

*Introduction: British literature of the late Ming
and early Qing dynasties*

When those creatures of my imagination, the Galactic Museum-Keepers, look back on our past, with the objectivity of a vantage point near the edge of the universe, ten thousand years in the future, they will center their display on China, and cram Western civilization into a corner of some small vitrine. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto¹

EUROCENTRISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

For many scholars, England's interactions with and understanding of the Far East in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remain an area of vague assumptions and misconceptions. Although there are obvious political differences between traditionalists, who celebrate the spreading of "civilization" to the non-European world, and their revisionist critics, who decry the violence and socioeconomic devastation of European imperialism, both camps share a fundamentally Eurocentric perception of early modern history. Both rely on historical narratives and analytical models – colonialist or postcolonialist – that retell an old story: the technological inferiority, economic backwardness, and political conservatism of oriental cultures spelled their inevitable defeat by European colonizers. In this respect, many scholars read the presuppositions of nineteenth-century colonialism back into the 1600s, taking for granted that the English and other Europeans assumed a national and racial superiority to all non-European peoples with whom they came in contact; that the same political dynamic, predicated on overwhelming European techno-military power, which operated in the Americas, functioned in Asia as well; and that intellectual, religious, cultural, and financial contacts between western Europe and Japan, China, and the sultanates of Southeast Asia were comparatively unimportant in the early modern period. All of these assumptions are false; to dislodge them is to contest traditional histories that posit European "mercantilism" in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and

eighteenth centuries as the engine of worldwide economic change.² In subsuming the shifting and unstable relations between western merchants, diplomatic emissaries, and mariners (on the one hand) and local rulers, tax officials, suppliers, and translators (on the other) within a one-size-fits-all model of postcolonialism, many critics may invert the moral valence of Eurocentric history but ironically reproduce many of its assumptions, values, and interpretations.

The Far East and the English Imagination offers a historical and theoretical critique of some of the fundamental assumptions, values, and interpretations of a Eurocentric modernity. My readings of the fictional and non-fictional literature of the period between 1600 and 1730 build on the profound challenges to Eurocentrism offered in recent years by K. N. Chaudhuri, Jack Goldstone, J. M. Blaut, Frank Perlin, Paul Bairoch, R. Bin Wong, Andre Gunder Frank, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Geoffrey Gunn, among others.³ In different ways, these historians argue that until 1800 an integrated world economy was dominated by China and to a lesser extent Japan and Moghul India, and that our recognition of this domination requires a fundamental reassessment of both neoclassical and Marxian accounts of the economic “rise” of the West. In Japan and China during the early modern era, something close to the inverse of common-sense propositions seems to have been the case. As Claudia Schnurmann puts it, “compared to the Far East’s progressive medicine, industry, and *savoir vivre*, even the Dutch, although highly sophisticated from a European perspective, at best measured up to what today would be considered ‘third world’ inhabitants in Asian eyes.”⁴ Behind this statement lies a complex history of the early modern world.

To write the history of English literature in an Asian-dominated world is not to minimize the near-genocidal horrors of the conquest of the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century or the costs and consequences of later European colonization in Africa, Asia, and Australasia. The valuable contributions of many postcolonial critics (some of them discussed below) to challenging traditional literary, economic, social, and cultural histories of the early modern world have tended to concentrate on European encounters with the Ottoman, Persian, and Moghul Empires. In devoting this study to the countries east of the Indian subcontinent, I want to emphasize the crucial differences between western reactions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to Islamic cultures – long known and feared – and responses to China and Japan.⁵ This vast but diffuse body of literature is crucial to an understanding of the early modern world and western Europe’s place within it.

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Literary texts by John Milton, John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, and Jonathan Swift and the geographies, travel narratives, and histories of Peter Heylyn, Thomas Mun, Matteo Ricci, Martino Martini, Jan Nieuhoff, Evret Ysbrants Ides, and many others reveal a variety of compensatory strategies to deal with Europe's marginalization in a global economy dominated by the empires of the Far East. Asia could be ignored or depicted as a vast region of pagans ripe for conversion; and European technological, military, and political power in the Americas could be invoked to counter the limitations of the Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and English in East Asia. If narratives of New World colonization reinforced Eurocentric beliefs in national greatness, universal monarchy, and Christian triumphalism, the experience of Europeans in China, Japan, and (before 1716) Moghul India radically challenged all of these ideological constructions.

No literate man or woman in western Europe could plead ignorance of the relative size, wealth, and natural resources of, say, England and China. By the middle of the seventeenth century, China had become a crucial site of contention and speculation in a variety of fields: Chinese chronicles called into question the dating of the Flood in the Masoretic text of the Old Testament, provoking seemingly endless controversies about the dating of the Bible; the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the "sinification" of the conquering Manchus led to encomiums for the resiliency of Chinese culture; the size and wealth of the empire provoked (as we shall see) an almost ritualistic praise of the country's natural wealth and the industry of its people; and, most significantly, the wealth of the nation whetted a seemingly insatiable desire for Chinese goods and what seemed, for many merchants, an infinitely profitable trade.⁶ As David Porter demonstrates, the continuity of China's culture, language, and Confucian precepts through millennia became emblematic strategies of patrilineal legitimation: for many sinophiles in the seventeenth century, the Middle Kingdom symbolized the very principles of sociopolitical stability and transcultural moral value on which European elites depended.⁷

The two hundred or so primary sources that I cite in this study represent a small fraction of the texts on the Far East available to eighteenth-century readers. Donald Lach and Edwin van Kley count 1,500 works published in Europe between 1500 and 1800 dealing with Asia, and they admit to erring on the side of conservatism; widely reprinted and cannibalized reports (such as those compiled by Samuel Purchas) were recycled in atlases, travelogues, economic treatises, and natural histories.⁸ In discussing this material, I concentrate on works that went through multiple editions (often in several languages and often in lavish folio volumes) and that

were ransacked for information about the peoples and cultures of the Far East by editors who converted firsthand accounts into seemingly authoritative commentaries. This body of work, until 1750, dwarfs the amount of material published on the colonization of the Americas.

Europe's fascination with the Far East reflects the complex ways in which China, Japan, and the Spice Islands functioned in economic theorizing in the early modern world. Writers in England and elsewhere recognized that "the Far East" could be described holistically; it existed as a complex network of ports, agricultural regions, and trading opportunities. The prospect of tapping into the markets of Aceh, Canton, Nagasaki, and Agra between 1600 and 1740 became a crucial element in European economic thought because it allowed writers to displace domestic problems – ranging from high tax rates, to environmental degradation, to lagging productivity in some sectors and unmarketable surpluses in others – onto the vision of a theologically sanctioned and enormously profitable commerce. For England, largely excluded from trade east of India, China, Japan, and the Spice Islands fulfilled two crucial and imaginary roles, promising both an insatiable market for European exports and a vast, inexhaustible, storehouse of spices, luxury goods (from tea to textiles), and raw materials. If China, Japan, and India represented the apex of civilization – idealized embodiments of the sociopolitical order and cultural sophistication necessary to carry on an ever-expanding trade – the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and the imaginary continent, Terra Australis Incognita, offered visions of exotic realms where the East India Company could either gather commodities with little effort or strike good deals with cooperative natives. The Far East thus serves as a fantasy space for mercantile capitalism because it allows for the rigorous externalization of costs: profits can be tallied (or future profits imagined) without calculating (to take only two examples) either the value of lost lives, ships, and cargoes, or the value, in devastated local ecologies, of the deforestation necessary to build ships for the British navy and East India Company (EIC) fleets.⁹

The Far East and the English Imagination examines critically this widespread faith in the benefits of trade. As Josiah Child, a sometime governor and long time director of the EIC, put it in 1681, "Foreign Trade produceth Riches, Riches Power, Power preserves our Trade and Religion; they mutually work one upon and for the preservation of each other."¹⁰ The crucial term in this logic is "produceth"; like many of his contemporaries, Child assumes that trade itself can generate wealth in excess of the expenditures of labor and capital required to man and provision ships for multi-year voyages, that it can be both mutually beneficial for all (civilized)

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parties concerned and yet always work to the economic advantage of England. This rhetoric of mutual enrichment dominates European defenses of trade in the seventeenth century and underlies the promise that the lands of the East Asia hold as both producers of desirable commodities and insatiable consumers of English goods, especially textiles. At the same time, however, Asian markets were also perceived as the sites of rags-or-riches competition with rival European and indigenous powers, and English writers from Queen Elizabeth on qualify Child's assertions by enlisting various nations as allies against England's commercial rivals, particularly the Dutch. In different ways, as I argue in each of the chapters below, these writers employ exclusionary, triangular models of politics, communication, and commerce to isolate (if only imaginatively) these antagonists and to protect their ideological investment in the self-perpetuating logic of infinite riches, unchallenged power, expanding trade, and true religion.

The fantasy of infinite productivity and profit requires a concomitant and profoundly anti-ecological faith in the existence of inexhaustible resources that can be endlessly exploited. In an important sense, the ideology of trade between 1500 and 1800 is a response to ecological and demographic crises in northwestern Europe. The widespread perception in the first half of the seventeenth century that England's resources were inadequate to support its population, or that nature itself had been corrupted by humankind's sins, placed the burden on international trade to solve complex ecological, demographic, and economic crises.¹¹ This "general crisis" of the seventeenth century requires, in effect, an eco-cultural approach of the kind outlined, in very different ways, by Goldstone, Pomeranz, and Perlin, among others – an approach that calls into question the economic premises of Eurocentric conceptions of modernity. In the rest of this Introduction, I lay out both the premises of Eurocentrism and its critique by postcolonial critics, then describe briefly the fundamentals of an eco-materialist approach to the early modern world.

ECONOMICS, MATHEMATICS, AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Eurocentrism rests on the belief that beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, northwestern Europe, led by England, rapidly progressed toward the industrialized, coal-based economy of the nineteenth century. Debates still rage about what factors made England unique, and a good deal of economic history is devoted to assessing which characteristics of the English economy contributed decisively to its emergence as a world power. In general, historians emphasize various combinations of factors in

their efforts to describe the causal narrative of English exceptionalism.¹² England developed and benefited from institutions such as the Bank of England to improve the climate for commercial enterprises and capital investment; this financial revolution led to both increased investment in the country's infrastructure and new technologies to improve trade, transportation, and communication. At the same time, England's civil service grew significantly in order to collect taxes and appropriate monies levied to support wars on the Continent and in the Americas. The development of a complex fiscal-administrative state fostered the professionalization of economic bureaus, agencies, and experts. The growth in the nation's military and naval finances, in turn, stimulated developments in a range of technologies useful for mining, textile manufacturing, and energy production. At roughly the same time, the agricultural revolution increased the efficiency of crop production to feed England's rapidly growing (after 1720) population. After 1688, liberal or "Enlightenment" values both strengthened and were strengthened by the codification of property rights and, for a small but increasing number of male property-owners, political rights. For many economic historians, then, the combinations of these factors, both ideational and material, made England the first country to industrialize, and the industrial revolution marks the advent of the modern world.¹³

Other countries or regions in southern and eastern Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa typically are evaluated according to this Anglocentric model of early nineteenth-century industrialization. If England is both the harbinger and exemplar of worldwide socioeconomic progress, then other nations must exist at more primitive stages of economic development. Invariably, China loses in such Eurocentric histories because it is treated as a wealthy nation that "failed" to modernize and consequently suffered the indignities of defeat, de facto colonization, and eventually communism. Not only is the senescence of the late Qing dynasty used to justify these views of China's failure but the very analytical vocabularies of a progressivist historiography reinforce an overall narrative of western Europe's economic dominance in the early modern period.

Yet as Greg Denning suggests, "historians always see the past from a perspective the past could never have had," and traditional accounts of the rise of England and northwestern Europe often assume that progress in technology, science, agriculture, industrial production, and finance is inscribed more or less self-consciously in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁴ Crucial to this narrative of the rise and progress of modernity are the principles and assumptions – often decontextualized and reified as transhistorical "truths" – of neoclassical economics. In neoclassical

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economics, all economic activity can be described in terms of a rational calculus; the process of reducing complex behaviors to the key variables of choice and utility has two important consequences: it treats real-world exchanges and negotiations as expressions of underlying mathematical laws; and it distinguishes modern principles that foster technological innovation, capital formation, and overall growth from retrograde or primitive practices that lead to stagnation and lack of competition.¹⁵ Because choice and utility can be modeled and generalized, neoclassical economic theory creates a virtual space of calculation where the costs and consequences of, say, resource extraction and environmental degradation can and must be rendered as functions of objective laws of the market.¹⁶ While individual experiences and fortunes may vary considerably, the mathematics of neoclassical economics offers a universal standard of measurement: the *form* of the equation remains constant even as the value of variables and consequently solutions vary.

While several historians have noted the ways in which mathematics became a crucial instrumental technology for economists in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, the values and assumptions of neoclassical economics have been challenged on both historical and theoretical grounds by Philip Mirowski, and the implications of his argument are far reaching.¹⁷ Mirowski demonstrates that the neoclassical fascination with mathematics derives from a nineteenth and early twentieth-century misreading of the second law of thermodynamics. At the time, both economics and energy physics confronted profound discrepancies between theories (expressed in mathematics) and empirical observations; for complex reasons, both disciplines came to detach “progress” in mathematical theory (defined by internal consistency) from actual observations and experiments. In searching for ways to legitimate these radical moves, researchers in each field took the other discipline’s constitutive metaphors as objectively true, then used these supposedly acknowledged truths to legitimate their own programs. Put simply, mathematical consistency – paradoxically because it does *not* conform to perceived physical reality – became an end in itself. Economics was thus cut free from the kinds of social and ecological considerations that had marked the discourses of economics prior to the mathematicizing of nature.¹⁸ Consequently, the virtual spaces of economic thought and representation could be extended indefinitely, both across the globe and through time: profits yet to be realized could be projected onto the blank spaces of the map – in Asia, Africa, and the Americas – and extrapolated into the future. In both cases, a faith in the new sciences of economics could displace the environmental and social

consequences of resource depletion into the mathematics of unending profits and infinite exploitability. Whatever resisted short-time quantification – deforestation, soil exhaustion, and water pollution – could be disregarded.

One of the problems in the historiography of the early modern world, as Frank argues, is that Marxist historians tend to share Eurocentric perceptions of both progressivist narratives of technological and socioeconomic development and theories of value that treat the natural world as though it were primarily a storehouse of resources for labor to exploit. While Marxism defines progress in terms of the equitable distribution of the goods and services according to a labor theory of value, making workers, not capital, the engine of technological, industrial, and social development does not in itself safeguard humankind from the consequences of resource depletion and pollution.¹⁹ To promote this version of socioeconomic progress, Marx paradoxically must follow John Locke in treating use value as (in theory) infinitely elastic: a collectivist future depends on resources remaining abundant.

Eurocentric, that is, modern, economic theory, whether neoclassical or Marxist, describes both a history and a historiography of the “rise” of capitalism. In this sense, the quest for the “origins” of western “imperialism” in Asia paradoxically remains bound to progressivist and self-reflexive narratives: searching for the origins of western-style economic “progress” produces a narrative that reifies discrete practices, data, and texts as evidence of such progress, even if the specific instantiations of bourgeois capitalism are perceived, in Marxian terms, as ultimately subject to the same inexorable laws of socioeconomic progress. Postcolonial critiques of empire in the early modern period thus run the risk of getting caught between condemning European military, political, and economic imperialism and a paradoxical reliance on either liberal or Marxist narratives of colonialist domination. In this respect, the narratives of Eurocentrism – as the intellectual DNA of our economic, social, political, scientific, and technological history – tend to be accepted and reproduced as accurate, if deplorable, descriptions of the genealogy of empire.

Ironically, many postcolonial studies rely on neoclassical or narrowly Marxian economic histories that reinforce myths of European technological, military, and economic superiority. In otherwise valuable works, for example, Shankar Raman in 2001 and Balachandra Rajan in 1999, follow G. V. Scammell’s Eurocentric histories in their descriptions of European trade in India, but do not discuss (or footnote) the work of Frank, Perlin, Goldstone, or Bairoch – all of whom had published their major critiques of Eurocentrism before 1997.²⁰ “Traditional” postcolonialism has no way to

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account for a Sinocentric world, and therefore tends either to ignore Japan and China or read European–Asian encounters in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries through the lens of the nineteenth-century European domination of India.²¹ In concentrating on European contacts with the Ottoman, Persian, and Moghul Empires, many critics and historians assume that the Far East lies outside of the circuits of trade, linguistic contact, and religious confrontation in the Mediterranean and Near East. John Michael Archer, for example, asserts that “China, Japan, and the Moluccas . . . effectively fall outside the overlap of early modern trade with the geo-historical itinerary of Mediterranean antiquity.”²² This seems, at best, a debatable point: Heylyn, John Webb, and Sir William Temple, among many other writers (as I argue in later chapters), explicitly compared the empires of the ancient world to China, and found that Greece and Rome suffered by comparison to the Ming and Qing dynasties. It is significant, in this regard, that there is no discussion of China or Japan in either David Armitage’s *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* or Anthony Pagden’s *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–1800*. China and Japan are also absent from the essays collected in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600–1850*.²³ At the very least, this neglect gives a skewed perspective of what authors, editors, and apparently readers found appealing in collections such as those of Purchas and Heylyn. In emphasizing European encounters with the Far East, I argue throughout this study that the confrontation of English writers with China and Japan became a catalyst for their recognition that the discourse of European empire was an ideological construct – part self-conscious propaganda, part wish fulfillment, and part econometric extrapolation to sustain fantasies of commercial prosperity, if not imperial conquest.

That said, some first-rate postcolonial studies of eighteenth-century literary culture have revealed the ways in which the contradictions within the ideology of empire worked to suture over fissures within social and political institutions as well as within unstable conceptions of colonialist subjectivity. In her provocative study of science, ecology, race, and colonialism in British India, Kavita Philip demonstrates convincingly that “local knowledges from the periphery of empire were constitutive of both the form and content of science at the metropolitan center,” and, consequently, of one of the key forms of modernist self-definition: the self-consistent and internalist progress of universal scientific knowledge, a knowledge that is then used to denigrate “primitive” belief systems and the peoples who practice them.²⁴ As Rajani Sudan argues, the colonizer’s

belief in his or her cultural and political authority is introjected so that the corollary of colonialist agency becomes xenophobia – the fear of others that forces the European self into ever more emphatic, even hysterical assertions of racial purity and sociopolitical authority. The threat posed by the racial other, she argues, can be contained only by the ongoing process of repressing the “profound insecurities” on which Eurocentrism and its “belief in an essential authorial subjectivity” rests.²⁵ This decentering of the colonizer’s subjectivity is mirrored by the construction of hybrid identities by and for colonized peoples who participate in, resist, and reshape imperialist practices. Srinivas Aravamudan calls attention to the significance of the “tropicopolitans,” that is, those “subjected to the politics of colonial tropology, who correspondingly seize agency through contesting language, space, and the language of space that typifies justifications of colonialism.”²⁶ The contested space of the tropics thus implicates English writers and readers in contestations of language, space, and political economy in the domestic as well as the public sphere. In this respect, Betty Joseph reminds us of the crucial importance of the myriad “transformations within everyday cultural spaces of empire.” The colonial project, she argues, in her study of East India Company archives between 1720 and 1840, reinforces the separation of the public and private spheres, thereby helping to reinforce an ideology of biological and cultural reproduction for the British colonial powers.²⁷ In different ways, then, Philip, Sudan, Aravamudan, Joseph, and Felicity Nussbaum, among others, contest the history and historiography of Eurocentrism on moral, political, and evidentiary grounds by providing a collective archaeology of the colonizers’ model of the world. As valuable as these studies are, they leave open questions about western Europe’s relations between 1600 and 1750 with the non-tropical world – the Asian metropolises of Beijing, Canton, Tokyo, Nagasaki, and many other centers of international and regional significance. These questions can be addressed only by resituating postcolonial critiques of European encounters with the Far East within the context of non-Eurocentric perceptions of global economic culture.

WORLD SYSTEMS THEORY

In the last fifteen years, historians such as Goldstone, Frank, and Pomeranz, among others, have challenged the seemingly bedrock assumptions of Eurocentrism – the interlocking “rises” of financial and then industrial capitalism in northwestern Europe – on both factual and conceptual grounds. In different ways, they reject or severely qualify the idea