China had long occupied European imagination as a faraway, mysterious country. The Romans had marvelled about the fantastic region from where they imported silk and Marco Polo brought rumours about Cathay’s fabulous riches back to medieval Europe. However, a new way of thinking about China began with the Jesuit mission to China in the middle of the 16th century. The Portuguese, and later the French and German Jesuit monks followed the Portuguese and French traders to the East and for the first time sent detailed reports back to Europe. Their translations of Chinese culture created a new idea of China, which would play a significant role in debates about ideas, language, government and religion of the enlightenment. These debates placed China mainly in the philosophical realm, alongside ancient Greece and Egypt. In doing so, the European literati created their own Europeanised vision of China.

A similar process took place with regard to the consumer products which the increasing trade with China brought to European shores, and which gave rise to the European fashion of Chinoiserie. Both of those aspects of early modern contact with China will be discussed in this chapter. They shaped the image of China in Britain significantly. However, this process mainly took place within a European network and created an idea of China as a far away, mystical country rather than a real political entity. Developments in the European history of ideas transformed the resulting images of China and from the 1750s onwards a slow change can be noticed in Britain that brought China into closer connection with India and British interests in the East.
2.1 The origin of language

The reports emanating from the Jesuit mission in Beijing had provided Europe with a continuous flow of information about China since the 17th century. The Jesuit principle of accommodation, as well as their need to defend this approach to converting China resulted in very positive representations of China. Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz and Voltaire were inspired by these accounts to create an image of China as a rational, enlightened state.³

By the second half of the 18th century, this enthusiasm had receded and the critics became more dominant. Moreover, The Rites Controversy at the beginning of the century and finally the abolition of the Jesuit order in 1773 deprived China of their most favourable advocates. Sinophilia had never been that dominant amongst the literati in Britain, and the suspicion about the reports from Catholic priests grew. In addition to this, changes in the intellectual climate and epistemological standards made the Jesuit reports appear increasingly less reliable. In the second half of the 18th century, the study of Asia changed from the framework of the ‘traditionalists’, to a ‘natural history of man’. The former had tried to incorporate information produced by the European ‘discoveries’ into the knowledge created by the Bible and the classical authors. The latter was more concerned with the progress of mankind and tried to identify different stages through which mankind had evolved, by observing contemporary societies. In this context, the Jesuit accounts of China were considered to be increasingly untrustworthy and many members of Britain’s intellectual elite saw the need for new knowledge about China.⁴

Despite this perceived lack of knowledge, China still figured in British philosophical debates of the second half of the 18th century. The Jesuit letters were still used as a source of information, although the interpretation of them changed. It was subordinated to the idea of progress, so dominant in the Scottish enlightenment, and the attempt to order the world according to a stadial theory. What had made China so fascinating to Leibniz and other enlightenment thinkers, namely its antiquity and its system of writing, now made it prone to the disdain of the literati of this period.

China could thus stand for example as a prototype for the agricultural society in Adam Smith’s ‘Wealth of nations’. Even though he still acknowledged its status as a civilised society, it had not been able to reach the highest level – that of a commercial society. He thought this was due to the Chinese neglect of foreign trade, which resulted from