The “Wisdom of the State”: Adam Smith on China and Tartary

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Adam Smith’s engagement with China and Tartary is a central yet underappreciated element of his economic and political thought. This article reconstructs this engagement and demonstrates its broader significance, arguing that it focuses on three themes: the economic institutions that promote domestic growth in a manner that alleviates the material conditions of the poorest, the social and political conditions that minimize the dependence of the poor on the wealthy, and the ethical values and civic institutions that guarantee the existential survival of the state. This treatment is significant for three reasons: It offers useful insight into the contested issue of Smith’s conception of legitimate state action; it clarifies Smith’s vision of a commercial order that promotes human dignity; and it reveals the depth of his participation in a specific contextual debate.

Adam Smith has long been regarded as an important source in efforts to understand the nature and implications of China’s economic development. Western scholars have prominently invoked Smith to explain how Western capitalism differs from Chinese capitalism and to illuminate the global order their balance may entail (Arrighi 2007). Asian scholars, at least since the pioneering translations of Yen Fu, have similarly looked to Smith as a source of insight on domestic economic growth (Chen 2012; Lai 2000). And in the wake of Premier Wen Jiabao’s recommendation of Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments (Coase and Wang 2012, 184–87; Zakaria 2010), many in China and beyond have become interested in how Smith’s synthesis of the morality of sympathy and the political economy of self-interest can illuminate the challenges China faces as it seeks to synthesize its traditions of social harmony with the emergence of its dynamic market economy (Dorn 2007). Yet for all this, largely overlooked has been the central element of Smith’s relationship to China; namely, the striking role that China and neighboring Tartary play in Smith’s own economic and political thought, particularly in the development of his concept of the “wisdom of the state” that lies at the core of his theory of the proper aims and scope of state power.

This article aims to remedy this oversight by reconstructing Smith’s sustained engagement with both China and Tartary. Although Smith’s engagement with China has been noted (Arrighi 2007, 57–59; Evensky 2005, 73–75, 116; Millar 2010, 728–30, 733–34; Pitts 2005, 39–40; Whelan 2009, 30, 36), it deserves more extended treatment given its significance in his thought. Smith clearly thought China worth the attention of Europeans, especially those interested in questions of economic development. He often reminds readers of his “inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations” that “China is a much richer country than any part of Europe” (WN I.xi.e.34; Lxi.n.1) and that “China has been long one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious, and most populous countries in the world” (WN I.viii.24; cf. II.v.22).1 This tremendous opulence distinguishes China as a key case study in his own theory of economic development. In addition, as the only non-European modern society to have reached levels of civilization and opulence that rivaled those of Europe, China occupies a singular place in Smith’s work. Whereas the cases of North America and Africa and Bengal that he also examined offered indispensable studies of premodern and precommercial social stages, in China alone did he find a non-European civilization in which the opulence and luxury and commerce (albeit domestic, not foreign, in China’s case) that distinguished European civilization were likewise flourishing. Indeed, China served for Smith as “a mirror or a model for European self-evaluation” (Millar 2010, 719) in which his readers might see the benefits and costs of certain policies of their own, especially those on internal improvements and international trade.

Smith similarly regarded Tartary as a phenomenon that deserved European attention. Attesting to the import and influence of the Tartars, Smith says of them that “more of the great revolutions in the world have arisen from them than any other nation in the world” (LJA iv.53; cf. LJ 28–29). As conceived in the 18th century, “Tartary” encompassed an enormous swath of central Asia (Whelan 2009, 180n24; cf. LJA i.49; LJA iv.108, 114). Yet Smith’s Tartars are largely those of

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1 Citations to Smith’s works are to the Glasgow Edition as published by Oxford University Press and Liberty Fund (1981–87) and take the following abbreviations: ED = “Early Draft” of the Wealth of Nations; LER = “Letter to the Edinburgh Review”; LJ = Lectures on Jurisprudence; TMS = Theory of Moral Sentiments; and WN = Wealth of Nations.

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the Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries and, more importantly, those of the Manchu invasion of the 17th century that resulted in the collapse of the Ming dynasty in China and its replacement by the Qing (Davis 1992, 22; Spence 1999, 95–97)—“the first big Chinese event reported in the Western world” (Van Kley 1973, 571; cf. Millar 2010, 724–25). Smith thus regarded China’s politics as inextricably bound up with the politics of neighboring Tartary. China’s story was necessarily Tartary’s story as well; indeed, it was a story about the tensions between a “barbarous and uncivilized” people and their opulent and civilized neighbors (WN Liii.8; cf. Lxi.g.26).

China and Tartary thus commanded Smith’s attention because of the magnitude of their significance on the world-historical stage. Yet Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary goes beyond merely recounting this significance, and attending to it offers valuable insight into his broader theoretical project on three fronts. First and most importantly, Smith’s engagement with China and Tartary shaped his vision of the proper ends and scope of state action. Indeed the principal focus of Smith’s treatments of China and Tartary is defining the proper sphere of legitimate state power; and his aim is to present a case for the indispensability of what he calls the “wisdom of the state” (WN Vi.i.a.14)—a phrase that he introduces in the context of one of his central discussions of the Tartars.

In this sense, his treatment of China and Tartary offers a helpful perspective on a principal debate in recent scholarship between “left Smithians” and “right Smithians” (see esp. C. Smith 2013). The crux of this debate is Smith’s conception of legitimate state power given his views on the relative effectiveness of natural market orders and human political institutions. Thus, where right Smithians take Smith to have been optimistic about the capacities of invisible hands and spontaneous orders to achieve general opulence benefiting all, and pessimistic about our capacities to achieve similar benefits through rational political action (e.g., Otteson 2010, 277–82), left Smithians regard him as pessimistic about the sufficiency of market orders to provide such benefits, and optimistic about our capacity to remedy their deficiencies via political action (e.g., Sen 2011, 258–62). The debate between the right Smithians and the left Smithians comes down to a debate over the proper extent of state power, with the former arguing for a minimal conception and the latter for an expanded one. Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary, however, suggests a third position. Here Smith conspicuously emphasizes the indispensability of the “wisdom of the state.” At the same time, this wisdom, he insists, should be limited by the recognition that the legitimate aim of state power is to secure the conditions that make possible the optimal functioning of the market processes that can most efficiently meet the needs of the least well-off. In so doing, Smith presents a nuanced view of state power beyond “right” and “left.”

This nuanced view suggests a second reason for the significance of his treatments of China and Tartary. Smith’s interest in how various types of state action can alternately promote or impede the realization of certain practical benefits was itself shaped by his understanding of the moral and practical benefits of commercial society itself. His engagement with China and Tartary is also of substantive import insofar as it clarifies his intention to defend commercial society on the grounds of its capacity to promote human dignity. Recent scholars have particularly emphasized this side of his project. Against an older caricature of Smith as the champion of self-interest or utility, recent work has done much to demonstrate the degree to which his moral theory was motivated by a concern for dignity (Debes 2012), and indeed the degree to which he deserves to be regarded as “a promoter of free markets not only on efficiency grounds but also on moral grounds” (Paganelli 2013, 334). His treatment of China and Tartary is an important contribution to this project insofar as it focuses on three issues: first, the economic institutions that promote domestic growth in a manner that alleviates the material conditions of the poorest; second, the social and political conditions that minimize or eliminate the dependence of the poor on the wealthy; and third, the civic values and institutions needed to guarantee the existential survival of the state. Smith’s study of China’s economic development focuses on the first of these concerns, his study of the organization of Tartar society speaks to the second, and his depiction of the clash of the barbarian Tartars with the civilized Chinese illuminates the third. Attending to each specific element of his treatment of China and Tartary thus brings into relief the degree to which his defense of commercial society is founded in its capacity to benefit the least well-off, thereby assisting efforts to recover his vision of the “decent society” ( Muller 1995) from distortions.

Third, Smith’s engagement with China and Tartary reveals the degree of his participation in a key debate in Enlightenment political thought. As is now generally appreciated, Smith shared the interest in comparative anthropology characteristic of 18th-century social inquiry, and his sustained engagement with the main sources on the native North Americans has been carefully documented (Harkin 2005; Marouby 2007; Whelan 2009). Yet his ethnographic inquiry also extended to Asia, attesting to what has been rightly called “the global aspect of Smith’s thought” (Muthu 2008, 187). This in turn led him to participate in the debate over China central to the French Enlightenment (Whelan 2009, 30–31), itself further evidence of his longstanding interest in several French debates. The China debate, which centered on the question of the superiority or inferiority of China to Europe, is frequently characterized as a debate between “Sinophiles” and “Sinophobes” (Hung 2003; Jones 2001, 29; Mackerras 2001; though cf. Millar 2010, 717–18, 734).2 Smith clearly knew these debates and sources well.3 Yet for our

\[\text{2 Helpful introductions to 18th-century European engagement with}\]
\[\text{China include Spence (1999, 81–100), Marshall and Williams (1982,}\]
\[\text{3 A much more detailed historical and textual analysis than can be}\]
\[\text{provided here would be necessary to assess the precise nature and}\]
\[\text{full extent of Smith’s debts to several specific 18th-century sources}\]
present purposes, what matters is that his inquiry into China’s economic and political development largely took a path independent of those taken by either the French Sinophiles or Sinophobes. Although some have suggested that he “upheld China rather than Europe as a model” of economic development (Arrighi 2007, 69; cf. 57–59), most agree that his perspective on China is “strikingly nonjudgmental” (Pitts 2005, 39; cf. Jones 2001, 67; Pitts 2005, 25–28; Mackerras 2001, 50; Welle 2009, 166) and that he maps uneasily onto the Sinophilia–Sinophobia axis (Millar 2010, 720, 729–31, 734). Smith instead turned to China and Tartary—and particularly to the story of China’s rise to civilized opulence, its future economic prospects, and its tense relationship with its Tartar neighbors—because it spoke directly to his concerns about whether commercial society’s gains could be preserved and whether the further progress of such a civilization could be guaranteed in the absence of the “wisdom of the state,” properly conceived and implemented.

Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary thus sheds important light on his conception of state power, on the moral grounds of his defense of commercial society, and on his participation in a key Enlightenment debate. What follows develops these claims in four sections. The first section examines his accounts of China’s historical economic growth and present stagnation to show how he presents it as a useful mirror for Europe, reflecting its own approaches to international trade and internal improvements. The second section turns to his study of Tartar society and the forms of dependence it encouraged, as well the parallels of this account to his treatment of social dependence in feudal Europe. The third section examines the institutions and values necessary to preserve a civilized state, as demonstrated by the conquest of the civilized Chinese by the barbarian Tartars, and the lessons these hold for Europeans. The conclusion reiterates that these elements of Smith’s substantive treatment of China and Tartary are united by a commitment to defining the decent society that preserves dignity and the role of state power in helping realize this vision in practice.

CHINA’S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: DOMESTIC MARKETS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The most prominent aspect of Smith’s engagement with China is his treatment of its economic development. On this front, Smith sees reasons for both celebration and concern. China’s historical progress toward its current opulence is deserving of celebration. Yet potential humanitarian disaster threatens its future if its present policies are left unchanged. In developing this point, Smith presents China as his key empirical evidence for three of the central claims of his political economy: the utility of state initiatives to expand domestic markets via publicly funded internal improvements, the utility of international trade for amelioration of the conditions of the laboring poor, and the costs borne by the poor when government’s interests are privileged over popular well-being. Taken collectively, Smith’s treatment of these issues reveals both the moral grounds of his defense of commercial society and his conception of the indispensable though strictly demarcated role of the state in helping secure the benefits to the least well-off that efficient markets can bring.

Smith’s account begins with his explanation for China’s remarkable historical growth. This he credits chiefly to two causes: its fortuitous natural conditions and the wisdom of its policies. Smith explains that China’s physical geography affords it a remarkably vast internal market, often noting the greater efficiency of water carriage over land carriage (e.g., WN I.iii.3–4); he claims that the river system “in the Eastern provinces of China...afford an inland navigation much more extensive than that either of the Nile or the Ganges, or perhaps both of them put together.” Indeed he credits China’s “great opulence” and the low cost of its manufactures largely to “this inland navigation” (WN I.i.7; I.xi.g.28). And regarding the wisdom of its policies, Smith explains that in China “the executive power charges itself both with the repairation of the high roads, and with the maintenance of the navigable canals” (WN V.i.d.17) and that the sovereigns of China “have been historically “extremely attentive to the making and maintaining of good roads and navigable canals, in order to increase, as much as possible, both the quantity and value of every part of the produce of the land, by procuring to every part of it the most extensive market which their own dominions could afford” (WN V.i.d.5). These efforts of the Chinese sovereigns clearly exemplify the fulfillment of what Smith calls the third duty of the sovereign: “erecting and maintaining those public institutions and those public works” that are “in the highest degree advantageous to a great society” even though their expense precludes relying on private initiative for their completion—especially public works “facilitating the commerce of the society” such as “good roads, bridges, navigable canals, harbors, etc.” (WN V.i.c.1–2; V.i.d.1; see esp. Evensky 2005, 74; Millar 2010, 729–30).

Yet this seemingly happy story of the sovereign’s fulfillment of the third duty of government also has a darker side, which Smith presents in explaining why China’s government supported the public works projects that extended its home market. On his account, the motive for these projects is not public well-being but the sovereign’s self-interest. Noting that in China “the revenue of the sovereign arises almost altogether from a land-tax or land-rent,” Smith explains that “the great interest of the sovereign, therefore, his revenue, is in such countries necessarily and immediately connected with the cultivation of the land” (WN V.i.d.17; cf. IV.ix.46; Millar 2010, 730, 733–34). This

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4 Smith, it should be noted, is skeptical about the true extent and excellence of these improvements (e.g., WN V.i.d.17 and II.v.22; these passages demand assessment in the context of a more comprehensive review of his sources).
connection, Smith further insists, both explains why China supported that agricultural development so admired by the physiocrats and why its administration was so dedicated to supporting public works: “In China, the principal revenue of the sovereign consists in a tenth part of the produce of all the lands in the empire.” Thus it is precisely the prospect of increased land-tax revenue that will serve to “interest the sovereign in the improvement and cultivation of land” and render him “extremely attentive to the making and maintaining of good roads and navigable canals, in order to increase, as much as possible, both the quantity and value of every part of the produce of the land, by procuring to every part of it the most extensive market which their own dominions could afford” (WN V.ii.d.4–5).

Smith finds this emergence of a divide between the public interest and the government’s interest problematic on several levels. First and foremost it invites potentially oppressive abuses in the methods of tax procurement. China’s methods of taxation were of great contemporary interest and were admired by thinkers well known to Smith (e.g., Rousseau 1992, 166–68; cf. Hanley 2012, 43–44). But Smith is decidedly critical of these methods, insisting that systems of centralized taxation in fact often fail to promote the sovereign’s ultimate interest insofar as they invite “the abuse and depredations of his tax-gatherers” (WN V.ii.d.7; cf. V.i.d.4–6, 18). Yet his principal worry on this front concerned not the possible abuses of unscrupulous administrators, but the human costs that this divide between public interests and government interests seemed to portend. To see this concern, we need to shift focus from his analysis of China’s past to his analysis of its present and future, and indeed from his explanation for China’s growth to his argument for the policies most likely to preserve and extend these gains.

Smith’s assessment of China’s current condition is clear: Although it may be one of the world’s most opulent countries, “it seems, however, to have been long stationary” (WN I.viii.24). Smith indeed often invokes China as a prime example of an economy “altogether stationary,” contrasting it both to the “rapidly progressive” colonies of North America and the “slow and gradual” growth of the economies of Europe (WN I.viii.40; I.ix.15). Smith’s insistence on China’s stagnation reiterated a claim often made by his contemporaries, and other scholars have rightly emphasized it (Chen 2004, 193; Jones 2001, 32; Marshall and Williams 1982, 135; Pitts 2005, 40; Whelan 2009, 30). But what have not yet received extended attention are the reasons why he regarded China’s stagnation as such grave cause for concern and how the government’s misunderstanding of its true interests exacerbated this stagnation.

Smith considered China’s stagnation particularly worrisome because of its effect on the laboring poor. He introduces this concern with a maxim: “Though the wealth of a country should be very great, yet if it has been long stationary, we must not expect to find the wages of labor very high in it” (WN I.viii.24). Throughout this account he invokes wage rates as the proper standard for measuring growth, insisting that “the liberal reward of labor” is the “necessary effect” and “natural symptom of increasing national wealth” just as “the scanty maintenance of the laboring poor” is “the natural symptom that things are at a stand” (WN I.viii.27). This concern for “improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people” ultimately leads Smith to his important claim that “no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable” (WN I.viii.36; Fleischacker 2004, 49, 131–32, 207). It is in this context that Smith makes his most arresting statement on China’s current economic state:

The accounts of all travelers, inconsistent in many other respects, agree in the low wages of labor, and in the difficulty which a laborer finds in bringing up a family in China. If by digging the ground a whole day he can get what will purchase a small quantity of rice in the evening, he is contented. The condition of artificers is, if possible, still worse. Instead of waiting indolently in their workhouses, for the calls of their customers, as in Europe, they are continually running about the streets with the tools of their respective trades, offering their service, and as it were begging employment. The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe. In the neighborhood of Canton many hundred, it is commonly said, many thousand families have no habitation on the land, but live constantly in little fishing boats upon the rivers and canals. The subsistence which they find there is so scanty that they are eager to fish up the nastiest garbage thrown overboard from any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome of food to any European ship.

Smith’s highly charged account demands to be read in the context of his ethical and economic commitments, rather than in the potentially distorting context of 18th-century European Sinophobia. So far from being a mere critique of China vis-à-vis Europe, Smith’s aim is rather to illuminate the plight of China’s poor, especially the ways in which certain policies have given rise to certain inhumane effects. Thus he calls particular attention to the challenges faced by Chinese workers in their efforts to secure their and their families’ subsistence. So too Smith’s mention of infanticide here—elsewhere called “so dreadful a violation of humanity” (TMS V.2.15; LIA iii.80–81; LJB 127; Paganelli 2013, 334–35)—likewise evokes the extent of the tragedy of the conditions of China’s poor, particularly in light of his reminders elsewhere of the disparity in the infant and child mortality rates of the rich and poor (LJA iii.133; WN I.viii.38). Most importantly, by describing the condition to which the laboring poor have been reduced in China in the language of begging and desperation, Smith calls attention to the human cost of specific Chinese economic policies in a manner that has rightly been described as “indicative of his values”
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might serve to “compensate many defects in civil government” (WN I.xi.g.26; cf. esp. IV.ix.41). China thus serves as an example of how “the wisdom of nature has fortunately made ample provision for remedying many of the bad effects of the folly and injustice of man” (WN IV.ix.28)—a judgment Smith delivers explicitly as a retort to Quesnay (cf. WN IV.ix.27; IV.ix.38) and implicitly, one suspects, to his views on China.

Yet China, Smith thinks, needs to change. Increased foreign trade, he argues, will benefit both the government and the people. Smith insists that when an agricultural state such as China “oppresses either by high duties or by prohibitions the trade of foreign nations, it necessarily hurts its own interest” by sinking the value of its surplus produce and giving incentives to withdraw capital from agriculture; thus “agriculture is rendered less advantageous, and trade and manufactures more advantageous than they otherwise would be” (WN IV.ix.25). This has important implications for sovereign self-interest so long as China’s revenue depends on agricultural production; in this way China exemplifies how states, “preferring agriculture to all other employments, in order to promote it, impose restraints upon manufactures and foreign trade, act contrary to the very end which they propose, and indirectly discourage that very species of industry which they mean to promote” (WN IV.ix.49). It is thus in the sovereign’s interest to encourage freedom of trade specifically because it is capable of “raising the value of that surplus produce” on which its tax revenue depends (WN IV.ix.20; IV.ix.24; cf. I.ix.15).

However, it is not only in the government’s interest to liberalize China’s trade policies. Such a shift is also important for the well-being of the people, because foreign trade provides the only possible hope for transcending the “narrowness of the home market” that, even in so extensive a home market as China, necessarily limits growth and prevents ascent to the progressive state that benefits the poorest (WN IV.i.31). Such trade, Smith further suggests, “could scarce fail to increase very much the manufactures of China,” with obvious benefits to laborers and consumers alike (WN IV.ix.41). Yet at present, “though the rich or the owners of large capitals enjoy a good deal of security, the poor or the owners of small capitals enjoy scarce any, but are liable, under the pretense of justice, to be pillaged and plundered at any time by the inferior mandarins”—a system that not only restricts capital circulation in China but also encourages an “oppression of the poor” and “monopoly of the rich, who, by engrossing the whole trade to themselves, will be able to make very large profits” (WN L ix.15).

In this sense, the justice that trade liberalization can bring to China is not merely the simulacrum of global justice that some of Smith’s readers have rightly found in “that equality of courage and force” that free trade encourages and that Smith thinks “can alone overcome the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another” (WN IV.vii.e.80; cf. Arrighi 2007, 2–3, 8; Lockwood 1964, 354–55; Muthu 2008, 204–07; Pitts 2005, 56–57). More concretely and immediately, only the liberalization of

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5 The three pages from the text cited at WN IV.ix.40 are revealing (see Bell 1763, vol. 2, pp. 258, 276, 293). They emphasize the Chinese view of foreign trade as a zero-sum game of one-sided benefit—the same prejudice Smith sought to counter in his own readers.

6 Although Smith himself notes China was already engaged in some foreign trade; see WN I.x.i.a.27; IV.ix.40; and IV.vii.c.100.
trade, coupled with reforms capable of protecting the property rights of the poorest, can alleviate the threat of destitution and starvation and end the tragic cycle of the “monopoly of the rich” and “oppression of the poor” (cf. Ahmed 2012, 127). Smith’s treatment of China’s economic development manifests both his fundamental concern for the promotion of human dignity through the spread of the markets and the degree to which he envisioned state action as capable of contributing to as well as inhibiting this end. By facilitating internal improvements that extended the home markets of such indispensable utility to China’s poorest, China’s sovereigns stand both as models for the emulation of Europe’s statesmen and as principal examples of the “wisdom of the state” in action. Yet insofar as China’s centralized administrations developed interests of their own that conflicted with the people’s interests and used their power to inhibit access to international markets, they also embody the dangers of state action ungoverned by the responsibility to secure the benefits of markets for the poorest.

FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCE: LESSONS FROM TARTARY AND CHINA

Smith’s second area of interest regarding China and Tartary concerned their systems of social relations. Here too his primary concern, as it was in his study of Chinese economic development, was the condition of the least well-off. But in this case Smith’s focus was not the material condition of the poor, but instead the social conditions that determined their dependence on the wealthy and powerful and thus inhibited their freedom. In shifting focus from material concerns to concerns regarding freedom and dependence, he also expanded his examination of China to include Tartary.

Smith’s key discussions of the Tartars come in the course of his analyses of the stages of the historical progress of society. In the *Wealth of Nations*, this account is given in the context of his discussion of “the second duty of the sovereign,” namely “that of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it,” a duty requiring “very different degrees of expense in the different periods of society” (WN V.i.b.1). These “different periods of society” concern the progress from hunting to shepherding to farming to trading societies that Smith, as did many 18th-century theorists, employed to account for the historical progress of civilization (see, e.g., Meek 1976; C. Smith 2006, 48–54). For our purposes, the significance of this stadial theory concerns Smith’s choice of data to illustrate his theory. Smith often returns to native North Americans as examples of hunters, and his fourth stage is exemplified by the civilized nations of Europe. Less well appreciated is that Smith’s key example of the agricultural stage is China and that he regards Tartary as one of the “two great nations” exemplifying the pastoral stage (the other being Arabia) (LJA iv.36; i.28–29, 33–34; cf. Marshall and Williams 1982, 137, 147; Pocock 2001, 324; 2005, 388; 2006, 281).

Smith uses the example of the Tartars to illustrate the important political developments that he associated with the shift from hunting to shepherding—a shift that he regarded as “of all others the greatest in the progression of society” (LJA ii.97). His appreciation of the “dynamic and creative” nature of this stage has been noted by several scholars who have called helpful attention to the extension of property that defined the shepherd age (Pocock 2006, 280; cf. Haakonssen 1981, 157–59; Hont 2009, 152–55; C. Smith 2006, 51–52). As they have shown, where in the hunting age there could be neither surplus nor stable property rights, animal husbandry inaugurated both permanency and the surplus of property (e.g., LJB 150–51), which in turn gave rise to the emergence of inequality and thus the need to devise a means of guaranteeing the property rights of possessors from the depredations of the poor (LJA iv.7–9, 22; LJB 19–20). Herein lies the origin of government, Smith suggests, which has as its end the “security of property” (WN V.i.b.12; LJA iv.21–24).

Thus we arrive at Smith’s essential formula: Shepherding begat property, property begat inequality, inequality instability, and instability the need for civil government. This theory of government’s origins is noteworthy for its emphasis on the inequality of rich and the poor (WN V.i.b.2; LJA iv.22–23). This is the decisive and distinguishing feature of the shepherd age, and Smith uses the Tartars to illustrate both its positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the emergence of a propertied class that could perpetuate its eminence across generations established new grounds for authority; thus he notes that in a shepherd age, “descent gives one more respect and authority than perhaps in any other stage of society whatever,” specifically invoking “the vast respect paid to descent amongst the Tartars and Arabs” (LJA iv.43; cf. LJA i.134; LJB 161; WN III.iv.16; Hont 2009). Yet there is also a decidedly darker side to the emergence of a propertied class. As Smith explains, the same inequality that gave rise to hereditary authority compels a dependence of the poor on the rich for their basic subsistence. Thus the age of the shepherds is that in which “men become in any considerable degree dependent upon others,” because once “the distinctions of rich and poor” are instituted, “those who have not any possessions” can “find no way of maintaining themselves but by procuring it from the rich.” Furthermore the rich in turn require the “service and dependence” of the poor, and thus in time “every wealthy man comes to have a considerable number of the poorer sort depending and attending upon him.” Smith thus concludes of the shepherd age that “in this period of society the inequality of fortune makes a greater odds in the power and influence of the rich over the poor than in any other” (LJA iv.7–9, 11–12)—for where luxury makes possible means of wealth expenditure that redistribute wealth to workers, in the age of shepherds, the rich “have no possible means of spending their property, having no domestic luxury, but by giving it in presents to the poor, and by this means they attain such influence over them as to make them in a manner their slaves” (LJB 20–21; cf. WN V.i.b.10–11). Smith uses the Tartars as a chief example of this
phenomenon. Thus in illustrating this “considerable inequality of fortune” in the shepherding age, Smith notes that

a Tartar chief, the increase of whose herds and flocks is sufficient to maintain a thousand men, cannot well employ that increase in any other way than in maintaining a thousand men. The rude state of his society does not afford him any manufactured produce, any trinkets or baubles of any kind, for which he can exchange that part of his rude produce which is over and above his own consumption. The thousand men whom he thus maintains, depending entirely upon him for their subsistence, must both obey his orders in war, and submit to his jurisdiction in peace. He is necessarily both their general and their judge, and his chieftainship is the necessary effect of the superiority of his fortune. (WN V.i.b.7; cf. LJA iv.45–46)

Thus Tartar social organization is synonymous with dependence. Legal bribery provides some evidence of this (e.g., LJA iv.16, 32–33; LJB 307), but more important is the fact that the rude conditions of Tartar society afford only one avenue for the expenditure of surplus wealth, namely direct distribution, which renders the impoverished recipients of such charity “entirely dependent” on the wealthy for their subsistence.

Yet if the social organization of the pastoral Tartars represents to Smith a pernicious dependence, he hardly regards the East as a simple scene of unmitigated dependence. For in China itself Smith discovered a remedy for the dependence he diagnosed in Tartary. Smith hardly thought China free of all dependence, to be sure; his discussions of polygamy in particular describe the condition of women in China as one of “tyranny” and “abject subjection” (LJA iii.28–34, 47–48). Yet China enjoys two advantages over the Tartars. As a landed society—specifically as one of the “rice countries” rather than “corn countries”—China enjoys an “abundance of food,” because rice can be harvested multiple times in a year and each harvest eclipses a typical grain harvest. This bounty not only furnishes the poor necessities at affordable prices but also “the rich, having a greater super-abundance of food to dispose of beyond what they themselves can consume,” are capable of “purchasing a much greater quantity of the labor of other people” (WN I.xi.g.28). Smith makes this claim in the context of his discussion of the advantages of European-Chinese trade in precious metals, but its force lies in its invitation to rethink the relationship of the rich and the poor. In particular, against the familiar Enlightenment critique of “Oriental luxury,” Smith seeks here to show the practical benefits of Chinese luxury insofar as it stimulates employment and leads the rich unwittingly to redistribute their wealth and authority.

These accounts of Tartar dependence and Chinese luxury are noteworthy for two reasons. The first concerns the degree to which Smith’s accounts of the dependence characteristic of the shepherd Tartars and the relative independence of social conditions in China parallels his comparison of the social conditions of feudal Europe to those of modern commercial society. Smith’s analysis of the breakdown of feudal dependence has been rightly called “the backbone of his history of modern Europe” (Hont 2009, 153, 165–66, 168; cf. Hanley 2009, 19–24); Smith himself famously insists in this context that “by far the most important” effect of commerce is its capacity to establish the “liberty and security of individuals” by eradicating the “servile dependence” of the poor on the rich (WN III.iv.4). Yet the details of Smith’s account of this transition closely track those of his account of the Tartar barbarians. Some instances of this tracking have been noted (see esp. the editors’ notes at WN V.i.b.7); especially noteworthy are the parallels between the feudal lords and those Tartar chiefs who both trade away their authority for “trinkets and baubles” (WN III.iv.5; III.iv.10–11; III.iv.15; Viii.1–3; LJA iv.8–9; LJB 36) and the parallels between the notorious love of “diamond buckles” of the feudal lord that leads him to barter away his authority and of the Chinese who seek the “great objects of the competition of the rich” (WN I.xi.g.28, III.iv.10). These parallels are noteworthy for several reasons, not least because the fact that the landed agricultural states of feudal Europe exhibited precisely the same dependence that defined the nomadic barbarian Tartar shepherds attests to Smith’s recognition that certain social ills transcend social states; thus the progress of society is not strictly linear in any simple sense. But perhaps more importantly, given that Smith’s interest in the Tartars dates at least to the early 1760s (as evident in early fragments of WN; see, e.g., FA 3; FB 3; ED 34), the many parallels between his account of the Tartars and those of feudal Europe suggest that his early engagement with the Tartars may well have decisively shaped his account of the transition from feudalism to commercial society in Western Europe, itself a foundational element of his defense of commercial society more generally.

The second significance of Smith’s account of Tartar dependence concerns its implication for his conception of state action. Smith’s account of the Tartars, when set next to the account of the demise of feudalism in WN III, helps clarify the specific type of state action that will best serve to minimize the dependence of the least well-off. On the one hand, Smith clearly recognizes an indispensable role for the state in guaranteeing property rights; indeed, the crux of his account of the Tartars is the need for government to provide security for property in ages of inequality. But herein lies the key claim in his nuanced account. On its face, a government primarily instituted to protect the property of the rich from the depredations of the poor may seem only to reify and indeed exacerbate inequality and dependence—an inequality and dependence that might themselves seem to require further political action for their amelioration. But Smith’s own approach is quite different. As his accounts of feudal Europe and barbarian Tartary aim to show, the most efficient remedy for the dependence of the poor on the rich lies specifically in the opulence and luxury that promote

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7 Smith interestingly regarded Chinese polygamy as imposed by Tartar conquerors (LJA iii.40–41), a claim that reinforces his contention that the modern Chinese owe their “miserable condition” at least in part to the Tartar conquest (LJA iv.108–09).
redistribution of material resources through expanded labor markets. The role of government and the “wisdom of the state,” in this sense, are indispensable, but are limited to securing what has been described as “the effective operation of the wider market” (C. Smith 2006, 67; see also 64–66). Smith’s argument is that the ultimate remedy for the dependence of the poor on the rich lies not in further state action, but rather in the natural progress of opulence that government’s initial security of property rights makes possible—a view that itself provides a helpful alternative to the conventional positions in the left–right debate.

TARTAR VIRTUE AND CHINESE CORRUPTION: CIVILIZATION AND ITS EXISTENTIAL THREATS

Smith’s third area of interest regarding the history and conditions of the east and their lessons for the west concerns the existential threats to which advanced civilization was particularly susceptible. In explicating these threats, Smith shifts his focus in a slight but significant way. Whereas his treatments of both the Chinese and the Tartars profiled earlier focus on their domestic institutions, here Smith’s explicit focus lies on the interrelations—indeed, the historically hostile relations—between the Chinese and the Tartars. In the story of these relations, Smith finds a crucial set of lessons concerning both the nature of the threats that barbarism poses to opulent societies and the normative remedies that such societies would do well to adopt to mitigate these threats. In this sense, Smith’s account of these remedies emerges as an account of the specific type of state action that commercial societies require to mitigate the negative externalities consequent to the otherwise welcome production of opulence and luxury afforded by commercial progress.

Smith’s account begins with his insistence that barbarian shepherds pose a greater threat to civilized and opulent societies than do savage hunters. “A nation of hunters can never be formidable to the civilized nations in their neighborhood,” he argues, because “the precarious subsistence which the chase affords” prevents them from forming large groups (WN V.i.a.5; cf. LJA iv.39). Where groups of hunters are limited to “two or three hundred,” groups of shepherds “sometimes amount to two or three hundred thousand” (WN V.i.a.5; LJA iv.38–39; LJB 28). Yet it is not only their ability to sustain large groups that makes shepherds formidable. First, their ordinary occupations and “common pastimes” are all “images of war” and prepare them well to take the field (WN V.i.a.4). Second, their nomadic life renders them mobile, and thus their entire nation, “being accustomed to a wandering life, even in time of peace, easily takes the field in time of war” (WN V.i.a.3; cf. LJA iv.77; LJB 29, 335). Third, they have an incentive to win their wars because they carry the whole of their nation and all of their property into battle, and thus “if they are vanquished, all is lost”—herds and flocks, women and children alike (WN V.i.a.3–4; cf. LJA iv.39–40).

Smith’s evidence for each of these claims is Tartary. For evidence that when barbarians “are vanquished they will lose their all” he invokes the example of a “clan of Tartars” (LJA iv.39; cf. WN V.i.a.4), emphasizing that all their men are warriors and that “among the Tartars, even the women have been frequently known to engage in battle” (WN V.i.a.3). To show that the ordinary occupations of the shepherd prepare him for war, Smith describes “the ordinary life, the ordinary exercises of a Tartar or Arab” (WN V.i.a.4). To illustrate the superior mobilization of the shepherds, Smith describes how “the Tartars live in a sort of wagons” and “have all their property in what is properly to be called moveables” (LJA iv.47–48; cf. LJA iv.77, LJB 30, 335; WN V.i.a.3). In so doing he not only gives empirical evidence of the formidable military power of shepherds but also calls repeated attention to the role played by the Tartars in world history as a consequence of this power (LJA iv.40, 51–55, 60; WN V.i.a.5; TMS VI.iii.30).

Yet it is not only the strength of the Tartars that renders them so formidable. Equally important as the strength that distinguishes shepherds is the weakness that characterizes opulent civilizations and renders them susceptible. In diagnosing this weakness, Smith calls attention to two forms of weakness: one institutional and one moral. Regarding institutional weakness, he explains that, just as the ordinary employments of shepherds prepare them for war, those of citizens of commercial societies disincline them to military service. “Every hour a smith or a weaver is absent from his loom or his anvil his work is at a stop,” he explains, because one can hardly devote “a single hour” to military exercises “without some loss, and his attention to his own interest naturally leads him to neglect them altogether” (LJA iv.79; WN V.i.a.15; cf. V.i.a.9). Such citizens come to see service in the military not merely as an “inconvenience” but also as a “great hardship,” with the result that it is left to “the lowest ranks” and “the dregs of the people” (LJA iv.88; cf. LJA iv.83–84, 93–94, 99; LJB 40; see esp. Montes 2009, 325). Further, in advanced societies it is not only not in the individual’s interest to go to war but it is also not in the state’s interest. Smith notes that in all nations that depend on taxation of manufactures for revenue, if manufacturers were to be sent to the battlefield, “the public revenues would have been greatly diminished”—and hence it is “no longer the interest of the government to press its subjects to go to war” (LJA iv.99–100), because such service would be “both difficult and prejudicial to the state” (LJA iv.103).

The “progress of manufactures” thus causes a weakening of military strength in an institutional sense (WN V.i.a.8; cf. LJA iv.76–77, 85; LJB 37, 47). Yet Smith also identifies a moral cause of this diminution of strength. In a key passage he describes “another bad effect of commerce,” namely “that it sinks the courage of mankind, and tends to extinguish martial spirit.” Smith traces this effect to the division of labor; just as “in all commercial countries the division of labor is infinite, and everyone’s thoughts are employed about one particular thing,” so too “war comes to be a trade also” in
which a few specialize, with the result that “among the bulk of the people military courage diminishes” and luxury leads them to “grow effeminate and dastardly” (LJB 331). This stands in sharp contrast to Britons of only two centuries earlier, animated by “spirit and vigor,” “brave and warlike” with minds “not enervated by cultivating arts and commerce” (LJB 332). Thus Smith reaches his notorious conclusion regarding the “disadvantages of a commercial spirit”: “Heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished” (LJB 333), the citizen is rendered “incapable of defending his country in war” (WN V.i.f.50), and “military exercises” are neglected as “the great body of the people becomes altogether unwarlike” (WN V.i.a.15).

These claims are now relatively familiar. What demands particular notice in that in developing them Smith again cites Tartary and China as his chief empirical evidence:

It is for the same reason too that an army of 4 or 500 Europeans have often penetrated into the Mogul’s country, and that the most numerous armies of the Chinese have always been overthrown by the Tartars. In these countries, the division of labor and luxury have arrived at a very high pitch, they have no standing army, and the people are all intent on the arts of peace. (LJB 332)

The coexistence of barbarian shepherds and opulent civilizations as exemplified by the Tartar conquest of China—elsewhere described by Smith in his gloss on Voltaire as a clash between “Chinese virtue” and “Tartar barbarity” (LER 17; cf. TMS VI.i.2.1)—reveals a tragic irony: namely, that the very opulence that marks the progress of commercial nations also “provokes the invasion of all their neighbors,” and thus “a wealthy nation, is of all nations the most likely to be attacked; and unless the state takes some new measures for the public defense, the natural habits of the people render them altogether incapable of defending themselves” (WN V.i.a.15; cf. LJB 32). This situation is worrisome partly because it impedes progress; thus “nothing can be more an obstacle to the progress of opulence” than the fact that “among the Tartars and Arabs, great bands of barbarians are always roaming from one place to another in quest of plunder” (LJB 288). Yet even more worrisome to Smith is the possibility of the existential annihilation of the civilized state as a direct consequence. Commerce, he insists, will “necessarily undo the strength and cause the power to vanish of such a state till it be swallowed up by some neighboring state” (LJA iv.x.81), because it is the very improvement in the arts that causes a state’s strength to be “greatly diminished” to the point that “it falls a sacrifice to some of its neighbors” (LJA iv.x.91; cf. LJB 43).

Smith thus thinks that his Western readers would do well to attend to the story of the conquest of civilized China by barbarian Tartary for two reasons. First, the story of the unpreparedness of civilized China to confront and resist the invasions of their neighbors helps clarify the unique responsibilities of the modern state in helping secure the conditions of stability. Smith quite forthrightly insists in the Wealth of Nations that “the security of every society must always depend, more or less, upon the martial spirit of the great body of the people,” yet “in the present times” this “martial spirit alone” if “unsupported by a well-disciplined standing army, would not, perhaps, be sufficient for the defense and security of any society” (WN V.i.f.59). Smith famously identifies “the first duty of the sovereign” as “protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies” (WN V.i.a.1; cf. V.i.a.42; IV.ix.51), and his conviction on this front led him, as is well known, to advocate for the public support of a standing army (cf. WN V.i.a.16–18). On this basis, it would seem that his call for the necessity of a publicly funded standing army was not merely an intervention in the debate over the relative merits of armies versus militias in which he had earlier participated from the other side (see esp. Montes 2009, 326–28) but was also the fruit of his reflection on Chinese civilization and the existential threat posed to it by the Tartars. Indeed, his key piece of evidence for the superiority of a standing army to a militia is “the frequent conquests of all the civilized countries in Asia by the Tartars.” Such conquests, especially the Manchu Tartar conquest of China, “sufficiently demonstrate[s] the natural superiority of barbarian armies to civilized militias and thus the need for civilized states to adopt standing armies, the only means by which “the civilization of any country can be perpetuated, or even preserved for any considerable time” (WN V.i.a.39; cf. V.i.a.36). In short, the Tartars, distinguished by military strength, warlike natures, and great mobility, represent an immense threat—indeed one that requires a certain type of state action to mitigate. In particular, the potential force of the enemy is too great to wait for it to arrive at the gates, and on such grounds Smith insists on the need for government to take the primary role in advance planning:

Into other arts the division of labor is naturally introduced by the prudence of individuals, who find that they promote their private interest better by confining themselves to a particular trade, than by exercising a great number. But it is the wisdom of a state only which can render the trade of a soldier a particular trade separate and distinct from all others. A private citizen who, in time of profound peace, and without any particular encouragement from the public, should spend the greater part of his time in military exercises, might, no doubt, both improve himself very much in them, and amuse himself very well; but he certainly would not promote his own interest. It is the wisdom of the state only which can render it for his interest to give up the greater part of his time to this peculiar occupation: and states have not always had this wisdom, even when circumstances have become such, that the preservation of their existence required that they should have it. (WN V.i.a.14)

The story of the depredations of the Tartars thus served to convey the lesson that the natural division of labor directed by private self-interest needs guidance by the “wisdom of the state” in matters of national defense if commercial societies hope to optimize the chances of “the preservation of their existence.”
But for Smith this concern with existential threat preparedness was hardly a matter of pure theory; hence the second reason for his drawing our attention to the story of the Manchu conquest. China’s fate was not a one-off event somehow distant from the dangers faced by contemporary Europe; on the contrary, Smith saw evidence of this threat in both the recent past and possible future of his own nation. Thus he offers several examples to illustrate his claim that “when a civilized nation depends for its defense upon a militia, it is at all times exposed to be conquered by any barbarous nation which happens to be in its neighborhood,” and that “it is only by means of a standing army, therefore, that the civilization of any country can be perpetuated” (WN V.i.a.39). In Scotland’s recent past, Smith clearly saw similarities between the Manchu invasion that sacked Peking in 1644 and the Highland invasion that reached Edinburgh in 1745 (see esp. Millar 2010, 725; Whelan 2009, 10); hence in making his claim that the vulnerability of rich civilizations is shown by “universal experience,” he cites alongside the Tartar conquest of China the events of “the year 1745” in which “four or 5 thousand naked unarmed Highlanders took possession of the improved parts of this country without any opposition from the unwarlike inhabitants” (LJB 331; cf. WN V.i.a.26; TMS VI.ii.1.12). Far from minimizing the significance of this threat, Smith makes clear that it was only the standing army that stood between the Highland invaders and the fall of the Crown: “They penetrated into England and alarmed the whole nation, and had they not been opposed by a standing army they would have seized the throne with little difficulty” (LJB 332). So too he notes that the British army plays a similarly indispensable role farther afield; even as he disparages the relative threat posed by the native North Americans (WN V.i.a.5), Smith is aware of what might well happen were the colonies to be “deserted by Britain and left to defend themselves against the savages” (LJAv.102).

Beyond the Highlanders and the native North Americans, Smith also presents the Tartars themselves as a threat to civilized Britain and Europe more generally. In part he appeals to history to argue this point, reminding his students and readers that not only did China fall to the Tartars but so too did Rome; his account of “the fall of the western empire” is thus presented not only to support his claim with regard to “the irresistible superiority which the militia of a barbarous, has over that of a civilized nation” (WN V.i.a.36) but also to argue that the barbarians who sacked Rome were of Tartar descent (WN V.i.a.35; cf. Lii.8; V.i.a.5). Yet the Tartar threat to Europe is for Smith hardly a mere matter of historical interest only. Students at one of his jurisprudence lectures were invited to participate in the following striking thought experiment:

Let us suppose that this island was invaded by a numerous band of Tartars, a people who are still in the state of shepherds, a people who lead a roving life and have little or no idea of industry. Here they would find all commodities for the taking, they would put on fine clothes, eat, drink, tear and wear every thing they laid their hands upon. The consequence would be that from the highest degree of opulence the whole country would be reduced to the lowest pitch of misery and brought back to its ancient state. (LJB 267–68)

Thus the possibility of the existential annihilation of Britain at the hands of the Tartars was sufficiently present to Smith to have led him to imagine its possibility and to ask his students to imagine it as well. Elsewhere he suggests that this possibility is not only on British minds; hence, his story of the returned ambassador who reported “that the Tartars used frequently to ask him, if there was plenty of sheep and oxen in the kingdom of France?” because “they wanted to know if the country was rich enough to be worth the conquering” (WN IV.1.2). Perhaps most significantly, reminding his audience that “the present Sultans, Grand Seignors, Mogulls, and Emperors of China are all of Tartar descent,” he observes that the caliphs who succeeded Mahomet had indeed some better regulations with regard to the administration of justice; but they, falling on that account into peaceable industry and commerce, cared not to go out to war themselves and took the expedient ordinary in such cases: they called in the Turkamans to protect their country. This Tartar nation in the same manner, and others of their employment, in a short time overthrew the empire of the caliphs and made way for the Ottoman family into Europe. (LJAv.108–09; cf. LJAv.45; LJAv.40, 52; LJAv.46)

Smith’s assessment serves as a précis of both his theory of commercial corruption and his historical account of civilized Europe’s engagement with the East. On the former front, it reiterates his long-standing concern, noted earlier, with the ways in which industry and commerce enervate military might and can lead to potentially fatal reliance on barbarian mercenaries (see LJAv.100–03). On the latter front, his narrative of the overthrow of the caliphate stands not only as another Tartar-driven upheaval but also marks the moment that the Tartars, via the Ottoman Empire, were brought to Europe’s door (cf. Wheatcroft 2009, 47–54).

Such claims attest to Smith’s interest in Tartary and his concerns regarding the threat they might pose to Europe. Yet care should be taken not to overstate his concerns regarding the Tartars or indeed any specific extant group. This is in part for practical reasons: Smith himself insists that the present superiority of European military technology significantly minimizes the barbarian threat in the short term, given the conditions of “modern war” (WN V.i.a.44; cf. V.i.a.14, V.i.a.25)—a claim now standard in accounts of the relations of the Ottoman Empire to Europe in the 18th century (e.g. Quataert 2005, 37–38). More importantly, Smith’s intention was less to identify possible future threats than to diagnose specific present ills. Rather than prognosticate about an uncertain future, Smith sought to gain clarity about the current problem of commercial corruption, as well as the specific institutional actions that civilized states, in their wisdom, ought to take to guard against any and all future threats, foreseen and unforeseeable. It is for this reason that Smith frames
his account not as a call for preparation for war with the Tartars but as a theoretical analysis of the ways in which “improvement in arts and cultivation unfit the people from going to war” and diminish strength until “it falls a sacrifice to some of its neighbors” (LJA iv.91; cf. LJA iv.85, 93; LJB 37)—“unless,” of course, “the state takes some new measure for the public defense” (WN V.i.a.15). China’s fall to the Tartars thus represents not merely the fate of a distant land but also the possible fate of civilized European states if they fail to take preemptive action. Smith’s claim is that the existential threat that barbarism poses to civilization, in conjunction with the corruption endemic to commercial society, demands that states anticipate and plan for the possibility that their gains could be erased if they fail to adopt certain practical measures, specifically maintenance of a standing army at public expense—lest “that fated dissolution that awaits every state and constitution whatever” come sooner rather than later (LJB 46).

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM CHINA AND TARTARY

This analysis has sought to demonstrate that Smith’s engagement with both China and Tartary was quite extensive if underappreciated today. Its significance is threefold. First, it attests to his participation in and indeed his unique contribution to the 18th-century French debates on China. A recent scholar has compared these debates to a “Rorschach test” in which all sides “could see what they wanted to see” (Harvey 2012, 41–42). Yet Smith’s own approach was quite different. Far from either celebrating or castigating the East by judging it against an idealized model, his nuanced engagement with the data these cases afforded testifies to his awareness of the difference between “natural and actual paths of economic development” (Hont 2005, 356; cf. esp. 374–75), the need to observe “actual social practices” rather than simply deducing ideals “from a priori principles” (Pitts 2005, 46–47), and the need to employ “comparison” to judge better and worse policies in the context of “the actual alternatives of political experience” (Whelan 2009, 2).

Second, Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary reveals the ethical grounds of his defense of commercial society. As shown earlier, Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary spoke to issues not at the margins but at the core of his larger project as both a moral philosopher and political economist, including the institutions that provide the poor a maximal degree of material security, the institutions that afford the weak a maximal degree of freedom from dependence, and the institutions necessary to preserve the security of the citizenry. In so doing, Smith’s engagement with China and Tartary helps clarify his moral vision of commercial society, as well as his defense of it on the specific grounds of its capacity to promote and preserve human dignity.

This in turn points to a third key element of Smith’s engagement with China and Tartary—his conception of the type of state action most likely to promote the realization of human dignity in practice. Smith’s treatment of the China and Tartary cases clarifies his view that state action is at once necessary for and also properly limited to securing the gains of commercial progress and to mitigating its negative externalities. In so doing, Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary both cuts a useful new path between “right” and “left” on the central and contested issue of the nature and extent of legitimate state action and also reaffirms a core point on which both right and left agree. Left Smithians and right Smithians both agree that Smith’s economic and political science resisted idealizations and focused on “actual realizations” and “comparisons rather than on transcendence” (Sen 2009, xvi–xvii) and that Smith inclined toward empiricism and harbored a “temperamental distaste for utopianism” (C. Smith 2013, 796)—a point confirmed by Smith’s deployment of the real-world cases of China and Tartary. Smith’s treatment of China and Tartary not only affirms this point of agreement between right and left but also suggests a way to resolve their central point of disagreement, namely the scope of legitimate state power. Smith’s own third way privileges the markets admired by the right to effect the poverty relief sought by the left, and it both mandates and limits the use of state power in furthering this specific end in this specific manner—a commitment that his treatment of China and Tartary helpfully illuminates. Delineating an indispensable but strictly limited role for the “wisdom of the state” in securing the gains brought by the progress of commercial society—specifically through encouraging internal improvements, improving access to international markets, and securing the safety of the citizenry—Smith sets forth a conception of state action that productively moves beyond conventional distinctions of right and left and ensures that market mechanisms work with maximum efficiency to promote and preserve dignity.

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