

## MALTHUS AND CHINA\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *T. R. Malthus was deeply interested in how his principle of population operated in societies distant to, and different from, his own. In this respect, China served as an intriguing case, already famous in his own time for its large and dense population and the central regulation of a closed economy. Malthus drew on both centuries-old Jesuit material and recent accounts from the Macartney embassy to the Qianlong emperor to assess its past and present food–land–population dynamics. This article explores Malthus’s interest in China in the context of British public and private commercial interest in opening its trade, not least interest from his own East India Company. Historiographically, Malthus’s China has been critiqued as an early rendition of orientalist demographic transition, posing a dichotomy of East/West fertility and mortality change. In disagreement with this interpretation, this article argues Malthus’s key distinction was not East/West but Old World/New World.*

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### I

Of all the world’s polities, China has a tight and enduring relation to population questions: in fact, in policy, and in reputation. Long the most populous state in the world – and long known to be so – the relation between demography, standards of living, and economic policy have been central to Chinese statecraft. Deng Xiaoping’s one-child policy introduced in 1979 is the most obvious instance, and demographers and economists are watching closely the impact of a relaxation to a two-child policy in recent years. In earlier republican and imperial eras, the relation between a vast population, economy, and welfare, was equally the business of the Chinese state, if manifesting in different ways.<sup>1</sup>

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\* My thanks to Helen Dunstan and Henrietta Harrison for advice and assistance with this article, and to the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge, for access to the Old Library Malthus Family Collection.

<sup>1</sup> J. Lee, ‘Food supply and population growth in southwest China, 1250–1850’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 41 (1982), pp. 711–46; Gang Zhao, *Man and land in Chinese history: an economic analysis* (Stanford, CA, 1986); Helen Dunstan, *State or merchant? Political economy and political process in 1740s China* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); R. Bin Wong, *China transformed: historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca, NY, 2000).

Outside China, the scale of its population was routinely noted from Marco Polo's accounts to those of seventeenth-century Jesuits. Key Enlightenment figures – Leibniz, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Smith – added praise for Chinese civil structures which managed to govern as one polity this remarkable mass of humans, while opening critique of its despotism and of an economy disinclined to foreign commerce. This is the tradition of European thought about China that Thomas Robert Malthus received and to some extent reproduced in his short *Essay on the principle of population* (1798), and which made a dedicated chapter on China seem both necessary and sensible when he vastly expanded his *Essay* into its long editions (1803, 1806, 1817, 1826). In 1798, he had signalled a particular use of, and for, China in a general history of population: 'a minute history of the customs of the lower Chinese would be of the greatest use, in ascertaining in what manner the checks to further population operate; what are the vices, and what are the distresses that prevent an increase of numbers beyond the ability of the country to support'.<sup>2</sup> After the great success of the first edition, Malthus set to researching just such 'minute histories' and writing his own chapter on China. Although we know now that in eighteenth-century China – as in Malthus's England – there was an increase in population, his *Essay* was not an account of accelerating growth (the enduring misunderstanding of Malthus's principle, and a much later Chinese problem). Instead, he sought to show his principle of population at work in a closed polity with an astonishingly large population whose land had long been fully cultivated. In that circumstance, Chinese fertility and mortality oscillated around a fixed capacity of the land (and sea) to yield food for humans, as his principle indicated it would, for better or worse.

This article examines Malthus's consideration of China in his own temporal context, rather than reading him backwards through centuries of critique and correction, through the confusions of 'Malthusianism'. How and why did Malthus write about China? What were the sources of information through which he could discern population trends and political economy in a part of the world so distant from him? What work did China perform in the *Essay* as a whole? And what was the wider context for Malthus's comparative consideration of China in the world?

Malthus's *Essay* was written and rewritten between 1798 and 1830; that is, between the first and second British empires.<sup>3</sup> This was a period when the Pacific region became internationally significant, and marked a turning point in British relations with China from the supplicant attempts to open Chinese markets in the 1790s to aggressive trading in opium by 1830. The East India Company's monopoly on China trade was both challenged and reasserted over these years, a matter germane to Malthus's major sources, written during the 1790s, and to his own immediate role as professor at the East India

<sup>2</sup> [Thomas Robert Malthus], *Essay on the principle of population* (London, 1798), pp. 56–7.

<sup>3</sup> See C. A. Bayly, *The imperial meridian* (London, 1989).

College after 1805. Most importantly, Malthus wrote about China in the aftermath, and from the accounts of, Lord Macartney's embassy from George III to the Qianlong emperor, which travelled between 1792 and 1794. The urgency of the question of trade with China fortuitously provided Malthus with detailed accounts and recent observations of Chinese land economy and population.

Writing c. 1800 also meant that Malthus wrote his world history of population at the point of the 'great divergence' between Chinese and European economies.<sup>4</sup> This invites the idea that one of Malthus's objectives in the *Essay* was to establish a Western/Eastern demographic and economic comparison. Thus, Lee and Feng's *One quarter of humanity: Malthusian mythology and Chinese realities, 1700–2000* challenges a 'received wisdom' about population in China, first established, they argue, by Malthus. This received wisdom posited a high fertility, high mortality Chinese demography against a low fertility, low mortality West.<sup>5</sup> Yet Richard Duchesne immediately checked Lee and Feng's characterization of Malthus as originator of the idea of a world divided into a restrained 'West' and an unrestrained 'East' (read China), against Malthus's own work. This comparison was not at all what Malthus actually communicated in the early nineteenth century, neither for China nor, especially, for Europe.<sup>6</sup> In short, and simply, for Malthus, the British demographic change to low fertility and low mortality was not yet apparent. He might have wished for this fertility transition, but it was not visible until much later in the nineteenth century.

At another level, Lee and Feng are quite right to claim that Malthus 'was one of the first social theorists to compare modern Western society to non-Western non-modern societies and to link the gap in affluence to specific population processes'.<sup>7</sup> Yet the mode and model of comparison they ascribe to Malthus is wanting. It was not a comparison of the newly emerging industrial economies (that he could barely discern) and older agrarian economies, with their associated patterns in the classic demographic transition model. Rather, Malthus compared land-based and organic economies of different kinds, along a spectrum of complexity from hunter-gatherers to commercial societies. It was as a stadial theorist that Malthus was also a comparativist. For Malthus, China was most interesting because it had maximized its agricultural capacity. In this regard, it was rather more than less like Britain. For Malthus, the most interesting comparison with fully cultivated and peopled China was not Europe or

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One quarter of humanity: Malthusian mythology and Chinese realities, 1700–2000* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Ricardo Duchesne, 'Malthus and the demographic systems of modern Europe and imperial China: a critique of Lee and Feng', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 35 (2003), pp. 534–42.

<sup>7</sup> Lee and Feng, *One quarter of humanity*, p. 16.

Britain at all, but North America, the great continent as yet ungardened and unfilled. It is constantly tempting to understand Malthus's *Essay* retrospectively, through mid-twentieth-century demographic transition ideas, but on its own terms and in its own time, the key dichotomy was not the West/the East but Old World/New World.

## II

Malthus's *Essay on the principle of population* has recently been re-read by Bashford and Chaplin within the context of his own colonizing world.<sup>8</sup> This accords with an historiography which places key political economists – Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, James Mill, John Stuart Mill – as actors in, and thinkers on, the British empire, a line of enquiry initiated by R. C. Mills early in the twentieth century, extended by Donald Winch in the mid-twentieth century, and more recently taking a post-colonial turn.<sup>9</sup> Bashford and Chaplin explore the context of debate on colonial and provincial costs and benefits, new colonization schemes, plantation wealth, and slave trading, and argue further that it is the specifics and the implications of late Enlightenment stadial theory that is important for a reassessment of Malthus's *Essay*, and especially for his chapters on the extra-European world.

The *Essay* was a 'universal history' in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, beginning with chapters on Aboriginal people in New Holland, native Americans in North and South America, and on Pacific Islanders. In Malthus's schema, they served to illustrate a first stage of economic and civilizational development; the principle of population at work in 'savage' or hunter-gatherer and 'barbarian' or what he often called shepherd societies.<sup>10</sup> Later geographies (and chapters) in Malthus's section on population in the 'lowest stages of civilization and in past times' analysed population and economies of Antiquity, Africa, Persia, India, Tibet, and China, while his next 'Book' studied commercial societies, (for him) Europe, beginning with Scandinavia.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Alison Bashford and Joyce E. Chaplin, *The new worlds of Thomas Robert Malthus: re-reading the principle of population* (Princeton, NJ, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Mills, *The colonization of Australia, 1829–1842* (London, 1915); Donald Winch, *Classical political economy and colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1965); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought* (Chicago, IL, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to empire: the rise of imperial liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Katherine Smits, 'John Stuart Mill on the Antipodes: settler violence against Indigenous peoples and the legitimacy of colonial rule', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54 (2008), pp. 1–15; Tony Ballantyne, 'The theory and practice of empire building: Edward Gibbon Wakefield and systematic colonisation', in Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie, eds., *The Routledge history of Western empires* (London, 2013); Duncan Bell, 'John Stuart Mill on colonies', *Political Theory*, 38 (2010), pp. 34–64.

<sup>10</sup> Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, chs. 3–5.

<sup>11</sup> T. R. Malthus, *Essay on the principle of population* (2nd edn, London, 1803), Books 1 and II.

A major objective of Malthus's long *Essay* was to demonstrate empirically how, in all these places and in all times, the human power of reproduction – the potential to double and double again – oscillated according to the availability of food. In almost all contexts, this potential to grow was regulated: fertility was necessarily limited, and mortality necessarily increased not just through natural means, but importantly through all kinds of governmental, educational, and economic interventions that differed over place, time, and to some extent on his stadial axis of apparent civilization. Malthus's most difficult question was thus not to explain population growth, but to explain the means by which the potential for growth was not, in fact, realized. For all societies, in the past and the present, the pressing question for him was always *how* the potential for reproduction was kept in check; a question that needed to be answered with researched precision, given the range of possible 'checks'.

The *Essay*, then, is a universal history in form, structure, and substance. This is what matters most in the international and intercontinental comparisons Malthus routinely made, and what makes sense of his chapter on China. It was carefully placed in the stadial sequence, though possibly less confidently and (for him) obviously than his chapters on New Holland, the Americas, or the South Sea. It followed a chapter on checks to population in Indostan and Tibet, and preceded chapters on checks to population in Ancient Greece and Rome. China was thus placed as the most economically advanced non-European civilization in the present, but one that Malthus, like his intellectual contemporaries, insisted on setting behind, and in some senses before, classical history.

China did not fit easily on this axis of commercial modernity and development. It was extra-European but was nonetheless typically considered part of the Old World, not the New. It was certainly not pre-commercial, yet nor was China 'civilized' in the sense of being an open economy, engaging in trade, within the law of nations, and with the rest of the commercial world. The irony is, however, that at the end of the eighteenth century, political economists, statesmen, and merchants in England only wished this were the case. Indeed, they were desperate for it to be so.

### III

Part of Malthus's difficulty was that he inherited more than a century of divided European scholarship on China. Early commentators assessed China's scientific, civic, and cultural civilization to match – at the very least – that of Europe. This is how Leibniz saw it, the major seventeenth-century source of European sinophilia: 'Now the Chinese Empire, which challenges Europe in cultivated area and certainly surpasses her in population, vies with us in many other ways in almost equal combat, so that now they win, now we.' Leibniz saw Europe and China as equivalent to the extent that they balanced 'the two

extremes of our continent'.<sup>12</sup> Over the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophers and British periodical writers engaged in a reassessment of Chinese governance and economy, some with high regard, others more critical, but in both respects there was a distancing of China from Leibniz's embracing image as the great polity that bounded the Eurasian continent, 'our continent'.<sup>13</sup> As Simon Kow has recently shown in his analysis of Leibniz, Bayle, and Montesquieu, China was a useful and even a common point of comparison, differentiation, and sometimes identification for early Enlightenment philosophers debating liberties, universalism, and the relative virtues and vices of republican, despotic, and monarchic states.<sup>14</sup> Much of this was about absolutist government and the possibilities and questionable desirability of enlightened despotism. China was deeply interesting, also, to the physiocrats' debate on land economy. For Quesnay, most notably, Chinese government was enduring and impressively stable precisely because it was a political system that accorded with natural laws and a natural order.<sup>15</sup> China's abundance and great population stood as an object lesson to Europeans who must recognize the limitations of their own land.<sup>16</sup>

Malthus's late eighteenth-century generation received two key ideas about China, its land, people, economy, and government: that it was superabundant and, simultaneously, that it was stationary. Both had implications for a principle of population and for a political economist concerned with poverty, wealth, and the value of labour. Almost all European writers on China commented on its prolific life. Montesquieu, for example: '[t]he climate of China is surprisingly favourable to the propagation of the human species', he wrote in *The spirit of laws*. 'The women are the most prolific in the whole world.'<sup>17</sup> David Hume famously disagreed with Montesquieu's signature climatic determinism,<sup>18</sup> as did Malthus in his first edition of the *Essay*. But Malthus relocated rather than

<sup>12</sup> Gottfried Leibniz, *Preface to the Novissima Sinica* (1697/9). See Patrick Riley, 'Leibniz's political and moral philosophy in the "Novissima Sinica"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60 (1999), pp. 217–39.

<sup>13</sup> Ashley Eva Millar, 'Revisiting the sinophilia/sinophobia dichotomy in the European Enlightenment through Adam Smith's "Duties of government"', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 38 (2010), pp. 716–37; William Christie, 'China in early Romantic periodicals', *European Romantic Review*, 27 (2016), pp. 25–38; Frederick G. Whelan, *Enlightenment political thought and non-Western societies* (London, 2009), pp. 30–1.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Kow, *China in early Enlightenment political thought* (London, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Gaarsmand Jacobsen, 'Physiocracy and the Chinese model', in Ying Ma and Hans-Michael Trautwein, eds., *Thoughts on economic development in China* (Abingdon, 2013), p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> James Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar: Qing guest ritual and the Macartney embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, 1995), p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The complete works of M. de Montesquieu* (4 vols., London, 1777), 'The spirit of laws', 1, p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Chinese have the greatest uniformity of character imaginable: though the air and climate in different parts of those vast dominions, admit of very considerable variations.' David Hume, 'Of national characters', in *Essays, moral, political, literary* (London, 1777), Part 1, Essay XXI. See also Whelan, *Enlightenment political thought*, pp. 29–37.

dismissed the idea of Chinese abundance and vitality: it was a different kind of Chinese fertility to which he accorded significance. Malthus recalled the French physiocrats' impressions of China, suggesting that it was not climatically induced women's fertility that mattered most, but the particular fertility of the soil, and the measures by which Chinese land was manured and cultivated: it was the most fertile country in the world, almost all its land was tilled, and much of it yielded two crops each year, he wrote, impressed.<sup>19</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the trope of China as superabundant was carried by British travellers to China and confirmed and repeated in their observations. Indeed, it was not unusual, before Malthus, to note an environmental limit to that profusion. Thus, when Lord Macartney led the embassy to China in 1793, he observed the fast-reproducing life around him: 'It would seem in this country everything that has life is multiplied to the highest degree.'<sup>20</sup> At that point, Macartney was writing about insects and not humans. Yet he was unwittingly anticipating just what Malthus was to say about human life in China: that it had reproduced to the highest level possible ('to the highest degree') in its particular environmental circumstances, that is, with all land, and some sea, cultivated to its maximum.

The second key received idea about China, seemingly inconsistent but in Malthus's scheme deeply related, concerned its economic, demographic, and cultural stasis. Retrospectively, we can observe an eighteenth-century population increase in China, estimated by Lavelly and Wong to have doubled over the one hundred years between 1700 and 1800.<sup>21</sup> But in the eighteenth century itself, European commentators generally presumed China's population and economy to have been as large as it was for centuries or even thousands of years. It was Adam Smith who most influentially embedded this idea into British discussion: 'China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in world', he wrote in *Wealth of nations*. 'It seems, however, to have been long stationary. Marco Polo, who visited it more than five hundred years ago, describes its cultivation, industry, and populousness, almost in the same terms in which they are described by travellers in the present times.' Smith took some care to indicate that while Chinese population might not increase, nor did it decrease:

China, however, though it may perhaps stand still, does not seem to go backwards. Its towns are nowhere deserted by their inhabitants. The lands which had once been

<sup>19</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1798), p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> See Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*, p. 86; Andrew March, *The idea of China* (New York, NY, 1974), pp. 23–45.

<sup>21</sup> William Lavelly and R. Bin Wong, 'Revising the Malthusian narrative: the comparative study of population dynamics in late imperial China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 (1998), p. 718. Lavelly and Wong rely mainly on data from McEvedy and Jones: Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of world population history* (London, 1978).

cultivated are nowhere neglected. The same or very nearly the same annual labour must therefore continue to be performed, and the funds destined for maintaining it must not, consequently, be sensibly diminished. The lowest class of labourers, therefore, notwithstanding their scanty subsistence, must some way or another make shift to continue their race so far as to keep up their usual numbers.<sup>22</sup>

For Adam Smith, despite its ‘full complement of riches’, the wages of Chinese labourers were perpetually low and its poverty great.<sup>23</sup>

It was Adam Smith’s China that Malthus reproduced most directly in the 1798 edition, even if he repeatedly wondered in the text about the accuracy of various claims and the insufficiency of evidence. It was certainly Smith’s version of China that Malthus taught to his East India College students. *Wealth of nations* was their core text, and Malthus required his students to follow closely Smith’s arguments, setting questions on every chapter and on most of the precise instances that Smith presented. In Smith’s chapter on the wages of labour, Malthus set the question: ‘Why are the wages of labour low in China though supposed to be the richest country in the world?’ Notes from one of his students provide Malthus’s own answer: ‘Malthus speaking of China says “The effects of the encouragement of marriage on the poor is to keep the reward of labour as low as possible & consequently to press them down to the most abject state of poverty.”’<sup>24</sup> Generations of East India College students, then, learned about China from Adam Smith via Malthus. And yet, while Malthus clearly received and accepted the idea of superabundant-but-stationary China directly from Smith (and from Montesquieu and Quesnay before him), when it came to revising and expanding his bestselling 1798 edition of the *Essay on the principle of population*, he sought other sources altogether.

#### IV

Perhaps the major distinction between the 1798 edition of the *Essay* and all the editions thereafter was that Malthus dramatically shifted his criteria for authoritative information and his method for acknowledgement. It is plain that in writing a universal history, he sought and credited more highly the observations from travellers, explorers, missionaries, and statesmen on the ground in

<sup>22</sup> Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (1776), ed. Edwin Cannan (New York, NY, 1994), ‘On the wages of labour’, book 1, ch. 8, p. 83. See Ryan Patrick Hanley, ‘The “wisdom of the state”: Adam Smith on China and Tartary’, *American Political Science Review*, 108 (2014), pp. 1–12.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Wealth of nations*, ed. Cannan, book 1, ch. 8, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> Inverarity Manuscript, ch. 8, p. 30, question 10, Cambridge University Library, Marshall. c.35. J. D. Inverarity’s copy of Adam Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (Edinburgh, 1829), holds extensive interleaved notes from Malthus’s lectures, comprising questions on the text set by Malthus and his prescribed answers. Inverarity was one of Malthus’s students at the East India College. See also J. M. Pullen, ‘Notes from Malthus: the Inverarity Manuscript’, *History of Political Economy*, 13 (1981), pp. 794–811.



different parts of the world than stay-at-home political philosophers.<sup>25</sup> Throughout his new book on Africa, the Americas, the South Sea, Central Asia, and India, he drew extensively on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel accounts, and he cited them meticulously in footnotes, typically three or four to a page (in his first edition there are none). The chapter on China was no exception. There were three sources on which Malthus relied, each written by people who had been there. From these, he built up a picture of Chinese agriculture, fertility, mortality, the productivity of the soil, and the various measures of reason and custom which affected each of these variables; the particular checks which in his view were most and least in operation in the Chinese empire, and over that vast area and population.

The first and most important source for Malthus was Sir George Staunton's three volume *Authentic account of an embassy from the king of Great Britain to the emperor of China*, published in 1797.<sup>26</sup> Staunton had accompanied Lord Macartney's embassy to China in 1792, as had his young son, who famously brought – and refined on the way – valuable language skills and served in the difficult and critical role of interpreter.<sup>27</sup> Macartney, on behalf of George III, and speaking also for the East India Company, sought to open trade with China, and relax the strict geographical limitation to Canton-based trade. But observation was very much on the embassy's agenda as well; delegates like Staunton were charged, not least by Joseph Banks, to observe agriculture and horticulture, land and habitations, population and customs.<sup>28</sup> Malthus benefited greatly from Macartney and Staunton's close descriptions of all these. The embassy returned to Britain in 1794, and George Staunton wrote up his account, publishing it more or less simultaneously with Malthus's first edition in 1798. But it was not until 1803 that Malthus used the work for his new chapter on China. Staunton's *Account* reflected both what he and his fellow travellers witnessed on the long journey and what he had already received through previous European visions of China, mercantile, missionary, economic, and philosophical. Importantly, it was mainly from Staunton that Malthus gained the latest data about the extent of China's population. He included in his Appendix, a 'Table of the population and extent of China within the Great Wall. Taken in round numbers from the statements of Chow-ta-Zhin.' 'Chow-ta-Zhin' was Qiao Renjie 喬人傑, the Tianjin salt daotai, or circuit

<sup>25</sup> Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> Sir George Staunton, *An authentic account of an embassy from the king of Great Britain to the emperor of China* (3 vols., London, 1797).

<sup>27</sup> For the Macartney embassy, the Stauntons, and interpretation, see Henrietta Harrison, 'A faithful interpreter? Li Zhibiao and the 1793 Macartney embassy to China', *International History Review* (2018) DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2018.1516685.

<sup>28</sup> Banks also selected and arranged the sequence of engravings in Staunton's *Account*. 'Papers concerning publication of the account of Lord Macartney's embassy to China, ca 1797', Mitchell Library, Sydney, papers of Sir Joseph Banks, series 62, doc. 1–4. Staunton was Fellow of Royal Society from 1797.

intendant. As such he would have had access to good data, though the accuracy of that data, and in any case Qiao Renjie's transparency to Macartney, is less than clear. Nonetheless, from this official Chinese source, Staunton reported China's total population to be an astonishing 333 million.<sup>29</sup>

This was certainly confirmation of China's proliferating life. Yet for George III, Macartney, Staunton, and the East India Company alike, the Chinese self-definition of superabundance annoyingly shaped its commercial sensibility as well. East India Company traders especially were familiar with Chinese declarations that the celestial empire had all it required within its own territory. There was little need for external commerce. In other words, the British needed Chinese trade more than the reverse. And this is just what the Qianlong emperor told George III in his dismissive letter of 1793, making sure that the British knew that his empire had no particular need for trade with outsiders; that he simply indulged the East India Company's presence in Canton and the ambassadors sent by kings on the other side of world (or at least so he postured): 'Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders.'<sup>30</sup> It was an ill-received message and a turning point in English–Chinese relations. A mid-eighteenth-century cultural sympathy, evident in the popularity of Chinoiserie, was diminishing in the face of three main factors, James Hevia argues in his study of the Macartney embassy: first by English annoyance at China's proclaimed self-sufficiency; second, that this was not reciprocal, that is the British economy *was* more dependent on Chinese trade than the other way around; and third, irritation at Chinese disinterest in accommodating English, or broadly European, manners and customs. The Macartney embassy clearly exacerbated rather than resolved each of these English problems.<sup>31</sup> It might have been a failed enterprise on diplomatic grounds, but for those eager for information on China, like Malthus, the published accounts of the journey were treasures.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, p. 467. See also Malthus, *Essay* (1803). 'Chow-ta-Zhin, a man of business and precision, cautious in advancing facts, and proceeding generally upon official documents, delivered, at the request of the Ambassador, a statement to him, taken from one of the public offices in the capital, and printed in the Appendix to this work, of the inhabitants of the fifteen ancient provinces of China' (p. 146). For Qiao Renjie, see Matthew W. Mosca, *From frontier policy to foreign policy: the question of India and the transformation of geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA, 2013), pp. 149–54; Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*, p. 90. Thanks to Henrietta Harrison for discussion on 'Chow-ta-zhin'.

<sup>30</sup> Qianlong emperor letter to George III in Elizabeth H. Chang, ed., *British travel writing from China, 1798–1901*, I: *Early encounters, 1798–1824* (London, 2010). See also Henrietta Harrison, 'The Qianlong emperor's letter to George III and the early twentieth-century origins of ideas about traditional China's foreign relations', *American Historical Review*, 122 (2017), pp. 680–701.

<sup>31</sup> Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*, pp. 72–3.

<sup>32</sup> Maxine Berg, 'Britain, industry and perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, "useful knowledge" and the Macartney embassy to China 1792–1794', *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006), pp. 269–88.

The second source on China used by Malthus was also contemporary to his own book: John Meares's *Voyages made in the years 1788 and 1789, from China to the north west coast of America*, published in 1790.<sup>33</sup> Mariner and rogue trader, John Meares had formed the Northwest America Company in 1785 to promote fur trading between the north-west coast and China. He did so under the radar of the East India Company; that is to say illegally ignoring the monopoly on British trade in the Pacific that the Company held. In the 1780s, Meares occasionally wintered in Canton, designing and driving his plans for a new cross-Pacific trade. Eventually, his activities alerted the Spanish on the west coast of North America, and it was only the Nootka Convention that averted war between Britain and Spain over the matter. This is partly why, when Meares published his *Voyages* in 1790, his account gained some considerable notoriety. Meares's intention was to paint a picture of a wholly new kind of trading network in the Pacific, one in which the East India Company wielded less power and one which depended on China opening itself to more and freer commerce. Free global trade was everything to Meares.

It must afford very animating satisfaction to every patriot mind, that the trade and commerce of this country are gradually extending themselves over every part of the globe ... every corner of the earth where the winds blow and the sea rolls its waves, will, sooner or later, be explored, to increase the wealth, the power, and the prosperity of the British Empire.<sup>34</sup>

Malthus read Meares's florid account of the British empire poised to expand in the Pacific and in the East, himself assessing that expansion in cooler and calmer terms.

Malthus's third source was the published letters and reports of Jesuit missionaries, compiled by the French Jesuit Charles le Gobien (1653–1708) and published by Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743). Twenty-four volumes of these letters were in the Malthus family library, probably acquired by his father. Gobien and Du Halde, rather like Malthus himself, were not travellers, but vicarious, if careful, collectors of others' travel accounts. In the case of the English economist, the *Essay on the principle of population* was a compendium of dozens of travelogues and memoirs. In the case of the French Jesuits, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* were many volumes of letters and reports from Jesuits all over the world, compiled and reprinted, including from those based in China. Du Halde's derivative *General history of China* was itself a compendium of seventeen Jesuit missionaries' reports, published in Paris in 1735 in four volumes.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> John Meares, *Voyages made in the years 1788 and 1789, from China to the north west coast of America to which are prefixed, and introductory narrative of a voyage performed in 1786, from Bengal, in the ship Nootka; observations on the probably existence of a North West Passage; and some account of the trade between the north west coast of America and China; and the latter country and Great Britain* (London, 1790).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxvii.

<sup>35</sup> *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères (de la Compagnie de Jesus)* (Paris, 1780). Twenty-four volumes of this edition are in the Malthus Collection, Old Library, Jesus

The Jesuit presence in China had been strong through the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, after Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci's arrival in Macau in the late 1500s. From 1685, Louis XIV sent his own mission of Jesuits to China, in competitive response to the Portuguese and it was this French group whose letters and reports Gobien and Du Halde collected and published. Over the eighteenth century, however, the Jesuits were in decline in China, succumbing to the so-called 'rites controversy'. The Kangxi emperor and the Yongzheng emperor successively responded to the Holy See's condemnation of Confucian rituals and banned Jesuit and Catholic missions. The Qianlong emperor, whom Macartney and Staunton met in his very late age, continued the policy of non-recognition of Jesuit mission and Roman Catholicism. In the middle of the century, he had amplified this anti-Catholic diplomatic stance to an anti-European trade policy as well, limiting foreign trade to a Canton base, to be conducted solely through the Hong merchants. One implication of the suppression of Jesuits in China was that the East India Company and other European trading companies lost the Jesuits as cultural intermediaries, and importantly as interpreters.<sup>36</sup>

Considered together, then, some of Malthus's sources on China were up to the minute, while others were more than a century old. Two whole pages of Malthus's *Essay*, for example, is a translated quotation of a letter written by the Jesuit Premare, originally dated 1 November 1700.<sup>37</sup> And yet this material did not figure in Malthus's *Essay* as redundant in any way. Nor did it seem to describe an historical China for Malthus, a context unrelated to his present. Characteristically, in fact, old sources rarely signified 'out-dated' information for Malthus: they could just as easily carry especially authoritative data.

Malthus's comfortable use of century-old Jesuit material signals several important things. First, it is characteristic of his desire to deploy first-hand accounts if he possibly could, for his new expanded study. In this way, he did not write his universal history as 'conjectural', as an extrapolation of classical texts, or as derivative of other contemporary writers in the earlier stadial tradition. Wherever he could, his new history was to be empirical, a description of facts on the ground, drawn from original observations. This is why old Jesuit letters from 1700 were as valuable to him as the recent Staunton account from his own time. Similarly, in other chapters, he drew on seventeenth-century French

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College, Cambridge, MC.1.13–36. Staunton had been educated at the Jesuit College in Toulouse. There, he read the extensive Jesuit writings on China.

<sup>36</sup> Sean Golden, 'From the Society of Jesus to the East India Company: a case study in the social history of translation', in Marilyn Gaddis Rose, ed. *Beyond the Western tradition: essay on translation* (Binghamton, NY, 2000), pp. 199–215; A. C. Ross, *A vision betrayed: the Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* (Edinburgh, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), pp. 152–3.

Jesuits in New France as authoritative as the mid-eighteenth-century work of Benjamin Franklin on North America.<sup>38</sup>

Second, this lack of distinction between recent and older observations signals something about Malthus's view on population itself. He did not consider population data secured from old texts as out-dated because he did not comprehend a world in which population necessarily increased, let alone at an accelerating rate; that was a later nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> Rather, population oscillated, and in different ways in different political, and what we would now call environmental, contexts. He could easily imagine, for example, the population of England as remaining steady or only increasingly slowly; and, as we have seen, the population of China was presumed to be more or less stationary. In no sense did Malthus expect that populations would grow, except in environmental circumstances that permitted it; where fertile lands remained available for cultivation, notably in North America.

With his three key sources in hand – Staunton's account of an official ambassadorial voyage, the Jesuit letters, and Meares's account of a most irregular voyage – along with received Enlightenment wisdom about China's mode of government, and its apparent economic and demographic stasis, Malthus proceeded to consider China.

## V

Malthus began his chapter with an expression of astonishment. Could China's population really be as large as recent reports indicated? Was Staunton's estimate of 333 million people credible? Malthus set about verifying the claims and checking the facts, insofar as he – or anyone – could. Malthus had received from Smith the information that China's population was huge, but Malthus had the benefit of the extensive observations made by the Macartney expedition. It was much more reliable data that seemed to confirm, yet again, a China that was superabundant and yet did not increase in population or wealth, but which stayed stationary. Staunton vouched for his own source, Chow-ta Zhin: 'a man of business and precision, cautious in advancing facts, and proceeding generally upon official documents, delivered, at the request of the Ambassador [sic], a statement to him'. The table of population from which Malthus drew the 333 million figure for China was 'taken from one of the public offices in the capital', that is, drawn from official court data.<sup>40</sup> And Staunton himself detailed some of the processes by which this massive population in China was reckoned, built up from provincial taxing and census procedures. 'The number of

<sup>38</sup> For Malthus's use of travel accounts and first-hand observation, see Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, chs. 3–5.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Connelly, *Fatal misconception: the struggle to control world population* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Alison Bashford, *Global population: history, geopolitics, and life on Earth* (New York, NY, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, p. 388.

individuals is regularly taken in each division of a district by a tithing-man', he explained. 'Those returns are collected by officers resident so near as to be capable of correcting any gross mistake; and all the returns are lodged in the great register at Pekin.'<sup>41</sup> Given that the first census of England and Wales was undertaken in 1801, such detail was highly topical.

Malthus tested Staunton's estimate against the claims of the Jesuits. He received a very specific headcount from them: 11,052,872 families and 59,788,364 men able to bear arms. The method of assessing total populations from the number of men in the military was common enough in Europe and often used elsewhere. Indeed, Malthus made his own population estimates this way, claiming that as a rule it was safe to do so at the ratio of 1:4.<sup>42</sup> And yet, Malthus was quick to state in respect to China that any manner of people were unlikely to be reckoned in such an equation. Counts of military men and even 'households' included neither princes nor courtly members, mandarins nor discharged soldiers, the literati nor doctors, youths nor children.<sup>43</sup> In other words, while this number of people seemed extraordinarily large, the full count was likely larger still. In addressing Staunton's estimates, Malthus was also careful about how he and others accounted for slaves.<sup>44</sup>

Allowing for the fact, Malthus wrote, that both the superior and the inferior were excepted from the Jesuit's count, Staunton's estimate of 333 million more or less accorded with their work, incredible though this seemed. Staunton had written that the number was 'so prodigious as to stagger belief'.<sup>45</sup> Malthus concurred, and no wonder: the census of 1801 held England and Wales to be only 8.9 million, and Scotland, 1.6 million.<sup>46</sup> Naturally, Malthus explained, China's vast population corresponded to its vast area. But even so, it was almost incomprehensibly dense. Staunton went to some trouble to estimate the area of China: 'eight times the size of France', he wrote, noting that 'every square mile in China contains, upon an average, about one-third more inhabitants, being upwards of three hundred, than are found upon an equal quantity of land, also upon an average, in the most populous country in Europe'. Even that fact was authorized: 'The extent of the provinces is ascertained by astronomical observations, as well as by admeasurement.' Density, in other words, was the point, not just net population.<sup>47</sup> This was a study in carrying capacity.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 388–9.

<sup>42</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 156.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>44</sup> Slaves are to be counted within the household, Malthus stated. Malthus here was extending David Hume's commentary on slaves, their reproduction, and methods for counting households, an engagement with Hume most fully undertaken in his chapter on Africa. For Malthus, slavery, and Africa, see Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, pp. 178–80.

<sup>45</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, pp. 388–9.

<sup>46</sup> E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 534.

<sup>47</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, pp. 388–9.

Again and again, Malthus and his sources stated that it was not only land that carried humans: the literal carrying capacity of China included water. For Malthus, this made the 333 million count a conservative one, since it seemed to be territorially reckoned, and did not include, he noted, ‘the great multitude living either on the sea, or on rivers in barks’.<sup>48</sup> Meares also wrote of the great number of people who lived on the river in Canton, and stated that such water-dwellers needed to be added to the total population count in China. ‘The river of Canton is supposed to be inhabited, if I may so express myself, by between sixty and seventy thousand people, who live on the water.’ For Meares, the population of the Chinese empire was likely so great that every effort should be made to ‘get an entire possession of the China market’.<sup>49</sup> The ‘prodigious population of China’ was one massive market for the consumption of furs.<sup>50</sup>

## VI

In their account of Malthus and later ‘Malthusian’ assessments of China, demographic historians James Lee and Wang Feng are at pains to show that Malthus wrote China up in damning terms, a place doomed to famine. This is the enduring Malthusian myth about China, they claim.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is rather more an enduring myth about Malthus. Like Staunton, Malthus presented a mixed picture of China. The population *was* almost impossibly large, but Malthus immediately remarked upon the structures and cultures that kept such a massive population functioning: ‘a grand and curious spectacle of so large a proportion of the whole human race, connected together in one great system of polity’.<sup>52</sup> He received this in part from the physiocratic rendition of China, and in part from an impressed Staunton:

After every reasonable allowance, however, for occasional mistakes, and partial exaggerations in the returns of Chinese population, the ultimate result exhibits to the mind a grand and curious spectacle of so large a proportion of the whole human race, connected together in one great system of polity, submitting quietly, and through so considerable an extent of country, to one great sovereign; and uniform in their laws, their manners, and their language; but differing essentially in each of these respects, from every other portion of mankind.<sup>53</sup>

Far from dismissive or derogatory, the first substantive section of Malthus’s chapter was an extremely positive reading of Chinese agricultural efficiency and productivity. Even in his first *Essay* he had been impressed: ‘In China it is said that the soil in some of the provinces is so fertile as to produce two crops

<sup>48</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, p. xcii.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxxxvi.

<sup>51</sup> Lee and Feng, *One quarter of humanity*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Staunton, *Account*. Reprinted in Malthus.

<sup>53</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, p. 389.

of rice in the year without dressing. None of the lands in England will answer to this description.<sup>54</sup> And in the long 1803 edition, he drew on Jesuit reports of 'plenty', what Malthus's cited as Du Halde's 'chapter on plenty'.<sup>55</sup>

In accounting for the means by which such a large population could be produced and sustained, Malthus emphasized the high esteem in which cultivation was held: it was an honoured enterprise. He recounted the tradition of the emperor himself symbolically ploughing every spring festival, 'in order to animate the husbandman by his own example', he wrote, 'and the mandarins of every city perform the same ceremony'. The emperor in Du Halde's time, Malthus noted, had an 'uncommon regard for husbandmen', and since the Chinese government was patriarchal, and the emperor venerated as father, such symbolic honours had a powerful effect.<sup>56</sup> The impressive industry and the economy of the Chinese in improving, watering, and cultivating their land escaped neither the Jesuits nor the Macartney embassy. And it did not escape Malthus.

Malthus reported how Chinese land was utilized and not wasted, with little stock, few meadow lands, and minimal fallow. In part, this was because of subdivisions into small shares.<sup>57</sup> There were no commons, he observed. Every possible area produced food for humans, noting the Chinese method of raising crops of vegetables 'upon the water and on marshy grounds'. Malthus reprinted Staunton directly on this matter, the kind of long verbatim quotation from sources that is common in the *Essay*:

The whole surface of the empire is, with trifling exceptions, dedicated to the production of food for man alone. There is no meadow, and very little pasture, nor are fields cultivated in oats, beans, or turnips, for the support of cattle of any kind. Few parks or pleasure grounds are seen, excepting those belonging to the Emperor. Little land is taken up for roads, which are few and narrow, the chief communication being by water. There are no commons; or lands suffered to lie waste by the neglect, or the caprice, or for the sport, of great proprietors. No arable land lies fallow.<sup>58</sup>

Clearly, the distinction with a rapidly changing English landscape was implied. The British came off rather worse than the Chinese, in all these respects. They were wasteful in land economy. The Chinese were not. Part of their economy lay in the prioritizing of cultivation for human food, not stock feed. And here we need to recall Malthus as reader and teacher of Adam Smith, who had argued that cultivating crops for direct human consumption was more economical than growing stock, 'a corn field of moderate fertility, produces a much

<sup>54</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1798), ch. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 149.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>58</sup> Staunton, *Account*, III, pp. 386–7. In drawing from accounts such as that of Staunton, Malthus was normally meticulous in his citations. But in this chapter, almost an entire page of Staunton was reprinted verbatim, and although containing a footnote, was unusually not in quotation marks.



greater quantity of food for man, than the best pasture of equal extent'.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese seemed to be putting into practice what Adam Smith claimed in theory. This much was impressive.

While remarking repeatedly on China's agricultural efficiency and its very large population, Malthus only ever saw its economy as stationary over the long term. Yet unlike Smith, Malthus was most interested in *how* populations of any size and density came to be stationary. What stopped China's population from doubling and doubling again? 'The more difficult, as well as the more interesting part of the inquiry, is to trace the immediate causes which stop its further progress.' What exactly keeps the numbers down? Or, as Malthus put it, 'What are the kinds of restraint?' This empirical question, asked repeatedly in the *Essay*, was always the point when Malthus turned from analysis of soil and its possible improvement to analysis of natural and cultural interventions into fertility and mortality, life and death.

## VII

There was a particular pattern of nuptiality in China that Malthus recapitulated from earlier sources. Despite the good soil and impressive industry, cultural encouragement to marry was strong in China: people married too young. There was a 'general prevalence of early marriages'. Fertility was thus high and as he put it 'wretchedness is the result'.<sup>60</sup> This correlation between high fertility and poverty in imperial China is the element of the 'Malthusian narrative' that historical demographers and economic historians have sought most strongly to correct. Lavelly and Wong have shown us that fertility rates in eighteenth-century China were no higher than in eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>61</sup> And yet, while the correlation between high fertility and poverty was certainly Malthus's intellectual focus, it was hardly his invention. In Montesquieu, he read about near universal marriage in a statement that was more or less his own principle of population: 'Wherever a place is found in which two persons can live commodiously, there they enter into marriage. Nature has a sufficient propensity to it, when unrestrained by the difficulty of subsistence.'<sup>62</sup> Staunton also made this observation of inhabitants along the Pei-ho: 'Nor was their poverty owing the bareness of their lands, which their industry fertilized; but human population was too crowded to admit such a portion of ground to each family as could supply all the comforts of life.'<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Smith, *Wealth of nations*, ed. Cannan, book 1, ch. 11, 'Of the rent of land', p. 170. Staunton also referred to this passage from Smith in his *Account*, III, p. 361.

<sup>60</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), pp. 151, 153.

<sup>61</sup> Lavelly and Wong, 'Revising the Malthusian narrative', p. 714.

<sup>62</sup> Montesquieu, *Complete works*, 'The spirit of laws', II, p. 128. See Jacques Pereira, *Montesquieu et la Chine* (Paris, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> 'The early marriages of men in easy circumstances have been already mentioned; with the poor, marriage is a measure of prudence, because the children, particularly the sons, are bound

Malthus asserted, from his sources, that in China marriage was encouraged in part in order to perpetuate the 'sacrifices in the temple of their father'. People were driven by an anxiety, Malthus noted, 'less the family should become extinct, and the ancestors be deprived of the honours and duties they are entitled to from their descendants'.<sup>64</sup> Staunton and Malthus both insisted that almost everyone married for this reason, especially almost all women, even if there was no prospect of sustenance. This was China's weak preventive check, although Malthus did qualify this claim to some extent: fertility was partly reduced by a certain number of unmarried men: literary bachelors, some soldiers, some courtiers. Still, as he saw it, this benefit was offset by early marriage and by the tendency for slaves in China to reproduce excessively. This latter idea he took from Du Halde, the slaves in households contributing to the 'prodigious multitude'.<sup>65</sup>

Incorrectly in retrospect, Malthus repeated the eighteenth-century truism that in China there was altogether too much reproduction and not enough active checking of marriage and thus fertility. And there lay the production of poverty, Malthus argued. The number of early marriages, the number of offspring, and thus of labourers, had the effect of keeping the 'reward of labour as low as possible, and consequently to press them down to the most abject state of poverty'. The poor, he learned from Staunton, were 'reduced to the use of vegetable food, with a very rare and scanty relish of any animal substance'.<sup>66</sup> Adam Smith had written something very similar:

The subsistence which they find there is so scanty that they are eager to fish up the nastiest garbage thrown overboard from any European ship. Any carrion, the carcase of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome food to the people of other countries.<sup>67</sup>

Smith's point was that Chinese prosperity had led to an overpopulation of labourers and thus wage competition.

Historians take Malthus to task for his depiction of the Chinese poor.<sup>68</sup> Yet poverty was hardly a solely Chinese phenomenon for Malthus. The entire *Essay* was a study in the production of poverty, countering Smith's study of the production of wealth. He was as quick to document great hunger in Sweden as China, for example, where people were forced to eat meals made

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to maintain their parents. Whatever is strongly recommended, and generally practised, is at length considered as a kind of religious duty; and this union, as such, takes place whenever, there is the least prospect of subsistence for a future family. That prospect, however, is not always realized; and children ... are sometimes abandoned by the wretched authors of their being.' Staunton, *Account*, II, pp. 334–5.

<sup>64</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *Wealth of nations*, ed. Cannan, book 1, ch. 8, 'On the wages of labour', p. 82.

<sup>68</sup> Lee and Feng, *One quarter of humanity*.

from the inner bark of firs.<sup>69</sup> And contrary to his reputation, Malthus was deeply concerned for the poor and about poverty, constantly describing the great distress of the English poor, the Irish poor, and the Scottish poor, and on occasion engaging in self-critique of his own class and those above him in rank, status, and wealth, for permitting and even creating the poverty he witnessed around him. The idea that he described a particular poverty in and for China derives from a retrospective fitting of Malthus into a twentieth-century theory of demographic transition, and critique of that theory.

Notwithstanding the poverty he documented there was still – necessarily for Malthus – natural and human means by which fertility and mortality were controlled. In New Zealand and in Japan, he nominated war between men; for Aboriginal people in New Holland, women’s fertility was kept low by violence, as well as the stresses of gathering. In China, Malthus and all his sources signalled infanticide as the key check. And so have most subsequent historians.<sup>70</sup> Lee and Feng set out the significance of female infanticide and the resultant sex ratios, in opposition to Malthus’s supposed focus on famine. Yet it is quite clear that Malthus also considered infanticide the major factor in China’s demographic profile.<sup>71</sup>

It is unsurprising that Malthus emphasized the significance of infanticide in China. It was one of the standard and enduring claims made in European and Chinese sources alike, and based, from all accounts, in a reasonable assessment of fact. In Peking, he read from Staunton, about 2,000 infants were exposed every year.<sup>72</sup> Smith wrote that ‘[m]arriage is encouraged in China, not by the profitableness of children, but by the liberty of destroying them. In all great towns several are every night exposed in the street, or drowned like puppies in the water.’<sup>73</sup> The point is not the fact that Malthus wrote about infanticide, but whether and how infanticide was conceptualized as a population check. It is notable that many of Malthus’s French and British sources already linked the practice to population control impelled by existing poverty. The response to real poverty, Staunton had reported, was the exposure of infants. Females were ‘chiefly exposed’. And this, he considered, ‘implied the excess of population beyond the means of subsistence’. And, in so many words: ‘In general there seems to be no other bounds to Chinese populousness, than those which the necessity of subsistence may put to it.’ The Jesuit Premare also detailed infanticide as a precise response to the lack of food, itself a result of population density vis-à-vis land, that is, overpopulation. Mothers expose many of their children, Premare reported, and daughters were often sold. And yet still, in famine times, millions of people perished in China. ‘The

<sup>69</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803).

<sup>70</sup> Lavelly and Wong, ‘Revising the Malthusian narrative’, p. 735.

<sup>71</sup> Lee and Feng, *One quarter of humanity*, p. 7.

<sup>72</sup> Staunton, *Account*, II, p. 337.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, *Wealth of nations*, ed. Cannan, book 1, ch. 8, ‘On the wages of labour’, p. 83.

country, however extensive and fertile it may be, is not sufficient to support its inhabitants.<sup>74</sup> Malthus's principle was anticipated again.

Lavelly and Wong suggest that Malthus was simply unable to 'conceive of infanticide as other than a desperate act',<sup>75</sup> and yet this fails to capture his oftentimes straightforward empirical description of the facts about infanticide, as he saw them. Infanticide certainly arose elsewhere in the *Essay*; in the chapters on France, on Aborigines in New Holland, on native Americans, in Tahiti, and in classical Greece. And even though Malthus is often taken to task for a moralizing Christian view, it is rather more striking that his accounts of infanticide were not framed by the outrage we might expect. So much so that at one point in his text, he felt bound to explain to his reader that he was not *advocating* infanticide, but simply describing what took place.<sup>76</sup>

### VIII

There is an East India Company context that surrounds Malthus's chapter on China. Malthus was professor of political economy at the East India College from 1805 to his death in 1834. Most of the students he taught proceeded to become writers for the Company in Bengal, Madras, or Bombay, but a handful were also sent to Canton.<sup>77</sup> The younger George Staunton became a writer for the Company in Canton from 1798, a valuable asset given his experience with Lord Macartney's embassy, and one of the few Englishmen relatively fluent in Chinese. Later a very significant orientalist scholar and translator (Malthus used his work), the younger Staunton joined Lord Amherst's 1816 embassy, which represented both the crown and the East India Company.

Turning to trade in East Asia and in the Pacific was part of British regrouping after the American War.<sup>78</sup> In this context, Adam Smith had made a point of decriing Chinese commerce as restricted and static.<sup>79</sup> The tight regulations on entry, the seasonal limits on trade in Canton, the keeping of outsiders outside, the mandatory trading with and through the Hong merchants: all this constrained the exchange of tea, porcelain, and silks for tin and furs. John Meares had more reason than Adam Smith to bemoan Chinese

<sup>74</sup> Staunton, *Account*, II; Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 151, citing Jean Baptiste Duhalde, *The general history of China*, trans. R. Brookes (2 vols., London, 1738), I, p. 277; Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 152, quoting Premare in *Lettres édifiantes*, xvi, p. 394.

<sup>75</sup> Lavelly and Wong, 'Revising the Malthusian narrative', p. 735.

<sup>76</sup> See Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, pp. 147, 158.

<sup>77</sup> Between 1808 and 1829, perhaps ten writers trained at Haileybury were sent to the East India Company Chinese Establishment. Patricia James papers, Old Library, Jesus College Cambridge, box 6, IV: 1, p. 4429.

<sup>78</sup> The East India Company sales of tea was about 5 million pounds in 1780. See David Porter, 'A peculiar but uninteresting nation: China and the discourse of commerce in eighteenth-century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33 (2000), p. 182.

<sup>79</sup> See Peter J. Kitson, *Forging romantic China: Sino-British cultural exchange, 1760-1840* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 128.

restrictions, and Malthus learned from him the various practices as experienced on the ground:

All goods entered at Canton pay a very exorbitant duty in the first instance: and if their owner should exercise the power which he has of objecting to the Houang merchant's price, he nevertheless cannot re-embark a single article of them; as merchandize once landed at the port of Canton, can never be removed from thence, but by the native trader who may purchase it.<sup>80</sup>

This restriction on free trade was accompanied by restriction of movement: 'All Europeans are prohibited from entering the city of Canton; and if any should persist in paying it a clandestine visit, as some have done, they are severely bamboozed and turned back again.'<sup>81</sup> And yet trade was growing, and that was why the likes of John Meares (and the East India Company itself) continued to tolerate the 'tyrannical' restrictions, and to work around them and under them, where possible. Meares wrote in 1798 that exports of Cornish tin to China over the previous five years had averaged 2,000 tons, with a value of £130,000, whereas the whole previous East India Company trade had a total export of £100,000.<sup>82</sup> Despite the failure of the Macartney embassy, and later the Amherst embassy (1816), there was a strong sense in which trade across the Pacific was poised to explode. As Meares put it:

The riches which the immense Southern Pacific Ocean offers to the adventurous spirit of trade, is far beyond the present conceptions of it; and the empires of China and Japan may not only become new sources of commercial advantage to this kingdom, in the exports of her manufactures, but prove the means of increasing her maritime strength; and thereby aggrandizing, in the most ample manner, the power of the British Empire.<sup>83</sup>

Revisionist histories of the Macartney expedition have foregrounded not the difference between the two empires, but the similarities between Qing China and Georgian Britain; equivalent kinds of governance and choreographies of statecraft.<sup>84</sup> Yet it was over Malthus's lifetime that the British–China trading relationship shifted. In the 1790s, when Malthus was initially writing his *Essay*, the Qianlong emperor felt able to dismiss Lord Macartney and George III in no uncertain terms. China had all the products it needed within its own borders and

no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign *hongs* should be established at Canton, so that

<sup>80</sup> Meares, *Voyages*, p. lxxvii.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xci.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxciii.

<sup>84</sup> Kitson, *Forging romantic China*; Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*.

your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence.<sup>85</sup>

By the year of Malthus's death, 1834, the importation of opium had changed all that (although neither in the *Essay* nor in *Principles of political economy* did Malthus consider the opium trade). Opium was the 'product within its own borders' which China did lack, the desire, addiction, and market for which the East India Company had created, the 'black and envenomed poison' being 'poured in' to China by the British. There was, in that context, an even greater intolerance for continued restrictions in Canton.<sup>86</sup> Other ports were opening illegally, and the British wanted this regularized.<sup>87</sup> The East India Company eventually pressed its advantage and the first Opium War began only a few years after Malthus's death.

There was, then, a newly global political economy emerging and swirling around China in the years in which Malthus wrote and rewrote his *Essay* as well as his *Principles of political economy*. And yet, Malthus wanted and in fact needed to assess China as a bounded geography and a closed economy. For his analytic purposes, it helped rather than hindered that successive Qing emperors controlled trade so tightly and that China was largely closed, and especially that Europeans were kept out. It was precisely this enclosure that served Malthus well for the purposes of exploring and explaining his principle of population. From actual islands (Tahiti, for example) to imagined islands (a besieged town) to the largest possible container ('the whole Earth'), Malthus sought to explain the principle of population as it functioned – necessarily – in limited space.<sup>88</sup> He wanted to analyse China within the geography of Chow-ta Zhin's 'Table of the population and extent of China within the Great Wall'. The more circumscribed China was between the Great Wall and the Pacific Ocean, the better for his analysis; the more accurately he could determine population and economic matters.

Counter-intuitively, then, Malthus's chapter on China aligned more with the emperor's vision than with those of the Macartney mission, Staunton, Meares, or for that matter his employer, the East India Company, each of whom wanted China to open fully to British trade. Political economist Malthus – both disciple and teacher of Smith and East India College professor – *should* have been interested in the new global commercial implications of trade with China, and yet his chapter skirted this entirely. In short, he was writing the *Principle of population*, not yet his *Principles of political economy*.

<sup>85</sup> Emperor Qian Long's letter to King George III, 1793, in E. Backhouse and J. O. P. Bland, *Annals and memoirs of the court of Peking* (Boston, MA, 1914), pp. 322–31.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant, president of the Board of Control, on the present state of British intercourse with China* (London, 1833), pp. 17, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Meares certainly sought an open China; 'The present exclusion of the European nations from all the ports of the Chinese empire, except Canton, is a serious disadvantage to Great Britain', Meares, *Voyages*, p. lxxxi

<sup>88</sup> Bashford, *Global population*, p. 29; Bashford and Chaplin, *New worlds*, pp. 147–51.

When Malthus did produce this later work (1820), he certainly considered China in a more expansive, global framework. In that text, China still served as a useful comparative case to demonstrate different measures of value. Chinese labour might be quite as efficient and equivalent as British labour, yet it is known, he said, that the ‘money price of labour’ is very low in China. Yet China also served as an interesting case in a competitive intercontinental, we might say global, market. ‘A Chinese commodity carried to Hamburgh would be sold at its China money price with the addition of freight, insurance, profits &c.’ Because of the low money price of labour, it would be cheaper than an equivalent Hamburg-produced commodity. Adam Smith was correct, Malthus noted, in stating that all the merchant need ever consider was ‘money price’.<sup>89</sup> His *Political economy* is a book with minimal citations, starkly different to the multiple citations on each page of the *Essay*. But one source he did cite in his later work was the younger George Staunton’s translation of the Qing penal code.<sup>90</sup>

## IX

Partly because of the central place of population growth, population control, and demographic transition theories to mid-twentieth-century identification of a ‘Third World’ (for demographic purposes including China), and to economic development and modernization models, there has been a great deal of scholarship establishing and then critiquing a Europe–China, sometimes Britain–China, comparison. As noted, this often relies on a passing idea that Malthus himself set up this quintessential global comparison. Claimants and critics both identify the idea that China represented an undesirable high fertility/high mortality society while Britain/Europe (already) represented a desirable low fertility/low mortality society. Lavelly and Wong successfully revise and question this ‘Malthusian narrative’ with a range of demographic data, especially correcting the presumption of high fertility, but nonetheless ascribe to Malthus himself a direct China/Britain comparison ‘opposing archetypes – Europe as a model of demographic restraint, China as demographic profligate’.<sup>91</sup>

The East/West demographic comparison ascribed to Malthus is misplaced, however. When Malthus was writing, China and Britain were more likely to be demographically paired than distinguished. The lands of both polities were highly cultivated, and both had (or were perceived to have had) high fertility and high mortality. Malthus could not foresee the great drop in English fertility that was to unfold in the generations after his death. Malthus’s own key

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *Principles of political economy: considered with a view to their practical application* (London, 1836), pp. 102–3.

<sup>90</sup> George Staunton, *Ta Tsing leu lee, being the fundamental laws, and a selection from the supplementary statutes, of the penal code of China* (London, 1810).

<sup>91</sup> Lavelly and Wong, ‘Revising the Malthusian narrative’, p. 714.

demographic comparison was not China/Britain, or East/West, or what would later become Third World/First World. It was, if anything, 'Old World/New World'.

The 'opposite' of China was not Britain, it was North America. In America, population was famously doubling due to the availability of fertile land, so-called 'wasteland' apparently available for neo-British cultivation.<sup>92</sup> This is what Malthus took from his key inspiration, Benjamin Franklin: the great plenty of room and food meant that human populations could, and in fact had, doubled within a generation, every twenty or twenty-five years.<sup>93</sup> Malthus was deeply interested in American doubling of population. The fastest rate then documented, North America represented one limit case in Malthus's own world. China, by contrast, was the vast area that already used every inch of its land and had already filled its area, and, intermittently, was overflowing it. In a sense, since Malthus argued that eventually even the great continent of North America would be gardened and filled, China was America's future.

The doubling of American population is something that Smith had also assessed in *Wealth of nations*. It represented growth. What mattered was not 'the actual greatness of national wealth' (for example, China), but 'continual increase' (for example, North America). China may be large, rich and populous, but it is stationary, as we have seen Smith noting. And if, according to Smith, China was more or less stationary, Britain and other European countries were hardly less so: they doubled only in perhaps 500 years, he reckoned. In North America, by contrast, population doubled every quarter century, and not by immigration. 'Those who live to old age, it is said, frequently see there from fifty to a hundred, and sometimes many more, descendants of their own body.'<sup>94</sup> North America was one limit case, for Smith, as for Malthus later: 'But there are no colonies of which the progress has been more rapid than that of the English in North America. Plenty of good land, and liberty to manage their own affairs their own way, seem to be the two great causes of the prosperity of all new colonies.'<sup>95</sup> Malthus wrote a version of this directly into his *Essay* (Smith is perhaps the initial source of this idea, only later tracked back to Franklin). In China, the ever-present *potential* for human populations to double quickly could not be realized. It was the baldest statement possible of his principle of population. 'The procreative power would, with as much facility, double, in twenty-five years, the population of China, as that of any of the states of America; but we know that it cannot do this, from the palpable inability of the soil to support such an additional number.'<sup>96</sup> China had long reached the limit of land improvement and therefore its growth. China

<sup>92</sup> For global 'wastelands' and Malthus, see Bashford, *Global population*, chs. 1, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Joyce E. Chaplin, *Benjamin Franklin's political arithmetic: a materialist view of humanity* (Washington, DC, 2008); Bashford, *Global population*, ch. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, *Wealth of nations*, ed. Cannan, book 1, ch. 8., 'On the wages of labour', p. 81.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, book 4, ch. 7, 'Of colonies', pp. 616–17.

<sup>96</sup> Malthus, *Essay* (1803), p. 153.



clearly served as the counter case to America. And so, for that matter, did Britain. Malthus asked his students, building on Smith: 'Why are the wages in America higher than in any part of England?'<sup>97</sup> China and Britain were rather more than less like each other, demographically considered. And both of these 'Old World' polities were environmentally, demographically, and to some extent economically unlike the North American New World.

The China/America comparison was one that endured. When William Godwin wrote his belated response to Malthus in 1820, *Of population*, his whole case rested on disputing the applicability of America's doubling to world history. It was entirely exceptional. How could this doubling (and its checking) possibly be true with respect to China, he asked in his chapter 'Illustrations on the history of China'. 'Whatever be the number of the children born in the United States of America, that die before they arrive at maturity, we know that in China three hundred millions of children more than in America, die every twenty-five years.' But, Godwin asked: where is the real evidence of all of the additional mortality in China that would bear the principle of population out? Malthus offered that about 2,000 infants were exposed annually in Peking, but that is insufficient evidence by far, argued Godwin: 'What a scene of devastation does Mr Malthus's doctrine lead us to see in China! They must lie on heaps, like what we read of the plague of Marseilles ... Does any traveller relate that they have witnessed this?' The spurious principle of population, fundamentally built on observations of American population doubling, is simply not born out, argued Godwin. Thus, 'from the shewing of Mr Malthus himself ... the Empire of China has never been subject to the operation of the geometrical ratio'.<sup>98</sup>

In his long section on population in the United States, Godwin continued to compare Chinese data, so as to establish the impossibility, as he saw it, of Malthus's principle.<sup>99</sup> And in his chapter 'of the number of human beings which the globe is capable of maintaining on our present systems of husbandry and cultivation', he turned again to China, because of its large area, its dominance of global space, and presuming its cultivation to be one of the most intense on Earth. In this matter aligning with Malthus, China became Godwin's benchmark to estimate a possible future carrying capacity: 'The earth, then, if all its habitable parts could be made as fertile as China, is equal to the sustaining a population of nine thousand millions of human beings.'<sup>100</sup> Godwin looked optimistically towards 'the whole earth at least as populous as China is at present'. Moreover, Godwin paired China with England as 'moderately peopled' (his argument was that both nations could well tolerate more people) and

<sup>97</sup> Inverarity MS, Smith, *Wealth of nations*, p. 28, question 8.

<sup>98</sup> William Godwin, *Of population* (London, 1820), pp. 50–2. See also review of William Godwin, *Of population* in *The Investigator or Quarterly Magazine*, 3 (July 1821), p. 96.

<sup>99</sup> Godwin, *Of population*, pp. 440–1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 449.

contrasted them, just like Malthus, with ‘the plains of North America’.<sup>101</sup> Malthus and Godwin disagreed intensely on the principle of population, but for both of them China and England were more similar than dissimilar; densely populated and cultivated land against which North America stood in great and stark contrast.

The Chinese case – mythic and true in equal measure – continued to serve British and European political economy through the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, given his East India Company employment, James Mill considered China, as did John Stuart Mill later in the century. Harriet Martineau recapitulated both Adam Smith and Thomas Robert Malthus on China in her *Illustrations of political economy*. And not long afterwards, also journalistically, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote about China in the war-torn 1850s.<sup>102</sup> China clearly mattered for European political economy. It would be neat to claim the inverse: that European political economy did not matter for China and the Chinese. And to be sure, as R. Bin Wong demonstrates so clearly in his comparative work *China transformed*, it is obviously necessary to consider political economy, state-building, and population dynamics ‘beyond European models of historical change’.<sup>103</sup> And yet, it is hardly possible to claim that Marx and Engels were irrelevant to China’s modern history, and the same must surely be said of Thomas Robert Malthus. In communist China, they came to be connected in unlikely ways, as Marx and Malthus have been made to reconcile in sequential economic programmes based on population control.<sup>104</sup> The Chinese life of Malthus’s *Essay* has been strange indeed.

In so many ways, Malthus’s rendition of late imperial China was just as strange, and just as context-dependent. And yet Malthus’s *Essay* and a dozen versions of sometimes entirely incompatible ‘Malthusianisms’ are often lifted from their very specific British intellectual, political, and economic contexts, and held up for assessment as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.<sup>105</sup> In this article, by contrast, the aim has been to restore Malthus’s *Essay* to its historical moment, c. 1800. One of the key characteristics of Malthus’s intellectual milieu, of his particular time and place, was the propensity to universal claims (of law, of principle, of local and world development, of economies in past times and distant civilizations). Understanding the *Essay* within this tradition of ‘universal history’, as a late rendition of stadial theory, is key to understanding China’s place within it. Malthus was writing within both the imperial meridian between the first

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 451.

<sup>102</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of political economy* (London, 1832–4); *Marx on China, 1853–1860. Articles from the New York Daily Tribune with an introduction and notes by Dona Toor* (London, 1951).

<sup>103</sup> Wong, *China transformed*, p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, ‘Population studies in China: privileged past, anxious future’, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 24 (1990), pp. 357–84.

<sup>105</sup> Adrian C. Hayes, ‘Was Malthus right about China?’, *China Journal*, 47 (2002), pp. 109–12.

and second British empires, and at the beginning of a great economic and demographic divergence. The former was more apparent to him than the latter, and yet in the final analysis, his own early nineteenth-century assessment of China was a backwards-looking one, aligned more with the closed China of the Qianlong emperor than the open China of the East India Company's dreams.