

BOOK REVIEW

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Briefe über China (1694-1716): Die Korrespondenz mit Barthélemy Des Bosses S.J. und anderen Mitgliedern des Ordens. Edited by Rita Widmaier and Malte-Ludolf Babin. Hamburg: Meiner, 2017. Pp. 660. Hardback EUR 148.00, ISBN 978-3-7873-3102-4.



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1. Introduction

Rita Widmaier and Malte-Ludolf Babin have done a valuable scholarly service for studies of the early modern European reception of China in collecting letters from Leibniz's extensive correspondence concerning China and translating them from the original Latin and French into German. This multi-lingual and chronologically organized edition gathers letters to and from Leibniz as well as supplementary texts composed between the years 1694 and 1716. It incorporates helpful clarificatory notes as well as an informative and lucid introduction.

This edition focuses on the exchanges between Leibniz and the Jesuit theologian and philosopher Barthélemy Des Bosses S.J. (1668-1738) and other Jesuits in Europe who were in contact with their colleagues in Asia.¹ Leibniz's two primary interlocutors in this volume are Des Bosses (selections from forty-seven documents are included) and the Bavarian Jesuit philosopher and theologian Ferdinand Orban S.J. (1655-1732) (twenty-seven letters). Des Bosses and Orban function as significant figures in the European transmission of information about China. Leibniz's less frequent direct correspondents included here are Theobald Isensehe S.J., Giovanni Battista Tolomei S.J., and René-Joseph de Tournemine S.J.

This volume should be considered a second in a series. It expands on Rita Widmaier's previous 2006 volume of Leibniz's correspondence regarding China, *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689-1714)*, that primarily concerns the period until 1707.² It testifies to the continuing importance of China in Leibniz's thought that in this new volume only the first nine letters were composed prior to 1708. The subsequent ninety-nine documents are dated between 1708 and, the year of Leibniz's death, 1716. These two volumes together provide the core of Leibniz's exchanges concerning Chinese philosophy, politics, religion, science, technology as well as reports on and controversies over Christian missionary activities in China. They are not limited to letters to and from Leibniz. There are, in addition, useful supplementary

materials such as missionary reports and reports on the Chinese rites controversy that were discussed in the original correspondence. Copies of letters and reports from China as well as Leibniz's own writings about China were circulated among European intellectual networks through which the development of the early modern European reception of China can be traced.

It is challenging to encapsulate the entire correspondence in a book review. This review will consequently outline a few of its major threads.

2. Leibniz and Intercultural Philosophy

There is an on-going intensification of interest in non-Western philosophy in the West and an intercultural turn in how—at least some—philosophers are practicing philosophy. There is furthermore a reevaluation of ethnocentric and anti-ethnocentric tendencies within the history of modern Western philosophy that offers an alternative understanding of its movements and figures. Leibniz has been seen as a crucial figure in this history not only due to his prestige as a philosopher and his evident enthusiasm for China but due to his sustained endeavors during the last decades of his life to sincerely engage with and interpret Chinese discourses and practices. The extent of Leibniz's interest and engagement is remarkable given that he never left Europe and did not know the Chinese language: one thread in the correspondence concerns his efforts to figure out the titles and contents of sixteen Chinese books that Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), his earlier and most significant interlocutor in China, had sent to him.³ Leibniz articulated the need for an “exchange of light” between Europe and China. Leibniz's efforts in this regard might appear to offer an exemplary instance of East-West philosophical interaction given the subsequent history of indifference and outright hostility that characterizes modern Western philosophy's relations with non-Western intellectual discourses.

There are, however, difficulties, and two potential conflicting extremes in interpreting Leibniz's discourse on China: one extreme would be to overly idealize this engagement according to recent aspirations and norms. The correspondence discloses how noteworthy Leibniz's engagement is as well as its limitations and problems. Despite the openness and tolerance of Leibniz's interpretive practice, it would be anachronistic to construe Leibniz's reflections on China from the perspective of contemporary secular multiculturalism. The other extreme would be to deny that it is a genuine encounter at all, pointing to Leibniz's reliance on the Christian missionary context that informs his correspondence and writings, and what has been argued is a proto-capitalist and proto-colonial model of exchange between East and West.⁴ The former point would place Leibniz's uses of Christianity in question and the latter would emphasize the practical interests evident in his attention to learning Chinese techniques and technologies. This practical interest is manifest throughout the correspondence. A list of fifty practical and technical questions for Leibniz on how Europe could gain useful practices and technologies from China,

encompassing Chinese practical knowledge of medicine, chemistry, production, and trade, is included as an appendix.⁵ In addition, there is the anxiety reflected in a number of letters concerning the rites controversy that the Chinese will find nothing of value in exchange with Europe and, if Jesuit strategies of accommodation are forsaken, China would exclude Europeans. As a result, they would have accessed European science and technology without Europe gaining access to Chinese science and technology.

Leibniz's correspondence reveals a more complex picture. First, Leibniz interprets Christianity as natural theology and as the ethics of charity, which as "natural" the Chinese have more greatly perfected than the Europeans. Second, his interest in exchange between Europe and China and learning from Chinese morality and practical knowledge, and the anxiety about losing this possibility, indicate how Europe is not yet asymmetrically positioned above China as would increasingly be done in Western discourses. Indeed, Leibniz advocated inviting Chinese missionaries to Europe to teach practical philosophy and hiring Chinese intellectuals to open schools in Europe to teach Chinese language and intellectual culture. If we compare Leibniz's discussions of China with those of Kant or Hegel a century later, it is clear that the European perception of China had been radically altered for the worse. Reason and philosophy are exclusively part of the history of the West as Chinese civilization is judged to be primitive and inferior.

3. Leibniz's Interpretation of China

Leibniz published the *Novissima Sinica (The Latest from China)* in 1697. It is a collection of documents from Christian missionaries in China with his own preface that praised Chinese moral and political thought, practice, and institutions (pp. 3-35). Leibniz recurrently expresses admiration for a great empire at the other end of the Euro-Asian continent that is superior to Europe in a number of ways, including ethical-political organization, pedagogy for ethical-political life, natural theology, and practical philosophy.⁶ Chinese forms of life and thought indicate models from which Europeans should learn and adopt in order to improve and reform their practices and institutions. China is not deemed an inferior land to be exploited and dominated by the West and its intellectual traditions are not categorized as merely proto-philosophical in the writings and correspondence of Leibniz. China surpasses Europe in a number of areas (natural theology, practical philosophy, and the organization of moral and political life) just as Europe surpasses China in other areas (revealed theology, theoretical philosophy, and mathematics and science).

Leibniz identifies in particular the legendary cultural hero Emperor Fuxi 伏羲 and Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) as the founders of philosophy in China. He attributed to Fuxi a mathematical wisdom because of his association with the development of the trigrams (*gua* 卦) of the *Classic of Changes (Yijing 易經)*. Leibniz went beyond Bouvet and figurist speculations about the *Yijing*. He

contends in letters from 1703 and 1705 (pp. 48-61), and in his remarks from August 1709 (pp. 120-123), that the *Yijing's* broken and unbroken lines indicate a binary mathematics of 0 and 1. In addition to its theoretical mathematical nature, it also expresses a monotheistic natural theology as the broken (- -) and unbroken (—) lines represent the nothing (0), God (1), and their combination the creation of the myriad things out of nothingness. The three great law-givers (*Legislatores*) recognized by the Chinese are Confucius, Fo (the Buddha), and Laozi (pp. 112-113). Of these three, he only addresses Confucian teachings as promoting a high noble ethics and a natural theology that parallel ancient Hebrew religious and Greco-Roman philosophical teachings (pp. 116-119).

Natural theology is religious truth demonstrated by the natural use of reason in contrast to revealed theology based on scripture and faith. It plays a crucial role in Leibniz's ethics and his efforts at reconciling divergent and opposing teachings, allowing him to simultaneously liberalize Christianity, separating its fundamental ethics of charity from a determinate form of revealed faith with specific religious practices, and recognize truth in other Western and non-Western forms of religious and philosophical discourse. It is in this sense of natural theology that he claims the following two points: the ancient Chinese are closer to the truth than the ancient Greeks (pp. 372-373), a statement that presupposes his projective interpretation of creation from nothing in Fuxi; and the Chinese practice the highest ethical teachings of Christianity and are more Christian than Christian Europe in the *Novissima* (pp. 6-7) and his unfinished late work *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (*Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois*, 1715-1716).⁷

Leibniz did not carefully distinguish between ancient Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophies, construing the supreme ultimate (*taiji* 太極), patterning principle (*li* 理), and material force (*qi* 氣) as fundamental Confucian notions of great antiquity that signify—in his Platonic Trinitarian interpretation adopted from the Jesuit missionary Nicolò Longobardo (1559-1654)—the original potency, wisdom, and will/love. The Chinese engaged in philosophical reasoning about nature and ethics although not in a fixed systematic scientific form (pp. 118-119). Leibniz's interpretation of neo-Confucian metaphysics would be more systematically developed in the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*.

The concept of the scientific systematic nature of philosophy would be employed by the time of Kant and Hegel to exclude non-Western intellectual discourses from philosophy. It is not yet the case that the West is identified with modernity in a way that separates it from the other cultures of the world. Nor is it conceived at this point as a one-way street in which the West exclusively developed it and imposed it on the world. Returning to Leibniz challenges such interpretations. China offers for Leibniz (as for other early Enlightenment thinkers such as Christian Wolff, the French physiocrats, and Voltaire) models for furthering European Enlightenment and accordingly modernization, if we

adopt the idea that there is an inherent connection between Enlightenment and modernity.⁸

4. Leibniz and the Chinese Rites Controversy

Leibniz's correspondence with the Jesuits occurs within the context of what was perceived as the greatest Christian mission since the time of the apostles and the so-called "Chinese Rites Controversy" between the Jesuits who upheld an "accommodationist" strategy between Christianity and Chinese culture and other missionary orders who opposed adapting Christianity to the Chinese way of life that they considered pagan and barbaric.⁹ The principal areas of contention centered on questions of whether: (1) converted Chinese could continue to practice honoring their ancestors or if this was a form of superstitious pagan worship, (2) the cult of Confucius was a religious or civil one, and (3) Chinese expressions such as *Shangdi* 上帝 (God on high) and *tian* 天 (heaven) were adequate to express the monotheistic Judeo-Christian conception of God.

The correspondence centers on the challenges to and prohibition of the Jesuit position of accommodation by Pope Clement XI, a prohibition that was only lifted by the Roman Catholic Church in 1939. Important supplemental texts are included that were discussed by Leibniz and his interlocutors: (1) a document clarifying Pope Clement XI's decree against the Chinese rites on 20. November 1704 that was forwarded to the Chinese mission (pp. 88-89), (2) the responding proclamation of the Kangxi Emperor (康熙, 1654-1722) that banned Christian missionary activities in China (pp. 128-131), (3) the papal decree issued by Pope Clement XI on 25. September 1710 that forbade the practice and toleration of the "Chinese rites" as well as forbidding further discussion of the issue (pp. 190-197).

Leibniz intervened as an advocate of tolerance and the principle of charity in these disputed questions throughout his correspondence and in writings such as "Circa Sinensium cultum religionemque" ("On the Cult and Religion of the Chinese") (pp. 110-123), an essay from August 1709 shared with Des Bosses, and later in the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*.¹⁰

Leibniz, relying on Jesuit and their Neo-Confucian sources, could argue: (1) honoring one's ancestors was understood in Confucianism as ethically formative rather than a superstitious worship of spirits involving rewards; (2) the cult of Confucius was primarily a civil and philosophical one aimed at moral education; and (3) different uses of words such as *Shangdi* and *tian* need to be distinguished, just as this is the case in Europe where heaven can refer to either the physical sky or the divine. There was nothing intrinsically wrong in Chinese ethics and religion that could not be brought in accord with true Christianity, which is in essence the practice of justice as "the charity of the wise, that is, universal benevolence" (*iustitia est caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis*).¹¹

5. Conclusion

Contemporary readers can engage Widmaier's and Babin's edition of *Briefe über China (1694-1716)* in a number of ways. Leibniz's interpretation of China is a significant example and test case for his hermeneutics, ethics, and philosophy of religion. It is also a noteworthy historical exemplar of East-West philosophizing. It is also of interest to trace the early modern transfer of knowledge from China and the formation of imaginaries of China and the Orient in the Western mind.

In Leibniz's correspondence, we can recognize the historical limitations of Leibniz's understanding of the Chinese world as well as how extraordinary this episode in the entangled history of East-West intellectual history continues to be as an attempt of a philosopher to grasp with curiosity and open-mindedness a distant and unfamiliar philosophical culture.

1 - The correspondence between Leibniz and Des Bosses is available in English translation in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

2 - Rita Widmaier, *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689-1714)* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2006).

3 - Leibniz to Des Bosses, 4. August 1710, pp. 184-185.

4 - A Marxist critique of Leibniz along such lines can be found in Jon Elster, *Leibniz et la formation de l'esprit capitaliste* (Paris: AubierMontaigne, 1975).

5 - See Heinrich Christian Kortholt für Leibniz: Fünfzig Fragen und Hinweise, wie Europa aus Asien Nutzen ziehen kann (Heinrich Christian Kortholt für Leibniz: fifty questions and indications on how Europe can benefit from Asia), pp. 398-409.

6 - For an overview and analysis of Leibniz's interpretation of China, see Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

7 - Available in English in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Writings on China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994).

8 - On Leibniz and the Enlightenment debate over China, see Simon Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Eric S. Nelson, "Leibniz and China: Religion, Hermeneutics, and Enlightenment," *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment (RAE)* 1 (2009): 277-300; Dawid Rogacz, "The Birth of Enlightenment Secularism from the Spirit of Confucianism," *Asian Philosophy* 28,1 (2018): 68-83.

9 - See "Vorrede zu den *Novissima Sinica* [1697/99]," pp. 34-35. On the Jesuits in China and the Chinese Rites Controversy, see David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989)

10 - Both texts are available in English in Leibniz, *Writings on China*.

11 - Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Political Writings*, edited by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 164. Compare Leibniz, *Writings on China*, p. 104.