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The Idea of Asia in British Geographical Thought, 1652–1832

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Abstract

This article explores popular British ideas about Asia from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, using largely neglected sources: geography books. Thanks to their popularity and focus on conventional knowledge, this genre of texts – geographical reference works, gazetteers, encyclopaedias and schoolbooks – allows us to glimpse the commonplace mentalities of the period, and consequently to understand how Asia was perceived by ordinary literate Britons and not just by prominent intellectuals. Geography books typically regard Asia as a ‘place of origin’ for the cultural and societal achievements of Europe. They also assume that Asia possesses plentiful natural resources and is thus ripe for economic exploitation. At the same time, however, Asia is understood to be degenerate and corrupt, usually due to a combination of climactic decay, religious failings and government mismanagement. Asia is thus alien and entirely distinct from Europe, and, simultaneously, it is intimately connected to Europe’s rise and future imperial progress. British geography books can tell us a great deal about how ordinary literate people understood Asian peoples and places in the formative age of British empire-building.

Keywords: Britain; history of geography; Asia.

What did the literate British public think about Asia in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? This article offers some answers to that question using largely neglected sources: British geography books. Scholars have long discussed how early modern European understandings of Asia are organised around particular tropes. In broad terms, Asia is often presented as a sclerotic continent resistant to historical progress; its torpid climate is said to promote languor and licentiousness among the populace; and its arbitrary social structures purportedly give rise to brutal despotisms and fanatical,

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superstitious religions, if not to outright lawlessness.¹ Many of these ideas – notably those concerned with climatic influence and so-called oriental despotism – have very long legacies, some even dating from classical antiquity.² But much scholarship on the textual adaptation, expression and dissemination of such ideas tends to use, as its source material, literature or works on political thought.³ Such texts were not necessarily rarefied or elite: novels and travel literature in particular increased in popularity throughout the eighteenth century. But there is nonetheless a propensity to understand European ideas about Asia through the perspectives of prominent intellectual and literary figures, especially key Enlightenment thinkers. The works of Montesquieu or Volney, Smith or Hume – with all their undoubted sophistication – are sometimes presented if not exactly as direct representatives of their period's thought, then as foundations for the comprehension of contemporary ideas.⁴

It cannot always be assumed, however, that celebrated intellectuals epitomise the commonplace opinions of their age; at the very least this assumption must be tested by examining a wider range of source material. This article's purpose is therefore to explore the characterisation of Asia in a different genre of texts designed for the broadest possible readership in early modern Britain. To what extent are certain ideas about the continent reproduced in books for a general audience? Are there notable patterns and complications in public discourse about Asia? Geography books – a genre of texts which includes geographical reference works, gazetteers, encyclopaedias and school-books – are a useful medium through which to consider these questions. Such works have largely been neglected by historians, or treated condescendingly, dismissed as 'second- and third-rate books' which are 'useless for any practical purpose'.⁵ But thanks to their popularity and focus on conventional

¹ Foundational works on European attitudes to Asia include V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitudes towards the Outside World in the Imperial Age* (1969); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), revd edn (2003); Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East* (1979), trans. Liz Heron, intro. Mladen Dolar (1998); P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (1982).

² See David N. Livingstone, 'Environmental Determinism', in *The Sage Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, ed. John A. Agnew and David N. Livingstone (2011), 368–80; Melvin Richter, 'Aristotle and the Classical Greek Concept of Despotism', *History of European Ideas*, 12 (1990), 175–87.

³ Frederick G. Whelan, *Enlightenment Political Thought and Non-Western Societies: Sultans and Savages* (New York, 2009); Srinivas Aravanudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago, 2012); Sankar Muthu (ed.), *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2012); Geoffrey P. Nash (ed.), *Orientalism and Literature* (Cambridge, 2019).

⁴ See, for example, Bruce Buchan, 'Asia and the Modern Geography of European Enlightenment Political Thought c. 1600–1800', in *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, ed. Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman (Plymouth, 2009), 65–86; Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (Cambridge, 2009); Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia, 2010); Phil Dodds, 'One Vast Empire': China, Progress and the Scottish Enlightenment', *Global Intellectual History*, 3 (2018), 47–70.

⁵ Lester Jesse Cappon, 'Geographers and Map-Makers, British and American, from about 1750 to 1798', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 81 (1972), 243–71, at 245; J. K. Wright 'Some British "Grandfathers" of American Geography', in *Geographical Essays in Memory of A. G. Ogilvie*, ed. R. Miller and J. Wreford Watson (Edinburgh, 1959), 144–65, at 147.

knowledge, they allow us to glimpse the commonplace mentalities circulating in the period. My purpose is not to imply that geography books offer startlingly original understandings of Asia. Indeed, many geographical texts relay perspectives which were deeply familiar or even clichéd in their period. But herein lies the books' principal usefulness: their wide readership and tendency to present commonplace knowledge help us to identify more precisely the ideas about Asia which circulated in popular British literate culture from the mid-seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries.

The first books in English which seek to describe the entire world appeared in the late fifteenth century; about fifty were published prior to 1650, many being translations of works originally published in Greek, Latin, French and Spanish.⁶ The 'first large-scale ... geography by an English author', however, was Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* published in 1652.⁷ From then the numbers of new works increased steadily: another forty-four before 1700, just under 140 between 1700 and 1800 (including forty in the 1790s alone), and around another 140 in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.⁸ These figures leave out reprints and new editions, numbers of which could be substantial – some books were revised or reissued upwards of thirty times.⁹

The growth in geographical material can be attributed partly to general expansions in literacy and book production, but also to flourishing cultural interests in travel, tourism, exploration and, consequently, foreign lands.¹⁰ Most importantly, geography books were read by many different groups of people. Many were produced specifically for educational use, most often for children – either at school or studying privately – but some served as university textbooks or emerged from public lecture courses for adults.¹¹ People with recreational or professional interests in travel and overseas places were another important audience. This included armchair tourists interested in exotic locales, but also actual travellers – merchants, sailors, naturalists, tourists – some of whom used geographical works as practical guidebooks.¹² Amid

⁶ The following paragraphs on the characteristics of geographical texts draw on arguments and examples from Paul Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination, 1760-1830* (Oxford, 2019), 17–37.

⁷ O. F. G. Sitwell, *Four Centuries of Special Geography* (Vancouver, 1993), 301.

⁸ Figures are approximations based on the bibliographical lists in Sitwell, *Special Geography*, 619–30. Titles published in the United States are excluded.

⁹ Richard Brookes's *The General Gazetteer* reached six principal editions between 1762 and 1815, with thirty-five 'other versions' between 1771 and 1842, some with further editions of their own. William Guthrie's *A New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar* (1770) had reached its forty-sixth edition by 1843. Sitwell, *Special Geography*, 120–4, 273–84.

¹⁰ Among many works on these topics see Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900', *Past & Present*, 42 (1969), 60–139; James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450–1850* (New Haven, 2007), esp. 221–56; David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (Oxford, 1992), esp. 127–33; John Towner, *An Historical Geography of Recreation and Tourism in the Western World 1540–1940* (Chichester, 1996), 96–138.

¹¹ Sitwell, *Special Geography*, 17–18; Robert J. Mayhew, 'Geography in Eighteenth-Century British Education', *Paedagogica Historica*, 34 (1998), 731–69, at 753–66.

¹² For the popularity of travel and geography books as reading material see Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and Their Users* (1969), 80, 138, 173; John Feather, 'British Publishing in the Eighteenth

this wide market, geography books were read by individuals of all ages and at every social level from monarchs to labourers. The future Queen Victoria is known to have read a geographical primer as part of her early education,¹³ and similar works were also consumed by working- and middle-class readers: the labourer Francis Place and the shopkeeper Thomas Turner both read geography books for self-improvement and general interest.¹⁴ The range of editions – from lavish folios to mass-produced cheap versions costing a few pence – is also evidence of a broad readership. Some books were high-end luxury products: Millar's *New and Universal System of Geography* (1782) was sold in eighty serialised parts for 6d. each, making the total cost 40s., or two-and-a-half to four times the weekly wage of a shop manager or office worker. Indeed, its published list of subscribers included aristocrats alongside senior military officers, clergy and doctors.¹⁵ But other books were significantly cheaper: Lenglet du Fresnoy's much-reprinted *Geography for Children* (1737) could be purchased for as little as 9d.¹⁶ Christopher Kelly's *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17) was not exaggerating when it claimed that geography books were aimed at 'people of every rank and description, from the prince to the peasant'; they were equally suitable for 'the lady's library, the tradesman's parlour, and the peaceful retirement of the sequestered cottage'.¹⁷

Like many books from this period, geographical works typically have unclear authorships. In some cases, the books are simply anonymous, but in others the authorship details are obscure or misleading. It is questionable, for example, whether William Guthrie actually wrote the *Geographical Grammar* which was published six months after his death, and it is entirely unknown who revised it through forty-six subsequent editions.¹⁸ Daniel Fenning and J. Collyer's *New System of Geography* (1765–6) lists nameless 'others' as co-authors on its title page.¹⁹ And the anonymous translator of Büsching's *New System of Geography* (1762) admits to editing and reorganising the material,

Century: A Preliminary Subject Analysis', *The Library*, n.s. 8 (1986), 32–46. For a traveller reading a geography book while travelling see Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality [...] in the Years 1774 to 1776*, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews with Charles MacLean Andrews (New Haven, 1934), 60–1, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=19056 (accessed 12 January 2023).

¹³ Megan A. Norcia, *X Marks the Spot: Writers Map the Empire for British Children* (Athens, OH, 2010), 130–1. The text in question is *Geography in Easy Dialogues for Young Children, by a Lady* (1816).

¹⁴ Francis Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771–1854)*, ed. Mary Thrale (Cambridge, 1972), 109, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=2093 (accessed 12 January 2023); Thomas Turner, *The Diary of Thomas Turner*, ed. David Vasey (Oxford, 1984), 37, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/record_details.php?id=6240 (accessed 12 January 2023).

¹⁵ George Henry Millar, *New and Universal System of Geography* [1st edn] (1782), iv, subscriber list bound after 812. The wage information is from J. E. Elliot, 'The Cost of Reading in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *English Literary History*, 77 (2010), 353–84, at 372–3.

¹⁶ [William Baynes], *W. Baynes's Catalogue for 1799* (1799), 42. Lenglet du Fresnoy's volume continued to be printed until 1852: see Sitwell, *Special Geography*, 347–50.

¹⁷ Christopher Kelly, *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1814–17), 1, preface.

¹⁸ Richard B. Sher, *Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (Chicago, 2006), 155–6.

¹⁹ [Daniel] Fenning, J. Collyer and others, *A New System of Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1764–5).

but does not explain the criteria for doing so.²⁰ Indeed, various geographical works present themselves as ‘compilations’, and a great many plagiarise text from each other, sometimes with brief acknowledgement but usually without it.²¹ Kelly’s *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17), for instance, includes material from Pinkerton’s *Modern Geography* (1802) both within and outside quotation marks.²² And a discussion of ‘Political Geography’ in the anonymous *New and Commercial System of Geography* (1800) paraphrases and copies an essay in Guthrie’s *Geographical Grammar* (1770) on ‘The Origins of Nations, Laws, Government and Commerce’.²³

These qualities are disconcerting to those methodologies in intellectual and cultural history which place a high premium on originality and authorial intent. Clearly, it is unsound to premise interpretations of the books’ contents on authorial intent; and seeking to establish the novelty or the genealogy of their contents is often speculative and, at times, impossible. Indeed, to attempt such tasks may be to misunderstand the roles of generic conventions, market expectations and the publishing procedures of early modern hack writing. But rather than seeing the books’ unoriginality and repetitiousness as regrettable hindrances, we can instead view their tendency to recycle text and ideas as advantages. Their borrowings and repetitions allow us to identify and analyse the cultural conventions circulating in Britain in that period. These are books which deliberately set out to accumulate and disseminate conventional knowledge, something which makes them extremely useful for tracing wider cultural mentalities. Naturally, we cannot assume that these works replicate the view of any individual reader; but by understanding geographical works as repositories of commonplace notions, we can use them to investigate broad cultural assumptions about Asia.

The discussion which follows is distilled from my reading of nearly 350 geography books published between 1652 and 1832, ranging from educational primers a few score pages long, through to multi-volume geographical encyclopaedias.²⁴ The opening date is set by Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* (1652), though I have also consulted a few English translations of atlases published earlier in the seventeenth century. The date range ends with the publication of James Bell’s *System of Geography* in 1832, ‘the last British example of a massive description of all the countries in the world’ purporting to be written by a

²⁰ A[nton] F[r]iedrich Büsching, *A New System of Geography* (6 vols., 1762), I, iii. The translator is probably Patrick Murdoch: see Gordon Goodwin, ‘Murdoch, Patrick (d.1774)’, rev. Alexander Du Toit, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/19559> (accessed 12 January 2023).

²¹ *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1796), I, v; Alexander Adam, *A Summary of Geography and History* [1st edn] (Edinburgh, 1794), iii.

²² Kelly, *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17), II, 1–4; John Pinkerton, *Modern Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1802), II, 7–16.

²³ *A New Historical and Commercial System of Geography* (Manchester, 1800), xiv–xxiv; Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar* (1770), xxxiv–xxxv, xxxix–xl.

²⁴ For bibliographical information on geographical texts, including notes on authorship and edition numbers, see Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 261–83.

single author.²⁵ My purpose is not to catalogue understandings of every region or polity in Asia from the Ottoman Empire to Japan. Instead, I have sought to show how geography books discern and characterise the continent of ‘Asia’ overall: to delineate the features which, they claim, homogenise the continent and make its natural environment, cultures, states and peoples distinctive. I have therefore focused my analysis on the books’ main entries on ‘Asia’: the articles which head the section on that continent, or the entries on ‘Asia’ in alphabetical gazetteers. By identifying the trends in these introductory articles, we can establish the core information which readers would encounter when reading about Asia.

One crucial such trend is that even when ostensibly talking about the whole continent, the books tend to focus on those parts of the Ottoman Empire which would later be called the Near and Middle East. In some respects, this emphasis is unsurprising. The rise of Ottoman military and economic power in the sixteenth century, and the creation of the Levant Company in 1581, prompted sustained (and often anxious) British interest in the societies, politics and commerce of the region.²⁶ In part, that interest pivots on the ambiguous position of the Ottoman Empire in wider British thought and culture. It is often denigrated as ‘an unfamiliar space at the margins of Europe’, principally due to its distinctive (and supposedly inferior) governmental system and religious culture. But the presence of Greece and the Holy Land within its territory complicates matters as these regions are frequently seen as central to ‘European history, culture and self-definition’.²⁷ The Ottoman Empire is thus at the heart and the periphery of ideas about Europe, and this dual role also influences how geographical texts conceptualise Asia. At times, Asia is presented as the parent of Europe’s later cultural achievements; at others it is seen as the antithesis of Europe’s supposedly superior civilisations. The Ottoman territories around the Mediterranean – especially the Holy Land – play an especially important role in facilitating both these narratives, and they thus receive considerable attention in general articles on Asia.

As we shall see, Asia is also woven into broader narratives about both European and universal history. These include: the role of environmental conditions in shaping social progress; the privileging of certain governmental systems, particularly non-despotic monarchy; and the relative access of certain cultures to religious truths.²⁸ It might be tempting, therefore, to see the ‘Asia’ of British geography books largely as an ideological construction framed by Eurocentric assumptions. We might even see Europe and Asia as mutually

²⁵ Sitwell, *Special Geography*, 95.

²⁶ See Gerald MacLean, *Looking East: English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (Basingstoke, 2007); Christine Laidlaw, *The British in the Levant: Trade and Perceptions of the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (2010); Anders Ingram, *Writing the Ottomans: Turkish History in Early Modern England* (New York, 2015).

²⁷ Paul Stock, ‘The Real-and-Imagined Spaces of Philhellenic Travel’, *European Review of History - Revue Européenne d’histoire*, 20 (2009), 523–37, at 523.

²⁸ For elisions of European and universal history see Michael A. Peters, ‘Eurocentrism and the Critique of “Universal World History”: The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation’, *Geopolitics, History and International Relations*, 6 (2014), 63–77.

constructed – each defined to some extent by the other – although this is not an equal relationship as the terms of reference usually favour European perspectives. But I also want to nuance the point further, lest seeing Asia in European terms implies fixity in the idea of Europe itself. I have previously argued that ‘Europe’ is not a stable concept in this (or probably any other) period.²⁹ It is rather a set of debates which orientate around certain enduring issues: in this period these include questions about how cultures and societies – at the local and continental scales – are shaped by environmental conditions, governmental systems and revealed religion. It is preferable, therefore, to understand British ideas of Asia in this context of patterned debate. Geography books, either alone or collectively, are not usually seeking to define Asia according to fixed principles. Instead, they incorporate it within a set of long-lasting controversies which together frame understandings of both Europe itself and the rest of the world in European terms.

In many geographical texts, Asia’s significance is cast in chronological and Judaeo-Christian terms. Heylyn’s *Cosmographie* (1652) lists the reasons for Asia’s ‘especial honour’: it was the location of ‘the Creation of man’ and the garden of Eden; it was ‘the Scene of almost all the memorable actions which are recorded by the pen-men of the holy Scriptures’; ‘here our Saviour CHRIST was born ... and accomplished the great work of our Redemption’; and ‘from hence all Nations of the World had their first beginning’, descended from ‘the sonnes of Noah’.³⁰ Variations on this logic are a staple of numerous books. Richard Blome’s *Geographical Description* (1670) opens with Asia on the grounds that here ‘all Religions have had their beginnings’ and ‘the chief mysteries of the old and new Law have there been laid open’; consequently, ‘we may easily be induced to prefer it before all other parts either of the one or other Continent’.³¹ A hundred years later, William Guthrie’s *Geographical Grammar* (1770) makes essentially the same observations: it references Eden, ‘the descendants of Noah’, Christ’s redemption and the emergence of Christian churches.³² And the theme continues into the nineteenth century: Asia is ‘the principal scene of sacred history’, where ‘Jehovah first smiled propitiously on the works of his own creation’ and ‘the truths of Christianity were first promulgated’.³³ In all these cases, and for many other texts, the ancient Holy Land epitomises – or, at least, contextualises – the whole continent. There is occasional concern about overly narrow or homogeneous discussions of Asia. One book, for example, worries that ‘though the Manner and Characters of the Inhabitants [of Asia] may be more similar to each other than those of the People of Europe’, this is not ‘sufficient Reason for abridging the Accounts’ of the many ‘Empires, Kingdoms and Provinces’ in the

²⁹ Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 256–9.

³⁰ Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie in Four Bookes* [1st edn] (1652), bk 3, p. 4.

³¹ Richard Blome, *A Geographical Description of the Four Parts of the World* [1st edn] (1670), pt 1, p. 1.

³² William Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), 440.

³³ James Bell, *A System of Geography* [3rd edn] (6 vols., Glasgow, 1832), iv, 1; Kelly, *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17), i, 5.

continent.³⁴ But, for most books, Asia is fundamentally defined by biblical history and Judaeo-Christian chronology.³⁵

Many texts broaden the principle of chronological primacy and present Asia as the point of origin for a wide range of social phenomena. As one book says, 'it was in Asia that not only the first Edifices were reared, and the first Cities built, but likewise where the first Kingdoms and Monarchies were founded, whilst the other Parts of the World were, if at all, inhabited only by wild Beasts'.³⁶ It is 'the theatre upon which all the great scenes of antiquity were acted': 'where arts were first invented ... and policies instituted'.³⁷ It claims the first 'institution of laws and government, civilization of manners ... and cultivation of human literature'.³⁸ Asia is, in short, 'the ancient cradle of history' and the 'first civilized country'.³⁹ In some respects, these sentiments present the continent as strictly time-bound: defined largely by characteristics and achievements at fixed points in the past. To consider Asia is to look backwards in time and to rediscover antiquity. But this insistent focus on the past also serves to make Asia timeless, as if beyond the flow of change. The introductory paragraph on 'Asia' in Guthrie's *Geographical Grammar* (1770) is repeated nearly verbatim in the forty-fifth edition published fifty-seven years later.⁴⁰ The implication is not just that Asia has been unchanged by the past half-century. More fundamentally, the continent is presumed to be immune to passing vicissitudes; ancient history and up-to-date knowledge can be equated.

At once time-bound and timeless, Asia thus has a central – and somewhat paradoxical – role in geography texts' presentations of history. This generates complexities in how the books compare Asia with Europe. Viewed from one angle, Asia's awe-inspiring cultural achievements – the origination of architecture, government, literature and so on – makes Europe seem insignificant. For the anonymous *System of Geography* (1807), 'Asia deserves more to be celebrated than any other division of the world': while 'Europe was 'immersed in the savage state, several parts of Asia had made considerable progress'. Nor has Asia necessarily been overtaken in more recent years: it remains 'far advanced ... in a progress totally dissimilar to any thing which has been obtained in Europe'.⁴¹ Having framed Asia's significance in ultimate terms – 'the cradle of the human race' and the 'theatre of the most tremendous revolutions' – John Bigland's

³⁴ Michael Adams, *The New Royal System of Universal Geography* (n.d. [1794/6?]), p. vi.

³⁵ For more on sacred history and the Holy Land see Adam G. Beaver, 'Scholarly Pilgrims: Antiquarian Visions of the Holy Land', in *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World*, ed. Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield and Howard Louthan (Oxford, 2012), 267–83; Zur Shalev, *Sacred Words and Worlds: Geography, Religion and Scholarship, 1550–1700* (Leiden, 2012), 1–22.

³⁶ *A Complete System of Geography* [2nd edn] (2 vols., 1747), II, 67.

³⁷ William Gordon, *A New Geographical Grammar and Complete Gazetteer* (Edinburgh, 1789), 311.

³⁸ Adams, *New Royal System of Universal Geography* ([1794/6?]), 165.

³⁹ [Conrad] Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography* [2nd edn] (9 vols., Edinburgh and London, 1833–4), IV, 1; Bell, *System of Geography* (1832), IV, 1.

⁴⁰ Compare Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), 440; and William Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar* [45th edn] (1827), 557.

⁴¹ *A System of Geography* [2nd edn?] (4 vols., Glasgow, 1807), II, 255.

Geographical and Historical View of the World (1810) reinforces Europe's relative unimportance with a quotation from Voltaire: 'our European battles are only petty skirmishes in comparison of the numbers that have fought and fallen in the plains of Asia'.⁴²

However, for all that these texts stress the apparent pre-eminence of Asia, they also present a version of history in which Asian achievements facilitate the European present. The 1807 *System of Geography*'s article on Asia quickly becomes an account of how the continent has influenced and attracted Europeans. Alexander the Great 'laid open to Europeans the more remote parts of that continent', and the article continues by showing how successive Mediterranean societies – the Romans, the Italian city states – benefited from commerce with Asia.⁴³ In this example, Asia is not simply seen through a European lens; it is also an instrument for European development. This sentiment is common to geographical texts, even if the details can vary. According to one work, perhaps adapting a comparable argument made by William Robertson in *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769), it was the encounter with Asian cultures during the Crusades which first galvanised Europeans' 'spirit of enterprise'. The Crusades 'opened a state of existence which astonished the barbarians of Europe', and their desire to obtain 'luxuries' and a 'state of life, which ... appeared to be so much superior' then led to greater interest in commercial exchange and global adventurism.⁴⁴ Although ostensibly a reflection on European inadequacies, the narrative treats Asia largely as a vehicle for European betterment. Asia remains defined by its past, and by its role in facilitating Europe's more recent accomplishments.

European priorities are also at work in the characterisation of Asia's natural environment: the continent apparently enjoys particular advantages, but these are presented in terms of European opportunity. One recurring phrase describes Asia as 'rich and fruitful', and the general idea that it possesses a superior climate and plentiful natural resources is widespread.⁴⁵ Echoing Hippocrates, Asia is said to be the 'most temperate' continent; and it is also blessed with the 'bounties of Providence, which are here dispensed in vast variety, as well as superabundance'.⁴⁶ As one text says, 'the most precious things that the world doth yield are found in this noble parte thereof, as besides great varietie & divers kyndes of beastes, & birds, excelent sortes of spices, frutes,

⁴² John Bigland, *A Geographical and Historical View of the World* [2nd edn] (5 vols., 1810), iv, 118. The quotation is a loose translation from [Voltaire], *Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (10 vols., [Geneva?], 1757), ii, 200.

⁴³ *System of Geography* (1807), ii, 256–61.

⁴⁴ *The Glasgow Geography* [1st edn?] (5 vols., Glasgow, 1819), ii, 3–4. This work reproduces text from *System of Geography* (1807). Compare William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (3 vols., 1769), i, 77–9.

⁴⁵ George Henry Millar, *The New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* [3rd edn.] (n.d. [1785?]), 6. See also George Augustus Baldwyn, *A New, Royal, Authentic, Complete and Universal System of Geography* (n.d. [1794?]), 2; *A New General Atlas* (1721), 141.

⁴⁶ Richard Blome, *Geographical Description of the Four Parts of the World*, pt 1, p. 1; *New Historical and Commercial System of Geography* (1800), 329. Hippocrates claims that Asia possesses the ideal median temperature: see *Ancient Medicine*, trans W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA, 1923), 107.

medicinall herbes, rootes, & other things, As also the moste precious metals, precious stones, and pearles'.⁴⁷ Asia exceeds other parts of the world in

the Richness and Fertility of its Soil, the Serenity of Air, the Delicousness of its Fruits, the Salubriousness of its Drugs, Frangrancy and Balsamick Quality of its Plants, Spices, Gums, &c. the Quantity, Variety, Beauty and Value of its Gems, Fineness of its Silks, Cottons, &c. the Richness of its Metals, and many more of the like Nature.⁴⁸

The continent, in short, produces 'a great abundance of all things necessary for Humane Life'.⁴⁹

For many geography books, therefore, Asia is defined by the superiority of its natural environment. This is complicated by that fact that these books also often use very similar terms of reference to describe Europe's natural environment.⁵⁰ 'Europe', says one,

surpasseth all other parts of the world, not only in abundance of all things through the admirable and sweete temperature of the aire, pleasant prospect, and multitudes of people, but also for the fertility of fruits, trees, plants, all sorts of beasts, metals and other things necessary for man's life.⁵¹

Many texts make observations about 'the fertility of the soil' in Europe and the 'abundance of its productions'.⁵² On one level, these correspondences seem contradictory: Asia and Europe surely cannot both possess the best climate and natural resources. But these overlapping qualities are perhaps better understood in terms of the chronological priority which casts Asia as the progenitor of modern Europe. Just as Asia was the location for religious and social events which contextualise and facilitate Europe's subsequent development, so too does Europe succeed Asia in natural and climatological advantages. Those environmental qualities – temperate climate, rich soil – which formerly defined Asia are now more applicable to Europe, in the same way that the guardianship of religious truths and the growth of advanced commercial states have also migrated from one continent to the other. This developmental logic is evident when one book says that, at the time of writing, 'Asia enjoys a temperature similar to that of Europe', and that 'this may be one reason ... why

⁴⁷ [Abraham Ortelius], *An Epitome of Ortelius His Theatre of the World* [1st edn] ([1601/2?]), 3.

⁴⁸ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67.

⁴⁹ *Thesaurus Geographicus* [1st edn] (1695), 412.

⁵⁰ There are classical precedents for prioritising the European natural environment: Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (8 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1917–32), I, 489; Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, W. H. S. Jones and D. E. Eichholz (10 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1938–62), II, 5.

⁵¹ Gerhard Mercator [and Jodocus Hondius], *Atlas* [1st edn] (Amsterdam, 1636), 42.

⁵² J. W. Clarke, *A New Geographical Dictionary* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1814), I, 779. See also [Richard] Turner [Sr], *A View of the Earth* [1st edn] (1762), 9; Clement Cruttwell, *The New Universal Gazetteer* [2nd edn] (Dublin, 1800), 260.

Europeans generally find this continent to agree with their constitution'.⁵³ By the modern period, Europe defines the ideal environment, and Asia is understood in European terms rather than the reverse.

Asia's subordination to Europe is most clearly on display when geography books discuss the exploitation of Asian resources. In its introductory article on the continent, the anonymous *System of Geography* (1807) devotes considerable space to ancient and modern commerce with Asia, tracing the rise and fall of Mediterranean powers – ancient Rome, the Italian states, Portugal – to the 'acquisition of trade' in the continent.⁵⁴ According to this narrative, Asia is a repository of riches and a means to achieve and consolidate wealth. For some texts, the connections between commerce and imperial ambition are outlined even more explicitly. Several tabulate commercial activities in Asia, listing the regions which 'trade with or belong to' certain European states. Hence, Japan is said to 'trade with or belong to' the Dutch, the Philippines to Spain, and Bombay to the English.⁵⁵ By blurring the distinction between commercial exchange and imperial possession, the books present Asian resources as the instruments of European empires.⁵⁶

For many texts, Asia is defined largely as a venue for imperial adventure and acquisition. Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* (1652) begins its account of Asia with a description of its physical geography and some remarks on its role in Christian history and practice. The next paragraph details the Roman Empire's incursions into the continent; the Roman provinces are thus itemised even before the entry mentions the 'great monarchs' of Tartary, China and Burma. Indeed, ancient Rome still defines modern states: the Ottoman Empire commands 'all these parts and Provinces which antiently belonged to the Roman Empire'.⁵⁷ A similar logic is on display when it is claimed that Asia's northward limits 'were not discovered till the reign of the Czar Peter the Great'; or when another book outlines the 'progressive geography' of Asia by listing incremental incursions into the continent by Europeans, starting in antiquity and ending with contemporary explorers.⁵⁸ For some books, Asia is merely an addendum to European empires. James Playfair's *System of Geography* (1808–14) is one of several which absorb non-European colonies into their sections on European states. The article on Britain thus concludes with its 'possessions and settlements' in Asia and elsewhere, presenting

⁵³ *System of Geography* (1807), II, 267.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 256–61.

⁵⁵ John Payne, *Universal Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1791), I, 6; John Smith, *A System of Modern Geography* (2 vols., 1810–11), II, 757.

⁵⁶ Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 224–5. For an overview of European imperial and commercial engagements with Asia see Om Prakash (ed.), *European Commercial Expansion in Early Modern Asia* (Aldershot, 1997).

⁵⁷ Heylyn, *Cosmographie*, bk 3, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Thomas Bankes, Edward Warren Blake and Alexander Cook, *By the King's Royal Licence and Authority. A New Royal, Authentic and Complete System of Geography* [1st edn?] (n.d. [1787/88/90?], 107; Bell, *System of Geography* (1832), IV, 28–33.

those regions as outposts of the European metropole.⁵⁹ On occasion, a geography book is self-conscious about the exploitative consequences of imperialism. Guthrie's *Geographical Grammar* (1770), for example, castigates 'the avarice and profligacy of the Europeans, who resort thither [to Asia] in search of wealth and dominion'.⁶⁰ But even that text still casts Asia as an imperial resource.

Overall, then, geographical works often present Asia in an apparently positive light, possessed of notable – sometimes unique – environmental qualities or cultural and religious achievements. But these advantages are habitually understood in European terms. This frequently involves empirical and teleological assertions: Asia possesses an environment which Europe can exploit; Asian societies instituted practices which Europeans have perfected. John Pinkerton's *Modern Geography* (1802) praises Asia for 'its intimate connexion with the destinies of Europe, which it has frequently overawed, while the savage tribes of Africa and America can never become formidable to European arts or happiness'.⁶¹ Ostensibly, this is a compliment: unlike other continents, Asia can both impress and intimidate Europeans. But its significance still ultimately lies in its connections with Europe. Just as with assertions about Asia's chronological primacy, Asia is superficially pre-eminent but is subsumed within a Eurocentric epistemological framework.

All of this carries substantive conceptual complications because Asia not only acts as a source and inspiration for Europe, but at the same time serves as its subject, waiting to be discovered, labelled and exploited. On one level, we might argue that Asia defines Europe, as much as Europe defines Asia. In some respects, this appears persuasive: after all, geography books delineate Europe's history, achievements and prospects via comparison with Asia. But while there is credence in this view, to assert reciprocity too strongly would be to mistake Europe's and Asia's relationship as an equal one. Ultimately, for most geographical texts, Asia's past facilitates contemporary Europe, and Asia's present and future enables further European growth. No geography book that I have examined reverses these positions.

Geography books, then, often present Asia as the predecessor and foundation of Europe. But Asia is also seen more negatively, in particular as an alien space, significantly different from Europe. One key theme is Asia's recent degeneration: whatever the glories of the past, the modern continent is now degraded and corrupt. For some books, the natural environment prompted this decline. Repeating an oft-made argument, the anonymous *New Historical and Commercial System of Geography* (1800) says that 'a considerable part of Asia ... has lost much of its ancient splendour'. Some parts are 'still in a flourishing condition, which is rather to be attributed to the richness of the soil,

⁵⁹ James Playfair, *A System of Geography* (6 vols., Edinburgh, 1808–14), III, 96. See also F. Francis, *An Introduction to Geography* [2nd edn] (1818), 23–4; Richmal Magnall, *A Compendium of Geography* [3rd edn] (1829), 12–17.

⁶⁰ Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), 441. See Smith, *System of Modern Geography* (1810–11), II, 755. For critiques of empire see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003).

⁶¹ Pinkerton, *Modern Geography* (1802), II, 8.

than to the industry of the inhabitants, who are remarkable for their indolence, luxury and effeminacy. This effeminacy is chiefly owing to the warmth of the climate, though in some measure heightened by custom and education.’⁶² Malte-Brun’s *Universal Geography* (1822–33) similarly asserts that the ‘climates no industry can sensibly ameliorate ... must have an influence on the moral character of the Asiatics, as well as uniformly modifying their nervous and muscular system’. The book goes on to quote and update Hippocrates, the ancient Greek exponent of climatic influence on the human body, concluding that ‘the people of Asia owe to geographical circumstances some political and moral features very different from those which exist in Europe’, not least because in Asia ‘the uniform fertility of the soil, and the constant mildness of the climate, in recompensing too rapidly the most trifling labour, have stifled almost in its birth the energy of the human mind’. This torpor has various consequences, from ‘mental and bodily inactivity’ and the prevalence of ‘religious superstition’ to the construction of poor-quality houses – all of which can be attributed to ‘the uniform influence of a climate’.⁶³

Several geographical texts argue, therefore, that ecological conditions in Asia have directly led to inferior or underdeveloped social structures. Other books reverse this relationship, proposing that societal mismanagement is, in fact, the cause of environmental decay. Charles Middleton’s *New and Complete System of Geography* (1777–8) argues that the Turks ‘possessed themselves of the center regions of Asia, laying waste to a most delightful country, and converting its fruitfulest spots into barren wilderness’.⁶⁴ An anti-Ottoman theme pervades several texts: one alleges that the empire has turned the most ‘fruitful Spot in all Asia’ into a ‘wild incultivated Desert’; another that it has ‘destroyed all [the region’s] ancient splendour’.⁶⁵ Some books are less critical of the rest of the continent: ‘the other parts of the Asiatic territories continue in much the same situation as formerly’.⁶⁶ But others argue that almost all Asian societies squander natural resources and exhibit moral failings. The continent is ‘bountiful and liberal to Mankind’, but ‘it furnishes not only every thing necessary for Life and Health, but all that Avarice, Vanity and Sensuality put a value upon’. Misusing or neglecting the bounties of nature, Asians are now ‘swallow’d up in Luxury and Idleness’, idolatry having ‘drench’d them in all sorts of Vice’.⁶⁷

⁶² *Historical and Commercial System of Geography* (1800), 329. See also Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), 440.

⁶³ [Conrad] Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography* [1st edn] (10 vols., Edinburgh and London, 1822–33), II, 17–24. For Hippocrates see *Ancient Medicine*, trans. Jones, 105–9, 115–17. Aristotle and, later, Montesquieu also offer similar theories, but ascribe Asian languor to excessive heat: Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Stephen Everson, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge, 1988), 165; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1989), 234–7.

⁶⁴ Charles Theodore Middleton, *A New and Complete System of Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1777–8), I, 5.

⁶⁵ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67; Fenning and Collyer, *New System of Geography* (1764–5), I, 6.

⁶⁶ Middleton, *New and Complete System of Geography* (1777–8), I, 5.

⁶⁷ *New General Atlas* (1721), 141–2.

Sometimes these arguments are presented concurrently. The anonymous *Complete System of Geography* (1747), for example, argues both that the rich Asian climate has generated inferior societies, and also that those societies have degraded the natural environment. In some respects, these assertions can be made to serve a consistent purpose. Asia's natural resources enabled a glorious past which in turn has facilitated the European present; and the continent is still rich enough to enable commercial opportunities. Latterly, however, the resources still extant are neglected or poorly managed, a fact which justifies European imperial incursion. But at root, a circular logic is at work because environmental conditions and social structures are seen as the ultimate cause of each other.⁶⁸ Geographical texts' presentation of Asia is thus somewhat unstable: it is both a resource-rich paradise which generates advanced cultures; and a sterile wasteland thanks to societal incompetence. This tension partly echoes wider early modern debates about the relationship between the natural environment and human activity.⁶⁹ Does the environment direct social activity, or do humans make their own history, partly by shaping the environment around them? As I have discussed elsewhere, these same debates also affect understandings of Europe in the period. Ideal environmental conditions – fertile soil, abundant rivers and so on – are sometimes seen as the cause of Europe's supposedly superior social development. But at the same time, Europe's *inferior* climate is said to have prompted greater social dynamism, principally because the challenge of overcoming privation has helped to accelerate progress. By offering different interpretations – often within a few pages of each other – geographical texts tap into wider contemporary controversies about environmental influence.⁷⁰ In their articles on 'Asia', we can see how these broad debates take on specific form, with consequences for how the continent and its people are understood by the literate British public.

Given widespread assumptions about Asia's environmental and societal decline, many geography books are interested in the causes of that supposed degeneration. One suggested reason is 'idolatry'.⁷¹ Fenning and Collyer's *New System of Geography* (1764–5) blames 'Mahometans' in particular for the decay of the 'most fertile spots of Asia', but goes on to complain that almost the whole continent is 'involved in the grossest idolatry', from 'worshippers of Brama [*sic*]' to 'followers of Confucius'.⁷² Denunciations of Islam are commonplace: it is described bluntly, for instance, as a 'stupid kind of religion'. But other faiths are also censured: 'in China, Japan, Siam, &c. they are, for the most part, heathens and idolators; have strange notions of the Deity, or rather of their deities, and use the most extravagant rites in the worship of

⁶⁸ Jan Golinski, *British Weather and the Climate of Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2007), 171–2.

⁶⁹ For an overview see Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1967).

⁷⁰ Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 79–102, esp. 99–100. See also Nathaniel Wolloch, *History and Nature in the Enlightenment: Praise of the Mastery of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Historical Literature* (Farnham, 2011), 73–135.

⁷¹ For early modern European attitudes to Islam, see David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto (eds.), *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other* (New York, 1999).

⁷² Fenning and Collyer, *New System of Geography* (1764–5), 1, 6.

them'. It is even argued that these 'idols, and superstitious ceremonies' are maintained by a priest class to subdue a credulous population.⁷³ These comments are especially interesting because they echo the anti-Catholic rhetoric also present in many geographical texts. The 'artifice and fraud' and 'absurd mummeries and superstitions' of Roman Catholicism are often ridiculed,⁷⁴ and it is even claimed that the Catholic clergy 'supress all scientific knowledge among the laity; and in order to keep them in ignorance and subjection, they brand all literary researches with the name of heresy'.⁷⁵ Many British geographical texts thus display the anti-Catholicism prevalent in wider British society of the period; Catholicism is so flawed that it replicates the errors of heathen idolators.⁷⁶ But it is perhaps more salient to reverse the comparison. Since geography books frequently exhibit a pro-Protestant worldview – suggesting, for instance, that 'Europe owes a great part of [its] superior civilization' to the Reformation – it is unsurprising that they should understand Asian religions in terms of more familiar Catholic faults.⁷⁷ In this way, religious practice in Asia can be rendered readily comprehensible and, at the same time, dismissed for its errors and deleterious effects.

Not all geographical books are quite so universal in their aggressions. John Payne's *Universal Geography* (1791) includes standard remarks about how 'Mahometans' have despoiled the natural environment; but it goes on to offer cautious praise for the 'more sagacious followers of *Confucius*' as well as the Zoroastrians who acknowledge 'but one Supreme Deity'.⁷⁸ Other texts go further still. Zoroastrians 'are sworn Enemies to all kind of Idolatry, Imagery, Temples, &c. which they look upon as derogatory to the supreme Being, who neither can nor ought to be represented by Images, nor confined in Temples'. 'Brahmans, or Brachmins' are also

very humane and benign, lead a contemplative Life, feed only upon Vegetables, and are so far from killing any living Creatures for their Use, or even noxious ones in their own Defence, that they build even Hospitals for the Maintenance of such, especially domestic ones, as are decay'd thro' Age, Accident or any other Infirmities.

If the praise for Zoroastrianism echoes typical Protestant hesitancy about icons and rich decoration, then the remarks about vegetarianism are more unexpected. In the very next paragraph, however, Christian pre-eminence reasserts itself. The book acknowledges that 'Asia was the Theatre of the first

⁷³ Baldwyn, *New, Royal, Authentic, Complete and Universal System of Geography* ([1794?]), 1. See also Millar, *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), 6–7.

⁷⁴ Thomas Salmon and J. Tytler, *The New Universal Geographical Grammar* [4th edn] (Edinburgh, 1782), 87–8; William Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar* [13th edn] (1785), 58.

⁷⁵ Millar, *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), 714.

⁷⁶ See Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c.1714–80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester, 1993).

⁷⁷ *Glasgow Geography* (1819), III, 205. See Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 70–5.

⁷⁸ Payne, *Universal Geography* (1791), I, 5.

Promulgation of Christianity’, arguing that the faith spread rapidly ‘as far as *India*’ and ‘was almost every where received and professed’. Unfortunately, societal and personal failings in Asian cultures caused it to decline. Chief blame belongs to ‘the Unworthiness of those Converts’ and subsequently ‘the Churches of *Asia Minor* were abandoned to Persecution; and ... utterly destroy’d by the Inundation of the northern Barbarians, *Saracens, Tartars and Turks*’.⁷⁹ Faint praise for Asian religious cultures thus quickly reverts to reflections on the continent’s societal shortcomings as well as implicit reaffirmation of Europe’s role as the principal heir to spiritual truths.

Geographical texts also blame Asia’s supposed shortcomings on its governmental structures, particularly the apparent prevalence of despotic empires.⁸⁰ As I noted above, geography books tend to understand European imperialism in terms of expansion, acquisition and the proper use of resources. Indeed, commercial activity was frequently understood – from the late seventeenth century onward – as a sign of social advancement and modern civilisation; and geography books often present European empires as an outgrowth of commercial exchange and enterprise.⁸¹ Europeans, for example, ‘have made themselves masters of the greatest part of the rest of the World, and sent thither numerous colonies ... Their commerce and navigation ... serve, as it were, to unite together the principal parts of the Earth.’⁸² Asian empires, however, are understood differently, often by adapting ideas derived ultimately from Aristotle about the continent’s propensity for absolute rule and slavery.⁸³ Asian polities are usually characterised as absolute monarchies (‘when the power of the sovereign is not limited by law’) or as outright despotisms (‘when the government is very absolute’; the monarch ruling ‘by his own arbitrary will’).⁸⁴ According to Guthrie’s *Geographical Grammar* (1770), ‘many of the Asiatic nations ... could not conceive how it was possible for any people to live under any other form of government than that of a despotic monarchy’. This pattern means not simply that one can generalise about the continent, but also that Asian states and peoples are, fundamentally, very similar: ‘in Asia, a strong attachment to ancient customs, and the weight of tyrannical power, bears

⁷⁹ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67.

⁸⁰ The literature on so-called oriental despotism is vast. For overviews, see R. Koebner, ‘Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), 275–302; Joan-Pau Rubiés, ‘Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 9 (2005), 109–80.

⁸¹ Istvan Hont, ‘The Early Enlightenment Debate on Commerce and Luxury’, in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge, 2006), 253–76; Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 229–32.

⁸² Büsching, *New System of Geography* (1762), I, 58.

⁸³ For Aristotle’s ideas about despotism and their early modern adaptations see Melvin Richter, ‘Despotism’, in *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, revd edn, ed. David Miller (Oxford, 1991), 119–22.

⁸⁴ *A Summary of Geography and History [...] For the Use of the Highest Class in the High School of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1784), 7; R. Wynne ([ed.] and trans.), *Introduction to the Study of Geography* (1778), 2.

down the active genius of man, and prevents that variety in manners and character, which distinguishes the European nations'.⁸⁵

Numerous geographical texts reproduce similar remarks about Asian despotism: 'despotism entirely prevails' in Asia; 'Asiatic governments are almost universally despotic'; and '*monarchical despotism* ... has all along been the established government over the whole of Asia'.⁸⁶ This insistence on the universality of despotism fuels wider cultural observations. Millar's *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), for example, asserts that Asia has fewer languages than other parts of the world 'chiefly owing to the very extensive empires comprised in it' – specifically, Persia, 'Great Mogul', China and Japan – 'each of which strives to introduce an uniformity of language among the subjects of it'.⁸⁷ Occasionally, one can find more measured, even generous remarks: 'the immense country of China', for example, is 'famous for the wisdom of its laws and political constitution' and 'for the singularity of its language, literature, and philosophy'.⁸⁸ But for most geography books, Asia is characterised by despotic government. Indeed, for Payne's *Universal Geography* (1791) even the 'dominions established here by the Europeans' have succumbed to this pattern: European territories 'have all an absolute and supreme authority; and the European governors have, in a great measure, the power of arbitrary princes'.⁸⁹

There are various theories about why despotism is supposedly so prevalent in Asia. One common argument places the blame on environmental conditions. Europe is

intersected with great numbers of mountainous ridges, which form natural boundaries to its kingdoms, and check the ambition of its princes. In Asia, these natural boundaries are placed at much greater distances from each other; hence the Asiatic empires are vastly larger than those of Europe, and of consequence their rulers being superior in wealth and power to the European monarchs, are proportionably more insolent, haughty, oppressive and cruel.⁹⁰

Some texts expand this thesis. For Malte-Brun's *Universal Geography* (1822–33) 'it is not enough to say that the great plains with which Asia abounds, give the conquerors easier access'. There are other factors involved too: 'the want of

⁸⁵ Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), 441, vii.

⁸⁶ Gordon, *New Geographical Grammar* (1789), 312; Pinkerton, *Modern Geography* (1802), II, 13; Bell, *System of Geography* (1832), I, cxxx.

⁸⁷ Millar, *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), 6. Turkey and Muscovy are also mentioned as Asian empires, though 'the most considerable shares' of their territories are in Europe.

⁸⁸ Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), vii. For similar remarks on the constitutionalism of China see Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History*, 2nd edn, trans. Nugent (4 vols., 1759), IV, 297.

⁸⁹ Payne, *Universal Geography* (1791), I, 5.

⁹⁰ Salmon and Tytler, *New Universal Geographical Grammar* (1782), 90. See also Nicholas Hamel, *World in Miniature* (1800), 14; [James Millar], *Encyclopaedia Edinensis* (6 vols., Edinburgh, 1827), III, 433. See Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 86.

wood for building' means that 'habitations offer nothing firm and solid' and empires can freely rise and fall, because 'the want of strong places, open the road to sudden and rapid invasions'. Furthermore, these circumstances have affected the 'moral and political' character of Asians. 'The uniform influence of a climate, which imperiously determines the sorts of cultivation and food for each region, and the irresistible influence of religious superstition, despotic laws, and servile moods', have together changed the behaviour of Asian peoples. The 'animated and free emotions which in Europe inspire the breast' are absent from 'the soul of the Asiatic': their states 'do not feel the ardour and energy of true patriotism', and sovereigns presented 'only a vain show of resistance to the audacity of the conquerors'. 'Every thing', in short, 'combines to facilitate the total and frequent subjugation of these vast empires of the east.'⁹¹

Other geographical texts emphasise supposed behavioural differences between Asians and Europeans. After explaining that it is hard to discern a physical boundary between the continents, Pinkerton's *Modern Geography* (1802) asserts that the distinction 'if not strictly natural, is ethical, as the manners of the Asiatic subjects of Russia, and even Turkey, differ considerably from those of the European inhabitants of those empires'.⁹² This statement implies that Asians and Europeans are different thanks to certain fixed characteristics, which remain constant even when they coexist under the same regime. Bigland's *Geographical and Historical View of the World* (1810) echoes this position: 'Turks, although settled in Europe, are Asiatic people; and their customs and manners are rather Asiatic than European. Prejudice, ignorance, and want of curiosity, gravity of deportment, and contempt of foreigners, are conspicuous traits in their national character.' European Armenians, by contrast, remain 'polite and sensible' under Ottoman rule: 'in amiableness of manners, and in purity of morals, they excel all other subjects of the Turkish empire'.⁹³ From this perspective, Asian despotism develops from the supposed qualities of Asian peoples; it is the system of government best suited to an ignorant and contemptuous populace. Another group of geography books, however, argues precisely the opposite: that despotism is not naturally suited to Asian peoples; it is imposed on them by tyrannical rulers and governmental convention. Millar's *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]) says that

we will not pretend to determine, whether the reflection which is commonly cast on all the Asiatic nations, that they are naturally admirers of monarchy, be altogether just; since their princes have always kept them in such abject slavery and subjection, that they never had the least opportunity of displaying their love of liberty, which we suppose to be as congenial to them, as with the rest of mankind.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography* (1822–33), II, 21, 24.

⁹² Pinkerton, *Modern Geography* (1802), I, 6.

⁹³ Bigland, *Geographical and Historical View of the World* (1810), IV, 114–15, 109.

⁹⁴ Millar, *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), 6. See also *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67; Baldwyn, *New, Royal, Authentic, Complete and Universal System of Geography* ([1794?]), 1.

In seeking to explain the supposed prevalence of despotism in Asia, geographical texts therefore offer a variety of theories, ranging from societal and environmental influences to the ‘natural and innate’ qualities of Asian peoples.⁹⁵ This breadth reflects wider ideas of the period about nature and society, and especially the often opaque relationship between acquired behaviours and supposedly natural characteristics in early modern thought. Far from being irreconcilable opposites, the ‘poles of an essentialised Nature and a capricious Environment’ were often assumed to be ambiguously – and sometimes mysteriously – interconnected. Purportedly fixed characteristics could be affected by external factors such as climate; and learned behaviours could come to seem innate, passed down through the generations. Consequently, ideas about manners and society were blended with “absolutist notions” of inheritance and non-acquired “essence”.⁹⁶ Discussion of ‘Asia’ in geographical texts reflects this fundamental ambiguity – which is why the books generalise about the innate qualities of individuals and populations, but also postulate the influence of external factors such as climate. Bigland’s *Geographical and Historical View of the World* (1810), for example, argues that Asian ‘customs and manners’ are fixed regardless of governmental and social circumstance; and then suggests – on the very next page – that ‘defects which appear in the national character, ought rather to be attributed to the baleful influence of a government ill-planned and worse administered’.⁹⁷ While ostensibly contradictory – especially to present-day readers – such moments reflect deep-seated debates in the period about human nature, social development and climatic influence, all of which inform how Asia is understood in popular geographical texts.

An emphasis on despotic empires is not, however, the only characterisation of Asian peoples and societies present in geography books. There is also substantial interest in the so-called ‘vagabond nations’ or ‘vagrant nations, who have no settled abode’ within the continent.⁹⁸ If any people in Asia ‘can be said to enjoy some share of liberty’, says Adams’s *New Royal System of Universal Geography* ([1794/6?]), ‘it is the wandering tribes, as the Tartars and Arabs’.

alone possess liberty, on account of the sterility of their soil; independent themselves of revolution and change, they see, with unconcern, empires falling and rising around them. They remain unconquered by arms, by luxury, by corruption ... When men are obliged to wander for subsistence, despotism knows not where to find its slaves.

⁹⁵ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67.

⁹⁶ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (2003), 8, cited in Paul Stock “‘Almost a Separate Race’: Racial Thought and the Idea of Europe in British Geographies and Histories, 1771–1830”, *Modern Intellectual History*, 8 (2011), 3–29, at 5.

⁹⁷ Bigland, *Geographical and Historical View of the World* (1810), IV, 114–15.

⁹⁸ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 68; Millar, *New, Complete, Authentic, and Universal System of Geography* ([1785?]), 6.

Although also wanderers, Tartars are less free: while ‘a violent aristocracy always prevails’, on occasion ‘the fortune of one established a transient despotism over the whole’. Indeed, the whole region is defined by fear and violence: ‘men are more afraid of men, in the solitudes of Tartary, than of beasts of prey’.⁹⁹ These are common assertions; other texts repeat them almost verbatim.¹⁰⁰

Some geography books offer specific theories about the relative despotism and mobility of Asian peoples. Kelly’s *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17) argues that ‘the northern tribes, who occupy the extensive regions of Tartary, are robust and active, hate idleness, and are continually roving about’. The ‘inhabitants of the southern parts of Asia’, by contrast, ‘are so extremely indolent, that they never stir but with reluctance’. The book goes on to theorise a rivalry between these groups: northern Asians ‘deem courage the greatest virtue, and athletic exercises the most essential mark of genius’, whereas southern Asians are ‘ingenious’ and have ‘brought several arts to great perfection’. Consequently, ‘this disparity of disposition occasions them to despise each other, on account of that contrast which marks their characters’ and because ‘each imagines that his peculiar mode of life leads by the most direct road to earthly felicity’.¹⁰¹ The idea that all Asian peoples are either independent wanderers or oppressed idlers, and that each group is associated with a specific topographical region, has a long legacy. The *Thesaurus Geographicus* (1695) offers the insight that ‘the People of Asia have always been great Lovers of Pleasure and Ease, except some that dwell in the Mountains, and the Tartars. They are not usually so vigorous and active as the People of Europe or Africa’.¹⁰² And the anonymous *New General Atlas* (1721) says that most Asians, ‘except those who live in Tartary, and other Northern Parts, have always been accounted effeminate, and swallow’d up in Luxury and Idleness’.¹⁰³ One geographical text adopts a rudimentary formula: one can assess the relative ‘Effeminacy’ and ‘Strength and Courage’ of Asian people ‘as they are seated nearer or further from the North. For it is plain, that the southern Climates produce not such robust Natures as the Northern ones.’ This book also treats Europeans as normative: ‘those Asiatics, who live near the same latitude with us, cannot be much inferior to us’; whereas ‘those who live in the more southern regions of Asia’ possess ‘Ingenuity in various kinds of Workmanship, which our politest Mechanicks have in vain tried to imitate’.¹⁰⁴

The general principle that Asians can be divided in two by location and style of government – and that these points of distinction are intimately related – is widespread by the early nineteenth century. Malte-Brun’s *Universal Geography* (1822–33) considers the matter ‘proved by physical geography, namely, that

⁹⁹ Adams, *New Royal System of Universal Geography* ([1794/6?]), 167.

¹⁰⁰ *Historical and Commercial System of Geography* (1800), 329–30; Smith, *System of Modern Geography* (1810–11), II, 755

¹⁰¹ Kelly, *New and Complete System of Universal Geography* (1814–17), I, 7.

¹⁰² *Thesaurus Geographicus* (1695), 412.

¹⁰³ *New General Atlas* (1721), 142.

¹⁰⁴ *Complete System of Geography* (1747), II, 67.

Asia has no temperate zone, no intermediate region between very cold and very hot climates. The slaves inhabit the hot, and the conquerors the elevated and cold regions.' Each group has a 'totally different physical and moral nature'.¹⁰⁵ The *Universal Geography* premises its observations on quotations from Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Montesquieu argues that Asia is polarised between 'very cold' and 'exceedingly hot' parts of Asia, and that it lacks a temperate zone. 'From hence', he continues, 'it comes, that in Asia the strong nations are opposed to the weak; the warlike, brave, and active people touch immediately on those who are indolent, effeminate, and timorous: the one must therefore conquer, and the other be conquered.' This explains 'the slavery of Asia' and also why 'liberty in Asia never increases'.¹⁰⁶ Evidently, the *Universal Geography's* arguments are dependent on Montesquieu's phrasing, but he is in no way the initiator of general theories about cold northern conquerors and warm southern idlers in Asia. Instead, these ideas are part of a much longer trend – evident in generations of geography books – which connects climate, governance and manners in order to define the distinctive features of the continent.

Overall, therefore, British geography books characterise Asia as a place with both too much and too little government, a continent of arbitrary despotisms and wandering 'vagabonds'. Most European states, by contrast, are said to have achieved an ideal form of government, usually described either as 'limited monarchies' (those states which limit a sovereign's power by law) or a 'mixed form' (which blends forms of government identified by classical authorities – monarchy, aristocracy and government 'of the people' – and fuses the advantages of each).¹⁰⁷ The implications of these assertions are complex. In some respects, geographical works stress the distinctiveness, even the strangeness, of Asia, particularly in its governmental arrangements. One text notes that while some Asian states have supposedly fixed boundaries and dimensions, in other parts of the continent – namely 'Russian, Chinese, Mongulean and Independent Tartary' – 'the bounds ... are unlimited, each power pushing on his conquests as far as he can'. It presents Asia as a chaotic and inchoate place; a place where, thanks to 'absolute monarchy', the power and territory of states are unlimited and unstable.¹⁰⁸ This contrasts with the characterisation of Europe as 'a system of political equilibrium' in which states coexist under a 'system of international law'.¹⁰⁹ Europe supposedly forms 'one complete whole – a great confederacy of states': any country seeking 'to

¹⁰⁵ Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography* (1822–33), II, 22. See also Bell, *System of Geography* (1832), IV, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws, Translated from the French [...] with Corrections and Additions Communicated by the Author* (2 vols., Dublin, 1751), I, 328–9.

¹⁰⁷ Malte-Brun, *Universal Geography* (1822–33), VI, 81; Bankes, Blake and Cook, *New Royal, Authentic and Complete System of Geography* ([1787/88/90?]), 578. For the classical idea that government takes three forms – rule by one person, a few individuals or a larger group – see Herodotus, *Herodotus*, trans. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library (4 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1920–5), I, 105–11; Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. Everson, trans. Barnes, 61–2. For more on monarchy and ideas of Europe see Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 133–8.

¹⁰⁸ Adams, *New Royal System of Universal Geography* ([1794/6?]), 166–7.

¹⁰⁹ David Brewster (ed.), *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* (18 vols., Edinburgh, 1830), IX, 239.

tyrannize' its neighbours exposes itself to 'chastisement', a point apparently demonstrated by various European conflicts which created 'a closer union ... sealed with the blood of all'.¹¹⁰ A blasé interpretation of European history this may be, but the principle that Europe constitutes an ordered political system is commonplace in geographical texts.¹¹¹ Asia, by contrast, is at once unbalanced, lawless and subject to overweening despotic power, unconstrained by the norms of limited government and territorial restraint.

At the same time, however, geography books use precise frames of reference to make Asia comprehensible to a domestic audience. George Augustus Baldwin's *New, Royal, Authentic, Complete and Universal System of Geography* ([1794?]) says that 'the principal monarchies or sovereignties of Asia, at present known to us, amount to forty two': six empires, thirty-three kingdoms, and three sovereignties 'established here by the Europeans'. The book almost immediately qualifies its apparent precision: it hastily mentions other imperial enclaves and 'independent ... nations'. But the effect is to present Asia as a known space which can be labelled with confidence. Moreover, the states themselves are familiar by type: all Asian polities are monarchies or empires, thus fitting neatly into categories of government derived from classical antiquity. Baldwin's *System* anticipates potential objections – 'that Tartary is not under one government; that India, beyond the Ganges, is independent of the Great Mogul' – but it defers further discussion 'to void clogging our readers' memory with too many distinctions'. It then simplifies further, offering 'the most clear idea of the continent' in a series of tables. One shows only fifteen states on the Asian continental land mass and includes 'distance and bearing from London' as key information alongside size, cities and religion, an emphasis which makes European places and priorities the criteria through which to understand Asia.¹¹²

British geographical texts thus familiarise Asia by presenting it in European terms, and, at the same time, assert its distinctive characteristics. It is both strange and exotic, and fully knowable and exploitable. Indeed, the apparent conceptual difference between these perspectives is eroded: Asia's predictable 'otherness' becomes a comfortable cliché through which to understand it. Furthermore, from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, geography books present Asia in a remarkably consistent manner. This is not to say that they all reach identical conclusions, but rather that the same debates and (sometimes unresolved) tensions recur across the whole period covered by this article. These trends include: Asia as the 'cradle' of religious truth and social order, at once the origin of European civilisation and

¹¹⁰ Thomas Myers, *A New and Comprehensive System of Geography* [1st edn] (2 vols., 1822), I, 14.

¹¹¹ Many texts reproduce William Robertson's theory that Europe formed 'one great political system' and a 'balance of power' at the dawn of the modern period. See Robertson, *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, I, x–xi; Guthrie, *Geographical Grammar* (1770), xlv–xlvi; Thomas Salmon and J. Tytler, *The New Universal Geographical Grammar* [2nd edn] (Edinburgh, 1778), 65; Banks, Blake and Cook, *New Royal, Authentic and Complete System of Geography* ([1787/88/90?]), 578. For the wider context see H. D. Schmidt, 'The Establishment of "Europe" as a Political Expression', *The Historical Journal*, 9 (1966), 413–41.

¹¹² Baldwin, *New, Royal, Authentic, Complete and Universal System of Geography* ([1794?]), 2–3.

superseded by it; Asia as an abundant environment, but also under-exploited and degraded; Asia as a continent without meaningful government and subject to despotic excess. This might seem to be an unexpected conclusion: there were, after all, very significant developments in British commercial and imperial engagements with Asia and the wider world across this period.¹¹³ But my contention is that because the themes discussed here are repeated so often, across a long period of time, and in texts which were read very widely, we can say with reasonable confidence that they represent the cultural frameworks through which Asia was understood in this period.

Geography books, then, allow us to appreciate the depth of certain ideas about Asia in British intellectual life: these are the commonplace notions which recurred in general reference material, were taught in schools and were encountered by everyday readers from monarchs to shopkeepers. And although some of these ideas – about the influence of climate, or the prevalence of despotism – are very familiar to scholarship, their consistent presence in popular geographical texts allows us to reassess how ideas may have circulated in early modern British intellectual culture. One possibility is that commonplace texts imitate and disseminate the arguments of prominent intellectuals. This is not always an easy contention to prove, in part because geography books so rarely cite their sources, but occasionally – as we have seen in the cases of Voltaire and Robertson – one can glimpse such influences. Robert Mayhew, for example, has proposed that Guthrie's *Geographical Grammar* (1770) incorporates arguments from key figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, especially David Hume, Adam Ferguson and Robertson.¹¹⁴ The 1771 edition of the *Grammar* asserts the primacy of Greece and Europe in the phrase 'what Greece therefore is with regard to Europe, Europe itself is with regard to the rest of the globe'.¹¹⁵ Mayhew traces this phrase to Hume's essay 'The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' which contends that 'Europe is at present a Copy at large, of what Greece was formerly a Pattern in Miniature.'¹¹⁶ Such instances potentially show how the ideas of prominent Enlightenment thinkers were distributed in wider British literate culture, often in ways which disguise their eminent exponents.

But there is an additional, perhaps more intriguing possibility which only comes into focus after an exhaustive survey of a great many sources. Prominent thinkers may in fact be mere participants – and not necessarily leaders – in sets of presumptions which permeated far more thoroughly throughout literate culture than might otherwise be assumed. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) is certainly an important text; for some it

¹¹³ See P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America c. 1750–1783* (Oxford, 2005); Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2013); David Veevers, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 2020).

¹¹⁴ Robert Mayhew, *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Languages of British Geography, 1650–1850* (Basingstoke, 2000), 175–80, cited in Stock, *Europe and the British Geographical Imagination*, 34.

¹¹⁵ William Guthrie, *New Geographical, Historical and Commercial Grammar* [2nd edn] (2 vols., 1771), I, 85.

¹¹⁶ [David Hume], *Essays, Moral and Political* [1st edn] (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1741–2), II, 71.

constitutes ‘the most influential formulation of the view that climate has a determinant role in human society’.¹¹⁷ But it is harder to claim that it drives the terms of debate about climate and Asian despotism in the eighteenth century when we can read scores of geographical texts articulating related ideas throughout the preceding and following centuries. Nor is it necessarily enough to identify the antecedents and successors of the great thinkers, tracing chains of influence and inspiration.¹¹⁸ Instead, geographical works show us that celebrated figures are contributors to much wider networks of ideas, in which certain notions are repeated and reformulated across hundreds of commonplace texts, encountered, absorbed and debated by thousands of participant authors and readers. If this seems an obvious remark about public discourse in abstract terms, detailed analysis of popular materials such as geographical texts can make such assertions more concrete and demonstrable. It allows the terms of discussion about significant historical problems – what did early modern British people think about Asia? – to be set by broadly consumed texts in that period itself, rather than by individuals selected, sometimes retrospectively, as representatives of an epoch. Significant questions, of course, still remain, not least the potential connections between the ideas discussed here and wider imperial ideology and practice. To what extent did these commonplace perspectives on Asia inform ideas about empire, or Britain’s commercial and colonial practice more widely? Clearly, such enquiries require confirmation using additional sources – not least, documents recording political decisions and justifications – and as such lie beyond the scope of this article. But my principal point is that geographical texts can open early modern British intellectual life to us more fully; they can help us to understand the principles on which British understandings of the wider world were founded.

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¹¹⁷ Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley, 2006), 23.

¹¹⁸ See Robert Shackleton, ‘The Evolution of Montesquieu’s Theory of Climate’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 9 (1955), 317–29; R. J. W. Mills, ‘William Falconer’s *Remarks on the Influence of Climate* (1781) and the Study of Religion in Enlightenment England’, *Intellectual History Review*, 28 (2018), 293–315.

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