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China, Social Ethics and the European Enlightenment

Stewart J. Brown

Abstract:

This chapter recognises Professor Stanley's global perspectives and pathbreaking work on the Enlightenment and missions by offering an account of Chinese influences in the making of the European Enlightenment. Europe's growing awareness of Chinese moral thought and culture, as conveyed through the translations and commentaries of the Jesuit missionaries, played a significant role in shaping the European Enlightenment. Many early modern thinkers came to admire China as an ancient, orderly, stable and humane society, but with a social ethic that had developed independently of Christian influence. For centuries, Europeans had believed that Christianity formed the only truly sound basis for individual and social morality. But the growing European knowledge about China's ancient culture suggested there were other possibilities and this helped to open up new religious and ethical perspectives, including an appreciation for other world faiths and for what world religions shared in common. Some European thinkers became convinced that China's ancient social ethics could provide a model for Europe, a notion that profoundly influenced the emerging European Enlightenment. The chapter explores China and the European Enlightenment with particular attention to recent scholarly interpretations of the mainstream religious Enlightenment – a religious Enlightenment which, as Professor Stanley has shown, would have an important role in shaping the nineteenth-century Christian mission movement.

In 2001, Brian Stanley edited a ground-breaking volume, *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*, in which he and a team of authors explored the role of the European Enlightenment in shaping the modern Protestant mission movement.¹ While many had viewed the modern mission movement and larger evangelical movement as a reaction against the Enlightenment, Stanley's edited volume demonstrated the close congruence between Christian missions and Enlightenment thought. As Stanley maintained in the introduction, 'the Protestant missionary movement cannot be understood' apart from the 'intellectual milieu' in which it emerged, and 'this milieu was essentially one formed by the intellectual contours of the Enlightenment'. These 'intellectual contours' included a confidence in the power of individual human reason, an optimism about the capacity of

¹ Brian Stanley, ed., *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

humanity for justice and morality, and a ‘tendency to assert the *intrinsic* unity and equality of all humanity’.² As Stanley recognised, the European Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included a cosmopolitanism, rooted in a growing awareness of other world cultures, and an interest in their religious beliefs and ethical systems. Stanley’s volume was a seminal contribution to what has become a growing scholarly interest in the role of both religion and global perspectives in the European Enlightenment.

As scholars have long been aware, early modern Europe’s growing knowledge about China, and especially of Confucian and neo-Confucian ethical writings, had a significant influence on the European Enlightenment. A number of leading thinkers of the Enlightenment learned to admire China as an ancient, orderly, stable and humane society, but with a social ethic that had developed independently of Christian influence. Some European thinkers became convinced that China’s ancient social ethics could provide a model for Europe, and this belief that Europe could learn from Chinese moral philosophy had a profound influence on the European Enlightenment. For the historian, Arnold Rowbotham, China was a ‘laboratory for the philosopher’, and ‘any discussion of the thought of the Enlightenment must, therefore, of necessity consider the literary and cultural contacts between this great Oriental country and the West’.³ According to the intellectual historian, Jonathan Israel, China represented ‘a philosophical thought experiment’ for the ‘enlightened philosopher, enabling [them] to determine how far unaided reason can attain valid moral concepts without revelation’.⁴ One German intellectual historian went so far as

² Brian Stanley, ‘Christian Missions and the Enlightenment: A Reevaluation’, in *Ibid.*, 4, 8, 11.

³ A. H. Rowbotham, ‘Jesuit Figurists and Eighteenth-Century Religious Thought’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17 (1956): 471.

⁴ J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 655.

to describe Confucius as ‘the patron saint of eighteenth-century [European] Enlightenment’.⁵ This essay will explore the vital influence of China, and especially Chinese moral philosophy, in shaping the moral and religious thought of the European Enlightenment, and thus in contributing to the milieu that Stanley identified as forming the modern missionary movement.

China and the Beginnings of the European Enlightenment

A sustained European awareness of Chinese culture began with the Jesuit missionaries who had begun working in China from the end of the sixteenth century. As part of their effort to convert the people of China to Catholic Christianity, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and his followers – including Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628), Alvaro Semedo (1586-1658), Gabriel de Magalhaes (1610-1677), and Martino Martini (1614-1661) – embraced a policy of ‘accommodation’, endeavouring to adapt Christianity to Chinese culture as part of their strategy for converting the Chinese people.⁶ The Jesuit missionaries arrived in China with no intention of ever leaving; unless recalled to Europe to promote or defend the mission, they remained in China for the remainder of their lives. They adopted Chinese dress and customs, and some, most famously Ricci, developed close connections with the imperial court. A learned order, the Jesuits were drawn to the Chinese literati class, and they focused their studies on the Confucianism of the literati. To enhance their understanding of Chinese culture and assist in instructing new recruits for the China

⁵ A. Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*, translated by J. C. Powell (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1925), 77.

⁶ D. E. Mungelo, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985).

mission, Jesuits began translating ancient Confucian texts into Latin.⁷ Through this translation and editing work, Jesuit missionaries became convinced that the ancient Confucian texts represented a form of natural religion, which included a perception of the one true God, a sense of the pre-ordained harmony of the universe, and a profound understanding of social virtues, including social responsibilities to others. These Confucian teachings were seen as compatible with Christianity. Indeed, the Jesuits believed, it would be possible to build upon Confucian natural religion in order to shape an East-West, Confucian-Christian synthesis that would form the basis for a vibrant Chinese Christianity. In their translations of and commentaries on the Confucian texts, to be sure, the Jesuits simplified the ancient and sophisticated Confucian teachings. While they took some interest in the later influence of Daoism and Buddhism on Confucian thought, they tended to view Buddhist and Taoist influences as corruptions of the ancient Confucian teachings.⁸ They created a version of Confucianism that fit their own purposes and they exaggerated its practical social influence in China. None the less, their translations of the Confucian texts were often highly accurate and through these translations they introduced the Confucian teachings to educated Europeans.

Jesuit translations of the Confucian texts began to be published in Europe from 1593, with the first significant translation, *Sapientia Sinica* (Wisdom from China) appearing in 1662.⁹ A highly influential collection of Jesuit translations was published in 1687 in Paris, under the title of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Confucius the Philosopher of China). This

⁷ A. C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 142-54.

⁸ Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 146-7.

⁹ For the history of the early Jesuit translations, see David E. Mungello, 'The Seventeenth-Century Jesuit Translation Project of the Confucian Four Books', in Charles E. Ronan and Bonnie B.C. Oh (eds.), *East Meets West: The Jesuits in China* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988), 252-72.

was the work of seventeen Jesuit scholars assisted by several Chinese co-workers, and it was edited by the Flemish Jesuit, Philippe Couplet (1623-1693). The volume consisted of a lengthy introductory essay on Chinese culture; translations, with commentaries, of three of the Confucian Four Books; a short biography of Confucius; and a chronology of Chinese history.¹⁰ Another collection, with three additional translated Confucian texts, was edited by the Jesuit François Noël (1651-1729) and appeared in 1711 in Prague, under the title, *Sinensis imperii libri classici sex* (Six Classic Books of the Chinese Empire). A further enlarged collection of Confucian texts, edited with a commentary by the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, was published in four volumes in 1735 and was viewed as the most credible eighteenth-century source on China.¹¹ In their translations and commentaries, the Jesuits promoted the view that Confucius had been the leader of a religious movement, and had worked to restore and preserve ancient religious beliefs, in a manner similar to the ancient Hebrew prophets in the Christian Bible.¹² The publication of these Chinese texts aroused considerable interest in Europe. For many, they provided convincing evidence of a harmonious Chinese social order of great antiquity. Educated Europeans found much to admire in the Confucian ethical teachings, including the ideal of service to family, community and state; the insistence on the humane and compassionate treatment of others; the practice of virtue for its own sake (rather than for hope of reward in a future life); and the belief that state functionaries should be motivated by the highest moral and

¹⁰ Mungelo, *Curious Land*, 247-99.

¹¹ Ashley Eva Millar, *A Singular Case: Debating China's Political Economy in the European Enlightenment* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 45-6.

¹² Rowbotham, 'The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth Century Europe', *Far Eastern Quarterly* 4 (1945): 227-8.

philosophical principles. At the end of the seventeenth century, a third of all literature published in France dealt with China.¹³

Some late seventeenth-century European thinkers, among them Isaac Vossius, Charles de Saint-Évremond, and the English philosopher and diplomat, Sir William Temple (three friends who had lived for a time in close proximity in The Hague), became convinced that ancient China had been a utopia, led by wise and virtuous philosopher-kings, who had ruled, under the guidance of learned Confucian literati, for the benefit of their people.¹⁴ These Europeans viewed ancient China as a highly developed civilisation, similar to ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. However, unlike those other ancient civilisations, China remained a living, vigorous culture.¹⁵ The Chinese imperial state was, as European observers were aware, expanding; Qing China would double the size of its territory between 1660 and 1760.¹⁶ The enduring vibrancy of imperial China was rooted in its Confucian philosophy and social ethics. For William Temple, China's Confucian literati 'adore the spirit of the world, which they hold to be eternal; and this without temples, idols, or priests'.¹⁷ The veneration of Chinese philosophy was paralleled by the growing European trade with China and the high demand for Chinese fine manufactures, including printed silk fabrics, porcelain vases and figurines, bronze ornaments, lacquered furnishings, wood carvings, and painted screens and wall hangings. China was admired, even idealised, and Chinese artefacts, tea, and gardens became highly 'fashionable' in Europe.

¹³ Millar, *Singular Case*, 43.

¹⁴ A. H. Rowbotham, 'The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth Century Europe', 224-42; W. W. Davis, 'China, the Confucian Ideal, and the European Age of Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 523-35; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 640-52; D. E. Mungelo, *The Great Encounter of China and the West 1500-1800* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 59-74.

¹⁵ F. Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23.

¹⁶ Millar, *Singular Case*, 112.

¹⁷ Sir William Temple, 'Of Heroic Virtue', *Miscellanies, In Four Essays* (Glasgow: Robert Urie, 1761), 143.

There was another aspect to this late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century 'China vogue'. As noted above, China was respected as an ancient civilisation. Jesuit histories, among them Father Martino Martini's *Sinicae historiae decas prima* (Chinese History Part One) of 1658, portrayed China as having a continuous history dating from the reign of Fu Xi in 2952 BCE. European scholars developed great respect for the accuracy of the Chinese historical records – perhaps too great a respect. Accepting Martini's chronology, they became profoundly impressed with the antiquity of the Chinese imperial state. These Chinese historical records, however, raised a problem: how did ancient China fit into the historical record of the world revealed by God in the Bible? According to the Vulgate version of the Scriptures, which was officially sanctioned by the Catholic Church, and James Ussher's chronology based on the Vulgate, published in 1654, the world had been created in 4004 BCE, and all human life, with the exception of Noah and his family who had found refuge on the ark, was destroyed in a universal flood that occurred 1,656 years after the world's creation, or in 2348 or 2349 BCE. Yet the Chinese records indicated that the Chinese state had a continuous history beginning some 600 years before the universal flood. Some European scholars found a solution to the problem in the Septuagint version of Scriptures; the Septuagint, they maintained, dated Creation in about 5200 BCE and portrayed the flood as occurring in 2957 BCE, or a few years before the establishment of the Chinese state.¹⁸ Other European scholars, including the polymath German Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kirchner (1602-1680) in his *China monumentis qua sacris qua profanes* (Chinese Records Sacred and Profane) of 1667, argued that ancient China had been settled by Egyptians after the great flood, and Kirchner and his followers claimed to see similarities

¹⁸ E. S. Van Kley, 'Europe's Discovery of China and the Writing of World History', *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 358-72; Mungello, *Curious Land*, 124-32.

between Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters.¹⁹ The English clergyman, Samuel Shuckford, maintained that after the flood, Noah's ark had landed on a mountain on the western frontier of China and that the Chinese people were all descendants of one of Noah's sons.²⁰

However, some more radical thinkers, including the Dutch humanist, Isaac Vossius, a great admirer of the Chinese historical records, found such explanations unconvincing. Vossius noted that there was no mention of China in the Bible. By the 1650s, he was arguing that the very existence of China's ancient civilisation served to undermine the Bible's authority as a history of the world.²¹ The accuracy of the biblical treatment of the natural universe was already being challenged by new discoveries in Western natural philosophy – for example, by the Copernican view that removed the earth from the centre of the universe. Now, knowledge about China raised doubts about the truth of a Near East-centred Scriptural history. These controversies concerning China's place in the biblical chronology played an important part in the growth of critical biblical scholarship from about 1650.

Confucian Thought as Natural Religion

The Jesuit missionary policy in China of accommodation, with its mission strategy of adapting Christianity to Chinese culture, contributed in the late seventeenth century to a major theological debate within the Catholic Church, one which captured the interest of

¹⁹ Mungelo, *Curious Land*, 134-57, 177-79.

²⁰ R. Shackleton, 'Asia as Seen by the French Enlightenment', in R. Iyer, ed., *The Glass Curtain between Asia and Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 183.

²¹ E. J. Van Kley, 'Europe's "Discovery" of China and the Writing of World History', *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 358-85; T. Weststeijn, 'Spinoza sinicus: An Asian Paragraph in the History of the Radical Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 537-48; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 640-41; R. Shackleton, 'Asia as Seen by the French Enlightenment', 183-4.

educated people across Europe. This was the Rites Controversy, focusing on the question of whether certain Chinese rituals venerating the ancestors and Confucius were forms of religious worship and therefore idolatrous in the view of the Church. For Jesuits, the rites in question were cultural ceremonies or social conventions, in which Chinese Christians should be permitted to engage. For their opponents, including members of the Franciscan and Dominican orders, the rites were forms of ancestor worship and idolatry in which Christians must not participate. A related question was whether the Chinese had a conception of God, as expressed in the Chinese terms *Shangdi* (Lord-on-high) or *Tian* (Heaven). For Jesuits, the Confucian tradition included a conception of the true God, which the ancient Chinese had discerned through the light of reason. For opponents of the Jesuits, the Chinese were atheists, as well as idolators, and the Jesuit mission strategy of accommodation was not only misguided, but fundamentally irreligious.

By the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Europeans were also becoming increasingly troubled over the existence of an ancient, reasonably stable Chinese civilisation, which had developed and flourished apparently without any knowledge of Christian revelation. Could it really be the case, as some maintained, that China had no connection to the God of the Bible? One group of Jesuit missionaries, including Joseph-Henri Prémare, Joachim Bouvet, and Jean-François Foucquet, developed an innovative response to the problem. For them, China had not been untouched by divine revelation. Rather, they argued, Confucianism was an expression of the *prisca theologia*, or Ancient Theology, a body of ethical teachings which had been revealed by God to all humankind through an Ancient Lawgiver, known in the Hebrew tradition as Enoch or Hannoch, and in Chinese tradition as Fu Xi, at the dawn of history. In China, much of this Ancient Theology had become lost or corrupted, but not all. Confucius had worked to recover vestiges of the

original revelation and thus Confucianism contained many aspects of the divine truth and moral law that had their purest expressions in Christianity. Bouvet and his supporters, who became known as 'Figurists', searched through the Confucian texts for images or expressions that contained fragments of the Ancient Theology. Because they shared a common origin with the Bible, the Confucian texts, which predated the birth of Jesus Christ, contained anticipations of later Christian teachings.²² These included Christ's 'golden rule' that we should behave to others as we would want them to behave towards us, a precept also expressed in the Confucian *Analects*. For many Jesuits, the teachings of Confucius offered the prospect of discovering the ancient roots of a universal religion that might unite the peoples of the world in a common faith and moral values. The German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher had argued as early as 1652 that Confucianism was a branch of the 'one primeval religion' that had once united all humankind, and might do so again.²³

A prominent promoter of the view of Confucianism as an expression of universal natural religion was the German Lutheran philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), arguably the most innovative and wide-ranging thinker of the early Enlightenment.²⁴ Attracted by the notion that China could provide a key to world unity and harmony, Leibniz corresponded with leading Jesuit scholars of Confucianism from 1670, especially the Italian Jesuit missionary, Claude Philip Grimaldi. Leibniz was the only leading Protestant philosopher to support the Jesuit view of China during the Rites

²² Rowbotham, 'Jesuit Figurists and Eighteenth-Century Religious Thought'; Mungelo, *Curious Land*, 300-19; J. W. Witek, *Controversial Ideas in China and Europe: A Biography of Jean-François Fouquet, S.J. (1665-1741)* (Rome: Institutum Historicum, 1982), 144, 148-59.

²³ Weststeijn, '*Spinoza sinicus*', 550-5.

²⁴ There is a rich literature on Leibniz's engagement with China. See D. F. Lach, 'Leibniz and China', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6 (1945), 436-55; D. E. Mungelo, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977); D. J. Cook and H. Rosemont, Jr., 'The Pre-Established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (1981): 253-67; F. Perkins, 'Virtue, Reason and Cultural Exchange: Leibniz's Praise of Chinese Morality', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 447-64; Perkins, *Leibniz and China*.

Controversy.²⁵ Leibniz began a serious study of Chinese history and culture from 1689, developing an impressive knowledge of the Jesuit translations of Confucian texts.²⁶ He advocated close cultural connections between Europe and China, believing that the two civilisations, at opposite ends of the great Eurasian land mass, had much to contribute to one another, and to the world. In a letter to a Jesuit scholar of Chinese civilisation, in December 1697, Leibniz described the Jesuit mission to China as ‘the greatest affair of our time’ promising immense benefit ‘among us as well as among the Chinese’. ‘For this’, he continued, ‘is a commerce of light, which could give us at once their work of thousands of years and render ours to them’.²⁷

In the preface to his book on China, the *Novissima Sinica* (News from China) of 1697, Leibniz praised Chinese social ethics. The Chinese possessed, he insisted, an intuitive moral sense and an understanding of the one true God, rooted in a natural religion revealed to them through reason and ‘expressed through Confucian and other values’.²⁸ China’s social morality, he further argued, was in some respects superior to that of the Europeans. To be sure, Leibniz had no doubt that Europe’s Christianity was intrinsically a superior religion, based as it was on direct divine revelation; but he also believed that Europe’s Christianity had become corrupted by its sectarian divisions and religious warfare, and that Europeans now largely neglected the Christian social teachings. As a result, he argued, the Chinese now ‘surpass us ... in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals’. ‘Indeed’, he added, ‘it is difficult to describe

²⁵ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 654.

²⁶ Julia Ching and W. G. Oxtoby, eds., *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China* (Nettetal: Steyler, 1992), 23-6; Cook and Rosemont, Jr., ‘The Pre-Established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought’, 256-8; Leibniz’s works relating to China, see G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on China*, trans. and ed. by D. Cook and H. Rosemont, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994).

²⁷ Quoted in Perkins, *Leibniz and China*, 42.

²⁸ J. D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 85.

how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquillity and the establishment of social order.’²⁹ Leibniz highlighted what he viewed as the most important elements of Chinese social ethics, including family devotion, mutual respect among social equals, an established set of social duties, politeness and good manners, calmness, neighbourliness and respect for customs. It was clear to him that Europe not only needed to study the natural religion and moral philosophy of the Chinese, but that it was in need of missionaries from China. ‘Certainly’, he wrote, ‘the condition of our affairs, slipping as we are into ever greater corruption, seems to be such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion’.³⁰ In one of his last works, the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716), Leibniz argued that the ancient Chinese philosophers, including Confucius, had developed a highly sophisticated set of beliefs about God, the immortality of the human soul, and rewards and punishments in an afterlife.³¹

Leibniz’s admiration for China’s natural religion was shared by later leading figures of the European Enlightenment, most notably the French deist *philosophe*, François-Marie Arouet, or Voltaire (1694-1778).³² Educated by the Jesuits, Voltaire was well read in the Jesuit literature on China, and while he rejected Jesuit views on the Church, he largely accepted the Jesuits’ positive views of Chinese civilisation. Impressed by the antiquity of the Chinese imperial state, Voltaire maintained that the Chinese emperors were hard-working civil servants and philosopher-kings, whose greatest concern was the well-being of the

²⁹ G. W. Leibniz, Preface to the *Novissima Sinica* (1697) in G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on China*, edited and translated by Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 46-7.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

³¹ G. W. Leibniz, ‘Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese’ (1716), in Ching and Oxtoby, eds., *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*, 87-141.

³² A. H. Rowbotham, ‘Voltaire, Sinophile’, *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 47 (1932): 1050-65.

people, and who were advised by able, learned Confucian scholars. Like Leibniz, Voltaire believed that the ancient Chinese, especially Confucius, had been monotheists, with a rational religion that included adoration of the Supreme Being, a high regard for social virtue, and toleration of other faiths. For Voltaire, China's social ethics were 'not dependent upon any belief in a personal God', but were rather based on the 'moral law' that was 'implanted' within each individual.³³ Voltaire venerated Confucius and kept his picture on the wall of his private library at Ferney. Of Confucius, Voltaire wrote, 'I have read his books with attention, I have made extracts from them; I found that they spoke only of the purest morality.... He appeals only to virtue, he preaches no miracles, there is nothing in them of ridiculous allegory.'³⁴ Of the Confucian literati, Voltaire observed in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (*History of the Manners and Spirit of Nations*) of 1756 'the religion of their learned men was never dishonoured by fables, nor stained with quarrels or civil wars'.³⁵ His play, *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (*The Orphan of China*) (1755), which he described as 'the morals of Confucius in five acts', portrayed the triumph of China's Confucian civilisation over the barbaric hordes of Genghis Khan, with the suggestion that China would also triumph over intruders from the West.³⁶

Other French thinkers shared Voltaire's admiration for China's social ethics, among them the French economist and leading figure of the physiocrat school, François Quesnay. Physiocrats believed that national wealth was based on agricultural production, and Quesnay was attracted to China as a model state, pursuing agricultural policies that were

³³ Davis, 'China, the Confucian Ideal, and the European Age of Enlightenment', 541.

³⁴ Quoted in A. Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*, English translation by J. C. Powell (London: Kegan Paul, 1925), 89.

³⁵ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), quoted in Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent*, 98.

³⁶ Quoted in Davis, 'China, the Confucian Ideal, and the European Age of Enlightenment', 544.

fully in harmony with natural laws. China, he believed, not only recognised that agriculture was the vital source of wealth but also understood that agricultural producers needed to be free from arbitrary actions by the state. Some have claimed that the physiocrats derived the conception of *laissez faire* in the economy from the ancient Chinese term, *wu-wei*, which means that everything should be allowed to follow its nature.³⁷ Known as ‘the Confucius of Europe’, Quesnay devoted himself to the dissemination of Confucian moral teachings. In his book, *Le despotisme de la Chine* of 1767, he lauded the enlightened despotism of China and its highly educated class of civil servants.³⁸

Social Ethics without Religion

Leibniz had maintained that China had a highly effective social morality based on natural religion; that is, a conception of the goodness of God gained through rational contemplation of the natural world. However, another leading German philosopher went further, arguing that the Chinese example demonstrated that a sophisticated, highly developed civilisation could exist without either natural or revealed religion. This, in turn, led to one of the best-known episodes of European Enlightenment.

Christian Wolff was a renowned German mathematician and philosopher, and a professor at the Pietist University of Halle in Prussia, a university that through the influence of August Hermann Francke had emerged as a major centre for the education of Protestant missionaries and the study of other cultures. Wolff had developed an interest in Chinese social ethics, in part through studying the Jesuit François Noel’s collection of translated

³⁷ J. M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 196.

³⁸ Ibid., 540; Reichwein, *China and Europe*, 99-109;

Confucian texts.³⁹ In 1721, Wolff gave a public lecture on Chinese philosophy at the University of Halle, arguing that the ancient Chinese had developed a highly sophisticated social ethic which had no religious foundation.⁴⁰ Confucius, he maintained, was not an original or creative thinker, but rather had revived much more ancient Chinese moral teachings. Wolff rejected the arguments of the Jesuit accommodationists that these Chinese moral teachings were rooted in an ancient theology and he also rejected Leibniz's view that Chinese ethics were based on a natural religion. The ancient Chinese, Wolff insisted, had no conception of God or a divinely ordained universal order. They 'knew no Author of the Universe, and had no natural religion, even less a revealed one. Only the strength of nature – free from every religion – could conduct them to the exercise of virtue.'⁴¹ Wolff may have misunderstood the ancient Confucian texts (and much depends on the multiple meanings of *tiān*, or 'Heaven').⁴² None the less, he insisted that Chinese civilisation showed that it was possible to have a highly effective social morality based solely on the innate powers of human nature, without any religious revelation or sanction. 'I do not see', he insisted, 'how anyone could deny that such strength of nature exists effectively for the practice of virtue and for flight from vice. And the Chinese ... have palpably proved by their example that one can make great use of such strength with success.'⁴³ The ancient

³⁹ Ching and Oxtoby, eds., *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*, 14.

⁴⁰ For accounts of the episode, see D. F. Lach, 'The Sinophilism of Christian Wolff (1679-1754)', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953): 561-74; M. Larrimore, 'Orientalism and Antivoluntarism in the History of Ethics: On Christian Wolff's "Oratio de Sinarum Philosophia Practica"', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28 (2000): 189-219; Julia Ching, 'Christian Wolff and China: The Autonomy of Morality', *Synthesis Philosophica* 7 (1989): 241-8; R. B. Louden, "'What Does Heaven Say?': Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics', in Bryan W. Van Norden, *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73-93.

⁴¹ Christian Wolff, 'Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese', in Ching and Oxtoby, eds., *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*, 162-4.

⁴² Louden, "'What Does Heaven Say?': Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics', 77-81.

⁴³ Wolff, 'Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese', 167.

Chinese, for Wolff, had established a highly moral culture, which survived for millennia, not by appeals to God or the sanction of future rewards and punishments in an afterlife, but through the cultivation of their innate human faculties. 'The Chinese took therefore as the first principle, that one should carefully cultivate his reason, in order to reach a distinct knowledge of good and evil and therefore become virtuous by choice and not from fear of a superior or hope for recompense.'⁴⁴ For the Chinese, Wolff insisted, virtue was its own reward: 'the Chinese are given to good works because they realized intimately the intrinsic goodness of such actions'.⁴⁵

Wolff's lecture sparked outrage. Conservative Protestant thinkers at the University of Halle, and across German-speaking Europe, denounced the lecture as an attack on Christian morals, and indeed Christianity itself. For them, Wolff's public insistence that Christianity was not the only sure foundation for individual and social morality, and that atheists could live moral lives, fundamentally challenged Europe's social order. While his opponents were scathing, Wolff's supporters could offer only a lukewarm defence of his positions on Chinese atheism and morality.⁴⁶ The controversy surrounding Wolff's lecture generated some two hundred polemical books. Wolff's opponents eventually appealed to the King of Prussia, Frederick William I, convincing him that Wolff's lecture was an assault upon the Christian foundations of social morality, and thus subversive of the social order. In 1723, the King ordered Wolff to leave his territories within forty-eight hours on pain of death. Wolff was immediately offered a teaching position at the University of Marburg in the neighbouring state of Hesse. For much of Enlightened Europe, he was a martyr for

⁴⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁶ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 656.

truth, and his views on Chinese social ethics, and the possibility of a social ethics without religious belief, stimulated considerable interest.

Wolff continued writing on Chinese social ethics. In 1730, he published a lengthy work on Chinese political philosophy, under the title, *De rege philosophante et philosopho regnante* (On the Philosopher King and the Ruling Philosopher). Here he argued that the ancient Chinese emperors had been enlightened monarchs, ruling in the spirit of philosophical reflection and receiving guidance from philosophically trained civil servants. As a result of this philosophical rule, Chinese civilisation, established nearly 3,000 years before Christ, continued to flourish. According to Wolff, 'the first three emperors, Fu-hsi, Shen-nung and the Yellow Emperor, established that model of government which after so many thousands of years still excels all other models in the world and is continuing to flourish while other monarchies and kingdoms have had their downfall and dissolution.'⁴⁷ In 1740, a new Prussian monarch, Frederick II, came to the throne, and made clear his own intention to rule as a philosopher king. One of his first acts was to reverse his father's judgement and invite Wolff back to his professorship at the University of Halle. But by now, as we will see, Enlightened Europe was losing interest in Chinese moral philosophy.

Enlightened Critics of China

The prolonged Chinese Rites Controversy culminated in the early years of the eighteenth century with a decisive defeat in Catholic Europe for the Jesuit missionary policies of accommodation. Following a debate in 1700, the theological faculty of the Sorbonne in Paris condemned the Jesuit positions on Chinese religion and ethics by a vote of 114 to 46.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Christian Wolff, 'On the Philosopher King and the Ruling Philosopher', in Ching and Oxtoby, eds., *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*, 193.

⁴⁸ Mungello, *Curious Land*, 329-42.

In 1704, the Pope issued a decree against the accommodation policies, forbidding Christians in China to participate in rituals relating to Confucius and their ancestors. It was kept secret while the decree was first communicated to the missionaries in China, and then it was published in Europe in 1709. Other decrees followed. The Papal condemnation was, according to the historian Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, a 'watershed': in China, Christianity ceased to offer a potential 'synthesis of East and West ... harmonious with Confucian learning' and instead became 'perceived by many as alien, aggressive and anti-Chinese'.⁴⁹ The Chinese emperor responded in 1724 by expelling most Catholic missionaries, effectively closing the Christian mission to China for over a generation.

Following the Papal condemnations of the Jesuit accommodation policies and China's expulsion of the missionaries, there was a gradual change in European views of China. European commentators grew more critical of the Jesuit portrayals of China as a highly moral country with a conception of God rooted in natural theology. This reflected in part the increasing opposition to the Jesuit order across Europe and in part the spread of more detailed information about China, including reports of wide-spread opium addiction and infanticide. Anti-Jesuit writers denounced Chinese historiography as deceitful and claimed Confucian ethics had little real influence in China as a whole. The result, as Jonathan Israel has observed, was that in Europe 'enthusiasm for China as a source of inspiration and a model haltingly receded after 1750'.⁵⁰ For Daniel Mungelo, 'because the Enlightenment's understanding of China was based on shallow foundations, it was more vulnerable to the shifting tides of intellectual fashion' and these tides now shifted away

⁴⁹ R. Po-chia Hsia. 'Christianity and Empire: The Catholic Mission in Late Imperial China', in S. J. Brown, C. Methuen and A. Spicer, eds., *The Church and Empire, Studies in Church History* 54 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2016.

⁵⁰ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 560.

from China.⁵¹ An expression of these changing attitudes was Montesquieu's influential work, *L'Esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws), which first appeared in 1748. The French political philosopher, who was well informed about China through his wide reading of travel accounts, rejected the notion that China was a moral, theistic civilisation with a long history of stable government by enlightened emperors. On the contrary, he insisted that the Chinese were atheists, that their history was characterised by civil warfare and frequent invasions, and that despite the 'appearance of order' and ideal of philosophical rule conveyed in Confucian writings, China was a despotic empire ruled through cruelty and oppression.⁵² In China, Montesquieu maintained, 'the authority of the prince is limitless, he combines both secular and ecclesiastical power'. 'The welfare and lives of his subjects' he continued, 'are always at the disposition of the sovereign, exposed as they are to the caprice and whims and the utterly unlimited will of the tyrant'.⁵³ 'China', he insisted, 'is a despotic state whose principle is fear'.⁵⁴ In his acclaimed discourse of 1750 on social manners, Jean-Jacques Rousseau maintained that the much vaunted Confucian writings had not preserved the Chinese from 'being tainted with every vice, familiar with every crime'; on the contrary, China was 'peopled with slaves and cheats'.⁵⁵ The French philosopher and social critic, Denis Diderot, emerged during the 1750s as one of Europe's leading critics of China. In his article on China in the third volume of the famous *Encyclopédie*, published in 1753, he portrayed the religious beliefs of the Chinese as superstitious, idolatrous, polytheistic or atheistic; their government as despotic; and their knowledge of the arts and

⁵¹ Mungelo, *The Great Encounter*, 91.

⁵² A. Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why it Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 236-42.

⁵³ Cited in Ibid., 238.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, 93.

⁵⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourse which Carried the Praemium at the Academy of Dijon in 1750 on ... Whether the Re-establishment of Arts and Sciences has Contributed to the Refining of Manners* (London: W. Owen, 1751), 21.

sciences as backward. Diderot's low view of China, increasingly shared by his friend, the Baron d'Holbach, was influenced in part by hostility to the Jesuits.⁵⁶

The negative views of China as stagnant and despotic spread beyond France. In an essay published in 1758, the Scottish philosopher and historian, David Hume, acknowledged that in China 'there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science', although he added that for such an ancient society, he would have expected 'something more perfect and finished than what has yet arisen from them'. The reason for the slow progress in the sciences, he believed, was that Chinese society had stagnated under the weight of their authoritative Confucian teachings.⁵⁷ In his lectures on Chinese history and philosophy at the University of Königsberg, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant dismissed the glowing Jesuit accounts and insisted that Europe had nothing to learn from Chinese ethical writings. 'Philosophy', he asserted, 'is not to be found in the whole Orient ... a concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese.'⁵⁸ The German philosopher and historian, Johann Gottfried Herder also rejected the Jesuit accounts of China as a fanciful construct, which it was his task to unmask. In Part 3 of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind), which appeared in 1787, he maintained that 'the [Chinese] empire is an embalmed mummy, painted with hieroglyphics and wrapped in silk; its internal cycle is like the life of the sleeping winter animals.'⁵⁹ Herder's mummy image was a response to those Europeans who had argued that China was both an ancient civilisation, like ancient Egypt or

⁵⁶ H. Cohen, 'Diderot and the Image of China in Eighteenth-Century France', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 242 (1986): 219-32; J.A.G. Roberts, 'L'image de la Chine dans l'*Encyclopédie*', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 22 (1997): 87-108.

⁵⁷ D. Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London: A. Miller, 1758), 76.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Julia Ching, 'Chinese Ethics and Kant', *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978): 169.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of Herder's treatment of Chinese civilisation, see Rolf J. Goebel, 'China as an Embalmed Mummy: Herder's Orientalist Poetics', *South Atlantic Review* 60 (1996): 111-29.

Greece, but also a dynamic, living civilisation. For Herder, China were a 'corner people', self-isolated in their corner of the world map with little to contribute to world progress.⁶⁰

Conclusion

'The Chinese Empire', observed the German-born, Paris-based author Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, in his influential *Correspondance littéraire* in September 1766, 'has become in our time the object of special attention and special study'.

The missionaries first fascinated public opinion by rose-coloured reports from that distant land, too distant [for others] to be able to contradict their falsehoods. Then the philosophers took it up, and drew from it whatever could be of use to them in denouncing and removing the evils they observed in their own country. Thus this country became in a short time the home of wisdom, virtue, and good faith, its government the best possible and the longest established, its morality the loftiest and most beautiful in the known world.⁶¹

While historians disagree about the dating, and the extent, of the shift away from the predominantly Sinophile attitudes to the largely Sinophobe attitudes, it is clear that for later eighteenth-century educated Europeans, the bloom was rather off the China rose. Europeans had grown weary of the 'China vogue'; Confucius and Chinese philosophy were no longer 'fashionable'. Thinkers of the European Enlightenment lost interest in the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁶¹ Baron von Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique adressée à un souverain d'Allemagne depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1769*, 6 vols. (Paris: Longchamps, 1813), vol. 5, p. 286.

'philosophical thought experiment' of China. From the later eighteenth century, Europe was moving ahead of China in agricultural production, manufacturing and military technology, and Chinese civilisation ceased to be viewed as a model to be followed. The enthusiasm over China in the early Enlightenment had helped many educated Europeans to embrace a moral philosophy that was free from the authority of a divine revelation as interpreted and controlled by the Churches. But by the later eighteenth century, the change in attitudes had largely occurred, and fewer educated Europeans insisted that Christian revelation and Scriptural law were necessary for an ethical society. As this attitudinal shift settled in, the example of China as a stable, sophisticated, but non-Christian society became of less interest to Enlightenment thinkers, and such later Enlightenment figures as Diderot, Kant and Herder now asserted the superiority of European philosophical thought. There was in Europe also diminishing support for notions of enlightened despotism and therefore less interest in how Chinese emperors may have ruled through a mandarin class promoting a natural morality expressed through Confucian writings.

Europe's exposure in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to ancient Chinese learning and Confucian texts had exerted a formative influence upon the developing European Enlightenment. The serious study of Chinese culture and history, first promoted by the Jesuit missionaries, had enhanced European awareness of another world civilisation, encouraged a willingness on the part of some educated Europeans to learn from a non-Western civilisation, and promoted cosmopolitan interests and sensitivities. Through the influence of such philosophers as Leibniz and Wolff, the Enlightenment interest in China contributed to the recognition that social ethics and moral values were not exclusive to any single religious tradition. Knowledge of China also strengthened the acceptance, so important to the European Enlightenment, of the essential unity of the human race, and of

the universal aspects of human needs, values and aspirations. While the Jesuit-inspired idealisation of a Chinese social ethics rooted in a natural theology had waned by the end of the eighteenth century, there remained a sense that different peoples in the world, even those separated by vast distances, shared a similar social nature. Such attitudes, as Brian Stanley's work has demonstrated, had a vital role in forming the intellectual milieu that would shape the modern missionary movement.

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