THE PRE-ESTABLISHED HARMONY BETWEEN LEIBNIZ AND CHINESE THOUGHT

BY DANIEL J. COOK AND HENRY ROSEMONT, JR.

The lifelong interest of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) in things Chinese has been largely ignored by later philosophers. His two most well-known philosophical biographers of the early twentieth century, Russell ¹ and Couturat, ² make only desultory references to China in their works. The more recent eight-volume Encyclopaedia of Philosophy ³ contains an entry on Leibniz over 10,000 words long without ever mentioning China either in the text or in the bibliography. And although Leibniz’s fascination with the Chinese written language is amply documented and linked time and again with his famous search for a “universal characteristic” or symbolic system for a calculus of reasoning (calculus ratiocinator), a recent philosophical commentary entitled Leibniz’s Philosophy of Logic and Language ⁴ does not discuss China or the Chinese language even in passing.

Historians and sinologists have been more attentive to this short but significant chapter in the history of ideas, with scholars such as Franz Merkel, E. R. Hughes, Donald Lach, Hellmut Wilhelm, Arthur Waley, David Mungello, and Oliver Roy ⁵ alike raising the question of whether or not Leibniz’s mature philosophy, especially his metaphysics, was indebted to Chinese thought in general, and to the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) in particular. This question has, however, been most directly put—and answered affirmatively, albeit tentatively—by Joseph Needham’s major study. ⁶ In

¹ Bertrand Russell, The Philosophy of Leibniz (Cambridge, 1900).
² Louis Couturat, La Logique de Leibniz (Paris, 1901).
⁴ By Hide Ishiguro (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972).
addition to its importance for Leibniz scholarship and for philosophy, Needham's interpretation has implications for the history of science and for cross-cultural studies as well.

Briefly stated, Needham maintains that the old sinological riddle of "Why didn't China develop science?" is poorly conceived because it suggests that the development of modern science is uniquely Western, which, according to him, it is not. Many rivers have emptied into the sea of science, with one of the major tributaries originating in China, bringing with it many artifacts and technologies that provided some of the necessary wherewithal for the successful voyages of the Age of Discovery, and the concomitant rise of modern science. But Needham goes much farther in challenging a monocultural focus for the history of science: in addition to objects and practices, the Chinese may well have contributed to theory too, especially the "philosophy of organism," which Needham says is "characteristically Chinese." This metaphysical system seems to arrive on the European intellectual scene fully mature in the philosophy of Leibniz, with few if any Western philosophical or religious antecedents. And Leibniz was the first major Western thinker to devote himself seriously to the study of China.

To be sure, Needham in elaborating his position does not confine himself to Leibniz; other scientific personalities and scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (e.g., Robert Boyle, the Cambridge Platonists, etc.) also figure in his broader claims of the influence of Chinese thought on Europeans during this period. That Leibniz is central for Needham, however, is seen when he asks whether the philosopher's metaphysics was not "strongly stimulated by, if not derived from, the organic world-outlook which we have found to be characteristically Chinese." The concern here is with Leibniz's mature views as expressed in the _Monadology_ (1714) and not with his earlier, though systematic, writings such as the _Discourse on Metaphysics_. Needham accepts the view, common in Leibniz scholarship, that "all the essentials of his system were worked out in the _Discourse on Metaphysics_ (written in the winter of 1685-86), the terminology of monads alone being missing." For Needham the proviso about monads is crucial because it is basically on the monads and the consequent organic model of the world they imply that he builds his thesis: "It might almost be said that the monads were the first appearance of organisms upon the stage of occidental philosophy." Furthermore, another key term in Leibniz's metaphysics, "pre-established harmony," is also not found in the early writings. The

9 *Ibid.*, 504, fn. g.  
coining of that term (in 1695) is considered by Needham to be another piece of evidence to show a change of direction or emphasis in Leibniz's views in his later years, a change that came about at least in part because of his exposure to certain streams in Chinese thought. Thus Needham says:

The hierarchy of monads and their "pre-established harmony" resembled the innumerable individual manifestations of the Neo-Confucian Li in every pattern and organism. Each monad mirrored the universe like the nodes in Indra's net.\footnote{Ibid.}

He of course allows that many of Leibniz's distinctive organic notions could have been developed from such Western sources as Giordano Bruno or Nicholas Cusanus and through them (and others) from the hermetic tradition; but in a later footnote he says: "The assessment of the extent to which Neo-Confucian philosophy directly influenced Leibniz will involve detailed bibliographical references. . . ."\footnote{Ibid., 296.} The question, then, for Needham, is not whether Chinese thought influenced Leibniz, but how much it did; his conclusion, though qualified, is that Leibniz "derived a great deal more than simply a conviction of [his system's] congruency with Chinese philosophy."\footnote{Ibid., 504, fn. g.}

Unlike his manifold and fully documented arguments that modern science owes much to Chinese efforts,\footnote{Indeed, the entire Science and Civilisation project bears on this issue, and the work must certainly rank as one of the scholarly monuments of the second half of the 20th Century. Perhaps the best testimony to its greatness is that other scholars are already going beyond it. Thus, while fully supportive of Needham's claims of a philosophical influence rests solely on circumstantial evidence. This evidence is by no means inconsequential: Leibniz did have a sustained interest in things Chinese; his metaphysics did contain many ideas novel in the West; and his metaphysics does bear a resemblance in places to Neo-Confucian speculative philosophy. Nevertheless,} Needham's claim of a philosophical influence rests solely on circumstantial evidence. This evidence is by no means inconsequential: Leibniz did have a sustained interest in things Chinese; his metaphysics did contain many ideas novel in the West; and his metaphysics does bear a resemblance in places to Neo-Confucian speculative philosophy. Nevertheless,
while research on the "detailed bibliographical references" to which Needham alludes has not yet been undertaken (and will not soon be forthcoming, because a comprehensive and accurate inventory of Leibniz's voluminous writings is still several decades in the future), a close reading of the more accessible documents suggests strongly that his view of Leibniz as the, or a, theoretical link between West and East will not be sustained; the quality and quantity of Chinese thought clearly interested and impressed Leibniz, but there is to date no direct evidence to show that its content had any great influence on the development of his mature philosophical system.

First, there is the important matter of chronology. Leibniz mentions Chinese thought briefly in his correspondence as early as 1670—sixteen years before writing the Discourse on Metaphysics—in a letter to the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher. However, the letter merely evinces an interest in the latter's writings on China; it does not show that Leibniz knew anything first hand about the subject at this time. From 1672 to 1676 Leibniz was in Paris, and a recent scholar has said that during this period Leibniz was exposed to Chinese materials in a "massive way"; but he does not cite any textual evidence at all to support the claim, nor has any appeared to come to light from other scholars who have studied this period of Leibniz's life.

By 1679 it is clear that Leibniz had some knowledge of the structure of the Chinese written language. In January of that year he learned of the efforts of Andreas Müller to work out a "key" to written Chinese, and in June wrote a letter to Müller asking a number of sophisticated questions about the Chinese language and the latter's work on it. Similarly we know that Leibniz was aware at this time of the view of the Dutch scholar Jacob Gohl that written Chinese had

16 China monumentis qua sacris qua profanis ... (Amsterdam, 1667) and La Chine illustrée ... (Amsterdam, 1670). The earliest mention of China we have come across is in 1668, when Leibniz compares Chinese medicine favorably with Europe's: "No matter how foolish and paradoxical the Chinese ordinarily appear to be in re medica, nevertheless, theirs is better than ours" (Lach's translation). Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, editors, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Politische Schriften, in G. W. Leibniz, Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe (Darmstadt, 1931), Series IV, I, 552; quoted in Lach, "Leibniz and China," op cit., 436.


Leibniz was also probably familiar with the work of the Englishman John Webb who had published a book in 1667 (a copy of which is still in Leibniz's library) and in it attempted to show that Chinese was the "primitive language" of the human race. Leibniz never abandoned his interest in the Chinese script, but already in this same year he indicates that he knew enough about it to doubt that it could serve as the basis for his "universal characteristic." In a letter to Duke John Frederick written in April he said:

If you know Chinese characters, I believe that you will find a little more harmony in them, but basically they are indubitably far removed from that analysis of thought which comprises the essence of my plan, as they are apparently content to give several connotations.

It must be noted, however, that to whatever extent these works provided Leibniz with his information about the Chinese language, they could not have provided him with metaphysical inspiration because they do not contain any substantive discussion of Neo-Confucian thought. (They could, and did, on the other hand, make available to him a fair amount of misinformation about Chinese history.)

The beginning of Leibniz's mature study of China seems best to be dated in 1689, when he was in Rome. There he met and visited with the Italian Jesuit missionary Claudio Grimaldi who had recently returned from a seventeen-year stay in China, much of it spent at the court in Peking. The two men maintained a correspondence for some time thereafter, initiated by Leibniz with a letter written in July, asking thirty questions about China. The questions ranged from topics in plant classification to Chinese armaments, and while taken collectively they are a good index of Leibniz's encyclopaedic mind,

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20 John Webb, An Historical Essay Endeavoring A Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is Like Primitive Language (London, 1669).

21 Lach, "Leibniz and China," op cit., 437. Leibniz did, however, maintain his interest in the Chinese script, and thought well of it. In a letter of 1703 to father Joachim Bouvet, for example, he said, "I cannot say of the Egyptian hieroglyphs... that they have any agreement with the Chinese characters... which are perhaps more philosophical and appeared to be built on more intellectual considerations such as are given by numbers, order, and relations," Quoted in Philip P. Wiener, "On Philosophical Synthesis," Philosophy East and West, 12, no. 3 (October, 1963), 200.

22 This theme is developed more fully in our Introduction to Leibniz's Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese, translated with an Introduction, Notes, and Commentary by Henry Rosemont, Jr., and Daniel J. Cook (Honolulu, 1977); hereafter cited as Discourse.

they also show that at the time of writing he was not well versed in Chinese geography, history, or culture, and not fundamentally concerned with Chinese metaphysics.

The next important document on China written by Leibniz was his "Preface" to the Novissima Sinica (Recent News from China), one of the relatively few of his works (on any subject) published during his lifetime, issued in 1697 and again in 1699. Although the work contains very brief passages on Chinese philosophy and religion—including a reference to the "accursed idol Buddha"—the bulk of the Novissima Sinica is basically a catalog of current events dealing with China and the opening of trade routes (a subject which deeply concerned Leibniz); it is not at all a treatise on Chinese thought.

As late as 1710, in the Preface to his Theodicy, Leibniz discusses the doctrines of many non-Christian religions but makes no mention of Chinese thought as a bearer of a natural theology consonant with his own. It was not until the last year of his life, in 1716, that Leibniz wrote at length on Chinese thought and religion, and it is to an examination of this document that we must now turn in our consideration of the question of the influence of Chinese thought on Leibniz. In a long letter (over 14,000 words) to Nicholas Remond de Montmart, a French Platonist and head of the councils of the Duke of Orleans, Leibniz set down his views on Chinese philosophy and religion, referring to his work as a "Discours sur la Théologie naturelle des Chinois." Remond—to whom Leibniz had addressed the Monadology two years earlier—had sent Leibniz two hostile works on Chinese religion written by Catholic missionaries and had asked the philosopher's opinion of them. The two books were the Religion Treatise, by the Italian Jesuit Nicholas Longobardi (the successor to Matteo Ricci as the head of the China Mission), and the Mission Treatise, by the Spanish Franciscan Antonio Caballero a Santa Maria. Both of these missionaries made basically the same claims

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24 Lach's translation, op. cit., is based on the 1699 edition.  
25 Ibid., 76.  
27 Discourse, op. cit.  
28 Ibid. The material which follows for the next three paragraphs is taken from our Introduction which contains the relevant citations.  
30 Traité sur quelques points importants de la Mission de la Chine (Paris, 1701); also in Kortholt, op. cit. Leibniz also mentions receiving from Remond the essay by Nicholas Malebranche, "A Dialogue Between A Christian Philosopher and A Chinese Philosopher: On the Nature and Existence of God," but does not refer to it in the Discourse, nor was there much reason for him to do so because Malebranche mentions only one Chinese philosophical term—Li (理)—in the whole of his essay, and not with much understanding or sympathy. This essay has been translated by George Stengren of Central Michigan University (manuscript).
about Chinese speculative thought, namely, that resemblances between Chinese and Christian concepts were only superficial, that the ancient Chinese thinkers were at best materialists and their modern counterparts out-and-out atheists, and, therefore, that conversion could only proceed by having the Chinese abandon altogether their intellectual and cultural heritage in favor of Revealed Christian Truth.

Leibniz's reply is the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*, an attempted rebuttal of the missionaries' views in which he discusses the Chinese conception of God, universal principles, spiritual substance(s), souls, immortality, and the correlations between his binary arithmetical notation and the ancient Chinese book of divination, the *I Ching*. In describing his position he employs many of his own key philosophical terms such as "pre-established harmony," "primary" (and "secondary") matter, and "entelechies" (the term "monads" does not occur in the text). There are also repeated references in the *Discourse* to Greek philosophy, the early church fathers, and to history, both Western and Chinese. The length and contents of the work thus make it an important piece in the Leibniz corpus, especially when it is remembered that he wrote it in his 70th and last year; it follows that the *Discourse* should shed light on the question of Chinese philosophical influences on Leibniz's own views, especially on his metaphysics.

The text of the *Discourse* is divisible into four sections. In the first, Leibniz argues, *contra* Longobardi and Santa Maria, that the Chinese do indeed have a conceptual analogue to the Christian concept of God and spiritual substance. In the next section (almost half the manuscript) he maintains that spirits and matter are treated very nearly the same in China and Europe. And the third section is devoted to making a similar case for the compatibility of the Chinese and Christian concepts of the human soul and its immortality.

Throughout these three sections (the fourth will be taken up below), Leibniz employs three distinct, but closely related, general forms of argument. First, he claims that Chinese thought is compatible with his own philosophy and his own philosophy is compatible with Christianity; therefore, Chinese thought is compatible with Christianity. Second, when confronted with a Chinese passage from the missionaries which appears to be clearly in conflict with Christian theology, Leibniz attempts to show that similar "errors" had been made by the Greeks or the early church fathers, scholastics, etc., without destroying Christianity, or indeed, without diminishing the respect with which such persons were treated in the Western tradition. And third, when rebutting a specific charge of Longobardi and/or Santa Maria against the "ancients," Leibniz would point out whenever possible that the ancient texts, as cited by the missionaries,
did not explicitly state the heresy charged by them. (Whatever the persuasiveness of this latter form of argument from negative evidence may have been in his own day, it cannot be given credence today because most of the "heresies" charged by the missionaries deal with metaphysical and/or theological issues which were not discussed in the ancient Chinese writings at all. There being no statements about prime matter in the classical texts, for example, it follows logically, but trivially, that there cannot be any statements in the classical texts which contradict Christian statements about prime matter.)

To anyone reading the Discourse from beginning to end it will be fairly clear that the work is not so much a treatise on philosophy per se, comparative or otherwise, as it is a sophisticated effort to provide an intellectual framework on behalf of the Riccian "accommodationist" position in the Rites Controversy so that the ecumenical movement could go forward and China could be brought more closely into the family of Christian nations. His Protestantism notwithstanding, Leibniz had a deep and abiding sympathy for the (majority) Jesuit position on the nature of Confucianism, shown consistently not only in the Discourse but in earlier writings as well: "In the Chinese controversy which is raging in Rome today, I favor the Jesuits and have for a long time. . . ." 31 In short, while the themes are often philosophically abstract, the overall tone of the Discourse is not basically philosophical; it is, in the broad sense, political.

But there are more positive indications in this work that Leibniz owed little to Chinese thought in regard to his own philosophical development. In the first instance, it is generally assumed that Leibniz not only had access to but read carefully early Chinese philosophical and religious texts, such as Father Couplet's Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (Paris, 1687). Perhaps so—because he had written De cultu Confucii civili in 170032—but there is no evidence for it in the Discourse; every single Chinese passage discussed by Leibniz is taken verbatim either from the text of Longobardi or Santa Maria. Indeed, no other sinological study is cited in the Discourse, although Leibniz regularly sprinkles his text with references to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, the Bible, Spinoza, and many other Western sources (some of which are also cited by Longobardi and/or Santa Maria).

Equally significant is the fact that Leibniz accepts in the Discourse without question every mistake made by Longobardi and Santa Maria with reference to Chinese names, places, dates, chronol-


ogy, or terms. Moreover, Leibniz regularly analyzes passages from the writings of the two missionaries in which Chinese terms figure prominently, in such a way as to suggest that because each missionary used a different system of Romanized transliteration for Chinese characters, he was unaware of when and where the two missionaries were discussing the same or different persons, places, things, or ideas. In summary, and somewhat surprisingly, there is not a single indication in the whole of the *Discourse* that Leibniz thought he knew enough about Chinese philosophy independently of what was contained in the *Religion Treatise* and the *Mission Treatise* to challenge either of their authors on any point of fact. We can find, in other words, no documentary evidence from the *Discourse* to show that Leibniz had, before reading Longobardi and Santa Maria, immersed himself studiously in works and/or translations dealing with Chinese thought—which reduces markedly the possibility that evidence will be forthcoming that he was influenced philosophically by it.

Not altogether tangentially, it is worth noting that however much in his later years Leibniz applauded the Chinese for their "precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals," it is clear that he believed that those precepts were not original with them; Leibniz's ecumenism was not purchased at the expense of European or Christian chauvinism. To appreciate this point it must be seen that in the *Discourse* (and elsewhere), Leibniz accords his highest praise for the Chinese not to Confucius but to the very shadowy Fu Hsi whom Leibniz believed to have ruled China ca. 3000 B.C. This legendary emperor is the purported inventor of the trigrams which comprise the basic structure of the *I Ching*, and he figured prominently in the correspondence between Leibniz and the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet, a contributor to the second edition of the *Novissima Sinica* and author of a number of letters to Leibniz from China in 1700-1703 (one of which described for the first time the now celebrated isomorphism between the *I Ching* hexagrams—two joined trigrams—and Leibniz's system of binary arithmetic). In one of his letters Bouvet described Fu Hsi as the "prince of all philosophers,"

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33 See the Introduction to the *Discourse*, 5-6 and 34-43.
34 Ibid., 5-6. In commenting on the *Discourse*, Paul Demiéville has come to a similar conclusion: "When it came to details, Leibniz did not understand much about Chinese philosophy and its history. He was too poorly informed." ["The First Philosophical Contacts between Europe and China," *Diogenes*, 58 (1967), 95.]
36 Introduction to the *Discourse*, 13-16. Several scholars have suggested that the isomorphism of his binary arithmetic and the hexagrams of the *I Ching* was discovered by Leibniz himself. Thus Lach, in "Leibniz and China," *op. cit.,* 446, says: "By his analysis of Fu Hsi's trigrams, Leibniz hoped to strengthen Father Bouvet's theory that the *I Ching* was a key to all the sciences." And E. R. Hughes in *The Great
but he then went on immediately to add that his commendation was not "an atrocious offense against Europe" because Fu Hsi was not Chinese at all; he was either Zoroaster, Hermes Trismigistus, or Enoch. Longobardi held a similar view, and so did Santa Maria who believed that the Chinese were descendants of Noah. Leibniz approvingly cites these related views in the Discourse:

And there are those who believe that because the beginnings of the Chinese empire occurred during the time of the Patriarchs, they could have learned about the creation of the world from them.37... There is a great likelihood that these [Chinese] expressions, so close to the great truths of our tradition, have come to the Chinese through the tradition of the ancient Patriarchs.38... Since, however, the Chinese have been fortunate enough to come by this wisdom without sufficient warrant for it, it may be that they learned part of it from the tradition of the Patriarchs.39

To recapitulate, the chronological evidence and an analysis of the Discourse together weigh heavily against any claim that Leibniz drew inspiration from Chinese thought in general, or from Neo-Confucianism in particular, in developing his own philosophical views. Chronologically, the available evidence shows no influence at all; the Discourse displays (a) a deep indebtedness to the Greeks and to Scholasticism, (b) a naivété with respect to Chinese history and thought, (c) many mistakes and misunderstandings about that history and thought, (d) a subdued but nevertheless clear Christian and Western bias—all of which seem to tilt the scales decisively against any East-to-West metaphysical influence.

But what of Leibniz's interest in the I Ching, especially the hexagrams which appeared to be conceptual analogues to his new mathematical notation? It is obvious that this interest was not due to any corroborative evidence the I Ching might provide for the efficacy of binary arithmetic. Unlike most endeavors in the physical and biological sciences, mathematical work is not in general logically established more firmly by having one's research replicated by others. Colleagues may check one's proofs with care and/or suggest notational variants, but neither the proofs nor the worth of proffered

Learning and the Mean-In-Action, op. cit., 20, notes: "The inference is that Leibniz owed his inspiration for his Arithmétique Binaire [to Bouvet]." The latter is simply anachronistic, and the former is also in error because Bouvet's letter to Leibniz of 4 November 1701 shows clearly that Leibniz provided the missionary with an outline of his binary system and that Bouvet provided the hypothesis of the isomorphism of it with the symbols of the I Ching. At times Leibniz acknowledges Bouvet's efforts in this regard, as in a paper published in 1703: "Explication de l'Arithmétique Binaire . . .," Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences, Année, 1703 . . . (Paris, 1705), 85-89.

37 Discourse, 94. 38 Ibid., 166. 39 Ibid., 197.
variants are enhanced by the fact that someone else arrived at them independently. Thus, Leibniz could not have felt vindicated, except psychologically, for proposing a notation of 0 and 1 for arithmetic operations by learning that the Chinese arrived at a similar conclusion forty-seven centuries earlier. The same is true about Leibniz's infinitesimal calculus with respect to the knowledge that Newton had developed essentially the same system shortly before.

When Leibniz learned about the isomorphism (up to a point) of his binary notation with *I Ching* hexagrams, it may well be that his excitement was less philosophical or scientific than it was political, for the discovery of the similarity could serve to advance his avowedly ecumenical ends. Such an interpretation comes from a consideration of that fourth section of the *Discourse* in which the isomorphism is discussed. The first three parts together make up more than ninetenths of the text, leading most readers to take the final segment as more or less an appendix to the work. However, this latter section can be seen in another way, as an essential ingredient of Leibniz's overall argument against the missionaries Longobardi and Santa Maria, which in turn illuminates his overall view of the nature, history, and development of Chinese thought, and of the way he hoped to convince both Chinese and Europeans that Confucian views were compatible with Christian doctrine.

Leibniz accepts, for the most part, the claims of Longobardi and Santa Maria that many educated Chinese of his own time were atheists, but, he insisted, these moderns have "strayed from their own antiquity." If we focus instead on the classical texts, he said, "I find them quite excellent, and quite in accord with natural theology... It is pure Christianity, insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts." To be sure, there are important theological issues on which the classical texts are silent, and even the most famous of Chinese philosophers, Confucius, is occasionally in error. But this only showed, Leibniz believed, that we have not gone back far enough in the relevant cases. If we would return to the era of Fu Hsi and the other sage-kings, "we could uncover in the Chinese writings of the remotest antiquity many things unknown to modern Chinese and even to those commentators thought to be classical." The *I Ching* is one such work, according to Leibniz, and if we read it carefully, we will uncover the fact that the "ancient Chinese have surpassed the modern ones in the extreme, not only in piety... but in science as well." "

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40 For the arguments which follow on Part IV of the *Discourse*, see *ibid.*, 34-38, from which they were taken.
The term "science" may seem odd here, but Leibniz surely intended it, and it is crucial for understanding why Part IV of the Discourse is not merely an appendix: "it concerns justification of the doctrines of the ancient Chinese and their superiority over the moderns." Leibniz acknowledged the theological weaknesses of modern Chinese thinkers, but he maintained that the ancient texts strongly suggested a natural theology consonant with Christianity and were thereby worthy of European respect. What better way to establish that respect than to show that the most ancient writers of those texts not only had theological ideas similar to Christian ideas but had also developed pure mathematics to a point which had only been reached in Europe during his own lifetime? Leibniz believed that while binary arithmetic was not his "universal characteristic," it was nevertheless a possible foundation for the natural sciences. If he could show, therefore, to post-Galilean Europe that his new notation had been prefigured 4700 years earlier in China, Leibniz would have a very strong case, founded on the principles of reason, for denying the conclusions of Fathers Longobardi and Santa Maria and for advancing his own view of the proper method for engaging the Chinese in ecumenical dialogue: show them the truth, but not simply by quoting from the Bible and giving them telescopes; show them also how both theological and scientific truth could be read in their own most ancient writings.

Seen in this light, the closing section of the Discourse can be read as an intellectual coup de grâce to the anti-accommodationist position with respect to China. The text breaks off abruptly, and although Leibniz continued to write for the remaining months of his life, he never returned to the work to finish it. The evidence suggests, however, that conceptually the manuscript was complete and that Leibniz had accomplished what he had set out to do: provide a sophisticated philosophical, historical, and theological framework in which the ecumenical movement and missionary work in China could go forward.

For all of these reasons the conclusion seems compelling that Needham and other scholars who have urged a Neo-Confucian influence on Leibniz's philosophy will not be borne out in their interpretations, the circumstantial evidence notwithstanding: materials thus far analyzed provide little warrant for such interpretations; on the contrary, they go some way toward establishing the originality of Leibniz's metaphysics of monads and pre-established harmony—with an occasional salute to Western antecedents such as Bruno's organic ideas. But this conclusion does not entail that China and Chinese

46 See also Merkel, Leibniz und die China-Mission, op. cit., 19.
thought did not influence Leibniz at all; the whole of a person’s views are not to be found in his or her metaphysics. The fact that Leibniz was interested in things Chinese for an extended period of time, and not merely for exotic or diversionary reasons, must be faced by serious Leibniz scholars; the bibliographic evidence indicates that he mentioned China more often in his writings than all other non-Western cultures put together. Why China? Why not Muslim culture(s) to which he refers on occasion? Or India? Or the Indians of the New World about whom books were being written and circulated in Europe while Leibniz was still a relatively young man?\(^{47}\)

To answer these questions, even in outline form, we must appreciate Leibniz’s geopolitical perception of China. He regularly called China an “Anti-Europe,” the antipodes which he sometimes also described as an “oriental Europe.”\(^{48}\) Between these two great centers of “human culture and refinement,” as he called them,\(^{49}\) all other cultures and systems of thought find their place, theologically as well as geographically. Leibniz came to believe that if he could successfully demonstrate to both the Chinese and the Europeans—at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum in so many ways—the close resemblances between their theological beliefs, then it would follow *a fortiori* that every other religious tradition, no matter how different from Christianity, would be amenable to the same consideration and thus increase the chances for universal understanding and peace. Furthermore, demonstrating the similarities between Chinese and Christian thought would be an excellent way to prepare the Chinese

\(^{47}\) The number of such books to which Leibniz had access is not known. David Mungello has compiled a bibliography of 71 books on China preserved in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek in Hanover which were available to the philosopher. How many he read is in question; only four contain his marginalia. (We are grateful to Dr. Mungello for sharing his bibliographical research with us.) Similarly, in “Leibniz and China,” *op. cit.*, 436, Lach says: “There were available to [Leibniz] in the libraries at Vienna, Hanover, Munich and Berlin a number of studies concerning China and eastern Asia, most of which were Jesuit letters and books concerning missionary enterprises.” But Lach does not specify which materials Leibniz actually read, or when; indeed, later on the same page he goes on to say: “From this analysis it is not to be assumed that Leibniz’s work on things Chinese was systematized. It was not.”


\(^{49}\) Lach, *Preface to the NOVISSIMA SINICA*, *op. cit.*, 68.
for conversion to Christianity, which Leibniz always proclaimed was the true religion for all peoples. At the same time he often cited this historic opportunity for "European piety" in order to make the public aware of the importance of a proper understanding of, and appreciation for, Chinese culture and thought.

As Merkel has pointed out, Leibniz consistently, in his correspondence, discusses "European piety" and the civilizing aspects of missions despite the fact that "the missionary idea in the awakening Pietistic movement . . . rested on a strictly Biblical and religious basis."50 But this idea does not condemn Leibniz to Europeocentrism because piety for him was not simply acceptance of revelation and/or surrender to God's will; rather the chief requirement for religion was a rational knowledge of the Divine Being since, in Leibniz's view, the knowledge of God and His perfections must be present before one could love Him. Merkel quotes Leibniz's optimistic ideas of civilization, proclaiming "science and true evangelical religion as twin sisters who must ever serve each other," and again, that "scientific enlightenment must bring even the heathen to the true Christian religion."51

But if, as Leibniz believed, the fundamental religious idea of God was a demonstrable truth grounded in reason, it would follow that those "heathen" who displayed the greatest employment of reason in their culture were eo ipso closer, or at least capable of being brought much closer, to the true Christian religion than those who did not. Again, Leibniz's interest in Fu Hsi is almost certainly less a function of the latter's stature as a pure mathematician than that the legendary ruler was a rational man who had attempted to pass down his legacy to later Chinese thinkers.52

To be sure, Leibniz admitted that "the Chinese are seen to be ignorant of that great light of the mind, the art of demonstration, and they have remained content with a sort of empirical geometry, which our artisans universally possess."53 But although they had not fully developed any laws of deduction, it was clear to Leibniz that the

50 "The Missionary Attitude of the Philosopher G. W. Leibniz," *International Review of Missions* (1920), 399. It has been suggested that Leibniz's piety was grounded in political rather than religious concerns. In *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), Lewis White Beck disputes this charge, saying: "There is no decisive reason to discount the constantly repeated strains of baroque piety in his letters and publications, as if they were merely expressions of his diplomatic and not his religious make-up" (240).


52 See fn. 37 above, and also Hans Zacher, *Die Hauptschriften zur Dyadik von Leibniz* (Frankfurt, 1973), 116ff.

Chinese regularly employed reason: "Who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our own view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life?"\(^5^4\) Similarly, Leibniz's long-term interest in Chinese technology suggests an appreciation for, if not a full understanding of, the rational philosophical framework of the culture which had produced that technology.

In sum, it seems plausible to maintain that the civilization of China—not merely its size, population, location, specific inventions, or philosophy—had a significant impact on Leibniz because it displayed a very high level of rationality, making the rational Chinese people the most likely non-Christian candidates for true Christian conversion without any missionary compromises with irrational paganism or barbarism, nor even a reliance on Revelation. His seriousness of purpose in this regard is illustrated in a letter written to the Russian Tsar Peter shortly before Leibniz died. If we do not actively promote understanding, exchange and communication between the Chinese and ourselves, he said, "it will follow that when the Chinese will have learnt from us what they wish to know they will then close their doors to us."\(^5^5\)

The prophetic nature of this remark underscores the way in which Leibniz's studies of China should be seen: not as philosophically seminal but as the sustained efforts of a gifted man to keep a Western foot in the door, to open the door wider, and then, perhaps, in concert with the Chinese themselves, to tear down the door altogether. Two and a half centuries of hindsight allow us to see that Leibniz did not transcend his own cultural heritage as much as he may have thought he did, but the list of major Western thinkers who have done better, or tried harder, is a very short list indeed.\(^5^6\)

Brooklyn College, CUNY (D. J. Cook) and St. Mary's College of Maryland (H. Rosemont, Jr.).

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{55}\) Philip P. Wiener, Leibniz: Selections (New York, 1951), 598.

\(^{56}\) Portions of this paper were read by Cook at the Third International Leibniz Congress at Hanover (1977); drafts were read by Rosemont at the Columbia University Seminar on Oriental Thought and Religion (1978) and at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London (1979). We are grateful to the participants for their comments and encouragement.