinal and patriarch of Alexandria, reached Peking during Bell’s stay on 15 December 1721. Mezzobarba had sailed from Europe to Macao and Canton, and from there he travelled by land to the capital. He had come, according to Bell, to “enquire into the disputes and misunderstandings” relating to the Jesuit practice of allowing Chinese Christian converts to continue their Confucian custom of ancestor worship, which had affronted the Dominican order, who regarded it as idolatry akin to “parentalia anciently in use among the Greeks and Romans” (150).
Bell keeps himself at a safe distance from these proceedings, claiming that he “never had an opportunity of seeing that gentleman [Mezzobarba] at our lodgings; as nothing passed between him and our ambassador, but messages of common civility and complement” (155). His reticence is not indifference, though, for he reveals his sympathy for Roman Catholicism and the Jesuits throughout the narrative. Stevenson in fact suggests that Dr. Areskine, a notorious Jacobite activist, may have endorsed Bell in St. Petersburg for this very reason (8-9). Although Bell tends to follow the Jesuit example in downplaying the theological incongruities between Roman Catholic and Chinese religious and social practices, he steers clear of the Rites Controversy almost entirely, perhaps feeling himself unqualified to engage a highly complex doctrinal matter. At any rate, he accurately predicts that “these differences, in all probability, will not soon be determined.” His own opinion appears to be couched in a comment contrasting European intransigence and K’ang-hsi’s religious tolerance:

The Emperor himself tried to make the parties compromise matters; but, finding his endeavours ineffectual, he left them to agree or dispute according to their pleasure. He inclined, indeed, to favour the opinion of the Jesuits, which he thought most reasonable. At any rate, it must be acknowledged an instance of uncommon condescension, for an heathen Emperor to interest himself so much in the peace of a Christian church. (150)

When Pope Clement XI had first ruled against the Jesuits in his Bull *Ex Illa Die* of March 1715, his decision so displeased K’ang-hsi when he learned about it in 1717 that he ordered the Board of Rites to prohibit Christianity in China. Christian persecutions ensued in the provinces, although in Peking the Jesuits remained effectively under the imperial court’s protection but no longer as highly regarded as
before. The reader catches a glimpse of their precarious situation when Bell visits the German Jesuits Fridelly and Keaggler. One “was a clock-maker; and, by such means, they frequently insinuate themselves into acquaintance with people of distinction, who protect them in times of danger. For, in China, they have still a great number of enemies, who would gladly see both them and their religion extirpated; but the favour of the present Emperor hath hitherto prevented, or disappointed, the design of such persons” (151). Bell later notes that Mezzobarba “returned to Rome, without accomplishing the ends of his embassy.” In fact, “the Emperor, who favoured the cause of the Jesuits, had concerted with them, to send Nicolai [one of their number] to the court of Rome, in order to represent the state of this affair, before Mezzobarba could arrive” (165-66).

On the whole, Bell presents an affable image of the Jesuits at Peking. They are seen as helpful interpreters at court or charitable fellow Europeans sending gifts of food to the newly arrived travellers. They appear quite different from the Jesuits described by European Protestants, such as the Dutchman Jan Nieuhoff, for example, who blamed their machinations for the failure of the embassy he accompanied in 1652 from the Dutch East India Company (3). Bell’s Jesuits, who are “well acquainted with the language, customs, and manners, of the country” (153), put their knowledge freely at the disposal of the Russian embassy. Bell’s tone rings positive when describing their proselytizing successes. He points out that the “Christians, at present, are computed to amount to one hundred thousand, of both sexes” (185). Protestants like Defoe, on the other hand, had long derided the superficiality of what
the Jesuits claimed as conversion in China: “the conversion as they call it, of the
Chinese to Christianity, is so far from the true conversion requir’d, to bring Heathen
People to the Faith of Christ, that it seems to amount to little more, than letting them
know the Name of Christ, and say some prayers to the Virgin Mary, and her Son, in a
Tongue which they understand not, and to cross themselves, and the like” (Farther
Adventures 288-89). Bell betrays no hint of scepticism when Fridelly claims that the
emperor is secretly inclined to Christianity and “worshipped the same God with the
Christians” but has declined baptism because “such a change of religion might
occasion some disturbance in the empire” (154).

Leibniz portrays K’ang-hsi as a “wisely charitable” emperor who follows the
light of natural religion to “the achievement of public tranquillity and the
establishment of social order.” He contends, however, that “the Chinese do not attain
to full and complete virtue” because they lack “heaven’s grace and Christian
teaching” (47). Bell, however, discovers that the emperor is “well acquainted” with
the Christian Scriptures, which the Jesuits have translated into Chinese. During an
audience with the ambassador, K’ang-hsi shows his familiarity with the Bible by
saying “that the chronology of the Chinese was far more ancient than that of the holy
scriptures; but observed, that it ended back in fabulous accounts, concerning which
nothing certain could be determined” (154). “As to Noah’s flood,” he “affirmed,
that, at or near the same time, there was a great deluge in China, which destroyed all
the inhabitants of the plains; but that such as escaped to the mountains were saved”
(154). Although Bell touches here upon the question of China’s antiquity as it relates
to the Judaeo-Christian chronology, which had stirred lively debate in Europe since
the sixteenth century, he does not pursue it further and his own opinion remains unclear.

Bell does express an opinion on the Chinese concept of God. The Jesuits’ study of China’s religions led to an awareness that the Chinese believed in a supreme deity. To some Europeans this suggested that Confucianism may have derived from the teachings of ancient Judaism carried to China after the Noachide dispersion. Ricci was doubtful and thus advocated a policy of accommodation. In his proselytizing handbook, written in Chinese under the title Tienzhu shiyi (天主實義 “The True Meaning of the Master of Heaven”), he recommends that the Jesuits turn Confucian philosophy “in such a way that it is in accordance with the idea of God, so that we appear not so much to be following Chinese ideas as interpreting Chinese authors in such a way as they follow our ideas” (qtd. in Gernet 27). By the mid-eighteenth century, Britons were still interested in knowing whether one or both of two names commonly used by the Chinese to refer to their supreme deity, shangdi (上帝 “sovereign on high”) or tianzhu (天主 “master of heaven”), coincided with the Christian idea of God. For Bell, the question is answered during a visit to a temple built to worship Fo, whose name “signifies God in the Chinese language.” It houses a statue representing the deity, a “monstrous image, about twenty-five feet high, carved and gilt, having twelve arms and hands, a frightful visage, and great goggling eyes” (158). After recoiling from this grotesque image, Bell regains his composure and quickly points out, almost apologetically, that the Chinese religion is divided into several sects, “among which, that of the Theists is the most rational and respectable”
The theists, he explains more hopefully, “worship one God, whom they call Tien, the Heaven or the highest Lord, and pay no religious homage to the images of their countrymen” (185).

Bell’s View of Chinese Arts and Sciences

Bell’s tentative treatment of Chinese religion is outstripped by a more confident and well-defined account of China’s fine arts. He pays particular attention to Chinese aesthetics, a subject sure to pique the interest of his readership. Visiting the prime minister’s residence, he finds the courtyard packed with lovely cane chairs and japanned frames inlaid with mother of pearl. The floor is a checker-work of white and black marble, upon which sit two large China-cisterns filled with curious gold and silver fish in crystalline water. As he is “conducted through all the different apartments of his house,” like Altangi’s antithesis, he sees a noble collection of many curiosities, both natural and artificial; particularly a large quantity of old porcelain or China-ware, made in China and Japan; and, at present, to be found only in the cabinets or the curious. […] These curiosities were piled up on shelves to the very roof of the house, and in such order and symmetry as had a pretty effect. (141)

The house validates European interpretations of the Chinese aesthetic that inspired rococo-chinoiserie. It is laid out, ironically, in mirror image of the English Lady’s apartment which Altangi mocks as thoroughly un-Chinese and grossly eccentric. Bell draws a different conclusion: such curios represent the universal allure of the

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24 For a history of rococo-chinoiserie, see Impey’s book-length study *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration.*
foreign. It is this allure, which the next emperor Ch’ien-lung mentions in his letter to George III, which determines the presents the Russian and Chinese emperors make to each other. Bell says: “it appears, that these two mighty monarchs were not very lavish in their presents to each other; preferring curiosities to things of real value” (166).

Bell is then led out “into a little garden, enclosed with a high brick-wall” and filled with “several old crooked trees and shrubs” and “artificial rock-work.” “This garden,” he writes, “and many other things in China, display the taste of the inhabitants for imitating nature” (141-42). The imperial palace also is laid out with artificial canals and trees “resembling the wild and irregular scenes of nature that frequently present themselves in this country” (158). They confirm Temple’s Sharawaggi, the studied irregularity that Chambers popularized as a gardening technique and Walpole puts to use as a literary device. Bell appears to witness the use of the Sharawaggi as a literary device in a Chinese play performed in Peking, which “seemed to be a parcel of detached dissimilar interludes, without any principal end, or unity of design” (143).

Bell observes that Chinese “workmanship in metals is but clumsy,” and “the arts of statuary, sculpture, and painting, have made but small progress among them” (182). Walpole laments this lack of progress in a letter to William Robertson in 1791. He says that the Chinese, like the Egyptians, “who made early progress in science and arts, and stopped short, are like forward children who have quick parts at five years old, were advanced no farther at fifteen, and at thirty are blockheads”
Bell shares Walpole’s high opinion of Chinese porcelain, however, noting that the Chinese excel in this art. When he visits a “manufactory of China-ware” to investigate porcelain, he registers more than mere curiosity. The commercial and cultural anxieties aroused by Britain’s continuing inability to reproduce this “white gold” would in time lead Macartney to enlist Josiah Wedgwood to supply his embassy with a master potter to try to discover the jealously guarded method as a matter of national importance. Bell claims that his own “view was so cursory and superficial, that [he] could form no judgement of the materials, or manner of making these cleanly and beautiful vessels, which still remain unrivalled by the similar productions of any other nation.” The Chinese “made no secret, at this place, of what they were employed about,” whereas in southern China, Bell says, as though to underscore the distance between the British experience at Canton and the Russian experience at Peking, they “are more cautious, and carefully conceal their art from strangers” (159-60).

As a physician, Bell naturally makes a point of speaking with Chinese doctors. Sadly, though, his narrative contributes little to Western knowledge of Chinese medical theories and practices. He notes the diagnostic skill of Chinese physicians in taking a patient’s pulse but curiously makes no mention of acupuncture. He also notes various herbal therapies. “As they have but few chymical preparations,” he says, “their chief study is the virtues of plants, which they apply on all occasions, and

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25 For a discussion of this subject, see Porter, The Chinese Taste (133-53).
often with success.” Such botanical remedies include “a famous plant, called gingsing” (185). Europeans had long been interested in ginseng (the “china root”) as a potential treatment for venereal disease. John Astruc writes in 1737 that in 1535 or 1536 “the china root was brought into Europe; which once more raised the expectations both of the physicians and their patients” (381).

On the whole, Bell pays surprisingly little attention to China’s medical arts, seeming to belong to that school of thought which, as Baker notes, regarded them as inferior to Western medical sciences (147). He describes other Chinese inventions in greater detail, such as stoves designed to heat homes. He delights in recording the “various compositions of gunpowder” (152-53), recounting a grand display of fireworks at a court festival “which far surpassed any thing of the kind, exhibited, at St. Petersburg, by the best artists in Europe” (163-65). He lauds China’s knowledge of printing, which he says predates gunpowder, noting that “the connection, between stamping and printing, is so close and obvious, that, it is surprising the ingenious Greeks and Romans, so famous for their medals, never discovered the art of printing.” The Chinese emperor claims that the loadstone “was known in China above two thousand years ago” and that the magnetic compass, a Chinese invention, was given to a foreign sailor “from some distant island” who had lost his course during a violent storm and landed on China’s shores (154).

Bell is fascinated also by the Chinese language. At once economical and expressive, he notes, it “is composed chiefly of monosyllables, and, seems to [him], easily acquired.” He acknowledges, however, that it takes “considerable abilities, to
acquire the character of a learned man in China” (186). He picks up a smattering of the Chinese language himself, apparently unaware of the edict prohibiting Europeans from learning it, which the imperial court reinforced after Captain James Flint’s transgression shortly before Bell’s account went to press. He appends to his narrative a remarkably accurate list of Chinese words and phrases in Romanized transcription.

One wonders if Bell ever considered remaining in Peking. Several remarks suggest it may have crossed his mind, but when his Chinese friend, a man named Siasiey, with whom he frequently dines and tours the city, asks Bell to “remain with him; and he would give [him his] choice of which of his wives or daughters [he] liked best,” Bell declines. “I could not but return my friend a hearty thanks for his obliging offer,” he writes, “which, however, I thought it not proper to accept” (167-68). Like Altangi, who decides to leave England and continue as a travelling Confucian philosopher, Bell opts to quit the Middle Kingdom and remain a Scotsman, although China evidently never quit him. As legend has it, during his final years in Antemony, Bell could be seen at nights riding out from his country retreat dressed in Oriental costume (6).

Bell’s narrative gives a curious turn to British ideas about China at mid-century. On the one hand, it shows a civilization that has achieved political soundness and social stability after long struggles with injustice and barbarism. It pictures an empire that has flourished because it values civility, liberty, and the rule of law under a benevolent monarchy solicitous of its subjects’ welfare, a notion which Murphy and Percy use to express British concerns. On the other hand, it nudges the idea of China
back into the context of those longstanding European theological, cultural, and aesthetic considerations that had given it shape for centuries. Goldsmith seeks to extricate China from these for the purpose of satirizing a pervasive cultural arrogance in London, while Protestant writers like Defoe exaggerate them to disparage Roman Catholicism. Bell’s narrative, however, suggests that the British cannot simply break from past European representations to create their own new vision of China. Above all, his narrative places Britain in a broader global context. While the advantages that Britain gained during the Seven Years’ War and its mastery of the sea routes leading to China roused national pride, promising a new era of influence and prosperous trade, Bell illustrates Britain’s relative inconsequence to the mighty Chinese Empire when compared with the importance of Imperial Russia.
Chapter 6

*The Bonze: A King’s Friend in the Vale of Hoangti*

In 1768 an “Oriental epic novel” appeared in London titled *The Bonze, or Chinese Anchorite*. Purportedly written by a “Tartarian Proselite” named Hoamchi-Vam, it was said to have been translated from the Chinese language by “Monsieur D’Alenzon” for the purpose of moral edification. A thinly disguised pseudo-Oriental translation, its florid style mimics the wild flights of fancy to which the Eastern mind was supposed to be given and which Goldsmith parodied. Its subtitle sets the tenor: “*With adventurous wing exploring new found Worlds, the Orient Muse unfettered with Rhyme who sings of Heaven, of Earth, and Wondrous mutations: strives to Mingle instruction with delight, in hope to gain the smile of Approbation.*”

Incorporating formal innovations made popular by Oriental tales translated into French, such as the *Arabian Nights*, it employs a frame story to hold together a series of moral allegories. These follow a Chinese prince’s soul as it transmigrates through various terrestrial and extraterrestrial bodies before gaining admittance into heaven. The tales are set in places as diverse as China, Egypt, India, and Italy; as well as on the planets Jupiter and Venus, and even on a comet shooting through the outer regions of our solar system. They are as varied generically as they are philosophically and theologically: dream vision, travel narrative, drama, romance, and fable. Often fantastical beyond the bounds of common sense, the tales freely mix
tragedy, comedy, and satire. They are conveyed to two British servants of the East India Company sojourning in China, Captain Wilford and Theodore Johnson, by a Chinese anchorite named Confuciango. Confuciango is a Confucian eunuch who has pursued the byways of error in so far as they have led him to reject both Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, only to discover religious and philosophical truth in a contemplative Protestantism that endorses the principles of good government established around a strong monarchy. He is all too happy to divulge the mysteries of divine providence as revealed to him in a beatific visitation from the spirit of the Chinese prince who had once been his dearest friend. These mysteries are presented as operating through an elaborate system of metempsychosis strangely adapted to a biblical allegory of good and evil conveyed with a distinctly Miltonic quality of style and emphasis.

This chapter examines the novel’s structure, meaning, and purpose within the context of British theological, philosophical, and political concerns at mid-century. It looks in particular at the way in which the novel uses the idea of China to endorse a strong, benevolent monarchy under George III. By equating the Chinese emperor’s “mandate from heaven” with the Judeo-Christian conception of God as a “paternal Deity,” the frame tale opens up possibilities for presenting a threadbare theme to a young readership. The fall of the Ming dynasty is seen to parallel the great moral lapses of Adam and Eve and Lucifer in the Bible. The factious rebel Ligh, like Lucifer, embodies the pride and envy of government ministers imperilling the sovereign power of the monarchy. The Tartar’s destructive incursions into China
correspond to Jacobite uprisings, while Peking bears witness to the luxury, effeminacy, and sectarianism corrupting civilization. Confuciango narrates the events that have led him to become a Protestant hermit and recounts the transmigrations endured by his princely friend’s soul as it passes from one life to the next. In contrast to the antagonist of Percy’s novel, he has abandoned Confucianism, for he has come to realize that the laws of nature are an insufficient support for morality. Like Percy, he believes that proper moral conduct, without which government cannot be maintained, has to be supported by the assurance of a future life of rewards and punishments.

The novel’s exuberant style might tempt one to read it as satire. Confuciango’s tales, however, lack the level of specificity required of a comprehensible and unified satire. They appear to be largely what they claim to be: moral instruction for youth, like Æsop’s fables, illustrating the principles and duties of good government established around a strong monarch, as this chapter attempts to demonstrate. The Critical Review (1769) is probably correct in attributing the novel’s “affected greatness and pomp of embellishment” to the author’s “exuberant imagination, under the influence of poetical enthusiasm and capricious taste; where all the ardour of descriptive genius is exhausted, decoration is lavished with unbounded profusion.” Rather than signalling a satire, the novel’s style, a “magnificently gothic” example of “the modern Oriental Order of literary architecture,” which is “inferior” perhaps to “the productions of Greece and Rome,” simply imitates (to excess) those qualities of Oriental literature that Murphy believed are only its superficial faults and which he endeavoured to correct in The Orphan (27: 178).
The bonze doctrine of metempsychosis affords a convenient literary device to tie the tales together. Theologically, however, metempsychosis is problematic in a British context, for the idea of past lives falls at odds with Christian beliefs and the biblical theme that informs the frame tale. Confucian therefore explicates a theodicy in which the deity, all-wise and all-merciful, governs the world for the best while admitting the possibility of pre-existence. “Liberal Anglicanism and the dawning deist Enlightenment,” Peter Gay observes of the period, “were connected by a thousand threads: both saw the universe as rational and God as beneficent, both despised enthusiasm and mysticism, both were critical of the written tradition and long catalogs of dogma” (327). The threads that connect liberal Anglicanism and deism to Confucianism and the Buddhist idea of metempsychosis are more tentative. Nevertheless the novel attempts to weave them together into a rich tapestry, the plan of which is revealed in a type of dream vision which diverges from the mystical tradition only in its attempt to be accessible to the intellect. Such tapestries, as incredible as they might appear today, were not uncommon to an age in which the syncretic impulse sought to discover beneath the seemingly disparate and heterogeneous elements of mankind’s varied mythico-religious traditions a “golden chain” linking them together into a unified and universal system.

Striving for a pleasing pedagogical atmosphere, the novel transports the reader to the Valley of Hoangti, a Sharawaggi garden “capable of exciting wonder, and preparing the mind to admit astonishment from grand ideas.” The novel’s purpose becomes clearer by way of inquiry into its authorship, which occupies the latter part of this chapter. It appears connected with John Stuart, third earl of Bute, who came
to prominence first as George III’s tutor and later (in 1760) as prime minister. There are marked similarities between Bute and Confuciango, like those between Bute and Murphy’s Zamti, which suggest that The Bonze may have been written by one of Bute’s adherents. If so, it was very likely written by someone who took part in the government press he had organized at the height of his power (Rigg 423), which included Murphy, or one of the members of Parliament, known as the “King’s Friends,” who rallied round Bute and supported George III’s attempts to increase the power of the monarchy.

Confuciango’s Theodicy and the Valley of Hoangti

The novel’s frame story contains nearly all of its distinctively Chinese colouring. It is set in China, where we find Wilford and Johnson (a man conversant in Chinese) taking a stroll “after they had secured a rich purchase of tea, china and silk” (1: 3). While discussing the Tartars, they come “to remark on that surprising opinion which has prevailed so much in the east, and particularly among the ancient Chinese; the transmigration of the soul from one body to another.” The idea strikes Wilfred as “extremely ridiculous” and “comical beyond reasoning.” When they chance upon a wounded fawn, shot by a Tartar to ridicule the Chinese belief that animals contain our progenitors, they wonder why God (the “Deity”) would allow such unoffending creatures to suffer the wiles of Satan.

For a moment they turn their thoughts to the countless horses agonizing in London. The subject is a natural one in historical context. London’s traditional
agrarian attitudes toward beasts of burden were ebbing at the time. Strengthening were Enlightenment concerns that radically questioned the difference between animals and humans, as were Romantic sensibilities showing greater sympathy and compassion towards animals. “The question is not,” Jeremy Bentham would write, “Can they reason? nor, can they Talk? but, Can they suffer?” (n. pag.; ch. 17, note 2). *The Bonze* juxtaposes horses made to suffer in the modern metropolis (the epitome of the fallen world) with the Edenic Chinese serenity in which Wilfred and Johnson find themselves discussing divine providence. Johnson proposes, like Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* (1733-34), to vindicate the ways of the God rationally, to philosophically explicate a theodicy in which the deity, an all-wise and all-merciful architect-creator, has endowed the universe with ethical laws that govern the world for the best and can be discovered by unaided reason. But reason alone, it seems to Johnson, as it does to Percy, has its limitations, and no single philosophical or theological system can lay claim to the whole truth. He submits that all worldly suffering and apparent imperfection can be understood in relation to the origin of evil (in the biblical sense) and the Eastern doctrine of metempsychosis, the purifying process that souls undergo in transmigrating through different bodies in a succession of lives and incremental stages of probation before reaching heaven. Wilfred is perplexed. He wants to hear the matter accounted for, not in the “dry method of cold metaphysics,” but in a fashion that would “mingle the sweetness of entertainment, with the utility of instruction,” thus setting the temper of what is to follow. Johnson recommends they seek enlightenment in the nearby vale of Hoangti from a renowned Chinese hermit named Confuciano.
The novel’s setting is symbolically significant. Du Halde describes Hoangti as China’s third fabled emperor, who laid the foundations on which China’s arts and sciences would flourish. He “employ’d himself wholly in making his Subjects happy, by procuring them all the Conveniences he could imagine; he levell’d the Mountains, and made Highways for the Convenience of Trade; he enlarged the Bounds of his Empire, which he extended towards the East to the Ocean, on the North to ancient Tartary, and on the South to the River Kiang, which served as a Barrier to his Dominions.” To govern more efficiently, he divided the empire into principalities, appointed six ministers, established a standardized writing system, and devised a lunar calendar. He eventually died upon the declivity of a mountain, and

*Chinese* Authors give this Prince the highest Encomiums; the Virtue and Talents of this Prince, they say, equalled Heaven and Earth; his Government was admirable, his Laws solid, his Conduct most steady: He pour’d out his Favours upon all the World, and his Liberality has reach’d down to us, so that we might say he still lives. (2: 274-77)

Hoangti’s valley, reminiscent of Johnson’s Happy Valley in *Rasselas*, is where we find Confuciango. The sage hermit’s name is clearly meant to bring to mind Confucius, with whom he shares much in common. According to Du Halde, Confucius was born to a Chinese family of lesser aristocracy named K’ung around 551 BC. Later in life, he was called K’ung Fu Tze (“Master K’ung”), which commuted through Latin into English as “Confucius.” His father, who died when he was three years old, had been first minister in the principality of Tsou. Amidst political sectarianism and strife, Confucius rose to prominence as a scholar-philosopher and eventually became prime minister in his native kingdom of Lou. Du Halde says that “through his wise Counsels the Face of Affairs changed; Candour,
Justice, Equity, and all other civil Virtues flourish’d during his Administration.” Then, despairing of the corrupted King of Lou, who had “given himself up to all sorts of Voluptuousness to please a Mistress,” he resigned from politics and quit the kingdom, leaving it to lapse once more into faction and strife. Withdrawing to a life of philosophical contemplation, he excogitated rules of proper social and political conduct, and he came to believe in the moral perfectibility of mankind through learning. His maxims were recorded by his students and survive in a book known as the Analects, gaining “such a great Authority, that if any body offer’d to make the least Alteration in them, he would be liable to Punishment.” In China, Du Halde writes, “whenever any Disputes arise in point of Doctrine, and a Quotation is made out of his Works, it immediately decides the Dispute” (2: 330-32).

Confucius’s maxims found popularity in Europe as well, where they were often held out as models of moral teaching. Translated into English from Latin and French since the beginning of the eighteenth century, they became widely quoted in Britain. “Confucius has well observed,” writes Frances Brooke in 1763, for example, “that virtue does not consist in never erring, which is impossible, but in recovering as fast as we can from our errors” (1: 148). Supposing that the Chinese worshipped Confucius as a god, however, some criticized the Jesuits for allowing Confucian practices to continue amongst their Christian converts. Others, however, recognized that Confucius had very little or nothing at all to say on religious matters, his wisdom consisting for the most part in mundane teachings. “The whole Scope of all CONFUCIUS has writ,” writes John Brown in 1757, “seems aimed only at teaching
Men to live well, and to govern well: How Parents, Masters, and Magistrates should rule; and how Children, Servants, and Subjects, should obey” (Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times 2: 107-8).

The Bonze introduces Confuciango in a setting resembling the pastoral landscapes of classical Greek and Roman poetry, which prepares the reader for philosophical rumination on society and politics. Goldsmith’s Altangi claims that Chinese landscapes are well suited to this purpose, for in them one is “taught wisdom as he walks, and feels the force of some noble truth, or delicate precept resulting from the disposition of the groves, streams or grottos” (Letter XXXI). They represent Chambers’s Sharawaggi, which one enters through striking gothic surroundings “composed of gloomy woods, deep vallies inaccessible to the sun, impending barren rocks, dark caverns, and impetuous cataracts rushing down the mountains from all parts” (Dissertation on Oriental Gardening 36). Like Bell approaching the Great Wall on a narrow path between precipitous mountains, Wilfred and Johnson “crept trembling” through a valley of “towering rocks” and “mountains of rugged stone, threatening every moment to fall and crush them to atoms.” They cross “precipices unfathomable” and pass through “a dark kind of grotto, in which the guide carried torches” and a “transparent stream ran gurgling” (1: 9).

Walpole’s Mi Li negotiates a similar landscape before descending into a subterranean passageway that leads to an “enchanted” Chinese garden at Park Place. Wilfred and Johnson also come to “an enchanting prospect opened to the eye of
admiration, with delight inexpressible.” Whereas Mi Li’s garden is accentuated by mock Augustan ruins, Wilfred and Johnson find a scene of
cupolated temples, cloud-pavilioned pagodas, rich palaces, turreted with gold blazing to the sun, and beautifully painted pleasure-houses, over-shadowed with fragrant shrubs of flowery elegance; where, led by the easy hand of Nature-imitating Art, crept round their verdant banks smooth glassy rivulets: or erected on over-hanging rocks, gay summer palaces projected deep shades over the bosom of smooth unruffled lakes. (1: 9-10)

Here, China’s religious, political, and social order (represented by temples, pagodas, and pleasure houses) exists in harmony with a natural order symbolized by a serene pastoral landscape reminiscent of Georgic gardens and Arcadian ease and contentment. The Chinese, however, have cultivated this Edenic harmony (“led by the easy hand of Nature-imitating Art”) for its inherent virtue. Addison, writing in The Spectator (No. 415), indicates that “the inhabitants of [China] laugh at the plantations of our Europeans, which are laid out by the rule and line; because, they say, any one may place trees in equal rows and uniform figures. They chuse rather to shew a genius in works of this nature, and therefore always conceal the art by which they direct themselves” (Works 3: 464). The Chinese regard literary and artistic creation, by analogy with organic vegetative growth, as the complex expression of a healthy psyche. Their gardens accordingly shun mechanistic models of mental operation in order to create an imaginative space where the mind can wander wild and draw inspiration from nature. Joseph Warton’s The Enthusiast: or Lover of Nature (1744) recommends a similar setting to stimulate the imagination and rouse the emotions (5-6).

The landscape over which Confuciango presides carries political and social
overtones. Like Samuel Johnson’s Happy Valley, it is a utopian city cloistered from the tumult and barbarity of the outside world by impassable mountains and an ancient wall built in a forgotten age. An analogous barrier in The Bonze guards the northern expanse of a country still largely closed to British merchants and explorers at mid-century. China’s Great Wall, which Addison praised for its magnificence, is visible from the mouth of Confuciango’s cave (3: 466). As in Bell’s travel narrative, it is seen to separate the external wastelands of Tartary from China’s interior fertility and abundance. It harbours a land:

Richly covered with rice, through which with endless track glittering canals gaily journeyed, bearing on their glassy bosoms innumerable frigates and gilded barges; prevented often by high over-arching bridges, crossed with busy throngs, inmixt with laborious horses and bunchbacked camels; while the golden pinnacles of superb temples, and the lofty turrets of pagodas, shot up through variety of garden scenes pleasingly magnificent. (1: 66)

Confuciango’s gothic retreat looks out over this orderly, prospering empire, which calls to mind Polo’s Cathay and is tinctured by earlier European descriptions. Writing in the same vein at mid-century, Henry Brooke says that the Chinese, “inspired by some forecast or sagacity, not imparted to the rest of mankind, […] cut and quartered this vast continent by as many navigable canals as answer to the ducts and veins in the human body for the dispensation of life and nourishment.” Such visions held immense interest in Britain during the formative decades of its modern transport network, when new canals, roads, and rail lines were being planned and built to supply amenities to towns and cities across the nation and to facilitate the expansion of commerce. China’s canals, Brooke says, “serve as links or chords to the grand community of the Chinese; they bind region to region, house to house, and
man to man, and hold the whole as one system or family together.” This “great kingdom,” he says, is headed by the Chinese emperor, a benevolent despot who acts as a father figure, looking after his people as though they were his children. The emperor maintains a land of plenty where “nothing is wasted, nothing lost, nothing superfluous, nothing wanting.” In consequence, the Chinese have “become as a world within themselves, sufficient to their own happiness,” and they “never enterprise war against others” (43-44).

From this lofty retreat and a vantage point above the minutia of political faction and personal ambition, Confuciango watches the world’s affairs with detachment and occupies his leisure hours in philosophical contemplation on such momentous questions as mankind’s place and role in the world. He is unlike Percy’s protagonist, who is a scholar in action, upholding the dictates of Confucian morality in righting wrongs and freeing the oppressed. He also strikes a contrast to the false “sage Banks” in Walpole’s Mi Li, who is a parody of the English gentleman amateur of science, an eccentric recluse feverishly hunting in the bowels of the Bodleian for an elusive lunar manuscript he believes will secure his fortune. Confuciango has settled down and found intellectual and spiritual stability after long wandering; he is a true Confucian gentleman and “man of taste” (1: 11) who lives, not in perpetual philosophical travel to distant cities, as does Altangi, but rooted in virtuous rustic simplicity, dwelling in a rather elaborate cave fashioned by the “petrific hand of Nature, in a taste that mocks the symmetry of science” (1: 14).
A First Reading of the Novel’s Frame Tale

Confuciangool’s life story reflects Britain’s philosophical, religious, and political preoccupations. After his mother dies giving birth to him, his father, a favourite minister of the previous Chinese emperor and a valiant general, designs to befriend him to the emperor’s son by making him a eunuch and placing him in the imperial palace to serve as tutor to the heir of the Dragon Throne, Prince Zangola. His father’s motive is not the zealous loyalty of a subject willing to sacrifice his own child to preserve the life of the monarch’s orphaned heir, as it is in Murphy’s play. Like Percy’s young protagonists, Confuciango and Zangola are tossed together by the rough and arbitrary hand of worldly ambition, only to find comfort in platonic love and a mutual quest for moral truth. Before long, the prince falls in love with Confuciango’s sister and they are married. The emperor, however, begins to neglect his office, withdrawing into his pleasure gardens to indulge in luxuriance, causing the kingdom to lapse into decline, the description of which reads conspicuously like a reproof of Britain’s own political and social ills:

The great and noble tyrannized over the gentry; the gentry opprest the poor; the poor imitating the rich, and effeminated by the pleasures of inferior luxury were impious, libidinous, and drunken; while Voluptuousness, with all her train of refined pleasures, varied the banquets of unwearied Delight. Justice was bought, or influenced by connexions. Merit was discountenanced. Sycophants and fawning slaves were raised to office. Virtue and Religion were driven far away by the scoff of Contempt, or only regarded in the formality of Hypocrisy; while bold unrefraining Vice, plunging into the arms of every offering Joy, reigned triumphant. (1: 20-21)

The barbarous Tartars to the north are emboldened when they see the Chinese so “luxurious, effeminate, and wicked; too weak and altogether too unfit to defend themselves” (1: 33). They attack, forcing their way beyond the Great Wall, and
“ravag[e] all China like an army of locusts” (1: 24). The Tartar’s destructive incursions into China had become proverbial in Britain, earlier popularized by writers such as Elkanah Settle. By mid-century they were cited almost interchangeably with the sacking of Rome by the Goths as a warning knell against an emergent sense of “effeminacy” thought to be threatening the nation. After the Jacobite Uprising of 1745-46 and before the Seven Years’ War, for instance, Lord Anson couched fervid criticism of Britain’s declining military vigour in a description of China’s conquest by the Tartars. “This populous, this rich and extensive country [China],” he writes, “so pompously celebrated for its refined wisdom and policy, was conquered about an age since by a handful of Tartars; and even now, through the cowardice of the inhabitants, and the want of proper military regulations, it continues exposed not only to the attempts of any potent State, but to the ravages of every petty invader” (369).

Confuciano and Zangola receive news of the Tartar invasion from the “Angel of Providence.” The announcement comes in an extravagant rhetorical flourish evoking the anxiety of a former age in Europe, when Genghis Khan’s hordes, believed to be the scourge of God, swept across the Eurasian landmass to the gates of the Holy Roman Empire. The Chinese emperor blames Confuciano’s father for China’s misfortunes and orders him north to fight the barbarians. A colossal battle ensues, in which the Chinese demonstrate the superiority of cool reason and disciplined martial strategy over the folly of Tartar impetuousness. As the Chinese near victory, however, a “more dreadfully fierce Rebellion” breaks out in Peking, led by the traitor mandarin Ligh. The emperor, to save his daughter from dishonour,
plunges his own dagger into her breast and then strangles himself. “Cowardice had taken possession of the native Chinese,” laments Confuciano, echoing Percy, “and heaven suffered them to be over-ruled by the folly of an unaccountable infatuation; made ripe for divine indignation by their iniquities” (1: 54). Peking is sacked like Troy or Rome, and Confuciano points the moral: “So wonderfully diabolic is human nature when left to its own blind unchecked impulses! [...] so vitiated is man without laws!” (1: 54-55). Confuciano witnesses his sister Philisanga murdered by Ligh, and he and Zangola are taken captive. Confuciano’s father settles a hasty peace with the Tartars outside Peking and returns to the capital, but Ligh flees into the mountains with his plunder and prisoners. The Tartar king Tsoute, now pretending to be China’s ally, takes advantage of Peking’s disorder to work himself onto the Dragon Throne by political manoeuvring and bribery (1: 58). Meanwhile, Zangola and Confuciano free themselves, kidnap Ligh, and spirit him off to a secluded cave, where Zangola, in an starkly violent and graphic scene—it seems strangely at odds with the novel’s predominantly whimsical mood—half flays him alive to satiate his desire for revenge. He then stabs him in the heart and leaves his corpse for the vultures to feed on.

Confuciano and Zangola disguise themselves as Bonzes to escape Ligh’s rebels. One recalls how the Ricci initially dressed as Buddhist monk in a failed attempt to ingratiate himself into Chinese society and ease his travel northward to Peking. Ironically, Confuciano and the prince escape southward and are soon converted to the worship of Fo. Their enthusiasm for this religion carries them as far
as Siam (present-day Thailand), but they gradually see “the absurdity of their idolatrous worship” (1: 69). When Jesuit missionaries arrive on the scene, they are easily converted to Roman Catholicism. Before long, however, they abandon the Jesuits since they adhere to a “religion defiled by ambition, and contaminated by superstition:”

Their offering up prayers to the Deity in an unknown language; their cruelly locking up the sacred laws they pretended to propagate; their silly worshipping pictures, and paying needless adoration to a wafer, while they made a fallible man infallible, were such bare-faced affronts to common-sense, that in giving up the priests, we were quitting their religion; but at length we were set to rights by a judicious Englishman, with whom we travelled and gained European learning. (1: 70)

In renouncing Roman Catholicism, however, Zangola and Confuciano do not abandon Christianity. Despairing “the weakness and fallacy of human reason,” they “resolved to relinquish the world” and “thus commenced hermits.” This time, however, they convert to a Protestant religious creed:

by a rational deduction, and an acquaintance with the English, we found the Romish too superstitious, and followed the Protestant plan; as we were too much struck with the magnificence of the system, and the divine purity of its laws, to reject a religion, that teaching us to despise terrene delights, led the immortal spirit high up the refulgent paths of never-fading glory. (1: 62-63)

Their improbable conversion to contemplative Protestantism, their final change in religious belief, would come across as satire were it not for the strength of their argument in favour of it and their unequivocal indictment of Roman Catholicism.

Turning finally to the question presented by Wilfred and Johnson—how is it that an all-good, all-powerful creator can allow the worldly suffering of innocent creatures—Confuciano proposes to answer by expounding the transmigration of
souls. Wilfred is naturally curious to know how Confuciango intends to reconcile Christianity with the Bonze doctrine of metempsychosis. Confuciango explains that he was led to a belief in pre-existence by a combination of rational thinking and religious philosophy, which was confirmed by an “angelic visitation of Zangola, from the intermediate Sphere” (1: 79). Before dying, Zangola had promised to come back in a vision and reveal the soul’s fate in the hereafter. He does so, and the remainder of The Bonze is taken up by tales tracing his soul’s previous lives.

The novel’s foray into the subject of life after death seems as though it might be setting the stage for a series of satirical rather than moral tales. It appears almost too outlandish to be taken seriously, and yet the Western poetic imagination has a long tradition of representing life after death using fantastical and figurative imagery, from classical antiquity with its florid visions of the Elysian Fields or the Isles of the Blessed, to Judaeo-Christian conceptions of immortality still widely accepted in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers energetically explored the supernatural domain along rational or philosophical lines, increasingly glancing eastward to Oriental wisdom literature for comparison or fresh perspective, although these often demand (and reward) poetical interpretation. Anglophile French philosopbes such as Voltaire and Montesquieu drew on Eastern philosophy to create pseudo-Oriental tales that advance deist or atheistic rationalist propositions, casting doubt on the possibility of human insight into the hereafter. The Bonze, in contrast, situates the workings of divine providence within the compass of human comprehension and the worldly means of expression. When Zangola returns from the other side to share heaven’s
wisdom, he descends from the clouds in a vision steeped in the symbolic imagery of apocalyptic literature and Milton’s poetical works. Arriving in a royal chariot of burnished gold and flaring crimson, he wears a crown of stars and snow-white wings and is accompanied by a host of signing angels. These Miltonic evocations and the moral tenor of the stories he delivers suggest that the novel is intended to be understood, for the most part, allegorically.

The preface describes the narrative as an “Oriental epic” expounding a “lofty subject glancing through the Miltonic theme.” The author declares that it “may be considered as an apology at once for the Christian religion, and the origin of evil.” Milton, of course, was celebrated as the great epic poet of English Christianity, as Homer was the great epic poet of Greek morality and Virgil of Roman politics. By means of a narrative form as irregular as Milton’s was deemed to be, The Bonze places the phenomena of the material world in relation to God’s creation and humanity’s fall from grace. The narrative may contain an apology for Christianity and an exposition of the origin of evil, but the frame tale carries unmistakable political connotations within its historical context. It equates the fall of China’s Ming dynasty to the great moral lapses of Adam and Eve and Lucifer in the Bible, giving them the same heightened prominence as does Paradise Lost. Lucifer became the worldly agent of evil; in The Bonze he is figured as the one “whom the vain

26 For a contemporary discussion of this theme, see Warburton.

27 For a sampling of contemporary opinions of Milton, see Miller (53-120).
Chinese worship under the direful form of a dragon” (1: 94). His influence is manifest in the treacherous Ligh, who initiates his rebellion by committing a filial impiety against the “supreme Father,” the Chinese emperor (1: 108). Chinese belief in the emperor’s mandate from heaven, the basis of both his authority and responsibility to govern the temporal world from the Middle Kingdom, parallels the biblical conception of God, emphasized by Milton, as the “paternal Deity, sitting in the centre of the universe” where he “received the angelic viceroys of worlds, with the homage of every order” (1: 100).

This conceptual framework rings true to the ideals espoused by the “King’s Friends,” an association of some thirty ministers in the House of Commons who, rallying round the Earl of Bute, subscribed to a moderate doctrine of the divine right of kings and sought to uphold a strong, benevolent monarchy under George III. Ligh, like Lucifer, embodies the pride and envy imperilling the divinely ordained hierarchy. Zangola attributes his own worldly pursuits of pleasure and revenge to having allowed himself to fall in league with Satan. In consequence, he is subjected to a series of transmigrations intended to purify his soul through physical pain and moral trial before it can enter heaven. The Bonze might be read in this respect as political propaganda whose moral lessons, drawing on both the poetic and theological allegoric traditions extending down from the Latin Middle Ages, advocates a strong, benevolent, and Protestant monarchy in Britain. Before further considering this approach, it is helpful to examine the frame tale’s philosophy and theology for added support.
A Theological Compromise

_The Bonze_ touches upon the period’s dominant philosophical and theological cruces. Confuciango weaves together a rich tapestry of Christian, deist, Confucian, and Buddhist thought. It appears at first hopelessly confused and evasive. The name “Confuciango” perhaps even suggests “confusion,” although it may simply be a compounding of Confucian (“Confuci-“) and Anglican (“-ango” for “Anglo”). On closer scrutiny, however, the novel’s rendering of metempsychosis, couched in a biblically informed frame story with Miltonic evocations, shows an intellectual coherence that goes beyond its utility as a literary device holding together miscellaneous moral fables. The novel uses metempsychosis to suggest that there is a divine scheme, concealed in the workings of the universe as though the universe were a Sharawaggi garden, linking natural religion with Christian scriptural revelation in a manner that recommends the kind of benevolent monarchy which Bute and the King’s Friends endorsed.

The novel begins by taking up the question of mankind’s place and role in the harmony of the universe, a theme popularized by works such as Pope’s _Essay on Man_. Pope asserts a theism that radically downplays the traditional significance given to scriptural revelation in understanding mankind’s place, stressing instead the empirical study of nature. He examines the natural world’s unity as a hierarchical system, a “great chain” of being extending from God through angels on down to mankind, thence to beasts, plants, and minerals. Each link is necessary to the whole, and the whole is secured by the creator’s fundamental benevolence (9). The universe
is administered by an all-good and all-powerful God, but Pope parts company with Milton by asserting that creation, although manifestly imperfect, is actually purposeful and orderly, even though the providential laws governing it remain largely a mystery. Pope encapsulates this idea in the phrase “Whatever is, is right” (62). In other words, of all possible worldly systems, infinite wisdom has formed the best. Mankind should therefore be submissive and content in knowing that everything is rightly disposed. Such theological optimism, attacked by Voltaire in *Candide* (1759), deems creation perfect and diminishes the Christian view (especially prominent in Roman Catholicism) that regards evil as springing from mankind, beginning with Adam’s corruption of free will.

Pope’s *Essay* confines itself to matters available to ordinary perception, deliberating on God as the creator of a visible natural world. It suggests that we may draw inferences about a larger scheme from that which we can perceive and extend these to that which we cannot perceive, thereby abstracting a metaphysical impression of the whole. Pope, however, disclaims any ambition of being able to interpret the world in the context of divine revelation. Unlike his great predecessor, Milton, he did not, as A.D. Nuttall points out, “include in his poem the absolutely central—one might almost say, the *vertebral*—idea of Scriptural Christianity: the Fall of Man, the Incarnation and Redemption” (50). Pope explains this omission to Joseph Spence: “Some wonder why I did not take in the fall of man in my Essay; and others how the immortality of the soul came to be omitted. The reason is plain: they both lay out of my subject, which was only to consider man as he is; in his present
state, not in his past or future” (qtd. in Kallich 31).

Pope employs metaphysical argument, while *The Bonze* deliberately and playfully veers away from the “dry method of cold metaphysics,” rejecting the notion that first principles can be discovered without the assistance of divine revelation and fully embracing the idea of an after-life that Pope can only hint at. Like Percy’s notes to *The Pleasing History*, it implicitly calls into question the value of reason as the sole or dominant spring of morality. Intellectual enlightenment, in other words, is indivisible from spiritual faith. All mysteries have an underlying reasonableness, largely hidden from mankind’s perception, like the design of a Sharawaggi garden, which can be discovered in part with the help of direct, articulated mediation from above. In this case, mediation comes in the form of an angelic visitation from Zangola, who retells the biblical story of mankind’s fall, God’s incarnation, and the final redemption.

The basis of *The Bonze*’s transmigration scheme—that gross worldly injustice serves as moral trial, and that evil committed in the here-and-now must be redeemed by future punishments—runs counter to Pope. It implies an imperfection in God’s grand design and, more importantly in this context, an imperfection in divine-right theory. Pope had anticipated the deists who would reduce the importance of mankind’s fall from grace by insisting that “corruption” is inherent in our existence as created beings. According to Pope, if this is the best possible creation, as implied by the existence of an all-powerful and truly benevolent God, the fall cannot in any literal sense have occurred. *The Bonze*’s theological argument begins along these
lines but then changes course. It reasons that creation, like a Sharawaggi garden, actually does have a hidden design, which God artfully fashions to achieve his ends. Confucian go reinstates the importance of divine revelation, which does not contradict reason but does transcend it. Like Milton, he stresses the biblical conception of mankind’s corruption, accounting for the existence of evil with a story of Lucifer’s rebellion. The difference between *The Bonze* and Pope’s *Essay* is therefore the difference between Milton and Pope.

The doctrine of metempsychosis is an awkward but necessary addition. Its practicality as a literary device allows the author to knit together assorted moral allegories that would otherwise have no logical connection, but it also serves another purpose. It represents a theological compromise, rationalizing a bridge between natural and revealed religion by arguing that the creator’s acquiescence to worldly suffering is not a flaw in the divine but part of its hidden design. Some readers no doubt found the notion, or at least its representation, absurd, perhaps in the same way Addison felt Milton’s personification of Sin and Death absurd (*Spectator*, No. 273 [12 Jan. 1712]; rpt. in Shawcross [ed.] 152). Milton’s eighteenth-century critics complained that he improperly combined Christian mysteries with pagan epic, stretching Christian theology to accommodate literary or dramatic concerns. *The Bonze* also stretches Christian theology, playfully attempting what Samuel Johnson praises Milton for doing: using his “imagination” to “shew the reasonableness of religion” (*Lives of the English Poets* 1: 209). Milton, as Voltaire remarks, is able to “remove those Shadows of Ridicule, to reconcile together what is Divine and what
looks absurd” (Essay Upon the Civil Wars of France 105). The Reverend James Bate tries a similar reconciliation in a small metaphysical tract he wrote in 1752 and republished in 1766 with a dedication to his sons, one a merchant in the East Indies. It aims to free the literal doctrine of original sin from its paradox within the “grand scheme of redemption.” The Jacobite Uprising of 1745-46 had roused Bate to the lingering threat of Roman Catholicism. His dissertation’s only flaw, he claims, is that “a Chinese or a Brahmin” might consider it incongruous with the doctrine of transmigration and “then have charged the Primitive Christians, with forging both the Testaments, in order to make the Cypher tally with the Key” (335).

The Bonze holds out metempsychosis as the key to reconciling Christianity with natural religion. The notion is not necessarily absurd, especially during an age in which Europeans entertained Oriental forms of religion to see if they might shed new light on, and provide added support to aspects of Christianity increasingly besieged by rational argument. After all, the Bible does not categorically rule out reincarnation any more that it explicitly spells out the commonly held view that God exists as a unity of three persons. Moreover, Zangola does not put forward a theory of reincarnation that asserts the soul is a part of God, an extension of the divine being become fallen, which is the fundamental objection Christianity has to some Indian theories of reincarnation. He simply states that his fallen soul, tempted and tried in its worldly manifestations, has undergone a lengthy process of purification before it was able to enter heaven, perhaps in a manner similar to the allegorical journey of Dante’s narrator in Divina Commedia, who travels through Hell beneath the earth,
climbs Mount Purgatory and then finds his way into Heaven, the lower stratum of which is located on the moon. Zangola’s soul undergoes a purifying evolution through hell and purgatory on earth and two astrological sites in successive transmigrations—a process of metempsychosis rather than reincarnation, since it passes through human as well as bestial and inanimate bodies—before God grants it a place in heaven.

_The Bonze_ allows itself some theological leeway by declaring itself a book meant to instruct children. Johnson concedes that Milton’s “confusion of spirit and matter, which pervades the whole narration of the war in heaven, fills [Paradise Lost] with incongruity,” but this incongruity is unimportant because “the book, in which it is related, is, I believe, the favourite of children, and gradually neglected as knowledge is increased” (223). In other words, _Paradise Lost_ aims to plant the seeds of Christian morality in young readers using symbolic and allegorical mnemonic aids. _The Bonze_, dedicated to the young Lord Kilwarling, has similar potential, but it attempts also to resolve the confusion of spirit and matter by introducing metempsychosis. “But in the subsequent detail historic,” _The Bonze_’s author writes,

be not shocked, when more plainly enumerating the transmigration of the soul, I speak a mere Bonze, as if horses or worms had pre-existed; for be assured the antient opinion is highly constant, to a reason enlightened by a divine Revelation, and the most elaborate philosophy. For all confess that matter, however delicately modified, cannot think and remember; but brutes think and remember, therefore brutes have within them something superior to matter, which is spirit; and if a spirit why mortal?

If innocent horses suffer, it is because “in a prior state they must have offended” (1: 137-38). Such is the case with humans, he asserts, and to illustrate he recounts
Zangola’s transmigrations.

In rationalizing a link between natural and revealed religion, Confuciango’s tales risk reducing Christianity to a stage in the development of mankind, essential but passing, like adolescence in the cycle of life or a single transmigration of the soul. They also run counter to the sort of teleological argument that Hume would publish a decade later in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Hume claims that one cannot legitimately infer from the imperfections of the world, such as animal pain and human suffering, a grand purpose or greater good such as the design of an all-powerful creator who is the object of the Christian faith (85-100). The Bonze’s theological position is aligned instead with the argument of an essay printed anonymously in Thomas Becket’s *The Repository: or, Half-yearly Register* for 1768, titled “The Perpetual War of the Creatures Considered as no Objection to the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity.” This essay prefaced another Oriental tale said to have been “written by the author of the Bonze,” titled “The Genii of Adversity,” an allegory attributing worldly suffering to an agent of evil personified in a character resembling Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* and *The Bonze*. The essay’s anonymous author begins by laying down a rational basis for the existence of “an original, wise, intelligent Being, who was the author and creator of all things which exist.” Reason, the essay contends, can lead us to understand that suffering is inconsistent with a perfectly wise and just creator, whose existence is evident in various worldly symmetries and contrivances. Such a creator “could have no greater, or other motive,
than the happiness of his creatures” (Part 2 [“Original Essays”]: 3-12). Confuciango makes the same case when he tells Wilfred and Johnson:

the idea which you form of the supreme Creator is, that he possesses goodness and power in the fullness of perfection; from which you naturally argue, that he could have no end to answer in the formation of his creatures but their happiness, and that he has plenitude of power for its completion. But on the other hand you perceive, and intimately feel, that the place of abode formed by the Deity for its creatures, is of absolute design, not by chance sprinkled with imperfection; and though rich with a variety of delights, yet it is but to very few the mansion of happiness. (1: 70-71)

If there is a “supreme Creator” who is all-powerful and all-good (in contrast to the claims of atheism and fatalism), then worldly pain and suffering is necessarily part of the creator’s design. While no man can be fully acquainted with the whole, the argument runs, mankind can use reason, guided by divine revelation, to partially comprehend the design. Confuciango claims that Zangola “gave [him] the clue which guided [him] to the portico of pre-existence, where rational tradition lending [him] the silver key, religious Philosophy opened the vast gate, and plainly discovered to mortal eyes, the mysteries of Providence!” (1: 70-71).

**Reincarnation as a Literary Device**

According to Du Halde, the doctrine of metempsychosis was introduced into China from India (3: 14-15). The ancient emperor Ming Li had a dream that brought “to his Mind a Sentence which Confucius often repeated, viz. *That the Most Holy was to be found in the West.*” He sent ambassadors to India, who returned with Bonzes who worshiped Fo and thus “introduced the impious sect into the Empire, and also
the ridiculous Opinion of Metempsychosis” (1: 360-61). Fo had been an Indian holy man who “forsook his Wives, and all earthly Cares, to retire into a solitary Place, and put himself under the guidance of four Philosophers.” His disciples regarded him as a god, although Du Halde and other Jesuits, such as Francis Xavier, consider him a demon incarnate (Xavier 2: 341). On his deathbed, he tried to persuade his followers to atheism, the mystery of which he articulated in a single aphorism: “the Principle of all things is Emptiness and Nothing; from Nothing all things proceeded, and into Nothing all will return, and this is the end of all our Hopes.” Afterwards, his disciples rejected this idea and “easily persuaded a simple and credulous People that their Master had been born eight thousand times, that his Soul had successively passed thro’ different Animals, and that he had appeared in the Figure of an Ape, a Dragon, an Elephant, &c.” The good can therefore expect future rewards, and the evil a succession of tormenting transmigrations. “It is easy to see that if the Chinese are the Dupes of a Doctrine so absurd and ridiculous as the Transmigration of Souls,” writes Du Halde, “the Bonzes, who propagate it with so much Zeal, draw no small Advantage from it: It is exceeding useful to support all their deceitful Tricks by which they gain so many charitable Contributions, and enlarge their Revenues” (Du Halde 1: 36-41).

The doctrine of metempsychosis has been familiar to the Western world at least since Pythagoras, Plato, Socrates, Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil (Kenny 229-31). These philosophers and poets considered the soul an immortal essence which has fallen from divine heights and become imprisoned in an earthly body. Once liberated by
death, it undergoes a period of purification in Hades before returning to the world as the actuating essence of another body. This process is repeated until the soul is sufficiently wholesome to take its place near the gods for all eternity.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the use of repeated incarnations as a literary device was well established and often associated with pseudo-Oriental tales. Joseph Addison, for example, wrote a short dissertation on the doctrine of transmigration in 1725, which was appended to Thomas Simon Gueullette’s *Chinese Tales; or, the Wonderful Adventures of the Mandarin Fum-Hoam* (231-36). It begins with a story claiming to have been written in a letter to an English lady. A thousand years ago the narrator, an Indian Brahman, is granted a wish. He asks that his soul should never pass into bestial form in subsequent lives, but as this wish is impossible to grant, he opts instead to retain memory of his former human life if his soul should wind up in beastly form. He spends his next life as the odious minister of a great prince on the Ganges, eroding away his former innocence as an Indian holy man. In consequence, he is reborn as a jackal, an impoverished Indian tax-gatherer, and a flying fish that is eaten by a shark near a fleet of English ships. He then finds himself a London banker who, remembering his former poverty, grows miserly. His soul passes through an industrious ant, a drone, a town-rake, a bay gelding, a tailor, a shrimp, and a tomtit. Afterwards he becomes a young beau and the lover of the lady to whom the story is addressed. He is finally born an Ethiopian who is “caught by a Servant of the *English* Factory, and sent over into *Great-Britain*” (234).
Addison claims that the story misrepresents the true theory of transmigration, which is “not inconsistent with the Light of Right Reason.” To square transmigration with the Christian resurrection, Addison, unlike *The Bonze*, draws a curious distinction between the soul and the spirit. The spirit, he submits, acts as a medium between the soul and gross matter; it is the “copula” between the soul and body. As an ethereal animating agent, the spirit is what transmigrates through different bodies, not the “rational soul,” which returns “into Abraham’s Bosom” to await the resurrection (235). Addison’s treatment is worth considering in relation to *The Bonze* because it illustrates an interest, shared by others at the time, in reconciling the notion of transmigration with Christianity. Also, the reincarnations that comprise Gueullette’s tales lay emphasis on the gradual confusion or loss of identity experienced by the old Brahman as his soul passes through successive trials that move geographically from the East towards England, away again, and then back to “Great-Britain.”

Geographical movement, literal or figurative, is an important component of ideas about China in British literature. Murphy’s audience is carried “*On eagle wings* [...] *To China’s eastern realms*,” imaginatively travelling the distance separating the two countries to have their patriotism bolstered by Confucian morals. Percy’s protagonist discovers that travel cannot surpass stationary book learning as a means to enlightenment and civic virtue. Goldsmith’s Altangi champions philosophical travel. Bell pictures civilization’s evolution and Britain’s place in the world as a trek across the Eurasian landmass to Peking, moving through counties at
different stages of development. Walpole, as the next chapter attempts to demonstrate, uses a Chinese prince’s “backward” expedition from Canton to England to satirize the British mercantile-colonial enterprise. *The Bonze* follows the spiritual journey of a Chinese prince’s soul as it transmigrates from Confucianism through Buddhism and Roman Catholicism towards a higher truth in contemplative Protestantism that endorses the principles of good government established around a strong, constitutional monarchy.

Transmigration’s frequent use as a satirical device during the period, together with the novel’s stylistic exuberance, begs an important question: Is *The Bonze* a satire? Henry Fielding uses transmigration in 1743 to narrate a Lucianic satire framed as a dream vision in “A Journey from this World to the Next.” “Some would have it to be an atheistical book,” Fielding’s pretended editor claims, “and some that it was a libel on the government; for one or other of which reasons, they all refused to print it.” He had shown it “to the R—I Society, but they shook their heads, saying there was nothing in it wonderful enough for them.” One Abraham Adams sees the manuscript and realizes “that there was more in it than at first appeared” (325). The narrator recounts his soul’s journey after death. It begins when his soul escapes his body through his nostrils and travels into the otherworld in a carriage driven by a former coachman of Peter the Great. He passes through the City of Diseases, whose porter writes in “one of the oriental languages” (338), and from there proceeds to the Palace of Death, which has the “stately pomp of eastern courts” (345). The gate of Elysium is attended by the judge Minos who, rather than send him back to live
another trial determined by the Wheel of Fortune, admits him by virtue of his good deeds. Inside he encounters Homer, Virgil, Pope, Addison, and Dryden. Julian the Apostate recounts his many reincarnations, and the narrative concludes with a history of Anna Boleyn, Henry VIII’s second wife and the catalyst of England’s separation from the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1760 and 1765 Thomas Becket, The Bonze’s publisher, printed Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal: or, The Adventures of a Guinea*, a thinly veiled chronicle of contemporary political scandals written in the convention of the speaking-object narratives made popular by Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* (1709), in which a man discovers that his gold coins are endowed with speech. In *Chrysal*, the spirit of gold, temporarily embodied in a guinea, relates to an emaciated alchemist its recent adventures in the hands of George II and his mistress (the countess of Yarmouth), Frederick the Great, and Lord Chesterfield, as well as various fools, knaves, and monsters. Jonathan Lamb argues that metempsychosis in *Chrysal* serves as more than simply a satirical device, for “transmigration is treated not just as a figure of mobility and assumed consciousness, but also as a sympathizing power and a force expressive of the autonomy of things” (221). In 1769 appeared Tobias Smollett’s *The History and Adventures of an Atom*. Targeting the British conduct of domestic and foreign affairs, it is a satire, narrated by an “atom” that has resided in the bodies of the greatest figures of state, containing “some political anecdotes now to be divulged for the instruction of British ministers” (6). The atom reveals itself to Nathaniel Peacock, a London haberdasher, saying that it began its “strange revolutions in the
empire of Japan” enclosed in a grain of rice. It is eaten by a Dutch mariner and transported to the Cape of Good Hope, where it is discharged and fertilizes some vegetation used to make a salad eaten by an English supercargo. The supercargo returns to England and dies of venereal disease. His body is thrown onto a dunghill and the atom enters a passing duck, which Peacock’s father eats. It transfers into Nathaniel at conception, eventually becoming lodged in the membrane between his brain and skull, whence it mysteriously perks up one day and narrates its adventures in a small, squeaky voice. The atom, whose corporeal transmigrations also move geographically from the Far East to England, makes no attempt to reconcile metempsychosis with the Christian theology of redemption. It tells Nathaniel that metempsychosis is simply the agent of “nature and fate,” sounding a note somewhere between deism and paganism. There is no mention of God, and after each life the transmigrating entity is bathed in the waters of oblivion, in the same manner that the soul is said to have the memory of its past life erased in Dryden’s translation of the sixth book of Virgil’s Æneid (11).

Smollett uses transmigration as a literary device to free his satire from the restraints of time and place. As a secret history told by an omniscient being, The Atom comes closer than The Bonze to the spy genre, in which an alien of some sort furtively reports on the absurd politics and customs of Europe, such as Marana’s L’Espion Turc, Montesquieu’s Lettres Persanes, or Goldsmith’s Chinese Letters. Smollett, however, shows domestic events and people clearly reflected in foreign countries, placing them under an unfamiliar light or making them appear ridiculous
by reducing them to outlandish or contemptible imagery. The method is used in the anonymous *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de Perse*, in which England is represented as Japan, and China as Spain. Smollett equates England with Japan also (but France with China) to satirize the limitations placed by Robert Walpole and his successors upon the powers of the Hanoverian monarchy. In reviewing *The Modern Part of an Universal History*, Smollett remarks that China (France) is more populous, powerful, and extensive [...] its palaces are more grand [...] its armies are more numerous. [...] But what the Chinese (French) have invented, the Japanese have improved. [...] The Chinese are more gay, the Japanese more substantial. [...] The Chinese are remarkable for dissimulation, complaisance, and effeminacy; the Japanese are famous for their integrity, plain-dealing, and manly vigour. (Critical Review [Sept. 1759] 189-90)

The Atom’s allegorical scheme is incredibly elaborate, and publishers often have to appendix a key to help guide readers. The Chinese deity Fo symbolizes Catholicism or idolatry. Spain is Korea; Germany is Tartary; and the Cham is the Holy Roman or German emperor. The bonzes represent priests, and China’s persistent threat to the tranquillity of Japan leads to hostilities that parallel the rivalries between Britain and France in North America during the Seven Years’ War.

Transmigration as a literary device in *The Bonze*, however, serves chiefly to hold together a series of moral fables. Since the fables appear to teach the principles of good government, rather than to convey satire, it is not surprising that the novel attempts to reconcile metempsychosis with both the Christian and Confucian ideals of a benevolent ruler who, like God or a father or a constitutional monarch, holds sway over a people willing to submit to a higher authority. It is an awkward accommodation but characteristic of a period which boldly explores possible
connections between Christian and non-Christian ideas. Only a century before, writers would have been careful to distinguish between the two, as translators of Virgil were in the seventeenth century. (Percy still makes such distinctions, although this is most likely because he is a newly ordained clergyman.) Milton may have suggested a way for the author of *The Bonze* to subtly work transmigration into the largely unrevealed system of God’s creation and thereby dramatize debate on the proper role of a king. He personifies Sin and Death as characters who transmigrate through Chaos to earth in Book X of *Paradise Lost*. *The Bonze* represents Abdiel as the angel who passes judgement on the newly arrived souls and administers transmigrations. Abdiel, the seraph who figures in Books V and VI of *Paradise Lost*, initially considers joining the rebellion in heaven but repents and helps to expel Lucifer. He admonishes Zangola for having “experienced the fallacy of mundane delights,” declaring that “nothing more ennobles the spirit than a resistance of pleasure; nothing purifies it more than acts of goodness.” In contrast to Fielding’s Minos, he allows each soul, including Zangola’s, a say in determining its next worldly trial. On earth, Lucifer is permitted only enough freedom to serve, like the Genii of Adversity, as an agent of trial and punishment, but not “above necessity” (2: 181-84).

**Synopsis of Zangola’s Transmigrations**

Zangola begins by confessing that he too was once an insurgent in the primal angelic host that rose up against God, briefly recounting with Miltonic intensity the
riotous mutiny in heaven. His first transmigration therefore is as a worm to “punish proud ambition” (1: 142). He chooses next the splendour of an Egyptian prince, but a series of misadventures in this life teaches him the folly of vanity, pride, and corruption. His final penance before dying wins him probation, but as punishment for tyranny he is placed on a barren comet in space. From there he witnesses extraterrestrial kingdoms caught up in a bizarre and perpetual cacophony of rebellions and civil wars before the comet is “sucked into the fiery gulf of the burning sun” (1: 206). His fifth transmigration occurs back on earth as a mite for formerly striving to conquer the world (1: 206). Afterwards he becomes a “sprightly game-cock” by “analogy to [his] former martial disposition” (1: 207). His next reincarnation punishes cruel ambition: a spotted leopard which eats a man but is killed by a lion.

Zangola moves to his second probationary stage as “a beautiful woman” (2: 17). Inordinately vain, she believes no suitor can match her beauty, but eventually she is forced to marry an old prince who is “ugly, diseased, pettish, and jealous” (2: 24). When she is seduced into a secret love affair with a handsome youth, her husband flies into a rage and slices off her nose. Next, as punishment for adultery, Zangola becomes an African prince in Niger whose lover abandons him for the king of a neighbouring tribe who has taken them captive. He escapes but is caught by another tribe and sold as a slave to Europeans, who execute him for inciting a botched rebellion. He next becomes a turkey and then a peacock to punish haughtiness and vanity (2: 50-51).
Zangola succeeds to his third probation as an Italian girl who is pretty but not beautiful, her station genteel but not high. She marries a merchant’s son, Immeritus, setting off a series of misadventures that takes them to Turkey and into the hands of slavery. They eventually return to Italy, only to confront corruption at home in the Italian court. Zangola then becomes a female turtle dove which is shot by a hunter. Abdiel advises him to put an end to this stage of “probation by a safer choice” in “one terrene life of abstinence” (2: 181-82). He becomes a philosopher whose tutor warns him to stay clear of all superstition. When he reaches manhood he falls in love with a lady but is soon sent off alone on a Grand Tour of France and Italy. After nearly losing himself to licentious foreign women, he returns to England and consults a renowned hermit in the mountains. The hermit discourses on the transitory follies of worldly riches, ambitions, and pleasures. He poses the all-important question: “suppose we should exist again, and be answerable for our actions—what then?” (2: 205). The hermit reveals himself as his former tutor and sends him back “to enjoy the world, without forfeiting [his] integrity” (2: 208). He marries his English sweetheart and they live a simple, virtuous life together.

Although Zangola avoids temptation in this life by using reason to guide his moral choices, he errs by rejecting the Christian plan of redemption. Consequently, his next life transpires on Jupiter, a dim, cold planet where people are insipid philosophers forever studying books and not permitted to accumulate wealth (2: 212). In many respects they resemble Voltaire’s Quakers in Lettres Philosophiques: idealized primitive Christians in the modern world (Letters Concerning the English
Nation 1-27). They live modestly, speak truthfully, and tolerate the opinions of others; they have no priests, confine their religious ceremonial to a simple prayer at mealtime, reject rituals like baptism or communion, and believe that Jesus taught a rational religion. Voltaire allowed that a society of atheists liberated from all religious constraints could exist peacefully provided that all citizens were philosophers. Zangola’s sixteenth (and final) transmigration is as a Chinese prince and Confuciango’s friend, with which we are already familiar. We discover that the rebel Ligh is, in fact, “Omphiel, the great friend and abettor of Lucifer” (2: 225). Zangola reports on the war being waged by the great “traitor-rebel” Satan on earth (2: 253), and he concludes with an account of his sojourn on Venus before entering into heaven.

**Authorship of The Bonze**

The tales’ tendency to generalize, dwelling on the principles of good and bad behaviour, suggests that they are intended to be read on the whole as moral allegories. They may contain satirical glimmers—for the most part theological rather than directly political in the conventional sense—but as Ellen Douglass Leyburn observes, satire and allegory are not incompatible; they are often complimentary “modes of indirection,” fundamentally moral in purpose (323). To better understand the novel’s purpose, it is helpful to explore its authorship. As mentioned, “The Genii of Adversity,” a tale also “written by the author of the Bonze,” is a moral allegory of the principles contributing to good government. It was later reprinted in Dublin as
The School for Majesty, or the Sufferings of Zomelli. An Oriental Tale (1780 and 1783). The Critical Review (No. 57, 1783) comments on it as follows:

We are weary of Eastern imitations; of bombast without sublimity; and of inflated pomp without true majesty. Though this tale be not one of the worst of its kind of manufacture, it is entitled to no praise, except for its moral tendency; its uniform recommendation of virtue, humanity, and justice. In this view, it is really the ‘School for Majesty.’ (235)

The same could be said of The Bonze, which exhibits more “inflated pomp” but is at least consistent in its “recommendation of virtue, humanity, and justice.”

The only other reference to the author of The Bonze is found in Polyhymnia: or, The Complete Song Book (1769), which contains a song, possibly adapted from one of the tales, said to have been composed by “the celebrated author of The Bonze” and sung at Vauxhall, suggesting that the author’s identity may have been an open secret within some circles.28 Copies of The Bonze extant in the British Library and the Bodleian offer few clues, for they contain no notes or additional information on the book’s provenance. The Lewis Walpole Library in New Haven holds only the second volume of a copy which belonged to Horace Walpole. It has not been annotated by Walpole, nor are there any references to the book in Walpole’s letters or manuscript notes. It is, however, accompanied by an intriguing reference written in pencil by William Rees-Mogg that reads:

One vol. only. From Horace Walpole’s Library. Mr. WS Lewis tells me that the blue edges are typical of Walpole’s bindings of this period. No shelf mark possibly because it was kept in the Glass Closet. HW’s armorial bindings were

28 This was kindly pointed out to me by Laurence Williams, at the time a DPhil candidate (Oxford) studying Oriental narrative forms in eighteenth-century accounts of travel to the Ottoman Empire, Tartary, and China.

An additional note by Lewis indicates that he purchased the volume privately from Rees-Mogg in January 1971. Hazen notes that the volume was auctioned from Walpole’s library, “possibly in some such miscellaneous lot, since it does not appear in the sale records,” and that it

was HW’s copy (perhaps presented by its author?) of an anonymous and extravagant pseudo-Chinese tale, The Bonze, or Chinese anchorite, an oriental epic novel. Translated from the Mandarin language of Hoamchi-van, a Tartarian proselite, by Monsr. D’Alenzon. London 1768 [corrected in pencil to 1769]. Two volumes, 8vo. A copy of the second volume only, bound in calf with HW’s arms on the sides, without press-mark, was purchased in 1957 from a bookseller in Bristol by Mr. William Rees-Mogg. The lack of a press-mark suggests that HW shelved the set in 1768, with other presentation books, in the Glass Closet. A name on the fly-leaf, “Henry James, his book, 1791” may mean that the volumes departed from SH at about that time; there is another name, “John Scott.” (Entry for [Downes, John] Roscius Anglicanus, 3: 259-60)

The Bonze evidently found a special place in Walpole’s library, but it was not printed at Strawberry Hill. Did Walpole know the author? The book is dedicated to the young Lord Kilwarling, son of the Earl of Hillsborough (Wills Hill, 1718-93), formerly president of the Board of Trade who in January 1768 was appointed secretary of state for the colonies, a post newly created to deal with festering problems in America. The flamboyant dedicatory epistle, perhaps satirically suggesting that Hillsborough’s son was in want of a book of moral instruction, is notable as Walpole describes Hillsborough in 1770 as “a pompous composition of

29 I am grateful to Susan Walker of the Lewis Walpole Library for examining its copy of The Bonze and transcribing this note, the handwriting of which, she indicated, is “a little difficult to read.”
ignorance and want of judgment” (qtd in Marshall, “Wills Hill,” ODNB online). Perhaps Walpole saw in the sage Confucian go a reflection of himself: the emasculated son of Britain’s prime minister, a wise man of taste who has retired from the world of politics to his gothic retreat at Strawberry Hill, and to whom worldly men flock for enlightenment. It is easy to see how this fanciful pseudo-Chinese production might have flattered its way into Walpole’s Glass Cabinet. One might even wonder if Walpole himself wrote The Bonze, although this seems very doubtful. Walpole would later try his hand at a short collection of framed Oriental stories titled Hieroglyphic Tales (1785), but the style of The Bonze is clearly not Walpole’s. The tone, tempo, phraseology, and rhetorical constructs that characterize Walpole’s writing differ appreciably. Moreover, The Bonze’s extraordinary theological fusion is too far removed from Walpole’s own outlook to be considered his, even satirically.

Stylistically, The Bonze resembles the Oriental tales translated by Alexander Dow and published in the same year. Dow, a Scottish soldier for the East India Company, had risen to the rank of captain and studied Persian in India. While on leave in England in 1768, possibly in consequence of having participated in a protest against Robert Clive’s policies in India, he published Tales, from the Inatulla of Delhi, a loose translation of Bahâr-e dâneš written by Inâyat Allâh Kanbû, a seventeenth-century Persian officer in the Mughal service. Dow, who corresponded with David Hume, published these tales because he believed the British should make

30 For a discussion and sampling of this book, see Ballaster (Fables of the East 49-70).
an effort to understand Muslim and Hindu cultures in order to strengthen their influence in India. He also published in 1768 a translation of *The History of Hindostan* by Muhammad Kāsim Hindū Shâh Firishtah. Dow prefixed to this history a “Dissertation Concerning the Customs, Manners, Language, Religion and Philosophy of the Hindoos.” This essay contains an outline of the Hindu doctrine of transmigration, which Inâyat Allâh Kanbû had also put to use as a literary device to link his tales. Like *The Bonze*, Dow’s History explores various causes and forms of despotism. In 1772 Dow published a continuation of the work, together with an essay “On the Origin and Nature of Despotism in Hindostan.” He also wrote two Oriental plays: *Zingis* (1769) and *Sethona* (1774). The main character of the latter is the Egyptian prince Amasis, who appears prominently in *The Bonze* as Zangola’s second transmigration as a despotic Egyptian prince who seeks to conquer the world. Walpole attended a performance of *Zingis* on 11 January 1769. He mentions it in a letter to Mann in connection with Britain’s failure to take advantage of opportunities for cross-cultural enlightenment afforded by its new Eastern empire, though he lamented the play’s poor quality (*Correspondence* 23: 82). Much later Walpole began reading Dow’s History, but he says he was “forced to quit [it], because the Indian names made so little impression on me, that I went backward instead of forward, and was every minute reverting to the former page to find about whom I was reading” (*Correspondence* [letter to John Pinkerton, 14 Aug. 1789] 16: 106).

Externally, both *The Bonze* and Dow’s productions are connected in so far as they were first published by Thomas Becket, a prominent London printer of
Enlightenment books, most often in partnership with the Dutchman Peter Abraham de Hondt, in the 1760s and early 1770s. The partnership’s main publications were the works of a handful of Scottish men of letters: Alexander Dow, James Macpherson, Hugh Blair (Macpherson’s mentor in Edinburgh), William Duff, and John Home (Bute’s secretary and also the chief promoter of Macpherson’s *Ossian*). Becket and De Hondt published Macpherson’s *Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem* (1762); *Temora, An Ancient Epic Poem* (1763); *Critical Dissertations on the Origins, Antiquities, Language, Government, Manners, and Religion of the Ancient Caledonians, Their Posterity the Picts, and the British and Irish Scots* (1768); and *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771). They printed Hugh Blair’s *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), as well as John Home’s *The Fatal Discovery: A Tragedy* (1769). At the time *The Bonze* was published, Dow was living in London with Macpherson who, like Home and Blair, is known to have been patronized by Bute. Bute came to prominence first as George III’s tutor and later, in 1760, as prime minister. At the height of his power, Bute had organized a government press by drawing on secret service funds to support a select group of writers, publishers, and authors. The effort was intended to promote government policy on major issues of public concern, and it involved the recruitment of coffee-house spies to monitor public opinion and cultivate connections. It was through Charles Jenkinson that Bute was able to enlist the help of Macpherson, Blair, Home, Edward Richardson, Roger Flexman, and Samuel Johnson (Rea 22-40). In

31 For a discussion of Becket’s partnership with De Hondt, see Sher (272, 702-3).
1761 Bute declared that “most of our best authors are devoted to me” (qtd. in Lovat-Fraser 30). By mid-1762 he had established the weekly *Briton*, edited by Smollett, and the weekly *Auditor*, edited by Murphy, who was still basking in the success of *The Orphan*. Even William Hogarth was recruited in 1762 to defend peace negotiations with France. *The Bonze*’s title page lists other booksellers who participated in Bute’s scheme, including Francis Newberry, a prominent publisher of children’s books and editor of the daily propagandist newspaper *Public Ledger*.

*The Bonze* shares with Dow’s *Tales and History* a parallel introductory apology for its flowery rhetorical excesses. The preface to *The Bonze* indicates that its lofty subject is told with a “majestic pomp of language” that embraces the “eastern taste, very fond of elevated language, yet not correct in its elegance.” Its “flowery exuberance” is likened to “the Garden of Eden, rich with a thousand luxuriant charms, that required the pruning knife, which at best would but sever a beauty from the grace of free Nature, who slights the prim nicety of Art!” The author promises to guide the reader down the “rugged paths of Virtue,” through “the flowery gardens of Vice” and “the blooming paths of pleasure,” to “the magnificent temple of Wisdom.” Such a style, so different from that which Percy represents as authentic Chinese simplicity in *Hau Kiou Choaan*, would strike a note very near to parody were it not for the author’s stated intention of appealing to youthful tastes, “to charm the young, the gay, and thoughtless, into thought, and the love of ethic truth by elegance of its enrichments:”

Lofty ideas can never be agreeably introduced to the young, the gay, and witty, by the mouth of severly-frowning Morality, or the lips of sage Philosophy. No,
this task is reserved for silken pleasure, purple-winged, blooming beauty, dropping odours; who, with dimpled smiles, leads her delighted votaries through the brilliant paths of intellectual delicacy, amidst delicious groves, lucid fountains, and gorgeous palaces: who, flying aloft on the wings of enraptured imagination, will introduce them into the very heavens; approaching as it were, the pavilion throne of Deity! viewing his wondrous works, in the company of beings the most glorious; till bright Religion arrests them to adore its author, to start back from cruel Vice, and to follow goodness in the delightful gardens of ever vernal happiness. (1: 3)

This language closely resembles the Persian translated by Dow, which Dow feared may “perhaps, be thought too florid and diffuse by men accustomed to the succinct and nervous manner of the ancients, and that concise elegance, which distinguishes many writers of modern Europe.” Like Percy, Dow wished to showcase an authentic specimen of Oriental prose but was less willing to make stylistic alterations. He claims to have translated as exactly as possible, for had he done otherwise, “the original would probably have evaporated in his hands.” His Persian tutors had recommended his sources as an exercise in learning the language, perhaps in the same way that Wilkinson is thought to have put Hau Kiou Choaan into English as an exercise in learning Chinese. Dow likens the Persian style to “poetical prose” because it is too “turgid and florid” or “diffuse and verbose.” Persians, he says, “often regard more the cadence and turn of their sentences, than the propriety and elegance of their thoughts; leading frequently the reader into a labyrinth to which he can find no end” (History 1: ix).

Dow’s Persian translation, however, does not fully reflect The Bonze’s style, suggesting that Dow may not be the novel’s author but perhaps only its inspiration. Certain tricks of expression are common to both Dow’s translation and The Bonze,
but identifiable parallels are faint at best. Many characteristic tropes employed by *The Bonze*, while following loosely after the peculiar Indo-Persian style, draw their language and imagery from a distinctly British stock of poetry. Few of the novel’s florid expressions in fact match anything in Dow’s translations but are abundant in contemporary British poetry. If Dow were indeed the author, one might expect to encounter borrowings and specific adaptations from his Persian translations. The novel’s language and imagery, however, as well as its moral principles, are consistent with those of Dow’s London friend and collaborator, James Macpherson. Macpherson’s works, also published by Becket and De Hondt, are animated by the same admixture of adventure, romance, and airy philosophizing. Contemporary readers were captivated by the epic quality and sublime imagery of works such as *Fingal*, which seemed to reflect a genuine Gaelic spirit and resonated with a public tired of witty but arid neoclassical verse.

Like *The Bonze*, Macpherson rejected neoclassical rules and freely adapted his sources to his own purpose. He drew inspiration and material from works such as Collins’s “Oriental Eclogues,” Young’s “Night Thoughts,” and Gray’s “The Bard.” Abandoning the neoclassical balance of order, proportion, and chronology, his works were frequently criticized for their apparent lapses in judgement and taste. Like *The Bonze*, Macpherson uses natural phenomena to connect ideas or create an atmosphere steeped in wonder, mystery, and fantasy, objectifying emotions in natural scenes and settings. The night, sun, moon, winds, ocean, sands, mist, rustling heath, and meteors recur as profusely in Macpherson’s works as they do in *The Bonze*. 
Macpherson also revels in stock epic epithets and descriptions of combat, exhibiting the same flair for military tactics and strategy as The Bonze’s author. He also stresses life’s transience, in which joy and pain are inextricable. The Ossian poems are filled with a sense of loss and defeat associated with a glorious past, creating a melancholy mood characteristic of a Gaelic *aisling* (“dream poem”), which anticipates the Romantic emphasis on individual sensibility. Macpherson’s interest in the oral tradition, his use of characters communing with ghosts, and his penchant for drawing out parallels with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* are all shared by the author of *The Bonze*.

It might seem odd for a Scotsman to produce a work, such as *The Bonze*, which appears favourable to the Hanoverian monarchy. Macpherson, however, changed political allegiance under Bute’s patronage. Bute promoted a number of Scotsmen during his administration, including Macpherson, carrying over a conservative allegiance to his clan and the Stuart dynasty into pro-Hanoverian, pro-Union politics. He transmigrated from Jacobite sympathizer during the Uprising of 1745-46 into something resembling a Celtic Whig, though the transformation was never complete. George III’s favouritism towards Bute, and Bute’s patronage of fellow Scots, drew attacks from polemicists such as John Wilkes and Charles Churchill, who penned anti-Bute and anti-Macpherson satires. Wilkes published them in his journal *The North Briton* (No. 45, 23 April 1763), and Churchill in his “Scots pastoral,” *The Prophecy of Famine* (1763).

Plagued by challenges to the authenticity of his Ossian poems and troubled by a growing anti-Scottish bias in London, Macpherson in 1764 accepted Bute’s offer of
an appointment to a small government post in the American colonies with a modest pension. There, as secretary to a Lowland Scot, General Johnstone, governor of Florida, he deepened his understanding of an expanding British imperial hegemony. When he returned to London, he took up political writing for the Tory government and became a leading writer and press manager for the Pitt, Grafton, and North administrations. *The Bonze* was published in 1768 and dedicated to the newly appointed secretary for the colonies. At the time, Macpherson was undoubtedly influenced by Dow’s *Tales* and *History*, and he likely gave Dow advice and helped him to make literary connections. Soon afterwards, Macpherson began writing history. He published his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771), which the Whigs criticized as being too sympathetic to royalists, and later *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted Against the Claims of America* (1776).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence to suggest that *The Bonze* may have been written by one of Bute’s adherents is the marked similarity between Confuciano and Bute. Bute, the son of a representative peer of Scotland who had supported the Protestant succession, was sent to England to be brought up from the age of ten after his father died. Like Confuciano, he became tutor and “dearest friend” to a prince: the Prince of Wales and future King George III. Bute drew on theology, philosophy, and world history to instruct his young pupil, as does *The Bonze*’s author. In a letter to the prince, Bute offers a glimpse into his teaching methods, giving “a brief survey of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires.” These empires are worthy of the prince’s attention, he
says, because “the main cause of their downfall” is “the defective education of their Princes.” Bute attributes the rise of great empires to the “parental fondness” of their emperors and the “filial piety” of their subjects. *The Bonze* emphasizes these qualities in China’s ancient imperial structure before it succumbs to luxury, effeminacy, sectarianism, and rebellion. Bute traces the dangerous course of such social and political ills, showing how at various times they have given rise to tyranny and driven some peoples to cast off “the royal yoke” and form new systems of governance, such as “aristocracies where the nobility governed, democracies where the whole people shared the power, while some again combined these various forms and raised mixed fabrics different from them all” (Sedgwick [ed.] lii-liii). The latter configurations are ridiculed in one of *The Bonze*’s transmigration stories from a point of view aligned with Bute’s composite, idealistic political creed—one that advocates a strong monarchy, the abolition of party distinctions, and the purging of corruption. 

Bute affirmed throughout his political career the monarchical prerogative of a pious “Patriot King” (described atheistically by Bolingbroke) and advocated an enlightened despotism along Chinese lines, in opposition to Whig libertarianism, utilitarianism, or radical Jacobinism. Such principles found contemporaneous expression and assent in political pamphlets such as John Butler’s “The True Whig Displayed” (1762), which calls for absolute passive obedience on the grounds that an evil sovereign should be punished by God, not his subjects.

By the time *The Bonze* was published in 1768, Bute had, like Confuciango, withdrawn from active politics and public life. Wearied by bitter factionalism and a
hostile press, and suffering from physical exhaustion and a nervous breakdown, he informed the king of his desire to retire. George III implored him not to forsake their friendship. He wrote in a letter to Bute that he felt Bute had been sent by “the Great Power above” to “conduct [him] through this difficult road and […] bring [him] to the goal” (Sedgwick [ed.] 3-4). Like Confuciango, Bute had been the prince’s guiding hand. He had even helped the prince to settle upon a suitable bride; in The Bonze, it is Confuciango who introduces the Chinese prince to his own sister. In another letter to Bute, George III, like Zangola, declares that without him he should wish to:

retire to some distant region where in solitude I might for the rest of my life remain, and think on the various faults I have committed that I might repent of them, and hope for the Divine Blessing which all true penitents whether in a high or low station have equally a right to hope for. (Sedgwick [ed.] 14)

In the end, the king reluctantly accepted Bute’s resignation but continued to ask his advice on important matters of state for several years afterwards, giving rise to the popular myth of Bute’s secret influence. Bute became the “minister behind the curtain” and was believed to be the cause of much of the period’s political instability. When George III formed an alliance with Pitt in 1766, which excluded Bute and most of his friends, Bute felt the king had forsaken their friendship and shared political ideals. He responded with a bitter letter effectively ending their relationship. In one sense, it was as though George III had died to Bute, just as Zangola had died to Confuciango. When Zangola returns to Confuciango as an all-knowing angel, he acknowledges that those very same precepts which Bute had tried so hard to instil in George III are indeed true and noble. This is reinforced in Zangola’s transmigration
stories. In the last transmigration of his third probation, Zangola discovers that the sage hermit he visits on the mountain in England is in fact his long lost childhood tutor.

After withdrawing from politics, Bute retired to Luton Hoo, his Bedfordshire estate. By 1768 he was planning to build a villa at Highcliffe, in Christchurch, Hampshire, which would overlook the Needles and the Isle of Wight. There, in melancholy grandeur, he would continue his botanical pursuits, collecting prints, books, and scientific instruments, and devoting himself more fully to the patronage of literature, science, and the arts. He gained a reputation for possessing “a gloomy sort of madness which made him affect living alone, particularly in Scotland,” and he was often accused of having “a very false taste in everything” (qtd. in Fitzmaurice 1: 110; Sedgwick [ed.] xlv). In Confuciango one sees a reflection of Bute, a man of the world who has withdrawn to his gothic retreat to lead a virtuous life in rustic simplicity. He sits and sleeps on straw mats, perhaps alluding to Luton Hoo’s principal industry of strawmaking. Confuciango is described as “a man of taste” in a manner in which Bute’s adherents were anxious to see him portrayed (Carlyle 376).

Bute’s lifelong interest lay in floriculture; as head of Kew Gardens, he had commissioned Sir William Chambers, author of the popular dissertation on Chinese gardening, to design new buildings, including the Chinese pagoda. The Bonze’s florid imagery and elaborate chinoiserie design would have delighted Bute. Confuciango may be figured as a eunuch partly in response to widespread gossip that Bute exercised inordinate influence at Leicester House because the Princess Dowager
Augusta (widow of Frederick, Prince of Wales) had become his mistress. The *Political Register* of May 1767, to which Wilkes contributed, carried an engraving depicting “A View of Lord Bute’s Erections at Kew; with some Part of Kew Green, and Gardens.” It depicts a phallic-like Chinese pagoda and hints at an improper liaison between Bute and the Princess Dowager. There seems to be a door in the garden wall between her residence and the garden of Bute’s house. David Miller writes that “this [engraving] must have caused Bute pain since he always thought of his botanical and other scientific work as an escape from politics and scandal” (221-22).

The Chinese prime minister and general appear to reflect William Pitt, first earl of Chatham, who came to prominence as a statesman during the Jacobite Uprising of 1745-46. Pitt was the chief architect of Britain’s victories during the Seven Years’ War and dominated the peace negotiations with France. This analogy would suggest that France is meant to be equated with Tartary, a short stretch of the imagination as England’s struggles with France were often compared to China’s conflicts with the Tartars. The Tartar king’s name, Tsoute (possibly based on the Chinese Principality of Tsou in which Confucius lived), seems also faintly evocative of the name of the deposed house of Stuart. Most Englishmen in public life still feared that the Hanoverian succession might one day be supplanted by the Catholic Pretender with the assistance of France. They often viewed Scots as crypto-Jacobite traitors,

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32 Smollett is a notable exception, for he uses China to represent France and Japan to represent England.
irreconcilable to English law and liberty. It is in the barbarian northern regions of Tartary that Confuciango and Zangola encounter heathen bonzes and superstitious Jesuits. Their criticism of the Roman Catholic Eucharist ("and paying needless adoration to a wafer") is notable as the historian Sir John Dalrymple alleges that Bute frequently received the sacrament with either "fits of laughter" or "cool contempt" (19). Like Confuciango, Bute was a former Roman Catholic, educated by the Jesuits, who had converted to Protestantism. J.C.D. Clark has examined George III’s desire to make popular use of his royalty in conjunction with the still surviving and widely diffused idea of the divine right of monarchy (ch. 3). Bute’s reservations on this score, together with Macpherson’s lingering ambivalence about the Jacobite cause, find expression in the French name of The Bonze’s pretended translator. “D’Alenzon” is an obvious Anglicization of D’Alençon, the ambitious and deceitful leader of the moderate Roman Catholic Politiques in late sixteenth-century France, who advocated passive obedience to a strong monarchy and promoted the principles that congealed in divine-right theory.

The political convulsions that shake Peking in The Bonze have their counterpart in Britain between 1765 and 1768, when English politics, as Robert Rea sums up, “laboured under the worst handicaps of a factionalism which very nearly deserved the epithets used by contemporaries in describing its evils” (122). The Chinese rebel Ligh seems to correspond with Wilkes and his scandalous newspaper campaign against Bute and George III. Wilkes was regarded as a dangerous man spreading lies and libels that threatened the preservation of peace and good order. Ligh’s name may
be a play on the word “lie” or “libel,” in similar fashion to Walpole’s probable play on the name of his Chinese protagonist Mi Li as “My Lie.” Lord North railed: “the first thing we lay our hands on in the morning is a libel; the last thing we lay out of our hands in the evening is a libel” (Cobbett [ed.] 16 [1813]: 1166). The episode in which Zangola flays Ligh alive appears far too macabre to be taken simply at face value. To peal the skin off a lie or libel is to reveal it for what it is; to stab it in the heart is to kill it. This episode seems to be a sardonic inversion of the celebrated cartoon that appeared in North Briton, Wilkes’ weekly paper catering to popular anti-Scottish prejudices, titled “Wilkes, and Liberty” (No. 45, 23 April 1763). It shows Bute as he “raises his dagger to pierce the naked breast of Liberty swooning in the arms of Pitt, while Temple, with raised sword, interposes a shield marked North Briton.” To one side, Wilkes and Churchill chase off a pair of Scotsmen and trample a fallen adversary whose escutcheon suggests that he is Smollett of the Briton (Rea, illustration “Wilkes, and Liberty”).

The Bonze is dedicated to the young Lord Kilwarling and perhaps also, by extension, to his father, the Earl of Hillsborough, a member of the King’s Friends. Looking to Bute for leadership, the King’s Friends supported a strong monarchy and held little sympathy for either the cause of “Wilkes and liberty” or the mounting grievances of the American colonists. Hillsborough had returned to politics in 1763 in consequence of the ministerial changes occasioned by Bute’s departure, replacing Shelburne (Bute’s protégé) as president of the Board of Trade, whose principal task was to gather and assess information and views on imperial policy and overseas
possessions. The growing troubles in America warranted the creation of a new, third secretaryship of state, to which Hillsborough was promoted in 1768, bringing to this post Bute’s desire to establish strategic advantages for the future security of the British colonies in North America. Hillsborough advocated colonial subordination, and his contemporaries widely believed him to be the author of a pamphlet titled *A Proposal for Uniting the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland* (1751). Bute, now out of politics, trusted that Hillsborough would champion his conviction that the post-war security of Britain’s new possessions in America depended on stationing a large force there, one capable of being easily expanded and funded by colonial revenues. John Bullion argues that the plan formulated by Bute and the George III “to keep the cost of the army below the 1749 level by taxing colonists for the support of the regulars stationed there precipitated the imperial crisis of 1765-6, and ultimately helped bring about the American Revolution” (17-35).

It was probably under Bute’s sponsorship that Becket and De Hondt had become engaged in publishing works favourable to his viewpoint. In 1768, for example, they printed a tract written by Philip Bendelowes, which warns of the continued threat of France in North America. Bendelowes labels Roman Catholics “wolves in sheep’s cloathing,” alleging that they exploit religious toleration in America and political factionalism in Britain to advance the “Romish” religion. He whips up fear of “all the Jesuits who are lurking here” and calls upon English Roman Catholics to rouse themselves to reason and “examine the chief points of [their] religion” (vii, 47). In Bute’s opinion, royal authority had to be free from the sort of
aristocratic domination that led to the autocratic treatment of colonists and, ultimately, to the loss of the America colonies. This belief, and *The Bonze*’s didactic moral thrust, calls for a moderate assertion of royal prerogative, something along the lines of the Chinese ideal of a benevolent despot who rules over his empire like a father heading the family. “The Genii of Adversity” presents the very same point of view. Becket printed it alongside an anonymous essay in *The Repository* for 1768 that gives a lengthy account of the deteriorating state of affairs between Britain and her American colonies. It suggests that Hillsborough’s autocratic response to complaints raised by the colonial assemblies, which were joining together in opposition to arbitrary taxation, erred by overstepping a moderate assertion of royal prerogative. Lucifer and the Genii of Adversity both exemplify autocratic tyranny licensed by a sense of aristocratic domination.

*The Bonze* might therefore be considered a moral allegory on the struggle between civic good and evil, public virtue and corruption. Its transmigration tales all endorse public good taking precedence over private interest, as in *The Orphan* and *The Pleasing History*. When Zangola reaches the penultimate stage in his serial transmigrations on Venus, he finds that “the whole empire is but one family, governed by one king or father, whose only pre-eminence is the study of the public good; the soul of the body politic which keeps the member together being unity of will and design, and which to one common centre directs our actions” (2: 269). The same general theme runs through John Home’s Leicester House plays (*Agis*, *Douglas*, and *The Seige of Aquileia*), which were all written with Bute’s help (Sher,
“Favourite of the Favourite” 184). Bute and Home may very well have had a hand in writing The Bonze. The novel’s author is said to be “Hoamchi Vam,” and perhaps “Hoam” is a veiled reference to Home. Hoamchi Vam is a “Tartarian Proselite.” Since the Tartars in The Bonze could be equated with Scottish Jacobites as well as the French, then this epithet might be taken to mean that Hoam (Home) is a Scottish Jacobite who has converted to a Protestant political and religious creed. His story of Confuciendo (Bute) is “translated” by the Frenchman D’Alenzon, quite possibly a veiled reference to Macpherson, the celebrated translator of Scottish epic poetry, who has perhaps taken material supplied by Home and Bute and, inspired by Dow’s Persian translations, worked it into its present form as an Oriental framed sequence. Macpherson would certainly have wanted to keep his involvement in such an obvious, politically motivated imposture secret for fear it would detract from the credibility of his already embattled Ossian poems. A French translator’s pseudonym and its associations with both an early French proponent of the divine right theory and Roman Catholicism may reflect Macpherson’s own ambivalence concerning his position as a highland Scot writing propaganda favourable to Bute and George III. Indeed, a satirically cynical element appears to have been introduced into the picture of life on Venus (the “World of Love”), possibly by Macpherson, which seems to ridicule George III’s desire for Rockingham in 1768 to draw up a plan for a comprehensive administration that would exclude no one.

Without additional external evidence, it may be impossible to say who wrote The Bonze. The novel is evidently connected in some way with Bute, his propaganda
campaign, and colonial problems. Exploring the question of authorship, however, appears to shed some light on the method by which the text exploits the idea of China to give expression to British concerns of the period. It is rewarding to examine the text through the idea of China (rather than China or British attitudes toward China through the text) to better understand the novel within its own British historical context. This approach appears to be equally useful in examining Horace Walpole’s Mi Li, which puts the idea of China to use satirically in a Chinese fairy tale that challenges Britain’s mercantile-colonial and imperial ambitions in the East.
Chapter 7

Mi Li Revisited: Horace Walpole and the Idea of China

Some time in the early 1780s, Horace Walpole wrote a small Chinese fairy tale to amuse himself and entertain a young girl of his acquaintance. Named Mi Li after its protagonist, it was one of several Oriental stories he penned at intervals during the two decades following The Castle of Otranto. He printed it in 1785, together with five others, on his own press at Strawberry Hill, under the title Hieroglyphic Tales. Only seven copies were made (including the proof), and it would be thirteen years before the public saw the collection, posthumously as Walpole intended, in the five-volume edition of his Works (1798). Absurd, comical, and grotesque, the tales met with far less enthusiasm than did his gothic novel. Since then they have attracted scant critical attention. Even a century and a half after Walpole’s death, his most widely acclaimed biographer, R.W. Ketton-Cremer, derides them as “delirious little stories” and “moonstruck nonsense,” all written in the “maddest and most inconsequent vein” (284).

Such critical disapprobation is a little surprising considering the enticement of a title that implies hidden or “hieroglyphic” meaning. When asked about them, Walpole claimed that the tales were not, “whatever they may seem, written while I was out of my senses” (Correspondence [letter to William Cole, 28 Jan. 1779] 2:
141-42). His remark hints at a method beneath a madness that carries the tales beyond the pale of social decorum and the conventions of literary composition prevailing at the time. A method, however, is difficult to detect. It is hard to imagine, for instance, any rational excuse for The Peach in Brandy, an outlandish and grossly offensive tale he first sent to his friend Lord Ossory shortly after his wife miscarried. In it, the king of Kilkenny names the princess Grata as the new reigning monarch, which causes Grata’s mother to miscarry twins. The butler, who is the earl of Bullaboo, snatches up one of the foetuses and, perceiving it to be a boy, pronounces it to be the true heir to the crown—a claim that sparks a bloody civil war which lays waste to the kingdom. The war terminates only much later when the Roman Catholic archbishop, in a sudden fit of cholic, takes a glass from the queen’s mantle-piece and, thinking it contains a peach in brandy, gulps it down. The peach in brandy turns out to be the queen’s dead foetus preserved in alcohol. To grasp the story’s import within the context of contemporary political and religious factionalism, one must be prepared to accept its appalling distastefulness as a satirical technique, similar to Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729), intended to heighten its impact. Walpole’s other hieroglyphic tales share a similar ease in departing from conventional satirical techniques, even if taken together as a whole they do not, as Kenneth Gross alleges, “invite us to read them as ciphers of an integrated satiric argument” (v). *Mi Li* takes its reader down an equally divergent path, though one much less odious and perhaps more predictable. This Chinese fairy tale’s satire is folded up like a Chinese riddle. One might recall that Goldsmith’s *Altangi* claims in Letter LIII that Chinese tales always “talk in riddles” and readers
must “dream for the solution” (Works [ed. Friedman] 2: 224-25). What follows is an effort to unfold and decipher Mi Li as a satirical hieroglyph within the context of contemporary ideas about China and English attitudes toward a wider world.

The tale follows the misadventures of a young Chinese prince. His fairy godmother foretells great unhappiness unless he marries a princess whose name matches her father’s dominions. Mi Li searches China and its neighbouring kingdoms, but to no avail. Impatient and angry, he rides off to Canton, intending to travel to England on a returning British man-of-war and continue his quest there. In Canton, however, he learns from an Irish sailor, Tom O’Bull, that the princess he seeks lives in Ireland, the daughter of Mr. Bob Oliver of Sligo. Mi Li hastily sets sail for Dublin but arrives only to discover that the fair Miss Bob has quitted Ireland and been married to another. Dismissing her from his thoughts, he falls asleep and dreams

that he would find his destined spouse, whose father had lost the dominions which never had been his dominions, in a place where there was a bridge over no water, a tomb where nobody ever was buried nor ever would be buried, ruins that were more than they had ever been, a subterraneous passage in which there were dogs with eyes of rubies and emeralds, and a more beautiful menagerie of Chinese pheasants than any in his father’s extensive gardens. (n. pag.)

Perplexed by this dream, Mi Li goes to England hoping to consult the “sage Banks” at Oxford. Once in England, however, he becomes stranded on the road to Henley, where a beggar advises him to see General Conway, who resides nearby. On Conway’s estate Mi Li encounters a gardener who leads him to the general through the very gardens of his dream. Conway is found standing together with his wife, Lady Ailesbury, and the young Miss Caroline Campbell. Seeing Caroline, Mi Li
believes that he has, at long last, discovered the girl who will fulfil the prophesy. He runs forward and seizes her by the hand, crying “Who she? who she?” Conway, in a tone of civil scorn, tells Mi Li that she is the daughter of Lord William Campbell, the late governor of Carolina. Caroline then becomes princess of all China.

The Historical Context of Mi Li

In order to appreciate this tale’s hidden satire, it is important to recognize that it was written after the American Revolutionary War. We know from Walpole’s notes that he wrote the first of his Hieroglyphic Tales in August 1766. In 1772 he notes: “This year, the last, and some time before, wrote some Hieroglyphic Tales. There are only five” (Toynbee 69). Commentators generally conclude from this note that “all of the tales seem to have been written between 1766 and 1772” (Gross iv; Stuart 191; Ketton-Cremer 283-84; Kallich, Horace Walpole 117), which only further obscures an already obscure satire. Six tales in fact appeared in the 1785 Strawberry Hill printing, and most of them likely were written before 1772: but “Tale V. Mi Li. A Chinese Fairy Tale” was clearly written much later and probably used instead of the unpublished tale “The Bird’s Nest. Tale the Fifth.”

The story itself offers internal evidence to suggest that it could not have been written earlier than 1776. Caroline Campbell is introduced as the “daughter of William Campbell, his majesty’s late governor of Carolina,” and she appears at Park Place with Henry Seymour Conway, Walpole’s cousin and close friend, and Lady Ailesbury. Lord William Campbell, Lady Ailesbury’s brother, had applied for and
received the governorship of South Carolina in 1773, an appointment he held until 1776 when forced by the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War to return to England. He died on 4 September 1778 from injuries sustained during that war, after which Caroline Campbell, her sister Louisa, her brother William, and her mother spent some time at Park Place (Correspondence [letter to Lady Ossory, 16 Sept. 1778] 33: 50-51). Caroline stayed on with Conway and his wife, who treated her like a daughter. Although Walpole had written “Tale III. The Dice-Box” for Caroline while she was visiting Park Place much earlier, Mi Li refers to William Campbell as the “late” governor of Carolina. Since this information is integral to Mi Li’s oracle, which gives the story unity of theme, there can be little doubt that the tale was written no earlier than 1776, when Campbell lost his governorship. “Late” more likely refers to Campbell’s death, suggesting the tale was written after 1778. The “heap of artificial ruins” that Mi Li comes upon at Park Place would support an even later date, for they may well allude to the artificial Grecian ruins that Conway had built there in the early 1780s. Indeed, it was not until the early 1780s that Conway undertook a major tree planting and landscaping project at Park Place, partly after the Chinese fashion, which saw the construction of the Cyclopic Bridge (1781-86) and the underground passageway leading from the existing grounds to Happy Valley (“The History of Park Place School,” online), both of which are prominent features of the landscape described in Mi Li.

Once the tale is situated in the early 1780s, the pieces of its satiric puzzle come into sharper relief. The two young lovers are associated with two major forces
transforming Britain’s global enterprise: Caroline with the loss of the American colonies and Mi Li with Britain’s growing commercial attraction to China. After the American Revolutionary War, the East India Company redirected its commercial ambitions away from the Western hemisphere towards the potentialities of the East: to India and the lucrative tea trade with China. The profits of the tea trade were vital during this period, not only to the Company, whose finances had fallen into dire straits after it lost its monopoly in America, but also to the British exchequer, which replenished its depleted coffers after the war by placing steep duties on tea.

The American Revolutionary War confirmed Walpole’s longstanding suspicions about the dangers of taxation without representation, to which the tale alludes in its caricature of the “sage Banks,” the Oxford savant who seeks to possess a new empire in the moon “upon condition that it should never be taxed, and so be lost again to his country like the rest of his majesty’s dominions in that [North American] part of the world.” Bernhard Knollenberg (among others) has illustrated Walpole’s pro-American sentiments and “opposition to Great Britain’s tyrannizing (as he viewed it) over the colonists by compelling them to pay taxes in the levy of which they had no voice” (85). Walpole recognized that taxation without representation threatened to undo Britain’s mercantile-colonial empire by robbing colonists of their sense of liberty, stirring them to revolt in ways that would unsettle England and its landed interests economically, politically, and socially. He is therefore not surprised to learn in 1774 that “the Bostonians have canted three hundred chests of tea into the ocean.” Anticipating a revolutionary war, he says that
“Lord Chatham talked of conquering America in Germany; I believe England will be conquered some day or other in New England or Bengal.” England’s colonial empire, he continues, has stretched itself so distant that “we may be undone a twelvemonth before we hear a word of the matter—which is not convenient and a little drawback on being masters of dominions a thousand times bigger than ourselves—Well!” (Correspondence [letter to Mann, 2 Feb. 1774] 23: 550-51).

By the early 1780s, events were unfolding in Britain’s fledgling Eastern empire that further excited Walpole’s anxiety. In his letters he accuses the Company of “tyranny” in India and objects to it receiving from the government financial and military backing to conquer and hold dominion over foreign territories, allowing it to pursue a commercial enterprise that Britons increasingly looked upon as little more than wanton exploitation. The Company’s insistence on such support in the face of mounting difficulties prompted Walpole in 1783 to remonstrate that “modern rapine is more barefaced” and

Our nabobs do not plunder the Indies under the banners of piety like the old Spaniards and Portuguese. I call Man an aurivorous animal. We pretend just now to condemn our own excesses, which are shocking indeed. […] We talk and write of liberty, and plunder the property of the Indies. […] In one age religion commits massacres, in another philosophy—oh! what a farce are human affairs! (Correspondence [letter to Mann, 30 April 1783] 25: 399-400)

Britain’s mercantile-colonial empire was believed to be founded on liberty and trade, yet the Company’s nabobs were amassing fortunes at the expense of liberty in the Indies, and free trade was giving way to plunder and atrocities in Asia. Walpole laid the blame for the terrible Bengal famine of 1770, which killed 3 million Indians, squarely on the Company’s narrow commercial interests. In 1780 he decried the
general indifference shown in England toward the Company’s appropriation of Indian territories and neglect of Indians (Correspondence [letter to Mann, 6 Feb. 1780] 25: 12-13). He would later claim that the Company’s profiteering was responsible for “murdering” more people than the Inquisition (Correspondence [letter to Thomas Walpole, 1 Feb. 1784] 36: 221). In his opinion, the pursuit of overseas profit may have brought benefits to Britain economically, but it was bankrupting the nation morally.\(^{33}\) A sense of illegitimacy and impermanence is conveyed by Mi Li. Caroline’s name is not the same as her father’s dominions (Carolina), for her “father had lost the dominions which never had been his dominions.” Implicitly, Caroline cannot truly fulfil Mi Li’s oracle, and the apparent happiness the two young lovers find together, suggested in the tale’s conclusion, can only prove fleeting.

Walpole places an “aurivorous animal” behind the nabob’s virtuous mask. John McVeagh adeptly draws out an image of this Latinate beast as one with a “ferocious and uncontrollable modern appetite for gain” (97). He points out that Walpole, in contrast to Defoe, depicts the mercantile capitalist not as the “hero of civilized living” but a greedy and morally degraded creature “presiding destructively at its centre,” a “nightmare [that] has issued from the Augustan dream” (93). This is borne out time and again in Walpole’s private letters, which yield rewarding material for such inquiry. Margery Sabin traces Walpole’s cynicism in connection to the

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\(^{33}\) Walpole’s indictment is echoed by others. See, for example, Samuel Foote (“The Nabob” 2.2.103 and 3.2.109). Thomas exclaims that Britain’s overseas dominions and grandeur are “obtained at the expense of honour and virtue,” to which the Lady Oldham rejoins, “the possessions arising from plunder very rarely are permanent.” Also, Altangi in Letter XXV declares that “when a trading nation begins to act the conqueror, it is then perfectly undone.”
Company’s “shift from trade to dominion in India,” giving emphasis to the 1780s, a period when the “traumatic loss of America had fuelled new anxiety about alleged misdeeds in the nation’s still unstable possessions in the East” (30). James Holzman offers a more earthy reason for Walpole’s cynicism and the “anti-Nabob extravaganza” of the period. He admits the influence of a rising tide of fashionable English humanitarianism but stresses the widespread envy and contempt mounting on the Company and its servants, whose newly rich were notoriously ill-mannered and grasping for prestige. Returning Nabobs precipitated fierce class strife and brought unsettling changes in the ownership of landed estates, parliamentary seats and the social hierarchy generally.

In this light, one might well ask why Walpole would choose to satirize Britain's global enterprise using the idea of China rather than India. First of all, Walpole had long held China in tender regard. It was during his first year at Cambridge in 1735 that he had read Du Halde’s Description de la Chine, published that year in four volumes and sent to him by Lord Hervey. It would remain his main source of knowledge of Chinese culture, and from time to time it seems to have set him off on wild flights of fancy in which he imagined himself a Chinese. Hervey wrote to Walpole that he was “extremely glad to hear the History of China has so strong an effect upon you,” and then he offers some light-hearted caution: “You describe in a manner the change it has made in you, but […] not withstanding my partiality to China, I advise you to continue an Englishman” (Correspondence [21 Oct. 1735] 40: 18).
More decisively, though, Walpole perceived that the idea of China was growing antagonistic in Britain. By the early 1780s, the China trade was expanding more rapidly than ever before (Pritchard, Crucial Years 142-69), and yet China’s recalcitrant attitude to the Company’s commercial initiative appeared in many respects unlike anything it had experienced elsewhere. The Company was unable to penetrate China’s interior, let alone ride roughshod over the country as it had done in India, and it continually failed to resolve to its advantage intensifying trade conflicts with Chinese merchants. The Chinese incensed the Company by reinforcing an imperial decree, in effect since 1757, requiring that all trade with British merchant “barbarians” be transacted at Canton only. Pritchard explains that this “precluded all possibility of expanding the rapidly growing British trade to other parts of China, [which] became particularly important when the newly created cotton industry began to demand ports in northern China, where its goods would find a more ready market” (Anglo-Chinese Relations 133). The Chinese had shored up this restriction with a number of ancillary limitations intended chiefly to protect Chinese merchants from their growing indebtedness to the British. Between 1780 and 1782, the Chinese Co-hong was re-established, and trade at Canton once again became the monopoly of the Hong merchants. This time, however, the Co-hong was instituted under official control of the Hoppo (the director of the Canton maritime customs) “and was made the instrument for exacting a great revenue from the foreign trade, for the benefit primarily of the Hoppo, and indirectly, through him, of the Canton officials and the Court of Peking” (qtd. in Pritchard, Anglo-Chinese Relations 142). The monopoly allowed Chinese merchants to inflate the prices of their goods and made it difficult
for the British to seek redress through official channels. The Company consequently found its trade increasingly hampered by unfair prices, corrupt Chinese officials, trade disputes, and trade stoppages. It pressed the British government for greater involvement and support; and Walpole, who had been exposed to these efforts in parliament, grew cynical of their motives. The Company’s inability to expand in China on the old paradigm of colonial-mercantilism tested the limits of Britain’s commercial and imperial strength and subjected it to the sort of treatment it dealt out in America and India.

How Mi Li Conveys Meaning

Before considering the tale’s satire any further, it is helpful to explore for a moment its method of constructing meaning. Du Halde had described Chinese literature as “abstruse, concise, allegorical, and sometimes obscure to those who are not well vers’d in the Characters” (1: 365). As late as the second half of the eighteenth century, speculation and debate were still rife about whether or not Chinese written characters, those enigmatic scribal signs that look like pictographs, had derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics, possibly because the Egyptians had colonized China in remote antiquity. Goldsmith satirizes the notion in *The Citizen of the World* (Letter LXXXIX), and Percy devotes a lengthy essay to the subject in *Miscellaneous Pieces*. That Walpole was familiar with the issue is evidenced by a note he recorded in 1787 (*Miscellany* 48-49). It is not surprising therefore to find a
Chinese tale couched in a collection of “hieroglyphic” tales and not unreasonable to expect enigmatic content within Mi Li.

As a hieroglyphic Chinese riddle, Mi Li takes some unpacking to get at its meaning. Luckily, the tale itself offers internal clues to help translate and work towards a solution. The first of these is given at the outset. The young prince, we are told, does not question his fairy godmother’s oracle because he knows “when she uttered an oracle, that it was with intention to perplex, not to inform.” The tale is structured likewise—it is meant to perplex rather than to inform. Like the prince’s governor, it does not give a “direct answer,” but rather remains “dumb […] that [it] might not instil any bad principles into his pupil.” It defends this reticence by saying that “it never helped [one] to understand any thing the better for its being rightly stated.” When asked to identify the bride described by his oracle, Mi Li’s governor finds himself confronted with an “unknown something” that “occasion[s] a conflict between his cunning and his ignorance, and the latter being the greater, always betrayed itself, for nothing looks so silly as a fool acting wisdom.” In other words, the tale itself is structured like Mi Li’s oracle in its obscurity, designed to call forth in the reader’s mind a corresponding discord between cleverness and ignorance. Any moral to be found hidden in the tale’s absurdity must be discovered by the reader, consciously if not by serendipity. Rather than resemble a “fool acting wisdom,” the tale’s hidden satiric wisdom acts a fool in its whimsicality and absurdity. This choice of method may owe something to Goldsmith. When Altangi seeks to put across a moral to an audience that objects to hearing any morals, he folds it up within an
absurd fairy tale, telling the story of a maiden transformed into a loyal blue cat who helps a young Chinese prince break free from his dangerous enchantment with a fairy in the form of a white mouse (Letter XLVIII).

**Sir Joseph Banks: A Fool Acting Wisdom**

Although mentioned only once, the “sage Banks” looms large in the background of this tale because he epitomizes a fool enacting wisdom and embodies the target of Walpole’s satire. Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) was a gentleman amateur of science who initiated scientific explorations to remote regions of the world and prepared the journals of explorers for publication. He gathered, classified, and studied thousands of foreign plant species previously unknown to Europeans, and by 1778 he had become president of the Royal Society. He represented the pedantry of the English gentleman that Walpole liked to scorn. Walpole writes elsewhere “that learning never should be encouraged, it only draws out fools from their obscurity” (*Correspondence* [letter to Richard Bentley, 6 May 1755] 35: 226). Earlier, he used the idea of China as a counterpoint by imagining a future Chinese visiting Europe for the first time and becoming confused by the absurdity of European libraries (“World. By Adam Fitz-Adam,” *Works* 1: 198). Mi Li tears off to search out the “sage Banks” in the Bodleian, which may be also a parody of Shen Fu-tsung, the first Chinese brought to England by the Jesuit Phillipe Couplet in 1687,
who went to Oxford to confer with Thomas Hyde, the learned curator of the Bodleian.34

Joseph Banks was also “the unseen hand, the shadowy impresario of Britain’s colonial expansion in the era before the state had created an administrative machine to run the empire” (Fulford, Lee, and Kitson 34). He ushered in a new era of economic botany by arranging for useful species to be transplanted from one British colony to another. He was responsible for arranging the smuggling of tea plants from China to British India in an effort to reduce Britain’s dependence on China as a source of tea. He also had breadfruit trees brought to the West Indies where he hoped they would provide cheap food for African slaves. He and Daniel Solander had discovered breadfruit on Otaheite (the island of Tahiti) when they sailed there with Captain Cook during his 1768-72 expedition to the Pacific. In the end, the scheme proved disastrous, and the licentiousness of the British with the women of Otaheite (who used sex as barter) introduced European venereal disease into their society (Fara 4-5). In 1780 Walpole writes in a letter to Cole: “how I abominate Mr Banks and Dr Solander who routed the poor Otaheitians out of the center of the ocean, and carried our abominable passions amongst them! Not even that poor little speck could escape European restlessness” (Correspondence [15 June] 2: 225). Walpole aims to expose the “aurivourous animal” motivating scientific exploration, and Mi Li is not alone in targeting Banks in this regard. An anonymous satirical poem appeared in

34 For an account of Shen, see Foss.
London in 1779 which caricatures Banks by “drawing on familiar clichés of geographical and botanical pornography to colour scientific exploration with imperial overtones of possession, domination and exploitation” (Fara 12-13).

In Mi Li Banks is “hunting […] for a MS. Voyage of a man who had been in the moon, which Mr. Banks thought must have been in the western ocean, where the moon sets, and which planet, if he could discover once more, he would take possession of in the king’s name.” As a confidant of George III and an advisor to the East India Company, Banks had grown obsessed with trying to discover prospective new colonies. Walpole describes him elsewhere as “that wild man Banks, who is poaching in every ocean for the fry of little islands that escaped the drag-net of Spain” (Correspondence [letter to Mann, 20 Sept. 1772] 23: 436). A glance at Walpole’s private correspondence sheds some light on Banks’s fixation on the moon.

Writing to Conway in 1783 of public hot-air balloon experiments, Walpole says:

people are staring at a voyage to the moon. […] When the arts are brought to such perfection in Europe, who would go like Sir Joseph Banks in search of islands in the Atlantic, where the natives have in six thousand years not improved the science of carving fishing hooks out of bones or flints?—Well! I hope these new mechanic meteors [hot air balloons] will prove only playthings for the learned and the idle, and not be converted into new engines of destruction to the human race, as is so often the case of refinements or discoveries in science. The wicked wit of man always studies to apply the result of talents to enslaving, destroying, or cheating his fellow creatures. Could we reach the moon, we should think of reducing it to a province of some European kingdom. (Correspondence [letter to Mann, 2 Dec. 1783] 25: 451)

The following year, Walpole amuses himself in another letter “with ideas of the change that would be made in the world by the substitution of balloons to ships.” He supplies Conway with an imaginary news announcement: “The good Balloon
Dæedalus, Capt. Wing-ate, will fly in a few days for China; he will stop at the top of the Monument to take in passengers” (Correspondence [letter to Conway, 16 Oct. 1784] 39: 425). Walpole’s balloon to China is not an instrument of conquest and plunder, like the Company’s ships, but a “good” aircraft that carries the “learned and the idle” on voyages comparable to the genteel travel institutionalised in the practice of the Grand Tour.

The manuscript that Banks is busy searching for most probably alludes to Defoe’s The Consolidator, which satirically portrays China as being heir to an advanced knowledge and civilization acquired from the moon in remote antiquity. Joseph Banks actually believed that China “possessed the Ruins of a state of Civilization” which “had carried all kinds of knowledge to a much higher pitch of perfection than we Europeans have hitherto been able to attain” (qtd. in Gascoigne 179). Unlike Defoe’s lunar world, whose civilization rivals or surpasses earth’s, Banks considers the moon a satellite that can be possessed like a colony. He seeks to take it “upon condition that it should never be taxed,” tacitly acknowledging that taxation without representation had cost Britain its colonies in America (including Carolina) and undermined its mercantile-colonial system. Hunting the moon, a body variously associated with the East and China, here becomes a metaphor for Britain’s desire to possess a new empire in the East. The tale’s satirical thrust, however, suggests that Britain is as likely to gain a new Eastern empire as Britain is to regain its former American colonies. The lunar metaphor infuses the new paradigm of imperial control and dominion with a sense of futility and lunacy. The complicity of
scientific exploration adds no more virtue to the pursuit of a new trajectory in extending the bounds of empire than the Company’s raw commercial ambition.

**Bringing China Home: An Inverted Travel Tale**

Walpole does not send an English traveller abroad to encounter alterity in strange, far-flung lands where a new light can be thrown on English follies and foibles. Like the pseudo-Oriental letter genre popularized by Marana, Montesquieu, the Marquis d’Argens, and Goldsmith, he brings foreign alterity into England. Mi Li’s journey begins after he encounters Tom O’Bull, whose name calls to mind John Bull, that popular personification of English patriotism in eighteenth-century political caricature. Tom O’Bull appears to be John Bull’s Irish cousin (the “O” in Irish surnames signifying “descendent of”), and perhaps Walpole was thinking of Conway’s characteristic description of Ireland as “that unholy land, that land of bulls” *(Correspondence* [letter from Conway, 16 Feb. 1741] 37: 93). At any rate, O’Bull typifies the sort of British sailor who might have been found at Canton. Many of the Company’s sailors were drawn from Britain’s Celtic fringes. Unlike better educated Englishmen, many of whom had more favourable prospects at home, Irishmen often went abroad in search of opportunity. O’Bull, however, is nothing like the honest and patriotic John Bull. He is a self-seeking rogue who misleads Mi Li with a preposterous lie. This is an obvious stab at the character of the Company’s directors and servants, and possibly a parody of the Company’s deliberate misrepresentation to the Chinese authorities of Captain Skottowe, who went out to
Canton to investigate the Flint affair. Skottowe was introduced as “the brother of the King’s Under Secretary of State, who had the honour to write the King’s letters” (Eames 88-89). By investing such qualities in an Irishman, Walpole invokes contemporary English prejudice against the Irish and the general sense of ambiguity about Ireland’s place in Britain. Ireland’s Roman Catholic dissidents traditionally looked to France for support, and many English Protestants felt anxious that Ireland might one day be used as a launching point for a French invasion of England. This anxiety turns to comedy as the pathetically self-seeking O’Bull leads an impassioned Chinese prince to England by way of Ireland, where he steals through the countryside “incog.” and eventually meets General Conway on the field in Happy Valley, only to be taken for a French madman who ought to be “collared.”

Mi Li’s expedition appears doomed from the very start. His first encounter with O’Bull at Canton is inauspicious, signalled when Mi Li, who, at the moment O’Bull enters the story, “scalded his mouth with the tea he was drinking, broke the old china cup it was in, and which the queen his mother had given him at his departure from Pekin, and which had been given to her great great great great grandmother queen Fi by Confucius himself.” The scalding tea symbolizes the life-blood of Britain’s China trade, the source of increasing friction (and future conflict) between the two empires. In 1664 England imported only 2lb 2oz of tea, but by 1785 imports had surpassed £15 million. What began as an exotic drink consumed almost exclusively by the leisured classes in England became so common that it was, as Sir Frederick Eden would observe, “to be met with in most cottages in the southern parts
of England” (1: 152). Tea was well on its way to becoming England’s national drink and was already generating substantial revenues for the British exchequer. Pritchard explains its importance to the Company in this way: it was “the god to which everything else was sacrificed,” for it “alone was an object of almost universal domestic consumption in England which did not compete with home manufacture, and from it the Company drew over 90 per cent of its commercial profits” (Crucial Years 163). As a leisure activity, the drinking of tea had become an indicator of politeness and the reformation of manners associated with the virtues of commercial expansion, particularly among the burgeoning middling classes. Rebelling against British taxation and colonial rule, the Americans had canted chests of tea into Boston harbour; Mi Li simply spits his out, repudiating the driving force behind the Company’s ambitions in China and snubbing British commercial-class pretension to genteel politeness and virtue.

Besides conjuring images of a bull in a China shop, Mi Li’s porcelain teacup, which shatters when O’Bull enters the story, symbolizes his ancestry, national history, and cultural inheritance because its provenance can be traced all the way back to Confucius himself, the original Chinese proponent of prudence and tradition. At the moment the impetuous prince comes into contact with this self-seeking upstart of the East India Company, the object that ties him to his own cultural past is broken and he is propelled further down a path leading to false happiness. The shattered teacup suggests the possibility that China, like Britain’s colonial empire before the American Revolutionary War, may also be shattered by middle-class British
commercialism run riot. It calls to mind Benjamin Franklin's metaphor of Britain’s empire as a “fine and noble China Vase,” which once broken could never be restored (2: 27). Here the teacup bears a similar association with the Chinese Empire and serves as a portent—Mi Li’s fairy-godmother also uses a tea cup as a prophetic medium—that bodes ill for China’s contact with the Company and its aurivorous appetite for tea.

Mi Li embarks from Canton on a British man-of-war. European ships at the time were restricted to that single port by a Chinese imperial edict that sought to contain foreign influences and prevent them from spreading in China. It is ironic that Mi Li takes passage on a returning English man-of-war, a vessel intended to extend the nation’s maritime reach and used to maintain dominion over foreign territories. Like the counterpart of Admiral Anson, whose voyage around the world was celebrated by posterity as evidence of a power poised to assert global supremacy, Mi Li makes a buccaneering expedition the other way round to assert himself over Caroline Campbell, the once privileged English girl whom the American Revolutionary War has left fatherless and, as Walpole describes, “beggared” (Correspondence [letter to Lady Ossory, 16 Sept. 1778] 33: 50). Rather than seeing Britain’s might travel outward on a man-of-war to establish a new empire in the East, a subversive Chinese prince uses one of these conduits to travel to Britain. Mi Li’s backward journey carries a sense of anxiety about the limits and dangers of Britain’s global enterprise. The projection of military power overseas, chiefly to protect the interests of a small and grasping commercial elite, taxed Britain’s finances and often
conflicted with the home values of liberty and benevolence. Global expansion, driven by profit and extended by arms, aroused fears that the nation’s mercantile capitalism and colonial pursuits would introduce socioeconomic instability at home. It was during the early 1780s that accusations were decisively agitated in London against Warren Hastings for allowing the unrestrained wealth, luxury, and power of the East to corrupt him. Walpole writes in 1784 that such “excesses” would “no doubt make us the horror of Europe, as we are of the Eastern world.” Referring to Burke’s speech on Fox’s India Bill, he says: “Mr Fox felt and had genius enough to have put a stop to and corrected those crying grievances—and consequently has been rendered odious by the interested villains of the Company and by the tools of Mr Hastings” (Correspondence [letter to Thomas Walpole, 1 Feb. 1784] 36: 221).

Mi Li arranges passage after speaking to “Mr. James Hall,” who is identified as the supercargo, the Company’s representative responsible for overseeing a ship’s cargo and its sale. Naïvely trusting that Hall has provided accurate information, Mi Li sets off for Britain. His trust parodies the excessive respect that the Chinese were said to place in the Company. Walpole elsewhere expresses cynical dismay that the Chinese call it “Mr Company” (Correspondence [letter to Selwyn, 7 Mar. 1766] 30: 216). Mi Li clearly lacks the Confucian prudence that Walpole would later applaud. Writing to Lady Ossory about Maccartney’s embassy to China, which failed to gain permission for a permanent British minister at Peking, Walpole says that he cannot “help admiring the prudence of the Chinese: they would be distracted to connect with Europeans” (Correspondence, [letter to Lady Ossory, 3 Aug. 1794] 34: 202).
Ironically, this was the very same embassy that Banks hoped would succeed. Banks had even asked Josiah Wedgwood for help in finding a skilled potter who might be hidden in the embassy’s suite to observe the closely guarded Chinese methods of porcelain manufacture (Gascoigne 179-80).

Mi Li must travel to England on a foreign trading ship, taking with him not “a proper set of ladies from Pekin” but the wives of the “first merchants in Canton” as ladies in waiting. The “first merchants” are the Hong merchants. Mi Li has authority to appropriate their wives to his service because he is the prince of China, and in China the mercantile classes were subject to the ruling classes, unlike in Britain where they had gained such powerful sway over matters of state. Pritchard writes that “merchants ranked near the bottom of the social scale, and trade was not considered a basic means of improving national welfare” (Crucial Years 108). The irony of a Chinese prince having to travel on a “barbarian” merchant ship would not have been lost on Walpole, who was familiar with Du Halde’s treatment of the subject. Mi Li’s imprudent passion thus carries him away from the regal imperial court at Peking and deposits him in the shadowy province of foreign trade. In Canton he loses his dignity, and the farther afield he travels, the more his princely status diminishes. In Dublin he loses his authority (on foreign ground he is unable to punish O’Bull for misleading him), and in England he loses his identity altogether when he has to travel “incog.” and is mistaken for a madman.

Mi Li comes to Dublin by way of St Helena, an island in the South Atlantic Ocean. Lying 1,200 miles off the western coast of Africa, on the edge of the
southeast trade wind, St Helena occupied an important position on the eighteenth-century sea route between Western Europe and the East Indies. The Company’s ships used it as a regular port of call, mainly on their return voyage from India and China, where they would procure fresh water, refittings, and provisions. The island was also a key transit and communications point in Banks’s botanical network (Fulford, Lee, and Kitson 44). Walpole associated St Helena with the apathy of Londoners concerning the Company’s “usurpations” abroad. In a letter to Mann, dated December 1780, he mentions it in connection with the plight of Americans, Mexicans, Peruvians, and African slaves. It calls to his mind how “a young gentlewoman, a native of our rock St Helena, and who had never stirred beyond it,” was caught in a “profligate apathy” in which Britain’s global enterprise appeared like a beautiful dream. She imagined Britons at home enjoying the luxury goods supplied by the Company’s noble “China ships” that so often called at St Helena, but she remained, like most Londoners, oblivious to the Company’s wars and tyranny abroad (Correspondence [31 Dec. 1780] 25: 109-10). Walpole was not alone in this view; The Nabob: or, Asiatic Plunderers, an anonymous satirical poem of the period, conveys the same sentiment: “Could they, if conscience were not quite asleep,/ Each day, a Saturnalian revel keep?” (26-27). This dream-like quality is mirrored in Mi Li’s fantastical, disjointed progression from Canton to Dublin by way of St Helena, which transpires in the blink of an eye, and yet leaves all the maids of honour “disqualified for their employments before his highness got to St. Helena.” The “two dozen virgins” are loaded onto the Company’s ship like commodities, their innocence symbolizing the commercial potential of China it desires to exploit. Their
disgrace, taken together with the tale’s allusion to Banks, calls to mind the conduct of
Cook’s men in Tahiti. St Helena is therefore not only a rock in the South Atlantic
but also a moral touchstone, a frontier point which separates the insensitivity of
London from the realities of the Company’s exploitation in the East.

Mi Li and Celtic Folklore

One naturally wonders who the fairies could be in this fairy tale. Mi Li bears a
faint resemblance to the cunning, mischievous, and vengeful fairies of Celtic
folklore, which generated considerable popular interest in Britain from mid to late
century. Walpole once “remember[ed] in the fairy tales where a yellow dwarf steals
a princess,” and Conway said that Park Place had a “little fairy” (Correspondence [19
May 1743] 18: 238; [7 July 1754] 37: 379). Mi Li journeys to Park Place from a
fabled “other” land and takes away a young girl, just as Celtic fairies were said to be
“greedy for mortal children, ready to decoy away young girls” (Briggs 104). In most
fairy tales, however, the protagonist is a mortal who ventures into fairyland. Here, it
is Mi Li who enters dreamy England, a strange realm where men like Banks spend
their time in madcap pursuits. Mi Li is a flesh-and-blood young man, stripped of all
trappings of rank and status, the pomp and majesty of a prince. Although little more
than a stock character, he marks a contrast to Walpole’s earlier Chinese philosopher-
traveller, Xo Ho, and evokes a more complex response—emotional as much as
intellectual. He is a young man driven by earthy passion, pragmatic in nature and
inclined to fits of anger, and he is susceptible to all the accidents and misadventures
that befall mortals. He elicits a mixture of sympathy for the ordeals of his romantic
pursuit, admiration for his courage and the promise of his budding manhood, and
exasperation at his unreasonableness and imprudence. He shows Britain from a
perspective which is not simply unfamiliar but upside down, rendering irrational the
rational confidence and sense of virtue Britons were coming to invest in a new
trajectory of global expansion.

Like so many mortals taken on a journey into fairyland, Mi Li is guided there
by someone native to that realm. His journey begins after he drinks, not enchanted
wine, but tea. Enchanted or poisoned wine figures commonly in fairy tales. Within
the historical context, tea symbolizes the commercial enchantment that draws Britain
and China together. Its warm stimulating quality and place in polite culture put
Britain’s conscience under a spell, rendering Britons insensible to the Company’s
tyranny abroad. Sir Mathew Mite in Foote’s The Nabob says of tea: “that commodity
will soon be a drug” (2.2.99). After taking this enchanting drink, Mi Li’s journey to
Britain transpires in the blink of an eye—for Goldsmith’s Altangi, the journey had
taken “seven hundred painful days” (Letter II)—lending a fantastical quality to the
passage of time. The tea is poisoning as well. By association with the Boston Tea
Party and the American Revolutionary War, tea symbolizes colonial taxation without
representation and unrestrained commercial ambition, which is poisoning the sense
of liberty and benevolence upon which the mercantile-colonial empire was supposed
to be based.
Arriving in Ireland, Mi Li finds that his bride-to-be has vanished, a recurrent motif in Celtic folk tradition (Briggs 10). He falls asleep and sees in a dream the fantastical location where his oracle will be fulfilled. When he awakens, the setting shifts abruptly to England, where he comes upon that very place, almost as though he had not really awakened at all. In the tradition of fairy literature, falling asleep is a common gateway into the fairy realm, as is becoming lost in, or taking short-cuts through, woods and then entering subterranean passages. Mi Li arrives at this destined spot after stepping off the road to Henley and being pixie-led by Conway’s gardener into a thick forest. He descends into a subterranean passage, like True Thomas of British folklore, chased by small spaniels with red eyes that correspond to the miniature hounds often found in the Celtic fairyland, whose eyes or ears burn red like the flames of hell (Briggs 28, 88). On the other side, Mi Li encounters an “enchanted” landscape resembling the fantastical orchards that travellers into the fairy realms typically find after passing through caves. Mi Li sees in the centre “a heap of artificial ruins.” Fairies are often found haunting the ruins of their former splendour. It is the English in this case who haunt the decayed grandeur of their unfulfilled Augustan dream.

The Chinese Garden at Park Place

Dorothy Margaret Stuart views the tale’s landscape as having “the inconsequence, the quaintness, the gaiety of colour and the lack of perspective, of a scene painted on a piece of Chinese porcelain” (191). She may have had
Wedgwood’s willow pattern in mind, a classical and orderly panorama painted on porcelain depicting two Chinese lovers standing on a bridge of magpies at Hangzhou, with which Walpole, an avid collector of Wedgwood’s work, would have been familiar (*Catalogue of the Classic Contents of Strawberry Hill* 130-31, 179-81). The garden at Park Place, however, is darker and more gothic: “Not finding his lady there, as he expected, [Mi Li] turned back, and plunging suddenly into the thickest gloom of the wood, descended into a cavern totally dark, the intrepid prince following [the gardener] boldly.” It conforms more closely to Chambers’s vision of how the Chinese were thought to add frightening elements to their gardens: Chinese “scenes of terror,” he writes, “are composed of gloomy woods, deep vallies inaccessible to the sun, impending barren rocks, dark caverns, and impetuous cataracts rushing down the mountains from all parts” (*Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* 36). It is quite different from the frieze-like composition and emotional restraint that characterize both Wedgwood’s china-ware and the aesthetic expression of neoclassical logic, harmony, and proportion.

The key to the structure of Mi Li is found in this Chinese gardening aesthetic. To begin with, Park Place actually did have a garden similar to the one described in “Mi Li.” Under Walpole’s direction, Conway fashioned it in the early 1780s after the supposed Chinese “want of symmetry,” juxtaposing it with the symmetrical Grecian architecture artificially lying in ruins. In a letter to Mann, Walpole says that he admires “variety” and “charming irregularities” in architecture, and that he is “almost as fond of the Sharawaggi, or Chinese want of symmetry, in buildings, as in grounds
or gardens” as he is of gothic architecture (Correspondence [25 February 1750] 20: 127). The term Sharawaggi had come to refer to the Chinese practice of “studied irregularity” in gardening. Although its actual derivation has been debated, it is generally thought to have been coined by Sir William Temple in his 1602 essay Upon the Gardens of Epicurus ([1908 ed.] 53-54). Temple writes that the Chinese, “whose way of thinking seems to lie as wide of ours in Europe, as their country does,” construct their gardens with scorn for European “proportions, symmetries, or uniformities.” Walpole quotes Temple in his own essay On Modern Gardening in 1780, defining the Sharawaggi (Walpole spells it here “Sharawadgi”) as the Chinese aesthetic in which “greatest reach of imagination is employed in contriving figures where the beauty shall be great and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed” (Works 2: 532).

Walpole considered Chambers’s vision of the Sharawaggi ridiculously exaggerated: “I have read Chambers’s book,” he writes to William Mason, “it is more extravagant than the worst Chinese paper” (Correspondence [25 May 1772] 28: 34). Walpole, in fact, is thought to have had a hand in Mason’s Heroic Epistle to Sir William Chambers, a political and anti-court satire published anonymously. He puts the Sharawaggi to use in “Mi Li,” but not, as he might have back in 1750, to “give a whimsical air of novelty that is very pleasing” (Correspondence [letter to Horace

35 See Chang, “A Note on Sharawadgi.” The editors of the New English Dictionary doubt that the word “sharawadgi” derived from the Chinese language, but Chang suggests that the word’s four syllables probably correspond to 灑 落 (“impressive” or “surprising”) and 瑣 琦 (“careless grace”).
Mann, 2 Aug. 1950] 20: 166). Instead, as Jonathan Spence observes, he takes “the extravagances of chinoiserie to their outermost limits, only to let them dissolve in their own absurdity” (79). He does so deliberately, not only reflecting a general decline in enthusiasm for chinoiserie in the second half of the century (Marshall, “Britain and China in the late Eighteenth Century” 11: 11), but also by way of continuing his assault on Chambers. Samuel Kliger suggests that Walpole’s aesthetic taste in gardens was determined largely by political factionalism between the Tories and the Whigs, and that “if Chambers had not received a royal appointment, the Whigs might never have found fault with his principles of design.” Kliger traces what he calls a “pattern of ideas which equated political liberty with a taste for ‘natural’ art and tyranny with formal art,” and that “the movement in aesthetics towards a freer, more natural style of gardening became a party-issue between Whigs and Tories, between friends and enemies of the American and French struggles for liberty” (135).

Walpole structures his Chinese fairy tale after the Sharawaggi, bringing into play a subversive, liberalizing dynamic that is carried, as the postscript notes, by an imagination “fettered by no rules.” Walpole pencilled a note into one of the original copies of Hieroglyphic Tales that reads: “the merits of an Hieroglyphic Tale consists in its being written extempore and without any plan, as the first four of these literally were” (Manuscript Notes, Hieroglyphic Tales xiv). Departing from the rules of neoclassical formalism, he gives release to his imagination and allows the tale to form organically: freer, more impulsive, and ultimately unsettling. This was his
method also, he claimed, in writing *The Castle of Otranto*. More broadly, it had become the hallmark of his style. As Thomas Macaulay writes in a review of Walpole’s letters in 1833, Walpole habitually “yokes together ideas between which there would seem, at first sight, to be no connexion” (*Horace Walpole: The Critical Heritage* 324). An attentive reading of “Mi Li,” however, reveals, like psychoanalysis applied to a dream, connections, subtle analogies, and meaning working beneath the surface. Walpole noted that only the first four tales were “literally” written extempore. “Mi Li,” a later tale, is not included in this category for good reason—it’s apparent irregularity is, like the Sharawaggi, studied and designed to convey a furtive moral. This didactic aspect of the tale’s Sharawaggi may have been suggested by Goldsmith, whose Altangi says “that there is scarce a garden in China which does not contain some fine moral couch’d under the general design, where one is not taught wisdom as he walks, and feels the force of some noble truth, or delicate precept resulting from the disposition of the groves, streams or grottos” (Letter xxxi). The tale’s structure is part and parcel of its meaning. By straying from the trend toward increased realism in English fiction around the middle of the century, which K.K. Mehrotra illustrates (1), Mi Li rejects the outlook that promoted it: the spirit of critical, rational sophistication attendant on the advance of scientific inquiry and the formation of learned orders such as the Royal Society. The tale’s formal Sharawaggi is inextricably bound up with the romantic idealism that motivates its satire on Britain’s fledgling global imperialism. Its whimsicality, irregularity, and wildness form a counterpoint to this new rationalist spirit, which
Walpole considered a perversion of the Augustan ideal because it uses reason and scientific enquiry only to conceal a dangerous rapacity.

The Augustan Dream and the Enigma of Leander

After passing through the Sharawaggi, Mi Li comes upon a more regulated setting reminiscent of a Virgilian pastoral landscape. He sees “a venerable wood of beeches,” a “chalk-hill,” a glistening stream, and an orchard-like garden. These are all features typical of Virgil’s Eclogues, which reflect the innocence and serenity of a virtuous simple life and natural order. Virgil juxtaposes gently sloping valleys and green meadows with thick forests, fir-covered mountains, and dark caves which suggest the anguish and corruption of city and political life. Park Place, situated in the gently sloping Happy Valley, is likewise surrounded by contrasting images: the rugged “wilderness of shrubs” that “climb[s] up the pendent cliffs,” and the two dark-green “mountains cloathed to their summits with cedars, firs, and pines.” Park Place is different, though, because the classical monuments at its centre lie in ruins.

Mi Li comes upon a “lonely tomb” near a dry brook and “surrounded by cypress, yews, and willows, that seemed the monument of some adventurous youth who had been lost in tempting the current, and might have suited the gallant and daring Leander.” Dry brooks, cypress, yews, and willows are all stock symbols of sadness in classical Greek and Roman poetry, and they lend the scene an air of romantic melancholy. Leander was the Oriental youth of Abydus, on the Asiatic side of the Hellespont, who was in love with Hero, the beautiful priestess of Aphrodite at
Sestus. The tragic story of these two star-crossed lovers is retold by Ovid in *The Metamorphosis*, and is the subject of Christopher Marlowe’s poem *Hero and Leander*. Every night Leander would brave the currents to swim from the eastern shore to the western shore to see Hero, who guided him by lighting a torch in her tower. Mi Li crosses the ocean, from East to West, in search of his elusive bride with the same raw passion. One night a violent storm extinguishes Hero’s torch and Leander goes off course and is lost to the currents. Hero, in deep despair, throws herself into the sea.

The empty tomb that Mi Li encounters, together with the allusion to Leander, intimates a comparable disaster in China attempting to “connect” with Britain. Will Mi Li somehow perish in this attempted cultural crossing? Our young prince poses the telling question: he “eagerly asked the gardener whose tomb he beheld before him,” to which he receives the enigmatic reply, “It is nobody’s.” “Nobody” brings to mind Odysseus’s journey home from the East after the Trojan war, when he names himself “nobody” in order to confuse the Cyclops Polyphemus, from whom he is trying to escape, and this allusion is strengthened by the presence of the Cyclopean bridge at Park Place. In sum, one wonders if Walpole could have been playing with the alliteration of “Leander” and “Li.” The name Leander has “occasionally been used as an elaboration of LEE (as a male name)” (“Leander,” Hanks and Hodges [ed.]). Could Mi Li be “My Lee,” or “my rendering of Leander,” a “gallant and daring” young prince who crosses to the West in search of romantic fulfilment, only to succumb, if his oracle holds true, to unhappiness? If so, then the tomb befitting
Leander is intended for Mi Li, who, like Odysseus, is the one referred to as “nobody.” A footnote tells us that the tomb “has a small pyramid on it,” perhaps a clue to deciphering the tale’s Chinese hieroglyphics—it seems the burial place of an Eastern prince’s cultural inheritance. Its Chinese association is strengthened if one recalls Altangi’s encounter with the English lady who makes no distinction between a garden pyramid and a Chinese pagoda (Letter XIV).

The Implausibility of Connecting with China

When Mi Li finally has Caroline in sight, he goes “galloping” to her with all the mock gallantry of a medieval knight intent on taking his “prize.” He seizes her by the hand and cries “Who she? Who she?” “Lady Ailesbury screamed, the young maiden squalled, the general, cool but offended, rushed between them, and if a prince could be collared, would have collared him.” General Conway, “perceiving by his accent and manner that he was a foreigner, and rather tempted to laugh than be angry, replied with civil scorn, Why she is miss Caroline Campbell, daughter of lord William Campbell, his majesty’s late governor of Carolina.” Mi Li cries “Oh, Hih! I now recollect thy words!” The tale’s final sentence, “And so she became princess of China,” has all the hallmarks of a fairy-tale ending, and a reader could be forgiven for presuming that our protagonist lives happily ever after. Spence writes that “like Goldsmith’s Hingpo, Mi Li had found his happiness. And once again the reality of transcultural dissonance was shrouded, for a playful moment or two, in the softer light of romantic oneness” (80). “Transcultural dissonance” is clearly suggested in
the maiden’s “squall,” Lady Ailesbury’s “scream” and the general’s “civil scorn,” as well as in Mi Li’s inability to command English politeness and self-restraint. Somehow Mi Li is able to make Caroline his wife, though one wonders why she surrenders to a stranger of inferior manners and such a poor linguistic overture. If not for love, Caroline is drawn to Mi Li presumably by the prospect of regaining higher social status or stability as princess of China. As Lady Oldham proclaims in *The Nabob*, “young girls are easily caught with titles and splendour; magnificence has a kind of magic for them” (1.1.87). After having lost her position as the daughter of a colonial governor in Britain’s failed American empire, Caroline seems ready to accept a new life at the pinnacle of Britain’s prospective new Eastern empire. But if transcultural dissonance is softened by the “lights of romantic oneness,” it is also clouded over by the knowledge that Mi Li has not truly fulfilled his oracle and is bound to become “the most unhappy man alive.” Walpole, with tongue in cheek, hints at this one last time when Mi Li exclaims: “Oh, Hih! I now recollect thy words!” The irony, of course, is that Mi Li never remembered his fairy godmother’s words correctly from the very start.

In passing Spence asks: “Did Walpole expect readers to pronounce the tale’s title ‘My Lie’?” (79). This is quite possible and worth exploring further because the play on Caroline’s name is central to the tale’s meaning. Apart from the one association already considered between Mi Li and Leander, there may be others as well. Walpole was certainly familiar with the ambiguities of the Chinese language
and the opportunity that its tonal complexity presents in forming puns. He wrote to
Lady Ossory in 1781, with some exaggeration, that

puns must be greatly assisted by that ambiguity, and the delicacies of the
language may depend on an almost imperceptible variation in the shades; as the
perfection of the Chinese consists in possessing but very few syllables, each of
which admits ten thousand accents, and thence pronunciation is the most
difficult part of their literature. (Correspondence [4 Jan. 1781] 35: 262)

In addition to simply altering pronunciation, Mi Li might be read as “My Ly,” by
substituting the i’s with y’s or, to use present-day spelling, “My Lie” (ly being an
earlier variant of lie). When Thomas Chatterton tried to dupe Walpole with poems
purporting to give a history of painting in England written by T. Rowleie, a secular
priest of St. John’s in Bristol, he gave his forgeries an ancient gloss by feigning
ancient spellings—most commonly by substituting y’s for i’s (1: 258-67). If this was
Walpole’s method, then what could the lie be if not the tale’s false happy ending?

While the tale’s ending holds out the prospect that Britain and China might be
able to connect on human ground away from the potential tyranny of mercantile
capitalism or imperial dominion, Mi Li’s failure to fulfil his oracle suggests this may
not happen. Mi Li takes into his own hands the search for his elusive bride in what
appears to be an affirmation of human striving, but he is actually much less
autonomous and more a creature of fate or the gods, like Leander or Odysseus, for
this to be the case. Like Manfred in The Castle of Otranto, the more Mi Li attempts
to assert control over fate, the more he loses control over his own destiny, and this
loss of control is marked in both characters by a similar inability to articulate
coherent sentences. After a subversion of order in the tale’s Sharawaggi wildness,
there appears finally, in the Augustan Happy Valley at Park Place, to be the restoration of a norm, as there is in *The Castle of Otranto*. But behind the apparent happy ending or revelation of providential design lurks the same sort of hedonistic paradox that characterizes Britain’s global enterprise and keeps Britons trapped in an enchantment that threatens to undo England. Mi Li’s attempt to find happiness by connecting with the English can only lead to unhappiness, and his ill luck is identified with imprudence. Mi Li cannot find his happiness in Caroline any more than Manfred can find his in Isabella; and Britain cannot truly possess foreign dominions any more than Manfred can hold onto the dominions of Otranto, which likewise had never truly been his dominions. The prospect of Caroline remaining the princess of China seems intrinsically flawed because she is not the true fulfilment of Mi Li’s oracle. It is at best only a fairy tale, an idealized and fleeting hope, and at worst a lie. Like the Sharawaggi, which appears at first enveloped in softer light, the story of these two lovers, like Britain’s prospect of finding a new empire in the East after its Atlantic empire is lost, appears as though it can only darken. The tale is thus open-ended, as Walpole acknowledged in 1787: “if I were not too old to have any imagination left,” he wrote, “I would add a sequel to Mi Li” (*Correspondence* [letter to Conway, 11 Nov. 1787] 39: 461).
Conclusion

Mi Li and Confuciango are two very different characters. The illusory happiness which Mi Li discovers in Happy Valley at Park Place is not the same happiness Confuciango has found in the Vale of Hoangti. After long trial and error, Confuciango has settled to a contemplative life. Unlike Mi Li, a man of action who misplaces his trust in a disingenuous Irish sailor and utters only two words throughout the entire tale, Confuciango imparts his Protestant wisdom to British tea traders of the East India Company, telling a lengthy series of moral tales over the course of two volumes which endorse the principles and duties of good government established around a strong monarchy. Confuciango’s tales, which are evidently moral allegories intended for youth, warn of the common moral lapses, factionalism, and strife which have ruined nations and empires from ancient Egypt onward. Mi Li’s story, if extended to its logical conclusion, could easily find a place among them.

Like Wilfred and Johnson, Mi Li enters a pastoral landscape through a Sharawaggi garden. Happy Valley, however, differs from the landscape over which Confuciango presides. Confuciango’s country seat reflects an Arcadian ease and contentment made possible by China’s restored religious, political, and social order. Park Place, on the other hand, is tinged with gothic foreboding and accentuated by mock Augustan ruins which symbolize the socioeconomic instability Walpole believed the Company was introducing into Britain through its rapacious desire for
profit and the personal ambition of its servants. The England to which Mi Li arrives after a backward journey to Britain on a man-of-war is an upside down nation. It is a wonderland in which the eccentric recluse is not a Bute-like sage but the false savant Banks, a parody of the British gentleman amateur of science, who is feverishly searching for an elusive lunar manuscript he thinks will secure his fortune. Tea, the lifeblood of Britain’s foreign trade, is both the enchanted wine that makes Mi Li’s journey possible and the commercial commodity whose profits threaten to upset Britain’s traditional landed interests. It represents London’s indulgence in luxuriance and its indifference to the Company’s actions abroad, which risk undoing the kingdom. Park Place, like England itself, may once have been a Johnsonian Happy Valley, a utopian land of plenty cloistered from external tumult and barbarity. But now it sits amid the ruins of Augustan refinement tossed down by middle-class avarice, where the beggared orphan of Britain’s failed mercantile-colonial enterprise awaits an opportunity to regain social status at the pinnacle of a new Eastern empire, which can only prove equally illusory.

Mi Li symbolizes the dangers of an acquisitive desire to range the world, which is the same moral conveyed by Goldsmith’s story of Happy Valley in *Chinese Letters*. His happiness can only prove false, for the dominions of Caroline’s father had never truly been his dominions, and Caroline is therefore not the fulfilment of his oracle. Mi Li calls to mind the ancient emperor Ming Li described by Du Halde who, induced by a dream, sent ambassadors to the West to seek the “most holy” but ended up inadvertently introducing a pernicious sect into China’s former spiritual calm. Mi
Li’s impetuosity is the counterpoint of the prudence and sound judgment recommended by Confucius, who told his students, as Frances Brooke quotes, “that virtue does not consist in never erring, which is impossible, but in recovering as fast as we can from our errors” (1: 148). Mi Li, like the Company he holds in satirically high regard, or Banks after the loss of the American colonies, fails to learn from past errors, unlike Confuciango.

Mi Li and Confuciango are both invested with qualities that reflect British concerns of the period. Confuciango is invested with Bute’s sense of good government established around a strong monarchy, and Mi Li with the Company’s imprudence. Like the other texts examined in this study, Mi Li and *The Bonze* both use the idea of China to help articulate British cultural and political values, or to contemplate Britain’s place within a rapidly expanding world view at mid-century. At a time when Britain and China still had little direct contact and cultural exchange with one another, the idea of China lent itself to such investiture. Retaining something of the protean character it had acquired through centuries of European romance and legend, the idea of China could easily be moulded to domestic preoccupations. The six texts examined here generally hold out the supposedly civic-minded, rational, and benevolent character of Confucian China (or its inverse) to engage contemporary debate about decadence in British society and government, to interrogate their nation’s moral criteria of the highest good, or to question its evolving global enterprise. At the heart of their ideas about China are fundamental questions about Britain, all of them familiar to Enlightenment discourse. Can a
monarchy exist for long periods in true benevolence, binding society together and working for the common good like the head of a family unit? Can a state-sponsored meritocracy actually be achieved? Can morality stand without the support of revealed religion? Should reason or scientific rationalism be allowed to crowd out feeling in the pursuit of enlightenment? Is Britain’s global expansion truly based on free trade and liberty?

The idea of China is often made to converge with Western philosophical questions handed down from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Northern Europe. It thus gained currency in the period’s dialectical interplay between literary appeals to antiquity and the pursuit of modernity, enlisted in the philosophical and theological debates of Enlightenment. For each of the primary English, Irish, and Scottish authors examined, the idea of China became an opportune vehicle for expressing contemporary British concerns, rather than a determinant of those concerns. Chinese exoticism provided a fresh metaphor to replace threadbare Greco-Roman allusions, lending a new complexion to social criticisms, philosophical aspirations, and religious tensions in Britain. It seems rewarding, therefore, to approach these texts by examining the uses to which they put ideas of China. This study has attempted to demonstrate that such an approach can lead to a better understanding of the texts themselves rather than simply to a better understanding of British knowledge of China or China’s ideological influence during the period.

Murphy’s play uses the idea of China to cater to the spirit of British patriotism that marked the outset of hostilities in the Seven Years’ War.
Emphasizing Confucian civic virtue, it endorses the merits of a constitutional monarchy aspiring to unity and the common good, warning against French absolutism. Murphy attempts to retain the elements of Chinese drama that coincide with Aristotelian and Shakespearean principles, thereby endorsing the dramatic standards he esteemed against the backdrop of a fresh-coloured setting. *The Orphan* in this respect stages a cultural and idealistic competition with France and Voltaire, who uses his own idea of China in part to illustrate his confidence in the civilizing process over Rousseau’s belief in the normative good of uncorrupted morals supposedly residing in “Natural Man.” Murphy’s idea of China serves to express familiar concepts which had circulated in Europe, in one form or another, since classical antiquity. China’s distance, both geographic and cultural, opens up a new space to reconfigure old ideas petrified under the weight of contemporary common usage. Confucianism, as represented by the play, is closely aligned with Murphy’s patriotic confidence in the viability of an enlightened constitutional monarchy. It becomes the expression of a budding political polemicist soon to be employed by Bute’s ministry. Bute sponsored the play no doubt because he saw in Zamti a reflection of himself as the faithful protector of the Prince of Wales.

Although geographically and culturally distant, China appeared to share an ideological closeness with certain ideals handed down from classical Greece and Rome. It offered a fresh iconography for many British values, although Confucianism did not always happily converge with them. It sometimes opened up unwelcome possibilities for expressing undesirable reformulations of Western questions of political merit, the nature and function of monarchy, national identity,
patriotism, class division, and global commercial expansion. At the core of British ideas about China during the period is an interest in Confucianism’s rational basis and its capacity to give rise to a meritocracy or supplant revealed religion. Conceptually, questions concerning the moral criteria of the highest good and the institutionalization of a meritocracy were not new to Europe. While some Britons wondered if China’s Confucian bureaucracy exemplified a regime of Platonic philosopher kings, others considered it either flawed or inferior by comparison, for it seemed to rest upon an inflexible adherence to moral rules.

While Murphy represents Confucian China as a complex, urbanized civilization besieged by external barbarity, using it to rouse British patriotism, Percy’s Chinese novel depicts China’s virtue and liberty beset by internal moral corruption and political intrigue. If post-1688 England had become a land of the free, a model of liberty and the active protection of the laws for Europe to follow, it had found, Percy felt, an ally in China. *The Pleasing History* illustrates that the Chinese are capable of expressing true public spirit and possess the moral fibre by which political liberty is sustained in the face of greed and civic apathy. The novel’s hero and heroine are conscientious censors of public morality and proponents of the rational regulation of political life, embodiments of an ideal eulogized in Western literature from the Greeks onward, but their periodic excesses lead Percy to make qualifying editorial interventions. Reason may preserve the God-given rights of life, liberty, and property, but Percy’s notes argue that reason alone is only a partial or an imperfect foundation for morality, just as Goldsmith shows in his *Chinese Letters* that rationality without feeling impairs true enlightenment. Percy’s editorial treatment
therefore qualifies, from a distinctly British Protestant standpoint, the idea that rational Confucianism can provide a corrective to Western religious and political thought. He simultaneously uses his editorial treatment of the novel as a vehicle for criticizing Roman Catholicism and the Jesuits. In this sense, China becomes for Percy, as it does for Murphy, an imaginative ground upon which two interpretive European philosophies, both religious and political, compete with one another.

There appears to be more at play in representations of China during the period than simply the dynamics of a Freudian or Kleinian ego-object psychology, an introjective and projective orientating process of coming to know the self through knowledge of the Other. Material imports from China certainly left their mark on Britain; and, as the century progressed, the global exchange of ideas would help to break down barriers between cultural systems, religions, genders, and geographies. During this highly self-conscious and self-reflexive period, however, when the currents of Enlightenment ran high, Britons were already developing cultural self-awareness and a sense of national identity independent of any exchange of ideas with China or actual contact with the Chinese. “China” is one of several entities about which various ideas from the crucible of contemporary Enlightenment concerns and debates coalesced, rather than one from which new ideas originated. The idea of China thus found a more conscious and deliberate place in British literature between 1757 and 1785 than many studies—especially those influenced by Said’s *Orientalism* and postcolonial theory generally—acknowledge.

Goldsmith constructs a Chinese character to satirize British follies and foibles.
Altangi is a philosophical traveller whose mission it is to cultivate, enlighten, and ennoble the human race. His letters interrogate the collective conscience of a British readership whose global horizons were expanding rapidly but whose self-understanding seemed impeded by national insularity and pride. Altangi appears at first to exemplify a loftier Chinese moral order and enlightened culture grounded in reason, advocating a civilizing process conceptualized as the struggle of reason to lift mankind through stages of social development, from barbarism to gradually higher strata, but one always threatened by its own excesses. The form and substance of his letters, however, are for the most part drawn from Horatian satire. Like the Athenian founders of Stoicism, he adheres to a radical cosmopolitanism which teaches that all men are brothers, members of a great city bound together by their possession of the spark that is a part of divine Reason. Altangi may rhyme off Confucian maxims as freely as the Chinese author of *The Pleasing History*, but he does not represent only Confucian rationality. He demonstrates that reason is capable of its own excesses. He progressively reveals the flaws in adhering slavishly to rationalism and moral maxims. For Percy, Confucianism is flawed because it is unsupported by revealed religion; for Goldsmith, it is flawed because it is devoid of feeling. Altangi’s character is therefore tempered by feeling during his sojourn in London, and he is gradually transformed into a moderate Johnsonian conception of cosmopolitan man.

Goldsmith’s *Chinese Letters* also draw the reader into an emerging discourse on the ways in which Londoners perceive foreign cultures and the psychological dynamics that shape transcultural understanding. It is through the lenses of British chinoiserie that Altangi is regarded as a simple exoticism in London, and it is against
chinoiserie that he most vigorously militates. Altangi arrives in London instilled with Confucian composure and throughout his sojourn labours to preserve it in times of trouble against the false impressions he receives and to which he is subjected. His ability to meet trouble with a level head strikes a deliberate contrast to the frivolity of British chinoiserie. When he fails to keep up a strictly rational attitude, it is to stress his humanity and to add satirical poignancy, to suggest the impossibility of self-knowledge, or to question whether reason alone is adequate to account for behaviour, whether personal or social. His own fallibility reminds us of our own unreliability as subjects and the need for a complex, questioning understanding of the world. In this respect, he does not represent China. He represents a method for Londoners to better connect with China and other cultures, including those closer to home such as Ireland. This method necessarily begins with philosophically disciplined introspection, a Socratic process of stripping away self-illusion. Perception is a central concern of the Chinese Letters, in which appearances are shown, time and again, to be misleading. Two centuries before Said, one finds in Goldsmith’s work a Saidian critique of Eurocentric visions of the Far East that ignore actual Orientals and undercut their ability to represent themselves. For Goldsmith, the true voice of the Chinese Other can never be uniquely Chinese. It is the same voice, expressed fundamentally through humane cosmopolitanism, which is the life lesson Goldsmith drew from his own continental travels.

Bell’s narrative, based on an actual journey to China, takes a different approach to bridging the cultural gulf separating Britain from China and the wider world. While Altangi travels westward to endorse a forward-looking cosmopolitan vision,
Bell’s narrative moves eastward and backward in time. It resurrects an erstwhile dream of discovering in China a golden age of prosperity and abundance that might become for Britain a source of inexhaustible wealth and mutually beneficial trade. Bell’s narrative puts the idea of China into global historical and anthropological context. Framed by a profound concern with historical processes, his journey presents the evolution of man and society in geographical and physical terms rather than abstracted into the vocabulary of progressive historiography. Like Murphy, Percy, and Goldsmith, Bell pictures China as a nation that has achieved a stable civilization after long struggles with injustice and barbarism. Unlike them, however, he is curiously unconcerned with Confucianism, a subject upon which he has very little to say. His observations instead confirm China’s fondness for the elaborate decoration and intricate patterning of chinoiserie, which Goldsmith ridicules as un-Chinese in an effort to satirize a pervasive sense of cultural superiority in London. He paints a picture of China resembling the landscape scenes on imported blue and white Chinese porcelain. His vision of China shares more in common with earlier notions of Oriental character and style, but without the ostentatious displays of wealth and power. Bell finds in Peking a polite and commercial people ruled by a benevolent patriarch. Although unable to convert to Christianity, the Chinese emperor is not disagreeable to it, and, in his own way, he exemplifies it better than many Christian monarchs. Bell’s narrative helps to reassert the Jesuitical view of China gradually being discounted by the satirical wit of Protestant writers like Defoe or by British flights of fancy inspired by a growing body of pseudo-Oriental tales. The effect is a vivid, earthy picture of the Middle Kingdom’s grandeur and apparent
immutability, which might be read as a reproach to Britain’s smallness, its inability to improve commercial and cultural exchange with China, and its seemingly quixotic aspirations for global expansion and empire.

*The Bonze*, an entirely imaginative work, uses the idea of China to endorse the virtues thought to reside at the nation’s core, namely a strong, benevolent, and enlightened monarchy under George III. Confuciano is a Confucian eunuch who has pursued the byways of error in so far as they have led him to reject both Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, only to discover religious and philosophical truth in contemplative British Protestantism that endorses the principles of good government established around a strong monarchy. He has come to realize that secular rationalism, as Percy and Goldsmith suggest, is an insufficient support for genuine morality, without which proper government cannot be maintained.

*The Bonze* uses the idea of China to hold together a series of moral allegories illustrating the same theme underlying *The Orphan* and *The Pleasing History*: the struggle of public good to overcome private interest. As in Murphy’s play, China becomes a metaphor recommending a constitutional monarchy that is strong, enlightened, and inclusive, one that can bring about and sustain internal political stability and colonial subordination in the face of external competition from France. The similarity between Confuciano and Bute suggests that *The Bonze* may have been written by one of Bute’s adherents wishing use the vogue for Chinese tales to open up new possibilities for presenting a threadbare theme to the young Lord Kilwarling. It also seems to be addressed, by extension, to his father, the Earl of
Hillsborough and one of the King’s Friends, who had returned to politics in 1763 in consequence of the ministerial changes occasioned by Bute’s departure. When the novel was published in 1768, Hillsborough had been promoted to a third secretaryship of state, bringing to this post Bute’s desire to establish strategic advantages for the future security of the British colonies in North America.

Walpole’s Mi Li uses the idea of China to a contrasting purpose: to satirize rather than reaffirm Britain’s mercantile-colonial enterprise after the loss of the American colonies. His Chinese protagonist, a counterpoint to the Confucian rationalism embodied in Altangi, is the vehicle for a satire targeting Britain’s new eastern trajectory in global expansion. Once the tale is situated in its proper historical context, after the American Revolutionary War, the pieces of its satiric puzzle come into sharper relief. Its two young lovers, one British and the other Chinese, are associated with the two major forces transforming Britain’s global enterprise: Caroline with the loss of the American colonies and Mi Li with Britain’s growing commercial attraction to China. Mi Li’s enigmatic oracle, however, suggests that he is as unlikely to find his happiness in Caroline as Britain is to recover its lost American colonies. The parody of Joseph Banks, “the shadowy impresario of Britain’s colonial expansion,” stresses this improbability. He is portrayed as a lunatic searching for the moon in the Western ocean, a metaphor for Britain’s desire to possess a new empire in the East. Tom O’Bull, the antithesis of the honest and patriotic John Bull, is a self-seeking Irish rogue who misleads Mi Li with a preposterous lie, which is clearly a satire on the Company and an expression of the ambiguity and anxiety aroused by Ireland and its Roman Catholic dissidents.
Like Goldsmith, Walpole brings foreign alterity into Britain to cast a critical light on British follies and foibles. Unlike “Xo Ho” or Altangi, however, the agent of this satire is not a rational Confucian. Taking his lead from China’s hieroglyphic-like writing system, considered abstruse, concise, and allegorical, Walpole conceals his satire in a fairy tale structured after the Chinese gardening aesthetic—a deliberate contrast to the pastoral serenity of Virgil’s *Eclogues*—which is meant to bring into play a subversive, liberalizing dynamic “fettered by no rules.” Mi Li, an impetuous prince seeking happiness in love, arrives in England, a dreamy, self-absorbed land in which rapacious men spend their time in madcap pursuits intended to expand their colonial empire. Mi Li is a flesh-and-blood young man, stripped of all trappings of rank and status, displaying none of the pomp and majesty of an Eastern prince or the composure of a Confucian philosopher. He is driven by earthy passion, pragmatic in nature, and inclined to fits of anger. Although resembling a fairy, he is susceptible to the accidents and misadventures that befall mortals, eliciting a mixture of sympathy for the ordeals of his romantic quest and admiration for his courage, but also exasperation at his unreasonableness and imprudence. He allows us to see Britain from a perspective not simply unfamiliar but upside down, one rendering irrational the rational confidence Britons at the time were coming to invest in their new trajectory of global expansion eastward. While the tale’s ending holds out the prospect that Britain and China might be able to connect on human ground, away from the potential tyranny of mercantile capitalism or imperial dominion, Mi Li’s failure to fulfil his oracle suggests its impossibility.
Like the other works examined in this thesis, Mi Li demonstrates that British ideas about China were not necessarily used by writers during this period simply to represent China as an exotic amusement for British “consumption” or to bring their readership to a better understanding of China. Most Britons knew China only from books. The second-hand nature of their knowledge of China gave the idea of China a plasticity that allowed it to be moulded into an instrument of self-criticism or used, indirectly, to convey a positive appreciation of Britain relative to Europe. China as a construct of the British mind was concerned less with Confucian civic virtues in China than with analogous civic virtues in Britain, or with the political, religious, and social tensions dividing Britain from Europe. In the texts that make up this study, the idea of China thus functions as a vehicle for the expression and interchange of ideas already familiar to the Enlightenment project, which are deliberately transformed by their authors into metaphors for their own concerns.
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