

# Chinese Thought in Early German Enlightenment from Leibniz to Goethe

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# Chinese Thought in Early German Enlightenment from Leibniz to Goethe

*Abortive Approaches to Transcultural Understanding*

*By*

Břetislav Horyna



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The study is supported by VEGA grant 2/0072/21 Task of Political Philosophy in the Context of the Anthropocene.

Cover illustration: Cover image by Tianhao Zhang, shows a flower on a table at The Lingering Garden in Suzhou, China (2022). The image is made available via unsplash.com.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Horyna, Břetislav, 1959- author.

Title: Chinese thought in early German Enlightenment from Leibniz to Goethe : abortive approaches to transcultural understanding / by Břetislav Horyna.

Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill, [2023] | Series: New research in the history of Western philosophy, 2949-9518 ; volume 2 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023010997 (print) | LCCN 2023010998 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004544611 (hardback) | ISBN 9789004544666 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy, German--Chinese influences. | Philosophy, German--18th century. | Germany--Intellectual life--Chinese influences. | Jesuits--Missions--China. | Enlightenment--Germany.

Classification: LCC B2628.C6 H67 2023 (print) | LCC B2628.C6 (ebook) | DDC 193--dc23/eng/20230501

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010997>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010998>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: [brill.com/brill-typeface](http://brill.com/brill-typeface).

ISSN 2949-9518

ISBN 978-90-04-54461-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-54466-6 (e-book)

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## Preface

“I remember very well that he visited me for the last time a few weeks before his death, assuring me that he wished to demonstrate his metaphysical truths in a geometrical manner, so that his demonstrations could be faulted as little as those of Euclid: and those who will take the trouble, and have the ability, to examine them thoroughly, will very soon find that they are nothing superficial, but look very deeply.”<sup>1</sup>

This is how Christian Wolff, the great figure of the pre-Kantian era of German philosophy, remembered the last visit of the only great figure of the ending Baroque era of European philosophy, Gottfried W. Leibniz. Who knows what people of their intellectual stature, insight, complexity of thought and, not least, awareness of the state of their world usually talk about during their visits. Probably also about their work, but (and here the focus is on the “usually”) they hardly have reason to make sure that they rework their lifelong “demonstrations” (*demonstrationes*) so that they stop being interfered with by all those who do not understand them before. Leibniz felt the need to tell Wolff that he had lost patience with all the (would-be) critics and wanted to put an end to their futility by elaborating his philosophy more *geometrico*, or systematizing it. Like perhaps everything that comes from the heart in philosophy, Leibniz’s sigh “I’ve had enough of them” sounds ironic: he no longer wrote a major systematic work, his multilateral work based on mathematizing thought never became a school analogous to, for example, Cartesianism, and the one to whom he entrusted his intention finally presented the first great systematization of German philosophy, even though he thought much less of “system” than of clarification, or rather, it was less a matter of creating the concepts necessary to illustrate the problems expounded.

Thus Wolff became a Leibnizian, and a “Leibnizian-Wolffian” philosophy arose: what mattered was that by a deceptive refraction of light the philosophies of Leibniz and Wolff plunged into the stream of the history of philosophy and began to “emerge”. But it allowed us to move on to a more important question: why did Leibniz want to rearrange his thought on a different plane

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<sup>1</sup> Reinbeck, J. G., Bertram J. F. (2014). *Drei Schriften zur Theologie und 'Praestablierten Harmonie'*. In: Wolff, Chr. *Gesammelte Werke (GW), Materialien und Dokumente*, Hrsg. J. École, R. Theis, W. Schneiders, Bd. 112, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 24. (*Ich besinne mich noch gar wohl, dass, als er [sc. Leibniz] wenige Wochen für seinem Ende mich das letzte mahl besuchte, er mich versicherte, er wollte seine metaphysischen Wahrheiten auf eine geometrische Art demonstriren, dass man an seinen Demonstrationen so sehr wenig, als an Euclides seinen aussetzen könnte: und, wer sich bemühen will, und das Vermögen hat, sie gründlich zu untersuchen, wird gar bald inne werden, dass er sie nicht oben hin, sondern gar tief eingesehen.*)

from the one on which he had been developing it throughout his life? Was he so self-critical that he wanted to prove that his work was truly naive? Or were other reasons and other history-making individuals at play?

There are undoubtedly more defining features of the century bounded by the years 1700 and 1800 than can be expressed in any general terms. It was a century of preparation for the arrival of our modern and late modern present. At the same time, it was here that a fundamental break with the Europe of the past took place and the first tricksters began to emerge, pulling it out of its millennial dogmatic slumber by pulling its beard of scepticism, irony and cynicism. However, something quite concrete was also taking place in relation to Leibniz, Wolff, the German and European Enlightenment, the treatment of alien and unusual thought, the emerging cultural criticism and other phenomena in the circle of the creation of a new type of rationality, with a profound impact on the life of the educational elites in particular. Europe in the 1700s was dominated by a dogmatic, valid and unquestioned orthodoxy, perhaps even more rigid and impenetrable in Protestant churches than the fundamental doctrine of Roman Catholicism. A hundred years later, Christianity and the Christian Churches *an sich* were subject to rational reflection, and the faith itself was transformed in learned circles into a 'religiosity of the scholars', at times deistic, at times pantheistic, but for the most part antidogmatic. To put it simply, in the space of a hundred years, the directive controlling society had become an examined and almost neutralized phenomenon in terms of its effect.

To rid culture of the influence of its dogmas means to find for it other, equally resistant and at the same time culture-creating foundations. What we would summarize today in one smooth, unproblematic sentence concerned processes whose drama, hardness, aggressiveness, and moral distortion are hard to imagine anymore; they are deeply embedded in cultural memory, and we would have to enter its labyrinths and not always passable labyrinths to learn about them at all. It would also be an increasingly alienating question whether we would understand by what means of power and for what reasons dogma resisted the limitation and eventual capping of its claims to validity, complementary to the ongoing rise and emancipation of philosophy and, above all, the increasingly obvious realization that the substitution of theological culture-making foundations for philosophical and scientific ones did not mean the collapse of the world into the nothingness of damnation. We live in our own mazes, and to find our way out of them into the mazes of our past, in which today's maze was born, is generally too difficult. Leibniz spoke with Wolff of precisely those cultural pressures which are already something of a relic of the past; pressures from those who defended themselves and their beliefs and their social position against those for whom no dogma could restrain

reasoning, judging, and knowing, and deny lived and tested experience. Neither Leibniz nor Wolff was afraid to think, to accumulate knowledge and verify it, much less to adopt from non-European sources what they were convinced corresponded to learned principles of reason: but they had good reason to fear those who feared their thinking.

Leibniz wanted to fortify his knowledge by geometrizing it, but he did not have enough time to do so; Wolff succeeded in such a systematization, but both were pushed to the brink of oblivion by their mainly religiously motivated opponents capable of using any optical illusions. It was only in the twentieth century that they underwent a more significant rebirth; research into the history of ideas and the history of concepts revealed gaps that were not so glaring as to draw attention to themselves in the mere history of philosophy. Emerging fields such as cross-cultural comparative research, intercultural dialogue and polylogue, comparative literary history, etc., have also played a significant role. It was also in their light that the importance of Leibniz's and Wolff's insights for the first ever purely philosophical reflection on their Chinese counterpart, the birth of modern Sinology and the development of intercultural scholarly exchange between Europe and China began to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Today, in the first third of the 21st century, China is positioning itself as an aspirant for global hegemony. Conventional economic and statistical data show that, with its economic magnitude and its ability to use geo-economic tools, it is outstripping the other contenders for primacy in this curious rivalry, who are forced to acknowledge its place geopolitically as well. This is a historical situation that is actually contrary to the spirit of Chinese thinking and action, which is not inherently confrontational, megalomaniacal and expansive. If this points to anything, it points only to the fact that China has been the erudite disciple of the West over the last three centuries, which penetrated China first with Christian missions, then with a brutal military-economic impact, and then made every effort to subjugate the five-thousand-year-old civilization economically, dismantle its integrity and humiliate it with every form of domination at its disposal. We should remember the historical relations: the history of the relations between the West and China has been determined by the West's attempt to dominate China, not by China's attempt to dominate the Occident. There is no doubt that the Middle Empire has had problems in

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2 See, for example, App, U. *The Birth of Orientalism*, Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010. MacKerras, C. *Western Images of China*, Hong Kong, et al.: Oxford University Press 1989. Pinot, V. *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640–1740)*, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner 1932. Reichwein, A. *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1925. Appleton, W. W. *A Cycle of Cathay: The Chinese Vogue in England during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, New York: Columbia University Press 1951.

its history that have almost touched its existence, often lasting decades and almost resulting in a national revolution only during the last Qing dynasty; but China did not solve its most serious grievances by expansion, as the European powers have done. It was not Chinese ships in Britain but British warships and merchant vessels in China that set the tone; just as today it is not Chinese vessels in the Gulf of Mexico but American warships in the South China Sea that 'defend national interests.' As with every other colonial aggression, the relationship with China was accompanied by discrimination, exclusivism, racial and religious intolerance, and a huge cultural underestimation of the "Orientals," whose thinking barely reaches to a kind of nature mythology. China has survived these centuries of political turmoil and imperial frenzy, not without damage and suffering, but without losing itself; in all this it has remained China, a historical culture with a historical consciousness incomparably beyond the two-century horizon of European and American industrialization. The Western world, or rather the USA, taught it opportunism; perhaps only in this aspect of its historical position are the two opposites of civilizational thought today, so to speak, in the same boat.

China has come back to itself again as a civilization and as a state with political and social spheres that it decides according to the principles of its responsibility. Moreover, it is a culture with the status of the individual, which is unique in its own way and hardly comprehensible to those of us who lack roots in a comparable tradition: individual, intellectual, scholar, adviser to rulers, master, critic, teacher, all these are words that cannot be transferred from one culture to another without thinking, if they are not to give rise to erroneous and often covertly neo-colonial analogies. The same applies to the terms, education, knowledge, knowledge, philosophy, thought, ethics, etc. Perhaps it is precisely because relations with China are still not about understanding and comprehension, but at best about interpretation, that they appear to us as something incomprehensible, something on the border between the marvelous and the strange, unpredictable other or alien. As a result of the propagandistic and geopolitical war waged by the US and other powers to preserve their hegemony, China is portrayed as an inhuman, anti-human, human rights and democracy-ignoring, aggressive, child labour-exploiting, increasingly backward and spiritually primitive culture, as an Asian 'yellow peril' full of power lusts, as the greatest pest of the environment and the most insidious enemy of Euro-American civilisation. Only on rare occasions does the media report China differently.

It is hard to know the reasons why many other countries, with their strong and varied historical experiences of subordination, oppression and injustice, are joining these anti-Chinese campaigns. It is as if the remembering of what slavery, occupation and subjugation to a foreign power means has disappeared

from their historical memory; it is as if the sense of what cultural humiliation means has vanished. Do other countries and cultures have any *factual reason* to place themselves above China (and other countries that are in America's disfavor)? In what ways are they more advanced to claim cultural dominance? Or does the old but tried and true *pecunia non olet* apply?

Relations of understanding cannot be built on a feeling of superiority, because superiority is only a manifestation of ignorance. Only stupidity and ignorance are elevated. In relations with China, both were evident from the earliest, mostly indirect contacts in late antiquity, and it was only in the 16th to 17th centuries, when the Jesuit mission began to work systematically in China, that condescension gave way to a growing admiration for the cultural achievements of ancient China, which were displayed before the eyes of the missionaries. Also, the certainty that China would be evangelized and made to adopt Christianity, as was already happening in other colonized parts of the world, vanished before the discovery that the Chinese language, though it had no words meaning "god" or "soul", nevertheless possessed philosophical doctrines on the basis of which it had built a political-moral system unlike any the West had known. Jesuit reports of an unknown world in the Far East that would equal or even surpass European achievements led a nascent layer of admirers of Chinese philosophical, literary and artistic culture among European intellectuals to speak of a "Europe on the East." The idea of cultural multipolarity was born, the possibility that "world culture" had multiple centers that could- and this was already a prospect attractive to the first promoters of the Enlightenment turn in thought- interconnect and give rise to a cosmopolitan educational whole. Its task: to contribute with all its strength and with all its faculties to the bliss of man (which of course also includes contributing to his salvation, which cannot be done without a silent, hidden, non-violent but persistent evangelization of the world).

At the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these intellectual activities were mainly concentrated in the intellectual sphere of the early German Enlightenment. China certainly did not escape the attention of many Catholic and Protestant philosophical theologians, who had a considerable share in spreading information and no less misinformation about its image in various European countries, from Portugal to France to Russia. But when it comes to philosophy, and to what is probably the first philosophically informed and intellectually collaborative presentation of contemporary knowledge about ancient China and the contemporary Chinese social and political system, attention must go especially to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who directed Western scholarship onto China's 'Silk Road.' With what intention, in what way and with what success Leibniz did this are the questions I will address in this book. The same is true of the Chinese inspiration of the practical moral

philosophy of Christian Wolff, the successful systematist and the actual founder of German systematic philosophy, for which he also created the conceptual basis. The whole picture is illustrated by portraits of now lesser known but at the time extremely important promoters of knowledge and understanding of Chinese intellectual culture, especially Georg Bernhard Bilfinger. The text concludes with a polemical reflection on the possibilities of intercultural comparison, the exchange of cultural goods, intercultural understanding in general, and the rules of possible coexistence in a world in which no one is blameless, just as no one is entitled to retribution.