

The Idea of China in Modern Political Thought:  
Leibniz and Montesquieu  
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## Introduction

Many of the current calls for a comparative or cross-cultural political theory are predicated on the view that Western modernity has largely marginalized the cultural traditions of non-European, non-Western societies.<sup>1</sup> There is nevertheless disagreement over what point in time European downgrading of non-Western cultures is most apparent in modern thought. The lack of consensus points to the complexity of modern Western attitudes to the non-European world. Edward Said and Charles Taylor, for example, offer contrasting accounts of the significance of post-Enlightenment thought. Said uses the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as the starting point for his conception of “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” The peak of European imperialism and belief in its own cultural superiority is interconnected with Orientalism as a discourse of domination.<sup>2</sup> Taylor, however, identifies the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe as generating the theoretical resources to criticize the exclusion of non-European cultures. The thought of Rousseau, Herder, and Hegel is the basis of the modern ideas of authenticity and recognition, which assert the inherent dignity of individuals and cultures. The politics of recognition which has emerged from the nursery of late- or post-Enlightenment thought is manifested in the contemporary discourse of

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<sup>1</sup> “Western” or “the West” will be employed as convenient, if problematic, terms for European and contemporary North American cultures and societies.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3.

multiculturalism.<sup>3</sup> Taylor's and Said's perspectives are not necessarily opposed in all respects, but the differences in their approaches suggest a disagreement on the relation between modern thought and marginalization of non-Western cultures: Said regards post-Enlightenment thought as inseparable from colonialism and imperialism, while Taylor finds in it the philosophical tools, as it were, for redressing historical injustices.

Other scholars are more sweeping their condemnation of Western modernity. Clifford Orwin argues that recognition tends to homogenize rather than distinguish cultures. Multiculturalism and recognition are modern Western concepts; the politics of recognition leads to a "pseudo relativism" in the service of contemporary Western dogmatism. For Orwin, it is not the "the West" as such which is exclusionary of other cultures, but modernity (the intellectual movement which gave rise to the concepts of recognition and multiculturalism). In contrast, the openness of the pre-modern West to other civilizations is exemplified in ancient Greece, in the writings for example of Herodotus and Thucydides.<sup>4</sup> Orwin's critique of Taylor and championing of an older tradition place the debate over multiculturalism in the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

A similar tack is pursued by Fred Dallmayr, who nonetheless regards Taylor's discussion as an important contribution to the project of comparative political philosophy. Dallmayr situates the question of comparative political theory in the context of contemporary developments in (particularly continental) philosophy. What the "linguistic turn" in philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and aspects of

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25-73.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Orwin, "Charles Taylor's Pedagogy of Recognition," in *Canadian Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ronald Beiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 232-45.

pragmatism and postmodern deconstruction share in general is “a dissatisfaction with modern Western egocentrism (stylized in Descartes’ *ego cogito*) and its corollary, Eurocentrism.” Contemporary philosophy calls on us to challenge the domination of Western modernity, especially the “universalism” of Enlightenment thought, over other cultural traditions. Dallmayr cites the work of Anthony Parel, Hwa Yol Jung, Charles Taylor, and Bikhu Prekh as pioneering efforts to elucidate the idea of comparative political theory. These authors contend that the history of political thought has been restricted to the study of Western political thinkers, based on the assumption that they are, in Parel’s phrase, “products of universal reason itself.”<sup>5</sup> While Taylor shares Dallmayr’s concern that political theorists study the works of other cultures,<sup>6</sup> Dallmayr draws more radical implications for overcoming the claims of Western modernity:

To the extent that Western modernity today is the dominant standard, comparative theorizing in many ways re-opens the old battle between the ancients and moderns, a battle which curiously intersects with the difference between East and West.<sup>7</sup>

Dallmayr thus regards comparative political philosophy as a theoretical support for an overall challenge to the imperialism, hegemony, and monologue of modern thought and practices. The inability to comprehend the events of September 11, 2001, for example, is reflected in the “deep-seated professional bias” of Western political theorists in limiting themselves to “familiar theories of the Western ‘canon.’”<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to defend the focus on Western political thought to the exclusion of non-Western, non-canonical texts in the history of political thought.

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<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Fred Dallmayr, “Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory,” *Perspectives in Politics* Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 2004): 252. See also the essays in *Dialogue Among Civilizations: Some Exemplary Voices*, ed. by Fred Dallmayr (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Taylor, 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> Dallmayr 254.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

The study of other cultures is useful and important for many reasons. Nevertheless, the assumption that Western modernity, or Western modernity before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, is unequivocally antagonistic to or ignorant of non-European thought and culture neglects the subtle and complex engagement of early modern European philosophers with cultures other than their own. In particular, I shall address the accounts of Chinese thought and culture in works by Leibniz and Montesquieu. Leibniz displayed a deep respect and enthusiasm for Chinese civilization as he saw it, and Montesquieu (despite his general derision of Chinese government and society as despotic) implicitly demonstrated the extent to which China in the late 17<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was held up as a model for Europe. Their interest in China, I shall argue, is related to their political concerns, especially the problem of absolutism in France. Thus the examples of Leibniz and Montesquieu show the extent to which certain modern thinkers were very much engaged in studying other cultures. It is true, however, that their ideas of China were often inaccurate, faulty, and betrayed a tendency to judge other cultures in light of particular conceptions of European civilization. Nevertheless, their perspectives on China are arguably instructive of the dangers involved in attempts at comparative political theory.

### **Leibniz's Interest in China**

Leibniz's preoccupation with Chinese thought, culture, and society arose from correspondence with Jesuit missionaries in China. Leibniz was particularly enthusiastic about the "accommodationist" stance taken by certain Jesuit missionaries in the wake of Matteo Ricci. By 1601, Ricci had penetrated the imperial court in China by impressing the Chinese literati with various aspects of European culture, including its technology

(e.g., clocks and harpsichords), cartography and mnemonic techniques.<sup>9</sup> Ricci's approach, followed by Leibniz's correspondents, was to accommodate Chinese culture and Christianity. The Chinese would not accept Christianity, he argued, unless it was adapted to their culture and traditions. The challenge would be adapting Christianity without compromising the fundamental theological doctrines of Christianity as understood by the Jesuits. Such accommodation was largely accomplished by relating Christianity to Confucianism while dismissing the Buddhist and Daoist elements of Chinese culture at the time. The Jesuits were clearly more comfortable with the this-worldly character of classical Confucian ethics, as well as the resemblance between the Confucian hierarchy of scholar-official and the Jesuit order, than the mystical and relatively more egalitarian tendencies of Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>10</sup>

Leibniz's interest in China went far beyond conversion, however. Unsurprisingly, the Jesuits faced opposition from both Europeans and Chinese. Many Europeans criticized the accommodationist stance for diluting Christianity, while the Chinese literati were hesitant to accept a religion centered on a member of the labouring classes who was crucified by his government. Leibniz, however, sought to establish a deeper metaphysical connection between European and Chinese thought as a means of facilitating cultural exchange. These connections were suggested to him by correspondence from 1694 with Joachim Bouvet, S.J. Bouvet argued that the Chinese classics (foundational works of philosophy, poetry, and cosmology) were allegorical texts written by the legendary universal lawgiver and occult philosopher, Hermes Trismegistus. In other words, the sources of Chinese civilization were considered as

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<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> D.E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 12-14.

completely consistent with the ancient wisdom of Egypt, Greece, Gaul, India, and early Christianity. This “Figurist” standpoint was rejected by the Jesuits as heretical.<sup>11</sup>

Bouvet’s Figurism nevertheless appealed to Leibniz’s conception of a pre-established harmony between European and Chinese cultures.

Recent scholarship has elucidated the connections between this idea of a pre-established harmony between cultures and the pre-established harmony in Leibniz’s metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> The most intriguing aspects of Leibniz’s interest in China concern the linguistic and mathematical commonalities between Europe and China. The Lutheran pastor Andreas Müller announced in 1674 that he had discovered the *Clavis Sinica*, the key to Chinese which would easily enable anyone to master the Chinese language. The idea of such a key was based on the notion of a universal language given to Adam by God. Chinese was thought to be related or identical to the universal language, given the direct pictorial relation between Chinese ideograms and the things represented by the characters. Leibniz eagerly wrote to Müller about the key, but the latter failed to respond to Leibniz’s queries.<sup>13</sup> Leibniz was more successful in establishing a connection between the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*) and the binary system of mathematics. In both the *Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion* (1708) and the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716), Leibniz remarked on the discovery he and Bouvet made of the exact correspondence between binary arithmetic and “the characters of Fohi,” the legendary founder of China and author of the *Yi Jing*. The substitution of 0 and 1 for the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20-21 and 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Daniel Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr., “The Pre-Established Harmony Between Leibniz and Chinese Thought,” *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (1981): 253-67.

<sup>13</sup> Mungello 63-64, and see G.W.F. Leibniz, *Preface to the NOVISSIMA SINICA* (1697/99), in *Writings on China*, ed. and trans. By Daniel Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 56.

broken and unbroken lines, Yin and Yang, of the 64 hexagrams of the *Yi Jing* yields the numbers 0 to 63 in binary notation. Leibniz regarded this discovery as “justification of the doctrines of the ancient Chinese and their superiority over the moderns,” i.e., later Chinese.<sup>14</sup> The ancient Chinese system of mathematics confirmed the Figurist view that Fohi must be Hermes Trismegistus, given the cosmological truth revealed by this discovery: “Fohi, the most ancient prince and philosopher of the Chinese, had understood the origin of things from unity and nothing, i.e., his mysterious figures reveal something of an analogy to Creation, containing the binary arithmetic (and yet hinting at greater things) that I rediscovered after so many thousands of years...”<sup>15</sup> Both the *Clavis Sinica* and the binary system of the *Yi Jing* show that Leibniz’s interest in China was rooted in the project of ascertaining the fundamental logic underlying all human thought and culture.<sup>16</sup> The project was certainly universalist, but Leibniz felt that the universal bases of knowledge could only be discovered through cultural exchange, at least between Europe and China.

### **Ethical and Political Dimensions of Leibniz’s Study of China**

The relevance of Leibniz’s interest in China for political theory lies in his high regard for Chinese society, particularly its Confucian foundations. The ethical and political dimensions of Leibniz’s interest are, moreover, not at all unrelated to the bizarre logical and mathematical associations discussed above. For the Platonic “natural theology” which arguably underpins Leibniz’s conception of a rational kingdom of the

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<sup>14</sup> Leibniz, *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1697/99), in *Writings on China*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Leibniz, *Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion* (1708), in *Writings on China*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold H. Rowbotham, “The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth-Century Europe,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 4 (1944): 235.

world governed by God is consistent not only with Judeo-Christianity but also with the cosmology of “Fohius” (Fohi).<sup>17</sup> In other words, Leibniz’s efforts to reconcile Christianity with ancient philosophy in the form of “natural religion,” i.e., lacking revelation but consistent with revealed religion, are identical to his attempted reconciliation of Christianity and Chinese thought. Indeed, Leibniz’s *On the Civil Cult of Confucius* (1700/01) explicitly cites Paul’s remark on the unknown god of the Athenians in the context of interpreting Confucianism as purely civil in content:

I praise the foresight of Matteo Ricci, a great man, for following the example of the Church Fathers who interpreted Plato and other philosophers in a Christian fashion. Let us suppose he didn’t understand properly—may we not for this reason retain their opinions, like gold, purged of all impurities? If we ever impute to Confucius doctrines that are not his, certainly no pious deception would be more innocent, since danger to those mistaken and offence to those who teach is absent.<sup>18</sup>

Leibniz’s metaphysical engagement with China was interwoven with his desire to learn from Confucian ethics and politics. In his central work on Chinese philosophy, the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*, Leibniz sought to translate the Neo-Confucian concepts of *li* (principle), *qi* (energy/force), and *taiji* (the great ultimate) into a metaphysical conception of the universe governed by reason and characterized by the dynamic interaction of spirit and matter. That is to say, Chinese metaphysics so interpreted is consistent with Leibniz’s own rationalist metaphysics, which in turn is the philosophic truth of Christianity. Now, the ethical underpinnings of the *Discourse* are indicated by Leibniz’s explicit use of the work of 12<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi, as translated by the Jesuit Father Longobardi.<sup>19</sup> Zhu Xi was a

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<sup>17</sup> Leibniz, *On the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology* (1714), in *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 236.

<sup>18</sup> Leibniz, *On the Civil Cult of Confucius* (1700/01), in *Writings on China*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> See Leibniz, *Natural Theology*, 87-88.

central figure of the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucianism, which Perkins characterizes as “the attempt to integrate a speculative, systematic metaphysics influenced by Buddhism and Daoism into the ethically and socially oriented system of Confucianism.”<sup>20</sup> Leibniz failed to acknowledge the Buddhist and Daoist influences on Neo-Confucian thought, but he saw the project of integrating metaphysics and Confucian ethics as motivated by the same spirit which animated his own philosophy. Leibniz was as much interested in Confucian ethics as he was in Neo-Confucian metaphysics, as indicated by his comparison of Europe and China in the *Novissima Sinica*:

But who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behaviour, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life? Yet now we find this to be so, as we learn to know them better. And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to present life and use of mortals. Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquillity and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible.<sup>21</sup>

China for Leibniz was an ethical and political model for Europe. What, then are the connections between Leibniz’s admiration of Chinese morals and society and his political thought?

It is useful to identify Leibniz’s conception of justice, in contrast to that of Hobbes, to discern the basis of Leibniz’s enthusiasm for Confucian ethics. Hobbes, Leibniz argued, failed to connect human and divine justice. Hobbes held that God’s rule is based on his omnipotence, unlike the foundation of human society. Because of everyone’s natural right to all things in the natural condition, a sovereign authority could

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<sup>20</sup> Perkins, 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> Leibniz, *Preface*, 46-47.

only be instituted by contract. If, however, there were someone possessed of irresistible power, then that person would have rightful dominion over others based not on contract but on his or her omnipotence.<sup>22</sup> Leibniz objected not only to this justification of God's rule, which tends to deny the centrality of God's infinite wisdom and goodness,<sup>23</sup> but also to the idea that divine sovereignty and human sovereignty have different foundations. Leibniz misrepresented Hobbes's position as "almost the same thing as Thrasymachus," but his polemics against Hobbes indicate his view that human justice derives from divine justice. God is a benevolent ruler of the world, and the principles of human society are properly understood as imperfect manifestations of God's universal justice.<sup>24</sup>

Leibniz did not simply proffer a variant on modern natural law theory. His definition of justice as "charity or a habit of loving conformed to wisdom"<sup>25</sup> integrates inward virtue in a way that is quite different, for example, from Hobbes's contractual notion of justice. Hobbes defined justice as the performance of covenants made, particularly the social covenant establishing political society.<sup>26</sup> Such covenants are buttressed by an inward desire to keep one's promise, though fear must usually be relied upon, but the social covenant itself does not in effect bind one's thoughts and intentions; it is binding on one's words and actions. Justice, then, is wholly contained in the observance of the social contract, i.e., to lay down one's natural right on condition that others do so.<sup>27</sup> In his critique of Pufendorf, Leibniz countered that natural law and justice depend on the moral education of the people. Such duties of the ruler go far beyond the

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 31, 246-47.

<sup>23</sup> See Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. by Austin Farrer and trans. by E.M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 402-3.

<sup>24</sup> Leibniz, *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice* (c.1702-3), in *Political Writings*, 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Leibniz, *Felicity* (c. 1694-98), in *Political Writings*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, chap. 15, 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 14, 92.

mere maintenance of comfortable self-preservation, and even beyond public instruction in obedience to the laws: “he who has control of the education or instruction of others is obligated, by natural law, to form minds with eminent precepts, and to take care that the practice of virtue, almost like a second nature, guides the will towards the good.”<sup>28</sup> Justice depends not simply on the observance of the laws and non-interference in the legal rights of others, but also on the cultivation of virtue. Good government is intertwined with the Good.

Leibniz’s synthesis of Plato, Aristotle, and Christianity in the idea of universal justice, over and against the contractualism of Hobbes and his successors, is manifest in his critique of absolutism. Universal justice finds its realization in international law. Human beings are not only bound to obey “the eternal laws of divine monarchy” as elucidated in scripture and in the natural religion of the pagans, but also bound to the law of nations, tacitly consented to by all peoples. Leibniz acknowledged that the law of nations is not universally agreed upon, “for there may have been many cases in which one thing was considered right in India and another in Europe,” but the idea of international law is an institutional means of actualizing universal justice.<sup>29</sup> An approximation to universal justice in the Christian world is the Holy Roman Empire, whose chief is “the secular arm of the universal Church.” Leibniz regarded the Emperor as the defender of Christendom against external invasion by “Infidels” and internal schism; moreover, he acts as a necessary check, alongside the Pope, on the tyranny and ambition of the great.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, the idea of absolute state-sovereignty should be

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<sup>28</sup> Leibniz, *The Principles of Pufendorf* (1706), in *Political Writings*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Leibniz, *Codex Iuris Gentium* (1693), in *Political Writings*, 174. See Paul Schrecker, “Leibniz’s Principles of International Justice,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7 (1946): 497.

<sup>30</sup> Leibniz, *Caesarinus Fürstenerius*, in *Political Writings*, 111-12.

resisted as contrary to universal justice: “Hobbesian empires, I think, exist neither among civilized peoples nor among barbarians, and I consider them neither possible nor desirable, unless those who must have supreme power are gifted with angelic virtues....Hobbes’s demonstrations have a place only in that state whose king is God, whom alone one can trust in all things.”<sup>31</sup> Leibniz later moderated his attack on state sovereignty, but maintained against Hobbes that state power should be curbed by the Empire and Church above it, and the power of intermediary bodies below.

Leibniz’s greatest scorn was therefore directed at Louis XIV for his bellicosity and absolutist rule. Leibniz’s *Mars Christianissimus* (1683) imputes an impious pride to Louis and satirically compares his divinely sanctioned monarchy to the “Empire of Jesus Christ on earth.”<sup>32</sup> His later *Manifesto for the Defence of the Rights of Charles III* decries the “dissolutions and...libertinage” of French society, which in its domination of other kingdoms would spread the “atheism” and “venom” of the “French spirit.” The despotism and absolutism of France are especially apparent in the total subordination of the Estates and weakening of the nobility. “The will of nations,” Leibniz asserted, “does not express itself through magistrates or regents but through the assemblies of the estates of kingdom and provinces.”<sup>33</sup> The doctrine of state sovereignty is sustainable only when rulers are virtuous; given the imperfections of human nature, however, internal and external checks are necessary. Throughout his political thought, Leibniz regarded French absolutism as the greatest breach of universal justice.

Leibniz’s critique of Hobbes and French absolutism provides a useful background to understanding his the political context of his admiration for China. Patrick Riley

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>32</sup> Leibniz, *Mars Christianissimus* (1683), in *Political Writings*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Leibniz, *Manifesto for the Defence of the Rights of Charles III* (1703), in *Political Writings*, 155-59.

points out that Leibniz's correspondence with Father Grimaldi, where he discussed the grace that can arise from the contemplation of nature, took place at the same time that *Novissima Sinica* was in press.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, Leibniz pointed to the Chinese emperor as an exemplar of grace through natural philosophy, in contrast to the "Christian Mars" Louis, whose governance showed that he was less Christian than the Kangxi Emperor. Despite his divine status, the Emperor

is educated according to custom in virtue and wisdom and rules his subjects with an extraordinary respect for the laws and with a reverence for the advice of wise men. Nor is it easy to find anything worthier of note than the fact that this greatest of kings, who possesses such complete authority in his own day, anxiously fears posterity and is in greater dread of the judgement of history, than other kings are of representatives of estates and parliaments.<sup>35</sup>

The Chinese Emperor is thus possessed of such exceeding virtue that his absolutist rule is more temperate than that of the French King, who fails to heed the Estates and nobility. China and France are exceptional governments: the former is an absolute empire guided by wisdom and virtue, whereas the latter is a nominally constitutional regime whose monarch is the scourge of Europe.

The implied contrast between the two monarchs is reflected in Leibniz's description of the respective societies. Comparing the manners and customs of Spain and France in 1703, Leibniz remarked on the licentiousness and frivolity of French manners: "Everyone allows himself no repose, and leaves none to others; the grave and the serious pass for ridiculous, and measure or reason for pedantic; caprice, for something gallant, and inconstancy in one's interactions with other people, for cleverness... Youth... respects neither sex, nor age, nor merit."<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Leibniz spoke of the remedy to social evils

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<sup>34</sup> Patrick Riley, *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 122.

<sup>35</sup> Leibniz, *Preface*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Leibniz, *Manifesto*, 157.

discovered by the Chinese. He presented Confucianism as an ethical teaching which has led to a higher standard for virtue than that found in Europe:

In a vast multitude of men they have virtually accomplished more than the founders of religious orders among us have achieved within their own narrow ranks. So great is obedience toward superiors and reverence toward elders, so religious, almost, is the relation of children toward parents, that for children to contrive anything violent against their parents, even by word, is almost unheard of...Moreover, there is among equals, or those having little obligation to one another, a marvellous respect, and an established order of duties.<sup>37</sup>

The Confucian duties of respect to elders and fellow-feeling among equals are in Leibniz's view perfectly consistent with Christian teachings. The Chinese cultivation of virtue within the family, throughout society, and even at the imperial court exemplifies Leibniz's doctrine that justice encompasses charity and wisdom at all levels. China for Leibniz had virtually realized the ideals of universal justice without even being Christian. He maintained, however, that Chinese ethics show ripeness for conversion, rather than the redundancy of Christian revelation. In contrast to later writers such as Voltaire, Leibniz insisted on the benefits China would receive not only from European science and technology, but also the Christian religion.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, "the condition of our affairs, slipping as we are into ever greater corruption, seems to be such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology." The Chinese have not attained the superhuman virtue of Christianity but rather the pre-eminence of natural virtue.<sup>39</sup> The moral decadence of Europe, especially apparent in France, necessitated a cultural exchange with China. Thus Leibniz's characterization of China as a moral and

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<sup>37</sup> Leibniz, *Preface*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Cook and Rosemont, "Pre-Established Harmony," 267.

<sup>39</sup> Leibniz, *Preface*, 51.

political model for Europe was related to his dismay at the “Hobbesian imperialism” of the French monarchy.

### **Montesquieu on Chinese Despotism**

Montesquieu devoted much less of his writing than did Leibniz on Chinese civilization. Nevertheless, China plays an important role particularly in his analysis of despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws*. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, a number of European intellectuals followed Leibniz in their enthusiasm for Chinese culture, including Christian Wolff, François Quesnay, and Voltaire. Despite his antipathy, evident in *Candide*, for Leibniz’s metaphysical rationalism, Voltaire shared Leibniz’s admiration of Chinese morals and politics. Like Leibniz, Voltaire championed the natural religion of the Chinese, though he departed from Leibniz in holding up China as a model for a rational society which had no need of revealed religion. Voltaire’s more radical, if less nuanced or erudite, remarks on China reflected a tendency of many Enlightenment *philosophes* to employ China as an argument for a secular, enlightened, despotism.<sup>40</sup> Montesquieu, in contrast, represents an opposing strand within the Enlightenment which sought to criticize Chinese society in light of constitutionalist politics. That Montesquieu was at such pains to criticize China indicates how much the idea of China was present in the minds of Enlightenment thinkers.

Like Leibniz, Montesquieu was concerned about the *ancien regime*’s slide into absolutism. In the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu depicted this slide in relation to an idea of Asian despotism. The novel ostensibly contrasts European Enlightenment ideas with the despotism of Persian society and the seraglio, but the novel tends to blur the

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<sup>40</sup> Mungello, 90-91.

differences between France and Persia in the course of the narrative. In Letter 102, Usbek distinguishes European monarchy from Asian despotism, but adds that “[m]onarchy is in a state of tension, which always degenerates into despotism or republicanism.”<sup>41</sup> Usbek’s failed attempts to suppress the uprising in his seraglio back home are related in letters dated in 1720, the year that the South Sea Bubble burst in France and England, crippling France’s economy for several decades.<sup>42</sup> As Montesquieu’s satire of the South Sea Bubble in Letter 142 indicates, the financial scandal represented to him the corruption of French society in his time. Letter 37 underscores Montesquieu’s subtle association between the *ancien regime* and Asian despotism. The French King, Usbek writes, “has often been heard to say that of all the types of government in the world, he would most favour either that of the Turks, or that of our own august Sultan, such is his esteem for oriental policies.”<sup>43</sup> In the *Persian Letters*, Montesquieu used his conception of Asian despotism as a mirror to French corruption.

The relation between monarchy and despotism is a prominent theme in *The Spirit of the Laws*, and should be understood in light of Montesquieu’s attitude towards human nature. Book 1 indicates that human beings are not simply bound by physical laws but are also, as intelligent beings, capable of violating human laws. There is an important respect in which human beings are free from nature. Indeed, Montesquieu’s discussion of natural law moves beyond the natural fear and diffidence emphasized by Hobbes to the

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<sup>41</sup> Charles de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. by C.J. Betts (London: Penguin Books, 1973), Letter 102, 187. See Orest Ranum, “Personality and Politics in the *Persian Letters*,” *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (1969), 614.

<sup>42</sup> H.G. Koenigsberger, *Early Modern Europe 1500-1789* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 1987), 180.

<sup>43</sup> Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, Letter 37, 91.

“desire to live in society.” The rest of the book displays Montesquieu’s departure from natural law theory, and also his conception of legitimate political constitutions as products of human reason. The laws of a country should relate to the particular people, the nature and principle of government, and the physical aspects of the country; they are not determined simply by an analysis of universal human nature.<sup>44</sup> For example, Hobbes sought to anchor the science of the commonwealth upon “the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions” of all human beings. Although the objects of the passions vary between individuals and even within the same person, Hobbes thought that he provided an unassailable deduction of the grounds of political obedience, the social contract, and the rights of sovereignty from his considerations on human nature.<sup>45</sup> Montesquieu, however, clearly explicated the spirit of the laws according to the particularities of social life rather than the universal axioms of human nature.

This departure from 17<sup>th</sup> century natural law theory underlies Montesquieu’s critique of despotism in general. He identified three kinds of government, but not according to the traditional typology of one, few, or many in power. In particular, monarchy and despotism are both characterized by the rule of one, but a monarch governs “by fixed and established laws” whereas a despot governs “without laws and without rule, [and] draws everything along by his will and his caprices.”<sup>46</sup> Montesquieu characterized despotic government as a *seraglio writ large*. “Intermediate, subordinate, and dependent powers” present in monarchical government are absent in despotism. The entire state exists to serve the prince’s desires. The prince in turn delegates the public

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<sup>44</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. by Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Book 1, 5-9.

<sup>45</sup> Hobbes, Introduction, 10-11.

<sup>46</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, Book 2, 10.

business to a vizir. The people are thus his harem and the officials his eunuchs.<sup>47</sup>

Despotism is both an unnatural form of government and yet the form that human nature most easily slips into. Montesquieu remarked that moderate government, including monarchy, is a “masterpiece of legislation” in which the laws “combine powers, regulate them, temper them, and make them act.” It is a product of human reason, whereas despotism arises from the worst in human nature: “as only passions are needed to establish it, everyone is good enough for that.”<sup>48</sup> Montesquieu thus distinguished between the liberty and reason of moderate government on the one hand, and the base passions of despotism on the other. For Montesquieu, the despotic regime is driven by the key passions in Hobbes’s account of human nature, i.e., fear and the desire of power. As Mark Hulliung notes, “Hobbes’ state of nature is Montesquieu’s [despotic] Leviathan; Hobbes’s Leviathan creates the unbearable state of nature and war of all against all that it was designed to suppress.”<sup>49</sup> From the perspective of human reason, then, despotism is unnatural; but is in another sense wholly natural in its rootedness in human passion.

The principles of monarchy and despotism, which set the government in motion, reflect Montesquieu’s divergence from Leibniz’s emphasis on virtue. The principle of monarchy is honour. Each person in a monarchy seeks his or her individual interests in the pursuit of honour, but thereby serves the common good. Montesquieu insisted that honour thus conceived is wholly distinct from moral virtue: “it is true that the honour that guides all the parts of the state is a false honour, but the false honour is as useful to the public as the true one would be to the individuals who could have it.” The honour is false because it has no intrinsic connection to individual virtue. In a well-constituted

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Book 2, 17-20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., Book 5, 63.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Hulliung, *Montesquieu and the Old Regime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 40.

monarchy, Montesquieu wrote, “everyone will be almost a good citizen, and one will rarely find someone who is a good man.” The pursuit of moral virtue will lead one away from the public deeds pursued out of a desire for glory. In contrast, the principle of despotism is fear, but it is in despotic societies that religion, the traditional site of virtue, can effectively constrain the subjects and the prince. The oppression and shamelessness of despotism means that only a higher law can constrain even the prince’s will, whereas the pursuit of worldly glory in monarchies entails a certain indifference to the laws of religion.<sup>50</sup> Thus Montesquieu broke from traditional conceptions of the relation between ethics and politics in diminishing the importance of morality in moderate regimes while relegating the power of religion to despotism. Unlike Leibniz, for whom good government is inseparable from moral virtue as determined by reason and revealed by scripture, Montesquieu regarded false honour as the spring of monarchy. The heavy reliance on religion in despotic regimes is a result of the caprice of and domination by the ruler.

The comparison of monarchy and despotism is arguably intended to be a critique of French absolutism, as scholars have noted.<sup>51</sup> In this light, it was important to Montesquieu that China not be regarded as an example of enlightened despotism. Montesquieu’s account of China is based a selective use of unreliable sources, and betrays a much weaker comprehension of Chinese (and other non-European) culture and society than Leibniz’s writings on China. Nevertheless, as Sharon Krause contends, Montesquieu’s aim was not to justify European colonialism or imperialism, but

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<sup>50</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, Book 3, 26-30. Even republics have political, not moral, virtue as their principle.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Hulliung’s book.

principally to counteract the romanticization of Chinese absolutism.<sup>52</sup> Krause understates the distortions in Montesquieu's discussion of China, but she persuasively argues that his interest in China stemmed from concerns over French absolutism. China posed an exceptionally cogent challenge to Montesquieu's analysis of the spirit of the laws. As Montesquieu acknowledged, "missionaries speak of the vast empire of China as of an admirable government, in whose principle intermingle fear, honour, and virtue. I would therefore have made an empty distinction in establishing the principles of the three governments." He insisted that the seeming order and prosperity of China are in fact the result of fear instilled by the laws. Although China may have in the past deviated in some respects from his account of despotism, its essential principle is fear.<sup>53</sup>

Montesquieu's interest in China is not wholly motivated by the defence of his three-fold typology, or of the separation of powers he mistakenly perceived in the English constitution. Chinese society tends to blur the differences between monarchy and despotism, according to him, because of the public tranquillity produced by the rule of manners. The reference is to the Confucian ethics Leibniz so admired: the Chinese legislators, Montesquieu wrote, "wanted men to have much respect for each other; they wanted each one to feel at every instant that he owed much to the others; they wanted every citizen to depend, in some respects, on another citizen." The description echoes Leibniz's praise of the respect and obligation found at all levels of Chinese society. Montesquieu conceded the utility of such rules of civility and politeness in inculcating gentleness, peace, and order especially at the local level, but found fault with the elevation of manners to a central place in all ethical and political relations: the Chinese

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<sup>52</sup> Sharon Krause, "Despotism in the *Spirit of Laws*," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, ed. by David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 251.

<sup>53</sup> Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, Book 8, 126-28.

legislators “confused religion, laws, mores, and manners; all was morality, all was virtue.”<sup>54</sup> The Confucian rites are in themselves unobjectionable; what Montesquieu criticized was the overriding emphasis on social manners to the exclusion of all other forms of authority. The effect is a stagnant tranquillity instead of a dynamic fostering of liberty, of individual initiative, and of political virtue. As Neil Robertson argues, there is in Montesquieu’s idea of China “an absolute respect paid to the intermediary realm [i.e., between public and private spheres]—and in this, it is no longer truly intermediary.”<sup>55</sup> Far from being an exemplar of virtue and justice, Chinese society is subject to a tyranny of manners.

For Montesquieu, then, China is not to be employed as a model for enlightened absolutism. Leibniz had praised China precisely because it exemplified his idea of universal justice, in which political rule is wedded as much as possible to inward virtue and charity at all levels of society, from family to imperial court. For Montesquieu, however, the vitality of moderate government depends on political virtue or false honour, not moral virtue as such. Confucian ethics are admirable, but not as the basis for all legislation. His objection to the absolutist tendencies of the French monarchy is thus not that the King and his people lacked moral virtue, but that the regime had deviated from the delicate balancing of powers in its constitution. China posed a challenge to Montesquieu’s concept of the spirit of the laws because it supported 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century arguments for enlightened absolutism. In contrast to Leibniz, then, Montesquieu’s critique of French absolutism led him to reject China as an ethical and political model for Europe.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Book 19, 315-19.

<sup>55</sup> Neil Robertson, *The Concept of “l’esprit des lois” in Montesquieu’s The Spirit of the Laws*, PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 1994.

## **Conclusion**

This discussion of the views of Leibniz and Montesquieu on China should at least indicate that early modern European philosophers did not entirely neglect the study of other cultures. Nor is modern political thought uniformly hostile to non-European culture and thought, as exemplified by Leibniz's admiration for China. There are legitimate grounds for criticizing Leibniz and Montesquieu: despite their interest in China, both the positive and negative evaluations are made from a Eurocentric perspective. Their ideas of China are to some extent caricatures: they failed to study Chinese society impartially, and China was wholly assessed in the light of European concerns, particularly French absolutism. Moreover, the focus on China may be seen as reflecting a deep bias, even in Leibniz's case, for "civilized" cultures that resembled Europe more than, say, indigenous tribal cultures.

Nevertheless, the strengths and shortcomings of cross-cultural engagement by such modern Western philosophers are nevertheless important lessons for contemporary approaches to intercultural political theory. Contemporary comparative philosophy may involve fairer and more balanced perspectives on other cultural traditions, especially as informed by knowledge of non-European languages, but the idea of China in early modern European thought raises questions as to the purposes and limitations of cultural engagement. Can comparative philosophy and political theory ever be truly objective? If not, then does the "fusion of horizons," a concept Dallmayr takes from Gadamer, or the politics and pedagogy of recognition fully escape the problem of projecting one's own philosophical and political concerns onto other cultures? Does the comparison of Eastern

and Western thought not serve to reinforce certain strains of postmodern thought, multicultural theory, or even the polemics of the contest between the ancients and the moderns? Comparative philosophers ought to be perspicacious of the instrumental use of non-Western thought to bolster Western criticisms of modernity, for example. The study of other cultural traditions is intrinsically worthwhile and a salutary antidote to Western provincialism, but should be undertaken with intellectual honesty about the particular political and philosophical agendas which underlie such endeavours. Despite the limitations of their respective accounts, Leibniz and Montesquieu were at least explicit about the European context of their ideas of China.

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