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The Humean Way to China: Beyond the Stereotype

Abstract David Hume seems to receive several stereotypes and commonplace sentiments about China regarding its religion, national character, government, practices and economy, that he goes on to dismantle. Doing so, he allows the eighteenth-century reader to look at China from a different perspective. This perspective can still be useful especially today, when the “immense distance” between China and Europe has been reduced and, as Hume would say, almost everything we use is Chinese. In the name of an ambivalent European tradition, we are often inclined to revive these commonplace sentiments (for example, the uniformity of Chinese character) and neglect that part of our own tradition that tries to understand what is behind them and that also offers us the tools to go beyond them. This study endeavors to assemble an array of Hume’s scattered remarks, consider them in their context, and explore their possible sources in order to obtain not only a more Humean China, but also a more Chinese Hume.

Keywords David Hume, China, stereotype

1 “Every Thing We Use” (“Would Be Chinese”)

“The distance of China,” Hume observes in November 1750, “is a physical impediment to the communication, by reducing our commerce to a few commodities; and by heightening the price of these commodities, on account of the long voyage, the monopolies and the taxes.” Yet, “a Chinese works for three-half pence a day, and is very industrious. Were he as near us as France or Spain, every thing we use would be Chinese, till money and prices come to a

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level” (Hume 1932, I, 144).¹ How remote is China? It is remote enough to be compared to planets and stars, according to Malebranche (Malebranche 1991, I, 233; II, 115), or only to the moon, as suggested by Fontenelle (Fontenelle 1825, III, 167). As William Temple puts it, the Chinese way of thinking “seems to lie as wide of ours in Europe, as their Country does” (Temple 1720, 186). When Fontenelle maintains that nature changes very much from Europe to China: “other visages, other shapes, other manners and almost other principles of reasoning” (Fontenelle 1825, III, 167), Jean-Baptiste Dubos agrees with him: “when the external difference grows greater, the difference of minds becomes immense. The Chinese have not a mind resembling the European” (Dubos 1719, II, 246).

The Frenchman Fontenelle observed that an Italian, a German and a French “would appear as countrymen” in China (Fontenelle 1825, I, 420). The Irish George Berkeley suggested that two Englishmen are friends in Constantinople, two Europeans are friends in China, a British and a Chinese are friends on Jupiter or Saturn (Berkeley 1714, 222). The Dutch-Englishman Bernard Mandeville claimed that two Londoners are friends in Bristol, while a French, an Englishman and a Dutch are friends in China: “being all Europeans, they look upon one another as Countrymen, and ... will feel a natural Propensity to love one another” (Mandeville 1723, 394). In the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), the Scotsman Hume summed this up: “An Englishman in Italy is a friend: A European in China; and perhaps a man wou’d be belov’d as such, were we to meet him in the moon” (Hume 1978, 482). China is almost as remote as the moon: Can such a sublime distance, like an ocean, excite our admiration? (cf. Hume 1975, 373–74, 432–33).

According to Hume, we sympathize more with persons “contiguous to us,” but “we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in China as in England” (Hume 1978, 581). Berkeley had already remembered that some of Confucius’ remarks are “as current morality in Europe as in China” (Berkeley 1993, 43). China stands as the remotest place on earth, but moral matters seem to reduce the distance. Hume also observed that travelers “depreciate those neighbouring nations, which may stand upon a foot of rivalry with their native country,” but are “commonly so lavish of their praises to the Chinese and Persians” (Hume 1978, 379), where a “great disproportion” between ourselves and others does not excite envy (Hume 1978, 377). Voltaire made a similar

¹ Notwithstanding Hume’s prediction, Hume and China is not a common topic (cf. Qian 1998, 130, 137–38, 144, 147–49, 154, 158; Whelan 2009, 29–37; on Hume and Buddhism, cf. Gopnik 2009; on the eighteenth-century philosophers and China, cf. Millar 2017; Israel 2011, 558–72; and Van Staen 2016).

observation: “European travelers ... bestow large praises upon the Persians and Chinese; it being too natural ... to extol those, who being far remote from us, are out of the reach of Envy” (Voltaire 1731, v). Distance itself can reduce the distance between Europe and China.

2 Deists and Idolaters: Religion Parts I and II

“The *Quakers* are, perhaps, the only regular Body of *Deists* in the Universe, except the *Literati* or Disciples of *Confucius* in China,” Hume maintains in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” (Hume 1741, 149). This is the first reference that he makes to China with specific content. Pierre Bayle made a similar comparison between the mystical quietists and the Chinese followers of Foe (Bayle 1734b, 202ab).² In 1753, Hume cast the Quakers as somewhat less deist: They “seem to approach nearly the only regular body of *deists* in the universe, the *literati*, or the disciples of Confucius in China” (Hume 1753, 112). And, he added in 1758, the Chinese literati remain the only regular such body, as they have “no priests nor ecclesiastical establishment” (Hume 1758a, 50n). The literati, Temple maintains in the “Heroick Virtue” (1696), adore the eternal “Spirit” of the world and have no “Temples, Idols or Priests” (Temple 1720, 205). Hume’s *Index* to the *Essays and Treatises* sums up: “Confucius, his Disciples Deists” (Hume 1758b, 532b).

In the *Description of the Empire of China* (1735), the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde accounted for the literati sect. Even though they all call themselves “disciples of Confucius,” it is possible to distinguish between “true” and “new” literati. The former acknowledged a first supreme being, the author of the universe, who governs everything. The latter admitted a celestial virtue united to matter, which is inanimate, material, visible, and blind, and they necessarily fell into atheism (Du Halde 1736, III, 38–44). In the *Chinese Letters* (1739), the Marquis d’Argens represented “almost all” of his Chinese correspondents as “very staunch Deists,” yet, he did not pretend “to decide the notable Dispute ... between several learned Europeans, whether the [Chinese] Men of Learning incline rather to Atheism than Deism” (d’Argens 1741, xi–xii). The former seems to be Locke’s opinion in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690): They have no idea of God, they are “all of *them* *Atheist*” (Locke 1985, 88; cf. La Loubère 1691, I, 370). The Cartesian Antoine Arnauld agreed: “the greatest part of them are Atheists” (Arnauld 1690, 35), and Bayle followed: They

² The sect of Foe Kiao, Bayle wrote, “was established by royal authority among the Chinese in the year 65 of the Christian Era. Its first founder was a son of the King *In fan vam*, and was at first called *Xe*, or *Xe Kia*; and afterwards when he was thirty years of age, *Foe*, that is to say, *no man*” (Bayle 1734b, 202a).

“deny the existence of God, and acknowledge a providence” (Bayle 1734a, 181a; cf. La Loubère 1691, I, 394–97, 404–5), namely a law by which evil is punished and virtue rewarded; they are a Spinozist sect of atheists (cf. Bayle 1737, 210b). Anthony Collins, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon all consented with this (cf. Collins 1708, 89; Trenchard and Gordon 1723, II, 958). As Toland put it in the *Adeisidæmon*: “they believe that the visible world is eternal and incorruptible, they do not recognize any God distinct from its matter and structure, and completely reject any doctrine of the future state.” However, nobody is “more honest” than them (Toland 1709, 74–75).

On the other side, the *History of the Christian Expedition to the Kingdom of China* (1615), drawn from the *Memories of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci* translated by Nicolas Trigault, maintained that the literati “acknowledge one sovereign God,” even though “they erect no temple to him ... therefore they have no priests or ministers of religion” (Trigault 1615, 106). In the *Novissima Sinica* (1699) Leibniz provokingly considered it necessary “to send us Chinese missionaries to teach us the use and practice of natural theology” (Leibniz 1699, 12; cf. Collins 1727, 83; Tindal 1730, 404–5). Eight years before Hume’s essay, John Leland reacted against these interpretations of the literati as virtuous atheistic moralists or good natural theologians. What is at stake is the corruption of the Christians rather than the purity of the Chinese. Leland protests:

Certainly we need not be sent to the Writings of Confucius to learn Morals, which we may much better learn from the Gospel ... Shall the Literati in China, many of whom deny a Providence and a future State, be sent to instruct us in natural Theology? Or those who worship Idols be sent to teach us the true Worship of the Deity? (Leland 1733, I, liv–lv)

Chinese literati are deists, but not all the Chinese are literati. In *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), Hume made the traditional distinction between a philosophical and a common religion, the unrefined product of our inclination to anthropomorphic projection. All polytheists and idolaters acknowledge “no first principle of mind or thought: no supreme government and administration; no divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world” (Hume 2007, 44). These “pretended religionists” are but “superstitious atheists”: “the Chinese, when their prayers are not answered, beat their idols” (Hume 2007, 45), asserted Hume, referring to the French Jesuit Louis Le Comte (Hume 2007, 44n.1).

In the *New Memoirs on the Present State of China* (1696), Le Comte tells us of a man who, to obtain the recovery of his daughter, addressed himself to the gods by prayers, alms, and sacrifices. The daughter died and the man asked for an exemplar punishment of the weak or malicious idol. He appealed to the Judge, to the Governor, and the Viceroy. Finally, he obtained a process and won his case:

“the idol, being useless in the kingdom, was condemned to a perpetual exile, and his temple was razed to the ground” (Le Comte 1696, II, 159–62). Le Comte remarked: “if they do not obtain what they want ... some people treat their gods with the highest contempt, some people insult them and some other beat them” (Le Comte 1696, II, 157).

In *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* (1682), Pierre Bayle accounts for the Chinese consulting their idols without obtaining a favorable outcome. Curses, prayers, strokes of whip and supplications: “they beat and worship their idol in turn” (Bayle 1737, 84a). In *Continuation of the Various Thoughts* (1704), Bayle faithfully reported Le Comte’s stories (Bayle 1737, 385), and Denis Diderot did the same in the article “Chinese” (1753) of the *Encyclopédie*, where he concluded: If Le Comte’s account be true, mandarins and literati are not the greatest part of the nation, and the people are “very inclined” to an “extremely gross” idolatry (Diderot 1753, 347ab). Were Diderot and Hume (who read Bayle and possibly Diderot) more interested in Bayle than in Le Comte? Chinese deists and idolaters supported Hume’s principles: Enthusiastic religions are contrary to priestly power, and popular religion is the gross result of anthropomorphic projection. Deism and idolatry, Quakers and Catholics: China appears so close to Europe.

3 A Peculiar China: “The Best of All Governments”

In China there is a “pretty considerable stock of politeness and science,” Hume observed in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences” (1742). Yet, in the course of “so many” centuries, these sciences “might naturally be expected to ripen into something more perfect and finished, than what has yet arisen from them” (Hume 1987, 122). In that “mighty” empire the sciences have made “so slow” a progress (Hume 1987, 122). Why? Hume gave into his natural reason and apparently yielded to commonplace thinking: China is “one” vast empire, speaking “one” language, governed by “one” law, and “sympathizing in the same manners.” Because of this unity, the “authority” of Confucius was “easily” propagated throughout the empire: People had not the courage “to resist the torrent of popular opinion” and posterity “to dispute what had been universally received” by their ancestors (Hume 1987, 122). Something like that happened in Europe, when the Roman Catholic Church “had spread itself over the civilized world, and had engrossed all the learning of the times; being really *one* large state within itself, and *united* under *one* head” (Hume 1987, 121; italics mine). Is Hume suggesting that the Chinese, like the Europeans, should throw off their “yoke”? It appears a question of time and conditions, rather than of inventive genius and stationary civilization, as some scholars suggest (cf. Qian 1998, 138,

147, 154–55, 158; Millar 2017, 66). Things can change, distances can be reduced, and the yoke can be broken.

China partially validated Hume's observation. "Extended" and "large" governments are not favorable to sciences: The "progress of authority" cannot be stopped, the "contagion" of popular opinion spreads "so easily," and the wits are not "sharpened" by debates (Hume 1987, 120–21). "Nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy" (Hume 1987, 119). Ancient Greece was a cluster of little republics, and modern Europe is "a copy at large, of what Greece was formerly a pattern in miniature" (Hume 1987, 120–21): Europe and Greece "were naturally divided into several distinct governments. And hence the sciences arose in Greece; and Europe has been hitherto the most constant habitation of them" (Hume 1987, 123).

Yet, unlike Catholic Europe where peripatetic philosophy played the same paralyzing role of Confucian philosophy, and notwithstanding its slow and incomplete progress, China does have a "considerable" stock of sciences. In 1748 Hume added a footnote chiefly concerning the rise of the sciences in such a large empire. The "happiness, riches, and good police" of the Chinese remain matters of fact (Hume 1987, 122n.13)—Temple writes "Riches, Force, Civility and Felicity" (Temple 1720, 198). How is this to be reconciled with the assertion that it is impossible for arts and sciences "at first" to arise, unless the people "enjoy the blessing of a free government" (Hume 1987, 115)?

Hume's cunning solution is to appeal to the uniqueness of Chinese government. "Properly speaking," China is a "pure" but not an "absolute" monarchy (Hume 1987, 122n.13).³ Since the Chinese have "no neighbours," the Tartars excepted—here Hume seems to follow Temple and Ricci (Temple 1720, 197; Trigault 1615, 8)—and they were "in some measure" protected from them by their superior numbers and their wall, they "always much neglected" military discipline (Hume 1987, 122n.13).⁴

Therefore, Hume goes on, the sword was and is "always in the hands of the people, which is a sufficient restraint upon the monarch," and the monarch, in his turn, was and is obliged to keep the governors of provinces "under the restraint of general laws" (Hume 1987, 122n.13), and the existence of laws limiting the power of the magistrates is a necessary condition for the rise of sciences (Hume 1987, 115–19). The monarch lies under the restraint of the people in arms, the governors under that of the laws: It is a double restraint, and this is a "pure"

³ In 1741 Hume called France "the most perfect model of pure monarchy" (Hume 1987, 95).

⁴ In China, Ricci remarks, "military art is neglected" (Trigault 1615, 41).

monarchy⁵ (Ricci calls it “entirely monarchical” (Trigault 1615, 621; cf. 41). And Hume concludes: “*Perhaps, a pure* monarchy of this kind, were it fitted for defence against foreign enemies, *would* be the best of all governments, as having both the tranquillity attending kingly power, and the moderation and liberty of popular assemblies” (Hume 1987, 122n.13; italics mine). It is China’s peculiarity: As a “pure” monarchy, it is not the best government, being not fitted to defend itself against foreign enemies; but, having no foreign enemies, it can be nearly the best government. As Hume’s *Index* sums up: “China, its Excellence and Defects” (Hume 1758b, 532b).

Now China, rather than serving as a counter-example, appears to be an interesting exception. It is also an occasion for Hume to resist to the torrent of tradition. Temple asserted that China is the “most absolute” monarchy in the world: There are “no other” laws but the King’s orders; “but,” Temple argued, all orders “proceed through his councils” and “pass into laws,” so that all matters are “debated” by them (Temple 1720, 202; cf. 204). Following Temple, Andrew Fletcher called China “one of the most absolute Monarchies of the World” (Fletcher 1732, 338). Du Halde not only said that the “Chinese government is perfectly monarchical” (Du Halde 1736, II, 49), but also that “there has never existed a state more monarchical than China: The Emperor has an absolute authority” (Du Halde 1736, II, 10). And Montesquieu, rejecting the view held by the missionaries that the Chinese “vast empire” is an “admirable government,” argued that a large and extended empire naturally supposes a “despotic authority” and tyranny: China is a “despotic” state founded on nothing but fear (Montesquieu 1979, I, 258, 260–61). The Chinese wanted “to have the laws reign along with despotism”; “but”—Montesquieu remarked—“whatever is joined to despotism no longer has force” (Montesquieu 1979, I, 260). China is a splendid occasion for Hume to contradict Montesquieu, if he read Montesquieu before adding his 1748 footnote. Is Hume answering Montesquieu or refining on Temple? Unlike Montesquieu, Temple added a “limitation” that renders Chinese monarchy, if not “pure,” much less “absolute” than it appears (Temple 1720, 202,

⁵ While Harrington seems to doubt the existence of “such a thing as pure *Monarchy*” (Harrington 1737, 48), and Montesquieu thinks that a monarchy, if it did not approximate to political liberty, would “degenerate into despotism” (Montesquieu 1979, I, 305), elsewhere in his 1752 work Hume delineates his “perfect model of limited monarchy” (Hume 1987, 526). Here, in the 1748 footnote, Hume distinguishes between “absolute” and “pure” monarchy. According to Warner and Livingston, a “pure monarchy” is “what Hume calls an absolute monarchy” (Hume 1994, 98n.41); yet, it has been remarked that in the “true spirit of visionary philosophy” Hume “changes the government of China from an absolute to a pure monarchy, and merely to support a theory, which would stand as well without the aid of so brittle a material.” He “endeavours to subtilize,” but the rationale put forth is “weak and inefficient”: It is a “mere sophism” (Proclus 1811, 127–29). Millar suggests that Étienne de Silhouette “made an argument similar to Hume’s” (Millar 2017, 144–45 and n.63; Silhouette 1731, 37).

204; cf. Fletcher 1732, 279–80, 337–48). As Ricci put it, this monarchy has so much of a republic (Ricci 2011, 69; cf. Trigault 1615, 47).

In that same year Hume published the essay “Of National Characters” (1748). Here China speaks for the influence of “moral” causes (especially government) in shaping the national character.⁶ Even though in the different parts of those “vast dominions” the climate admits of “very considerable” variations, the Chinese, Hume says, do “*have* the greatest uniformity of character imaginable” (Hume 1987, 204; italics mine). Where a “very extensive” government has been established for “many centuries,” it “spreads a national character over the whole empire” and “communicates to every part a similarity of manners” (Hume 1987, 204).

China is also a counter-example to the influence of “physical” causes (especially climate), which was defended by Dubos and Montesquieu. If we say that a sunny climate “inflames” the imagination of men and gives it a “peculiar spirit and vivacity,” and adduce the example of the French, Greeks, and Persians, who are “remarkable for gaiety,” then we should consider the counter-example of the Spaniards, Turks, and Chinese, who are “noted for gravity and a serious deportment.” No great “difference of climate” can justify such a “difference of temper” (Hume 1987, 208).

Through being posed as an example and as a counter-example, the Chinese acquired a uniform and grave character. They show an astonishing “constancy” and affect “in everything an air of gravity,” writes Le Comte in the *New Memoirs* (Le Comte 1697, I, 232, 234; cf. I, 231, 235). According to Du Halde, the “distance from every commerce with foreigners, joined to the solid genius of these people, did much contribute to preserve this constant uniformity of their manners” (Du Halde 1736, II, 2). They affect “gravity and politeness” (Du Halde 1736, II, 116), and they are educated to “a grave and serious air” (Du Halde 1736, II, 53). The Chinese government is despotic, Montesquieu asserted, and a despotic government is “uniform throughout”: Chinese manners are “indestructible” (Montesquieu 1979, I, 190, 466).

Hume generally observed that where several neighbouring nations—by policy, commerce, and travel—have “very close” communication together, they acquire a “similitude” of manners, “proportioned” to the communication. Therefore, all Western Europeans “*appear* to have a uniform character” to the Eastern nations (Hume 1987, 206; italics mine). The differences among them are like the “peculiar accents of different provinces”: They are “not distinguishable, except by an ear accustomed to them” and “commonly escape a foreigner” (Hume 1987,

⁶ By “moral” causes, as opposed to “physical” causes (air, food, climate, degrees of heat and cold), Hume means the government, the plenty or penury, the situation with regard to the neighbours, language and religion (Hume 1987, 198, 207).

206). Why do the Chinese have a uniform character, while the Western Europeans only *appear* to have it?⁷ Does Hume, like most of us, acknowledge and claim these differences only when the European character is reduced by others into something uniform? Is he not ready to accustom his ear to the “peculiar” accents of China and recognize differences even among others? Perhaps what is remote is condemned to appear much more uniform than it really is. Even though national characters “change very considerably from one age to another,” even in fifty years (Hume 1987, 205–6; cf. 213n.17), is the grave Chinese character condemned to remain the same? Hume does not suggest that the Chinese character appears to the Europeans as uniform as the Western European character would appear to the Eastern nations. Chinese uniformity is chiefly intended to show the influence of one singular government.

4 Exposing the Children: An “Unusual” Practice

“China is the only country, where this barbarous practice of exposing children prevails at present,” Hume asserts in the 1752 essay “Of the Populousness of Antient Nations” (Hume 1752a, 181). In 1760 he turns the traditional “barbarous” into “cruel,” while in 1770 it is but a simple “practice” (Hume 1987, 399). Apparently it is a stylistic change: A few lines earlier Hume refers to the same “barbarous practice” of the ancients (Hume 1987, 399). In Hume’s time the law is clear: “it is Murder...even to expose a helpless Infant, and leave it in a Desert or an unfrequented Place, where it dies for Hunger” (Forbes 1730, II, 99).

China is the “richest and most flourishing” empire in the world, Du Halde allowed, but the land, however extended and fertile, “scarcely” suffices to maintain all the inhabitants, and this “extreme misery” leads to “terrible excesses” (Du Halde 1736, II, 172; *Lettres Édifiantes* 1717, 155). Chinese people are “sober and industrious,” but because of their great number and the consequent “great deal of misery,” some of them are “so poor that, not being able to supply their children with the necessary nourishment, they expose them in the streets” (Du Halde 1736, II, 87; cf. *Lettres Édifiantes* 1732, 391, 412; 1717, 155, 160; 1781, xxi–xxii).

Locke reminded the reader that even in the “most civilized” nations, “exposing their Children ... has been the Practice, as little condemned or scrupled, as the begetting them” (Locke 1985, 70). In “some” countries, he adds, it is “still” a

⁷ This is because the Chinese uniformity is real, and it is the effect of one government, while the European uniformity is only seeming. Yet, we could say with Hume, the close communication among European countries should give rise to a similarity of manners. This similarity, he would reply, being proportioned to the degree of communication, cannot be compared to that produced by “one” empire, “one” law, and “one” language.

practice, and to find instances of it we do not need to seek “so far as Mingrelia or Peru” (Locke 1985, 73). We should not even look on it as the “Brutality of some savage and barbarous Nations,” since it was “a familiar, and uncondemned Practice among the *Greeks and Romans*” (Locke 1985, 74–75). In the *Answers to the Questions of a Provincial* (1703), Bayle maintained that exposition was allowed in the most “learned” and “civilized” (the Greeks and the Romans) rather than in the “barbarous” nations; and it is still practiced in “some” parts of China, which is a “learned and ingenious nation” (Bayle 1737, 710b; cf. La Loubère 1691, I, 384). Warburton denounced that this “most degenerate and horrid Practice among the Ancients ... was universal; and had almost erased Morality and Instinct” (Warburton 1738, I, 207–8).

In Hume’s *A Dialogue* (1751) on the standard of morals, the skeptic accounts for the astonishing manners of a people “extremely civilized and intelligent” (Hume 1975, 324). His adversary replies that such “barbarous” manners “are ... incompatible with a civilized, intelligent people ... They exceed all we ever read of, among the Mingrelians, and Topinamboues.” The skeptic reveals that he was accounting for the manners of the ancient Greeks: The “exposing of their children,” he says, “cannot but strike you immediately” (Hume 1975, 328). Having observed the wide differences and oppositions in the sentiments of morals, the skeptic represents “the uncertainty of all these judgments concerning characters” (Hume 1975, 333). Fashion, vogue, custom, and law are the (four) “chief” foundations of all moral determinations (Hume 1975, 333). The adversary replies that he will account for differences and oppositions from the (four) “most universal” principles of morals (Hume 1975, 334). Since we call “good” every action which is either useful or agreeable to ourselves or to others (Hume 1975, 336), the exposition of children can be easily explained: Had you asked an Athenian parent “why he bereaved his child of that life, which he had so lately given it,” he would reply with Plutarch: “it is because I love it ... and regard the poverty which it must inherit from me, as a greater evil than death, which it is not capable of dreading, feeling, or resenting” (Hume 1975, 334; cf. Plutarch 1962b, 355–57).

Not every philosopher agreed with this explanation. Montesquieu suggested that this “abuse” was lately introduced among the Romans, when luxury took away comfort, and the father, distinguishing between family and property, “believed he has lost what he gave to the family” (Montesquieu 1979, II, 130). In the *Dialogue*, Hume did not mention China. Yet, in the same years, exposing the children becomes for him “the” Chinese practice. Following the *Dialogue* (Hume 1975, 328, 332), the “Populousness of Antient Nations” compares it with the modern European practice of putting children into detestable popish institutions, like convents and nunneries. In modern Europe, not to be “over burthened with too numerous a family,” parents thrust their children into institutions; the

ancients, Hume said, had a method “almost as innocent, and more effectual to that purpose, to wit, exposing their children in early infancy” (Hume 1987, 398).

No ancient author, Hume remarked, spoke of this “very common” practice “with disapprobation” (Hume 1987, 398), Tacitus excepted.—Actually Tacitus said that the Germans do not expose their children and look upon it as a “shameful” action: With the Germans the good manners have more force than the good laws “elsewhere” (Tacitus 1914, 290–93). Referring to Tacitus, Montesquieu concluded that the corrupted Romans did not follow their good laws any longer (Montesquieu 1979, II, 130 and n.f). Hume inferred that Tacitus “blames” the practice (Hume 1987, 398n.56). On the contrary, the “humane, good-natured” Plutarch mentions it as a merit (Hume 1987, 398–99; cf. Plutarch 1962a, 308–13). Solon, Hume goes on, the “most celebrated” Greek sage, “gave parents permission by law to kill their children” (Hume 1987, 399; cf. Sextus Empiricus 2007, 199), and Seneca “approves of the exposing of sickly infirm children” (Hume 1987, 398–99 n.57; cf. Seneca 1928, I, 144–45). Silently following Montaigne’s method, Hume first compared the blamed practice of antiquity with modern practices that were supposed to be laudable; then he found some examples of severe traditional authorities praising the ancient blamed practice.

However intended, the “barbarous” practice of the ancients “perhaps” was not, as we can suppose, so unfavorable to the propagation of mankind and, by an “odd” connection of causes, it “might rather” render them “more populous”:

By removing the terrors of too numerous a family it would engage many people in marriage; and such is the force of natural affection, that very few, in comparison, would have resolution enough, when it came to the push, to carry into execution their former intentions. (Hume 1987, 399)

In his private early annotations (he is probably summarizing the *Lettres Édifiantes*), Hume applied the same reasoning to China: “perhaps the Custom of allowing Parents to murder their Infant Children, tho barbarous, tends to render a State Populous, as in China” (Hume 1948, 503; cf. *Lettres Édifiantes* 1722, 102, 118–25). Since one of his intentions in this essay on populousness was to compare ancient domestic manners and modern ones, which “seem rather superior” (Hume 1987, 400), Hume moved to modern China, where the practice is kept alive.

Against all those who praise China’s virtuous atheists, Leland had evoked “the inhuman Practice so prevalent among [the Chinese], of exposing and destroying their Infants,” concluding that we certainly do not need any Chinese instructions concerning the duties of life (Leland 1733, I, lv). Montesquieu had also advanced his own account of the practice. The climate of China is “prodigiously favorable

to the propagation of the human species” and its women have the “greatest fertility” on earth: “despite tyranny, because of the force of its climate, China will always populate itself and triumph over tyranny”; and “despite the exposing of children, population is always increasing” (Montesquieu 1979, I, 259–60). Since climate is more favorable than terrain to the propagation (“people multiply and famines destroy them”), a father “exposes his children” (Montesquieu 1979, II, 116).

Possibly against Montesquieu’s climatic suggestion, Hume advanced his own explanation in terms of “moral” (as opposed to “physical”) causes. Notwithstanding the exposition, China—he traditionally acknowledges—is the “most populous country we know of.” Every man is married before twenty (Hume is possibly following Ricci and du Halde, cf. Trigault 1615, 85), and such early marriages could scarcely be so general, as they are, “had not men the prospect of so easy a method of getting rid of their children” (Hume 1987, 399). Therefore, China is the “only” country where this practice prevails “at present.” The Chinese population is always growing, “despite” the exposition, asserted Montesquieu; “because of” the exposition, replied Hume.

Adam Smith, Robert Wallace and Thomas Malthus criticized Hume (Wallace 1753, 165; Malthus 1798, 59–61). They all blame this “horrid office” in China and this “most savage barbarity” among the civilized Athenians. The Athenians, Smith said, “supported the horrible abuse, by far-fetched considerations of public utility” (Smith 1994, 210).

In politics—maintained Hume in “Of Populousness of Antient Nations”—first appearances are more deceitful than those in other sciences: What seems favorable to something, in certain circumstances has “probably a contrary effect” (Hume 1987, 400). So he can conclude his comparison between putting a child into an institution and exposing him: To “turn over the care of him upon others, is very tempting to the natural indolence of mankind,” to “kill one’s own child is shocking to nature, and must therefore be somewhat unusual” (Hume 1987, 400). In the name of utility, the modern Chinese do something shocking and unusual that produces an unattended, if not contrary, effect. Hume first called it a “barbarous practice,” like that of the ancient Greeks, then a “cruel” one, and finally only a “practice.” If compared with the refined and indolent European habit of putting children into institutions, exposing them appears to Hume “pretty unusual” (Hume 1752a, 182) or, as he put it in 1770, “somewhat unusual” (Hume 1987, 400). So many things can be read into these kinds of stylistic changes.

Hume has learned Herodotus’ art: accounting for a practice and suggesting its causes and effects without blaming it. Even the adversary of the skeptic in the *Dialogue* agrees: We should not “try” a Greek by the common law of England; we should have “indulgence” for the manners of different ages and places; we should not render them “odious” by measuring them by a “standard, unknown to

the persons” (Hume 1975, 330).

5 The “Immense Power”: Chinese Economy

In “Of the Balance of Trade” (1752), Hume tried to dissolve the unfounded fear of an improper balance by proving it impossible, at least as long as we preserve people and industry. Money is proportional to “commodities, labour, industry, and skill”: If they are double what they are in a neighboring state, money will “infallibly” be double. The only obstacle to this exact proportion is the “expence of transporting the commodities,” which depends on an obstructed and imperfect communication among nations (Hume 1987, 315n.11).

If a nation’s stock of money were suddenly reduced by four-fifths, the price of labor and commodities will fall “in proportion” and the nation will be increasingly competitive in foreign markets (Hume 1987, 311). This will quickly bring back the money and raise the nation again at the level to the neighboring competitors. The nation will lose the advantage of cheap labor and commodities, and the abundance will stop any further inflow of money. The same causes, which would correct this imaginary inequality, must forever “preserve money nearly proportionable to the art and industry of each nation” (Hume 1987, 312). Briefly: It is impossible “to heap up money ... beyond its proper level”; yet, there may be a “very great inequality” of money, if any “material or physical” impediment cuts off communication (Hume 1987, 312–13).

The “immense distance of China” and the monopolies of the India Companies are a “great obstruction” to communication and thus preserve silver “in much greater plenty” in Europe than in China (Hume 1987, 313). With regard to manual arts and manufactures, Hume argued with Du Halde (Du Halde 1736, II, 85) that the “skill and ingenuity” of Europe in general “much surpasses” those of China (eight years later Hume mitigated the assertion: “surpasses perhaps”), but Europe is never able to trade in China “without great disadvantage” (Hume 1752b, 185; 1987, 313). At the same time, money would soon sink in Europe and rise in China, until it came “nearly to a level” in both places; but Europe receives “continual recruits” from America (Hume 1987, 313).

China is an “industrious” nation (Hume 1987, 313), Hume argued with Montesquieu (Montesquieu 1779, I, 436, 473; Du Halde 1736, II, 163): The Chinese, “were they as near us as Poland or Barbary, would drain us of the overplus of our specie, and draw to themselves a larger share of the West Indian treasures.” This would be the necessary consequence of a full and infallible “moral attraction, arising from the interests and passions of men” (Hume 1987, 313). Yet, the India Companies have their monopolies, Europe has its American recruits, and China is not “as near us as” Poland.

It is fallaciously maintained, Hume remarked in “Of Money” (1752), that any state is “weak” simply because it “wants money,” however fertile, populous, and well cultivated (Hume 1987, 293). Yet, the quantity of money (gold and silver) is of no consequence to domestic happiness. The real riches of a state consist in the stock of labor, which increases along with an increase in the supply of money and its positive effects on industry. That weakness which is supposed to flow from the scarcity of money, “really” arises from the manners and customs of a people. The want of money can never “injure any state within itself.” Men and commodities are the “real strength” of a community. When the manner of living confines gold and silver to few hands, and prevents their “universal” circulation, it hurts the state. Industry and refinements incorporate them with the “whole” state and make them enter into every hand and transaction: The prices fall down, and the sovereign can draw money by taxes and use it (Hume 1987, 293–94).

The absolute quantity of the precious metals is a matter of indifference; what really matters is their “gradual encrease” and their complete “circulation through the state.” China is there to prove it (Hume 1987, 294). In Europe there is “more than four times” the money that there was in the fifteenth century, in China money is “not more plentiful” than it was in Europe in that century (Hume 1987, 292). Yet the Chinese empire has such an “immense power,” as can be judged by “the civil and military establishment maintained by it” (Hume 1987, 294).

History tells us that foreign trade commonly precedes “any refinement in home manufactures” and gives birth to “domestic luxury” (Hume 1987, 263), Hume observed in “Of Commerce” (1752). Once awakened, industry and delicacy lead to “farther improvements, in every branch of domestic as well as foreign trade” (Hume 1987, 264). Commerce with strangers rouses men from their indolence. Imitation diffuses all the arts, and domestic manufactures “emulate the foreign in their improvements, and work up every home commodity to the utmost perfection” (Hume 1987, 264). In this situation a nation may even lose most of its foreign trade, and yet “continue a great and powerful people” (Hume 1987, 264). Following Temple—“they never had any [trade] but among themselves” (Temple 1720, 198)—Hume concluded: China has “very little commerce beyond its own territories,” yet it is “represented as one of the most flourishing empires in the world” (Hume 1987, 264; cf. Montesquieu 1979, I, 465).

China has an “immense power,” even though it does not have a great quantity of foreign trade and money. It would have more foreign trade and money, if it were not separated from Europe by an “immense distance.” However, it has power enough to validate Hume’s economic reflections.

6 Hume’s Sources for China

Even though he believed that “nothing serves more to remove Prejudices” than

travelling (Hume 1932, I, 126), Hume did not travel to China. He could say along with Malebranche: “it is not experience that taught me this: I have never seen ... a Chinese” (Malebranche 1991, II, 185). As Hume observed in 1739, “[we] bestow more fruitless pains to clear up the history and chronology of the [old Egyptians], than it wou’d cost us to make a voyage, and be certainly inform’d of the character, learning and government of the [modern Chinese]” (Hume 1978, 433). There are only books and conversations behind Hume’s scattered Chinese remarks. Who informs his views?

Hume’s points about China—a scholar observes—are “too general to identify a particular source,” but “it is difficult to avoid the impression that he had read Du Halde’s recent extensive account” (Hume 2001, 290n.13; cf. 286n.3; Millar 2017, 66–67). Du Halde’s *Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China* was first published in 1735,⁸ and it was composed by putting together “a prodigious quantity of Memories from China” (Du Halde 1736, I, xvi). “Although he never went out of Paris, and didn’t know the Chinese,” Voltaire said, Du Halde “gave the widest and best description in the world of the Empire of China” (Voltaire 1894, 787). As far as I know, Hume never mentioned Du Halde, while in the *Natural History* he referred to “Pere le Comte” (Hume 2007, 44n.1); but he could have found Le Comte’s passages on Chinese idolatry in Bayle’s and Diderot’s writings. I will briefly illustrate some symptomatic difficulties related to Hume’s sources.

Hume said that in Chinese houses each apartment “rises no higher than a single storey” and “is separated from the rest” (Hume 1987, 437). Du Halde sometimes said that the houses are “nothing but a ground-floor” (Du Halde 1736, I, 96; cf. 232; II, 98, 100) and sometimes that they are “nothing but one storey high” (Du Halde 1736, I, 75; cf. I, 93, 131; II, 98–100); Le Comte said that the houses are “generally but one storey high” (Le Comte 1697, I, 96, 108); and Simon de La Loubère, who is quoted by Locke and Bayle on Chinese atheism, maintained that they are “but one storey high” (La Loubère 1691, I, 90, 94–95). Yet neither Du Halde nor Le Comte explicitly asserted that each apartment is “separated from the rest”, while the *Lettres Édifiantes* did say something like that (*Lettres Édifiantes* 1722, 120).

Hume said that a Chinese “works for three-halfpence a day” (Hume 1932, I, 144). Du Halde said that a worker is paid “three-half-pence a Day” (Du Halde

⁸ Du Halde *Description Géographique* (Paris: P. G. Lemercier, 1735, 4 vols.) was translated into English and published as *The General History of China* in 1736, 1739 and 1741 (London: J. Watts, 4 vols.), and as *Description of the Empire of China* in 1738 (London: T. Gardner, 2 vols.); Le Comte’s *Nouveaux Mémoires* (Paris: J. Anisson, 1696, 2 vols.) was translated into English and published as *Memoirs and Remarks* in 1737 and 1738 (London: J. Hughs), and as *A Compleat History* in 1739 (London: J. Hodges).

1736, II, 211; 1736a, II, 306). Yet he only referred to the workers who collect the varnish from the trees when they have no provisions, which is very rare. Hume said that “military discipline has always been much neglected” in China (Hume 1987, 122n.13). Du Halde said that the Chinese troops are “not comparable to European troops either for courage or discipline” (Du Halde 1736, II, 53; cf. Vossius 1685, 85). Yet he added that their only use is “to prevent the revolts of people or appease the first commotions” (Du Halde 1736, II, 53), while Hume maintained that these troops are “unfit to suppress any general insurrection” (Hume 1987, 122n.13).

In other cases, Hume drew his information about China from other philosophers, like Temple and Montesquieu. When Hume asserted that China is “the only country, where this barbarous practice of exposing children prevails at present” (Hume 1752a, 181), was he referring to the *Lettres Édifiantes*, to Du Halde, or to Montesquieu? Since the *Lettres* and Du Halde are Montesquieu’s declared sources, and Hume seemed to discuss Montesquieu rather than the *Lettres* and Du Halde, it is difficult to determinate who in fact informed his views. For a better understanding of Hume’s discussions of China, every single possible source should be identified at the very least. But this is not easy at all.

7 Conclusion: Everything Hume Uses (Is Humean)

Chinese religion, national character, government, practices and economy—everything Hume uses is Humean and helps him to confirm his principles and argue against his adversaries. Hume is not someone who wrote “in defence” of Confucius, “to perpetuate in all hearts the respect which his memory deserves,” as, according the *Chinese Letters*, Leibniz did (d’Argens 1769, I, v). He is not even one of those Western philosophers who “strove valiantly to grasp the fundamentals of classical Chinese philosophy but ended up, in the main, merely mirroring their own prior obsessions,” like several eighteenth-century philosophers did according to the *Enlightenment Contested* (Israel 2006, 640). Hume never contracted Sinophilia, not even by bookish contagion. He seems to receive the stereotypes and common sentiments about China and go beyond them. Literature offered him some images of China as matters of fact, but Hume attempted to explain them by his own principles. And we should not forget his “spirit of opposition, and ... censure of established opinions” (Hume 1947, 213), and the pleasure that he took in contradicting others (especially Montesquieu). In general, Hume’s China is more Humean than it might appear at first sight. He teaches us how to see things in a different way.

Standing before such a deep eighteenth-century ocean of commonplace sentiments about China, one would be tempted to share Bayle’s reaction. Having

accounted for the frauds of the Japanese bonzes (and compared them to those of European priests), he suggested: “it would be very curious to see an account of the West written by a Japanese, or a Chinese ... They would pay us in our own coin” (Bayle 1734c, 549a). Even Du Halde allowed that we should not judge of foreign manners by way of our prepossessions:

If, when we compare the customs of China with our own, we are tempted to look upon so wise a nation as weird, the Chinese in their turn, according to the particular ideas they have formed, they look upon us as barbarians. (Du Halde 1736, II, 116)

Yet, Hume pursues his own way. He does not pay attention to Le Comte’s characterization of the Chinese people as deceivers and liars (Le Comte 1697, I, 360, 374), which was partially attenuated by Du Halde (Du Halde 1736, II, 91) and climatically mitigated by Montesquieu (Montesquieu 1979, I, 473; cf. 465). He certainly never spoke of the Chinese “poverty of genius” (Anson 1748, 541), and does not even delineate an unchangeable “non-progressive” character of China (cf. Qian 1998, 138, 144, 147, 154–55, 158).

Despite his conscious Eurocentrism (Europe is the most constant habitation of sciences), Hume did not deny that in China there is a “pretty considerable stock of politeness and science” (Hume 1987, 122–23). His problem is to explain their temporarily slow and incomplete progress. Sometimes China seems to occupy a hypothetical dimension: “every thing we use *would be* Chinese ...” (Hume 1932, I, 144), “*perhaps*, a pure monarchy of this kind ... *would be* the best of all governments ...” (Hume 1987, 122n.13); “that industrious nation ... *would* draw to themselves a larger share of the West Indian treasures ...;” “money *would* soon sink in Europe, and rise in China ...” (Hume 1987, 313). Sometimes Hume is cautious, and depicts China as surrounded by uncertainty: “China *is represented* as one of the most flourishing empires” (Hume 1987, 264); “In China, there *seems* to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science;” “this *seems* to be one natural Reason, why the Sciences have made so slow a Progress” (Hume 1987, 122). Sometimes he even mitigates his own assertions: In 1752 he maintained that “the ingenuity of EUROPE in general *much* surpasses that of CHINA”; in 1760 he turned it into “surpasses *perhaps*” (Hume 1987, 313).

Are we Europeans and Chinese today the “most distant Native of our own Planet” (Berkeley 1714, 222), as we used to be in Berkeley’s times? Do we really need to be deported to another planet in order to look on each other as near relations, and start a mutual friendship? We Europeans, we should finally begin to discover in our ambivalent traditions the proper tools for this new relationship. As Montaigne put it more than four hundred years ago:

In the kingdom of China administration and arts, without any commerce or knowledge of ours, offer examples that surpass ours in many excellent features; and its history teaches me how much wider and more diverse the world is than either the ancients or us have been able to enter into. (Montaigne 1992, III, 1071)

We Europeans, we should finally begin to understand how often our tradition did prevent and is still preventing us from understanding many things about China. Especially today, when the distance is not an impediment anymore and almost everything we use is, or could be, Chinese.

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