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## Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light by Franklin Perkins (Review)

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*Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light*. By Franklin Perkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xvi + 224.

Reviewed by **Robin R. Wang** Loyola Marymount University

In December 1697, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) wrote to a Jesuit friend in China, praising the Jesuit mission there as “the greatest affair of our time” (p. 42). The purpose of that mission, in Leibniz’s view, was not simply to glorify God and to spread Christianity; it was also being undertaken for the good of humanity and the growth of human knowledge. He went on:

For this is a commerce of light, which could give to us at once their work of thousands of years and render ours to them, and to double so to speak our true wealth for one and the other. This is something greater than one thinks. (p. 42)

Why was Leibniz, unlike his contemporaries Locke and Spinoza, so enthusiastic about other cultures, especially Chinese culture? Why, in contrast to the scholars of today who claim that philosophy is the privilege of the Western mind and who dismiss philosophical exchange as useless, was Leibniz able to understand the importance of cultural exchange? And why is it that his “commerce of light” can still illuminate our path toward wisdom in this age of globalization? In a well-researched and carefully crafted monograph, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light*, Franklin Perkins answers these questions with compelling evidence and persuasive argument.

To emphasize the significance, magnitude, and relevance of cultural exchange Perkins organizes his book thematically in five chapters. The first chapter provides the historical context of the world in which Leibniz lived. Perkins cites well-documented events to illustrate how Europeans first encountered other cultures and the “three lenses” through which they viewed them (p. 12). This exploration sets the stage for understanding Leibniz’s knowledge of China and his basic orientation toward learning from diversity.

In chapter 2 Perkins challenges current scholarship and makes the critical claim that Leibniz’s interest in China and cultural exchange was “not accidental” (p. 45), but rather flowed from his own distinctive philosophical system. This argument distinguishes Perkins’s innovative approach from the mainstream traditional scholarship on Leibniz. He claims that Leibniz was “a more pragmatic, empirical and fallibilistic investigator of the world,” that he was “motivated by practical and theological concerns,” and that he was “a pluralistic thinker” (p. 45). To support his argument, Perkins discusses Leibniz’s “monads” in the context of order, diversity, and perfection. Each monad is a different manifestation of the same universe, yet one unitary universe is multiplied by its expression in diverse monads. God chose to create a world exemplifying the utmost perfection, with “the greatest possible combination of order and diversity” (p. 44). Diversity is essential to the perfection of the world since the most perfect possible world maximizes the greatest order. This intrinsic relation between order, diversity, and perfection creates an unqualified need for cultural exchange because order requires diversity for perfection, and an ordered diversity only amplifies the magnificence of its Creator. On a metaphysical level, cultural exchange for Leib-

niz was “driven by the value of diversity in the best possible world and the derivation of diversity from variations in monadic perspectives. On an epistemological level, exchange was driven by the necessary limits of our own perspective and the fact that monads in distant places have different and complementary perspectives” (p. 108).

After laying out the philosophical foundation for cultural exchange in Leibniz’s system, Perkins turns his discussion to Leibniz’s specific connection with China. In chapter 3 he offers a historical narrative that traces the development and growth of Leibniz’s interest in and knowledge of China. Leibniz’s first mention of China was in his *De Arte Combinationis* in 1666, when he was only twenty years old (p. 109). Through his massive correspondence with Jesuits in China and his active social participation in controversies around the Jesuit mission, Leibniz’s knowledge of China grew in depth and sophistication as the decades passed. His initial approach to China reflected “his interest in international politics and economics” (p. 113). But this practical focus was superseded by an interest in culture and a growing desire to learn from the Chinese. This is described as a switch from the “commerce of goods” to the “commerce of light” (p. 113). One particular event demonstrates the extent of Leibniz’s familiarity with Chinese thought: Leibniz saw an association between his binary arithmetic and the hexagrams of the *Yijing*, and more specifically with Shao Yong’s 邵雍 (1011–1077) *Xiantiantu* 先天圖 (Diagram of Prior-Heaven). This is recorded in a communication to the Paris Academy in 1703 (p. 117), and the event has become controversial in contemporary Chinese academic circles; the central dispute is over whether Leibniz saw this *tu* before or after his discovery of the binary system.

Another interesting and valuable observation by Perkins is that Leibniz promoted this exchange of knowledge with the expectation that it should be “reciprocal” (p. 120). In other words, cultural exchange with China should be a two-way interaction, not just one way—for example, with Europeans like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) teaching Chinese about science or building a “palace of memory.” In many respects, Leibniz put more emphasis on how the Europeans could learn from the Chinese: “He speaks as if knowledge was a homogenous mass—we can give ours to the Chinese, they can give theirs to us, and we will each have twice as much” (p. 121).

To elevate a historical and textual analysis of Leibniz’s engagement with China to a philosophical plateau, Perkins in chapter 4 critically reconstructs four of Leibniz’s hermeneutical principles for interpreting Chinese thought. This chapter is extremely beneficial for its application to the field of comparative philosophy. It reveals how Leibniz dealt philosophically with another philosophical system that differed from his own. The first hermeneutical principle is “the assumption of a shared rationality” (p. 160). The assumption of human reason is “part of a two-sided principle, taking reason as relatively universal and experience as relatively limited or perspectival” (p. 161). This principle combines “flexibility regarding facts and rigidity regarding logic” (p. 161). Leibniz’s confidence in the universality of reason or a shared rationality suggests a conceptual basis for the resolution of today’s world conflicts.

The second hermeneutical principle is “the principle of generosity” (p. 163). This refers to “interpreting a text as saying something reasonable and consistent”

(p. 163). In other words, if a text is ambiguous or inconclusive, or one lacks sufficient knowledge to judge it adequately, one should give a text the benefit of the doubt and accept the most favorable interpretation.

The third hermeneutical principle is that “precedence should be given to the ancient texts rather than the modern and their interpretations of classics” (p. 163). Like the Jesuits, Leibniz preferred the classical Confucians over the Neo-Confucians because the classics were more useful for making a European theological apologetic in the context of Chinese philosophy. Leibniz even convinced himself that he had a better grasp of Chinese classical thought than the Chinese of his day.

The last hermeneutical principle is a universal principle of interpretation that allows a “shifting” to take place in the area of cross-cultural understanding. This is a shifting from forms and concepts that are foreign and unfamiliar to what is more recognizable and familiar. Leibniz thus takes Chinese philosophy seriously enough to identify Chinese philosophers with Plato, Aristotle, and even some Christian thinkers (p. 167). This further illustrates Leibniz’s fair-minded treatment of Chinese philosophy. Using these hermeneutical principles of interpretation of Chinese texts, Leibniz synthesized Chinese philosophy into a system of his own that would be applicable to converting the Chinese.

At the end of chapter 4, in an analysis that exemplifies the best in sound, balanced scholarship, Perkins deliberates on Leibniz’s successes and failures as an interpreter of Chinese thought. Leibniz was far ahead of most of his contemporaries in envisioning the scale of cultural exchange with China, yet, unable fully to escape the Eurocentric view of his time, he still fell into the trap of orientalism, “the belief that orientals were inferior in their ability to reason” (p. 194). Leibniz’s other major failure was his inability to recognize “the radicality of cultural difference” (p. 195). His assumption that every monad expresses the same universe and the same innate ideas can be used to perpetuate the presumptuous view that Chinese thought is just another form of one’s own, and this carries the risk of imposing Western concepts on Chinese tradition. Perkins’s analysis allows us to see that there is a fine line between the similarities and divergences between European and Chinese culture. A proper appreciation of both can have great significance for future cultural exchanges.

In chapter 5 Perkins dissects the current situation regarding cultural exchange and proposes a model for further interactions between cultures, especially an intellectual and philosophical dialogue across cultures. He is concerned that “academic philosophers around the world know Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, yet few European or North American philosophers could even name three non-Western philosophers. It remains very common for a new Ph.D. in philosophy to have learned nothing of the thought of any other culture” (pp. 199–200). He argues that “No *a priori* reason indicates that Western philosophy is so superior to all others as to make philosophical exchange useless. At the same time, we lack sufficient knowledge to make such a judgment *a posteriori*” (p. 200). And recognizing the value of different perspectives, the connection between thought and language, and the principle of fallibilism, he argues that we should renew the intellectual and philosophical dedication and com-

mitment to cultural exchange that animated Leibniz three hundred years ago. Between the poles of the Western perception of cultural superiority on the one hand and the denial of the possibility of cross-cultural normative standards on the other lies the possibility of cultural exchange. Our acceptance of this possibility must be “flexible enough that we are open to learning from other cultures, yet fixed enough to supply some criteria by which to judge both our own beliefs and those of other cultures” (p. 201). A dialectical interplay between relativism and universalism, between difference and similarity, between the variety of experience and rational structure facilitates our understanding of the universe and the human beings within it. This is the philosophical light Leibniz may help to shine in us.

Perkins’s exceptional scholarship invokes a discussion of the very nature of philosophy itself. The term *philosophia* derives from two Greek nouns meaning “love of wisdom.” However, Carl J. Vaught contends that we often fail to notice that love transcends desire; it is a mistake to reduce the love of wisdom simply to the desire for understanding (nor is wisdom identical with knowledge; otherwise philosophy can never be self-sustaining):

The love to which *philia* points is the love of friendship, and wisdom is both practical and theoretical. Both *philia* and *sophia* call our attention to a way of life in which the philosopher attempts to live on friendly terms with wisdom. Philosophical friendship fulfills desire by pointing to the unity of the philosophical life.<sup>1</sup>

The love of wisdom goes beyond desire; it constitutes a region of reciprocity for which the friends of wisdom generate a space for community. There is a hidden dimension underlying the love of wisdom. If the love of wisdom is understood as the love of friendship, then the love of wisdom will have the properties of friendship. One of these is a relationship of reciprocity. The love of wisdom is a performative and intelligible discourse in a community of others. Our community has been enlarged to encompass the globe, and it would be strange if the love of wisdom happened only in our own backyard. Friendship based on wisdom requires a reaching out to friends across the world; it is in this way that philosophy will be able to sustain human society. Confucius saw the inherent connection between individual self-cultivation and friendship: “The Junzi (cultivated person) bases his association with friends on cultural refinement (*wen*) and promotes his cultivation of humanity (*ren*) through the support of friendship” (*Analects* 12 : 24).

Perkins has called our attention to the importance of cultural exchange. He has also demonstrated what solid scholarship should be: accurate in research, faithful to the primary text, and astute in interpretation. This book is an excellent and timely resource for anyone involved in the pursuit of philosophical wisdom in the context of world community.

Note

1 – Carl G. Vaught, *Metaphor, Analogy, and the Place of Places: Where Religion and Philosophy Meet* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), p. 32.