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Yu Liu
yuliu2001@hotmail.com

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The Intrigue of Paradigmatic Similarity: Leibniz and China

Yu Liu

In a long letter written in the last year of his life, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) notably defended the philosophical and religious conviction of China from some Catholic missionaries. “[Far] from being blameworthy,” he proclaimed, the Chinese “merit praise for their idea of things being created by their natural propensity and by a pre-established harmony.”¹ Because of his apparent endorsement of Chinese belief in terms of his well-known credo, Leibniz has been viewed as “the only major philosopher of the period to hold that the Chinese possessed a spiritualistic doctrine compatible in some of its aspects with Christianity,”² but he has also often been seen at the same time as someone whose “ecumenism was not purchased at the expense of European or Christian chauvinism.”³ “Leibniz’s standard argument,” as Roger Ariew says representatively, “was that a particular aspect of the Chinese religion was compatible with his own thought—and was therefore compatible with Christianity.”⁴

The cosmology of China is indeed strikingly similar to the metaphysics of Leibniz, but precisely where the two resemble each other, the former is unmistakably different from Christianity. Scholars of Leibniz have so far generally taken it for granted that he was ideologically aligned with Christianity, but his paradigmatic similarity to China should alert us of a surprisingly different story. Leibniz was indisputably “the greatest of the seventeenth century sinophiles”⁵ and key Chinese cosmological ideas were introduced to Europe long before he formulated his worldview. Together, these two facts can help us decide whether he “owes to Chinese organic naturalism ... a deeply important stimulus”⁶ or his doctrinal affinity with China resulted merely from “[the] spontaneous generation of similar ideas in cultures removed in time and distance from one another.”⁷

¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese,” in *Writings on China*, trans. Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1994), 93.

² Donald F. Lach, “Leibniz and China,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6 (1945): 436-455, 454.

³ Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, “The Pre-established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42 (1981): 253-267, 261.

⁴ Roger Ariew, “G.W. Leibniz, Life and Works,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, ed. Nicholas Jolley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 18-42, 37.

⁵ Arnold H. Rowbotham, “The Impact of Confucianism on 17th century Europe,” in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 4 (1944-45), 224-42, 235.

⁶ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), II.504-505.

⁷ David E. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1977), 15.

The Metaphysics of Leibniz

As revealed by his long 1716 letter to Nicholas Remond de Montmart who incidentally was also the confidential recipient in 1714 of *The Monadology* or the definitive statement of his final philosophy, what is innovative and significant about the metaphysics of Leibniz is the idea of things being created by their innate capacity or a pre-established harmony which he most aptly used in his profoundly insightful and positive interpretation of Chinese cosmology. Away from his discussions of China, however, he largely buried this distinctive innovation under a totalizing conceptual framework known as the best possible world. “[The] more we are enlightened and informed in regard to the works of God,” as he alluded in 1686 to this all-encompassing matrix of ideas early in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, which constituted the first systematic pronouncement of his then still evolving mature philosophy, “the more will we be disposed to find them excellent and conforming entirely to that which we might desire.”⁸ “[Among] all the possible plans of the universe there is one better than all the rest,” as he more palpably touched on this overarching panoramic vision in 1710 in *The Theodicy*, which was the only one of his main philosophical works published in his lifetime, “and ... God has not failed to choose it.”⁹ “[In] creating the universe,” as he most clearly said in 1714 in “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason” which, no less than *The Monadology*, embodied his final philosophical manifesto, “[God] has chosen the best possible plan, in which there is the greatest variety together with the greatest order; the best arranged ground, place, time; the most results produced in the most simple ways; the most of power, knowledge, happiness and goodness in the creatures that the universe could permit.”¹⁰

With God being characterized prominently as the *raison d'être* of everything and with the anthropomorphized divine personage being imagined implicitly as all powerful and all beneficent, the world simply could not have been other than the best of all possible alternatives. Even though the undeniable presence of evil made it easy in the 18th century for Voltaire (1694-1778) to satirize in *Candide* the theocentric optimism of Leibniz, his all-embracing metaphysical frame of reference centered on a supernatural agent is, as Nicholas Jolley astutely points out, “not the complacent nonsense that it appears to be.”¹¹ If anything, its pedigree started long before Leibniz.

⁸ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* [1686], in *Leibniz: Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 291.

⁹ Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952), 268.

¹⁰ Leibniz, “The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason” [1714],” in *Leibniz: Selections*, 528.

¹¹ Nicholas Jolley, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, 1-17, 1.

It is Plato (427 BCE-347 BCE) who in *Timaeus* first described the world as emerging miraculously out of chaotic disorder at the hands of a reformist deity who “put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and framed the universe to be the best and fairest work in the order of nature.”¹² Since the divine artificer “was good, and ... being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as possible,” as the eponymous hero of Plato’s work explained it to Socrates, “the world became a living soul and truly rational through the providence of God.”¹³

Even though in *The Republic*, *The Symposium*, and other works Plato had unequivocally disparaged the phenomenal world of becoming as transient, ever-changing, and illusive and glorified the noumenal world of being in contrast as eternal, constant, and true, he surprisingly moderated the antithetical evaluation of his dualistic vision momentarily in *Timaeus* via what Arthur O. Lovejoy perceptively calls “a bold logical inversion”¹⁴ by binding up the ideal with the real as near equivalences in a tight and inseparable relationship of cause and effect.

On the basis of the Platonic Good and the related principle of plenitude explaining the rich and divergent emanation of the multifarious from the originally singular one, Aristotle (384BC-322BC) built his theory of four causalities and his hierarchically structured and downwardly graded great chain of being (*scala naturae*). After being synthesized with Stoicism by Plotinus (204-270), this part of European humanist antiquity was eventually absorbed into the rationalist theology of European scholasticism. The Platonic and Neo-Platonic myth of the world as being created or recreated from disorder to order by a highly artistically-minded supernatural agent was noticeably different from the doctrinal belief of Judeo-Christianity which involved the divine seven-day creation of the world out of nothing, the history of humanity descending from Adam and Eve, and the cosmic warfare of Christ against Satan. However, the former nevertheless provided a most useful complementary service for the latter with the theocentric orientation of its logic and the easy amenability of its cosmological claims to monotheism. In *Candide*, Voltaire singled out Leibniz for attack, but the best possible world scenario was never the idiosyncratic vagary of any individual person. When poking fun at Leibniz, Voltaire was therefore consciously taking to task the entire theistic heritage of Europe.

¹² Plato, *Timaeus*, in Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 30.

¹³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 29 and 30.

¹⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 49.

As part of his Lutheran upbringing, Leibniz was introduced to the usual theocentric tradition of European philosophy and religion when he started attending one of his hometown Leipzig's two main Latin schools at the age of seven. The strictly propaedeutic mission of that educational establishment meant no special facility in or encouragement to any in-depth study of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, or music, but the emphasis of the curriculum on grammar (Latin and Greek), rhetoric, and logic helped as much to seed a lifelong habit of seeing things theistically by reference to a singular original cause as to provide him with the necessary linguistic tools for learning about those ancient European writers who were most exemplary in connecting rational thinking with theism.

Even before his formal schooling, he had already been guided informally into the European world of learning centered on God by his father Friedrich Leubnitz (1597-1652) who was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Leipzig and who had great expectations for his precocious son. Leibniz lost his father when he was only six years old, but one year after his father's death, he gained free access to the family library which, beyond the philosophical books of his father and the legal books of his maternal grandfather Wilhelm Schmuck (1575-1634), included a great deal of ideologically indiscriminate material left behind by Bartholomäus Voigt, father of his father's second wife Dorothea Voigt (?-1643) and a bookseller and publisher in Leipzig. Unsupervised and unstructured, his entirely fortuitous exploration of writers, often at doctrinal variance with each other, enabled him to mythologize himself later as an autodidact and to evolve his characteristic eclecticism in theistic thinking.

At the University of Leipzig and long afterwards, Leibniz subsequently continued his intellectual apprenticeship in the theocentric tradition of European philosophy and religion. From writers of European antiquity and their Renaissance revival, he progressed in time to scholastic philosophy and theology and their revisions in the Reformation, ending finally with the brave new ideas of the modern period. In turn he was exhilarated, but the sequentially late attraction of the new complicated rather than erased his earlier attachment to the old. During his fateful stay in Paris from 1672 to 1676, for instance, the geometrically phrased new teaching of René Descartes (1596-1650) decisively inspired his intense interest in mathematics and logic while helping to wean him from the heavily Aristotelian scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and from the materialist philosophy of Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).

No matter how he was then captivated by the mechanistic worldview of Cartesianism, however, he never lost his affection for the old cosmology of Platonism and Neo-Platonism. With the God-centered theory of the best possible world, he doubtlessly wished to accommodate as much the past and the present of his formative influences as the ancients and the moderns of his intellectual heritage. However, as will be shown later, in relation to his true metaphysical innovation, his attempt at such an accommodation within the existing parameters of European philosophy and religion worked out mostly as an elaborate cover.

The Reconciliation of the Old and the New

Leibniz was born two years before the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Confined initially to a religiously instigated regional revolt within the Holy Roman Empire, the hostilities had quickly spilled over into a full-blown pan-European conflict, embroiling most of the major European powers and inflicting unprecedented pain and devastation from protracted military violence and collateral famines and diseases. As much as the unusual exposure to doctrinal diversity in his father's library at a young and impressionable age and the subsequent influence of teachers at the University of Leipzig such as Jakob Thomasiaus (1622-1684) who strove to synthesize the scholastically mediated classical philosophy with the fundamental tenets of Lutheran theology, the historical circumstance of Leibniz's birth in a world debilitatingly fragmented but yearning for unity and peace contributed to the development of his characteristic inclination for open-minded reconciliation and eclecticism.

Even in his youth, as a recent biographer of him points out, he already saw it as the mission of his life "to put the pieces together to achieve a universal synthesis for the glory of God and the happiness of mankind."¹⁵ When he came to formulate his mature philosophy later in life, it was not surprising that he spared no effort in showing off his continuing desire in this direction and in making it perceived by others as what he was doing.

Within his theocentric theory of the best possible world, he managed to make peace between writers who were objectionable to each other. "[The] writings of distinguished men of ancient as of modern times," as he wrote in 1695 in *Specimen Dynamicum*, "apart from their too sharp polemics against opposing thinkers, contain for the most part much that is true and good and what well deserves to be excerpted and deposited in the common treasury of knowledge."¹⁶ For his ostensible purpose of intellectual and ideological irenicism, he was particularly interested in discovering common ground between the ancients and the moderns of his European heritage.

¹⁵ Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66.

¹⁶ Leibniz, *Specimen Dynamicum*, in *Leibniz: Selections*, 121.

Both inspired and emboldened by revolutionary changes in Post-Renaissance astronomy and physics, the mathematically based new teaching of Descartes had daringly challenged the scholastically filtered old thinking of European antiquity by demanding to explain everything in terms of the sequential logic of causal relations. In its turn, it had opened itself to attacks from defenders of the old because of its suspected tendency to atheist materialism and its apparent inability to deal with issues such as the coordination of the body and the soul. Rather than taking sides in the heated dispute, Leibniz went between the old and the new. “It appears more and more clear that although all the particular phenomena of nature can be explained mathematically or mechanically by those who understand them,” as he said in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, “yet nevertheless, the general principles of corporeal nature and even of mechanics are metaphysical rather than geometric, and belong rather to certain indivisible forms or natures as the causes of the appearances, than to the corporeal mass or to extension.”¹⁷

Here as elsewhere, the logical and rhetorical maneuver of Leibniz’s argument was, first of all, to expose the deficiency of the moderns so as to cut down to size their proud achievement, but the very fact of him attempting this already implied significant prior recognition of what the moderns had claimed for themselves. In the same complex way, Leibniz defended the honor of the ancients so as to direct attention to their enduring usefulness, but in the study of nature he conspicuously limited this usefulness to metaphysics and this limitation could not but give implicit validation to some of the ideological challenges which the ancients had received from the moderns.

At once critical and appreciative though in different ways, Leibniz never shied away from differences between the old and the new of his intellectual inheritance, but he deftly chose to construe the differences as indicating a relationship of complement rather than irreconcilable conflict or contradiction. So far as he could see, the moderns were preoccupied with the mechanical explanation of specific natural phenomena or the study of efficient causes, while the ancients were concerned with the metaphysical understanding of underlying reasons or the consideration of final causes. “Both explanations are good;” as he said conciliatorily in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, “both are useful not only for the admiring of the work of a great artificer, but also for the discovery of useful facts in physics and medicine.”¹⁸

Through a sort of division of labor or a conceptual sleight of hand, Leibniz brought the ancients and the moderns together under his theocentric canopy of the best possible world. Rather than embodying something innovative, however, this very reconciliation of the old and the new exposed problems with the existing framework of his intellectual heritage which to all appearances he was espousing.

¹⁷ Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, 317.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

To be specific, the notions of efficient and final causes which he used respectively to delineate the quasi-separate spheres of influence for the moderns and the ancients were both derived from what Aristotle in *Metaphysics* called “knowledge of the first causes.”¹⁹ In *Physics*, Aristotle identified the efficient cause as the third of the four causalities and presented it as having to do with “the primary source of the change or coming to rest; ... and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed.”²⁰ Classifying the final cause as the last of the four causalities, Aristotle described it in contrast as understandable “in the sense of end or ‘that for the sake of which’ a thing is done.”²¹ Alike, the efficient and final causes were ultimately about a primordial original cause which, as the singular unchanging external source of the changing multifarious inside the world, had to be understood theistically, but in the quotidian exercise of this logical thinking which emphasized the distinction of before and after, the invocation of the final cause could potentially or actually cause confusion for the application of the efficient cause and vice versa. With Aristotle, as with Leibniz, it is this actual or potential confusion which made these two causalities problematic alike.

In *Physics*, for instance, Aristotle explained the final cause via a situation involving the activity of walking about and the state of being healthy. Insofar as the state of being healthy could be perceived as an end or goal while the activity of walking about could be seen as the means or instrument to achieve that end or goal, the former could be considered as the final cause of the latter. “[Health],” as Aristotle said in *Physics*, “is the cause of walking about.”²²

The problem with this way of logical analysis is that the relationship between the state of being healthy and the activity of walking about could also be explained by the efficient cause so that the activity of walking about was the prior cause while the state of being healthy was the subsequent effect or result, but the invocation of the final cause decidedly overturned this temporal sequence of causal relations and consequently made the very concepts of before and after or cause and effect potentially or actually confusing. In the 17th century it is this kind of potential or actual confusion which drew the critical attention of Spinoza (1632-1667) who, in the process of formulating his radically new philosophy, dismissed all final causes as “nothing but human fictions” and characterized the ultimate identification of the final cause with divinity as “[taking] refuge in the will of God, i.e., the sanctuary of ignorance.”²³

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 983a.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), Bk. II, Ch.3, 194b.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 442 and 443.

Just as Spinoza targeted Aristotle in his criticism of the final cause, so Voltaire set his satirical focus on Leibniz in his repudiation of the same idea. “Observe: noses were made to support spectacles,” as he had his fictional character Pangloss say in an obviously ludicrous way in *Candide*, “hence we have spectacles.”²⁴ “Legs, as anyone can plainly see, were made to be breeched,” as the plainly misguided philosophical teacher of Voltaire’s creation went on to remark idiotically, “and so we have breeches.”²⁵ “Stones were made to be shaped and to build castles with;” as he concluded his ridiculous mini-lecture about the idea of an end for everything in the best possible world to his pupil Candide, “thus My Lord has a fine castle, for the greatest Baron in the province should have the finest house; and since pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all year round.”²⁶

From this kind of attacks Voltaire lodged against him or Spinoza launched against Aristotle, Leibniz was in reality largely immune, but it was so only because his discussion of the final cause was always vague and he never quite made clear what specific end was achieved through what specific means in his cosmological thinking. “There seems to be no followable route from Leibniz’s basic metaphysic to the notion of doing something for the sake of an end,” as Jonathan Bennett says incisively, “let alone the more fully teleological notion of doing something because one thinks it will lead to a certain end.”²⁷

The Metaphysical Innovation of Leibniz

Rather than the reconciliation of the old and the new within the existing boundaries of his intellectual heritage, what was truly innovative about the metaphysics of Leibniz was, as pointed out earlier, the idea of things being created by their natural propensity or a pre-established harmony which he used most aptly in his profoundly insightful and positive interpretation of Chinese cosmology. “[Every] soul,” as he said as early as 1686, “is as a world apart, independent of everything else but God.”²⁸

²⁴ Voltaire, *Candide or Optimism*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jonathan Bennett, “Leibniz’s Two Realms,” in *Leibniz: Nature and Freedom*, ed. Donald Rutherford and J.A. Cover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 135-155, 139.

²⁸ Leibniz, “Identity in Individuals and True Propositions” (1686), in *Leibniz: Selections*, 97.

By itself, the idea of every predicate being necessarily included in the subject (principle of sufficient reason) was not new, since it was closely related to the notion of *ex nihilo nihil fit* (nothing comes from nothing) which was a major pillar of Aristotelian logic and a crucial part of scholasticism, but it became innovative in Leibniz's use of it, because he not only extended the implied notion of self-sufficiency to the totality of subjects to which all predicates belonged but also did it in a very unusual way. "[Every] substance expresses the whole sequence of the universe in accordance with its own viewpoint or relationship to the rest," as he proclaimed in the same 1686 treatise, "so that all are in perfect correspondence with one another."²⁹ Free from external compulsion, each thing was independent. Rather than engendering chaos, this independence ensured the good and mutually beneficial coordination of everything. "God," as Leibniz wrote in 1695, "has from the first created the soul or any other real unity in such a way that everything arises in it from its own internal nature through a perfect *spontaneity* relatively to itself, and yet with a perfect *conformity* to external things."³⁰

The world was never without order, but the order resulted from the independent state and action of everything rather than any immediately discernible external determination. More than anything, this unusual notion of things being free individually but well-coordinated collectively at the same time in their independent relationship distinguished Leibniz from his contemporaries in a competition of ideas. In addition to being unable to explain any meaningful interaction between the body and the soul, as mentioned before, the dualistic vision of Descartes had opened itself to the accusation of atheist materialism. To remedy this situation, Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715) developed the doctrine of Occasionalism so that the body and the soul could impact each other, but the cause was always external and ultimately a singular and personal God who continuously intervened to bring about the miraculous result. To confront the same problem but away from the mechanistic worldview of Cartesianism, Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) and Henry More (1614-1687) drew on Plato's concept of world soul or its Neo-Platonist variation and enrichment and came up with the vitalist idea of plastic nature which supposedly acted "as a Subordinate Instrument of Divine Providence, in the Orderly disposal of Matter."³¹ Leibniz roundly rejected the involvement of miracles or divine interventions (direct or indirect) in the explanation of nature, thereby clearing the way for his metaphysical innovation.

²⁹ Ibid., 98.

³⁰ Leibniz, "New System of Nature and of the Communication of Substances," in *Leibniz: Selections*, 114.

³¹ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), 178.

From the Cartesians (Malebranche) and the Cambridge Neo-Platonists (Cudworth and More), Leibniz differed superficially only in limiting the role of the deity to before the creation of everything so that the world was still a supernaturally-made machine or watch or automaton but everything in it always ran in perfect order and nothing ever required any supernatural adjustment or maintenance. In reality, the palpable autonomy of the world in its actual operation from any direct control of a supernatural agent implied that the world was an organism rather than a machine and as such it cried out for a cosmological explanation which involved a significantly different conceptualization of divinity and a significantly different understanding of causality. Even though things could and did impact each other, for instance, why everything was the way it was could not be explained ultimately by the usual efficient causes. Even though things could be related to each other in terms of means and ends, the routine coordination between them could not be understood ultimately by the usual final causes. Since freedom or self-determination was as characteristic of each individual thing as of the totality to which all things belonged, in other words, neither the operation of everything individually nor its independently well-coordinated cooperation with everything else was explainable by the Cartesian idea of mechanism or the Platonically mediated Judeo-Christian notion of teleology.

Being free, the activity of everything individually or in its cooperation with everything else was contingent, but being conducive to the well-being of each thing and the totality of all things alike, the same activity was also necessary. Both contingent and necessary at the same time rather than either the one or the other, the paradoxical sounding causality cannot but push the search for the ultimate explanation right inside the operation of the world rather than outside it and cast light in the process on the intricacies of Leibniz's theistic attitude. In public, he never stopped touting himself as a staunch defender of a unified Christian church and he always prompted others to perceive him as such under his theocentric rubric of the best possible world. In private, however, as reported after his death by Johann Georg von Eckhart (1664-1730) who was his secretary during the last nineteen years of his life, he was never more than a nominal Christian who rarely went to church and never took communion. Around the House of Hanover he was widely known as a non-believer, being nicknamed Loewenix or "believer in nothing." Even on his deathbed in 1716, he rejected repeated appeals of Eckhart to allow a priest to come and give him the last sacraments, and he reportedly protested both angrily and rhetorically by asking what he should confess since he had stolen or taken from no one.

Just as his habitual use of the efficient and final causes for the reconciliation of the ancients and the moderns provided no real insight into the innovation of his cosmology, so his customary parade of ideas supposedly taken from European antiquity generally obscured rather than clarified the real and radical import of his inspiration. In *The Monadology*, the most eye-catching and seemingly most important word is of course *monad* which in the plural he defined notoriously as entities which “have no windows through which anything can enter or depart.”³² This account of the *monads* has been most appropriately characterized by Bertrand Russell as “a kind of fantastic fairy tale, coherent perhaps, but wholly arbitrary.”³³ Other allegedly ancient ideas he invoked are not as bewilderingly mystifying, but they do not obfuscate things any the less. *Entelechy* or *entelechies*, for instance, is a term which he was fond of throwing around and which he explained in 1695 as meaning “*primitive Forces* which do not contain only the *act* or the complement of possibility, but further an *original activity*.”³⁴ Here, as if providing an etymological origin for his notion of things being created by their natural propensity, he was willy-nilly reminiscent of Cudworth and More who had resorted to similar concepts of vitalism for the explanation of nature and for the related understanding of an external God.

In reality, Leibniz differed drastically from the Cambridge Neo-Platonists because what was most important in his innovative vision of the world was not how everything was divinely animated to operate predictably in a downwardly spiraling chain of being but how everything was independent of everything else in their well-coordinated cooperation and how this independent correlation cannot be easily understood by reference to the externally conceptualized God of Judeo-Christianity or the similarly understood Demiurge of Plato and Aristotle.

In light of his true metaphysical innovation, both Leibniz’s habitual promotion of the efficient and final causes within the theocentric theory of the best possible world and his routine parade of ideas supposedly taken from European antiquity can be seen as largely and even intentionally red herrings. Rather than identifying him ideologically with his intellectual and religious heritage as is still generally and problematically assumed today, they most importantly provided him with a convenient defensive or self-defensive cover so that he was iconoclastic while being shielded somewhat from any accusation of heresy. “It was necessary,” as he wrote in “New System of Nature and of the Communication of Substances,” “... to recall and, so to speak, rehabilitate the *substantial forms* so decried today, but in a way which would make them intelligible and which would separate the use we should make of them from the abuse that has been made of them.”³⁵

³² Leibniz, *The Monadology*, in *Leibniz: Selections*, 534.

³³ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1900), xiii.

³⁴ Leibniz, “New System of Nature and of the Communication of Substances,” 108.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 107-108.

In the name of resurrecting moribund old ideas, he then went on to be daringly revolutionary about a brave new world which was organic rather than mechanistic or vitalistic. The new may still sound like being closely connected with the old, but the connection was much more in rhetoric than in substance. To see this, it is crucially important to take note of “an astonishing correlation [of his ideas] with various schools of Chinese thought”³⁶ which, from time to time, has been pointed out but which has not so far received adequate attention.

The Paradigmatic Similarity to China

In the 20th century the person who most influentially pointed out the striking resemblance between the metaphysics of Leibniz and the cosmology of China was Joseph Needham. For Needham, the key to this resemblance is the historical context. As mentioned earlier, Leibniz developed his metaphysical thinking in the late 17th and early 18th centuries in response to Malebranche on the one hand and to Cudworth and More on the other. No matter how different from each other in their accounts of the communication between the body and the soul, the mechanistic worldview of Cartesianism and the vitalistic cosmology of Cambridge Neo-Platonism were at the same time similar to one another in the theistic orientation of their efforts and in their consequently questionable attribution of the ultimate cause (be it efficient or final) to the idea of God who was conceptualized as singular, personal, and existing outside the natural process. With his notion of things being made by their innate capacity or a pre-established harmony, Leibniz not only kept any direct supernatural intervention away from his explanation of nature but also changed the European understanding of the world from a machine to an organism. It is in the stunning success of this quietly iconoclastic effort to surmount “the characteristic European schizophrenia or split-personality” or “to overcome the European antinomy between theological vitalism and mechanical materialism”³⁷ that Leibniz most vividly and ineluctably reminded Needham of China.

³⁶ Julia Ching and Willard G. Oxtoby, *Discovering China: European Interpretations in the Enlightenment* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1992), xix.

³⁷ Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, II. 302 and 505.

To Needham, Leibniz's metaphysical innovation is particularly reminiscent of the Chinese Daoist worldview. In the human body, as the famous Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369 BCE-286 BCE) once explained it by way of an example, there were nine openings, six organs, and hundreds of joints which came together and kept good order, but being uncommanded, the good coordination of the bodily parts did not result from their being commanded in any way. "The hands and feet differ in their duties;" as two Chinese scholars annotated Zhuangzi's idea in the third century, "the five viscera differ in their functions."³⁸ "They never associate with each other," as the two scholars quickly pointed out, "yet the hundred parts (of the body) are held together with them in a common unity."³⁹ "They never (force themselves to) cooperate," as they went on to say, "and yet, both within and without, all complete one another."⁴⁰ "This is the way in which they cooperate in non-cooperation," as they concluded, "... Heaven and Earth are such a (living) body."⁴¹

To protect himself from any accusation of atheist heresy, Leibniz understandably invoked the idea of God, but the essence of his metaphysical innovation, like the Daoist worldview, consisted in what Needham calls "a kind of harmony of wills" or "a system of correlative thinking,"⁴² and his habitual invocation of the deity was not only largely perfunctory but also helped in that way to highlight his paradigmatic similarity to the Chinese Daoists. "It would seem," as Zhuangzi said about the cooperation of the bodily parts in their independent relationship, "as though there must be some True Lord among them."⁴³ "But whether I succeed in discovering his identity or not," as he pointed out bluntly, "it neither adds to nor detracts from his Truth."⁴⁴

In the history of modern science since the late 17th century, organism is arguably the single most important idea which liberated Western conceptual thinking from the Cartesian and Newtonian understanding of the universe as a machine and consequently enabled drastic and revolutionary advances in field physics and evolutionary chemistry and biology. As early as the third century BCE, Chinese Daoist philosophers like Zhuangzi already talked about the idea.

³⁸ Cited in Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, II. 302.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., II. 302 and 504.

⁴³ *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 38.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The decisive breakthrough of modern science was not achieved in China, and why this did not happen is intriguing and important for any study of modern Chinese history, but the crucial and indispensable idea of organism which made possible the scientific revolution of the modern world was characteristically Chinese rather than European and it was indisputably introduced in the early 17th century to Europe from China by Jesuit missionaries who, furthermore, made crystal clear its fundamental difference from European theistic and secular logical thinking by repudiating it.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Leibniz was among the very first European philosophers to think about the world innovatively as organic rather than mechanistic or vitalistic. He has since been followed by a very long line of Western thinkers going all the way to Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) in the 20th century, but in his day could Leibniz have taken his inspiration from the Chinese organismic worldview which was then verifiably accessible to him?

Needham apparently believed that Leibniz owed a crucially important inspirational debt to China. “[Leibniz’s] own, the first, great attempt at a synthesis, which should surmount the dichotomy of *either* theological vitalist idealism *or* mechanical materialism,” as he put it, “was strongly stimulated by, if not indeed derived from, the organic world-outlook which we have found to be characteristically Chinese.”⁴⁵ Before Needham, other scholars of China already drew attention to various points of contact between Leibniz and China. In 1687, for instance, Leibniz had in his possession a copy of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* which Jesuit missionaries to China published that year and which, in addition to three Confucian classics in Latin translation, included a lengthy discussion of the greatest Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and his organismic theory of *Li* (principle) and *Qi* (material energy) which was known to have been heavily influenced by Daoism and Buddhism. In 1689, Leibniz met in Rome Jesuit missionary to China Claudio Filippo Grimaldi (1638-1712) to whom he subsequently sent a list of thirty questions about a wide range of topics concerning China. In 1697, Leibniz also started a correspondence with Jesuit missionary to China Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) which continued for several years. Needham knew all these facts and more, but, as he readily admitted, none of these could have proved any decisive influence, because “all the essentials of [Leibniz’s] system were worked out in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (written in the winter of 1685-86), the terminology of monads being alone missing.”⁴⁶

Chronologically, as implicitly acknowledged by Needham, it is plainly not the case that Leibniz first studied Chinese cosmology consciously and then evolved his metaphysical innovation. In his day, Leibniz was accused of plagiarizing Newton in the development of the infinitesimal calculus. Leibniz strongly denied it and he was later largely vindicated.

⁴⁵ Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, II, 498.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 504, Footnote G.

During his correspondence with Joachim Bouvet beginning in the late 1690s, Leibniz was amazed to find resemblance between his binary arithmetic and the hexagrams of the ancient Chinese classic *Yijing* (Book of Changes), and so far there has been no evidence that the resemblance was anything other than coincidence.

However, the case with organism is different. For his difficulty to link Leibniz's iconoclastic worldview with his knowledge of Chinese philosophy, Needham's attribution of Leibniz's inspiration to China has been rightly challenged by David Mungello, but in the context of the fact that organism was a characteristically Chinese idea and was circulated in Europe before Leibniz even began to philosophize, Mungello's explanation of Leibniz's paradigmatic similarity to China as "[the] spontaneous generation of similar ideas in cultures removed in time and distance from one another"⁴⁷ is in its turn highly problematic, especially because his speculated independence of Leibniz from China has since been used implicitly by some recent scholars to deny the reality of Leibniz's ideological affinity with the Far East and to perversely characterize his insightful and positive interpretation of Chinese cosmology in the long 1716 letter as, at worst, part of a show of "European or Christian chauvinism,"⁴⁸ and, at best, a misguided display of "hermeneutic generosity."⁴⁹ Leibniz may not have studied the organismic idea of China consciously until very late in his life, but long before that he could have absorbed it without knowing it consciously. The crucial clue for this is his long 1716 letter.

The Chinese Connection of Leibniz

The long letter of Leibniz to Remond in 1716 contained his most important thoughts about Chinese cosmology, but the thoughts were given in the form of a carefully measured response to the separate discussions of the same topic by two Catholic missionaries to China: Nicholas Longobardi (1565-1655) and Antonio Caballero a Santa Maria (1602-1669). A Jesuit and a Franciscan respectively, both Longobardi and Santa Maria were important in the history of the early modern East-West intellectual interaction and in any study of Leibniz because of their principled and spirited opposition to the legacy of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) who pioneered the evangelical enterprise of the Catholic Church in the Middle Kingdom.

⁴⁷ Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism*, 15.

⁴⁸ Cook and Rosemont, "The Pre-established Harmony Between Leibniz and Chinese Thought," 261.

⁴⁹ Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187.

From Macao, Ricci first entered the Chinese mainland and founded the Jesuit China mission in 1583. After years of study about the Chinese language and Chinese culture, he gradually came to recognize the special importance of Confucianism which was dominant in Chinese society both ideologically and politically. To win official acceptance or at least tolerance, Ricci simply had to befriend Confucianism, but to advance his apostolic agenda, he also had to distance himself from the official Chinese ideology and repudiate it at the same time. Out of the contradictory needs of this situation evolved eventually his carefully calculated strategy of evangelism which had two main components: acceptance of ancient Confucianism as prefiguring Christian monotheism and rejection of Neo-Confucianism as corrupted by Daoism and Buddhism.

Ricci's complex attitude of simultaneous acceptance and rejection toward Confucianism inaugurated a longstanding Western prejudicial view of the Chinese as being acquainted with ethics or natural theology but "[having] no conception of the rules of logic" and "[having] obscured matters by the introduction of error rather than enlightened them."⁵⁰ To a large extent, Leibniz's surprising neglect of Chinese metaphysical thinking reflected this. As early as 1667, as he revealed it in a letter to Landgrave Ernst von Hessen Rheinfels, he was already intrigued by China.

So eager was he to lay his hands on everything about the Far East that he proudly boasted to the Electress Sophia Charlotte (1668-1705) in 1697 that he should post a notice on his door: Bureau of Information for Chinese Knowledge. In spite of his well-known consuming interest, there were always blind spots up to the late 1690s. "His interests extended beyond collecting data," as Franklin Perkins says recently while echoing Mungello's doubt about Needham's attribution of Leibniz's metaphysical inspiration to China but overlooking Mungello's simultaneous recognition of Leibniz's real paradigmatic similarity to the Far East, "but did not extend to philosophy."⁵¹ When Leibniz wrote toward the end of the 17th century about the need of Europe for missionaries from the Chinese "who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology,"⁵² his underlying assumption about the relative strengths and weaknesses of Chinese and European philosophical and religious paradigms was still largely informed by Ricci.

⁵⁰ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, translated from Latin by Louis J. Gallagher, S.J. (New York: Random House, 1953), 30 and 30.

⁵¹ Perkins, *Leibniz and China*, 168.

⁵² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Preface to Leibniz' Novissima Sinica*, trans. Donald F. Lach (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1957), 75.

Not until the late 1690s or early 1700s did Leibniz realize that the supposed weakness of the Chinese in having no conception of the rules of logic and in having obscured metaphysical thinking by the introduction of errors was a Jesuit code phrase for the idea of organism for which Ricci denigrated Chinese philosophy but in which Leibniz found his closest affinity with the Middle Kingdom. Long before he achieved that realization, Longobardi and Santa Maria already prepared that process by challenging Ricci. For his purpose of both endorsing and attacking the dominant Chinese ideology, in particular, Ricci claimed to have detected in ancient Confucianism monotheistic tendencies which were then lost in Neo-Confucianism under the corrupting influence of Daoism and Buddhism.

Because of his ostensible acceptance of ancient Confucianism, Ricci has been celebrated as epitomizing what Wolfgang Reinhard calls “one of the few serious alternatives to the otherwise brutal ethno-centrism of the European expansion over the earth.”⁵³ In reality, his monotheistic reading of ancient Chinese texts was nothing more than what Edward Said terms “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient.”⁵⁴ No matter how he seemed to be inclusive in his ambiguous accommodation of Christianity to Confucianism, his supposedly inclusive reading of Confucianism was actually exclusive because, as Urs App perceptively points out, “it also hijacked other people’s histories and religions and embedded them in a fundamentally biblical scenario.”⁵⁵

Longobardi was one of the very first in the small Jesuit China mission to be critical of Ricci’s specious division of Confucianism into a pristine early part and a degenerate later part. Entering China in 1597 and staying in the country until his death in 1655, he knew that the organismic worldview was not limited to Daoism or Buddhism but was the crucial cornerstone of a productive relationship of concurrent competition and complement among the three main philosophical and religious traditions of the Middle Kingdom. Ricci was aware of Longobardi’s criticism. Before his death in 1610, he could have meant to acknowledge its validity quietly and to silence it at the same time when he promoted Longobardi to be his successor as the leader of the Jesuit China mission.

Longobardi did not stay loyal and submissive to the legacy of Ricci for long. Soon after Ricci’s death, he started an internal Jesuit debate about Ricci’s dubious reading of Confucianism, and as one of Ricci’s most vocal critics, he also wrote a long and feisty treatise. Things did not go his way in the debate and he was even ordered to have his treatise destroyed, but his anti-Ricci text was leaked out and Santa Maria was the one who got it and made it possible for it to be published in Europe.

⁵³ Wolfgang Reinhard, “Gegenreformation als Modernisierung? Prologomena Zu einer Theorie des Konfessionellen Zeitalters,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 241.

⁵⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 95.

⁵⁵ Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 279.

On the basis of Longobardi's information, Santa Maria also wrote out his opposition to Ricci. Both of these texts were sent by Remond to Leibniz for a response, but before Leibniz wrote his long 1716 letter, there is evidence that he not only already knew the contents of the two treatises but also already put two and two together about his paradigmatic similarity to China.

The doctrinal fight Longobardi and Santa Maria had with Ricci was over the Chinese idea of *tianren heyi* (humanity's unity with heaven) or *wanwu yiti* (ten thousand things in one body) which Leibniz dealt with in the most important first two parts of his 1716 letter (the last two parts treated Confucian rites and the similarity of his binary arithmetic to the hexagrams of *Yijing*). Ricci first discussed the Chinese idea in the early 17th century when he described the Chinese as believing "that the entire universe is composed of a common substance; that the creator of the universe is one in a continuous body, a continuum as it were, together with heaven and earth, men and beasts, trees and plants, and the four elements, and that each individual thing is a member of this body."⁵⁶ For the tactical maneuvers of his proselytizing enterprise, Ricci willfully characterized the view as a Daoist and Buddhist corruption of Neo-Confucianism, but relying on testimonies of Chinese scholar-officials either friendly or hostile to Ricci, Longobardi and Santa Maria proved that it was a fundamental belief always shared by Confucianism with Daoism and Buddhism. Just as European mechanistic and vitalistic views of nature both distinguished God clearly from everything else, so all three Chinese philosophical and religious traditions considered everything in the universe in contrast as intertwined with heaven because the latter as an ever on-going organic process was actualized only in the independent exercise of a cooperative principle by each participant and because "Heaven and Earth ... are void of Reason, that is, of Will and Deliberation, but do all things by a certain natural Propension."⁵⁷

In the form of *tianren heyi* (humanity's unity with heaven) or *wanwu yiti* (ten thousand things in one body), the organismic worldview of China was apparently absorbed into the monistic philosophy of Spinoza in the middle of the 17th century. Spinoza is not widely recognized today as a Sinophile, but when he was expelled from his synagogue in 1656, he was reportedly accused of teaching children of the Jewish Sabbath school "that the Bible was not the history of the world, that Chinese history was independent of biblical history, and so on"⁵⁸ and his Latin teacher Van den Enden (1602-1674) is known to have believed "that nature had to be considered the only God."⁵⁹ Between 1619 and 1633 Van den Enden was a Jesuit.

⁵⁶ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 95.

⁵⁷ Niccolò Longobardo, *A Short Answer Concerning the Controversies about Xang Ti, Tien Xin, and Ling Hoen and other Chinese Names and Terms* (1623-24), *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1704), I. 183-224, 205.

⁵⁸ Richard H. Popkin, *Spinoza* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 30.

⁵⁹ Salomon van Til, *Het Voor-Hof der Heydenen, voor alle Ongeloovigen geopent* (Dordrecht, 1694), 5.

To the European public, China was then the pride of the Jesuit missionary effort outside Europe, but behind closed doors, debates about the Chinese organismic cosmology were raging between Ricci's supporters and detractors and both sides sent their views back to their Jesuit superiors and confreres in Europe. With his insider's information, Van den Enden evidently played a most instrumental role in the formulation of Spinoza's radical philosophy which, reminiscent of the Chinese organismic idea of humanity's free and entirely voluntary conformity with heaven, conceptualized the highest ideal of life as freedom or "a firm existence, which our intellect acquires through immediate union with God, so that it can produce ideas in itself, and outside itself effects agreeing well with its nature, without its effects being subjected, however, to any external causes by which they can be changed or transformed."⁶⁰

Leibniz's substantive contact with the organismic conviction of China was via Spinoza. On the way from Paris to the Court of Hanover in 1676, he made a special detour to The Hague and met the Dutch philosopher in person for at least three days and possibly a week. Before that momentous encounter, he had already learned diligently about the main contents of Spinoza's monistic philosophy in 1675 in Paris from Walther Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708), a mathematician and fellow German compatriot, who had earned the trust and respect of Spinoza in 1674 and had been given extracts by Spinoza from his then unpublished masterpiece the *Ethics*. "In a philosophical as well as a literal sense," as Matthew Stewart points out in a recent study of the two European philosophers, "Spinoza opened a door for Leibniz."⁶¹ Leibniz did not seem to have any idea then of any possible connection of Spinoza with the Far East, but in the late 1690s he could not have remained unaware of it, because Pierre Bayle (1647-1708) had already drawn public attention to the similarity of Spinoza to the doctrinal beliefs of Chinese Buddhism and to what he called "[a] hypothesis, that is very much in vogue among the Chinese"⁶² by which he meant Neo-Confucianism. In *Theodicy* published in 1710, Leibniz alluded to Bayle's reference to Chinese Buddhism when he described how the belief about the annihilation of all things belonging to us was shared by the Quietists of Europe and "the Quietism of Foë, originator of a great Chinese sect,"⁶³ but he did not mention Bayle's concurrent reference to Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism. Given the reputation of Spinoza as a materialist and atheist philosopher and the need of protection for himself, Leibniz's omission could not have been accidental.

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *Short Treatise*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 149.

⁶¹ Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 293; the direct and indirect contacts of Leibniz with Spinoza are all carefully documented in chapters 1, 8, and 12 of this book.

⁶² Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical*, 2nd Edition (London, 1734), 5:217.

⁶³ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 79.

In a short piece about the civil cult of Confucius written in 1700/1701, Leibniz first mentioned Longobardi by name and showed knowledge of the internal Jesuit debate about the nature of Chinese metaphysics. He claimed then that he did not “know if it is sufficiently clear what in fact is the authentic doctrine of the Chinese literati (especially of the classical ones), officially approved, based on their classical texts,” but he quickly supported Ricci by praising him as “a great man, for following the example of the Church Fathers who interpreted Plato and other philosophers in a Christian fashion.”⁶⁴ In another short piece about Chinese rites and religion written in 1708, he more clearly sided with Ricci in the internal Jesuit dispute, claiming that “nothing prevents us from thinking well of the ancient doctrines until we are compelled to proceed in any other ways.”⁶⁵

In his 1716 letter to Remond, Leibniz superficially maintained his usual support for Ricci. Close to the start of his treatise, he advised against repudiating Chinese cosmology, because “[it] would be highly foolish and presumptuous on our part, having newly arrived compared with them, and scarcely out of barbarism, to want to condemn such an ancient doctrine simply because it does not appear to agree at first glance with our ordinary scholastic notions.”⁶⁶ It was reasonable, he suggested, “to inquire whether we could give it a proper meaning.”⁶⁷ Here, as in his habitual promotion of the new in the name of the old in his own metaphysical thinking, he was reminiscent of Ricci, but the Jesuit father read monotheism into Confucianism for the purpose of subverting it while Leibniz lined Confucianism up with Christianity for the different purpose of deflecting criticism from both it and himself.

Longobardi, for instance, disputed Ricci’s identification of the Chinese Heaven with the Christian God by mentioning how the Neo-Confucian *Li* “is the natural law of Heaven and by its operation all things are governed, according to weight and measure, and conforming to their state; not, however, on the basis of intelligence or reflection, but only by propensity and natural order.”⁶⁸ In response, Leibniz did not distinguish ancient Confucianism from Neo-Confucianism as Ricci would have done. Instead, he simply embraced the Confucian and Neo-Confucian idea of *Tian* (Heaven) or *Li* (principle) by pointing out its similarity to his metaphysical innovation. “For me,” as he said, “I find all this quite excellent and quite in accord with natural theology.”⁶⁹ “It is pure Christianity,” as he said in a different place, “insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts—except for what revelation and grace add to it to improve our nature.”⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Leibniz, “On the Civil Cult of Confucius (1700/1701), in *Writings on China*, 63 and 63.

⁶⁵ Leibniz, “Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion (1708),” in *Writings on China*, 71.

⁶⁶ Leibniz, “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese,” 78.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Cited in Leibniz, “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese,” 92.

⁶⁹ Leibniz, “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese,” 105.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Without hesitation, he included Neo-Confucianism in his approval. “Thus one can even find satisfaction with modern Chinese interpreters, and commend them,” as he said, “since they reduce the governance of Heaven and other things to natural causes and distance themselves from the ignorance of the masses, who seek out supernatural miracles—or rather super-corporeal ones—as well as seek out Spirits like those of a Deus ex Machina.”⁷¹

Leibniz’s iconoclastic view of the world as organic rather than mechanistic or vitalistic was indeed uncannily similar to the cosmology of China including Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, but precisely because they so much resembled each other, his metaphysical innovation could not be Christian in character as he claimed or as scholars of him have so far generally followed him in taking it to be.

Conclusion

One of the things which Leibniz in his long 1716 letter cited Longobardi as saying about Confucianism was the idea of an esoteric or secret doctrine. Leibniz showed no trust in Longobardi on this issue, but the idea of a contrast between a well-hidden private belief and a well-advertised public conviction seems to be most apt and illuminating about Leibniz’s metaphysical thinking and about his interest in China.

In public, he never stopped prompting others to see him as a great conciliator who brought the mechanistic worldview of Cartesianism and the vitalistic cosmology of Platonism and Neo-Platonism together under the theocentric umbrella of the best possible world. In reality, in the name of resuscitating moribund old ideas from his intellectual heritage he quietly and iconoclastically promoted his brave new vision of the world as organic.

⁷¹ Ibid., 116.

Similarly, he appeared in public to be as much motivated in his interest in China by international politics or by what Yuen-Ting Lai calls “a grandiose vision of a world-society, to be realized by the elimination of Islam, the conversion of China and Tartary, and the reconciliation of Protestants and Catholics in Europe”⁷² as in his famous or notorious Egyptian Plan which he concocted around 1672 with his friend Johannes Christian von Boineburg (1622-1672) for the purpose of diverting the aggressive urge of Louis XIV (1638-1715) from Holland. In reality, the most important connection of him with China was the quiet absorption of the characteristically Chinese philosophical idea of organism and the related Chinese monistic doctrine of *tianren heyi* (humanity’s unity with heaven) which, as the noted 20th century Chinese scholar Qian Mu contends, “constitutes the greatest contribution of Chinese culture to mankind.”⁷³ In relation to what he was in private, what Leibniz appeared in public was rarely more than smoke and mirrors. To understand the real and radical import of his metaphysical thinking and his inspirational debt to China in this regard, it seems crucially important to recognize this fact.

⁷² Yuen-Ting Lai, “Leibniz and Chinese Thought,” in *Leibniz, Mysticism and Religion*, ed. Allison P. Coudert, Richard H. Popkin, and Gordon M. Weiner (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 136-168, 142.

⁷³ Qian Mu, *Shijie Jushi yu Zhongguo Wenhua* (The World Situation and Chinese Culture) (Taipei: Lantai Chubanshe, 2001), 376.