

Forum: "Chineseness" and "Europeanness" 【專題論文】

Admiration of China and Classical Chinese  
Thought in the Radical Enlightenment (1685-1740)  
歐洲激進啟蒙時期（1685-1740）  
對中國經典及思想之讚賞

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**關鍵詞：**中國經典哲學、儒學、物活論、自然神學、教皇體制、  
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## Abstract

The European controversy over how to interpret Chinese Confucianist thought, during the early eighteenth century left the Radical Enlightenment's conception of Confucianism as essentially atheistic, materialist and as resembling Spinozism, in a generally rather strong position. This was partly because the subversive argument put forward by writers like Isaac Vossius, William Temple, Saint-Evremond, Pierre Bayle, Anthony Collins and Nicolas Freret was, in effect, supported by one wing of the moderate mainstream Enlightenment, most notably by Arnauld, Malebranche, and La Croze, who arrived at broadly the same conclusion out of opposite motives, wanting thereby to damage the reputation of classical Chinese thought (and also that of the Jesuits). The opposing view upheld by the Jesuits and Leibniz, according to which classical Chinese philosophy embraces "natural theology" and a providential God, did not prosper so well as it came to be opposed by the Papacy and condemned by the Sorbonne.

## 摘要

十八世紀初期的歐洲，存在著一場關於如何詮釋中國儒學思想的激烈爭論：

激進啟蒙運動將儒學視為本質上的無神論與唯物論，為斯賓諾莎主義的一種變形；這類見解一部份是受到諸如弗西鄂斯、坦普爾、聖埃弗勒蒙、培爾、柯林斯與弗雷烈等人顛覆性的著作所致，但實際上更為主流啟蒙陣營的一支溫和派（以阿爾諾、馬勒伯朗士神父與拉科塞等人為代表）所影響。這支溫和派大抵上接受激進派的主張，更無意與之對抗，因而也接受貶抑中國古代思想聲望的立場。

反對陣營的主力為萊布尼茲與耶穌會成員，認為中國古代哲學緊扣著「自然神學」與「天命所授」等概念；這種見解由於遭逢教皇體制的打壓，並受到索邦神學院的責難而未能興盛。

A vital challenge for the western Enlightenment as a whole in the eighteenth century was the question of how to classify 'the other'. Efforts were made by the Europeans to reach general assessments of Arabic, Indian, Japanese and Chinese thought. But as so often in cases of attempts at cross-cultural evaluation the result was curiously self-centered and limited. Western philosophers valiantly strove to grasp the fundamentals of classical Chinese thought but ended up, in the main, merely mirroring their own prior obsessions.

The Radical Enlightenment's enthusiasm for what it took to be classical Chinese thought originated during the third quarter of the seventeenth century, among a small but remarkable group of libertine Deist Neo-Epicureans. Apparently, the first esprit fort, or 'suspected atheist', as Jacob Friedrich Reimmann (1668-1743), the German historian of atheism called him,<sup>1</sup> to hit on using Chinese culture as a subversive strategy within western intellectual debate, was the Dutch Deist, Isaac Vossius (1618-89) who already in his dispute with La Peyrère, in the late 1650s, deployed the evidence of Chinese antiquity, and the ancient character of their philosophy, as part of his campaign to undermine confidence in Biblical chronology, and notions of *prisca theologia*, as well as the indispensability of Christian Revelation for establishing the principles of morality. Opponents of Vossius, then and later complained that despite knowing no Chinese, or having ever been to China, Vossius had vastly praised and extolled the Chinese, Chinese thought, morality and culture, lauding its antiquity and inflating it, supposedly out of all proportion to its real worth into one of the greatest achievements of humanity.<sup>2</sup> Here was the beginning of a tradition of thought in the West which would culminate in the mid eighteenth century with the loud praise for China and the Chinese voiced by Voltaire.

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1 J. F., Reimmann, *Historia universalis Atheismi et Atheorum* (Hildesheim, 1725), pp. 480-481.

2 *ibid.*, 179; Christoph August Heumann, *Acta Philosophorum* xi (1720), pp. 717-720, 774, 778.

In his *Variarum Observationum Liber* (London, 1685), Vossius' most notable contribution to radical thought, he argued that ancient China was not just the oldest but also the world's most admirable and praiseworthy society if one measures achievement, as one should, in terms of peace, stability, and the cultivation of the arts and sciences.<sup>3</sup> He particularly eulogized the accomplishments of Chinese science, technology and medicine, stressing that it was they, not the Europeans, who had invented printing and, moreover, done so 1,500 years before the West.<sup>4</sup> The reason for their unparalleled success, he suggested was that they had come closer than others to achieving a 'Platonic republic' where the most vital affairs are entrusted to 'philosophers and lovers of philosophy': 'quod si peccent reges, tanta in admonendis illis philosophorum est libertas, quanta vix olim prophetarum apud Israelitas' [so that were the rulers to err, the philosophers enjoy such great freedom to admonish those things as formerly was scarcely even found among the Israelite prophets.]<sup>5</sup>

The stress of the vital role of classical Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism, was similarly reflected in the writings of other early exponents of this disturbing new 'principe des esprits forts' [principle of the freethinkers] such as the French libertine, Saint-Evremond, and, the English diplomat Sir William Temple (1628-99); and it is undoubtedly significant that Vossius, Saint-Evremond and Temple knew each other and in the later 1660s, indeed resided in the same town—The Hague—where they were neighbours and all three, as it happens, were on friendly terms with Spinoza. In their different ways, all four men became involved in a complex subterranean revolt against conventional religion, morality, philosophy and authority. Labeled an 'atheist' by his foes while praised by Dutch libertine friends as a wise republican, loving Holland, reportedly, as if it were his own country, 'parce

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3 Isaac Vossius, *Variarum Observationum Liber* (London, 1685), pp. 56-57, 77; J. F., Reimmann, *Historia Philosophia Sinensis* (new edn. Braunschweig, 1741), p. 47.

4 Vossius, *Variarum Observationum Liber*, pp. 59, 75-76, 81.

5 *ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

qu'elle étoit libre' [because it was free],<sup>6</sup> Temple fully approved Saint-Evremond's preference for Epicurean moral philosophy and the pursuit of calm enjoyment of life and philosophical peace of mind, tendencies integrally related to his Sinophilia.

A true cosmopolitan, much influenced by Italian and French skeptics, libertines, and republicans, like Montaigne, Bocaccio, Machiavelli and 'Padre Paolo' [ie. Sarpi],<sup>7</sup> Temple greatly admired what he knew of classical China and especially Confucius 'the most learned, wise and virtuous of all the Chinese'.<sup>8</sup> He too held there is no better model for men to emulate in organizing their lives than the wisdom of Confucius. Like Vossius and Saint-Evremond, Temple was struck above all by the close parallelism between philosophical insight based on reason and the practical ordering of human life and politics on earth. Confucius' 'chief principle', held Temple, was that everyone ought 'to study and endeavour the improving and perfecting of his own natural reason to the greatest height he is capable, so as he may never (or as seldom as can be) err and deviate from the law of nature in the course and conduct of his life' and, furthermore, that precisely 'in this perfection of natural reason consists the perfection of body and mind and the utmost or supreme happiness of mankind'.<sup>9</sup> This Neo-Epicurean admiration for Confucius later prompted Reimmann to exclaim, echoing Buddeus' maxim about Spinozism before Spinoza: 'fuisse in China Epicureanismum ante Epicurum et post Epicurum' [there was Epicureanism in China both before and after Epicurus].<sup>10</sup>

The emphatic Sinophilia of Vossius, Temple and Saint-Evremond subsequently developed into an integral feature of the European Radical Enlightenment and is reflected in the admiring remarks of a large number of writers, none of whom had actually been to China and whose knowledge of that country was almost en-

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6 Quoted in S. H. Monk, "Introduction," to Sir William Temple, *Five Miscellaneous Essays* ed., S. H. Monk (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1963), p. viii.

7 Temple, *Five Miscellaneous Essays*, p. 65.

8 *ibid.*, p. 113.

9 *ibid.*, pp. 113-114; Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001), p. 606.

10 Reimmann, *Historia Philosophiae Sinensis*, p. 9.

tirely based on travellers' and missionaries' accounts and reports and on the 'image' of China projected within the Republic of Letters, in western Europe ,as a result of the controversies surrounding the 'Chinese Rites' quarrel within the Catholic Church and the dispute among the philosophers over whether or not Confucianism should be classified as 'atheistic'.

During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, for instance, the learned Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749), a protoge of the Spinozist Boulainvilliers who is known to have been the author of the atheistic clandestine text *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, written around 1725, subscribed fully to the opinion of Vossius and the Evremondistes, remarking: Confucius is full of good maxims 'qu'il seroit à souhaiter, pour le bonheur du genre humain, que tous les hommes pratiquassent' [which it would be desirable, for the happiness of the human race, that all men should practice] .<sup>11</sup> The opinion of the Italian radical writer, Count Alberto Radicati di Passerano (1698-1737), an exile from Turin and from London who died in lonely poverty, in 1737, in Rotterdam, was very similar: 'the followers of Confucius have precepts which contain most excellent morals, with very sublime ideas of that Supreme Power which gives life and motion to created beings.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in his *Entretiens* of 1723, Bruzen de la Martinière, a French expert on the book trade and writer of radical opinions, based in Holland, notable for having denounced black slavery as a disgrace to all mankind and who maintained 'la raison est la même dans tous les hommes, mais tous ne la consultant pas également' [that reason is the same in all men, but all do not consult it equally], stressed the special value for the whole of humanity of the social, moral and political thought of Confucius, a philosopher, he thought, who should be praised far above Machiavelli.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Fréret, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, p. 112.

12 Alberto Radicati, *A Succinct History of Priesthood, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1737), p. 36.

13 [Antoine Bruzen de la Martinière], *Entretiens des ombres aux Champs Elisées sur divers sujets d'histoire, de politique et de morale* (2nd edn. 2 Vols., Amsterdam, 1723), pp. i, 586, 591-592, 596.

Confucius' philosophy was viewed by western Europe's freethinkers, radical Deists, esprits forts and Spinozists as a moral and political system which had positively influenced the development of China, over many centuries, and was potentially a model for all men. In their eyes, it was an added advantage that such a perspective was highly problematic and subversive from a Christian and conservative 'enlightened' view-point, especially since many late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century European observers tended to approach classical Chinese thought within the context of 'atheism'. The full extent of the problem this posed for those of more conventional opinions was brought out by the highly controversial propositions about the moral and political feasibility of an atheistic society put forward by Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), in various of his books. As one of his chief detractors, the Swiss erudite Jean-Pierre de Crousaz pointed out, Bayle classified classical Chinese philosophy on the one hand as form of Spinozistic atheism, not, that is as an unsophisticated, unsystematic primitive atheism, such as that, allegedly, of the American Indians, but 'un athéisme positif' [positive atheism]—with Confucius and Mencius supposedly setting aside metaphysics infused with the idea of God in favour of 'le système opposé [opposite system]- equating Nature with God, while, simultaneously agreeing with the Jesuits that Confucianism upholds the highest and most praiseworthy moral and political values and well serves 'le bien public' [the public good].<sup>14</sup>

In his late works, with plainly subversive intent, Bayle had deliberately equated 'les Spinozistes et les Lettrez de la Chine' [Spinozists and Chinese learned men] as being just as aware as the most pious men of other nations of secular morality and the 'diverses sortes de bien' in human society.<sup>15</sup> China was not, in his view, the only focus of Spinozist sentiment in the East: he had already proposed

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14 Pierre Bayle, *Continuation des Pensées diverses sur la comète* (2 Vols., Rotterdam, 1705), pp. ii, 728-729; Pierre Bayle, *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial* (5 Vols. Rotterdam, 1704-1707), pp. iv, 139-141; Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, *Examen du Pyrrhonisme ancien et moderne* (The Hague, 1733), pp. 438, 689.

15 Bayle, *Réponse aux questions*, pp. iv, 434; Bayle *Continuation*, pp. i, 68-69, 73, 134-135.

earlier, in his *Dictionnaire* (1697) that Spinoza's 'atheism' was also the dogma 'de plusieurs sectes repandues dans l'Asie' [of several sects spread through Asia].<sup>16</sup> Nor by any means was Confucianism the only relevant Chinese doctrine. But it was especially around the question of Confucius and Confucianism that the main controversy among Europe's philosophers concerning China was to be fought out. From the 1690s, European readers were continually bombarded with the idea that classical Chinese culture was quintessentially 'atheistic' and, at the same time, 'Spinozistic'. As the radical Deist, Lévesque de Burigny, expressed it, echoing Bayle, in 1724: 'les Chinois ont aussi leurs Spinozistes, dont le principe est que tout est un; ils sont en grand nombre' [the Chinese also have their Spinozists whose principle is that all is one and they are very numerous] according to them, 'l'univers n'est composé que d'une seule substance' [the universe is composed of only one substance]; similarly, 'les japonnois', he added, again following Bayle, 'ne sont pas éloignés du système, que Spinoza a tâché de faire valoir' [the Japanese are not far removed from the system which Spinoza tried to establish].<sup>17</sup>

The remarkable thing is that this same point was emphatically asserted again and again by both radical writers and one faction among their more conservative Christian opponents, both Catholic and Protestant, in almost the same terms for entirely opposite and opposed purposes. The former made these comparisons approvingly, in order to raise China's image and damage traditional structures of authority and morality in the West while the latter said the same things in order to disparage China and Chinese culture and defend western Christianity against the freethinkers and Spinozists. Thus more or less the same set of ideas and phrases concerning China, Chinese culture and tradition were integrally employed as part of at least two opposing philosophico-theological strategies. A particular implication of the rhetoric on this subject of the radicals, was that Spinozism was not only an ancient way

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16 *ibid.* pp. i, 68; Yuen-Ting Lai, "Leibniz and Chinese Thought" in A. Coudert *et al.* eds., *Leibniz, Mysticism and Religion* (Dordrecht, 1998), pp. 136-168, 154.

17 Jean Lévesque de Burigny, *Histoire de la philosophie payenne* (2 Vols., The Hague, 1724), pp. i, 100, 102.



of thinking but also, however much it might be decried in contemporary Europe, a 'natural' way for men to think and potentially—even perhaps actually—the mode of thought of most of mankind.

Hence, André-François Boureau-Deslandes reaffirmed in his *Histoire critique de la philosophie*, of 1737, that most nations of the East adhered still to 'le même sentiment' [the same opinion] as Spinoza, drawing an especially close parallel between Confucius' thought and that of the 3rd century Greek philosopher, Strato whom Bayle had identified as the closest classical equivalent to Spinoza.<sup>18</sup> Similarly the fashionable French Deistic writer, Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens (1703-71), who often referred in favourable terms to China, and one of whose chief works the *Lettres chinoises* (5 vols. The Hague, 1739) revolves around a fictitious Chinese visitor to Paris regularly writing to his friends back in China, has his observer report back that in Paris and elsewhere in Europe innumerable men now follow a philosophy closely resembling that of the Chinese literati and that its European originator was a Dutch thinker called 'Spinoza' though he was perhaps only its 'restaurateur' [restorer] since, apparently, it closely resembled the philosophy of various ancient philosophers.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, at the same time, the parallel was continually used to underline what many persisted in regarding as the atheism and immorality of the classical Chinese, a position opposed to that of the Spinozists and freethinkers and at the same time opposed to the policies of the Jesuits who all along strove to persuade the Papacy and the rest of the rest of the Catholic Church that the moral and other traditions of the Chinese were not atheistic and could be usefully incorporated into a Jesuit-forged Chinese Christian culture. The main discussion about how to classify Confu-

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18 André-François Boureau-Deslandes, *Histoire critique de la philosophie* (3 Vols. Amsterdam, 1737), pp. ii, 296-29 and iv, 30; Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution* (1954; 2nd edn, Paris, 1982), p. 352.

19 Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises ou correspondance philosophique, historique et critique* (5 Vols., The Hague, 1739), pp. i, 106; Vernière, *Spinoza*, 353; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. i, 588.

cianism had begun after the publication, in 1687, in Latin, of several classical Confucian texts under the title *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. These were prepared by a group of Jesuits, headed by Father Philippe Couplet, in order to prove classical Chinese thought was not in fact 'atheistic'. They did so as part of their campaign to defend the long-standing Jesuit practice of mingling Confucian and Christian concepts, terms and rituals in their missions in China; consequently, they placed much stress on the alleged underlying theism as well as the great antiquity, moral uprightness and reasonableness of Confucianism.<sup>20</sup> The *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* argues that Confucius had always cultivated a vigorous notion of a providential God, and that the terms Tien and Xam-ti in classical Confucianism expressed not the universe, as the opponents of the Jesuits maintained, but the Divinity.

To the Jesuits, modern Chinese atheism was real enough. But was also something in no way genuinely Confucian. Couplet warned that to designate as 'atheists' the classical Confucians whom most commentators agreed had been outstandingly wise and virtuous would be catastrophic; for that would be to concede that 'virtuous atheists' exist, that virtue and piety are distinct, and that denial of God can arise from something other than moral depravity.<sup>21</sup> Thus while he agreed with Jesuit critics, such as Father Nicola Longobardi (1565-1655), in dismissing Neo-Confucianism, and especially the most eminent Neo-Confucian, Chu Hsi (AD.1130-1200), as 'atheistic', Couplet strove to defend Confucius and classical Chinese philosophy and make their texts and ideas better known. It was his firm belief that for centuries before Moses, as well as Christ, the Chinese had possessed genuine knowledge of the true God, and of morality, which they had gleaned from nature but especially tradition, a case powerfully reiterated, in 1696, with the publication of another work by a Jesuit missionary, Louis Le Comte's widely-consulted *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Alan Kors, *Atheism in France* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), Vol. i, p. 163.

21 Kors, *Atheism*, pp. i, 164.

22 *ibid.*, 169-70; Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cam-

Unlike ancient Greece and Rome, where only a handful of philosophers had grasped the truths of monotheism and morality while most of the people had remained sunk in idolatry and superstition, in China, held Le Comte, *prisca theologia* had prevailed, shaping the religious traditions and culture of the people and enabling them effectively to resist atheism as well as superstition and idolatry. While they employed the old *prisca theologia* concept, the Jesuits also deployed it in a novel way, so as to fit the Chinese context. In the religious thought of ancient China, they held, one finds clear traces of an authentic ancient theology, the antiquity and genuineness of which were more certain than in the case of the Corpus Hermeticum or Orphica. The Chinese, held Le Comte and his allies, had preserved since over 2,000 years before Christ intact an authentic knowledge of the true God and it was this that had enabled their society to uphold, ever since that time, a truly excellent moral code and system of social thought as pure as that taught by Christianity.<sup>23</sup>

Among the first philosophers to react to the new material, after 1687, was the Jansenist Cartesian, Antoine Arnauld who, being no friend of the Jesuits, was entirely won over by dissident critics such as Longobardi. His concluded from his reading of the Latin translations of the Confucian texts, that the ancient Confucians had never known any spiritual substance separate from matter 'et qu'ainsi ils n'avoient point eu de vraie notion, ni de Dieu, ni des anges, ni de nôtre âme' [and that thus they had not had a true notion either of God, or of angels, or of our soul].<sup>24</sup> But as in so many other instances it was especially Bayle who fixed the contours of the ensuing debate.<sup>25</sup> His chief interventions in the Chinese philosophy controversy were published towards the end of his life, in the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* (1705) and the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial* (1706), writings in which the

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bridge, 1990), p. 138.

23 Kors, *Atheism*, pp. i, 169-170.

24 Arnauld, *Morale Pratique*, in Antoine Arnauld *Oeuvres* (43 Vols., Paris, 1775-1783), pp. xxxiv, 304; *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* (Oct., 1692), pp. 94-99, reviewing Arnauld.

25 Zoli, Sergio, "Pierre Bayle e la Cina," *Studi Francesi* xxxiii (1990), pp. 467-472, 468, 471; Sergio Zoli, *Europa Libertina tra Controriforma e Illuminismo* (Bologna, 1989), pp. 206-209.

philosopher of Rotterdam introduced his convoluted and deliberately perplexing double contention that while the classical Chinese believed human happiness and social stability depend on morality, and their accomplishment in moral philosophy was unparalleled, nevertheless they also held that the beauty, symmetry, and order which one sees in the universe are, as his enemy, Crousaz indignantly expressed it, 'l'ouvrage d'une nature qui n'a point de connoissance' [the work of a nature that lacks intelligence].<sup>26</sup> In other words, Bayle claimed the Chinese upheld the most elevated morality and social system but one which was essentially atheistic and Spinozistic.

Confucianism, for Bayle, like Malebranche, possessed a purely rational structure grounded in nature rather than any transcendental realm which identified Nature as the totality of what is and therefore as the exclusive source of its own laws and principles.<sup>27</sup> Bayle's radical analysis was subsequently espoused by the fiercely anti-Jesuit electoral librarian at Berlin, Mathurin Veyssière de La Croze, and by Anthony Collins (1676-1729) who similarly equates the 'Literati of China' with Strato and Xenophanes (another Greek thinker labeled 'Spinozistic' by Bayle) who, adds Collins, 'all seem to me to agree with Spinoza'.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to what has sometimes been contended,<sup>29</sup> it seems quite clear that Bayle, like Collins, was in effect asserting both the moral superiority and the greater coherence of Chinese and Japanese thought to that of the Europeans.

In his *Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois sur l'existence et la nature de Dieu* [Dialogue of a Christian philosopher with a Chinese phi-

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26 Crousaz, *Examen*, pp. 410-411, 675; J.S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London, 1960), pp. 263-264; Yuen-Ting Lai "The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche," *Journal for the History of Philosophy* xxiii (1985), pp. 151-178, 153.

27 Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)* (1932, repr. Geneva, 1971), pp., 314-327, 332; Yuen-Ting Lai, "Linking of Spinoza," p. 167.

28 Charles Etienne Jordan, *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de Mr de la Croze* (Amsterdam, 1741), p. 170; [Anthony Collins], *An Answer to Mr. Clarke's Third Defense of his Letter to Mr. Dodwell* (London, 1708), p. 89; Zoli, *Europa libertina*, p. 227; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. i, 617.

29 Yuen-Ting Lai, "Linking of Spinoza," p. 177.

philosopher about the existence and nature of God], of 1708, Father Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) who had for years been fiercely criticized by the Jesuits, robustly attacked the Jesuit notion of a Chinese *prisca theologia*. For Malebranche, classical Chinese thought, or at any rate Confucianism was a purely monistic philosophy which nowhere undertakes a thoroughgoing differentiation of body and mind. On the contrary, he, like Bayle, but with opposing purposes, believed Confucian thought conflates body and mind into one, reducing the totality of what is to a single substance.<sup>30</sup> He emphasized that the neo-Confucianist principle of Li, though an emanation notionally distinct from matter (Ch'i), is not conceived as existing independently of matter and while it expresses the supreme rationality of the universe, lacks intelligence as well as freedom of will. Hence, the Li of Malebranche's 'Chinese philosopher' acts only through the necessity of its nature without knowing or wishing anything that it creates or influences.<sup>31</sup> What in the West is called 'spirit' or 'soul' really consists not of pure spirit but 'de la matière organisée et subtilisée' [of matter organized and made subtle].<sup>32</sup>

Malebranche firmly rejects these notions, of course, holding that the Chinese are grossly in error in supposing that our perceptions 'ne soient que des modifications de la matière' [are only modifications of matter],<sup>33</sup> since Nature can be shown to be devoid of motion and sensibility, indeed wholly inert. From this it follows, held Malebranche, that the Spinozist-Confucian hypothesis of force and movement innate in bodies is utterly false as well as morally pernicious. By depicting Confu-

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30 *ibid.*, 156; G. Cantelli, *Teologia e ateismo* (Florence, 1969), p. 263; W.W. Davis, "China, the Confucian Ideal and the European Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* xliv (1983), p. 534; D.E. Mungello, "European philosophical Responses to non-European Culture," in Dan Garber and M. Ayers eds., *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (2 Vols., Cambridge, 1998) pp. i, 97-98.

31 Nicolas Malebranche, *Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien et d'un philosophe chinois* (1708) in A. Robinet ed., *Œuvres Complètes* xv (Paris, 1958), pp. 3, 14; A. Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz* (Paris, 1955), p. 483.

32 Malebranche, *Entretien*, p. 12; Yuen-Ting Lai, "Linking of Spinoza," p. 157; D.E., Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xli (1980), pp. 551-578 here, 556, 559.

33 Malebranche, *Entretien*, p. 13.

cianism as a system in which the active, creative force in the universe, 'Li' is neither 'libre ni intelligent' [free nor intelligent], and is inseparable from the inert matter it infuses, he just as effectively bracketed the debate about classical Chinese thought with that about Spinoza, as did Bayle, albeit he does not spell this out directly in the dialogue itself. Rather he maintains, in unstated opposition to both, that in our universe the rationality and energy animating Nature must derive wholly from outside, via a decree of God.<sup>34</sup> Malebranche had already attacked Spinoza, much earlier, in his *Entretiens sur la métaphysique*, of 1688.<sup>35</sup> But there too the attack had been indirect, an allusion rather than something explicit.

No one was misled, however, by Malebranche's manoeuvre. When Malebranche says 'Chinois', retorted his Jesuit critics 'il pense Spinoza' [he means Spinoza].<sup>36</sup> Perfectly correct. But by doing so, Malebranche not only struck at his Jesuit foes, especially Father Joseph René Tournemine (1661-1739), tarring them with Spinoza – in effect paying Tournemine back for denouncing him as a virtual 'Spinosiste', in his own coin – but could reaffirm his own strict dualism in direct opposition to one-substance monism thereby convincingly demonstrating the wide gulf between his own philosophy and the Spinozism with which the Jesuits insisted he showed telling affinities.<sup>37</sup> His analysis of Confucian philosophy was thus partly incidental to what, to him, was a still more important undertaking. Malebranche himself subsequently admitted as much when he declared, answering Jesuit complaints that his *Entretien d'un philosophe* was transparently an attack on them, that actually he wrote not to harm them, or the mission in China, but primarily to com-

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34 Malebranche, *Entretien*, p. 40; Robinet, *Malebranche et Leibniz*, p. 487; Yuen-Ting Lai, "Linking of Spinoza," pp. 173-174.

35 Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* ed., N. Jolley (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 149-151; Joseph Moreau, "Malebranche et le spinosisme," in Nicolas Malebranche, *Correspondance avec J. J. Dortous de Mairan* ed., J. Moreau (Paris, 1947), pp. 2-3.

36 Malebranche, *Entretien*, appendix, pp. 42-3.

37 Yuen-Ting Lai, "Linking of Spinoza," p. 167.

bat the threat of Spinozism which he (like the Jesuits) thought was now making 'de grands ravages' [severe ravages] in France.<sup>38</sup>

Malebranche used the debate about Chinese thought to try to advance the cause of rationalistic dualism as a viable Christian metaphysics in the eyes of the French clergy and court. It was a shrewd tactic which, however, had the disadvantage of provoking Tournemine and another Jesuit, Jean Hardouin (1646-1729), into redoubling their attacks on his own philosophy.<sup>39</sup> The Jesuits granted that 'le système de l'impie Spinoza fait icy [ie. in France] de grands ravages' [the system of the impious Spinoza was making severe ravages in France], and that this imparted added urgency also to the debate about China, but argued that Malebranche in publishing a dialogue in which he postulates an extensive 'rapport entre les impietez de Spinoza et celle de nôtre philosophe chinois' [relationship between Spinoza's impieties and that of our Chinese philosophy] had merely slandered the Jesuits and concocted a ridiculous travesty of Confucianism while doing nothing effective to combat Spinozism.

The deep division on the Catholic side between those supporting the Jesuit view and those, including Arnould and Malebranche, opposing it greatly weakened the position of the Church in the face of the freethinking, Spinozist and radical Deist strategy of praising China and Chinese classical thought. If the Church was successfully to avoid the looming pitfall of 'atheism' tied to moral uprightness into which Bayle designed to drag them, the theologians had either to come up with a convincing demonstration that the classical Chinese were 'atheists' and lacked moral uprightness or alternatively that they were indeed admirably 'virtuous' but were not 'atheists'.<sup>40</sup> After years of bitter wrangling and strenuous maneuvering in Rome, the former stance was endorsed by the cardinals and the *prisca theologia* thesis of the

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38 Pinot, *La Chine*, p. 331; Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy," p. 561.

39 *ibid.*, p. 564.

40 O. Roy, *Leibniz et la Chine* (Paris, 1972), pp. 34-35; Kors, *Atheism*, pp. i, 171-175.

Jesuit Confucionists, as Arnould dubbed them, formally rejected. Accordingly, the thesis that 'Li' is a memory or premonition of the providential God of the Christians in classical Chinese civilization descended from *prisca theologia* was formally condemned by the Sorbonne in 1700.<sup>41</sup>

All along it had been obvious to connoisseurs of the philosophical-theological warfare of the age, that whichever solution the Papacy decided on would be fraught with difficulties and risk. While there were formidable arguments against supporting the Jesuits, equally, by condemning Couplet's and Le Comte's arguments, and sanctioning the view that Chinese thought is essentially 'atheistic', the cardinals not only questioned the basis of decades of Jesuit missionizing in China but also threatened the philosophically vital argument, from *consensus gentium*, for the existence of God. For condemning the Jesuit view, inevitably implied that much of the world's population was, after all, 'atheistic' while simultaneously admitting that what many judged an admirable moral code had been devoutly nurtured and taught over many centuries, by 'atheists'. One way of getting around the apparent boost this seemed to give to Bayle's seditious thesis that a well-ordered society of atheists is possible was to argue that while the Chinese Emperor, mandarins and scholars may have been Confucianists and atheists, the Chinese people were not, and that they adhered to praiseworthy moral standards because they believed in divine reward and retribution and in an authentically God-centered religion, even if it was a false one.<sup>42</sup>

The argument from *prisca theologia* relied on the notion of a pristine moral order, God's original revelation to man, delivered not by reason but a supreme lawgiver and teacher appointed by God to instruct humanity. This Lawgiver, the progenitor and promulgator of all morality, science, and human knowledge, held a number of the Jesuit publicists, was the Hermes Trismegistus of the Egyptians and

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41 *ibid.*; J. Charnley, Pierre Bayle. *Reader of Travel Literature* (Bern, 1998), p. 22; Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, p. 138; Zoli, *Europa libertina*, pp. 208, 211.

42 Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, *Apologie de la religion chrétienne* (1769; 2nd edn. 2 Vols. Paris, 1776), pp. ii, 299.



Greeks, his Chinese name being Fu Hsi, the primal god-man, and founder of Chinese culture, identified by some with Enoch. Hence, there was no atheism in classical Chinese thought and not just an acknowledged providential God but also the doctrines of Heaven, the Fall, the Saviour, Redemption, fallen angels and the Immaculate Conception. Allusions to Christ, insisted key Jesuit missionaries, featured integrally in the authentic Chinese classics.<sup>43</sup> This fitted with their conception of the universal presence of the Christian 'mysteries' and of a submerged expression of Christian truth everywhere, in symbols and arcane traditions. The idea of a single source and primal tradition, uniting, but also veiled behind the apparent differences of, both western and Chinese theological and religious traditions, remained a powerfully seductive one over several decades.

Malebranche's intervention in the debate about China, Chinese thought and morality was bound to provoke two different counter-attacks, as we have seen, from the radical fringe, on the one hand, and from the supporters of the Jesuits, on the other. By far the most distinguished supporter of the Jesuits among the philosophers was the great German thinker, Leibniz. Having studied and annotated Malebranche's text in November 1715, Leibniz in the last months of his life composed his *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois* (1716) presented in the form of a letter to a Catholic correspondent who was his intercessor with Malebranche.<sup>44</sup> Here, Leibniz, robustly contradicted Malebranche and warmly endorsed what he construed as the main tradition of classical Chinese philosophy, broadly accepting the claims of Le Comte and Couplet and dismissing the arguments of Arnauld, Bayle and Malebranche. Leibniz had, over many years, shown an altogether more active interest in learning about Chinese culture and philosophy than the other western philosophers.<sup>45</sup> To his mind it mattered fundamentally that the classical

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43 *ibid.*, p. 479.

44 Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy," pp. 575-577; Schmidt-Glintzer, "'Atheistische Traditionen' in China," in F. Niewohner and P. Pluta eds., *Atheismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance* (Wiesbaden, 1999), pp. 273-275.

45 Mungello, "European philosophical Responses," pp. 88, 97.

Chinese were after all not 'atheists' but believed in a God who is an intelligencia supramundana, and in spiritual substance and divine providence as well as immortality of the soul.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, the great German thinker was increasingly impressed by the unmatched antiquity of classical Chinese thought, seeing Confucius merely as the reformer of a much older tradition reaching back to the shadowy figure of Fu-Hsi. He was drawn to the idea that one finds in Fu-Hsi 'une méthode générale et très-parfaite des sciences, un système numéraire semblable à celui de Pythagoras' [a perfect general method for the sciences, a numerical system resembling that of Pythagoras] and was certainly drawn also to the notion that primal Chinese and western wisdom might perhaps have descended from a common source, whether in Hermes Trismegistus or another such equivalent,<sup>47</sup> hence certainly moving in the direction even if not going quite so far as the more extreme Jesuit claims that virtually the entire system of true religion 'se trouve renfermé dans les livres classiques des Chinois' [is to be found within the classical books of the Chinese].<sup>48</sup>

Leibniz, though, was unique among the philosophers in being attracted to this style of reasoning. The rest of the philosophers, both Catholic and Protestant failed to be swayed. Meanwhile, much the same critique of classical Chinese thought as was deployed by Malebranche against the Jesuits, was being recycled with slight modification, for opposite purposes by one of the most accomplished exponents of radical ideas of the age—the learned Fréret whose treatise on Chinese writing,

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46 G.W. Leibniz, "Lettre de Mr G.W. de Leibniz sur la philosophie chinoise," in G.W. Leibniz, *Opera omnia, Nunc primum collecta, in classes distribuita* ed., Ludovicus Dutens (6 Vols. Geneva, 1768), pp. iv, part I, 169-210, 170, 174, 204-205; D.J., Cook, and H. Rosemont, "The Pre-established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought," *Journal for the History of Ideas* xlii (1981), pp. 253-267; Davis, "China," pp. 535-536; D. F. Lach, "Leibniz and China," in J. Ching and G. Oxtoby eds., *Discovering China: European Interpretations in the Enlightenment* (Rochester, NY, 1992), pp. 109-111.

47 Wolff, Christian, *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia* (1721) ed., M. Albrecht (Hamburg, 1985), pp. 40-45; Albrecht, "Einleitung," pp. xx, xxii.

48 *Bibliothèque Germanique* xxxv (1736), pp. ii, 175.

though not published until 1731, was composed for an address to the Parisian Académie des Inscriptions, in December 1718.<sup>49</sup> Fréret was a scholar who had actually learnt some Chinese, having studied the language with Arcade Hoang, a bilingual young Chinese, a friend of his and a protégé of the director of the Bibliothèque du Roi, in Paris, the Abbé Bignon, where he was employed as a translator. Over the years, Fréret was to display a sustained interest in China, corresponding with missionaries there and writing several discourses on Chinese culture, chronology, and literature, between 1714 and 1733.<sup>50</sup> It was his considered view that Confucian philosophy was entirely at variance 'with what most European philosophers considered the first principles and 'maximes d'éternelle vérité en morale et métaphysique' [maxims of eternal truth in morality and metaphysics];<sup>51</sup> he scorned the idea that the Chinese thinkers believed in 'natural religion'. Chinese philosophy, he asserted, practically echoing Malebranche, 'n'admet ni création ni providence; et par conséquent ne reconnoit point de Dieu, c'est à dire, d'Être distingué de l'Univers, qui ait produit ou créé le monde, et qui gouverne ou le conserve en consequence des loix qu'il a établies' [admits neither the Creation nor Providence; and, consequently, acknowledges no God, that is no being distinct from the universe, who produced or created the world and who governs or conserves it in accordance with the laws he has established].<sup>52</sup> Thus, Fréret connected Confucianism with Spinozism in the reader's mind just as forcefully as Arnauld, Bayle and Malebranche, albeit for very different motives, than the first or last.<sup>53</sup>

Already in his notes on Couplet's Confucius Sinarum philosophus, Fréret had ridiculed the Jesuit's credulity regarding miracles and self-delusion, stressing that Confucius 'ne parle jamais ni du souverain estre ni de l'immortalité del'âme ni de

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49 Danielle Elisseef-Poisle, *Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749). Reflexions d'un humaniste du XVIIIe siècle sur la Chine. Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* (Paris, 1978), p. 72.

50 C. Larrère, "Fréret et la Chine: du philosophique des langues à l'historique de la chronologie," in Ch. Grell and C. Volpilhac-Auger eds., *Nicolas Fréret, légende et vérité* (Oxford, 1994), p.109.

51 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 163.

52 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 166; Pinot, *La Chine*, pp. 345-346.

53 Larrère, "Fréret et la Chine," pp. 114-115; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 374.

l'autre vie' [never speaks either of a sovereign being nor of the immortality of the soul nor of an after-life']. Confucius, he holds, exhorts men to practice virtue for its own sake 'et pour les avantages qu'elle entraîne nécessairement avec elle par une suite naturelle' [and for the advantages that it necessarily brings with it, as a natural consequence], implying everything the Jesuits had said about the Confucian conception of God, and the relationship between morality and religion in China, was false.<sup>54</sup> He warmly endorsed Confucius' rejection of metaphysics and theology and explains the spirituality of which Confucius speaks as something which is 'uni intimement à toutes choses et qui n'en peut estre séparé', as something comparable to 'l'âme du monde ou a la vertu active des spinozistes' [intimately united to all things and which can not be separated from them].<sup>55</sup> Plainly, concluded Fréret, Confucius had no conception of divine Providence in the Christian sense, his notion of the creative principle in Nature being that of action inherent in matter, 'suivant le système des hylozoïstes' [according to the system of the hylozoists].<sup>56</sup> It was a remarkable intervention but, in essence, merely recapitulated the positions of Vossius, Temple and Bayle.

To sum up, the European controversy over the character of Chinese thought during the Early Enlightenment was thus one of great interest from various points of view. It was also an area where radical ideas were in an exceptionally strong position owing to the deep and unbridgeable divisions over the issue within the Catholic Church, as we see from the multiple resonance of Fréret's retort to both Malebranche and the Jesuits. Leibniz, on the other hand, failed to make the impression for which he had hoped. His disciple, Wolff, declined to follow his lead on the subject of Chinese natural religion while one of his close friends, the Huguenot librarian La Croze, who had the reputation of having read everything on this issue, squarely sided with Bayle. In a letter of 1721, La Croze ruled that Confucius was

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54 quoted in Elisseeff-Poisle, *Nicolas Fréret*, pp. 54, 91.

55 *ibid.* p. 54; Larrère, "Fréret et la Chine," pp. 113-114.

56 *ibid.*, p. 114; Elisseeff-Poisle, *Nicolas Fréret*, p. 55.

indeed a 'Pantheist' while Confucianism definitely teaches 'omnia sunt unum', and must be equated with Spinozism.<sup>57</sup>

On the side of the Protestant mainstream, the only possible response, by the 1720s and 1730s, was to warn professors and students alike of the great dangers that awaited anyone who became involved in the intellectual debate about China. An entire public disputation was devoted to the very real perils posed by the controversy over Chinese philosophy held at the Baltic university of Greifswald, in May 1739. Students were reminded of the great trouble and bitter furore which Leibniz's foremost disciple, Christian Wolff (1679-1754) had landed himself in, with his lecture on Chinese philosophy delivered at Halle, in 1721, a disaster for him and university caused by his being overly enthusiastic for Chinese moral thought while at the same time admitting (as Leibniz had not) the atheistic tendency; the students were reminded also that Buddeus as well as Bayle confirmed, against Leibniz, that Confucianism is Spinozistic.<sup>58</sup> The conclusion was that 'since the Chinese do not acknowledge the highest God' it is entirely unsurprising that they understand nothing of the duties Man owes to the Deity and that, from this, one sees, 'how necessary it is, to use caution whenever one thinks of praising the philosophy of the Chinese'.<sup>59</sup>♦

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57 Leibniz, *Opera omnia*, pp. iv, 212-213.

58 *Grundliche Auszüge aus denen neuesten theologisch-philosophisch und philologischen Disputationibus welche auf denen hohen Schulen in Deutschland gehalten worden* (11 Vols., Leipzig, 1735-1745), p. ix, (1741), pp. 407, 411-413.

59 *ibid.*, p. 414; Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of man 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 655-657.

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