# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: ACROSS THE DICHOTOMY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: THE UNFAITHFUL JESUITS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: A SYMPATHY BY DISTORTION AND INVENTION: VOLTAIRE’S SINOPHILA</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: MONTESQUIEU AS A SINOPHobe: A CRITIQUE BY SELECTIVITY</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: AN ONGOING SINO-FRENCH RELATION</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgement

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor Professor Lloyd Kramer for the year-long support of my research and writing, for his patience, inspiration, passion, and knowledge in the subject matter. He has been the best mentor throughout my undergraduate career, and I am grateful to what I learned from him in his class, in our independent study, and in the thesis advising.

I would also thank Professor Brett Whalen for his responsive, helpful, and inspiring feedbacks on the drafts of this thesis as well as the writing techniques he taught us in the thesis seminar.

My sincere thanks also go to Professor Donald Reid, who serves on my defense committee. Professor Reid supervised my history capstone research paper, titled *Reconstruction of Sino-French Rapprochement*, which laid a great foundation for my honors thesis. Besides, I extend my gratitude to Professor Donald Raleigh, Professor Eren Tasar, Professor Michael Tsin, Professor Michelle King, and Professor Lisa Lindsay, who had either built my historical research skills or had offered kind assistance to my project.

My research was supported by the Boyatt and Kusa Grant. I would like to thank them for the kind support. This grant made it possible for me to travel to the Houghton Library at Harvard University, where I was able to access many of the primary sources. I would also, at this point, extend my thanks to the librarians and staff at both UNC and Harvard for their assistance.

Last but not the least, I would also like to thank my parents, Tongdong Wu and Ai Ji, for giving birth to me at the first place and supporting me throughout my life.
Introduction:
Across the Dichotomy

Encore une fois, j’aurais souhaité que l’auteur eût plus parlé des vertus qui nous regardent, et qu’il n’eût point été chercher des incertitudes à six mille lieues. Nous ne pouvons connaître la Chine que par les pièces authentiques, fournies sur les lieux, rassemblées par Duhalde, et qui ne sont point contredites.

- From *Commentaire sur quelques principales maximes de l’Esprit des lois*, by Voltaire

In 1778, Voltaire published the *Commentaire sur quelques principales maximes de l’Esprit des lois* (English title: Comments on Some Principal Maxims of *The Spirit of Laws*) for the first time in Geneva. The above excerpt from the *Comments* was Voltaire’s response to Montesquieu’s treatment of the conceptions of China in *The Spirit of Laws*. Voltaire, or François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), was a French Enlightenment writer, historian, and philosopher famous for his attack on the Catholic Church and his advocacy for freedom of religion as well as the separation of church and state. On the other hand, Montesquieu (Full name: Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu, 1689-1755) was a French lawyer and philosopher, well-known for his articulation of the theory of separation of powers. From this excerpt it is evident that Voltaire rejected Montesquieu’s hostile characterization of China and, quite the opposite, he praised China as being a virtuous and ordered state with long and admirable history.

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Both Voltaire and Montesquieu were great *philosophes* during the Age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in early modern times and it included a range of ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority. The Enlightenment was fruitful, blazing the trail for advanced ideas such as liberty, progress, tolerance, division of power, and constitutional government, which later became the foundation of modern Western democratic traditions. It is significant that two of the great French philosophes would engage in debating the strengths and weaknesses of China, a distant empire that was rare and difficult to visit at the time. If so, how did Voltaire and Montesquieu, or maybe their contemporaries, know about China? What is more interesting is that Voltaire and Montesquieu, who were of the same nationality and came from similar social backgrounds, would come to a fierce disagreement on the conceptions of China. What made them diverge on the idea of China?

The answer to the first question has been already implied in the quoted excerpt: there were people who “supplied [the knowledge of China] on the spot”. Those people whom Voltaire mentioned were Jesuits who embarked on a mission to spread Christianity in China after 1522. They frequently wrote back to Europe and their letters were published in series, titled *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*. Jean-Baptise du Halde, an eighteenth century French Jesuit historian, later collected these letters and recomposed their accounts to provide a survey of the Chinese history and culture. And his publication, *Description de la Chine* (1739), became an important piece on the reading lists of many people, who were interested in learning about the East in the early eighteenth century.

Therefore, there were mainly three kinds of people who wrote about China in early modern France. There were Jesuits, who were the conservative intellectuals aiming to spread Christianity in China and to preserve Catholic power in France. There were political writers

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4 J-B Du Halde, *Description ... de la Chine*... (Paris, 1735).
who were in favor of China, represented by Voltaire. And, of course, there were people like Montesquieu, who were intellectuals showing contempt for China. The identities of all three kinds of writers mingled with their distinctive judgments of China, complicating the second question I posed: What made them diverge on the idea of China? In order to solve this question, I studied the writings of the Jesuits, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, and consulted with secondary sources on the topics. I will argue in three following chapters that the French writers who wrote about China in the early modern period, no matter if they were Jesuits or Enlightenment philosophers, or if they were praising or criticizing China, all fell into a recurring pattern: The conceptions of China in their writings were dynamically shaped by the universalistic beliefs they individually held and they all needed to process, to some extent, the image of China by distortion, invention, or selection, to match their original intellectual purpose in using China for a larger cultural purpose.

Historiography: The Problem with Sinophile/Sinophobe Dichotomy

In the past, Chinese, or generally, Asian influence on Europe appealed to historians in many ways. Particularly in the past six or seven decades, the number of publications indicated that academic interest in this subject had grown. Starting in the 1930s, Arnold Rowbotham and Donald Lach pioneered in new works on European-Chinese relations. Rowbotham was particularly interested in the Jesuits’ role in the Chinese royal court during the Ming and Qing dynasty while Donald Lach was keen on looking for Asian influence in early modern Europe. Following Lach and Rowbotham, more scholars published on this general topic. There were

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5 Arnold Rowbotham is a Professor Emeritus at UC Berkeley. In 1910s, he was appointed Head of the French Department at Tsing Hua College in Peking. His exceptional knowledge and experience in China led to his dedicated studies in Sinology and Chinese history. For example of his research on this subject, see Arnold Rowbotham, Missionary and mandarin: the Jesuits at the court of China, (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1966).

Donald Lach is a historian on Asia’s influence on Europe from 1500 to 1800 at the University of Chicago. See: Donald Lach, Asia in the making of Europe, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
also many academic conferences, particularly in France and China, which were organized to discuss the topic. For example, in France, The Triennial Colloque Internationale de Sinologie were held five times in France. And Hong Kong Chinese University, in 1987, organized the International Symposium: China and Europe, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries. All of those publications and conference products have shed light on my research. In general, earlier scholars were more interested in solving and addressing historical facts. And, most recent scholarly works on the topic focus on interpreting the influence of a particular figure or historical event.

One general problem associated with the past historiography is that those scholars tended to be arbitrary in judging a particular historical figure’s vision of China. They categorized historical figures, such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, into opposite camps of Sinophile and Sinophobe based on their attitudes or their conceptions of China. On one hand, this partition is especially problematic given today’s political definition and discussion of xenophobia. The word “Sinophobe” or “Sinophobia” definitely stood for a different sentiment in the early modern time but those words were used indiscriminately. People like Montesquieu might have shown contempt for a particular Chinese characteristic but they, by no means, could be interpreted to the extent of xenophobia when mutual interaction between China and the West was largely limited. On the other hand, the dichotomy of Sinophile and Sinophobe implies an irreconcilable relation between the two camps and people, encouraged by this, would fail to see the commonality between the two different attitudes.

Therefore, my research serves to remedy such deficiencies. While I will use the “problematic” dichotomy of Sinophobe and Sinophile throughout my chapters, my intention is simply to recognize the most superficial difference in their perceptions of China on whether China was a positive or negative image in their account. Furthermore, the dichotomy will reinforce my argument and show why I believe French writers sought to create a universal, or
recurring pattern because this pattern embraced consistency across the dichotomy, represented by Voltaire and Montesquieu. All writers, whether they were “Sinophobe” or “Sinophile”, shared the pattern of projecting on to China their own intellectual concerns within French society.

On Universalism and Cultural Relativism

I will use the concept of both “universalism” and “(cultural) relativism” throughout my thesis, so I would like to explain these terms prior to chapters. Both terms are used in contemporary politics and ethical studies. And it was really the globalization that necessitated these two different philosophical approaches. Today, the relation between universalism and cultural relativism is particularly important in the human rights studies. According to Jack Donnelly’s definitions, “Radical universalism would hold that culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights and rules, which are universally valid” while “Radical relativism would hold that culture is the sole source of validity or a moral right or rule.”

As to my project, cultural relativity was undeniable. Since the very first encounter between China and the West, Europeans knew that China was different. Demel argued that the discovery of China gave rise to a certain degree of relativism in European thought. So I want to use the term “relativism” as I characterize the different levels of acceptance of the Chinese difference. On the other hand, “universalism” is a more important theme in my project as every single author I will discuss in the three chapters held an idea of truth, which they thought was universally applicable. To Jesuits, their universalism was defined by Catholicism. To Voltaire, his universalism situated reasons as the ultimate source of legitimacy. To Montesquieu, he tried

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to invent a grand intellectual framework of universalism that defined politics and governments across countries. As I unfold my arguments, you will see that the universalism in them all respectively triumphed over the different levels of relativism in them, which ultimately shaped their views on China.

On Chronology

I would also like to explain how my three chapters are ordered. My intention was to arrange the chapters in chronological order, therefore putting Jesuits, whose activities in China started in the early sixteenth century and had continued throughout the eighteenth century, as the objects in the first chapter. But the chronology becomes tricky when I talk about Voltaire and Montesquieu: Historically, Voltaire was much younger than Montesquieu. However, since the majority of the works I will cite from Voltaire are usually older than Montesquieu’s, I decided to follow the publishing date instead of the author’s age. But it is ultimately important to note that Voltaire and Montesquieu were living and writing in the same historical period and the order of my two chapters shall not entail any chronological confusion.
Chapter One:

The Unfaithful Jesuits

On a tenté plusieurs fois de tracer la physionomie des Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, de ces petits recueils périodiques qui eurent tant de succès au XVIIIe siècle parce qu'ils apportaient non seulement des renseignements sur les missions et sur le nombre considérable des conversions que faisaient les Jésuites dans les pays lointains, mais aussi des faits nouveaux sur des pays mal connus.

- Virgile Pinot in La Chine et la formation de l’esprit philosophique en France

The above text written by Virgile Pinot, a French historian who studied the influence of Chinese culture in France, explained how the Lettres édifiantes et curieuses became influential in the eighteenth century France. The Lettres édifiantes et curieuses was a collection of 34 volumes of letters sent to Europe by Jesuits missionaries in China, Levant, India and America. Published between 1702 and 1776 in the form of periodicals, it largely exposed non-European cultures to Europeans, especially to the French. Jesuits were the members of the Society of Jesus, which was a male religious congregation of the Catholic Church, established in 1540. According to David E. Mugello, there were, from 1522 to 1800, a total of 920 Jesuits who aimed at spreading Catholicism and embarked on the mission to China, of whom 314 were Portuguese and 130 were French. In the seventeenth or eighteenth century, a trip from France to China was unimaginably difficult for most of the ordinary Europeans. Therefore, when

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Translation: Several attempts have been made to trace the physiognomy of the Lettres édifiantes et curieuses those small periodical collections, which were so successful in the eighteenth century because they not only provided information on missions and the considerable number of conversions made by the Jesuits in distant countries but also new facts on countries not well known.

Jesuits frequently wrote back to Europe during their missions, their letters became the primary source for most French to know about China and its culture.

In fact, Jesuits were not the first wave of missionaries that appeared in China. As early as in the thirteenth century, Franciscan missionaries started to work in China but their activities were largely limited to “constitute a genuine cultural exchange”\(^\text{10}\). As a result of the Protestant Revolution in Europe, Catholic initiated a great counter-Protestant revival, which included an effort to dominate missions in China by Catholics\(^\text{11}\). The first mission to China was therefore made in 1552 by St. Francis Xavier, a founding member of the Society of Jesus. Xavier never reached mainland China and he unfortunately died on offshore of the Chinese island of Shangchuan. Xavier’s failure did not discourage Jesuits from continuing their missions. Three decades later, in 1582, Jesuits attempted another mission to China, led by several figures including the famous Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci. The 1582 wave of missionaries was a great success in terms of their achievement in conversion. Notably, Ricci was able to convert some of the Chinese literati, who ranked extremely high in the Chinese bureaucratic system. However, it also led to the Rites Controversy, which later became the biggest crisis to the Jesuits mission in China.

The Chinese Rites Controversy was a dispute within the Catholic Church over the religiosity of Confucianism and Chinese rituals during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The Jesuits argued that the Chinese rites were compatible with Catholicism, therefore should be tolerated. On the contrary, the Dominicans and Franciscans disagreed and reported the issue to Rome. Henri Bernard-Maître argued that the Chinese Rites Controversy was perhaps the

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 15-19.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
most bitter and long-lasting religious controversy in the long history of the Catholic Church in terms of the number of participants, its length and its ferocity.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to the Rites Controversy, Jesuits in China encountered more difficulties in preaching as Chinese started to reject Catholicism. Anti-Christian sentiment soon broke out in the early seventeenth century. There were a number of anti-Christian movements throughout China. For example, in 1616, Shen Que, a scholar-official accused Jesuits of subverting the Chinese regime in order to advance his own political career.\textsuperscript{13}

Therefore, Jesuits in China were situated in a quite challenging position during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the Vatican, they had to win the Rites Controversy by persuading Rome that the Chinese rituals were essentially compatible with Catholicism. In China, they were principally doubted and challenged by the Chinese authority and its people. Against such background, this chapter will argue that these troublesome and complex situations led to Jesuits’ distorted presentation of the Chinese image. On one hand, the Jesuits needed to cater Christianity to the Chinese culture in order to facilitate their missions in China. But, meanwhile, their accounts of China revealed the great frustration they had encountered during their missions, contributing to a biased conception of China. On the other, Jesuits’ firm position on the Rites Controversy left them no choice but to distortedly translate the Confucian texts in order to show the compatibility of Chinese rituals to Catholicism. It was ultimately their belief in the universality of Christianity that led to this unfaithfulness.

In order to accomplish this, I will first discuss Matteo Ricci as a case study to show how those conflicts were presented by individual Jesuit and then expand the discovery on Ricci to a prevalent pattern by analyzing works done by other Jesuits. Here, I want to note that although


\textsuperscript{13} Mungello, The Great Encounter, 61.
Ricci was originally an Italian, he had worked in France for years and his works became so influential in France that the majority of his works were written and first published in French in lieu of Italian. He made a great impact on French conceptions of China and therefore should be included into the discussion under the scope of “French writers”.

Ricci: Experience in China and Its Patterned Consequence

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was probably the most famous Jesuit that traveled to China. He initially arrived at the Portuguese settlement of Macau in 1582. Once in Macau, Ricci studied Chinese language and cultures. His gifted linguistic skills allowed him to learn Chinese quickly and he impressed the Chinese literati with his memorization of Confucian classics when he was allowed to enter the mainland China. Ricci successfully converted many Chinese literati and officials, of whom Xu Guangqi was the most significant figure. Xu Guangqi was a Chinese bureaucratic scientist, who, at the peak of his political career, became the Minister of Rites and the Grand Secretariat. Ricci and Xu worked together to translate Western Classics, for example, Euclid’s Elements, into Chinese as well as Confucian classics into Latin for the first time. Ricci was highly recognized in China and he became the first European to enter the Forbidden City of Beijing in 1601, invited by the Wanli Emperor, and served in Chinese royal court in matters such as astronomy and calendrical science. Even after he died in Beijing in 1610, he was allowed by royal permission to be buried in Beijing, instead of being buried in Macau like other Jesuits in accordance with the rules of the Ming Dynasty.

Ricci was a successful Jesuit in terms of his achievement. However, his own legend also illustrated one of the dilemmas or challenges that every Jesuit would encounter when

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14 Ibid, 18.
15 Note: Euclid’s Elements (几何原本 in Chinese) is a mathematical and geometric treatise consisting of 13 books attributed to the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid in Alexandria, Egypt, circa 300 BC. The original Chinese translation of Euclid’s Elements by Ricci and Xu was lost.
conducting missionary works in China: how to incorporate Catholicism into the Chinese indigenous culture? While trying to maintain the essence of Catholicism, the Jesuits also had to cater to Chinese traditions and refine Confucian’s teachings for the purpose of the mission. This dilemma was well represented in Ricci’s first writings in Chinese, *Jiao You Lun*.

*Jiao You Lun*, or namely “A discourse on Friendship”, was written by Ricci in 1595. The purpose of the creation of the essay was clear, as illustrated in Ricci’s letter to Claudio Acquaviva, the leader of the Society of Jesus:

Le prince de Kienan me fit asseoir comme un hôte de marque, m’offrit du vin doux et avec un grand geste de respect des deux mains me dit: ‘Lorsqu’un homme de qualité et grande vertu visite mon pays je l’invite chez moi et le traite avec honneur, comme un ami. L’Extrême-Occident est le pays de la perfection et de la raison. Je voudrais connaître ce que l’on y dit à propos de l’amitié’. Je me retirai et composai un court traité de l’amitié avec tout ce que j’avais entendu depuis mon enfance. Je le lui offris avec respect.

As a gift to the Prince of Kienan, Ricci carefully crafted the *Jiao You Lun*, adapting famous proverbs in the West in accordance with Christianity and selecting those that could be

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17 Note: *Jiao You Lun* was later published in France and Italy, entitled *De L’amitié* and *Dell’amicizia*.
19 Translation: “The Prince of Kienan treated me as a distinguished guest with sweet wine and a flourish of respect with two hands and said to me: ‘When a man of quality and great virtues visits my country, I invite him home and treat him with honor, as a friend. The Far West is the land of perfection and reason. I want to know what it says about friendship.’ I returned and wrote a shorty essay on friendship with what I heard since my childhood. I offered it to him with respect.”
incorporated into Chinese traditions. Confucian traditions value the five relationships and
Confucius believed that as long as the five relationships were harmonious, no chaos would ever
happen. Friendship was one of the five relations. Probably illuminated by that idea, Ricci wrote
in the *Jiao You Lun* that:

> The God gives people two eyes, two ears, two hands, and two
> feet, (because) he wants one to help the other so that everything
> will be successful.\(^{20}\)

From this it is evident that Ricci was trying to construct an intellectual framework, in
which Christianity was the basis of friendship. He smartly characterized the creation of God as
the foundation of friendship, one of the most important elements in Confucian teachings. In
the long discourse, there were many other details like the example above that could be used to
show how Ricci tried to tailor Western and Catholic culture into Confucian traditions. While
Ricci might find it a useful way to approach Chinese literati and bureaucrats, the effectiveness
of this way of accommodating Chinese tradition was yet questionable. I would argue that
Chinese acceptance of Ricci was not due to his careful craft of writings to accommodate
Chinese traditions, but his knowledge in science. For example, when Ricci was about to be
expelled according to a Ming regulation over foreign missionaries, Ricci made the emperor
decide to make an exception for him by bribing him with a striking clock. This widely used
European technology became what Ricci regarded as “the God’s blessing” to allow him to stay
in Beijing.\(^{21}\) The royal position later assigned to Ricci was also evidence to show why Ricci


was tolerated in Beijing: Ricci was ordered by Ming’s Emperor to serve in his royal court but in a position of astronomy and calendrical science.

Ricci obviously wanted to convert more people into Christianity, but he later found himself in a weird position that he was mostly valued by the Chinese because of his knowledge in science. In fact, even among those converts that Ricci would be pleased about, they did not truly comprehend Catholicism. And, because of Ricci’s intentional entanglement of the Christianity and the Chinese traditions, some actually considered “the Lord” in Christianity was the same concept as the “Heaven” in the Confucian teachings. For example, Roger Hart argued that Xu Guangqi’s belief in the Lord “was the key to returning to the allegedly perfected moral order of ancient China; the Jesuits were tributary officials from Western nations, ‘men from afar’, who came to China to pay tribute to the Ming.”

In addition to the frustration of his unintentional fame as a science introducer, Ricci was also discouraged by those who were against Christianity. In fact, during Ricci’s mission, Chinese literati or authority rarely or never considered that Catholicism would be a subversive threat to its regime. It was usually the atheist culture of China, or, even religious culture of Buddhism or Taoism that made Ricci extremely difficult for Ricci to convert people. His journal, which was later published in France, reflected some of his resentment. For example, Ricci wrote the following in his journal:

They (Chinese) do not know the size of the earth but they are arrogant. Therefore, Chinese think that they are the only one among all the countries that could be praised.23

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23 Matteo Ricci. 利玛窦中国札记 *Limadou Zhongguo Zha Ji*, 68. Original text in Chinese: 因为他们不知道地球的大小而又夜郎自大，所以中国人认为所有各国中只有中国值得称羡。
My goal here is to explain how Jesuits’ conceptions of China were formed. Ricci’s individual experience in China demonstrated at least two enduring patterns of Jesuits’ experience in China. Firstly, in order to make the Chinese understand and be willing to be converted into Christians, Jesuits endeavored to tailor Christianity and cater it to Chinese culture. This might have relatively less influence on the French conceptions of China because the details of their preaching techniques were seldom mentioned or of attraction to French intellects. After all only famous Jesuits, such as Ricci, would have their journals published in France. But, secondly, the frustration they had encountered in China did influence their accounts of China. When a great many Jesuits encountered no encouragement in converting Chinese, they tended to reflect their frustrations in their letters, which were later published in France, and this process became a recurring pattern in practice.

In 1685, the French king Louis XIV sent a mission of five Jesuits to China in an attempt to break Portugal’s predominant influence in China. Following the first wave of French missionaries in China, more were sent to China to spread the influence of both France and Catholicism. French Jesuits frequently wrote back to Europe and their letters were collected in Les Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, which was published between 1702 and 1776. According to Donald Lach, French Jesuits played a crucial role in disseminating accurate information about China in France, even in Europe. I disagree with the statement as I will show how their accounts, or particularly, their translations of Chinese classic texts were distorted, but even if the information in Jesuits’ account might be “accurate”, their conception of China would consist of a more negative tone because the French Jesuits shared the same discouragement as Ricci did, or even greater frustration in some cases.

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Unlike Ricci who received recognition and was offered a royal position in the Ming court, Jesuits under the Qing Dynasty generally had a worse reception. Qing authority sometimes publicly criticized Christianity. Manila, one of the French Jesuits, typified such reactions from the Qing government in one of his letters:

Cependant nous apprîmes que le seizième du même mois d’avril
il s’était tenu à ce sujet, par ordre de l’empereur, une assemblée
générale des chefs de tous les tribunaux, où notre sainte religion
avait été absolument condamnée, les missionnaires chassés, etc.
Voici quelle était la sentence qu’ils portèrent.  

In addition to public condemnations, Jesuits also received warnings from the Qing authority demanding “proper” activities. Unlike the Ming’s treatment of Jesuits, the Qing officials considered Jesuits’ activities in China as a potential subversive movement. In one of the letters written by Zhijun Prince to Jesuits, the prince warned against the Jesuits that:

If the Westerners do not follow Ricci’s rules, they are not
allowed to live in China and must be ousted

Ricci’s preaching strategy was set to cater the Catholicism to the Chinese traditions. By the time of the Qing dynasty, the missionary activities in China had grown into a certain scale.

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Translation: We learned, however, on the sixteenth of the same month of April, by order of the Emperor, a general assembly of the chiefs from all tribunals had been held, in which our holy religion had been absolutely condemned, etc. This is the sentence they gave.

Obviously, the Qing authority, different from the Ming authority, feared an overthrow of its regime due to the religion. Therefore, they asked all the Jesuits to practice like what Ricci did to cater the Catholicism to the Chinese traditions and intolerant of any disobedience.

The increasing hostility from the government in addition to the difficulty of preaching led to negative reflections on the Jesuits’ experience in China. For example, in one of the letters by Entrecolles, he reported his progress in baptism in Jiaozhou. Entrecolles obviously received no encouragement in converting Chinese as he subtitled his letter as “Progrès des travaux apostoliques. — Difficultés toujours renaissantes audevant des missionnaires. — Calomnies répandues de toutes parts contre eux”.

Unlike Ricci who dealt with many Chinese literati who served in bureaucracy, Entrecolles attempted to introduce common Chinese into Christianity. However, he failed his missions in the same way that Ricci did because he only attracted Chinese ordinary people with his knowledge in medicine. Therefore, when he told the story of his Catechumen, those people seemed to be merely opportunists and only began to believe in Christianity for illness treatment.

For instance, he described one of his Catechumen “il tomba malade, et il demanda le baptême.” By establishing such causality, no matter intentional or unintentional, constituted an image of an insincere and opportunist Catechumen. Another similar account followed:

La petite vérole avait réduit la fille d’un infidèle à la dernière extrémité, et elle était désespérée des médecins. Son père sut qu’un chrétien avait sauvé deux de ses enfants attaqués de la

28 Ibid. Translation: Progress of apostolic work – Difficulties always reborn to meet missionaries – Slander spreads every where against them
29 Ibid. 529. Translation: he feels ill, and he asked for baptism.
même maladie, par un remède que le missionnaire lui avait donné.  

This account contributed to a similar opportunist image of Chinese ordinary people, who approached Jesuits only to seek medicine or remedy at emergency. While the account was probably true, the Jesuits’ description of those Catechumen might lead to negative evaluation of Chinese culture. Because the Jesuits often ignored their failure in missionary strategy and searched for extrinsic excuses to explain their failures, they would disproportionately emphasize the opportunist facet of only some Chinese people. Therefore, when Frenchmen who read their accounts took this conception for granted as a cultural tradition for all the Chinese, Jesuits unintentionally produced a distorted account of the Chinese behaviors.

The Rites Controversy and Jesuits’ Resolution

While Ricci, along with later Jesuits, had already been fully aware of difficulties in converting Chinese, they later found out that there was a more serious challenge for them: how to persuade Rome that Confucianism was not a form of religiosity, and therefore, Chinese rites should be tolerated.

The challenge was to be known as the Chinese Rites and Term Controversy, usually abbreviated as the Rites Controversy. It posed the question of whether “it is necessary to change a culture in order to adopt a foreign religion.” Jesuits argued that neither the Chinese terminology nor their indigenous rituals to celebrate their ancestors should be considered idolatrous as they believed most rites to honor Confucius were practiced in a more civil way.

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30 Ibid. 540. The smallpox had made the daughter of an infidel to the last extremity, and she became desperate for doctors. His father knew that a Christian had saved two children of the same disease by a medication the missionary had given to him.
In opposition, a large group of other religious orders within the Catholic churches, represented by the Dominicans and Franciscans, argued that rites to honor Confucius violated the teachings of Christianity.

The Rites Controversy posed a serious question to Jesuits when they attempted to translate Confucian classics into Latin or French. In order to win the debate, Jesuits needed to illustrate to the Vatican that Confucianism and Christianity were not mutually exclusive so that the very practice of Confucian rites should not cause any concern. A common strategy used by Jesuits in China was to argue that although Confucianism per se was not religious and the use of Tian in Confucian teachings showed that “the Ancients somehow had perceived some glimpses of the divine truths.”32 One prevalent pattern which I found throughout Jesuits’ translation of Confucian texts was that they tended to allude to a connection between Catholicism and Confucianism by translating secular concepts with Christian terms or ideas. I will show with examples in Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (1687) how this particular technique of translation was accomplished and what it implied.

In 1687, Confucius Sinarum Philosophus was published in Paris from the Royal Library by orders of Louis the Great. This was the first attempt to translate the first three of the Four Books with commentaries and to introduce a life of Confucius with a portrait of the sage.33 Originally published in Latin, it was reprinted later in different languages.

The evidence of Jesuits’ careful processing of translation could be seen throughout the text. For example, the first chapter of Lun Yu, or the Analects, which was a collection of conversation between the Master and his disciples, contained Confucius’s comments on his personal development as he aged. One of the famous quotes in this part is:

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32 Ibid, 51. Note: Tian, (in Chinese: 天), is an important concept in Confucianism. Usually translated as the “Heaven”, it is used to represent a kind of impersonal high ancestral deity.

In 1893, James Legge, a Scottish sinologist, attempted another translation of the *Analects* and he simply translated this sentence into “At fifty, I knew the decrees of Haven.” Here, contemporary Chinese literature scholars usually interpret the “decrees of Havens” as the course of life. However, in the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, the Jesuits translated it as:

> At fifty, I immediately knew the providence of heaven and its decree, that there was a nature, a force, and a reason imparted by heaven for each thing.  

It is evident that Jesuits attempted to expand the original meaning of the simple sentence and connect Confucius’s interpretation of destiny, which was a secular or philosophical one, to a religious or monotheistic context, in which the “heaven” represented the Christian God. In Jesuits’ translation, “a nature, a force, and a reason” is dominated and guided by “heaven”, rather than a sense of self-denial or modesty that Confucius tried to express. In short, the translation of this simple sentence was Christianized to a great extent. By this particular translation, Jesuits projected their claim that Confucianism *per se* was not a form of religion, yet could be considered as a form of Judeo-Christian tradition.

On another occasion, for example, Jesuits translated *Lun Yu* using vocabularies that were frequently used in religious contexts while opting not to follow the literary translation,

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which also showed that Confucianism could potentially be part of the monotheistic Christianity. 

The original text was:

子曰：学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆

The translation by Jesuits was: “Confucius said: One who devotes himself completely to practicing, but without mediating, labors absolutely in vain. One who devotes himself completely to meditation, but without practicing, is guilty of illusion and confusion.”

While this proverb is now simply used to criticize ways of learning that lack retrospect, Jesuits translated it using word such as “practice”, “devote”, “guilty” and “meditation”, which were closely related to religious practice, typifying another way how Jesuits Christianized the Confucian texts.

From the two examples above, it shows Jesuits’ efforts to link Confucian teachings to a religious context. In the first example, Jesuits tried to imply Confucian admittance of supernatural power by linking a secular text to religious meaning. In the second example, Jesuits translated a secular text regarding the process of learning using religious vocabularies. Both examples distorted the original meaning of Confucian teachings, catering to a religious tradition. Therefore, when French thinkers used such texts to study Chinese culture, they might be misinformed about the religiosity of Chinese rites. By no means do I attempt to assert a causality here that Jesuits intentionally translated the Confucian texts in religious terms in order to win the Rites Controversy. However, it is certainly plausible that their translation was carefully done to match their strategy of arguing that Confucianism was a Chinese version of Judeo-Christianity. And, to say the least, even if Jesuits did not intend to manipulate the texts, the only other possibility would be that they faithfully believed in the convergence of

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37 Meynard, trans., The Jesuit Reading of Confucius, 131.
Confucianism and Christianity. Either way, it was Jesuits’ beliefs in the universality of Catholicism that led to this particular way of translating.

**Conclusion: Jesuits’ Universalism and Their Conceptions of China**

This chapter discussed the formation of the Jesuits’ account of China. As missionaries who embarked on the trip to the Orient, Jesuits undertook a challenging task to bring Christianity to China. It was the rareness of information on China during the seventeenth and eighteenth that made the Jesuits’ account particularly valuable as a source of knowledge of China to French intellects in the eighteenth century. However, this source, I argue, is not as reliable as many would expect. On one hand, the Jesuits’ characterization of China was biased due to the frustration they had encountered in the mission. More importantly, on the other hand, Jesuits’ resolution of the Rites Controversy somehow “required” them to interpret China, or translate Chinese text in certain ways which could justify their argument in the Rites Controversy. But the translation, which made the texts incredibly Christianized, deviated from the original meaning. Their accounts were therefore not as reliable as it should be otherwise.

Universalism, or universal belief, plays a key role throughout my thesis. To Jesuits, their universalism lays within their religious belief that monotheistic Christianity could be the only truth. So when Confucianism came in as an alternative system, Jesuits refused to accept it as a religion and attempted to construct a Christian understanding for it. It was their eagerness to spread their universal belief that frustrated them even further when they encountered no encouragement in this alternative land and it was their belief in monotheistic Christianity that led to the Christianized translation of Confucian classic texts. In other words, it was Christian universalism that shaped China in Jesuits’ characterization.

Unlike Voltaire and Montesquieu, the Jesuits represented a conservative religious wing of thought in early modern France. They believed in the particular form of universalism that
had existed for so many centuries from the Medieval era until their age. We usually assume an inborn hostility between conservatives and liberals, which was also true in this era. But in the numerous accounts of China in early modern France, the Jesuits’ characterization was merely a beginning of a recurring pattern across conservatives and liberals.
Chapter Two:
A Sympathy by Distortion and Invention: Voltaire’s Sinophila

Les écrits moraux de Confucius, publiés six cents ans avant notre ère, lorsque presque toute notre Europe vivait de glands dans ses forêt; les ordonnances de tant d’empereurs, qui sont des exhortations à la vertu; des pièces de théâtre même qui l’enseignent, et dont les héros se dévouent à la mort pour sauver la vie à un orphelin; tant de chef-d’œuvre de morale traduits en notre langue: tout cela n’a point été fait à coups de bâton.

- From Commentaire sur quelques principales maximes de l’Esprit des lois, by Voltaire

Introduction

François-Marie Arouet, better known by his nom de plume Voltaire, was one of the most famous French Enlightenment writers, historians and philosophers. When Voltaire was born in 1694, it had been seven years since the French publication of Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, the first translation of Confucian classics. France, or even Europe in general, was being exposed to the discovery of the mysterious oriental land – China, primarily through letters from Jesuits in China. Voltaire studied at Louis-le-Grand, a public secondary school founded by Jesuits. Obviously, the Jesuits failed to spread their spiritual and intellectual views to young Voltaire given his later famous critique of Catholic Church and his advocacy of freedom of religion. However, different beliefs which Voltaire and his teachers held did not reduce the impact of the education he received. When Voltaire was at Louis-le-Grand, one of the biggest concerns among Jesuits at the very beginning of the eighteenth century was

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38 Voltaire, "Commentaire sur quelques principales maximes de l'Esprit des lois, 341. English translation: The moral writings of Confucius, published six hundred years before our era, when almost all our Europe lived acorns by forests; The ordinance of so many emperors, which are exhortations to virtues; Of the theater plays which teaches it, and whose heros devote themselves to death to save the life of an orphan; so many masterpieces of morality translated into language: all this was not done with a stick.
39 Knud Lundbaek, "Translations of Chinese Historical and Philosophical Works.", 37.
probably the Rite Controversy, a dispute over the religiosity of Confucianism. As Guy Basil
argued, “Voltaire was guided by them [his teachers/fathers] in the choice of his ideas, just as
he was when it came to illustrating those ideas by example. This inspiration is perhaps difficult
to discern, but it is, we believe, the case for China.” Therefore, Voltaire’s fathers and teachers
at Louis-le-Grand might have contributed greatly to his interest in China.

Voltaire’s interest in China was genuine, represented by more than sixty of his works,
including dramatic art, history, philosophical essays, proses and letters, in which he either
writes about or mentions China. Given this evidence, some historians developed their interest
in studying the Chinese image in Voltaire’s writings by focusing primarily on its relation to
Voltaire’s political philosophy. Against such background, this chapter is going to discuss the
political implication of the Chinese image in Voltaire’s writings and argue that Voltaire’s
conceptions of China originated from his philosophy of the Enlightenment universalism, which
superseded his belief in cultural relativism. In addition, the existing historiography tends to
characterize Voltaire as an active Sinophile yet I would argue that it was Voltaire’s intention
that he labeled himself as a Sinophile by fundamentally distorting or even creating accounts of
China so he could project his political views of France on China. Ultimately, Voltaire’s
discussion of China was merely a discourse on France.

Existing Historiography on Voltaire’s View of China

The first modern exploration of Enlightenment thinkers’ views on China in general
could be traced back to 1930s, when American historian Arnold Rowbotham produced several
important articles and a book on the subject. Following Rowbotham, many historians have

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41 Ibid. See Appendix D.
studied the Chinese influence in the French Enlightenment, notably Donald F. Lach who contributed *Asia in the Making of Europe*, a multi-volume work that systematically introduces Asian influence in the West. Afterwards, historians decentralized to work on many subdivisions such as the Chinese elements in Voltaire’s writings, in which the most detailed and systematic account is probably Basil Guy’s *The French Image before and after Voltaire*, published in 1963. As a historian who worked at the Institute and Museum of Voltaire in Geneva, Guy had exceptional access to plentiful primary sources and finally came up with this admirable book. The primary focus of this book situates Voltaire’s work in the ideological context of Voltaire’s contemporary era and shows how Voltaire’s attitude towards China, or in Guy’s word, the “Sinomania”, developed and changed over time.

Existing historiographies on Voltaire focus on various dimensions of Voltaire’s views of China. His individual works might differ in methodology or evidence, but all of them unanimously presented a positive view of China. In most cases, Voltaire is regarded as a “sinophile” with a particular enthusiasm, known as “sinomania”. For example, Danielle Elisseeff-Poisle wrote in her article, *Chinese Influences in France, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, “Voltaire admired China tremendously, but he used it as a convenient argument in a debate which remained thoroughly in France.” This sense of using the Chinese image as an ideal model also prevails in other scholarly work. For instance, Mungello alleges that “Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers argued that China was a model enlightened monarchy in

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45 Danielle Elisseeff-Poisle, "Chinese Influence in France, 16th to 18th Centuries" in *China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Thomas Lee (Hongkong: Chinese University Press, 1991), 158.
which the emperor ruled by the rational values of Confucianism which required the monarch to consult with the scholar-official class.”

It is true that Voltaire weaponized the Chinese image to make his own argument, most often as an ideal social model that he suggests France could learn from. However, none of the existing historiography studies the selection process in which Voltaire filtered certain accounts of China and presented the “desirable” part, or in some cases, invented a Chinese image to fulfill his own purpose. Neither did any scholarly work explain how this selection process was accomplished. Therefore, this chapter provides a first effort dedicated to address these two questions by considering the reconciliation of Enlightenment universalism and cultural relativism as the mechanism in Voltaire’s selection and invention.

**Enlightenment Universalism vs. Cultural Relativism**

The Age of Enlightenment was a profound intellectual movement of the seventeenth century and eighteenth century. It centered on reason as the primary source of legitimacy in lieu of the Church doctrine. Preceded closely by the Scientific Revolution, a period known for the emergence of the natural science, the Enlightenment was characterized by knowledge, which made people, especially the *philosophes*, understand the power of human beings. Those series of scientific discovery also challenged the Christian understanding of the universe and made great thinkers start to accept a Newtonian universalism. English thinkers, such as David Hume and Francis Bacon, had laid the foundation for the Enlightenment by popularizing inductive methodologies. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza also promoted empiricism and rationalism. All these efforts blazed a trail for the birth of the Enlightenment’s paradigm, which was argued by F.R. Ankersmit and best represented by David Hume as he suggested that

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“it is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations.”

This Enlightenment paradigm is characterized by universalism. In other words, only a universal truth, to those Enlightenment thinkers, would be deemed both sufficient and persuasive to reject the long established Catholic doctrine. This impetus to universalize the claim of reason, or in many scenarios, the human meaning of nature, became a huge project that philosophes all wanted to accomplish.

Voltaire was no exception; The sense of universalism exists throughout his writings. For example, he wrote in his Dictionnaire Philosophique under the entry for “law” that “Full of these reflections, I was pleased to find that there is a natural Law independent of all human conventions; that the fruit of my labor should be my property; that it is my duty to honor my parents; that I have no right to my neighbor’s life, nor my neighbor to mine.”

Therefore, Voltaire’s writings were obviously engaged in the building of this Enlightenment paradigm of universalism. It was the universal human nature and an independent natural law that allowed the possibility of the falsehood of Catholicism and served as Voltaire’s intellectual weapon. The essence of universalism focuses on the single truth that is universally applicable. To many Enlightenment philosophes, the truth referred to reason as the source of legitimacy.

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For Hume’s quote:

For original text in French, see entry “lois” in: Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique portative par Mr. De Voltaire, (London Press, 1764).
However, there was another philosophical standing that was popular during the Age of Enlightenment, the cultural relativism. Relativists argued that all claims to value are *per se* equally valid, which means that all beliefs and norms are dependent on cultural context. Relativism obviously challenged universalism and the Enlightenment paradigm in the way that the universal truths could not exist if truth was built upon different cultures.

In addition, the Enlightenment was only a little after the Age of Discovery when European sailors crossed the oceans or continent to discover the new world, both Asia and America. The new discovery exposed Europeans, in general, to various forms of cultures and religions. The exposure became a source for debate on cultural diversity, a nourishing ground for relativism. Even on the European continent itself, the discussion of religious tolerance never ceased. Politicians and philosophers formulated theories of religious toleration, among whom Voltaire was also a famous proponent for toleration. In the Voltaire Lecture of 2011 at King’s College, London, Simon Blackburn argued that “Toleration gives us the dictum attributed to Voltaire: that I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Relativism, by contrast, chips away at our right to disapprove of what anybody says.”

Therefore, Voltaire struggled between the Enlightenment paradigm, or universalism and cultural relativism. He supported universalism to argue for a truth and human nature which are universally applicable but he also acknowledged relativism for toleration as a response to the intolerance prevailing in France. Under such context, would Voltaire’s account of China be more about universalism or cultural relativism?

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China in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* and *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations*: A Selected Positive Image

Books were the main way of spreading ideas during the Enlightenment and the form of encyclopedia became a style of critique after Pierre Bayle employed this form in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697).\(^{50}\) Voltaire, following the same encyclopedic fashion, wrote and published the *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, or the *Philosophical Dictionary* in 1764.\(^{51}\) The *Dictionnaire* contained entries to many categories of subjects, mostly ideologies or philosophical terms. It was a life-long project for Voltaire, in which he aimed to criticize the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions by selling ideas in encyclopedic entries.

Meanwhile, Voltaire’s *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations* (English title: An Essay on Universal History, the Manner and Spirit of Nations; Abbreviated: *Essai*) is also crucial to my argument.\(^{52}\) Published for the first time in 1756, it was a historical work that discusses European history before Charlemagne until the age of Louis XIV as well as the history of European colonies and the Far East. Being another life-long project of Voltaire, this essay consisted of 174 chapters and Voltaire kept revising it until his death in 1778. Beyond a historical work, the essay also served as one of the most significant Enlightenment writings that emphasize reason.

Both works contained chapters that were exclusively about China. Given that Voltaire never traveled to China himself, Voltaire’s detailed knowledge of Chinese customs and institutions was doubtlessly amazing. Based on Voltaire’s correspondence and other evidence, Guy has found out that Voltaire’s knowledge of China comes mainly through his close readings on the popularized presentation in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses de Chine* and Fr. du Halde’s *Description de l’empire de la Chine*.\(^{53}\) There has been extensive discussion on the *Lettres in

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the first chapter, but the Description has not been introduced yet. Edited by Father du Halde and based on Jesuits’ accounts, the Description was the most comprehensive book on the knowledge of China during the eighteenth century. It contained four volumes which includes history, geography, and translated classics of China. Particularly for the Description, Voltaire commented du Halde in his Le Siècle de Louis XiV that “Though he did not come out of Paris, and that he did not know Chinese, [du Halde] gave the ampest and best description of the empire of China in the memoirs of his colleagues in the world”.54 Due to the high estimation, it is arguable that Voltaire, at least, read the entire text of the Description. And since Voltaire primarily acquired his knowledge of China through these readings, any difference between Voltaire’s account and what was in the original text of the Description or the Lettres could most likely be explained by Voltaire’s intention. Therefore, this section is going to show the discrepancies between Voltaire’s account of China and the image of China in the Description and argue that Voltaire, by filtering out the undesirable part of Chinese history and customs, presented a selected account of China to serve his own purpose in writings.

To begin with, the impression of China in Voltaire’s account in the Dictionnaire was incredibly positive. Namely in the first paragraph in the entry on “China”, Voltaire gave great respect and appreciation to China’s antiquity, and described the Chinese people as “new-made nobles” (“voulût leur persuader qu’ils sont nouveaux nobles.”)55 Therefore, historians who argue that Voltaire was an avid sinophile usually used the evidence presented in the Dictionnaire. One of the most famous quote, under the entry of “China”, Voltaire gave compliment to China as following:

54 Voltaire, “Le Siècle de Louis XIV” in Oeuvres completes de Voltaire, ed. Louis Moland, (Pairs, 1877-85), 1074. Original text in French: “Jésuite ; quoiqu'il ne soit point sorti de Paris, et qu'il n'ait point su le chinois, a donné sur les Mémoires de ses confrères la plus ample et la meilleure description de l'empire de la Chine qu'on ait dans le monde”.
55 Voltaire, The Philosophical Dictionary From the French of M. de Voltaire, (Dublin, 1793), 85.
The constitution of their empire, is, indeed, the best in the whole world, the only one which is entirely founded on paternal power, (the Mandarins, however, controlled their children very seriously,) the only one where the governor of a province is punished, if, at the expiration of his office, the people do now shew their approbation of his conduct by loud acclamations; the only one which has instituted prizes for virtue…\textsuperscript{56}

According to Voltaire’s account, China was laudable based on its paternal values and its political institutions. Let us now explore both the ideas in the original Description and see what Voltaire had filtered in his own account.

To begin with, we need to know why Voltaire valued the paternal order in China. Voltaire included detailed explanations in the first chapter of his Essai, titled “Of China, Its Antiquity, Force, and Laws”. In this chapter, Voltaire introduced ancient Chinese civilization and addressed Chinese customs. He particularly liked the judicial system in China and regarded it as “what they seem to understand best.”\textsuperscript{57} And Voltaire seems to be most interested in Chinese social norm, especially the paternity, and their relation to the judicial system. As he wrote,

The respect which children bear to their parents, is the foundation of Chinese government. Paternal authority is so strongly supported among them, that a son cannot go to law with his father, but by the consent of all his relations, friends, and of

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. 86.
the magistrates. The learned mandarin are considered as fathers of the towns and provinces, and the king as father of the empire.\textsuperscript{58}

Voltaire later commented that such a paternal system “has formed this vast empire into a single family”.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, the familial bond, in lieu of a religious bond in Catholicism, was what Voltaire was in favor of. However, Voltaire never addressed the strength of this familial bond and its practical value in Chinese history. In fact, this paternal bond, described in Voltaire’s account, was truly valued in traditional Chinese moral philosophy and Confucian teachings. Yet, the strength of such value needs to be questioned as exceptions or disobedience to this moral code had existed throughout Chinese history. Those concerns or realities were all presented in the \textit{Description} with abundant historical examples but Voltaire chose to ignore them. On the strength of this bond, few examples involving murdering of one’s father were accurately recorded. For example, when the \textit{Description} introduced the three emperors of the Sui Dynasty, it is clearly documented that “he [Sui Yangdi] murdered his father in the sixty fourth Year of his Age and the first of the Cycle” but Sui Yangdi was still considered to “have very valuable qualities.”\textsuperscript{60}

To create an idealized image of the paternal society, Voltaire intentionally selected those accounts that would only support the stability and applicability of the moral code while ignoring deficiencies and exceptions in the paternal system. By filtering out the exceptions in historical practice, Voltaire presented the Chinese paternal system as an intangible moral

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\footnote{58 Ibid.}
\footnote{59 Ibid.}
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code, which was abided by all Chinese. The aim here was to establish a secular social norm paradigm which could be applied universally.

In addition to the paternal system, the political institutions of China were another quality that attracted Voltaire and appeared positively in Voltaire’s account of China. However, the positive account of China once again contradicted the Description. For example, Voltaire described how Chinese government was coordinated and how it selected officials that “Mankind cannot possibly frame a better government than where every thing is decided by great tribunals, subordinate to each other, the members of which are not admitted till after severe examination.”

According to Voltaire, the tribunal system produced a perfect social hierarchy that could potentially rule the vast country systematically. However, Voltaire once again chose to ignore the deficiencies of the system. One of the big drawbacks of this tribunal system was political corruption. According to the Description, corruption in the tribunal system had become a pattern, for example, in the punishment of criminal. It recorded,

There is another Method of mitigating the Correction, which is
to bribe those that apply it, for they have the Art of managing it
in such a manner that the Blows shall fall very lightly, and the
Punishment become almost insensible.

To Voltaire, bribery in the judicial system was not hard to foresee. Nonetheless, in order to protect the positive image of China, Voltaire failed to address the deficiencies and falsely impressed his readers that the Chinese judicial system was perfectly an alternative to the French

61 Voltaire, An Essay on Universal History, 324.
one, which was dominated by Catholic dogma. While trying to build an idealistic alternative society, Voltaire’s account was ultimately selective, filtering out the deficiencies in the system, in order to create a possible solution that is universally applicable. But given that he had closely read the Description, his awareness of the corruption in China was almost certain, just like his knowledge of the historical flawed exceptions of the paternal system.

Therefore, in both the examples of the *Dictionnaire* and the *Essai*, I have shown that Voltaire spoke highly of the paternity and the political institutions of China but failed to discuss the flaws of the respective systems. In consideration of the fact that Voltaire acquired knowledge of China almost solely from the Jesuits’ account, we should suspect that any discrepancies between the Jesuits’ account and Voltaire’s account of China would be of Voltaire’s intention. It is, therefore, my contention that Voltaire deliberately omitted such deficiencies to idealize the Chinese society as an alternative to replace the Catholic ruled French society. However, Voltaire’s fantasy of China did not cease in these two works. He would later adapt a Chinese play to once again promote the conception of China, and, of course, to propagate his political philosophy.

The Invention of Enlightened Despotism and Nationalism: *L’Orphelin de la Chine*

*L’Orphelin de la Chine* was a three-act drama, written by Voltaire in 1753 and first performed by the Comedie Francaise in 1755. In June 1763, Voltaire himself also acted in an amateur production, playing the role of Genghis Khan. Voltaire’s participation in the performance demonstrates his passion for *L’Orphelin de la Chine*. Hence, this section is devoted to analyzing Voltaire’s intention to create the play and the implication in the play. As

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63 Adrian Hsia, “"The Orphan of the House Zhao" in French, English, German, and Hong Kong Literature,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 25, no. 4: 338.
a dramatic art created by Voltaire, the imaginary plot directly demonstrates Voltaire’s intention to invent a positive image for China as an intellectual support for his universalistic view of reason.

*L’Orphelin de la Chine* told a story under the fall of the South Song Dynasty, when the last emperor of Song entrusted his sole orphan to Zamti (Zhang Ti in Chinese). When Genghis Khan knew about the orphan, he gave orders to eliminate the last hope of the Song Dynasty. Under such circumstance, Zamti decided to hand in his own son for execution, but the plan was hindered by Zamti’s wife, Idamé (Yi in Chinese), whom Genghis Khan pursued in his early years in Beijing. Knowing the fact, Genghis Khan decided to forced marriage with Idamé, threatening the lives of her husband, child, and the Song’s orphan. In the end, Idamé made up her mind to die with Zamti, and Genghis Khan was extremely ashamed and astonished by Idamé’s virtues and finally gave an amnesty to them, including the last son of the Song’s royal family.

The orphan himself never appeared in the play but the notion of orphan recurred throughout the play and pushed the plot to a climax. The real protagonists, Zamti, Idamé and Genghis Khan, developed the plot and reconciled around the orphan. To Zamti and Idamé, Genghis Khan represented the barbarians, who had no sympathy for universal values of reason and ruled China and his Mongol Empire with bloody despotism, sweeping across China with cruelty and killing many people. His cruel regime spared no one, not even an infant. Genghis Khan’s victory indicated a barbarian’s triumph over a civilized world. The sense of reason was totally destroyed when the Mongol soldiers “robbing, busy with their prey” and their “superb contempt turned away their eyes.”

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Contrary to the cruelty they faced, Zamti’s hiding of the orphan and his willingness to replace his own son for execution, in addition to Idamé’s decision to die with her husband, reflected a nationalist sentiment and a virtuous civilization guided by reason. This respected sense of reason was exactly what Voltaire had been seeking from China. Zamti’s loyalty to his emperor and Idamé’s loyalty finally paid off and could be ascribed to their fortitude will and resistance. In the end, Genghis Khan exclaimed,

Il va l’être, madame, et vous allez l'apprendre.

Vous me rendiez justice, et je vais vous la rendre.

À peine dans ces lieux je crois ce que j’ai vu :

Tous deux je vous admire,

et vous m'avez vaincu.

Je rougis, sur le trône où m'a mis la victoire,

D'être au-dessous de vous au milieu de ma gloire.

En vain par mes exploits j'ai su me signaler ;

Vous m'avez avili : je veux vous égaler.

J'ignorais qu'un mortel pût se dompter lui-même ;

Je l'apprends ; je vous dois cette gloire suprême.

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66 Translation: “It will be, madam, you’ll learn.
You did me justice and I will give you the equal.
Just in these places I believe what I just saw:
Both I admire you
And you’ve defeated me.
I blushed on the throne which put me the victory,
Below you in the glory.
In vain by my exploits, I knew my fame;
You humiliated me: I want to match you.
I did not know mortal could be tame itself;
I learn it; I owe you this supreme glory.”
Genghis Khan’s acknowledgement of his defeat once again claimed superiority for universalism and his virtuous amnesty to Zamti and Idamé presented a challenge to the idea of absolutism and fixed dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in France. Therefore, this dénouement of the entire play became a powerful support for Voltaire’s core ideas.

It is widely believed that Voltaire’s inspiration of the drama comes from *The Orphan of Zhao*, which was translated by Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare, a French Jesuit to China. *The Orphan of Zhao* was included as a part of *Description*, therefore making it available to Voltaire.\(^{67}\) *The Orphan of Zhao* told a slightly different story. During the Warring State Period in the State of Jin, General Tu murdered the entire family of Dun Zhao because Tu envied Zhao’s talent, leaving Shuo Zhao, the only son of Dun Zhao, alive. The orphan is later adopted by Zhao’s friend Cheng. In order to leave no future trouble, Tu searched for the orphan and threatened to kill all children in the city if the orphan was not found. To save the orphan, Cheng decided to give his own son to General Tu in order to save the orphan of Zhao. After twenty years when the orphan grows up, Cheng told the truth to the orphan and the orphan finally revenged by killing Tu.

By comparing the plots in both play, it is obvious that Voltaire made significant changes to the historical context by changing the time period from the Warring State Period (770 B.C. – 221 B.C.) to the late Song and early Yuan period (c. 1280). Voltaire never reflected his adaption or gave an explanation to this change. This change was ultimately Voltaire’s intention as he does not have to adapt the play in a totally different historical context. So, what are the plausible explanations for this change?

Given the particularity of the Yuan Dynasty, which was the first dynasty in China established by a foreign ethnicity, Voltaire’s rearrangement could be interpreted as a support

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for nationalism. Nationalism is a key concept in understanding modern French history as a driving force. Lloyd Kramer defines nationalism as “the widely held belief that people living in particular geographical spaces share distinctive cultural and historical traditions and have the right to live in an independent political state.”68 Today’s scholars and historians consider nationalism originated in the French Revolution because the French started an effort, since the Revolution, to maintain their terrestrial order without the presence of God. Yet, in David Bell’s *The Cult of the Nation in France*, he innovatively argued that French nationalism emerged “out of and in opposition to Christian systems of beliefs.”69 If this argument is valid, it is true that Voltaire could potentially be considered as a pioneer of inventing French nationalism because he saw the nation as an alternative to the Church, given his fierce opposition to Catholic order and had dedication to create an authority of reason.

This conjecture is possible given that Voltaire accurately identified a sentiment shared by people towards their fatherland, or the nationalist sentiment, in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* as he wrote,

So it is the human condition that to wish for the greatness of
one’s fatherland is to wish evil to one’s neighbors. The citizen
of the universe would be the man who wishes his country never
to be either greater or smaller, richer or poorer.70

In addition, Voltaire also demonstrated his sympathy toward Chinese Han when he wrote about Chinese history. For example, in his *essai*, when Voltaire described how Jurchen

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came to replace the Ming Dynasty, which was the last dynasty ruled by Han Chinese, to establish the Qing Dynasty, Voltaire wrote,

This desirable state was followed by a most terrible catastrophe,
or general desolation, towards the year 1630.\textsuperscript{71}

By defining Jurchen’s conquering as a catastrophe to China, Voltaire seemed to share a nationalist sentiment with many Han Chinese. In Voltaire’s account, nationalist sentiment was universal across cultures and became a way to promote universal values. And his efforts to promote reason under a nationalist context, therefore, proved that it was possibly his intention to build the Enlightenment paradigm through the play.

Another possibility here to explain the rationale of Voltaire’s changing the historical context was that Voltaire attempted to universalize reason by making the story become an ethnic or a national conflict, rather than a conflict between two families. The original play, \textit{The Orphan of Zhao}, situates between the family of Zhao and Tu but Voltaire’s adaption crafts a larger scope for the play. In lieu of the animus for murdering one’s family, national conflict is a better venue to express universal values and Genghis Khan was a more credible authority to admit the merits of reason.

Either way, Voltaire’s change of the historical context was for the purpose of promoting universalism by intentionally setting up a universalist sentiment of nationalism and creating a more universal platform for the plot. Compared to the change of historical context, Voltaire’s creation of a totally different obligatory scene was definitely a bigger change.

\textsuperscript{71} Voltaire, \textit{An Essay on Universal History}, 278.
Both plays promoted certain ideas in Confucianism. *The Orphan of Zhao*, by emphasizing the orphan’s revenge, addresses Yi (Justice), one of the five virtues in Confucian teachings. To gain revenge for Zhao’s father, the orphan had the justice done. However, Yi is expressed in a different way in Voltaire’s adaptation through Idamé and Zamti’s virtues. Unlike *The Orphan of Zhao*, Voltaire created the story that extended to praise Ren (Benevolence) by changing the dénouement. The play raises a possible moral code from foreign sources as well as offers an appreciation of an enlightened decision following reasons, as opposed to King Louis XV.

Therefore, Voltaire’s adaptation in his play *L’Orphelin de la Chine*, both the historical context and the dénouement, served to promote reason in his political philosophy. And, it was really his universalism, which consisted of nationalist sentiment and reason as the source of legitimacy, that shaped how he adapted the play by changing historical context and some other details.

Relativism in Voltaire: The Tolerance

Voltaire’s account of China, in addition to promoting reason, also serves to advertise the relativist idea of tolerance. At Voltaire’s time, deism started to gain prominence among intellectuals, particularly in Voltaire. The deists believed in a creator of the universe but were disenchanted with the dogmatic organization within the Catholic Church, therefore denying the Catholic Church as a continual source of authority. Voltaire was a faithful deist. In order to support and prove deism, he needed concrete evidence to support the theory. The School of Ru, or the Confucian teachings, gave him a perfect intellectual weapon. Confucius’s worship of the Heaven and his status as religious truth worked perfectly as a deist practice and it was extremely legitimate because of its long tradition. Voltaire sought to replace the organized
religious dogma with a similar entity of Confucianism, which turned out to be rational as well as tolerating.

The diversity of religions in China also offered Voltaire a great opportunity to address religious intolerance in France. After establishing Confucianism as the mainstream religion of China in his *essai*, Voltaire also introduced Laozi (Laokium), the founder of Daoism, and Dailama, the God of Buddhism. To explain how different sects of religious beliefs were reconciled in China, Voltaire wrote, “These sects are tolerated in China for the use of the vulgar, as a coarse fort of food proper for their stomach.”

By arguing that tolerating different sects of religion was as normal as allowing different vulgar choice of food, Voltaire used this simple comparison to justify the tolerance of religious diversity and to criticize the Catholic dogma in France. Voltaire was a big proponent for the separation of the Church and politics, and religious diversity, or simply tolerance, might be a good start for the separation.

In Voltaire’s account, China was a country characterized by religious tolerance. However, this mere image as a positive example, I would argue, is another example Voltaire’s intentional distortion. The real China, or at least the China Voltaire was aware of, did not allow religious freedom to the extent Voltaire described.

One of the permanent themes in Voltaire’s writings is the criticism against Catholic dogma and his disenchantment with the poisonous politics of the Jesuits. Voltaire’s antagonism against Jesuits, however, revealed his limited knowledge of the religious intolerance in China, which was contrary to the image he built. For example, toward the very end of the entire *essai*, Voltaire for the last time wrote a chapter on China. In this chapter, Voltaire undisguisedly criticized the intolerance of the Catholic Church. By the second half of the eighteenth century, it was obvious that Jesuits had failed their mission in China and were even officially banned

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72 Ibid, 22.
and expelled by Qing Emperor Yongzheng. To attack the Church, Voltaire transcribed Yongzheng’s criticism of the Jesuits’ missions in China. He wrote,

> What would you say, should I send into your country a company of Bonzes and Lamas; what reception would they meet with? Though you have been able to impose on my father, do not think of doing the like to me. You would have the Chinese embrace your law; your worship, I know, tolerates no other: In this case, what is to become of us? We should be the subjects of your princes; for the disciples that you make, pay no regard to any but you; so that in the troublesome times, you might turn them which way you would.\textsuperscript{73}

While this quote worked perfectly to criticize Jesuits, it also showed that China was not as religiously tolerant as Voltaire had once described, therefore undermining his own argument. On another occasion, Voltaire criticized the poisonous politics of the Jesuits, particularly concerning the Rites Controversy that “The Chinese were surprised to see foreign sages, who could not agree, even in regard to what they were come to teach; who persecuted and anathematized one another, who had entered into mutual prosecution at Rome…”\textsuperscript{74}

As mentioned at the very beginning, Voltaire’s knowledge of China was entirely based on his readings, especially on the \textit{Lettres} and the \textit{Description}. Both, however, were either written or edited by Jesuits. Hence, throughout the two sources, it was impossible for Voltaire

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 280.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 282.
to find an evidence to justify such a statement. Therefore, Voltaire’s intention to use the Chinese voice to criticize Jesuits is once again clear here.

In addition, I have argued in the first chapter that the Chinese, as a matter of fact, did not truly understand Christianity for a long time. Due to Jesuits’ intentional entanglement of Christianity and the Chinese traditions to better convert Chinese, some Jesuits actually considered “the Lord” in Christianity was the same concept as the “Heaven” in the Confucian teachings. For example, Roger Hart, a historian who specializes in the history of science, argued that Xu Guangqi’s belief in the Lord “was the key to returning to the allegedly perfected moral order of ancient China; the Jesuits were tributary officials from Western nations, “men from afar”, who came to China to pay tribute to the Ming.”75 Hence, the Chinese reception of Jesuits could not even be considered as religious tolerance.

More importantly, Jesuits encountered no encouragement in their mission to China and this sense of frustration was fairly presented in the Lettres, which Voltaire had closely read, too. Therefore, it is arguable that Voltaire, even knowing the reality of religious tolerance in China, still depicted China as a utopian country for religious freedom. It is the relativist part of Voltaire and his support for religious tolerance that led him to the fantasies he crafted.

Conclusion: Universalism over Relativism

This chapter has reviewed the image of China in three of Voltaire’s works. By comparing his actual knowledge and his account of China, I come to the conclusion that Voltaire’s account of China was questionable, given how he selected, or in the case of the Orphelin, invented, a desirable portrait of China in his writings to serve as a practical alternative society. These distortions or inventions ultimately came from his struggle between

75 Roger Hart. Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter (Baltimore: Johns Kopkins University Press, 2013), 195-256.
universalism and relativism. As a universalist, Voltaire believes in reason as the only legitimate source of power. He has to not only show that some values in China, especially those promoted by reason such as nationalist sentiment, are universally applicable but he also filtered out the historical exceptions by simple avoidance. As a relativist, he believed in diversity and characterized China as a venue of religious tolerance and freedom to support his project of Church-politics separation.

Throughout Voltaire’s account of China, we could see that his universalism did play a more significant role in constructing and campaigning for his political philosophy while relativism only applied when he discussed religious freedom and tolerance. I have characterized Voltaire’s discussion of tolerance in China as an evidence of his relativism in a very narrow and superficial way because such characterization solely relies on his support for religious diversity and tolerance. Although this implies that Voltaire might believe that religious values shall change in accordance with cultural contexts, which was a core value in cultural relativism, one can always argue that Voltaire was more in favor of universalism even in his discourse on tolerance because he believed that religious tolerance should be a universal theme across states and cultures.

Therefore, if we take this argument into consideration, Voltaire’s account of China was entirely shaped by his universalistic values. As a result, I have shown a recurring pattern applicable to both Jesuits and Voltaire, across conservatives and liberals during the Enlightenment: It was the universalism that shaped French writers’ views on China and required distortion or invention of the image of China to fit the universal theory that each individual writer held. Would this pattern hold across Sinophile, such as Voltaire, and Sinophobes?
Chapter Three:
Montesquieu as a Sinophobe: A Critique by Selectivity

If China contains such a prodigious number of people, it arises only from a certain way of thinking: for as the children regard their fathers as Gods; whom they respect as such in this life, whom they honor after their deaths by sacrifices… everyone therefore is induced to increase a family so dutiful in this life and so necessarily in the next.


The *Persian Letters*, written and first published in 1721, was one of the earliest works by Montesquieu. Montesquieu was a French lawyer, man of letters, and, most importantly, one of the best known political philosophers during the Enlightenment. Born in 1689 into a French noble family, Montesquieu enjoyed abundant resources when he was young. He went to the Catholic College of Juilly, a prominent school for the children of French nobility, where he met many famous intellectuals, including Malebranche, who inspired him to write political philosophy throughout his adulthood. His father died in 1713 and he became a ward of his uncle, the Baron de Montesquieu. His uncle died a few years later and left Montesquieu his fortune as well as his position in the Bordeaux Parliament. Therefore, Montesquieu came to serve in the French politics for years and experienced significant governmental changes in and outside France while he held office. Outside France, England declared constitutional monarchy through its Glorious Revolution (1689) and formed the Kingdom of Great Britain by joining with Scotland (1707). In France, the long-reigning Louis XIV died (1715) and was succeeded by Louis XV who was only five years old at his coronation. The series of political changes inspired many of Montesquieu’s political writings as he repeatedly refers to those political changes.

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events. His service as the président à mortier, one of the most important legal posts of the French ancien régime, became the primary source for his experience in jurisprudence and in part led to his interest in law and the publication of De l’esprit des Lois. Today, Montesquieu is most famous for his theory of separation of powers, which is implemented in the constitution of many democratic countries.

The Persian Letters discussed French politics from an outsider’s perspective and criticized the role of religions in politics by recounting the experience of two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, who were travelling in France. But for the purpose of this chapter, the Persian Letters is notably Montesquieu’s first time to write on the idea of China in his principal works. The above excerpt shows Montesquieu’s exceptional knowledge of Chinese culture given the rareness of information regarding China in early eighteenth century France. The excerpt is also subtly argumentative, leaving no evident traces of Montesquieu’s attitudes towards China and Chinese civilization due to the neutral tone. However, by his later life, Montesquieu shifted his attitudes dramatically, becoming a fierce critic of Chinese civilization, primarily targeting the despotic nature of its political system. His criticism against China was pervasive in his most famous book, De l’esprit des lois. For example, he wrote, “But I cannot conceive what this honor can be among a people who act only through fear of being bastinadoed.” Therefore, Montesquieu is considered as the pioneer Sinophobe among early modern European intellectuals by many historians, notably David E. Mungello and Rebecca Kingston. Montesquieu and Voltaire lived in the same historical age and came from similar social backgrounds in France. However, they expressed the exact opposite opinions on China. Thus, their different opinions could not be simply attributed to national background or historical epochs. In order to solve the question of difference, this chapter will explore sources on

Montesquieu and argue that Montesquieu falls into the recurring pattern of French writers who wrote about China in the early modern time: his conceptions of China were ultimately shaped by this grand universal intellectual framework, through which he attempted to define politics and governments across states and cultures. However, his universalism led him to a different conclusion from Voltaire’s because the complexity of China contributed to the problem of fitting it into the grand intellectual theory, which Montesquieu wanted to build. Such challenges required Montesquieu to over-generalize China as a despotic state, which was the worst regime type in his argument. In addition, just like Voltaire, Montesquieu’s criticism over China and its government largely relied on the careful and deliberated selection of the sources on China to match his conception of China in the l’esprit des lois.

Existing Historiography on Montesquieu’s Views on China

As mentioned in the previous chapters, recent historical research on Enlightenment philosophes’ views on China started in 1930s. Many historians, such as Arnold Rowbotham, Donald Lach, and David Mungello⁷⁹, who study general Chinese influence on the Enlightenment also touched on Montesquieu’s sinophobia. Unlike scholarship on Voltaire, no historian has produced scholarly work solely on Montesquieu’s views on China. However, Montesquieu’s views, due to its critical nature, were often studied in a comparative method along with other Enlightenment thinkers’ views on China. Walter Watson and Simon Kow are probably the most influential historians among others on this topic.

Walter Watson wrote Montesquieu and Voltaire on China in 1979.⁸⁰ Seeing through the superficial difference between Voltaire’s and Montesquieu’s opinions on China, Watson argued that both thinkers are remarkably similar except for the different approaches. According

⁷⁹ See details on Arnold Rowbotham, Donald Lach, and David Mungello in “introduction”.
to Watson, Montesquieu adopts an Aristotelian tradition while Voltaire operates in a rhetorical manner. As he wrote,

For Montesquieu the content is prior to the point of view; for Voltaire the point of view is prior to the content. Montesquieu sees a civilization as a coherent objective whole to be analyzed in terms of a set of generic principles which are to be found everywhere but whose specific forms vary from one nation to another… For Voltaire, on the other hand, a civilization is characterized by the outlook of its leading minds, and is to be analyzed in terms of the basic determinants which are common to all men everywhere, and which have a normative and descriptive force.81

Simon Kow exclusively devoted his historical work to the studies of Western conceptions of East Asia. Most recently in 2011 and 2014, he published two articles of comparative studies on Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu’s views on China in the European Legacy.82 In the earlier article, he argued that Montesquieu’s account of Confucianism in De l’esprit des lois was partially influenced by his critique of Bayle’s position on the role of religion in society through his Pensées diverses sur la comète (1682).83 In 2014, his article “Enlightenment Universalism? Bayle and Montesquieu on China” examined both thinkers’

81 Ibid, 48-49.
perspectives on China and argued that both Montesquieu and Bayle attempted to reconcile ethical universalism and cultural diversity. In addition to these two articles, Kow also included a chapter on Montesquieu in his most recent book, *China in Early Enlightenment Thought*. In this chapter, he “demonstrates the significance of China to his critique of absolutism and argues that Montesquieu’s interest in the diversity of political constitutions led him to the negative account of China”.

Both scholars’ works have obviously shed light on this chapter. Watson touched on Voltaire and Montesquieu’s different levels of trust in Jesuits’ accounts of China while this chapter will discuss Montesquieu’s treatment of Jesuits’ accounts of China and argue that Montesquieu relies on and deliberatively filters Jesuits’ accounts of China in order to provide evidence of his conception and make his argument on China consistent. While Kow situates Montesquieu between universalism and cultural diversity, this chapter is going to argue that Montesquieu was primarily universalistic, and it was his universalism that dynamically shaped his views on China. To support my argument, I will also draw on other relevant historiographies, which were not primarily concerned with Montesquieu’s views on China.

**China in *De l’esprit des lois*:**

*De l’esprit des lois* (English title: *The Spirit of Laws*) was probably the most famous masterpiece by Montesquieu. According to Colher in his introduction to the text, Montesquieu spent around twenty-one years researching and writing the book. The scope of *The Spirit of the Laws* was not limited by its title, covering other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, therefore it became an inspiration to those modern academic fields. His efforts

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certainly paid off given the enormous success and long-lasting influence of the book: It was rapidly translated into other languages and even became the theoretical foundation of many countries’ constitution.

An interesting fact about The Spirit of the Laws is that the book was initially published anonymously in 1748 because Montesquieu feared censorship of the book. His concern was definitely proved right after The Spirit of the Laws was listed in the Index Librorum Prohibitorum (English: List of Prohibited Books) by the Catholic Church in 1751. The reason behind the prohibition has to do with the purpose of this political treatise. Montesquieu aimed, as in his own words,

The most happy of mortals should I think myself, could I contribute to make mankind recover from their prejudices. By prejudices, I here mean, not that which renders men ignorant of some particular things, but whatever renders them ignorant of themselves.  

This “prejudice”, as argued by Montesquieu, was the foundation by which France’s flawed monarchical system was established. He argued that only by replacing such a system with a more liberal and equitable system of government could France become great again. Montesquieu tried to accomplish such a goal by analyzing the various types of governments or political institutions in the world throughout history. And this was when the concept of China, which was one of the possible models for a government, came into his discussion.

87 Montesquieu, The complete works of M. de Montesquieu (Dublin, 1777), 39.
If not questioning the preciseness and accuracy of Montesquieu’s writings, readers of *De l’esprit des lois* could be easily impressed by his profound knowledge of China. Indeed, Montesquieu’s writings on China covered Chinese history, customs, religions, cultures, and certainly, laws. As mentioned in the previous section, Montesquieu was regarded as the vanguard of Sinophobes. Yet, Montesquieu’s attitudes towards China might not be self-evident. His criticism mounts when he repeatedly associated China with despotism, which was criticized throughout his book. Jonathan Spence probably gives the most comprehensive description on how this negative conception of China is formed: “Montesquieu’s numerous comments on China … added up to an indictment of China.” But other than despotism, Montesquieu seemed rather neutral on some of the Chinese characteristics that were not immediately associated with despotism. However, these neutral facts would later indirectly contribute to Montesquieu’s accusation of despotism or evilness against China.

To begin with, China was closely associated with despotic power in *The Spirit of Laws*. This association certainly set the negative tone for his conception of China since the overarching thesis of the entire treatise argued against tyrannical regimes. For example, in the early chapters where Montesquieu discussed laws and customs in the world, he had started to build this characterization that “In China, fathers are punished for the crimes of their children. This was likewise the custom of Peru – a custom derived from the notion of despotic power.” The conception of a despotic state, which is characterized by violence and fear, continue to rise as “It is determined by the laws of China that whosoever shows any disrespect to the emperor is to be punished with death.”

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90 Ibid, 126.
In addition to criticizing China as a despotic state, Montesquieu also denounced the stubbornness of Chinese culture. He stated, “But China is the place where the customs of the country can never be changed.”\(^91\) The consequence of such an unchangeable custom, according to him, was that “it is almost impossible for Christianity ever to be established in China.”\(^92\)

Other than these two criticisms, Montesquieu’s description of China seemed neutral on factual statement. Yet, whenever he wrote about a fact with a neutral tone, there must follow a problem associated with the fact. For example, he was quite interested in the size of the Chinese empire and, particularly, its huge population. As he wrote, “In China, the women are so prolific” and the bad consequence follows is that “the human species multiplies so fast, that the land, though never so much cultivated, are scarcely sufficient to support the inhabitants. Here, therefore, luxury is pernicious.”\(^93\) After all, the evilness of luxury expanded in China along with its despotism and the neutral fact of huge population became weaponized to attack despotism.

**China as an Outlier in Montesquieu’s Theory**

Contrary to Voltaire and many other sinophiles, Montesquieu’s views on China were predominantly negative, as shown in the previous section. This section aims to argue that Montesquieu’s negative evaluation of China ultimately resulted from Montesquieu’s efforts to produce a universally applicable political theory. Therefore, in other words, the unfitness of the Chinese political system in Montesquieu’s theory was due to its particularity. Since China jeopardized Montesquieu’s universal framework, the contradiction could only be reconciled by the inferiority or backwardness of Chinese political system as Montesquieu’s views of China had presented it.

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\(^{91}\) Ibid.  
\(^{92}\) Ibid, 139.  
\(^{93}\) Ibid. 184.
Where Montesquieu stood in the spectrum between universalism and relativism has been discussed by a few scholars, including Kow in his “Enlightenment Universalism? Bayle and Montesquieu on China”. According to Kow, Montesquieu, unlike other Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, had deviated from the Enlightenment universalism, moving towards a balance that also took relativism into consideration. As Kow argued, “Montesquieu’s De l’esprit des lois, first published in 1748, marked a significant shift from universalistic natural law… Political regimes could and should be reformed according to universal rational principles, but ones which are applicable to the particular circumstances of each country; Enlightenment is not a matter of one size fitting all.”

Some went further and argued that Montesquieu left no traces of universalism. For example, Keegan Callanan argues in his Ph.D. dissertation, Montesquieu, Liberalism and the Critique of Political Universalism, that Montesquieu’s “liberal theory is not inherently or necessarily allied with projects of political universalism but rather possesses in-built resources for critiquing, educating, and resisting such projects”.

Thus, among the few scholars who have situated Montesquieu on the spectrum between universalism and relativism, they unanimously consider Montesquieu either as a cultural relativist or more relativist than universalist. Montesquieu’s relativist traits might have been obvious, which could be seen through the structure of his De l’esprit des lois. By placing his discourses onto the context of both European and non-European cultures, including cultures in Africa, America and Asia, Montesquieu doubtlessly sought to adapt his political theories into all kinds of cultures, tolerating alteration to changing circumstances. However, as I will contest, the purpose of using non-European contexts, which seemed to be examples of relativism, was to prove a universalistic “spirit of laws”. Thus, contrary to the views of most historians, I argue

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that Montesquieu was more in favor of universalism and it was exactly his universalism that shaped and processed his account of China.

Montesquieu’s use of China showed a universalist rather than relativist theory of politics. To Montesquieu, divisions of power should be a universal principle, whereas China represented a particular political principle. He was thus closer to Voltaire than many recognized. In regard to the case of China, the reverse was also true that Montesquieu’s universalist point of view also shaped his views on China. This pattern was evident especially when Montesquieu tried to fit his conception of China to the universalistic theory of forms of governments and climates he had developed in the *De l’esprit des lois*.

In *De l’esprit des lois*, Montesquieu famously classified all the governments existing in his age and throughout history into three kinds: monarchy, republic and despotism. His classification built the reasoning for the theory of division of powers, which was the thesis of the whole book. Therefore, this classification theory was vital to his entire project.

According to him, republic was the most favorable polity. The nature of a republican government was that “either the collective body of the people, or particular families, should be possessed of the supreme power”, and ancient Rome and Greece had both experienced such type of government.\(^96\) Because the power was handed to everyone in the state, virtue was the key to the success of such a government. A monarchy was characterized by a single ruler (emperor, king, etc.) and laws served to determine how power should be distributed, yet in most cases, to nobilities. “Of a monarchy, that the prince should have this power, but in the execution of it should be directed by the established laws.”\(^97\) In a monarchical state, power was largely shared between the head of state and nobility, and both parties would behave well for the sake of their honor. However, if the ruler felt threats from nobilities, it would turn into

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\(^{97}\) Ibid.
despotic state. Despotic states were also characterized by a single ruler but this single ruler usually possesses a larger power that “a single person should rule according to his own will and caprice.”\textsuperscript{98} In such a despotic state, in order to make people submissive to his or her power, the dictator would use violence as the tool to create fear because “as virtue is necessary in a republic and in a monarchy honor, so fear is is necessary in a despotic government: with regard to virtue, there is no occasion for it, and honor would be extremely dangerous.”\textsuperscript{99}

The case of China obviously made an exception to this classification, therefore undermining this classification theory. Gu, a literature scholar, addressed this difficult question to Montesquieu that “anyone who has sufficient knowledge of Chinese history would agree that the three principles of honor, fear, and virtue were all present in Chinese dynastic governments, but this recognition would make untenable Montesquieu’s constructed grand system.”\textsuperscript{100} Gu argued that Montesquieu, faced with such a contradiction, took a pre-emptive action by claiming that “he perceived to lack on idea of honor central to a monarchy in his conception: ‘I do not know how one can speak of honor among peoples who can be made to do nothing without beatings.’”\textsuperscript{101}

As Gu pointed out, the complexity of China in which its rulers acted on all of the three principles of honor, fear, and virtue had already bothered Montesquieu. However, this single challenge to his theory would not lead to Montesquieu’s arbitrary hostility against China. After all, only those who understood Chinese history would notice such a contradiction. Nonetheless, the particularity or the unfitness of China to his theory extended to other parts of his theory, some with a simple fact known to everyone.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 54.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 86.
\textsuperscript{100} Minglong Gu, "Sinologism, the Western World View, and the Chinese Perspective," \textit{CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture} 15, no. 2 (2013): 3.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 4.
For example, using his theory of types of government, Montesquieu attempted to construct a universal theory that determines the type of government applicable to a particular state. As he wrote,

If it be therefore the natural property of small states to be governed by a republic; of middling ones, to be subject to a monarch; and of large empires, to be swayed by a despotic prince; the consequence is, that, in order to preserve the principles of the established government, the state must be supported in the extent it has acquired, and that the spirit of this state will alter in proportion as it contracts or extends its limits.\(^{102}\)

It was evident that Montesquieu tried to construct this universalistic theory that the size of a state determined the type of government it should use. We now know that the size of the state does not affect the polity in a particular nation. For example, the United States and Russia are both large but deemed as democratic and authoritarian respectively. Yet, this phenomenon contradicted Montesquieu’s theory, which was true in most cases, and he could only classify China, a country of huge size and population, into a despotic state in order to preserve his theory. To Montesquieu, China was viewed as a state that was too big to have anything other than despotic government. Therefore, right after he summarized the relations between the size of a state and the type of government, Montesquieu claimed that “Before I conclude this book, I shall answer an objection that may be made to the foregoing doctrine. Our missionaries inform us that the government of the vast empire of China is admirable… Consequently, I must have

given an idle distinction, in establishing the principles of three governments.” It was clear that Montesquieu was very protective of his theory in order to address the possible disagreements from readers who would not believe China was a despotic country. Montesquieu started to attack the Jesuits’ credibility by using accounts of merchants or a particular case of a religious ban in China. I shall discuss Montesquieu’s choice of sources in a later section but my point here is that Montesquieu’s universalistic theory regarding the size of a nation now required him to classify China as a despotic country.

Another universalistic theory which Montesquieu devoted himself to producing is his climate theory. Interestingly, he tried to build the relations between the climate of a nation and the natural inclination of the inhabitants within that nation. He stated that “If it be true, that the temper of the mind and the passions of the heart are extremely different in different climates, the laws ought to be relative both to the variety of those passions, and to the variety of those tempers.” This theory of the influence of climate was deemed by many scholars significant. For example, Robert Shackleton, a modern scholar on Montesquieu, averred that “Along with the separation of powers, it is his most influential doctrine, and his disciples have been very ready to laud him, and his enemies to censure him, for having advanced it.” Such a significant universal theory was once again challenged by the exception of China.

According to Montesquieu, people who live in warmer countries tend to present a fiery but vivacious personality but people who live in colder countries tend to be braver and rigid. As a result of this theory, countries that are warmer are suitable for despotic regimes because these countries, if ruled by the principle of fear, would encounter less resistance from their people. And China, as Montesquieu characterized it, was a warm land. As he wrote, “Asia has properly no temperate zone; as the places situated in a very cold climate immediately touch

103 Ibid. 214.
104 Ibid.
upon those which are exceeding hot; that is, Turkey, Persia, India, China, Corea and Japan.”

Since China is warm, Montesquieu attempts to prove his theory that warm lands gives rise to despotic countries given “the climate of China, where they are naturally led to a servile obedience.”

Therefore, both the size and the climate of China would determine, if Montesquieu’s theory were to be true, that China would have to be a despotic state. Since the purpose of De l’esprit des lois was to argue for divisions of power, namely, a democratic political institution, China as a despotic country would definitely be treated as a negative example used by Montesquieu.

After all, it was the universalistic grand theory of Montesquieu that led to his negative accounts of China. And it is also crucially important to recognize that Montesquieu was a deductive thinker, which also contributed to his conceptions of China. As Montesquieu wrote in the preface of De l’esprit des lois, “I have laid down the first principles, and have found that particular cases follow naturally from them; that the histories of all nations are only consequences of them; and that every particular law is connected with another law, or depends on some other of a more general extent.”

In other words, once he devised a universal theory, his accounts on particular examples could only cater to his theory and allow no deviation by the logic of the universal system. And, of course, in our case of China, since all those principles of governments, or the size and the climate of a country, had already defined China as a despotic state, Montesquieu had to claim then, to some extent, that China was a despotic country and completed the argument by carefully selecting supportive evidence. One of Montesquieu’s contemporaries, François Quesnay, already cast doubt on the logicality of Montesquieu’s argumentation. Quesnay was the leading figure of the Physiocrats, generally

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107 Ibid, 421.
considered to be the first school of economics. He became fascinated by the Chinese agricultural economy and wrote *Le Despotisme de la Chine* in 1767, systematically introducing Chinese political institutions.\(^{109}\) As he pointed out, “‘j’ignore ce que c’est que cet honneur chez un peuple qui ne fait rien qu’à coups de baton.’ La charge n’est pas ménagée dans ce tableau; les coups de bâton sont, à la Chine, une punition réservée aux coupables, comme le fouet, les glaères, etc., sont de même dans d’autres royaumes des punitions. Y a-t-il aucun gouvernement sans lois pénales?”\(^{110}\)

Although I would also question the logicality of Montesquieu’s argumentation, which was flawed as Quesnay had pointed out, I am more interested in how Montesquieu selected accounts of China to support his universal theory. In the following sections, I will explore the sources Montesquieu used for his knowledge of China and argue that he, just like his contemporary French writers who wrote about China, also manipulated the sources to construct a finer argument on China to serve his views on France.

### Montesquieu’s Sources on China

Since Montesquieu never traveled to China, his knowledge of China came presumably from reading. It is usually very difficult to determine what kinds of books did a historical figure, such as Montesquieu, read. However, the newly edited and published *Complete Works of Montesquieu* gave a perfect solution to this problem.\(^{111}\) The new edition of Montesquieu work


\(^{110}\) Translation: “‘I do not know how one can speak of honor among peoples who can be made to do nothing without beatings.’ This charge is not spared in the picture; Beatings are, to China, a punishment reserved to the criminals, like the whip, the glacier, etc. are likewise punishments in other kingdoms. Is there any government with no punishments laws (on criminals)?”

now included “thousands of manuscripts, books, and documents, which were conserved in La Brède since the death of Montesquieu, and were accessible since 1994.”

These manuscripts were mainly the notes that Montesquieu took when he read all kinds of books and he later categorized and arranged these notes under different subjects, such as “law”, “politics” and “geography”, among which the Geographica II contributes most to my subject. In the Geographica, it clearly showed that Montesquieu had closely read and taken notes on books regarding China, including Voyages au nord, Anciennes relations des Indes et de la Chine par deux mabométans, Description de la Chine, Histoire généalogique des Tatars, Voyages, contenant la description des Etats du Grand Mogol, and Lettres édifiantes et curieuses.

Besides, what was more exciting was that the Geographica also included a piece, titled Quelques remarques sur la Chine que j’ay tirées des conversations que j’ay eües ave M. Ouanges. (Some Remarks on China which I extracted from conversations that I had with Mr. Ouanges) Mr. Ouanges, also Arcadio Huang, was a Chinese Christian convert, who traveled to Paris around 1715. According to Kow, these remarks “indicate not only Montesquieu’s openness to learning about China but also his surprising acknowledgement that ‘the Chinese will never be understood by us.’” However, in 2007, Benitez pointed to the annotated notes attached to the Remarques and argues that the Remarques was, in fact, written by Fréret, instead of Montesquieu. Yet, this document was still of great strategic significance to my project as no matter whether the conversation documented took place between Montesquieu and Acardio Huang, Montesquieu definitely knew intimately about the conversation per se so that he would include the Remarques in the Geographica. In addition, Huang’s personal journal, which is

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113 Mungello, The Great Encounter, 125.
114 Simon Kow, China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought, 138.
115 Ibid.
now preserved in the French National Archive, also showed the possibility of the meeting between Montesquieu and Huang. According to Xu, a Chinese historian who researched Acardio Huang, Huang and Montesquieu met at least 8 times in 1713, from October to December, as testified in Huang’s journal. And the last record of Montesquieu in Huang’s journal was on December 15, 1713, when he wrote, “Mr. la Bray is leaving for Boudreaux today.”\(^{116}\) The fact that Huang knows the details of Montesquieu’s travel plan proves that the relation between the two were somehow close.

Therefore, compared to Voltaire, Montesquieu had access to much greater information regarding China. In addition to the Jesuits’ account presented in La Description and Jesuits’ letters, he also read few more books, primarily travel journals written by merchants. Particularly, he also personally met Huang, a Chinese who traveled to Paris. This level of sources of China essentially granted Montesquieu the room to manipulate sources to support his own argument.

Montesquieu on the Jesuits: A Distrusted Evidence

As discussed in the first Chapter, Jesuits depicted China as a great empire and a promising land to spread Christianity. Influenced by such an image, Voltaire argued that China could work as an alternative society for France to learn from. When it came to Montesquieu, he began to challenge this ideal model of the Chinese empire. Yet, by challenging to the established positive conceptions of China, Montesquieu had to use some special techniques, which, I would argue, were intrinsically contradictory. Therefore, it was arguable that Montesquieu manipulated sources to build the negative conceptions of China.

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\(^{116}\) Minglong Xu, "《我与黄先生的谈话中关于中国的若干评述》的作者应是孟德斯鸠." 历史研究 (Historical Research), no. 4 (2010): 152-161.
To begin with, Montesquieu’s distrust in Jesuits’ account could be seen easily in his comments on China throughout the *De l’esprit des lois*. From the famous quote that “Our missionaries inform us that the government of the vast empire of China is admirable… But I cannot conceive what this honor can be among a people who act only through fear of being bastinadoed”, it is evident in this quote that Montesquieu took a pre-emptive action to defend his argument by casting doubt on the validity of Jesuits’ statement.117 Other than simply doubting Jesuits’ observation, Montesquieu also raised the possibility that the Jesuits could simply be deceived by the superficial appearance of Chinese people to discredit Jesuits’ accounts. For example, later in the same chapter, he wrote, “Might not our missionaries have been deceived by an appearance of order?”118 Thus, in general, the technique Montesquieu used here was casting doubts on the Jesuits’ account.

Another technique used by Montesquieu was to challenge the Jesuits’ presentation with others’ accounts. For example, he wrote, “Our merchants are far from giving us any such accounts of virtue so much talked of by the missionaries; we need only consult them in relation to the robberies and extortions of the mandarins.”119 The merchants, to whom Montesquieu referred, were probably the authors of the several books he had read. In the early modern time, merchants who conducted business between Europe and Asia usually suffered from the distant trip and became disenchanted due to the risky jobs. Therefore, it was understandable for merchants to give a negative or biased accounts of China. However, by using merchants’ account, Montesquieu was able to rebut the established positive conception of China.

However, the techniques which Montesquieu used to reject Jesuits’ account were undermined by his own move. Throughout the *De l’esprit des lois*, he repeatedly used the *Description*, which was an organized Jesuits’ account by Father Du Halde, as evidence to

118 Ibid, 426.
119 Ibid.
support his argument. More than twenty of the footnotes referred to Du Halde’s *Description* suggested that Montesquieu also relied heavily upon the Jesuits’ account to compose his theory. Besides, Montesquieu’s uses of Jesuits’ accounts were also carefully selected so that he would only use three kinds of information from Jesuits.

The first kind of Jesuits’ account used by Montesquieu were factual statements. These factual statements, such as China is a warm country, will lead to no direct implication. Adopting these statement in writings obviously causes no problems since Jesuits would not have incentive to lie on those kind of descriptions. On the other hand, by integrating these simple facts into his theory, Montesquieu could justify his grand intellectual framework by placing China into the category of despotic regimes.

If using factual statement was just fine and maybe smart, the second kind of Jesuits’ account in the *De l’esprit des lois* might be too purposive. Montesquieu employed some uncommon phenomena presented in the *Description* to generalize his conception of China. For example, when he gave the discourse on the luxury of China, he adopted a quote from Kiayventi to illustrate how corrupted and luxurious was the Chinese royal family. Kiayventi, or the Jianwen Emperor, was the second emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Due to his efforts to restrain the power of his uncle, his reign was soon overthrown by a coup d’état, known as the Jingnan Rebellion. Therefore, his reign lasted for only four years and was probably one of the most atypical emperors in Chinese history. By quoting this kind of rare historical case, Montesquieu was able to situate China into an extreme of corrupted regime, which matched his description and judgment of China as a despotic state. Nonetheless, if the reader was not familiar with Chinese history, one could easily be persuaded that such level of power abuse or luxury was common in China.

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120 Ibid, 189.
The third kind of selected account, which was the most useful to justify his criticism of China, was to quote Jesuits’ negative comments on China. During the eighteenth century, since the conception of China was primarily formed by Jesuits accounts, which led to the “sinomania” among intellectuals, the most direct refutation would be formed if Jesuits themselves carried a negative tone when narrating stories of China. It was used, for example, to justify Montesquieu’s most famous quote on China, “But I cannot conceive what this honor can be among people who act only through fear of bastinadoed.” In the footnote, Montesquieu noted that “‘It is the cudgel that governs China,’ says Father Du Halde.” By presenting such a quote, it provided people with the impression that even people who really lived in China would think China was a despotic country, becoming a powerful evidence to support Montesquieu’s judgment. In fact, the Description offered a generally positive image of China except for the frustration they had when conducting missionary works. But after Montesquieu’s careful selection of sources, Jesuits were also characterized as those who could not bear with China.

Therefore, Montesquieu’s uses of Jesuits’ accounts were intrinsically contradictory. On the one hand, Montesquieu discredited Jesuits and questioned the facticity of Jesuits’ positive accounts. On the other, he also relied upon Jesuits’ negative account with careful selection to support his own argument.

Meeting with Huang: A “Superior” Source

Compared to Voltaire, Montesquieu had a not only different but exceptional access to knowledge of China – he met with a Chinese convert coming to Paris. As mentioned above, Arcadio Huang met with Montesquieu for at least six times and their conversation was allegedly preserved in the Geographica. Huang made so great an impact on Montesquieu that André Masson, the translator of one of the commonly used Complete Works of Montesquieu,

121 Ibid, 214.
even argued that Huang inspired Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* and he was probably the prototype of the two Persian young men.\(^\text{122}\) Notably, through the comparison between the *De l’esprit des lois* and *Remarque*, it was evident that many of Montesquieu’s opinions on China originated from his conversation with Huang.

For example, in the *Remarque*, Montesquieu took note that “Il n’y a guère dans le monde de tribunal plus injuste ni plus sanguinaire que celui qui rend la justice criminelle à la chine. Pour crime de concussion on mene aussi au suplice la femme du coupable et tous ses parens en ligne droite ascendans ou descendans, les freres les soeurs sont traitès de même.”\(^\text{123}\)

Historically, this kind of judicial practice was known as *Lianzuo*, or collective punishment. While often used in military court, it was seldom practiced in civil cases, except for the Yuan Dynasty. But the practice of collective punishment was largely restricted by its standard. Only severe felonies, such as treason, were subject to the collective punishment.

This idea of *Lianzuo* would later be reflected on *De l’esprit des lois*. In Chapter XX of Book VI, Montesquieu spent an entire chapter on how relatives of a suspect would be punished once a suspect was convicted, where he wrote, “In China, fathers are punished for the crimes of their children. This was likewise the custom of Peru; a custom derived from the notion of despotic power.”\(^\text{124}\)

It is impossible for us, without more documentation on the conversation between Huang and Montesquieu, to determine whether Huang told Montesquieu the restriction or the frequency of such system, but Montesquieu still arbitrarily used this rarely practiced procedure to criticize the cruelty of the Chinese laws.

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\(^\text{123}\) Montesquieu, *Complete Works*, 125. Translation: “There is no tribunal in the world that is more unjust or bloody than that which renders criminal justice in China… For the crime of concussion, the wife of the suspect, along with all his relatives, ascendants or descendants, are also treated with surplice, the brothers and sisters are treated alike.

\(^\text{124}\) Montesquieu, *The Spirits of Laws*, 120.
The conversation between Huang and Montesquieu became even more interesting to my argument because Huang sometimes tended to offer a different description of China from the Jesuits’ account to Montesquieu. For example, the Jesuits’ account of the punishment of criminals in China would not mention *Lianzuo* and it would look much more cautious and humanitarian that “Criminal matters often pass through five or six Tribunals before they come to a decisive sentence”.\(^{125}\) Regarding the death penalty, Jesuits reflected that “the present emperor gave orders in 1725 that henceforward none shall be punished with death before his process is presented to him three times”, meaning that any death penalty would be confirmed by the emperor himself, not once, but three times.\(^{126}\) Notably, Montesquieu had read the *Description* and taken notes on it so it was impossible for him to ignore such lengthy account on criminal punishments. However, it was his decision to write solely on the rare but cruel law of China, which justified his theory of three types of government.

This pattern seems to suggest that Montesquieu always chose to listen to Huang, rather than Jesuits. The simple comparison between Huang’s account through the *Remarques* and Jesuits account through the *Description* once again proved that Montesquieu’s account of China was principally selective. In addition to his selected use of the Jesuits’ account, it was obvious that Montesquieu would manipulate among the sources he had, and he chose the best one to support his various theories, such as the types of government or the climate theory.

**Conclusion**

Unlike Voltaire, Montesquieu’s knowledge of China might have come from a much more diverse background. In addition to Jesuits’ accounts, he also read several more books on China and had the chance to meet with Arcadio Huang, a Chinese Christian convert. The

\(^{125}\) Jean B-P, Du Halde, *La Description de la Chine*, 224.

\(^{126}\) Ibid, 234.
different sources, however, did not contribute to his entirely opposite views on China. In light of several historians’ research, I argue that it is Montesquieu’s universalism that prevails over the concern with relativism/particularism regarding the case of China. The complexity of China leads to its unfitness into Montesquieu’s grand intellectual framework. Therefore, he could only over-generalize the conception of China and categorize China as a despotic country. Also because Montesquieu’s project was to argue for division of powers, a despotic state, which by definition lacks division of powers, must have negative consequences in Montesquieu’s theory. Therefore, the despotic China has to be evil. On the other hand, Montesquieu’s negative description of China relies heavily on his careful selection and uses of the Jesuits’ accounts. While distrusting the Jesuits, he weaponized Jesuits’ comments to serve his own purposes.
Conclusion:
An Ongoing Sino-French Relation

When Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French historian, political scientist, and diplomat who lived nearly a century after the Enlightenment era, looked back at the ancien régime and the French Revolution, he argued in his most famous discourse, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, that the failure of the French Revolution resulted from the inexperience of the deputies who were too addicted to the Enlightenment ideals.\(^{127}\) When Tocqueville commented on Enlightenment writers’ conceptions of China, he wrote,

> Finding nothing in their neighborhood comfortable to this ideal of theirs, they went to the heart of Asia in search of a model… One is sure to find at least that in their books; and as China is very imperfectly known even in our day, their statements on its subject are generally pure nonsense… China was for them what England, and afterward America, became for all Frenchmen.\(^{128}\)

From this, Tocqueville argued that Enlightenment thinkers typically described China as the alternative governmental system to France while they, in fact, did not truly understand China. My thesis, to some extent, reinforces Tocqueville’s claim and constructs an intellectual framework applicable to all French writers across the apparent dichotomies in that period. I argue that early modern French writers had sufficient knowledge of China, either through life experience or reading, and their characterizations of China, unanimously shaped by their


\(^{128}\) Ibid, 192-205.
universalism, were carefully crafted so that they could use it as a useful “other” in their political discourse. And, no matter how they would weaponize China for their own purpose, they repeated a similar process of text manipulation, through distorting, inventing, or selecting examples to support their own ideological arguments.

This thesis has ranged across about two centuries of early modern French intellectual history and discussed three representations of early modern French writers: Jesuits represented by their missionaries in China, Sinophiles represented by Voltaire, and Sinophobes represented by Montesquieu. The three representations situated into two dichotomies: conservatives vs. liberals and Sinophile vs. Sinophobe. It is impossible to include all early modern French writers into the discussion because there were simply too many French intellectuals who were interested in China in that era when most of them could never travel to China. The past studies of French early modern interpretations of China were fairly sporadic, with historians or scholars interested in talking about merely one or two figures and usually ignoring a broader thematic picture. My thesis is one of the first efforts in search of a universally applicable theory of the conceptions of China in early modern France.

Only a century after Montesquieu or Voltaire’s discourse on China, like in many other cases, French knowledge about China rapidly rose rapidly as technology eased the transportation. And the French conception of China in early modern times continued to evolve and affects, to some extent, historical or even contemporary Sino-French relations. It is hard to measure how much legacy today’s Frenchmen inherit from Montesquieu’s or Voltaire’s perpetuated stereotypes of China. But their usage of China, which contributed to their intellectual masterpieces, did make some of the French traditions today.

My research also could pose further relevant questions to the scholarship. If French writers’ conceptions of China had extreme similarities in their formation, what about other Europeans’ views of China in the same era? Some German philosophers, for example, Leibniz,
Goethe, Herder, and Hegel, were particularly interested in China and how would German philosophers different from *philosophes*? On the reverse side of the original question, what would Chinese literati or intellects think of France during the Ming or Qing dynasties when their geographical knowledge of Europe became clear. If French conceptions of China started to deteriorate after Montesquieu along with the decline of the Qing Dynasty, how do we explain that France was the first NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) state to recognize the communist regime in China during the height of the Cold War? There is still much to be discovered. But in the long history of European-Chinese interactions, however, it is, at least, now clear that early modern French accounts of China conveyed French concerns and political theories, rather than the actual history of Chinese politics, society, and culture.
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