Journal of History, Society and Culture; Vol.1, No.2; 2026
E-ISSN: 3136-2222 P-ISSN: 3136-2214
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70267/jhsc.v1n2.1926
Published by: Zeus Press

From the Chinese Rites Controversy to the Physiocrats: Representations of Chinese Government in Eighteenth-Century French Debates on Economic Reform

Xinjin Jiang*

School of History, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

**Corresponding author: Xinjin Jiang.*

Abstract

What did French writers do with accounts of Chinese government when they argued for economic reform? This article follows particular passages from missionary translations and compilations into the writings of François Quesnay and Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot. It distinguishes three kinds of evidence: a reference that establishes what an author read, a change of wording that reveals an interpretation, and a document that connects reading with a decision. The Chinese Rites Controversy made the authority to interpret Chinese texts and practices a matter of public dispute. Later compilers preserved such disagreements even as they selected and rearranged their sources. A comparison between Rousselot de Surgy and Quesnay shows how listing cultivators first among commoners became an explicit claim about their rank. Read alongside Quesnay's treatment of taxation and public instruction, this small change explains how an account of China could lend historical authority to a model of agrarian government. Turgot used some of the same literature differently. His questionnaire asked Chinese correspondents for prices, records and specimens that a printed report could not supply. His letters connect this intended exchange with the composition of the Réflexions. They do not trace the French grain or guild reforms to a Chinese measure. The strongest evidence for influence concerns the arguments French writers made and the questions they learned to ask.

Keywords

Chinese rites controversy, physiocracy, François Quesnay, Turgot, Sino-French intellectual exchange

1. Introduction

In 1767 François Quesnay published *Despotisme de la Chine* in four instalments. In the last chapter he invited readers to consider whether the doctrine he attributed to China could serve other states [1]. What made a report about one empire evidence for the government of another? The question matters particularly for a writer who held that cultivation yielded the surplus on which other incomes depended [1]. Neither an account of an emperor at the plough nor a description of an imperial tax register could by itself establish that economic proposition. Such accounts could, however, give a reader reasons to believe that a sovereign might act on it.

Accounts of this relationship differ in what they ask the evidence to establish. In 1938 Lewis Maverick read similarities between *Mencius* and the Physiocrats as evidence of borrowing [2]. Hu Jichuang's preface to Tan Min's study describes a still wider comparison, extending from natural order and the *Tableau économique* to

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taxation and property [3]. Pablo Rodriguez places China at the centre of Quesnay's political thinking, a claim about the formulation of an argument that does not require Chinese authorship of the *Tableau* [4]. Liana Vardi's distinction between studies of Physiocratic economics and studies of its political programme is useful here: a source may bear heavily on the second question without resolving the first [5].

This article follows references and changes of wording. Where Quesnay names a source, the comparison begins with the passage he sends his reader to; where a compilation is silent about rank or a tax is reported only as hearsay, that difference matters as much as verbal agreement. Turgot's letters allow a further distinction between reading about China, writing for Chinese interlocutors and borrowing an institution. The four sections follow the making and circulation of translations, the selection of witnesses, the interpretation of Chinese government in political economy, and the kinds of influence demonstrable in subsequent writing and reform. The object of comparison throughout is the use of evidence about China. Establishing how Qing institutions actually operated would require a different body of records.

2. Dissemination and Translation: How Chinese Texts Entered French Discussions

A reader in Paris in 1687 encountered Confucius under a Latin title: *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis Latine exposita*. The title page names four Jesuits—Prospero Intorcetta, Christian Herdtrich, François de Rougemont and Philippe Couplet—and announces publication by royal command from the royal library [6]. The preface makes clear what their readers were being offered. The translators selected particular books because they thought Europeans could form a judgment about Chinese philosophy from them. They presented the *Great Learning* as instruction for a ruler who must cultivate himself, order his household or court and only then govern a kingdom [6]. The sequence helped a reader recognize a political argument in a work that began with the conduct of the individual.

The editors also recorded the limits of their undertaking. They described the four books in the preface, but the commentary at the end identifies only three as complete: the *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Analects*. *Mencius* was discussed as a possible future publication [6]. The editors further explained that they followed a Chinese commentator while rendering the material in a European idiom, on occasion even using the words of European philosophers [6]. Thierry Meynard's comparison of the Latin *Analects* with Chinese commentaries points to Zhang Juzheng as a base text checked against Zhu Xi [7]. Their edition thus invites two distinct questions: whose understanding of the classics informed the commentary, and what language made that commentary intelligible to a new readership? A decision about how to express an argument should not be confused with a claim to have originated it.

The French mission supplied another route into print. In the first volume of his *Nouveaux memoires* (1696), Louis Le Comte recalled that the king had sent six Jesuits to China as his mathematicians. He dated their embarkation to early 1685 and identified the vessel as the one carrying the French ambassador to Siam [8]. For Le Comte, natural knowledge was to help the missionaries preach the Gospel, and he explicitly ranked the expansion of Christianity above the perfection of science as a royal motive [8]. The distinction matters: the author's account of why the men were sent is evidence for how a participant represented the expedition to a French readership. In his 1697 portrait for Louis XIV, Joachim Bouvet compared Kangxi's ability to govern himself and his subjects with that of the French king, while qualifying his praise by reference to Kangxi's paganism [9].

The public controversy over rites made the terms of this representation visible. In 1698 Charles Le Gobien defended honours paid to Confucius and the dead as "purement civils"; that was a judgment advanced in defence of Jesuit practice [10]. Elsewhere in the same book he reported a distinct argument addressed to the emperor: the sages and early emperors of China, the missionaries contended, had worshipped the same God as Christians [10]. The Paris Faculty of Theology excerpted this latter claim as its fifth proposition in 1700 and condemned it [11]. The censor's judgment therefore cannot be quoted as if it directly ruled on Le Gobien's classification of ceremonial honours. Two related arguments about religion reached readers through the same book, but the censure allows us to identify precisely which of them it rejected. The Paris judgement was only one part of the controversy. In Beijing, Kilian Stumpf documented negotiations involving Tournon, Qing officials and the Kangxi emperor [12]. Chinese Catholic correspondents also took a position: Nicolas Standaert counts about 430 distinct signatures in a collection of some sixty letters translated into Latin and brought to Rome in 1704 [13].

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Identifying the people behind an account changes what counts as transmission. In a letter dated 1712 and printed in the twelfth collection of the *Lettres édifiantes* in 1717, François-Xavier d'Entrecolles distinguished his own observations of porcelain production from what local Christian artisans and merchants told him. He also identified the relevant entry in the fourth volume of the Fuliang local history as a check on their answers [14]. In the field of moral writing, d'Entrecolles's selections from Shi Dian's *Yuanti ji* and Julien-Placide Hervieu's partial translation of Zheng Xuan's *Zuofei'an rizuan* appeared together under the rubric of Chinese moral philosophy in Du Halde's third volume [15]. In both cases the French text becomes more legible historically once its contributors and the editors' decisions can be distinguished.

3. Selection of Evidence: Whose Accounts of Chinese Government Counted?

An eighteenth-century reader could meet witnesses from China in a book assembled by someone who had never been there. Jean-Baptiste Du Halde was such an editor; his distance from the events he described makes the attribution of particular passages especially important [16]. Rousselot de Surgy acknowledged using Du Halde, earlier materials that Du Halde had cited and travellers whom he had omitted [17]. Quesnay in turn acknowledged drawing one particular extract almost entirely from Rousselot's *Mélanges intéressans et curieux* [1]. That acknowledgement has a precise scope. It identifies a route by which material reached Quesnay without making every passage in his treatise a copy of the *Mélanges*. As Olga Borokh observes, the fact that the evidence was second-hand does not mean it contained no information about Chinese life [18].

These compilations left room for disagreement. In book VIII of *De l'esprit des loix*, Montesquieu set traders' complaints against missionaries' accounts of virtue; he also cited Du Halde in a note on punishment [19]. He concluded that fear was the principle of Chinese despotism, yet observed on the same page that the pressure of subsistence gave the government reason to attend to its subjects' livelihoods [19]. Voltaire drew a different inference. The administrative bodies that held and applied the laws made arbitrary rule more difficult, he argued, even though the emperor could abuse his power over those close to him [20]. The disagreement concerned the operation of imperial power: accounts of punishment and accounts of consultation could lead to different answers without either writer treating every missionary as an authority.

Quesnay gave his readers a way to re-enter this dispute. When answering Montesquieu, he referred them to volume V of Rousselot's compilation, page 164 and following [1]. Page 164 opens with praise for Montesquieu as an analyst of Chinese government; by page 168 Rousselot had drawn a distinction between an emperor with extensive powers and one whose wishes never met resistance [21]. Thus the compilation was more than a repository of observations. It offered Quesnay an existing argument about how to interpret them. He added a test of geographical reach: Europeans trading at Canton did not thereby know commerce elsewhere in the empire, whereas missionaries who lived there and travelled inland could, in his view, testify about more than one port [1]. This tells us how he assigned weight to testimony; it gives no independent guarantee of its accuracy.

Virgile Pinot identified a change of wording that makes the effect of selection unusually clear. On page 204 of his 1906 article he described the additions and omissions; on page 205 he set the passages on the standing of cultivators side by side [22]. In Rousselot's list of people without literary degrees, cultivators appear before merchants and artisans. The list itself does not rank them [21]. Quesnay converted their place in the list into an explicit social precedence: "les laboureurs tiennent le premier rang". The section begins on page 581 of Oncken's edition, but those words occur on page 583 [1]. This is a change from sequence to status. It can be identified without assuming that Rousselot was indifferent to agriculture or that Quesnay invented an imperial preference for it.

The contrast is less sharp in the case of imperial ploughing. Du Halde described the emperor setting an example to other cultivators and offering a sacrifice for an abundant harvest. Political instruction and religious obligation already belonged to the same act in his account [23]. Quesnay emphasized the distinction accorded to cultivators and the work the emperor performed in public [1]. On taxation, the difference is sharper. Du Halde distinguished the duty legally owed at customs from the courtesy sometimes extended to the bearer of an imperial pass, and remarked that officers in Beijing were usually stricter [23]. Quesnay reported additional levies conditionally; if they existed, their correction need not change the constitution [1]. The comparison does not establish either author as a witness to the whole Qing fiscal system. It shows why the existence of an inconvenient charge need not, for Quesnay, disqualify China as a political example.

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4. Interpretation: How Quesnay Joined Sovereignty, Cultivation and Public Instruction

Quesnay begins *Despotisme de la Chine* with a question about the emperor's title. A ruler called a despot might exercise either lawful or arbitrary power. The question, then, is what obliges this ruler to obey the laws he enforces. Quesnay tells his readers that the accounts he has read describe an emperor who observes such laws himself [1]. Another Physiocrat, Le Mercier de la Rivière, distinguished two kinds of despotism in a book published in 1767: the lawful kind rested on evident principles, the arbitrary kind on opinion [24]. The comparison helps identify what Quesnay wanted the Chinese case to show. He wanted readers to distinguish the extent of a sovereign's powers from a sovereign's discretion to decide what was just.

Learning gave that distinction an institutional form. Quesnay describes candidates for literary degrees passing a succession of examinations, beginning under an official in the jurisdiction where they were born [1]. In the final chapter, he gives a different account of what a government should teach. There the subject is natural law, and China appears as his example of why the study and teaching of those laws should be continuous and general [1]. The two passages do different work. The first describes a route to a recognized qualification; the second proposes a purpose for public instruction. Reading them together explains how he used the examinations without assuming that their historical curriculum was Physiocratic.

Cultivation undergoes a similar change of meaning. In his account of China, Quesnay assigns cultivators precedence over merchants and artisans and describes an emperor ploughing and sowing grain himself [1]. He pointedly contrasts cultivators' standing in China with their low standing in an unnamed European kingdom, referring readers to Domat's civil laws to identify it [1]. In the last chapter, however, agricultural priority rests on a calculation: once the expenses of production have been replaced, the surplus supplies both public revenue and the income of proprietors [1]. He connects the security of landholding to the willingness to pay for improvements whose return lies in the future [1]. The ceremony makes honour paid to cultivators visible. It cannot establish that cultivation yields a net product; that proposition depends on Quesnay's account of expenditure and return.

The distinction mattered when the information he received pointed in another direction. Quesnay acknowledges reports that land contributions were collected alongside customs duties, tolls, and a charge resembling a poll tax. He introduces the reports cautiously. Even if correct, he argues, the additional levies would disclose an administrative error that could be corrected without altering the empire's constitution [1]. In his general argument about commerce, the advantage of competition lies in bringing more buyers and sellers into the market on terms favourable to each nation [1]. Thus the political example has a limit of Quesnay's own making: a reported practice can count against an administrator without counting against the model.

The chronology sets a different limit. A surviving sheet of the *Tableau* catalogued as 1759 already distinguishes productive expenditure from sterile expenditure; Quesnay's *Le droit naturel* appeared in 1765. Both precede the 1767 treatise [1, 25, 26]. The later prose *Analyse* spells out the deduction of agricultural advances before proprietors receive their income; its wording should not be attributed to the early diagram [25, 27]. None of these dates excludes earlier encounters with Chinese writing. They do establish what the 1767 text can show on its own. At the opening of its final chapter Quesnay expressly presents the preceding reports as grounds for a doctrine that other states might adopt. That is direct evidence of how he argued for his political economy, whatever the earlier history of its formation [1]. The order of exposition is not the order of discovery. Christine Théré and Loïc Charles found that the chapter which closes the published treatise stands first in the manuscript they examined; they could not identify who changed its position [28].

5. The Reach of Chinese Influence: From Turgot's Questions to French Reform

Turgot put a different demand on accounts of China from the one Quesnay made in the final chapter of *Despotisme de la Chine*. Where Quesnay presented a doctrine he thought other states might adopt, Turgot left questions open for two named correspondents to answer [1, 29]. Neither the dates nor the form of the texts support a simple succession from one author to the other. Turgot described his questionnaire in a letter of December 1766; Quesnay's treatise appeared in four instalments between March and June 1767 [1, 30]. The contrast is between two uses of information available in France: one author asked what an account could teach a legislator, the other what further observations would make it possible to judge that account.

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The printed questionnaire names its addressees as Ko and Yang and ends at question LII [29]. John Finlay identifies the two men as Aloys Ko and Étienne Yang, Chinese Christians who in 1764 asked Bertin for help with their passage home [31]. The editors of the *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* recalled in 1776 that the two men had studied in France and had agreed to continue a correspondence after returning home. Ko also signed the dedication to Bertin of an essay on Chinese antiquity, which he distinguished from a translation [32, 33]. That distinction matters: Ko appears in print as someone advancing a historical argument in his own name. His essay is evidence of his authorship; it cannot be treated as either man's answer to Turgot.

On porcelain, we can identify a particular report that Turgot wanted them to pursue. In a letter dated 1712 and printed in 1717, d'Entrecolles explained that he had learned from Christians who worked in porcelain and had consulted the section on the subject in a Chinese local history [14]. Turgot named both the missionary and the twelfth volume of the *Lettres édifiantes*, qualifying the volume number as a matter of recollection. He asked for labelled samples of the raw materials, before they had been ground, washed and purified for delivery to Jingdezhen [29]. Elsewhere he proposed comparing his correspondents' field notes with Du Halde's maps [29]. Existing books thus helped determine what to collect, but they also gave him reasons to seek evidence that readers could inspect independently.

The economic questions exhibit the same attention to what an answer would have to contain. Turgot asked who cultivated land, how landlords were paid, and who furnished the working animals. To investigate the usual rice price in Beijing, he requested prices for the same quantity in each of ten years and explained how to calculate their mean [29]. He distinguished tax rates attached to individual plots in a public register from rates known through custom. His questions about grain separated permission to store it from official price setting and restrictions on movement between towns during shortages [29]. French readers can recover his comparisons from these instructions, but the instructions are not observations of Chinese landholding, taxation or markets.

The inquiry did have a demonstrable consequence for Turgot's writing. On 9 December 1766 he told Du Pont that he had prefaced the questions with a sketch of social labour and the distribution of wealth to explain their purpose. On 12 September 1770 he told Josiah Tucker that he had written the piece to help the two men understand his questions about their empire's economy [30, 34]. The prospect of addressing them helped shape the exposition of the *Réflexions*; neither letter says that answers from China supplied its propositions. Nor should Turgot's argument be assimilated to Quesnay's: in February 1770 he protested to Du Pont about editorial additions that made him appear to speak for the *économistes* [35].

The measures taken during Turgot's ministry pose a different question of evidence. The council decision of 13 September 1774 freed trade in grain and flour inside the kingdom, expressly reserving a decision on sales abroad [36]. In February 1776 one royal edict replaced compulsory road work with a contribution apportioned among liable property holders; another suppressed guild bodies and masterships while expressly excepting several trades. Both edicts were registered at the royal session of 12 March [37–39]. Domestic opposition had reasons of its own. Charbit notes the authorities' fear of unrest over bread; Kaplan documents the disturbances known as the Flour War in the Paris region in May 1775 [40, 41]. The edicts' provisions identify the relationships the French government sought to change. They supply no link between a Chinese report or reply and the choice of those measures. What the correspondence does establish is more specific: the intended exchange with Ko and Yang gave Turgot an occasion to set out his economic reasoning for particular readers.

6. Conclusion

China's influence on French Physiocracy is clearest in the political case François Quesnay made for agrarian reform. Jesuit translations and missionary accounts circulating at the time of the Rites Controversy had introduced French readers to Chinese discussions of a ruler's duties. Quesnay put that literature to a new use. Where Rousselot de Surgy had listed cultivators before merchants and artisans among those without literary degrees, Quesnay explicitly gave cultivators first rank. He contrasted the honour paid to cultivation by an emperor who took up the plough himself with the low standing of cultivators in an unnamed European kingdom. By directing readers to Domat's civil laws, he invited them to recognise France in that comparison. His criticism was that the crown depended for its revenue on the labour of people whom French society held in little esteem.

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China also shaped Quesnay's account of what should restrain a sovereign. Against Montesquieu's judgement that fear sustained the Chinese empire, Quesnay held up an emperor who was himself bound by the laws he enforced. He read the examinations for office as evidence of the place learning could occupy in government, and argued that natural law should be publicly taught. The Tableau économique traced the circulation of the agricultural surplus. The Chinese example helped Quesnay answer a different question: how a monarchy might protect the sources of that wealth while binding its own ruler to fundamental laws.

Turgot's Réflexions show how this engagement reached beyond Quesnay: he set out his account of wealth so that Ko and Yang could understand the questions he wished to ask them about landholding, taxation and grain prices in China. Where the prospect of addressing Chinese readers shaped the way Turgot explained his economics, accounts of Chinese government shaped the demands Quesnay drew from his. Through Quesnay, the Chinese example helped define what the Physiocrats expected of a French king: he should protect the cultivators on whom his revenue depended and govern under laws that bound him as well.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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