
The Oeconomy of Human Life: An ‘Ancient Bramin’

In Eighteenth-Century Tibet

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Abstract

The Oeconomy of Human Life purports to be an English translation of an ancient Indian text found by a Chinese scholar in Lhasa. Almost certainly written by Robert Dodsley (1704–1764), the book became an eighteenth-century bestseller. This article discusses its place in the varied lineage of western images of Asia, beginning with Alexander the Great’s encounter with a group of ‘naked philosophers’ in India. It argues that the key features of the Oeconomy are representative of the Enlightenment period, with at best tenuous links to Tibet, India and China. However, it also belongs to a much broader literary tradition with deep roots and unexpected contemporary resonances.

In November 1750 a new book appeared on the stalls of London booksellers. Presented by an anonymous editor, *The Oeconomy of Human Life*¹ is a collection of aphorisms on the moral “duties that relate to man” and ostensibly an English translation of an Indian manuscript written by an ‘Ancient Bramin’, but discovered in the archives of Tibet.² It was an immediate bestseller. By the end of the eighteenth century some 200 editions had been published in England, Ireland and America, and it had been translated into a dozen European languages ranging from Latin, Welsh and Gaelic to French, Italian and Hungarian.³

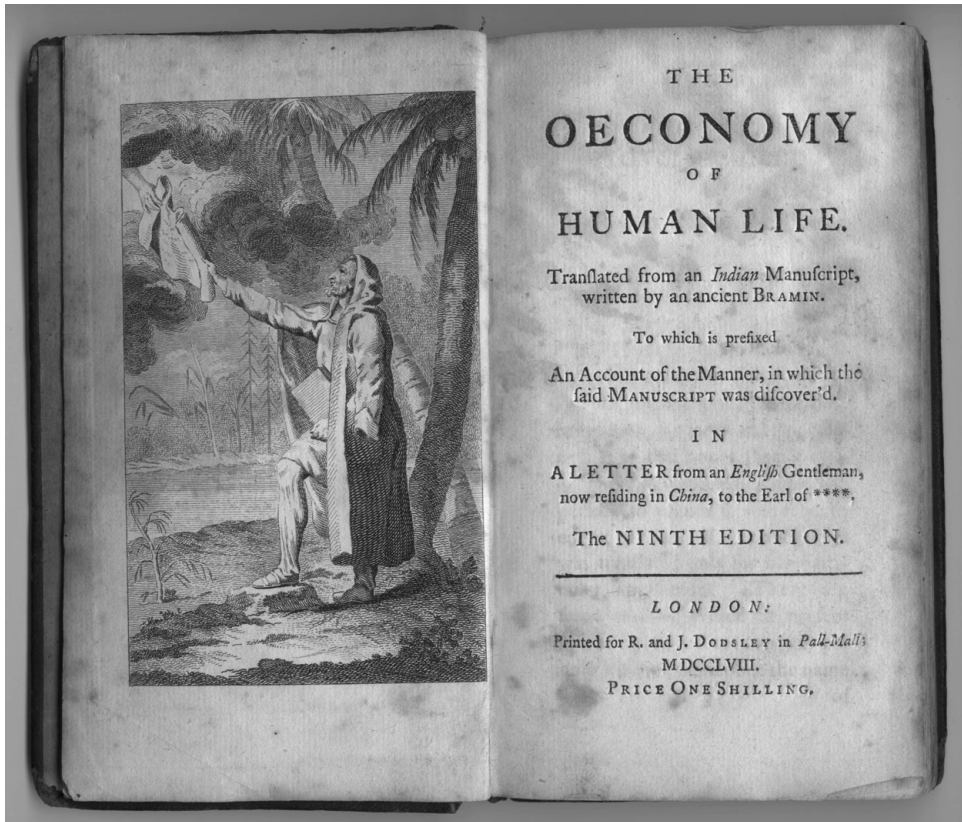
Tibet has long held a special place in the western imagination as a repository of ancient wisdom, protected by its remoteness. As a series of recent studies have shown, this ‘myth of Tibet’ has passed through several stages.⁴ In the seventeenth century, Portuguese Jesuits hoped to find the kingdom of Prester John, the legendary king who was believed to be

¹‘Oeconomy’ is a now-obsolete alternative spelling for ‘economy’. One of the definitions offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “a ‘dispensation’, a method or system of the divine government suited to the needs of a particular nation or period of time.”

²The full bibliographic details for the first edition are: [Robert Dodsley], *The Oeconomy of Human Life*. Translated from an Indian Manuscript written by an ancient Bramin. To which is prefixed an Account of the Manner in which the said Manuscript was discover’d in a Letter from an English Gentleman, now residing in China, to the Earl of **** (London: Printed for M. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-Noster-Row, 1751). It was dated 1751 even though it came out at the end of the previous year.

³See: Donald D. Eddy, “Dodsley’s Oeconomy of Human Life 1750–51”. *Modern Philology* LXXXV (1988), 4, pp. 460–479; and the British Library online catalogue <<http://catalogue.bl.uk>>.

⁴See in particular: Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel-Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (London, 1989); Thierry Dodin, and Heinz Räther (eds.), *Mythos Tibet*, (Cologne, 1997); Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la. Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago and London, 1998); Martin Brauen, Renate Koller



Title page to the ninth edition of *The Oeconomy of Human Life*.

ruling an isolated Christian kingdom in the wilds of Central Asia.⁵ In 1800 Samuel Turner, the third British emissary to Tibet after George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton, published his *Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, thus launching a tradition of British travel writing on Tibet.⁶ In the 1880s Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophist movement, claimed that the hidden Mahatmas of Tibet had transmitted their wisdom to her by means of telepathy and a series of mysterious letters. For much of the twentieth century, despite its painful immersion into real-world conflict, Tibet was viewed as a utopian Shangri-La.⁷

and Markus Vock, *Traumwelt Tibet: westliche Trugbilder* (Berne, 2000); Thierry Dodin, and Heinz R  ther (eds.), *Imagining Tibet. Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies* (Boston, 2001).

⁵See: C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia. 1603–1721* (The Hague, 1924); Hugues Didier, “Ant  nio de Andrade    l’origine de la tib  tophilie europ  enne”. *Aufs  tze zur Portugiesischen Kulturgeschichte* XX, ed. Dietrich Kriesemeister, Hans Flasche and Karl-Hermann K  rner (M  nster, 1988–1992); Hugues Didier, *Les portugais au Tibet. Les premi  res relations j  suites 1624–1635*. 2nd ed., (Paris, 2002).

⁶Samuel Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet* (London, 1800). On Bogle and Hamilton see in particular: Alastair Lamb (ed.), *Bhutan and Tibet. The Travels of George Bogle & Alexander Hamilton 1774–1777* (Hertingfordbury, 2002).

⁷The name Shangri-La of course comes from: James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (London, 1933).

The *Oeconomy* is well-known to cultural historians of eighteenth-century England,⁸ but to my knowledge its place in the varied lineage of western images of Tibet has never been discussed.⁹ This article aims to fill that gap. It begins by reviewing the book's contents and philosophy before discussing the identity of the author – almost certainly the bookseller and writer Robert Dodsley (1704–1764). It then discusses the sources that he used to construct his image of Tibet and the 'Ancient Bramin'. The overall argument is that the key features of the *Oeconomy* are representative of the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment period in which it was produced, with at best tenuous links with Tibet. However, it also belongs to a much broader literary tradition with deep roots and unexpected contemporary resonances.

A Chinese scholar's journey to Tibet

The Oeconomy begins with a short 'Advertisement to the Public' followed by a 13-page letter to the 'Earl of ----', dated Peking (Peking), 12 May, 1749.¹⁰ These provide an introductory framework that puts the main part of the book into context.

From the outset, the 'advertisement' introduces an air of intrigue. The owner of the manuscript has been inspired to publish it because of the "spirit of virtue and morality which breathes in this ancient piece of eastern instruction". Nevertheless, there are unspecified reasons that make it proper to conceal, not only the editor's own name, but also the name of his correspondent in China. Apparently, these reasons would not subsist long because the correspondent planned to return to England. However, as will be seen, this promise was never fulfilled: no author or editor ever publicly acknowledged responsibility for the book.

The letter from Peking offers further details on the discovery of the manuscript:

Adjoining China on the West, is the large country of Thibet [sic], called by some Barantola.¹¹ In a province of this country, named Lasa [Lhasa], resides the grand Lama, or high-priest of these idolaters; who is reverenc'd, and even ador'd as a god, by most of the neighbouring nations. The high opinion, which is entertained of his sacred character, induces prodigious numbers of religious people to resort to Lasa to pay their homage to him, and to give him presents, in order to receive his blessing. His residence is a most magnificent pagod [sic] or temple, built on the top of the mountain Poutala [Potala]. . . (p. viii).

The learned in China had long been of the opinion that 'some very ancient books have for many ages been concealed' in the archives of Lhasa. The Emperor was determined to find out whether this was so, and selected Cao-tsou, a high-ranking Chinese scholar, to

⁸See, for example, Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie. The Vision of Cathay*, 2nd ed. (London, 1973), p. 131. Honour dismisses the *Oeconomy* as a "remarkably platitudinous treatise composed in stilted metaphoric language by one of Robert Dodsley's grub-street hacks, if not by the publisher himself". For an excellent study of the wider eighteenth-century cultural context see: Roy Porter, *Enlightenment. Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*. (London, 2001).

⁹As far as I know, Géza Bethlenfalvy is the only Tibet specialist to draw attention to the book, and he does so in a discussion of Indian influences on Hungarian literature rather than in a Tibetan context. See: Géza Bethlenfalvy, *India in Hungarian Learning and Literature* (Delhi, 1980), p. 5.

¹⁰Page references are to the ninth edition (1758) in the author's possession.

¹¹Several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European authors cite 'Barantola' as an alternative name for Tibet. It appears to be a Mongolian word although its precise etymology is uncertain. See: Luciano Petech, *I Missionari italiani nel Tibet e nel Nepal*, Vol.1, p. 204; Vol. 3, p. 47; Vol. 6, p. 313 (Rome, 1952–1956). I am grateful to Isrun Engelhardt for these references.

travel to Tibet. Cao-tsou's qualifications included the fact that he had learnt Tibetan from a lama who had spent many years in Peking. The Emperor provided him with a letter to the Grand Lama, and this begins with an appropriately deferential salutation:

We the emperor of China, sovereign of all the sovereigns of the earth, in the person of this our most respected prime minister Cao-tsou, with all reverence and humility prostrate myself beneath thy sacred feet, and implore for myself, our friends and our empire, thy most powerful and gracious benediction (pp. xii–xiii).

The letter then explains the purpose of Cao-tsou's journey:

Having a strong desire to search into the records of antiquity, to learn, and retrieve, the wisdom of the ages, that are past; and being well informed that in the sacred repositories of thy most ancient and venerable hierarchy, there are some valuable books, which from their great antiquity are become to the generality even of the learned, almost wholly unintelligible; in order, as far as in us lies, to prevent their being totally lost, we have thought proper to authorise and employ our most learned and respected minister *Cao-tsou*, in this our present embassy to thy sublime holiness, the business of which is to desire, that he may be permitted to read, and examine, the said writings; we expecting, from his great and uncommon skill in the ancient languages, that he will be able to interpret, whatever may be found, tho' of the highest and most obscure antiquity (pp. xiii–xiv).

The letter was successful. Cao-tsou was allowed to stay in apartments in the 'Sacred College' for six months and, assisted by one of the most learned lamas, he "had the satisfaction of finding many valuable pieces of antiquity". One of these was of particular interest:

But the most ancient piece he hath discover'd, and which none of the Lamas for many ages had been able to interpret or understand, is a small system of morality, written in the language and character of the ancient Gymnosophists or Bramins; but, by what particular person, or in what time, he does not determine (p. xv).¹²

Cao-tsou translated the manuscript into Chinese, and it attracted widespread attention in Peking and all over the empire. There were conflicting views on the original author among the "Bonzees and the learned doctors". Some attributed it to Confucius, and others to "Lao Kiun. . . founder of the sect Taossee". Yet others attributed it to Dandamis, the leader of the Gymnosophists or 'naked philosophers' who, as discussed below, is said to have met Alexander the Great in India. Cao-tsou himself seemed to agree with this view:

. . . at least, so far as to think that it is really the work of some ancient Bramin; being fully persuaded, from the spirit with which it is written, that it is no translation. One thing, however, occasions some doubt amongst them, and that is the plan of it, which is entirely new to the

¹²At first sight it is surprising that Dodsley refers in general terms to the 'language of the Gymnosophists', without referring to Sanskrit or any other Indian language. However, at this time the pioneering researches of scholars such as William Jones (1746–1794) and his colleagues in the Asiatic Society of Bengal still lay in the future. The significance of Sanskrit was scarcely appreciated even in English scholarly circles in the 1750s, still less to the popular audience for which the *Oeconomy* was intended. On the Asiatic Society of Bengal and its contribution to Sanskrit scholarship see: O.P. Kejriwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past* (New Delhi, 1988).

eastern people, and so unlike any thing, they have ever seen, that, if it was not for some turns of expression peculiar to the East, and the impossibility of accounting for its being written in this very ancient language, many would suppose it to be the work of an European (p. xvii).¹³

However this might be, the Peking correspondent decided to make an English translation of Cao-tsou's text, noting in his letter to the 'Earl of ----' that he was "the more easily induced to make this trial as, very happily for me you cannot judge how far I have fallen short of the original, or even of the Chinese translation".

The letter concludes with a postscript about the "little drawing inclos'd": this was a copy of one found with the original manuscript, which Cao-tsou attached to the Chinese translation (p. xx). This is a reference to the frontispiece in the early editions which shows a Moses-like figure receiving a document from a hand descending from the clouds above: the implication is that the text is divinely inspired. The surrounding palm trees imply a certain exoticism, but there is no explicit link to China, Tibet or India.

The *Oeconomy's* Precepts

The translator offers an apology for the style which he says followed naturally from the "great energy of expression and shortness of sentences" in the original. The result was that he found himself writing in a language and style reminiscent of the Old Testament in the Authorised Version of the English Bible. However, the *Oeconomy's* philosophy is Deist – affirming a reverence for God – without being explicitly Christian. This is apparent from the first paragraph:

Bow down your heads unto the dust, O ye inhabitants of earth! Be silent, and receive, with reverence, instruction from on high. . . All things proceed from God. His power is unbounded; his wisdom is from eternity; and his goodness endureth forever. . . Hear then his voice; for it is gracious: and he, that obeyeth, shall establish his soul in peace (pp. xxiv-xxvi).

The *Oeconomy's* Deism is representative of a strand of Enlightenment thinking in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, whose exemplars included Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d. 1648) and Mathew Tindal (1657–1733) in England, as well as Voltaire (1694–1778) in France.¹⁴ While believing in God as the ultimate creator, the Deists emphasised reason rather than a belief in miracles, and challenged both the theology and the hierarchical governance of the established churches.

However, the *Oeconomy* is not so much a philosophical tract on the ordering of the universe as a series of moral precepts. The main part of the book consists of a series of aphorisms set out in seven main sections over approximately a hundred pages in most editions. These concern: 'Duties that relate to Man consider'd as an Individual'; 'the Passions'; 'Woman'; 'Consanguinity, or Natural Relations'; 'Providence, or the accidental Differences of Men'; 'Social Duties and Religion'. In a representative passage on 'Application', the *Oeconomy*

¹³Here the author approaches – but falls just short of – the Eurocentrism of James's Hilton's *Lost Horizon* where the Grand Lama, and overall fount of wisdom in Shangri-La, turns out to be an aged European.

¹⁴On English Deism and the Enlightenment, see: Porter, *Enlightenment*, pp. 96–129.

proclaims the virtues of the work ethic:

Idleness is the parent of want and of pain; but the labour of virtue bringeth forth pleasure. . . The slothful man is a burthen to himself; his hours hang heavy on his head; he loitereth about; and knoweth not what he would do (pp. 7–8).

In a similar vein, both parents and children are exhorted to display reverence for God. For example, in a section on the role of a good son, the *Oeconomy* proclaims:

The piety of a child is sweeter than the incense of Persia offer'd to the sun: yea more delicious than odours wafted from a field of Arabian spices by the western gales (p.55).

The role of the ideal monarch is to support his industrious citizens by serving as a patron both of the arts and of commerce:

The spirit of the merchant, who extendeth his commerce, the skill of the farmer, who enricheth his lands, the ingenuity of the artist, the improvements of the scholar, all these he honoureth with his favour; or rewardeth with his bounty.

He planteth new colonies; he buildeth strong ships; he openeth rivers for convenience; he formeth harbours for safety; his people abound in riches; and the strength of his kingdom encreaseth (p. 71).

The section on 'Religion' is reminiscent of Psalm 8 in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* which runs:

O Lord our Governor: how excellent is thy Name in all the world: thou that has set thy glory above the heavens! . . . For I will consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained. What is man that thou art mindful of him? . . . Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet; all sheep and oxen, yea and the beasts of the field.

The wording of the *Oeconomy* suggests a direct if unacknowledged inspiration:

If we lift up our eyes to the heavens, his glory shineth forth; if we cast them down up on the earth, it is full of his goodness. . . (p. 92).

However, the *Oeconomy's* comments on mankind's dominion introduce a characteristically eighteenth-century emphasis on the importance of reason:

But thee, O man, he hath distinguish'd with particular favour; and exalted thy station above all creatures.

He hath endow'd thee with reason to maintain thy dominion. . . (p. 92).

The book concludes (p. 94) with a paean combining the Psalmist's reverence for the Deity with a middle class approbation of the virtues of prudence and temperance:

O fear the Lord, therefore, all the days of thy life; and walk in the paths, which he hath opened before thee. Let Prudence admonish thee; let Temperance restrain; let Justice guide thy hand, Benevolence warm thy heart, and Gratitude to Heaven inspire thee with devotion. These shall give thee happiness in thy present state; and bring thee to the mansions of eternal felicity in the paradise of God.

This is the true oeconomy of human life.

The references to Persia and Arabia suggest a vaguely Biblical flavour,¹⁵ but there is no reference in the main text to India, Tibet or China. Similarly, there is nothing that points to an explicitly Buddhist, Confucian or even Gymnosophist origin, although – as will be seen – readers from a variety of schools of thought judged the book to be compatible with their own beliefs.

Who was the author?

The *Oeconomy* was one of several supposedly Oriental texts produced by eighteenth-century European authors. Other examples include Charles Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721) written from the viewpoint of two Persian travellers in Europe, and Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1760–1761) which pretends to be a series of reports by a philosopher named Lien Chi Altangi, “a native of Honan in China”.¹⁶ It is doubtful whether any contemporary reader took the claim of the ‘ancient Bramin’ at face value.

Instead, there were thought to be two main candidates for the authorship, neither of which had any personal connection – or even a close second-hand link – with India, Tibet or China:

The first was Philip Dormer Stanhope, the fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773), who was a politician and diplomat, now perhaps best remembered for the posthumous publication of his letters to his son.¹⁷

The second was Robert Dodsley (1704–1764), a leading author, bookseller and publisher in mid-eighteenth century London.¹⁸ Dodsley was the son of a schoolmaster in Mansfield who had first come to London as a footman and then, having achieved a modest reputation as a poet, started a bookshop at Tully's Head in the passageway between Pall Mall and King Street. Dodsley benefited from the initial patronage of Alexander Pope, and served as the publisher of many of the leading writers of his generation including Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray and Edmund Burke.

It seems that there were rumours of Chesterfield's authorship even before the *Oeconomy* was published, and a review in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of November 1750 states that the book was “attributed to a noble E. distinguished by his fine genius and the elegance of

¹⁵See for example: Ezekiel 27:21; Ezra 1:1.

¹⁶For discussions on the fashion for Asian themes in eighteenth-century European literature and in particular the fashion for ‘chinoiserie’ see: Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie*; Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon. An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilisation* (London, 1967); Julia Ching and William G. Oxtoby (eds), *Discovering China. European Interpretations in the Enlightenment* (Rochester, NY, 1992); and Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient. Fictions of the East in England 1662–1785* (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁷For a summary of Chesterfield's life and a guide to further sources, see: John Cannon, ‘Stanhope, Philip Dormer’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁸For details of Dodsley's life see: Richard Henry Tedder, ‘Robert Dodsley’. *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 15, Ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (London, 1885–1900), pp. 170–174; Ralph Straus, *Robert Dodsley. Poet, Publisher and Playwright* (London, 1910); Eddy, “Dodsley's *Oeconomy*”; James E. Tierney, *The Correspondence of Robert Dodsley. 1733–1764*, (Cambridge, 1988); Harry M. Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley. Creating the New Age of Print* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1996); James E. Tierney, ‘Robert Dodsley.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 16, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. (Oxford, 2004), pp. 433–437.

his writings and speeches".¹⁹ Even now, Chesterfield is occasionally cited as the author in library and bookseller catalogues, but no modern scholar supports this view.

The evidence for Dodsley's authorship includes the *Oeconomy's* somewhat confused publishing history. The first edition was brought out by Mary Cooper, a bookseller from Pater-Noster Row who was closely associated with Dodsley. It sold well and was soon followed by a putative Part 2, apparently composed in haste by a rival author. Dodsley issued an advertisement under his own name in the *General Advertiser* for 8 January 1751 denouncing the second book.²⁰ The advertisement does not explicitly state that Dodsley is the author, but announces that new editions of the book have been printed for him and are available at his shop. All subsequent authorised editions from London were distributed from Tully's Head.

Although Robert Dodsley never formally acknowledged authorship, his younger brother James included the *Oeconomy* in a posthumous collection of Robert's *Trifles* published in 1777. As Ralph Straus notes in his 1910 biography of Dodsley, the two brothers routinely issued lists of books where the *Oeconomy* was cited along with other works by Robert Dodsley.²¹ Further supporting – though still circumstantial – evidence comes from the quasi-Biblical style of the book: Dodsley had demonstrated an earlier taste for pastiche with the publication in 1740 of *The Chronicles of the Kings of England* which likewise was written in a pseudo-Biblical style, ostensibly by 'Nathan Ben Saddi, a Priest of the Jews'.

If Dodsley was indeed the author, why did he not formally acknowledge the fact? Part of the answer is that it was not especially unusual for the first editions of new works to be published anonymously either because they might prove to be controversial, or out of modesty, or simply to test the market. The initial publication arrangements for the *Chronicles* in 1740 followed the same pattern as the *Oeconomy's* in that they were initially sold anonymously at the shop of Thomas Cooper.²² In the case of the *Oeconomy* there may have been an additional commercial consideration: the suggestion that a distinguished nobleman such as Chesterfield was the author would undoubtedly have boosted sales. Dodsley may or may not have originated the rumour, but he would have benefited from it, and evidently saw no great reason to contradict it.

Even the controversy surrounding the publication of Part 2 of the *Oeconomy*, ostensibly by a rival author, would have been brought beneficial publicity. Both parts were sold by Dodsley's ally Mary Cooper. James E. Tierney, the editor of the definitive edition of Dodsley's letters, suggests that he approved the publication of the second part as well as the first.²³ Harry M. Solomon, Dodsley's most recent full-length biographer, goes a step further to speculate that he wrote the second part himself.²⁴ Dodsley was a man of letters, but he was also a businessman who had an eye for his market.

¹⁹Cited in Eddy "Dodsley's *Oeconomy*", p. 61. For a discussion of the rival claims see also: Straus, Robert Dodsley, pp. 169–181; Tierney, *The correspondence of Robert Dodsley*, p. 143; and Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley*, pp. 139–144.

²⁰The advertisement is reproduced in Eddy, "*Dodsley's Economy of Human Life*", p. 473.

²¹Straus, 'Robert Dodsley', p. 179.

²²Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley*, p. 81. Mary Cooper took over the business after her husband's death.

²³Tierney, *The Correspondence of Robert Dodsley*, p. 42.

²⁴Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley*, p. 144.

The ‘naked philosophers’

The *Oeconomy*'s introductory letter suggests that the original author of the text was the Indian Brahmin Dandamis. This suggestion makes a link with a much older tradition: the legends surrounding Alexander the Great's invasion of India in 327–325 BCE and his encounter with a group of Indian ascetics who, because of their nudity, became known as the ‘Gymnosophists’ or ‘naked philosophers’. These legends are ultimately – if somewhat distantly – founded on historical events, but passed through many variations and embellishments before coming to Dodsley's attention in the eighteenth century.²⁵

Alexander's invasion route took him to Taxila, to the north-west of the present-day Pakistani cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. There his army encountered a group of Indian ascetics, and Alexander sent Onesicritus – a Cynic philosopher and historian who was serving on his staff – to enquire about their beliefs. Onesicritus subsequently wrote an account of the meeting. The original text has not survived. However, it is thought to provide the basis for the summary which is included in the works of the Greek geographer Strabo, as well as the account of the philosophers' ascetic way of life which appears in Geneva papyrus inv. 271 (c. 200 CE) and successive versions of the Alexander Romance.²⁶

In Onesicritus's account as reported by Strabo, a philosopher named Calanus explained that man had become arrogant as a result of the luxuries of the Golden Age, and that Zeus had therefore appointed for men a life of toil.²⁷ A second philosopher called Mandanis stated that “the best teaching is that which removes pleasure and pain from the soul”.²⁸ Onesicritus may have felt some affinity with the naked philosophers in that Cynic philosophy likewise challenged the merits of worldly grandeur, and this raises the question whether his account reflected his own views rather than those of his Indian interlocutors. A further complication arises from the fact that he had to work through a series of interpreters,²⁹ another example of the theme of multiple translations that keeps recurring in the story of the *Oeconomy* and its sources. However, Richard Stoneman, the British historian of the Alexander legends, argues that the early descriptions of the encounter do reflect the ascetics' original beliefs, and speculates that they may have been Jains or – less likely – Buddhists rather than Hindu Brahmins.³⁰

The story of the meeting with the Gymnosophists went through a series of elaborations in subsequent centuries, and appears in Hebrew and Arabic versions as well as Greek, Latin, French and mediaeval English. An early Greek version appears in a papyrus of about 100 BCE (Berlin papyrus 13044), and shows Alexander interrogating the philosophers in person

²⁵For a summary of the historical accounts of Alexander's invasion of India, references to further sources, and an analysis with translations of subsequent evolution of the Alexander legends, see: Richard Stoneman (ed. & trans.), *Legends of Alexander the Great* (London, 1994). See also: Richard Stoneman, “Who are the Brahmins? Indian Lore and Cynic Doctrine in Palladius' De Bragmanibus and its Models”, *Classical Quarterly* 44 (1994), 2, pp. 500–510; Richard Stoneman, “Naked Philosophers: the Brahmins in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romance”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995), pp. 99–114; Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: a Life in Legend* (Yale, 2008).

²⁶Stoneman, “Naked Philosophers”, p. 103; Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander*, p. xi.

²⁷Stoneman, “Naked Philosophers”, p. 103.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 103

²⁹Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander*, p. xxvi.

³⁰See the introduction to Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander*; Stoneman, “Who are the Brahmins?”; Stoneman, “Naked Philosophers”, p. 103.

rather than using Onesicritus as an intermediary.³¹ In some of the later versions, the story takes on a more overtly Christian tone. For example, in *De gentibus Indiae et de Bragmanibus*, which is attributed to Palladius the fifth-century Bishop of Helenopolis, Alexander appears as a seeker of wisdom who goes to visit Dandamis, the teacher of the philosophers.³² Dandamis invites Alexander to live a simple life free of material things: his speech is an implicit recommendation of the ascetic virtues of the monastic life.

The *Oeconomy* refers to a ‘famous letter’ from Dandamis to Alexander, and the story of an exchange of letters already appears in the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, a Latin text, apparently based on a Greek original, dating from before 800 CE.³³ Variations of this text, which expands the debate between Alexander and Dandamis (or ‘Dindimus’) on the merits of the active and contemplative lives, appeared in mediaeval English literature, for example in a verse translation from Gloucestershire in 1340. One version relatively close to Dodsley’s own time is a set of ‘Epistles and Discourses between Alexander the Conqueror and Dindimus King of the Brachmans’ in a ten-page chapbook published in London in 1683.³⁴

In the 1683 chapbook Dindimus/Dandamis speaks in a somewhat aphoristic preaching style, for example:

We seek not plenteous gain for it is right liking to us to behold the firmament and stars of heaven: we be men of single speech, it’s common to us all not to lie. The God of all grace is our god, for he hath liking in our words and deed, by our manner of speaking; he is a word, a spirit, love and thought, and is not pleased with worldly riches, but with holy works and thanks for his grace.³⁵

There is no evidence of a direct link between this particular version and Dodsley’s text, but it is nevertheless possible to see the *Oeconomy* as a late and rather distant echo of a longstanding Alexander tradition.

China, Tibet and the European Enlightenment

If the *Oeconomy* has a claim to originality, it lies not in the reference to Dandamis, but rather in the leap from the India of the naked philosophers to eighteenth-century Tibet, China, and on to London. This leap reflects specifically eighteenth-century pre-occupations in two important respects:

First, it draws – albeit rather distantly – on the knowledge gained from new geographic discoveries, particularly of China.

Secondly, and more importantly, it is an example of the way that European writers drew on their own interpretations of this somewhat limited knowledge to challenge older western conventions.

Dodsley’s role was not that of an original enquirer, but rather that of a populariser and embellisher who helped transmit new information and ideas to a wider audience. In the

³¹ Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander*, p. xvii, pp. 76–77.

³² *Ibid.*, p. xxi; pp. 34–56; Stoneman, “Who are the Brahmins?”

³³ Stoneman, *Legends of Alexander*, p. xi; p. xxii; pp. 57–66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

process of transmission this information acquired new meanings that had not been intended by its originators, most of whom were Roman Catholic missionaries.

Jesuit Sources

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Jesuits were the main source of information in Europe on both China and Tibet. The Jesuits' China mission was founded by Francis Xavier (1506–1552). Its most famous luminary arguably was Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) who was one of the first Europeans to master the Chinese script and, like his eighteenth-century successors, was respected within China for his skill in mathematics and cartography. The Jesuits' accounts of China had a significant impact on European philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) who went so far as to argue that Christian missionaries to China should be counterbalanced by Chinese missionaries who would teach Europeans the practice of 'natural religion'.³⁶

By the time that Dodsley was writing in the mid-eighteenth century, images of China ultimately originating from the Jesuits had helped promote something of a craze for *chinoiserie* in art and fashion as well as in literature.³⁷ This helps explain why Dodsley placed the beginning of his narrative in China rather than India, with which the British already had much stronger political and commercial contacts. Also, in a paradox which likewise applies to later images of Tibet, China's comparative remoteness made it a more conducive location for European fantasies of the East.

While the Jesuits' China mission is better known, the Society of Jesus also played a pioneering role in the development of western knowledge of Tibet. The first Jesuits to enter Tibet established a mission in Tsaparang (rTsa brang) in Western Tibet between 1624 and 1640.³⁸ More importantly for an analysis of the *Oeconomy's* sources, the first Europeans definitely known to have visited Lhasa were two Jesuit fathers, Johannes Grueber (1623–c.1680) and Albert d'Orville (1621–1662), who travelled through the city in 1661 in the course of a journey from north-west China to northern India. Grueber's account of his travels was incorporated into *China Illustrata*, a major work published in 1667 by the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680).³⁹

The next in the succession of Jesuits to visit Tibet was Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733), a brilliant scholar who lived in and around Lhasa from 1716–1721.⁴⁰ However, only a small

³⁶D.E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, 2005), p. 91. For a now-classic review of the western reception of Chinese culture see: Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Vol.2 (Chicago, 1977). See also: J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* (London, 1997), pp. 37–53. For the standard reference work on the history of Christianity in China, see: Nicolas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China*. Vol. 1 835–1800 (Leiden, 2001).

³⁷See fn. 16 above.

³⁸For the first Jesuits in Tibet, see in particular: Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers*, pp. 42–118; António Andrade, Didier; Didier, *Les portugais au Tibet*.

³⁹'China Illustrata' is the shortened version of the title. The full version is: *China Monumentis, quâ Sacris, quâ Profanis, nec non variis Naturae et Artis Spectacularis aliarumque rerum memorabilium Argumentis illustrata* (Amsterdam, 1667). For an English translation see: Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata*. Trans. Dr Charles D. Van Tuyl from the 1667 original Latin edition (Oklahoma, 1986). For a detailed account of Grueber and D'Orville's travels, see Wessels, *Earlier Jesuit Travellers*, pp. 164–202.

⁴⁰Desideri was forced to leave Lhasa because the Vatican had assigned missionary work in Tibet to the Capuchins rather than the Jesuits. On his return to Rome he compiled a detailed account of his stay in Tibet, hoping to use it as evidence in support of his appeal for permission to return to Tibet. However, his appeal failed, and his

portion of Desideri's findings were available to a wider European public during the period when *Oeconomy* was published.⁴¹ By contrast, the work of the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Régis (1664–1738) was more celebrated during his own life-time and – even though he never visited Lhasa – more influential in shaping contemporary European images of Tibet.

Régis was one of a group of mainly French Jesuits then based at the Manchu court in Peking, where they were held in high esteem for their expertise in the latest astronomical techniques as applied to map-making.⁴² These skills made it possible to establish precise latitudes and longitudes, and thus to produce more accurate maps than any of their predecessors. In 1708 the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722) assigned them the task of preparing a survey of the entire Chinese Empire.

As in the *Oeconomy's* fictional account, the Kangxi Emperor's interests extended to Tibet, but for political as well as religious reasons.⁴³ The Dalai Lama's religious authority extended to the various Mongol groups operating on the borders of north-west China. To the extent that the Manchu court could align itself with the Dalai Lamas, it would boost its own legitimacy in these regions. Equally, if the Dsungar Mongols – who were hostile to China – were able to draw the Dalai Lama to their side, this would pose a strategic threat to western parts of the empire.⁴⁴ These political preoccupations no doubt encouraged the Kangxi Emperor to extend the map-making project to Tibet.

Instead of travelling to Tibet themselves, Régis and colleagues relied on two sets of emissaries from Peking. Although there is no definite proof, these may have provided Dodsley with the inspiration for Ca-tsou, a Peking scholar who likewise travelled to Tibet on behalf of the emperor.⁴⁵

manuscript *Relazioni de' viaggi all Indie e al Thibet* [Account of Journeys to the Indies and Tibet] lay untouched in the Vatican archives until the late nineteenth century. On Desideri, see in particular: Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers*, pp. 205–272; Ippolito Desideri, *An Account of Tibet. The Travels of Ippolito of Pistoia SJ. 1712–1727*. Trans. Filippo de Filippi (London, 1937); Petech, *I Missionari Italiani*, Vols V–VII (Rome, 1952–1956); Enzo Gualtieri Bargiacchi, *A Bridge Across Two Cultures*. Ippolito Desideri S. J. (1684–1733). *A Brief Biography* (Florence, 2008). Bargiacchi now hosts a website with further bibliographic references to Desideri: <www.ippolito-desideri.net>.

⁴¹These consisted of selected letters reproduced in the Jesuit periodical *Lettres Édifiantes*. For example, Desideri's account of his journey through Ladakh in 1715 was published as “Lettre du Père Hipolite Desideri Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jesus. Au Père Ildebrand Grassi Missionnaire de la mesme Compagnie dans le Royaume de Maysur. Traduite de l'Italien. A Lassa le 10 Avril 1716.” *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses Écrites des Missions Etrangères, par quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus XV* (Paris, 1722), pp. 183–203.

⁴²An authoritative study of the Jesuits' map-making activities is: Walter Fuchs, *Der Jesuiten-Atlas der Kanghsi-Zeit: seine Entstehungsgeschichte nebst Namensindizes für die Karten der Mandjuren, Mongolei, Ostturkestan und Tibet, mit Wiedergabe der Jesuiten-Karten in Originalgröße*, Monumenta Serica Monograph 4 (Peking, 1943).

⁴³For Sino-Tibetan relations in this period see: Zahiruddin Ahmad, *Sino-Tibetan Relations in the 17th Century* (Rome, 1970); Luciano Petech, *China and Tibet in the Early 18th Century*. *T'oung Pao Monograph 1* (Leiden, 1972). Pamela Kyle Crossley gives a valuable overview of the evolution of the Qing Empire, including its relationship with Tibet in *The Manchus* (Oxford, 1997). Two useful general histories, both written from the Tibetan perspective, are: Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: a Political History* (New York, 1982); and Hugh E. Richardson, *Tibet and its History*, 2nd ed. (Boston and London, 1984). Gary Tuttle gives an overview of Sino-Tibetan relations between the 18th and early 20th centuries in: *Tibetan Buddhists and the Making of Modern China* (New York, 2004), pp. 15–33. He emphasises the extent to which pre-20th century Tibetan religious and political relations with Peking were with the Qing court rather than the wider Chinese populace. On these links see: 'Xiangyun Wang, “The Qing Court's Tibet Connection: Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje and the Qianlong Emperor”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, LX (2000), No. 1, pp. 125–163.

⁴⁴Petech, *China and Tibet*, p. 14.

⁴⁵I have not been able to identify a source for the name 'Ca-tsou'. It is possible that it derives solely from Dodsley's imagination.

In 1709 the emperor sent a senior official called He Shou to Lhasa to provide political and military support for Lajang Khan, the Qōšot Mongol ruler who then controlled central Tibet.⁴⁶ Alongside He Shou's political activities, members of his secretariat prepared maps of the country, and these were presented to Régis on his return to Peking in 1711.⁴⁷ However, the Jesuits did not consider them to be sufficiently accurate.

The emperor therefore commissioned two lamas from Peking to make a second cartographical survey of Tibet, and they set out in around 1715. Citing the *Daqing yi Tongzhi*, Fuchs transcribes their names as 'Culcim and Dsangbu Ramjamba'.⁴⁸ They were qualified for their task because they had learnt geometry and arithmetic in a mathematical academy established under the protection of the emperor's third son.⁴⁹ Apart from these details, little seems to be known about their background.

The geographical lamas spent approximately two years in Tibet. However, they were forced to cut short their investigations in 1717 because of the Dsungar invasion of Tibet which led to Lajang Khan's death and – in the longer term – to the series of events resulting in the establishment of the Chinese protectorate in Lhasa.⁵⁰ Once they had returned to Peking, the two lamas presented their findings to Régis, and he incorporated them into the *Huangyu quanlantu* atlas which was presented to the emperor in 1718.

The Chinese version of the atlas soon became known in Europe. In 1735 Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743), a Jesuit based in Paris, drew on Régis's findings to publish a four-volume *Description géographique, historique, chronologique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine*.⁵¹ This was accompanied by an atlas of regional maps prepared from the Peking Jesuits' originals by the great French geographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (1697–1782). In 1736 a four-volume English translation appeared in London with the title: *The General History of China*.⁵² Volume 4 includes Régis's account of Tibet, citing the experiences of the two map-making lamas.⁵³

Régis's work – as transmitted by Du Halde and his English translator – was cited in *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*, which was published in four volumes by Thomas

⁴⁶Petech, *China and Tibet*, p. 19

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19; Fuchs, *Der Jesuiten-Atlas*, pp. 14–18.

⁴⁸Fuchs, *Der Jesuiten-Atlas*, p. 12. The full reference is *Daqing yi Tongzhi*, Cap. 413, 2b–3a. 'Culcim' is almost certainly the Tibetan name 'Tshul khrims'. 'Dsangbu Ramjamba' may be 'bZang po rab 'byams pa'. Probably, the monk's personal name was bZang po and he had the monastic degree 'Rab 'byams pa'. An alternative reading of the first part of his name could be gTsang bu, literally 'son of gTsang' in central Tibet. However, this seems unlikely. I am grateful to Tsering D. Gonkatsang for these comments. Fuchs cites a second source on the two lamas. This is *Zhunka'er Fanglüe*, which has been translated in part in: Erich Hänisch, 'Bruchstücke aus der Geschichte Chinas', *T'oung Pao* 12 (1912), p. 218.

⁴⁹Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique et physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise. Enrichies des cartes generales et particulieres de ces pays*, (Paris, 1735), vol. 4, p. 460. Du Halde does not cite the name of the Emperor's third son, but Fuchs (*Der Jesuiten-Atlas*, p. 67) gives it as Yun Zhi.

⁵⁰Fuchs, *Der Jesuiten-Atlas*, p. 13. For a detailed analysis of the Dsungar invasion and subsequent developments in Tibet, see Petech, *China and Tibet*. The lamas' premature departure led to inaccuracies in the depiction of western Tibet and neighbouring regions. In particular, the map shows the river Ganges – rather than the Indus – as flowing through Ladakh.

⁵¹See fn. 49 above for the full bibliographic reference.

⁵²Jean-Baptiste Du Halde. *The General History of China, Containing a Geographical, Historical, Chronological and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese Tartary, Corea and Thibet*, 4. vols (London, 1736).

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 441–464.

Astley in London between 1745 and 1747.⁵⁴ Volume 4 is a carefully-footnoted distillation of the most important European accounts of Asia that had been published by that date. It includes a “Description of Tibet, or Tibbet”, and cites Régis as well as Grueber, Desideri and the Capuchins. It is thought that the geographer John Green edited both the 1736 translation of Du Halde and the *New General Collection*.⁵⁵

One detail linking the *New General Collection*'s fourth volume with the *Oeconomy* is its explicit dedication to the Earl of Chesterfield (as distinct from the putative Earl of ----). This may be no more than a coincidence but there can be no doubt that Dodsley had access to the *New General Collection*, or possibly the *General History of China*, because several phrases in the *Oeconomy* correspond closely with Régis's description of Lhasa as cited in the two books.

Comparing Texts

In these passages Régis may himself be drawing on Grueber as transmitted by Kircher in *China Illustrata*. Grueber's account of Tibet is tantalisingly brief, but it contains certain details in common with the *Oeconomy*. For example, it includes the alternative name ‘Barantola’ for Tibet; and it is the first European text to refer to the Potala (‘Bietala’), and to include an illustration.⁵⁶ Grueber also refers to the pilgrims' worship of the ‘Great Lama’ (*magnus Lama*). He was not admitted to an audience with the lama, because he did not share the same faith, but describes him as sitting in a raised place on a cushion (*in eminenti loco supra culcitram*) in a dark palace.⁵⁷ The text is accompanied by a somewhat imaginative illustration showing the lama in this position.

Régis as reported in the *New General Collection* describes the lama in similar terms:

... the Grand *Lama* sits cross-legged on a Kind of Altar, with a large and magnificent Cushion under him. . . .⁵⁸

In the same vein, the *Oeconomy* reports:

When the grand Lama receives the adoration of his people, he is rais'd on a magnificent altar, and sits cross-legged upon a splendid cushion. . . (p. ix).

Grueber's account continues by recounting how the faithful prostrate themselves before the lama as though he were the Pope, a practice which he attributes to the deceptions of the

⁵⁴[John Green], *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels consisting of the most esteemed Relations, which have hitherto been published in any Language: Comprehending every Thing remarkable in its Kind in Europe, Asia, Africa and America*, Vol. 4. (London: Printed for Thomas Astley in Pater-Noster-Row, 1747).

⁵⁵G.R. Crone, “John Green. Notes on a Neglected Eighteenth Century Geographer and Cartographer”, *Imago Mundi* (1949) VI, pp. 85–91.

⁵⁶Kircher, *China Illustrata*, p. 74. The picture of the Potala in *China Illustrata* is europeanised – it has a castellated roof – but is broadly recognisable from its commanding position on a hill above the city of Lhasa.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 72. The full quotation is: “*Sedet in obscure Palatii sui conclavi, . . . auro argentoque organo, nec non multiplici ardentium lampadum apparatu illustrato, in eminenti loco supra culcitram, cui pretiosi tapetes substernantur. . .*”

⁵⁸Green (1747), Vol. 4, p. 462; Du Halde, *The General History of China*, pp. 444–445. There are slight differences in the wording of the two versions: Du Halde in the 1736 English translation has “is plac'd upon a sort of Altar, sitting with his Legs across upon a large and magnificent cushion”.

devil.⁵⁹ In the *New General Collection* version, Régis does not refer to the Pope but likewise emphasises the humility of the pilgrims:

Princes are no more excused from this servile Adoration, than the meanest of their Subjects; nor do they meet with more Respect from the Grand *Lama*, who never moves from his Cushion, nor in any other Way returns the Salute. He only lays his Hand upon the Head of the Worshippers, who then think all their Sins pardoned.⁶⁰

The *Oeconomy's* version is:

... his worshippers prostrate themselves before him in the humblest, and most abject manner; but he returns not the least sign of respect, nor ever speaks, even to the greatest princes; he only lays his hand upon their heads, and they are fully persuaded, that they receive from thence a full forgiveness of all their sins (p. x).

In modern academic circles, Dodsley would certainly be blamed for failing to give a proper citation, and might even face accusations of plagiarism.

An Enlightenment Re-interpretation

In any case, the origin of Dodsley's geographical conceptions is less important than the literary and philosophical use that he makes of them. Here his Jesuit sources might not have been best pleased in that the *Oeconomy* proposes a view of the Deity and of right living which implies that it is impossible to achieve spiritual wisdom without the benefits of the Christian revelation or the ministrations of the church hierarchy.

In this respect, the *Oeconomy* reflects a wider eighteenth-century pattern concerning Enlightenment views of China, and extends them to Tibet. The Jesuits had presented a favourable assessment of Chinese philosophy and political governance, and argued that the church could engage with Confucianism in much the same way that the early Church Fathers had engaged with pre-Christian Greek philosophy. However, as the American historian D.E. Mungello puts it, the Jesuits' argument was "persuasive in a way that boomeranged on them".⁶¹ Secular Enlightenment thinkers argued that, if China could achieve great heights of civilisation without the church, then perhaps Europe did not need the church either. Voltaire in particular used the Jesuits' reports of what appeared to be a prime example of 'natural religion' in China to launch a series of polemical attacks on the church.

Dodsley became Voltaire's English publisher,⁶² and may have been in broad agreement with many of his critiques of Christian belief and practice. For example, Tierney cites a letter written in 1741 in which Dodsley says that he and his wife are going to the "solemn

⁵⁹Kircher, *China Illustrata*, pp. 72–73. The full quotation is: "... ad quem advenae capitibus humi prostratis advoluti, non secus ac Summo Pontifici pedes incredibili veneratione osculantur; ut vel inde Daemonis fraudulentia luculenter appareat, qua venerationem soli Vicario Christi in terris Romano Pontifici debitam, ad superstitiosum barbarum gentium cultum". Van Tuyl (*China Illustrata*, p. 66) translates this as: "Before him the visitors fall prostrate and place their heads on the ground. They kiss his feet with incredible veneration, as if he were the Pope. Thus, even by this the deceitfulness of the evil spirit is marvellously shown, for veneration due only the vicar of Christ on earth, the Pope of Rome, is transferred to the heathen worship of savage nations..."

⁶⁰[John Green], *A New General Collection*, p. 462. Du Halde, *The General History of China*, Vol. 4, p. 445.

⁶¹Mungello, *The Great Encounter*, p.83.

⁶²Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley*, pp. 151–152.

foolery of a christening”.⁶³ Nevertheless, the *Oeconomy* scarcely matches Voltaire’s polemical style. It affirms the importance of reason, and makes no reference to miracles—but neither are there any explicit attacks on the church. The book’s Deist opinions were consistent with those of an Enlightenment philosopher, but it contained nothing that would have caused offence to an archbishop.

An Eighteenth-Century Bestseller

The extent to which the *Oeconomy* matched the spirit of its times is attested by its popularity. In London, it ran through seven editions in seven months. French editions – among other foreign-language translations – appeared in London, Edinburgh, the Hague, Frankfurt and Leipzig. There were a series of imitations with titles such as *The Oeconomy of a Winter’s Day*, *The Oeconomy of Female Life* and *The Braman: an Eclogue*. James Bawdoin (1727–1790), a governor of Massachusetts produced a verse paraphrase. A Hungarian edition, re-translated from a German version, came out in 1787.⁶⁴ The British Library catalogue includes versions in – among other languages – Latin, Gaelic and Welsh. Altogether, some 200 editions appeared in the eighteenth-century, and another hundred in the first part of the nineteenth-century.⁶⁵

Among the book’s admirers was the future American President Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) who in a letter written in 1771 included it in a selection of worthy books that might usefully form the basis of a gentleman’s library.⁶⁶ The *Oeconomy* falls in the section on ‘Religion’, along with works by Locke, Seneca, Cicero and Hume. Towards the end of his life Jefferson wrote *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, which was published posthumously at the end of the nineteenth century, and is also known as the *Jefferson Bible*.⁶⁷ The *Life* is a biography of Jesus drawn from the Gospels, but with the miraculous elements removed. It is easy to see how the *Oeconomy* could have fitted in with Jefferson’s worldview.

The *Oeconomy*’s Theosophist Reincarnation

By the mid-nineteenth century the *Oeconomy* had begun to fade from view, perhaps because its message of bourgeois respectability fitted in neither with the new models of ‘scientific’ travel writing nor with the wilder reaches of romanticism. However, in the final decades of the century the Theosophist Society, which was founded in New York in 1875, had begun to play a major role in popularising eastern religious texts – including many of dubious origin – in North America, Europe, Ceylon and India.⁶⁸

⁶³Tierney, ‘Dodsley, Robert’, p.21.

⁶⁴[Robert Dodsley], *Böls ember; vagy-is az erköltses böltsegré vezérőörövid oktatások*. Irta Faludi Ferencz. Második kiadás, Hungarian trans. Fercz Faludi. (Po’sonyban, 1787).

⁶⁵Eddy, “Dodsley’s *Oeconomy*”.

⁶⁶“To Robert Skip with a List of Books, Monticello, Aug. 3 1771”. The Letters of Thomas Jefferson. The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. <www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jefflett/let4.htm>. Accessed on 28 May 2008.

⁶⁷Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Washington, 1904).

⁶⁸On the Theosophists’ place in the wider history of East-West intellectual encounters see: J. J. Clarke. *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York, 1997), pp. 89–93; Poul Pedersen, “Tibet, Theosophy and the Psychologization of Buddhism”. In Dodin & Räther, *Imagining Tibet*, pp. 151–166.

In 1886 Dr Elliott Coues, who was a prominent figure in the early development of the Society in the United States, published a new version of the *Oeconomy*. He gave the book a new title: *Kuthumi. The True and Complete Oeconomy of Human Life, Based on the System of Theosophical Ethics*. The name in the title is a variant spelling of Koot Hoomi, the Indian *Mahatma* or ‘great soul’ whom Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, claimed as a spiritual guide. Blavatsky maintained that Koot Hoomi was based in Tibet, and communicated with her and her associate A.P. Sinnett through a series of letters that were ‘precipitated’ by psychic means to unexpected places, such as the branches of a tree outside Sinnett’s house and the interior of a railway carriage.⁶⁹ In naming the new edition of the *Oeconomy* after Koot Hoomi, Coues was claiming an association with the same wellsprings of wisdom as Blavatsky herself, while at the same time giving Dandamis – or Dodsley – a new incarnation as a *Mahatma*.

The foreword begins by alluding in somewhat stilted language to the anonymity of the original edition of the *Oeconomy* as well as the futility of seeking to identify Kuthumi/Koot Hoomi:

That which hath been ascertained or conjectured in respect of the system of Theosophical Morality intituled “The True and Compleat Oeconomy of Human Life”, availeth not to discover the author thereof. The endeavour of Psychical Researchers to determine the locality and identify the person of Kuthumi hath not been more futile. For as bloweth the wind where it listeth, so roveeth the Spirit and taketh many forms, though it is always one.⁷⁰

The wording implies an acknowledgement of the uncertain origins of the *Oeconomy*, combined with the argument that the contents matter more than the source. The rest of the foreword is a partial adaptation and elaboration of the supposed letter from Peking. For example, the account of the discovery of the text in Lhasa cited above is rephrased to include a reference to the Theosophists. Cao-tsou’s “most ancient piece of writing” is now said to have been:

...written in the language and character of the most venerable Sanyassis, called by the Greeks Gymnosophists (who were the Theosophists of their times in that territory); but by what particular person or at what exact date Cao-tsou hath not pretended to determine.⁷¹

The foreword goes on to describe the book as a “system of theosophic morality such as hath been practised to some extent in the oeconomy of life through all the ages and in all places”.⁷² The core of the book is reproduced almost verbatim, with only minor changes. For example, the introduction to the main text carries the extra heading “Kuthumi”.⁷³

⁶⁹See K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed. Madam Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany, NY, 1994); Johnson argues that Blavatsky’s *Mahatmas* were real people, or at least based on real people, even if they did not have psychic powers.

⁷⁰Elliott Coues (ed.), *Kuthumi: the True and Complete Oeconomy of Human Life, Based on the System of Theosophical Ethics*, A new edition, rewritten and prefaced by Elliott Coues (Boston, 1886), p. 1.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 13.

Coues was an eminent ornithologist, well-known for his scientific achievements,⁷⁴ and at first sight it seems odd that such a man should have identified himself with a movement in which strange psychic phenomena played such a prominent part. However, the US-based historian Joscelyne Godwin argues that the Theosophists “often displayed a surprising affinity with Enlightenment scepticism. . . as if they were searching for a rational religion”.⁷⁵ Be that as it may, Coues’ own scepticism contributed to a confrontation with Blavatsky and her close followers, and in 1889 he was expelled from the Theosophist Society.⁷⁶

The Bramin’s return to India

In the late nineteenth century the *Oeconomy*, which purports to be a western translation of an eastern original, underwent a new transformation from West to East.

In 1889 the Anglo-Jewish & Vernacular Press published an Indian reprint in Bombay.⁷⁷ The Banaras Hindu University, which was founded in 1916 with the assistance of Theosophist leader and political activist Annie Besant, published another version in 1922.⁷⁸ Also in the early twentieth century an undated Panjabi version produced by a Sikh publishing house appeared in Amritsar.⁷⁹ In 1926 the Indian scholar Veturi Prabhakara Sastri published a Telegu version of the *Oeconomy* under the title *Neeti Nidhi* meaning a ‘treasure of aphorisms’, and this came out in a second edition in 1982.⁸⁰ Sastri apparently intended to prepare a Sanskrit translation, but never did so.

In a chapter introducing the second edition of the Telegu translation, his disciple Veturi Anjaneyulu explains how it came about.⁸¹ Sastri had not known English but – acting on the suggestion of a friend – arranged for a colleague to prepare a first draft in Telegu before revising it with the help of his brother. According to Anjaneyulu the outcome was “a translation that was not only precise but also an improvement on the English original”.

In his own comments, Sastri observed that there were “no strong grounds to say that the manuscript was written by a Brahmin”, but that it might be a Buddhist treatise. There was only one verse that would not be acceptable to a Hindu, presumably because it contradicts the belief in reincarnation. This comes from the second part of the *Oeconomy* and says of the soul:

Although she shall live after thee, think not she was born before thee; she was created with thy flesh, and formed with thy bowels.⁸²

⁷⁴See: Paul Russell Cutright and Michael J. Brodhead, *Elliott Coues: Naturalist and Frontier Historian*, (Urbana, 1981).

⁷⁵Joscelyne Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY, 1994), p. xi. Cited in Pedersen, ‘Tibet, Theosophy’, p. 151.

⁷⁶This episode is discussed at some length in Chapters 13 and 14 of *The Theosophical Movement*, first published in the *Theosophy* journal and now available on <www.blavatsky.net>. Accessed on 28 May 2008.

⁷⁷[Robert Dodsley], *Economy of Human Life. Being an Indian reprint . . .* (Bombay, 1889). In British Library.

⁷⁸[Robert Dodsley], *Economy of Human Life*. (Benares: Benares Hindu University, 1922). In Library of Congress.

⁷⁹[Robert Dodsley], 19??. *Jivana jugati, arathaā, Loka praloka wicamāna pāuṇa dā rasatā / racita [anuwādaka] Carana Singha Shahīda*. (Ammritasara: Gurū Khālasā Praisā, 19??). Microfilm in Library of Congress.

⁸⁰Veturi Prabhakara Sastri, *Neeti Nidhi*, 2nd edition (1st editon 1926), (Hyderabad, 1982).

⁸¹Veturi Anjaneyulu, “‘Neeti Nidhi’. A Unique Exercise in Translation”, in *Neeti Nidhi*, pp. 33–45.

⁸²*The Economy of Human Life* (Chennai: Samata Books, 1999), p. 58. Anjaneyulu’s English re-translation of Sastri’s Telegu runs: “Even if it (soul) exists after you die, do not think that it existed before your birth. It was created along with your body. It has grown with your intestines”.

Sastri speculated that the English translator had either changed the sentence or made an addition in accordance with his religious faith.⁸³ His overall approval is a tribute both to his own generosity of spirit and to the ecumenical tone of Dodsley's original. Indeed, one factor which made it easier for the *Oeconomy* to cross cultural boundaries was precisely its blandness. The book contains no startling insights, but also – in twentieth-century India as in eighteenth-century England – no major source of controversy.

Arguably, the book also fitted into a wider pattern in that European scholars had played an important, though now under-acknowledged, part in the development of Indian historical research, starting with the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784.⁸⁴ Similarly, the Theosophist Society, though founded in North America, had found a welcome in Indian and Ceylonese intellectual circles, and had served to reinforce a revived sense of confidence in South Asian spiritual traditions. Most twentieth-century Indian readers would have no knowledge of the eighteenth-century fashion for *chinoiserie*, and would have missed cultural references such as the *Oeconomy's* allusion to the *Book of Common Prayer*. It would have seemed quite plausible that an ancient Indian text could be transmitted via the West. Indeed, this transmission route might even have strengthened its authority.

At the time of writing in early 2009, both parts of the *Oeconomy* are still in print with an Indian publishing house, Samata Books in Chennai.⁸⁵ Samata was set up by a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, and specialises in Hindu religious texts.⁸⁶ At least implicitly, the *Oeconomy* has therefore been welcomed into the canon of the Indian classics.

Conclusion: Gymnosophist Whispers

In her study of oriental tales in eighteenth-century English literature, Ros Ballaster refers to the parlour game 'Chinese whispers' where a message is passed from one person to the next until the final version – often completely transformed – is read out by the originator. The phrase 'Chinese whispers' echoes a sinophobic European tradition of representing spoken Chinese as "an incomprehensible and unpronounceable combination of sounds".⁸⁷ However, Ballaster argues that it can be taken as a useful metaphor in another sense:

... it can also serve as a figure for the way in which European representations of China, constantly rehash and re-circulate earlier accounts, each time adjusting them to the expectations and prejudices of the new historical moment and specific culture.⁸⁸

The *Oeconomy* exemplifies this 'whispering' process in several respects: the story in the book itself purportedly describes the translation of a set of ideas from the "language of the Gymnosophists", first into Chinese and then into English. Dodsley drew on an emerging body of knowledge of Tibet that derived via French and English geographers from the Jesuits in Peking. However, like many other Enlightenment writers, he used this knowledge

⁸³ Anjaneyulu, "A Unique Exercise", p. 38.

⁸⁴ On the Asiatic Society's contribution see: O.P. Kejriwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal*.

⁸⁵ [Robert Dodsley], *Economy of Human Life. Complete in Two Parts*. With a preface by Douglas M. Gane, Reprint of 1902 edition (Chennai, 1999).

⁸⁶ See the company's website: <www.samatabooks.com>. Accessed on 15 February 2008.

⁸⁷ Ballaster, *Fabulous Orients*, p. 203.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

to convey Deist ideas that fell short of Jesuit ideals. In its subsequent history, the book passed through further translations – both literally into new languages, and metaphorically in that it was used by a variety of different people with contrasting world views. In the parlour game, the humour – such as it is – lies in the distortion of the original. In the case of the *Oeconomy*, the joke is better still: there never was an original. Or, rather, it might be more appropriate to say that all the different versions of the book – and of the Alexander legends before it—are in their own way authentic.

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