

Ashley Millar
London School of Economics
a.millar@lse.ac.uk

Authority and Parenthood: how facts on China's political economy travelled to and within Europe during the Enlightenment

'The fantasies of one age are often the facts of another; contrariwise, the facts of one age sometimes become the myths of another. Nowhere is the truth of these aphorisms more clearly illustrated than in the revelation of Asia to Europe'

--- Donald Lach¹

This paper will examine the importance of authority and parenthood in the travelling of facts on the China's political economy during the European Enlightenment. The paper does not deal with the methodological questions involved with establishing a definition of a fact, but rather focuses on an examination of the nature and implications of the travelling of information and views on China from their original authors (namely, missionaries, merchants and emissaries) to recipients (in the form of scholars and popular authors). Adopting the approach developed by the 'How Well Do 'Facts' Travel?' research project, the paper takes as its working definition of a fact that which was perceived as a fact by the groups being studied: as the Enlightenment authors frequently refer to 'facts' in their own writing, this paper accepts their language in investigating how such facts travelled.²

In examining the case of the circulation information about China's political economy in eighteenth century Britain, this paper explores the relationship between primary facts and the conclusions carried with and drawn from them. Primary facts – on topics ranging from manufacturing to agriculture, trade policy, general wealth, and economic culture – are pieces of

¹ Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), Volume 1, Book 2, 822.

² For a philosophical examination of images of China and the relationship between knowledge, belief and myth, see Jamie Morgan, "Distinguishing Truth, Knowledge and Belief: A Philosophical Contribution to the Problem of Images of China" *Modern China* 30, 3 (2004): 398-427.

information that were transmitted by primary sources. They then travelled largely through the form of publications to scholarly and popular authors in Europe and were continuously recycled.³

These groups of actors each had their own purpose, agenda and use for the facts. The respective primary sources of information, namely the missionaries, merchants and emissaries, all had varying motivations and loyalties in mind when constructing and transmitting facts about China's political economy. The most influential missionary group active in China were the Jesuits. Although they were often viewed as being Sinophilic (excessive admirers of China) by their contemporaries, and indeed by modern authors, they undoubtedly provided European scholars and popular authors with a wide variety of primary facts on the political economy of China. The missionaries and emissaries, on the other hand, were often labelled as Sinophobes (those who disdained China), and are perceived to have provided an alternative set of facts about China. However, this paper argues that these two sources merely offered different conclusions, presentations and interpretations of what was essentially the same set of primary facts. On the receiving end in Europe, scholars who included China in their writings tended to manipulate the available primary facts to fit their arguments and frameworks of analysis. Further, the expanding role of popular writers (geographers and historians) during the Enlightenment underlines the increasing complexity in respect of how various sources of information were assessed. This growing complexity results from a widening and deepening knowledge of the world, as well as a shift to a market-oriented knowledge economy.

Views of China in this period tended to gravitate towards either Sinophilia or Sinophobia. While these two perspectives were antithetical, authors on both sides often drew on the same primary facts. This is not just a dichotomy set up by modern historians, but was also recognised at the time:

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

³ This paper will primarily focus on Britain, where the popular authors played the largest role. It also includes discussion of important primary and scholarly sources from Holland, France, and Spain.

deceitful, ignorant, and superstitious, and destitute of every principle of human justice.⁴

As primary sources of information, the Jesuit missionaries and the merchants were respective representatives of these two categories. In assessing the facts, the popularisers and scholars took a stance on which group was the most trustworthy and were often explicitly critical of the other group. Interestingly, even in cases where the validity of the facts met with scepticism, the information still tended to be diffused. This reflects the unique nature of how facts travel in an environment where the receivers (and recyclers) have limited access to alternative sources of primary information.

This paper concentrates on facts on China's political economy. These facts were deemed to be more 'hard' than those on religion or Chinese culture, particularly as the missionaries were perceived as having little incentive to be deceptive about aspects of China's political economy. As a contemporary editor of a popular compendium commented: 'We have no reason to distrust the fidelity of the [Jesuit missionaries] in their various relations, except where the religion or particular interest of the Jesuit order is concerned.'⁵ Further, China is a particularly **elucidating** case, given its isolation from Europe. Unlike India, where East India Company merchants spoke Persian and intermarried, non-Jesuits had limited access to China's inner-workings, and as such the primary pool of facts can be more clearly isolated.

From China to Europe

In the early modern world, facts travelled from China to Europe through the accounts of missionaries, emissaries and merchants. In this first phase of travelling, the varying motivations of the authors, in addition to their contrasting exposures to different elements of China and its people, meant that these groups had varying agendas and accessibility to information thus limiting the production and transmission of primary facts. The initial assessment of facts on

⁴ Translators Unknown, Translator's Preface in Jean-Baptiste Grosier. *A general description of China: containing the topography of the fifteen provinces which compose this vast empire;*... Translator unknown. (London: Printed by G.G. and J. Robinson), iv.

⁵ Unknown. *The Chinese traveller, Containing a geographical, commercial, and political history of China. ... To which is prefixed the life of Confucius, ...* Vol. 1 of 2. (London: Printed by E. and C. Dilly, 1772), iv.

China during the Enlightenment was shaped by the type and quantity of information that trickled to Europe during the preceding era. The most important travellers' account during this period, which provided Europe with primary facts on China prior to the missionaries, was Book II of Marco Polo's *The Description of the World* (written with Rustichello of Pisa as *Livre des diversité* in 1298-99).⁶ This work was one of the first widely read and original accounts of China by a European traveller. Polo was clearly impressed by China's wealth, providing an 'account of Cathay as the largest, wealthiest, and most populous land of the thirteenth century'.⁷ Interestingly, Polo was still influential by the eighteenth century, despite many of his facts having being discredited.⁸ Samuel Derrick defends the inclusion of Marco Polo in his eighteenth century travel collection:

the most weighty objection that has been made against this writer, is the improbability that appears to be scattered thro' his work; but that this argument does not in the least invalidate the performance, will be evident from considering that many parts of it, which wore once the air of invention, have been proved real from unquestionable authorities of later date.⁹

This defence was necessary as most readers had become weary of the accounts of early travellers to China, as evinced in another compendium, *The Chinese Traveller*. It pointed to John Albert de Mandelslo's account of China from his 1640 trip, which included descriptions of unicorns and twenty-four stone oysters.¹⁰ Indeed tales such as these made observers weary of reports, and new facts on foreign lands. George Psalmanazar (1679-1763), who falsely claimed to be an inhabitant of the East Asian island of Formosa visiting Europe, published an account of 'his birth land', entitled *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island subject to the Emperor of Japan* (1704). He managed to convince many British (despite the protests of the

⁶ Moule and Pelliot discuss the various names under which this work was known. AC Moule and P Pelliot. *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd, 1938), 32.

⁷ Lach, Volume 1, Book 1, 36.

⁸ For instance, Polo was criticized for 'exaggerating' the practice of Tartars slaughtering innocents after the death of their Khan in John Green (most likely the editor). *A new general collection of voyages and travels* 4 Volumes (London: Printed for T. Astley, 1745-47), 405.

⁹ Samuel Derrick. *A collection of travels, thro' various parts of the world; but more particularly, thro' Tartary, China, Turkey, Persia, and the East-Indies* 2 Volumes (London: Printed for John Wilkie, 1762), Volume 1 of 2, 56-7; John Harris, (updated by John Campbell), *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca. Or, a complete collection of voyages and travels...* (London: Publisher Unknown, 1744-48) Volume 1 of 2, 545 makes a similar point about the relevance of Marco Polo's work.

¹⁰ *Chinese traveller*, v.

Jesuit missionaries who worked in Asia) of the truth of his account. Upon his confession in 1706 that, in fact, he had never been to Asia, the British public was made acutely aware of the ease with which they could be deceived.¹¹ Thomas Salmon, an editor of a popular compendium of the eighteenth century, aptly articulated the sentiment of the age:

Since the world is no longer to be amused with the fabulous relations of travellers and historians, any more than with the dreams of superstition and enthusiasm; an attempt to distinguish truth from fiction, and to discover the certainty of those accounts we have received of distant nations, it is presumed, will not be unacceptable in this discerning age.¹²

It was in the beginning of this ‘discerning age’ in the sixteenth century and rising throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the main providers of the primary facts on China, namely the missionaries, merchants and emissaries began to report first-hand accounts of the Chinese Empire.

The most important group was the Jesuit missionaries. As pivotal filters of information, the Jesuits’ motivations and actions are integral to understanding the history of knowledge on China in early modern Europe. The Society of Jesus was founded in 1534 and officially confirmed by Pope Paul III six years later. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) established their first mission in China in 1583 and reached Peking in 1601. The Jesuits recognised upon their arrival in China that it ‘...was more than a state. She was a world unto herself, and a closed world’.¹³ They were, however, able to pry their way in through use of their wide-ranging diplomatic and linguistic skills, religious understanding and scientific knowledge. The work of the Jesuits to reduce the language and cultural barriers enabled relationships to be formed with the Chinese imperial court and literati, so that by the seventeenth century they could attempt to understand China’s ‘inner

¹¹ However, Psalmanazar managed to maintain a good reputation, and became one of the main contributing editors to *An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present* (1736-1768), one of the most popular books of its time. Tamara Griggs. “Universal History from Counter-Reformation to Enlightenment.” *Modern Intellectual History*, 4, 2 (2007): 229. As his confession did not receive much attention, his reputation as a Formosan was still being defended decades later: Patrick Barclay. *The universal traveller: or, a complete account of the most remarkable voyages and travels of eminent men ...* (London: Publisher Unknown 1735), 604.

¹² Thomas Salmon. *Modern History: Or, the present state...Illustrated... by Herman Moll...* 3 Volumes (London: Printed for M. Bettesworth, 1739) introduction to the octavo edition (1724), Volume 1 of 3, p. ix

¹³ George H. Dunne. *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1962), 10.

spirit', analysing its moral and political dimensions.¹⁴ The nature of the Jesuit sources changed over time with varying narrative biases stemming from events in both Europe and China. Ricci's diaries were expanded and published (1615) by Nicolas Trigault, S.J. (1577-1629), making it the first major source of primary facts on China since Marco Polo that was authored by somebody who had travelled to or lived in China.¹⁵ Although running fewer editions than other sources, this book was extremely influential as 'It was almost universally cited by scholars who mentioned China, and it was regularly pilfered by later authors and publishers'.¹⁶ Trigault argued this work had a unique perspective and a special claim to authority because, for the first time, the author had lived in China for an extended period (over thirty years), had travelled around it, spoke the Chinese language, read their literature and discoursed with their citizens.¹⁷ This claim to authority would become prominent in the debate over the accuracy of primary facts provided by the Jesuits relative to those from merchants and emissaries.

It was not the principal aim of the mission to provide the European public with information on China; but this role evolved out of the need to receive moral and financial provisions from Europe and ultimately to cultivate support for their position in the Rites Controversy.¹⁸ The Chinese Rites Controversy was a debate about whether specific Confucian traditions, such as worshipping ancestors, were civic rather than religious ceremonies. If they were considered the former, as the Jesuits maintained, they would be compatible with Catholicism, but if they were deemed religious then the Church would ban them and ultimately any converted Christian would not be able to practice such cultural rites. During the height of this controversy the Jesuits had to defend themselves on several fronts from outside and within the Catholic Church, from the Jansenists, the Société des Missions Étrangères, other missionary orders such as the Franciscans and the Libertines who argued against the political position of the Church in Europe. Some of

¹⁴ Raymond Dawson. *The Chinese Chameleon: an analysis of European conceptions of Chinese civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 35; Lach, Volume 1, Book 1, 794.

¹⁵ 4 Latin editions, 3 French editions, German, Spanish, Italian and having English excerpts reproduced in Samuel Purchas. *Hakluytys Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others* (London: 1625).

¹⁶ Lach, Volume 3, Book 1, p. 513; Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault. *China in the Sixteenth Century: the journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610 [The compilation by N. Trigault]* Translated by Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), xvii.

¹⁷ Ricci and Trigault, 5.

¹⁸ D.E. Mungello. *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of

Hawaii Press, 1989), 207; Dawson discusses the changes in the Society even though the organisation and central tenants remained the same, Dawson, 38-9; Wolfgang Franke. *China and the West*, Translated by R.A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 64.

these missionary orders had produced their own primary information on China. For instance, in 1676 the Dominican friar Domingo Fernández Navarrete (c.1610-1689) published an account based on the time he had spent in China. Popular authors into the late eighteenth century referenced this account. Navarrete also attacked the Jesuit position in the Rites Controversy.¹⁹ The presentation of information on China, therefore, became increasingly sensitive to the European context. Their publications, particularly their popular *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses* (1702-1776, translated into English) were edited for clarity, security and reasons of censorship. Ultimately the Rites were condemned by Rome in 1704 (confirmed in a papal bull in 1715), and eventually contributed to the temporary demise of the Society of Jesus.

As a result of the Rites Controversy, Jesuit sources were increasingly questioned and attacked in Europe. For instance, Louis Le Comte's, S. J. (1655-1728) widely read *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état present de la Chine* (1696, published in English in 1737) was burned at the Sorbonne in Paris. Nonetheless, many were still consistently cited in the secondary literature of the time, particularly Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's, S.J. (1674-1743) *Description de la Chine* (1735, published in English 1736). Du Halde's work despite being a compendium of primary information, as he had never travelled to China, is considered a source of primary facts because as a Jesuit he had access to unpublished Jesuit reports, and it was considered to be the source of new, credible information about China for much of the eighteenth century. Most historians recognise that writers on China from the middle to late eighteenth century from popular authors to Adam Smith necessarily consulted Du Halde.²⁰ Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), an English literary figure, in an essay entitled *Letter on Du Halde's History of China* (1738) published in *Gentleman's Magazine*, notes '[t]here are few nations in the world more talked of, or less known, than the Chinese,' and he thanks Du Halde for completing the most accurate account of China available.²¹ It is clear that in spite of the controversy surrounding the positions held by the Jesuits in various debates on China, for many they were still considered to be reliable sources of information on China.

¹⁹ See J. S. Cummins. *A Question of Rites: Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China* (Cambridge: Scolar Press, 1993)

²⁰ Otto Berkelbach and Van der Sprenkel. "Western Sources" in *Essays on the Sources for Chinese History*, edited by Donald D. Leslie, Colin Mackerras and Wang Gungwu Editors (Canberra: Australian National University, Press, 1973), 158; Paul A. Rule. *K'ung-tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 185; Walter W. Davis, "China, The Confucian Ideal, and the European Age of Enlightenment." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44, 4 (1983): 538.

²¹ Samuel Johnson. "Letter on Du Halde's History of China" (1738) in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol. 6*, by Samuel Johnson: *Reviews, Political Tracts, and Lives of Eminent Persons* (1825 Oxford edition) Project Gutenberg, 2003.

Surprisingly, as they were deemed Sinophiles and their main arguments were nearly always in praise of China, the Jesuit sources did offer a variety of primary facts on China's political economy, both positive and negative. For instance, the aforementioned Trigault offers two sides to the picture of the activity on China's rivers and canals. First he argues that 'In [his] opinion it might be said with greater truth and without fear of exaggeration, that there are as many boats in this kingdom as can be counted up in all the rest of the world'.²² However, after this bold claim, he notes the Chinese cannot match Europeans in terms of sea faring ships. Underlining such strengths and weakness shows the Jesuit source to be rather nuanced in its assessment of China. *De Christiana expeditione* is the first important text to critically assess Chinese goods. For Trigault, 'the Chinese are a most industrious people' and due to their raw materials and natural 'talent for trading' they have 'a high development of the mechanical arts'.²³ However, he notes the imperfection of their goods stemming from the low expectations of Chinese buyers: '[The producer's] labour is guided rather by the demand of the purchaser who is usually satisfied with a less finished object'.²⁴ Further evidence of China's ample raw materials and industriousness is offered by Trigault's report that enough cotton – a crop he believes was only introduced to China forty years earlier – 'could be grown in China to supply the whole world'.²⁵ Once again Trigault qualifies his approbations. In comparing the Chinese and European silk manufacture, he determines the 'latter may be of higher quality'.²⁶ In distinguishing between quality and quantity of production, Trigault introduces a criticism of Chinese goods that becomes predominant in future works discussing China's political economy. This observation is of particular interest because it contradicts the many scholarly and popular sources in Europe that argued the Jesuit writings too highly extolled the Chinese and believed non-missionary reports were more balanced in their assessments.

The second group that had the capacity to provide primary facts on China were the merchants and emissaries. The attempts to open China up to trade provided ambassadors from states such as Russia, the Netherlands, France, and England as well as representatives from their respective East India Companies, and other explorers and merchants on the ground, with the opportunity to

²² Ricci and Trigault, 12-13.

²³ Ibid, 19.

²⁴ Ibid, 19.

²⁵ Ibid, 13.

²⁶ Ibid, 13.

claim their own authority in providing primary facts on China. The merchants dramatically outnumbered the Jesuits. Between 1552 and 1800 there were only 926 Jesuits in China. As early as 1563 there were already 700 Portuguese on Macao.²⁷ However, in spite of their larger numbers, the merchants and emissaries, unlike the Jesuits, had not mastered the Chinese language, and had no contact with the Chinese literati that educated the Jesuits on Chinese literature and science. Merchant traveller accounts increased in the seventeenth century, and although they offered less insightful commentary, many were continuously referred to, or seemingly had a transformative effect on European thought.

The reports from European merchants and seamen who encountered Chinese in the East Indies or along the China coast from the late sixteenth century onwards often reflected their authors' lack of knowledge of the Chinese language, Confucian ethic and Buddhist theology. Though they could offer important and interesting facts about their own voyages and encounters, their insight and knowledge of China itself was very limited. They typically expressed little admiration towards China and they described the merchants and officials they encountered as avaricious and untrustworthy. Unlike the Jesuits, whose policy of cultural accommodation allowed a greater (though in no way complete) view of Chinese society, the European merchants judged China by their own frame of reference and were typically exposed only to the class of merchants, sailors or low officials, who themselves did not necessarily understand the subtleties of Chinese culture, or the diversity and history of the empire. However, even on the topic of Chinese morality and economic culture, where they are thought to have differed the most, they in fact provided a similar pool of information about the variety of behaviour in the empire. For instance, the account of Captain George Anson's *Voyage around the World* (1748), written by his chaplain Richard Walter, describes the surprise at Chinese fisherman's 'inattention and want of curiosity' in their 'uncommon and extraordinary' European vessel. He also describes how 'interest indeed is known to exert a boundless influence over the inhabitants of that Empire'.²⁸ From this he concludes that whether an 'effect of nature or education...it is an incontestable symptom of a mean and contemptible disposition, and is alone a sufficient confutation of the extravagant panegyrics, which many hypothetical writers have bestowed on the ingenuity and capacity of this

²⁷ Arnold Rowbotham. 'The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth Century Europe'. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*. 4, 3 (1945), 50.

²⁸ George Anson and Richard Walter *Voyage round the world...* 3rd edition. (Dublin: 1748) 364 and 373.

Nation.’²⁹ However, he also refers to a meeting with a Chinese carpenter that he was ‘a person of very considerable parts, endowed with more frankness and honesty, than is to be found in the generality of the Chinese’.³⁰ Even given their differences in exposure and the Jesuits provided a more contextualised point of view, they nonetheless also reported a nuanced view of the Chinese character. For instance, Du Halde gave an example of a Chinese man trying to sell bad silks to a European merchant and commented on this ‘ingenuity in Fraud’. However, he does note that this is ‘principally observ’d among the vulgar’. He also describes the well-known extreme self-interest of the Chinese but notes they are not as ‘deceitful and knavish’ as the Jesuit Le Comte paints them, thus referring to disagreement amongst the Jesuits.³¹ Both sets of sources reflected the variation in China. While the merchant sources are claimed to have ‘added the shadows to the frequently over-idealised picture painted by the Jesuits’³² they merely constructed a limited package of similar primary facts, which were also found in Jesuit sources.

In the seventeenth century, merchant accounts from China were primarily Dutch, as the Netherlands began to dominate the China trade.³³ One of the most widely cited and translated works was Johan Nieuhof’s *An Embassy from the East India Company* (1665, published in English 1669). Nieuhof’s work was based on a Dutch East India Company delegation to China, which he took part in from 1655-57. Apart from the numerous anecdotes of his trip, a large amount of his description of China came from the published works of the Jesuits Trigault, Martino Martini (1614-1661) and Alavaro Semedo (1586-1658).³⁴ This is a clear example of how the parenthood of particular facts could be confused or lost.

²⁹ Ibid, 365.

³⁰ Ibid, 377.

³¹ Jean Baptiste Du Halde. *The general history of China. Containing a geographical, historical, chronological, political and physical description of the empire of China* 4 volumes. (London: Printed by John Watts, 1736), Volume 2, 133, 136, 132.

³² Donald F. Lach, and Edwin J. van Kley, *Asia in the making of Europe Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1568.

³³ The Dutch fort in southern Taiwan was established in 1624, and though they were anxious to trade with China, the embassies they sent to Peking in 1656, 1667 and 1685 all failed.

³⁴ Dutch authors wrote compendiums based on these types of reports. Olfert Dapper, a Dutch physician, compiled reports in his 1670 encyclopaedic compendium on China entitled *Atlas Chinensis* (also translated into Dutch, German and English in the seventeenth century). The work covered Dutch relations with China in the seventeenth century and drew largely from Jesuit sources for its general description of China. It was a popular work and was used in many eighteenth century collections of voyages. For more information see John E. Wills, Jr. *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K’ang-hsi, 1666-1687* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984)

By the eighteenth century, British travellers and merchants made the largest contribution to expanding non-missionary accounts of China. Anson's *Voyage* contributed to the thinking of Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu's (1689-1755), Denis Diderot (1713-84) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778).³⁵ The popularity of this work is striking as the first edition had over 1800 advanced subscribers, by 1776 there had been fifteen editions in Britain alone and it had been translated into French, Dutch, German and Italian with extracts also printed in *Gentleman's Magazine*.³⁶ Expressing the frustration of trying to deal with Chinese merchants, it is argued to be the 'first full-scale attack on the rosy images of China which the French Jesuits were pushing'.³⁷ This claim is based, in part, on Anson's criticism of Chinese manufacturing, claiming their goods were inferior to those of Japan or Europe.³⁸ However, Trigault and Ricci made this point much earlier. There is also evidence of Anson being impressed with China's political economy in his description of the vastness of the empire, and his interest in the amount of ships (for domestic fishing) around Macao, which he believed 'seemed to cover the surface of the sea as far as the eye could see'.³⁹ On the primary facts of China's political economy, this account, held to be one of the strongest critiques of China during its time, does not offer any radical new evidence. Further, the explorer's limited contact with the Chinese is apparent, as stated in the account of his voyage: 'we could have no communication with [the Chinese] but by signs.'⁴⁰

The primary sources of information then offered a similar pool of nuanced facts on China's political economy. The emissaries and merchants, whose aim was to increase trade with China, were argued to have provided new facts, but in reality they had very little access to China. Most of the merchants' dealings were limited to coastal encounters with Chinese merchants, and the majority of emissaries knew and spent so little time in China that they had to rely on the Jesuits as translators. The missionaries, whose purpose was to convert the Chinese to Christianity, used their monopoly on information to engender support for their mission in China. The travelling of primary facts from China to Europe created a space for dissent about their nature, quality and interpretation. Though the Jesuits, emissaries and merchants offered a similar package of primary

³⁵ Michael Adas. *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1989), 90.

³⁶ Colin Mackerras. *Western Images of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

³⁸ Adas, 92.

³⁹ Anson, 364

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 364.

facts on China's political economy, they often disagreed on the implication of said facts, or how they fit into a wider view of China. The receivers in Europe picked up on these differences.

Recycling the Facts

In the second phase of travel, facts were used and presented by scholars and popularisers, who also had their own agendas, and different approaches to their use of primary facts. The relationship between the arguments of scholars and their use facts varied, but generally the scholars tried to fit the facts into their predetermined frameworks, models or theories, which in turn influenced the selection of primary sources they drew on. For instance, Roy Campbell and Andrew Skinner, describe Adam Smith's (1723-1790) 'use of history':

As always, Smith's desire to devise a major intellectual system determined the use he made of historical and factual material. No one of his intellectual eminence would distort the facts, even if only because refutation would thus have been infinitely easier, but, even when facts were not distorted, they may still have been used in such a subordinate and supporting role to the dominating systematic model that their use for any other purpose needs qualification.⁴¹

In short, 'he worked from the system to the facts not from the facts to the system.'⁴²

However, this prioritisation did not mean the scholars were not concerned with an explicit assessment of the parenthood and authority surrounding the facts. Although they tended to rely on the sources whose claims were most in line with their own, some were acutely aware of the use, and misuse of facts. Guillaume Thomas François Raynal (1711-1796) explicitly attempts a reconciliation of the views of the Jesuit and merchant sources by noting that they were describing different parts of China:

⁴¹ Roy Harold Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner. "Preface to Adam Smith's *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*" in *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* Edited by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981)

⁴² Ibid.

China may be considered in two distinct points of view. If we study the inhabitants as they appear in the sea-ports, and great towns, we shall be disgusted at their cowardice, knavery and avarice: but in the other parts of the empire, particularly in the country, we shall find their manners domestic, social and patriotic.⁴³

This is a remarkably accurate and forgiving insight, especially because the primary authors did not admit their respective biases.

Often Sinophobic scholars were vehement critics of the Jesuits; yet, out of necessity, they still relied on them for primary facts. This is seen clearly in Montesquieu's approach to facts on China. In a published letter to Abbé Count de Guasco, written in 1755, Montesquieu describes the dispute he had with Jean-Jacques d'Ortous de Mairan over the different presentations of China. The editor of the English edition published in 1777 notes:

These two learned gentlemen did not agree in some points relating to the Chinese, in the favour of whom Mr. de Mairan declared, on the authority of Father Pararin, a Jesuit's letter, of whose veracity M. de Montesquieu doubted not a little. As soon as the voyage of Admiral Anson appeared, Montesquieu triumphantly exclaimed 'I had always said that the Chinese were not such very honest men, as the missionary Jesuits would fain make us to believe them through the channel of their edifying letters'.⁴⁴

Montesquieu appears to have been waiting for a source to confirm his suspicions, thus not working *from* the facts. He has chosen to rely on Anson, whose only original facts arose from relatively trivial and circumstantial encounters, over the Jesuit sources who had a much longer and more intense interaction with the Chinese. Despite Montesquieu's argument about the bias of the Jesuit sources, in the following paragraph he refers to a Jesuit source to support his argument on the despotic nature of the Chinese government: 'It is the cudgel that governs China, says

⁴³ Guillaume-Thomas-François Raynal. *A philosophical and political history of the settlements and trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Translated by J. Justamond. (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1776) 103

⁴⁴ Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Complete Works of M. De Montesquieu* 4 Volumes Translated by T. Evans (Printed for T. Evans and W. Davis : London, 1777) Volume 4 *Familiar Letters...*, Letter Lvii (written Paris, 1755), Editor's Footnote.

father Du Halde'.⁴⁵ In fact he cites Du Halde several times on topics ranging from the Chinese gain in trade from sugar, the origins of the Chinese work ethic, their views on luxury, and the corruption of former dynasties. Montesquieu suggests that the missionaries may have been too obtuse to clearly understand the nature of China: 'Might our missionaries have been deceived by an appearance of order?'⁴⁶ He also posits a maxim, which could be a defense of his use of the Jesuit sources that he adamantly criticised: 'In fine, there is frequently some kind of truth even in errors themselves'.⁴⁷

On the other side, the Sinophile François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694-1778) expresses his frustration with how the debate on authority of the Jesuits connected to the way in which their facts were used. He mocks the logic of a popular source that discredited a primary fact on China's history simply because it originated in Jesuit sources:

The compilers of a universal history, printed in England, have also shown a disposition to divest the Chinese of their antiquity, because the Jesuits were the first who made the world acquainted with China. This is unquestionably a very satisfactory reason for saying to a whole nation – 'You are liars'.⁴⁸

His point, that the primary facts should be considered regardless of one's view of their authors, was advice only taken when it was convenient.

The editors of universal histories and geographies had another relationship with the material and did try harder to sort through the primary facts, hoping to find some consistency in the varying sources, if not some abstract notion of truth. As the preface to a travel collection points out:

when the difference is between only two authors, or there are as many vouchers on one side of the question as the other, it is often very difficult to determine where

⁴⁵ Ibid, Volume 1, Chapter XXI: *Of the Empire of China*, paragraph 966.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ François-Marie Arouet Voltaire. "'Cannibals to Falsity of Human Virtue' *Philosophical Dictionary* 4 vols" in *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version*. 22 Vols. (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901) 81.

the truth lies, unless we have some unexceptionable authority to guide us, such as the writers of the country, to which the fact relates.⁴⁹

This led many to attempt to gather as much evidence as possible from a variety of sources. John Campbell's updated version of John Harris' *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca*, published in the 1740s, claimed on its title page to have been the result of research from more than 'six hundred of the most authentic writers,' who have written in English, Italian, French, Latin, Spanish and Dutch.⁵⁰ Some editors of popular compendiums hoped their efforts could help 'discover the fictitious relations from the genuine, the copy from the original, and trace the theft through a series of authors to the fountainhead.'⁵¹ This was not typically achieved because primary facts often lost their parenthood entirely as they travelled without citation. This means facts that originated from the Jesuits could be found in merchant accounts, as is evident from the above-mentioned work by Nieuhof.

While many of these authors or editors had personal agendas (for instance, promoting free trade ideology), the explicit primary functions of this genre of work were to assess the information and to organise it. In assessing the information, the same disagreements the scholars had over who provided the most trustworthy facts were present. For instance, in a compendium entitled *The Chinese Traveller* (1772), the editor argued the Jesuits were the most qualified to provide information because of their

education and great erudition, their knowledge of various arts and sciences, and of the Chinese tongue; their winning address, their admittance into the court of the Emperor's palace, their familiar intercourse with the inhabitants.⁵²

They are particularly reliable when compared to the alternative merchants or emissaries who, the editor argues, 'just touch upon the coast of a country, or who dwell in it for some time merely to trade there'.⁵³ William Guthrie in *A new geographical, historical, and commercial grammar* (1770) took a less favourable stance, pointing out to his readers the many conflicts of interest that

⁴⁹ John Green, editor. Preface, viii – ix.

⁵⁰ John Harris. *Navigantium atque itinerantium bibliotheca. Or, a complete collection of voyages and travels...* 2 volume (London: Publisher Unknown, 1744-48), title page.

⁵¹ Ibid, viii.

⁵² *Chinese Traveller*, preface, iv.

⁵³ Ibid.

limit the missionary sources. He describes that the information from Du Halde was taken from Jesuits who were sent to China by the pope, and whose missions had been ended for 50 years. Guthrie concludes:

Some of those fathers were men of penetration and judgment, and had great opportunities of being informed about a century ago; but even their accounts of this empire are justly to be suspected. They had powerful enemies at the court of Rome, where they maintained their footing, only by magnifying their own labours and success, as well as the importance of the Chinese empire.⁵⁴

However, with such drastic and varying views on the sources of information, their use of evidence seems not to differ greatly. In the 9 pages that Guthrie devotes to describing China (discussing topics ranging from geography to funerals to religion and government) he mentions only one source. He refers to the Jesuit Du Halde when discussing the Chinese education system. In a section on morals, he does justify his claim that the Chinese are dishonest and thieving as being drawn from ‘the latest and best accounts’, though offers no suggestion as to what these might be. For the rest, it is the information gathered from the Jesuits and dispersed in various sources that is used.

Similar to Montesquieu’s ambivalent relation with the Jesuits, popular authors who criticised the missionaries, often resorted to relying on them. The English translator of a JB Grosier’s *A General Description of China* attacked the work of Cornelius de Pauw’s *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Egyptiens et les Chinois* (French 1744; English 1795). He describes how Pauw openly treats the missionaries in China as ‘cheats, imposters, and exaggerating enthusiasts, who wrote only with a design to deceive the Europeans’; however, ‘when the relations of these missionaries coincide with the opinion embraced by Mr. Paw [sic], this writer produces them as his proofs’.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ William Guthrie. *A new geographical, historical, and commercial grammar; and present state of the several kingdoms of the world...* (London: Printed for J. Knox, 1770), 464.

⁵⁵ Grosier, vii-viii pointing to Pauw’s criticism of the Chinese annals as fantasy, but then borrowing some of their facts. Cornelius de Pauw. *Philosophical dissertations on the Egyptians and Chinese*. Translated by Capt. J. Thomson. 2 Volumes (London: Printed for T. Chapman, 1795)

It is clear that there was a difference between the primary facts and the conclusions drawn from them. For instance, Voltaire mocks the fallacy of an argument extrapolated from two primary facts: ‘The Egyptians sometimes lighted torches at night. The Chinese light lanterns: the Chinese are, therefore, evidently a colony from Egypt’.⁵⁶ Indeed, popular sources also made it their explicit goal to not only relate the primary facts, but to deduce the meaning behind them. For instance, the preface to *A Compleat Universal History* noted the work was not ‘content with merely relating things as they appear, but learns from the philosopher to reason on their latent principles.’⁵⁷ Similar to Voltaire’s criticism of the inferences of authors from primary facts, many popular authors also disagreed with each other’s extrapolations. For instance the translator’s preface to Grosier’s aforementioned work was dedicated to attacking the headline claims of Cornelius de Pauw, though not disputing the primary facts which they were based on. The preface described how Pauw took the description of the barren environment in which the Kangxi Emperor was hunting as evidence for the sparseness of China’s population. The translator concluded, ‘one can scarcely refrain from laughter at the inference which Mr. Pauw draws from this passage.’⁵⁸ Another example the translator pointed to is the interpretation of the Kangxi Emperor’s edict in 1662 that prohibited maritime trade. While Pauw argued this was a result of the emperor trying to populate sparse areas of China, the translator concluded it was a result of a short, unsafe period where a rebel leader made commerce unsafe. Thus he argued that while ‘[t]he fact which Mr. Paw here quotes is undoubtedly true,’ the context was entirely wrong.⁵⁹ He concluded, ‘[t]he present instance alone is sufficient to shew with what deliberate coolness this writer mutilates and misrepresents those facts which he relates’.⁶⁰ On the other hand, in the English preface to Pauw, the translator argued that the reason why the Chinese are represented in a negative light in this work is because ‘[t]he Chinese are not described here from ideas generally received, but according to facts; and it must be allowed that they lose greatly by being judged in this manner’.⁶¹

Although scholars and popularisers offered competing claims to their position as the best sources of information, they nonetheless all relied on recycled or direct facts from an identifiable set of

⁵⁶ Voltaire, “China”, *Philosophical Dictionary*, *op.cit.*, 80.

⁵⁷ B. le Stourgeon, *A compleat universal history, of the several empires, kingdoms, states &c. throughout the known world...* (London: Printed by Benjamin Baddam, 1732-38), preface.

⁵⁸ Grosier, x.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, xi

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, xii.

⁶¹ Pauw, xii.

sources. The scholars generally used the facts to support their varying frameworks. Adam Smith and Montesquieu, who were making different arguments, relied on the same pool of primary facts about China (though they would not always admit it). A few scholars, notably Gottfried Leibniz, had private correspondence with Jesuits in China, but for the most part, these authors relied on published works (often translated into several European languages), that were edited for various purposes.⁶² The popularisers, on the other hand, made it their duty to assess and organise all the available facts to find the ‘truth’. A point of pride for them was their comparison of numerous, diverse sources, which was thought to make distinguishing between fantasy and fact easier. Broadly, the scholars tried to make the facts fit their frameworks, while the popular authors tried to put the facts first. Still, they often fell into the same traps and patterns of the scholars. In particular, they often relied on the same primary facts despite criticising either the Jesuits or merchants and emissaries; both groups recycled the primary facts and the larger claims about them in different ways; and both groups strongly questioned the assumptions and veracity of their fellow authors’ and editors’ use of the facts.

How did facts travel?

The complex relationship between primary facts and claims in the travel of information on China becomes evident through the example of a quantifiable fact, namely the population of China. As such, inconsistencies in reports are more apparent, and the origin of the fact can be traced more easily. The author of *An Irregular Dissertation* (a text devoted to attacking Du Halde’s work) describes how China’s population represents a unique fact:

Nothing is more deceitful then number at first sight...It is good to examine every thing our selves, especially in China, where they never reckon but by millions; and

⁶² Howard Rienstra distinguishes between the type of editing done in this context: eliminating administrative details, deletion of material that may not be understood by the public such as aspects on the structure of Chinese society, deleting material the editor cannot understand and finally censorship. All of these types were used by Jesuit editors and are equally as important in understanding the formation of the concept of China in European minds. M. Howard Rienstra, ed. and translator. *Jesuit Letters from China 1583-84* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 7.

tho' in these cases one cannot be so very exact, it is not impossible to come something near the truth, that we may not deceive the inquisitive reader.⁶³

The majority of the primary facts on China's population originated from the Jesuits because they were the ones with the access and ability to comprehend the Chinese documents upon which these estimates were based. In this case, both the accuracy of the primary fact and the claims around it were debated and questioned.

Specific facts on the size of China's population began to travel from China in the seventeenth century through Jesuit publications. Both *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (a Jesuit translation project led by Philippe Couplet, S.J. (1623-1693) and published in 1687) and Gabriel de Magalhães', S.J. (1609-1677) *Nouvelle relation de la Chine* (published in 1688 but given to Couplet in 1682) report, without an assessment or description of how this fact was created or learned, China's population. In China, they report, there are 11 502 872 families (exclusive of soldiers, women and children, and those who do not pay tax) and 59 748 364 males.⁶⁴ The Jesuits Trigault, Semedo and Martini all reported figures within the range of 58.5 to 58.9 million taxpaying men.⁶⁵ These primary facts travelled into the eighteenth century, and surprisingly were not replaced by newer, more contemporary facts.

Du Halde, in a section entitled 'Of the Authority of the Emperor...' addresses population in relation to the formidable revenue of the emperor, and presents the aforementioned two facts, noting their time as during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor.⁶⁶ It is notable that Du Halde does not choose to make the jump to the more contentious final figure of China's population. This is also highlighted by the absence of a section devoted solely to population. Instead, Du Halde provides the primary facts to his readers, who then can make the assumptions they choose. The

⁶³ Louis Le Comte. *Memoirs and observations typographical, physical, mathematical, mechanical, natural, civil, and ecclesiastical...* (London: Printed for Benj. Tooke and Sam. Buckley, 1697), 58.

⁶⁴ Gabriel de Magalhães. *A new history of China containing a description of the most considerable particulars of that vast empire* (London: Printed for Thomas Newborough, 1688), 40.

⁶⁵ Lach, 1573.

⁶⁶ Du Halde, Volume 2, 20.

standard at the time was to use Edmund Halley's multiplier⁶⁷ (against the number of men able to bear arms), which would mean China's total population was about 223 million.

On the receiving end, the popular editors and authors questioned the facts themselves. The author of *An Irregular Dissertation* does not use Du Halde's fact of 59 788 364 males, but finds a different number: 'If it is true, that there are sixty four millions of fighting men in China, then, by Dr. Halley's computation, the total number of souls should be about 256 millions'.⁶⁸ However, even based on his assumption of 64 million fighting men, Halley's multiplier indicates the total population would be about 241 million. The author then utilises Du Halde's fact on the number of families (rounding the number to 11 million), but questions the assumption that the number of families in China has the same implications as it would in Europe. He asks, 'what sort of families must they have in China? Not so numerous as ours (one would think) because the poor expose such children as they cannot educate.'⁶⁹ The author is adding other primary facts, such as infanticide, to achieve different claims. However, the author also questions the validity of the primary fact itself. Using the *Lettres Edifiantes*, and other assumptions such as the rice given to women over seventy years of age, the author concludes there are 67.5 million people in China. Thus, the author is questioning the primary fact as well as the claims surrounding it.

The Chinese Traveller (1772), which had a favourable position towards using the Jesuit sources, does not report where its facts on population originated, but states in its preface that 'It is computed that in China there are seventy millions of people.'⁷⁰ The editor notes that this is a fact (the total population) that must be computed, rather than reported. The number of families in China amount to 11 502 872, and the total number of males is 59 788 364.⁷¹ Clearly this fact was taken from the aforementioned seventeenth century Jesuit publications. Unlike Du Halde, the editor does not note that this figure was first reported nearly a full century earlier. In another section covering the 'general description' of the empire, the editor cites Johan Nieuhof (1618-1672) whose work, originally in Dutch was published in 1665 (with English translations in 1669

⁶⁷ See Edmund Halley. "An Estimate of the Degrees of the Mortality of Mankind, drawn from curious Tables of the Births and Funerals at the City of Breslaw; with an Attempt to ascertain the Price of Annuities upon Lives." *Philosophical Transactions*, 196 (1693): 596-610.

⁶⁸ Author Unknown. *An irregular dissertation, occasioned by the reading of Father Du Halde's description of China. Which may be read at any time* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1740), 50.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 46.

⁷⁰ *Chinese Traveller*, preface, vi.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 20-21.

and 1670). He then describes that during Nieuhof's time, the Chinese register showed 10 900 790 families and 55 416 476 fighting men.⁷² This is an odd choice of fact to report, as Nieuhof's fact is nearly contemporary to the one first reported by Couplet thus not providing a long-range view nor one that is very different. The editor does not point this out and as such offers an incomplete contextualisation of the primary facts.

Another popular compendium compiled by William Guthrie demonstrates a more sceptical view of China's population. In a short paragraph on 'the population and inhabitants' of China, he argues that by the best accounts, the population of China is not less than fifty million. He also comments on the other, higher, numbers available: 'Most of those accounts are exaggerated, and persons, who visit China without any view of becoming authors, are greatly disappointed in their mighty expectations.'⁷³ Paradoxically, in a description questioning the veracity of sources, the author does not cite his own sources for the fact of China's population being less than fifty million.

The debate and desire for exactness seems to intensify with time. One of the most explicit debates over the facts of China's population was between JB Grosier and Cornelius de Pauw (as well as through those who translated their works into English). The translator's preface to Grosier's description of China, argues how Pauw's description of China's 'enormous population is a mere chimera', and then proceeds to attack on Pauw for not sourcing his information entirely or properly.⁷⁴ Grosier's chapter on the population of China recognises the contentiousness of China's population: 'one of those things which have been thought most incredible and contradictory by Europeans, is the prodigious population of China'.⁷⁵ Referring to the Jesuit, Jean Joseph Marie Amiot's (1718-1793) *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences et les arts des Chinois* (15 volumes, Paris, 1776-1791), Grosier recognises that a total population of 200 million seems astonishing 'but, when we have weighed the proofs and followed the reasoning which this learned missionary makes use of, we shall find that his account is by no means exaggerated.'⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid, 21.

⁷³ Guthrie, 465.

⁷⁴ Grosier, vi and vii.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 364.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 365.

Pauw, on the other hand, disagrees: ‘Thus the population of China, which as shall now appear, has been prodigiously exaggerated.’⁷⁷ He notes the inconsistency in the reports on China’s population where authors

even vary in their calculations as far as one hundred millions...All the details we possess on this subject have been written at random. Father du Halde gives Peking three millions of inhabitants: Father le Comte admits only two millions; and Father Gaubil expresses himself in so vague a manner, that nothing can be concluded from his accounts.⁷⁸

Proudly doing the job of the geographers to compare sources to discover the accurate primary facts, he then turns to attack the claims by using other or new primary facts. Pauw chooses to focus on facts about the sparseness of population as evidence for the claim that China is not as populous as many assume. He notes that the Jesuits had to make the map of China, and uses the fact (his word) that strangers who visit the interior of China say it is difficult to travel at night because of the wild beasts, indicating that it is uninhabited.⁷⁹ As infanticide and stories of sacrifice were used as evidence that China’s population was extremely large, he makes the efforts to demonstrate that infanticide is a result of crowding by rivers (for livelihood) and that human sacrifice is not true.⁸⁰ He accepts that there may be 82 million people in China (though notes it is ‘most probably is exaggerated’) nevertheless he argues, ‘China has still much less people, in proportion to its size, than Germany’.⁸¹

On the other hand, scholars do not concern themselves with the exact number of China’s population, but instead address the implications of relative size to other countries. This is likely due to their interest in what it means for their theoretical arguments. For instance, Adam Smith notes

China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world. Marco

⁷⁷ Pauw, 72.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 75 and 76.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 78.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 79-80.

⁸¹ Ibid, 84.

Polo, who visited it more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry, and populousness, almost in the same terms in which they are described by travellers in the present times.⁸²

For Smith, this is an indication of China's stagnation. The scholarly interest and aims differed from the popularisers in this case. Both the primary fact of China's population and the claims around it were questioned and debated, and their parenthood often lost.

Conclusions

This paper has described two different stages involved in the travelling of facts about China. The first involves the travel of the primary facts from China. In this stage facts were attached to the viewpoint or agenda of the missionary, merchant or emissary who carried them. In the second phase, these facts were recycled in European popular and scholarly sources, where they may, or may not have lost their parenthood, but the veracity of the sources and the character of the varying authors was hotly debated. An examination of the most important primary sources on China's political economy reveals a much more diverse presentation of facts by merchants, missionaries and emissaries than was assumed by scholars and popularisers in the eighteenth century and indeed by modern historians. Moreover, a simplistic distinction between the facts put forward by the missionaries and merchants is not merited – both parties presented varied and nuanced fact on China's political economy. The scholars tended to prioritise their theories and models over the facts, whereas the popular authors generally worked from the facts to the theories. Still they often fell into the same traps and patterns. In particular, they often relied on the same primary facts despite criticizing either the Jesuits or merchants. This demonstrates the importance of the themes of authority and parenthood in shaping views of the Other as well as the role of bias' and frameworks of analysis in shaping and carrying of facts. In particular, it points to the utility of tracing one subject over time and across genres to determine how well facts travelled.

⁸² Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* Edited by Edwin Cannan, (New York: Bantam, 2003), Chapter VIII: of the wages of labour, paragraph 326.

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