It has been suggested that Leibniz was the only seventeenth century philosopher to show any interest in China. This is not the case. Locke had a long standing interest in China that went back to his days at Oxford when he referred to China in his early writings and lasted to his final years at Otes when he had a map of China on the wall of his study. Locke’s interest in China and other Far Eastern societies was expressed in the *Essay*, in which he maintained that highly civilized societies as well as those that were illiterate and lacked an advanced material culture could be atheistic. He made a study of two such societies, whose culture was only just becoming known to Europeans through travel literature—Siam and China—which seemed to offer evidence that the belief in God was not innate in the human mind. The question came up in his dispute with Stillingfleet and he returned to it in some notes that he made late in his life while in retirement at Otes.

The intellectual and social context of the accounts of Siam and China that Locke used was complex and controversial and needs to be examined in some detail to make sense of the views that Locke expressed in the *Essay* and also to explain why he returned to this question after the publication of the *Essay* and made extensive notes on Chinese religion. A note book containing notes from his reading on China is among the manuscripts kept at the Bodleian Library, Oxford and offers an additional source of information about how he developed his ideas on materialism and atheism.

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2 MS Locke, c. 27.
Seventeenth century accounts of both China and Siam suggested that these were in important respects atheist societies, but the context of the reports in each case was different. All the descriptions of Siam that Locke used were connected to French attempts to establish themselves as latecomers in the Far East between 1662 and 1688. Siam, or Thailand, offered a potential point of access to the rich Asian trade networks where French influence might be established through missionary work and diplomatic contact. These efforts produced a number of studies of Buddhist religious ideas some of which Locke used in the Essay. La Loubère offered one of the best informed sources for Buddhism in this period. In the case of China, Locke drew on the works of missionaries who had made a profound study of Confucian beliefs in their attempts to evangelise this vast and sophisticated empire. The books that Locke used on Siam represent a fairly homogeneous body of work. They were written within a short space of time when French efforts to establish themselves in Siam were at their peak. They express similar ideas. The writers had the same informants and experienced some of the same events. The works on China, by contrast, reflect a much deeper level of knowledge than those on Siam since they came out of a much longer period of contact that was far more varied than the brief French experience in Siam. It was not until well into the sixteenth century that a detailed knowledge of China began to emerge from travellers’ accounts. While contact between Europe and China was possible, the extent of contact that actually took place before the mid seventeenth century was small. The first Chinese scholars arrived in Europe in 1654 with Martino Martini and in 1683 some came with the Belgian Jesuit Philippe Couplet. They spent some time working in the Bodleian and discussing with Oxford linguists. Locke had, by this time, left Oxford for the Netherlands. His collection of books on China was, however, considerable. He had 30 books on China, includ-