

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Writings on China*, translated by Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr. Chicago: Open Court, 1994. 157pp.

Reviewed by Eric Sotnak, University of Akron

This book contains translations of four of Leibniz's writings on China: *Preface to the Novissima Sinica* (1697/1699), *On the Civil Cult of Confucius* (1700), *Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion* (1708), and *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716). Cook and Rosemont have included a splendid introduction to the collection, which describes the historical and theological background of Leibniz's China writings, placing them (mainly) in a context of debate over whether or not existing philosophical and cultural traditions could be reconciled with Christian theology. In the main, this is the topic addressed by all the essays translated here. Leibniz takes the position that there is something of the truth in Chinese intellectual traditions, and thus it should not be too difficult for missionaries from the West to instruct Chinese literati, and help them to see that, with the exception of the special revelation found only in Christianity, their own traditions have always contained the seeds of (Christian) theism within them. At times Leibniz is even charitable enough to suggest that certain concepts found in Chinese philosophy are similar in spirit to concepts found in his own philosophy. Leibniz professes great admiration for Chinese culture and philosophy, even going so far as to claim that in many respects, the Chinese had the upper hand over the West (in social and moral philosophy, in particular).

Cook's and Rosemont's introduction also contains helpful discussions of the Confucian tradition, the specific sources from which Leibniz gained his knowledge of Chinese texts and traditions, information on the four texts translated, and overviews of three classical Chinese texts that Leibniz cites by name in his writings: the Ji Jing, Shu Jing, and Shi Jing. In translating the texts, Cook and Rosemont have endeavored to capture the character of Leibniz's style, and have, for this reason, preserved Leibniz's own transliterations of Chinese names and terms, (which are not always consistent). In consequence of this, the reader is able clearly to appreciate that Leibniz was grappling with an unfamiliar language and tradition, about which information dribbled into his hands through very limited channels.

So why should this book be of interest to Leibniz scholars? In the Preface, the authors state that Leibniz "arguably" used the word "China" in his writings more often than words like "monads," "entelechies," and "pre-established harmony," and they conclude, "if so, then his sustained writings on things Chinese...should

take their place alongside his other major works..." As interesting as Leibniz's writings on China may be, it seems to me that this inference is unwarranted. Permit me to attempt to explain briefly why I think this is so.

First, there is no reason to think that Leibniz's metaphysical views were significantly influenced by his acquaintance with Chinese thought, however strong his interest in such might have been. Cook and Rosemont, themselves, have argued this quite persuasively (see, especially, "The Pre-established Harmony between Leibniz and Chinese Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1981).

Second, the China writings shed little light on his metaphysics or his considered theology. We do see Leibniz attempting to liken various Chinese concepts to some of those that characterize his own metaphysics, but the similarity is forced, and one is not likely to understand such comparisons at all unless one first has acquired from other sources some familiarity with Leibniz's metaphysical views.

Third, although Leibniz expresses great admiration for Chinese civilization, and even idealizes the Chinese as possessing superior ethical philosophies, he says little about how, precisely, they are superior in this respect, and in any case, Leibniz's admiration of the Chinese on this score seems to be more a result of headstrong romanticization of Chinese culture than of genuine knowledge of it.

Fourth, Leibniz had very limited (and only secondhand) access to Chinese philosophical materials, and so we cannot reasonably consider Leibniz's writings on China to constitute an important contribution to Chinese studies.

It is, frankly, difficult to see any persuasive reason to count the China writings as on a par with his metaphysical writings, just as it is difficult to see any persuasive reason to count his work on the history of the House of Brunswick as on a par with his metaphysical writings.

Having said all that, I do think that Leibniz's China writings are important, and even worth studying — I merely do not think they stand on a par with, for example, the Discourse on Metaphysics or the letters to Clarke in philosophical significance. William James said that in order to understand a philosopher, one must "grasp his center of vision by an act of imagination." Although it is not at all clear that, in Leibniz, there is any real *center* to be grasped, there is certainly a network of interconnected common threads. One such common thread is Leibniz's tendency always to attempt to find something of intellectual value in whatever views he takes up for consideration. In the China writings, we see Leibniz at his best in this respect; struggling to "rescue" Chinese philosophy from certain overzealous Christian theological critics. It is interesting to see the extent to which Leibniz may have succeeded, despite the paucity of information available to him, in comprehending the

traditions he was discussing, and to see how he goes about constructing a case for the position he takes up.

The China writings also serve to impress all the more upon the reader the scope of Leibniz's intellectual interests. Wherever there was an intellectual dispute going on in Leibniz's time, it seems he endeavored to learn about it and to involve himself in it. There is very little likelihood, I think, that Leibniz had anything at stake in the dispute over whether Chinese philosophy could be reconciled with Christian theology, but rather, he became involved in the dispute because his boundless intellectual curiosity would not permit him to keep out of it. The real value of this collection of Leibnizian essays on China, then, is that it broadens our picture of Leibniz as a thinker, and helps us to grasp, if not the center of his vision, at least another thread in the tangled skein of his interests.