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## LEIBNIZ AND CHINA

Why was Leibniz so fascinated by Chinese philosophy and culture? What specific forms did his interest take? How did his interest compare with the relative indifference of his philosophical contemporaries and near-contemporaries such as Spinoza and Locke? In this highly original book, Franklin Perkins examines Leibniz's voluminous writings on the subject and suggests that his interest was founded in his own philosophy: the nature of his metaphysical and theological views required him to take Chinese thought seriously. Leibniz was unusual in holding enlightened views about the intellectual profitability of cultural exchange, and in a broad-ranging discussion Perkins charts these views, their historical context, and their social and philosophical ramifications. The result is an illuminating philosophical study which also raises wider questions about the perils and rewards of trying to understand and learn from a different culture.

FRANKLIN PERKINS is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at DePaul University, Chicago. He has published in early modern European philosophy, early Chinese philosophy, and comparative philosophy, with articles appearing in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, and the *Leibniz Review*.

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*For my parents*

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## *Preface*

Leibniz and China? The topic usually meets with surprise. Even when people know that Leibniz had a life-long interest in China and directed his considerable energy and political skills to encouraging cultural exchange – his “commerce of light” – the topic remains strange and peripheral to the concerns of a philosopher engaged with philosophy’s history. A broader interest in the place of other cultures in early modern thought meets with greater skepticism, because it seems obvious that other cultures have no place there. The reason Leibniz’s engagement with China appears so surprising and worthy of attention is its contrast with the disinterest of his contemporaries. Yet our reaction of surprise should itself be surprising and worthy of attention. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, information from other cultures flooded into Europe, while Europe’s economy became more and more obviously global. In this context of globalization, the odd phenomenon should not be Leibniz’s writings on China but that everyone else showed so little interest in the world outside Europe. How could Descartes, so interested in the nature of “man,” show no interest in the variety of human beings? How could Locke, an “empiricist,” show so little interest in the experiences of non-Europeans?

Such questions seem somehow inappropriate or unfair, not the kinds of questions with which a philosopher would approach Descartes or Locke. Why? We think of our time as uniquely multi-cultural, and surely some aspects of our time are unique. For the first time, almost all cultures have some connection. We have radically fast access to almost any culture, in that, given enough money, we can fly almost any place, and we can get some limited access even faster through the internet. But if we consider our time uniquely multi-cultural because in our everyday lives we encounter people from other cultures, or because so many live in a cultural setting different from that of their parents, or because the greatest challenge of our time is how to accommodate cultural differences, then we are wrong. This illusion of uniqueness cuts us off from the guidance we could gain from

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history, both from the history of Europe and the histories of the rest of the world. At the same time, we strengthen the illusion that European thought is a *causa sui*, growing up of itself, without interaction with the rest of the world. This illusion of an independent Europe allows for easy distinctions between “us” and “them,” “East” and “West,” at the same time that it obscures the historicity of those distinctions. This illusion of an isolated Europe tempts us to explain the absence of other cultures in the writings of early modern philosophers by the absence of the rest of the world from their experience.

This book is meant to undercut this illusion, using Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz as an example of how early modern thinkers deployed their own philosophies in understanding the place of other cultures, and how they incorporated cultural diversity into their own philosophies. Leibniz is not a typical example, standing almost alone in his recognition of the value of cultural exchange. Leibniz’s vision of China developed, though, within a context of European expansion and a history of engagement with other cultures. This context must be grasped if both the uniqueness and the continuity of Leibniz’s approach is to be understood. The direct goal of this book is to understand Leibniz’s engagement with China, both in this context of Europe’s encounters with other cultures and in the context of Leibniz’s own philosophy. I hope this project also contributes to two broader goals. One is to add another small piece to a growing concern with how Europe theorized and constructed other cultures. Such a concern cannot be separated from European dominance of other cultures and the discourses of colonialism, particularly the construction of orientalism, which Edward Said (*Orientalism*) describes as forming in the late eighteenth century, and the construction of race, which Emmanuel Eze (*Race and the Enlightenment: a Reader*) attributes to the early eighteenth century. My work here differs from these histories because it addresses an earlier time and because Leibniz’s writings do not fit easily into any story of the intersection of philosophy and colonialism. In its evaluation of other cultures, the early modern period is remarkably heterogeneous: when Leibniz calls for Chinese missionaries to come and teach ethics to Europeans, not everyone found his remark outrageous. Even those philosophers with little interest in other cultures explicitly claimed that all peoples have roughly equal capabilities. In the seventeenth century, we find some of the Euro-centric elements of later colonialist discourses but without the confidence in European superiority that would soon emerge, for example, in the racism of Hume and Kant. I make little attempt here to generalize about broad discourses, but the example of Leibniz at least illustrates that the discourses of European

colonial dominance have both significant continuities and significant discontinuities with early modern approaches to other cultures.

With this as the goal of this book as a historical study, the other goal is more directly philosophical. Perhaps the greatest challenge of this new century is the set of issues clustered around “multi-culturalism,” particularly in how to negotiate the similarities and differences between cultures and how to balance universal ethical claims with the diversity of world cultures. Yet contemporary philosophy seems particularly ill equipped to address these problems, unable even to address its own relationship to culture. Contemporary philosophers have oddly ended up in a position like that of Spinoza or Locke, happy to concede an abstract equality to other cultures but showing no interest in the thought generated by those cultures. I present Leibniz here partly as one model for a philosophical concern with cultural exchange and partly as an early but powerful voice calling for such exchange. At the same time, I hope to show that Leibniz’s philosophy provides a foundation for pluralism absent in his contemporaries, and through this point to show that Leibniz’s philosophy might still provide elements of a foundation for cultural exchange.

These philosophical and historical goals have required more than just a description of what Leibniz wrote about China. On one side, I have tried to show how Leibniz’s engagement with China emerges from a tradition of European encounters with non-European thought. On the other side, I have tried to show that Leibniz’s openness to China is not an accident of his experience or personality but flows naturally from his philosophy. In other words, the answer to why Leibniz’s interest in other cultures differs from his contemporaries lies in how Leibniz’s philosophy differs from his contemporaries. The first chapter of this book sets the context for Leibniz’s engagement with China. It includes a discussion of the main ways European thinkers created a space for non-Christian thought and how they attempted to accommodate China in particular. Chapter 2 examines Leibniz’s philosophy as it founds his approach to cultural differences, focusing on what different minds can and must learn from each other. This focus is a question of method, but it can only be understood in the broader context of Leibniz’s ontology and the psychology of monads. Chapter 3 applies this broader foundation to Leibniz’s particular engagements with China, focusing on his progressive vision of cultural exchange and what in particular he hoped Europe would learn. Chapter 4 examines how Leibniz thought the Chinese should be engaged and how Chinese thought should be interpreted. This progression may appear foundational, where Leibniz’s political concerns derive from his epistemology, which derives from his ontology,

but it would be a mistake to read it this way. Leibniz's ontology can just as easily be read as a justification for his more immediate political goals of harmonizing diverse views, as Leibniz himself lived with more concern for diplomacy than ontology. The more likely view is that all these levels – ontology, epistemology, and politics – are varying expressions of the relationship between diversity and order.

Just over twenty-five years have passed since David Mungello published *Leibniz and Confucianism: the Search for Accord*. His work was preceded by Donald Lach's translation and extensive introduction to Leibniz's preface to the *Novissima Sinica*. In the past quarter century, Leibniz's writings have become much more accessible, largely through Mungello's own work, the work of Rita Widmaier, and the translations by Daniel Cook and Henry Rosemont Jr. Other writings have become accessible as parts of broader projects, most importantly the continuing publication of Leibniz's correspondence by the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften. The possibility of my writing this more inclusive study of Leibniz's engagement with China and of integrating that with his philosophy rests on the work of these scholars. Mungello's original book was animated by a conviction that accord between cultures is one of the most pressing problems of our time and that Leibniz's engagement with China has something to offer us in confronting this problem. I offer this work with those same convictions.

A wide-ranging philosophical and historical work like this would have been impossible without great assistance. This work is most directly indebted to Emily Grosholz, who first allowed me to see what was interesting in early modern thought and whose assistance went from first suggesting I look at Leibniz's writings on China to reading various versions of the manuscript. On-cho Ng, Henry Rosemont Jr., and an anonymous reader all gave me essential feedback on the entire manuscript. I am also grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee, who read an early version of much of this work, Veronique Foti and Pierre Kerszberg. I would also like to thank Charles Scott, who first drew me into philosophy and its history. This project could not have been carried out without the aid of Rita Widmaier and Herbert Breger, both of whom guided me at the Leibniz Archive and commented on parts of this manuscript. I have received beneficial comments on parts or versions of this work from Nicholas Jolley, Paul Lodge, Marcelo Dascal, and Richard Lee. The students in my graduate seminar on Leibniz also helped me to clarify many of the ideas presented here. I would also like to thank Cambridge University Press and Hilary Gaskin, Jackie Warren, and most of all Sally McCann for her careful comments on the entire manuscript. An early version of parts of chapter 2

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*Preface*

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## *Abbreviations*

- A G. W. Leibniz. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.). Multiple vols. in 7 series. Darmstadt/Leipzig/Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923–.
- AG G. W. Leibniz. *Philosophical Essays*. Trans. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Ed. by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Rev. edn., Paris: Vrin, 1964–76.
- C G. W. Leibniz. *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*. Ed. by Louis Couturat. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966.
- CD G. W. Leibniz. *Causa Dei*. Appendix to the *Theodicy*. Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI, translation in E. M. Huggard, *Theodicy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).
- CSM R. Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- CSMK R. Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Cult G. W. Leibniz. “De cultu Confucii civili.” Cited by section. Original text in W 112–14. English translation by Daniel Cook and Henry Rosemont Jr., *Writings on China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994).
- Dascal G. W. Leibniz. *Leibniz: Language, Signs and Thought*. Ed. by Marcelo Dascal. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987.
- Discourse G. W. Leibniz. *Discours sur la Théologie naturelle des Chinois*. Cited by section. Original text in Loosen and Vonessen

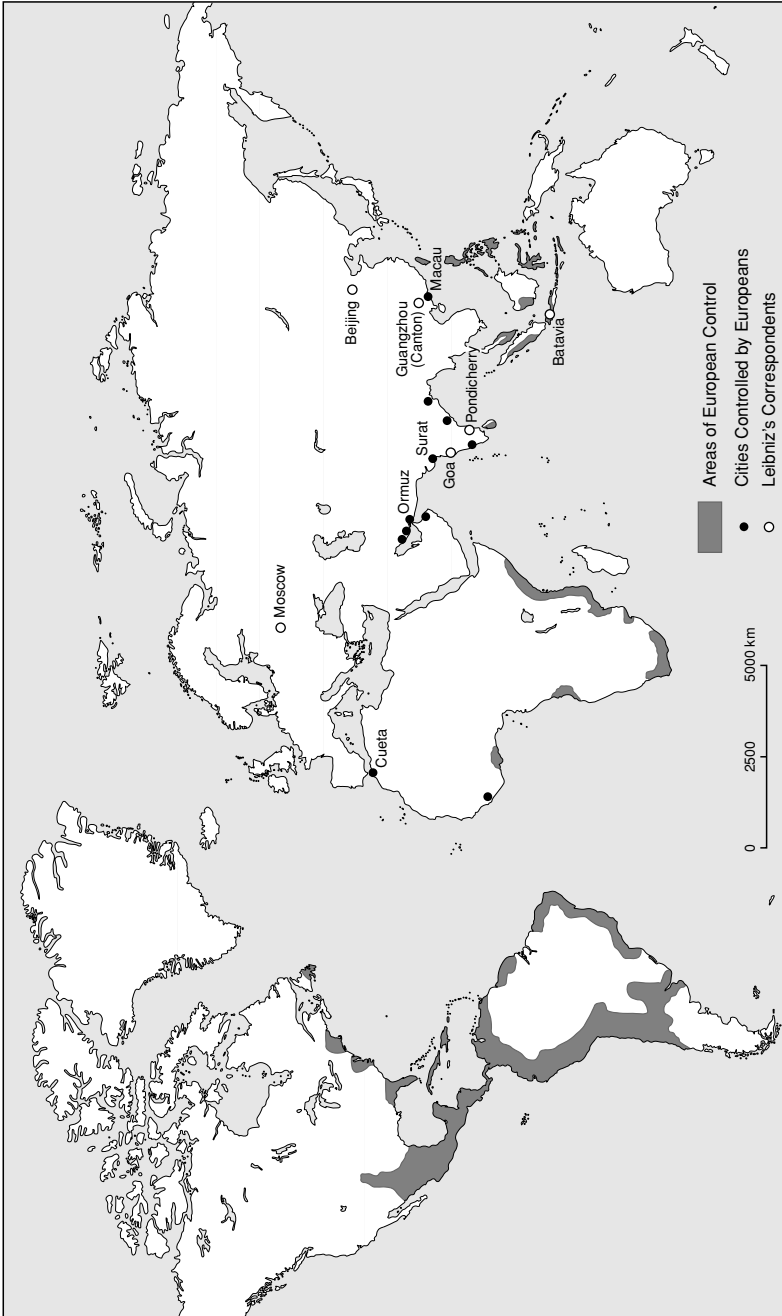
*List of abbreviations*

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- (1968). English translation in Cook and Rosemont, *Writings on China*.
- DM G. W. Leibniz. *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Cited by section number. Original text in GP IV; translation in AG.
- Dutens G. W. Leibniz. *Opera Omnia*. Ed. by Louis Dutens. Geneva, 1768.
- GM G. W. Leibniz. *Die Mathematische Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*. Ed. by C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin and Halle: Weidmann, 1849–55.
- GP G. W. Leibniz. *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*. Ed. by C. I. Gerhardt. 7 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978.
- Grua G. W. Leibniz. *Textes inédits*. 2 vols. Ed. by Gaston Grua. New York: Garland Publishing, 1985.
- K G. W. Leibniz. *Die Werke von Leibniz*. Ed. by Onno Klopp. Hannover, 1864–84.
- L G. W. Leibniz. *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Trans. by Leroy E. Loemker. 2nd edn. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969.
- LBr G. W. Leibniz. Reference to unpublished Leibniz correspondence, preserved in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, in Hannover, Germany.
- M G. W. Leibniz. “Monadology.” Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI; translation in AG.
- Essay Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. by Peter Nidditch. Cited by book, chapter, section, and page. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Ethics Benedict de Spinoza. *The Ethics*. Trans. by Edwin Curley. *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994. Cited by book and proposition (p), definition (d), and scholium (s).
- NE G. W. Leibniz. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Cited by book, chapter, and section. Original text in A VI, vi; translation in RB.
- NS G. W. Leibniz. *Novissima Sinica*. Cited by section. Original text in H. G. Nesselrath and H. Reinbothe, *Das Nueste über China* (Koln: Deutsche China-Gesellschaft, 1979). English trans. by Donald Lach, in Cook and Rosemont, *Writings on China*.

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PD	G. W. Leibniz. "Preliminary Discourse on the Conformity of Faith and Reason." In <i>Theodicy</i> . Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI. Translation in Hubbard, <i>Theodicy</i> .
PNG	G. W. Leibniz. "Principles of Nature and Grace Founded on Reason." Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI; translation in AG.
Remarks	G. W. Leibniz. "Remarks on Chinese Religion." Cited by section. Original text in GP II, 380–84. English trans. in Cook and Rosemont, <i>Writings on China</i> .
RB	G. W. Leibniz. <i>New Essays on the Human Understanding</i> . Trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathon Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
T	G. W. Leibniz. <i>Theodicy</i> . Cited by section number. Original text in GP VI. Translation in Hubbard, <i>Theodicy</i> . Cited by section number and page in Hubbard (H).
W	G. W. Leibniz. <i>Leibniz Korrespondiert mit China</i> . Ed. by Rita Widmaier. Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1990.





Map 1 European expansion around 1700.